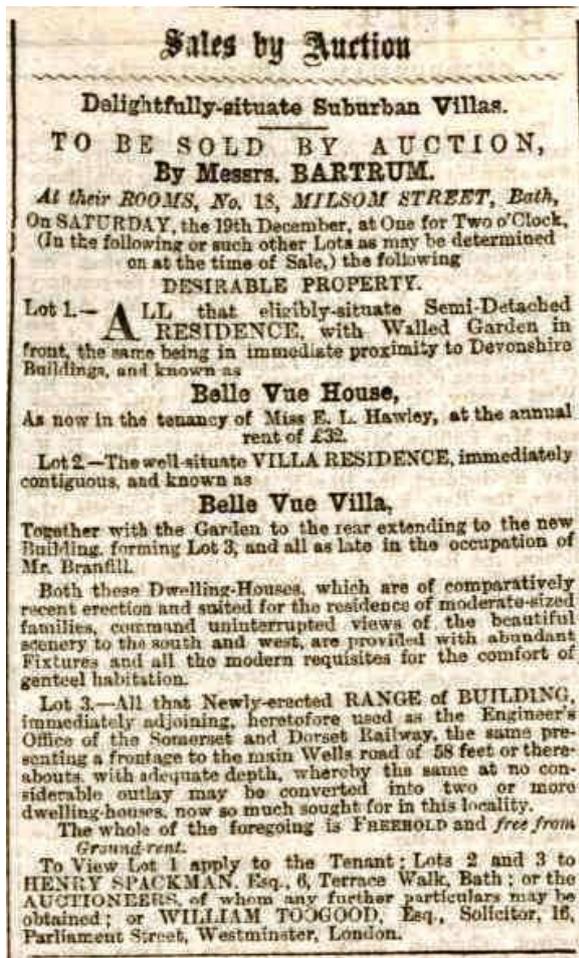




## A HISTORY OF 131 WELLSWAY

Number 131 is the distinctive bungalow building on Wellsway, directly opposite the entrance to St Luke's Road. When my wife and I moved in about 15 years ago we were told that the reason for its unusual design was because it was originally built as a tram ticket office. This idea was further supported by local conversations and a tram crossing point did indeed exist opposite the Devonshire Arms a few buildings away, up until 1939 when the trams stopped running. And yet we could find no actual proof of any link between the house and the tram company in any publications, newspaper accounts or any other local records

As it turns out the property appears to have no connection with trams, but everything to do with trains.



The Dorset and Somerset Railway Company received the Royal assent to start work on the rail link between Bath and Bournemouth on 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1871, and began work almost immediately. The project involved the building of two tunnels: a short tunnel under Devonshire Buildings and the longer Odd Down tunnel, which both now serve as a part of the Sustrans cycle route. Over 3,000 men worked on building the spur route from Green Park, with many involved on the excavation and lining of the tunnels. Several newspaper references affirm that 131 Wellsway was built by the company as an 'engineer's office'. This would make sense since it was sited adjacent to the most critical aspect of the project. The Somerset and Dorset Extension Railway was officially opened on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1874.

The first confirmation that 131 Wellsway was an engineer's office appears in an advertisement from the Chronicle dated 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1874 covering the sale of the property together with the two "Belle Vue" semi detached property next door (to the North).

The actual date when the property was built is unrecorded, although we can assume it was possibly in late 1871 or 1872.

Further investigation reveals that the redundant engineer's office was purchased in 1874 by a Mr Charles Henry Keel for the sum of £307 10s.



Mr Keel was a local gardener in the employ of a retired army officer, Colonel Landon, late of the 16<sup>th</sup> Bombay Native Infantry, who lived at The Ferns in Oldfield Road. As a tribute to his employer, Charles Keel rechristened the engineer's office 'Fern Cottage' and he remained there until his death at the glorious age of 99 in 1923. His wife Anne died a year previously at the age of 91. They were married for 70 years.

As a measure of his respect for his old employer, Colonel Landon, who had died in 1890, Charles Keel arranged to be buried in the plot alongside his, in the Abbey Cemetery (the gravestones are still there but sadly the information on them has become hard to decipher).

The fact that Charles Keel lived to such a great age offers us some bonus information in terms of the history of Bear Flat, for a year previously he was interviewed by the Bath Chronicle and a part of that interview was published on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1923.

Here is the text of the article and accompanying photograph (opposite).



