



## THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS IN NINETEENTH- AND EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY NORFOLK

by Richard C. Maguire

This article considers the under-researched subject of English people of African heritage who lived a prosperous and fulfilled life in Norfolk during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In doing so, the article aims to provide additional data and analysis in respect of an issue to which Gretchen Gerzina and James Walvin have, rightly, drawn our attention; the relative paucity of our knowledge concerning the lives of Black and mixed-race people in 19th-century Britain.<sup>1</sup> In respect of Norfolk I have suggested elsewhere already that the evidence of the history of Norfolk's Black and mixed race population shows how Norfolk had a long-standing Black population from at least the 16th century and that this population appears to have been integrated relatively well into the white majority population.<sup>2</sup> The evidence produced here expands upon that interpretation by looking at the period after 1800 and also by looking at a specific group about which nothing has been written to date, those members of the county's middle-class who had an African heritage.

### INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the members of two families, the Steeles, one of whom lived in Yarmouth, and the Minns family in Thetford. The Minns family name is more well-known, because on 9 November 1904 one of them, Dr Allan Glaisyer Minns (Plate 1), was elected as the mayor of the town of Thetford and, in so doing, became Britain's first Black and mixed-race mayor, some nine years before John Richard Archer was elected in Battersea, London.<sup>3</sup> Minns' story is now becoming more well known, but less recognised are the stories of his brother, Pembroke, his sister, Ophelia, and those of his five children; all of whom lived as an integrated part of Thetford's middle-class society from the 1850s onwards. The story of the Steeles is another story of middle-class life, but this time concerns Norwich and Great Yarmouth. Both stories begin, however, in the heart of the darkness of transatlantic slavery, the Caribbean, and it is in the contrast between the evils of the lives forced upon those of African descent in Caribbean slavery and the freedom and status achieved by their descendants in Norfolk that these stories offer us a new insight into the issue of race in 19th-century and early 20th-century English county society.



Plate 1. Dr Allan Minns in *Photographs of Norfolk Mayors, 1904–6*, Norfolk Record Office BOL 6/36, 742x7  
Reproduced with permission of the Norfolk Record Office

### EDWARD AND KATHERINE STEELE

In his wonderful 19th-century history of the port of Great Yarmouth C. J. Palmer made the following entry





when discussing notable inhabitants of one of the town's most prestigious residential addresses – Regent Road:

At No. 13 resided for many years Edward Steele, Esq., long known and highly esteemed in Yarmouth society. He was born at Barbadoes (sic) in 1785, and was for many years an officer in the East Norfolk Regiment of Militia. He died here in 1873, in his 89th year, unmarried, and having retained his faculties almost to the last.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from the passing reference to his birthplace, Barbados, there is no reason to think that Edward Steele might have any connection to the history of Norfolk's Black population. In fact, Steele's story, and that of his sister Katherine Ann Steele, began in the very bowels of Caribbean slavery and racism. For Edward Steele Esq. and his sister Katherine were both born enslaved, the illegitimate children of a plantation owner in Barbados called Joshua Steele.

Little is known of Joshua Steele's life before 1750, but he eventually became an accomplished 18th-century 'Gentleman and Scholar'.<sup>5</sup> In 1750, he married a wealthy widow, Sarah Hopkins Osborn.<sup>6</sup> Osborn had inherited a large plantation on the island of Barbados, called Halletts, which in 1774 held 131 enslaved people.<sup>7</sup> She also had the lease of two other plantations that bordered Halletts: Byde Mill House plantation, which covered 320 acres of land and held 102 enslaved people, who were valued in 1777 at £4,600, and Kendalls, which held 184 enslaved people in 1774.<sup>8</sup> When his wife died in 1757, Steele found himself the possessor of both enslaved people and plantations. Although interested in how this income might be increased, Steele showed no interest in the welfare of his enslaved people and kept silent about his own ownership status in general discussions.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, he needed the income from these plantations to fund his lifestyle and from 1775 he became increasingly concerned over their falling cash-flow, beginning to attend meetings of the Society of West India Merchants and Planters, which had been established to protect the interest of absentee landlords such as himself.<sup>10</sup>

In 1780 Steele, possibly now eighty years of age, travelled to Barbados to examine his estates.<sup>11</sup> There he was confronted with the reality that he had avoided for so many years. Appalled by, what he termed, the 'brutality of my species' Steele spent the next decade challenging the accepted way in which plantations were run. To the delight of abolitionists in England, he implemented changes such as banning the use of the whip, paying his slaves, having them sit in courts to judge their fellows, and even established a system of tenancy.<sup>12</sup>

Steele remained on Barbados until his death in 1796 and fathered two children with Anna Slatia, one of the enslaved women on the Byde Mill plantation. These were Edward, born in 1785, and Katherine (birth date unknown). The children remained enslaved, as did their mother, but a few hours before he died, Steele changed his will. He left his plantation to his sister, Mary Ann Steele, and his children, stating that the plantation was to not to 'become the property of any other person claiming in right of my said children, who are now slaves, but for their own proper benefit and not otherwise.'<sup>13</sup>

As Steele had probably intended, the will led to a major court case. Firstly, disagreement flared between Mary Steele and the executor, Francis Bell, when Mary proposed to sell the plantation to a planter named Phillip Gibbes, disinheriting Edward and Katherine. Bell, to his credit, disagreed. Mary Steele died before the matter was settled and Bell assumed control of the plantation. Gibbes continued litigation, however, claiming that his agreement with Mary Steele should be honoured, because Edward and Katherine, as slaves, had no rights.<sup>14</sup>

The case was eventually dealt with and the wishes of Steele were ignored. The idea that enslaved people could be allowed to hold property was so dangerous that it was not allowed to be entertained in the Barbados courts. Yet, while Edward and Katherine lost their inheritance, they did not remain enslaved. Francis Bell arranged for Edward and Katherine to be freed and for them to travel to England. Now free for the first time in their lives, the children received the education appropriate for the children of a gentleman such as Joshua Steele. Katherine went to a finishing school in Camberwell, while Edward was sent to school with Bell's own son in Norwich.<sup>15</sup> It seems possible that Bell may have been connected to the Bell family of Beaupré Hall in Outwell, Norfolk and that this led to the connection with the county.<sup>16</sup> Bell had been a loyal confederate of Steele for many years, and his allegiance to his friend's last wishes was instrumental in enabling Edward and Katherine to make the transition from lives as enslaved people to lives as fully integrated members of Norfolk and London society.

