



# AMBLECOTE HISTORY

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The Newsletter of Amblecote History Society

December 2007

## A DEVASTATING BLOW FOR LOCAL HISTORY

CHANGES TO LOCAL LIBRARY SERVICES ARE SET TO DESTROY  
A VITAL STOURBRIDGE RESOURCE

**Another blow to the history and heritage of Stourbridge at the hands of 'Dudley' fell in November when, as part of the 'Providing a Modern Library Service' initiative, Dudley Council decided to axe the post at Stourbridge Library that includes responsibility for the Stourbridge Local History Collection.**

In plain English this means that Marilyn Ferris, whom all local historians know well, and the collection of unique Stourbridge related archives that she looks after, will both be leaving the town.

This is appalling, and any amount of hogwash, eyewash and whitewash (such as that propounded by Councillor Kettle in the *Stourbridge News* that the "need to review our preset library services is obvious" as if this is somehow for our own good), can deny the fact that this blatant cost-cutting exercise is designed to reduce facilities at Stourbridge Library; with the added effect of destroying yet another reminder of Stourbridge's independent past.

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### CAN YOU HELP?

#### A message from the Secretary

Since the Society was formed in February 2003 it has operated on the principle of 'minimal administration', with only three elected officers – Chair, Secretary and Treasurer, and a small number of co-opted assistants most notably Conservation Officers; all ably assisted by a number of informal volunteers who help organise events, man the door and set out the room, etc.

Indeed, since 2003 we have managed to operate with only a couple of committee meetings. Not a

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### EVENTS 2008

A full listing of next year's events is made on the back page.



Please read these carefully as one, a visit to Halfpenny Green Vineyard in May, will take place on a Thursday, a change from our usual Wednesday evening.

Advance booking for this event is essential with final numbers required by the 1<sup>st</sup> of February. A booking form is included inside, please return the Secretary, by hand or post, with payment, by the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2008.

# A DEVASTATING BLOW FOR LOCAL HISTORY

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Whilst Dudley town centre becomes a polished granite piazza, no doubt designed to compliment the mooted 'Dudley' Council Centre, the once proud town of Stourbridge is, once again, having its historical nose rubbed in the civic dirt.

Meanwhile, Marilyn's friendly expert knowledge will be lost and the Stourbridge Collection at best left moribund, at worst destroyed. Indications are that it will be transferred to the Dudley MBC Archives at Coseley – about as far away from Stourbridge as it is possible to get within 'Dudley'.

Of course there is the promise (isn't there always) of a new Borough Archives Centre at the Black Country Museum site. But then, of course, there was previously a promise of one in Kingswinford. Meanwhile the 'Dudley' archives continue to be housed in the wholly unsuitable Victorian school building in Coseley, more convenient for the residents of Wolverhampton, Walsall and West Bromwich, than Stourbridge, Wordsley and Amblecote! Let's face it, as those of us who use neighbouring archive services well know; compared to Staffordshire and Worcestershire (from which counties 'Dudley' was

carved in 1974), the facilities at Coseley – despite the valiant efforts of the staff – are poor indeed.

Let us work out exactly what is at stake here, and what Councillor Kettle and his ilk think we should acquiesce to as 'obvious' for our own good.

## **Just what *is* at stake?**

The Stourbridge collection has the largest accumulation of local material within the Borough outside Coseley, although in terms of focussed subject matter – the Town of Stourbridge including Amblecote – it is the largest. There are over 6,000 photographs, thousands of pamphlets, dozens of maps, census and parish records.

Of vital importance is a set of microfilmed newspapers dating back to 1856, including a full set of the *County Express* – plus the facility to read them. The collection is dynamic and well used. Authors and publishers of local history (including our own Society) regularly donate material, whilst researchers old and young, experienced and novice from all over the world make use of it. Stock is continually added, including current Stourbridge newspapers, and the presence of a

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bad thing many would say! However, I am not sure this is entirely appropriate when considering the range of activities we now carry out and – as Helen Cook's article in this Newsletter makes clear – have an occasional brushes with big business and the local Authority.

