

## The History of Fernleigh House - the home of Nottinghamshire Hospice



On William Seardens plan of the town of Nottingham, published in 1844, there are few buildings north of Parliament Street. There were some densely packed streets on the sites occupied today by Victoria Centre and York House. The largest building in Nottingham then, the Union House or Workhouse was the last building before open country was reached. The Workhouse which stood on the site which is now the 'hole in the ground' just north of Victoria Bus Station had been built in 1842. To the north and east was called the Clay Field, whilst to the west was a similar large expanse also unbuilt on, the Sand field and between the town and the River Trent were the open meadows. All these lands had remained unbuilt on because they were commonable, that is, the burgesses or freeman of the town had the right to turn out cattle or pigs after harvest, to graze on the stubble. The freeman had been able to cling to these rights, despite a four-fold increase in the population of the town between 1780 and 1840, until 1845. In that year the Nottingham Enclosure Act was passed by Parliament. Commissioners were appointed under the act and

they had wide powers to reallocate land ownership, put out new roads and dispose of land for various purposes, particularly for building houses to relieve the insanitary, over-crowded rookeries of Nottingham.

There was a track leading from the Workhouse which was called Goosewong Lane which was the road to Woodborough. From its junction with Red Lane, now Redcliffe Road, the road rose steeply more so than it does today. To the right the ground was waste and land known as Mapperley Hill Common. On the Enclosure Commissioners map the contours are shown as rising from 138 feet to 318 feet in less than 2000 feet. The Enclosure Commissioners had power to sell land and had agreed in 1850 to sell 1028 sq yds to William Smith, a builder of Sneinton for £5.00. No conveyance was made and in 1853 Smith sold the land to John Green Hine. He had already bought adjacent land from the Commissioners and on 14 July 1854 he conveyed 10,449 sq yds including the land he had bought from Smith to William Windley for £767. This was the site on which Fernleigh House was built, about 1857, for William Windley, to plans by Thomas Chambers Hine, one of Nottingham's foremost 19<sup>th</sup> century architects. He was associated with his two brothers, John and Benjamin, in developing this small residential estate known at first as Mapperley Park. After the Prince of Wales, later King Edward the Seventh married Princess Alexandra of Denmark in 1863, the estate was renamed Alexandra Park.

It is clear that from the outset the intention was to create an exclusive estate similar to Nottingham Park which was being developed at this time. T C Hine was the architect responsible to the Duke of Newcastle for planning that development as well, together with many of the houses. The houses at Alexandra Park had to be of not less than £40 annual value and no industrial premises or steam engines were permitted. Hine designed the first four of the large houses, one of them, Springfield, for his brother Benjamin. The winding roads, including the Crescent (at first known as Park Drive) and Albert Road, were private ones.

William Windley, the first owner of Fernleigh, was born in Nottingham about 1822 and by 1851 was living in Park Valley, The Park, where his father Thomas also lived. Thomas married Jane Hutchinson at St Peters Church, Nottingham on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1821. In the 1851 census return he was aged 53, born in London described as a Dyer employing 94 men and had two servants, a cook and a housemaid. His son William, in the same return, was described as a silk throwster employing 221 persons. His wife Elizabeth was the same age as William, 29, and was born at Broughton, Notts. There was one son, Thomas aged 11 months and also three servants, a cook, housemaid and nursemaid.

In the 1861 census, William Windley is living at Fernleigh House, although it is not described as such, his address being merely Mapperley Park. He was then a silk throwster, employing 335 persons, under the firm of Windley & Barwick. His wife does not appear on the return, although William is described as married and not widowed. There were now 4 children, the youngest 16 months and there were five servants, including a groom and a labourer. It would seem that his wife Elizabeth died and soon after William remarried, for in the 1871 census return his wife's name is Frances aged 44, born in Nottingham. William was again described as a silk throwster and employing 220 persons and again there were five servants. Five children are named in this return, excluding Thomas who would be 20 and had probably left home. One the of the children was named Edward Crosland Windley aged 7 and as Crosland was Frances maiden name, she probably married William about 1863.

