

## PORTRAIT OF A WOODBRIDGE WESLEYAN METHODIST

### ROWLAND HILL 1845 - 1929

This article is based on a monograph first written by Rev Ivan Moore, the husband of Anita Rowland who was the eldest grandchild of Rowland Hill. It was published for the Suffolk Local History Council in the early 1980s.



**Rowland Hill Rowland and Sarah Jane Rowland with sons at Hamblin House where the boys lived**

R. H. ROWLAND and Sons Ltd, usually referred to as "Rowlands of the Thoro'fare" were based in large premises occupied in the early 2000s by Woolworths, and now split into two units. Their yard has become a central town car park. The firm were Ironmongers, Upholsterers, Cabinet Makers, Bespoke Furnishers, with a China and Glass Warehouse, Oil Merchants and Gunsmiths. They were once a household name in Woodbridge. R. H. Rowland himself was deeply involved in the life of the town. This is a story of a rise and fall brought about by the seizing of an opportunity and a far reaching change in social conditions.

Rowland Hill Rowland was born in Halstead, Essex, in 1845, the son of a hairdresser. Where he learned his trade is not known. However, in due course he was to join Richard Dunnet Minter, and another partner Harrington, in taking over Knights, an ironmonger's shop in Halstead, ultimately to be entirely owned by Minter but trading at first as Harrington, Rowland and Minter.

In 1873 R. H. Rowland took over the business of Richard Dunnet Minter and came to reside in Doric Place, Woodbridge.

Rowland met Sarah Jane Bailey, who was to become his wife, at a church social in Chelmsford.

Shortly after the arrival of Rowland in Woodbridge, their marriage took place at the Independent Chapel, Great Baddow, the bride being 19 and the bridegroom 30.

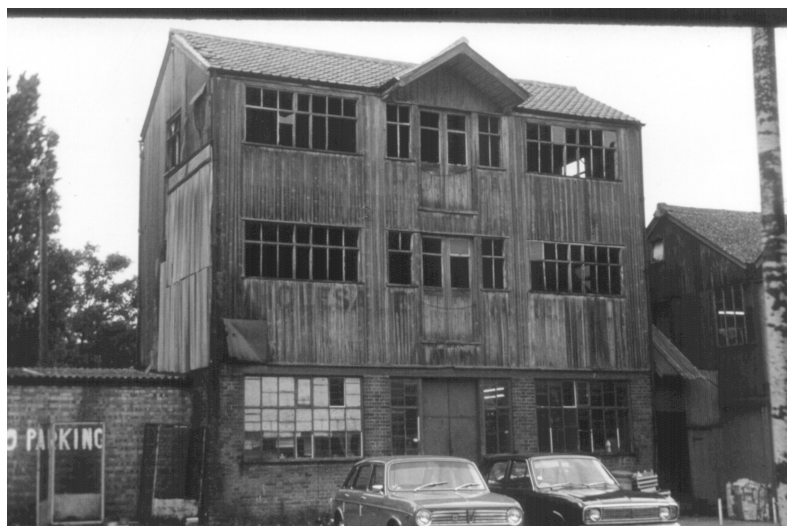
Their eldest son Bernard de Horne Rowland was born in 1876.



**R H Rowland's shop in the late 19C is on the left with the triangular roof level ornamentation. The shop on its right was purchased to develop into one building.**



