



AMBLECOTE HISTORY

Number 17

The Newsletter of Amblecote History Society

January 2007

WAR MEMORIALS OF AMBLECOTE

The Society has published a new work in two volumes entitled *War Memorials of Amblecote*, the outcome of two years of research and compilation by Ian Williams and Nick Baker.

The first, *The Memorials* by Nick, explores the efforts to erect memorial in Amblecote after the First and Second World Wars. As is usually the case with Amblecote this includes not only those relating directly to the Parish itself but also overlap considerably with the efforts of neighbouring Stourbridge. Indeed, Amblecote's memorials cover the complete range of Great War commemoratives,

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A new Society publication.

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'planners' strike again!

Sankey House. *The Man from the*

Ministry spells the end.

HISTORY SOCIETY

MEETING DATES 2007

Meetings will be at Amblecote Church Hall commencing 7.30pm unless otherwise notified.

Guests £1 unless otherwise advertised.

10th January (AGM)

8th February (Thursday)

14th March

11th April

9th May

13th June (Walk)

12th September

10th October

14th November

12th December

AN EVENING WITH CARL CHIN

The Society's February Meeting will take place on
THURSDAY 8th FEBRUARY
at

Amblecote Church Hall
Commencing 7.30PM

When we will be pleased to welcome
Prof. Carl Chin
Guests £2.00 on the door.

14th March

**GUNPOWDER PLOTTERS
AND RELIGIOUS RIOTERS**

A history of Stourbridge
non-conformism 1603-1715

by

Roy Peacock

11th April

**MORE AMBLECOTE
AIR-RAID SHELTERS**

Exploring The Shelter Complex off
Old Wharf Road

by

Nick Baker & Mike Perkins

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ranging from individual names added to family gravestones, private memorial plaques, the Parish and UCD Lych Gate with its list of the fallen, and the War Memorial Athletics Ground, purchased by public subscription in 1920. Perhaps somewhat counter intuitively not all these projects were without controversy, indeed quite the opposite. The Stourbridge effort in particular was dogged by skirmishing between revolutionary minded ex-soldiers and the political and social 'establishment'. Whilst that of Amblecote epitomised many memorial projects in 'starting big and finishing small', as economic post-war realities overwhelmed initial enthusiasms.

The second volume *The Men & Women* by Ian, contains lists and biographies of all known First and Second World War casualties with Amblecote associations. This also includes several who are not commemorated on the Amblecote Parish memorial. One of these, Sergeant Major Joseph Nicholls MM, although buried in Amblecote church yard is not an 'official' war casualty, having committed suicide in 1919 as a result of wounds. It was felt important to include Sgt/Major Nicholls as a victim of the war. In all eighty two WWI and eighteen WW2 casualties are listed, with only one from the Second War - D. Meredith - proving untraceable. The volume also includes a number of death and in memoriam notices from the *Country Express*. The listings show that Amblecote service personnel served, fought and died in every theatre - with the changing nature of both conflicts reflected in the casualties. Only a small number of regular soldiers lost their lives in 1914, whilst two

years later the slaughter of the Somme brought tragedy to almost every street in Amblecote; with several families suffering multiple losses. During the first war only once casualty was from the Royal Flying Corps, whilst in the second almost one third of the dead were from the RAF, including one woman Mary Elwell. Perhaps most poignant is the tragic link between the two conflicts made by the Mills family, with Edward Mills killed in 1945 the son of Charles Edward Mills killed 26 years earlier in the Somme.

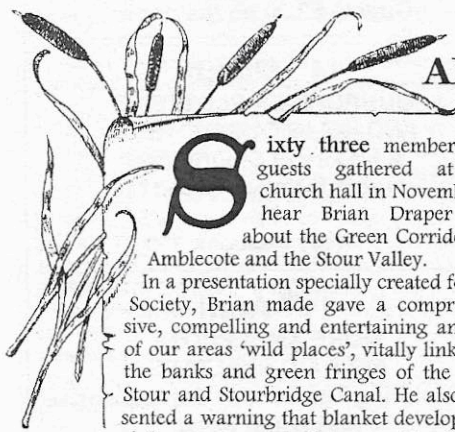
War Memorials of Amblecote Parts I and II are available at Society meetings, from Books Unlimited in Lower High Street and from Stourbridge Library at £3.00 each.



