



AMBLECOTE HISTORY

Number 6

The Newsletter of Amblecote History Society

April 2004

MEETINGS IN APRIL/MAY/JUNE

Monday April 26th – Visit to Plowden & Thompson Glassworks (Dial Glassworks, Stewkins) 10.15am. Please contact Nick Baker 01384 894446 by April 20th if you wish to attend (numbers required in advance).

Wednesday May 17th Talk by Alan Smith, Chairman of the West Midlands Historic Buildings Trust, Amblecote; Church Hall 7.30pm.

Wednesday June 23rd Guided tour of Holy Trinity Church, Amblecote, by Father Paul Tongue; Meet at the Church 7.30pm.

Amblecote's Lost Windmill?

Borough Archaeologist's theory about the Corbett Hospital site

Many people will be aware that Amblecote Manor was long in the possession of the Grey family, Earls of Stamford and Warrington, resident at Enville Hall.

Twentieth century land sales have severed most links, but many records relating to Amblecote are still held at Enville (a full list may be found on the former Historical Monuments Commission web site at <http://www.hmc.gov.uk/nra/lists/BG-2184-Grey.htm>). Many aspects of Amblecote's past await discovery here, as this correspondence to the Society from Dudley MBC's Archaeological Officer, John Hemingway reveals.

Notes on Windmill Hill and Amblecote Park

I read with interest Helen Cook's article on Corbett Hospital Meadow in Amblecote History, February 2004. I may be able to add a little more information to what is an interesting study. As the Archaeology Officer for the Borough I have recently been doing some research on Amblecote for a landscape characterisation study of 1750. To do that I needed to get map evidence and went to Enville Hall the home of the post medieval Lords of Amblecote, the Grey family, to have a look at their archive. Two maps of Amblecote proved interesting; a map of the parish in 1688 and one in 1769.

The 1688 map showed most of the area of 'The Hill' as unnamed which implied that this was one parcel of land the Grey family did not own. However to parcels to the north, both within the present hospital complex, were named and called Windmill Hill. As both parcels are not on a hill we have to look at a nearby area of high land and of course the area to the south is known to have been called 'The Hill'. I knew there had been a windmill in Amblecote but could never place it. Now there is enough evidence to suggest it predated the site of The Hill House on the crest, which in turn predated the Corbett Hospital. The probability is that the name of the site was originally called Windmill Hill and then shortened by the Rogers family. The 1769 map shows Thomas Rogers house right on top of the hill.

Amongst the other features that turned up on the map was a route on the north side of the Windmill parcels that is now lost. This was an east-west

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SOCIETY GAS WORKS SURVEY

Meet on the Church Hall car park at 7.00pm on Wednesday 14th of April.

At the General Meeting of the Society on 24th of March it was decided to carry out an informal survey of the perimeter of the old gas works site with a view to recording the current visible historical landscape.

This will involve walking around the edge of the site, so far as is possible, and noting and photographing (photographers very welcome) items and objects of interest.

The results will be published in the newsletter and will serve to register the Society's interest and concern in this area prior to any development.

Please just 'turn up' if you are interested, though if you need further details contact Nick Baker on 01384 894446.

BACK TO THE WALL

One feature of the Amblecote landscape which causes considerable concern amongst Society members is the wall in High Street that defines the western edge of the Corbett Hospital (formerly Hill House) estate.

This is regarded by many as a signature architectural inclusion within the area, and something that must be preserved in the face of possible development of the Corbett site. The hospital lodge and gates are already locally listed by Dudley MBC; Amblecote History Society would like to see this protection extended to the entire wall.



The High Street Wall. An important feature of the Amblecote landscape which should be preserved.

GAS WORKS CONCERNS

AND THE CANAL-STOUR CORRIDOR

As readers of the local press will be aware the future of the old gas works site, owned by Secondsite Property Holdings, is causing some controversy in political and planning circles, with a split over whether development should be commercial or residential. Amblecote Councillors Pat Martin and Colin Banks, both regular attendees at the Society's meetings, provided an overview of the situation at the General Meeting of the 24th March, noting that the outline residential planning permissions recently granted in no way guarantee that housing will be the final outcome.

