

## Griffin Avenue and Reservoir Road

These two roads on opposite sides of Kidderminster may not seem particularly connected to the casual observer but they are very much connected in my mind.

The connection was revealed a little while ago when I investigated the house, I now live in on Reservoir Road which I learnt was built for a man called John Benjamin Griffin. In the course of that research I also found out rather a lot about his brother, Thomas, as a consequence.

Thomas was the older of the two, a significant figure in the town and I think had sufficient self-regard to have expected to be introduced first. John, a much more reserved man, would have been only too happy to acquiesce in that.

### Griffin Avenue

On 5 October 1938 the General Purposes Committee of Kidderminster Council agreed that a new street being built off Hoo Road would be called Griffin Avenue.

One of the members of that Committee was Alderman Thomas Griffin. The coincidence of his name and that of the new road was surely not an accident.

### Thomas Griffin

By this date, Alderman Griffin had a record as a member of the Town Council longer than any other then member, having been first elected in 1896. By the way, the aldermen – an ancient title- was a sort of House of Lords of the council. Councillors were elected directly by the local people as they are now; a small group of aldermen were elected from the body of elected councillors. They were alderman for six years and could then be re-elected if they wished. Most did – they got power and influence without the bothersome task of offering themselves for election by citizens every four years. There were six Aldermen sitting on the council - there had never been an Alder-women (and I am not sure there ever were any!). Thomas Griffin had been an alderman since 1923 and he was Mayor in 1926. (The position of alderman no longer exists in local government – it was abolished in 1974).

However, the council had taken a decision a few years previously that streets should only be named after people who were dead and of some national standing.

I am not aware if anyone challenged the naming of Griffin Avenue. If they had I am sure that Alderman Griffin would have been very quick to tell them that his own father, Benjamin, was a figure of some note, if only in Kidderminster. Benjamin Griffin was shoemaker and cobbler living in Wood Street for most of his life. More significantly he was the parish clerk and sexton for St John's Church for some twenty-five years – his long and valued service was noted when the new altar rails, installed when the church was refurbished at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were dedicated to him.

So, I suspect that Alderman Griffin might have suggested, if challenged, that the street was named – at least in part - for his father. I equally suspect that no one would have entirely believed him. We can however be fairly sure that his father's connections and respect in which

his father had been held, were no hindrance at all to Thomas Griffin's career and reputation. In honouring one, the other was honoured by a sort of reflection.

Thomas first trained as a carpet designer under a man called Edward Perrins and after Perrins' death took on the running of his company with Perrins' widow. He then set up on his own account in the same line of business. Clearly this activity alone was not enough for him and he involved himself in housebuilding including projects on Woodfield Crescent, Sutton Road, Crescent Road and Claughton Street in the 1890s.

Thomas Griffin – as a younger man

He became a member of the Town Council for St Johns Ward (perhaps unsurprisingly) in 1898, no doubt hoping that closeness to power and influence might assist in his other ventures. His reputation went before him a little as he sought election. The Kidderminster Shuttle, as avowedly Liberal as Thomas was conservative, commented on his candidature that 'some humourists have persuaded Mr Griffin that his presence on the Council would be the salvation of the commonwealth. Mr Griffin shows a readiness to believe them which is quite pathetic'. Forty years later at a council event to celebrate Griffin and his wife's Golden Wedding, another opponent (Labour this time) observed that Alderman Griffin was 'always fighting which gave others a chance to fight... when battle was over he was willing to continue as friends.

Sometimes, his attempts to combine politics and business caused raised eyebrows. He initiated, with his business partner Maurice Smith, a scheme for the development of Adam Street. Shortly afterwards, Thomas was actively promoting a scheme for the Town Council to extend the main sewer along Greatfield Road from Claughton Street to Adam Street which would have benefited this scheme. His eager seconding of the proposal at a Town Council meeting led to suggestions in the Chamber that he and his partner (who was also a Town Council member at this point) were 'feathering their own nest' - a suggestion which was strongly denied. However notwithstanding the sewer investment, by 1911 only three houses had been built on Adam Street and ultimately, many years later, the Corporation bought the land from him and oversaw its development.

