

The Bowdon Sheaf

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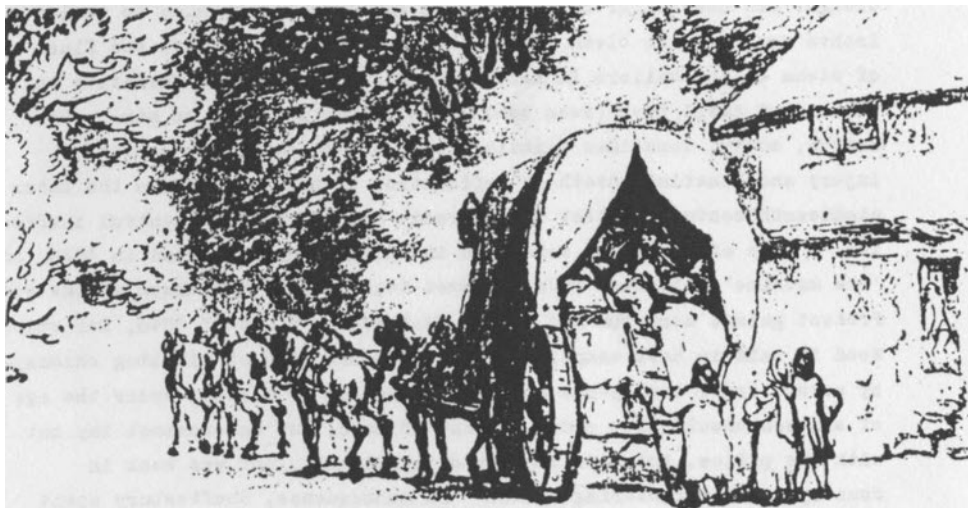
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18th Century Carrier

The Preston Carrier which plied between the Swan with Two Nicks in London and the North West of Great Britain in the 1770s, travelling through Bowdon, would be very similar to the one depicted in this drawing by Thomas Rowlandson.

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William Wood of Bowdon: 'the chimney boys' friend'

William Wood of Bowdon: champion of 'climbing boys'(or boy chimney sweeps) was the subject of a short talk I gave many years ago to the Bowdon History Society. Recently, after further research, especially on his life in Manchester, I have published an article on him under that title in the Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society. Vol. 91, a volume celebrating the ninetieth birthday of the distinguished local historian, the late Mr Norman Dore. My purpose here is not to repeat the contents of that detailed article (off-prints of which are available), but to concentrate on Wood in Bowdon, where he spent his lengthy retirement, the period of his most active campaigning on behalf of the climbing boys and of his association with Lord Shaftesbury.

You will, doubtless, know that as a result of the increasing replacement of wood by coal from the late seventeenth century, more draught was needed for burning and so narrower flues, nine to twelve inches square. To clean these domestic chimneys and also the flues of steam engine boilers in factories, there seemed no alternative to the use of small boys (even some girls), some as young as six. The narrow, sooty, sometimes twisting flues caused cancerous growths, injury and sometimes death by suffocation or burning. From the later eighteenth century protest was sporadic and legislative control ineffective. Hope of abolition came with the invention, perfected in 1828, of 'the machine' - jointed rods, screwed together, with a brush at the end. Protest gained momentum and led to Shaftesbury's Act of 1840, for which Wood is said to have campaigned. Its prohibition of climbing chimneys by anyone under twenty-one and apprenticeship to a sweep under the age of sixteen should have ended the use of boys, but enforcement lay not with the police, but with concerned individuals, and was weak in country and manufacturing areas. In consequence, Shaftesbury spent the next thirty-five years trying, vainly, to get Parliament to improve the working of its own law. Not until 1875 was this achieved by licensing sweeps and making the police responsible for prosecutions. Wood was active in this cause from the 1830s to his death in 1868, but did not live to see the end of the cruel practice.

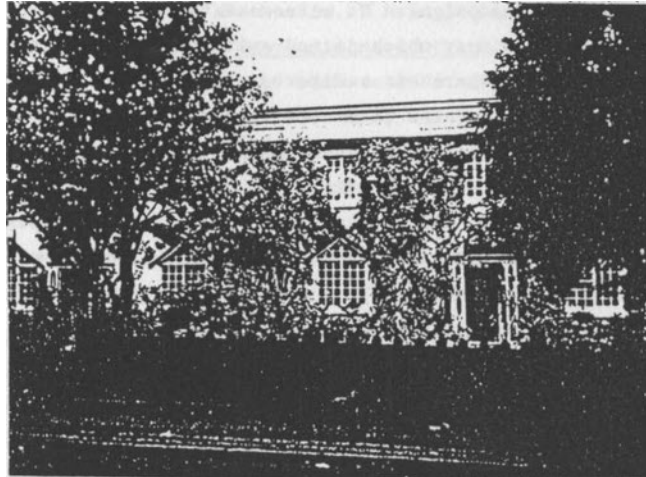
Wood was born in Bolton in 1782. His father, a Methodist, was on the lay, anti-establishment wing in the 1790s and he himself inclined to that side. He played prominent role in the Association movement of the 1830s, which bitterly split the Methodists and brought him close to the Manchester Dissenters. From early in the century until 1843, he was a woollen merchant in Manchester, and, like many merchants, still lived in the centre of the increasingly industrialised town, in Newton Street, off Piccadilly.

