

From Hetfelle to Hatfield - over 1000 years of history

HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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Agriculture at De Havilland's (part 2)

In our Newsletter No. 79, December 2010 we wrote about the Agricultural Dept side of the De Havilland aircraft business which was set up in the late 1930s in the run up to WW2. Over time, the company acquired about 1400 acres, but most was not used for aviation purposes.

DH's first Agricultural Manager was Reg Sutterby, who was supported by his brother John as a Foreman tending the aerodrome and gardens. The family connection continued with John's schoolboy son, Mick, helping out at weekends before joining the department from St. Audrey's school in 1954 to become a groundsman. His main work centred around grass cutting in summer and maintaining ditches and hedgerows in winter.



Reg Sutterby

He enjoyed his work thoroughly, but redundancy in 1991 brought to an end 37 years of service at the airfield - plus another four as a boy helper!

Recently, Mick gave HLHS member Jon Brindle a near 3 hour guided tour over the site and provided many recollections. One particularly, propelled him to national awareness!

In the summer of 1962, whilst out mowing the airfield on his tractor near Popefield farmhouse, he saw a man with a camera apparently trespassing towards the runway. Mick drove over to speak to him, but as he drew near he heard a roar from above and turned to witness a prototype Lightning jet fighter plummet out of the sky and crash close to the west end of the runway just 200 yards from him and only 20 yards from the Nottcuts garden centre.

There was no great explosion – just a loud ‘whoof’ as it hit the ground. The pilot, George Aird, had ejected at just 300ft, and fallen through the roof of a greenhouse, breaking both legs as he landed and lay unconscious on the ground. The water from a sprinkler system for the tomatoes woke him. On coming to, his first thought was that he must be in heaven.

The cameraman happened to be a friend of the unfortunate pilot but, incredibly, he captured the moment he ejected as the plane nose-dived - and Mick was caught in the frame too. The photo was withheld by the Air Ministry at first as the Lightning jet was still deemed a secret. When the ban was finally lifted, the Daily Mail



DH homegrown: cattle and bags of grass meal

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thought the photo a hoax but it soon made the national press through the Daily Mirror and from there it went round the world; and Mick remembers seeing a copy of it in the RAF museum at Hendon. It transpired that the cameraman usually photographed hunting scenes for magazines like The Field. If he'd returned to the site in late Autumn he could have



Mick, top, sees the crash in 1962 and returns to the scene in 2018

snapped some of the shooting parties which also took place on the airfield and surrounding woodland. Mick was also involved in these events and would transport the shooters to their various positions. Men from the Agricultural Dept and some Astwick Manor apprentices would earn a bit of weekend overtime as beaters to flush out game. Mick was once given a £5 tip - this being two week's wages at the time! The parties were most often made up of nine or ten 'guns'. About half would be directors of De Havillands and the rest would be visiting VIPs such as ambassadors, potential aircraft customers or high ranking men from the military.

Pheasants, which had been reared there in Home Covert, would fly out from the woods towards the guns and, as winter approached, out on the fields partridges became the target.

Rabbits were on the hit-list too. The Gamekeeper would soak rags with creosote and put them by their holes. The smell kept the rabbits out in the open. He also recalls that over a two day shoot 90 hares were bagged over on the airfield site.

That seems an incredible figure as today, some sixty years later, hares are rarely seen over on what is now known as Ellenbrook Fields – yet no shooting has gone on there for decades.

One amusing anecdote involved the famous Comet test pilot, John 'Cats Eyes' Cunningham. "He couldn't hit a barn door even if he was in the barn!" said Mick, "I can still hear him saying 'Oh deary, deary me' as he missed time and again. Another 'marksman' who used a pair of very expensive 6-shooter Purdy shotguns was reduced to venting out his poor performance on small birds in bushes. So much for sport!

About half the aviation manufacturing site was on part of the former 730 acre Harpsfield Hall farm (as in 1901).

The advert, opposite, for shooting rights was in 1837.

In 1863 the Sinclair family leased the farm and made a great success of it until the aircraft business arrived and acquired it in the early 1930s.

As our walk proceeded, Mick pointed out some of the man-made topographical features such as a bridge he'd once created when diverting the Nast stream under a track. The stream continued in a pipe under the runway before it re-appeared in a ditch that flowed into the Ellenbrook.

Quarrying to the north nearer to Coopers Green Lane seems to have stopped the flow today. In another nod to the past, at the time of his redundancy in 1991, a large area of field to the north side of the runway was still referred to as the 'golf links' - yet golf hadn't been played there for 53 years!

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***Mick recalls foxhunters meeting at Astwick Manor in the 1950s**

BEATRIX POTTER'S LOCAL CONNECTION by Hazel Bell

Beatrix Potter was a frequent visitor to Hertfordshire. Her father rented Woodfield in Essendon in 1883. During her stay there Beatrix fished in local ponds, sketched local wildlife and visited St Albans, North Mymms, Panshanger and Hatfield Park. In 1884 she rented Bush Hall for 25 guineas a month. She thought the local area was picturesque and praised its “select society” and close proximity to London. She fished trout in the River Lea, and produced detailed sketches of the Hall and the paper mill close by. However, she found the “shocking smell” when the “miller at Brocket Hall cleared the dam” very unpleasant!

Her grandparents bought Camfield Place in Essendon in 1866 [*the year she was born*]. Beatrix described the house as “the place I love best in the world”, and it inspired many of her books. Mr McGregor’s garden was based on one of the estate cottage gardens.