Amblecote History Society

War Memorials of Amblecote Parts I and II. Available at Society Meetings and from Books Unlimited. Price £3 each

GREEN CORRIDORS OF AMBLECOTE & STOURBRIDGE



Sixty three members and guests gathered at the church hall in November to hear Brian Draper talk about the Green Corridors of Amblecote and the Stour Valley.

In a presentation specially created for the Society, Brian made gave a comprehensive, compelling and entertaining analysis of our areas 'wild places', vitally linked by the banks and green fringes of the River Stour and Stourbridge Canal. He also presented a warning that blanket development of these areas, and others considered until lately as 'waste ground', severely compromises wildlife habitats.

Brian, having worked for forty years maintaining the River Severn and its tributaries, has an intimate knowledge of the Stour and the water systems associated with it. The river traditionally rises at St.Kenelm's Well on the Clent Hills, although there are in fact several adjacent springs that combine to provide its watershed. The river then falls rapidly (indeed it is characterised all along by a steep course) into the Black Country where for many years it was itself very black indeed. Making its way through Halesowen, Lye and Stourbridge the river, historically both worked hard for water and treated as a drain for all manner of effluent, joins the Smestow at Stourton before passing through Kidderminster and onto the Severn.



CONSERVATION 2006

A YEAR OF GREAT CHANGE IN AMBLECOTE

by Helen Cook
Society Conservation Officer

The beginning of 2006 brought a fall of snow during February, a good time to see what has been roaming around in the virgin snow. The tracks of Fox and other small mammals were clearly visible, so were the footprints of birds who were busy searching for food. All this was easily seen in and around the areas of open space and our green corridors along the Stour. The Buzzards are seen regularly now and during March, they become more vocal. I have spotted three circling over the parish and Clare and I are hoping that there is a pair among them. There seems to be plenty of food in the area to keep them here, a most welcome new resident to Amblecote. Amongst our earliest risers within the bird population, is my local Robin. Nevertheless, you cannot rely upon him as an alarm clock as Robins will sing throughout the night, perched on a lamp standard for warmth and fooled into think it is daylight.

However, even becoming more vocal is our resident Blackbird, when I hear his song I really feel that spring is just hiding around the corner. Soon the courtships will begin and the rest of the population of birds will join in. During the dull winter days, we can see Redwings actively feeding in flocks in the Corbett Meadow, as they turn over the cowpats for insects. They need to be getting plenty of sustenance for they will soon begin their journey North and East to their breeding grounds.

Redwings usually flock and feed together along side our other winter migrant thrush, the Fieldfare. For some reason we rarely see these large grey and brown thrushes in the Amblecote area, this maybe due to the lack of their preferred environment. They tend to feed in open country and orchards where they can feed on the abundance of fruit. A habitat that is now lost to our more urbanized area where sites like these have diminished. Other good news is that our local Tawny Owls are heard most evenings as they move between the Churchyard and the Hospital grounds. One regularly roosts on one of the church turrets, Clare has found some of its pellets and we have inspected these to see if we can analyse what they have been feeding on. Mostly the main diet appears to be small mammals; this gives a good indication that we have a sustainable vole and other small

rodent populations in the

meadow and churchyard. The Tawny Owl (whether it be he or she) is often heard calling from our much loved and now protected Horse Chestnut that stands near the Hospital.

After our History Society's meeting in March, I observed a sight, which brought a lump to my throat, on my way home I passed the top entrance to the old A&E department of the Corbett and silhouetted in the lamplight I saw and watched a Hedgehog making its way across the tarmac. I wondered how long it had been a resident here and how it will fare when they start the demolition of the buildings. Even now as a New Year starts, I wonder what has become of him.

