

bridge

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Newsletter of the Sonning & Sonning Eye Society

West Drive

Rodney Huggins MBE, resident of West Drive

In March 2005 an article appeared in the The Telegraph national newspaper and opened: “Welcome to West Drive, Sonning, Berkshire, where accountants retire and Rotary Club stalwarts seek peace. Stroll up this tree lined private road and you will spy substantial modern houses in in quiet mock Tudor...”

In 2004, Sonning Parish Council had produced a Design Statement for Sonning Parish and on page 13 a description of West Drive is given as follows:

“West Drive runs between Pound Lane and the Old Bath Road with large individually designed family houses all fronting onto and set back from the Drive. The houses are predominantly double-storey although they are intermingled with a few bungalows. This diversity adds to the overall character of the area. Most of the properties were built in the 1930s and 1950s but over the years many have been extended and improved. It is a very low density area with most plots in excess of three quarters of an acre.”

West Drive is a private street with the freehold registered title held in a private company owned by the residents. The Drive is lined by a variety of mature trees growing in the grass verges including oak, lime, beech, sycamore and horse chestnut. There are no pavements and few light standards. All of the above combine to make this a unique, leafy suburban area with a feeling of spaciousness.”

In 1981 the unmade Drive with many potholes was given a tarmac surface with chippings.

Since 2004 there have not been many changes except for first, six houses being built in the last seven years (with one at Number 21 currently in construction) on plots where original houses have been demolished. There are now 40 houses. Secondly, as a result of a successful planning appeal, in the early 1990s, 24 flats were constructed on land adjoining Pound Lane and the southern side of the Drive where there had been two houses.

The earlier history of West Drive

In volume 1 of The History of The Sonning Parish Magazine by Gordon Nutbrown, it is revealed at page 159 in the entry for June 1912 that “The Manor House and land, Charvil Farm and East Park Farm were to be offered for auction at The White Hart, Sonning. Among the attractions it is mentioned that an 18 hole golf course at Sonning is in contemplation”. It is believed that the area containing West Drive was part of the farmland auctioned.

In the February 1914 edition it is mentioned that the gentlemen’s golf links and clubhouse are to be opened on May 1st. “The Ladies course on the other side of the line in Woodley Parish has begun.”

Therefore it can be assumed until the auction in 1912 the area of land upon which West Drive and its dwellings are built was farmland. The Ladies course was then constructed with some three holes being laid out in the land to the west of Pound Lane then known as Butts Hill Road, Woodley, the remaining six holes were part of the main golf course. A track was made in the middle which eventually became West Drive.

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Memories of:

Michael Emmanuel, owner of The French Horn

Interviewed by Annabella Marks

I met with Michael one January morning and we sat and talked in the front sitting room looking out over the beautiful gardens to the Thames. Michael was in a track suit, a very different figure from the immaculately dressed man who greets his guests. He had kindly agreed to be interviewed and was relaxed as we talked over an excellent cup of coffee.

A.M. Michael, What are your first memories of The French Horn?

M.E. Coming as a five year old and looking through the windows of Bridge House. We were living in London but this is where we're going to live. Originally it was owned by Frank Barnes who created a very glamorous hotel restaurant.

A.M. What was it before?

M.E. There's always been a hostelry here because of the Thames crossing. The bridge we see was originally a footbridge and there was a ford leading to the island.

A.M. Am I right in thinking that your mother bought it?

M.E. Yes. My grandfather had always wanted to buy The French Horn, but Frank wouldn't sell it to a

chain (Grandfather ran the holding company Wheelers) but let my mother buy it.

A.M. Tell me about your grandfather.

M.E. My mother's father. Mum's grandfather had oyster beds in Whitstable but they were poisoned so he ran a shell fish bar called Wheelers instead. Grandfather went to London, was taught to dance by his sister and got a job on the stage. But the woman he loved said she would not marry him until he got a proper job so he found a site in Old Compton Street and started selling shellfish and later opened Wheelers and the rest is history. The place became busy, his friends became famous and it became fashionable. The Thursday Club met up every week and Prince Philip's stag evening was there. There's a photo of my grandfather sitting at the table with him.

Mum went into the industry and she ran The Braganza. The late Michael Winner and all of that crowd went there; lovely people. Then Mum managed the French Horn by herself while Dad ran Wheelers but when we sold it Dad came back to help. I came back to help out twenty nine years ago.

A.M. Did you spend your childhood here?

M.E. I was at Sonning Primary first then went to Crossfield's and later to Shiplake. I started working here when I was ten. My father would be happy if I was with friends and busy but otherwise it was 'get over here and work'. I'd be in the laundry or serving coffees after lunch. I met some wonderful people. I met Fred Astaire when I was ten years old. After that I started tap dancing in the village, but stopped when I went to public school.

I knew I wanted to go into the industry so after finishing at Shiplake I immediately started work in a kitchen in London. After a few months later Dad said 'Do you still want to do it?' I said 'Yes.' So he got me an apprenticeship abroad. I had grand ideas of going to catering school in Lausanne but he said 'We're restaurateurs not hoteliers. You start at the bottom.' I started with Paul Bocuse in Lyon.

A.M. So what were you doing?

M.E. My very first job was gutting and filleting fish, skinning hares. I spent some years there and progressed in the kitchen to chef tournant. Then my father was ill so I stayed with him and realised that

