

Tamworth

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The History of Drayton Manor Leisure Park by Fred Bromwich



Preserving the Past, Recording the Present
Safeguarding the Future



Fred Bromwich

Midlands journalist Fred Bromwich is vice-chairman of [Birmingham Press Club](#), the oldest Press Club in the world. A former business editor of The Birmingham Post and ex-editor of a Birmingham-based business/finance magazine, he is also a former assistant director of a leading financial PR consultancy. He has also been a director of City 2000, the Birmingham lobby group which represented the professional and financial services sector.

This is not Fred's first writing on Drayton Manor Leisure Park. In 2006 he authored "*Drayton Manor, George and Vera Bryan's Memories of a Family Fun Park*" for the Bryan family. We have a review of this at the end of this book.



Tamworth Heritage Magazine

This Tamworth Heritage Magazine Special 02 has been produced by Tamworth Heritage Magazine with Fred Bromwich linking together the 2 part article he wrote for the Magazine in 2024

Tamworth Heritage Magazine covers all and any history and heritage from in and around Tamworth. That is Tamworth Staffordshire, but we maintain links to the other four Tamworth's around the world.

A lot of the things covered in Tamworth Heritage Magazine are about the "ordinary" people as much as notable names. This hopefully fills in the many blanks between the dates of battles, kings and MP's. Including people whose names and AKA's are so ephemeral that we don't really know who they were... outside the name they used at the time.

[Tamworth Heritage Magazine](#) works with several Tamworth [history](#), and [genealogy](#) groups but we welcome content from any source if it has a link to the Tamworth area or its people. [The magazine is Free to download and read.](#)

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The History of Drayton Manor Leisure Park by Fred Bromwich

Seventy-four years ago this Easter, a Tamworth man's vision of creating one of the country's leading inland leisure attractions started to become more than just a dream. Here, journalist Fred Bromwich traces the history of Drayton Manor Resort and its founder, George Bryan, a pioneer of the British theme park.

A FAVOURITE SINCE THE FIFTIES

Much-loved Drayton Manor Resort has been a favourite leisure destination of families ever since it first opened in time for the Easter holiday in 1950. And what better time could there have been to welcome the public through its gates?

It was a definite pick-me-up as Britain emerged from the shadows of World War II – especially as just two months later motorists rejoiced at the end of petrol rationing! Fuel restrictions had been imposed in 1939 at the outbreak of hostilities and rationing in battered Britain was not entirely lifted until 1954.

All these years later, I can still recall the thrill of driving off with my parents to visit the park alongside other families who had suddenly discovered a new-found sense of freedom after ripping up their fuel coupons. Not that I can remember venturing into any cafeteria, where a cold meat luncheon was on

Above George, Vera and Children the early days. [Bryan Family Archive](#)

sale for about 3s (15p). Like many others at the time, we just tucked into a picnic on the grass, sitting alongside Dad's Ford Anglia – and looking forward to splashing about in the paddling pool and having a ride on the "snake-train." Little did I imagine that 60 years later I'd be partying with my own grandchildren and great-grandchildren – not just a picnic this time, but (as a birthday treat) enjoying the delights of a VIP room in Thomas Land before they raced off to experience white-knuckle rides and a soaking on Splash Canyon (beats a paddling pool any day). How times change!



The Snake Ride 1950s
[Tamworth Digital Archive](#)

Decades after that first visit, however, while working as business editor of The Birmingham Post, I met George Bryan, who co-founded the theme park with his wife, Vera, and discovered for myself just how remarkable a successful entrepreneur he was. Through his business talents, and a dedication to help those less fortunate than himself, George became an admired figure in the West Midlands, richly deserving the OBE that was bestowed upon him in 2004.

It was with much pleasure that I was able to spend many a happy hour with him and Vera discussing and writing "Memories of a Family Fun Park" – the book that charted the history of Drayton Manor and the Bryan's entrepreneurial journey.

Yet when George and Vera Bryan opened Drayton Manor in 1950 their ideals and vision were the same as those of later generations of Bryans – to offer visitors a fun-packed day of excitement at an affordable price. And to continually challenge themselves to improve the park's visitor experience.

In the unsophisticated 1950s, youngsters were happy enough to build castles in a sandpit, pretend they were cowboys while taking a pony ride – or imagine they were on the high seas instead of being in a children's boat on a very shallow pool.

Parents could "gamble" the odd penny or two on coin slot machines such as The Clock where, for 1d, they would spin the hands on the dial and hope for a pay-out of a few pence more. I doubt whether few people knew then that such machines were the inventions of George's father, [William E Bryan](#) – a remarkable engineer who himself became a leading figure in the amusement industry.

Not only did he invent, design, manufacture and supply the coin-operated machines ([inventing almost 50 of them in total](#)), which became popular attractions on seaside piers and street-corner amusement arcades, but he also introduced a range of wind-driven toys, marketed as **Bryan's Breezy Toys**. More information can be found here <http://www.melright.com/bryans/history.htm>

Some of the machines can still be found in use today in arcades up and down the country.

No wonder that George regarded his father as King of the Penny Arcade!

Today, with fabulous attractions such as Thomas Land, the 'World of Imagination' is still very much part of the appeal of Drayton Manor. Thrill-seekers may have taken themselves to new heights with major roller-coasters and crowd-pulling, stomach-churning rides but essentially the theme park remains family-focused.

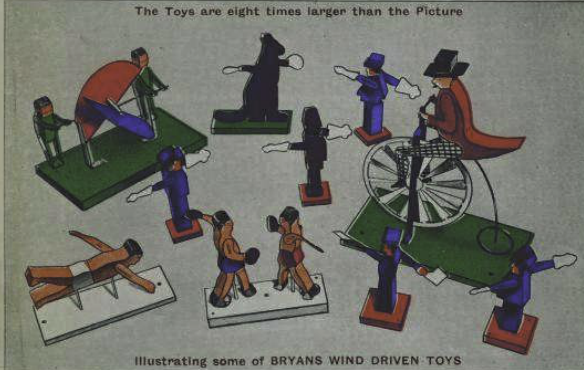
To date, the theme park extends over 280 acres but when George and Vera acquired Drayton Manor in 1949 for around £12,000 the site covered just 80 acres.



