

AVENUE OF REMEMBRANCE PROJECT



Avenue of Remembrance near Glen Avenue

Lexden History Group's current project is to record the history of the Avenue of Remembrance, constructed in 1933, and research those dedicated on the special bronze plaques (*example right*) placed on railings around trees. They honour the town's leading citizens, war heroes and many others.

We will be launching a book in the autumn of 2018 and it should fill a large gap in the history of Colchester.

Liz White has already started research on the plaques and says it is fascinating to find more about the lives of people in Colchester from as early as 1805, each one being commemorated by their families. Some very interesting facts have been already been unearthed!



The list of names is very long and if you wish to know more about those who were commemorated on the Avenue of Remembrance or have any information on family members, please contact Lexden History Group.

Help with this mammoth task would be welcomed. Not all names give up their secrets easily, but we will try!

There is a general misunderstanding that the Avenue of Remembrance only reaches as far as North Station Road but it actually stretches from Lexden Road in the west to Greenstead Road in the east. Cymbeline Way is from the junction of Lexden Road with London Road to Water Lane – what is now called Sheepen Road. Colne Bank Avenue continues from there to North Station Road but it has been severed by the building of a large roundabout and West Way which reduced the number of trees by almost by half. Cowdray Avenue goes from North Station Road to Ipswich Road and St Andrew’s Avenue from there to Greenstead Road – which joins the large Greenstead roundabout.

Looking at original documents it appears that many dedicated trees were in Cymbeline Way but there were a good number along Colne Bank Avenue (Sheepen Road to North Station Road) and could easily be confused as being part of Cymbeline Way. A number were allocated between North Station Road and Ipswich Road. It was reported at the time that there was “a considerable number of Limes and Cherries in Cowdray Avenue (Eastern end) that can be allocated as Memorial Trees.” However, only a couple of trees were dedicated in St Andrew’s Avenue. With advice from the Roads Beautifying Association, 750 trees were planted (some visible on the right of the photograph *right*) but only just under 300 were dedicated which would explain why there were not plaques to be seen all the way along the Avenue of Remembrance.



Some research could be carried out to plot the trees in the different areas to see if they were dedicated by those who lived very locally, ie, Lexden end of Cymbeline Way, dedicated by those from Lexden Heath, London Road, Straight Road, etc, or Colne Bank Avenue and Cowdray Avenue dedicated to those whose families lived around North Station Road, Bergholt Road, Mile End Road, etc. If this were to be so it would indicate that families were interested in visiting their “special” tree.

Research so far has been very interesting and revealing some remarkable facts about the people commemorated on the bronze plaques. There were many men killed in the First World War. A couple of them were only 16 years old and many others have no known grave, lost in the churned mud on the Somme. Many of these are also commemorated in the magnificent memorials in France. A good number were members of the Essex Regiment whilst others enlisted into the regiments that were in Colchester at the time. Others had emigrated with their families to Canada and joined the Canadian Forces and were remembered some 15 years later by their relatives who remained in Colchester. There were also the older men in their late thirties who had enlisted after 1916 when the carnage had become so great that there were few younger men left to fight. Although some were too young to have a career, most men had left a job or profession in the town: plumber, baker, farm labourer, photographer, (the son of an internationally renowned photographer, William Gill, who had his premises in Head Street and Sir Isaac’s Walk), printer, blacksmith hammerman, syrup maker, a dance band musician (Harry Sanger) - the list goes on. A few men came from wealthy professional families and were educated at public school but war takes all regardless.



Not all men were killed in action, some received devastating wounds and lingered in the Casualty Clearing Stations, others became ill - tuberculosis was common - and conditions such as appendicitis were deadly in war zones. Some were transferred back home, only to be posted on recovery back to the Front some months

Members of Lexden History Group holding plaques at the Avenue of Remembrance in October 2014

later. They did not all die at the Front in France or Belgium but in Turkey, Greece, Egypt, India and other countries. Some were shot down in the early aircraft of the Royal Flying Corps or sank with their Royal Navy colleagues following a torpedo attack. All their stories are sad as wives, children, parents and friends were left to mourn their loss, but there are still some of their descendants living locally and we would love to contact them.

