

'OUR LOST ELYSIUM' – RURAL MIDDLESEX: A PICTORIAL ESSAY

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Written as recently as 1954, *Middlesex*, Sir John Betjeman's famous lament for the lost countryside of his childhood, recalled a rustic landscape which had, in the main, vanished:

Gaily into Ruislip Gardens
Runs the red electric train.
With a thousand Ta's and Pardons
Daintily alights Elaine,
Hurries down the concrete station
With a frown of concentration
Out into the outskirts' edges
Where a few surviving hedges
Keep alive our lost Elysium – Rural Middlesex
again.

Well cut Windsmoor flapping lightly,
Jacquard scarf of mauve and green
Hiding hair which, Friday nightly
Delicately drowns in Drene;
Fair Elaine, the bobby-soxer,
Fresh-complexioned with Innoxia,
Gains the garden – father's hobby –
Hangs her Windsmoor in the lobby,
Settles down to sandwich supper and the
television screen.

Gentle Brent, I used to know you
Wandering Wembley-wards at will;
Now what change your waters show you
In the meadowlands you fill!
Recollect the elm-trees misty
And the footpaths climbing twisty
Under cedar-shaded palings,
Low laburnum-leaned-on railings,
Out of Northolt on and upwards to the
heights of Harrow Hill.

Parish of enormous hayfields
Perivale stood all alone,
And from Greenford scent of mayfields
Most delightfully was blown

Over market gardens tidy,
Taverns for the *bona fide*,
Cockney anglers, cockney shooters,
Murray Poshes, Lupin Pooters,
Long in Kensal Green and Highgate silent
under soot and stone.

Yet even at that late date, people whose memories reached back no more than 30 or 40 years would have been able to recollect a Middlesex which had changed so dramatically in such a short time; and it is perhaps difficult today for those of us living in the Metropolis that is Greater London to grasp how rural much of the area was less than a century ago.

Although the movement of London's clerks, shopkeepers, and low salaried workers out of town was made possible by the great expansion of London's suburban railways from the 1860s, Middlesex was still essentially rural in the year of Betjeman's birth, 1906. Tongues of development had stretched out between the 1880s and 1914 to the west from Shepherd's Bush, through Acton to Ealing and Brentford; to the north-west, as far as Willesden and Cricklewood; and to the north, to Tottenham and Wood Green. However, the remainder of the county was a scattering of villages, most of whose names still survive — though to most of their inhabitants they have little or no meaning now, except as a way to find the way to where they live — set in a busy agricultural landscape providing food and fuel (*ie* hay for horses) for the greatest city in the world.

It was the massive expansion of London's population during the period between the First and Second World Wars, combined with cheap fares on the suburban railways, which was the catalyst for the creation of what was to become known as Metroland, the expansion of which

was to eclipse the horrors of urban development forewarned less than a century earlier in George Cruikshank's 1829 cartoon *London Going Out of Town*. Between 1901 and 1921, 930,000 people were added to 'outer' London. Between 1919 and 1939, the built-up area of London doubled. Between 1924 and 1939, 860,000 new houses were built; in 1934 alone, 1,500 new suburban houses were being built every week.

The story of the expansion of London has been told many times. By contrast, the story of what was effectively the destruction of a county and a rural society, within a period of 60, 30 or even 20 years — depending on the benchmark one chooses to use — remains virtually untold; Guy Williams' *London in the Country: The Growth of Suburbia* (1975) and Andrew Saint's *London Suburbs* (1999) remain the only easily available works on the subject.

Conversely, there are a number of earlier books, written at a time when the expansion of London was only just commencing, which focus on the Middlesex countryside and its value to Londoners, encouraging them to visit its rustic attractions. Presciently, perhaps, the majority of them appeared between c.1890 and the First World War, as if they were trying to alert Londoners to the beauty of the countryside on their doorsteps and the fate which threatened it. Two booklets, both undated but dating to c.1885–95, give a selection of rural walks. The first was *Our Lanes and Meadowpaths; or, Rambles in Rural Middlesex* by H J Foley, who writes, 'To how many a North Londoner does the greater portion of his own county of Middlesex remain a wholly undiscovered region? If you speak to such a one of the spots of quaint beauty and rural seclusion that lie within a comparatively short distance of his own doorstep, he will probably regard you with astonishment' and commends 'the rustic quiet of the Middlesex lanes and meadowpaths', all of which can be reached 'by a sixpenny railway ticket from the heart of London'. The 112-page book — with a large map and an appendix for cyclists — gives detailed itineraries for 22 walks, much of them over land now totally built up.

