

# THE COCKPIT

A Publication of the Chislehurst Society (Founded 1934)

*The Cockpit, on Chislehurst Common, has been the traditional meeting place for Chislehurst people on all great occasions from time immemorial*

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## The Famous Station Garden at Elmstead Woods

Everyone who travels from Elmstead Woods Station will know about its gardens, but many will not know that on Saturday 19th August, 1995, fifteen months ago, the Daily Mail Weekend Magazine featured an article by Diana Hutchinson, entitled "The garden now standing on Platform 3". It took the form of an interview with the two railmen who created the garden, Howard Pettit and Peter Phelps. We wish to thank them, and the Daily Mail, for permission to use that article in the following item, and to thank Nicolette Comport of the Chislehurst Society for drawing the Editor's attention to the article in the first place.

The garden can be found on platforms 2, 3 and 4, and is lovingly tended by Howard and Peter "between trains". It evolved from simple flowerbeds dug out years ago. When the station was extended in the late 1980s the garden suffered badly, and it was in the course of clearing up the mess that the present garden really got started.

A pond was created in the hole left after diesel-contaminated soil was removed; it is pleasing to report that a pair of ducks have made a home on this pond this year. Tons of unwanted cobblestones from another station became the foundation of the garden and rockery. The soil poses great difficulties. It is described as "white sand", which sounds very like the Thanet Sand that overlies the chalk in this area, plus lots of stones and gravel. The remains of the old station beneath the surface made for a lot of very hard work. The sheer size of the garden is daunting; platforms are a good 300 yards long, with a garden on each. Even Platform 1 is included, with its wild embankment kept under control. On Platform 2 there is a woodland walk. Thinking about the magnitude of the task makes one realise just how dedicated Howard and Peter must be. The plaques in the booking hall, awarded to them and their garden are a reminder of this toil. With all their usual duties to perform it is a wonder that they get as much as "an hour a day in the garden", if they are lucky. This is obviously the key to gardening success; a little every day. On Sundays, with fewer trains, more is done. It seems that on Sundays many people come along just to ask gardening questions. It is all good for public relations.

Another difficulty is created by the fast trains that rush through, producing miniature gales and dust. This led to the use of tough shrubs like rosemary and lavender, to surround the flower beds as a shield. Anything grown here has to be

### The Society's Publications

The *Cockpit* is a periodic review of Chislehurst matters of mainly long-term interest (history, environment, heritage, architecture etc). It now has its own distinguishing colour.

**Chislehurst Report** is the Society's newsletter about current issues and events.

**The Annual Report** is published shortly before the Annual General Meeting.

These publications are delivered free to all members by Committee Members and Road Stewards.

For information on other publications relating to Chislehurst please see **page 4**.

tough to survive. It is a man-made valley, a cutting, harbouring a lot of wild life in the surrounding vegetation. With conservation in mind, Howard and Peter employ organic methods, as far as possible.

Seats for the pond-side were requested, but only those familiar red painted metal ones were available. The gardeners, quite rightly one feels, thought that oak would be better, and they got what they wanted, with some help from revenue raised through advertisements featuring the garden, and with the agreement of the railway directors.

The garden attracts visitors, donors of plants, helpers dead-heading whilst waiting for trains, and even takers of cuttings and seed-heads - a common feature in public gardens. We wonder if would-be passengers get so engrossed in the garden, or loiter so long in the woodland walk, that they forget their train?

A final thought. Herons visit gardens with ponds, looking for fish. Here, at Elmstead Woods Station, banks and steps down to the ponds, combined with bulrushes, hinder the flight path of herons, and frustrate their approach on foot. But Howard and Peter have discovered a new problem. "Experience now tells us, don't just blame the heron for nicking your fish; watch out for the crows!"

(The original article from the Daily Mail Weekend for Saturday 19th August 1995 is filed at Chislehurst Library for reference.)

Roy Hopper

## An Alien in Chislehurst

Rush Pond on the Common makes a delightful autumnal picture as the trees on the island change colour. Few passers-by would realise that an alien is present and surreptitiously taking over the pond. The alien comes, not from a far planet, but Australia. *Crassula Helmsii* or Australian Swamp Stonecrop, also known as *Tillaea Recurva* to the aquatic supplier, is a plant generally available from aquatic centres as an "oxygenating plant" for ponds. It is of little value as a food plant for birds and fish, who find it distasteful. It is quickly able to dominate aquatic areas with vigorous growth continuing throughout the year. Native aquatic plants are unable to compete and eventually die out.

