



Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group

The Great Fire of August 1868

in SUTTON PARK



**Contemporary local accounts of the fire in Sutton Park
that devastated Streetly Wood and surrounding
heathland: includes the Public Notices issued
by the Warden and Society, and more.**

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The Great Fire of August 1868 in Sutton Park

The heathland habitat of Sutton Park is prone to spontaneous combustion during periods of prolonged drought, especially when combined with extremely hot weather. This combination of weather provides the potential for fires to spread from the heathland to the woodlands with disastrous results. We know from contemporary sources that this was the case when the Park was subject to serious fires in 1921 and 1976. Going further back in history we know of other major fires that occurred in the Park.

1868 was one of those years when the UK endured extreme weather conditions (refer to page 13 for official weather details) and the, so called, Great Fire raged across the north-west section of Sutton Park. Contemporary accounts suggest that it burnt out of control for about a week spreading from the heathland to the semi-ancient woodland of Streetly Wood, destroying trees and thus reducing the size of the woodland considerably.

Very little has been recorded about this event and the only account that is readily accessible is recorded in a book of local history written in 1891, twenty-three years after the event, by the Rev. W.K. Riland Bedford, who was Rector of Sutton Coldfield from 1850 to 1892:

“One of the most remarkable events of these years was the great fire in Sutton Park in the year 1868. This fire, which was suspected of having been the act of an incendiary, commenced on the 3rd day of July, and consumed trees and woods in an area of over 500 acres of Sutton Park. It was not extinguished for several days, and then only by the greatest exertions of Mr. Cooper [*the Town Surveyor*] and the Park staff, and of the constabulary. The year 1868 was one of great heat and drought, no rain falling between April and August. Many fires occurred that summer throughout England in forests and commons.”¹

This brief account of the fire by Riland Bedford appears to be the source material on which later local historians have based their accounts of the fire because there has been a lack of alternative contemporary sources that might provide details of the fire’s extent. Riland Bedford’s local history accounts have not been regarded by some local historians as totally reliable because of his reliance on his and other people’s memories and the notable absence of his use of source references. For example, Midgley, in his short 1904 history of the town, devotes just three lines to the fire, stating that the event occurred in July 1868, a minor error which has almost certainly been sourced from

¹ Riland Bedford, W.K., “*History of Sutton Coldfield*”, (1891), Birmingham, privately published, p.63.

Riland Bedford's "*History of Sutton Coldfield*", a book which Midgley lists under "*Authorities*" in the front of his book.²

Unfortunately, in the quoted section above, Riland Bedford appears to have made an error in dating the outbreak of the fire. He states that the fire commenced on July 3, 1868 when other sources, including official ones, state that the outbreak commenced on August 3, 1868. To be fair to Riland Bedford, he does preface his book by stating that, "[he] does not suggest that the [his] sketch of local history...is either complete or accurate in detail."



Rev. W.K. Riland Bedford M.A. in 1861
Rector of Sutton Coldfield 1850-92

It was therefore heartening to discover in a recent transcription by Janet Jordan of Sarah Holbeche's Diary³, which is a gossip account of random daily events that happened in and around Sutton Coldfield in the period 1802 to 1869, that there is a page devoted to the 1868 fire which includes local press cuttings. This information describes the fire and how the Warden and Society dealt with the crisis.

Sarah Holbeche's so-called diary is really a scrapbook in which she pasted photographs and press cuttings to illustrate her contemporary entries. The diary is not kept on a daily basis and her notes are sometimes a little terse and ungrammatical – jottings would perhaps better describe them, and her spelling is often somewhat variable but not an uncommon feature at that time. Nevertheless, amongst a wealth of local information is a dated page of personal comments and local press cuttings which fortunately adds to our brief knowledge of the Great Fire of 1868. Unfortunately, Sarah Holbeche did not provide the names of the local newspapers from which she took the cuttings nor, in some cases, their precise dates of publication. It is likely that most of the press cuttings were taken from *The Birmingham Daily Post*, or *The Birmingham Weekly Post* which was published on a Saturday. Sarah Holbeche writes in her diary for August, 1868:

² Midgley, W., "*A Short History of the Town and Chase of Sutton Coldfield: with Two Maps and Many Pictures*", (1904), Birmingham, printed privately, p. 95

³ Contained in the Transcript of the "*Sarah Holbeche Diary*", edited by Jordan J., (2021), p 94, and available to study under "Transcriptions" on this website – Transcription Page 129.

“On the 4 [August 4, 1868] I took the servants to see the sight of the fire. As we left the scene in truth at 10 o’clock, at night shoals more were going in [*the Park*] by moonlight.”

This snippet of information illustrates succinctly the excitement and curiosity shown by many of the local people for whom in 1868 this huge fire was likely to be a topic of conversation in the months and years to come. Taking the servants to the Park to see the fire was obviously a major social event and theories would be debated among the spectators as to the causes and eventual toll of the fire. Also, the fact that she spent nearly six hours at the scene of the fire illustrates the curiosity and excitement, which one can safely assume was shared by all of the other sightseers. It also demonstrates her relationship with her household staff and illustrates the dangers that local visitors were willing to subject themselves by entering the Park, particularly after dark, at the mercy of an uncontrollable and hazardous environment that might have had fatal consequences and put any potential rescuers in great danger. It is understandable that the presence of hordes of sightseers in the Park, particularly at night-time and so soon after the fire had broken out, would force the Warden and Society to issue a public notice declaring the Park out of bounds until further notice. It is not hard to imagine the melee of visitors on foot mingling with horse-drawn carriages and riders in the fading light of day, everyone intent on establishing their own viewpoint of the encroaching fire and no doubt hindering the fire-fighting abilities of the local constabulary.

For her late afternoon and evening visit to the Streetly area of the Park, Sarah Holbeche would have taken her servants, no doubt well provisioned, by horse and brougham or similar mode of horse-drawn carriage from her home in the High Street via the Town Gate at the end of Park Road, to Wyndley Glade before turning right (northwards) towards Streetly Wood. In 1868 the Streetly entrance to Sutton Park was a pedestrian entrance and was situated on Thornhill Road south of the point where the Sutton Coldfield Golf Club entrance is today. The new Streetly Gate, Streetly Lodge and the re-aligned carriage road to the new entrance would not be installed until March 1899.

August 1868 was at an age before the existence of Daylight-Saving Time or British Summer Time which was not introduced until 1916 during the First World War. In 1858 the clocks were set all year round to Greenwich Mean Time (GMT)⁴, meaning that in the summer it was light by 3am and dark around 9pm.

⁴ **Greenwich Mean Time** was adopted across the island of Great Britain by the Railway Clearing House in 1847 and by almost all railway companies in the following year. However, in 1858 a legal case held local mean time to be the official time. Greenwich Mean Time was legally adopted throughout the island of Great Britain in 1880.

Local Press Cuttings from 1868

The following local press cuttings are taken from the Sarah Holbeche Diary (p. 94 of 104/Transcription Page 129).

Public notice No. 1 announced that the Park was to be closed to all visitors until further notice with a threat of prosecution for anyone transgressing the rules.

1. **Press cutting of a Public Notice printed in a local newspaper, no date given.** (Source: Sarah Holbeche Diary)

FIRE IN SUTTON PARK

In consequence of the excessive Drought and the disastrous Fire which has recently occurred in Sutton Park, *Notice is hereby given*, that until further orders, **NO PERSON WILL BE ALLOWED**, under any circumstances, **WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF THE PARK**.

Anyone Trespassing will be Prosecuted.

