

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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Heather Firbank - our own Mary Crawley?

A note prepared by Joanna Friel

The Society received a phone call from The Victoria and Albert Museum last summer asking what we knew about the Firbank family, daughter Heather in particular. This led to a glorious period of research and several new discoveries. A biography of Ronald Firbank, author, can be found on our website but followers of Downton Abbey may be interested in Heather's story.

Heather was born in 1882 at The Coopers Mansion House, itself the subject of a recent three million pound restoration. She was the daughter of affluent MP Sir Thomas Firbank and had her best clothes made at leading couturiers of the day, Lucile, Redfern and Mascotte. Her clothes dating from early 1900 to 1920 were packed into trunks and put into storage in 1921, where they stayed for nearly forty years. Over 100 items were donated to the V & A and exhibited in 1960 'A Lady of Fashion'. Heather had a preference for understated pastel-colour day dresses, immaculate tailored suits and evening gowns. She wore a lot of clothes of a heather colour to complement her name. Some of the dresses are now in such poor condition they cannot safely be put on display, but are currently being photographed for a new book about the collection. Numerous comparisons have been made between the fictional Lady Mary of Downton Abbey and Heather Firbank.



From the V&A exhibition

Not surprisingly, the costume designers for the successful television programme took their inspiration from the Firbank collection.

The real life Heather followed a potentially scandalous path not unlike that of the character of *Downton's Lady Mary*. When her brother went abroad Heather lost her confidant. She fell in love with a married MP who would not get a divorce and she then took up with a chauffeur. The story goes on that she also took up with alcohol.

Heather was the last surviving member of her family. She died of a cerebral haemorrhage on 13 April 1954. Whilst I had found the graves of her parents and two brothers at St Nicholas, and knowing that Ronald was buried in Rome, I was intrigued to conclude the story and find her final resting place. Her probate record gives her final address as the County Hotel, Lindfield and she died in Brooklands Nursing Home, Haywards Heath. Miraculously, with the help of the Lindfield History Project by way of the local undertakers, we discovered that Heather had been cremated at Woodvale Crematorium, Brighton on 20 April 1954 and her ashes were not scattered until 1 September 1955.



Lepel, in Manor Park, where Roland Beecher Bryant lived as a child (see p. 3)

Childhood Memories of Manor Park

These memories, written in 1999 by Roland Beecher Bryant, are part of our Millennium collection.

I first arrived at Chislehurst at the tender age of 18 months in 1934 when my parents bought a Victorian house in Manor Park – at that time described on the board at its junction with St Paul’s Cray Road as “Manor Park - Private Road”, to distinguish it from Manor Park Road, which wasn’t!

There are now over a hundred residences in Manor Park, but in 1934 there were twelve. The first hundred yards on the right hand side was taken up with the side front of Cholmeley, a house owned by a Mr Edward Gower, which fronted on Manor Park Road. There followed Manor Cottage, where lived Brigadier C E Clark, DSO, and immediately adjoining, a smaller cottage known as Marion Cottage. This was later occupied by a Mrs Mews, and inevitably my sister and I (once I was old enough to formulate such thoughts), referred to it as the Mews Cottage. Next to this was a vacant plot used as the kitchen garden of The Manor House, situated in Manor Park Road and occupying a nine-acre site, which ran behind all the properties on the right-hand side of Manor Park. Beyond this was The Oaks, where Mr Charles Young and his family lived. My earliest memory of him stems from when he wrote a polite note to my father asking if I could be quieter when playing in our back garden next door. After aspiring to a bicycle, I had various ‘bus routes’ and ‘race tracks’ mapped out there, which I used to whizz round with all appropriate noises. Mr Young’s daughter was, I believe, one of the BBC Singers, and married one Scott-Joynt, who was later a well-known vocal soloist. The Oaks was a substantial three-storey house but in the days of austerity following the Second World War, a new roof was built within the third floor, whereupon the original roof and outer walls were dismantled making it into a two-storey home, as it remains.

Next to The Oaks was Lepel, where I spent my childhood until age six, when, owing to the imminence of the Blitz, I was sent to a boarding school in North Wales for safety reasons, although I still returned for school holidays, except when the bombing was particularly severe. Lepel was a lovely house for children; it was a large Victorian three-storey property full of nooks and crannies and with extensive attics to get lost in. It had its own gardener’s cottage, where my family and I now live, to which was attached a series of buildings comprising a large coach-house with glass roof frequently broken during the Blitz by shrapnel, which I collected as souvenirs, a tool shed and stable with corrugated iron roof and a brick-built boiler house to heat the adjoining

greenhouse. Next to the greenhouse was a chicken run and shed, whose occupants kept us supplied with fresh eggs throughout the war.