As a result, and due to increasing work commitments, during 2007 I feel I have been able to support the Society as its Secretary in only a minimal capacity. Indeed, I have only just been able to organise meetings and produce an occasional newsletter.

I feel the restricted job I have been able to do has not really been adequate in support of the potential of the Society. In addition I feel we could achieve more, not least in the area of grants and publications (I feel very strongly that the latter should be a prime Society objective), if we operated in a (slightly) more formal manner.

Therefore, at the last Society meeting I announced that, as from the AGM on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2008 I will be looking to spread some of the secretarial role, and asked everyone to think about whether they would be

dedicated librarian ensures that the collection is maintained and kept in good condition.

One of the most important facts about the collection and the librarian is that enquiries about Stourbridge history that we as a Society (and

indeed many others) receive, can be forwarded to Marilyn, safe in the knowledge that these will be dealt with personally and efficiently. These enquiries (for the information of Councillor Kettle and others whose world view is clearly quite narrow) come from all over the world.

### So, to what should we 'obviously' acquiesce?

Firstly these are cuts. No amount of dressing up can hide that fact.

Secondly and in the short term, without a dedicated librarian there will be no-one with direct responsibility to add new material, maintain that which exists, or to answer specific enquiries. A further effect of this will be that the collection will lose its focus even if it remains within Stourbridge Library.

Thirdly, and in the long term, if the collection is transferred to Coseley it will be in this disassociated state which will result in it being subsumed within the wider 'Dudley'

archives, something that will never be recovered even if (along with the runway for the pigs) Dudley MBC ever get round to building an archive centre at the Black Country Museum or anywhere else for that matter.

**It will be easier to visit the Birmingham City Archives than see the Stourbridge ones at Coseley!**

This is to say nothing of the effect that the collection's physical dislocation from Stourbridge will have.

To take a 'quick look' at a Stourbridge map, or to browse the essential resource that is the *County Express*, will require a difficult journey to Coseley. It will actually be easier to get to the archives of the City of Birmingham!

This proposed change to the archive service at Stourbridge is a disaster for local historians and the history of Stourbridge. Once again the civic mish-mash that is 'Dudley' has reached out its grabbing hand to take, take, take from what it views as the 'periphery'.

**The extra-special depressing thing about this occasion is that not only are services being reduced, but this time very heritage of Stourbridge is set to be destroyed.**

“There is more than one way to burn a book.”

Ray Bradbury

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able to assist in any way.

The form this might take is, of course, a matter for the AGM. However I would suggest that the role I currently undertake could be divided up into several (and hence less onerous) ones. These might be, Secretary (as in Correspondence, etc), Events, Membership and Newsletter. Whether or not these could be added to or amalgamated would be a matter for discussion, and I would say straight away that I would be more than happy – if this were approved – to carry on at least producing the Newsletter (indeed this would be more frequent if I had more time).

I also think it would be an idea to make the Conservation Officer's role (currently so ably filled by Helen Cook) a formal one, and support this with a slightly more formal committee structure than has been the case up until now.

Nick Baker



# THE EVER CHANGING FACE OF AMBLECOTE

## Helen Cook—Conservation Officer

**A**s quoted in an earlier edition of Amblecote History Society newsletter, 'we hope that all housing developers reputable?' Or are they just taking advantage of the Councils' lack of manpower to police vital planning issues in the face of challenging Central

Government housing targets? With much more relaxed planning laws now in the pipeline; this could make a big difference to you, especially if you are unfortunate to be living next to a potential new development site.

I can mention a few examples of plans changing halfway through a site development. Adding a few more houses here and there boosts profit margins of the already rich major building contractors. Neighbouring and impacted residents are not being properly consulted over the new plans, green areas are not receiving adequate environmental surveys and due consideration, roads are redirected or choked up and these things continually are allowed to happen because they appear 'unimportant'.

