

# THE BRITAINS OF TULLYSKERNEY & MANORHAMILTON LAUNDRY MAGNATES & CAR ASSEMBLERS

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## Family background

The first members of the Brittain family came to Ireland either during the Cromwellian Plantation (1650s) or the Williamite Confiscation (c.1700). In the course of the 18th century the Brittains became established in Tullyskerney—a townland of some one thousand acres which lies to the south-east of Manorhamilton. The first Ordnance Survey Map in 1836 shows that Francis Brittain (1773-1849) lived on 24 acres of arable land in Tullyskerney, but also owned farms in the neighbouring townlands of Glenboy and Carricleitrim. His son, Francis Junior (1804-1893) continued to engage in agriculture and acquired further holdings in Donaghbeg and Ramooney. However, perhaps influenced by the huge agricultural depression which followed the Great Famine, he leased a two-storey thatched building in Upper Main Street, Manorhamilton and opened a general grocery and drapery store in the late 1840s.

Francis Junior's son, Francis Armstrong Brittain (1842-1923), married Harriet Ballam of Ballyfarnon, Co Roscommon in 1866. She converted her husband from the Church of Ireland to the Methodist faith and their thirteen children were all baptised in the Methodist church in Manorhamilton. In 1872 Francis Junior handed over the shop to Francis A who built up a thriving *Francis A. & Harriet Brittain's Golden Wedding Anniversary, 1916* (photo courtesy of Eddie Brittain).



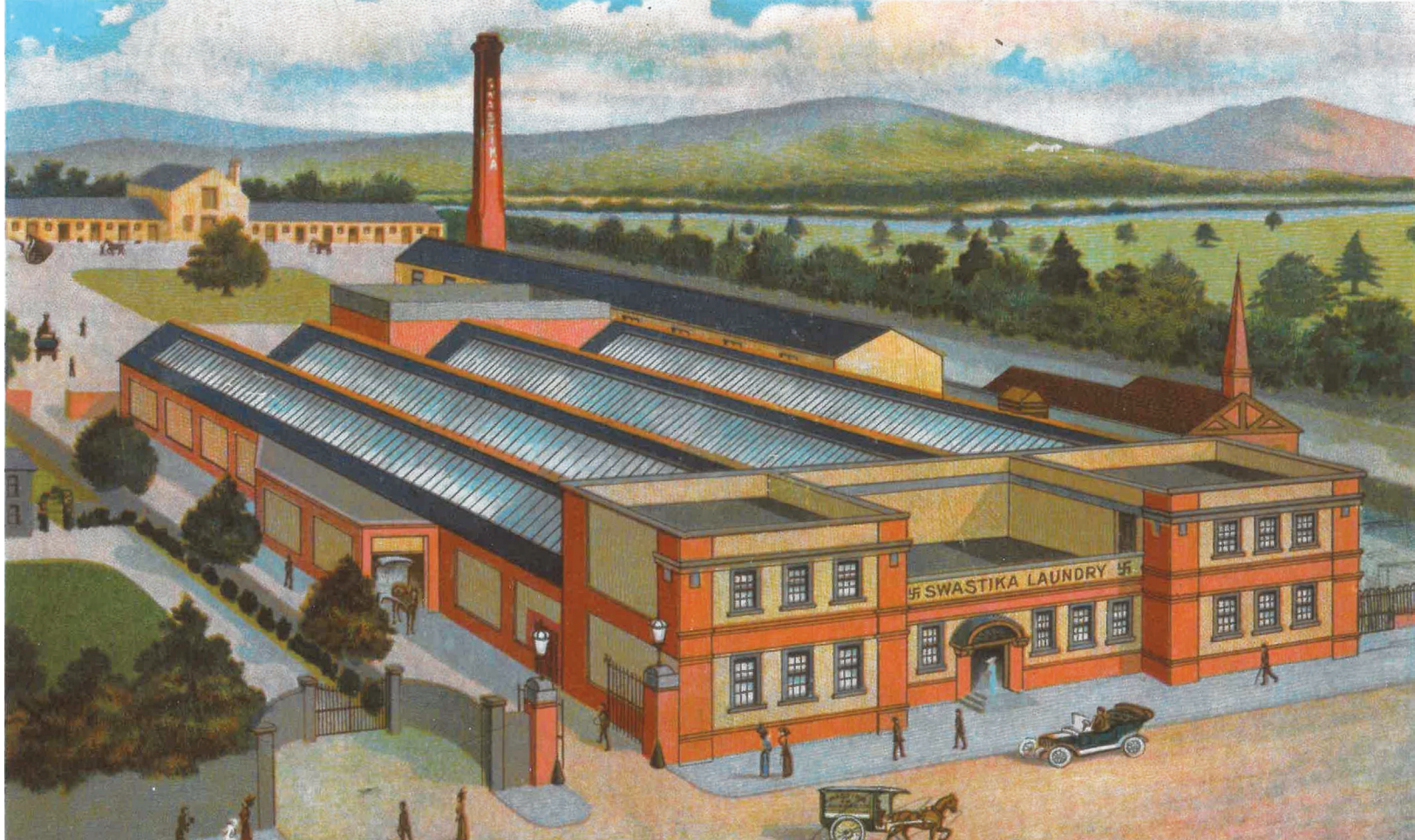
*Jack Brittain (laundry magnate)* business which now sold hardware, timber, iron and coal, as well as groceries and drapery. He also became an insurance and emigration agent. In 1889 he decided to reconstruct the shop and showed an enterprising streak by adding an adjoining terrace of houses which became known as Brittain Terrace. Francis A was a hard worker and a strict disciplinarian even at home, which earned him the nickname 'The Governor'. All of the Brittain children attended the local Church of Ireland Masterson National School on Church Lane. The boys helped out in their father's shop on Saturdays and during the school holidays. Several of them went on to work fulltime there for some years following the completion of their primary schooling.

