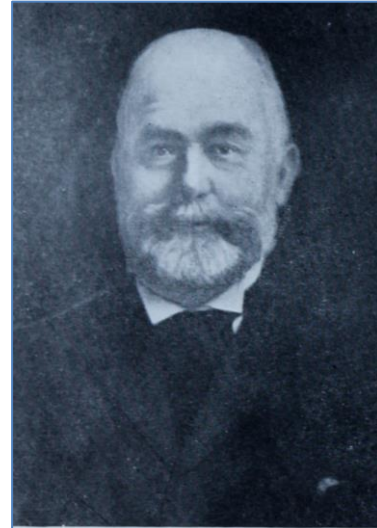


Henry Wells 1835-1908

Introduction

On 9th November 1908, life in Aldershot stopped for a few hours on a Monday afternoon, in respect to the funeral cortege of Mr. Henry Wells, as it moved from his family home up to Redan Hill and the Aldershot Cemetery. It was followed by the great and good of Aldershot, as well as over 120 of his employees.



Painting by T.C. Lawrence

After over half a century, the town was left without the familiar form that had become one of its foremost citizens. However, what is surprising is that Henry Wells emerged from extremely humble beginnings.

Beginnings (1835-1860)

Henry Wells was born on 25th January 1835 into the home of the agricultural labourer, Henry Wells at the village of Ivinghoe in Buckinghamshire. He was one of a large family.

In the 1851 census Henry, then aged 16, was shown still living with his family in Ivinghoe. His occupation was a straw plaiter, the same as his family, father Henry (49), mother Leah (48), and brothers and sisters Charles (22), John (19), Edna (13), Emma (11), and Maria (8). His elder brother George however was a bricklayer's labourer living with his wife and son Dan also in Ivinghoe.

Straw plaiting at this time was the major occupation in villagers within Buckinghamshire. Earnings were higher undertaking this work than as agricultural labouring, and straw plaiting was an established cottage industry in Ivinghoe. The straw plaits were utilised in the manufacture of rustic hats and bonnets and were sought after accessories for the fashions of the day. The opening of railways assisted in the importation and export of goods especially to London. Ivinghoe possessed its own market where the straw plaits were sold.

(As an aside, Sir Walter Scott utilised the village name in his bestseller novel *Ivanhoe*, first published in 1819.)

England in the mid Nineteenth Century

At this time, in the late 1840s and early 1850s, England was undergoing vast social and economic change. The austerity and problems that manifested themselves during and following the Napoleonic Wars that ended with the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, were swept away by firstly the Agricultural and then the Industrial Revolutions, both of which commenced in England at this time. Population was booming and huge swathes of this population was on the move from the countryside, where they had previously lived, to the towns and cities offering potential for wages far exceeding anything dreamed of in their sleepy villages.

Commencing with the building of the canal network and being swiftly followed by the onset of the railway age, goods and people were moving speedily and in large numbers around the country. The period of relative world peace that was held in place following Waterloo, primarily by the superiority of the Royal Navy, finally ended with the commencement of the Crimean War in 1853; a war that saw England with its allies France, Turkey and Sardinia fight against the common enemy, Russia. This war finally ended in 1856, with soldiers returning to England, many injured and suffering from disease with what is now known as post-traumatic stress syndrome, but at that time not all understood.

The Workers for The Camp at Aldershot

The British government, in 1854, agreed to Lord Hardinge's (the Commander in Chief of the Army) recommendation to the purchase of over twenty-five thousand acres of land at Aldershot, selling at £12.00 an acre. The intention was to construct a camp for the British Army, being the first time such a camp had ever been envisaged in England. There was seen a need to centralise the Army instead of relying upon local regiments in many centres around the country, enabling the War Office to mobilise the Army quickly in times of national emergency.

Aldershot, at this time, was a small backwater village, just off the London to Winchester turnpike, on the edge of a vast area of heathland previously renowned for highwaymen. The Basingstoke Canal crossed the heathland, having been built by 1794 for the transportation of agricultural produce to London; but after this initial upheaval little else had changed. Then, suddenly, the quiet was disrupted by the sudden appearance of Royal Engineers who were to oversee the mass of men and materials descending on the village to build 'The Camp'. The initial influx of soldiers were housed in a vast township of canvas, sleeping and living in tents.

