

‘The Wenhaston Millions’

Southwold’s year of collective delusion

It was early summer in 1933, the lowest point of the Great Depression. Hitler had recently become Chancellor of Germany, the book burnings were in full swing and the first Nazi concentration camp was up and running. In Scotland, the Loch Ness Monster had made its first appearance and, in Southwold, a dashing young Londoner called Major Leonard T Crane CBE and King’s Messenger (1st Class) was checking in to the fashionable Marlborough Hotel. He was 32, and on this and his many subsequent visits to Southwold, was to make quite an impression on the locals. They would variously describe him as dark, good-looking, authoritative, urbane, of military bearing, with guileless blue eyes and a winning smile though having a disconcerting twitch about the lips when holding forth – which he did a great deal.

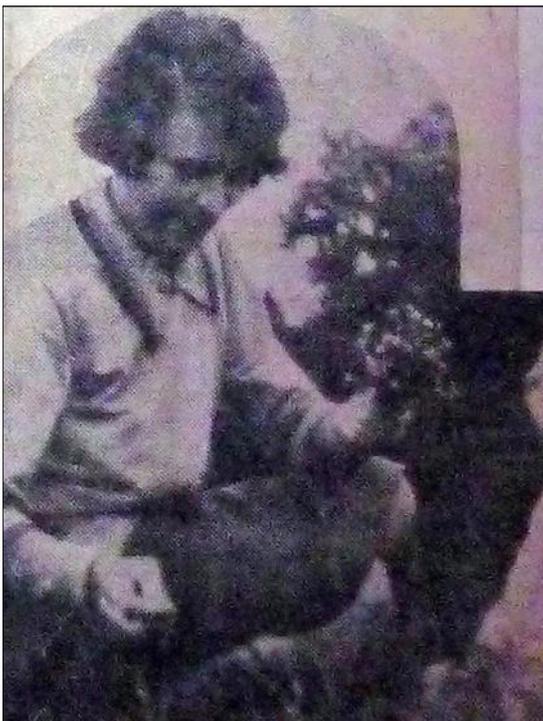
Mrs Mary Ann Waldorf, who with her second husband, owned the Marlborough Hotel as well as an up-market apartment block at Centre Cliff and a hairdressing salon in the High Street, was certainly impressed by the Major. So was her daughter by her first marriage, Muriel Mary Georgina.

Muriel was, in fact, already

married to, though separated from, a certain Frank Duke, now living in London. They had two children – a girl in boarding school and a young boy whose custody was apparently rather chaotically shared.



The Marlborough Hotel in 1933



Muriel Duke with her daughter, Margaret as a baby

A regular and honoured guest

On his trips to Southwold, the Major lost no time in networking with the movers and shakers of Southwold and the surrounding villages, attending local functions, getting invited to shooting parties and standing drinks in the town’s lounge bars. One well-to-do household where he became a regular and honoured guest was that of Edward Percy Rawlins who styled himself ‘Late Scots Greys’. He lived at Hawthorn Farm in Blythburgh, was riding master to Saint Felix School and, until very recently ran the upmarket Southwold Riding Academy from Daisy Villa in Gardner Road, Southwold. He was much taken with the entertaining Major Crane and Crane, in turn, was delighted to discover that the Rawlins’ housekeeper was none other than the fetching daughter of his hotel proprietor, Muriel Duke. They were soon ‘an item’.

One of the characteristics that Mr Rawlins found most disarming about his guest, Leonard Crane, was his refreshing honesty. Despite his impressive credentials Crane made no bones about



The dapper Major Crane

the humbleness of his origins and his relative poverty. His rank, he explained, was conferred by his former regiment, the Second King's Horseguards but he also referred darkly to his connections with the Secret Service. Some years ago he had set about raising a modest mortgage on his property. During this process he had occasion to draw a cheque on his current account with the National Provincial Bank for the sum of £350. Although the account was sufficiently in credit, the cheque bounced. So incensed was Crane at this insult to his integrity that he put in a claim to the bank for damages. The National Provincial eventually offered him ex-gratia compensation of a few thousand pounds but Crane, far from satisfied, rejected the offer out of hand and decided to sue the bank for a sum amounting to tens of thousands of pounds. Alarmed, the bank, sought support from the Bank of England.

