

Grangetown Local History Society



Fact Sheet No. 5

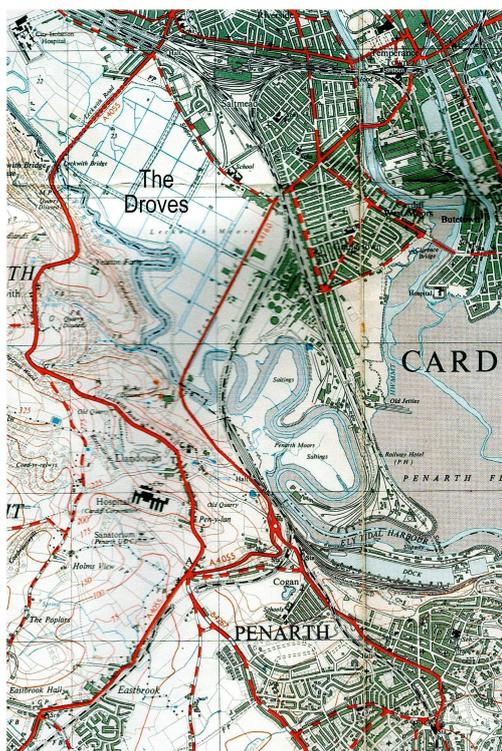
Memories of the Drovers

The land bounded by Penarth Road (The Mile Road) and Sloper Road

Terry Gale

Memories of the Droves and Low Lying Land to the South West of Cardiff.

I was going to write about my memories as a boy in the Nineteen Thirties when we had trips in the summer to The Droves, an area to the south-west of Cardiff, with my brother, Russell, my mother and grandmother, but really this has to be a story about the whole of the former flood plain. Although I have tried to be factual it may be that some of my memories are not exactly true.



I have been thinking about The Droves, why they were so called and why they were there: it also made me think about other land low lying land in the area, the whole of which I would say, was formerly a flood plain of the River Ely. The above officially updated Ordnance Survey map should help the reader understand this my thoughts more clearly, but note I have added the name The Droves to the map.

I have also been able to add my later memories of the area as a teenager and adult working in Sloper Road Bus Depot, memories of a friend and work colleague, Basil Hall, who passed away this year, on the Seventeenth of March Two Thousand and Sixteen and those of a then neighbour and work colleague, Jimmy James, real name Augustus Montague James, who died many years ago.

The Droves are that part of west Cardiff that have only recently been developed as an industrial and commercial area. A number of car showrooms and other industrial and commercial outlets have been built along the Penarth, Hadfield and Sloper Roads plus a retail shopping park. And, amongst other developments, along Leckwith Road are the relocated Cardiff City Football Stadium, which replaced Ninian Park, and a new Cardiff Athletics Stadium.

The area may be seen as white on the map which was first produced in 1889 and amended as the

area has developed. It shows it as it existed in about the mid-1930s but with later additions. As it's shown, it could not have been published before 1928 as Council Houses around Jubilee Park, which are shown on the map, were built around this time.

The houses in Broad Street are shown on the map and, I believe, these were built in the mid-1930s. As it happens we were going to buy one of these houses which cost £340 but my father decided we couldn't afford the cost and we ended up renting a Council House in Ely.

And there is no sign of the Speedway Stadium just off Penarth Road which was built in the late 1940s but closed in the mid-1950s. And where is Fitzalan Technical High School which was built next to the Lansdowne Isolation Hospital in, I would guess, the 1960s? And where are the houses in Broadhaven, Broadacres & Broadstairs Roads, the first of which were built in 1956?

So let's accept that The Drovers and the surrounding land had not been commercially developed before the 1950s and the area prior to this consisted of common land, small-holdings, pig farms & Council owned allotments. There were developments, for example, the Ninian Park schools and the Ninian Park Football Ground which were built many years before on the east side of Sloper Road.

The Drovers is an area bounded on the north-west by Leckwith Road & by the Penarth railway line on the south-east. It is also bounded by the river Ely & by another section of the Penarth Railway line.

Penarth Road actually bisects the area and now only the main area is considered to be The Drovers. I have not been able to establish the reason for the name but it could have been a resting place for cattle being driven on their way from West Wales to the east of England or maybe a resting place for cattle being exported from Penarth Docks. Incidentally, cattle used to be fitted with iron shoes so that their hooves could stand being driven on the long journeys.