The estate, which had been occupied by the Army during the war, resembled a giant tip with 17 derelict army huts, overgrown pastureland and huge mounds of rubbish.

BRYANS BREEZY TOYS

The Toys are eight times larger than the Picture



Illustrating some of BRYANS WIND DRIVEN TOYS

The range of toys pictured above are working models which perform in a life-like and entertaining manner when exposed to a wind – or draught from a fan.

They are Engineer designed, strongly and well constructed, brightly coloured and they appeal to all ages.

These Wind Driven Toys are also available in larger sizes for display and advertising purposes.

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Site clearance 1950s
Tamworth Digital Archive



But after six-months of back-breaking hard work, George and his gang of helpers, were ready to open to the public – although facilities were restricted to one tiny restaurant, one tea room, three hand-operated rides, half-a-dozen rowing boats, some pedal cars and a set of second-hand dodgem cars. But the ‘magic’ was already there – and it’s still there today, though



The first rides 1950s
Tamworth Digital Archive

the resort is no longer owned by the Bryan family (having been acquired by the Looping Group in 2020), who are acknowledged as having been vital ambassadors for regional tourism and key supporters of Staffordshire, Heart of England tourism and a raft of local and national charities.

When the theme park, now re-badged as a resort, first opened admission was 6d (2.5p in today’s money) and half price for children. People were encouraged to turn up and “picnic-in-the-park” – and fleets of coaches brought families from Birmingham, nearby Tamworth and other parts of Staffordshire, who were all in search of a relaxing day in the countryside. Today, the coach parties still come in their

droves to visit an attraction that became one of the five largest theme parks in the UK. Sadly, from the visitor’s point of view, admission charges have increased somewhat. However, “offers” are always available on-line – and for day-long value, it’s still one of the best deals around.

But back to the start. Both George and Vera served their leisure industry “apprenticeship” at California-in-England, a 70-acre estate in Berkshire, which was owned by Vera’s father, Alfred Cartlidge.

The Pavilion: California-in-England.
Bryan Family Archive



After the Great War, Mr Cartlidge manufactured 14-seater motor coaches and organised trips to the South Coast. But when Parliament passed an Act in 1929 prohibiting the use of coaches on the roads over a certain width that was it. All of Mr Cartlidge’s coaches were too wide – so he sold them off to a business in Jersey and then went off to develop his country amusement park!

Vera, who had left school at the age of 14, first had the task of helping with the teas, serving visitors by the lake but eventually took over the running of the tea shop, with all the responsibilities that that involved.



The first coach park
Tamworth Digital Archive

Years later, when World War Two broke out, Vera donned bib-and-brace overalls and spent five years working alongside her father (who had closed the pleasure park and converted his restaurant into a factory manufacturing vital parts for aircraft) – much of the time as an acetylene welder!

As for George, at the age of 19 he volunteered for the Army, joining the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, later serving with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. While serving with REME at a base near California-in-England he attended a dance in the Sgt's Mess and it was there that he met Vera – admitting that he later took dancing lessons so he could meet her again.



George in Egypt : 1942
Bryan Family Archive

During the two years or so that George spent at California-in-England he and the Cartlidge family created a ballroom, restaurant, opened up the lake for swimming and boating and constructed a paddling pool. It was with a sense of pride that George built the park's first "snake train," which weaved its way around the picturesque lakeside to the constant delight of visiting families.

With such experience under their belts, it was little wonder that George and Vera decided that they

The couple married the same year – 1942 – while



George and Vera's Wedding Day: 1942
Bryan Family Archive

George was on embarkation leave waiting to go to Egypt. Honeymoon was a five-day stay in London, while the "wedding feast" saw them consume a large tin of Danish gammon which Vera's father had somehow managed to save.

After the war George returned to California-in-England to help Vera and his father-in-law to re-establish the pleasure park business, settling down to home life in a wooden holiday bungalow and then in a flat above the shops which had been constructed in the park. It was there that their son, Colin (who would later follow in his father's footsteps to become chief executive and chairman of Drayton Manor) was born.

would like to run their own enterprise. The opportunity came along when George saw an advertisement in a trade journal which said that the derelict Peel Estate in Staffordshire was up for sale. As a Midlander, George was well aware of the estate's connections to one of Britain's most famous families. In fact, Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel was one of the most important men in the land in the 19th century and, of course, his achievements – including the introduction of the London "Bobby" - live on today through the activities of the Metropolitan Police.

Drayton Manor itself was bought by the 1st Baronet in 1790 who, later, demolished the old Tudor property and replaced it with a square Georgian mansion. However, his son, the Prime



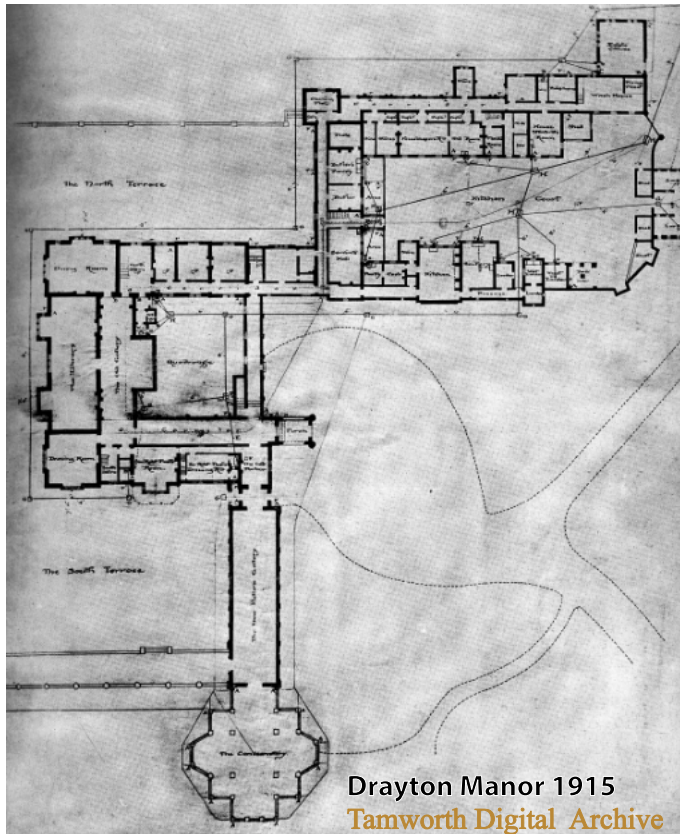
Pool at California-in-England.
Bryan Family Archive



