

A view of Alfred Hickman's Bilston works, 1953



Seen today, the 1880, indoor tennis court in the grounds of Wightwick Hall

For his choice of location for his family residence, Hickman selected from his constituency the affluent suburban surroundings of Tettenhall, a decision probably influenced by other higher social industrialists residing in the area who also had made their fortunes out of iron and steel. Some like Hickman in raw materials, and others in consumer products made from the process.

Best described as an escarpment which provided distant views of Bilston, the Tettenhall ridge roll call of well-heeled owners of elegant stately homes includes:

Colonel Thomas Thorneycroft (iron and inventions); **Sir Geoffrey le Mesurier Mander** (paint and varnish); **John Marston**, (Sunbeam cycles, motor cycles, cars and buses), **Sir Charles Marston**, (Villiers engines); to be joined by Sir Alfred Hickman at Wightwick Hall on Tinacre Hill, Wolverhampton – not to be confused with the nearby

Mander family's Wightwick Manor, today a gem, maintained by the National Trust.

Alfred Hickman's plans to construct Wightwick Hall on the high ground of Tinacre Hill, reflected a dwelling expected of a man of substantial wealth, in size and setting, in a fine distinctive red brick, skilfully adorned by intricate red terracotta features. The huge estate had spacious stables, coach house and staff accommodation, set along tree-lined drives leading to an imposing gatehouse.

In one of the exquisite stained-glass windows at the main entrance to the hall, the craftsman was instructed to add Hickman's family motif of *igne et ferro*: (Fire and Iron).

An account confirms that Sir Alfred was an enthusiastic and competitive sportsman who was playing tennis well into his seventies, and a report reveals that at one time there

were no less than ten lawn tennis courts in the extensive landscaped grounds.

He also commissioned in 1880 the building of an indoor lawn tennis court, luxuriously fitted out with changing rooms of green glazed tiles and central heating from an integral coal fired boiler. Above the door, Hickham had carved in local sandstone his aforementioned motto, surrounded by crossed rackets and tennis balls beneath a crested shield.

The hall served him and his wife **Lucy Owen** with a lifestyle that was to bring forth eight children, four girls and four boys. In the census of 1901, Sir Alfred was living in the spacious hall with only his wife and two daughters, **May**, 35, and **Lillian** aged 28.

Sir Alfred Hickman died aged 80 in 1910, prompting the family to bequeath 12 acres of land to Bilston town council to create a public park complete with open air theatre, which would bear the Hickman name.

It opened one year later in Wolverhampton Street, Bilston. It is said that 50,000 people filled the streets for the funeral with a burial service at St Bartholomew's church, Penn, Wolverhampton.

In later years Wightwick Hall became the home of **Sir Walter Evans** (1872-1954) a renowned hydraulic engineer and public servant of Staffordshire County Council. During the Second World War, Allied troops, including from the USA, were billeted in Nissan huts throughout the grounds of the Hall in the run-up to D-Day.

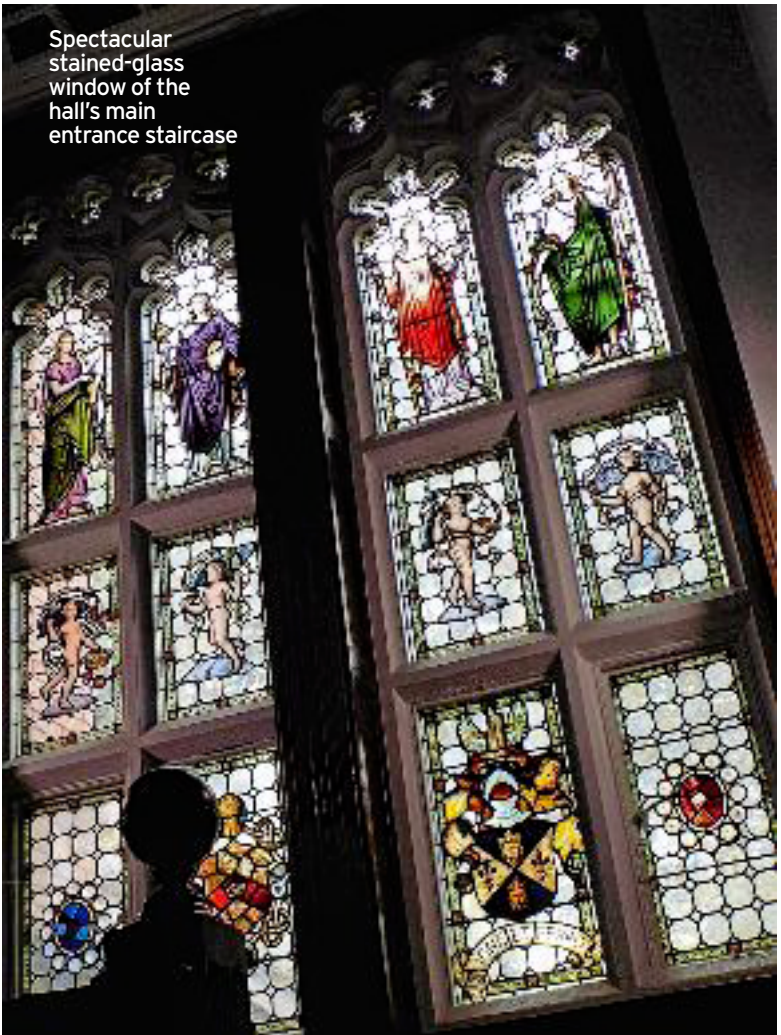
Today, the splendid residential legacy of Alfred Hickman is home to Wightwick Hall School catering for students with a wide range of individual needs for children from the ages of 11 to 19.

■ Acknowledgements: **Wightwick Hall School; Robert T Everitt**, author of *One Hundred Sporting Summers*, a history of Bilston Lawn Tennis Club available at Wolverhampton public libraries.

There was an indoor tennis court with green glazed tiles and central heating



The family motif above the entrance to indoor tennis court



Spectacular stained-glass window of the hall's main entrance staircase



Close up of family motif (fire and iron) set in stained glass window