My first memory of a trip to The Drovers was before World War Two when I was under ten years old and, as a family, we'd already moved from Lucknow Street in Grangetown to Ely. This was at a time when there were few private cars and walking was the real pleasure for ordinary people. Please accept that these memories may not be absolutely correct as they are of a young child of a time over seventy years ago with later memories.

My maternal grandparents lived in Redlaver Street, next to the lane behind the Doctor's in Corporation Road. So the trip to The Drovers involved walking the whole length of Redlaver Street – do I remember a car called a Bean on the opposite side of the road from the library? I have checked and there was a Midlands company which made Bean cars – the owner was a Mr. Bean.

Then we'd walk under the two railway bridges in Penarth Road and were transported into a different world – into an undeveloped countryside.

I would guess that the route of Penarth Road was originally a track through The Drovers, which was formed of hardcore, topped with ash and, when the toll bridge was built over the River Ely to take vehicular traffic to and from Cardiff, it was made into a proper road. This was a more direct route than the bridge at Leckwith, up Leckwith Hill and through the village of Llandough. A new bridge at Leckwith with new roadworks was constructed in 1935 but the medieval 16th. Century bridge is still there giving access to a trading estate.

I am aware that in Edwardian times, a sewage pumping station was built in 1907 right next to the River Ely and this was accessed from the Cardiff side. The station was closed some years ago but the Listed buildings still exist and they are now used as showrooms selling antiques.

A privately owned toll bridge was built over the River Ely at the western end of Penarth Road in, I would guess, about 1890. A toll was collected to allow a vehicle to cross the river Ely via the bridge. Pedestrians and cyclists were exempt from this charge. I actually remember riding my bike over the bridge in the late 40s and early 50s. I have not been able to establish the exact date the bridge was built but the City Council took it over in 1952 and tolls were taken for a few years afterwards. The bridge was demolished some years later and it was replaced by the present bridge.

Overleaf is a photograph of the old bridge at Leckwith, which it can be seen could never have



handled modern traffic.

After crossing under the two railway bridges in Penarth Road, there were houses on the right hand side of the road but the left side was just fields which ran right down to the river - not ordinary fields but scrubland typical of a flood plain. A good example of this type of field is on the flood plain between Dinas Powys and Barry. The land has now been built on with car showrooms and other businesses. It was a similar situation with scrub-land on the right side of the road after Sloper Road.

I would guess that the following photograph at the toll bridge was taken in the Nineteen Twenties. Can you see the man with his bicycle crossing the bridge?

I remember in the 1940s taking part in a Western Welsh Sports Day – my mother worked in the canteen of the Western Welsh Bus Depot in Penarth Road - on land which became Curran’s Sports Field. The field and Curran’s Club doesn’t exist anymore as, some years ago, part of the GPO Sorting Office was built on the site.

So what was Penarth Road itself like? As I remember it was a tarmac road with no pavements but the right side was lined with hawthorn (May) hedges with a footpath between the hedges and the fields. And, the road was a lot narrower than it is now.

A few hundred yards up the road towards Penarth, on the right there was an ash covered hard core cart track which led onto The Droves. Almost opposite on the left hand side was Gas Works Lane which, I imagine, after the works opened in 1863 was the main entrance. A railway line running from Cardiff to Cogan, Penarth and Barry was, I believe, later constructed, which involved a bridge being built over Gasworks Lane. There probably wasn’t enough height for vehicles to pass through so I guess this was why the main entrance to the Gasworks was relocated at Ferry Road. The road & bridge are still there but the bridge has not been in general use for over fifty years.



20 The toll gate on the Cardiff to Penarth Road was acquired in 1952 by the local authorities concerned—Cardiff, Glamorgan and Penarth—after lengthy negotiations with the owners. Tolls continued to be levied for a couple of years but were eventually abolished giving free passage to vehicular traffic.

The main track into The Droves ran from Penarth Road to Leckwith Road and there were two other tracks running towards Sloper Road. The main track ran along almost the same route present Hadfield Road and one track ran along the route of the present Bessemer Road. I cannot say where the other track came out in Sloper Road. I would say that the land had been laid out for development before 1899.