Drayton Manor 1915
 Tamworth Digital Archive

Minister, did not think it was grand enough and replaced it with his own impressive house, which was built in the 1830s. Sadly, the house is no more, having been demolished in 1926, seven years after the Sir Robert Peel family went bankrupt.

Visitors today can still see tangible evidence of her visit to Drayton Manor; in fact most families follow in Queen Victoria's footsteps when they drive over a bridge – straddling one of the brooks – which was specially built for the occasion, as was a road leading from the railway station.



Drayton Manor 1915
 Tamworth Digital Archive

Although the manor itself is no longer standing, there is one reminder of what was such a superb residence – the Clock Tower and the Estate Office.

It was with funding from his family and his in-laws, that George secured 80-acres of land in October 1949 and, in spite of all the odds, he and Vera opened the park to the public at Easter 1950. For the next ten years, he and Vera lived in a flat above the old Estate Office - and "living above the shop" inevitably meant that they worked through the night as well. It was there that the couple's other two children, Jane and Andrew, were born.

To say it took a lot of back-breaking hard work to get everything shipshape for the public is a massive under-statement. George and his gang of workmen toiled for months, clearing lakes and watercourses of silt and sludge, laying down roadways, restoring acres of grassland and removing 4ft high brambles, mounds of rubbish and dismantling 16 old army huts.

In its heyday it had entertained royalty and some of the most important people in the land, including the Duke of Wellington and William Gladstone, both of whom were in Peel's 1841 government. Another visitor was the deposed King Louis-Phillippe of France. However, perhaps the visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1843 was the most memorable.

When the park eventually opened, Tamworth and Staffordshire still had something like five working collieries and there were dozens more factories in north Birmingham than there are now. So you can understand why so many of the men who were engaged in such hard-working environments just wanted to get out "in the fresh air" at the week-ends.

Of course, Birmingham had its own “playgrounds” such as the Lickey Hills and Sutton Park. But George knew that Sutton Park only ever served tea in a marquee – and he was confident of providing families with much more than that.

The first organised coach party to visit Drayton Manor was a group from Aston Working Men’s Club in Birmingham. George recalled the visit some years later when he was interviewed on BBC Radio WM by historian Carl Chinn – and he said if anyone was listening who might have been on that particular trip they could phone the studio and he would give each of them a family ticket. Before the end of the programme at least five people had responded.

Back in the days when Drayton Manor opened as an inland pleasure resort England was still in the Land of Make-Do-and-Mend as Britain struggled to recover after World War II. George found that it was almost impossible to buy anything new – and he recalled straightening out bent nails so they could be recycled, buying second-hand frying pans (one could fry 28 eggs at a time) and travelling to Blackpool to purchase a second-hand doughnut making machine.

When the park did open, it had one tiny restaurant, one tearoom, three hand-operated rides, half a dozen rowing boats, some pedal cars and a set of second-hand dodgem cars that George purchased in Middlesbrough for £500 after seeing an advertisement in World’s Fair, the “bible” of the leisure industry.

George and Vera hadn’t even started to imagine the exciting, spectacular rides of today but back then, when Drayton was more like a park with a small funfair than the mega-attraction it is now, families, for the most part, were just happy to bring along a picnic and relax in the grounds.

Admission cost 6d in old money (2.5p today) – half price for children. But parties were allowed in for free if they bought a meal in the tearoom, where Vera and her band of ladies had lined up huge urns of tea. Hi-tech in those days was a machine that buttered and sliced a 4lb loaf of bread (purchased from Wicksteed Park in Kettering)– equipment that proved a real boon as more and more visitors decided to splash out on sandwiches and afternoon teas rather than bring their own picnics.

As Drayton Manor grew, so did the workforce – and George always had a policy of recruiting its staff from the local community. Its workforce became an extended “family” with loyalty the name of the game. In later years, George admitted he had lost count of the number of long service awards he had distributed.

A number of ex-miners were employed in the early days – all of them who jumped at the chance of an “open-air” existence after years of working “down the pit.” One such man was Geoff Ingram, who had been working as an electrician at a local colliery when George first met him.

Geoff became foreman at Drayton Manor. Superb at DIY with a gift for being able to make, or do, just about anything, George found his support invaluable. Geoff helped build some of the early funfair rides, including the popular “snake train” – so called because of the way it weaved its way around the grounds. George made the carriages from ex-landing craft and other Army surplus, while the axles came from bomb-carrying equipment.

Eventually Geoff left Drayton Manor to help Molly Banham start up Twycross Zoo – itself now very much a leading visitor attraction. In the late 1950s-



Drayton Manor 1950s
Tamworth Digital Archive



Drayton Manor 1950s
Tamworth Digital Archive

early 1960s, Molly's performing chimps were a massive attraction at Drayton Manor, eventually becoming famous as the "stars" of the PG Tips television commercials.

It wasn't long before George and Vera could see that Drayton Manor was becoming a very popular attraction with families living within the Birmingham and Tamworth areas – and as time progressed they were soon serving 2,000 teas every Saturday. They realised it had the potential to develop into a playground for the whole of the Midlands and, maybe, even beyond.

