

## Mill Road History Society Annual Report 2020-2021

**Committee:** Allan Bringham, Kay Blayney (co-opted during the year), Ila Chandavarkar, Jo Costin, Julia Ewans (Treasurer), Simon Middleton, Sophie Smiley, Lucy Walker (Chair), Caro Wilson (Secretary).

Former committee member Robin Mansfield contributes to our programme of events.

2020-2021 has been a year like no other. Extremely difficult and emotionally challenging for each of us as individuals, and also as a society. There has been no avoiding the impact of the pandemic on the way we live our lives, and many have lost relatives and friends or are dealing with Long Covid and other issues, perhaps with parents in Care Homes or children and grandchildren (not) in school or university, or having difficulty managing the uncertainty of everything and the lack of social contact. On top of all that, Allan Bringham's death, due to cancer, in September 2020, has been a huge blow and a very sad loss.

In this report I outline the activities of the Society, and then talk about Allan below. Initially we thought that we would have to cease our monthly meetings until firmly out of Lockdown. But, as safely returning to enclosed spaces began to look less and less likely, we found we could successfully transfer many of our activities to Zoom - and most people took to it like ducks to water! That was very much thanks to our calm IT Guru, Simon Middleton, who has managed our IT for every meeting. Simon live-streams our events on Facebook, and has put several of the recordings onto the Society's YouTube channel here <https://bit.ly/3g9XzcN>. He also collates news for our monthly newsletter, and manages our Social Media. So our thanks for an engaging year with Mill Road History Society definitely go first and foremost to Simon for making it all possible. As one of our members said, without Simon, we might have been silent for much of the year!

As it turned out we were able to co-ordinate a wonderfully varied range of occasions, stay in touch with our members, recruit new ones, and remain engaged with the Mill Road area. Our first event was ***Show an Object, Tell a Story*** linking with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE day (WW2). In July, instead of an actual walking tour, Claire Martinsen entertained us with ***Tales from the Cemetery*** - stories from her detailed research into people buried there. Julia Ewans and Jo Costin prepared a challenging quiz for our AGM in August, and it was amazing what we didn't know! We adapted our contribution to ***Open Cambridge*** (organised by the Office of External Affairs at the University of Cambridge) and replaced our proposal for guided tours with individual short films by Caro Wilson, Jo Costin, Julia Ewans and Ian Bent about buildings and places on Mill Road - all recorded with Simon. It's interesting that digital presentations on the OC website extended audiences from the local to the global, and these films reached a wide audience at the time. They can now be seen on our YouTube channel.

In October we had a Society Social and in November Jo Costin ran a writing workshop on the theme of ***Plot, People and Place***. An evening of music and entertainment, ***Not the Usual Victorian Parlour Evening***, was brilliantly organised by Robin Mansfield and colleagues at the Cambridge Folk Club, and brightened an increasingly tense Covid-19 December. Musician, writer and broadcaster Nick Barraclough kicked off the New Year 2021 with his talk ***A Disorderly House*** about aspects of his life and family associations with the Flying Pig

pub on Hills Road. This was prompted by his engagement with the campaign to rescue it from demolition and writing a book about its story in order to raise funds. The latest news is that the City Council refused the Developer's planning application, and the publicans have since received government Cultural Recovery funds to help them rebuild their business.

In February Shahida Rahman, a Mill Road Maternity Hospital baby and now a writer, talked about ***My Parents' Story: from Sylhet to Cambridge*** – their journeys from the country which is now Bangladesh, to live in Cambridge. Her father left East Pakistan to come to the UK in the 1950s and her mother joined him a few years later. This is part of a bigger story about migration to Britain, and Cambridge, after WW2, and there is now an increasingly rich body of material relating to this theme on the Capturing Cambridge website <https://capturingcambridge.org>, including writing by Shahida. Look out for the South Asian and Black History month sections, where material is posted as part of the City Council sponsored Culture History Months.

The Capturing Cambridge website, built by the NLHF funded Mill Road History Project (MRHP) (2013-2015), is now hosted by the Museum of Cambridge and reaches an increasingly wide audience around the world. The story of Albert Gordon (interviewed as part of the MRHP) who ran the Midland Tavern in Devonshire Road, recently caught the eye of a new publican in Cambridge St, Wembley, Western Australia, who saw [Memories of Growing up in The Midland Tavern | Capturing Cambridge](#). He has decided to call his pub Albert's Small Bar, and is in touch with the family in Cambridge UK and in Jamaica where Albert has returned – and they are all busy exchanging photographs and stories!

Capturing Cambridge is increasingly used as a resource which is constantly being added to. It has been possible to develop the site using archival sources linked to people and places because we have a rich range of public archives curated by dedicated people. In recognition of their significance, our most recent event, **Archives and Digital History**, was a workshop about using paper and digital archives, with Mary Burgess (Cambridgeshire Collection, Central Library), Mary Naylor (Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire Family History Society), and Jim Costin (digitisation technician at Cambridge University Library). This was recorded, is now on our YouTube channel, and we hope people will find it useful.

