

# **Hodsons Garden. A glimpse of 19th century Cambridge from a ditch on Coe Fen**

**Allan Brigham: 2016  
Cambridge Local History Review. For final edit.**

## **Introduction: A Local Historian's Diary**

Do you read all your emails ? About to delete yet another unread online petition, the title ' Restore Hodson's Folly' caught my eye. Ever since first cycling across the bridge over the Cam between Newnham paddling pool and Coe Fen I had been curious about the small, decaying classical ruin that you could see upstream. Surrounded by an ivy shrouded wall, it is a romantic feature, built in stone and boasting on a coat of arms a proud, solitary swan. It stands out because of its setting, and as a formal building that you might expect to find in the corner of a college garden rather than amidst the rough cut grass grazed by cows and horses.

Eventually I found the ruin had a name - 'Hodsons Folly'. And that allegedly it had been built by a 'Gentleman' so that his daughters could go swimming. But who Hodson was, and what sort of 'Gentleman', who his daughters were and how he came to expropriate what appears to be part of the common was unexplained. Curious, but no more, I left the questions unanswered. Maybe the mystery was part of the attraction of the Folly ?



**Figures 1 & 2: The island site of the garden, and the Folly**

Seeing the online petition made me realise that I wasn't the only one who enjoyed this quirky, unexpected building that would look more at home in a College garden. I did my bit by signing the petition, and felt reassured that someone else was going to care for the folly - those being petitioned were English Heritage and the National Trust.

Eighteen months later I was searching for information about World War Two Huts that had stood on Donkey Common. Looking in the 'Commons' cuttings files in the Cambridgeshire Collection I found a Cambridge Evening New article from 1972 recording memories of Hodson by his niece<sup>1</sup>. Knowing I'd never find it again, and that maybe it would be useful to

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs E Fordham. Hodson's niece. Cambridge Evening News: 15.12.1972

someone else, I quickly took a copy. A few weeks later in the Cambridgeshire Archives on the same Donkey Common mission I found a reference to a collection of papers headed with Hodson's name. I took copies again. And eventually I read the documents. On the face of it not very exciting, they concern a ditch on Coe Fen. But together with 19th century census returns and newspaper reports they provide a glimpse of John Hodson, his garden now the site of the Folly, and of the common.

## The Ditch

The papers record a dispute between Hodson and the Corporation that began in October 1885:

To: John Hodson, 2 Oct 1885

I am instructed by the Commons Committee to ask you to let me see the writings you hold relating to the ground you hold on Coe Fen. The Committee do not understand on what right you claim to hold any interest in the ditch or any right to cart over the Fen

Signed: Edmond Foster, Town Clerk, Cambridge <sup>2</sup>

Fifteen months later Hodson was in the County Court, charged with owing the corporation £50 for damages:

Between the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of Cambridge, Plaintiffs  
and John Hodson, Defendant

'The plaintiffs being owners of the Common called Coe Fen in the Borough of Cambridge and of the ditch on the west side of the said Common sue the Defendant for damages:

(1) For building a wall on the West side of the said Common on the edge of the said ditch opposite the land in the possession of the Defendant. (2) For building another wall across the said ditch whereby the flow of water into the said ditch from Vicar's Brook is obstructed (3) for building another wall across the said ditch at a point nearer the river Granta (4) For building a bridge or causeway over the said ditch from the Common to the Defendants land.

The Plaintiffs claim damages to the amount of £50' <sup>3</sup>

The 6ft wide ditch enclosed an island known as 'Hodson's Garden', now the site of the Folly. Hodson had been involved in a spate of activity in the 1880s apparently formalising his ownership of this land by building a wall along the Coe Fen side of the ditch; bricking up both the entrance from Vicars Brook along one boundary, and the exit into the Cam (Granta); and building a causeway across the ditch to reach the island. The Corporation claimed that in the process he had absorbed the ditch into his garden site, when it was in fact Corporation property. To compound this, they claimed he was carting manure across the common to the garden without having any right of access.

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<sup>2</sup> Cambs Archives (CA): CB/2/7/2/29/2

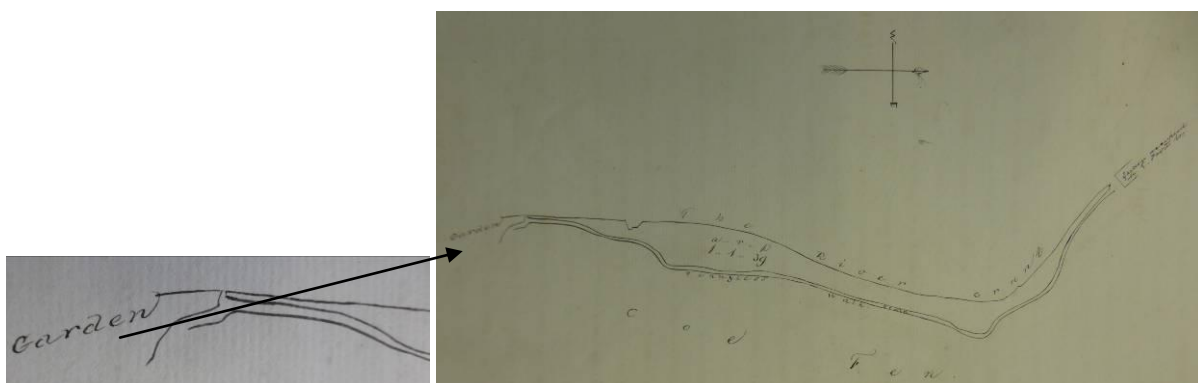
<sup>3</sup> Cambs Archives. CB/2//CL/7/2/29/1

