

Green Space of the Month – December 2003

Moat and Tower

Contact:

Sue Fenoughty

Tel. 0121 354 8438,

suefen@enviro.fsnet.co.uk



The moat that gives its name to Moat House tower block is an important green space for the elderly people who live there. It is also a haven for wild life in an urban setting, and that adds immense quality to the residents' lives. But much more than this, the moat turns out to be a significant historic location - one of the most important archaeological sites in Birmingham, in fact - and as such, a fantastic resource for everyone in the local community.

Northfield is not an especially multicultural part of the city, and Moat House Residents' Association comprises mainly English people, with perhaps the occasional Asian or Irish accent. Still, the Moat and Tower is distinctive as a BEN Green Space of the Month because it is an example of an innovative, community led heritage project which can inspire other community groups by showing what can be achieved when ordinary people engage with the historic environment around them.

Network members may recall Sue Fenoughty's presentation of this marvellous project at the BEN conference in March 2003. Here is a chance to learn more about the inside story of an amazing community group and their fight to improve their own environment, for the benefit of all.

Hawkesley House dates back to the 13th Century, and has belonged to the Middlemore family for most of its history. The homestead, consisting of a long hall with a courtyard, bakehouse, chapel, dovecote, stables and barns, was originally encircled by a moat, not for defensive purposes like a castle, but more as a status symbol. The moat would no doubt have functioned as a pool for fish and a reserve of water in the event of fire.

Archaeological digs in the 1950s showed that the buildings were made of timber with tiled roofs.



On the day when I visited Moat House, the ladies in the common room were trying on Elizabethan costumes ready for the forthcoming re-enactment of a day in the life of the Middlemore family. I was served tea with Jumbles, yummy if rather hard biscuits from an original Elizabethan recipe. Local primary school children are also preparing to take part in the event, enacting a mini play about Anthony Sherlock, a visiting priest. This was a Catholic stronghold at a time when Catholicism was outlawed in Britain. What a wonderful image of sustainable development – an intergenerational project keeping alive a heritage of spiritual diversity manifest in the landscape!

A colourful and fascinating leaflet, produced by the Moat House Residents' Association, explains how, during the English civil war, between 1642 and 1646, "the Middlemore family was ousted from Hawkesley by Parliamentary troops who took it over as a fortified garrison. It was besieged by Royalist troops in May 1645 enforcing a surrender when King Charles arrived, but the buildings were nonetheless razed to the ground by Prince Rupert's men". Together with a watercolour illustration by Steve Rigby, this account captures some of the drama, and strategic importance of the story of this place.

In the 17th Century a farmhouse was built on the site, and was occupied during the 1920s by Clara Jane and Albreda Austin, mother and sister of Sir Herbert Austin of Longbridge car plant fame. The farmhouse in turn was demolished in 1957.

The current buildings were erected, shoddily some say, during the 1950s, as part of Birmingham's programme of expansion of council housing. Other tower blocks in the neighbouring regeneration area of Longbridge have suffered massive vandalism and are due for demolition but the fate of this particular block remains uncertain.

According to many of the present occupiers, Moat House should never have been put here at all. There was dispute amongst historians as to the precise location of the historic events described above, since there is another place called Hawkesley a few miles from here which the Ordnance Survey map had mistakenly indicated as the site of historic interest. The council at that time had been happy to believe the map, as it suited their plans to position working class housing here, alongside an electricity sub-station.

The moat itself was dismissed as a mere ditch by planners and ‘landscaped’ (partly filled in, partly fenced off) in the most economical way possible. Still it provided a feature to add interest to the grassy area between the tower and neighbouring low-rise blocks. Doreen, who is one of the more vocal residents, remembers when she was at school, the moat was very lush and home to water lilies, irises and carp. Betty, of the erstwhile Northfield Society, describes the joy of watching a brood of ducklings being raised on the moat. Then Emily Warwicker sadly recalls how the valuable plants were stolen and the moat became a polluted dumping ground. People were even putting old furniture in there. “It was foul”, says Emily, “there was not other word for it.” But the city archaeologists didn’t care about the rubbish. They took the view that that’s what ditches were for.

Meanwhile the housing department have recently constructed a fence to keep people from walking too close to the 8 storey Moat House tower and overhead porches covering the paths leading to the entrances, to protect residents and visitors from falling masonry! The building is clearly in a poor state of repair and some tenants are campaigning for other basic maintenance and improvements to their homes and the grounds surrounding them, although as elderly residents in sheltered accommodation, they find it a challenge to organise. There is quite a high turnover of tenants in Moat House. But Emily and her husband Arthur were determined to do something. They told me, “we wanted a clean up, in our lifetime”. The Moat and Tower heritage project became a focus for this campaign.

Emily and Arthur went to the library and studied maps. They talked to their neighbours from the prefabs and got lots of people involved. Local historian Jim Melling made a sketch of how the site would have looked in medieval times. The story emerged of how the Roundhead, Tinker Fox had surrendered to the King in 1645. Then John the hairdresser produced an old newspaper photo of Hawkesley manor before it was demolished. One resident was keen to involve local schools and began to draw up a timeline.

