

The Finchley Society Newsletter

JUNE 1984

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Sir John Betjeman

We have all heard of the sad loss of Sir John Betjeman and most of us will have read the very detailed obituaries which have been published since his death. I do not wish to add to what has been said, but I would like to tell you how it was that he became our Patron.

It was in 1967 that I first met Sir John when I was a member of the GLC Historic Buildings Committee and he was one of the advisers. It was this Committee, with its great concern for preserving buildings of merit, which made me ponder deeply about the way Finchley was going and which first prompted me to consider forming the Finchley Society.

Sir John, as you probably know, was an incredibly shy man, more inclined to listen than speak at our committee meetings, but when he did have something to say, his words commanded complete attention. Although he was more known for his wish to preserve early buildings, he was not against modern architecture - in fact. I have heard him persuade a Committee with quiet, reasoned argument that a new well-designed building could blend very well with an old one.

We all regarded him with such respect and affection, and he was such a sympathetic person, that it seemed only natural that I should feel able to ask him to be Patron of our Society, even though at the time we had only had letters published in the local papers and were yet to hold the inaugural meeting. When I think about it now, I'm astonished at my temerity in asking someone who was so busy to take on yet another responsibility, but it is an indication of Sir John's nature that he accepted the post without a moment's hesitation.

I had not realised that he had such affection for Finchley but this was revealed in his letter to me of the 5th February, 1971 when he wrote... "I hope you will save the Express Dairies Farm which I can remember from my Highgate days. It is as important to Finchley as is that delightful part of the old village of Finchley, which still survives south and west and maybe a bit north, of the old Parish Church of St. Mary..." and I'm sure we all share his sentiments when he concluded ... "Long live Finchley and its sudden steep hills. tree-shaded gardens and memories of a civilised prosperity."

Sadly his declining health made it impossible for him to attend our functions but his interest never flagged and he was always appreciative of the various important events and successes which we were able to report to him.

We are all the poorer for his passing.

Jean Scott
Vice President

Our Stephens Exhibition Paddy Musgrove

The Finchley Society's forthcoming Stephens Exhibition in Avenue House will be our most ambitious venture to date. 1984 marks the centenary of the building by Henry C. Stephens of his spacious Avenue House drawing room - used from 1940 as Finchley's wartime council chamber - and of his private laboratory on the first floor, now largely restored from its former sorry state, substantially by Finchley Society labour, and currently being prepared to house a fascinating and literally unique exhibition.

There will be paintings and family records from Cholderton Lodge, the Stephens family's country seat, kindly lent us by Mr. Henry Edmunds, the famous man's great-grandson. There will also be personal and business documents relating to the family ink business, including original patent drawings and specifications. And Stephens' handwritten records of his chemistry experiments and his locked book of "recipes", once kept in a safe for added security reasons, will for the first time ever be on general public view.

Early advertising items will be on display - do you remember this famous "blot" symbol and the large outdoor thermometer? - and, with help and advice from Mr. Gerald Griffin of Brunel University, Stephens' century-old workbench will be furnished with period laboratory equipment, set up as if for a repeat of one of his ink-related experiments.

During the nine days of the Exhibition, in a room close to the laboratory, 70 watercolours of old Finchley also will be on display. Kindly released to us from the Barnet Libraries' Local History Collection, many of these will be receiving a first public viewing; others have only once previously been seen in Church Farm Museum, Hendon, in 1978. All are the work of the late Walter C. Colbert.

No entrance charge of any kind will be made and our expenses will be high; total outgoing for the Exhibition and the Garden Party (see below) are estimated at considerably more than £1,000. We therefore rely for much of our revenue on the sale of what we believe will be a very well produced illustrated booklet, now with the printer, to back up the events.

The Exhibition will run from Saturday, 30th June, to Sunday, 8th July, and be open daily from 10.30 a.m. to 8.00 p.m. We are grateful to all those members who have already volunteered to act as stewards, but many more names are needed. If you can attend for one or more periods, please phone Paddy Musgrove (346 0128). "Shifts" for stewarding are: 10.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m.; 1.30 p.m. to 4.30 p.m.; 4.30 p.m. to 8.00 p.m.

Finally, please tell your friends; or why not make up a party and bring them all along?

