



ITS HISTORY



Rockwood

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by

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It was because of the cotton industry that the house of Rockwood was built. It was also because of the cotton industry that Rockwood became a nursery.

The area of land lying between Todmorden Road, Hufling Lane and Brooklands Road could be called the 'Mill Owners Triangle' for here their homes were built; Fir Grove, Park View, Oak Mount, Oak Hill and in 1868, Rockwood.

William Witham, who lived at Rockwood, was a director of Messrs Whitham Brothers Ltd., who had mills in Plumbe Street and Finsley Gate. These mills, along with others, were built on the banks of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal because the owners had permission to use the water for their boilers. The canal also provided easy transport for the bales of cotton, brought from Liverpool, to the mills and for the finished cloth, which was sent to the Leeds' clothiers or back to Liverpool to be exported.

The cotton industry had first settled itself in Lancashire because of the damp atmosphere necessary in the spinning and weaving process, and started as a cottage industry. Then, inventions by Lancashire men, such as John Kay's Flying Shuttle and James Hargreaves' Spinning Jenny revolutionised the industry and as a result the great mills were built. All this and the coming of the railways, which aided the transport of coal from the Lancashire mines to the mills, where it was needed to provide the heat for the great steam engines, caused Lancashire to become the greatest cotton spinning and weaving area in the world. Most of the cotton cloth was taken abroad and a popular quote of the time stated that, "What Burnley wove before breakfast was for the home market and what it wove for the rest of the day was for export.'

The mills, however, needed workers, who, in turn, needed homes and those in the Burnley Wood area, near our nursery, were built between 1855 and 1910. They were laid out in a grid pattern, row after row of terraced houses, so as to permit easy drainage from the toilet and sink to be found at each house. The result of two Improvement Acts passed in 1846 and 1854 meant that each house built was supplied with piped water, drains and sewers. Streets had also to be lit, roads and pavements laid and new services such as libraries, public baths, parks and schools provided.

These houses were palaces compared to the back to back slums in the centre of the town, but nothing in comparison to the mill owners' mansions. Rockwood was no two up and two down dwelling.

It is possible that Rockwood was originally named Rookwood because of a colony of rooks that lived in the trees around the house. If and why the name changed it is hard to say. William Witham, who lived for most of his life at Rockwood, and his brother Francis, owned a spinning mill on Finsley Gate, now the property of Larnbert Howarth, and a weaving shed on Plumbe Street.

William, who was known locally as "Smiler Witham", was a bachelor and, by all accounts, a delightful man to know. As a diabetic he was the first man in Burnley to be maintained on insulin. He was a member of the Mechanics Institute for over fifty years, part of this time being spent as a director. He represented Burnley Wood ward as a conservative and became a Justice of the Peace in 1903. He and his brother donated money for an operating theatre at Burnley General Hospital. He was also a member of the Burnley Literary and Scientific Club and, through his love of the countryside, bought a farm at a place called Bridgefield. It was here he was knocked down by a motor cyclist and died shortly after at Rockwood on 5th November, 1930 aged 80. In his obituary in the Burnley Express he was described as, "...one of the best known men in the town."

In his will he left his house to his brother Francis who lived at Fir Grove. He gave Rockwood to one of his three daughters, Edith, who moved into the house after her marriage to Mr J. S. Wilson a poultry farmer. Here their only child, a daughter named Jean, was born on 5th May, 1932.



The family lived at Rockwood until 1947. For most of this time they employed a gardener and three maids. The maids 'lived in', sleeping in the attic or the small upstairs room at the back of the house to the right of the stairs. This room had easy access to the back stairs which ran down under the attic stairs emerging in the dining room, where there is now a cupboard. The other three upstairs rooms were all bedrooms and the small room over the porch was Mr Wilson's dressing room, with a door leading from it into one of the front bedrooms. What is now the staff toilet was a bathroom and the room next to it Jean Wilson's bedroom. The stairs boasted a red carpet and the banister provided excitement for children who enjoyed sliding down.

Downstairs there was a kitchen, now the cloakroom, a dining room, now the small playroom, a drawing room and a family living room, the latter two being made into one big room when the house was turned into a nursery. The drawing room, which overlooked the front garden, was used only for children's parties and for drinks after church on Sundays.

