

RETURN OF THE RATTON LIONS

This is an account of the history of the stone Lions at the entrance to Ratton, their theft, the steps taken to recover them and their eventual recent replacement thanks to the generosity of Rhylva Holder and Judy Jones in memory of their recently deceased husbands Peter Holder and Derek Jones.

I have tried to carry out some research into the history of Ratton relative to the provenance of the stolen Lions. The history of the three Ratton Manors, the principal families and their connections with the development of Willingdon, the Parish Church and of Eastbourne is fascinating but tells one little or nothing of the Lions.

Ratton Drive has always been the main entrance to Ratton Manor. It may be however that there were no gates in medieval times as the original Manor was approached by a Gatehouse leading to a courtyard in front of the Manor and the buildings of Home Farm. The Manor was demolished in about 1800 and a new Georgian Manor built a little further up towards Babylon Hill, leaving the Gate House and Home Farm buildings which now form Ratton Village in Manor Way and The Close. The gates to close the entrance to Ratton Drive together with the flanking flint walls and the local stone and flint gate piers could have been built at that time. The then Halfway Cottage was replaced by the existing pair of Gatehouse Cottages in 1887 by which time the gates and Lions were certainly in place.

The Manor had been owned for many years by the Freeman-Thomas family when in 1891 it was destroyed by fire. Mr Freeman-Thomas (later to become Lord Willingdon) decided to replace it with a Tudor style Manor built in 1899. At about this time he enabled the opening of Willingdon Golf Club by leasing it land and being an early sponsor as well as its first President. The Lions shown in the Golf Club crest do seem very similar to those in our poor photos of our own Lions so they may have been from the Freeman-Thomas coat of arms. It seems therefore that our Lions happily sat on their gate piers for at least 100 years.

Peter Holder moved to Ratton in 1968 when he designed his own house and had it built in Linkway. He always considered it a joy and a privilege to live in Ratton and was a keen supporter of the Residents Association. In due course he joined the Committee and became Chairman in 1988. Following his 3 year term he stayed on as Secretary and later as Chairman of the Planning and Development sub-committee until finally retiring in 2000. He was a very gentle man and in his own quiet way bravely fought cancer for over 3 years before his sad death in 2004.

Derek Jones moved to Ratton to retire in 1997. His organisational and people skills were quickly recognised and he agreed to join the Committee and then became Chairman in 2000. He did an excellent job and additionally, jointly with Ron Price, brought the Association into the 21st century by the formation of a limited company. At the end of his term as Chairman he remained on the Committee as a most experienced and valuable advisor. Regrettably by this time he was also involved in a long and painful fight with cancer. He refused to give in to it but sadly died in 2007.

In some way I felt responsible for the theft of the Lions in August 1999. I was Chairman at the time and a problem had arisen with access to and through the gates. Many years before, the then owner of 2 Ratton Drive, had planted a line of leylandi trees on his boundary between the gate piers on his side of the drive and his entrance. They had grown and grown and despite trimming had become a thorough nuisance and a positive danger to pedestrians forced out into the road to approach the gates. The twin gate piers and the stone Ball and Lion could not be seen coming down Ratton Drive and were also heavily covered in ivy. It was agreed to cut down the trees and remove all ivy from the gate piers and flank flint wall outside the gates. The entrance to Ratton was also much

improved and the Lions looked marvellous. Unfortunately the thieves also thought so and removed them one night. How they managed to do so is still a mystery.

I notified the Police and the Herald but they were not interested. Once we managed to find some photographs I consulted Sotheby's South at Billingshurst. They were most helpful and provided this description 'Pair of carved stone gate pier Lions. Each Sejant with raised paw on a stepped square base. Value circa £5,000.' They agreed to note them in their records in case they were offered them in the future and I also entered the full details in the Art Loss Register. I went to Billingshurst to view the 400 or so items in their September 1999 Garden Statuary sale but found nothing.

Derek and Peter then took over the search. It seemed clear that as an Association we could not afford to buy replacement antique Lions or commission a sculptor. A special appeal was considered but personally, despite my love of Ratton, I would be very reluctant to give the equivalent of a year's subscription to this cause. Catalogues from specialist architectural stone suppliers were traced and studied but nothing suitable could be found. The most attractive alternative was to find a college or art school or studio to make a model, take a cast and produce a pair of reconstituted stone Lions. Extensive enquiries were carried out to include the Arts Council funded South East Arts but, despite some offers and promises to assist, all to no avail.

Eventually it was felt that we would have to give up our search for replacement Lions and purchase a pair of reconstituted stone Balls instead. By this time the search was being led by Rhylva Holder and she was in negotiation with Chilstone Architectural Stonework. It was found that the largest stone Balls available were no larger than the existing Balls on the outer gate piers which were not stolen. New clean Balls would have looked rather strange and Graham Gilbert of Chilstone rose to the challenge and asked for some time to search the market in the hope of finding suitable Lions at a reasonable price. He later came back with two options. One was another supplier of modern Lions which were not very exciting. The other was an eBay auction of a pair of Lions which looked much better. Rhylva and Judy decided, in memory of their late husbands and their attachment to Ratton, to bid for these Lions as a personal matter. Chilstone assisted in this free of charge, a price was agreed and the sale went through. I offered to assist with arrangements for delivery and installation and approached Dean Lynch of Orbital Roofing and Building Ltd. He came up with a cunning plan for installation and security, the latter obviously being a priority. All these costs were also paid for by Rhylva and Judy. Thanks to their generosity the Lions have returned to Ratton at no cost to the Residents.



This account has been written to record the gift of Rhylva and Judy in memory of Peter and Derek. They say that their husbands felt privileged to live in and enjoy Ratton and wished to give something back. I understand and applaud this sentiment and am most grateful to them.

This account may also give an insight into the amount of time and effort which has been given entirely voluntarily by many Residents for the benefit of us all. This of course is on top of the normal work of the Association regarding maintenance of roads, gulleys, trees, leaf clearing, planning etc. To borrow a catchphrase 'The Estate does not look after itself'. I would hope that this may cause some Residents to review their attitude to supporting the work of our Association.