

EAST GRINSTEAD MEMORIAL ESTATE – April 2025 Newsletter

I'm beginning this newsletter with an update on the latest steering meeting held with Mid Sussex District Council in January where we took stock of the current challenges facing the Estate.

The winter months had a predictably savage impact on the state of paths with the Holtye Track becoming harder than ever to navigate, as was Owl Path which had been closed – it still remains so. The debris from the first phase of the ash die-back programme is still in evidence and assurances have been given that this will be cleared ahead of phase 2 commencing in April. The newly installed Ghyll Steps are a major improvement but to enhance safety, edging to the steps has been suggested alongside the limited installation of a hand rail on particularly steep inclines – this is currently with the Council's Health and Safety team to progress. As I write, the re-commissioned football pitches at East Court have also taken a hammering through the winter months with play currently suspended pending drier weather. Investigative work to evaluate the effectiveness of the historic drainage systems has also been suggested given the much-appreciated surface work undertaken last Summer by the Council's contractors clearly has its limitations.

Our input to the steering meeting was to focus on the wider issues of progress against plan. The existing 10 year plan commissioned by MSDC, expires shortly and as I've said previously, the hygiene issues of managing the Estate (eg grass cutting, waste bin emptying and so on) have broadly been satisfactorily discharged over that time, but a recent estimate of plan actions indicated some 80% had not been addressed. The learning from the first 10 years is that the initial plan was superbly crafted but in reality, over-ambitious and under-resourced – its successor plan needs to be more pragmatic if it is to help move the Estate forward. The arrival of Glendale as the MSDC preferred contractor has given us encouragement over its first year of operation but there is a sizeable backlog of work to be addressed over the next nine years of their contract. It is for that reason we have suggested that for each year of the plan a major theme is addressed to provide clear focus – the scale of the issues are such that right now we literally can't see the wood for the trees!

There was recognition that the overriding first priority was to put the paths and tracks in good order - a process that can be sized and costed now with a view to early implementation. The rest of the plan can be formulated in tandem, with the existing 10 year plan informing the priority debate. In conjunction, Glendale are producing a 12 month delivery plan which will be available during April and to which we have been assured we will have access.

We shared that we had undertaken some work to identify main routes through the estate and also a review of signage - they (Glendale in association with MSDC) have a community support process which could be a source of funding for this and will let us have an application opportunity. Glendale are also about to kick off a volunteer recruitment programme across Mid Sussex organising weekly working groups - more details anon - but they recognise their coordination role in juggling tasks with MSDC and the Ashplats Conservation Group.

Signage and paths

Before any major enhancements can be made around the Estate in the years to come, it is self-evident that key access routes need to be open and robust.

Your board has been engaged in a conversation in recent months to address signage shortcomings on the Estate with a view to more effectively directing users to adhere to the major pathways/tracks rather than see a further proliferation of desire routes which damage the development of both flora and fauna. This is a conversation we have now surfaced with MSDC and Glendale and a summation of where our current thinking lies is best given at <https://www.egmel.co.uk/Maps> (note there are some basic layer filters on the right hand side of the web page).

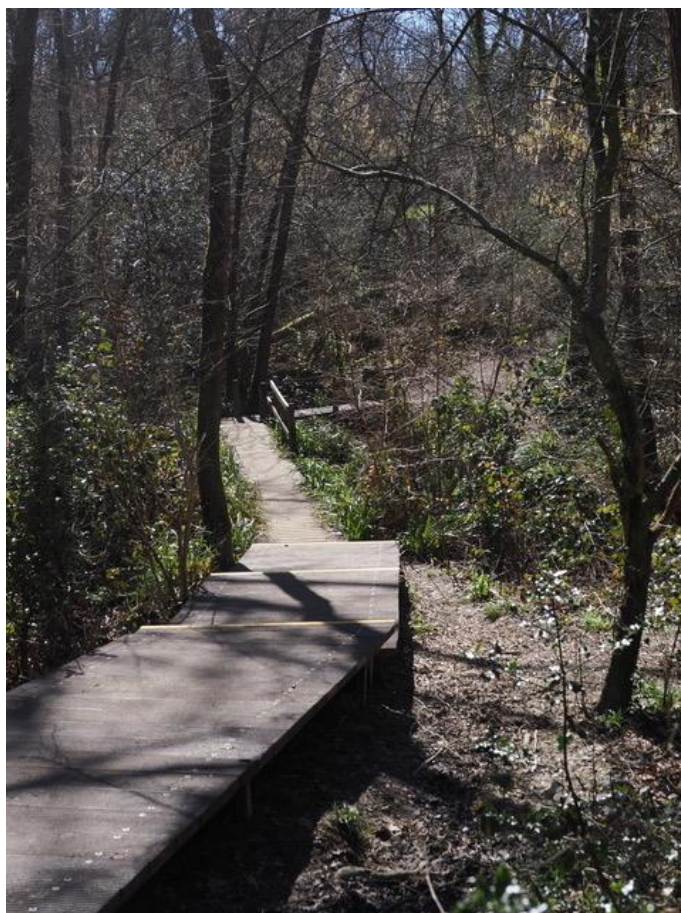
This link will take you to a screen which gives you two options – the first being to see the tasks undertaken by the Conservation Group and the second showing the proposals for path grading and signage

