
Audley St George's News

Incidental bits and pieces from our Edgbaston community

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Audley St George's view

In the article in our last issue (No 76) about the school for deaf people which stood on the Audley St George's site, we published an unattributed drawing of part of the school. It



showed the rear of St George's House with its distinctive curved Regency bays thought to date from about 1815. This prompted **Harry Harper** to share with us his own coloured sketch of part of the same view. With typical modesty Harry described it to us as a 'pretty rough sketch' but we thought it has a lot of charm, and we asked his permission to reproduce it. Harry is often seen out and about doing landscapes in his favoured medium of water colour, and there's no doubt his talent and industry are

always an inspiration to the members of the Audley art group.

Good neighbours

And talking of being inspired, we heard the other day of one of our owners who thought one of their neighbours needed cheering up after having a bit of a hard time. It resulted in a day at the races for them both and a leisurely lunch. We thought that was such a kind thought and needed to be recorded. There are also those who call in on neighbours who are not well just to cheer them up. And we heard of some one who'd lost their credit card, but again, neighbours stepped in to help them cancel it and order a new one. We think that's what living in a community such as ours is all about.

The gas lamp mystery

Our volunteer guide at The Roundhouse on Sheepcote Street was telling us about the



restoration of the Grade II* listed building and was showing us a wooden replica of a gas lamp, the sort that lit the building for many years. She commented that there were now none left in Birmingham. We didn't want to argue, but were sure we remembered seeing some recently, so afterwards went looking for them. Sure enough we found half a dozen of what look like original gas lamps lining the street in one of the most charming rows of Georgian houses in Edgbaston - Lee Crescent, opposite Lee Bank Middleway, which runs up to Fiveways (left). They've obviously been converted to electricity now, but our interest was further aroused when from a search on Google we read that Birmingham's last gas lamp, in Duke Street, Gosta Green, was dismantled in 1975. In the late 1930s the city had 35,000 gas lamps, and as late as 1967 there were still 11,000. However, with the increased use of electricity, they finally disappeared. So, are the Lee Crescent lamps original? We asked **Jill Cadbury** who told us that

Wellington Road had gas lamps some years ago, and when they were under threat residents fought to keep them, but without success. Were the Lee Crescent lamps overlooked, or were they replaced with replicas to maintain the Georgian appearance of the street? If you have any memory of this, or of any other gas lamps in Birmingham, we'd be interested to hear from you.

Café de kerb

We've always found The Vale a convenient destination from Audley St George's for the daily dog walk - and now there's added incentive these days, the Curbside Coffee Co. Josh Thomas, who runs it, started his new business in January but mechanical problems forced him to take an unexpected three-months' break. But now he's back in what's become his regular venue, beside Edgbaston Park Road, open from 7.30am to 3pm, Monday to Friday. In addition to hot drinks he offers a range of snacks including cakes, croissants and crisps - and even doggie treats. He told us he's happy with business so far and has been looking forward to the return of the students for the new term. We think such enterprise deserves to do well.



A Nigerian interlude

Roger Browne has been a regular contributor to *Audley St George's News*, writing especially about his travels, and in his recent talk, *Nigerian Interlude*, he explained how a work opportunity helped to develop a passion for exploring new places. In 1969, Roger



was senior lecturer in oral pathology at the University of Birmingham, and was offered the opportunity to establish a new dental school in Lagos, then capital of Nigeria. It was nearly the end of the Biafran Civil War, but he leapt at the chance to take his wife and children to share the six months' experience. A country of about 150 million Nigeria had 220 tribal groups, and many different languages. In his talk Roger described arriving in Lagos with an estimated population of about 6-7 million and a strong military presence. Roger said: "The terminal was crawling with soldiers, and our daughter, who had bought a new camera for the trip, was asked on arrival if she had taken any photographs. She admitted doing so, and as a result the film was torn out of the camera." The compound where they lived was surrounded by barbed wire with guards at the gate. But Roger said there was little real evidence of the war, and they felt comparatively safe.