By order of the Warden and Society

HOLBECHES and ADDENBROOKE, Deputy Stewards

Press cutting No. 2 is an account by a local journalist which describes the extent of the fire and the problems caused by crowds of onlookers who visited the Park throughout the day and evening to behold the spectacle. Riland Bedford states that the fire broke out on July 3, but this press report places the date as August 3, 1868, a month later.

2. **Press cutting of a report in a local newspaper dated Tuesday, August 4, 1868.** (Source: Sarah Holbeche Diary)

GREAT FIRE IN SUTTON PARK

“Yesterday afternoon, by some means at present unexplained, a fire broke out in Sutton Park. The flames commenced a little distance to the right of the Beggar’s Bush, close to the park of the Hon Parker Jarvis⁵. They spread quickly, and soon consumed six or seven acres of gorse and brushwood and the palings which divided the Park from the road. A crowd assembled, and the fire was partially stamped out, but about 9 o’clock a breeze sprang up from the direction of the town, and the flames again burst forth with fury. Soon about three-quarters of a mile of gorse was blazing, admitting huge volumes of smoke. A number of trees, including several magnificent old oaks, were ignited, and the lurid glare of the gorse and wood was seen from miles off. Closer to the scene of the

⁵ **Hon Edward Swynfen Parker Jervis** purchased Little Aston Hall and Park in 1857 having the building enlarged and improved at a reputed cost of £35,000.

conflagration the fire presented a splendid spectacle and hundreds of persons visited the place including the afternoon and night. The Sutton Coldfield engine⁶ was on the spot but was of little use in extinguishing the flames. The fire was still burning when we went to press, and fears were entertained that it would reach the woods in the vicinity. Whether the fire was caused by the careless throwing away of a lighted Vesuvian, as some people maintained, or not we cannot say, but there is no doubt that it is a very common and dangerous practice in the Park.”

This press report states that the outbreak of the fire was a little distance to the right [north] of the Beggars Bush, an inn located at the junction of Jockey Road with Chester Road at New Oscott. However, the park of the Hon. Parker Jarvis referred to above was Little Aston Park at Streetly which was at least three miles from the Beggars Bush tavern. In 1868 the Chester Road was a spur of the old Welsh droving route from Brownhills to Buckinghamshire known as the Welsh Road with fields and heathland on either side. As far as can be ascertained, Streetly did not exist as a settlement in 1868. The name Streetly is first recorded in the Anglo-Saxon charter of AD957 and referred to the wood rather than a settlement. This charter describes the boundaries of Barr and Little Aston and includes *streat lea*, a wood or clearing on the Roman road, which is likely to be Streetly Wood.⁷

3. Press cutting of a Public Notice printed in a local newspaper dated Friday, August 7, 1868 (Source: Sarah Holbeche Diary)

FIRES IN SUTTON PARK £100 REWARD

Whereas, within the last few days, several large **FIRES** have occurred in **SUTTON PARK**, which there has been reason to believe were the acts of Incendiaries, and damage to a very considerable extent has been done.

This is to give notice, that a **REWARD** of £100 will be paid by the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, to the Persons upon whose information the Parties guilty of such acts of Incendiarism shall be apprehended and convicted.

By order
HENRY ADDENBROOKE, Deputy Steward
Sutton Coldfield, August 7, 1868.

⁶ engine: referring to the Sutton Coldfield fire engine. Refer to text on p.12

⁷ Hodder, M., *“The Archaeology of Sutton Park”*, (2013), Stroud, The History Press, p.22

The key information in public notice No. 3, dated Friday, August 7, are the words “within the last few days” which suggests that the date of the outbreak of the fire was likely to have been Monday, August 3, 1868.

4. Press cutting of a Public Notice printed in a local newspaper dated August 14, 1868 (Source: Sarah Holbeche Diary)

SUTTON PARK

From **THIS DAY (FRIDAY)**, the 14th inst., the **PUBLIC** will be **ADMITTED** to the **PARK**, subject to the usual regulations.

By order of the Wardens.

HENRY ADDENBROOKE, Deputy Steward

Riland Bedford talks of the Great Fire lasting a week. These public notices confirm that the Park was officially closed to visitors for seven days – from Friday, 7th August until Friday, 14th August.

5. Press cutting of a report in a local newspaper dated Monday, August 17, 1868. (Source: Sarah Holbeche Diary)

THE FIRE AT SUTTON PARK

“The heavy fall of rain which commenced early yesterday morning, and which continued at intervals during the day, has the effect of almost entirely extinguishing this extensive fire, all fears of its extending beyond the limits it had attained on Tuesday night are now removed. The measures adopted by the operation for effectively subduing the fire and preventing any other ravages were as complete as could possibly be devised for the circumstances, but had it not been for the much-desired change in the weather, it is impossible to say what would have been the result. As it is, there has been, as may be supposed, a great amount of damage done, or it will doubtless be a considerable time before the Park can regain its wealth of gorse and ling which this fire has destroyed.”

Long periods of drought invariably end with heavy rainstorms as seems to be the case here on Sunday, 16th August. Remember the year 1976 when, during the severe drought of that year, Dennis Howell MP, the former Birmingham City councillor and later MP for Birmingham Small Heath, was appointed Minister for Drought (nicknamed “Minister for Rain”) because when the drought ended it rained for weeks afterwards; this was the last year in which Sutton Park suffered an extensive fire which was also eventually extinguished by heavy rain.

The press reports quoted on pages 4 to 7 do not present us with much information regarding the extent of the devastation caused and it would have

been useful to have an official assessment of the precise extent of the damage caused by the 1868 fire, in particular, the number of mature trees lost in Streetly Wood, together with a map or a description of the parts of Streetly Wood that were destroyed.

By August 2021 Coronavirus restrictions were lifted and it became possible to gain access to the archives in Sutton Coldfield Library and inspect the handwritten 1868 Minutes of the Warden and Society to discover what information the Park Committee produced about these events. On page 267 of these Minutes was the following entry:

p.267 - 10th August, 1868

“.....Also, that the following report of the Park Committee as to the recent fire in the Park be accepted and entered on the minutes.

7th August, 1868

“Your Committee regret to have to report that on Monday the 3rd instant at about half-past 12 o’clock a serious fire broke out in the Park in two places within 200 yards of each other between Darnelhurst and Stretley (sic) Woods which has resulted in the destruction of Stretley Wood, Little Stretley Wood and part of the Warden’s Belt – the whole of the ornamental belt from Stretley down to the Little Aston Park Corner [*junction of Thornhill Road, Hardwick Road, Roman Road, Rosemary Hill Road and Streetly Lane*] also in the entire destruction of the whole of the herbage, soil, and peat over the space extending from the causeway called [*Lord*] Donnegals ride running from Barr Common to Rownton Well, to the line of Brook Course running from the Little Aston side of the Park to Bracebridge Pool comprising an estimated area of 500 square acres, also upwards of a mile of the Park paling.

“Here it is feared to good reason to believe that it was the act of an incendiary, as tending to confirm this opinion, on the following day several small fires occurred in different parts of the Park totally distinct from the original fire but which fortunately were extinguished without much damage.

“On Wednesday at about 12h.30m. a fire, clearly the act of an incendiary, was discovered raging in the Near Nuthurst or Stepping Stone Wood but, owing to the great exertions of the parties present, chiefly inhabitants, the fire was providentially confined to an area of about 3 acres.

“The Warden [*Rev. E.H. Kittoe – 1867-8-9-70*] with several other members of the Corporation, the Deputy Steward and Surveyor were for several days in constant attendance in committee at the

Keepers House by Rowton Well [*aka. Rowton Well Cottage*] taking every step to extinguish the fire and have much pleasure in acknowledging the great assistance rendered by the inhabitants generally.