The demolition of the hospital started in March this caused us some concern about the future the large landmark of a tree, the Horse Chestnut. We kept a constant watch on it to make sure it was well protected, having to seek advice on its well being a couple of times with the tree preservation officer from Dudley Borough. The massive demolition machines had only a few feet to spare from the tree as the final brickwork came down still it all went well. Our worries next, turned to the Holly trees in the Shrubbery, so after many site meetings with the engineers and further discussions Clare and Father Paul had, we managed to get two of the ancient trees moved back towards the wall so that the new road could be accommodated. I do not know how many litres of water poor Claire and Paul trudged across to give the trees a good chance of survival, but this year they have had everything against them including the hot summer, so shush! Don't tell Severn Trent. Up until the present time the trees are looking good and promising, I thank you both. By the way, Paul, I will give you a reference as the irrigation supervisor at any nursery if you wish a change of job during your retirement

During April, we did part of our Green Corridor walk around the parish, starting at the Bonded Warehouse and then along the river Stour and Canal towpath. Spring was certainly in the air and we saw plenty of water birds like Moorhen and Coot. Mallards were busy also as several pairs were engaged in the throws of producing this seasons youngsters. Many of the spring flowers were now coming to life, we saw Violets, Wild Arum and the lovely yellow flowers of the Colts Foot.

The area around the old Managers House at the now defunct Bradley's Iron Works, the Dingle, this has become a wonderful area for wildlife. In what remains of the old garden of the House, there is an old orchard now looking sad and overgrown after years of neglect, excellent habitat for small birds though. Nearby, is what we believe to be a Black Poplar tree, now lying on its side felled by vandals, how could people destroy such a magnificent tree,

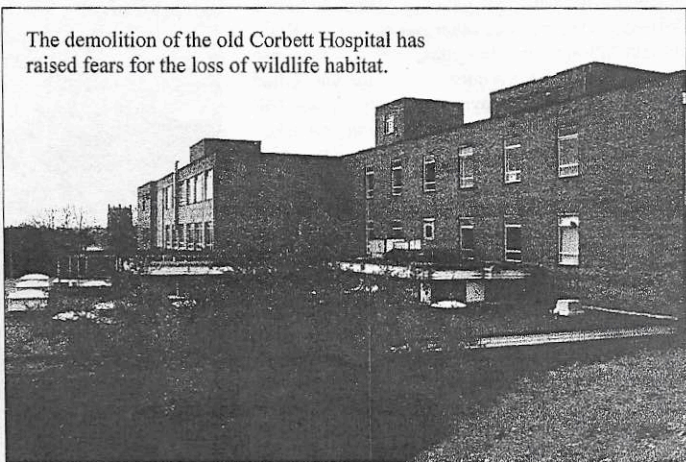
its more a wonder that no-one was killed when it fell. More interesting is the Poplar tree that stands by the bridge at the entrance to the dingle, by the canal overspill, this a fine mature tree and now the question is, is it a rare Black Poplar or is it a sub species of the Italian variety. Maybe it is the Manchester Poplar, a variety bred to cope with industrial pollution in the 19th century, and often planted along canals and industrial works. We hope to solve the mystery in the spring of 2007.

As I made my way into Dennis Park and along the Coalbourne Brook, I noticed a significant difference where the brook has been cleared out and some of the vegetation on the banks had been removed, allowing more light through to encourage the bank side flora to flourish. Some of the willows along here have been neatly pollarded. Towards the top of the brook, I saw a blue flash skim by, and there heading downstream, to my amazement was a Kingfisher. Real excitement this as it suggests the water quality of the brook is much improved and it has a source of food for it.

The top of the brook is now fantastic with great area of Bluebells and a wonderful patch of Wood Anemones, in the boggy places near the brook, Marsh Marigold, sometimes called King cups, were in full bloom. This area of the Brook is now looking spectacular and is a gem for Amblecote. It is a nice rest place for our now local Buzzards; they often perch in a tree along the brook.

