

## MIDLAND LODGE, SUTTON PARK

**A history of the building with details of its architecture,  
its association with two well-known tenants  
and the establishment of Sutton Coldfield's Vesey Club in 1888.**

**Roy Billingham**

Midland Lodge is a residential property situated within Sutton Park, designed by William Jenkins, a Birmingham architect, and built in 1880 for the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield. Following the Town's incorporation in 1886, ownership passed to the new Corporation of Sutton Coldfield, and to Birmingham City Council in 1974 after Government reorganisation of local authority boundaries.

The site of Midland Lodge (O.S. Grid Ref. SP 1121 9715) is adjacent to the Midland Gate entrance to Sutton Park at the western end of Midland Road which was constructed as a private road by the Midland Railway Company in 1879 to provide direct access for train passengers to and from the Park for their Sutton Park railway station.

"New Lodge", as the cottage was originally called, had several tenants prior to 1886 when Benjamin Stone, Sutton Coldfield's first Mayor, took over the tenancy in order to meet the necessary residential qualifications to become a Burgess of the Town. During his four years as Mayor, 1886-90, the lodge was known as "The Mayor's Cottage" which he treated as his pied-à-terre, his own home being in Grange Lane, Erdington. After Stone terminated his tenancy in 1891 the cottage was referred to ever afterwards as "Midland Lodge".



**Fig. 1(a) – Midland Lodge in c. 1910**  
Photograph by Benjamin Stone [Ref. 4309]



**Fig. 1(b) – Midland Lodge in February, 2014**  
Photograph by Dr. Mike Hodder

The other notable tenant was Albert Wood who was tenant from 1892-1917. His major contribution to Midland Lodge was the establishment of an alpine rock garden which gained a national reputation of excellence and made the garden a must-see venue for alpine rock garden enthusiasts who flocked in their hundreds to view the plant collection.

Both Benjamin Stone and Albert Wood were founder members of a private club called The Vesey Club which was created from an idea of Benjamin Stone and some of his friends at a social gathering in the south-facing lounge of the cottage in June 1888.

## **A history of the construction of Midland Lodge and its early tenants**

The construction of Midland Lodge was very much associated with the construction of a railway line through Sutton Park. In December 1871 proposals for the route of this line were presented to the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield by the Wolverhampton and Walsall Railway with the object of connecting the Walsall end of the Wolverhampton and Walsall Railway line to the Birmingham and Derby main line at Castle Bromwich. This would give the Midland Railway access from its heartland in the East Midlands into the Black Country in South Staffordshire. An Act of parliament was passed on August 6, 1872, authorising the Walsall, Wolverhampton and Midland Junction Railway (WW&MJR) to build a line from Walsall to Castle Bromwich thereby linking the London & North Western Railway's Birmingham and Lichfield line at Walsall (Ryecroft Junction)<sup>1</sup> to the Midland Railway Company's (MR) Birmingham and Derby line east of Castle Bromwich.

A choice of three routes was initially proposed, these being "Midland and South Stafford", "Midland and South Staffordshire" and "Wolverhampton, Walsall and Midland Junction". All three schemes cut through part of the Park, and the Corporation, using the evaluation carried out by the Estates Committee, discussed all three schemes on January 8, 1872, and accepted the Committee's recommendations that the Corporation turn down the proposals.

The proposed encroachment of a railway line through Sutton Park was highly contentious and bitterly opposed by many of the residents of Sutton Coldfield as well as some who lived outside the town who thought that the encroachment would blight the natural attractiveness of the Park. Petitions were made at the highest level<sup>2</sup>, resulting in a hearing in the House of Lords.

The Lords duly completed their enquiry and came down in favour of the railway construction going ahead. The strength of vested interests among the Town's unelected governing body and elsewhere, who had made empty promises of cheaper coal for the local area, eventually won the day<sup>3</sup>. A final choice of route was implemented and in May 1873 the exact line of the route through the Park was staked out and viewed by the Corporation who unanimously agreed this was less injurious to the Park than running nearer to Four Oaks Park. An Agreement between the Corporation and the Railway Company was made in October 1873 and the corporate seal affixed to it. In 1874 the MR, which had been a supporter of the WW&MJR scheme, took over the smaller company.

One person who bitterly regretted the creation of the Sutton Park Railway Line was Francis Kerril Amherst (1819-83), Roman Catholic Bishop of Northampton who from his schooldays at both Oscott and New Oscott Colleges developed a lifelong passion for the Park's natural beauty. He wrote in his Memoirs<sup>4</sup>, "It is melancholy to ancient Oscotians to see the changes time has wrought in the park and woods. In these degenerate days the trains bring hundreds

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<sup>1</sup> Ryecroft Junction also included a service and repair depot for Walsall station and goods yard. The shed was opened in 1877 and closed in 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Bramham, D., "The Railway Line through Sutton Park, the 1872 Debate" in the Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group, Vol. 3, Spring 1994.

<sup>3</sup> MacFarlane, A., "Dr. George Boddington 1799-1882" – "The Great Park Railway Controversy", Chap. 3, p. 28 in the Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group, Vol. 11, Summer 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Extracts from Chap. II – 'OSCOTT' of the "*Memoirs of Francis Kerril Amherst, D.D., Lord Bishop of Northampton*", [http://archive.org/stream/francisamherst00roskuoft/francisamherst00roskuoft\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/francisamherst00roskuoft/francisamherst00roskuoft_djvu.txt) accessed 05/01/2013.

to wander beneath the trees or lounge on the banks of the pools, so the police surveillance has invaded the wilds, and one may expect to be called on to exhibit one's authority ticket. But the railway has been guilty of a monstrous thing for, not content with Sutton Station, it has poked and bored its way like some irresistible reptile right through the wood, puffing, whistling and screaming its odious triumph in a way that sorely tries my heart."

There is no doubt that his resentment was shared equally by the Town's residents and hastened the move to replace the undemocratic governance of the Town by a Warden and Society and led to the general support for the Municipalisation Charter that created for the first time a democratically elected Sutton Coldfield Borough Council in April 1886.

