

# *The Bowdon Sheaf*

A BOWDON HISTORY SOCIETY PUBLICATION

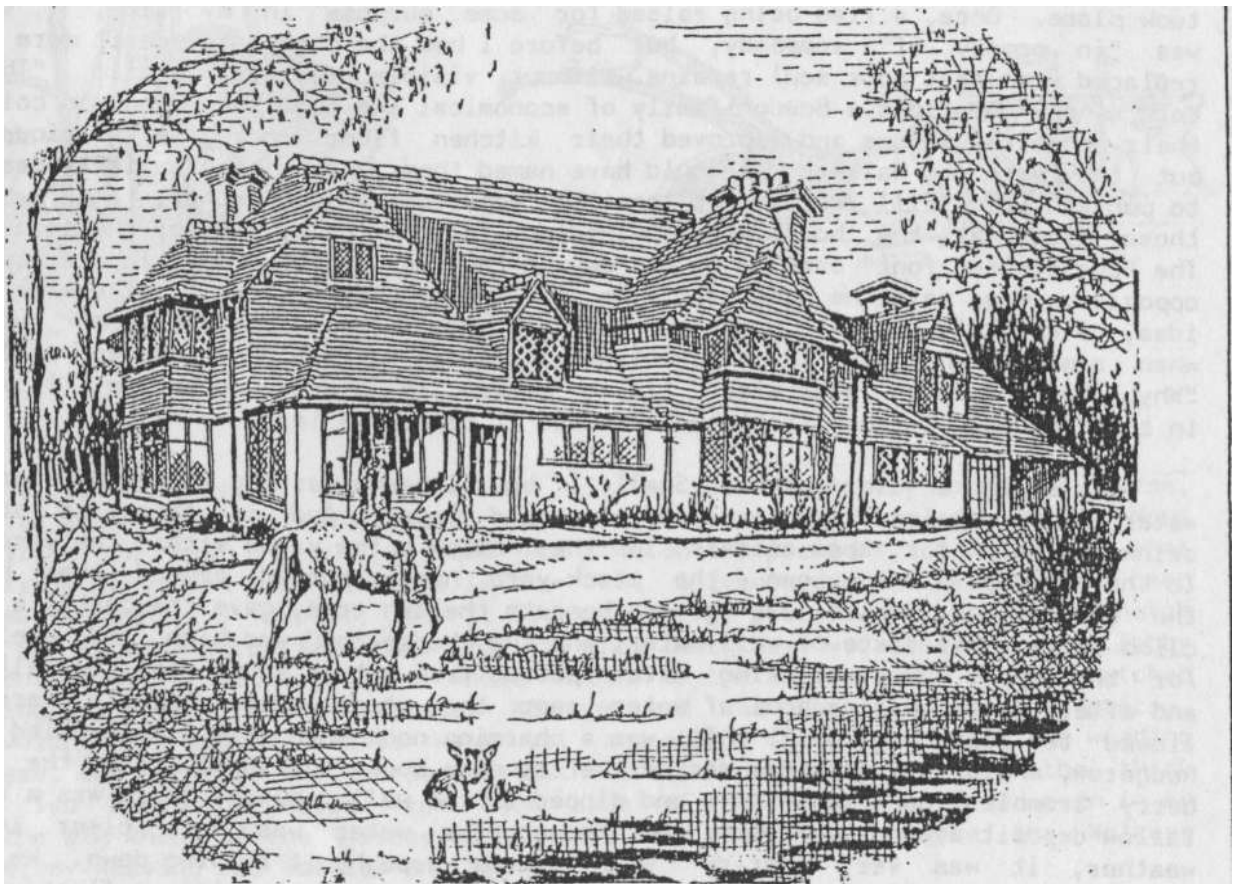
No.10 October, 1987

40p

Contents:

Moss Farm by Alice Walker

William Neild by Marjorie Cox



## BOW GREEN

This house which was built in the 1920s to the design of Frederick Henry Brazier, Architect, was influenced by the East Anglian Domestic Work of Lutyens and the gardens were set-out in accordance with the teachings of Gertrude Jekyll.

