

FROM WOODS TO WOODS – the saving of the Battle of Britain House site

by Colin Bowlt

Battle of Britain House, Northwood, (Fig. 1) is still an evocative name, even though it was burnt down almost 27 years ago. There is a certain amount of misunderstanding about the name. The house never did have anything to do with the actual Battle of Britain, but in 1948 it was opened as a centre for short liberal arts courses as a memorial to those who had fought in the Battle of Britain (Figs. 2 & 3). In 1905 a Josef Conn Esq. had taken out a 99-year lease of the site, 10 acres of the southern end of Copse Wood, from King's College, Cambridge and a house was built. Before the First World War his wife ran a health hydro there.

There followed various vicissitudes including its use in connection with Clandestine Operations during the Second World War following which it was purchased by the Middlesex County Council (see RNELHS Journal 1985).

The House was burnt down in August 1984 and the ruins of the charred shell (Figs. 4 & 5) were cleared in a remarkably short time.

However a series of photographs were taken for the London Borough of Hillingdon (LBH) and were handed to me a few years later. (There still remained another newer building in the grounds which had been used as a dormitory and not touched by the fire, but in spite of being boarded up it was eventually vandalised and had to be demolished.)

Following the fire the site remained derelict whilst the LBH decided what to do with it. Being adjacent to Copse Wood there was much public concern about its future use, leading to the Ruislip Woods Management Advisory Group taking up the case.

The site was in two parts (Fig 6). The lower section to the east, of 4.8 acres (1.95ha) had never been touched since Mr. Conn took possession in 1905. It was indistinguishable from the contiguous Copse Wood with coppiced hornbeam and standard oak trees. LBH eventually agreed to make this open and returned it to Copse Wood (of which it had once been part).



Fig. 1

Battle of Britain House: South side (rear of house)

The two lead 'Japanese lions' at the top of the steps were probably installed by Mr Meyer Franklin Kline when he took over the lease in 1920 and renamed the house 'Kokyo'



Fig. 2 - July 1971
Painting on the West side of the house
during an art weekend



Fig. 3 - July 1971
An art class tutored by Miss Joan Scott

The upper western portion of the site of 5.1 acres (2.1ha) had contained the house and gardens. This, the Council seemed determined to sell off and its fate hung in the balance for several years.

In 1985 the LBH proposed to sell it for housing development. This caused much concern as entirely unsuitable, and might, indeed prove to be the thin end of the wedge for continuing development in the fields running down to the Lido. However the LBH advertised the site for sale in the *Advertiser and Gazette* of the 5 December 1985, pointing out its scope for a wide range of uses, subject to planning permission, including residential, institutional, hotel, country club, office headquarters, training centre, old people's nursing home - in short, anything!

This resulted in a letter from the Ruislip Residents Association to the Secretary of State pointing out that many of the possible uses were non-conforming with many Ministerial assertions emphasising restraint on development in the Green Belt. The Ramblers' Association which was represented on the RWMAG also sent letters of protest.

LBH on the 13 October 1986 agreed 'that planning permission be sought for use of the site as an educational or institutional establishment compatible with Green Belt policy.' More than six months passed and then in 1987 there was an approach by the Herts./Middx. Wildlife Trust for the lease of the site for use as a Woodland Interpretive Centre.



Fig. 4
Just after the fire on Friday 17 August 1984
South side; compare with Fig. 1



Fig. 5
Just after the fire.
West side; compare with Fig. 2

Meanwhile in November 1987 a public petition was presented to LBH signed by 857 people requesting that:

- 1) We the undersigned request Hillingdon Borough Council to retain Battle of Britain House site in the spirit of its original endowment
- 2) We strongly urge the Council seriously to consider the Herts./Middx. Wildlife Trust offer to restore the property, **without cost to the Council** for use as a Woodland Interpretive Centre for the public.

As a result LBH agreed to delay a decision until the Herts./Middx. Wildlife Trust Proposal had been investigated. The Trust eventually decided it was too big an undertaking, particularly with the dormitory building vandalised, and withdrew their interest.

In the middle of 1988 the Youth Hostel Association expressed an interest in leasing the site for a Youth Hostel. This seemed a proposal more in keeping with the original idea of Battle of Britain house as a centre for youth. In December of that year the Policy and Resources Committee of LBH resolved that the Estates and Valuation Officer be authorised to invite the YHA to submit detailed proposals. The YHA submitted a discussion document giving an indication of the intended hostel. The provision of the site and associated buildings was estimated at £2,000,000, provision for which had already been made. Their intention was 'that the new Youth Hostel have minimum effect on the environment of this attractive site.' They planned to submit detailed proposals to the LBH during September 1989 and a solution seemed in the offing. But these were rejected in April 1990, and LBH decided to 'dispose of the site on the open market' - again.

Matters dragged on during 1991/2 with discussions of various ideas, including a Battle of Britain memorial and a picnic area within the site. At the LBH Property Sub Committee (Special Meeting) on the 23 April 1992 it was stated that the site had been advertised on more than one occasion and the last exercise had resulted in proposals for:

- 1) Private Residential Care,
- 2) Private Medical Care,
- 3) Place of Worship,
- 4) Animal Sanctuary,
- 5) Conference/wedding facility,
- 6) Educational use.

