



AMBLECOTE HISTORY

FEBRUARY 2004

MEETINGS IN FEBRUARY and MARCH

WEDNESDAY 18th February 7.30pm —JOHN COOKSEY on BRICKYARDS of the BLACK COUNTRY
WESNESDAY 24th March— General Meeting

SOCIETY MEETINGS

The Society's inaugural AGM was held on January 21st at Amblecote Church Hall. A constitution was discussed and adopted and three officers elected; Chairman, Father Paul Tongue; Secretary, Nick Baker; Treasurer, Mrs Doreen Easthope. A General meeting followed at which a number of projects were reported upon including the Dennis Hall Commemorative, Fish Glassblower Statue, Obituary Project, WW2 Memories, Sankey House Glass Door and the pending development of the old Gas Works site. The input of Councillor Pat Martin was especially appreciated regarding the latter. After the meeting memberships to the Society were accepted and membership cards issued. Altogether 50 memberships have so far been accepted.

MEETING DATES

Seven fixed dates have been allocated for meetings during 2004. These are all Wednesdays and will take place at Amblecote Church Hall. They are February 18th, March 24th, May 19th, June 23rd, September 22nd, October 20th, November 17th. Speakers are in the process of being arranged for most of these dates beginning with John Cooksey's talk on *Brickyards of the Black Country* on February 18th. A programme will be published shortly. It is hoped to arrange additional meetings and visits during the year and, again, details will be circulated.

DENNIS HALL COMMEMORATIVE

Good progress on this project. A meeting has taken place between Nick Baker representing the Society, Mr Tony Stapleton of Lord Edward Developments, Pete Boland and Peter King of Dudley MBC Environmental Directorate, Glass Engraver Andy Cope (also a Society Member) and Iestyn Davies glass sculptor of Blowzone (Ruskin Centre). It was agreed to pursue the twin objectives of a wall mounted glass sculpture and a glass plaque for display in the restored entrance hall.

GLASSBLOWER STATUE

The Society can congratulate itself on an immediate and very successful conclusion to the campaign to restore the Crystal Mile glassblower statue at the Fish. Action by Councillor Pat Martin on the Society's behalf resulted in Dudley MBC strengthening the blowpipe in order to (hopefully) make it vandal proof. There was some *slight* murmuring from more than one quarter that the bent pipe actually better reflected the vandalised state of the Stourbridge glass industry...however.

THE LIST

Members are reminded of the existence of the Amblecote History Society List (Newsletter Oct.03), and additions are welcome. In fact 'The List' has been very well received by the Conservation department of Dudley MBC who receive a copy of the newsletter. The department is under constant pressure of work and local initiatives such as ours are very much appreciated by its officers as indicators of what local people regard as important and want preserved. Therefore, please do not underestimate the power of 'listing' a building or artefact in this way — it really can make a difference.

SANKEY HOUSE GLASS

The sale of Sankey House in High Street will almost certainly be followed by its demolition. However, Father Paul Tongue was pleased to announce at the last meeting that the vendors have stipulated that an unusual glass panelled door and surround are to be presented to the Church. Father Paul is investigating the possibility of relocating the door in an appropriate historical setting.

GAS WORKS SITE

Speculation about the future use of the old Gas Works site at Holloway End resulted in some considerable discussion at the last meeting. Latest indications are that the site may well be used for housing. However, of special interest to Amblecote history enthusiasts is the cliff area where demolitions have revealed a number of interesting cave constructions, including a WW2 vintage air raid shelter. The Society is perusing an interest in this, although access to the site is limited.

PUB INFORMATION

Member Steve Sharples is compiling information on Amblecote pubs for a planned publication (its tough, but someone has to do it), and would very much welcome reminiscences and information of watering holes past and present. He may be contacted on 01384 376557.

