

A VICTORIAN / EDWARDIAN PHOTOGRAPHER IN SUTTON PARK

FREDERICK WHITLOCK
(1839 - 1911)

Anyone having an interest in local or family history is hugely indebted to the early Victorian and Edwardian photographers for the wealth of pictorial information they have left us. Images bring the past to life and make researching our families, local surroundings, architecture, churches and parks so much more interesting.

To get a glimpse of our town in times gone by is fascinating and pictures of our ancestors are invaluable.

In the early 1840's, photography was a very exciting but expensive new 'hobby'. Only the most affluent of families could afford to buy the new 'magic box' plus the large glass plates and chemicals needed for developing the positive image. The equipment was bulky and heavy and the prints were 'one off' images, meaning copies could not be made.

However, over the next 15-20 years, developing and processing techniques vastly improved. New materials and methods reduced the required camera exposure time from minutes to seconds, so making the art of photography easier and more versatile.

Further inventions meant multiple copies could be printed off each image and a new profession, "Photographer", was emerging and being advertised in the local press.

By the mid 1860's every town and city had at least half a dozen commercial photographic studios. The demand for portraiture photographs of family, local dignitaries and even well known actors was enormous.

The newly-fashionable requisite, the 'Carte de Visite', was immensely popular. Each photograph was the size of a visiting card and such cards were traded among friends and visitors. The popularity of these provided photographers with a substantial boost to their income and collectors found a new hobby.

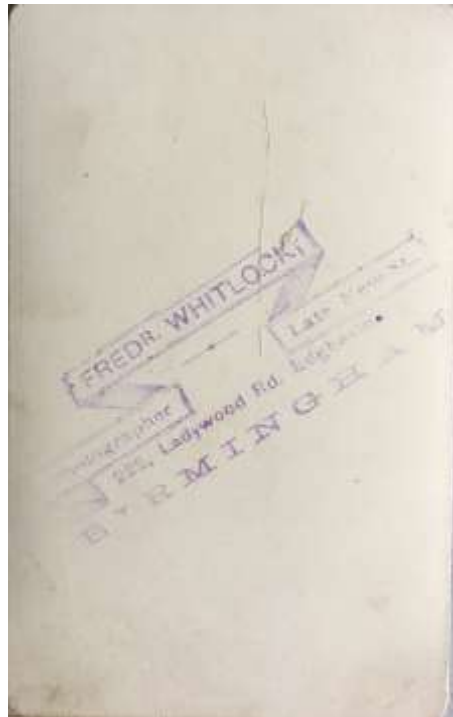


Albums displaying collections of these cards and the larger Cabinet cards became an exciting talking point in Victorian parlours.

By 1880, Sutton Coldfield had at least six successful studios mostly situated in and around the Parade. The works of Speight, Wort etc have been well documented and popularised by the later production of postcards, so I have chosen to look at the life of the lesser known Frederick Whitlock who, quite late in his life, acquired a studio in Park Road close to his beloved Sutton Park.

FREDERICK WHITLOCK

Even before he moved to Sutton Coldfield, Frederick was taking group photos in the open air with beautiful Sutton Park as a backdrop.



This is the earliest Sutton Park group photograph by Whitlock I have found. The reverse stamp shows it was taken while he was still living and working at his studio in Ladywood Road, Birmingham, circa 1870/1880 during one of his difficult financial periods. The stamp on the back suggests a temporariness, but in spite of arrears in rent and rates, he managed to stay at this address for several years, taking groups of clients to pose in the park he loved.

One of his favourite locations was Blackroot and far as I can make out, Frederick Whitlock was unique in this practice - at least in Sutton Coldfield.

I have managed to find six original photographs taken by him in Sutton Park during the 1880's up to the early 1900's, most of them when he eventually moved to Sutton.

I presume he hired some sort of transport at this time as the large camera and associated equipment would have been far too heavy to carry on public transport; he may even have had a car. Two of his daughters and at least one son assisted him but, even if they went by train, it was quite a walk down to the park and then out to Blackroot.

