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Frederick Charles Collens 1876-1895

by Ann Nosowska

On Friday February 15th 1895 the Manchester Times reported that weather of terrible severity had (again) been experienced throughout the United Kingdom and on the Continent during the past week. The cold had been of phenomenal intensity and had occasioned much suffering and considerable loss of life. At Southport the ice on Hesketh Park Lake was almost six inches thick; the lowest temperature recorded was 1.3 degrees. *This was in degrees Fahrenheit – where freezing point is 32 degrees, the Celsius equivalent being -17 degrees.* At Wilmslow on Saturday February 9th 26 degrees of frost had been recorded (-14.5 C).

An “occasional correspondent” of the Manchester Courier and Lancashire Advertiser, writing on the previous Friday reported that, “A most extraordinary sight was to be seen at Blackpool. The sea was an almost continuous sheet of ice for a mile out or more. So thick was this ice that the fishing boats could not make their way through it. Such an occurrence had never been witnessed before by even old inhabitants.”

Other newspapers reported ice floes on the Mersey at Liverpool and on the Humber with the attendant disruption to trade and to shipping. The suffering of the poor was immense. Soup kitchens were set up in Manchester whilst Boards of Guardians of the Poor deliberated on their responsibilities, and their abilities, to alleviate the distress. All over the country there were reports of men, women and children being found frozen to death, canal and river skaters drowning and deadly accidents caused by exploding boilers.

But the poor were not alone in their misery. The prosperous population of Bowdon also felt the effects of the coldest ever February or the “Great Freeze”, as it became known. The following extract taken from An Enquiry into the Distress by the Special Commissioner for the Manchester Times of February 15th 1895 gives an insight as to how the merchants of Bowdon might have been affected:

“Even the well to do have not escaped. Rich sables and abundance of food do not keep us at normal heat, neither are they a complete protection from the chills. Moreover the internal economy of many houses, including some on which thousands of pounds have been spent, is not adapted to the maintenance in a comfortable condition of the human body. Hundreds of highly esteemed citizens who are amply provided with this world’s goods have endured privations that are not lightly borne, in consequence of the water supply and the gas supply of their establishments becoming suddenly stopped. Scores of kitchens, generally bright with the ruddy glow of huge fires, are now cold and desolate, owing to the fear that the presence of burning coals in the immediate proximity to a paralysed boiler will wreck the whole place. And added to the misery of the situation is the unbanishable fear that, upon a thaw setting in, the pipes will burst and jets of cold, pure water spring, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, from unaccustomed quarters, with the result that walls and ceilings will be ruined, and filth and dirt reign supreme.”

However, for the young and energetic, with time for leisure, the arctic conditions must have been a magical godsend affording them a very rare opportunity to venture onto the ice to indulge in one of the crazes of the late nineteenth century – skating! Roller skating at the time was a popular and exciting pastime for the young and ice skating was also extremely popular. Local newspapers ran advertisements for shops newly stocked with ice skates and for businesses where used skates could be sharpened. Belle Vue Zoological Gardens proudly advertised that they could offer skating and curling on ice which was kept in the best possible condition, lighted by electric light each evening and costing only 6d each all day. On Friday 22nd and Saturday 23rd February the London & North West Railway Company laid on day excursions from Manchester to Lake Windermere where conditions for skaters had never been better.

An indignant reader of the Liverpool Mercury felt moved to write to the editor:

Liverpool Mercury Friday 22 February 1895

SKATING ON WINDERMERE

“Gentlemen, I do not think the Liverpool public can be aware of the magnificent condition of the Windermere Lake for skating. The ice is perfectly safe, and as there is a hard frost in this district every night, it is likely to remain so. I left Liverpool at 11.37 this morning, and was on the ice by three o'clock, and enjoyed the most splendid skating I have ever had. At Preston and Lancaster I saw notices up advertising cheap railway excursion tickets. Why cannot the railway companies issue cheap day excursion tickets from Liverpool? I feel sure thousands would avail themselves of the opportunity of witnessing a scene that may only occur once in a lifetime. They might get through their business in the morning before starting, have three hours on the ice, and get back comfortably in the evening. A band of music, which can be heard for miles, tents and booths for refreshments, which, by the by, are excellent and very cheap, add to the enjoyment, to say nothing of the splendid scenery, which is now quite Alpine.”

