

*JAMES KINNEAR – AN
AMBITIOUS POSTMAN AND
GROCER
BY PETER GIBSON*

James Kinnear was a Postman in Derry who, for some years, also had a grocer's shop. Both his son-in-law and grandson also worked for the Post Office.

James Kinnear's Family

James Kinnear was born in July 1850 in Culmore, Londonderry. His father, Alexander, was a gardener.

Originally a rural area across the River Foyle from the city centre, the small townland of Culmore became urbanised during the 19th century as part of what is known as "the Waterside".

James Kinnear married Ellen Smyth on 11 May 1871 in Glendermott Presbyterian Church, Londonderry. Ellen had been born in County Down about 1848. She died in 1911, aged sixty-three. The cause of her death was "Bronchitis, 12 months. Cardiac failure, 21 days. Certified."

James and Ellen Kinnear had two children.

Their son, Alexander Kinnear, was born on 15th September 1873. Sadly, he died on 17th September 1875, two days after his second birthday. The cause of his death was "Diarrhoea, 1 week. Uncertified". Diarrhoea was a common cause of the death of infants and young children at that time.

Their daughter, Sarah Ann Campbell Kinnear, was born on 11 May 1876.

In 1898, Sarah married Samuel Spence in Glendermott Presbyterian Church. Samuel was a Post Office Clerk.

Sarah and Samuel had at least seven children. Their eldest child, James (born in 1898) followed his father's and grandfather's footsteps by working for the Post Office. At the time, it was common for some families to have a tradition of working for the Post Office. I will consider Samuel and James' careers in the Post Office later.

James Kinnear died on 8th September 1928, aged seventy eight at Sarah's home in Duke Street, Derry. The cause of his death was "Mitral regurgitation (unknown). Cardiac failure, 7 days. Certified."

The Post Office and other work

James Kinnear was employed by the Post Office in 1867 to be a messenger from Derry to Campsie (now Campsey). In 1878 he was employed as a clerk in Londonderry. This move to an "office job" suggest that James was keen to make progress in his career.

He worked for the Post Office for thirty-four years until he retired on grounds of ill health in 1901. He salary was £149 per year and he was awarded a pension of £84 9s per year.

In 1880, James Kinnear was one of eight unsuccessful applicants for the post of Master of the Londonderry Union Workhouse. The position instead was given to the Master of the Coleraine Workhouse. The fact that James applied for this post indicates that, along with the higher salary of a Workhouse Master, he may also have sought a higher position in society than that of a Post Office clerk.

James' ambition may have led him to open a grocer's shop. We do not know in what year he opened the shop, but Directories record that he had the shop in Abercorn Road, Londonderry from at least 1894 until at least 1901.

Although he may have been the owner of the business, given that he had a full-time job with the Post Office, it is likely that the shop was run day-to-day by other people, most likely by his wife, Ellen. They were also perhaps assisted by their daughter, Sarah. In 1901, Sarah, her husband, Samuel Spence, and their family, were living at 38 Abercorn Road, the address of the shop.

Family members who worked for the Post Office

As mentioned, above, James Kinnear's son-in-law, Samuel Spence and Samuel's son (James Kinnear's grandson), James Spence, both worked for the Post Office.

Samuel Spence was employed as a Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist in 1897.

Samuel seems to have been valued by his superiors. In September 1909 he was chosen to be the Post Office official designated to assist members of the public to submit the first claims for the newly-introduced Old Age Pension for the over 70s. When the Old Age Pension was introduced the only "welfare" system in the UK was the Poor Law. Under the Poor Law, "indoor relief" meant being admitted to a workhouse and "outdoor relief" meant going through, the often demeaning, process of applying for money to Relieving Officers. Partly to avoid the stigma of the Poor Law, the government decided to make Old Age Pension payments through the Post Office. It later became the norm in the 20th century that state benefits were paid through the Post Office.

Later in 1909, Samuel became the first person in the Londonderry Post Office to be awarded an additional technical allowance for his technical and manipulative skills in telegraphy. Reporting this success, on 10th December 1909 the Londonderry Sentinel added:

“The postmaster and Mr Gallagher, the superintendent of telegraphists, are to be congratulated on having such an efficient and highly-qualified member on their staff, an officer, too, who adds the qualifications of geniality and tact to those of ability.”

I am sure these qualities led to Samuel being appointed an Overseer at the GPO in Derry.

Samuel died suddenly, of heart failure, in 1932 at the age of fifty-six, while he was still employed at Derry GPO.

James Kinnear’s grandson, James Spence, joined the Post Office in Londonderry as a Learner in 1915. In 1920 he was appointed to be a Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist. He transferred to the Post Office in Coleraine in 1933 and, along with his wife and three children, moved to live in Portstewart.

Tragically, James Spence died in 1935 aged thirty six of head injuries, following a road accident. He had lost control of his motorcycle on the Portstewart to Coleraine Road.

