

THE LIFE OF A VICTORIAN SUBURB

BY

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VICTORIAN domestic architecture is usually overlooked as being shoddy imitation; but whatever its aesthetic value it is of importance as a reflection of the society that produced it. With this in mind, I have attempted a short study of the physical history of a typical Victorian suburban estate at Kingston Hill, where development began in the 1850's.

The building firms, estate agents, auctioneers and solicitors involved have gone, or if remaining have no records, so that erectors of specific properties are not known for certain. Consequently, the chronology of building has had chiefly to be traced through local street directories, builders' advertisements in the *Surrey Comet*, and the first and second editions of the Ordnance Survey 25-inch maps. Fortunately, the conveyancing deeds by which the land passed to the builders and landowners (and which name them) are extant, and the history of the National Freehold Land Society which formed the estate, has already been written.¹

Agitation was fierce in the 1830's and 1840's for extending the franchise to the lower classes. Even after the Reform Act of 1832 only about one householder in six was qualified to vote, and the ancient right that accompanied ownership of a forty-shilling freehold might cost a man £60 or £70. The situation was improved by the proliferation, particularly in industrial areas, of friendly societies and 'terminating' building societies—groups of men who pooled their resources to enable each in turn to purchase property to be mortgaged by the society. In 1847 the first 'permanent' society appeared,² the Birmingham Freehold Land Society. In societies of this type subscriptions were united to purchase land at wholesale prices, and it was then distributed to the members in lots at prime cost. This improved system was supported by reformers like Cobden, Bright and Hume, and all three were connected with the National Freehold Land Society which was founded in 1849.³ Four years after its formation it had at its disposal more than £250,000,⁴ and today, as the Abbey National, it is the second largest building society in the country.

The political objectives for which the National had been founded soon faded. Gradual extensions to the franchise made the forty-shilling freehold less in demand and as early as 1850, in its first annual report,⁵ the society noted that men were already choosing to

¹ Bellman, Sir Harold, *Bricks and Mortals* (1949), 39.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 43-4; Appendix II, 205.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-6.

use land societies as a savings bank rather than as a means of acquiring a house and the right to vote. Apart from receiving a good rate of interest on his investment a member was also entitled to a share when his subscription reached £30. Shares entitled him to a building lot and they could also be acquired through the weekly lotteries which the society held with the members' united subscriptions; and if a man drew a share, by either lot or subscription, he could sell it and his right to a building lot to another member at an agreed price, and so continue to save. The society wholeheartedly supported these thrifty habits, believing that they would morally improve the working man and make him more fit for the privilege of voting.

One result of this policy was that building estates were soon designed to cater not only for the forty-shilling freeholder, and this was clearly the case with the estate bought by the National Society in 1853 at Kingston Hill, Surrey. In general their estates had been in the southern suburbs of London and in positions which were in the path of the city's expansion, but this was not the case here. The Royal Borough of Kingston had been an important market town since at least medieval times when its bridge over the Thames had been the most easterly before London Bridge itself, and the town's insularity had not yet been affected by London's expansion. Kingston Hill lay almost a mile to the north-east of the centre of the town, and the two were only linked by a thin straggle of houses that ran along the London Road and a little way beyond the estate. The land was bounded to the west by fields, to the north by Richmond Park and to the south and east by the London Road and the Duke of Cambridge's estates (of which it had formed a part) and covered something in the region of 54 acres. The hill never rises to more than 200 feet, but lies in a pocket of the gravelly Bagshot Beds (most of surrounding Middlesex and Surrey is of London Clay), and this, in an age with poor sewage disposal, must have added to the attraction of the estate. One serious drawback to building, however, and one probably unappreciated in 1853, was the prevalence of underground springs—a factor which may well explain why it took more than fifty years to cover the land with houses.

Set in such a position, with no likelihood of Kingston expanding that far for a long time to come, the land was unlikely to have been intended for cheap housing. It was sold to the shareholders in two sections, in 1854 and 1856,⁶ and by the first of these dates the society had undertaken the construction of four roads—Tudor Road, Queens Road, Liverpool Road (the Prime Minister Lord Liverpool had once owned the Cambridge estates) and Crescent Road—and had laid down road-drains. That they intended the estate to be middle or upper class in character was also shown by their building stipulations.