In 1876 The Midland Railway Company took over the smaller WW&MJR and paid the Corporation £6,500 for the 2-mile long strip of land across Sutton Park and the total cost of construction of the 8-mile long line rose from an estimated £175,000 to over £400,000. The line became later known as the Sutton Park Line.

The Corporation had insisted on controlling the design of the bridges within the Town and that a station be constructed on the west side of the Park at Streetly to provide easy access



to the western and northern areas of the Park for visitors from the Black Country. Because of the high volume of visitors entering the Park via this station the Corporation eventually built a lodge (Fig. 2) to cope with the problem. They also constructed a new entrance and a repositioned entrance road diagonally opposite the station, which was sited on the corner of Thornhill Road and Foley Road.<sup>5</sup>

**Fig. 2 – Streetly Lodge, built in March, 1899, on the corner of Thornhill Road and the new Streetly entrance. The road from Streetly to Keepers Pool was also realigned to join up with the new entrance.**

Construction work on the Sutton Park section of the line began in the spring of 1875 under the "highly respected" railway contractor Joseph Firbank. The line running south from Walsall to Castle Bromwich included four stations within the Borough of Sutton Coldfield at Streetly, Sutton Park (originally named, prior to opening, as Tudor Hill), Sutton Coldfield Town and Penns. These stations and the line were officially opened to all traffic on July 1, 1879. Upon the line opening for business, Sutton Park station was served by passenger trains between Birmingham New Street and Wolverhampton High Level via Walsall.

As part of their construction programme, the Midland Railway Company built a private pedestrian route, later named Midland Drive, which connected the company's Sutton Park Station platform on the up-line to the north of and alongside the line into the Park at the Midland Gate entrance adjacent to the site of the New Lodge. This gate was provided for passengers arriving at Sutton Park Station intending to have a day out in the Park, but the

<sup>5</sup> The plans for Streetly Lodge were prepared in 1897 and the building completed in 1899 at a cost to the Corporation of Sutton Coldfield of £304. A new entrance and road were constructed at the same time, the previous entrance being nearer to the Sutton Park Golf Club's clubhouse.

road is now a rutted and overgrown track; the station itself, which was closed in 1965 under Beeching, has been demolished. It was this new entrance to the Park and the hundreds of likely visitors entering the Park at this point that persuaded the Council that a lodge should be built adjacent to the new entrance.

The effect of the construction of the Sutton Park Line was to increase the importance of the Park as a rural retreat for the population of both Birmingham and the Black Country. The Park thus developed as a place of recreation with the construction of sporting facilities and a variety of shelters, most of which were constructed in a rustic style with ling and rush thatched roofs, for visitors as well as for the gatekeepers. The sharp increase in the number of visitors to the Park from the 1850s onwards was a mixed blessing for the Town Council. It generated a welcome increase in revenue but also brought with it the need for increased staffing to police the Park against rowdy behaviour and vandalism.

The Park and Estates Committee of Sutton Council had responded to this need to police the Park as early as 1826 with the construction of two identical cottages for housing keepers within the Park and each cottage was contained within a quarter-acre of ground at the remote Rowton Hill location and at Holly Hurst woodland near to the town entrance at that time, which was via Wyndley Lane. Subsequently these cottages were referred to as Rowton Well Cottage and Hollyhurst Cottage or in the latter case more colloquially as The White House on account of its white painted walls on which were painted advertisements for refreshments and related facilities.

The rapid increase in public transport facilities during the Victorian era also led to the gradual need to provide park attendants' accommodation particularly at the major entrances to the Park. The character of these lodges was very individual in style and it could be claimed that they were meant to create an impression of a large country estate to the increasing throngs of visitors to the Park.

As implied in the Introduction, the history of Midland Lodge is very much involved with the construction of the Sutton Park line which enters the Park in a cutting and under a road bridge to the immediate south of the property. The Warden and Society imposed their requirements on the Midland Railway Company over the construction of the line, bridges, and boundary fences and the overall effect on the Park and in order to show their authority over the introduction of the new Gate they persuaded the Midland Railway Company to fund the construction of a lodge which was intended to impose some style and authority to the brutal scar of the line through some of the more scenic attributes of the Park.

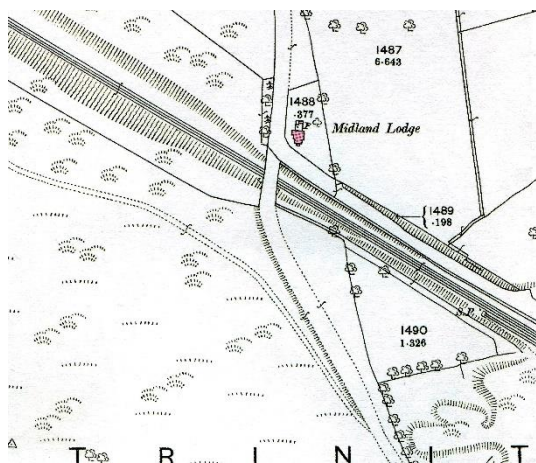
During the later construction period of the railway there had been a lot of legal wrangling between the Warden and Society and the Midland Railway Company over compensation claimed for unpaid bills, disputes over further land being taken from the Park, the funding of a Lodge at Midland Gate and an agreement over what was called the Ballast Land. In particular, there was a lot of ill feeling over the Railway Company's reluctance to replace the bolt at Bracebridge dam which had partially collapsed due it was claimed to the construction work on the adjacent embankment. While this later dispute was going on Bracebridge Cottage remained unoccupied with a consequential loss of income to the Corporation which led the Park Committee to negotiate for further compensation from the Railway Company. It is clear from archival material that the Corporation drove a hard bargain and a mutual agreement on compensation was eventually reached by April 1879.



This meant that the Corporation now had sufficient finance to build a lodge alongside the new entrance and it was hoped that the design of this building would add some stylish character, however modest, to this remote part of Sutton Park and impress the hordes of visitors expected to use the new entrance. Many years later a newspaper article was to describe the Lodge thus, “Midland Lodge – a picturesque house in Sutton Park was built by the Midland Railway Company as part of the consideration they had to pay for running their line through the Park.”<sup>6</sup> This statement was not entirely accurate but certainly the building was funded from the compensation received by the Council from the Midland Railway Company.