## Hodson's Garden: History



**Figure 3. 1830. Coe Fen with site of Hodsons Garden: Area between Coe Fen, river Granta and Vicars Brook, shown under 'Ladder'. Baker**

The site of the garden in 1830 is shown on Baker's map of Cambridge. It lies on the edge of Coe Fen, surrounded by the ditch, Vicars Brook, and the River Granta ( Figure 3). The first reference found to this enclosure as a garden in the Corporation records is in the papers recording a lease with William and Henry Herring Smith dated 4th May 1837. The Herring Smiths were renting the narrow strip of marsh land known as Hell Meadow stretching upstream from Robinson Crusoe Island. It was bounded next to Coe Fen by a path known as Pennyles Walk, and terminated at the ditch that was at the centre of the County Court case. Beyond this lay an area marked on an accompanying map as 'Garden' ( Figure 4).



**Figure 4. 1837. First reference in Corporation records to a Garden at this site. Cambridge Corporation Lease Book. 1837 (CB/2/CL/17/9)**

The County Court Case reveals what was known about the ownership of the site. The earliest deed that Hodson could produce dated from 1848, but oral testimony from 74 year

old shoemaker John Frisby of Little St Mary's Lane traced use as a garden back to the early 19th century. He stated that his father 'has often told him that this garden was occupied by Newman who worked for Comins, and who paid his rent to a Mr Wheeler. After Wheeler died Newman was not called upon by anyone to pay rent. Believes Wheeler has been dead between 50 and 60 years' <sup>4</sup>.

Frisby went on to say that 'Gunn followed Newman', and this was confirmed by Labourer John Emmings who said he had known the garden for over 60 years and that Ephraim Gunn succeeded Newman. Hodson couldn't produce any deeds recording this conveyance but in a written statement Mrs Gunn recorded that 'her husband had been in uninterrupted possession of the garden since Michaelmas 1823 when he purchased it' <sup>5</sup>. Gunn held the land until 16 September 1848 when the first deed shows Mrs Gunn and her son Charles conveying the ground to William Fuller. Twenty years later in 1868 it was purchased by John Hodson, who still occupied the land in 1887 <sup>6</sup>.

### **Ownership before John Hodson:**

The site is referred to as a garden in all the court records, but there are only a few clues to how it was used, or to who the occupiers were. It seems to have been part working garden, part retreat for clerical or self employed manual workers.

### **Newman and Wheeler ( Unknown-1823):**

Newman was said by Emmings to have 'measured corn for Mr Comins the merchant', while he added that the landlord, Wheeler, 'used to grow Osiers and after cutting them would put them in the ditch' around the garden. This is probably the Mr Wheeler who was a basket maker, recalled by John Banks in 1838: ' he remembered old Mr Wheeler, the basket maker, and had worked for him when a young man; he knows the river between Cambridge and Grantchester, his master having has Osier holts a mile up it, above the point where the chain was thrown across; one Osier-holt was opposite that point, the other was half a mile higher; he has brought Osiers from the furthest holt in a boat to Coe Fen, where they used them for the making baskets; he has worked with Mr Wheeler and his family for 50 years, and had been up the river in boats very often' <sup>7</sup>.

### **Ephraim Gunn (1823-1848):**

The deeds to the 'Garden Ground' state that Ephraim Gunn was a Labourer living in Cambridge Place, off Hills Road, where the 1841 Cambridge census recorded the 60 year old living with his second wife Lydia and five children<sup>8</sup>. Charles, the eldest son, later recalled

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<sup>4</sup> Cambs Archives. Proofs: John Frisby (CB/2/7/2/29/3). 1881 Census

<sup>5</sup> Cambs Archives. CB/2/7/2/29/1

<sup>6</sup> 'the parcels contain a description of the piece of ground giving the boundaries as Coe Fen, The River, and Mr Pemberton's land respectively. Together with the ditch in dispute theretofore belonging to Gunn the father or such part of it as belonging to him and the same with regard to the ditch ( Vicars Brook) next Mr Pemberton's land. William Fuller conveyed the garden by the same description and the same words as to ditches to the Defendant on 31 Oct 1868' (CB/2/7/2/29/1)

<sup>7</sup> Witness in a dispute between Pemberton & Hawes about whether the river was navigable above Kings Mill. Cambridge Chronicle: 4.8.1838.

<sup>8</sup> Deeds (1848) now held by Cambridge City Council. The spelling in the Census is Ephriam; in the Court documents it is Ephraim. Lydia states they married in Sudbury in 'about' 1820.

that 'for many years previous to my Father's death I helped him to cultivate this garden ground as soon as I was able to work, infact from my very boyhood until my Father's death'. He went on to stress that his father had always had a right of way across Coe Fen to the garden, bringing manure by horse and cart from the entrance on Coe Fen Lane. He added that his father's right to the garden had only been challenged once, by Mr Pemberton who claimed it was part of the Trumpington Estate. The claim failed.<sup>9</sup>

Cambridge Place had a reputation as a street of poor working class residents, and neighbours included numerous other Labourers, Laundresses, Char Women, a Bricklayer and a Shoemaker. Ephraim's sons seem to have been in regular trouble with the law. A Charles Gunn was described as 'a pugnacious Labourer who had been six times before the bench for misbehaviour', while his brothers Samuel and William were also regularly in court<sup>10</sup>. This culminated in April 1848 with Samuel attacking Ephraim: 'On Saturday night the defendant was beating his sister, when the old man interfered and was knocked down until rendered senseless by the brutality of the defendant, who is too well known as a desperate character'<sup>11</sup>. Two months later Ephraim died. Reports that the 66 year olds death was a result of injuries inflicted by Samuel led to an inquest, but the Surgeon recorded death due to kidney disease<sup>12</sup>. In September Lydia and Charles Gunn conveyed the Coe Fen 'Garden' to William Fuller, 'Merchants Clerk', for £28<sup>13</sup>.

