

The Bowdon Sheaf

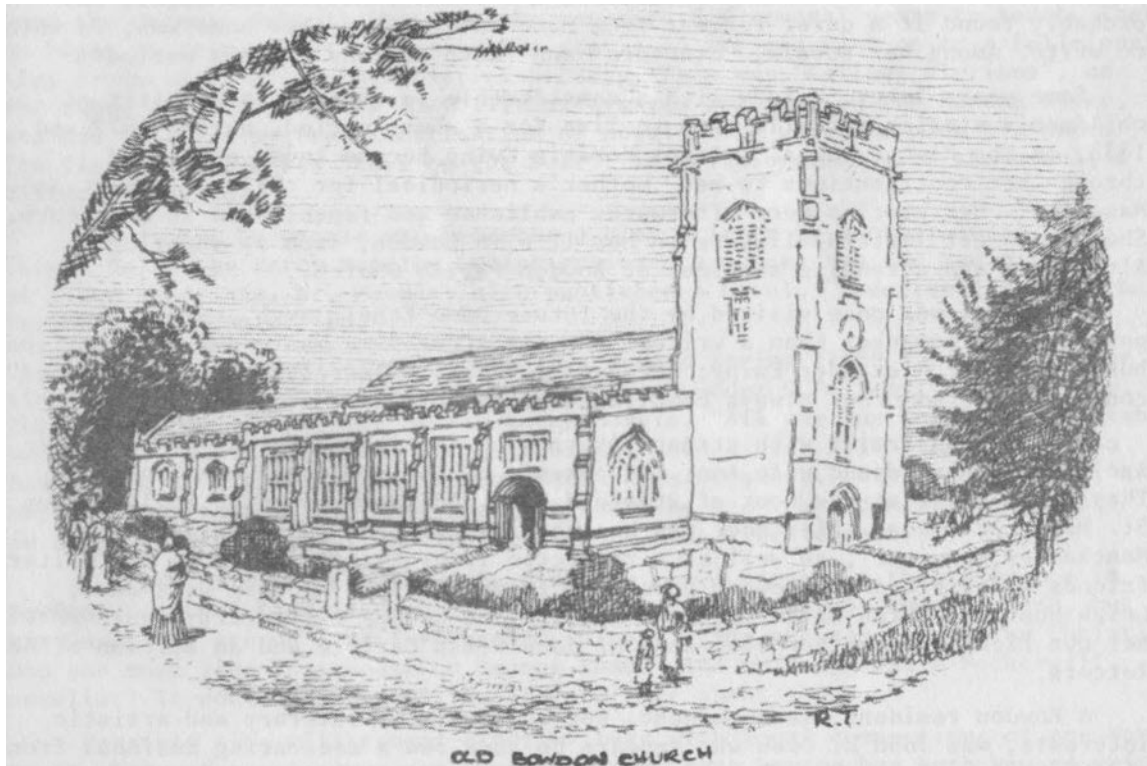
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A sketch of Bowdon Church from the north based upon a survey drawing undertaken in 1858 showing the Romanesque (Norman) doorway.

BOWDON AND THE LITERARY WORLD

by Myra Kendrick

Bowdon has had its links with literary stars of varying degrees of brightness for at least one hundred and fifty years.

The earliest known such writer is William Harrison Ainsworth, a once popular Manchester historical novelist, best known for such romances as "Windsor Castle" and "Old St. Paul's". Ainsworth had family connections with Rostherne which he obviously visited often, and two of his novels, "Rookwood" (1834) and "Mervyn Clitheroe" (1858), show how well acquainted he was with nearby Bowdon and Dunham Massey. "Rookwood" introduces an episode in the career of the highwayman Dick Turpin, set in a shady spot near the river Bollin, and several events in "Mervyn Clitheroe" are clearly linked with Bowdon under a feigned name.

