

Robin Somes, *From Severn To Solent: Theo Osborn Smith & the Smith Family*, privately published, 2024, 404 pp., £15.49 (paperback) or £7.99 (e-book), available from <https://shop.robinsomes.co.uk/>.

Robin Somes's family history is based around the life and descendants of his great-grandfather, Theophilus Osborn Smith (1862-1924), a versatile boatbuilder, designer and inventor blessed with diverse interests and a penchant for reinventing himself. Self-published to mark the centenary of Smith's death, the work expands on an earlier article entitled 'Dear Papa', written in 2016 for the two hundredth anniversary of the rebuilding of Ashlett Mill, on Southampton Water, where the family once resided. *From Severn to Solent* is an 'unashamedly personal journey' for the author, whose own career as a biologist and ecologist has taken him to the Severn estuary, near where his ancestors once hailed from. Indeed, his extensive research draws from the recollections of many relatives, as well as 'a vast hoard of letters and other ephemera, recording the minutiae of life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.'

The work follows a chronological approach centring around the main protagonist, but also extending to many of the wider family, up to the time of writing. A 'Dramatis Personae' is therefore required, as over fifty individuals are featured in the book. The result is an eclectic account that includes background information about locations, lengthy quotations, personal musings, and numerous anecdotes. The broad-ranging and oscillating commentary touches on everything from mental health and vaccinations to phrenology and even Theo's musical compositions. The sheer breadth of the work is epitomised by the wonderful collection of over two hundred images that help bring to life the many characters and themes.

Theo Smith grew up in Oxford, after his grandparents, John and Mary, moved from Arlingham in Gloucestershire in the 1830s. His father, John Theophilus Hallier Smith, was a decorator, plumber and later publican, and his mother, Emily Osborn, was from a printing family. Theo did a brief stint as a plumber, but by 1885, aged twenty-two, he had set up his own boatbuilding business on Port Meadow. His enterprise was based on a barge that was conveniently shared with the Oxford University Sailing Club, which provided an important source of customers. Joined in the venture by his younger brother, Harry, they built a range of small boats together, most notably a number of canoe yawls (two-masted sailing craft). The 'Oxford yawls' were fast craft that enjoyed success in races in the 1890s because of their ability to 'skid' over the water. Indeed, the author suggests their design deserves greater recognition, as they were a precursor to those of Uffa Fox, the pioneering Isle of Wight boatbuilder, who is credited with popularising planing hulls in the 1920s.

Local readers may be interested by some of the well-known Oxford figures the Smiths encountered. One early customer was C. C. Lynam, the Headmaster of the Dragon School from 1887 to 1920, who was nicknamed 'skipper' because of his regular sailing exploits. Theo also entered into an agreement with a number of prominent local Nonconformist businessmen, after co-designing an innovative type of folding craft. The three senior directors of the Oxford Canoe and Folding Boat Company were John Salter (boatbuilder), Thomas Kingerlee (builder) and William Alden (butcher). The latter was particularly well-known to the Smith family, as they worshipped together at the New Road Baptist Chapel, where Theo Smith was a lay preacher.

After five years, the lives of Theo and his younger brother diverged when they split from each other and set up rival businesses in 1890. In 1897, Harry left Oxford to manage

Burnham Yacht Company in Essex, becoming its proprietor in 1914. By the end of the nineteenth century, Theo had moved to Summertown where he opened a bicycle building and repair shop. He also briefly had a cycle shop on the Iffley Road, which had a brazier supposedly used by William Morris (later Lord Nuffield) in his nascent bicycle business.

However, the liquidation of the Oxford Canoe and Folding Boat Company in 1901 led to an agreement forbidding Theo from undertaking any boatbuilding within fifty miles of Oxford. He relocated to Southampton Water to manage the Hythe Shipyard Company and, by 1902, he had his own business at the nearby Ashlett Mill, providing yacht and rowing services, as well as running a camping ground. He patented numerous boatbuilding innovations during his career, and even tried his hand at building hydroplanes and aeroplanes. By around 1910, he had moved to Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight, where he constructed a number Yarmouth One Design yachts. His passion for inventing was undimmed by his advancing years and, at the time of his death in 1924, he was working on a new form of ball valve for cisterns and experimenting with wireless apparatus. His gravestone read 'A noble life well spent'.

The book covers a vast amount, but given its focus on sailing, it would have been helpful to have more of an overview of the historical context and evolution of the activity, in terms of both the local and national scene. Indeed, the Smiths embraced boatbuilding at a time when many forms of aquatic leisure were taking off across the country. It would also have been useful to have some comparisons with other boatbuilding and sailing businesses. Sam Saunders of Streatley (1857-1933) might have been a good candidate, as he was an inventor and engineer who shared a similar journey from boatbuilding on the Thames to constructing larger vessels (and aeroplanes) on the Isle of Wight.

Ultimately, the book is a reminder of how rich and diverse family histories can be, as well as the difficulties of knowing how much detail to include. If you like a concise read that is tightly themed around a single person/topic or a study that contains a lot of historiographical commentary, this is probably not the book for you. If, however, you enjoy works that follow the evidence where it leads, even if it's into all kinds of side discussions, then this could be the book for you. Although the shifting subjects and level of detail can make it easy to lose track of some of the characters and the chronology, *From Severn to Solent* remains a deeply personal celebration of research, recording a wealth of family history for posterity.

Dr Simon Wenham, Oxfordshire local historian, August 2026