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HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER NO 89 June 2013

THE HATFIELD CHALK MINES

In 1978, a 12 feet square piece of ground subsided near housing in the Briars Lane area. Ten years later, cracks began to develop in the walls of some bungalows situated near the junction of Briars Lane and Dellfield Road. Then, in 1996, a small hole appeared in the playground of New Briars school some 100 yards further up the hill from the bungalows. The hole was duly repaired and little more was thought about it. In 2001, Briars Lane resident Jim Knight was living in a 2 bed semi about 25 yards downhill from the New Briars school. At around 2pm on Monday 12th February he needed to pop out, and as he walked down his path he noticed a small hole in the lawn at the end of his next door neighbour's garden. When he returned about half an hour later, the hole had grown to about 4 feet across and part of his neighbour's concrete path had dropped down it. Then, in front of his very eyes, the hole grew bigger. First a tree, and then bushes fell into the chasm and a water pipe fractured. The hole ended up around 12 feet across and 30 feet in length. After alerting the authorities, Jim shone a torch into the enormous hole which he estimated was at least 20 feet deep. He also noticed that the side walls lower down within the chasm were "flat and whitish". What he was looking into was the remains of a chalk mine, and the flatness of the walls were evidently created by the hews of miners. Later that day a Highways spokesman investigated the site and was quoted in the WH Times as saying: "*These holes are not uncommon, but it's rare in this part of Hatfield*" He also mentioned, "*A bloke came along earlier today and said there used to be a tunnel along here leading to a chalk pit...*" And, rather optimistically, he stated, "*We're going to fill it in...*" This eventually happened, of course, but about seven years and £4million later!



A capped chalk shaft within Chantry Lane spinney. There were once three, sunk to a depth of c65 feet. They were often bell shaped. At the bottom, tunnels may have radiated out horizontally. When they became disused, farmers would sometimes throw in dead animals and backfill with soil.

But there was nothing 'rare' about chalk mines in Hatfield, and the Briars Lane one was certainly common knowledge for some long time local folk!

In fact, the Ordnance Survey map of 1880 noted nine Old Chalk Pits in Hatfield. The term 'Old' indicating disuse; with most sited in a neat arc from Bradshaws in South Hatfield, through the main University campus, alongside College Lane and on to the Meadow Dell area off Cavendish Way; this last pit being back-filled in c1950 to allow for new housing and roads. It was also rumoured to have been used as a burial 'plague pit' for victims of the 1665 Bubonic Plague. Whatever the truth, it would've made an ideal location, as quicklime - which is derived from chalk - could be made at the site, and was used to both disinfect and hasten the decomposition of bodies, particularly in mass graves.

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Chairman: **Mrs Chris Martindale**



An interesting aside is the nearby road name Feather Dell, which is said to have been corrupted from Fever Dell. This may add further credence to the past use of the pit; a high fever being a symptom of the plague.

And many other Hatfield place names with 'dell' in them are often evidence of chalk mining.

Historically, chalk was used in the making of lime and bricks, and used in agriculture for spreading on fields to reduce acidity in the soil; a practise called 'marling'. Miners were attracted to the Hatfield area - perhaps from Roman times - particularly because the chalk lies fairly close to the surface, and local chalk is also a soft variety and easier to use in the process of making lime. Seams of flint are often found within it, but there is no evidence that it too was mined at Briars Lane, although present. But whilst chalk mining was a known activity in the Hatfield area from the 17th century, neither the modern day civil engineers or local authorities would be drawn on when the Briars Lane mine was last in use. Yet it seems likely the mine was closed due to the land being purchased by the council shortly before they built new housing above and around it. Indeed, the boundary of the playing field at Dellfield school - built in 1933 - also encroached upon the accepted mine entrance area.

