

# OXTON HISTORY



This hand tinted early Edwardian post card was sent from Oxtan in February 1907. That Oxtan should have a cricket club was first discussed by a group of local gentlemen who met at the Queen's Arms on 27th September, 1875. The proposal was warmly accepted, and so the club was formed and then located on Townfield Lane, being laid out across a part of Oxtan's ancient field system. As the result were lost the names of *Town Croft*, *King's Meadow* and *Little Townfield*. It is sometimes interesting to remember what was happening in the wider world at the time that Oxtan continued to be developed. As examples: 1875 was the year that Alexander Graham Bell first made a successful voice transmission using his latest invention – which became known as the telephone; in Paris, Bizet's opera *Carmen* was first performed; Jessie James and his gang of outlaws pulled off a *great train robbery in Missouri*; Captain Matthew Webb became the first person to swim (unaided) across the English Channel, and Thomas Edison invented the electric light bulb - and in Oxtan there was now to be a Cricket Club (with tennis, lacrosse, hockey and bowls to be added to its sporting facilities later on!).

## Grand Cricket Match At Oxtan

*"Gentlemen of West Cheshire v Gentlemen of Canada"*: So ran the headline on the sports page of the Birkenhead News on Saturday August 27th 1887. *The Gentlemen of Canada* were then on a tour of England during which they played against most of the major English teams including the MCC at Lords. Inviting the Canadian cricketers to tour England was not so surprising at that time given that the very first international cricket match was played in 1844 (and in New York) between those then great cricketing nations of Canada and the United States of America. How things have changed! During their 1887 tour of England, the Canadians were invited to play against the *Gentlemen of West Cheshire* at the Oxtan Cricket Ground on Townfield Lane, and the Birkenhead News went on to say of the event that *"Thanks to the enterprise of the committee of the Oxtan Cricket Club, the people of Wirral were provided with an opportunity on Wednesday and Thursday of witnessing a first-class match"*. The West Cheshire





team included players from a number of local clubs with Birkenhead Park Cricket Club in particular being well represented, but two members of Oxton Cricket Club were included in the West Cheshire team – W. Brook-Stevens and James Curwen. Curwen was an Oxton Cricket Club stalwart who had only to take a short walk from his home at 32 Beresford Road to the ground. He was the son of Robert and Alice Curwen and his father is recorded as being a “*ship-owner and broker, timber broker and bottle merchant*” in contemporary directories. The family first came to Liverpool from the Fleetwood area of Lancashire intended, no doubt, on making their fortunes from Liverpool’s expanding trade opportunities. Later they came to live in Oxton, of course. As a cricketer, James Curwen seems to have been considered to have been one of the better players at Oxton Cricket Club given that he was to captain the West Cheshire team for this match, and he was described in the match programme as a *batsman*. This rather macho photograph of him (smoking a cigarette, as perhaps most keen sportsmen did in those days) was taken at the event and shows him wearing a sport’s hat, a sport’s blazer (of course) over his cricket whites, sporting a splendid moustache and most probably a club tie. So, suitably dressed he was to take his place batting at number five for West Cheshire. Wednesday 24th and Thursday 25th August were both “*beautifully fine days*” according to the Liverpool

Mercury and the match was attended by a large crowd on both days. The Birkenhead News particularly reported that on Thursday there was “*a fair attendance of ladies*”. West Cheshire won the toss and chose to bat first. Interestingly the score card for the event noted that for this match there were to be “four balls per over” and “twelve men in each team” – the standard format for cricket matches at the time. The four-ball over continued in use until 1889, when the five-ball over was introduced. It was only in 1900 that the six-ball over became the standard as of today – and, of course, there are now only eleven players allowed in each team. The *twelfth* man is now only called upon to act as a temporary fielder if one of the fielding side needs to leave it for a short time or as the *runner* for an injured batsman. James Curwen scored 3 runs on his first visit to the crease and 5 runs on his second. He was *caught and bowled* in both innings – so perhaps he was not quite the batsman he had been made out to be in the match programme! Brook-Stevens, by the way, was considered to be just a *tail ender* batting at number eleven. He scored 7 runs in



his first innings and then just 1 run in his second – but he was *not out* on both of his visits to the crease. As a bowler, however, he did manage to capture 2 Canadian wickets. The match ended in a draw although the honours went to West Cheshire who just failed to take the last Canadian wicket although they had runs to spare. The Birkenhead News stated that “*the draw was greatly in favour of the home team, and had not so much time been wasted in photographing the teams at the interval the match might*

*have been won*". It also reported that James Curwen – as West Cheshire's captain - presented Mrs Ogden, the wife of Dr Ogden the Canadian captain, with a beautiful bouquet of flowers whereupon three cheers were called, and heartily given for the visitors. The photograph that caused all the delay is the one shown here with Mrs Ogden holding her bouquet and surrounded by the members of the two teams. James Curwen went on to live a full and active sporting life serving for many years as President of Oxtan Cricket Club. Remaining a bachelor, he died at the age of 80, but it seems likely that he spent many happy summer days enjoying the company, the sunshine, the cricket (of course), perhaps a cigarette or two and no doubt a glass of ale in Oxtan Cricket Club's pavilion on Townfield Lane.

