

WILLIAM SYDNEY PENLEY (CHARLEY'S AUNT)



William Sydney Penley, in Charley's Aunt (left), with his son (above) and on his motor launch at Langman's Bridge (below right).

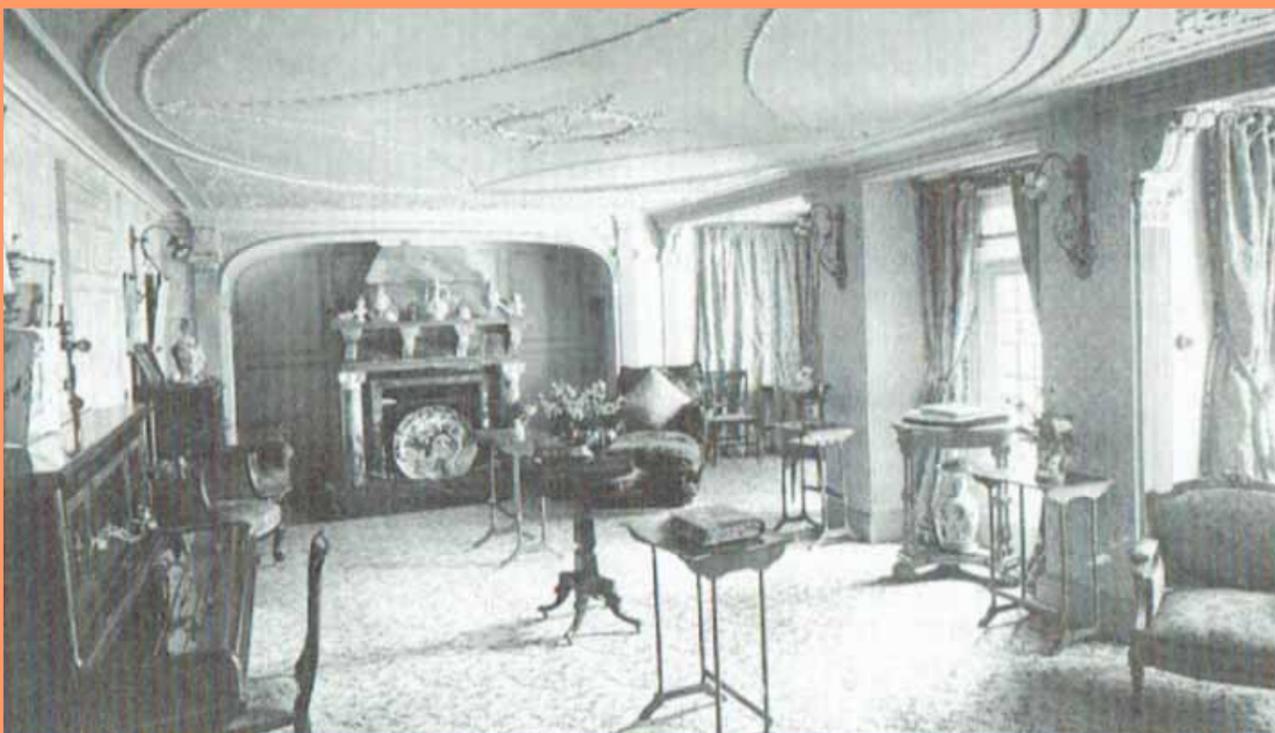
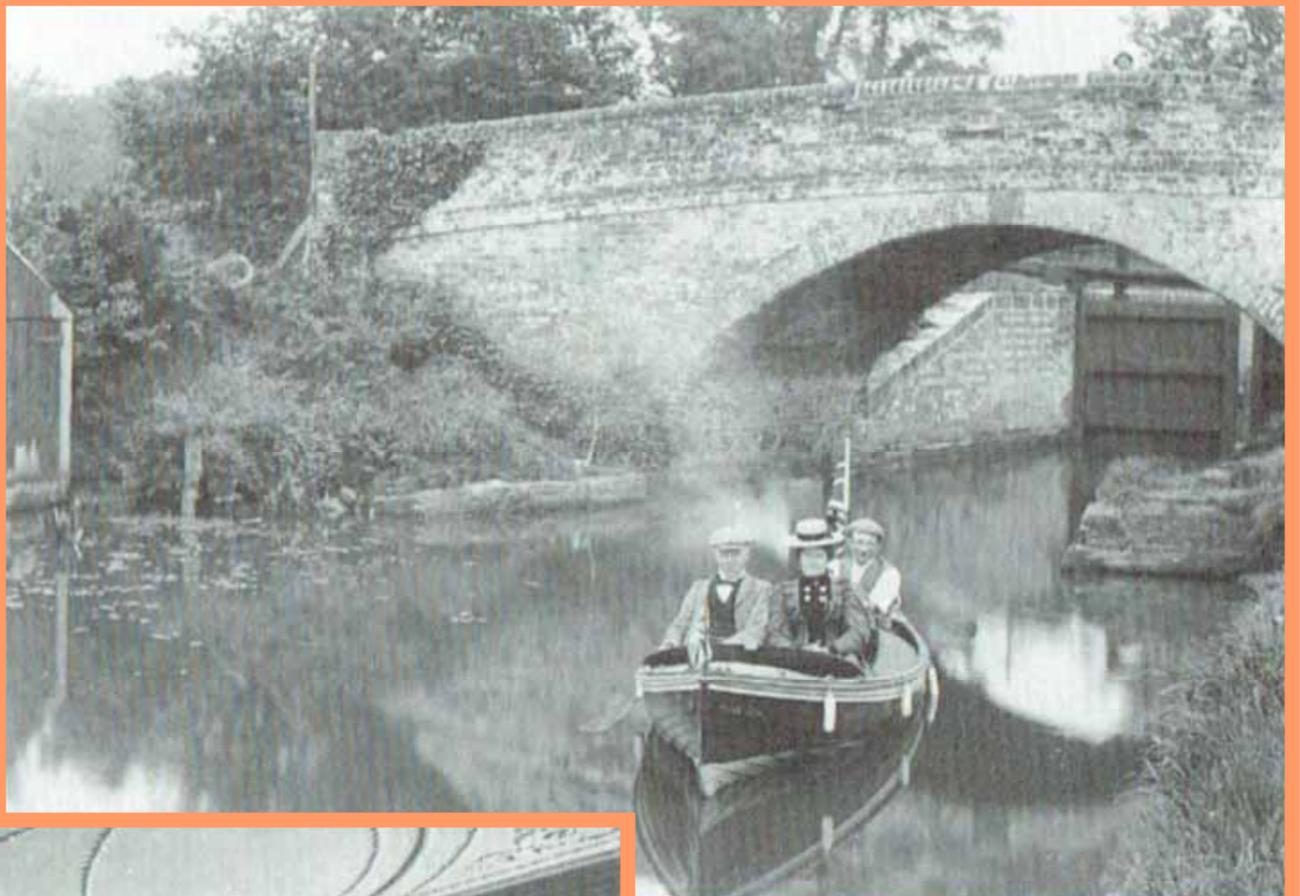
He lived at The Vines, Goldsworth Road (below left) and built the Grand Theatre in Commercial Road, Woking.



