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***Old St. Mary's Church, Bowdon before the rebuild of 1858
(Altrincham Area Image Archive)***

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When the Weathercock on Bowdon Steeple Winked!

Ann Nosowska

On a dull drizzly evening on Wednesday 7th August in 1850 a small group of people made their way to the old St Mary's Church in Bowdon where, probably with the aid of candles or lanterns, they climbed to the top of the church tower. There was a storm brewing but that had not dampened their spirit of anticipation for they were expecting to witness a spectacle never before seen! The expectant parishioners took up their positions and turned their eyes towards Manchester.

On the previous Friday evening a large gathering of Manchester worthies had attended a meeting, presided over by the Mayor, John Potter Esq., in the large room of the Town Hall (which was then in King Street) to witness a demonstration of Mr Staite's new electric light.

The Manchester Times on Saturday 3rd August reported that Mr Staite:

"Proceeded to the more practical part of his lecture by displaying the power of deflagrating iron, steel and zinc, which the electric force possesses. He then exhibited a small lamp, the light from which was generated by simple voltaic electricity upon a small piece of iridium in a glass chimney; the luminous effect produced being equivalent to a gas light of ordinary dimensions, although it differed very manifestly from gas in the purity and intensity of its flame....The lecturer afterwards introduced his grand electric light, which he stated to be obtained by the use of electro magnetism.... The effect was truly electrical. An intense furnace of light seemed to have been instantaneously ignited....The whole room seemed pervaded with a sort of double-distilled daylight, an aggravated sunshine. The gas chandeliers, which had hitherto appeared respectable enough, were now rendered perfectly ridiculous. Yellow, smoky glares, their aspect was now utterly contemptible and, upon the ceiling their shadows – the shadows of the glass globes in which a large jet of gas, be it understood, was then

burning, were absolutely black - as though each globe were an impenetrably dense and opaque body."

Mr Staites next demonstrated the even more startling effect produced by placing a large dioptric lens and a parabolic reflector in front of the electric light. It was reported that the room was not large enough to hold the brightness of the light. In this light he held up by turns a lighted wax candle, a tallow candle and a coal gas flame – and “to public contempt” he was able to show that as they burned they each emitted a thick stream of vapour. Finally he was able to prove that, even when totally submerged, the electric light was not extinguished. He asserted that there was no practical obstacle to prevent the regular use of this new mode of lighting.

The mayor announced that on the following Wednesday night the 7th August at nine o'clock, the light would be demonstrated to a group of scientific men from the roof of his own house at Buile Hill estate, Pendleton in Salford. Buile Hill House was a fine neoclassical mansion with a stone balustraded platform on its rooftop (since grade II listed but currently in need of restoration). Thus it was that people gathered at high points for miles around Manchester in the hope of witnessing the phenomena. News of the success of the experiment was reported to the Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser which published several similar accounts in its edition of Saturday 10 August 1850. For example Mr. Edward Taylor of Rochdale, sent the information, that eighteen gentlemen went to Tandle Hill, about four miles from the town and fully six in direct line from Buile Hill. The night was rainy and the atmosphere thick yet, when the light was turned in the direction of the hill, it was distinctly seen. When it was turned away, they could perceive the reflection only and no diffused light. From Denton, eight miles south-east from Buile Hill, the Rev. T N Farthing also forwarded an account of what he had observed. Rev. Farthing corroborated the statement of a gentleman who communicated similar information from Bowdon as to the revolving character of the light. It reminded him very much of some of the lights he had seen on the sea coasts on clear nights.

The electric light was first observed from Bowdon Church tower at about a quarter past nine. Bowdon was said to be about eight miles in a straight line from Buile Hill. A drizzling rain was falling at the time, and the light was not very distinct at first but that was partly attributed to the residual daylight at the time and to the unfavourable state of the atmosphere, which between the two points was dull, heavy, and damp. Afterwards the light seemed to increase in size, and the changing of position of the reflectors was very plainly detected and seemed to be constant, never remaining exactly in the same position for two minutes in succession, which gave it the appearance of a revolving light in a lighthouse.