Conclusion

The story of James Kinnear’s life and that of his family is a story of striving for progress – socially and financially. When James’ failed to be appointed to a much more demanding post than that of Post Office clerk, he decided to open a grocery business while still working for the Post Office. His son-in-law, Samuel Spence, demonstrated his abilities within the Post Office and was able to progress from being a clerk and telegraphist to the post of Overseer.

Fact Sheet: James Kinnear

Pensioner Details
<i>Pensioner name:</i> James Kinnear
<i>Person ID:</i> IR1007
<i>Your name:</i> Peter Gibson
<i>U3A group:</i> Northern Ireland
Part One: Birth and Family
1: When and where was your pensioner born?
James Kinnear was born in July 1850 in Culmore, Londonderry. Originally a rural area across the River Foyle from the city centre, the small townland of Culmore became urbanised during the 19th century as part of what is known as “the Waterside”.
2: Who were your pensioners’ parents? Record any details you can find out about them here (e.g. occupation, religious affiliation, whether they could read or write)
James Kinnear’s father was Alexander Kinnear , a gardener who lived in Culmore. Alexander Kinnear died on 16 September 1881, aged 78. The cause of his death was “Renal disease, months. Certified”.
3: Did your pensioner have any siblings? What were their names, and how old were they in relation to your pensioner? Use this space to record anything else you have found out about them (e.g. occupation)
No records of siblings have been found. Any siblings would probably have been born before the start of civil registration of births in 1864.
Part Two: Marriage and children
1: Did your pensioner marry? What was their spouse’s name, and when and where did they marry them? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about their spouse (e.g. when/where they were born, their occupation)
James Kinnear married Ellen Smyth on 11 May 1871 in Glendermott Presbyterian Church, Londonderry. At the time of the marriage, James was a Post Office Official, living in Clooney. Ellen was living in Union Street, Waterside. Her father was Henry Smyth, a farmer. Ellen Kinnear (nee Smyth) was born in County Down about 1848. She died on 12 August 1911, aged 63, at 104 Duke Street. The cause of her death was “Bronchitis, 12 months. Cardiac failure, 21 days. Certified.”
2: Did your pensioner have any children? What were their names, and when they were born? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about them (e.g. occupation, where they lived later in life)
James and Ellen Kinnear had two children. Alexander Kinnear was born on 15 September 1873 at Bishop Street. He died on 17 September 1875, aged 2, at Albert Street. The cause of his death was “Diarrhoea, 1 week. Uncertified”.

Sarah Ann Campbell Kinnear was born on 11 May 1876 at Bishop Street.

On 17 July 1898, Sarah married Samuel Spence in Glendermott Presbyterian Church. Samuel was a Post Office Clerk and his father was Andrew, a farmer.

Sarah and Samuel had at least 7 children: James Andrew Spence (1898), Edna Isabella Spence (1899), Helena Celestine Spence (1902), Samuel Clements Spence (1904), Iris Regina Spence (1910), Horatio Herbert Kitchener Spence (1915) and Harry Spence (1918).

In 1901, Sarah and her family lived at 38 Abercorn Road, the address of James Kinnear's shop (See Part Three, below).

The family later lived at 104 Duke Street from many years. Both Ellen and James Kinnear died in this house.

Part Three: Work

1: What occupation was your pensioner recorded as doing in census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

James Kinnear was employed by the Post Office in 1867 to be a messenger from Derry to Campsie. In 1878 he was employed as a clerk in Londonderry.

He worked for the Post Office for 34 years until he retired on grounds of ill health in 1901. His salary was £149 per year and he was awarded a pension of £84 9s per year.

In 1880, James Kinnear was one of 8 unsuccessful applicants for the post of Master of the Londonderry Union Workhouse. The position was given to the Master of the Coleraine Workhouse.

Directories from at least 1894 to at least 1901 record that James Kinnear had a grocer's shop in Abercorn Road, Londonderry. Although he may have been the owner of the business, given that he had a full-time job with the Post Office, it is likely that the shop was run day-to-day by his wife, Ellen, perhaps assisted by their daughter, Sarah.

2: What occupations were people living with your pensioner (e.g. spouse, children, boarders) doing in the census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

In 1901, James Kinnear completed Census returns for two households, but mentioned himself on only one.

He recorded himself (a Clerk) as the head of household in the house in Abercorn Road where his daughter, Sarah, her husband, Samuel Spence, a Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist, and their children lived.

In the second household, in Culmore, which was probably where James lived, he recorded his wife, Ellen, and a servant.

In 1911, James (a Postal Clerk, Retired) and Ellen, along with a servant, lived in Dungiven Road.

Part Four: Anything Else

Please use this space to record anything else you have found out about your pensioner

James Kinnear's retirement and death

After 1901, the next Directory which can be accessed is that for 1907. This document indicates that James no longer had a grocer's shop in Abercorn Road. James Kinnear died on 08 September 1928, aged 78 at 104 Duke Street. The cause of his death was "Mitral regurgitation (unknown). Cardiac failure, 7 days. Certified."

