

Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust

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“My It was Cold!”

Now under the care variously of Staffordshire County Council and The Forestry Commission, Cannock Chase has long been a managed environment.

A hundred years ago, in 1914, Cannock Chase, of which some parts are now wooded, others covered by stretches of bracken, had been a vast open expanse. Untouched by developers, this upland landscape has afforded archaeologists the opportunity to unearth evidence of some of its earliest settlements, which, it has been found, date back as far as the late pre-historic period.

Designated a Royal Forest in 1066, it was in the thirteenth century granted to the Bishops of Lichfield, who were given the right of chase. Specific areas were given over to woodland to provide cover for deer and boar, while the rest was heavily grazed. Poaching was savagely punished, but later landowners were to learn to tolerate squatters when they realised that they could get more money from fines than from rent!

From the fifteenth century the discovery of coal and iron and the proximity of wood and water led to the creation of a mining industry (and later the development of a glass-making industry) which, in the view of many people,

gives Cannock Chase, not Ironbridge, the right to describe itself as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution!

Strategically, it was centrally placed and, in the nineteenth century, had good connections to both rail and road networks. Indeed, in 1873 it had been the venue for large-scale military manoeuvres, and in 1897 volunteer units had also used the area for exercises. It was therefore a natural choice to host one of the camps that sprang up in the early years of the War.

When war broke out on August 4th 1914, the British Army had a nominal roll of more than 900,000 men, but in reality could call on only 175,000, which led to the famous campaign spearheaded by Field Marshall Kitchener, whose pointing finger reinforced the message that “Your Country Needs You”.

In the enthusiastic response which followed a million young men answered the call, thereby creating a crisis for the authorities, who could at that time provide training accommodation

for only 185,000, a deficiency which the War Office set about correcting.

After successful negotiations with the Earl of Lichfield, who owned the land, two camps were built; the first of these, Rugeley Camp, was built to an 1890 design, followed by Brocton Camp, started in the autumn of 1914. The camp, comprising a total of five hundred huts laid out in rows, was originally intended to accommodate an entire infantry battalion, but, by the time this camp was completed, the big battalions were already in France, so the focus was on giving basic infantry training to smaller units; however, by 1916 specialist training in sniping, reconnaissance and machine-gun warfare had been introduced. It was also possible that recruits were given training in gas warfare, though, ultimately, the British Army eschewed its use. However, there is no evidence that Cannock Chase was ever used for tank-training, as has been suggested.

Work on Brocton Camp, on the site of which we began our tour, was started in January 1915. The two camps were separated by the Sherbrook Valley, from whose brook water was pumped. However, this was never likely to provide an adequate supply, and water was later extracted from three boreholes and stored in a large water tank capable of holding 30,000 gallons. The concrete base of this tank can be seen to this day.

Such vast camps were, in effect, small towns which, over the years of their existence, housed a total of more than half a million men. In addition to the essential infrastructure of water supply, sewage system, road network and railway (known as “The Tackerloo Express”), they included facilities such as post offices, banks, churches, a cinema, a VV. H. Smith’s, and a recreation hall provided by the Church of England Men’s Society. It even had its own hospital, whose patients, as well as those injured in the course of training, included shell-shocked soldiers brought back from the front.

Inevitably, it impacted on the local community,



Practice trench as it is now



As it might have been

on which it drew for labour. Local businesses benefited from the custom which the soldiers brought to them, and there was a number of marriages involving local girls.

A notable event in the history of the camps was the arrival, in September 1917, of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade. The last to leave when the camps were finally closed in 1919, they left behind two permanent memorials of their two years' residence, one conspicuous, the other concealed.

The first of these is the stone which marks the grave of Freda, a locally-bred harlequin Great Dane who acted as the regimental mascot and who became a familiar figure at parades and around the camp. The second is the Messines Model, now covered by a protective membrane, sand and turf to preserve it against adverse weather conditions and the possible depredations of souvenir hunters.

It had been laid out in concrete and brick by the fifth battalion of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade to replicate in miniature the trenches, dugouts, railways, roads and contours of the battlefield of Messines Ridge, where the Anzac Corps had inflicted a heavy defeat on the German forces occupying the ridge above the village of Messines, south of Ypres. Lessons had been learnt from the bloody but indecisive Battle of the Somme, for which the British forces taking part had been poorly briefed, and the model, which, with the aid of aerial photographs, accurately created in detail the town and its surroundings immediately before the attack, was built specifically to train officers and non-commissioned officers in topography and map-reading.

The battle is also remembered for the detonation of over a million pounds of high explosive laid in upward of twenty mineshafts tunnelled under the German defences. Described as the biggest blast of the pre-atomic age, it could be heard as far away as London and is thought to have killed ten thousand German soldiers.

Between the wars, the model became a local attraction looked after by a local custodian named Arthur Groucott, and it remains the only surviving terrain model in this country, though buried to ensure its continued survival.

