

A History of The Ossett War Memorial Community Centre by Alan Howe.

This is a history of the War Memorial Community Centre and the owners and occupiers of the nine roomed dwelling, Prospect House, which once it was.

Located on Prospect Road at the junction with Illingworth Street the Ossett War Memorial Community Centre, first proposed in 1947, was opened for activities in November 1951. It cost almost £9000 and was dedicated by the Lord Bishop of Wakefield, Right Reverend R.P. Wilson on Saturday 17th May 1952 in the presence of a crowd of 400. The ceremony took place in the grounds fronting the building, in glorious weather and was followed by a seven hour programme of indoor and outdoor events.

Others present on the platform included the Mayor and Mayoress of Ossett (Councillor and Mrs. A. Clark), the Deputy Mayor (Alderman J.W. Gill), the Vicar of Ossett (Reverend J. Barton) and Messrs H. Leighton, G. Ball and J.F. Winterburn from the Ossett War Memorial Committee. Acknowledgement was made for the sterling efforts and valuable work behind the scenes of Mr C.H. Lawrence (legal advisor) and Mr Charles Kendall M.C., architect who had also been the co-designer of the Ossett War Memorial which at this time stood at the bottom of Kingsway.



Mayor Arthur Clark on opening the Centre on 17th May 1952.

During the Dedication the Bishop said that “if it is not maintained in a manner worthy of its origin and conception, it becomes a rebuke to those who have set it up. Thus we have a heavy responsibility laid upon us”.

On 1st September 1948 the Mayor wrote to Ossett citizens confirming the public meeting view supporting a proposal to build a community centre to perpetuate the memory of our gallant heroes of the late war. He announced that a Subscription Fund had commenced for a minimum total of £7500 adding that *it is certain that this figure can easily be surpassed.*

Public meetings had been held in 1947 and 1948 to seek opinions and support for the proposal of establishing a War Memorial Community Centre. It was finally decided that a nine roomed dwelling known as Prospect House, set in its own acre of land, would be the ideal location for the Centre to be established. Prospect House had been owned by three generations of the Stringer family since it was built in about 1870. Negotiations for its purchase were well in hand by mid September 1949 and the Government’s Ministry of Education had offered £6,460 towards the estimated cost of £8610 to acquire, refurbish, extend and provide facilities for the purpose of the War Memorial Centre. At that time the owner of the land and property was Herbert Craven Stringer, whose father Herbert and grandfather Joseph had been the previous owners. Herbert junior had long since left Ossett in the early/mid 1930’s.

On 31st December 1949 Herbert Craven Stringer, a bank manager, of Laceby Road, Grimsby agreed to the sale of the then unoccupied Prospect House and outbuildings set upon 5220 square yards (1 acre 5 perches) to the Trustees of the War Memorial Community Centre for the sum of £1,600. The Conveyance and Trust Deed, agreed and signed by Mr. Stringer and the Trustees, permitted the accommodation for private and public functions with catering for development of the arts and literature, music and drama, dances and indoor pleasures and gardens and grounds for outdoor sports. Also generally for the religious social, moral and physical *well-being* of Ossett residents and the surrounding district by provision for social and physical training and recreation.



The Centre is now in its 70th year. In the 1950's it was reputed to be one of the finest in the North; a fitting response to a national movement for such War Memorial Community Centres which was first launched in early 1945.

OSSETT WAR MEMORIAL COMMUNITY CENTRE

The Ossett War Memorial Community Centre in Prospect Road is reputed to be one of the finest in the North. Ossett may well be proud of such a building and of those citizens who worked unceasingly through difficult times to translate an idea into a worthy memorial to those who gave their lives in the Second World War.

The Centre was opened for activities in November, 1951, and dedicated by the Rt. Rev. the Lord Bishop of Wakefield in May, 1952. Although its development is still in its early stages, there is a varied programme which caters for a wide range of interests. On the social side, there are Games, Old Time Dancing, Whist Drives and Social Evenings, whilst the Orchestra, Discussion, Arts, Literary and Foreign Language Groups give opportunities for self-expression and the development of particular interests; and out-of-doors activities commenced at Easter 1952. When the extensive grounds are developed, a bowling green and tennis courts will be provided.

