



AMBLECOTE HISTORY

Number 14

The Newsletter of Amblecote History Society

March 2006

FORTY YEARS ON

REMEMBERING THE URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL

March 31st 2006 sees the fortieth anniversary of the disbandment of Amblecote Urban District Council which, along with several other Black Country local authorities, ceased to exist on April 1st 1966.

This issue of *Amblecote History* recalls the old UDC and its final days and invites members to a special celebration to remember the old authority at Amblecote Primary School in School Drive on Wednesday 10th of May at 7.30pm, where the past chairmen's board is preserved. There will be an exhibition of UDC items and a glass of wine and nibbles will be provided.

We are also looking for a successor to the UDC Poem of 1966 - see page 4 for details.



Amblecote UDC holds a special place in the history of local government in England. Widely considered the smallest Urban District in the country it was created in 1898 and comprised just 665 acres, with a border more or less contiguous with that of Amblecote parish. The parish itself had been created in 1859 out of the much older Old Swinford, and placed Amblecote in the peculiar situation of being a parish within the diocese of Worcester, but an Urban District within the county of Stafford.

Quite why Amblecote was traditionally part of the diocese of Worcester yet in the County of Stafford is unknown, as this ignores the natural (and ancient county) border of the Stour. There is a theory that this is the result of a Saxon 'land swap' made when the diocesan boundaries were created in the tenth century, or perhaps even a tribal border agreement in pre-Roman times when Amblecote, for some strategic or economic reason, was claimed by those living South of the river.

Whatever the reason, Amblecote folk over the centuries had rather enjoyed their unusual overlapping border, and this showed no sign of diminishing when the UDC, as part of the Kingswinford division of the County of Stafford, was created from the former Parish Council in 1898. The new UDC had nine members and appointed a number of officers comprising a Clerk, Medical Officer of Health, Surveyor, Sanitary Inspector, Overseers and a Poor Rate Collector.

The nine councillors were elected from a total population of around 3,000, representing once councillor to every three hundred or so people, or - in terms of eligible voters - one councillor for less than 100 individuals (our three Amblecote councillors now represent

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All Events are at
Amblecote Church Hall 7.30pm
Unless Otherwise Stated.

April: 12th

The Stourbridge Navigation Trust.
Chris Dyche.

May 10th

40th Anniversary Commemoration of the
UDC. (At Amblecote Primary School in
School Drive 7.30pm).

May 21st (SUNDAY).

Rogation Walk around the
Parish Boundary.

June 14th

Stour Valley Walk. Meet on the Church Hall
Car park at 7.00pm

August 25th - 28th:

International Glass Festival.

September 13th

Archaeology of Stourbridge.
John Hemingway.

October 11th

General Meeting.

November 8th

The River Stour. Brian Draper.

December 13th

Christmas Social.

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A UDC letter head from 1924—when an office was maintained in Brettell Lane



Final Meeting of the UDC (from left) seated, J.D.Wooldridge (treasurer), W. Evans (chairman), T.A.Wass (clerk), J.J.Round. Standing, C. J. Fenn, W. Skidmore, A.J. Mees, D. C. Gittins, R. Sweeting and W. T. Hollis (vice-chairman). The Council was formed in 1898 and held its last meeting on Monday 21st March 1966.

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over 18,000 constituents). The meetings of the UDC were held for many years in the National School in School Drive and in later years an office and council chamber was established at 131 High Street.

The UDC had considerable powers, setting its own rate and providing a range of local services including sanitation, lighting and health. For most of its existence it was a truly 'local' council, bereft of the party and ideological dogma that besmirch so much local politics these days.

In 1936 the UDC's boundaries were increased by 1 acre when the top corner of Collis Street and Brettell Lane were added to its area, thus bringing the 'Rasclé' pub into Amblecote territory!

Throughout its entire existence Amblecote was jealously regarded by its bigger neighbours, and especially Stourbridge which was itself elevated from Urban District to Borough status in 1914. Having already swallowed Wollaston in 1894 the councillors of Stourbridge set their sights on Amblecote which, as the location of Stourbridge's gas, water, rail and canal infrastructure to say nothing of much of its industry including the famous 'Stourbridge Glass' and even its sports ground, was they reasoned, a 'natural' part of the town—and hence rate revenue. The battle lasted for two generations with several very serious attempts at take over. However, for sixty years Amblecote UDC remained firm, its Councillors resolute in defending their right to remain independent, and insisting on negotiating with Stourbridge only as an equal, if at all. The following report of an Amblecote UDC meeting in the *County Express* from 1930 is typical.

"At Monday's meeting of Amblecote UDC the Clerk (Mr.Rowland Moore) read a resolution from Stourbridge Borough Council on the subject of a suggested conference on the question of boundaries in North Worcestershire and South Staffs to which the Council were asked to consent.

The Chairman asked if there were any remarks; if there were not they would pass on to any other business.

Mr. Guest "They ask for a meeting?"

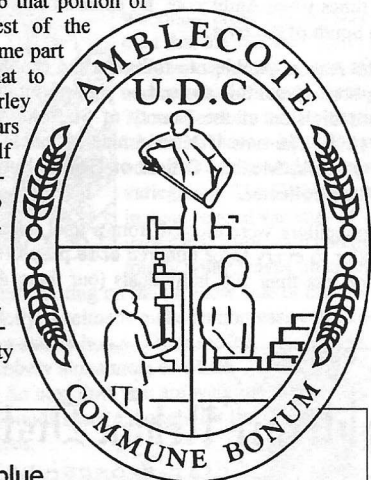
The Chairman "No, they suggest a conference. Any other business?"