Unfortunately, far less is known about Katherine's life after she arrived in England than is of Edward's. Katherine married on 17 July 1807, in the St James Church, Clerkenwell, London. The man she married was 'Henry White Esq.' of the Parish of St Paul, Covent Garden, London. Although the marriage record lists her as 'Catherine Ann Steele', she signed it as 'Katherine Anne Steele'.<sup>17</sup> Katherine had married well, with no indication that her heritage as a mixed-race, formerly





enslaved, woman had any impact upon her marriage prospects in early 19th-century England. The couple had at least one child, Mary Ann White, who became the major beneficiary of her uncle Edward's estate on his death in 1883, where he described her as his 'dear niece' and the daughter of his late sister 'Katherine Anne White'.<sup>18</sup>

It is not known where in Norwich Edward was schooled, however, Steele was to make his permanent home in Yarmouth. It appears that this was a consequence of his military service. Edward served with the East Norfolk Regiment of militia for many years, although he is also recorded as being a member of the 'Norfolk Regular Militia' at one point. He made steady progress through the junior officer ranks, being listed as a Lieutenant in 1824 and 1826, but had become a Senior Lieutenant in 1832.<sup>19</sup> It may be that he eventually rose to the rank of Captain, since his 1873 obituary in *The Ipswich Journal*, listed him as 'formerly Captain in the East Norfolk Militia'.<sup>20</sup> He lived at the Royal Barracks, Yarmouth, which were situated at the South Denes until at least 1841. The barracks had been begun in 1809 as a naval hospital, but were later converted to a general military barracks, capable of accommodating about one hundred men.<sup>21</sup> It may have been that he was resident in one of the 'four excellent family houses, for officers belonging to the establishment, handsomely constructed with every requisite for convenience, and suitable to the comfort of the inhabitants' that were to be found in the courtyard.<sup>22</sup>

During this period Edward appears to have had a full social calendar and to have been actively engaged in the intellectual life of the town. Three letters from him while living at the Royal Barracks survive, giving us a small glimpse into his life during late 1833. All the letters were written to Charles John Palmer (1805–82), the Yarmouth antiquary and historian.<sup>23</sup> The first two letters, from June and September 1833, were written in respect of a manuscript entitled 'Love and Money' that Palmer had written. Steele promised to examine the manuscript and 'endeavour to form a proper opinion of it'. Having done so, he was able to inform Palmer that the manuscript was missing certain pages. The other letter relates to social engagements. In December 1833, Palmer invited Steele to spend Christmas at his house, but Steele had already agreed to spend it with his 'my old neighbour Mr Buckle at Hethersett'.<sup>24</sup> It is clear that Steele and Palmer were good friends, for Steele was also involved in Palmer's editing of *Manship's History of Great Yarmouth* and was one of the subscribers to the completed work.<sup>25</sup>

Edward was also involved in his local church, St Nicholas. Described in 1806 as being in 'a very decayed

state' St. Nicholas saw a series of restoration projects during the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> In 1840 Edward was one of a group of local gentlemen, including H V Worship, W Yetts and S C Marsh, who established a committee to raise the funds required to restore the church's organ, which was described as 'once the pride of, but now the town's disgrace'.<sup>27</sup> Whereas other restoration projects at the church caused some controversy, the organ project was successfully managed by Steele and the other committee members, and the completion of the repairs in 1844 was seen as a major success for the town's community. Edward Steele appears to have found such activity suitable for his talents, as he was also responsible for supervising the restoration of the organ at The Chapel of Saint George, King Street, (which was a chapel of ease for St Nicholas), in 1844.<sup>28</sup> His talent in this area appears to have become known across the county, since around 1850 he also designed the wainscot for the organ at All Saints, Necton, which lies to the west of Norwich.<sup>29</sup>

Sometime between 1841 and 1851 Edward moved to a house at 8 Regent Road. This move appears to have related to his retirement from army service, since the 1851 census shows that he was unmarried and, now at sixty-five years old, he was a Lieutenant on half-pay. His household consisted of a female servant, Christiana Heighs, who was aged 41 years and unmarried. This arrangement was unchanged a decade later, but at the time of the 1871 census Steele, now eighty-five years old, was cared for by two female servants, Mary Britton, aged 65, and her daughter Charlotte.<sup>30</sup>

Edward's death, at age eighty-eight, was recorded in the register of the church he had been so heavily involved with. No mention was made of his colour, or of his birthplace, just that he had been born in 1785. Indeed, no official document made any mention of his colour. The censuses of 1841, 1851 and 1861 noted merely that he was born in Barbados. The 1871 census noted on that he was a 'British subject'. It seems that his access to a good education, and presumably some degree of funds from his father's estate had given him the necessary entrée to middle-class society. His middle-class credentials appear to have removed any issue, if such ever existed, that might have been occasioned by his racial background. Indeed, the complete absence of any evidence for racial antipathy towards him is an interesting fact, that should cause us to re-evaluate any preconceptions about attitudes to race in a county such as Norfolk in this period. To most people in Norfolk it seems that Steele was perceived by his class position rather than his racial heritage, he was simply 'Edward Steel Esq., gentleman'.<sup>31</sup>





