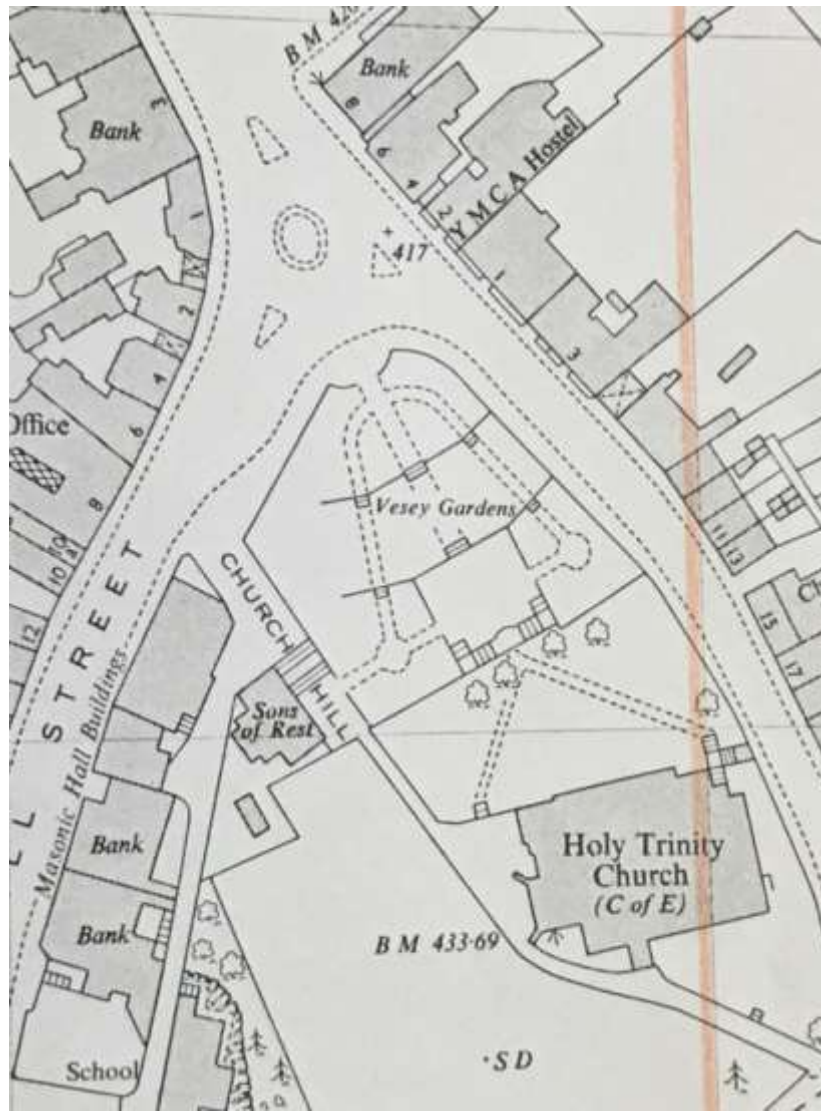


Church Hill, Coleshill Street and Mill Street

Part 4

Vesey Memorial Garden



By Keith Jordan

(Member of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group)

June 2020

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS

By the 1930's the area bounded by Church Street, Coleshill Street and Mill Street had deteriorated enough for it to start attracting comments from the residents of Sutton as a whole.

The decline had been gradual since the 1880's, the buildings were now in a poor state of repair and overcrowded. Verbal evidence came from an 80 year old gentleman who, recalling a memory from his earlier days, stated:-

"I remembered going into an attic in Church Hill as a child and was struck by the Dickensian scene".

Another lady said:-

"One family was particularly poor and had to use the doors and banisters to chop up for firewood"

She further added:-

"I always expected the houses to fall down of their own accord".



Site of the Vesey Memorial Garden prior to the start of demolition work.

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

Members of Holy Trinity Church also put forward their views about how it would be a great benefit if a vista could be opened up between the church and the High Street and also the possibility of instigating a lasting memorial for the town's most famous benefactor, Bishop Vesey.

The respected architect Mr Charles Edward Bateman was approached for his input. This was a natural thing to do, as he was well known by many of the parishioners, due to his earlier work in connection with the church. In 1914 he designed the decoration for the chancel ceiling, later on he was involved with the design for the ceiling of the nave and finally, in 1929, for the design of the Vesey Chapel ceiling.