## **VENERABLE BATH CITIZEN'S DEATH**

### ***Three Quarters of a Century in Wells Road***

#### ***Mr Charles Keel's Reminiscences***

*Mr Charles Harvey Keel, one of the oldest citizens of Bath, passed away on Tuesday night at the residence 131, Wellsway (Fern Cottage). In April last, Mr Keel completed his 98<sup>th</sup> year. Up till quite recently he was wonderfully alert in his mind.*

*Mr Keel was born at the Swan Inn, at Dunkerton, in April 1826, and had been in Bath since 1848, living all the time in the Wells Road district. Last year Mr Keel gave a "Chronicle" representative his recollections, some of which are here reproduced:-*

*"I remember, said Mr Keel, all this land (Wells Road) before it was built on. The house that we are now in was the office of the Somerset and Dorset line. I was a gardener for 52 years and I was 30 years with Colonel Landon at the Ferns in Oldfield Park. I was a great shower of orchids, stove plants and greenhouse plants and azaleas; and I was very successful with them. I remember once on the*



*22<sup>nd</sup> of May, the show was held in Sydney Gardens, and we had two vans loaded up. The snow came down so hard and fast that we did not take the things down to the show, and we put them all back into the house. Let me see, that was about 1850; it must have been about 50 something. I remember the races were on the same day, and they must have been run in a snowstorm. The snow was over your boots. The flower show at Sydney gardens was then held in a summerhouse – and that was not full. The last show we had there we had a bit of a kick-up and somebody stole all the money, and we never had a halfpenny. I have shown flowers at Oxford and London. At London we went to the Crystal Palace and showed there. I remember there was a breakfast got up for 700 gardeners, so there was something going on. I remember a boy being killed by a squib or rocket fired off in the Sydney Gardens. He was sitting on the top of a post. The thing took a wrong direction and flew against the boy. His name, I think, was Day.*

#### **HOLLOWAY TURNPIKE**

*There used to be a turnpike gate at the top of Holloway, and then it moved up to Elm Place. There was also a bar across Greenway Lane, put up to stop people going that way into town, as they tried to do to avoid the turnpike.*

*“All down from the present St Luke’s Church to Elm House was a great garden. Old Stephen Viles was gardener there for old Cooper, of the White Lion, where the Grand Pump now is. They used to grow the vegetables there for the Pump. And on the other side of the road from Devonshire Buildings downward was a farm, then kept by Mr Carey.*

*“Down at the Ferns in Oldfield Road (after which I named my house Fern Cottage) I had seven glass houses, one 81ft long. I have laid out more gardens than anybody about here. I went all through farming in my young days; and I could make a mow, reap or sow, and plough and cut an acre and a half of grass in a day, at 35cwt to the acre. I have been through the engine work as well, and could work one with ..... I laid out Clandown churchyard, and had ten men under me when I was 18 years of age.*

*“I remember this road (Wellsway) coming down from Breeze Down to the Great Western Railway Station, when it was as black as soot. There were five or six wagons of coal going down it in the course of the day; and the roughness of the road, and the size of the loads, caused a certain quantity to fall from each wagon.*

#### **BELL RINGING MEMORIES**

*“I rang on the Abbey bells nearly 50 years. I once went to Oxford. We were on an outing, and we went to a certain place. There was a tenor bell weighing 52cwt. I rang that bell myself, and a man who had been there 40 years said he had never seen that done before – pull the bell up single-handed as I did. They used to have two men on that bell. I have been to Bristol many times ringing. But it is many years now since I rang.*

*“I have no family, and never had any. I am the only one left out of the whole lot of us. There were seven of us – three sisters and three brothers – (I was the third child) – but they are all dead.”*



*Mr Keel was an ardent Conservative and insisted on voting at the General Election in November last. His wife predeceased him about 2 years ago.*

*The funeral will be at the Abbey Cemetery on Saturday morning at 11.30.*

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Just as an aside there is a brief account in the Bath Chronicle dated 13 January 1887 which suggests that Mr Keel owned another property at 2 Willis's Place. It would appear that there was a tenant, Emily Wigmore and the account states that Keel had taken out an ejectment summons against her which was upheld.

On the death of Charles Keel in 1923 Fern Cottage was again offered for sale in the Chronicle. The notice stated that in addition to the main accommodation there was a rear garden with its own heated greenhouse.

The property was purchased by an even more eminent Bear Flat citizen, the builder and contractor F W Armstrong, who was responsible for designing and building many of the houses in Poets Corner and properties in Englishcombe Lane. Armstrong paid £700 for it. F W Armstrong had various commercial interests in Bath beyond construction work. He also ran the local Enterprise charabanc company and Armstrong's Chocolate Emporium at No 1, The Corridor. On occasion when you took an excursion trip on one of his charabancs you also got free chocolate.

It's possible that Armstrong may have bought 131 purely as an investment although, according to the local street directories, it seems that he did live there himself for a year or so. However ownership eventually passed into the hands of his daughter, Evelyn, and her husband Joseph Parsons, a retired engineer. At the time they were running a grocery business at 4 St George's Place, Bathwick Hill.

In 1927 Evelyn lost both parents which seems to have affected her deeply. A year later she took her own life. On arriving home from the shop one evening Parsons found his wife in the bedroom. She had drunk a bottle of disinfectant. A full report appeared in the Chronicle on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1928.

Despite these terrible associations concerning the circumstances of his wife's death, Joseph Parsons remained living at 131 Wellsway until at least July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1943. This is confirmed in an obituary notice for his mother, Emily Parsons, who lived at 151 Wellsway.

There is more research to be done on the occupants who lived in the house after 1943, although we do know that during the 1990s it was home to the distinguished (and, in some circles, much hated) art critic and founder of the Arts Review, Peter Fuller.

Mervyn Heard  
November 2014