

OXTON HISTORY



John Gray Hill of Mere Hall

On September 18th 1839 Arthur and Ellen Gray Hill announced the birth of their third son John Edward at Bruce Castle School, where Arthur was Headmaster. Sadly, Ellen died in October following the birth. The school was a family business and Arthur had taken over when his brother Rowland was appointed Postmaster General. Rowland is remembered for introducing the world's first postage stamp, the Penny Black.

Following his education at Bruce Castle School, John Edward Gray Hill was articled to a firm of London solicitors. He attained a certificate of merit in the final exams and qualified in 1863. He first practiced at Founders' Court, Lothbury. In 1864 John married Caroline Emily Hardy, known as Carrie, whose family were merchants and neighbours living at Bruce Lodge in Tottenham. In 1865 he joined a Liverpool firm of solicitors Duncan, Squarey and Duncan, which specialised in marine law. The Gray Hills first resided at Apsley House in Rose Mount, Oxton. From there John Gray Hill would ride in a horse-drawn carriage to Woodside and take the ferry across the Mersey to the Liverpool office.

During the next three years the senior partner died and Andrew Squarey retired through ill health. Gray Hill suddenly found himself the senior partner and the secretary of the Liverpool Steam Ship Owners Association. This body was set up to lobby the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board on behalf of the ship owners. Under Gray Hill the practice expanded rapidly, representing the Cunard partnership and the Inman Steamship Company. Gray Hill entered into partnership with John Dickinson in 1874, thus establishing the law firm Hill Dickinson in premises at 10 Water Street.

Around 1870 the Earl of Shrewsbury granted building leases in Oxton and along the Noctorum and Bidston Ridge. This elevated position with splendid views across the Wirral to North Wales was soon the scene

of extensive building work. Men deriving wealth from the maritime economy were keen to invest in luxury mansions. They employed architects to design houses in which to display their antique furniture, paintings and fine porcelain. John Gray Hill purchased 4.8 acres of land and commissioned the architect Edmund Kirby to design the Old English-style Mere Hall; the cost of this project was £12,000. Gray Hill was a prolific collector of paintings, owning works by Sir Joshua Reynolds, Gainsborough and Botticelli. Mere Hall showcased his fine collection of antiques, tiles, and tapestries purchased through his close shipping contacts and his opportunities to travel widely in the Middle East.

The vestibule and entrance hall of Mere Hall were completely panelled in Old Dutch Oak taken from a church in Antwerp. Fine wooden panelling imported from Germany adorned other walls in his new home. The fireplaces were decorated with Persian tiles and oriental porcelain was displayed throughout the mansion; everything exuded luxury. Although

the couple had no children, the Gray Hills employed a staff of seventeen at the Hall but frequently abandoned this prestigious mansion for adventures travelling in remote and perilous places in the Middle East. In 1903 John Gray Hill was elected President of the Law Society and the following year King Edward VII conferred a knighthood on him for services to his profession.



*Caroline and John
Gray Hill*



Apsley House, Rose Mount



Mere Hall, Noctorum

On June 4th 1912 Sir John Gray Hill opened the Palestine Exhibition in Liverpool. In a lecture entitled “The Jews of Jerusalem” he drew on his experiences of travelling through the Holy Land and told his audience of the many adventures and narrow escapes he and his wife had endured. He spoke about the Jewish ghettos in Old Jerusalem and advocated a garden city like Port Sunlight be built outside the city walls. He urged the rich Jewish communities of England, Europe and America to raise funds to subsidise the building of decent homes and the development of a green and pleasant land.

On June 14th 1914 John died suddenly at his home Mere Hall. Carrie continued to live at the house until her death on 20th March 1924.

We thank Julian Treuherz for lending the History Group his first edition of John Gray Hill's diary on which these articles are based.

