

A grand old house in the village that would become apartments

by STUART McMASTER

FOLLOWING the death of John Twigg Homer in 1934, it is believed that the house known as Dormston lay empty and unused until the beginning of the Second World War when it became the headquarters of the local Home Guard.

Following the end of the war and departure of the Home Guard, Dormston was put up for sale by auction on Friday, 3 May, 1946. Details of the house and the name of its current owner, believed to have been a Mr F.W. Jones, were published in the local press as mentioned in the extract at the beginning of last week's instalment. Unfortunately, information regarding Mr Jones's background is unknown, nor is there any indication as to when he acquired the Dormston estate.

Allan John Richard Hickling (1909-1996), his wife Muriel Constance nee Carrier (1918-2014) and their first two children Anthony (Tony) b.1940 and Angela b.1943, moved into Dormston in early 1947. The name of the house was subsequently changed from Dormston to Dormston House and six years later in 1953 Allan and Muriel's third child Amanda was born.

Prior to their move to Dormston House, Allan and his family lived at Netherby Hall, a grand house of Sedgley which sadly was demolished in the 1950s to make way for a council housing estate.

Allan was born in Nottingham but moved when he was a young boy to the Black Country with his parents John Richard Hickling and Polly,



Inset: Allan and Muriel Hickling attending a SUDC function in 1962, Allan wearing the SUDC Chairman's chain-of-office. Above: Netherby Hall, Sedgley c.1944: Allan JR Hickling's residence prior to moving to Dormston House

nee Proudler, his father Richard having secured employment in Stourbridge. Allan, educated at King Edward VI Grammar School, Stourbridge, qualified as a chemist and in due course made his living as a 'manufacturing chemist' and entrepreneur specialising in bespoke chemical products.

In the early 1930s Allan acquired a sole-supply contract for his 'Mennex The Wonder Snuff' to Alfred Preedy and Sons Ltd, tobacconists of Dudley. In 1957 he acquired the Newball &

Mason Food Flavourings company and established the Sedgley Chemical Company (SCCo).

The stable building block at the rear of Dormston House was converted into a laboratory and workshop.

Allan's SCCo. undertook work for such companies as Maxicrop, Drywite and Avolit-Lighter Fuels.

His company is also known to have designed and produced the 'first' felt marker pen (complete with special formulated inks) as used by TV weather presenters in the

early days of television.

Allan eventually expanded his business interests to embrace the property market, becoming involved in shops, factories and specifically the development of an industrial estate in 1954, later to be known as Dormston Trading Estate. Located adjacent to Jews Lane off Burton Road, Upper Gornal, the estate was originally the site of an old brickworks.

In addition to his professional interests Allan was also involved in local politics, a council member of Sedgley

Urban District Council and appointed council Chairman in 1962.

Following the demise of SUDC in 1966 the council Chairman's chain-of-office with pendant was transferred to Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council for display and safekeeping.

In the early 1950s Allan was in a position to pursue his interest in Theatre Organs and in particular the Wurlitzer organ which he regarded as tonally, and in build quality, the best. So, in 1955 he purchased what was Britain's first

Wurlitzer organ from the Gaumont, (originally The New Picture House) Walsall, and installed it in his music room at Dormston House.

In 1957 the organ was replaced by a larger Wurlitzer which came from the City Cinema, Leicester. The organ soon became a centre of great interest particularly with the local press, television and the BBC. The list of organists who played the organ was a 'who's who' of theatre organ at the time, including Reginald Dixon, Robin Richmond and well-known Black Country



Allan JR Hickling in his Office at Dormston House c.1985, above. Left: Allan JR Hickling's Chemists Shop c.1927/28, located at 25 Zoar Street, Lower Gornal.



Aerial view of Dormston House with adjoining apartments (left of centre) and former laboratory and workshop building and ex-stables building (right of centre next to Mill Bank)

lads Trevor Bolshaw and Brian Sharp. Both became virtual 'resident organists' at Dormston House, playing the organ for the many functions which were held in the music room. In the 1980s as Allan got older he eventually decided to dispose of his beloved Wurlitzer and sold it to the Isle of Man Government.

Sadly, Allan passed away in

1996 and so his wife Muriel was to be the last of the Hickling family to occupy Dormston House; Muriel's children Tony, Angela and Amanda having left home.

In late 2000 Muriel left the house for the last time, moving into a more modest property in Gospel End.

Dormston House was then put up for sale by Tony in 2001/2.

However the house, in the first instance, failed to sell.

Tony then decided to convert it into three apartments and as result the house was eventually sold to Jim Drennan of Daynote Limited, Wolverhampton, who converted the house from three to four apartments and erected an adjoining two-storey building containing six more apartments at the rear of

the house, accessed via Mill Bank. The organist Brian Sharp, who frequently played the organ at Dormston House, eventually went to live in one of the apartments where, sadly, he passed away in 2016.

The sympathetic upkeep and continued active use of Dormston House, a listed building located within Sedgley's Conservation Area, will help to

preserve and protect it's historic integrity for future generations.

Stuart would like to thank the following for their assistance: Tony Hickling, Sedgley Local History Society, Martin Jones, website editor, All Saints Church, Sedgley, The Isle of Man News.

If you have any associations

with any of the family members referred to in this article then Stuart and the Bugle would be pleased to hear from you. Write to us or pay us a visit at the Black Country Bugle, Dudley Archives and Local History Centre, Tipton Road, Dudley, DY1 4SQ, give us a call on 01384 889000, or email gjonas@blackcountry-bugle.co.uk



Allan JR Hickling in his laboratory/workshop at rear of Dormston House c.1964



Muriel Constance Hickling's Ladies Clothing Shop c.1960, located left hand corner, junction of Sedgley High Street/Bilston Street