

Cliffe Hill Mansion and Park



Pre 1880

Cliffe Hill mansion on the Crow Nest Estate in Lightcliffe, West Yorkshire was owned by the Walker family. William Walker (1713 – 1786) is reputed to have had it rebuilt with timber from the Baltic at the same time that he had Eastfield Chapel replaced by St. Matthew's old church. His second son John Walker and family lived there after he married and all his children including Ann Walker junior were born there. In 1809 John Walker inherited the main Crow Nest mansion on the death of this older brother another William Walker (1748 – 1809). The two spinster sisters Mary Walker (1747 - 1822) and Ann Walker senior (1757 - 1843) then moved mansions. On the death of Ann Walker senior in 1843 her niece Ann Walker junior (1803-1854) moved back to the house she was born in, remaining there until she died. But what happened to the mansion after that?

Her nephew and heir Evan Charles Sutherland Walker appears to have resided at Cliffe Hill up until he married in February 1859. He and his wife then moved to the Crow Nest mansion. John Foster the owner of the Black Dyke Mills in nearby Queensbury then rented Cliffe Hill from at least August 1860. He and his family were there on census night in 1861. When Evan Charles Sutherland Walker put the whole Crow Nest estate up for sale in 1867 the second son Jonas Foster, as the sitting tenant, bought Cliff Hill.

Major Johnstone Jonas Foster - as he became known - and his family lived there until they moved to Manor Park near Ludlow in Shropshire. Not long after that in 1880 Major Foster died and the family no longer had the need for Cliffe Hill. It was then subject to tenancies for the next 45 years.

1880 to 1938

The first tenant was **Benjamin Scarf**, a Bradford stuff merchant. He was born in Leeds in 1837 where his father was a stuff merchant. The Scarf family moved to Bradford in the late 1840s. Subsequently Benjamin was educated at Bradford Grammar School where he was a keen cricketer. After school he had worked in his father's firm and then purchased McKean, Tetley & Co. of Leeds Road, Bradford. In 1863 he married Elizabeth Johnstone in Cumberland. They lived there and then in Birmingham where most of their seven children were born. Benjamin became the principal partner in the West Bromwich Ironworks. His wife died in Birmingham in 1878, and it was after then that the family moved to Cliffe House.

On the **1881 census**, Benjamin was not at home but six of his seven children (Charles, Frederic, Emily, Mabel, Madeline and Ben) and the housekeeper, Annie Denning were. She was the children's unmarried aunt. Also in residence were a governess and two servants.

In **1885** Benjamin married Esther Marsh Rowe and a daughter, Gwendoline Marjorie, was born in February 1889 quite possibly at Cliffe Hill. The photograph below may well have been taken at Cliff Hill after the christening at Lightcliffe Congregational Church.



It shows Benjamin seated in the middle with Esther on the right holding Gwendoline Marjorie on her knee. On the left and seated on the grass mound is Emily with Mabel behind her. Elizabeth (Lillie) stands behind her father and Charles is next to her. Frederick and Madeline complete the back row with young Ben alongside his father.

On **census day 1891**, 53-year-old Benjamin was with his wife, Esther, three of his adult children and little Gwendoline. Arthur Rowe, presumably a relative of Esther and an auctioneer was a visitor in this household which, in addition, had six servants. Twenty-five-year-old Elizabeth (Lillie) who had not been at Cliffe Hill at the previous census was at home with two of her brothers Charles and Frederick. Both young men were described as stuff manufacturers with Charles, also a Captain in the Bradford Rifle Volunteers. Frederick was described in his father's obituary notice as being actively engaged in West Bromwich Ironworks.

During Benjamin Scarf's time in Lightcliffe, he and the family were much associated with the previously mentioned Lightcliffe Congregational Church which Sir Titus Salt had funded. Benjamin Scarf was the treasurer of the new school building fund and had made substantial contributions to it.

In **November 1892** ill health forced him to seek a residence further south and so he moved back to Birmingham. Benjamin Scarf died in King's Heath House, Birmingham on 9th January 1893. He left over £142000 with his immediate family being the main beneficiaries. An annuity was left to Annie Denning, his cousin, who had lived with them for several years. Cliffe Hill was vacant again but not for long.

In **January 1893**, The *Brighouse Echo* announced that **James Fitzalan Hope**, the Unionist candidate for the Elland Division, would be in residence at Cliffe Hill for a six-week period. Seven years later he became the Conservative MP for Sheffield Brightside and then had a long political career in Westminster. He was created Baron Rankeillere in 1932.

In **August 1893**, the Band of Hope held a picnic in the grounds when the house was described in the *Echo* as 'the residence of the late Mr Scarf'. A year later the caretaker, Mr J Newsome, gave permission for Bethel Young Ladies' Sewing Class to hold another picnic.

In **April 1895** a golf club was formed and agreed to rent 40 acres of land in Cliffe Hill Park for links golf. The professional from St Anne's, Mr Geo Lowe, had inspected the park and concluded that it was admirable for a golf course. He arranged a 12-hole course though this was criticised as most holes were short (at 200 yards) and only three being longer whereas a 9-hole course would have allowed some longer holes. A groundsman and professional were engaged from Hoylake. Two cottages were to act as changing rooms for gentlemen and ladies. The membership maximum was agreed at 200 with an entrance fee of three guineas and an annual subscription of two guineas.

