

Grand Victorian Houses in Cross Town and Over Knutsford

5: Rockford Lodge

No photograph of Rockford Lodge has come to light. It was built in about 1890 in a rectangle of land covering 2¼ acres between Manor Park South and the ancient Sparrow Lane. Though not on the lavish scale of Woodlands and Thorneyholme, it had 14 rooms if kitchen and pantry are included. At much the same time other grand houses were being built on Legh and Leicester Road for rich merchants and industrialists, and Richard Harding Watt was indulging his architectural fancies.

Charles Scheu

I cannot be certain who built Rockford Lodge, but after about 1900 the Scheu family were in residence. Charles Scheu, a German by birth, was a prosperous chemical merchant. His family had moved here from Bowden where he and Nora Lydia, 9 years his junior, had been married in the parish church in 1888. Two years earlier Carl had become a naturalised British Citizen and changed his name to Charles.

By 1911 Charles was 52 years old and owned a profitable chemical trading company with offices off Deansgate, Manchester. Nora and he had had three daughters in quick succession: Violet, now aged 21, Gladys, 20, and Mona, 19, were all still living at home. The house, of course, needed servants so three unmarried woman, Mary, Lizzie and Edith, lived in and did the work. Later in 1911 the Scheu family moved into White Lodge, a more modern residence in Leicester Road.

The chemical industry was a major part of Manchester's economy from mid-Victorian times. It grew largely from the desire for new synthetic dyes for cotton. Mauve, the first synthetic, had been discovered by William Perkin senior in 1856 and his son, also William Perkin, moved to Manchester in 1892 as professor of chemistry. By then Owens College had a renowned chemistry department. Ludwig Mond, a German Jew and naturalised British citizen, was a leading figure and employer at his chemical factory in Northwich. Clayton Aniline (founded 1876, later part of CIBA) and Levinstein Ltd (later part of ICI) were major Manchester dye manufacturers. However in Germany an even larger chemical industry had grown up so that by 1913 80% of the dyes used in Britain were imported from Germany. It just so happens that the chemistry of dyes is closely related to the chemistry of TNT and other high explosives.

We might ponder what might happen to a German-born man, still with an accent, who worked with chemical import-exports when the Great War broke out. Public opinion flared hotly hostile to Germans and other 'suspect' persons – 'the internal enemy'. Many were arrested and sent to interment camps – there was one at Handforth. Perhaps it was an act of self preservation, therefore, that in June 1915 Charles changed his surname by

deed poll from Scheu to Wallace. The Royal Family too changed their name at the same time.

The Stewart and Bolden families

From 1911 to 1919 the owners of Rockford Lodge were Hinton Arthur Stewart (1874-1956), a Londoner of Scottish descent, and wife Dorothy. They had married in 1906 in grand style at Rougham parish church near Bury St Edmunds where her father, Sir George W. Agnew, Bart., was variously Liberal MP for Salford West (1905), High Sheriff of Suffolk (1922) and owner of Rougham Hall. Hinton had worked in central London before marrying and coming to Cheshire. The couple took Legh Cottage in Legh Road then moved to Rockford Lodge as his business prospered – he shipped piece goods (bespoke lengths of cloth) to the East. They must have known the Scheu family.

In 1919 a wealthy couple, George and Helen Bolden, left Tabley Road and seem to have moved in with the Stewarts for a while, then taken over living at Rockford Lodge. They must have been on friendly terms. George Lennard (*sic*) Bolden Esq., gentleman, had been born at Tabley but grew up in Manchester where his father had a cotton business. In 1914 he succeeded his father as a director of the Calico Printers Association Ltd, an amalgamated company of printers and merchants formed to restructure the industry and fight off fierce competition from overseas. At the outbreak of the Great War exports fell drastically and the situation was dire. As a director George aimed to keep business going as far as possible to limit unemployment, both because of the hardship it would bring to working families and because if skilled workers dispersed, they might never return when trade picked up again. The Association built the St James Buildings in Oxford Street, Manchester, and George had his office there. He was also a shareholder in the Great Western Railway Company.

