

# HASLEMERE UNCOVERED



I have always taken an interest in the work of John Wornham Penfold (JWP) as he was one of the small group of 'movers and shakers' in Victorian Haslemere and was, like me, a chartered surveyor and FRICS (Fellow, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors). Penfold, though, was a man of many talents and achievements and made a great difference to the town and, in a fairly unobtrusive way, the whole country.

John Wornham Penfold, born in Haslemere on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1828, was the fourth in his family to have that name. The family house *Courts Hill* - now named *Penfolds* - a very attractive and distinctive old house at the foot of Sandrock, proudly bears the Haslemere Society blue plaque. It was the home he shared with his two sisters, Katherine and Susanna. The family moved here from south-west London in the 1600s as they returned to their Chiddingfold and Kirdford roots. They were in the tanning trade and the close proximity of Penfolds to Tanners Lane is no coincidence, of course.

Neither farming nor tanning appealed to JWP and, as a young man, he went to work in London in the offices of architects and surveyors, Thomas Bury and Charles Lee, between 1845 and 1850, after which he set up his own practice. He specialised in house conversions and extensions and did well, moving from his first office near St Paul's to others in Gt George Street, off Parliament Square. JWP worked closely with John Clutton and Edward Ryde. Both those names will be familiar to all chartered surveyors and JWP was a key player in establishing what was to become the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, whose general secretary he became in 1868, a position he held for 36 years. Penfold died in 1909, his plaque was unveiled exactly 100 years later.

Letter boxes were first introduced in this country in 1959 at the suggestion of Anthony Trollope who was working as a surveyor/clerk in The General Post Office. He had seen letter boxes in France and Belgium, and thought that we should follow their example. The 'penny post' had been introduced in 1840 and increasingly people were recognising the value of a reliable postal service. The boxes were introduced in Jersey but the design was thought to be unworthy of such a great organisation as the GPO and a design competition was held in 1864. Penfold was the winner

and the first of his attractive and charismatic octagonal letter boxes (which came in three sizes) was made by Cochrane Grove and Co of Dudley in 1866.



*A Penfold in Cambridge*

Initially the letter boxes were painted green with a black plinth but in a country which was then predominantly rural it was difficult to spot green letter boxes so it was decided that red would be better. The Penfold box was the standard design from 1866 until 1879. The reproduction model that we have under the famous horse-chestnut tree outside the Georgian Hotel was installed in July 1992 and officially unveiled by our then county councillor Christine Stevens, who had been instrumental in its creation and location. At first the post office refused to allow it to be a working model, but at the last minute they relented! There are still about a hundred Penfolds in use in the UK, with 8 in Cheltenham alone, certainly from

as far north as Berwick to the south coast and in New Zealand and the West Indies. I am told they can be seen in India too, so I assume they became commonplace throughout the British Empire.

Any article about Penfold should really include a reference to Danger Mouse. A cartoon 007 character whose sidekick, named **Ernest Penfold**, is a timid, bespectacled hamster, and Danger Mouse's reluctant assistant. Penfold stands just over half the height of Danger Mouse, and always wears thick round glasses and a crumpled blue suit with a white shirt and a yellow and black striped tie and lives in a letter-box.

In the interests of eclecticism I thought you should know this!

With the coming of the railway to Haslemere in 1859 JWP was able to spend more time at the family home and to become more involved with local concerns. He recognised that the place would change over time and, being a pioneering type, took an interest in the new craze of photography. He left a huge archive of early prints to the museum. The very comprehensive records that he kept of the village as it then was were to form the basis of the book by Swanton and Woods, '*Bygone Haslemere*'.



JWP's reputation as an architect specialising in vernacular buildings led to his being commissioned in 1868 to design and oversee the building of an extension to Thursley village school (shown left) to create a 'master's house' and also to enlarge the adjacent school room.

The school at Thursley had been built in 1843 and JWP created a fine addition to the older building. The place is now a most attractive and much valued Village Hall.

Shortly after that commission in 1870, JWP was invited to prepare designs for our own parish church of St Barts. The original building was too small for the growing population and its design and construction (incorporating cast iron columns) did not lend itself to modernisation but rather demolition and, apart from the bottom portion of the medieval tower and the north wall, the church was re-built. He went on to design 'Sadlers', the rectory in Grayswood Road.

In Haslemere High Street the Working Men's club (now metamorphosed into the Comrades club) was another of his designs and the plaque inside mentions the date of 1886 and the benefactor Stewart Hodgson of Lythe Hill



It was gratifying to note that when the Comrade's Club was recently repainted, the delicate decorative designs of the plaster infill panels on the façade were faithfully restored as the picture on the left shows. The work is reminiscent of the Arts and Crafts plasterer/artist Ernest Gimson (1865-1919).

In 1876 the old almshouses in Petworth Road were rebuilt, porches added and a new block erected to match the original. So good was the work it is hard to distinguish the new from the original. In 1883 JWP was involved with the restoration and

enlargement of Thursley church, the scope of the work being similar to that at St Barts., to which he returned in 1888 to add a new south aisle.



JWP had a very full life, devoted in the later years to Haslemere, and it was Penfold who, in 1898 gave the town its first cottage hospital at the top of Shepherd's Hill. He designed it, paid for its construction and gave a generous endowment. It was given by him with his two sisters, Katherine and Susanna in memory of their parents.

The cottage hospital was no longer needed after the present hospital was opened in 1924. Now called Anderson Court, it was converted into a number of apartments.

There was a great deal more to John Penfold than the humble letterbox and Haslemere continues to derive much benefit from his well-designed and executed buildings.

My grateful thanks, as ever, to the Haslemere Museum Volunteers team.

*Robert Serman*