Avenue House Garden Party

David Smith

On Saturday, June 30th Avenue House and its grounds will be the setting for what we hope will be a worthy "send-off" for the Stephens' Exhibition. Our aim is to attract a large number of people, especially those who do not know the delights of the Avenue House grounds, to enjoy the atmosphere of this quite beautiful legacy left to us, the people of Finchley by "Inky" Stephens in 1918.

You are invited to join the crowds. Bring your friends. Bring your own picnic or buy your refreshments from the kiosk. Enjoy the Mummings' Play presented by the Dunhelm Players (in the afternoon), the songs of Jestyn Phillips, the guitar music of Rose Andresier.

In the afternoon there will be additional activities for younger children, including races, and in the evening the Finchley Society Wine Bar will be open for custom from 6.30 pm onwards. Members of the College Farm Gallery will be present tool drawing portraits, and painting the scene on canvas. They will also be showing a display of paintings of Avenue House and its environs.

In conjunction with the Garden Party, we have organised a Handwriting Competition for the Primary Schools of the Borough. The winning entries in this competition will be on show on the 30th.

We would welcome further participation by local musicians, whether in the Society or not, so please let David or Joanna Smith (883 4154) know of any other talents that can be added to our programme.

Provided the weather is good - and most events will still take place if it isn't it promises to be a memorable day, and, above all, a Finchley day.

Do join us!

March Monthly Meeting

Mary Hodgkinson

London's Green Belt, whose future is so uncertain as we await the demise of the GLC, was our "Topic of the Month" Vice-presidents Jean Scott and Bill Tyler, who introduced the subject, and Paddy Musgrove, warned us of encroachments - for housing developments, commercial projects of various kinds and vast recreational complexes such as the Cophall scheme.

Bill Tyler said that if we lost the GLC we should face the problem of having Green Belt land whittled away and of being without the one authority on whom we could rely to protect it. Equally grave was Jean Scott's warning that no part of the Green Belt can be regained once we have lost it.

The proposed abolition of elections for the GLC, along with other metropolitan authorities, has been keenly debated locally. Bill Tyler reported that our Committee has been unanimous in opposing legislation which seeks to do away with these elections. "This prevents us from voting for a new GLC", he said, "before we know whether or not it is to be abolished. It is a pre-emptive situation."

Guest speaker at the March meeting was Mr. Barry Le Jeune London Transport's Public Relations Officer.

He began his talk, which was illustrated by slides, with an apology for his delayed arrival, On this "no transport" day of strike actions his journey across London, had taken more than two hours. Mr. Le Jeune had to leave early for his return to Sussex, but fortunately he had time for a brisk exchange of views with members, who, in the words of chairman Denys Pegg, were queueing up to ask questions and voice criticism - mostly constructive.

Members welcomed the assurance that West Finchley's Underground station was "not on a hit list"; that the alleged uncomfortable riding of trains on a section of the track between Finchley's Central and East Stations would be reported; that improved methods of self-service and announcements to passengers on tube stations were being introduced; and that new arrangements for luggage, allowing more space, were being considered on airport services.

One-man operated buses did not escape criticism. Mr. Le Jeune conceded that the case for them was not open-and-shut and that from the employment point of view they had an obvious disadvantage, but they were more cost effective than conducted buses.

April Monthly Meeting

The "production" for us by Peter Pickering of seven member-speakers, resulted in programmes of slides and comments that were rich both in variety and the obvious degree of concern for their subjects that each speaker expressed.

Their audience will have gone home with much food for thought, provided, not the least, by the final speaker, Vice-president Bill Tyler, who played Devil's Advocate (or did he?) on the theme that we should ask "Has conservation gone too far?". He suggested that perhaps in Finchley and elsewhere people are fretting about the loss of often quite indifferent buildings and are fearful of what might replace them. "Was the past that good?" he enquired. "If so, why didn't it survive?" He supported these thoughts with quite unexpected slides, including shots of Egyptian pyramids and temples - why has nothing of the "Ordinary" architecture of those times survived? - and of Manhattan's ever-developing and regenerating skyline. Members will surely be asking Bill to amplify his theme on other occasions.

