Wolverhampton Archaeology Group

Project No 89

The WW2 observation tower at Marsh Park, Brierley Hill and a brief glimpse at the park's history

Site Director: Clive Westwood

Date: January 2025

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2024, Wolverhampton Archaeology Group was approached by Jim Galloway from Dudley Council to help The Friends of Marsh Park locate what they believed to be foundations of an observation tower from WW2.

Work to improve the park was being undertaken by contractors on behalf of Dudley Council and the Friends wanted to commemorate WW2 by uncovering the tower foundations and have an interpretation panel next to the site explaining its significance to the people of Brierley Hill and visitors to the area.

A site visit was arranged for the following week and the area was pointed out to us by way of a couple of broken bricks at right angles to each other and the remainder, an area underneath the grass that felt solid when using a steel probe. The area involved had been measured at about 4x4 metres square using the probe.

An agreed start date was arranged for Sunday 12th January 2025 whereby the area would be stripped of the patchy grass and excavated to uncover the foundations just underneath the surface.

We also felt it would be useful to dig a 1x1 metre square test pit on the highest flattest part of the hill to get a feel for the activity that had occurred on the site over the years the area has been in use considering that clay and coal extraction had played a prominent part in the history of this place.

During the week preceding the dig, the weather was very cold with significant freezing of the ground taking place and thawing of the ground did not occur. When the day arrived the ground was absolutely solid! However, we persevered!

LOCATION

Brierley Hill is a town and electoral ward in the Metropolitan Borough of Dudley, West Midlands. It is about 3 miles south of Dudley and a mile north of Stourbridge.

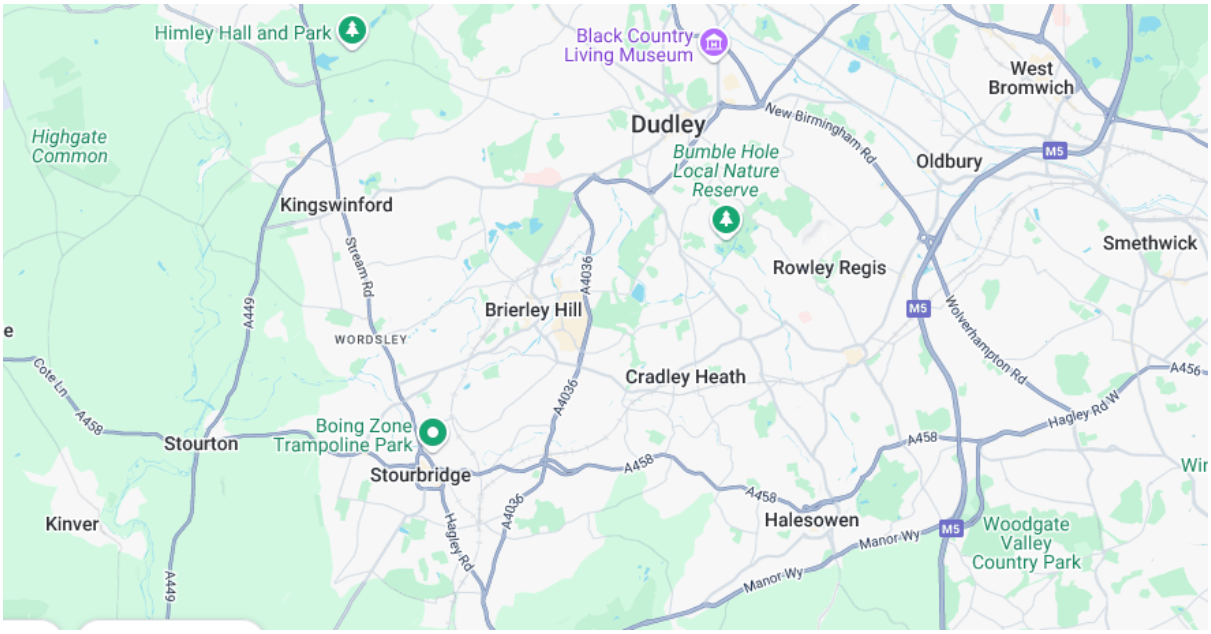


Figure 1. Location of Brierley Hill, West Midlands.

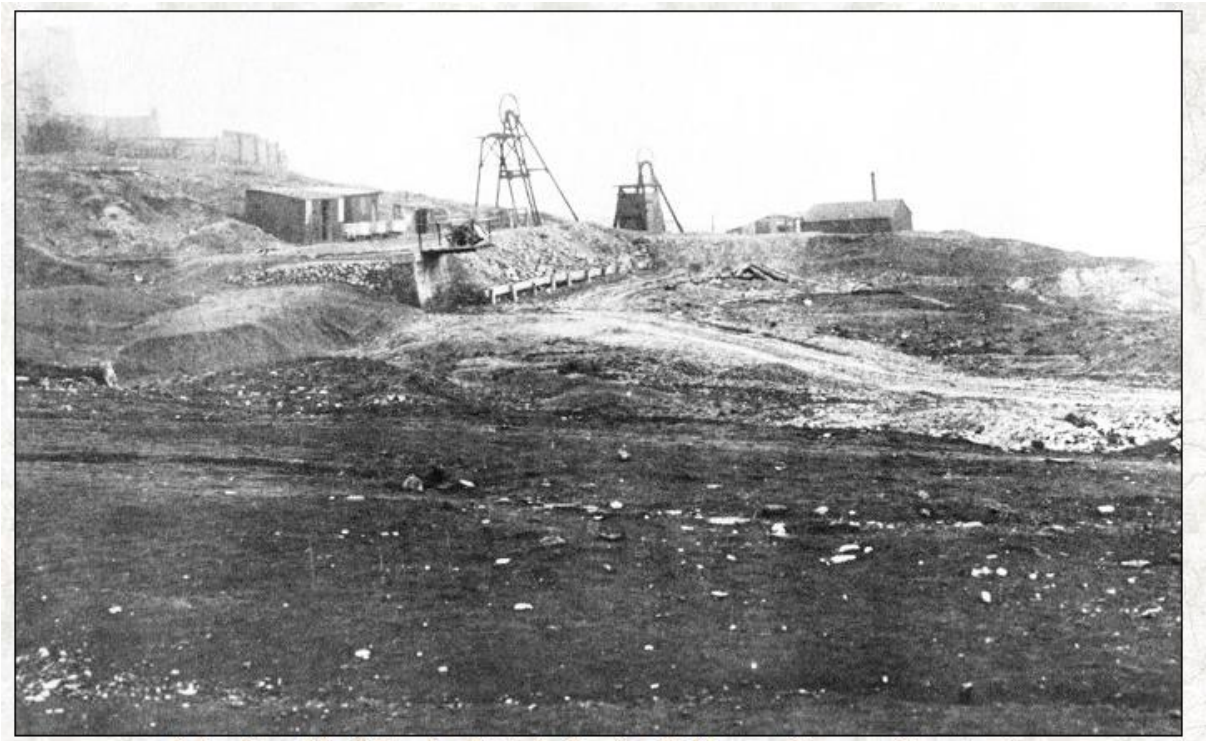
Marsh Park is to the SW of the High Street and adjacent to St Michael's Church.