IN THIS ISSUE

This issue contains a comprehensive article (pages 2-4) by member Helen Cook on the *Past Present & Future of Corbett Hospital Meadow*. Concerns over the future development of The Corbett site have featured strongly at past Society meetings, and this article is intended to provide a background to the history of the meadow and its preservation, and to heighten awareness should the need arise to defend it again in the future.



IMPORTANT NOTE

Amblecote History will from now on be issued to members only. Membership is £3.00 per annum, and may be taken out at any meeting of the Society, or contact Nick Baker on 01384 894446. Visitors are welcome to attend speaker events at an on the door charge of £1.00



CORBETT HOSPITAL MEADOW

PAST- PRESENT- FUTURE

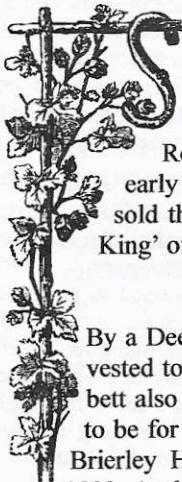
By Helen Cook



Amblecote History Society member Helen Cook, who has a lifetime interest in the meadow at the rear of Corbett Hospital, outlines the history of this important piece of land including the battle to save it from housing development, and poses questions about its future in the light of the impending closure of 'The Corbett'.

The house at the Hill

*Yon old Mansion frowning thro' the trees,
The gardens desert paths.*



SO wrote the poet Samuel Rogers who once lived at The Hill. The mansion was a substantial Georgian house standing in thirty acres of grounds. It was built for Thomas Rogers, a wealthy glass manufacturer in the early 18th century. His grandson Samuel Rogers sold the estate in 1892 to John Corbett, 'The Salt King' of Droitwich.

The Hospital & Meadow

By a Deed of Gift, dated September 13th 1892 it was vested to trustees for conversion into a hospital. Corbett also gave the surrounding land, all of which was to be for the benefit of the people of Stourbridge and Brierley Hill. The Hospital opened on the 31st July 1893. At the opening ceremony John Corbett presented a golden key to Lady Cobham. Lunch was provided in a marquee in the grounds of the Hospital, afterwards, at two o'clock, the United Friendly Societies of the District held a Fete in the grounds. An estimated 18,000 people attended. This is probably the first record of any public use being made of the meadow at the rear of the house.

The trustees then let the meadow to local farmers for grazing, which provided an income for the hospital. However, on the first weekend in August each year the meadow was in use for the local horticultural show and fete. In later years a gymkhana and dog show were part of the day, an exciting time for the local people. A wall of death, balloon ascents and swing boats, all added to the entertainment. In the evening firework displays ended the day in spectacular fashion. In 1946 this fete was said to have attracted a crowd of 35,000.

At this time the meadow was much larger than the fifteen acres of today. In 1964 an outpatient and accident department plus two car parks were added which reduced the size of the Meadow to its present area.

Today, prior to the recent works, the meadow consisted of one fifteen acre field with two ponds. The top pond consists of little more than a man made hole, a dew pond, situated on high ground in the south-east corner. It was probably built to take local surface water to provide drinking for the grazing stock if the field was ever divided. The bottom pond is a much larger construction and is to the north



of the site. It is fed from the meadow catchment and possibly at one time a local spring.

The meadow slopes steeply from the east and has a gentler fall from the south, while the western boundary slopes slightly from where the Hospital now stands. In 2001 further works were undertaken at the Corbett Hospital and an additional two acres of the meadow used to provide a new access road and as a depot for offices and storage. However this is due to be returned to the meadow on completion of the works.

