

Archive: The lasting Nuneaton legacy of Alderman Edward Melly

By Nuneaton News | Posted: May 19, 2016



ANOTHER GIFT... Alderman Melly addresses the crowd from the bandstand when Riversley Park was officially opened on July 6, 1907.

NUNEATON still benefits from the boundless generosity and kindness of a remarkable man, three-quarters of a century after his terrible and untimely death. Alderman Edward Ferdinand Melly was born more 100 miles from Nuneaton.

A 'Scouser,' from a well-to-do family, he grew up on the banks of the Mersey in Liverpool, but moved to Nuneaton as a young man, embraced the town and its people, and went on to become its greatest benefactor.

People stroll and children play in Riversley Park, which he donated to the town and was named after 'Riversley,' the family home on Merseyside.

Visitors enjoy the exhibits and artefacts at the Museum and Art Gallery in the park which he also gave to the town to help preserve its rich past and heritage.

Alderman Melly also played a key role in the founding and funding of the Nuneaton General Hospital, later known as the 'Manor,' where one of the wards was named after him.

The hospital played a major part in his life. He was its financial secretary and was instrumental in its extension and expansion for which he collected £4,500, a considerable amount in those days. He set an example by digging deep into his own pocket and donating £500.

Edward's philanthropy was staggering. His financial generosity knew no bounds and he worked tirelessly for Nuneaton and its people, becoming a towering figure in his adopted town.

Educated at Rugby School, he would have known of Nuneaton, but could hardly have envisaged how important it would become in his life and the part he would play in its history.

It was in 1882 that he arrived in the town with his family. He was just 25, but was to spend the rest of his days there.

Trained at Sheffield in coal mining, Edward took over Griff Colliery which had been sold by the Newdegate family to Emerson Bainbridge, who saw the bright young Liverpoolian as his prodigy.

Griff Colliery was under-financed and in danger of stagnation when he arrived. Under his guidance, however, it made rapid progress. So much so that its 'sister' pit, Griff Clara, was sunk in 1893 and the two mines were soon producing half a million tons a year.

Edward was made a director and then chairman and his benevolence, kindness and consideration shone through. He helped to establish Griff and Coton Sports Ground and Institute and, more importantly, the payment of pensions to old colliers.

In July 1932, when the company celebrated its jubilee, he had completed 50 years at Griff, and luncheon was held at the Institute where Edward was presented with a gold cup as a token of the company's esteem.

A member of the Nuneaton and Chilvers Coton Urban District and then Nuneaton Borough Council, he was mayor in 1908-10 and 1926-27 and became an Alderman just before the outbreak of the First World War.

Aldermen no longer exist in local authorities. They were elected by fellow councillors and not by the public and were few a far between.

For 40 years, Edward served as a magistrate, becoming chairman of the Nuneaton Bench. He was described as "merciful" to wrong doers, except in cases where cruelty to children was concerned.

Keen on sports and music, Edward was president of Nuneaton Rugby Club and Nuneaton Amateur Operatic Society and sat on numerous and various committees and outside bodies.

One of his relatives was George Melly, the flamboyant, larger than life jazz and blues singer, author, critic and raconteur, who became a household name and died at the age of 80 in 2007.

Another was William Rathbone, his father's cousin. He came up with the concept of District Nursing and clearly had an influence on Edward's outlook on life.

So much so that, during the First World War, he secured a lease on palatial Weddington Hall to establish a Red Cross Hospital which treated men wounded in the terrible carnage of the trenches.

Edward paid for most of the equipment needed to treat the battle-scarred patients, who were cared for by 50 Red Cross nurses, most of them recruited from Nuneaton and Hartshill.

There were few organisations in the area that were not influenced by the wisdom of Edward's careful counsel or touched by his kindness.

His indefatigable efforts were rewarded in 1930 when he became one of only a handful of men to be made a Freeman of the Borough, the highest honour the town can bestow.

Despite his successes and achievements, however, his life was tinged with heart rending personal sadness. Married three times, he had three sons by his first wife, who died in childbirth in 1892. He remarried two years later, but his second wife died in 1899 after a short illness.

Edward then took Harriet Lees of Shustoke, better known as 'Hattie' and a lifelong friend as his third wife and they adopted two children together. The couple lived at The Close in Church Street, where the traffic island is now, in between St Nicolas Parish Church and the library.

Their house received a direct hit when enemy bombers unleashed their deadly cargoes of death and destruction on Nuneaton on the night of May 17, 1941, an infamous date that is forever etched into the history of the town.

One hundred people died and many more were injured as a terrible, blazing inferno engulfed and destroyed homes, churches, shops and factories in the heaviest raid Nuneaton suffered during the Second World War.

In the awful aftermath of the attack the following morning, police constable Joe Boneham was searching the shattered, smouldering ruin that had been The Close when he discovered the bodies of an elderly couple.

PC Boneham recognised them instantly as 83-year-old Edward Melly and Hattie.

It was said that they had refused to go to the cellar when the air raid siren sounded and had died together, killed by the blast of the bomb that wrecked their home. As a grieving town mourned its dead, the devoted couple were laid to rest in the family grave in Nuneaton Cemetery after a simple private funeral.

Edward Ferdinand Melly, Nuneaton's greatest benefactor, was dead – but his remarkable legacy survives and thrives in the adopted town that he came to love.