Work commenced on the new permanent barracks in 1854 and being completed in 1859. In addition to the camp, it was originally planned to build accommodation for the Militia battalions who flocked to the colours at the commencement of the Crimean war. Provision was made to house altogether some 20,000 men.

The first permanent buildings were eight hundred timber huts on brick foundations to house the soldiers, and an additional four hundred and sixty huts for officers' quarters, administrative offices, mess rooms, kitchens, hospitals and so on. Although this was thought to be a temporary arrangement, the huts remained in occupation until eventually replaced by brick-built barrack blocks many years later.

So for the next thirty years, the timber huts were the only accommodation for soldiers until they were eventually replaced in the 1890s. When the huts were taken down, it was found the foundations were still solid and had been very well built.

Taking charge of the initial building of The Camp was the renowned builder Mr. George Myers. George Myers worked on the building of the first North and South Camps. Albert, the Prince Consort, also commissioned him to build a library for the Army at Aldershot to his own requirements, and a Royal Pavilion for his wife Queen Victoria. George Myers was closely associated with famed architect of that time Augustus Pugin, working on a vast range of ecclesiastical projects across the country. He was therefore a much sought after builder for major projects in the country at that time.

There is now an intriguing question posed. Where were the numbers of men to come from required to undertake this vast building programme? Answers can be found, in part, from reports in local newspapers. For instance in March 1854, the *Hampshire Chronicle* was reporting that handbills were being hastily distributed in Winchester. This was a call for five hundred labourers to come to Aldershot bringing their own picks and shovels.

Lieut.-Colonel Howard N. Cole records in his *Story of Aldershot*, one Isaac Lamb, a former farm labourer, working on The Camp at a rate of £1 per day whilst in his previous employment he had received 18 shillings a week.

The competition for labour at this time was immense. England was not only continuing the Industrial Revolution but was also in the middle of a building boom. For instance the population of London grew three-fold to just over 3 million between 1815 and 1860, to house the growing population as well as many immigrants. The railway boom continued, to seemingly connect every town and city in the UK by railway, drawing in, not only Irish labourers, but also many others, to the lucrative Navy gangs working across the entire country. Locally the enormous building projects of the Portsmouth and Gosport Forts (later known as Palmerston Follies after the Prime Minister at that time Lord Palmerston), were being built due to the possibility (maybe imagined) of a French invasion looming, went on unabated from 1860 until 1880, requiring a large workforce of both labourers and skilled workmen for the entire programme period.

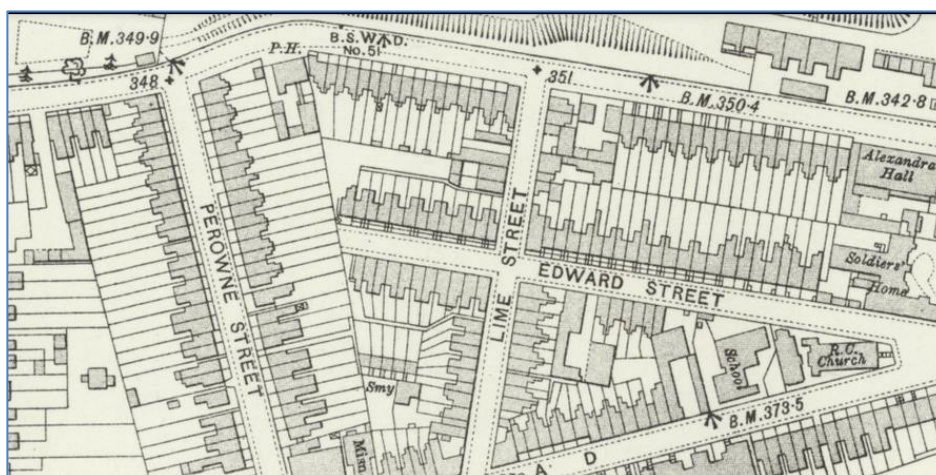
Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were taking a deep interest in the building of The Camp at Aldershot, visiting for the first time on 10th June 1855 to inspect the progress and then regularly staying at the then newly completed Royal Pavilion.