Reminiscences of the Meadow

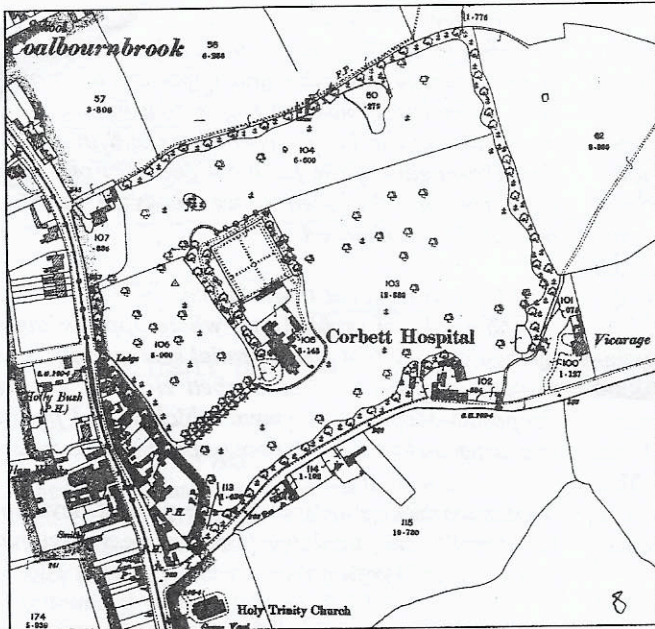
I would now like to reminisce about the meadow of my youth, looking out onto the field every morning, and some of the things I have seen. I remember during the spring and summer how the meadow would lie quiet as the grass grew, mowing would take place prior to the Fete with the hay being bailed into large blocks and hauled away to provide winter feed. During the rest of the year the animals were left to graze and forage amongst the specimen trees. In the autumn evenings we could hear the sheep bleating or maybe the mournful call of the cattle. Unbeknown to them this was often their last port of call en route to the local abattoir.

I remember, one evening many years ago, hearing a loud thud in our garden, on investigating my mother was confronted face to face with a large cow at the back door!

The Fete ceased in the early 1960's, and the meadow lapsed into an oasis of wildlife. The habitat being helped by the adjacent Clockfields, the name coming from the clock on the lodge at the top of Collis Street. Poppies were often a dominant flower, but bluebells could be gathered by the armful. In the winter months as frost covered the field I would watch large flocks of winter thrushes, redwings with a few fieldfare among them. They would descend on the field like a swarm of locust and feed continuously, on what I have no idea.

In February, frogs and toads would make their way from their winter hibernation to breed in the ponds. On many occasions I have given them a helping hand through the boundary fence. Later the two ponds would be black with the tadpoles of both. Around the same time newts would appear in the lower pond.

With the arrival of spring and by mid April, the cuckoo would call from tall limes. Down by the pool a silent grass snake would lie waiting for the frogs. As dusk fell we would hear the eerie hoot of the Tawny Owl, echoing from the black pines. Early spring and the meadow was alive to a dawn chorus, the rhythmic drumming of the woodpeckers, both Green and Greater. The soothing calls of the local Woodpigeons (hated over the fence by the allotment holders), but so relaxing elsewhere in the field. Birds, such as the Bullfinch and Yellowhammer were common in this rural setting. May, and the meadow would be a mass of yellow Buttercups amid the white blossoms of the Hawthorn. The white candle flowers of the Horse Chestnut, a tree that dominates the centre of the meadow. In June,



The Hill estate in 1901, as presented to the people of Stourbridge and the surrounding area by John Corbett. A Georgian mansion set in thirty acres of ground amidst semi-rural countryside.

many of the grasses flower and meadow plants such as clover, pignut and hay rattle are in bloom. This flora would bring in a host of butterflies, Common Blue, Orange Tip being amongst a dozen or so species found here. On balmy nights of July and August we would often see Pipistrelle Bats feeding at dusk, on late flying insects which favoured the pond areas. Autumn brings the fruits of the season. Always, a gang of us local youngsters would run the gauntlet for conkers off the Horsechestnut tree. If not in awe of a bull in the field, it was the hospital caretaker who would threaten us with trespassing. With the consequences of such a crime we would have faced a dozen bulls! This probably has contributed to how the meadow is today because it has always been a no-go area. Twenty five years on, and Clockfields is now a housing estate and gone is the Cuckoo, Yellowhammer and Bullfinch. Other green areas in Amblecote have also gone for housing. From a country lane, Vicarage Road has now become a major road through to the Merry Hill Centre. Important habitats have been lost, so greatly reducing Amblecote's green areas. The meadow now has become an emerald island surrounded by a sea of brown.