In the 1850s a woman novelist whose work is weathering better than Ainsworth's had close connections with Bowdon, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell had been visiting here before her marriage, but evidence of frequent visits during the fifties, after the birth of her four daughters, is to be found in her letters. In these she writes graphically of the children's staying at Moss Farm, the home of the Walker family. Sometimes she herself stayed the night, and probably found it a quiet retreat from Manchester, where her home was, in which to write. Among her novels, "Cranford" and "Ruth" belong to this period. Some years later, a lady with a considerable reputation as a writer of children's stories actually came to live for a short period, during 1877 and 1878, on the Higher Downs. Juliana Horatia Ewing became known and loved through her contributions to her mother's periodical for children, "Aunt Judy's Magazine". Her stories were afterwards published and republished in book form. She, too, left letters alluding to her life in Bowdon, such as shopping in Altrincham and attending services at Bowdon Parish Church.

Her house was once visited by the future Dame Ethel Smyth, better known perhaps as a composer than a writer. She was a one-time music pupil of Juliana's husband, Major Alexander Ewing; her autobiography, "Impressions that Remained" contains references not always complimentary to Juliana. A Victorian family with strong literary connections was that of Alexander Ireland and his second wife Ann, the parents of the composer John Ireland. They lived first at the foot of Stamford Road and later moved to Inglewood on St. Margaret's Road. Alexander was business manager and publisher of "The Manchester Examiner", as well as a respected literary critic. Among the writer friends who visited his Bowdon home were Thomas Carlyle and his wife Jane, Leigh Hunt and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ann Ireland became a literary figure in her own right through her biography of Jane Welsh Carlyle and an edition of her Letters.

A Bowdon resident, less eminent, but obviously of literary and artistic interests, was John L. Owen who appears to have run a decorating business from the White Cottage on Church Brow. In 1873 he had a book of verse published by the Manchester firm John Heywood's. This volume was dedicated to the Cheshire (not Bowdon) poet Lord de Tabley, contains memorial verses to Archdeacon Pollock, late Vicar of Bowdon, and refers to a book of poems recently published by Dr. Pollock himself.

The twentieth century has had its resident writers too. It is remarkable that a second woman writer for children, Alison Uttley, also lived for some years 1924 to 1938, on the Higher Downs, actually writing her first Little Grey Rabbit books there. Mrs Uttley is said to have believed that she lived in the house previously rented by the Ewings, but modern research places the two writers next door to each other.

A contemporary of hers was John F. Leeming, whose book "The Garden Grows", an account of the creation of his own garden at the house he called "Owlpen", off South Downs Road, was published in 1935 and made great local impact. This many-sided Bowdonian, business man, aviator, novelist and gardener, won praise from P.G. Wodehouse for his comic novel "It Always Rains in Rome" (1960). He wrote books about delphinium-growing and flying and a story intended for the young, "Claudius the Bee", (1936). The naturalist T.A. Coward was born in Bowdon, and for over thirty years lived in Grange Road. He belonged to the tradition of naturalists whose works in their chosen field are so well written that they can be read with sheer pleasure. Such are his "Birds of the British Isles and their Eggs", published by Warne in 1920, the popular "Picturesque Cheshire" (1903) and his nature notes appearing in "The Manchester Guardian" for thirty-odd years.

A living dramatist, Ronald Gow, although not born in Bowdon, in childhood and youth lived successively at Bank House, Goose Green, Altrincham, Stamford Road and Portland Road. His schooling was wholly local: at Culcheth Hall kindergarten, Miss Wallace's and finally at Altrincham High School for Boys (now the Grammar School), to which he returned for several years to teach. There he began to write short plays for his pupils to act and went on to a full-length play produced by Altrincham Garrick Society. This was "Gallows Glorious", on the theme of "John Brown's Body". It afterwards appeared on the London stage, and was followed by the dramatisation of novels with which he made his name. The first of these was "Love on the Dole", in collaboration with the novelist Walter Greenwood.

