

Dry weather in 2020 exposes details of a World War 2 Civil Defence training camp in Sutton Park at Boldmere



An Austin type K2 fire tender and a Dennis mobile pump in wartime NFS colours (source: [www. nfs-afs.org.uk](http://www.nfs-afs.org.uk))

**Details of the camp and its wartime and post-war history, 1942- 1958,
including details of the CD Training Ground at Hollyhurst Cottage
and reference to the U.S. Army Camp at Streetly Lane.**

**Roy Billingham
2020**

A Second World War Civil Defence camp emerges as a series of parchmarks in Sutton Park, at Boldmere, in May-June 2020

As a result of information sent to me by Dr. Mike Hodder at the start of June 2020, that on a visit to Sutton Park he had discovered, due to the recent drought conditions, and possibly the exceptional heavy level of footfall on the grass over the Covid-19 lockdown period, the foundation outlines of long demolished buildings on the old Civil Defence Training Camp site at Boldmere. These were showing up very clearly as parched lines as shown on pages 2 and 3.

These parched outlines, known as parchmarks, are the equivalent of cropmarks but occur where there is grass rather than a crop growing over a site, as is the case at the Boldmere camp site. In times of drought or very dry weather, like May 2020, the grass will wither and parch out over buried walls and stony areas. Often this can be seen from the ground or from a high vantage point. The view in Photo 1 was almost certainly taken from the camp site's water tower.



Photo 1 - This Second World War view of the NFS Training camp at Boldmere, taken from the top of the static water tower looking south-westwards, shows firemen parading outside the clerical block at the south-east end of the camp site. Beyond the trees are Powell's Pool and Monmouth Drive. In the 1950s the strip of land over the water was to be redeveloped by the Borough Council as a municipal eighteen-hole golf-course and as a base for the Sutton Coldfield Sailing Club. Note at the far left of Powell's Pool the Sea Cadet training boat that was permanently moored on the Pool in 1943.

(Photograph courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)

Met Office News¹

The Met Office News headline for Monday, June 1, 2020 was, “May 2020 becomes the sunniest calendar month on record”. The News report goes on to add that May 2020 has been the sunniest calendar month on record with 266 hours of sunshine, beating the previous record of 265 hours in June 1957.

It has also been the driest May in England and second driest in Wales with 9.6mm (0.375in) and 14.33mm (0.56in) respectively, which are both just 17% of the average rainfall for May.

Dr. Mark McCarthy, the head of the Met Office’s National Climate Information Centre, said, “The sunshine figures for spring would even be extremely unusual for summer and only three summers would beat Spring 2020 for sunshine hours.”

“The principle reason for the dry and sunny weather is the extended period of high pressure which has been centred over or close to the UK. This has suppressed the development of clouds and rainfall over the UK, while allowing plenty of sunshine to reach the surface. There has been a band of similar weather conditions extending across central parts of Europe, whereas Iberia and parts of Scandinavia have experienced rather wetter conditions.”

Photographs of some of the parchmarkings



Photo 2 – This view of parchmarks is taken from near the Boldmere to Streetly Gate roadway looking eastwards towards the roadways from Powell’s Pool to Wyndley Glade and Town Gate.

(Author’s photograph DSC01252.JPG taken 08/06/2020)

¹ www.metoffice.gov.uk/about-us/press-office/news/weather-and-climate/2020/2020 - accessed on 17/06/2020



Photo 3 – This view is from the Powell's Pool end of the site looking towards the roadways to Wyndley Glade and the Town Gate. The footings of a large rectangular building are evident in the centre foreground. (Author's photograph DSC01264.JPG – taken on 08/06/2020)

