

From Hetfelle to Hatfield - over 1000 years of history

HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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£ The L'Epine Missing Millions £

In 1798 Maria L'Epine died and was interred within a family vault at St.Etheldredas. Maria had no next of kin and died, aged 27, an 'intestate lunatic'. She appears to be of 'Huguenot' descent and was fabulously wealthy, but the authorities decided that she could not 'enjoy' her money - certainly during her latter years. She has an inscribed memorial plaque on the wall within the Church. Following her death there was a long campaign by members of her family to claim her fortune. This famously ended in 1927 when a Court ruled any claim was thence barred under the 100 year law of the Statute of Limitations. It was well known that in c1870 Maria's vault was opened. A church officer told us that it was then filled in. But why? The plot thickens!

Jon Wicken, an ancestor of Maria L'Epine, is conducting a thorough research and would be grateful for any information. Whilst we made our own enquiries, an episode of TV sleuth Poirot was being filmed within the Church - we told the producer that the L'Epine story might make a better 'Whodunnit'.

The Four Courts: Haddon , Rodney, Northumberland and Altham



Hatfield man John Greenham tells us that his granddad Charlie, delivered newspapers to the Courts in 1931-32, shortly after they were built. He would give details of new tenants moving in to his boss, newsagent shop owner George Dixon at Harpsfield Broadway. Young Charlie received one shilling (5p) for every new customer he got. The photo* of Rodney Court, kindly provided by Douglas Hall, shows the architectural style of that time now called 'Art Deco'. It appears that the similarly styled white De Havilland Admin block (now Police Station), built c1934 was designed to complement the four Courts opposite.

The 'Art Deco' movement began in France during the mid 1920's and it quickly proved popular across the Channel. One good local example is 'Torilla' - a large white house in Wilkins Green Lane, Ellenbrook.

By the late 1970s the flats were used as temporary 'half way houses' for Council home aspirants and local Polytechnic students alike. There were also many squatters.

*If clothes are an indicator, the photo was taken c1960.

Extracts from a letter by Douglas Hall:

My parents moved to Hatfield from Darlington in 1940, when my dad was offered a job as a toolmaker at De Havillands. They eventually moved into a private rented flat in one of the 1930's blocks of flats opposite the De Havilland factory. The address was No.14 Rodney Court.

I recall the ground floor flats had sectioned off gardens to the back of the buildings, while the front was a more formal affair with flower beds and lawns - not to be played on ! *Continued next page.....*

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The Four Courts Continued

There were also communal tennis courts. The flats themselves were a good size with kitchen, bathroom, living/dining room and three bedrooms. The memory I have is of a less than well maintained accommodation. Rain came in through the roof and my parents sat in bed with umbrellas up on wet nights !

We moved to No.1 Rodney Court where there was a slight improvement but the outside walls were damp and our beds had to be moved away from the walls which needed a regular lick of distemper by my mother every 6 weeks, to stop the mould.

In 1958 the Landlords wanted to increase the rent from £1.10s to £2.10s.

The tenants rebelled. One of them, Gordon Beck, barricaded himself into his flat. Some tenants hoisted food and supplies up to him and the whole Court joined in the protest.

**Does this indicate that there was just one 'Landlord' in 1958 ? -Ed.*

Tenants were threatened with bailiffs and took turns to 'Bailiff watch'. De Havilland workers were in support too, and a scheme was set up whereby tenants working at De Havs could be alerted should the bailiffs arrive, although this was never needed. Trades Union representatives gave advice to the tenants which resulted in a petition to Parliament regarding the huge rent increase.

Every tenant was soon offered alternative Council accommodation. All those in Rodney Court accepted and our family moved to Foxglove Close.

Extracts from a piece by our Frank Cox - 'I Lived There!'

In 1940 my family moved to Hatfield due to the threat of German invasion during WW2.

There was plenty of work but finding accommodation was a problem until the tenancy of 23 Altham Court was obtained. There were four blocks comprising 30 flats in each. By 1940 they had deteriorated badly from the 'luxury accommodation' envisioned when first built.

Entrance was via double glass doors into a small hallway. Lino covered the concrete stairs. Inside a flat, a passageway extended both left and right. Turning left, one came to the main living room with open fireplace and a large kitchen / dining room. The right passage led to the bathroom. Of the three bedrooms, the main one had an original built-in electric fire, but ours didn't work. Although basic, they were quite commodious. Although suggested to become Listed Buildings, all four blocks were demolished to make way for the Hatfield Tunnel.

