

*John Walker Bott*

*Biography*

*Of*

*A Victorian Builder*



# *John Walker Bott*

## *A Biography*



John Walker Bott, and his twin sister, Mary, were born in 1814 in Newcastle-under-Lyme, the illegitimate son and daughter of John Walker and Elizabeth Bott.

John Walker is described as a “hawker” and it seems likely that he is the John Walker who was born in the village of Alton, Staffordshire, where Elizabeth Bott was also born. Did they baptize these children away from the village they knew because of the stigma of illegitimacy?

Strangely, the two children were baptized again five years later, and this time John Walker’s profession was described as “Gentleman”. This entry remains a mystery as it is unlikely that he could have made such a leap up the social ladder within five years, but perhaps he was trying to prove something!

What happened between him and Elizabeth Bott we can only guess at, and we may never know whether JWB ever saw his father. On JWB’s marriage certificate his father is described as “farmer”, but this has then been crossed out. We do know that the John Walker of Alton, who is probably John Walker Bott’s father, turns up later in the census as a milk seller, married to Ann Ibbs. If we read between the lines, we can sense some tension surrounding JWB’s parentage,



but how he felt about his father we cannot know. It is interesting, however, that he kept the middle name of Walker all his life, and even gave it to some of his children. This suggests that the tie was not completely broken.



Elizabeth Bott was born in Alton in about 1786, the daughter of Samuel and Jane. Later in life she married John Rutland in 1836, by which time her son John was a young man of 22.

John and Mary were not the only illegitimate children of Elizabeth, it seems. A Matilda Bott was also born in 1820, who sadly died at the age of 13, and is buried with her grandfather, Samuel at Alton church. Was John Walker also her father? The records do not tell us, but obviously the young Elizabeth found it a little too easy to get herself into trouble!



John Walker Bott and his sister were born into the Regency period, when the Prince of Wales was Regent during the illness of his father, George III. It was an unsettled time, with war in France and America, and an unstable monarch. Yet, there was much to be thankful for: the nation was celebrating the downfall of Napoleon and his exile to Elba (though the Battle of Waterloo was yet to come in 1815), Jane Austen had published *Mansfield Park*, Edmund Kean made his debut as Shylock at Drury Lane Theatre and Britain's first art gallery opened in Dulwich.

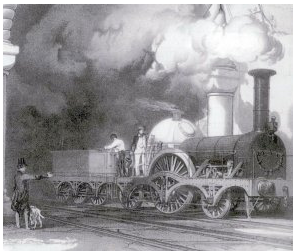


On the left you can see that kind of clothes that a young boy might have worn at this time in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a child, JWB would no doubt have been aware of the first passenger railways coming into existence in 1825, and perhaps was interested in the first police force set up by Robert Peel.

Newcastle-under-Lyme was an old borough market town situated two miles from the River Trent in Staffordshire. By the time of JWB's birth, Newcastle was a well appointed town with good paving, gas lighting and a supply of good water. It had two churches, the main one being St. Giles where John was later to be married. By the time JWB was 17, the population was just over 8,000 and had grown to 10,000 by 1839. Market days were Monday and Saturday, and there were five annual fairs. Newcastle also boasted a thriving hat trade, three silk mills, a cotton and paper mill, a theatre and a library.



It would have been a very busy and bustling town at this time, lying on the direct turnpike road from Liverpool and Manchester to Birmingham and London. There was a constant flow of coaches, wagons and vans. However, the arrival of the railways meant that the coach trade went into decline and when the Grand Union Railway was built, bypassing the town, it must have become much quieter by the 1840s and 50s.



Perhaps this is one of the reasons why John decided to move to the City of Birmingham some time before 1851. There would have been more work available for a brick maker in the developing area of Ladywood in Birmingham than in a town that was losing much of its main traffic.

But JWB spent the first half of his life in Newcastle, and that's where he was living when the young Queen Victoria came to the throne.



We know that JWB was a brick maker at the time of his marriage to Louisa Lucy Downs on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1845. They were married at St. Giles Church, Newcastle and John was 31 years old. Louisa was the daughter of a painter, Thomas

Downs, and it seems likely that John would have come across the family in his work as both men were involved in the building trade. Present at the marriage were a John Timmis and an Eliza Gallimore. John Timmis may have been the husband of JWB's twin sister, Mary. The Gallimores were also possibly connected through the Timmis family and were certainly know to the Botts for the next few years.

It was a good time to be in the house building industry. From 1830 more bricks were being made than at any other previous period; the manufacture of bricks had improved considerably as had the range and colour.

Furthermore, because of improved roads and communications, bricks could be transported

over wider areas and builders were no longer restricted to local variations.





By 1847, John and Louisa had moved to Birmingham, no doubt using the new Birmingham to Warrington railway, and it was this year that they had their first child, George.



John must have found work easily in Ladywood, Birmingham. As more and more people moved into cities, the need for housing grew rapidly.



Ladywood was one of the areas under development and it is very likely that he took a part in the building works. One of the buildings that was built at this time was St. John's Church (left), between Monument Road and Alston Street. A sum of £1000 had been donated for its erection and endowment of this church. Perhaps JWB carried out some of the building work.

