

Abbeyfield (formerly Westhill *)

24 Silver Street, Lyme

Graham Davies and Richard Wells

* Sometimes written as West Hill

August 2025



Westhill was built in the 1830s by Joseph Hayward, a Wiltshire man, author of a few books on scientific agriculture and horticulture, who had retired to Lyme Regis. He became a prominent figure in the town. It was he who spearheaded the campaign against John Ames, owner of Pinhay, to establish a right-of-way through Pinhay Cliffs. Ames had built two walls across this walk. The resulting lawsuit, 'the Queen v Ames' lasted 3 years between 1840 and 1843, with Abraham Hayward, a junior barrister at the time, leading the prosecution during court proceedings for his father. Ames finally admitted defeat in 1843 thus confirming the right-of-way that Joseph Hayward had fought for. Joseph's personal expenditure was over £1,000. A public subscription aimed at his reimbursement raised only half the amount.

The period from the 1780s to about 1850 was a time of investment in the increasing tourism in Lyme Regis. Houses were built as retirement homes, second homes, or for leasing to the visiting gentry. Villas were being built in Silver Street: Little Place and Rose Hill (1824) and the Burley Villas (1832). Westhill was probably built before the Roman Catholic Church of St Michael and St George which dates from 1835.

Extensions have subsequently been added in the 20th century but the core part of the building is still the marine villa of the 1830s, which has retained much of its Regency character, both inside and out. The villa also had a conservatory (Cox and Davis map 1854), which would have been used as an extension to the main house to display garden statuary and tender or exotic plants.

An advertisement in The Times, August 2, 1867 gives a description of the house:

LYME REGIS, Dorset – a MARINE RESIDENCE, entirely detached, to be LET, Furnished, for commanding three months, or a longer period. The house stands in the centre of a garden, beautiful sea views, and contains dining, drawing and breakfast rooms, eight bed rooms, two of which are large double-bedded rooms, dressing room, three water-closets, second staircase, servants' hall, and all the usual offices. The garden and conservatory are stocked with the choicest fruit, vegetables, and flowers, and will be kept up by the proprietor the tenant having the produce as it becomes fit for the table. An abundant supply of excellent water, the spring arising on the premises. Perfect drainage. Rent 30 guineas per month. Lyme Regis is celebrated for the salubrity of the air, beautiful scenery, and sea bathing. Address M A H, Westhill, Lyme Regis Dorset.

The ownership/occupation of West Hill, before it became Abbeyfield, can be divided between three families: Hayward (circa 1835-1905), Wallis (1906-1915) and Eyre (1919-1978).

The 1841 census records the West Hill household:

Joseph Hayward (65), head of household, Independent means.
 Mary Hayward (65), wife, and daughters Mary Ann Hayward (30) and Frances Hayward (20).
 Thomas Hayward (35), son, Grocer, with his wife, Josephine (25) and three young children, Emma (3), William (2) and Josephine (6mo).
 Four servants, John Badcock (15), Harriett Hodges (20), Ann Fowler (20) and Elizabeth ? (30).

There would have been extra staff, such as a gardener, who lived in the town.

The household changed in the next few years. Joseph Hayward died in December 1844, aged 73, his wife Mary, aged 76, in July 1847. They are buried in the graveyard of Lyme's parish church, St Michael the Archangel. Thomas Hayward and his family left Lyme to live in St Pancras, London where he was a wholesale grocer.

In 1851, Mary Ann and Frances Hayward were living at West Hill with two servants. The sisters never married. Mary Ann Hayward died in August 1870, aged 70. She was buried with her parents. Frances Hayward continued to live at West Hill, with a cook and housemaid, until her death in 1904. She is buried in Lyme Regis cemetery.

Elizabeth Hamilton Wallis (widow) lived at Westhill from 1906 to 1915. Her husband, Walter Banfield Wallis, had died in 1900. He had been a corn merchant and miller. The 1911 census describes her household:

Elizabeth H Wallis (69), widow.
Mary Elizabeth Wallis (44), daughter.
Alice Bowyer (39), companion.
Louisa Hoare (27), cook.
Myra Spiller (24), housemaid.

