



# POLITICAL WINGS

WILLIAM WEDGWOOD BENN  
FIRST VISCOUNT STANSFORD



ALUN WYBURN-POWELL  
FOREWORD BY DAVID WEDGWOOD BENN

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William Wedgwood Benn,  
first Viscount Stansgate

Alun Wyburn-Powell



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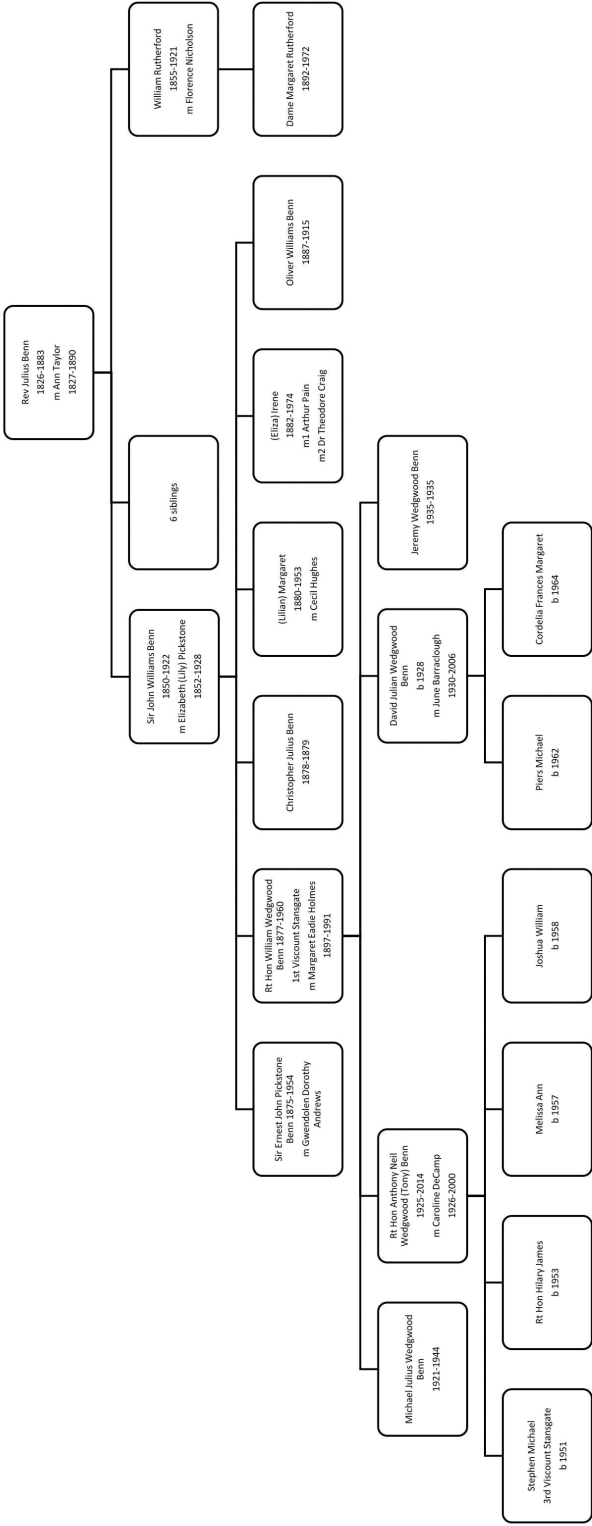
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Benn family tree.

## Acknowledgements

I have thoroughly enjoyed researching and writing this book. This has been due to a fortunate combination of an intriguing subject, enthusiastic surviving family members, an extensive range of archives, a dynamic publisher, generous reviewers, an award from the Society of Authors and my own supportive family.

The Benn family has been outstandingly kind and encouraging. I initially interviewed Tony Benn and his brother David about their father. Subsequently, Tony's children Stephen, Hilary, Melissa and Joshua invited me to Stansgate and provided me with photographs from the voluminous family collection. Hilary's son, James has researched the military careers of some of his ancestors and has been very helpful in piecing together some of the wartime events. David, as now the only surviving member of his generation of the family, has written the foreword. Ruth Winstone, editor of Tony Benn's diaries, has been a valuable source of information and advice.

William Wedgwood Benn was a witty and courageous person, but he was also by his own admission a 'file-merchant'. He collected and preserved records of most aspects of his life, from sorties in the RAF to charts of how much sleep he had each night. Some of his papers were lost in a fire and others in a flood, but many survive. The Stansgate Papers are now mainly to be found at the Parliamentary Archives, where the staff are exceedingly helpful and friendly and the surroundings literally palatial.

I would especially like to thank Steve Richards, Michael Crick, Vernon Bogdanor, Norman Franks, Richard Doherty and Martin Bowman for reading drafts of the book and for their encouraging comments.

The research for the project was supported by the Society of Authors who selected the biography for an Authors' Foundation Award. I am very grateful to the assessors, Helen Simpson, Simon Brett, Sameer Rahim, Fiona Sampson and Frances Wilson and also to Paula Johnson at the Society.



