

Avenue House, a Grade II listed, local gem

Avenue House is a Grade II listed house, which belonged to Henry Charles Stephens also known as 'Inky' Stephens. He was the son of Dr Henry Stephens (1796–1864) who invented an indelible 'blue-black writing fluid'. The British government made it the mandatory ink for legal documents and ships' log books. In its day it revolutionised office life – much time previously had been spent mixing inks and cleaning nibs.

Inky Stephens inherited his father's company in 1864 at the age of 23 upon the sudden death of his father, and went on to develop it into a successful multinational business. He also found the time to be the MP for the Hornsey and Finchley constituency from 1887 to 1900.

In 1874 Stephens purchased Avenue House in East End Road and ten acres of adjacent land. At that time it was a small villa dating from 1851. Henry undertook a four-year building project and the family moved into the House in 1878. As well as the usual rooms, the House included a library, school rooms and a laboratory where Henry, who had trained as a chemist, ran a series of experiments.

Henry asked Robert Marnock to design the gardens. Marnock was one of the leading landscape gardeners of the mid-19th century who strove to achieve the effects found in nature within intensively managed gardens.

Marnock's Gardenesque design focused on trees and hard landscape with integral water features. The gardens have evolved over



PHOTOS: TERRY BROOKS

time and today they consist of a mixed landscape which includes a unique arboretum, a rockery, a bog garden, a large park area to play in and wooded areas to enjoy. The arboretum has some unusual trees such as the Common Medlar *Mespilus Germanica* as well as ten varieties of oak trees.

Henry Stephens had farm buildings (now called The Bothy) built with their own gardens. They were originally designed as kitchen gardens and it is probable that Marnock, with his expertise in hot houses, advised on the layout, as well as the orientation and the positioning of the glass-houses. There was even a tropical house with palms. The Bothy allowed the whole estate to be self-sufficient, as it had fish ponds,

a dairy, an abattoir, and room for farriers. It also provided housing for the principal estate workers. The castellated walls of the Bothy make it distinct and clearly different from the house and other buildings on the estate.

Inky Stephens was very much a man of his time. He set up a domestic electricity system for the house and constructed a Water Tower, which originally serviced the domestic water supply to the house and an adjoining laundry. The Water Tower is a 9m high octagonal, reinforced concrete structure with pebble-dashed render and crenelated top, matching the Bothy corner towers.

In point of fact he was so interested in the reliable supply of water that he set up a water

company at Cholderton in Wiltshire where he built his country home. The Cholderton and District Water Company was established by Act of Parliament in 1904 and was incorporated as a private limited company. Throughout the many changes in the water industry Cholderton has remained an independent privately-owned company (www.choldertonwater.co.uk).

The house and grounds were left for public enjoyment by Stephens in his will. At the time of his death in 1918 it was in use as a Voluntary Aid Detachment Hospital, and between 1919 and 1925, the RAF central hospital.

The grounds were formally opened to the public on 3 May 1928. The house was then used

for many years as a public library, and as the offices of Finchley Borough Council.

In 1989 the east wing of the house was gutted by fire, but it was restored thanks to the intervention of Margaret Thatcher who was then the MP for Finchley, and the Prime Minister.

The House and Gardens are now managed by an independent charitable body, the Avenue House Estate Trust, which took over responsibility from London Borough of Barnet in 2002.

The House is a meetings and events venue. Various rooms in the house can be rented for both business and private functions, including weddings.

The gardens and arboretum are open to the public free of charge and the stables have been transformed into a cafe serving snacks, light lunches, hot and cold beverages and ice cream.

The coach house has become a small museum dedicated to the history of the Stephens Ink Company. It aims to show, the

development of the famous blue-black writing fluid, the growth of the Company and the life and work of Henry 'Inky' Stephens.

Guided tours of the Estate are available by prior arrangement, as are lunch and dinner packages.

