

Who lived in a house like this?

A man of steel, mad on tennis

Many look forward to a summer of tennis, but not many loved the game more than a local steel boss



Wightwick Hall as it is today

By **DAVID COOPER**
Bugle correspondent

AS tennis fans prepare for this year's Wimbledon Tennis Championships, The Bugle reveals a Black Country captain of industry who had ten lawn tennis courts in his back garden.

The time-honoured process of naming urban public thoroughfares, parks and public buildings is often used to pay tribute to a citizen who has contributed to the local community in some way or another. In Wolverhampton, Bilston, Tipton and Wednesfield, there are several road signs bearing the Hickman name and a public park in Bilston carrying it too.

The man is **Sir Alfred Hickman**,

born in Tipton, 1830, son of **George Rushbury Hickman**, owner of Moat Colliery situated in the Summer Hill district on Upper Church Lane, which along with the Birmingham Canal Navigation's (BCN) Ocker Hill Branch canal – now abandoned – formed the boundary of the extensive mine workings.

At the time, common in family businesses, Alfred, aged 16 joined his father to later inherit the coal mine and sometime later to acquire **Springfield Iron Works**, Bilston. By the age of 20, living in Swan Lane, Bilston he had earned the mantle of a budding entrepreneur destined to join an elite aristocracy of Black Country giants of industry, in his case as an "Iron

master".

His ironworks was praised as the finest in Europe. Clearly, he was a man of colossal energy and foresight, blessed with social prestige and municipal endeavour. He was knighted in 1891; created a Baronet 1903; president of the British Iron Trades Council; MP for Wolverhampton West on two occasions between 1885 and 1906; president of Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club; chairman, Staffordshire Railway and Canal Freighters Association and the driving force in the formation of Tarmac construction materials in Bilston.

In 1906 he was given the honour of freedom of the borough of Wolverhampton. Along the way, the Hickman empire procured ironstone mines in Oxfordshire and collieries in North Warwickshire to warrant the reputation of the largest employer in England.

Thirty years after acquisition, Springvale Iron Works and the **Staffordshire Steel & Ingot Iron Co.** amalgamated to become **Alfred Hickman Ltd**, on a site comprising of 200 acres. By 1920, the business was sold to **Stewarts & Lloyds**, which became responsible in 1954 for the construction of a dominant, towering industrial landmark, visible across Bilston town and beyond. This new furnace, replacing the outdated original three Hickman furnaces, alone delivered 275,000 tons of steel a year.

It was given the name "Elisabeth", taken from the name of the daughter of S&L's chairman. It was a name that became familiar to almost everyone in the town for the next twenty-five years until the final billet was cast on 12th April 1979, ending two hundred years of iron and steel production at the site. Monolithic Elisabeth was demolished eighteen months later leaving a gap in Bilston town landscape, its industrial heritage and its significant employment base of 2,500.

Sir Alfred Hickman
1830 - 1910



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