

The Castles of Carsick Hill

Although Ranmoor is particularly noted for its Victorian style buildings, it can boast several less-well documented examples dating from the Edwardian era: *Bishopscroft*, *Quarters*, *Tainby*, *Rydal* and *Snaithing Garth* were all built later and illustrate "Arts & Crafts" style decoration.



One in particular, *The Croft* at 7, Stratford Road, came to our attention recently when asked for information on its special garden. This example was designed and built c.1909-12 by a prestigious Liverpool-based architectural practice, Briggs, Wolstonholme and Thornely. The garden design and landscaping which carefully complemented the house was undertaken by Backhouses & Sons of York, at the time, an equally respected horticultural design company,



A Characteristic Arts & Crafts treatment using natural materials: the lower storey is faced in local stone from the Bell Hagg Quarry contrasting with the roughcast walls above. The roof is constructed of Brighthouse stone slates

The original brief had clearly been to design the house and garden as a unified whole in an Arts & Craft style; one that was particularly arranged to occupy a hill-top position commanding extensive views across the natural landscape of the Porter Valley. At the time it was considered significant enough to be featured in the 1912 Architects and Builders Journal and, more recently, it merited a mention in the revised 2012 Pevsner guide.

Quite clearly the project was conceived by someone with some taste and considerable means, without the need to feel obliged to confine the search to local contractors. The person

responsible for commissioning this large house in this case was James Neill, an ex-accountant who had founded his tool company twelve years earlier with just nine men and a boy. Despite having no training in metallurgy, he was, by 1909, well on the way to owning one of the biggest tool-making firms in Europe largely as a result of patenting a special composite steel hacksaw blade marketed under the "Eclipse" brand. *The Croft* would have represented an appropriate residence for such a successful entrepreneur.

A surprising fact is that the road network linking Stratford Road, Carsick Hill Crescent and Snaithing Park Road had lain virtually derelict for the previous 34 years. Having owned much of the surrounding land here for most of the nineteenth century, in 1872 the Pye-Smith family placed Carsick Hill farm and its adjacent fields up for sale. This 23 acre tract of land was advertised as being "*well worth the attention of Capitalists, Gentlemen disposed to build and others*" and passed through several sets of hands before being acquired by the new Carsick Hill Land Society founded in 1876. The Societies' trustees were then obliged to pre-install a network of 40 foot-wide roads and associated drainage before any building work could begin. This would also have been vital in providing access to this rather remote area on the western edge of the city.

The Land Society estate was divided into 39 plots of less than half an acre and initially seemed to attract a mix of local industrialists and professional men; names including William Brittain, John Bingham, Thomas Cocker, Edward Tozer, and Ernest Reuss. But despite the original intention to attract modest home owners to this area it eventually appears that most individuals were involved in speculating and had no real interest in building properties for their own occupation. Instead the main interest was to link adjacent plots to create much larger sections on which to build their "castles". Edward Porter, the only original member, a wine merchant with a business in Sheffield city centre, immediately reserved four plots, (about three acres), on which he built *Dalebrook*. Elizabeth Birks, heiress of Rawsons Brewery, took six plots (nearly 11 acres) and built *Carsick Grange*.

Both mansions had been erected by 1881 and it seems there was little subsequent interest. Now those members with no plans to build their own house were saddled with land which was not generating any income, and were only too ready to sell it on. By 1904 the 22 original members had dwindled to nine. The Carsick Hill Land Society had misjudged the public mood and had not recognized that the steam had already gone out of the housing

market in Ranmoor.



Carsick Grange

A Victorian style "castle" built in 1881 for Elizabeth Birks of Rawsons Brewery

So as the more affluent Edwardian era dawned, James Neill became the accidental beneficiary of the 1876 Land Society's work thirty four years earlier. Five half-acre plots were still available and could be combined into a suitably large site on which to place his substantial house. The elegant network of curved roads, with sewage and drainage already plumbed-in, was well connected by road to the rest of Ranmoor and offered the added bonus for motor car owners now this was becoming a prime mode of transport. And because most of the surrounding land had remained vacant on this western edge of Sheffield he would still be able to enjoy uninterrupted views across the Porter valley in a rural setting which, as yet, remained gloriously undeveloped.

A Bolt from the Blue at Lodge Moor



Seventy years ago on the 10th of December 1955 the Lodge Moor Hospital found itself making front-page news in the national newspapers, but not for medical reasons. A United States Air Force F-84F Thunderstreak jet fighter had plunged out of the sky, and buried itself in the hospital roof, narrowly missing the clock tower, and leaving a trail of destruction in its wake after coming to rest only yards from 1000 gallons of petrol.

The 24 year old pilot 1st. Lt. Roy Evans had taken off on a training flight from his base at RAF Sculthorpe in Norfolk earlier that day but while flying over the Peak District he had suffered "a flame-out" and been forced to eject at 3,500 feet after unsuccessfully attempting

to relight his engine. He himself landed safely near Hathersage and was able to walk into the local police station and report that he'd bailed out.

The Thunderstreak meanwhile continued to glide north-eastwards on its remorseless downward path until minutes later, shortly after five in the afternoon, it struck the roof of North Ward 2 at Lodge Moor Hospital. Reports state that after tearing the roof off the ward the aircraft demolished a corridor, ploughed through the sanitary block and finally burst into flames in a quadrangle ten yards from the petrol tank.

Very sadly there was one fatality, Mrs Elsie Murdoch, who had been due to go home two days later. Seven others were injured. The fire brigade attended and by 7.30pm it was reported that all fires were under control.

"*Secret Jet Hits Hospital*" claimed the Daily Mirror in its tantalising front-page headline the following day. However, the jet was no secret; it was the swept-wing version of the F-84 which had been in operation with the USAF since 1947..

What caused the fuss was the revelation afterwards that the plane had been carrying live ammunition in its wings and this could have presented a much greater risk to life and limb had the ammunition exploded on impact or whilst the rescue operation was taking place.

The matter was raised in the House by MPs from Sheffield and Rotherham. A question to the Prime Minister was answered by the Under Secretary for Air who explained that the weight of the "full war load" of ammunition was there to balance the plane correctly in flight. Furthermore the ammunition was carried in boxes and the guns were not charged. Apparently It wasn't possible to substitute a different sort of ballast such as sand but this didn't satisfy the questioners. Why wasn't the PM here to answer? Shouldn't training flights with live ammunition be carried out over uninhabited areas? What might have happened if the plane had crashed into the furnace in a steel works?

The USAF top brass certainly took the incident very seriously. A brigadier, several colonels and 50 technical staff descended on Lodge Moor Hospital in the following days.

A sad coda to the event was the reported death of the pilot in Morocco three years later. Lt. Roy Evans once again bailed out, but this time didn't survive.

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