The lots, though differing greatly in size and value, were each

⁶ Conveyancing deeds (at the Surrey Record Office), also the source for the following on road-construction, drainage, and building regulations.

divided so as to consist of a 'Main Building Space,' 50 feet in depth, lying 30 feet from the road; a 'Back Building Space' extending 21 feet inside the back boundary; and an 'Intermediate Space' between the two. Building could extend to the front edge of Lots 1 to 47 on the London Road as these were intended for shops, but elsewhere 'No Building is to be erected as a Shop Warehouse or Factory and no operative machinery is to be fixed or placed.' Houses were to be detached or semi-detached; regulations governing the positioning of boundary fences prevented houses from being set too closely together; and it was laid down that 'No Building behind the Main Building Space is to be erected or used as a Dwelling House.' Minimum heights, areas, and rateable values (see Appendix I) were stipulated for houses in each road, and it was even declared lawful for neighbours to take possession of any lots containing an 'improper or misplaced building, or other thing.'

The minimum rateable values (never below £15 p.a.) were enough to prevent working men from living on the estate, but twenty-seven were nonetheless among the seventy-eight shareholders.⁷ Seven of these acquired over one hundred pounds-worth of land, representing a good deal of saving or good fortune with the lottery, but the fate of all but one of them, John Hatfield,⁸ was to be bought up by wealthier men.⁹ Oddly enough, at the opposite end of the social scale there was also a large number of holdings of less than £100: thirteen out of twenty-three, or roughly 56% as compared with 74% among the lower classes. Furthermore, of the five shareholders in this category who spent over £200, it is noticeable that all were professional men—the town-clerk, a retired lieutenant colonel, a barrister, a retired merchant and a retired publisher—and in this respect they were more typical of the middle-class investors, the men who were really responsible for the shape that building development was to take. There were twenty-eight shareholders who could tentatively be described as middle class. Their number included bakers, builders, drapers and grocers, for example, though it is obvious that in such trades there were likely to be men whose standing was indistinguishable from that of a working-class man. In spite of this difficulty of definition the number of men who laid out less than £100 was no more than eleven (39%), and nine indeed spent over £200 each on land. These nine, together with the five already mentioned in the upper social bracket, were those most interested in the future of the estate, and among them seven in

⁷ The shareholder's trade or profession, as indicated in the conveyancing deeds, was usually the only guide to his social standing. The distinctions made are between manual workers, the employers' class, and the professional, retired and upper classes.

⁸ Hatfield could afford to buy an existing, small semi-detached house as well as to build his own home, so, though a carpenter, he was probably nearer middle class than his trade suggests.

⁹ Evidence suggesting that a good many shareholders were bought out lies in the facts that the conveyancing deeds frequently record more than one purchaser per lot and, secondly, houses were often built to cover adjacent lots which the deeds record as having different owners.

particular who had sunk over £500 apiece into it: Lieut.-Col. G. B. Holman; Frederick Augustus Du Croz (merchant); Edward Hedge (barrister); Samuel Mason (timber merchant); Joseph Marsh (miller); James Goulter (builder); Benjamin Looker (brick manufacturer).

