

MARSH PARK CENTENARY 1921-2021

HERITAGE OPEN DAY

Funded by



MARSH PARK

Marsh Park was officially opened on 17th September 1921, known at the time as 'Marsh's Park & Recreation Ground'.

It was conveyed by a Deed of gift by the owners of Marsh & Baxter to Brierley Hill Urban District Council to be used as a public park and it forms part of the Brierley Hill WW1 memorial.

THE EARLY YEARS - BEFORE 1921

18th Century - The Rev. Thomas Moss, Charles Dickens and Jane Austen

The views from Marsh Park, or Chapel Hill as it was known, are extensive. Clee Hills, Clent and Malvern can be seen, and it is said that on a clear day it is even possible to see as far as the Bristol Channel.

The Enclosure Map of 1784 shows Chapel Hill in the ownership of Thomas Seager, Joseph Higgs and the Reverend Thomas Moss.

Thomas Moss was the first curate of St Michael's Church. He achieved fame during the nineteenth century as the author of the "The Beggar's Petition" published in 1769. The poem urges compassion to those who have fallen on hard times. The first and last verses read:

*Pity the sorrows of a poor old man,
Whose trembling limbs have borne him to your door,
Whose days are dwindled to the shortest span,
Oh! give relief, and Heav'n will bless your store!*

The poem became so famous that it was taught in schools across the country and is referenced in the opening pages of Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey and it is also mentioned by Charles Dickens in Nicholas Nickleby.

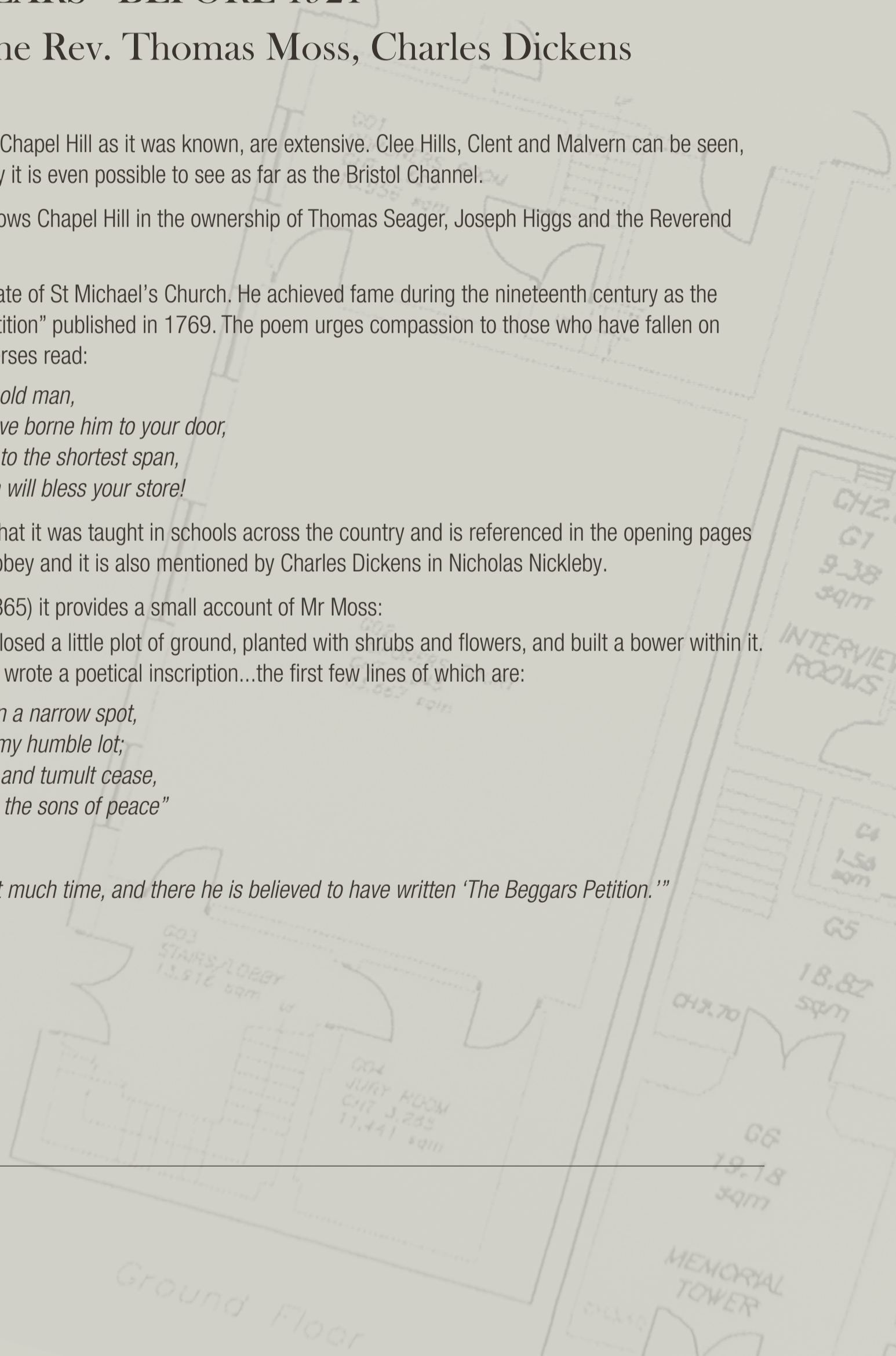
In The Advertiser (3rd March 1865) it provides a small account of Mr Moss:

"During his time...Mr Moss enclosed a little plot of ground, planted with shrubs and flowers, and built a bower within it. Above the seat of the bower he wrote a poetical inscription...the first few lines of which are:

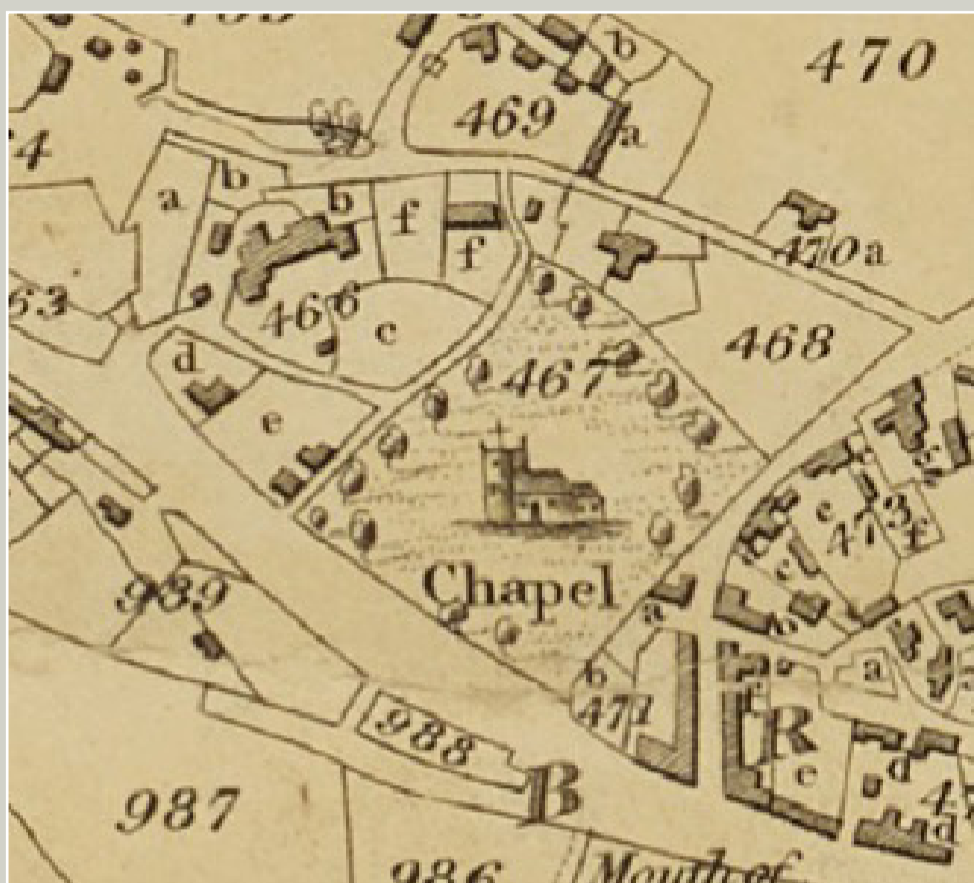
*"Here circumscribed within a narrow spot,
Calm and contented with my humble lot;
Let each rude dissonance and tumult cease,
And non approach me but the sons of peace"*

The article continued:

"...in this bower Mr Moss spent much time, and there he is believed to have written 'The Beggars Petition.'"



