

# ERDINGTON: ROOKERY HOUSE

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Richard Spooner, Esq., M.P.



## CULTURAL CHAMPIONS PROJECT

Birmingham Archives & Heritage  
[www.birmingham.gov.uk/archivesandheritage](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/archivesandheritage)





Rookery House, 1962 [BA&H: photographic album 'Erdington in the 1950s and 1960s' / Press 1]

## The Cultural Champions Project

### Rookery House and Birmingham Archives & Heritage

 Birmingham City Council

Special collections housed in Birmingham Archives & Heritage highlight many significant aspects of Birmingham's social history and local heritage.

During 2010-11, the *Cultural Champions Project* worked in partnership with the Rookery House group to connect these rich archival sources with the historic Erdington property.

Led by an expert from Birmingham Archives & Heritage, monthly research sessions located documents that unlock some of the many unknown stories that lie behind the doors of the Rookery. The following pages are designed as a resource guide to showcase key pieces of evidence spanning centuries of social history. There is still a huge amount to be discovered about the many inhabitants, families, and social movements connected to Rookery House. Its history is a public asset that deserves to be better known and celebrated.

## Time Line: Rookery House

**c1730:** Birches Green House built by Abraham Spooner, an important iron merchant.

**1760:** House leased by J. Miatt, a local farmer. Abraham Spooner moves to Elmdon Hall.

**1770:** Isaac Spooner (son of Abraham) marries Barbara Gough. They live together in Birches Green House and have a family of ten children.

**1789:** After the death of Abraham Spooner, Isaac Spooner and Barbara Spooner move to Elmdon. In 1797, Barbara Spooner marries William Wilberforce.

**1819:** Birches Green occupied by Brueton Gibbins, an important Birmingham glass manufacturer and also a prominent Quaker. The house is sold in 1848.

**1852:** The house is leased by Abraham Dixon, a county magistrate and merchant, brother of the famous civic politician, George Dixon.

**1871:** William Wiley now owns the property, a pencil-case manufacturer who employs 1,000 people. Around this time, the house becomes known as 'Rookery'.

**1894:** Ernest Welcome Richards owns Rookery House, a businessman with food supply stores across Birmingham.

**1903:** Property of Dr Alfred Paget Evans, a local Erdington councillor and civic philanthropist.

**1905:** Rookery becomes the Erdington Urban District Council House. The gardens are also opened as a 'public park' for Erdington.

**1911:** After the end of the EUDC, the Rookery continues as a public park. In 1918, the property also becomes used by the The Tame and Rea Drainage Board.

**1966-89:** Rookery leased by engineering firm Sir Herbert Humphries and MacDonald. Park and House continue to hold public events as site of BCC Leisure and Community services.

**1989:** Rookery House provides office space and hosts BCC events.

Aprilis.

A. 1737.

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 and 135,000 People would be deprived of their Livelihood;  
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 e in were yearly manufactured: That in the Manufacturing  
 of each Ton, Five Hands were employed, which made the  
 Two Number of Hands 45,000: That supposing, on each  
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 had for Subsistence, it made the whole Number of Depen-  
 ber dents on their Trade 135,000.

Being asked, How much of these 9,000 Ton manu-  
 factured in *Birmingham* was *English* Iron? he said, He  
 s in believed that about 6,900 Ton were *English* Iron, the  
 rest, 220 of which were converted into Steel, chiefly  
 s of *Swedish*.

The Committee then inquired into the State of the *Bir-  
 mingham* and *Wolverhampton* Trade for these last Seven  
 was too Years, and whether it had, in that time, increased or  
 Cow decreased: And he informed the Committee, That,  
 e of he believed, there had been an Increase of Manufacture,  
 rted especially in the Toy Trade, at *Wolverhampton*, of late  
 e of Years, but that the Goods so manufactured lay on the  
 Con, Hands of the Owners; which he attributed to the De-

↑ "...in Birmingham, and the adjacent places within ten miles, not less than 9,000 Ton of Iron, from the Bar and Rod, were yearly manufactured: that in the manufacturing of each ton, five hands were employed, which made the number of hands 45,000..."