Figure 2. Location of Marsh Park (area of interest arrowed).

The park itself sits on a high ridge (also known as Church Hill) with magnificent views overlooking the S, SW, W and NW areas. To the east, the church of St Michael sits on an even higher summit about 15metres taller than the park.

HISTORY

The area which was to become the park was used for coal mining and fireclay extraction during the late 18th and 19th centuries creating a huge waste tip which added to the height of the ridge quite considerably. The coal was used to fire ironwork furnaces and the fireclay was used to line these and other furnaces appertaining to the glass industry as it was very resistant to high temperatures.



Salop Street No. 2 Fireclay Pit in the London Fields area. From an old postcard.

Fireclay Mines in Dudley in 1896:

Mine	Manager	Minerals	People Underground	Surface Workers
Brettell Lane, Brierley hill.	Trotter, Haines & Corbett	Fireclay	14	5
Clattershall, Brettell Lane, Stourbridge.	Bowens Limited	Fireclay	15	4
Crown, Amblecote.	E. J. & J. Pearson	Fireclay	15	2
Dibdale, Lower Gornal.	T. E. Jackson	Fireclay, Pyrites	38	15
Freehold, Lye.	William Cox	Fireclay	3	1
Moor Lane, Brierley Hill.	John Hall & Company	Fireclay	17	9

Figure 3. An example of a fireclay mine in nearby Dudley and even in 1896 this area (Brettell Lane) was still involved in its mining.

Figure 4. Church Hill with disused fireclay shaft marked (centre). OS map circa 1900.

At the end of the 19th century when all these minerals were running out the whole area was becoming a waste tip. The hill though did have its uses because it was a social meeting point on a Sunday afternoon when locals would meet and gather to discuss the week's events before church. It was also a place for local celebrations especially in 1887 and 1897 when there were celebrations for Queen Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilee with a huge beacon bonfire which could be seen for miles around.

The park was opened in 1921 thanks to the generous gift of land from Ernest Marsh (of Marsh and Baxter fame, holders of a Royal Warrant from George V to supply York hams). Before opening, the park had to be made safe with the two pit shafts needing to be filled in and debris from the site removed. Much of the work was to be undertaken by unemployed ex servicemen who had come home from the Great War and because of the economic situation at the time were unable to find work.

Over the next few years, improvements were made to the park including a bowling green and pavilion, a Heroes' Avenue which consisted of the planting of trees and small gardens to commemorate the fallen soldiers of local families, a bandstand and children's corner.

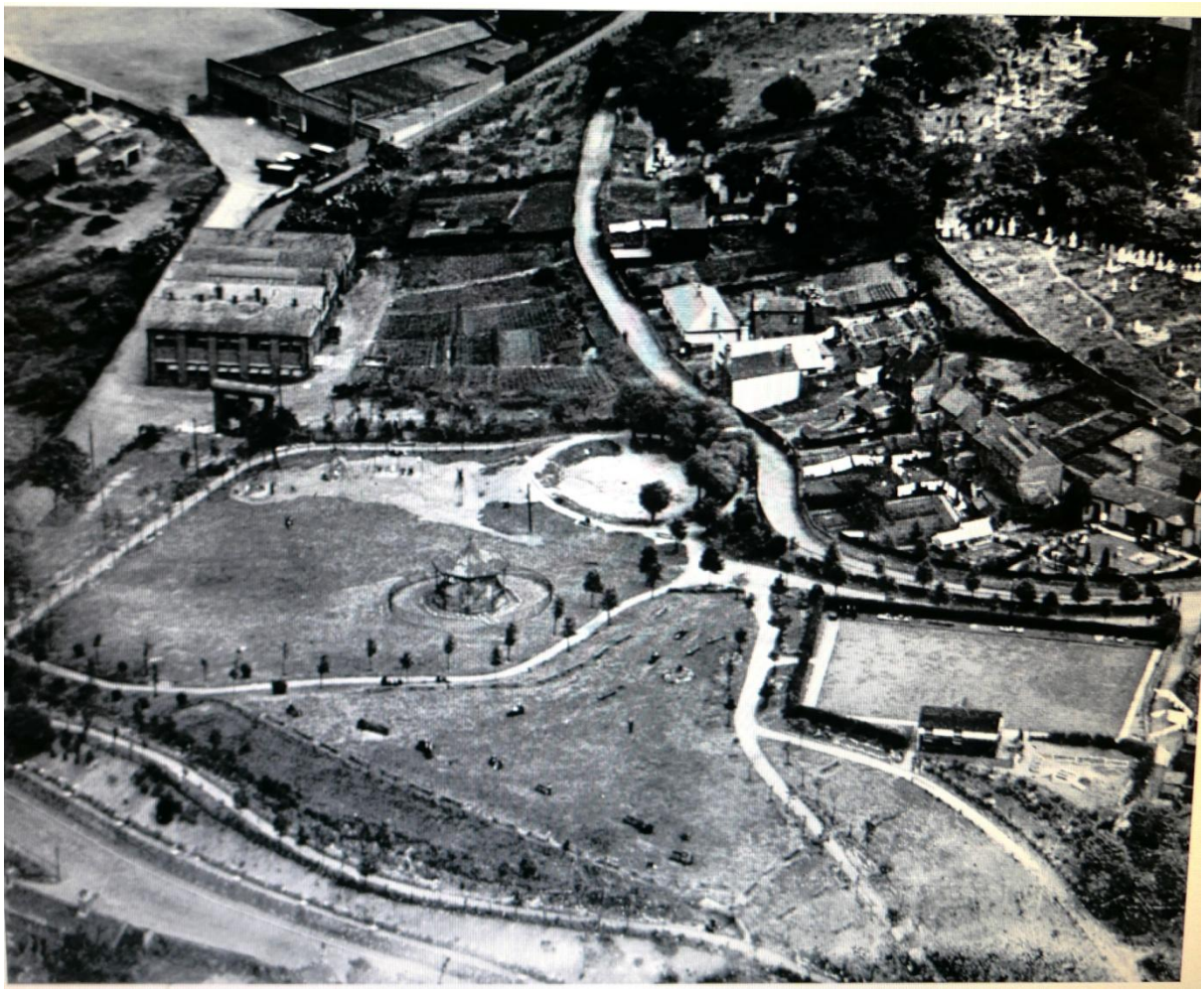
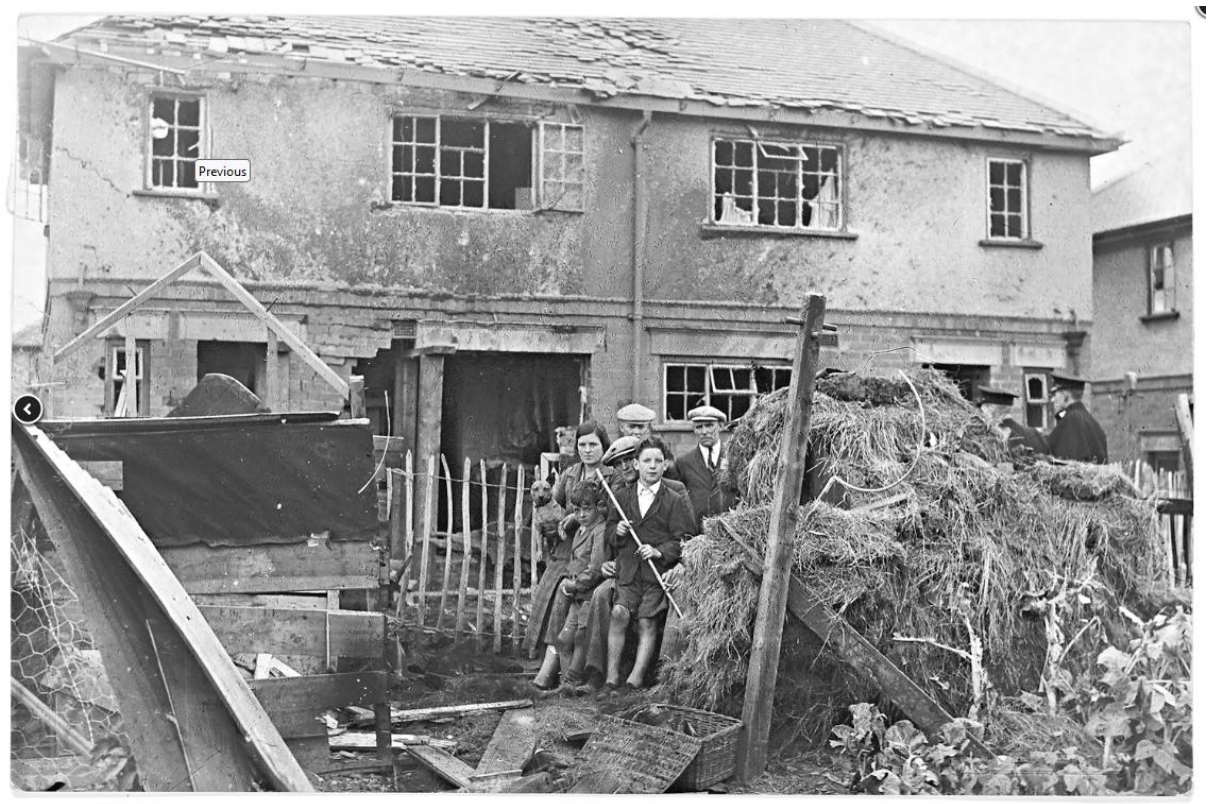