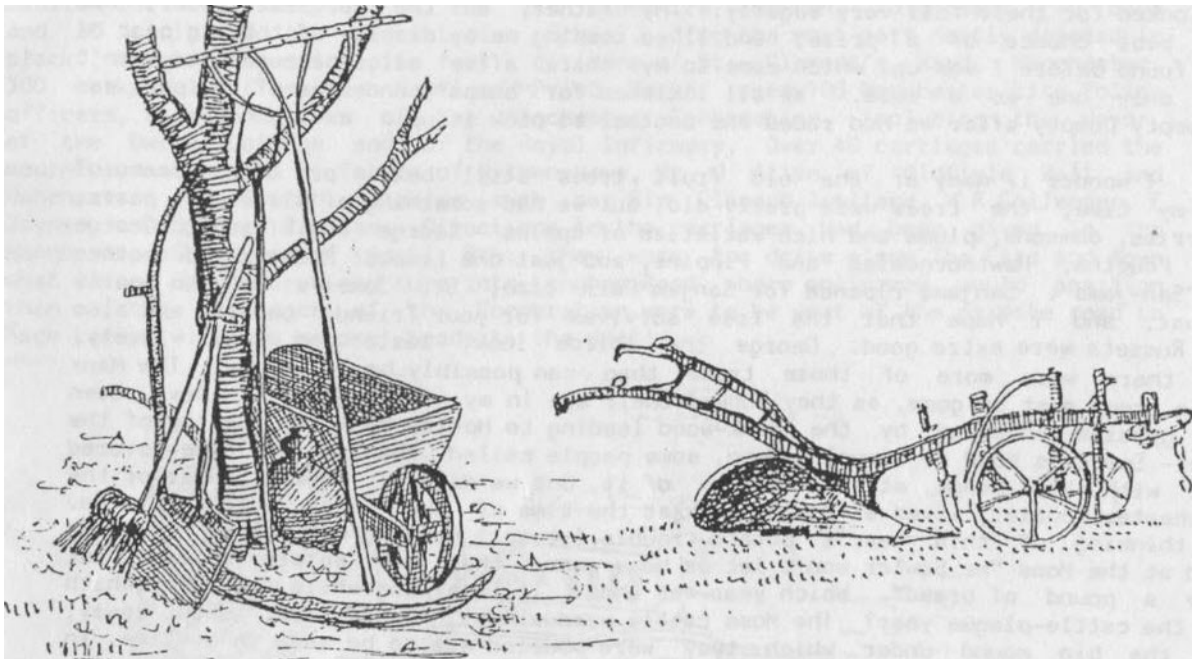
**MOSS FARM**  
**by Alice Walker**

In June 1944, at the age of 80, Alice Walker, the daughter of William Walker of Moss Farm, Bowdon, wrote an evocative letter to a relative, Josephine Greenwood, in which she recalled memories which are of great interest to those living in the area today. In this letter Alice graphically described the farm and the buildings when she was young, recorded some of its early history, told of her Aunt's recollections of Mrs Gaskell's visits to them and described a local murder Hunt.

The letter is too long to be published in its entirety but extracts are given in this and future issues of the Bowdon Sheaf, the first of which, her description of the farm, is as follows:- "Bowdon Moss House was very old then, and I believe there was some rebuilding or patching-up done by the older Walker tenants, but don't think it was at the thatched end. There must have been alterations before my time. The dairy, which I knew as having only an outside entrance, plainly had once had two windows, and there was a fireplace near the door still."- - - - - "However, quite appropriately, as you may agree, the dairy floor was paved with gravestones upside down which came from the church, either interior or exterior, when rebuilding took place. Once, a flag being raised for some purpose in my time, I saw it was "in memory of" somebody, but before I had the chance to see it more it was replaced - so that poor soul remains without visible memorial still! "The Old Lord's day" mentions a Bowdon family of economical and sagacious mind who collected their ancestral stones and improved their kitchen floor in quite a pious way, but they were not Walkers. I could have named them, had it been politely desirable to publish it! Still, we did not lose the opportunity altogether, and I expect those flags at the house front leading to the dairy were of the same order. The "christening font" came in my own day to the Moss front garden, from a cottager opposite, who said he got it from an Ashley garden - but I believe he had an idea, or was told, that it came from Bowdon. We, to be candid, were surprised when someone who saw it after transplantation to Vale House garden, exclaimed, "Why, that's a font! What else?" Is it broken in pieces somewhere, I wonder, in that garden? I fancy frost had affected it before we left.

