

## C.GRAY HILL - ONE BRICK; SEVERAL STORIES

One of the joys of what might loosely be termed 'research' is the way in which the most mundane of items can produce both interest and surprise. So it was with the desire to find out more about some of Coventry's lesser-known brickyards. The task of trying to seek out some information about these yards gradually led to some fascinating detail of entrepreneurial initiative.

The other great danger of doing all this is that someone else has already covered the ground, and a re-invention of the wheel takes place. My hope is that this is not the case with the following example.

Let us start with a brick retrieved from a demolition site in Coventry, carrying the name C GRAY HILL COVENTRY.



Charles Gray Hill was born in Highbury, London in 1864 and spent his early years in the metropolis, only coming to Coventry in 1881. He was the son of Thomas Hill, partner in the London building firm of Messrs Higgs and Hill.

Charles Gray Hill was also a building contractor, and in 1886 he took over the business and premises of Coventry Alderman Mr. James Marriott, Much Park Street. As the Coventry Herald of January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1886 reported

### MR. JAMES MARRIOTT

Desires to inform his Friends and his Public generally that he has Transferred his Business as a Builder and Contractor to MR. CHARLES GRAY HILL, on whose behalf he respectfully solicits a continuation of that confidence and patronage so generously accorded to himself for upwards of forty years.

Directly beneath there is a welcoming response from Charles Gray Hill, assuring the inhabitants of Coventry and neighbourhood that all works entrusted to him would receive his personal attention, and would be executed with 'economy, stability and dispatch'.

The Coventry Herald of 23 August 1895 carries an advert for the company's products

C. GRAY HILL

MUCH PARK STREET, COVENTRY

Manufacturer of Tiles, Finials, 6in., 8in. and 9in. Quarries.

Wire Cut and Facing Bricks etc.

He also had a brickyard in The Foleshill area, although it has not yet been possible to determine exactly the location. References in Trade Directories place the address as Foleshill Road, and it seems to have been in that area of land that lies north of the Coventry Canal, bordered by the Foleshill Road to the west and Stoney Stanton Road to the east. This was, of course, the location of Websters brickworks and Hill's brickyard seems to have been close by. Substance for this view comes from Websters Annual Report to shareholders of 1899 which, in a justification for the proposed railway to link with the LNWR (Leamington to Nuneaton) line, the report states

"With this object in mind, the directors report that they have recently acquired the brickworks of C. Gray Hill. These works adjoin those of our Company, and have a frontage onto the proposed line of the railway." (Coventry Evening Telegraph 22 August 1899)

At a relatively young age, Hill seemed to have developed a growing reputation as a building contractor, developing some important connections, including the world of London theatres. In a productive partnership with architect Ernest Woodrow A.R.I.B.A, he had been appointed the contractor to build a number of theatres in London. One of these was the Camberwell Palace of Varieties, and the laying of the Memorial Stone and the Opening Ceremony were reported in The Music Hall and Theatre Review (an unlikely source of information on Coventry builders!).

The Review for 7<sup>th</sup>. July 1899 included details of the Laying of the Memorial Stone, with the reporter obviously much taken by the role played by renowned entertainer of the period Miss Vesta Tilley, describing her as looking "extremely well".

'AT 3.25, or thereabouts, by the clock last Monday afternoon, Miss Vesta Tilley, after performing certain graceful evolutions with a handsome silver-plated trowel, specially designed for the purpose, declared the memorial stone of the new Camberwell Palace of Varieties to be "well and truly laid". The announcement was received with loud cheers by the company who had accepted the invitation of the directors to be present at the ceremony, echoed back by the workforce stationed aloft the on the walls of the new building.'

The Music Hall and Theatre Review of December 15<sup>th</sup>. 1899 reported that 'The structure has been erected by a contractor who had had large experience in theatre buildings, for Mr. C.Gray Hill, of Coventry, has erected The Granville Theatre of Varieties, Walham Green, The Shakespeare Theatre, Clapham Junction, and many other theatres'.



### The Camberwell Palace of Varieties

C Gray Hill, builder      A later painting by William Keddie Forester.  
The theatre was closed in 1956, and was demolished soon afterwards.

Coventry also received the benefits of his abilities, with the Public Baths, Priory Street built in 1894. Details of this can be found [www.historiccoventry.co.uk](http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk) Interestingly, Hill used bricks from a Kenilworth brickyard for the façade of the building. The report on the laying of the foundation stone included 'The façade will stand out in bright Cherry Orchard bricks, relieved with alternate bands of white Portland stone, the gable rising high and clear of the one-storey wings, which will be broken up with pediment gablets and capped with Portland stone pediments.'



The Coventry Public Baths built by Charles Gray Hill in 1894

Other projects included the Opera House in Hales Street (1899) and the Foleshill branch police station, fire station, and free library, opened in 1903. His home 'Broadwater' in Kenilworth Road was among a number of large residences constructed by his firm in the locality.



'Broadwater'  
Painting in the Herbert Art Gallery by James Bambrick

In 1900 he moved from his brick activities in Much Park Street to 'more commodious premises in Godiva Street'. George Loveitt advertised the sale of the Much Park Street site - 'Offices, Joiners' Shop, and capital Workshop, formerly part of Messrs. Calcott Bros., Cycle Works, Much Park Street'. As it turned out, this was not the last occasion that Hill would work in this street.

