

The History of the RNELHS 1964-1989

by Susan Toms

The 1960s

The Society was founded in 1964 at a public meeting on the 22 May at Manor Farm Library because many in the community were concerned at the rapid development of the area which was resulting in the destruction of many historic buildings, often with no recording of their history. (see 'The Birth of the RNELHS in 1964' by Susan Toms, *RNELHS Journal* 2014). This article continues the story by looking at the first 25 years of the Society and how it achieved its aims of saving historic buildings and recording the history of the area.

By June 1964 working parties were established to address specific subjects such as photography, street name origins, cataloguing of existing published material on the area, church memorials and archaeology. This last group was in action later that year in September when they did a trial dig in Parker's Field prior to the building of Winston Churchill Hall.

Within a year the Society arranged that William Kemp, a founder member would check the register of planning applications held at the council offices to see if any historic buildings were threatened. As a further precaution all members of the committee were allocated specific vulnerable buildings to monitor and report their concerns to the local authority if necessary.

One of the main impetuses behind the formation of the Society was the proposed demolition of Eastcote House in 1962. In June 1964 Mr Marks of LAMAS attended a Society committee meeting to give his report on the condition of the House. (Unfortunately there is no indication of the contents of his report or whether it exists still). The house was demolished later in 1964. There are several references in the minutes to photographs being taken before and during the demolition.

The Society then had to focus on the next battle to save Haydon Hall, which had been under threat of demolition since 1965. There are many references over the next two years to the Society's efforts to prevent demolition. Hopes were raised when surveys by the Greater London Council and Middlesex County Council recommended that the older central portion of the building, which was



William Kemp

**A founder member of the Society and author of
*The History of Eastcote and The History of
Northwood and Northwood Hills***

constructed in the early 18th century by Sir Thomas Franklin, should be preserved. However the Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council had already given notice of the proposed demolition and the new authority of the London Borough of Hillingdon was unwilling to overrule that decision. The earlier idea that Haydon Hall could be converted into new council offices for the RNUDC was no longer viable as that authority had been abolished and the new authority favoured a more centrally sited building. The inevitable happened in 1967/1968 when Haydon Hall was demolished and this destroyed some fine interior wood panelling which the Society had been campaigning to preserve. A letter from the Town Clerk claimed he had been advised there was 'nothing of historical interest worth preserving' in the house although the Society was allowed inside to take photographs before the demolition so we have the evidence of early intact 18th century panelling. A search through the local newspapers for 1967/68 has not confirmed in which of those years the demolition took place although I did find a newspaper cutting and a

catalogue card entry giving the date as 1968, whereas most publications give the date as 1967. The Society's minutes for January 1968 state 'Haydon Hall was due for demolition' and it was only in the September minutes that the demolition was noted.

Another aim of the Society was to raise awareness of the history of the area among local residents and members. This was achieved through a variety of ways, all of which are used today.

Firstly a monthly lecture programme of speakers was organised to attract as wide an audience as possible. These meetings were publicised at local libraries and through other means. The Society also decided to build up a catalogue of its own publications starting with *The Growth Ruislip-Northwood as a Suburb 1887-1939* by Daniel Massey in 1967. Its origin was in one of the first talks given to the Society by the author in September 1964. To keep members informed it was decided to publish a *Bulletin*, edited by Doreen Edwards, three times a year. This was later expanded in 1978 to become an annual *Journal* which is still issued to all members.

Another method of publicising the Society and its work was through exhibitions. The first exhibition, created by Laurence Morris was very ambitious in bringing together material from many different sources including the Metropolitan Police and Middlesex County Archives to illustrate the development of Ruislip, Northwood and Eastcote. It was held on the 21 May 1966 in the Great Barn and attracted six hundred visitors including over a hundred children. There was a small admission charge which raised £12 to offset the costs of £25. One of the more unusual exhibits was an Olympic medal presented to Louis Carr in 1908 to commemorate his role as Council Engineer and Surveyor when the marathon passed through the district from Windsor to the White City. A review of the exhibition by W.A. Kemp was fulsome in its praise. 'As soon as I entered the Old Barn my eyes were attracted by such a feast of pictures, maps, documents and other large objects that I was like a small boy coming into a room with a large table so lavishly laid out with all sorts of delicacies of food that he doesn't know where to begin'. In conclusion 'to everybody it was useful for it pointed out the sources of information as well as providing interesting and indeed absorbing facts about so many aspects of the past'.