The London & North West Railway Company obliged by offering excursions to the lake leaving Lime Street station at 8.20 am on Fri 22 and Sat 23. The lake was frozen from end to end and the ice was in excellent condition.

Dozens of young people from Bowdon and district took full advantage of the ice but *their* destination was closer to home than the Lake District. On Tuesday 12th February one girl, named Needham, fell and broke her leg in two places whilst skating on Rostherne Mere. Ten days later the world speed skating record was broken on the Mere by two seconds when J Bates of Leigh beat F Litherland of Sefton over a quarter of a mile course.

On Saturday 16th February the extensiveness of the skating area and the excellent condition of the ice attracted a large number of people from the city and the suburbs, including from Bowdon. Amongst the skaters that day were

Frederick and Arthur Collens, two brothers, aged respectively 18 and 17, the sons of Mr Henry Collens and his wife Ellen. The Collens family had lived on Prussia Terrace, Langham Road in 1881. At that time a house on the terrace could be rented for £35 pa.¹ They moved to Wrexham briefly but had returned not very long before 1895 to live in Sandiford House on Stamford Road, Bowdon. This was a handsome detached house which had been the birthplace of Philip Perceval Graves in 1876. He was the older half brother of the famous poet Robert Graves.² Henry Collens was a master draper who was employed as an agent for cotton ware. There were seven children in the family, the two eldest were children of a first marriage and by 1895 Frederick and Arthur had three younger sisters,, Winifred aged 16, Edith Maud aged 14 and Hilda aged 12.

It is not difficult to imagine the eager anticipation of the Collens brothers and their friends as they arrived at the mere. The surface was well frozen over, with the exception of a small patch at the north end where a stream of water had its inlet into the mere. They skated until well into the afternoon but by half-past five the fading light made it difficult to see all the surface of the water and the hole in the ice created by the stream was barely discernible. A fellow skater, Mr Scott of Longsight in Manchester, skated towards the hole but just in the nick of time he noticed it. At that moment the two brothers were skating towards the spot from the other side and Mr. Scott shouted to warn them of the danger. Arthur Collens, who was skating in front of his brother Frederick, heard Mr Scott's warning and immediately changed course and yelled, "Look out Fred!" But Frederick either did not hear the cry, or else he was going too fast to stop, and he plunged into the freezing water and disappeared under the ice. In an attempt to rescue his older brother Arthur too fell in. Hastily several of the skaters formed a line and succeeded in pulling him from the water. They managed to drag him to the bank where luckily a member of the Ambulance Society, Mr Crowther, who was an employee of the Manchester Post Office, administered life saving first aid. Suffering from exhaustion, and the effects of his immersion in the ice cold water, Arthur was taken to the home of the lodgekeeper, Mr Kirkbride, where he was brought round with the assistance of Dr Charles Jones of Peel Causeway Hale.

*Skaters on Rostherne Mere in 1895.
Photograph by courtesy of
Altrincham Area Image Archive.*



Meanwhile nothing had been seen of Frederick Collens and so another skater, Mr T Clark, hurriedly removed his skates and any superfluous clothing before bravely diving into the mere in search of the missing youth. He swam about for several minutes, until he became exhausted, but his efforts were in vain. He too had to be assisted to the lodgekeeper's cottage. Mr Trueman, an agent of the Egerton family, secured a boat in order to break the ice around the scene of the accident but there was no sign of Frederick. With darkness setting in the rescuers had no alternative but to wait until the following day and it was on the morning of Sunday February 17th that Frederick Collens' body was recovered.³

How Arthur Collens returned home to Stamford Road is unknown and how the awful news was broken to his poor parents that their other son was drowned, and his body was missing, is unimaginable. They placed an obituary in the Manchester Courier on the following Wednesday:

“Collens.—On the 16th February, aged 18 Frederick Charles, the beloved son of Henry John and Ellen Collens, of Stamford-road, Bowdon.—Drowned whilst skating on Rostherne Mere.—Interment, one o'clock today at Bowdon Church.—No cards.”

The funeral was reported on Thursday 20th in the Manchester Courier.