Indeed both were of the opinion, generally reflected by those present, that housing was not ideal for a number of reasons. Firstly, and importantly, allowing housing on this site would further 'hem in' Stourbridge's commercial area as defined by the ring-road; precluding forever any chance of this part of the town expanding, in terms of a public area, outside the ring-road's grip. Secondly, Councillor Banks brought attention to long-term residential development plans for the entire Canal Arm/Stour 'corridor', into which developers would no doubt like to incorporate the old Gas Works site. Thirdly, it was noted that the polluted nature of the site seems to fluctuate according to the developer's immediate requirement; on the one hand being too polluted for public areas or access, yet on the other entirely fit for houses and gardens!

From an historical perspective the site, although largely cleared, possesses important sandstone cliffs with some interesting tunnels dug as air-raid shelters during the Second World War, as well as some remnants of its former industrial usage.

Preserving the Canal-Stour Corridor

Concern over the Gas Works site reflects a growing local feeling that the now largely redundant, yet highly valuable, land in Amblecote around the canal and river, should be developed only very carefully. Public access, along with vital historical and environmental conservation should be considered alongside any housing developments. Various local groups such as the Stourbridge Navigation Trust have laboured long and hard over the past decades to save our canals and historic buildings in this area, and it would be a travesty to see any chance of public space development disappear under blanket private housing.

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THE AMBLECOTE WINDMILL

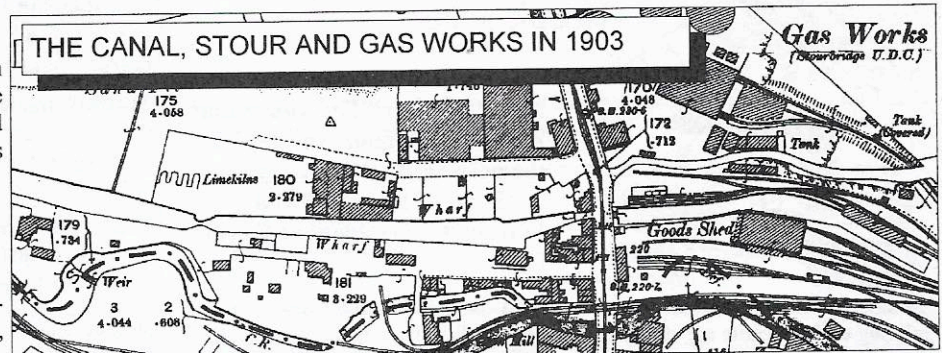
track that led to 'Whittymore', today's Withymoor. A primitive glass cone had been drawn on the early map, to which this route led. This was the Whyttymore Glasshouse of Paul Henzy whose whereabouts were lost after it closed down in the early 18th century and which we can now tell lay at the present junction of Rannoch Close and Kirkstone Way.

By the time of the 1688 map the eastern part of the parish was being enclosed, but it is easy enough to make out the waste land of Whittymore on the north east side of Amblecote and The Waste, (Bagley's Road area), in the south east. These were part of the same unit in the medieval period and the area as called Amblecote Park. This area had probably originally been part of Pensnett Chase to the east. Anyone hunting in the Chase without permission (Lord Dudley's property), was poaching and in 1292 a document taken by the king's sub-escheator at the time of the death of the lord implied that the lord of Amblecote and his parker were guilty of this offence.

