

Frank Chown: East Horsley's housing pioneer

A presentation by

HORSLEY HERITAGE

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**These sections are copied from the privately published Woodland Drive Jubilee Book of 2014 and reproduced here by the kind permission of the Woodlands Drive road association.*

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1930's Frank Herbert Chown (1878-1942) pioneered the development of residential housing in East Horsley.

In the early 1920's Chown worked as a local builder and surveyor based in Ashted. Then in 1927 at an auction forced upon owner Tommy Sopworth, Chown succeeded in bidding for 500 acres of land around Horsley Towers in East Horsley, which he proceeded to develop, creating new houses in a distinctive 'arts & crafts' style. Chown's design themes included the frequent use of thatched roofs, although this was not the local village vernacular at the time. His houses often included 'eyebrow' windows at the first floor level, decorative facing brickwork in chevrons or other patterns, inglenook brick fireplaces and the widespread use of oak internally. Each house was slightly different, thereby creating interest and originality as Chown sought to respond to the varying rural context. His housing plots were generous in size and he also imposed conditions of sale to ensure his design concepts were strictly maintained by those builders who acquired plots of land from him.

Whilst precise numbers are unavailable, we estimate significantly more than 100 houses were built in East Horsley by Frank Chown over the period 1930 – 1939, either himself or by other builders adopting his designs on land that he sold them. The result was to establish a style of housing across East Horsley which is still seen as typifying the character of the village today.

In Section 2 we show a selection of current photographs illustrating Chown's houses in a dozen roads across East Horsley.

Section 3 relates the 'Frank Chown story', describing in detail his 'arts & crafts' approach in East Horsley. This account was first written in 2014 for a private publication by the Woodland Drive road association. To our knowledge this is still the most comprehensive account of Chown's work in East Horsley and we make no apologies for reproducing it in full here.

This is followed in Section 4 by further material taken from the same book written by Perry Barnes, a well-known local architect, who gives his professional assessment of Chown's work and compares him favourably with more nationally recognised architects.

Finally, Section 5 concludes with details of Horsley Heritage's self-guided heritage walk focused on the Chown houses of East Horsley.

2. PHOTOGRAPHS OF CHOWN HOUSES – a present day selection



Cobham Way



Farm Lane



Glendene Avenue



Guildford Road



The Highlands



Lynx Hill



Ockham Road South



Park Horsley



Pine Walk



Pennymead Drive



The Warren



Woodland Drive

3. THE FRANK CHOWN STORY

- reproduced from the Woodland Drive Jubilee Book of 2014

THE FRANK CHOWN STORY

The year was 1920 and Tommy Sopwith was a worried man. He'd only recently moved into the massive Victorian pile known as Horsley Towers in East Horsley, a quaint Surrey village a few miles from Guildford. Now as he stood in the magnificent dining room looking out over the green fields, he took stock of his situation. The Great War had ended a couple of years before and, for Tommy Sopwith, it had been a very profitable war. Eight years earlier at the tender age of 24 he'd had the foresight to open an aircraft factory in Kingston-Upon-Thames with his partner, Harry Hawker, to produce small biplanes capable of being adapted for use in aerial combat. Aviation was in its infancy but already the name Tommy Sopwith was well known for developing increasingly reliable and agile aircraft. Not that the government had shown any interest, or ordered any aircraft. That was until war broke out in 1914 and the Army Flying Corps came into being. Suddenly the strategic benefits of being able to take to the air became apparent and orders started to flood into the Sopwith factory. Very soon substantial numbers of Sopwith aircraft came rolling off the production lines – 'Pups', 'Snipes', 'Strutters', 'Tabloids' and of course the famous Sopwith Camel.

The profits were so substantial that on July 29th, 1919, when Horsley Towers and 2,750 acres of prime countryside came up for auction at the offices of Knight, Frank and Rutley in Hanover Square, he was easily able to outbid everyone else. In just three minutes it was sold to Sopwith for £ 150,000. The purchase cost was just the start though as the building was in a poor state of repair and desperately needed modernising. Sopwith spent another £50,000 upgrading the building including a new heating system, a new drainage system, electricity and new kitchens and bathrooms. He was one of the first people in East Horsley to obtain a Post Office telephone – his number was Clandon 21. All seemed to be going according to plan when, in 1920, the bombshell hit from the government.