Adventures in Syria

The Gray Hills had become fascinated by the idea of exploring Syria, which at that time included the countries of Lebanon, Palestine and Israel. For the next twenty five years they spent the winter months trekking on horseback and camping in tents as they travelled throughout the region. Carrie's delicate health was not helped by the damp of Merseyside and opportunities to spend time in a warmer, dryer climate improved her condition. Caroline was an accomplished artist and spent many hours sketching and painting scenes of deserts, lakes and Bedouin life. Writing in 1887, Gray Hill recorded “in a month of riding and camping we have found new health and life, opened a fresh source of happiness, and imbibed somewhat the spirit of the country”. At the end of a trip in 1889 the Gray Hills purchased 35 acres overlooking Jerusalem on Mount Scopus, to build a home.

The Gray Hills could not have undertaken so many challenging expeditions without the local knowledge of their reliable chief guide George Mabbedy. He, an Egyptian Copt, was born in Jerusalem and educated at the English Bishop's school there. George was unquestionably loyal, an excellent horseman and capable of negotiating contracts with local sheiks to allow the safe passage of these intrepid travellers through the tribal lands. John and Carrie were keen

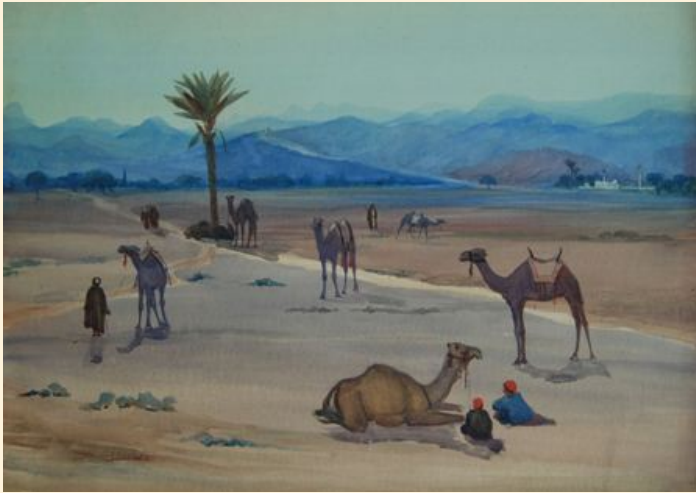


George Mabbedy

to visit Petra via the Dead Sea, though both the British Consul in Jerusalem, and George seriously counselled them against such a mission, as there had been an escalation of fighting between the Bedouin tribes in the area. Reluctant to accept the advice, the Gray Hills were determined to continue with their travel plans, despite the danger. They were

confident that the contracts secured by the Consul would ensure their safety as they had on previous trips. A respected Holy Man whom they had met in Jerusalem, offered to accompany them along with their usual retinue of servants. Leaving their valuables behind, they carried sufficient gold and silver coins for the journey.

Six days into the journey they were informed it was too dangerous for them to continue. Undeterred, the Gray Hills attempted to carry on to Kerak, an old crusader fort, at that time under the control of 2000



Caroline's painting of Bedouin Life

well armed tribesmen. They quickly ran into trouble and their camp was surrounded by 22 armed horsemen. George distributed what weapons they had and they spent an anxious night waiting for an attack. At dawn they broke camp and after giving the sheiks a Turkish pound were allowed to continue on their way.

Their sense of relief was short lived. Three days later local horsemen arrived to provide the safe passage agreed in Jerusalem. However, their leader Sheik Saleh started to demand more money. John's appeal regarding the agreed contract was to no avail and he was forced to pay up. The party were then escorted

by Sheik Saleh to the encampment of the powerful and much feared Sheik Khali.

When the Gray Hills tried to resume their journey money was demanded and a pistol was put at George Mabbedy's head, forcing them all to make camp. Luckily the Holy Man managed to slip away with a letter from John to the Consul explaining their predicament.

