The Limes

The Limes and the Tinsleys

Before 1851 The Limes was built on a plot known in 1844 as Quarry Piece. Limepit Piece, west of it, was owned by Theophilus Tinsley, a nail factor and licensee of the Leopard Inn on Dudley Road, from where he ran his business. Nail factors bought in small iron rods that were turned into nails by workers at home. Factors paid nailers for their work, and sold their products on.

Eliza Tinsley, date unknown

Eliza and Thomas Tinsley
Eliza Butler married Theophilus Tinsley's son Thomas in 1839. Thomas prospered in the nail business, expanding into chain-making, and had a splendid new house built for them. Tragically, the eldest of their six children, Elizabeth, died in May 1851, just before they moved in; the following month, Thomas died suddenly. Within weeks, Eliza had begun to run his company, and named the house The Limes, maybe punning on Limepit Piece next to it. (There was already a Quarry House nearby.)

Eliza established a factory at Reddal Hill, Cradley Heath, and by 1871 employed four thousand 'men and boys'. The company's products were exported all over the world.

Eliza Tinsley 's company made chains in Cradley Heath. They made what was at the time claimed to be the longest chain ever to produced in the Black

[In 1861, as well as two domestic servants, a governess for Lucy Jane (her youngest child) lived with the family, while the three sons were at boarding school. By 1871, Lucy Jane had died; her elder sister Katherine was married and living in New Zealand; of her sons, only Thomas lived at The Limes.]

Eliza lived at the house until her death in 1882, gradually retiring from the business. She was a benefactor to local charities, sometimes working with her neighbour, F. A. Homer. Eliza, Thomas and two of their daughters are buried in All Saints' churchyard.