The second guide is *Rustic Walking Routes in the London Vicinity: West to North District* by W R Evans, who remarks on the solitude and isolation which are a feature of walks within this region so close to London, observing that this is not because 'Londoners avoid the fields, but simply that they do not know the ways across

them'. As if to emphasise the rural isolation of Middlesex at this late date, he further notes that the numerous field paths of the region 'in many cases... form the only direct routes between neighbouring villages or hamlets'. In an early defence of walkers' freedom to roam, he cites the public's 'indefeasible right with regard to footpaths', but reminds his readers strictly to respect private property and fences, crops, and animals. An ominous note to the third edition,¹ in c.1895–1900, adds that a number of alterations have been made, 'consequent, for the most part, on the spread of population and the extent of building'.

Several books on Middlesex appeared within a short period. The first, by John B Firth, was the Middlesex volume of the familiar *Little Guides* county series, still easily available on antiquarian and secondhand bookshelves. Published in 1906, it contained general and topographical data, and an alphabetical gazetteer describing the towns and villages of Middlesex and a 2 miles to 1 inch map. Though the second edition was published as late as 1930, there is nostalgia even for today's motorist who reads that 'The North Circular Road provides an excellent means of passing across the North of London'!

Picturesque Middlesex, a book of nostalgic and historic sketches by Duncan Moul and R H Ernest Hill, is undated but probably dates to c.1905–10. In the preface, they observe that 'it is fortunate that so much that is picturesque still exists unspoilt by the ever-increasing influence of London and the onslaughts of the Jerry-builder. It is possible, however, that in a short time many of the sketches in this volume will possess a distinct value as records of rustic scenery that have hopelessly disappeared'. The book ends on an optimistic note: 'notwithstanding the ever-increasing ravages of bricks and mortar and similar abominations, it will be a long time before Middlesex ceases to be picturesque'.

Rural Nooks Round London (Middlesex and Surrey), a similar book by Charles G Harper, was published in 1907. At the time of writing, he was able to remark on 'the pleasant regions of Golders Green...' where 'you are but seven miles from the very hub of and centre of the City' — though, by the time the book was published, development of the crossroads area had already commenced and, when talking of the still-rural village of Highgate, he recommends that those of his readers 'who would see, in a manner, what the "Garden Suburb" at Golders Green

will be, on a larger scale, should certainly visit Holly Village'. The book's large coloured map emphasises, particularly for today's reader, how little London had yet expanded beyond the old London County Council boundary. The same year saw the publication of A R Hope's more art-historical *Middlesex*.

Perhaps the most well-known of the volumes on rural Middlesex was Walter Jerrold's volume in the popular *Highways and Byways* series, published in 1909. Following a similar format to other volumes, it apologises to the reader for having the 'temerity to seek to interest readers anew in the homeliest of the Home Counties', but observes that 'there are yet some people who do not allow the fascination of the far to destroy their interest in the near', and reminding them that 'there are still some rustic "bits" to be seen away from the tram-dominated highways', and that 'if Middlesex has lost much of its natural beauty owing to its relation to the capital... it is still in its more agricultural parts well favoured in... these most attractive byways'.

Just before the outbreak of war, the Middlesex volume of the *Cambridge County Geographies* appeared. It reminded readers that Middlesex was, after Rutland and London itself, the smallest county in England, but that it would enable us to much better understand our national history 'if we first study the geography and history of this small, but very important, portion of our land'. It also reminded us that, as late as 1913, 'yet there are picturesque spots and beautiful villages' and could still illustrate this, on page 17, with an astonishingly rustic landscape, with ancient oaks, a footpath across grassland, and distant tree-clad hills, identified as 'East Finchley', and with a description of Highgate as commanding 'splendid views of the Metropolis and the surrounding country'.

Perhaps the last book of the true era of rural Middlesex was *The Footpath Way Round London; Field-Path and Woodland Rambles*, a small, 80-page, pocket-sized book which, in style, appears to date to about 1910–20, when change was at last beginning to have its impact. 'This district has', it says, 'in the last twenty years [since the 1890s] altered almost beyond recognition owing to railway and tramway developments. These facilities', it naively continues, 'have enabled many people to live in the country who before dwelt in London. They cannot be said, however, to have added to the rural delights of Middlesex, but... even now... there are remote and pretty

spots that are astonishingly green and unspoilt, from which the "great smoke" is almost within sight... There are still plenty of footpath walks in rural Middlesex in spite of the great railway developments of last thirty years to the west of London'. Yet of Harmondsworth and Ickenham, it could still claim that few villages 'prettier in their quiet charm exist today in England'.