Another surviving feature is the complex system of practice trenches designed to train recruits in the techniques of trench warfare including digging and trench discipline. This includes communication trenches and so-called island trenches which allowed troops to pass each other in silence by way of a looped diversion without making any sort of contact which might alert the enemy to their presence. The trenches were laid out in zig-zag fashion, a late development in trench building which was found to strengthen the line and limit the damage caused by the blast if a shell landed in the trench. Barely discernible at the time of our visit, they are more clearly evident during the winter months when no longer hidden under the bracken

A further development in the history of the camps was the conversion of some of the huts in Brocton Camp previously used to



accommodate British and Commonwealth troops into a prisoner-of-war camp (after the strong objections of the Earl of Lichfield were first overcome!). The camp was the third largest in the country and, from late 1917 until October 1919, it housed thousands of German prisoners, the most trusted of whom spent their years of captivity working under supervision in the neighbouring countryside.

A contemporary photograph of the camp shows an open site with lines of huts on either side of a road (known as the Lagerstrasse) in front of which are rows of well-tended flower-beds; now, the road is a broad track running through an avenue of tall trees.

It is thought that some of the prisoners may have been employed in laying out the Messines Model, though this has been disputed on the grounds that such collaboration would have been met by a lethal response from other prisoners. Instead, it is argued, their role would have been restricted to weeding.

Inside the camp the prisoners entertained themselves in a variety of ways, organising an amateur dramatic group (which made its own props and costumes) and an orchestra, improving their education in the library and reading room (which shared space with the camp barber) or playing billiards.

The camp commandant was Lieutenant Arthur (later Sir Arthur) Grant, who had seen action in both the Boer War and the present war, in which he had been seriously wounded. Both he and his adjutant, Arthur Birley, had experienced captivity; both had escaped, though neither directly from a prisoner-of-war camp.

Generally speaking, the prisoners were humanely treated; indeed, some locals complained that the prisoners were enjoying a better diet than they were. Certainly, they enjoyed better living conditions than British prisoners-of-war in German hands; Stephen cited the example of an Irish Guardsman who, when captured, weighed sixteen stones and, when released, seven and a half, though he attributed this not to German callousness but to the growing food shortages in Germany as the war progressed and the Allied blockade tightened.

This did not, of course, prevent the prisoners



from complaining and even going on strike; however, a visiting delegation from the Swiss Embassy concluded that the camp was among the best they had visited. Nonetheless, it was, said one visiting officer, a very difficult camp!

Naturally, there were attempts to escape in which a total of seven were successful, three after the war had ended! None succeeded in reaching their homeland, though one reached as far as Ipswich. During the dismantling of the camp the remains of an escape tunnel were found, but it is doubtful whether it was ever successfully used.

Sadly, one prisoner lost his life, shot by a sentry who believed that he was attempting to escape. Though the sentry was exonerated by a local inquest, an inquiry held by the Swiss Legation at the request of the Germans after the war questioned whether the sentry's interpretation of the prisoner's actions was justified, and whether it had been necessary for the sentry to shoot to kill.

The last prisoner was repatriated towards the end of 1919, though some contemplated a return to a defeated country ravaged by war and riven with political turmoil with a distinct lack of enthusiasm! Indeed, several chose to remain in the area after the war, accepted by the local community, and some went on to marry local girls.

So what remains to be seen of this significant chapter in the history of Cannock Chase?

Very little, you might think – the concrete foundations of some of the huts, the remnants of the practice trenches, Freda's gravestone, the remains of a rifle range.

There is also one of the original huts re-erected next to the Visitors Centre at Marquis Drive which has been laid out so as to appear exactly as it would have been at the time it was first erected.

Perhaps the most poignant reminder of this period in the history of Cannock Chase is the Commonwealth and German Military Cemetery, at Broadhurst Green, close to which is the more recent German Military Cemetery, where scores of German soldiers and sailors are buried, some of whom succumbed to the deadly Spanish Influenza which ravaged this country in the last year of the war while they were prisoners of war held in the PoW camp.

Alternatively, you could enlist the services of someone like our guide, Stephen Dean, until very recently the County Archaeologist and now working for The Environment Agency, whose hands-on approach to the history of the Chase over the years has made him a guide non pareil. The Trust extends to him its most grateful thanks for providing us with a most informative and enjoyable afternoon.

While our visit was a departure from the usual round of formal gardens and managed parklands, it opened our eyes to our wider landscape history and illustrated the ways in which alternative uses have shaped our landscape. In the case of Cannock Chase the natural appearance it has now achieved may have disguised the commercial purpose which has given it its present shape. We also saw evidence at an attempt at more formal landscape planting at some of the sites we visited.

POSTSCRIPT: Cannock Chase's involvement in the national war effort did not end when the last of the First World War's huts were dismantled; between 1938, when war first threatened, and 1939, when World War Two broke out, RAF Hednesford was constructed, used during the war years for technical training and then, until 1950, to train National Service recruits.