Henry Chown



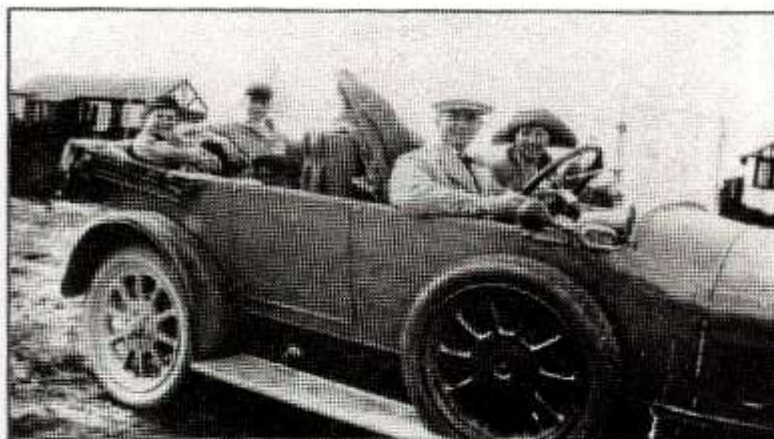
Frank (aged 6 months)
sitting on mothers knee



Frank Chown



Off to the Boer War



Frank, Nell, Donald and Kenneth at Pagham



Nell and Frank

Sopwith was accused of making excess profits and the government wanted them back! In addition, with the end of hostilities, orders at the factory had dried up completely and within a year or so, Sopwith Aviation was put into administration. Sopwith was declared bankrupt and had to raise money fast. By July with debts piling up, he started to auction off parcels of land from the estate and, by November of that year, the entire Horsley Towers estate was offered for sale at an auction in Guildford. It was a disaster; the highest bid was just £ 99,500, less than half Sopwith's investment to date. The lot was withdrawn and re-offered for sale in a few months later in smaller lots comprising of plots of land plus the house and surrounding parkland. Once again bidding was slow with the highest offer for the house now just £ 58,000 and once again it was withdrawn. However there was considerably more interest in the plots offered for sale and these were quickly snapped up by some opportune developers. Tommy Sopwith decided to stay in Horsley Towers and continued to live there until 1926, indulging in favoured pastimes such as shooting and playing cricket.

Frank Herbert Chown was born in London on June 19th 1878, the son of Henry and Elizabeth Chown. He had nine brothers and sisters although some died in childhood. The Chown family originally came from Devon where they were yeoman farmers but moved to London in the mid-nineteenth century. Henry was a licensed victualler with a shop in John Street, Holborn. Given Frank's career as an architect and developer, it's interesting to note that his grandfather was involved in the construction of the Lyceum Theatre in London. Frank was educated at Ardingley College in Sussex and when the second Boer War broke out in 1899, he signed up with the City of London Volunteers, a yeomanry cavalry unit.

After returning from South Africa, Frank studied and qualified as a building surveyor and, on June 1st 1907, married Ellen 'Nell' Hilliard at the Parish Church in Wimbledon. The couple lived initially in Tolworth and later in Norbury with their young sons Donald and Kenneth, driving to their beach bungalow, Sea Echo, in Pagham, Sussex for holidays and weekends.

In July 1920, Frank happened to be visiting Guildford one day and by chance came across an auction of land at Horsley Towers. On impulse he successfully bid for a parcel of land. On the way home he detoured via East Horsley to investigate, obviously liked what he saw and before long he and Nell had purchased a plot of land in Ockham Road South (then called Ripley Rd) and built a family home which he named Frenchlands (which is still there today).

In those days East Horsley lacked electricity and there was no mains water south of the station. He persuaded the water company to extend the supply and negotiated with the Electric Light Company Ltd in Leatherhead to run a cable to the village. Under the terms of the contract, Frank agreed to act as guarantor.