Our present push for progress is to focus maintenance activity on paths that we regard as the equivalent of 'A' roads, ie high usage and /or on the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace published walking route – these are marked as priority 1 on the attached map. Such paths or tracks need to be able to facilitate year-round access not just for users but also for contractors to undertake wider maintenance of the Estate. This mapping of priorities is very much a work in progress, so it is **important to us that you have the opportunity to voice your own thoughts** as to whether the suggested prioritisation makes sense before it is cast in stone! Please do send your thoughts to me at chair@egmel.co.uk

Starting to dry out at last

For those of you who have not managed to access the estate this month since it finally started raining, below are a selection of pictures taken by one of our members.





Around the Estate

During the last few months we have seen plenty of evidence that the seasonal litter picks organised by the Bonfire Society and the Ashplats Conservation Group are leading to much lower levels of littering than has been seen in recent years - that's a blow for freedom! Many thanks to the volunteers in both these groups for their positive impact.

As ever, there are negative examples of poor behaviour to report, and two notable instances are:

1. This hide containing what we assume was looted garden machinery has now been cleared by Glendale (see photos over page).
2. In addition, we have seen video of motorbike scrambling activity on the playing fields (reported to the authorities) as well as cyclo-cross by youngsters (also reported) – should any members witness anti-social activity we are advised to report this to the police using the 101 options, unless it's an emergency, in which case call 999.



Parkrun is growing from strength to strength and whilst it is great to see the increased use of the Estate, through the winter months it does come at a price in terms of wear and tear. The Parkrun volunteers have been laying down wood chip to protect the most worn or muddy areas and are in active discussion with MSDC to develop more sustainable options to ameliorate their impacts going forward.

Many of you will already appreciate the work undertaken by the Conservation Group is from their base on site which is the jolly green container! Discussions are taking place with the Bonfire Group to install a container of their own at that location to house all of their equipment. We have no objections to this.

Whilst we're on the subject of the Conservation Group, it's worth mentioning that they have recently started to put up dormice tunnels to confirm the existence of the little chaps in the woods – the picture below shows a tunnel in situ (just in case you spot one and were wondering!)



History of the Estate

There are references to our history on the EGMEL website but we were recently asked to produce an article for the members of the East Grinstead Society. This article may be of interest (which is a consolidation from various sources) can be found below.

As the weather now seems to be easing into its customary spring phase with the bulbs blooming and the grass growing, I wish you every enjoyment in wandering the Estate at this lovely time of year.

Lloyd Richards
Chair, East Grinstead Memorial Estate Ltd

1 April 2025

History of the East Grinstead Memorial Estate

18th Century

The house at East Court was built in 1769 by John Cranston, a London lawyer of Scottish descent and who had been Assistant Warden of Sackville College from 1767 to 1769. He was married to Catherine Green, whose family owned the nearby farm known as Estcot's, and it was on their farmland that East Court was constructed and the estate developed.

John Cranston died in 1781 and his only son, Edward, inherited East Court. He later became a major in the local Volunteer Force, a magistrate and Deputy Lieutenant of Sussex. The East Court estate is shown on the Christopher Greenwood map of 1825. The 1840 tithe map shows that the East Court estate covered 53.5 hectares, but increased to 74 hectares with the addition of two farms, East Gate Farm (Estcot's) and Blackwell Farm. When Edward Cranston died in 1841 his five daughters jointly inherited the estate. The 1841, 1851 and 1861 Census Returns showed Edward Cranston's widow Harriet, together with some of her family, were living at East Court throughout this time.

19th Century

In 1863 the Cranston family let East Court to the Rev. Charles Walter Payne (C.W.P.) Crawford and his family. They were related to the Crawfurds of nearby Saint Hill. C.W.P. Crawford became Chairman of East Grinstead Urban District Council and he and his family lived at East Court until 1903.