In 1999 Moat House Residents’ Association was granted a Millennium Award from Birmingham City Council Housing Department. The grant would not cover capital costs but it did allow for training and publicity. Sue Fenoughty was appointed by the residents’ association as an environmental education consultant, and with help from the local community, councillors and local government officers, they have carried out extensive research and are developing a vision plan to conserve both the archaeological and ecological features of the Moat.

During the first two years the project made a number of achievements:

- A desk top archaeological survey of the site
- An ecological survey of the medieval moat
- Publication of an illustrated leaflet detailing the site’s history
- Open days on site with the council’s ‘History Bus’ and archaeological walkabouts
- Permission obtained from the Secretary of State to conduct an auger survey of the moat and remove rubbish from last 20 years

- Removal of weed from the moat
- Maintenance strategy obtained for management of the site
- Resource pack compiled for teachers to use at the site for curriculum based studies
- Study visits from local schools
- An interpretation board

The project has been remarkably successful at involving people and raising awareness of heritage throughout the community, including all ages.

The story didn't end there. Funding had run out – and so had the water from the moat! The side walls had sprung a leak and needed the mortar replacing but the council wouldn't do the work and so water levels were steadily falling. Doreen told me how the caretaker had to try and refill the moat from a hosepipe during hot summers, although that is not really allowed by the water authority. On one occasion Emily and Arthur persuaded the fire brigade to come and fill the moat in exchange for a donation to their benevolent fund, but this was not a sustainable approach. After four years of this, the moat was almost dry.

As for funding for the moat, Emily, Chair of the residents' association and her husband Arthur, the Treasurer, have helped to raise money for the project through raffles and applications to the local ward fund. Undeterred, Sue also stayed on as a volunteer and together, the group successfully applied to the Queen's Golden Jubilee Fund. This paid for further improvements including painting the railings around the moat and supplying materials used by a local girls' secondary school to make historical emblems to fix on the railings. Decorations to the railings have raised the tone considerably and the girls enjoyed designing emblems and creating festive butterflies and dragonflies in their technology class, to embellish the site during events. These are cosmetic improvements though, and a fundamental approach is still required.

The Heritage Lottery Fund have since given a major grant of £25,000 towards exploring (not actually tackling) the problem of water loss, as well as staging a re-enactment of the siege that took place here 350 years ago. The longed-for clean up has removed debris down to the level of the 1957 excavations and construction work. Archaeologists have sunk auger holes and a geophysical survey has been undertaken, involving secondary school pupils.

Seeing how the fortunes of the site are changing, the housing department then pledged £8,000 to pay for proper repair maintenance to the structure of the moat, although there is no evidence of it at time of writing. Doreen and Betty have been attending Moat Meetings every month for the last four years to try and get the council to move but describe their position as "obstructionist". The maintenance strategy commits the council to ensure a water level of no less than 10cm. Subcontractors, however, have proved ineffectual and the residents themselves have volunteered to don protective clothing and wade in to tackle the build up of algae. Seeing this, a couple of local lads who looked a bit rowdy (Jill, the warden tried to shoo them away at first) came and asked, "what can

we do to help the moat?” They put their pocket money in a plastic cup and donated it to the cause.

Sue has been talking with the Environment Agency about what can be done. The nearby River Rea floods, but cannot be diverted to fill the moat. A dowser has identified underground water courses but similarly, these could not be diverted without permission from the Secretary of State. Severn Trent Water might be able to supply a standpipe, but that would be chlorinated and possibly fluoridated, which is not good for wild life. Another drawback is that it would cost money, as well as increasing the risk of drops in water pressure, meaning no tea – which to the residents is unthinkable! A drainage engineer from the city council has suggested collecting water from the flat roof to drain into the moat, and this environmentally friendly solution might be possible to organise as a PR exercise.

Plans for the Future

Next May Fairfax Battaglia and the children from the local boys’ and girls’ schools will join forces to re-enact the siege of Hawkesley. right here on the original site. Picture them in full costume, flooding past the electricity substation where the Tudor gatehouse once stood, charging across the moat into the car parking area ... and having to ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for permission to drive pegs into the ground to pitch their authentic medieval tents. This farcical situation has developed because the significance of this site has been recognised at some levels, but not yet at others.

Then in June the Medieval Heritage society are planning a weekend event for local residents. The residents’ association meanwhile has plans for a better interpretation board and a reprint of the schools’ resource pack. But one can’t help thinking that something more fundamental is needed. Doreen told me about the frustration of watching the moat’s lifeblood drain away while the men who are meant to be responsible “drift in and out” contributing nothing. “They think it’s a small project”, she says. But clearly it means more to her than that. “Birmingham has lost its character completely” she tells me. It’s not industrial any more, its character has to change. The new Bullring Shopping Centre is very dramatic but not really relevant to local people.

Here at the Moat and Tower there is probably not enough left to see to make this a prestigious visitor attraction, but the residents know they are walking on layers of history, and are committed to preserving these stories in a living tradition. Projects like this improve the quality of the lives of ordinary people like Emily and Arthur immeasurably, giving them the chance to share the meaning of this heritage with the next generation.

How can BEN members learn from this? What legacy would your community wish to share with future generations?