By this time Bateman was around 70 years of age and either retired or thinking of it, but nevertheless he put forward a sketch of his ideas for consideration. At a private meeting summoned by the Rector at the time, the Reverend G L H Harvey, the matter was discussed and, as a result, Mr Bateman's drawing was reproduced in the Birmingham Post and also the Parish Magazine.



Bateman's preliminary drawing illustrating a suggested design for a public improvement in Sutton Coldfield to be known as Vesey Memorial Garden.

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

Approaching Sutton Coldfield from the North, the traveller by road may notice ahead of him, just before he turns round towards the Parade, the tower of the Parish Church among the tree-tops, peering, as it were, for a sight of its old domain over the roofs of upstart properties that are old but which were not there when already the Parish Church was very old. It has seemed to many of the inhabitants of the Royal and ancient borough, who have an ever-present regard for the amenities of the town, a great pity that the interesting old church, with its Norman font and its tomb of Bishop Vesey, should be thus unworthily cloaked, and that a considerable improvement would be effected if the property which lies to the north of the church—consisting in the main of very old and out-of-date buildings—were to be demolished and an open space provided in their stead.

Apart from aesthetic considerations, such a clearance would enable a much-needed plan of road widening to be carried out in a part of the borough where the traffic is extremely congested. It would entail, however, the acquiring of two licensed houses, "The Old Sun" and "The Royal Oak," both of which belong to one brewery company. Having regard to the continuous expansion of the borough, suggestions have been made that it would be a positive advantage to remove these houses, and, in compensation, to permit the erection of one licensed house in a part of the town where the needs which it would supply are not catered for at present.

The area which would be affected by a clearance covers roughly nine-sixteenths of an acre, and is shaped like an irregular quadrilateral bounded by Church Hill, the church and churchyard, Colleshill Street and Mill

Street. It had been hoped a few years ago that some of the public-spirited residents would come forward and assist in carrying out the improvement, and the hope was not altogether a pious one, but the war came to fill men's minds with other things that drove local plans into the background. Now the idea is being revived that this area should be made an open square or treated as a garden place on the lines tentatively indicated in the plan reproduced above.

An open space of this kind, it is thought, too, would be a suitable place for a monument to the great Bishop Vesey, the town's benefactor in mediæval times, and to whom it owes its charter of incorporation. It has often been a subject of comment that there is no monument to the bishop except the recumbent figure on the tomb in the church. The clearance scheme would also provide a better

means of access to the church, and if carried out on the lines sketched above would beautify the centre of the old town and be an added attraction to the many thousands of visitors for whom the name of Sutton Coldfield is even now a synonym for spacious heath and water and woodlands.

One gathers that the idea of such an improvement is widely supported in the borough. The above plan, which was prepared some years ago by Mr. C. E. Bateman, the Birmingham architect, who is a resident of many years standing in Sutton Coldfield, and zealous for the enhancement of its amenities, is an artist's conception of what might be achieved. But the angle from which the sketch was made does not permit one to visualise the broad sweep of the road turning round to the right which the improvement would make possible.

Birmingham Post article

Public interest was awakened even more as a result of this article, but it was obvious that an undertaking of this magnitude was quite beyond the legal powers and the finances of the parish church and that only the Corporation could hope to carry out so large a project.

The difficulties in the way were considerable. Among the buildings on the site were two inns, the 'Old Sun' and the 'Royal Oak', some old established shops and a number of cottage dwellings. To acquire these would require patient, friendly and confidential negotiations. Luckily, Councillor A E Terry, J.P., who was the Mayor at the time, was enthusiastic about the idea and he instigated the help of Mr R A Reay-Nadin, the late Town Clerk to join him in the task. Their efforts were successful, due to the willingness of Ansells Brewery Company and the other owners of the various properties to negotiate satisfactory terms

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

The cost of acquiring the site was £7,221 and the cost of demolishing the properties and levelling the ground added a further £947, making a total of £8,168 (equivalent to £581,000 today). This expenditure was met by the Corporation, but nothing further could be done out of the public funds. Charles Bateman was then asked, in collaboration with Mr T Porter, the Borough Surveyor, to finalise a suitable design. The estimated cost of carrying out the work was approximately £3,000, an expenditure that could only be met by voluntary effort. It was thought initially, to raise such a large sum via private contributions would be an extremely difficult undertaking. Within a few months, however, the appeal raised the sum of £2,760 from some 500 contributors (equivalent to £196,000 today).