April this year, was not only a busy time for our wildlife, it was a busy time for developers in Amblecote, making it a frustrating month for Clare and myself, and still continues to be. The most worrying problem was to the proposed changes to the sandstone cliff face on the old Gas Works site. This is not only

The demolition of the old Corbett Hospital has raised fears for the loss of wildlife habitat.



important for its wildlife value but also its geological value. The scrub area has been thinned out, and some new tree plantings with imported soil. This is losing more and more of the visible Sherwood Sandstone. Clare has been in touch with the appropriate people concerning these issues. I do find it hard to see what these designations are for, because in some instances where work has been done these designations do not appear to be upheld. This site is designated as a S.I.N.C. (Site of Importance for Nature Conservation) coming under the jurisdiction of Nature England formerly English Nature but work still seems to go ahead despite these designations.



During July and August, the heat and the drought played havoc with the newly planted trees at the New Corbett Day Care Hospital. I had many comments from people expressing their concern for the trees. Some of the trees were looking dead and appeared to be dropping their leaves, but they were only behaving in a way that was natural for their survival, to shed leaves, they were merely closing down. The Lime trees along the front of Vicarage Road have survived, with the worst casualties being some of the Oaks, but by far our biggest disappointment was the loss of the Cut Leaf Beeches. We have however, been told by the landscape contractors, that if there are any losses over a period of two years, the trees will be replaced. I am quite concerned about this sort of promise, as we have had promises from that direction before and are still waiting for a certain Centenary Oak to be replaced; this promise had not been honoured due to contractual difficulties!

The hot weather of the year also have
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played havoc with my patience, What with the Centenary Oak tree and other issues like the Right of Way through the Hospital, with no response from many of the avenues that Clare and I had tried, I took it upon myself to write to our MP Linda Waltho. I explained the situation and asked if she could help. I have since had replies which are hopeful.

Whilst on the subject of the Hospital and the restoration of the grounds, I have noted some new plants appearing. These seeds have been brought in with the loads of new top soil to the Corbett meadow and some had been spread onto the area adjacent to Vicarage Road. This gave quite a fine display of flowers during the summer and early autumn. One interesting flower that appeared was the Celery Leaved Buttercup (*Ranunculus sceleratus*), we had no record of it in the parish, this seemed to indicate that the soil had come from an area of wetland, it will interesting to see if it reappears in 2007. One other wildflower that came with the soil gave us a super display, was one of the White Umbellifer families, the Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*), this gave a spectacular show in the meadow, shimmering in a light breeze in the intense heat and continued to flower through to into September. Other plants noted were Red and Purple Poppies, Weld or Dyers Rocket (*Reseda luteola*), Ox-eyed Daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) continued to bloom into in December.

During the autumn, our Finch population have suffered a devastating virus, especially the Greenfinch. In Worcestershire, I have seen quite a few sick and dead birds, they have all succumbed to a disease called trichomoniasis, this is a disease that usually affects pigeons and doves. The symptoms are lethargy, puffed out feathers and the birds drip saliva and appear emacipated even where there is plenty of food. It is thought that this years hot summer conditions may have helped the disease to spread. It also can be spread by contaminated bird feeders or water containers, so make sure all feeders are clean and move them around the garden if possible. Living by the Corbett Meadow I do not have a big population of greenfinches visiting my birdfeeder, but Clare fares better as the Vicarage is surrounded by shrubs, also the area around the Allotments is a good place to see them. I will be interested if anyone has seen any casualties, so far none have reported in Amblecote. If anyone does see any sick or dead birds please let us know.

November began with a request for a memorial tree to be planted in

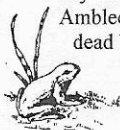


The Coalbournbrook and its valley are a vital conservation resource within Amblecote.

the churchyard, we were asked to find a suitable species. After much deliberation a Copper Beech was chosen and planted, I am sure this will complement the other mature trees in the Churchyard in time.

One positive step at the New Corbett Hospital was when I found some trees, newly delivered to replace the ones that did not survive the summer, amongst them were some Oak Trees. Later in the week I had a telephone call from Dudley Health Trust, inviting me to meet with their Development Manager and the Construction Manager for Summit Healthcare. We had a very constructive meeting and chose a tree and its location. The tree can be viewed from the Hospital restaurant and it is the last oak on the right when looking out of the window. I felt the tree needed to be identified from the others, after all it is our new Centenary Oak. So I put an idea to both parties to see if a fence, with an inscription branded into the wood, explaining the tree's status. Sadly, although all parties agreed it seems there are no funds available from the Health Trust. I am now in the process of getting some estimates for this and pursuing other avenues for funding. Therefore, my thanks go to all concerned after such a long time we now have our Oak Tree.