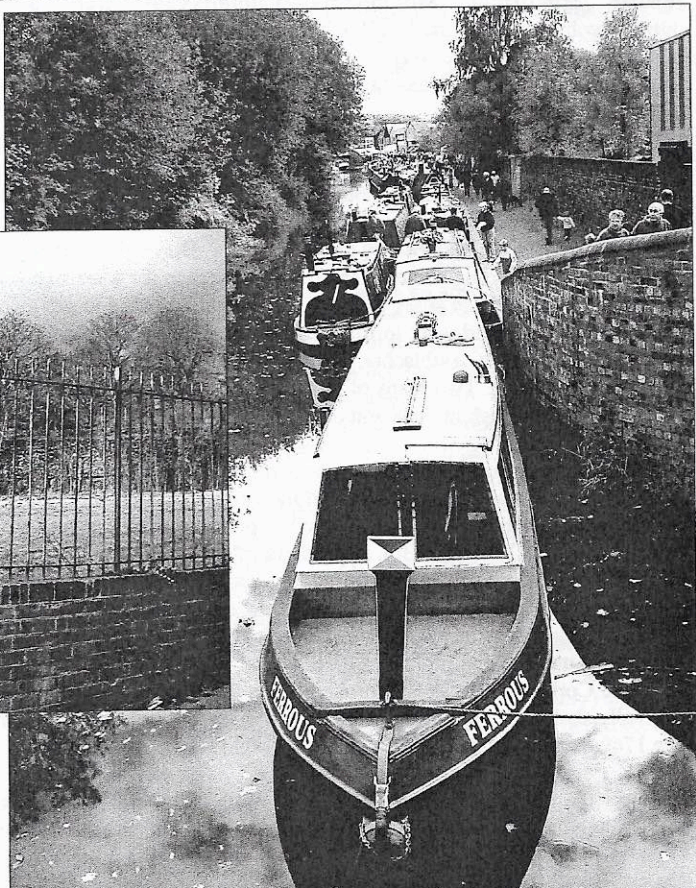
"William, parker at Amelcote, came many times with a horse and carted away venison, which they had taken to the hall of Sir William de Stafford of Amelcote."

Granted Sir William and William the parker may have been poaching on the east side of the Ravensich brook in Kingswinford but it is much more likely that he was killing his own deer on his own land and the sub-escheator was not aware that the Ravensich was the boundary.

It is amazing how a few lines on a scrap of paper lead us into revelations about the history of a given area!



Above: The old gas works site. Residential development would restrict future Stourbridge public space expansion.



Right: The hard won reclamation of the Stourbridge Canal Arm should not be sacrificed to blanket housing construction.

BRICKYARDS OF THE BLACK COUNTRY

A Talk by John Cooksey

Eighty eight people packed into Amblecote Church Hall for the February meeting of the Society to hear an illustrated talk by John Cooksey on Brickyards of The Black Country. John, author of a book of the same title, is a former worker in specialised refractories who, upon retirement, felt moved to record the history of this vital, yet at times surprisingly obscure, industry.

John noted that he was pleased to be presenting his talk in Amblecote, an important, if not the most important, area of fire brick production. Almost all the Black Country's mined clay was 'this side'

of the Dudley ridge, with thick deposits lying on or close to the surface. Indeed, Amblecote Church Hall itself is constructed of fire bricks donated (at cost) in 1921 by the firm of John Hall, whilst Holy Trinity Church is built of bricks from William King donated (at cost) eighty years earlier.

Brick making in the area can be traced to 1566, and John considers the life of the Black Country industry to have been just four hundred years, ceasing in all but token form after 1966. The quality of Amblecote clay, with a natural chemical constituency that made it ideal for furnace linings, was recognised very early on and John pointed out that in 1699 clay was 'exported' to Coalbrookdale for the iron furnaces there, whilst in the 1770's local bricks were being taken to Scotland for use in blast furnaces.

However, the clay was mainly used locally, occurring as it did interspersed with the coal of the great South Staffordshire 'thirty foot seam' at a relatively shallow average depth of between 90 and 400 feet. With coal and clay so close together the Black Country became an important 'engine' of the industrial economy. John explained the method of extracting fireclay, which occurs as a hard rock like, mineral that has to be mined by conventional techniques.



John Cooksey, author of 'Brickyards of the Black Country' whose talk to the Society took place amidst an impressive collection of Amblecote bricks! Both Amblecote Church and Church Hall are of firebrick.

Although (at least in later years) the miners were men, John quickly introduced the Black Country's female brick yard workers, an incredibly hardy breed without whom the industry could not have functioned.

Women were employed to pick out impurities from the newly mined clay, before heaping it into banks where it was left for up to eighteen months to weather.

As the industrial revolution gathered pace so extraction rates rocketed.

In 1852 some 46,000 tons were processed, representing some fourteen million fire bricks. Ten years later thirty million bricks were produced, whilst in 1872, 278,000 tons of clay was mined. John remarked that with such a massive extraction rate, to say nothing of simultaneous coal working, it was a wonder any building in the Black Country at that time could remain standing - although of course quite a few didn't!