It might be appropriate, at this point in time, to expand a little on the life of Charles Edward Bateman (1863-1947).

He was born in Castle Bromwich on the 8th June 1863.

In 1880, at the age of 17, he was articled in his father's architectural practice. He qualified as an architect in 1887 and entered into partnership with his father as Bateman and Bateman.

He gradually moved away from his father's gothic styles towards a more simplistic approach and he became an early pioneer of the Arts and Crafts movement in Birmingham. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1898, at the age of 35.

His love of the Cotswolds also led him to a reputation for the design of country houses. Bateman lived for some time at No. 7 Anchorage Road, in a property he designed himself, before moving onto the Four Oaks Estate. Whilst there he designed several imposing houses for fellow residents.

During his career he was involved with designing in the local area, the following:-

<u>Property</u>	<u>Date</u>
12, Mulroy Road, Four Oaks	1900
'Carhampton House', 11 Luttrell Road, Four Oaks	1901-02
St. James' Church (East end), Mere Green Road	1906-08
The Rectory, Rectory Lane, Castle Bromwich	1911
The Vicarage, St. Peter's Church, Maney Hill Road	1911-12
St. Chad's Church, Hollyfield Road, Walmley	1925-27
Vesey Chapel Ceiling, Holy Trinity Church, Sutton Coldfield	1929

He retired to the Cotswolds and lived in Bourton-on-the-Hill, close to Moreton-in-Marsh, where he died on the 5th August 1947. He is buried at St. Mary and St. Margaret Church, Castle Bromwich, a building he helped restore in his younger days.

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

Turning now to the Minutes of the General Purposes Committee, these show that the council started to acquire properties in 1936. Mr Cattell was paid £900 for four houses in Church Hill, Mr Feltin £500 for two cottages, Mr Barton £2,000 for four houses and Ansell's Brewery £3,000, presumably for the two public houses.

The Register of Electors for the period 1936-37 indicates that all eight houses in Church Hill were fully occupied, as per the list of tenants detailed below:-

Church Hill (Trinity Ward)

<u>Postal Address</u>	<u>Name of Tenant</u>
No. 1	<u>Lakin</u> , Charles Henry Lakin, Charlotte
No. 2	<u>Bevington</u> , Edith <u>Moody</u> , Alfred Moody, Fanny Marian
No. 3	<u>Corbett</u> , Richard Corbett, Annie
No. 4	<u>Phillips</u> , Alfred Henry Phillips, Jennie
No. 5	<u>Lamb</u> , Francis Lamb, Phoebe Elizabeth
No. 6	<u>Kyte</u> , Leonard Kyte, Louisa Kyte, Ada
No. 7	<u>Johnson</u> , William Thomas Johnson, Elizabeth <u>Jones</u> , Horace Jones, Alfred
No. 8	<u>Horton</u> , Albert Horton, Nellie

This would be for the last time, as the Borough began to purchase the various properties. The Register of Electors for 1937-38 lists only Nos. 1, 2, 6, 7 & 8 and for 1938-39 there was just Nos. 1 & 2.

The following notes have been taken from the Sutton Coldfield Council Minutes regarding the creation of Vesey Memorial Gardens and subsequently a 'Sons of Rest' shelter adjacent:-

Quarterly Meeting of the Council held at the Council House on Wednesday 28th April 1937.

Mill Street Improvement

The General Purposes Committee reported that they had instructed the Borough Surveyor to take steps to demolish the various buildings on the site, recently agreed to be purchased by the Council, bounded by Coleshill Street, Mill Street and Church Hill. As and when the Council obtain possession, it is hoped to make an early start in clearing the whole of the site.

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

Report by the General Purposes Committee on the 11th April 1938.

Mill Street Improvement.

The Committee had agreed terms with the tenants of all the shops on the Mill Street improvement site to give up possession. The tenants of the houses on the site will be re-housed as soon as houses are available on the Holland House Estate.

It is proposed to incorporate in this improvement scheme a memorial to the late Dr. Bodington.

