

# ***The Bowdon Sheaf***

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(Altrincham Area Image Archive)***

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## The Origins and Evolution of East Downs Road

*Ian Bryce*

1840 and 1841 were important years in the history of Bowdon because land in the area owned by the Assheton Smith family was sold off for residential development. The family originated from the Asshetons of Middleton and had succeeded the Breretons at Ashley Hall by marriage when **Ralph Assheton (1594-1643)** married Catherine Brereton, whose father had died without male issue. He was succeeded by his son **Thomas Assheton (1633-1684)** and in turn by his son, **Thomas Assheton (1678-1759)** who was to enhance their future fortunes considerably in 1724 when he married **Harriet Theodosia Smith (1699-1773)**.

The Smith dynasty had held the *Tedworth* estate at Tidworth in Wiltshire since 1650. Her father, John Smith (1655-1723), had been a famous political figure, a Whig Member of Parliament for Beeralson, Devonshire, and later Andover. He went on to become Chancellor of the Exchequer and Speaker of the House. His father of the same name had been granted the manor of the *Vaynol* estate in Snowdonia in 1699, and John inherited it when his elder brother died without issue. On his death the estates passed to his son Captain William Smith, the brother of Harriet. William died childless in 1773, 36 weeks after his sister, having left his estate to her son (another Thomas, born in 1725) who changed the family name by appending his uncle's name to it by act of Parliament. Thus he was now known as **Thomas Assheton Smith**, but not for long, as he died in 1774.

The Ashley estate went for life to the younger son William Henry Assheton Smith (1756-1839), the elder one **Thomas Assheton Smith II (1752-1828)** inherited both the *Tedworth* and *Vaynol* estates and moved away from this area. *Vaynol* amounted to over 35,000 acres, much of it rented out to tenant farmers, and he amassed substantial wealth by exploiting the rich deposits of slate on his land. He played a major part in the emerging Welsh slate industry by developing the Dinorwic quarry on his estate at Llanberis and also Port Dinorwic as a point of export for the slate,

connecting them via a private railway. In 1793 he built a magnificent Georgian Villa on the estate, called *Vaynol Hall*, overlooking the Menai Straits, where he stayed for a few months each year, with a coastal landscape park added in 1820. A dyed-in-the-wool Tory, he was Member of Parliament for Caernarvonshire from 1774 to 1780 and for Andover from 1797 to 1821 and a keen sportsman noted for his involvement in cricket.

**Thomas Assheton Smith III (1776-1858**, pictured), the eldest surviving son, was born in

Westminster, London and followed in his father's political footsteps firstly by taking over the Andover constituency from 1821 and holding it for 10 years, and later by representing Caernarvonshire from 1832 to 1837.

He was known for pioneering work on steam yachts and was an all-round sportsman, noted as a pugilist at Eton School and later as one of the outstanding amateur cricketers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Following the death of his father he lived at Tidworth where he rebuilt *Tedworth Hall*, and in summer enjoyed sailing in the Straits adjacent to *Vaynol*. He was a crack shot and a fanatical fox-hunter, out with his hounds four days a week until a year before his death, acquiring the sobriquet 'the British Nimrod'. On the death of his uncle William he inherited the Ashley estate, but it was in financial difficulties as he had five sisters needing annuities, and in 1840 he sold it to William Tatton Egerton of Tatton Park.

By 1841, in his mid-sixties and having few remaining ties to, or interest in, our locality he cashed in on the demand there for building land, disposing of various holdings. Amongst these were three arable fields, each between 4 and 5 acres, tenanted by a George Pimlott, on the south-facing slopes of Bowdon Downs and with splendid views over the Cheshire Plain. They were named on

tithe maps, from east to west, *Davies Lane Field*, *Great Downs* and *Nearer Downs*, and should he have wanted to exercise some influence over how the area was developed, the seller could have divided the fields into building plots, imposed covenants and sold them off individually. As this was not the case, he sold them as single units to three separate buyers and left it to them to decide what use was made of the land. It transpired that they were to use them in three very different ways.