The camp, whose site was close to the present Visitor Centre, offered its occupants facilities very similar to those their forerunners had enjoyed twenty years before – a YMCA canteen, a cinema, a post office, a hospital, churches and a synagogue; nonetheless, like their forerunners they too complained about the challenging conditions the bleakness of the open landscape forced them to endure (in 1955 it snowed in June!).

"Square Bashing in Freezing Cold" summed up in five words what many veterans remember, though for others it was "Happy Days", no doubt remembered more for the comradeship experienced over the seven weeks of basic training.

However, for one the experience was traumatic. "Worst 2 months of my life. Took me 60 years to find courage to return" wrote one veteran in the Old Comrades Book kept at the Visitor Centre, while another, possibly tongue in cheek, wrote "Still fear Cpl B*****n will appear"! Another complained that the camp, situated in England's heartland, was "Too far from the beach for me", but, then, he was from Cornwall. One entry even hints of a romance: "Betty Collins – Where are you now?".

Immediately after the departure of the last RAF personnel in 1956, the huts they had left behind were occupied by up to eight hundred Hungarian refugees who had fled their country as a consequence of the Uprising, a wide-spread revolt against the Russian-dominated Government which was crushed by Soviet forces. Eventually, a property sale was held in April 1969. Now in the ownership of Staffordshire County Council it was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1968. The entrance to the camp is now marked by a memorial stone.



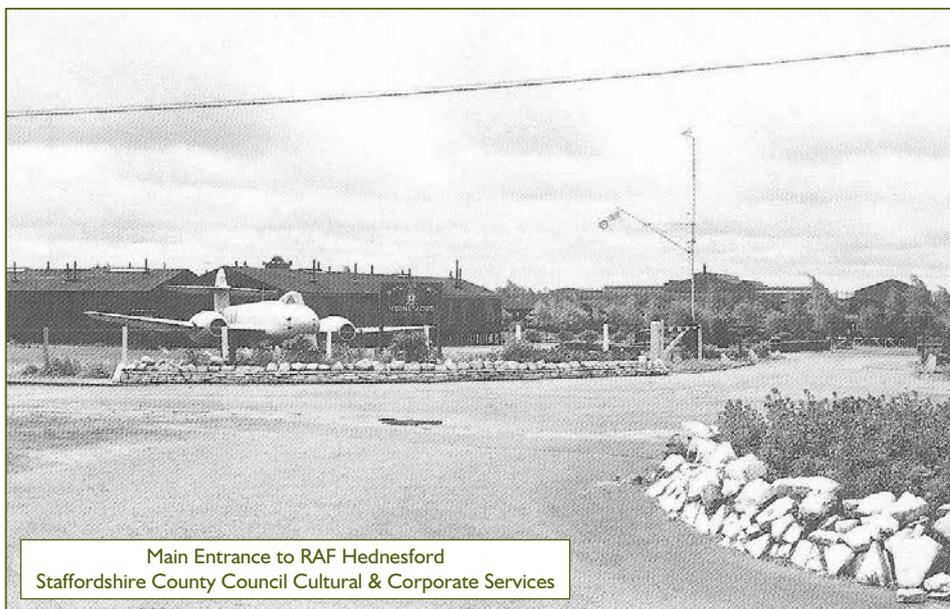
Reconstructed World War One Hut



Inside the Hut

C. J. Whitehouse has written and published "Kitbag Hill – The Story of RAF Hednesford", an account of the history of the camp. The title refers to the hill up which fully-laden recruits laboured on their way from Hednesford Railway Station to the camp.

(This article is based on the commentary provided by Stephen during the Trust's visit on September 9th, 2017, supplemented from a number of literary sources, including "Great War Camps of Cannock Chase: A Short Guide", published jointly by the Staffordshire County Council and the Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Archive Service; "A Town for Four Winters: Great War Camps on Cannock Chase", by C. J. and G. P. Whitehouse, published by the authors; and "A Long Slow Walk from the Station: The Story of Brocton Prisoner of War Camp 1917-1919", by Beryl Holt, published by Russell Press, Nottingham, all recommended reading for anyone wishing to further their knowledge of the subject. The writer also thanks Joanna Terry and Tim Groom, of the County Record Office, for their support of his efforts to establish the source of photographs of the camps, including the illustrations used in the article).



Main Entrance to RAF Hednesford
Staffordshire County Council Cultural & Corporate Services

“A Living Memorial”: The Verdun Oak

Verdun, a fortified town in North Eastern France, was the site of the longest and bloodiest battle of the First World War.

It was launched by the Germans on February 21st, 1916, with the purpose of ‘bleeding France white’ and consequently forcing France out of the war, leaving Britain isolated and ready to sue for peace.

However, by the time the German High Command conceded failure and called off the offensive on December 18th, it has been estimated that the French had suffered between 337,000 and 550,000 casualties and

the Germans between 350,000 and just over 400,000, half of all casualties being fatalities.

While no British forces were involved in this campaign, the stubbornness, the resilience and the endurance of the French army, encapsulated in the legendary cry of “On ne passe pas” (“They shall not pass!”), won the deepest admiration of the British public.