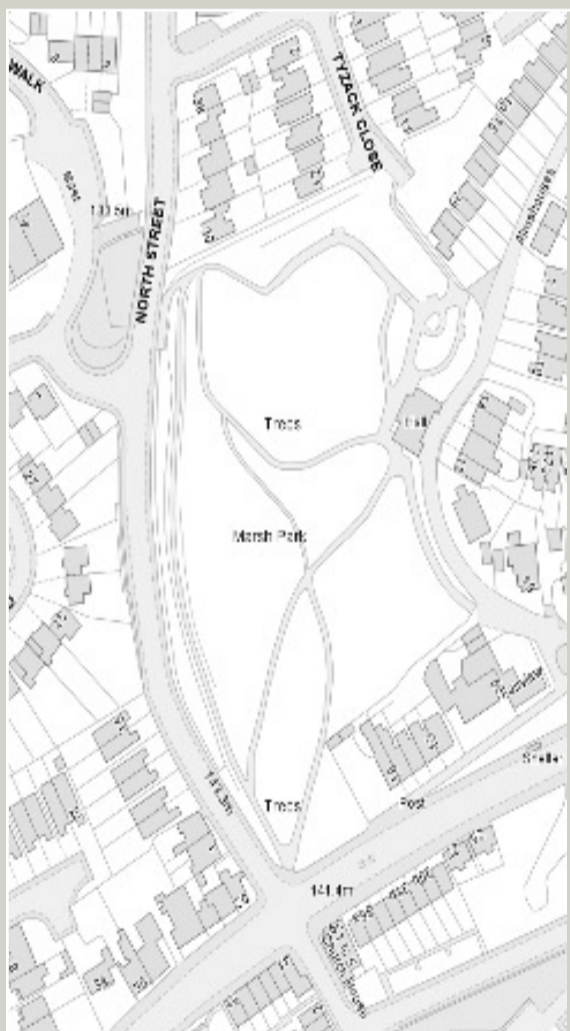
Mid-19th Century - Coal and Fire Clay



Prior to being laid out as a public park, during the 19th century, it formed part of a wider site which was used for coal mining and for the extraction of fire clay. The 1822 and 1840 Fowler maps of the area show that the dominant landowners of Chapel Hill were the Seager family and the Earl of Dudley.

Fowler's 1822 Map

By the mid-19th century, in place of Thomas Moss's rural idyll was an industrial landscape of extraction, as can be seen from the first edition OS (1881-87).



Modern OS



First edition OS 1881-87

The coal from the Chapel Hill Pits fired the furnaces of the ironworks which once occupied the land where Brierley Hill Primary School now stands and the fire clay was important due to it being resistant to high temperatures therefore suitable for lining furnaces and for the manufacture of utensils used in the metal working and glass making industries (such a crucibles, saggars, kilns etc).

Land, Buildings, and Mines of Stourbridge Fire Clay, Coal, Ironstone, &c. situate at the Black Delph, in the parish of Kingswinford, in the county of Stafford.

TO be SOLD by Auction, by JESSE WRIGHT, on Friday, May 16, 1834, at the house of Mr. David Higgs, the Sign of the Duke William, at the Black Delph, in the parish of Kingswinford, at three o'clock in the afternoon—the STUMP STILE ESTATE, late the property of Thomas Higgs, deceased, in one lot, subject to conditions to be then produced: comprising all that Freehold Plot or Parcel of Land, with a Messuage, now occupied as two tenements, and other Erections upon the same, situate near the Black Delph, in the parish of Kingswinford, called Stump Stile or Higgs's Land, now or late in the respective occupations of Thomas Higgs, Samuel Allchurch, and Benjamin Bird; together with the Mines of Stourbridge Fire Clay, Thick Coal, Ironstone, and other Mines under the same.

This Property is situate near the Canal, and surrounded by pits belonging to the Earl of Stamford and Warrington and the Earl of Dudley, and within a small distance of Mr. Eade's celebrated Fire-brick Works, and contains in the whole 2A. 1R. 9P. or thereabout.

For further particulars apply to the Auctioneer, Dudley, or at the Office of Mr. Spurrier, Attorney, Paradise-street, Birmingham.

Unlike conventional brick-making clay, some fire clays are mined at depth, found as a 'seaeath' (a British coal mining term) which is the layer found underlying a coal seam. Located within Marsh Park was a former shaft which was used to extract the fire clay.

A newspaper article from the Birmingham Gazette dated 1834 (left) shows how extensively the land in the area was being worked for fireclay.

Late-19th Century - a social gathering space

By the time of the production of the second edition OS (1903-1912) the site had become disused and more of a social/meeting area due to its prominent position, near to the Church. This is captured by Thomas Clulow who wrote a journal which documented the late 19th century history of Brierley Hill (copy available from the library):

Chapel Hill, in those days, was the gathering place of the villages, who met on Sunday afternoons, some half hour before the time for service, to discuss the events of the past week, while the singers, and other church officials, held an informal kind of parish meeting, waiting for the third knell of the bell before going into church.

Clulow also observed:

...the hot water from the colliery winding engine, which ran down an open wide gully in Seager's Lane, was much sought after by the wives of the colliers and nailers for washing purposes. Early in the week they would be found there in a row, with their tubs and stools, busily engaged.

The hill became a gathering space for festivals and celebrations, and in 1887 and 1897 it hosted beacon bonfires in celebration of Queen Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilees. The Advertiser in 1897 described the bonfire as being thirty feet high, consisting of old railway sleepers, cordwood and other combustible materials, all splashed with tar and fed by a considerable quantity of petroleum.

People thronged Seagers Lane and North Street to view the spectacle. At 10 o'clock the fire was lit by Mark Rollinson, the chair of the Brierley Hill Urban District Council:

The heat was intense, and there was soon a wide space around, the spectators spontaneously falling back to a respectful distance. The fire lighted up the immediate locality with wonderful vividness, and it was a sight never to be forgotten to look down from the height on the upturned faces massed in North street, each brought out into lurid distinctness by the flames which played around the more solid beams and consumed with crackling rapidity the lighter and looser contents of the beacon.



The beacons answered each other. From Chapel Hill "...it was reckoned that at least thirty bonfires were in sight," including at Kinver, Barrow Hill, Sedgley, Rowley, Lye, Wychbury, Clent, Hagley, Woodbury, Abberley, Clee, Titterston, Malvern and the Wrekin.

Any money that remained after the jubilee, was to be put towards the provision of a recreation ground in the town, or, failing that, split between the Corbett and Guest hospitals.

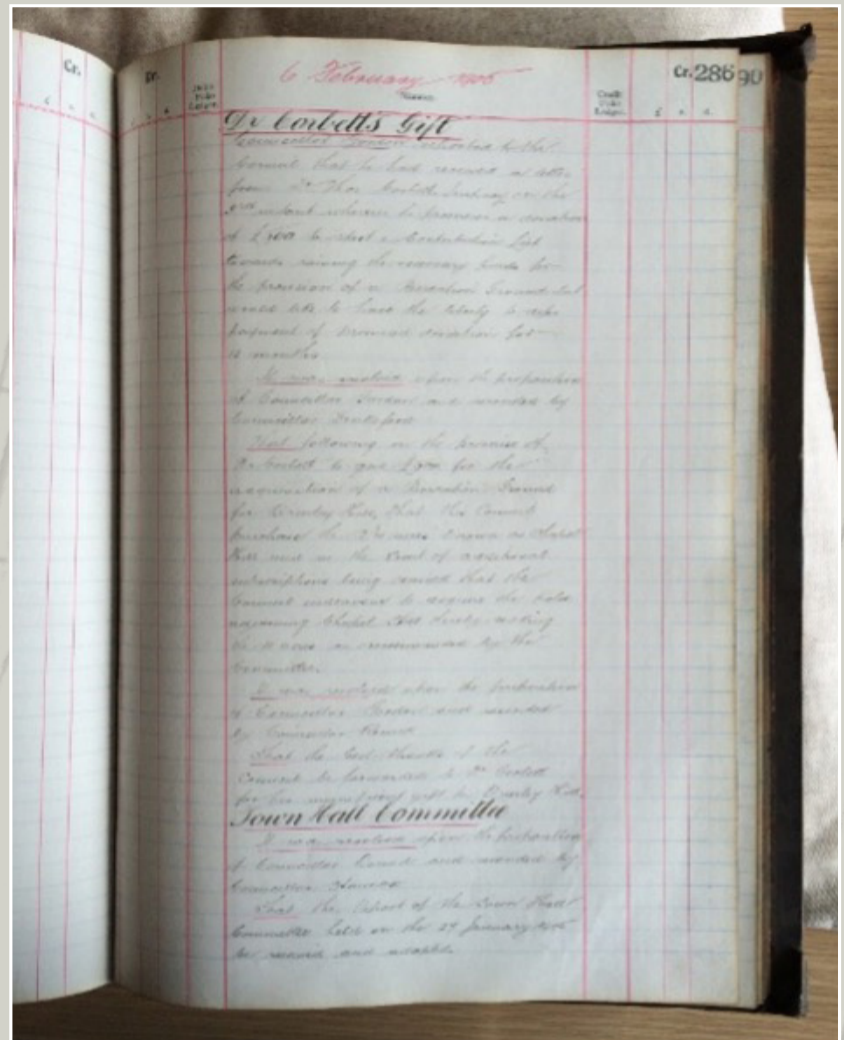
The 1897 Jubilee bonfire - source Dudley Archives.

