

## Midland Lodge, Sutton Park

### The profiles of two remarkable tenants and their association with the foundation of The Vesey Club in Sutton Coldfield

Roy Billingham

This late Victorian cottage was designed by Birmingham architect William Jenkins in 1879 in the Gothic Revival style for the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield. When completed in 1880 it was named *New Lodge* to complement the adjacent *New Entrance* to Sutton Park created by the Midland Railway Company the previous year. In the late 1880s, it was known as *The Mayor's Cottage* when it was in the tenancy of Sutton's first Mayor. When he gave up the tenancy in 1891 its name was changed to *Midland Lodge* in accord with the new entrance being called *Midland Gate*.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Midland Lodge had two remarkable tenants. One was a well-known local businessman, political figure and photographer, while the other was a renowned plantsman. They were also founding members of the Vesey Club in 1888, a learned organisation that was elitist and to which membership was most keenly sought from far and wide.

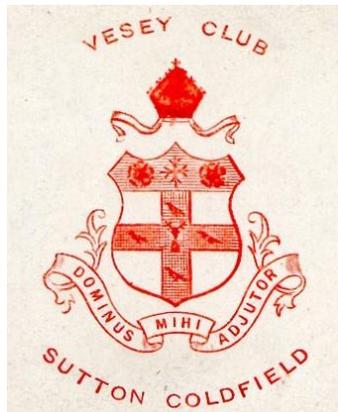
This essay aims to highlight the contribution that each of these three subjects made to the history of Midland Lodge as well as to Sutton Park and Sutton Coldfield.



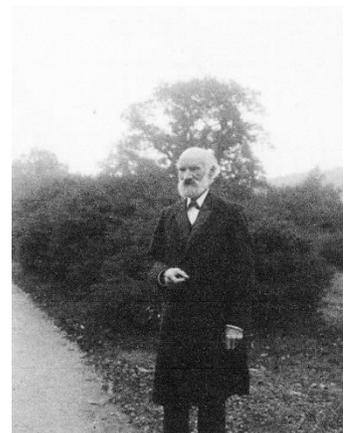
Midland Lodge in c.1910 [Photograph by Benjamin Stone]



1. Benjamin Stone



2. The Vesey Club



3. Alfred Wood

## **1. – John Benjamin Stone (1838-1914) who was tenant from 1886-91**

Benjamin Stone (the name John was dropped early in his life), who became one of the councillors for the Wylde Green Ward of Sutton Coldfield in 1886, lived for almost forty years at *The Grange*, in Grange Road, Erdington, now the John Taylor Hospice.

John Benjamin Stone, was born in Aston on February 9, 1838, son of the Birmingham glass manufacturer Benjamin Stone and his wife Rebecca, the daughter of Richard Matthews of Cookley, near Kidderminster. He attended King Edward's School in New Street, Birmingham, and after completing his education entered his father's business and eventually succeeded him as director as well as establishing a wide range of interests. Father and son were partners in the business of Stone, Fawdry and Stone, which had recently taken over the Birmingham business of George Bacchus & Sons who produced fine glassware. The third partner was Frederick Fawdry who was married to Benjamin Stone's half-sister Catherine.

Benjamin married Jane Parker from Lethersdale, Yorkshire, on June 5, 1867, and they eventually had four sons and two daughters. Sometime later Stone had become a partner in the firm Smith, Stone and Knight which had a large paper mill in Landor Street, Birmingham. One of the partners, Frederick Knight, had in 1868 married Stone's sister Clara. By the time of the Census taken in 1871, Benjamin and Jane Stone were living in Aston village at *The Retreat* and had three children and three servants. Jane's occupation was given as a paper maker – it was unusual for a married middle-class woman to be noted in the census with an occupation.

Stone soon became well respected in his trade and went on to become a juror at a number of important exhibitions in London, Edinburgh, and Paris. He was also elected master of the court of the Worshipful Company of Glass Sellers in 1882.

Stone's considerable income enabled him to travel extensively in Britain and abroad at a time when foreign travel was still very much the prerogative of the rich. He was in great demand as a lecturer and, because of his interest in antiquities and natural and social sciences, he began to collect photographs so that he could illustrate his lectures and travel books. Dissatisfied with the quality of many of the commercial prints he purchased, Stone decided in the 1860s to master the art of photography.

Apart from collecting photographs, Stone in his role of first President of the Birmingham Photographic Society and then in 1897, as founder of the National Photographic Record Association, actively encouraged his fellow amateur photographers to record images of what he saw as the vitally important work of aiming to record history with the camera.

Stone's interests outside business were many and varied. He was a Fellow of the Geological Society, the Linnaean Society, The Royal Historical Society, the Society of Arts and the Royal Astronomical Society. But as one contemporary newspaper put it, "his ruling passion for photography...swallowed all the rest." Stone is thought to have spent as much as £30,000 on photography in his lifetime. He is probably best remembered now for the prolific number of photographs that he took during his lifetime.

He was an enthusiastic traveller visiting China, Japan, the West Indies, South Africa and North and South America, as well as most of Europe. He published several books about his travels together with papers in the specialised scientific press about his wide range of varied interests.

Stone could be described as a product of the confidence of Victorian England and the industrial power and wealth that embraced the industrial town of Birmingham. He became active in political and municipal affairs. He was an ardent Conservative at a time when Birmingham was a Liberal stronghold very much controlled by the Chamberlains. Despite this, he was elected to the Birmingham Town Council for the working-class ward of Duddeston from 1869-78. For a time he was one of only two Conservative councillors in Birmingham. As founder and later President of the Birmingham Conservative Association for ten years (1874-84), he helped to maintain party unity in the face of the massive Liberal majority controlled by the Chamberlain family. During his period of presidency of the Conservative Association he was largely responsible for reorganising its structure and remodelling it along the lines of the Liberal Party organisation with a system of ward committees overseen by a central executive. He left the council in 1878 but returned to public life four years later when he was elected to the Aston Board of Guardians.

In 1883, in association with Lord Randolph Churchill, Sir Drummond Wolff, and Colonel Burnaby, Stone was prominent in founding the Primrose League the aim of which was to commemorate the life and work of the Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beconsfield, who had died in 1881. The Primrose League became a vast, loyal band of working-class Conservatives of both sexes. By 1910, when the entire voting population was only 7.7million, the League's membership was of the order of 2 million. It was named after Disraeli's supposed favourite flower. The organisation was wound-up by a majority of its members in December, 2004. Towards the end of his term of office in 1884, when Lord Randolph Churchill was the Conservative candidate for Birmingham, he presided at the Conservative meeting held in Aston Park which led to riotous clashes between the rival supporters.

Following Joseph Chamberlain's acrimonious split with the Liberal Party over the issue of Home Rule for Ireland, Chamberlain started a new party called the Liberal Unionists and led them into alliance with the local Conservatives. This new party dominated municipal and parliamentary elections in and around Birmingham.

Among his other social contributions, Stone was a magistrate for Birmingham, Warwickshire and Sutton Coldfield in turn. He was also associated with many cultural and philanthropic foundations including the Birmingham and Midland Institute, Mason's Orphanage, the Children's Hospital and the Birmingham Blue Coat School, as well as being a member of several learned societies.

The Municipalisation Charter that came into force on April 9, 1886, created the Borough of Sutton Coldfield. Instead of a system of an unelected Warden and Society, that had governed the town since the granting by Henry VIII of a Charter of Incorporation to Sutton Coldfield in 1528, the town was now to be governed by an elected council comprising eighteen councillors and six aldermen. Benjamin Stone was very keen to become a member of the new Borough Council but because he had lived since November 1877 at *The Grange* in Grange Road, Erdington, which was outside the boundaries of the new Borough, he needed residential status to qualify as a burgess before he could be elected as a town councillor. To meet these statutory requirements, he had previously agreed to "his tenancy for the time being of Midland Lodge – a picturesque house in

Sutton Park”<sup>1</sup>. The Sutton Coldfield Rates Books (Vesey Ward) for the years 1886-89 record him as the tenant of Midland Lodge paying an annual rent to the Borough Council of £24.

An election was held to select three councillors to each of the six new wards: Trinity, Hill, Boldmere, Maney, Wylde Green, and Walmley, and Stone was elected unopposed as one of the three councillors to represent the Wylde Green Ward. He also had ambitions to become mayor but discovered that Joseph Ansell, a member of the Aston brewing family and an old school friend, was also desirous of the post. A deal was struck between the two; Ansell would nominate Stone as mayor and Stone would nominate Ansell as his deputy.



**Benjamin Stone, first Mayor of the Borough of Sutton Coldfield, wearing the new mayoral chain of office c.1888.**

This new democratically elected Council held their first meeting under the chairmanship of Jesse Herbert, who had been appointed temporary Mayor by the Charter of Incorporation, and their first task was to elect a mayor. At the meeting Mr. Ansell moved that Councillor Benjamin Stone be elected as Mayor of the Borough of Sutton Coldfield until November 9 next and this motion was seconded by Councillor Todd. Stone was unanimously elected as the first Mayor of Sutton Coldfield and, with the consent of the Council, then appointed Councillor Joseph Ansell as Deputy Mayor. Later in the meeting both men were elected as two of the six aldermen required under the terms of the Charter of Incorporation.

Stone remained the tenant for his four terms of mayoral office, 1886-9, and during this period, Midland Lodge was known as ‘The Mayor’s Cottage’. Although nominally the tenant, Stone never took up residence there but used it for frequent meetings and social gatherings. The Park and Estates Committee were happy to approve the Mayor inviting members of the British Association<sup>2</sup> to visit the Park on September 14, 1886. Stone derived great pleasure from sharing his knowledge and discovering new things with like-minded men. He had long corresponded with and invited to *The Grange*, his Erdington home, men who shared his enthusiasms.