'The King and I'

At this point, said Crane, The 'Crown' came to hear about the case and saw in it an opportunity to humiliate the National Provincial Bank which his Majesty had never forgiven for refusing to sell War Bonds in the late conflict. As related by Crane, he and King George V were to become co-litigants in a claim against the Bank for an eye-watering sum of £850 million. Crane's share was to be a paltry £10 million (the equivalent of well over £600 million today) which was to be in gold bars, Treasury Scrip and Bank notes.

However, explained Crane, his own status as an ordinary working man was a potential embarrassment to the Crown who accordingly arranged for him to be appointed King's Messenger (1st Class) and Commander of the British Empire. Being such a sensitive case, it was heard in camera before Lord Sankey, Lord High Chancellor of England. Crane conducted his own case with such conviction and aplomb that Lord Sankey personally congratulated him and thereafter became his dear friend. The



Edward Percy Rawlins and, left, an advertisement for his Riding School in Gardner Road

SOUTHWOLD RIDING ACADEMY.



Riding
Horses and
Traps
for Hire.

Phone
South
18.

Special Terms and Tuition to Children. Riding Master to St. Felix School.
E. P. RAWLINS, late Royal Scots Greys.



Edward Percy Rawlins and Daisy Villa in Gardner Road from where he ran his riding academy

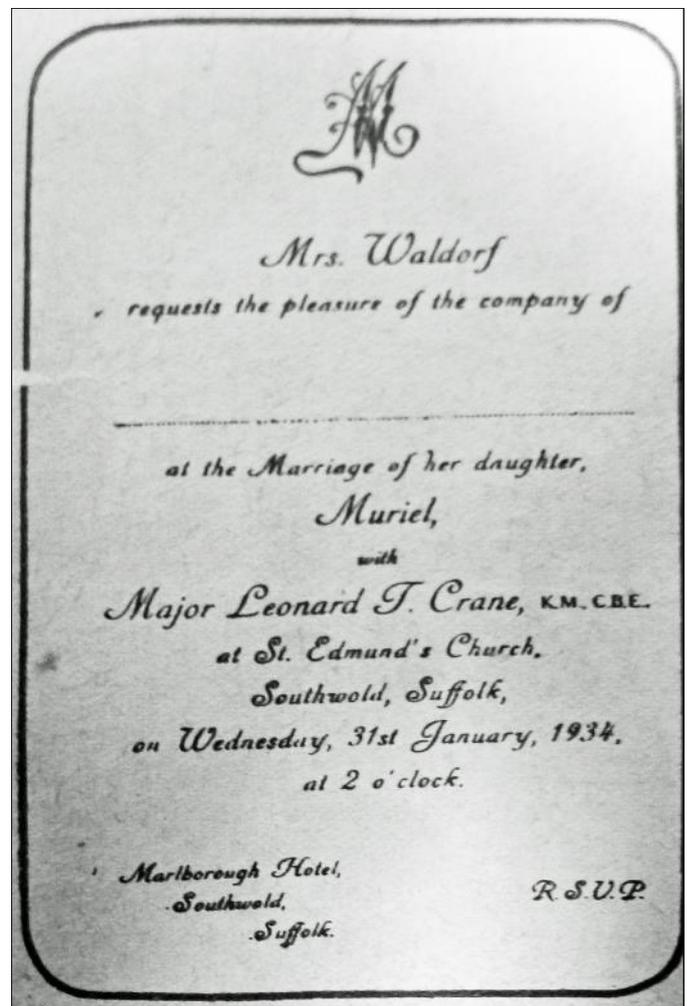
claim against the bank was won but, unfortunately, as a result of some bureaucratic slip-up, the moneys owing to Crane were paid into the Chancery Court, and now Crane was faced with the complex and costly legal process of getting his millions out of Chancery, a process which at present he could not afford. However, added Leonard Crane, he would be prepared to share his wealth generously with anyone prepared to contribute to his fighting fund... let's say a £50,000 return for an investment of £650!