The Labour History Group and the Liberal Democrat History Group provide a mine of useful information for a project like this, as well as organising meetings and discussions. William Wedgwood Benn, in common with other political defectors, belongs in the history of both parties. From studying these sometimes-neglected figures it is clear that there is more in common between the parties than current tribal politics sometimes admits.

Frank Meeres, archivist at the Norfolk Record Office in my adoptive home city of Norwich, kindly provided photographs of the Boulton and Paul catalogue, from which the Benns' 'ancestral home' at Stansgate was chosen.

My publishers, Pen & Sword, have been very efficient, decisive and helpful. Laura Hirst, Lisa Hooson, Matthew Blurton and the team have been a pleasure to work with. Karyn Burnham has edited the book with judgement and diligence and Jon Wilkinson has certainly brought the jacket to life.

I can truly say that without my dear wife Diana and son Chris, this book would never have been written. While we were on a walk in Hampstead, we saw a piece of paper tied to a gate, advertising a talk by Tony Benn, which triggered the idea, which started a chain of events, which led to this biography of Tony's father.

I would like to dedicate the book to the memory of Tony Benn (1925–2014).

Alun Wyburn-Powell  
Norwich 2015

## Foreword

*by David Wedgwood Benn, son of William Wedgwood Benn  
and younger brother of Tony Benn*

As the last surviving member of my generation, I write as the only one who knew my father well. I remember him as a vibrant, vivid personality which is difficult to convey to anyone who did not actually meet him. Besides that, his life had many different facets. He married somewhat late in life – when he was forty-three – and was already fifty-one when I was born. As a result, his life before marriage was something of a closed book, shrouded in family legend which was sometimes difficult to separate from fact.

Alun Wyburn-Powell has, in this book, carried out a hugely ambitious exercise in family history backed up by a wealth of documentation – including Census details from the Nineteenth century and diaries – most of which were new to me. All this has given our family an entirely new insight into our Victorian roots.

William Wedgwood Benn, the first Viscount Stansgate, was one of a large group of Liberal MPs who changed parties and joined Labour in the 1920s. However, as this book points out, he was never a key player. This was partly because he was not pushy and partly because he was never involved in economic cabinet decisions. During his first term in government (1929–31) he was dealing with India and during his second term (1945–46) he was dealing with the negotiation of a new Anglo-Egyptian treaty.

My father was born into a family of Congregationalist Victorian radicals whose religious beliefs were closely linked with a belief in justice. In 1903 he suffered a shock which affected the rest of his life, on discovering that his much-loved uncle William Rutherford Benn (the father of Margaret Rutherford) had murdered his own father, the Reverend Julius Benn. He fell

into a deep depression, being unable to reconcile this tragedy with Divine goodness. To help him recover, his father sent him on a holiday to Egypt and South Africa. On his return home he felt worse than ever. Only when he plunged into work in the family publishing firm did he begin to recover – and this convinced him that overwork was the cure for depression and that holidays were depressing. It also led him to adopt the principle of ‘Job first’ and the job somehow stood above him. This set a pattern for the rest of his life: an alternation of overwork followed by exhaustion, accompanied by constant (and largely groundless) worries about money. This was partly due to his puritanical upbringing and partly due to the experience of seeing bailiffs move into the family home to enforce a judgment which was overturned on appeal.

My uncle, Sir Ernest Benn, differed from my father both in style and character. Although, like my father, he championed free speech, he ruled his family autocratically, was against the dole and advocated policies which were indistinguishable from Thatcherism – except that he would not have approved of a woman prime minister. One family legend was about childhood poverty. However, by the beginning of the last century, thanks to the business talents of Ernest Benn, the Benns had come into considerable wealth – as shown by the purchase of the Old Knoll in Blackheath, London – a huge house with an enormous garden recently sold for £5,000,000, although it had long since passed out of the Benn family.

My father’s life did follow a consistent pattern. As a child he had a reputation for mischievousness, but this reflected a desire to deflate what he saw as sanctimonious Victorian hypocrisy, particularly in relation to money or religiosity. Ridicule was his main weapon. He prided himself on his filing system and pointed to the absurdity of filing alcoholism under A, drunkenness under D and temperance under T. He made a point every day of reading, marking and cutting the then authoritative *Times* and tried to create a pre-electronic binary system where for example the figures 1006 represented Foreign Affairs, 10065 represented Russia and 100651 represented the Ukraine. By 1940 this project had become unsustainable but these volumes, now held in the Parliamentary Archives in the Victoria Tower, represented a unique chronicle of the 1920s and 30s. My father did continue to read and mark the *Times* until the end of his life because he was

convinced that in order to make an impact it was essential to get one's facts right.

My father was a fighter, but only in what he regarded as a just cause. He was always afraid that as a member of the House of Lords, whose debates he used to describe as 'old gentlemen's political croquet', he would be rendered harmless. As a student at University College, London, he had denounced the Boer War. But in both World Wars he joined the Forces believing that an issue of moral principal was at stake. His wartime service took him to Gallipoli in 1915, and his war record earned him both the DSO and the DFC.

Needless to say all his worries took their toll on the family. When my father was in a buoyant mood he cast a ray of sunshine and when depressed he cast a pall of gloom.

