

## PURCHASE OF PLAYING FIELDS FOR SLIP END

Around the years 1934 - 1935 it was general practice on a Sunday for twelve to fifteen year old lads to kick a tennis ball around in the streets in the vicinity of the Royal Exchange Public House, now the Frog & Rhubarb. In those times traffic was very light, there were no street lamps, the streets were the playground, and the youngsters made full use of their emptiness.

This particular activity must have upset some Senior Citizens who arrived on the 'pitch' from the direction of the Church after the Service. Someone must have complained to the local policeman who, arrived one Sunday on the scene and took half a dozen names. The final result was that the lads found ourselves arraigned before the Magistrates of the Luton Juvenile Court in Stuart Street accused of causing a nuisance to pedestrians by kicking a ball around the streets. The sole defence, earlier agreed amongst 'the accused', was that there was no Playing Field and therefore nowhere else to kick a ball around. Lady Ludlow, owner of Luton Hoo at that time, was on the bench and known by the boys. After the members of the Bench had put their heads together, they finally agreed that there would be no conviction, but costs had to be paid, three shillings each! Teddy Baldock asked for time to pay, he was later to die on the beach at Anzio during the Second World War. (there is a memorial to him in St. Andrew's.) This little cameo of so long ago only is, perhaps, the trigger buried deep in the mind of Peter Edwards (one of the accused!) that 25 years later catapulted him into a long involvement with an overwhelming desire for Slip End to have a Playing Field to call its own, rather than continually to have to rely on the generosity of the local Farmers and Landowners. It was, perhaps, this little episode too that prompted the Village Hall Trustees to write to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners Solicitors Smiths, Gore & Co in London, in December 1935. The rough draft written in pencil on notepaper, has 'WOODSIDE NR LUTON' embossed into the paper on the top right hand corner and 'TELEPHONE LUTON 1119' printed in the left hand corner. It was probably written by Mr Harry Abrahams, owner of Woodside Farm, who was a straw plait merchant, bleacher and dyer of Waller Street Luton, and a Trustee of the Village School and secretary of the Trustees who received the reply.

The letter from the Trustees read:

*"I am writing on behalf of the Trustees of the Village Hall Slip End. The population is over 1000. There are 8 or 10 clubs in the Village which consists of Cricket, Football & Tennis. The Trustees are doing their utmost to cater for the young people to keep them in the village in the way of entertainments at the Village Hall, which is a great boon. Unfortunately for Football and Cricket they have no ground in the Village for practice or matches. The only land suitable is part of the field now occupied by Mr Samm of Caddington. Part of the field is let for allotments and part has been used for Brick Earth. Can you help the Committee by offering part of this field at a low price. The part suitable is next to the council houses and facing Markyate Road and runs back to Mr Abrahams land. This part of the field is now fallow. I might say the purchase money and the developing would have to be raised by subscription The Trustees would hold themselves responsible for payment within one month of the purchase."*

The reply, dated 3rd January 1936, received by Mr. Harling was thus:-

*"Your letter of the 19th December which was addressed to the Charity Commission and forwarded to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, has been handed to us as agents to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. We observe that your application is in respect of an area of land in the Brickyard Field which forms part of the Manor Farm in the occupation of Mr V. Samm and adjoins the site which was sold to the Rural District Council for Housing. We think the commissioners would be prepared to sell an appropriate area for the purposes desired, but we see no justification in submitting terms other than on a present day value. Perhaps you will let us know the area which your committee desire to acquire, when we shall be better able to put the land in price and state terms on which a sale could be advised"*

Written in ink on the bottom of the letter were the words:-

*Reply Forwarded:-*

*Area about 11 to 12 acres 11 - 11/15 acres.*

*2nd letter Forwarded*

*20 - 2 - 1936 4th January 1936*

There is no copy of second letter. Suffice it to say that this purchase never succeeded for some reason or other, and the frontage of the land in question is now occupied by bungalows. There were 14 Trustees of the Village Hall at the time, the majority, businessmen. At this time Cricket continued to be played on a pitch at Woodside Farm. Tennis on the three grass courts in the Village Hall Grounds on land purchased specifically for the purpose in 1920. There were

five football teams in the Village. The two main teams were Slip End United who played on a pitch on Red Lion meadow Woodside, and the Robin Hoods whose pitch was on Stockwood Park a short distance from the wall in Newlands Road. Two other teams of lesser ability were Craven Athletic (named after Mr Craven - Lee from Luton who was a great benefactor of the Local Youth and member of the Adult School) and the Stockwood Athletic Football Club affectionately known as the "Stalks".