Earlier, Dr. Natelson, enlisting our support in his campaign to have Coppett's Wood declared a Nature Reserve, revealed that it is not only an ancient woodland site (and the only remaining wood in Friern Barnet) but one with unusual plant growth

characteristics due to fermentation resulting from the period when part of the site was a sewage works. Coppett's Wood supports no less than 48 recorded species of butterfly and moth plus voles, hedgehogs, foxes, owls, dragonflies, frogs and even some plants not found elsewhere in North London/Middlesex. Members who wish to support the Coppett's Wood campaign were asked to write to Dr. Natelson at 17 Hollickwood Avenue, N12 OLS.

Andrew Forsyth's slides of his collection of Finchley picture postcards gave us a tranquil Edwardian circular tour of the area. One of the postcards included the message "Finchley is a nice clean place", neatly capturing the mood of his programme. The audience must also have reflected that those still quite familiar scenes of Old Finchley had an added dimension not only of peace but of considerably more "space" than is the case today when cars, trucks, hoardings and the paraphernalia of shop advertising have exploded into those same streets.

Mrs. Pinnell entertained us with slides of East Finchley, especially features either neglected, overlooked or now demolished ... have you managed to spot the house in Long Lane which sports the "stalking" cat on the roof?

Mr. Pinnell, in truly graphic fashion, called for our vigilance in respect of potential speculative in-filling building development. He described his personal involvement with a neighbourhood group, successfully fighting off one such inappropriate development. Their success, he declared, was due to a blanket campaign they mounted to impress their reasoned views upon anyone or everyone involved with planning decisions - an example, Mr. Pinnell suggested, that others should follow in similar circumstances.

The theme of Miss Gwen Watson's presentation was "Brookside Walk over 14 years", literally a photographic record of her walks at all seasons with her dog, along the Dollis Brook. Many of the audience will have reflected not only that the Brook creates a most valuable and attractive "lung", but that it extends further through Finchley than we generally appreciate.

A call for support for an important campaign was made by Society Secretary, Kurt Weinberg. He described the imbalance of swimming facilities in the Borough of Barnet, with the outdated and small Squires Lane pool at one extreme and the supra-modern, though rather less accessible, Copthall swimming complex at the other. Well placed facilities do exist at the Finchley Open Air Pool but being seasonal and even then not cost-effective this site is continually under threat of closure. Kurt asked us to join him in urging that the Open Air Pool be converted to a covered pool, while still neatly preserving its outdoor surrounds as presently enjoyed. He suggested that members should address their support for this relatively inexpensive leisure concept to the council and specifically to their individual ward councillors

College Farm Open Days

31st March and 1st April

Denys Pegg

Despite the very cold weekend, we were pleased to welcome 673 visitors. The treasurer reports gate takings of £265 and would like to record his special thanks to the stalwarts who collected the money in the bitter wind.

Inside the exhibition room all was warm and cheerful, the new gas heaters contributing to the former and the colourful display of flowers for sale to the latter. The gallery offered for sale a large display of oil paintings and watercolours produced by their own members.

Without doubt most families came to see the animals and to admire Muriel, the Gloucester Old Spot pig in her newly-built home. The lambs, three of them black, skipped around and the trade in animal food at 10p a bag was brisk.

The Dunhelm Players (Mummers) performed on both days. St. George duly overcame the dragon, although on the Saturday the cold wind nearly slayed both and froze the maiden, as the performance took place on the granite sets outside the stables.

Refreshments were served in the new aviary tea bar and visitors were able to admire the newly cleaned tiles whilst consuming tea and cakes. The aviary is due to appear shortly.



6th - 7th May Timothy Johnson

The campaign to save the Farm has met with so many uncertainties that it is small wonder the public at large is sometimes baffled. Now visitors can at least see some positive signs of real progress with improvements in the facilities and attractiveness of the Farm plus the heightened quality of Open Days. These show that the last year has been a significant one. Instead of saying "Isn't it a pity?", visitors are now tending to say "Isn't it wonderful!"

This year "May Day" fell on May 7th and holiday crowds celebrated this quaint oddity of the English Calendar by spending either Sunday or Monday afternoon at College Farm. The sheep shearing took place on Sunday to the music of the Hosier and Dickinson (Watford) Band and there was much else to do and to see on both days. At the mini-motor show lucky people could win Volvo motor cars and Wilkinson Sword garden shears while their children tossed horse-shoes for prizes. With the cooperation of the Nat West Bank a novel "Pig Fair" featured resident porkers including the now famous Muriel plus a plethora of piggy banks and a giant carnival-type pig. By guessing Muriel's weight a pre-financed savings account could be won. Although really staged with the laudable aim of encouraging thrift in the young, the Pig Fair amused people of all ages - but Muriel looked bored.

