



# AMBLECOTE HISTORY

Number 6

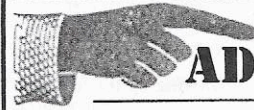
The Newsletter of Amblecote History Society

May 2004

## EVENTS MAY/JUNE

**Wednesday May 17<sup>th</sup>**  
**THE WORK OF THE WEST MIDLANDS HISTORIC BUILDINGS TRUST** by Alan Smith. Church Hall 7.30pm.

**Wednesday June 23<sup>rd</sup>**  
**GUIDED TOUR OF HOLY TRINITY CHURCH**, by **Father Paul Tongue**. Meet at the Church 7.30pm. Cheese & wine afterwards.



## ADDITIONAL EVENT

**WEDNESDAY JUNE 9<sup>th</sup>**  
**AMBLECOTE, ARCHAEOLOGY & ARCHIVES**  
Including Researches at Enville Hall  
by John Hemingway, Archaeology Officer Dudley MBC  
Church Hall. 7.30pm

## SURVEY SUCCESS

### Gas Works Perimeter Walk Produces Several Surprises



The Amblecote History Society survey of the perimeter of the old Stourbridge Gas Works site on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> of April was a great success with 17 members in attendance. We were also pleased to welcome a representative from the *Bugle* who took photographs and accompanied us for part of the walk.

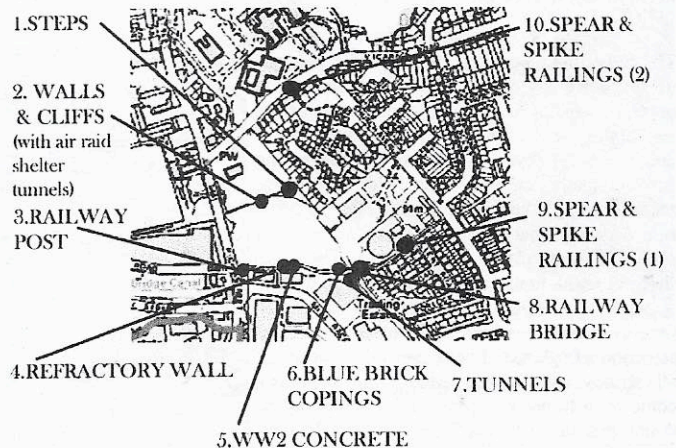
The validity of a group survey of this kind was amply illustrated by the wide variety of objects and artefacts observed, along with the special local knowledge derived from several individuals who had known the area before major changes took place in the 60's and 70's, and had even worked at the former Gas Works.

Above all, the survey demonstrated the integrated nature of the historical survivals in the area and why, with development pending, the Society should do its utmost to preserve the most important of these.

### Birds Eye View

The survey began with a 'birds eye' observation from the heights of Holy Trinity churchyard. Although no buildings now stand the perimeter of the Gas Works is still clearly defined. To the north and east this takes the form of a long cliff face, some of it brick faced, some exposed sandstone. Whilst to the south there is a long and eccentric brick wall, and to the west (facing the A491) modern railings. Visible on the bed of the site, immediately below the cliff face, can be seen the part outline of a gas holder pit, one of three that once stood here. Looking to the left of the churchyard there is a piece of ground on the same

AMBLECOTE HISTORY SOCIETY GAS WORKS SURVEY  
PRINCIPLE ITEMS OF INTEREST



level, high above the main site, with the heavily overgrown remains of some brick steps and wall structure.

### Cliffs, Bricks and Tunnels

Moving out of the churchyard via the west gate the party walked along High Street to the former main site entrance opposite Jones & Attwood. A large brick abutment still stands just beyond the cottages, forming an end to the brick facing of the cliff. In the entrance, now guarded by modern gates, it was possible to look horizontally over the site and appreciate the massive brickwork of the cliff facings. Largely blue brick, these include a series of abutments designed to add strength and provide for infrastructure support, whilst several large metal pipes still emerge at intervals, presumable associated with gas working operations. Norman Robbins, who worked shortly after war at the gas works weighbridge, recalled this stood near the entrance, and also that during county cricket matches played on the sports ground opposite the tops of the gas holders provided workers with a better than grandstand view of play! Also visible from this angle are the modern covers placed over the WW2 air raid shelter tunnels dug in the sandstone cliff and discovered during recent demolitions.

