



Friends of Firbeck Hall

NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 3, July, 2009

Chairmans Report

Welcome to our third Newsletter and an update on our endeavours to save Firbeck Hall.

Friends will be pleased to hear that we have now received a reply to our letter (Copy in Newsletter 2, June, 2009) to Mr. Roger Stone (Council Leader RMBC). He informs us that English Heritage and the Rt. Hon. Kevin Barron MP (Rother Valley) have both taken an interest and have been updated on the current situation. This has culminated in yet another inspection of the property (Friday, 12 June) attended by Mr. Giles Proctor (Team Leader, South/East Yorks & North Lincs, ENGLISH HERITAGE), Mr Glen Saint (for the Owners), Mr. Peter Thornborrow (Conservation Officer, RMBC) and the representative of a Trust that may be interested in the preservation and development of Firbeck Hall. Everything is in the melting pot just now!

The village is never asleep to any activities taking place within the Hall grounds and we are aware of temporary repairs being carried out to the structure. These appear to have been actioned by a recent inspection by RMBC and very similar to those repairs carried out in 2005. These measures are totally unacceptable to FoFH except as a very short term stop gap. We will press for nothing less than a full restoration program under the auspices of English Heritage regardless of ownership. We would not be opposed to a Compulsory Purchase Order served on the Owners by RMBC, for which they would receive our full backing. We are also of the opinion that Firbeck Hall (a Grade II Listed Building) is worthy of an upgrade to Grade II* for a number of good reasons. This would place the property in greater safety during the short term and certainly make it better placed for grant aid and other funding required to achieve full restoration. Friends will be very pleased to note that this is the precise course of action being adopted by RMBC and Kevin Barron has been informed of this in a letter from the Chief Executive Officer. *(see more detailed explanation of Listed Building status elsewhere in this issue)*

'FIRE OVER FIRBECK HALL' (Sid Ellis)

The first indication of an incident (early evening of Friday, 10 July) was the sound of emergency vehicles heard by several residents about 5.00pm. The first reported sighting was by Carl Spedding who saw smoke in the vicinity of Firbeck Hall but assumed it was the contractors, who he knew were working on site, burning rubbish before packing up for the weekend.

At about 5.45pm I received a telephone call from Richard Potts (a near neighbour of Firbeck Hall) who, on seeing Fire Appliances en-route to the Hall, went to investigate. He reported that the fire had taken hold in the roof area behind the first two or three right hand gables (facing the Hall frontage). When I asked if they were fighting the fire with any success he said not; - 'there was little action and for the most part the fire fighters appeared to be standing about waiting'.

Una and I thought we should investigate as closely as possible (by car) but were held up outside the Black Lion by a very large fire appliance that had lost its way. We advised the driver to follow us and proceeded at high speed to Firbeck Hall back entrance accompanied by another vehicle which turned out to contain a representative of Cambs Constuction Ltd. The situation was still as described by Richard with lots of smoke and occasional flames, but issuing solely from behind the right hand gables. There were two appliances already in attendance. Sue Potts informed us (I assumed she had been speaking to the firemen) that the fire hydrants were 'dry', hence the apparent inaction. The appliance we had guided to the scene was carrying the required extension hoses to reach the lake, and these had to be assembled before fire fighting 'proper' could commence.



In the meantime they continued with spasmodic, but futile attempts to reach the fire with inadequate hoses and water supply. 'Our' appliance was closely followed by another very large machine carrying a 'cherry picker' type extension hose which was essential if the fire was to be dealt with effectively. It had great difficulty negotiating the yew lined drive to the rear entrance of the Hall. (I note the great difficulty of access and the delays due to the blocking off of Firbeck Hall main

entrance). There were now four fire appliances in attendance and they were joined by at least four 'fire chiefs' in cars.

In addition to firemen, the only other 'spectators' were the Potts Family, Carl Spedding, a photographer from the Rotherham Advertiser, and the man (+ his family ?) from Cambs Construction Ltd (who escorted Carl Spedding from the grounds after he had tried to take photographs) and ourselves.

It was 6.30pm before the cherry picker and hose-line extensions were in position, and finally they were able to tackle the fire. This, surprisingly after some 2+(?) hours, still appeared confined to the same area of the roof. This remained the situation when we left the site at about 6.50pm although by this time there was little sign of actual flames.

