

# Grand Victorian Houses in Cross Town and Over Knutsford

## 2: Woodlands, later Woodside

### *Henry Long*

Woodlands was the first grand merchant's house to be built in Cross Town on land sold by the Pennington-Legh family. It was built for the wealthy tanner, Henry Long, in about 1850. Henry (1807-1882) and his elder brother John owned shops in King Street, Rostherne and Grappenhall and the tanneries in Cross Town and Drury Lane. John lived at Grove House and a Miss Jane Long at Vale Bank in today's Woodvale Road.

Henry Long probably bought 25 acres of fields and woodland from Pennington-Legh -- a rectangle of land which included his tannery. A clearing was made in the wood and Woodlands House built there in about 1850. It was a large mock-gothic place with breakfast, dining and drawing rooms, 13 bedrooms, butler's pantry, etc., stables and other outbuildings, approached by a drive running along today's Woodside cul-de-sac, off Thorneyholme Drive. Two photographs and a painting are at the end of this article.

Master Henry, ever an entrepreneur, enjoyed his social position and estate until old age. In 1843 he and his brother were appointed as inspectors to "effect the lighting of the town with gas". In 1859 he became chairman of the Knutsford Waterworks Company, raising £4,000 capital by sale of shares "to supply the town of Knutsford with a constant supply of good and wholesome water at high pressure". At that time railway fever was in the air so Henry became a director of the new Cheshire Midland Railway Company. He retired two years later, in 1862, along with Sir Harry Mainwaring of Peover Hall, but not long afterwards both he and Sir Harry were promoting a bill to Parliament which would allow the new Macclesfield, Knutsford and Warrington Railway Company to lay several new railway lines. One was planned to run from Booths Hall, past Woodlands and across to the water tower!

Henry and his wife Mary were at the Unitarian chapel in Brook Street in 1863 for the wedding of their eldest daughter Mary Esther to William Gaskell Harvey Esq. of Ceylon. The Longs had grown up five daughters – Mary, Harriet, Ada, Frances and Bertha. Bertha was the only one not to marry in the chapel.

What more can we learn of the character of this self-made man? In 1882 Long applied to the courts to eject a tenant, Joseph Burgess, and his wife from a cottage they had lived in for 30 years. The cottage had been taken on a quarterly tenancy, but Long now wanted the rent paid weekly. Burgess argued his corner, but the magistrates sided with Long and ordered Burgess to be evicted.

Burgess may have sighed when Henry died in December 1882, aged 75. His widow Mary took herself off to the south of France, but died the same year at Cannes, aged 67. One

daughter hung on at Woodlands for a couple of years until the family sold the estate in 1885 to Charles John Galloway, a successful engineer and industrialist from Manchester. The list of furniture and fittings also auctioned shows the luxury the Longs had enjoyed; quality furniture and glassware, and even a new top-of-the-range Broadwood grand piano in rosewood.

### *Hugh Arthur Birley*

Galloway divided Long's 25 acre estate into two plots. He kept the 11 acres to the north of what is now Thorneyholme Drive for himself and immediately built Thorneyholme House there. He sold Woodlands House with 14 acres to the south of the drive to Hugh Arthur Birley from Didsbury for almost as much as he had paid the Longs for the whole 25 acres – what a brilliant deal!

The Birleys were a numerous, wealthy and influential family of Manchester factory owners. Confusingly, almost all the males were called Hugh. Hugh Arthur's father, Hugh Hornby Birley, had been Deputy Lieutenant for the County Palatine of Lancaster and Conservative MP for Manchester. He had died two years previously in 1883, leaving young Hugh a considerable endowment plus the India rubber manufacturing company in Cambridge Street, central Manchester, founded by his great uncle, another Hugh Hornby Birley. This elder Hugh Hornby Birley (1778-1845) had been a cotton mill owner and, as captain of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry, had led the fatal charge at the Peterloo Massacre, 1819. In the 1860s Hugh Arthur's father sold the rubber mill to Charles Macintosh & Company, but continued as a director, and no doubt wore a 'mac' in wet weather. The director's position passed to Hugh Arthur and the family involvement with the factory seems to have continued until about 1920 when it was sold to the Dunlop Company.

Hugh Arthur clearly moved in the Cheshire squirearchy, becoming a Justice of the Peace alongside Lord Egerton, and a major in the Cheshire Imperial Yeomanry. The Birley family had long been benefactors of the Church of England, and Hugh Arthur paid for the construction of St Mark's church, Hulme. His wife, Amy, bore him five children. The elder son went into the family rubberised cloth business, while the second, Bevil Langton Birley, started as a lieutenant in the 4<sup>th</sup> Kings Own Royal Lancaster Regiment and rose to the rank of major in the Great War. He fought at Gallipoli, but survived the war. The three girls were Mabella, Mildred and Eva. Mabella was married in St Cross church in a full choral ceremony in 1906, her sisters as bridesmaids. As the couple left the church local children scattered primroses in their path and older residents sanded celebratory designs on the pavements, an old Knutsford custom.