Of course, Amblecote UDC in common with most local authorities of that era was composed of prominent local businessmen in whose interests it was to retain control of

their own local affairs. Rates in Amblecote, both domestic and commercial, were consistently lower than those of the surrounding districts (indeed they were often claimed to be the lowest in the country) something that did little to ferment unrest amongst the voters and politicians alike.

However, by nineteen sixties the pressure to amalgamate had become unbearable. Much larger authorities than Amblecote had succumbed to the 'bigger is best' approach, and for England's smallest UDC the writing was on the wall. Existing councillors were encouraged to compete for seats on the enlarged Stourbridge Borough Council and once the political will to resist was lost, the economic and administrative arguments for amalgamation – despite its effect on the rates – were irresistible. There were protests of course, but government pressure was also being applied to rid the country of authorities that, in the eyes of central government, were both anomalous and anachronistic.

Thus on April 1st 1966 that portion of Amblecote to the west of the main railway line became part of Stourbridge and that to the east part of Brierley Hill. Less than ten years later Stourbridge itself was absorbed by government dictate into the enlarged and subsequently much resented Metropolitan Borough of Dudley, itself part of the entirely artificial 'County of West Midlands'.



The badge of the Urban District Council, as displayed in engraved blue glass within the Chairman's chain of office, illustrates Amblecote's principle industries. These are glass manufacture, metal-working and refractory brick making. The Chairman's chain was acquired in 1960 when Cllr. Eric Mees presented it in memory of his father who had been Chairman from 1928 to 1930. The UDC never applied for an official coat of arms.



End of an Era



The passing of the UDC was not without some sorrow and certain ceremony. The winding up of the council was of course primarily administrative as responsibilities were passed to Stourbridge and Brierley Hill. However, as the hand over date approached – 1st of April 1966 – so a number of events were organised to commemorate the final days of Amblecote as an independent political entity.

Final Dinner

On Wednesday 16th March a Final Civic Dinner was held at the (now demolished) Stewpony Hotel. The councillors, officials and guests enjoyed a five course roast turkey dinner.

Following the dinner, the Vice Chairman, Councillor W T Hollis proposed 'The Queen' and Councillor W Evans J.P. proposed, for the very last time 'Amblecote Urban District Council'. This was followed by Councillor J.J.C. Round who replied on behalf of the Council and a further proposal of 'The Guests' by Councillor D.C. Gittins which was replied to by the Vicar of Amblecote, The Rev. John Hencher.

Final Meeting

The final meeting of the Council took place on Monday 21st March at the UDC offices in High Street. What little business there was took less than ten minutes to conclude, after which the Chairman invited the Council's small group of clerical staff to join the Councillors. He then thanked all those present, and Councillor Clarke who was indisposed, for their support. He also thanked local manufacturers and trades people for their support over the years; something that was no doubt reciprocated especially in light of the fact that higher business rates would no doubt be set by Stourbridge and Brierley Hill. Cheques were presented to the Clerk, Treasurer and Cashier, and past-chairman's badges to Councillors Evans, Round and Mead. In a final gesture Tom Wass read an anonymous poem marking the demise of the UDC (see page 4).

After the meeting a social gathering took place at Tom Wass' house in Vicarage road, the prominent double fronted bungalow that now stands next door to the much extended nursing home.

Civic Farewell Service

The following Sunday the 27th of March, a Civic Farewell Service was held at Holy Trinity. As the very last civic function of the Council this was a highly charged and emotional event. There was a procession that included the Chairman of Brierley Hill UDC and Mayor of Stourbridge, the local MP, Amblecote's Councillors and principle officers and the local Methodist minister as well as the Vicar of Amblecote. This wide political, civil and religious representation reflected a long tradition in Amblecote whereby the Church was used on such occasions to encompass all opinions and traditions within the parish, and hence UDC, boundary. The service included prayers led by the Methodist Minister, Lesson read by the Chairman of the UDC and Sermon by the Vicar.

The highlight occurred when the Chairman,

Clerk of the Council and the Churchwardens came to the chancel steps with the Chairman's chain of office. This was ceremonially handed over to the church by the Clerk of the Council, Tom Wass, who presented it to Reverend Henchard with these words; "Reverend Sir, in the name of Amblecote Urban District Council

we ask you to take into safe-keeping the Chain of Office of the Chairman of the Council." The Vicar replied; "On behalf of this parish church of Amblecote and in the name of the people of this parish now and of future generations I receive this Chain of Office to be laid up and kept for safety in this church from now onwards." The Chain was then placed on the High Altar.

More Than a Gesture

There was more to this gesture than simply finding an appropriate place to keep the chain. Amblecote's Councillors would have been more than aware that the civic regalia of the several other small Black Country authorities that were set to disappear on April 1st were being regarded more or less as trophies by the absorbing authority; destined to take a museum-like subordinate place alongside that of the 'winning side'. By

placing the Amblecote regalia in the parish church Amblecote UDC provided a measure of moral, physical and spiritual protection that ensured the chain would remain within Amblecote in perpetuity. That it was done with due solemnity and ceremony in front of the Mayor of Stourbridge more than reinforced the point. To this day the chain remains safe within the church.

With this the UDC's last civic event was over, and it only remained for the officials to wind up the final administrative tasks before handing over the Stourbridge and Brierley Hill.

An era had come to an end.