The imperfect weather demonstrated the value of the range of new indoor attractions. There is no room to detail these here: come soon and see for yourselves!

Fifteen hundred people paid for admission while voluntary helpers were entitled to free entry. Welcome new faces among the helpers led to the extraordinary phenomenon that both days seemed well and adequately staffed. Is this a major breakthrough? Are the staff problems really over? No! they are not! Expanding activities will need more people to run them and the more people lending a hand the easier and the more enjoyable it is for everyone. Open-day helpers work part-time, flexitime or any time they can spare, so if you would like to join the final push that leads to glorious victory, ask Ken Duffin to put you on the list. He will inscribe your name in gold! Give him a ring on 368 3726. College Farm needs You!

College Farm Gallery

The Gallery is always open on the first Sunday afternoon of each month with a picture exhibition and varying other interesting features. When this does not coincide with one of the special "Open Days" admission is normally free. These "First Sundays" have proved very successful and subject to the completion of other arrangements involved, the Gallery should soon be open every Saturday and Sunday afternoon during the Summer months.

The College Farm Gallery Association will be playing a very active part in this year's Friern Barnet Summer Show in Friary Park on August 10th and 11th, thereby adding to the Finchley Society's own presence at this uniquely entertaining country-style horticultural show.

Edwardian Tramways - Reprieve For Redbourne Avenue - Cyril Smeeton

There were only about 3 or 4 houses in Redbourne Avenue, on the North side, at the end of the 19th Century when the earliest applications were made for Light Railway powers, covering lines through Finchley to Highgate and to Golders Green and beyond. Depots and generating station sites in Oak Lane, East Finchley and in East End Road, to the rear of the Bald Faced Stag were mentioned and another unnamed site in Finchley was specified. The Light Railway Commissioners did not approve the proposals.

The next proposals covering Finchley were in November, 1898, in the application by the Metropolitan Tramways and Omnibus Co. Ltd. They asked for powers to construct a line 712 chains in length, to terminate at the proposed generating station in Redbourne Avenue. The application was again unsuccessful.

By this time, the Middlesex County Council were taking an interest in the various schemes and decided that as tramways and Light Railways were in the main to operate on County roads, they should be the Light Railway authority under the 1896 Act, They accordingly joined forces with the M.T.O.C. who would lease proposed lines from the M.C.C. if powers were granted. This in turn aroused the wrath of the London County Council who were firmly wedded to the idea that all public utility undertakings should be municipally owned and operated. So the L.C.C., together with the Finchley U.D.C. and some other councils, objected to the joint proposals. As a result of this, the Light Railway Commissioners agreed to grant the powers to the County only. However, the route along Ballards Lane, and the 7½ chains in Redbourne Avenue, which were included in the County's scheme, were not passed by the Commissioners. Also rejected was a rival application at the same date by the Finchley U.D.C., which included Redbourne Avenue, and a second depot site in North Finchley between Avenue Road and the "Malt & Hops" (the erstwhile Hillside telephone exchange and Advance Laundry.)

The confirmation of the County of Middlesex Light Railways Order of 1903 sanctioned the Ballards Lane line, the line in Woodhouse Road and that between Whetstone and the Middlesex-Hertfordshire boundary at the present Wallfield Avenue. The main Great North Road route in Finchley, from Archway up to the Hornsey-Finchley boundary and beyond to Whetstone had been sanctioned in the County Council's Light Railways Order of 1901.

