



Robert Heenan: railway engineer in India

ROBERT HEENAN was born in Parsonstown, King's County (now County Offaly), Ireland in about 1828. He was the fourth surviving child of **JOHN HEENAN** and (unknown) Alexander. John Heenan was a doctor in Parsonstown.

Robert Heenan was involved in constructing railways from a very young age.

According to his obituary when he was 17 years old he became a pupil of a Mr George W Hemans, a leading engineer in Dublin. Robert was put to work on an extension of the Midland Great Western Railway of Ireland. After six years he'd developed enough expertise to be appointed as Resident Engineer on the Waterford and Limerick railway and was posted to Cahir where an ornamental bridge was to be built to carry the railway between box girders over the River Suir.

The opportunities in Ireland might have felt too limiting for a young man of twenty four especially when across the world railways on an even grander scale were needed. The country's first railway was introduced in the year 1853, joining Mumbai to Thane. Thousands of miles of additional rail lines were planned.

Robert Heenan asked his contacts in the engineering world to help him find an opening in India . In 1854, at the age of twenty five he arrived in Calcutta. With him was his new wife **KATE MARY DUIGAN**, a doctor's daughter from Westmeath, who he had married on 28 November 1853 at Drumcannon, Waterford, Ireland.

Career in India

His first posting was at Bhangulpore (alt spelling *Bhagalpur*) on the River Ganges where a series of large and small bridges were needed by the East Indian railway company to carry the railway over the streams coming down from the hills. Unusually for engineers and officials, he stayed in the region for almost his entire time in India. Robert did however return to Ireland on at least one occasion. In January 1864 he drew up his will and signed it in the presence of a solicitor in Parsonstown,

In 1872 the directors of the East India company scaled back their workforce when their projects were completed. They allowed many employees to retire on a pension but Robert Heenan wasn't

Key Facts

Born: abt 1828, Parsonstown, Ireland

Married: Kate Mary Duigan

Died: 1873 at Multan, Punjab, India

Children: George Charles John; Robert Alexander; Robert Cecil, Edith and Harriet (?)

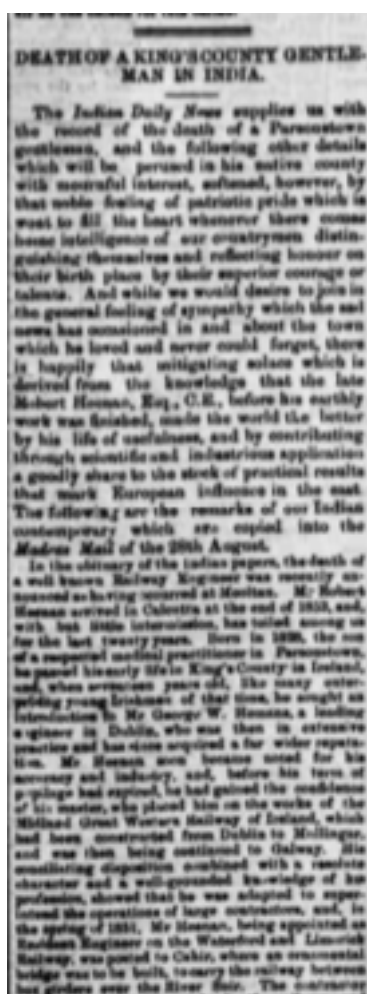
Family group: 127

ready to hang up his hat. He joined the State Railways to supervise a new project to construct a rail bridge over a railway.

Normally a healthy man, he apparently suffered frequently from fever and ague at this time. In June 1873 he deputised for a senior official at Mooltan (alt spelling Multan) and developed a severe fever from which he did not recover. He died on July 26, 1873 at the age of 45.

He left an estate, valued at £300, to his wife.

The only unusual aspect of his will is that he makes an "*express wish that my sons should be brought up as members of the Protestant Church of England.*" Until this point all the indications were that the family had been practising Catholics so the question is really what happened to bring about this change of faith?



Testimonials

The first notice of his death that appeared in the King's County Chronicle was very brief. But a more extensive obituary was published by the same newspaper on October 16, 1873.

It gives detailed information about his career, both in Ireland and India, and talks about Robert Heenan in glowing terms.

He had, as a young man, had a "conciliating disposition combined with a resolute character and a well-grounded knowledge of his profession." His esteem rose when the project to construct a bridge at Cahir was completed under his direction as resident engineer. The directors of the Waterford and Limerick Railway "soon learnt that they might rely on Heenan's honesty of purpose and engineering knowledge."

In India he apparently was as equal a success, being a "good type of constructive engineer, painstaking and honest in his profession and amiable in private life."

He had, said the newspaper "*made the world better by his life of usefulness, and by contributing through scientific and industrious application a goodly share to the stock of practical results of that mark European influence in the East.*"

Life after India

Robert Heenan's wife left India after his death. In 1891 she is recorded on the census as a 60 year old widow living in Brighton, Sussex, England. The address is of a boarding house in Montpelier Road. With her is her daughter Edith, aged 20 and single. Both women are described as "living on their own means" and were born in Ireland.

Kate Heenan died in 1892, her death is registered in the Margate district of Kent. In her will she named "my daughters Harriett and Edith and my brother Samuel Duigan" as executors. She instructs them to pay one eighth of the estate to her son George Heenan and the remainder to be invested with equal shares to her daughters. She also makes provision in the event of the daughter's marriages and any children they might bear.

What happened to her daughter Edith is not yet known. But at least we have something to indicate her existence. Where Harriet fits into the picture is unclear - there are no records of her birth or presence in a census record.

More information is available about her sons.

GEORGE CHARLES JOHN HEENAN

Born in 13 Sep 1855 in Bhangulpore and baptised in the same location on 24 Sept. He followed in his father's footsteps and became an engineer. He married MAUD BADDELY DYER in Auckland in New Zealand in 1884.

ROBERT ALEXANDER HEENAN

Born in Bhangulpore on 20 Sept 1860. There is no further information available about him. He may have died in 1861 from dysentery while on a ship called the Renown.

ROBERT CECIL HEENAN

Born 20 October 1867 at Bhagulpore and died in June the following year.

This profile is part of the Heenan One Name Study - a project registered with the Guild of One Name Studies. The idea is to understand the origins of the surname and how it is distributed worldwide. As part of this research I am collecting all references to the surname HEENAN wherever they occur in the world.

If you have any Heenans in your ancestry and want to know more about this surname do visit the blog site www.heenan.one-name.net

New contributions are always welcome so you have information please contact heenan@one-name.org.