I hope that I am not going to have to make a nuisance of myself on the site of the Corbett Hospital in the process of that imminent housing development. Snatched greenery that hopefully could just go unnoticed, perhaps another mature tree felled at a later date, just to accommodate two or three more houses. A local councillor, not of Amblecote has called this process the 'drip effect' - this is where a site developer goes back to the various planning committees seeking permission for making extra space on their site. This more often than not happens without further public consultations. These not being agreed upon at the original public consultation period and are generally the variations that affect the people close to the development site agreed on. They remind me of children asking for more sweets, 'Drip effect?' I call it the GDE (Greedy Developers Effect).

We find building plots marked out on site, half built homes being built without the full planning process completed. Our own ward councillor pointed out to me that this is common practice with councils across the country. I find it difficult to see why we bother to have a planning

process in the first place if these sites cannot be policed due to lack of manpower or is it because it is considered not 'cost effective'? It appears that developers can change the face of our countryside pretty much as they wish. However, we do have to meet the Central Governments housing quotas.

### **You may ask, what does this have to do with Amblecote?**

Only this summer I have experienced all of the observations I have made above. The residents of Hammond Way and other bordering roads at Cricketers Green have had their homes blighted over a relatively short period of time. If anyone has suffered this, it becomes a very unwanted, stressful and upsetting intrusion into their lives, to which no one seems accountable for their actions.

When the initial site proposal for the residential development of the Transco Site off Church Avenue was announced, the neighbouring residents on Hammond Way and elsewhere were given access to the Planning Application that was submitted to build houses and a block of Apartments on this site. The initial plans showed there to be an access road to be constructed on the right hand side of the site (east side) on top of the bank at the bottom of the gardens along Hammond Way. All of these plans were accepted by the residents with no significant objections to the proposed development.

Between the bank, and the boundary of the gardens of Hammond Way was a green or wild-life corridor. I suppose you could say it was a bit of a "no man's land". But, this corridor was in fact a major link to the designated SINC (site of interest for nature conservation), the sandstone cliff, on the site of the old gas works. It had been designated for its geological features and for protected species that were known to regularly use this green corridor for feeding and movement. The residents of Hammond Way had cared for the green area bordering their gardens by installing bird boxes, making compost and generally encouraging the wildlife to visit it.

During April, I received a telephone call from some of the residents concerning the strong likelihood that this vegetation was being removed. The explanation we were told was that the land had been contaminated by gas work activities. A JCB bucket was used to extract a crude, one-off

soil sample as 'evidence' to support the developers intended unilateral action. All this was done after some of the vegetation had been removed or damaged by construction vehicles. This appeared to indicate that the vegetation removal was taking place without a full and proper soil contamination survey on that part of the site.

I alerted our local ward councillor, who due to her timely intervention, managed to put a stop to any further tree and vegetation removal works, until a new revised landscaping plan could be submitted to and agreed by the council. This development control process was to now include a survey of all native species and habitats along this wildlife corridor, which had now accepted by the developers that it did exist and they had some responsibility to safeguard. This consultation period took up the whole of the summer and resulted in several site meetings between our local ward councillor, the developers and Dudley Borough Planning Department (who on several occasions had not time to attend these vital meetings). Even some council officials were shocked at the near completion of some of the houses on the site at that time, especially when the planning process had not been fully completed. Also the access road remained in the original place, which had not been agreed to by the adjoining residents on the original plans. These changes were that houses were now to be built on the original line of the access road on top of the tree and shrub lined bank.

Sadly we were told that the trees and vegetation had to be removed and the soil to be capped because of contamination, although no written evidence was ever presented to the residents. The new houses properties at the rear of Hammond Way have very little garden space and significantly overlook the existing properties at Hammond Way (who feel their privacy has been invaded despite assurances from the developers that this would not happen).

