Woodbury on Biggin Hill, Upper Norwood – a bygone place of art, literacy and scholarship

Frank-Thorsten Krell

Denver Museum of Nature & Science, 2001 Colorado Boulevard, Denver, Colorado 80205, U.S.A.; frank.krell@dmns.org

In the upper part of Norwood’s Biggin Hill, on the west side of what was called Biggin Lane, Biggin Road or Biggin Farm Road, is a forgotten place, long gone and replaced by Havisham Place, a yet pleasant and quiet 1990s development in mock Tudor style, but leaving no trace of its long and surprisingly significant past. The place was called Woodbury and had an intriguing history for an array of notable people lived or were born here.

Woodbury, situated south of Norbury Hill, was built around 1805, or even earlier as the enclosure map of 1800 already showed a structure on the western part of the property (in enclosure 333; reprinted in Coulter 1996: p. 34), being part of the old village of Cupgate. The lot was owned by James Wood, the nurseryman (born 1776), of the D. Wood & J. Copeland nursery. As shown in the Roberts Map of 1838 (reprinted in Griffin 2004), Woodbury soon consisted of two structures on about one acre, called 1 Woodbury and 2 Woodbury in the census of 1871, 4 and 2 Biggin Hill in later directories, and Woodbury and Woodbury Cottage in Betty Griffin’s local history of Biggin Wood and other sources, respectively. According to the Stanford map of 1862 and the Ordnance Survey map of 1894, the western property itself was composed of two adjacent structures (Griffin 2005). Pictorial documentation of the place is largely lacking. I could find only one photograph, of Woodbury Cottage from 1980, published in Betty Griffin’s
booklet and reproduced here from the original photograph. Descriptions of the place are likewise sparse. Hart (1927) calls Woodbury Cottage “a charming old-world cottage”, and the obituary of the owner, Mrs. Williams, describes Woodbury as “a quaint, wooden structure” (Anonymous 1905). We know that both houses had large gardens, and at least the Cottage provided views of the country. This is surprisingly little information given the illustrious residents of Woodbury and the Cottage throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Eliza Jane Williams

Mrs Williams was the steady rock of Woodbury. She was born there in 1806 as Eliza Jane Douglas, and died there more than 98 years later. She was the oldest inhabitant of Norwood, having lived in the same house for almost a century, excepting a very short time (when the Emerson-Tennents resided at Woodbury and Mrs Williams and her sister lived down at the coast, in Broadwater, Sussex). Her mother, Ann Douglas (born around 1773), owned Woodbury Cottage, her uncle James Wood the main house, Woodbury. Eliza married the Rev. James Williams of Lowestoft on 24 April 1834 in Chelsea (Bury & Norwich Post, 7 May 1834). He was the son of the Rev. W. Williams, who served from 1830 for a few years as the minister of the West Norwood Congregational Church on the south side of Chapel Road. The marriage did not last long. Rev. James Williams passed away the next year. The 1841 census shows Mrs. Williams living with her uncle James Wood and “Independent” Betsy Moxon in Woodbury, whereas her mother and her sister Ann lived together with servant David Jones in Woodbury Cottage. Ten years later, the census recorded the same situation, but without servants, whereas in 1861, Eliza’s sister, Mary Ann Douglas, was listed as the house servant; and two boarders lived in the house. Eliza Williams and her family had moved out of Norwood for some short time in the 1870s, but the
1880 Norwood Directory listed Mrs Williams again in Woodbury; and in the 1881 census, she, her sister Anne Douglas, and niece Gertrude Williams are back together in the main house. Eliza Jane Williams died at the age of 98 at Woodbury on 20 January 1905. Gertrude Ina Bell Williams, Eliza’s niece and later adopted daughter, was still living – on private means – at 2 Biggin Hill (Woodbury Cottage) in 1911. Even when the Douglas-Williams family lived in Woodbury and the Cottage, lodgers or tenants were commonly taken in.