The Meadow Under Threat

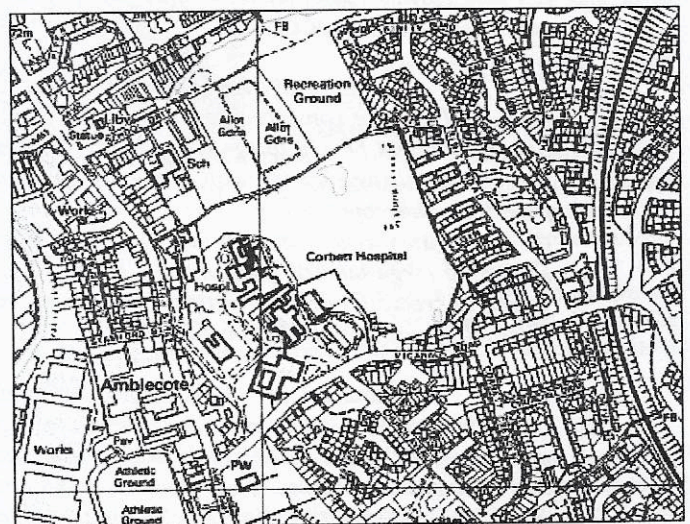
At the beginning of 1992, a neighbour alerted me about a very real threat to the meadow. It was a proposal that it may be sold for building purposes by the West Midlands Health Authority. Years before this there had always been many speculations and rumours that this would eventually happen. So I telephoned various local councillors and to my horror found this was true. In March 1992, Dudley Council would be holding public enquiries to draught out the Unitary Development Plan. This plan was to earmark sites in the Dudley Borough for future buildings and housing needs and planning guidelines, including recreational facilities.

In 1948, the newly formed National Health Service took into their control the local hospitals and their grounds which had been given to local communities as John Corbett had given the Corbett Hospital. At this time land sales were becoming common practice, with the cash raised going into building one giant hospital to serve an enormous area. This meant that the people of the district would no longer have John Corbett's gift and the area would lose its only prime wildlife site. We had just less than two months to get ourselves organised and present our case to save the meadow. We knew we were fighting the Government's new health reforms and the West Midlands Health Authority. They had put forward a case that the land use be amended in the U.D.P. for a housing estate. A public inquiry was set for March to be chaired by a government officer from the Department of the Environment. She would make the final decision on the fate of the meadow.



Taking Local Action

Neighbours and various people from the Stourbridge area formed the Amblecote Local Environmental Matters Group (L.E.M.). We set out a campaign and a plan of action. This involved letters to the local press and we sought help from other environmentally friendly groups such as Friends of the Earth, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. We spoke to, and asked help from, our local Stourbridge Group of the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust. I got in touch with Urban Wildlife Trust who responded by a series of letters to Dudley Council expressing their objections to this proposal. The Open Spaces Society also offered their expertise in this field. All this involved a lot of time and energy, and



The Hill estate in 2001. The meadow almost totally encroached upon by urban development. During 2003/4 even more building has taken place, making this last Amblecote natural open space an historic and precious local resource.

thankfully we received help from many people including local councillors, whilst both our MP and Euro MP responded with offers of help and encouragement. Dudley Metropolitan Council along with their Leisure Services was also against the proposal to destroy this prime site. Another project was to organise a local petition and we set about knocking on doors, and in just three days 855

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people had signed the list. Again this was a hard task but with petition in our hand, we managed to present on the very day the inquiry took place. During this time our group managed to set up a survey of the meadow, records of birds seen over the years were assembled, and we realised a list of over 45 species. A local botanist did a survey of the field and its surroundings and again to our surprise this produced a total of 79 vascular plants of the site. We engaged a amphibian expert who did an extensive survey of the pools. This concluded that we had three species of amphibia present, and recorded one of the largest frog populations ever seen by the expert with a total in excess of 2000 frogs seen. Ninety three Smooth Newts were also recorded. Another campaign was to get all the trees surveyed and where appropriate, tree preservation orders imposed. This survey again showed that in the meadow was a rare Cut Leaved Beech Tree. The result of this was that a blanket TPO was imposed over the whole Hospital site.