Crane told this extraordinary tale to many, and to any who doubted its veracity, he would produce sheaves of official documents validating his tale. Most impressive of these was one unmistakably carrying the Royal Seal. It read in part:

*"1st day of October 1932. George V of Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Dominions beyond the seas, King Fidei Defensor, Emperor of India, to our beloved Leonard Thomas Crane, Greetings.
Be it known that our utmost displeasure has been incurred by the treasonable action of the directors, shareholders and board of management of the National Provincial Bank Limited, and that we have caused a trial in Privy Council to be ordered to determine between us and the aforesaid defendants, such trial to be holden at my House of Lords in the City of Westminster.... " etc*

This was the clincher. Edward Rawlins gladly offered to invest £650 of his savings in the confident expectation of the outlandish returns promised by his friend.

He was not the first of Crane's investors, nor the last.



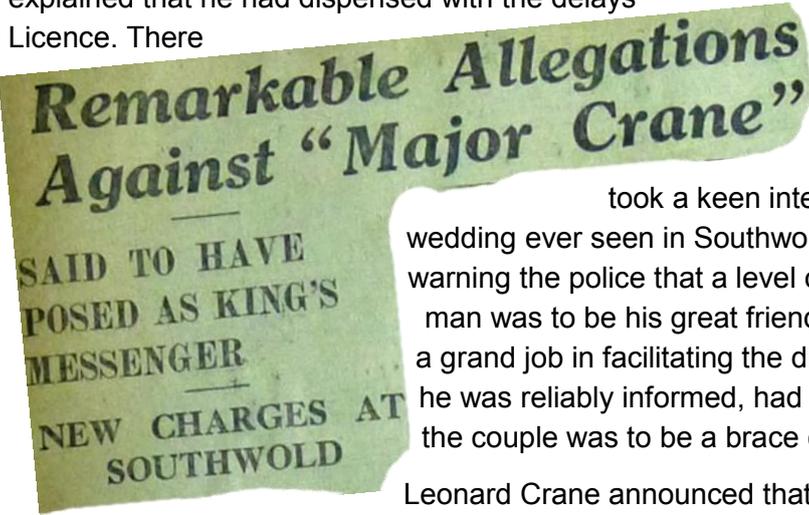
A few months before he had met Robert Spindler, a shopkeeper in Camden Town close to where Crane himself lodged. It was Robert who advised Crane to try his luck in wealthy East Suffolk, providing him with an introduction to his two his brothers, Oswald Spindler who ran a garage in Wenhaston, and William who was a fishmonger in Southwold. Wenhaston had accordingly been Crane's first port of call and the one that was to give the whole affair its popular name: 'The Wenhaston Millions'. Oswald put in £385. In total, it was said, around 30 people in the Southwold area contributed large and small sums to Crane's Chancery pot in return for life-changing slices of the Wenhaston Millions.

Fast-track divorce

Meanwhile, the dashing Major had proposed marriage to Muriel, brushing aside her protestations that she was already married, saying that, with the assistance of his powerful friends, a fast-track divorce was as good as accomplished. True to his word, within a few days, he showed her an affidavit, signed by the President of the Divorce Court himself, Lord Merrivale, indicating that the way was now clear for the decree absolute to be granted. The divorce itself, he explained, would be ratified in the 'French Statutory Court' following a short procedure in the English law courts. Major Crane took Muriel and her mother with him on a trip to London to show her the very court where the procedure was to take place. During the trip he wined and dined his fiancée generously, bought her expensive love tokens including what Muriel described as a 'rather nice ring' for £25 and a handsome engagement ring which he let her know had cost him a cool £40.

No expense spared

Muriel's mother, Mary Ann Waldorf, had already busied herself with the wedding plans. Major Crane explained that he had dispensed with the delays of banns readings by purchasing a Special Licence. There



was to be a big Church do in St Edmund's on Wednesday 31st January 1934, followed by a no-expense-spared reception at the Marlborough – where else! Crane himself

took a keen interest in the plans; it was to be the grandest wedding ever seen in Southwold and the Major took the wise precaution of warning the police that a level of crowd control may be necessary. His best man was to be his great friend Lord Merrivale who had already done such a grand job in facilitating the divorce. Lord Sankey (Lord High Chancellor) he was reliably informed, had let it be known that his wedding present to the couple was to be a brace of race horses.