More good news came with the opening of the Right of Way from Vicarage Road through



the Hospital to the High Street. Its status will be marked on the new Ordnance Survey Map as an official Public Right of Way. Many thanks must go to Clare and Father Paul who have campaigned tirelessly on this issue, also many thanks to all those people who filled in the Evidence of Right of Way Forms, without these forms this result would never have been achieved. Finally I would like to thank our MP Lynda Waltho for responding immediately with the above issues. Along with Clare, Father Paul and myself I do not think a month went by without her keeping us all fully informed of the progress and responses she was having.

The Public Right of Way not only makes a very pleasant walk away from the main road but it is worth observing what wildlife is around when we use it. We also have to be aware that in the spring there will be further demolition work on the remaining old buildings of the Corbett Hospital, to make way for the impending housing development, so expect a further possibility of disruption. In addition we must remain diligent and keep an eye on the trees and make sure they remain un-

damaged within the construction area.

During the very successful Glass Festival, I joined the parish boundary walk led by Nick. Towards the end of the route, passing Bradley's Iron Works where the site has previously been cleared and now has a lot of re-growth on it, we noted a rare butterfly, a Clouded Yellow, we observed it for a time until it flew across the Stour, it has not been seen since. It is a migratory butterfly, so it was obviously enjoying that spot and was just passing through. However, who is to say that it is not a regular visitor along this route?

Finally, all of our observations will be passed on to EcoRecord which is an ecological database for the Black Country, at the same time we are creating our own database. So, please continue to let us have any records of wildlife you see, be it animal, bird, insects or plant within Amblecote parish. Remember not to be put off, even if you think it may not be that unusual.

Telephone

Helen Cook 01384 395034

Clare Tongue 01384 394057



SANKEY HOUSE—THE END WILL BE SOON

Government Inspector Overrules Good Sense, Conservation and Heritage

The Dudley MBC web site has recently published a report by The Planning Inspectorate following an appeal by Sheils Construction concerning the site of Sankey House on Amblecote High Street. The appeal was against the Dudley MBC (remarkably sensible!) decision to refuse planning permission for five "detached dwellings with private amenity space and shared access". The Council was concerned (as indeed anyone who knows the A491 will be) about access to such a 'shoe horn' development on this relatively small plot. Unfortunately the Government Inspector, a Mr John Mattocks, overturned Dudley MBC's objections in favour of the developer.

From a heritage perspective; on the archaeology front the Inspector decided there was "no clear evidence" that there is anything of archaeological importance on the site, thereby ignoring the clear evidence known to the History Society and many others that this site was occupied in at least 1688 (by map evidence) and certainly before this as a significant settlement at the junction of a lane leading from the ancient Amblecote Hall. On the question of bat foraging, the Inspector acknowledges that the site is used by bats but dismisses this as 'resolvable' by tree planting and retention! Members will recall that all significant mature trees were swiftly felled a couple of years ago...

Sadly there is nothing that can be done to change this situation and Sheils Construction will no doubt move within the near future to swiftly destroy Sankey house along with any archaeology and wildlife habitat it may support. However, the report is well worth reading as an example of how central government is predisposed to overturn sensible local planning decisions as well as ignore historical and wildlife concerns.



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fauna. In fact, it is the building of apartment blocks and the creation of roads and pavements that totally destroys wildlife habitats; making property developers much more profligate eliminators of wildlife than the local hoodies.

Using photographs taken along the Stourbridge Canal Arm Brian revealed what he thought might be a (very) rare Black Poplar. Closer investigation is still required (and is being carried out) but if the tree is indeed a *Populus nigra subs. Betulifolia*, then it is one of the rarest native trees in Britain. Common until the 19th century (Black poplars feature in Constable's famous Hay Wayne painting), and grown and used extensively for tough wear requirements such as in buildings and wagons – as well as medieval arrow shafts – the Black Poplar has almost died out due to a lack of suitable propagation habitats. Brian had a theory that the ironmasters of the Stour valley may well have had a special use for such trees and that the canal-side example – if indeed it is a Black Poplar – might be a survival from these days (more in the Newsletter in the future).