On an examination of the properties situated in Coleshill Street, an underground cellar was discovered, which it is proposed to incorporate in the general scheme for use as a bomb proof shelter.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE NO. 1: The Holland House Estate was an area around Royal Road, Jerome Road, Kathleen Road and Ebrook Road.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE NO. 2: The Sunday Mercury dated 1st September 1939 devoted a special article on these cellars. They stated:-

Centuries ago a crowd of frightened people crouched inside cellars far below a main street in Sutton Coldfield sheltering from Cromwellian troops. In time to come those same cellars will provide shelter for the people of Sutton should the enemy aeroplanes roar overhead unloading their deadly cargo of high-explosive bombs.

The cellars were discovered 20ft. below the surface during recent demolition operations in Mill Street. They are estimated to be between 200 and 300 years old, but little alteration is needed to transform them into air-raid shelters to supplement the specially constructed ones which are to be built by the Corporation on the lines of some recently inspected in France.

A suggestion that the cellars were probably used as hide-outs during the Reformation has been advanced by Mr Edgar G Harcourt, an authority on the history of Sutton Coldfield. "There is no doubt, he said, that the cellars belonged to the old Royal Oak Hotel. One of them is a skittle alley; the others look like store cellars".

Footnote: It may be that Mr Harcourt was confused in saying the 'Royal Oak', as this only opened for business in 1866, but meant to say the 'Old Sun' Inn. Also the report mentions the cellars were found as a result of demolition in Mill Street but, of course, the cellars could only be accessed via Coleshill Street.

By way of interest, the other air-raid shelters in Sutton Coldfield were situated in Monmouth Drive, Sutton Park, Chester Road near the tram terminus, College Road, Kings Road, New Oscott, Sheffield Road, Mere Green Road, Streetly Lane and Thornhill Road and Beeches Walk.

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

Report by the General Purposes Committee on the 16th May 1938.

Mill Street Improvement.

The sub-committee, appointed to deal with the demolition of the properties situated in Mill Street, Coleshill Street and Church Hill and the re-housing of tenants, are proceeding with these matters as quickly as possible, with the view to an early commencement of the laying out of the gardens etc.

Report by the General Purposes Committee on the 20th June 1938.

Mill Street Improvement.

All the properties on the Mill Street Improvement site have been vacated and demolition work is in progress. Tenders have been invited for the building of retaining walls, in connection with the lay-out as an open space.

Report by the General Purposes Committee on the 18th July 1938.

Mill Street Improvement.

The demolition and clearance of the site at the junction of Mill Street and Coleshill Street is proceeding satisfactorily.

'Sons of Rest' Shelter.

Regarding the suggestion for the establishment of a *Sons of Rest* shelter in the Borough, a sub-committee has inspected various sites and, subject to certain conditions, it is proposed to make an application to the Trustees of the Municipal Charities to let the site of the School Room on Church Hill at a nominal rental for a period of 99 years, subject to the gentleman, who has generously promised to erect the shelter, approving of the site for this purpose.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE: The gentleman concerned was later found to be a Mr C T Avery, a prominent Sutton Coldfield resident.

Report by the General Purposes Committee on the 13th September 1938.

'Sons of Rest' Shelter.

The Trustees of the Municipal Charities, being the owners of the School Room and land adjoining Church Hill, have agreed in principle to the use of the site for the construction of a '*Sons of Rest*' Shelter

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

Report by the General Purposes Committee on the 17th October 1938.

'Sons of Rest' Shelter.

The Committee approved the recommendation of the Sub-Committee, appointed to confer with the representatives of the Trustees of the Municipal Charities, to acquire outright the site of the present School Room on Church Hill for the 'Sons of Rest' Shelter for £50.00, subject to the arrangements being confirmed by the Charity Commissioners.

Report by the General Purposes Committee on the 16th January 1939.

'Sons of Rest' Shelter

In anticipation of the receipt of the Order by the Trustees of the Municipal Charities authorising the sale of the Old School building and land situate in Church Hill, the Committee instructed the Borough Surveyor to prepare plans of the new shelter, in order that they may be considered at the next meeting.

Report by the General Purposes Committee on the 17th April 1939.

Mill Street Improvement.

The laying out of the Vesey Memorial Gardens is now nearing completion and it is hoped to officially open the gardens at the end of May.



Work in progress at Vesey Memorial Garden Circa 1938

All the walling in the garden is of Cotswold stone and the work was undertaken by the well known and established Sutton building contractors Streathers Limited. The lawns and bed planting were carried out by the Corporation.

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

In actual fact the opening was, for some reason, delayed slightly and the event did not occur until 4.00 pm on Monday the 5th June. The Vesey Memorial Garden was officially opened by the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Wilfrid Bigwood.