On 7th September David Lloyd George, as Secretary of State for War, attended as guest of honour at a mess dinner in the vault of the citadel of Verdun. He told the French how much the British people respected the French for their tremendous war effort. British newspapers at the time reported that he collected chestnuts there and remarked that he would take them home to plant as an avenue of trees in recognition of the French defence of Verdun. However, newspapers also reported that Lord French, who led the British forces at the beginning of the war, had likewise collected chestnuts from Verdun.

One way in which this admiration for the French resilience found expression with the British public was the planting of what became known as ‘Verdun oaks’, and the ‘Verdun chestnuts’ grown from acorns and conkers gathered from the devastated forests around Verdun and sent by the Mayor of Verdun in late 1916. These were distributed by the London and North Western Railway Company for sale (at half-a-crown a box) to various towns along its route, the money raised to be used by the War Seal Foundation to provide self-contained flats for disabled ex-servicemen and their families.

Not all the trees known to have been planted were planted along the route of the railway, extensive though it was; those planted in other locations are thought likely to have been purchased directly from Euston Station, either from a stall or by post, where boxes could be obtained from the General Manager of the LNWR, Mr. Guy Calthrop.

Most notable of the sites chosen for planting these acorns were Sandringham, the Norfolk home of the Royal Family, where the tree,



Lichfield's Verdun Oak

planted by Queen Mary, the consort of the reigning monarch, George V, became known as "Queen Mary Oak"; Great Windsor Park, where Princess Mary, only daughter of George V and Queen Mary, planted two oaks and three chestnuts; and Kew Gardens.

Another place was Lichfield, then part of the LNWR network, where two acorns and a chestnut were received by the Mayor, who intended to plant them in the Museum Gardens, opposite the site of The Garden of Remembrance, not then in existence.

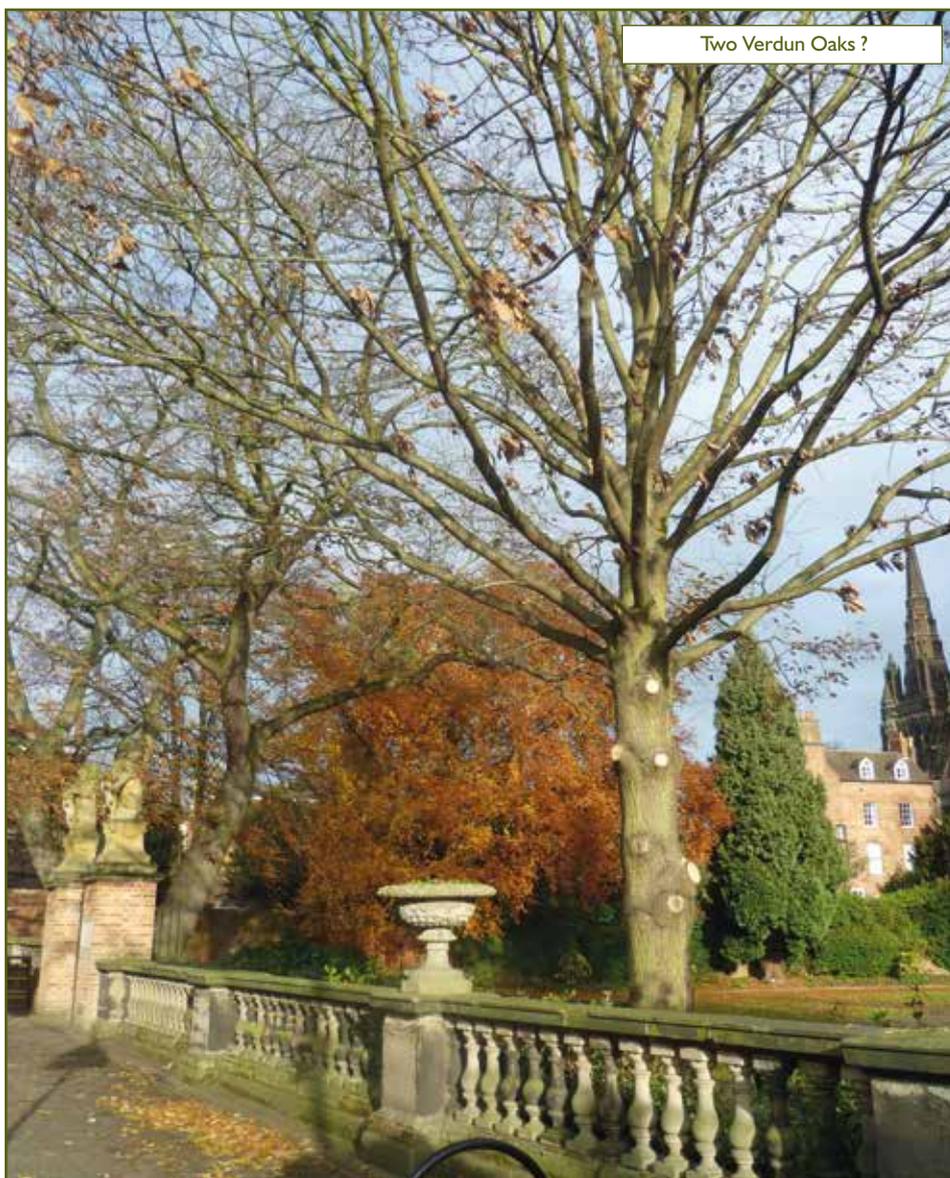
However, according to a report in "The Lichfield Mercury" of 12th December 1924, two fine oaks grown from these acorns were later transplanted in The Garden of Remembrance.