The Centre offers facilities to various local organisations as well as to its own groups and thus provides a common meeting ground for people from all sections of the community in the pursuit of social and cultural activities and the discussion of common problems in everyday life.

Whilst co-operating with various local authorities and voluntary bodies, the Centre is an independent organisation which manages its own affairs and depends upon member's subscriptions, money raising efforts and voluntary contributions for its upkeep.

Above: The Ossett Official Handbook 1953. Issued on the authority of The Corporation.

On 16th May 1955 the Mayor of Ossett, Councillor L.R. Smith, officially opened a new tennis court at the Ossett War Memorial Community Centre. Whilst celebrating the opening the Mayor expressed his disappointment about the small attendance on that day with the youth of the town practically unrepresented. An exhibition match was played on the new court by A. Reader (Yorkshire Doubles Champion) and T. Pickering (Yorkshire Singles Champion). The result of the match is unknown. The cost of the Court was £600 which had been defrayed by the volunteer labour of Centre members and the Ossett and Horbury Round Table. Later that year the Community Centre reported its intention to add a bowling green and two further tennis courts.

It had been practice for many years for the Borough Council to issue an Annual Year Book but it failed to do so in 1969, instead providing *Information Sheets*. Under the heading *Activities In The Borough* the entry for the Ossett Memorial Community Centre read;

The work of the Community Centre is very varied, comprehensive of all ages, and of all sections of the community life, and the Centre has played a most part in the community life itself. Each evening the Centre can be seen to be full of activity engendered by one or more of the Centre's Sections. Activities range from football to whist, and first-aid to "Twist"! (The Modern Dance Group).

Some years ago, a prominent Youth Officer expounded the view that the Centre was doing little towards the Community good, but over the last few years it has proved itself a most virile organisation towards this end. The organisation is headed by the Management Committee, by whom general policy is decided upon and ably administered by a Standing Committee, which meets every month. Each section within the Centre has its own Committee which keeps the heavy burden of small administrative work of the whole Centre spread over as large a number as possible.

The various sections include a Ladies' Committee. Whist Drive, Old Time and Modern Sequence Dancing, Modern Dancing (for teenagers). Football. Military Band. Snooker and Billiards, and, for the children, a "Saturday Playbox". In addition however to these various sections of its own, the Centre provides accommodation for many other local organisations. Amongst those taking advantage of these facilities are such organisations as the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Trade and the Inner Wheel Club etc. The Centre has, over the past few years, provided social contact for many through its varied activities, and it is the desire of both the Management and Standing Committees that it shall continue to do so, whilst at the same time endeavouring to improve as may be possible existing facilities.

The history of Prospect House & the Stringer family (1870-1949)

But, of course, the main building, Prospect House, and its companion structure known as the Coach House existed much earlier than the late 1940's/early 1950's. The fine stonework of these buildings tells its own story of the 19th Century nature of their beginnings. A clue to the earlier origins of the land itself, is the Centre's location at the junction of Prospect Road (formerly *Back Lane*) and Illingworth Street (formerly *Joseph Illingworth Lane*). In those days Ossett had two routes named *Back Lane*. One to the east of the town centre (latterly known as Prospect Road) and one to the west, parts of which are now known as Ventnor Way and parts which retain the name, Back Lane.

The land upon which the Community Centre now stands was known then as *Back Lane, or Lower, Croft* comprising 1acre 5 perches (5220 square yards). The 1843 Ossett Tithe Award records that this croft, plot 348, was owned by Joseph Illingworth's wife **Mary Illingworth**, nee Marsden (1763-1851). Mary was the great great grand daughter of Francisci Marsden who built Sowood Farm in 1689. She and her husband lived at nearby Rock Cottages; both properties still survive (2021).

Mary was a landowner in her own right and also owned 2 acres 2 roods of pasture land on the north side of Joseph Illingworth Lane. In those days the pasture and the meadow, Back Lane/Lower croft, were farmed by her fourth son Joshua. When Mary died in 1851, aged 88 years, the croft was left to her eldest son, William (1790-1861).

