



# Friends of Firbeck Hall

NEWSLETTER

Issue 7, Summer 2010

## Chairman's report

Following on from the announcement made at the AGM, our campaign has entered an interesting phase. On 13<sup>th</sup> May, The Yorkshire Post carried the official notice that the owners of Firbeck Hall, Cambs Construction Limited, are in administration and accountants KPMG have been appointed as receivers. It is therefore likely that Firbeck Hall could have a change of owner in due course. Administration is a complex business situation and the process could take several months. We are hopeful that a new owner will be found who has both the financial capability and vision to bring success to Firbeck Hall once again. Our organisation offers any developer the opportunity to share information regarding future plans with our community at the appropriate time, and we remain open minded and optimistic for the future of this great building and estate.

What we continue to do in the meantime is maintain contact with RMBC and the amenity societies to ensure that the interests of the building are not overlooked as the change of ownership process takes centre stage.

Finally a huge thank you to the committee who worked so hard to put together an interesting agenda and display at the AGM, I know their efforts are appreciated by all those who attended and it was wonderful to see so many people there. We are all grateful to Jonathan Hunt for a fascinating talk on our local history which was very well received. A warm welcome from the Black Lion contributed to the friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

*Simon Drohan - May 2010*

## 'So Far So Good' - Report on AGM by Sid Ellis



The restaurant of the Black Lion was full to capacity when 64 members attended the first Annual General Meeting of Friends of Firbeck Hall. They included 11 new members joining on the night. All present were impressed with a fascinating display of memorabilia and photographs (some not previously shown). Our new range of Greetings cards were a great success and almost sold out by the end of the evening.

Treasurer Valerie Oxley presented the annual accounts and followed with a report on our contacts with other societies. These have been most beneficial to our ongoing campaign. Val was followed by Chairman Simon Drohan with his annual report\*. He spoke of an eventful year during which the prospects for the future of Firbeck Hall have improved considerably. We have enjoyed much effective publicity, but probably the greatest benefit has been the good working relationship that we have established with Rotherham Council Conservation Department. In particular our recent initiatives have proved successful with action pending in respect of West

Lodge, Stable Block and the entrance/threshold area on New Road. We can also expect more positive action in respect of more permanent repairs to the Hall itself which we trust will be forthcoming with a new owner. Whoever this may be, our aims and ambitions for the future of Firbeck Hall remain the same.

Details of the demise of Cambs Construction Ltd are reported elsewhere, but on the day of the AGM the Committee was in a dilemma. Although we had obtained information from reliable sources, 'legally' we were not in a position to disclose it. Fortunately, shortly before the start of our meeting Simon got word that a winding up petition had in fact been served on Firbeck Hall owners at Leeds District Registry. As a result he was able to give us the latest information.

The formal affairs were followed by a most interesting and relevant talk by Jonathan Hunt about the foremost families of South Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire. From the 16<sup>th</sup> and all through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century they had had many varied and fascinating connections with Firbeck Hall.

All in all, an enjoyable evening to celebrate our inaugural year. Although we still have a long way to go, it was particularly satisfying for those of us on Committee. - So far, So good!

*\*Members wanting a full copy of the Chairman's Annual Report should contact the writer. Telephone 01709 813330.*

**Historical Article by Barbara Beck,  
a FoFH member living in Las Vegas**

*Firbeck Hall has a long history of murder, ghostly tales and unrequited love.*

*I first learned about Firbeck Hall when I inherited papers and diaries from my great Aunt Marjorie. One rainy afternoon I finally went through those papers and I found a diary from John Cruso, which mentioned the estate of Firbeck Hall. John Cruso was a barrister and an ancestor of Sir Ralph Knight and his eldest son, John Knight. Sir Ralph, while never owning Firbeck Hall, was associated with the property as his relative was murdered there on the Dark Walk in the Hall grounds.*

*The legend is that Ralph Knight (my family name is Knight and Gally) was murdered because he was in love with the daughter of William West, the first owner of the Hall, during the Civil War period. Apparently her lover was murdered by*

*her brother after a note the girl had written arranging a meeting with her lover was intercepted. She was so overcome with grief at seeing her murdered lover that she threw herself into the lake. Her body was recovered the next morning, shrouded in weeds and green slime from the lake – hence the green lady.*

*Thus my family's association with the Hall began on a grim note. In 1676 Jonathon Staniforth of Rotherham bought the Hall. Jonathon married for the fourth(!) time the daughter of Sir Ralph Knight of Langold Hall (now destroyed). My ancestor was the eldest son of Sir Ralph, John Knight. Sir Ralph was a great friend of General Monk and owned Letwell Manor as well as Langold Hall. A very eccentric owner of Firbeck Hall was another Jonathon Staniforth who held a patent for the 'Rotherham Plough' and played the violin for hours at a time.*

*By 1792, the estate was sold to Henry Gally Knight of Langold Hall. John and his brother Henry were both barristers and John was MP for Aldborough and Boroughbridge. It seems the existing church of Firbeck was rebuilt by his wife in 1828 and also the schools of Firbeck and Letwell.*



Henry Gally Knight 1786-1846

*The estate passed to their son – another Henry, who was an MP for North Notts between 1814 and 1831. He was also High Sheriff of Nottinghamshire and was a famous poet and architectural writer. He had a very strained relationship with Lord Byron. Apparently Byron was a bit jealous of Gally Knight's more extensive travel in the Orient. The fact that they shared the same publisher didn't help much. In fact, Lord Byron wrote a very insulting poem to Henry Gally Knight, part of which reads, "He hath a Seat in Parliament, So fat and passing wealthy, healthy. And surely he should be content." The ballad goes on to portray Henry Gally Knight as a fool with money. It seems that if my ancestors from Firbeck Hall were not*

murdered, they were made fun of by famous poets!

