

From Hetfelle to Hatfield - over 1000 years of history
HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER NO 87 December 2012

ROMAN HATFIELD

Hatfield has a recorded history going back to the Norman Domesday book of 1086 when 55 families were noted as living here at 'Hetfelle'. And there was certainly a human presence over a century before during the Saxon period when, in 970, King Edgar gave Hatfield to the monks of Ely. But before then, things become a bit sketchy for local evidence of the earlier Romano-British period.

Hatfield is bordered by the Roman town of Verulamium in St. Albans to the west, and the famous Welwyn Baths - part of a substantial Roman villa - a bit to the north. Roman trackways are known to pass through Panshanger and Colney Heath. And Devils Dyke in Wheathampstead was a stronghold of the Catuvellauni tribe where Julius Caesar is said to have paid a surprise visit around 54 BC. A hoard of Roman coins was found in Essendon a few years ago. A Belgic settlement was discovered at Letty Green and an ancient farmstead unearthed at Stanborough.

The question begs itself : If there, why not here?

But Hatfield only has a marble bath to show for its possible Roman era connection.

Until now.

In September, archaeologists conducted a thorough survey of the old Howe Dell School playing field sited between Woods Avenue and Rectory Drive. They scraped at least 2 feet of top soil from an area of about an acre and discovered clear evidence of farming activity.

Archaeologist Wesley Keir writes:

"The predominant features found in the excavations were thirteen parallel, shallow linear trenches which are likely to represent Late Iron Age/Roman cultivation trenches. Similar features identified on sites elsewhere are thought to have been used to grow soft fruits such as grapes [and olives].....In the eastern end of the excavation area was a larger probable boundary ditch of an apparently earlier rectangular enclosure upon which the cultivation trenches were superimposed. A rubbish pit containing Roman pottery, brick and roof tile was located to the north-west of the enclosure..."

As the cultivation plot investigated was only confined to an available section of the former Howe Dell playing field - due to it being surrounded by housing and roads - it was therefore probably part of a larger area. And where there is farming of any substantial scale, there is usually a farm house.

Perhaps the "Roman pottery, brick and roof tile.." found on the site are artefacts from a Roman styled villa located nearby.

Whatever the merits of this suggestion, the site was evidently farmed at least 2000 years ago, and for some considerable time too, thus adding further credibility to the likelihood of local habitation.

The final report is expected in the new year.



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THE LONDON ROAD SCHOOL BUILDING

In 1850, John Church of Woodside gave some land for a school to be built in Hatfield. Initially it was termed a National School and belonged to the National Society for Promoting Religious Education. It became known as London Road School, and was enlarged in 1854. The building stood just off the Great North Road / French Horn Lane junction having been built in the year before the GNR railway line was laid, barely 50 yards away.

By the turn of the century it became clear the school premises were not big enough to cater for demand so, in 1905, a new school named St. Audrey's was built in Endymion Road with various departments transferring to it from the old one by way of amalgamation.

Whilst the old and new establishments co-existed to serve local pupils, sometime in the early 1920s the NUR (Nat. Union of Railwaymen) complained that the old school building was "hopelessly out of date and unhygienic". Their concern being possibly due to local railwaymen having their children attend there.

Gradually changes of use took place and, by 1928, it was listed in Kelly's Directory as St. Audrey's Elementary School and had become a satellite faculty for the Department of Science & Woodwork of the main St. Audrey's (mixed) school in Endymion Road - its work-shop use being a sign of things to come!

In 1932 it was still listed the same but, by 1936, there was no listing in Kelly's Directory. However, on 16th November 1939 Messrs King, Cooper and Vernon formed an engineering firm and named it *KCV Precision Tool Company* and set up their new business in the old school premises. But it seems they weren't alone; as listed with KCV at the old school were also *Herts Manufacturing Company* and a bakery business known locally as 'The Munch Factory'. In 1935, five year old Tony Gibleen recalls buying ha'penny packets of broken biscuits there. And 9 years later a 14 year old Ron Price recalls they produced a tasty flap-jack confection made of oats and syrup. But by 1940 the second world war was raging, and locally the De Havilland aircraft company had become increasingly busy manufacturing planes for the war effort.

Perhaps it was the urgent requirement for engineering services that prompted the emergence of KCV, whose niche business was to supply larger companies - like De Havillands - with specialist support for those customised jobs that couldn't be done in-house.