There will be people who remember a play written by another local man, "Eight Bells" by Percy Mandley, which achieved a success on the radio forty or fifty years ago. Mr. Mandley also published a novel, "Madeline", set in the French Revolution period.

The popular novelist and journalist Howard Spring (1889 to 1965), at one time on the staff of the "Manchester Guardian" under C.P. Scott's editorship, introduced Bowdon into one of his later novels, "All the Day Long!". The Cornish heroine of this story comes with her brother and sister Bella to stay with a Bowdon family in a large family house he names Grosmont. Both topographical and architectural features suggest that the house he had in mind might be Denzell in Green Walk. Bella marries the son of the fictitious owner.

A slighter connection with the literary world occurs in the residence in Bowdon of Arthur Ransome, M.D.; not the author of "Swallows and Amazons", but his uncle. We are on less firm ground in mentioning the name of Agatha Christie. Did she once live in a house on Grange Road? And who was Jessie Fothergill, novelist? It would be interesting to know more about these.

Possibly time will reveal other writers with local connections of one sort or another yet these names are enough to show that Bowdon has both housed writers of some reputation and attracted others to write about it even if under a disguised name.

EDMUNDS FIELD: THE ORIGIN OF A BOWDON FIELD-NAME?
by Marjorie Cox

Edmunds Field, of about four acres, is No. 113 on the Bowdon Tithe Map of 1838 and lies east of Street Head farm and cottages and on the north side of Bow Green Road as it runs westward to the Chester Road. Its owner was the Earl of Stamford and at that date the arable field was leased to William Warburton, Senior. The origins of many Bowdon field names have been traced by J. McN. Dodgson *The Place Names of Cheshire* in but not that of Edmunds Field. What follows is a suggested origin of the name, which may not be capable of proof, only of probability, but at least brings to light a gentleman farmer of Bowdon under the later Stuarts whose agricultural improvements became known throughout England.

Among the wills of inhabitants of Bowdon from the sixteenth century onwards which are kept at the Cheshire Record Office is that of John Edmunds, gentleman, of Bowdon, made on 2nd March 1713 and proved at Chester on 23rd October 1714. One of the executors of the will was John Edmunds' 'loveing brother' (often used for brother-in-law), Nathaniel Banne, Rector of the very newly opened St. Ann's Church in Manchester, whose sister, Elizabeth Edmunds had married in 1692. John Edmunds left most of his lands to his son, George, but he left three fields in Bowdon to provide £20 a year for his 'dear wife', who also received his silver tankard and watch. These were 'the fields called Bowdon Eye, Green Eye and Bank Meadow', eye meaning island. The Tithe Map shows the first two down near the Bollin; 'Bank Meadow' does not exist, but there is a Bank Field near the Ashley township boundary on the east; all, like Edmunds Field, then belonged to the Earl of Stamford.

Though these facts about John Edmunds may be of interest, why might he have given his name to a field? I think the answer may lie in a book by John Mortimer F.R.S., *The Whole Art of Husbandry* published first in 1707 and into its fifth edition in 1721. Chapter VIII of the fifth edition is entitled 'Of Sand' and contains 'An Account from Mr John Edmonds of Bowden in Cheshire, of his improving of Land by Sand', an improvement made in the late seventeenth Century.

His Land, he says, was Marsh-land, very flat and full of Rushes, of a black deep Mould, such as they dig Turf in; upon which Land he laid six hundred Cart-load of Sand upon a Cheshire Acre, which is near double the Statute Acre. This Sand is digged on Bowdon Downs, which is a red hot Sand of a small Grain, lying under a sandy Soil of about a spit deep, that bears nothing but Fern and a short Grass which burns away in Summer, being good Busk-wheat Land; and laying of the Sand so thick, without plowing of the Land up, he sowed it with Oats and Fitches, which yielded an extraordinary Crop. The next Winter he dunged it well with Dung, and had the Summer after fourteen loads of Hay upon an Acre. 'Tis now, he says, twenty-four Years since he sanded it first, and he has not dunged it since; and the Lard that before was not worth ten Shillings an Acre, he can now let for six Pounds, and could have two Crops of Grass upon it every Year, if he could be sure of fair Weather to make it in.