Leonard Crane announced that, a few days after the wedding, there was to be a second reception at the Savoy Hotel in London to which all his 'investors' would be invited and which would also be attended by all the judges of the King's Bench Division. It was to be at this event that the grand share-out of the millions would be made. While, in the rest of England, the depression was deepening, in Southwold an island of optimism, expansiveness and affluence emerged. The housing market enjoyed a mini-boom, shopkeepers reported freakish spikes in business. One gentleman had purchased £200 worth of clothes, a local garage (though not, we believe, Oswald Spindler's) sold someone a Rolls Royce while a High Street electrical retailer took orders for 15 radiograms at £90 each. But the more Southwold spent, the more apprehensive it became.

Anxiety mounts

Early January 1934 saw a series of whirlwind guided trips to London during which Crane took some of his increasingly anxious principal investors to the Law Courts, Somerset House and the Bank of England by way of reassuring



BANK VAULT MILLIONS
STORY THAT WAS BELIEVED!
SO PREPOSTEROUS THAT IT MUST BE TRUE, SAID
FRIENDS OF MAJOR

them that the money was truly on its way. The standard procedure, described later by Oswald Spindler, was that the party would arrive at the distinguished destination and Crane would stride confidently in, asking his

companions to wait outside. Some time later he would emerge clutching a document signed by an eminent figure and apologetically asking his friends for cash to pay some legal fee or stamp duty. Following one such trip to the Bank of England, Crane described how he had been shown the stacks of gold bullion which were earmarked for him once the few legal formalities had been tied up.

Back in Southwold, Leonard Crane and his fiancée made an appointment to see the vicar, the Rev R N Pyke. As a mark of his gratitude, he had already promised St Edmund's the gift of two five-foot gold candlesticks. Rev Pyke was polite but sceptical – not just about the candlesticks but about the divorce decree which Crane showed him, bearing the signatures of Lord Merrivale and Mr Bosanquet KC. He was even less impressed about the Special Licence which Crane claimed he had secured for a tenner from the Consistory Court. Knowing that the Consistory Court had nothing to do with marriages, that marriage licences cost £30, not £10, and that Lord Merrivale had retired from the Presidency of the Divorce Division three months previously, the canny vicar called the local police.

Realising he was about to be rumbled, the Major went to ground. But before doing so he called together all his investors and solemnly presented them with a document 'under the Official Secrets Act' which he had all of them sign, making them swear that they would reveal nothing of the story they had heard of the Wenhaston Millions or of the share-out they were expecting in a few days. Thus, when reporters from the Daily Mirror, Sunday Graphic, Daily Mail and News of the World pitched up in town soon afterwards they met a very un-talkative community – as did the police.

By the time the Daily Mail broke the story Crane had fled to London, taking Muriel with him. When he saw the paper, Crane was livid and immediately dialled the editor, saying that he was speaking on behalf of Major Crane and that if they wished to know more about his credentials they should telephone the War Office or Horse Guards. The unhappy Muriel was not convinced by this little charade, noting that "no voice came over the other end of the wire." She

determined

MAJOR'S MOTHER TALKS TO US
Plea to Her Son Through 'Sunday Graphic' to Surrender and Try 'To Clear His Name'
HIS FATHER DIES—ALONE

to leave him for ever, hurrying off to Liverpool Street Station alone

and in tears – but not before her fiancée had thrust into her hand a prayer book with the inscription : "To my beloved wife Muriel upon her wedding day, from her loving husband, Len."

The missing groom

Back in Southwold, the Wedding Day came and went with cake untouched, dress unworn, gold candlesticks undelivered. The only crowd control needed was of the hordes of reporters and photographers who had descended on the town demanding 'The Story'. But Southwold had not quite heard the last of Major Crane.