Dr. Wyburn-Powell rightly points out my father's distrust of his former friend Lloyd George over the sale of honours. My father's own sense of honour led him to resign his seat when he changed from Liberal to Labour in 1927. By no means all today's politicians follow this example.

Both my parents, as this book points out, strongly championed the ministry of women. And in the 1930s my parents' religious convictions gave rise to a lifelong friendship with Reinhold Niebuhr, the American theologian and political scientist.

My father's removal from the Attlee government in 1946 came as a very severe blow. It was not, as he thought, a slur on his expertise but simply reflected the need of a Prime Minister to appoint a younger generation of leaders. However his election in 1947 as World President of the Interparliamentary Union earned him a fresh lease of life.

Like many other people, my father had been bitterly disappointed by the onset of the Cold War after 1945 and was unhappy about the conduct of the Labour Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin which he felt had aggravated the conflict. He therefore resolved to convert the IPU from a mere tourist agency for parliamentarians into a surrogate United Nations. His policy took him to Eastern Europe in 1948 and in 1955 to Russia (where I accompanied him in both cases) and subsequently to China. The IPU headquarters in Geneva, heavily dependent on American money, did not welcome this and my father was deeply wounded when told by an American delegate that



if he admitted 'Red China' to the organization the Americans would walk out. His policy did, however, bear some fruit. When he resigned in 1957 he was elected President of Honour on the initiative of the American delegate seconded by the delegate of the Soviet Union. The messages of condolence on his death included a letter from the Chinese ambassador, a message from the chairman of the Soviet Interparliamentary group and a telegram from the Queen.

As a son, I naturally cannot pretend to be neutral. I will therefore quote from tribute to him by the Conservative Lord Chancellor, Lord Hailsham who highlighted his chivalrousness and said he wondered whether my father ever paused to consider the affection he aroused among those who had little agreement either with his causes or with his ways of pursuing them. A *Times* obituary on the day after his death emphasised that his integrity of purpose was manifest, that his physical bravery was matched by high moral courage, that he stood in awe of nobody and that the spell of his charm could vanquish the most acute exasperation that he might provoke so that even his victims soon forgave him.

Today, at a time when voter confidence in politicians is lower than ever and when the belief is widespread that politicians are 'in it for themselves', my father stands as a striking counter-example. That was his life's main achievement.

David Wedgwood Benn  
London, 2015

## Introduction

In December 1916 a 39-year-old second lieutenant serving at a seaplane base in the Middle East received a telegram from the new prime minister, Lloyd George, inviting him to join the cabinet. The unmarried officer consulted his father and one friend, before turning down the post. He was probably the one person who could have held the warring factions of the Liberal Party together. The officer survived the war unscathed. The Liberal Party nearly died. The officer was William Wedgwood Benn, now most widely-remembered as the father of Tony Benn.

The best-known things about William Wedgwood Benn are that he was born in the East End of London and that he was an hereditary peer – a viscount. These true, but seemingly contradictory, facts explain very little about his life. Labelling him as an ‘East Ender’ is little more revealing than describing Gladstone as a ‘Scouser’; two of the four seats which Benn represented as an MP were actually in Scotland. Later in life, William Wedgwood Benn became Viscount Stansgate, which sounds as though he was elevated along an established family path into the aristocracy; it *was* an hereditary peerage, but he was the first of the line. The Stansgate name comes from a place which is sometimes now referred to as his ancestral home. When he was in his twenties, this pre-fabricated ‘ancestral home’ was chosen out of a catalogue, delivered on a barge, and built on land which his father had recently bought in Essex. However, only four years later, the house was sold.

At different stages of his life, William Wedgwood Benn was known by many different names – as William, Will or Willy (by his family and his wife), Billy, Bill or ‘Billy Dawdle’ (by his childhood friends), Wedgwood or ‘Wedgie’ (by his political friends and associates), Captain Benn (by the press and Hansard between 1918 and 1942), as Viscount Stansgate (from 1942 to his death), as ‘Dear Old Pa’ to his children and as ‘Tappa’ to his grandchildren. He will remain simply Benn throughout this book, as there was much more consistency about him than all the renaming would suggest.



## *Chapter One*

# **A Fledgling Dynasty with a Flat-Pack Ancestral Home 1877–1906**

**L**ooking back, the life of William Wedgwood Benn (1877 to 1960) clearly spanned what we can now see as the early stages of one of Britain's greatest political dynasties, launched on the back of profits from publishing a trade magazine. But when William Wedgwood Benn was born, the publishing business was not even a twinkle in his father's bank account, the family was not involved in politics and the pieces of their 'ancestral home' had not even left the factory in Norwich. The Wedgwood name seems to hint at a connection with the pottery business, but Benn's parents were not actually sure if there was a family connection. So, what was the family's ancestry and did it really matter?

No-one escapes the genetic legacy of their forebears, but for some, their inheritance is crucial to the course of their lives. Ancestors, known or unknown, will have passed on their DNA, influencing longevity and appearance. Others may hand down money, a family home, a famous name or even a title. Some may be the subject of family stories, which – true or not – influence how later generations see themselves. What someone wrongly thinks happened to their ancestors could have as much bearing as what actually did. William Wedgwood Benn's life is defined more than most by his inheritance and his legacy.