Some young fourteen year old lads started their own team. The inaugural meeting took place in a very old chicken house in the house next to Tom Reid's paper shop where the Rising Sun Car Park now is. It had a very low roof and half a dozen lads crouched around a candle set on a wooden box. They didn't know what name to call their team, so Mr. Lee, with deference to the chicken house suggested the 'Slip End Fighting Cocks' and they remained thus until the War.

In 1950 the question of a Playing Field was considered by the Parish Council and in December of that year, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners wrote to say that the land fronting Markyate Road was not for sale, but there was backland. The Council decided to enquire the price and in the meantime the Councillors of Slip End and Woodside were to inspect and report.

In February 1951 the Ecclesiastical Commissioners offered to lease six acres of the backland at £7. 10. 0 per annum for 21 years. The Council rejected the offer and asked for land fronting Markyate Road. In March 1951 the agents to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners wrote offering to sell backland at Slip End. The Council confirmed they had no interest. From then onwards various discussions arose and eventually 6 acres of land fronting Markyate Road were reserved by the County Council for a playing field in March 1952.

Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in 1953 and festivities were arranged by the Coronation Committee and after the festivities were over a sum of money remained, amounting to £13.16s. 10d. At the winding up of this committee a vote was taken as to what should be done with the money. The choices were: leave the money for the upkeep of the garden or buy a third seat for the garden or to start a playing field fund. It was decided that until a committee of the Playing Field Association be formed the money to be left in the bank.

On November 27 1953 a meeting of the Slip End area of the Parish was held, about 35 people attended including Mr Welch Sec. of the Beds Playing Field Association. A committee was elected comprising Mrs Batchelor, Mrs Leathers, Messrs Eling, Williams, Leathers, Bates, Garner, Hawkings, C. Cook, Albon, Anderson, S. Cook, Doggrell, Gutteridge and Burton. Seventeen others were co-opted, which brought the number to 32. It may have been considered that such a large committee might generate funds more quickly. This committee proceeded to raise funds by organising whist drives, football sweep, dances, house to house collections, raffle and collections of scrap iron and scrap paper order to purchase land and by November 1956 they had raised £360. During the 4 years, the committee had dwindled to 9 people who decided that money was difficult to come by and was coming in too slowly, and public support was poor. The land which the Playing Fields wanted to buy was 5 acres of an 18 acre field which at that time was under cultivation and sown with corn. A condition of purchase was that the 5 acres had to be fenced off to prevent children trespassing on the corn. There was an offer of Grant Aid from the Ministry of Education. At a meeting of January 1957 it was decided to call a Public Meeting to review the whole situation. 500 leaflets were circulated in the district calling for a meeting for the 13th February 1957. There was such a poor attendance at this meeting that the executive officers resigned and another meeting was convened for 27th March. Another leaflet was circulated advertising this meeting and the fact that £1400 has to be raised in order to qualify for grant aid. The funds available was sufficient for the land but the fencing was estimated at £450. There were about 50 people at this meeting which was chaired by Mr Ned Brown. There was quite a bit of discussion at this meeting about the feasibility of being able to raise so much money since it had taken four years to raise £360 and the old committee members tried to persuade the meeting that it would be chasing its tail and suggested that the whole idea be scrapped and the money used for other purposes, e.g. Repairing the Village Hall which was becoming dilapidated and needed bringing into the 20th Century. It was said there was enough money to buy 3 acres, why not buy this acreage now and a further acre as and when more money became available. Mr Albert Flitton offered to instruct his Solicitors to handle the transaction on behalf of the Slip End Playing Fields Association. No committee was elected at this meeting and no minutes were taken (the old committee had resigned), but a vote was taken and it was agreed that Mr Flitton should purchase the Playing Fields on behalf of the committee. No meetings were held again until another leaflet was distributed in 1959 headed "The Slip End and District Playing Fields - a Public Meeting will be held in the Village Hall Slip End on Friday May 22nd at 8pm." The leaflet went on:-

*"The Playing Field has been purchased and is now the property of the Village. A management committee has to be*

*formed and the other numerous important items are on the Agenda for discussion. Please make an effort to attend this meeting if possible as this is your Playing Field."*

It was signed by N. C. Brown, owner of Woodside Farm, nephew of former owner Mr Harry Abrahams, Trustee of the Village Hall, S.F. Garner, G. Porter, R. E. Wood. There were about 50 people at this meeting, chaired by Ned Brown, who explained the Trust Deed: Sid Garner, who was the Treasurer, said there was £209.17s. 6d in the bank. A committee was formed of the following people; Mrs. T. Edwards, Mrs Camp, Messrs F. Hawkings, P. Edwards, S. Garner, H.W. Butler, F. Doggrell, D. Worsley, R. Wood, G. Porter, M. Taylor, I. Clark and Rev. K. Ashworth.