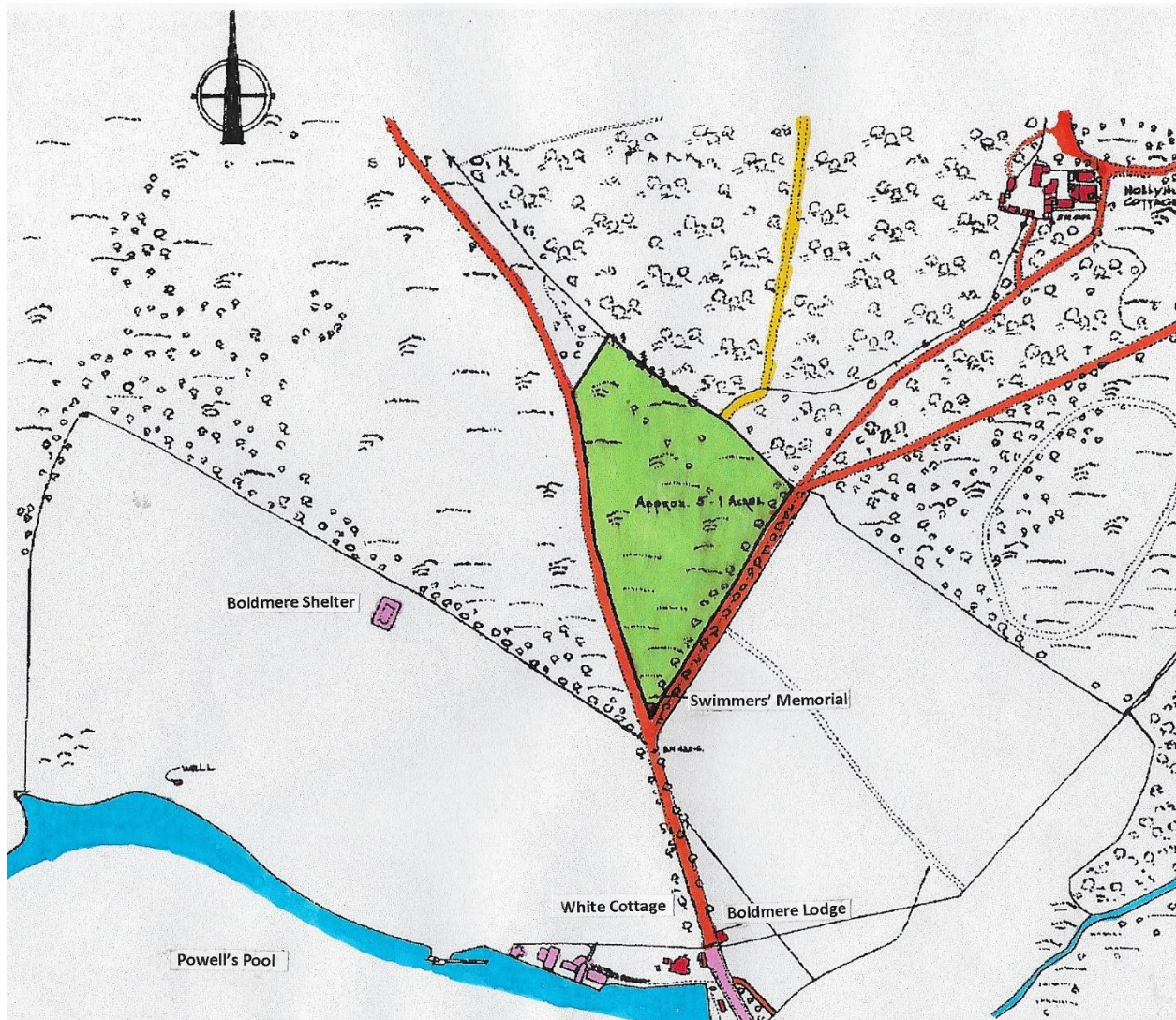


Photo 4 – In this view looking south-westwards, the parchmarks show a small rectangular structure, the foreground being close to the south-west boundary of Holly Hurst and the left-hand side of the photograph being near to the roadway from Powell's Pool to Wyndley Glade.

(Author's photograph DSC01259.JPG taken on 08/06/2020).

The location of the Boldmere camp site (NGR SP 106 957)

The 5.1 acre site of the training camp (see Map 1 below) was on the triangle of grassland near Powell's Pool bordered by the roads from Boldmere Gate to Streetly Gate, the road from Powell's Pool to Wyndley Glade and the Town Gate, and by the south-west edge of Holly Hurst. The National Grid Reference (NGR) to the Second World War site is SP 106 957.



