



An Aldcliffe recollection by Nick Webster

first came to Aldcliffe as a boy with my parents in 1959. Although it was by then 15 years after the end of WW2, there were many wartime restrictions still applying. bought a plot of land almost impossible to find a builder to put up a house, so my father (an oil company manager) decided to act as builder and employ tradesmen in their spare time.

The summer of 1959 was long, hot and dry and the house progressed splendidly, rising quickly from its footings through the many processes of construction to its eventual satisfactory completion. Not so the fate of Aldcliffe hall, standing derelict a stone's throw from our land.

Although empty and forlorn, the hall and its grounds held a great fascination for me and at every opportunity my black Labrador and I set off to explore.

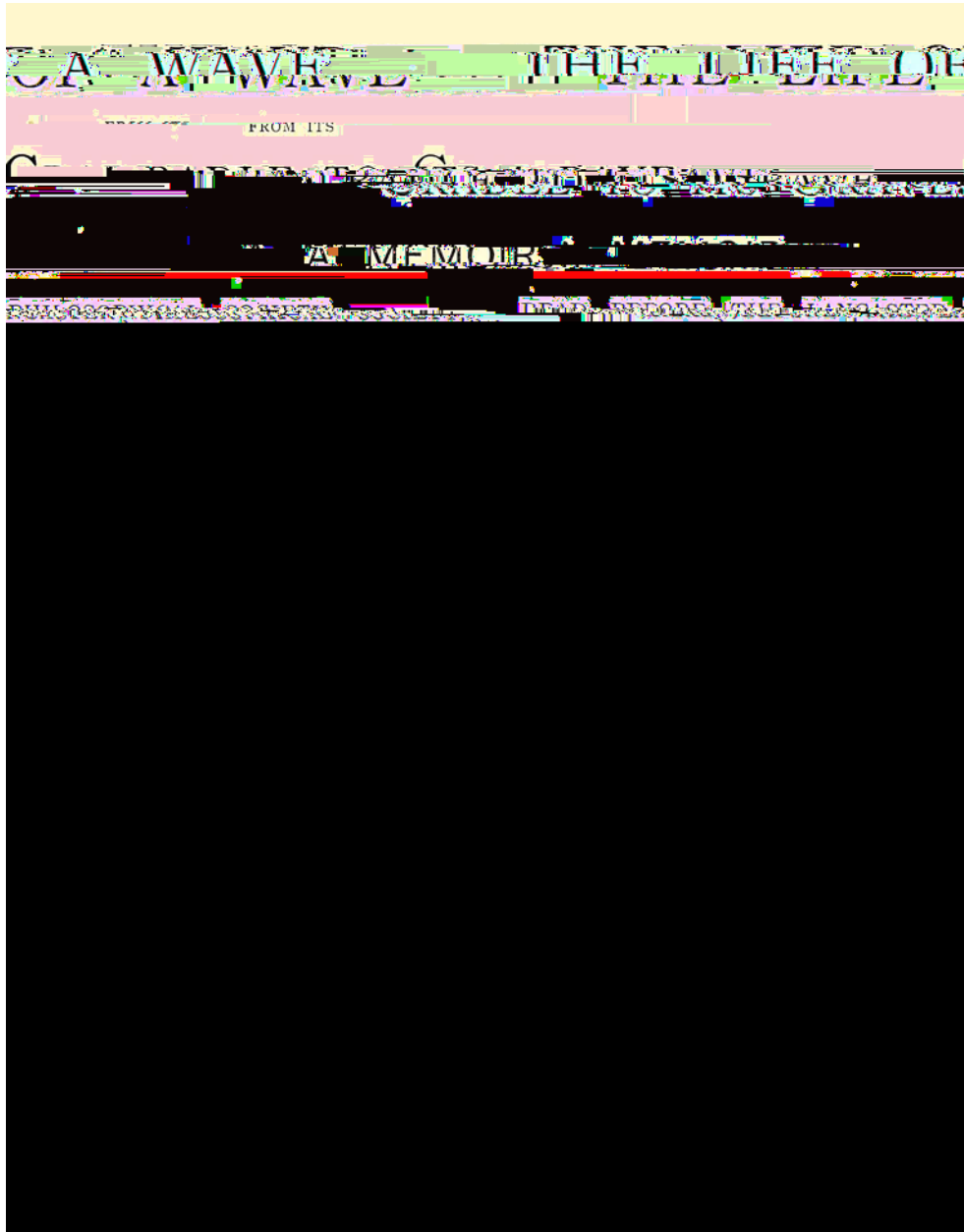
Physically, the hall had presence but somehow lacked charm. The walls of the

To the right of the hall was the lawn tennis court and below that was situated the enormous, heated, lean-to greenhouse, which leaned against the back wall of the barn of Home farm.