David Caplice's mother, Florence

Edward Rawlins, Crane's most loyal and least sceptical friend and investor, received an anonymous phone call. It sounded like Crane's voice, said Rawlins, and what it said was that, although the planned big share-out at the Savoy had been unavoidably postponed, investors should not despair. Major Crane would be returning to Southwold that night, bearing with him 'a few million' to be going on with. Quickly Rawlins called a conference of fellow investors at his Blythborough home. He told them it was true he was getting less hopeful of receiving the promised return but he had not yet totally given up the prospect of getting something back. His friends could not share his optimism and they proved right.

A few weeks later it was the Sunday Graphic which finally tracked down the true identity of the mysterious Major. . He was not a Major, nor a CBE, nor a King's Messenger of any class. Nor was he in any branch of the Secret Service. Nor, indeed, was his name Leonard Crane. He was David Percy Caplice, a timber salesman and occasional bricklayer and the Graphic had found his distraught mother in a small house in Stoke Newington. His father had a heart attack and died directly he heard the news. Mother, Florence Sarah Caplice, collapsed with shock but managed to issue an appeal to her son, via the paper, to give himself up. She couldn't believe her son would have been capable of such ingenuity and chutzpah. He had been such a shy, unassuming boy, so timid that even when he attended job interviews, his mother had to accompany him. He wasn't a total stranger to His Majesty's forces; he had spent a short time in the 'Lancers' but had been discharged on compassionate grounds so that he could support his mother. He had even been married for ten years but his wife, Agnes, was now in an asylum.

Arrested

It was not until five months later that David Caplice was arrested and charged. He had attempted suicide but was now running a vegetable stall in London. He was remanded in Norwich Prison and appeared at the Southwold Police Court in July 1934 before the Mayor, Edgar Pipe, and a full bench of magistrates. Every public gallery seat was filled. He was committed for trial at the Suffolk Assizes in Ipswich on various charges of obtaining money by forgery and false pretences and of forging divorce papers. He pleaded not guilty but, by the time the trial opened on 25 October. He had changed his plea to guilty on all counts. The prosecuting council opened proceedings by stating: "When your Lordship has heard the case, you may wonder whether to be more surprised at the fertility of the prisoner's imagination or the credulity of the people he succeeded in defrauding."

'Blackguardly'

Mr Justice Hawke, presiding, was indeed astonished and somewhat impressed... "Many of your frauds must have taken months and months to carry out and the use of the utmost ingenuity." He regarded the fraud perpetrated on Muriel Duke as a particularly "blackguardly thing to do" but he also expressed himself as somewhat bewildered by the collective gullibility of otherwise intelligent and responsible pillars of Southwold society. Caplice's counsel used this very fact in a plea for leniency, arguing that no one of any sense would have believed Caplice's fantastic stories and would easily have been able to see through his forged documents. However, the judge would have none of it and sentenced Caplice to four years' penal servitude (hard Labour) for the fraud perpetrated upon Muriel through forged divorce papers. Several other shorter sentences relating to his many other fraudulent activities were to run concurrently.



David Caplice's first wife, Agnes

The press tended to play up the extent of the losses suffered by the Southwold victims, referring to thousands of pounds when in fact the largest individual loss ran only to a few hundred. Popular rumour had it that Rawlins lost his life's savings and was a ruined man. This seems unlikely; £650 was the equivalent of about £40,000 in today's money—not, perhaps, a fatal blow to a prosperous businessman and farmer. But there is little doubt that the humiliation of the 'Wenhaston Millions' scandal took its toll on the people concerned. After the trial, the episode was little spoken about and quietly forgotten. Edward Rawlins, who had kept faith with the Major for longest, had most face to lose and went into a slow decline, dying two years later in June 1936, aged 60. Muriel did remarry in 1937, a man called Francis Smyth. Caplice himself, released from hard labour, went back into the building business, went bankrupt, was discharged in 1942 and married a woman called Mary John in Edgware in 1945. He died aged 52 at No 34 Fairmead Crescent, Edgware in 1954, leaving his widow effects valued at £533 (today's equivalent: £12,300.)