Benn's DNA was a good inheritance. His ancestors tended to outlive their contemporaries. Even a vague awareness of this can have an effect on someone's life: an old man in a hurry, a slow starter, a léger dilettante, someone who grew up too fast – all could be the result of suspicion of one's likely longevity. Tony Benn wrote confidently, while his father was still alive, that he would live to the age of eighty-two (he nearly reached eighty-nine).<sup>1</sup> Benn's ancestry meant that he could reasonably expect a generous lifespan (although he made decisions at several stages which put this in jeopardy,



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and he was always eager to use every day to the maximum, as though it was to be his last). Benn inherited a terrier-like make-up – short, solid, brave, lively, eager and highly intelligent. In appearance he was attractive in a neat, friendly, youthful and open-looking way, quite the opposite of the formulaic tall, dark and handsome.

Benn's ancestors before his parents' generation passed on no money, title, land or property. The name Wedgwood was indeed connected to the eponymous potters. It was Benn's middle name, given to him (but not to his siblings) because his mother was fairly sure that she had a distant family connection to the Wedgwoods. She was correct in her belief – both in the connection and the distance. The connection, in fact, pre-dated the founding of the pottery business. The common ancestors were Gilbert Wedgwood (1588–1678) and his wife Margaret Burslem (1594–1655), four generations *before* Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795), founder of the pottery business. The Wedgwood name was an asset and a liability at different times, but it was just a middle name, not a share in a valuable business.

The connection to Josiah Wedgwood the potter meant that Benn also had a very distant family link to Charles Darwin and composer Ralph Vaughan-Williams. Darwin was the grandson of Josiah Wedgwood and Vaughan-Williams was his great-great grandson. Other famous relatives included Margaret Rutherford, who was his cousin and his much more distant relative, but his contemporary in politics, Josiah Wedgwood MP.

Benn was certainly influenced by stories about his forebears. The most striking was about his paternal grandfather, Julius – a semi-literate, religious, melancholic and unlucky man. The family story was that Julius ran away from home in 1842, aged fifteen, contemplating suicide by jumping in the Mersey. He had fallen out with his step-mother, who had brought money from a brick-making business to the impoverished family, who had been living in a damp and smelly cellar in Ardwick, a mile east of the centre of Manchester. Julius's father was, according to the family legend, either a master quilt-maker, or possibly a licenced victualler (a profession very much at odds with the views of later teetotal generations). Rescued by a rich philanthropic Quaker, Julius was taken in, fed, taught and set up as a linen-draper's assistant in Limerick, Ireland. Here he was converted to Congregationalism by the Rev. John De Kewer Williams, author of the

rather dour-sounding *Words of truth and soberness, earnestly addressed to the Independents of England*. At the age of twenty-two, according to the family legend, Julius uprooted himself again. He left his job and home in Ireland in disgust after finding that his employer had tried to trick a customer by mis-describing goods. Benn was thus fed a story which hinged on his grandfather's uprooting his entire life on a matter of principle, because of some dodgy linen.

The gist of the story turns out to be true, but some rather important details were missing. The 1841 census does indeed show Julius, prior to his departure for Ireland, living in Chapel Street, Ardwick with his widowed father, William, listed as a weaver (not a purveyor of alcohol – although many people did also use their homes as public houses at the time), an older sister and two younger brothers. Later censuses show that Julius's father remarried and that he moved back to Leeds, the city where he was born. Here, he had four more children with his second wife, Ann. In Leeds he worked as a shoemaker, later rising slightly in status to cordwainer – a maker of shoes from fine new leather, as opposed to re-using old leather, the method employed by most shoemakers. Julius's father remained in Leeds until his death at the relatively advanced age of seventy-eight. Julius's brothers do not seem to have shared the aversion to their step-mother, as they remained in the same household into their twenties, while they both worked as boilermakers. Evidence for the family's increased wealth from the brick-making business brought by William's second wife is scanty and speculative. One of William Benn's neighbours listed in the 1841 Census was a 33-year-old woman called Ann Dean, a member of whose family was listed as 'brickmaker'. She was then lodging with a family called Clegg. Circumstantially, her details fit with the family legend and she may have been the Ann who became William Benn's second wife. William, a poor, widowed, single father working as a weaver, would have been likely to have found his new wife in the immediate neighbourhood. The family's circumstances do appear to have improved marginally in the years after their move to Leeds, as would have been the case for most families in Britain as the country industrialised and imported cheaper foreign food. However, they remained working class and poor.