This is a digression. Shall I be tiresome asking if the Moss drinking water is now obtained from civilised pipe and taps? And if there is still a drinking well for the animals in the hollow a few yards within the yard gate? In the old days - and my own - the stock-yard hedge curved around that hollow; the steep bank, which was grassy beneath the ash tree, gave the cattle a little climb after their taste of well-water, and the "hedge-cop" was high and sheltering for the spot. Our drinking water poured from a tile spout near the well-head, and after leaving a tiny pool of water near the stone where buckets were set, flowed to fill the well. It was a charming nook when primroses nestled in the hedgerow, and pretty greenery decked the crannies above the spout, and the black- berry brambles hung from above and dipped in the well. Always there was a reddish tallow deposit around the spout, and though the water was very clear in calm weather, it was very "carry" when storms brought it rushing down. We called this reddish clay "Car". Our old doctor often stood looking reflectively at the well - and also asked about the water source. They said it came from our Long Moss, from springs at the Yeald foot, and surface water from the hillside. They wondered if he thought it was impure, but it was lovely water to taste and so different from the stone-cold very hard pump water which served the house for general use. I think the doctor had a suspicion that there was some such spring in the Moss land! And these Moss fields under the hill must of course have been boggy enough for anything - a mere continuation of Hale Moss. Of course, Bowdon Moss House is built on marl-clay, not the wonderful gravel soil of Bowdon Hill, but real blue marl.

Is "the Pit" still at the orchard-foot behind the Moss House? We were a bit timorous of the "Big Pit" which was so deep - we were warned off it, but it was very pleasant to be beside it when the banks had big primrose tufts well over the water while you couldn't pick them, or the bushes and hedges on the fields side were white with may; and to smell new-mown hay, or hear the corncrake at dusk, or perhaps a fox's bark - sounds coming "over the water", the sweeter for it to our childish fancy! After we left we heard the pit had been drained, and flat fish found in the bottom, but I suppose it may have some water still? When work was over, or people were tired and wanted refreshment - or especially when anything was happening and our minds were over-excited, I think all the Walkers strolled down to the Pit, at their quite natural resource and escape, either alone or to talk things over.



To come indoors at the Moss of old - it was never a ghostly house; of course, the White Rabbit in the Yeald seemed the speciality of Walkers at Bowdon Moss dwelling so near - but it did not come on the premises. I don't know what alterations have been made since we left - the galvanised roof will have been made water-tight, I expect, but it did not look as picturesque as the old thatch when I saw it as a surprise-shock. You may know that there was formerly no lobby to front door or stairs, the whole width of the central part of the thatched end being one room - the house-place. At one end was the kitchen and pantry, from which the second stairs went up, and at the further end were the winding staircase, the parlour, and the larder with the window set deep in the thick wall. Two beams projected from each side of the house-place, and even in my time, the big knobs of the jersey-hooks were in place, as before the Walkers day, jersey-weaving was carried on there".

Referring to the bedroom occupied by Mrs Gaskell when she visited Moss Farm Alice wrote-

"Personally, I was fond of the room opening from the main stairs, with the deep eaves of the thatch over the little-paned window, with the lattice opening to floor level and the whitewashed post which gave some extra support to the roof. It was the servant girl's room usually, and still called "Mary's room", but after which of the Mary's I don't know. The last but one (who was there when Alfred was born and nursed him [ believe) was Mary Booth. She was liked at the Moss, but married and went to America with her husband, who murdered her there - I don't know how or why.

The loft at the top of the higher part of the house had a cemented floor for the convenience of the owls and preservation of ceilings below; the entrance by the square clap door at the gable was somewhat screened in my own time by the tall Jargonelle pear tree, which must have been planted for wall fruit and had grown to greater bulk than any of the apple trees, as well as over-topping the house. The tree saved the trouble of setting a ladder if anybody ever wanted to creep inside the loft, which was only a likely haunt for starlings in my day (and how I liked to hear them pattering and crooning overhead when (woke in the morning!), and boys made an adventure of it now and then; whether they secured any ripe pears thereby, or not. They were the most luscious and delicious pears I have ever tasted, but not easy to reach, so that we looked for their fall very eagerly. My father, as the earliest riser, had the best chance of a prize, and liked teasing me by display of the big pear he had found before I was up, which came to my share after all, because it wasn't the only one as a rule. We all listened for "bumps", and alas if the pear was a Humpty Dumpty after we had raced one another to pick it up.