In his first year as Mayor, Benjamin Stone’s influence and reputation was such that in September 1886 the Park and Estates Committee recommended that half an acre of land in front of the cottage and extending up to the railway line be planted with trees. Prior to this planting, the view from the cottage across New Field to the Gravel Pit at Blackroot would have been somewhat severe and unattractive because of the scars of the ‘Ballast Land’ which the Midland Railway Company had leased from the Corporation so that they could extract material for their

<sup>1</sup> *Birmingham Daily Mail*, Wednesday, March 4, 1914 Ed.

<sup>2</sup> The British Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in York on September 27, 1831. From its formation, the Association attracted the country’s leading scientists. It is now known as the British Science Association.

construction purposes. To this day a large quarry scrape can be observed alongside the railway fencing opposite Midland Lodge. There was also the deep railway cutting which separated



**The tree belt planted opposite Midland Lodge in 1886 by the Council**

Midland Lodge from New Field and the Blackroot Pool area and this tree planting would produce a screen to hide the railway line which many townspeople considered to be an eyesore that sliced through the northeast corner of the Park. When in 1894 the lease of the 'Ballast Land' expired, the Midland Railway Company reinstated the embankment and built it up to its present level. The Corporation made a new plantation on the two acres of this land planting a variety of trees, largely Scots

Fir, all of which were supplied from the Park's tree nursery situated on the west side of Stoney Glade. Prior to the cutting of the railway line, this land would have been flat heathland which in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century accommodated a part of what is regarded as Sutton's first official racecourse. This extended southwards from Blackroot Gravel Pit area to Holly Knoll. Remnants of this racecourse can still be found north of Holly Knoll and to the west side of the road from Meadow Platt towards the railway bridge adjacent to Midland Lodge. This area of Blackroot, called the New Field, once contained lot acres and in certain daylight conditions one can still see the plough lines.



**View from the north-west of the quarry scrape on the 'Ballast Land' next to the railway cutting and opposite Midland Lodge.**

Hartopp Gate did not exist at the time that Midland lodge was built and the entrance to the Park for the Blackroot area was nearer the Lichfield Road. The entrance gate at the southern end

of Hartopp Road was created in 1892 to harmonise with the development of the Four Oaks Estate road system and to provide convenience for the rail-travelling commuters who were beginning to occupy the new housing development. The gate was taken over by the Council in 1903 and was called Hartopp Gate. In the following year the Council decided to improve access to the Entrance by raising the level of that portion of Blackroot Road that extended from Halloughton Road to the Hartopp Gate, hardcore for which was extracted from the gravel pit alongside the internal road to the Four Oaks Entrance.

During his four terms as Mayor, Stone, true to his reputation, was ever watchful of the Town's finances resisting the temptation to increase the rates but preferring to borrow prudently from the Local Government Board for projects such as road improvements and sewers. His robust leadership came to the fore in October 1887 when he secured a halving of Sutton's contribution to the running of Saltley police station and Aston magistrates' room. In the following year Sutton built its own combined police station and court room in Station Street.



**Police Station and Court Rooms erected in Station Street, Sutton Coldfield, in 1888. The building was demolished in 1967.**



**Maypole dancing on New Field, Blackroot, on Queen Victoria's Jubilee Day in 1887.**

Stone was a devoted royalist and oversaw arrangements for the celebrations for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in June 1887 making sure that the festivities, which lasted for a whole week, would be truly memorable for the people of Sutton Coldfield. On Jubilee Day, June 21, Jubilee medals and brooches were provided for each boy and girl in the town and, as well as a church service and town procession, festivities were also held in



**Dr Mike Hodder standing on the Maypole dancing-ring at Blackroot in October 2014.**

Sutton Park including sports, maypole dancing, bell-ringing, a dinner for the elderly and the planting of trees in the Park by Stone and his wife. The day's festivities closed with a fireworks display.

Stone not only made a habit of documenting festivities with his camera but also sometimes rescuing them. During this Jubilee Year he was credited with being instrumental in reviving the ancient tradition of maypole dancing in Sutton Coldfield; there were two maypoles in the Park at this period, one in the centre of the New Field, close to the present Blackroot Bistro, and the other was near Holly Knoll. One of the maypoles was taken down in March 1909 due to its dangerous state.

It is hardly surprising that, because Stone was an avid photographer, Sutton Coldfield Reference Library has a large collection of his photographs not only of these Jubilee celebrations but also of other local events. This contrasts with the paucity of photographs

existing of the town's equally memorable celebrations of the Coronation of King George V in 1911. Because of his photographs of the Coronations of both Edward VII and George V, he became known as the royal photographer.

Reference has already been made to the frequent social gatherings which Stone held at the Mayor's Cottage and it was in July 1888 when Stone was entertaining a group of famous artists in the south-facing reception room, where the topics under informal discussion were geological and botanical, that the assembled friends were inspired to propose the establishment of a private club "in which it was sought to assemble the brightest intellects in the neighbourhood". This led to the formation of The Vesey Club whose purpose was to promote the state of Science, Art and Literature. More information about The Vesey Club is contained within Section 2 of this work.

During Stone's period as Mayor, the manner of managing the Park was dramatically improved by the appointment of its first Park Forester. Previously, the Borough Surveyor, Mr. C.F. Marston, had undertaken on his own the management of the Park and its staff along with all his other duties but the workload imposed by the creation of the new Borough was becoming too great and it was felt that he needed to delegate the day-to-day running of the Park to a responsible person who would be answerable to him. The job was advertised in October 1889 and there were 470 applicants. The Committee narrowed their choice down to just 3 candidates who were each interviewed in the November, the successful applicant being Mr Charles Morwood of Canwell, who commenced his duties immediately in the New Year of 1890.

The new Park Forester made an immediate impact by creating a one-acre tree nursery on the west side of Upper Nut Hurst adjacent to Stoney Glade where tens of thousands of young trees were to be planted for use mainly in the Park to maintain the regeneration of the Park's ancient woodlands.

At around this period Sutton Coldfield Council began a programme of erecting thatched shelters at strategic positions within the Park for the convenience of the large number of visitors to the Park during the season. The first shelter to be built was near the Boldmere Entrance and others followed at intervals at Blackroot Pool, Blackroot New Field and Holly Knoll. In 1899 the Mayor, Benjamin Stone, had given the Park, Estate and Buildings Committee a sum of money to erect a shelter in the Gumslade that was to be known as the Mayor's Arbour. However, this shelter plus the others were soon subjected to vandalism and had to be repaired. Worse was to come over time because on February 6, 1903, the Mayor's Arbour was burnt down. Quite soon, a replacement arbour was erected within the Gumslade at the end of the main path through the woodland. One can envisage visitors to the park entering via Four Oks Entrance to immediately enter the Gumslade and walk to the Mayor's Arbour, rest awhile, and return to the Entrance.

Having served five terms as Mayor, Stone stood down from the Sutton Coldfield Council in November 1890, and was then presented with the freedom of the town. He gave notice that he intended to give up his tenancy of the cottage on the following Lady Day in 1891. The Park, Estates & Buildings Committee responded by expressing their very great regret at his intimation and urged the Mayor to reconsider his decision. However, Stone's mind was already made up and his life was set to move on to other interests. After the following Lady Day, the cottage was renamed Midland Lodge and the adjacent entrance as Midland Gate. Stone was appointed as High Steward of the Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield in 1902.



**Sir Benjamin Stone (extreme left) with his family around the turn of the century at his home, *The Grange*, Erdington.**

Stone was an active philanthropist in Birmingham and was a member of The Birmingham Bean Club, a loyalist dining club founded in Birmingham shortly after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 and reputed to be the oldest political society in England.

As a founder member of the Primrose League<sup>3</sup> and because of his long association with the Birmingham Conservative Association, Benjamin Stone attracted the attention of the Marquis of Salisbury on whose recommendation he was knighted on December 2, 1892, receiving his knighthood at Buckingham Palace from Queen Victoria. In 1895, he accepted an invitation to succeed unopposed Henry Matthews as M.P. for the East Birmingham constituency, a position he held until he retired from Parliament in 1908 due to ill health.

His pioneering work alongside William Jerome Harrison in the Warwickshire Photographic Survey, inspired him to set up the National Photographic Record Association in 1897. He also took a series of parliamentary Portraits of members of the House of Commons and The Lords.

Benjamin Stone died on July 2, 1914 at *The Grange*, Erdington, less than two hours before Joseph Chamberlain, his old Birmingham political adversary, died at his home in London. Stone's



Sir Benjamin Stone's home, *The Grange*, at 27 Grange Lane,

wife, Jane, who had been ill for some time prior to this and was unaware of her husband's death, died three days later. They were laid to rest together in the graveyard at Sutton Coldfield Parish Church on July 7, 1914. Seven years after his death, the trustees of his estate presented to The Birmingham Reference Library 22,000 photographs, 600 stereographs, 2,500 lantern slides, 17,000 glass-plate negatives, 50 albums of collected prints, and 50 volumes

of press cuttings relating to his work all contained in the Benjamin Stone Collection. Copies of many of his local photographs are also held by the Sutton Coldfield Reference Library.

The Benjamin Stone Collection in the Birmingham Reference Library also contains his own personal archive (Collection MS 3196) comprising tens of thousands of photographic prints, negatives and other papers. His work is also well represented in the Birmingham Photographic Society (Collection MS 2507) and the Warwickshire Photographic Survey (Collection MS 2724), Stone having been appointed President of both groups.