Early 20th Century – Ambitions for the town

It was a long-held ambition of Brierley Hill Urban District Council to establish a park for the town, and Chapel Hill was the preferred site. As early as 1905 attempts had been made to secure the land for this use. In 1905 a delegation visited, and Dr Thomas Corbett (brother of the late John Corbett) was asked for help to purchase the land. This is recorded in the minutes of the town Council:

Deputation waits upon Dr Corbett at Impney.

Yesterday afternoon a deputation from the Brierley Hill Recreation Ground Committee, consisting of Mr Josiah Gordon (chairman of the committee), Mr Thomas Clulee, and Dr Ellis, visited Impney, Droitwich, by invitation of Dr Thomas Corbett, to discuss with him the proposal to acquire Chapel Hill and adjacent land at Brierley Hill for the purpose of public recreation ground. The whole of the facts were carefully laid before Dr Corbett, who has taken considerable interest in the movement, and, we understand, regards the scheme favourably. Dr Corbett has promised to communicate to the chairman of the committee in the course of a few days his decision as to the extent to which he will, be able to help the proposal.

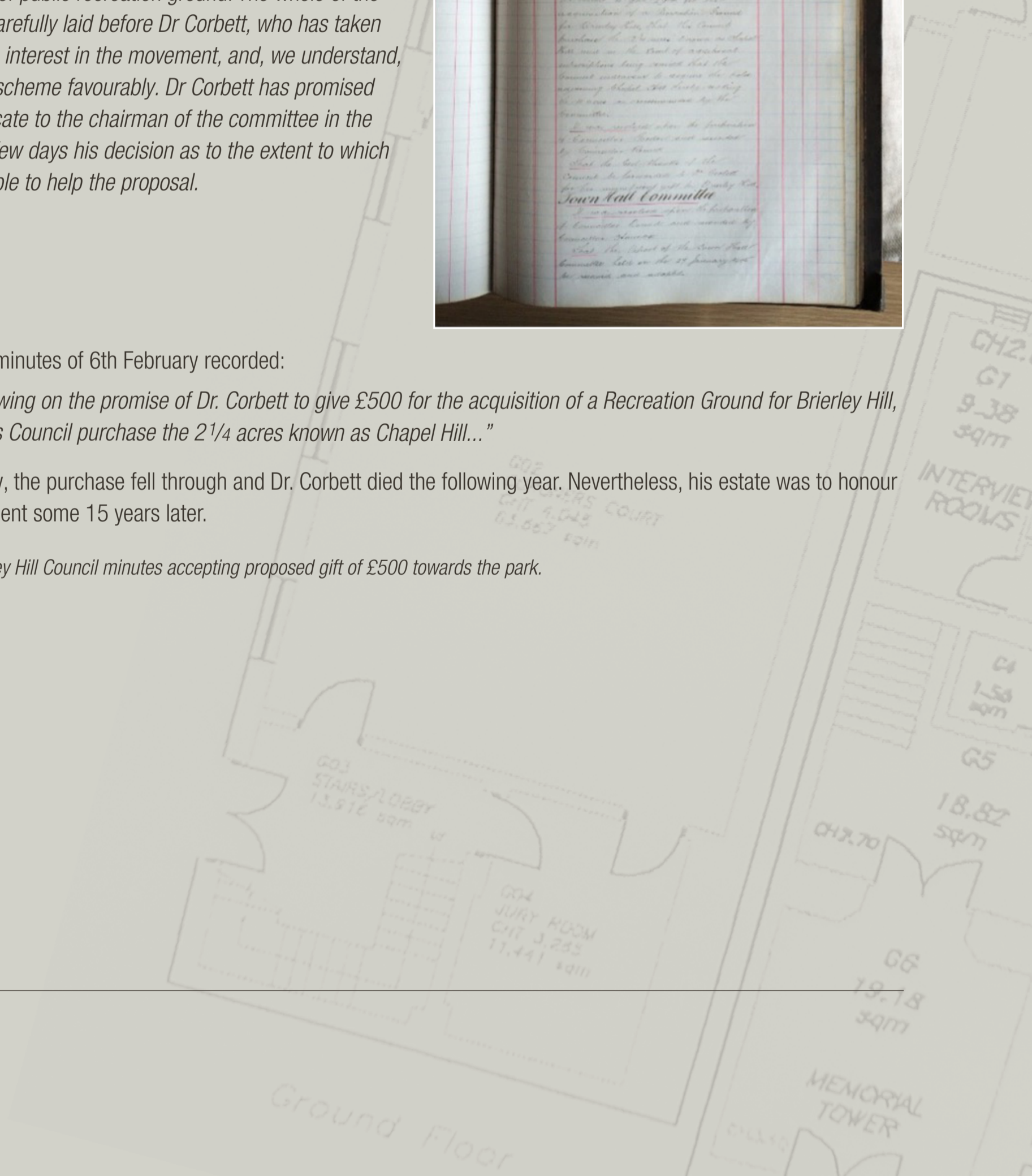


The council minutes of 6th February recorded:

"...following on the promise of Dr. Corbett to give £500 for the acquisition of a Recreation Ground for Brierley Hill, that this Council purchase the 2¹/₄ acres known as Chapel Hill..."

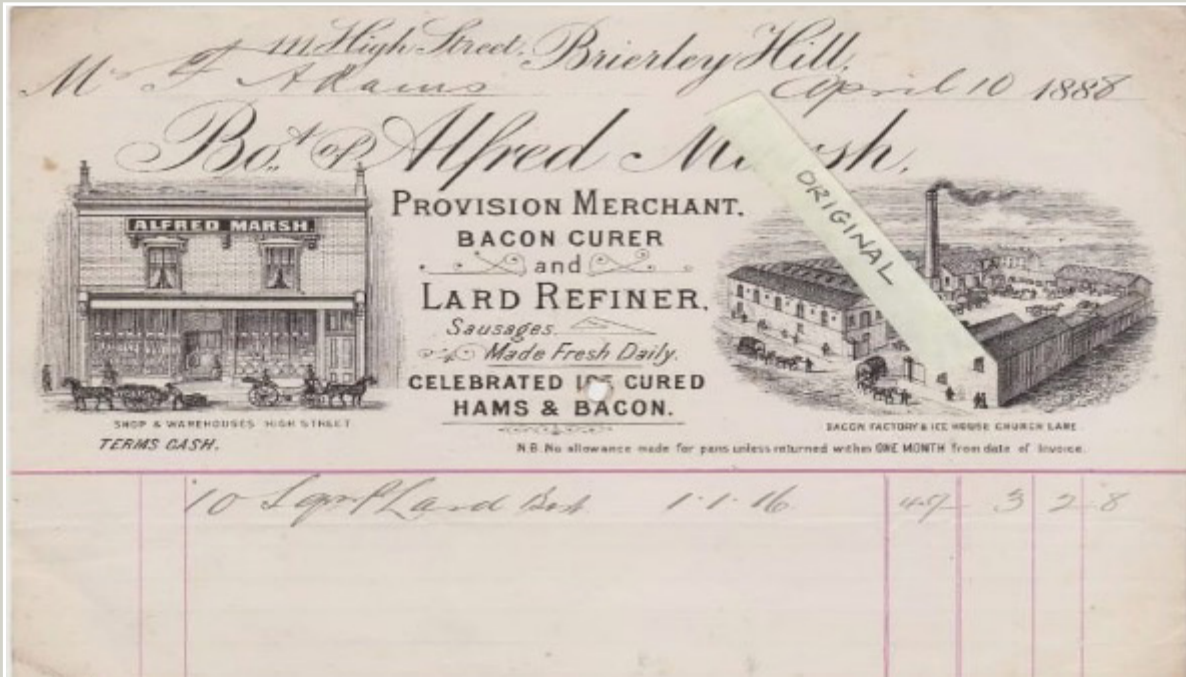
Unfortunately, the purchase fell through and Dr. Corbett died the following year. Nevertheless, his estate was to honour his commitment some 15 years later.

Above: *Brierley Hill Council minutes accepting proposed gift of £500 towards the park.*



Marsh & Baxter and A. Ernest Marsh

In 1867 Alfred Marsh (1849 - 1918) established a pork business in Brierley Hill. The business obtained premises in Hall Street, Brierley Hill, and became the world-famous Marsh & Baxter and from the time of George V held a Royal Warrant for York Hams and sold to Harrods.



The Marsh family played a very active part in the life of Brierley Hill being a major employer for many. Alfred Marsh served on the Local Government Board, whilst his son, Ernest Marsh (1878-1938), served on Brierley Hill Urban District Council (UDC) for 28 years, including eight years as its chair. Ernest took a great interest in housing. During his time on the council 3,000 council homes were built. He was also the founding chairman of Dudley Zoo.

Marsh & Baxter's buildings dominated the High Street and Brierley Hill skyline. By 1924 it was reported that the company could slaughter 10 to 12 pigs a minute, between 4,000 and 5,000 pigs a week and had a normal stock of 75,000 hams in various stages of curing.

To efficiently transport such vast quantities of pigs, Marsh & Baxter purchased the land on which Marsh Park now stands, along with the Chapel Hill estate, with the intention that it was suitably located to ease the delivery of pigs to their bacon factory. The County Express of 18th December 1915 reported:

"Originally, for a long term of years, the pigs were unloaded at Brettell Lane Station, and were driven along the main road to their factory. This system has now been abolished, the acquisition of Chapel Hill estate making possible some very wide improvements.

