



Friends of Firbeck Hall

NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 9 DECEMBER 2010

Chairman's Report

Our organisation has entered a quiet phase as we await further news from the new owner regarding developments at the Hall. In the light of the positive relationship we have established, we have elected to adopt a supportive position to the new owner and give the necessary time and space for Mr Cooper and his team to develop plans for the building and grounds.

Mr Cooper has informed us that he intends to develop Firbeck Hall into his private residence. We also know that a series of discussions have been held with RMBC and we are informed by council staff that the outcome of dialogue with the planning and conservation departments has been constructive. We understand that a substantial team of professionals has been engaged to assess the scale of the work involved in restoring the building and to develop plans. We look forward to being able to receive and share information with our members and the wider community in due course.

Our region is currently experiencing the most severe winter weather for a generation and we are concerned about the effect of this on the already dilapidated structure. I very much hope that Firbeck Hall will not have to suffer for much longer.

2010 has been an eventful year in Firbeck Hall's colourful history and 2011 could see it enter a more positive era.

I would like to thank our members and the committee for remaining so motivated and enthusiastic throughout 2010 and wish everyone a very happy Christmas and New Year.

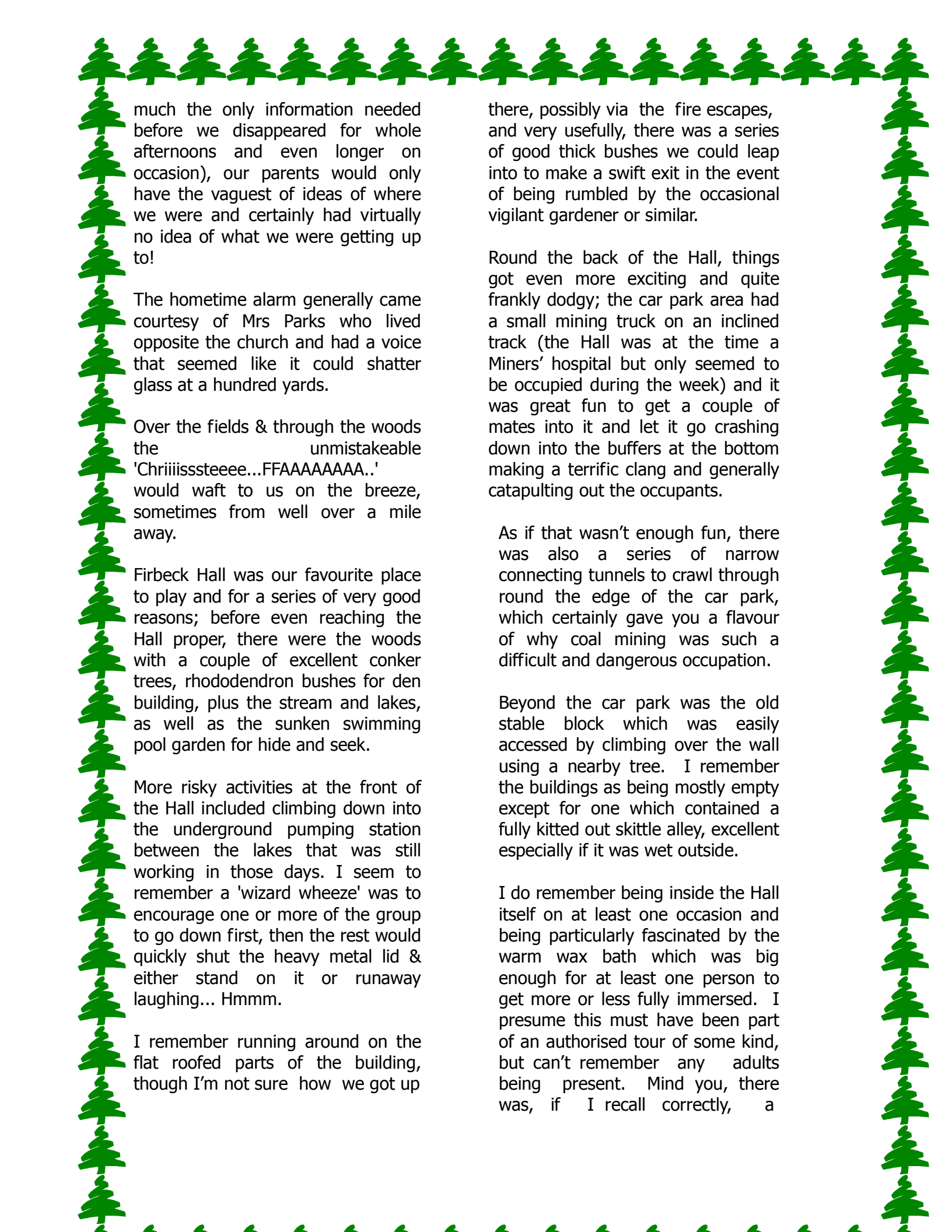
Simon Drohan
December 2010

Firbeck Hall Fun in the 70's (by *John Phillips (aged 48 and a quarter)*).

Whilst I must first state that the following is filtered through nearly 40 years of my fairly suspect memory, and as such would certainly not stand up in court; my memories of the fun we had in and around Firbeck Hall are still written in vivid colour even today.

In a nutshell, the place was the best adventure playground it is possible to imagine for our little group in an era when youngsters certainly seemed to have a great deal more freedom to roam than they have today.

Most days, when we were 'out playing' (which I recall was pretty



much the only information needed before we disappeared for whole afternoons and even longer on occasion), our parents would only have the vaguest of ideas of where we were and certainly had virtually no idea of what we were getting up to!

The hometime alarm generally came courtesy of Mrs Parks who lived opposite the church and had a voice that seemed like it could shatter glass at a hundred yards.

