

# THE BUTLER FAMILY [1691 – 1927]

- previous owners of -

'Bleak House', 85 Lichfield Road, Coldfield

by Keith Jordan.

Henry Butler, who became the Owner of 'Bleak House' in 1891 when he purchased it from the Trustees of Thomas Hayward, was born in Walsall in 1842. He later married, his Wife Sarah coming from nearby Netherton. This is now within the boundary of Staffordshire but, at the time, it fell across the border in Worcestershire and is described thus on the Census. They had seven children, four girls & three boys, all of whom were born in Walsall. <sup>1</sup>

As a young man Henry Butler joined his Father, John Henry Butler, in the family firm of Saddlers. The firm itself was initially established in 1812, during the reign of George III. In Slaters Directory of Staffordshire 1850, it was described as Butler Bros & Whitehouse of Park Street, Walsall. Between 1860 and 1876 the firm's title changed to J. Butler & Sons and subsequently, in 1891, they traded under the name of Butler Bros.

They operated from their premises at Park Street for over 100 years, before moving to larger accommodation in Long Street, Walsall, which was known as the 'Triumph Works'. Both these premises were extremely well positioned, Park Street<sup>2</sup> being situated opposite to Walsall Railway Station and Long Street<sup>3</sup> alongside the railway line, where there were railway goods sidings<sup>4</sup>. The finished manufactured articles could therefore be dispatched, without delay, to all parts of the Country and also to the docks, for subsequent shipping overseas.



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Goodall st. Tel 3091

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Established in the Reign of George III

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Street

During the latter years, the firm's name changed yet again, this time to Butler Brothers [Walsall] Ltd. and, when they finally ceased trading in the early 1980's, they were based at 27, Eldon Street, Walsall.<sup>5</sup>

The firm advertised quite extensively during its long in the saddlery industry and it is interesting to note the wide range of leathers goods offered for sale to the general public. Butler Bros., in their earlier days, appeared to specialise in saddles, harness & associated equipment for Polo, Hunting & Racing purposes. Later on, their range was extended to incorporate riding boots & dog furnishings, in addition to fancy & general leather goods. This was done to keep pace with changes in the market.

Returning to the family, it has already been mentioned that Henry Butler was born in Walsall, as were all his children. However, it was to the leafy open spaces of Sutton Coldfield that he eventually turned, when deciding upon a permanent place of residence. In 1891, at the time of the Census to be published, he & his family were living at 'Ruskin Lodge', Tudor Hill, Sutton Coldfield.

He was described on the Census as an 'Australian Merchant' and two of his three Sons, namely, John Henry & Harold, aged 19 & 17 were working in the family business as Clerks. The youngest Son, Erick Rock Butler, was only 14 at the time and was at school. It can also be ascertained from the Census that the Butlers were a wealthy family, as they employed the services of a full time Cook, Housemaid & Gardener.

The Business must have continued to flourish & prosper as, in the same year, Henry Butler commissioned Titley & Jones, a firm of Architects of Bennetts Hill, Birmingham, to design a fine Gentleman's residence to be situated on land at the rear of 'Bleak House'.<sup>6</sup> The total area of land in question was approximately 10 acres. Detailed Plans were drawn up<sup>7</sup> and it can be seen from these that the property consisted of three storeys, in addition to having a basement.

1100 No 131.

Notice No. 1.

BOROUGH OF SUTTON COLDFIELD.

H Butler Esq  
Residence  
Sutton Coldfield

Form of Notice of Commencement of a New Street or Building  
required to be given under Bye-Law No. 93.

June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1891

To the BOROUGH SURVEYOR,  
Sutton Coldfield.

Sir,

I hereby give you Notice that I intend to commence  
on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of June 1891.  
the (a) Erection of one House  
in Highfield Road  
for M<sup>r</sup> H. Butler

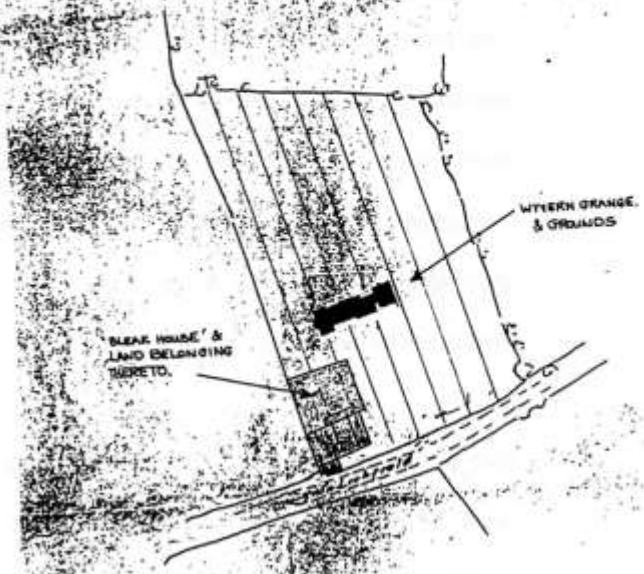
plans and details of which were approved by the Town  
Council on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of May 1891.