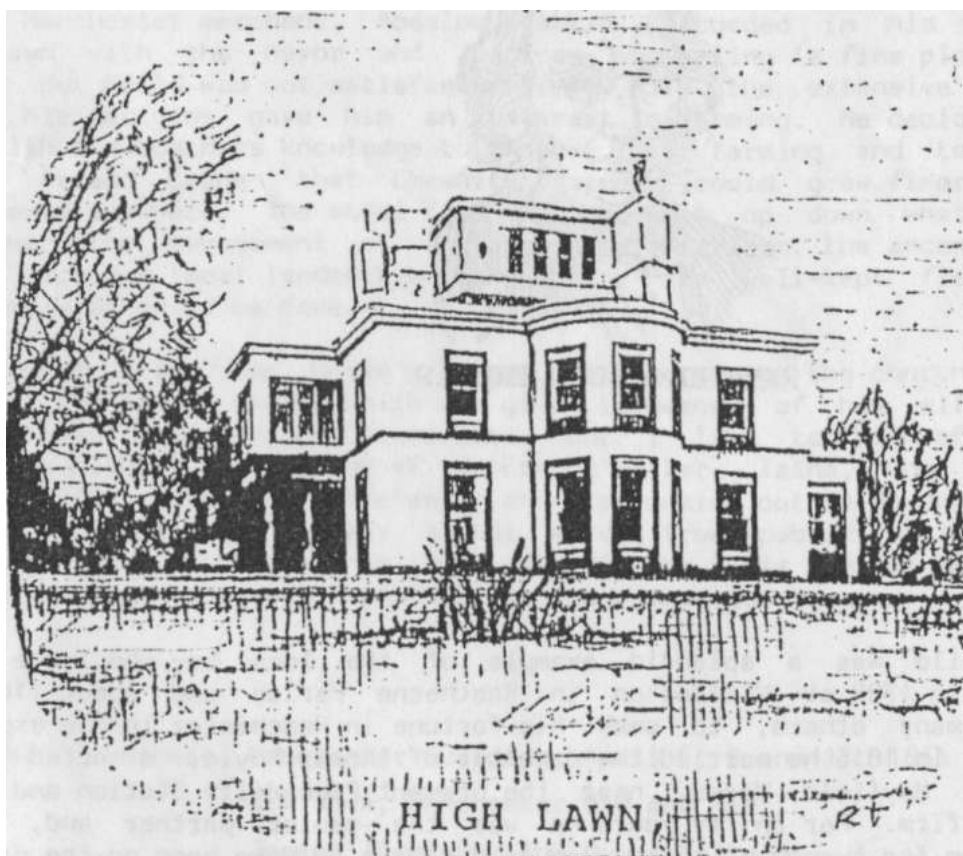
I wonder if many of the old fruit trees still bear, or indeed remain? In my time, the trees were pretty old, but we had something of all sorts; pears, cherries, damsons, plums and nice varieties of apples - George the Thirds, George the fourths, Hawthorndales and Pippins, and just one tree of Russets and another of "San-jams". Sanjams ripened for Sanjam Fair time, St. James's Day in early August, and I hope that the tree survives for your friends' benefit and also the Russets were extra good. George the Thirds look, taste and smell lovely, and there were more of those trees than can possibly be alive now. The Manx apple trees must be gone, as they looked their age in my day. Even I have seen the gypsies encamped by the Bank-wood leading to Motley Bank, on the top of the rise - Sowler's Wood or Samuel's Wood, some people called the rough, tree-covered Bank with the brook at the bottom of it, but we didn't. Thomas Sowler of the Manchester Courier, lived at Motley Bank at the time of the Irish potato famine. In thinking of this year's potato trouble I recall hearing how one of his maids said at the Moss "Mr Sowler won't let us have more than one potato apiece, but many a pound of bread". Which year was that? It is a long while ago. And which was the cattle-plague year? The Moss cattle were almost, if not all, swept away, and the big mound under which they were buried was to be seen in my time, in the Black Field hollow at the dry end where primroses grew, while the marshy end would be golden with kingcups. In my father's youth, your great-aunts and grandfather, and cousins Betsey and Sarah, could pop through the wicker at the orchard foot near the Big Pit and wander across the Black Field and down the Bollin Meadows to Ashley Mill, as freely as could be, and how charming it was to them all, as to the Gaskells! The weir and the swirling river were beautiful, and the busy mill-wheel very fascinating to watch, and the winding Bollin banks a delight for wandering. Oh dear, what charm old Bowdon had, and has lost even in my eighty years. And I suppose new England, full of pre-fabricated huts with bathrooms and electric lights, will seem a desirable land to coming generations, but the idea of it annoys me, in spite of the hope that many coils and miseries are really being swept out of the world along with most of the beauty of this "blessed isle", which the "younger end" have never seen as it is. Of course, there were sink-ditches, etc. in the good old days!!!"