Childhood memories include being taken to Rabbits, a sweetshop in Royal Parade next to The Bull's Head, now occupied by a jewellers, to spend my Saturday penny; I used to buy a bar of Nestlé's chocolate and pocket the halfpenny change. In those days Royal Parade supported two butchers, Walter Atkins (whose cashier was, of course, a Miss Mutton) and Lidstones; a fishmonger (I believe Bastables); a greengrocer (Wood & Austin), a chemist (Prebble & Bone), and Waters, which sold stationery and books, as well as having a small printing works. The grocer started out as Coffins, and was transformed over the years into Uridges, Stephenson & Rush and eventually, Oakeshotts.

Whilst groceries were mostly delivered, I remember going there with my mother when it was Uridges; she was seated by the counter and the worthy Mr Albone, who usually served us, would hurry round the shop and the rear store bringing recommended provisions for her inspection. Everything was, of course, sold loose, and I was fascinated with Mr Albone's skill at folding a flat piece of blue paper into a container for sugar, rice, cornflour or whatever, without the use of adhesives. He would at the end take the money and send it speeding with the bill, in a container attached to an overhead wire, leading to the cashier who sat in a raised glass box. She would then receipt the bill and send it back along the wire to Mr Albone. Bacon was sliced to the thickness ordered and when I was tired of watching the slicing machine



*Abury and Miss
Battle's baker's
shop, opposite the
Bull's Head Hotel.*

and the overhead wires, I was kept quiet with a supply of broken biscuits, which were always on sale at much reduced prices, although they tasted none the worse.

Mention must also be made of Miss Tessa Battle who ran the baker's shop opposite the Bull's Head Hotel. At the beginning of the war, she transferred the business to the front room of her next-door cottage, Abury, and displayed a notice on the fence: "T M Battle – Cakes, Comfits and Confectionery." I always had the urge to go in and ask for a couple of comfits but resisted the temptation.

My sister – who was a member of the Pony Club – and I on occasion took riding lessons at Captain Stephenson's Rectory Riding School in Manor Park Road, where Bishop's Walk is now, and opposite the Rectory Field (or was it the Glebe Field?), where I first learnt the rudiments of cricket. I remember Captain Stephenson admitting to me later that he never attained a rank senior to lieutenant, but as he succeeded a Major Lister as owner of the stables, everyone felt he should have a military rank and insisted on calling him Captain.

In the summer months a Walls Ice Cream tricycle appeared from time to time at the white gate leading to the Common in St Pauls Cray Road immediately beyond Saxbys. There were no piped jingles in those days, but the bicycle bell was sufficient to attract local children, and we used to indulge in delights such as "Sno-fruit" – a water ice in a triangular cardboard tube.

Other trips I remember were visits in the summer to swim in the open-air Bickley Baths and during the War to the British Restaurant in West Chislehurst immediately beyond the library, where we had a three-course meal for 1/6d (7½ p).

Between 1939 and 1945 my father was Chairman of the Emergency Committee of the old Chislehurst & Sidcup Urban District Council and was thus responsible for all local authority services during that period, which were of course considerably increased by wartime requirements. My mother was Centre Organiser of the Women's Voluntary Service, which was virtually a full-time job at that time, and as a result I was left very much to myself during school holidays. There was however no shortage of things to do or see. By 1945 my sister was away at University, but either alone or with her, I must have cycled hundreds of miles throughout north Kent. A favourite ride was through St Mary Cray to Eynsford with a picnic in the fields on the way. There was virtually no traffic and in other respects it was perfectly safe for children to travel on their own.

But this trip down memory lane is digressing from my trip down Manor Park! Before I stopped at Lepel, we were travelling down the right-hand side. Next to Lepel

there was a similar Victorian house known as Walpole, the property of Captain R F Wright, which during the War was requisitioned by the War Office – as in fact was The Oaks – and used to accommodate at various times, units of the Guards. I recall Coldstream and Grenadier, and the ATS, all of which I used to watch drilling in the road. Walpole, after being a ‘half-way house’ for temporarily homeless people, was subsequently acquired privately and converted into flats as it is now.