After the first meeting the members went to look at the Playing Field and found it uneven and in a rough state. There were pig sties and the remains of the Brick Kilns in one corner of the field and it was soon realised that a lot of work would be needed to make this land into a Playing Field. It was also realised that whilst Mr Flitton had been purchasing our Playing Field he had also purchased the rest of the 18 acre field (of which it was a part) from the owners, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, which had now been converted into a car storage area. The exits and entrances to the playing field were alongside the entrances and exits to be used by the car transporters. At the next A.G.M. in 1960 the public declared that this situation created a hazardous situation for the children who were to use the playing field and instructed the committee to sell the playing field and find another site. The vicar said that he would approach Mrs. Ross-Skinner to see if she would give a donation for the swings, slides etc. Mrs. Ross-Skinner visited the site with her husband and said that her mother Edith Crawley had left a sum of money to be spent on the village children. "You tell me what items of equipment you want and I will buy them, but my husband and I think the site is dangerous and we feel that if the Village Hall Trustees are approached they will let you put the equipment in the Village Hall grounds." This is what eventually happened and it was called "The Crawley Playgrounds", after its patron and a lease was drawn up for sixty years between the Village Hall and Playing Field at a peppercorn rent of £2 per annum in 1966.

The next 17 years from 1960 to 1977 were spent, trying to sell the field and buy another one. 1971 to 1979 saw negotiations with the Beds Education Department with regard to the possibility of acquiring land for the Playing Field through "joint Recreational Facilities" with the building of the new Lower School in Markyate Road.

During the negotiations the Education Department were persuaded to sell 7.66 acres of land and to include in the building of the new School, two committee rooms, kitchen and toilet facilities and a room for the storage of non-educational equipment: the main hall was to be high enough to accommodate badminton.

The Playing Field land was to cost £8,500 and £25,000 for the facilities that had been built in the new School. During these negotiations the original Playing Field was sold in 1976 for £62,000 for housing, becoming Claydown Way.

Negotiations for joint recreation facilities dragged on and became bogged down over the means of access to the proposed playing field. Six different access routes were proposed and for one reason or another rejected. The matter dragged on until finally the offer of 7.15 acres of land next to the Church was made and accepted. Negotiations for the purchase of this land began in 1980 and the matter was finally completed and the land vested with the Official Custodian of Charity Lands on the 10th January 1984.

It was also thought a good idea to buy the small wood of 2 acres which had been planted when the motorway was built, as a screen against the motorway.

Before selling the earlier playing field land, the association had always been as poor as a church mouse. At the 1969 Annual General Meeting, the Treasurer reported that after meeting bills for maintenance repairs and rent of the Crawley Playground our balance at the Trustee Savings Bank stood at one shilling and threepence and added that £1 was owing to Mr Edwards to make up the cost of repairs to Playground equipment.

In November 8th 1988 issue of the Daily Mirror, a very small comment appeared saying "Builders are now paying around £1 million an acre for land in the South East. The shortage of land there will push up the cost of new homes further, the Housebuilders Federation warned yesterday." Taking this into consideration it would appear that the residents of the Beneficial Area of the Registered Charity know as the Slip End Playing Field Association "have done quite well out of all this hassle." They own 9 acres of land.

A few years ago the Parish Council opened negotiations with the Association to see if some land could be made

available for extension to the churchyard, which had become full up as a burial area. The public were unwilling to allow this, and the long story of the founding of the Playing Field explains why; the fight for the land was so arduous that the last thing they wanted to do was to give some up, whatever the reason! What, then, of the future? After the many years of effort, the Playing Field is now well established and used by a variety of village associations for cricket, tennis, archery, football, etc.. It is hoped that in 1990, the drainage will be improved and a new cricket square will be laid. The coming years will probably see the 'Terrapin' building becoming 'life expired' and will need replacement in some form. the work continues..

*Since Peter Edwards wrote this article in 1989, he has died, and the terrapin replaced by a brick built hall with several changing rooms. It has been aptly named:*

***The Peter Edwards Memorial Pavilion.***