### **William Fuller (1848-1868):**

John Emmings stated that Mr Fuller was 'Clerk to Mr Beales'.

At his death aged 73 in 1870 the local newspaper recorded that William Fuller had been 'for upwards to half a century in the service of Mr Patrick Beales'<sup>14</sup>. He had held regular employment, his wife was described in the Census returns as a Dress Maker, a servant lived in the house, and while his social status was far below that of his employer it was distinctly higher than that of Ephraim Gunn.

Patrick Beales was a prosperous merchant and twice Mayor of Cambridge in the mid 19th century. He lived next to the river in Silver Street in what is today Darwin College, and described himself as a 'Coal & Corn Merchant' transporting coal up river, and corn down river in barges that moored outside his house. Fuller lived nearby next to the Maltings in Newnham, a small hamlet then clustered around the Newnham Mill Pond<sup>15</sup>. The Maltings were described in 1850 as 'capable of wetting 60 quarters in 8 days, 2 floors, 2 kilns, and Barley chamber'<sup>16</sup>. Together with Beales's barges they were a reminder that this was still a working river set on the edge of the countryside, not the academic suburb that it became in the 20th century.

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<sup>9</sup> Declaration by Mr Charles Gunn (17.12.1886). Held with deeds: Cambridge City Council.

<sup>10</sup> CIP: 9.1.1847

<sup>11</sup> CIP: 15.4. 1848

<sup>12</sup> CIP: 17.6.1848

<sup>13</sup> Deeds: Cambridge City Council

<sup>14</sup> CIP: 19.2.1870

<sup>15</sup> See 1841, 1851, 1861 Census.

<sup>16</sup> CIP: 27 April 1850

**HIGHLY  
IMPORTANT FREEHOLD PROPERTY,  
CAMBRIDGE,  
PRODUCING £242. PER ANNUM.  
LAND-TAX REDEEMED.  
TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,  
*Under the Trusts of a Settlement.*  
BY WENTWORTH and SON,**

At the Bull Hotel, Cambridge, on THURSDAY, May 16th, 1850, at Half-past Seven o'clock in the Evening, in One Lot, (if not previously disposed of by private contract, of which due notice will be given.)

**C**OMPRISING the following Valuable FREEHOLD ESTATES, at NEWNHAM, a portion of which is close to the Navigable River, and opposite the Water Mills, viz:—

	£.	s.	d.
A capital and substantial Brick and Tiled MALTING, capable of wetting 60 'quarters in 8 days, 2 Floors, 2 Kilns, and Barley Chamber extending to the Street. Also a Range of Brick and Tiled STABLES, and LOFTS over, Foreman's HOUSE adjoining, &c., all in excellent order, as now let to Patrick Beales, Esq., at the Annual Rent of .. .. .	100	0	0
Also, adjoining, a very neat Brick and Slate HOUSE, containing Entrance Hall, 2 Dining Rooms, Study, Drawing Room, Kitchen, Store Room, and 7 Bed Rooms, together with an excellent GARDEN attached, in beautiful order, with GREEN-HOUSE, &c., forming a very compact and genteel Residence, as now let to James Hunt, Esq., whose tenancy expires at Christmas, 1850, at the low Annual Rent of ..	74	0	0
Also, a Brick and Tiled HOUSE, being No. 26, in Newnham, next the Malting Premises, let to Mr. Fuller, at the Annual Rent of ..	10	10	0

Figure 5. Sale: 'Brick and Tiled House being No 26, in Newnham, next to the Malting Premises, let to Mr Fuller at Annual Rent of £10-10-0' :

Sale of Maltings, Newnham & adjoining properties. CIP 27 April 1850

Fuller lived and worked near the Cam, but his personal interest in the river dated from at least 1844 when he began fishing<sup>17</sup>. Fuller doesn't seem to have been the only person fishing in the river, but fishing rights were contentious, and claimed by the Corporation, who leased them to Mr Clayton, a fishmonger living on Pease Hill, site of the Fish Market.

Fuller believed the Corporation had exceeded its rights in giving Clayton a lease to fishing on all the river within the Borough boundaries, and in 1846 a letter in the Cambridge Independent Press states that he challenged the Corporation's 'right of fishing on Sheep Green and other parts of the river in the neighbourhood of the town and that they have granted a lease of the same to Mr RP Clayton for a mere nominal sum, giving that person the sole right of fishing in the river, to the exclusion of every other person'<sup>18</sup>. Clayton refused to accept this, adding that Fuller had previously offered to hire the fishery. Fuller appears to have lost the case, but he was in Court again over the same issue of fishing rights in 1855, and again in 1858 when he stated that he did not deny throwing nets into the river, and that 'the only reason they had for doing so was to give ground for an action against them, as they wished to contest the point, so oft disputed, whether the Corporation had the power to let the fishery to any one exclusively; and he contended that every Burgess had as much right to fish there as Mr Clayton'<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> CC: 17.11.1855

<sup>18</sup> CIP: 8 Aug 1846

<sup>19</sup> See CC: 17.11.1855; CC: 2.1.1858

Perhaps this explains why Fuller acquired Gunn's Garden when it became available in 1848. Forty years later it was certainly remembered that he 'kept a boat on the island and was fond of fishing'<sup>20</sup>. But he does seem to have used it for growing fruit too, as four boys admitted to breaking branches and stealing fruit in 1867, and were fined 5 shillings each, or seven days in prison<sup>21</sup>.

