



AMBLECOTE HISTORY

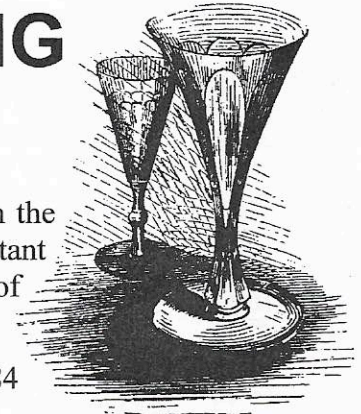
AUGUST 2003

HISTORY ACTION MEETING

Amblecote Church Hall,
Wednesday September 10th at 7.30pm.

A meeting will be held to discuss actively pursuing history projects in the Amblecote area, including a plaque on Dennis Hall, preserving important items associated with Corbett Hospital, and indeed any other matters of concern or interest.

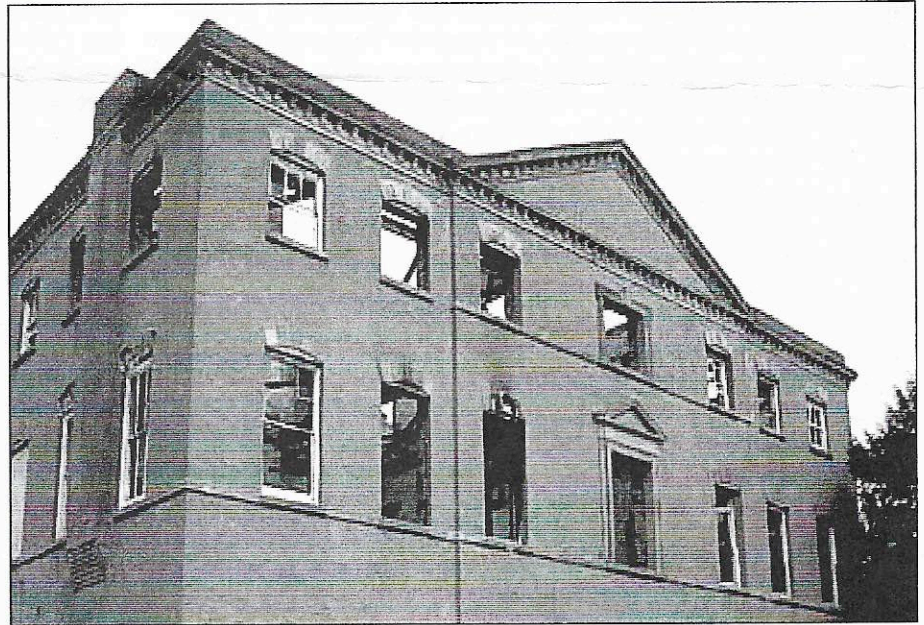
If you require further details please contact Father Paul Tongue (01384 394057) or Nick Baker (01384 894446).



DENNIS HALL SAVED—WHAT NEXT?



he rescue of Dennis Hall from demolition was a relief to everyone interested in Amblecote history and, although its derelict state was to be deplored, at least the shell of the building will be saved. Contractors are currently hard at work turning the building into apartments.



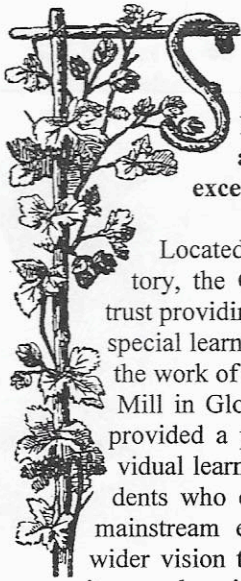
Dennis Hall, built in the 1760's for Thomas Hill I

Discussions at Amblecote History Society meetings have resulted in the idea that some form of plaque or other commemorative device might be appropriate for this building, which began life as the mansion of the Hill family in the late 18th century, and later became incorporated into the Webb's glass

works. There is every chance that sponsorship for such a project might be obtained and the plaque, or whatever, designed and produced locally.