On the world stage there were momentous times, with the onset of the American Civil War in 1861. This had profound repercussions in England as trade especially of cotton for the mills in the north became scarcer. The Army of course kept a close eye on the progress of weaponry utilised, and even more, the Royal Navy seeing for the first time iron and steel ships in close combat. Of course England was not directly involved in this conflict. However many families had relations in the United States therefore news was closely watched in newspapers as well as British ships being involved in blockade running to outrun the Union warships in an effort to export cotton to the mills.

Henry Wells moves to Aldershot (1861-1868)

It appears that Henry Wells, in the 1861 census, was residing in Farnham, Frimley District, with his brother John Wells, a bricklayer, and John's wife Hephzibah. Henry records in the census his occupation at this time as Inn Keeper, an occupation he appears to have maintained in a small way later. They appeared to have heard, from far away Ivinghoe, Buckinghamshire, of this bonanza for employment, and made their way, possibly by foot over two days, from Ivinghoe to The Camp at Aldershot. It was recorded that Henry Wells had succeeded in obtaining a post as foreman on the newly built temporary railway with the builder George Myers. This appears quite remarkable in as much as Henry appeared to have no trade training or experience. Therefore, in the turmoil of the vast construction site that was to become Aldershot, Henry must have stood out as somewhat exceptional amongst the labourers employed. As events turned out George Myers made a very shrewd decision to employ Henry, as later history will show. Henry recorded that on 1st December 1857, the first unit of the army, the Lancaster Militia occupied the first part of the new camp, and therefore he was already working at Aldershot at that time.

It appears that Henry Wells may have understood the situation in Aldershot from the outset, as very soon in 1857, he had procured some land in the town and built himself two houses. These may well have been cottages in the newly formed Edward Street.



It is difficult for us some 150 years later to be able to appreciate the enormity of the tasks presented to these newcomers to the village of Aldershot. Not only had they to build dwellings, but also to cut out the very roads to access their new homes, provide water and sanitation to the same, basically from what were fields or orchards. No one to dictate what was to be done, only obtain a licence to build, just the urge to begin a new life in a new location. True pioneers?

By 1860 Henry was obviously feeling financially much more secure, since on 24 June he married Elizabeth Short, whose home was also in Ivinghoe. So it appears they had been childhood sweethearts, and Henry had not forgotten her in his headlong rush to become someone of note in these booming times. They were married at the East Street Chapel in Farnham. He was a foreman on a railway line.

1860 Elizabeth Short at the time of her marriage to Henry Wells at Farnham



1905



No.	When Married	Name and Surname	Age	Condition	Rank or Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Surname	Rank or Profession of Father
10.	Twenty-fifth June 1860.	Henry Wells	25 years	Bachelor	Foreman on Railway line	North End Farnham	Henry Wells	Lassner
		Elizabeth Short	21 years	Spinner	—	Farnham	Charles Short	Butcher

Married in the East Street Chapel according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Independents by me, J. Felley

This Marriage was solemnized between us, Henry Wells and Elizabeth Short in the Presence of us, W. Jenkins W. Mason W. Fisher X The clerk of Ham Court.

It appears that Henry was well connected with the Baptist Church or rather the part of the Church known as the Particular rather than General. This required members to have undergone immersion at baptism enabling them to take communion. Henry remained a staunch member of the Baptist Church throughout his life, attending the 'Little Chapel' at Hale, every Sunday and supporting the Baptist Church. In his obituary he is recorded as building the Baptist Chapel, but may well have donated finance and labour to provide the numerous extensions to the building during his 40 years attending.

Henry's elder brother George had already been working successfully as a bricklayer in Aldershot. We find him in 1858 being baptised at Bethel Baptist Church in Hale, Farnham, and providing financial support to the church, which would indicate the family's observance to the Particular part of the Baptist Church.

Henry, much later in 1895, was reported in the Rochdale Times to have donated 206 Ruby Bibles to the Hope Chapel in Rochdale to superintendents, teachers, and scholars, as a souvenir of his visit to the Hope Chapel Sunday School.

The links between Rochdale and Farnham appear to be connected through the Particular Baptist Denomination, as both at this time were centres for non-conformist religion. Baptists were particularly interested in promoting education, something that Henry took very much to heart later in his life.