Cover of the Order of Service for the UDC's final civic events. During this the Chairman's chain was placed within Holy Trinity Church in perpetuity, thus preventing its acquisition by Stourbridge or Brierley Hill (and later Dudley).



Guests at the farewell dinner included the Mayor of Stourbridge, E.J. Broughton (front left) and Chair of Brierley Hill UDC, Miss E. Pearson (centre), seen shaking hands with Bill Evans, last Chair of Amblecote UDC. Careful arrangements were made to ensure the Amblecote chain of office remained within the parish.

Amblecote Parish Church

Civic

Farewell

Service

of

Amblecote Urban District Council

Sunday, 27th March, 1966

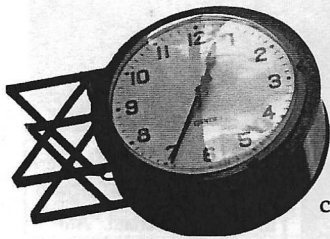
at 3 p.m.

Poetry Please Over to you....

Whilst researching the final days of the UDC in the *County Express*, mention was found of a 'UDC Poem', read out at the final council meeting - although unfortunately no words were included in the report. Fortunately Mrs Marilyn Wass, past head of Amblecote Primary School and wife of the late Tom Wass, was able to provide us with an original copy.

Here it is; and its last line exhorting Amblecote's history to 'echo in prose and rhyme' surely issues a challenge! The poem will feature in the Society's 40th Anniversary commemoration on May 10th, and it would be nice to present a modern work or works alongside it.

So, are there any verse mongers out there who would like to bring Amblecote's rhyming history up to date with a present-day sonnet, limerick, stanza or whatever...? Anonymity guaranteed if that's what you want, and readers can be provided. Submissions (in writing - no answer phone balladry please) to the Secretary at 23 Brompton Drive, Amblecote, DY5 3NZ or at a meeting by May 1st.

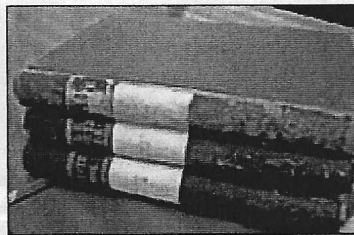


TIMES PAST

Survivals of the UDC

There are many reminders of the old UDC still in existence, both as physical artefacts and in historic records.

The UDC clock at The Fish - restored to use in 2002 by Dudley Council after a campaign by Amblecote residents - is a fine example of the former, whilst the Dudley Archives in Cosley hold a large amount of UDC material including the complete set of minute books from 1898 to 1966.



Fifty members and guests attended the February meeting of the Society when guest speaker Chris Modd gave a wonderful talk and demonstration of the life and times of a soldier during the Civil War period. A National Trust volunteer based at Mosley Old Hall near Wolverhampton, Chris is a Civil War re-enactor who came dressed, and armed, for the part.

Beginning with a knowledgeable and highly entertaining virtuoso history of the English Civil Wars of 1642 to 1651 (plus a bit before and after) Chris set the scene for a compelling description and demonstration of contemporary fighting techniques. He explained both the wider strategy of seventeenth century warfare and the minutia of how this affected the ordinary soldier, whilst peppering his talk with dozens of fascinating facts about everyday life in that period. We learnt that both Roundhead and Cavalier were terms of abuse, the former used to describe shorthaired (to keep the lice down) 'townies' and the latter inferring that the King's men were 'Spaniards', a term of abuse in itself. That the Royalist forces tended to have uncut hair was due to their generally being recruited from the countryside where hair was worn longer (to keep out the cold).

Demonstrating the technique of fighting with an eighteen-foot pike Chris showed how a 'wall' was maintained with several ranks of soldiers forming a hedgehog of spikes which were variously aimed at the horse, head, chest or groin of an attacking force. Two armies of pike men would simply push at each other, those at the back having every interest in pushing those at the front even harder!

Later on in the war, and to compensate for a generation of military neglect, the musket became the main infantry weapon; allowing even a relatively ill-trained individual a measure of offensive firepower. Chris demonstrated musket drill, telling us that a good musketeer could fire off a round every thirty seconds or so. However, speed with a musket was only made possible by careful training and regular practice, and many men lost their dexterity along with their fingers. In the final resort musketeers used the stock of their weapon as a club!

After the talk Chris was assailed with numerous questions, not least how the various Civil War armies managed to fodder their horses (a Parliamentary advantage being that they partly paid for theirs) and the origin of British Army uniform (red, because the dye was cheaper). Chris Modd's talk really was 'something different' and was extremely well received, resulting in a request for further re-enactment talks. So, if anyone has any ideas or contacts (perhaps you have chatted to, or up, some Romans, Storm Troopers or Elizabethan kitchen wenches recently) please let the secretary know. Meanwhile we hope that Chris, still dressed in 17th century garb and with his pike on the roof rack and musket on the back seat, made it back to Wolverhampton without getting captured!

AMBLECOTE URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL

For sixty eight years of existence
You have battled with persistence.
Efficient in your superintendence
With dignity and independence.

In long years of administration
You found success and foiled frustration.
And natives of your little town
Are justly proud of your renown.

But neighbouring towns cast envious eyes
Upon your zeal and enterprise.
Like eagles, with their soaring wings
Halt, when the lowly linnet sings.

At last authority's cold hand
Decrees that you must now disband.
With Stourbridge, where you were related
You are to be amalgamated.

Although your identity has gone
Fond memories will linger on.
And through the corridor of time,
May your history echo in pros and rhyme.



