

The Finchley Society Newsletter

SEPTEMBER 1984

No.7/84 (Supplement)

Since our June Newsletter and Supplement, we have enjoyed a truly long summer packed with Fin.Soc. and College Farm events. The earlier ones, for example those in June, may now seem quite stale but we crave your indulgence for the members who were unable to attend the various venues, while we record at least the highlights.

For those "who were there", we hope that these reports will induce pleasant recollections or even reveal incidents that went unnoticed at the time.

A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE CELEBRATIONS, 30th JUNE

Mary Hodgkinson

A few hundred yards from the Church End shopping area, far more visitors than some of us had dared to hope for were spending a day packed with varied pleasures in the sunshine.

Not for many years has Avenue House been the setting for a social occasion on this scale. Last winter, as I strolled through the gardens on the way to an afternoon class, finding fresh interests at every visit, I had no idea (not even an inkling!) that our celebration of a Stephens' centenary would bring the whole place to life on a sunny summer day.

To see families queuing to enter the grounds - to hear them exclaiming with pleasure at the sight of the animals from College Farm and at all the day's entertainments - to spend a few quieter moments in the picture gallery in the stables - all this was a delight.

Up in Inky's restored workroom, people were fascinated by his records and other documents, by the fine display of photographs and the dip-in pen, inkstand and blotter which inspired school day memories for many signatories of the visitors' book. Some, not unexpectedly, had something to say about the quality of today's handwriting with ballpoint pen. One elderly visitor was convinced that aids to speedy communication had led to laziness, carelessness and lack of discipline in correspondence.

Not only at the garden party but also throughout the week, personal links with Avenue House were recalled. Mrs. Kay Snowden remembered how her father, Mr. George Baxter, used to speak of happy afternoons among schoolchildren from Inner London who were guests of "Inky" Stephens. Looking round the laboratory, another visitor was heard to say "My grandmother was Mr. Stephens' cook"; and a waitress at a luncheon held there during the week revived a legend about a female figure in black and white who haunted the basement.

One of the most pleasant features of the celebrations was the interest taken by so many of the public in a mansion and gardens which have been little known outside the locality. Just before the exhibition was completed, it was a happy coincidence to hear on L.B.C. radio a mention of the Avenue House grounds as one of North London's most delightful but lesser known public parks and gardens.

Reflections on the Stephens' Exhibition Paddy Musgrove

Plans for the Stephens laboratory centenary exhibition and for the display of the late Walter Colbert's watercolours of Finchley were outlined in the Newsletter Supplement; for March and June last. They were duly carried into effect and therefore need not now be repeated, but a few comments on our helpers and visitors may be of interest.

Seventy volunteers provided more than 250 man/woman-hours of coverage as stewards for the 2 exhibition rooms and their valuable contents. If we add to this the many Garden Party stewards and the workers involved in the planning and staging of the exhibitions, it is obvious that well over 100 people were involved one way or another in our project - a re-assuring sign of our members' abilities and enthusiasm.

In our souvenir booklet, "Henry C. Stephens, an Avenue House Centenary", we paid tribute to outside individuals and organisations which had helped us to mount the exhibition. It is not normal Society practice to record official thanks to all members who carry out Society tasks (how could we in this case with so many involved?) but due recognition should be given to three committee members who each took responsibility for one aspect of activities: Peter Marsh, who organised and mounted the laboratory display: Timothy Johnson, who was responsible for the display of paintings: and David Smith, who planned and co-ordinated the opening day's Garden Party.

We cannot say exactly how many people came to the exhibition, but 900 signed the visitors' book in the laboratory and many more, of course, did not. That book turned out to be an unexpected attraction. It had seemed appropriate to provide signatories with an old-style pen with steel nib and "real" ink, but we were quite unprepared for the sensation this was to cause, even amongst those who could fairly be termed middle-aged. Some, overcome by apprehension, asked for scrap paper for preliminary practice. For others, the simple act recalled their happy youthful days. There were, of course, the skilled few who joyfully accepted the challenge, as these examples clearly show.

There were no inhibitions amongst the children who came in class groups from Manorside and St. Mary's schools. They loved the old pen, although Mitesh Patel, in a "thank you" letter on behalf of her group, thought it might be difficult to do all their school work with it, while Julie, Debra, Neal, Gary and Nicholas, on behalf of Class 34 at St. Mary's, wrote: "We enjoyed looking at the pictures of old Finchley and writing our names with the old pen and ink. We shall remember Inky Stephens and our visit to his laboratory." And that, of course, is just what we would wish them to do. What a pity no more than two schools accepted our invitation for an escorted visit.

There were groups also from the Hornsey Historical Society and from "Watch" at College Farm. The Writing Equipment Society, who had arranged a weekend meeting in London to coincide with our exhibition, was represented by members from as far afield as Sheffield, Cheltenham, Cambridge and Rochester.