**The completed Rowland shop as it appeared on letterhead notepaper**



**The mattress works and carpentry workshop in 1971 (now demolished)**

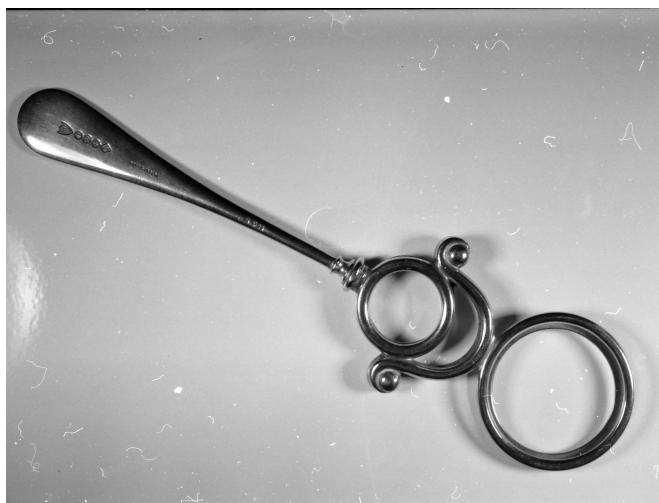
As the business expanded the old Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Brook Street was taken over as a store and also a meadow in Station Road upon which the Swimming Pool and Leisure Centre now stands. Opposite were stables housing twenty horses because there was a wholesale side to the business and supplies were being taken out to the villages of East Suffolk. The meadow, used for pasturing the horses, was a regular venue for the Woodbridge Fair.

The railway had reached Woodbridge in 1859 enabling factory products to reach Woodbridge from the Midlands and lessening the dependence on the sea route from London.

However, goods were still arriving by sea and river well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the ketch "Hope" and a Captain Moss bringing regular supplies of oil from London.

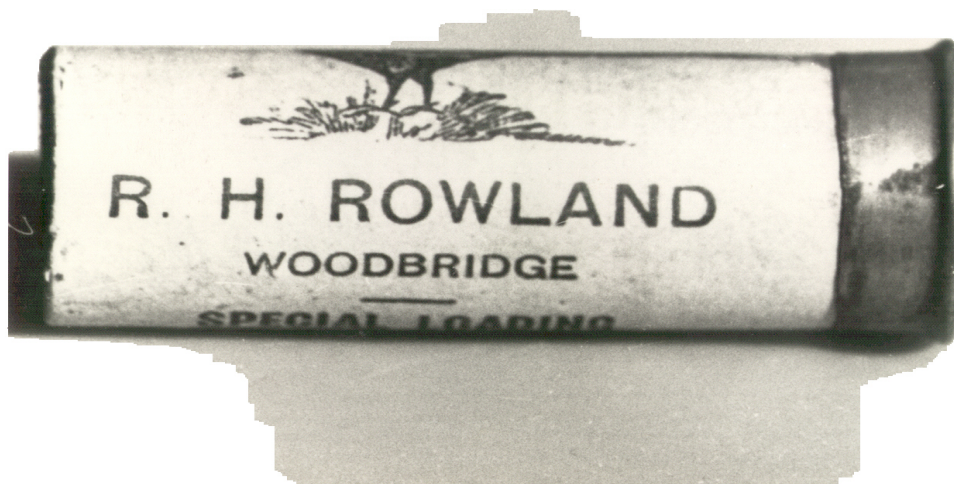
"Hope" now lies in the mud beside the Deben.

Besides his entrepreneurial skills Rowland had an inventive streak. He was the inventor of a "pie cup" and a device for topping eggs at table both of which survive.



The "Rowland" Egg Topper

This comprised two parallel rings mounted on a handle. When placed over an egg and a table knife inserted and leverage applied, the top was easily removed. There are other surviving items: a 12 bore cartridge case marked "R. H. Rowland, Woodbridge, Special Loading" with a pheasant design above; pieces of china showing scenes of Woodbridge with Rowland and Sons and a stamp, Foley China, on the base of cups and saucers; and a yard measure "Follow this Rule and Shop at R. H. Rowland and Sons Ltd., Woodbridge, Phone 31, Made in US of AM, War Bros., London", on the reverse "Complete House 1/4 yard Furnishers 1/2 yard Ironmongers 3/4 yard Wireless Dealers"



12 Bore cartridge

The business thrived in the days before the Great War. Rowland moved from his first house in Doric Place to live at the Hermitage in Cumberland Street, and was also occupying Hambin House opposite. At this time he was serving on the Town Council having been a member from its inception. He had become a Manager of the Council School, formerly a British School, a Director of the Woodbridge Plate Glass Insurance Company and a founder member of the Woodbridge Land and House Company. 1906 saw him become a Magistrate. His eldest son had entered the business after serving an apprenticeship elsewhere. Another son Stanley was also to be in the business.