"From the siding just erected on land purchased by them adjoining the G. W. R., the pigs are driven along a new road to North Street, which leads to another new road giving access to a lairage recently completed. From here they pass by another short journey through the firm's land to Bell Street, which leads directly to the factory. The whole of the length of the new roads from the siding to Hall Street is electrically lighted."

Later a tunnel was established under North Street to ease the movement of the pigs. The entrance to that tunnel is still visible today.

1919 - A Munificent Gift to Brierley Hill

The desire and need for a public park was, by 1919, all the more stronger with the end of World War 1, this is documented in the 9th August 1919 County Express in a speech provided by Ernest Marsh (chairman of both the Urban District Council and Marsh & Baxter) as part of the Peace Celebrations.

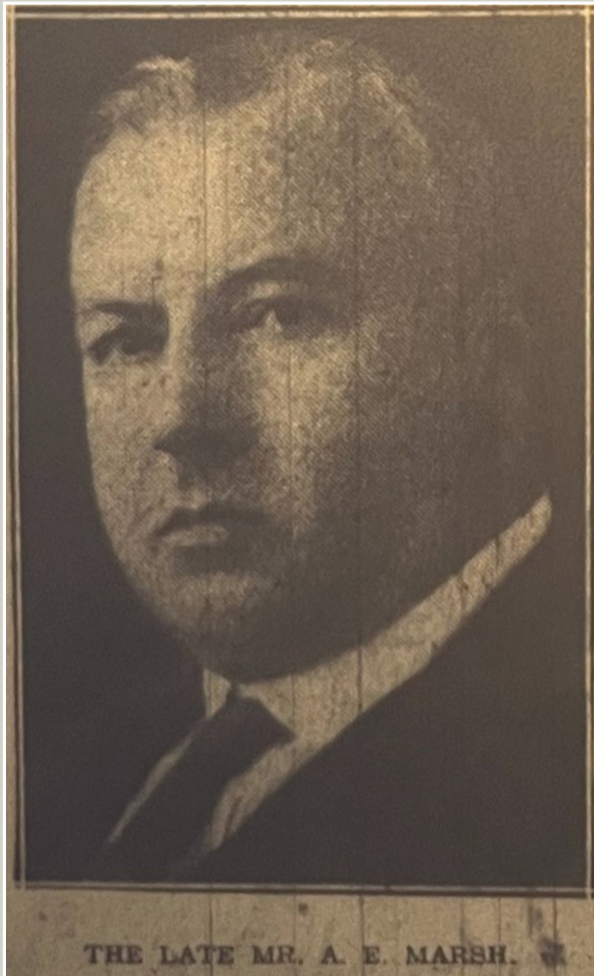
'The Chairman (Mr. Ernest Marsh) said the meeting was called to consider the proposals of the committee appointed to consider what form the town's memorial should take.

It was proposed, in the first place, to erect a monument on Church Hill as a tribute to those who had fallen, and if they had the good fortune to realise all they hoped they would place there a very handsome and suitable memorial.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

Secondly, they proposed to acquire a much-needed recreation facility for the town. The difficulty of obtaining suitable land had long existed, but he was hopeful that in a few days he might be able to give them information which he felt sure would be satisfactory - (hear, hear)



The third suggestion...was to purchase and equip suitable premises as a service club to be dedicated to the use of Brierley Hill men who served in any capacity in His Majesty's forces...'

By September it is announced that Ernest Marsh, (whose brother, John Marsh had been a casualty of World War 1), was going to present to the town a recreation ground.

This is documented in the 13th September 1919 County Express where it is described as being a 'Munificent gift'

"We are in the happy position of being able to announce that Mr. Ernest A. Marsh, chairman of the Brierley Hill Council, has, with the members of his family, definitely arranged to present to Brierley Hill a recreation ground...

...The site is Chapel Hill and the adjacent field bordering the length of Seager's lane...It is the most prominent piece of land in the urban area, the only "lung" the town possesses and has been a very popular rendezvous for thousands of townsfolk and visitors during the summer of each year."

County Express 13th September 1919

The laying out of the park

Now the land had been secured for the park the resources were then needed to be found for the laying out of the park and this was potentially going to be a challenge during what was an economic slump and period of austerity following the war. First, there was a need to do a land deal with the Earl of Dudley, thereby allowing a new section of Seager's Lane to be constructed. The old route of Seager's Lane became the path followed when on entering the Park from Church Hill. There was also a need to make the space safe and for funding and loans for the project, this is recorded in the minutes of the town council dated 6th March 1920.

'Mr. Harpur, the surveyor of the Brierley Hill Urban Council,' has prepared a scheme and estimate for the laying out of the public park upon Chapel Hill, which was recently given to the town by Messrs. Marsh and Baxter, Ltd. The cost of the necessary excavating, levelling, boundary wall, fences, and of laying out the grounds is estimated to be £6,060, the sum which, by the way, does not include any provision for a bandstand or seating accommodation. The scheme has yet to be examined and approved by the Council, but when it is settled it is anticipated that permission will be asked to raise a loan for carrying out the work'.

In order to lay the park out for the public it first needed to be made safe. In the minutes of the town council dated the 17th April 1920 it is recorded how the two pit shafts on-site were to be dealt with:

The Chairman expressed the view that in consequence of the great difficulty experienced at the present time in obtaining loans, the land should be made available to the public for the time being with as little expense as possible, the proper and suitable setting out of the land which all would consider was desirable being carried out later. Councillor Broome suggested that the first duty should be to make the two pit shafts which were upon the land perfectly safe, and a suggestion was made that the shafts, which were already covered with iron plates, might be fenced in and a flower bed made inside the fencing thus placing the shafts out of view. After considerable discussion it was resolved that the surveyor prepare and submit an estimate for the filling up of both shafts with debris to be removed from the site. The report was adopted without comment.

It was then concluded at a subsequent meeting on the 14th Aug 1920 that the pits were to be back-filled.

The two old pit shafts on Church Hill, Brierley Hill, on the site presented to the town by Messrs. Marsh and Baxter, Limited, for a park, are now to be filled up, and this work will coincide with the commencement of the scheme of levelling and laying out the land, in keeping with the plan already adopted.

Donations towards funding for the park are also recorded in the minutes of the town council. At the meeting dated 6th May 1920 it is documented how a cheque for the sum of £500 had been bequeathed by Dr Corbett in his will.

Much gratification will be felt in Brierley Hill at the news that the solicitors to the trustees of the late Mr. Corbett, of Impney, have forwarded to the clerk of the Urban Council a cheque for £500 towards the equipment of the Chapel Hill recreation ground presented to the town by Messrs. Marsh & Baxter, Ltd. It is some 15 or more years since Mr. Corbett, at an interview with Dr. Ellis and Mr. J. Gordon, promised £500 towards acquiring Chapel Hill for public use. A comparatively short time afterwards Mr. Corbett died, and it was not until a recent date that the trustees were able seriously to entertain the Council's applications for the promise to be honoured. The gift is a very valuable one at a time when the laying out of the ground will necessarily entail a considerable expenditure.

The minutes also made clear that unemployed ex-service men were used to do the laying out of the park. They were to work two weeks on, two weeks off, with around 50-60 men working on the park during the day. The works were to be overseen and supervised by Mr J A Avery, an ex- lieutenant of the Royal Engineers who had served in France and Flanders.

On the 19th February 1921 a 'special committee' of the District Council took place to discuss how the works would be supervised.

A meeting of the special committee of the District Council (Messrs G. Fred James, J. Gordon, J. T. Broome and Chattin) held in the Council Chamber on Friday night to further consider the laying out of the park on Church Hill and the appointment of some person to be in charge of the 50 unemployed men to be provided through the Local Labour Exchange. Mr. Broome was appointed to the chair. Three applications for the position, whose names had been forwarded by Mr. Warne, the Labour Exchange superintendent, attended for interview, and the committee decided to appoint Mr J. A. Avery of Gravelly Hill, Birmingham, an ex-lieutenant of the Royal Engineers, and at one time divisional officer in the Royal Engineers, Southern Command. Mr. Avery saw considerable service in France and Flanders, and testimonials from superior officers testified to the valuable service he there rendered. Mr. Avery is taking over his duties this week, and it is expected that the actual work on the park will be entered upon next Monday. Under the conditions of the Unemployed Grants' Committee of the Ministry, 60 per cent. of the cost of Labour involved in the scheme will be paid by the Treasury.

By the 26th February works on-site had begun

On Monday morning a large party of ex-service men, hitherto unemployed, commenced work in laying out at Church Hill, the park given to the town by Messrs. Marsh and Baxter Ltd. It is hoped that ultimately about 60 men will be engaged in the operations, which are being supervised by ex-Lieut. Avery, of Gravelly Hill, Birmingham. It may be noted that there are approximately 400 unemployed ex-service men in the town, and it is proposed that these should work in gangs of 50, each for a fortnight at a time. Considerable work has already been accomplished in laying out the park, and preparations are well in hand for the erection of a cinder wall on the North Street side.