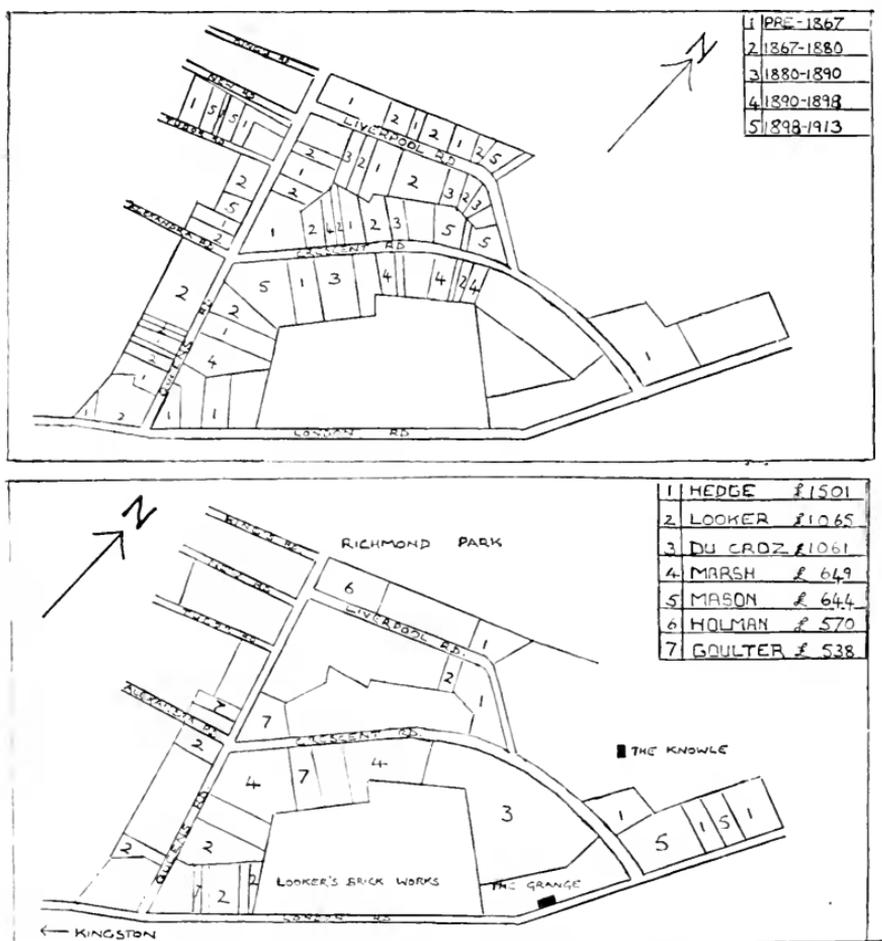


FIG. 1.—Upper: CHRONOLOGY OF BUILDING.

Lower: LAND PURCHASED BY THE PRINCIPAL SHAREHOLDERS (The 'Knowle' belonged to Hedge; the 'Grange' to Du Croz).

With the exception of Goulter these landowners contributed surprisingly little towards building on the estate, especially in view of the pleasantness of its situation and the hopeful fact that Kingston's population growth rate suddenly leapt forward in the 1850's and 1860's (see Appendix II). But their policy was also that of the majority of shareholders. Although a quarter were in some way connected with the building industry¹⁰—a situation common in

¹⁰ Conveyancing deeds.

the building of the London suburbs where workmen helped each other to put up houses—building on Kingston Hill was for most of them out of the run of ordinary life. For one thing, the estate only formed an isolated suburb of Kingston, and the town's expansion had so far been largely to the south¹¹—in Surbiton and along the riverside. The demand for upper middle-class housing in the district, therefore, was not high, and the land itself was found to be an adequate investment because, purchased at wholesale prices, it could always be sold for more than it had cost. In fact, seventy-five of the seventy-eight shareholders must have made money out of their land in one way or another as only three used all that they owned for their own house (no more than eight, indeed, ever lived on the estate¹²) and judging from the amount of early building that went on, most sold their land unbuilt on.

The business of selling land or houses, however, is difficult to trace at this time. Advertisements in the *Surrey Comet* were not usually explicit as to the owner and the precise location or the cost of the property, but the following are examples of advertisements relating to the estate:—

29 March, 1856:

To Let—Two Convenient Villas, situate in the Crescent Rd., Kingston Hill. Kingston, replete with every requisite for a respectable family. Good garden. Rent moderate. For particulars apply at the Office of this Paper.

14 January, 1865:

For Sale. Building Land, Kingston Hill—several eligible plots to be sold, or Let on Building Lease—Apply at the Surrey Comet Office.

One inviting more speculation than these, though, appeared on 26 March, 1859. It announced a forthcoming auction of

Valuable Freehold Building Land, a well-built house (intended for a Public House) a House with Shop adjoining, Hay Stack, and a quantity of Timber.