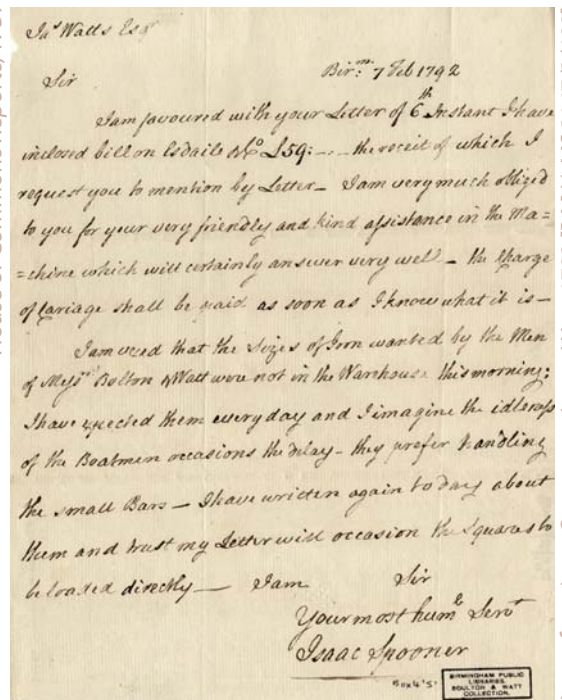
[Abraham Spooner, Commons Journal, 1737]



Reverse of letter, 1797 [BA&H: MS 3147/3/420]

"I am very much obliged to you for your very friendly and kind assistance in the machine which will certainly answer very well [...] I am vexed that the sizes of iron wanted by the men of Boulton & Watt was not in the warehouse this morning" ↓

[Isaac Spooner to James Watt, 1792]



House of Commons Reports, 1737 [JSG: Social Sciences]

Letter from Isaac Spooner to James Watt, 1792 [BA&H: MS 3147/3/400]

## Early Archives: Industry and Empire

Evidence showing the significance of the **Spooner family** name in metal trades first emerges in a 'House of Commons Report' dated 1737. This includes a dramatic account by Abraham Spooner discussing Birmingham's international involvement in the production and usage of iron.

Further sources in Birmingham Archives & Heritage highlight other important connections. The '**Boulton and Watt**' collection features a number of letters from Isaac Spooner. Such links depict Rookery House at the heart of the industrial revolution.

# Erdington: Mapping History



Above - map showing Birches Green, 1760 [BA&H: 292886]

Below - Erdington tithe map, 1849 [BA&H: Jewel Baillie 411]



*"Mention in the Mail of the Spooner family of Elmdon Hall, serves as a reminder of the fact that it was Miss Barbara Spooner, the eldest daughter of Mr. Isaac Spooner, then squire of the parish, who, in 1797, became the wife of William Wilberforce"* ↓ [Birmingham Mail, 1933]

## Antislavery Houses: The Wilberforce Connections

Highlighting Rookery's early cultural significance, the Spooner family can also claim a link with one of the most famous figures of British politics in the late 18th century. In 1797 **Barbara Spooner** married **William Wilberforce**, a parliamentary campaigner who fought for the 'Abolition of the Slave Trade Act', passed in 1807.

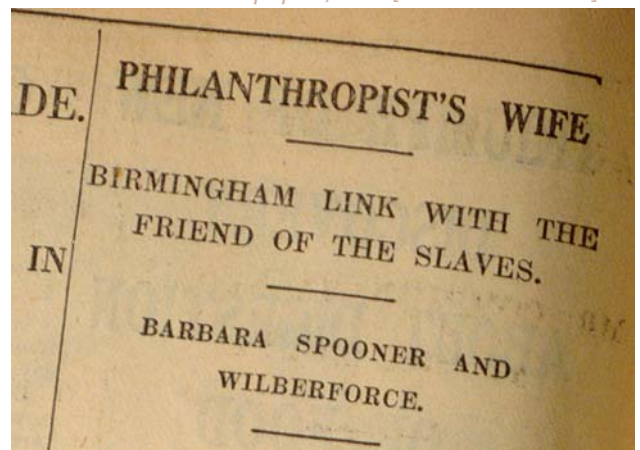
Birmingham Archives & Heritage holds a significant range of materials regarding antislavery activists. These materials suggest that the Spooner family continued throughout the 19th century to have links with the abolitionist cause. The later **Richard Spooner**, for instance, signed his name as one of the founding members of the **Birmingham Antislavery Society**, established in 1826.

