

friends of Red House



friends' AGM

The Friends' Annual General Meeting was held at St John's Church Hall, Sidcup on Friday, 15th April. Over 80 members were present. Chairman Martin Wilson reported another successful year and a busy time at Red House for those Friends who worked there as volunteers. In elections to the Friends' Committee, Alan Hofman became our new secretary and Betty Sadler was elected as a committee member. The Mayor of Bexley, Councillor Val Clark, was present and spoke of the importance of Red House to the Borough.

The AGM was followed by the traditional cheese and wine party, expertly organised by John and Olive Mercer. Malcolm Youngs then spoke about the diaries of Red House owner Walter Godfrey which were the subject of his article in the April 2010 issue of the newsletter. Mrs Arabella Hobson, Walter Godfrey's great-granddaughter, who made the diaries available to us, was present at the meeting and added to Malcolm's talk.

Copies of Malcolm's book *'The Later Owners of Red House'*, recently published by the Friends, were on sale at the meeting. A review of the book appears in this issue and copies can be obtained by post from Linda Hubbard.

During the summer, parties of Friends have been to Kelmscott House, Morris's home in Hammersmith, for the annual garden party of the William Morris Society; and to Rodmarton Manor, the important Arts and Crafts house near Cirencester. Future trips will include a visit to Leighton House in Kensington.

The Royal Oak - William Morris's local

The Red House village of Upton has had its own inn since the 1830s. In 1827 three adjacent farm cottages near Home Farm were built at the junction of what are now Alers Road and Mount Road. George Crafter occupied one that fronted Alers Road and by 1837 he became a beer retailer in addition to his main occupation of chandler, calling his establishment *'The Woodman'*. In 1842, Robert Elms took over the and by 1851 it was called *'The Royal Oak'*. He later moved it to an adjacent cottage fronting Mount Road where it remains to this day.

Robert Elms died in 1865 and the licence was taken over by his widow, Mary Ann, and she ran the pub until 1894. Mary Ann was known as a very house-proud lady and she gave the pub its nickname *'Polly Clean Stairs'* which has stuck to it ever since. In the 1861 census, when Morris was at Red House Robert and Mary Ann Elms were living at the Royal Oak with their four children and three lodgers. Robert, 50, was described as an 'agricultural labourer and victualler'. By 1891 Mary Ann was still there as the licensee, aged 82, with a 25 year-old grandson and a 34 year-old domestic servant who had been there at least 10 years.

In 1854, the pub had been bought by Fox and Son, brewers of Farnborough, and

in 1909 it was taken over by the Plumstead brewery, Beasley's.

After the death of a long-resident landlord, Mr Leonard Smith, in 2009, the Royal Oak was closed until this year when it was refurbished and reopened as a very attractive, genuine local. The name *'Polly Clean Stairs'* still appears on the pub name board. It is an excellent place for a drink after a visit to Red House, or a stint working there.

We can only surmise whether Morris patronised his local. However, a few years ago a visitor to the house told an intriguing story. He said that a local resident had told him that an ancestor of his remembered meeting Morris in the Royal Oak and that Morris had complained that some of the bricks for Red House cost him a penny each!

Malcolm Youngs

(With acknowledgements to *'Bexley Pubs'* by James Packer, published by Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre)



The Royal Oak, photograph by M. Youngs.