One of the most important details missing from the story was that Julius actually left Ireland during the potato famine. It had ravaged the country

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over the previous three years, slashing the yield of the island's main food crop by seventy per cent between 1845 and 1848 – the year Julius departed. A million starved and a million more emigrated. Julius cannot have been unaffected, at least emotionally and intellectually, if not nutritionally, by the famine. He left the island amongst the million others, with the western side of the country (including Limerick) being the area worst affected by the exodus. It is also extremely likely that he was acutely aware of the part played in this Irish tragedy by the wealthy English Tory landlords and by the British government's policy of tariffs, which kept imported wheat and bread prohibitively expensive. Another factor, not totally unconnected to the potato famine, was the departure of John de Kewer Williams from Limerick in 1846 and the near-collapse of the Congregational church in Ireland – the dissolution of Julius's spiritual home. On his return to England Julius went to Hyde, seven miles to the east of Manchester, to look for a job as a school master's assistant. Drawn both by the religious creed and the companionship he had enjoyed through the church in Limerick, he visited the Congregational chapel. Here he met his future wife (Benn's paternal grandmother), the 19-year-old daughter of a shuttle-maker. Unfortunately for Julius, she shared the first name of Ann with his detested step-mother, but this does not seem to have dampened the attraction. Julius and Ann set up, and both worked in, a school at the chapel.

Benn's father was the first born child of Julius and Ann. His parents had been married on 13 February 1850 and he was born on 13 November 1850 – exactly nine months later to the day. He was given the names John Williams Benn – the Williams being in honour of the Reverend John de Kewer Williams. So, like the 'Welsh Wizard' Lloyd George, John Benn, a future leader of London politics, was actually born in Manchester.

Having been unlucky in timing his arrival in Ireland just before the start of the potato famine, Julius and family were more fortunate in leaving Lancashire before the cotton famine, caused by the American civil war, in the 1860s. The family decamped to the East End of London, which was to be a focus of the working life of three successive generations of the family. They initially settled in an 'awful little alley' called Commercial Place.<sup>2</sup> In the East End, Julius was involved in social work, including setting up a home for destitute boys. His work here led to his being offered the charge

of the country's first reformatory and industrial school, which was to be set up at Tiffield in Northamptonshire. The family moved there and took up lodgings. Their landlord was Julius's deputy – making it a rather convoluted hierarchy. John Benn therefore also spent five years of his childhood in rural Northamptonshire.

The family returned to the East End of London for a combination of reasons. The principle cause was that Julius could not practise his Congregational faith in Tiffield and had to worship at the local Anglican church, whose doctrines he could not fully accept. However, as with the combination of principle and practicality which had led to his departure from Ireland, there was also another, more prosaic, reason for the move. Julius had got into financial difficulties, after a failed investment in an agricultural patent. He lost his savings and ended up in debt. He had to leave his job and also the lodgings. Julius's wife was by then in poor health and unable to walk without difficulty. One version of the family story has Julius pushing Ann in a bath chair, another in a wheelbarrow. Whatever the means of transport, the eventual destination was Stepney. Here Julius set up a toyshop and newsagent – a business which did not thrive, but which taught his son a good deal about commerce. The premises were also used as a depot for the British and Foreign Bible Society.<sup>3</sup> The toyshop premises were redeveloped and the family moved again and set up a different business, this time a recruitment agency for domestic staff.<sup>4</sup> Julius eventually returned to missionary work and became the minister of the Gravel Lane chapel. There was some controversy over whether he was entitled to the designation of 'Reverend' or not.<sup>5</sup>

So, on his father's side of the family, Benn's grandparents were Congregationalists, poor and from a working class background associated with the textile industry around Manchester. When Benn was born both his paternal and maternal grandparents were still alive. His maternal grandparents also came from Hyde and were non-conformists, but they were wealthier. Benn's maternal grandfather, John Pickstone, had been a manufacturing chemist and had bought some land and property. He retired to Altrincham, the town of his birth. Benn never got to know his maternal grandfather Pickstone particularly well, but did not feel that he had lost out as a consequence. Even to the teetotal Benn, who had a strong set of morals

and could be rather puritanical, his grandfather was ‘uncompromising’, ‘narrow’ and ‘unbending’.<sup>6</sup> His four sons (Benn’s uncles) were named Benjamin Franklin Pickstone, Louis Kossuth Pickstone, John Bright Pickstone and Alfred Tennyson Pickstone. Benn wryly commented that he was ‘never able to detect very much trace of the paternal influence in their behaviour’, nor presumably did they live up to their names as a founding father of America, a Hungarian freedom-fighter, a Corn Law abolitionist, or a poet laureate. Benn later realised that his opinions of his grandfather were to some extent coloured by his father’s ‘kindly malicious recollections’. Pickstone’s eldest daughter became a member of the Plymouth Brethren. As well as drink and frivolity, another object of Pickstone’s disapproval was the proposed marriage of his younger daughter, Elizabeth, to Benn’s father – ‘this boy from London’.

Fortunately for the family, ‘whatever was lacking’ in Benn’s maternal grandfather was ‘made up’ in his grandmother and Benn believed that his mother’s sweetness and devotion could be traced to her mother. His maternal grandmother was born in 1817 in Nottinghamshire to a father born in Holland and a mother from Burslem in the Potteries, which supported her belief that she probably had a connection with the Wedgwood family.