GLASSHOUSE VISIT



Some forty Amblecote history enthusiasts took part in a visit to the Glasshouse College in Wollaston Road on July 16th, touring the site and afterwards socialising in the excellent café.

Located within the former Webb Corbett factory, the Glasshouse College is an educational trust providing opportunities for young people with special learning needs. Janine Christley introduced the work of the college and its sister site at Ruskin Mill in Gloucestershire, explaining that the trust provided a practically based programme of individual learning and support for special needs students who cannot be properly accommodated in mainstream education. In addition, as part of a wider vision that engages both the community and its own learning ethos, the college is committed to providing a venue not only for education, but the preservation and encouragement of traditional craft manufacturing. Janine noted that the college's Director, Aonghus Gordon, who established Ruskin Mill some 16 years ago, "had an interest in glassmaking and canals", and in casting round for a second site found the former Webb Corbett factory both fortuitously available and irresistible!

The college not only provides a learning facility but also, through the provision of sensibly priced workshops, enables small businesses to both manufacture and trade on-site. In addition the resident businesses are contracted to provide a measure of teaching to the students, creating a synchronous cycle of opportunity advantageous to all.

The tour began with a glimpse inside the Glasshouse Studio Theatre where rehearsals were underway for the following evening's opening night of *Searching Satyrs* an ancient play in the tradition of masked satyr comedy. All a far cry from the annealing tunnels once located in that particular factory area!

Accompanied by Andy Cope and Brian Mason, and later joined by Aonghus Gordon (train delayed, wrong sort of rain) the tour moved outside during what proved to be a very refreshing summer downpour!

Janine introduced the college's bell tower with its bronze bell that was cast on site. The college also has a bell tower in Gloucestershire, with both bells tuned to ring a symbolic 'peal' on special occasions, something that will be expanded as more sites are opened across the country. Janine noted that in order to acknowledge an old tradition of adding a small quantity of gold to a new bell, the college had invited anyone who wished to incorporate a sentimental piece of jewellery in the metal to come along and drop it in the 'pot'. The result was a considerable queue!

The tour then progressed to view a magnificent piece of wooden sculpture currently under production representing the mythology of the essential nature of the human beings as driven by a creative force. The sculpture proved immediately challenging, with a question over its relevance to the Black Country countered by the opinion that creativity, and a piece of sculpture, may be, literally, viewed on a number of levels.

Inside the Glasshouse building once more, the party were introduced to Andrew, one of a number of former Stuarts craftsmen located at the Glasshouse who have formed the Crystal with a Twist company, specialising in lead crystal airtwist stemware. Although the company principally supply glass to Waterford Crystal where it is sold under the Stuart Crystal brand, the company also have a showroom in the Glasshouse.

Aonghus then showed the party an entirely different aspect of the Glasshouse, though one that illustrates the 'joined up thinking' it encourages. Utilising plant bought from redundant local glassworks a small research company had set out to develop a means of recycling lead from cathode-ray tubes in anticipation of EU legislation to ban their disposal by landfill. Good for the environment and a valid recycling project, the company was in the process of developing a portable recycling plant at the Glasshouse. However, and unfortunately, the withdrawal of the UK government from the agreement has resulted in the project being mothballed.

Passing into the teaching areas, Kevin and Andy provided an enthusiastic description of the work they carry out with the students. As long time glass craftsmen both have been both delighted at the career change that the Glasshouse Project has provided, enabling them to continue in the craft and utilise their skills as a means of delivering special education. Aonghus pointed out that glass cutting involves a range of mathematical and cognitive skills, including the need to pre-plan and to appreciate proportion, something that some students might find, if taught conventionally, overly challenging. A recent OFSTED had reported glowingly on the college's maths teaching, something he felt was in no small measure due to the glass-cutting programme.

The party then followed a route around the Glasshouse's 'red carpet' trail, passing a number of craft workshops open to the public including glass, weaving, printing and photography. Gary Hodgetts, the site's Blacksmith, and caster of the Glasshouse bell, was congratulated on the successful completion of the project by one visitor whose former experience of casting engine blocks made them wholly appreciate of the process!

