

## The Moor Green Estate, Pitmaston and the Ideal Benefit Society

### **Background to the Area**

It is thought that the name Moor Green may be Anglo Saxon, or Medieval, in origin meaning 'common pasture by the marsh.' The marshy area alluded to would have been located at the bottom of Moor Green Lane by the River Rea and the pasture area at the junction of what is now Moor Green and Shutlock Lanes. In the 1840s Moor Green was a rural area of scattered farms and cottages and a mill on land owned by wealthy local business families such as the Taylors, the Russells and the Rylands. These families made their wealth from manufacturing and banking in Birmingham but lived outside Moor Green in nearby Bordesley, Showell Green and Edgbaston. By the late 1800s land continued to be owned by the Taylors but now included Mrs Partridge's Trust and John Charles Holder.

### **Moor Green Farm**

This was an early working farm in 1871 although records of a Moor Green Farm date back to 1743. In 1871, James Lane, a forty four year old farm labourer lived here with his forty four year old wife and his nine year old niece. James Lane originally came from Herefordshire and by 1891 was a gardener living at 49 Ten Acres, Northfield.

Ten years later, the 1881 census shows John Hawkesworth, Bailiff, aged thirty four years lived there with his wife and three daughters. In 1871, he was an agricultural labourer at Swynnerton Staffordshire. The Hawkesworth family do not appear to have stayed at Moor Green Farm for long as he was a farmer at 'Selly Farm,' Warwood lane, Northfield in 1891. David Davies then lived in Moor Green Farm with his wife. In the 1891 census his occupation was given as 'Farm Manager' and he was fifty one years old.

### **Moorcroft Farm**

Alfred Preston and George Collett are recorded as farming Moorcroft Farm from 1876 – 1891. Their households consisted of their wives and children, farm labourers, a servant and visitors including a sister-in-law and a school teacher. It remained a farm into the 1900s but no longer employed servants.



Moorcroft Farm.<sup>5</sup>

In 1883 there was a scandal. Walter J Harrison (b.1847), a merchant, and also brother-in-law to Alfred Preston, committed suicide by ingesting Prussic Acid in a field called 'Bromley' near Moseley.' John Arnold, a solicitor, of *Moor Green*, known to the deceased for twenty five years, had taken him to Cannon Hill in his 'phaeton' carriage and found him 'very excited'. Walter spoke of pecuniary difficulties saying, 'I am very hard pressed. They are all round me for money.' He had 3¼ d in his pocket. John Arnold's monument can be found in St. Mary's, Moseley.

George Edward Collett took over Moorcroft Farm in 1890 and in the 1891 census was thirty six years old and married to Eliza aged thirty eight years.

## Cottage Farm

Cottage Farm was near to the Moor Green Rolling Mill on the River Rea. William Reynolds had this farm from around 1876 and was succeeded by his wife, daughter and son until around 1895. A William Reynolds, farmer, aged forty and married to Elizabeth, aged forty three, was living there in the 1901 census with six sons and two daughters. There were no servants.



## **Moor Green Mill**

Moor Green, or Farmon's Mill, and its pool, lay on the east of the Rea just above the point where Holders Lane reaches the river. The mill, called a blade mill, was already in existence when the Moore family acquired it from John Middlemore, together with the manor, in 1597. It was held by the Moore family until 1783 when it was sold by John Moore to James Taylor. The Serjeant family held the lease of the mill from Moore and Taylor between 1780 and 1841, and William Serjeant greatly improved the mill, then still a blade mill, between 1816 and 1841. In 1841 his widow surrendered the lease to James Taylor and the freehold was sold to Charles Umpage, metal-roller. William Betts and Co., metal-rollers, occupied the mill in the 1860s and 70s. It was still in use as a rolling mill in the 1880s but seems to have fallen into disuse shortly after, and only a part of the wheel channel still remains.

(Information taken from A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7, the City of Birmingham originally published by Victoria County History, London, 1964.)

