

## WILLIAM HENDERSON'S NURSERY

Henderson's Nursery was an Oxton landmark for just on 100 years – from c1850 up to the outbreak of WW2. In its later years it occupied the piece of land on Village Road where Talbot Court now stands, but at its height it stretched across to cover the land where now are Glenmore, Templemore and Kylemore Roads.

William Henderson was born in Port Menteith, Perthshire, in either 1802 or 1803 (the 1851 Census shows his age as being 48). When he moved south to England, what took him there – or where it was that he first settled - is not known, but certainly Liverpool was a magnet for many enterprising Scots (not the least of whom was William Laird in terms of Birkenhead's history), so perhaps it was there that he first came to live.

Port Monteith is still today a particularly isolated place with farming as the main occupation of its inhabitants, and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century many young men from similar areas in Scotland came to the industrial south in search of better employment or even to make their fortunes; and many of them did! To Birkenhead was often their next move – especially in the 1840's and 1850's when *The City of the Future* was being laid out there. Mortimer, in his History of The hundred of Wirral, refers to the opening of the Scotch Church on Conway Street in the early 1840's and adds "*the Scottish population has of late years increased considerably in the district of Birkenhead*".

It is possibly the case that Henderson did not arrive in Oxton until c1850. The 1847 Oxton Tithe Map shows all of the land over which his nursery was to spread was then in the hands of William Potter and is generally described as 'Land', but it is possible that whilst Potter owned the land, it was being (had been for some time, perhaps) rented by Henderson. Certainly, Potter would not have let it stand idle.

William Potter is another interesting Oxton Man of the time. Eventually (after many moves around town) residing at 43 Rose Mount (then known as Hampden Villa), he was yet another Liverpool merchant who, having made his money in Liverpool, crossed the Mersey during Birkenhead's boom years in the early 1840's. He had been buying up available land in Birkenhead and Oxton for some time, and in Oxton he became the major landowner with 142 of its 800 acres. He had also been financially involved with a number of major developments in Birkenhead – the Docks Scheme and the Birkenhead to Chester Railway especially, but he had also embarked (with others) upon the building of speculative churches in the town. Most notably were St Anne's, St James', and of course Christchurch (then Claughton, now Oxton). The building of the latter of these was halted in 1849 when Potter became almost bankrupt along with a number of prominent Birkenhead speculators as the result of the financial crisis of the middle 1840's. McIntyre (in his work *Birkenhead Yesterday and Today*) gives us a contemporary description of the town at the depth of its depression, saying "*Grass grew in many of its principal streets. Price Street grew a crop of dog daisies, and its sole occupants were donkeys grazing, and geese*".

Perhaps it was at that point that William Henderson appeared on the scene – picking up some of Potter's land in Oxton for what was probably a very good price!

At the 1851 Census, William Henderson is recorded as being 48 years old, a Nursery Man and living at 10 Market Cross, Birkenhead. His household then consisted of his 44 year old

wife Elizabeth (born in Shoreham, Kent); Ester Henderson, his sister in law, recorded as being their Housekeeper and born in Gloucestershire: a 19 year old nephew, John Mankine, born in Scotland and 10 year old William Henderson – another nephew and born in Devonshire. There was also Mary Hughes, their servant, from Llangollen.

What this data shows first is that William Henderson at that time was already a man of some means (with a housekeeper and a servant), but it also shows that his wider family were drawn from across England. It should be considered that if Henderson was indeed so personally well placed by 1851, then either he had been operating as a nursery man in Oxton for some time, or that he had made his money elsewhere and moved his nursery business to Oxton perhaps to expand it – there being plenty of inexpensive land available there to meet his needs.

In an 1855 Cheshire Directory, William Henderson is described as being a *Nursery and Seeds Man* – and also an agent for the Lancashire Insurance Company. His private residence is given as 18 Market Cross, Birkenhead, and his nursery as being situated on Village Road. Not yet an Oxton resident, but certainly now much involved in Oxton affairs.

By the time of the 1861 Census, the Henderson household had changed again – and so had the diversity of places of birth of those of his wider family members then in his house. He is now recorded as being resident in Oxton (Village Road) so we must assume that a family house had been built there (in which case, it is certain that he actually owned the land).

On Census day, William and Elizabeth shared their new Oxton home with: 13 year old Mary Henderson (their niece, born in Ireland); an 82 years old uncle, Charles Henderson – described as a *former gardener* born in Scotland (which suggests that the wider Henderson family had been nursery owners for some time); James Knight who was born in Essex in 1844 (described as a junior clerk in a Merchant's office and who was yet another nephew), and Isabella Henderson. She was recorded as being 62 years old at the time, born in Scotland and a *House Servant* – but not as a family member!