## THE MINNS FAMILY IN THETFORD

This interpretation of the relationship between class and race is borne out in the far more detailed history of the Minns family in Thetford. The grandfather of Allan, Pembroke and Ophelia, John Minns, was born in Reading, England in October 1771, most likely from a Quaker background. He was apprenticed as a baker and seems to have left England after 1794, arriving on the island of New Providence in the Bahamas around 1800.<sup>32</sup> It appears that he became a slave-owner soon after arriving in the colony. In an 1808 manumission document Minns freed 'my two mulatto children Samuel and James' and confirmed that the mother of the two boys was a woman named Rosette, described as 'my female slave'.<sup>33</sup> One year later Minns freed Rosette, by this time styled 'my Negro woman', and the couple's newest son, 'my mulatto child named Thomas', along with any and all of Rosette's future children.<sup>34</sup> It appears that Minns and Rosette then lived together as a couple until her death in 1826, having a number of other children. They did not marry, although in his 1822 will Minns stated that Rosette had 'ever considered me her husband and has conducted herself in every respect as a chaste wife'.<sup>35</sup> The couple were, however, successful participants in the Bahamas' slavery-based economy and both John and Rosette appear in the records as slaveowners until their deaths.<sup>36</sup>

### *Pembroke Minns*

It was the children of John and Rosette's fourth son, also called John, who would move to England. Born in 1811, after his mother's manumission, John Minns Jnr. was never enslaved. He worked as a shopkeeper and his will suggests that he was intelligent, literate and commercially-aware. There is no evidence of his involvement in slave-holding.<sup>37</sup> He married Ophelia Elizabeth Bunch, who was described on her death in 1902 as being, 'Of (M)ixed Race, a Lady'.<sup>38</sup> The couple had nine children, three of whom - Pembroke, Ophelia and Allan - would emigrate to England.

The couple's eldest son, Pembroke Robert Bunch Minns, was born in 1840 and received private tuition at Nassau School. This was an exclusive establishment, the entry to which was limited to the few non-whites on the island who had access to sufficient funds to pay for it.<sup>39</sup> In 1858 Pembroke and his father came to an arrangement that would allow the young man to travel to England to train as a doctor. Financing Pembroke's further education was a significant risk. In his will



Plate 2. Dr Pembroke Minns, c.1908, in W.T. Pike (1911) *Norfolk and Suffolk in East Anglia: contemporary biographies*.

John noted that the move had resulted in 'considerable expense' and would incur 'greater and further expenses' in the future. The funds 'advanced' to Pembroke were to be deducted from his share of the estate at his father's decease and the balance divided amongst his siblings. If his share of the estate did not cover the loan when the time came Pembroke had promised that he would 'refund the said expenses'.<sup>40</sup> John Minns died only five years after Pembroke left and, while the details of the repayment have not survived, it appears that Pembroke was able to keep his word since his brothers all received good educations on the island.

Pembroke studied medicine at Guy's College, London, he became MRCS (Eng.) in 1861. He studied at St Andrews, receiving his MD in 1862 and then returned to Guy's as Resident Accoucheur before moving to Thetford, where he acted as locum tenens for a surgeon and accoucheur named Henry Waddelow Best.<sup>41</sup> Upon Best's death in 1865, Pembroke grasped his chance and purchased the practice. This suggests he had either already been able to amass some funds in England, or still had access to funds advanced to him by his late father.



Over the next fifty years, Pembroke used the medical practice as the base from which to advance himself, professionally, financially, and socially. He worked hard to establish his reputation in the medical and scientific community, both locally and nationally. He became a member of both the Norwich Medico-Chirurgical Society, which was founded shortly after he arrived in the region, and the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society of London (later the Royal Society of Medicine), eventually becoming a Fellow. The success of this strategy was based, of course, on his professional ability, but also on his use of social networks. These extended beyond the medical societies themselves to his membership of the Junior Athenaeum Club in London.<sup>42</sup> Fellow members included men from both Houses of Parliament, the universities, fellows of the learned and scientific Societies, and others connected with literature, science, and art.<sup>43</sup> Eventually, in 1910, he would become the President of the East Anglia Branch of the British Medical Association (Plate 2).<sup>44</sup>

Alongside this, Pembroke worked at the local level to enhance his status. He built a strong basis for his practice, becoming a certifying factory surgeon, medical officer for the Thetford Workhouse, doctor for the Local Court of the Oddfellows, and doctor to the Post Office.<sup>45</sup> Newspaper reports show that his medical opinion was respected and that he carried out the normal duties of a town doctor without any difficulties. He had a wide circle of friends and was fully engaged in Thetford's social calendar, attending dinners, weddings, funerals, school sports days and other social events. He acted in positions of trust, for example as the executor of wills.<sup>46</sup> He was involved with charities, such as Royal Blind Pension Society.<sup>47</sup> Pembroke also seems to have cultivated connections with local notables, such as the Duke of Grafton, who lived at Euston Hall just south of Thetford, and the Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last Maharaja of the Sikh Empire, who lived at his 17,000 acre country estate at Elveden, just four miles from Thetford.<sup>48</sup>

An astute and active investor, Pembroke gradually built up property holdings in the town that included twenty-nine houses and shops, along with a stock market portfolio that spread across the Empire.<sup>49</sup> His political leanings were known to be 'Unionistic' and he did his duty as a member of the town's middle-class community, serving for three years on the town council from 1875–8, but he avoided the rough and tumble of political life and did not attend any party political meetings.<sup>50</sup> Pembroke died in 1912, an event that provoked an outpouring of praise for the 'lamented Dr Minns'.<sup>51</sup> Fulsome obituaries highlighted his 'Fifty years of service at Thetford', his 'large circle of friends', his



Plate 3. Dr Allan Minns and Miss Ophelia Minns, c.1906, Thetford Town Council Additional Records, NRO ACC 2005/292.