By 1864 the *Lower Croft*, formerly Back Lane Croft, was acquired by clothier **Joseph Whittaker Ellis** (1813-1877) and pub owner Jane Gartside (nee Hallas). The Gartside's owned land and buildings along Bank Street and were well known to the Illingworth family who were licensees of her family's pub, The Globe on Bank Street, between 1839 and c. 1872. No evidence has been discovered of a dwelling house on the Back lane/Lower croft until December 1870 when a "recently erected.....dwelling house.....outbuildings" had been built by Joseph Whittaker Ellis on Lower Croft.

On 3rd December 1870 **Joseph Stringer** (1826-1897), a Horbury Attorney at Law and “Gentleman”, purchased *Lower Croft* land and buildings from widow Gartside & widower Ellis. It was a perfect arrangement for Joseph Stringer since his wife, Jane Ann Craven (nee Lee) had been left four closes of land comprising seven acres by her father, landed proprietor, William Lee, a landed proprietor of Horbury. This seven acres of pasture and meadowland had a frontage to Back Lane (Prospect Road) and was adjacent to Lower Croft.

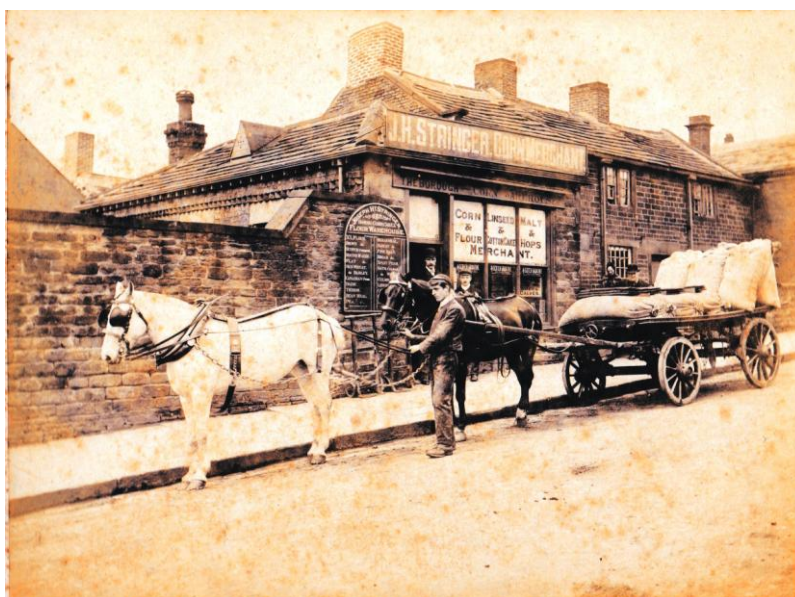
For the next 79 years (1870 – 1949) the Stringer family owned *Lower Croft* upon which was built a dwelling or dwellings known, subsequently, as Prospect House which was to become the Ossett War Memorial Community Centre in 1949.

What is clear is that by 1870 a dwelling had been recently erected on Lower Croft, by Joseph Whittaker Ellis. In that year Joseph Stringer bought the land and the dwelling house but it's not certain whether Stringer retained that dwelling, built another in its place or in addition to that built by Ellis. Whatever the case the dwelling, built by Ellis or Stringer in the early 1870's, was to become known as Prospect House and sometime later it became the Ossett Memorial Community Centre.

Joseph Stringer was born in Horbury in 1826 and married Jane Ann Craven Lee there in 1852. In 1861 the couple lived at Church Lane with their first child, Herbert (born 1856). By 1867 the couple had four children, three sons and a daughter, the first two children, Herbert and Rosa were born in Horbury, Joseph Henry and John William were born in Ossett.

Joseph and Jane Ann appeared to live apart, at least on occasions, for by 1871 Joseph was living at Ossett and Jane Ann was living in Horbury describing herself as “wife of a solicitor”. Joseph lived at Ossett Green (he had property in the Radley Street area) with his eldest son Herbert and a domestic servant, Christiana Rogerson. Jane Ann was living at Church Lane Horbury with their other three children and her mother.

