

DUDLEY:

PROUD OF THE PAST,

POSITIVE FOR THE FUTURE

# The Limes

## The Limes and the Tinsleys

### Before 1851

By 1844, the plot on which the house would be built was called Quarry Piece. For some years, limestone had probably been extracted from it, to be burnt in nearby limepits for use in iron smelting, construction and agriculture. Before he died in 1849, Theophilus Tinsley bought the plot and gave it to his eldest son, Thomas (b. 1807). Theophilus was a nail factor and licensee of the Leopard Inn on Dudley Road, from where he ran his business. Nail factors bought in small iron rods that were turned into nails by workers at home. Factors paid nailers for their work, and sold their products on.

### Eliza and Thomas Tinsley

Thomas Tinsley and Eliza Butler (b. 1813) married in 1839. Thomas prospered in the nail business, expanding into chain-making, and they had a splendid new house built for their family at the north end of Quarry Piece. Tragically, the eldest of their six children, Elizabeth, died in May 1851, just before they moved in; the following month, Thomas died suddenly. Within weeks, Eliza had begun to run his company and named the house The Limes (punning on the site's previous use).



Eliza Tinsley (date unknown)

In 1861, as well as two domestic servants, a governess for Lucy Jane (her youngest child) lived with the family, while the three sons were at boarding school. By 1871, Lucy Jane had died; her elder sister Katherine was married and living in New Zealand; of the sons, only Thomas was at The Limes.

Eliza lived at the house until her death in 1882, gradually retiring from the business. She was a benefactor to local charities, sometimes working with her neighbour, Frederick Augustus Homer.



One **MINE CHAIN**, 1 1/2 inch diameter, length 3220 yards, weight 2 1/2 tons, 13 cwt. 1 qr. 0 lbs. The Carriers, (L. & N. W. Joly Cox) state that this is the longest and heaviest chain in any length despatched from the Black Country for many years. Makers—ELIZA TINSLEY & Co., OLD HILL, Staffs.

Eliza Tinsley's Cradley Heath factory made what was at the time claimed to be the longest chain ever produced in the Black Country.

## Subsequent Owners

### The Fowler Family

Henry Fowler (1820–85) came from Bilston, and made his fortune as a colliery proprietor and iron-master. After some years at Tettenhall, he moved to The Limes towards the end of his life. His widow Eliza remained there with their son, William Henry (1853–1920), until her death in 1889. When William married in 1893, his address was still The Limes, but between 1896 and 1900 he and his wife Jessie left to live with her family in Cheltenham.

### William Arthur Foster (1862–1919)

Arthur Foster (as he was known) grew up at Woodsetton House on Tipton Road. He became a solicitor, with a flourishing practice in Wolverhampton and Tipton. In 1900 he married Editha Greville Prideaux, and bought The Limes as an impressive home for his bride. A governess for their two daughters, aged 9 and 6, was living with the family in the 1911 census. In 1919, after Foster's tragic death, his widow took the girls to London. He was buried in his family's vault in Vicar Street cemetery, now a garden.

### Eliza Gray Gibbons (1845–1929)

Eliza was the daughter of John McNab Ballenden, who served Sedgley as a doctor for over 50 years. The family lived at Bleak House on Dudley Road, next to present-day Arcal Street. In 1898, she married the widowed John Lloyd Gibbons, owner of Ellowes Hall, the finest mansion in the district. After he died in 1919, she bought The Limes; her youngest brother, also a local doctor, already lived on the other side of Dudley Road at Holborn Lodge. The Limes was never again occupied by a single family.

All the owners of The Limes are buried in All Saints' Church or its churchyards.

## The Changing Uses of The Limes

### Up to 1929: a Private Residence

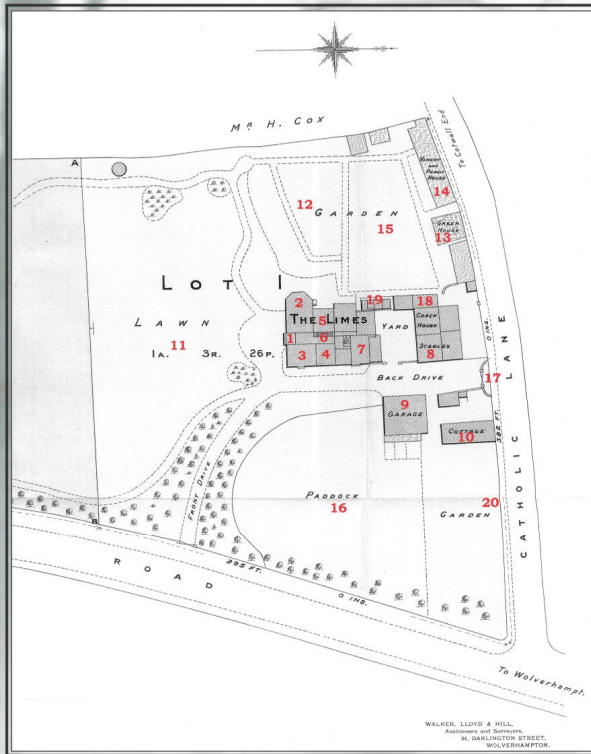
A sale catalogue, produced for the property's auction following Eliza Gibbons's death in 1929, details the layout of the house at that time.



The Limes as it looked in 1947, by local artist Ron Baker.

