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## BIBLE SOCIETY

The annual meeting of the local Auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society will be held at Hope Hall, Kings Road, Berkhamsted on Tuesday 14th May at 8 p.m.

A film in sound and colour entitled "Footsteps of Livingstone" will be shown. The chair will be taken by the Rev. Maurice Cartledge, B.D.  
All are welcome.

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THE ASTONISHING ADVENTURES OF TOM STEVENS

## Round the World on a 'Penny Farthing'

SHORTLY BEFORE THE WAR I was shown an extract from an English newspaper published in Peking. Under the heading, "Fifty Years Ago", it reprinted a news item stating that Thomas Stevens, of Berkhamsted, England, had arrived in Peking from Kiunchiang during a journey round the world on a bicycle.

This news from China was recalled a few weeks ago when an American university professor sought information about Thomas Stevens' life in England. I was able to contact three of the pioneer cyclist's distant relatives, two in Berkhamsted, one in Bushey, and some of the information which has been sent to Professor Irving A. Leonard, of the University of Michigan, will perhaps be used in his forthcoming book, *Forgotten Adventure: The Travels of Thomas Stevens*.

### LABOURER'S SON

Professor Leonard has a fascinating story to tell, and I am grateful to him for much of the information given in this article.

Thomas Stevens was born in Castle Street, Berkhamsted, on 24th December, 1854, the eldest son of William Stevens, labourer, and Ann Stevens (née Preston). At the age of eight Tom became a scholar at the Bourne Charity School (the building now occupied by the National Provincial Bank), and to quote an American magazine (*Outing*, May 1887), "in physical daring and endurance he was the leader of his school, particularly in the matter of a war with rival schools". On the gustiest days of March he would "climb to the tops of the tallest trees and there sway to and fro in the wind like a mad imp of the upper air, revelling in the fury of the storm as though in his natural element."

### PASSAGE TO AMERICA

In 1868 his father left Berkhamsted for Missouri to clear some land for a settlement, leaving young Tom to look after the rest of the family and learn the grocery trade. Working hours were long, but Tom always found time at night for his favourite reading, travel and adventure books.

Mrs. Stevens' illness brought her husband back to England, and in their

Castle Street cottage Tom repeatedly expressed his determination to go to the United States. One day, when the boy was about sixteen years old, he astonished the family by saying that he was going to America the following week. He had saved sufficient money to pay for the passage.

William Stevens knew it was useless to try to dissuade his son from crossing the Atlantic. "Go!" he said. "Young as you are, you are well able to take care of yourself."

And so Tom Stevens started work as a pioneer frontiersman at an age when other boys were in their second or third year of apprenticeship. Two years later his family joined him in Missouri.

But Tom dreamed of wider horizons than those of the family ranch. Though he had never ridden a bicycle and knew no language other than English, he decided to tour the world with a heavy, cumbersome machine known officially as an "ordinary", and more familiarly to us as a "penny-farthing."

### SPONSORED TOUR

He went to San Francisco, bought and learnt to ride a bicycle, and set off on his first journey on 22nd April, 1883. Over the Rocky Mountains, across wild deserts, through forests and new farmlands, Tom pedalled and pushed for nearly 4,000 miles, ending the great ride at Boston 104 days after leaving the Pacific coast.

He described his experiences in a series of articles published in *Outing*, a monthly magazine owned by Albert A. Pope, who was also head of the largest bicycle factory in the United States. Mr. Pope decided to sponsor a world tour by Tom Stevens, and he sailed for Liverpool to start his famous ride on 9th April, 1884. After nearly three years of pleasure and hardship—not to mention world-wide publicity—the Berkhamsted adventurer reached Yokohama on 17th December, 1886, and sailed to San Francisco to be welcomed as a hero on 6th January, 1887.

He was praised for his articles in *Outing* and given a substantial share of the stock of the magazine, of which he

was cycling editor. Tom Stevens also wrote the first of his three books.

He was a good lecturer as well as a good writer. Whenever possible he looked up his relatives at Berkhamsted and was naturally asked to relate his adventures to fellow townfolk. At the Town Hall he was given the next best thing to a civic reception. The town was proud of Tom Stevens.

A distant relation (Mrs. Beatrice Dell, of 108 Bridgewater Road, Berkhamsted) writes: "On returning to Berkhamsted he stayed with my parents in Ellesmere Road for a time. One story we were always told was how he was set upon in China by thieves.

### SCARLET COAT

"He wore a scarlet coat lined with bright red silk, and on it were many gilt buttons. The thieves who beat him up stole these buttons, thinking they were gold, but they did not find the gold coins in the lining of the coat. He gave one of these coins to my mother, and it was made into a brooch which unfortunately was lost."

Another relation, Miss M. Verney, now living at Bushey, has shown me a letter in Tom Stevens' handwriting, a photograph of which is being sent to Professor Leonard and may be included in his book. On notepaper headed "Cunard Royal Mail Steamship 'Umbria,'" dated 11th January, 1889, he wrote:

"Mrs. John Verney.—Dear Aunt Betsy, I shall be in England a few days, and will try to get down to Berkhamsted for two or three hours to see how all of you are getting on. May possibly manage to get to Berkhamsted on

Sunday, but not certain. Regards to all Tom Stevens."

About this time he was probably en route for East Africa, where he hoped to meet Sir Henry Stanley, the explorer. Tom was then a correspondent of the *New York World*, and his third book recounted the African adventure.

### FAMOUS STEPDAUGHTERS

He does not appear to have been spoiled by publicity. The American Press was often filled with stories of his exploits. He was feted at banquets. He saw many strange countries, pushed on through jungle and desert, often without good maps and sometimes with none at all. He gave many people their first sight of a bicycle. He obviously enjoyed it all, for he was a true adventurer.

But the pioneer spirit is apt to die as one approaches middle-age. Some time around 1895 Tom Stevens decided to return to England and settle down. He met and married a charming widow, Mrs. Vanbrugh, thereby becoming stepfather to Irene and Violet Vanbrugh two celebrated actresses who are remembered with delight by the older generation. We had the pleasure of seeing Violet Vanbrugh at the Court Theatre when the Berkhamsted Repertory Company flourished sufficiently just before the war to introduce from time to time a famous guest.

### "COMPRESSED GIANT"

The *Times* briefly sketched Tom Stevens' early career when reporting his death on Thursday, 31st January, 1935. He was buried at the Church of St. Marylebone, London.

Perhaps the best tribute is one which appeared when Tom was at the height

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of fame. *Outing* concluded an article with these words: "It only remains to be said that our hero stands 5-ft. 6-in., is built like a compressed giant; bears the stamp of personal courage and chivalrous enthusiasm upon his handsome features; and whether you call him Briton or Yankee, reflects honor upon the Anglo-Saxon stock, of which he is a magnificent type. Long live Tom Stevens!"

"BEORCHAM"

(The series of articles on the History of Northchurch will be resumed next month.)

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