On each side of the tracks were ditches – we called them reens – which were almost always filled with water. I seem to remember there were fish in them but I can’t be sure of this. Do I really remember the reens drying out and fish floundering in the pools which were left?

What I do remember is that the area had many smallholdings and a few pig farms.

Then further up the main track, somewhere about where ASDA is now, there was a gate and beyond it a field with wild flowers in abundance. It was here that we used to settle and have a picnic. We never got further than this and I didn’t know then that the track carried on right up to Leckwith Road.

Until recently I had a friend, Basil Hall, who sadly passed away this year. Until he married, when he was thirty-four years old, he lived with his mother and family in Wedmore Road. Amongst stories of other adventures, he used to tell stories about couples courting in The Drovers and hinted that there were many unexpected pregnancies after illicit affairs. I intended writing down some of his stories about Grangetown but we never got round to it. He did tell me, though, that his daughter, Elizabeth, had written down some of them so all is not lost.

Do you think the children of these illicit relationships were called Drovers? Joke!

To round up this section, after heavy rainfall and high tides, the River Ely sometimes caused flooding at Ely Bridge and, after the 1950s, the river was straightened along Leckwith Moors which included The Drovers. The whole area became a Council owned tip which raised the ground level. Then permanent roads along the original cart tracks were constructed paving the way for the Commercial and Industrial estate. The Fruit Market moved to the area in 1966 and the GPO Sorting Office was built in 1986.

Sections of the Cardiff Link Road were constructed over a period – the link from Leckwith to Culverhouse Cross opened in 1982 and the link from Leckwith to Grangetown was opened in 1988.

When I was in my mid to late twenties, I had a work colleague and later neighbour, Jimmy James – real Christian names Augustus Montague - who was about twenty years older than me. He told me that when he was young he was a very good runner and, from his age I would guess, in the early thirties he took part in sprints called Powderhall Races which were run in The Drovers. These were professional races where the runners got paid and there was betting on each runner to win.

Sounds good but, according to Jim, the races were fixed. He said he used to run in other parts of the United Kingdom under a number of different names and he was quite successful. So when he ran in Cardiff no one quite knew of his repute and he and his backers made quite a bit of money when he won races.

I also have memories of developments along Sloper Road. We lived in Lucknow Street in Grangetown and, for a short period of time when I was three or four years old and before we moved to Ely, I attended Ninian Park School. In the late 1940s and early 50s, when I'd moved back to Grangetown, until November 1955, I also worked as an apprentice motor fitter in Sloper Road Bus Depot.

I returned to the Bus Depot in December 1955 as a motor fitter after two years National Service. So I also have memories of a time when the area was being developed.

From the start of Penarth Road the first turning is Sloper Road. In the 1930s there were a few houses on the right hand side of the road then a public playing field – now called Sevenoaks Park but previously called Gillard's Field or just The Tan.

Incidentally, my father, Freddie's third wife was a Gwen Gillard and I found out that a Gillard, who lived around the Cornwall Street area had a business using horse drawn vehicles and when they weren't at work, he grazed the horses on the field.

The Gripoly Mills, from the smell that came from them I assume they were processing leather, was on the right hand side, then three houses.

Then there was the White City Stadium. I know it opened in 1928 for Greyhound Racing and Speedway but it closed when the World War 2 started and didn't reopen after the war. I have no memories of the White City but there are web-sites about it. It became the GKN Sports Club and I played football and cricket there. It afterwards, became the City Gardens housing estate.

After Sevenoaks Park, there was Ninian Park School, which was opened in 1900 as Virgil Street Board School and was given its present name in 1911. Then, as now, there was Virgil Street. Then there were a number of Council Houses built in the late 1920s and, possibly, early 30s which ran up to Sloper Road Bus Depot. I'm not sure when the Bus Depot was built but I would have guessed this would have been in the 1920s.

There were coal sidings behind the Council Houses but these have been demolished and the site is now the Carlton Gardens housing estate

Then there were more Council houses and then Ninian Park, the home of the Cardiff City Football Club which was built in 1910 and lastly there are more original Council Houses right up to Leckwith Road.

I haven't covered the Ninian Park School and Cardiff City's Ninian Park ground as there are websites dedicated to them and their history.