He says likewise, that he improved some of the same sort of Land by plowing of it up with a Breast-plough, and burning of it, and spreading of the Ashes while hot, and plowing of them up, and sowing of them as soon as possibly, he could. This Land he sowed twice with

Barley, and the third Year with Oats, and then it was so soft that he could not plow it any more, which obliged him to lay it down; and he had extraordinary Grass on it for three or four Years, and then it began to run over with Rushes again, which occasion'd him to repeat burning of it again, and it had the same effect as before.

He says also, that in their Country (County) many make very great Improvement of their Lands, by laying on them the Crumbs which are scattered in digging of the Turf that they burn, which is very good for all sorts of binding Clay Lands, especially such as are overtadned (fattened) with Marie; and the Land which, he says, they dig for Turf, is extraordinary Land for Potatoes.

Mortimer's book is described in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as 'a landmark in English agricultural literature' and as having 'largely influenced husbandry in the nineteenth century'. Given this, it seems to me quite likely that John Edmunds' fame as an improving gentleman farmer might well have been perpetuated in the name of a field in Bowdon. It remains to be discovered if this field was one he himself had on lease from the Earl of Stamford and possibly, even, the subject of his experiment.

RURAL BOWDON: 4 **by Ronald Trenbath**

From earliest times Field Sports have been the main pastime of the gentry, with the peasantry participating in a different capacity, but most of these sports are now socially unacceptable and in many cases illegal. In the first instance these activities developed out of the primitive necessity of obtaining food, and the skills required became the subject of competition, so that one partook of activities such as hunting and shooting to test one's prowess rather than to acquire replenishment for the larder. The hunting of deer and boar were the earliest sports, and laws were enacted to make the hunting of deer the exclusive right of the king and his court, and the contravening of these regulations provided for the death penalty in the case of anyone killing deer, and maiming for anyone attempting to do so. The wealth of a baron could be calculated by the number of parks licensed to him.

The original definition of a park was an enclosed area of land used for hunting by kings and nobles, and at Dunham Massey Hall one of the oldest deer parks exists, which originally provided entertainment for royalty and nobility. Stags were chased by hounds followed by horsemen, but in the Victorian era it became fashionable in many parks to rear hound puppies and deer calves together, and when mature the stags would be chased by hounds in a form of play, in which they were not hurt, to provide a romp enjoyed by all parties.

Cock fighting was popular locally, and very well-preserved cages, of a sophisticated design, for housing and tending game cocks may be seen in a brick arcaded cloister at the Home Farm today. Hawking is also an ancient skill which is still practised in the area and demonstrations are often given, particularly at events such as the Game Fairs held at Tatton Park.

Fishing and angling could be accommodated at the great fish pond adjacent to the Home Farm, and in the Bollin and Birkin rivers, although these temporarily ceased to function as fish reserves due to pollution.

Fox hunting, however, has remained as a controversial activity, with a great following in Cheshire, although it ceased to take place locally prior to living memory, which may account for the increase in the fox population north of the Bollin.

The seventh Earl, however, was a very keen huntsman and meets took place regularly at Dunham Massey Hall where magnificent stables of great architectural character provided for the well being and comfort of the hunters. Shooting was, and still is, a popular local sport, although the sophisticated facilities of game preservation of former times have declined and only rough shooting is practised today. Nevertheless, at the height of its popularity two shoots operated in the area, one at Dunham Massey for the Earls of Stamford, and the other at Bow Green for the Ecclesiastical authorities, which was leased to local sporting gentlemen.