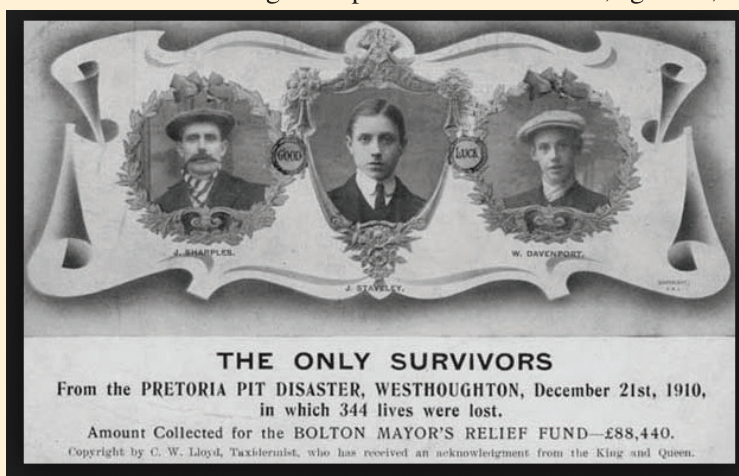
caused a mighty underground explosion in the Pretoria pit creating the second greatest mining disaster in English history (the greatest was at the Oaks Colliery in Barnsley when 380 lives were lost in 1866). Of all of the men who descended into the Pretoria pit that day, only four came out alive (but one later died of his injuries). 344 lives were lost and Robert Curwen was amongst those killed. His body was identified by his brother-in-law, Sydney Williams of 10 Arno Road, and he was brought home to Oxtan to be buried in the non-conformist section of Flaybrick Cemetery on 28th December 1910 (grave location NC 6 135).

## Now & Then

### The Pretoria Pit disaster

James Curwen's immediate family were not the only Curwens living in Oxtan. His widowed aunt Emma lived at 4 Silverdale Road until she died in December 1901. Her son, Robert Clifford Curwen, was James Curwen's cousin and he might well have gone to live with his cousins' family in Beresford Road when his mother died when he was only 10 years old. What we do know is that Robert later took up residence at number 20 Fairview Road and started training for a career as a mining engineer. To gain experience Robert went, aged 19, to

It is intended that a regular article in our future Periodicals will be Now & Then - showing images of how some parts of Oxtan used to be and how they look today. The first **Then** image shown here is of the original St Saviour's school on Storeton Road (photographed c1912 and built in the early 1850's). The building became redundant in 1966 when a new school was opened on Holm Lane in 1967. Storeton Close was built on the old school's former site.



the Hulton Bank Colliery in Westhoughton, Lancashire. He had only worked there for two weeks before his budding career and all of his ambitions were cut tragically short. On the morning of 21st December 1910, 900 men entered the colliery to work within its five coal pits, but a build up of gas





### Essex Bowen MD, FRCS(Eng.) JP



Born at Llwyngwair, Pembrokeshire, in 1829 Essex Bowen's chosen career was that of a surgeon becoming a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1850. Sometime before the outbreak of the Crimean War he was gazetted Assistant Surgeon in the Royal Artillery with whom he served in that seat of war until the fall of Sebastopol in 1856. He served in the trenches before Sebastopol for six months, was present at the battle of Inkerman and was an eye-witness to the *Charge of the Light Brigade*, after which, no doubt, his skill as a surgeon was greatly called upon. He was highly decorated for his war service and at the end of those hostilities he retired from the army. In 1862 he came to Birkenhead to serve as Honorary Surgeon at the town's Borough Hospital, which post he held for 20 years before becoming Consultant Surgeon there, and he also became the Consulting Surgeon at the Wirral Children's Hospital (then on Oxtan Road). He lived for a time at Talbot House, on Talbot Road – but not the Talbot Road that we think of today. This particular Talbot Road then ran between Slatey Road and Palm Grove and was ultimately to lose its identity in favour of the later, and perhaps grander, Talbot Road in Oxtan (at one time called Dawbarns Lane). The Talbot Road on

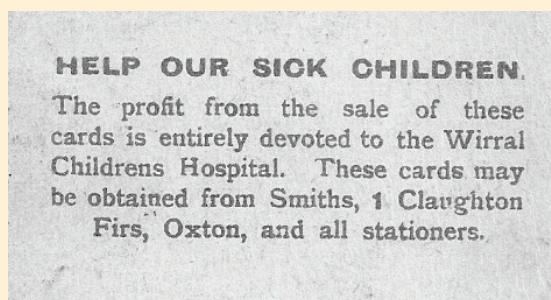
which *Talbot House* once stood became just a part of today's Balls Road. In 1880 Essex Bowen was elected President of the Birkenhead Literary and Scientific Society. Described as "*a lover of nature, a first rate rider and a first rate shot*", he died suddenly on March 18th, 1890 aged 61 years.

### Wirral Childrens Hospital

Officially opened by the Duke of Westminster in 1883, it replaced an earlier but by then inadequate building on Oxtan Road. It was, perhaps, a fitting tribute to the work of men like



Essex Bowen who were concerned for the well-being of local children. On the reverse side of this Edwardian post card there is a reminder that fund-raising in support of health care is nothing new. The building, on Woodchurch Road, is now occupied by the Wirral Christian Centre.



### Notice Board

For further information about the History Group, or anything else that you are interested in or would like to know about Oxtan's history, contact Bob Knowles at: [history@oxtonsociety.org.uk](mailto:history@oxtonsociety.org.uk)