



# George Frederick Harris

(1856 – 1924)

## A Journey from Merthyr to Sydney & A Talented Portrait Painter

By: **Graham John Wilcox**  
Ymlaen Lodge No. 8419

WBro  
George Frederick  
Harris PPGSW

PM  
Loyal Cambrian  
Lodge  
No. 110

Primus Master  
Fforest Lodge  
No. 2606



George Frederick Harris  
Pictured in 1890  
Aged 34

### The Early Years

George Frederick Harris, was born on 30 October 1856 in Birmingham, the eldest son of Cleopas Harris (1828-1923) and Anne Jones (1828-1906). George followed his father into the family photography business in Merthyr and by 1880 the name of the firm had changed from Harris & Co. to Harris, Son and Co. Within the next 10 years George successfully managed to set up his own studio in the centre of Cardiff, at 59 Queen Street. As well as showing an aptitude for photography George and his younger brother Albert Edward were also talented portrait painters.

### Initiation into Freemasonry

George was Initiated into Loyal Cambrian Lodge No.110 at the age of 23 on 4 September 1879 by the WM, WBro Thomas Wilson Goodfellow, and was subsequently

Passed on 2 October, and Raised on 6 November of that same year. Each of these Ceremonies were shared with his Co-Initiate John Evan Davies a 36 year old Draper from Merthyr Tydfil.

At this early stage of his career, George had already built up a reputation for himself as a portrait painter, a number of his paintings having been exhibited in The Royal Academy in London. He was also asked to paint portraits of Past Masters of the Loyal Cambrian Lodge, which were hung in the Banquet Hall of the Lodge building in Merthyr, a number of these can still be seen in the Lodge building to this day.

Many of his paintings of prominent local individuals are currently on display in Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Merthyr Tydfil. The National Museum of Wales is the custodian of other George Harris paintings.

### Marriage and Children

George married Jemima Reid Bowman, a Minister's daughter, on 15 March 1882 in St Tydfil's, Merthyr. Unfortunately it proved to be an unhappy marriage and they eventually parted. There were two children from this first marriage, Ethel and Claude.

George later married Rosetta Elizabeth (née Lucas). Rosetta (Picture 2) was the mother of George's nine other children, Cromwell, Ruby, Carl, Rosamund, Marcus, Rhona, Esme, Olaf, and Patricia.



Rosetta Elizabeth  
Lucas  
(1874 – 1946)

*"Many of his paintings of prominent local individuals are currently on display in Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Merthyr Tydfil"*

Artistic Influences

Rolf Harris  
Australian artist  
and entertainer:  
*"I always  
imagined I  
would be a  
portrait painter  
like my Welsh  
grandfather."*



Rhona  
Pixie O'Harris  
Aged 21  
(1903 - 1991)

The home in Merthyr that George and his brothers grew up in was very creative, imaginative and artistic. Therefore it should come as no surprise that this background influenced not only George but also his own children. It clearly later influenced George's grandson, the notable Australian artist and entertainer, Rolf Harris who said during an interview in 2001: "I always imagined I would be a portrait painter like my Welsh grandfather."

One of George and Rosetta's children, Rhona Olive Harris (Picture 3) wrote verses at an early age. She was also a talented artist and was also strongly influenced by the artistic atmosphere in the home. Rhona was educated at Sully village school and Allensbank Girl's School in Cardiff. Rhona went on to study at the prestigious Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney.

Later in her life, she was confined to hospital in Australia for the birth of her third daughter. She decided to use her talents to paint colourful fairy-style murals for the children, to make their stay in hospital more pleasant. She went on to decorate over fifty children's hospital wards, schools, day nurseries and baby clinics, for which commitment to her craft she was awarded an MBE in 1976. She also received the Queen's Coronation Medal in 1953 and the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977.

The Harris family emigrated to Australia in 1920. It was while on the ship to Australia that she adopted the name 'Pixie.' Being referred to as 'the Welsh pixie' and not liking the name Rhona, she decided to use Pixie. A change in her surname followed after a printer's error at the Sydney Morning Herald added an apostrophe to her second initial.

Pixie O'Harris died on 17 November 1991 aged 88. The Australian Publishers Association Pixie O'Harris Award is now presented to a person who has worked consistently in the field of children's literature, has demonstrated a commitment above and beyond the call of duty, and has developed a reputation for their contribution to the industry. It was established in 1994 in her Memory and is presented Annually by the Children's Publishing Committee of the Australian Publishers Association.

