



Remembering Roger Lea

26th June, 2022



A Remarkable Legacy!

**A Talk with accompanying Chart
by Janet Jordan**

I wonder how many of you sitting here today would be able to say exactly what you were doing on 2nd October, 1991? My husband Keith and I can. It was the day we embarked upon Roger Lea's local history course and a day that was to affect the rest of our lives.

The first session was about the geology of the area and subsequent weeks would take us through the Norman Conquest, Medieval Sutton, Bishop Vesey, the Charter, Sutton Park, 18th Century Sutton and 19th Century Enclosure. Finally, it would touch on coaching, canals, the railway and 'desreses' (desirable residences)!

Having completed the course, for the rest of that year we became Honorary Members of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group, an organisation that Roger had been instrumental in setting up some years earlier, with the members meeting up each week in the renowned Local Studies section of Sutton Coldfield Library.

He encouraged us to take up a project to research on our own and said that we would eventually become "experts in our own field", the course having furnished us with the tools we needed to do in-depth research. This proved to be the case and we did actually finish knowing more about our

particular subject than anyone else. Whether we remain experts of these long forgotten projects is a moot point!

Some years later, Roger, Keith and I, as Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary, became a team and had many happy years working together.

In the 1990s, before the onset of emails, iPhones and websites, members' completed research was typed up and handed in to the library. We waited in anticipation, sometimes for up to a year, to receive from the library a bound copy of our work, which was a duplicate of the one which was placed on the library shelves. This was always a thrill and Keith and I still treasure the books that we received over the years.

These were times of frequent output in the way of articles and Roger certainly did his share, which brings me to the main purpose of my talk. I want to show the legacy he left us in the way of books, articles, newsletters, leaflets and so on, much of which is still available in the library or on the group's website.

To this end, I have compiled a Chart which lists as many facets of his work with the Research Group as I have been able to find, and I will briefly touch upon them as follows:

1. PUBLISHED BOOKS

Most Suttonians will be aware of his published books which are available in local bookshops and online. The first one, he completed in 1984, when I believe he was Head Librarian of Sutton Coldfield Library. This was called "Steaming up to Sutton" in which he told the story of how the Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield Railway Line was built in 1862. It was followed, in 1989, by "Scenes from Sutton's

Past”, a wonderful historical anthology of the town, being a series of short essays compiled by members of the group and edited by him.

The 1990s was a busy decade and many events took place – courses, exhibitions, lectures and field trips, and through it all, I believe, Roger was quietly preparing to write his “dream” book!

However, rather to everyone’s surprise, at the Millennium a different publication appeared, which he had been encouraged to write by the Civic Society in association with the Sutton Municipal Charities. This was the colourful guide called the “Sutton Coldfield Blue Plaque Trail”.

Moving on to the “noughties”, his “pièce de résistance” arrived in 2003, a masterpiece in local history writing. It was clear and concise and full of interesting information, which was one of Roger’s great attributes. What else could it be called other than “The Story of Sutton Coldfield”!

2. WRITTEN ARTICLES

Bearing in mind that some of Roger’s early written work was only intended for the library shelves and was produced on a typewriter or an early computer, it is not surprising that some of these old papers have disappeared, hopefully only temporarily, into the library archives. I have managed to track down those still available by checking the library’s index cards and, where possible, have indicated on the chart where they might be located.

I am told that many of the other papers that I couldn’t find are likely to be kept in the library Stack where older books and papers are kept for preservation purposes.

3. PUBLICATIONS

Going back to Roger's course, it follows that having completed it, many members of the Group, past and present, were producing some valuable research material for others to use. It was therefore decided in the early 1990s that it would be a good idea to collate these into a publication called "Proceedings". It was Roger's unenviable task to check everyone's work and ultimately arrange for the combined articles to be printed and distributed. In all, thirteen volumes were produced by him and a fourteenth, a Contents and Index Volume, was prepared by Keith to tie everything together. These volumes form a very readable set of local history articles and can be found in the library and on the group's website.

4. FIELD TRIPS FOR "SCLHRG"

Some of the greatest joys, which only a knowledgeable historian can offer any group, are Field Trips. Roger led several, some four to five miles long, taking in the countryside around Sutton. There were a couple that took in Minworth, Wigginshill, Wishaw and Peddimore. Several started at the Railway Station car park and meandered around the town. Others went into the park via the Manor House, Maney and Driffold. The longest trails, however, were those in the hilly Four Oaks area, taking in Hill Village Road, Hillwood Common, and Roughley. Roger often accompanied these trails with a map or a written description of the route which he handed out and some of these can be found on the group's website.