The land was situated in the London, Crescent, Liverpool, King's and Queens Roads, and was in 97 lots. There were arrangements for mortgage, and particulars with plan and conditions of sale could be had of Mr. W. Looker and Mr. John Collings. William Looker, a Kingston grocer, was Benjamin Looker's cousin and himself owned a number of lots on the estate; and John Collings, though not a shareholder, was the third trustee of the Kingston Building Society (which was founded in 1865 by Benjamin Looker and James Goulter). This suggests that Looker and Goulter may well have been involved in the venture; and if one assumes that the lots were of the same dimensions as those originally laid out by the land society, a little arithmetic presents an interesting, though merely conjectural, solution to the problem of whose lots they were. Excluding the lots on which William and Benjamin Looker had houses built for themselves, the united lots of Goulter and the two Lookers, plus Lot 18 (which contained the Albert Arms) and Lot 1 (the only lot with a

¹¹ Ordnance Survey 25-inch map, 1st edition (1865-67); cf., e.g., Rocque's *Environs of London* (1746), sheet 16, or Bryant's *Map of Surrey* (1823).

¹² Street directories, see Note 14.

shop on it at this time) when added to the land purchased by Du Croz and Hedge, makes a grand total of 96 lots, the last presumably lying off the estate in the King's Road. Unless the 97 were made up by buying them in ones and twos from less important shareholders, or unless original lots were subdivided to produce this number,¹³ this may well explain how Du Croz and Hedge disposed of their land.

All that one can be absolutely certain of is that particular houses were built between certain dates. Here the guides are local directories and the three Ordnance Survey 25-inch editions of 1865-7, 1913 and 1955. Most of the directories¹⁴ contain inaccuracies and omissions so that none could be used as a reliable statement unless supported by the evidence of others. Hence it was as necessary as convenient to follow a fairly broad if irregular chronological spacing in describing the physical growth of the estate. This spacing is not intended to indicate developments in architectural styles, for such changes, though frequent, were of course gradual.

The estate cannot boast distinction architecturally, even when judged by standards of individuality rather than taste; most of the houses in any one period, while maintaining a certain individuality, employed the same motifs and proportions, and in many cases are almost indistinguishable from contemporary houses elsewhere in Kingston or in Surbiton and Twickenham. The builders may have employed pattern books,¹⁵ but if they did the same patterns were being followed in every London suburb. *Avant-garde* the Kingston Hill estate was certainly not. Its local architectural importance lies rather in the comprehensiveness of the styles it embraces, for nowhere in the neighbourhood is there so complete a spectrum of Victorian upper- and middle-class taste.

1854-1867. (Plate X.)

In 1854 one small regency-type house of *circa* 1830 already stood in Liverpool Road. Its proportions were somewhat squat and its detailing heavy, but it was a model for the early houses of the Victorian development. Two other houses which by the size of their gardens must also have helped to establish a restrained tone in the building of the area were those erected by Holman and Mason during this period; and if the other wealthy shareholders preferred not to build much, this was almost as important a factor in shaping the appearance of the estate as if they had done so. Advertisements in the *Surrey Comet*¹⁶ at this time, however, show that Goulter was building a good deal in Norbiton, and his land on the estate was all built on by 1867. As we have seen, he was probably more deeply

¹³ This is unlikely, for in two auction plans dated as late as March 1886 and June 1889 the delimitation of lots is still compatible with that of 1854.

¹⁴ The directories chiefly used are dated: 1862 (Kelly's); 1865, 1869 (Phillipson's); 1870 (Post Office); 1876, 1880, 1890, 1895-98 (Phillipson's).

¹⁵ E.g. Brooks, S. H., *Erection of dwelling-houses; or, the Builder's Comprehensive Director* (1860); Richardson, C. J., *Picturesque designs for Mansions, Villas, Lodges, &c.* (1870).

¹⁶ E.g. 28 July, 1855; 4 June, 1859.

involved than his recorded land purchases show, and though it can now no longer be proved, close similarities in detailing suggest that he was responsible for at least 8 of the 22 detached and 4 of the 5 semi-detached houses that had appeared by 1867.