Fuller also began the transformation of the island from working garden to into a riverside leisure garden. This was recalled in 1887 by John Emmings who said: ' When Mr Fuller built the summer house on the garden the materials were carted to Newnham Mill and put into boats', adding that he helped to cart them up to the garden<sup>22</sup>. As Emmings worked for Mr Clayton for over thirty years fishing ' all along the river from Barnwell Pool up to Mr Pemberton's water' this seems to indicate that the dispute over fishing rights had by then been settled.

Fuller died aged 73 in February 1870.

### **Thomas Smith & John Hodson (1869-1884):**

Hodson acquired the garden on 31st October 1868 for £55, although the purchase may have only been made possible with help from his Uncle, Thomas Smith, whom witnesses in 1887 remembered using the site after Fuller<sup>23</sup>.

The population of Cambridge rose fourfold in the 19th century, and both Gunn and Fuller, from Histon and Toft, were part of this process. So too were Smith and Hodson, but their journey was from much further away in Lancashire. Smith is first recorded in 1841 as College Butler in Pembroke College<sup>24</sup>. He was born in Over Kellet where his father, George Smith, was an Agricultural Labourer and he probably came to work in the College through connections with the Master, Gilbert Ainslie (1793-1870. Master: 1828-1870), a major landowner in the village.



**Figure 6. Pembroke College**

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<sup>20</sup> CIP: 29.1.1887. Comment by Henry Holden, Clerk to Town Clerk. Report on Court Case Corporation & Hodson

<sup>21</sup> CC: 29.6.1867

<sup>22</sup> Cambs Archives. CB/2//CL/7/2/29/1

<sup>23</sup> John Emmings and John Pearce refer to Smith occupying the garden: CB/2//CL/7/2/29/1

<sup>24</sup> 1841 Census.



In 1841 Smith was 33, married to Jane, and they both lived in the College. By 1851 he was a widower, and his sister, Elizabeth Hodson (1818-1881) had moved to live with him in Pembroke as his Housekeeper. She appears to have been widowed, and although her son John (1840-1908) is recorded living with her family in Over Kellet in both the 1841 and 1851 census, she must have brought him to Cambridge too as Frederick Clark latter recalled that he 'used to go to school with Hodson and lived near him ever since'<sup>25</sup>.

Elizabeth seems to have remained her brother's housekeeper until he retired, and he appears to have taken responsibility for his nephew. By 1861 John was a 21 year old living in the college with his mother and Uncle and working as a Carpenter, and in 1871 they were all still resident in the College, with John now employed as 'Butler's Assistant'. Reports in the local newspapers reveal him as a keen sportsman, rowing for the Cambridge Town Rowing Club and winning awards for his shooting skills as a Lance Corporal in the First Cambridgeshire Rifle Volunteer Corps <sup>26</sup>. His colleagues were local tradesmen and clerks, and a picture from 1868 shows him with his fellow rowers, looking very athletic, fashionably bearded, and self confident.



**Figure 7. John Hodson. 1868. Lying down, bearded, front row. Cambridge Town Rowing Club. See CIP: 1 Aug 1868.**

Sometime in the next decade Thomas retired and moved to Downing Terrace, Lensfield Road, where he was living aged 73 with two servants at the time of the 1881 census and described a 'Late College Butler' <sup>27</sup>. The Butler's post at Pembroke seems to have become hereditary by then, as John Hodson had taken over the position. Intriguingly the college records for May 11 1881 state 'John Hodson was appointed Butler in place of his mother deceased', which implies that Elizabeth Hodson had first taken over the role from her

<sup>25</sup> Cambs Archives. CB/2/7/2/29/3

<sup>26</sup> CIP: 1.8.1868; CIP: 28.11.1868

<sup>27</sup> 1878: The first mention in Spalding's Street Directory of Thomas Smith living at 10 Downing Terrace



brother. At the same time it was agreed to pay John £125 a year, a considerable improvement on £27.10-0 he had received in 1873 for 55 weeks work<sup>28</sup>.

It is difficult to define the duties or status of a college Butler, especially as every college would have had different arrangements. It involved the provision of wine, there are payments to the butler for supplying wine for special dinners, and he may have sub-contracted work to others<sup>29</sup>. No details survive at Pembroke, but Thomas Smith prospered. He was the son of a farm labourer, with a brother, Robert, who worked first on the land and later as a railway labourer<sup>30</sup>. But at Thomas's death in 1884 he had risen well above his family in Lancashire. His will describes him as 'Gentleman', owning two freehold houses in Parker St, his own and one more in Downing Terrace, a leasehold property in Jesus Lane, and with household property that included silver, plate, china, books, pictures, wine and stuffed birds. The whole estate was valued at £8,000, far more than his parents would ever have owned, and all this he left to his sister's son, John Hodson<sup>31</sup>.

John seems to have resigned his post as College Butler almost immediately after his Uncle's death<sup>32</sup>. By the end of 1884 he had moved with his wife and daughter Bessie to 13 Downing Terrace, which with three adjoining properties cost £420<sup>33</sup>. A few months later in 1885 he also bought an Inn and Brewery in Great Chesterford for £1,380<sup>34</sup>. Ten years earlier he had been a lowly paid college servant earning 10 shillings a week. He was now a 'Gentleman' too.