Laurence Morris

A founder member who gave a talk at the first public meeting of the Society and produced a wealth of local history research

A final way of raising awareness was to organise walks and outings. Soon after the Society was founded Laurence Morris organised a tour of Manor Farm and St Martin's Church, Ruislip. Later, half-day outings in the early years to Harefield, St Albans and Windsor all proved popular but when all-day coach outings were organised there were some problems. The AGMs of 1967 and 1970 raised concerns about the lack of support for some coach outings, which had led to their cancellation and this can still happen today. Besides reaching out to the local community the Society made contact with other local history societies in the borough, sometimes holding joint meetings with them. It participated in the Local History Council which included the four societies within Hillingdon Borough. It also joined LAMAS in 1965 to form a more effective united front rather than working in isolation.

Throughout the 1960s the venue for the meetings rotated between Manor Farm Library, Northwood Hills Library and for Eastcote either the library or the Haydon Hall meeting rooms. This was a conscious decision by the committee to reflect the three different areas covered by the Society. But this ideal was challenged by realities and there were many complaints about some of the venues especially Haydon Hall. The rooms were unsuitable shapes, there was too much background noise and the heating was not within the Society's control. In fact members were also unhappy about the heating at Northwood Hills and Eastcote libraries. There were constant mentions at the AGMs that it was confusing for members to remember the different venues and it

was noted that the best attendances were usually at Manor Farm Library. Eventually in 1971 pragmatism won out and the Society fixed on holding its meetings in the one place - at Manor Farm Library. It was also decided that the programme should run from September to April in view of the poor support for May and June meetings.

The 1970s

At first, the Society continued to prosper with increased attendances at meetings, but then there was a blip in the early to mid 1970s. In November 1974 the Secretary, Ron Edwards reported that the attendance at the first two meetings that season had been the lowest since 1967. This was especially worrying in view of the success of other local societies such as the recently formed Pinner and Hatch End Local History Society with over two hundred members. A review of the original working parties set up in 1964 indicated that some momentum had been lost. There had been little archaeological activity, the catalogue of material about Ruislip needed updating and the photographic survey was spasmodic. Perhaps the Society was feeling the major loss of two of its most respected founder members with the deaths in 1971 of William Kemp and in 1973 of Laurence Morris. The Society immediately decided to form a sub committee to catalogue all Morris' papers to ensure their survival and they are still stored today in the Society's archive collection at Manor Farm House. At the end of the decade the Society lost another founder member with the death of the President, Sir Christopher Cowan.



Ron Edwards

He was one of the main instigators of establishing a local history society to campaign against the destruction of so many historic buildings

In 1972 there was a proposal from the Borough Librarian Philip Colehan that the Great Barn at Ruislip should be a museum for the whole Borough of Hillingdon since its spacious interior was suitable for large exhibits and reconstructions. The committee had mixed views about this proposal which were outlined in their response. They were in favour of a museum but felt a modern specially constructed building would be better. The internal appearance and structure of the Barn could be compromised by inappropriate alterations and the installation of modern lighting and heating. In his reply Mr Colehan said the idea had been agreed in principle by the Council but he would be happy to come and address a meeting of members of the Society to discuss their concerns. In the event nothing further happened because the Council had no money to spend on the project. We had to wait until the Heritage Lottery funding of 2008 saw the restoration of the whole Manor Farm site with Manor Farm House becoming an interpretation centre. The aim of a museum for the borough has still not materialised although one is planned within the present redevelopment of the RAF site at Uxbridge.