Four other sons had departed for Australia where a relative was a judge.

His only daughter, Naomi, married a Wesleyan Minister, the Rev Reuben Simons.

Two other sons were at home and other relatives had come to reside in Woodbridge. His sons had attended Woodbridge School and a relative, William Shakespeare Rowland, achieved an Exhibition Scholarship to Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

By this time more land had been purchased on Ipswich Road overlooking the river. Here he planned to build a house and it was here that Sunday School parties were held.

By 1916 the house had been built and his address was now Highfield, Ipswich Road; this was on and directly opposite land being developed by the Land and House Company.



**The China Department of the Rowland's shop (early 1930's)**





**Furniture Dept (early 1930's)**



**Furniture Workshop 1932**

Life at Highfield in the few years after the war before the "depression" began to bite must have been very pleasantly busy. In summer time there were tennis parties and also visits from the children and grandchildren living away from Woodbridge and also other relatives, particularly those of Mrs Rowland, for some had entered government service, one serving in Palestine. There were regular visits from the Methodist Minister. Mrs. Rowland was a keen member of The British Women's Temperance Association. Fellow members were often at Highfield. Rowland himself was a Liberal, taking the chair at party meetings and bringing home to supper prominent Liberals who had been speaking. Sometimes the police brought some unfortunate who was to be admitted to St. Audrey's Asylum, for which a magistrate's warrant was required. He humoured one such by saying, "Giles, you are going for a nice holiday". Once a woman slightly disturbed called to complain about the infidelities, as she thought, of her husband saying she found notes in his pockets. "I often find notes in my pocket", was the reply. He was often called upon to take the chair at all sorts of religious and charitable events in the town, sometimes accompanied by his granddaughter Anita.



**A typical Highfield fete**

The house was meticulously cared for by Mrs. Rowland. Cakes and pastry were made and tinned up ready for instant use. The newspaper and magazines which were ever ready on the hall table were bundled and placed in the box room when the new editions arrived. The door handles and locks were carefully oiled with a feather. There was a sideboard made by one son, a skilled carver, Dennis (known in the family as "Denny"), with even a carved back so it could stand free from the wall.



**Sarah Jane Rowland sitting in front of sideboard carved by Frank Dennis**

Latterly Mrs Rowland was helped by her granddaughter, Anita, who with her sister Gertrude came to live with her after the early death of their mother, Bernard's wife. Anita continued to do so until she trained for secretarial work. Numerous people in the town had presents at Christmas from Mrs. Rowland. The gardener provided vegetables for the household every day and it was his task to sweep the drive on Saturday ready for Sunday. Relating any conversation he had had with his employer he would say, "I spake unto the master". There was a cook who was fond of saying to the Grandchildren, "Don't arga". There was a housemaid too and a "companion" for the grandchildren until they went away to school. The washing was carefully listed and sent out to a laundress who came to fetch it in an old pram. When it came back all ironed, it was checked and put away. A sewing woman came in to do any mending required.

Outside there was a revolving summer house where Dennis had a telescope. Mrs Rowland had her own fern garden. She also liked listening to the "Wireless", wearing headphones, especially football, following the movement of the ball by means of a numbered plan of the pitch. When the War came in 1914, Denny built an airraid shelter. Rowland was warned by the police when a raid was expected and it was said a red lamp was also shining in the town to warn other townspeople. It was on the way to the shelter that the blazing Zeppelin which came down at Theberton was seen. Quite unknowingly Rowland was said to have remarked, "What a lovely sunrise!" It was from here that Mr. and Mrs. Rowland were to move to Heath Lodge which was built for their retirement. To it a special road was constructed across the heath from the lane.

The coming of the war brought large changes for the family. Officers were billeted at Highfield and the sons in Australia came home with the Australian contingent. Bernard, the eldest, was to become a Quartermaster Sergeant in the Suffolk Regiment, was to remarry and never return to the business. The youngest son, Donald, had died aged 13. Dennis was killed in action on the RAMC boat the Royal Edward in the Aegean Sea. He appears as D. F. Rowland on the Woodbridge War Memorial and on the brass memorial at the Methodist Church.



