

## PHILIPPS, JOHN WYNFORD, 1st Viscount St. Davids, 13th Baronet, of Picton Castle, (1860-1938)

**Name:** John Wynford Philipps

**Date of birth:** 1860

**Date of death:** 1938

**Spouse:** Leonora Philipps (née Gerstenberg)

**Spouse:** Elizabeth Frances Philipps (née Rawdon-Hastings)

**Child:** Colwyn Erasmus Arnold Philipps

**Child:** Roland Erasmus Philipps

**Child:** Jestyng Reginald Austen Plantagenet Philipps

**Parent:** Mary Margaret Philipps (née Best)

**Parent:** James Erasmus Philipps

**Gender:** Male

**Area of activity:** Business and Industry; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Royalty and Society

**Author:** David Lewis Jones

Born on 30 May 1860, at the Vicarage, Warminster, Wiltshire, John Philipps was the eldest son of Sir James Erasmus Philipps, 12th Baronet, vicar of Warminster, and Mary Margaret Best. Sir James inherited the baronetcy as a descendant of Hugh Philipps, the second son of **Sir John Philipps, the first baronet**, but **Sir Richard Philipps, Baron Milford, the seventh baronet**, who died in 1823, had devised Picton Castle and its large estate out of the male line to a distant cousin who assumed the name Philipps. The loss of the estates was a source of considerable resentment with both Sir James and his eldest son. As a clergyman, Sir James was energetic and his sons inherited this quality.

John Wynford Philipps, named Wynford after his mother's brother, Lord Wynford, was the eldest in a family of five sons and four daughters. All of Sir James's sons, except Albert Perrot who died young, made successful careers and three are noted separately: **Sir Ivor Philipps**; **Owen Cosby Philipps**, **Lord Kyslant**, and **Laurence Richard Philipps, 1st Baron Milford**. His large family was a financial burden for Sir James; his two eldest sons, John and **Ivor**, were sent in 1873 to Felstead School, which offered concessionary rates to the sons of clergymen. As the eldest son, John was allowed to enter Keble College, Oxford, where he graduated in 1882 with a third class honours degree in modern history. While reading for the bar at the Middle Temple, he stood in 1886 as a Gladstonian Liberal for the Devizes constituency in Wiltshire but lost heavily to the Conservative member. He was called to the Bar in 1886.

On 14 February 1888, at St. Marylebone Parish Church, Philipps married **Leonora Gerstenberg**, one of two orphaned girls who inherited a fortune from their father, Isidore Gerstenberg, founder of the Corporation of Foreign Bondholders, which guarded the interests of British holders of foreign bonds. By the time of her marriage, Leonora's Gerstenberg's fortune had grown to around £100,000. Two months after his wedding, Philipps won a by-election in the Mid Lanarkshire constituency; his brother, **Owen**, who worked in a Glasgow shipping office and was active in the Liberal Party, helped him to obtain the nomination. Keir Hardie came a poor third at this election. When the vacancy occurred, Philipps was on his honeymoon at Tangier; he rushed to the constituency, which he had never visited before, won the Liberal nomination against strong competition and increased the party's majority at the poll. Philipps held the seat at the 1892 general election but resigned in May 1894.

In 1890, Philipps joined the board of Government Stocks & Other Securities Investment Company, an early investment trust, which, within months, was facing an uncertain future because of a grave crisis at Barings Bank. Despite his youth, Philipps was appointed chairman and he rescued the company from its difficulties. This success led to his appointment as a director of the Omnium Investment Company and he became chairman of this company within a year; other trusts in which Philipps had an influential voice were Premier Investments and Consolidated Trust. Through these trusts, Philipps was able to assist the shipping interests of his brother, **Owen**, and to build the business careers of his other brothers, **Ivor**, **Lawrence** and Bertram.

During the 1890s, Philipps invested heavily in Latin American railways through the Costa Rica Railway Company and the Buenos Ayres and Pacific Railway Company. In Argentina, which he visited at least five times, he was responsible for a major expansion in railway track. Through the Buenos Ayres and Pacific Company, Philipps obtained control of a number of smaller railway companies, not by full amalgamation but through agreements to service the capital accounts of the small lines, and eventually controlled a network of around 2,500 miles. The priority for Philipps throughout the thirty-eight years he was chairman of the Buenos Ayres and Pacific railway was the value of the shares rather than the detailed and painstaking work of building an integrated railway company. Philipps showed a similar want of attention to the details of running a company when he invested in the cement industries. Henry O'Hagan, a considerable figure in the Stock Exchange, formed the Associated Portland Cement Manufacturers Ltd to take over small cement works. In the autumn of 1910, O'Hagan noticed that the company's £10 shares, which had fallen to £1, were being traded vigorously and that the price had reached £4; the mystery buyers purchased over three quarters of the shares. Philipps was behind the purchase of these shares and he promised O'Hagan that two million pounds was available to increase the company's control of the cement industries and that he would have complete independence in running the company, provided Philipps was made chairman. It was clear to O'Hagan that Philipps did not have the least interest in the cement industries except as a profitable investment. The funds provided to O'Hagan led to the formation of British Portland Cement Manufacturers Ltd with Philipps as chairman. When the two cement companies were profitable, Philipps kept to his initial undertaking and stood down as chairman. O'Hagan praised him as a man who grasped the general management of the company but left technical matters to the experts; he had held to his promise to provide the necessary funds to establish the cement trade in Britain on a sound and profitable basis. He played an equally important part in the development of the British Electric Traction Company Ltd, operators and manufacturers of trams and buses. The investment group led by Philipps, known from its address as the '69 Old Broad Street Group', was very successful and made him a wealthy man.