The front entrance led to a marble-floored entrance hall (1), giving access to the drawing room with bay window (2), dining room (3), library (4), and breakfast room (5). Oak stairs (6) led to four bedrooms and a bathroom with supplies of hot, cold and soft water.

Two bedrooms were also provided for live-in servants. They had their own Hall and worked in a 'Kitchen Scullery' (7), Butler's Pantry, larders and cellars. Outside, stables (8) housed up to three horses, and a garage (9) had been added with the advent of the motor car. A two-bedroomed 'Man's Cottage' (10) offered separate tied accommodation for a male employee, perhaps with a family. (This began as a gardener's house, built in the 1880s.) While the area that is now Coronation Gardens (11) seems always to have been parkland, near the house there were flower beds, including roses (12), a greenhouse (13), a vinery and peach and melon house (14), and a kitchen garden (15).



### After 1929

After Eliza Gibbons's death, the house failed to find a buyer until 1931. It was then purchased by trustees on behalf of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham. Although it remained in their ownership until 1949, the possible charitable purposes the trustees proposed – for example, a priests' retirement home or seminary – came to nothing thanks to the Depression and the Second World War.

### 1938–45: Wartime Use

In 1938, The Limes was requisitioned for civil defence purposes in anticipation of the outbreak of war. It became headquarters for local Air Raid Precautions (renamed 'Civil Defence General Services' from 1941). Fire Watchers used the tower to look out for incendiaries dropped by German planes – as one of the highest points for miles around, it provided an excellent observation point. The Auxiliary Fire Service, formed nationally in 1938, was also based at The Limes. In the 1960s a bicycle-powered air filtration unit for the air raid shelter was found in the cellars.



Auxiliary Fire Service volunteers pose with their equipment, kept in former tram sheds at the rear of Jack Darby's cinema in Dudley Road, Upper Gornal (now County Wallpapers).

Scouts were also part of Civil Defence: they took messages to outlying control points in the area. They also used the sheds in the yard for storing paper they collected for the war effort.

### 1945–70: Council Offices and Depot

When firefighting was reorganised in 1948, a substation was established in the garage (9), used until 1971, and a retained fireman lived in the cottage (10). Sedgley Urban District Council bought The Limes in 1949 as a base for its Engineers, Public Health and Parks departments. Their machinery was stored in the former stables (8), coach house, and sheds behind them. The walled kitchen garden (15) was used by the Parks Department as a yard and plant nursery. Plants were grown in the former 'Vinery and Peach House' (14) and greenhouse (13), and espalier pears grew against a wall (18). Coronation Gardens were created in 1953.



Sedgley branch of Civil Defence (CD) General Services gathered together for this photo in April 1945 prior to being stood down at the end of the war.

The entrance (17) was used by the Urban District Council Parks and Highways departments in the 1960s. The buildings (19) were removed so that council vehicles could drive straight through into the yard and nurseries. There was a 1.8 metre (6 ft) high wall around the Catholic Lane perimeter to the property (20); the corner section at the junction with Dudley Road was removed in the 1960s to improve visibility and create a footpath. A council mortuary (16) was built in 1963 on the former paddock.

After Sedgley UDC was absorbed by Dudley Metropolitan Borough in 1966, the house was used by Dudley MBC entirely for Public Health.

### Up to the Present

From 1970 until 2007, following the sale of the house, it was occupied by a computer software firm that was taken over by a series of companies. From 2007 to 2012 it was unoccupied, which left the building open to attack from vandals, arsonists and metal thieves, and we are fortunate that this distinctive building survives at all.

Kelly Holdings Ltd commissioned Roe Developments to return the building to residential use in June 2012, and work was completed a year later. Four new apartments occupy the original stables area, while one new house was built on the site of the garage and cottage, and the other over the kitchen garden and glasshouses.

The original building retains the title of The Limes. Tinsley House, to the east of it, has been named after the first owners of the property. Downing House, to the west, recalls Downings Lane, the former name of Catholic Lane, referring to a family who farmed nearby.

## The Observatory

The architect of The Limes is unknown, but the Tinsleys commissioned a house in the fashionable Italianate style. One of its most distinctive parts is the tower, designed as a 'belvedere', similar in design to towers at Osborne House, built for Queen Victoria on the Isle of Wight around 1845. Council workers at The Limes in the 1960s describe a set of mirrors on all four walls in the room at the top of the tower, angled at 45 degrees on the ceiling cornice, and they referred to the room as the 'Observatory', although its original purpose is unknown. For someone sitting in the room (assuming no windows were blocked) the mirrors would have provided a 360 degree panorama of the area.

## Further Information

For further information about the owners of The Limes, internet searches are recommended.

### Research by:

**The Tinsleys:** Richard Hawkins (used by permission of *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*); Pam Inder and Marion Aldis, *Staffordshire Women* (Stroud, 2010); Geoff Webb, 'The Story of Eliza Tinsley – Nail Mistress', *The Blackcountryman*, 15 (1982), 43–6.

**The Fowlers:** Judith Glover (<http://dogbiteoldroper.btck.co.uk/FOWLER>)

**The Fosters:** webpages concerning Greville Texidor (Margaret Greville Foster) and Kate Mangan (Katherine Prideaux Foster).

With thanks to Mervyn and Carol Law; Ron Baker; Dudley & Wolverhampton Archive Services. Additional research by George Blackham (Sedgley Local History Society), Christine Buckley and Martin Jones (All Saints' Church, Sedgley).



The Limes from Coronation Gardens in the late 1950s.



Sedgley  
Local  
History  
Society