There were further proposed alterations to the Manor Farm site in 1973 when the Council submitted plans for a new two storey social services building by the corner of St Martins Approach and the Eastcote Road. This was opposed because the new building would block the view of the church and almshouses from the pond and be unsightly. The committee also wanted the ambulance station to be moved but this too did not materialise until the Heritage Lottery funded restoration of 2008.

In 1972 the Society had to deal with another major conservation matter when it was consulted on a revision of *The Statutory List of Historic Buildings*. The previous list dated from 1936 but there was a supplementary list compiled by Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council in 1950. Some of the buildings like Eastcote House and Haydon Hall had since been demolished and there were many others worthy of listing which had been omitted. The Society provided comments and suggestions to be passed on to the inspector who would be in the area to investigate potential listings. It is thanks to the work of the committee all those years ago that so many historic buildings were listed and still survive in our area.

One of the listed buildings that had been causing many concerns was the Ruislip almshouses, listed in 1950. They had become very dilapidated through a lack of money and interest in their importance. It was the Society who raised the issue and was the driving force, despite many false starts, behind their eventual restoration and conversion into five self contained flats in 1980.

In 1975 two new Conservation panels for Ruislip and Eastcote were created with Bob Bedford as the Ruislip representative and Jean Mitchell as the Eastcote representative. These members fully participated in the work of the panels to further protect the historic legacy of our area and the panels are still active today with input from Society members.

The Ruislip Conservation Panel was to prove its worth almost immediately when in 1976 the Cow Byre at Manor Farm burnt down and the Council wanted to demolish it. Only after pressure from the Panel and the Society did they agree to restore the building as much as possible to its original state. The replacement building (see below) opened in October 1980 with a commemorative exhibition by the Society on farming which included farming implements from Knightscode Farm and the anvil from the old Ruislip forge. Despite having a membership comparable with present day the Society was able to steward this exhibition for three weeks.



Newly opened Cow Byre with a plough advertising the Society's exhibition on *Farms and Farming* in October 1980

To celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 the Society felt it was more appropriate to hold a major exhibition in the Great Barn rather than taking part in the Procession through Ruislip. The exhibition centred on Families and Institutions in Ruislip and contained very colourful heraldic shields, made by Mrs Cresswell. These are still stored in our archives at the Manor Farm House and are used in some of our exhibitions.

There was another major exhibition in 1978 in the Great Barn on Local History ranging from pre-history to the Second World War, which ran for a week and attracted over five thousand visitors. Again the Society was able to steward the exhibition for the whole week even with a membership of just over a hundred. This established a pattern of regular exhibitions on the Manor Farm site in cooperation with the Manor Farm Librarian Margaret Hoare.

In 1977 after 13 years' service Doreen Edwards resigned as editor of *The Bulletin* which had established the Society's reputation for local history scholarship. This reputation provided the basis from 1978 for a new and expanded publication *The Journal* with a 'proper' cover designed by Tom Allum. This is, of course, still published and issued to our members once a year.

The 1980s

This was a decade of expansion and great activity when the Society increased its membership and was involved in many projects to raise both its profile and the importance of local history in the community. It opened with a flourish with the long overdue restoration of the Ruislip almshouses and the rebuilding of the Cow Byre at Manor Farm. Unfortunately when the granary at Manor Farm burnt down in 1981 no replacement building was forthcoming despite the efforts of the Ruislip Conservation Panel.

In 1984, the same year as the Society was granted charitable status, the venue for meetings was changed to St Martin's church hall because the increased numbers attending meant that Manor Farm Library was too small. The annual membership was now averaging 140-150. With the extra space the Society could actively advertise for more members.

This decade saw our most active publishing period with all the following publications being produced: Kemp's *History of Northwood* (1982), Laurence Morris' *History of Ruislip* (1982) (these were both reprints), David Tottman's thesis on

Ruislip-Northwood an early example of Town Planning and its consequences (1983), *Ruislip Around 1900* (1982), *Ruislip and the Abbey of Bec* (1988), *Archaeological discoveries from Ruislip-Northwood* (1981), *Ruislip in Times Past* (1982), *Eastcote a Pictorial History* (1984), and *Ruislip Woods* (1983). In 1986 we also published the four OS six inch maps of 1897 covering the old parish of Ruislip.