Reproduced with permission of the Norfolk Record Office

hospitality and the respect in which he was held by the public and his professional peers.<sup>52</sup> His business acumen was proven in an estate that was valued at the huge sum of £27,865.<sup>53</sup> As had Edward Steele, Pembroke had become an upper middle-class Englishman, and no-one appears to have been interested in his racial heritage.

### *Ophelia and Allan Minns*

The same is true of his sister, Ophelia. We know nothing of her early years in the Bahamas and, even after her arrival in Thetford, her life remains opaque. Born in 1857, it is unclear when she arrived in Thetford. She lived with Pembroke until his death in 1912 and appears to have run their household. She received a legacy of £2,500 in his will and then she lived in her own property until her death in December 1939. Her will shows that she was financially secure, although she was not wealthy.<sup>54</sup> As 'Miss Minns' she regularly appeared in the newspapers accompanying her brothers to many social events, such as the annual Thetford Grammar School Sports Day, and events related to the British Medical Association.<sup>55</sup> A photograph taken at the opening of the new public park in Thetford in September 1906, shows her seated next to her brother among the 'great and the good' of the town (Plate 3). In this she appears completely at ease and fully integrated into the life about her, an Edwardian lady, with no sense of outsider status or of question over her suitability to be in the assembly.<sup>56</sup>



Plate 4. Dr Allan Minns, 1910, standing on the left of the podium.

Reproduced with permission of the Norfolk Record Office

In the picture, Ophelia sits next to Allan, who had just ceased to be the town's mayor. Allan received his secondary education at the newly-founded Nassau Grammar School for Boys. Having studied at Guy's Hospital, by 1884 he was qualified to practice medicine (MRCS Eng. 1881, LRCP Lond. 1884).<sup>57</sup> Following the route established by his older brother, he appears to have then moved to work in Thetford as the locum to another of the town's physicians, Dr Archer. Allan implemented a strategy similar to Pembroke's, utilising his brother's existing connections, for example with the Oddfellows, to enter Thetford life.<sup>58</sup> He married in 1888 and became closely involved with the Thetford Grammar School, which his children would go on to attend.<sup>59</sup> He presented the Mechanics' Institute with medical textbooks, and he gave well-attended public lectures on medical subjects.<sup>60</sup> Like his brother, Allan set to work establishing his medical reputation locally, and was unanimously appointed as Medical Officer to the Thetford Workhouse in July 1888.<sup>61</sup> Newspaper reports show that his medical opinion was accepted without question in court proceedings, and in 1889 his salary

was increased.<sup>62</sup> In 1890, he received praise for his supervision of a case of typhoid in his private practice and for dealing successfully with two cases of scarlet fever at workhouse.<sup>63</sup> Allan followed Pembroke into the Norwich Medico-Chirurgical Society.<sup>64</sup> After the death of his first wife, Allan re-married in 1896 and expanded his links across the town, becoming involved with groups such as the Oddfellows, the Musical Society and the Thetford Horticultural Society, which he founded in 1905.<sup>65</sup>

Unlike his brother, however, Allan decided to become active in politics. From the late 1880s he was a regular attendee at Thetford's political events and a staunch supporter of the town's Working Men's Conservative Association.<sup>66</sup> The link with the Conservative Party would continue throughout Allan's life and eventually enable him to become mayor. He became a councillor in 1903 and then mayor in 1904. His two terms of office, 1904–5 and 1905–6, began with acceptance speeches that were models of self-effacement and non-partisan speech-making.<sup>67</sup> It was agreed that he worked exceptionally hard in fulfilling his ceremonial duties





and that he did so with charm and wit, his appearances were often recorded as receiving loud applause and laughter.<sup>68</sup> Politically, he presided over a number of successful initiatives, such as the construction of a new pavilion at the recreation ground, the expansion of the fire brigade, the creation of a surveyor's committee, and considerable improvements in sanitation.<sup>69</sup> Allan served on the council until 1912, and as a photograph of the Coronation events of 1910 (Plate 4) shows, was a significant figure in the town. He lived in Thetford until 1924, and died on 16 September 1930, leaving a large estate valued at £14,238. Unlike Pembroke, there were no obituaries for him in the Norfolk papers or the *British Medical Journal*, and he slipped from the sight of history for nearly seventy years.

### *The Next Generation at Thetford Grammar School*

Of the three siblings, only Allan had children; Muriel Emily (born 1889), Allan Noel (born 1891), Marjorie Emily Pearson (born 1892), Phyllis Gertrude (born 1896), and Enid Mary (born 1898). The details of their lives tend, once again, to support the idea that their racial background appears to have had no impact upon their place in the local community and give an impression of full integration into middle-class life in Norfolk, and English society more widely. Beginning with their schooling, what is most notable is the normality of their lives. All of them went to the local grammar school along with their middle-class peers, with Allan attending the Boys' Grammar School and the four girls going to the Grammar School for Girls, which had opened in January 1888.