Woodlands were planted such as Headman's Covert, Watch Hill Covert and Hanging Bank Covert to provide cover for partridge and pheasants while protected areas were reserved for rearing pens, and grouse was shot over the marches. Harry Johnson was the gamekeeper in Bow Green for many years and lived in the large brick house now known as West Bank Farm, and his grandson, after recuperating from wounds in the first World War, prospered and eventually became proprietor of the shoot. Shooting parties were organised and it was considered a very great honour when a young man was invited to take part. Lunch was an important feature of a shoot and competitions were organised by Shooting Times for wives who produced the best menus, but alcohol was very often prohibited at this stage.

Beaters were engaged from the local labour force who were well fed and recompensed for their labours, and an enjoyable time would be had by all, but on one occasion the local policeman was invited for a day's shooting with very serious consequences when he himself was accidentally shot! 'Siah (Josiah) Goodyear from Street Head Farm was a crack shot who would aim at a rabbit within two yards of a colleague and kill the animal without harming anyone else, but it was always a very nerve-wracking experience.

A pony and trap was sent to collect the game at the end of the day when tea was served, this time with a addition of alcohol, to be followed by the playing of cards into the early hours of the morning.

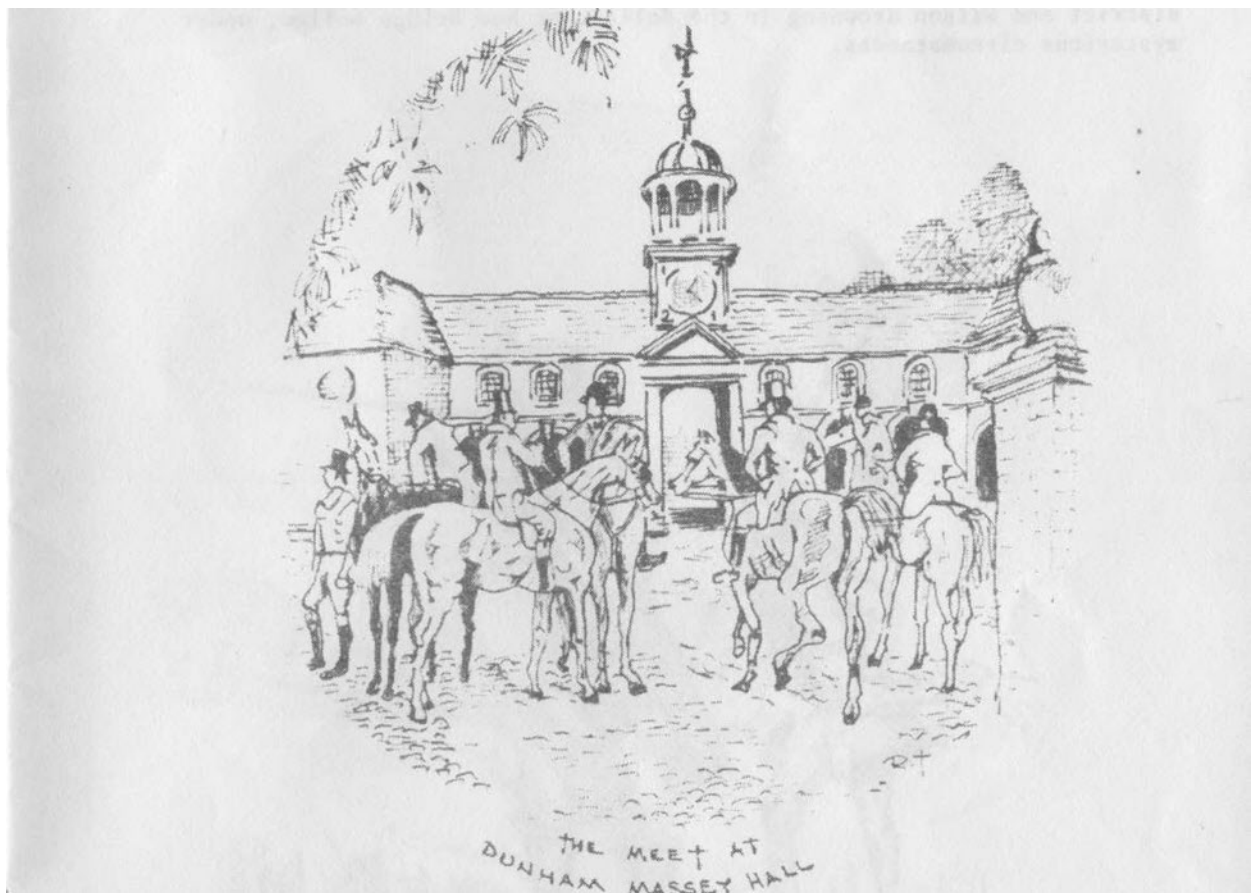
On New Year's Eve it was customary for local men to go ferreting in the woods adjacent to Castle Hill. This was a very skilled and exciting activity which is still practised, as the writer of this article found when a stray ferret took up residence in his kennels one night recently to the annoyance of his Labradors.