**Figure 8. John Hodson in later life.**

**Picture: Sue Ison, inherited from Mrs E Fordham, niece to John Hodson.**

<sup>28</sup> 1881: Pembroke College Register, Volume 19, page 383 (Pembroke Archives, College Manuscript B Epsilon 1). 1873: Pembroke College Accounts (Pembroke Archives, College Manuscript M alpha 10). Hodson was described a 'College Porter' not 'Butler's Assistant as recorded in 1871 Census.

<sup>29</sup> Information from Jayne Ringrose, Hon Archivist Pembroke College.

<sup>30</sup> 1851 Over Kellet. 1861 Census Ulverston

<sup>31</sup> 30.7.1884: Will proved at Peterborough Probate Division

<sup>32</sup> October 21 1884 'Edward Haggis was appointed to discharge the duties of Butler till Christmas in the room of John Hodson resigned'. Pembroke College Register, Volume 19 (Pembroke Archives, College Manuscript B Epsilon 1. Page 436)

<sup>33</sup> Cambridge Independent Press: 25.10.1884

<sup>34</sup> Crown & Thistle Inn. Chelmsford Chronicle: 31.1.1885

## Hodson's Garden and John Hodson: 1884-1908

Hodson had owned the garden since 1868, and he experienced the same problems as Fuller with trespassers. In 1882 he had already brought a case against William Bateson of St John's College claiming that 'it had been the habit of persons to anchor their boats against the complainants garden, which was at the side of the river, and, getting out, walk over the garden trampling down various things and doing damage' and that Bateson 'was seen to row up to the garden, get out and walk over the garden, doing damage to various things that were growing'<sup>35</sup>. But it was in the years after his Uncle's death that he seems to have taken further steps to secure the garden, leading to his dispute with the Corporation. Perhaps his Uncle had previously restrained him, or perhaps his new wealth now allowed him to make the changes that provoked the Corporation's action.

The dispute with the Corporation centred around the ditch running along the Coe Fen side of the boundary. Cattle were breaking down the banks of the ditch and to try to prevent this oak posts were inserted on both banks in the early 1880s<sup>36</sup>. Around the same time Hodson's Uncle had replaced the old willow tree that had been the route across the ditch with an earth causeway. Perhaps because this was ineffective in 1885 Hodson built an 8ft wall along the ditch. This prompted a lengthy correspondence from Edmond Foster, the Town Clerk, culminating in the County Court case in 1887. Amongst the details are glimpses of Coe Fen, the river and those working there.

The need to clean all the ditches and the river bank on the Fen is a recurring theme, a task sometimes undertaken by employees from Mr Foster's nearby mill. On one occasion in the early 1880s the mill foreman, Daniel Sayer recalled that his men had taken mud out of the ditch around Hodson's garden too. One of these, Frederick Clark, remembered that Hodson said 'we had no business to meddle with the ditch at all, and threatened to punch my head for it'. Hodson followed this up with a visit to Sayer at Foster's Mill Lane office. The conversation is the nearest we come to seeing Hodson, and of how others viewed his relationship with his Uncle: 'He was very angry and told me he had thrown the mud into the ditch which we had taken out and if we liked to take action against him he was prepared to defend it. I told him he would never have come with such a message if his Uncle had not sent him and he said 'Oh yes that's right'<sup>37</sup>. Sayer's men continued to make good other parts of the river, but did not touch the ditch again.

Another theme was about whether ownership of the garden included a right of way for carts to cross the common. Hodson seems to have accessed the Fen through a gate 'at the bottom of the lane leading from Trumpington Road, at the end of Scrope Terrace', and as evidence was presented to justify his holding a key to the gate a picture of a working garden emerges. Hodson said he needed access to cart manure and pea sticks, while the builder George Kett stated that his firm had carted rubbish across the Fen to the garden for twenty-five years. It was said too that, like Fuller, Hodson enjoyed fishing.

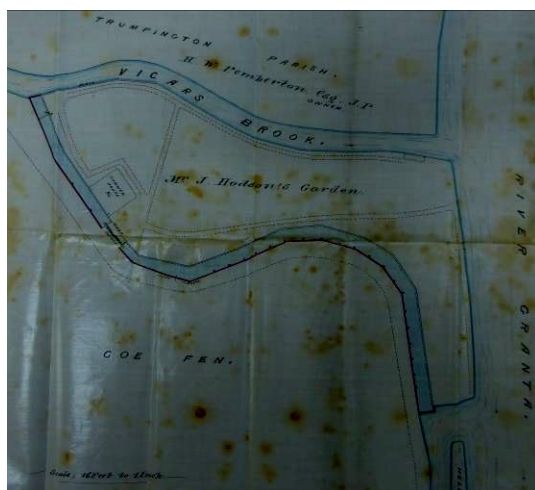
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<sup>35</sup> CIP: 8.4.1882. William Bateson is Master of St John's in 1881 Census.

<sup>36</sup> John Lilley: Cambs Archives. CB/2//CL/7/2/29/1

<sup>37</sup> Cambs Archives. CB/2/7/2/29/3

The papers linked to the Court case also state that Hodson or his predecessors had put up buildings on the island, and the site is shown on an accompanying map. This is very similar to the Ordnance Survey map of the same period (Figures 7 & 8). A Summer House lies adjacent to the ditch, presumably the one built by Mr Fuller. What is possibly another building is marked on the map prepared for the Court case, near the junction of Vicars Brook and the Granta. This is approximately the site of today's Folly, but nothing is shown here on the Ordnance Survey map.