Later, on his arrival at the Black Lion at about 8.00pm, Richard Potts reported the 4 appliances still in attendance and fighting the fire.

Late Note : Jim Rands, our Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinator, has been informed by the Dinnington branch of SY Police that the fire was not malicious but caused by workmen who had been doing repairs and maintenance in the area where the fire started. It would be up to the Fire Brigade to determine the cause and investigations would be carried out if there were suspicious circumstances. Four Fire Appliances attended the scene from Maltby and Edlington

'Green Lady' (Don Scott)

Our Treasurer was beside herself...this couldn't be! She checked with our Membership Secretary but sure enough, we had signed up only 134 'Friends' and yet the FoFH 'biscuit tin' clearly contained £135. An extra £1 had found its way into the coffers but where had it come from? Did it really matter? Well, yes it did and we had to balance the books. A bold plan was set in motion that would both solve our problem and culminate in the raising of a spirit that would surely aid our cause.

When signing up new members, the committee had deliberately left Friendship No. 13 blank so as not to upset anyone of a superstitious nature but, here was an opportunity to both recruit a new member with supernatural powers and balance the books.

The English Civil War (1641-1651) touched many people's lives and the West family of Firbeck Hall were no exception. A young lady of that place became a victim of it, even as if she had been struck down on the battlefield and all for the love of a man on the wrong side...a Roundhead. Through the passage of time, almost all of the details have been lost but it would seem that these lovers would meet secretly on a path known as the 'Dark Walk' by the lower lake (then a mill dam) until they were at last discovered. The young man was despatched by the sword, run through by the girl's own brother for daring to court a lady of the Royalist persuasion. The loss



was so unbearable that she threw herself into the lake and was drowned. When her body was drawn from the water it was found to be covered in that green slimy algae which sometimes infests still waters and... a legend was born.

There have been sightings of the 'Green Lady' since that tragic story unfolded, for almost 400 years, right up to recent times when she makes her brief appearances here and there, or waiting by the lake for a lover who will never return. That is very powerful stuff and who are we to deny such a sad and pitiful tale? Far better to take advantage of this fascinating story and make her a Friend of Firbeck Hall with her very own email address...scary@firbeckhall.net. Our group may disband one day but our latest card holder, No.13, will stay on in that place....a Friend of Firbeck Hall forever!

Listed Buildings and Firbeck Hall (Sid Ellis)

Some time ago, if one expressed concern about the deteriorating condition of Firbeck Hall, the usual answer was, 'Nothing can be done; its private property'. Well, if we didn't know then we certainly know now that this isn't so, the significant factor being the 'Listed' status of Firbeck Hall. A number of our members have asked what this means and what are the implications? How do they affect the owner? How are they applied?

In the first instance English Heritage are the national body responsible for ancient and historic buildings and grading them in accordance with their perceived importance and status. Only 5% of such buildings fall into the top grades of I or II*, all the rest are Grade II which includes Firbeck Hall although one of our main aims and objectives is to achieve an upgrading to II*. This higher Grade II* status imposes even stricter conditions in respect of upkeep and use, and the building becomes eligible for grant aid application.

However, Grade II itself does invoke strict conditions on the owner with regard to the standard of maintenance, and similarly determines the extent and style of any future development. All of these conditions are set out in the Town & Country Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (T&CPA'90) and are administered by the local authority which in the case of Firbeck Hall is Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. (RMBC)

Prior to the sale of Firbeck Hall to Cambs Construction Ltd in the mid 90's there appears to have been few problems with the Hall and its surroundings in relatively good condition. The first indication of any deterioration was in March 2004 when the then Conservation Officer of RMBC reported Firbeck Hall as being 'at risk' (together with several other properties in the area). The Council appeared happy with the owner's response and their promise of early plans for the development of the site. No plans were in fact forthcoming and in the spring of 2005 the extensive removal of roof lead resulted in considerable interior damage due to the ingress of rain water. Following a site inspection by a new Conservation Officer in June 2005, urgent temporary roof repairs were authorised together with the erection of security fencing under Section 54, T&CPA'90. There is no evidence of any pressure for more substantial repairs which we now know could have been applied under Sections 47 & 48 T&CPA'90. These insist on a return to the condition of the building at the time it was 'Listed', with the threat of Compulsory Purchase Order if not complied with. Unfortunately we can find no evidence of any subsequent action by RMBC, or indeed, of any contact

whatever with the owners after August 2005 (until some two months ago).

