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Stag Gates and all that ...

Stag Gates - the name sturdily persists in popular usage for the junction of Lodge Road and The Avenue, especially the bus stops there, notwithstanding that the stag-surmounted stone gate pillars were demolished in 1919 and the actual gates disappeared much earlier.

Although successive generations of Southampton folk seemingly find no problem in perpetuating the memory of these long-vanished features of the street scene, the name must puzzle visitors and new residents - at least for a while, until they too accept the invisible bequest of enduring tradition.



Figure 1. Edwardian postcard (used in 1905) showing an open-top tram passing between the Stag Gates, at the point where the tracks merged into a single line along the centre of Lodge Road. Behind the tram can be seen the original St Barnabas church of 1903 - bombed in 1940, rebuilt in 1957

Over the years, this has become shrouded by myths and misconceptions. It is therefore opportune to seek to put the record straight - particularly in relation to the varying accounts of how William Burrough Hill gave them to the town in 1919, in celebration of Victory (or supposedly in memory of his son killed in the war) and that when the Corporation soon afterwards demolished them for road widening, he was so incensed that he had the stags secretly removed early in the morning after they had been brought down from their pedestals and buried them in the garden of his home in Regents Park Road.

The story must begin with William Betts, a contracting engineer whose projects included the first Royal Pier of 1833. The gates and elaborate stone piers, each over 20 feet high and capped with a carved stag, were erected to flank the lodge at the entrance drive to Bevois Mount House soon after 1844 when he bought this early 18th century mansion and estate, originally created by the third Earl of Peterborough.

Betts spent heavily on "improvements", financed by selling off the southern part of the 103 acre estate for smaller scale housing development, but he over-reached himself and in 1854 had to dispose of the house and the rest of the grounds. They were all built over during the following thirty years.

Bevois Mount House itself (standing within the area enclosed by modern Lodge, Cambridge, Avenue and Cedar Roads) passed through several ownerships. For thirty years from 1869 it accommodated a private school for young ladies, then became a student hostel for Hartley University College. Its last role was as a transit prison camp for captured German officers during World War I, before being demolished soon after 1920 - although a fragment of the old mansion was incorporated into garage premises on the site.

Lodge Road was built up along the former entrance drive in the later 1870s. The actual gates across the road must have been removed at this time - more of them later.

The Stag Gate piers, which incorporated arched passage ways for pedestrians, straddled the pavements on either side of Lodge Road, restricting its width at the junction with The Avenue (figure 1). These stone structures and adjoining strips of land came into the possession of the estate agent and auctioneer, William Burrough Hill.



Figure 2. William Burrough Hill as an old man, working at his desk in his 'den'

He was long a notable character, who lived into his 97th year, dying in 1941, still actively involved with the history and public affairs of his native town and exercising his remarkable talent for minuscule penmanship (figure 2). For more about this "grand old man" see the articles by John Edgar Mann in *Hampshire* magazine, May 1990 and March 1991.

On the north side of Stag Gates, replacing the original lodge, stood the house called Elm Lea, replacing the original Merchant Navy Hostel/Avenue Hotel; the opposite corner of Lodge Road was occupied by another Victorian house, Ravensbury, which later gave way to a garage and filling station.

Burrough Hill converted the railings in front of it, adjoining the southern gate pillar, into his own private bill-posting station for announcements of property sales and auctions; he also displayed his posters on the stonework abutting the northern pillar. For a man deeply concerned about the town's historical and artistic heritage, he seems to have been curiously insensitive in creating such an eyesore at this prominent feature of The Avenue, for whose amenities Southampton people had great regard, then as now.

Public reaction found expression at the Borough Council meeting on 8 May 1889. After several members had supported Alderman Gayton's call for immediate action to deal with the unsightly effect of hoardings "erected by a private individual as a speculation", the Council unanimously resolved "that shrubs be planted in front of the

advertisement boards on the railings at the south side of Stag Gates." This decision was quickly implemented.

At the next Council meeting a fortnight later, a letter was read from Councillor Button (absent owing to illness) urging it to try to buy the Stag Gates, as he had previously unsuccessfully proposed - "it would have been much better for the town to have acquired them than for such a disfigurement of our beloved Avenue to have been possible." Alderman Bance revealed that he had personally offered Burrough Hill £50 for them; local residents were said to have made a similar offer. The Council, however, decided not to pursue the matter of their acquisition.

Over the next few years, the shrubs and trees grew to considerable height and thickness, obscuring the south side of Stag Gates. Postcard photographs show, however, that throughout Edwardian times their owner continued to display his posters on the stonework immediately adjoining both gate piers.