HLHS member Brian Tott recalls that his mother, who moved to Hatfield in 1929, had told him she would sometimes use lumps of chalk that had fallen from the horse drawn wagons coming from the Briars Lane mine. "It must have been a big mine" said Brian, "as these wagons would have needed a fair amount of space to turn around inside!"

His mother would use the chalk to rub on her doorstep (perhaps in her 'Right of Way' home) as a substitute for a so-called 'donkey stone', described as: *"A sort of briquette of off white chalky stone, which housewives would dip in a bucket of water to soften, then use to rub on their washed stone step, in circular motions, so that the creamy, chalky stuff would adhere to the step. When dry, it looked very clean and matt..."*

Domestically, chalk was also applied to the stone floors around cooking ranges.

Brian, aged ten in 1945, recalls the wide metal gates that barred the mine entrance; which by then had been long filled up. The gate would have been about 40 yards downhill from where the big hole appeared in Briars Lane in 2001.

The OS map of 1898 does not indicate either a chalk pit or a lime kiln at Briars Lane, but the 1924 OS map shows 'Old kiln' on the site - presumably disused by then - but no mention of a chalk mine either before or since! However, whilst lime burning at the kiln may have ceased by 1924, chalk mining for agricultural purposes could have continued; even in a 'help yourself' basis should the mine have fallen into commercial disuse. But whilst OS maps are not totally reliable, and do not always contain every feature in each survey, it seems more than a little remiss to ignore a mine that was later found to cover over seven acres!

We know that the operator / owners of the mine were the local Chapman family of builders who are referred to in the 1962 WEA book, Hatfield And It's People: *"Throughout the 19th century the Chapman family were leading bricklayers. The business had been started in the late 1700s by James Chapman, after whose death (in 1816) and that of his widow, it was carried out by their three sons in partnership. In 1851 James Chapman bricklayer, who lived in Priory House [in the Old Town] was noted in the census as employing five men. The family appears to have done their own brick making and lime burning, their limekiln being situated in one of the Broomfields (now the site of Dellfield Road and Newtown School) which is still remembered by some as "Chapmans Field." The family name is still preserved in Chapman's Yard and Terrace, in Park Street, which were built and owned by the family in the middle of the last century [1850s]"*

Again we see reference to the kiln at the site, but no mention of the mine itself. Yet when the WEA book was written, many local people would still have had first hand knowledge of it,

notwithstanding Mrs Tott's recollections from 1929-30. Accordingly, when the construction of new housing in the immediate area took place during 1932-33, the council must have known they were building on top of a very big chalk mine. Maybe the council surveyors back then had not considered the potential for the later instability which led to subsidences between 1978 and 2001. Perhaps there was an understandable cover-up? The WH Times even had to request a Freedom of Information to get a report from the council in 2006.

The WEA book also reveals that a Charles Chapman (born 1847) was a 'brick maker, lime burner and builder'. Further research indicates he died aged 77 in 1923. It is likely that either he, or one of his two sons, were the last operators of the Briars Lane mine, albeit one son was an architect and the other a carpenter!

HLHS member David Wilson, now aged 82, was also well aware of the mine and described how he'd heard it was formed within the hillside at Briars Lane. "Starting at the bottom of the hill, they would have dug down to the chalk. This would have created a flat open area, a bit like an empty swimming pool. Then, they dug horizontally into the hill, and a 'cliff face' would have been created. Eventually, when the cliff became too high, they tunnelled into it"