Going back to what now next to Bessemer Road, the land adjacent to Sloper Road was much lower in level and was just scrubland right up to Jubilee Park. This was raised by tipping to the same level as the road so that the area could be developed to what it is now.

I wasn't aware that there were allotments just off the road but I now know some of the allotment holders had sunk wells on the site to get water. This was done by hammering a two inch pipe for about 30 feet into the ground to pick up a large underground lake and, using a petrol driven pump to bring the water to the surface.

We come to Jubilee Park – my father called it Pop Alley Park because a lot of broken soft drink bottles – those with glass balls as stoppers – had been dumped there. He said it was nothing to end up with gashed knees, etc. from the broken glass. Was it named to mark the Silver Jubilee of George the Fifth and his wife, Mary, which took place in 1936. There was no broken glass when I played soccer there.

Oh! And young men played Pitch and Toss just to the left of the park on, what is now, the car park of the Cardiff City Stadium.

In the early 1930s the causeway across Leckwith/Canton Common, which regularly flooded, was raised to line up with the new bridge and a new permanent concrete road built. Rail bridges replaced the level crossings at the Canton end of the road. However, the land either side of the new road was still much lower than it and the land was still liable to flooding. There was a gypsy camp not far from Leckwith Bridge and one day I counted over one hundred of their horses on both sides of the Common.

Spoil from the construction of the Western By-pass was dumped on the Canton Common and this raised the land level about ten feet. But, immediately before this the soil was scraped from the existing land, which was a bit enlightening. Firstly, there wasn't much top-soil and secondly, ditches had been back-filled with waste which contained broken clay smoking pipes. I collected many different types of these and eventually gave them to a collector, a Frenchman who was in Cardiff on holiday. The site is now the home of the Cardiff Athletics Stadium and playing fields but I remember the original stadium was on the other side of Leckwith Road.

One thing which may be of interest is that part of the land was once Canton Common which, many years ago in The Leckwith Residents Association, we were told was owned by the Commoners who sold it to the City Council for recreational purposes only. However, this possibly isn't true as I've read in the past few days that it was owned by the Cartright family who sold it to the Cardiff City Council in 1885 for, I believe, £1 on the condition it would always be used for recreational purposes. Other parts of the adjacent land were not covered by this condition.

The new Cardiff City Stadium, the Shopping estate and other developments were built on land, the level of which had already been raised by the tipping household waste.

From a personal point of view, I live in a house on a small estate, sometimes called The Broads, consisting of Broadhaven, Broadacres and Broadstairs Road, which has been built on land which would have originally been the flood plain. The road level of Broad Street, which was built in the 1930s, was raised above flood plain level and those on The Broads estate, which was built between 1956 and 1959, are at the same level.

Just one bit of useless information about the name Broad Street. Well, it isn't broad, is it? It is named after the first person, a Doctor Broad, who was in charge of the Sanatorium, later called Lansdowne Hospital. This is now the Lansdowne Gardens housing estate and, I believe, that some the

roads are also named after doctors who worked at the hospital.

Where I live, the ground floor of my house is about eight feet above that of the rear garden – the original ground level. On the rear garden, there is little top-soil and the sub-soil, about one foot down, is formed of grey clay i.e. alluvial silt which has been deposited over the centuries by the River Ely. At the bottom of the rear garden there was an area with no soil or clay, just hardcore, which I was told was part of a cart track to a pig farm. There has never been any sign that my garden will flood.

Council Flats were built in Lawrenny Avenue in about 1965. These are at a slightly higher level from the rest of the area. I've been told that, because the land is unstable, their foundations go down some 25 feet. These were there when I moved to Broadhaven but I am lucky as my house looks with uninterrupted views towards Leckwith Hill.

I have lived in my house on the Broads estate for over 48 years and the area has changed from a rural to an urban one. Whereas I used to have an unimpeded view of Leckwith Hill, I now see floodlights and rugby posts. There were many horses on the Common and now there are none. We used to see lapwings and larks – birds I mean - on the Common but not anymore. There were also hedgehogs, grass snakes, slowworms and newts in the garden but these have also disappeared. To balance this out there are now grey squirrels, collared doves and wood pigeons. I suppose that's progress for you!

F. T. Gale

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