

INVENTOR OF THE ELECTRIC BALL

Part of the NHS logo and a defining feature of our facade



This sphere, often mistaken by passers-by for a mine, was part of a device designed by Alfred Robshaw in 1908 with a view to harnessing the sea to provide electricity for Sorrento township. A number of spheres were tethered on rocks swept by the sea at Pearce's Beach and their movements transferred to a dynamo housed near Sphinx Rock. However, severe wave action damaged the system built in 1909 and after the death of Robshaw the following year, the project was abandoned, although at one stage one street lamp was lit for a while.

Young Teddy Skelton and Billy Morce were contracted to remove damaged machinery from the beach, and in the 1970s Evan Skelton recounted how, as a child, he had played with the ball as it lay concealed by bushes in a Hurstwood Road paddock. The inventor's name given, and inscribed on the brass plaque outside the Museum, was Robilliard.

Between 1999 and 2001 several vain attempts were made by Janet South, Barbara Stephenson and Nick Zorbas to discover anyone of that name connected with the machine. However, Martin Elliget recently posted new information on Facebook showing that an Alfred ROBshaw applied for the patent No. 10,926/08 on 26/2/1908, stating he was the actual inventor and is described as an engineer with coke and brick works. Why then do our records show the name Robilliard?

I started to search census records to look for a link between the names and I found it in Brunswick - the two families lived opposite each other in Barkly Street and at the time of his death probate papers show that Alfred Robshaw owed money to Mrs C E Robilliard, Wood and Coal Merchant!

Charles Edward Robilliard had died in 1903 and his widow, Alice had continued to conduct the business. She had two teenaged sons and a daughter. In 1908 Walter Robshaw was 20 and Thomas Robilliard 16.

It is entirely feasible that Alfred Robshaw cast a fatherly eye over the sons of the widowed Alice Robilliard. It is also possible that it was Thomas who accompanied Alfred Robshaw on visits to Sorrento and that after his death Walter and Thomas settled the business and dealt with the "Machinery and Sundry Timber at Sorrento " valued at £10 in his personal estate assets.

Alfred Robshaw died 16th May 1910 in his 50th year. His obituary describes him as possessed of the rare faculty of invention. He succeeded in establishing many patents, some in connection with electrical work in which he was deeply interested

The NHS record of events surrounding the installation of the Electric Ball stems from recollections of Mabel and Evan Skelton and a newspaper account. The surnames of the men have obviously become confused.

Bergliot Dallas