### Railway Survival

Moving down the hill towards Stourbridge past yet more modern fencing, the party turned left into the footpath that follows the southern edge of the site. The corner is composed of a curved low brick wall, now backed by advertising hoardings, which leads into a set of fairly modern, but nonetheless contemporary with the gas works, gates. However, before proceeding further the railway buffs spotted a remarkable and unexpected survival, which provided a genuine 'well I never moment'! Standing on the right hand side of the footpath, in front of a concrete post that supports the modern fence dividing it from the trading estate, was a well worn but massive upright timber

(Continued on page 2)



Members gather on the church hall car park prior to the gas works survey.

(Continued from page 1)

some 10" square and 4 feet high. After some discussion as to the exact whereabouts of the former railways and level crossings, it was concluded that the post was almost certainly a railway survival, possibly the remains of some part of the crossing structure. Incredibly the post also had paint remains on it, in faded but familiar Great Western Railway mucky brown!

Walking up the footpath it was possible to peer through the right hand fencing at the rising cliff face which drops into the trading estate and former goods yard. Those who recalled the latter pointed out the existence of yet more tunnels in this area, with others linking into a complex under the former Grammar School that, again, served as air raid shelters in WW2. There was some rueful comment that plans to convert the old yard, with its canal wharf, into a marina never came to fruition; something that would have found ready backing today.

On the left the rising ground and open link fencing enabled further good views of the Gas Works site, especially the brickwork cliff facings and sandstone bluffs. The feeling was that these really should be preserved, although it was difficult to see how that could in any case be removed!

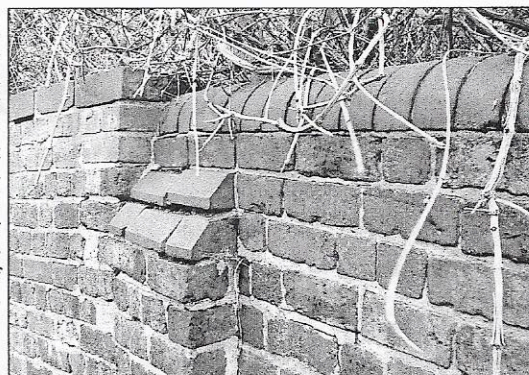
### A Wonderful Wall

The chain link fence then gave way to a long run of brick walling which on close examination proved a wonderfully eccentric mixture of bricks and styles, and contained an absolute gem – another ‘well I never’ moment in fact. Beginning conventionally enough with old hand-made building bricks, the wall suddenly changes into a riot of old refractorys, all quite deliberately placed to form patterns and shapes. There are firebricks with makers names set so as to display outward, curved pieces of broken gas retorts (the fireclay tunnels in which coal was coked), and a selection of ‘glazed’ bricks and brick pieces of all shades and colours which had obviously come from furnaces. There can be absolutely no doubt that the wall has been deliberately constructed to display these pieces to special advantage; though why, when and by whom no one present knew. In one place a definite ‘face’ can be seen using a curved retort as a smiling mouth. Looking at the section of wall careful (it is about thirty feet long and ten feet high) it obviously forms a patch in the main wall, and is itself penetrated by a bricked up doorway. On top of the eccentric area is a very neat row of conventional coping bricks which, apparently contemporaneous, would suggest that the wall was no amateur effort. Two possibili-

ties were discussed; firstly that the wall patch was a deliberate attempt to preserve a collection of interesting bricks; and secondly (and possibly additionally) that it was an austerity measure perhaps carried out in wartime. Indeed, supporting the latter theory is the next section of wall which consists simply of shuttered concrete of, as John Easthope spotted, ‘wartime’ quality with crushed bricks rather than pebbles as aggregate. Whatever the explanation, the wall section is certainly worthy of further study and definitely worthy of preservation.

Moving up the footpath the wall again reverts to conventional brickwork, yet still remains incredibly interesting. Obviously never intended as a specimen example of the bricklayer’s art and altered and patched over time, there are mixtures of old hand made and Staffordshire blue bricks, as well as an impressive variety of blue brick copings. At least three varieties of the latter were noted, including ‘half moons’ some specially curved to follow corners, large sloped blocks, and bevelled bricks for top edges.

A gap in the wall gave a fine elevated view over the main site, and with the refractory wall still in mind another intriguing possibility manifested itself. It



A wonderful collection of blue coping bricks

and spike’ top. About four feet high and set in a concrete coping which is buried under an earth bank but then emerges on top of a low wall, these fine railings are in excellent condition, preservation assisted by what looks like a generous layer of good old fashioned gas tar.