In 1849, the couple had their second son, John. Louisa, the third child, was born in 1850 but sadly died a year later. It was not uncommon for Victorian families to lose at least one child in infancy or childhood when childhood diseases were still dangerous, particularly for those families living in cities and towns.



In 1851 we know that they were living at 22 Springfield Street (pictured left in 1964), and JWB's mother Elizabeth Rutland, now a widow, was living with them. On the night of the census,

John Gallimore, a joiner, was staying with them.

John and Louisa's fourth child was Eliza, born in 1852, and lastly came Joseph, born in 1854.

Two years later, Louisa Lucy was dead at the age of 41, leaving JWB with four young children and, possibly, an ageing mother (we do not know when Elizabeth Rutland died). Life was difficult for the working classes, and it was not unusual for women who had borne five children to die at such a young age. John Walker Bott would have found himself in the position that many men found themselves in during the Victorian age: a single father struggling to make a living.

It was therefore very usual for a widower to take a second wife very quickly, and this John did on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1859, marrying 36 year old Louisa Lawton, also a widow, the daughter of Samuel Platt, a collier. They were married at Wolstanton (right) in Staffordshire and she brought with her two children from her previous marriage, Martha and William Lawton.



JWB's fortunes seemed to have improved from now on. By 1861 he was employing one man, and the family were living at 52 King Edward's Road in Ladywood. The picture on the left was taken in the 1960s. This was obviously a slightly better class of housing and we can safely assume that JWB was

experiencing success in his occupation and finances. In fact, it is very possible that JWB had built these houses himself. The group of terraces they lived in were named “Bott’s Buildings”.

JWB and his new wife produced two more children, Albert (perhaps named after Prince Albert, who had died in 1861) and Henry Charles. With the birth of these two, there would have been ten people living in the Bott household, most of them under the age of 16. One can imagine the lively and noisy household it must have been, and it is likely that Louisa’s daughter Martha would have been called upon to help to look after the younger children.

There was a school near by, next to St. Mark’s Church, which had been built before the Botts’ arrival in Birmingham, in 1841. This school no longer exists, but although this was before the 1872 Education Act which



made school compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 and 13, we can imagine that the Bott children were scholars at this school. On the left is a typical school room of this time.

In 1867, the Second Reform Bill became law, allowing working men with an established place of residence the right to vote. This means that John Walker Bott would have been able to vote for the first time in his life in the 1868 election. This was the election that brought William Gladstone to power with a Liberal Party victory.

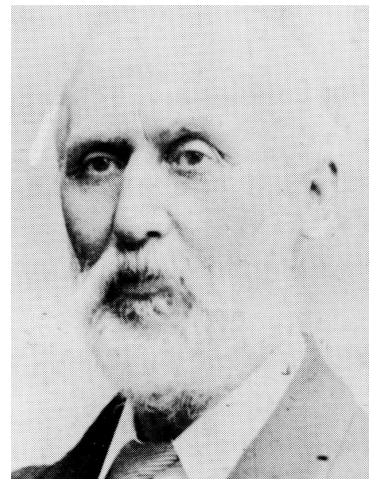




By 1871 the family had moved a little down the road to No. 9 Lower King Edward's Road – again in houses called Bott's Buildings. JWB's fortunes had continued to improve. In this census he was now described as an employer, and the household would by now be a little quieter with only three children living at home: Joseph, who was a bricklayer and probably working for his father, Albert, and the young Henry Charles, both still attending school.

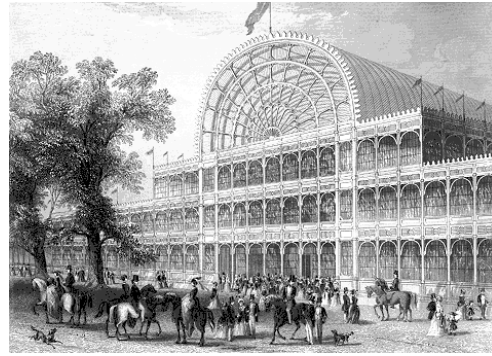
John Walker Bott died on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1874 at the age of 60. For a hard-working man in a physically tough trade, this was a good age for this time.

By the time of his death, John Walker Bott had progressed to the occupation of 'builder' rather than the lower status of 'bricklayer'. He had also built a family and improved their housing. His second son, John, was to become a joiner, and a year after his father's death was living in Manchester, marrying Mary Jane Stamper in the same year. He went on to produce the next Bott generation. His photograph – the earliest known photograph of the Botts – is shown on the right.



The 'Walker' name had disappeared; none of JWB's children kept the middle name, and so the mysterious John Walker passed out of memory.

Throughout JWB's life he would have been many changes as the Victorian age grew and developed. He had lived through the cholera epidemics of the 1830s and 40s. When the young Queen Victoria came to the throne he would have been a young man of 23. He perhaps read the weekly instalments of Charles Dickens' novels, if he had time. He experienced the rapid growth and expansion of the railways, and would have known about the Great Exhibition of 1851. Did he, like many others, travel by train to visit this amazing international exhibition? As a builder, it may have been within his interests to do so.



It was an exciting time to live in, and John Walker Bott was part of it and benefited from it. He had prospered and produced a family. In other words, he was an ideal Victorian working man.