Fortunately, the records of Thetford Grammar School contain details of the children's school lives and educational achievements, along with photographs of these young people which, if considered in the context of images of Britain's Black population, are extremely rare pieces of evidence.<sup>70</sup> As we have seen, the information on Ophelia Minns and Elizabeth Steele is extremely sparse, but this was more a consequence of the constrictions placed on both women in Victorian society by their gender than their ethnicity. In contrast, the Thetford Grammar School Records provide a significant level of data about the Minns sisters. It appears that the girls were initially schooled at home, and that Muriel and Marjorie Minns, aged eleven and eight, joined the Girls' Grammar School on 17 Sept 1900, which was the same day as Allan started at the Boys' Grammar School. Phyllis joined in May 1903, and Enid one year later. Muriel and Marjorie completed their education in

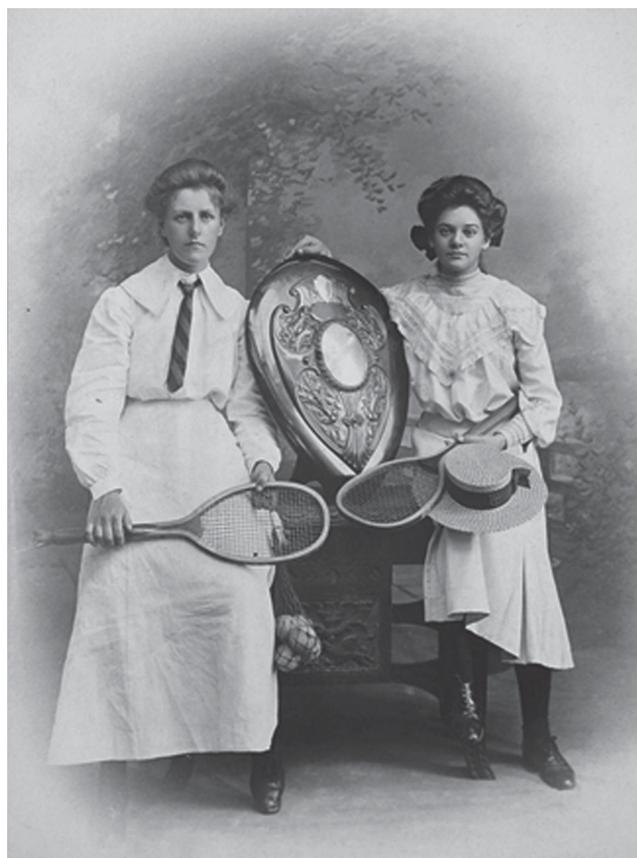


Plate 5. Muriel Minns (right), 1906.

Reproduced with permission of Thetford Grammar School Archives

Thetford, while Phyllis and Enid both left for a private school in Eastbourne in December 1913, although they returned in early 1915 to study on a special Domestic Science course.<sup>71</sup>

While Muriel and Enid do not appear to have been academically inclined, Marjorie and Phyllis are both recorded as achieving good grades in the Cambridge Junior and Senior Local Examination. Between 1906 and 1909 Muriel gained distinctions in History, Physiology and Hygiene, and qualified for London Matriculation. Between 1909 and 1913, Phyllis gained distinctions in English, French and Drawing. Both girls also received scholarships that exempted them from school fees, something that again suggests a lack of interest in their racial background.<sup>72</sup> It appears that Phyllis was a good musician, she is recorded as performing a violin solo at the school concert in 1910.<sup>73</sup>

Muriel appears to have been an extremely good tennis player and was one of a pair that won the East Anglian Games Association tennis trophy in 1906 (Plate 5). Marjorie was a member of the school hockey team





Plate 6. Marjorie Minns, 1911, seated middle row, second from left.

Reproduced with permission of Thetford Grammar School Archives.

which won East Anglian Games Association trophy in 1911 (Plate 6). Both these victories led to photographs of the girls, which provide striking evidence of their lifestyle and participation in the school community during this period.

The details of Allan Noel's school life appear to show that he was a fully accepted member of the school, with no issues about his heritage. He was academically successful, achieving grades similar to Phyllis and Muriel in the Cambridge Local Examinations and was the recipient of Norfolk County Council Scholarships. In 1908 he gained First Class Honours in the Cambridge Senior Local Examination, with a distinction in History, and was successful in the London University Matriculation.<sup>74</sup> He was also a member of school sports teams, and one photograph in the school archives appears to show him in such a team, seated in the front row second from the right (Plate 7).<sup>75</sup>

He also appeared in school dramatic productions, such as the 1906 Christmas show.<sup>76</sup> The details of their school lives appear therefore to show that the Minns

siblings were not regarded in racial terms by their peers or the school staff. The level of their involvement in school life – sporting, entertaining, and scholarly – is far more indicative of complete integration into Thetford's middle-class culture. As was the case with their older relatives, class status seems to have been far more important than any racial heritage.

### *The First World War and After*

The advent of war in 1914 provides further support for this idea. Allan's academic success had allowed him to follow his father and uncle into medicine, and he was studying medicine at Guy's Hospital on the outbreak of war. He immediately joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, with no indication in any record that his racial background was an issue at all. His military career, thereafter, was exemplary and heroic. He served in the Gallipoli theatre of operations from June 1915 to January 1916 and was awarded the DSO and the





Plate 7. Allan Noel Minns, 1907, seated second from right.

Reproduced with permission of Thetford Grammar School Archives.

Military Cross for bravery under fire at Suvla Bay. His citation reads:

'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli Peninsula, on 30th August 1915, when attending to the wounded under heavy shrapnel fire. Another officer who was assisting him was killed. Lieutenant Minns later returned to the dressing station, took out 12 stretcher squads and brought in 24 wounded men.'<sup>77</sup>

Having survived the carnage of Gallipoli, Allan then served in Mesopotamia from March–July 1916 before going to India during 1916–17. He finished the war as a Major in Mesopotamia where he remained until 1921.<sup>78</sup>

This service would make Allan Noel Minns one of the first Black officers in the British Army, but it seems unlikely that he considered this fact for a moment. His upbringing had not given him any reason to consider himself in such a fashion and the likelihood is that he self-identified as a middle-class Englishman, rather than as Black. Whether this situation would have changed

as the 20th century progressed cannot be known, for having returned to England in early 1921 Allan Noel Minns died in a car accident near Newmarket in March, aged thirty.<sup>79</sup>

Allan was not, however, the only one of the siblings who volunteered to support the war effort. His youngest sister, Enid, served with the British Red Cross from July 1915 to April 1918. She worked as a nurse at Canons Military Hospital in Thetford in 1915, before working at Sheringham Red Cross Hospital in 1916 and then at Cromer, Heddingham, Hunstanton and Felthorpe Hall in 1917. She finished her work as a nurse at Walsingham Hall.<sup>80</sup> Muriel also served with the Red Cross Society volunteers. She was working as a short-hand typist in London in 1918, where she was living at an address in Sloane Square, and had previously worked in the same role in France.<sup>81</sup> There is no record of war service for Phyllis and Marjorie.