The evening ended with a return to the College's café, and informal discussions took place long after the meetings

projected closure time on matters of some related to Amblecote history, and some not..

The visit proved wholly enjoyable and highly informative. It provided local history enthusiasts with the opportunity to appreciate the Glasshouse College's work, and its commitment to ensuring that the craft traditions of the Black Country, and especially those of glass manufacture, are both maintained and developed in a valid and sustainable

manner.

Future plans for the Glasshouse include the re-development of the old Webb Corbett roundhouse into a theatre, as well as further workshop and educational expansion. The College sees itself very much as part of a community, providing a continuum of traditional manufacturing and offering a cultural facility to both its students and the people of Amblecote and beyond.

A History of Corbett Hospital

Fifty four people attended a meeting of the Amblecote History Society on May 14th at Amblecote Church Hall to hear Dr Eric Bowers talk on the History of Corbett Hospital. In fact Dr Bowers strayed delightfully from the brief, presenting not only a history of the hospital, but a selection of his own recollections as a long serving pathologist within the Dudley area.

John Corbett was born in 1817 in Brierley Hill, and Dr. Bowers noted that as the difference in dates between his parent's marriage and his birth was only 11 weeks, he was undoubtedly "born in a hurry"! John attended various church schools until the age of 11 after which he worked with his father who operated a fleet of narrow boats in the area. By the age of 14 John was in sole charge of consignments of coal from the Black Country to London. In 1840 he was apprenticed for five years at the Hunt and Brown Ironworks in Stourbridge, later returning to his fathers business. However during the 1850's the advent of railways brought hard times to the canals, and the Corbetts wisely left the business. During his life as a canal haulier John had transported salt from Droitwich, and saw an opportunity to apply the technology of the second Industrial Revolution to its extraction and make a profit. He thus bought a bankrupt salt works at Stoke Prior and by sinking cast iron cylinders 1000 feet into the ground was able to pump enough brine to provide two tons of salt for every ton of coal. This was amazingly efficient; something Corbett compounded by improved evaporation pans that produced 'graded' salt, from small crystals for table use to large lumps for industrial and agricultural purposes. John Corbett became very rich.

In 1856 he married Anna Eliza O'Mera a Frenchwoman of Irish extraction and over the next two decades erected the magnificent Chateau Impney, a French style chateau complete with Versailles style garden for her and their five children. Dr. Bowers noted that the Chateau Impney was not only beautiful but also innovative and efficient, with cat-flaps in the skirting boards to allow rat-catching

cats free access, and acetylene lighting. Sadly the edifice failed to impress Anna, who was estranged from John shortly after its completion.

Corbett was a typical 19th century paternalistic employer. He provided worker accommodation, health care and reduced hours, and in 1859 abolishing female labour whilst increasing men's pay to compensate. Nevertheless, Corbett did demand absolute loyalty and had an expectation of a fair days work for a fair days pay.

As Corbett became rich so he adopted many of the pretensions of Victorian upper middle class life. He had a grand house of course, and later obtained a coat of arms. In 1874 he entered Parliament as MP Droitwich. However, Corbett never forgot his Black Country roots and, although never really poor himself, was always willing to assist the labouring classes on whom his wealth ultimately depended. Nevertheless, Corbett's 'something for something' ethos demanded that those helped must also help themselves.

In 1889 Corbett sold his works and three years later retired as an MP, concentrating instead on supporting many philanthropic institutions across the Midlands. In 1892 he was persuaded of the desperate need for a hospital in the Stourbridge area, and purchased 'The Hill' estate in Amblecote, comprising a dilapidated mansion and 30 acres of park, at a cost of £6500. Corbett spent a further £5000 to convert the building into a hospital, and in 1893 presented it to a board of trustees. It opened the same year providing 18 beds. Later on Corbett funded a grand house for the hospitals surgeon. 'Hill House' still stands adjacent to the main Amblecote High Street, its future uncertain.

