

MOGGERHANGER PARK AND 'THIRTY YEARS ANNIVERSARY'

An abbreviated view of the snap decision to visit Moggerhanger Park this summer which will form part of the published story due out next year.

It was when we were looking back at our old diaries in the summer of 2023 to put dates onto our newly developing website providing highlights of, and learning lessons from, our 70 years of active ministry, that we happened to spot the significance of the August Bank Holiday Monday which was in just two days' time.

It was exactly 30 years ago since we had climbed over the gate at Moggerhanger Park and first seen the house and estate that was to dominate our lives for more than twenty years. That first encounter had led us into entering into the negotiations which saw the start of a new era, not only for us but also for Moggerhanger Park. Although the completion of the sale of the House to Harvest Vision would not take place until March 1995, and even then, without either the Walled Gardens and woods, nor the farmland and Park Farm, it included an attempt to create a Christian community as an example to the church and nation. It was personally significant and brought back visual memories of that busy, but exhilarating and promising stage in our own lives. And of course, we were just completing writing up the story for publication!

We, and our on-going ministry, had been physically away from Moggerhanger now for more than six years and engrossed in establishing a number of other ministries since then. It was a holiday weekend and a bright sunny day, just as it had been thirty years ago, so we thought we would take an afternoon drive out and pay an unannounced visit, to reminisce and see what was happening there after all this time – who was now involved and what had happened with all the millions that had been spent on the building.

We had heard that the trading company had gone into liquidation at the start of the year. Commercialisation had not worked, there were no longer any staff and we knew that the building would be closed, but we hoped that the grounds might still be open for casual visitors.

On that Bank Holiday Monday afternoon 28 August 2023, we drove down the A1 and turned right at the Sandy roundabout to drive the mile or so to Moggerhanger village reminiscing all the way on people and events that had meant so much to us for so many years. To get all the details, and follow up the all references, you will need to read the book (or books) when published next year!

As we drove along the Bedford Road, we identified a number of supporter's homes, even one we almost purchased ourselves, and on reaching the Guinea pub we turned left down St John's Road, into the southern more-well-known area passing many places that brought back memories. When we reached the Sue Ryder Home which had been the old Dower house, we turned right into Park Road and stopped the car outside Park Farm, before we drove into Moggerhanger Park. There was security lighting and a heavily padlocked gate, and it looked completely deserted. We could see a barn door swinging open and it had an air of desolation. We recalled the hive of activity it became for the Gospel in the 2010 decade – not too long ago.

Two or three cars and a couple of dogwalkers indicated that access was still possible although apart from the Moggerhanger House sign, there was no other welcoming noticeboard, the gatehouses were now separated by a high fence instead of being the community house we remembered.

We went through the five-barred gate and crossed the cattlegrid, The fields we had bought on the right hand side and used for Children's Outreach camps were now fenced off and had obviously been let out to a farmer but looking the other way and seeing our first view of the house, made us grieve – it seemed to have returned to being in the same condition as it had been 30 years ago when we saw it for the first time. The shoulder-high grass then was now only waist high, but we looked in vain for the sheep who had in our time given it such a lived in and welcoming image.

We drove down the drive towards the car park passing the bungalow which we had personally restored for ministry leaders, that was now standing on a considerably reduced footprint but looking well cared for.

We decided to drive on into the stable courtyard and see what had happened to our old offices - meaning to return to the walled gardens and the woods later. As we went over the second cattlegrid and passed Filbert Walk (which we had known as Broad Walk) we noticed that they seemed to be faring well and the much-enlarged car park, although containing only a few cars, was neat and tidy. The Ice House looked in good shape with large trees no longer interfering with the brickwork! We entered the 'private area' of the Stable Courtyard through the narrow entrance, and were struck by the bollards preventing access to buildings with grass growing through the roof and in obvious need of repair.

We walked over onto the lawn where most of our summer ministry events had been held and the old Garden Room (Ward 6) the hub of so much activity, had been located and where the large Cypress stood starkly on the skyline on the southern boundary but the beautiful 200 year old iconic Copper Beech was gone. We remembered it had survived the Great Storm in 1987 which had caused nation-wide damage, but a much smaller local storm in 2016, soon after we had moved away had taken it down completely and hit the local headlines.

Cliff circled round the back of the house while Monica made her way back to the stable courtyard passing through the outdoor café area with welcoming but empty tables and noting that the Tour entrance to the House was now down the pathway circling round, rather than going through, the large stone floored hall in the Grooms House as it had done in our day.

The large hall here had served well as a Reception Centre during our time as well as many other purposes – from book shop, ticket and enquiry office, general chat area as well as an Exhibition Hall and we wondered where the various exhibitions, from Time-lines to detailed large Estate Plans, from exhibitions of the Thornton Family, to displays on the Bible, slavery, snowdrops, and the grounds, to the ongoing Oral History of the Hospital Days, would now be available to view.