Although Griffin and Smith were members of different political parties (Smith a Liberal and Griffin, a Conservative), they supported each other in the Chamber on occasion, not least with regard to a proposal to build an electric tram system to connect to Bewdley. This would have been of great benefit to the people Griffin represented in St Johns Ward – but also to other property development schemes with which he and Smith were involved. The Tram Company insisted that the line would only make commercial sense if it passed through the Bull Ring which would have required major reshaping of this part of the town – including taking down the statue of Richard Baxter which had already stood there for about thirty years. The Town Council were not willing to meeting the costs of these various changes and the scheme failed to progress.

Griffin does seem to have been a particularly combative individual. Surprisingly, perhaps, as a Conservative, he objected strenuously to a suggestion that the Town Council use ratepayers money to celebrate the coronation of Edward VII in 1902. He argued, fiercely and disruptively in the Chamber from 1903 to 1904, against a major investment to enhance the town's water supply.

His capacity for feather ruffling was not confined to colleagues in the Council chamber. In 1904 he wrote to the Kidderminster Shuttle complaining that the newspaper was not giving credit to the Conservative members of the Town Council for the effort to enhance Brinton Park - a proposal he, Griffin, had seconded in Council. The Shuttle, committed to the Liberal cause at local and national level, insisted that the park, which had first opened in 1887, was due to diligent work by Liberals. The Shuttle commented rather dismissively of Councillor Griffin that he was indeed an eager seconder of proposals but not a great carrier-through beyond that action. In 1902, though, the Shuttle had praised Griffins 'indefatigable efforts' to secure a memorial to Richard Eve - a Liberal politician but also brother Freemason - which still stands in Brinton Park. On this occasion Thomas was only too happy to press the Town Council to contribute to the cost.

In 1905, Thomas was appointed to the Borough Bench as a magistrate-and at about the same time -set up in business as a carpet manufacturer in town with the establishment of a company called Empire Carpets. He was absent from the town council between 1909 and 1916, stepping down solely due to the business pressures at this time. To be fair, he must indeed have had such pressures as after setting up the Empire Carpet manufacturing business he had relocated it to new premises he had built on Beauchamp Avenue, Foley Park by 1912.

He returned to the council to fill a occasional vacancy in 1916 - he was nominated rather than elected as local elections had been suspended for the duration of the first world war.

In 1923 he was appointed an Alderman- which did away with the need for him to be elected - and then became Mayor in November 1925. He served as mayor for one year and had the privilege, as 'first citizen' of greeting the Duke of York (who became King George VI - the present Queen's father) when he visited the town in 1926.

There appears to have been a tradition that grandees of the carpet industry who served as Mayor undertook a tour of their overseas business operations immediately afterwards - indeed Thomas's own progress to become Mayor was accelerated because Alderman Brinton who would normally have expected to serve as Mayor over two years from 1924-26 had a commitment to just such a visit. Not to be outdone and notwithstanding the relative youth of his own business, Thomas set off in the year after serving as mayor, and in his seventieth year, made a visit to Australia to support business opportunities there. His business partner, Harry Johnson, had made the same trip a year earlier.

He did not particularly slow down on his return continuing to serve as an Alderman and being particularly involved in housing development - not least on the Sutton Farm estate. Thomas Griffin was adamant that the Council should be building houses for sale rather than rent, despite the arguments of the small Labour group that it was rented housing that was urgently needed. Though he was a landlord himself - as was his brother John - he seems to have had a marked suspicion of tenants and the care they took of properties they rented.

The Labour Group did seem to have a small if symbolic victory with regard to Sutton Farm and Griffin. As the scheme progressed the names of a succession of alderman associated with it were attached to the new roads being created -in particular Brinton, Woodward and Tomkinson. One might suspect that Griffin might have been pencilled in for one of the final streets in the scheme.

At this point the Labour group proposed that, in the future, streets should only be named for people who were both deceased and of national stature. Those originally proposed names (endorsed by Alderman Griffins as seconder) were referred back to Committee but re-emerged unchanged. Shortly afterwards there was a proposal that one of the last streets be built should be named Empire Street. This might seem, perhaps, no more than a nod to the times, until one recalls that Thomas' company was, of course, Empire Carpets –perhaps this was an early and far sighted example of seeking naming rights on the Alderman's behalf. In the event, the street in question became Lister Road and Alderman Griffin had to wait a little while until he got his proper reward through the naming of Griffin Avenue in Aggborough. He continued in public life, and in business, well into his eighties. Indeed on the occasion of his eightieth birthday he was interviewed by the Shuttle and was asked how would mark the day, replied ' The same as I have been all my life – at work.' He told the paper he had only recently stopped cycling from home on Bewdley Hill to his business premises on Beauchamp Avenue. He remained serving as an Alderman and magistrate until his death in 1944.