The majority of houses were squarish in appearance and slightly squat. Built in London Stock, though occasionally faced with an ugly semi-glazed white brick, they were usually in two storeys and had a shallow-pitched slate roof with neat chimney stacks to the sides. A handful broke away from the squareness of the majority and displayed a large gabled end which contained an attic or second floor, but roughly half the houses without this extra space had a basement instead so that most were clearly built to accommodate servants. In interior design these houses followed the simple regency plan, which indeed was used, with minor aberrations, until the 1890's when an obsession with spaciousness encouraged people to cram as many rooms into their house as they could with no regard for symmetry or simplicity.

Exterior detail varied widely. The door was usually central and set in a recessed porch; its importance was stressed by the stucco work of the surround and pediment which, though simple—dentils were usually the only decoration—tended towards the massive. About half the houses had a ground-floor window of the regency type with vertical glazing bars towards the sides, and this was often surmounted by a rather heavy dripstone; elsewhere there were simple bay windows, sometimes with a dentil cornice below the coping. On the first floor, windows were usually square and broad with white wooden surrounds, and were set several inches below the eaves, which often had decorated brackets.

Taken as a whole, these early houses showed respect for regency discretion, but their proportions were heavy and some of the later buildings were already equipped with arched windows which challenged the old square solidity.

1867–1880. (Plate XIa.)

Prospects were improving for residents in the district by the 1870's. In 1863 the opening of Norbiton station had provided a link with the metropolis; shops were being built on the London Road frontage of the estate; and the smartness of the area is shown by the fashionable additions made to the Albert Arms during the decade. Finally, in 1876, the foundation stone was laid for St. Paul's Anglican Church, Queens Road, which was dedicated two years later. St. Peter's, the Parish Church of Norbiton, was little more than a quarter of a mile down the London Road, but that the Kingston Hill residents preferred to worship on their own demonstrates both their wealth and their insularity.

The actual rate of building was much the same as during the preceding years—thirty-one houses, five shops and a church—except that the number of semi-detached houses was relatively increasing (eleven to the eighteen detached houses) and most of the building

was apparently completed in the early '70's. The first semi-detached houses had been small and unaffected in style, but in the late '60's builders began to add a third storey and a basement. Decoration remained simple, but the added breadth and height were calculated to give an air of magnificence. In detached houses it became the rule to have slightly arched windows. The regency type with its wooden surrounds disappeared, and brick decorations began to creep in—decorated capitals to window mullions, decorated roof cresting, balustrades over the ground- or first-floor windows, decorated keystones in the surrounds, and red or yellow string courses.

The building of St. Paul's, however, the size of the new houses, and the fashionable French and Italianate decorations some of them employed, show that the social status of the estate was not in decline. What had changed was that conservatism had given way to individualism.

1880–1890.

The '70's and '80's mark a turning point in the estate's growth. During these years the horse-drawn tram¹⁷ made Kingston Hill a convenient distance from the town centre; but more important was the encroachment of Kingston itself. The railway of 1863 had passed along the north edge of the town, and an ugly sprawl of workmen's cottages had then begun to appear in Tudor Road and King's Road and the building started to work back towards the town, so that by 1913 there was an almost continuous splash of unplanned building from the Thames to Kingston Hill.

An early result of this was that the building rate on the estate dropped between 1880 and 1890 to one house per two years. Two quiet detached houses which appeared early in the decade—a red-brick stable block¹⁸ and three hideous grey semi-detached houses with red brick decorations—were all that was produced. It was a period of transition in which the virile individualism of a decade before was reflected anaemically in the tall semi-detached houses, now no longer with basements but with slightly arched windows, poky doorways and an absolute lack of stucco work to relieve the ugly brick.

1890–1898. (Plate XI*b*.)

In the 1890's, however, the building rate picked up a little—six houses were built in the nine years—and almost all traces of previous building styles suddenly disappeared. In their place two new basic

¹⁷ Plans for the 'Kew Richmond and Kingston on Thames Tramway' were brought forward in November, 1871. The rails were laid along the London Road as far as Crescent Road, and along the King's Road to the Park gates.