“They could mention the names of many parties who were conspicuous in their exertions but refrain thinking it might appear invidious to do so but they feel obliged to express their admiration of the Surveyor’s conduct in the trying position in which he was placed.

“Very great assistance was afforded by the County Constabulary and a few of the Birmingham Force who were with Chief Superintendent Isaacs and Superintendent Bloxham to afford every assistance in their power.

“Your Committee have deemed it advisable to offer a reward of £100 to be paid to the parties upon whose evidence the offenders shall be apprehended and convicted!!”

The Corporation resolved that, with a view to the safety of the woods in the Park, the Surveyor, Mr. Charles Cooper, be instructed with the men employed by the Corporation to clear the gorse, ling⁸ and underbrush from the fences around the woods. Also, that the attention of the Park Committee be called to the propriety of cutting new drives through the woods where necessary and improving existing ones.

The Park Committee’s report raises some interesting points. Since it is difficult to be precise about the boundaries of Streetly Wood as they existed prior to the fire, I sought some guidance from Dr. Mike Hodder whose comments are reproduced below and should be read with reference to that portion of the 1779 Map of Sutton Park⁹ shown on page (page 10):

“The name “Little Stre[e]tly” appears just inside the Park boundary on the 1779 map of Sutton Park just south-west of Streetly Wood but there does not seem to be any woodland marked on the map. Other possibilities are that the name refers to the woodland between Streetly Wood and the original Streetly Gate, or the south-east part of the original Streetly Wood which was the area later occupied by the 1880s army camp.

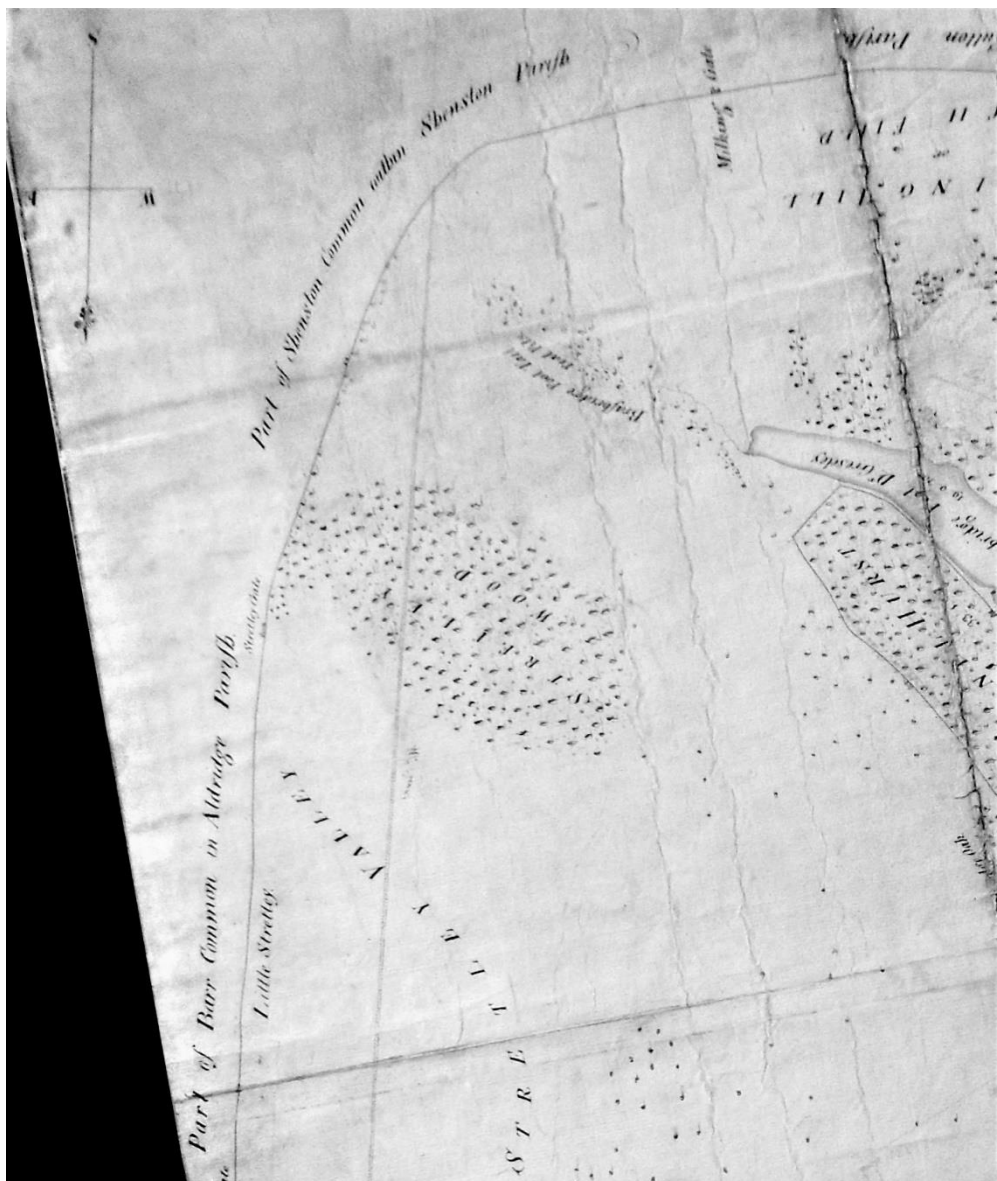
⁸ **Ling (*Calluna vulgaris*):** another name for heather. The Latin name Calluna is derived from the Greek word kalluno meaning “to sweep”. Ling was used to make brushes and to thatch.

⁹ **Title of the 1779 map of Sutton Park:** “A Plan and Admeasurement of SUTTON PARK within the Parish of SUTTON COLFIELD and COUNTIES of Warwick and Stafford. Taken in the Year 1779.” (Map drawers at Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)

“Warden’s Belt, as far as I am aware, is first recorded on the 1857 Valuation Map but there may be an earlier reference to it. The mention of it in 1868 confirms that it originally extended along the Park boundary with Thornhill Road almost as far as the original Streetly Gate.

“The ornamental belt from Streetly to the Little Aston Park corner [by the entrance to Roman Road] is the woodland marked along the boundary from Streetly Gate to the north-west corner of the Park. Little Aston Park, around Little Aston Hall, was near this point. The report emphasises the remarkable extent of the fire which included all of the area labelled Streetly valley on the 1779 map, part of Streetly Wood as well as land to its east and north, extending up to the Ebrook.”

(Email from Mike Hodder dated 02/09/2021)



Portion of the 1779 map of Sutton Park showing the north-west corner of the Park boundary (Thornhill Road/Streetly Lane). From bottom left to top right can be seen Little Streetly, Streetly Valley, Streetly Gate, Streetly Wood, Bracebridge tail and peat pits, Bracebridge Pool, Darnel Hurst and the Milking Gate.

fire. The reader might recognise in some of the phrases used a familiarity with the press report of August 5, 1868, shown on page 5. Was A. Peers and the press reporter one and the same person. The account is reproduced below:

GREAT FIRE IN SUTTON PARK

“August 4th, 1868, the townspeople of Birmingham were alarmed by an express¹¹ from Sutton stating, that by some means at present unexplained, a fire had broken out in Sutton Park. The flames commenced a little distance to the right of the Beggar’s Bush [NNE direction] close to the park of the Hon. Parker Jarvis. They spread quickly, and soon consumed six or seven acres of gorse and brushwood and the palings which divided the Park from the road. A crowd assembled, and the fire was partially stamped out, but about nine o’clock a breeze sprang up from the direction of the town [a south-easterly breeze], and the flames again burst forth with fury. About three-quarters of a mile of gorse was blazing, emitting huge volumes of smoke. A number of trees, including several magnificent old oaks were ignited and the lurid glare of the burning gorse and wood could be seen for miles off. Close to the scene of the conflagration the fire presented a splendid spectacle, and hundreds of persons visited the place during the afternoon and night. The Sutton Coldfield engine was on the spot but was of little use in extinguishing the flames; fears were entertained that they would reach the woods in the vicinity. Whether the fire was caused by the careless throwing away of a lighted Vesuvius¹², as some people maintain or not, we cannot say, but there is no doubt that it is a very common and dangerous practice in the Park.