It can still recommend Hendon station as a good starting point for those walking from Preston to Harrow. The state of the county by the second decade of the 20th century is summarised by the observation that 'London has not yet eaten up all the meadows of Middlesex, though if you travel along the main roads you may get that idea. But between the great arteries of macadam there are cantles of green that stretch for miles, whose silence is only disturbed by the lowing of cattle and the droning of aircraft'. On the day he visited the Greenford and Northolt areas, the anonymous writer continues lightheartedly, 'there were almost as many aeroplanes as cattle, and, although I cannot guarantee you the same experience, you may get all the elements of an exciting adventure when a machine prepares to descend in a field with a rather irritable herd of bullocks looking for trouble.' Though 'there are now seven or eight stations... where twenty years ago there was none', the area between Alperton and Greenford 'is still a pleasant rural district whose main occupation when I passed was getting in the last of the hay'. He adds, more ominously, 'In a few years, judging from the way things are going, this district will be a humming hive of industry. So you had better see it while there is still time and it is still green'. How green Middlesex still was is evident from the last of the 18 Rambles in the book, 'Meadows near Home', recommending a walk from Long Lane, Finchley, to the Orange Tree at Totteridge. 'Thus will you get to know how really remote and rural some of the meadows near home remain.'

In 1934, when the juggernaut of the Metropolis had rolled over much of the area which 20 years before was still rural, Martin Briggs, in *Middlesex Old and New*, realised what were the problems and suggested what needed to be done to save what remained: 'Fifty years ago, Middlesex was predominantly rural and contained less than a quarter of its present population. Now it is largely suburbanised and partly industrial, with a population which is growing at a sensational rate and is rapidly approaching two millions... But this is not to say that all is lost in Middlesex.

Much may still be saved from the wreck... Taking the new townships... I have shown... what [each] may still do to preserve its surviving amenities without obstructing reasonable development. It is my hope that this study may create a spirit of civic consciousness and civic pride in the inhabitants, most of whom have come to Middlesex from other parts of England, and thus have no roots in its soil.'

'Full of the brash, confident optimism of the 1920s' is Oliver Green's description of *Metro-Land*, a handbook published annually by the Metropolitan Railway Company between 1915 and 1933. Its purpose was partly to encourage leisure excursion travel from London, but also to stimulate residential development along the line of the new suburban railway network, built between 1880 and 1905, which the new residents of the same developments would, of course, use to travel into London to work. The publication, which also served as the main method of advertising these developments, last appeared in 1933 when the company became a part of London Transport, but the name *Metro-land* had entered the language, and was the title of John Betjeman's nostalgic 1973 television programme. The Metropolitan Railway Company itself became involved in development, its first venture being the Willesden Park Estate on railway land near Willesden Green station in the 1880s and '90s; other developments followed at Pinner (Cecil Park) and at Wembley Park, on the site of the failed attempt to build London's equivalent of the Eiffel Tower (never rising above its first stage, 155ft high, it was demolished in 1907). What was revolutionary about these developments was the fact that, until this period, virtually no-one owned their own homes, renting being the main type of tenure, even among the better-off; the rise of the well-paid middle classes meant that, at a time of low interest rates, the prospect of home ownership was opened up to millions, and the prospect of that home being in the countryside, 'where charm and peace await you', was even more of a spur. The process came to a halt with the outbreak of war in 1939, followed, in the 1940s, by the designation of London's Green Belt. The full story of *Metro-land* can be read on the London Transport Museum's website, www.ltmuseum.co.uk.

Other similar publications appeared during the 1930s, doubtless endeavouring to climb on board the *Metro-land* bandwagon. One example was *London and Suburbs Old and New* by Frank

Green, providing information about London, its history and amenities, but primarily advertising the new suburban developments mushrooming throughout the area.

During his childhood and early adulthood, Sir John Betjeman (1906–1984) witnessed at first hand the destruction of the rural Middlesex he loved, from the Metropolis' first flexing of its muscles after the First World War to its climax on the eve of the Second. The destruction was not, of course, total. It is still possible, even today, to find remnants of rural Middlesex in areas such as Enfield, Totteridge, Mill Hill, Pinner, Ruislip, Kingsbury, Harefield and others, while the hearts of ancient and picturesque villages such as Harrow, Pinner, Hendon, Ruislip, Northolt and Hillingdon (threatened in its entirety by the expansion of Heathrow) have been preserved. Even Highgate, Norwood, Ealing, Sunbury, and Laleham still survive, surrounded now by suburbs but, as is coming to be realised, with the potential to become the historic, cultural, and even economic focus of the drive to regenerate *Metro-land's* declining suburbs.

How this is to be achieved is the challenge. To almost all of the population of Greater London, these still attractive and historic villages are little more than the residential dormitories whence they commute to work by day, and where they can indulge in the pleasures of the 'evening economy' at night. Martin Briggs' was right, as far back as 1934, when he realised that, to save something from the wreck without obstructing reasonable progress, we need to 'create a spirit of civic consciousness and civic pride in the inhabitants, most of whom have come to Middlesex from other parts of England, and thus have no roots in its soil'. There is a risk that modern pressures, not least the drive to solve London's severe housing shortage and accommodate its massively-growing population, will relegate such longer term issues as London's historic and rural heritage to a low position in the priorities of local, regional, and national government, and that what *Metro-land* did not entirely destroy, these new pressures will. Public education must become a critical element in our efforts to ensure that the new London does not destroy its own historic environment, and the expertise and passion of its many archaeological, historical, and civic amenity societies undoubtedly have a central role to play in making sure that this happens.