Distinguished individual visitors included the Mayor and Mayoress in their personal capacities, Mr. Neville Beale, our GLC representative, also a number of local councillors and council officers. We were very pleased to welcome the Misses Colbert, who expressed pleasure at the Public showing of their late father's watercolours; also Mr. J. Daniels, Chief Chemist of the DRG Royal Sovereign Group, successors to the Stephens organisation, whose professional appraisal of the exhibition was naturally most welcome. He was accompanied by Mr. Charles Sidney, his retired predecessor, who had many tales to tell of the old Stephens works in Gillespie Road.

Sales of the souvenir booklet were good and voluntary cash donations from visitors were most generous. It will be some time before final figures are available, but, contrary to our preliminary estimates, it looks as if neither the exhibition nor the garden party will result in any charge to Society funds.

The Avenue House Garden Party - And What Next David Smith

Looking back at the events of Saturday, 30th June, it is quite astonishing to recall the range and variety of both "acts" and "activities" that we succeeded in packing in to the afternoon and evening programmes.

The "cast list" included

Henry Edmunds - presenting "Stephens" prizes for the schools handwriting competition
The College Singers - Christ's College seniors singing "barbershop"

The Dunhelm Players - a mummings play spectacular
Lilian Massey with Irish Dancing by local children
Barnet Arts Workshop - children's face-painting and pavement art
A Scout Camp display - 6th Finchley Troop
Children's games and races with Isobel McPherson and friends
Toddlers' games with Sylvia Brand
College Farm animals corner
"Live" filming and a film show - Finchley Cine Society
Stephen Jack of BBC fame with readings and recitations
Greek Dancing - Barnet Cypriot Junior Dance Group
College Farm Gallery - mobile as ever
A Children's Treasure-Hunt
Full-scale refreshments on sale
Music for a summer garden - trio named "Avenue House" for the occasion
Rose Andresier classical guitar, with
Jestyn Phillips poetry and prose
Play it again Peter - old favourites on the electric organ by Peter Pugh.

That this kaleidoscope actually went so smoothly is a tribute to the sheer talents of all these contributors, to the generous participation of the Avenue House and Grounds staff, to the enthusiasm of all of our volunteer members who participated and, as they say in the Music Hall tradition, "chiefly yourselves" the 500-plus visitors who attended and clearly enjoyed the day.

We must admit to one criticism though - one mum laughingly wanted to know why we hadn't organised a treasure hunt for grown-ups!!

Arising from it all, your committee is already discussing other possible events on a similar scale for the future. It is clear however that the practical experiences gained on 30th June should not be allowed to dissipate.

In order to be ready for further occasions, we need to establish a pool of members that will undertake the very practical tasks involved. If you could help with moving chairs and tables, putting up displays and notices, installing lights, stewarding, shepherding artists, etc., etc., please contact me, David Smith, so that the society can benefit from the service of such a team. Here's to the next time!

College Farm Reports Timothy Johnson

Strawberry Fayre - 16th and 17th June

Our capricious climate brings both joys and sorrows. They say it has formed the national character and taught us how to cope with chaos. Saturday was one of those perfect days that inspires enough goodwill to forgive anyone for everything. The sun shone on clean new paint, gilding the flowers in the new window-boxes with midsummer freshness. The colourful open-air crafts fair looked cheerfully inviting. It was surely only the rich social life of Finchley with a host of clashing counter-attractions that robbed us of record breaking takings at the gates.

Sunday was different. On Sunday we were thunderstruck. A spectacular thunderstorm turned the crafts fair into a disaster area. Refugee stallholders, hastily setting up shop indoors, transformed the Picture Gallery into a crowded covered market. The sun appeared briefly to welcome the Mayor and Mayoress, Councillor and Mrs. Leslie Sussman, for the ceremony of opening the new aviary and The Aviary Tea Room. The bell above the great gable newly restored, rang in celebration. The Mayor thanked Chris and Jane Ower for what they were doing at the farm for the community, congratulated their voluntary allies and expressed hope that the worrying uncertainties about the Farm's future would soon be resolved. The Mayor and Mayoress toured the Farm, chatting with stallholders and people from the voluntary organisations taking part. Beneath a threatening sky children bounced happily on the inflatables, tossed horse-shoes and demolished strawberries and cream. All things considered, it was not a bad two days, but we can record only 800 visitors.

East Finchley Community Festival - 23rd June

What's in a name - fourteen years ago The Society entered "show business" with its first exhibition in Carnival Week at Victoria Park and ever since then has been appearing at local fairgrounds, projecting ideas to the public, arousing interest and recruiting new members. As the exhibitions grew in size and scope the people designing them made quite a name for themselves. This name was "The Exhibitionists" (Who on earth thought of that?)