The arrangement appears to have satisfied at least one of the couple and by 1881 Joseph had a Prospect Road address, living alone albeit with the same domestic servant. Jane Ann lived in Horbury with the same three children; the eldest son, Herbert had moved to Batley and was working as a solicitor's clerk. By 1891 Joseph was living at Prospect Road with his daughter, Rosa and son John William, whilst John Henry was lodging on Church Street and working as a corn merchant with a shop on Queen Street. Herbert had married and was living in Batley with his wife Ann Smith, their daughter, Maude and his mother, Jane Ann Craven Stringer.



John Henry Stringer at his Queen Street corn merchant's shop c. 1891. Courtesy of Miss Ruth Nettleton

Census information can be misleading, of course, but Joseph made his Will in 1891 and neither mentioned his wife's name nor left anything to her in his Will. Joseph died on 5th September 1897 without changing his mind and by 1901 his wife had removed to Harrogate where she died in 1902; Jane Ann Craven Stringer was buried at Horbury St. Peter's & St. Leonard's Church on 8th April 1902.

Their beloved daughter, Rosa Stringer, born 1860, died in August 1917 at Manor Villa, Tithe Barn Street, Horbury aged 57 years. In 1911 Rosa was living there in the care of a sick nurse. Rosa is buried with her father at Holy Trinity Church, Ossett.



The gravestones of Joseph Stringer (1826-1897) and his only daughter , Rosa (1860-1917)

Holy Trinity Church Ossett. Photograph courtesy of Joan Smith

Following his father's death Prospect House was acquired by his eldest son, estate agent **Herbert Stringer (1856-1926)** and he was living there in 1906 when he made his Will. He was there too in 1911 with his wife, Ann (nee Smith) and two children, Maude (1898-1993) and Herbert Craven Stringer. Herbert Stringer died at Prospect House in 1926 whilst living there with his wife, Ann who was left a life interest in his estate.

Ann Stringer died in 1929 and consequently **Herbert Craven Stringer (1894-1969)** inherited his father's real estate, including Prospect House, and the adjacent Apex House, in that year. In 1906 Herbert was living at Apex House, and on the occasion of his demobilisation from the army in 1919 his address was Hawthorn Villas, Cotton Street Wakefield. In October 1921 he married German born British subject, Kathleen Jane Atkinson, when he was living at Cliffe Parade Wakefield. By 1926 his address was Apex House, Prospect Road as it was in 1930 when he offered Prospect House for sale.



FOR Sale. Prospect House. Ossett; vacant; freehold; beautiful well-built stone dwelling-house, comprising hall, 3 reception rooms, kitchen, 5 bedrooms, bath, etc.; situated in own well-kept grounds, over 1 acre; outhouses and well-stocked greenhouses. — Apply Stringer, Apex House, Ossett. c

Yorkshire Post & Leeds Intelligencer 25 January 1930

Prospect House was not to be sold on the above occasion but Herbert Craven Stringer did move on. By 1936 he was living at St. Aubyn, Laceby Road Grimsby and he remained there in 1939 with his wife Kathleen Jane and a servant. At this time Herbert was a bank manager whilst doing his bit for his country as he had done in The Great War 1914-1918. In 1939 Herbert Craven Stringer had volunteered and was assistant head warden of the Air Raid Precautions (A.R.P.) for 6th Grimsby section.

Fittingly it was Herbert Craven Stringer who conveyed the dwelling to the Centre in 1949 as a memorial for the men and women of Ossett who made the ultimate sacrifice during the 1939-1945 War.

Private 555499, Herbert Craven Stringer, knew a bit about wars and suffering having himself lived through two wars, serving in both but in particular in WWI with the 16th battalion of the London Regiment. Herbert enlisted in December 1915, embarked for France in 1916 and was discharged on the grounds of wounds or sickness on 7th July 1919 when he was awarded a Silver Badge to signify his service and that his disability was caused by his service to the country.

The Whitaker Ellis family also had history in WWI. Joseph Whitaker Ellis junior served with the Yorks & Lancs regiment and Edgar Whitaker Ellis, a Quaker, served as a hospital orderly and ambulance driver.