From February 1921 onwards work progressed on the laying out of the park. In the minutes of the meeting dated 27th August 1921 it describes the erection of the boundary walls to the park which were composed of slag and clinker and the ornamental iron gates for the park. It also describes the generous donations from Mr Cartwright, a Councillor for the North Ward, and from two 'well-known local ladies' of plants for the park.

By the 27th August 1921

Work on Brierley Hills public park has advanced considerably during the past month. A cinder wall has been constructed on the North Street side. and ornamental iron gates are erected at the two main entrances (Church Street and Church Hill) with high palisades on the Seagars Lane side. This week Mr. Benjamin Cartwright has continued his efforts in the direction of beautifying the ground, and up to the present has planted no fewer than 500 flowering plants, chiefly at the Church Hill entrance. The plants have been transplanted from his own garden. In appreciation of Mr. Cartwright's services, two well-known local ladies have handed him a cheque with which to purchase more plants and some shrubs.

The Elwells, Roberts and Bastock families presented more plants - as did the chair of the local gas board. Over the next few years Cartwright's work in the park was continued.

"Eulogistic references were made at Monday's meeting of Brierley Hill Council to the splendid work of Mr. Benjamin Cartwright in obtaining, and planting very large numbers of trees, shrubs and flowering plants for the beautifying of the Marsh Park. For weeks and months past Mr. Cartwright has, almost daily been found working in the park, and its present advanced condition of attractiveness is in very large measure due to his earnest zeal and self-sacrificing endeavours. His personal labour, and, through the kindness of generous, donors, gifts of trees, shrubs and plants have saved the town a considerable sum of money."

County Express 14th April 1923

The Tank on the Bank

During the Great War two fund raising drives were undertaken: Tank Week and Guns Week. Brierley Hill residents gave generously (bearing in mind that the population of the town was about equivalent of one electoral ward today).

"In Tank Week about £180,000 was raised...in the Guns Week £121,000...this represents about £230 per head of the population" (County Express 16th November 1918).

The Bank of England Inflation Calculator suggests that the £310,000 raised by the town is the equivalent of £14,153,000 at 2023 prices.



'Julian' the tank at the gates of St Michael's during Tank Week. This image is taken from a Pathé newsreel (available on YouTube) - possibly the earliest remaining film of Brierley Hill.

By way of thanks for this extraordinary total a tank was presented to the town and was to be placed in Marsh Park.

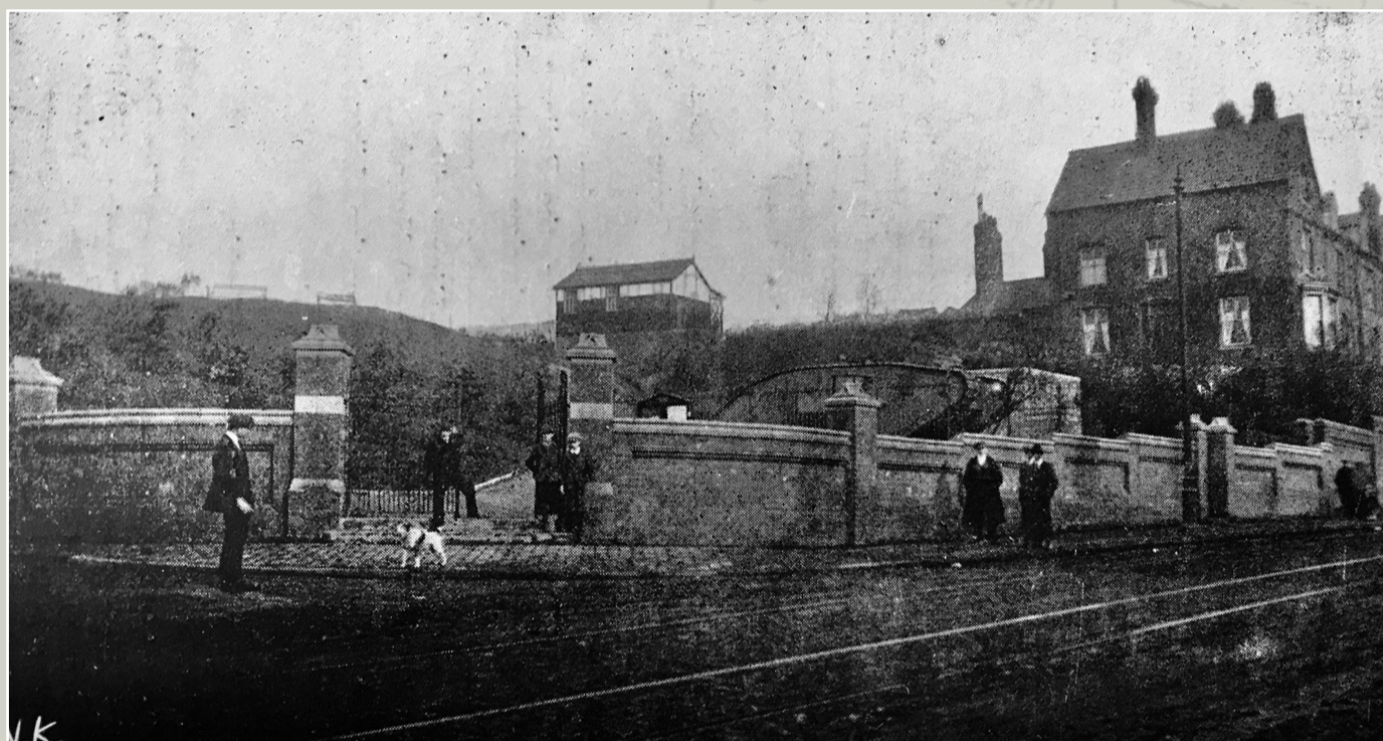
“The war tank presented through the War Savings Association of Brierley Hill in recognition of its notable contribution to war funds is expected to arrive in about ten days’ time. The town surveyor is to prepare a concrete platform on the Church Street portion of the recreation ground...” (County Express 14th January 1920)

The tank remained in place for some twenty years. Occasionally it was suggested that it should be removed but ex-service-men resisted the idea: tanks had been viewed with relief by those serving during the war as something which made them feel safer.

Nevertheless, the tank met its demise and was removed in the early years of the Second World War. The County Express of 11th January 1941 reporting:

“THE GHOST OF A TANK - BRIERLEY HILL MAY SEND IT “MARCHING ON” - Not very long ago, Brierley Hill’s tank - souvenir of the last war - was sold for scrap to make munitions. The tank’s “ghost may go marching on” if Brierley Hill War Weapon’s Week is successful, for it is hoped to raise £200,000 by the effort and this money is to be for the purchase of tanks.”

The level platform where the tank stood is still visible today, albeit covered with grass.



The tank in-situ at Marsh Park with the bowling green pavilion on the hill in the background

17TH SEPTEMBER 1921 - OPENING OF THE PARK

The opening of the park took place on Saturday 17th September 1921.

In town council minutes dated 10th September 1921 it describes the preparations for the official opening of the park which was to be done by Mrs Marsh the following Saturday and how it was hoped that it would be a joyous event. The same meeting discussed the provisional arrangements for the day of the opening event and how the local community would be engaged in:

It was the generally expressed desire that there should be a public procession, in which the various public bodies, the friendly societies, the elementary schools, ministers of religion, fire brigade, local bands, etc., should take part, that the tradespeople should be asked to decorate their premises and that following the ceremony, sports for the children should take place. It was arranged to convene a meeting of the teachers in the town to enlist their support in making the occasion a success.

The opening ceremony was performed by Mrs. Elsie Marsh, wife of Ernest Marsh and daughter of Caleb Roberts.

"Elaborate celebrations were carried out, and flags bunting, and other decorations were extensively displayed throughout the principal thoroughfares of the township..."

"...As may well be judged from the fact that it included some 2,500 school children, the impressive procession was one of considerable length." (County Express 24th September 1921)



Speeches were made by Mr. Charles Sitch MP, Mr Thomas Williams, Mr. Benjamin Cartwright, Mr. James and Mr. Ernest Marsh. Proceedings were completed with a daytime fireworks display. The children then marched to their respective schools where they were entertained to a plentiful tea by Mr. and Mrs. Marsh.

Presented on the day, to commemorate the event was a badge.