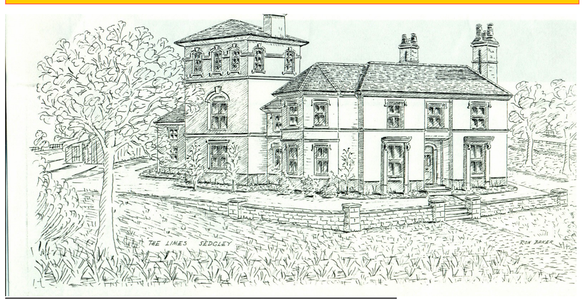
Subsequent owners

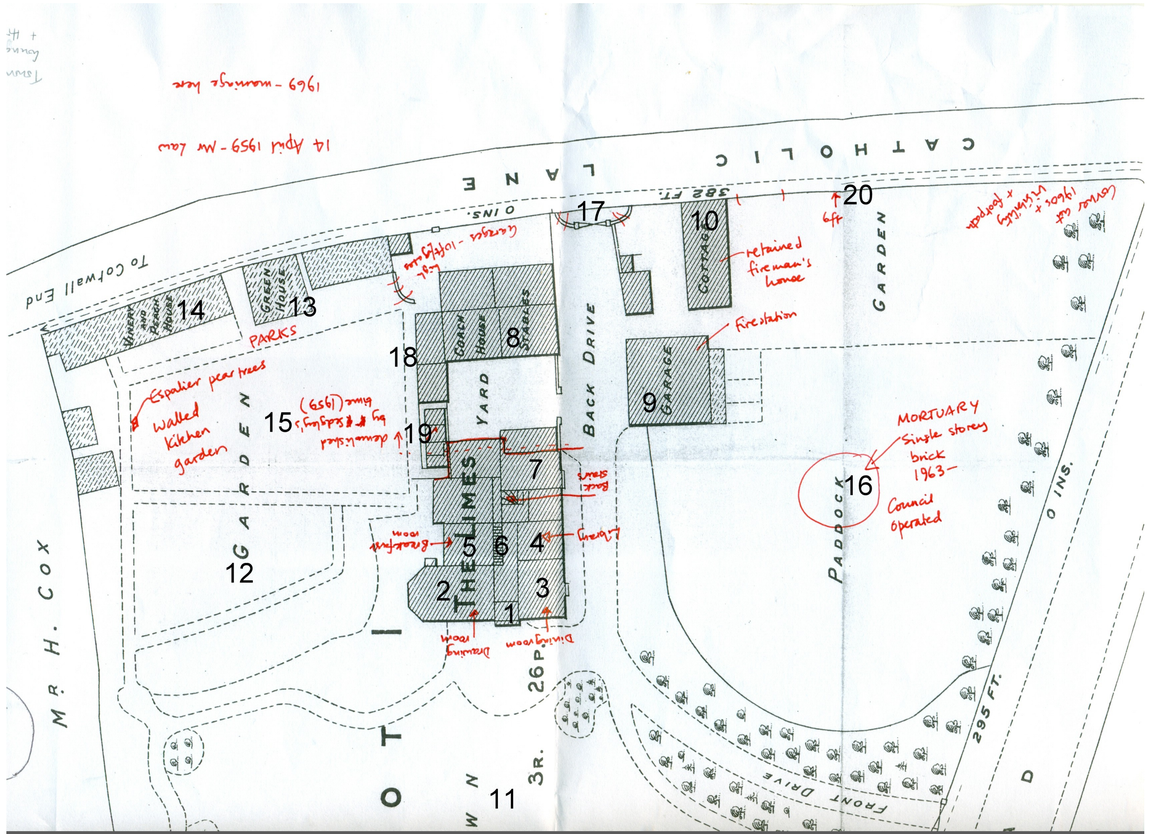
The Fowler family
Henry Fowler (1820–85) came from Bilston, and made his fortune as a colliery proprietor and iron-master. After some years at Tettenhall, he moved to The Limes towards the end of his life. His widow Eliza remained there with their son, William Henry (1853–1920), until her death in 1889. When William married in 1893, his address was still The Limes, but between 1896 and 1900 he and his wife Jessie left to live with her family in Cheltenham.

William Arthur Foster (1862–1919)
Arthur Foster (as he was known) grew up at Woodsetton House on Tipton Road. He became a solicitor, with a flourishing practice in Wolverhampton and Tipton. In 1900 he married Editha Greville Prideaux, and bought The Limes as an impressive home for his bride. A governess for their two daughters, aged 9 and 6, was living with the family in the 1911 census. In 1919, after Foster's tragic death, his widow took the girls to London. He was buried in his family's vault in Vicar Street cemetery, now a garden.

Eliza Gray Gibbons (1845–1929)
Eliza was the daughter of John McNab Ballenden, who served Sedgley as a doctor for over 50 years. The family lived at Bleak House on Dudley Road, next to present-day Arcal Street. In 1898, she married the widowed John Lloyd Gibbons, owner of Ellowes Hall, the finest mansion in the district. After he died in 1919, she bought The Limes; her youngest brother, also a local doctor, already lived on the other side of Dudley Road at Holborn Lodge.

1929 and After
The house failed to find a buyer, and remained empty for nearly a decade. Requisitioned in 1938 as a base for local Civil Defence administration when war preparations began; never again was it occupied by a single family.


The Limes as it looked in 1947, by local artist Ron Baker.



From private residence to council offices: the changing usage of The Limes.

Use up to 1929 as a private residence

A sale catalogue, produced for the property's auction following Eliza Gibbons' death in 1929, details the house's layout at that time.
The front entrance led to a marble-floored entrance hall (1), giving access to the drawing room with bay window (2), dining room (3), library (4) and breakfast room (5). Oak stairs (6) led to four bedrooms, and a bathroom with supplies of hot, cold and soft water.

Two bedrooms were also provided for live-in servants. They had their own Hall, and worked in a 'Kitchen-Scullery' (7), Butler's Pantry, larders and cellars. Outside, stables (8) housed up to three horses, and a garage (9) had been added with the advent of the motor car. A two-bedroomed 'Man's Cottage' (10) offered separate tied accommodation for a male employee, perhaps with a family. While the area that is now Coronation Gardens (11) seems always to have been parkland, near the house there were flower beds, including roses (12), a greenhouse (13), a vinery and peach and melon house (14), and a kitchen garden (15).