In 1982 we commemorated one of the most important events in our local history, the 50th anniversary of the handover by King's College, Cambridge of Park Wood and Manor Farm to the local authority. (See Figs. 1 and 2). There was a recreation of the handover ceremony on the 24 July 1982 and a major exhibition on the woods in the Great Barn and the Cow Byre. The Society's aim was a simple day of commemoration without commercial overtones in which all sections of the community could participate. It was especially fitting that George Rylands, Fellow of King's College attended the event as he had been present at the 1932 ceremony along with Maynard Keynes. King's College very generously loaned many valuable documents from their archives for the exhibition although they came with a very strict condition that some members had to spend the night in the Cow Byre to protect them. I think this is the only time members have had to show such dedication in the cause of an exhibition.



Fig. 1 - Dr Rylands of King's College receiving the gift of the *Woodlands Management* book from Eileen Bowlt at the Ruislip Jubilee Day in July 1982

Fortunately, by the time of Ruislip Jubilee Day, the Council had rethought its plans to restore the woods. Its original plan for regeneration had been to clear large areas of woodland and replant it with ornamental trees to create more of an arboretum or glorified park. The Society together with many other local organisations campaigned vigorously against these proposals.



Fig. 2 - Dr Rylands and the Mayor and Mayoress of Hillingdon, Councillor and Mrs Keith Briggs with Eileen Bowlt and Len Krause looking on

These concerns were expressed so forcibly at a packed public meeting in November 1979 at Winston Churchill Hall that the Council did a complete 'U' turn. They established a Woods Advisory Working Party to write a long term management plan, which was adopted in 1982 to secure the future of the woods. One of our members Colin Bowlt has been actively involved with both the first working party and its replacement, the Ruislip Woods Management Advisory Group, which demonstrates the Society's long standing commitment to such an important feature of our local history.

It was during the early 1980s that major restoration work was undertaken on the buildings at Eastcote House Gardens due to the combined efforts of the Society and the Eastcote Conservation Panel under Sheila Liberty. There were extensive repairs to the dovecote, the stables and the walls. Two of the walls were reduced in height during these repairs and they were only restored to their original height this year (2015) with heritage lottery funding work on the site.

During this active decade some more ambitious local outings were organised. As a result of a suggestion by Margaret Hoare several all-day coach outings led by members of the Society visited sites of historical interest in the parish of Ruislip. In 1987 we organised a tour of the Abbey of Bec lands in southern England to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the acquisition of the Manor of Ruislip by the Abbey. In the same year we held an exhibition at the Cow Byre celebrating this anniversary. This included material from King's College Cambridge, the Abbey of Bec and Ealing Abbey, as well as a model constructed by one of our members Freddie Shackell.

During the previous year we organised an exhibition to commemorate nine hundred years since Domesday, which featured life sized models representing a Norman household. The exhibition attracted over two thousand visitors during one week and was favourably compared with the official national exhibitions. All these exhibitions were underpinned by the work of a very active research group, which provided much of the impetus.

In recognition of our close links with the library service in 1987 we participated in Manor Farm Library's Golden Jubilee Celebrations. Six members read extracts from the national and local newspapers for 1937 with an accompanying slide show. There is a stained glass window in the library commemorating the jubilee which depicts a pollarded willow (a pun on the name of Miss Pollard a former librarian whose bequest paid for the window) and the duck pond with some mallards.

Towards the end of the decade in 1989 the Society celebrated its Silver Jubilee with a special social meeting in April where members enjoyed celebration cake and wine. It was a time for the Society to look back on the past 25 years with a

justified sense of achievement. What had started as a small group of like minded residents, who wanted to campaign against the rapid loss of many historical buildings had developed into a Society of over a hundred members, who were able to raise awareness of the importance of protecting our local heritage with the relevant authorities and the local community through meetings, publications, exhibitions and cooperation with other groups. The Society was in a good position to deal with the challenges facing them during the next 25 years.



RNELHS Silver Jubilee celebration cake

Sources:

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