“The scene on the outskirts of the Park was something akin to a racecourse. The news that the trees and bushes of this favourite place for pic-nics and short outings were in a blaze, attracted visitors in thousands.

“Various opinions are given of the extent of the ground which has suffered from the flames – estimates range from 300 up to 1,000 acres; but the nearest calculation is perhaps the medium of the extremes. In consequence of the dense smoke which clouds the Park, a personal view of the scene cannot determine the area of destruction, but there is no doubt that from 700 to 800 acres of gorse, heather and underwood were burnt. Water was obtained from the premises of Mr. Crundhall and by the engines playing around the roots of the large trees, the fire was confined to the underwood. Trenches made by ploughing and digging very much prevented the

¹¹ **Express** – a 19th century newspaper term for sending news via a special messenger.

¹² **Vesuvius**: a match to light pipes, cigars & cigarettes.

extension to the fire in the gorse and heather; the new racecourse suffered considerably.

“After a thorough investigation by the authorities, it was their opinion that some incendiary had set the turf on fire, either purposely or by culpable negligence, and therefore they issued the notice reproduced on pages 4 and 6.

“Notwithstanding the £100 reward offered by the Corporation on August 7th, the guilty party was never discovered.”

One interesting historical fact that emerged from the account of the fire on page 5, and the account above, was the presence of the Sutton Coldfield engine. Indeed, the account above refers to “engines” which implies that the County Constabulary brought in extra engines from neighbouring Warwickshire towns. They would have been of little practical use in the prevailing circumstances because water availability would have been determined by the size of the water tank on the engine. These engines would have been of the manual type with paddles on either side of the engine for the crew to operate and would have been horse-drawn. Sutton Coldfield Corporation had a fire engine as early as 1865, but owned no horses, and archival records show that they employed a Fire Engine Keeper, William Yates, who was paid £2.0s.0d. p.a. for his troubles. Refer to the photograph of a typical 19th century fire engine on page 16.

The weather in England in 1868

Having established the precise date and location of the Great Fire, it would be appropriate to search for official information on the weather conditions leading up to August 1868, the period of the fire. Riland Bedford highlights in his description of the event the unusual weather in the summer of 1868, which he explains was responsible for the prolific occurrences of woodland and heathland fires throughout the country. Apart from the abnormal heat he also mentions the great drought – a disastrous combination in an environment like Sutton Park.

Therefore, let us examine reports of the weather in England during July 1868. The section of a website report entitled “Weather in history, 1850 to 1899 AD” relating to the early-to-mid summer period is reproduced below¹³.

1. “1868 (early to mid-summer) – Persistently warm weather by CET series over period May to July. The summer of 1868 was very hot and dry, with some of the highest temperatures

¹³ www.premium.weatherweb.net/weather-in-history-1850-to-1899-ad/, – 1868 (early to mid- summer), accessed 30/12/2020.

ever recorded for the second half of July occurring in this year. There was a remarkable spell of hot days, with temperatures over 30 deg.C in England. For the south-east of England specifically, a maximum temperature above 32 deg.C was recorded in each of the months from May to September, and in July specifically, the temperature exceeded 32 deg.C on 9 days, the soil was very dry (lack of precipitation) which would of course mean that solar energy was most effective. [Note that consistency of instrumentation/housing was not as high as it is today.] It was regarded for many years, until 1976 at least, as the longest (due to lack of rainfall) and hottest in the instrumental record for England.

2. Although not accepted (because of problems of comparison between Glaisher and Stevenson screens), the maximum Temperature recorded on the 22nd July, 1868 at Tonbridge in the county of Kent is still remarkable: 100.6°F/(converted=38°C) [It is now thought that this value, when compared with the standard Stevenson screen, is about 1.5°C or 2°C too high.]

3. Notable drought occurred from May to July over England and Wales in particular: somewhere around 40% of long-term average. Using the EWP series (Hadley), both June and July were in the 'top-10' of dry-such-named months (4th driest as at 2007), with 17mm (-25% average) & 20mm (-33% average) respectively. Not quite so dry in Scotland (just under 70%).

The role of the Met Office in 1868

The reader might be astonished to learn that national weather details were being recorded in 1868. It is interesting to note that the Meteorological Office, or Met Office as it is now known, was founded in 1854 by Vice-Admiral Robert Fitzroy who became well-known as the captain of HMS Beagle at the time of her famous journey circumnavigating the globe. He would go on to establish the science of weather forecasting, the basis of what we still use today. The purpose of the Met Office was to learn more about marine climatology and thus gain a greater understanding of the science of weather to improve the safety of life and property at sea.

In October 1859 the steam clipper *Royal Charter*, on the final leg of her two-month voyage from Melbourne to Liverpool, foundered on the coast of Anglesey at Point Alert with the loss of 460 lives, including all of the women and children, in what became known as the Royal Charter gale. This was the

most severe storm to hit the Irish Sea in the 19th century and Fitzroy forcefully pleaded with the government that his establishment could have forecast the disastrous events and he persuaded them to set up a supply of coastal observation stations which were used to set up a new storm-warning service which began in 1861. Now known as the U.K. shipping forecast, it is thought to be the longest running national forecasting service in the world. Because Fitzroy knew that the general public would be interested in the weather, he also set up the first public weather forecast service in August 1861.

In September 1860, the UK Met Office (then known as the Meteorological Department of the Board of Trade), under the direction of Admiral Robert Fitzroy, as he became at this time, began publishing Daily Weather Reports (DWRs) which consisted of tabulated weather observations from coastal stations around Great Britain and Ireland (GBI). These stations communicated the observations daily to the Met Office in London by telegraph.

The DWRs were handwritten as the example on page 16 of the DWR for 8:00am on Monday, August 3, 1868 indicates. There was often a 2:00pm report if information was not available in time to be written up at 8:00am. There was also a page for “REMARKS” and for this particular day they were:

“During the last 24 hours a slight diminution in atmospheric pressure is shown at all stations, but readings are still high, except in the South Western District. The region of least pressures is in the SW of Ireland.”

The Weather Report for Monday, August 3rd, 1868 (page 17) shows the tendency of the prevailing wind direction to have been blowing from an east-south-easterly direction which would account for the fires spreading from the heathland between Streetly Wood and Darnel Hurst, the apparent source, towards Streetly Wood and Warden’s Belt (Thornhill Road).

The DWRs were not weather forecasts but snapshots of meteorological readings at the observation stations. These observation stations were mainly coastal and included many in Europe. However, Brussels, Paris, Strasbourg, Lyon and Toulon were certainly not coastal stations but embedded within the continental mass.

Fitzroy used these observations to provide storm warnings and the first ever public weather forecast was published in *The Times* on August 1, 1861 under the heading “The Weather – Meteorological Reports”. Fitzroy became an overnight celebrity, nicknamed the ‘Clerk of the Weather’. His forecasts in *The Times* were syndicated across the country. In the 1850s more than 1,000 people a year died off the British coast; in the years after his storm warnings began, that number had dropped by a third.

