

## JOHN HENRY BETHELL 1859 to 1945

On Friday 9th November 1906 Robert Newall, Headmaster of Levens Boys School, made the following entry in the school log-book -:

"In the lists of 'King's Birthday Honours', published today, the name of John Henry Bethell M.P. heads the list of new Knights. As a boy Mr Bethell was a scholar at this school for several years."

This bald statement conceals a story of personal success of a sort that we often tend to associate with the generation to which the 1944 Education Act availed free secondary education, rather than the underprivileged masses of Victorian England. Incidentally, the story also reminds us that frequent moves around the country for work are not solely the experience of modern man, and some of it is on a bigger stage, that of a landmark development in British political history: For the "anoraks" amongst us there is even a glimpse of how the public telephone system developed in London.

From rags (not quite) to riches.

### ORIGINS

John's father George was born in Didsbury and in the 1851 (March 30/31) census George was stated to be 17 years old and working there as a gardener.

By the time of the next census (April 7/8, 1861) George was married, working as a gardener in Timperley Cheshire, probably at Timperley Hall the home of a silk manufacturer called George Smith. By then he had two sons, George Arthur born 18th June 1858 and John Henry, born on 23rd September 1859.

The census of April 2/3 1871 shows the family having grown to include 6 children, George, John, Elizabeth, Frank, Thomas and Alfred, but by the census date the family was living in Sedgwick in the "Gardener's Cottage", presumably at Sedgwick House the residence of William Wakefield "Landowner, Banker & Gunpowder Maker" (See Note 1 below) - who else in Sedgwick would own a "gardener's cottage"? George may have moved up in the world and gained an assistant as the only other gardener shown in the census is a 15 year old youth called John Fell.



*Sedgwick in the 1890s.*

*The gardener's cottage is the one with the dormer window, on the left of the picture, behind the tree.*

### **When did they move to Sedgwick?**

In the 1871 census the four older children, of which the youngest was by then 8, were declared to have been born in Bowden, Cheshire. All these four children's births were registered in Altrincham and the most recent of them as late as the first quarter of 1863. The earlier census shows the two eldest as having been born at Timperley, Cheshire, but there is at most a mile and a half between the two places, so maybe the discrepancy can be ascribed to sloppy census taking or forgetfulness rather than a real geographical difference. Perhaps the ecclesiastical and civil parishes didn't quite overlap: Anyway, the point is that in 1871 the two youngest children were recorded as being born in "Lancashire, Grange". The elder of these two was 6 so there is approximately a 2 year window between c1863 and c1865 during which they moved up from Cheshire.

### **But did they go straight to Sedgwick?**

Levens Boys School records show that George Arthur and John Henry were both admitted on the same date, 16th August 1869, Frank on 16th June 1873, Thomas on 12th June 1876 and Alfred on 23rd April 1877. All the boys were stated to have been admitted from Crosscrake School. The Levens School records state that on the date of admission George and John had 6 months "previously under instruction".

Taken at face value this means that George didn't start school until he was c11.

Even in 1869, boys usually started elementary school much earlier, at about seven years of age. Prior to this they might have attended an infants school (there was one in Sedgwick as well as Levens). John and Frank Willacy, 11 and 9½ years old respectively, joiner's sons from a local family who were admitted on the same day, also from Crosscrake School were stated to have had 3 years previous instruction. When Alfred Bethell, aged 9, was admitted to Levens School in 1877, he had already done 2 years at Crosscrake. It is likely that George Arthur had been at school for around 3 years before he started at Levens and therefore probably somewhere else before Crosscrake, suggesting that the Bethells did not settle in Sedgwick much before 1869.

Curiously the very youngest child, Alfred (born 5th September 1867) appears on the 1881 census when he was still living with his parents as being born in "Lancashire, Cartmel", a location which he stuck to in later census declarations. Thomas Robert (born 8th May 1865) the second youngest always declared "Grange" or "Grange-Over-Sands". The discrepancy between Grange and Cartmel is immaterial as the two villages were close together, but that between Sedgwick and Grange is a real difference for they are about 9 miles apart as the crow flies. It seems unlikely that anybody without close relatives there would travel from Sedgwick to Grange to give birth: George's Wife Frances (nee Tipper) was born in London.

The births of both Thomas Robert and Alfred were registered in Ulverston, which was what one would expect for Grange residents at the time.

The solution is supplied by Alfred's birth certificate which shows that he was born at "Castle Head Allithwaite Upper" a township in the parish of Cartmel and that this address was also where his mother, who registered the birth, resided. His father's occupation was recorded as "Gardener".