De Havillands Reminiscence Project

Further to the September newsletter article, the University of Herts has been busy recording the oral history of people that had any connection with De Havillands at Hatfield. Several of our Society members were interviewed by Dr. Andrew Green and attended a get-together at the De Havilland Club on November 4th to officially launch the project.

Entertaining talks were made by Dr. Green, and his colleague Dr. Owen Davies. These were complemented with a slide show, including snippets of spoken recollections by contributors. Whilst my (Jon's) 90 minute interview didn't make it to the 'top ten', fellow HLHS member Dick Whittingham, who'd worked 50 years at DHs, was interviewed for almost a week.

Whereas he was feted on the day, I was half expecting to be arrested for my stories !

After the talks, us attendees had a chance to mingle over drinks and nibbles.

One aspect of the DH history project that, perhaps, did not receive enough attention was the Dynamics site or, to use a book title from our Jim Parker - The Other Side of the Runway. Jim worked there and had occasion to effect resonance tests on the famous Blue Streak rocket - which was

developed during the 1950s at Hatfield. It was originally designed as an inter-continental ballistic missile with a range of 2500 miles and could reach an altitude of 450 miles. It later became a very successful launcher of satellites. We met up with two other chaps who'd worked on it too - although nobody had met before. There were two towers that housed the rocket 'fuselage' tanks at Dynamics. However, only testing and assembly took place at Hatfield.

Full blown tests and launches happened in Cumbria and Australia. However, local folk weren't without some concerns over on the top secret Dynamics site.

Jim Parker provided this story, taken from the 'Dynamics News' magazine of Sept 1984:

.....Throughout the 1960s these impressive stainless steel monsters were to be seen in their towers, the taller of which was over 120 feet high. Periodic simulated engine runs were carried out using kerosene, and an inert gas in place of liquid oxygen. The large quantity of excess kerosene was burnt off, producing flames higher than the tower itself. This was a particularly awe-inspiring sight after dark and used to terrify the local populace, some of whom were quite convinced the rocket was about to take off!

The Hatfield Cinema

The request for Cinema recollections in the September newsletter has yielded a rich crop of wonderful replies. There is, already, enough to produce a HLHS booklet 'special'. Space here is always tight, and I hope we can be forgiven for publishing abridged extracts - but please keep sending in your Cinema stories, as they're all sure to be used one day.

Jean West writes:

During the War, when I was aged about 10, our youngest aunt, Marie, visited us whilst waiting to join the WAAFS. She took us children to The Regent to see The Wizard of Oz.

All was going well through the Newsreel and the minor 'B' film shown before the main feature.

Alas, we hadn't heard the air-raid siren, but we did hear the bomb that landed close by.

Although no damage was done to cause injury, the blast had damaged the projector, so the film could not be shown. We were given vouchers for another showing but I never got to use them. I eventually saw the Wizard of Oz on TV many years later.

*The Cinema never had an organ but the St. Albans one in London Road did.

Peggy Skeggs writes:

Hatfield residents did not have TV until the late 1950s, so the Cinema was our main entertainment and meeting place. I was three, in 1936, when my mother took me to see Bambi. My love of the cinema grew from then. I recall we paid 6d to sit at the front, where you'd get a stiff neck, and 9d to sit farther back. Nobody could afford the balcony.

Bizarrely, one could enter a film at any time. It was not uncommon to see the last half of the 'B' feature film, then the Newsreel, the main film and then watch the bit you missed of the 'B' film. People were coming and going all the time.

I vividly remember one visit during the end of the war. The auditorium lights suddenly came on and the film stopped. The Manager announced from the stage that all children under 12 were to leave and wait in the foyer. The Newsreel showed, for the first time, the horrendous scenes as Allied soldiers entered Belsen Concentration Camp, and the footage was deemed too harrowing for young children.

At the end of the War, Hatfield Council arranged to hold a 'Hatfield Navy Week' Beauty Queen contest at the Cinema. A finalist was selected from heats held nightly during the week, with the Final on the Saturday. We were so excited when my sister Daphne won!