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<sup>3</sup> **The Primrose League:** Founded in 1883 to commemorate the life and work of the Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beconsfield, who had died in 1881, the Primrose league became a vast, loyal band of working-class Conservatives of both sexes. By 1910, when the entire voting population was only 7.7 million, the League's membership was of the order of 2 million. It was named after Disraeli's supposed favorite flower. The League was wound-up by a majority of its members in December, 2004.

## 2. Midland Lodge – The birthplace of the Vesey Club, founded in 1888



“Who has not heard of the Vesey Club? We venture to think that very few of our readers have never had their attention attracted by the title of this famous society in connection with some branch of artistic work. There are not many people residing in the Midlands, however, who know where and under what circumstances the club originated.”

So stated an article in the *Birmingham Weekly Mercury* of June 20, 1908. The article was written by a newspaper reporter, signing himself simply as A.E.A., who continued in grand eloquent style to report, “On the fringe of the most interesting piece of nature’s handicraft, Sutton Park, stands an ivy-covered cottage known as Midland Lodge wherein are to be found the traces of many remarkable associations with the early years of the Vesey Club’s existence. It was in one of of the rooms of this building that a meeting was held at which the Club was constituted, and after visiting the Lodge and noting the picturesque character of its

surroundings, one cannot help but admit that the illustrious gentlemen who founded the society could not have chosen a spot so favoured by nature and more in harmony with the aims and objects of the Club.”

Late Victorian Britain was a time of energetic amateur enthusiasts who were often successful business men with large disposable incomes and who, largely self-taught, wrote books about subjects like botany, fossils, and geology. Benjamin Stone was one of these men and over a long period of time had corresponded with and invited to his home at *The Grange* in Erdington many well-placed friends who shared his enthusiasms.

Stone continued his social activities during his mayoral years in Sutton Coldfield attracting many of these friends to the town and the Park. It was on one such occasion in June, 1888, when in his usual way he was entertaining a number of well-known artists in the south-facing reception room at his *pied à terre*, “The Mayor’s Cottage”, that the topics under informal discussion were both geological and botanical in nature. During these discussions, Stone became the prime mover in proposing the establishment of “a private club in which it was sought to assemble the brightest intellects in the neighbourhood”, and it was unanimously decided by the assembled friends to form a society to which only a limited number of celebrities in the world of art should be admitted as members. It might be thought that they wished to emulate from a previous century, to some degree, the Lunar Society of Birmingham that used to meet at members’ residences. These assembled friends comprised, apart from their host, Dr. Duncalfe and Messrs. J.E. Bagnall, C.J. Harcourt, W. Sherwood, Joseph Landon and C. J. Gilbert.

Following their decision, the assembly decided to arrange a meeting at Sutton Coldfield Town Hall on July 30, 1888, to which other like-minded friends would be invited to discuss the proposal.

At this meeting, it was decided to form an elitist Literary and Scientific association which they chose to call The Vesey Club after Sutton Coldfield's famous 16<sup>th</sup> century benefactor, Bishop John Vesey (1452-1554)<sup>4</sup>. It was agreed that meetings should be held once a



The south-facing reception room at Midland Lodge, Sutton Park, in c.1910. Photo: Benjamin Stone Collection (Ref.4310)

month at the residences of each member in turn. In order to make

this proposal feasible the roll of membership would be limited to forty. The original founder members were Alderman Benjamin Stone, Drs. Duncalfe and A.H. Evans, and Messrs. J.E. Bagnall, C.J. Harcourt, W. Sherwood, Joseph Landon, C.J. Gilbert, J.A. Jones, T.B. Grove, Albert Wood, and R. Hartshorne. Dr. Lapworth<sup>5</sup> and Mr. J.B. Stone were elected vice-presidents, and Mr. C.J. Gilbert honorary secretary and treasurer.

The formation of the Vesey Club was regarded as a very important event in the world of art, evidenced by the competition for membership which was extremely keen and the proposed limit of forty members was soon reached. Those unfortunate people who could not gain membership to the club sought consolation by mischievously dubbing the society "The Forty Thieves". After a good deal of persuasion, the club was induced to raise its membership to fifty out of whom certain members were appointed to serve on the governing council. As a consequence, the club soon discovered that the intention to meet at the residences of each member was not a practical idea and so meetings were arranged to be held at public locations.

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<sup>4</sup> **Bishop Vesey's** death was certainly in 1554 but there is some doubt about his year of birth since so little is known about his childhood. 1465 has been suggested in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as a more probable date. He was born John Harman at Moor Hall Farm, Sutton Coldfield, and was ordained Bishop of Exeter in 1519.

<sup>5</sup> **Professor Charles Lapworth LL.D., F.R.S.** (1842-1920) was born in Faringdon, Berkshire, and trained as a school teacher in Oxfordshire, his main interests at that time being literature, history, art and music. His first post in 1864 was in Galashiels and in 1875 he was appointed to Madras College at St. Andrews. Lapworth's interest in geology began in Scotland and, although largely self-taught, he soon made significant contributions towards unravelling the geology of the Southern Uplands. By the late 1870s he had gained a considerable academic reputation and in 1881 was appointed as first professor of geology at Mason College, the forerunner of the University of Birmingham. His legacy is to be found at the Lapworth Museum of Geology at the University of Birmingham which *The Guardian* (2016) highlighted as one of Britain's best paleontological museums.



**The bay of the south-facing reception room at Midland Lodge. As built in 1880, the central section of the bay was a French window before being partially bricked in.**

A further meeting was arranged on September 8, 1888, at which William Carruthers Esq<sup>6</sup>, F.R.S., F.L.S. was elected president. The first fifty members were then enrolled, and the first council elected, comprising two vice-presidents, along with Dr. Duncalfe and Messrs. Harcourt, Sherwood, Landon, Bagnall and Jones. The subscription for membership would be ten shillings (50p) payable in advance in October each year.

The initial meeting of the Vesey Club was appropriately held at “The Mayor’s Cottage” in Sutton Park after which members were taken on a tour of the Park. In their first year there were papers on such subjects as fungi, the poetry of Tennyson, meteorology and explosives; at the latter “there were some demonstrations...but it is pleasant to report that no lives were lost.”

The Rules of the Vesey Club, as published in October 1899 under the presidency of Sir Clements Markham<sup>7</sup> and the two vice-presidents, Professor Charles Lapworth and Benjamin Stone, clearly state in Rule 1 that the club was established to promote

the state of Science, Art and Literature. The society attracted a membership comprising men of an intellectual disposition from different disciplines who also had influence and money. According to Roberts<sup>8</sup>, those who were invited to join were men very like Benjamin Stone. The club might justifiably have been regarded as the “Lunar Society of Sutton Coldfield” because, like the members of the original Lunar Society, the Vesey Club’s members had enquiring minds and were largely self-taught in the fields which they claimed expertise. These 1889 rules also stated that

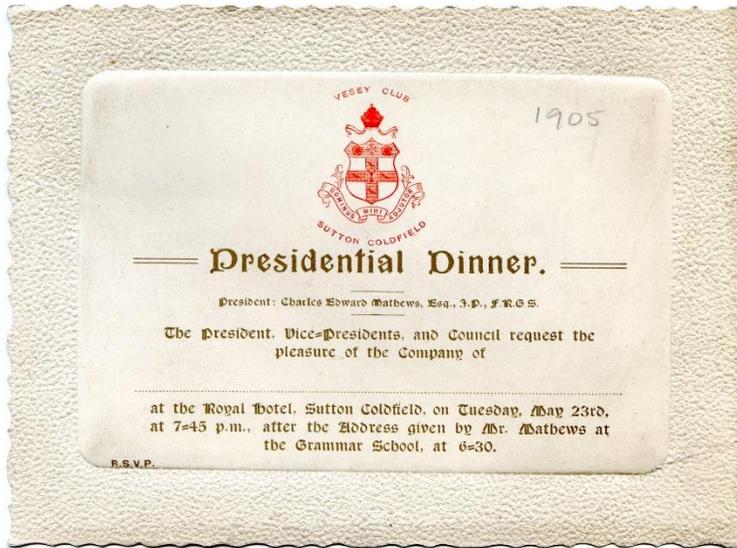
<sup>6</sup> **William Carruthers F.R.S., F.L.S.** (1830-1922) was born in Moffat, Dumfriesshire, and was educated at Moffat Academy. He graduated from Edinburgh University and became a botanist. He was keeper of the Botanical department of the Natural History Museum from 1871 to 1895 and was consulting botanist to the Royal Agricultural Society from 1871 to 1909. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1871 and was President of the Linnean Society from 1886 to 1890.

<sup>7</sup> **Sir Clements Robert Markham K.C.B., F.R.S. (1830-1916)** a geographer, explorer and writer, was born at Stillingfleet, and educated at Cheam and Westminster Schools. He began his career as a Royal Naval cadet and midshipman during which time he went to the Arctic with HMS *Assistance* in one of the many searches for the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin. In 1853 Markham secured a junior clerkship in the Legacy Duty Office of the Inland Revenue. Six months later he transferred to the forerunner of what became in 1857 the India Office and worked as a geographer. In 1854 Markham was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and in 1863 he was appointed its honorary secretary, a position he held for 25 years. He later served as the Society’s president for a further 12 years. In this latter capacity he was mainly responsible for organizing the National Antarctic Expedition of 1901-04, and for launching the polar career of Robert Falcon Scott.