Castle Head is a small hill to the east of the main road from Lindale to Grange and the large house there with its attendant cottages and outbuildings is now the "Castle Head Field Centre" run by the Field Studies Council Ltd. It was built by the great pioneering Ironmaster and reputed millionaire John Wilkinson (b1728, a pioneer of cannon boring from solid metal and for that reason a collaborator of James Watt whose company relied on Wilkinson's for its supply of castings for engine cylinders) who owned it until his death in 1808 and in which grounds he was buried (before being re-interred in Lindale Church) and commemorated by a 20 ton iron obelisk. In 1863 Castle Head was bought by Edward Mucklow, a dye manufacturer who, as is attested to by the plaque on the obelisk, had the monument re-erected in its present site in Lindale. Interestingly, the railway having come to Grange in 1857, Mucklow was something of a pioneering commuter. He travelled to his office in Manchester each day, his carriage taking him to the station. He would then breakfast on the train, conduct his affairs in Manchester and return on the afternoon train, taking tea on the way. At Grange his

carriage would be waiting to take him back home in time for dinner.

It was presumably at Castle Head that George worked as a gardener until the Bethell family moved to Sedgwick

At any rate we can estimate that George Bethell and his family moved to Sedgwick somewhere between late 1867 when John Henry was c8 years old and, at the latest, early 1869, when he was about 9½

### **Back to John Henry.**

The surviving documents from Levens School are mainly the School Log Book which records the day to day events, curriculum, exams, attendance etc. and not much about individual pupils: However, the then Schoolmaster, George Stabler, did sometimes note the names of pupils who had done well in the frequent class tests and exams, and John Henry's name appears quite frequently for arithmetic and writing and drawing (which was a major subject in the curriculum with its own national external examination) and at least twice for top marks in the previous half-years "home lessons" (which I take to be homework) - both bright and industrious.

He was still at Levens School in March 1874 when it was recorded that he had been "presented at" i.e. sat, the national drawing exam.

In March 1874 the records show him as having reached "standard 5" by the time of the annual examination carried out by the H.M.I. Inspector (see note 2 below). Standard 6 seems to have been the highest level in the school at the time, but there is no record of John Henry achieving it, and the latest mention of him in was in July 1874 when the Drawing Exam results were received. In the exam results entered in the logbook in April 1874, Mr. Stabler recorded his age "last birthday" as 14. We don't know when he left the school but boys didn't normally stay much longer than their 14th birthday.

The family were in the area until at least 1879. Thomas Robert is mentioned in the records as having "presented at" the annual examination in March 1878. The results arrived in July 1878 and after this date there is no mention of any Bethells in the Levens school records.

I cannot discover if John Henry went on to a "secondary" school locally, but Heversham Grammar School records show that Thomas and Alfred were admitted to that school in 1878 (May & September respectively). Thomas left Heversham Grammar in August 1878 and Alfred in August 1879.

By the 1881 census Thomas & Alfred were living in different parts of the country altogether as was John Henry. The siblings were going their separate ways.

Publicly available biographical information (e.g. [www.thepeerage.com](http://www.thepeerage.com) citing G.E.Cockayne's "Complete Peerage" or "Essex in the Twentieth Century" by W.T.Pike & Co.) states that John Henry was educated at King's College London.

King's College had a pioneering and very active "Evening Department" offering diplomas to "the youth in the office or the shop, the clerk in the bank, and the incompletely qualified teacher in the day school".

King's archives record that he enrolled as an "Occasional Student" in 1880. Occasional Students were not matriculated students of King's College London, but rather signed up for one or a series of short courses. They could attend, on payment of a fee, a range of courses including ones on literature, languages and medical subjects.

Name of Student in full: JOHN HENRY BETHELL  
Name of Parent or Guardian: GEORGE BETHELL  
Residence of Parent or Guardian: SUDBOURNE HALL WICKHAM MARKET  
Date of Payment: MAY 14 1880  
Course: PRACTICAL ART, EVENING (paid 12 shillings)

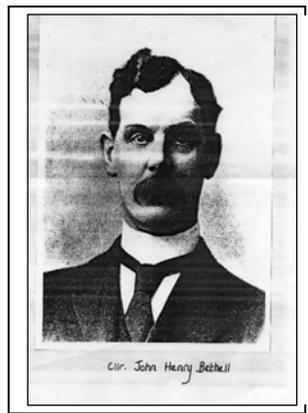
According to the King's College Calendars the Evening School of Practical Art was run by Prof. W.J.Glenny

and classes were held on Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings from 7-9pm. The 12 shillings payment would only have covered one term's worth of lessons. The elementary course was described as consisting of "Freehand and Model Drawing, Plane Geometry, Solid Geometry, Perspective and Isometrical Projection, Drawing details of Ornament and Colouring from Examples, Building and Machine Construction, Projection of Shadows, etc.". These classes would have helped in what transpired to be his chosen career because the 1881 census (April 2/3) shows John Henry aged 21 with the occupation of a "clerk surveyors" living as a lodger at 75 Kennington Lane, Lambeth in the home of a warehouseman.