Beyond Walpole was another substantial house, Harley, and behind it, accessed from the side road leading to Manor Place, Pelham. In the 1930s, both were privately owned, but were converted into flats, one of those in Pelham becoming the family home of the Sims’, whose son, Roger, achieved fame as, until recently, the long-serving Member of Parliament for Chislehurst.

Manor Place, already referred to, was a larger property with its own lodge and gardener’s cottage, owned in my early days by Sir Alfred Bower, Bart., a former Lord Mayor of London, founder of El Vino’s in Fleet Street and the former Bodega chain of restaurants. He lived in some style and owned an open Rolls-Royce tourer. After the War his grandson, David Mitchell, lived there, engaging in local politics, subsequently entering Parliament, serving as MP for Basingstoke, and eventually achieving Ministerial office and a Knighthood.

Along the far side of the approach to Manor Place was a vacant piece of land which my father purchased from Sir Alfred Bower, when “Dig for Victory” became the watchword, and used it throughout the War as an orchard and kitchen garden, where the whole family spent long hours – up to 11pm, when Double British Summer Time was in operation – and the produce from which was more than useful in those days of austerity. After the War, he resold it at the price he had paid, not wishing to be thought a profiteer! At about that time a faith healer was allowed to operate from a caravan parked within the grounds of Manor Place and a neat notice appeared at the corner, indicating the Hours of Healing, a telephone number and adding “Animals by appointment only.” I remember my father irreverently suggesting our current dog might give them a ring if he felt off-colour!

The next house was Walsingham Cottage, followed by Walsingham itself, obviously named having regard to Sir Thomas Walsingham’s local connection. Walsingham was probably the most substantial property in the road and its frontage stretched right down to the end of Manor Park. It had a swimming pool in its grounds and in 1940 when it was requisitioned by the Chief Inspectorate of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, our Scottish terrier, a very independent dog, used to return home soaking

*Walsingham
in more recent
times*



wet. We found later that he had got into the habit of swimming in the pool with a member of the staff.

Our pre-war journey up the left-hand side of Manor Park will, you will be relieved to know, be much shorter. The farthest house, The Gorse, which later became a children's home before being converted into flats, occupied the frontage down to its stables, which remain in converted form at the foot of the hill, after which were the grounds of Manor Close, an attractive Victorian house built on the road frontage roughly opposite Walsingham Cottage. As with The Gorse, its stable block remains converted into a private house. Manor Close was owned by a delightful gentleman, Mr Edward Ganderton, who always put me in mind of Mr Pickwick. He was an Underwriting Member of Lloyds, and his hobby was collecting rare books, of which he had an extensive library.

Next to Manor Close were two smaller houses, Friary Cottage and Sunbury Cottage, (now Southernwood), and there followed Riverwood Lane which at that time led to one house, Brackenside, owned by Mr R C Macfarlane. Later this property was the home of Francesca and Robert Hall, who generously acquired and donated to the National Trust a large part of the Hawkwood Estate, a fact commemorated by a stone memorial in the woods. [The Edlmann Memorial stone – Ed]

The other side of Riverwood Lane was the estate of Cookham Dene owned by Mr Alfred Fleuret. My small bedroom at Lepel overlooked their garden in which they kept a donkey, which was a good alarm clock in the morning, although its time-keeping

was open to question. Cookham Dene and its gardener's cottage, then occupied by Mr Frank Gunner and his family, still exist and immediately beyond is a snicket which led into the back garden of St Nicholas Lodge, fronting St Paul's Cray Road, in those days a school run by Miss Nicholas, which I attended from about age five to six. She was an energetic lady who until the early 1950s was to be regularly seen dashing about the area in her 1938 Austin Seven. My memories of the school are associated with a strong smell of linoleum (which must have been newly installed when I arrived) and the fact that in the back garden was a mulberry tree from which Miss Nicholas allowed me to take leaves to feed my silkworms.

I believe Wayside Cottage had an access to Manor Park through the snicket referred to, but all the rest of that side of the road formed the reverse frontage of the White House, a castellated property at the junction with St Paul's Cray Road, which appropriately in the 1950s, came to be occupied by a Miss Whyte.

This is the end of the road and of my random jottings, which I hope may be of some interest.