Similar flamboyant architectural styles were used at nearby Great Barr Hall landscape Park where originally six entrance lodges, all displaying individual Victorian architectural styles, were built. One, now called Merriens Wood Lodge, was designed by the architect Sir George Gilbert Scott in 1858 and is Grade II listed<sup>7</sup>.

In June, 1879, Mr. Cooper the Town Surveyor was recommended by the Park Committee to obtain plans with an estimate from Mr. William Jenkins<sup>8</sup>, architect and surveyor of 34 Bennett’s Hill, Birmingham, for a lodge to be built in the Park adjoining the entrance to the Park Station of the Midland Railway Company. The plans were completed by July with an estimated building cost of between £400 and £500. At their next meeting on July 14, 1879, the Warden and Society approved the recommendation to adopt these plans for the erection of the lodge at a cost “not under any circumstances to exceed £500”<sup>9</sup>.



**Fig. 3 – Midland Lodge as shown on the 1889 Ordnance Survey map of Sutton Coldfield. Note the position of Midland Gate entrance coincided with the Park boundary, unlike the present day.**

Six local builders submitted tenders for the work and the lowest bidder, J. Simons of Park Lane, Aston, with a bid of £475 was awarded the contract in August 1879. At the same time Mr. Hayward and Mr. Cooper set out the precise site for the Lodge so that construction work could begin within the month (Fig. 3). By October arrangements had been made to dig a well and fit a pump to provide a water supply for the New Lodge which was the name initially adopted for the cottage.

In March, 1880, a soft water tank with pump was installed at a cost of £10. 10. 0. so New Lodge was well provided with water. The building was completed by April, 1880, and on production of the Certificate of Completion by Mr. William Jenkins, the architect, the Corporation paid Mr. Joseph Simons, the builder, the balance of £135. 10. 0. in respect of the building contract.

<sup>6</sup> Extract from *The Birmingham Daily Mail* of Wednesday, March 4, 1914, and filed on p.62 of “Newscuttings 1907-17”, in Sutton Coldfield Reference Library, SH ??

<sup>7</sup> [greatbarr@b43.co.uk/lodges.html](mailto:greatbarr@b43.co.uk/lodges.html) - accessed 26/02/2015.

<sup>8</sup> William Jenkins was also the architect appointed by George Lowe in 1896 to design “Oakhurst” in Anchorage Road, Sutton Coldfield – Article by Lea, C., “‘Oakhurst’ – the Changing Fortunes of a Family Home” reported in The Proceedings of the Local History Research Group, Vol. 12: Spring 2015, pp. 11-31. The bargeboards and fascia panels of ‘Oakhurst’ together with timber-framing are similar in pattern to those used on Midland Lodge.

<sup>9</sup> Minutes of the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield (1878-86), p.66, February 14, 1879.

A question that has often been raised by local historians is, for what purpose was the lodge built. Was it to impose the Corporation's authority over the new entrance. If so, was it intended to house an employee of the Corporation or to be let as a private residence. Not long after construction began on New Lodge, the Corporation's Park Committee recommended in October, 1879, that the Warden be empowered to appropriate it as the residence for the person to be appointed Woodman<sup>10</sup> in place of William Kennedy who had given notice to leave the Corporation's employ. William Pears was duly appointed as his replacement and was offered residence in New Lodge as soon as the building was completed. However, by December 1882 William Pears, now referred to as the Park Bailiff, had given notice of his resignation which was to take effect from Lady Day 1883.



**Fig. 4 – The carriage road constructed in 1880 from Midland Gate to the wall of the Four Oaks Estate (Hartopp Gate). The road passes in front of Midland Lodge, seen on the right of picture.**



**Fig. 5 – The cart road cut in 1880 from the railway bridge through the gorse of New Field to the Gravel Pit (seen in the distance) by Blackroot Pool. This provided a direct route to and from Midland Road.**

In June, 1883, the Town Surveyor, Mr. Charles Cooper, reported that Mr. C. J. Phillips, who was the tenant of Keepers Pool, was prepared to pay a rental of £24 for New Lodge and do all necessary repairs and painting during his tenancy from September 25, 1883 until Lady

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<sup>10</sup> The post of Woodman, to attend to the general management of the Woods, Plantations and Fences in the Park, was first advertised in August 1877 and Alexander Whitelaw from Sussex was appointed to commence duties on Lady Day, 1878, but subsequently declined the position. William Kennedy from Lanarkshire was then appointed on a 12 months contract and was offered residence at Bracebridge Cottage but resigned after eighteen months. The next appointee was William Pears who was offered residence at Midland Lodge. This post was eventually superseded in 1889 by that of Park Forester who would take sole responsibility for the management of the Park under the control of the Borough Surveyor. The first Park Forester was Charles Morwood whose residence and office was at the newly enlarged (1890) Town Lodge in Park Road adjacent to the Town Main Gate entrance.

Day, 1884, the tenancy to be a Lady Day one<sup>11</sup>. However, in the following year Mr. Phillips died and a Captain Howell was invited to take over the tenancy but declined, so the tenancy was advertised.

As a result of the advertisement, John Whitehouse, a commission agent, took over the tenancy of on the 13<sup>th</sup> November, 1884, at a rental of £26, but he was to be a Lady Day tenant.

The next tenant was Benjamin Stone in his capacity as the first Mayor of Sutton Coldfield. During his occupation of New Lodge, 1886-90, it was known as *The Mayor's Cottage* (see pages 20-22). At the conclusion of his mayoral role Benjamin Stone gave notice of the termination of his tenancy from Lady Day 1891.

The payments received from the Midland Railway Company not only paid for Midland Lodge, as it was eventually named, to be built but also initiated a lot of improvement work in the Park from 1879, particularly around the area of the site of the Lodge.