<sup>8</sup> **Roberts, S.**, “*Sir Benjamin Stone 1838-1914, Photographer, Traveler and Politician*”, (2014), published by the author under his imprint *Birmingham Biographies*.

Sessions would commence in October of any year when the annual subscription of ten shillings (50p) would be payable in advance.

The first club Presidential Dinner was held at *The Royal Hotel* (later to become the Council House) on February 13, 1889, under the presidency of William Carruthers. Thereafter, each year the Vesey Club would hold its Annual Presidential Dinner, usually at *The Royal Hotel* which was situated in King Edward's Square, Sutton Coldfield. From the collection of programmes for these events, held in Sutton's Reference Library, it is apparent from the menu cards that members' annual celebrations were resplendently enhanced by the fine cuisine on offer.



A ticket for the 1905 Presidential Dinner of the Vesey Club. The President was Charles Edward Mathew J.P., F.R.G.S. (1883-1905). He was a former vice-president of the Old Edwardians (1883-1905), Clerk of the Peace for the City of Birmingham and lived in Farquar Road, Edgbaston.

It is clear from the account of the early years that the Vesey Club had some prestigious Presidents including Professor Charles Lapworth, Henry Woodward<sup>9</sup>, who was President of the Palaeontographical Society from 1895 to 1921, Sir John Evans, a past President of The British Association and William Carruthers, also a past President of the Linnean Society. It is a measure of the prestige of the Vesey Club that these academics recognised the importance of the club.

By 1906 the club's Rules had changed to allow for the membership to be extended to a strict limit of one hundred. *The Birmingham Daily Mail*

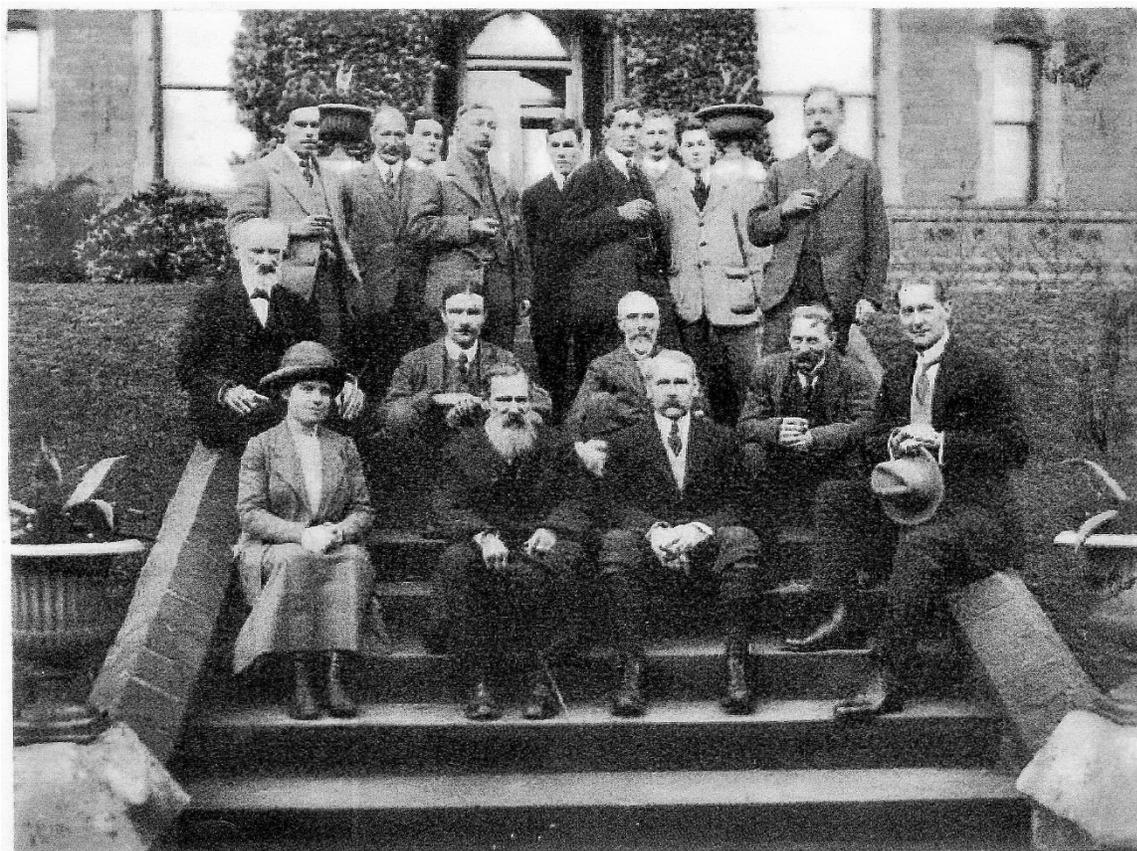
in its edition of December 29, 1906, ran an article on the Vesey Club in which it stated that, "*the membership is now strictly limited to 100. When a vacancy occurs, a man wishing to join must be elected by the unanimous vote of the Council, so it will be seen that the Club is distinctly exclusive. For this reason, its membership is always full, and there are a large number of people who wish to join and are awaiting vacancies.*"

The club's success was no doubt driven partly by this exclusivity but also possibly by the quality of speakers and the extent of subjects covered which met the needs of members who

<sup>9</sup> **Henry Woodward LL.D, F.R.S. (1832-1921)** was a geologist and paleontologist known for his research on fossil crustaceans and other arthropods. Born in Norwich and educated at Norwich School, he became assistant in the geological department of the British Museum of Natural History in 1858 and keeper of that department in 1880. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1873, LL.D at St. Andrews in 1878, and was president of the Geological Society of London (1894-96). Woodward was president of the Geologists' Association for the years 1873 and 1874, president of the Malacological Society [*the study of molluscs*] 1893-95, president of the Museums Association for 1900, and president of the Palaeontographical Society from 1895 (upon the death of the incumbent president T.H. Huxley) until his own death in 1921.

wished to expand their knowledge and experiences as well as socialise with their peers. In the changing social climate at the turn of the century the Vesey Club almost certainly offered an ideal ambience to people who were desperate to progress both socially and professionally.

As originally set up, the Vesey Club membership was limited to men only but the 1906 rule changes were such that Rule 3 now stated that “ladies and gentlemen may become members on the invitation of the council”. It was further stated in Rule 4 that, “ladies shall be eligible for any office”, no doubt reflecting the change in social attitudes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



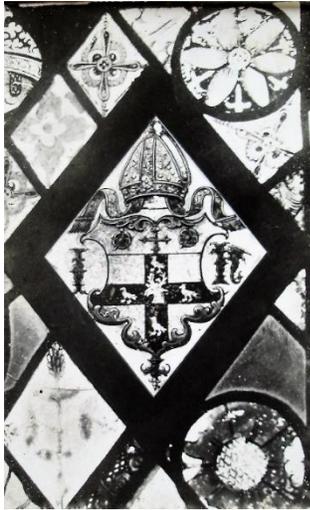
*J. Benjamin Stone  
Sep 14. 1913*

**A group photograph taken by Sir Benjamin Stone of some of the members of the Vesey Club gathered on the steps of the Sutton Coldfield Council House on September 14, 1913. On the extreme left of the middle row, seated on the balustrade, is Albert Wood. Ladies were allowed to become members after 1910.**

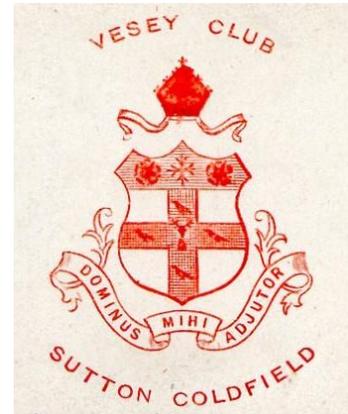
In 1913 the Vesey Club celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the following resumé was issued to members at the Annual President’s Dinner. Of the original council, all were still council members with the exception of Dr. Duncalfe and Messrs Bagnall and Jones. Of the first fifty founding members there were still thirteen subscribing and four honorary members while at least ten others, who had removed from the district, were known to be living. The total membership was one hundred and sixty-two. It was not only the monthly meetings which made up the annual programme as organised trips overseas were also undertaken to visit foreign geological and

archaeological sites of interest, and there are a number of photographs in the Benjamin Stone Collection taken on these occasions.

The badge adopted by the Vesey Club for its letterheads and other stationery is based on the



only known evidence of Bishop Vesey's coat-of-arms which happens to be on a stained glass window (pictured left) in a small Devonshire church. These arms comprise a quartered shield bearing the Harman of Moor Hall family arms, "Argent on a Cross Sable a Stag's Head coupé between four Doves of the field on a Chief two Tudor Roses and a cross surmounted by a mitre proper". For its motto the Vesey Club badge has the following



inscription in Latin: *Dominus mihi adjutor*, the rough translation being "The Lord is my help". These words are taken from verses 6-7 of Psalm

117 (118), as follows:

*Dominus mihi adjutor: non timebo quid faciat mihi homo. Dominus mihi adjutor, et ego despiciam inimicos meos. – The Lord is my help; I will not fear what man might do to me. The Lord is my help, and so I shall look down on my foes.*<sup>10</sup>

The Vesey Club flourished probably until about the early 1930s whereupon it closed down. Why and when it ceased to function is not certain because no known records exist. Those records that do exist confirm that the club was still functioning in 1924. It could be described as an organisation of its time and its life-cycle eventually ended as social conditions changed.

