

The more hidden history of Watford



Russell's Farm, c1909. Picture: Watford Museum

by Martin T Brooks

SOME of the many historic buildings that make up the rich heritage of towns such as Watford can easily be found on its high street, such as St Mary's Church, dating back to the early 13th century at one end, an award-winning theatre opened in 1908 in the middle and the Westminster Bank Limited building built in 1834 at the other end.

Other historic sites and buildings, with their many stories to tell, are further afield and tucked away remembered only by the residents who have grown up near them and have heard the tales of these local features.

One of these stately homes and its associated estate is that of the Russell's House, which is hidden away atop a good size hill situated along Greenbank Road. This former dower house (a house inhabited by the widow of the estate-owner) was possibly constructed in 1718 by the third or fourth Earl of Essex as part of his family's Cassiobury estate.

Other notable inhabitants of this Grade II-listed building have included William Copeland, former Lord Mayor of London (1835-36) and owner of Stoke Potteries, London.

Copeland was also an admirer of the work of painter John Frederick Herring Sr, who was known for his paintings of fox hunting, scenes of rural life and horses. In 1830, William Copeland offered Herring a house on his estate and commissioned him to paint his own racehorses, which were stabled near the main house and let to run in the nearby fields, which would become the Goodwood Recreation Grounds.

This collection of paintings, many made of the Watford countryside, which Herring would have seen from the elevated views offered by the estate, were used on the well known "The Hunt" collection of earthenware produced in 1930.

Sayajirao Gaekwad III, The Maharaja of Baroda, was also an owner of the estate from the early 1930s until his death in 1939. The Maharaja (great ruler) served as head of Baroda, a state in present-day India, from 1875 to 1939, as part of the Gaekwad dynasty. On assuming the reins of government, he set about improving the lives of his subjects by enacting many judicial, agricultural, and social

reforms. During his residence in Russell's House, he made the acquaintance of many of the British aristocracy and was known for throwing lavish parties in the gardens of the estate and for the stable of fine racehorses he kept.

The unique vantage point of the estate's main house, being on top of a hill and overlooking the newly constructed Leavesden Aerodrome, helped it to play a crucial role in the war effort when it was used by the Home Guard searchlight unit to assist pilots in finding the airfield during night maneuvers. This use of the estate by the local Home Guard may have also been the basis for the creation of the television series *Dad's Army* as Jimmy Perry, a member of the Watford Home Guard, went on to co-write the series after possibly visiting the site.

The estates nearby fields and woodlands are now Goodwood Recreation Grounds and have over time created many new memories and stories for the residents whose homes were built up around it.

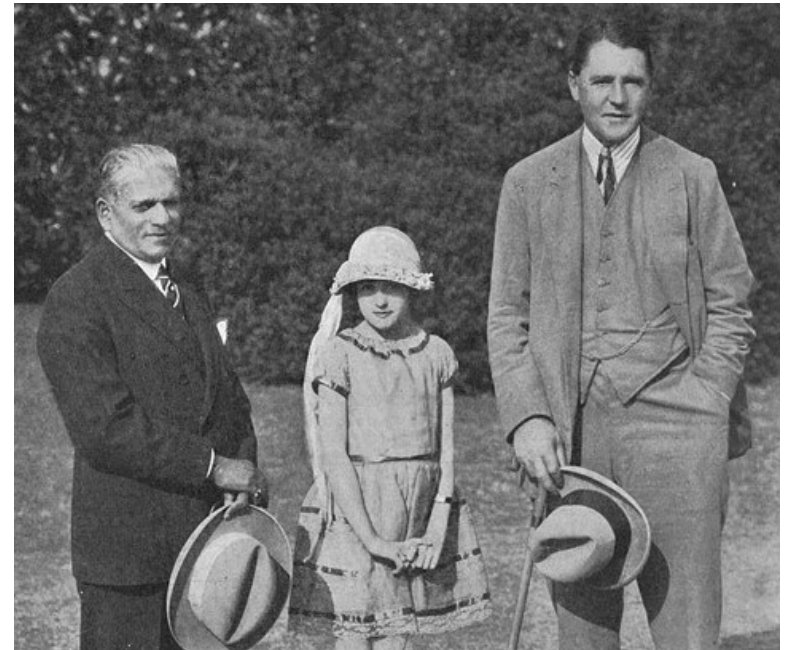
One such local lad is Razi Hassan who has lived next to the park since 1988, when he moved there with his parents at the age of 5, and who has many a fond memory of growing up there. He recalls: "Growing up next to, Greenbank, Goodwood Park, Russell's House and the Leavesden Aerodrome made up a childhood full of adventures and mischievousness for myself and my neighbourhood friends. Summer holidays are etched in mind for eternity."

Carrying on the tradition of storytelling that his grandfather started, and to inspire the imagination of his son and his friends, Razi created the idea of bringing to life some of the Goodwood's furry friends through fanciful stories to inspire children and adults alike.

Working with a team of illustrators and writers from the locally-based marketing company Mustri, Razi is looking forward to introducing the 'Good Wood Gang' to the local, and wider Watford communities.

Razi said about the upcoming book: "We don't want to give away too much just yet, but there will be wise old owls, wizardly trees and lots of mischievousness, not to mention a dragon!"

This is the type of local storytelling that has kept the memories of our neighbourhoods and communities alive and that ensures they will be around for some time to come.



The Maharajah of Baroda, Lady Pamela Smith and the Earl of Birkenhead at a garden party in July 1925. Picture: Watford Museum



The Fox Hunt by John Frederick Herring Sr, c1830



The Dragons Den, Goodwood Recreation Grounds, this year. Picture: Martin T Brooks



Carved bench, Goodwood Recreation Grounds. Picture: Stephen Danzig