At first, they didn't really know how to describe themselves, after all, tourism, as such, in the UK had hardly been "invented." So they settled for being an "inland pleasure resort" before the industry evolved and Drayton became a "theme park."

With increased attendances, George decided to acquire some children's paddle boats and a number of rowing boats – which meant that he and his team had to dig out a pool, largely by hand shovel. A roller skating rink followed and so did the opening up of a second lake where visitors enjoyed time in motor driven hire boats. Donkey rides were introduced for children and so were Punch & Judy shows as the public suddenly found themselves demanding more and more.

In 1954, Drayton Manor opened its first self-service cafeteria - then, a somewhat rarity. In fact, it was such an innovation that canteen staff

couldn't quite get used to the idea that they no longer had to wait on people! Five years later, George linked up with Jim Shipley, a member of one of Britain's great fairground families, who took a lease to run the amusements arcade – a move which allowed George to concentrate on the expansion of Drayton Manor as a whole.

Jim even introduced bingo to Drayton Manor and as his arcade brought in more and more visitors the whole place was buzzing, with more than 6,000 visitors flocking through the gates on Bank Holidays.

It wasn't until the end of the 1950s, however, that the park was able to significantly increase its facilities, purchasing 13 new rides, one of which, a 19th century-built carousel is still going strong today.

The park also invested in a new chairlift (opened by Miss Great Britain), which cost £27,000 to buy and install. But George found himself paying an unexpected additional cost of several hundreds of pounds. Those who were airborne when the chairlift – now a thing of the past – was in full swing had a bird's eye view of the gents' urinals, which were then open-topped! Hence the unexpected expenditure on a hurriedly erected roof for the toilet block.

Next came a Jungle Cruise – and 6,000 people turned up to see it officially opened by John Noakes of TV's Blue Peter fame.

TOWER SUITE ENTRANCE



The park took a further step forward in 1960 when it redeveloped the tearoom into a ballroom and added the fully-licensed Tower Lounge. Ten years later the Hamilton Suite opened however the 70s was not a particularly happy decade and it was one that put Drayton Manor severely to the test. An OPEC price war saw an end to party group catering, there were strikes, power cuts and countless other problems and it was not until the early 80s that the economy really started to move again.

From teas and tug-of-war competitions on the lawn the park had diversified into holding evening functions, dances, wedding receptions, anniversary parties and annual dinners. And that meant that big band names of the day became popular attractions. For those who can still remember, they included the likes of Victor Sylvester (he always liked egg-and-chips for his meal), Edmundo Ross, Joe Loss, Kenny Ball and Acker Bilk, to name but a few.

The era of the big rides, whose magnetic appeal attracts legions of thrill-seekers from all over the country, came along in the 1960s. The park's first major ride, the Chairlift, opened in 1964, its installation heralding the start of an expansion phase which by the 1980s had witnessed a doubling in size of Drayton Manor. Between 1990-2005 the park's investment in new rides and other attractions was in excess of £30 million, as well as annually spending £800,000 on essential maintenance.

Its first proper white-knuckle ride was the log flume, which opened in 1981 but this was eventually replaced in 1999 with the more exciting Stormforce 10 – a wet-knuckle ride and the country's first reverse chute water coaster. Constructed at a cost of £3 million, it won a top leisure industry award as Best New European



Drayton Manor 1960s Tamworth Digital Archive

Attraction – just one more accolade to add to the numerous awards bestowed on the park over the years.

It was 1994, however, that turned out to be a milestone year. That was when the park launched the £4.2 million Shockwave, Europe's only stand-up roller coaster – it was an instant success and became the darling of the Roller Coaster Club of Great Britain, which voted it the Best Stand-Up Roller Coaster in the World.

More rides followed: Apocalypse, Pandemonium and G Force, launched in the summer of 2005 by chart-topping "popera" group, G4, who delighted the crowds with a rendition of "My Way" before becoming the first people to brave the new-look ride. The same year the park hosted one of its biggest events – a sell-out VE Day 60th anniversary celebration attended by over 5,000 people. Nostalgia ruled that day, with the sounds of Glenn Miller, marching bands, a spectacular firework display and a Spitfire fly-past.

But even as the theme part developed its "big rides" feel, George and Vera knew full well that continuing to provide less scary attractions, such as the Jolly Roger family boat ride, Excalibur – A Dragon's Tale and a 350-seater theatre, would enable them to provide the perfect mix, catering for both families (toddlers to grandparents) and thrill-seekers alike.

A firm family favourite ever since its opening in 1957 has been the park's 15-acre zoo with its collection of over 100 different species ranging from birds of prey to big cats and a fascinating Reptile House.

For those of us with long memories, perhaps you might recall the late John Foden, who was curator at the zoo for about 20 years. John was a remarkable man who during his career also worked for Dudley Zoo and was the author of a number of books on herpetology. In addition, he was a founder member of the International Herpetological Society and acted as a consultant at Birmingham and Heathrow Airports, working with Customs & Excise officials to rescue rare endangered species which were illegally imported into Britain.

As an expert in his field (John was the first person in the country to breed golden pythons in captivity) he was also at the forefront of providing snake serum to hospitals and indeed helped to start a serum bank at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine to combat the effects of snake bites.

Almost inevitably, after years of working with venomous snakes, one day John was bitten. John then cut his own wrist, calmly walked into the offices and phoned for medical attention. That's when the drama really started. For the serum that was needed for John's injection was in London - and it had to be flown by Phantom jet to Birmingham before being driven under police escort to Drayton Manor. Fortunately, John survived!

Sadly, John died in 2000 at the relatively early age of 52 after a two-year battle with cancer. So well was he regarded by the community that several hundred people attended his funeral service at St Peter's Church, Drayton Bassett.

One of the reasons why George decided to open the zoo in the first place was that it should be "educational" and it was with this in mind that the zoo established its own special "learning centre" with a dedicated Education Officer and a programme of tailor-made education packages for schoolchildren.