20th Century

In 1906 the Cranston trustees sold East Court to Ernest Cooper, an accountant from Limpsfield in Surrey. As the house had fallen into a state of disrepair, Cooper restored and extended the house as well as developing the grounds.

At the time of Ernest Cooper's death in 1926, the estate consisted of over 202.5 hectares which included several farms. The whole estate was bought by Frederick Woodgates, a developer, who then sold off parts of the farmland for housing. Later owners of East Court included Capt. Frederick Card and Godfrey H. J. Williams. During World War 2 East Court was requisitioned by the Army.

On 21 March 1944 a special meeting of the East Grinstead Urban District Council was held to consider an approach "by a resident of the town regarding the possibility of the acquisition of the East Court estate in connection with the following purposes:

1. the major portion of the estate to be designated a war memorial,
2. the mansion and a small agreed area of land for use as new Council offices

It soon became known that this astonishing offer had been made 17 months before the eventual end of the war by [Alfred Wagg](#), a merchant banker and philanthropist living in East Grinstead.

Alfred Wagg lived at The Hermitage, East Grinstead. He joined the family firm of Helbert, Wagg & Co., City stockbrokers, but when he became head of the firm it became known as Schroder Wagg, later Schroders, which still exists. He also gave part of the land on which today's Queen Victoria Hospital, East Grinstead, now stands, as well as being a generous benefactor to local people who had fallen on hard times.

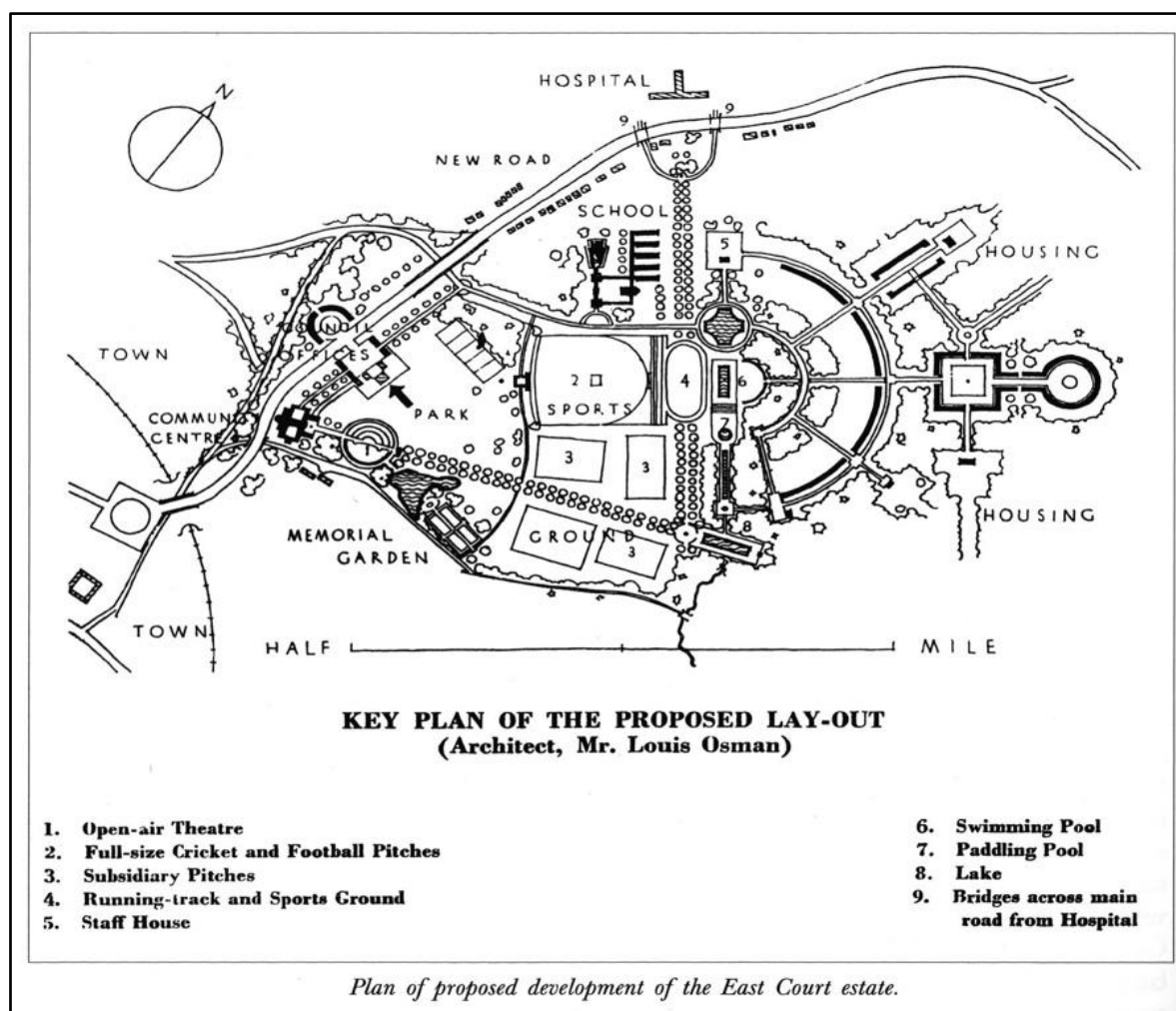
Incidentally it was his sister, Elsie Wagg, also a philanthropist and living at The Hermitage, who started the National Gardens Scheme in 1926 where private gardens were opened to the public on a 'special' day to raise money for nursing and other charities. This highly popular scheme continues to this day.)

