

**James Joseph Dunn Powell and Ella Mildred Minter**



**James Joseph Dunn Powell as a young man**



**Ella Mildred Minter as a young woman**

When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered
Thirteenth January 1910. 12.20 a.m. 27 Trinity Street	James Joseph Dunn	Boy	James Henry Powell	Rebecca Nicks Powell formerly Dunn	Labourer at Telegraph works	M. N. Powell mother 27 Trinity Street Woolwich	Twenty first February 1910.

**Birth certificate of James Joseph Dunn Powell**

Maternal grandparents James Joseph Dunn Powell (1910-62) and Ella Mildred Minter (1910-1977) lived through the most tumultuous events of the twentieth century: the two world wars and the depression. Whilst James did not see active service in World War II he and his wife were to live in the most heavily bombed area per square acre in Britain with their young family. Whilst their house survived intact many of their neighbours were not as fortunate; by recounting their tale it is easy today to forget relaxing in our twenty first century chairs with our colour televisions, mobile phones and laptops the personal bravery and stoicism of this generation and who were forced to make such enormous personal sacrifices in order to assist the war effort.

Neither James nor Ella was born in Dartford: both had grown up in London within a couple of miles of each other. James was born a twin at 12.20 am on January 13<sup>th</sup> 1910 at his parents' home, 27 Trinity Street, Woolwich, the youngest of five children. He was the son of James Henry Powell and his wife of eleven years Rebecca Nicks Dunn. James Henry Powell an employee of the burgeoning Siemens factory telegraph (which today is one of the world's largest engineering firms) who had commenced his career first as labourer and electrical installer. Trinity Street in Woolwich was far from being an idyllic place to live. In 1900 the social commentator Charles Booth had visited it with local policeman PC William Clyne and commented in his notebooks which formed the basis for his research in his primary work *Life and labour of the people of London*. that Trinity Street itself was home to "birdcages and loafers" although conceded that "half skilled telegraph workers and construction workers" were also present in the locality. He continued: "there is something dismal about the low lying streets north of the Woolwich road...if trouble is to come out of the east in times of unemployment, it is from these streets." Fortunately for James's father by 1911 he was promoted to the clerical role of telegraph messenger and subsequently became a clerk.

The family had a tradition of naming their children after their forebears: the original Joseph Dunn and Rebecca Nicks, James's mother's grandparents had been married in Warwick in 1842 and were derived from an industrious family. Little if anything, however, has come down through family sources of James early life in Woolwich: he spoke in later life not one word to his children regarding his upbringing. Whilst not necessarily the case - many people of this era appear to have declined to relate to their descendants details of their formative years - this may, perhaps, be attributed to not one but a number of skeletons in his family closet: when James was still in the second year of this life the census enumerators of 1911 found his paternal grandfather – another James - incarcerated for an undisclosed offence in Wandsworth prison with his grandmother Selina living with his grandfather's co-worker George Gurden whilst still married: at the turn of the last century this behaviour would have seen her treated as essentially a social pariah. Yet until the 1930s and the introduction of legal aid divorce was only accessible to the wealthiest members of society.

At the age of four the great war broke out and a matter of weeks later news came to James's father that his brother John, a sergeant in the British Expeditionary Force had been killed in action in France at the battle of Neuve Chapell after one of the trenches his battalion were stationed in was blown to pieces by German fire. For the next four years the war raged and it would be difficult to conceive that James had anything other than a traumatic early childhood.

Within a year of his birth the family had relocated to 622 Woolwich Road, Charlton and in close proximity to his future wife Ella's residence. A piece of conjecture around their first meeting may lie in the fact that James cousin Julia Thrale nee Barker was working as a barmaid around this area at the time of her marriage in 1920; it remains a possibility that she worked at Ella's father's pub – the White Swan – for a time, and James may have at some time visited her: however, James came from a Methodist family whose doctrines promoted an abstinence to alcohol on a par with the temperance movement. James was no exception – oral history informs us that both James and Ella did not drink: Ella's abstinence stemmed from a number of ugly scenes witnessed at her father's pub whilst she was growing up: at Christmas they had sherry and port when the extended family came to stay but, according to his children, "that was the only time they ever drank".