A horrific personal experience about 1826 began Wood's involvement in the campaign. He witnessed the death of a boy who was climbing a chimney which joined another at the top and fell down the latter, where there was a fire burning. From then he worked to introduce 'the machine' to Manchester. Many of the sweeps were hostile to him and about 1834 played a malicious trick on him, covering his chimney with a slate to make it smoke and so discredit the machine'.

About 1843, Wood retired from business and by 1847 had come to Bowdon. Two of his daughters joined the Bowdon Downs Congregational Church in September, 1847, and he himself joined a year later. In the earliest edition of Balshaw's Local Directory, probably of 1847, he appears at Willow Cottage (a detached house, still to be seen) on the south side of Sandy Lane, later Stamford Road, where his daughter ran a seminary. Sales of land by the Assheton Smiths (of Ashley Hall) in 1840-41 in what is now the area of Stamford, East Downs and Richmond roads had led to rapid mid varied building development, and Willow Cottage was only a few years old. Wood's household in Newton Street in 1841 had consisted (in the absence of the parents) of five daughters and a son, plus one servant. In 1851, at Willow Cottage, there were himself, his wife, two unmarried daughters (both schoolmistresses), a warehouseman son, another daughter and her Canadian-born husband and the same servant. By the later 1850s Wood had moved across the road to another rented house, then called Oakfield Cottage, which also still stands, seeming externally little altered. There in the 1861 census he was, curiously, entered as 'informer against chimney sweepers', but this was replaced by 'gentleman'. Living there, too, were his wife, his two daughters, a fourteen-year old Frank Redpath, born in Montreal, (presumably a grandson) and the same servant.

Tracing the history of Oakfield Cottage is a complex business and I am indebted to Mr J.J. Rowe, Q.C. and Judge Hart for help. The building, originally one house, later two, is quite different in material and style from its first new neighbours, Oak Terrace and Sunny Bank. It is of rendered brick, small-windowed and 'Gothick' and is pretty certainly the house shown as No. 27 on the Tithe Map of 1838 and so pre-dates its neighbours, probably by a good deal.

Until the late 1850s it had only one occupant, Mrs Elizabeth Holland, but by 1858/9 she and Wood were in what Balshaw called Oak Cottages, but later directories correctly called Oakfield Cottages. Wood lived in the lower of the two houses until 1868, his daughter, Martha, until 1900 and her niece until 1912. From then the lower house was called The Cottage and the upper one Oakfield Cottage.



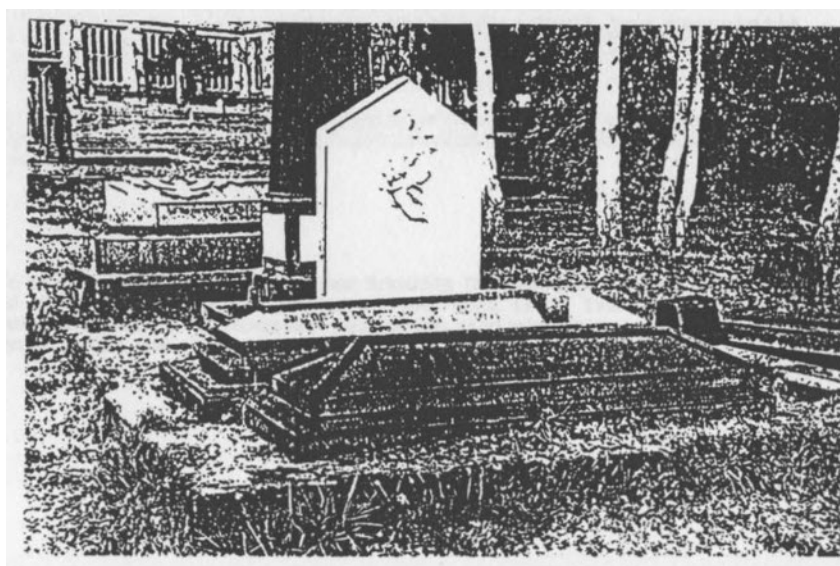
It is from these two houses in Bowdon, Willow Cottage and Oakfield Cottage, now The Cottage, that William Wood carried on his indefatigable campaign against the use of climbing boys, which earned him, the title of 'the principal promoter in Manchester' of the cause. To the author of *Chimney Sweepers and their Friends*, a pamphlet published in 1869, the year after Wood's death, and adorned with an engraving of him with a small sweep (from a photograph taken in Manchester) he seemed irreplaceable.