### Reservoir Road

I know so much about Thomas Griffin, because the house I live in was built by his brother John Benjamin – though intriguingly was owned by John's wife Clara with her name on the deeds. In finding more about John found myself unable to ignore his brother Thomas who lived much more in the public eye.

John was as successful in his own way as his brother but appears to have been a much less abrasive character. He spent his entire working life at the firm of Woodward Grosvenor where he rose to position of Company Secretary and Director. This was in the course of a working life of some 59 years and he did not retire from the company until he was 72. When he, and similarly loyal colleagues, were presented with gifts from the company to mark the fifty years of service for each of them, he was exceeding modest and self- effacing. Life he said was about work and family. In the 1911 Census when he already held a very senior position in the company, he was happy to describe himself as a 'carpet manufacturers clerk'. He was living then in Reservoir Road then with his wife and seven of his eight children – his eldest son Henry having left the family home.

Reservoir Road, itself, came into being from around 1905. Plots of land for housebuilding were first offered from around 1903 and the first phase of the development was almost certainly completed by about 1910. Since then there have been phases of in fill and also building taking place on land released from the gardens of larger plots with the last of these developments occurring only thirty-five or so years ago.

Paradoxically the reservoir after which the road is named was no longer in service as a reservoir even before any phase of building on Reservoir Road began – what had been a reservoir was, by then, an open air swimming pool which operated during the summer months. So how did that come about?

The reservoir proper was actually built in 1870-71. It was part of a scheme to provide the town with piped water and proper sewage for the first time. (The water in the reservoir came

from artesian wells hundreds of feet below the town).

The need for the reservoir and a system of water supply and sewage management had become all too clear over the course of the previous ten years. Kidderminster had suffered a dramatic economic recession in the 1850s as power looms replaced hand looms. The town's population shrank by some 25%, some 5000 people leaving for work elsewhere and significant numbers emigrating to Australia, New Zealand and Canada. However, there was a dramatic recovery through the 1860s bringing new investment and a growing population. This upsurge in activity exposed the inadequacy of many of the town's vital services – industry discharged its waste largely into the river, households had ash middens and the assistance of the night soil men, water was drawn from neighbourhood springs.

This began to impact in a number of ways – the town smelt unpleasantly on occasion for example – but much more importantly the health of the people was suffering as a result. Doctors complained that Kidderminster as a result had a higher death rate than did the neighbouring towns. After a long battle – for despite these circumstances, local people weren't prepared to pay the rates to enable better services to be put in place – the Government forced action on the Town Council in 1869. This led to the construction of the reservoir and the laying of systems to deliver water to homes and take away waste.

However, the council fell out with the engineer responsible for the sewage and drainage work and partly as a consequence it wasn't installed properly. The ultimate upshot of this was an outbreak of typhus in late 1884. About 1000 people contracted the disease and over 100 died. One of the problems was that the reservoir was not sufficiently high above the town for gravity to act effectively to flush through the sewage system. As a result, a new reservoir had to be built. It was still in service till quite recently, situated further up Sutton Park Road at its junction with Whitehill Road.

And the town was left with a redundant reservoir.

Kidderminster had had a swimming pool and public baths since 1855 – one of the very first towns in England to have these things at all. They stood in Mill Street adjacent to the Town Mills. However by the 1880s these were rather tired buildings and also too small to accommodate the enthusiasm that was growing for swimming and the need for bathing at a time when few ordinary homes had a bathroom. Another battle, this time over the costs of building new baths raged – for decades – and in the middle of this, as a short-term solution, the idea of using the old reservoir as a summertime open air pool was proposed. (It also served as a skating rink in winter when it was cold enough for the water to freeze – the depth of the water was reduced as the winter began to make this safer.)