George and Vera were passionate in their belief to "give something back" and their regard for the local community and the welfare of those on their ever-increasing payroll, coupled with the respect that was shown to them in return, cemented a "family" relationship that endured for years.

Two years after moving to Drayton, George became a member of Tamworth Round Table (while Vera joined the Ladies Circle), later

joining Rotary and, in 1969, when he became president helped conceive the idea of an annual Kids Day Out at Drayton Manor – an initiative which involved 500 Rotarian's giving up their day to help entertain 1,500 disadvantaged children.

The same year, service to the community took George in another direction and he was asked to join a Hospital Management Committee to act as a lay manager for hospitals in Tamworth, Lichfield, Sutton Coldfield and Erdington. George served on the committee for four years during which time he developed a strong interest in the mental health sector; a commitment which ultimately resulted in George helping to form a new type of "watch-dog" group, known as Community Health Councils.



St Giles Hospice
Tamworth Digital Archive

George was elected as CHC chairman and through that role he met the Rev Paul Brothwell of Whittington Church. One day he told George that the vicarage was going up for sale and his wish was that there was some way the property could be converted into a hospice. The idea eventually became a reality with George being one of a seven-strong group which helped found St Giles Hospice – still providing an invaluable service more than 40 years later.



St Giles Hospice
Tamworth Digital Archive

And it was with a sense of great pride that George hosted a special ceremony at Drayton Manor in 2004 when the Lord Lieutenant of Staffordshire presented the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service to St Giles Hospice volunteers. It was also in 2004 that George was awarded an OBE for services rendered to tourism.

George also served on the Burton-on-Trent-based South East Staffordshire Health Authority, which gave him another opportunity to get involved with mental health.

Altogether, George spent many years serving on hospital committees but it was in 1985 that he experienced one of his proudest moments, and one that was to last in his memory for ever. That was when he was called upon to officially open a 28-bedded mental wing at the Sir Robert Peel Hospital which was named after himself. Sadly, the George Bryan Centre, which provided medical treatment to people with mental health issues, was destroyed by a huge fire in 2019 after an arson attack.



At the age of 75, George stepped down from being a Tax Commissioner – a duty he performed for 21 years, sitting on a tribunal once a month helping taxpayers solve whatever differences they had with the Inland Revenue. He relished the time he spent there because, as he said, it was all about helping “real people with real problems.”

As for Vera, after her voluntary work with the Ladies Circle and Inner Wheel friendship organisations, she memorably undertook significant charity work, with the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) being one of the organisations nearest and dearest to her heart; enjoying a connection which went back to her childhood days when she stood with a collection box, cajoling the public to give a few pence in order to support the lifeboat men.



For many years, visitors to the park also helped to fund-raise for the RNLI – for George's son, Colin, who took over as chief executive in 1987, negotiated an agreement with the charity that it would receive 1p every time someone took a ride on Stormforce 10, one of Drayton's most popular attractions. In 2004, when Vera was 86, she “launched” the “Drayton Manor Lifeboat” in a ceremony at the park – the culmination of an exercise which raised a grand total of £75,000.

However, as the lifeboat was made of rubber she couldn't break the traditional bottle of champagne over its bows, so she had to pour the bubbly over the vessel instead!

Video Interview with Colin . Click link or picture <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqluhIcrMOo>



George, William, Colin Bryan
and Helen Pawley **Bryan Family Archive**



Loved by families, the running of Drayton Manor was very much a family affair in itself. When George was appointed as chairman, his son Colin stepped up to become chief executive; daughter Jane acted as company secretary and her husband, Richard Pawley, the park's operations director, stayed at Drayton for 27 years before branching out on his own. Richard, a leading figure in leisure development, and Colin were instrumental in creating the era of new rides at the park.

Edward and Helen - Jane and Richard's children - also had senior roles in the organisation, as indeed did Colin's sons, George and William,

who later would become the family's third-generation managing director.

By the time Drayton Manor celebrated its Diamond Anniversary in 2010, a million visitors a year were pouring through its gates - - and for the fourth time it was being judged the Best UK Attraction for Children by readers of the Group Leisure magazine; just one of the many awards that would win over the years. It was a year when the park also entered a spectacular new phase of its development- one which was to see the commencement of work on of the park's piece de resistance, a £15 million 150-bedroom hotel. The project would initially create 40 full-time and 30 part-time jobs.

George and Vera
Bryan Family Archive



For Colin Bryan it was a far cry from the days of 60 years ago when his parents opened Drayton Manor - and when he was a toddler trundling around a toy wheelbarrow and pretending to help the builders!

Complete with conference and banqueting facilities for corporate clients, the hotel heralded in an exciting new era for the park, taking it further up the top league of UK

leisure destinations. Families especially loved its Thomas the Tank Engine themed-rooms, reflecting the fame of Thomas Land, the enormously popular attraction which opened at Drayton Manor in 2008.

Thomas Land – the only one in Europe – represented a major investment, with £7.5 million being pumped into the project. Right from day one, when an extra- special guest, a six-year old boy from Sutton Coldfield by the name of Thomas Land, attended the official opening, the attraction has proved to be one of the most popular crowd-pullers in the Midlands.

It was with a sense of great loss to the community that George and Vera both passed away within a month of each other. George, who was an inspiration to those he met with his passion and humility, died at his home on 20 September 2013 at the age of 92, while Vera died on 16 October aged 96. Only the year before they had celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary.

