

MEMORIES OF OLDWAY by Mrs Laura M Goss

Many thanks to Tony Hill, who has provided us with some fascinating memories of Oldway. These were recorded by Mrs Laura Goss, (daughter of the Architect, George Soudon Bridgman) in 1948.

My earliest memories go back to Torquay in the last century, about 1869, but these are only childhood memories which become more clear from 1870 onwards until the time when I got married and left Paignton in 1888.

That early date was at the time of the Franco-Prussian War. Many French families were escaping from the troubles of their country fearing the result of Napoleon III's endeavours to retain his throne. Torquay and other places were besieged by visitors of different nationalities. French, Italians, Greeks and Americans, many of whom having recognised the beauty of Torquay, settled down to reside there.

My father, George Soudon Bridgman, a pupil of Messrs Harvey, Architects – who had laid-out and developed the Estates of Sir Lawrence Palk - was then practising as an Architect in the town. Houses were being snapped-up and enlarged and still more were being built. Father was very busy with an increasing practice in Torquay and Paignton.



One of his engagements at this time was for alterations and enlargements at the 'Victoria and Albert Hotel' in Belgrave Road, Torquay. Amongst the guests staying there was a Mr Isaac Merritt Singer, an American visitor. He had come to look around Torquay to try to find a home for himself, his French wife and family, or some estate where a suitable dwelling could be built. Nothing was available in Torquay but finally the 'Fernham Estate' in Paignton was offered for sale, containing already a comfortable villa 'Oldway House' and a second villa 'Fernham'

(occupied at the time but later vacated) which must be made sufficient for the time being.

The Estate was purchased by Mr Singer and my father was taken by him to undertake the building and planning of a new house and stabling that he wished to have built. As a young man interested in Paignton and engaged in opening up and planning several Estates there, he gladly accepted the offer which would give him such valuable additional experience.

It was a tiring business though to get the preliminaries in order and all the detail of what would be required.

"I want a big 'Wigwam'!" his client said "... and I shall name it 'The Wigwam'." However as to the design, he wanted it to be as far as possible in the style of a rather florid French villa. Also there must be roomy stables, a place for exercising his horses, harness room and carriage accommodation, with many other details regarding affairs outside the house.

The family duly settled into 'Oldway House' and elsewhere so these outside buildings were necessary as the first part of the proceedings.

It was not, as I have said before, an easy task but finally the Arena (now spoken of as Rotunda) was planned, approved of and finally evolved into the present structure. (I went to the Arena one afternoon last summer to recall 'old times'. It had not been altered much but could not believe the very dirty, dark, dingy place was the 'fairyland' where we used to dance and play!). I think that the floor of the Arena was removable, so that Mr Ward, his daughter and the stableman could exercise the horses. Riding lessons could be given to the young people and the floor then re-laid for parties, etc.

As soon as the Arena was in hand, Mr Singer gave Messrs. Edwards, Coachbuilders, Torquay – an order for two large vehicles. A carriage for travelling by road as he did not like railway travel, fitted with every convenience for picnicking and a high coach for four horses to attend the local race meetings. The coaches were exhibited at Messrs. Edwards' premises and were an attraction. I don't think the race coach was used many times but it caused a sensation as it dashed around the New Road and the streets to St Marychurch races.

[pictured; a steeplechase at Petitor, Torquay]



It required a considerable time to complete the Arena. Messrs Matcham of Plymouth were the builders of this and also the house.

In the meantime, my father was preparing plans for the house. At Mr Singer's request he visited France, the war being over, and made special notes of items which Mr Singer desired. The iron railings outside the windows were at that time a speciality. I notice that many of these still remain.

The coloured drawing of the original house design was, I am told, given to the Council by my nephew,

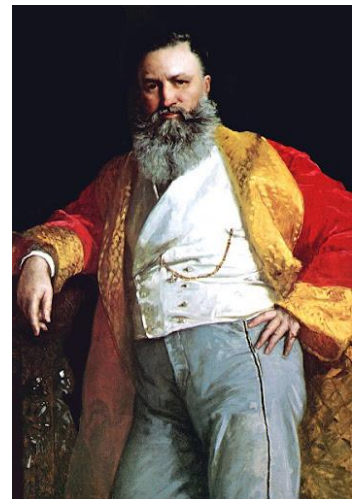
Gerald S Bridgman. It is, I believe, one of my father's own drawings. I hope I may see it when I am able to visit Oldway again.

The house was at last put in hand, but it took a long time to complete. There were, I think, many alterations and difficulties internally. However it grew into the house that was desired by its owner, but he was gradually becoming a serious invalid.

When the house was nearly finished and in the hands of the decorators, I was taken to see it. I was greatly impressed by the wide staircase but cannot in my mind, see it as it is at present. It was probably altered by Mr Paris Singer when the house was renovated and other changes made. The kitchens too were impressive for size, as were the domestic arrangements although still unfinished.

It was not very many weeks after that visit with my father that to the great regret of all interested in the work, Mr Singer became very ill and lived only a short time longer. It was a great blow for everyone connected with him. All felt sad that he did not live to see the fulfilment of his 'Dream Home'. He liked to visit the building every day that it was possible for him, to see how it was progressing.

My memories of Mr Isaac Merritt Singer are very vivid still. He was most impressive in appearance. A handsome old gentleman of medium height with a white 'Father Christmas' square cut beard and when dressed in his party attire, he was to us children magnificent. He felt the cold very much due to his illness and usually wore an overcoat, but for a party this overcoat was of velvet-lined satin.



I remember a large garden party (before the Oldway grounds were disturbed for building) of children and grown-ups. Mr Singer was immaculately dressed in morning attire with a long coat of royal blue velvet lined with primrose satin. It had a striking effect but it seemed to suit him and looked quite in order – for him – and on other occasions similar coats in different colours.

After the Arena was finished, several large parties were held there in which we participated. Two American daughters had joined the family. Alice, very tall and fair, and Caroline, pretty and petite with dark hair and a brunette complexion. Alice afterwards married Mr Legrange, a

The guests at these parties were principally children with a good sprinkling of grown-up young people. Entertainment by a conjuror. A Christmas tree as well as the Italian Band from Torquay, added to the joy and excitement.



I remember on one occasion we were attracted by the terrible sounds coming from the band. There standing between the players and blowing their best, were Washington and Paris Singer, one with a tin whistle and the other with a borrowed cornet. Each kept a perfectly straight face, but the musicians were almost helpless with laughter. It all added to the fun.

child and at her wedding to a French nobleman, Duc Elie Decazes, the Queen Isabella of Spain was present. Winneretta became 'Princess de Polignac'.

It was a serious loss to Paignton when Mr Singer died. He was kind and generous to all. He gave freely to all the charities in existence and promulgated others. His sons who later lived in Paignton, were generous in carrying them on.

Except when on a visit to Paignton after my marriage, I heard little of Oldway affairs, but after Mr Paris singer took over the Estate, when the young people had become of age, it was good to hear the big house was at least to become a home. Mr Paris altered the house. He preferred a different style.

A circular portrait of two women, Mrs. Lavinia Sager and her daughter Miss Minnie Sager. Mrs. Sager is on the left, with her hair styled in an updo and wearing a light-colored dress with a small brooch. Miss Sager is on the right, wearing a dark choker and a light-colored dress. The portrait is set within a circular frame on a light-colored card.

Mr. Paris Linger and her daughter Miss Minnaretta Linger