From its creation in 1888, the Vesey Club was an organisation of considerable intellectual substance and in the late Victorian age proved to be a major attraction, in particular, for middle-class professional men who wanted to expand their intellectual knowledge in the arts and sciences. By good fortune that opportunity occurred in Sutton Coldfield due to Benjamin Stone who, because of his involvement in local government, happened also to be the tenant of Midland Lodge in Sutton Park. Thus, Stone, his intellectual friends and Midland Lodge could be described as the catalyst that created a society that attracted members in large numbers who found the Vesey Club the ideal instrument to pursue their quest for knowledge.

The 1914-18 Great War took a heavy toll of Britain's young bright men and the generation of founding members were now after twenty to thirty years possibly dead or they no longer possessed the enthusiasm and ability to keep the organisation flourishing, or had moved away from the district in retirement.

This essay, which is not intended to be a history of the Vesey Club but merely a window onto its existence, has been researched using material filed in the Reference Section of Sutton

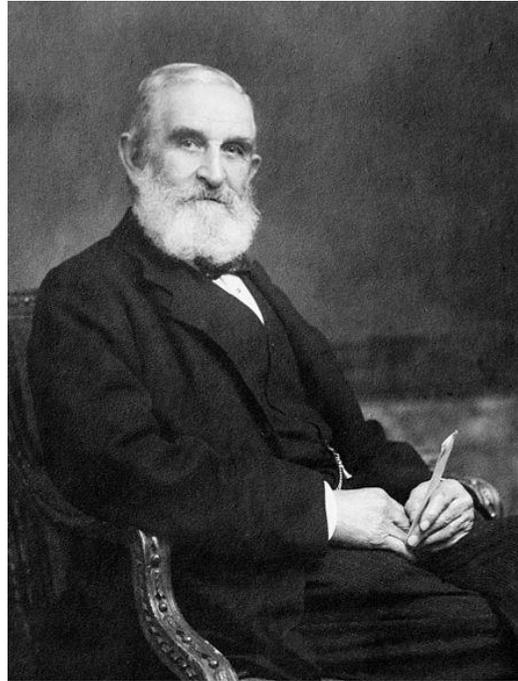
<sup>10</sup> <https://hughosb.com/2010/09/26/dominus-mihi-adjutor-its-meaning>. Accessed on 15/10/2017.

Coldfield Library. The information has come mainly from the “Vesey Club” file and “Newspaper Cuttings” (both sources are kept in the main Reference Library), and from “The Vesey Club Ephemera” file which is kept in the Stacks at Sutton Coldfield Reference Library. A number of photographs also exist in the Sutton Coldfield Library Collection which are associated with Vesey Club events. Sutton Library also houses an illuminated book presented on October 18, 1907, on behalf of the members of the Vesey Club, to Mr. Edgar G. Harcourt for his seven years of service as secretary of the Club.

### Portraits of three Presidents of the Vesey Club



**Professor Charles Lapworth – a geologist**



**Sir John Evans – an archaeologist and a past President of the British Association.**



**Sir Clements Robert Markham - geographer, explorer and writer**

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For more detailed information concerning the early years of the Vesey Club, please refer to the Birmingham Archives, Heritage and Photography Service:

**Vesey Club – Sutton Coldfield,  
1888-1917; Minutes, Visitors Book and Correspondence**

Birmingham Ref: MS 679

National Archives Ref: NRA 32188

Birmingham Archives can be contacted:

Tel: 0121 242 4242

Email: [archives.heritage@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:archives.heritage@birmingham.gov.uk)

### **3 - Albert Wood F.C.S. (1840-1917) who was tenant from 1892 – 1917**

The other remarkable tenant of Midland Lodge was Albert Wood F.C.S. who took over the tenancy in May 1892 and remained there until his death on July 12, 1917, aged 77. He lived there with his younger brother Lewis, who is described in the 1901 Wales Census, when he and Albert were on holiday together in Tenby, and in the 1911 England Census, as “feeble minded”. Since Lewis was married we could reasonably assume that in his later life he was suffering from some form of dementia. Albert Wood employed a housekeeper, Selina Hickingbotham, who was a widow.

Albert Wood was born in Dudley in January 1840 to parents Edward and Harriet Wood. In the 1841 English Census his father is described as a clothier, selling second-hand clothes, living at 9/10 New Street and head of a large household that comprised Edward, his wife Harriet, three sons and a daughter, three female assistant domestic servants and a young male domestic servant. By 1851 the family had moved to the Market Place in Dudley where Edward Wood Senior was now a pawnbroker employing two men, an apprentice and a woman. Their eldest son, Edward, appears to have taken over the clothier’s business from his father. Eliza, their daughter was not recorded in 1851, nor was their youngest son, Lewis, who was born in 1844. He died in 1918 at Midland Lodge, Sutton Park, in 1918.

This later Census would seem to suggest that Edward Wood had a successful business which enabled him to provide for such a large household. Pawnbroking was big business in the Black Country in the middle and later 19<sup>th</sup> century because workers in the local iron industry, which had been in steady decline over many years, earned pitifully low wages and were subject to the notorious Tommy-shop wage system. Also, hand-made nail making, which was largely a cottage industry in the Black Country, was extremely poorly paid and there was much poverty as a result. The industry would eventually be put out of business by lower priced machine-made nails imported from the United States. It is ironic that the decline in the iron industry within the Black Country forced many men and their families to emigrate to the United States to seek a better life in the iron and steel producing centres like Renton and Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania.

The 1861 English Census shows that Albert Wood, whose occupation was recorded as a “chemist”, had left home and was living in High Street, Dudley, with a young assistant chemist, Samuel Baddeley. Albert Wood was just 21 years old which seems now to be an incredibly young age to be managing his own pharmacy and employing an assistant. However, the pharmaceutical trade was somewhat different in the 1860s to that of the present day. Albert Wood would have been governed by The Medical Act of 1858 and later by the Pharmacy Act of 1868 which tried to bring the profession under some form of regulation by, amongst other things, limiting the sale of poisons and dangerous drugs to qualified pharmacists and druggists. Until 1898 the basic requirement for membership of The Pharmaceutical Society was the ownership of property. The characteristic form of that property was an independent shop. Chemists who did not own shops, even if registered as pharmaceutical chemists, were treated as second-class citizens<sup>11</sup>. So, Albert Wood who lived above the shop met the property ownership criteria.

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, Ed. 1 Jan., 2000, by Sydney Holloway

At some stage Albert Wood was elected to fellowship of the Chemical Society (F.C.S.) which was formed in 1841 and in 1847, its importance was recognised by Royal Charter, which added to its role in the advancement of science, and the development of chemical applications in industry.

Albert at the age of 23 married Eliza Augustus Perry Watkins in July 1863 and twelve months later they produced a son, Albert Charles Fraser Wood. Eliza's family were Walsall valuers and auctioneers. Her uncle, John Fraser Watkins, had formed the Walsall family business of Watkins & Powell in 1845 and this firm later merged with Walter Hughes. When Albert Charles Fraser Wood became a partner in the firm in the 1890s it changed its name to Watkins, Powell & Wood.

It would appear from the 1871 English Census returns that Albert and Eliza's marriage was not to be a long-standing relationship because Albert is recorded as living alone at No. 6 Hill Street, Dudley, with a housekeeper. His wife, Eliza A.P. Wood, was living with her widowed mother at 61 Park Street, Walsall, both recorded as hosiers and glovers. Meanwhile their son, Albert Charles, was living with the family of Eliza's uncle, John Fraser Watkins, at No. 7 Lower Bridge Street, Walsall.

By 1881, the Census for Dudley shows that Albert Wood's father, Edward Wood, was living at 9/10 New Street, Dudley, still engaged in his pawnbroker business. His household comprised his wife, Harriet, his thirty-seven years old unmarried son, Lewis, three female assistant pawnbrokers, a porter, a cook and a housemaid. The rest of the family had all fled the nest and Edward Wood's pawnbroking business was able to support a large household.

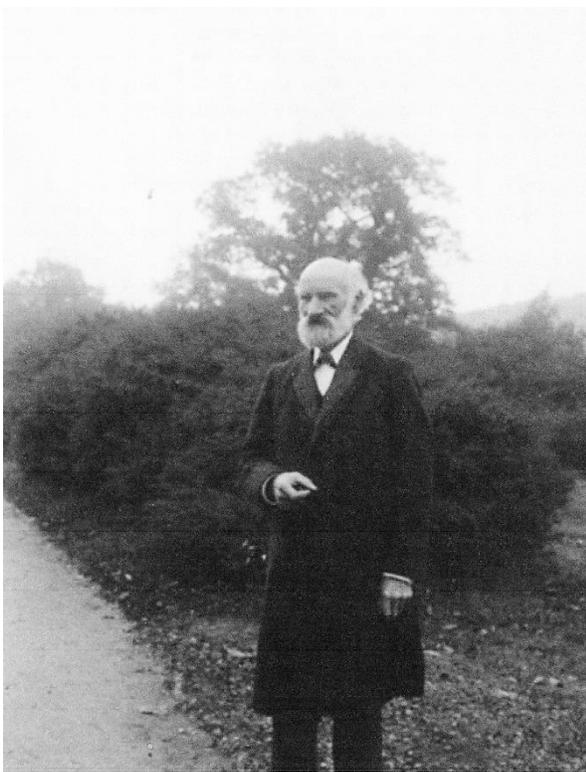
The only reference to Albert Wood for 1881 would appear to locate him in Croydon, Surrey, as manager of a business in the High Street. In that same year Eliza Augustus Perry Wood, who was now 40-years of age, was living with her widowed uncle, John Fraser Watkins, at No. 7 Lower Bridge Street, Walsall, along with her son Alfred Charles Fraser Wood, who was 17-years old, and employed as an auctioneer clerk with her uncle's firm.