Yet the new science remained controversial. MPs complained about the high cost of telegraphy and some clerics insisted that that he was blasphemously claiming to “read the mind of God”. Scientists criticised the lack of formal theory behind his weather warnings.

When predicted storms failed to happen, or worse, struck without warning, he was pilloried. He argued that his forecasts were “expressions of probabilities, and not dogmatic predictions”. Ailing and penniless, having invested his fortune in weather forecasting, and under intense media pressure, he sank into a deep depression and took his own life in April 1865 at the age of 59.

Fitzroy, the father of weather forecasting, has gained belated recognition; the Met Office he founded stands on Fitzroy Road in Exeter, and in 2002 one of the zones on the BBC shipping forecast was renamed in his honour.



A horse-drawn Shand-Kidd manual fire engine with the water tank mounted on the body of the wagon, which would have also provided seating for the crew. This engine would have been similar in design to the type owned by the Corporation of Sutton Coldfield in 1861 and later. The engine would have required one or two draught horses to haul it and 8 men to operate it using paddles either side of the engine to pump the water onto the fire. Refer to page 12 for details of Sutton Coldfield's fire engine.

EIGHT A.M.		WEATHER REPORT					1868 August 3 rd				
Monday											
	Barometer.	Temp.	Wet Bulb.	Wind.	Force. 1 to 12	Extreme		Weather.	Rain.	Sea 1 to 5	
						Force.	Direction.				
Nairn ...	30.13 f	60	59	NW	1	4	NW	cm	—	1	
Aberdeen ...	30.17 f	65	60	S	1	1	SW	b	—	1	
Leith ...	30.12 f	66	63	ESE	2	2	E	b	—	—	
Shields ...	30.14 f	67	63	SE	2	2	SE	cm	—	2	
Scarborough...	30.18 f	67	63	SE	1	1	SE	b	—	2	
Yarmouth ...	30.18 f	68	65	ESE	2	2	SE	cb	—	2	
Helder ...			—			—	—		—		
Cuxhaven ...											
Skudesnaes ...			—						—		
Ardrossan ...	30.10 f	62	63	E	2	2	NW	cm	—	1	
Greencastle ...	30.00 f	70	65	S	1	2	SE	b	—	—	
Holyhead ...	29.99 f	70	62	ESE	2	1	SW	b	—	—	
Liverpool ...	30.10	71	64	SE	2	1	SE	bc	—	1	
Valencia ...	29.89 f	64	61	NW	2	3	SW	fc	—	1	
Cape Clear ...	29.85 f	62	67	S	3	4	ESE	rf	0.02	2	
Roche's Point	—	65	62	S	2	4	SE	b	—	1	
Penzance ...	29.96 f	66	64	SE	2	6	ESE	c	—	3	
Plymouth ...	29.98 f	67	63	E	6	8	E	b	—	4	
Weymouth ...	30.02 f	68	66	E	8	5	SW	bc	—	5	
Portsmouth ...	30.07 f	70	64	SE	5	5	SE	c	—	4	
London ...	30.13 f	71	66	ESE	3	4	SE	b	—	—	
Cape Gris Nez	30.12 f	62	64	E	3	—	—	bc	—	1	
Brest ...	29.95 f	61	61	NW	1	—	—	bf	—	1	
L'Orient ...	29.93 f	60	66	SE	3	—	—	c	—	1	
Rochefort ...											
Biarritz...											
Corunna ...			—			—	—		—	—	
Brussels ...			—			—	—		—	—	
Paris ...			—			—	—		—	—	
Strasbourg ...			—			—	—		—	—	
Lyons ...			—			—	—		—	—	
Toulon ...	29.98 f	75	75	Z	0	—	—	b	—	1	
Heart's Content (6 a.m. local time.)	30.00 f	60	60	SW	1	1	W	+ 0.39	—	3	
2 P.M. REPORT.											
Nairn						—	—		—		
Scarborough...						—	—		—		

Daily Weather Report (DWR) issued by the Meteorological Department of the Board of Trade for 8:00am, Monday, August 3, 1868, when the Great Fire of Sutton Park broke out.

Streetly Wood - the years following 1868

Following the Great Fire of 1868, Streetly Wood was considerably smaller in acreage as a result of the devastating fire. The Minutes of the Warden & Society unfortunately contain no references to the aftermath of the fire. If

there had been any official comments, they would probably have been in the Park Committee's Minutes books for this period. Unfortunately the books no longer exist. It would have been interesting to learn of the number of trees that were destroyed and the acreage of heathland that was damaged by fire, an area which the Rev. W.K. Riland Bedford claims was 500 acres.

Thirty-three years after the fire, the effects of it were still visible as noted in Henry Horland's (Park Forester) special report of 19th March 1901 to Mr. W.A.U. Clarry, the Borough Surveyor, about the current condition of the woods and plantations in Sutton Park. The Park Forester describes Streetly Wood thus:

"This unenclosed wood is composed entirely of oak, with holly underwood. The trees are of varied sizes and are healthy. Owing to the great exposure, the trees on the outsides are misshapen and stunted in height, and many still bear traces of the great fire which took place in this wood and destroyed a large number in August 1868. ..."

Horland's Report states that Streetly Wood is unenclosed, which I found puzzling because when I was surveying the saw pit sites in this wood in 2010 (see map on page 23) I was conscious of the fact that there was a shallow bank and ditch boundary enclosing much of the Wood and I plotted its outline using a GPS device. I queried Horland's statement with Dr. Mike Hodder, the ex-Planning Archaeologist for Birmingham City Council, who confirmed that Streetly Wood was certainly enclosed in the 16th century, but that Horland was correct in stating that by 1868 the Wood was unenclosed (for more details refer to pages 19-20).

The 1824 Inclosure Map and the 1857 Valuation Map are the only existing early 19th century maps available to the researcher. Both maps show Streetly Wood as a rather irregular shape. Mike Hodder thinks the boundary indicated by the surviving earthwork probably went out of use before 1779, otherwise the boundary would have been shown on the map. The shape shown on these 19th century maps must simply be the extent of woodland at that time. It is difficult to determine whether or not the shape includes the southern "lobe" shown on the 1779 map and indicated by the boundary earthwork and there is also a strange small outlying area of woodland shown on the south-east side of the woodland.

Part of Sutton Coldfield Golf Club's new course at Streetly was laid out on land which once formed part of Streetly Wood and which was left barren due to the fire. In the years leading up to the First World War it was an extremely popular club but the 1914-18 War took a heavy toll on its membership and in 1919, in order to enhance the Club's popularity, the Club invited Dr. Alister

MacKenzie¹⁴ of Leeds to design a new course. Work to revise the plan of the course began in 1920 but was severely hampered by a serious grass fire in 1921 which burnt deeply into the peat in places leaving the Club to face a crippling debt. MacKenzie's revised course was eventually opened in September 1924¹⁵.

Dr Mike Hodder's comments on Henry Horland's Report of the Condition of Streetly Wood

"Horland was correct in stating that Streetly Wood was unenclosed by 1868. The 1779 map shows the extent of the wood but no boundary, in contrast to Darnel Hurst, the Nut Hursts and Holly Hurst whose boundaries are marked. No boundaries are shown around Pool Hollies and Lady Wood, which was still then within the Park, suggesting that their boundaries were no longer maintained.