In 1881 he fathered an illegitimate son, Henry, with a dressmaker named Mary Elizabeth Chillingworth. Although at the time John Henry didn't marry the child's mother, it is to his credit that he acknowledged him, at least privately, giving him a gold watch on the occasion of his marriage in 1909 and later actively assisting him when he was starting his construction business in the early 1920s, which used as a base the address in South Woodford which had been the home of John Henry's father and his sister Elizabeth. They were even members of the same Masonic Lodge. (source Arabella Seymour).

By 1891 the census (April 5/6) shows him as an "auctioneer" boarding at 39 Claremont Rd, West Ham in the home of an insurance clerk.

Sometime between the 1881 and 1891 censuses his declared age seems to have dropped so that in the latter census he was stated to be 30. If this was the "age last birthday" it should have been 31: He was actually 31½. This change persisted into the 1901 census and in 1911 his age was given as 49. All directories in which his rise to fame caused him to appear give his birth date as 23rd September 1861, exactly two years less than that recorded on his birth certificate.



*John Bethell in the 1880s*

In 1895 he married Florence Ethel Wyles, daughter of James Woolley Wyles (shown in the 1891 census as a builder in West Ham). They had six children ([www.thepeerage.com](http://www.thepeerage.com)) of whom three were born by the time of the 1901 census: Frank Harry b1896; Dorothy Frances c1898; Grace c1899.

The other three children were John Raymond b1902, Phyllis b1909 (Phylis K in the 1911 census) and William Gladstone b1904 ([www.thepeerage.com](http://www.thepeerage.com)). That one child bore the name of the great Liberal Prime Minister throws some light on John Henry's career.

The 1901 census (March 30/April 1) shows the family as living at 88 Romford Road, West Ham. By this time John Henry styled himself "Land Agent & Auctioneer" on his "own account" and in addition to a nurse and a cook they employed a maid: Obviously, John Henry was moving up in the world.

The 1911 census ([1911census.co.uk](http://1911census.co.uk)) records the family at Park House, Blake Hall Road, Wanstead. John Henry is now described as a "Surveyor".

### **What of his parents & siblings by this time?**

**George, Frances & Elizabeth** - They presumably left Sedgwick sometime after Alfred left Heversham Grammar School in August 1879.

By May 1880 George was working at Sudbourne Hall, Suffolk. The 1881 census shows George's occupation as "Domestic Serv Gardener" living in a "Private" house in Sudbourne. By this date only three of his children lived at home, but there were also seven other people at the same address, all described as domestic servants, obviously not George's: These seven were all born in different parts of the country, Norfolk, Berkshire, Gloucestershire, Kent, Bedfordshire, Devon and Surrey.

In the 1891 census, a George Bethell (born in Didsbury) was a Head Gardener in Long Ashton, Somerset (now on the outskirts of Bristol) and his household comprised just his wife Fanny (born in London) and a daughter "Lessie" (at least that's what the entry looks like) born in Altrincham, Cheshire but only 23 years of age. I think this is a corrupt entry as it doesn't fit any of their children: The earlier censuses show their daughter Elizabeth (Lizzie?) as being born in c1862, making her 29 in 1891. Elizabeth reappears in the 1901 census still living with her father at "The Firs" South Woodford, Wanstead, East Ham, London, and this time her age is given as 27 which is clearly impossible (see further on).

The obvious question is whether or not we are talking about the same people and in spite of the fact that these censuses contain contradictory ages for the people involved, their places of birth look consistent.

Frances died in January 1894.

As already mentioned, the 1901 census shows George Bethell living in Wanstead ("The Firs, South Woodford, London) and it states his occupation as "living on own income". His daughter Elizabeth, evidently a spinster, and one of his sons (Thomas Robert) live with him as do two servants. It seems that George aged 66 is in comfortable retirement: I suspect that John Henry had something to do with this state of affairs, though maybe being a Head Gardener in C19 was more lucrative than we might think.

George was still at "The Firs" when he died in 1908 and in his will, four of his sons were named Executors: John Henry, Frank, Thomas and Alfred. (Interestingly, eldest son George Jnr is left out). His daughter Elizabeth was left "for her own use and benefit and separate estate, in addition to any gifts made to her in my lifetime, All and singular the plate, linen, china, pictures, stores furniture and other domestic chattels and effects now at The Firs, South Woodford, or in my residence at the time of my decease (horses, cattle and outdoor effects excepted.)also a legacy of one thousand pounds sterling".

