

From Maj (RE) D.C. Willatts RE

3 Mill Close

Broom

ALCESTER

Warwickshire B50 4HT.

The Librarian

Royal Military College of Science

Shrivenham

Swindon - Wilts

28 August 1991

Dear Sir/Madam

OLD FORD - BECKETT LAKES.

Following an incident at work today I am reminded that I ought to correct a mistake I made several years ago when serving on the Administrative Staff at RMCS. I did not pass on to you, or your predecessors, the fact that I believe we discovered the remains of the Old Ford near to the Chinese Bridge over the lake.

In the summer of 1976 I was the Staff Captain 'Q' or Q4 at College HQ and one of the works projects we were trying to tackle on the cheap was the dredging of the lakes. Official funds were not forthcoming for such a low priority project. The lakes had become very silted up and were almost one big mud bed. The scheme accepted to solve the problem was to dredge them using a land based dragline excavator and to spread the mud on the grassed area of the west banks. It did not solve the whole problem but it at least created some clear water and was done at no cost by sappers from 22 Engineer Regiment at Tidworth.

When working to the south of the Chinese Bridge some old timbers were dragged up; they were or had been linked together and were covered with stones. It appeared that they were probably part of a "corduroy road" laid to strengthen the pavement of the old ford. Old maps held by the College showed an 18th Century road from Shrivenham to Longcot at approximately the same point. Unfortunately the timbers were broken into many pieces and did not seem worth preserving. Some may still be on the lake bed now, for we stopped the work from going any further.

For the record it may be of interest to any College historian to know that two other solutions to the problem of clearing the lakes were proposed but not proceeded with. They were:

- a. To fill in the lakes and put the stream in a culvert. The whole area to be then grassed over. (A PSA Regional HQ proposal).
- b. To dredge from the eastern bank and spread the mud over the Golf Course. It would be allowed to dry out over a long period and then be reseeded. The penalty was the loss of part of the Golf Course for about a year and then having the restored area about 1m higher than the rest.

This second course of action produced a violent reaction from the College Old Guard and the proposal was dropped although it might have solved the problem! The first was deemed to be a vandalism on the Beckett heritage and no more was said about it.

I suspect that your records of the College's history will not have this story and I offer it to bring them up to date. I do remember that you had reports of problems of casting away the needs in the 1740s: so the problem was not new.

Yours faithfully

David C Willatts

Information on the Ford by Beckett House. Donated to SHS by Rachel Daniels

A letter was received dated 28th August 1991, at the Library of the then, Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham. It was written by Major D.G. Willatts R.E. retd, and contains some interesting information.

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This second course of action produced a violent reaction from the College Old Guard and the proposal was dropped although it might have solved the problem! The first was deemed to be a vandalism on the Beckett heritage and no more was said about it.

I suspect that your records of the College's history will not have this story and I offer it to bring them up-to-date. I do remember that you had reports of problems pf carting away the reeds in the 1740s; so the problem was not new.

Yours faithfully

David C. Willatts

OK

Maj (Rtd) D G Willatts RE
3 Mill Close
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9th September 1991

Dear Maj Willatts,

Thank you for taking the time to write to us about your experience of dredging the Beckett Lake.

We are always interested to hear about the history of the house as it is something we are often asked about by the people who visit the library. I was especially amused by your account of the reaction of the Golf Club members to the suggestion of spreading mud over the golf course. Some things change little over time!

We have quite a collection of little "titbits" that we are trying to (eventually) turn into a book. We may be able to incorporate some of this information.

Thank you once again.

Yours sincerely,

L Wood ALA MLS
Deputy Librarian

Letter from Dr Alan Smith (21 July 1986) when aged 82.

29 Greywethers Avenue, Swindon, SN3 1QG

Tony

How nice to hear from you, even though the query is a snorter. The quick answer to it is, I think, that Beckett was "held pending".

Records of the Halls of Residence appeared in the College Journals, until Student Editors took over and discontinued them (1968). The October 1967 number, Volume 4, Number 4, p366, announced the decision (December '66) re the proposed closure of Beckett Hall as a Mess and its intended use as College Headquarters. Closure came, from memory, only in Summer 1967 (or even later?). Mess records would surely settle this.