By early 2009 there was increasing evidence that the condition of Firbeck Hall was deteriorating rapidly to a perilous state and that urgent action was becoming essential. Such evidence was difficult to obtain due to aggressive security and inaccessibility to the Hall grounds, but it led directly to the formation of Friends of Firbeck Hall on 3rd April 2009.

Within one month of the formation of Friends of Firbeck Hall our campaign registered its first success. On 1st May, 2009, after four years of complete inaction (to which they admitted), RMBC issued a 'Repairs Notice – Warning Letter' to Cambs Conststruction Ltd. This drew attention to the deteriorating condition of Firbeck Hall and stressed their powers under the provision of Section 48, T&CPA'90 which ultimately could lead to compulsory purchase proceedings under Section 47. It also insisted on an early meeting which took place shortly afterwards when Mr. Glen Saint of Cambs Construction Ltd attended RMBC Bailey House offices. A site inspection followed to determine the true condition of the building and the work required to restore it to its previous standard at the time of purchase. The site inspection duly took place on 3rd June and shortly afterwards work commenced which is ongoing. The Primary task was emergency attention to the roof, in order to prevent further ingress of rain water.

There was another site meeting on Friday, 12th June which was potentially of great importance inasmuch as it was attended by Mr. Giles Proctor, Team Leader, English Heritage Regional Office, York, together with a potential developer who leads a trust with a keen interest in the Hall and its grounds. They were joined by Mr. Glen Saint and Mr. Peter Thornborrow, RMBC Conservation Officer.

Our letter to RMBC which was featured in Newsletter No2 attracted a positive response from both Cllr. Roger Stone OBE, Council Leader, and the Rt. Hon. Kevin Barron MP (Rother Valley). The most significant points to emerge were; RMBC's intention to impose Sections 47 & 48 (T&CPA'90) if it became necessary, a definite undertaking to pursue an upgrade of Firbeck Hall to 2* status. Last, but by no means least, an appreciation was expressed of all the efforts being made by FoFH and the promise of even closer co-operation in the future between RMBC and our group.

Environmental Matters *(Derek & Enid Bailey)*

A 'Scene Setter' for the environmental background to Firbeck Hall and the village.

In 1962, when we came to live in Firbeck, the village was quiet, isolated and a part of the true countryside. The only disturbances to the peace were the heavy lorries which occasionally thundered through the village bearing enormous loads to the 'Timber Company' beyond Princes Plantation. There were no street lights and so we could see the stars clearly. Our gardens were bordered by the ancient field hedges and with no pavements, the road to the shop was very narrow.

The shop stood next to Keeper's Cottage and there was space to park vehicles. The shop was run by Mr. And Mrs. Walsh and was very well used. The shelves were well stocked with all manner of goods. Fresh meat was supplied daily from Frank Turner's shop at Loughton and most people had their milk delivered by Mr. Walsh. Since buses were few, the shop

was the centre of the community and a place to meet our neighbours. There was a bus to the market at Worksop on Wednesday afternoons (return within the hour!) or a weekday bus at 2 o'clock to Maltby (return at 7 o'clock). Not everyone had a car and few people, if any, had second cars, so our village shop was very important.

At that time there was no St. Martin's Close and no Kingswood Close. The bungalows around Kidd Lane and numerous other homes had not yet been dreamed of. The population of the village was much smaller. This could have made living in the village rather isolated but we were very fortunate in having young next door neighbours, Barry and Joy Davidson. Our baby sons were close in age and together Joy and I would push our prams around the village.



Firbeck Hall was then the Miner's Rehabilitation Centre and local people were discouraged from walking through the grounds. However, Joy's parents lived close to the hall in a green, wooden building which had served as RAF officers accommodation during the war. We frequently walked along the chestnut avenue which led to the hall to visit Joy's mother. Those tall trees were beautiful at all times of the year and spectacular in Autumn. It was a special time in my life and the hall has a special place in my memory.

On either side of the avenue are native trees but more exotic species were planted on the other side of the hall, beyond the lake. This was before it became the salubrious club created by Mr. Cyril Nicholson but only a few remain today.

Communications

For the foreseeable future, this Newsletter will be the primary means of communication with our Membership. Meetings will be called as and when required but our Friends are invited to contact any member of the committee by telephone when further information or clarity is required.

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