Meanwhile Carrie decided to take matters in hand and demanded the Sheik and his sons attend her. She reminded them of the many journeys she and her husband had taken in Syria and the kind welcome they had received. At first the Sheik Kahli had invited them into his tent as welcome guests and they had been offered bread and coffee, a sign of hospitality; now they were being robbed, treated as prisoners. In defiance Carrie confronted him: "Is this well done?". Her eloquence appeared to shame the Sheik, who assured Caroline that he had no intention of harming her or her husband but he still demanded he be paid in full. The Gray Hills' treatment improved after that and after seven days the Holy Man returned with a letter and funds from the Consul. The party left as quickly as they could after thirteen days of anxiety and danger.

The Gray Hills' adventures were recorded by John in a book called *With the Bedouins* published in 1891 and dedicated to Carrie.

Oxton's link with the Oscars in Los Angeles

The winning of an Oscar Academy Award is very often the apex of ambition for those who work in the film industry. Birkenhead has of course had Glenda Jackson, who won two Oscars, and Oxton tentatively had Eva Le Gallienne, daughter of Richard of Hampton Villas, Rose Mount, who was nominated for her work as a dramatic producer but who was at that time living in America.

It therefore came as something of a surprise to find that in 1991 when *Silence of the Lambs* was winning so many awards, that an Oxton resident, Seth Winston won an Oscar for *Session Man*, which was a 30-minute film written and directed by him. It was voted Best Live Action Short Film. Although Seth was an American, he had married a Wirral woman, Susan Bailey, in 1983. In 1991 the couple had two homes, one of which was Arno Vista Cottage in Birch Road.

The couple had two children, Alexandra and Dashiell. Alex was seven at the time and was a pupil at Prenton Preparatory School, as was Dashiell later. Alex recalls the night of the Awards at their home in Oxton. Their father even mentioned them in his acceptance speech by saying, "They have my permission



Seth Winston

to stay up late to watch” as he received his award.

Seth had also worked alongside Steven Spielberg on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* having got his big break through a scheme initiated by David Puttnam.

In a recent communication Alex said that they were frequent visitors to the Wirral and Oxton, as they visited their grandfather Charles Bailey here. In 1990 they then moved back to Oxton and she recalls with fondness her time at Prenton Prep. and then Birkenhead High. Dashiell unfortunately has little recollection of his time here but Alex recalls her many memories of Oxton Village, of Parkgate for its ice cream and Beatties for cake treats with her grandfather.



Dashiell has followed very much in his father's footsteps and is currently at Paramount Studios where he is part of the worldwide brand marketing team coming up with exciting concepts for upcoming releases.

Sue moved to New York in 1993 and now runs a successful flower shop called The English Garden. Alex also moved there and worked as a fashion stylist and for Vogue Magazine between 2010 and 2015. She moved to London in 2015. Seth himself died suddenly in 2015 leaving a huge gap in the fabric of

the family.

The last word must go to Alex: “The Wirral and especially Oxton is, and always will be, a special place for our family”.

The view from the Queen's Arms



This advert for the Queen's Arms appeared in the front pages of a street directory from around the 1870s. It trumpets the reassuring news “Beds well aired” and the comforting availability of “Havana Cigars”....and only “one and a half miles from Woodside Ferry”.

The landlord Thomas Hughes was it seems popular, as you might expect, offering “Home brewed ales in draught or bottles”, so popular that they named the lane to the side of the hotel after him.

The rest of the advert is indistinct, though study with a magnifying glass reveals it states: “The above house is situated in the healthy part of Cheshire. It commands views of Cumberland, North Channel, Liverpool and is therefore well worth the attention of travellers, pleasure tourists, who will find every accommodation at moderate charges”.

Cumberland? Well, sceptics might be persuaded by the fact that from the top floor window of an Oxton resident's house sometime last summer, the Cumbrian mountains were just visible to the naked eye.

notice board

For further information about the Oxton History Research Group, or anything else that you are interested in or would like to know more about Oxton's history, contact **Bob Knowles** at history@theoxtonsociety.co.uk.