

AONB PRESENTATION

1. INTRODUCTION

We were amazed when we started this project just how strongly connected to this place some local people felt. This mining village, which was originally a WW1 Military Hospital, was still remembered so clearly by so many people, almost 70yrs after its closure.

Phil Grainger and myself felt it was a story that needed telling not just for this generation but also for the ones that follow. One of the most important elements were the audio recordings of past residents. Where a few of them related their various tales in their usually colourful way. Sadly a few of these are no longer with us.

2. BRIEF AND OUTCOMES

THE BRIEF we set ourselves was a simple one. To collect, record and collate what we could, in any form that we could, enough to paint an accurate picture of life in this place at this time.

We decided on 4 OUTCOMES.

1. An Exhibition
2. A Book
3. Interpretation Boards on the site.
4. An Archive we could place with the museum service.

I think we achieved all of this and I would like to think more besides.

3.HOSPITAL.

Our story started in 1916 when the hospital opened. It was a standard military design, with a long corridor linking 12 wards. It must have been an extremely busy place, treating the injured from the western front and men from the camps. We found that in November 1918, (notice the date) in one week, spanning the 2nd to the 9th, 40 members of the NZ Rifle brigade died 38 of these deaths can be attributed to The Spanish Flu.

It continued its work until 1923, treating veterans suffering gas poisoning and shell shock. Gaining a reputation for its pioneering mental health work.

4. LEASE AND OPENING OF THE VILLAGE.

But life moves on- and our story really begins in 1924, six years after the war ended. When the West Cannock Colliery Company were awarded the rights to the lease. It lost no time in converting wards and outlying building into homes for its workforce. They did a very good job, as commented by a local newspaper at the time. Each had an inside flushing toilet and bathroom. This wasn't typical of the miner's cottages of the 1920's. The conversion wasn't rushed and it surprised us to learn that it took 5yrs to complete. The Colliery missed its target of 70 homes and in fact converted 58. It's impossible to say how many families lived there during the life of the Village, as many of the rent book holders took in lodgers.

5. 1926 STRIKE – COLLIERY WELFARE

By 1926, 33 families had moved in. The strikes and pit stoppages across the whole country meant that for working class people times were hard. This was reflected in the village community. Families had to rely on food and second hand clothes from the numerous relief committees. In fact, we discovered a photograph in a local paper of officials from the pit handing out parcels to mothers on the village. We did get the impression when doing this research that the colliery Company took the villager's welfare very seriously. On another occasion, it provided 17 pairs of boots to children who weren't attending school because they were without shoes. I'm not sure that their concern stretched as far as giving their workers a pay rise.

6. OPENING. WORKING MEN'S CLUB, SCHOOL. CHURCH.

It was a year of hardship across the whole country, so it came as a shock when we discovered that the working men's club opened that year. At its opening one of the pit managers said the Colliery were keen to improve the social conditions of the Villagers.

Earlier the same year the school opened. This was two wooden huts, like the WW1 hut at Marquis drive, rented by the Education Board for £30 per annum.

The Church opened at Easter. The Military Chapel was rededicated and became St Mary's Mission Church and became a centre for community events and services.

The next 3yrs saw the completion of the Village culminating in the opening of the shop.

7. WW1 VETERANS – FIRST RESIDENTS.

Originally, we hadn't given a thought to the background of men who bought their families to live here but we quickly realised that of the first residents most were war veterans, many with life changing injuries. For many it was their first home and they were very grateful to have been given it. It must have been heaven to make a home in such a peaceful place after the horrors of the fighting.

We discovered one man was awarded the Military Medal and given the freedom of Rugeley.

8. ENTERTAINMENT. SPORTS, DANCES, FOOTBALL.

The village thrived and became a very tight knit community. These people knew how to enjoy themselves always taking advantage of any reason at all to celebrate. They held sports days on the football field, that has all but disappeared now. There were fancy dress parades, dances and celebrations as each of the men returned from service in WW2. A party for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and another when she became Queen.

The men loved sport. In particular boxing, snooker, running and football. In the 1940s the boys and young men would run around the Village on a home - made running track to keep fit. Although this was popular their passion was football. They had a very successful team in the 50s. We discovered that one villager had been a professional and in 1920 had played for Derby County in a cup final.