The Corporation agreed in September 1879 to a request from the Four Oaks Park Company to enter into an agreement with them for the Corporation to construct a carriage road from the new entrance to the Park at Midland Road as far as the Four Oaks Park wall (Fig. 4) and to fence the whole length up to the wall including the garden of the New Lodge. The Four Oaks Park Company would make an annual payment of £50 for the use of the road and also pay a proportion of the cost of the construction and fencing of the road since the purpose of the scheme was to provide a benefit for the residents of Four Oaks Park by means of a more direct connection to and from the new Sutton Park Station. Just over six years later, in April 1886, the Four Oaks Park Company had decided to terminate their agreement with the Corporation and paid their final rent of £30 for the use of the road.

The Corporation also decided in March 1880 to cut a cart road from the railway bridge opposite the new entrance across the gorse on New Field to the Gravel Pit at Blackroot Pool (Fig. 5). This would provide not only a direct route for visitors entering the Park via the railway to access the Blackroot recreational area instead of having to travel to the next bridge to access the area but also a shorter route from the Gravel pit to the Main gate and the Town. Some years later a large maypole would be erected on this cart road at the instigation of Benjamin Stone who was very keen on rural arts.

During the period immediately after the opening of the Midland Railway Line there was a considerable programme of drainage initiated. About 20 acres of land on the west side of the railway line towards Streetly Wood were drained with the outlet being Bracebridge Pool – what we would now call Little Bracebridge Pool before the tail-end of Bracebridge Pool became silted and formed, in effect, two Pools. The Midland Railway Company had already built a carriage road from the bridge at Darnel Hurst Wood to the tail-end of Bracebridge Pool and now the Corporation were to make a new road across the tail-end of Bracebridge Pool with a new culvert.

At Bracebridge Pool dam a new bolt was finally built and the spoil bank at the upper end of Bracebridge Pool was planted with trees. Drainage was also undertaken on the land from Blackroot Pool and Keepers Pool to Mrs. Wiggins' property<sup>12</sup>. This was drained by opening the existing drains and adding new ones.

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<sup>11</sup> Minutes of the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield (1878-86), p.229, para. 56, June 6, 1883.

<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Wiggins' property was the 16<sup>th</sup> century Blade Mill, now the site of Park House.

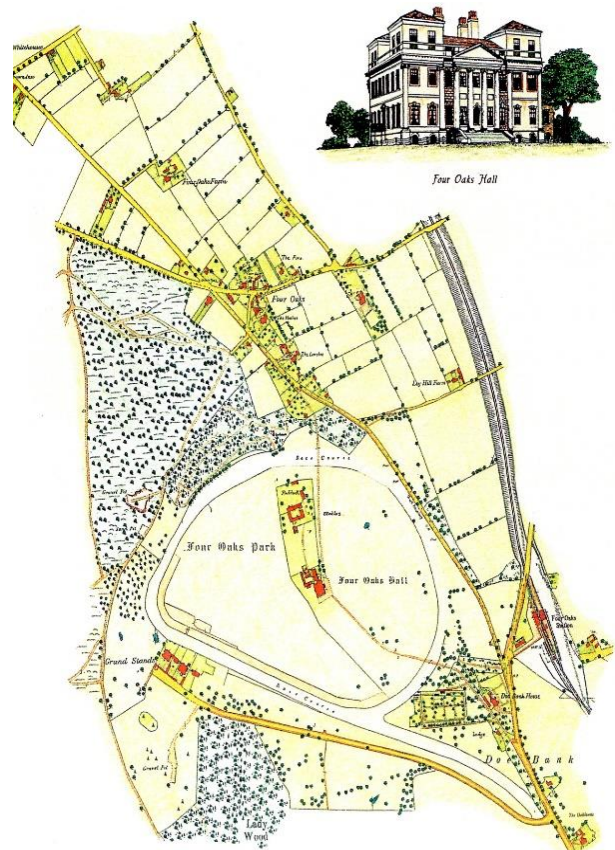


In addition to the natural attractions of the Park for visitors using Sutton Park Station and its associated entrance at Midland Gate, a racecourse was opened in Four Oaks Park just north of New Lodge by The Four Oaks Company in 1881. The Four Oaks Company was incorporated on December 9, 1879 with a share capital of £100,000 and the purchase of the freehold of the 246 acres of Sir William Craddock Hartopp's Four Oaks Park was negotiated for a sum of £60,000. Roads were constructed, as well as the 1¼ mile racecourse, stands and paddocks. The grandstand was built on the site of the present Four Oaks Tennis Club and the project had facilities for spectators and the press, a telegraph office and even a police station with cells (Fig. 6).

The first season's race meeting was held on March 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. This first meeting was a great success with glorious weather and crowds of more than 15,000 on both days, a great many of them arriving by train at Sutton Park Station and making their way into the Park at Midland Gate via Midland Road and passing the front of New Lodge on their way to Four Oaks racecourse. The Railway Company policed the Gate by means of issuing entrance tickets to the Park. It was reported that, "The only drawback to the otherwise perfect arrangements was the inefficiency of the train service of the Midland Railway Company. Several of the trains from Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield on this line were more than an hour late in making the journey and the complaints of the important passengers were both loud and deep".<sup>13</sup> In its first year the racecourse housed the Grand National Hunt Steeplechase.

So popular were these race meetings at first that within four years the London & North Western Railway Company had extended their Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield line northwards towards Lichfield and opened a station at Four Oaks in 1885. A new road, now called Bracebridge Road, was constructed to give racegoers easier access to the course from the new station.

During Easter week of 1886 the total number of visitors to the Park was officially recorded as 23,693 of which 1,843 entered via Midland Gate.<sup>14</sup> It was shortly after this that the Four



**Fig. 6 – A map of Four Oaks Hall and Racecourse pictorially adapted from the 1887 Ordnance Survey Map of Sutton Coldfield which appears on page 31 of their 2011 publication *"The Environs of Sutton Coldfield – A History in Maps"* by Mapseeker Archive Publishing Ltd. [ISBN 978 1 8449 1780 8]**

<sup>13</sup> Reported in *The Sutton Coldfield and Erdington News*, March 19, 1881.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes of the Park, Estate & Buildings Committee for May 11, 1886 [Sutton Coldfield Reference Library]



Oaks Park Company terminated their rental agreement with the Council for the road from the Midland Gate.