**John Dickinson**

As the first notable personality apart from the centenarian owner, John Dickinson, probably with his family, moved into Woodbury Cottage at some point after the 1851 Census. He was the Controller-General of her Majesty’s Customs. He had moved to Norwood from Mitcham, Surrey, and first lived in Norwood Cottage, Norwood. After only a few years, he died at the age of 66 on 29 March 1855. On 12 October 1856, his widow, Maria or Mary Dickinson, followed her husband.

**Birth of Theodore Dru Allison Cockerell**

On 22 August 1866, Alice Elizabeth Cockerell gave birth to her first son, Theodore Dru Allison Cockerell, at Woodbury. She was the daughter of Sir John Bennet, watchmaker, later sheriff of London and probably close to what we nowadays would call a celebrity. Alice was married to Sydney John Cockerell, coal merchant and son of George Joseph Cockerell who was also sheriff of London and purveyor of coal to Her Majesty Queen Victoria. Theodore became a famous naturalist (Kings 2014b), working in Jamaica, New Mexico and Colorado, the longest time as professor of zoology at the University of Colorado Boulder. He became known because of his enormous productivity and broad interests, having published over 3,900 scientific papers on insects, mollusks, fossils, plants, fishes, and more. He also was one of the world experts on bees. A book on his early years in England and Colorado is in preparation, to be published by the Denver Museum of Nature & Science.
Henry Dru Drury

The street directory of 1869 notes Henry Dru Drury living in Woodbury Cottage; Mrs. Williams occupied Woodbury. Dru Drury was the best friend of Sydney John Cockerell who gave his firstborn son the middle name Dru. When Henry Dru Drury married Margaret Pelham Power on 23 April 1867, Sydney John was his best man. The Drurys’ residence at the time of marriage, however, was given as Blackheath, the residence of Henry’s parents, but a note in *The Daily News* of November 19, 1870, indicates that Drury lived at Woodbury Cottage for more than a year.

Henry Dru Drury was a wine merchant based in Madeira, head of Power, Drury & Company which is now a part of the Madeira Wine Company. He was the grand-grandson of the famous entomologist Dru Drury (1725–1803), one of the fathers of entomology in England as Theodore Cockerell acknowledged him in a biographical note. Every entomologist knows his spectacularly illustrated three-volume opus, *Illustrations of Natural History*, published between 1770 and 1787. When Theodore Cockerell was a teenager, Henry took him on a several months long sojourn to Madeira, resulting in Theodore’s first scientific papers and strengthening his interest in natural history.

The Emerson-Tennents

The 1871 census shows Sir William William Emerson-Tennent (*14 May 1835), 2nd Baronet, and Lady Emerson Tennent living at “1 Woodbury”, together with two servants, parlour maid Eliza Craig and cook Martha Tompkins. In “2 Woodbury”, domestic servant Caroline W. Wakefield was recorded. No. 1 was Woodbury, no. 2 Woodbury Cottage. Sir William was the son of Sir James Emerson-Tennent, friend of Charles Dickens, author, and Colonial Secretary of Ceylon under Queen Victoria (Boase 1898). His son William was a barrister-at-law, clerk in the board of trade and was involved in negotiations of a treaty of commerce in Vienna in 1865 and in the mixed commission to Paris (1866–7) for revising the fishery convention (Boase 1898). In 1870, he married Sara Armstrong of Eden Hall, Armagh, who was born in Madeira, making one wonder whether there was a connection to the previous resident. A year later, the year of the census, the Emerson-Tennents’ daughter, Ethel Sarah, later Lady Langham (1871–1951), was born at Woodbury on 26 October. Sir William died at the age of 41 at Tempo Manor, county of Farmanagh.
The handwriting of the census is not easy to decipher. Betty Griffin (2005) misread when she indicated Sir W. Turnbull and Lady Turnbull living at Woodbury that time. There was no Turnbull at Woodbury.

Sidney Colvin

From 1873 to 1876 Sidney Colvin (1845–1927) lived in Woodbury Cottage. Richard Lines summarized his life in the *Norwood Review* 153 (2001). Colvin was an art critic, Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge, later Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum and finally Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. He was knighted in 1911.