Emerging from the footpath into Church Avenue, the survey party turned left and walked past the main Transco entrance, with signposted boasts of environmental responsibility only partly assuaged by an admittedly fine selection of shrubs. After Transco the site’s border disappears behind the gardens of the modern estate (Kenyon Close etc.) that covers the former Grammar School sports ground, and the party continued to Vicarage Road and turned left to return to the Church Hall car park. However, one last surprise was in store, and something that dramatically illustrated the value of this survey walk.



The Refractory Wall. Who built it, when and why?

Passing the pathway alongside the Brambles nursing home which leads from Vicarage Road to the modern housing estate, and which formerly formed an entrance to the school sports ground, it was noted that some railings defining the edges of the path were of the same ‘spear and spike’ design as those formerly encountered around the gas holder. Is this a coincidence or, as this seems unlikely, what is the connection between them? In either case both sets of old railings are most certainly worthy of preservation.

### Well Worth While

It was dusk when the group reached the car-park, and all agreed that the walk had proved not only extremely useful from a local history perspective, but provided a pleasant fresh air (except for the A491) social event. Several important historical Amblecote survivals had been identified, some entirely unexpected, placing the Society in a much better position to lobby for restoration and preservation if and when the time comes, as well as posing a number of fascinating historical questions. What is the connection between the spear and spike railings\*; and when, why and by whom was the wonderful refractory wall built?

This first survey walk by Amblecote History Society was a great success. It certainly won’t be the last.

*\*Since the survey the Secretary has spoken to a former pupil at the school who remembers an incident, in around 1941, when he assisted in ‘removing’ a fellow pupil, spiked through the leg, from railings that ran along the western (churchyard) edge of the ground. The rapid application of iodine and a ‘chair lift’ to Corbett hospital ensured a positive outcome...*

had already been remarked how the wall buttressing the cliff face beneath the churchyard was of varying brick types. However, clearly visible (now the survey party were ‘in the know’), high up on the wall, was a large patch of apparently multicoloured large blocks. Are these also re-used firebricks?

### Rail and Railings

Almost at the top of the footpath the party paused to appreciate, at the right of the path where it branches towards the Stour valley car parks, the remains of the railway tunnel entrance which once took a branch line from the goods yard to the gas works. Resembling the municipal tip though less tidy, the area is an eyesore with rubbish, shopping trolleys and bicycle frames filling the area of the old line where it passes beneath the footpath (“We would have repaired those.” [1960’s teenager] “We wouldn’t have thrown them away in the first place.” [1950’s teenager]). However, the top of the tunnel entrance can just be seen above an infill bank and the embankment buttresses on either side still contain an impressive mass of Staffordshire blue bricks including yet more huge copings.

Ascending the footpath further, on the left is the remaining Stourbridge gasholder. This higher area of the works is rather more modern than that of the cleared lower part and remains in use for both gas storage and as a Transco depot. Modern railings enclose the site. However, in front of these and running along the footpath edge of the gasholder, are a set of older railings with a decorative ‘spear



Spear & spike railings. Exactly what area did they once enclose?

More pictures can be seen at  
[www.amblecote.org](http://www.amblecote.org)

# PRESERVING THE FUTURE

## KEVIN BARRY - THE GLASSCUTTER



In this edition of *Amblecote News* we feature Kevin Barry, one of several craftsmen based at the Ruskin Glass Centre within the Glasshouse College in Wollaston Road. The Society made a highly enjoyable visit to the Centre last summer and members were impressed by the efforts to preserve local craft skills within a highly innovative educational and realistic economic environment. It is hoped to feature at least some of these over the next few issues. Meanwhile if anyone knows of any other 'old crafts' that still survive in the Amblecote area, please let us know.

### Decline and Fall of an Industry

It is a sad fact that glass making as an industry has desperately declined in the Stourbridge area over the last decade, with the closure of Thomas Webb, Webb Corbett, Royal Brierley and Stuart Crystal marking an end to significant

large scale factory style production. Only Plowden & Thompson of the Dial Glassworks remain anything like a large scale producer.

The reasons for this loss are complex, involving economic and 'corporate' strategies which had little to do with the actual craftsmanship inherent in the production of crystal glassware. However, whatever the reasons – and future histories of the industry will undoubtedly discover much to be ashamed of – the closures resulted in the 'release' of a number of skilled craftsmen from their traditional employers.