9. PRIDE AND ILLNESS

it's fair to say these people didn't suffer fools but they were also very private and proud. During very hard times free meals at school were being offered, many were too proud to accept these. The Chairman of the Education Board took the decision to give them to the children anyway, even though the parents wouldn't sign the consent forms.

They also had their fair share of tragedies. We were struck again how this community reflected what was happening in the rest of the country. Lives were lost in 1930s through the diphtheria outbreak. Which saw the whole village being tested and some being moved to an Isolation Hospital in Curborough.

Winter after winter there would be a flu epidemic. But the disease I remember in my life time was polio. This awful illness took its toll on several children. One in particular being left very disabled.

10. WW2. LOSS BUT NOT ALL DOOM AND GLOOM.

Two village men lost their lives in WW2 which hit the community very hard. If anyone here has lived in a mining community you'll know it's very close and a tragedy hits everyone.

But It wasn't all DOOM AND GLOOM. One of the most important and rewarding features of the whole project was the fact many residents who spent their formative years there were still alive. I say were, in some cases, we've lost five of them in the recent years.

In all, 17 people told their story and some of them allowed us to do audio recordings.

11. A GOOD WAR AND DRESSING GOWNS.

We were told in no uncertain terms by men now in their late 80s and even 90s, they had a great war. These, then lads, were free to roam the chase collecting PARACHUTES AND FLARE BOMBS. Many on the village had dressing gowns made of army blankets with collars made of parachute silk, tailored by the Italian prisoners of war, interred near Marquis Drive.

There was also a fair amount of PLANE SPOTTING going on.

12. BOYS - ITALIANS, AUSTRIANS, AMERICANS. BABY BOOM

The lads loved to plague the Australian Airmen stationed along Marquis drive and the Italians, as they marched past to work on the local farms. That's until they were chased and caught. But their all-time favourites were the Americans, who were camped in Sherbrook Valley. These guys gave the boys more supplies than they could carry home to their families. Goodness knows what these young men thought of this rag tag bunch, with broad accents in hand-me down clothes and borrowed wellies. They visited the men whenever they could but one afternoon when the boys turned up, after school, the men had gone. IT WAS 1944.

We discovered the village again mirrored what was happening in the rest of the country when they had their own baby boom after the war. From February to December 1947, 28 babies were born.

13. GRAHAM'S DEATH AND CLOSURE.

On New Year's Eve morning, 1952, a terrible event took place, one that would haunt some people for years. There was a huge fall of coal in the mine killing a 21-year-old TRAINEE COLLIERY MANAGER from the Village. He was engaged and the wedding was set to take place in the spring.

By this time, the villagers knew that their life in this place they cherished was coming to an end. The buildings were no longer seen as fit for purpose. The Village closed in 1955 although the club stayed open for another year, the faithful trudging up in the dark.

Something to do with keeping the licence going until the new club was ready. Or at least that's what they told their wives. The school remained open for a further 4yrs and continued to be lovingly cared for. Most of the residents moved new estates on Brindley Heath Road.

Brindley Village

A LEGACY OF THE GREAT WAR

The military hospital on Brindley Heath, that treated so many broken and troubled souls during and immediately after World War I, left an enduring legacy for the local neighbourhood.

The local colliery company reclaimed the site in 1924. Spending £7,800 they converted the huts into bungalow type accommodation for villagers. It nurtured and guided its transformation into a complete mining village, housing miners and their families for the best part of thirty years. A thriving community developed, with its own primary school, shop, church and working men's club.



THE ENTRANCE TO THE MILITARY HOSPITAL



HOSPITAL PATIENTS WAVING GOODBYE TO MATRON



HOSPITAL WARDS



NURSING SISTERS' QUARTERS

The villagers were bound together by hard work and high spirits. Their resilience was forged by the general strike and pit stoppages, World War II, food shortages, epidemics and pit tragedies – and the larks they got up to. Brindley Village history is part of the Chase's heritage.

In the 1950s the huts were demolished and the villagers rehoused on a new council estate. Nature reclaimed the site and soon there was little left to show that it had ever been home to more than sixty families.