The White Rabbit, mentioned in this letter, may refer to a wide-spread belief in Cheshire that white rabbits appear on properties prior to deaths, It also features in local legends and was introduced into Alice in Wonderland by that famous son of Cheshire, Lewis Carroll.

It is also interesting to note the provision of a loft at Moss Farm for the encouragement of owls in order to control the rats and mice. Alice Walker referred to the pond as a pit, which is not unusual in many parts of the country originating, no doubt, from the fact that marl pits and similar excavations were often left to fill with water, usually to relieve surface water drainage, as what are technically called balancing ponds.

**BOWDON'S EMINENT VICTORIANS: 1. WILLIAM NEILD**  
by Marjorie Cox

On the morning of Saturday, April 9th, 1864, there took place at Bowdon Church what must surely be one of, if not the, largest funerals ever held there. According to the Manchester Guardian, thousands of people, rich and poor, were there to show their respect, crowding the churchyard and lining the roads along which the funeral procession passed - Langham Road and Stamford Road. The procession included a company of the 12th Cheshire (Bowdon) Volunteers, 30 boys and 30 girls of the Lancasterian School, 'for the most part neatly dressed in black', about 100 gentlemen on foot-citizens of St. Clement's Ward, Manchester, 300 workpeople from the Mayfield Print Works, over 100 Manchester city Police officers, representatives of the Manchester Corporation, including the Mayor, of the Owens College and of the Royal Infirmary. Over 40 carriages carried the mourners, among them Mr Tatton of Wythenshawe, Mr J Allen of Oldfield Hall and Manchester and Bowdon notables such as Sir Elkanah Armitage, W R Callender, E Joynson and Spencer Bickham. Directions to the carriages had been given in the Manchester Guardian of April 8th: they were to drive along The Firs and down what is now Church Brow and turn into Langham Road, where policemen would position them - the carriages of the Corporation were to be west of the private road to High Lawn, 'with the horses' heads to the east'.



The man to whom all this honour was paid was one of the most outstanding of Bowdon's Eminent Victorians' - William Neild of High Lawn, the imposing stuccoed house standing prominently on Bowdon Downs. (The name is sometimes spelt 'Nield', but the correct form appears to be 'Neild'.) Alderman William Neild had died suddenly in a committee room of Manchester Town Hall at a meeting of the City Council to pay tribute to him, it was said that it was impossible to speak of the history of Manchester during the last 40 years without referring to him'.

William Neild, with his friend, Richard Cobden, was in the forefront of the struggle to secure for Manchester a royal charter of incorporation as a municipal borough. It was he who, in October 1837, initiated the struggle by refusing to serve as borough reeve in the antiquated manorial government (under the lord of the manor, Sir Oswald Mosley) which then ran the great town of Manchester, an offence for which he was fined the considerable sum of £200. It was he who first suggested that it was not fitting that Manchester should continue to be so governed, and it was he who, in October 1838, as chairman of the committee which had organised the petition to the Queen, received the charter of incorporation. Only chance prevented him from being elected the new borough's first mayor, but from 1840 to 1842 he served as its second mayor and for the rest of his life his ability, energy and strong sense of duty were at the service of the city. He was especially noted for his work for the good policing of the town (created out of a number of separate townships, each with its own constabulary) during a period of unprecedented increase of population, economic ups and downs and consequent acute social problems.



