

**Elstree & Borehamwood Museum
Friends Newsletter
May 2026: Issue Number 35**



***VISITORS FLOCK FROM FAR AND WIDE TO
40 YEARS OF EASTENDERS EXHIBITION***

The latest temporary exhibition which has been running for six months, will be closing shortly. There has been plenty of interest, with visitors coming in from all over the UK, as well as France, Malta and even Canada! Two local primary schools have visited us recently, including year one pupils from Kenilworth School, and year five pupils from Woodlands School respectively. On the 18th April we had a coachload of visitors from Clacton. Such is the interest in this locally filmed soap opera.



U3A PRESENTATION

A few weeks ago, Elstree and Borehamwood U3A approached us to arrange a talk on local history. We created a PowerPoint presentation about the history of Borehamwood since 1926. This went down very well with the 57 members that attended.

NEXT EXHIBITION ANNOUNCED

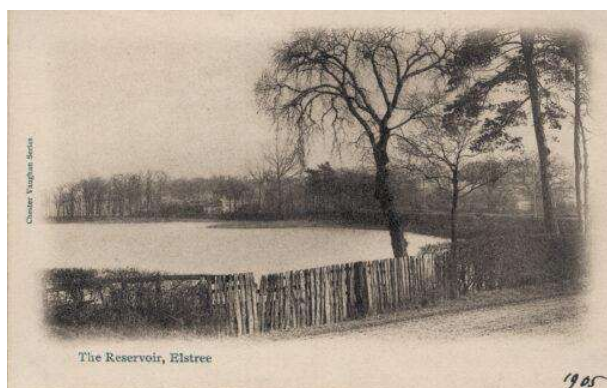


Our team of volunteers are currently preparing our 20th temporary exhibition "Ribbon of Dreams", which is due to open at the end of this month. It will be about the history of Elstree Studios, which started business in 1926. Hundreds of notable films have been made at this studio over the years, and it will be difficult to present its illustrious history within the museum's small area.

REMINISCENCE MEETINGS

At the meeting in January, we held a quiz titled "Where Is This Located?" This comprised of various close-up photos of places located around the local area. Participants had to guess which buildings these belonged to. Last month's meeting was on the changes to Elstree village, featuring lots of photos dating from the 1890's to the present.

THE STORY OF ALDENHAM RESERVOIR



Aldenham Reservoir is located in south-west Hertfordshire. Although the nearest village is Elstree, when the reservoir was constructed, the site it occupied was unenclosed common land forming part of the ancient manor of Aldenham, from which it took its name. The reservoir was necessitated by the construction of the Grand Junction Canal under an Act of Parliament in 1793, providing a direct transit route for goods from the midlands towards London. The canal followed the river Colne for several miles, and at Batchworth, the canal and the river converge for a short distance. There were a number of locks which constantly needed to be refilled. So, the canal company was given powers to transfer water when needed. But this had the consequence of reducing the flow of water to a number of mills along the river, driven by water power.

So, a clause was included in the Act stating whenever the river fell below a certain level, the canal company had to top it up. In order to do that, it had to have a store of water available, and that's what the reservoir was for. It was designed to compensate for the loss of water. The reservoir was built by damming the very shallow valley of a stream called Tykeswater which originates from springs in Elstree, Stanmore and Bushey Heath, and converges with the Colne just north of Radlett. The land on which it was built on

was part of Aldenham common, and the canal company had to pay £30 per acre in order to compensate the lord of the manor and other people with a right to use it. The site originally purchased covered 68 acres, costing £2,040 (or £120,000 in today's money), and a further 10 acres were purchased in 1801 to increase the volume.

The dam which holds the water is 436 yards long and 25 feet high in the centre. It was built between 1795 and 1797 and is believed to have been built by French prisoners of war. Few impounding dams of its size had been built in England at the time, so the builders had limited hydraulic engineering experience to draw upon, and simply used uncompacted local clay and soil, presumably dug out of the bed of the reservoir. Unfortunately, clay is not stable building material and is liable to shrink and crack in dry weather, so the dam has been giving trouble from subsidence ever since. In 1802, engineer James Barnes attempted to raise its height and strengthen it by covering it with a protective layer of sand and gravel using horses to tread it down, and topped by a thin layer of soil. Only two years later, the water had to be lowered to allow urgent repairs and strengthening to be carried out. A sluice at the end of the dam controlled the water level. Records of the reservoir during its first hundred years are fairly scant. The earliest known picture dates from 1822,

and appears to be looking east towards Elstree on the hill beyond with the dam out of sight on the left. Some cottages appear on the water's edge, which may have housed canal company workers. Local directories in the 1870's and 1880's refer to its use for boating and fishing, and say that it had become a favourite haunt of wildfowl and (avian) waders.