To commemorate the centenary of the War, The Woodland Trust is creating a Centenary Wood in each of the four home countries, to include some second generation Verdun Oaks grown from acorns taken from original Verdun oaks planted in or after 1917, though not all have survived and the whereabouts of many of them is no longer known.

Their research has identified the whereabouts of only about twenty Verdun oaks, the tree at Lichfield being one, though this tree is second-generation, recorded as such on a plaque at its foot as having been grown from the original oak, the original tree having been cut down because it had become diseased.

However, this tree, planted in the Garden in March 1985, was not found growing in the immediate vicinity of the original oak; instead, it was found growing as a sapling in a nearby suburban garden and donated by the occupant, Mike Knights, at the time a Committee Member and later Chairman of The Lichfield Civic Society, who was convinced by the distinctive shape of its leaves that it was indeed an offspring of the original Verdun oak, dropped as an acorn into his garden by a passing bird, a view also given support by the small number of oaks found elsewhere in the city.

In any case, the tree standing in the Garden continues to be respected by local community as of commemorative importance to those who fought in the First World War.



Two acorns from this tree were recently given by Lichfield City Council to the community of Galleywood, in Essex, who in return gave £100.00 to the Mayor of Lichfield for the Royal British Legion.

Intriguingly, standing unheralded on the opposite side of the entrance to the Garden is a second and older oak which must have a strong claim to being the second of the "two fine oaks" recorded as being transplanted in the Garden of Remembrance, though the "suitably-worded tablets" which, in December 1924, the Lichfield City Council resolved should be fixed near them have long since disappeared, replaced only by a plaque recording Mike Knights's donation.

The Woodland Trust is now appealing for help in identifying other locations. Lichfield's Garden of Remembrance is the only known location in Staffordshire; anyone who thinks he or she knows of another is asked to contact Claire Martin

at The Woodland Trust at www.woodlandtrust.org.uk or ring 01476 581111.

Acknowledgements: Both the minutes of Lichfield City Council and the columns of "The Lichfield Mercury" were consulted in the preparation of this article, as was The Woodland Trust's website.

The writer also wishes to acknowledge with very real gratitude the assistance given to him by Keith Lelliot, a Woodland Trust volunteer, who made available to him the results of his own research and whose suggested amendments greatly improved the original text, and to Lorna Bushell, of The Lichfield Civic Trust, who made enquiries on his behalf which yielded vital leads.

He is also very grateful to Philip Youngson, of ITV plc, who provided him with a copy of a news item filmed in the Garden.

“A small village with many stories to tell”

A small Shropshire village close to its border with Staffordshire, not far from Watling Street to the north, cut in two by the A41 and now blighted by the M54, Tong can be easily overlooked by the countless motorists hurrying by who just might catch a glimpse of its magnificent medieval church but will not pause long enough to recognise and appreciate its long history

However, members of the Staffordshire Gardens and Parks Trust who attended Advolly Richmond's absorbing talk on the history of Tong Castle and estate had a fascinating introduction to many of its facets.

There was a castle in the village of Tong as far back as the eleventh century, built by Roger de Montgomerie, Earl of Shrewsbury and counsellor to William I, who also founded Shrewsbury Abbey. It was re-built in the first decade of the fifteenth century and replaced in the following century by a new mansion when the estate was inherited by the Vernon family of Haddon Hall, in Derbyshire, after ownership had passed through a succession of families as the result of marriage. Some of these families are commemorated by a number of magnificent tombs in St. Bartholomew's, Tong's parish church.

In the seventeenth century, it passed from the Vernons' possession when a daughter married Thomas Stanley, the son of the Earl of Derby, only to be sold, a generation later, to one Sir Thomas Harries. As a consequence of his daughter's marriage, possession of the estate eventually passed into the hands of the Pierrepoint family, later Dukes of Kingston, who continued to live in their ancestral home at Thoresby, in Nottinghamshire, and were not therefore active in the life of the estate. However, Tong Castle had been subjected to two attacks during the English Civil War and

had been left slighted, and William Pierrepoint arranged for repairs to be carried out and for other improvements, including the addition of an Italianate garden, to be made.

A map of 1739 also shows a wilderness, which has now reverted to woodland, but its outline can still be seen in aerial photographs.