"Streetly Wood was certainly originally enclosed in the 16th century because one can trace almost all of the bank and ditch around it. This bank and ditch boundary is very clear on the north side where it is now mainly outside the existing woodland, then it crosses the Roman Road and the tarmac road. The western boundary is clear in the woodland to the east of the path from Streetly Gate to the golf course. The south-western boundary is also clear and is even clearer now that the golf club have carefully cleared the surrounding holly and birch. The boundary crosses the Roman road again before it turns south under a golf green and turns again. It is particularly visible where the golf club have cleared some trees. Then it is visible as a slight bank and ditch along the edge of the fairway, near the military practice trench, and turns north to run through woodland, across a fairway and across the tarmac road.

"The shape of the wood is not as originally shown on mine or your maps; the south-western side is not just one straight stretch but extends south as a sort of lobe and this is the general shape of the wood as shown on the 1779 map.

¹⁴ **Alister MacKenzie** (30 August 1870 – 6 January 1934) Born in Normanton, Yorks., a golf course architect whose course designs span four continents. He designed more than 50 golf courses including three that remain in the 2016 top 10 golf courses in the world: Augusta National Golf Club and Cypress Point Club in the US and Royal Melbourne Golf Club (West Course) in Australia.

¹⁵ www.suttoncoldfieldgc.com/history - accessed 20/09/2021

“As I am sure you know, the boundary bank and ditch of Streetly Wood is quite small, probably the size to which it was originally restricted in the 16th century.

“This is in contrast to Darnel Hurst and Upper Nut Hurst whose boundary banks and ditches are much larger, probably as a result of the re-fencing and heightening recorded in the 18th and 19th centuries. The bank and ditch around Pool Hollies, not shown as enclosed on the 1779 map, again is quite small and therefore was not heightened or maintained by 1779. The additional feature here is the evidence for the extension of Pool Hollies southwards to join Darnel Hurst which must have taken place before the construction of the Midland railway Company’s line in the years leading up to 1879. The original boundary was the bank and ditch, the eastern end of which I recorded several years ago. This and the southern boundary can be traced north of Bracebridge Pool, along the ends of the channels feeding into the pool.”

(Mike Hodder’s Email dated March 26th, 2021)

Sections of the 1824 Inclosure Map and the 1857 Valuation Map referred to by Dr. Hodder are shown on page 21. It is difficult to compare them not knowing their relative scales but the shapes of Streetly Wood are similar.

An earlier map is shown on page 22. It is a section of Ordnance Survey Drawing 275, dated 1817¹⁶, but when used by Birmingham City Council’s Historic Landscape Characterisation Project was retitled “Birmingham North” 1815 Ordnance Survey One Inch map (1819). The section of this map that I have chosen to depict shows Sutton Park and surrounding area – Bourne Pool and Little Sutton at the top (north) of the map and Kingstanding, Gibbet Hill (off what is now Antrobus Road) and Windley Green at the bottom (south) of the map. Streetly Wood is in the north-west of Sutton Park and is labelled Streetly Hill on the map. The shape of the Wood differs from that shown on the later maps and there is a southern “lobe” just to the east of the Roman Road (Icknield Street) which Dr Mike Hodder refers to on page 18. This lobe appears to be the area of woodland most devastated by the fire.

This early Ordnance Survey map has errors which can be ascertained by the fact that Wyndley Pool has been labelled as Powell’s Pool while Powell’s Pool has been labelled Rolling Mill Pool, its earlier name.

¹⁶ This map was supplied by courtesy of Dr. Mike Hodder.

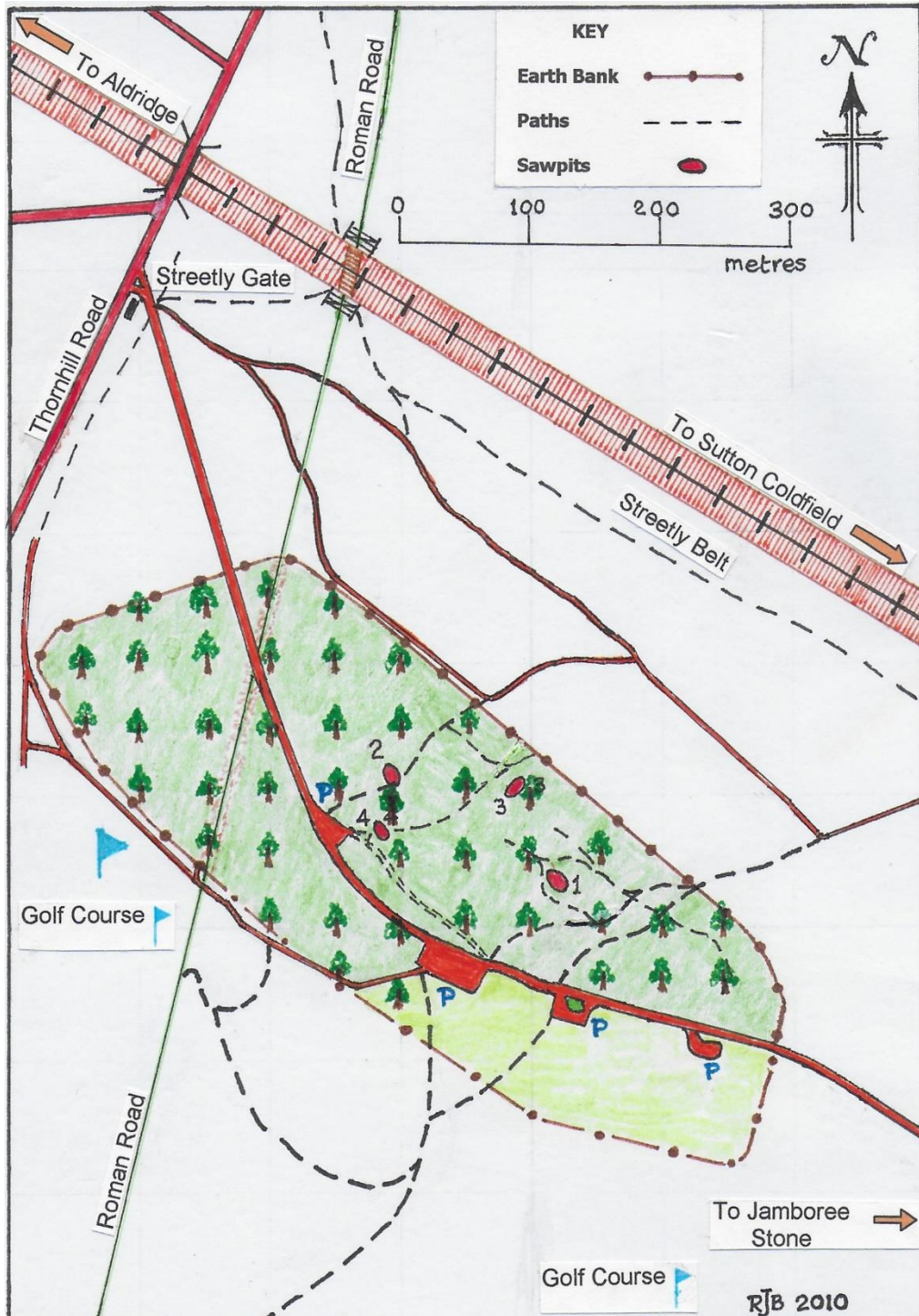
The Ordnance Survey Drawings are all in the British Library and are accessible at <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegalleryonlineex/ordsurvdraw/>.



