

JAMES PHILPOT WITHAM, INVALID CARRIAGE MANUFACTURER.

James father came to the Island around 1880 from the London area and became the owner of nine river barges. However his sons, led by James the eldest, branched out into engineering. Their family home was at Pyle House, large premises that today are the offices of Chartered Accountants, Harrison Black. The brothers had working premises at Borough Hall garage, opposite what today is the County Hall, (but at the time was the Swan Hotel) as well as a shop that older residents will recall as later being the Medina Café cake shop. Further repair premises would have been found on Coppins Bridge so it can be seen they would not have been a business it was easy to ignore. The postcards I was given clearly show the range and also the quality of their products, that in the beginning were invalid carriages, for many were testimonials sent by satisfied clients from all over England, as far afield as Nottingham and Bishop Auckland.

James Philpot Witham was the driving force behind this short lived firm. Following an accident at school he was confined to a wheelchair for the remainder of his life. He never let this hold him back however and was in fact an intelligent youth and he developed a talent for writing articles for magazines before moving on to learn typing, something that his sisters continued to teach for many years after his death. James put his disability to good use as later he was instrumental in designing those self-propelled invalid carriages before moving on to motor cycles and sidecars. His disability made him aware of many of the details that might otherwise have been overlooked by an able bodied man. He was well supported by his brothers who included Ernest who following being called into the Army did service in India in the First World War. Sadly James was to die in 1922 at the age of just forty five but in those few short years in business he had left an indelible legacy.

The account of James funeral tells us much about the man. It was with a Mr. Dingwall that they brought out the first Dingwall-Witham invalid carriage that went on to gain not only a national but a world-wide reputation. It was later that he branched out into bicycle and motor cycle manufacture and maintenance. Even though he was disabled James never let this hold him back and he became well known throughout the Island, often to be seen in his invalid chair that he had fitted to a Douglas motor cycle with special controls. He was a member of the Isle of Wight Motor Cycle Club as well as being an enthusiastic photographer. He was buried in Fairlee cemetery and those attending his funeral included many of the town's foremost businessmen that included fellow engineer Mr. Bird Cheverton whose firm had made carriages for Queen Victoria. Members of the Pittis, Black, Blake and Fred Trim families attended, the latter becoming well known for his fruit and vegetable distribution business as well as Captain Brannon who represented the Motor Cycle Club. Also attending were members of the Trojans Athletic Club of which he had been a Vice President and, of course, his employees. Into a much too short a life this remarkable man crammed more than many who lived to be twice his age.

(Brian Greening)

Friends of Newport & Carisbrooke Cemeteries, <http://www.foncc.org.uk>