In an 1864 Cheshire Directory, William Henderson's nursery is again listed as being on Village Road, Oxton, but it adds that he also had a premises at 2 Market Cross, Birkenhead. This, most probably, was his retail outlet – i.e. his *Florist's Shop*! An 1870 Directory (Gore's) simply adds that he is now also a *landscape gardener* – but that his shop was still at 2 Cross Street, Birkenhead.

At the 1871 Census, the Henderson household had reduced in numbers: William and Elizabeth were now sharing their Oxton home with their young nephew, William, who was now 30 years old (but had gone away since 1851, and had either now returned or was just visiting), and another Isabella Henderson (not the one who, at the 1861 Census, had been recorded as being their *servant* but one who was recorded as being William's 70 year old sister). Theresa Jones, an 18 year old young lady born somewhere in Cheshire, was their domestic servant at the time.

William was 78 years old at the time of the 1881 census. He is recorded there as still being the head of the household – in Village Road - which included: His 74 year old wife Elizabeth and his 37 year old daughter, Mary Henderson, who was born in Liverpool in 1844. This piece of information really does suggest that William Henderson had followed the classic route of many wealthy Oxton folk during the middle years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - first move to Liverpool from somewhere in Britain; next, make some money in Liverpool; then move to

Birkenhead, and then finally move to Oxton to live the grand life – but it also implies that Henderson was not, as earlier suggested, using Potters land in Oxton much before c1850. Katherine McIntosh (a visitor from Somerset) was also at the house on Village Road on the day of the Census – as was 22 year old Sarah Parr (their domestic servant born in Neston). Gore's 1882 Liverpool Directory records that William Henderson's shop had moved to 86 Hamilton Street, Birkenhead – certainly a move *up-market!*

At the 1891 Census, William is not listed (now, potentially, 88 years old, it seems that he must have passed away), but his wife, Elizabeth is – and now aged 84, she is described as the head of the household and a *Florist*, but still living in her home at 30 Village Road together with 66 year old Elizabeth Ellison (her employed *Companion*, and also born in Scotland) and 19 year old Mary Jones from Birkenhead – her Domestic Servant. In Gore's 1892 Directory of Liverpool can be found: ***Mrs Elizabeth Henderson, Nursery, 30 Village Road, Oxton.*** So even at great age, she seems to have carried on the business for a while.

By 1894, Elizabeth Henderson has disappeared (perhaps she had died), and in Kelly's Liverpool Directory of 1896, we find that whilst *William Henderson's Nursery* is listed as a business, the *proprietor* is given as John Hearn. At the 1891 Census, John Hearn is recorded as living at 22 Poplar Road. Then aged 49 (and born in Kent) he was described as being *employed* as a Nursery Manager. This suggests that after William's death, Elizabeth kept control of the family business for a few years, employing a local man as its manager, but that he eventually (quite soon, it seems) became the owner.

On an 1899 OS Map, the extent of the nursery at that time is clearly substantial: Stretching from Shrewsbury Road to Village Road and from Gerald Road on one side to Alton Road on the other. Across Village Road, it stretched from Rose Mount - bordered by Fairclough Lane and the un-adopted lane that is alongside where now Rosemount Park is, down to Village Road.

In a 1901 Directory, John Hearn is recorded as living at 30 Village Road (i.e. in the former Henderson's family house), but by 1905 there is no trace of him! Surprisingly, the business is then recorded as being in the hands of a certain (other) William Henderson living at 30 Village Road. This person might have been the nephew mentioned earlier, but if it was the he would have been 64 years old at the time, and the transfer of ownership from Henderson to Hearn, and then back to Henderson seems strange. There might, of course, had been yet another William in the Henderson family – it was something of a tradition at the time that first names were given in memory of a *greater* family member. The Laird family, as an example, is littered with Williams and Johns, and it is difficult sometimes to work out which particular William or John is being referred to! But again in Directories of 1910 – and then 1920 – we find *William Henderson, Nurseryman* living at 30 Village Road.

In a Directory of 1930, however, it is clear that neither Hearn nor the Henderson family were involved in the business. Robert Sumner is recorded as living at 30 Village Road, and the nursery is listed as being operated by *Robert Sumner & Sons*. But its immediate future and demise is not clear. In 1935 it is still recorded as being at 30 Village Road, with Robert Sumner the occupant of the house and the owner of the nursery, but just 2 or 3 years later everything changes.

The nursery on Village Road is no longer listed in Directories of the time (1938 –9), and Robert Sumner has moved to a house at 3 Wellington Road – where he also has a nursery garden (of reasonable size, but nothing like that which was in Village Road).

Unfortunately, that's where our trail ends. Just before the outbreak of WW2 the Village Road nursery established by William Henderson ceased to exist. Why? And its site lay unused until Talbot Court was built.

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