Australian Swamp Stonecrop has completely taken over Rush Pond, the only wild pond in the Borough of Bromley to be infested. It is probable that the plant was introduced into the pond by a well-intentioned dumping of surplus material from a garden pond. The elimination of this alien is going to be a difficult and expensive task for the Conservators. The pond has now been sprayed with a chemical which, it is hoped, will eliminate this plant. The pond will then be restocked with native aquatic plants. The Conservators appeal to all residents not to place surplus fish and aquatic plants in the ponds because of the danger of introducing diseases or undesirable aliens.

## Who Needs Heather?

A local resident has queried why volunteers bother to preserve the heather on the Common. He argues that in ancient times the area was covered by trees which were felled and cleared to allow crops to be grown. The land, because water rapidly leached away the minerals, provided a poor return and became rough grazing. In time peat formed and heath plants became established. The grazing animals prevented trees becoming established. In modern times the animals have been removed and much of the area has reverted to woodland. Why not let the small area of heath remaining become tree covered, which the gentleman prefers?

At one time large areas of the South-East were heathland, but today only relatively small areas remain. Much has been reclaimed for agriculture or forestry, used for military training or golf courses or used for housing or roads. Many of the plant and animal communities associated with heathland have become rare. If nothing is done heathland will continue to disappear and some of the associated species will become extinct. Woodlands on the other hand are not considered as threatened to the same extent.

The Conservators are keen to preserve the two small areas of heath remaining on St. Paul's Cray Common which show how the Common looked years ago, together with its plant and animal communities. There was heathland at least from the 16th century until the early part of the 20th century. Bromley Council are carrying out similar work to preserve an area of heathland on Hayes Common, and across the border in Greenwich an area of heathland has been created near Lesness Abbey. These small areas help to preserve the species which rely on a heathland habitat and ensure that our grandchildren

will be able to enjoy this unique habitat.

John Mitchell

## Foundations at Farringtons

Farringtons is very well known to many readers as the big school in Perry Street, which was built in 1910 and has grown much larger over the intervening years. It is now Farringtons & Stratford House School. It includes the beautiful Chapel, built in 1936, which is one of the dozen buildings that were open during Heritage Days this September.

What is perhaps less well known is the origin of the original name of the school; a Jacobean house of that name once stood on this site. It was built about 1649 by Thomas Blencarne or Blinkhorn, and acquired the name "Farringtons" when it was purchased by Thomas Farrington about 1670. It was his son, also a Thomas, who married Theodosia Bettenson, a daughter of the then Lord of the Manor, who was living in the moated house at Scadbury. "Farringtons" thus passed into Manorial hands, and was finally demolished about 1822 or 1823 after the death of its last resident, Mary Townshend. She was the sister of the first Lord Sydney, whose title was adopted for the name of the new settlement in New South Wales, near Botany Bay. The site lay deserted until it was bought by the Methodist Church, and the school was built.

Where did the old house stand? In a prospectus for the school, which can be seen at Chislehurst Library, there is an aerial photograph of the whole school complex. On an area of grass behind the school a paler square patch is visible which I think must be the site of the old house. Reference to Webb's "history" provides four plates of old prints, showing two exterior views and one tantalising glimpse of the interior, and a ground floor plan. To my eye, this seems to match the pale square on the grass in the photograph.

The way in which aerial photography can reveal buried foundations or ancient archaeological sites, is well known. I have an aerial photograph of the centre of old Chislehurst that clearly shows the Cockpit, and calls to mind J W Marriott's idea that the circular area within the pit is like a bowl-barrow. I am not convinced about this (see Cockpit No 67), and it is perhaps a useful reminder that things are not always what they seem; but that pale square on the grass in Farringtons school grounds does look very like the plan in Webb.

If readers have any similar aerial photographs of Chislehurst that show features not clearly seen at ground level, or show buildings now demolished, I would be interested to see them. Please contact me at the Library.

Roy Hopper

## Our Local National Trust Centre

Membership of the National Trust has always guaranteed a good day out and contentment in the knowledge that your subscription has contributed towards the cost of maintaining Historic Houses, beautiful gardens, peaceful countryside and magnificent coastline for us and future generations to enjoy.

The National Trust slogan for Centenary Year, "For Ever, For Everyone" was well conceived and in a simple sentence said exactly what each member feels.

Another anniversary is shortly to be celebrated as it is almost 50 years since the idea of National Trust Centres was formed. There are almost 200 Centres throughout the United Kingdom offering members closer ties to the National Trust and enabling them to have a better understanding of the work, care, preservation and conservation undertaken: and if any member wishes to actively participate with any particular skills, or even if it is just simple enthusiasm, the National Trust will extend the hand of appreciation.

The Orpington and Chislehurst Centre was founded in 1980 and immediately attracted over 1000 members. Membership is not just confined to these two areas but includes neighbouring districts, and a friendly welcome is assured.