Although the industry was far from 'mechanised' in a technical sense, John showed the types of heavy machines that were used to crush and grade the weathered clay. Water was added and then the material was pressed, ready for turning into bricks for firing. Again women carried out much of this work, laborious in all senses of the word.

The fire bricks themselves ranged from simple 'brick shaped' blocks to highly specialised shapes made for very specific purposes. John ran through some of these, with a fascinating range of photographs and drawings that brought home just how vital these bricks were to British industry. Above all John made the point that many

furnaces were, from the earliest times, designed for continuous production. Indeed the ability to contain heat within a furnace can be regarded as a defining point of industrial history. By such means processes can be prolonged and better controlled, higher temperatures achieved and fuel economy optimised. Taking glass furnaces as an example John showed how specialised brick channels directed heat repeatedly around the 'pot', minimising waste.

Bricks were used in almost every heat-based industrial manufacturing process. Blast and (later) open-hearth furnaces for iron and steel, kilns for the production of cement, retorts used in the manufacture of town gas from coal (everyone in the room over 40 took a nostalgic imaginary 'whiff!'), and of course glass. John spoke about the several types of glass furnace, ranging from the pots used by the relatively small scale crystal makers of Amblecote and Wordsley, to the huge plate glass float-furnaces of manufacturers such as Chance and Pilkington, where molten glass was kept at 1,400 degrees in swimming pool sized containers - all lined with precision fitted fire bricks. Such furnaces were expected to run continuously for over a decade, demanding a high quality clay product.

The use of fire bricks in steam engines was another fascinating area of usage. Marine and locomotive engines both used refractories, and John showed some fascinating slides of the so-called 'loco-arch' situated in the firebox of all locomotives. These had to operate at variable, but

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BRICKMAKER.

INFORMATION REQUEST : QUEENS CRESCENT & AMBLECOTE HALL

Society member Pat Harper is seeking information on a two items concerning now demolished Amblecote buildings.

Firstly, what were the dates of construction and demolition of Amblecote Vicarage, which once stood off Vicarage Road on what is now Queens Crescent? Secondly he would like to establish the truth of the occasionally told story that the actor Chris Gittins once lived in Amblecote Hall?

Indeed this latter request opens up a long awaited debate about Amblecote Hall. Clearly shown on maps until well after the Second World War (along with the adjacent Amblecote Hall Farm), there is precious little in print about this building and, as far as is known, no photographs - or are there?

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FOR THE LATEST INFORMATION

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BRICKYARDS OF THE BLACK COUNTRY

potentially very high, temperatures and making them was a highly specialised almost bespoke task. Oakfarm Brickyard in Pensnett was renowned as one of the best loco-arch manufacturers. Another once common refractory product produced in the Black Country was the humble fire-back, with many fine examples still lurking behind modern gas fires!

Turning away from the heat of the furnace John outlined other important clay items produced in the area. Glazed pipe was a prime example of how one invention can change the world, with these hard wearing yet highly efficient items revolutionising sanitation in Britain, responsible in no small measure for allowing the cities spawned by the Second Industrial Revolution to remain tenable as they grew. Continuing the sanitary theme John mentioned Victorian efforts to produce a single piece glazed bath – finally achieved locally, but weighing several hundredweight.

However it was the humble brick that had occupied the lives of most brickyard workers, seventy five percent of whom during the 1870's heyday, were women. Their hours were long and the work extremely hard with conditions unthinkable by today's standards. An average days production was 1000 bricks, with each worker responsible for making the clay, shaping the bricks, loading the kiln and firing them. John made the point that these women were by no means a Victorian phenomenon, the last, Irene Sherwood who died in 1995, having worked well within living memory. "They knew", John remarked "about work."

The Claymasters who owned the brick yards, and who proudly stamped their names on their product, were no different to other manufacturers of their times, with good and bad amongst them. A bad master on a bad day would happily destroy a pile of made bricks as sub-standard, forcing a piece worker to start again, whilst many were happy to donate (or at least discount) bricks to good causes – most notably the building of chapels and churches. John showed slides of several such buildings, including Amblecote's own Holy Trinity Church, and those of Quarry Bank and Brockmore. Close ups revealed these to be built of specimen products of the highest quality.