Figure 5. Marsh Park, 1931 showing the bandstand, Bowling Green, pavilion and planted trees. (Courtesy English Heritage).

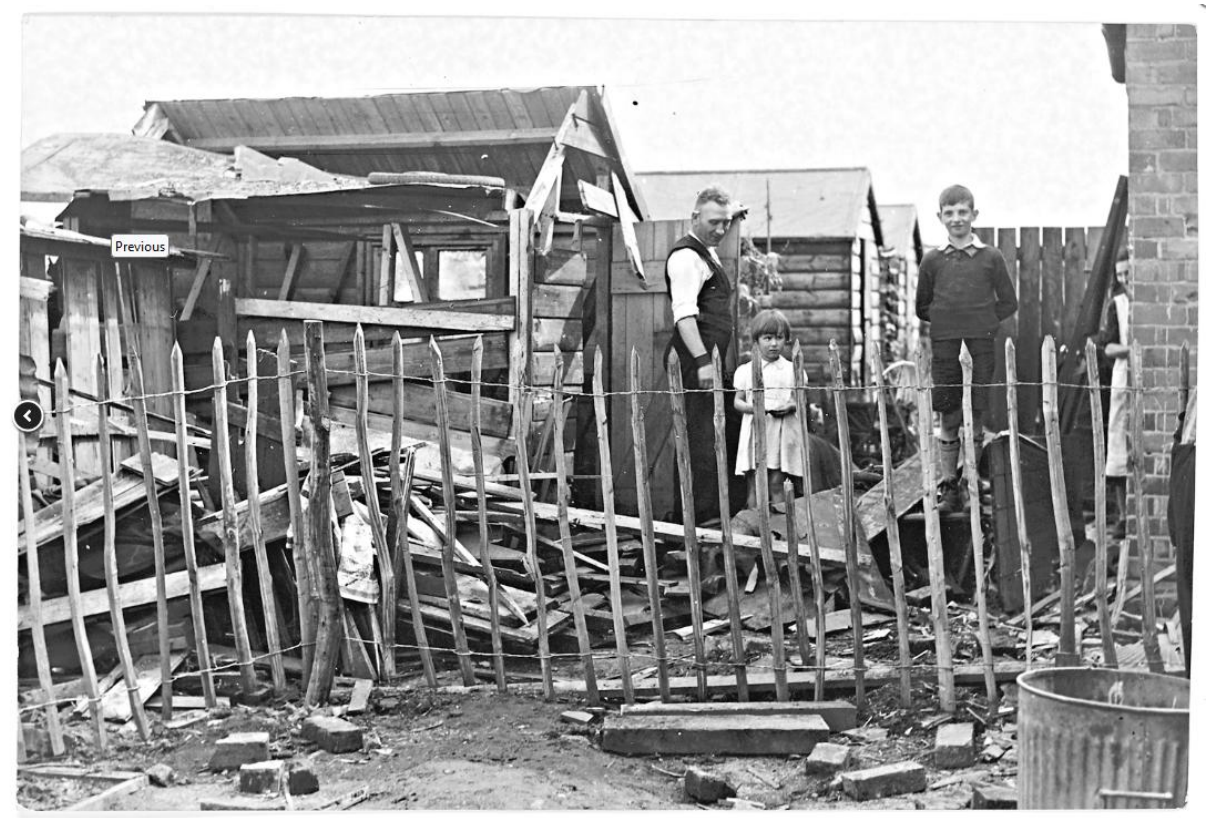
Due to its superb elevated location, just before WW2 started, it was decided to erect an observation tower in the park (August 1938) as part of the perceived aerial threat to the UK; observers could spot enemy planes and pass information to anti aircraft units to take appropriate action. After the war ended, it was demolished maybe sometime in the 1950's.

The area of Brierley Hill was not immune to damage from the air when in August 1940 an air raid caused destruction in Bryce Road to the NW of the town.



Bryce Road, Brierley HillBryce Road, Brierley Hill

Figure 6. Damage in Bryce Road from an air raid.



Bryce Road, Brierley HillBryce Road, Brierley Hill

Figure 7. More damaged property in Bryce Road.

In March 1944, a Canadian plane came down in Adelaide Street causing a lot of damage.

Figure 8. Damage from Canadian plane in Adelaide Street, March 1944.

Figure 9. Adelaide Street damage, March 1944.