Through the funds at his disposal, John Philipps provided opportunities for his brothers to build their own careers in business: **Ivor**, Bertram and **Laurence** were directors of companies in which John Philipps had invested heavily. When **Owen Philipps** established a small shipping company, Philipps & Co., at Glasgow in 1888, John Philipps

provided financial assistance. From this small company, **Owen Philipps** built the Royal Mail Group, one of the largest shipping companies in the country. Without the investment funds provided by John Philipps, it is unlikely that **Owen Philipps** would have been able to establish himself as a significant figure in the shipping business so quickly. After the first ten years, **Owen Philipps** was independent of his brother and relations between them broke down in the 1920s, with the result that John Philipps was not helpful when his brother faced a major crisis in the early 1930s. The differences between the two brothers have been ascribed either to the fact that **Owen Philipps** joined the Conservative Party in 1916 or to the fact that he was friendly with **Sir Henry Erasmus Philipps** of Picton Castle. The breach between the brothers was so complete that John Philipps did not attend his brother's funeral.

Like their father, the Philipps brothers were Liberals in politics. When John Philipps won the Mid Lanarkshire seat, the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 13 July 1892 noted that he proposed to devote himself entirely to politics and described him as owning an unnatural amount of self-assurance and a glib tongue. In the event, Philipps resigned the Mid Lanarkshire seat, possibly on the grounds that a Scottish seat was inconvenient after his brother's shipping firm moved to London. Although a Scottish member, Philipps was an active participant in Welsh Liberal politics and he became close to a number of Welsh Liberal members, including **Lloyd George**. In the year that Philipps resigned his Scottish seat, he built Lydstep House on the Pembrokeshire coast, not far from Tenby and with remarkable views across to Caldey Island.

It was known throughout Welsh Liberal circles in 1895 that Philipps was looking for a Welsh seat at the next general election and that his name was mentioned at every Welsh vacancy. He was one of the two candidates considered for the Cardiganshire vacancy but withdrew his name at a late stage. He did not stand at the general election in the summer of 1895. However, the appointment of W. Rees Davies, the Liberal member for Pembrokeshire, as Attorney General of the Bahamas led to a by-election which Philipps won on 15 February 1898, with a large increase in the Liberal majority over the Conservative candidate. He stood unopposed at the 1900 general election and held the seat in 1906; his brothers, **Ivor** and **Owen**, were also elected to Parliament in that year and the fact that three brothers were in the House of Commons attracted press attention.

Philipps was close to **Lloyd George** and served for many years on the Welsh National Liberal Council, first as a member and later as chairman. In the 1920s and 1930s, Philipps controlled, as chairman, the Lloyd George Fund, which provided the former prime minister with financial support, independent of the Liberal Party Organisation, for his political activities. Philipps was never offered ministerial office but he did serve on a number of official bodies: a member of the Investment Board under the Insurance Act; a member of the Roads Board; and, chairman 1920-1932 of the Unemployment Grants Committee.

Around 1900, Philipps purchased Roch Castle and restored it as a Pembrokeshire residence. A decade later, he built another house, West Lodge, at Lydstep. On the grounds of ill health, he resigned from the Pembrokeshire seat in 1908 and was granted a peerage on 6 July as Baron St. Davids of Roch Castle in the county of Pembroke. He was made Lord Lieutenant of Pembrokeshire in 1911; appointed a privy councillor in 1914; raised to the rank of Viscount St. Davids, of Lydstep Haven, co. Pembrokeshire in 1918; and, awarded a knighthood in 1922. As a Member of Parliament and as Lord Lieutenant, Philipps was assiduous in his duties on behalf of Pembrokeshire and he was careful to draw attention to his family's ancient roots in the county.

Leonora, 'Nora', Philipps, Lady St Davids, was a considerable figure in her own right, both as a strong supporter of women's rights and as an able platform speaker. In Wales, she took an interest in folklore, performed recitations, had a leading part in the Welsh National Pageant of 1909, and, supported the National Eisteddfod, being the lady president at a concert during the Abergavenny Eisteddfod in 1913. Lord St. Davids suffered three grievous blows in the months from March 1915 to July 1916: his wife died on 31 March 1915 at a London nursing home after an operation and she was buried at Roch Church; his elder son, Collwyn Erasmus Arnold Philipps, was killed in France on 13 May 1915; his surviving son, Roland Erasmus Philipps, was also killed in France on 7 July 1916. Lord St. Davids re-married at St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, on 27 April 1916; his second wife was Elizabeth 'Betty' Margaret Rawdon-Hastings, who was allowed by the House of Lords to revive the ancient baronies of Strange of Knokin, Hungerford and De Moleyns in 1920. Lord St. Davids had a son and a daughter from his second marriage; the son, Jestyng Reginald Austen Plantagenet, succeeded to his father's and, eventually, to his mother's titles.

Like his brothers, Lord St. Davids was a tall, handsome man with a strong and confident personality. He died at his home in Buckingham Gate, London, on 28 March 1938 and was buried on 31 March at Roch Church in Pembrokeshire. He left an estate of £123,736 gross.

## Author

**David Lewis Jones**

## Sources

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## Further Reading

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NLW Archives: [Mr Philipps' Address to the Liberal Three Hundred at Haverfordwest, January 10th, 1906](#)

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NLW Archives: [To the Electors of Pembrokeshire](#)

Wikipedia Article: [John Philipps, 1st Viscount St Davids](#)

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