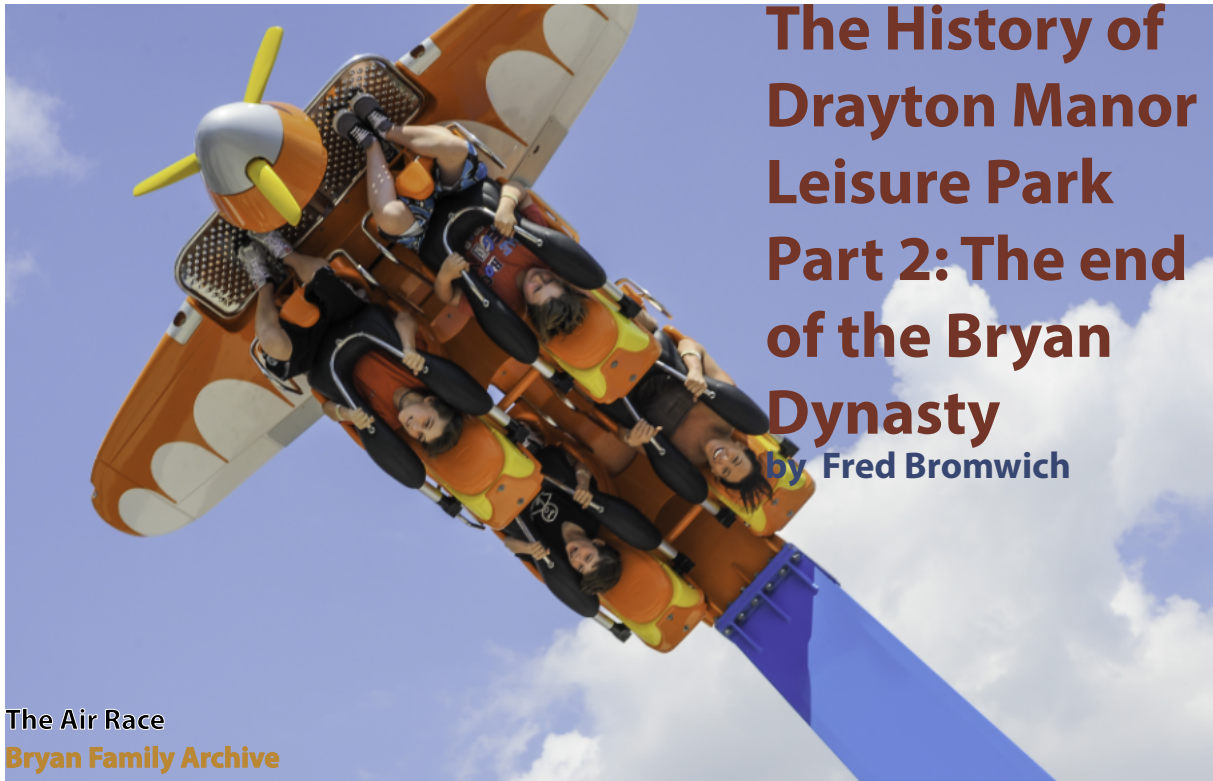
Hundreds of people attended their funeral services, both of which were held at St Editha's Church, Tamworth.



Parachute Ride 1960s
Tamworth Digital Archive

Roller coaster Club of Great Britain at Drayton Manor Park
Bryan Family Archive





The History of Drayton Manor Leisure Park Part 2: The end of the Bryan Dynasty

by Fred Bromwich

The Air Race
Bryan Family Archive

Seventy years of Drayton Manor Theme Park being in family ownership ended when it was acquired by an overseas operator. Here Fred Bromwich reviews the last few years of the popular leisure resort before it was taken over.

Since 2020, Drayton Manor Theme Park has been owned by one of Europe’s leading leisure operators – the French-owned Looping Group, whose 15 attractions across eight European countries lure in more than 6.2 million visitors every year.

Not that the Group was a stranger to the UK, for it already owned the West Midlands Safari Park in Worcestershire and Pleasurewood Hills, located near Lowestoft on the east coast. But what Looping’s further involvement in the UK leisure sector signalled was an end to a family dynasty which had created and developed Drayton Manor since 1950.

George Bryan, and his wife Vera (both of whom died in 2014 after a marriage lasting 71 years) founded Drayton Manor

Theme Park, turning the derelict Peel Estate into a family-friendly attraction which is now spread over 280 acres.

Today, incredibly life-like bronze busts of George and Vera, created by internationally-renowned Staffordshire artist Peter Walker, are located in the park as a lasting legacy to the co-founders of Drayton Manor.

It was their son, Colin, who stepped up to become chief executive in 1987 when George took over the role of chairman. In turn, Colin



George Bryan, William Bryan, Colin Bryan and Helen Pawley
Bryan Family Archive

would eventually become chairman and it was his son, William, who was managing director at the time of Looping's acquisition.

William, who heralded the move as an "exciting and positive new chapter" for the park and welcomed Looping's "commitment towards a very ambitious investment plan," relinquished his role two years later, ending the family's long-standing relationship with what had become one of the top inland leisure destinations in England.

William was originally appointed managing director in 2015 and had acted as Colin's deputy after being identified as his successor in 2013.

But to go back a few years.....

Before the take-over, Drayton Manor was a multi-award winning attraction (and it is still winning accolades today), renowned as an extraordinary success story and being visited by more than a million visitors a year.



In fact, in 2016 it achieved a magnificent milestone welcoming the 50th million visitor since opening its doors to the public at Easter 1950 and winning a clutch of awards including "gold" for Staffordshire's Best Tourism Launch of the Year for the unveiling of its Thomas Land extension.



However, as I will relate in due course, disaster and tragedy, would take their toll in the run-up to the acquisition.

Under Colin's stewardship the foundations of the business created by his visionary parents became the platform for further growth and, in turn, his vast experience and sector knowledge ultimately helped his sons, William and George, and niece Helen, to take their place as next-generation directors of the park.

To say that Colin was immensely proud of the park's success is an understatement; more so in the light of it being a family business. Indeed, from his parent's dream of creating somewhere magical for people to visit after the war, to becoming a top inland leisure resort, the park was "the whole family's life works."

With Drayton Manor entering a period of major investment (that included the development of an £18.5 million, 4-star 150-bedroom hotel within the grounds of the park), it introduced in 2008 a massively popular family attraction – Thomas Land. Today, packed with rides based on Thomas and Friends characters, it is more popular than ever, pulling in thousands of excited youngsters– and their grandparents!