Unfortunately, for all its finery the Four Oaks Racecourse was unable to sustain enough high-class customers and in August 1889 The Four Oaks Company was wound up adding to the list of failures of racecourses within the Park for the greater part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> In 1891 Four Oaks Park was purchased by the Marquis of Clanrickarde and laid out for residential development.

Like many of the lodges and keepers' residences in the Park, which by their very nature were often remotely sited, Midland Lodge relied on a well for its source of water supply. This was not without its problems and in April 1888 the Borough Surveyor instructed Mr. Thickbroom to inspect the well and pump. It would appear that after an inspection he advised the sinking of another well and by the end of October of that year an invitation to tender for the work was issued.

However, it would appear that progress was very slow due to difficulties in locating a sound water supply and in March 1889 the Borough Surveyor reported that the water supply at Midland Lodge was very impure and he could not recommend the sinking of a fresh well as he considered that a satisfactory and pure supply would not be obtained. The Committee had sought an estimate of the cost of providing a supply of water from the South Staffordshire Water Company and this was likely to be in the region of £50. Despite the high cost of laying this water supply to Midland Lodge it was considered essential and the Committee recommended to the Council that the South Staffordshire Waterworks Company's water be laid on at a cost not exceeding £50 and this was approved.<sup>16</sup> The tender from the Company for laying on the water supply to Midland Lodge was £44 with additional payments of 5/- a quarter by meter plus a meter rent. So water metering is no modern technology but was standard practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time the Borough Surveyor was authorised to sign an agreement with the Midland Railway Company for the easement of laying the water main across their line on an annual payment of £1.

In February 1903 the Town Council provided a new pump over the sink in the kitchen as well as a new outlet and gully. They also filled in the unused well.

Also in 1903 the Town Council agreed to take over the gate into the Park belonging to Lord Clanrickarde and named it Hartopp Gate. A year later they arranged to have a portion of Blackroot Road raised from Halloughton Road to the Hartopp Gate and proposed to deal with it by way of the Private Street Works Act of 1892 under the directions of the Highways Committee.

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<sup>15</sup> Hinson, M., "Racecourses in Sutton Park" – Four Oaks Park in The Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group, Vol. 6: Autumn 2001, pp. 22-25.

<sup>16</sup> Minutes of the Sutton Coldfield Borough Council for April 3, 1889 – Item 639.

## **Late Victorian Architecture 1870-90, including Arts and Crafts Architecture**

Before considering the specific architectural features of Midland Lodge, it is perhaps worthwhile reminding ourselves of the styles of architecture that were current in the late Victorian period.

Early Victorian buildings were no different in design to late-Georgian ones and classically inspired themes were perpetuated. However, by the end of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Victorians were beginning to tire of these classical themes and were searching for a cultural identity and longed for the establishment of a truly English style that would be separate from the European styles that had dominated domestic art and architecture since the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Men of taste argued between Classicism and Gothic, an argument that was won by the latter, especially following the choice of Victorian Gothic Revival architecture for the majestic interiors by A.W.N. Pugin<sup>17</sup> for the New Palace of Westminster to replace the one destroyed by fire in July, 1834. Instead of classical styles of architecture the Victorians turned first to Domestic Revival style and later to Arts and Crafts.

Gothic architecture was based upon the pointed arch with the emphasis on the vertical lines of the house, hence the pointed gables, windows and doors. Architecture, particularly in decorative terms, was also influenced by the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870s and 1880s, an artistic reaction against what was seen as the misdirected opulence and extravagance of the High Victorian period, particularly in revolutionising middle-class taste. The Gothic Revival may not have had a lasting influence stylistically on house design but it introduced not only a satisfying authentic kind of domestic architecture but also a freer kind of internal planning.

The new English Revival style took its inspiration from the more humble houses of the Tudor and Elizabethan periods. Mock timber framing, hand-made bricks, fine cut stone, tile hanging, pebbledash and traditional roof coverings came back into fashion under the influence of what was later to become labelled the Arts and Crafts movement with its encouragement to return to vernacular architecture.

The term 'Arts and Crafts' was first used at the suggestion of the bookbinder T.J. Cobden-Sanderson for its offshoot, the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society set up in 1888, but the style had been gathering favour for a number of years before this date. The movement was concerned with the revival of traditional craftsmanship and a return to the vernacular as the Gothic Revival was set on a new and vigorous course by the ideas of Pugin, Ruskin and Morris. They opposed the inhumanity, as they saw it, of the Industrial Revolution and showed the way to a new future in which the Gothic spirit could serve people's needs.

In England the Arts and Crafts influence upon house building, not least within the Midlands, was far-reaching between 1870 and 1914. It introduced a romantic English vernacular vision of domestic architecture, characterised by large roofs generally pitched steeper using deep overhanging eaves and prominent outward facing gables embellished with elaborate wooden bargeboards and distinctive timber-framed patterns. Ornate ridge tiles and finials were often used on the roofs. Elongated chimney stacks were also now regarded as a positive feature of the overall design and were usually decorated with projecting courses of brickwork. Other

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<sup>17</sup> Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-52) had strong ties with Sutton Coldfield having designed the magnificent interior of St Mary's Chapel at New Oscott College as well as the two gatehouses, one on the corner of Chester Road and College Road and the other in Court Lane. He was also Professor of Ecclesiastical Art at New Oscott College.

features included the use of pebble-dash roughly rendered walls, and simple country detailing.<sup>18</sup>

Architects used old vernacular buildings as inspiration for their bright, simple and modern houses with an emphasis on traditional styles and materials. Some architects believed in honesty in construction, which meant that the materials used were carrying out a specific task and not masquerading as something else. Many houses kept a low profile seeming to grow out of the landscape as if they had developed over centuries. They were often asymmetrical in plan. Gone was the Flemish bond brickwork universally favoured in Georgian buildings and instead late 19<sup>th</sup> century English bond was adopted as a more appropriate traditional form. Cut brick and terracotta decorative work was also used extensively. Chimneys tended to be tall and plain. Doors were generally plain with either vertical strips or small windows in the upper part, while decoration was limited to the hinges and handles and other door furniture.