World War 1 and Australia

Rolf Harris' father, Cromwell (circled) and his brother Carl, (Picture 4) in uniform, were the first members of the Harris family to emigrate to Australia in 1915. The brothers enlisted in the Australian Army in 1916. This photograph of the Harris family was taken in Cardiff, during a period of leave for the brothers from the hostilities in Europe in 1917.

Carl's service was delayed at first because his mother protested that he had lied about his age to enlist. Both brothers eventually served on the Western Front where Cromwell was fortunate to escape with his life after a piece of shrapnel pierced the top of his helmet but sadly Carl was killed in action on the Amiens front in August 1918. In the wake of this tragedy, George's family emigrated to Australia in 1920. They settled in Perth at first before moving to Sydney in 1921, where George once again established himself as an artist and photographer of note.



(Picture 4) The Harris Family.  
Back row left to right: Rosamund, Carl, Ruby, Cromwell, and Marcus.  
Front left to right: Olaf, Rosetta, George, Rhona, Esme and in the centre, Patricia

*Being referred  
to as 'the Welsh  
pixie' and not  
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Rhona, she  
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## George Harris' Masonic Career in South Wales

### Loyal Cambrian Lodge in Merthyr

On the evening of 6 January 1887, a probably very nervous 31 year old Bro George Harris was Presented to the Retiring WM, WBro John James Jones for Installation by none other than the DepPGM WBro Marmaduke Tennant. George was then duly Installed by WBro John James Jones as the Worshipful Master of the **Loyal Cambrian Lodge** for the ensuing year. Interestingly, only nineteen Brethren and five Visitors were present at this the particular Installation Meeting.

The following account appears in The Illustrated History of the Loyal Cambrian Lodge No 110 (1810-1914) Written by WBro James Frazer.

It describes the Presentation of a new Masters Chair to the Loyal Cambrian Lodge in Merthyr in 1893: *Bro D A Thomas, MP attended the Lodge Meeting held on 7 September 1893 and formally Presented to the Lodge, in a graceful manner, a handsome and massive oak chair, carved in the Ionic Order, with fluted columns, and having a shield carved with Masonic and Welsh emblems, for the use of the Worshipful Master. Bro Thomas, assisted by the Deacons, placed the chair in position, and afterwards completed the Ceremony by seating therein the WM Bro Duncan Macdonald.*

*The WM moved a hearty vote of thanks to the Donor for his valuable and much appreciated gift. This was seconded by WBro D R Lewis supported by Bro T W Goodfellow, and cordially agreed to by all.*

*The chair was designed by WBro George Frederick Harris and carved by the Mr Williams, of Gillar Street, Merthyr.*

*It serves a useful purpose, and will always be a reminder of the Donor's happy connection with the Lodge. Bro Thomas also presented a similar chair to Saint David's Lodge No 679, Aberdare.*

*"The WM moved a hearty vote of thanks to the Donor for his valuable and much appreciated gift."*

### Fforest Lodge in Treharris

When Fforest Lodge in Treharris was Constituted in 1896 WBro George F Harris was unanimously Appointed the Primus Master. WBro David Rees Lewis was the more Senior Brother but stood aside to allow his close friend George Harris to take the Office of Worshipful Master of Fforest Lodge. It is recorded that: *WBro George F Harris proved himself worthy of that trust by his diligence in training the then inexperienced Officers of the new Lodge.*

The self-portrait (Picture 5) was repaired and restored by WBro G.H.G. Cooper and Presented to Fforest Lodge in 1981. It is now positioned in pride of place at the entrance to the Lodge room in the Fforest Lodge building in Treharris. The portrait is a constant reminder of the very close affinity that has always existed between Fforest Lodge and its Mother Lodge in Merthyr, Loyal Cambrian.

(Picture 6) shows the Procession from St Mathias Church on 9 June 1910 to witness the laying of the Foundation Stone of the new Masonic Temple, Williams Terrace, Treharris The bearded Marmaduke Tennant may be seen turning his head towards the photographer and George Harris the Primus Master of Fforest Lodge is situated just to his left in the foreground of the picture. (Circled)



WBro George F Harris  
Proudly wearing the  
Centenary Jewel of  
Loyal Cambrian Lodge



Photo Courtesy of: Alan George [oldmertytydfil.com](http://oldmertytydfil.com)

George Frederick Harris died in Sydney,  
Australia on the 14th June 1924.

He was 68 years of age.