Meanwhile, the advent of electric trams and increasing traffic created problems at the narrow entrance to Lodge Road. The matter engaged the attention of the Borough Council meeting on 13 November 1912. Its resolution is worth quoting as a fine example of contemporary minuting style - "This Council, being of opinion that, in consequence of the congestion of vehicular and other traffic in the immediate neighbourhood of the erection known as Stag Gates, the presence of such erection has become a source of public danger."

The Council instructed its Works Committee "to enquire of the owner at what price and under what conditions the Corporation could acquire the same." A month later, the committee considered a letter from Burrough Hill saying "he was willing to sell, for demolition, partial removal or otherwise, the large stone piers and curved wall and railings to the south and the freehold site of the same, for the sum of £500." The committee was unable to recommend the Council to entertain this offer - partly on grounds of cost, partly because there had apparently been no serious accident at Stag Gates.

There the matter rested until 1919 - although the increased traffic of World War I must have heightened public awareness of the situation. On 15 January, the Town Clerk read to the Council a letter which Burrough Hill had the previous day sent to the Mayor, Alderman Sidney Kimber, following a discussion between them at a meeting of the Southampton Camera Club, of which both were leading lights.

He wrote "I am anxious to do something in the town's interest to mark our Victory year ... and to show my belief in the high standards of ethics of the Rotary Club to which I belong and whose motto is "service not self" ... I now offer to my native town the freehold of the Stag Gates property as a free gift."

Burrough Hill made no mention of his gift being in memory of a son killed in the "Great War" - as he surely would have done if this were the case. Moreover, he clearly envisaged the demolition of Stag Gates - as he had in 1912, when offering to sell them to the Corporation.

"I shall be sorry to see them demolished but they are not of any material historical or antique value; nevertheless they form an interesting landmark of one of the last of Southampton's most beautiful estates which has given way to the demands of our ever increasing population."

"I am anxious not to hamper the gift with any restrictions or reservations but I will add that so long as the structure remains as it is, both the materials and the site shall belong to the town and the same shall apply if your council determine to erect it elsewhere immediately on removal, but in the event of its demolition and not being

rebuilt elsewhere the materials shall be at my disposal and placed where I may direct."

The Council "tendered their warmest thanks for his generous and kindly gift to the town". Its Estates Committee quickly instructed the Borough Engineer to remove the mound of shrubs and the advertisement hoardings and asked him to report "as to a preservative for the stone." On 3 March, he told the committee the results of his examination:

"I find that the cornice is in considerable disrepair and requires renewal almost wholly. The carved stags are crumbling in parts and require attention and there are other minor repairs required." (The photograph on a postcard used in 1912, reproduced in *Pictures of Portswood's past* by B J Ticehurst and H H Meachen, shows the northern stag minus its head; the stone had presumably split and part had fallen - to be replaced soon afterwards, on the evidence of later photographs).

"I also note that the outer piers, *ie* those against the roadway, are out of plumb, and the arches over the footways show signs of settlement. This may either be occasioned by insecure foundations or by the vibration consequent upon the heavy traffic passing through the gates. The south pier is in the worst condition, and this being the case, the committee might well consider setting back the south pier 15 feet, thereby rendering possible a much needed road improvement."

The specialist stonemasons Garret & Haysom estimated repairs would cost about £200 - equivalent to well over £10,000 today - and that another £60 would be involved in dismantling and re-erecting the southern gate pier.

On 6 March, a special meeting of the Estates Committee convened at Stag Gates, to examine their condition and discuss the Borough Engineer's report. Eventually it was decided, on a show of hands, "to recommend that the structures and the railings be pulled down and the materials placed at the disposal of Mr W B Hill in accordance with the terms of his gift and removed to where he may direct."

A writer in the *Southampton Times* of 14 July 1919 noted that the Stag Gates were in course of demolition and referred to "a mass meeting called on the Common last weekend, which was, to say the least, a tame affair." In 1912 Inner Avenue residents had got up a memorial to the Corporation protesting against the suggested removal of Stag Gates but in 1919 feelings about their retention seem to have been less strong. Perhaps their removal was then more readily accepted as "the price of progress."

The *Southampton Pictorial* published photographs of their demolition in its issue of 17 June 1919 (figure 3), with the caption "This prominent landmark has been razed to the ground. Though picturesque, it was a somewhat dangerous corner for traffic and its disappearance will afford a much wider sweep into Lodge Road."

Demolition evidently extended over several days, with the southern pier being dismantled first. Since Burrough Hill retained title to the materials, there was no occasion for him secretly to retrieve the stags after they had been brought down from their pedestals - although he may well have sent horses and carts early in the morning to take them away, as he was entitled to do. Nor had he any cause to feel aggrieved that the Corporation had demolished Stag Gates, because the terms of his gift specifically allowed for this being done.