#### A change of direction

On 14<sup>th</sup>. May 1896 he had married Louise Maude Singer, daughter of George Singer, cycle and later motor magnate. In fact Hill had done some extremely important work for Singer, including the building of the Canterbury Street Factory and Coundon Court, Singer's home.



The surviving front of the  
Canterbury Street Singer factory



Coundon Court



The Midland Daily Telegraph allocated a large number of column inches to the wedding, and gave it the title of 'INTERESTING WEDDING IN COVENTRY'. It was held in the Warwick Road Congregational Church, a singularly appropriate location in view of the fact that Charles Gray Hill had erected it.



It was clearly an important occasion in the Coventry social calendar and was a ticketed event in view of the anticipated crush of guests, well-wishers and interested onlookers. The report described in meticulous detail the floral decoration of the church, the dresses worn by the members of the wedding party, and the list of presents – 'very numerous, and of costly character'. An address with 226 signatures from the managers, foremen, office staff and workers of Messrs. Singer & Co was also presented to Miss Singer, together with an ornate table lamp and candelabra.

Clearly, Hill's thoughts were turning elsewhere and the Singer connection was probably influential in the decision to join forces with Charles Steane to form Charlesworth Car bodies in 1907, in the Much Park Street premises.

Prior to that – and possibly more influential in the decision – was the fact that Hill had clearly run into financial difficulties. Perhaps he had stretched himself too far, for he had amassed considerable debts. The Birmingham Daily Mail reported, under the heading 'COVENTRY CONTRACTOR'S AFFAIRS'

'Under the failure of Charles Gray Hill, builder and contractor, of South Place, Finsbury, and Godiva Road, Coventry, which has been reported to the London bankruptcy Court, the liabilities are estimated at about £40,000, and the assets are

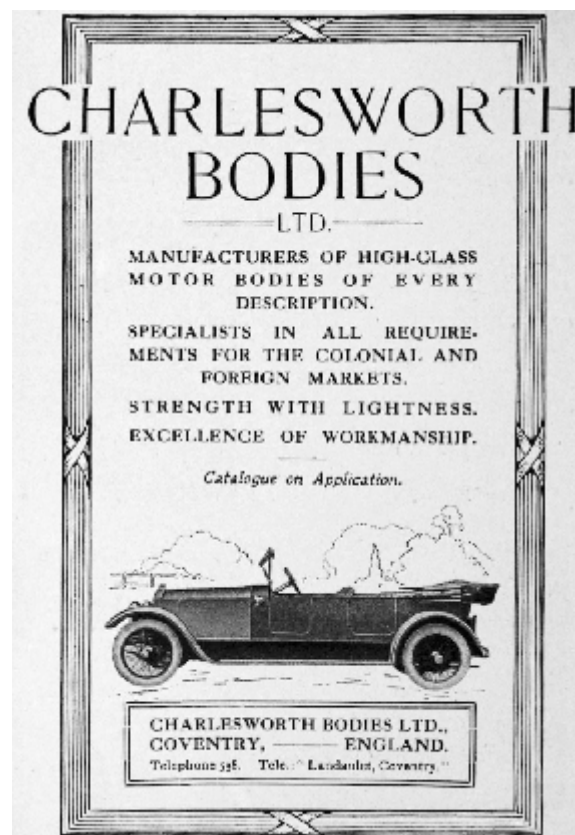
valued at sufficient to pay all debts in full. The debtor has carried out some important contracts in Warwickshire and London, among the number being the Hearts of Oak Buildings in the Euston Road, London, which was opened by the King early in the present year.'

In February 1907, the Godiva Street stock and plant were up for sale, consequent upon 'the failure of Mr. C. Gray Hill'. The size of the business is perhaps reflected in the Odell's sales catalogue which ran to 58 pages with 1200 lots.

Charles Gray Hill also moved from Broadwater, for in the Coventry Herald of 12 April 1907, Charles B. Odell is advertising 'the charmingly-situate modern residence late in the occupation of Charles Gray Hill Esq.

George Singer died at Coundon Court in 1909, and the premises were soon put for sale. Included in the sales particulars is Coundon Court Lodge or Holly Lodge. This was itself of considerable size – 7 bedrooms, 3 sitting rooms, ample offices; stabling and garden; three cottages; fitted laundry; useful farmery. The details concluded with a simple description 'Charming'.

Charles Gray Hill and his wife were beneficiaries of the Singer estate and the 1911 Census revealed that Charles Gray Hill now occupied Holly Lodge. He continued as managing director of Charlesworth until his retirement in 1928.



An advert in 1917

Rather than being explored here, the Charlesworth Bodies story merits inclusion in the motor industry section, but suffice it to say that it seems to reflect the entrepreneurial initiative and spirit of optimism typical of Coventry industry at the turn of the century.

It seems that he departed to Jamaica with his wife in 1933, only to return almost immediately. He died the following year at Abbey Spring, Beaulieu, Hampshire.

So the story of Charles Gray Hill contains much unanticipated material, revealing him as a significant builder in the city of Coventry (and beyond), with a sharp change of direction to the world of car-bodies early in the twentieth century. He certainly left his mark on the industrial history of Coventry.