Map 1 – This map shows (in green) the triangular piece of land near Boldmere Gate, Sutton Park, which was to accommodate the Civil Defence Camp. Note the road access to Hollyhurst Cottage (top right) which became the Civil Defence Training Ground. Also marked on the map are the Boldmere Gate lodge and the White Cottage. The buildings depicted to the left of Boldmere Gate are pre-1937 when Powell's Field, the White Cottage and Powell's Pool were part of the Somerville Estate. The Swimmers' Memorial was unveiled in 1921 therefore we can date this map to a period between 1921-37. (Map supplied by courtesy of Dr. Mike Hodder)

During the First World War this had been the site of Military Camp 2 which had extended over the roadway up to the treeline bordering Powell's Pool Field. Military Camp 1, which was of a similar size to Camp 2, was sited in front of the parade ground at Crystal Palace, Wyndley.

There is a shortage of archival information available concerning the short history of the Boldmere camp and its contribution to the war effort in WW2. What few references exist tend to describe the camp either as a Civil Defence or a NFS training camp. We must therefore rely on other sources, such as they are.

Douglas Jones in his history of Sutton Coldfield² merely remarks that, "Sutton Park, as during the 1914-18 War, played an important role in the war effort [of WW2]. A great amount of tank testing took place there; a Civil Defence camp was built near Powell's Pool;"

In contrast, Marian Baxter in her illustrated books³ is more explicit. She writes, "The Ministry of Works and Buildings requisitioned land near Powell's Pool and a Civil Defence camp for the Mobile Reserve was erected." In another illustrated book by the same author the builder is quoted as being the Home Office. The official website states that the first Civil Defence Mobile Reserve was formed in Kent in 1940 and comprised approximately two hundred personnel drawn from ambulance, decontamination, first-aid and rescue squads who with the aid of their vehicles could quickly assist those areas overwhelmed by an air raid. By 1943 there were fourteen such units spread across the UK.⁴

What is certain is that the Boldmere camp housed a Civil Defence Rescue School (see Photo 5 on page 6) as well as a National Fire Service Training School. The Civil Defence Rescue Service comprised expert teams who could rescue victims from collapsed structures as a result of the blitz by tunnelling into the debris and by other methods.

Civil Defence Service (CD)

This was a civilian volunteer organisation in Great Britain during the Second World War. Originally established by the Home Office in 1935 as Air Raid Precautions (ARP), its name was officially changed to the Civil Defence Service (CD) as a result of the passing of the Fire Services (Emergency Provisions) Act on May 20, 1941. The primary objective of the Civil Defence Services was to provide a comprehensive service for the protection of the public, the saving of life and the mitigation of damage to property. The Civil Defence Service included the ARP Wardens Service as well as firemen [initially the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) and latterly the National Fire Service (NFS)], fire watchers (later the Fire Guard), rescue, first aid post and stretcher parties.

The 1941 Act was given Royal Assent on May 22, 1941 establishing a National Fire Service (NFS) from August 18. The NFS structure was to be based upon the existing regional civil defence structure with twelve matching regions. Local authorities had to pay 75% of the cost of their regular brigade. Those who had no brigade were assessed at 75% of a two-penny rate. The organisation of civil defence was the responsibility of each local authority. The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) aided in ARP and observer duties as well as running and operating the mobile canteens and rest centres.

² Jones, D.V., *"The Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield"*, (1994, 3rd Ed.), Sutton Coldfield, Westwood Press, p.140

³ Baxter, M., *"Sutton Park"*, (2006), Stroud, Tempus Publishing Ltd., p.83, and by the same author *"Sutton Coldfield-the second selection"*, (1997), Stroud, The Chalford Publishing Company Limited, p.95

⁴ www.ww2civildefence.co.uk/civil-defence-reserve.html accessed 17/06/2020

The Civil Defence Service was disbanded on May 2, 1945. Many of the duties of the service were later revived as part of the Civil Defence Corps in 1949.



Photo 5 – Civil Defence Rescue School, Sutton Park. Photograph taken on February 23, 1942. The group were photographed on the corner of the roads to Streetly Gate and to Hollyhurst Cottage and Wyndley Glade. Note immediately at the back of the group, in its rustic enclosure, the Boldmere Swimming Club Memorial to all members who died in the First World War. The memorial was unveiled in October 1921 and was re-erected, minus its plinth, at the new Wyndley Swimming Baths in 1974.