The opening of the Woking Public Hall (or Grand Theatre) appears to have been connected with a famous Victorian comic actor by the name of William Sydney Penley, who moved to Woking in the early 1890's after making his fortune in the West End (and this time I don't mean the one at Chobham).

In the 1880's he had shot to fame playing the Rev Robert Spalding in Charles Hawtrys' farce 'The Private Secretary', but it was his role of Lord Fancourt Babberley in the comic-play 'Charley's Aunt' that really made his fortune.

It was first performed in the Theatre Royal at Bury St Edmunds in February 1892, but soon transferred to the Royalty in London before going on to The Globe in 1893, running for 1,466 performances – an unprecedented number at that time, not exceeded for many years.



As well as starring in the play he also produced it, and with his fortune was able to buy a large house, then called 'The Vines' by the Basingstoke Canal at Goldsworth. The house is now divided into apartments and renamed St James House with the extensive grounds also built upon, so that it is hard to picture just how grand it was in his day.

Penley was also a freemason and in 1903 was 'Grand Treasurer of the Supreme Grand Chapter of England' bringing him into contact with Royalty, including the Duke of Connaught (at nearby Bagshot Park) and the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII).

1897 - THE OWEN ARTIFICIAL STONE WORKS AT WORPLESDON STATION

Iain Wakeford 2015

According to the Glasgow Herald on the 4th November 1897,

'a number of engineers and architects went down to Woking today to visit new works for the manufacture of stone on a system which originated with tests of stone made with sand got on the shores of the Firth of Forth near Dunfermline, and later at Bathgate where also works are established. The process invented by Mr William Owen differs from most other methods of processing artificial stone in that heat is applied not only to the component sand and lime, but more especially to the water used in pressing them into a homogeneous mass. Ordinary sand is used, the location of the works at Woking having been determined because of the subsoil there being entirely Bagshot Sand. The sand is headed in a cylinder which revolved in the boiler fire, and thence passes into hoppers whence it drops along with its proportion of lime into another cylinder which rotates to ensure a thorough mixture. The proportions are 12½ per cent of lime to 87½ per cent of sand. In the form of a powder well mixed both are dropped into moulds formed of steel, and these moulds are run into large cylinders placed horizontally. The cylinder is then closed. Hot water is pumped into the cylinder until the pressure is 60lb to the square