Throughout his life Frederick, despite coming from a famous and successful photographic family, struggled to make a living and to keep a roof over his family's heads. I suspect his artistic nature and his apparent lack of business sense didn't mix too well and he often came unstuck financially.

He married at 23 years old and had 7 children in quick succession.

Money was short and he was forced to move from property to property, setting up various studios around Birmingham.

Most of these failed, not because he was not good at his art but because of impending debts. In 1867 he filed for bankruptcy shortly after his parents died.

Through all the ups and downs he managed to survive and kept on working and producing quality photographs up until his death in 1911.

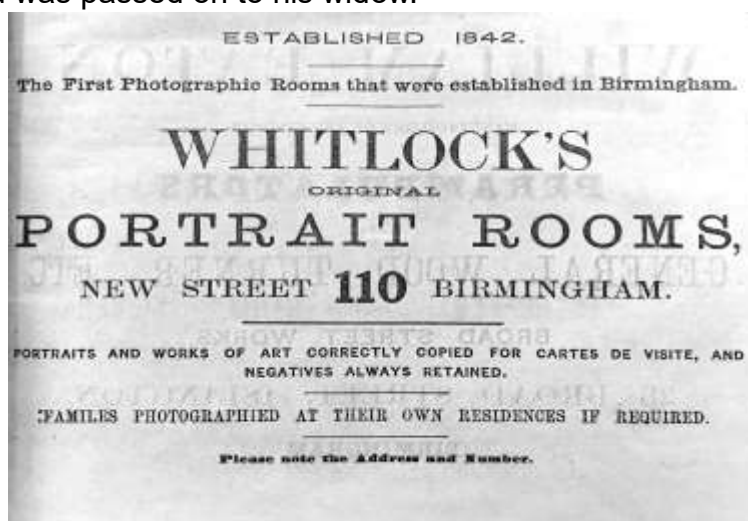
EARLY LIFE

Frederick was born in 1839 in Olney, Buckinghamshire. His father Joseph Whitlock (1806-1852) was already an established photographer. He was one of the earliest photographic artists in Britain and the first to set up a permanent Photographic daguerreotype Studio in Birmingham when he moved to the city in 1843. Frederick was then only 3 years old.

On Monday 30th January Joseph Whitlock opened a studio at 120 New Street. Between this time and 1853, the business flourished and several more shops were opened in Leamington Spa, Coventry, Rugby and Warwick, but only the studio in Birmingham proved successful so this was expanded.

Joseph's wife Sarah (1815-1862) worked as his assistant and their two sons, Henry aged 18, and Frederick aged 14, were recruited as technicians and trainees of the art.

By 1855, aged 20 Henry left Birmingham to set up his own studio at 42 High Street, Worcester. His father Joseph's health was in decline and his wife and his younger son Frederick became more involved with the running of the business. In 1857, at the age of only 51, Joseph died. The business now moved to 110 New Street (opposite CannonStreet) and was passed on to his widow.



Advertisement showing the first Studio to be opened in Birmingham 1842

According to the 1861 census the household comprised:

Sarah Whitlock nee Mason, mother

Frederick

Sarah Earl aged 30, a cook;

Elizabeth Dealey aged 30, a housemaid;

Emily Worley aged 23, a cousin.

Sadly, on 24th October 1862, his mother Mrs Sarah Whitlock also died (aged 47) at their home in 110 New Street.

After the death of his parents, Frederick's older brother Henry came back to Birmingham and by 1863 had opened a studio of his own at the lower end of New Street, number 11 where he established a thriving and successful business. This was opposite Worcester Street and the Hen and Chickens Hotel and the Free Grammar School. By the late 1860's he was able to claim 'Photographer to the Queen' with the Royal Crest, though this was modified in 1870's to 'By Special Appointment to the Queen'.



