

Joseph Joel Ellis and Westmount

Martyn Webster

It was by and for a man named Joseph Joel Ellis that the mansion later known as Westmount set back in upwardly sloping grounds off the Folkestone Road, Dover was built in 1865. At the time it was called after him as Mount Ellis. He and his wife Marguerite were present at the laying of the foundation stone on 11th May 1865 in a ceremony presided over by Rev Raphael I. Cohen, the locally respected leader of Dover's then Jewish community. A vase was placed in the foundation stone hermetically sealed containing two Hebrew scrolls recording the occasion and coins of the realm. The Ellises lived but a short time at Mount Ellis and their magnificent home was eventually turned over to become Westmount College. It survived for 150 years, latterly becoming increasingly tumbledown, arsoned in 2007 and demolished in February 2016. Efforts to find the vase are, at the time of writing, undergoing, meanwhile plans are afoot to develop the site for regeneration housing development.

But who was this Joseph Joel Ellis?

He had been born Joseph Joel sometime between the years 1807 - 1816 into the sizeable Jewish community of the town of Krotoschin in Prussian Poland. This is now modern day Krotoszyn in the province of Poznan. He was a son of Isaiah, a merchant, and Pessa Joel who subsequently came to settle with their family in Bristol for forty years before moving on to Dublin, Ireland where they were buried in 1840 and 1848 respectively, their grave still surviving in the Ballybough Jewish Cemetery.



Westmount Before Demolition

"Joseph Frederick Joel" as he was named on his marriage certificate first came to the record in 1848 when, described as a jeweller, aged 32 years, resident and in business at 49 The Strand, London he was married on 13th September at 9 Calthorpe Street, St Pancras by the Chief Rabbi, Revd. Dr Nathan Marcus Adler, Marguerite Nathan, twelve years his junior. She was the daughter of Joseph Nathan, a Commission Agent, late of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil where she had been born. Contemporary business directories described the business at 49 The Strand as that of a dealer in plate, watches, jewellery and army accoutrements.

In the 1851 Census Joseph Joel was living with his wife Marguerite and their first born son Isidore aged 1 year old at 6 Onslow Square, Brompton, West London and described as a jeweller and diamond merchant.

On 31st October 1855 giving the addresses Brompton Hall and 58 Pall Mall, then having 5 children, Joseph Joel, described as a bill broker, having resided in England

"since he was 4 years old", was naturalized as a British subject.

In the 1861 Census he, his wife and all of their 7 children aged between 1 -11, were living at Brompton Hall (soon after demolished to make way for South Kensington Underground Station). He was described at this point as a banker.

On 19th August 1863 Joseph Joel changed his name by deed poll to Joseph Joel Ellis so that thereafter he, his wife and their children were known by the surname Ellis. It is possible that this name was chosen because Ellis Lane (now Phillipsburgh Avenue) in Fairview, Dublin was where many of Ireland's early Jewish settlers, perhaps including his parents, first lived.

It was at this time that Joseph Joel Ellis had fixed upon Dover to have his house built. It is unclear why he did this but one explanation might be that some of his children were at the Jewish school nearby run by the Revd. R.I. Cohen. Either that or he or his wife perhaps had some local family connexion in the small Jewish community of the town. We will probably never now know. All the same their stay would prove to be all but fleeting and the reasons for this are also elusive.

In the 1871 Census described as a landowner Joseph Joel Ellis with wife and their seven children were living at 102 Harley Street, London. The family cannot be found in the 1881 Census which gives the impression that they were probably out of the country at the time.

It is interesting to note that Joseph Joel Ellis was coy in describing his birthplace in the UK censuses. In 1851 and 1861 he stated he was born in Bristol (which is where he must have spent his childhood from age 4). Then in 1871 he stated he was born in Vienna, Austria, a naturalised

British subject. He must have had his own reasons for this purposeful decoy but his real birthplace of Krotoschin was revealed only at his own declaration in the naturalisation application in 1855 (now lodged in the National Archives).

Joseph Joel Ellis died on 10th July 1885 at 51 Portland Place, London leaving an estate worth £77,000. His will is on record as is an obituary in a contemporary edition of the Jewish Chronicle. His widow Marguerite lived on for a further 14 years and died intestate at 26 Oriental Place, Brighton, her estate of £3,500 being administered by her sons Isidore (colliery manager), Walter Lima (solicitor) and Albert Joel (barrister-at-law), all Ellises.

Husband and wife are buried at London's Brompton Jewish Cemetery where two large tombs mark their graves inscribed in Hebrew and English, in his case the inscription reads "Joseph Joel Ellis late Consul General for Persia who departed this life July 10th 1885 aged 78 years".

Throughout his life Joseph Joel Ellis had his fingers in many pies, was clearly very successful at whatever he put himself to and prospering from his Bohemian Jewish origins he made a lot of money in the process. Not least of which were his colliery and brick making enterprises in Leicestershire where between 1861 and 1865 he started up as owner of the collieries around what became known as Ellistown, named after him and subsequently managed for the rest of his life by his eldest son Isidore. Precisely what motivated this venture so well out of London is also still tantalisingly unknown.

To his many faceted life must also be added that Joseph Joel Ellis had been Honorary Colonel in the 1st Tower Hamlets Artillery Volunteer Corps

(resigned 1873) and had been known to one and all as "the colonel" not to mention his extraordinary tomb inscription "Consul General for Persia". No more illuminating records and reasons for these disparate facets have yet been traced.

His descendants today are widespread and feature well in online family history discussions.

The Ellis family papers are deposited at the Leicestershire Record Office. This potted biography has been drawn from UK Census returns, probate records, National Archives and online family history discussion threads, all freely and publicly accessible. No photograph or painting of him has yet been found.

N.B. Mount Ellis - Westmount

The present main building on the site, is the original Mount Ellis, the brick four-storied mansion of Joseph Ellis referred to earlier and which R.I. Cohen opened in 1865.

Despite the fact that its grandeur was a little decayed, it would have been a substantial and imposing house in its day, befitting a wealthy businessman. The foundation stone that R.I. Cohen helped to lay, could still be found in an outer

buttress wall on the right hand side of the property, near to the frontage. It is below the immediate ground level as part of the lower ground floor. The inscription is much eroded but one can just make out 'LAID [BY] J J ELLIS..' but the rest is almost perished. It seems that after Ellis' death the building reverted back to educational use. By 1898 'Mount Ellis' had become 'Westmount' and was the junior branch of Dover College.

As to Cohen's school, it lay approximately lengthways, across the north-south axis of right-hand side of the present site of West Mount, with its frontage closer to the road than the present Westmount. It consisted of a main building to the front, with a small extension wing to the east, widening the frontage, and with an annex laying across to the rear. There was according to the OS maps, a tree-lined garden to the front, and a play-ground at the left-hand rear corner of the site. The buildings were considerable larger than the other houses in the vicinity as might be expected with well in excess of 50 residents and pupils at the school.

Editor's note

Hopefully by the time the Westmount article appears, the hermetically sealed vase in the foundation stone might have been found!



Westmount Site from Folkestone Road



Remains of Westmount