“The funeral of Mr. Frederick Charles Collins (sic), the victim of the skating accident on Rostherne Mere Saturday last, took place at Bowdon Parish Church at one o'clock yesterday. A large number of

people assembled in the churchyard. The chief mourners were the father and six other members of the family, and friends.

A large number of beautiful wreaths were deposited, and the utmost sympathy was manifested on all hands for the bereaved.”

However that was not quite the end of the story for on 11th May 1895 at Manchester City Police Court Mr E Crowther, the employee of the Manchester Post Office who had saved the life of Arthur Collens, received an honorary testimonial from the Royal Humane Society for his gallant assistance to Arthur Collens who had been in imminent danger of drowning.

In Bowdon Churchyard there is a gravestone commemorating members of the Collens family. Sadly one of Fred’s younger sisters Edith Maud died in the new year of 1906 from double pneumonia. She had been a music student.

In Loving Memory of Frederick Charles beloved son of Henry John and Ellen Collens who was drowned whilst skating on Rostherne Mere. Feb 16th 1895 aged 18 years.

Also of Edith Maud second daughter of the above who passed away Jan 9th 1906 aged 24 years.

Also of their father Henry John who died on June 5th 1917 aged 72 years.

Also of Ellen Collens wife of above who died Oct 22nd 1933 aged 90 years.

Henry John Collens died in Sale leaving effects to the value of £1116-5s-5d.

Sources:

1. *Manchester Courier & Lancashire General Advertiser Dec 1884.*

2. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biographies.*

3. *Report published on 18th February in the MC & LGA.*

*Local newspapers including “The Manchester Courier & Lancashire General Advertiser”, “The Manchester Times”, “The Liverpool Mercury”.
Articles and Family Announcements.*

Ancestry.com records. Censuses 1861-1911.

National Probate Calendar 1858-1966.

An Observation on 'Social Ecology'

by Chris Hill

The simple geology of the Bowdon / Altrincham area is that of a hill of porous sand and sandstone sitting on a layer of impervious clay. The interface between these two materials is indicated all around the hill by seeps and springs. In some cases this has resulted in subsidence to relatively modern houses built over the interface, requiring rebuilds or piling.

In times gone by, when there were far fewer buildings covering the landscape, people were much more knowledgeable about the countryside and its features, such as springs, mosses, rocky outcrops and landscape gradients. An example is the now redundant water supply which topped up the moat at Dunham Hall. Although there is sufficient drainage now from the south-eastern corner of the park to serve this purpose, in former times when water was also required to power the saw mill, a gravity feed was relied on from springs in Hale Moss, running north of the present Bridgewater canal and by White Oaks Wood and then into the Park close to the railed gap in the park wall and so to the moat. It was because of local knowledge about surface drainage possibilities, that this was originally put into operation.

With the coming of the railway from Manchester, a building boom in the Altrincham / Bowdon area resulted. The Earl of Stamford owned most of the land in the area and he was reluctant to allow building on his land without adequate compensation in terms of ground rent. This expense could be absorbed in the cost of building larger, mansion-type houses, most of which were rented out, but proved to be a critical consideration in the building of small dwellings. After the limited amount of 'cheap' land had been used up, the rapidly increasing population, including the workers attracted and required for the Broadheath factories, found it difficult to find places to live. This resulted in a sharing situation, with houses being occupied by several families. The Linotype, for example, wanted the council to build an estate for its workers, but the damp land available, close to the factory, required concrete rafts on which to build each home, adding half as much again to the cost of building. This extra cost made the undertaking economically

impracticable and so the firm had the houses built itself, to quite a good standard. This general problem resulted in the Oldfield Brow estate. The Countess wished to commemorate her late husband by donating land to the council for 'worker's cottages'. Originally, the land occupied by Oldfield Hall had been considered, but Sir John Leigh jumped in before the Countess and presented the estate to the council to be used as a park for the citizens of Altrincham. A parcel of land similar in area to John Leigh Park and somehow separate from the rest of the earl's estate, was a convenient second choice, resulting in the estate at Oldfield Brow.