Over the fields & through the woods the unmistakable 'Chriiissteeee...FFAAAAAAA..' would waft to us on the breeze, sometimes from well over a mile away.

Firbeck Hall was our favourite place to play and for a series of very good reasons; before even reaching the Hall proper, there were the woods with a couple of excellent conker trees, rhododendron bushes for den building, plus the stream and lakes, as well as the sunken swimming pool garden for hide and seek.

More risky activities at the front of the Hall included climbing down into the underground pumping station between the lakes that was still working in those days. I seem to remember a 'wizard wheeze' was to encourage one or more of the group to go down first, then the rest would quickly shut the heavy metal lid & either stand on it or runaway laughing... Hmmm.

I remember running around on the flat roofed parts of the building, though I'm not sure how we got up

there, possibly via the fire escapes, and very usefully, there was a series of good thick bushes we could leap into to make a swift exit in the event of being rumbled by the occasional vigilant gardener or similar.

Round the back of the Hall, things got even more exciting and quite frankly dodgy; the car park area had a small mining truck on an inclined track (the Hall was at the time a Miners' hospital but only seemed to be occupied during the week) and it was great fun to get a couple of mates into it and let it go crashing down into the buffers at the bottom making a terrific clang and generally catapulting out the occupants.

As if that wasn't enough fun, there was also a series of narrow connecting tunnels to crawl through round the edge of the car park, which certainly gave you a flavour of why coal mining was such a difficult and dangerous occupation.

Beyond the car park was the old stable block which was easily accessed by climbing over the wall using a nearby tree. I remember the buildings as being mostly empty except for one which contained a fully kitted out skittle alley, excellent especially if it was wet outside.

I do remember being inside the Hall itself on at least one occasion and being particularly fascinated by the warm wax bath which was big enough for at least one person to get more or less fully immersed. I presume this must have been part of an authorised tour of some kind, but can't remember any adults being present. Mind you, there was, if I recall correctly, a

particularly loose sash window on the first floor up the fire escape hmmm!

(This is a light-hearted article from many years ago and the Committee wish to point out they do not condone any trespassing in Firbeck Hall and point out that strict security is in place at all times).

