



A Brief History of Cell Barnes Pond

By John Ely (Park Director) Highfield Park

The photograph above is taken from an article in the Lady's Field magazine dated 25th August 1905. The pond is a fine ornamental feature of the garden. The article explains the origins of Cell Barnes and although there is an alternative version relating to "Cell" meaning a parcel of land and "Barnes" being a corruption of the word "barn" at Little Cell Barnes House and what is now the London Road Residents Association Club, it is worth quoting the article and its theory: -

*"Place names, like family names often tell something of their owner's history and antecedents. Though it frequently happens that they become altered in the course of time so that their meaning is a little difficult to interpret. "Cell Barnes" must strike the incurious as a rather unusual appellation, which may mean more than appears at first: as a matter of fact it is a corruption of "Cell Berners". The original house once belonged to Dame Juliana **Berners**, famous as the author of the "Boke of St Albans". This lady was prioress of the nunnery of Sopwell and when as no doubt frequently happened, she wearied of the society of her sister nuns, she retired to her **cell** a few miles distant for rest and recreation."*

The Boke of St Albans was first printed in 1481 so the origins of the house go back over 500 years. How long the pond was there before 1905 we can but speculate but it is likely that it was constructed in Victorian times when formal gardening became fashionable. By the 1920's the estate was in the

ownership of the Earl of Verulam who sold the 82 acres at Cell Barnes to Hertfordshire County Council who then built a "colony for mental defectives" - Cell Barnes Hospital. The Cell Barnes house was extended and converted into a Nurse's Home. Undoubtedly the gardens were maintained to a high standard by the Head Gardeners (the last of whom was George Dollimore) and in 1983 the gardens were described as "being well preserved with their formal rose gardens, lawns, stables, tree-fringed lake and magnificent fir trees." However, as health care priorities changed and resources became stretched, the ability to maintain the high standard of the gardens became more difficult and through the 1980's and 1990's although it was no doubt tidy, the pond became overgrown. Following the closure of the Hospital in 1998, the pond was included in Highfield Park. The first task was to de-silt the pond and remove the now mature conifers as their leaf fall and shade had caused the pond to become acidic and sterile. Year on year the wildlife has returned and following further restoration works in 2002 it was re-opened to the public.

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