The more affluent incomers to the area preferred the higher land of Bowdon (then part of Dunham), especially if there was a nice view, but this only occurred on the edges of the hill and there are plenty of houses built on the flattish top of the hill without a view. The builders were happy to accommodate the incomers from grimy Manchester. The lower areas of the Town, as explained above, were too damp and in former times a string of mosses ran from Warburton to Hale, which in some places required horses to be fitted with wide shoes to prevent them sinking into the boggy ground. Local people used to say, 'that land's too damp, they'll never build on there'. Over time, with drainage by farmers, these mosses became suitable for agriculture. Similar arguments apply to the land on the other side of the hill, south of Langham Road. Think of The Springs on Bow Green Road, and further east, the springs mentioned in a previous Bowdon Sheaf in an article about Mrs. Gaskell spending summer holidays at Moss Farm. In more modern times, say from WW1, the pressure of population increase and the requirement for more houses reached a crisis point, obliging Altrincham Council to apply to Parliament to have its boundaries increased. This was achieved in 1919 by taking over a large part of Dunham Massey, allowing more land for houses and in Broadheath, more land for factories. In addition a large estate of worker's council houses was also built there.

So, returning to the original theme, if one wishes to have an idea of where the clay / sand interface lies, one way of doing this is to look for the areas where the big houses have been built and where such houses are absent. The builders of former times were no fools and they would have chosen land

allowing them to build big houses on sure foundations, i.e. on dry sand / sandstone. Until after WW2, there were plenty of unused open spaces which had been considered unsuitable for building, either because they were damp, or because of potentially high ground rents. Some had been used as recreational areas, allotments or were still fields used by farmers, but by using modern techniques of building, such spaces were acquired and built upon. Another indicator of where the interface occurs, is the existence of old farms, either the former sites or maybe still surviving buildings; farms, cottages or even clumps of old holly trees, where a well or spring was a necessity of everyday living. Thus a rough idea can be obtained as to where the geological interface exists. The problem of water supply to houses on the higher parts of the hill when the building boom took place, was solved by the local water company building a water tower on the Devisdale to which water was pumped, giving a suitable head of pressure.

For a more detailed investigation into the sites of wells and streams, the twenty inches to the mile 'Detailed Plan of the Township of Altrincham', surveyed and published by the 'Local Board of Health' in 1852, gives extensive information and is available at Sale Local Studies Library. However, it only covers the historic Saxon boundaries of Altrincham, omitting neighbouring Dunham, part of which lay on the hill, but nevertheless, it aids the above idea, which is intended to be a rough and ready general observation, which does not seem to have previously been in circulation.

Brakspear's drawing of his proposed 1860 St. Mary's Church

by David Miller

In the September 1991 issue of the Bowdon Church News Canon Anthony Martin relates an interesting story about what at first appears to be an early photograph of the rebuilt Bowdon Church of 1860. On closer inspection the illustration shows the church with only one clock face whereas it now has four. In fact this is a watercolour over a pen-and-ink drawing of a perspective design for the new St. Mary's Church to be built in 1858 by its eventual architect William H Brakspear.

The drawing was submitted to the church authorities to be considered to replace the 1510 building. Brakspear won the competition and the church was built to his design with one or two modifications which included four clock faces. The new church was consecrated on 27 September 1860.



The picture was initially retained by the Brakspear family but later sold. In April 1990 its owner decided to sell it and Canon Martin thought that the best place for it would be St. Mary's Church, the only problem being raising the funds. It so happened that in the very week of the sale the church received a substantial legacy from Mrs Elsie Evans in memory of her late husband the Rev. Sydney Evans who had been brought up in Bowdon, sang in the choir and became ordained. He served in various parishes and retired to Shrewsbury.

After consultation with the churchwardens, it was decided that it would be fitting to spend part of the legacy on purchase of the picture. The result is that we have a magnificent 24" x 18" picture of the proposed church in the Vestry to which is attached a plaque with the following words:

"The perspective view of the design for St. Mary's Church, Bowdon by the architect William H Brakspear, was bought in 1991 from Sotherby's out of a bequest from Mrs Elsie Evans in memory of her late husband The Revd. Sydney Evans, brought up in the parish."

Brakspear also designed St. Paul's Wesleyan Methodist Chapel on Enville Road, known as the Dome Chapel, which was built in 1880 and demolished in the 1960s.