

Swimmers

The

HIDDEN CAMBRIDGE

TEMPLES, GARDENS AND CHARACTERS

HODSON'S FOLLY: 'SWIMMERS TEMPLE'

Hodson's Folly is not listed, but is known as a Building of Local Interest (BLI). The Folly is a small classical building in a walled garden. Hodson's Folly is thought to have been built circa 1897, by Rattee and Kett stonemasons, a Cambridge Business which appears to have ceased existence in 2011 after around 167 years of trading (1844). They built Cambridge University Library in the 1930s, completely rebuilt Arundel Castle and worked on Ely Cathedral and Westminster Abbey amongst many other significant buildings. They were commissioned by the intriguing John Hodson, butler of Pembroke College, following a grant of permission by Cambridge Corporation (Borough Engineer and Surveyor), supposedly so he could keep a watchful eye on his daughters bathing in the river whilst overseeing his nearby land and enterprises.

Hodson's Folly is a high quality exorbitantly lavish example of a building of its type. The building sports a coat of arms granted to Hodson in 1896, showing a swan in a rain storm with the saying 'fait bien' on the underside, or going well. The folly and its garden are in many ways a Cambridge college in miniature.

Hodson's Folly and garden on the common land of Coe Fen have been controversial in the past. The Council and possibly Pemberton Landholdings did bring legal action against Hodson, for allegedly trespassing and causing damage to the adjacent landholdings in the 1880's. However, Hodson won the cases brought against him including the Councils case in 1886, which cost them nearly £40 about 120 days of a craftsman wage at the time. At the time Cambridge Town Council asked the town clerk, Edmond Foster, to resign over the Hodson case, he didn't.

THE INTRIGUING JOHN HODSON

John Hodson was born in Liverpool, Childwall, in 1840. By 1861 he was a carpenter, living with his Uncle at Pembroke College. His Uncle was College Butler, and his widowed mother was the butler's housekeeper. In 1871 Hodson was his Uncle's assistant; in 1881 his Uncle had retired. 1881 seems to have been an eventful year for John Hodson. Following the retirement of his Uncle he was butler at Pembroke College earning £125 a year 'modern equivalent £6,039 or in 1881 equivalent to a crafts persons annual wage! In 1881 his mother Elizabeth Hodson died and he had a one year old daughter Bessie Waterloo Hodson. A few years later in 1884 John Hodson inherited from his uncle Thomas Smith, the former butler of Pembroke College, £8,300 about 66 years of a butlers wage (modern equivalent £401,000) plus four freehold properties, one leasehold and all the household contents including his stuffed birds, wines and spirits.

Things soon went awry as Hodson's fortunes collapsed according to his niece Mrs E Fordham following the Whittaker Wright railway scam in 1900, which was investments for building the Bakerloo Line in London. Following this in 1901 Hodson sold his garden for £300, the Folly and possibly his house 'Waterloo House' on Lensfield Road to Frederick Dale the local brewery magnate (Dale's brewery Gwydir Street off Mill Road), the Dale's family used the garden from this time and it was accepted that no-one intruded. In 1907 he was living at number 7 Albert Almhouse on Hills Road and in 1908 he died.



HODSON'S FOLLY GARDEN

Hodson's Garden is a small enclosed area on Coe Fen opposite the former ladies bathing place, which was originally called Bunker's Hill Island, a small island separated from Coe Fen by a ditch. John Hodson acquired it in 1868 from William Fuller for £55 primarily as a garden but potentially a secured fishing spot, fish hatchery and to grow Osier: a willow used in basket making or indeed willow eel traps. Fuller seems to have purchased the land with its established garden in 1840 proving the garden was well established. In 1867 four boys were caught scrumping apples and either had to pay 5s each, or face seven days imprisonment?

A substantial summerhouse was present at the end of the 19th century but disappears from mapping at the beginning of the 20th century. Hodson's Folly and the present garden sit within an enclosed area much smaller than the original garden. Its original brick walls were supposedly erected circa 1904; these may have been constructed to cordon off the area to increase privacy for the Dale family.

The provenance of the picture (shown) of the brewer Col. Dale (Owner of Dale's Brewery, Gwydir Street off Mill Road), has been difficult to determine, it is suggested the picture was taken in 1903, Col. Dale would have been 4 or 5 years old as he died in 1969 aged 71. It has been established that following John Hodson's 'loss of fortune' the Dale's did purchase the land, which backs up the picture as circa 1903, does this mean that the child in the picture is Col. Dale? The City Council eventually acquired the site in 1936, the part near the river remained walled, and the rest was in essence added to Coe Fen.

SWIMMING IN THE RIVER CAM

The early history of swimming here is shrouded in mystery. While swimming was seen as a useful military skill, it's thought that few people in Britain were good swimmers before the 16th century. The danger of venturing into deep water prompted the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge in 1571 to forbid undergraduates from entering the water: "...if any scholar should go into any river, pool or other water in the county of Cambridge, by day or night, he should .. be sharply and severely whipped publicly'.

For centuries, until the public pool at Jesus Green was constructed in 1923, people swam in the River Cam. On a stretch of the river between Sheep's Green and Coe Fen, ten minutes' walk from the city centre. In the 19th and much of the 20th century hundreds of local children took their first strokes in a side stream known at the Snobs.

"Children had to show they could swim confidently in the Snobs before they were allowed to swim in the main river where they would be out of their depth."

At the town bathing places men and women had separate spots until well after the Second World War. Men and boys had long been able to swim on Sheep's Green, but in 1896 the city authorities provided bathing sheds for women in a more secluded spot opposite Hodson's Folly.

'All summer, Sheep's Green and Coe Fen were pink with boys, as naked as God made them; for bathing drawers did not exist then: or at least, not on Sheep's Green.' Gwen Raverat, *Period Piece* (1890s). Due to this and the ladies being given facilities for bathing close at hand, there were many letters to the press urging the necessity for bathing costumes or trunks for men, but these were not made compulsory until 1909.

Sources: Jean Perraton; *Swimming against the Stream* (Jon Carpenter Publishing, 2005)