Eventually in October, our ward council-

lor arranged a meeting between the residents and developers. This was the first point of contact that residents had had with any of the senior managers of the development, which was not without trying as all their telephone calls trying to make contact were all left unanswered.

At the residents meeting we were shown a plan of the new landscaping proposals, which we were pleased to see included all native species of trees, such as Oak, Birch, Hazel, Hawthorn and Holly which were to be planted along this wildlife corridor. The re-instated bank was to be supported by stone gabions which visually are not that wonderful, but groundcover plants such as Ivy will eventually screen them. Other ground covering plants to be placed within the wildlife corridor will be Bramble/Blackberry species and Elderberry; all of the plants selected are a food source for the variety of wildlife which can be found in the area. The occupants of the new houses are to be told of these arrangements and about the sensitivity to the wildlife areas and encouraged to care for their part of the corridor. Planting was due to take place in mid-November.

I know that the residents in Hammond Way will be doing their bit to get the green corridor flourishing with wildlife as quickly as possible, and perhaps some of their privacy restored. This of course does not make up for all of the strain and stress created by an ineffective planning process. From the initial consultation to the final landscaping the local residents have struggled to make their views known, in what should have been an exercise in co-operation between all of the interested parties. Even now, no one is sure of the final outcome. Yes, in time the vegetation will become established but only if the relevant parties stick to the new agreements. To me, the most upsetting part about any development is it can take away your much loved surroundings in an instance. We the victims of this just have to wait for nature to take its course.

## THE AMBLECOTE BLACK POPLAR - SOME GOOD NEWS

Many of us within the Society have regularly walked from the Bonded Warehouse, along the Stourbridge arm of the canal towpath, admired the beautiful Poplar tree, located by the bridge where the canal overflow enters the river Stour. Many a conversation has ensued in the past as to whether it is the much rarer English native Black Poplar. So I contacted the National Recorder Dr Fiona Cooper, then sent samples of twigs and leaves along with photographs for identification.

We were above all pleased to know that the results confirm that yes, it is a genuine Black Poplar. A letter of confirmation of this proven fact has been forwarded to Dudley's Nature Conservation Officer,

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the Ecologist for British Waterways has also been informed.

British Waterways have now commissioned a tree survey for the whole of the West Midland canal systems. During October, there was a possibility of the tree having to be felled. The surveyor found the tree dangerous with base rot, sadly accelerated by vandalism. It was severely leaning towards the canal and the bridge, which would place it a risk to the public. Also the tree over time had become top heavy with its spreading crown and some of the boughs were unsafe from age and lack of maintenance. The approximate age of the tree is given between 100 and 120 years old.

A Bat survey was carried out before the work to the tree took place during the last week of October. Paul Wilkinson, Ecologist for British Waterways and the tree surgeon, managed to retain the tree in quite a high pollard. This was very pleasing for us as this was much more than we expected. They also retained a large hollow at the top of the tree, that was used and hopefully will continue to be used as a roost for Tawny Owls.

More good news is that British Waterways now have a commitment of maintenance towards this tree over the coming years; Paul explained that it would be monitored over the next 7 years before it is scheduled for more safety work, this is depending on how the tree responds to the crown reduction as the tree was quite large to undertake pollarding.

Cuttings have also been taken from the tree to hopefully ensure the future of the Black Poplar remaining a feature along the Stourbridge Canal.

#### History and facts of the Black Poplar

John Constable immortalised the black Poplar in many of his paintings of East Anglia where it flourishes in fertile soil near water. Since the last century it has been planted in heavily industrialised areas particularly in the North of England, where it is sometimes called the Manchester Poplar. It makes an attractive screen for factories, railways and other industrial structures.