Unfortunately, I have not been able to find Elizabeth Bethell or "The Firs" in the 1911 census, though I did find the houses either side of it in the 1901 census, perhaps the residents were all away on the day.

Elizabeth remained at "The Firs " until c1918 (the last year in which she appears in the London phone directory"). In that year, Thomas was also listed at "The Firs", but not in subsequent years.

There was a "legacy of £200 to each of the children of my eldest son George Bethell, payable on their attaining the age of 21", and a "legacy of one thousand pounds to John Henry Bethell". the remainder of his estate was to be converted into cash by the Executors, and divided equally between John Henry, Frank, Thomas, Alfred and Elizabeth.

**Thomas Robert** - It is worth remarking that Thomas Robert was described as a "Barrister-at-Law" in the 1901 census, though someone has scribbled "Solicitor" on the page: Nevertheless, another Bethell on the way up. He is recorded at the same address as his father & sister, "The Firs", South Woodford, Wanstead, London.

In the 1881 census he was not at his father's address, but a "Thos Robt" Bethell born in "Lancashire Grange over Sands" was shown as a lodger in the home of a carpenter with his occupation described as "Seed Trade". By 1891 he was a "boarder" in the home of a Master Mariner in West Ham with the occupation of "Commission Mercht". Ten years hence he was a lawyer, perhaps John Henry helped him.

In the 1911 census a Thomas Robert Bethell, an unmarried barrister, born North Lancashire was recorded as a "boarder at the Araleum Private Hotel, Grand Parade, Eastbourne, and that is as far as we can go with censuses: However we can see from old phone books ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)) that he was a barrister with chambers in The Temple from c1904, that he also was styled "M.P" from 1908 to 1911 & "Sir" from 1915 with "J.P." added in 1918. Another Bethell success story.

**George Arthur** - I'm unable to find George Arthur (John Henry's elder brother) in the 1911 census, but in that of 1901, he was recorded as a nurseryman ("employer" not "own account") in Hayes, London, married with three children and with a servant living-in.

Perhaps he had received a helping hand to bring him to London and go into business as in 1891 he was recorded as a gardener living in Bexley, married with one son whose place of birth was given as "Scotland", the same as that of his wife. In 1881 he was one of five men described as "Gardener dom serv" living in the household of the Head Gardener of Brocklesby Hall, Lincolnshire, residence of Charles Pelham Earl of Yarborough.

Interestingly, in his will, his father left him nothing, stating "I have omitted my eldest son George Bethell from my Will as I consider that the advances which I have made to him in my lifetime have been equal to the share to which he would otherwise have been entitled".

**Alfred** - The 1911 census for the Bath registration district records him as a "retired surveyor" age 43, born "Lancashire Carmel (sic)". Note, this is taken from the transcription (not the original document image) on the [www.1911census.co.uk](http://www.1911census.co.uk) website.

The 1901 census appears to have caught him on holiday or perhaps working away from home in the Bath Hotel, Leamington Spa. His occupation was given as "Land Surveyor - own account". His home address was not shown but we know that the 1891 census shows him as a "tenant" aged 23 in the home of a groom in Plashnet Lane, East Ham and gives his occupation as "Surveyor": Already being drawn in to the John Henry/East Ham nexus?

In 1881 he was recorded as living with his parents in Sudbourne - no occupation shown.

**Frank** - In the 1881 census a "Frank Bethell" born "Altrincham Cheshire" age "18" was shown as a "Billiard Marker (Dom Servt)" at the Grange Hotel, Grange-over-Sands. After that the census trail goes cold.

According to Arabella Seymour a great granddaughter of John Henry, Frank didn't venture down south: However, he was named in as an executor as well as a beneficiary in his father's will which was written sometime after George moved to "The Firs", South Woodford.

In August 2009, David Wilkinson, a grandson of Frank Bethell, saw an earlier version of these notes on the Levens Local History Group website and contacted us. It turns out that Frank had continued his association with the hotel trade after 1881. He went on to work as assistant manager at the Tavistock Hotel in Covent Garden, London, worked at Reid's Hotel in Madeira, and then, about 1890, was offered a job in Dublin and moved to Ireland, where he remained for the rest of his life, and where he became a prominent restaurateur and hotelier, becoming chairman of the Central Hotel Company before retiring to Bray, Co. Wicklow in 1945 (The "Irish Independent" newspaper 25th January 1945). Frank died on 7th October 1956.