When one starts these campaigns, the number of things that come forward never seem to end, and just when you think they cover every thing something else appears. What about the mammals they asked us? A look at local records along with a survey found at least six species were regularly using the meadow, and this included a very healthy Fox population.

Armed with as much information as we could muster, we made our representations to the tribunal. These were presented on our behalf by Councillor John Simpson. After much deliberation the inquiry finally gave its decisions and we were overjoyed.

If I can quote a couple of paragraphs from the inspectors report it will show how our hard work had been rewarded.

Para. 3.1.69 However I find this area of open land to be of considerable visual amenity and potential recreational benefit to the community. Whilst views of the site are limited by the wall along its boundary, it is from the public open space....The dramatic topography of the site, with the grassland sweeping up to the west and south, the large mature trees and the ponds all come together to create an area of distinctive character and considerable visual and landscape quality.

Para. 3.1.71 I am also of the opinion that the objectors (WHA) under estimate the nature conservation value of the site. The ponds are clearly identifiable foci of such interests, but the grassland and mature trees must also make a contribution to creating a wildlife habitat in the heart of the urban area. This nucleus of open space within the built up area has, in my view, enhanced value in terms of nature conservation because of its urban location, offering opportunities for city dwellers to learn about and enjoy the wildlife attracted to it.



The Future of the Site?

So we had won. But what of the future? In the Dudley Borough Unitary Development Plan of June 2000 page 295 concerning the meadow at the Corbett Hospital and states the following.

Reasons for the Policy.

The open land to the rear of the Corbett Hospital is an extremely attractive and important area of open space which makes a major contribution to the quality of the local environment and indeed the quality of life for local people. For these reasons, the open space needs to be protected and enhanced.



S07 Corbett Hospital Open Space.

The Council will protect and, where appropriate enhance the amenity, wildlife and potential recreational value of the open land to the rear of Corbett Hospital shown on the Proposals Map. Development which would prejudice the character and value of the open space will be resisted.

Under the new guidelines for the present development of the Hospital site, the large pond has been designated as a **wildlife conservation** area.

In February 1999 proposals were put forward for further development of the Corbett Hospital site. Part of this was the building of a new Community Day Care Hospital. This new hospital would encroach upon part of the meadow, meaning some loss of habitat. However it was agreed that any loss of land would be compensated for by land adjacent to the site being incorporated to the meadow. Any other encroachment such as the storage and office area was to be temporary until the major works on the site had been completed. The land used would be re-instated and any damage made good. Work on the site began in July 2001. The down side of this is that a number of trees, some mature, were felled. Another casualty has been the oak tree that was planted to celebrate the Hospitals Centenary in 1993; this has been lost despite it being moved to a new location in the meadow. We have been assured by the contractors that they will provide a new specimen oak to replace it.

At the present time the works have almost been completed and we wait to see what the outcome will be. We still have the meadow and we still have much of the wildlife. The fox still visits and the grey squirrels still dance in the boughs of the lime trees.

Perhaps, I should end the story with a quote from one of the many people who fought so hard to preserve our heritage, John Simpson.

"We have a moral duty as custodians of our heritage, and of our future generations, to ensure as best as we can, that the things our forefathers handed down to us, are preserved and enhanced as was envisaged by John Corbett when he gave the Hospital and grounds to the people of the area."

STAYING IN TOUCH

Amblecote History will be printed as often as practicable throughout the year. However, members are advised that the Society also advertises its events in the local press, and on the website www.amblecote.org. Keeping an eye on one or both of these will keep you up-to-date with any last minute inclusions or changes.