Rookery was no longer inhabited by the Spooner family at the end of the 18th century. Nevertheless, its history shows the complex relationship between Birmingham, slavery and abolition. On one hand, local iron merchants could make large profits from the goods needed to supply the slave trade. At the same time, local activists sought to end horrific trades in human beings that slavery promoted.

Later archives reveal that an Erdington-based woman collected money for the **Freedmen's Aid Association** in 1863 [IIR62] to aid freed black people in the U.S. This same activist may have been responsible for the idea of sending a ship full of surplus industrial goods to support life after slavery. Did this woman remember the earlier link between Rookery, Barbara Spooner and William Wilberforce?



Volume of bound newspapers, 1933 [BA&H: B'ham Mail]



Title of Birmingham Mail article, 1933 [BA&H: B'ham Mail]

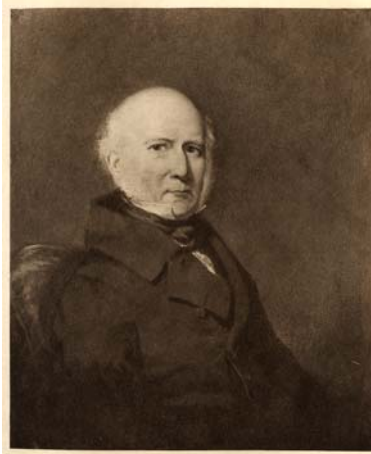


Richard Spooner [BA&H: Portraits]

In 1819, **Brueton Gibbins** moved into the property, a business man who owned the **Aston Glass and Flint Works**. The Gibbins were a well known Quaker family involved with many social causes.

When the house is put up for sale in 1848, its auction document gives us a wonderful insight into the location of this *“desirable and exceedingly interesting estate”*.

Brueton Gibbins [BA&H: IIR 73]



*Brueton Gibbins*

Sarah Brueton Gibbins [BA&H: IIR 73]



*Sarah Brueton Gibbins*

## “A Comfortable Mansion”: The 19th Century Property



Illustration and description from the catalogue of the sale of Birches Green, 1848 [BA&H: Sales Catalogues/Robins Vol 2/p21]

**BIRCHES GREEN**, one of the choicest and most delightful Seats in the Neighbourhood of Birmingham, is situated on the Turnpike Road from Birmingham to Tamworth, only three Miles and a half from the former; comprising an elegant, substantial, and most comfortable MANSION, in the midst of richly-dressed Park-like Grounds, and varied Woodlands, through which are romantic Walks of half a Mile in extent, opening on picturesque Scenery; with all requisite Outbuildings, Bailiff's and Gardener's Cottages, capital Fruit, Pleasure, and Kitchen Gardens; with Vineries, Greenhouses, Pinery, and Orchards; beautiful Pleasure Grounds, Shrubberies, and Plantations; Fish Ponds, and several Closes of very superior old Pasture and Arable LAND, all in a Ring-fence, and containing in the whole about fifty-six Acres.

# Sir Benjamin Stone: Erdington's 'Global' Photographer



Lodge entrance to the Rookery  
 Samuel Road Erdington. Sep: 1904

Rookery Entrance, 1904 [BA&H: Stone/12/31]



The Principal Street in Barbados  
 1895

Barbados, 1895 [BA&H: Stone/386/41]

The *Cultural Champions Project* was excited to find among the Stone archive a number of photographs taken of Rookery House in 1904. Sir Benjamin Stone was an influential late 19th century photographer, industrialist and politician. He lived in Erdington at a house called 'The Grange'. Becoming interested in photography, he not only documented Erdington and Birmingham, but also travelled to places such as China, Japan, the Caribbean, Africa, America and many sites across Europe. Stone's photograph of the Rookery was taken at a significant time for the house, as it marks the moment when the property became a public park.