When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant
Eleventh May 1910 Dedham N. S.	Ella Mildred	Girl	George Henry Minter	Rebecca Minter formerly Steed	Publican	Rebecca Minter Mother Dedham

Birth certificate of Ella Mildred Minter

Ella Mildred Minter was born in rural Essex, only a few miles distant of the setting for the artist John Constable's *The Haywain* in Dedham, on May 11, 1910. The third of seven children of George Henry Minter and Rebecca Steed, she was herself to face every bit traumatic time for a young child as her future husband after her father was allegedly apprehended by the police after using the basement of their village pub, the Compasses as a den of unlicensed gambling. The family were forced at a stroke to move to London to set up business again, this time at the White Swan, Charlton where her father retained the tenancy for the rest of his life. This was closely followed by the outbreak of the First World War. As a child holidays were spent at her maternal grandparents William and Gertrude Steed at Pound Farm in Dedham; Ella became a member of the girl guides and was also a keen gymnast yet from family recollections it does not appear either she or her husband - at least after their marriage - were much of social animals. She commenced her working life as a shorthand typist but all this was to change when she married James at Charlton Methodist church on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1934. James took what today would be considered the archaic view that the head of the household was the sole breadwinner and provider for his family; this, however, for the time, was a view shared by a large proportion of their generation. Working wives were the exception rather than the rule.



Ella Mildred Minter as a girl guide

Subsequent to their marriage the couple soon after relocated to Dartford, Kent where they mortgaged a house at 20 Gainsborough avenue, and James found employment as toolmakers Inspector at J & E Halls of the town, a long established engineering company: founded in 1785 the company was the innovator in the production of refrigerators during the nineteenth century and by the early twentieth Halls were supplying these to most the London hospitals.

Progressively this family run business diversified into the manufacture of lifts and escalators, in which James was primarily involved. It was Halls escalators which were to find their way into both Harrods and



**Studio photograph of Ella circa 1931**



**20 Gainsborough Avenue, Dartford: The family home**

Selfridges in due course and the company thrived until the beginning of the twenty first century.

1934. Marriage solemnized at <i>Charlton Methodist Church Woolwich Road Charlton</i> in the District of <i>Greenwich</i> in the County of <i>London</i>								
1	2		3	4	5	6		7
No.	When Married	Name and Surname	Age	Condition	Rank or Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Surname	Rank or Profession of Father
15	<i>October Sixth 1934</i>	<i>James Joseph Dunn Powell</i>	<i>24 years</i>	<i>Bachelor</i>	<i>Tool maker</i>	<i>122 Woolwich Road Charlton</i>	<i>James Henry Powell</i>	<i>Self</i>
		<i>Ella Mildred Minter</i>	<i>24 years</i>	<i>Spinster</i>		<i>22 The Village Charlton</i>	<i>George Henry Minter</i>	<i>Quaker</i>
Married in the <i>Methodist Church</i> according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the <i>Methodists</i> by <i>C. J. Powell</i>								
This Marriage was solemnized between us, <i>J. J. D. Powell</i> in the Presence of us, <i>E. M. Minter</i>			And in the Presence of <i>E. J. Part</i>			Authorized Person for <i>William Henry Lawson</i> the <i>Said Church</i>		

Marriage certificate of James Joseph Dunn Powell and Ella Mildred Minter, 1934

James and Ella soon settled into their new domestic life: with a house and job secured in Dartford already assured the couple set about raising a family, commencing on June 7, 1936 with the birth of their first child, a son, Keith James. Yet within the course of a few years the day to day life of the family along with so many of their contemporaries was to be changed forever.

Whilst the Powell's were not — like their fathers — resident in London during the course of the Second World War, when it came in 1939 they could hardly have found a less propitious location to live. It was over Dartford where the Luftwaffe came on nightly bombing raids to London, and it was over Dartford where they dropped their bombs if their passage to London was intercepted before returning to their homeland and as such was the most heavily bombed area per square acre in the country: the sheer scale of the bombing today is difficult to comprehend: during the course of the war almost 6000 high explosive bombs were dropped, together with 23 land mines, 73 phosphorous bombs and 200 oil bombs not to mention a staggering 2 million incendiary bombs. 150 civilians of the town lost their lives as a result of these sustained bombing raids, a figure which could have been much, much worse given the intensity of the bombing and damage inflicted. These air raid sirens sounded over Dartford for the first time in Dartford on August 25, 1940 and over the successive 90 nights the residents of the town were bombed on no less than 69 occasions: the worst of these occurred on September 5<sup>th</sup> 1940 when one of the female wards of the West Hill hospital was subjected to a high explosive bomb killing a nurse and twenty four patients: it was in this very same hospital that James and Ella's second child, Pamela Mary, was born on February 25 1944 during the height of the VI Doodlebug bombing campaign by the Germans on the capital ,many of which fell short of their targets and landed in Dartford. Pamela was destined, almost thirty years hence, to become my mother.