In late Victorian times the designs of houses were frequently an amalgam of styles and motifs borrowed from different ages and cultures according to the whim of the particular architect. Symmetry as seen for example in Jacobean and Georgian architecture was out and replaced by a freer form that relied more on the logical use of rooms dictating the form of the building. This freedom of design led to a more simplistic approach and the introduction of what we call Arts and Crafts.

Sutton Coldfield is fortunate to have so many examples of fine Arts and Crafts buildings and to have been home to so many contemporary influential architects too. This led to commercial builders copying the architectural details and applying them to speculative building projects. The range of Arts and Crafts homes include not only the finest detached homes designed by the likes of Bateman, Bidlake, Crouch and Butler, Newton and Parsons, but also a significant number of more modest homes including simple terraces. The work of these leading architects was copied on a smaller scale for less affluent clients using mass-produced materials such as bricks and decorated timbers.

#### **Useful Local Victorian and Arts and Crafts Architectural Reference Books:**

- Crawford, A. (Ed.), *“By Hammer and Hand, The Arts and Crafts Movement in Birmingham”*, (1984), Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery.
- Ballard, P. (Ed.), *“Birmingham’s Victorian and Edwardian Architects”*, (2009), Wetherby, Oblong Creative Limited, for the Birmingham and West Midlands Group of the Victorian Society.

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<sup>18</sup> Some of these features were used in earlier domestic buildings in Sutton Park, e.g. Rowton Well Cottage and Holly Hurst Cottage (identical keepers’ cottages built c.1825, but now demolished), Bracebridge Cottage (now *The Boathouse Restaurant*), and Banners Gate Lodge both built in the 1850’s. Although much altered, Banners Gate Lodge and Bracebridge Cottage are worth studying for comparison of their roof tile decorations, their gable ends with decorated bargeboards and stylistic tall chimneys, and in the particular case of Bracebridge Cottage the ogee windows and doors, plus the stucco walls. In particular, Bracebridge Cottage has been subject to a number of architectural alterations over its lifetime but has fortunately continued to maintain the original style within its scenic setting.



## Midland Lodge architectural features

As previously mentioned, the official go-ahead for the construction of the house was given in 1879 and was completed in the following year when its first tenant, William Pears, rented it from Sutton Coldfield Corporation for £24 per annum on a yearly basis. The land measurement of the property was officially stated in the Borough Surveyor's Annual report of 1887 as 1 rood and 20 perches, i.e. 1,815 square yards (1,518 square metres), or just over one third of an acre.

As built, the house was described as comprising two reception rooms, a kitchen, a larder and three bedrooms. Much later, in 1934, one of the bedrooms was converted into a bathroom and in more recent times a prefabricated concrete garage has been added to the north side of the house with direct access to the internal Meadow Platt to Hartopp Gate roadway.

When one first encounters the lodge on the roadway leading from Meadow Platt to the Hartopp Gate one is taken aback by its sudden emergence in such sylvan surroundings and one's eye is pleasantly surprised by the attractiveness of its large gable ends and black mock timber patterns set off by three elegant tall chimneys. It is certain that in 1880 there were not as many trees in the vicinity as there are today. The photograph of Midland Lodge (Fig.1a) taken around 1910 depicts a more open location than is the case today when there are far more trees, many of which are quite mature.



**Fig. 7 – The south-western aspect of Midland Lodge with Midland Gate to the right of the picture with the bridge parapet nearest the camera.**

From the road, the roof line with its prominent south and west outward-facing oversailing gable ends and their distinctive mock timber-framed patterns with stucco infills give this lodge the air of a small countryside property (Fig.7). The prominent decorated bargeboards with their simple three-leaf clover frettings also add to the property's grandeur (Fig. 8). At some time an inelegant repair has been made to the lower right-hand south-facing bargeboard although the black paint helps to disguise the fact from the casual viewer. This repair was probably carried out in 1934. The gable end on the east facing side has differently patterned fascia mouldings on the bargeboards with a single four-leaf clover fretting at the lower ends and saw-tooth serrations on each lower inside edge (Fig. 8). The east gable end wall has plain stucco instead of timber-framing. The asymmetrical plan of the house is emphasised by these large gable ends which is typical of early Arts and Crafts architecture.

We know from the photograph taken by Sir Benjamin Stone in c.1910 (Fig. 1a) that, as built, the roofs had decorative terra-cotta ridge tiles but at some stage these ridge tiles have been

replaced with plain ridge tiles. It would appear to the author that the whole of the roof tiling is not original and has also been replaced in more recent times.

The chimney pots shown on the 1910 photograph are yellow terra-cotta Crown Kings but likewise these have been replaced with plain round red terra-cotta pots. Now, the timber-framed patterns are painted black with white stucco infill panels but originally the timber would probably have been painted green or brown with the stucco left in its natural condition. The present-day arrangement would appear to present a more dramatic effect.



**Fig. 8 – The bargeboards on the south-facing gable end showing clearly the clover leaf cut-outs in the bargeboards. The gable over the west front is similarly decorated.**



**Fig. 9 – By contrast the bargeboards on the east-facing gable at the rear of the cottage have saw-tooth decoration on the lower edges and a single four-leaf clover cut-out at each lower end.**



**Fig. 10 – These decorated fascia panels with their alternating pattern of triangles and rounds plus piercings flank all of the gables at the front and rear of the house.**

Around all of the gables are decorated fascia panels under the eaves with an alternating pattern of triangles and rounds on the underside. These panels are painted white (Fig. 10).