The years '67-'69 were full of big ideas and changes. Occupation of Beckett Hall by College HQ did not occur. We academics viewed it as military one-upmanship; and it had the drawback of distance in reaching HQ. The bigger scheme, emanating from the Parliamentary White Paper in 1967 was to establish a new Royal Defence Academy at Shrivenham - see The Commandant, General Bates' article, p326 in the 1967 Journal. Probably Beckett was held available for this; but the scheme was too grand, and the Navy unco-operative, and it too fell - see the notes on Crookenden's departure, p10, 1969. Crookenden followed Bates in Summer 1967.

Also in that year Sir Donald Bailey was followed by Dean Farley. Management Studies were added for TSOs with Bates' backing. Liberal Studies were developed, slowly and painfully, and though its lectures were located normally, some of its items were held in Beckett and I seem to remember that Col Dietz, distinct from both DS and Academic Staff - had an office somewhere in the rear quarters of Beckett.

The proposal to use Beckett for the Library was unpopular with the Librarian and many others, and even when it happened, students complained of restrictive availability. The Library in Wellington Hall was good, central and well run; but its space was needed because the central heating system in Marlborough Hall demanded replacement and the contractors would not undertake this unless rooms were vacated. Branches conferred as to whether they would move out temporarily and then back home again or out permanently to new sites. Their choice was unanimously for one move only. Met Branch was due to move between the summers of '69 and '70 and rough plans of our new location in Wellington were drawn up. I retired in September 1969 having declined Baughan's offer of an extra year because I wished my successor to arrange his own details and not have to accept or alter my ideas. In fact the move was delayed a year, as you know, and to enable it to happen the Library was cleared by December 1969. For months preceding this Beckett had been modified to suit it - kitchens removed, floors strengthened, I believe, entrance foyer adjusted and long overdue, toilets re-vamped etc, etc. The move is recorded in 1970 Journal, p12, though it does not even get a mention in the list of articles at the front. (See also 1969 p 39 for facetious Library info.)

The swimming pool was opened in May 1967. Its water comes from Beckett and I well remember the pipeline channel cut across the grass and under the cedar tree roots; it was lovely weather, most likely Spring '67 and we were still lunching in Beckett then; Assuming closure as early as Summer '67 this leaves approximately 18 months working through the alternative proposals re HQ and Academy, and 6 months for pressure from Marlborough Hall upheavals to cause adoption of Library move and 6 months to adapt Beckett for the Library. There was also a claim that

Beckett should be demolished because of its costly upkeep, but this had little support in 1967).

This is a sort of hindsight timing that seems likely. I hope this rigmarole is of some help to you. Good luck with the history.

Alan

BH.....Beckett House in 1985

In 1970 Beckett House became the College Library. The house's high ceilings and spacious well-lit rooms provide comfortable and pleasant working conditions for both the Library staff and their clients.

Though there have been changes in the Library over the years, its basic configuration has remained the same, with the main Library occupying the ground floor and the Reports Section situated on the first floor.

The principal physical alterations which have taken place since the Cranfield contract in 1984 are the furnishing of a bookshop with catering facilities, overlooking the lake. The Library is also in the process of establishing an Audiovisual service by the main staircase.

Unfortunately, a survey of the upper two floors of the house in 1984, revealed a substantial degree of dry rot. Emergency restoration work is currently under way. Great care is being taken to replace exactly the ornate plasterwork which is a feature of the house.

The lake has become silted up over the past few years with the water level gradually dropping. However, it is still a home for a number of species of waterfowl and various forms of plant life.

The China House has also fallen into a state of disuse. Though structurally sound, it has been boarded up for many years.

In 1985 a number of new trees were planted to replace those which had been lost through disease.

It is to be hoped that the house and gardens will be maintained. It would be sad to see such attractive surroundings, which are so popular with local residents as well as College staff and students, disappear through neglect.

(source unknown)