The Black Poplar is native to Britain and crosses easily with other poplars to produce vigorous hybrids. It has a beautiful spreading crown which in spring gives a wonderful amber glow of newly opened buds, also distinctive is that the trunk appears to be covered with massive bosses and burrs. The branches appear to sweep towards

the ground and suddenly tweak upwards at the end of the stems, a good indicator for identification. It is estimated that there are 7,500 Black Poplars in this country. The major population being in the Vale of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire

The species is dioecious - meaning it has Male and Female trees. Out of the national population only about 600 females exist. Female species of the tree were once discouraged as the seeds produced vast quantities of fluff which caused a nuisance. The Poplar, as with certain other tree species reacts well to being a pollard, this is achieved by reducing the crown to increase further growth and to make them more stable. The word pollard is from the French word 'poll' meaning to behead. The height of a pollard is arrived at where the tree is cut above the height that any large stock (horse or cow) can graze at, so not to eat the re-growth. Pollards therefore often tend to be a tree of riversides open grazing meadows rather than of woodlands or old arable lands. Some magnificent examples of polled Black Poplars can be seen on Castlemorton Common near Malvern in Worcestershire and they are still harvested today.

Black Poplars are valued for their fast growth and high quality timber. The timber is often used for making baskets for fruit containers, pollarding helps to provides a good crop of wood for making bean sticks. The wood was used many years ago in the construction of farm carts as the timber is soft, spongy and very nobby making it capable of withstanding heavy loads. It was once used for matches and matchboxes until more hybrid trees were introduced, once again because of its open texture which makes it easy to impregnate with paraffin wax in which the matchsticks are soaked. It is not liable to break or splinter when the match is struck. In Holland, the solid wood is traditionally used to make clogs.

There is much folklore attached to the Black-Poplar with the most famous tree located in Aston on Clun in Shropshire, sadly this was topped by a gale in September 1995, but with some good thinking a cutting was taken some years before and new tree was quickly re-established on the same site. Also known as the 'arbor tree' or 'flag tree'. Every 29<sup>th</sup> of May, the tree is dressed with multicoloured flags and buntings, where they remain until the following year when they are replaced again by a wedding pageant, this to commemorate the wedding in 1786 of a local squire and his wife also the reason being is that his new wife is said to have liked the flags that decorated the tree during her wedding and donated a sum of money so that the festivities continued annually.

Coincidentally the date of flag dressing is on Oak Apple Day, which on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1660, Charles II declared a public holiday 'for the dressing of trees' known as 'Arbor Day'. The squire's wed-

ding just happened to coincide with Arbor Day. The wedding ceremony and dressing of the tree still continues each year.

## BACK ON THE RAILS

**R**ailings have been in the news in Amblecote over the past few months, with changes to those surrounding Holy Trinity Churchyard.

Firstly, the gap caused though accidental vehicle damage to the Vicarage Road railings in 2006 has at last been repaired. The specialist firm of Barr and Grosvenor in Wolverhampton carried out the casting of new rails from patterns that exactly matched the 150 year-old Bradley's Foundry originals. Full details of this excellent (and wholly Black Country) project can be found on the Holy Trinity Church web site at [www.holytrinityamblecote.org.uk/railings.htm](http://www.holytrinityamblecote.org.uk/railings.htm)

Secondly, during the summer, Church Warden John Easthope has been hard at work replacing the railings at the back of the car park across the end of the churchyard extension. At one time the Bradley's railings ran the full length of the eastern side of the churchyard, as evidenced by the existence of an isolated brick and cast iron column above the old gas works cliff face. When these were removed is unclear, although they appear to have been taken away for scrap, and a rather inadequate fence was erected at right angles to the old one to designate the new churchyard area.

During the demolition of the old Corbett Hospital Out-Patients, Dudley Health Authority very kindly donated some redundant railings which previously fenced the hospitals periphery on Vicarage Road. Time and machinery were also readily given by the builders who transported the heavy railings across to the churchyard and later helped move them into position.