For those wanting to extend their day out, the theme park took the Thomas & Friends immersive experience one step further in 2012 when it opened the four-star Drayton Manor Hotel, giving

The Hotel
Bryan Family Archive



families wishing to turn their trip into an overnight or weekend break the option of staying in one of the 15 incredible Thomas and Friends themed rooms. More than 73,000 guests booked into the hotel during its first year of operation, consuming 3,185 burgers, 9,000 children's meals, 54,000 teabags, more than 6,000 fruit drinks and six-and-a-half tonnes of baked beans!

But it turns out that not everyone wants to book into four-star accommodation, tucking into scrumptious quality meals while being served by friendly, attentive staff. Which is why another of the park's facilities – a ten-acre full-facility camping and caravan site – has turned out to a roaring success.

Opened in 2012 and operated in conjunction with the Camping & Caravanning Club, it is used by visitors not just for making the most out

of the park's leisure activities but also as a springboard to visit nearby Lichfield and Tamworth and other tourist attractions in the Midlands. It's easy to see why the site is such a magnet. It's conveniently positioned just a couple of minutes walk away from the park facilities but surprisingly sits in an oasis of calm and tranquillity – a buffer of trees and shrubs shielding it from the shrieks and screams of big-ride thrill seekers.

Small wonder then that the site was awarded a four-star rating by Quality in Tourism, the assessment service for Visit England, the country's national tourist board.

When it is full to capacity, the site can take 90 touring caravans as well as numerous campers, including those looking for a "glamping" experience



10 years of Thomas Land
Bryan Family Archive



Brownies on the Troublesome Trucks
Bryan Family Archive

It had always been the Bryan family's mission to help create family fun memories – and the ongoing development of Thomas Land (which boasts the world's largest Thomas Land retail shop) certainly helped strengthen their commitment to keep everyone entertained, come rain or shine. Winning "gold" in Staffordshire's "Best Tourism Launch of the Year" for the unveiling of a £3.2 million extension to Thomas Land was a richly-deserved accolade.

But the theme park is much more than just a major leisure attraction which, year in year out, continues to win a raft of industry awards.

Significantly it became an integral part of the economic life of Tamworth, working with local suppliers and proudly presenting commemorative silver salvers and silver photo frames to 30 organisations and individuals at a lunch held to mark the park's 65th anniversary.

Over the years, it has also provided employment for thousands of local families (at least one of which proudly proclaims five generations having worked at the park) – and contributed enormously to the near-£2 billion annual value of tourism to Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. And it was also recognised as a major supporter of various charitable institutions such as the annual Rotary Clubs-sponsored Kids Day Out.

For Colin, Drayton Manor was not only a business -it was the home where he grew up. Just fancy – a theme park in your own back garden!

"When my parents took over the estate, it was an overgrown jungle. There were giant brambles everywhere; lakes had been blocked up by all kinds of rubbish and old army huts survived as a stark

reminder of when the site had been occupied by the armed forces during the war. Not that I remember that exactly – I was just one-year-old at the time! But I do remember the years of backbreaking hard work that went into turning my parents dream into a reality. A reality that, I am so proud to say, has over the years brought so much pleasure to literally millions of people."

"I do have lots of happy memories of growing up in a theme park, however, like driving my mother's Ford car around the grounds at the age of nine – and becoming the proud owner of my own Austin 7 when I was just 14 years old!"

Right from the age of ten, Colin knew that he wanted to be involved in the running of the park and its future. And he still recalls the catering staff teaching him the art of frying chips – and helping his mother serve endless afternoon teas to seemingly endless queues of children!

After leaving college in 1967 Colin began his career at Drayton Manor as an assistant catering manager, going on to work full-time at the park for well over half a century. It was under Colin's management when, in 1981, the park introduced its first white-knuckle ride, the log flume – to be followed later by such breath-taking attractions as Shockwave, Maelstrom, Pandemonium and Apocalypse, the world's first stand-up tower drop, which opened in 2000.

Early days: clearing the land

Bryan Family Archive



10 years of Thomas Land

Bryan Family Archive



But the park – loved by the [Roller Coaster Club of Great Britain](#) which voted Shockwave the Best Stand-Up Roller Coaster in the World - has always been more than just the Big Rides. And less scary attractions enabled it to offer the perfect mix – catering for both families and thrill seekers. That’s why its appeal is enduring.

Recalling some of his earliest memories, Colin said: “When I was three years old, I was a proper little “Bob the Builder,” moving bricks and rubble about in a children’s wheelbarrow as my parents set out to transform a derelict site into what was to become one of the region’s leading leisure attractions – five years before Disneyland opened in 1955.

“But my earliest vivid recollections of childhood are of a pretty Spartan existence.

“My parents had made a flat on the upper floor of the former Peel estate office, in the grounds of the park, and it was here that we lived for ten years. It was anything but grand. Central heating was unheard of. We had to cope with paraffin lamps – and in the winter it was so cold the bedroom windows iced up on the inside as well as the outside!

“We moved away for three years when my parents bought a house at nearby Hopwas. It was a lovely property with a fascinating look-out tower where the previous owner kept an eye on his acres of woodland in case of fire. And there was a deep well in the garden where it was rumoured that Queen Elizabeth I had lost some jewels. But they’ve never been discovered – that’s even if they existed.

“I never wanted to move away from Drayton Manor, however, and even at the age of ten I knew I wanted to succeed my father in running the theme park. So I was well pleased when we eventually moved back to Drayton Manor, where my early- unpaid – duties included emptying the cash from the cigarette machines and counting the half-crown pieces.

“Over the years, I have worked in nearly every department and, after studying at Birmingham College of Food, now University College Birmingham, I qualified as a chef to really understand what made the park, and its catering company, the success it was.”

Troublesome Trucks in full flight

Bryan Family Archive





Zila on the prowl
Bryan Family Archive

For a time, Colin also worked as an animal handler at the park's ever-popular zoo – and received the scratches to prove it! Be he found romance there as well – dating one of the keepers. Lynne, who he later married and who has been his wife since 1971.