The sales were concluded concurrently in July, and five months later the three purchasers agreed between themselves that a new road eight yards wide should be laid across the land from west to east. The road would have not only have facilitated the creation of a new neighbourhood but also fulfilled a practical need, as access from the south (i.e. Langham Road) entailed ascending 30 feet on a steep gradient – quite a challenge in the days of horse-drawn vehicles. The copy of the indenture illustrated on the next page shows the proposed road starting at the highest point on *Nearer Downs* and keeping to the same land contour as much as possible whilst still allowing room for building plots of a reasonable depth to be created on either side.

The new road, to be known as **East Downs Road**, only continued as far as the border of *Davies Lane Field*, since the purchaser was retaining the land for the exclusive use of himself and his family. This was prominent Manchester businessman and civic leader **William Neild (1789-1864)**, who over the following two years constructed, in grand Regency style, the grandest mansion in the area and named it *High Lawn*. In the next two decades he would go on to acquire two further plots of land on the east from the Earl of Stamford, extending his grounds as far as Heald Road, remodeled the house in Italianate fashion, adding the crowning glory of a belvedere, to a design by Alfred Waterhouse. There is much more about Mr Neild, his life, career and family, and subsequent owners of the mansion in the paper “*High Lawn, Bowdon, in Victorian times.*”



*Indenture dated 1841 showing the proposed new East Downs Road across Nearer Downs Field & Great Downs Field.*

The adjacent field, *Great Downs*, was bought by **Alfred Binyon (1800-1856)**, the brother-in-law of William Neild and also one of his co-partners in the family calico printing business founded by their wives' grandfather in 1782. Here he created and sold six building plots, which were generously-sized, particularly on the southern side, being designed to accommodate detached or semi-detached villas which were large, although not on the scale of *High Lawn*. The houses were built in the distinctive pale 'white Bowdon brick' and were owner-occupied, which was then not the norm. In 1850 only 26 out of 113 houses on a Church Rate Assessment were recorded as such. Mr Binyon did not come to live in the area himself but his son and namesake would later become a long-term resident. Details of their lives and families can be found in the February 2015 *Sheaf* article entitled "*Bowdon's link with the war poet Lawrence Binyon.*"

Later in the 1800s, a notable resident of one of these houses *Summerfield* (later Cransley School), was Abel Heywood, a publisher and radical who served two times as Manchester's Mayor.

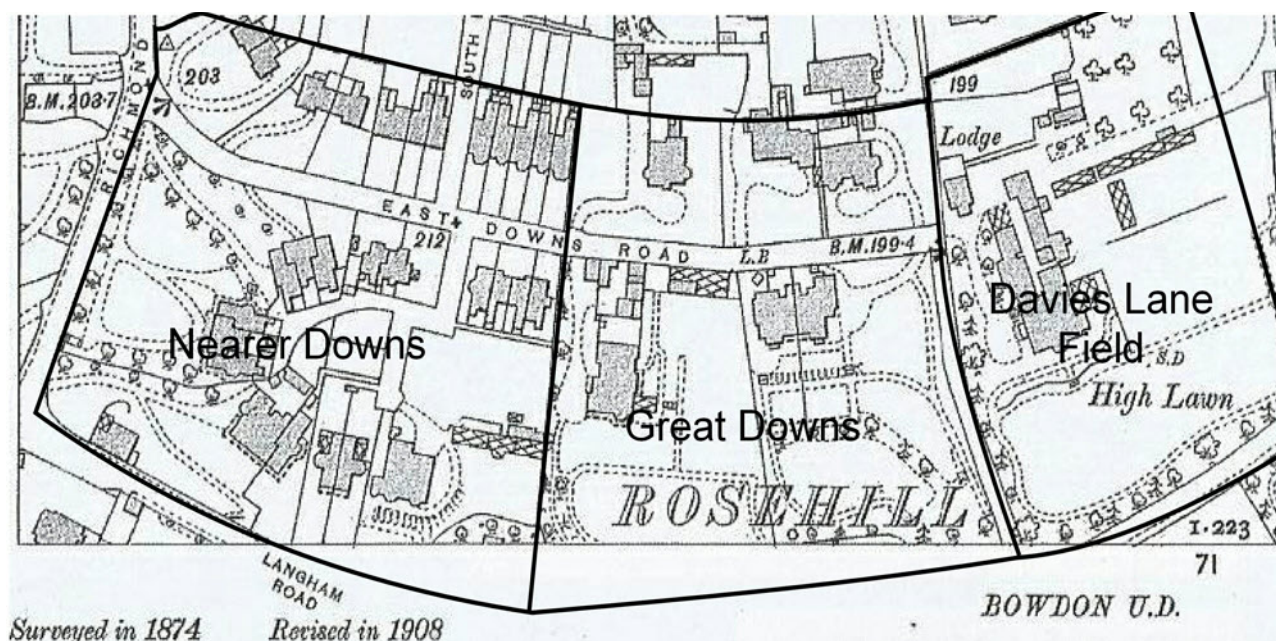
Perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most diverse, use of land was made by **John Barratt (1773-1848)** the purchaser of *Nearer Downs*, a local man and a merchant in Manchester. The tithe records show him as having extensive land holdings all over North Cheshire, but there is no connection, as far as I am aware, with the modern house-building company that bears his surname. He kept the land in his family, dividing it into two parts and endowing it to the next generation.

