

## FROM THE LOOKOUT POST

## EX LIBRIS

## MOLLY CASEY

I knew Molly for 30 years. But it didn't take me that long to discover her many gifts. I first came across her when I was as an editor of this journal and she provided us with her monthly column, *Watchdog*. She pulled no punches. She was passionate about what she chose to write. With Molly around there was no need for the sword; her pen did the work. She possessed a razor sharp mind and spotted details which others failed to notice. It was only earlier this year, at a CADRA committee meeting, she pointed out a simple but significant error in a document we were looking at: none of the rest of us had spotted it!

If eternal vigilance is the price of freedom then Molly never even blinked, let alone rested. Much will be written about Molly in this paper and elsewhere, but more importantly her legacy will be with us for many years. The face of Caversham, and indeed Reading, would have been very different without her.

Many of her efforts resulted in only small changes but the accumulative effect was immense. I may mention that the trial extension of the number 9 bus owed much to Molly. If our village is so much richer for having had Molly in our midst, if our lives have been made so much the better for her presence among us, then I am sure Caversham will want a permanent memento to remind us of this great individual who worked so diligently for us all over such a long period.

## CAVERSHAM COURT

It seems to me, therefore, most appropriate that we are in the process of examining a project, which would have interested Molly, and about which she would have had some strong opinions.

Caversham Court, and its gardens, have been a feature in Caversham for a thousand years. I will leave the history to others. It began as the rectory for St Peter's Church, let out by the Abbey at Notley to wealthy lay families. By the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century there was a substantial house on the site and the current structure of the garden was in place. . There followed a complete rebuilding programme in the 1840s when Mr. Simonds of the well-known Reading brewing family, bought the property and demolished the old house. He engaged A W Pugin as architect for the new house. Pugin had just completed the designs for St James Catholic Church next to the Forbury.

The Council acquired the property in 1933, demolished the Simonds house, and the grounds became public gardens for the pleasure of us all.

Unfortunately Caversham Court is now in a rather poor state of repair. Its main features, the Gazebo with its causeway, the Crinkle-crankle wall, the garden and even the trees themselves are all in need of urgent attention

The Council is concerned to secure Caversham Court's future. With the help of a £1.2 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and £0.4 million from the Council, its refurbishment is now a very real possibility. About 50 people attended CADRA's autumn meeting at the Baptist Church in early November. The history of the Court and the future plans were explained. Dr Carolyn Jenkins who is the Council Officer in charge of Parks and Open Spaces Development led the presentation.

The plan is to restore the Gazebo for public use, possibly incorporating a permanent exhibition. There will be a ferry and landing stage enabling visitors to leave their cars over the river, so easing parking problems around the Court. A jetty will also allow pleasure craft such as the Caversham Princess to make scheduled stops at Caversham Court. The 10 metre high Crinkle-crankle wall, which can be dated back to the 17<sup>th</sup>

century, will be restored. It is hoped it may be used for its original purpose, as a sheltered area for growing fruit trees, possibly specialising in rare and tender varieties. The yew hedge, planted in the 1700s, will receive much needed attention. The stable block will be restored and the public conveniences converted into a refreshment area with unisex toilets and baby changing facilities. The plan is that the Council should maintain the refurbished block and charities would be able to man the refreshment stall and so make money for their various causes.

There is already an on site gardener and guardian, Sara Kopp, to reduce the risk of vandalism and take care of the gardens. Sara will be delighted to talk to visitors to the gardens about the preparation work for the restoration programme that is underway. It seems that Reading Croquet Club will have the use of the great lawn in the evenings and they are going to offer free coaching to any youngsters who would like to come along. The Griffins have been badly vandalised. These will be restored. This gives me extra personal pleasure as my mother in law, who died this year, used to take my younger son, now 21, to see them at least weekly when he was a baby.

Indeed any of us who have lived in Caversham will have emotions and memories connected with the Court. Perhaps we will remember playing there as a child, perhaps it was a good place as a teenager to meet our friends, perhaps we found early romance in the shade of the trees with the river flowing by, perhaps we have more poignant memories and we are one of those who have a memorial tree in the garden.

This last is a difficult issue. The Council is well aware of the problem and wants to handle it on an individual basis and in a sensitive manner. Dr Jenkins is hoping to contact everyone who has concerns or ideas. In case she misses someone out, she has asked me to say she really would appreciate a call and has asked me to pass on her contact details. Please see the end of this article.

There is so much more to this plan. I think everyone at the meeting left feeling that here was something really positive and good for Caversham. There are plans to create a Friends of Caversham Court group. Please contact the Parks Department at the address below if you are interested in being informed about the group. The benefits to Caversham will be immense and the Council does want to hear from anyone who has concerns or suggestions.

Returning to Molly. I am sure she would have wanted to keep a close eye on the plans and make a positive contribution. Let us continue her excellent work and make the Caversham Court restoration project one that we are all involved in. Here is a unique opportunity for each of us to be part of the next stage in the thousand-year history of Caversham Court.

*Contact details for Caversham Court restoration:*

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