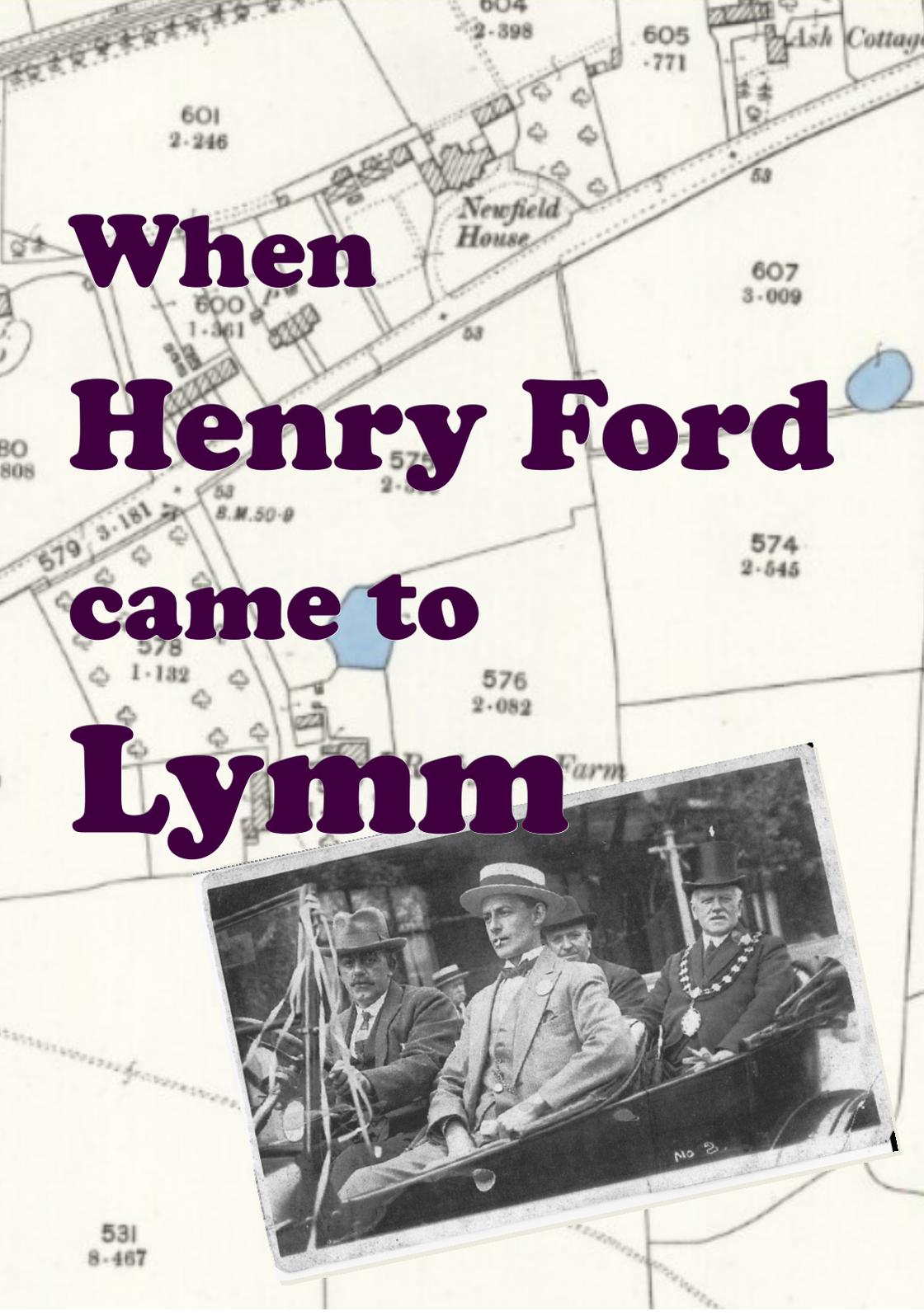


When Henry Ford came to Lymm



So how did Henry Ford . yes, **THE** Henry Ford end up playing bowls on a lawn in Rushgreen Road in 1912? It's quite a story.