THE AMBLECOTE BUNKER

On February 8th Nick Baker and Mike Perkins carried out a preliminary survey of a Second World War bunker that was recently exposed during demolition work on the old gas works site. The survey was carried out with the approval of the site architect who, as part of the wider Taylor Woodrow project to build residential apartments, is required by the terms of planning consent to retain the vintage excavations.

Previously described in the press as an 'air raid shelter', Mike and Nick in fact discovered a considerable complex of underground tunnels and rooms that penetrate almost one hundred feet into, and some twenty five feet beneath, the sandstone cliff behind the gas-works site.

An access gallery opens onto an L-shaped corridor off which five large 'rooms' have been excavated. At the extreme end of the tunnel system is a vertical, circular, steel-section lined shaft that clearly once provided an access/escape route from the cliff top. Remains of what look like an air supply system and possible a water feed all indicate that this was no amateur effort, but a serious and extremely purposeful sheltering place.

The tunnels are accessed via an opening (now closed by a security gate) off a ledge about eight feet up the cliff face. This tunnel, which stands about five feet high and is two and a half feet wide, has the remains of what seems to have been a double blast door structure between three and thirteen feet along its thirty feet length. Set in the walls at about 45 degrees on either side are metal and wood inserts pointing inwards towards each other.

After about thirty feet the access tunnel terminates in a cross tunnel, which is slightly higher, allowing for comfortable standing. Immediately opposite the junction is a rounded full height alcove carved from the rock – a feature most of the junctions throughout the complex. On the left is a nineteen-foot long corridor tunnel, which, four feet along, has the remains of a wooden door casing set into the walls and ceiling. A few feet beyond this on the right, a two foot wide, two foot thick opening leads into the first of the bunker's rooms. This is full tunnel height and some eighteen feet by five feet, and differs from all the other rooms in that it has been fully excavated to 'ground level' to create a single large open space.

On the right of the entrance junction the corridor tunnel runs for a further thirty-eight feet before a second corridor strikes left at right angles. Along the first run there are three further rooms each dug into the left-hand (inner) wall. Spaced at about ten feet intervals the first room is slightly wider at six and half feet, and the other two

five feet, but otherwise all three are very similar having two foot wide, two foot thick openings and are around seventeen feet in length. 'Benches' are cut in the rock on both sides.

Opposite each entrance are alcoves. Those opposite the first and last rooms are about the same width as the openings they face, although the first has a small shelf or half seat cut in about twenty inches high and the last one a full 'seat' right across it at the same height. The middle alcove how-

ever is much wider (five feet six inches) and deeper than the others and obviously had a different function.

The right hand corridor tunnel ends in a right-angled junction with a second corridor which runs left, penetrating some forty-five feet further into the cliff. At the junction is a further alcove cut facing the left hand tunnel, this time with a 10 inch shelf just above waist height. On the right of the second corridor, about five feet along, is the complex's fifth and final room. This follows the pattern of all those to the right of the entrance tunnel, with a two foot wide, two foot deep doorway leading to a five feet wide, seventeen feet deep room with fourteen inch high 'benches' on both sides. Unlike the other rooms however the floor of this is remarkably uneven – as if someone didn't quite finish the job!

Further down this tunnel, again on the right are two more large alcoves five to six feet across and thirty to thirty-two inches deep although with no accompanying rooms or further tunnels. At the end of the tunnel the floor begins to slope steeply upwards and is, in fact, a mass of concrete. It is just possible to squeeze (well it was for Nick and Mike – taking it in turns) through this gap and into a vertical shaft that obviously once formed a second entrance/exit.

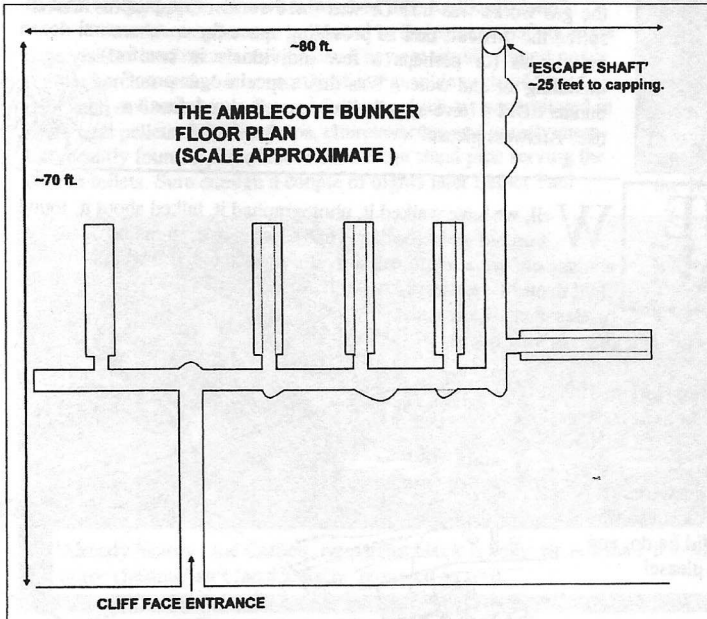
The shaft is three feet six wide at the bottom where it is cut into the sandstone. However, it soon narrows to two feet where it is lined with circular steel pipe sections. The whole thing is a robust piece of engineering with a metal ladder emerging from the concrete and climbing via nineteen rungs with eleven-inch risers to a capped-off top. Also in the shaft are two pipes running its full height. One is comprised of six-inch oval section and may have been an air supply whilst the second, running behind the ladder, looks like it might have been for water.