The M.C.C. submitted applications for Extension Orders in May 1901 including the Ballards Lane route, and this time the route was sanctioned together with the Redbourne Avenue 7½ chains. On 26th November, 1902 after the many delays in getting powers and raising capital, and with the Commissioners expected to recommend powers for the lines in the May 1901 application, the Metropolitan Electric Tramways' directors sanctioned the purchase of the Redbourne Avenue site for some £6,000. However, negotiations with the owners (whose names are not recorded in the Minutes) were of a protracted nature and finally fell through, leaving the directors with the problem of finding another site. Meanwhile technical developments in power generation caused some policy changes. The M.E.T. bought from the Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge the large site on the banks of the River Lee Navigation on which the huge Brimsdown generating station was built. Also a large power house at Taylors Lane, Harlesden was bought in 1903 from Willesden U.D.C. to serve the lines radiating from Cricklewood towards Edgware and Willesden, Acton and Paddington. It was now possible to abandon the original scheme for several small generating stations since the large stations at Brimsdown and Willesden could provide high tension current conveyed to sub-stations via underground cables for conversion to low tension 550 volts d.c. for the overhead.

Thus in Finchley only a small site for a depot and sub-station would be required and after a hurried search the site in Woodberry Grove was bought in May 1903 from the well known builder C.F. Day, for £2,500. Part of the site had been occupied by "Rosemont", the home of one-time Finchley and Middlesex Chairman, Benjamin Todd.

Depot sites in Finchley provided the M.E.T. with more difficulty than all the other four depots. Had they been successful in obtaining the Redbourne Avenue site, as originally envisaged, it is possible that they may have built other works there besides a car depot. If they had been still in possession of such land in 1912, part of it may have become a bus garage for the Tramways (M.E.T.) Omnibus Company, formed in that year to counter growing omnibus competition. In the event, a piece of ground next to Hendon Depot was taken for that purpose.

For Your Environmental Edification

Rosalind Batchelor

Keeping dogs in their place: A petition of nearly 2000 signatures, initiated by Bernice Thompson of Windsor Road, N3 was submitted recently to Barnet Council Development and Estates Committee, asking for action to curb dog fouling in local parks and elsewhere. The committee will debate the issue at their June 18th meeting. Anyone able to give support from the public gallery will be most welcome.

Finding a place for a tree: Windsor Road is also the new home for a fine but unwanted product of the autumn tree collection - a nine foot ash tree from New Barnet. The very morning after I had contemplated consigning the tree to the bonfire to make room for the beans, a member rang specifically asking for an ash. The answer to a prayer!

Time still stands still in Church End Finchley. It will soon be eighteen months since the King Edward Hall Clock has worked properly. I am a little tired of writing to the council about this matter, to put it mildly! The sick clocks' disease seems to be catching; the clock on the old bank near the bridge has stopped recently too.

Horticultural mysteries: The 'mystery shrub' with long tap root and glossy green leaves sold at the coffee morning was identified after a visit to Sissinghurst as Daphne Laureola or Spurge Laurel. Has anyone identified the mystery annual, referred to as "Policeman's helmets"?

News In Brief

The Sound of Finchley Past: Tony Parkins writes to say that an one of his recent cycling runs (he puts in a "plug" for the St. Albans Section of the 40+ Cycling Club!) he lunched at the Plough Inn at Great Munden, three miles west of the A10 from Puckeridge. There in a special extension to the bar, is the current home of the Compton Organ formerly at the Gaumont Cinema, Finchley. The organ is still played regularly and Tony suggests that interested persons (or parties) could, through a telephone call, time a visit to coincide with a playing session.

Another Hat: Invited recently to address a Finchley Probus Club luncheon, Paddy Musgrove on arrival recognised quite a few familiar faces. One of these belonged to Finchley Society membership secretary, Roy Thomas, seated, as we are accustomed to seeing him, at a table and collecting money. Roy carried out a quick membership check and found that fifteen out of the seventy Probus Club members wore also members of the Finchley Society. Most of those who weren't requested membership forms!

Green Belts: Our present concern with the Green Belt is not new. John Donovan reminds us that in 1933, J. B. Priestley wrote in his "English Journey" under the chapter heading "To Lincoln and Norfolk" about Norwich ... "city's purchase of land all round the edge of the town which is now enclosed in a green ring about two miles wide. This is what every city should do. It ought to have been done in London years ago. Not only is the open space valuable in itself, but it also sets a boundary to the city. It is time we discouraged this sprawling practice of our cities which, instead of spoiling more and more of the surrounding countryside, should be compelled to rebuild their worst districts and to make the best of the area they already occupy. They have played the octopus long enough."

For the Finchley Society: Carol and John Halls (Joint Editors),
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