## **THE BUSINESS AND POLITICAL CAREER**

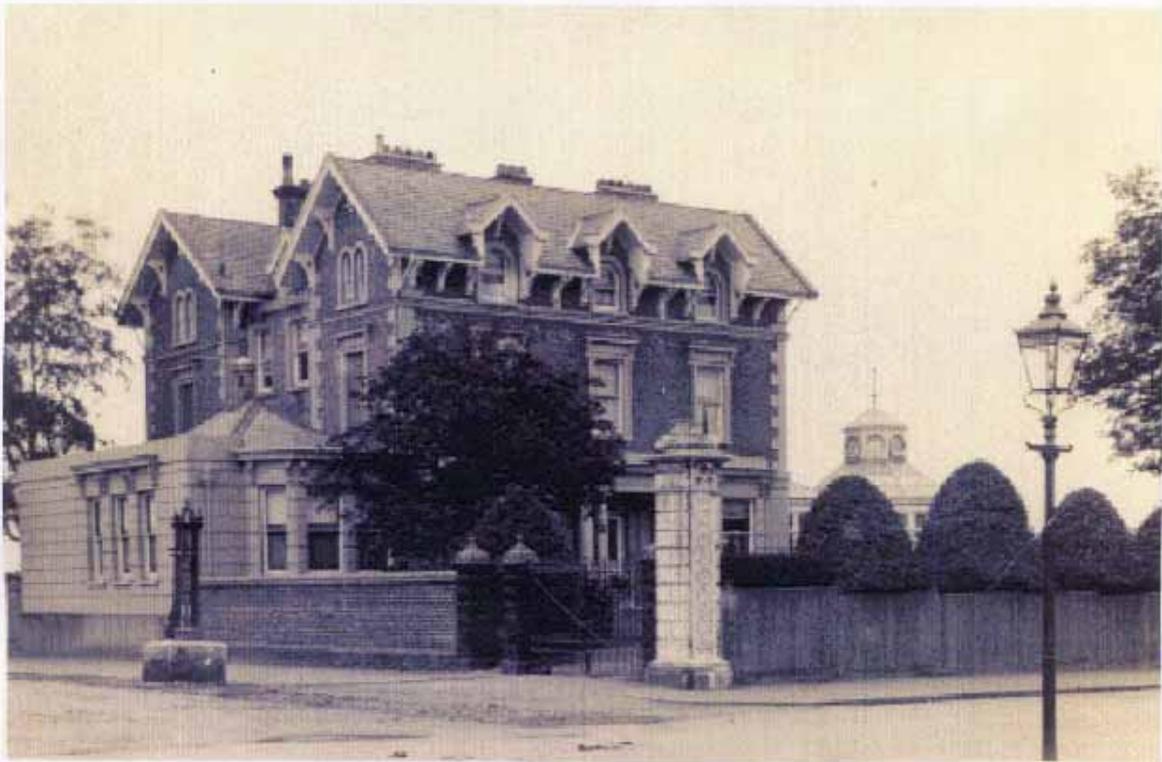
As noted above, by 1911, John Henry was well on his way but from then on the censuses are no longer available and other sources need to be called on.

The old phone books chart his moves to more affluent areas in London ([ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com)).

The earliest phone directories accessible on-line date from 1884 the year after the inauguration of the public telephone service. The London directory for 1884 has 125 pages each with about 30 subscribers listed, say 3,250 to 3,750 in all, with phone numbers from single to four digit (the highest I could find was in the 7nnn series) presumably in some sort of scheme but not one readily discernible from the phone book.

The first appearance of John Henry was in the 1898/99 book as "Auctioneer & Surveyor" at 31 Liverpool St. and at 13 Plashnet St. Upton Park. These entries continue until the 1912 book no longer includes the Liverpool St. address. In the 1903 book he gets a phone at home as there is an entry for "John H Bethell, 88 Romford Rd. E". This entry continues until 1907 when it changes to "Bethell, John Henry, Sir, M.P." with the address of "Park House, Wanstead".

Park House, Blake Hall Road, Wanstead



Home of Sir John Bethell

*Park House Wanstead, a long way from the Gardener's Cottage, Sedgwick*

In 1911 his entries are styled "Bethell, John Henry, Sir, M.P., Bart".

In 1923 the style changes to "Bethell, Lord, M.P." and the address from Park House, Wanstead to "Bushey ho, Bushey".

In the following year "M.P." is removed and the permanent style of "Bethell, Lord" appears.

From a business point of view the phone books continue the Upton Park address until 1923 when it ceases to appear.

In 1928 he acquires an additional residential address, 41 Park St. W1 (close to Park Lane and Grosvenor Sq) and if that isn't arriving I don't know what is!

The Bushey address disappears in the 1941 book and until his death in 1945 the sole entry is for Park St.

Lest you think that the story is just the bare facts extracted from dusty old sources, I have kept the best till last. I cannot do any better than quote the story as told by his great granddaughter, Arabella Seymour in an email of 15th January 2008. Here it is, in her own words.