## John Wesley (Jack) Brittain (1871-1937)

Jack, the 3rd eldest of the Brittain children, begged his father to be allowed leave school and help in the shop when he reached the age of twelve. For the next five years he worked hard and probably laid the foundation for his successful career. When he was seventeen he secured a position in McBirney's Department Store on Aston Quay in Dublin. He lived over the shop and was paid £17 a year, rising by increments of 2s/6d per annum.

The Golden Wedding Anniversary of Francis Armstrong Brittain and Harriet Brittain (née Ballam) 1916





*An artist's impression of the Swastika Laundry in 1912 (image courtesy of Peter Brittain)*

After spending a number of years with McBirney's, Jack decided to move to Belfast where he got a job with Messrs Fultons, a shirt manufacturing company. However, on hearing about the increasing popularity of steam laundries in the USA and Britain, he went to London to train with a large firm of launderers there. Steam laundries were becoming more in demand at the time because of a growing interest in hygiene, allied to the fact that women were finding work in factories in preference to domestic service. In 1898, with the help of some money advanced by his father, Jack opened a small steam laundry in Drogheda. He chose this location because he would be able to reside with his brother Frank who then owned two chemist shops in the town.

Jack married Elizabeth McLarnon in Belfast in 1899. His ambition was to open a laundry in Dublin. So, after securing capital from a Mr Hilton and a Mr Paisley, he leased an old mill in Inchicore and persuaded them to engage him as managing director. The company was named the Metropolitan

Laundry. Jack, who did everything—boiler man, mechanic, packer, etc—worked hard for a salary of £3.00 a week. In 1907 Jack convinced his partners to move the operation to a site on the South Circular Road and build a custom-built, stream-lined operation all on one floor. The new enterprise was called the White Heather Laundry.

In 1910 Jack was offered a position as managing director of three large laundries in Ealing in West London. He accepted it, but after encountering unexpected difficulties there he decided to return to Dublin. Early in 1912 he purchased a three and a half acre site on the Shelbourne Road in Ballsbridge and built the Swastika Laundry at a cost of £5,000. He chose the name after seeing a hatpin in the shape of a swastika on a stall at the Coronation Exhibition at White City in London in 1911. He was told it was one of the oldest good luck signs in the world. The new enterprise went well despite the outbreak of World War One. After the war there was a tremendous boom in business.

By the mid-1930s the Swastika Laundry

was prospering. It had established sixteen branches around the city. The company, which originally had used horse-drawn vans to collect and deliver laundry, now switched to electric vehicles painted in red with a white swastika on a black roundel. The laundry also introduced a collar replacement service where collars were laundered and replaced with new ones as they wore out. Those were the days when all shirts had separate collars attached with two collar studs. During the 1930s the company acquired Bells Dyers & Cleaners Ltd. This extended the Brittain business so that now it could clean clothes as well as wash articles.