By 1949 three generations of the Stringer family had owned the dwelling known as Prospect House which was to become the Ossett War Memorial Community Centre. The family's tenure of Prospect House had ended after 79 years and two World Wars. A new era began on 31st December 1949, when Herbert Craven Stringer signed the Conveyance & Trust Deed which saw Prospect House and 5220 sq.yds of land (1 acre 5 perches) sold to the Trustees of the War Memorial Community Centre.

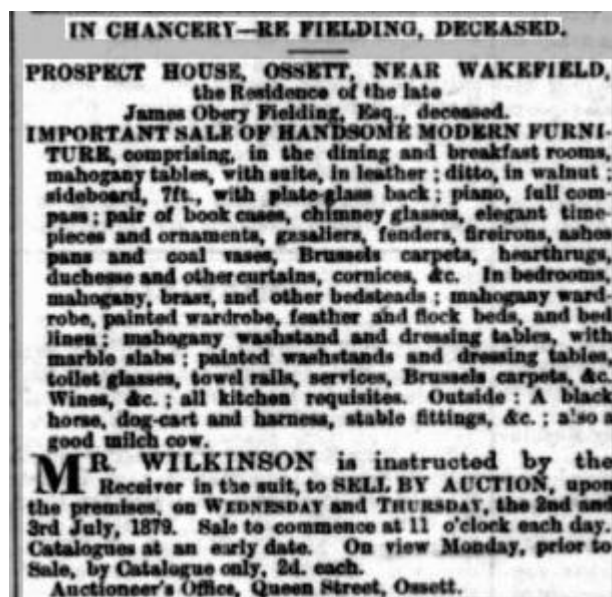
Herbert Craven Stringer made his Will in June 1950 and died at the General Hospital Poole, Dorset on 20th May 1969. He was 74 years of age. His address and that of his wife Kathleen Jane was 68 Dulcie Road, Talbot Woods Bournemouth formerly 35, Laceby Road, Grimsby Lincolnshire which had been their home since the 1930's. The couple appear not to have had children. Kathleen Jane Stringer (nee Atkinson) born at Grunberg, Danzig, Prussia in November 1891 died at Cavendish Nursing Home Harrogate on 30th June 1979, aged 87 years.

Other occupants of Prospect House

Whilst the Stringer family owned Prospect House and its land between 1870 and 1949 they were occasionally living elsewhere leaving the dwelling empty or in the hands of tenants. There are several instances of this but two in particular, around 1880, which are worthy of reference.

In 1879, only a few years after Prospect House was built, Halifax born drysalter, manufacturer of chemicals, James Obery Fielding was a tenant living at Prospect House. Mr Fielding was found drowned at Healey on 3rd March 1879. Coroner Thomas Taylor held an Inquest and found that his death was accidental.

James Obery Fielding was 38 years old and his belongings were sold at auction on 2nd & 3rd July 1879. Note "Outside: a black horse, dog-cart and harness, stable fittings etc.; also a good milch cow". This might suggest that these animals and goods may have occupied the "Coach House" at Prospect House.



Batley Reporter & Guardian 21st June 1879 – sale by Auction

Shortly after James Obery Fielding's unfortunate death and unexpected vacating of Prospect House in 1879 the 1881 census and Kelly Directory records Walter Berry, cloth manufacturer and Walter Townend, rag merchant at Prospect House.

The Well being Garden

The 1949 Trust Deed permits the Ossett War Memorial Community Centre to encourage physical *well-being*... by the provision for social and physical training and recreation. In 2019 the Centre was successful in obtaining funding from WMDC to develop and build a Sensory Garden for use by centre users and the general community. Interrupted by the pandemic for much of 2020 the Well being Garden at the Community Centre was officially opened by the Lord Mayor of Wakefield, Councillor Tracey Austin supported by the Leader of Council, Councillor Denise Jeffery on Sunday 3rd October 2021. The chairman of the Centre offered thanks to Julia Roebuck and her team for their sterling effort and expertise in creating the Garden.



Well being Garden at rear of the Centre 2021



Opening of Well being Garden Sunday 3rd October 2021

Alan Howe September 2021