James and Ella on their wedding day

Second World War has been designated by posterity "Dartford's finest hour".

Not only did the populace of Dartford endure these nightly air raids but were forced to make many personal sacrifices, and as a whole were to offer a valuable contribution to the war effort: the employees of grandfathers own firm, J & E Hall contributed enough to purchase an anti aircraft gun for their own premises which was disguised from the air to avert German attacks; other streets gave what little they could to finance ammunition, with many household donating aluminium for recycling into aircraft; others donated clothes to the newly opened second hand shops which acted as charity outlets for the victims of bombing. Add to this the rationing introduced and the uncertainty of the outcome of the war without the benefit of hindsight these were grim times indeed. Sixty years after the end of the war a resident of Dartford, an E Garrett was interviewed for a feature on the town and related how, during rationing, "some people used to keep chickens to get a few eggs". The Powells were no exception.

Many of the younger residents of Dartford were evacuated to the countryside in these turbulent times, but the Powell children were not among them; they owned a brick air raid shelter which would have been used on a frequent basis which after the war was converted into a rockery, adorned with flowers. Indeed, horticulture was a hobby close to James's heart: he served as secretary to his works horticultural society and arranged the local flower and vegetable shows. He cultivated roses and chrysanthemums in his garden which went down to the allotment where he grew vegetables and fruit bushes. A keen craftsman, James also made toys for his children, including a rocking horse and a brass hoop for daughter Pamela's ballet lessons. An avid photographer, many of his snapshots of family life still survive.



James circa 1945

The couple's family was completed with the birth of their daughter Angela Beryl in 1947 and the young children accompanied their father to Charlton on Sunday afternoons for "high tea" to visit James' father. It was a journey the young Pamela would need to accustomise herself to as one day she find herself working in the heart of the capital.

In 1954 the family purchased their first television set and for their summer holiday travelled to the Isle of Wight to visit James Aunt Eleanor Hussey: her son – James's first cousin - was a



Ella circa 1945

classically trained actor and

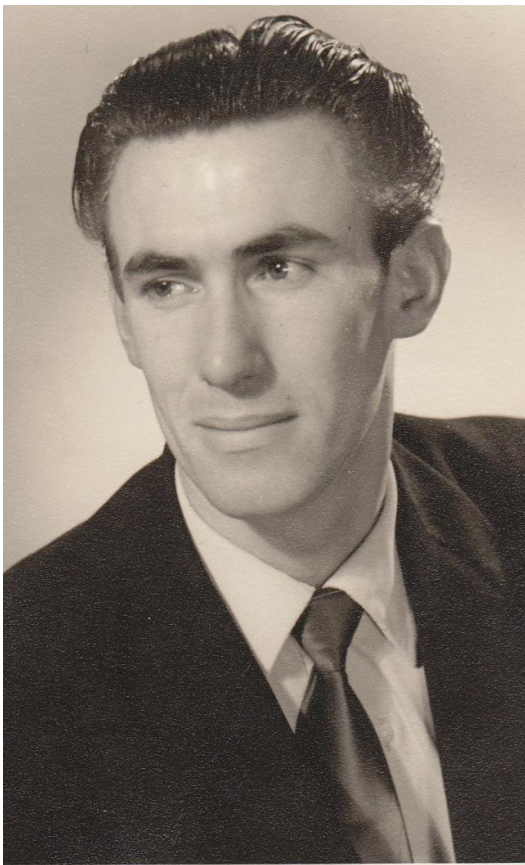
friend of Kenneth Williams who had been affiliated to the Royal Shakespeare Company. Later in his career he was to appear in both television shows such as *Z cars* and *The Avengers* and in a number of films, playing an architect in one of the most famous British productions *Get Carter*. With their television set the Powell's could watch his appearances, a fact testified to by his daughters.

In 1959 Pamela enrolled at Gravesend arts college to study for A levels in Art, Design and Dressmaking and began a career in London commencing at Bijon's fashions and subsequently Jane and Jane, the fashion designer Jean Muir's outlet in Oxford Street, who was involved in designing the costumes for the cast of *The Avengers* with Pamela on one occasion conducting a private fitting for one of its stars Diana Rigg. She left Jane and Jane to marry David Roy Bedingfield and moved to rural Cambridgeshire.

James and Ella remained in Dartford: when James died suddenly of a heart attack in February 1962 Ella was finally able to return to clerical duties at Vickers in the town after 28 years as a housewife, a post she retained until her retirement eight years later.



Gravestones of James and Ella, Dartford cemetery



**Keith James Powell**



**Pamela Mary Powell**



**Angela Beryl Powell**



**Ella in 1963**