

The Indoor Cricket Pitch of Parkgate

(Or, the Rise and Fall of the Dive)

HITLER & MUSSOLINI

These two have finally decided me to go in for what I have long wanted...

AN INDOOR CRICKET PITCH, for use with nets in Winter and on wet days.

Construction has begun and is well under way. It will, I hope, be a fine room – 100 feet long by 22 feet wide & nine feet high. It will be brilliantly lit by artificial light & will be well but very carefully ventilated...rather necessary, for it will be underground! It will have a roof of steel, covered by concrete reinforced & again on top of that by a few feet of earth [as I should hate to spoil the grass and let it be unsightly]; the walls will be of 20 inch reinforced water-proof concrete...

...I am pleased to advise you that I have now sold the Parkgate Swimming Baths: but I hope the boys will still enjoy the use of them. The Indoor Cricket Pitch called for some immediate capital...and anyhow, I'm a Schoolmaster.

This announcement was in a letter of April 1939 from AMD Grenfell, the Headmaster of Mostyn House School to the parents of their pupils, proclaiming the construction of an indoor cricket pitch, which (purely a co-incidentally you understand...) was of a VERY solid construction.

You have to remember that the First World War was known at the time as “The War to End All Wars” - which sadly we know it didn't. Many - far *too* many - families had lost relatives in that war, and were not happy to hear from some (a certain Winston Churchill, for one) that there might be another war. Such proclamations seemed to some to render the sacrifice of so many lives pointless. Often those who dared to say so were branded as “war mongers” and were not popular, and this was probably the reason for the rather tentative and slightly jocular announcement.

It was in this atmosphere that the construction of an air raid shelter was probably not the best thing to announce - but it did (eventually) benefit us, the Phoenix Shooters Association as this was the beginning of what became known as the “Geoffrey Place Range.”

Later, in August of that year The Headmaster again wrote to say that the Home Office had confirmed that the Indoor Cricket Pitch could probably “withstand a bomb of up to 50lbs in weight” and that it could shelter “280 people” making it clear that while war had not been declared, AMD Grenfell felt that it might be a good idea to obtain official approval for an air raid shelter - just in case.....



The Cricket pitch became known by both staff and pupils as “The Dive” and was used many times during the war when air raid warnings were sounded. There were three tiers of bunks in two rows down the centre of the Dive, and chairs all round the walls. There were labels on the walls so that everyone knew where they were supposed to go, and an empty chair could represent a missing pupil. There was an air raid siren on the roof of the school, so there was little excuse for not hearing it.

As far as I can tell no bombs fell near enough to the school to cause damage, although apparently one fell in

Parkgate Road Neston, but failed to explode. It is also interesting that the nearby Burton Marshes contained a “Bombing decoy” where fires were lit once the first wave of bombers bound for Liverpool had passed, in the hope the next wave would bomb the marsh instead of Liverpool.



The way down

If we now zip along to early 2006, Keith Roberts (a very good pistol shot incidentally) became the school’s site manager, and therefore gained access to all parts of the school. He had to take some kit to store in the Dive one day, and asked Mary -who was then the school nurse and head of shooting - to come with him. Once they had opened the huge steel door and switched on what remained of the lighting, Mary went through the accumulated rubbish “stored” there, to find that the Dive was about the right length for a 25 yard shooting range. This was important, as the schools old indoor air gun range was becoming decrepit, and would have cost a great deal to repair.



Behind the green door ?



What was found



The old Shooting Room



Mike McCartney presenting the cheque to our Chairman and his wife

Discussions followed with Suzi Grenfell the headmistress, who was extremely helpful and gave us (Phoenix) the go-ahead to see what we could do. Janet Grenfell, Suzi’s mother, (and widow of Julian Grenfell, who had been the Headmaster until his death) was also very supportive and encouraging. In view of the disruption we must have caused, this was exceptional. It was a measure of their enthusiasm that “The Friends of Mostyn House ” raised funds for the club to help with the work, with the cheque being presented by Mike McCartney.

by artificial light” Is a phrase which today would definitely attract the attention of the Advertising Standards Agency - It appears there were twenty single light bulbs each in their own enamelled lightshade, and a few bulkhead lights yet even when fitted with 100 watt bulbs (as we did) the effect could never be called “brilliant.” You can judge for yourself by looking at this photo taken without flash - I think it was a 15 second exposure - although not all the lights had been replaced when it was taken.

Despite “20 inch reinforced water-proof concrete” the Dive was subject to some seepage, requiring a pump to empty any accumulated water from a small sump, but

In the letter of 1939 the Dive is described as “*Brilliantly lit*



Brilliant ?

The sump corner, showing seepage



damp was still a problem as the ventilation had long since been blocked off. Particularly obnoxious (or just “noxious”?) was a pile of coconut matting that had become wet, and had rotted. It stank. We eventually had to scoop it out in buckets.