## **Pitmaston House and the Ideal Benefit Society Moor Green**

The Pitmaston estate lies within Russell Road, Goodby Road, Holders Lane and Moor Green Lane. Most of the landscaping dates from 1870 when the original Pitmaston House was built to replace Moor Green Cottage. The wealthy Holder family were millers, brewers and distillers who owned the Midland Brewery in Nova Scotia Street, close to Curzon Street station in Birmingham. The firm was taken over by Mitchell & Butler's in 1919 and the brewery closed soon afterwards. Sir John Charles Holder was a Justice of the Peace and High Sheriff of Worcestershire. In 1872 he married Geraldine Knipe a descendant of John Williams, a famous horticulturist who had grown the Pitmaston Duchess Pear. The Holders had ten children, six girls, Kathleen, Geraldine, Flora, Edith, Isabella and Gladys and four boys, Alfred, Henry, Norman and John.

In 1884, John Holder bought the Moor Green Estate following the death of the owner, John Arnold, a solicitor. The 1884 House Auction describes a freehold residence, garden and grounds and a building estate of 50 acres. The Holders built Pitmaston House to replace Moor Green Cottage that was on the site. Pitmaston was named after Geraldine's previous home in Worcester. The grounds boasted a lake and a cascading stream. Woodland was created on an exposure of the Birmingham sandstone ridge with walkways carved into the outcrop. The Holders were also miniature railway enthusiasts fascinated with technology and built a 10¼ inch gauge track around the grounds of the house in 1898. Despite this emblem of the industrial era, the property was seen as a refuge from the relentless procession of Birmingham's urban centre.

Sir John Holder was a significant benefactor of the General Hospital. The Holders made several generous donations to the city, including the stained glass window in The Great Hall at Birmingham University and several pieces of art to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

In the 1920s and 1930s allotments became popular and developed in response to high food costs, unemployment and poverty following World War One. In 1940 the 'Dig for Victory' government campaign further supported the development of allotments. Allotments were created on the Pitmaston estate within the following four streets: Russell Road, Goodby Road, Holders Lane and Moor Green Lane. Land belonging to the Holders was sold to create allotments at the same time that The Ideal Benefit Society acquired the majority of the Moor Green estate to build their Headquarters. Their offices, also known as Pitmaston, stand on the site of the original house and were designed in a neo-Georgian style by Birmingham architect, Holland W Hobbs in the 1930s. Around this time Louisa Anne Ryland, another great Birmingham benefactor, inherited great wealth and land on the death of her father in 1843, following which Louisa donated many things to Birmingham, culminating in 66 acres of meadow land and six pieces of land that was formerly Moor Green Farm, this land being developed into Cannon Hill Park. The Holders also donated land to the Cannon Hill Park project.



The building was Listed in 2003 and included in the Moseley Conservation Area the following year. In 2007 Ideal Benefit Society sold Pitmaston, which has now been developed into the Church of Scientology opened in Autumn 2017.

### **Moor Green Hall - "A gothick, crenellated building"**

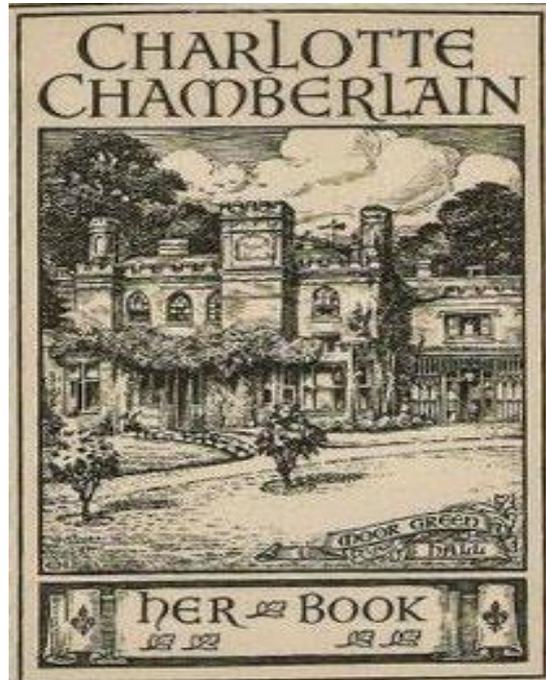
Charlotte Chamberlain was born at Moor Green Hall in 1878 and was the daughter of Arthur Chamberlain. The Hall, stood on Moor Green Lane opposite Yew Tree Road and was leased by Arthur Chamberlain, brother of Joseph Chamberlain, as a home for his family from the Taylors of Moseley. The house was probably built in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and during the

First World War was used as a military hospital treating 1500 injured forces personnel. The north end of Elizabeth Road now runs on the site of the hall.