The purpose of this essay is to remind

Londoners of how dramatic and rapid was the change in transforming Middlesex from a rural society to a giant suburb, much of it within living memory — a change perhaps unparalleled in England in the short time in which it occurred. It would be interesting to know how a skilled and sensitive writer and observer of rural life such as Richard Jefferies might have chronicled the decline of rural Middlesex had he lived another thirty years. However, it was Betjeman who became the best-known chronicler of these changes, and his poem *Middlesex* perhaps singles him out as the chief mourner for the demise of this rural society.

The best way of illustrating these changes, and losses, must be through photographs, and we are fortunate that the destruction of rural Middlesex coincided with the boom years of the picture postcard; as a result, rural Middlesex was surprisingly well recorded for us by the postcard makers; even the process of destruction was sometimes the subject of a postcard.

The choice of no more than 50 out of thousands of photographs to illustrate this theme was a difficult and inevitably personal one, but it seemed most appropriate to be guided in that choice, as far as possible, by Betjeman's own words in *Middlesex*, encapsulating his memories of the Middlesex countryside in its

last days. The illustrations have therefore, as far as possible, been chosen to illustrate the places and events — or, where not possible, the mood — memorialised in various lines from the poem. It is hoped that they will help Londoners to realise how rural Middlesex was, not so very long ago, and to understand the importance of Londoners working together to ensure that what remains to us is not entirely lost in the drive to resolve real current social problems which can, many believe, be satisfactorily achieved without having to destroy what remains of this unique and important cultural asset. Once it is lost, it is lost forever, and no amount of new thinking will bring it back.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The text of Sir John Betjeman's poem 'Middlesex' is taken from pp 87–8 of *The Best of Betjeman*, selected by John Guest (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1978) and is reproduced by permission of John Murray Publishers. All photographs courtesy of the author.

NOTES

¹ Since going to press, a first edition has been located, dated 1887.

'Gaily into Ruislip Gardens...'



Fig 1. Ruislip Metropolitan station, c.1930. The old village stands at centre background. Just left of centre, two pairs of semis have just been built. In the background, 'a few surviving hedges' await their fate

'A few surviving hedges...'



Fig 2. Roe Green 'Garden Village', Kingsbury, in 1920. The development was commenced in 1917 for employees of the nearby Airco factory, one of several aircraft industry factories attracted by the pioneering aerodrome at Hendon

'Gentle Brent, I used to know...'



Fig 3. Greenford village, from across the ford over the River Brent, c.1910

'...wandering Wembley-wards at will...'



Fig 4. The River Brent near Wembley, 1922. Lines in the fields at left and rear, only discernible under magnification, suggest the survival of possible ridge-and-furrow systems in the area

‘Now what change your waters show you in the meadowlands you fill’



Fig 5. J Lyons' factory at Greenford, c.1930



Fig 6. An idyllic rural scene in Hendon Lane, Finchley, where it crosses Dollis Brook, a tributary of the Brent, 1909. The sign behind the horse-and-trap at far right reads 'White Hall Estate: To let on building lease or for sale'

'Recollect the elm-trees misty...'



Fig 7. Whitchurch Lane, Edgware, 1907

'...and the foot-paths climbing twisty...'



Fig 8. 'Rough Lots', a remnant of Finchley Common, near Squire's Lane, c.1910; some of it remains open today, though no rural quality remains



Fig 9. Footpath from Finchley to Summers Lane; an unidentified rural path, probably today within earshot of the busy A1000, during the 1920s

'Low laburnum-leaned-on railings'



Fig 10. It's very difficult to find a photograph of a laburnum leaning on railings; but here are some railings leaned on by a profusion of vegetation, in a Lordship Lane, Tottenham scene unrecognisable today

'Out of Northolt, on and upwards...'



Fig 11. The old village pump, Northolt, c.1910

'...to the heights of Harrow Hill'



Fig 12. Harrow from the fields between Pinner and Wealdstone in about 1910–20

'Parish of enormous hayfields, Perivale stood all alone...'