After lengthy negotiations between Mr Wagg, the Urban District Council and the Ministry of Health, the estate was purchased for £16,700 by the Manor Charitable Trust (founded by him and four others in 1929) on the understanding the U.D.C. would purchase the mansion and two hectares for £6576. The U.D.C. duly completed their purchase and took over the mansion, which had been requisitioned by the Army during the war.

Following a public meeting in 1946, a War Memorial Committee was set up to own and manage the estate for the enjoyment by the townspeople, a role which it still fulfils today. It was made up of representatives of many local organisations, sports clubs and churches, and later that year the Manor Charitable Trust conveyed the Estate to the interim War Memorial Committee.

Fund-raising for a permanent war memorial in the grounds had begun in 1947 and a London architect, Louis Osman, was commissioned to design a development scheme for the estate. The result was a development that included a county-size cricket ground, football pitches, tennis courts, running track, swimming pool, paddling pool and formal gardens. A new road layout, school and housing were also included. The whole scheme was costed at £70,000 (without the housing and presumably the road layout), which was to be raised by public subscription.

An Appeals Committee was formed, but by 1948 only £7,646 had been raised. It was recognised that the scheme was far too ambitious for a small market town of 10,500 souls, particularly in a post-war era. It was decided to concentrate on two items – the Garden of Remembrance, for which £1,000 had already been set aside, and the playing fields. A new target of £30,000 was set (but never reached) and arrangements made to provide a rugby pitch and two football pitches and two cricket squares.



Eventually, on 13 May 1949, East Grinstead War Memorial Limited was established, being a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital. It was incorporated under the Companies Act 1948 and registered as a charity. The War Memorial and Appeals Committees were wound up and all assets transferred to the new company, including the title deeds from the Manor Charitable Trust. The company had an initial capital of £10,857. The objects of the company (which were modified slightly in 2017) are two-fold:

1. To provide and maintain, as a memorial to the men, women and children of East Grinstead who lost their lives in the 1939-45 war, a public park with playing fields, recreation grounds, or other recreational or educational facilities for the people of East Grinstead.
2. To encourage and promote any form of public recreation or education or any other charitable object, including by the making of grants for the benefit of the people of East Grinstead.

There are ten other objects and these are classified by the Charities Commission as "functional objects" and may be pursued to achieve the two primary objects. Overall, the company must be managed in accordance with Charities Commissioners' requirements as laid out in the Charities Act 2016.

Apart from Alfred Wagg, there were six other subscribers who formed the company – two surveyors, an accountant, a local government official, a widow and a tailor. These seven met on 18 July 1949 and elected Mr Wagg, J.H. Taylor and L.R. Bennett as directors of the company. The business of the company is the responsibility of the Council of Management, and at the first meeting Mr Wagg was elected Chairman together with 13 other local worthies including a Secretary and an Assistant Secretary but, surprisingly, no Treasurer. Mr Wagg gave up the chairmanship in 1951 and for the next 44 years the role was shared by senior partners from either Turner, Rudge & Turner (now King & Chasemore) or Whitley, Hughes & Luscombe (now DMH in Crawley)

By 1950 the Garden of Remembrance had been completed at a cost of £1,548 on land owned by the U.D.C. It was paid for by East Grinstead War Memorial Limited and leased to it by the U.D.C. In order to maintain it and do other duties about the estate, a gardener was employed full-time, living in the Lodge rent-free. The Garden was dedicated by the Bishop of Lewes on 4 June that year. The playing fields were also laid out in 1950 with the help of a grant from the Ministry of Education.