In March 1993 (time passing) it was noted that it had not been possible to implement the resolution of the April 1992 meeting and further instructions were sought. LBH resolved to seek offers for the property but that the sale's terms include the laying out of a picnic area and erection of a war memorial at the purchaser's expense (some hope!).

This long sad saga seemed destined to continue for years (an albatross about the Council's neck) when the story took an interesting turn (and in next to no time Jack sprang free!). During the long negotiations the party in power in the LBH was Conservative, with 35 Conservatives against 34 Labour. But in the middle of 1993 the death of a Harefield Conservative Councillor caused a bye-election on the 12 August. Labour won the seat, and now Labour were in control of the Borough. Only just - but it was enough to change things. On behalf of the Ruislip Woods Management Advisory Group I immediately phoned the Labour Councillor Michael Craxton and reminded him of the Conservative determination to sell off the site. In no time at all (or so it seemed) he had set things in motion.

On the 25 November 1993 the Ruislip Northwood Area Committee of LBH resolved to:

- a) incorporate the site into Copse Wood and manage it as an integral part of the woods
- b) instruct officers with RWMAG ways of funding the clearance of the site and the memorial.
- c) instruct officers to explore the feasibility of an ecology/nature centre at the Lido with the Ruislip Lido Advisory Group and Conservation groups.
- d) instruct officers to review the planning brief for the site to provide maximum protection from future development and consider whether any changes be made to the draft Unitary Development Plan.

The saga had a happy ending after all – but it was a close run thing (as a certain Duke said). After 88 years the site was once again part of Copse Wood.

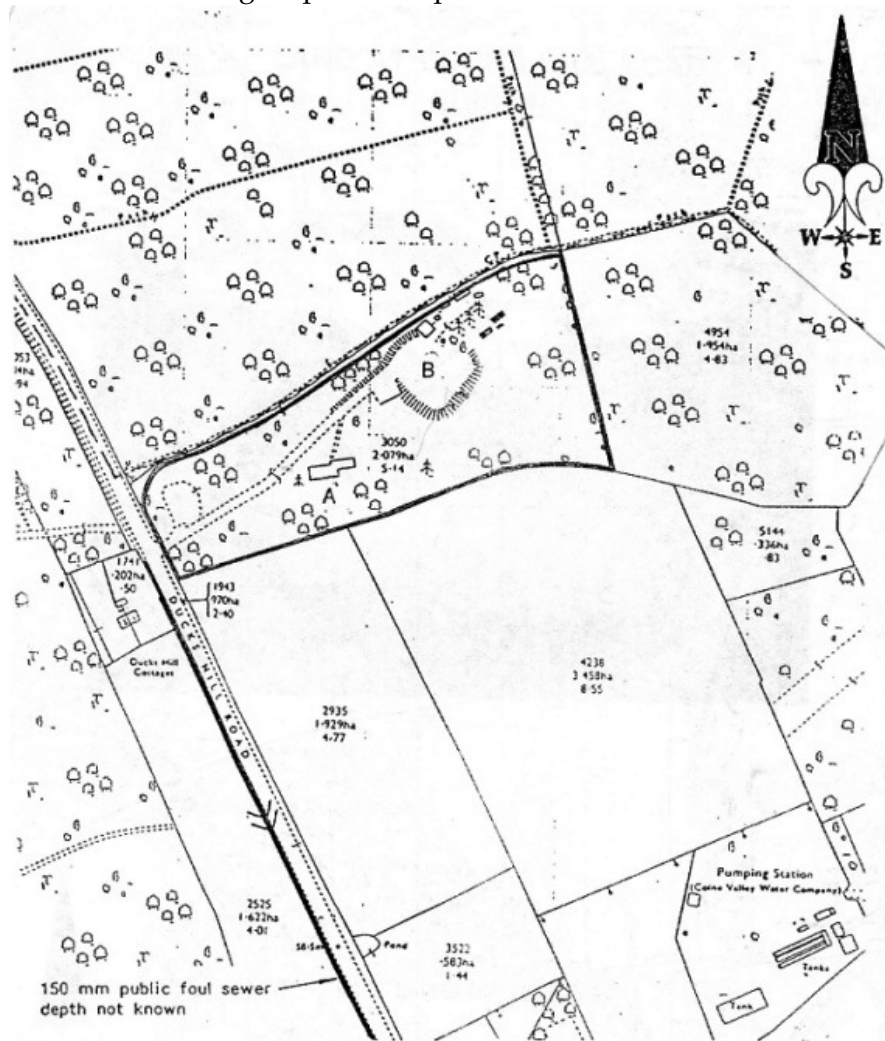


Fig. 6

Map of the site. A is the later building. B is the site of Battle of Britain House.



Fig. 7 - View of the site April 2011

The only relic remaining is the stairs (minus the lions); compare with Fig. 1.