Two years ago Chris Ower set up the College Farm Gallery Association and insisted on giving it this dignified title. Conversationally, however, it has names that are less formal and Chris himself is quite enterprising in inventing new ones. This year College Farm Gallery has been "on tour" and staged such a rapid succession of one- and two-day exhibitions in different places that one hears a new name being muttered. Is it "Christopher's Travelling Circus"? These visits are effective in extending popular interest in the Farm and one example tells the story of them all. At the East Finchley Community Festival, the exhibition stand attracted a solid stream of interested visitors all day. A constant barrage of questions revealed that the good people of East Finchley were generally a little unsure about either the location or nature of College Farm. We are all parochial; we all live in "little villages", but there is now ample evidence that the "Travelling Circus" excited enough curiosity to make people venture across parish boundaries to pay a visit to the Farm. Most of them seem likely to come again.

Cream Teas Day - 5th August

The annual Cream Teas day originally offered nothing more than the placid pleasures of a Victorian Sunday Afternoon. People strolled gently round the Farm greeting friends and exchanging polite remarks about the weather. They had cream buns for tea in the Sunken Garden and then went home.

These quiet delights were extended last year to include a charity art exhibition by the Burnbake Trust. Clearly - and cheerfully - this was the thin end of a wedge destined to expose the event to the dangerous excitements of what Victorian ancestors called "The Continental Sunday".

This year, visitors having tea in the Aviary Tea Room saw the flying bicycles of FAZE 7 BMX TEAM leaping about outside the windows. BMX jargon must have names for all the tricks they did, but most of us had only a thrilling impression of aerial acrobatics performed on bicycles high above the cruelly hard cobblestones of the Courtyard. Other organisations taking part (and all of them less dangerously) were the 6th Finchley Scouts, The Herts and Middlesex Trust for Nature Conservation, "Watch", The Finchley Society, The Friends of College Farm and College Farm Gallery Association. They combined to make the afternoon so full of interest and entertainment that perhaps even Queen Victoria herself would have been amused. It was a good day.

There is no space here to dwell long upon the gastronomic experience of the cream teas but at least the cream itself must be mentioned. Denys Pegg could tell you more about its pedigree, but it was real cream, it was local cream and many customers remarked that it was unusually good cream!

Monthly Meeting, June 27th Mary Hodgkinson

"There may be water in your tap that Cleopatra drank!"

This illustration of the persistence of matter and global re-cycling of water was given by Mr. Derek Ardern, Area Manager of the Thames Water Authority's Central Division, at the June meeting.

Even more surprising was the list of items regularly recovered from river= nowadays. Shopping trolleys have joined cars, tyres, mattresses and dead cats in the weekly harvest from problem areas. Around Edmonton, 100 trolleys a year are the usual "catch".

On the other hand, thanks to the clean-up programme started by the L.C.C. and continued by the GLC - the Thames is likely to become "a proper salmon river".

At question time, Denys Pegg raised the inevitable subject of the Dollis Brook, cleaned up on occasion by Fin.Soc. volunteers. About the responsibility for its cleanliness, Mr. Ardern explained that there might be some uncertainty, as the Water Authority was undergoing some administrative changes, but he gave an address to which we could write if problems arose. His quip that "It is up to the people who put in the rubbish to take it out", and his advice about safe and suitable clothing for amateurs engaged on river clearance were much appreciated.

So too was the assurance that historic and aesthetic considerations are borne in mind. For example, among the slides Mr. Ardern presented was a photograph of an old rural river bridge which has been extended in keeping with the original "instead of putting up a concrete monster". Altogether a talk from which one learnt a great deal the easy way!

Recollections of Avenue House In Wartime Irene Shuttle

In September 1939, I joined the ARP Staff at Avenue House, as a telephonist in the Control Centre. This was situated in the basement of the building and was suitably fortified for its wartime use. It was the Nerve Centre of the Borough of Finchley's ARP Services, and was connected by telephone to the Wardens' posts, and also the Rescue, Fire and Ambulance Stations. The officer-in-charge was also in communication with higher regional authorities, and he received warnings of any danger heading our way.

There were three shifts, working continuously in the control room (I was on the 'Red' Shift). During the early months of the war, when there were fewer alert warnings, we spent most of the time attending lectures on first aid, poison gases, etc., and in taking part in exercises. These were to test the routines to be adopted during possible enemy attacks.

These procedures were such that when the air-raids were for real, the system proved very effective in getting the necessary services into action as quickly as possible, throughout the Borough.