Then, in 1769, George Durant, the son of the Rector of Hagley, in Worcestershire, bought the entire village of Tong. He had twice travelled to the Caribbean as paymaster to military expeditions to French-held Guadeloupe and Spanish-held Havannah, where he had been present at the sacking of the city, returning with prize money of £300,000, the equivalent of at least £15,000,000 in today's money, to add to the money he had made in the slave trade (in spite of his enormous wealth, he haggled over the sale price of £45,000, claiming, not without justification, that the castle was in a neglected state, and finally bought it for £40,000). To commemorate the event on which his fortune was founded, Durant was later to name a small hamlet in the northern corner of Tong “Havannah”, a name it bears to this day.

With this vast fortune, he set about rebuilding the existing Tudor mansion, the first example of the large-scale use of red brick in Shropshire, demolishing all but the central wing and replacing it with a mansion in the

Gothic style, which was in its turn the first of its kind in Shropshire. In this enterprise he may have been assisted by Shrewsbury-born Thomas Farnolls Pritchard, best known as the architect of the world's first cast-iron bridge at Ironbridge. A mixture of Gothic and Moorish, it was described as being “in the Moroccan style”. Enormous in size, and a riot of ogee-capped towers, battlements, domes and cupolas, it was intended to house the many treasures which he had brought back from the West Indies. However, visiting the Castle in 1792, the inveterate traveller the Hon. John Byng was less than impressed, writing that it had been “rebuilt in overgrown taste”. Even less flattering, it has been described as “an architectural mongrel”!

At the same time he engaged the services of ‘Capability’ Brown, a surprise to some garden historians, who were of the view that Brown's clients were usually members of the aristocracy. However, Brown's account books show that he charged Durrant just £52. 10, his standard fee for simply providing plans, which has led to the conclusion that George Durant, like some of Brown's other clients, intended to carry out these improvements himself. Moreover, at this time Brown had already been working at nearby local estates - Trentham, Chillington, Fisherwick and Weston -, all a convenient distance for Brown.

His plans for the park focused principally on transforming existing water features. He began by building a dam near the Castle, thereby increasing the size of the pool around it so that the lake it formed created a visual feature from the Castle. He also created two lakes, Norton Mere and Lodge Lake, the second fed from the first by a canal known as “The Cut”, a feature he had already introduced at Chillington, whose secondary use was to irrigate the surrounding meadows. Like Brown's cascade, it has now dried up, though its line can still be traced by the line of different vegetation.

Lodge Lake was drained in 1949, while Norton Mere is now leased to the Weston-under-Lizard Angling Club and is not accessible to the public.

In typical Brownian style, geometric-style



Tong Castle - painting by Nathaniel Buck, 1731

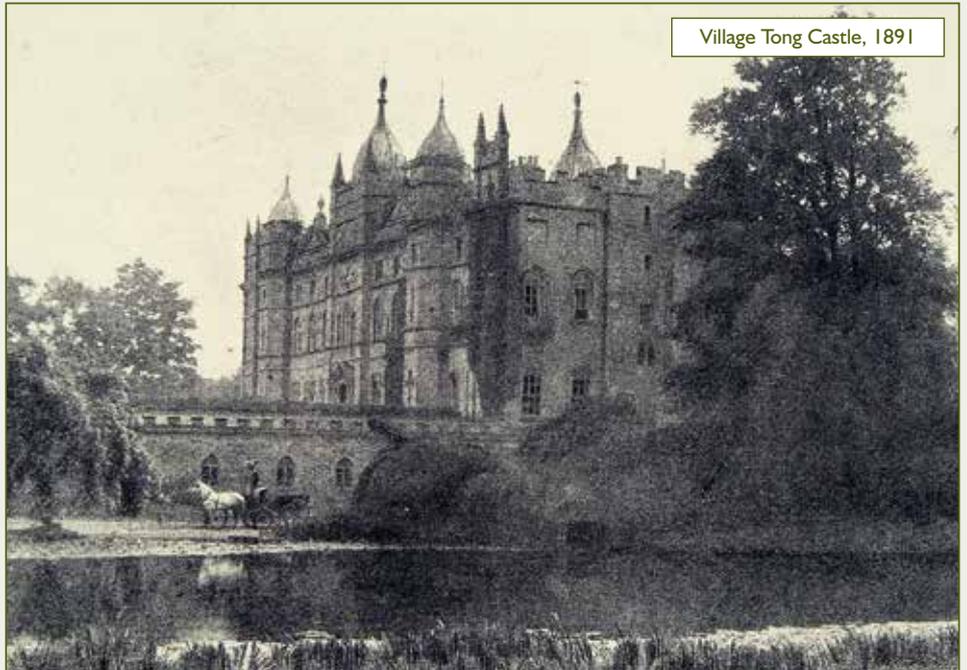
paths were to be replaced by serpentine rides, and the kitchen garden, which had been intended to be a feature of the original formal landscape, was to be moved further away from the house. It is also thought that his contribution may have extended to advising on the design of the Castle; Christopher Hussey thought that the Bath House was designed by Brown, but added that it was not one of his best work!