William Windley died comparatively young in 1877, aged 44, after 3 days illness. The Nottingham Journal described him as a staunch Conservative and firm and unflinching member of the established church. He had attended regularly the All Saints Church created in 1864 and designed by the firm of Hine and Evans. This was of course the firm of T C Hine who designed Windley's house. The

cost of All Saints Church, about £20,000, was met by Windley. He was buried in the church cemetery, after a service at All Saints Church.

In his will dated November 1875 he made a number of charitable bequests to a number of religious and charitable bodies, amounting to £1050. He stipulated that his wife was to have the use of Fernleigh House as long as she required it. He also said that his son, Thomas Wilson Windley was to have the option of purchasing an estate at Broughton. As his mother was from Broughton, this probably came to William Windley from his first wife. The total value of his estate was about £30,000.

William's widow Frances, was still living at Fernleigh in 1881, together with two sons, John and Edward. John aged 28 and unmarried appears to have been carrying on the family business as he is described as silk throwster and cotton merchant, employing 275 persons. Also living at Fernleigh was Frances's widowed mother, Mrs Amelia Crosland and a widowed sister, Mrs Amelia Stringer. By 1883 according to a directory for that year Mrs Windley was living at 30 Waterloo Road and she died in February 1884. The directories for the period 1885 to 1896 seem to have made a curious error. In them Fernleigh is described as being occupied first by W H Willatt and then by G N Greasley. In fact they lived at the house opposite Fernleigh, called Endersleigh.

Fernleigh itself was sold in June 1885 to William Hutchinson Farmer and he is described in the conveyance as occupying the house. He had no doubt rented the house until Mrs Windley died, when the trustees of her estate decided to sell it. The purchase price was £5,800 and this included not only the original site and the house, but also a further 5659 sq yds, including the gardens to the south of the Crescent, as well as the Lodge at the entrance to the Park. Windley had purchased the latter from J S Hine in 1863.

William Hutchinson Farmer was already living at Alexandra Park in 1881, the census returns describing him as Manufacturing Director of the Midland Lace Co Ltd, employing 600 people. The name of the houses are not given but it appears likely that he was living at Endersleigh, probably renting it. He was then aged 38, his wife Jane was 36 and he had three children aged 10 to 14. He had three servants, a nurse, a cook and a housemaid. Earlier he lived at Alexander Street (later changed to Alexandra Street) of Sherwood Rise. He was then in partnership with William Fully as Lace Machine Holders in Farmers Factory, North Sherwood Street. It would appear that the factory belonged to and was named after his father John Farmer.

It was whilst Farmer was living at Fernleigh that Woodborough Road was made less steep by soil being removed from the top and deposited lower down. He claimed that the Corporation in doing this had damaged the Lodge which belonged to him and managed to persuade the Corporation to pay for a new one. He played a prominent part in politics, being President of East Nottingham Liberal Association. In 1887 William Gladstone visited Nottingham and addressed a large rally. He was entertained whilst in Nottingham by William Farmer's next door neighbour, Sir John Turnley, whilst Farmer himself had amongst his guests the Marquis of Ripon who later became Secretary of State for the Colonies. Farmer was also the President of the Nottingham Gladstone Club from its foundation.

In December 1894 William Farmer left his home on Sunday night and did not return. Next morning his body was found in his office of the Midland Lace Company on Stoney Street, where he had committed suicide by shooting himself. He had resigned as Managing Director of the company the previous week and at the inquest it was thought that the depression in the Lace trade had resulted in his becoming depressed and suffering from insomnia. His father had died only five months earlier aged 82. William

Farmer left a widow and six grandchildren and an estate valued at £12,280. Five months later Alexandra Park had another tragic death, this time at Endersleigh the house opposite Fernleigh, George Greasley, a Farm Merchant who lived there thought he could smell gas. He turned the gas off at the mains and decided to burn off any residual gas in the pipes. This resulted in an explosion which killed him.

