



BELL LANE

Mrs Hillman's gift

I've often wondered whether we really make enough of the fact that the Greenwich Meridian runs through Lewes. Of course it's marked by a couple of humble plaques on Western Road, where there was, until relatively recently, a pub named after it, but that's gone the way that pubs occasionally do and given way to a row of new – and still appropriately named – houses. And there's a road and memorial in Landport acknowledging its presence. But, as far as I know, that's about it. There is, though, one little Lewes destination, Bell Lane Recreation Ground, that is completely silent about this geographical happenstance. It straddles the Meridian and so belongs partly in the Western hemisphere and partly in the Eastern. And I've always liked the idea of standing there and being, in some virtual way, at the centre of the world and of time.

We have King Charles II to thank for the siting of the Greenwich Meridian, but it was a bunch of Lewes children we should thank for Bell Lane Recreation Ground being the pocket of green space that sits so comfortably upon it. Until the thirties, it was just one more field, one more open space, in an area of Lewes that was still relatively undeveloped. In the years that followed, field after field was to fall to the demands of housing, but this particular field, running along the south of the Winterbourne, was destined for a different fate.

It was owned by a Mrs Aubrey Hillman who lived in a rather grand house called Saxonbury on Juggs

Road. Local children used to play very close to the house and garden, and the maid was frequently called to the back door to return the balls that had come over the wall. Eventually Mrs Hillman – or perhaps her maid – grew so tired of these stray missiles that drastic action was deemed necessary. But rather than a stern notice, or a higher wall, she generously decided to divest herself of another piece of land she owned and give it to the Council, expressly for the children of Southover. And so Bell Lane Recreation Ground – or 'the rec' – was born. And, one hopes, the nuisance came to an end. Things have, of course, changed since those early days, not least the fact that a park attendant used to sit in a little hut keeping an eye on things. Then, after the war, and following the tide of enthusiasm for such things, there were plans to build a community centre here. But Mrs Hillman's gift proved its worth: it was stipulated in the deeds that it was to be kept as a space for the children of Southover to play, and the plans were turned down. At one time a plaque marked the gift, but now the plaque is gone and the lucky children of Southover (along with quite a few equally lucky dogs) simply avail themselves of this open space without a thought for history. Or, for that matter, geography – but still the Greenwich Meridian crosses right through it.

Juliette Mitchell

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