The oaks and beeches Brown planted are still evident in the landscape, and a single conifer which once stood close to the Castle is typical of Brown, who liked to plant an ornamental tree near to the house.

Convent Lodge, dated 1765 by English Heritage, marked the entrance to the park and was also part of Brown's proposals.

However, George Durant, having spent £100,000 on Castle and estate, died before work on the new Castle was completed, and his work was continued by his son, George Durant II once he had reached his seniority and taken back control of the estate from his widowed mother and her second husband, whose efforts to appropriate the estate had been thwarted.

For the best part of the next century, Tong was dominated by the Durant family, who employed just about everyone living in the village, and treated the estate as their personal fiefdom, to the extent that at least one member of each family was expected to attend church each Sunday on pain of a fine of sixpence in the event of non-attendance (by the mid-nineteenth century Tong's population numbered in the region of 550, whose principal employment was provided by agriculture, but now, it is barely half that number, most of whom are commuters travelling via the A41 or M54 to Wolverhampton or Telford).



Village Tong Castle, 1891

In 1854, the estate was sold by George Durant IV to the Earl of Bradford, of nearby Weston Hall, thus extending the Bradford estates northwards, and the Castle was leased out, but it gradually fell into ruin; the lead removed from its roof and masonry 'recycled' by villagers, until, in 1954, it was finally demolished. The M54 now passes over where it once stood, though several features of Brown's design are still visible. The estate is now in multiple ownership.

No account of Tong and its castle would be complete without further reference to George Durant II, the son of the first George Durant, who inherited the estate on his father's death when he was only four.

While George Durant I had scandalised society by having an affair with Elizabeth Lyttleton, wife of Lord Lyttleton of Hagley Hall, and went on to father two sons by another mistress, his son fathered twenty children in two marriages and thirty-two out

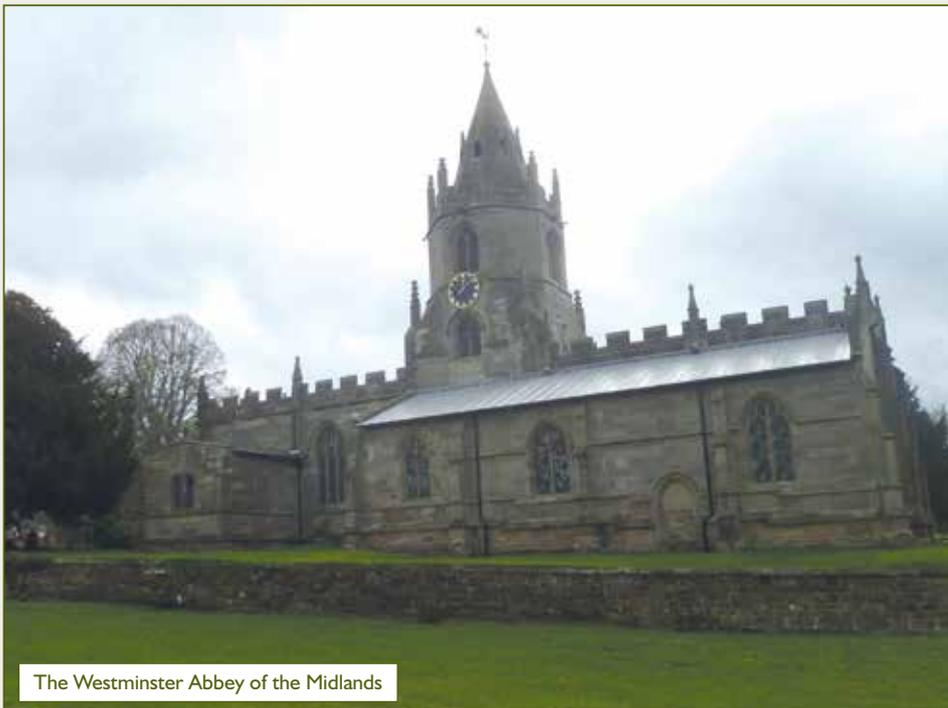
of wedlock. Far from disowning the latter, he gave them outlandish names like Napoleon and Anguish and insisted on being godfather to all of them. He was notably irascible and quarrelled with nearly everyone with whom he came into contact, including his own children, one of whom, inheriting his father's fiery nature, threatened one of his half-brothers with a gun.

He is recorded as throwing his seven-year-old son Mark fully clothed into one of the Castle's pools in order to teach him to swim only for the poor child to drown!

George Durant II introduced a number of follies around the estate, including an arch made out of a whale's jaw bone, a pyramid-shaped Egyptian fowl house, a hermitage, and a water feature known as St. Swithin's Chair, a seat beneath a tree which poured water from its leaves onto anyone unwary enough to sit on the seat.

He set tablets in the walls which flanked Convent Lodge on which were inscribed with some sort of iconographic programme relating to chivalry, religion and his own family, which Advolly is still trying to decipher! Also built into the wall was a pulpit modelled on a pulpit in the refectory at Shrewsbury Abbey from which he would address passers-by.