Old photo showing Hen and Chickens on the left. H J Whitlock's studio was on the opposite side of the road

Meanwhile, further up New Street opposite Cannon Street, his younger brother was struggling to keep their parents' business afloat.



110 New Street was just past the junction with Corporation Street opposite Cannon Street

Frederick was only 18 years old when his mother died so presumably Henry helped him to run the business for a year or so before setting up his own studio.

By the age of 21 he had married his cousin Emily Worley age 23, who had been living and working with his parents as an assistant. Within 4 years, they had 4 children,

Sarah Jane 1863

Jennie 1864

Annie George 1865 &

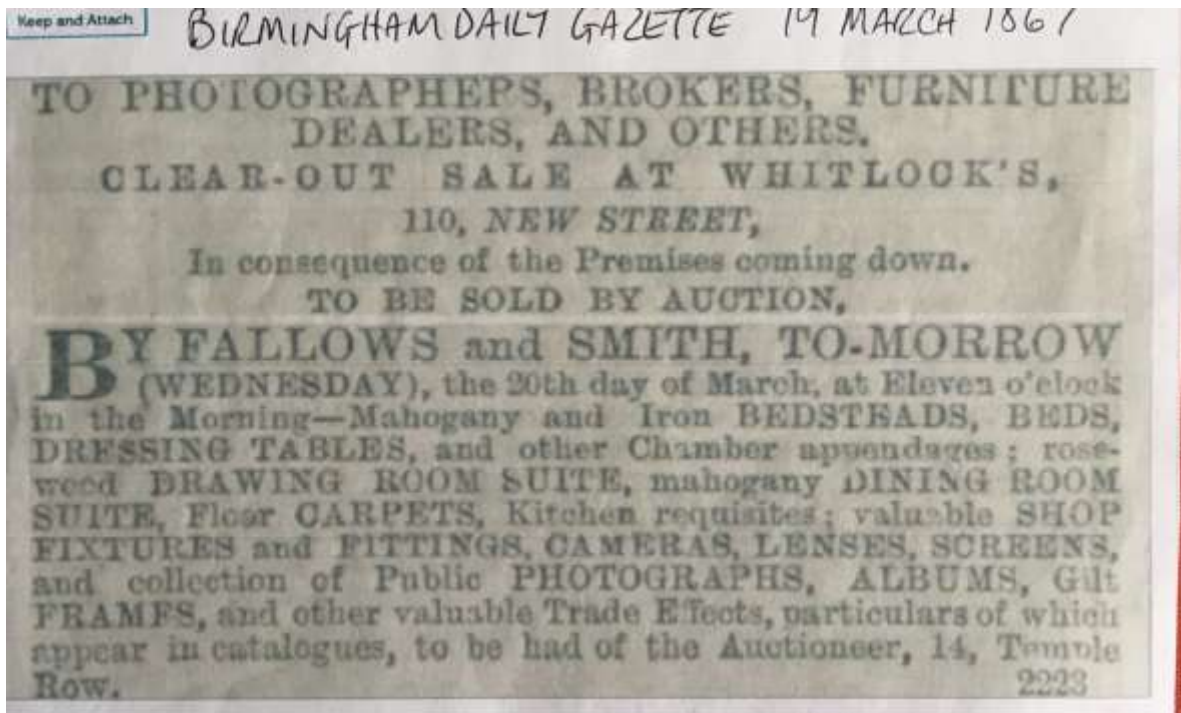
Frank Joseph 1866



An early advert shortly after Frederick took over the studio. Birmingham Daily Gazette 6 July 1865