Over the years, the park has been used by dwindling numbers of people resulting in the loss of the bandstand, the Bowling Green, pavilion and a Sons of Rest building until today, when The Friends of Marsh Park are breathing new life into the park, celebrating its centenary and creating again an area of respect and pride.

A fuller history of Brierley Hill and Marsh Park can be found in Annexe D and the booklet '*Marsh Park Centenary 1921-2021 Heritage Open Day'*, available from Dudley Council website.

METHOD

Previous to WAG involvement, what appeared to be the corner of the structure had already been identified by The Friends of the Park using a probe which detected something hard just under the turf layer. Their observation was that it was about 4 metres square in size.

In order to involve as many as possible in the project, some of the spoil was to be sieved to look for any relevant artefacts appertaining to the structure and the history of the park. The turf was to be removed until the structure was uncovered and also a test pit was to be dug, away from the excavated area on the higher flat ground to the south. The test pit would again enable involvement of the Friends alongside members of WAG.

It was felt that a test pit could be opened and dealt with accordingly:

- be one metre square and up to 1 metre deep
- be closed or protected at the end of the day so there would be no hazard to the public
- turves are removed and carefully stored so they can be replaced later.
- soil is removed 10 cm at a time and carefully sieved on to polythene sheet
- any finds (pottery, glass, tiles etc) are washed and stored according to their depth
- digging stops when finds run out or archaeology (building remains) are found

At the end of the dig, the pit is filled in and the turves replaced in the same order as they were removed.

Any finds of value or interest would become the property of Dudley Council or be subject to inquest if treasure trove.

Although large trees were present on the green area, they were avoided so that roots were not disturbed.

As much soil as possible to be sieved and the finds retained in the depth order they came out of the test pit.

RESULTS

The area was uncovered at: National grid ref to centre of foundations: SO 9142386780

Digging commenced on the 12th January which was part of a freezing cold week with temperatures below zero for several days prior which meant the ground was not able to thaw out and allow easy digging. Ultimately, it was a huge struggle to get through the frozen layer on the first day. However, a large portion was completed enabling the digging to be finished on the following Sunday.

Sieving of some of the spoil took place with quite a few finds made but they were not in context as the structure had been covered to some degree since its demolition 70 or so years ago.

The soil was very black and initially it was thought that the structure might have burnt down but as digging progressed it became more apparent that the soil was indeed the waste materials from the mining era all those years ago. It was mainly fragmented coal waste with ash and clinker and after uncovering the foundations, an area was cleared to the side to check for depth and look for any finds.

The foundations were constructed from mortar containing brick fragments and were roughly aligned on the long axis N-S, measuring 15 feet x 11 feet (imperial measurement) or 4.5 x 3.35 metres (metric). The depth of the foundation was 6 inches (15 cms) and a width of 2 feet (60 cms). Several brick impressions could be seen in the foundations indicating bricks had been used at some stage in construction but there was virtually no evidence of them in the removed spoil and no evidence of a flooring material that was used inside the construction.

A sondage was dug next to the foundation edge (inside and outside the structure)in two places to a depth of 40 cms confirming the 'soil' was black and consisted of coal waste, ash and clinker.

Figure 10. Uncovered foundations made of mortar and brick fragments.

Figure 11. Drone aerial view of foundations (poles are 2 metres). Photo Wayne Little.

Figure 12. Edge of foundation showing coal debris below.

RESULT TEST PIT

Test pit GR: SO 9143886743

The location was chosen so that it was on a high point, away from trees and away from potential tree root area to make digging easier and not to cause tree root damage. This was done to compare the soil with that from the excavated area and to see if the high ground had been made up with waste materials from the previous mining activity.

The 1 metre square test pit was de-turfed and the grass was stored in the same way it was removed (for later replanting). After just 10 cms of nice clean soil the material turned black with coal debris and thick clay, similar to the coal material from the previous area. This continued down into the test pit until about 45 cms depth when a wall foundation was encountered on the east side. The fill from this contained pottery sherds including some coarse earthenware with black glaze. Unfortunately, due to the clay content not all the spoil could be sieved.

At least two types of brick could be identified in this spoil; one was a thick heavy half brick with no frog (dated early 19th century) and the other was a thinner half brick (again no frog) biscuit colour and probably late 18th century indicating maybe at least two phases of building. A lot of mortar and brick fragments were present in the foundation material.

Figure 13. Test pit at 45 cms depth showing wall foundation on the east side (trowel pointing north).

A sondage was dug on the SW corner of the test pit as time was running short and this showed multiple alternating layers of coal, ash and clay just going deeper and deeper into the pit showing this was all waste materials from the old mining processes. The foundation wall itself was built on a levelling layer of black material. The digging of the sondage stopped at one metre depth.

Due to the nature of the spoil in the test pit, it was decided that 10cm spits were not particularly useful, so spit 1 was the topsoil; spit 2 concluded at the wall foundation and spit 3 concluded at the final depth of one metre.

At this point, the test pit was filled in and all the turf replaced back in the same order that it had been taken out to cause as little disruption as possible to the ground.

Figure 14. Sondage at SW corner of test pit, one metre deep showing all the alternating waste layers and the orange construction/demolition layer of foundation wall.

FINDS

Observation tower site

Figure 15. Black glazed coarse earthenwares (plus one yellow sherd of Staffordshire slipware)

Figure 16. Stoneware pottery sherds

Figure 17. Transferware pottery sherds.

Figure 18. Cream and white ware pottery sherds.

Figure 19. Shards of glass.

Figure 20. Clay pipe bowls and stems.