*Any text in italics is my own, supplementary information or by way of explanation.*

"John Henry lived in lodgings in London while he was climbing the ladder - graduating from a humble clerk to auctioneer, then Land Agent. He entered politics around 1886, when he became Chairman of the East Ham Ratepayers' Association; in 1897, *Queen Victoria's* Diamond Jubilee year, he was at the centre of a very stormy meeting at the Lathom Road Board School, when he succeeded in carrying his point and securing the decision of the meeting to erect a hospital. Through his help and later influence, large sums of money were donated for the building of East Ham Memorial Hospital.



**The first Council of the Borough of West Ham 1886-7. Of Councillors who achieved prominence — W. Crow, first left, top row; J. H. Bethell, second from right, second row. Seated: Aldermen H. Phillips, J. Scully, W. Deason, G. Hay, J. Meeson (Mayor), G. Rivett, H. Worland, C. Stoner, H. Barry, R. L. Curtis.**

*The list of "election of English mayors" published on 10th November 1893 in the Leeds Mercury and other provincial papers recorded Alderman John Henry Bethell (Liberal) as having been elected Mayor of West Ham.*

Every year at Christmas, he visited the hospital where he carved the festive turkey - and gave garden parties every summer. The work in the hospital was his especial hobby and the chief work of his life - he presented it with a piece of land at the rear, and had it laid out.

Unfortunately, in those days he was considered an awful political radical (*as was the whole Liberal agenda, see note 3 below*) and upset quite a lot of people - but his undoubted business acumen and foresight helped enormously in the forming of the Borough (*of East Ham*); it was generally considered that if he had had his way completely, a great deal more would have been done. He sat on numerous committees and was absolutely tireless in everything he undertook. His programme included dividing the parish of East Ham into wards, increasing the number of members of the Board, and the acquisition of land for open spaces while land could be obtained cheaply. This resulted in the purchase of land for Plashnet recreation ground (now Plashnet Park), obtaining a grant from the City Parochial Trustees of £3,000, a lot of cash in those days. He was also responsible for the laying out of this park.

He led an enormously busy life, with his public life and charity work, as he was now a member of West Ham Council, East Ham Council (*he was Mayor of each borough, twice*), and was by this time also an MP.

*In its report of the Romford bye-election on 2nd April 1894, The Pall Mall Gazette stated that the Conservative candidate (appropriately named Alfred Money Wigram) was likely to win, which he did with a majority of 683 in a turn out of 14,463.*

*John Henry contested the North West Ham seat for the Liberal party unsuccessfully in the 1900 general election, but was returned for Romford in 1906 Liberal landslide, he held this seat in the 1910 election and*

from 1918 to 1922 sat for the new seat of East Ham North.

He was a Liberal M.P throughout a period in which took place a hugely important change in the British Constitution (see Note 3 below).

By 1898 he had a following on the larger Urban District Council, and successfully put forward his more progressive proposals - running the tramways, provision of public libraries, artisans' dwellings, electric lighting, swimming baths and the building of the present Town Hall. He was considered something of a superman! His mail while he was in the House of Commons reached enormous numbers - about 20,000 letters a year. In 1904 he was elected the first Mayor of the new Borough, and again elected in 1905. During his second year in office, he purchased (with the assistance of friends), land from a Colonel Burgess for Barking road Recreation ground, and obtained money for laying out the grounds from the Unemployment Fund of the Government. He was given the Freedom of the Borough in 1906 and *and also knighted in that year*. In 1911 he was *created 1st Baronet Bethell*.

*According to "Essex in the twentieth century - Contemporary Biographies, Pike's New Century Series No. 27 Published by W T Pike and Co. 1909", John Henry was "one of the most prominent political figures for many miles east of London".*

By this time his work in Parliament, and as representative for Romford, the largest division in the country, had become so great that he was unable to remain a member of the Council. This didn't stop his abiding interest in the place, as one of the first things he did in 1911 was to help in the fight for county borough powers and severance from the county of Essex for administrative purposes. There was a huge furor over this and John Henry was told that if he pursued it, it would mean the end of his parliamentary career - but he ignored this, introducing a Bill in 1913 which received a second reading. There was a great fight over this in the subsequent Commons' debate, but eventually it received the Royal Assent in 1914. It was held to be one of the greatest successes of his parliamentary career. He was also instrumental in getting the Government to recognise the difficulties under which the education authorities worked where the child population was high but the rateable value low, and was highly successful in getting larger grants for what he deemed to be necessitous areas. In the wider sphere of Parliamentary life he was actively engaged in helping to put through the National Health Insurance Act and was also a member of the Speaker's Conference on the re-distribution of Parliamentary seats.