(Continued on page 6)

AMAZING SURVIVAL FROM WORLD WAR TWO



Over one hundred and fifty feet of tunnels are hidden beneath the old gas works cliff.



(Continued from page 5)

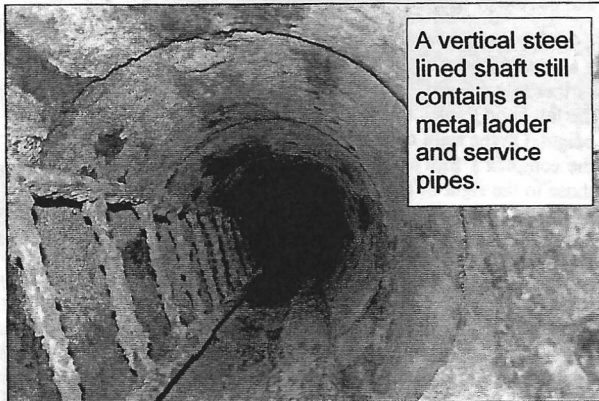
It would seem from the evidence that a large volume of concrete was once poured down the shaft filling it almost, though fortunately not completely, to tunnel roof level; and that the shaft is (assuming there is nothing below it and the cap is indeed the top) about 25 feet in depth.

A walk around the tunnels for ephemeral evidence revealed (with the exception of the fixed shaft contents) very little. Clearly the tunnels had been used after WW2, probably for gas-works storage; and from various 'artefacts' lying around the place they had also become well known to, and well used by, local nare-do-wells for some time after that. An amount of rotten wood might be the remains of original fittings and some large, now disjointed, metal pipe sections may be part of the conjectured air supply system. Also of interest were several soot markings above small, carved, shelves indicating where candles or lamps would have been set. The large alcove opposite the middle room in the run of three contained some scrap iron and the plastic roof pyramid from a BSM learner vehicle! The only sign of life was a single large spider.

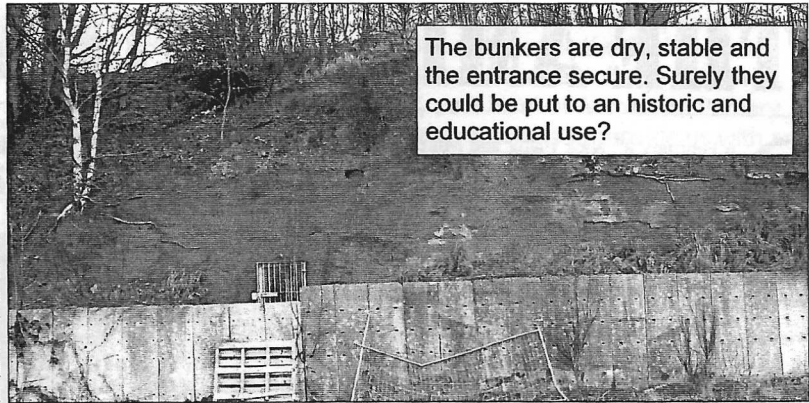
The tunnels are remarkably dry, the only exception being a trickle of water that obviously seeps down the vertical shaft and which has, over time, brought down some of the sandstone roof in that area. Indeed, on reflection, access to the shaft is probably only possible as a result of water trapped in it widening the opening between ceiling and concrete slope. Apart from this the tunnels appear very stable and there is no reason to think that proper capping of the shaft wouldn't solve the slight damp problem in that area.

History and Future

There are of course two main questions that concern the bunker. Firstly its history, and secondly its future. Hopefully the two can be combined. With Taylor Woodrow committed as part of their development scheme to preserve it, a plan might be worked out to not only conserve but to allow reasonable access to interested groups.



A vertical steel lined shaft still contains a metal ladder and service pipes.



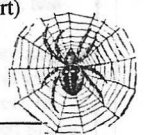
The bunkers are dry, stable and the entrance secure. Surely they could be put to an historic and educational use?

Archaeologically the tunnels are 'clean', and clearing them out would simply be a matter of time and manpower. Meanwhile, with the developer required to bring services to the building site anyway, it should not be beyond possibility to run electricity to the bunker to provide lighting – perhaps via the street main?

Assuming the bunkers can be accessed in the future what could they be used for? The answer (at least as thought up by Mike and Nick during their several hours underground trying to read tape measures) would seem to be educational. A trip round the tunnels is interesting enough for adults, but for children this would be a real adventure and could incorporate aspects of history, geography and geology. The cliffs themselves are part of an important geological sandstone structure within the Stour valley. Building them involved mining techniques vital to the Black Country. The reason for them was of course the Second World War. All of these subjects are regularly studied in local schools.

The bunker is stable enough and small enough to be maintained at an absolutely minimal cost (minuscule in comparison to saving and maintaining a building) and with the security door in place is vandal proof (at least this side of the neighbourhood hoodies carrying gelignite). It is therefore not difficult to envisage a 'trip to the Amblecote tunnels' as part of a local schools visit programme. As for administering this - perhaps we as the local history society should offer our services?

Finally, of course, there is the history of the bunker. This is no mere Anderson type shelter sunk into the cliff face, but a carefully executed, very expensive underground complex made for a definite purpose. There are thought to be further tunnels in the old quarry cliffs off Old Wharf Road, and during the hey-day of sand quarrying in the area the skills required to construct these would certainly have existed. However, why was the gas-works complex built? Was it simply to shelter personnel during raids and provide some measure of protection against the horrific fire that would result if the gas works was hit? Or was there some other purpose that inspired the difficult task of providing space for up to several dozen individuals (or perhaps a few individuals in comfort) including air and water? Was this a special 'gas proof' bunker? Did it have an offensive as well as a defensive use? Answers please!