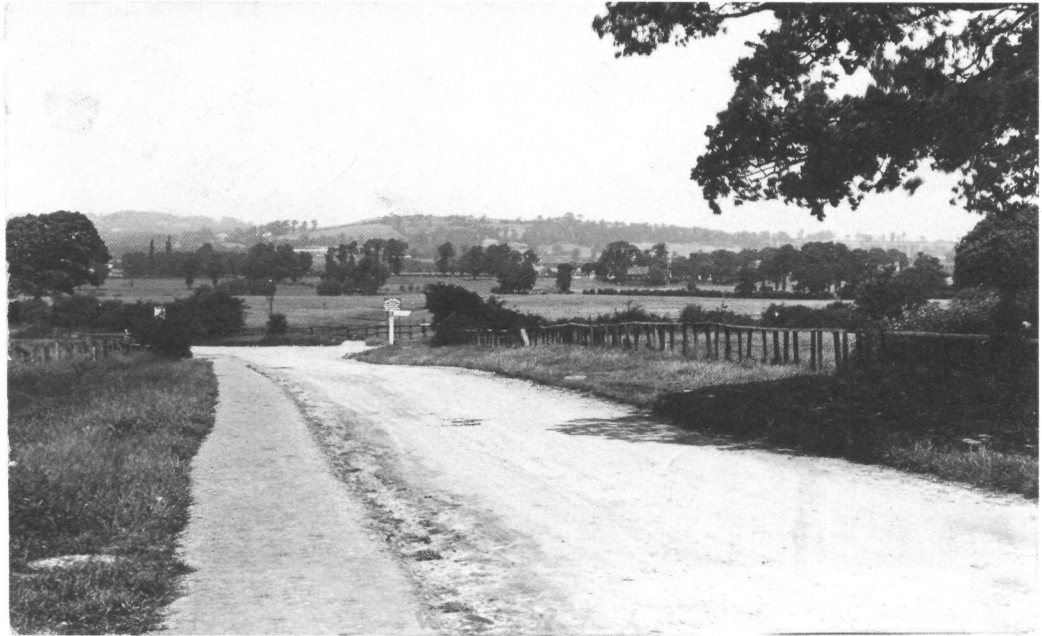


Fig 13. Perivale seen from the direction of Ealing, 1904

[but there were hayfields throughout Middlesex, to meet London's insatiable demand for horse fodder before the motor-car became dominant]

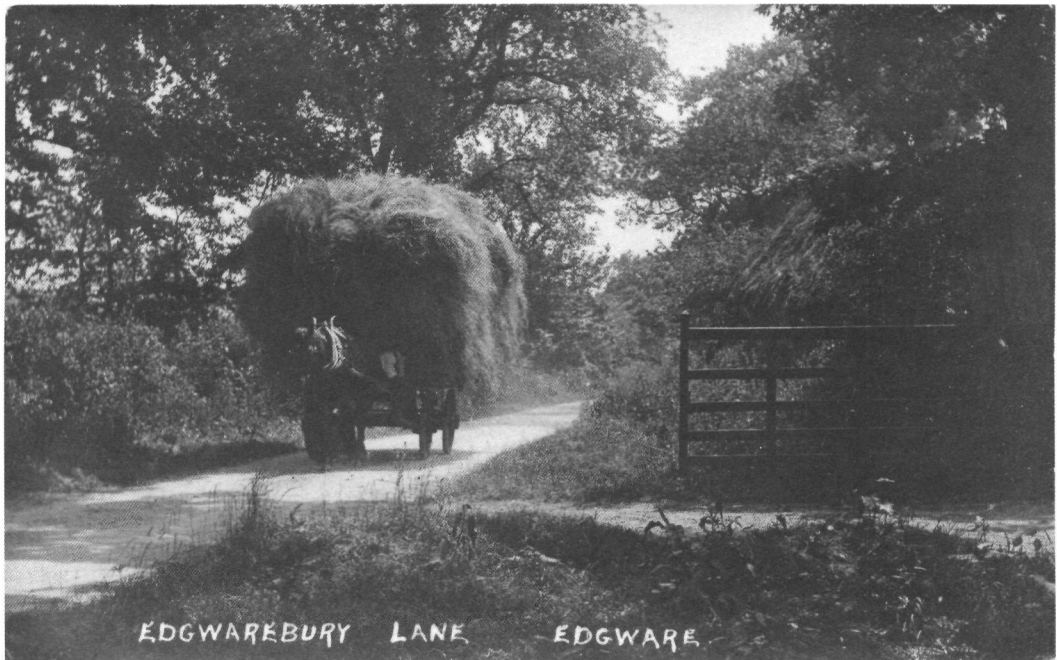


Fig 14. In Edgware: a view in Edgwarebury Lane, c.1910



Fig 15. In Cricklewood: rustic Oxgate Lane, now an industrial estate near Willesden Green, c.1910



Fig 16. Haystacks somewhere in the Pinner area, 1906



Fig 17. Woodhouse Lane, New Southgate, 1910



Fig 18. Even on Hampstead Heath: haymaking for the Earl of Mansfield in 1891 in Kenwood Fields, which became part of the Heath only in 1923. The spot was but a few hundred yards from Betjeman's childhood home at 31 Highgate West Hill

'...and from Greenford scent of mayfields most delightfully was blown...'



Fig 19. Footpath from Horsenden Hill to Greenford, 1911

'...over market gardens tidy...'