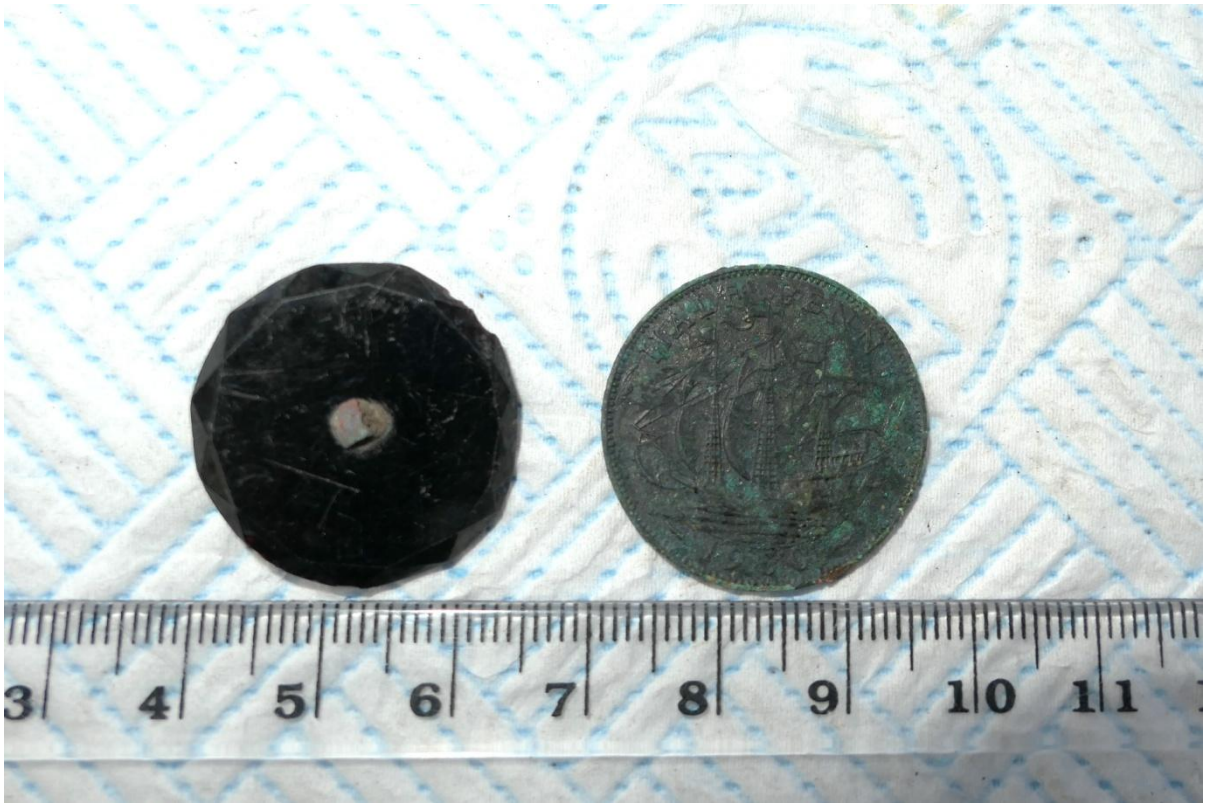


Figure 21. Button and halfpenny coin, George VI (1950.)

Figure 22. Metal brackets and fasteners.

Figure 23. Iron nails.

Figure 24. Copper alloy bolts.

Test pit site

Figure 25. Spit 1, 10cms depth.

Figure 26. Spit 2, 45 cms depth.

Figure 27. Spit 3, 1 metre depth.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

In August 1938, Members of the Observer Corps (later to become ROC in 1941) opened post F2 (of 27 Group HQ based in Shrewsbury) in Marsh Park, Brierley Hill (*Ref: John Miller recollections, appendix B*). At the time, they did not know what was about to happen but by building and manning this tower they could help influence the outcome of the war along with other nearby posts in their F 'cluster'. Their role was to report enemy planes on bombing missions to HQ so that anti –aircraft units stationed nearby could at least try to neutralise them before reaching their targets. Although this post was opened in 1938, we do not know if it was modified when war broke out.

Strangely, there was no 'blueprint' for the construction of these observation towers which you might have expected in the military (although the ROC was not military) when everything had to be done by 'the book'. Instead, there was a 'make do' attitude so that every ROC post (I shall use the term ROC from now on although the title was not forthcoming till 1941) was different in the way it was constructed and or positioned.

The 'Friends' of the park made this particular job of uncovering foundations fairly straightforward because they had done most of the hard work by telling us the history and where it was! There was no having to use geophys or interpret it! A simple probe did the job beautifully. The foundations were duly uncovered to leave us a mortar 'pad'.

The pad was not solid concrete as we might have expected but a series of mortar foundations, 15 cms deep, perhaps telling us where walls had been erected as can be seen from the photos when uncovered. The material used to construct the foundations was a mix of mortar containing brick chunks and fragments and the pad was not solid which may be a sign of someone keeping the cost down and hence not a 'professional 'job. As to what the walls were made of we do not know, except there are brick imprints in the mortar base so the lower part of the construction may have been brick and the upper parts reinforced concrete sheets. What was apparent from digging the site is that there was virtually no sign of brick or brick fragments in the spoil, nor for that matter building materials such as wood, tile, concrete or iron work. What we did find however were several copper alloy bolts which might have been used for fixing the reinforced concrete sheets and some rusty iron brackets. (See *figures 24 and 22*).

So what can the foundations tell us about the structure? We were told that the structure was two storeys high with the upper having no roof and was used for lookout (*ref: recollections by Alan Whittaker Reid, Appendix C)*. There would need to be a set of stairs in the building to reach the upper storey with some sort of hatch entry at the top and maybe a door at the bottom of the steps. It would have been important to keep out the light from down below so it did not shine through and be seen by the enemy planes. They may well have used a paraffin lamp to work by as electricity may have been cut off occasionally, especially if there was an air raid warning.

As well as stairs, they might have needed a tiny office for a phone or radio and keeping all their recognition booklets dry and secure. Perhaps there might have been a camp bed in there too if they worked shifts. Under the stairs could have been a space for a toilet bucket as you would not be able to leave your post until relieved (not a pun!). All ROC posts were manned continuously throughout the war.

Due to the lack of flooring materials in the spoil, it would seem that wooden boards may have been used as flooring as it was reasonably cheap and could be re-used later.