We noted that most of the Grooms House, was now reserved for B&B purposes, the carriage house area seems to have been well remodelled for the gardener and the volunteer grounds team, but the entrances below the residential area to the exhibition hall, the old reception centre and the disabled toilet were all locked up and inaccessible, but still had their names on the doors. The office space on the Westside, though, leading off the first room reclaimed as Monica's office for the BCGA and Harvest Vision, was obviously still being used for ministry but of a different kind as meetings were obviously still taking place.

Cliff then appeared and reported from his outside tour of the House, that all the windows had been shuttered, but he had spotted someone using a computer in a side room which had been the Butler's Pantry and even in our time had become the main Admin Office! We drove the car round and parked it in front of that window and immediately we heard the front door being unbarred and met Ola for the first time. Although we had never met before and had not let anyone know of our visit, when we said our names, her face lit up and she invited us in – we felt very special and privileged.

She told us that the House was no longer officially open and was only fulfilling one or two already booked events and only the grounds were now open to the public, but she had volunteered from the SCC church who meet in the Stable-block on Sundays to be on site to help Danny Stupple. He is the only trustee remaining from any of the trusts now in ownership. Ola came in most days to help as he was trying to pick up the pieces and to bring it back to life using Christian principles.

She was keen to talk and show us some rooms on the inside, so we went into the Old Library where we sat and talked about her involvement and the church now meeting there with some of the original community members still worshipping with them. We learned that the chapel was no longer used for weddings as they did not want to be asked to perform a same-sex marriage. She explained their plans now were to try to get back to the original vision and that any ideas of a hotel or even a B&B were now being run down.

We were sorry to hear that the lift had been decommissioned, so we stayed on the ground floor and did not go either up to the chapel and bedrooms or down to the lower floor where we remembered the ancient 'well' discoveries and the problems in reclaiming that large expanse and the various stages we wet through.

We just glanced into the Main Kitchen, full of lots of seemingly now unused equipment and recalled earlier days when the restaurant was always full and meals had to be pre-booked well in advance. We also looked into the Servants Hall which had served as another excellent dining area and where we had held our 50th Wedding Celebration family meal. It brought back other stimulating memories of the earlier full day we had spent with our prayer partners in other areas of the grounds and estate.

We spent a short time in the Eating Room and remembered Soane's use of it as a template to design the Cabinet office in 10 Downing Street and that the entrance hall was the telephone box model that will live on as the Tardis in the Dr Who series.

We had not intended to take up so much of Ola's time, but it was good to be able to see a little of the inside of the House and to hear some positive plans.

It was already nearing 5 o'clock and we did not want to be locked in so we just drove down Filbert Walk to the Orchard area beyond the Walled Gardens noticing how well kept the grounds are although little as yet appeared to be growing in the Walled Gardens that we could see, and we remembered the plums, pears and blackberries we used to gather, preserve, make into 'Park Preserves' and share with others of which there was now very

little obvious sign. We were more used to calling this lovely stretch Broad Walk, but the old Ward 6/Garden Room/Education Centre now used as the Orchard Tea rooms or 'The Woodland Café' and manned by volunteers was, not surprisingly, now no longer open.

We could also only imagine the woodland area, potting sheds and aviary, and the greenhouses, including a sunken one which grew incredible strawberries and tomatoes in our time. The parking lots were now empty.

We drove out over the cattle grid having had a couple of hours of reminiscing and being brought up-to-date and turned left to complete our tour of 'our' southern section of the village.

We drove back home through the larger more populated northern sector of the village, down the Burnham Road past St John's Church built by the widow of Rev Edward Henry Dawkins, who had died just a year after purchasing Moggerhanger Park from the Thornton family in 1858 and to which Gillian Orpin had been linked after she had been ordained, past the Lower School who joined in so much when Simon Cooper ran the community and was a Governor there. Then we left the village to return home the back way passing the Village Hall on the northern outskirts with which also we had many links where we had gathered and which we had used many times when we were unable to hold anything at Moggerhanger Park itself – before and after the purchase,.

Our afternoon out reminiscing may help our supporters and readers to understand a little better the story we have tried to capture in this more recent history of our ministry base that started in 1993.

We are sharing this in the belief that God still has a purpose for Moggerhanger House – but it is the next generation who will need to carry it forward. It will not be easy but then God never does promise us a smooth ride.

Our prayers are with Moggerhanger House and the Park estate in the days ahead. May our successors learn lessons from all that we went through in an endeavour to accomplish a restoration that would be honouring to the Lord's name. Perhaps soon others will be able to pick up the story and write positively about the next phase and how it has benefited others and been able to glorify the Name of the Lord through its very presence – both in the past and in the future.