George's wife, Helen, grew up in Caputh, Perthshire where her father, William Gloag, the Hon. Lord Kincairney, was a laird and senior Scottish judge. Her uncle Paton was Moderator of General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Both the Stewart and Bolden marriages are examples of how money and title married other money and title to maintain their stratum of society.

The Boldens probably stayed at Rockford Lodge until war broke out again in 1939. There is evidence that they took refuge in the USA and, when war was over, moved to Stroud in Gloucestershire. I have been unable to determine who owned the house during the war. In her excellent history book on Knutsford Joan Leach states that at the outset of WW2 a small hospital and clothing depot were managed by the Women's Voluntary Services at Rockford Lodge.

Sir Richard Martin-Bird

From about 1950 the owners of Rockford Lodge were the Martin-Bird family, wine merchants and owner-managers of the Yates Wine Lodge chain of wine bars. As well as being an energetic businessman, Richard Dawnay Martin-Bird (1910-1992) had an

outstanding career in the British Territorial Army (part time volunteer force. There is an extensive account of Richard's career on the Museum of the Manchester Regiment's web site (www.themenbehindthemedals.org.uk), so I will just outline his distinguished life. He was born in Weybridge, Surrey. His mother was Mildred Bird, but her maiden name was Yates. Her father, Peter had co-founded Yates Wine Lodges. Richard was educated at the prestigious Charterhouse School, Godalming, where he got into soldiering through the school's army cadets. During World War II he served as a signals officer with the Ardwick Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, a Territorial unit, in the defence of Malta, and later all round Egypt and the Middle East before fighting northwards into Italy against strong German opposition. He rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

He retired from the Territorial Army in 1956 but stayed in contact with his old battalion. In 1963 Lt-Col Martin-Bird was awarded the OBE, and soon promoted to honorary Colonel. He and Sir Douglas Crawford (of Crawford's biscuits) started a campaign in 1965 to sway public opinion behind support for the Territorial Army, 'a national asset', in the face of proposed Government cuts. They maintained that 'at the rate we are going there will hardly be a drill hall left in the country'.

In 1964 Richard was appointed Deputy Lieutenant of Lancashire, honoured with a CBE in 1971 and knighted in 1975. In 1976 he became High Sheriff of Greater Manchester. He also became Vice-Chairman of the Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Association. On the business side he was President of the Wine and Spirit Trade Association 1978-79. A breathtaking career.

In the 1980s he retired to Pepper Street, Chelford/Snelson, enjoyed gardening, and died aged 82 in 1992. Those who knew him remember 'a true gentleman ... the kindest, most courteous, considerate and compassionate of men'.

Christopher Jelf Martin-Bird (1946-1999) grew up in Rockford Lodge and succeeded his father as chairman of Yates. The first Yates's Wine Lodge was opened in Oldham in 1884 by Peter (1854-1944) and Simon Yates. Their motto was 'moderation is true temperance', probably written in the face of the strong Victorian temperance movement which insisted on total abstinence from alcohol. The company's offices were in central Manchester and Richard and later Christopher would have worked from there.

Yates are still popular; readers may have enjoyed a glass at one of their lodges. They have been a homely, no-frills wine bar-cum-pub. As one landlady in Liverpool explained to Christopher in 1989, their appeal was that they had not been 'Yuppified'; they were both where working people could feel at home and where professional people did not feel out of place. In 1989 Christopher reported to happy shareholders that they had had a very good year, with pre-tax profits increasing by 25% to almost £1M. Yates has since been through several restructurings and ownerships.

Christopher was keen on polo. He kept his polo ponies at Mr Furnival's farm in Mobberley and in the 1960s played at the Cheshire Club in a team with Randle Brooks of Peover Hall and Sebastian de Ferranti of Henbury Hall. Sadly he died in his 40s.

Rockford Lodge was demolished in the late 1960s and 22 open-plan detached houses built on its grounds.



Col Sir Richard Martin-Bird.
Photo courtesy of the Manchester Regiment

John Coffey, October 2021