In the grounds around the house were stables, a boiler house by the back wall, and a wash house, which was a small cottage adjoining the back of the next door house. All these buildings have been demolished and the stones used to build the toilet block for the nursery.

In the back yard wall was a gateway, near to where the oil tank is now situated, which led to stone steps, which can still be seen, which in turn led to the area of land behind the nursery which was part of Rockwoods garden. Here, as well as lawns and flower-beds, there was a tennis court.

During the war the house was used as a billet for soldiers who slept in one of the front bedrooms. Mrs Wilson, her daughter and one maid remained at the house, throughout the war years, living mainly in the back living room which was heated by a coal fire during the cold weather, The central heating could not be used as there was only a limited amount of fuel.

By 1947 Mr Wilson had bought a farm at Coniston in the Lake District and the house was put up for sale. As this was the time just after the second world war selling was difficult and eventually it was the Burnley Corporation who bought the house for around £1,800.

For many years the cotton industry had suffered a decline due to overseas competition and two world wars. In 1946, after the second world war, a shortage of cloth saw a boom in the industry, but also a call on wives and mothers to help with this sudden revival.

Mothers however, could only work in the mills if their children could be cared for and Burnley led the way in nursery care for the working mother, and so it was that Burnley Corporation decided to convert Rockwood into a nursery. It was the fourth one in the town to be opened with plans for another thirty-six to be built. The final total was, in fact, thirteen.

The opening ceremony on 20th June, 1949 was attended by Councillor Mrs Battle, Alderman T. Maxfield, Alderman E. Sandy, Miss Wood the nursery superintendent, Dr. W. Howarth the Director of Education, Alderman R. Bushby the Deputy Mayor, Councillor H. Hartley and Alderman E. Broderick who performed the opening.

There were, however, critics of the day nurseries and those at the opening replied to them by stressing, "...the vital part the nurseries were contributing in allowing mothers, who wished to go out to work, to leave their children in the best possible care and to enjoy amenities which parents could not be expected to buy."

Alderman Broderick stated, "I think we all know and realise that if this country is to take its place as a leader of nations our exports must not only be maintained but increased, and we in Lancashire know the importance of cotton in the export trade." He also added that it was the, "Education Committees function to look after the children and we are determined to carry that out as well and as fully as we possibly can."

Alderman Sandy commented, "It is easy for people to take sides and see no good in the others point of view. I regret the need that makes mothers go out to work, but owing to the wages paid in this part of Lancashire this has become a necessity.

Nursery schools preferred to child minding



Group outside Rockwood Nursery School shows (from left): Councilor Mrs. Battle. Alderman T. Marfield. Alderman E. Sandy, Alderman E. Brodrick (the opener), Miss Wood (nursery supt.), Dr. W, Howarth (Director of Education), Alderman H. Bushby (Deputy Mayor), and Councilor H. Hartley.

The 22nd June, 1949 issue of the Burnley Express reported on the opening ceremony. The nursery was described as being, "...formerly a mansion which has been adapted at a cost of several thousand pounds. It has playrooms, rest quarters, a kitchen, which might be the envy of an American housewife, and all the toys dear to the hearts of youngsters - swings, see-saws, roundabouts and slides. The colour scheme is blue, cream, green, brown, red and white.

"...each child has his or her own bed and there are stated periods for rest and sleep. Also, when the weather permits, the children get plenty of fresh air and exercise and play outdoors."

"They have a full mid-day lunch, breakfast and tea and snacks between - all this for 4s 7d (23p) a week or 11d (4 1/2p) a day."

On 4th July, 1949 the school opened its doors for the first time. Seven children attended on that day under the care of Miss Wood, the superintendent, one teacher, three nursery nurses, a domestic help and a caretaker. By October two more nursery nurses had been employed and on 16th November the cook began work.

The nursery was opened for twelve hours a day from 6.30 in the morning until 6.30 in the evening, although not all the children attended for the full twelve hours. It closed for Christmas Day and Boxing Day, Good Friday and Easter Monday, for one week in July and for three days in September.