Dr. Bowers outlined the early years of 'The Corbett' based on his researches into its archives. It was officially opened on July 31st 1893 by Vicountess Cobham with a 'golden key', accompanied by the Bishop of Worcester and a military procession. The proceedings were followed by "A banquet for the knobs and a fete for you and me", the latter becoming an annual fund raising tradition still remembered by many Amblecote residents.

Admission to the hospital was by so-called 'ticket' or by emergency. Thus admissions were very strictly controlled. Persons suffering from infections were not admitted (a wise move in pre-antibiotic days), whilst the poor were referred to the workhouse at Wordsley (later Wordsley Hospital). The rich too were excluded, Corbett Hospital

remaining in its early days a facility for *working* men and their families, thus complying with Corbett's own vision of provision for those who provided.

Dr Bowers noted some early board minutes referring to improvements to sewage facilities that occurred after complaints of a 'miasma' affecting the operating theatre. This itself was far from ideal, being a converted room within the mansion. It had a sloping floor leading to a drain that was stopped by a wooden ball to prevent drafts. The first Matron, Jane Heath, was responsible for two nurses who received board and lodging but no salary. Dr Bowers noted that only later was the nurses accommodation sub-divided, inferring that the two 'hot-bedded' day and night shifts of 12 hours each.

John Corbett died in 1901, but the hospital he founded grew steadily as a charitable institution run by its board of trustees and funded by public subscriptions and fund raising. In 1948 it was taken into the National Health Service "with a debt of £14,000", and the modern era of healthcare began. Hill House was converted into a nurse's training school, and over time new buildings and facilities were added until by the 1960's The Corbett provided all the services of a modern general hospital.

Dr. Bowers then outlined his own career within the hospitals of the area, including Corbett, where he came in 1960 as a Pathologist. He emphasised that even in those days the Stourbridge / Dudley area was regarded as underprivileged, and that health services were desperately over-stretched. Attempts by him at inaugurating post-graduate medical education initially failed due to fact that medical practitioners "had no time or energy for that sort of thing with a tradition of working flat out". However, as time went by he managed to fund a post-graduate facility at Corbett, emphasising that continuing education there was always "for all health professions not just doctors", something certain of his medically qualified colleagues found a little difficult to accept. In 1968 the Rotary Club and the Matron were concerned that the local population and the hospital were drifting apart and the League of Friends of

CORBETT COMMEMORATIVES

The impending demise of Corbett Hospital, at least as we know it, is a cause for disquiet across the whole of the Stourbridge area not least because of the disposal of the open grounds for housing development.

However, of more immediate concern from an historical perspective are the fate of artefacts and significant buildings associated with the hospital's past. What if any, for example, are the plans for the old main entrance on Amblecote High Street, with its ornate gates and Edwardian Lodge? Although these are 'locally listed' by Dudley Council, demolition has a nasty habit of making it 'too late', as those who perpetrate it know only too well. In addition the buildings themselves are known to contain a number of objects associated with the old Corbett Hospital including a portrait of John Corbett and at least one commemorative plaque. Coincidentally the *Black Country Bugle* of July 3rd featured a copper shield with the Corbett arms made by Hill and Smith of Brierley Hill specifically for the Corbett Hospital.

As Dr. Eric Bowers indicated during his talk to Amblecote History Society in May, the League of Friends of Corbett Hospital has an interest in such matters. Nevertheless a wider profile of concern amongst locals would help ensure the survival of as many important objects as possible.

This matter could be discussed at the meeting of the 10th of September – if you have a view please come along to the Church Hall at 7.30pm.

Corbett Hospital was founded. Dr Bowers, a long-standing active member, told how the Friends had raised over half a million pounds over 30 years and that the cause still needed support.

Finally he outlined the gradual diminution of the Corbett's role as a general hospital within Dudley Area Health Authority. From possessing almost 200 medical and surgical beds in 1979 and a fully functioning A&E department, Corbett had gradually lost many services to the new Russels Hall site. However, although closure of the main hospital is now inevitable Dr. Bowers pointed out that medical services will continue in Amblecote with the new ambulatory unit being built off Vicarage Road, and that local support in the tradition of 'The Corbett' is still required.