Wood's activities, even at an advanced age, were not confined to the Manchester area. He had large placards stating the law put up at main railway stations all over the country; he bearded individuals, including magistrates, who allowed the use of climbing boys in their own homes; he visited sweeps' houses on Sundays to check if the boys had been washed; he brought prosecutions, at his own expense, in Staffordshire and he even wrote to Queen Victoria about a chimney at Windsor Castle swept by a boy. In 1853, as one of fifteen witnesses called by Shaftesbury, he gave evidence before a Select Committee of the House of Lords about the iniquities of the practice and the merits of 'the machine', and was cross-questioned hostilely of Lord Stanley of Alderley. Later, in the House of Lords in 1864, Shaftesbury supported his case by quoting resolutions to renounce the use of boys, passed at a meeting of Manchester and Salford sweeps, chaired by Wood.

Even semi-rural Bowdon was no refuge. In 1853 Wood gave a vivid account of the local sweep, an ignorant, drunken man, who employed a lad and two boys of ten to twelve to do all the work. In vain he had tried to get a local man to use 'the machine'. He himself, and others in Altrincham and Bowdon used a 'mechanical' sweep from Manchester, but as he came by train, concerted arrangements were needed, not always easy. Some awkward social situations seem to lie behind his account of asking friends how they had their chimneys swept and being told that they yielded to the sweeps' persuasion that boys were more efficient: even Wood's own wife had wavered in 1834. More painful was his lament that it was unpleasant to inform against neighbours.

Wood's last appearance in the public arena was in 1862. Shaftesbury had secured the inclusion of boy sweeps in the large-scale Royal Commission on Child Labour of 1861, the occasion for Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. In his evidence, taken locally, Wood confessed to being an old man, his memory at times confused, and never having kept a diary, but he gave chapter and verse for cruel treatment in the Manchester area and deplored the behaviour of magistrates who failed to convict sweeps.

By now age was telling on Wood. In 1862, after twelve years he ceased to be a deacon of the Bowdon Downs Church. His wife died in 1862 and a daughter, Mary Hannah Brailsford, wife of a Methodist minister, in 1864, aged 51. He himself died on March 5th, 1868 at his home in Bowdon, in his 86th year. Movingly, his coffin was carried to the grave in Bowdon churchyard by six master sweeps from five different towns, their tears a tribute to his work to raise them from their degraded status.



The Wood family grave plot has two tombstones and a later headstone, one covers the graves of Wood, his wife, Grace, and his daughters, Mary Hannah and Martha, and, touchingly, of Sarah Midgley, '48 years faithful friend and servant in the family', who died in 1877. The other similar tombstone is that of his son, William, of Oakleigh, Dunham Massey, who died in April, 1891, and of his wife. The younger William Wood, also of Bowdon Downs Church, was active in the Provident Society and in Newtown Night School: he has as an epitaph one appropriate to his father, too 'Their works do follow them'.

The last burial in the family plot was of Wood's daughter, Miss Martha Wood, who died on March 5th, 1900, in her 89th year, according to *The Altrincham and Bowdon Guardian* of 10th March 'one of the oldest ladies in Bowdon'. Owing to the destruction by enemy action in the war of the first seven years' issues of this paper in the British Library, we do not know if there was a tribute to Wood at the time of his death, but the account of Martha's funeral shows that her father was still remembered and valued locally. Her funeral account ran: 'She was the daughter of the late Mr William Wood, a Manchester merchant, who was known throughout the country from the fact that he was instrumental in getting an Act passed prohibiting boys from climbing chimneys. Mr Wood was familiarly known as "the chimney boys' friend".' What better epitaph could he have?

Sources are given in my article in the *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, with the addition of information from Mr Rowe and Judge Hart and extracts from *The Altrincham and Bowdon Guardian*, on microfilm at Trafford Local Studies Unit.

Flight Lieutenant John Andrew Edward DFC 1914 - 1944

John Andrew Edward's family came to Bowdon during the 1920s and until about 1949, when his father, Harold Edward, retired from managership of Manchester Liners, lived at Newlands, Portland Road.

On 19 July 1914, barely a month before the outbreak of the first world war, John was born in Antwerp where his grandfather had a business. When, in August, the German army invaded Belgium, the family fled with the loss of all their possessions. After a period spent mainly in France, they settled in England, eventually arriving in Bowdon during the 1920s. This was John's home background for the rest of his life, although he was often away, first at Radley School and then in Henley-on-Thames, where he studied accountancy.

