

Biography: George Keen GM 1898-1941 - for our future

George Frederick William Keen was born 12 March 1898, Feltham, Middlesex, third child to George William Mark Keen, a railway worker (London and South Western), and Florence Charlotte Mary Beatrice Keen, formerly Selwood - brother to two older sisters, Florence Mary 15 December 1895, and Daisy Emma 15 December 1896.

George later joined the Navy at the age of sixteen, serving his country during the First World War 1914-1918, for which he was awarded the 1914-15 Star, the British War and Victory campaign medals for his service. George served aboard HMS Spitfire [1895-1920] as a telegraph operator (*telegraphist*) at the Battle of Jutland (31 May-1 June 1916), and was later onboard HMS Speedy [1918-22] late 1922 when she was sunk following a collision with a trawler off Istanbul, then Constantinople, reportedly sending all of his eight medals to the bottom of the sea!

The following year, 1923, George, now a warehouseman, married Elsie Fuller (1902-1976) from Mitcham, Surrey, and they were to live at 84 Lavender Avenue. Their daughter Doris (1924-1995) was born one year later, but the marriage wasn't to last and they were legally separated in November 1927; Elsie unable to leave her parents when George found work elsewhere. George later met Mabel Wheeler, formerly Pike, while lodging with her parents. Mabel's husband (Laurant) had earlier been admitted to a mental asylum, and she and George became a couple, later moving in with Mabel's sister-in-law in Ashford.



Twin Tracks: George is third from the left - date and exact location unknown, circa 1926

Laurant Wheeler died in 1932 - George and Mabel were to have their first child that year, a girl Mavis Thelma born at 32 Sandells Avenue, Ashford, Staines, on 24 July. When the birth was registered, George conceivably failed to mention that he wasn't married to Mavis' mother, and he and Mabel were to make a second visit to the Register Office, during March the following year, to have George's name omitted, and to have both her maiden and surname corrected!

George had by this time been working for the Southern Railway (SR) Company some six years, spending five of them at Clapham Junction. Consequences meant that he and Mabel were forced to move from Ashford, while he went to live in Battersea. Mavis was boarded out, and Brian, born at St. James' Hospital in Balam on 8 October that year, 1933, was taken home to live together with Betty and Joyce, Mabel's daughters from her marriage to Wheeler in 1923.

In July 1937 however, Mabel was to go into hospital, and Betty, Joyce and Brian were then taken care of by their Aunt, Alice Freeland. Meanwhile Mavis' foster-mother met with an accident and Mavis was returned to her father. George found it difficult to place Mavis because of his ongoing association with her mother, and with it impossible for Alice to look after another, he had little option but to leave her in the park with the ground keeper while he went off to work.

Mabel later left hospital and spent time convalescing until October that year, 1937. George found a home to rent in Westminster Road, Carshalton for 18s and 9d a week, where they were all to live until the late summer of 1938. Pending George's divorce however, it transpired that they weren't to stay together, and Mabel was to move to new premises at West Grove, Walton upon Thames. It's also thought that she may have lived above a bakery, possibly in Hersham, and for some time at Thistlecroft. George moved to Oxenden Place in Tongham, and it's also understood that he resided at 4 Grange Road, Tongham, almost certainly by the outbreak of war.



Mabel placed both Mavis and Brian with Dr. Barnardo's on 4 August 1938, initially for six months only. George was earning £2.2 shillings a week at that time, and it's known that he was to pay 7s 6d to the home in addition to the 5s he had to pay his wife Elsie. Mavis and Brian stayed for one night at Stepney Causeway, and were placed at Barkingside, Essex the very next day. It's thought that Mabel perhaps hadn't been completely honest to the home in that she may have wanted to leave George when asking them for their help.

Mavis was later to understand that their stay was meant to be a temporary one, and they were to be back together eventually. George is known to have visited the home, and Mavis was also later to learn that their Mum and Dad would continue to meet, apparently in secret, at a cafe by the station in Weybridge, perhaps in an effort to reconcile their differences? Mavis was later to spend time at Lilleshall Hall before being fostered out at Creting St. Marys, subsequently attending the Warlies Training School in Waltham Abbey.

However, on 3 September 1939 (11:15 BST), the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, announced that Britain and France were at war with Germany following the invasion of Poland two days earlier - George, a sub-ganger (*platelayer*) for the Southern Railway, and a Scoutmaster with the 9th Farnham (*Tongham*) Troop, was within the year living at cottages alongside the single-track railway at Tongham.

The railway had been twin tracks from 1898 through 1930. Public transport came to an end in 1937, the line remaining open only for industrial use, mainly for the Aldershot Gasworks up until 1954, finally closing on 31 December 1960.