Family members who worked for the Post Office

James Kinnear's son-in-law, Samuel Spence and Samuel's son (James Kinnear's grandson), James Andrew Spence, both worked for the Post Office.

Samuel Spence was employed as a Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist in 1897. In 1909 he was chosen to help members of the public make the claims for the newly introduced Old Age Pension. The following is an excerpt from *The Derry Journal* of 25th September 1909:

"Yesterday was the first date for the making of the claims under the Old Age Pensions Act [...] in the Derry GPO a special apartment on the first floor adjacent to the telegraphic rooms was set apart in anticipation of yesterday's requests. To deal with the demand a member of the postal staff, Mr Samuel Spence, was detached from other duty. In Court phraseology, Mr Spence 'took his seat' at ten o'clock yesterday morning, and from that hour till close upon six pm he was closely and almost continuously occupied. The total of callers for forms – men and women – was sixty or over. A good proportion of these were evidently much advanced in years, and some of them were so feeble that they had to be carefully assisted up the stairway to the room by postmen or telegraph messengers"

Later that year, the *Londonderry Sentinel* of 10th December reported on Samuel's success in gaining additional qualifications and salary:

"Mr Samuel Spence is the first member of the Londonderry Post Office staff to secure the technical allowance granted by the recent Parliamentary Committee on Post Office officials for technical and manipulative skill in telegraphy. Mr Spence secured the necessary first class certificates in technical telegraphy and in magnetism and electricity at the examinations held this year under the City and Guilds of London Institute and the Board of Education. Having also passed the high speed manipulative tests, he has secured the honour and benefit mentioned. The postmaster and Mr Gallagher, superintendent of telegraphists, are to be congratulated on having such an efficient and highly qualified member on their staff, an office, too, who adds the qualifications of geniality and tact to those of ability"

Samuel later became an Overseer in the GPO in Londonderry. He died at his home, 104 Duke Street, on 28 December 1932, aged 56, from heart failure. The newspaper reports of his sudden death mentioned that he had been a keen angler on the River Faughan.

James Kinnear's grandson, **James Andrew Spence**, joined the Post Office in Londonderry as a Learner in 1915. In 1920 he was appointed to the post of Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist. He transferred to the Post Office in Coleraine in 1933 and, along with his wife and three children, moved to live in Portstewart. James Spence died on 13 February 1935, aged 36, after losing control of his motorcycle on the Portstewart to Coleraine Road. The inquest found that he had died from a fractured skull and lacerations of the brain.

Part Five: Your Sources

Please use this space to record the sources you have used

James Kinnear (Postal Pensioner – JK)

- Birth 1850 – Civil Service Evidence of Age:
<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=GBOR%2FCSEOA%2F100%2F0555&parentid=GBOR%2FCSEOA%2F00032347>
- Marriage 1871:
https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage_returns/marriages_1871/11343/8163931.pdf
- Appointment as Messenger 1867: British Postal Museum and Archive; Series: POST 58; Reference Number: 84
- Appointment as Clerk 1878: British Postal Museum and Archive; Series: POST 58; Reference Number: 87
- Application for post of Workhouse Master 1880: *Coleraine Constitution* (10th January 1880), page 6
- Directories (<https://www.lennonwylie.co.uk/PT1901L2.htm>): Slater's Royal National Directory of Ireland 1894, page 190; The Belfast And Province Of Ulster Directory 1897, page 1293; The Belfast And Province Of Ulster Directory 1901:
- Census 1901: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000621840/> and <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000634438/>
- Census 1911: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai002854701/>

Alexander Kinnear (father of JK)

- Death 1881:
https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1881/06422/4844783.pdf

Ellen Kinnear (wife of JK)

- Death 1911:
https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1911/05388/4504067.pdf

Alexander Kinnear (son of JK)

- Birth 1873:
https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/birth_returns/births_1873/03173/2163881.pdf
- Death 1875:
https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1875/020614/7232605.pdf

Sarah Kinnear (daughter of JK)

- Birth 1876:
https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/cert_amends/cert_1876/2116187b.pdf
- Marriage 1898:
https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/marriage_returns/marriages_1898/10405/5789124.pdf

Samuel Spence (son-in-law of JK)

- Appointment as Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist 1897: British Postal Museum and Archive; Series: POST 58; Reference Number: 96
- Newspaper articles:

Old Age Pensions: Derry Journal 25 Sept 1909, page 5

Qualifications: Londonderry Sentinel 10 Dec 1909, page 4

Death: Londonderry Sentinel 29 Dec 1932, page 4

James Alexander Spence (grandson of JK)

- Birth 1898:
https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/birth_returns/births_1898/02073/1791484.pdf
- Appointment as Learner 1915: British Postal Museum and Archive; Series: POST 58; Reference Number: 112
- Appointment as Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist 1920: British Postal Museum and Archive; Series: POST 58; Reference Number: 116
- Newspaper report of death and Inquest 1935: Derry Journal 15 Feb 1935, page 14.