inch, while at the same time the temperature is maintained at 300 degrees by steam at 100lb pressure in pipes within the cylinder. This continues for 33 hours, when the water is withdrawn, but the steam pressure is continued for 15 hours longer to thoroughly dry the stone and even then it is allowed slowly to cool, so that the stone takes 50 to 60 hours to make. Slabs of 4½ tons weight can thus be made, and the form of mould determines the shape or amount of ornamentation, while colour can be varied by chemicals. Exposure to the air hardens the stone, and at the end of a month it was found in tests that it withstood pressure of 4000lb to the square inch. Messrs R R Tatlock & Readman of Edinburgh have tested it in other respects, the Dunfermline sand showing 93.64 per cent of silica and 9.3 of lime, 23 per cent of iron and alumina oxides and 8.25 per cent of water when only four days old. It is said to stand the effects of hydrochloric acid better even than Aberdeen granite.'

It has been suggested that the new Albion Hotel, begun in 1897, incorporated a new artificial stone manufactured locally by a gentleman called William Owen (who lived at Craigmore – a house that in the 1960's was demolished and replaced by Craigmore Towers).

The Owen Stone Works, near Worplesdon Station, opened in November 1897 making artificial stone that the journal 'The British Architect' described as being 'equal to the best Portland', whilst the Glasgow Herald reported that 'it is said to stand the effects of hydrochloric acid better even than Aberdeen granite.'

The British Architect added that 'an important fact too that should not be overlooked is the fireproof quality of the stone. In this respect the stone has proved itself to be alike impervious to the fiercest flames or the sudden application of cold water upon the stone when at glowing heat'.

A catalogue issued by the company showed some ornamental work made by their skilled stone carvers, including the 'balustraded porch of a Woking hotel; the 'old' font at Worplesdon Church; a gargoyle; a carved panel and a fountain'.

Again according to The British Architect, the stone had been 'as thoroughly tested as it could be by any ordinary means - in the crushing tests also, applied at the Broadway Testing Works, Westminster, the results were in every way most satisfactory. In fact it would seem that the only test left to be applied is the actual one of time itself.'

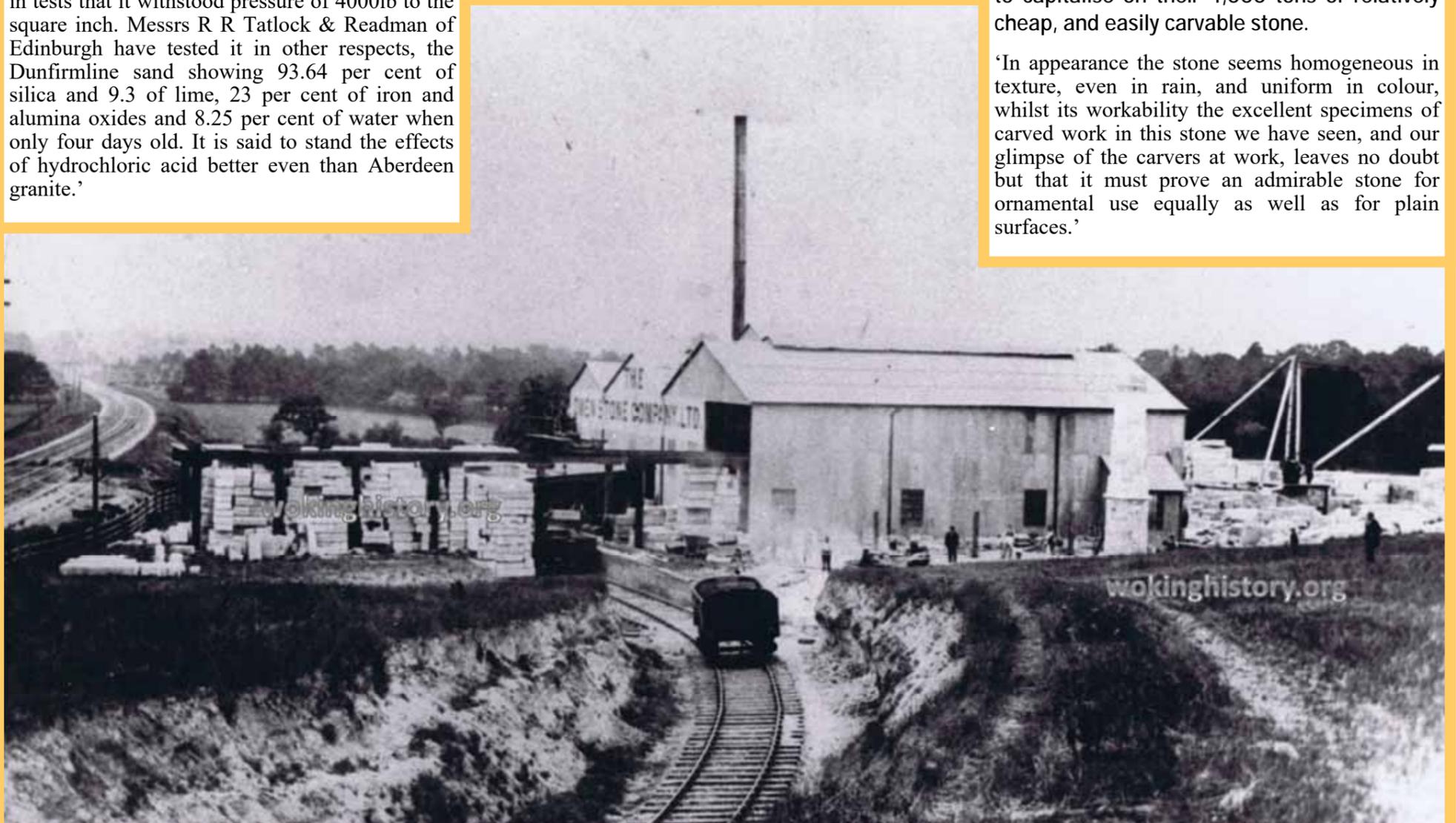
Unfortunately it seems that that was the one test the 'Owen Stone' failed! Within a few years the stone began to crumble, but fortunately for Mr Owen it appears that he discovered the problem before anyone else did and sold up before the company went bust in about 1910.