Fig 20. Ferguson's sweet peas, Northolt, 1911

'taverns for the bona fide...'



Fig 21. The Plough, Norwood Green, 1924

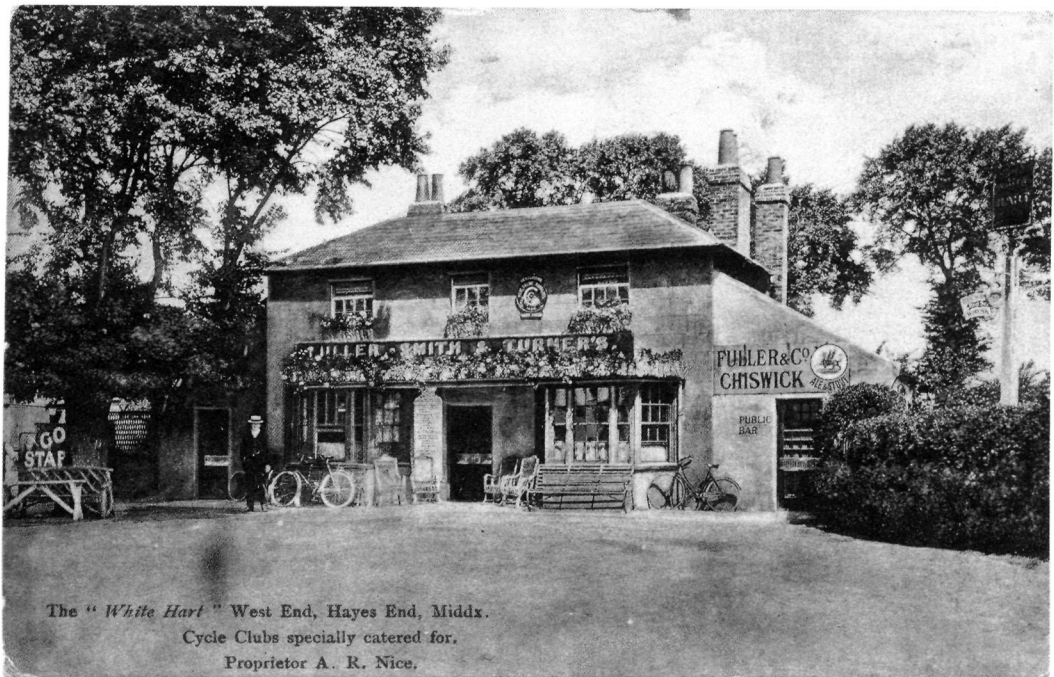


Fig 22. The White Hart, Hayes End, 1908



Fig 23. *The Old Welsh Harp, Hendon, 1906*



Fig 24. *The White Swan, Golders Green, 1909*



Fig 25. 'Down at the Old Bull and Bush': in 1903, 'Arry and 'Arriet were beating a path to its doors: but it was still a country pub



Fig 26. The Old King of Prussia, East Finchley Village, 1904

'...Cockney fishers'

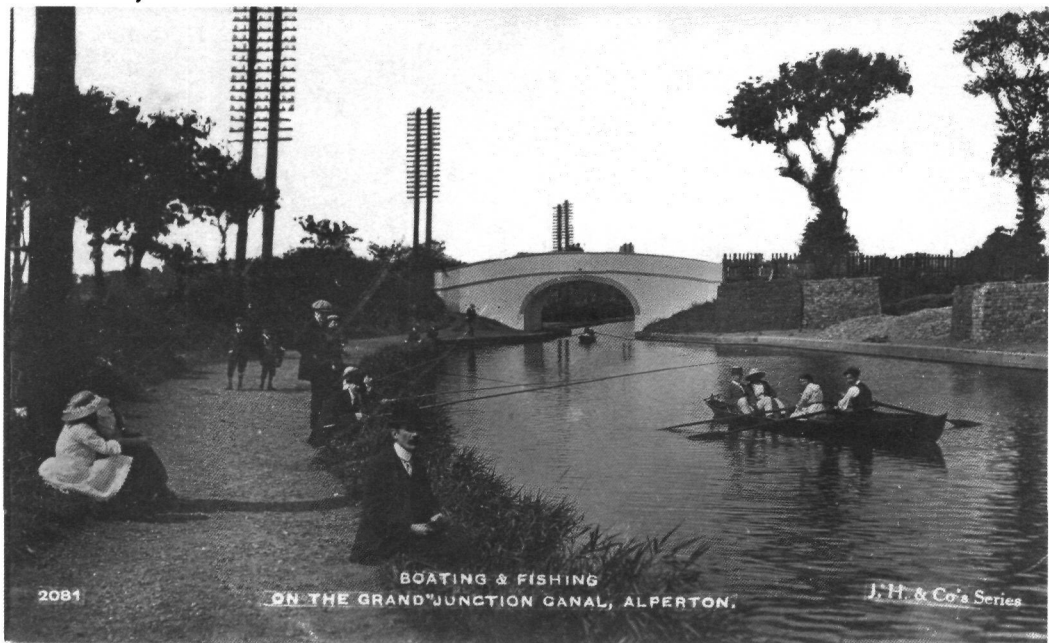


Fig 27. Fishing on the Grand Junction Canal, Alperton, 1920

'... Cockney Shooters'