Probably the heaviest part of his work as an MP occurred during the first world war, when his correspondence was gigantic. Every minute of his at the House of Commons was used to deal with letters, interviewers and seeing Ministers on service matters. Apparently he and his secretary worked 7 days a week, holidays included, and he often worked into the early hours of the next morning.

He was Hon. Colonel of the Motor Transport Corps, and generally assisted the government in raising troops and money for the war effort. During that period of national crisis he was a member of the Canteen Committee of Inquiry (see note 4 below) at the special request of the Minister of War, Chairman of the Jack Cornwell Memorial Fund (see note 5 below), Hon. Colonel of the Essex Motor Volunteers, and a member of the select committee appointed to enquire into the advisability of imposing a capital levy on fortunes made during the war. These duties, in addition to his House of Commons duties, must have been very exacting indeed, but he still made time to pay several visits to the battlefields in France. After the war had ended, he helped many returning men to find work.

*The then Prime Minister Lloyd George wrote the following letter to the Chairman of the Romford Divisional Liberal Council, on 11th June 1918:*

' To represent the largest constituency in this country during the entire life of the present Parliament, is a work which perhaps few people outside parliamentary life can quite properly appreciate, and for which we all ought to be grateful. But the Member for Romford is a man who has devoted his great business capacity to the service of his constituency and of his country. His untiring and patriotic support of the war has been a wonderful example to all.

When the sacred cause for which we are fighting has been achieved, Sir John Bethell's experience and business capacity will be of great service in the task of re-construction of our new England after the war.'

When he was raised to the House of Lords (*in 1922 when he took the title Baron Bethell of Romford*), he was able to spend more time with his Hospital work, in which he always had a deep interest.



*Photograph by Bassano of J.H. Bethell, taken on 24 October 1922.  
Copyright National Portrait Gallery, London*

He was President of East Ham Hospital, Treasurer of Queen Mary's Hospital, Governor of King George Hospital, Visitor for the King Edward Hospital Fund for London and a keen supporter of several other Hospitals.

He also kept keenly in touch with everything that happened in East and West Ham, and had many irons in the fire. He was also Chairman of the Sterling Telephone Company (*a large manufacturer of telephones and switchboards; absorbed by GEC c1934*), a Director of Barclays Bank (*and also the Royal Exchange Assurance Company, now part of the Aegon Group*), additionally, he had a land, property and surveyors business in the city of London, where amongst his other honours he held the office of Lieutenant of the City of London."

John Henry Bethell's story is one of very considerable success: He came from a tied cottage to Mayfair and the House of Lords and from attending a village elementary school to sending his sons to Harrow and Eton.

Lieutenant Frank Henry Bethell, his eldest son by his marriage to Florence Wyles, went to Harrow School, was commissioned into the 3rd battalion Connaught Rangers and was killed in action in France on 25th September 1915, aged 19.

-----

The current inheritor of the title is James Nicholas Bethell who was born in 1967. The best known of the Bethell successors to John Henry is James's father Nicholas Bethell who died in September 2007. Nicholas was a historian and Conservative MEP who was one of Britain's leading experts on eastern Europe, both as an objective analyst and controversial translator, especially of the dissident Soviet writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He came into the public eye in 1971 when an article by Auberon Waugh in *Private Eye* suggested he had published "Cancer Ward" without Solzhenitsyn's permission and had enabled the Soviet authorities to arrest Solzhenitsyn for circulating anti-soviet propaganda. Bethell sued for libel and won the case. He was staunchly anti-communist and was again publicly controversial with his expose of British government duplicity in his book "The Last Secret : forcible repatriation to Russia 1944-7" published in 1974.

-----

**Note 1** - Sedgwick House was built in 1868 by the well-known Lancaster architects Paley and Austin for William Henry Wakefield as a replacement for the original house built by John Wakefield I, great grandfather to William Henry Wakefield.

The Gardner's cottage is believed to have been the house now known as "Spinney Cottage" (source Robin Willacy, retired building contractor, Sedgwick).

**Note 2** - John Henry's period at Levens School coincided with a very important change in English elementary education, The Education Act of 1870.

Until 1870 the development of a national system of education was left entirely to voluntary initiative, with the churches as main providers. When the Church of England's National Society was formed in 1811, educational opportunity for the majority of the population was strictly limited. Existing schools were for the wealthy ('public schools') or for the poor, on a charitable and local basis. The intention of the National Society was to provide a national system of a school in every parish, run by a trained teacher. Sites were mainly given by local benefactors, under the 1841 School Sites Act, with the vicar and churchwardens as trustees. Trust deeds usually refer to education 'for the poor of the parish'.