In 2008, a researcher, Dr Michael J Franklin, wrote a paper in *Language Review* about the relationship of Byron and Gally Knight from the footnotes of literary history." An interesting coincidence is that my only brother died on the same date in December that Henry Gally Knight was born and was born on the same date in February that Henry died!

From what I have learned, the Firbeck Hall estate village was self-sufficient because the 19<sup>th</sup> century census returns list a butcher, carpenter, blacksmith, miller, weaver, teacher, carter, shoemaker, tailor, shopkeeper and publican.

At some point, Henry Gally Knight gave Firbeck Hall to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Apparently there was some family feud so he did not want to leave it to relatives.

After its rise to fame in the 30's as a country club, the Hall became an annexe to Sheffield Royal Infirmary during the war. In 1943 it was placed on the market and was purchased by the Miners' Welfare Commission in 1945 as a Miners' Rehabilitation Centre, closing in 1991. In 1996 it was purchased by Mr G Saint and remains uninhabited and dilapidated. Another interesting train of thought is that if it had stayed in the family it might have been inherited by my father, as Sir Henry had no children and the nearest male relative was the elder original son of John's family.

Several years ago I went with my mother (whose family is also English) to England to take a study course at Cambridge University (all the Gally Knights and the Crusos went to Cambridge I found out later)! I rented a car and drove up to Yorkshire. Staying at the Black Lion, I enquired about seeing the Hall and eventually was able to go inside. I found the state of the Hall alarming. Wallpaper that had once been beautiful was hanging in tatters on the walls and trash was everywhere. The original windows at the time were still intact; although later they would be stolen or missing. The Hall had an air of mystery and sadness and I felt the hairs on the nape of my neck standing up when I went to Firbeck Hall, feeling immediate kinship with this beautiful old house.

The Hall has had enough sadness, murder and mayhem and deserves a future as exciting as its colourful past.

*Barbara Beck, May 2010.*

## 'An Ornament of the Country'

by Derek and Enid Bailey

This description of the bullfinch was written by the Reverend F O Morris BA in Volume Two of 'A History of British Birds' in 1853. The picture he creates of this 'bird of the greenwood' and its habitat makes nostalgic reading:

'It frequents where trees abound, being to be seen in the depths of the large wood, along the side of the shady grove, in the rich orchard, the budding plantation, the trim garden, the leafy hedge and the secluded dell through which some little streamlet winds, the gentle trickle of which you listen to with complacent pleasure while you saunter along the bank in the noon of a summer day. Everywhere his rich red colour forms a conspicuous object, so that like the den of the 'Dragon of Wantley' you could not choose but spy it.'

So it must have been many years ago at Firbeck Hall when bullfinches were a common sight with their startling colour. The scientific name 'Pyrrhula pyrrulas' refers to the colour of the plumage. Pyrrus means red.

The Rev Morris may have found the bullfinch a delight but, sadly, it was unpopular among farmers and fruit growers



Male bullfinch

who, understandably, looked on it as a pest. The birds live on hips, haws, berries and fruits, especially the blossom buds on many fruit trees. Reverend Morris conjectured that the name 'bullfinch' was a corruption of 'budfinch'.

Carl Speddings recalls that soon after he came to Firbeck in the early fifties he saw flocks of them descending on the blackcurrant bushes growing close to the vegetable field. A beautiful sight but not a welcome one for the gardeners at the Hall. This was one of the reasons the blackcurrant bushes were uprooted. The destructive habits of the bullfinch led to fruit growers being granted permission to shoot or trap the birds and consequently there was a serious decline in the bullfinch population.



Female Bullfinch

During the period of the Hall's use as a rehabilitation centre for the miners, the patients were encouraged to cycle around the Hall and the surrounding area. Miners have traditionally enjoyed outdoor occupations – not surprising, considering their working lives – and took note of the birds they saw. Their observations led to contacts with the Rotherham Naturalists' Society and the Rotherham District Ornithological Society. Both societies had always had an interest in the Firbeck Hall site and their efforts eventually resulted in the Nature Reserve and the Nature Trail.

Members of these societies kept records of the wildlife at Firbeck Hall and submitted them to the Rotherham Recording system – one of the best in the country. This was, until his retirement, kept by Bill Ely. The records now continue under the supervision of Paul Martin who is very knowledgeable about birds and draws them superbly.

From the Rotherham records we know of nine sightings of bullfinches between 1977 and 1998. Since 1998 we have been recording the birds for the RDOS in our garden. The Winter Garden Bird Survey begins at the end of October and concludes at the end of March. Occasionally we catch glimpses of the bullfinches in the rowan trees where they feast on the berries. One was sighted in October 1998 and no more were seen until November 2003 when we had a pair in the garden. The female is not so brightly coloured as the male. Her plumage is a more dull salmon pink.

Another pair visited in 2004 and one appeared in 2005. It had flown into the window, perhaps chased by a sparrowhawk, and fallen there.

A tiny rose coloured feather still clung to the window. Grieving, we picked it up and admired its perfection. Certainly it was an 'ornament of the country'.

Should anyone wish to take part in the Winter Garden Survey, please contact us. (*Contact details at end of Newsletter*).

### Greetings Cards

Thank you to everyone who supported FoFH by purchasing our Greetings Cards. These have so far raised £54.50 and we only have left a selection of single small cards with envelopes, so if anyone wishes to buy some more at 50p each, please contact Julia Colver, details at the end of the Newsletter.

*The observations and opinions expressed in the various articles in this Newsletter are those of their authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Editor or of the FoFH committee, and their accuracy cannot be verified.*

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