Reservoir Road was created as a residential location by one Maurice Smith. He was born and grew up at Lea Farm which sat on the crown of Bewdley Hill and trained as a pharmacist. He was in business as a chemist and optician in Kidderminster from the late 1890, located variously in Oxford Street and Vicar Street. He also manufactured patent medicines from premises on Church Street.

He had another business interest in property development in the first instance with another retailer Arthur Hyde – they created Lea Hall Drive together and also Adam Street (with Thomas Griffin).

In 1902/03, Smith acquired some eight acres of land from a company called Worcester Land and Investment which had owned much of the land which now makes up Sutton Park Road but which had gone into administration. These eight acres became Reservoir Road and also the stretch of Sutton Park Road from Reservoir Road to Stourport Road. One of the major selling points for the location was the fact that the site lay outside the then Kidderminster Borough – the boundary in this area ran down Greatfield Road, along Sutton Road and then down Stourport Road at the edge of Brinton Park. Everything to the south of this was in Kidderminster Rural District and had lower rates than the town.

In addition, an electric tram service operated along the Stourport Road from 1898 so it had become a very much more accessible location for people working in Kidderminster. A terrace of ten houses were built on the stretch of the road that opens into the Stourport Road as well as a mix of semidetached villas and one detached house. Two larger detached houses were built on the part of the road that meets Sutton Park Road. Reservoir Road is now a ‘dog-leg’ connecting Sutton Park Road and Stourport Road. It seems very plausible that, in fact, the two arms of the road were initially cul-de-sacs. In some documents up to the early 1920s, the two houses on the arm with a junction with Sutton Park Road were classed as being on Connaught Avenue.

By 1911, Smith himself was living in a house called Westleigh (now 12 Sutton Park Road) which had been built on the land he bought; his father, Stephen Smith, was living in The Laurels (then 16, now 17, Reservoir Road) with which his own house shared a boundary. Stephen Smith died there in 1911 and the house was occupied shortly afterwards by Leonard Harry Thompson, Maurice’s brother in law. Leonard Harry’s wife was Rosa Jellyman of one of the town’s celebrated carpet families. Rosa’s sister, married to Mr Fehrenbach, was living at the Knoll on Sutton Park Road with which they shared a boundary. Maurice’s old business partner Arthur Hyde now lived across the road in the Limes – the house on the corner of Sutton Park Road and Connaught Avenue. And very close on the other side of Reservoir Road was John Griffin, the brother of another of Maurice’s one time business partners. Very cosy.

Maybe feeling just a little too cosy – Maurice moved in 1914 and returned to a house in the old family farm estate on the Lea.

He was a man of some substance in the town. As well as his business interests he was a JP and had been a town councillor and a rural district councillor. He was a member of the local wartime tribunal which judged who might be called up to serve and who should not serve in the first World War. Then, in 1917, he left Kidderminster and moved to Harborne in Birmingham where he spent the rest of his life. He remained a JP here in Kidderminster and was in fact buried in Kidderminster after his death in 1942 – but why he left the place of his birth and the business and professional roots is still unclear to me.

The open air pool was a huge popular success. By the late 1920s, some as many as 20,000 people were using during the summer months (in warm summers). From 1901 it had hosted an annual swimming gala and the adaptations made in 1930 made it a more attractive place (with a sun terrace) and also provided facilities aimed at small children.

By 1932 the long battle to replace the ancient Mill Street baths was concluded – though not before yet another bitter series of arguments in the Council Chamber. New baths opened on Castle Road in August 1932 and events such as the swimming gala transferred there. The open air baths continued to function for a few years but one of the drawbacks to them was tendency for plant life to turn the water green. This had been a problem even when it served purely as a reservoir as a consequence of being open to the sun but can't have been helped when 20,000 users were filling the baths through the summer with themselves and other organic material. The pool had no filtration system and, although the council insisted that there was no risk to health of users, the decision to cease its use as a pool came in 1936. The pool remained in place though, unused, for a further quarter of a century - a rather dank, dark and sinister spot, people who remember it say. Finally in the early 1960s the site was reclaimed and an extension to Summer Road was built across the site on which it had stood.

Now only the name 'Reservoir Road' remains to, perhaps, confuse both residents and visitors unaware of the dual role that actual reservoir of 1870 provided to the town for almost seventy years.

*Michael.*