Now August 1940, there has been a munitions train in the sidings for some ten days, loaded with explosives intended for reception and re-issue by the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. Nearing midnight on 22 August, George heard the drone of an aircraft overhead, later thought to be a lone Dornier bomber - the plane reportedly guided by a spy's light from the Hogs Back Hotel - and then a flash. Watching from his doorway, George counted as many as eleven incendiary bombs as they dropped from above, then a number of explosive bombs, at least one hitting the third carriage...

It's quite possible that a spy may have helped to guide in an aircraft equipped with the Lorenz beam blind landing system, an air radio navigation system in use from the late 1930s, modified for blind bombing from German planes in their offensive against English cities during 1940/41.

...He rushed to the train to try and unhook the carriage, but beaten back by the flames and the sheer weight of the wagon, George instead assisted locals in nearby cottages, quickly helping them into shelters before attempting to muster an engine, and trying again to release the trucks. George Leach arrived, having cycled approximately two miles from his home, and

it's thought that they then both set out to gather a working party before unhooking the trains, pushing them down the metals some 300 yards into a clearing away from immediate danger west of Grange Farm...

...Along with others, including military personnel, the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS), and the Home Guard, they continued to work for a further two hours, with munitions igniting and debris shooting everywhere, clearly without consideration for their own safety. Finally, black to the waist, their combined efforts averting a certain catastrophe, undoubtedly preventing untold damage, reportedly saving the lives of those in nearby homes, the danger to individuals in Grange Road quite apparent.

British Red Cross Society (BRCS) volunteer nurses also attended the scene that night. Following the bombings there were reports of beds on fire and brave young scouts, cracks in housing, of an unexploded time bomb, and damage to St. Paul's Church and the burial grounds on Poyle Road. The RAF diary entry for that night reported High Explosive (HE), Incendiary Bombs (IB), and one casualty (unknown) so far - now understood to have been Wilfred Friday (d. 24 August 1940).

Both men were publicly thanked for their courageous acts at a presentation in the Village Hall, and on 15 November 1940 the London Gazette announced that George Frederick William Keen and George Henry Leach were to be awarded the George Medal, stating: 'Both men acted quite regardless of their own safety and at very considerable personal risk'. George Keen was also decorated with the Fire Service Gallantry award, the Southern Railway Silver Gilt Medal, and presented with the Scouts Bronze Cross, the highest award of the Association for gallantry, granted for special heroism of action in the face of extraordinary risk, 'For his gallantry in saving from destruction with the help of volunteers he had called upon, an ammunition train which had been bombed during an air raid at Tongham, August 1940'.

Nine months after the bombing to the day, 22 May 1941, George Keen, a diabetic, was taken ill while at work. Returning home he was attended to by a nurse and, following a visit by a doctor on the Saturday, was admitted to the Royal Surrey County Hospital at Guildford reportedly suffering from shock. George subsequently slipped into a coma and died the next day 25 May 1941, just two days before he was due to collect his medal from the King at Buckingham Palace.

Working many years for the Southern Railway, at the time George had been employed by the Aldershot Gasworks, and had lived at Rose Cottage in Tongham. Sadly his death certificate was subsequently issued on the day he was due to collect his award from King George VI; and he was later buried in Feltham Cemetery on 31 May 1941. His George Medal was sent to his wife Mrs. Elsie Keen of Mitcham, Surrey on 23 July 1941. The following year, 21 January 1942, the Chairman of SR sent Mrs. Keen a special illuminated certificate specifically designed for railway staff that had been awarded the George Medal. George Keen GM and George Leach GM were as a matter of fact the very first working for the railway to be awarded the George Medal, created 23 and instituted 24 September 1940.

The following is a quote by a local resident, Mrs. Hyde who earlier sent a message to George - taken from an unknown 1940 newspaper clipping: *"It must ever stand out in the memory as one of the greatest deeds of heroism."*

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Acknowledgement and bibliography: Brian Keen, George Marsden (Grandson), Mavis Woollven, (Formerly Kerr (nee Keen)), A Surrey Village and its Church, St. Pauls, Howard. N. Cole (1973), Ash Museum, Barnardo's, Brave Railwaymen, Allan Stanistreet (1989), Forever England, William Collins Sons & Co. (1941), Guildford Register Office, Southern Railway Magazine (Nov/Dec 1940), The Aldershot Gazette and Guildford Times (29 May 1941), The Aldershot News and Military Gazette, Farnborough Chronicle and Fleet Times (30 May 1941), The British Red Cross, The Daily Mirror (16 November 1940), The Herald (7 September 1940), The Left Handshake, Hilary St. George Saunders (1949), The London Fire Brigade, The London Gazette (Supplement (15 November 1940)), The Ministry of Defence, The National Railway Museum, The Scout Association, The Surrey History Centre, The Times (29 May 1941), The War Illustrated (13 September 1940), Tongham Scouts, Weybridge Register Office.