

# Local History



**'The Magpies':** The local Victorian team

# Friends Of The Field

**We are an active Community Association within the Freemantle & Shirley area.**

Our aim is to stop housing development on a 7 acre sports field in Freemantle and to return the huge field back to the local Community.

The local children desperately need an open space within safe walking distance that is clean, free from traffic and has good facilities.

We have started several public meetings with "remember playing in the streets when you were a child?" Playing on the streets of Southampton is no longer safe to do, mainly due to traffic, so we have an urgent duty to provide places where children can play.

Our communities are fading away without some form of central focus.

We need, what we call, a Community Hub.

This is a place with amenities where people WANT to go to. A place where people WANT to go to in the daytime, mornings and the evenings.

An important place which the Community feel proud of. A place which they helped to design and build and maintain. Sit back for a moment and see if YOU can see our dream. This dream place could be yours too.

*'Come and help build this dream and make it a thing that Southampton will be proud to declare to the UK, Europe and beyond as a model Community Hub. A place of cultural, educational, sports, social, physical and mental COMMUNITY focus.'*

**Email us, phone us, write to us or call by. We need you to help us help us all.**

working people should have opportunities to enjoy sport and not to waste their time in public houses. Local philanthropist George Thomas who poured money into the ground improving facilities until his death in 1907 supported this ethic. (see obituary enclosed)

## **Purchase of the field by the Civil Service**

The Atherley Family estate eventually sold the ground to the Civil Service in 1927 for £5000 as a fully operational sports ground with facilities. The Land Registry title of 1927 shows the vendors as Isabel Eleanor Pease (nee Atherley) and Helen Myrtle Kellett (nee Atherley).

Please note that the copy of the portrait enclosed is of Arthur Atherley M.P for Southampton, born 1772-1844.

## **George Reader**

From 1945 until his retirement from teaching in 1961 the Headmaster of the school adjoining the Atherley Ground was George Reader. The school was named Western Secondary School in those days and is now known as St. Marks C.E. school headed by Anne Steele-Amett.

George Reader was heavily involved with football and would probably be best remembered for refereeing the 1950 World Cup Final between Brazil and Uruguay.

## **Closure and a new owner.**

After over seventy years of use by the Civil Service Sports Council, the sports club became unprofitable and the ground closed in January 1999. Little or nothing was done to protect the security of the site and after two arson attacks on the clubhouse in July 1999 all buildings at the ground were demolished including the original pre-CSSC cricket pavilion of the 1900's. All evidence of over one hundred years sporting tradition was removed overnight rendering the facility unusable for organised sporting use to the membership of the CSSC or any potential sports orientated purchaser.

In 2003 the fencing around the ground facing the school had virtually collapsed allowing access for vehicles onto the field. Travellers easily gained access and set-up camp. It cost the ratepayer £50,000 to remove the travellers and clean up the site.

Southampton City Council earmarked funds late in 2003 to compulsory purchase the sports ground; the CSSC properties management countered any potential action by making the ground available for informal tenders in 2004.

The ground became increasingly overgrown and neglected apart from one unmarked football pitch that the adjoining St Marks School had permission from the CASK to use. The school currently leases this part of the field from the new owners, Bovis Homes