Whilst the water quality of the Stour is still rather poor (albeit much improved compared to 50 years ago), that of the canal is very good and supports an entire ecosystem of fish, amphibians, reptiles, mammals and birds as well as a diversity of aquatic and other flora. Chatting to fishermen, Brian has learned the canal contains Stone Loach, Roach, Bream and Pike, whilst the northern bank with its inaccessible, vegetation covered sandstone cliffs provides an ideal habitat for larger birds and mammals.

Moving on from the canal arm Brian explored Amblecote's last remaining 'wild' stream – the Coalbournbrook – and in doing so revealed a natural landscape that is as historically impressive as it is contemporaneously precious. Although severely culverted at both ends, the exposed stream, which runs parallel with Collis Street, is both natural (in that it has never been 'worked' like the Stour) and of such good water quality that a surprising variety of wildlife flourishes there. Add to this the existence of a patch of mature woodland with Oak, Ash and ancient plants such as Mares Tail and Dog Mercury, and all the indications are that the valley of the Coalbournbrook is one of Amblecote's last remaining pieces of truly natural landscape. Once again, even the attentions of our local chavs are unlikely to do harm (aside from attacking the woods directly with flamethrowers or pouring arsenic in the water) their abandoned car tyres and other debris actually provide additional shelter for fish and frogs. On his trip along the brook Brian saw Sticklebacks, Dragonflies and even a Green Woodpecker, whilst the presence of a Jay in amongst the trees – a true woodland bird – attested to the high natural quality of this area.

Turning his attention to larger expanses of water Brian spoke about the lake at Lakeside. Acting as a drain for the numerous minor underground watercourses disturbed by open cast mining, the lake, although artificial, has developed into an important wildlife haven. Along with several other lakes in the area including the Fens Pools, that of Mary Stevens' Park and that of the Corbett Meadow, the Lakeside Lake [Ed: Does it actually have a name?] acts as an important link in a chain of open water 'landing grounds' for migrating water birds. Adjacent to Lakeside the railway embankment forms a 'mini woodland' providing another important green verge that links with the other green corridors. Although, Brian did mention the plethora of domestic cats that also roam this area; not so domesticated that a tin of Whiskers can possibly compete with a tasty sparrow or nest of voles!

Finally Brian talked about the larger open spaces in Amblecote which, along with the 'water and verge' corridors formed by the Stour, Canal, Coalbournbrook and railway, provide habitat, food and migration pathways. The Corbett Meadow is one and is especially vital as it is enclosed and, still in use as a grazing field, is not a public open space. Again this is 'primary landscape' with no former use other than a very long-standing agricultural one. The churchyard is also a vital open space and although hardly 'undisturbed' its large areas of complicated paths and undulating ground as well as nooks and crannies formed by old gravestones make it an ideal 'wild' place for plants and animals.

To conclude Brian discussed the threat to Amblecote's wild corridors which, of course, comes from the current and apparently inexorable requirement for residential development. The government is keen to use 'brown field' sites (such as the old gas-works) which may, in fact (such as the old gas-works) actually be highly developed urban wildlife havens. Meanwhile in Amblecote which was, after all, until very recently largely rural, the dangers of a developer disingenuously calling ancient natural land (such as the Coalbourn valley) 'brown field' is ever present.

However, there is hope, and Brian's last few slides showed the upper Stour valley as it used to be some thirty years ago. Sterile, sometimes poisonous, water flowing past and often over piles of rubbish and scrap metal. A river used and abused to the point of death, and only fit for a drain and as a dumping ground. Since then regulation of pollutants and reclamation of land together, it has to be said, with some industrial decline, have re-vitalised the Stour. Not completely, of course, and the river is a long way from its 'natural' state, but with care, patience and not a little vigilance from groups such as ours the Otters may yet one day return.

