

Fleetville Community Centre New Building Project

Summary of the history of the site and building

Until 1896 the site was part of a field on the north side of Hatfield Road; one of three – the others being on the south side of the road – which were owned by St Albans School. At this time the School decided to sell its fields in order to help fund the construction of new buildings at the school, which had previously been accommodated in the Lady Chapel, and then the Gateway.

The north field and one south field (on which Morrison's now stands) were purchased by Mr Thomas E Smith for a printing factory, and three parallel roads for employee housing. In 1906, the County Council acquired space for a school fronting Tess Road (now Woodstock Road South) and Royal Road. The first stage of the school opened in 1908. The demand for houses fell away in competition with new homes being built further west by other developers, and no homes materialised on the west side of Royal Road. Only six were built on the east side. Fleet House only arrived in the 1930s.

A dispute between Mr Smith and developers of Burnham Road, were not resolved and a connection was therefore not made between Royal and Burnham roads, restricting the former to a cul-de-sac. Later, a house was built across the gap, so preventing a subsequent change of mind.

In 1913 the benevolent Mr Charles Woollam, who had already donated the Victoria Playing Field to the city and a field in Harpenden Road to St Albans School, with which he had a connection, decided to do the same for Fleetville. He purchased the remainder of the field to the west of Royal Road, on which it had been intended to build houses, and donated it to the city as a "pleasure ground" or recreational park for the benefit of the people of Fleetville.

Not much was done to improve the surface until after WW1, although the boundary was bricked and railed. It even survived the pressure to have the field ploughed up for wartime allotments.

The only permanent building ever permitted arrived in 1938, when a small public toilets building (now Beech Tree Cafe) was erected by the city council.

In the same year preparations for possible war were advanced by the city council, especially following the Berlin Conference in September 1938. Two sets of zig-

zag trenches were excavated, one set at the north end of the rec, and the other near to Royal Road. However, they were not lined and became unusable following wet weather. During 1939 the council received permission from the government to deepen the shelters to 9 feet, lay concrete floors, brick walls, and install electricity and heating.

The county council wanted to dig trenches on the rec for the school but only wanted cheaper six foot trenches. The city council refused permission unless they were the full nine feet. Instead, the county council reinforced the roofs of two of the school cloakrooms, fixed netting to the lower halves of windows, and had blast walls constructed opposite all of the external doors.. The parents were angry that their children would be put at risk by leaving them in the building if there was an air attack; the county council relented and excavated trenches to the city's specification, accessed via tunnels from Royal Road – the road end of the tunnels are today part of the Community Centre's parking area.

As a result of the government's push to persuade women to work in factories, it provided funding to the county councils for the building of wartime nurseries. As several hundred women worked on shell casings at the Ballito Hosiery Mills (the site now occupied by Morrison's) the city council offered part of the rec for a nursery for as long as required by the wartime situation.

In 1942, therefore, the county council had a concrete slab laid (or used the existing slab over the tunnels and subterranean shelters) and had a British Concrete Federation standard reinforced concrete building placed on top. In order to protect the little children and the adults inside two standard air raid shelters were constructed, one at each end of the building.

Following the end of the war, there were regular communications between the city and county councils during the next 25 years; the city requesting the county to remove its building so that the rec could be restored to full recreational use. The city also required the school to cease using the rec for its games lessons, instead taking the classes over to Sandfield Secondary Modern School (now Fleetville Junior School) field. Which seemed an odd request, given that the rec was, well, a rec!

The county's use of the nursery building also included housing up to two Fleetville Junior School classes. This space requirement was not diminished by the opening of Fleetville's overflow school, Oakwood JMI in 1957, and was only deemed surplus to requirements once the junior department of Fleetville JMI

School moved into the vacated Sandfield School building on the south side of Hatfield Road.

In 1979, just when it was anticipated that the building would finally be demolished, the county council and a group of Fleetville residents met: and the result was a new use for the premises, the Fleetville Community Centre, which still uses the temporary concrete structure which was anticipated to have a lifespan of five to ten years.