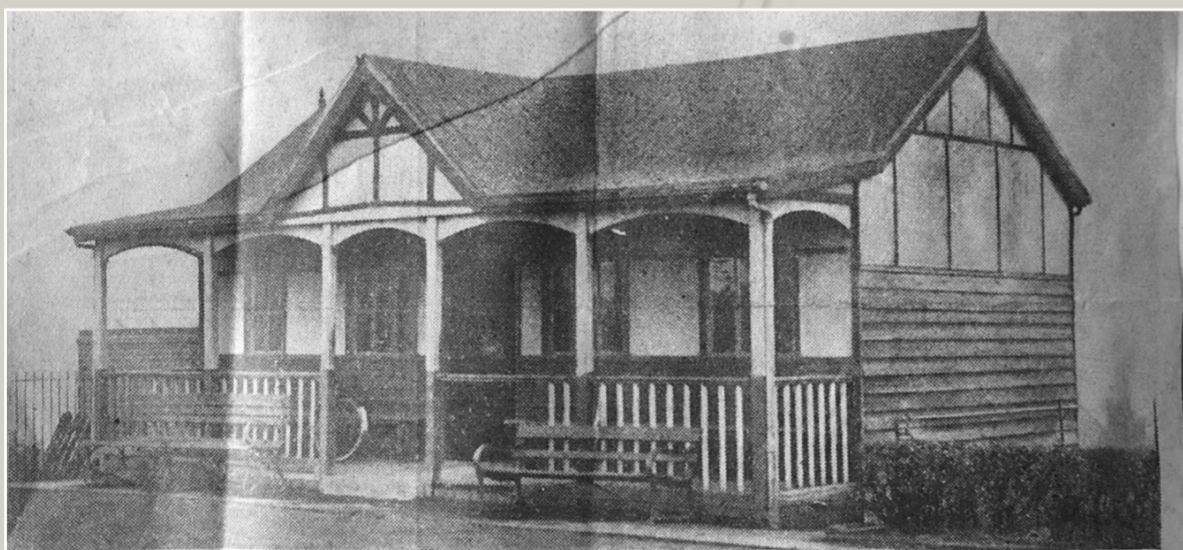
1922 Park Improvements – Provision of a Bowling Green and Pavilion

Following the official opening of the park, work still continued on the enhancement of the park. In minutes dated 12th November 1921 installation of seats for the park were discussed.

Mr. Fereday reported that he had agreed with Mr. W. H. Hill as to the style of seats to be provided by the council in Marsh Park. The surveyor was directed to have the seats on the promenade overhauled and painted.

In the minutes dated 10th December 1921 Mr. B. Carwright, of Brierley Hill, is recorded to have planted 25 lime trees in the Marsh Park. A bowling green had been provided in the park and a Mr T Wall had been appointed as keeper and bowling green attendant at £2. 10s a week.

"The green, of ample proportions, was laid out last year, and during the past few weeks a handsome pavilion has been erected on the western boundary".



Top picture shows Brierley Hill Sons of Rest Pavilion which they say could be made much more comfortable. Bottom picture is a view of the pavilion but the appearance, they say, belies the condition inside.

The pavilion (image left) was opened by Ernest Marsh, chair of the Council, who threw the first jack across the green (County Express 8th July 1922). The pavilion became the base for Brierley Hill Sons of Rest, a social organisation founded in 1927 for men of retirement age in and around Birmingham and the Black Country. At its peak the Sons of Rest had 3000 members and 29 buildings located in parks.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

1923 - Heroes' Avenue and 150 park keepers

One of the most striking features of Marsh Park is the avenue of trees which borders its paths. The trees are of significant historical interest and are part of "Heroes' Avenue"

In February 1923 it was reported:

Mr. Cartwright said after the last meeting he conversed with their chairman with regard to the desirability of planting an avenue of trees right round the Marsh Park, and to call it "The Heroes' Avenue"...He suggested that on each tree there should be put, in alphabetical order, tablets bearing the names of all their local lads who fell in Great War.

Around these the relatives could plant their snowdrops or other flowering plants.

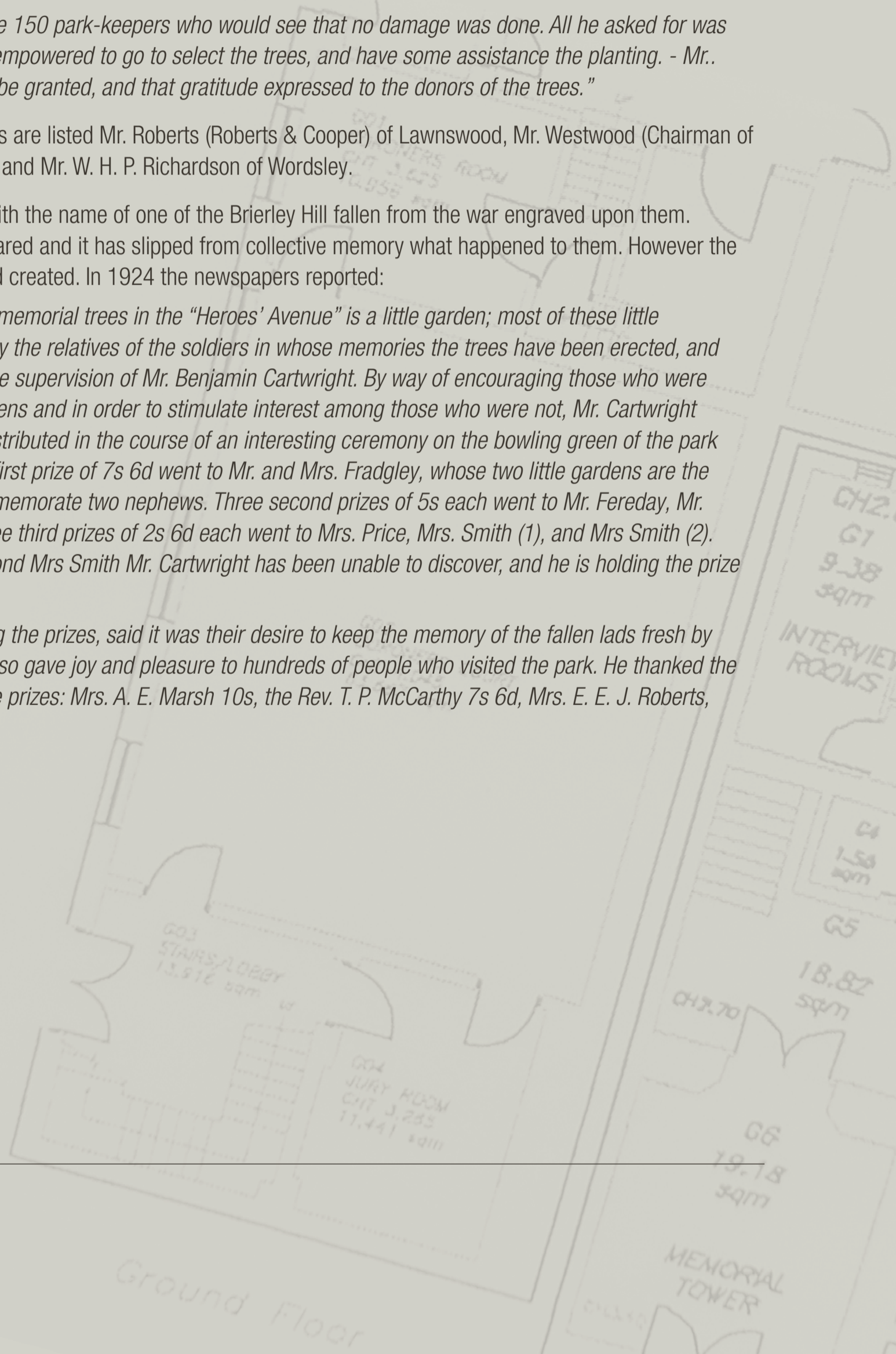
In this way they would secure 150 park-keepers who would see that no damage was done. All he asked for was that park-keeper should be empowered to go to select the trees, and have some assistance the planting. - Mr. Willams moved the request be granted, and that gratitude expressed to the donors of the trees."

Amongst the donors of the trees are listed Mr. Roberts (Roberts & Cooper) of Lawnswood, Mr. Westwood (Chairman of the Brierley Hill Gas Company); and Mr. W. H. P. Richardson of Wordsley.

Plaques were provided, each with the name of one of the Brierley Hill fallen from the war engraved upon them. These have long since disappeared and it has slipped from collective memory what happened to them. However the miniature gardens were indeed created. In 1924 the newspapers reported:

"...at the foot of each of the memorial trees in the "Heroes' Avenue" is a little garden; most of these little gardens have been tended by the relatives of the soldiers in whose memories the trees have been erected, and the whole has been under the supervision of Mr. Benjamin Cartwright. By way of encouraging those who were already cultivating their gardens and in order to stimulate interest among those who were not, Mr. Cartwright obtained prizes, which he distributed in the course of an interesting ceremony on the bowling green of the park on Thursday afternoon. The first prize of 7s 6d went to Mr. and Mrs. Fradgley, whose two little gardens are the first in the Avenue, and commemorate two nephews. Three second prizes of 5s each went to Mr. Fereday, Mr. Walsh, and Mr. Rea, and three third prizes of 2s 6d each went to Mrs. Price, Mrs. Smith (1), and Mrs Smith (2). The whereabouts of the second Mrs Smith Mr. Cartwright has been unable to discover, and he is holding the prize until it is claimed.

"Mr. Cartwright in distributing the prizes, said it was their desire to keep the memory of the fallen lads fresh by these little gardens, which also gave joy and pleasure to hundreds of people who visited the park. He thanked the following for donations to the prizes: Mrs. A. E. Marsh 10s, the Rev. T. P. McCarthy 7s 6d, Mrs. E. E. J. Roberts, 5s., Mr. Josiah Gordon 5s.



1926 - The Band Stand - 6th November 1926



As with so many early initiatives in Marsh Park, the provision of a bandstand was down to Benjamin Cartwright (pictured left). To raise funds he organised a Sportsmen's Committee. The group arranged many activities, including concerts and whist drives, to raise £290 to supplement the £150 the Council paid to fund the base.