GASOMETER LANE

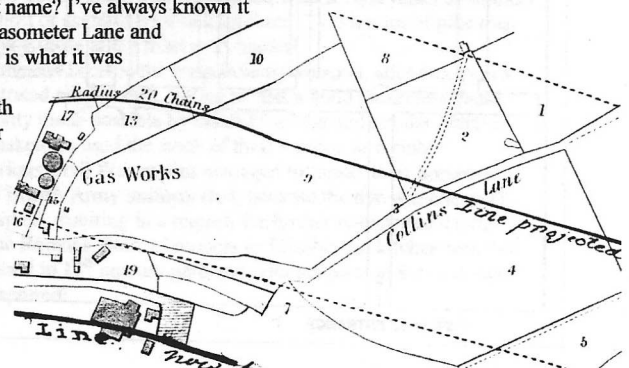
BY MIKE PERKINS *or is it?*

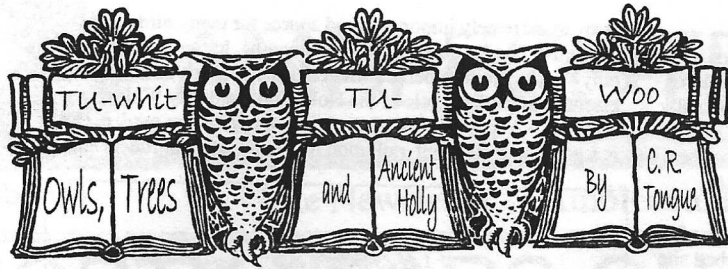
my parents and friends always called it that. What I've never thought about is what it was called before the gas works were built in 1834?

A survey map has recently been discovered (probably dating to late 19th century) which shows the gas works and the lane. I was about to pass over the map when I noticed a name at the top end of the lane – COLLINS LANE.

This story doesn't really have a happy ending, for having answered one question as to the early name of the lane, I now have to discover who Collins was, what was his name, where did he live, what did he do, and why was the lane named after him? Answers on a post card please!

Well, we have walked it, photographed it, talked about it, found it on old maps (back to 1686), and I've even managed to educate our secretary to call it by it's right name. But what is its right name? I've always known it as Gasometer Lane and





CONSERVATION MATTERS

Society
Conservation
Officers Clare
Tongue & Helen
Cook keep an
eye on
Amblecote's
Natural History

The wildlife of Amblecote has already decided it is spring. The Great Tits are making themselves heard with their familiar 'teacher-teacher' call, the House Sparrows in The Holloway are frantically building their nests and today we had a Blackcap at our feeders. It seems early but the days are beginning to lengthen meaning all the garden birds are becoming more vocal.

By far the most vocal of our garden birds over the last few months have been the rarely seen but often heard Tawny Owls. It has to be said more often than not I wish I didn't hear them as they tend to be at their most vocal between 1 and 2 am! It is not the 'tu-whit-tu-woo' beloved of horror film makers that I hear, but the much more piercing and loud 'ke-wick ke-wick'. I've heard them around The Holloway area for many years. In fact I vividly remember taking owl pellets to school for the rest of the class to dissect in the late 1970s. At night when I hear them I often get up and open my window just to catch a glimpse of 'our' owls. More often than not there are up to three 'talking' to each other between the trees of the Vicarage garden and the 'old' hospital grounds. If I'm lucky they will fly between the trees making a beautiful silhouette against the moonlit sky.

Originally purely a woodland bird the Tawny Owl 'Strix aluco' has adapted to many man-modified habitats. It now often lives in parks or large gardens right in heart of cities and has a particular liking for churchyards with suitable large trees. In Amblecote it is undoubtedly the relatively high proportion of mature trees that has led to such a healthy population.

Tawnies are thoroughly nocturnal and seldom seen in daylight. Saying this we were recently lucky enough to see one huddled in a Victorian chimney pot on the banks of the R. Severn in Worcester on a cold sunny day in broad daylight. Their superb camouflage makes them often difficult to see even in daylight. Often the only thing that gives them away is a mob of small birds continually alarm calling. This behaviour is with good reason as although in woodland these owls prey on small mammal's mice, voles etc., in towns they have largely switched to preying on small birds. The tawny is described as between 37-39cm high and typically weighs 350-500g. The plumage varies but 'tawny' is definitely a misnomer as they are usually a far deeper chestnut brown in colour. Their other names include 'brown owl' and 'wood owl' which are both perhaps more descriptive. In flight they look huge but most of this is due to their enormous wingspan. With a short tail and stocky appearance when perched they look quite small.