By 1891 and at the age of 26 Albert Charles Fraser Wood had his own house at No. 80 Wednesbury Road, Walsall, and living with him was his mother, Eliza A.P. Wood, and a female domestic servant. By this time his occupation was given as auctioneer.

Four years later, records show that Albert Charles married a Fanny Mack on February 11, 1895, at New Brighton, Cheshire. Witnesses at the wedding included William Mack and Albert Wood. He took another wife at some time because when he died in 1946 the name of his widow was given as Norah Helen May Fraser Wood (née Goulder) who was born in Nottingham.

By the time of the next English Census in 1891 Albert Wood, who was 51 years old and retired, was recorded as boarding with his great friend Thomas Grove F.R.H.S., a nurseryman living at Windley nurseries in Clifton Road, Sutton Coldfield, next door to Joseph Thickbroom, a local wheelwright who held the tenancy of Windley Sawmill. Thomas Grove also had a shop at 64 Parade trading under the name Thomas B. Grove & Son, nurserymen and seedsmen. His wife Mrs. T.B. (Marion) Grove ran the refreshment rooms at Wyndley Pool. It is likely that Albert had been boarding at the Grove home at Wyndley for some little time while looking for a suitable place to live within Sutton Coldfield to pursue his interest in rock gardening because when Mrs. Palmer was forced by health reasons to give up her tenancy of Midland Lodge due to ill health

she recommended to the Park & Estates Committee Albert Wood of Windley (sic) as a suitable tenant. This seems to suggest that Albert was not a casual boarder. He probably saw the potential of Midland Lodge as an ideal location in which to create an alpine rock-garden as well as being a convenient place to look after his younger brother Lewis.



**Albert Wood probably outside Midland Lodge**  
 Photograph by Sir Benjamin Stone, c.1910

Albert Wood was also a founder member of the Vesey Club and an active supporter. He was an authority on botany, ornithology, conchology, and other branches of natural history. He was also an expert plantsman specialising in the cultivation of alpine plants within a rock garden, a form of gardening that achieved great popularity in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century.

When Albert Wood took over the tenancy of Midland Lodge the garden was only suitable for growing vegetables. His first task was to plant some trees which soon flourished. Then he turned his attention to the bottom of the garden which was exposed to all phases of the weather, a wild profusion of holly bushes lending the place a most uncared-for aspect. These bushes formed part of the natural boundary of Sutton Park but by careful pruning and training of the holly he formed an impenetrable hedge which effectively formed a shield against the rigours of the weather for the delicate plants that he was to grow in

successive years.

Behind this hedge on the north-eastern side lay Fern Hollow, once a shaded walk which was formerly a ditch. Albert Wood described it as containing a miscellaneous collection of broken crockery and rubbish. It can still be traced from Meadow Platt to the railway and beyond to Hartopp Gate. Prior to 1827 it seems likely that this boundary path extended from the Blade Mill (now called Park House) northwards in a straight-line past Meadow Platt, skirting Lady Wood and then following the service road to Four Oaks Hall and beyond to the Common land on the northern side of Streetly Lane. It is interesting to speculate on the origins of this ancient path.

Following his initial efforts to bring some order to the garden, Albert Wood set about establishing an alpine rock garden at Midland Lodge. However, his exuberance for his hobby soon meant that he was running out of growing space sufficient for his aspirations and he requested permission from the Sutton Coldfield Council's Park & Estates Committee to extend the garden on the north side. This they granted on July 31, 1895. It took him some years to clear the ground, import special soil, rocks and plants. He also added sophisticated methods for irrigating his alpine garden.

Rock gardening is a style of horticulture which can trace its roots back to classic Chinese and Japanese garden rockwork and achieved great popularity in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As the growing middle class sought to expand their horizons, they began to travel extensively – Benjamin Stone being a classic example – many would travel to the Alps, dig up, and bring home examples of the alpine plants they had discovered to grow in their own gardens. The first classic outlining of the modern art of rock gardening was *The English Rock Garden* by William Robinson (1838-1935), although its most famous practitioner was Reginald Farrer (1880-1920), an eccentric and brilliant horticulturist, who was the most charismatic and popular garden writer of Edwardian England. It is likely that many of Albert Wood’s ideas for his successful rock garden came from the pen of Farrer.

The Borough Surveyor reported to the Park and Estates Committee in April 1905, that Mr. Wood had made an application for permission to take down the stable at Midland Lodge and replace it with a tool-house and in addition make some alterations to the garden fence. It appears that Albert wood’s rock garden was expanding and requiring extra space.

In June 1908, a report in the *Birmingham Weekly Mercury* quotes Albert Wood describing his garden thus, “This garden is undoubtedly the finest collection of plants to be found in the Midland Counties and I hope in a few years’ time it will be the finest in England. I have travelled all over the country to secure rare specimens, and many of them I have purchased from dealers. At present, I have in hand a scheme of enlargement which will greatly enhance the beauty of the garden. I have hundreds of visitors who come to see my collection of plants”. He gave away thousands of plants, specialising in the propagation of many rare and exotic plants.

In describing some of the most curious plants in his garden, Albert Wood expressed the importance of a small plant called *Echinops nivalis* which he claimed any amateur gardener could be excused for mistaking as a thistle. Its common name is Globe Thistle and in July of each year its white golf ball heads are alive with insects. Other great features of his garden were the *Sempervivum*, meaning ever-living. This plant is better known by its common name of houseleek or hen and chicks. He was very proud of one variant of this genus, namely the *S. arachnoideum*, or cobwebbed houseleek plant, which continually exudes natural juices from the tips of its leaves, thus becoming stringy and forming an interlaced design as the plant opens out.



*Sempervivium arachnoideum*  
**“Cobwebbed Houseleek**

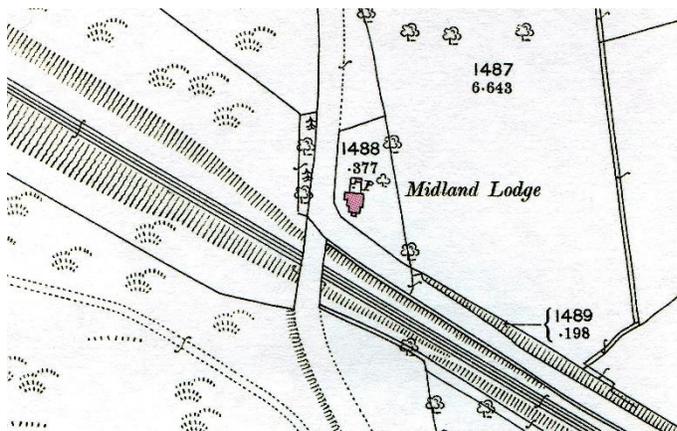
His great speciality was his alpine garden consisting of rows of rock-studded terraces which suited the sloping garden site at Midland Lodge. The great feature about his alpine garden was that every plant was classified into family groups. There was a special rockery bed for saxifrages which contained a very complete set of 82 species. There were 60 different kinds of alpine

campanula, and 20 species of sedum. He maintained that the advantage of this system of grouping was that the growing plants could more easily be compared and interesting horticultural points noted.

Describing the reasons for his success, Albert Wood remarked, "To obviate having the same soil for every plant in my garden I have tried to suit the requirements of each plant by varying the nature of the loam. From soil which is for the most delicate of plants there is every gradation down to the ordinary vegetable patch. Drift marl and peat play the principal part in my alpine garden. Hence everything that I grow looks healthy and beautiful".

So proficient a plantsman was Albert Wood that during his tenure of Midland Lodge he spared no time, trouble or reasonable expense in providing the proper rocks and soils so that his comprehensive collection of specimens might have natural conditions in which to grow and flourish. He even constructed an arrangement of tanks and water supplies to provide natural conditions for plants which would normally grow only in the neighbourhood of glaciers.

In 1908 the local press reported that he had in hand a scheme of enlargement which would greatly enhance the garden. Permission to extend the garden had been granted by the Borough Council on July 31, 1895, the Council to carry out the alteration to the line of the fence. It must be assumed that in the intervening thirteen years Albert Wood had been implementing his plans as quickly as time and finances allowed. This would have entailed preparing the new ground and procuring rock, soil and plants as well as establishing his elaborate watering system.



**A section of the 1888 Ordnance Survey map showing Midland Lodge and its garden boundary. Note that the Midland Gate at this time was sited on the Park boundary in Midland Road because it was operated by the Midland Railway Company's staff. The garden was extended northwards in 1895.**

Dr. Mike Hodder, the former Planning Archaeologist of Birmingham City Council, and the author spent part of an afternoon in October 2014 exploring this garden extension where it is still just possible to make out the lines of the terracing and find the odd remnant of the original rockery. The holly hedge that formed the northern boundary of this extended garden is still in place although somewhat overgrown and the area itself has been invaded by natural tree generation. This extension dating from 1895 has, after due clearance, been allowed to revert to nature with the inevitable encroachment of tree and shrub growth.

As previously mentioned, the rock garden at Midland Lodge attracted hundreds of visitors which would have swelled the coffers of the Park and Estates Committee and provided an eminent and attractive amenity for the Park.

In the records that exist, there is no mention of any assistance that he might have been able to call upon but it would seem unlikely that he would have been able to manage a garden of this size unaided.

Also, it would have been interesting to have been able to learn how the hundreds of visitors to the alpine garden were managed and whether there were stipulated visiting days and opening hours. This would have required organising and it is likely that a team of volunteers were on hand to monitor both the garden and its visitors.