(Photo sourced from www.sutton-coldfield.net/ww2.html - accessed 18/06/2020)

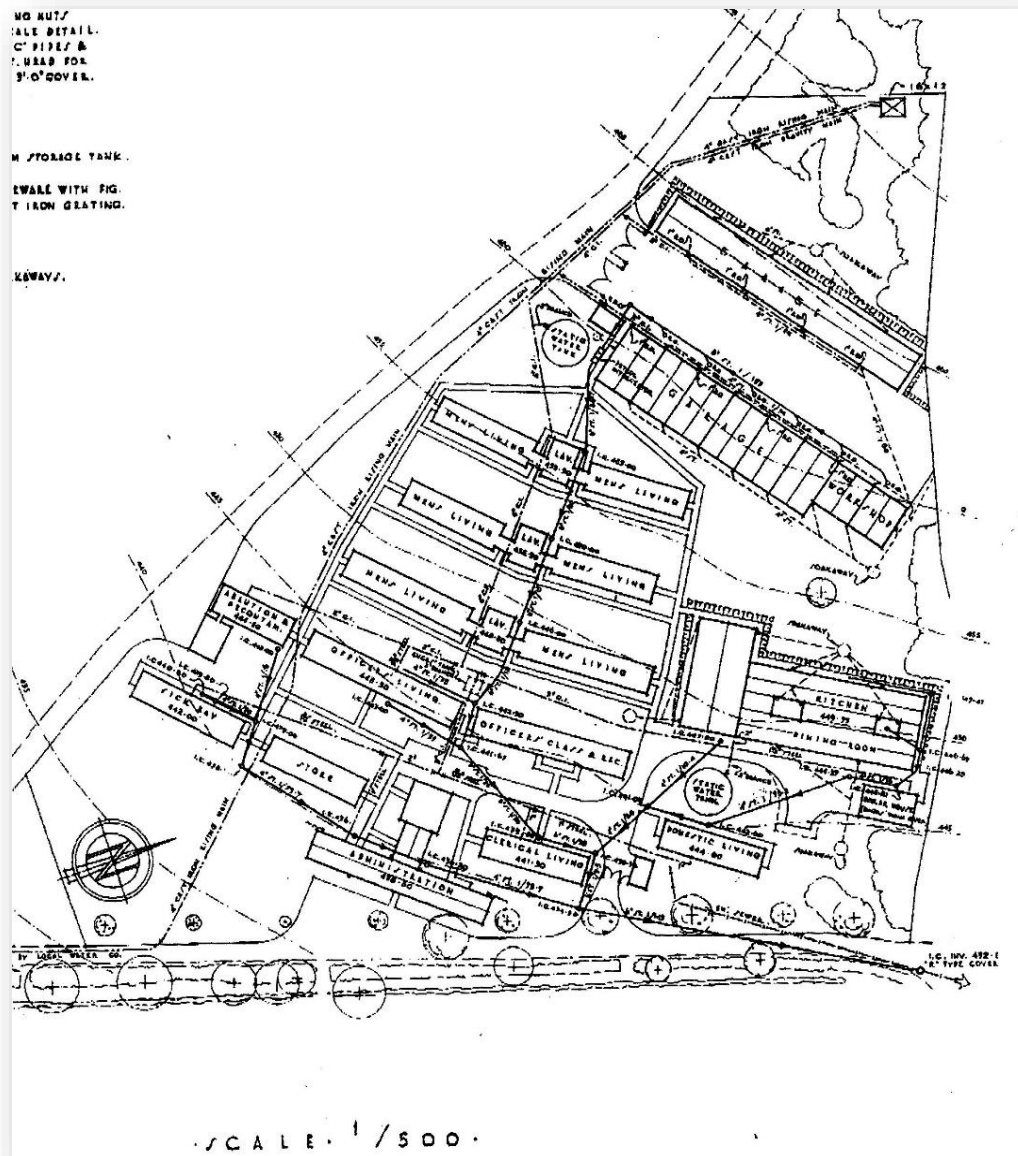
The composition of the camp

From Map 2 on the page 7 we can get an idea of the camp's layout. It shows, although not too clearly on this print, the boundary fence, foul drains, storm water drains, water supply and electric overhead cables.

The buildings comprised brick-built messing, latrines, married quarters, stores, boiler house, cookhouse, and sergeants' mess; concrete air raid shelters, and washdown; 10 - 36ft x 16ft Nissen⁵ huts for living accommodation, sergeants' mess, cookhouse and guardroom; 2 x Romney store huts one of which was 96ft x 35ft; timber buildings for cycle sheds, officers' mess, and garage.