5. PROPERTY SURVEYS

Not only did we become hardened walkers, but Roger tried to make surveyors of us, too. Exciting forays up and down rickety ladders or staircases into attics and cellars immediately spring to mind!

The first and most memorable survey, was in 2007, when the owner of No. 1 High Street was about to have remedial work done to her property and was keen for the group to make a survey beforehand. This building had many secrets waiting to be discovered. Although it appeared to be Georgian, its façade actually disguised a property built sometime between 1623 and 1638. Among its many ancient features was stud partitioning in the roof space which contained many builders' marks on the timbers. It was also possible to see from inside the roof space exactly where the Georgian frontage was stitched onto the older building.

Delving even deeper into the history of this property, Roger made a visit to Emmanuel College in Cambridge, where Latin documents revealed that the present building had replaced an even earlier one, which had burned down in 1623.



Photograph courtesy of Keith Jordan (16.12.2008)

Members of the group, led by Roger, finally completed the survey in 2008 and a very detailed account, with photographs, was presented to the owner of the property. A copy was also given to the library and this can be examined, on request. This was one of the highlights of the group's history.

6. NEWSLETTERS TO “SCLHRG” MEMBERS

Roger also produced newsletters and these were sent out approximately four times a year. Not only did he report on recent events, but there was always the chance that another outing or talk had been arranged, or he would come up with some new and exciting fact about Sutton's history.

7. PROMOTIONAL LEAFLETS

Along with these newsletters, there was an occasional leaflet prepared by him to promote a forthcoming event. I still have about 40 of them. No wonder Christine, his wife, used to say that she didn't see much of him during the day, because he was always upstairs on his computer!

8. LOCAL HISTORY COURSES

Every so often, he would decide to organise another Introductory Course. He had a variety of names for them, such as "Villa Regis", "Know Your Town", "Our Hidden Past" or "Landscape History" and these courses ran from 1989 to 2014. Support for them fluctuated but, when they were well attended, Roger would be in his element.

9. ANNUAL GENERAL MEETINGS

As Chairman, of course, he conducted the Annual General Meeting each year, taking it in his stride. A big problem, however, presented itself on the Agenda in 2016. The group felt they needed a website. He tried personally to set one up, which must have been a bit of a nightmare for him and ultimately it proved to be unsuccessful. Thankfully, Brian Jones, a very proficient web technician kindly offered his services in 2017 and we could almost hear Roger give a sigh of relief!

10. ARRANGING LECTURES, EXHIBITIONS, ETC

Over the years, the group was treated to many exciting lectures and exhibitions which Roger arranged, some actually being public talks given by him, which were always well attended, and one wonders now how he managed to juggle so many different tasks.

11. ALAN GODFREY OLD ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPS

One example of these various tasks, was the private arrangement he forged with the Alan Godfrey Old Ordnance Survey Maps organisation, for whom he would write an historical appraisal of an area for the back of their maps. This only came to light when he brought along a large supply of these maps to sell. There are six of them, two for Sutton Coldfield and one each for Chester Road Erdington, Four Oaks, Bromford Bridge and Wylde Green.

12. NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

As we come to the end of Roger's achievements, probably the finest and most well known is his "History Spot", a series of weekly articles that was printed in Sutton's former local newspaper, the "Sutton Coldfield Observer". No mean feat this! For nearly ten years he wrote for them, a goldmine of historical facts, on a comprehensive range of topics relating to Sutton Coldfield. In 2017, in collaboration with the group's web technician, he worked on making these articles available for the website – www.sclhrg.org.uk . They are a fully searchable and extremely useful record of the history of Sutton Coldfield, invaluable to all who have an interest in the area.

CHART

The attached chart also lists every "History Spot" that he submitted to the *Sutton Coldfield Observer* newspaper.

So, taking all of this into account, what a wholly remarkable legacy he has left us! I should therefore like you all to join me in applauding him in the usual way – as I am sure he and Christine are here with us today, if not in actual body then certainly in spirit! Thank you.

**Janet Jordan
June 26th 2022**