

Past Times

**A WEEKLY LOOK
DOWN MEMORY
LANE**

with MIKE
PRIESTLEY



How historic hall became a seat of counter-revolution

...not to mention the man who 'discovered' the bends and an explorer to deepest Africa...

Cottingley Hall has had its share of residents who have made their mark. Not the Cottingley Hall which is now a nursing home. That isn't the original Cottingley Hall (or Cottingley House, as it was once known).

The "new" hall was built around the same time as Cottingley Manor after prominent Bradford businessman Arthur Harry Briggs, chairman of Briggella Mills in Little Horton, bought the old hall plus more than 100 acres of agricultural land and a wood in 1913 from Asa Lingard (of the Bradford department store family).

He had it demolished and replaced by Cottingley Manor, in which he and his wife lived, and a new Cottingley Hall built as a wedding present for his only son Arthur.

But while the old Cottingley Hall is long gone, the memorable stories of some of the people who lived in it survive and are now being publicised thanks to the efforts of the Cottingley Village History Society, which has published a fascinating book, *Cottingley Hall and Its Families*, written by Elizabeth Downsborough.

The hall got off to a troubled start in the hands of the family of Stephen Franke, who lived there from 1591. Stephen's younger son William, a "spendthrift and wastrel", fathered an illegitimate daughter and later was fined in court for assaulting his own father and another local man.

In the 18th century the hall was childhood home of William Wickham, younger son of Henry Wickham and destined to become a sort of Cottingley Scarlet Pimpernel.

William began his education at Bingley Grammar School, continued it at Oxford and completed it abroad, studying law at the University of Geneva in Switzerland and marrying a Swiss woman, a member of an important Geneva banking family. William joined the diplomatic service and through his Oxford friendship with Lord Grenville was invited to join the British Secret Service following the French Revolution.

One of his tasks was to organise the raising of a regiment of Swiss volunteers to support an uprising to restore the French monarchy of King Louis XVIII, who was living in exile. Unfortunately he chose an unreliable accomplice in the "extravagant and pleasure loving" General Pichergu, the plans were discovered and the counter-revolt failed.

Elizabeth Downsborough writes: "William's life was the stuff that movies are made of. The French Revolution was a time of great unrest; no-one knew who their friend or enemies were. William was a man without fear, and obviously had a strong nerve. In a letter he once wrote, 'I trust in God that for myself, as long as a drop of good old English blood shall run in my veins, I shall never know what it is under any circumstances to be afraid'."

William's courage was rewarded. In 1802 he was named chief secretary for Ireland and four years later he was made a Lord of the Treasury. He and his wife of 48 years ended their days gardening in retirement in Southampton, specialising in growing figs. He's remembered by a monument in York Minster.

Another notable product of Cottingley Hall was John Gillies Priestley, elder son of Charles Henry Priestley and grandson of Briggs Priestley, MP for Bradford and head of worsted manufacturers Briggs Priestley & Sons.

Eton and Oxford-educated Gillies had a strong scientific bent, for which deep-sea divers can be grateful. While working in collaboration with John Scott Haldane in 1906 he discovered the role that too much carbon dioxide can play in producing the phenomenon known as the bends.

But perhaps the most fascinating character to emerge from what was then still known as Cottingley House was Richard Thornton, son of the family which occupied the hall from 1835 to 1852. He studied first at Bradford Grammar



CAST OF CHARACTERS:
The original Cottingley Hall and, far left, 'Scarlet Pimpernel' William Wickham and, near left, African adventurer Richard Thornton

School (to which he rode each day on a donkey), then at Bingley, then at Bradford again, showing a particular interest in zoology, entomology and the countryside.

Later he went to the Royal School of Mines in London, studying geology and mineralogy and working during the summer holidays in Cumberland lead mines.

He was a star pupil, winning several awards for his studies. He was about to accept a job he had been offered as a geologist with a government survey in Australia when he was summoned to the office of the head of the School of Mines, Sir Roderick Murchison, the most eminent geologist of that period.

Elizabeth Downsborough explains: "Sir Roderick was a friend of the explorer David Livingstone who had approached him to ask him to recommend a geologist for a second expedition to the Zambesi that he was planning. Sir Roderick had no hesitation in recommending the young



Richard Thornton, in spite of him being only 19 years old at the time. Livingstone met Richard and decided to employ him, overlooking the fact that he was so young, and probably influenced by the fact that Richard had a strong constitution which would obviously be needed on the type of expedition that was being planned."

So on February 25, 1858, Richard returned to Bradford to spend a few days with his family, bid them farewell for what would turn out to be the last time, and set sail for Africa.

His adventures and misadventures are entertainingly recorded by Elizabeth Downsborough, who has had access to Richard's meticulously-kept diaries. They record his 14 months working with the expedition, examining the geology of the area, collecting specimens, surveying and drawing maps until, thanks to an unpleasant bit of mischief by Livingstone's brother Charles, he fell foul of the leader and was dismissed from the expedition.

With no money but lots of determination, he went it alone, spending the next 20 months continuing his exploration of the Zambesi region before sailing to Zanzibar where in 1861 he met Baron von der Decken, a wealthy 27-year-old Hanoverian aristocrat.

He invited Richard to join him on an expedition to the Mount Kilimanjaro. With more than 50 porters and servants, they set out carrying with them a bottle of the Baron's champagne with which to celebrate their arrival at the summit but drinking it along their thirsty way instead.

Despite an encounter with ferocious native warriors and a strike by porters who were reluctant to proceed above the rain-forest level, they made it on to the mountain and spent 19 days there before being forced back by bad weather, including snow, at about 14,000 feet.

Later the Baron paid tribute to Richard as "a good companion and extremely useful by taking observations, working very laboriously with the theodolite and as a geologist in collecting and describing the rocks."

Livingstone, meanwhile, had had a change of heart and invited Richard to rejoin his expedition. He agreed, on favourable terms, and returned in July, 1862.

The following February he volunteered to trek 15 miles to bring fresh supplies of goats and sheep for the drought-stricken University Mission and supplies for his own expedition.

"This journey through the hot and swampy fever-stricken country proved too much for him, and on his return he fell ill with dysentery and tragically died... on April 21, 1863, 16 days after his 25th birthday," reports Elizabeth Downsborough in this lively account of the lives and times of the various families who occupied Cottingley House/Hall between 1591 and 1930.

● *Cottingley Hall and Its Families*, published by Cottingley Village History Society at £3, is available by telephoning (01274) 566705 or (01274) 820235.