A range of events and activities are offered throughout the year both for children and adults. They include pond dipping, Easter egg hunts, quiz nights, gardening mornings and shared reading taster sessions. Two of the most popular events are the Halloween Spooktacular, which includes a ghost hunt in the gardens, and the Summer Fête complete with live music and maypole dancing.

The gardens also play host to a seated statue of Spike Milligan, which encourages you to join him and share a conversation.

MARIE-CHRISTINE O'CALLAGHAN

For more information please visit: www.stephenshouseandgardens.com. Stephens House & Gardens, 17 East End Road, N3 3QE.



Heritage, now and then

The annual Michael Rowley lecture this year was given on June 2 in the Meeting House on the subject of 'Heritage Now and Then' by James Stourton, Fellow of the Institute of Historical Research and a member of the Panel of the Heritage Memorial Fund, amongst other things.

The title, Heritage Now and Then, reveals the purpose of the talk to mark the 50th anniversary of the designation of the Suburb as a conservation area in 1969. The speaker took his audience on a trip through the history of

our built landscape; the different movements in this country affecting both development and redevelopment.

Looking at how we live in an urban context the speaker identified what he considered to be two periods of great disruption. The first was related to the consequences of the Industrial Revolution and then the spread of the railways.

The antidote to unplanned development in cities can be seen in St Petersburg, Washington DC, Paris and, closer to home, John

Nash's Regent's Park and Regent Street, while the movement against overcrowded and low quality housing for working families led to housing associations such as the Peabody Trust in 1862 creating decent urban accommodation.

In a rural setting Nash designed Blaise Hamlet for retired employees of the Quaker banker, John Scandrett Harford. Built around 1811, it is regarded by some as the original garden suburb.

Model estates for workers gave us, most famously, Port Sunlight and Bournville, while Ebenezer Howard and the garden city movement produced Letchworth, our own Suburb, and later Welwyn. Green spaces were preserved for London in places like Epping Forest and Hampstead Heath.

The 1900's brought more state intervention with various housing laws, and the need for 4 to 5 million homes after the war meant an investment in high-density housing estates. The Red Road Flats in Glasgow and Churchill Gardens in Pimlico

Highcliffe slab blocks, Alton West estate

were part of this effort; the Glasgow flats no longer exist but the Pimlico estate is now a conservation area with some blocks Grade II listed.

Meanwhile in Roehampton, the Alton West estate, with more Grade II listed towers, is a local example of Le Corbusier's *l'unité d'habitation – la Cité radieuse*. The 1946 New Town Act allowed for grander developments with Milton Keynes being the most famous example of such a development.

For James Stourton the second great disruption occurred post-war with the destruction of the built environment and loss of landscape between 1965 and 1985. The rise of car ownership, and the need to accommodate the car, along with a loss of sense of place gave rise to a great deal of redevelopment and new development.

Public disquiet at the loss of much loved buildings and green spaces gave rise to preservation movements, and so in places like

ADRIAN PINCHSTONE



Circular Cottage at Blaise Hamlet

Bath and Covent Garden, to name two famous cases, developments all over the country were stopped or reviewed.

There was reaction in the world of politics as well when a cross party alliance between Dick Crossman and Duncan Sandys helped the passage of the Civic Amenities Act of 1967, which

allowed for the creation of conservation areas such as ours.

Although the UK consistently builds fewer houses than it needs, with worries about quality as building regulations and standards are being relaxed, there are beacons of hope. The brown-field Accordia development in Cambridge demonstrates modern sustainable residential housing. The growing cohousing movement is another example of future possibilities; Marmalade Lane, again in Cambridge, was offered as a showcase for cohousing, again sustainable.

James Stourton took us through over two centuries of urban development in just under an hour, and made it possible to see our transient present in its context – the history before and the possible future beyond.

The present housing situation worries him greatly and he feels a solution needs someone in power to be interested – like a Crossman or Sandys – in fact, he said, "we need a crisis."

We went from crisis to cake as the event ended with thanks to the speaker and tea with the home-made cakes that are a Suburb ubiquity, and very tasty.



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