Another way we can be alerted to the presence of our night time visitors is of course owl pellets. They are usually found under regular perches and consist mostly of indigestible parts of their prey such as bones, teeth, fur and feathers which are regurgitated in small neat pellets. John Easthope, churchwarden and society member recently found a pile of these next to the stand pipe serving the church toilets. Sure enough a couple of nights later Father Paul

found a Tawny Owl huddled on top of the standpipe we assume for warmth. Illuminated by the football floodlights we were both able to see the owl very clearly through binoculars. It was a rich brown with paler facial disc, clear white flecks in its

wings and a yellow bill. It stared back at us with beady eyes. These eyes give them binocular vision so as to judge distance more precisely for hunting. To combat the problem of looking behind them their heads also move through 180°. When hunting the Tawny will seize its prey with powerful talons and swallow it whole. The indigestible parts are then regurgitated as pellets the dissection of which is a valuable way of learning more about these birds. The nest is usually in a hollow tree or deserted nest of another species of bird. Occasionally they have been known to nest in holes in rocks, buildings or on the bare ground. The area in and around the churchyard and former hospital grounds is ideal habitat for the Tawny with all the mature Limes, Horse Chestnuts and Beech trees. Of the 6 species of owls that breed in the British Isles by far the most numerous are the Tawny owl. They are at their most vocal right now as territories are being established. So if you hear a screech late at night its well worth jumping out of bed to check it out. The sight of this large winged, stealthy nocturnal hunter gliding against a moonlit sky is still very special. If you are lucky you will be rewarded with a glimpse of one of our resident Tawnies here in Amblecote.

'The' Horse Chestnut

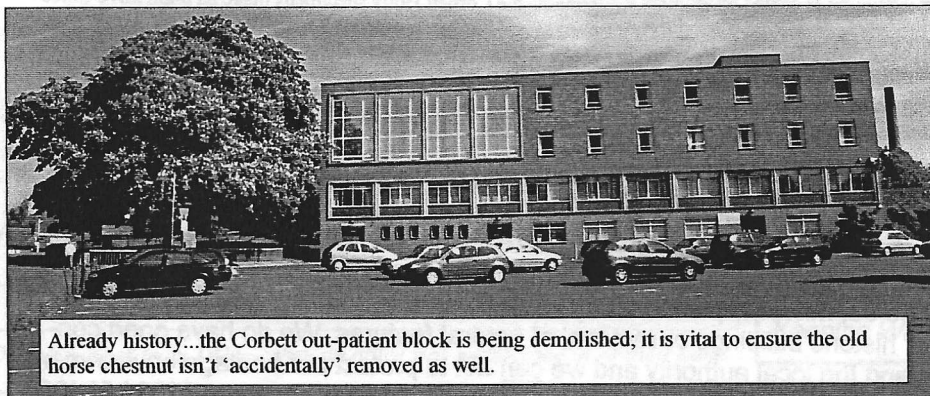
More often than not the owls I see are in the large Horse Chestnut at the back of the 'old' Corbett car park. This tree has many knarled holes within its trunk and branches. Thankfully this tree is due to be kept throughout the new developments but please keep an eye on it! Truly a spreading chestnut it is a key landscape tree in our area and should definitely be cherished. Over the years it has become important to people as well as wildlife. Generations have 'conkered' there as well as the enormous amount of associated wildlife a tree of that size sustains. There is a 'Tree Preservation Order' (TPO) on the whole of the former Corbett site meaning no trees can be touched without proper planning permission. If you notice anything worrying please call the DMBC Tree Protection Officer on 01384-841127 or let Clare (394057) or Helen (395034) know. It is often left to the local community to police these orders as building contractors are frequently unaware of a tree's local significance or TPO status.

The Horse Chestnut *Aesculus hippocastanum* is widely planted as a parkland tree and this seems to have been the case in the Corbett grounds. Local residents recall parkland planted with many Horse Chestnuts and grazed by cows before the building of the out patients building in the late 1950's. One local resident recalls being frightened walking up 'the lane' as a teenager passing railings behind which was nothing but parkland grazed by cattle and of course no street lighting. Now only 'our' Horse Chestnut survives to the SW of the former 'Hill' mansion.

The Horse Chestnut is believed to have got its name when Europeans found Turks feeding its nuts to sick horses in Constantinople in the 16th century! This could well be true as unwell horses will apparently gnaw the bark and an extract is now used in veterinary science. Another suggestion of the origin of its name is the horse shoe shaped scars left on the twig when the leaves have fallen.

In spring large brown 'sticky buds' form in pairs on stout twigs - the sticky resin is thought to thwart invading insects. The buds give rise to a brilliant display of candles of white blossom in May. The

(Continued on page 8)



Already history...the Corbett out-patient block is being demolished; it is vital to ensure the old horse chestnut isn't 'accidentally' removed as well.



(Continued from page 7)