The bandstand was opened by A. Ernest Marsh with a silver key inscribed: "Presented to A. E. Marsh, Esq., J. P. on the occasion of the opening of the Bandstand, Marsh Park, Brierley Hill, November 6th 1926." It was supplied by Messrs. Holmes and Cartwright, Brierley Hill.

The new stand was octagonal in shape...

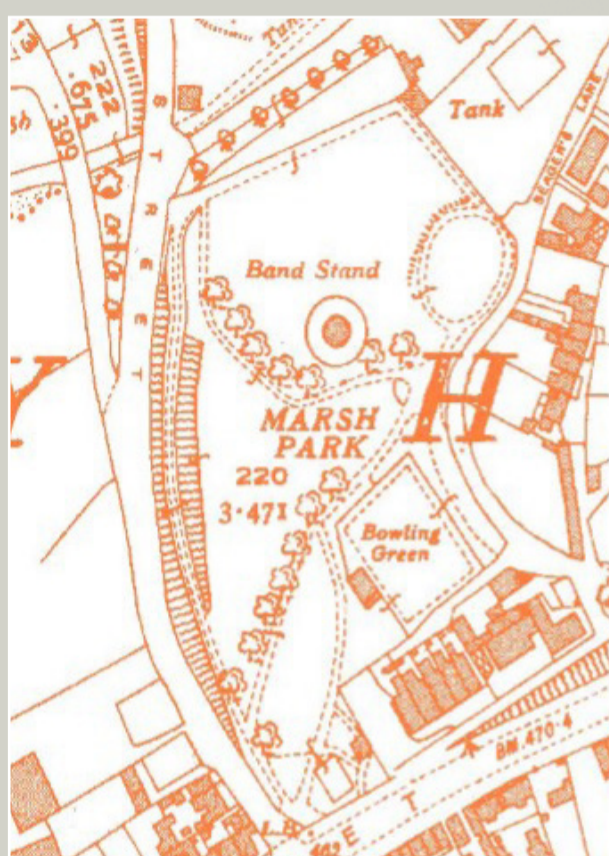
"...set on a foundation of red brick and stone, and the ornamental ironwork and the graceful outline of the superstructure present a very pleasing combination. In the roof is a specially designed sounding board of polished pitch pine, and there is a Marbello floor. The stand has accommodation for a band of 40 players. The Committee had the valuable technical advice of Mr. John Yorke (surveyor to the Urban Council) in the choice of position, materials etc. The Council at a cost of about £150, put in the base, the work being excellently done by Messrs. G. A. Allen and Son, Moor Street, Brierley Hill. The remainder of the work for which the Sportsmen's Committee were responsible, was done by Messrs. Hill and Smith Ltd., Brierley Hill, at a cost of £290." The work has been excellently done throughout, under the personal supervision of Mr. Cartwright.

"The position of the stand has been most happily chosen; it is erected in the centre of a natural amphitheatre. In the future development of the park advantage is to be taken of the contour of the land around the stand and seating accommodation is to be provided. The stand is enclosed by ornamental railings (provided by the Council) and encircled by a path, and small plots of land, artistically arranged and planted, add much to the delightful effect..."

"...The Brierley Hill Town Band then marched on to the bandstand and played the National Anthem, and afterwards contributed a short programme of music.

The members of the Council and the Sportsmen's Committee and others were afterwards entertained to tea at the Conservative Club where the assembly room had been placed at their disposal."

County Express 13th November 1926



Left: Fourth edition OS 1937-48

Above: A view of the bandstand taken from Brierley Hill UDC handbook (1950s)



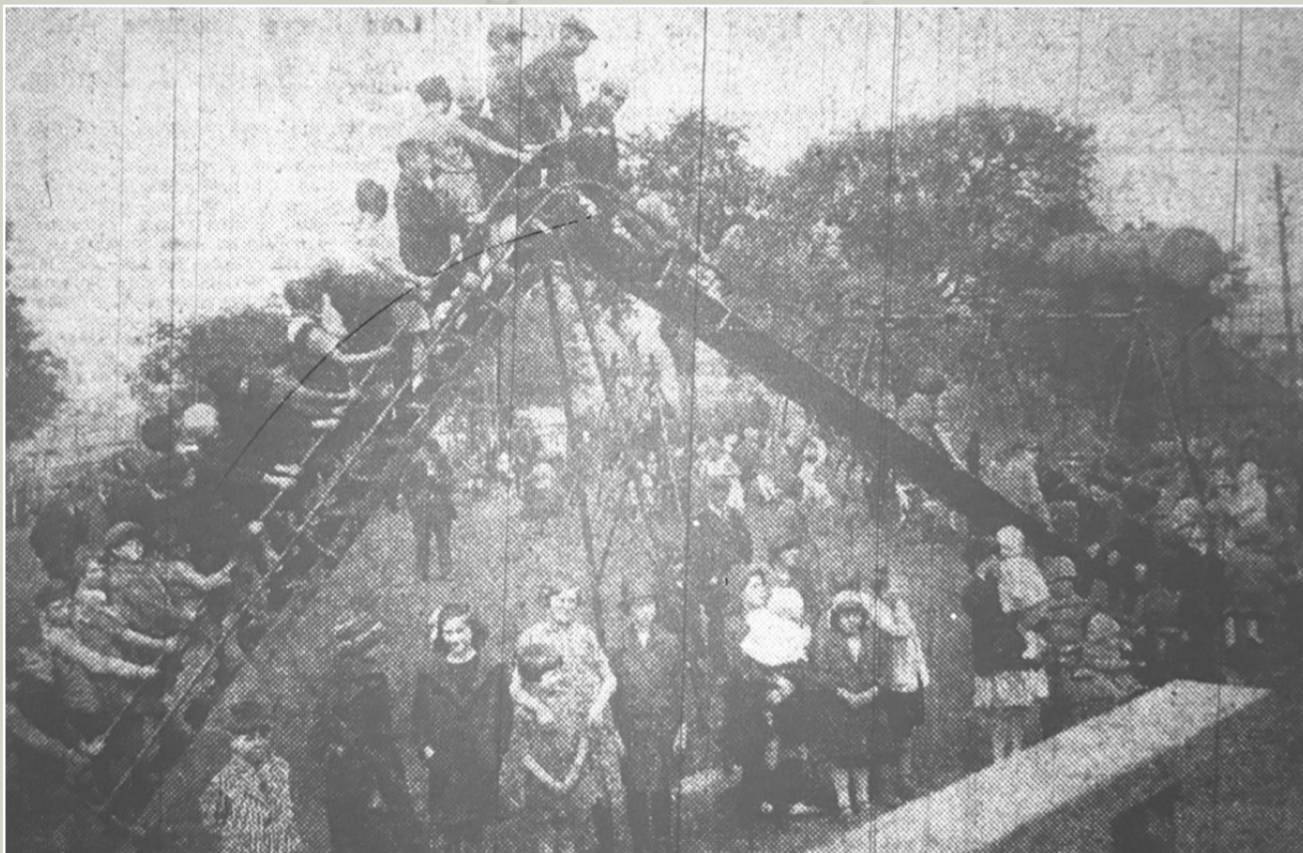
An aerial view of the Town with Marsh Park in the foreground along with its bandstand

1927 - Children's Corner

Children's Corner was opened on 9th July in 1927.

As with so much of the history of the park, the initiative was reliant on the generosity of local residents and businesses.

The Misses Harris of The Elms (descendants of Peter Harris of Harris and Pearson brickworks, The Elms occupying the space of what is now the open space in front of the Civic Hall); Mr. Skidmore-Westwood of Brierley Hill Gas Company (after who the Westwood Street on the Hawbush Estate is named); the family of the later Mr. W. H. Smith (of Smith and Williams brewery) and Mr Chattin (of Chattin and Horton, the prime shopping store on the High Street) were the four donors who enabled the project to come to fruition.



Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

Unsurprisingly the ever enthusiastic Benjamin Cartwright was the key driver in the project and it was he who visited the donors of the equipment.

Children's Corner comprised:

- 6 swings for senior children - funded by the Misses Harris
- 6 swings with cradle swings for the smaller children - funded by Mr Skidmore-Westwood
- A plank swing - funded by the family of the late Mr. W. H. Smith
- A slide - funded by Mr. Chattin



1944 WW2 observation post and Post War Plan

Given the outstanding and distant views which could be appreciated from the park there is no surprise that an observation post was established there during the Second World War. Local memories recall the bowling green hut being used for shelter during the long nights watching for enemy aircraft, and anti-aircraft guns being sited there.

But a threat was emerging. The 1944 post war plan for the town envisaged the park being used for a new Civic Centre.

“Civic Centre: Owing to the urgent need for municipal buildings, steps were taken prior to the war to examine suitable sites, and preliminary proposals were explored. However, the authors of the report were asked to review the whole position and to advise the council on the most suitable location for the new civic centre. After pursuing their enquiries they came to the conclusion that by far the best site for this purpose is Marsh Park and the land immediately adjoining it. This stands at the highest part and in the centre of Brierley Hill, where an imaginative scheme for public buildings grouped around formal gardens and other features on the hillside would dominate the town, and constitute a very fine scheme. This would include the clearing of some of the old properties and improving the access to Marsh Park up the slopes from several sides.” (County Express March 1944).

