

140 Years of “The Holmes”



2019 marked the 140th anniversary of the building of The Holmes in 1879, as can be seen from the date over the main door. The Holmes has had a long association with the University and has been part of Churchill Hall since 1956, it had a rich and varied history before that date.

To understand the building of The Holmes, we need to go back to 1869 when the land on which The Holmes and the main part of Churchill stands, was put up for sale. This was due to the Stoke House estate being broken up and sold. Stoke House (now the main part of Trinity Theological College) was built in 1669 by Sir Robert Cann (Bart) who had been Mayor and MP for Bristol in the 1660s. The estate remained in the hands of the Cann family until they were offered for sale in 1867-69, in separate lots. The lots were for the building of “superior private residences”.

A large part of the estate was purchased by William Edward George, who built the Holmes in 1879. Mr George and his executors owned the house until 1921, leasing it to a number of tenants. Who were as follows:-

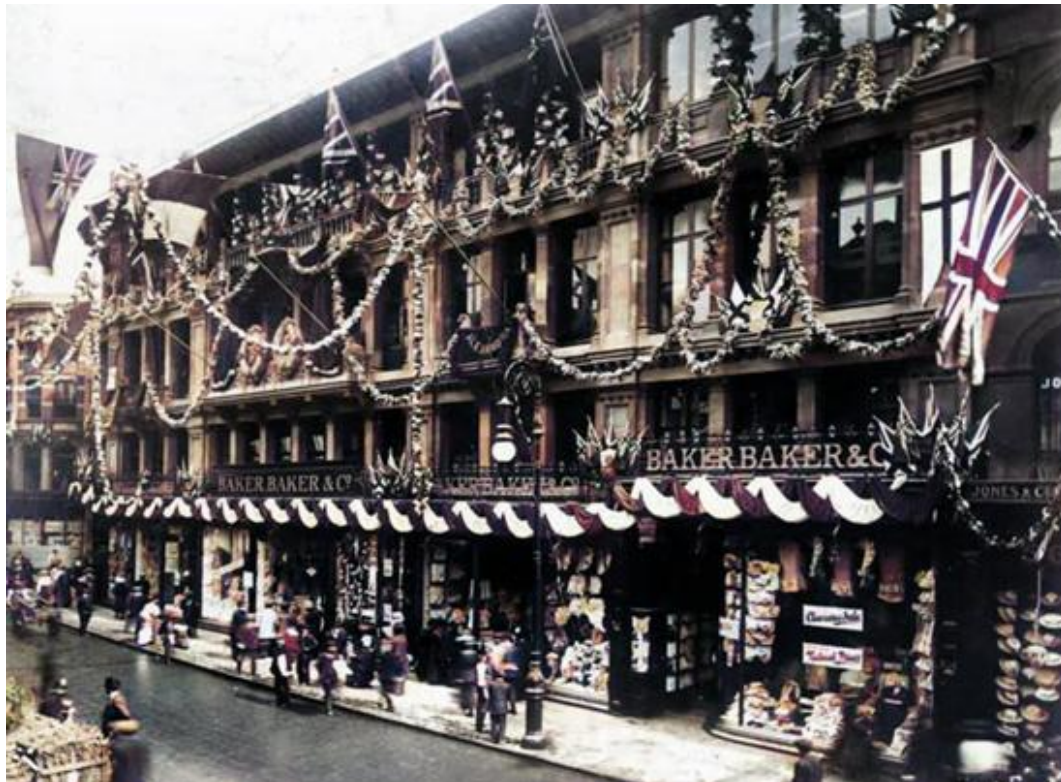
- To 1884 T.G. Matthews;
- Then William Mills Baker, an early supporter of the University College Bristol (Bristol did not become a University until 1909), and the father of Hiatt Cowles Baker, a future Pro-Chancellor of the University and after who Hiatt Baker Hall is named. He remained at the Holmes until his death in 1890. His widow Hannah is recorded as still living there in 1891 before moving to Hallen Lodge.