⁵ **Nissen huts:** designed and patented by Major Peter Norman Nissen of the 29th Company of Royal Engineers in 1916 and produced by Nissen Buildings Ltd. The longitudinal bays came in multiples of 6ft allowing the length of the cylinder to be any multiple of 6ft. Similar-shaped huts were developed such as the larger Romney hut in the UK and the Quonset hut in the U.S.

The gated entrance to the site was on the road from Powell's Pool to Hollyhurst Cottage with the administration block and guard room on either side of the entrance. The clerical living quarters and sick-bay were in the row behind the admin. block. The officers' quarters were in the next row. Then there were three rows of men's living quarters with two buildings in each row. A large kitchen and dining room stood between the men's quarters and the boundary with Holly Hurst. At the top end of the camp were two parallel rows of garages and a workshop in between which there was a double-gated entrance off the roadway from Boldmere Gate to Streetly Gate with access to a large vehicle yard. There were two static water towers on the site, one at the south-eastern end by the kitchens and the other at the north western end by the garages.



Map 2 – A plan of the layout of the Civil Defence Training Camp in Sutton Park, near Boldmere.
(Map courtesy of Dr. Mike. Hodder – originals probably in the archives at The Birmingham Library)

The camp after the end of the Second World War

The end of the Second World War was not the end of the camp nor its associated site, Hollyhurst Cottage, which had been used by the Civil Defence as a Rescue Training Ground towards the end of the war. What took place thereafter was a typical illustration of how government bureaucracy hinders decision making, in this case by thirteen years.

Towards the end of 1945, the Town Clerk was in correspondence with the Home Office in order to establish their plans for relinquishing the Boldmere campsite. He reported to the Borough Council Parks Committee on January 7, 1946 that he had received from the Home Office correspondence that gave a definite undertaking to give up the Civil Defence Camp site and restore it to its former condition before the end of December 1946, although the training of National Fire Service personnel may not in fact have been completed by June 3, 1946. On the instructions of the Chairman, the Town Clerk had responded by accepting these terms.

However, events overtook these plans because, in July 1948, the Town Clerk referred to the conference held on April 16, 1948, at which representatives of the Park Committee met representatives of the various ministerial departments in relation to the use of the Civil Defence Camp by the Women's Land Army. He reported the receipt of a communication from the Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries stating that the position since the conference had undergone a change owing to the rate of recruitment for the Women's Land Army not coming up to expectations and it was not proposed to continue using the camp as a hostel for the Women's Land Army.

Faced with the necessity to provide a pool of agricultural labour in the Borough⁶, the Ministry felt that the unforeseen change in circumstances left them with no alternative but to use the camp as a hostel for male agricultural workers. In fact, the camp had been so used for the previous ten to twelve weeks. The Ministry were anxious to continue the present arrangements believing that it was in the interests of food production to do so and they trusted that the Borough Council would acquiesce in the altered arrangements. The Park Committee expressed its disappointment and instructed the Town Clerk as to the nature of the reply to be sent by him.

According to local historian Ken Williams, the camp was given a new lease of life in 1948 when it became a European Volunteer Workers Hostel bringing many Latvian and Lithuanians to the district.⁷ Many Eastern European workers also came to work in the British coal industry, particularly in places like the Nottinghamshire coalfield.

In May 1948, the Borough Surveyor submitted a claim to the Home Office for the sum of £325 for repairing the road from the Civil Defence Camp to Hollyhurst Cottage, £300 being the estimated cost of the clearance of the site at Hollyhurst which had been used as a rescue practice ground.

⁶ During WW2, the Warwickshire War Agricultural Executive Committee requisitioned land in Sutton Park to grow essential foods, e.g. 163 acres near Longmoor Pool, 95 acres near Streetly Golf Course, 8.361 acres near Powell's Pool and the Municipal Golf Course, 5.171 acres Park fields near Longmoor Pool, and 13.496 acres off Monmouth Drive and Stonehouse Road. The first two sites were relinquished by September 29, 1950 and the other sites by November 30, 1950.

⁷ Williams, K.J., (1994), *"A History of Boldmere"*, Sutton Coldfield, Westwood Press Publications, pp. 74-75.