His son-in-law Richard Hampson (1811-1866) was given a slice of land along the west side where he planned, built and continued to own a series of houses, which were not detached but arranged in pairs and threes giving the impression of being grander than was actually the case. His solicitor son, James Barratt (1807-1866), acquired the larger portion of the field and built a small number of houses – one of them being *Rose Hill Cottage*, which was sold in 1844 along with some adjoining land, to John Spence, a Manchester surgeon.

In 1847 Mr Spence sold off some of his land on the east side to two Manchester grocers, who built an imposing pair of semi-detached houses on it, and in 1850 he sold the house itself. The bulk of James' part of the field, however, was sold off in individual plots, many quite small ones, to buyers who built on them in different styles, the outcome being a remarkable and charming collection of houses of varying size and appearance. These included a small terrace of four houses in the Palladian style (numbers 10/12/14/16) which were built in 1845 for a man named Perkins and became known informally as 'The Candle Ends'. The story is that Mr Perkins was the butler to the then Earl of Stamford and by collecting and selling the candle ends from Dunham Hall, he was said to have made enough money to build those four houses. When the area was mapped in 1876, there were a total of 31 dwellings on this former field, one of them being the single-storied *Swiss Cottage* on



Langham Road (opposite the Vicarage Lane junction), which in recent years has been shielded from public view by tall fencing.



1874 OS Map showing East Downs Road with Nearer Downs Field, Great Downs Field & Davies Lane Field superimposed & the initial buildings including High Lawn on the latter field.

In 1876 the name of the road on the west side was shown as *Rose Hill Road* but when the maps were revised in 1908 it had been given the present name *Richmond Road* with the name *Rosehill* (a Victorian invention) applied to this area as a whole. It is remarkable how the density of the housing increases from right to left, and not difficult to discern where the original field boundaries existed.

During the 1950s and 1960s there was some infill development on East Downs Road, with three smaller houses built in the grounds of the large villas in the *Great Downs* area, one of which was to the design of and occupied by the composer, poet and craftsman Thomas Pitfield.

During the present century those recent houses have all been demolished and replaced with larger ones of strikingly differing designs. Inevitably some of the larger houses built in the mid-1800s have been turned into luxury apartments but it is gratifying to note that, unlike those on the parallel West Road, all of them have escaped the bulldozer.



## Sources

David Miller, *In Memoriam: Thomas & Alice Pitfield*, Bowdon History Society.

Gwynedd Archives: Caernarfon Record Office: Vaynol papers.

Joanna Williams, *Manchester's Radical Mayor: Abel Heywood*.

Marjorie Cox – archives of notes and correspondence.

Welsh Historical Gardens Trust.

## The Will of Edward Janny, Merchant

*by Judith Miller*

Education in Bowdon was given a boost in 1553 when a Manchester merchant, Edward Janny (or Janney), left a sum of £4 to pay for a schoolmaster to teach poor boys of the area.