Amelia Staniforth's Journal

A journal, recording the years from 1782 to about 1785 written by Amelia Staniforth who lived at Firbeck Hall, has been shown to the FoFH Committee. It is a fascinating documentation of life in a Country House in the eighteenth century. The weather is recorded meticulously by Amelia, who was about 60 when she wrote the journal. Amelia and her sister Henrietta, seem to drink much tea (sage tea at one point) and they play the game of Quadrille in the evenings. Apparently this was a popular game in France in the early 18th century and was particularly enjoyed by ladies. Little walks are taken and rides in the coach. General St Leger visited the sisters frequently as did Henry Gally from Langold. Mr White of Wallingwells is mentioned too and a gentleman travels from Wallingwells Hall to tune the spinet at Firbeck Hall for evening entertainment. There is mention of fishing in the grounds of Firbeck Hall on one occasion but nothing is caught.

We hope to record more interesting snippets from the journal in our next Newsletter. For further information please contact Valerie Oxley.

Rt Hon Kevin Barron MP

Our local MP, the Rt Hon Kevin Barron has written to Friends of Firbeck Hall thanking us for our last Newsletter and enclosing a copy

transcript of a debate he had in January 1988 with the then Health Minister Edwina Currie.

Unfortunately it runs to six pages, which makes it too long to include in the Newsletter but the online link is:


<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1988/jan/13/firbeck-hospital>

In this debate he is asking that the proposed closure of Firbeck Hall Rehabilitation Centre is reconsidered. Interestingly both his father and brother were in-patients there. It offered unique, inspirational opportunities for patients but sadly despite his lengthy arguments for keeping the hospital, it was closed in 1991, some three years later, and Firbeck Hall has not been lived in since that date.

The Mistletoe Bough *(by Derek & Enid Bailey)*



European Mistletoe
(*Viscum album*)



The word mistletoe is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words 'mistel' (dung) and 'tan' (twig). It is thought that the plant is named after bird droppings on a branch.

It's strange life cycle led to beliefs that it possessed powerful properties. Some believed that it was sacred and others that it induced fertility. ('Some women wore it around their necks, or on their arms' wrote William Coles in 1657). Certainly it has some medical attributes. There was a general belief that it kept evil and witchcraft away, that it could open a lock and, used as a divining rod, could find treasure!

In England it grew abundantly in the counties of the Severn and in Herefordshire was most common on apple trees. Also, in the gardens of Holm Lacey Court, close to Hereford, it could be found on birch, hawthorn, pear, lime, apple, locust, red buckeye and zelcova. Herefordshire people gathered mistletoe from hawthorns and maples to hang up for 'good luck throughout the year'. Poplar mistletoe was coveted.

Mistletoe does grow in our local region but it is rare. It is quite possible that it grew in the grounds of Firbeck Hall, possibly on lime trees. Birds are known to spread it, often through droppings, but it can be propagated.

In England mistletoe is associated with Christmas and would no doubt have been part of the festivities at Firbeck Hall.

An old carol contains the lines:

'Holly, and ivy, mistletoe
Give me a red apple and let me go'

A Herefordshire custom was to cut a mistletoe bough on New Year's Eve and

it was' hung up in state as the clock strikes twelve.' The old one, which hung throughout the year was taken down and burnt. Dressed with nuts, apples and ribbons, the mistletoe bough was suspended in the centre of the room. It could be lowered for a lady to pick up a berry after she had been kissed. The berry was then thrown over her left shoulder. In Worcestershire the bough was hung on Christmas Day and left till the following Christmas.

Two old names for mistletoe are 'Churchman's Greetings' and 'Kiss and Go'. Whatever your beliefs, the mistletoe with its particular shaping and translucent berries is a beautiful plant and will always have a special place at Christmas.

References have all been taken from 'The Englishman's Flora' by Geoffrey Grigson.

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To help save costs, if any of our members receiving this Newsletter by post or hand-delivered now have an email address, please would they let any member of the Committee know (details below).

*The observations and opinions expressed in the various articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Editor or of the FoFH committee and their accuracy cannot be verified.*

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