There are three plain, very tall, wide and slim, elegant chimney stacks, the two servicing the reception rooms having twin flues while the third one at the rear of the house has three



flues. The implication is that the bedrooms also had fireplaces which was quite normal. The chimney stacks have oversailing brick courses towards the top and at their stepped bases double-strings of oversailing blue and red bricks that add decorative relief. All three chimney stacks have terracotta chimney-pot inserts (Fig. 11).

The outside walls of the house have, in true Victorian fashion, a stepped base of Staffordshire blue bricks to carry the weight above (Fig. 12). There are ventilation bricks in the wall to maintain air circulation beneath the wooden ground floor. It is almost certain that the walls are solid. The brick bond varies from wall to wall which is not uncommon – the neighbouring brick boundary wall to the Four Oaks Estate has brick bonds that vary from section to section.

**Fig. 11 – One of the three chimney stacks.**

The small wicket gate facing the road gives the lodge the air of a substantial country cottage and leads directly down a short path to the front door within a porch over which the low-slung roof provides a canopy that is supported by substantial fretted timber consoles painted white. In between each pair of consoles at the top is a simple but clever decorative feature on infill panels of a Gothic Revival arched head cut-out. The front door, which is probably not original, is of simple six-panel design with a Victorian design brass knocker and has a small three-light window immediately above it (Fig. 13). To the right of the doorway is a scrolled stone nameplate inscribed 'Midland Lodge' (see title page).

The gabled landing window over the front porch originally had a pierced panel over the single casement window with a three-leaf clover patterned cut-out in the triangular shaped panel which has sadly been removed and replaced with a plain UPVC insert (Fig. 13).

On the left of the front porch is the angled bay window of the west facing reception room while to the right of the porch is a single narrow pointed window which has a Gothic Revival arched head, the window opening having chamfered cut-brick edging. This window is on the side of the south facing reception room. Above the pointed arch is an arched string of protruding blue tiles that link up to a string of blue bricks (Fig.14).

The windows within the brick courses and the back doorway all have segmental arches with equal voussoirs, surmounted by a string of blue brick headers and chamfered surrounds utilising rubbed bricks (Fig. 15).

Above the scalloped fenestration lintels are a string of terracotta dentil dressings, each one separated by a terracotta header (Fig. 16). Above these are two courses of blue bricks on which rests the projecting tiled roof. The way these dentil dressings have been used is



interesting in so far as they have not been used as their manufactured design was intended, that is to form a decorative column. Each terracotta dentil has a brick maker's mark moulded within the frog (Fig. 17). These dentils have not been applied to the identical west facing reception room bay window at the front of the house. Terracotta was the fashionable accessory of this period of Victorian architecture.

The use of terracotta<sup>19</sup> bricks is predominantly reserved for the angled bay window of the south facing reception room as if they are meant to draw attention to the importance of this particular room. The central window with a projecting step has at some stage been bricked in from sill-level downwards which suggests that the original design incorporated a single doorway which gave access to the garden area (Fig. 16), this being an important feature of the lodge in its earlier history.

The original window frames have in recent years been replaced with double-glazed units using white UVPC fittings. Assuming that the contractors matched their replacements as closely as possible with the original window design, it seems likely that the major ground floor windows were originally of the sash type and multi-paned, whereas the upper were originally casement type. All of the ground floor windows have Victorian stone lintels. Sir Benjamin Stone's 1910 photo shows the bedroom windows to have been of the casement type with a pair to a window frame. The original glazing was two by three panels on each casement. The ground floor bay windows look to have been of the sash type with four over four window panes at the side and six over six for the west facing bay. However, as previously mentioned, the south facing bay originally had a large glazed door to enable access to the garden area.



**Fig. 12 – The front of Midland Lodge showing the blue-brick stepped base, the framed porch and the bay of the west facing reception room.**



**Fig. 13 – The front entrance showing the substantial fretted canopy supports and the gabled landing window over the front door.**

<sup>19</sup> Three firms dominated the manufacture of terracotta in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Gibbs & Canning, based near Tamworth, J.C. Edwards of Wales, and Doulton of London. Terracotta for the Midlands was manufactured in Stourbridge, Nuneaton, Ruabon and to a lesser extent in the Potteries. ["Birmingham Terracotta", (2001), Birmingham City Council, Planning Department, Conservation Team]



**Fig. 14 – Side window of the south-facing reception room with Gothic Revival arched head. Note the decorative strings of blue bricks at the top and bottom of the window space.**



**Fig. 15 – The north side-door illustrating the segmental arch with equal voussoirs, surmounted by a string of blue brick headers and chamfered surrounds.**



**Fig. 16 – The south facing aspect of the cottage. Note the bricked-in doorway of the bay window that originally led into the garden, and the terracotta dentil dressings above the lintels.**



**Fig. 17 – Close-up of one of the terracotta dentils showing the brick-makers mark within the frog of the brick. These were only used over the bay of the south-facing reception room.**





**Fig. 18 - The south-eastern aspect of Midland Lodge taken from the bottom of the garden. Note that the garden slopes downwards from north to south as well as from west to east.**



**Fig. 19 – These gate portals on the northern wall would have provided a sizeable side entrance to the property and garden.**



The south-facing reception room is the most important room in Midland Lodge from a historic context. Fig. 19 shows a photograph taken by Benjamin Stone in c.1910 of the interior of this room. By way of comparison, Fig. 20, taken by the author in September, 2014, of the same room through the side window illustrates the sunny aspect of this room.



**Fig. 20 – The interior of the south-facing reception room in c.1910.  
The original doorway to the garden can be seen.  
[Photo by Benjamin Stone]**



**Fig. 21 – The same room in September 2014 photographed through the side window**

## **A summary of the building's architecture**

The most prominent feature of Midland Lodge and the one that a casual visitor will be drawn to is the Victorian Gothic Revival style characterised by the steep pitch of the roof with its dominant outward facing gable ends complete with decorated bargeboards and black timber patterned panels. This style is repeated in the tall narrow side window of the south facing reception room with its pointed head and is also subtly reflected in the pointed fretted infill panels of the front porch timber consoles. Shallow black timber panels are carried around all four sides of the building.