Those children who arrived at 6.30 a.m. were often put to bed and in cold weather would be given a warm drink. Breakfast was served at 7.45 a.m. and was a cooked meal such as scrambled eggs, bacon and eggs or porridge. On a fine day the morning play was spent outdoors playing with bikes, prams, balls and a slide. Indoors they played with a dolls house, a 'Wendy' house, sand and water.

The mid-morning snack of cakes or biscuits with milk was taken sitting at a table. After this break table top toys such as jigsaws and bricks were brought out. The 2-3 year old children played in one room, the 3-4 year olds in another. All the children were encouraged to put the toys away.

Before lunch they were taken in small groups to the toilet and to wash their hands, after which they gathered in their groups for rhymes and songs, an activity which kept them as still as possible so that they would keep clean.

Dinner, at twelve o'clock, taken in separate rooms, consisted of a main course, meat, potatoes and a vegetable, a cooked pudding and water to drink. The children helped to set the tables. The staff, who ate their meals later, sat with the children encouraging them to try any foods they disliked and to watch table manners and behaviour.

After lunch and a visit to the toilet each child settled down on a canvas bed with one blanket for a sleep. Each blanket was embroidered with a different motif. The children knew their own picture which was also on their own hook in the cloakroom.

It was a rare thing for a child not to fall asleep and this was also a time when the very young or new ones would become upset and cry, wanting their mothers.

One member of the staff stayed with the sleeping children while the others ate their lunch. This quiet time was also used for repairing toys and equipment.

At about 2.45 p.m. the children were woken up and given a drink of orange juice, which would be taken standing around the table from which the drinks were served. This was followed by another visit to the toilet, then all the children were brought together for singing and dancing or, weather permitting, they played outside.

Tea was a light meal, maybe sandwiches, cakes, biscuits or jelly. Hometime was as soon as mother arrived, any time up to 6.30 p.m.

Medicals were held twice a year and the school nurse attended for routine inspections. According to the log book, the doctor also made, "... nutrition surveys," and, "...examined children with defects." In 1950 and 1951 when the school closed for the July holiday numbers were as low as four out of forty children due to measles epidemics.

A report by school inspectors, who visited on the 18th May, 1955, stated the following, "...after a somewhat chequered start the school has settled into its present pattern. The playrooms provide good space for play and the well set environment offers scope for lively activities. Meals are appetising and arrangements for sleeping and toilet facilities are adequate... There is a delightful garden, although the stretch of concrete from the flags to the perambulator shed is in a dangerous condition. The drains do not appear adequate for the downflow from spouts and the grates over them need more efficient protection. Equipment has been accumulated through the years and is generally adequate... The programme is wisely planned... Ventilation is difficult when the wind is in the east as the windows are mainly on that side... Apart from these matters the school is well organised and maintained. It is a happy place, though it is a rule of entry that the mother is out at work, therefore, other children who would benefit by its facilities can only be admitted in very special circumstances."

This report also recorded the number of children on roll in 1955, these being thirteen two year olds, sixteen three year olds and eleven four year olds.

In August 1960 the school hours were reduced to eight and a half, starting at 8.30 a.m. and finishing at 5.00 p.m. These were altered again in 1967 when the school began closing at 4.00 p.m.

By 1974 the school had changed to a morning and afternoon intake.

The first superintendant, Miss Wood, retired in December, 1958. She was succeeded by Mrs Enid Tate who took up her duties on 6th January, 1959. In August, 1988 Mrs Tate retired. By this time the school admitted fifty children at both the morning and afternoon sessions, which ran from 9.00 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. and 12.30 p.m. to 3.00 p.m. The staff consisted of a head teacher, two assistant teachers, two nursery nurses and a cleaner-in-charge.

The school is now under the headship of Mrs Lesley Handley, with a third nursery nurse employed for special needs children. The children are not admitted until after their third birthday and leave to start school before they are five years old. They are not separated into groups and the nursery is open to all children regardless as to whether mother works or not.

Our nursery has changed in many ways over the years, but perhaps the quote in the Burnley Express report of the opening ceremony In 1949 could still be echoed today.

"Everyone would agree that Rockwood is the last word in Nursery Schools."





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