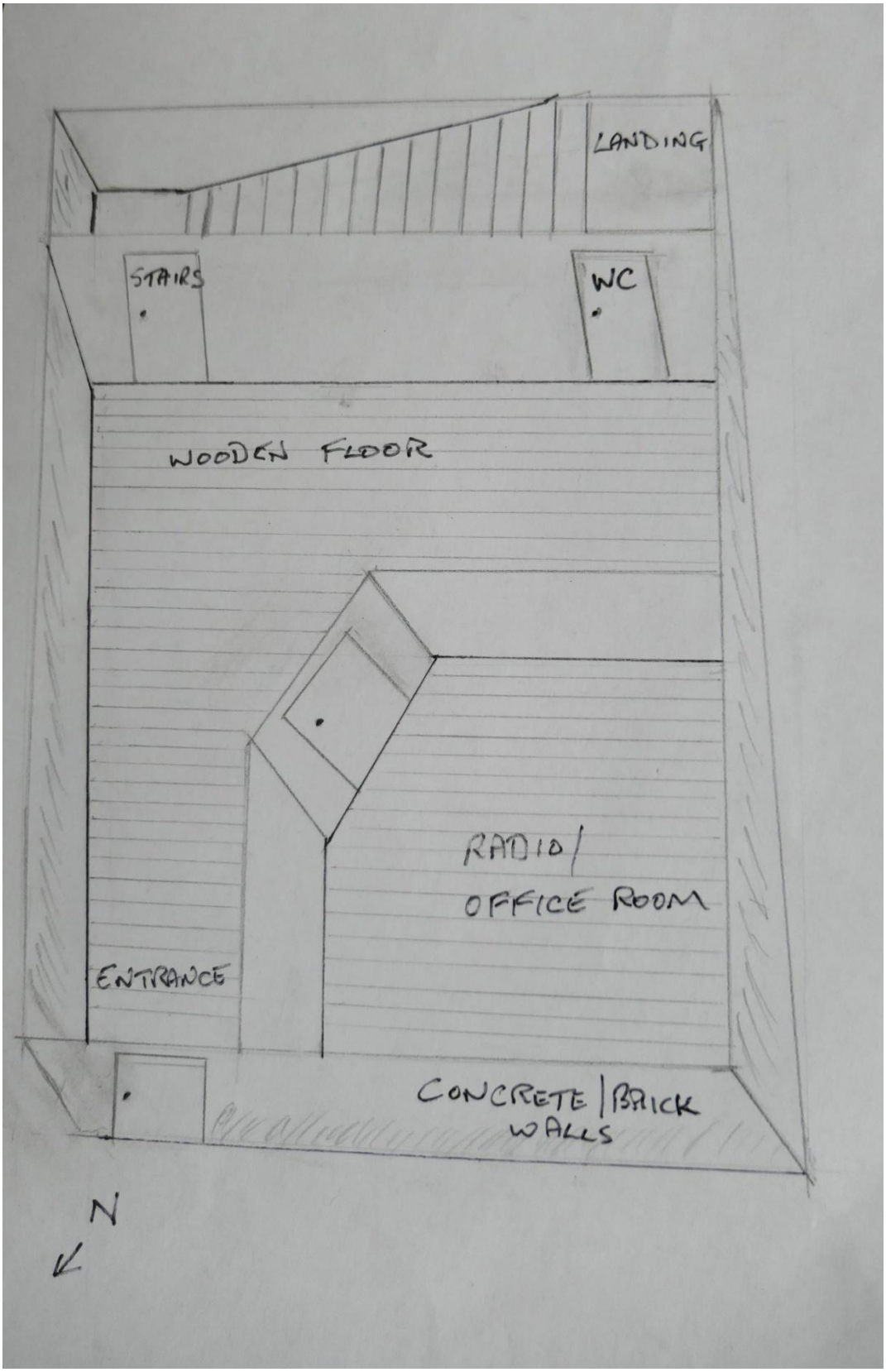


Figure 28. Possible layout for ground floor of tower using noted foundations. (C Westwood).

The example in *figure 28* is probably just one of many combinations that could work with those foundations but as no plans have been found as yet, we can only speculate. It would have been

important to keep the building secure and ready for immediate action if needed so having one entrance and the steps inside would be beneficial. There are more examples of observation towers to look at below.

Figure 29. Isle of Wight observation tower.

Figure 30. Skipness observation tower.

Figure 31. Titchfield observation tower (front).

Figure 32. Titchfield observation tower (rear).

Figure 33. Torquay observation tower.

Figure 34. Weybourne observation tower (windmill).

Figure 35. Saltfleet observation tower (church).

All of these examples worked fantastically as long as there was a communication network to report various pieces of information to help the gun batteries and RAF fighters.

As we are aware, radar existed and was used in WW2 by British forces however it was not sophisticated enough to be very accurate and really only worked by picking up planes as they approached the shores so it was vital the planes could be tracked across the country and height, numbers, direction and position were recorded and passed on to the HQ units.

Figure 36. ROC using standard optical sighting system (courtesy of Wikipedia).

As mentioned previously, we wanted to add a little bit to the history of the park and one of the ways we wanted to do this was to look at the finds from the excavation and also dig a test pit to look at the stratigraphy of the layers of soil making up the hill.

With reference to the excavation, the main finds that were relevant to the observation tower were probably the copper alloy bolts (*figure 24*), the metal brackets (*figure 22*) and maybe the nails (*figure 23*).

With regard to the other artefacts from the tower site, there is a date range from late 18th century through until more recent times with the exception of a sherd of Staffordshire slipware which could take us back into the 17th century. All of these finds were made out of context, having been found on and surrounding the tower foundations; they may have been local to the park or they may have been brought in from elsewhere e.g. when gardens were set up for the fallen heroes after WW1 by family members trying to improve the waste spoil from the mining processes.

Moving on to the test pit and the finds, they tell a different story because the finds are in context and various undisturbed layers can be seen.

If we look at spit 1 finds, there is a piece of roof tile and nails present indicating maybe a structure was present. Spit 2 continues the structure theme with 5 pieces of roof tile, atmospherically blackened by the work from the mines and also sherds of pottery, clay pipe fragments and glass all from the late 18th through to the 19th centuries indicating habitation. At the final spit 2 depth of 45 cms, wall foundations were found linking with the roof tiles and habitation finds to confirm the presence of a building on the site.

What was the building doing on this site of built up mining waste? Looking further down in the test pit it shows the structure was constructed on a layer of black material, probably a levelling layer, whilst mining was in progress on site as can be witnessed by all the alternating waste layers below the foundation. It was constructed of at least two types of brick, probably from the late 18th century through into the 19th century and it also appears that some mining work continued after the building was demolished as can be seen by the clay, ash and coal in the layers above the structure. The orangey layer in the image (*figure37*) indicates the construction and demolition period of the building.

It may well be that there was a site overseer or manager living there who could make sure the mine was kept safe and secure during the nights and weekends and also make sure that the workers arrived on time. All the tools and equipment could have been kept safely locked up and horses could have been stabled and looked after by this person and his family.

There was one quite interesting find from spit 3 and that was a clay pipe bowl found deep down and this looked to be quite an old pipe, probably from around the early part of the 18th century.

Ultimately, as the minerals started to run out, so the mine began to run down and eventually it closed, leaving tons and tons of waste materials spread out over the ground in alternating layers as witnessed in the test pit. By around 1900, the whole area was scarred by mining activity leaving a bleak and desolate landscape (e.g. see figure 3). About 20 years later, we have the origins of the park for all to enjoy!

Figure 37. Multiple layers of waste above and below the orangey building layer.

This project has been an interesting exercise for all involved because it was a joint venture involving WAG, the Friends of the Park and Dudley Council all working together for the benefit of the community of Brierley Hill. It has been a learning opportunity for all involved to find out about archaeology, Marsh Park, how our recent ancestors lived and coped during the war and how their ancestors survived and created a future by digging out vast amounts of minerals to keep warm, build houses and produce merchandise. Not only that, but there is now a permanent historical record, albeit small, for those who follow us, so they can have some idea of how life was like in the past and should they wish to take up the mantle, there is a wall foundation in a test pit scar in Marsh Park just waiting to be investigated!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Wayne little

Tim Sunter

Dudley Council:

Jim Galloway

Members of WAG:

Sam Cox

Jo Beeston

Bill Martin

Charlotte Dicken

James Farr

Isabelle Bullock

Apologies to anyone who participated and I have not mentioned!