The original capital of £10,857 was put in the hands of Schroder Wagg and was soon added to by the sale of cottages near the northern entrance (no longer there) in 1951. Some of the land to the north and north-west of the house was sold in 1960 to East Sussex County Council. An ambulance station was built on the north side while a new police station, police houses, and Magistrates' Court were constructed to the north-west. (The police station and court properties have recently been sold for private development)

In 1959 a lease was agreed with East Grinstead Football Club (now East Grinstead Town F.C.) for the football ground off Holtys Road, and in 1964 the company met with Felbridge Rifle Club (now East Grinstead Target Shooting Club) for discussions about the provision of a rifle range. Both clubs now have well-established facilities, and the football club in particular has received considerable financial assistance from the company for floodlights and clubhouse improvements.

Also in 1964, land to the west of the drive was sold to East Grinstead Urban District Council - there were plans to create a sports centre and a swimming pool in 1968 but these never materialised. Meanwhile, the sports pavilion had been built, mainly through a contribution of £25,000 from the company.

In 1973, following the national Local Government boundary changes, the company purchased the Garden of Remembrance from the defunct U.D.C. and leased the playing fields to the newly-formed Mid Sussex District Council.

In 1974, with the change in the structure of local government, East Grinstead Urban District Council was downgraded to become East Grinstead Town Council and its powers were transferred to the newly-formed Mid Sussex District Council based in Haywards Heath. Since only a portion of the house was needed by the new Town Council the remaining rooms were let out to various local groups, including the town's museum. This arrangement continues to this day although the museum has now moved to other premises nearby.

To commemorate Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee in 1977, the Greenwich Meridian Line, which runs through East Court's grounds, was marked by a plaque set into the upper terrace just south-east of the house. An open-air theatrical podium was also built at the northern end of the garden's middle terrace.

In 1986, at a cost of £500,000, the southern stable complex of the house was converted into the Meridian Hall for community use, the cost being borne by East Grinstead Town Council.

In 1992 a 2m-wide strip down the centre of the track from Holtye Road to Ashplats Wood was dedicated a public footpath. The Garden of Remembrance was sold to the Town Council in 1997 for £1,000, and the services of the full-time gardener were dispensed with. The company now retains no employees, either full or part-time, and the Lodge (subsequently sold) was let unfurnished on a short-hold tenancy that made a substantial contribution to the company's incoming resources.

Two parcels of land were sold to M.S.D.C. in 1999 for the construction of a balancing pond to alleviate occasional flooding in the Gleave Close area.

The company now retains some 100 acres of the land originally conveyed to it, including Ashplats Wood which is now designated as an S.N.C.I. (Site of Nature Conservation Importance). Much work has been done in the wood by the [Ashplats Conservation Group](#) (local volunteers), for which the company is extremely grateful. A public meeting was held in 1998 and a Steering Committee formed of local residents and representatives of all parties with an interest in the estate. It acts as a local sounding-board and adviser on the maintenance and usage of the estate. Mid Sussex District Council leases (for a peppercorn) and maintains the playing fields and the majority of the estate (excluding the part owned by the East Grinstead Town Council) from East Grinstead War Memorial Ltd.

21st Century

The Millennium Year 2000 was marked by the placing of a beacon just to the north of the house and by the installation, on the Meridian Line, of a large block of unworked ironstone supplied by nearby Phillpots quarry, West Hoathly. In addition, terracotta markers were placed through the grounds to mark the Meridian Line. To commemorate the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002, a path was laid to connect the southern and northern entrances via the upper parkland. Also in that year East Grinstead War Memorial Ltd., in conjunction with Mid Sussex District Council, commissioned a landscape design scheme from Parklife Ltd. which produced guidelines in the form of a master plan for the future of the East Court estate. This was done with the intention of making applications to various grant schemes, including the National Lottery Fund but, to date, this initiative has not advanced any further.

The area around the house, together with the gardens, lake and parkland, was designated as a Conservation Area in 2004.

In 2015 the Company signed a new lease with Mid Sussex District Council for them to manage the Estate, at no cost to the Company, for a period of 125 years. At this time, the Estate was granted Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace designation and in return for this, MSDC agreed to levy new developments in the area and use that income to further support and improve the Estate. A steering committee was established (with representatives of the Estate, EG Town Council and Mid Sussex District Council) to oversee the use of these funds and monitor the progress of the Estate – the committee continues to this day.

In 2017 the Members voted to change the name of the Company to East Grinstead Memorial Estate Ltd to better reflect what we do.

A good history of how East Court has developed over the years is given on the www.parksandgardens.org/places/east-court from which much of this article has been drawn with more recent history sourced from the www.egmel.co.uk website