Brindley Village was lost; but it was not forgotten. Those who had grown up there never forgot their childhood in this close-knit, isolated neighbourhood.



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CHURCH LIFE

St Mary's Mission Church was originally the hospital chapel. It was re-dedicated on 18th April 1926 by the Rev John Reay. It served the villagers for nearly 30 years and was a social hub as well as a spiritual focus.

Baptism and 'Churching'

THE BLUE PILGRIMS, a charitable Christian organisation, supported the church, and helped found miners' societies. On 28th July 1926 the first child was baptised in the new wooden font presented by Mr Siddall of Hednesford. Mrs Appleyard presented a silver chalice and paten. "Churching" was a service for new mothers. In the church accounts for 1929, baptisms and churchings raised 4/1d. There were two Sunday services.

Great effort went into decorating the church for Harvest Festival, using foliage, fruit and vegetables. "...The lovely little altar was decorated by Mrs Jones... We choir boys had to thread corn and mountain-ash berries on string that was pinned around the altar". A harvest tea was held on the following Monday. Home-grown produce was sold for the church's benefit. Fruit was donated to the Accident Home in Hednesford.



REV CALLAGH, COLIN GRICE, MRS BENTON, RON MELLOR



SCHOOL LIFE

From December 1924, two huts (formerly the hospital canteen, toilets and outbuildings) were leased from the Colliery Company at £30 a year. In 1926 they became Brereton Brindley Village School, originally teaching children up to fourteen years old.

During the school's first year, the mining stoppage meant seventeen homes qualified for free school meals, but parents were too proud to apply. The school board formed a committee to provide meals for 'necessitous' children. In 1928 the head teacher reported that the children were well fed but some could not attend school because of a lack of footwear. The following year the colliery company provided 28 pairs of boots. All children now had boots.

Radio Broadcast lessons with work booklets opened up a new world to the children. In February 1952, during a live wireless lesson, the King's death was announced. The children learned to read using 'Janet and John' books. Sums usually involved money, progressing to more complicated maths as pupils prepared for examinations. The nature table encouraged the children's interest in Chase wildlife. Shell posters hung from the walls covering topics such as fossils and butterflies.

At the beginning of 1953, 94 children were on the roll. The school staff worried about the village's uncertain future and the impact on the children. The school's closure was finally announced in autumn 1957. The school closed on 24th July 1959.



READING IN THE CLASSROOM



CHECKING THE RAIN GAUGE



SCHOOL DINNERS

DID YOU KNOW?

In 1958 tank exercises went ahead on Brindley Heath. Pupils were thrilled to see soldiers and tanks rattling past the school.



RECREATION

In 1926 the colliery company decided to establish a social club. 17 out of 31 households were receiving help to support families during the General Strike. The timing seems strange, but the men felt entitled to a drink with their workmates after hard work in dangerous conditions.

Brindley Village Working Men's Club and Concert Hall was opened by W. H. Goodwin, colliery manager. He said the Company had included a church to provide for the afterlife, the school provided education, and now the club would introduce a brighter social life. He hoped that soon everyone would be working again, because a man was never happier than when at work. There was a youth club, founded by Mrs Anthony in 1948. For a few pence they had somewhere warm to play games and listen to gramophone records.



YOUTH CLUB DINNER

Free Beer and Dancing

On Saturday night everyone gathered in the club to be entertained by anyone willing to stand up and sing. In the wake of WW2 it was the custom for women to sing "The Old Rugged Cross" around the snooker table. The evenings ended with everyone standing for the National Anthem.

Sporting Victories

In 1950, the team played 26 games, won 21 and drew three. They won the Cannock Chase League (Division B). In the Longstaff and Beddowes cup final they beat Wimblebury 3-0. It wasn't until 1956, a year after the last residents moved to the new village, that the club finally closed.



DRESSING UP TO RAISE FUNDS



1950 BRINDLEY VILLAGE FOOTBALL TEAM WITH THE CUPS

"...a spirit of union and comradeship must prevail."

REV. F. COBB AT THE OPENING OF THE WORKING MEN'S CLUB

DID YOU KNOW?

During bank holidays married men played football or cricket against the single men, or sometimes the women. The winners got a barrel of beer, which would be enjoyed by everyone that night.