Name Mark Lloyd.  
Address Sutton Coldfield.  
(b) (Builder)

(a) Erection of new or more Streets; laying out or construction of a new  
street; or other works.

(b) Owner, Agent, Architect, or Builder.

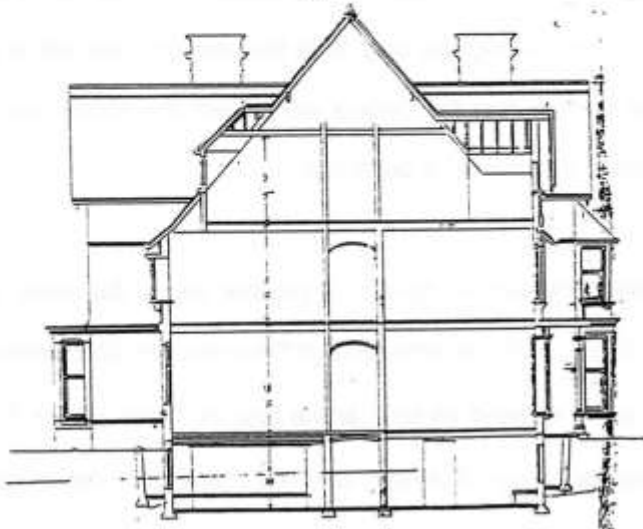
This Notice was received on the 25<sup>th</sup> day  
of June 1891.  
Signed R.P.W.



Block plan.

H. Butler Esq  
Residence Sutton Coldfield

Lilley Jones  
Arch<sup>t</sup>



Section C.D.

Extracts from Building  
Plan No. 131

The Basement was sub-divided into Cellars for the storage of wine and dry goods. A Dairy and large rainwater tank were also included. On the Ground Floor, the spacious floor area provided a Breakfast Room, Drawing Room, Dining Room & Kitchen as well as Pantry, Larder, Scullery & W.C.'s. A Carriage Yard with Coach House, Stall & Loose Box were also built. The First Floor comprised four Bedrooms, Sitting Room & Bathroom, whilst on the Second Floor there were no fewer than six Attic Rooms. The Builder was Mark Lloyd of Sutton Coldfield and it was arranged that work should commence on the 24th June 1891.<sup>8</sup> The foundations were completed shortly afterwards on the 17th July.<sup>9</sup>

Henry Butler & his family took up residence as soon as the house was completed and this is recorded on the Burgess Rolls of 1903-05.<sup>10</sup>

It is intriguing to note that, although Henry Butler was the owner of 'Bleak House' between 1891 & 1927, it would appear that he never actually lived there himself. It is possible that he only purchased the property in order to take possession of the land itself and may have had every intention of demolishing the fine Georgian residence once 'Wyvem Grange' was completed !

Thankfully, for one reason or another, this did not happen and 'Bleak House' stood unoccupied for over 30 years until his eldest Son, John Henry Butler, took possession in 1924. This can be established by reference to the Register of Electors [Trinity Ward] for that year and also to the Sutton Coldfield Directory.<sup>11</sup>

His Father died on the 23rd November 1915 aged 73. His Mother survived for a further 11 years and, when she died on the 1st November 1926, she had reached the rather grand old age, for those times, of 83.

## THE BUTLER FAMILY [OWNERS OF 'BLEAK HOUSE' 1891-1927]

BASED UPON INFORMATION TAKEN FROM 1891 CENSUS RETURN [NO. 61] AND LAST WILL & TESTAMENT OF HENRY BUTLER DATED 9/3/1914. CENSUS TAKEN WHILST FAMILY WERE LIVING AT 'RUSKIN LODGE', TUDOR HILL, SUTTON COLDFIELD.

Name	Relationship	Condition	D.O.B.	Occupation	Age	Birthplace	Date of Death	Aged	Will
BUTLER, Henry.	Head of Household	Married	1842	Australian Merchant	49	Walsall, Stafford	23.11.1915	73	Yes
" Sarah	Wife	Married	1843	Housewife	48	Netherton, Worcester	01.11.1926	83	Yes
" Sarah Anne	Daughter	Single				Walsall, Stafford.			No
" Florence	"	"	1867		24	"			No
" Elizabeth Edith	"	"	1869		22	"			No
" Elizabeth Mary	"	"	1870		21	"			No
" John Henry	Son	Single (later married)	1872	Clerk	19	"	03.01.1937	65	Yes
" Harold B.	Son	Single	1874	Clerk	17	"			No
" Erick Rock	Son	Single (later married)	1877	Schoolboy	14	"			No
Servants									
FRANCIS, Julia	Servant	Single		Housemaid	32	Essington Stafford			No
GRIFFITHS, Elizabeth	Servant	Single		Cook	29	Martley, Worcester			No