Albert Wood died on August 12, 1917, aged 77 years, at Sutton Coldfield. Although he was married, it appears that he and his wife lived apart and the administration of his estate was awarded to his son Albert Charles Fraser Wood, auctioneer, on July 31, 1918. His estate was valued at £371. 8s. 0d. Albert's younger brother, Lewis, died the following year at Midland Lodge.

### **Midland Lodge and its garden after 1917**

After his death in August 1917, Albert Wood's effects were put up for disposal under the hammer by his son Albert C. Fraser Wood, the well-known auctioneer and valuer. Albert Wood's collection of British birds' eggs was a remarkable one, and was reputed to contain specimens of eggs of every British bird, migratory or otherwise, excepting the Great Auk. He had, too, a fine collection of molluscs and the shells of snails, both land and fresh water varieties. In the garden of Midland Lodge Albert Wood had compiled quite a unique and very valuable collection of rare alpine plants.

The Mayor of Sutton Coldfield, Alderman W.J. Seal, together with the Chairman of the Park and Estates Committee, Alderman S.C. Emery, both attended the sale primarily in the interests of the Council's freehold of Midland Lodge. However, when they saw the nature of the collection they were so impressed that they decided to bid for it in the interests of the Town, and as a result there was very little on the natural history side of the sale that was not knocked down to them. The Council were to support the prompt initiative of the Mayor and Chairman wholeheartedly in securing the collection for the Town to prevent the dispersal and possible removal from Sutton Coldfield. The Council's general intention was to use the collection, plus other items already in its possession, to form the nucleus of a museum which it was hoped to establish eventually within Sutton Coldfield.

The Committee visited Midland Lodge in October 1917 to inspect the collections in the house and the very valuable collection of rare alpine plants in the alpine garden recently purchased at the sale by the Mayor and the Chairman. Mr. T.B. Grove F.R.H.S., the nurseryman and friend, who was for so long associated with Albert Wood, wrote to the Committee offering to assist in the cataloguing of the rock plants as well as to advise on their preservation. He also offered the Parks and Estates Committee a valuable collection, properly mounted, of two cases of butterflies and moths found in the district. Mr. Grove also stated that Mr. H. Foster Newey<sup>12</sup> would give his collection of natural history specimens to the Committee. The Park and Estates Committee

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<sup>12</sup> **Harry Foster Newey** (1851-1933) – was an English School landscape and genre painter. He studied at the Birmingham School of Art and lived in Sutton Coldfield. He was Principal at the Tunstall School of Art (also known as the Victoria Institute) from 1900–08 and was elected a member of the RBSA in 1927. He exhibited at the Royal Society and published "Elementary Drawing". He was a private painter to Queen Victoria in watercolour. Newey was a close friend of Myles Birket Foster, the leading watercolourist of his age. Newey had a son Eric Foster Newey, also a painter, who studied at The Birmingham School of Art.

acknowledged with thanks the contribution of Mr. Richard James of 'Copsewood', Four Oaks, for his cheque for £20 to cover the cost of rockeries. A letter was also received from Mr. F.J. Bamford, President of the Vesey Club, congratulating the Committee upon acquiring the collection.

The Committee resolved that a plan of the existing alpine garden be made by the Borough Surveyor and the individual plants marked thereon for reference. They also responded to the Vesey Club informing them that it was the intention of the Committee to retain the alpine garden intact for the present and the collection for a future museum. The Mayor, Chairman, Borough Surveyor and Park Forester all resolved to make arrangements, if possible, for the collection to remain at Midland Lodge.

In November 1917, the Park and Estates Committee reported that it was not its intention to re-let Midland Lodge and the alpine garden was to be left intact for the present. The collection would remain at the Lodge and the alpine garden would form a nucleus for a museum in the future. These well-intentioned plans were made at a time when Britain was still engaged in the First World War with its inevitable demands on the public purse which due to the debt built up throughout Europe and elsewhere was to eventually culminate in the Great Depression of the 1920s. Eventual peace in 1918 was to impose the consequences of the high economic and social costs of the Great War onto everyone including local government. Debts had to be repaid and priorities inevitably had to change because of these new economic circumstances. It would be interesting to know whatever happened to the collection of natural history artefacts collected by the Borough Council at this period.

The onus of maintaining the alpine garden now fell on the Borough Council and more particularly their Park staff.

Over the Christmas period of 1917 Mr. Fraser Wood wrote to the Committee stating that the family had decided to retain possession of Midland Lodge until next Lady Day, March 25, 1918. This decision was probably reached because Albert Wood's brother, Lewis, was still living at Midland Lodge being cared for by the housekeeper. Lewis Wood, continued to live at Midland Lodge until his death in February 1918. His estate was awarded to his wife Eliza Auster Wood on July 20, 1918, and was valued at £3,724.12s. 1d.

There was an occurrence during January 1918 of a heavy snowfall and it was reported that a large frame had been made and placed over the alpine plants in the "moraine"<sup>13</sup> to protect the plants from the accumulating snow. By March the Borough Surveyor had been instructed to have the necessary repair work carried out at the Lodge and to appoint a caretaker for the property.

During the First World War Sutton Park had played host to the requirements of the War Office and there was still much military equipment existing there after hostilities ceased, including military staff. Because of these circumstances, the decision not to re-let Midland Lodge was soon to change because on March 26, 1918, it was reported that the Chairman of the Park and Estates

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<sup>13</sup> **Moraine:** rock garden moraines and screes simulate natural ones. Their purpose is to provide plants with extremely well aerated rooting mixes of low fertility [[www.nargs.org/reference/intro-rock-gardening](http://www.nargs.org/reference/intro-rock-gardening)] – accessed on 16/07/2015. In the normal way snow would offer the alpine plants some protection but in the context of Midland Lodge in the late winter of 1918 the moraine was obviously a structure to prevent the alpine plants from being overwhelmed by the weight of the accumulating snow.

Committee had interviewed Colonel D'Arch Smith who wanted a house on a short-term basis within Sutton Coldfield. It is almost certain that the Colonel had been appointed by the War Office in some capacity connected with the disestablishment of the military camps and equipment still scattered throughout the Park after the war. By May 1, 1918, the Council announced that the Midland Lodge had been let temporarily to the Colonel at the rate of £35 per annum. Two small portions of ground in the garden had been cleared of plants to allow the cultivation of vegetables by the new tenant. The Council had repaired the paled fence and gates at the Lodge and the north end of the garden containing the rare alpine plants had been divided off from the other portion by iron fencing.

In researching the genealogy of Albert Wood's family, it was apparent that, although he married Eliza Watkins in 1863, he and his wife had lived apart for most of their married life. It was something of a surprise to discover that she had written to the Committee in July 1918 requesting some plant moss from the garden of Midland Lodge so that she could use it on her late husband's grave. It was agreed that Mr. Clary, the Town Clerk, would arrange with the Park Forester to fulfil her request. Eliza Wood in her later years lived in Walsall and died, aged 83, on July 4, 1923 at "Lyttondale", 53 Lichfield Road, Walsall. Her estate was valued at £3, 442. 0s 1d.

During the twelve months following Albert Wood's death, there was the possibility that vandalism had taken place at the property because it was reported that the fence and hedge at the back of garden had been repaired. In November 1918 the Committee reported that the garden had been kept clear, and the hedges and shrubs had been trimmed and pruned. This would infer that the tenant was either not prepared to take on the task of keeping the garden tidy or had been instructed by the Council not to interfere with it other than to tend his vegetable patch.

In September of 1918 the Borough Surveyor arranged to have the unclimbable iron railings, previously erected in July, removed from the garden and replaced by wooden fencing and the Town Clerk was instructed to liaise with the Colonel and inform him officially of the Council's decision. The Colonel would seem to have been a man with a military eye for detail.

However, the Colonel's tenure was to be a short one because by January 1919 the Committee were discussing the likeliness of Colonel D'Arch Smith leaving Midland Lodge and by the following month they reported that Allen, the Park keeper, was occupying the Midland Lodge.

The subject of Albert Wood's collection plus the other artefacts donated to the Council appeared to go very quiet for two or three years. However, it raised its head again in 1921 when the Park and Estates Committee commissioned Mr. W.A. Wilkinson to advise them on the best method of dealing with the collection of birds' eggs and other natural history items. His report was received by the Committee in June of that year and presented to the full Council who expressed regret that at this time they were unable to carry out his recommendations due to the cost involved. This, as previously inferred, coincided with a time when the country was experiencing difficult financial problems because of the national debt created by The Great War.

World War I was a significant moment in the gradual decline of Britain as a world power and had a disastrous effect on the British economy. The War went on for a longer time than was originally envisaged and foreign trade, which had previously been a key part of the British

economy, had been badly damaged. Countries who had been cut-off from the supply of British goods due to the hostilities had been forced to build up their own industries with the result that they were no longer reliant on Britain, instead directly competing with her. In 1920-21, Britain would experience the deepest recession in its history.

Fortunately, the Council was still able to fund the maintenance of the garden at Midland Lodge which included repairs to the rustic work and arches and the felling of two trees that were overhanging the plants. Also, the Committee had entirely enclosed the garden with wire netting to prevent damage being done by rabbits. In the winter of 1922 the small rustic arbour was rethatched and later re-walled with rustic boarding once the correct material had become available.

