



Cash crisis at Avenue House

By Ann Bronkhorst

The completion of nearly a decade of work to improve the grounds of Avenue House, East End Road, was celebrated on Sunday 13 February. Supporters met to thank the groups and individuals responsible for all the planning, funding and sheer spadework involved. They also heard a bleak warning about the future of the mansion and its beautiful gardens.

Bequest

Henry 'Inky' Stephens, son of the inventor of Stephens ink, bequeathed the large Victorian house and grounds to the people of Finchley in 1918. Since 2002 the Avenue House Estate Trust (AHET) has managed, without any council subsidy or grant, to meet the huge cost of maintaining a historic but long-neglected mansion (Grade Two listed) and grounds that are open to the public daily, dawn till dusk.

The grounds are on the Register of Historical Parks and Gardens and are remarkable for their varied landscaping, a large pond and rare specimen trees, some dating from 1859 when the original villa was built.

Thanks to a grant from Community Spaces and management by Groundwork, gates, fences, walls and paths have been improved and shrubs and bulbs planted, often using

volunteer labour. Other projects have been completed or are ongoing. A plaque commemorating this work is near the top gate.

Cuts affect income

At the reception (hosted by Groundwork) Bill Tyler, Chair of AHET, pointed out that it costs around £80,000 a year to maintain the grounds as, in effect, a public park. To meet those costs, the mansion and its stable block must generate income from regular bookings and lettings. Due to the recession, however, bookings have dwindled and two tenants have vacated after losing their grants. Losing £35,000 of income in 2010 was a devastating blow to the Trust. Now, said Mr Tyler, it needs "a large injection of cash very urgently".

With Avenue House and its beautiful grounds at risk of closure, local residents are rallying round. A new Friends group is mounting a campaign of support; they can be contacted at info@friendsofavenuehouse.org. Donations should be sent to AHET at 17 East End Road, N3 3QE or via the website www.avenuehouse.org.uk

Last ditch pleas for library

By Daphne Chamberlain

"You could call it a bad year, but the next was worse." That line of one of Fleur Adcock's poems generated wry laughter in East Finchley Library's meetings hall last month. Three days before Barnet announced its proposals for the borough's libraries, a capacity audience was demonstrating how important this one is to our community.

At an event organised by East Finchley Library Users' Group, Fleur read an entertaining selection of her poetry, several featuring East Finchley. Later, Peter Hart, Oral Historian at the Imperial War Museum, transformed himself and some of his audience into fighter pilots to demolish "the myth of the First World War aces".

Avoiding closure

Shortly before the event, EFLUG's Polly Napper and Leslie Gilbert had met Cllr Robert Rams and Barnet Council officer Tom Pike, who have responsibility for libraries and museums. Polly and Leslie had emphasised our library's high usage, and the effect of closure on the many vulnerable people in our community.

They also asked the Council to avoid closing any branch, and were told that Barnet was looking at several options. These included sharing resources with other boroughs, and locating other council services within libraries.

East Finchley library saved

The eventual outcome of the Council meeting on 22 March was that East Finchley library will remain open, but neighbouring Hampstead Garden Suburb library is to close.

EFLUG is an apolitical group of library users. Contacts are pollynapper@btinternet.com or www.eflug.org.uk. Peter Hart also introduced the East Finchley Oral History Project. More on this in THE ARCHER next month.



Fleur Adcock and Peter Hart. Picture by John Dearing

Memories of the code breakers

By Daphne Chamberlain

Ruth Bourne, who worked with the Bletchley Park code breakers, had never heard of their Enigma computers until she went to a lecture after the war. This was one of the surprise snippets for a capacity audience at Avenue House in February. Her talk raised £1,110 for the North London Hospice.

Most people know that Bletchley Park was vital to the Second World War victory, but when 18-year-old Ruth was assigned to Special Duties X section in 1944 she was unimpressed. She had joined the Wrens because she liked the sea, sailors and ships. "Breaking German codes? So what?" she thought. "Everybody breaks codes in Biggles books".

In fact, she became a bomb-operator in neighbouring Eastcote, acting on instructions from the code breakers. Mathematicians and crossword-compilers, they worked in such secrecy that only 32 people outside their immediate circle knew of their existence.

The Germans changed codes every 24 hours, and senders and receivers had to have complementary computers. Organisations such as banks had used Enigma machines since the 1920s, but Bletchley Park had the good fortune to work with

specialty wired computers sent from Poland just before the war.

However, when types of code changed significantly, they were saved at first by two naval lieutenants who retrieved vital notebooks from a submarine.

Breakthrough

Then, when new computers were used, there was complete bafflement. It was primarily the exhaustion of a German operator in Athens that led to breakthrough. He sent a very long and complex message to North Africa, which had to be repeated. Fatally, he used the same code, but this time with abbreviations. The abbreviations were the key to cracking the code and building a parallel computer.

All this was unknown to Ruth Bourne at the time, but now she is one of the guides on open days at Bletchley Park. For details of tours, see www.bletchleypark.org.uk. For help and information about the North London Hospice, visit www.northlondonhospice.co.uk or call 020 8343 8841/7672.

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