Some Baker Family Background

William Mills Baker and his brother Thomas Baker came to Bristol to seek their fortune. They joined the firm of Culverwell Son & Co. who were wholesale and retail drapers operating from premises in Wine Street and Bridge Street. By 1860 the two brothers had become partners and, a few years later, the name changed to Ramsdale, Baker & Baker.

By 1883 William Mills Baker and Thomas Baker were in control of the drapery business. Hiatt Cowles Baker, eldest son of William Mills Baker, and Herbert Middleton Baker, eldest son of Thomas Baker, had now joined the partnership. In March 1884 the name of the firm was changed to Baker & Baker Co. Their census records list the occupation \ industry within which they work as being "Manchester warehouse" when during the industrial revolution Manchester Cities nicknames included "warehouse city" and "cottonopolis" as it was the center of the cotton industry.

Historical Photo of the Baker & Baker Co. store decorated either for the Coronation of Edward VII and his wife Alexandra 9th August 1902 or their visit to Bristol to open Royal Edward Dock on 9th July 1908, it was destroyed during the WWII blitz.



On the sporting front Hiatt Cowles Baker was Clifton and Gloucestershire Rugby Captain and played for England 1887.

- The next occupant was Alfred Capper Pass, another supporter of the University College, who owned a Bristol smelting company and in whose memory the Alfred Capper Pass Chair of Chemistry at the University was endowed;
- Finally, Herbert Midelton Baker in 1901 (a nephew of William Mills Baker, and cousin of Hiatt Baker), who moves in after his marriage in 1900 and who then buys the freehold in 1921. Following the destruction of Baker & Baker Co. store in the Bristol Blitz and his death in 1943 The Holmes was sold to the University which added the East and West wings.

It was during Herbert Midelton Baker's time that the gardens remembered by many students, including the croquet lawns were laid out (most of this Garden was reconfigured when the University Botanic Gardens took over the grounds in 2005).

Although the University purchased the house in 1943/4, they did not get to use the building at first as it became the official residence of a number of senior American Commanders, including Generals Collins, Hodge, Dever, Patton and most notable General (of the Army) Omar Bradley. It was here that Gen Bradley commander of the US 1st Army, and later 12th Army Group, planned the D-Day assault on Normandy. In his autobiography "A Soldier's Story" he refers to the Holmes twice.

Firstly "V Corps had requisitioned a residence for me beyond the Bristol Downs, a billet spacious enough to house my key staff officers and aides."

Secondly "It was 7.15 when I went down to breakfast at my quarters in Bristol on the morning of June 3rd. We had loitered late over dinner the night before, our last evening together in England. Today we were to board Admiral Kite's flagship for the invasion. D-Day had been set for June 5th*, and the warm summer sun that poured through the leaded glass windows of the Holmes cheered us ..." (*D-Day was postponed to 6th June due to the weather.)

To mark these events an act of remembrance was held in the Holmes in June 1948, when the then American Military Attaché, unveiled a framed statement from General (later President) Eisenhower which read "It was here General Bradley spent the months during which he organized the First United States Army for the momentous assault against the Normandy beaches."



With the acquisition of The Holmes the University acquired the services of its butler Mr. Henry Cainey, who had served in WWI and who at the time of his marriage in 1926 lived there and who in 1939 is recorded as living with his family in the nearby Downside Cottage in the grounds of Wills Hall.

He was to become a legend, serving as Churchill Halls Steward until his retirement in 1982, four days short of his 85th birthday and shortly before he died in 1983.

After WWII The Holmes, became part of Wills Hall opening as “O” House in the autumn of 1946 with thirty-two students as residence.

It then transferred to Churchill on its opening in the autumn of 1956.

The next major changes came in 1979 when because of new legislation a new fire alarm system, fire escapes, fire doors and a metal spiral staircase through the middle of the upper floors were installed.

Fortunately, The Holmes escaped the sale by the University of the other two out houses, Claverton and Waltham, in 1984. The next significant event was the University Botanic Gardens taking over the grounds and a number of the Ground floor rooms in 2005.



Finally, the Holmes, together with the rest of Churchill Hall benefited from an extensive refurbishment program over a number of summer vacations up to and including 2016.