In 1915, a tunnel was built under the dam which carries a pipe from an inlet a few yards offshore to a discharge valve or sluice feeding into the spillway, now acting effectively as the source of the Tykeswater. During WW1 the reservoir was used for target practice for planes flying from the temporary airfield in Shenley. Daniel Evans, a resident of one of the cottages, was accidentally killed as he stood outside his property by a Canadian pilot on a training flight. Another incident was the death of trainee American pilot Winslow Wait, who was killed when his fighter plane crashed into the water while he was carrying out gunnery practice. In the interwar decades of the 1920s and 30s, the reservoir was a popular alternative to a day at the seaside, for swimming, boating and fishing. Teas were served from the reservoir warden's house built in 1898 at the east end of the dam. In the early 30s, sand was brought in to create an artificial beach, a jetty was constructed for bathers and novice swimmers could use a small pool at the water's edge. In 1937, the canal company came to an agreement with the Colne Valley water company to allow it to draw water for public supplies when required. This meant the reservoir had to be protected from possible pollution, so swimming and boating came to an end. The reason for using Aldenham as backup storage was due to the large reservoirs south-west of London being thought to be at risk of breaching from enemy bombing during WW2. In 1938, a concrete wall was built along the entire upstream face, while the weir was reconstructed and enlarged

with a footbridge across it, and the spillway was turned into a concrete trough. Another significant event during this period was the acquisition by Hertfordshire County Council under early Green Belt legislation of most of the land around the reservoir. While the reservoir remained in the canal company's ownership, it entered in an agreement with the council not to "erect any building or other erection on the site" without the council's consent, apart from those related to existing uses. The deed also prevented the company from emptying the reservoir, except in an emergency, and is still in force today.



Although swimming was banned when the reservoir became a standby source for public water supply, sailing and angling continued. It was home from the 1920s onwards of the Aldenham Sailing Club, which had racing fleets of Laser, Illusion and Enterprise dinghies, and sponsored the Pico and Optimist classes for juniors. Fishing rights were acquired by the Aldenham Angling Club, based in the former boat house near the east end of the dam, built by the canal company in 1939. Pumping for domestic supply continued intermittently until the 1960s. The agreement with the water company lapsed in 1973, after it had built a larger reservoir at nearby Hilfield Park. Trees along the downstream shoulder of the dam were removed to reduce the risk of leakage, but this resulted in subsidence. By this point the reservoir had ceased to be used for its original purpose and British Waterways considered it an unwelcome liability. Hertfordshire County Council stepped in, and decided to use some of the adjacent

land to develop a recreational amenity in the form of a country park. As part of the development, the council took out a 42-year lease on the reservoir, after British Waterways had completed some urgent repairs to the dam. In the 1980's, the council installed drains on the downstream face, and in 1998 undertook major sheet piling works towards the eastern end. But the council never acquired the reservoir itself, concrete posts around the edge marking the boundary between council and reservoir land. In 1992, British Waterways decided to sell the reservoir. It was bought out by Safari Investments. It was subsequently sold to Liberty Aldenham in early 2016. In recent years, the condition of the dam worsened, and the sailing club was forced to close due to insufficient depth of water. Groups campaigning to save the reservoir became very active, and the local Elstree & Borehamwood Town Council successfully applied to have the reservoir registered as an Asset of Community Value, the first reservoir in the country to be designated. This status had no immediate effect, but in the event of the owners putting the reservoir up for sale, local community groups would be given six months in which to put in bids to acquire it. In December 2022, following some unsuccessful development applications, Liberty Aldenham came forward with a new proposal to install an industrial park on the site adjacent to the former Fisheries pub in Watford Road. This received Hertsmere council's consent, in the face of some strong local opposition. It contains an undertaking that before the industrial units can be occupied, the dam will need to be repaired and strengthened. The sailing and angling clubhouses will be renovated, the water will be restored to its original level, and fishing and rambling in and around the reservoir will be permitted. A non-for-profit public interest company will be set up and funded to manage the reservoir thereafter.

Based on "The Story of Aldenham Reservoir"
by John Cartledge

MIKE'S NOTE

Thank you for supporting the museum this year, we look forward to your continued support over the coming months ahead. Please note that deadlines for renewing annual subscriptions is the 31st August, after which those who have not renewed will no longer receive Newsletters or invites to Friends events.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Our next Friends Evening will be a talk on the history and building of Aldenham Reservoir, at 96 Shenley Road, on 2nd June 2026 at 7pm.

Elstree & Borehamwood Museum

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Instagram: www.instagram.com/ebwm2007/

Trip Advisor: <https://goo.gl/RTbKQi>

Open: Tues, Wed & Thurs: 12pm – 6pm

Sat: 10am – 3pm

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