George Frederick Harris affiliated with Lodge Maroubra No 422 UGL of NSW & ACT on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1922 from the Loyal Cambrian Lodge No 110 English Constitution. Lodge Maroubra surrendered its Charter in 1924. George Harris died in June 1924

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## Obituary

### The Sydney Morning Herald

Tuesday 17 June 1924

#### A NOTED ARTIST

#### MR. G. F. HARRIS' DEATH

figure among artists, winning several prizes at Eisteddfods for Freehand, Geometry, and Model drawing. Mr. Harris lived in Merthyr Tydfil for 20 years, and later he moved to Cardiff. He was Chairman and Secretary of the Art Society of South Wales for many years.

Two of his sons having settled in Perth Mr. Harris decided to follow them, and in 1920, with his wife and seven other members of his family, arrived at Perth. He decided to settle in Sydney.



G. F. Harris  
in 1890

*'Both in Sydney and in Wales Mr. Harris took a very keen interest in Masonic affairs.'*

The death occurred on Saturday at Sydney Hospital of Mr George F Harris, who during his short residence in Sydney, was one of its foremost artists particularly as a portrait painter. Mr Harris came to Sydney less than four years ago but during that time received lucrative commissions for his work including the portraits of a number of prominent public men.

Among these are the portraits of the Premier (Sir George Fuller) presented to him on his return from England by Members of the Nationalist Club the late Sir Herbert Maitland, Sir Joynton Smith, Sir Owen Cox, Mr W. M. Hughes, Ex-Prime Minister, Mr W. H. O'Malley Wood President of the State Savings Bank and The Most WBro. Thompson (Past Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of Freemasons of New South Wales) The last named portrait hangs in a prominent position in the Masonic Club.

Among his well known pictures in Sydney are *Golden Wattle* and *In the Larder*, which were included in his exhibits at last years exhibition of the Royal Art Society One of Mr Harris' greatest pictures was that of the King Saluting the Grave of an Unknown Soldier in Flanders. This was hung in the Cardiff City Hall.

Before coming to Australia, Mr. Harris had already won a place of Honour in his Profession. His first success was attained at the age of ten years, and during his career he had been a frequent exhibitor at the Royal Academy and Walker's Art Galleries. Portrait, landscape, and still life came from his easel.

Mr. Harris was born in Birmingham, but he subsequently went to London, and finally to Wales, where he lived at Merthyr Tydfil, in the South. Here he became a prominent



G.F. Harris  
in 1896

Before leaving Cardiff he was presented with a handsome wallet containing a substantial cheque, and was made a Life member of the Art Society of South Wales. His daughter, Miss Pixie Harris, is well known in Sydney as a black and white artist, being a frequent contributor to the Sydney Mail.

Both in Sydney and in Wales Mr. Harris took a very keen interest in Masonic affairs. He was a Member of the Provincial Grand Lodge, South Wales, was a Past Master of the Loyal Cambrian Lodge of Freemasons at Merthyr, and was a Founder of Fforest Lodge in Treharris, and eventually attained the High Office of a Provincial Senior Warden.



G. F. Harris  
in 1917

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*'On reaching  
Sydney, Mr.  
Harris became  
a Joining  
Member of the  
Lodge  
Maroubra.'*

On reaching Sydney, Mr. Harris became a Joining Member of the Lodge Maroubra. Mr. Harris is survived by a Widow, Rosetta, and four sons: Cromwell, Claude, Marcus, and Olaf and five daughters: Rosamund, Pixie, Esme, and Patricia, and Mrs. Ruby Emmett. The funeral of the deceased took place yesterday at Randwick Cemetery. The Rev. William Greenwood officiated, and among those present at the graveside were Messrs. Claude, Marcus, and Olaf Harris (sons), Captain B. Emmett (Son-in-law), Dr. Bridge, and Messrs. Kenneth R. Olson, Arthur Garrutt, Bacon Goldman, N. Zions, H. Dudley, W. Williamson, A. E. Clarke, and J. Fenton.

The Masonic Club was represented by Bro. Owen Valentine Briner (Vice-president), and Bros., W. Nesbitt, and F. McDonald (Directors).

Grateful acknowledgement to:

- Nick Harris  
(The Harris Family History)
- Census Records
- The Illustrated History of the Loyal  
Cambrian Lodge No. 110  
(1810-1914)  
by WBro James Frazer.
- The Sydney Herald Obituary  
(Tuesday 17 June 1924)
- Alan George  
[oldmerthyrtydfil.com](http://oldmerthyrtydfil.com)