***"The Rookery, Erdington. Just purchased by the Erdington District Council with the surrounding estate for a public park."*** ↓

[Benjamin Stone, 1904]

The Rookery, 1904 [BA&H: Stone/12/32]



The Rookery, Erdington.  
 Just purchased by the Erdington District Council with the surrounding estate, for a Public Park. Sep: 1904

J. Benjamin Stone





Erdington Park [BA&H: Birmingham Postcards Collection/Suburbs/ERD-LOZ]

## Civic Spaces and Public Parks: Rookery House in the Early 20th Century

***“On 6th December, 1905, the Erdington Urban District Council purchased the land and mansion house of Rookery House from Alfred Evans. For the sum of £7,250 the mansion house was to be used as the council house for the district, the grounds were already laid out as gardens, ferneries etc., and glasshouses were opened to the public as a park...”*** [‘Public Parks, Gardens, and Recreation Grounds’, R.K. Dent, 1916]

‘Bygone Erdington’ [BA&H: L91.7 ERD]



ALDERMAN A. PAGET EVANS.

Alderman A. Paget Evans

Rookery House - opened as an official municipal park in 1904/1905 - continued to link Erdington with key issues of trade, industry, civic activism and urban change. Once the ‘Greater Birmingham’ scheme incorporated the Erdington District into the city, the Rookery was also occupied by the Birmingham Tame and Rea District Drainage Board on a tenancy basis from 1918 until 1964. After this point, the space was still often used by community groups, artists and educators, as an important public meeting and recreation space.

For those interested in charting the history of the Rookery as a public park, ‘The Story of Erdington in the Early Twenties’ presents a colourful and intimate account of the central role that the space played in the life of Erdington. Dent’s book on Birmingham’s parks and gardens is another important source of information. Such accounts highlight the cultural role of the Rookery in Erdington’s civic life.

***“Although small, it has become one of the most charming of the garden parks of the city. The house is used as a reading room and contains a number of interesting pictures belonging to the Museum and Art Gallery Committee”.***

[‘Public Parks, Gardens, and Recreation Grounds’, R.K. Dent, 1916]

## **“An Oasis of Beauty”**: Postcard Sources for Rookery House



Birmingham Postcards Collection [BA&H: Postcards/Suburbs/ERD-LOZ/Erdington Park]



**ROOKERY PARK — JUNE**

**GALA WEEK!**

Wednesday, 17th — Saturday, 27th

**BOB WILSON'S FUN FAIR**  
(except Sunday, 21st)

**GALA VARIETY**

DAILY at 6.30 and 9.30 p.m.

**A Community Venue: Post War Entertainment in the Park**

*'Entertainment in the Parks' leaflet, 1959. [BA&H: Plays and Other Entertainments/Vol 2/1951-62]*

**ROOKERY PARK—JUNE (contd.)**

Wednesday, 17th — Saturday, 20th

**THE TWO REXANOS** (Comedy Acrobats)  
**SCOTT & RAY** (Sensational Roller Skaters)  
**RUSTY & CO.** (The Amazing Calculating Collie)  
**MANZ & CHICO** (Western Pastimes)

