



**Mill
Hill
Park
Residents'
Association
Acton**

A Speculative Early History of the Mill Hill Tavern

By Ray Batchelor

A sports oriented pub just up the road from Acton Town station. It's alright if you like that sort of thing, but if you're not into sport, it's probably not the place for you. The management are definitely trying but we can't say it was our cup of tea. Can be a bit quiet so who knows how long it will last.

This posting from fancyapint.com was prescient. I lived opposite The Mill Hill Tavern on the corner of Gunnersbury Lane and Mill Hill Road for a dozen years but was an infrequent visitor. It was not my 'cup of tea' either and, like so many others in recent years, it closed as a pub in March 2013. Faced with redevelopment plans which involved its complete demolition, Mill Hill Park Residents' Association (MHPRA) fought successfully to have the oldest parts of this familiar local landmark incorporated into a redevelopment scheme for housing which is now in hand. The developers had been obliged to commission an 'independent' historical survey, but it was flawed. Even so, by piecing together some more reliable parts of that survey, some original research by local resident and MHPRA member, Jerome Farrell, and a bit of close

observation of the building by me, something of the pub's early history can be reconstructed.

According to public records found by Jerome Farrell, the Mill Hill Tavern was built by Henry Hartless Hayward. Hayward was born in Acton in 1798. He was a builder and carpenter who, at the time works on the Mill Hill Tavern began, was living in The Steyne not far from the Mill Hill Tavern. Hayward bought these and other plots of land from the British Land Company at auction in 1860. On the other plots he built houses which remain to this day. On plots 34 and 35, he built the first parts of The Mill Hill Tavern, which in 1863, he leased it to its first landlord, William Thomas Leader.

For its time – when the more highly decorated Italianate or even modish gothic could have been chosen – Hayward, aged 60 plus and most likely with a limited architectural education, chose a 'safe', conservative, respectable, classical style popular in his youth for both the houses and the Mill Hill Tavern, of which the Tuscan columned portico and roof brackets are typical. Mark Girouard in *Victorian Pubs* notes:

A good many builders probably acted as their own designers for both their pubs and their houses... generally speaking, with a few extra trimmings, a foot or two of extra height...distinguished pubs in residential districts from the adjoining houses, they were recognisably of a piece with them.... Pubs serving an estate [yet to built?] of detached or semi-detached villas, sometimes assumed a villa character themselves...

Mark Girouard, *Victorian Pubs*, 1975, p. 39

When the Mill Hill Tavern was built, there would have been no houses in the area, only building plots, and so no conventional clientele. The first, limited development was probably built by Hayward as an on-site headquarters for his building operations in Mill Hill Park. Girouard again:

The pub was often the first part of a speculation to be built with the builder as the first licensee. This had two advantages for the builder. It gave him a base in which his workmen could drink, eat and be paid, in effect, a combined site office and canteen; and the lease could [sometimes] be sold off at a good price...to raise capital to finance...development...

Mark Girouard, *Victorian Pubs*, 1975, p. 38

As the historical survey commissioned by the developer notes, house building in the area was not a smooth process:

Mill Hill Road had a mix of housing types including several detached and semi-detached three-storey houses. The rapid development of the area meant that supply was greater than demand and better quality homes proved difficult to let. The documentary evidence highlighted that by 1871 one in six of Acton's houses was unoccupied.

This must have proved a commercially unhelpful climate for Hayward's leasees of the Mill Hill Tavern, and it is notable that none of them lasted very long:

1867 Edward Thomas

1868 Charles Cockburn Hyde

1871 Thomas Shepherd

Yet, Hayward continued, bit by bit to develop the Mill Hill Tavern in the same classical style in which he had begun, in part, because, as the houses became occupied, a conventional clientele of residents was probably building up and a more commodious accommodation would be more appropriate as the function of building as builder's headquarters was dwindling; and in part, perhaps, to re-assure potential pub leasees that this was both a viable and potentially an expanding business. Perhaps the lovely interior mirrors, now vanished, date from this period of 'improvement'.

Hayward died on 14 Nov. 1871. The consistency of building style probably died with him, and the more 'modern' brick extension with constructional polychromatic brick decoration surely dates from very shortly afterwards. It is now demolished. It is the earliest and most visible part of the Mill Hill Tavern, including the portico which serves as a local landmark which is being incorporated into the development of flats and houses which is now being built.