Frank was, by now, working hard to build his business from an office in Ashted High Street. Later he established three estate offices in East Horsley. One was in the wooden building at the bottom of Station Approach (subsequently this was to become The Wayfarers Café, the Midland Bank, then HSBC and is nowadays a Funeral Parlour). Another was adjacent to the former Gate House of Horsley Towers opposite the Duke of Wellington and a third was in Bishopsmead Parade.

In December 1923, Frank's wife Nell sadly died of cancer at Frenchlands and he moved to Oxshott. Five years later, in 1928, he met and married Eileen Stulcken (known affectionately as 'Chummie'). Frank and Eileen moved initially to Ashted to a house that Frank had constructed near the City of London School. Like all their subsequent homes, he called it 'Franleen', a combination of Frank and Eileen, and their daughter Jill was born there on February 10th 1929.



Frank and Eileen



Skating on Sheepwash Lake



Eileen with daughters Jill and Sheelagh

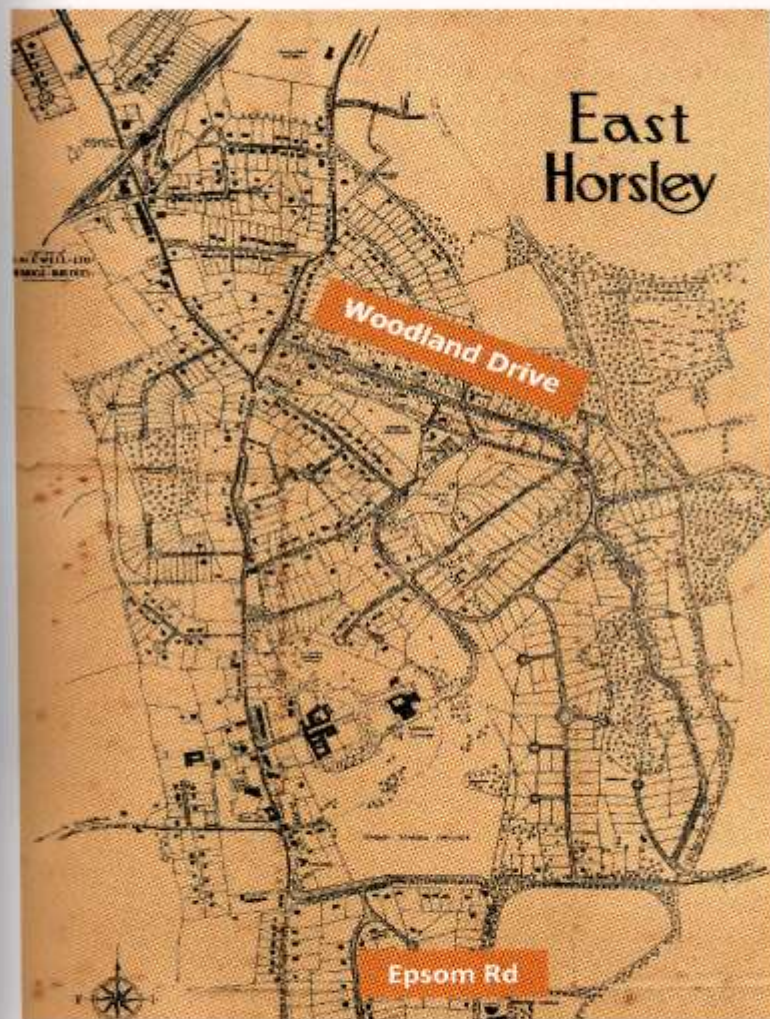


By the early '30s Frank was busy developing Woodland Drive and moved into one of the first homes to be finished in the road, a magnificent house which they again named Franleen. Externally the house is today still very much as it must have looked when Frank and his young family moved in apart from a change of name - it is now called Rosemount. Frank and Eileen's second daughter Sheelagh was born in Woodland Drive on March 17th 1935. As he developed the estate, the family moved to a new house in Pine Walk in 1937 and finally to The Warren in 1941.

In 1926 Tommy Sopwith instructed Knight, Frank and Rutley to have another attempt to auction Horsley Towers and this time the sale was successful. The main house was purchased by a couple of rather genteel ladies, Misses Maule and Isaacson, who ran a private school, St Michaels, for young ladies in Hove and were looking for new premises. Horsley Towers suited them just fine. Another attendee at the auction room was Frank Chown however his interest was not in the building but in the land surrounding it. He came away very satisfied having purchased no less than 500 acres surrounding the Towers.