A “Park Belt” was planned for the town stretching from Fens Pool, through Buckpool to Wordsley. It was predicted the plan would take 50 years to complete. This proved optimistic, as the proposed bypass for the town (now known as Venture Way) wasn't completed for another 64 years!

Fortunately, the site eventually chosen for the new Civic Centre and Hall was at the other end of the town (where they now stand) and Marsh Park was reprieved.



1950s - The Park continues to host events

During the 50s concerts and other events continued to be produced in the Park. On Coronation Day, 2nd June 1953 there was a huge ox-roasting event and the following year music events in the park.

An advert for a concert in 1954.

1957 Knott Sons of Rest Pavilion

By 1952 the Sons of Rest were tiring of their accommodation. The Country Advertiser and Herald (8th March) reported:

"The only comfort in the Sons of Rest Pavilion - a very old wooden building situated near the town's bowling green - is a few chairs, a stove and a table."

Local butcher Mr. Fred Knott said: *"I'm sure if Brierley Hill folk knew what the old pavilion is like they would be glad to help. The Council has already promised us a piece of ground in Marsh Park and the services of their architect to plan a substantial brick building with a recreation room. A local organisation has promised to look after the pavilion when built."*

"The old timers have to leave the pavilion at 8 p.m. when the park closes. We want to arrange a special entrance for the Sons of Rest to be open much later than that."...

One Son of Rest commented... *"We don't want charity. We think the town owes it to its old men to provide them with a decent place for recreation. This place is ready to fall down, and it is the Council's property. They ought to repair it and make it suitable enough to invite friends.."*

Mr. A. E. Hardy, the Treasurer, said: *"The Council ought to do something for us old chaps. Put it on the rates if they must. It would not cost much and they owe it to us. We have 30 members and they can't all be accommodated here...In the winter if we shut the door it's so hot we had hardly breathe so we have to open the door and freeze. We can't open the windows because there are no cords."*

By the following year funds had been raised and permission for new pavilion to go ahead had been given. The drawings of the new building were proudly published in the local paper.



In 1955 the foundation stone/ memorial plaque was laid

In 1957 a new Sons of Rest building was opened in Marsh Park. The final cost of the building was £4,000 and the funds were raised through the work of Mr. Fred Knott, the chairman of the Brierley Hill and Brockmoor Old People's Welfare Committee. Owing to his illness the opening ceremony, on 27th May 1957 was performed by Mr. Walter Marsh, Chairman of Marsh & Baxter, who, with his co-directors had contributed £1000 to the scheme. The commemorative plaque unveiled bore the inscription "This plaque was presented by members of the Brierley Hill and Brockmoor Old People's Welfare Committee in honour and appreciation of the loyal service rendered by the Chairman, Mr. W. F. Knott for the old people of the district."



Source: County Advertiser and Herald 4th May 1957

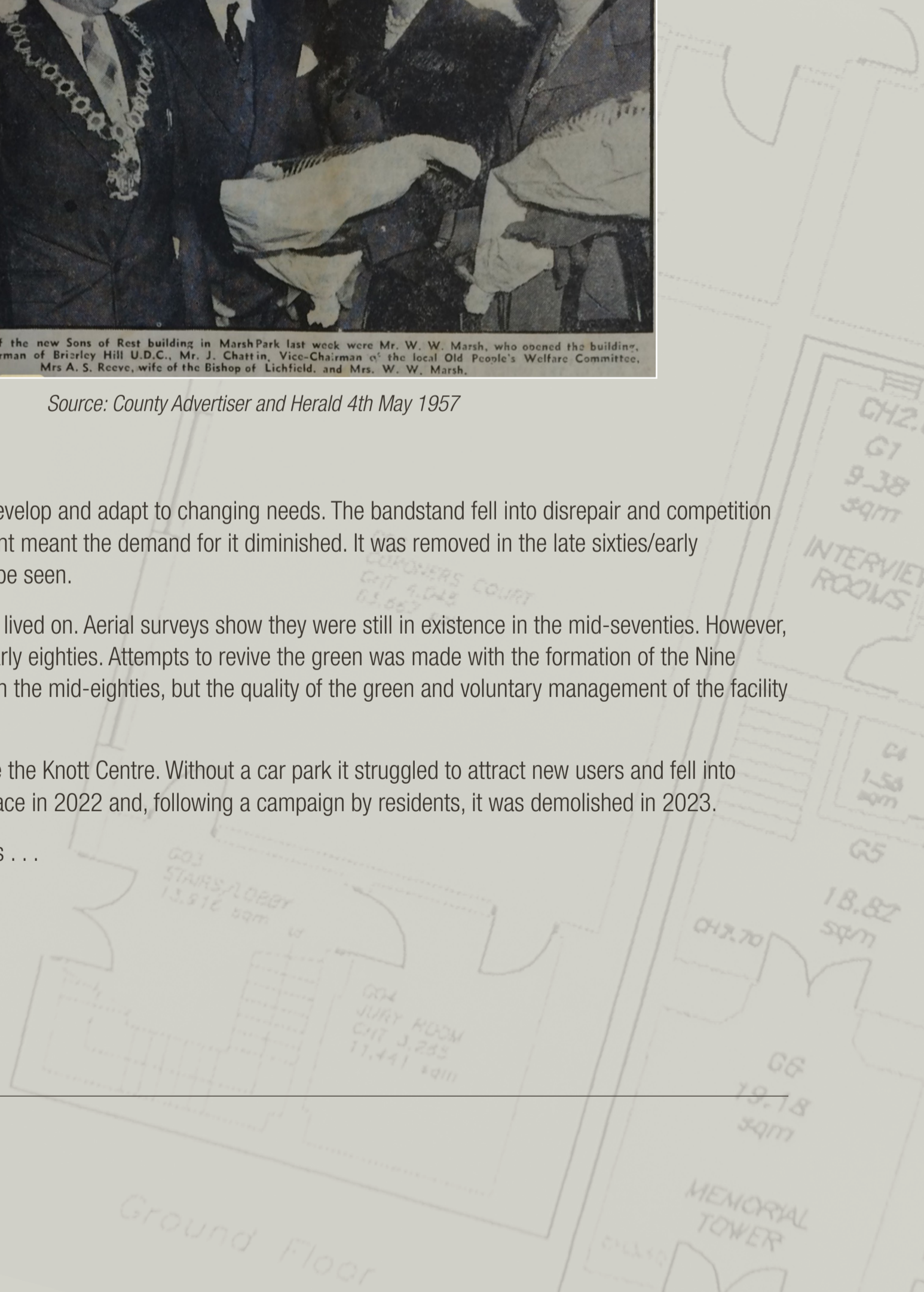
And so to today

Marsh Park has continued to develop and adapt to changing needs. The bandstand fell into disrepair and competition from new forms of entertainment meant the demand for it diminished. It was removed in the late sixties/early seventies, its footprint can still be seen.

The bowling green and pavilion lived on. Aerial surveys show they were still in existence in the mid-seventies. However, they had disappeared by the early eighties. Attempts to revive the green was made with the formation of the Nine Locks Community Association in the mid-eighties, but the quality of the green and voluntary management of the facility proved too difficult.

The Sons of Rest ceased to use the Knott Centre. Without a car park it struggled to attract new users and fell into disuse. An arson attack took place in 2022 and, following a campaign by residents, it was demolished in 2023.

However, it is not all bleak news . . .





2021 CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS 'PICNIC IN THE PARK'

The park is much valued by local residents. There is an active Friends group who help with maintenance and act as advocates. New benches were installed in 2021 acknowledging the park's origins as a part of the town memorials.

On Friday 17th September 2021 the 100th anniversary of the Park was celebrated. It started with the ringing of the bells at St Michael's Church and then on Saturday 18th September 2021, there was a "Picnic in the Park" event arranged to celebrate the centenary, with the then Mayor of Dudley, Cllr Anne Millward, in attendance.

A commemorative badge was presented on the day to commemorate the event (as had been done 100 years earlier).



The flyer for the event



Mayor of Dudley, Cllr Anne Millward

Love for the Park was further expressed in March 2022 with the organization of a 'Hug Your Hi Street' event, which resulted in a giant human love heart being created in Marsh Park and photographed by a Drone – to see the live video go to

<https://www.dudley.gov.uk/residents/planning/historic-environment/brierley-hill-high-street-heritage-action-zone/>



In 2024, thanks to funding through the Brierley Hill High Street Heritage Action Zone, the original gates in Church Street and Seager's Lane were repaired and redecorated in readiness to welcome thousands more visitors into the park for another 100 years.



Brierley Hill High Street Heritage Action Zone

For further information about this initiative administered by Historic England and Dudley MBC visit:

<https://www.dudley.gov.uk/residents/planning/historic-environment/brierley-hill-high-street-heritage-action-zone/>

Acknowledgments:

Dudley Historic Environment Record

Elizabeth Thompson - Black Country Living Museum (BCLM)

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Tim Sunter - Brierley Hill Community Forum