Benn’s mother, Elizabeth Pickstone (known in the family as Lily) met Benn’s father in 1870, aged nineteen when he came to her parents’ house in Hyde to perform a ghost play involving skulls and crocodiles.<sup>7</sup> How this play accorded with the alleged serious narrow-mindedness of her father is not clear. According to her future husband, Lily was a ‘bounding’, ‘round’, ‘compact’ figure (not terms usually applied in searching for a potential spouse). She described her own education as having concluded at a ‘finishing school’ in Stockport.<sup>8</sup> Her outlook on life was domestic – there was ‘family’ and ‘the outside world’.<sup>9</sup>

So, Benn’s father, ‘this boy from London’ as his prospective father-in-law, Pickstone, referred to him, had actually been born in Manchester in 1850, but had moved to St. George’s in the East End of London the following year. In 1856 his family had moved to Northamptonshire, and he had arrived back in the East End again when he was nine. Leaving school at the age of eleven, he was sacked from his first job as an office boy. He then worked for a furniture wholesaler, attending art school at night. In 1868 he was promoted

to junior draughtsman, then chief designer and, in 1873, junior partner. An entrepreneurial, hard-working and ambitious young man, Benn's father had to make up for what Pickstone considered to be his lack of substance in terms of wealth, education and contacts.

Benn's parents were married on 1 July 1874, after an official engagement lasting a year, to satisfy Pickstone. They went on to have six children. The eldest, Ernest, was born on 25 June 1875. William Wedgwood followed on 10 May 1877. Their third child, Christopher, was born on 27 November 1878, but died just over a year later on 29 December 1879. There followed two daughters, (Lilian) Margaret in December 1880 and (Eliza) Irene in February 1882, and finally a son, Oliver, born in July 1887. The death of one child out of six was unfortunately a fairly typical occurrence at the time.<sup>10</sup> Benn was two and a half years old when his younger brother, Christopher, died. He would have been unlikely to have carried any direct memories of his lost sibling or of his death because at that age children typically do not understand death and regard it as a temporary state. However, Benn is likely to have been influenced indirectly by the effect which it had on the family and by later discussion of their loss. Benn's sister, Margaret, was born around a year after Christopher's death. The changed family dynamics after Christopher's death would have been altered again by this new arrival. Typical effects of the death of a sibling tend to be guilt, anxiety, susceptibility to stress, but in some cases a feeling of invulnerability, greater emotional strength, ability to empathise with the bereaved and greater independence.<sup>11</sup> All of these were, in fact, characteristics displayed in abundance by the adult Benn.

It is widely recorded that Benn's origins were in the East End of London. However, there is no official definition of the East End, so it is quite hard to determine categorically if this is true. There is general agreement that it is bounded by the City of London to the West and by the River Thames to the south. The eastern boundary is usually taken to be the River Lea. However, the northern boundary is less well defined. The widest definitions include the 'southern part' of Hackney.<sup>12</sup> Benn was born at Ferncliff Road, almost exactly in the centre of the London Borough of Hackney.<sup>13</sup> So, by the most generous of definitions, Benn's birthplace just squeaked into the East End.

The East End was well-known for its significant concentrations of poverty. The house where Benn was born has since been demolished and the area was redeveloped by the GLC as the Mountford Estate, although the name Ferncliff Road survives. Records also survive of the relative affluence or poverty of the surrounding area towards the end of the Victorian era, thanks to the work of a future next door neighbour of Benn's, Beatrice Webb, and her cousin-by-marriage, Charles Booth, who produced the famous 1889 poverty maps of London. They concluded that thirty-five per cent of the East End population lived in abject poverty.<sup>14</sup> Conversely though, this meant that two-thirds of the population was living in better circumstances and Ferncliff Road was classed as being a mixture of 'well-to-do middle class' and 'fairly comfortable [with] good, ordinary earnings'. The poorest residents (unflatteringly described by Booth and Potter as 'lowest class, vicious and semi-criminal') and those just ahead of them ('very poor, casual' and in 'chronic want') were huddled in the small back streets and alleys, mainly concentrated nearer to the Thames, while the main arterial roads throughout the area were generally lined with better quality houses. Ferncliff Road was a short residential road running parallel to the main (and more prosperous) Amhurst Road.

The growing Benn family moved to 241 Dalston Lane, shortly before the birth of Benn's sister Margaret in May 1880.<sup>15</sup> The new home was about ten minutes' walk east of their old house, once again on the fringe of the East End. Dalston Lane was a busier and slightly more prosperous road – 'well to do middle class' according to Potter and Booth. This house, too, has since been demolished, but the original four-storey Victorian villas with steps up to the front doors survive on the opposite side of the road.

That same year, Benn's father launched the *Cabinet Maker*, a journal which was eventually to become the foundation of a thriving publishing business, Benn Brothers. In the early years though, Benn's father had to subsidise his earnings from the journal with performances at clubs and halls where he gave illustrated lectures. By nature, he was more of a showman than a businessman, but he was a good salesman. Once the business began to grow, it provided the money which enabled the family to become involved in politics, and in the process to begin a political dynasty. However, the first generation cannot know that they have started a dynasty, as a cricketer cannot

know if the first run of an innings is going to be the foundation of a century. Benn's uncles, Henry, Julius and Robert, all joined the staff of the *Cabinet Maker*. On the back of an insecure income, never much above £1,000 per year, Benn's father turned his attention to politics.