Walton Lodge, Royal Parade

A note by Patricia Gibson of the occupation of Walton Lodge and its adjoining neighbours in Royal Parade, Chislehurst. Edited for Cockpit by Roy Hopper.

Editorial note: The name Walton Lodge appears to date from 1904. In Webb's History of Chislehurst, p258, it is referred to as Mr Izzard's house in the page margin, and 'now called Dolobran' in the text.

Walton Lodge is a Grade II listed building situated in the centre of the original settlement of Chislehurst. It is an elegant three-storey early 18th century house and is abutted on one side by two cottages. These three residences are currently sited within a parade of about twenty shops, in close proximity to the Bull Inn and the parish church. The surrounding land is still largely made over to common.

In 1680, the Bull Inn was the only house on an area of land bounded by the churchyard and the roads, which are currently called Church Row, Church Lane and Royal Parade. In the early 1700s the house, now called Walton Lodge (called that throughout this paper), was built fronting onto Royal Parade, then called the Village Street. The plot was about 1½ acres and comprised the house and garden, and a field to the northwest, which was within the boundary mentioned above.

The land belonged to the Tryon family of Frognaal Manor, one and a half miles to the

north. It was originally part of Shott's Farm, Sidcup. This was settled on Mary Yarde for life, when she married Thomas Tryon in 1727. The earliest occupancy that has been established is that of John Palmer who, according to the Land Tax Assessment, occupied the house from 1780 to 1791. The Turners occupied the two attached cottages at that time. The owner of Walton Lodge and the two attached houses is listed in the Land Tax Assessment as Mary Tryon until 1785, when it changes to the 'late Mrs Tryon.' Thomas Tryon committed suicide in 1747. His executors, who included his wife, renounced probate, and his estate was thrown into Chancery. For a short period in the 1790s Mr Pomol and then Peter Pimmel (they may be one and the same person) occupied the house, with the Turners continuing in the attached houses. By 1797 Richard Gravett had purchased and moved into Walton Lodge. He was quite a prominent member of the community. From 1787 until 1807 he, and later his son, were assessors of the Land Tax for the area, and at the time of living at Walton Lodge he was a butcher. The attached two-storey house was his shop and slaughterhouse.

By analysing the Land Tax Assessment it can be seen that there was very little growth in Chislehurst in the fifty years up to 1831. However, two other premises were situated on the Village Street between the Bull Inn and Walton Lodge by 1800; and in the 1820s Richard Gravett's son erected a post office on the land of Walton Lodge, which abutted Church Row.

With the exception of the Post Office and an orchard to the rear, Richard Gravett sold Walton Lodge, including the two attached cottages and its remaining land, to Mr Izzard in 1825. According to the census of 1841 Robert Owen, one of many surgeons who were to feature as occupants of Walton Lodge, leased the property. Henry Aylward, Edward Fussell and Bertie Matthews (all surgeons) followed in the years

*We can find no
old images of
Walton Lodge.
This image of
Royal Parade
from 1913 is from
the Society's
Ribbons collection.*



Go online to the Society's website at www.chislehurst-society.org.uk

to 1895. By 1843 Henry Willis, the tailor, was operating out of the premises adjoining Walton Lodge on the Bull Inn side. The two cottages attached to Walton Lodge had continued to be run as a butcher's premises, first by Andrew Allen in 1841, and then by Alice Isard (may be related to the owner, Mr Izzard) and by 1851 to George Crowhurst, who had a building lease on Mr Izzard's land. In 1860 Crowhurst built the shops at the north end of the village street and formed a new slaughterhouse and yard behind the cottages attached to Walton Lodge. He also converted the butcher's shop into a dwelling house. Doctor Matthews purchased the cottage beside the Bull Inn and built shops and other premises on the site. According to the Ordnance Survey maps these were built between 1863 and 1897, possibly during his tenure at Walton Lodge (1861 approximately to 1895).

According to Strong's Directory of 1887, Royal Parade consisted of numbers 1-10 (possibly the shops built by George Crowhurst): chemist; corn merchants; greengrocers and fruiterers; watchmaker and jeweller; grocer and wine and spirit merchant; draper and tailor; boot and shoemaker; stationer; saddle and harness maker; furniture depository. Then followed some unnumbered premises: carriers; fishmonger; butcher (Crowhurst's, adjoining Walton Lodge); Ivy Cottage (previously the slaughterhouse). All these were built on land which was part of the Walton Lodge estate. A row of shops, numbered 7 to 10, are still clearly dated 1870. Continuing from the Directory: next came Walton Lodge itself, occupied by Dr. Matthews; and then the tailors and outfitters (Mr Whur, who had succeeded Mr Willis). The following four premises, presumably those built by Dr. Matthews, were infill up to the Bull Inn: sanitary plumbers and builders; stationers; hatters and hosiers; fly proprietors.