The gentlemen on the church tower reported that:

“the light appeared to be elevated about three yards above the head land in the distance and bore first a striking resemblance to the rising of one of the larger planets Jupiter or Venus as they appear when just rising on the verge of the horizon; afterwards the body of light was larger in extent but seldom attained so great brilliancy as the planets possess on a clear night. About half-past nine o’clock the power of the light seemed to increase considerably, and it appeared of larger size....the light being, as seen from Bowdon, strictly confined to one bright ball, which appeared in some part of unequal brilliancy, and at times somewhat dazzling, but in no instance so intense as to throw any shadow or to afford the slightest additional light by which to enable the spectators either to read or even see any object more distinctly with than without it. For one second, and for one second only, could the light be said to attain great brilliancy, and this was about a quarter to ten o’clock at which time a very considerable light was produced, and we have little doubt that had it been directed upon the church, which it was not, and for a sufficiently long period for observation it would have been found to illumine a considerable extent the venerable pile, but the bright light was but a flash, and afterwards very little more was to be seen, the exhibition being to all appearance at an end and at ten o’clock the rain came down so heavily to render speedy retreat

very desirable. The night, it must be observed, was not favourable for the exhibition, as there was a strong wind blowing throughout the period from nine to ten o'clock, accompanied by rain, but until ten o'clock the rain was not heavy."

The newspaper article concluded:

"We should certainly like to see this power tested under more favourable circumstances and perhaps, if Mr. Staite were to offer to have another exhibition, his worship would not object to let the roof of his house be used again. It would be extraordinary to see the little white cottages at Pott Shrigley in the middle of the night, or to surprise the inhabitants of Bowdon by letting them read the time on the dial of their clock."

Poems were penned about Mr Staite's demonstration. One such, published in the Manchester Times on 10th August ended with a mention of Bowdon – and some poetic license!

*That just one other fact I'll mention:
The weathercock on Bowdon steeple
Was seen to wink by several people!
STAITES "lightning" struck the bird with wonder,
Ten thousand voices pealed the "thunder",
And, Jones, unless I'm much mistaken,
Folks' incredulity was shaken,
That light's "A fact" and Staite will "do it",
Let clever people look unto it.
Of my impressions you've the pith.*

NOTE: William Staite (1809-1854) was a pioneer of electric lighting but he received little recognition for his work. Numerous demonstrations were given throughout England and serious interest in his system of electric lighting was shown by railway companies and dock authorities. The problem was that there was as yet no cheap electricity supply and very few practical generators.

Chemical batteries were too expensive. The death of Staite in 1854 brought to an end these early attempts to use electricity for illumination.

(G Woodward in IEE Proceedings Vol.136, Issue 6, November 1989).

Postscript: Electric lighting was eventually installed in St Mary's Church, Bowdon by the Altrincham Electric Supply Co. in 1901.

Minutes of the Wardens of Bowdon Church in 1821:

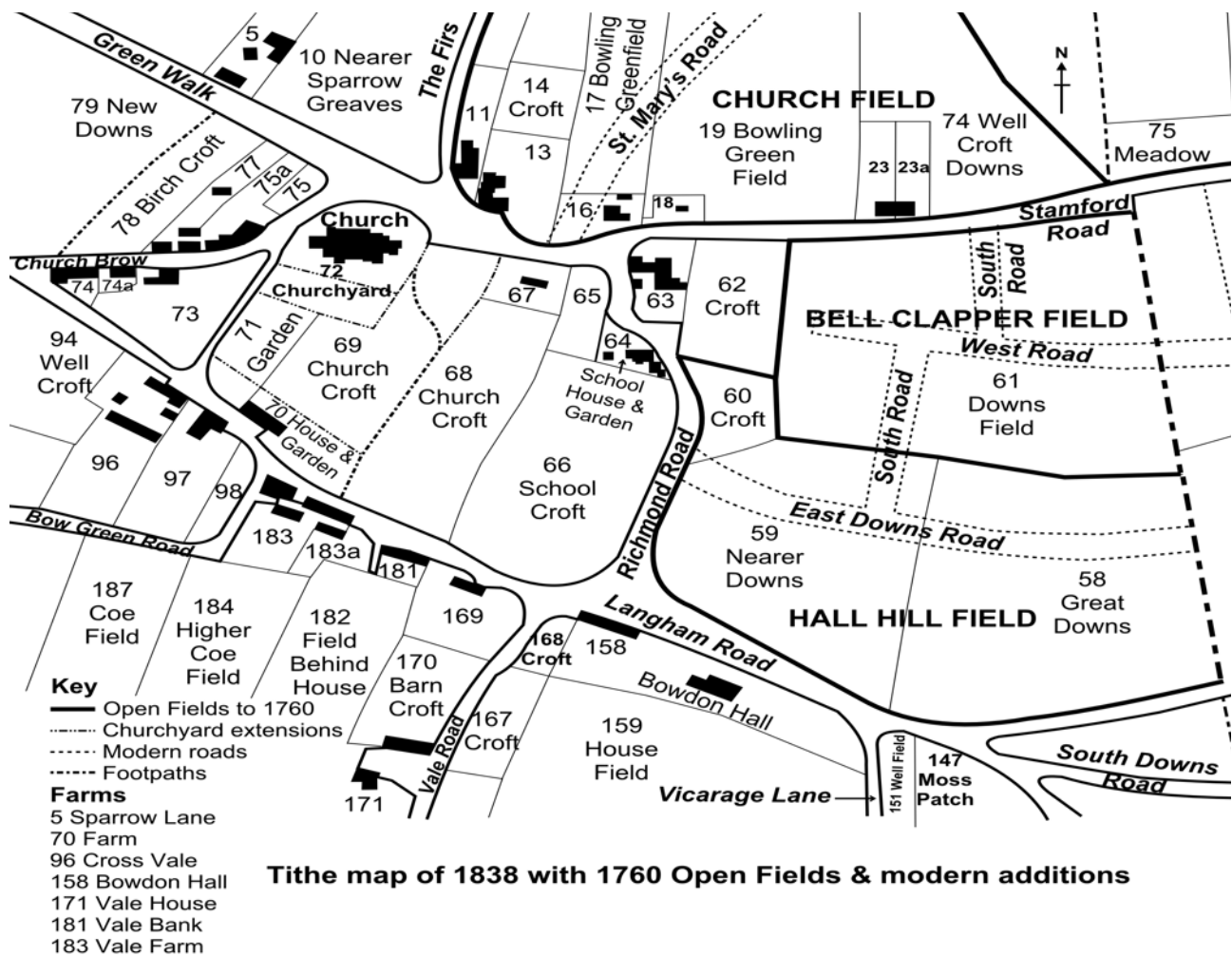
"Wardens authorised to provide a pulpit cushion and cloth for Communion Table to replace those stolen. Ordered a China or Spode Manufacture Bowl for the Font. No cattle to be admitted in future into the churchyard."

Bowdon Village in 1838

David Miller

Introduction

This article adds to Peter Kemp's notes on Old Bowdon Houses in Sheaf 49, and on Don Bayliss' description in *The Changing Landscapes of Bowdon*. It is based on an accurate drawing of the 1838 tithe map with roads added after that time shown dashed. Also shown are the last remnants of three open strip fields close to the church which were enclosed by 1760. There were four more open fields down Bow Green Road, making seven in all; most unusual for a township. Also shown is the gradual expansion of the churchyard in three phases from 1815 to 1876. The village is built on deep sand overlying boulder clay which produced springs very suitable for settlements along Langham Road. One can still be seen at the bottom of The Springs on Bow Green Road.



Bowdon Village from the tithe map of 1838 with new modern roads shown dashed, and the three Open Strip Fields which were enclosed by 1760 superimposed. They were shared by the Church, Assheton-Smith and Lord Stamford. Church Field had 17 strips, Bell Clapper 7, and Hall Hill Field 13, all drainage north-south.

Roads

The old roads in the area run through the village from the west, diverging at the church, the northerly branch to Altrincham, the easterly down Stamford Road to Hale, and the south-easterly to Wilmslow along South Downs Road. There is some evidence that the Stamford Road route had been a minor Roman road from the copper mines at Alderley Edge to Warburton and a smelting site at Warrington. Both of these roads contain several cottages and Langham Road several farms. The roads outlined in dashes such as St. Mary's Road and East Downs Road, are all Victorian built, on the ancient Open Fields. Stamford Road was called Sandy Lane

until Victorian times. The Firs was originally called Burying Lane, the last part of the route from Altrincham to Bowdon Church for the burial cortège. Green Walk was built about 1740 by the Fourth Earl of Stamford as part of his coach driveway from Dunham Hall to Bowdon Church. Bow Green Road leads to the site of four further open fields, the Eyebrooks.

Fields

It is well documented that three open fields existed just east of the village: Church Field to the north of Stamford Road, Bell Clapper Field between Stamford Road and East Downs Road, and Hall Hill Field, named after Bowdon Hall just to the south. It is thought that Bell Clapper Field was so named because its income was used to support the church. All of these fields were divided into strips running north-south including the very steep Hall Hill Field. The strips were shared between the three major landowners: the church (glebe), Assheton-Smith of Ashley Hall, and Lord Stamford of Dunham Hall, each having alternate strips. These strips were formed by a primitive plough to give a raised bed and drainage channels and by mutual agreement were consolidated into fields for more efficiency by 1760. The other tithe fields were gradually enclosed between the 13th and the 17th century. Named fields are shown on the map; those with only a plot number are all House, House & Garden, Garden. Details of plot and strip owners and occupiers can be found in the Kemp and Bayliss articles.