The author of the heritage survey commissioned by the developers noted that it was 'typical of its period', and concluded that it was 'of little architectural merit [or] quality'. What the author failed to acknowledge was that for the residents of Mill Hill Park, the fact that it *is* typical, that it *has* survived 163 years and that it is *ours* warrants its

preservation, so that something of its qualities can be enjoyed by us all in the years to come.

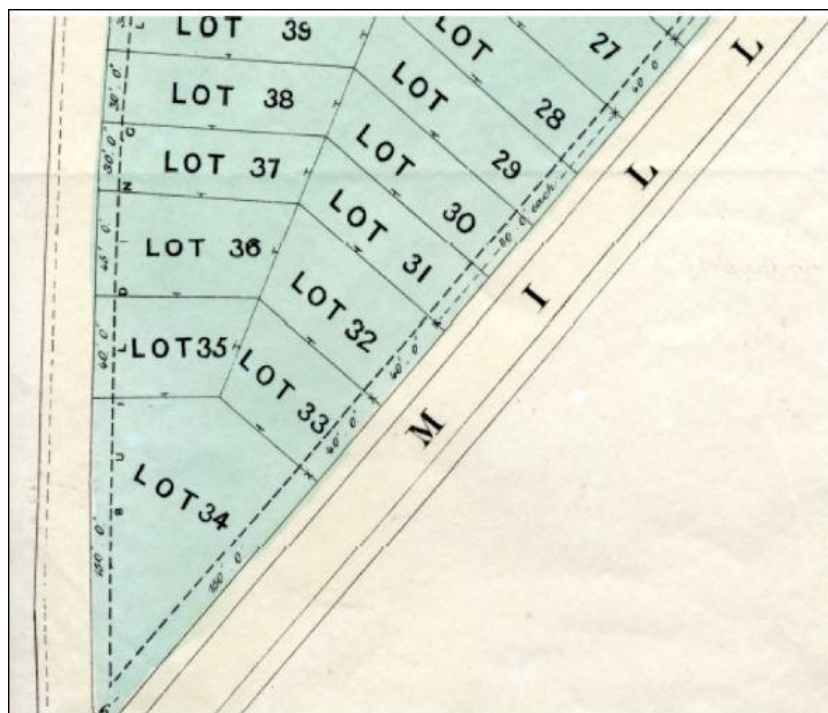
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Chair 2011 – 2014 Mill Hill Park Residents' Association (MHPRA)

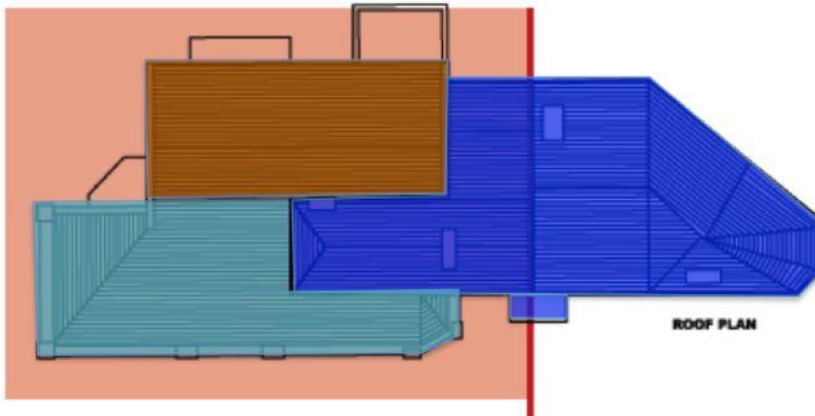
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Illustrations

This detail from the map drawn up for the auction by the British Land Company in 1860 shows plots 34 and 35 bought by Henry Hartless Hayward. He built the oldest parts of the Mill Hill Tavern on these plots.



The Phases of Building the Mill Hill Tavern



1861 - 1871



1871 - before 1894 Ordnance Survey Map



1980s



1861 - 1871



1871 - before 1894 Ordnance Survey Map



1980s

The 1860s porch (left) compared with a porch on Denmark Villas, Mill Hill Road, directly opposite – 1864.



1860s eaves brackets compared with Denmark Villas opposite – 1864.



One of the fine gilt mirrors probably dating from the 1860s and designed to make the pub more attractive to the socially mixed residents of the newly built villas in streets such as Mill Hill Road and Avenue Road.



The Mill Hill Tavern circa 2005. Note the ill-considered water wheel powered mill on the pub sign – odd for a pub/mill on Acton Hill.



The pub circa 2010 showing the 1980s additions to the left of the 1860s porch.



The Mill Hill Tavern photographed in 2013 shortly before it was closed down.