In 1909 a young British businessman, Percival Perry disembarked from a transatlantic liner in New York en route for Detroit to meet Henry Ford. As the manager of the growing Ford sales operation in UK he was on his way to challenge the motor magnate about his trading policies which he claimed were stifling Ford sales growth in UK. At the time Henry Ford was insisting on payment for all cars as they left the dockside in USA. This presented huge cash flow issues for the UK. Perry didn't win that argument, in the short term at least, but he did win a friend. Ford saw in Perry a man after his own heart – that rare combination of engineer and marketeer with a visionary streak and huge ambition.



*Percival Lea Dewhurst Perry
1878-1956*



*Model Ts at Ford's first European factory
in Trafford Park*

Together they created a plan to open the very first European production line for Ford cars in Europe. And so, by 1911, Perry had left the glamorous surroundings of the Ford showroom on Shaftesbury Avenue in London for the smoke of the industrial north – the new Trafford Park Estate to be precise.

Perry must have looked around for somewhere to live that was within reach of Trafford Park (in his new Model T Ford), but away from the industrial grime of Manchester.

What he found was Newfield House on Lymm's Rushgreen Road. He and his wife, Catherine, moved in around the turn of 1912. It was a large double fronted house with outbuildings and five acres of land around it that included a bowling green.



Henry, Clara and Edsel Ford on board ship, en route for England... and Lymm 1912

It was in that same year that Henry Ford, along with his wife Clara and son Edsel decided to take their first overseas trip and Britain was to be the destination. They were mixing business with pleasure. Ford no doubt wanted to check out his first European operation and also spy out potential sites for further expansion. But both he and Clara were also keen to explore their family roots, Henry in Ireland, Clara in

England. They went first to Ireland and more specifically Cork where Ford later established a factory. When they moved onto England they were met on the dockside by Percival Perry who took the family on a motor tour of the country. That must have been quite an adventure in 1912 though they made it as comfortable as possible,



Henry Ford during his visit to Lymm and Manchester in 1912. That's Henry looking nonchalant and slightly awkward in the straw boater. The Mayor of Manchester is behind him.



Newfield House years later.

travelling by Rolls-Royce rather than Model T Ford. (They probably kept that quiet at the time!)

At the end of the tour they all returned to Lymm where Henry, Clara and Edsel spent a week with the Perrys at Newfield House. The favourite activity of an evening was a leisurely game of bowls on the Perrys' private green. (The visitors enjoyed it so much that when they were leaving Percival and Catherine presented them with a set of bowls as a memento of their stay

in Lymm.) As they played they would have had the opportunity to discuss business, including one of Perry's pet theories and strategies for industrial relations. He argued that car manufacturing was so profitable that it made



This picture overlays an 1897 map on a modern one. It shows the location of Newfield House on Rushgreen Road and the extent of the grounds, including the bowling green.



Percival Perry made regular visits to USA from 1916 onwards in spite of the war.

Henry Ford second left at the front with Percival on his left. Looks like a summer fishing trip.

Photo courtesy of Henry Ford Archive

economic sense to pay workers well above the market rate. It reduced worker turnover, which in turn brought down training costs. But this was no philanthropic gesture. Perry was also determined to stem what he saw as the growing voice of the trade union movement and in return for his “generosity” he expected total compliance from the workforce. (This approach was later to rebound on him with resulting disputes but in 1912 it appeared to be working.)

An interesting postscript to this story is that less than two years later Henry Ford introduced the \$5 day for his workforce, effectively paying twice the going rate for Detroit workers. He also demanded a lot in return even expecting to be able to send staff to visit workers’ home to ensure they were living “the American way”, which included not drinking or gambling. Could it be that American industrial pay policy was forged on the bowling greens of Lymm?