He quickly got to work planning roads like Norrels Drive, High Park Avenue, Pine Walk, The Warren, Park Horsley, Woodland Drive, and Pennymead Drive. He advertised plots of land for sale along with an individually designed house. He put the building work out to tender, often using the firm of Roker and Strudwick. The designs in the 'Chown' portfolio were often of Tudor style, incorporating seasoned oak beams from timbers of old ships and barns. Many had solid oak staircases, polished wood floors, oak window frames, inglenook fireplaces and thatched roofs but these features were not built into all his houses.

He favoured low density housing with wide frontages and, when drawing up a contract, he restricted the erection of sheds and wooden garages in gardens. In his endeavour to maintain a continuity of style, high standard of appearance and quality in the development of his housing, he insisted on approving the plans and imposed restrictive covenants in the title deeds of the land he sold, to that effect.



Ambitious plans to link Woodland Drive to the Epsom Rd

Frank and Eileen were founder and life members of Horsley Sports Club. The inaugural meeting took place at Thatchers on 30th March 1936, when Frank was thanked for his generous gesture in keeping this ground for a recreation ground.

The inaugural meeting of the Horsley Sports Club took place at Thatchers on March 30th 1936. The minutes state 'Mr Chown was thanked for his generous gesture in keeping this ground for a recreational ground instead of tuning it into a building estate'. At this time Frank had paid for the construction of two hard tennis courts and a grass court for use by the Club.

In 1937 residents of Pennymead Drive and Woodlands Drive got together to form the Pennymead Sports Ground Ltd. (PSGL) and raised sufficient funds to buy the cricket ground bordered by the road running through the Club. Unfortunately they could not raise the additional finance to buy the land to the east of the road where the tennis courts are now situated, and this land was leased by Frank Chown to PSGL for 99 years at a rent of £80 per annum.

Frank Chown had visionary plans to continue extending his estate. In particular the grandest of all his ideas would have extended Woodland Drive to Park Horsley through an area known as the Pheasantry. However these plans remained unfulfilled due to the onset of war, the imposition of the Green Belt and his untimely death from a heart attack in June 1942.

After Frank's death Eileen continued to live in Franleen in The Warren until 1972 when she married Douglas Bacon and moved to Haslemere. After Douglas' death Eileen's sisters, Greta and Lola, lived with her until they both died. In 1999 Eileen moved to a nursing Home in Exmouth to be near her daughter Sheelagh. She died just three months short of her 100th birthday on February 5th 2002.

Frank's enduring legacy is a desirable residential district within easy commuting district from London and featuring high quality housing in a spacious rural setting bearing his own particular Chown finish. Woodland Drive remains a prime example of the Frank Chown vision.

From the Surrey Gazette (June 1942)

DEATH OF MR. F.H. CHOWN - His Work for the Village

The passing of Frank Herbert Chown of Franleen, The Warren, East Horsley on Sunday following a sudden heart attack, is deeply regretted. It is to Mr Chown, more than any other man, that the village owes its modern and delightful development. Mr Chown, who was 64 years of age, was a member of an old Devonshire family. The son of Mr and Mrs Henry Chown of London, he came of a family associated with the building industry and his grandfather was the builder of the Lyceum Theatre, London. As an architect and developer, Mr Chown had a successful career. Before coming to East Horsley 22 years ago, he had developed an estate at Norbury and at that time was a member of the Croydon Borough Council.

Mr Chown's coming to East Horsley was purely by chance. He happened to be passing the auction sale of portions of the Earl of Lovelace's estate and purchased a parcel of land he had never seen. Later he acquired a large acreage from Mr T.O.M. Sopwith. The guiding principle behind all his estate developments was the blending of the houses with the natural landscape. The extensive use of thatched roofs was accordingly introduced with advantage.

On his estates – and they embrace the majority of East Horsley's modern developments – he refused to countenance any building plan which was not in accord with his views as to the amenities of the countryside. Many of the houses were built in his own designs. For the social life of his estate he provided a sports club and made it possible for residents to enjoy tennis and cricket.