Use in the 1960s as council offices and depot

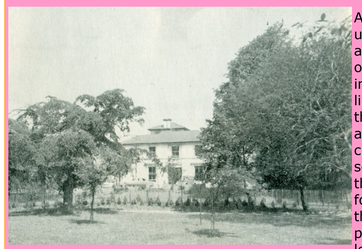
A council mortuary (16) was built in 1963 in the former paddock. There was a Fire Station (9) occupying the former garage, in use until 1971; a new station in Tipton Road station took its place, opening in January 1972. The 'cottage' was occupied by a retained firefighter. The entrance (17) was used by the Urban District council Parks and Highways departments in the 1960s. The former stables (8) were used to store drain cleaners and mowers. The walled kitchen garden (15) was used by Sedgley UDC as a yard and plant nursery. The former 'Vinery and Peach house' (14) and greenhouse (13) were used for growing plants. (18) was a wall where espalier pears grew.

By the 1960s, the buildings (19) had been removed so that council vehicles could drive straight through to the yard and nurseries. There was a 6' high wall around the Catholic Lane perimeter to the property(20). However the corner section at the junction with Dudley Road was removed in the 60s to improve visibility and create a footpath.

Left: The Auxiliary Fire Service was based at The Limes; this photo shows them assembled with their equipment at the rear of Jack Darby's cinema in Dudley Road Upper Gornal, the former tram sheds. Right: Sedgley branch of Civil Defence (CD) General Services -formerly called 'Air Raid Precautions' (ARP) gathered for this photo in April 1945 prior to being stood down at the end of the war.

Wartime use, 1938-45 In 1936, Sedgley Urban District Council bought The Limes to use as additional offices. However, by 1938 it had been commandeered for civil defence purposes in the lead up to the outbreak of hostilities. It was used as headquarters for Air Raid Precautions (renamed 'Civil Defence General Services from 1941). Fire Watchers used the tower to look out for incendiaries dropped by German planes; it was the highest point for miles around and provided an excellent observation point. The Auxiliary Fire Service, formed nationally in 1938, was also based at The Limes. In the 1960s a bicycle-powered air filtration unit for the air raid shelter was found in the cellars. Scouts also part of Civil Defence: they were used to run messages; they also used the sheds in the yard for storing paper.

Public and commercial use, 1945–2007


The Limes from Coronation Gardens in the 1960s

After the war, Sedgley Urban District Council used The Limes for its Engineers, Public Health and Parks departments. When firefighting was reorganized in 1948, a substation was established in the garage, used until 1971, and a fireman lived in the cottage. The Parks Department used the walled garden and glass houses as a yard and plant nurseries, and Coronation Gardens was created in 1953. After Sedgley UDC was absorbed by Dudley Metropolitan Borough in 1966, the house was used by Dudley Council entirely for Public Health. In 1970, following the sale of the property, it was occupied by a series of computer companies, until its last owner, Invensys, left in 2007.

Today

The house was unoccupied until June 2012, when ROE Developments began its conversion into four apartments. Four new apartments occupy the original stables area, while one new house was built on the site of the garage and cottage, and the other over the kitchen garden and glasshouses.

The Observatory

One of the most distinctive parts of the Limes is the tower, designed as a belvedere in fashionable Italianate style. It's similar is design to towers at Osborne House, built for Queen Victoria on the Isle of Wight in around 1845. Its original purpose is uncertain: it's possible the tower was a later addition after the main part of the house was built. Council workers at The Limes in the 1960s describe a set of mirrors on all four walls in the room at the top of the tower, angled at 45 degrees on the ceiling cornice, and they still referred to the room as the 'Observatory'. Sitting in the room (even allowing for the windows) the mirrors provided a 360 degree panorama of the area.

Sedgley Local History Society

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

To read more about the history and owners of The Limes go to: www.sedgleylocalhistory.org.uk/sptlght/limes.asp