

BAXTER'S FIELD

Green heart of Lewes

If a town has to have industry at its heart, then a brewery and a printing firm is not a bad combination. And between 1802 and 1997 Lewes was lucky enough to have both. But while Harvey's is still going strong, W.E. Baxter Ltd didn't quite make it into the new century, and in 1997 it was bought out by Fulmar, a Croydon company, supposedly for investment but in practice as an asset to be stripped right down. Soon there was nothing left but a metaphorical goldmine in the centre of town (the development which bears the Baxter's name) and a field: the triangle of land forming the western end of the green valley still standing its ground in the middle of Lewes. This was W.E. Baxter's sports field, a piece of land bought by the company in 1923 along with a small area of copse leased in 1928 from St Anne's Church. It was for the use of the company's employees, and there were tennis courts, a bowling green, a cricket square, and pitches for soccer and rugby. And there was even a bit of infrastructure – a pavilion and two air-raid



Photo by Simon Goodman of photocopus.co.uk

shelters – and a determined and eagle-eyed groundsmen on hand to keep people out. But whenever the field was covered in snow, the big wooden gates in Paddock Lane were flung open to allow children to sledge.

The printing firm's new owners would, I imagine, have been delighted to see the field sold for development along with the printworks, but a farsighted Mr H.J. Powell, in selling it to W.E. Baxter, had imposed a covenant: the field had to be kept as an open space (the covenant is set in stone – literally – in the vestry of St Anne's), so this asset wasn't quite what it might have been, and Fulmar abandoned the field to its own devices. A few murky years followed: the field was locked up, and nature took over. And, sadly, the pavilion was set on fire and, due to the exploding asbestos tiles, had to be entirely demolished. Order was only restored in 2003 when two nearby residents decided enough was enough and took control. Volunteers then

undertook the mammoth task of clearing the field of brambles, rubbish, and the evidence of whatever shady activities had taken place there in the preceding few years.

When Fulmar did put the field on the market, it seemed just a question of formalising the arrangement, and Lewesians got together to buy the field for the asking price of £78,000 and take over the lease of the copse. They had only six weeks to find the money but, in yet another case of Lewes 'not being druv', they raised it all.

And since then Baxter's Field has been for the use of everyone – and not only when it snows. The wide expanse of grass is still pretty much the perfect place to kick a football around, and last year three apple trees were planted to create the beginnings of a community orchard. But when the snow does arrive... Now that's when Baxter's Field – still – comes into its own.

Juliette Mitchell