

## Mr 'Astley Castle' passes away

by MORT BIRCH

A LOCAL historian who campaigned to save one of the area's most ancient buildings has died after seeing his dream come true.

Pete Simpson fought for years to preserve Astley Castle which is being revamped by a £1.47m Heritage Lottery Grant.

Illness overtook him several years ago and he died at his home in Donnithorne Avenue, Nuneaton, on Monday at the age of 63.

But his son Dave Simpson said: "He kept himself up to date with what was happening with the castle and I found a scrapbook full of newspaper cuttings in his house about it being saved."

He is probably best remembered for his historic walking tours of Nuneaton and his campaigning work to save the castle following a mystery fire in 1979.

Today, the remains of the former home of three Queens of England, Lady Jane Grey, the 'nine days queen,' Elizabeth Woodville and Elizabeth of York, have been saved from further destruction largely due to his awareness raising efforts in the 1990s.

Former Heartland Evening News chief reporter and fellow heritage campaigner Gef White said: "His campaign to save Astley Castle from the elements and from years of neglect was almost a single-handed battle and he thought nothing of writing to the Queen to plead for her help.

"The rescued ruins of that noble castle will stand as a lasting memorial to Pete's persistence."

He added: "Pete Simpson had a special passion for local history which inspired him to battle for what he believed in. He also had a flair to bring alive the past so it fascinated those who are living in Nuneaton today."

Although he steeped himself in the history of Nuneaton, Pete Simpson was born at Boston in Lincolnshire.

His family moved to the town when he was a boy and he went to Higham Lane School: "It was his grandfather Norman Coton, who first interested him in local history and the fight to save Astley Castle and he took up the campaign after his grandfather died," said his son Dave.

He also spearheaded a petition to save Nuneaton's first hospital, the former Manor Hospital in Manor Court Road, from the bulldozers.

Many former pupils of Abbey Green School will have fond memories of the walks he organised to highlight the history of the town.

He was also a leading authority on Reg Stanley and the brickworks that employed so many Nuneaton men over the years.

As well as being a local historian, he was also a talented drummer and played in a band that supported the Beatles at the old Co-op Hall.

The band also played at Caesars's Palace in Luton and at British Army bases and he also drummed for Screaming Lord Sutch.

But he will mostly be remembered for his efforts to preserve the history of the town he came to

love and save the castle that played such an important part in the nation's past.

He moved from Winfield Road in Abbey Green to a sheltered bungalow in Donnithorne Avenue after his wife Elaine died eight years ago.

He is survived by his son Dave, a daughter Amanda and seven grandchildren. Funeral arrangements will be announced later.

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