It is not known what KCV produced during the war but, in 1946 Brian Stoker left school and would go on to have working experience at both of these companies. Aged 14 he began a four year stint at De Havillands, starting off in their Printing and Photography departments. But when 18, Brian left to become an apprenticed toolmaker with KCV who were still based at their factory in the ex school building. He commenced his employment on 16th May 1949 with a wage of one shilling and a half pence per hour. He went on to become it's workshop manager and chief estimator.

The land for the school was donated by John Church of Woodside.

He and his family are interred at St. Etheldredas



The former London Road school

Brian recalls how the factory was laid out:

"At either end of the building there were jig borers and benches. Facing the main entrance, the Tool Room was to the far left and in between was the Fitting Shop, Grinding Shop and Office, then came the Machine Shop with lathes. Outside at the back was the Welding Shop and Steel Store. We also had a small canteen room where a lady made tea and rolls to order." KCV always seemed to have plenty of work, with overtime usually available seven days a week. Normal working hours were 8am to 6pm.

Brian considers that they earned good pay, and several engineers bought their own homes - a not too common thing for workers in the 1950s.

In 1957 he bought his first home; a three bed semi in Crawford Road for £1,750.

In 1961, it appears that KCV had changed ownership with a Sidney T White replacing original founder Alfred Cooper as Managing Director. At this time there were 27 hourly paid workers - including 6 salary paid persons - and 3 apprentices.

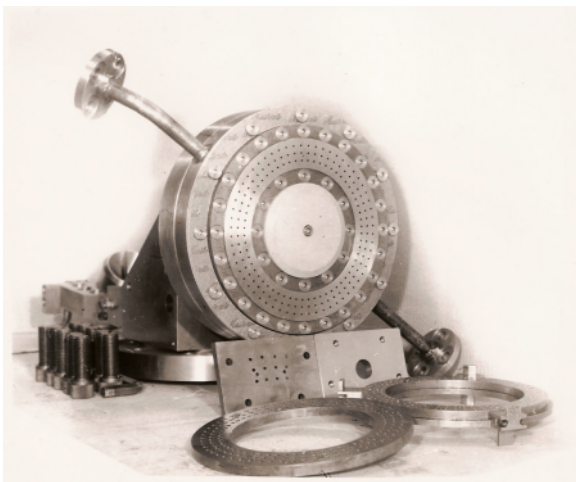
Most of KCV's engineering orders generally involved making one-off specials for local firms like ICI, who would supply their own designs for dies and moulds to be made.

But by the late 1960s the old school building was earmarked for demolition as part of the Hatfield Old Town redevelopment. This necessitated in KCV having to move, in 1968, to newly built premises in nearby Beaconsfield Road. Within two years the old site had been cleared by agents acting for landlords of the John Church Estate. A new car showroom, workshop and petrol station was purpose built for use by Grays (Hatfield) Ltd who, like KCV, had also to relocate due to the Old Town redevelopment.

The Grays' motor trade business had enjoyed a long working relationship with KCV since setting up in Hatfield in 1946. Grays Director Mick Clark recalls they used KCV's services, "...for making parts that motor manufacturers were unable to supply, especially so soon after the war; and machining worn engine parts and even making new parts as well, plus making special tools that we required. We valued the relationship we had with them and the benefits of having an engineering company close by"

But even after both companies had moved premises, their relationship flourished, as Mick continues, "...And in 1981, after negotiations with Sydney White, we (Grays) bought the company which we renamed Grays Precision Engineering. We were aware that many of KCV's customers had moved away but the benefits to our company and other users of KCV continued to make it a profitable business."

The company then relocated to WGC in the late 1980s. But with the ensuing downturn in local manufacturing, mainly due the closure of companies like ICI, Rank Xerox and De Havillands (BAe), Grays decided to close the precision engineering part of their business in 1994 - with Brian Stoker still there til the end.



This is a die made by KCV for ICI. Molten plastic was to be injected through the two tubes - shown extending diagonally from the main round die.

The plastic would then pour out through the many small holes seen on the face of the die. They would then be cut to the required length; a bit like making spaghetti - but more exact!