Beyond the chapel and to the left, and outside the protective wall, was West Lodge guarding the riverward defences. Back away, on the bend of the road as it rises uphill, part inside and part outside the wall, was the gardener's cottage (now Ivy Cottage).

To the right of the Chapel and at the far North Westerly edge of the wood one came across a shallow, ornamental pond surrounded by water-worn limestone rockery, - roughly where the circular turning area has been built at Craiglands Court. Smelly and muddy, the pond had by then fallen into decay but when maintained must have been a delightful "surprise view" when coming out of the edge of the wood. Not quite the surprise the developer's JCB driver had when beginning to clear the pond. His workmates saw him start his day's work only to immediately jump from his cab and run off to the boss's office in a high state of agitation. Apparently, his first manipulation of the JCB's arm had revealed the menacing shape of a Crocodile residing in the primeval sludge. Unbeknown to the driver, however, the previous day his co-workers had been investigating the hall's under-croft and had come across the animal and had placed it in the mud for him to find. Fortunately for the JCB driver, the reptile was nothing worse than a fine example of the taxidermist's art. However, it made a fine story for the local paper.

Most people who entered the hallway of Aldcliffe hall were shocked and alarmed by what they encountered. There was no electricity and what little light that



Upstairs in the Hall, the family bedrooms were equally large and an elegant fireplace heated each. But it was the views from their windows that were their main

letters and figures of an inscription could be clearly seen on the terrace directly below. However, when that same person descended to the terrace, the inscription had strangely disappeared.

After careful and protracted inspection it was just possible to make out how the trick had been done. The mason had spelled out the letters and numbers using tiny marble chips spaced very far apart. Close-to these small chips appeared to be part of the cement mix of the terrace surface. However, when viewed from high above, the chippings resolved themselves into the words and letters E.D. 1880.

At the rear of the building, facing northeast was the forbidding kitchen. Cold and empty then, it gave little indication that it was ever a warm or welcoming place situated as it was alongside a broad ramp that sloped downwards under the house to the cavernous, arched, under-croft. Dark, eerie and forbidding, this massive space would have stored provisions for an army.

From the kitchen, the back stairs serviced every floor and led out onto the roof between the gables where the bell was situated. Used for calling the workers in from the fields for meals and for signalling the end of the working day, this relic of the past was to cause quite a stir one summer's night in 1960.

It was a still, velvety, moonless night in late Summer and everyone in the community was preparing for bed when the bell could be clearly heard mournfully tolling – an unnerving sound. The peals didn't last long, perhaps three or four rings and then silence.

The following day people began to meet and talk about the strange “goings on” of the previous night. None of us ne

then went on his way. Later, she asked the housekeeper, “ Who was that gentleman I just met on the stairs, wearing a big hat and funny old clothes?”

“Oh don’t bother about him, my dear!” came the reply. “That’s just the old cavalier! Our ghost. He’ll not bother you again. He just comes to see what the new maid looks like. He was a fine one for the ladies, they say.”

Behind the greenhouse, and sharing a wall, was the barn of Home Farm. Not a good site for farm buildings as it faced northeast and was always a frost pocket in the winter – animals did not thrive there and it was abandoned in recent years for that reason.

Parallel with Home Farm, but less gloomy, was the coach house. Four massive double doors enclosed two enormous garages for the coaches, and adjacent were stalls for the coach horses. Next came the tack room and then a fully tiled loose box for the owner’s hunter. Above the loosebox was a spacious hayloft; whilst above the garages was a flat for the coachman. One can imagine the clatter of hooves on the cobbled yard as farmhands helped the coachman manhandle the coach from its garage and then struggled to back the horses into their shafts and traces. Up until the early sixties Mark Airey, the farmer at Bank Farm, still worked horses on Aldcliffe’s fields.

Barbed wire can easily tear and permanently mark the flesh of horses and to protect the pristine nature of their coats when turned out into the fields adjacent to the drive, Edward Dawson had installed an elegant system of pressed metal fence posts threaded through with high-tensile steel cables held in tension – unfortunately, rotted away now and replaced with the mundane fencing of today’s animal husbandry.