By November of 1948, the Borough Surveyor referred to the claim the Borough Council had made to the Home Office in the previous May for the damage to the road leading from the Civil Defence Camp to the training ground at Hollyhurst Cottage. In response, the Home Office asked that the old Civil Defence training ground at Hollyhurst Cottage be left as it was until the future Civil Defence arrangements had been formulated. It took until April 1949 before the Home Office agreed to contribute £215 towards the damage to the aforementioned road which the Park Committee said would now be repaired before Easter of that year. At the June meeting of the Borough Council this repair was confirmed as having been accomplished and the claim met by the Home Office.

Meanwhile, the state of the old rescue training ground at Hollyhurst was an issue still rumbling on and it was raised again in December 1950 when it was resolved that the Town Clerk pursue the matter with the Home Office with a view to getting the site cleared as soon as possible.

The Town Clerk reported back on September 10, 1951 that the Civil Defence Department of the Home Office had approved the expenditure of a sum not exceeding £250 for the clearance of the old Rescue Training Ground at Hollyhurst.

On June 8, 1953, the Borough Surveyor reported to the Borough Council that tenders had been invited for the demolition of certain buildings at the Civil Defence Camp site at Boldmere and asked whether the Parks Committee would consider retaining the three concrete huts fronting the road. The Committee resolved not to retain the three concrete huts but that the whole of this camp site be cleared and the Borough Surveyor be authorised to accept the highest price tendered for the huts. There was still a problem with the site because on December 7, 1953 the Borough Surveyor reported that there were now twenty-two huts tenanted at the Boldmere camp but the occupiers would be re-housed early in the New Year after which the demolition of the huts would then proceed. This reflected the dire housing shortage in post-war Britain.

There were further delays to the demolition of this camp site because on July 11, 1955 the Town Clerk reported to the Borough Council that he had received from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government a notice of de-requisition dated June 15, 1955 relating to 4.08 acres of land being part of the former Civil Defence camp in the south-east corner of Sutton Park and that it would now be necessary to arrange for the clearance and restoration of the site and for the submission of a claim in respect thereof. The Borough Council resolved that the Town Clerk, in consultation with the Borough Surveyor, prepare and submit a claim for compensation under Section 2(1)(6) of the Compensation (Defence) Act, 1939.

Twelve months later, matters seemed to have approached a resolution when the Town Clerk reported on June 4, 1956 to the Borough Council that the Sub-Committee, having executive power in this matter, had accepted the tender of Land Gear Co. Ltd., Birmingham, amounting to £1,613. 19s. 2d., for the demolition of the Civil Defence Camp in Sutton Park and clearance of the site.

Finally, the Borough Surveyor was able to report to the Borough Council on September 10, 1956 that the site had now been cleared and would be seeded in the near future. Exploration of the Borough Council Minutes reveals that this was not the end of matters concerning the demolition of the Boldmere camp site because on February 8, 1958, under Minute 1646, the

Borough Surveyor, in relation to Minute No. 886 – SUTTON PARK – REMOVAL OF MINISTRY EQUIPMENT, submitted a list of tenders received for the removal of the garage block and water tower at Boldmere camp in Sutton Park. It was resolved that, subject to the approval of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government the tender of M. Cunningham & Sons Ltd. of Birmingham, being the best offer received, be accepted. On March 10, 1958, the Town Clerk was able to inform the Park Committee that the Ministry of Housing and Local Government had issued a Notice of Release from Requisition of approximately 5.18 acres of land at Sutton Coldfield.

So thirteen years after the end of the Second World War the Civil Defence camp site was finally cleared and the site returned to Sutton Park. Other military sites within Sutton Park were also slow to be cleared, for instance the Borough Surveyor reported on February 11, 1957 that work to clear the Streetly Gun Site had finally been completed. The Borough Treasurer reported that the final cost of clearance of the site had amounted to £2,430. 18s. 4d. as against the original contract price of £1,613. 3s. 4d.

It was the tardy removal of these wartime structures, referred to in the text, that was one of the reasons why FOSPA⁸ was founded in 1950 in response to suggestions at that time that parts of Sutton Park could be made available for building sites. The idea that Sutton Park could be built upon caused great consternation in the local press as well as Borough residents.

Parchmarks at the WW2 U.S. Army Camp near Streetly Lane

Having discovered the parchmarks at the Boldmere site, Mike Hodder next visited the site of the WW2 U.S. Army Camp that was built in 1943 just inside the Park close to the “White House” pedestrian gate on Streetly Lane.