The Order of Proceedings was, as follows:-

1. *Address on Bishop Vesey and the Memorial by Alderman J E Willmott, J.P.*
2. *Unveiling of the Memorial Tablet and Official Opening of the Garden by the Deputy Mayor.*
3. *The Deputy Mayor asked the Mayor to accept the Garden on behalf of the Inhabitants of Sutton Coldfield.*
4. *The Mayor accepted the Garden and formally thanked the Deputy Mayor and Subscribers.*
5. *Dedicatory Prayer by the Rector and Mayor's Chaplain, the Reverend G L H Harvey, M.A.*
6. *The Assembly proceeded to the site of the 'Sons of Rest' Pavilion, where the Mayor laid the Foundation Stone.*
7. *The High Steward of the Borough, Colonel Sir Henry R Fairfax-Lucy proposed a vote of thanks.*



Unveiling of the Vesey Memorial Tablet.

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)



The Vesey Memorial Tablet with Inscription.

The Inscription reads, as follows:-

**THIS MEMORIAL AND GARDEN
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF JOHN VESEY
BISHOP OF EXETER**

(Born c. 1462, Died October 23rd 1554)

THE ELDEST SON OF WILLIAM VESEY OR HARMAN OF SUTTON
COLDFIELD: SO GREAT WAS HIS LOVE FOR HIS NATIVE PLACE
THAT HE CONFERRED UPON IT GREAT AND LASTING BENEFITS.
HIS MOST DISTINGUISHED SERVICE TO THE TOWN WAS TO OBTAIN
FROM KING HENRY VIII A CHARTER OF INCORPORATION,
DECREEING THAT THE INHABITANTS OF SUTTON COLDFIELD
SHOULD CHOOSE A WARDEN AND SOCIETY FOR THE GOVERNMENT
OF THE TOWN, AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE LANDS AND
PROFITS OF THE MANOR AND LORDSHIP FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE
POOR, ABSOLUTELY AND FOREVER.

THIS CHARTER ALSO DECREED THAT THE INHABITANTS SHOULD
HAVE THE FREE USE OF THE ROYAL PARK AND CHASE IN PERPETUITY
AND THAT THE TITLE OF THE TOWN SHOULD THENCEFORTH
AND FOREVER BE THE "ROYAL TOWN OF SUTTON COLDFIELD."

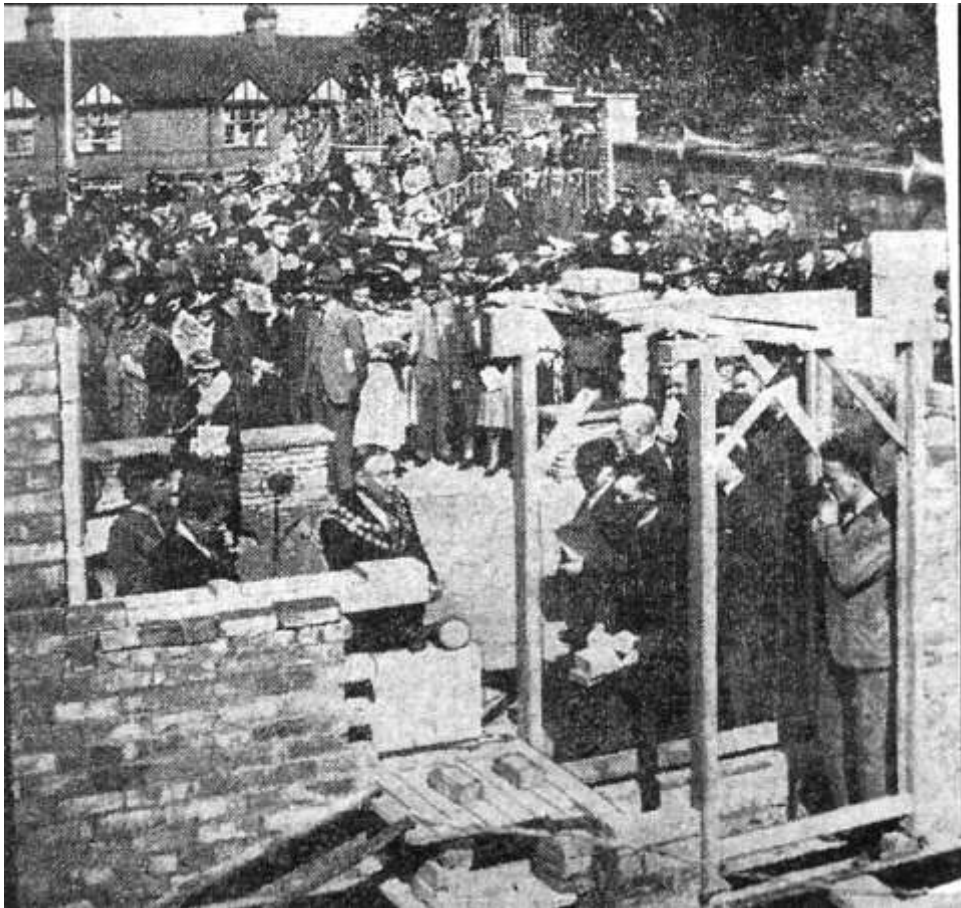
AMONG HIS MANY BENEFACCTIONS, HE ENLARGED AND BEAUTIFIED
THE CHURCH AND FOUNDED THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL WHICH
BEARS HIS NAME. HE BUILT A MOOT HALL AND MARKET PLACE,
FIFTY-ONE STONE HOUSES FOR THE POOR AND TWO STONE BRIDGES,
PAVED THE WHOLE TOWN, REPAIRED THE FENCES OF THE PARK
AND STOCKED IT WITH CATTLE.