**Figures 9 & 10. Hodson's Garden: 1887 Map (Cambs Archives: CB/2//CL/7/2/29/ ?); Ordnance Survey 1888 (25 inch to Mile. Surveyed 1886)**

Hodson won the Court case, and apparently flaunting this success, shortly afterwards news was reported in *The Cambridge Independent Press* of the 'successful sport obtained by Mr Hodson during the past few weeks, fishing from his garden on Coe Fen. It appears that 201 roach weighing 164.5 lbs, giving an average of 13ozs each, have fallen victims to his bait, finishing on Monday last with 11 fish of 1 lb each' <sup>38</sup>. The consequences for Edmond Foster, Town Clerk, were less benign, and three months later the Corporation Commons Committee was calling for his resignation to his handling of the proceedings.

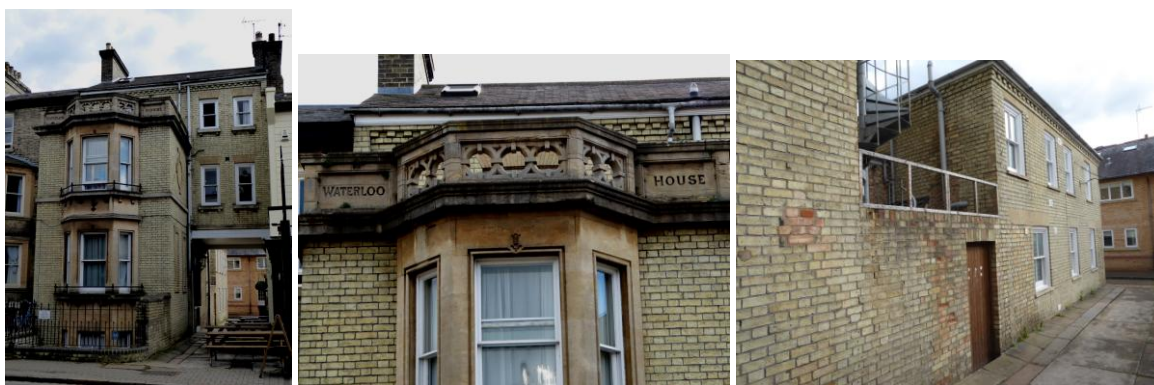
Hodson's wife died in 1894, aged 51, leaving him responsible for their 13 year old daughter Bessie. He was still enjoying use of the garden in 1900, when it was mentioned in the press that those using the Women's Bathing Place crossed the river by a ferry from the landing stage adjoining its northern end <sup>39</sup>. Bessie was still living with him at the time of the 1901 census.

Later claims that Hodson built the Folly to watch Bessie swimming and oversee the fish hatchery that he built may be true, but the dates given (1902-1906) cannot be correct as by then he no longer owned the garden <sup>40</sup>. The same report adds that he lost his money in the notorious Whitaker Wright railway scam of 1900. This seems to be confirmed by the sale of the riverside garden for £300 to local brewer Frederick Dale in 1901, and the Hodsons' move from the substantial 'Waterloo House', where they had lived with servants, to a cottage in nearby 'Downing Archway'. By 1904 Dale was also living in 'Waterloo House'.

<sup>38</sup> CIP: 5.2.1887

<sup>39</sup> CIP: 17.8.1900

<sup>40</sup> Mrs E Fordham. Hodson's niece. *Cambridge Evening News*. 15.12.1972.



**Figure 11. 'Waterloo House', Lensfield Road, the Hodson family home c1884-1901.**

**At the rear through the arch is 'Downing Archway', Hodson's home 1901.**

**John Hodson had also given his daughter the name 'Waterloo' before he moved to Lensfield Road (Bessie Waterloo Hodson, b.1880)**

Hodson died on 6th April 1908 at The Royal Albert Almshouses, Hills Road, a 'refuge for retired tradespeople who often, having lived in tied accommodation, found themselves homeless when they retired'<sup>41</sup>. He was still a 'Gentleman', but his address indicates he had lost his houses, and the fact that he appear to have left no will implies that he had no money to leave his daughter.



**Figure 12. The Royal Albert Almshouses, Brooklands Avenue, Cambridge.**

Bessie Hodson, who allegedly swam in the Cam watched by her father from the Folly, remained single until after her father's death. In 1916 she married John Dunk in London, son of a butcher from Kent and employed at the time of the 1911 census as a 'Hotel Clerk'. At John's death in Sidcup in 1942 they were living in a older semi detached house in a good neighbourhood. Bessie died in Doncaster in 1974.

Did Bessie ever swim in the Cam ? Maybe we need never know the answer. That image is part of the charm of the Folly<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.cambridgeroyalalberthomes.org.uk/history.html>

<sup>42</sup> John Dunk was born at Charing, Kent in 1885 where his father was described in the 1881 census as a Master Butcher. In 1911 census the family are living at 25 Harvard Mansions St Johns Hill Battersea. John and his

## Conclusion:

The collection of old documents about the ditch on Coe Fen failed to answer the many questions about the Folly. But the search for information about John Hodson and his garden did reveal glimpses of the Cam in its last days as a working river. These ranged from Mr Wheeler, his osier-holts and basket making; to William Fuller and his employer Patrick Beales bringing boats laden with wheat and coal up and down the river; to the maltings in Newnham; Mr Foster's mills where punts now moor at Silver Street; and labourers clearing ditches and maintaining the river bank for their employers, not just for conservation. There are also reminders that this was not the only 'island' on the river, with Hells Meadows and Robinson Crusoe island both nearby.

