

## Merlewood

Merlewood, situated between Grange and Lindale and now an establishment of the Holiday Property Bond Company, was originally built in the 1850s as a retirement home for Alfred Binyon and his family. Alfred laid the foundation stone on Thursday 19 May 1853 in the company of his wife Lucy and their friends. The Lancaster Borough Band, which by chance was on tour in the area, was prevailed upon to grace the occasion by playing the National Anthem and other appropriate tunes.



The house was designed by George Webster, of the firm of architects then known as Thompson & Webster based in Kendal. George had retired from the business in 1846 and was living at Eller How above Lindale, but had produced the design 'to oblige a neighbour', leaving the constructive part to his partner Miles Thompson. It was built of Urswick limestone, most probably from Eden Mount Quarry in Grange. The house was described thus: *on the ground floor, four spacious entertaining rooms, housekeeper's room, excellent kitchens, servants' hall, butler's pantry, laundry, wash house, &c; and on the first floor, eight principal and five other bedrooms, bathroom, &c. The attics are spacious and convenient; the outbuildings include excellent carriage house, four and two-stalled stables, loose box, and harness room, with commodious residence for a coachman over part of the same.* Richard Carradus Shaw, who later became an architect and designed several fine buildings in Kendal, submitted an estimate for painting Merlewood, including 19 transoms @ 2/3d each.



Alfred Binyon had been a partner in Thomas Hoyle and Sons, a firm of calico printers in Manchester, founded by his wife's grandfather in 1788. Unfortunately Alfred did not enjoy a long retirement – his wife Lucy had died in November 1853 whilst the family were on holiday in the Pyrenees, and he died at

Merlewood on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1856 and was buried in the churchyard at Lindale. Alfred had gathered together a valuable collection of hothouse and greenhouse plants, foreign ferns and mosses in the conservatory which was accessible by a verandah from the house.

Merlewood then passed out of the hands of the Binyon family, and was bought by Mrs Eliza Horrocks of Preston. She was the sister of Thomas Miller junior who was by then the sole proprietor of Horrockses, Miller and Company, cotton manufacturers, with ten mills in and around Preston employing over 3,000 operatives and producing about 230 miles of cotton cloth every week. Mrs Horrocks soon began to extend her new estate, acquiring the adjacent Blawith Farm, rebuilding the farmhouse on a site nearer the road and re-naming it Merlewood Farm in 1862.

Mrs Horrocks died at Merlewood in 1872, and the house was let for some three years. It was then purchased by Mrs Horrocks's nephew William Pitt Miller, who had already inherited from his father an estate at Thistleton in the Fylde. In 1875 he married Emily Mary Schultz, daughter of a stock-broker in Liverpool, and Merlewood became their main residence. Some alterations were made in 1881 when a tower was added to provide additional bedrooms for children and servants. A bay window was added to the right-hand gable on the south front, and a fireplace inserted in the downstairs room. This contains decorative coloured tiles either side of the fire grate.

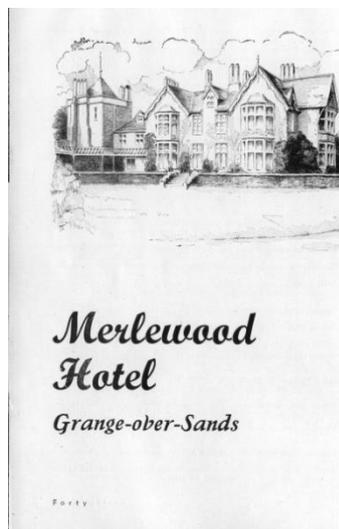


The census report of 1881 reveals that there were nine servants living in the house, the coachman and his family occupied rooms over the coach house, and the gardener and his family lived in the lodge. A number of neighbouring houses – Slack House, Yewtree Cottage and Hazel Bank – were purchased in order to accommodate the butler, George Bateman, other servants and a laundry.

William Pitt Miller and his wife were very supportive of events and societies in both Grange and Lindale. The first Conservative Ball ever held at Lindale was given in the National School in 1889 when the room was decorated with ornamental plants from the conservatories at Merlewood, and in the same year the children attending the school were invited to tea at Merlewood followed by games and races. William Pitt Miller was a member of the Lancashire & Cheshire Antiquarian Society, and took great interest in the excavation of a cave which had been discovered in the limestone cliff immediately below Merlewood, sending in one of his boys to reach its furthest extremity. He frequently visited his estate at Thistleton, and it was there whilst on a shooting trip that he contracted pneumonia and died in November 1893 aged 44.

Mrs Miller was in her seventy-ninth year when she died at Merlewood in 1930, having lived there for fifty-five years, thirty seven of them as a widow. The Merlewood Estate was then offered for sale by auction in 1931, when it was described thus: *This Valuable Freehold Estate comprises the excellent stonebuilt and slated Residence of "Merlewood", with Gardens and Grounds, Conservatories, Garages and Outbuildings, Entrance Lodge, Farm Lands, Farmhouse and Buildings, Plantations, The Slack House, Cottages and Laundry, with a total area of about 138 acres.* The house was sold as Lot 1 – it contained *Entrance and Inner Halls, four large Reception Rooms, with Billiard Room, Kitchens, Scullery, Pantries, Larders, Butler's Pantry, Housekeeper's Room, Servants' Hall Lavatories, &c on ground floor, with 20 Bed and Dressing-rooms, Bathroom, &c above. It is cellared and all in excellent repair and condition, and is ideal either as a Private Residence or as a Hotel, School, Nursing and Convalescent Home, or similar Institution.*

It eventually became the first of these options, opening as the Merlewood Hotel in 1938:



*The Hotel is well appointed in its own grounds of 37 acres facing south; open view of the bay, off Windermere Road. Central heating throughout, hot and cold running water in all bedrooms and all beds fitted with Vi-spring mattresses. A first-class Hotel with own tennis court, putting green, bowling green, full-size billiards table in spacious room, table tennis, etc. Lovely laid-out gardens with exquisite walks in own woods.*

Two years later it was requisitioned by the War Office and used as a training centre by the Army. It reopened in 1947 continuing as a hotel until 1951 when it was bought by the Nature Conservancy and converted into laboratories for scientific studies on moorland and woodland vegetation and soils. In 2003 the decision was taken to move to Lancaster University, and Merlewood was bought by the Holiday Property Bond Company.

*John Beckett*