# Silver trowel story stretches from Rugby to London

## Words etched in sterling not always true!



**Commemorative trowel**

A most unusual object turned up stored in a drawer in Historic Rugby's archives. Inside a hinged box lined with velvet and silk was nestled a sterling silver trowel with bone handle. Engraved on the blade was this:

"Presented to Sir Henry Kimber, BART, MP, On the occasion of the laying of the Foundation Stone of the Putney Hippodrome, March 31st, 1906."

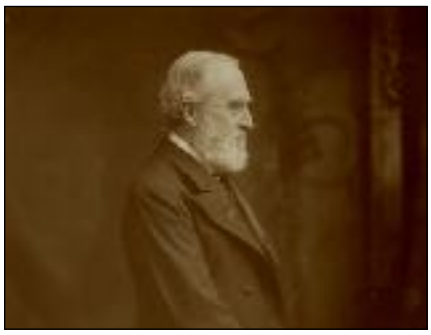
Kimber's name is familiar. The London lawyer, banker, railroad investor, a baronet and member of parliament, was one of the primary financial backers of the settlement of Rugby, Tennessee. The name of one of his sons is associated with Rugby lodging facility Percy

Cottage, a reconstruction of the original built with Kimber money. But what of this trowel? And the "Putney Hippodrome"?

The answers led in unexpected directions. Ceremonial trowels were common in the Edwardian era, and even earlier in Queen Victoria's time. A few are found for sale on eBay today.

Putney, a neighborhood in southwest London, is within the area known as Wandsworth (1905 population 200,000) which Sir Henry represented in parliament for more than 20 years.

The Putney Hippodrome it turns out was a well-known variety theater designed by architect Frederick W. Hingston with a seating capacity of 1,641. It cost an estimated 23,000 British pounds, was "entirely fireproof" and "run on strictly temperance principals," according to *The Architect & Contract Reporter* of April 6, 1906. The same newsletter revealed this as well about our 1906 trowel: Sir Henry "who was to have performed the ceremony was prevented by illness from attending. His son, Mr. Henry Dixon Kimber, C.C., officiated, however in his stead." So the trowel became an inaccurate relic remaining with the Kimbers.





**Sir Henry Kimber & eldest son Henry Dixon Kimber, from Historic Rugby Archives**

How did it get to Rugby? We're not entirely sure. The best theory lies with Rugby's first-born child, Sarah Kellogg. She married Sir Henry's fifth son, Hugh Dixon Kimber, in 1902 and the two spent some in England, but divorced in 1914. She then married Will Walton of Rugby and finished her years with him in The Lindens house, opposite Newbury House owned by her parents.

Was Sarah given the incorrect Kimber relic? If so, it would have been preserved by her daughter, Anna Joyce Walton Herr (1920-2019). In 2007, a truckload of Herr's Rugby holdings were acquired by Historic Rugby and returned here from her home near Philadelphia, PA. Many of those materials, including guest registers from Rugby's ill-fated Tabard Inn hotels (the second burning in 1900), wound up in the archive.

But what about the Putney Hippodrome? In 1924 it gave up as a variety theater and began screening films, according to the website Cinema Treasures. That role lasted until 1961, when comedian Jerry Lewis' film "Cinderfella" was the last shown. But refusing to die quickly, the theater reopened briefly in 1971 as a film set itself for the movie "Sitting Target" (1972) starring Oliver Reed and the 1973 film "Theatre of Blood" with Vincent Price and Diana Rigg. The final scene in that work showed the Hippodrome interior on fire in a contained blaze. In 1975 it was demolished and housing built on the site, the website tells.