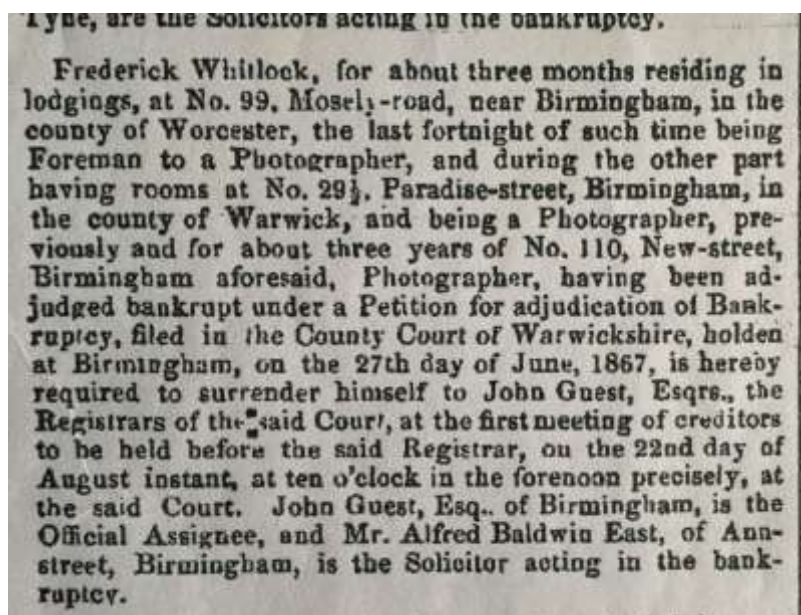
Frederick kept the business going as best he could but, because of increasing competition in the City and the expenses of his growing family, he was finding it a struggle. Then in

1867 the property at 110 New Street became due for demolition and so Frederick and Emily had to sell furniture, fixtures and fittings, and endeavour to find new premises and accommodation for their young family.



Clearance sale notice in the Birmingham Daily Gazette 19th March 1867

The family moved into a studio with living quarters at 29½ Paradise Street near the Town Hall where he carried on with his photographic work until, later that year, he finally had to admit defeat and declared himself bankrupt and was ordered to appear in Court on 22nd August 1867.



Notification of Bankruptcy

Birmingham Daily Gazette June 1867

This must have been a devastating blow for him; not only because he had to sell a lot of possessions and photographic equipment to pay off his debts but because of the shame

he felt he brought on his family. His brother Henry, was now very well known as a Society Portrait artist and photographer to Her Majesty the Queen and had 65 pieces of his work showing at the National Portrait Gallery in London. He had reached the top of his career.

Henry must have tried to help his brother because Frederick also had 2 portraits accepted by the National Gallery around 1868. These were portraits of George Augustus Selwyn who was Bishop of Lichfield from 1868-1878 and Benjamin Gibbons a local businessman. This must have given him back a bit of much needed self esteem. Hopefully he helped him financially too.

Over the next 10 years another 3 children were born,
Herbert Mason 1869
Frederick Worley 1874 &
Emily Helen 1875

Census records and Trade directories show that he moved his family every couple of years to various properties around Birmingham. In 1871 they were residing at 2 Hilton Place, Balsall Heath Road, Kings Norton. I have not found any of his photographs from this time but I know he was still working as he is listed in the directories as a Photographic Artist. According to the 1881 Census he had set up a Studio with accommodation at 222 Ladywood Road. As I have shown earlier, he had started taking his clients to Sutton Park.