Name of Applicant	Age in 1890	Father's Name & Occupation	Address	Date of Application	Date of Entry	Remarks
153 Taylor Paul	10 Sept 12	Paul Taylor Commercial Traveller	Stratford Avenue Wylde Green	Dec 20 1890	Jan 20 1891	Admitted
154 Parker Harry	9 June 23	Henry Parker Ironmonger	East Clith Sutton Clithfild	Jan 18 91	Jan 20	Admitted left term 90
155 Allen Arthur	12 Oct 30	Thomas Allen Sec <sup>y</sup> Loan Office	Avenue Road Sutton Clithfild	Jan 18 91	Jan 20	Admitted left term 91
156 Moore George L.	10 May 31	Jacob Moore Saddler	The Woodlands Dyke Way Stratford	Aug 29 90	Jan 27	Admitted
157 Clarke A. Harry	12 May 25	James Clarke	Veg Veen, Babbly R. Daventry	Jan 1 91	Jan 20	
158 Dain, Frederick S	15 January 17 <sup>th</sup>	Major Dain Driffield	Wheat Sutton Clithfild	April 91	May 5	left term 91
159 Dain Arthur E	9 May 15	" "	" "	" "	" "	
160 Butler, Erick	12 April 13 <sup>th</sup>	Henry Butler Leather Merchant	Tudor Hill	May 5 91	May 5	left Easter 1892
161 Butler, Oswald	11 March 26	William F Butler Leather Merchant	Clifton Road	May 2 91	May 5	

Extract from the Register of Bishop Vesey's Grammar School

John Henry Butler and his Brother, Erick Rock, were named Sole Executors of their Fathers Will, the other brother, Harold, having died at a relatively early age.

At the time of his Father's death, John Henry was residing at 'Ellesmere', Anchorage Road, Sutton Coldfield. Following in his Father's footsteps John Henry Butler, who was an Old Veseyan, having been admitted to the school in 1882,<sup>12</sup> became a Senior Partner in the firm.

As a young man, he travelled to Australia to oversee business interests at their headquarters in Brisbane, where he stayed for 19 years.<sup>13</sup> He subsequently made his home in Guernsey in the Channel Islands and became a notable breeder of the native cattle. It was here that he bred the famous bull 'Major' which, reputedly, was the best bull ever produced and which went on to win the Kings Cup.

John Henry died on the 3rd January 1937 aged 65, leaving a Widow, Eileen Malachi. At the time of his death he resided at 'Brereton Lodge', Brereton, Nr. Rugeley, Staffordshire.

His Brother, Erick Rock Butler, also went to Bishop Vesey Grammer School and, from the School's records,<sup>14</sup> it can be ascertained that this was in 1890 at the age of 13. He also joined the family business and, like his Brother and Father before him, he chose Sutton Coldfield to live. In 1909, according to the Burgess Rolls of that year, he resided at 'The Firs', Little Sutton and in 1914 he moved to 'Vesey Grange', Weeford Road, Roughley.<sup>15</sup>

'Vesey Grange' is very interesting in that it is one of the few surviving Vesey Houses. Originally there were a total of 51 of these stone built properties, which were built in the mid-16th Century. It has the usual well known hallmark of a spiral stone staircase, positioned in the wall, at or near the angle and close to, the front entrance door.<sup>16</sup>



Over the years the property has been much altered, extended & improved until it is barely recognisable today as a Vesey House. The exterior has also been covered in rough cast, thus making the original features difficult to assess. <sup>17</sup>

Erick Rock Butler died between 1946 & 1947 aged 70 and he left a Widow, Helen, who continued to live at 'Vesey Grange' until the mid-fifties.

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Sources of Reference contained in 'A Brief History of 'Bleak House' and its Owners' (awaiting publication)

1. Information taken from the Census Return of 1891 for Sutton Coldfield & also from the last Will & Testament of Henry Butler dated 09.03.1914.
2. Photograph showing the site of 48A, Park Street, as it is today. [1993]
3. Photograph showing the site of Long Street, as it is today. [1993]
4. Photograph showing the Railway Track, now electrified, as it is today. [1993]
5. Photograph showing Eldon Street, as it is today. [1993]
6. Borough of Sutton Coldfield Notice No. 131 dated 21.05.1891
7. Detailed Plan & Elevation Drawings, submitted by Architects - Titley & Jones.
8. Notice of Commencement dated 22.06.1891.
9. Notice of Completion of Foundation Work dated 17.07.1891.
10. Burgess Rolls 1903-05 [Trinity Ward]. Sutton Coldfield Local History Dept.
11. Sutton Coldfield Directory 1924. - SH.06 SUT.
12. A History of Bishop Vesey's [1527- 1902] by Kerry Osbourne. [SH.48. 34]
13. The Old Veseyan News Vol 5. [Summer 1937]
14. Vesey Grammer School Records.
15. Map of area, showing location of 'Vesey Grange'.
16. Plan of Vesey Grange, showing spiral staircase, prior to extensions.
17. Estate Agents Particulars - August 1987.