Other happy memories include welcoming numerous distinguished guests, including the Princess Royal, but one occasion stands out – when the park, in 2016, welcomed its 50 millionth visitor, 27-year-old Jamie White, from Pembrokeshire. That was quite a milestone – especially as it was the park's 65th anniversary year when it also achieved a record-breaking attendance figure of more than 1.2 million.

Another not-to-be-forgotten moment came just a year later, in 2017, when Her Majesty the Queen awarded Colin the OBE for his ongoing contribution to tourism and in recognition of his own charity work, acknowledging fund-raising activities that had raised millions of pounds for deserving causes. It was an honour richly deserved, underlining the passion and drive he had for the park, its employees and the people it served.

“Giving back” was always paramount in the minds of Colin's parents and Colin himself was proud to continue to invest time and money in helping those less fortunate. Indeed, as part of a

long-term commitment to charitable causes, Colin launched the Drayton Manor Park Foundation, raising funds for organisations such as the Midlands Air Ambulance, St Giles Hospice (of which Colin's father was its first president) and Alzheimer's Research UK.

But then, an unforeseen tragedy and two “natural disasters” catapulted the park to the brink of closure.



Sumatran Tigers in the zoo
Bryan Family Archive

Shockwave
Bryan Family
Archive



Stormforce
Bryan Family Archive

It was in 2017, during a visit by a group of schoolchildren from Leicester, that the park endured probably what was its darkest day, with the death of an 11-year-old girl, who drowned after falling from the Splash Canyon rapids ride.

An inquest jury, in 2019, concluded that the girl died accidentally but, after a lengthy investigation into the circumstances of the accident, the Health & Safety Executive, in 2021, successfully prosecuted the operators of the park for breaching the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

A major calamity occurred in February 2020. Storm Dennis caused havoc across the country and severe flooding, worsened by the park's main lake bursting its banks, resulted in the closure of the attraction at a time when thousands of schoolchildren would normally have been enjoying half-term treats at the park. To make matters worse, a severe fire damaged a changing block in the Thomas Land area.

All in all, it was a financial disaster – heightened by the park's planned reopening being delayed as Covid 19 took its toll. All factors which exacerbated the park's cash flow problems, ultimately forcing it into administration.

For the Bryan family, it was a devastating, unimaginable end to a 70-year old family business.

But they should always be proud of having created one of the most popular inland tourist attractions in England.

The Bryan legacy will be forever woven in the history of Staffordshire and the leisure industry.



Maelstrom
Bryan Family Archive

Book Review

Drayton Manor:

George and Vera Bryan's Memories of a Family Fun Park

by Fred Bromwich

Published by Drayton Manor theme Park 2006

ISBN 978-0-9952779-0-0

Softcover, 100 pages

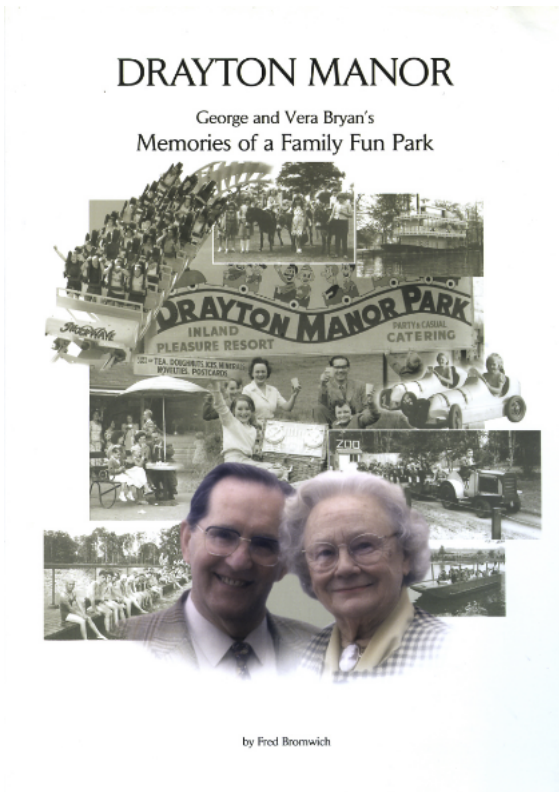
The book you are currently reading is not the first one about Drayton Manor Leisure Park. Twenty years ago the Bryans together with editor Helen O'Neill and author Fred Bromwich set about writing a 100 page story of the park and intriguingly a chapter on their view of the future as they saw it in 2006. However, just over a decade later the future plans in the book were destroyed by an accident, but let's go back to the start...

The book was George Bryan's idea. He and Fred Bromwich spent many hours with George, his wife Vera and Helen the editor researching the material. Fred wrote most of the words and Helen, a long-time contact of George, liaised with him re photos and talked to the printers.

The book explains how and why the Bryans wanted to set up a leisure park and why they picked Tamworth. The book follows much the same path as the book you are reading however in more detail with more pictures hence being four times the length of the book you are reading.

This is very much a personal story rather than a corporate or company story. Actually that should be *a family story* as the whole family for three generations lived and worked in the park as it grew from empty, though over grown spaces to one of the foremost theme parks in the UK.

This becomes obvious as you look through the pictures of the Bryan children becoming adults and their children appearing. The Baton being passed from generation to generation.



The chapter on the future shows the proposed hotel and the actual building, opened in 2012, does look remarkably like the artists impression, which makes me wonder what the huge covered water park would have looked like! It appears larger, on the plans, than the domes at Eden Park!

The future chapter is written by Colin Bryan and is as much about his personal and career path that guided his view for the future of what was a truly family run and family orientated Leisure Park, spanning three generations of Bryan's and heading to a forth?

When the book was first published it was also available in local outlets around Tamworth, including W H Smith, but now if you are interested in reading more about Drayton Manor Park, the book currently appears to be easily available 2nd hand. It is highly recommended.

Tamworth

HERITAGE

Trust Magazine

SP-02, 2024



Preserving the Past, Recording the Present
Safeguarding the Future