Apart from his business interests, he served the village faithfully as a Parish Councillor and ARP warden. He was also a member of the Surrey Rural Preservation Society. Mr Chown was married twice. He is survived by his second wife and two sons, Messrs Kenneth and Donald Chown, of his first marriage and two daughters, Misses Jill and Sheelagh Chown of the second marriage.



Frank and Nell are buried together in St Martin's Church, East Horsley

4. AN ARCHITECT'S APPRAISAL by Perry Barnes

- reproduced from the Woodland Drive Jubilee Book of 2014

FRANK CHOWN

An Architect's Appraisal

Perry Barnes RIBA



Often the first thing you notice when arriving at a Chown house is its position within the garden plot. The apparently random nature of the setting-out, not parallel with the roadway, starts a process which gives an ad hoc sensation. This creates a less developed response to the site and more a feeling of a house which has somehow evolved on its site, almost naturally.

When first built a Chown house would have been set amongst established trees. This genius loci, along with the materials employed and the articulated roof forms gave a general feeling of the English country picture postcard, a charming, rural, chocolate-box image. The houses have a modest scale which in some cases disguised their larger accommodation.

It seems to me that although the design process came naturally to Frank Chown, it was a considered approach aimed at his market, the London business man. Clearly the Lovelace designs of Horsley parish informed him. They set the benchmark for the old Horsleys and there had now been a strong Arts and Crafts movement in Great Britain, particularly associated with fine houses for successful society.

The tudor-esque style employed by Frank Chown was a vernacular approach, often using local oak beams and joists. The use of thatched roofs at houses like Dray Cottage was not generally a local reference however it added to the affect and clearly pleased Chown's artistic side as well as his desire for financial success. The modern expression of "good design sells" would have reflected the Chown approach very well. Many of the building materials used along with the varied detailing were typically Arts and Crafts and symbolic of a fairy tale life away from the harsh rigors of the city.

Chown developed houses which were truly personal. There was an architecture of humanism in his approach to design and materials. Herringbone brick texture, eye-brow windows, nose like porches, inglenooks, church wall plaster finishes, leaded lights, rolling roofs, all set in a woodland backdrop.

Chown had developed a vernacular much like other British architects who chose to concentrate their efforts on a particular spot. Clough Williams Ellis did it most famously of course at Portmeirion in North Wales. Closer to home there was Blair Imrie at Esher with his similar approach albeit for private clients. Herbert Luck North developed in Conwy Bay creating something of a hamlet in Llanfairfechan, North Wales. These examples may not have been influences but they were going on at much the same time in a period when modernism and traditionalism were at odds.

Likely influences on a young Frank Chown would have been varied. As a businessman with a professional surveying background there was a need to build what appealed to the Horsley market. As an architect he would have read Country Life. The magazine championed our great British domestic architects. Men like Edwin Lutyens and Charles Voysey. Chown must surely have visited Goddards in Abinger, a typical Lutyens surrey house. He may well have gone to Norney Grange to see the beautiful Voysey creation not far up the Portsmouth Road. The main house at Wisley may well have influenced Chown along with the expansion of garden cities such as Letchworth.

In terms of books which may have sat on the Chown bookcase, there were publications by Lawrence Weaver such as Small Country Houses and The Country Life Book of Cottages. Chown may also have read about the so called Wandering Architects, who had earlier followed the teachings of Ruskin and Morris. They had travelled around working with their own hands early in the century.

Whatever the influences the Frank Chown house has become synonymous with Horsley. Not a bad legacy it seems to me.

5. THE CHOWN HOUSES WALK

Horsley Heritage has developed **The Chown Houses Walk**, a comfortable heritage trail offering views of Frank Chown's work across six different roads in East Horsley – Glendene Avenue, Woodland Drive, Pine Walk, Farm Lane, Lynx Hill and Pennymead Drive.

This circular walk begins and ends in Station Parade and is 2.2 miles in length. An illustration of the route is shown on the right here.

A full description of this heritage walk may be downloaded from the Horsley Heritage website at www.horsleyheritage.info by opening the section entitled 'Heritage Walks' and clicking on the 'Chown Houses Walk' document.