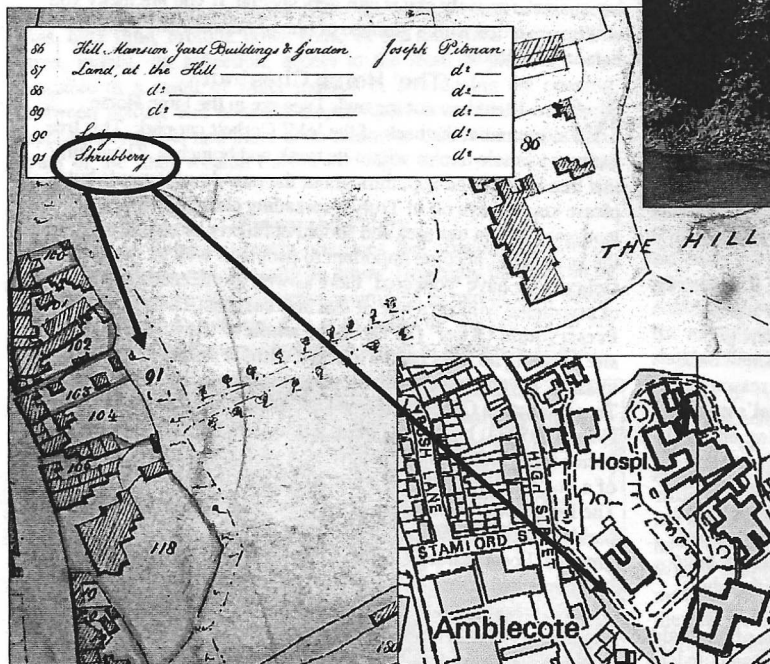
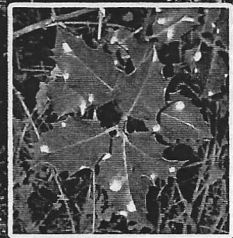
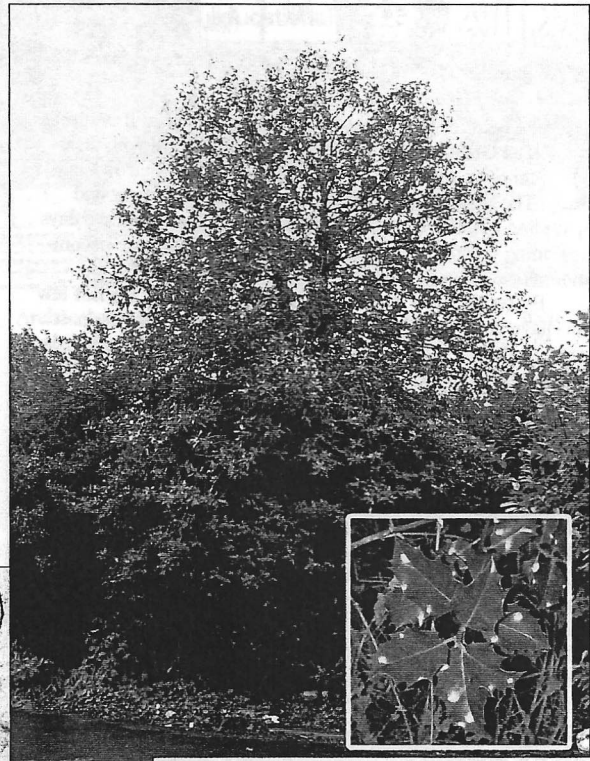
large brown 'nuts' then ripen in October inside spiky green husks Enthusiastically gathered by generations of school children to play 'conkers' - originally known as 'conquerors' but colloquially used to describe the nut and the game.

The '1841' Shrubbery

Helen and I have been trying to keep an eye on much of the valuable habitat, some 'ancient' currently under threat in Amblecote. Cartographic evidence recently found suggests the often overlooked 'shrubbery' on the western boundary of the Corbett site is well over 165 years old. A 'shrubbery' is clearly marked on an 1841 map and schedule which have recently come to light. This shrubbery runs from the 'locally listed' blue gates to the junction with Vic Rd. Generations of Amblecote Primary School pupils have walked past it on their daily trudge to and from school - most like me paying little attention to the bushes and trees against the wall. Like most things we see every day we only realize their real value when they may be under threat.

The shrubbery consists largely of a series of very mature holly trees interspersed with laurels and some mature Lime trees. Does this ring any bells yet? Holly Bushes and a shrubbery shown on this site prior to 1841! The exact age of the present holly trees is not known (suggestions welcome) but our estimates suggest the majority are over 100 years old. Dare we suggest this is the shrubbery (or direct descendant) from which 'The Holly Bush Pub' and subsequently 'Holly Bush Lane' got their names? The name lives on in the lane and the care home now called 'Holly Bush' so maybe this is an area long associated with Holly?

form an extremely important food source for many birds especially the thrush family, during the winter months. In the wild a tree will only start to produce berries when at least 20 years old. It is also essential in the life cycle of the Holly Blue butterfly 'Celastrina argiolus' - a species very often seen in the Vicarage garden. Holly is a good hedging plant, pollution resistant, deters intruders and has



Map comparisons (1841 left, 2003 below) clearly show a shrubbery in place for at least 160 years. The holly tree (above) is almost certainly a survival of the original planting.

Holly
Holly, *Ilex aquifolium* is an ever-green and slow-growing shrub. The dark green leaves are glossy and thick. The spiky leaves are only found low down on a tree, where in the wild it is grazed by animals. The 'prickles' are thought to have evolved to protect the slow growing tree from the grazing animals. Higher up the same tree leaves are smooth and ovate. Holly is 'dioecous' meaning it has separate male and female plants and it is only the female plants that produce berries. The berries

dense foliage providing excellent nesting sites for birds. Although a native shrub and abundant in the understorey of woodland areas it is my suspicion that the 'Corbett' holly trees were planted as part of an ornamental/parkland scheme. There are many holly varieties including those with different coloured berries and degrees of variegation. The Corbett trees include several varieties of variegated some with patches of totally white leaves. In combination with a substantial planting on the meadow side of the grounds the Corbett Holly specimens make an impressive collection, as good as many a stately home. There are 20 Holly trees in the shrubbery alone most of which are extremely mature. So next time you are walking through the Corbett grounds spare a thought for the old and noble Holly trees.



YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE....

As we all aware several major construction projects are currently underway in Amblecote; on the old Gas Works, Corbett site and in the Canal Street area. Contractors are of course required to behave responsibly and generally do so, however please let us know if you see anything you think is amiss with regard to demolition of historic buildings or removal of natural features. We do have good contacts with local councillors and the local authority and we can act to protect our heritage environment.

Nick Baker: 01384 894446. Helen Cook 01384 395034. Father Paul / Clare Tongue: 01384 394057

