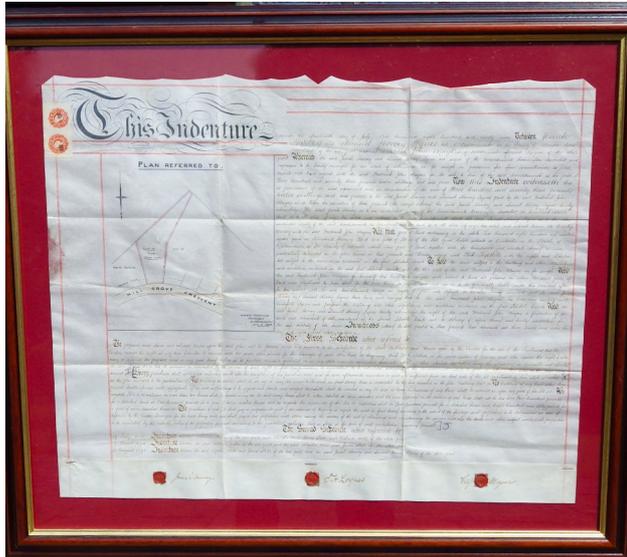


Oakhill Discoveries.

Following on from my article in Volume II of the Orchard, we have continued to make some interesting discoveries about Oakhill and its history and construction that I would like to share with our readers.

The deeds of sale.



It is difficult to imagine exactly what the area around Oakhill would have looked like when we consider the current landscape of multiple trees and houses, although obviously we would hope there are clues in the name of the house! We have, however, been fortunate enough to be able to track down some of the original deeds that F.J. Mayers signed when purchasing Oakhill, and these include maps and descriptions of the area. These would seem to indicate that

Oakhill was one of the first, if not the first house to be built on Hill Grove crescent. It would appear that most of the surrounding land was owned by Roger William Oldnall, an honorary Captain in the Worcester Regiment and son of a distinguished Judge, who lived in nearby Sion House, Chaddesley Corbett, the family being granted the right to use the surname Oldnall and an associated Coat of arms by Royal license from Queen Victoria in 1897. As part of the purchase agreement, F.J. Mayers was, according to the deeds, required to 'erect and forever after maintain a good and sufficient boundary wall or fence along the westwardly and northwardly sides of the said piece of land and will maintain such fences in such condition as to keep out cattle and sheep'. This obviously suggests undeveloped farm land surrounding the house and early ordinance survey maps from 1885 seem to confirm this, with little further property development until the 1920s. There are several aerial photographs of Hill Grove Crescent from 1932 on the internet that show firstly the development of the nearby Kidderminster Golf course, and secondly, several large houses, many of Arts and Crafts design, possibly demonstrating the influence Oakhill had on the style of local properties. Some of these houses still exist, although a few, built on quite extensive pieces of land, have been demolished and replaced with modern housing estates.

Water storage tank

We have also found an underground water storage tank with a well style opening into the tank. The tank itself is situated within the boundary of the walls of Oakhill just inside what was, according to the original plans, the rear entrance to the building (labeled 'shed' on the original plans, adjacent to the scullery at the entrance to what is now part of an extension built in the 1990s) and extends under the scullery so almost certainly must have been part of the original construction. It does however,

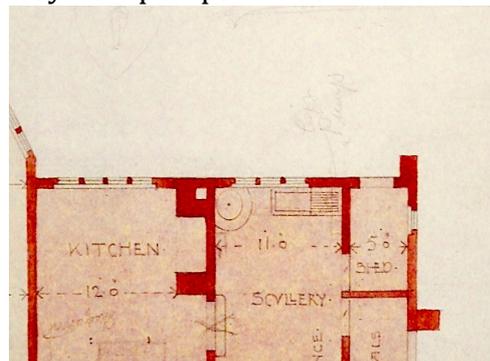


seem an odd place to site a well opening – right under your feet as you walk through a door. From what I can gather from my research, such wells have one of two roles – either to help disperse accumulated water as a soak away or to collect and store water. The former seems unlikely with Oakhill been situated on the top of a small hill with natural drainage, and from what I can see inside the tank, the construction of the well and the tank itself also make it seem unlikely to