The New York Times reported an incident at the hall in its edition of 13 February 1914: *Birmingham, 12th. A tube charged with high explosives was found to-day on a window sill of Moor Green Hall, Highbury, the residence of Arthur Chamberlain, brother of the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain.*

*A fuse attached to the bomb was connected with a photographer's lamp in which a candle had been burning. The flame, however, was extinguished before it reached the fuse. A postcard addressed to Reginald McKenna, the Home secretary, was found nearby. It bore the words, "Militancy is not dead, but if you are not already you soon will be." A quantity of suffrage literature was left nearby.*

In 1914 Joseph had been long out of politics through ill health, while Arthur was chairman of Kynoch's a chemical company but also a major Birmingham firm involved in a wide range of manufacturing, from explosives to bicycles. This firm would become a constituent part of Nobel Industries and later ICI. In the 1881 Census, Arthur was noted as employing 110 Men, thirty eight Women, and five Girls and six Boys aged below sixteen years of age. At this time he was living at Moor Green Hall with his wife, seven daughters and one son, a private Governess, and four household servants.



Charlotte Chamberlain's 'ex-libris' plate shown above shows Moor Green Hall.

## **Moor Green House and the Britannic Assurance**

In 1868 Moor Green House was occupied by Mr Thomas Clemont Sneyd Kynnersley, who came from a Staffordshire banking family and became part of the judiciary in several nearby counties during his career. He was interested in reformatories, industrial schools and prisoner aid. He died aged 88 in 1892. Moor Green House, with its collection of farm buildings was purchased and given by Sir John Holder to his son, Henry in 1899. He demolished the existing buildings and built a new house in 1900 as a family home for himself, his wife Evelyne and their four children. Boundary Drive stands roughly on the site of the original house. It is not clear when this house was first built. It was approached by a long drive from Moor Green Lane and was tastefully laid out with an ornamental lodge. The house was sizeable as it had twenty-one rooms, a walled garden, peach house, greenhouses, garages, a cow house, fodder store and calf pen, but it was not lived in for long.