The Original Hatfield Lawn Tennis Club

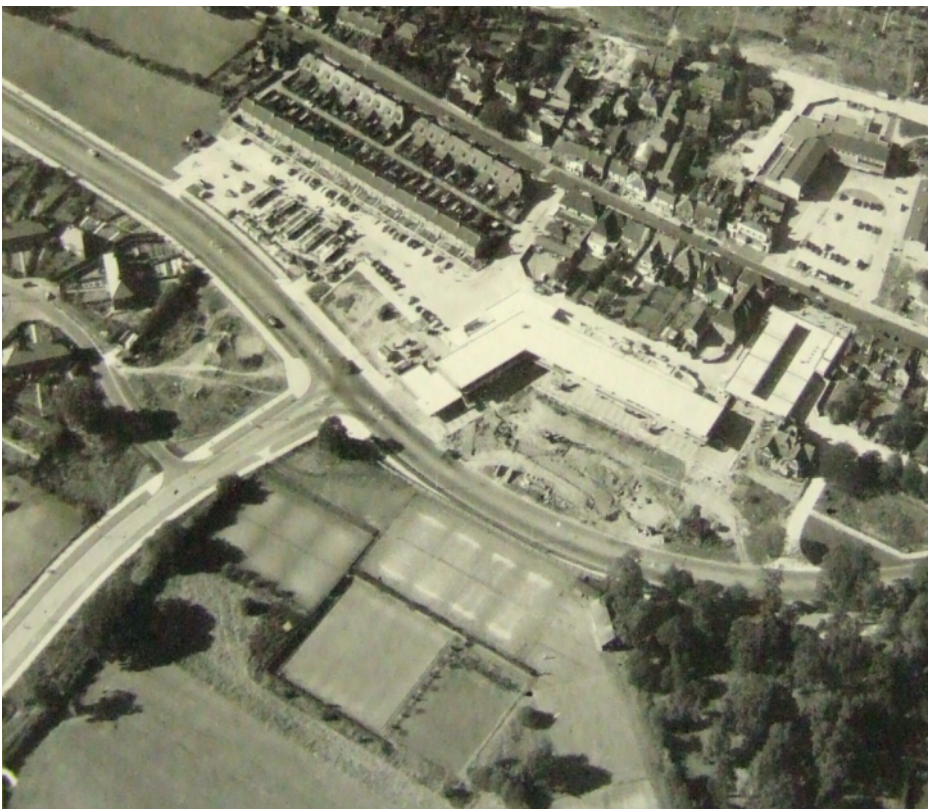
By Phil Marris

While researching the history of the Ryde area of Hatfield, I came across evidence of a lawn tennis club that was once on the Ryde land. The Hatfield Bowls Club in College Lane can trace its origins back to this club whose courts were located behind a detached house in Bull Stag Green called *The Poplars* and roughly where the back gardens of Nos 13 and 15 The Ryde stand today. The clubhouse was at the Red Lion Hotel in the Great North Road.

The earliest surviving honours board dates from 1897 when T W M Bennett won the Gentlemen's Singles Championship. Old minute books have also survived and have helped piece together some of the club's early history. The first recorded meeting took place at the Red Lion Hotel on 28th Sept 1900 with the Rev RF Bryans in the chair. The meeting elected Mr Bassett as President, Mr Bryans as Captain and P T Rowlatt as Hon Sec and Treasurer. In 1904, Lord Salisbury became the club's Patron and, in the same year, the club secured an extra piece of ground for a third tennis court. In 1913, Court No 3 was given over to bowls and the club became the Hatfield Lawn Tennis & Bowling Club.

Around 1908-11, another club was formed. This was the Herts County Croquet Club whose grounds were situated a hundred or so yards due south of Kennelwood House and with access gained via a footpath from French Horn Lane. By 1913-14, this club too was playing tennis and became the Herts County Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club.

In 1920, the two clubs amalgamated, at which point the Ryde club sold its assets (e.g. the club's pavilion) and moved in with the other club. The amalgamated club moved to its College Lane premises in the 1960s when the New Town was developed. It today boasts indoor and outdoor courts for bowls although tennis is no longer played. Two original honours boards dating from the Ryde era hang proudly in the board room.



This photo was taken in 1959. It shows the town centre under construction and bordered by Queensway. The tennis courts can clearly be seen directly opposite the market place, at the bottom centre of picture.

Photo by Derby Aerosurveys Ltd