East Lodge has, sadly, deteriorated over the years since I first knew it. In 1959 it was owned by a Mr Craig, an antique’s dealer. In those days the place smiled; the paint sparkled; the lawns were mowed; the garden borders were neat and tidy and sported rare and attractive plants; the gate swung on its hinges, and Nancy, Mr Craig’s pretty daughter drove her pony and trap down to the river every weekend. Idyllic! East Lodge seemed to be a rose covered cottage straight out of a fairytale, with the warm glow of table lamps reflecting off the highly polished antique furniture that so suited its interior. Sadly, there was and still is a serious downside to East Lodge – damp; rising, penetrating, damp! Owner after owner has been unable to cure the porosity of the local stone. Now, the Lodge is neglected and its garden severely overgrown. It is occasionally let to students but the damp soon overcomes their romanticism and they leave. What will happen to this grade 2 listed building, I wonder? A saviour with plenty of money and architectural sensitivity seems urgently required.

In the field to the North West of the drive there stands a magnificent ‘L’ shaped copse of oak trees. Planted three and four deep, I take this formation to be what is sometimes called ‘Admiralty Oaks’. Apparently, up until the age of steam, the law of the land required every large landowner to plant a number of oak trees for eventual use by the Navy. Planted three or four deep like this the cent

“M~~o~~rose” is also graced by Aldcliffe Hall’s fo~~o~~mgateposts, and a previous
redesigned the li~~st~~one arch, which once spanned the village horse trough, as
e gate.

If one walks Northwards along the railway track and then turns Westward at

was the last journey Glasson branch line would ever see. The line lay abandoned for many years until it was transformed into a linear walk and cycle track for the enjoyment of all.

As the sixties progressed, the bulldozers arrived and Aldcliffe became very different. Lorry after lorry took rubble away from the hall and used 'Long Mile Lane' as a short cut to 'Lune Point'. Unfortunately, the unmetalled 'Long Mile Lane' was not suitable for such heavy traffic and it soon became completely impassable for the light village traffic that had always used it. Heavily rutted and waterlogged, it has remained unusable until its recent rejuvenation as a footpath & cycle track in 2004.

Within a week of the bulldozer pulling the tower down with a steel hawser (later discovered under the lawn of what is now 'River View') the Hall had completely disappeared and the grumbling machine headed menacingly for the wood.

Promises were made by the developers to keep many of the feature trees in the wood. But, once planning permission was given, the promises were forgotten, most of the trees were felled and the Georgian houses of 'Oaklands Court' and 'Craiglands Court' began to rise in their place.

A tasteful development, the Courts soon mellowed as lawns and plants embellished them and Aldcliffe settled into its new way of life – quiet, leafy suburbia.

However, there was serious trouble looming on the horizon and sleepy Aldcliffe reluctantly stirred.

Lancaster City Council decided to build a four-lane bypass within a hundred yards of 'West Lodge'. This proposal threatened the environment, the view and the tranquillity of the people who lived in Aldcliffe – and those people fought back.

Forming 'Aldcliffe Resident's Association', under the leadership of John Rollins and David Hopkins, the people of Aldcliffe, together with 'Friends of the Earth', the 'Greens' and other interested parties, demanded an inquiry.

After much double-dealing and despite the added weight of Lancashire County Council and a dubious Government decision against us, we, the Aldcliffians, fought on and forced a second inquiry. This time, it was decided that the original Government Inspector's report had been correct and the bypass would be constructed to the North of Lancaster thus saving the Bats and Toads and humans of Aldcliffe from acres of noisy tarmac and an irrevocably altered environment. Note the order of preference. Not humans first but last. The whole foolish, time and money-wasting exercise was finally decided upon the needs of Bats and Toads living in the path of the proposed road. A world turned on its head! (John Rawlinson has written a definitive history of the bypass saga that can be found by clicking on file (C) on the CD).

Will peace descend once more on 'sleepy' Aldcliffe as I write this at the beginning of 2005 or will the remorseless demand for housing force urban sprawl to finally engulf this rural idyll?

Like the Roman sentinel that Mr Bellis believed was stationed here at an early-warning post for the defence of the fort of Lunecastre, we must remain vigilant; danger threatens most when once we relax our guard. Perhaps the battlements that adorned the tower of Aldcliffe Hall were not so fanciful after all?

Nick Webster.
"Silver Lune"

I am most grateful to Denis McCaldin of Heron House for his encouragement and for the opportunity to copy the b/w photos of Hill Farm (File F). My thanks also go to Gill and Peter Walters of 3, Oaklands Court for the opportunity to copy not only the 1958 OS maps of Aldcliffe but also the rare ~~water~~ bookplate of Aldcliffe Hall (File E). Lastly, I must thank John Rollins of 6, Craiglands Court for spending considerable time writing up the history of the bypass (File G).