



Tim Lawrence & Anne Petrie

2017

The estate agency now known as Lawrence & Co. was established as Finnis and Ronalds in the 1820s by George Finnis and John Ronalds.

George Finnis was born in 1793 at Prospect House, in Prospect Road, Hythe, the third son and fifth child of Robert Finnis and his wife Elizabeth nee Quested. His father was an upholsterer and grazier and was six times mayor of the town. George's brothers and sisters all spread their wings and left Hythe and, in some cases, achieved fame and fortune, but George chose instead to follow his father's example of hard work and civic duty. He married a widow, Anne Castle, and had two daughters.

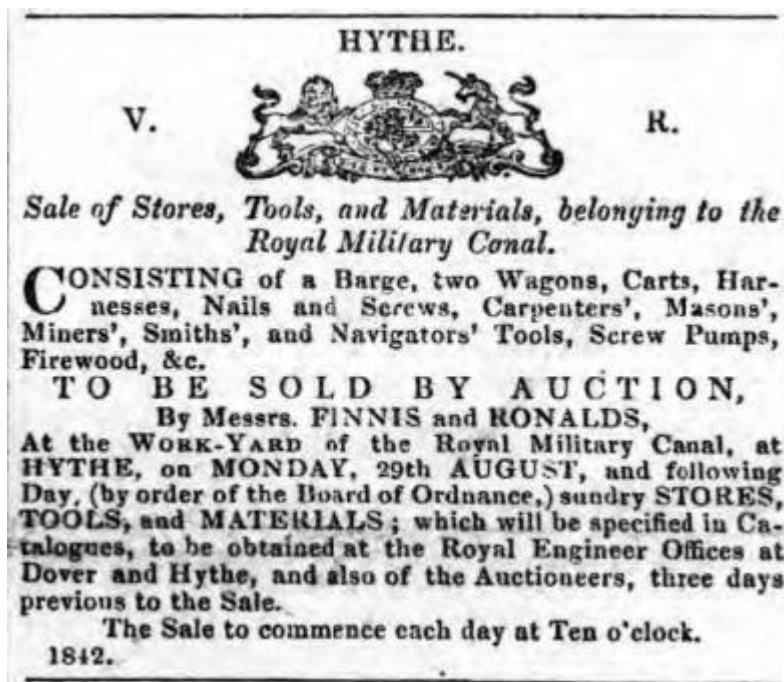
John Ronalds was born in Canterbury in about 1786, was married to a Dymchurch woman, Mary Blake and had settled in Hythe where his son, Edward Hobday Ronalds was born and a daughter, Cordelia.

Both men had separately set up business in Hythe High Street as upholsterers, cabinet makers and auctioneers, but clearly decided that it would be more profitable to join forces and by August 1826, they were trading as 'Finnis and Ronalds' when they auctioned sheep in New Romney.

ROMNEY MARSH SHEEP.
TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
By FINNIS and RONALDS,
 On Tuesday, 12th September next, on the LAND,
 near the Town of New Romney,
THE whole of the valuable, and well-selected
GRAZING STOCK of the late JOHN WAL-
 TER, Esq. deceased, consisting of about 156 Ewes,
 81 Ewe and Wether Tags, and 158 Lambs, two
 Milch Cows, one Barren Cow, and one Calf.
 The sheep will be put up in small Lots for the
 convenience of Purchasers, and the sale commence
 precisely at twelve o'clock.
On the same day, and on Land adjoining, Messrs.
FINNIS and RONALDS, will offer for Sale
by Public Auction,
 One Hundred and Twenty-five Ewes, 100 fat We-
 thers, 200 Wether Lambs, 2 Barren Cows, 1 Hei-
 fer, forward in calf, 8 Country-bred Steers, and 5
 Welch Steers, the property of a Gentleman leav-
 ing Land,
 24th Aug. 1826.

Sussex Advertiser 24 August 1826

Their premises were at 94 High Street, now demolished, which was on the site of the Spring House shops at the east end. They auctioned not only livestock: in 1842 they secured a contract from the Government's Board of Ordnance to action off stores and tools, including a barge, which were surplus to requirements on the Royal Military Canal.



Kentish Gazette 23 August 1842

George Finnis died on 3 May 1850 at his sister Jane's house in Regent's Park, but John Ronalds kept the business going under the same name with the help of his son, Edward. It was clearly successful, as in 1851, they were employing seven men and a woman. At a time when most houses were sold by auction, they acted as estate agents. In 1861, they auctioned Cambridge House in the High Street, the *Prince of Prussia* inn in Bartholomew Street and the *Nag's Head* opposite the School of Musketry (probably the public house later called the *Gate Inn*).

After John's death in 1863, Edward Ronalds continued the business until his own death in 1874. He had never married, and left everything to his sister Cordelia, who had also remained single.

In December that year, she sold the business to the Cobay brothers, Robert and William. Though born in Hythe, they lived in London, where they ran their own very successful furnishing and auctioneering business in Bond Street. They assured the customers of Finnis and Ronalds of continued good

service and reminded them that as they would be in a position to 'afford intending purchasers an opportunity of selecting furniture from their London Establishments'.



William Cobay, Mayor of Hythe during WW1

Robert and William appointed their younger brother Henry to run the Hythe business, now known as Cobay Bros. for them, though he never became a partner. They set up at 40, now 86 High Street, which also became the family home.