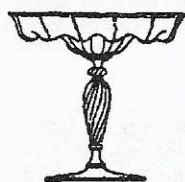
### 'The Ruskin'

Enter the Ruskin Centre, brainchild of Aonghus Gordon who had already established a similar centre at the Ruskin Mill in Gloucestershire. After purchasing the Webb Corbett site Aonghus created the Glasshouse College as an educational centre based on arts and crafts for students with special learning needs. In addition, and to compliment this, the Ruskin Centre was opened to house a series of small industrial units and workshops with the aim of providing affordable accommodation for local craftsmen. Sensitive to the both the decline and heritage of the Stourbridge glass industry, one of Aonghus' principle aims was to provide a 'haven' for the continuance of local glass making skills.

As a result a number of former factory based glass workers, and some newer ones as well as other complimentary trades, have populated the Ruskin Centre to establish a vibrant new local focus of craft manufacturing.

### The Glass Cutter

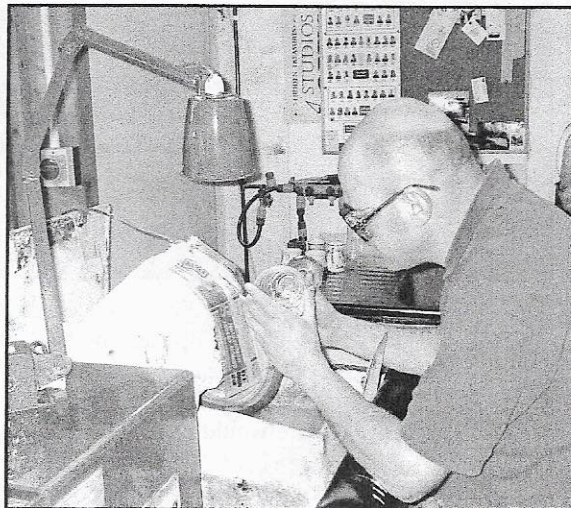
When Kevin Barry began a glass cutting apprenticeship at Royal Brierley in 1976 he did not envisage a working life outside the factory mainstream. Confidence in the industry was high and its three hundred year history seemed destined to continue for generations to come. In the early 80s Kevin moved to Stuart Crystal where he spent twenty years as a master cutter specialising in intaglio and sand engraving, although turning his hand out of interest to all the traditional cutting techniques. In this Kevin followed in the footsteps



of earlier craftsmen who were both specialists and experimentalists, testing and trying out techniques across a range of established procedures in search of new and innovative design. As a top cutter Kevin toured the country as part of a Stuart demonstration team.

However, at the turn of the new century the Stourbridge Glass industry, its local family business' long since sold out to corporate concerns, began to implode. Cheap foreign imports flooded in, first as blanks and later a finished products, and 'the writing was on the wall'. Kevin saw it coming and, whilst Stuarts were in their death

throes, planned for the future by purchasing a lathe from the company and holding out during some difficult final months for a redundancy payment with which to establish his own business.



*Kevin Barry, rode out the 'crystal crash' to become a highly successful independent glass cutter based at the Ruskin Centre in Amblecote*

Initially (after spending five weeks building a long promised conservatory to mark his transition from employee to self employed), Kevin was hopeful of obtaining premises within the Redhouse Cone craft development. However this did not work out, and shortly afterwards Aonghus Gordon offered him a unit at the Ruskin Centre where a number of other ex-Stuart employees had already established 'Crystal with a Twist'.

### No Looking Back

Since then Kevin has not looked back. He offers off-the-shelf pieces, a design service and undertakes bespoke commissions. Self-employment at the Ruskin has allowed him the freedom to change from a tied factory craftsman to his being his 'own man'. He develops, and continues to develop, his own designs across an wide range of glass using every possible cutting technique. His stock displays a mingling of styles never encountered in the old factory showrooms.

Contemporary stands alongside traditional, minimalism alongside high Victorian extravaganza. Now operating outside the constraint of factory production, Kevin makes what he wants, or indeed what his customers want, and in doing so provides glass buyers with a choice never previously offered. He will make an individual piece for an individual customer, something that could never happen - except by very special command - in the days of large scale outputs.