In **October 1895** a 24-hole competition was held with the winner being Mr S W Highley who took 119 shots. Second was Mr A F Firth, presumably Sir Algernon Freeman Firth of Holme House.

The *Halifax Courier* reported in **August 1899** that, after a lengthy period when the house had been unoccupied, a new tenant had agreed a long tenancy with the option to purchase. This was to be William Henry Aykroyd, a Bradford gentleman. The Halifax Golf Club was given notice to quit.

William Henry Aykroyd, later Sir William, lived in Cliffe Hill with his wife Emma née Hammon and their children for the next two decades. Youngest son George Hammond Aykroyd and then their daughter Mary Hammond Aykroyd were born during this time, again quite possibly at the house. All three sons were there with their parents on census night 1901. Ten years later only eight-year-old Mary was with them.

The Aykroyds seem to have kept the tenancy of Cliffe Hill even after Sir William Henry Aykroyd moved to Ingerthorpe Grange between Harrogate and Ripon where he was on the 1921 census. Presumably this was because it was close to the Clifton Mills which he had bought from Sir Algernon Firth. His sons helped him run the business, so they were all sometimes recorded as being in residence at Cliffe Hill before they married. Their story is told in the article **The Aykroyds of T F Firths & Sons Ltd.**

In 1929 the Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer advertised that Cliffe Hill, Lightcliffe was to let. This would appear to be after all the Aykroyd sons had married and after their father had bought the Grantley Hall estate near Ripon. Cliffe Hill was described as a desirable residence, standing in well-wooded parkland with a south aspect. It comprised a large lounge hall, two reception rooms, six bedrooms and attics. The house had electric light, central heating and every modern convenience. Outside there was a tennis lawn, and garage. Applications were to be made to Denham, Lower Crow Nest, Lightcliffe.

Captain Frank Nicholl of Cliffe Hill was on the Halifax War Pensions Committee in 1931. But then the *Halifax Evening Courier* for May 1933 reported on the Lightcliffe Will of a Mrs Gaunt of Cliffe Hill. The Nicholls were certainly still in residence in July 1937 when they held a garden party for Hipperholme Methodist Church. However, in May 1938 it was reported that the Nicholls were to move to Sussex. The report mentions Captain Nicholl's business interests in Halifax and his work on behalf of ex-servicemen.

In June 1938 the Bradford auctioneers and valuers, A. Gadie & Son, advertised that Cliff Hill was again to let and would be 'vacated shortly'. At this time the number of bedrooms had been reduced to five and there were two bathrooms.

1939 – 1959

Was the house left unoccupied after 1938? Who owned it? Who knows!

What is certain is that during WW2 there was a prisoner of war camp at Cliff Hill. Locals remember seeing names carved on trees and in outbuildings. There are references to Cliff Hill being one of four hostels attached to a 'satellite camp' in Huddersfield. Some German prisoners were still at this camp in December 1946 when a service was held at St. Matthew's Church, Lightcliffe for 60 Lutherans. According to the *Halifax Evening Courier* this service, held on 15th December, was the first service to be held in a local parish church for German prisoners. One reason for the service was because the Lutheran padre previously held in the camp had been repatriated. Apparently about half of the German prisoners in the Cliff Hill camp were Protestants. A year later a similar service was held at Hipperholme Methodist Church in October 1947 by which time the Lutherans had their own padre again. A few years ago, one of the prisoners of war explained to a local historian that he was held in the camp. After he was released, he married a local girl and lived in Cleckheaton.

As well as housing German prisoners of war Cliff Hill was also where hundreds of Belgium troops came for training. A report in the *Halifax Courier* on 29th June 1945 noted that the first batch of five hundred came in January 1945. “*This first batch held an impressive service at the war memorial on the Stray, at Lightcliffe, on February 4, when wreaths were laid in remembrance of the fallen of this country and of Belgium*”. They left in March 1945. Further batches of Belgian troops were expected to come to the headquarters at ‘Cliff Hill Mansions, Lightcliffe’ for training and/or equipping. A member of the permanent staff at the headquarters was quoted, suggesting that the military had the use of the entire building at the time.

Two years later the military had obviously moved out. On 12th July 1947 the *Huddersfield and Holmfirth Advertiser* advertised. ‘LIGHTCLIFFE FOR SALE with Vacant Possession, Westerley half of Cliffe Hill. Viewing was to be arranged through Walsh, Wilkinson and Coutts of 10 Harrison Road, Halifax. But who bought it and when? According to the *Brighouse Echo* on 13th January 1950 the Borough Engineer was concerned about the unoccupied property. He was investigating the possibility of the premises being made suitable for habitation after requisition or put into repair by the owner and relet. A few months later, on 24th March 1950, the *Boston Spa News* reported the death of a gentleman at the home of his daughter Mrs Donald S. Rayner of Cliffe Hill, Lightcliffe. The Rayners were still there in 1959 when a daughter married.

After that it is difficult to distinguish between Cliff Hill Farm, Cliff Hill Nurseries, Cliff Hill School and other Cliff Hills that come up, so it is difficult to tell what happened to the mansion. But perhaps it is best to stop there anyway.



Dorothy Barker, November 2025.