John then showed a set of fascinating views, including some early

aerial photographs, of long closed brick works, pits and mines. Some of the 'marly holes' were well known to the audience as former swimming pools, their bottomless reputations seemingly well deserved when John outlines the fantastic quantities of clay many had yielded. One especially interesting picture clearly showed the Harris and Person building on Brettell Lane – the subject of a forthcoming talk by Alan Smith at the May meeting of the Amblecote History Society.

Finally John outlined the demise of the Black Country industry, which after four centuries of production ground almost to a halt in the late 1960s as socio-industrial change swept the UK. The end came suddenly and killed off numerous firms at the same time, John noted that the large number of manufacturers were always able to live alongside each other, so great was the demand for their product, and thus they all 'died' together. The workers in one yard, when informed of its imminent closure, managed to produce 30,000 bricks impressed with a rather rude word - now collector's items! However, no amount of black humour could save the yards and by the 1970's the brick industry, including its highly specialised refractory arm, had become a mere shadow of its former self. Sadly, John pointed out, there is no remaining example of a classic round brick kiln anywhere in the Black Country, not even as a museum item, a reflection perhaps of the 'invisibility' of this most vital of manufacturing industries.

The Secretary, Nick Baker, thanked John for his most informative and entertaining talk, noting that the thick Amblecote clay in his own garden made him entirely appreciative of the difficult nature of the material!

Questions and discussion revealed a number of former brickyard employees in the audience as well as relatives of several lady brickyard workers. Their comments revealed the classic dichotomy of the traditional Black Country workplace; on the one hand the difficult working conditions of the yards and on the other, pride in a high quality hand made product that has now disappeared.

John Cooksey's Book, *Brickyards of the Black Country* is available from the author price £9.99 (he will sign it if you ask him) and contains many and more of the illustrations used in his talk. Contact John on 01384 836122. It is also available from the usual local bookshops.



WAR MEMORIALS PROJECT

Nick Baker and Ian Williams continue to work on this project to discover all they can about the various Amblecote war memorials and those commemorated by them. Nick is researching the construction of the Amblecote Lych gate, the history of the War Memorial Athletics ground and a number of smaller memorials in Amblecote, whilst Ian has produced an impressive dossier on those commemorated plus some who are not, and others who, whilst not casualties, have war records of note. As a very useful first step Ian has produced a comprehensive list of all Amblecote casualties including their full first names, something often missing from memorial records.

So far most of the effort has been concentrated on the Great War although over time the involvement of Amblecote residents in all conflicts before and since will be included. It is hoped to present the results of these researches in both lecture and printed form, with

an initial presentation in October.

Meanwhile Ian and Nick would be very pleased to hear from anyone who has memories or knowledge of the involvement of Amblecote men and women with the armed forces during the First or Second World War, or who have any recollections of the construction of war memorials within Amblecote.

CHURCHYARD MEMORIALS PROJECT

Avril Williams and Doreen Easthope, members of both Amblecote History Society and of the Birmingham and Midlands Society for Genealogy and Heraldry, have embarked on a project to update a list of churchyard memorials first drawn up around thirty years ago. This plotted the position of all grave markers and memorials in Holy Trinity Church and Churchyard, and recorded all inscriptions (even fragmentary ones). Carefully indexed, the list has proved an useful tool for local historians and a ready reference device for genealogists who want to find a particular grave.

However, since its publication a great many more markers have been added and Doreen and Avril are carefully recording these and adding them to the plan. Meanwhile, to prove

the invaluable worth of this kind of work, Father Paul Tongue notes that some of the inscriptions recorded in the original document, especially those on sandstone, have become illegible.

Avril has also made a start on a wider project to record Amblecote obituaries printed in the old Country Express.

WAR GRAVE ADDITION

Still on the subject of churchyard and war memorials Father Paul has received a request from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to place a memorial on the family grave of Sergeant William Basil Hale of the Machine Gun Corps, one of nine recognised war graves in the Churchyard. Hale, who died aged 28 in St. George's Hospital, London on June 25th 1918, was buried in a family grave just to the right of the western Amblecote Churchyard steps. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has a responsibility to perpetuate the memory of those buried in family plots though (understandably) not the family monuments themselves. Therefore, as the Hale gravestone is becoming worn, the Commission will place one of its small plaques in front of the stone, unobtrusively ensuring that his name remains legible.