In 1923, Muriel married a former pupil of Thetford Grammar School, Guy Summerall Harris.<sup>82</sup> The other sisters remained at home, and the family moved to





Dorking a few years later, and Phyllis, Marjorie and Enid were recorded as spinsters at their father's death in 1930.<sup>83</sup> The sisters were all well-off, having received legacies from their uncle Pembroke that ranged between £1,000 and £2,000 and then inherited further funds in their father's will.<sup>84</sup> These funds appear to have allowed them to continue to live comfortable middle-class lives over the next few decades. Marjorie married a medical doctor called Thomas Jobson in 1935 and Phyllis married a man named Eric Hall in the same year.<sup>85</sup> The youngest sister, Enid, was listed as one of six women living in the 'Wilson (Barrett)' household, with her occupation listed as 'private means' in 1939.<sup>86</sup> She finally married in 1957, one year before her death in Bournemouth.<sup>87</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

By any measure Minns family and the Steele siblings lived successful lives. They moved in the highest social circles in their adopted home towns and were popular members of its social life. The opportunities of Catherine Steele and Ophelia Minns were circumscribed by contemporary attitudes to gender, rather than race, but within these confines they were fully integrated members of their social milieu. Their brothers did not face the hurdle of gender and became substantial middle-class Victorians. Edward Steele was a stalwart of his local church community, a man of letters, organ designer, and a militia officer. Pembroke and Allan Minns became wealthy, highly-respected professionals and businessmen and Allan became a successful local politician. Alan's children attended the local grammar school and were fully integrated into its life. The restrictions on the Minns sisters were a result of attitudes to gender, not race, but they prospered, receiving an education, serving their country in the war, living independently, and marrying. Unrestricted by his gender, Allan Noel Minns lived to epitomise the British middle-class ideal; well-educated, handsome and brave, he became an officer in the British Army and a decorated war hero.

The core argument that has been made here is that racial prejudice appears not to have been an issue in these lives. It seems that their racial background made no difference in their dealings with friends, colleagues, neighbours and even political opponents. This is a conclusion that is somewhat at odds with the current received interpretation of attitudes to race in 19th century and early 20th-century England; but is the one that most clearly fits the available evidence. If evidence of racial antipathy towards the Minns and Steele fami-

lies comes to light, then the interpretation presented here can be reassessed, but until that point the critical element in understanding these lives appears to be one suggested by Lorimer; 'by and large Englishmen did not think colour alone was indicative of character or status.'<sup>88</sup> Lorimer suggests that this attitude began to change towards the end of the 19th century, but in Norfolk it seems to have carried on at least into the early 20th century. This is not to argue that negative racial attitudes did not exist in the area. In December 1906, the Thetford Grammar School, which Pembroke, Ophelia and Allan supported and where Allan's children were being educated, held its annual Christmas entertainment and included sections described as 'A Negro dialogue' and 'A nigger farce' in the show.<sup>89</sup> Norfolk was, therefore, not immune to attitudes toward race that our culture finds unacceptable; but the Minns family and Edward Steele, his sister and niece do not appear to have been affected by any racial stereotyping or to have been perceived in racial terms. Rather, they were perceived by their peers in class terms. They were not seen as 'Black' but as members of the English middle-class. Furthermore, it appears that their self-perception was primarily one of class, rather than of race. This was the reason that Allan Minns' status as England's first Black mayor was forgotten for nearly a century; because Minns himself was uninterested in that fact and made no mention of it. It seems, therefore, that rather than assuming Black people in 19th-century England faced automatic, and insuperable, walls of racism, we need to think of 'race' in the Victorian and Edwardian period as malleable concept. As Tim Barringer reminds us, 'the concept of race is socially created and thus historically variable' and the lives of these families in Norfolk appear to support this idea.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the success achieved by the members of these families in becoming leading figures in two, markedly different but equally bustling, English towns emphasises the importance of resisting any temptation to automatically treat the Victorians as, what Douglas Lorimer terms, our 'racist Other' and to bring an *a priori* expectation of racism to the historic evidence.<sup>91</sup> The issue was far more complex than this, and the evidence from Norfolk suggests that, in the end, class and money mattered far more than race.

February 2018



**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Paul C. Arana for his assistance in the Bahamas archives and the historian and archivist of Theford Grammar School, David Seymour, for his invaluable help.