In 1891, the Potters rented Bedwell Lodge in Essendon, which inspired Beatrix’s later tales, *The Mice in their Storehouse* and *The Cat and the Fiddle*. When Beatrix’s grandmother died Camfield was put up for sale and later became the home of Dame Barbara Cartland.

Here are some extracts from a letter Beatrix wrote to a friend, about 1890, describing the view from the terrace of Camfield Place:

“You see the windy north front, with the oaks moaning and swaying on winter nights close to the bedroom windows, and at their feet the long green slope of meadow down to the ponds, and are wakened on summer mornings by the persistent crying of a cuckoo in these same oaks, twenty to thirty. I believe the record was fifty-two cries before seven o’clock, till tired of counting. You draw up the window-sash and look out. A slight mist still clings to the beech-wood over against the ponds. Further east, beyond the sweep of grass-land and scattered oaks, the blue distance opens out, rising to the horizon over Panshanger Woods. If you get on any rising ground in this neighbourhood you would fancy Hertfordshire was one great oak wood.

There are trees in every hedgerow, and, seen from the moderate elevation of our hills, they seem to stand one against another. In summer the distant landscapes are intensely blue.

The autumn frost spreads a ruddy glow over the land. I shall never forget the view I once saw from Essendon Hill, miles upon miles of golden oak wood, with here and there a yellow streak of stubble, and a clump of russet walnut trees behind the red gable, and thin blue smoke of a farm.

Another weak point during snow is an enormous hollow elm opposite the kitchen windows. It is braced up with iron bands and a useful receptacle for a wheel-barrow, brooms, etc. It has had two tragedies within my memory, the first time smashing on to the roof and kitchen wall, but it always sprouts.”

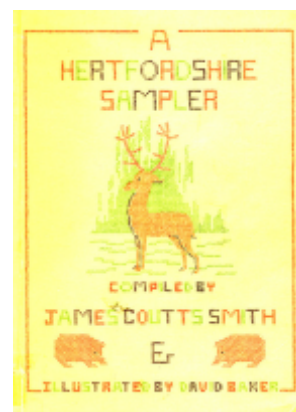
- from *The Journal of Beatrix Potter From 1881 to 1897*: Transcribed From Her Code Writings by Leslie Linder; © F. Warne & Co. Ltd., London; quoted in *Hertfordshire Sampler* edited by James Coutts Smith; Hertfordshire Publications, 1980



Camfield Place, Essendon



Beatrix Potter



THE BREAKS AT 88

The Hatfield Youth Centre - or Breaks as it was more commonly known - opened in 1951. Most local people only think of it as a youth club, but it was previously a family home too. When the Hatfield Development Corporation purchased it, with its eight acres of land for £10,000, they converted it into a hub for Hatfield's increasingly bereft young at a time when the town's population was being increased from 8,000 to 25,000.

Dating from Saxon times, the word 'breaks' is almost certainly a corruption of the word 'braecs' which described land that had been cleared for cultivation. Like many historical terms, the word has been spelt in a variety of ways over the centuries. But 'braecs' can still be seen in Hatfield street names as 'breach' as in Stockbreach Road and 'braitch' as in Great Braitch Lane. Other variant spellings include 'bricks' and even 'bridge'.

A field map from the 1830s show two abutting fields of 8 acres and 5 acres named Great Brickifields and Little Brickifields which covered part of the current Breaks Manor site. The plots extended to the middle of what is now the town centre to the north-west and alongside the old French Horn Lane to the east. It was then owned by the church, nominally by Parish priest the Rev Joseph Faithfull as glebe land.

A century later the Breaks story shifts to Great Nast Hyde House, an imposing Jacobean manor house built c1600 in Ellenbrook.

It is here that a successful 'stock jobber' named Lionel Janson lived in some style with his wife Margaret and three daughters. But their descendants say that the London and Wall Street stock market crashes of 1929 had such a detrimental effect upon his fortunes that he sold GNHH and bought a plot of land off French Horn Lane and had a house built there.

He and his wife stayed at the Peahen Hotel in St. Albans until 1930 when they moved into the new family home which they named 'Breaks'.

The family never called it '*The*' Breaks or Breaks '*Manor*', just 'Breaks'. Formal gardens were laid out plus a lawn tennis court and croquet lawn installed. Mr & Mrs Janson were joined at Breaks by their three daughters: Pamela, Marjorie and Delia.

It could be said that the association of Breaks with youth work started in the late 1930s as Pamela and Marjorie Janson were Captain and Lieutenant of the 1st Hatfield Girl Guide



Lionel & Margaret Janson
c1940



Pamela and Marjorie
outside Breaks c1942

Company which was based at their hut in Ground lane.

Hatfield girl guide Rosemary Marshall (nee Ewington) recalled that during wartime blackouts, the 'lovely' Janson sisters would collect her from home and walk her to the guides hut. She also remembered Lionel as a kindly gentleman who regularly attended services at St. Etheldreda's church. He died in 1946 and is buried at St. Luke's cemetery. With all three daughters then married, his wife moved to a house named Greenaways in Fore Street in the Old Town. She was accompanied by her children's former governess, a Miss Squire. Mrs Janson and her daughter Delia were also interred at St. Lukes.

Earlier this year a film was made about the history of Breaks. To obtain a DVD copy for £5 contact: hatfieldhistory@ntlworld.com
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