¹⁸ About one house in four used the back building space for an out-building of some kind, with access by a passage round the side of the house; but it is curious, with regard to the estate's position, that no more than a handful of such buildings remaining have the appearance of stabling. And the trend is confirmed elsewhere in the locality. The practice of the 1830's of building stables with comparatively humble houses (e.g. at Twickenham Green) had become the exception rather than the rule by the 1850's.

designs came on the scene. Both were red-brick with tiled roof, an attic with windows in the gable, and a tiled porch. The first type lacked almost all forms of decoration but Gibbsian sandstone window surrounds. Its windows often had three lights, and balanced this greater breadth with added height, giving the building a solid and spacious air. The second and more popular type of house, though also aiming at spaciousness, combined it with a frailty of appearance. Mock timbers in the gables represented a reaction from the Ruskin-inspired Italianate towards the 'Old English' style; windows often took on the appearance of a box, with a tiled roof; and the whole effect is surprisingly nineteen thirty-ish.

An effort to be fashionable may have been partly responsible for these changes in building style, but the rather self-conscious efforts to appear spacious may also have been produced to contrast with the cramped lower-class building nearby which was employing the same kind of elaborate decoration as the estate had seen in the 1870's.

1898-1913.

If there was indeed an element of self-defence in this building it would suggest that the unity and insularity of the estate was faltering as new buildings pressed in around it. In spite of this, however, twelve more houses, five of them semi-detached, were built between 1898 and 1913, and all but one of them were in the 'Old English' style—with stained glass windows over the stairs, the front door sometimes to the side of the house, windows and gables facing every direction, and small rooms fearlessly tacked on to the back of the building to give the front rooms extra space.

Since the days of Goulter, who died in 1881, there had been little conformity in building. Men had erected two or perhaps three similar houses, but generally individuality and taste were evidently thought to be synonymous. Under these circumstances the growth of the estate reflected a good deal of the snobberies and fashions of the Victorian upper classes; and when, by about 1910, the atmosphere of that era had disappeared, Kingston Hill had also had its lease of life, and its story since then has largely been one of decay.

There was a lull in the building until the 1930's when the few vacant spaces were filled, and a row of semi-detached houses appeared on the site of Holman's house. A new suburb, now part of London's suburbia, was beginning to grow. Since the 1950's other houses in Queens Road and on the London Road have made way for flats, and the latest move has been to develop the land that was once Looker's brick works. At the same time most remaining houses on the estate have been converted into flats.

APPENDIX I

Table extracted from the National Society's building stipulations for Kingston Hill, giving minimum dimensions and rateable values.

<i>On lots fronting upon</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>		<i>Net Value</i>
		<i>Height</i>	<i>Area</i> ¹⁹	
The London Road (within 15 foot of the building line on the west side of Queens Road and within 30 foot of the building line on the east side of Queens Road) ...		18 ft.	500	£25
The London Road (remainder)		17 ft.	450	£20
Tudor Road	Detached or semi-detached	17 ft.	400	£15
The Queens Road, Crescent Road and Liverpool Road	Detached or semi-detached	18 ft.	500	£25

N.B.—Tudor Road—a loose end of the estate—was evidently intended for cheaper housing than the remainder of the area, and its seven houses have not been as closely considered as those in the other roads.

APPENDIX II

POPULATION OF THE PARISH OF KINGSTON

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>% Increase</i>
1801	3,793	—
1821	4,968	(31·0)
1831	5,989	20·6
1841	8,094	35·1
1851	10,630	31·3
1861	16,123	51·7
1871	25,155	56·0
1881	33,545	33·4
1891	41,886	24·9

¹⁹ No units are given in original table, but square feet are implied.



(a) LIVERPOOL ROAD, *circa* 1830.



(b) QUEENS ROAD, 1854-67.



(a) LIVERPOOL ROAD, 1867-80.



(b) CRESCENT ROAD, 1890-8.