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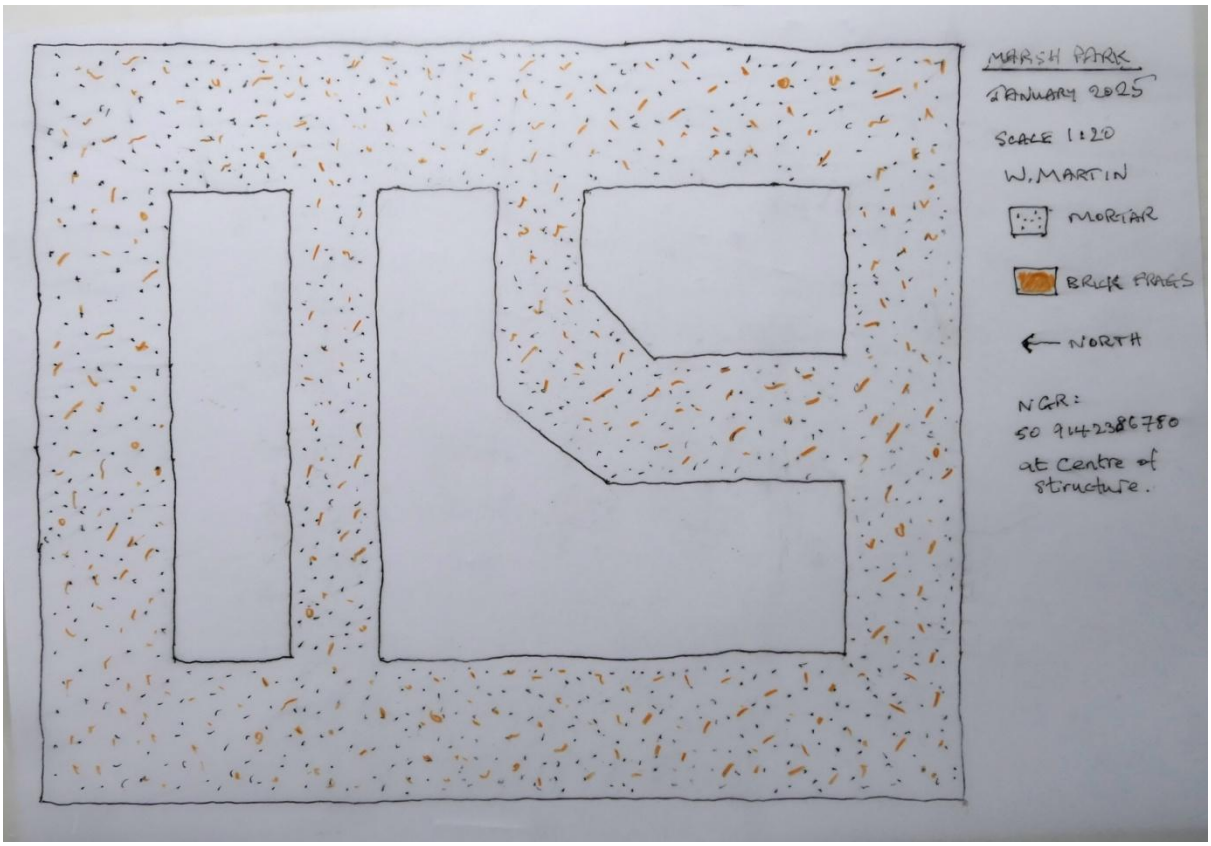
APPENDIX A



Plan of Marsh Park foundations scale 1:20 drawn by W. Martin

APPENDIX B-recollections by John Miller

Background

The Observer Corps was formed in 1917 as the London Air Defence Area to combat German air raids. During the inter-war years there was a decline then ramping up of the perceived need for an air defence system for the country and the Corps was formally inaugurated in October 1925. By 1936 virtually the whole of Great Britain was covered by a series of above ground observation posts linked by telephone to an area headquarters. The equipment used was basically a plotting table with a sighting system over a map grid. When aircraft were spotted the Observers would report the map coordinates, height, time sector code and numbers to their Group HQ. By the end of the war there were approximately 1500 posts.

Due to the importance of the work carried out by the Observer Corps during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz King George VI granted the title 'Royal' in April 1941.

Early posts were often a wooded garden shed located next to a telegraph pole to enable posts to communicate with HQ. These were gradually replaced by more substantial brick structures, protected by sandbags, which due to their often having been built by Observer Corps personnel themselves meant that no two posts were identical! Posts were located in open playing fields, hilltops or cliff edges and, particularly in urban areas, on the rooftops of public buildings. Purpose built observation posts introduced later were usually two storey construction of brick or concrete with an open topped observation deck above a small crew rest area.

In 1955 the role of the ROC was widened to include defending against the effects of a nuclear attack. Between 1958 & 1968 a total of 1563 underground monitoring posts were built. Over the years the number of posts reduced so that when the ROC was 'stood down' on 30 September 1991 there were approximately 870 posts and 25 Group Controls.

Observers were never classed as being in the armed forces but were, at stand down, uniformed civil servants.

Brierley Hill post

The post was opened in August 1938 at map ref O.919968 as 27/F2, 27 Group HQ was Shrewsbury and F2 was the post designation. Posts were arranged in clusters so Brierley Hill was in F cluster. Following an ROC reorganisation in November 1953 it became 16/A2 still part of Shrewsbury group but with a different cluster designation. It was resited in October 1961 at map ref O918893. It became an underground post in February 1965 and had a new designation of 16/L1 in October 1968. Finally, it was resited to O916895 in November 1972. Sometime after that it became 16/J2.

J cluster consisted of Master Post J1 - Cheslyn Hay, J2 Brierley Hill, J3 Pattingham & J4 Stottesdon. Although I thought that I'd kept my old Ordnance Survey map of the area I only have a Landranger 139 where the map references do not correspond to Brierley Hill so, if your dig is the site of a ROC post I can't tell you which one it was. The final post site was on Barrow Hill, Pensnett but the post was always referred to as Brierley Hill.

APPENDIX C-recollections by local people

Bert Skipton - "My dad was a member of the home guard due to him being a reserved occupation working in steel manufacture. He was stationed on Barrow Hill Pensnett where the cross is and on Marshes Park. He was on duty the night they bombed Coventry. He told me how the sky glowed and you could hear the bombs explode. They thought it was Birmingham at the time until word came through. He said it glowed red for a few nights. He was on duty on Barrow Hill when they bombed the rail engines at the back of Rookery Park. At the time they were carrying ordinance so the ensuing percussion blew out all the windows in Bromley. I have his spotter cards still."

Alan Hickman - I read with interest the article re the discovery of the building on Marsh Park. Aged 18 in 1940 as part of the Brierley Hill home guard my father and his unit spent their nights guarding the structure. My father told me the people they allowed to enter the building were operators using portable radio tracking equipment using radio waves to plot enemy planes he could hear the frequency echos. Also my father told me the path leading up from the park's main gate was known locally as heroes walk due to on the right hand side of the path a rose bush had been planted with a cross in remembrance of every Brierley Hill serviceman who had lost his life in world war one.

Joan Ellett - "My dad Eli Postin was in the home guard and used to spot the planes coming over during ww2. I remember him having a box of photographs of different planes. I used to play with them. I remember going over there and there was a bed in there from what I remember on the downstairs floor and some steps up to roof."

Christopher Southall - "My dad was in the home guard which was stationed on Marsh Park."

Quentin Southall - Dad talked a lot about American soldiers around north street and a military hospital on marshes playing field. His name was Reginald Southall. He also worked in the cage as a slaughter man Marsh and Baxter. Tough guys in those days.