Elizabeth Wallis died in November 1916 and was buried with her husband in Lyme Regis cemetery.

The Rev George Frederick Eyre M.A. was born in Axmouth on 21 March 1872. His parents were Frederick John (Gentleman) and Florence Ann Eyre. He was baptised in the parish church on April 25 with Henry Eyre, vicar of All Saints, St Johns Wood, officiating. He was educated at Lancing College, Sussex and Trinity College, Oxford.

In 1919 the Rev Eyre relinquished his living at Compton Beauchamp, Berks and retired to Lyme Regis to live at Westhill. It appears that he owned, or part owned, the Eyre estate at St John's Wood, London. On the site of the original conservatory he built the extension to Westhill that can be seen today. He bought the Sadborow Estate, near Chard, in 1823, where he carried out many improvements.

He took a great interest in public affairs and was elected a member of the Council in 1925 and was an alderman from the following year until he resigned in 1937. He was mayor in 1927-28 and again from 1935 to 1937. His great interest was in welfare of the Lyme Regis and District Cottage Hospital, of which he was a vice-chairman and trustee, and also secretary, registrar and chairman of the Lyme Regis Hospital League. In 1927 he gave Hernelee, Pound Road, a house formerly occupied by his mother, to the Hospital Committee for the new home of the Cottage Hospital.

He owned considerable property in Lyme Regis and was director of the Lyme Syndicate. Passionately fond of the sea, he was a keen member of the Lyme Regis Sailing Club. He assisted with the services at the Parish Church whenever the need arose.

He died on June 15th 1944 at Westhill and left a wife, Eleanor Charlotte, two sons – Lieut-Com John Eyre, Royal Navy, and Major Frederick Charles Eyre, Royal Artillery, a Japanese prisoner of war – and one daughter, Miss Margaret Eyre, who was doing war work in Oxford.

The Rev Eyre's widow and daughter continued to live at Westhill. Eleanor Charlotte Eyre died in 1954. In 1974 Miss Margaret Eyre was living at Little Westhill, Pound Road.

Miss Margaret Eyre sold Westhill to the trustees of the Lyme Regis Abbeyfield Society in 1978.

Visit to Westhill

Photos at house by Richard Wells

On the afternoon of 6th July 2022, the authors were given access to Westhill. It had been, until June 2022, a retirement home under the name of Abbeyfield and was, at the time of the visit, empty and being sold. The building has been modified and extended to accommodate residents' rooms with en-suite facilities. The extensions, which are unusual in their positioning, are large, modern and complicated.

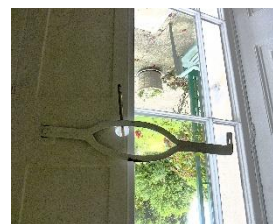
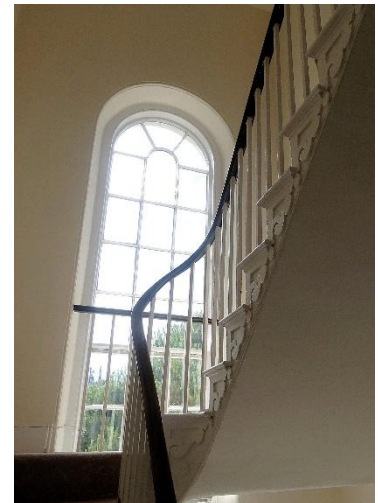
The authors identified and turned their attention to the original core Regency building, which was square, measuring externally 36.5 feet/11 metres, which has been extended on the south and west sides. The entrance faces north with a typically Regency arch over. There were three floors and a cellar. The original fittings that remain on the ground and first floors are much in the late Georgian style which include *high skirting boards, ceiling mouldings, door architraves, window shutters with security bars, fireplaces and tall French windows*. The stair in the main hall has retained the original rail with spiral lower finish and stick balusters with original panelling and decoration to sides; stair rises up to the second floor. The cellar would have been the wine store.