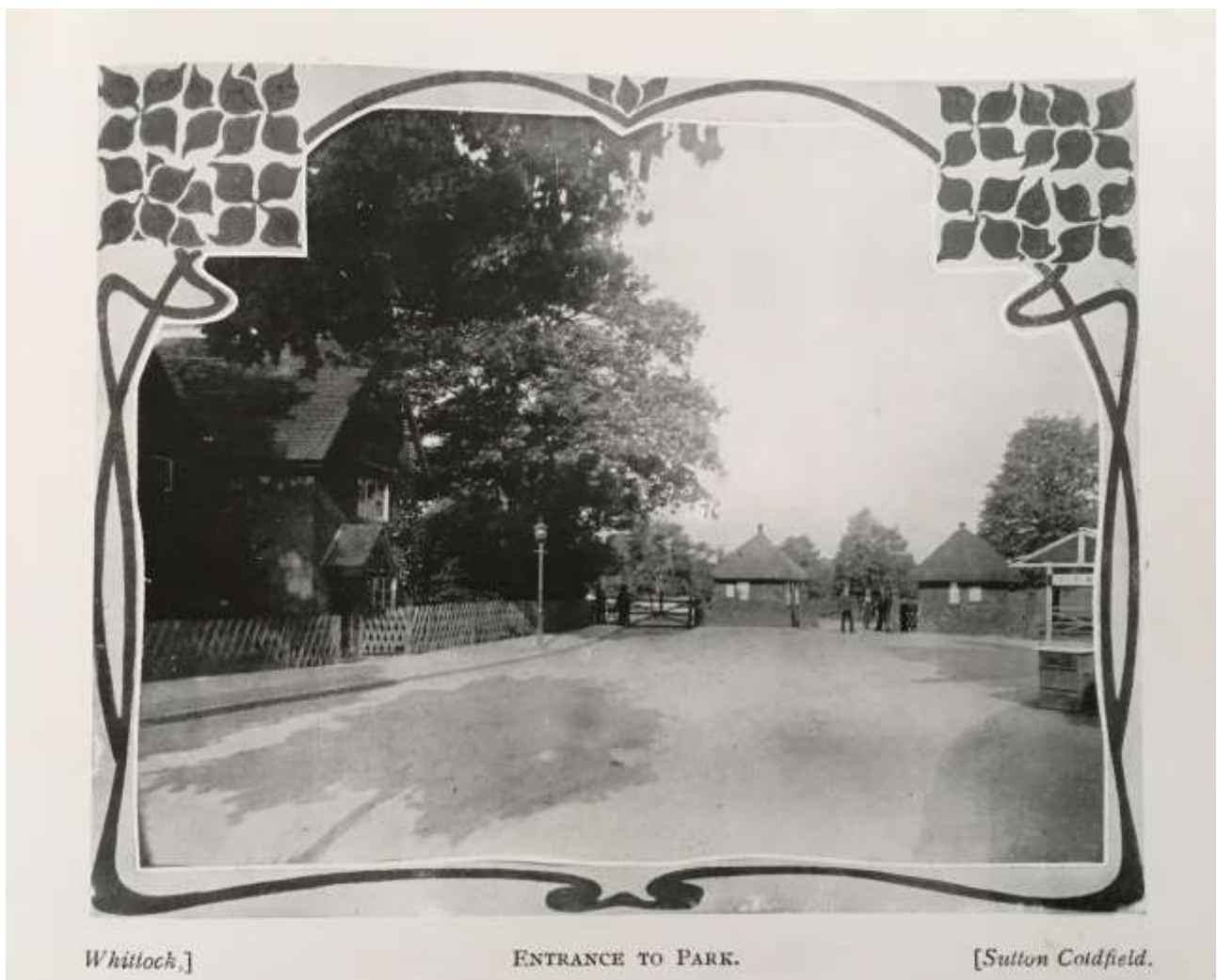
Here is another study from this time.

The reverse of this card shows that it was taken in Sutton Park. The design is of a more permanent nature than the earlier one which was only rubber stamped - so hopefully he settled here, finding new success and urging his prospective clients to travel to Sutton Park for unique portraits while looking for permanent premises in Sutton.

A STUDIO IN SUTTON COLDFIELD

By 1886, four of his children, Sarah Jane (known as Jennie), Annie George, Frank and Frederick Jnr, were fully trained as Photographic Artists and lived and worked alongside him as his assistants, processing and finishing the prints. Annie George in particular showed artistic talent and because of her abilities, the studio was able to offer hand tinted copies as an extra. His business appeared to be doing well and he was determined to move to a 'respectable' area. He had always dreamed about a business in Sutton Coldfield, home to the beautiful Sutton Park where he visited often for business and pleasure. Taking photographs was his business and enjoying the stunning views was his pleasure.