There are glimpses too of old rights being challenged, both officially in court, and by practise. William Fuller persistently questioned the corporations rights to all fishing on the river within the borough boundaries, and evidence given to support this case gives an insight into river life. Fuller himself said 'I fish generally at night - in the evening, not having time during the day. Never produced a book to show the profits I made from fishing. For fishing below the mills with nets I was fined. I fish with nets'. In the same report a printer, James Taverner, said he 'had seen the millers fishing there scores of times - regularly whenever there was a flush of water, and they used to hawk them through the town for sale'<sup>43</sup>.

Similarly the information about basket maker Mr Wheeler was part of a dispute in 1838 about whether the river was navigable above King's Mill<sup>44</sup>. Mr Hawes, a boat builder and 'letter', had broken a chain that Colonel Pemberton of Trumpington Hall had put across the river to stop progress between Newnham and Grantchester. Hawes claimed everyone had the right to use the river. Pemberton stated that it was his property. In the evidence that was presented it became clear that pleasure boating was a new phenomenon in the last 16 years, and 65 year old John Cross 'remembered the time when there was no other boat-letter in Cambridge than a man named Halliday, who lived at Fort St George....This Halliday had not a dozen boats'. Cross confirmed that boat were had been going above the mills only in the last 16 years, adding that the boats were damaged as they had to be pulled over the land, and the oars damaged because the river was not adapted for rowing.

The changes came slowly, prompted by cultural change and by the arrival of the railway in 1845. By 1900 women were swimming in the river by Hodson's island. Trade moved to the railway station, and the mills were eventually demolished in the 1930s. Mr Beales's riverside house and the nearby maltings became luxury homes for the new families of Dons now allowed to marry. Students started rowing, and later punts appeared as the river was transformed from the commercial centre of the town to the leisure centre it is today.

Those who occupied the Coe Fen island garden site in the 19th century were working men, not Dons or leisured gentlemen. Gunn, Fuller and Hodson all seem to have been stubbornly

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father are recorded as Hotel Clerks. Bessie Hodson is a 'Visitor', implying an existing family or personal relationship.

<sup>43</sup> CC: 17.11.1855

<sup>44</sup> CC: 4 Aug 1838



independent, perhaps part of their character or perhaps shaped by circumstances. We only have hints of how the garden was used. Probably the best comparison is with present day allotments, a mixture of place to grow food, and place to relax away from more crowded homes. And a place to fish.

Fredrick Dale came from a different background and held a different status from his predecessors. An employer who had become a successful local brewer, John Hodson's retreat seems to have become a leisure garden. A picture from 1903 shows a group of men sitting at the river's edge next to the Folly. They are dressed very formally in suits and boaters, and surrounded by well-tended flower beds. Later a local resident remembered that the garden was used by the Dales to entertain friends to tea 'on beautiful summer days long after the first war'<sup>45</sup>.



**Figure 13: The Garden and Folly: 1903. The wording under the photo states 'Presented to The Colonel by the Members of Ye Ancient Xth Club as a Souvenir of July 2 1903'.**

**Claimed to show Col Dale and friends of the brewery family (Cambridge Evening News: 4.5.2014). The Folly has been built, and what is probably Fuller's 'Summerhouse' visible at the rear of the garden.**

In 1925 Frederick Dale sold the site to George Reynolds, the owner of a nearby Hotel, later 'The Garden House'. The land bought by Hodson in 1868 for £55 was now worth £550. Eleven years later Reynolds negotiated a land swap with the Borough Council, exchanging the garden for some Council owned land at the northern end of the Common adjoining his hotel<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Mrs D Humberstone, 9, Oak Tree Avenue. Cambridge Evening News: 15.12.1972

<sup>46</sup> 6.6.1925: F Dale to G Reynolds, Belle View Hotel. 11.9.1935: Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries agree to land exchange. 18.3.1936: Reynolds to Cambridge Borough Council. Deeds ( Cambridge City Council).



In 1936, fifty years after the had Council first challenged Hodson about ownership and rights of way, the riverside garden became part of Coe Fen. Much of it was absorbed into the Common, and the disputed ditch is now lost, but a small strip adjoining the river remained enclosed behind a new wall.

The date of Hodson's Folly remain unconfirmed. Perhaps 1887 is correct. But maybe that is of secondary importance to the story of the island, its occupiers and of the adjoining river. The classical ruin with its coat of arms reflect the changes that took place during the 19th century as the Cam became a romantic backdrop for the newly leisured classes rather a working river where fish were caught for sale in the town and osiers grown along its banks.

The Folly was reputed to have been built by a mysterious 'Gentleman'. John Hodson was a 'Gentleman', and in 1896 he very publicly proclaimed this by adopting his own coat of arms, which are displayed on the riverside folly<sup>47</sup>. But he was not a 'Gentleman' in the same way as the young students at Pembroke College, where he and his Uncle had worked as Butler. Nevertheless his story is worth remembering. As a one-year old in 1841 he was living with his grandfather, a labourer, in a small Lancashire farming village. By the turn of the century he was living the life of a man of leisure on 'private means' in Cambridge.

And then, if his niece is correct, it was all lost in a financial fraud that offered the innocent unsustainable returns. The Folly is his legacy. Romantic or pretentious depending on your viewpoint, it is part of the character of the 21st century Cam.

I now know more about the Coe Fen island. The history of Donkey Common where I started still remains unwritten.

### **Postscript: A Local Historian's Diary**

Since writing this I have found Bessie Hodson's granddaughter in Doncaster. She wrote: 'I believe my Granny was a strong swimmer and swam quite a lot in her youth. She always spoke very warmly of her father, they also had a great interest in the University Boat Race and I believe he was quite a good oarsman'. The recollections and photos of her grandmother as a mother herself transformed Bessie Hodson from a figure glimpsed briefly in historical records into a very real person.