Monday, 22nd — Friday, 26th

**AUGUSTO'S MINIATURE CIRCUS**

Monday, 22nd — Wednesday, 24th

**THE SENSATIONAL LEONE**  
(Thrills on the Swaying Mast)

**AND ALSO**

Wed. 17	Ray Vaughan's "VARIETY SHOWTIME" ... ..	7.30
Thurs. 18	<b>THE BIG BEAT SHOW</b> featuring winners from 1958 Skiffle Groups Contests ... ..	7.30
Fri. 19	Tommy Randle's "COWBOY CAPERS" ... ..	7.30
Sat. 20	The Ann Harris Juveniles ... ..	3.00
	Muriel Cochrane's "GAYTIME" ... ..	7.30
Sun. 21	"SEARCH FOR STARS" ALL WINNERS CONCERT (in the Summer Theatre) ... ..	7.30
Mon. 22	<b>GRAND RHYTHM GROUPS CONTEST</b> ... ..	7.30
Tues. 23 & Wed. 24	Johnnie & Harvey Riscoe's "TELEVISION VARIETY" with <b>HOWARD de COURCY</b> the world-famous Swiss Magician ... ..	7.30
Thurs. 25	"SEARCH FOR STARS" Contests — Rookery Park Finals (in the Summer Theatre) ... ..	7.30
Fri. 26	Johnnie & Harvey Riscoe's "TELEVISION VARIETY" with <b>HOWARD de COURCY</b> the world-famous Swiss Magician ... ..	7.30
Sat. 27	"TELEVISION VARIETY" ... ..	3.00 & 7.30
	"MASKO" presents Punch & Judy and Magical Moments ... ..	6.00
	<b>GRAND FIREWORKS DISPLAY</b> ... ..	10.00

(The above Gala attractions will be presented from an open-air stage but in the event of bad weather or unforeseen circumstances as many shows as possible will be transferred to the Summer Theatre.)

# Researching Rookery House: An Unfinished Story

As shown in this resource guide, the Cultural Champions Project has contributed some important new materials to what is known about the Rookery. The research has involved exploring census lists; rate books; maps; trade directories; newspaper cutting collections; multiple resources relating to industrial history; church records; photographic materials; and the many scrapbooks and albums donated from a local Erdington historian named E. Meacham. These archive sources may yet hold other untold stories about Rookery's richly layered past.

The power of Rookery's overlooked history lies in its ability to unexpectedly reconnect us with major social themes and changes taking place locally, nationally and internationally. In the future, it will also be important to document living communal and individual stories carried by people in and around Erdington over the last fifty years, bringing together the historical contexts with public memory. In every sense, Rookery house remains an unfinished story.

Tea Rooms, Erdington Park.  
934 Resolved:- That for the purpose of providing tea rooms in the old Council House at Erdington Park, the Superintendent be instructed to make such alterations as may be necessary to the two rooms in the Council House facing the Gardens and to the back room to be used as a kitchen at a cost of £42.

Resolutions from Birmingham City Council Parks Committee Minute Book, 1913 [BA&H: BCC/Parks Committee/Minutes/2]



Rookery House, Erdington Newscuttings, 1967 [BA&H: LF 91.7]



Photograph of a map draw in Birmingham Archives & Heritage

Council Chamber, Erdington.  
934 Resolved:- That permission be granted for the Council Chamber at Erdington to be used as a reading room, and that the Superintendent be instructed to make such alterations as may be necessary for this purpose.

## ROOKERY PARK, ERDINGTON

(17 acres).

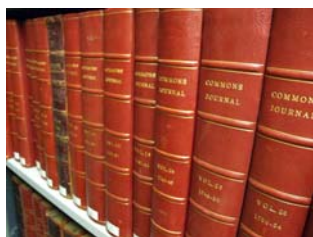
The Urban District of Erdington, incorporated with the city in the "Greater Birmingham" scheme in 1911, began the task of providing open spaces for this large and rapidly growing district in 1905, when the District Council purchased the mansion known as "The Rookery" to serve as a Council House for the district, and with it acquired the beautiful gardens, greenhouses, ferneries, etc., from Dr. Alfred Paget Evans, for the sum of £7,250. The grounds were converted into a public park, which was taken over by the city in 1911. Although small, it has become one of the most charming of the "garden parks" of the city. The house is used as a reading room, and contains a number of interesting pictures belonging to the Museum and Art Gallery Committee. The total area of the park is seventeen acres.