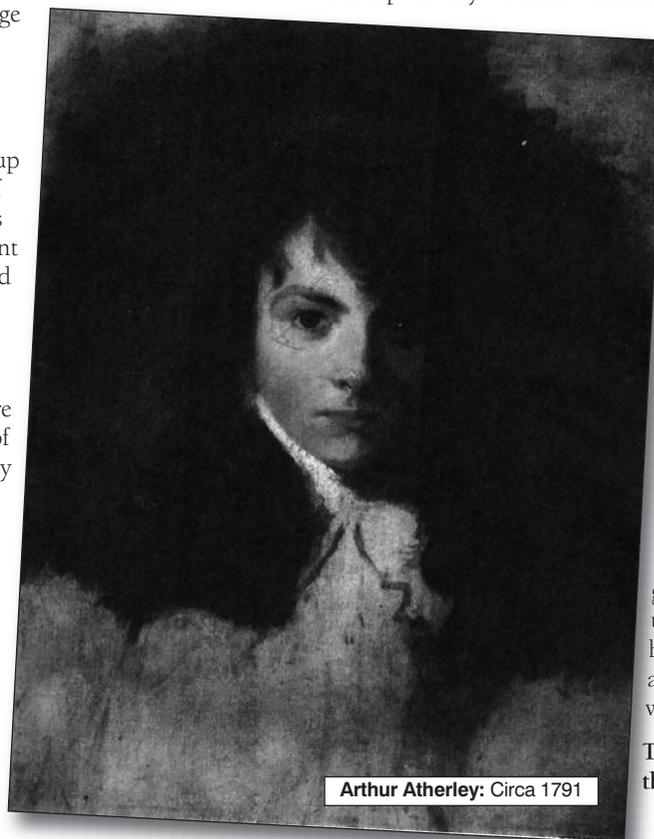
Bovis Homes bought the ground from the Civil Service in September 2005 for £160,000.

To date planning permission has not been granted to build housing on the site and a covenant set in 1927 by the vendors clearly states that the land be used solely as a sports ground.

## **Community Action. Friends of the Field.**

There is a desire in the community of Shirley and Freemantle to bring, what is the last Victorian sports ground in Southampton, back into community sporting use as it original owners and local benefactors intended. I hope that Shirley Community News can promote the field and bring our concerns to a wider audience. Good luck with issue one!

**Thanks very much to Martyn Biffen for supplying this article.**



**Arthur Atherley:** Circa 1791

## **The Atherley Ground/former Civil Service Ground, Freemantle.**

**The boundaries of the field we know today were established in 1830 when Shirley Common was enclosed by act of parliament. Most of the common land was awarded to the prominent Atherley family.**

By the 1880's the field was being used for organised sporting activities and was the home ground of Freemantle AFC, the "Magpies" who leased the ground from the Atherley family. The Freemantle club's main benefactors were chairman Tankerville Chamberlain M.P and George Thomas a local businessman.

In 1893 Southampton County Borough announced its intentions to apply to Parliament to expand its boundaries to include Shirley, Freemantle, Bitterne Park and Woolston. There was fierce opposition to this from local residents in Freemantle and Shirley, who were far from enthusiastic to pay increased rates to fund a proper sewerage system for the area. Football matches between the Magpies and the Southampton team, Saint Marys, were always heated encounters. The Magpies had aspirations to be the best side in the region and were seen, by many, as the flag-bearers for Freemantle and Shirley's opposition to absorption into the borough. The 1893 final of the Hampshire Senior Cup between Freemantle and Saint Marys was an opportunity for residents of Freemantle and Shirley to vent their opposition to the County Borough's plans. A crowd of over 6000 witnessed Freemantle's 2-1 victory over Saint Mary's at the Northlands Road County Cricket Ground. The aptly named Shirley Hawkins scored the winning goal, a penalty, in the final minutes.

Sadly, the Magpies fortunes declined. Freemantle AFC had won promotion to the Southern League First Division in 1897, only to have two points deducted for fielding a player who played his football for more than one team. Freemantle remained in the Second Division as a result of the points deduction which accelerated their demise. Freemantle, who by then were in severe financial difficulties, approached deadly rivals Saint Mary's proposing amalgamation of the two sides, utilising the Atherley Ground in Freemantle for home matches. This never materialised. The Magpies declined even further, entering into liquidation and finally out of business in the early 1900's.

In 1895 Shirley and Freemantle became part of Southampton and by the early 1900's the Atherley Estate was broken-up and developed for housing. The playing field remained intact and housing was built around three of its boundaries. The field probably survived the building onslaught not only because the field was an established sporting concern, but also because the Atherley Family believed that young