William Neild was a splendid example of the local boy who 'made good'. He had been born in 1789 at Millington in Rostherne Parish and about 1809 he went, like so many others, to seek his fortune in Manchester in the expanding cotton industry. In 1816 he married the daughter of Thomas Hoyle, a noted calico printer, of the Mayfield Works, near the present Piccadilly Station and became a partner in the firm. For thirty years he was the senior partner and, though he lived in Bowdon for twenty of those, was said always to have been on the premises by 6 a.m. Hoyle's prints became world-famous, thanks to the triumph of Free Trade, a cause which Manchester businessmen like Neild championed. He was on the committee of the Anti-Corn Law League, formed in 1838, and in this, as in the charter campaign, he worked with Richard Cobden.

Neild's interests extended beyond business and civic duties. From 1822 he was a member of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. Like many leading Manchester businessmen he was concerned over the social problems caused by industrialisation. He played a large part in the Royal Lancasterian School founded about 1810 by Non-conformist efforts to provide the first organised elementary education in Manchester, for Neild, though he ended as an Anglican was earlier a Quaker. He was a leading member, and President in 1850-1, of the Manchester Statistical Society, founded in 1833 to collect accurate information about social problems as a necessary preliminary to solving them. Neild even found time for statistical studies of his own: a paper read by him at a British Association Meeting on comparative income and expenditure of families in Manchester and Dukinfield was published in the Royal Statistical Society's Journal of 1841-2. On the practical welfare side he was, from its foundation in 1833 to 1850, on the committee of the District Provident Society, designed to alleviate the evils affecting the working classes of Manchester. Neild's friendship with another great Manchester entrepreneur, John Owens, linked him with the foundation of Owens College, later to become the University of Manchester. He was among the trustees appointed in Owens' will to carry out his plans for a college giving non-sectarian university education and became the second chairman, his son, Alfred Neild, succeeding him.

Perhaps Neild's local origins led him to choose Bowdon to live in. In 1841 he bought from the Assheton Smith family a four-acre field on the south-facing slope of Bowdon Downs, hitherto farm-land. There, by 1843, he had built High Lawn with its coachman's and gardener's cottages. A leading Manchester merchant, Absalom Watkin, recorded in his diary dining at High Lawn with the Mayor and Justices, commenting 'a fine place with extensive views'. But Neild was not satisfied merely with the extensive views: perhaps, again, his origins gave him an interest in farming. He decided to use some of his wealth and business knowledge to improve local farming and to refute a jibe of his friend Cobden that Cheshire farmers could grow finer rushes than were to be found anywhere. The model farm which he set up down what is now Grange Road under the management of a Scot, Peter Morrison, the ancestor of the estate agents, became a local landmark and showed by its well-kept fields, good crops and stock what could be done.

Bowdon still has Neild's house, his grave in the churchyard and the east window of the parish church which was given in memory of his wife, who died in 1859. These are tangible reminders, but I like to think of William Neild in connection with an observation of the French writer, Taine, who came to England in the 1860s, visiting Manchester and also coming out to Bowdon and Dunham Park. He wrote 'An Englishman rarely stands aside from public business. He does not live withdrawn; on the contrary he feels himself under an obligation to contribute, in one way or another, to the common good'.

MARJORIE COX

**Chief sources**

*Manchester Guardian* April 5, 8 and 11, 1864

W A Shaw, *Manchester Old and New*

Joseph Thompson, *The Owens College*

H Taine, *Notes on England* (translated by E Hyams)

THE  
CERTAINTY  
OF  
SALVATION  
To Them who Dye in the LORD.  
A  
SERMON,  
PREACHED

At the FUNERAL of the Right Honourable,

GEORGE Lord DELAMER ;

A T

BODEN,

In the County-Palatine of CHESTER :

*September the 9th. 1684.*

---

By *ZACHARY CAWDRET*;  
Rector of *BARTHOMLY*, in the said County-Palatine of *CHESTER*.

---

*LONDON*, Printed for *Peter Gillworth*, Book-seller  
in *New-Castle*, in *Staffordshire* ; and *James Thurston*,  
Book-seller in *Nantwich*. 1684.

Title page of an old sermon.