When William Farmer bought Fernleigh in 1885, he raised two mortgages, one for £3500 and a second one to Frederic Wadsworth, a Nottingham solicitor for £1000. In June 1894 there was still £2250 owing on the first mortgage which Frederic Wadsworth then took over. Thus when Fernleigh was sold in 1896 to John Player, tobacco manufacturer, for £4000 it was Wadsworth who conveyed it to him.

John Dane Player was the elder son of John Player, the founder of the tobacco business, the younger son being William Goodacre Player. When John Player died in 1884 he left the running of the business to his executives but stipulated that his two sons could be employed if they so wished, but at a salary of not more than £150 pa each. The sons were to inherit the business when the younger son became 25, in 1891. In 1889 John Dane Player married Margaret Page and his brother married in 1894. The following year the tobacco firm became a limited company and the two brothers were each able to purchase large houses.

John Dane Player did not immediately take up residence at Fernleigh, as he had it extensively altered. The register of building plans kept by Nottingham Corporation shows that on 14 August 1896 Marshall and Turner Architects submitted plans for alterations and extensions to a villa residence, Fernleigh. These were approved but unfortunately the plans cannot now be found. However some idea of the extent of the alterations can be gleaned from the two sketches of the ground plans. The first is

from a document dated 1875 and the second from a report to Nottingham City Council in 1950.

In October 1899 Arthur Marshall submitted further plans, which have survived, for a stable and carriage house etc on the opposite side of the Crescent fronting Woodborough Road. This attractive building with a turret on the roof is now used as a garage. Arthur Marshall was another of Nottingham's successful Victorian architects who designed several houses in Nottingham Park, including 'Brightlands' on Clumber Road East and 'Lenton Hurst' now part of Nottingham University. This was built for John Dane Player's brother William Goodacre.

John Dane Player lived at Fernleigh for the rest of his life, dying there in 1950 at the age of 86. He and his brother greatly expanded their fathers business, bringing it into the Imperial Tobacco Co. They retired from active participation in the business in 1926 and in 1934 were made honorary freeman of the City of Nottingham in recognition of their philanthropy. Both brothers gave considerable sums to churches and hospitals. John Dane had no children of his own and he gave £50,000 towards re-building Nottingham Children's Hospital where he used to visit the children almost every day. He was also made an honorary freeman of Saffron Walden in Essex, his fathers home town, in recognition of his interest in that towns literary institution. His wife died the year before him and in his will valued at £2.5 million, he left £27,000 in legacies to churches and chapels and the remainder to his brothers children.

In 1950 Fernleigh was sold to Nottingham Corporation. The inventory of fixtures and fittings mainly electric lights and curtain rails gives a description of the house in 1950. There was an entrance hall, cloakroom, billiard room, telephone room, drawing room, morning room, dining room, pantry, kitchen, store room, scullery, wash house, 2 bathrooms, dressing room, 5 bedrooms, housemaids closet, linen room, housemaids wash room, 2 maids bedrooms, maids bathroom, 2 top bedrooms, tower room and three WCs.

In November 1950 the City Council decided the main building should be handed to the Welfare Services Committee to be used as a hostel for the infirm and elderly in need of care and attention. These hostels were provided under the National Assistance Act 1948 to replace the workhouses as poor law institutions which until then had been the dreaded refuge for those unable to care for themselves. The land formerly the kitchen garden, south of the Crescent was allocated to the Housing Committee to build thereon a hostel for women. This was from the start intended as superior accommodation particularly when compared with similar existing hostels for men, such as Sneinton House. When it was opened there were insufficient applications from women, so only one floor was used for them, the remainder living available for men.

In 1974 on the re-organisation of local government, the responsibility for running Fernleigh and other similar hostels passed to Nottinghamshire County Council. The council continued to use it for this purpose for some years, but with the erection of new hostels in the new St Anns nearby, it became redundant. It was then used for a short period as a children's home. When this ceased the County Council leased it to the Nottinghamshire Hospice from 1980.

I am indebted to the legal department of Nottingham City Council and Nottinghamshire County Council for allowing me to look at the deed relating to Fernleigh. I also obtained some information from 'Alexandra Park before 1900' by Trevor Buck, which deals with the history of other houses in the part as well.

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