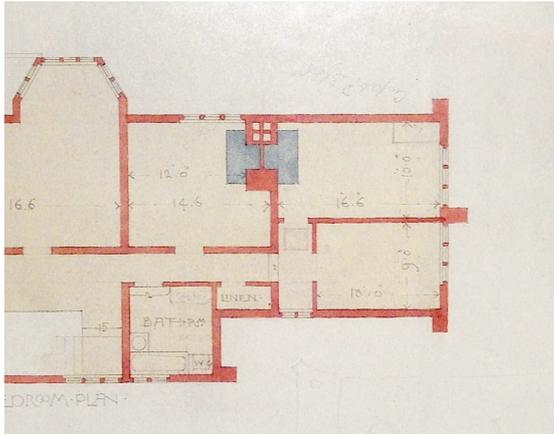


be for this purpose. The latter, however, makes sense, especially with the scullery, the traditional place to clean pots and pans and to do laundry, being situated right next door. Historically running water was available only in some middle class family homes from the 1850s onwards but this was only supplied between 3 and 5 days a week and never on Sundays. Uninterrupted water supplies were only just starting to be developed when Oakhill was constructed, so I would imagine that this tank would be used for collecting water to supplement an intermittent water supply. One other supportive observation is a

small penciled square seen drawn on Voysey's drawings of Oakhill on the wall of the scullery adjacent to the entrance where the well opening lies. There is a line from this small square to some faint sideways writing just above the scullery, which, although not easy to read, appears to say 'loft pumps'. Was water from this well pumped into storage tanks in the loft to allow gravitational feed on demand? It is something I have never heard of, but seems to fit with the evidence. I have seen on some other of Voysey's wonderful drawings, green water butts for collecting rainwater, but I can find no reference to underground water storage tanks. I wonder if any of our readers are aware of Voysey houses with similar water storage facilities.



Loft storage space.



We have been aware of an additional 'room' in the loft of Oakhill and have often wondered about the origins of this room. The room itself does not appear on the original plans but interestingly there is a small square penciled in on Voysey's plans between the three rooms in the west wing of the house (see adjacent) that correlates exactly to where the loft entrance is, suggesting that access to the loft and so possibly the room as

well, could be an original part of Oakhill's construction. The loft room is situated above what we have been told was accommodation for a maid / housekeeper. Entrance to the loft is gained by a tapered oak stepladder, oval in cross section, with tapered oval rungs, and an elongated flat rung at the top, which hooks over two metal loops on the side of the entrance to the loft. Although obviously old, the ladder has proved difficult to date accurately as there are no manufacturer's mark or label on the ladder itself, and no other visible clues as to its origin. The only comparable ladder I have been able to identify dates from the 1920s and was manufactured by H.C. Slingsby, a company still in existence. This ladder differs from the Oakhill ladder in that it is entirely rectangular in cross section, but is similar in design in so far as it is tapered and has the elongated rung at the top. I have contacted H.C. Slingsby who tell me unfortunately they do not have records going this far back so my research on the ladder itself has



reached a dead end here. There are, however two unusual washers that secure the top rung to the ladder, and my research has indicated that the unusual style of these washers can be accurately dated to the late Victorian era which obviously fits with the date of construction of the house, suggesting the ladder could have been supplied with the construction of the loft in mind.



Once you open the loft door and enter the loft, you notice immediately above your head a pulley, which is attached to a roof beam and lying almost exactly centrally over the loft door aperture. There is no indication as to how long this pulley has been there or how old the pulley actually is, but the position of the loft aperture directly under a roof beam and the way the pulley has been sited over the middle of the opening, could indicate a degree of planning in locating the loft door and pulley together, and as the beam in the roof must be original, it possibly seems to point to all of these features being installed around the same time.

Once in the loft, the door to the loft room is immediately on your right and sited exactly centrally to the eaves of the roof. The design of the door is similar to all the other doors in the house, but consists of

four panels instead of six and the door itself is less substantial than the other doors in the house, and so considerably lighter. The whole area is painted a shade of green, a colour I can't help but associate with Voysey. Of note are the door handle, latch and lock, which is a typical Victorian steel and brass rim lock. There is a manufacturer's stamp on the lock, indicating manufacture by a company called Parker Winder and Achurch, which was based on Broad Street, Birmingham. The company was founded in 1836 by William Parker who, as business grew, was subsequently joined by initially Alfred Winder in 1873, and finally John Achurch in 1890. The fact that the lock has the names of



all three of these people on it therefore dates it to after 1890 and the fact that the lock appears to be typically Victorian once again gives us a very useful timeline for when the room is likely to have been made. **Logically the room itself should be a storage room. However, at some stage the beams within the room have been paneled over, beading applied around the edges and the panels wall papered over, as evidenced by the fragments of wall paper still stuck on the remnants of the paneling we have found attached to some of the beams. This would seem a lot of trouble to go to for a storage room unless the room had some other unidentified purpose. There is one small fragment of wallpaper where a pattern is visible and the pattern is quite ornate, possibly showing flowers or fruit but unfortunately (much as I would like it to be) not recognisable as any particular Voysey design.** Given the pencil square on Voysey's drawings of Oakhill, and the

likely time lines we have been able to establish on the ladder and loft room, despite the fact that the room does not appear on the original drawings, I feel there is enough supportive evidence to suggest that this could be an original feature. Also, given Voysey's obsessional attention to detail, I would expect nothing less than for him to deal with not just the room itself, but access and usage as well. I would like to think this is the case here.

Dr. Jonathan Darby