In 1889, Benn's father was elected for East Finsbury as a Progressive on the newly-established London County Council, where he was to retain his seat for the rest of his life. He was elected on a platform of municipal control of gas and water supply, of liquor licences, and markets. He supported council housing, the abolition of the privileges of the City corporation and a fairer local taxation system. He assured his electorate that 'if elected, I shall be found among the party of progress'. He went on to be chairman of the LCC in 1904–5 and leader of the Progressives on the council from 1907 to 1918. In his last years, as the only remaining original member, Benn was widely known as the 'father' of the council.

Benn Senior's political ambitions were not confined to municipal administration and at the 1892 general election he fought and won the parliamentary constituency of Tower Hamlets, St. George for the Liberals. He claimed that he wanted to be 'the member for the back streets'.<sup>16</sup> This was to be the first of eight parliamentary contests, in five different constituencies, which he was to fight. His first term in Parliament spanned Gladstone's last premiership and the brief and ill-fated tenure of Rosebery – a colleague of his on the LCC, where both were to serve terms as chairman.<sup>17</sup> The 1895 election spelt the end of Rosebery's premiership after just over one year and the end of Benn Senior's representation of Tower Hamlets, St. George – by a margin of just four votes, adjusted to eleven after a recount. A bitter dispute erupted over the St. George's contest, in which Benn Senior demonstrated that 'restraint and calculation were never strong points in his vivacious character'.<sup>18</sup>

John Benn launched a legal challenge to the election of his Conservative opponent. In a retaliatory action, the Conservative victor, Harry Marks, claimed that Benn Senior had, among other irregularities, illegally paid for the printing and publication of a derogatory song about him. The court hearings over these 'futilities' stretched out for an 'unprecedented' forty days over this 'squalid dispute' as the *Times* referred to it, with most of the allegations being dismissed. Benn's counsel went to extraordinary lengths to



try and obtain Marks's disqualification, alleging 352 instances of corrupt or illegal practices, all of which were struck out, withdrawn or failed. However, two counter-charges against John Benn were upheld – namely irregularities over paying for banners to be produced and in making returns about the funding of a club house. As the *Times* pointed out, the offences involved 'no grave moral guilt', but they did involve the expenditure of a vast amount of time, energy and legal fees.<sup>19</sup> But, these were not the only losses incurred by John Benn. He was disqualified from standing again in the same constituency for seven years.

However, this did not mark the end of the fledgling political dynasty. John Benn stood unsuccessfully for Deptford in 1897 and Bermondsey in 1900. At a by-election in 1904 he won Devonport, which he retained in 1906 and held until his defeat in January 1910. In December 1910 he unsuccessfully contested Clapham, in what was to be his last parliamentary contest. His parliamentary career thus spanned a total of eight and a half years – three years at Tower Hamlets, St. George from July 1892 to July 1895 and five and a half years at Devonport from June 1904 to January 1910, separated by a gap of nearly nine years and 240 miles.

Families are supposed to have a skeleton in the closet, and the Benn family is no exception. When Benn was born all four of his grandparents were still alive, but this was to change abruptly with the murder of his paternal grandfather, Julius, when Benn was just short of his sixth birthday. At the time Benn was not aware of the circumstances. Julius was murdered by his own son, William Rutherford Benn (Benn's uncle) on 4 March 1883. William Rutherford Benn had recently returned from honeymoon in Paris, where he had suffered a breakdown. He had had no prior history of mental illness. His wife of just eleven weeks, Florence, had brought him back to be cared for by his parents, but his condition continued to deteriorate and he had to be admitted to Bethnal House Asylum. After six weeks, William Rutherford appeared to be much recovered and he was released and collected by his father, Julius, who took him to Matlock Bridge in Derbyshire to recuperate. There, tragedy struck. William Rutherford smashed his father over the head with a chamber-pot (a Spode, not a Wedgwood) while he slept, and then slashed his own throat. The lodging house keeper called the police and a doctor, who was able to stitch William Rutherford's throat wound and save

his life, but he was unable to resuscitate his father. William Rutherford Benn was then detained in Broadmoor.

The aftermath of the murder, apart from the distress of the events and the need to keep the details secret from the younger family members, caused an upheaval in family living arrangements. A new home was established at 37 Kyverdale Road, Stoke Newington – a Victorian terraced house, one of those which deceives potential occupants by being larger than it appears from the outside. This house is still standing. Here moved in Julius's invalid widow (able to move around with difficulty, but without the wheelbarrow) and her five unmarried children, Benn's father and mother and their three (soon to be four) children. So the 6-year-old Benn was then living with his grandmother, three uncles, two aunts, his parents, his older brother Ernest and his younger sister Margaret, soon to be joined by another sister, Irene. Julius left an estate valued at £118 7s 6d<sup>20</sup> – roughly equivalent to £12,000 in today's terms – not destitute, but certainly not a family fortune.

