

August 2010

The Xylonite War Memorial

As you know the Society held an Exhibition called 'The Xylonite Factory' in 2008. The exhibition was very successful and it created a lot of interest. A great many people both in and out of the Society had memories of Xylonite; they may have worked there themselves or they may have had family who worked there.

The British Xylonite Company (BXL), including Halex, Bissell Appliances and other trade names was a big influence in the development of Highams Park. It was the major employer in the area and many of its employees lived in Highams Park. It was a plastics manufacturer and started off in Hackney and Homerton in the 1860s. Owing to its success and expansion in 1895 new premises were sought and Jack's Farm in Larkshall Road (then known as Hale End Road) was purchased and a new factory was built. The business continued to flourish and expand until the early 1970s when the decision by its then American owners was taken to close the site.

During both World Wars men from the Xylonite Factory joined the Forces. Sadly a number lost their lives and in 1920 a memorial with plaques listing the names of the men who lost their lives was erected, followed by a further plaque after the Second World War. On every Armistice Day those men who lost their lives in both wars were commemorated.

The factory closed in the early 1970s and the site redeveloped and the stone memorial and the plaques removed. Although it was probably no secret at the time the new location of the memorial and the plaques was lost or forgotten over the years. Mary Dunhill in her book 'A History of Highams Park and Hale End' states that the whereabouts was unknown.

When we were researching the Xylonite Exhibition the Committee agreed that it was not right that the names of the men who lost their lives in the Wars should be forgotten. We resolved therefore to 1) try and locate the Memorial and the plaques and 2) if at all possible restore them all to Highams Park where they belonged. Rodney Smith one of our members, and Ian Wade, a former soldier who takes a particular interest in War Memorials independently and simultaneously through their own connections found that the memorial and its plaques had been transferred to another BXL plant in Brantham near Manningtree on the Essex/Suffolk borders and installed at that factory. (It now appears that the Monument itself was not transferred, presumably because Brantham had its own monument which was identical to the Hale End Monument, and the Highams Park plaques were simply attached to the Brantham Monument.)

We now knew where the plaques had been taken to. However we found that the Brantham site itself had closed a couple of years previously and the site was now derelict awaiting redevelopment as a new housing estate. The Monument itself still

stood but the plaques were missing. Subsequent enquiries were made and it appeared that one of the local parish councilors had removed the plaques for safekeeping and the plaques were now safely under lock and key in the custody of a local farmer.

We now knew the location of the plaques. We then asked the Parish council to return the plaques to us. It was not as easy as that; the plaques, the council argued were not theirs to hand over. They belonged to the new site owner. Also it was arguable that being historic relics English Heritage may have some say in their future as may possibly the Imperial War Museum. In the event the owners were happy to let the Society take them. English Heritage was only interested in the plaques if they or the monument had been 'listed'. They were not listed. Also the Imperial War museum were interested in the names etc but otherwise had no jurisdiction over them.

The Parish Council courteously agreed to allow us to take the plaques and they have now returned home to Highams Park where they belong. They were displayed at the recent AGM and this was the first time they have been seen in public in Highams Park for nearly forty years.

The question now remains as to how to display them. Suggestions had been made to display them at the proposed Tesco site which was their original location. The Committee feels this would be entirely inappropriate: the Tesco proposal is a contentious one and is in any case far from settled. A busy retail area would not be appropriate.

A suggestion was made to display them on the Millennium clock. We feel that any outside location would be insecure and would tempt vandalism.

All Saints Church was suggested. Although inside the Memorial was originally installed in a private factory in a non-secular setting. It would not be appropriate to house them now in a religious building.

The best choice the Committee feels is Hale End Library. Lorna Lee, Manager of Libraries and Museums for LBWF fully supports this. The plaques would be inside and secure. They would be protected by the Library burglar alarm. The Library is a public Building and open to all. We feel that the setting is suitable. Above all they would be secure and inside. Only this week thieves have stolen similar plaques from a park in Manchester and it is a sad fact of life that plaques like these are targeted by thieves.

We propose to make an application for a grant to the North Chingford Community Council to fund the installation. We won't hear until November whether or not we have been successful.

We hope you find this good news. If you have any comments or suggestions about this project I would be pleased to hear them. Email andrewgolds48@hotmail.co.uk

Ian Wade's website for more information about all the names on the memorials is www.highamparkwarmemorial.co.uk

The site refers to the Memorial as the Higham's Park war Memorial. It should more correctly be known as the British Xylonite War Memorial (Highams Park)