Kevin makes a point of using local blank suppliers, ensuring his product is indeed 'Stourbridge Glass' in every sense. Furthermore he is pleased to be handing on the traditions and skills of Stourbridge to a new generation via both students from the Glasshouse College and work experience placements. He is poised to expand his business by permanently employing a trainee and increasing his workshop area.

Kevin Barry's glass is something special. These are not anonymous objects produced to conform to some distant designer's dictate of taste and style; but genuinely hand crafted pieces that speak loudly of the satisfaction inherent in their creation.

Kevin Barry's studio is open Monday to Friday 9.00 to 5.00 and Saturday 9.00 to 4.00. He may be contacted on 07951 031 993.

## PLOWDEN & THOMPSON VISIT

Twenty Society members toured the Plowden & Thompson works on the 26th of April. This most enjoyable visit included a comprehensive appreciation of both hot and cold sides of the factory which is centred around an 18th century cone.

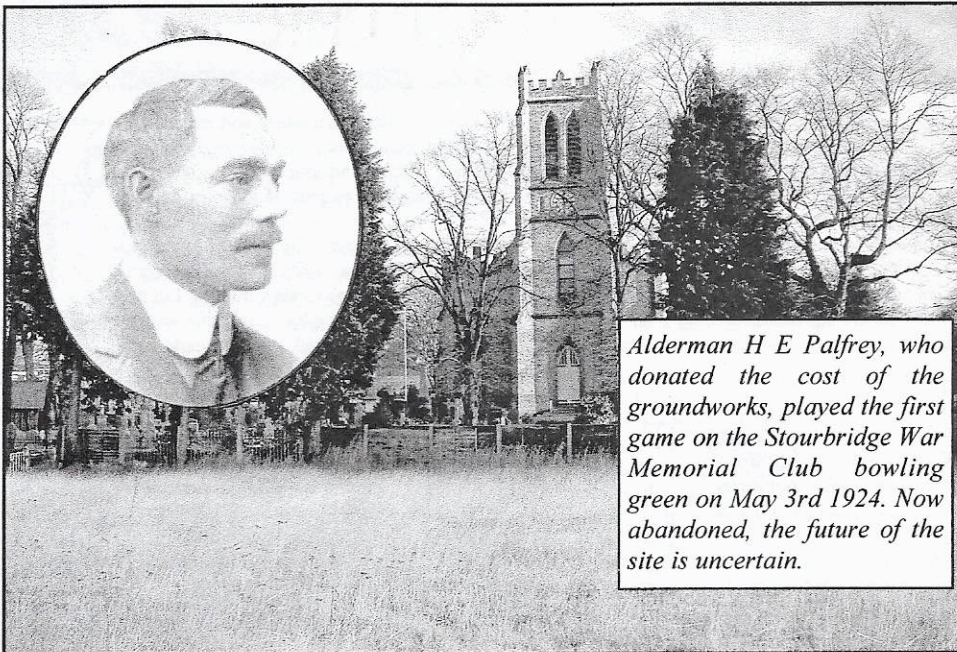
On display were traditional skills used to produce an astonishing repertoire of products ranging from Tudor Crystal cut glass tableware to tail lights for Harrier jump-jets.



*Amblecote History Society apprentice glassblower John Easthope (right) leaves a Plowden & Thompson craftsman in no doubt as to the security of his job.*

## BOWLED OUT AFTER EIGHTY YEARS

### THE END OF AN ERA AT THE OLD WAR MEMORIAL CLUB

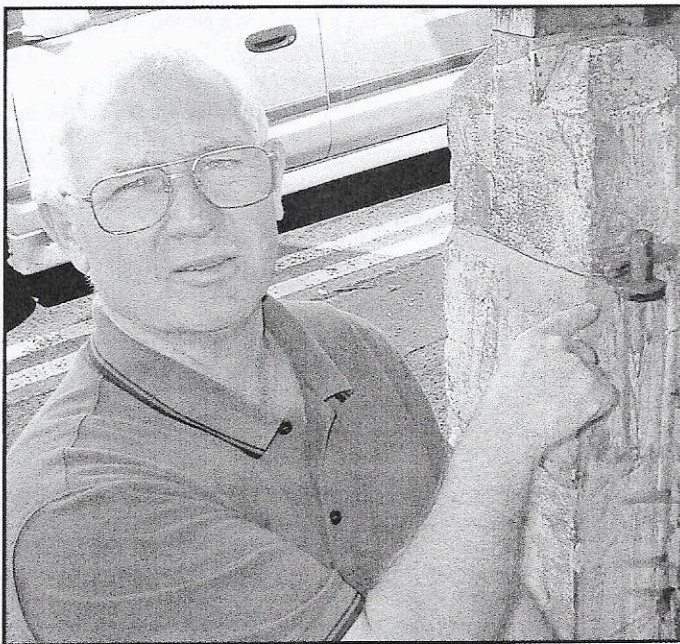


*Alderman H E Palfrey, who donated the cost of the groundworks, played the first game on the Stourbridge War Memorial Club bowling green on May 3rd 1924. Now abandoned, the future of the site is uncertain.*