Section of the Sutton Coldfield 1824 Inclosure Map showing Streetly Wood



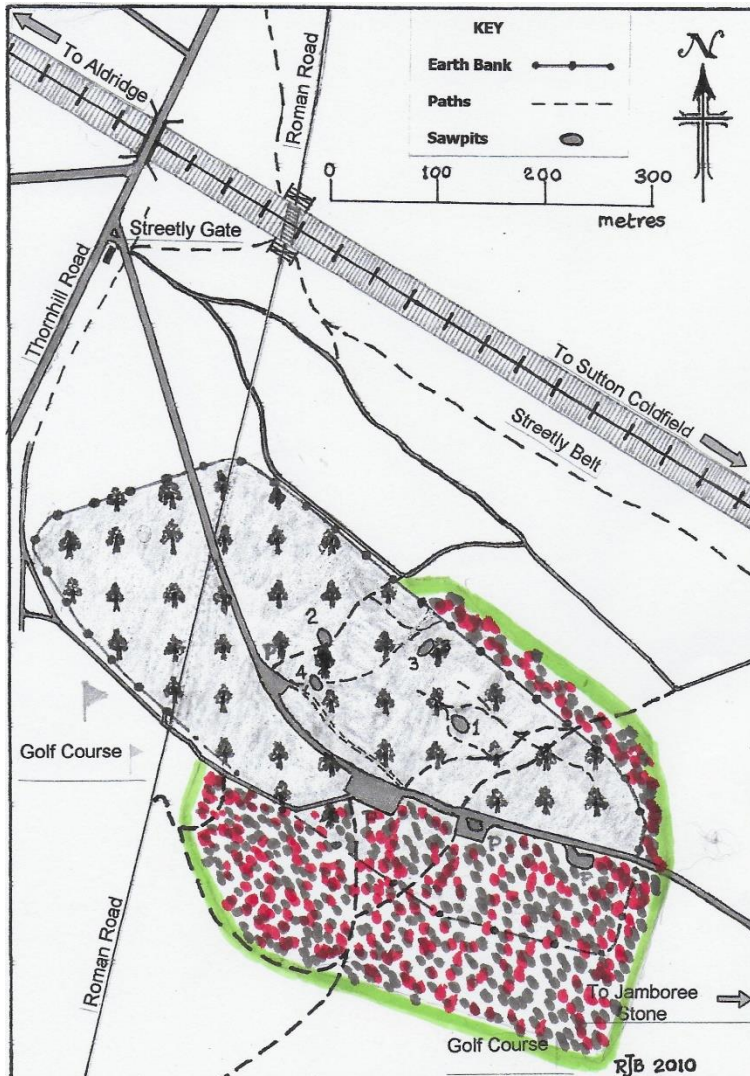
Streetly Section of the 1857 Valuation Map of Sutton Park showing Wood and the tail-end of Bracebridge Pool.



Map of Streetly Wood drawn by the author in 2010 to illustrate the location of the four sawpits discovered at that time. More sawpits and other archaeological features were discovered in 2017-18 thanks to the work done by members of Sutton Coldfield Golf Club to clear trees and undergrowth.

How much of Streetly Wood was destroyed in the Great Fire

Having gathered as much written evidence as possible, we still do not have a very clear picture of the amount of woodland lost in the Great fire. Studying the 1815 Ordnance Survey Map on page 22, and the fairly definitive outline of Streetly Wood with its predominant southern lobe, the author compared it to his own 2010 map and attempted to construct a conjectural map by superimposing on his map the basic outline of Streetly Wood depicted on the 1815 map. The result is shown below.



This shows the conjectured boundary of Streetly Wood prior to August 1868 based on the outline of the woodland on the 1815 Ordnance Survey Map imposed on the author's 2010 map. The area dotted brown and red represents the oak woodland lost in the fire.

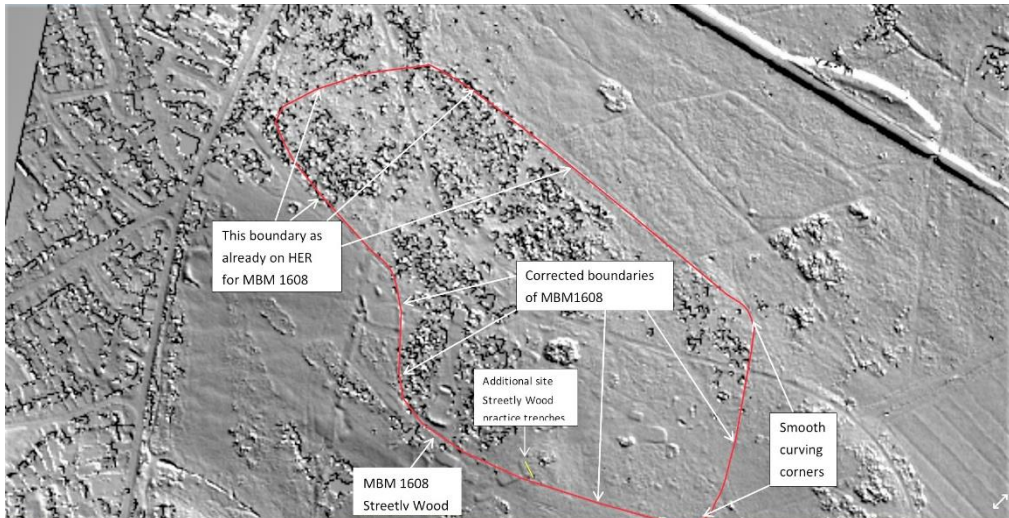
It should be remembered that the carriage road shown on the 2010 map (page 23) is the realigned road that was built in 1898 to run from the new lodge to the Camp Ground before joining the existing carriage road from Keepers Pool.



Keith Hopkinson, who has worked closely with Dr. Mike Hodder discovering new archaeology in Streetly Wood, standing in front of a square or rectangular military earthwork near the old Camp Ground during the winter of 2017-18. This area is associated with the military campsite that existed in the late 19th century.

(Photograph by courtesy of Dr. Mike Hodder)

It is not possible from the evidence available to state exactly how much of Streetly wood was destroyed in the Great Fire. However, the acreage of affected land expressed in various reports implies that the destruction of woodland and heathland was considerable. It is surprising that there appears to be no evidence in the Corporation's Minutes of a programme of replacement tree planting. It was to be another 21 years before a Forester, Charles Morwood, previously employed on the Canwell Estate, was appointed in December 1889. His first task was to establish a fenced one-acre enclosure for a tree nursery in the Park at the top of Stoney Glade adjacent to Upper Nut Hurst. £40 was initially spent purchasing young trees for the new nursery as well as trees to fill up existing plantations, which might have included Streetly Wood, and for planting along the road to Blackroot Pool. Mr Morwood died in April 1896 to be replaced by Henry Horland in the same year



Section of the LiDAR image of Sutton Park centred on Streetly Wood and its environs.
(Photograph by courtesy of Dr Mike Hodder)

Above is a section of the LiDAR image of Sutton Park showing the outline of Streetly Wood superimposed in red. Thornhill Road is to the left (west) of the map, with *Icknield Street* (Roman Road) running in a straight line from SSW at the bottom of the picture to NNE at the top of the picture. The new section of roadway built in 1898 can be seen winding its way through Streetly Wood to the Streetly Gate entrance in Thornhill Road. To the right of the picture is a section of the Sutton Park Railway Line.

Mike Hodder points out that just east of the Roman Road it is possible to actually see the original woodland boundary-bank in cross-section in the side of a golf green. He also draws attention to the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey 6" Map¹⁷ on which the outline of the, by then abandoned, military camp is shown and this would have been established in a relatively open area rather than woodland.