In his memories, Colvin (1921) talks about “a cottage I then inhabited in the southern hill-suburb of Norwood”, or simply the “Norwood cottage” as if it had no name. As a man of letters, persons seem to have been more important to him than places. Yet his time at Woodbury Cottage had a lasting influence on his future life as it was then when he befriended and was visited by Robert Louis Stevenson, a friendship that had long lastingconsequences well beyond Stevenson’s premature death. Nowadays, Colvin is remembered mainly as friend of Stevenson and, above all, as editor of his letters.

When Colvin became Director of Fitzwilliam Museum in 1876, a post he held for eight years, he left Norwood. Years later he wrote “From within [London], it is but now and then, when some clear wind is blowing, in some chance street, or from some high attic
window opening north or south, that the heights of Hampstead or Norwood catch one’s eye, and remind one, not without surprise, of the existence of a circumjacent world.” (Colvin 1921: p. 233), a world he had once lived in.

The Norwood Directory of 1880 notes Woodbury Cottage as unoccupied, which changed that very year.

Henry Wallis and son Felix

The notable Pre-Raphaelite painter and ceramic collector Henry Wallis (1830–1916) lived in Woodbury Cottage from 1880 to 1895 as a tenant. Wallis called his residence Woodbury, but both the 1881 and the 1891 census list him at Woodbury Cottage. He rose to fame through achievements in three different fields: as a painter and artist, as a collector and expert in ceramics (Van De Put 1917, Lessens 2014), and as a lover. At Woodbury Cottage, he lived together with his son Harold (Felix), and a servant (in 1881 Mary A. Ely, in 1891 Henrietta Stones). His son was the outcome of a tragic love affair with Mary Meredith, the wife of his friend, the celebrated novelist and poet George Meredith (see Kings 2014a, in Norwood Review 206). It ultimately led to an early and lonely death of Mary, a deep upset of her husband manifesting in some profoundly emotional poems, and possibly in Henry Wallis ultimately giving up painting. Felix joined the staff of the Bank of England at the age of twenty and retired after forty years as the Manager of the Dividend Department.

Henry Wallis is best known as a Pre-Raphaelite painter with masterpieces such as Chatterton (1856) (see Kings 2014a, Norwood Review 206) or the tragically impressive The Stonebreaker (1857), but he also created watercolours from his archaeological travels. By the time he moved to Woodbury Cottage, he had retired from painting, but still needed a studio that he had built, as he wrote to
Wilhelm Bode of the Berlin Museum: “The house is entirely in a garden with wide views of the country, and unfortunately I have had to build a studio, & of all trials in life the Builder is the greatest…” (Wilson 2002). He needed the studio for producing illustrations for his seven books on Persian pottery he published during his time in Woodbury Cottage.

In 1895, Wallis moved to 9, Beauchamp Road, Upper Norwood, about 1.5 km southeast of Woodbury, a Victorian mansion now converted into flats. He departed from Norwood in 1909 for Sutton because the place was “so built over as to be now intolerable” (Wilson 2002: 259). What would he think about the current state of affairs? He might agree with James Stevens Curl, Professor of Architecture at the University of Ulster, who wrote in *Spas, Wells & Pleasure Gardens of London*:” Biggin Hill was ruined in the twentieth century by chaotic, sprawling, speculative housing over the sides of a long valley: if one ventures further into Surrey, one can glean an inkling of ‘what glorious country this once was’.”