Fig 28. No pictures of cockney shooters — but one of a hunt about to set off from Harefield in 1908

'Our Lost Elysium': rural Middlesex, not so long ago



Fig 29. Greyhound Hill, Hendon, c.1910



Fig 30. Totteridge Fields, North Finchley, 1907. Thanks to far-sighted pre-War local planning policies, the view today is, miraculously, almost unchanged

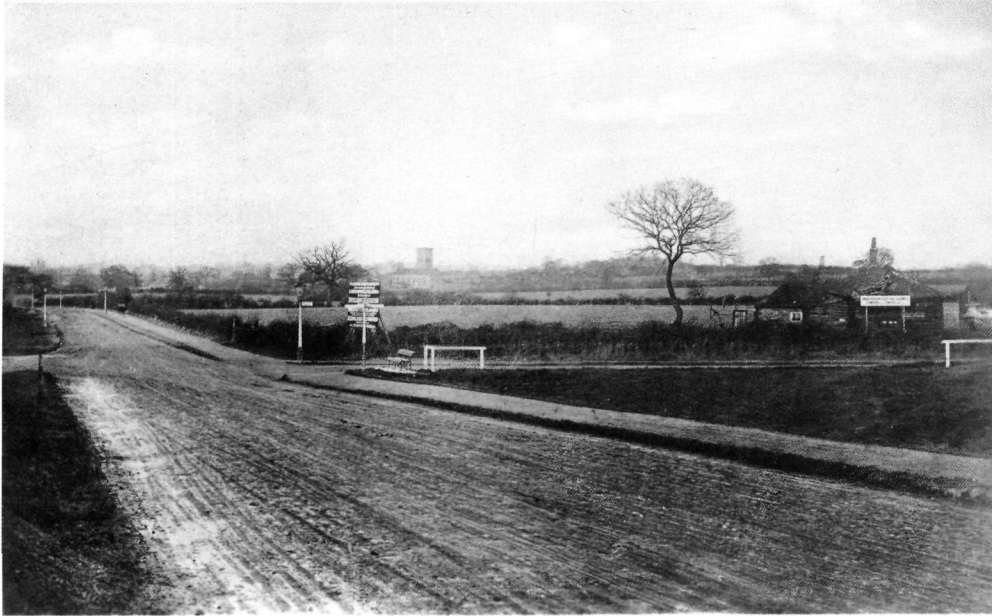


Fig 31. The Finchley Road crossroads at Golders Green, 1904, looking north; the building of Hampstead Garden Suburb is just starting in the distance. A well-known view, which nevertheless forcibly reminds us how rural was the area now covered by London's inner suburbs until relatively recently. The Estate Agent's board at the crossroads signals that the development of Golders Green is imminent



Fig 32. East Finchley from Highgate, 1913; probably looking across the farmland now occupied by Aylmer Road



Fig 33. Neasden, 1909. A view in such contrast to what might today be a candidate for London's dreariest suburb that we could doubt the accuracy of the identification, were it not for the signpost pointing to Kingsbury and Hendon



Fig 34. Dollis Hill Lane, Cricklewood, 1904. Another view so in contrast to its appearance today that one's first reaction might be incredulity



Fig 35. Blackpot Hill, Kingsbury, c.1905



Fig 36. 'This picture was taken from the end of our garden We... would not like to go back to London'. Thus writes a resident of Wembley Hill in 1911