The other immediate prominent feature of the lodge is the three tall chimney stacks which emphasise the vertical lines of the building.

This building followed the tradition started in the 1860s by the Sutton Coldfield Council's Park Committee of providing gate lodges that had the appearance of English country cottages and would add to the sylvan attractiveness of the Park for the increasing number of visitors who used their free time to escape their industrial environment in Birmingham and the Black Country to enjoy the beauty and relaxation of a rural retreat as well as the recreational features that the Park offered. This was a period when there was a great emphasis by local authorities on providing open-air spaces for the majority of the working population.

The Park Committee's thinking may well have been influenced by the six gate lodges associated with the nearby Great Barr Hall Estate that were built in the Early Victorian Gothic period. Each of the six gate lodges had their own individual style and one, now called Merrion Woods Lodge, is Grade II listed and was designed in 1858 by the architect Sir George Gilbert Scott, a member of the Scott family associated with Great Barr Hall. Possibly not to be outdone by their illustrious neighbour, the Park Committee of Sutton Coldfield Council applied their modest resources in maximising the attractions of Sutton Park.

The date of 1879 for the design and construction of the Midland Lodge places its style of architecture in the late-Victorian period. The building's local vernacular style has been cleverly adapted to form a picturesque form of architecture in order to establish a certain rural attractiveness to Sutton Park.

This was done with the very serious intention by the local council of making the experience of the growing number of visitors to the Park from the industrial Midlands an increasingly pleasurable one. Before the Railway Age the Park had very largely remained an area of heathland and ancient woodland but the advent of public transport in the form of horse-drawn omnibuses, and later trains, created a pressing need in the later Victorian period to meet the growing demand for leisure space. Visitors to the Park represented income which was readily used to replace wooden structures affected by the wear and tear of age as well as to provide new facilities, such as benches and thatched shelters which impressed visitors with a rustic charm.

## **The Case for Local Listing**

While the architecture of Midland Lodge may not be as grand as that of several domestic buildings in the immediate vicinity of Sutton Coldfield, it has a very attractive appearance enhanced by its position within Sutton Park. As originally built the Lodge would have been in an open position surrounded on its eastern flank by open fields as compared to its current

sylvan surroundings which lend a dramatic appearance to its architecture. It could be justifiably classified as a superior cottage of vernacular architecture, albeit presently needing a lot of tender loving care and sympathy.

Having been designed and built in 1879, Midland Lodge is undoubtedly a good example of the fashionable English Domestic Revival form of architecture that was becoming ever more popular at this late Victorian period and would lead quite naturally to the Arts and Crafts style of which Sutton Coldfield is blessed with so many fine examples.

This building not only possesses striking architectural merits but of equal importance is its association with two well-known tenants who between them occupied it for a period of thirty-one years within the consecutive reigns of Victoria, Edward VII and George V to make it somewhat unique. Midland Lodge is important in its close associations with two tenants in particular, one of whom, Benjamin Stone, was to be the prime mover in creating an organisation called the Vesey Club, which in its period could possibly be considered as the Lunar Society of Sutton Coldfield, while the other, Albert Wood, was to create a horticultural showcase that attracted hundreds of visitors to the garden.

These four important elements: architecture, well known tenants, the location of the foundation of the Vesey Club, and the creation of a famous garden, make it an obvious case for consideration for local listing in order to preserve it in the interests of future generations of Birmingham citizens. For these very reasons a submission was made to the Planning Department of Birmingham City Council in early 2016 for Local Listing in order to provide some protection for the future of the building. The submission was supported by Dr. Mike Hodder, the former Planning Archaeologist of Birmingham City Council and by Elizabeth Allinson of the Sutton Coldfield Civic Society. This cottage possesses too much grace and historic connections to be allowed to be neglected.

## Epilogue

For anyone interested in Midland Lodge and its more remarkable tenants, the author recommends that you also read his article on this website called, ***“Two Remarkable Tenants – Midland Lodge”***, which should provide the reader with a rounded knowledge of the building and its importance within the history of Sutton Park.

With regard to the application for the Local Listing of Midland Lodge made to the Birmingham City Council Planning Committee in 2016, the news is not good. From the Planning Committee’s point of view, there are plenty of finer examples of Arts and Crafts buildings within Sutton Coldfield. The association of Midland Lodge with two of its most remarkable tenants plus its relevance to the formation of a remarkable social and scientific club cuts no ice. Frankly, in the author’s opinion, Midland Lodge is an embarrassment to the City Council because they do not know what to do with it, particularly in their present straitened financial circumstances. They cannot allow it to fall into utter disrepair, neither can they afford to spend a lot of money on the building to make it habitable. It is debateable if the property is saleable on the private market due to issues with its location and accessibility and this last comment has relevance to any possible social uses to which the property could possibly be put.

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## APPENDIX

### 1. List of Tenants of Midland Lodge from 1880-1919

1880-83	William Pears - Park Bailiff
1883-85	Mr. C.J. Phillips – Tenant of Keepers Pool
1885 -86	John Whitehouse – Commission Agent
1886-90	<b>Benjamin Stone</b> – Mayor of Sutton Coldfield
1891-92	Mrs. Emily Palmer
1892- 1917	<b>Albert Wood, F.C.S.</b>
1918 -	Colonel D'Arch Smith
1919 -	Mr. Allen – Park Keeper
1943 –	Mr. H. Hopkins – Park employee

The last known tenant (c.1974-2010) – Martin Lapworth (City of Birmingham Parks Dept.)

### 2. Another building designed by Birmingham architect William Jenkins – “Oakhurst”, Anchorage Road, Sutton Coldfield, built in 1896.



It is interesting to compare these views of “Oakhurst” which was built sixteen years later than Midland Lodge. Many of Jenkins’ ideas have been developed and repeated in the later “Oakhurst” building which has benefitted from a recent refurbishment and conversion to apartments. In 1934 this building might have become the much-wanted museum when the owner, Mrs. Florence Lowe, offered “Oakhurst” to the Corporation of Sutton Coldfield as a free gift but covenants and other restrictions militated against its use as a public amenity.