The retired bishop's scribe who transcribed Edward Janny's wishes actually wrote: “...£4 yearly to be payed to a suffyeyent and honest scole mayster to kepe a ffre scole at Bawden to instruct youthe in vertue and lerninge...” Janny, a Manchester draper, was buried in the Parish Church of Manchester, now the cathedral. He must have been a



*Bowdon Church School  
(Altrincham Area Image Archive).*

wealthy man for his will was many pages long. He left: “*howses, shoppes and tackes in Manchester*” to his wife and many items to friends, servants and relations. We don't know where he lived but he must have spent time in Bowdon and liked the people for he left 13s 4d for the repair of the lane between Altrincham and Timperley and £3 6s 4d to the poorest householders in Bowdon. Two local men received legacies: Thomas Cropper was left a gown faced with 'chamlet' (a satin-like lining material) and Henry Allen a furred gown faced with 'budge' (lambskin).

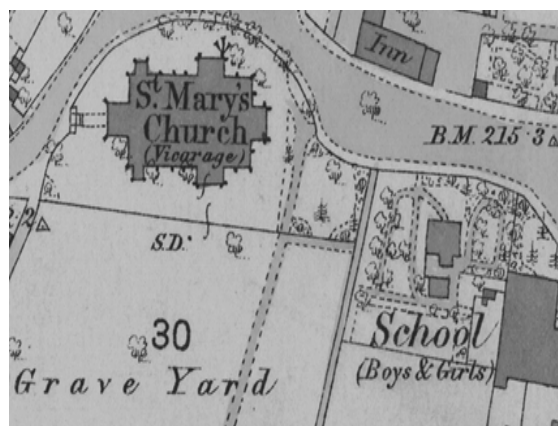
The vicar of Bowdon, the Rev. Robert Vawdrey, was left an advowson (the right to nominate a priest) and lease of the vicarage of Bowdon. When he made his own will in 1568, he also remembered Bowdon and left £4 15s to “*pay an honest and learned schoolmaster to teach grammar at Bowdon.*”

The original school site next to the church is featured on the 1876 Ordnance Survey map opposite. In 1969 the school was moved to Grange Road.

Over four hundred years after its foundation, local historian Basil Morrison was the auctioneer who sold the school and land near the church in 1971, now apartments at the top of Richmond Road, for £20,800 at a sale at the Unicorn Hotel in Old Market Place,

Altrincham. The money raised became part of an Education Trust controlled by five appointed trustees, the vicar and four churchwardens, and went towards the cost of the new Bowdon Church of England School in Grange Road. The thriving school was completely rebuilt to nearly double the size to 480 pupils in 2015.

*(Edited from Bowdon Church News August 1971; thanks to Derrick Murdie for access).*



*Ordnance Survey Map of 1874 showing Bowdon Church School in relation to the church (Altrincham Area Image Archive).*

## Gravedigger reply to an advertisement in 1867

**Derrick Murdie**

Transcript of an application for the post of gravedigger dated 1867.

*"Carrington March 25th 1867*

Gentlemen

*Perceiving an advertisement in the Bowdon Guardian that the situation of Gravedigger for the very Beautiful & Venerable Parish Church of Bowdon will be vacant at Easter, that your honourable Wardens are prepared to receive applications for the situation.*

*I beg most humbly to offer myself a candidate for the situation, assuring you that should you have the kindness to favour me with the appointment that the duties thereof shall receive my most devoted and energetic attention, and that it will be my aim and endeavour to perform them in such a manner as to meet with your approbation. I may be allowed to say that I have a Nephew that I have brought up who is in his 14th year, that will be able to render me much assistance, you will remember that I was engaged numbering the gravestones in the Church Yard which I hope met with your approval, should I become your servant I shall, with your consent be most willing to engrave Stones for you or the parties owns the Graves & that economically as I wish to bring up my nephew to engraving stones.*

*It will be honesty on my part to inform that my age is 52 which you will consider rather too old, but if you will take into consideration the Age of my Nephew and the assistance he will be able to render me will compensate a little for my Age, nevertheless should I become your servant that the duties shall be performed faithfully and diligently.*

*As my chief object in offering myself is that I want to meet with a situation where I can make a comfortable home for a Deaf & Dumb Sister who is my housekeeper.*

Gentlemen

*I am your humble*

*Servant Jn<sup>o</sup> Daine*

*Collins Fold*

*PS. Should you wish a reference as to my character be, I refer you to the Curate of Carrington the Revd. R. Bramby and to Mr John Davies the Clerk of Ashton upon Mersey Church."*

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