

EARLY PLANS TO SAVE MANOR FARM AND PARKWOOD, RUISLIP

by Colin Bowlt

I have in my possession, at the moment, a document marked PRIVATE and CONFIDENTIAL, ROUGH DRAFT and entitled:

'Memorandum prepared by the Ruislip Association in connection with the proposed acquisition by the Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council of Park Wood and Manor Farm'.

It was written by I. Wild (Hon. Secretary of the Ruislip Association) and Arthur I. Dawson. Annoyingly there is no date, but it must have been prepared about 1931, since a *Short History of Ruislip* (Cattle 1930) is referred to, and by early 1932 Park Wood and Manor Farm had been conveyed to the County Council of Middlesex.

The document deals with the Ruislip Association's (forerunner of the Ruislip Residents' Association) response to the threat posed by the Ruislip Town Plan. The residents hoped to save Park Wood and Manor Farm from being lost to development. The execution of the Town Plan of 1914 would have resulted in Park Wood (and much more of the area) disappearing under houses and roads (see Bowlt 1989). So far as Manor Farm was concerned, the Soutar detailed planning map of 1911 shows a motor garage, workshops and shops lining Bury Street from the Pinn Bridge replacing the barns, a new road through the motte, and a public bath and wash house in Copwell Mead.

A scheme to save Park Wood, and involving King's College Cambridge, had been devised by the residents.

The document is of special interest because 75 years later in 2006, Heritage Lottery Funding has been obtained to restore the ancient buildings at Manor Farm.

'Origins of The Park Wood Scheme'

It appears that'this scheme originated in the desire of the Provost and Scholars of King's College to continue in perpetuity their connection with the historic manor of Ruislip which was gifted in 1441 to the College by King Henry VI.'

They had made an offer of the land at a very favourable price (in the event Park Wood was purchased from King's College for £27,300). Additionally recognising that Park Wood would require a considerable expenditure in preparation and maintenance for public use they had offered a substantial sum to meet this. Rather alarmingly it was envisaged that this expenditure would include lights and roads, as well as paths, a bird sanctuary and fencing. Did the scheme envisage made-up roads illuminated by standard lamps wending through the woods? Enclosed bird sanctuaries were very fashionable in those early days of conservation, but are less so now. Government legislation and the proliferation of conservation publicity has made most people conscious of the need to protect wildlife - witness the dramatic decline in 'bird nesting' during the last 50 years or so.

'Features of Park Wood'

It is stated that Park Wood originally formed part of the Great Forest of Middlesex. This has been frequently repeated but Middlesex never had a forest in the sense of a royal hunting area, such as the New Forest, or Hatfield Forest. What is important is that Ruislip had a very early deer park, which included a large part of what is now Park Wood. It is not known when it was formed, but is one of only about 35 Saxon parks recorded in the Domesday survey (Rackham 1980) and is one of the very few with any features surviving.

Its northern boundary ditch and bank is still visible crossing the centre of Park Wood, and was scheduled as an ancient monument early in 2006.

The document states that the timber growing in the wood'generally consists of Oak, Beech, Elm, Wych Elm, and particularly Silver Birch'. Elm is not a woodland tree and does not grow within Park Wood now, and there is no evidence that it did in the 1930s. Curiously there is no mention of Hornbeam, which is the most common tree in the wood, though mainly as coppice. It is likely that this was confused with Beech - a frequent mistake.

As a warning it emphasises that approaches and roads leading up to the woodland had already been built and clearing had already commenced on the south-east side. I presume this refers to Broadwood Avenue, Park Avenue, and Sherwood Avenue.

'Accessibility to Congested London Areas'

It is pointed out that Park Wood was already at that time attracting enormous numbers of visitors from areas served by the District and Metropolitan Railways (Ruislip Station), and the Great Western and Great Central Joint Railways (present West Ruislip Station). In addition'omnibus services are rapidly increasing. It must make a special appeal to London's population, particularly for the congested areas and the suburban populations of Willesden, Harlesden, Acton, Wembley and other densely populated suburbs'.