As the Borough Engineer reported to the Public Lands Committee on 4 July 1919, Burrough Hill agreed to sell to the Corporation for £15 all the rest of the stonework of the dismantled gate piers. Most of it was re-used to make five pedestals or flower boxes, as ornamental features along the footpath in East Park leading to the Aviary -

replacing old wooden boxes there. Other stones from Stag Gates were incorporated into nearby rockeries.



Figure 3. Photographs of the demolition of the Stag Gates from the *Southampton Pictorial*, 17 June 1919. (courtesy of Brian Ticehurst)

Their owner kept the carved stone stags in the garden of Bridell Lodge (later the Edgecombe House Hotel). In various published statements and private conversations, several responsible witnesses have recorded their recollections of seeing them there, from 1919 right up to 1939.

It was probably around the beginning of World War II that Burrough Hill seems to have had these celebrated stone carvings buried in a corner of his extensive garden. One can now only speculate as to his reasons; perhaps he wanted to protect them from anticipated wartime uncertainties, including the possible requisition of Bridell Lodge for military purposes, or maybe the burial of the stags was simply an old man's fanciful indulgence.

Certainly pre-dating their funeral has led to unnecessary mystification surrounding the circumstances of their original transfer from Lodge Road to Bridell Lodge in 1919, which this article has sought to clarify.

In 1963 the *Southern Evening Echo* published an account, with photograph, of how a large piece of carved stone, very likely to have been part of the body of one of the famous stags, had been dug out ten years previously for the making of a lawn at one of the several post-war houses built on the former garden of Bridell Lodge. Other

fragments of the stags may still be buried nearby ... but respect for the privacy of the householders concerned must preclude any archaeological investigations.

There remains the question of the gates themselves that once hung from the pillars of Stag Gates, across the entrance drive to Bevois Mount House. No contemporary illustration or description of them is now to be found and it must be assumed that they were removed in or before 1877, when the entrance drive was laid out for house building, as Lodge Road.

In recent years it has sometimes been thought that they were re-used at the main entrance to the Old Cemetery off the Common. This belief derives from articles of 1957-67 by the late Miss Elsie Sandell but she gave no date or source for this supposed re-location of the gates and would seem to have been misinformed. No mention of it is made in earlier accounts of the Stag Gates.

The handsome wrought iron gates, bearing the town arms, which grace the entrance to the Old Cemetery do not give the appearance of having originally spanned the carriage drive of a private mansion in the 1840s; they seem to assert Victorian civic pride in an important municipal project and must surely be to the design by the architect Frederick Francis which the Cemetery Committee approved on 19 December 1844.

The minute books of the committee covering the ensuing half century (preserved in Southampton City Archives) are full of detail but contain no record of these gates being replaced by those from Bevois Mount House - which seems inherently unlikely, as well as being devoid of documentation.

Through nearly a century, fact and fiction have become intriguingly entangled in the story of Stag Gates. This article has sought to document the differences and establish the facts of the matter.

References and Sources

This article was originally published in *Hampshire* magazine, November 1996. It is reprinted here with minor up-dating revisions.

It will be evident from the text that it presents the results of research in contemporary Borough Council records and sources, the most important of which are set out below.

Southampton Archives

Southampton Borough Council. Council and Committee minutes: 1889 (mss volume SC2/1/28, especially pages 234, 246, 248); 1912-13 (printed, especially pages 11, 53, 87); 1919 (printed, especially pages 127-8 (W Burrough Hill's letter of 14 January 1919), 161, 233-4, 565)

Southampton Borough Council. Cemetery Committee minutes (3 mss volumes, 1843-94, SC2/3/6/1-3)

Southampton Times: 1889, 1912-13, 1919 (reports of Council meetings and other references)

Other Sources

Newspaper files and cuttings collection, Local Studies Library, Southampton Central Library

Library, *Southern Evening Echo*

Cuttings gathered by the writer, including:

Southern Daily Echo: 28 May 1941, obituary notice of W Burrough Hill

Southampton Local History Forum

Southern Evening Echo: articles by Elsie Sandell published 20 September 1956, 25 August 1961, 20 November 1962, 13 October 1965

Southern Evening Echo: 8 May 1963, Tom Bargate account of stonework found in 1953 in garden of house in Regents Park Road

Southern Evening Echo: 6 October 1975, demolition of Stag Gates (referring to *Southampton Pictorial*, June 1919)

Southern Evening Echo: September/October 1975, numerous readers' letters, including L S B Ridges, grandson of W Burrough Hill

Southern Evening Echo: 9 February 1989, including J Guilmant's recollections of stags in W Burrough Hill's garden to 1939; also personal information

Southern Evening Echo: 1958-1989, other reports letters (mostly speculative)

Southampton Guardian: 11 May 1988, letter P G Sims (saw stags in W Burrough Hill's garden c.1934); 1 June 1988 (H Meachen)

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