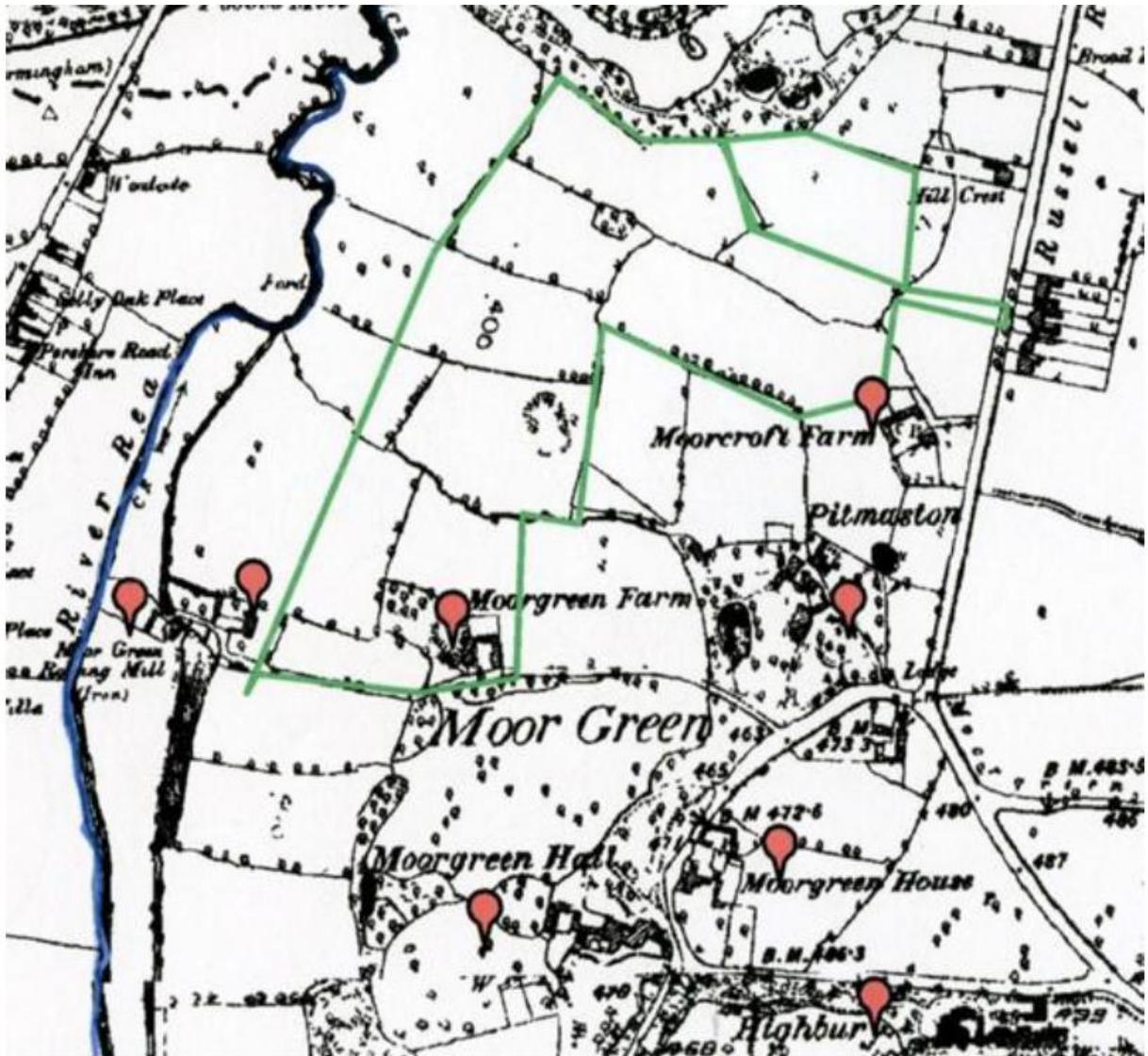
The Britannic Assurance chief office was later built in the grounds. This has recently been converted into luxury private flats. During the First World War the house was used as a hostel for Belgian refugees and then as a military hospital, as an annexe to Highbury, and became designated the 4th Auxiliary Hospital.

Like many large companies of that era, Britannic decided to provide sports facilities for its staff and in 1920 bought Moor Green House and its surrounding grounds which were transformed into sports pitches. Over the years a bowling green, putting green and tennis courts were added along with cricket and football pitches later. Moor Green House was retained and served as a recreation club house until 1970 when it was demolished. Britannic had been started in Birmingham in 1866 as the British Workmens' and General Insurance, changing its name in the early 1900s. The architects for Britannic at Moor Green created a sweeping crescent-shaped building, clad in creamy and green, which combined a certain elegance with functionality. The higher echelons of management were always keen on sport so when plans were drawn up and building work started on the new Chief Office at Moor Green in the 1959, the sporting facilities were retained and the Britannic Assurance building was completed in the early 1960s. The size of the staff outgrew the Moor Green building, and although it had been designed so that an extra floor could be added at the top, the decision was made to move to a new site at Wythall where a new Chief Office was constructed.

### **Moor Green House**



**Moor Green in the 1890s. (The future allotment site is outlined in green.)**



Compiled by Gail Pittaway-Highbury Park Friends 2018.

Thanks also to publications and articles written by:

- Moseley Society "People and Places around Moor Green, Moseley"
- Britannic Magazines
- Reg Monk – "Britannic Assurance – Moor Green Memories."
- A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7, the City of Birmingham originally published by Victoria County History, London, 1964
- Thanks also to help from others with a local interest

Please Note: This is an overview of the history of Moor Green and is not intended as a definitive history of the area.