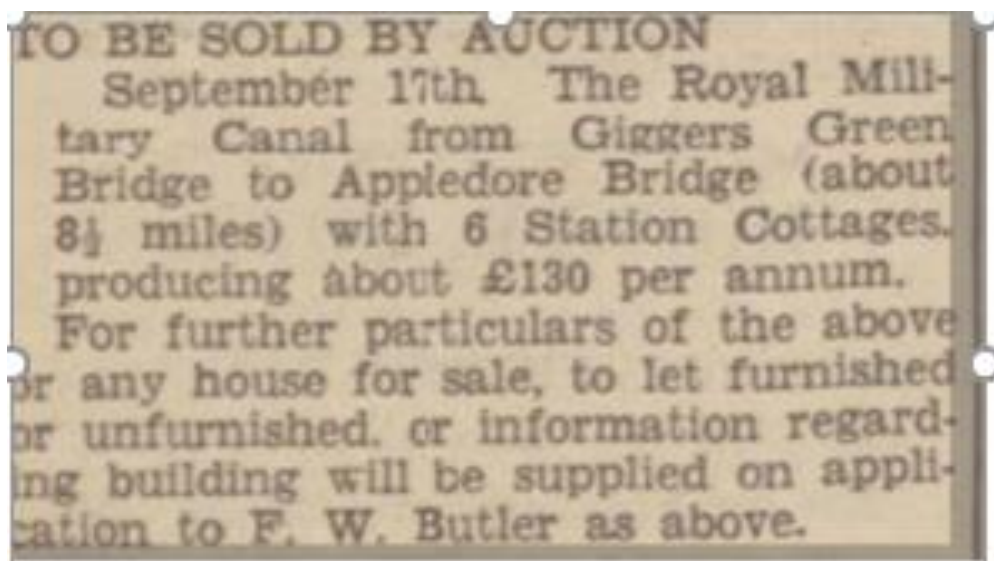


86 High Street, Hythe

It seems they leased this property until 1919 at a rent of £120 per annum. It was huge, with five bedrooms, a drawing room, morning room, dining room kitchen and scullery. The street frontage at ground floor was double fronted business premises and office. They constructed an auction room, partly out of old ships timbers, at the back of the house with access from Marine Walk Street. There were also stables and a store there. By 1919, the entire premises, including the outbuildings, were lighted by electricity. The Cobays bought the building in 1919.

The last Cobay brother, Robert, died in May 1924, and the business was taken over by Frederick William Butler, who bought number 86 High Street and its outbuildings on 2 July 1924 for £3000. By November that year he was trading as 'Mr F W Butler amalgamated with Messrs Cobay Bros', telephone number Hythe 8.

Fred Butler already had premises in Bank Street and later at 77 High Street and had been Mayor of Hythe before and after the First World War, from which he returned as Major Butler with the Military Cross. As a baron of the Cinque Ports he had attended the coronations of both George V and VI and had many distinguished clients, including Lord Wakefield of Hythe and Sir Philip Sassoon MP and in 1935 acted as agent for the sale of part of the Royal Military Canal.



TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION
September 17th. The Royal Military Canal from Giggers Green Bridge to Appledore Bridge (about 8½ miles) with 6 Station Cottages, producing about £130 per annum.
For further particulars of the above or any house for sale, to let furnished or unfurnished, or information regarding building will be supplied on application to F. W. Butler as above.

Folkestone Herald 24 August 1935



Fred Butler before WW1 and later in life

He was also a magistrate, clerk to Saltwood Parish Council and clerk to the Trustees of the Hospitals of St Bartholomew and St John with its alms houses at 'Centuries' at the bottom of Church Hill and at 150 High Street.

Fred died in 1941, which was a difficult time for the business, with Hythe being in the front line and badly affected by wartime restrictions. On his demobilisation from active service, Fred's son, Lt. Colonel Neil Butler (affectionately known as 'Winkie') took over many of his father's roles and succeeded in bringing the business back up, together with Bill Bailey (also a Mayor of Hythe) and Major Alec Watson. Later, the partnership was joined by John Heddle (later MP for Lichfield & Tamworth and Mid Staffordshire) and Andrew Beggs and in due course was briefly known as Heddle, Butler.



Neil Butler

In 1974, the firm amalgamated with Hatch & Waterman of Tenterden to become Butler, Hatch & Waterman and Pauline Chalk and Tim Lawrence joined the partnership. The firm then expanded to six offices: Hythe, Folkestone, Ashford, Tenterden, Ramsgate and Rye and Barry Gilbertson became a partner (he was later President of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors). Tim Lawrence had become Clerk to the Trustees of the Hospitals of St Bartholomew and St John after the death of Neil Butler in 1980 and

still is, thus completing over a hundred years of the association between that charity and the firm.

The Butler, Hatch & Waterman partnership was dissolved in 1986, when Tim Lawrence purchased the Hythe practice and was joined by Major Michael Vincent, trading as Lawrence Butler & co. Then in 1992, the auction rooms were closed and the business transferred to 49 High Street as Lawrence & Co, where



it is now led by Mark Wilkins MNAEA (whose grandfather Bob Wilkins was manager of Lloyds Bank, Hythe at the time of the Butlers) and will be celebrating over two hundred years of its roots in Hythe in 2026.

And by coincidence, for the last forty years Tim Lawrence has lived in Prospect House in Prospect Road where George Finnis, who started it all, was born.

Tim Lawrence

POSTSCRIPT IN 2023

Tim Lawrence having stepped back from day-to-day activities these are overseen by Director, Mark Wilkins MNAEA, ably assisted by Jo Peers, Alexa Brooker and Sophie Pritchard. They all live within walking distance of the office, have wide experience in their specialist fields and good local knowledge.