Around this time it was noticed that a former laundry horse showed an ability to jump. Jack agreed that she should be trained as a show-jumper. Swastika Rose became well-known at shows throughout the country. She was particularly successful at the Royal Dublin Horse Show, winning the Duggan Challenge Cup for the Champion Wall jump in 1935 and 1936.

Jack Brittain died in March 1937 and is buried in Dean's Grange Cemetery. He was succeeded by his son Eric who decided at the outbreak of WWII to retain the name of the laundry company, but with 'Established 1912' placed under the Swastika sign. During the 1950s the collar-attached shirt had become the norm. By collecting the shirt on a Monday and returning it on a Friday the Swastika Laundry grew in popularity. It was now laundering up to 50,000 shirts a week, which made it possibly the largest launderer of shirts in Western Europe. Employment in the company stood at about 450.

In 1987, after three quarters of a century in business, the laundry was taken over by a UK firm which changed the name of the company to 'Springgrove'. The property was sold for redevelopment during the Dublin property boom earlier this century. An office development called The Oval was built on the site, and the only reminder of the Swastika Laundry is the tall brick chimney, a protected structure, which stands in the centre of the development.

### **George Brittain (1878-1943)**

George was the sixth eldest of the Brittain children. It is not known if he worked in the shop in Manorhamilton after completing national school, like his brother Jack, or if he went to Wesley College in Dublin like another brother Frank. By the turn of the century, however, he was living in Belfast. No doubt seeing the success that Jack was having in the laundry business, George set up the Monarch Laundry on the Donegal Road in 1902 with the backing of his father. Within a few years the laundry had agencies in several parts of the country, including Ballina and Mullingar, all of which dispatched soiled linen to Belfast.

As a young man George had always been fascinated by motor cycles and motor

cars. He had driven right around Ireland on a motor cycle in 1899 and had also taken part in many motor cycle hill climbs. By 1901 he was a motor car enthusiast, and notwithstanding the success of his laundry business, he was eager to enter the motor trade. In April 1912 George married a Belfast lady, Alice Finlay. Later that year he travelled to Oxford to seek a franchise from William Morris who was making a good quality, reasonably priced car. When Morris granted him a franchise for the southern half of the country, George moved to Dublin and bought a former roller-skating rink at Earlsfort Terrace which he converted into a garage. The Morris car was not well known at the time, so George also secured several other agencies including Lancia and Bianchi.

George's business was inconvenienced on several occasions by military disturbances during the war years that followed. The rebels occupied the Brittain premises for a short time during Easter Week 1916, while in December 1917 George was forced to host a display of aircraft in his extensive premises, as part of a recruiting campaign by the Royal Flying Corps. Then during the War of Independence two armed men held up a motor van belonging to George and commandeered the vehicle. Nevertheless, Brittain's motor business flourished during the 1920s. George now concentrated entirely on the Morris agency as the British car grew in popularity. In the early 1930s he built a huge new garage near Portobello Bridge. This was at the time the largest garage under a single roof in the British Isles.

In 1933, in the wake of the Great Depression and the Economic War, Seán Lemass, the Fianna Fail minister for Industry and Commerce, imposed high tariffs on many industrial imports in an effort to reduce unemployment and stimulate Irish industry. He then granted tax breaks to Irish entrepre-

neurs who would create native industries. In relation to the motor industry he stipulated that all cars sold in Ireland must now be assembled here, and granted concessions to companies that would assemble cars in Ireland with a high percentage of locally manufactured parts such as tyres, batteries, glass, paint, spark plugs, upholstery and springs. George Brittain was one of several car dealers who initiated assembly works in Ireland in 1934 after Morris agreed to supply him with new partly-assembled cars. His premises at Portobello were ideal for the job. The new operation was very successful and by 1939 Brittain was producing over 2,000 Morris cars a year.

George moved to Hove near Brighton on the south-east coast of England before the outbreak of WWII, leaving his eldest son Vincent in charge of his business in Ireland. George's second son Norman, a Royal Navy volunteer reserve, was killed in a shipping accident off the Derry coast in October 1942. George was heartbroken and died the following year at the age of sixty-five. George Brittain and his wife are both buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin.