North facing entrance with Regency arch



Regency stair rising from hall to second floor



French doors with Shutter and security bar



Ceiling Mouldings



Door frame architrave & high skirting board

With reference to the maps on this page, North is at the top of the page



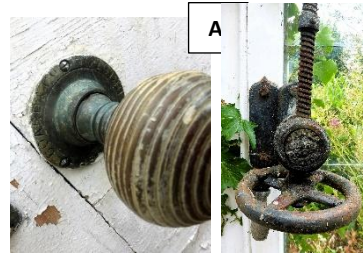
The original conservatory was probably built at the same time as the house. The maps between 1854 and 1903 indicate its position and size. An estimated length of 36 feet, together with a glimpse of the building in the photo of 1889, presents this conservatory as a significant structure.

The Rev G F Eyre retired to Westhill in 1919 and built an extension to the house (1920) on the site of the former conservatory, as shown on the 1929 OS map, the photo of 2022 and "C" in the photo to the left.

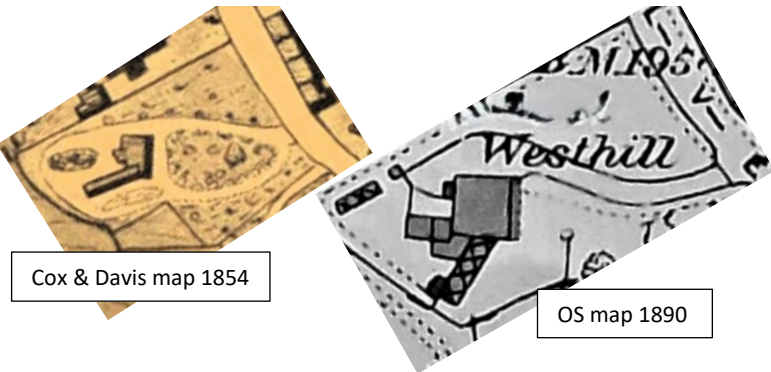
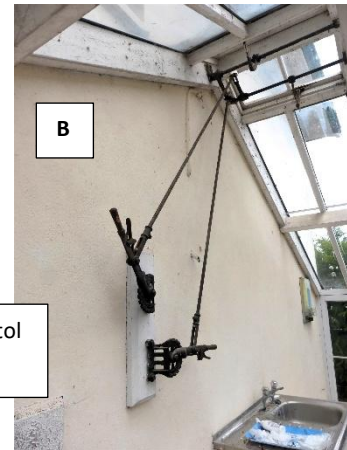
Greenhouse(s) at Westhill, 2022

Created in 1858, Messenger & Co are described as "horticultural builders and hot water apparatus manufacturers" (1877). The firm was famous, in the Victorian and Edwardian periods for making greenhouses etc. Declined from the 1930s. Skinner, Board & Co were heating engineers and greenhouse manufacturers (financial records 1893-1980).

Skinner, Board & Co will have built the curvilinear style greenhouse (A). One could surmise that when the said extension was completed, the glasshouse (B) was built by Messenger & Co against its end wall, to which was later added the more stylish greenhouse (A).

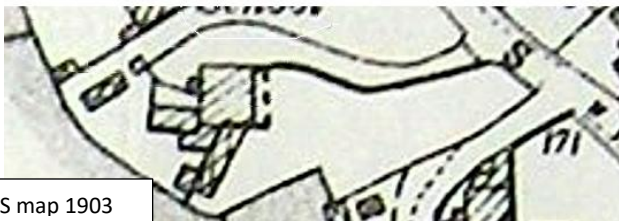


Fittings in A – Skinner, Board & Co, Bristol
Mechanism in B – Messenger & Co Ltd



Cox & Davis map 1854

OS map 1890



OS map 1903



OS map 1929



Westhill 1889



Westhill 2022

References

Lyme Regis Museum Research Team's Digital Archive
National Archive, Kew, Online