### Monthly Meetings

Monthly meetings take place either at the Methodist Church, Sevenoaks Road, Orpington, or at Crofton Road School, Petts Wood, with summer afternoon meetings at the Methodist Church Hall, Prince Imperial Road, Chislehurst. The main event at these meetings is an illustrated talk given by professional or recommended Speakers on a whole variety of subjects. This year, for example, we have had talks on "National Trust in East Anglia", Caneletto, Sheffield Park Gardens, 40 years of Fleet Street Photography, Clandon Park and its Collections, My Life as an Auctioneer, Smallhythe, A Woman Conductor in Vienna, and Igham Mote. A varied diet of National Trust subjects mixed with a selection of talks with general appeal.

### Varied Activities

To maximise the enjoyment of Centre Membership frequent coach outings to National Trust and other properties occur in the warm summer months. Popular destinations have been Waddesden Manor, Anglesey Abbey, Stowe Landscape Gardens, Osborne House, Frogmore House and Eton College.

We raise money for the National Trust by selling tickets to our members for our coach outings and also by providing a social programme of events. Next year we have invited Lars Tharp of the BBC Antiques Roadshow to challenge our members to identify and value various items at a mock auction. Other activities include Rambles, Quizzes, Wine Tasting, Theatre and Concert visits, Summer and Christmas Lunches at Chartwell, as well as holidays home and abroad (which has seen the Centre travel to Sorrento, Kitzbuhel, Madeira, Paris, Moscow and Leningrad, New England in the Fall and Niagara Falls, Scotland, Ireland, Derbyshire, Norwich, Bath, Holland and Jersey). We have a quarterly newsletter. Many members give invaluable assistance by helping at local National Trust properties as stewards or recruitment officers, or offer their skills in any way beneficial to the National Trust.

### A Welcome to New Members

Over the years the Centre has developed a friendly atmosphere and a vibrant approach in its support to the

National Trust. Over £55,000 has been raised painlessly, and members take pride in its particular projects including the restoration of the wooden bridge at Igham Mote, the painted staircase at Knole, the boathouse at Scotney Castle, and the summerhouse at Sheffield Park Gardens; and, for the Centenary Year, a beautiful stained glass window dedicated to the National Trust and Octavia Hill, a founder member of the Trust, installed at Holy Trinity Church, Crockham Hill. Friendships between members have been established, in some cases leading to marriage. Membership of the Centre is available to all National Trust members and we hope that we may welcome you to the Centre and share with you many of the pleasures that are available. (Membership details are available from Fred Craddock (Tel No: 01732 885969)

(Centre Vice-President) **Mike Turner**

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## The Blockhouse, Kemnal Road

Further to the article about this building in Cockpit No 67, January 1996, I have been contacted by a young man living in Orpington, who is very enthusiastic about this relic of the Cold War. At some time he has managed to get inside, and told me that there was nothing to be seen except stained concrete walls, floors and ceilings. His interest in this relic extends to the idea of refurbishing the Blockhouse so that it looks as it once did in the 1950s, and opening it at times as a tourist attraction. He had made enquiries at the Civic Centre in Bromley, and showed me a copy of a Notice of Refusal from the Borough to a Bromley firm, who in 1974 had made planning application for a change of use from a defence building to a sound recording studio.

In refusing the application it had been decided that such a change of use would lead to increased traffic in Kemnal Road, for which the road was totally unsuited, and which would lead to disturbance to other residents; also that the building was situated in Metropolitan Green Belt in the Initial Development Plan. Wherein there is a presumption against development such as that proposed.

Presumably such objections would also apply to refurbishment and reopening as a sort of museum. It seems unlikely that any such development would be permitted; but meanwhile, there it sits, a concrete monster from the Cold War era, on Bromley Council's "Local List" because of its historical interest, which has captured the imagination of at least one young person for good historical reasons.

**Roy Hopper, with thanks to D.P.**

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## The True History of Chislehurst Caves

This was the title of a fascinating talk given by Eric Inman, Chairman of the Bromley Borough Local History Society, at the Methodist Church Hall on 18th September, as a post-script to Heritage Days. This was in effect the culmination of a process started in February 1995 when Dr Inman was one of several speakers at the Caves Forum. (see Cockpit No 66, June 1995 for details).

The Caves are an integral part of Chislehurst's heritage, but they are probably more misunderstood and misinterpreted than any other feature in the area. This well-illustrated talk has begun a process of setting the record straight, and this is strongly supported by the publication of a new guide to the Caves, written by Eric Inman, entitled "Chislehurst Caves: a short history".