As can be seen from the above, the 19th century was a period that saw a great deal of development in the vicinity of Walton Lodge. The railway had arrived in Chislehurst in 1865, an Act of Parliament in 1886 preserved the commons, and when Napoleon III fell from power, he was offered sanctuary in Chislehurst. This encouraged royal patronage and put the spotlight on the area for the few years until his death in 1873. At this time the Village Street was renamed Royal Parade as a tribute.

According to Strong's Directory, Arthur Lloyd Sturge was renting Walton Lodge in 1897. Mr Sturge named the house 'Dolobran' a name he took with him when in 1903 or 1904 he moved to Shepherds Green, Chislehurst (according to Land Tax Record of 1910). In 1904, Walton Lodge returned to being a doctor's surgery when John Henry Tallent moved in and gave it its current name. In 1918, I am told by the present owners, Tallent bought the freehold from Mr Izzard's heir. Walton Lodge continued

to be flanked by the tailor, Mr Whur, and the Crowhursts.

By 1945, according to the Electoral Register, the Crowhursts had left and the tailor's premises were empty, as was Walton Lodge. By the 1950 Electoral Register, Greta and John Arthur Tallent were living in Walton Lodge. The house had been passed to John by his father in 1948; he had been raised in the house in the period starting with the Great War. Quite soon after, in 1951, Tallent sold the house to the Bradfords, and by about 1967 the Bradfords had sold it to the Hitchcocks. In 1986 its present owner, Anthony G Bompas, purchased the house. According to the Electoral Register the attached cottages changed occupiers several times during the last fifty years. The Electoral Register has followed the same sequence of recording premises for the last eighty years. However, the records for these attached cottages appear unreliable. On the other side of Walton Lodge, what was previously the tailor's is at present a ladies' clothes shop on both floors and has been so for at least twenty-five years.

Walton Lodge was occupied by surgeons almost continuously for a hundred years. Its neighbours developed from being just an inn and a church when Walton Lodge was built, to a thriving community of shops and services for the local community. The land of Walton Lodge and its owners and tenants were largely responsible for this development. Today, however, the shops, which surround Walton Lodge and its two attached cottages, represent lifestyle-type offerings – interior designers, clothes, beauty salons and restaurants. The nearest doctors' surgery is over a half-mile away.



Royal Parade from the north c.1904. Walton Lodge is out of view on the left.

The First World War – an appeal

The Great War resulted in huge changes to Britain, through its impact on its people and its economy, and imprinted itself on the nation's psyche. Most of us will be aware of former family members who were directly affected by the Great War – stories handed down, or told directly to us by grandparents. The power of some of the poetry written during or immediately after the Great War is still potent, even now, a century later, and many novels, films and TV series featuring the War have been very successful.

The Society's History Group is planning to publish a series of articles in *The Cockpit*, and on our website, reflecting the War's impact on Chislehurst, starting from next Summer, the centenary of its outbreak.

We would be very interested in hearing from any of our members who have stories to tell, diaries to open up, letters from relatives, or photographs, showing the impact on our community and forebears.

Please let us know if you have something that you think may be of interest to our members, as we build a picture of Chislehurst during the Great War years.

Correspondence

Society member Roy Evans, who has made several contributions to previous editions, wrote to the Editor after reading the Winter 2012 edition of *The Cockpit*.

"I received my Cockpit last week and found it to be a great read. The subjects touched on were all so interesting, many covering my time working in Chislehurst High Street; the 1950s to 1960s. I like the new history website. Keep up the good work!"

Regards from Roy Evans, Sevenoaks."

Contributions to *The Cockpit* are always welcome, be they short or long. Roy Evans sets a good example with his writing from personal experience. At present we have a number of articles that will be included in future editions, but the more the Editor has to choose from, the happier he will be!

Local History Group

The History Group meets monthly, undertaking research and projects, many of which will appear in *The Cockpit* or on our website. Tempted to join?

Please contact: localhistory@chislehurst-society.org.uk

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