One particular exercise I remember, took place at night. The location of the imaginary incident was plotted to be at Avenue House which was reported to have sustained a direct hit. Evacuation of the survivors in our Control Room was imperative, mainly because the telephone system had to continue its function elsewhere. The way of escape was through a trap door set in the wall. This led to a tunnel which was cylindrical in shape and just about wide enough for us to crawl through on our hands and knees. It was not very pleasant as the walls were lined with a sticky substance which was (so I was told) a precaution against poison gas. However, we arrived, one by one, at the end of the tunnel and emerged through another trap door which opened outwards into the grounds of Avenue House. This exit is still there, and looks like a manhole cover. It is on the grassy slope by the terrace at the rear of the house.

Having had a roll-call in the darkness, we were then bundled into vehicles and whisked off to the Fire Station at North Circular Road. An emergency control centre awaited us and service was resumed in new surroundings.

A diversion from our control room duties was to take part in entertainments. These included sketches, dancing, songs, etc. and proceeds went towards the Mayor's "Comforts for the Troops" fund. Our first show took place in the drawing room of Avenue House (the room that later became Finchley's Council Chamber). We became more ambitious and repeated the programme at St. Luke's Hall, and later again as one of the entertainments put on in the grounds where a stage was erected for the "Holidays at Home" concerts.

We called ourselves the "Avenue House Dancers" and I was also one of a singing trio, the "Three Arpeggios"! The repertoire consisted of renderings (in harmony) of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" and "Run Rabbit Run".

These reminiscences are but a few of my ARP memories of Avenue House. Fortunately it is the happy times that one remembers with affection.

As the war progressed, ARP became Civil Defence. The control room was moved to new premises near Hertford Lodge, but dear old Avenue House survived, and is always there adapting itself to the various needs of the Borough.

The Summer Shows Esther Johnson

Finchley Carnival 12th/14th July

One might be forgiven for believing that the weather was the main event at this year's Carnival. Thursday produced half a gale, was dreadfully wet and our stand staff virtually had to re-build the stand after the marquee suffered a near lift-off! Friday was showery, but the marquee kept it all at bay and Saturday, though windy and threatening, did not deter a large public attendance.

Our book sales were excellent (over £80.00) perhaps reflecting the much wider range of items we now display. On Saturday afternoon Mrs. Duffin and her daughter Ann included Mrs. Thatcher among their customers. The Prime Minister bought both "Finchley" and "Mill Hill" from the "As it was" series and in turn was presented by Paddy Musgrove with an Inky Stephens Centenary book.

Not only was our stand generous in space at the head of the marquee, but the adjacent formal floral display added a charming dimension to the location.

Friern Barnet Show - 10th/11th August

Friern Barnet Summer Show is famous for its attendant thunderstorms; but not this year. Saturday, in particular, was a perfect day.

Our exhibition stand, in an excellent position, was smaller and more compact than at the Carnival and very attractive, and as a bonus, we had a view of the seemingly endless dog show judging!

Plant sales were similar to the Carnival's (£34.55). At both places the customers emptied several buckets of garden shrubs. Finchley and Friern Barnet must now be absolutely full of Leycesteria !

The new notelets were popular, selling at the introductory bargain price; and in literature sales, the favourite was "Finchley as it Was".

The staff manning the stands, and the "heavy mob" who helped to erect and dismantle it were all marvellous at both exhibitions.

News In Brief

Another "First"

The booklet on Henry C. Stephens, compiled and produced by Paddy Musgrove for the Society to mark the centenary exhibition, is the first piece of publishing undertaken by the Finchley Society. To date some 550 copies have been sold but if you haven't yet bought your copy, they are still available from Faculty Bookshops and local libraries.

Pavement T(r)ips

Another pavement nuisance - and hazard - is the sprawling bicycle (writes RH). Instead of propping their machines against a wall or shop front, or the stands provided by the Council, many young cyclists simply leave them lying on the ground, often in the middle of the footway, where they are a danger to pedestrians. Some of these endangered people have been known to go into shops and enquire who left a cycle on the pavement.

A firm word, nicely put, would seem to be the most effective cure!

Horses for Courses (?)

Derbyshire for land
Devonshire for tin
Wiltshire for hunting
Middlesex for sin!

This delightful old rhyme is the tailpiece in the Middlesex Society's Autumn/Winter bulletin recently published. We "lift" it, with full acknowledgment and thanks to our friends in that Society.

How many Finchleys?

The original hamlets of the old parish of Finchley were Church End, East End and Whetstone. North End, or North Finchley, was to come much later. For reasons of sound Victorian snobbery, our forebears clearly preferred East Finchley to East End. Whetstone has retained its name, thanks to that object in front of The Griffin, as also has Church End to a more limited extent. Some of us like to ensure the perpetuation of the name of Church End by including it on our printed stationery or those non-U, but very convenient, self-adhesive labels. Finchley Central exists only in the name of the railway station which, in more respectful days, also was known as Church End and, indeed once, rather optimistically as Finchley and Hendon!