So we have enjoyed a full and thought-provoking annual programme– in spite of Covid 19. I would like to extend a big thanks to the committee (including our secretary and treasurer who keep close scrutiny, in different ways), everyone involved in organising and presenting, and also to those who participate, who are genuinely interested and ask great questions! We hope that people are then inspired to do their own research and discover the delight of making new connections between the past and the present, and writing new stories.

That is exactly what Allan Brigham did so successfully, using archives to bring local history to life and make it relevant. His writing was both scholarly and engaging, linking information about people and places he found in the archives with themes which matter to us today - all done with wit and humour, which we enjoyed on his walking tours of Cambridge neighbourhoods as much as in his writing. A streetsweeper in Cambridge for all his working life, Allan was also a trade unionist, a local historian, a Blue Badge tour guide, and a

community activist - so he knew Cambridge like no one else. He was also a trustee of the Museum of Cambridge (the former Folk Museum) and founder member of the Mill Road History Project (which morphed into the present Society).

Allan was known and loved by many people, his smiling and engaging presence was an important part of our lives in Cambridge, and for many of us, his death has left a big hole. We paid tribute to him on our website and on March 30, as part of the Cambridge Festival, we ran an evening in his memory, ***An Evening for Allan Brigham***, with moving contributions from many people, together with some short, now quite old, films which made us smile (courtesy of Anglia TV). As a separate tribute, Leigh Chambers made an exceptional radio programme, researching and interviewing people who had known him, which was aired on Cambridge Radio 105 at Christmas 2020. You can find links to both recordings on the home page of the Society website here [Mill Road History Society](#)

We miss Allan hugely. He is a big loss to the Society, to which he gave so much, always coming to our meetings and happy to share knowledge and enthusiasm. It is fortunate that he was able to channel so much of his meticulous and detailed research into writing about people and places down Mill Road. During the 7 years he was actively engaged in the History Project and then the Society, he wrote several very significant reports, including histories of the early development of Mill Road, the Mill (with Peter Filby), Donkey Common, and the City Council Depot site - which included Headley's 19<sup>th</sup> century iron foundry, and is now being developed for housing, known as Ironworks (including 50% council homes). These are all published by the Society, and can be found on the Capturing Cambridge website. The Society will contribute to a memorial in the area, when that is decided.

We are also very sad that the pandemic prompted Bridget and Steve Leneghan to close Elitian Printers. They were a mainstay on the road and a huge support to the Society; they designed and printed our posters and leaflets and took a genuine interest in what we were doing. Goodbye and thank you Bridget and Steve.

On the plus side we are very pleased to welcome Kay Blayney, educationalist and writer, onto the committee, and look forward to working with her to develop the Society in the future. Kay has always lived in Cambridge, and worked with the History Project when we were researching stories about people on Mill Road. She wrote, performed and published monologues about those characters, and we look forward to more creative writing and performances, using our local history sources.

**Publications:** in 2020 the Society published a fascinating new report, researched and written by John McGill (edited by Ian Bent): ***MADRAS ROAD, ROMSEY TOWN, CAMBRIDGE: Development and Change in a Typical Romsey Town Street***. This is available for all on Capturing Cambridge, and is introduced with the following text: *The evident transformation of much of Romsey Town from its original work-a-day character to a that of a more gentrified, and speculative, quarter are often commented upon. Change occurs at a rapid pace: shops have changed from supplying domestic needs to catering more to recreational desires; houses have changed from being rented (typically to railway workers) to becoming financial assets. Indeed, there is scarcely a dwelling which hasn't been fundamentally altered*

*in some way or another, and with its value having increased in the region of thirty times.*

John McGill explores the road from its incipient beginnings, with the development of the area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to very recent times, from this perspective. He is also currently working on a report on Brookfields-Burnside, which will be published shortly.

Ian Bent has sent us a list of the 20 reports which the Project/Society has produced so far, written by local researchers - all of which he has very ably edited, and all published on Capturing Cambridge. 19 are about buildings, sites, places and streets in the immediate Mill Road area, and the other is A Guide to Researching and Writing a Building or Site Report for the Mill Road Area (Bent, Blythe and Brigham, 2017). We would like to warmly thank all the authors for their research and writing of each report, and also Ian for the enormous amount of caring and meticulous editing work he has put in over the years, working closely with each researcher to bring their report to a very high standard. Ian has also written a summary for the AGM 2021, on the current state of play of the Society publications, inviting more people to consider researching and writing one - included with the AGM papers.

Finally, we would like to say a big thankyou to everyone who generously supports the Society – which would not exist without you. Keep in touch and let us know if there are particular things you would like us to include in our programme, or if you would like to do some research on some aspect of the Mill Road area. We hope you continue to enjoy our monthly newsletters, and will encourage anyone you think might be interested to sign up to our mailing list on the website. Our programme for 20/21 will remain on Zoom until further notice, but watch this space!

This is my last year as Chair of the Mill Road History Society - I will be standing down at the AGM. I have very much enjoyed helping shape the Society in its first 6 years, and will remain on the Committee.

**Lucy Walker 25.04.21**