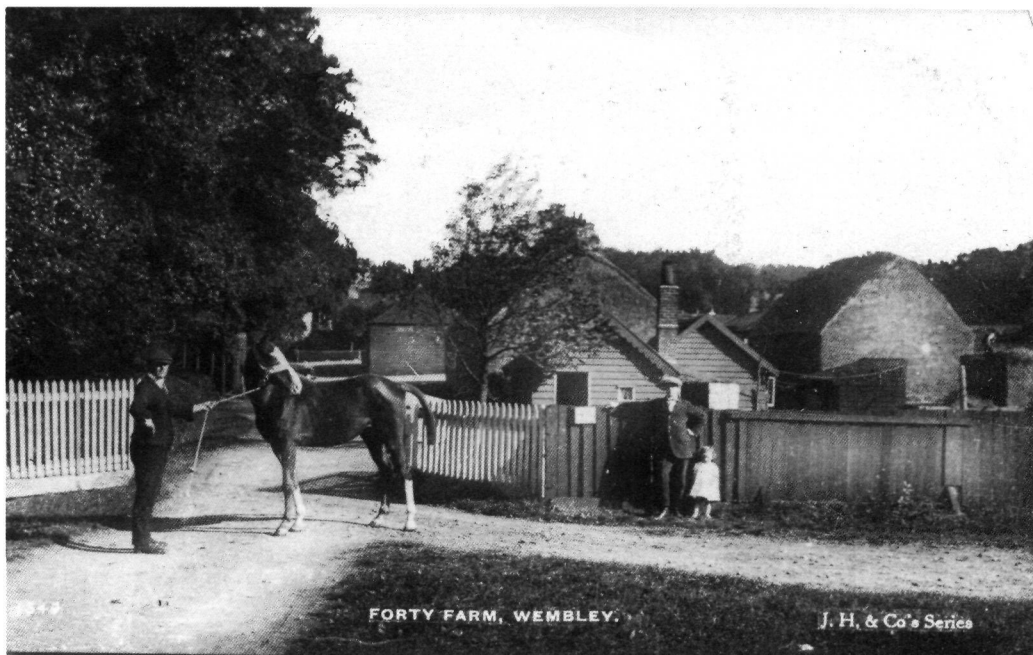


Fig 37. Forty Farm, Wembley, 1922



Fig 38. Bryant's Farm, Harlesden, 1928



Fig 39. Windsor Dairy, Willesden, c.1910



Fig 40. The village smithy, Eastcote, c.1920. The tattered Daily Mail poster on the door advertises a Treasure Hunt at Robart's Field, Northwood on Whit Monday



Fig 41 Powys Lane, Palmers Green, 1906. In the background is a farm with haystacks. The sign warns cyclists against using the footbridge

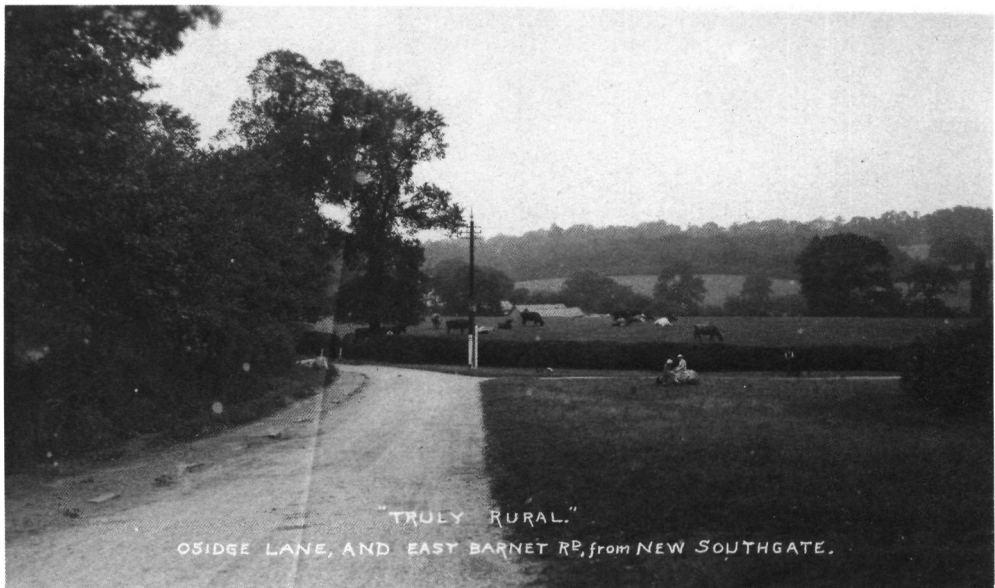


Fig 42. Osidge Lane and East Barnet Road, from New Southgate, still 'truly rural' in the 1920s



Fig 43. The Old Smithy, Southgate, 1910. The sign advertising William J Cain, Gas and Hot Water Engineer, Locksmith, Bell Hanger and Farrier, visible in photos only five years earlier, has been erased by the photographer



Fig 44. Footpath to Sudbury Hill Station from Horsenden Hill, 1915

Elysium Lost...



Fig 45. 'The King and Queen passing Ravenor Park Estate', Greenford, c.1910 — clearly not tempted to stop, even by the offer of freehold plots for only £5 down



Fig 46. 'Cross Roads, Western Avenue, Perivale', 1937



Fig 47. New housing in Southgate, 1913: 'London Going out of Town; Or, the March of Bricks and Mortar' on a scale dwarfing the growth caricatured by George Cruikshank in 1829



Fig 48. New houses in Ruislip, 1909 — and no surviving hedges! Perhaps Elaine and her family lived in this very house?



Fig 49. New houses going up somewhere in Wembley, 1920s



Fig 50. The destruction of rural Middlesex illustrated in graphic detail: proposed layout of the Lyon Farm and Preston Manor Estates, Kenton, 1935