In August 2007, civil engineers began drilling a series of boreholes - 82 in total - around the suspected mining activity to gauge its extent. They started at the bottom of the hill by the bungalows, and went all the way up to the school. 9 inch holes were drilled deep into the ground to depths of between 6 metres (20ft) and 20 metres (62ft) before voids were found. Then a remote controlled camera was lowered into the void and a film was produced. In all cases seen, there was no evidence of any refuse or debris, just the scarred white walls and many lumps of chalk scattered on the floor; still, it seemed, awaiting collection. But more likely, these lumps were the result of collapsed ceilings, thus destabilising the ground above further. Tunnels, typically 6 feet wide and 9 feet high, spurred off here and there and some open areas were quite cavernous. Despite no engineers actually venturing inside the mine, one reportedly said that three double decker buses could've fitted inside one of them! It transpires that there were four levels of tunnelling at the Briars Lane mine, which covered an area of 7.5 acres - equivalent to three full size football pitches. Eventually, 800 holes were drilled to allow the injection of cement based foam and grout mixtures to fill up the old mine and its tunnels for stability. Finally, in 2008, the civil engineers were able to certify the stability of the area, much to the relief of local residents.

NURSE REED AND 1930s MIDWIFERY by Janet Robinson (nee Tingey)

When I was 65 my mother gave me an unusual birthday card. She had written down her memories of my birth and included details about the 'monthly nurse' :

"The first thing was to book Nurse Reed. To look after mother, baby, plus family, but with no housework, would cost 12 guineas a month. Two weeks before Nurse Reed's expected arrival a friend called to ask if the nurse could help them as her mother had had an operation. This was agreed on condition that Nurse came to us when needed. One morning I was awoken with a pain. By breakfast time Randall and I were a bit worried, so we sent for Nurse. "Nothing to worry about," she said firmly. "It will be a long time yet. I'll come at tea-time". Of course, I had followed the Motherhood Book which instructed "Carry on as usual. Prepare the bed etc." Nurse Reed arrived with her case at 4 o'clock. At tea-time she looked at me and said "I'll put my uniform on, no need to think of bed." At six o'clock she phoned Dr Lamb. "Nurse speaking. Mrs Tingey's baby is on its way. All's well." The doctor replied, "I had better put off my surgery," and came from his house just across the road.

Continued

Randall was sent downstairs to occupy himself in the shop. My brother phoned but was told to call later. We went into the bedroom. I had a bottle of chloroform on the bedpost with a nozzle attached and this I should have been sniffing but more often than not it just banged on my nose. Janet Hope Tingey was born at 7.10pm on October 29th 1935. After the birth I was not allowed out of bed for two weeks which meant using the bedpan. After use, Nurse would put a few live coals on a shovel with sprigs of dried lavender and circle the room to make "all things sweet." She was doing this one day when Dr Lamb walked in, much to her embarrassment. After a fortnight of pampering I was up and about. Nurse Reed was wonderful, doing all our washing as well as the baby's and cooking for us and any visitors. The christening was arranged as Nurse always liked to carry the baby in its christening robes to the church before she left at the month's end. You were her 365th baby".



Randall & Roland (children) after Nurse Reed's time with them.



Janet Robinson (nee Tingey) 1936. Taken in the grounds of the shop, 101 St Albans Road, warehouse in the background.

Recently I looked at the 1911 census to find my grandparents who lived at 4 Belmont Cottages, St Albans Road. Listed there were: John Tingey , aged 32, Grocer and Furniture dealer; Emily P; (29), Randall (3), Roland (baby) and, notably, Mary Ann Reed (38) the Monthly Nurse! I imagine that she was also there 3 years earlier when my father, Randall, was born.

A monthly nurse could earn more than a midwife as the monthly nurse was employed for periods between 10 days and often much longer and might attend several women on a part time basis. She often "lived in". Many certified midwives transferred to the ranks of monthly nurses to benefit from an increased income.

Nurse Reed probably practised for well over thirty years. Do the arithmetic: If usually she stayed a month with each baby she could surely not have delivered more than 10 babies a year. (And she was apparently married), so that is 36 + years back from 1935.

But that is not quite the end of my story. My brother, born in 1946, was a crying baby and once, out of desperation, my father phoned for Nurse Reed. I remember her coming in uniform with a felt hat. She would have been 73 by then, and still on call.

NB I note in the Register of deaths that a Mary A Reed died in Hatfield in 1959 aged 87. Was that her?