**ENDNOTES**

- 1 See Walvins' comments and Gerzina's view in, Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina (ed.), *Black Victorians/Black Victoriana* (New Brunswick, N.J.; London, Rutgers University Press, 2003), 1–3.
- 2 Richard C. Maguire, 'Presenting the History of Africans in Provincial Britain: Norfolk as a Case Study'. *History* 99 (2014): 819–38.
- 3 Norfolk Record Office, UK (hereafter NRO) T/C2/19, 9 Nov 1904; *Norwich Mercury*, 12 Nov 1904; Richard C. Maguire, 'Minns, Allan Glaisyer (1858–1930)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, (2016); On Archer see, Peter Fryer, 'Archer, John Richard (1863–1932)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, May 2010 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/59532>, accessed 20 Oct 2015]. On previous discussion of Archer see, David Dabydeen, John Gilmore, and Cecily Jones (eds.) *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 33. See also, Jeffrey Green, *Black Edwardians. Black People in Britain 1901–1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 209–11.
- 4 Charles John Palmer, John Robert Harvey, *The Perustration of Great Yarmouth, with Gorleston and Southtown: Volume III*, (G. Nall, 1875), 85.
- 5 Larry Gragg, 'Steele, Joshua (c.1700–1796)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2013 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26345>, accessed 30 Jan 2017]. See also ; "Steele, Family of", *Notes and Queries* (1861), 137; The best discussion of Steele's activity in Barbados is to be found in David Lambert, *White Creole culture, politics and identity during the age of abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), 41–72. For his work see, Joshua Steele, 'Account of a Musical Instrument, Which Was Brought by Captain Fourneau from the Isle of Amsterdam in the South Seas to London in the Year 1774, and Given to the Royal Society' *Philosophical Transactions* (1683–1775), 1/1/1775, Vol. 65, 67–71; 'Remarks on a Larger System of Reed Pipes from the Isle of Amsterdam, with Some Observations on the Nose Flute of Otaheite' *Philosophical Transactions* (1683–1775), 1/1/1775, Vol. 65, 72–8. For a recent example of discussion of his work see, Chao, Noelle "Listening to the Voice on the Page: Joshua Steele and Technologies of Recording" *The Eighteenth Century* (2013), 245–61.
- 6 James, Philip, and M. H. Combe Martin, 'General Notes.' *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 117, (1968): 34–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41371992>.
- 7 'Joshua Steele', *Legacies of British Slave-ownership database*, <http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146643119/> [accessed 30th January 2017].
- 8 'Byde Mill [Barbados | St John]', *Legacies of British Slave-ownership database*, <http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/estate/view/670> [accessed 30th January 2017]; 'Kendals [Barbados | St John ]', *Legacies of British Slave-ownership database*, <http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/estate/view/664> [accessed 30th January 2017].
- 9 James, Philip, and M. H. Combe Martin, 'General Notes.', 43.
- 10 Steele, Joshua, and William Dickson. *Mitigation of slavery*, in two parts. (Miami, FL. : Mnemosyne Publishing, 1969), 3; Allan, 'General', p.357; Lambert, *White Creole*, 49.
- 11 James, Philip, and M. H. Combe Martin. "General Notes." *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 117, no. 5151, 1969, 220–9. [www.jstor.org/stable/41372015](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41372015).
- 12 James, Philip, and Combe Martin. 'General Notes', 227; Steele, and Dickson, *Mitigation*, 9; Dickson, *Mitigation*, 116–18. See also his commentaries written under a pseudonym, *Letters of Philo-Xylon, First Published in the Barbados Gazettes, During the Years 1787 and 1788. Containing the Substance of Several Conversations at Sundry Times, ... on the Subject of Negro Laws, and Negro Government, on Plantations, in Barbados* (London 1789).
- 13 James and. Combe Martin. "General Notes.", 229.
- 14 Gibbes, *A Letter*, 5–10.
- 15 Gibbes, *A Letter*, 5–10.
- 16 "Beaupre Bell", *Notes and Queries* (1912), 139.
- 17 Parish Register, Parish of St Paul, Covent Garden, London, July 1807.
- 18 NRO, Will No 412, Will of Edward Steele, died 30 July 1873.
- 19 Royal Norfolk Regimental Museum, (M23) West and East Norfolk Militia Scrapbook 1804–1900.
- 20 *The Ipswich Journal* (Ipswich, England), Saturday, August 2, 1873; Issue 7133. British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800–1900.
- 21 NRO, Y/L 20/1/178–180, Edward Steele, Royal Barracks, (Yarmouth). Re social engagements and literary matters, 1833; 1841 Census, Great Yarmouth.
- 22 John Preston, *The Picture of Yarmouth* (1819), 7.
- 23 For more on Palmer see, Ecclestone, A. W. *A Yarmouth miscellany*, (Great Yarmouth: the author 1974), 69–74.
- 24 NRO, Y/L 20/1/178–180, Edward Steele, Royal Barracks, (Yarmouth). Re social engagements and literary matters, 1833.
- 25 Henry Manship, C J Palmer (ed.), *The History of Great Yarmouth* (1854), ii.
- 26 C J Palmer, *The History of Great Yarmouth, Volume 2*. (1856), 132–9.
- 27 NRO/PD/28/354, 'Letter from AB', *Norwich Mercury*, 23 December 1840.
- 28 Manship, *History* (1854), 261. Stephen Heywood, 'The Chapel of St George King Street, Great Yarmouth', Norfolk Historic Environment Record No. 4336, (2009).
- 29 Betty Matthews 'Norfolk Annals', *The Organ*, (1983), 21–2.
- 30 NRO, Will No 412, Will of Edward Steele, died 30 July 1873.
- 31 William White, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory of Norfolk, and the City and County of the City of Norwich* (1854), 303.