The first thing the family noticed was the tropical heat. "Heat, of course, encourages disease," Roger said, "and in

the 1960s infant mortality was about 30% many from malaria and diarrhoea. There were piles of used tyres which trapped rain water - ideal breeding places for mosquitoes." They were also struck by the very crowded streets, but there were few men to be seen. It was the women who carried everything, usually on their heads. The countryside was lush and produced lots of plants and trees. They could pick fruit from their own trees - paw paws, grapefruit and pineapples. There were also lots of wildlife - ghekos, fruit bats, and occasionally dangerous snakes such as black and green mambas. During their stay they had the chance to travel outside Lagos, travelling in Mammy Wagons, crammed with people, goods and livestock. At one village they were honoured with a feast, but "we were very cautious of what we ate for fear of picking up some local disease." Meat and milk in Lagos were of poor quality because by the time cattle had been driven hundreds of miles for slaughter, they were often skin and bone. Roger told his audience how they planned to take their own new car to Lagos, but because they were not prepared to offer any bribes, or 'dash', it was five months before they could take delivery of it when it arrived. It meant they could resell the car for a substantial amount of money - enough to pay for a 'marvellous trip home' via Johannesburg, Salisbury and Kenya where they enjoyed a safari. These experiences encouraged their keenness to travel in later years.

* *As a sequel to his talk earlier this year, Tony Brett Young will follow up with Falling Towards England, the story of his arrival in Swinging London, of the eccentric characters he met, and how his experiences changed his life. The illustrated talk will be given at 7pm, Monday 21 October.*

The tale of Chocolate Charlie

We've always been fascinated by stories about West Midlands characters, and the latest communication from the Canal and River Trust has one which caught our eye - the tale of Chocolate Charlie. For years, Knighton Wharf in Staffordshire was a vital cog in the Cadbury machine, used to process local milk into chocolate crumb, which was then transported by boat along the canal to their main site at Bournville. Here, the crumb (a blend of cocoa, sugar and milk which gives Cadbury's milk chocolate its distinctive taste) was mixed with cocoa butter to produce the company's famous confectionary. The canal journey from Knighton Wharf to Bournville was an arduous 14-hour trip winding through the heart of the Midlands, with no less than 50 locks to negotiate along the way. From 1948 to 1961, the trip was made by the narrowboat, *Mendip*, with skipper Charlie Atkins at the helm. Carrying a cargo of chocolate crumb, *Mendip* became a regular feature on Midlands canals and earning the skipper his nickname. Legend has it that Charlie would give left-over chocolate crumb to children along his route. The 21-metre (70 ft) *Mendip* was constructed using a unique design that had barely changed since the 1880s. *Mendip* was known as a 'Josher', after canal magnate, Joshua Fellows, who gave his name to the boats' distinctively shaped hulls with their composite construction of riveted wrought iron sides and elm bottoms. Charlie took charge of *Mendip* in 1948, becoming her first master. It would be his home and workplace for the next 30 years. In his heyday, Charlie would load 25 tonnes of chocolate crumb, make the long trek from Knighton Wharf to Bournville and back again, twice a week.



When the crumb trade ended in the early 1960s, Charlie continued working on *Mendip* ferrying cotton, coal and other cargo along the canals. But with traffic dwindling and Charlie approaching his 72nd birthday, it was finally time to hang up his cap. *Mendip* carried her final load in 1974. Charlie lived out his final years aboard *Mendip*, becoming somewhat of a local celebrity, as the revival of canals kindled an interest in the dying breed of men, women and children who spent their lives working on the waterways. Charlie died in 1981, but in 2009, thanks to a donation from Cadbury, *Mendip* was restored at the Canal and River Trust boatyard at Ellesmere Port in Cheshire. Two years later, in 2011, the fully-restored vessel set out for Knighton Wharf once more, to honour Charlie's memory and commemorate 50 years since the boat's last journey to Bournville. Today, Charlie's beloved narrow boat can be found at the Trust's National Waterways Museum at Ellesmere Port, having recently returned from further vital restoration work. The boat remains a powerful reminder of a bygone age and a testament to the life of a remarkable, indefatigable man.