HE SERVED THE STATE ON FOREIGN EMBASSIES, HELD MANY
OTHER OFFICES, WAS TUTOR TO THE PRINCESS MARY (DAUGHTER
OF HENRY VIII) LORD OF THE MARCHES OF WALES AND DEAN
OF THE CHAPEL ROYAL OF WINDSOR.

DEXTRA DEI EXCALTAVIT ME ----- DEXTRA DEI FECIT SALUTEM

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)

After the speeches and unveiling ceremony were completed in the Vesey Memorial Garden the Lord Mayor, Councillor James J Ogley, J.P., then proceeded to the site of the partially built 'Sons of Rest' Pavilion, where he laid the Foundation Stone.



**Laying of the Foundation Stone for the
'Sons of Rest' Pavilion.**

The Mayor can be seen with a typical stone mason's mallet in which to tap the stone into its required place. Note also the somewhat old fashioned microphone (by today's standard) just to the left of the Mayor in the photograph, which he used for his speech.

Before the Mayor performed the ceremony Mr Avery, who provided the necessary funds, said that:-

"The building would be a meeting-place where men of all classes, who had served their generation in one way or another, could come and spend their leisure hours. The 'Sons of Rest' movement had proved very successful in Birmingham and surrounding towns and he was sure it would do equally good work in Sutton Coldfield."

After the ceremony Tea was provided in the Town Hall where an exhibition of pictures of Sutton Coldfield in bygone days was displayed.

VESEY MEMORIAL GARDENS (Continued)



View of the completed Vesey Memorial Garden 1939.

Bibliography

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Bateman_\(architect\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Bateman_(architect))

sclhrg.org.uk 'History Spot' by Roger Lea. Article No. 340

'Church Hill to Vesey Gardens' by K M Kendall. 1989

'Official Opening of Vesey Memorial Garden'. Commemorative Brochure. 1939

Borough of Sutton Coldfield Council Minutes 1936/1937. Ref: SH 34.3

Birmingham Post Article

Sunday Mercury dated 19th June 1938

Birmingham Post 6th June 1939

The Herald 10th June 1939

Birmingham Mail dated 18th October 1982

Sutton Coldfield News dated 6th January 1940

Birmingham Mail dated 29th September 2019

Register of Electors 1936-37

Register of Electors 1937-38

Register of Electors 1938-39

Photographs (All taken from Keith Jordan's Photographic Collection)

Site of the Vesey Memorial Garden prior to the start of demolition work.

Bateman's preliminary drawing illustrating a suggested design for a public improvement in Sutton Coldfield, to be known as Vesey Gardens.

Birmingham Post article.

Work in progress at Vesey Memorial Garden Circa 1938.

Unveiling of the Vesey Memorial Tablet.

The Vesey Memorial Tablet Inscription.

Laying of the Foundation Stone for the 'Sons of Rest' Pavilion.

View of the completed Vesey Memorial Garden 1939.