



# Friends of Firbeck Hall

NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 8, Autumn 2010

## Chairman's Report

It has been an eventful summer! In June it became clear that the tenure of Cambus Construction had come to an end following the official appointment of administrators who were tasked with the sale of the land and buildings.

The Leeds office of property consultants GVA Grimley handled the sale and for a time it appeared as though interest in the Hall was very limited and many rumours abounded. The GVA agents indicated that a detailed study and a series of proposals for the future of the Hall could be drawn up, however this did not materialise.

It could be that once the costs of ongoing ownership combined with the scale of liabilities associated with owning the hall became clear to the organisations involved, a rapid disposal was the preferred choice. In any event an instruction to dispose of the site was given and interested parties were invited to submit offers. The final outcome of this process was the emergence of a new owner, Mr Jason Cooper, who on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2010 took possession of Firbeck Hall.

I am delighted to report that FoFH has now established contact with Mr Cooper, who has briefly and sincerely expressed his respect for Firbeck Hall and the surrounding community. The relationship is at an early stage and it would be unfair to comment further, however I am very hopeful that positive dialogue will ensue.

Mr Cooper has requested the help of FoFH members. Sadly the Hall has been broken into several times over the last few weeks and

in spite of 2 arrests, these events continue. Anyone noticing suspicious activity near the Hall is invited to take any details of vehicles parked in or near the entrance and report them directly to the police or to his company reception on 01302 325225. It is stressed that the site remains private and closed to all unauthorised visitors in the interests of maintaining security and safety.

I am very pleased indeed to report that Mr Cooper has accepted an invitation to become an honorary member of FoFH, taking our total to 279 at the time of writing.

I look forward to bringing news of further developments over the coming weeks.

*Simon Drohan - September 2010*

**Firbeck School** – an article kindly sent in by Valerie Oxley, our Treasurer.



Firbeck Schoolchildren

Firbeck School was opened in January 1879 by the first headmistress, Malvinia Godman.

The school was frequently visited by members of the local gentry and clergy and female members of the family at Firbeck Hall often helped with the teaching.

The main problem which appears to have plagued the school was that of very poor attendance. This seems to have been directly attributed to the children working in the fields and the boys being frequently required for 'beating' duties by the various landowners.

In November 1881 the second headmistress wrote:-

*"Owing to the great trouble I have had this year with the irregular attendance of the children; I intend to resign my post as Mistress of this school in January. The parents do not in any way aid my efforts as regards the education of the children, so I prefer to extend my efforts in a larger sphere."*

In March 1883 the Managers of the school offered one farthing to every child who attended over 300 times a year, but matters did not improve, and the Headmistress records in October 1884:-

*"Many of the elder boys still away picking potatoes, consequently they are backward!"*

In 1885 a list of "irregulars" was sent to the Attendance Officer. In November 1889 the Headmistress wrote:

*"On account of the very irregular attendance of the children I think it will be better to give no holiday for Christmas".*

The Headmistress was as good as her word and on 27<sup>th</sup> December she wrote:-

*"Kept school open during Christmas week and had a better attendance than for some weeks previously. Closed for Christmas Day"*

Discipline and behaviour problems were recorded in the school log. In March 1880 the Reverend Poole descended on the school to lecture the children on their *"want of politeness in the streets"* and in July 1882 the Headmistress wrote:-

*"Punished William Willowby and Samuel Kitchen for throwing stones at the Reverend J. Poole"*

In August 1894 the saga of Elizabeth Tyson began, the Headmistress wrote:

*"Elizabeth sent out of school for stupidity, defiance and gross disobedience, she attempted to both scratch and kick me"*

Four months later Elizabeth was still causing problems:-

*"The girl Elizabeth Tyson was most obstinate and disobedient, yesterday morning she refused to do anything that I told her so I felt it my duty, as an example to the rest of the school, to turn her out which I did with the help of four of the older boys. She kicked the school door several times and continued to do so until I threatened to send for a policeman"*

The years of the First World War gave rise to some fascinating accounts in the school records. In January 1915 twelve Belgium children were enrolled at the school; the families were living at Firbeck Hall. The Headmistress appealed for clothing and crockery for the families.

Mr. Cuthbert Bean, the vicar's son visited the school to talk about his experiences at the Front and afterwards the children marched with Mr Bean and saluted as they sang "Tipperary".

On Empire Day in 1917 the children were exhorted on the importance of *"eating less bread and not wasting any."* All the children wore the Empire Badge.

The war was followed meticulously by the Headmistress, Miss Rooke and there were many more entries in her log. On 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918 she wrote:-

*"Today as soon as the news was known of the surrender of Germany the Head Teacher gave it out to the children. Then flags were given out and all marched into the school yard where the first hymn "Praise God from whom all Blessings Flow" was sung followed by the "Marseilles" and the "Star Spangled Banner". Three cheers were given heartily by all and all marched back into the school singing "Rule Britannia".*

By January 1937 the school's numbers had dropped alarmingly and on the 27<sup>th</sup> of that month there were only six children in the school out of a possible 20. A year later, in April 1938 the final entry in the school log states:-

*"Firbeck School closes today. Of the 14 children on roll, 10 are to be transferred to Woodsetts Council School, 2 will attend Oldcotes School and 2 will attend Maltby Craggs School. Some of the furniture has been transferred to Woodsetts School and the remainder returned to the stores in Wakefield."*

## Eight years in the 1980's Working at Firbeck Hall – memories from Mrs Freeman's time as a waitress to the amputees at Firbeck Hall Rehabilitation Centre. (These are just notes jotted down as Mrs Freeman told me her memories – Julia Colver))

There were about 90 patients when Mrs Freeman worked at the Hall, not all injured miners, and the amputee patients had lost their limbs because of diabetes, not mining injuries. They did their exercises in what had been the ballroom in the Firbeck Club days. The patients arrived by coach on a Monday morning and would leave on a Friday afternoon.