However, most of the work was carried out by John who cunningly adapted the railings, which were originally too high, through the simple if hard-going expedient of burying the bottom to a depth that made the top match those of the existing Bradley's ones. The additional concrete required to hold these in place has thus resulted in a 'reinforced' foundation of which any cold-war bunker would be proud! Anyone from a future generation who comes to replace these railings would be advised to quote an hourly rate...

With all the replacement railings now painted black to match those around the rest of the churchyard, the overall appearance is of a neat job well done. Meanwhile the historical significance of both repairs should not be ignored. The Vicarage Road railings will, on close inspection, reveal themselves as 'new' for many years to come; thus indicating the continuing ability of specialist Black Country manufacturers to produce quality cast-iron even into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The car park railings on the other hand will recall the past of the old Corbett Hospital long after even the current building has undoubtedly itself become redundant.

## CORBETT COMMEMORATION

**T**he Society has been visited on a couple of recent occasions by Steve Field the Borough Artist, with regard to a public art commission on the outside of the new Health Centre in Vicarage Road. During the first meeting it was clear that there was a strong public feeling that anything placed here should commemorate the life of John Corbett and that, importantly, it should be able to outlast the new building – thus perpetuating John Corbett's memory into the foreseeable future.

Steve visited the Society again in October to talk about the work – which is now on the west face of the building. This consists of several square panels held in a frame that represents salt crystals – the basis of Corbett's fortune. Each panel holds an image that represents John Corbett's life, ranging from his portrait to the raven that he adopted as his family crest.



# 2008

## EVENTS

The following events have been organised for 2008.

Please note that we must have final numbers for the visit to Halfpenny Green Vineyard on Thursday May 8<sup>th</sup> 2008 by February 1<sup>st</sup> together with the full payment of £12.50 per person.

All Events are to be held in Amblecote Church Hall commencing 7.30pm unless otherwise stated.

**January 9<sup>th</sup>**

Annual General Meeting. Of which notice is hereby given.

**13<sup>th</sup> February**

Charles Hajdamach on Amblecote Glass  
Charles is a renowned world expert on glass, and was formerly Keeper of Glass at Broadfield House. He is in demand as a speaker throughout the world, and we are very lucky to have enticed him to travel all the way from Villa Street to talk to us about local glass.

**March 12<sup>th</sup>**

Film: 'A Story of Cradley Heath'

Local filmmakers Val and Harry Bloomer will present their new production about this famous Black Country location.

**April 9<sup>th</sup>**

The Medieval Herbalist

Kevin Goodman, local re-enactor and Medieval Expert will give a talk on medicine in the Middle Ages.

**THURSDAY May 8<sup>th</sup>**  
(Note NOT WEDNESDAY)

A visit to Halfpenny Green Vineyard

Guided tour commencing 7.00pm at Halfpenny Green Vineyard reception. Cost includes tour, winetasting and Winemakers Platter (Ham and cheese platter, freshly baked bread, pickles, coleslaw & salad plus desert and coffee) £12.50.

Final numbers required with payment by February 1<sup>st</sup>. Please complete the enclosed slip and return to the Secretary by hand or post by February 1<sup>st</sup> 2008.

**June 11th**

Society Summer Walk

To be arranged

**August 22<sup>nd</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup>**

International Festival of Glass

The Society will again play a role in the Festival.

**September 10<sup>th</sup>**

To be arranged.

**October 8<sup>th</sup>**

The Hill family of Dennis Hall.

Don Cochraine.

Local historian and author Don Cochraine will talk about this famous Amblecote family whose mansion – Dennis Hall – still survives.

**November 12<sup>th</sup>**

The War Graves Commission

Geoff Longmore

On the day following the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1918 Armistice, Geoff Longmore will present a highly appropriate talk on the setting up and work of the War Graves Commission and its founder Fabian Ware.

**December 10<sup>th</sup>**

Our Traditional Society Christmas social