Blackcountryman article by one of the Newton brothers who was in Adelaide Street when the plane crashed in March 1944:

“Outside, Adelaide Street was chaotic, the footpaths and roads covered with debris. The fire brigade soon arrived and the police and air raid wardens were soon in control. Amazingly, into this chaos walked the aircraft's Canadian pilot who had bailed out and landed in North Street, half a mile away. **Then a member of the Royal Observer Corps arrived from the observer post in nearby Marsh Park.** He had observed everything. He said that the low flying plane's wing had hit a chimney, turned and crashed into the triangular space between Adelaide Street, Talbot Street and Trinity Street.”

Alan Whittaker Reed
As I remember it was a two storey brick building with the top open where air raid wardens were able to scan the skies and fire watch.

APPENDIX D-History of Brierley Hill

HER Number: 12311
Name: Brierley Hill ' Township' in Pensnett Chase.

Summary

Township area as designated on Township area map.
Brierley Hill lay in the parish of Kingswinford and within the county of Stafford. Its name is derived from three Anglo-Saxon words: - Brer meaning the place where the Briar Rose grew, - leah meaning a woodland clearing and Hill meaning what it does today……

Grid Reference: SO 9184 8702
Map: Show location on Streetmap
Designation: None recorded

Description

Brierley Hill (Pensnett Chase) 'Township'

Brierley Hill lay in the parish of Kingswinford and within the county of Stafford. Its name is derived from three Anglo-Saxon words: - Brer meaning the place where the Briar Rose grew, - leah meaning a woodland clearing and Hill meaning what it does today. The place-name might suggest a mini-estate but the area that it lies within from the medieval period was on the edge of Pensnett Chase. Brierley Hill was technically never in a medieval township.

The bounds of Brierley Hill are: the Mousesweet Brook on its east and south borders, the Ravensich brook and Black Delph Road on its southwest border and the township of Brettell (now Hawbush) on its west boundary. Dudley Road is its northern boundary. The geology of the area is the coal measures. The oldest man-made feature is the ridgeway that crosses Pensnett Chase (now called Brettell Lane-High Street-Dudley Road). Merry, as in the hill not the place, was derived from the Anglo-Saxon word gemeare which means the boundary, presumably meaning the boundary of the parish of Kingswinford, which is at Black Brook and Tipsyford Brook to the east. Tipsyford - the ford of Tippa across the Typsyford Brook is another Anglo-Saxon personal name which implies the Lye-Dudley route is also of great antiquity.

Although the surrounding villagers used the chase as common ground to graze their animals it was officially a hunting reserve. (The Wallows is a medieval term for a large pool or swamp, which collected streams where wild boar and deer, used to take mud baths.) Throughout its history people were officially banned from putting dwellings on the hill. Only charcoal burners were allowed to erect temporary booths there during their seasonal occupation. It was however during this period that people discovered that the Chase was a source for numerous mineral deposits; coal, iron and fireclay and the utilisation of these valuable resources could not be ignored. One of the first places that people started to settle on

was Black Delph; the name signifies coal working. Delph is a medieval word - meaning to dig.

During the late medieval period the traditional woodlands began to disappear. As charcoal was an important product by this time the replanting of trees occurred. These man-made plantations were cut every ten years or so and they were called coppices after the technique of cutting them down to ground level. By the 18th century most of the land east of the High Street was coppice woodland, Brierley Hill Coppice, Archill Coppice, Merry Hill Coppice and the larger Level Wood. This wooded area was recorded in Two Woods Lane that ran from Merry Hill, west to Black Delph. The name of the woodland in this area was Archill in Kingswinford and Harts Hill in Dudley. (This was a variation of the same name. The two parish authorities were at loggerheads over the exact site of the boundary prior to the 18th century.)

A Court of the Star Chamber case held at Westminster was recorded in 1540 when John Dudley, Earl of Warwick and Baron of Dudley had enclosed a part of Myrry Hill within the Chaice of Pencenytt. He had planted saplings (spryng) there which he had hedged for the past five years to protect it from the commoner's animals. The locals thought that their rights to this particular part of the Chase was going to be removed and led by Thomas Alen, parson of Swinford on the 16th May tore down the hedge. Obviously his lordship objected to this!

Recorded references to Brierley Hill did not start until the 17th century. In 1642 the first reference of a resident is recorded, when Richard Pierson, a Blacksmith of Brierley Hill is mentioned and by 1701 the population has risen so much that Edward Ashenhurst built a school there for the children. The settlement continued to increase, but it was not until Pensnett Chase was enclosed in 1784 that the race was on to utilise all the land. The person with the largest share was Lord Ward who had also been involved in the building of the Stourbridge Canal across the Chase in 1776. In 1785 John Snape drew a map of the Stourbridge canal and in it showed Brierley Hill for the first time. St. Michael's Chapel was constructed on the chase in 1765. This was built by public subscription and the first incumbent was the Rev. Thomas Moss (1765-1808). By this date however there were only a few dwellings in the High Street and a scattered settlement at 'Black' Delph.

By the turn of the century Brierley Hill was growing. Ribbon development had occurred all along the lanes that surrounded the hill, collieries, quarries (Quarry Bank) glass works, and iron works filled the spaces between the dwelling houses and woods. In Fowlers Map of 1822 the settlement of Brierley Hill had extended to the canal except for a small piece called Level Coppice. A rash of collieries and iron works had opened up alongside the canal. A timber compound of Lord Dudley's replaced the northern part of Level Wood, east of the canal. This in turn became the Old Level Ironworks. The New Level Works was added on the other side of Level Road and the whole complex eventually became the Round Oak Steel Works.

The mining subsidence, open shafts, cinder tips, heaps of slag and waves of black smoke made the hill a very unappetising place to live on, so much so that a rhyme was composed comparing it with Hell.
When Satan stood on Brierley Hill
And far around it gazed
He said, "I never more shall feel
At Hell's fierce flames amazed."

An attempt was made to make it more civilised, but the miners, quarrymen, foundry men and glass workers whose rough and dangerous work made them hardened to social niceties made it an uphill climb. A National School was built in 1835 to accommodate the rising population and the new parochial district of Brierley Hill with Brockmoor, Delph
and Quarry Bank was drawn up in 1842 - St. Michael's became a parish church. By this date the High Street had become a market area. Marsh and Baxter's became a major employer in the centre of the town making pork products. With the philanthropy known at the time they laid out Marsh's Park on the hill. This probably made up for the lack of
greenery as during the 19th century the coppices began to disappear. Even Level Wood was rapidly depleted and industry grew in the surrounding area.

By the end of the century Brierley Hill had become a town. The purpose for its existence,the excavation and manufacture of raw materials, began to decline as the resources were used up. By the beginning of the 20th century most of the mineral deposits were worked out and with the advent of other materials the ironworks began to close. Finally Round Oak itself shut its doors in 1984 and the land was left as a waste area until the arrival of
the Merry Hill Centre.
John Hemingway, 29th January 2005.

Notes: The base material for the composition of the 1750 map is the parish map of 1822, with other material gathered from local histories and documentary research.

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Sources and Further Reading

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