The bulk of the visitors to Ruislip today are attracted to the Lido, which of course had not been developed as an attraction at that period. It was pointed out that there would be an even larger Park Wood, arising from the opening of a very large section previously restricted to private shooting, with much of the wood 'off-limits' at that time.

'Utilisation of the Manor Farm House, the Great Barn and the Small Barn'

At this time the Manor Farm was still set up as a farm with rickyard, barns, kitchen garden and a roomy farmhouse. Richard Ewer, the farmer, was living in the house. Suggested uses for the site were a depot for plant and materials needed in the maintenance of Park Wood and the Pinn Recreation Ground (an anticipated 53 acre area along the Pinn). The farmhouse could be available for catering purposes, and club and dressing rooms in connection with the Recreation Ground. An alternative suggestion was for it to be used as a public library and local clinic. In the event the Little Barn was brilliantly converted into a public library, which opened in 1937. Another suggested use for the farmhouse put forward at that time by Mr Frederick Herbert Mansford, the architect and keen local historian, was as a local museum (see Spink 1988). He noted that'until 5 years ago, the Manor Farmhouse contained a very old kitchen range, several iron man traps, and spring guns...', which along with other local objects could be appropriately housed in the Manor Farm.

Now in 2006 the Heritage Lottery Fund is providing money for an interpretation centre (not a museum) in two of the ground floor rooms at Manor Farm.

The document goes on to suggest that the barns could be available for the Scout movement and for indoor games such as badminton, as well as'providing shelter and catering for large numbers of visitors in a fine traditional Middlesex atmosphere'.

The days when crowds came to visit the country at Ruislip and Eastcote to take tea and dance were probably largely over by the time this memorandum was written. The Poplars Tea Garden closed in 1929 and Poplars Close was being developed in 1930. Baily's Pavilion in Field End Road was sold in 1933 to become just a fond memory for thousands of Londoners who had spent happy afternoons there as children.

Tastes change and with the increase in car ownership people could travel farther afield. As though in token anticipation of this, it was suggested that'part of the farmyard should be available as a motor park'.

'Administration of Park Wood and Manor Farm Building'

'If the Park Wood Scheme is dealt with by the Local Authority as an open space, and is accepted by the County Council of Middlesex as part of their Regional Scheme of open spaces, the latter authority may grant two thirds of the purchase price from County funds'. However it was pointed out that the cost of maintenance would fall entirely on the Ruislip-Northwood funds and in this case the special rebate or grant offered by King's College should be available for fencing, lights, roads or footpaths, bird and flower sanctuary, restoration of Manor Farm and maintenance of woodland and incidental buildings.

It was recognised that this should be supervised by highly trained specialists and'it may be advisable to consider handing over the whole to the National Trust'. This body had been approached and had expressed interest in the proposal.

In 2000 during a period when the London Borough of Hillingdon, the successors to the Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council, were having difficulty in seeing their way to properly funding the running of the woods, the National Trust was one of the bodies approached to explore taking over the running of Ruislip Woods. As before this came to nothing, but adds weight to the argument that history repeats itself.

References.

- Bowl E.M. 1989. *The Goodliest Place in Middlesex*. Hillingdon Borough Libraries.
- Rackham O. 1980. *Ancient Woodlands* Edward Arnold.
- Spink K. 1988. *Ruislip in 1937* RN&E Local History Society Journal.



Entrance to Manor Farm c.1930 showing the rickyard, the Little Barn, the old Cow Byre and the stable block in the distance.

Hanley's shop (now Bluebeckers restaurant) is on the left and the Lodge on the right. The Rivoli cinema (opened in 1929) was showing *LummoX* and *Unholy Nights* at the time.



Park Wood - Possibly mid 20th C. judging from the men's attire. Unknown entrance.