¹⁷ <https://maps.nls.uk/view/101597426>

Streetly and the Sutton Coldfield Golf Club

Prior to the late 19th century, Streetly existed only as the name given to a small hill in Sutton Park near the Roman road (Ryknield Street), according to Ted Hiscock¹⁸, the Little Aston local historian. The name Stretley is derived from the Latin *strata* meaning a “paved” or “laid road” and is first recorded in its Anglo-Saxon form in a charter of AD 957¹⁹ as *straet lea*, a wood or clearing on the Roman road, i.e. Streetly Wood. By 1897 this had become Streetly. It was during the later Victorian period when the Hon. Parker Jervis lived at Little Aston Hall and after the Midland Railway Company had opened their Sutton Park Line station at Streetly in 1879 that a gradual influx of new quality housing emerged. The first residential roads were Thornhill Road and Middleton Road.



The Sutton Coldfield Golf Club's clubhouse at 110 Thornhill Road, Streetly, pictured in 1913. It was built in 1895 with a ground-floor veranda and balcony above it from where visitors could view the state of play across the road. This feature was subsequently removed when the trees lining the Park matured to a level that obscured the view. This view of the clubhouse is taken from within Sutton Park looking across Thornhill Road.

(Photograph by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)

¹⁸ Hiscock, E., “*Gone are the Days: A History of Little Aston & Surrounding Area*”, (1986), Major Communications Limited, Sutton Coldfield, in conjunction with Storm Publishing, Amblecote, Stourbridge, p.114.

¹⁹ Hodder, M., *ibid*, p22

The Sutton Coldfield Golf Club was founded in 1889 by the Rev. W.K. Riland Bedford and others and in 1890 moved from its former cramped course near the Town Gate entrance of Sutton Park to the north-western (Streetly) area of the Park. There they constructed part of their golf course on an area that had once been part of Streetly Wood. The course originally extended from Thornhill Road up to Rowton Well Cottage and Lord Donegal's Ride across to Upper Nuthurst and Darnel Hurst. It was later moved westwards to include



The Sutton Coldfield Golf Club clubhouse in Thornhill Road opposite Sutton Park.
(Photograph by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)

ground adjacent to Thornhill Road, thus avoiding the road from Lord Donegal's Ride to Streetly which was previously within the course and proved hazardous to visitors, especially those in carriages when they were using the road.

In 1895 the club built a clubhouse in Thornhill Road close to its junction with Middleton Road. This clubhouse was thus one of the earlier buildings to be erected in Thornhill Road and was located opposite the first tee of the new course in Sutton Park. It sported a fine balcony and veranda where members could view the progress of play, but this feature was removed in later years probably because as the trees on the edge of Sutton Park matured they began to obscure the view and make the balcony pointless as a viewing platform.

The photograph of the Clubhouse on page 27 was taken from within the Park because although the photograph looks as though it was taken from

Thornhill Road the photograph on this page shows that the building has very little frontage onto the public footpath of Thornhill Road which in 1895 was little more than a country lane. The photograph on page 26 of the Clubhouse illustrates this point.

When the Midland Railway Company opened their Sutton Park Line in 1879 they built a station at Streetly (originally to have been called Jervis) which had three platform faces; the main facilities were available on the up platform (Castle Bromwich direction) and were accessed by a driveway from Thornhill Road.

The old Streetly pedestrian entrance to Sutton Park was located south of the golf course entrance which was over a quarter of a mile from Streetly



This early 20th century tinted photograph taken in Thornhill Road shows the Thornhill area in the distance and the new Streetly entrance to Sutton Park and keepers lodge, opened in March 1899, on the left. The entrance to the Sutton Coldfield Golf Club is on the brow of the hill on the left-hand side of Thornhill Road. The old Streetly pedestrian entrance was on the left-hand side of the road, over the hill.

(Photograph by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library)

station. Because of the large number of visitors to the Park, mainly from the Black Country, using the Midland Railway's Streetly station the Borough Council decided to replace the old pedestrian entrance with a new entrance suitable for carriages nearer to the station. At the same time, they also built a gate-lodge for a gate keeper and created a new section of road from the new entrance to connect to the existing road from Keepers Pool. The new entrance, road and lodge opened in March 1899.

There might have been another reason for moving the entrance nearer the railway station which was to obviate any loutish nuisance from visitors to the residents in Thornhill Road.

For a detailed account of the medieval road that ran across the Park from Wyndley to the old pedestrian entrance at Streetly, the reader should refer to the well-researched article by Keith Hopkinson on the SCLHRG's website <https://sclhr.org.uk/non-member-s-research/2357-the-forgotten-medieval-road.html>.

The Great Fire - a summary of the main events

- The fire broke out on Monday, August 3rd 1868 in two areas between Streetly Wood and Darnel Hurst and spread to Streetly Wood burning fiercely for 8 days, then ebbed until heavy rain on the 13th day almost completely extinguished the fire on Sunday, 16th August, a duration of 14 days.
- Rowton Well Cottage was the command post for fighting the fire.
- The Park was inundated with hordes of sightseers, so the Corporation closed the Park to the general public for about eight days.
- It is suggested that 700 to 800 acres of gorse, heather and underwood were destroyed along with a number of mature oaks.

A possible consequence of the Great Fire?

The Great Fire must have had a severe effect on the fauna and flora of this area of the Park but does not seem to have been recorded. The author came across this report which may have some bearing on the Great Fire.

There is a report by the West Midlands Bird Club that both red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus*) and black grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*) were present in Sutton Park until 1868 and 1897, respectively²⁰. In the case of the red grouse, one wonders if this had anything to do with the Great Fire of 1868 which devastated Streetly Wood and a lot of the surrounding heathland. Some years ago, the author did witness an unusual occurrence of red grouse briefly roosting on the ridge tiles of some flats in Boldmere, a rather strange type of habitat for this bird. Black grouse are associated with more northerly parts of Britain and western areas of Wales rather than the Midlands.

In 1868 much of Sutton Coldfield was farmland. Cowberries, cotton grass tips and buds, annual meadow plants, birch catkins and buds which are all favoured foods of red grouse, were all plentiful within Sutton Park.

In 1868 the Corporation were still issuing licences for hunters to shoot wild animals in Sutton Park although there was already a strong anti-hunting

²⁰ Harrison, G., (2005), "The New birds of the West Midlands": W. Mids. Bird Club – ISBN 09507881-2-0

contingent comprising both townspeople and town councillors together with much press comment in favour of banning it.

In the early years of the 19th century, the Corporation employed its own head ranger and gamekeeper whose name was John Swift and he lived at the Park cottage adjacent to Four Oaks entrance to the Park. This cottage and adjacent piece of land was outside the Park and is marked on the 1779 map of Sutton Park. Swift died in 1850 and was not replaced as gamekeeper. The Roman Catholic cleric, Francis Kerril Amherst (1819-83), encountered Swift from time to time on his favourite walks through Sutton Park²¹ on the occasions that he stayed at New Oscott College. He describes John Swift as a game preserver rather than a field sports shooter, “since everyone in the parish of Sutton had the right of sporting”. He recollects that during his walks he encountered lapwing, lark, pipit and even snipe.

Further recommended reading

- G.B. Benton, *“Early earthworks, dykes, and hollow roads of the upland of Barr and Sutton Coldfield”*.
- H.H. Bloomer in “Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society”, Vol. 32, (1906), pp. 41-61.
- Hodder, M., *“The Archaeology of Sutton Park”* (2013), Stroud, The History Press, p36.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the help and encouragement given him by Dr. Mike Hodder in the preparation of this research, especially with regard to data he has provided about Streetly Wood.

Roy Billingham, November 2021

²¹ Billingham, R., *“The comments of a 19th century cleric about Sutton Park and other observations”* - Contained in Proceedings, Vol. 13, Spring 2017, pp.4-5.