- 32 *Friends' Monthly Magazine* (Bristol: Wright and Bagnal, 1831), 285; The National Archives of the Bahamas, (hereafter NAB), *Register of Freed Slaves*, Book X2, 242, 8 November 1809; NAB, Burial record, St Matthew's, 4 September 1830. Wilson Armistead, 'A tribute for the Negro; being a vindication of the moral, intellectual, and religious capabilities of the coloured portion of mankind' (Manchester, 1848), 399–404; Manuscript written by Frederic A. Minns, 17 May 1876, (Private collection).
- 33 NAB, *Register of Freed Slaves*, Book W2, 154, 28 November 1808.
- 34 NAB, *Register of Freed Slaves*, Book X2, 242, 8 November 1809.
- 35 NAB, Will of John Minns, 12 October 1822.
- 36 See for example, TNA/T71/456, 1822, T71/458, 1828.
- 37 NAB, Will of John Minns, 15 Dec 1858.
- 38 NAB, Bahamas Civil Registration, Deaths, 27 June 1902.
- 39 W T Pike, *Norfolk and Suffolk in East Anglia: contemporary biographies* (Brighton: The author, 1911), 327; John M Traynor, 'Education in the Bahamas 1821–1836: A Prelude', *International Journal of Bahamian Studies* (1982): 1–18.
- 40 NAB, Will of John Minns, 15 Dec 1858.
- 41 *The London Gazette*, 1850; *The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald* (hereafter BNPSH), 29 Aug 1865; *The Norfolk Chronicle*, 6 April 1912.
- 42 Pike, *Norfolk*, 327.
- 43 John Timbs, *Curiosities of London* (London 1867), 242.
- 44 *British Medical Journal*, 22 July 1893, 19 Aug 1911.
- 45 *Kelly's Directory*, 1869, 1892, 1900.
- 46 *BNPSH*, 18, June 1889, 24 Nov 1891, 17 Oct 1899.
- 47 *The British Medical Journal*, 20 April 1912.
- 48 *BNPSH*, 4 Nov 1893; *The Morning Post*, 3 May 1894.
- 49 NRO/MC/642/13/32/786x5.
- 50 *BNPSH*, 6 April 1912.
- 51 *British Medical Journal*, 13 July 1912.
- 52 *Norfolk Chronicle*, 6 April 1912; *British Medical Journal*, 20 April 1912.
- 53 NRO/MC/642/13, Will of Pembroke Minns.
- 54 NRO/MC/642/13, Will of Pembroke Minns; NRO/PRDR 2/225/159, 1940.
- 55 *BNPSH*, 7 July 1891; *Thetford and Watton Weekly Standard*, 8 December 1908; *British Medical Journal*, 9 July 1910, 11 June 1910.
- 56 NRO ACC 2005/292, Thetford Town Council Additional Records.
- 57 Pike, *Norfolk*, 327.
- 58 *BNPSH*, 28 May 1888.
- 59 *BNPSH*, 7 July 1891.
- 60 *BNPSH*, 3 July 1889, 4 March 1890, 10 Feb 1891.
- 61 *BNPSH*, 17 July 1888.
- 62 *BNPSH*, 8 March 1889.
- 63 *BNPSH*, 15 April and 3 June 1890.
- 64 Pike, *Norfolk*, 327.
- 65 *Norwich Mercury*, 4 Jan 1905, *Thetford and Watton Weekly*, 16 Feb 1906.
- 66 NRO ACC/2005/22, 19 June 1888; Bury, 7 April 1889.
- 67 *Norwich Mercury*, 12 Nov 1904, 11 Nov 1905.
- 68 *Thetford and Watton Weekly*, 8 Dec 1906.
- 69 *Thetford Weekly Post*, 15 Nov 1906.
- 70 Thetford Grammar School Archives, uncatalogued.
- 71 Thetford Grammar School Archives, uncatalogued.
- 72 Thetford Grammar School Archives, uncatalogued.
- 73 *Thetford and Watton Weekly Standard*, 10 June 1910.
- 74 Thetford Grammar School Archives, uncatalogued.
- 75 Thetford Grammar School Archives, uncatalogued.
- 76 *Thetford and Watton Weekly Standard*, 22 and 27 December 1906.
- 77 D.S.O. *London Gazette* 22.12.1916 Alan Noel Minns, M.C., Temp. Captain R.A.M.C. (Mesopotamia); M.C. *London Gazette* 29.10.1915 Temporary Lieutenant, Allan Noel Minns, 39th Field Ambulance, Royal Army Medical Corps.
- 78 NRO, MC 642/33–40 786X5, Papers of Dr Allan Noel Minns; *London Gazette* 29.10.1915, 19.10.1916, 27.8.1918, and 9.9.1921.
- 79 National archives – WO 339/90009, Officers Service Records, Royal Army Medical Corps; *East Anglian Daily Times*, 7 April 1921; *The Times*, 7 April 1921.
- 80 Archive British Red Cross, Record set British Army, British Red Cross Society Volunteers 1914–1918, <http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/History-and-origin/First-World-War/Card?sname=minns&id=152062>. She is erroneously recorded as 'Enid May'.
- 81 Archive British Red Cross, Record set British Army, British Red Cross Society Volunteers 1914–1918, <http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/History-and-origin/First-World-War/Card?sname=minns&id=152067>.
- 82 Marriage of Murial Minns, <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=BMD/M/1923/4/AZ/000778/020>
- 83 NRO, MC 642/40, Will of Alan Minns, 1923
- 84 NRO, MC 642/33–40 786X5
- 85 London Country England Volume 1A Page number 925 Record set England & Wales Marriages 1837–2005; Surrey Country England Volume 2A, Page number 1113 Record set England & Wales Marriages 1837–2005.
- 86 Marriage and Death from Find My Past <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=BMD/M/1957/2/AZ/000733/020> and <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=BMD/M/1957/2/AZ/000733/020>
- 87 Marriage and Death from Find My Past <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=BMD/M/1957/2/AZ/000733/020> and <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=BMD/M/1957/2/AZ/000733/020>
- 88 Douglas A Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the mid-nineteenth century* (Leicester: Holes and Meier, 1978), 67–8.
- 89 *Thetford and Watton Weekly Standard*, 22 Dec 1906.
- 90 Tim Barringer, 'Images of otherness and the visual production of difference: race and labour in illustrated texts, 1850–1865' in *The Victorians and Race*, ed. Shearer West (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 35.
- 91 Douglas Lorimer, 'Reconstructing Victorian Racial Discourse: Images of Race, the Language of Race Relations, and the Context of Black Resistance' in *Black Victorians*, ed. Gerzina, 187–8.