Janet Robinson (nee Tingey) writes:

The Regent, as it was then, was a significant part of my entertainment as a child. Saturday morning pictures were a highlight of the week. We lived above our grocery shop at 101 St. Albans Road and, aged 8 or 9, my mother could watch me as I'd walk up the road to meet my cousins coming from Roe Green Lane and we'd join the queue of excited children as we processed up the steps and into the foyer. I was reminded that we paid tuppence ha'penny to go in. Predominantly we saw cartoons, Robin Hood, Tarzan and cowboy films. If ever a kiss appeared on screen all the little boys would boo and roar in disgust. As mother watched me return past the white wicker fences of Gracemead, she could often tell what sort of film I'd seen as I would strut with square shoulder and military bearing or sway in my saddle with a Stetson hat over my eyes as I trotted home.

I believe there were some live shows - such as magicians and comedians too.

However, Richard Tauber, the world famous tenor did appear at Hatfield's Regent cinema one Sunday afternoon in 1943. I've still got the programme of that performance which my parents (without me!) attended.

Also appearing were pianist Percy Kahn and

The great Polish bass, Marian Nowakowski. An impressive line-up for little old Hatfield!

Continued on back page.....

Cinema continued

Douglas Hall writes:

Our Saturday mornings were spent at the local cinema - The Odeon. I was 5 in 1947 and It cost 6d to get in. There was always a full house. The usherettes, with their large torches, tried to keep order - little boys with pea-shooters were quite common then!

There was a Birthday Club too. Members would receive a card and a priority seat upstairs - otherwise costing 2/6d. A lady would sell ice creams from her tray for 6d each.

By the mid 1950s basic entry was 1/6d for adults and 9d for children.

Photo of a photo displayed in The Cock pub, Colney Heath



The Hatfield area has been the home of many 'Traveller' communities over the years.

When the North Eastern railway line was constructed through Hatfield, c1850, many so-called 'navvies' - meaning navigational workers- passed through the town. Some of these workers would've been Irish people migrating here after the potato famine of 1847. Some too, would have worked on the branch line to St.Albans in the late 1850s.

There were also Romany travellers. Our photo appears to show a Romany woman at work, outside her 'traditional' styled caravan. This photo is one of a number in the pub, depicting a settlement on the heath at neighbouring Colney Heath. There are now other established caravan / traveller settlements locally such as: Barley Mow Lane, Barbaraville at Mill Green, the Holywell site by the Essendon roundabout on the A414, the former Ellenbrook site, perhaps the Ascots Lane-WGC campsite and the Marshmoor one at Welham Green.

Has this subject been covered before? Any recollections will be gratefully received.

Moving On

In November, long time Hatfield residents and HLHS members - Barry and June Smith - moved to Wrexham to be nearer their daughter.

They came to Hatfield in January 1954. Barry joined De Havillands when he was 16 and later became a flight test engineer. He stayed in the aircraft industry until retirement.

Despite having a busy and responsible job, he also found the time to work with the Scouts and was recently presented with a 60 years Service Award for Scouting. Barry and June were also active members of the St. Johns Church congregation.

Girl Guides

As you may have heard in the media recently, Girlguiding is celebrating its 100th birthday over the next year. Guiding in Hatfield has also had a long and interesting history and the current members of the district want to celebrate this. The first unit to be opened was the 1st Hatfield Guide Company in 1922, and ten years later, the first Brownie pack started.

Sadly the 1st Hatfield Guides closed in 1994, but the Brownies are still going strong and provides an exciting and inclusive girl-only space. Over the last century Guiding in Hatfield has thrived, at one time having as many as eight Brownie Packs. Were you a member of one of these units or involved in Guiding in Hatfield in another way? Perhaps you were a Leader, or the husband of a Leader? If you've got a story to tell, no matter how big or small it would be greatly appreciated. Vicky Nash and her colleagues are hoping to put together a 'Museum of Guiding' next year and they need your stories to help fill it.....*We'll pass on your stories to Vicky, Ed (What about some Boy Scout's recollections too?)*

After much hard work, HLHS member Brian Lawrence has finally seen his Old Hatfield History Board project come to fruition at the unveiling ceremony in the Old Town last month. The event was covered by both the local press and Hertfordshire Countryside and attended by local WHBC dignitaries.

At last visitors can learn something at a glance of Hatfield's long history. Well done.