By early 1887 Frederick's dream came true. At last he was solvent and able to acquire a property in Sutton. Records show that during the year 1886/7 Frederick was living in a house with studio in Highbridge Road. He had this address printed on the back of the CdV's so I assume he intended to stay there but, according to the Burgess Roll of that year, he was already in the process of moving to Park Road. Here he set up his final studio under the Patronage of Sir Benjamin Stone JP and members of the Sutton Coldfield Corporation. Only yards from the main entrance, the house was right on the doorstep of the Park he loved.



The Town Gate entrance to Sutton Park in 1907. Whitlock's house was on the left...possibly the one shown here. Over the next 10 years, his children had all trained as Photographers or Photographic Artists. The business was doing well but advertisements were still being placed in local publications promoting popular sites in the Park.

*Under the Patronage of Sir J. B. Stone, J.P., and Members
of the Sutton Coldfield Corporation.*

F. WHITLOCK,
High-Class Photographer,
 STUDIO—PARK ROAD.

—+—

GROUPS TAKEN BY APPOINTMENT.
BLACK ROOT POOL, OR ANY SUITABLE SPOTS IN THE PARK.

—+—

All kinds of Pictures Copied and Enlarged

OLD PHOTOGRAPHS RENEWED. OLD PLATES KEPT. PICTURES FRAMED.

F. WHITLOCK,
High-Class Photographer,

—+—

STUDIO—PARK ROAD.

—+—

GROUPS TAKEN BY APPOINTMENT
AT WHITE COTTAGE, IN THE PARK.

All kinds of Pictures Copied and Enlarged.

**OLD PHOTOGRAPHS RENEWED. OLD PLATES KEPT.
 PICTURES FRAMED.**

2 adverts from the Popular Guide to Sutton Coldfield by Sidwell & Durrant promoting Blackroot and The White Cottage. 1893 & 1900 respectively.

Most of the photographs at Blackroot were taken near the entrance to the woods but the next image shows a couple actually on the pool. The stillness of the water and the frozen image of the lady is an indication of just how long they had to 'Watch the Birdie' while the exposure took place. That poor man's arms must have been aching holding up those oars!

But the result is stunning. It is a beautiful image and so unusual for its' time.



The reverse of this card shows the old Highbridge Road address, scratched out and changed to Park Road which would date it to c.1897

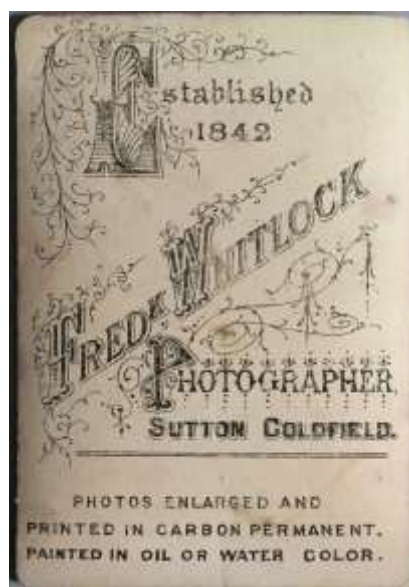
I am guessing the next photograph which, is a larger Cabinet Card, was taken on the old

Pageant site near the White Cottage at Hollyhurst. It is a snowy scene and may have been intended as a Christmas card.

I like to think that afterwards the group would make their way to the White Cottage for Refreshments – steaming hot chocolate and muffins - while warming their toes in front of a log fire.