In 1885, improving family finances from the publishing business enabled a move to 17 Finsbury Square, an area now comprehensively redeveloped for offices. However, in 1890, a former employee set up a cheaper rival to the *Cabinet Maker*. This led Benn's father to resort to a drastic, but decisive, measure to solve the resulting financial crisis. The children were sent to live with their nanny in Southend, while their parents moved to a smaller home across the street in Finsbury Square, in a flat at the top of number fifty. From here Benn's father launched a new cheap rival paper, *The Furnisher and Decorator*. The new title undercut the rival's paper and drove it out of business. Benn's father then closed his cheap paper and the fortunes of the *Cabinet Maker* revived. During this same, difficult year, Benn's father underwent an abdominal operation without anaesthetic (fearing that his heart would not stand the sedation) and also Benn's paternal grandmother died.

Constantly on the move, in 1891 Benn's father rented *Hoppea Hall*<sup>21</sup> at Upminster, then a rural Essex village with a population of 1,400. This was a large, rather austere, three-storey brick-built house with small windows, dating back to at least the seventeenth century. It was demolished in January 1939 to make way for a post office, sorting office, petrol station and car park.<sup>22</sup>

William Wedgwood Benn shared the trait of many successful people – of not being fearful of making mistakes, but of making them (and many),

admitting them, learning from them and refusing to be embarrassed by them. From the unfinished draft fragments of his autobiography, we get many insights into Benn's thinking about key stages in his life, but by no means the full story.<sup>23</sup> Tellingly, Benn started with an explanation that 'This is not a self-serving' autobiography nor the 'story of my inward struggles'.<sup>24</sup> For many, their major struggles are with the outside world. Benn publicly was successful and happy, but clearly he was hinting at some inner turmoil. He comes across as ahead of his age, in terms of his writing style, informality and self-disclosure. These were also traits that were recognisable to his family, friends and colleagues. On the other hand, the content of some of his writing does make him sound rather obsessive. He was a pioneer in the drive to achieve a work/life balance and was much influenced in his timekeeping regime by Arnold Bennett's book *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*. Bennett warned his readers against becoming a slave to the system, but Benn seems to have skipped over this section!<sup>25</sup> Benn explained that for him there were 'two purposes in life, one is repose and the other is work' – although in reality he placed the latter ahead of the former.<sup>26</sup> To keep track of how he used his time, Benn divided the day into half hour units. He kept a record for nearly fifty years of how he spent each day and even drew up daily graphs of his activities. Benn commented that Walter Citrine and Herbert Samuel used a similar system. Perhaps the greatest recorder of personal activity though was Gladstone, who went as far as recording every one of the 20,000 books that he read and noted with a whip symbol when he felt he was deserving of punishment (which was often). Benn did not seem to feel that he had strayed as badly as Gladstone, but he did get cross with himself for frittering time away or allowing others to do it for him. 'It makes one very much irritated with kind friends who come and waste time when you know that you have had a bad day and your chart is going to give ... a shock at bedtime.'<sup>27</sup> Benn was self-aware enough to realise that his method of operation would not suit everyone. He described himself as a 'file merchant' and acknowledged that 'this may not interest everybody but for me is the most interesting thing of all'. Citrine, Samuel and Gladstone were all rather austere characters and their obsessive monitoring of time cannot have helped to alleviate this. Benn, however, had a lighter side and was witty and self-deprecating and keen on practical jokes.

So, who did the maturing Benn think he was? Or, perhaps first, did he think at all about who he was and where he fitted into the world? Late Victorian Britain was not consumed with introspection and self-analysis. (Freud published his major work, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in 1901, the year of Queen Victoria's death.) In late Victorian times some aspects of life carried labels, so no-one could escape all the markers of social position. On top of this, Benn was thoughtful, intelligent and self-aware. More than most, he had a realistic idea of himself. In many respects Benn was in the middle; having attended a 'Middle Class School', he was pigeonholed socially. He was clearly not a member of the aristocracy, nor from the working class. He was perched, slightly precariously, in the middle – literally within sight of both Parliament and extreme poverty; within touching distance of both ends of the social spectrum. His mother's side of the family were established middle class, while his father's newly-moneyed side, were well-aware of the risks to their financial security. Like most of the population, they believed that economic growth and technological developments had benefits for society as a whole and that most people could expect a rising standard of living.

In terms of religion, being a Congregationalist meant that Benn was not part of the established Church of England, but nor was he part of a very distinctive, and to some extent still repressed, minority, such as the Catholics or the Jews. Non-conformists had gained full political rights in 1828, one year ahead of the Catholics. Jews achieved the same position in 1858, but atheists were only granted equal status in 1888. Although Benn always identified himself as a non-conformist, he was not very religious. The church's teachings played a bigger part in his life than any form of religious practice.

In terms of place, Benn was first and foremost British, and generally proud of it, although he was not proud of Britain's record in Ireland and was in favour of self-determination for all peoples within the Empire. He was English, with little early connection to Scotland or Wales. He later developed strong links with Scotland and his grandfather, Julius, had lived in Ireland. Despite being urban, he grew to love a more rural life and took up sailing.

Within his family he was also in the middle – not the eldest, nor the youngest, sibling. Emotionally, Benn was secure. He was well-loved and