Ex-mayors, headmasters, surveyors, farmers, even an Astronomer Royal, medical practitioners (how many people know that Sigourney Weaver's great grandfather is commemorated on one of the plaques?), rose growers (Ben Cant), brewers, merchants, engineers, clerics, magistrates, founders of well-known local businesses, and many others are remembered by plaques. Sometimes their sons, killed in the War, are also commemorated on plaques. Others are distinguished men and their wives who moved to Colchester in their declining years after many years of devoted service to the country. Children were "given" trees, often those whose families were closely connected with the building of the road and many Girl Guide Companies subscribed to trees.

The History of the Avenue of Remembrance

is interesting and starts with the usual local government plans to ease increasing congestion in the town. The proposed by-pass had been the subject of "discussion and conjecture" and the total costs of £292,000 seem negligible today especially as the works were extensive. Huge amounts were excavated, transported, tipped and spread (*right - working near Glen Avenue*). Two bridges, one over the River Colne and the other over the LNER line were built and a new bathing pool (*below*) replaced the old one. Gradients, marshy ground, surface drainage, extra concrete reinforcements on embankments, sewer diversions and many other obstacles and complications were overcome. Many trees at Lexden Springs had to be cut down, but 750 trees were planted along the new road, "many of them in areas hitherto plain and unattractive".



Nearly 300 local people and organisations each subscribed 30 shillings (£1.50) to dedicate a tree. (For some families this could have been a week's wages.) Each tree was surrounded by a wrought iron guard to which the plaque, inscribed with the name of the person commemorated, was fastened. One section commemorated servicemen who died in the First World War with another for former citizens, including 25 former mayors. An avenue of flowering cherry trees in Colne Bank Avenue was known as Girl Guide



Avenue as each local Guide Company subscribed to a tree in honour of the Movement. Another was called the Children's Avenue. The grand project was opened with due ceremony just after noon on Thursday 29th June 1933 by Viscount Ullswater (Ex-Speaker, House of Commons) and Jean Pye, "the Mayor's little daughter".

Even in 1935 Harold Collins, the Borough Engineer said that "What the congestion of the town would have been without the construction of the Bypass it is difficult to imagine."

Over the years this important Colchester memorial declined and even the carved signs at either end of the road disappeared (*picture below left*). Many of the bronze plaques were stolen and sold at militaria fairs or

simply for scrap. A local scrap dealer fortunately recognised them and returned them to the Council. They were put in store for years which prevented further pilfering. It was agreed that any remaining plaques should be removed to preserve them from damage or souvenir hunters.



Pictures above left 1933 and right 2017

Years later in 1996 Cllr Christopher Arnold, supported by Cllr Sonia Lewis, proposed the restoration of the Avenue of Remembrance with the hope of replacing and displaying the memorial plaques. He said, “.... This is a part of the Borough’s heritage which should be better known and cherished. Many of the trees were planted in memory of people who made outstanding contributions to the history of Colchester’s 20th century and we should do our utmost to ensure that their memorial is spruced up so that the 21st century remembers them too.”

After various meetings it was agreed that the garden at North Station Roundabout should be used to build a memorial to “beautify the corner and house the 8½ metres of bronze plaques”. The Colchester Civic Society members were great supporters and Peter Luxmore, their Vice Chairman, carved another Avenue of Remembrance sign to replace one that had been stolen. This was inaugurated on 16th April 1997 on the verge of St Andrew’s Avenue at the rear of Greenstead Court. It matched the sign already erected the previous year near Glen Avenue, Lexden. The cutting of the first sod took place on 22nd April 1998 followed by an evening reception in the Mayoral Suite at the Town Hall. Mr John Welham of Colliers agreed to donate the bricks for building. Students from Colchester Institute constructed the wall which was



completed in July 1998. The new large plaques were on the wall by 3rd October and shrubs and trees were planted in time for the official opening at 10.30 am on Saturday 17 October 1998. More landscaping continued over the next few months to further enhance the area.

The council put out an appeal for the families of people commemorated on the plaques to come forward and claim those which had been removed. Any that were not claimed were put on sale at a minimum donation of £10 each to raise funds to pay for the memorial wall. Although some lost plaques have been recovered, out of the many plaques originally made, the council now has just 34.

The work goes on to either recover or locate the lost plaques but in the meantime the research continues to unearth interesting facts about the people of Colchester.

1946 Ordnance Survey map (sheet 149) showing the by-pass with trees