The talk ranged widely from the early industrial use of the Caves as sources of chalk and flint, through their rediscovery and exploitation as an Edwardian tourist attraction, to their use as an ammunition depot in the First World War. Post war years saw them primarily as a mushroom farm, and then came the Second World War and their use as a vast air-raid shelter. Post war activities have included jazz and rock concerts, role-playing fantasy games, and the setting for science fiction films or television such as "Inseminoid", and the Doctor Who adventure of "The Mutants", sadly not yet released by the BBC as a video.

It is very easy to become scornful about the Druids and Romans in connection with the Caves. These ideas were put forward by William Nichols, a local archaeologist, and they are certainly more exciting than industrial archaeology. The talk left one with the idea that perhaps Nichols deliberately emphasised Druids, however unlikely, as being the more attractive to tourists. His theories excited comment and argument, got into newspapers, boosted membership of the Archaeological Association, improved trade at The Sidney Arms, and worked wonders for ticket sales on the railway. Clever Mr Nichols?

Eric Inman has performed a valuable service to local studies by casting light upon Chislehurst's darkest corner. The Caves need continued public support if they are to remain open. Why not treat yourself and your friends to an Autumn or Winter visit, and buy a copy of the guide? There is no bad weather underground. Dr Inman will consider invitations to give his talk to local groups and societies; contact him at 28 Downs Hill, Beckenham, Kent BR3 2HB, or telephone 0181-650 8342. He is still looking for any extra details about the Caves, ranging from memorabilia to personal recollections. The telephone number for the Caves is 0781-467 3264.

**Roy Hopper**

## Publications About Chislehurst

A new publication was produced by the Chislehurst Society to mark Heritage Days in September 1996. "Chislehurst - A guide to some Heritage Buildings", is by Roy Hopper, Librarian at Chislehurst Library and Chairman of the Local Studies Group. It consists of twelve essays of varying length about each of the buildings open during Heritage Days, and would be a useful companion to anyone interested in Chislehurst, regardless of whether or not the buildings are open. The price is £1.00, and copies are available from Roy Hopper at Chislehurst Library. Please apply either in person

to the author, or by post to Chislehurst Library, Red Hill, Chislehurst, Kent, BR7 6DA, enclosing a stamped addressed A5 size envelope. Cheques should be made payable to The Chislehurst Society.

Alice Sennett's "Historical Walks Around Chislehurst" is still available from Paper Lane and the Post Office in the High Street, and from Michael Sims and the Post Office in Royal Parade, or by post from the author; send a stamped addressed A5 envelope to Alice Sennett, 1 Copperfield Way, Chislehurst, Kent, BR7 6RY. Please enclose a cheque for £1.50, payable to The Chislehurst Society. Either or both of these publications could solve some Christmas present problems, especially for Chislehurst-lovers who now live far away.

One such ex-resident of Chislehurst is Juanita Axeling, nee Bastable, now living in New Jersey. She has written a memoir of her life in Chislehurst as a child during the war, and thanks to Rosemary Chapman, nee Battle, to whom the memoir was originally sent, a copy is now available for reference at Chislehurst Library. It is entitled "Call me Birdie". It runs to 19 pages, and is too long for inclusion in Cockpit, but it does not take very long to read.

Juanita Bastable and her family lived at 41 High Street. She attended Chislehurst and Sidcup County School for Girls with Rosemary Battle. The title of her memoir was inspired by meeting a Cockney woman in a London hospital in 1965. "I'm Mrs Sparrow. Just call me Birdie". For Mrs Axeling she represented the indomitable spirit of the British people, and she thought of the England that she loved, and her childhood in war-time, and felt that "I should put on paper a part of my life as I remember it" before it was too late.

A new guide to Chislehurst Caves has just been published. "Chislehurst Caves: a short history", by Eric Inman, is available at the Caves booking office, and costs £1.20. Dr Inman has carefully researched his subject, and the result is a very useful addition to local history. See the article in this issue, "The true history of Chislehurst Caves", for further details.

A prizewinning survey of parking in Chislehurst is available for reference in the Library. "The introduction of pay and display car parks has changed the pattern of parking in Chislehurst", is a thesis by Karen Cartwright. This careful survey was conducted by the author in the week leading up to and including August Bank Holiday 1994, as part of her practical course work at Bullers Wood School. The thorough way in which this was carried out was commended by the judges of the 1996 Alun and Joy Jones Environmental Studies Awards, and it was unanimously agreed to give Karen the Joy Jones Award for the most outstanding single entry by an individual. It is a suitable reminder of how much young people can contribute to local studies, and we thank Karen Cartwright for granting permission to copy her thesis for Library use.

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