The long history of Tong and its Castle is recorded by the many family monuments, brasses and busts to be seen in the village church of St. Bartholomew's, "the Westminster Abbey of the Midlands". Six hundred years old and Grade I Listed, the church has a spectacular vaulted roof in the Vernon Chantry Chapel and medieval glass windows. Its bells, which include The Great Bell of Tong, the largest bell in Shropshire, once "entertained the ears" of Charles II as he lay in hiding at Boscobel House two miles away after his defeat at Worcester.



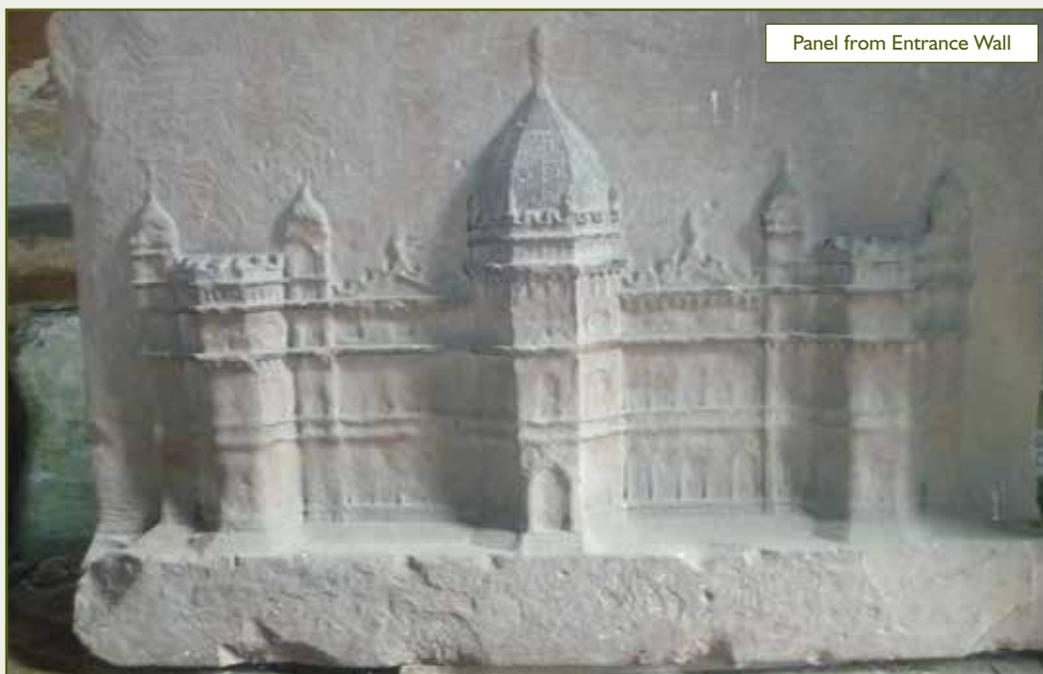
The Westminster Abbey of the Midlands

Between 1410 and 1546, the church had a College attached to it, founded by Lady Isabel, widow of Sir Fulke Pembrugge, to accommodate six clergy tasked with saying daily masses for the souls of her late husband and other family members. In addition, they had in their care thirteen paupers who lived in an almshouse to the west of the church.

It also has associations with two literary giants, William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. The two-tier Stanley Monument, on the upper tier of which the effigies of Sir Thomas Vernon and his wife Margaret lie and on the lower that of their son Sir Edward, has at each end words attributed to the Bard, while local tradition has it that Little Nell's grave is to be found in the churchyard!

Certainly, Dickens was known to have visited his grandmother when she was housekeeper at Tong Castle, and he set the closing chapters of "The Old Curiosity Shop" in Tong. According to the novel, Little Nell was buried *inside* the church, but this did not discourage a verger from taking money from gullible visitors who had not read Dickens's novel closely enough by taking them to her grave *outside*. He even forged an entry in the church's burial register to support his enterprise!

Tong was also the birthplace of Maria Smythe, who, as the widowed Mrs. Fitzherbert, became the wife of George IV, a union illegitimate under English civil law but declared legitimate by the Pope. Certainly, for a village of its size, Tong has secured itself a place in at least the footnotes of the nation's history! Members of the Trust were extremely fortunate in having as informed and engaging speaker as Advolly Richmond to introduce them to it.



Panel from Entrance Wall



The tomb of Richard Vernon (died 1517) and Margaret, his wife

(This article is based on a talk given to the Staffordshire Gardens and Parks Trust by Advolly Richmond at The Haling Dene Centre, Penkridge, on November 16th, 2017, supplemented by further information found in Robert Jeffrey's book, "Discovery Tong: Its History, Myths and

Curiosities", and Paul Stamper's essay, "Tong Castle: A Shropshire Brown Commission", published on the UK Parks & Gardens Website. The two illustrations of Tong Castle are reproduced by kind permission of the Shrewsbury Museum Service)

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