**Frank Dennis**

It was after the war that there were special problems. These comprised finding employment for the sons who were demobilised, and also facing changed trading conditions. Philip was to find employment outside the business and at one time worked as a surveyor on the Woodbridge Bypass built in 1936. Another, Reginald, was to open a business in Cumberland Street as a Pork Butcher, Poulterer and Poultry Feed Merchant. Potted meat was made at Highfield for sale in the shop. He was to "cease trading" in 1926 but during and after World War II ran a cafe in a hut in Station Road where the Swimming Pool now is. He had become quite crippled from "Trench Feet". Norman and Hugh now entered the business. Rowland was "Sir" to his sons.

Prior to the war travel round and about Woodbridge was restricted to a private conveyance, the Carriers' carts or the railway. Now there was to be a bus service taking passengers from the villages to Ipswich and from Woodbridge itself. Then the "depression" arrived, hitting agriculture badly and opportunities for business generally. By this time Rowland was 79 and it was decided to make his business into a private limited company. The documents relating to the formation of the company, R. H. Rowland and Sons Limited, survive. It was formed in 1924 with Rowland Hill Rowland as Permanent Director and Chairman of the Company, with Norman Lancelot Rowland, Stanley Hill Rowland and Hugh James Rowland as Directors. The share capital was £15,000 comprising Preference Shares and Ordinary Shares.



R. H. Rowland was to die on the 4th March 1929, aged 84, having been at the office the day before. The funeral took place at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, St John's St. His grave, with that of his wife, in Woodbridge Cemetery is without any stone. He had been a staunch member of Woodbridge Wesleyan Methodist Church for half a century and a Sunday School Superintendent for 30 years. For all of this he had great sympathy with the Quakers, in fact describing himself "of Quaker persuasion". A pulpit lectern was donated to the Methodist Church to his memory - "his devoted service for Christ in connection with this church".

In the year that the company was formed, Rowland had made his will making provision for his wife and the distribution of his shares in the company among his surviving children with special provision that a proportion of the shares left to his son Bernard should pass to the children of his first marriage. Similarly a proportion of Philip's were to pass to his children.

The executors were to find there was no estate to distribute as Rowland's personal estate had been pledged to sustain an overdraft to enable his company, which had already mortgaged the premises, to continue trading. He was to be followed to the grave within nine months by his wife Sarah Jane. In 1936 there was a Petition by creditors that the Company should be wound up. Though this was resisted in the High Court by Bernard de Horne Rowland, the eldest son who had become a director, and other creditors, liquidation was agreed. A Receiver and Liquidator were appointed and a Manchester firm bought the stock and sold it off in a series of sales in July, August and September of the same year.



Closing Down sale

The creditors received just over nineteen shillings in the pound. The building was to remain empty until occupied by troops throughout the war (1939 - 1945) and was then to be briefly an Antique Shop until it passed to its present owners and use.

(N.B. Woolworths subsequently went into administration 2008).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must express my thanks to the Rev R. Minter for information regarding his family connection with the business; to Miss J. Simons for loan of the Articles of Association; to Mr R. Crowe for providing a photograph of the cartridge case; to Woodbridge Museum for the legend on the ruler and information regarding the china; to the Principal Area Librarian of Staffordshire County Council for information regarding the latter; to Mr R. Simper and the Suffolk Record Office for locating and providing respectively a photograph of "Hope" and the Minister of the Woodbridge Methodist Church for information regarding the Pulpit Lectern. Mr David Rowland has put his own research at my disposal including references to the "Woodbridge Reporter" and provided the photographs of the Pie Cup, the Egg Slicer and the closing down sale. Without the recollections of my late wife, Anita Jean, daughter of Bernard de Horne Rowland, and granddaughter of R. H. Rowland, this work would have been impossible. My profound thanks must go to Mrs M. Canning for typing the manuscript.