She remembers a mosaic over the doorway by the front door showing the Firbeck golf course.



Staff at Firbeck Hall Rehabilitation Hospital

The windows had internal shutters and when these were closed from the top floor downwards, when finally all the ground floor shutters had been closed, the top floor shutters would re-open on their own, and these shutters opened inwards and they were really heavy.

On the top floor it was possible to walk round the inside of the walls from room to room, all the way round.

The top floor on the side of the Hall over the front door was where all the odd happenings occurred. Noises were often heard coming from here, often someone shouting, but on investigation there was nothing or nobody there. A room on the top floor always had dead flies in and when they were swept up, they just appeared again – as dead flies – no living flies were ever seen.

There was a room called the coffin room as it was the shape of a coffin and this led onto the fire escape. An employee called Irene Buckle was cleaning the brass door knobs on the top floor when someone grabbed her by the neck, but there was nobody there at all. Nobody would go up to the top floor on their own.

When the last caretaker worked there, a patient came down the stairs one night in his dressing gown and pyjamas, but when he was asked if he couldn't sleep, he walked straight through the wall.

The Green Lady ghost only appeared when the lake was green over with slime and several people said they saw her. A boxer from Langold who was a patient there was so frightened he said he would never come back. Patients often saw a monk wandering round.

Powder was put down for the cockroaches in the kitchen. The kitchen equipment was still there in the 1990's and there was a dumb waiter in the kitchen that was not used but had been there for the Club days. There was a passenger lift to the second floor. The best crockery was kept in the cellars, which had really old doors. This crockery was used when the top people from the Health Authority came to visit.

There was a sunroom on top of the flat roof with fancy plaster carving in it. Matron's quarters were on the top floor below the part of the roof that recently (2009) caught fire.

After the Rehabilitation Centre closed, the police used the grounds for dog training.



Vegetables were grown in the garden for use in the kitchens. John Gates was the gardener.

The buildings that were the Dormy house in the Firbeck Club days were used for woodworking and treatment rooms.

Mrs Freeman used to scrub the front steps to the Hall. There was a big boiler house at the back. A patient aged 49, suffering with spondylosis, committed suicide by wrapping a window cord round his neck and jumped off the toilet wall.

On the ground floor there were offices, a laundry room and matron's ironing room and toilets. Upstairs were offices, toilets, patients' rooms with 10 beds in each room and on the top floor were Mr Humm's private quarters (the physiotherapist).

The other physiotherapy staff came in on a daily basis. Bradley Cox was another physiotherapist, Dot King was the cook, Dickie Bentley taught woodwork and metalwork, Bill Raynor was the Manager and Freda Bannister worked in the office. Mr Kennedy was the chief engineer and lived at West Lodge and his wife collected stray and wild cats.

The staff used to put on shows to entertain the patients. The patients would walk down to the Social Club in the village and sometimes come back with hedgehogs etc and put them between the sheets on the beds. Women were accepted for treatment later on in Mrs Freeman's time there. The patients used to use weights to strengthen their arms.

In the stable yard one or two stables remained, the rest were carriage rooms and the patients had a 10 pin bowling alley and billiards in the rest of the stables. There were about 20 RAF bicycles in the stables from the war days, men's and ladies', and the staff used to use them in their lunch times.

Kate Walker worked in the bedrooms and her husband was Stuart the handyman. Her mother and father were doctors in Rotherham. In a nearby farm are paintings

done by the Poles during the war. The paintings are of Poles in their national dress.

There is a headstone in Firbeck churchyard being the grave of a servant at Firbeck Hall.

The beautiful tree to the left of the Hall frontage was known as 'chicken feet tree' as its roots looked like chicken's feet.

Between the dining room and the gym a different type of grass had been planted that showed the Prince of Wales feathers quite clearly from the windows. There was a stone planter in the grounds and two metal planters down the drive. The metal planters disappeared one night.

**From Magic to Tragic** A pictorial display showing the sad decline of Firbeck Hall from its days as a glamorous Country Club to years of neglect in recent times. By Julia Colver.



Firbeck Hall 1935



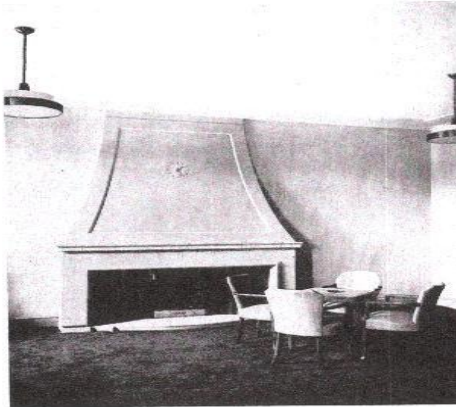
Firbeck Hall 2010



Firbeck Hall Reception 1935



Very Poor Reception 2010



FIREPLACE AND CANOPY IN THE CARD ROOM.

Firbeck Hall Card Room 1935



Firbeck Hall Interior 2010

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*With grateful thanks to Messrs Hadfield, Cawkwell, Davidson, Chartered Architects, Sheffield for permission to use the first picture of Firbeck Hall. Vogue photographs shelfmark N 17503C.58 reproduced by kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.*

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