On arrival at the site he discovered that parchmarks of the footings of camp buildings were also evident, although not so obvious as those at the Boldmere site. This could be because Nissen huts were mounted on 4 x 4in (10 x 10 cm) stumps with 15 x 9 in (38 x 23 cm) sole plates. On these sole plates were 4 x 3in (10 x 8 cm) bearers and 4 x 2in (10 x 5 cm) joists at 2 ft 10 in (8cm) centres. The author assumes that the American Quonset hut is similar in construction to the British Nissen hut.

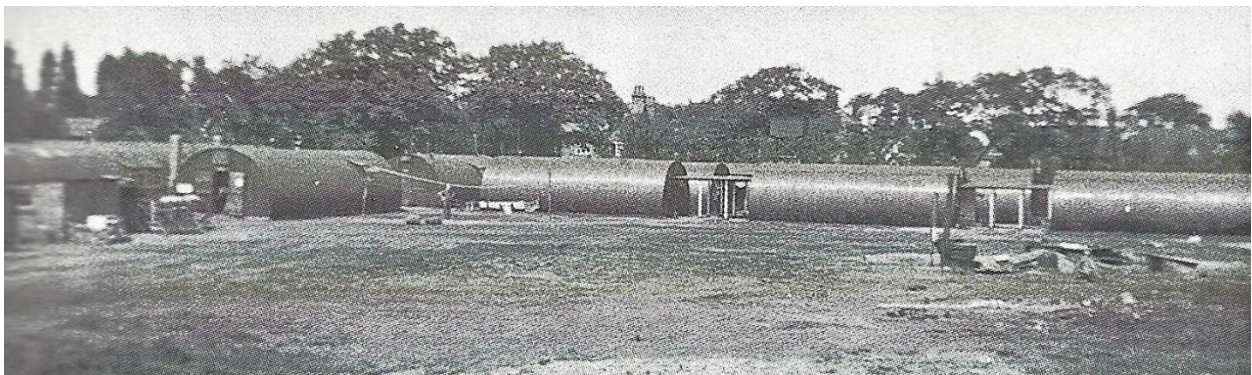


Photo 6 - A WW2 photograph of the temporary U.S. Army camp site in Sutton Park, bordering Streetly Lane, some houses are just visible beyond the trees. The camp had a short life of only nine months 1943-44.

(Sourced from: Collins, M&F, *“Letters for Victory”*, (1993), Studley, Brewin Books Limited, p.69)

⁸ **FOSPA:** a.k.a. ‘Friends of Sutton Park Association’ – refer to their website: www.fospa.org.uk for details.