Church & Churchyard

Bowdon Church is situated at 200 feet above sea level, almost the highest point on Bowdon Hill. To the north are the extensive Bowdon Downs stretching to Altrincham, long used to assemble armies, for horse racing, and in the 20th century for the Altrincham Agricultural Show. To the south a steep scarp drops down to Bowdon Vale. The church site may date to Celtic times, certainly Saxon and the church was rebuilt in 1100, 1320, and 1858 (the last architect was W H Brakspear who also designed the now- demolished 'Dome Chapel'). The churchyard lies on a steep slope to the south and contains 5,000 graves with 40,000 burials. It was

extended in 1815, 1859, and 1876 down to Langham Road, the last requiring the demolition of the large building in tithe plot 70. The wall on the west side is medieval.

Buildings

None of the buildings on the tithe map are recorded as farms but this can be derived from the size of the holdings and the later Victorian names. Many of them are aligned to Langham Road where the sand of the hill met the underlying boulder clay and produces springs or allowed wells to tap into the fairly pure water. Drinking water, from plot 94 Well Croft, had to be carried to the buildings higher up and a path still exists from The Springs (plot 94) to Green Walk. Many of the buildings along Langham Road still have wells, eg Bowdon Hall which dates from 1700 and is still a substantial building despite demolitions. A hall has existed here since 1200. Another source of water existed on the north-eastern side from plot 74 Well Croft Downs which may have been used to power Seddon's 1775 woollen mill lower down Stamford Road. The buildings on plots 11 and 13 may have been farms originally but are now The Stamford Arms and The Griffin pubs. There is still a bowling green on plot 19 today. All of the other buildings are listed as houses in the tithe schedule but are in fact cottages, most with a garden and occupiers often rented additional land for sustenance.

Sources

Bayliss, Don & David Miller, *The Changing Landscapes of Bowdon*.
Bowdon tithe map & schedule 1838.

Kemp, Peter, Bowdon Sheaf 49, *Some Old Bowdon Houses*.

Big Bang in Bowdon

Judith Miller

The explosion occurred in December 1906 when a workman lit a cigarette on the steps of the public drinking fountain opposite St Mary's Church, Bowdon.

The incident was reported in the Manchester Guardian of December 2nd and in St Mary's parish newsletter in January 1907. Two boys delivering newspapers about 7am reported a strong smell of gas to local workmen near the fountain. One of the men went to investigate and lit a cigarette in front of the fountain. The gas escape caused the fountain to explode and fragments of stone were hurled into the air breaking the outside glass of one of St Mary's clerestory windows and the tops of some church railings. The force of the explosion flung both workmen several yards and one of the newsboys had his foot crushed by debris and was taken to Altrincham Hospital for treatment.

The fountain had been erected in 1872 by Mrs Elizabeth Marriott in memory of her husband, Francis Marriott, a Manchester solicitor. Elizabeth was the sister of the well-known surgeon, Arthur Ransome. She and Francis lived at Greenbank on The Firs around 1858 and later at Lea Hurst on St Margarets Road. They had four sons and one daughter.

The restored fountain is constructed of ashlar stone and polished granite with a three-stepped plinth, octagonal corner columns and two troughs. There are four recesses with cusped arches and polished granite columns under a Gothic style canopy. The recesses have fountains and bowls alternating with the inscriptions. At the time of the explosion, as can be seen in the photograph on the next page, it stood in front of the church, roughly in the centre of the square at the crossroads with Stamford Road and The Firs. Following restoration in 1972, it was moved much nearer to the Stamford Arms, presumably to help the flow of traffic. Bowdon Conservation Group contributed to its restoration.

*Marriott Memorial
in the 1950s
(Altrincham Area
Image Archive).*



The inscriptions on the fountain read as follows:

**In Memoriam
Francis Marriott
born January 30 1830 died
January 3 1871 Erected by
his wife
anno domini 1872
The Fear of the
Lord is a Fountain
of Life. prov: X1VXXV11**

**The opposite panel reads:
Blessed is the man
that trusteth in the Lord and whose hope
the Lord is:
Jeremiah 17:7.8 & part 8. Verse**

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