

Little Plumstead: 'The Walled Garden' Project

by Richard Hobbs

Little Plumstead Hall, which sadly burnt down in 2016, was built in 1889 for the Rev Charles Johnston. It was built just to the west of a much earlier building at the edge of parkland and a lake created in the early 19th century by the Rev John Penrice, who had been appointed Rector of Little Plumstead in December 1821 when he also became Lord of the Manor. The estate was put up for sale on Friday 10th August 1855. The sale particulars, which are housed in the Norfolk Record Office, includes the following: "Near the hall and contiguous to the village church which here forms an interesting object, there is an exceedingly prolific walled-in garden, well planted, and the lofty walls clothed with choice fruit trees." [Fig 1].

The Hall and estate were purchased by Norfolk County Council to be used as a home for the mentally handicapped. This followed the Mental Deficiency Act of 1929. After the National Health Service Act of 1948 it became Little

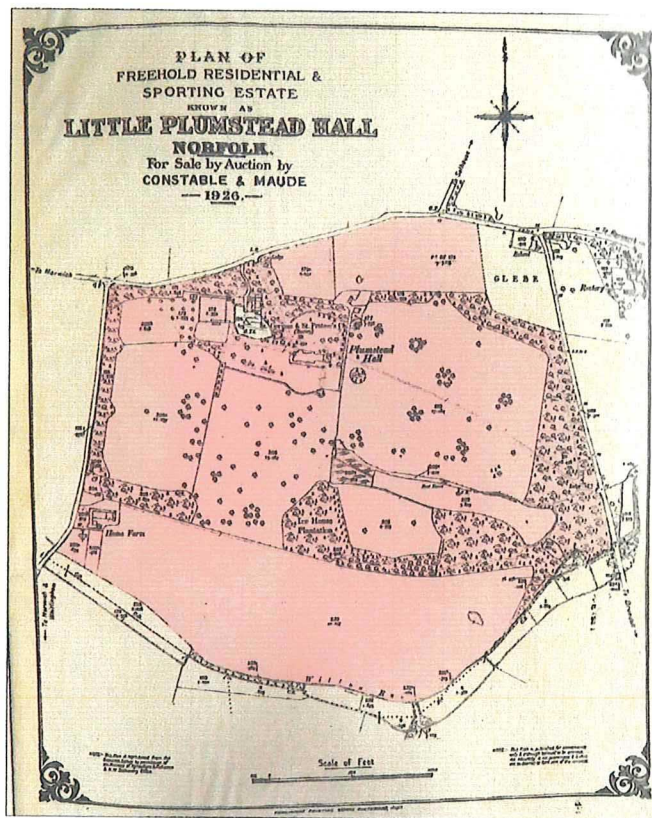


Fig 1. A sale map from 1926. Courtesy of the Norfolk Record Office.

Plumstead Hospital [Fig 2] which, at its largest, looked after nearly a thousand patients. In the early days patients worked in the garden and on the farm. The farm was sold off in the early 1960s. Over the past 15 years the hospital has been sold to developers and around 400 homes have now been built on the old estate. All the woodland and most of the many established trees remain within



Fig 2. Little Plumstead Hospital. Courtesy Archant.

the now large housing estate. The area is protected by a blanket tree preservation order (TPO).

The walled garden was used by the hospital right until the end [Fig 3]. It was used extensively by the patients for rehabilitation through gardening work. The walled garden environment was therapeutic and relaxing and provided a space for social events for hospital patients and staff as well as residents from the villages. Today the walled garden is in a sad state and an almost impenetrable jungle. The garden is 64 by 43 metres. It has an internal wall cutting off the most eastern 16.8 metres.

The walls are in reasonable condition and are in the process of being restored [Fig 4]. There are two frost doors, one on the south wall and another close by on the west. The original bothy/potting shed remains in a somewhat modified condition but the glass has long since gone. The garden has woodland to the north, the church yard and wall to the east and houses to the south. Adjacent to the west wall is what is known as the Paupers Plot where residents of the Hospital Community who died without family or resources for burial elsewhere were interred. This, together with the intrinsic value of the walled garden and its history, makes it a very special place.

Little Plumstead, Great Plumstead and Thorpe End have all lost their shops and post offices. Early 2017 saw the beginnings of a passionate group of volunteers who formed a Community Benefit Society with the aim of building a shop and café in a renovated Victorian walled garden. Public consultation very clearly showed the demand for a community-owned shop. The café will become a convenient meeting place and the walled garden a super setting for community events. In July 2019 the land was passed to the Parish Council from the developer and a lease from the Council to the Community Benefit Society is about to be signed. Building the shop and café is projected to start in the next couple of months but the wall restorations are already under way.

Two interesting problems have cropped

up. The first is that there are a number of trees on the site which are protected by a TPO. In order to restore the area as a working kitchen it would best if the trees in the western part of the site were removed. The second problem is trickier and more intriguing. A survey of the soil showed that it has slightly elevated levels of lead. Surprisingly the lead levels are very similar throughout the site and through the first metre of the soil profile. They are just over the recommended levels for food production. It has been suggested that the lead has come from many years of the use of lead pipes. However, lead is relatively insoluble. Lead paint is the most common form of contamination but cannot explain the uniformity across the site. Red lead which was used to kill anything from rats to green fly is a possibility. The suggested way to remedy this is to remove and



Fig 3. When the hospital garden was still used by patients.

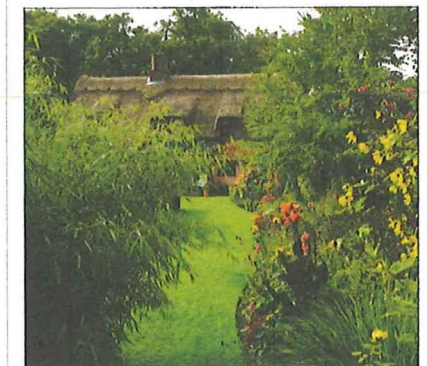


Fig 4. The garden wall 2019.

replace the top 60 cms of soil. This is prohibitively expensive.

Quite a number of allotments have elevated levels of lead and some of those in the north east of England have been investigated by a group at Newcastle University. They found that even where soil lead was ten times the recommended level this did not result in elevated levels within the vegetables produced or in the blood of those who ate them. The bioavailability of lead depends upon how it is chemically bound as well as the condition of the soil. It was hoped that fruit and vegetables from the site could be sold but this may not be possible.

This is an exciting project for a small community and although it may be some time before it looks like an original Victorian kitchen garden the important features will be safe for the future.



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