In the mid-nineteenth century books were written to instruct aspiring country gentlemen on the finer points of running a shoot, and great emphasis was placed on the discipline of the keepers and the need to regulate their remuneration in relation to their performance, and on the necessity of limiting the amount of poultry kept at their homes so that corn for game was not diverted to hens.

Long descriptions were given of poachers in order that they might be recognised and apprehended, and one learned that these characters were rough rascals readily noticeable by their uncouth appearance and behaviour. A copy of one such book was available for many years in Altrincham Library.

The poacher was, in fact, a menacing character, unlike the romantic notions so often held about him, and according to Richard Jefferies, writing in 1879, far from being "an idle, hang-dog ne'er-do-well" he was "to all appearances (an) industrious individual, working steadily during the day at some handicraft (being) a somewhat reserved, solitary workman of superior intelligence".

Local poachers tended to work in gangs and a poachers' depot was located, after Mr. Johnson's retirement, in an outbuilding adjacent to the stables at the back of West Bank Farm, which acted as a refuge, meeting place and a storage for equipment such as nets, pegs, traps and snares. The gin-traps, most commonly used, were very cruel and two maiden ladies, the Misses Chadwick, used to visit the coverts regularly to destroy the traps and leave notes to the effect that the owners of them should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves.



The poachers were adept at disappearing through fields and gardens at night no matter how closely they were followed by police or keepers, and from their depot they had a large area at their disposal in which to operate, including Tatton Park. Large nets were used for catching rabbit and smaller ones were used for hares, but one night in Tatton Park they accidentally netted a stag and were annoyed when it ruined their net.

One poacher, called Bowker, bred his own strain of lurchers, which he named Bedlington-Whippets, as they were a cross between Bedlington terriers and whippets. Those which he retained for his own use were, sent to a trainer who specialised in training dogs for poaching, which included the ability to sniff out gamekeepers and hide when the occasion arose.

After poaching the men would return to the depot, store their equipment, arrange their "bag" and remain hidden until dawn when they would mingle with workers reporting for work in the town. Several local dealers were only too pleased to purchase game at an advantageous price, with no questions asked, and many of the poachers were quite well paid until they were caught. Of almost equal annoyance as the poachers, to the keepers, were the local youths who played pranks on them and lured them into embarrassing situations at night, a pastime which some Bowdon residents today may remember participating in when they were young.

Accidents did occur, and there was the incident many years ago in which John Henshall was wrongly hanged, in connection with a fatal accident involving a gamekeeper, on the perjured evidence of another keeper, called Wilson, and a poacher who turned King's Evidence.

The outcry which followed when Henshall's body was put on show outside the Griffin Inn resulted in Perrin, the poacher, being forced to flee the district and Wilson drowning in the Bollin, at New Bridge Hollow, under mysterious circumstances.