The article in 'The British Architect' of the 18th November 1898, was a little more 'flowery' (in every sense of the word) than the Glasgow Herald.

'Away down in Surrey, where the pine woods flourish and the heather blooms in luxuriant profusion, and where quaint old villages give a drowsy interest to the surrounding landscape, lie the works of the Owen-Stone Company Limited, snugly tucked away under the lee of a great sandhill close to Worplesdon Station on the South-Western line from London to Guildford. However it was the sand and not the lovely situation that proved the attraction in this case, for the artificial stone which the Owen-Stone Company are engaged in producing is composed of this quartzose sand and hydraulic lime, hence this extensive bed of beautiful fine sand covering some 20 acres (already tapped to a depth of about 160ft) proved to be a most suitable locale for the new works'.

The firm had been going for just over a year and the problems of the stone crumbling had not yet been discovered. Indeed it appears that the works were being expanded. With so many properties being built all over the country at this time, and the works at Worplesdon Station having their own sidings and direct access to the vast Victorian rail network, the company was in an ideal position to capitalise on their 4,000 tons of relatively cheap, and easily carvable stone.

'In appearance the stone seems homogeneous in texture, even in rain, and uniform in colour, whilst its workability the excellent specimens of carved work in this stone we have seen, and our glimpse of the carvers at work, leaves no doubt but that it must prove an admirable stone for ornamental use equally as well as for plain surfaces.'



DEVELOPMENT AT DERISLEY'S IN 1898

The date on the building is 1898, although the 'arch' underneath, to the houses behind, is much newer, 'progress' dictating that the old butcher's shop, established by Lloyd Derisley was no longer required. The planners in their ultimate wisdom decided that whilst the locally listed building should be saved as much as possible, the old shop front - the wonderful long marble counter; the original Victorian tiled Angus steer; and the little wooden payment office at the back of the shop (let's face it, the real reason the building was locally listed in the first place) – didn't matter, so long as the developers could make as much money as possible.

The Derisley family came originally from Diss in Norfolk, but by the 1860's Lloyd's elder brother Robert, had moved down to Wisley where he farmed Church Farm. Lloyd (the youngest of seven) was sent to help him, delivering churns of milk to customers in the surrounding district. Over time as well as selling milk the brothers also started selling meat, and eventually in the late 1890's Lloyd decided to set up shop, building his north facing premises at the entrance to Byfleet village so that the carcasses of meat could be hung up outside (or in the covered passageway shielded from the sun).

Later a refrigerator was installed at the back of the shop (one of the first in the area), with ammonia piped into the room from where it was made in an outhouse in the back-yard – all gone, of course, another victim to 'progress' (or should that be 'profit')!