When the second world war began, John was in his mid-twenties. He joined R.A.F. Bomber Command and became a member of Squadron 617 which, under Squadron Leader Guy Gibson, became famous for its successful raid on the strategic Mohne Dam in the Ruhr, using Barnes Wallis's invention, the 'bouncing bomb'. John, as Flight Lieutenant piloting a Lancaster bomber, took part in this raid and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his share in it. He received his award from King George VI, on 22 June 1943.

By that time he had completed his statutory minimum number of flying hours and could have retired from active service. He chose, however, to continue and on 24 June 1944, shortly after D Day, was taking part under Group Captain Leonard Cheshire in a raid on a V2 rocket launching pad near Wizernes in the Pas de Calais. These were high level daylight raids, as the bombs, also designed by Barnes Wallis and known as "tall boys" because of their shape, had to be placed with extreme accuracy. They were designed to pierce through the hillside to the V2 storage areas below.

On approaching the target John's Lancaster was hit by flak in the port wing and both port engines caught fire. The "tall boy" bomb did not explode as the plane crashed but penetrated two metres into the ground, John among other members of the crew parachuted out, but he and most of his crew were killed. There were three survivors.

John's body was found near St. Omer in a field owned by a local farmer, who negotiated with German authorities in the area for his burial, with two of his crew, in nearby Leulinghem village churchyard. There, in time, a memorial to the three British airmen was raised. The Edward family used to tell how once, when John was flying his Lancaster back to base from Manchester, he dipped over Bowdon and saluted his parents by "buzzing" their house in Portland Road.

MK May 1997

The writer acknowledges a debt to Paul Brickhill's *The Dam Busters*, first published in 1951, and Alan W. Cooper's *Beyond the Dams to the Tirpitz*, 1983.

Two members of the Edward family have checked the details and valuable first-hand information has been supplied by Mr. Gerrard Hobbs, one of the surviving members of John's crew.

The Bowdon Literary and Scientific Club

The Club was formed some short while after 1870. and was composed of a few acquaintances of similar tastes and sympathies who met at each others houses for discussions about literature and science. The first such meeting was held at the home of Alfred Simpson. The general format later adopted was for a short paper to be read, such as a review of a book, or the description of some new scientific discovery, followed by a five minute question time. Afterwards, the main topic of the evening consisted of a longer paper in which some original results of a study, enquiry or experiment would be presented. A table was also provided on which/members could display items of general interest. Later, the content of the evening's programme would be just one paper.

As time passed, the existence of the society became well known, so that others desired to join the club. As membership increased, it became impractical to meet in member's homes and the Bowdon Parish Room came into use. The society did not keep formal records before 1887, but after that time it is known that Dr Ransome, FRS, was president during 1887/8 and that for the sessions 1888-1890 and 1898-1901, Canon Wainwright held that position, and Mr W Noel Johnson in 1907. Other presidents included Dr P H Mules, Prof T D Hall, Messrs E J Sidebotham, W M Smith, F Smith and Dr Percy Withers. During the winter seasons, the club arranged a series of lectures in the Literary Institute in Altrincham, where the speakers included Richard Procter Whympers, Dr Mules, Dr Bridge, Dr Dallinger, and Sir Oliver Lodge.

To begin with, ladies only attended certain ordinary meetings by invitation, as certain subjects discussed at the meetings were not considered suitable for them, but gradually this feeling changed until they were admitted as members on an equal standing with the men.

The Club supported the beneficial nature of the local library and on the initiative of Prof Hall, a collection of reference books, covering subjects such as science and history, were bought and presented to the Free Library. The Club did not initiate the first library in the Altrincham area; this came about by the efforts of a different organisation; the Altrincham and Bowdon Literary Society in 1847. This society acquired premises in Well Lane (now Victoria Street), and used the rooms as a library and reading room. That same year the library was affiliated with the Lancashire and Cheshire Union of Mechanics and Literary Institutes. Such was the enthusiasm with which the library was received that two years later it became necessary to move to larger accommodation. By public subscription, new premises were built in George Street, costing some £800, designed by Mr Bailey and built on land donated by George Harry, 7th Earl of Stamford. The building provided a library, reading room, lecture room and three classrooms, and was opened on March 11th, 1853. Further enlargement was required in 1865, again paid for by public donations, the necessary amount this time being £1,066. In 1877, fire destroyed the lecture room, but this was rebuilt at a cost of £1,200, In 1887, the Local Board was persuaded to adopt the Free Libraries Act and the Trustees of the Board of Directors of the Literary Institution transferred their building and property over to the Board to create a Free Library. The buildings were then further enlarged on adjoining land and at a cost of £5,100. It was this Free Library that the Bowdon Literary and Scientific Club encouraged and supported with the collection of books. The total library stock amounted to some 5,400 books, so the addition of the Bowdon collection was a significant and important addition.