In the early 1920s the Council Minutes began to describe the late Albert Wood's garden quite specifically as "The Alpine Garden". This would appear to have been inspired by the receipt by the Park & Estates Committee in December 1922 of a letter from Mr. H. Overton of the Royal Horticultural Society of London requesting specimens of the genus "Sempervivum" (see previous reference) from the large collection growing in the garden of Midland Lodge. The Park Forester, Henry Harland, was instructed to supply these specimens and about 170 distinct species were carefully selected by Mr. Overton and sent to Mr. Lloyd Praeger<sup>14</sup> who was an Irish naturalist, writer and librarian, and had been requested by the RHS to undertake monographs of this species of plant. The Borough Council was eager to assure residents that the remaining plants would not suffer from the reduction made in each clump because the plants were carefully selected.

By 1934 the then Park Forester, Mr. J. Parker, was reporting that the rock garden at Midland Lodge was still receiving attention with new wire netting fixed and rustic work repaired but no evidence exists that the garden was still open to public viewing.

In his report for May 1934, Mr. Parker advised the Park & Estates Committee that Midland Lodge urgently required general repairs and painting. He pointed out that the woodwork of the windows and doors was in a very bad condition and considered that the half-timbered work should be removed. Fortunately, his considerations were ignored because removal of the half-timbering would have detracted from the Gothic Revival architectural features. However, this report goes some way to explaining the repairs to some of the bargeboards.

Later in the year, the Borough Surveyor in his report of September 25, 1934, highlighted the sorry state of Midland Lodge stating that it was still without either electric or gas lighting and an application had been made for the installation of electric light. Cooking had to be carried out by means of an oil cooker, the existing range being broken, and he suggested that a small "Triplex" or similar type of combination grate be fitted in the living room. He further reported that there was no bathroom at the Lodge and if the fitting of a new range was approved then the conversion of a bedroom into a bathroom could easily be arranged.

The subject of Albert Wood's collection and the creation of a borough museum arose again in late 1936 in a rather strange manner as a result of a crude stone implement having been

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<sup>14</sup> **Robert Lloyd Praeger (1865-1953):** He co-founded and edited the *Irish Naturalist* and wrote papers on the flora and other aspects of the natural history of Ireland. In 1922, at the request of The Royal Horticultural Society, he undertook monographs of *Sedum* and *Sempervivum*.

discovered inside the Park near the *Parson & Clerk* pub by a Mr. Hall who handed it over to Mr. W.F. Bullows<sup>15</sup>, a well-known local archaeologist. When the Park & Estates Committee learnt about this discovery they wrote to Mr. Bullows asking him if he had the artefact in his possession. Mr. Bullows responded by confirming that he had the item and wrote, "... I should be pleased to hear whether there is a Museum in Sutton Coldfield where it can be kept safely. I presume that there would be no objection to it being shown in the Birmingham Museum for a time."

By his rhetorical question to the Committee, the author senses a subtle hint of sarcasm in Wilfred Bullows' response in respect of the natural history museum which was eagerly proposed by the Borough Council in late 1917 and seventeen years later was no nearer being established. Was Bullows accusing the Borough Council of dragging its feet in establishing a museum in the town. He further suspects that Albert Wood's collection plus other items, so enthusiastically donated after Albert Wood's death, almost certainly lay in a store room, possibly in the Council House, in imperfect conditions for years and have almost certainly been confined to landfill in more recent times. It is probable that we will never learn what happened to these artefacts. The reference to the Birmingham Museum must have been a sting in the tail for the pride of the Sutton Coldfield Council.

By the early months of the following year there is evidence in the Council Minutes that the Council had more serious concerns on its mind, such as the building of public air-raid shelters and the storage of gas masks. These public tasks increased as the threat of war with Germany increased.

As late as May 12, 1941, the Council Minutes were recording under "Estate Work and Repair" that the rock garden had been cleaned and weeded, so essential maintenance of the rock garden was still being carried out after 1941.

From henceforward the Council Minutes were drastically reduced in content by government edict due to a national paper shortage attributable to the Second World War. This situation seemed to condition the manner in which Council Minutes were recorded thereafter right up the time that Birmingham took control of Sutton Coldfield in 1974. The picture painted by these later minutes was definitely broad brush-stroke with little effort made to give details, unlike the minutes recorded from an earlier age which are a blessing to the local historian.

### **The remains of the extended garden**

In October 2014 the author, accompanied by Birmingham City Council's ex-Planning Archaeologist, Dr. Mike Hodder, spent part of an afternoon tracing the remnants of the extended area of rock garden, dating from 1895, which is now overgrown by trees and shrubs. The following photographs give some idea of how it must once have looked.

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<sup>15</sup> **Wilfred L. Bullows:** Lived in Streetly Lane, Sutton Coldfield and was a member of the Birmingham Archaeological Society, He was instrumental in excavating and mapping the Bronze Age Burnt Mounds in Sutton Park, near to Streetly Lane, in 1926, after the great fire in the Park. Refer to the *Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Group*, Vol. 12, Spring 2015, p.32 – fn2.



The photograph on the left is a view looking southwards from the northern boundary of the extended garden towards Midland Lodge and its ivy covered prefabricated garage. One can see the steep fall of the land from west to east which must have attracted Albert Wood to the land's potential as a rock-garden with rows of alpine rock terraces. Just visible in the middle is a shallow eroded ridge which would have accommodated one of the rock terraces. There are several other ridges in this extended

area which continue into the existing garden at Midland Lodge.

The photograph on the right, looking eastwards, shows Dr. Mike Hodder standing near the Park boundary fence in the former area of the extended garden at Midland Lodge. On the other side of the fence is housing in Anderton Close, but at the time of Albert Wood's tenancy of Midland Lodge that area was farmland and Midland Lodge was somewhat remote. Also, beyond the fence was the ditch that formed Fern Hollow, an ancient footpath which extends up to Hartopp Gate northwards and to Meadow Platt southwards, but once extended from the old Spade Mill (Park House) to the Commons on Streetly Lane via Four Oaks Hall.



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The soil in Sutton Park has a notorious reputation for its poor quality and thus its unsuitability for growing plants. Albert Wood, as previously mentioned, imported over a period of some years large quantities of marl and peat to produce specific types of growing medium designed to suit individual plant types. He went to great trouble and expense to provide the optimum growing medium for each species of plant as well as setting up a sophisticated irrigation system. The task of converting the area from heathland to a fertile environment and to construct a rock-garden would have taken patience and many years, from 1895 to probably 1908.



The photograph on the left looking south-eastwards gives an impression of the extent of the area of the extended garden. In the left background can be seen the fencing which forms the Park boundary. This picture illustrates how fast trees and shrubs can take over land that is no longer managed. Dr. Mike Hodder is shown searching for ground features associated with Albert Wood's alpine rock-garden. The boundaries of the garden would have been the ubiquitous holly.

If, from these photographs, one can imagine this area, but without the trees and shrubs, then one can begin to understand the size of this garden extension and the extent of the comprehensive collection of alpine plants that Albert Wood was able to cultivate

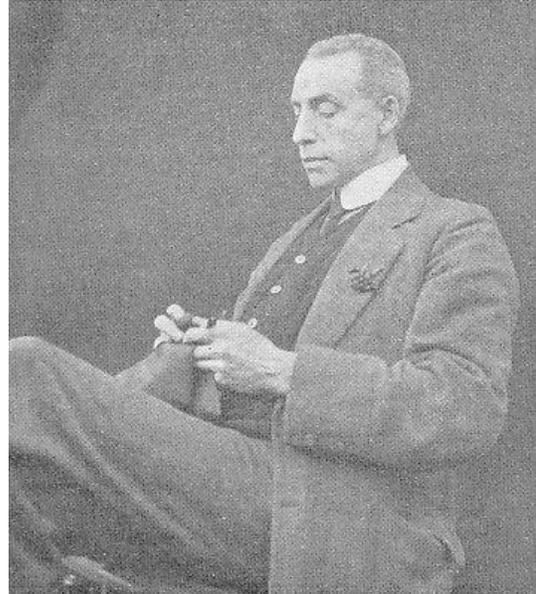


**The south-east aspect of Midland Lodge photographed from the corner of the garden. This view shows on the left of the picture the ground floor bay of the south-facing reception room where the idea was conceived in 1888 to form an association that was to become The Vesey Club.**

### **Albert Charles Fraser Wood**

Albert Charles Fraser Wood, Albert Wood's son, died at the age of eighty-three on December 4, 1946. At the time of his death he had been living at Cholmondeley House, Richmond, in Surrey. Probate for his estate, which was valued at £85,778. 10s. 0d., was granted to his widow Norah Helen May Fraser Wood.

Albert Charles Fraser Wood was a successful business man and the company that bore his name still exists in Lichfield Street, Walsall, offering services as auctioneers, valuers and chartered surveyors. He was also a successful dramatist having had plays produced by such renowned artists as Mr. and Mrs. Kendal<sup>16</sup> and Mr. W.S. Penley<sup>17</sup>.



**Albert Charles Fraser Wood (1864-1946)**

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<sup>16</sup> **William Hunter Kendal and Dame Madge Kendal, DBE:** William Kendal (1843-1917) was an English actor and theatre manager. He married Margaret (Madge) Shafto Robertson in 1869 and they had five children. Madge Kendal (1848-1935) was an English actress best known for her roles in Shakespeare and English comedies. As "Mr. and Mrs. Kendal", their professional careers became inseparable, and he invariably played opposite his wife. Together with her husband, she became an important theatre manager.

<sup>17</sup> **William Sydney Penley (1851-1912):** Was an English actor, singer and comedian. He later achieved wider fame as producer and star of the prodigiously successful Brandon Thomas farce, *Charley's Aunt*.

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