



FRIENDS OF BUTTS CLOSE

AN OCCASIONAL NEWSLETTER

November 2016

PROGRESSING THE BUTTS CLOSE GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN 2016-21

Desilting the Pond



Work has now started on the pond, with an excavator and crew digging out the silt – and finding four bicycles, a trolley, and goodness knows what else. The contractors advised that the pond was originally lined with concrete blocks, but over time these have shifted and partially disintegrated, and are best left as they are, on the bottom of the pond.

The sludge will be allowed to drain and settle before it is spread and, finally, seeded. It will look messy for some time, but this work enables the pond to be revitalised for future seasons, and ensures that its flood risk management function will continue. Later this month CMS will sow wildflowers on the grassy areas by the pond.



Photo: Simon Maddison

CMS Volunteer Work Party

Andrew Taylor has advised that the first Work Party on the Close will be on Thursday December 1st, from 10 am- 4 pm. Andrew has reiterated that all Friends of Butts Close are very welcome to join in: "Hot Drinks and Biscuits provided". The first jobs will be to coppice the growth against the wall to the north of the pond, and to install the Interpretation Boards.

Please contact Andrew Taylor on andrew.taylor@hertfordshire.gov.uk or 01992 556063 if you'd like more information. There is no need to let him know in advance if you intend to come along.

Litter-Picking Butts Close, 16th October

Despite the unavoidable cancellation of the Hitchin-wide 'Big Tidy-Up' we decided to do our own thing and go ahead on the Close anyway. We gathered the usual eight bags of rubbish and recycling. Sadly, we also found some used hypodermics and other drug paraphernalia in a secluded area of the pond. The Police were advised, and the syringes disposed of by staff at Hampden House on Elmside Walk, for which many thanks. The contractors working on the pond later found another 12 hypodermics: they said they always carry a sharps box on their vehicles anyway. This emphasizes the need for cyclical management of the growth around the pond. There was a large number of glass and plastic drinks bottles along the pathway to the south of the pond. Sadly, two weeks later there were nearly as many again, strewn about in the same place.

Some more history...

We worked with Hitchin Historical Society on the content of the Interpretation Boards, and this has enabled us to expand on some of the items we'd put in previous newsletters.

...The Tank

We now have more information¹ on what became of the tank, the "Fearless," and the two field guns that stood at the north end of the Close. In 1937 the Royal British Legion suggested that these should be sold for scrap and the money donated to Hitchin Hospital. The Urban District Council agreed, and a firm in Sheffield paid £57 to collect and dismantle them. In terms of average wages, that would be about £9,500 in today's money.

¹ Thanks to David Howlett, Hitchin Historical Society.

...The Big Dip

In the Newsletter for August 2016 we'd asked for any ideas regarding the dip or depression at the north end of the Close, by the Fishponds Road entrance. We also contacted Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews, Archaeology and Outreach Officer of NHDC, for his opinion. He responded thus:

My guess – and it's only a guess – is that it's likely to be a clay pit. These shallow circular depressions seem to be for clay rather than chalk extraction, as the clay exists only to a relatively shallow depth, whereas it is possible to dig deeper for chalk.

I wouldn't want to guess the purpose for digging the clay. I suspect that it's unlikely to be for the creation of the bank around the close, as this would be more easily achieved by digging a linear trench and piling up the spoil on one side. Given the importance of potting in the medieval town and of brick-making in the Victorian period, it could be for either of these. It might also be to extract clay for tile-making at any date. You're really left with a wide range of possibilities.

It so happens that we have a map² showing the locations of all the bombs that fell during the Second World War and the only one close to the town centre fell on Priory Park: all the others were in the Walsworth area (presumably targeting the railway).

So there we have it! Your wall or your roof (or even that ancient pot on the shelf) just might come from Butts Close clay.

...Archers on Butts Close

We know that mediaeval archers³ were required to practice on the Close, and there was always rumour that Men of Hitchin fought at Agincourt, but the evidence was tenuous. However, a project⁴ funded for the 600th anniversary of that 1415 battle has identified every man who served there, and no Hitchin man appears. Hitchin men did serve in the armies of Henry IV, V and VI, but not at that seminal conflict.

...Common Land and the Last Grazer...

Common land refers to an area set aside since feudal times for use by local people – hence known as 'commoners'. This was mostly for grazing or gathering firewood, but common rights could extend to fishing, cutting turf, and extracting minerals or clay. There were clear regulations – originally overseen by a Manorial Court - regarding what, when and by whom these rights could be exercised.

² The map will feature in the North Herts Museum, once it opens...

³ See Newsletter for October 2013

⁴ See <http://www.medievalsoldier.org/database/maindbsearch.php>

Contact Friends of Butts Close at buttsclose@gmail.com and Hitchin Forum through www.hitchinforum.org.uk

This was a lifeline for the many families who did not themselves own land, but who could use the common for grazing their few cattle, geese or sheep and make a living⁵.

Books on Hitchin's history usually state that grazing on Butts Close had largely ended by the late nineteenth century. But not quite...



Vito Manzullo (1921-2011)
Photo: Enzo Manzullo

Mr Vito Manzullo lived with his family at the north end of Bedford Road, overlooking Butts Close. The family came to England in 1966 from Agrigento, Sicily, where he was the proud owner of large flocks of goats.

He retained a great affection for these gentle animals, and kept a pair for many years, raising a number of kids. Every summer he would graze the goats on Butts Close, leading them on a long leash which he tethered to a stake. The goats would munch the grass in circles, and then be led back home.

Mr Manzullo sadly died some five years ago, but many local people remember him and his goats with affection.

Tony Riley
for
FoBC

⁵ Many livelihoods were shattered by the Enclosure movement of the 17-1800s which removed these common rights. Nevertheless, there are still some 7,000 registered commons in England alone.