That “20 Inches” of concrete gave us one of the major hurdles - we HAD to have a ventilation exit at the target end of the range, and we found that nothing we could wield would do anything but chip away at it. Michael Eveleigh Junior came to the rescue by borrowing a friend's mini digger with a “pecker” attached, but even then it took him over a week to break through and cut a hole big enough for the ventilation outlet pipe.



The breakthrough



The list of members, ex-members and friends of members who worked so hard to clear, clean and convert the Dive into a shooting range was VERY long, as was the job. We had it cleared and dried out by September, then the design and construction phase started - including cutting that hole through the concrete. This had to be completed by September when the playing fields were required again.

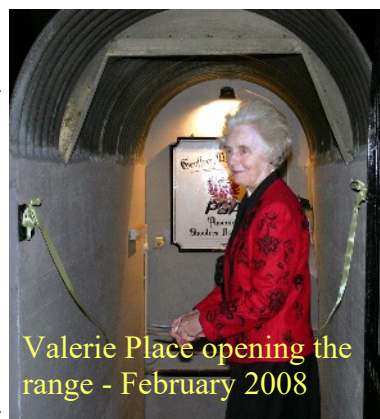


The ventilation excavation starts

Sections concrete bombproof?



Then on 27th February 2008, Mrs Valerie Place cut the ribbon at our opening ceremony. Now comes the reason for the name. Geoffrey Place was a master at the school, and a historian of some note; he was the President of the Preparatory Schools Rifle Association, of which Mostyn House school was a founding member in 1905.



Valerie Place opening the range - February 2008

Looking back now I am honestly, truly amazed at what the members of

Phoenix had done in those two years. Everyone who contributed energy, strength, know-how, money, expertise, time, materials, has very good reason to be very proud of the range.

We had six firing points, (either prone or from a set of tables), and had a small but useful clubroom at the back. Thus the School had a far better shooting range than before, and Phoenix had access to an indoor 25 yard range and clubroom - with parking facilities as well.



Then came 2010. The economy was not in a good state and as a sad result, the very difficult decision was made to close the school as it was no longer economically viable. It had been in Parkgate since 1855, and was very much a part of the history and life of the village. The Grenfell family had run the school since 1890, and now Suzi Grenfell was faced with what must have been one of the most painful decisions ever - to end

all that. I can quite clearly remember getting a 'phone call from Mary who was in tears; initially all she could say was "It's over!" and it was.

The school closed, and the land and premises were up for sale, but once again the Grenfell family supported us and gave us full access to the premises and the range until contracts were finally exchanged. We tried hard to persuade the developers that the range was of considerable historical interest; we had preserved most of the artefacts and signs in the Dive, and had had visitors coming to see it, but in vain.



Finally in July of 2013, we had to leave as the new owners PJ Livesey had taken over the site, so we took what we could, leaving the Dive in a very much better condition than it was when we first saw it in 2006.

So, what happened to the Dive then? We were told that it would be filled in with sympathetic materials so that should any archaeologist in the future want to excavate it, it would still be possible. Since there was always seepage which required constant pumping during our tenure, we somehow doubt it. There are a number of houses built over the range, and if they try to dig down deeper than about two feet in their back gardens, they'll probably meet reinforced concrete - and we know how tough that is!

.....And the epitaph? A nearby close built on the school site has been named "Phoenix Court."



What follows is a fairly random series of pictures in very rough chronological order showing the Dive as it was, the work that went into building the Geoffrey Place Range, and the results.



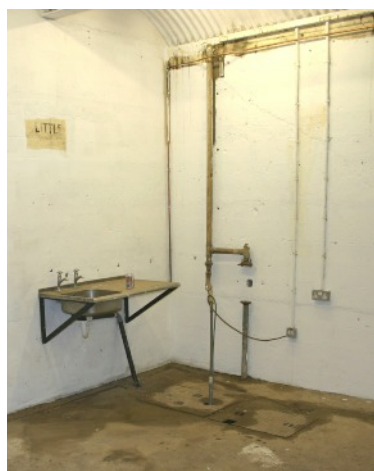
The entrance



Not exactly inviting.



School desks, a trifle mouldy





The original
sump pump
- renovated



The ventilator outlet

.... And so, it was.....



Looking back and wishing will do no-one any good. Looking back and enjoying what we had at the time, and keeping a little of the History of Mostyn House School, and thus of Parkgate and the history of target shooting - well, that's a completely different matter. We can't change the past but we CAN enjoy our memories, and maybe treat ourselves to a little glow of pride in what Phoenix achieved? Sadly the closure of the Dive meant the end of the tradition of target shooting in Parkgate - after over a century.

We have kept numerous other photographs which were taken to preserve the images of the Dive - in particular the notices either painted on the walls or on wooden plaques, but other than these, our memories, one or two notices (and Phoenix Close,) there is little now left to show of the **"THE DIVE."**