The Morris Minor—'the World's Supreme Small Car'—which was launched in London in October 1948 was assembled at the Brittain plant in Portobello. Production of

*George Brittain (car assembler)*





*Manor Expert Hardware – formerly Brittain's Shop & Terrace  
(photo courtesy of Bryan Rooney)*

Morris cars in Dublin rose significantly in the decades that followed, with figures peaking in the late 1960s when almost 6,500 units per annum were assembled here. Brittain's amalgamated with Austin assemblers Lincoln & Nolan in 1966 to form the BLN Motor Company. The new group had a workforce of over 1,200 and were producing 25% of all cars sold in Ireland. In 1974 British Leyland, which manufactured Morris cars, cancelled the franchise of the Brittain Group. 1,000 car assembly workers were made redundant as a result. Shortly afterwards Brittain's were granted the Datsun franchise and began assembling the Japanese car. However, they never recovered from losing the British Leyland franchise and the company collapsed in 1977.

### **Other Brittain siblings**

The two eldest girls—Elizabeth (1868-1930) and Harriette (1873-1940)—married Methodist ministers, Rev William Caldwell and Rev Henry McConnell respectively. The eldest boy Frank (1870-1942) was sent as a boarder to Wesley College in Dublin. He later qualified as a pharmacist and opened a chemist shop in Drogheda in 1894. He married Nell Hobson and had two children. However, Frank and Nell separated in 1905 and Frank and his children went to live in

Belfast. He subsequently became manager of Belfast Dyeworks on the Donegal Road. Sam (1879-1941) began his career as a chemist's assistant to his brother Frank in Drogheda. In 1907 he married Daisy Boyd from Belfast. Shortly afterwards he was appointed manager of the Monarch Laundry in Manchester by his brother Jack. Emily (1875-1959) married Joseph Armstrong, a farmer and magistrate from Fivemiletown in Co Fermanagh. They sold their farm and moved to Manchester where Joseph invested in the Monarch Laundry there.

Bob (1881-1958) worked in his father's shop in Manorbennet until he was twenty. He then went to America to make his fortune, but soon moved on to Cuba to grow sugar cane. Here he was visited by his father Francis A who had been advised to take an extended holiday as he was suffering from a severe stomach ulcer. Francis A's brother-in-law George Ballam from Ballyfarnon looked after Brittain's shop in Manorbennet during Francis A's absence. Francis A. and Bob soon realised that nothing would come from the venture in Cuba, so both returned home in 1902. Francis A then decided to sell his business to George Ballam and move to Belfast with his wife and their three youngest children. Bob meanwhile spent six months learning the

laundry business with Jack in Dublin, before being sent over to Manchester to help Sam in the Monarch Laundry. Bob eventually sold that operation to Jack's son Eric.

Florence (1882-1928) was in her early twenties when the family left Manorbennet. Up to then she had worked as a housekeeper assisting her mother. In 1918 she married Bob Richardson, settled in Bangor, Co. Down and had one daughter. After suffering a stroke, she died in May 1928. Twins Frederick (1884) and Laura (1884) both died as infants. Jimmy (1885-1966) was in his late teens when the family went to Belfast. He began his working life in the Monarch Laundry in that city and by 1918 was its managing director. He had married Madeline Nichol some years previously and they had two daughters. During the 1930s Jimmy changed to a career in textiles. His brother George's grandson then took over the running of the Monarch Laundry. Eva (1888-c.1960) married Alex Smith of Kane & Smith, Distributors, in 1915 and they had three children. Alex jointly owned the Franklin Laundry in Belfast which much later merged with the Monarch Laundry in that city.

When Francis Armstrong Brittain died in 1923 he left all his children £1,000 each. They used this money to create a trust known as the 'Brittain In Memoriam Trust' in memory of their parents, the proceeds of which were to go to retired Methodist ministers in need of some assistance. Several descendants of the Brittain family have recently renewed contact with the birthplace of their ancestors. I am very grateful to Eddie and Peter Brittain and Tim Graham for their assistance with this article. I have also drawn on Mabel Fitz-Simon's family memoir and on Rev D L Graham's Brittain of Tullyskerney, Manorbennet booklet. Finally I wish to acknowledge Bob Montgomery's recent book *Motor Assembly in Ireland*.