**David Recordon and family**

From at least 1896, the year after his marriage to Hilda Mary Pike, to his death on 15 May 1908, David Recordon lived with his family in Woodbury Cottage, 2 Biggin Hill (occasionally and erroneously spelled Recordan in directories). He was the Surrey-born son of the Swiss immigrant David Emile Recordon, a straw plait merchant from Vevey, and also was a commission merchant working in the City. At Woodbury Cottage, two sons were born to the Recordons, David Aubrey on 13 Feb. 1897 (died 1972), who became an attorney, and Dory K. on 1 Nov. 1899. The 1901 Census shows a sister in law, Mary K. Pike, and a domestic servant, Esther Thomas, living with the Recordons. It seems that the Recordons lived an unspectacular life leaving few traces behind, unlike the next resident of Woodbury who shaped towns and cities on both sides of the Atlantic.
In the 1911 Census of England and Wales, Caroline Adams with her two sons Frederick and Thomas, and domestic help Lily Fisher, are registered at Woodbury. The head of the household was missing, but it was Thomas Adams (1871–1940), pioneer of city planning, founder of the Royal Town Planning Institute, the American City Planning Institute and the Canadian Institute of Planners, “America’s best-known Scotchman – the most distinguished city-planner of our time” (Survey Graphic, New York, 1929). At the time of the Census, Adams was attending the Third National Conference on City Planning in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, this having been the first of a long series of almost annual visits to the United States.

Adams was born near Edinburgh where he spent his life as a farmer and writer until he moved to London at the age of thirty. In the capital he started out as a freelance journalist but soon became the first secretary of the Garden City Association which gave birth to Letchworth Garden City, with Adams being instrumental in its development and early success. Adams moved to Norwood sometime between 1908 and 1911. This was the time when statutory town planning became law in Britain. Adams was appointed the first Town Planning Assistant at the Local Government Board on 1910. Somewhat discontented with the slow and rigid government bureaucracy, he left England in October 1914 to become Town Planning Advisor to the Commission of Conservation in Canada. Later, in the 1920s, he directed the Regional Plan of New York and its Environ. His influence reached to the highest ranks, advising President Hoover’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership in 1932. Later that year, soon-to-be President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote the foreword to Adams’s Outline of Town and City Planning (1935). The last decade of his
life Adams spent back in England at Yew Tree Cottage at Henleys Down near Battle. He guided King George VI’s Coronation Planting Committee as member of the Executive Committee and the Chairman of the Technical Advisory Sub-Committee. For the Committee he wrote a booklet on *Playparks*, in which he emphasized the necessity of safe outdoor play areas for children to strengthen their physical fitness and wellbeing. He died in spring 1940 (Simpson 1985).

His eldest sons followed in their father’s footsteps: Frederick Johnstone Adams became professor of city planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1932 to 1964 and head of the Department of City and Regional Planning from 1944 to 1957. James, not mentioned in the 1911 Census, was the County Planning Officer for Kent. Thomas Neville Adams read engineering at the University of London.

**Madeleine and Charles Nightingale**

Around 1920 to 1925, Madeleine Emily Nightingale, née Thrift (1879/1880–17 March 1940), her husband, Charles Thrupp Nightingale (1878–29 Nov. 1939), married in 1908, and their daughter Domini Helen (*1910), lived in Woodbury Cottage “for some years” (Hart 1924). The building was then called “The Old Cottage”, under which address the Nightingales appeared in *The Literary Yearbook* and its successor, the *Who’s Who in Literature*, at least between 1921 and 1927. Madeleine was the daughter of Sir John Thrift, Chief Inspector of Inland Revenue from 1907 to 1910. She wrote and contributed to around 25 books of poems for children between 1918 and 1937. Those charming booklets are true works of art: Madeleine’s husband not only illustrated them with wonderful woodcut illustrations, but also provided the woodcut script. The British Museum owns a few woodcut borders and figure designs by Charles which were inspired by William Morris.
T.P.’s & Cassel’s Weekly called Madeleine “In the front rank of writers for children” and the Aberdeen Daily Journal attributed her “the gift of understanding the child mind with its vague but incessant quest after the imaginative”. In his autobiography, Richard Adams, the author of Watership Down, considered Nightingale’s Tony O'Dreams one of the most enjoyable and memorable children’s books he read.

The daughter, Domini Helen Nightingale, served as aircraftwomen 2nd class during World War II. Today, the Nightingales’ booklets are still available on the antiquarian book market, but not much is known about their authors apart from a blog post by antiques and art dealer Steven Bishop (2011).