'Public Parks...' R.K. Dent, 1916 [BA&H:L 27.3]



Archives workshop and Rookery House group, 2010

# Archives & Heritage Resource List



- Sales Catalogue/Robins Volume 2/p21 (Sale of Birches Green, 1848)
- Erdington Tithe Map, 1849 [Jewel Baillie 411] (includes Spooner family lands & Birches Green House)
- Birmingham Sales Catalogue/large/1339 (Sale of Birches Green, 1880)
- Birmingham Postcards Collection/Suburbs/ERD-LOZ/Erdington Park
- Benjamin Stone Photographic Collection [Box 12/Image 31 and 32 ]
- BCC/Parks Committee Minute Book 2, 1913 (minutes opening of tea room and public reading room)
- BCC/Parks Committee Minute Book 4, 1918 (notes use of Rookery by Drainage Board and WWI, p230-231)
- Photographic Album, Erdington in the 1950s and 1960s [Press 1]
- Photographic Album, Erdington, c1972 [Press 1]
- Public Parks, Gardens, and Recreation Grounds, R.K. Dent, 1916 [L 27.3]
- Bygone Erdington, Saxton [L 91.7 ERD]
- Meacham's Erdington, Scrapbook Collections, Vols 1-5 [L 91.7]
- Erdington Scrapbooks [LF 91.7]
- Collection of Newspaper Cuttings relating to Erdington [LF 91.7]
- Bygone Erdington Revisited, Rookery House, by G. Hitchman [LF 91.7]
- The Story of Erdington in the Early Twenties, W.J. Hewitt [LF 91.7]
- Erdington Historical Society, Notes and Transcripts, 2 vols [LF 91.7]
- The Erdington News [Birmingham Newspaper Collections]
- Birmingham Mail, 12 January 1933, "The Philanthropists Wife" (item on Wilberforce and Rookery House)
- House of Commons Reports, Social Sciences Collections (see 1737 for Spooner entry)
- Records of the Gibbins Family, 1911 [IIR 73]
- Spooner correspondence in Boulton and Watt archive [MS 3147] including [MS 3147/3/400 and MS 3147/3/420]

# ***The Cultural Champions Project***

## **Birmingham Archives & Heritage - General Information**

### **Visiting Birmingham Archives & Heritage**

Plan your visit in advance so that you can make the most effective use of your time spent in Archives & Heritage. The service is based in Birmingham's Central Library and consists of an Open Access Area and an Archives Searchroom.

### **Using the Service: Open Access Area**

The Open Access Area, which in general holds printed local and family history material, genealogical sources, maps, local newspapers on microfilm and computers, does not require a special ticket.

### **Using the Service: Archives Searchroom**

The Archives Searchroom holds archival collections. All photographs, slides and engraved prints are also served in this area, together with early printed material and manuscript maps. A special CARN reader's ticket is required to use this area. The 'County Archives Research Network' is a national network of record offices that share one standard ticket system. So when you get a ticket from this office, you can use it at any of the other offices that are part of the CARN network. As part of a national network, tickets are required to be issued by the same standard rules. To obtain a ticket we need to see proof of your identification. This should be an official document with your full name, printed address and signature, such as a driving licence. See [www.birmingham.gov.uk/archivesandheritage](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/archivesandheritage) for further information.

### **Online Information for Birmingham Archives & Heritage**

<http://calmview.birmingham.gov.uk>  
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/>  
<http://birmingham.gov.uk/libcat>

### **Contact & Enquiries**

Contact us in advance, particularly if you wish to consult archival records in the Archives Searchroom and particularly if the archival material is under 100 years old and may be closed to viewing. It is also advisable to check opening hours and levels of service, which can change throughout the development of the new Library of Birmingham, due to open in 2013. Email: [archives.heritage@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:archives.heritage@birmingham.gov.uk) or phone: **0121 3034549**.

Any enquiries that are specific to this *Cultural Champions* learning resource should be directed to: [andy.green@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:andy.green@birmingham.gov.uk) and not to Birmingham Archives & Heritage.

### **Project and Learning Guide Credits**

Dr Andy Green of Central Library would like to thank all of those who attended the *Cultural Champions* events. A special word of thanks goes to the Rookery House group.

*Produced 2011 by Dr Andy Green. Designed by Brigitte Winsor.*