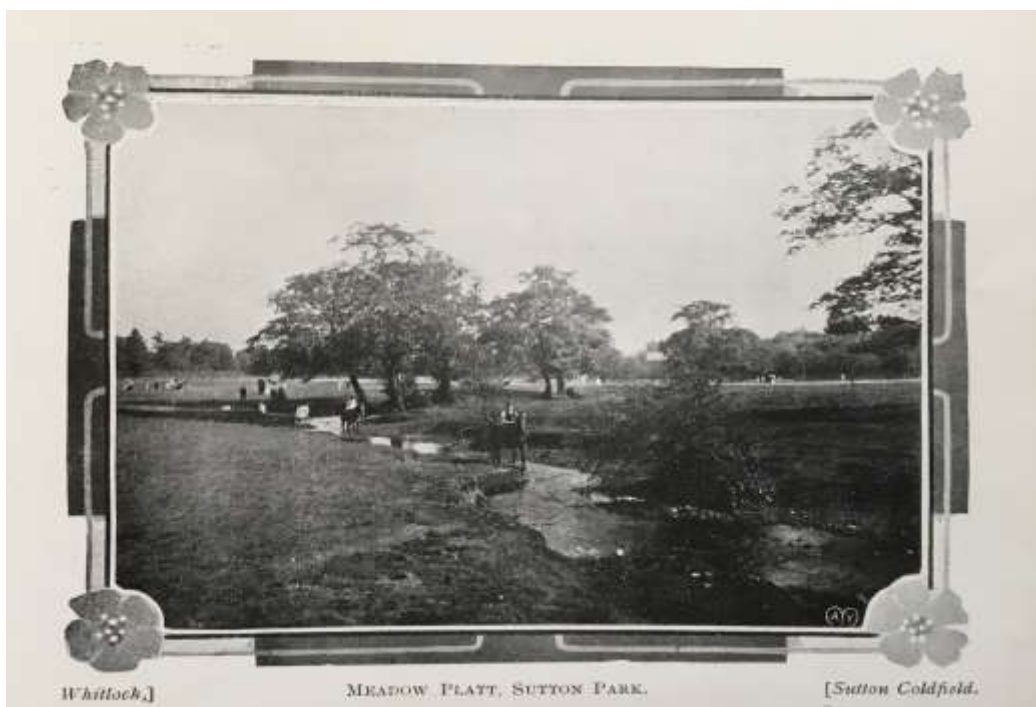
There is no indication on the following card of an address other than it is in Sutton. I assume because of this, that it was when he was possibly in temporary accomodation before moving to Highbridge Road. I cannot find another address for him at the time of moving from Ladywood Road to Sutton so it is a bit of a mystery. But it was definitely taken in Sutton Park as it shows the same tree as in the study shown earlier while at the Ladywood Road studio.



The final Sutton Park Carte de Visite that I have is a lovely photo of two young girls. By the beginning of the 1900's these cards were quite affordable so young people of the working classes delighted in splashing out their hard earned cash on a memorable keepsake. Dressed in their 'Sunday best' these friends are doing just that.



In 1907, Frederick was commissioned to illustrate the Sutton Coldfield 'Borough' Guide, No 71. He took several photographs of prominent buildings such as Bishop Vesey School, The New Technical School (later the Art School), The Town Hall etc., but he also included several beautiful views of the Park.





Whitlock,

LONGMOOR POOL.

[Sutton Goldfield.]



Burton
THE ENTRANCE TO SUTTON PARK.

Whitlock, Photo, Sutton Goldfield & West Bromwich.



BLACKROOT POOL, SUTTON PARK.

Whitlock, Photo, Sutton Coldfield & West Warwick.



The old Druid's Well

F. Whitlock

The 1911 Census shows that Frederick, now aged 72, was still active as a Photographer. Household members were his eldest daughter, Sarah Jane, and second daughter Annie George. Frederick junior had set up his own photographic business in West Bromwich. Frank, Herbert and Emily had moved on in their own lives.

Later that year, Frederick travelled down to Southend on Sea. I have not been able to find out why he went there. It may have been for a holiday, or to visit relatives but sadly on 12th July, he died whilst there.

Annie George carried on the business in Park Road for another couple of years but after Frederick's passing there were no more Whitlock photographs taken in the park.

I have been unable to trace any photos of Frederick himself, or his family. He must have taken many throughout his life. Hopefully, with the help of the internet I will find some. It would be wonderful to put a face to this man whom I wish I had known and have grown so fond of but....I was so lucky to find six examples of his Sutton Park groups.