James Robert Hart

The last resident of Woodbury Cottage who imprinted himself in the written record, to my awareness, was James Robert Hart (*6 July 1869) who lived at least from 1913 to his death on 22 May 1943 at 2 Biggin Hill which he called just Woodbury and which curiously appeared as 138 Biggin Hill in the 1939 Register and in Hart’s death notice. The road seems to have become renumbered.

On 4 March 1914 James married Elsie Minôt of Beulah Hill, the sister of aviator Capt. Laurence Minôt, later a World War I flying ace who shot down six enemy aircraft before he was killed in action at the age of 21 and was posthumously awarded the Military Cross.

J.R. Hart was a member of the Historical Association and the Aristotelian Society and drew our attention to the Nightingales. He was an actuary by profession, a business professional who analyses the financial consequences of risk, employed by the Pelican and British Empire Life Office, at 70 Lombard Street in the City of London. Hart also was in the council of the Institute of Actuaries. Before he moved to Woodbury Cottage, he had published several articles in the Journal of the Institute of Actuaries, e.g., on mortgages and registrations of title to land, and above all, a substantial paper on the “The English Land Registry” in the Transactions of the Faculty of Actuaries of 1905.

Here my trail of notable inhabitants of Woodbury ends. On 5 July 1944, a V1 bomb struck between Norbury Hill, Biggin Hill and Beulah Hill, apparently where the path to Woodbury and Woodbury Cottage branched off Biggin Hill.
One house was destroyed and three others severely damaged. It is not unlikely that Woodbury was the one destroyed. Woodbury Cottage survived the war and was demolished in 1996 (Griffin 2005).

Places can attract people of a certain kind, a certain mindset, or of creative nature. This might not only depend on financial actualities, such as the rate of the rent, but also on the setting and the history of a home. Woodbury and Woodbury Cottage certainly provided the environment that attracted literate, cultivated and creative minds. It is a pity that we cannot see and experience this place ourselves any more, as so many bygone places with a hidden yet remarkable history.

Postscript.

1. As much as I would like to add Thomas Attwood (1765–1838) to the significant early residents of Woodbury, as Betty Griffin (2005) had suggested in her Biggin Wood booklet, it is very unlikely that he ever lived there. Thomas Attwood, pupil of Mozart and long-time organist of St. Paul’s Cathedral who composed for the coronation of King George IV and King William IV, was famously visited by Mendelssohn in Norwood, but this was in his residence Roselawn, where Attwood lived from 1821 to 1834 (Edwards 1895; Anonymous 1925). Roselawn was 98 Beulah Hill, almost opposite to The Priory, and demolished in 1962 to make room for smaller houses on the site. Griffin certainly erred that he had resided at Woodbury “for a time” after he had left Roselawn. Attwood had lived at Roselawn till 1834 and moved to Chelsea in early 1835 when he was appointed organist at the Chapel Royal. His house in Chelsea at 17 Cheyne Walk was built in 1834 and stood empty that year with Attwood first appearing in the rate book for March 1835. This does not leave much time to intersperse a residence at Woodbury. He died less than two years later. When Eliza Williams, who had lived at Woodbury almost all her centenarian life, indicated where Attwood had lived (Edwards 1895), she mentioned that she had not known the Attwoods personally and she certainly would have if they had ever lived on the same or a neighbouring property as herself.

2. Some readers might know the engraving of Beulah Spa in its early years. This engraving was made by Henry Wallis, but this is not our Henry Wallis who lived in Woodbury Cottage and who was born in 1830. The engraving was published first in the The Watering Places of Great Britain and Fashionable Directory of 1837. The artist of the engraving was another Henry Wallis (1806–1890), who
worked as an engraver for book publications for a few years before becoming an art dealer in London, first managing and then owning the well known French Gallery at Pall Mall. He was the brother of the better known engraver Robert Wallis (1794–1878) who received an entry in the Dictionary of National Biography.

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References


EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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020 86538768
chairman@norwoodsociety.co.uk

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treasurer@norwoodsociety.co.uk

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secretary@norwoodsociety.co.uk

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