

Oxton Residents in the mid 1800s

Oxton was a surprisingly mixed community even as early as 1841. The Tithe map of 1847 shows only around 110 to 120 dwellings but living in these dwellings we find listed in the Census of 1841 as many as 40 occupational groups. These were the days before the great building boom of rich merchants' houses, so there were few residents that fitted this description and similarly few people working in "the professions".

In fact there were just seven "merchants" listed and these were likely to have been working on a smaller scale. There was one attorney and one solicitor, one architect and one resident listed as the Treasurer of the Cheshire and Birkenhead Railway, that was John James living with his wife Harriet.

In the "middle classes" we find two school mistresses, an insurance broker, a ship agent and a shipbroker. Those working in shops and services included a builder, a shoemaker, a grocer, an ironmonger, a stationer, a tailor, a printer and a bookseller (Mr Willan of Willan Street who had premises in Bold Street Liverpool). And doing the hard graft were the artisans - a smith, a plumber, 10 stonemasons, 12 stone getters, 5 farmers, a twine spinner (who may well have worked in Peter Caton's ropewalk along Wellington Road), 39 agricultural labourers (the biggest occupational group), one plasterer, only three publicans and one police constable to keep order.

It is common to hold the impression that people in mid-Victorian times didn't travel far, stayed in the vicinity where they were born and married the girl or boy next door. It is true that the roads were often poor, and in some weather virtually impassable, that sea passages were risky and railway lines were only just beginning to spread across the country. The great migration from the country to the towns that provided the human fuel for the industrial revolution was at its height a generation before. So where did Oxton folk come from?

Looking at the 1841 census we can see that around a quarter of the residents of Oxton of all ages were born in Oxton - some 130 or so people. The majority of these people were in fact labourers or farm labourers or stone getters, who hand carted the newly hewn sandstone from the various local quarries to the building sites of the mansions and villas that were being built and of course for the miles of sandstone walls that are an important feature of Oxton today. It can be seen that more than 50 Oxton residents were born in Ireland and that a good proportion of these were labourers. One family of Irish people stands out. Daniel Walsh born in 1812 in Ireland and his wife Frances born 1813 started their family in Ireland with a son John born 1836. But by 1838 they had taken up residence in Preston where they had son number 2 who they called Michael. Their next three children Mary 1843, Daniel 1845 and Frances 1847 were born in France. They then seem to have returned to England, lived in Runcorn for a short while before settling, at least for the time being, in Oxton. They resided in one of Pimms Cottages – a cluster of labourers dwellings situated along Bidston Road. But the newly arrived Irish residents were not all labourers. Lucy Blood for example was a teacher, 34 years old and living with the Armstrong family in Oxton Village and teaching 4 of the 5 Armstrong children at home as a governess. The cook and the house servant in the Armstrong house were also born in Ireland.

There was a perhaps surprisingly small population of Welsh-born people - only about 25 in total and you'd have to get up early to spot a man or woman born in Scotland, as only about a dozen of Oxton's residents were born there. Robert Miller, master joiner and Mary Whitwright, house servant to the McGill family in Village Road, were two of them. Mrs McGill, from New Brunswick Canada was one of a good number of Oxton's residents born overseas.

The largest group of residents living in Oxton, though born elsewhere, were those born in Lancashire and particularly Liverpool - around 60 people.

Many of the professional residents hailed from all parts of the country and indeed the world. Next door to the McGill's at number 2 Village Road lived the Godden family. Joseph, the head of the house was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons and Licenced Apothecaries and was born in London, while his wife Matilda was born in St Petersburg, though now a British citizen.

The greatest number of residents from overseas in the census are to be found amongst the teachers and serving staff at Lingdale House. This was a school opened on the fringes of Oxton in October 1849, when twelve sisters and 24 pupils moved from Great George's Square in Liverpool to their new boarding school. Later, in June 1863 the school moved from Lingdale House to Upton Hall and became Upton Convent. The Census gives the French Governess as Anna Grana born in France. Josephine Pretes, born in Italy, was a Governess in Italian, Josephine Dupont was born in Switzerland, as was Elegance Gerrand. Both were teachers. There were also five French house maids.

The houses along Bidston Road mostly housed residents who were listed as labourers of one sort or another. If you lived there you would find that your neighbours were mostly born locally in Bidston, Irby, Greasby, Upton, Claughton, Wallasey or West Kirby, although several families came from further afield from Denbigh, Buxton, Runcorn or Ireland.

Oxton in the 1850s was a cosmopolitan place.

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