Attached was a photograph of Bessie Hodson reading a book on the bank of the Cam. Her father is seated in a nearby wooden structure. Bessie was born in 1880, and appears to be a teenager, so the picture must have been taken in the 1890s.

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<sup>47</sup> John Hodson was granted arms on 29th July 1896: College of Arms - Grants 69/142 to 'John Hodson. Gentleman. Born June 18 1839, being the son of William Hodson and Elizabeth Smith'. 'Armorial bearings: Argent, guttee-de-larmes, in base water proper, thereon a swan sable, on a chief azure, a nugget of gold of the second. Mantling sable and argent. Crest - on a wreath of the colours, upon water proper, a swan as in the arms, holding in the beak a lotus flower slipped also proper, between two coral branches gules. Motto - 'Fait bien'. Does the black (sable) swan imply a journey to Australia? Or was it placed there because Hodson has shares in an Australian mining company?



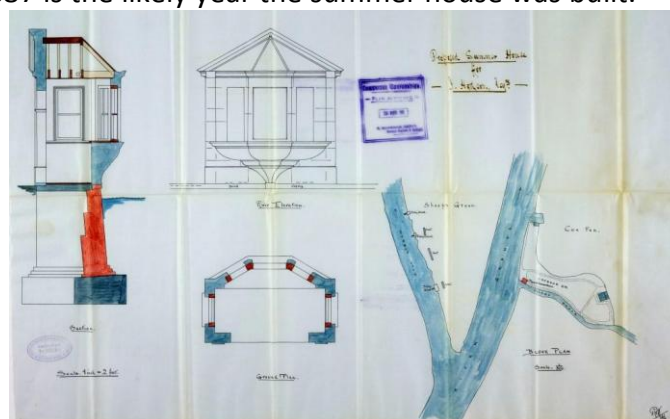
**Figure 14. John Hodson with his daughter Bessie and friend. 1890s. The site of The Folly ?**

Is this 'Hodson's Garden' ?

It seems likely. Hodson's arm is overhanging an inlet running into the Cam which is probably Vicars Brook, the historic boundary of the garden site. If so it means that the stone Folly replaced this wooden building after the photo was taken, probably at the time Hodson acquired his coat of arms in 1896.

This supposition is confirmed by the discovery of the Building Plans for a stone summer house on the river site. These were submitted by Rattee & Kett, local builders, for John Hodson of 'Waterloo House, Lensfield Road' , and approved on 20 august 1896<sup>48</sup>.

1897 rather than 1887 is the likely year the summer house was built.



**Figure 15. Building Plans for Hodson's Folly. Approved 20 August 1896. Cambridgeshire Archives. (CROC .No.CB/2/SE/3/9/1082)**

<sup>48</sup> With many thanks to Stacey Weiser ( Cambridge Past, Present & Future) and James Ogle ( Cambridge City Council).

## Notes:

### 1. Hodson Family: Coat of Arms



Figure 16. From *Armorial Families: A directory of Gentlemen of coat of Armour* (1905) from Jane Flavell.

**John Hodson. Gentleman.** Born June 18 1839, being the son of William Hodson and Elizabeth Smith.  
**Armorial bearings:** Argent, guttee-de-larmes, in base water proper, thereon a swan sable, on a chief azure, a nugget of gold of the second.

Mantling sable and argent

**Crest -** on a wreath of the colours, upon water proper, a swan as in the arms , holding in the beak a lotus flower slipped also proper, between two coral branches gules.

**Motto -** 'Fait bien'.

**Married,** Sept 10 1878, Elizabeth Wiles Mutton (who died July 13 1894) of St Ives, Hunts; and has

**Issue -** Bessie Waterloo Hodson.

**Residence -** The Archway, Downing Terrace, Cambridge

John Hodson was granted arms on 29th July 1896: College of Arms - Grants 69/142.

At much the same time as he was granted arms he recorded a short pedigree here headed by his parents: College of Arms - S3/55. In this pedigree his father was described as of "Wavertree, Liverpool, Lancashire".



Figure 17. Crest: From Jane Flavell, John Hodson's great granddaughter. 2015

### 2. Ownership of Riverside Garden: Information from Deeds ( Cambridge City Council)

Michaelmas	No Price	Unknown to Ephraim Gunn
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1823	given for sale	
1848	£28	Between Lydia Gunn, Charles Gunn & William Fuller, William Randall
31 Oct 1868	£55	William Fuller to John Hodson
6 June 1901	£300	John Hodson of Waterloo House, 13 Downing Terrace, Gentleman to Frederick Dale, Tailor & Clothier
6 June 1925	£550	Frederick Dale to George Reynolds of Belle Vue Hotel, Hotel Keeper.
18 March 1936	Exchange of land (See Deeds)	George Reynolds to Mayor, Aldermen, Borough of Cambridge

### Allan Brigham. September 2015

Many thanks to John Hodson's family - Jane Flavell and Sue Ison; Mr & Mrs Chapman for prompting this research through a change.org petition to English Heritage requesting the Folly should be restored; John Green for saving and sharing the 1903 picture of the riverside garden; Jayne Ringrose (Hon Archivist Pembroke College) and to staff at The Cambridgeshire Collection and at Cambridgeshire Archives.



Figure 18. The Documents that began the search for John Hodson: 1887. Cambridgeshire Archives.

### Abbreviations:

CA: Cambridgeshire Archives  
CC: Cambridge Chronicle  
CIP: Cambridge Independent Press