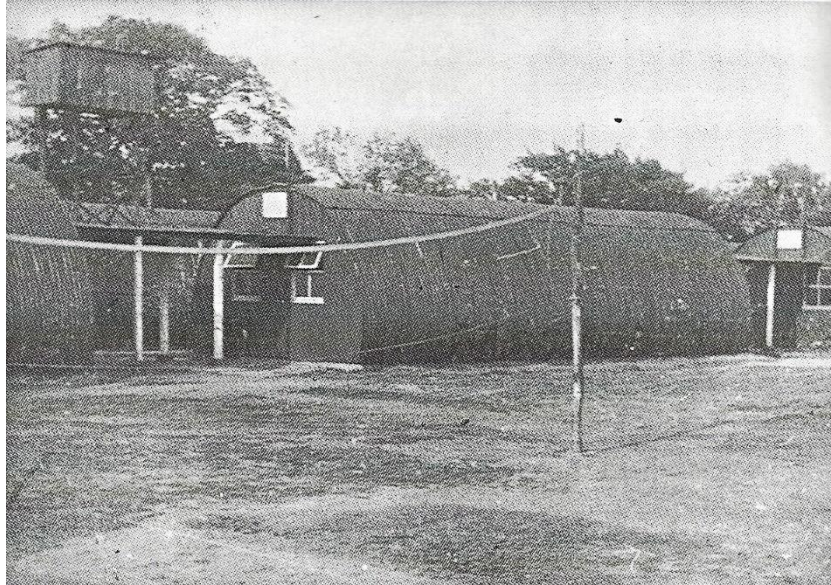


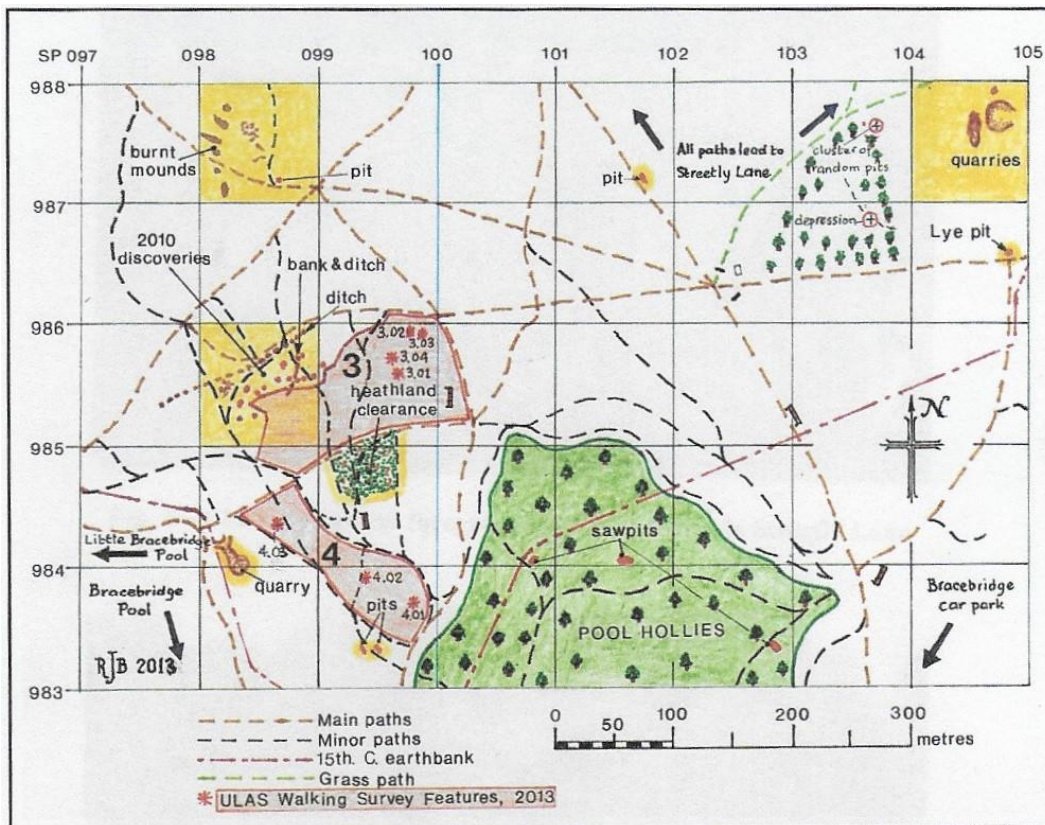
Photo 7 –This close-up view of the volley-ball court shows the arrangement of the American style Nissen huts, probably manufactured by Quonset. Windows were only provided in the end walls but the huts were centrally heated (note the overhead pipes). Nissen huts had a reputation for being cold and draughty. (Sourced as for photo 6 - photo from p.124)



Photo 8 -Random pits near the “White House” pedestrian gate near Streetly Lane which can just be seen right of centre amongst the trees bordering Streetly Lane. (Author’s photograph – 19/05/2013)

In 2013 after some heathland clearance had taken place in the Four Oaks area of the Park, I discovered close to this old camp site a number of ground disturbances, both pits and mounds, some of which were enclosed by the triangular group of trees shown on Map 3 on page 12 at about NGR SP 1035 9870. Other pits were found randomly to the north of this group of trees near to the “White House” pedestrian gate on Streetly Lane, as shown in photo 8 on page 11.

A year or two earlier, I had discovered a series of pits and quarry slips (top right yellow grid square) near to this site and north of Gumslade which at the time I ascribed possibly to the construction of either Four Oaks Hall or the development of the Four Oaks Estate in the 1880s. Mike Hodder is now inclined to think that they were, instead, associated with the construction of this U.S. Army camp site and, looking at Map 3, their proximity seems to support this likelihood.



Map 3 – This 2013 archaeological map by the author covers an area of Sutton Park from Pool Hollies north to Streetly Lane. The WW2 U.S. Army camp site was just north of the triangular cluster of trees in the top-right of map by the quarries. For further information about this map, refer to *“Sutton Park Archaeology: Unravelling a complex of ground disturbances”*, to be found in SCLHRG “Proceedings, Vol. 12: Spring 2015” on this website.