

## 21 Bedford St – house history

When we bought 21 Bedford St back in 1994, the previous owners handed to us a pack of deeds, some beautifully handwritten, tied up with a ribbon. These cover the period from 1895 to 1956. We are pretty certain the first houses actually built in Bedford St were numbers 17 and 19, by a father for his two daughters. A street map of 1900 shows only the plots 21 and 23 marked out, but they remained vacant for some years. Other plots were sold off for development over time.



Closely involved in this development, in both East and South Oxford, was Walter Gray. His is a fascinating story. He rose from being a railway porter to steward of Keble and then started to build up property investments. As his portfolio expanded, he became one of several who led the speculative development of N Oxford and eventually became Mayor of Oxford.

[https://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/mayors/1836\\_1962/gray\\_walter\\_1888\\_1901.html](https://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/mayors/1836_1962/gray_walter_1888_1901.html)

And it is with Walter Gray that the story of 21 Bedford Street begins:

1895

Walter Gray, Esquire, and James Mace Dormor, Gentleman, sell plots 21 and 23 to Mark Keen of 70 James St for £80. Elsewhere I have found Dormer described as a brewer's agent from Summertown. Mark Keen was born in 1843 and in the 1881 census was living in Headington with his wife and four young children.

1905

Mark Keen sells both plots to Thomas Herbert Cantell, a tailor, of 19 Bedford St, for £126. Cantell had a mortgage of £95 from the Oxford Coop and Industrial Society. There is a Cantell family living in Headington in the 1881 census – Thomas William b.1849 is a bricklayer, and has a baby son called Thomas Herbert.

<https://www.findmypast.co.uk/1881-census>

1906

Thomas Cantell sells the plots on to Charles Henry English, a carpenter and joiner of 18 Littlegate St St Ebbe's for £145.

1907

Charles English takes out a mortgage of £150 at 4% interest from the Loyal Borough Lodge Trustees (Oddfellows Manchester Unity Friendly Society). Presumably this loan, several months after the purchase, was to build the houses, which are clearly a pair.

1930

In February, Charles English dies, and in October his widow, Hannah Martha (now living at 133 Portland Rd Bournemouth) sells the house for £735 to Alexander Victor John Walker, publisher's clerk, and Helena Elizabeth Walker, spinster and schoolmistress, both of 2 Chester St, brother and sister. Moving up in the world to a bigger house? They took out a mortgage of £400 from the Oxford Industrial and Provident Land and Building Society.

It appears from the property register searches included in our bundle of documents that the Englishes had already moved to Bournemouth before his death, and are described as 'formerly of 143 Dulwich Rd Herne Hill'. Had the house been rented out some or all of that time? Did Charles English buy the plot and build as an investment rather than to live in? As a carpenter and joiner he might have done much of the work himself.

1946

Helena Walker dies and leaves her share to her brother Alexander.

1955

When Alexander dies his will appoints as executor Sidney Frank Florey, a schoolmaster from Hassocks, Sussex. (Relationship not specified, but in the next transaction he is described as vendor as well as executor, so may have inherited).

1956

Florey sells the house for £1650 to Edward Alexander Robbins, wood machinist, and his wife Dorothy May of 59 Argyle St. (It seems people moving to Bedford St from other parts of Iffley Fields is not new!) Mr and Mrs Robbins had a mortgage from the Cheltenham and Gloucester.

This where the records stop.

We (both academics) bought the house from Iain and Jane Tenquist, solicitors, in 1994 for what seemed then the princely sum of £135,000. They moved to Raleigh Park, and now live in the Cheshire/Lancs area.

There's every reason to think these past owners are pretty representative of the social history of this area. A tailor; a carpenter and joiner who later rents out the house; a publisher's clerk and his spinster schoolmistress sister; a wood machinist; and then two solicitors and two academics. It's our house now, but only for a while. We're just tenants, really.

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