

# Grayshott Village Archive

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## Grayshott in India

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### Background

Whilst out and about, have you ever come across a house with the name of a town or village that you are familiar with and wondered how it came about? Well, some five thousand miles away from Grayshott, in Madras (now known as Chennai) on the East Coast of India, is a house with the name of 'Grayshott'. How did this come about?

The house was first brought to our attention following the publication of an article in 'The Hindu' (an online edition of the Indian National Newspaper) in July 2002 in an article entitled 'Grayshott and The Oakshotts'.

The article related to the sale by auction of a property in Raja Annamalaipuram, Madras, that the Taxation Department had acquired in 1997 against a debt from Spencer & Co., the property being described as a 7,000 sq. ft. house with gardens, lawn and groves set in 2.7 acres.

A 'Charles Durrant', a Merchant and Commission Agent originally established Spencer & Co. in 1863. Soon after formation, Durrant was joined by John Spencer who later bought out Durrant. In 1871, Eugene Phillip Oakshott joined the firm as a partner and took over control in 1882. Under Oakshott's leadership over the next few years, the company enjoyed rapid growth from being a corner store to Asia's biggest departmental store. Sometime around the turn of the century, the nephew of Eugene Oakshott, namely John Oakshott Robinson, joined the company. It is not exactly clear as to when John O Robinson moved to India as the Hindu newspaper reports that he moved there in 1896/7, whereas the census indicates that he was in England in 1901. However, he was to become its Chairman in 1913. Under his guiding hand, the Company, helped by a number of acquisitions, grew throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century to become a presence continent wide, with some seventy branches dealing in retailing, hotels, catering, the motor industry, pharmaceuticals, cigar manufacture and other industries. There were numerous hotels, club stores, over 300 railway refreshment houses and the catering services of most of India's railways.

The Oakshott/Robinson family continued to manage the business until 'Indianisation' began in the 1940's/1950's. The last member of the Oakshott/Robinson dynasty to work for Spencer & Co., as the Group continued to be known, was John Oakshott, a working director, who retired in 1974. He returned to England and is reported to have moved to Hampshire and also to have named his new house 'Grayshott', although its location is unknown.

### The Family

To follow the story of the naming of the house in Madras as 'Grayshott', we have to look into the history of the Oakshott and Robinson families.

Records show that Eugene Phillip Oakshott was born in Co. Cork, Ireland in 1839 and was in residence in Liverpool in 1861 working in the linen and woolen trades. By 1871 he had moved to India and joined Charles Durrant at Spencer & Co. as noted above.

Eugene's sister Jane was also born in Co. Cork, Ireland, in 1841, and in 1862 she married a James Robinson of South Shields.

Jane and James had nine children, one of whom, John Oakshott Robinson, was born in 1870 and it is this John O Robinson, nephew of Eugene, who moved to India to take up a position in the company run by his uncle. From census records we believe John may have been a scholar in West Derby in 1881, and a Drapers Assistant in Bootle in 1891.

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Between 1920 and 1932 when he died, John is shown to be living at Bramley Croft, Tower Road, Hindhead. This period therefore appears to be his connection to Grayshott, although it is not clear how, or if indeed, he divided his time between Grayshott and India or when he left India for the final time. The marriage of his eldest daughter (recorded in the Times newspaper in 1926) shows the father of the bride to be 'of Madras and Bramley Croft, Hindhead'.

## **The property named 'Grayshott' in India**

John O Robinson's eldest daughter Esther married Stanley Wilson Edwards at St. Lukes Church, Grayshott on 13th September 1926. Robinson's wedding gift to the couple was the property in Raja Annamalaipuram and the house that he had had built there. In view of Robinson's close association with the village and the marriage of Stanley and Esther in St. Luke's church, the house was named 'Grayshott'. Esther and husband Stanley moved into the property in 1930 when Stanley, a Chartered Accountant, became a director of Spencer & Co. Later, Stanley was to become Chairman of the company and saw it through the period of changes in the late 1940's and early 1950's resulting from India's independence.

Stanley Edwards was a racing man and 'Grayshott' was the centre of many extravagant parties and Sunday 'open' houses for the racing fraternity and personalities of the Madras society. The couple continued to live there until 1957 when the property was taken over by Spencer & Co..

However, the fortunes of the company were in decline throughout the 1970/80s and what was left of a once great empire was the subject of a takeover, although the name Spencer remains.

'Grayshott' was put up for sale in 1994 and was then 'purchased' by the Tax Department in 1995. The last report we have is that the property has since fallen into disrepair with the once grand house almost derelict and the once magnificent-gardens a jungle.

A development company has recently acquired the property on which a major housing development and Mall is planned. The hope was that the house would be refurbished and retained as a central Clubhouse, but whether this is the case we are currently unable to ascertain.

## **The Marriage Certificate of Edward & Esther**

### **Footnote**

Eugene Oakshott died in Brentford in 1911. John Oakshott Robinson died in Farnham in 1932 and is buried in St. Luke's cemetery. John's wife was still living at 'Bramley Croft', Hindhead in 1939 as there is a record of her attendance at the marriage of her daughter Marion in Hanover Square, London.

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Grayshott Village Archive  
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### **Acknowledgements:**

Richard Peskett

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'The Hindu' (an online Indian National Newspaper)  
Jacky Lee & Peter Delaney