Birley changed the name of his mansion from Woodlands to Woodside soon after he bought the place. Perhaps this was because most of the trees had been felled by then. Today only the narrow strip of College Wood at the west corner of Thorneyholme Drive survives.

Mrs Amy Birley employed several servants to run her large house. In 1911 there were five serving women, all unmarried: Katherine Parry, Annie Pugh, Rose Devereux and her 15 year old sister Nellie, and Ethel Moulden, aged 17.

Here's a story: in 1900 Birley was a witness in a legal case against a clergyman in Manchester. The Rev. John Kelty, a well respected rector in Old Trafford, was charged with larceny, falsification of accounts and forgery. Kelty had been secretary of a church charity to erect new churches in Manchester and support poor ones. At the trial Birley gave evidence that in May 1889 he had sent a cheque for £400 to Kelty on trust to support St Philip's, Hulme, where a relation, Canon Birley, had been incumbent. The auditors had found that Kelty had paid the cheque into his own account then withdrawn it all in cash. The case was sent to the assize court where Kelty, then a broken man, pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 9 months in prison.

Amy died in 1920 and Hugh in 1924, and sadly also their elder son, Hugh Ronald. Mildred stayed on for a couple of years, but servants and groundsmen were hard to come by so the Birley's great rambling estate was unmanageable. The remaining children did not want it so it was put up for sale.

### *Edward Percy Hope*

Woodside therefore became a boarding school. There were many small private schools at that time 'for the sons of gentlefolk'. Parents thought they would prepare their sons for the army, the law or the diplomatic service. They were the backdrop to so many heroic or comic stories for boys and girls. Older readers will know Billy Bunter and have watched the farcical film 'The Happiest Days of Your Life' (1950), or the 1950's TV comedy series 'Whacko!' in which Jimmy Edwards played the ignorant, swindling headmaster of Chiselbury School and Arthur Howard the bumbling deputy head, both outwitted by the boys. I'm sure that Knutsford College was not like that, but I will not write much about it here because the web site of the old boys association gives the details ([www.knutsford-college.com](http://www.knutsford-college.com)). There is also a book, 'The No Hoper' by David Skentelbery, published June 2021, in which an old pupil reminisces. The Knutsford college web site features a short film made of sports day in 1948. About 20 boys in white tops and shorts march in military formation onto the field and are led by an elder boy as drill sergeant in physical jerks. Later we see them race round the field watched by a sizable crowd of proud mums and dads.

The school was started with only eight boys in 1927 by Edward Percy Hope (1881-1951). He had previously run a school in Beeston, near Tarporley. His school motto was 'Hope, the anchor of life'. He employed a staff of about a dozen teachers and supporters. I'll mention only two snippets. In 1939 he advertised for a dormitory maid; a comfortable home and good wages were on offer but she "must not be afraid of work"! Later, during the war, Percy wrote to the Manchester Evening News about Growing for Victory -- the large number of vegetables they had sown to feed the 48 people who dine there every day. He even remarked on the 400 pounds of chutney and pickles they had made.

Percy's wife Maria Maud died in a nursing home in 1948, aged 79. Her funeral was at St Cross church. Percy himself died in 1951, aged 71. Their son James ('Jimmy'), also a master at the college, tried to carry on, but the old formula no longer worked with post-war families. The college closed down at the end of the summer term, 1954. Jimmy sold off some of the land along Manor Park South (then called Manor Park Drive) for house building and converted Woodside into single-occupancy flats which he let out until he himself died in 1960.

### *Manor Park South and St Vincents School*

So once more the Woodlands-Woodside estate was sold, this time to property builders. The detached houses along the west side of Manor Park South were built in 1954 on what had been the college's cricket pitch. When Woodside House was demolished in the early 1960s, the houses in Woodside cul-de-sac were built. Meanwhile St Vincent de Paul's Roman Catholic school needed new and larger premises because the population of Knutsford increased greatly after the Second World War. For many years St Vincent church had had a small school in Queens St, but in 1949 this was sold to the Knutsford amateur dramatic society who renamed it The Little Theatre. The school then used temporary premises at Winstanley House until the present primary school opened on Manor Park South in 1967, built at a cost of £50,000. The headmaster was Mr Ron McCormick – he was a keen amateur actor at the Little Theatre. The school has recently been extended and now has 210 pupils.

The name Woodlands persists in 'Woodlands Drive', and 'Woodside' is the name of the *cul-de-sac* off Thorneyholme Drive near to the patch of trees called College Wood. Mounted on a wall in Woodside, just where the house once stood, is a plaque commemorating Edward Percy Hope and 'Knutsford College, Woodside'.

*John Coffey, October 2021*





Woodside in 1927. Photos and painting courtesy of Mr. Doug Griffiths, Knutsford College Old Boys Association, [www.knutsford-college.com](http://www.knutsford-college.com)



Watercolour painting of Woodside by E.P Hope's great-grandson. The colour shows the zig-zag decorative brickwork.