This was not the end of Ford family involvement in Lymm. When war broke out in 1914, Ford, who was a committed, if sometimes eccentrically misguided, pacifist wanted to help the war effort by opening a convalescent home or hospital for wounded soldiers. He was advised that this was not permissible given USA’s neutrality, so at the suggestion of his wife Clara they came up with a plan to create a settlement for Belgian refugees and enlisted the help of Percival Perry to set it up.

The plight of the Belgian people drew huge attention at the start of the First World War as German forces marched through the country toward France. The invasion was in direct defiance of Belgian neutrality. They caused havoc



Crowds at the dockside in Antwerp fleeing the country after the German invasion.

and misery, terrorising the population and destroying homes as they went. It was described at the time as “the rape of Belgium”. A quarter of a million people fled to England in the second half of 1914 and the country responded with huge sympathy for the “plucky Belgians” as they were described, by setting up local homes and support groups all over the country to accommodate them.

Oughtrington Hall, which is today the core of Lymm High School, had been bought by Sir William Lever (later Lord Leverhulme) as part of his acquisition of the huge Dewhurst estates around Lymm and Oughtrington in 1911. Three years later it was lying empty so Perry wrote to Clara Ford suggesting that he could negotiate a short term lease on the building with the owner. Sir William Lever would take rent on the building from Henry Ford but would then re-donate it to the Belgian refugee fund.

And so work quickly went ahead on furnishing the house and preparing it to receive up to 100 Belgian refugees. At the outset the expectation was probably that the home would be needed for months rather than years but eventually it was occupied through till the end of the war. The Belgian community created their own chapel plus sewing and repair workshops as well as a laundry. They even ran their own farm.



This pre-war postcard of Oughtrington Hall travelled to Belgium after the war with one of the refugees. The family still have it.

From the outset Perry wrote regularly to Clara Ford to report progress as well as sharing some of the daily challenges of administering the settlement. We are fortunate that many of those letters as well as dozens of photographs of the Belgians' stay have survived in the Ford Archive.

Ford did not court publicity for this act of philanthropy but nevertheless Perry did take care to include a Model T Ford in the background of a photograph of a group of children taken at the Hall.



Belgian Refugee children pose in front of a Model T Ford at Oughtrington Hall—now Lymm High School—probably 1915—courtesy of the Henry Ford Archive.

Towards the end of the war Ford had started to build the first production line tractors in the USA. When the first batch were shipped to UK Percival Perry brought one to the farm at Oughtrington Hall to try out.



One of the first Fordson tractors off the production line in USA being tried out at Oughtrington Hall. Could that be Percival Perry at the wheel.?

there is a story that the bricks were used to build the first houses on what is now Adey Road.

Percival, always a man to plough his own furrow, had been heavily involved with other responsibilities during the war for which he was rewarded with a knighthood in 1918. Sadly though, in the following year he fell out with Henry Ford and was sacked as Managing Director of Ford in the UK. This was in part due to Perry's involvement in the wartime effort as the government's director of traction mechanical warfare which would not have sat easily with Ford's pacifist views. He came back into favour in later years and was invited to become Chair of the UK Ford Motor Company Limited in 1928. In the meantime the Perrys had taken the lease of the Island of Herm in the Channel Islands where they co-wrote a book called the "Island of Enchantment". Perry was elevated to the peerage in 1938 as Baron Perry. He and his wife died within six months of each other in 1956 in the Bahamas.

As far as we know the Ford family never returned to Lymm though Clara Ford is said to have expressed a great fondness for the village. If ever they did reminisce about their stay on Rushgreen Road they could maybe have unpacked their bowls gift from Lymm for a game though they may have struggled to find a crown green to play on!

Later that year with peace finally on the horizon Perry recommended closing down the refugee settlement. In 1919 Sir William Lever put Oughtrington Hall up for sale and it became a private home before eventually being purchased by Cheshire County Council for use as a school.

The Perrys too left their home in Lymm. Newfield House was later owned by the Adey family. When it was eventually demolished