The Education Act of 1870, also known as the "Forster Act", is generally regarded as the real birth of the modern system of education in England. It created school districts and education boards and required ratepayers to build elementary schools for communities not already served by church or other elementary schools. The local board was empowered to compel children to attend these schools and to charge a nominal fee. Not only did the act give rise to a national system of state education but it also assured the existence of a dual system - voluntary denominational schools and nondenominational state schools..By 1874 over 5,000 new "board schools" had been founded. In 1880 education became compulsory up to the age of 10 (raised to 12 in 1899) and in 1891 it was made free.

**Note 3** - The long period of Conservative government between 1895 and 1905 had meant a slowing of reform. In 1900 it was estimated that 30% of the population lived on the edge of starvation. There were also great inequalities of income and wealth. A working class family lived on about 18 shillings a week while a middle class family spent £10.

During the Boer War the medical condition of the working-class recruits was a cause of grave concern and more attempts were made to improve the nation's health.

In 1906 a Liberal government led by Henry Campbell Bannerman was elected with a massive majority of 104 seats. John Henry's own Election Address is a complete manifesto of Liberal Party intentions in government.

Campbell Bannerman died in 1908 but his reformist intentions were carried on by his successor Herbert Asquith. It eventually introduced a large number of social reforms, including medical tests for pupils at schools and free treatment provided (1907). Workers were compensated for injuries at work (1906). In 1908 a pension of five shillings was introduced for those over 70. In 1911 the government introduced the National Insurance Act that provided insurance for workers in time of sickness. Unemployment benefit was introduced into certain industries (e.g. Shipbuilding).A basic social welfare service had been created which greatly improved the conditions for poorer people in British society. To pay for these social reforms the Liberals wanted to increase taxes on the rich.

Lloyd George's distributive and thereby provocative "people's budget" budget of 1909 contained these tax increases & the Lords duly vetoed it, behaviour which was equally provocative to the Government as the Lords had not challenged the Commons power of the purse since the seventeenth century. This pitched the country into a very serious constitutional crisis which ultimately required two General Elections in 1910 and the ground breaking Parliament act of 1911 to resolve.

Asquith got the budget through in 1910 by persuading the King to agree to create enough Liberal Peers to outvote the Conservatives in the Lords. As all peerages were hereditary this short term measure would have had long term consequences, In the event the threat and some back-peddling on land tax sufficed, but Asquith was still determined to curb the power of the Lords & in 1911 the Parliament Act stripped the Lords of the ability to hold up "money" bills indefinitely. Any doubts as to the primacy of the House of Commons in

*the British Constitution were dispelled.*

**Note 4** - *The Canteen Committee of Enquiry. I think this relates to the "Army Canteen Committee" and this organisation sounds to have had some serious problem. Parliamentary archives contain a memo from Lord Derby (Secretary of State for War) dated February 1917 which mentions that the Prime Minister might insist on the dismissal of the Scottish Area Manager of the Committee.*

*More than a storm in the highest level teacup.*

*Prior to 1914, each army unit ran its own canteen, mostly contracted out to private firms. In Victorian times they had a reputation for being expensive, corrupt, unpleasant, and selling inferior goods. In 1894, three army officers founded the "Canteen and Mess Co-operative Society", which improved the situation immensely. It bought canteen goods in bulk and sold them on to the regimental canteens. During the First World War the Army Service Corps took over the overseas canteens, but in 1917 the Army Canteen Committee was created to take over canteens at home, later becoming the Navy and Army Canteen Board. In 1919 this also took over the Expeditionary Force Canteens. A large undertaking indeed and one we now know as the NAAFI.*

**Note 5** - *The Jack Cornwell Fund was set up to provide a memorial to "Boy First Class" John Travers Cornwell who, aged under 16½ was a "sight setter" on the forecastle gun of the light cruiser HMS Chester at the battle of Jutland on 31st May 1916. Early in the action German shellfire killed or wounded the entire gun-crew. Cornwell remained at his post awaiting orders until the end of the action. He died of his wounds in Grimsby hospital two days later. Admiral Beatty in his official report of the battle recommended "...special recognition in justice to his memory, and as an acknowledgement of the high example set by him."*

*According to the "Times History of the War", "through one of the stupid blunders which are inseparable from officialdom he had been buried in what was no better than a pauper's grave". As soon as the facts became known, public opinion required a befitting interment and he was reburied in an impressive funeral in Manor Park Cemetery. Some months later his father Eli Cornwell who had joined the Army was buried in the same grave.*

*A committee was formed to organise a national memorial to Jack Cornwell. and £21,849 13s. 11 1/2d. was raised by public appeal. Of this sum, £18,000 collected throughout the country in the schools & by scholars was contributed to the Star & Garter Fund for disabled ex-servicemen.*

A.C.Steward, 3rd August 2009 for Levens Local History Group  
this revision was for 1911 census info & Frank Bethell info.