It is exactly eighty years since the bowling green of the Stourbridge War Memorial club was opened for play. Sadly the playing surface did not quite achieve octogenarian status, having been abandoned following the closure of the club a couple of years ago and is now overgrown.

Such a fate would have been unimaginable on the 3rd of May 1924 when Alderman H E Palfrey, who paid for the groundwork, and Major Harcourt Webb (Webb's Seeds), who donated the grass, played the first game at an opening ceremony. Palfrey, a prominent local politician, significant early Stourbridge historian, and great supporter of the club won the game 9 - 8.

The ground and adjacent club were recently sold following mounting debts and the site, the ownership of which is now unknown, is gradually falling into disrepair. In August 2002 Dudley Planning Department announced that development options were very limited owing to previous sporting use and difficult access.



## LYCH GATE PHOTO APPEAL—CAN ANYONE HELP?

John Easthope is making an appeal for any photographic records of the Amblecote Parish Church Lych Gate which clearly once possessed....gates. Erected in 1921 as a civic war memorial, only the hinge pins and floor bolt retainer remain of the actual gates. Does anyone have any photographs (wedding pictures perhaps) showing these?

### PUBLICATION FROM OVER THE BORDER

The long awaited *A History of Wollaston* from the HOW (History of Wollaston Group) has been published and is an absolute bargain at £16.99. With Amblecote and Wollaston sharing more than just a border many aspects of the book are of immense interest to Amblecote historians, not least the 'cross border' manufactories of Bradley's Ironworks and Wollaston Mills. Many individuals mentioned in the book either lived in Wollaston and worked in Amblecote or vice versa, whilst images of Amblecote appear 'in the distance' in many of the drawings and photographs. Meanwhile anyone who ever went to school in Wollaston should be wary of unexpected photographs of former head teachers lurking around page corners! This a great book—buy it!

### WEST MIDLANDS HISTORICAL DATA

West Midlands Historical Data is an exciting new company specialising in the production of historical texts of special interest to local and family historians. Run by Tony Abrahams in Solihull, the company is working in close collaboration with local archives and libraries, including our own Stourbridge Library and Dudley Archives, to reproduce on CD ROM a wide range of Directories, Local History Books, Church Records, Maps, Military Books and Databases. Amongst the large, and expanding, repertoire of titles are the otherwise unobtainable Stourbridge Directories of 1885 - 1917 (which includes Amblecote), and at £39.44 the set, £17.50 for five-six or £11.75 each - not bad for otherwise unobtainable!

### QUEENS CRESCENT & AMBLECOTE HALL

Society member Pat Harper sought 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? Information has been received that help in both these matters and these are dealt with separately below as both are likely to invite further comment.

#### The 'Queen's Crescent' Vicarage.

Caroline Wharton has forwarded an extract from *Kelly's Directory for Staffordshire* of 1912 which states "The parsonage was erected in 1885 on a site granted by George Earl of Stamford and Warrington". In addition the Secretary, whilst looking for something else entirely, discovered a report in the *County Express* of November 10<sup>th</sup> 1923 which refers to the vicar moving to the "...the new vicarage (formerly Harrington House)." Thus the tenure of the 'Queens Crescent' vicarage was 1885 to 1923. Can anyone fill us in on the date of demolition which must easily be within living memory?

#### Amblecote Hall

David Cox, Editor of the *Blackcountryman* wrote to the Society reminding us of an article written by himself and published in the Autumn 1999 edition of that magazine. This outlines both the history of Amblecote manor from medieval times and poses a number of questions about the Hall, which was apparently demolished in the 1950's. He also notes that a family named Gittins were occupants in 1951/2 (Misses Marjorie and Margaret Gittins and their brother Donald). Again, this is within living memory; do we have any recollections?

Meanwhile the history of the Hall remains an important potential Amblecote history project.