



Mill Hill Park
Residents'
Association
Acton

The History of Mill Hill Park

Origins

Signs of life and residency on the piece of land where Mill Hill Park now lies have been traced by Museum of London archaeologists back through medieval, Saxon and Roman times through the Bronze Age to the prehistoric era.

From the front garden of 51 Avenue Gardens flakes of flint have been unearthed from the Palaeolithic (Stone Age) period, and pieces of burnt and struck flint, mostly blades and scrapers, from the Mesolithic era and the first thousand years BC.

The Romans were active here in the second century AD. Discoveries have been made, again in Avenue Gardens, of pieces of broken tile and decorated pottery from the Gaulish (French) part of the Roman Empire.

These remnants include fragments of bowls and dishes from East Gaul (today's Trier and Rheinzabern). One of them, in the style of the potter Donnaucus from Les Martres-de-Veyre in the French Puy-de-Dome region, shows images of Jupiter with a thunderbolt, a lion ridden by a small Cupid, a lioness, wreaths, and rosettes. These and other fine decorations suggest well-to-do owners.

Further Roman finds date from the late 3rd and mid-4th century AD. Among them are cable-rimmed jars, flanged bowls and "beakers", many made in British kilns at Alice Holt near Farnham in Surrey. A small copper alloy or gold finger ring was also unearthed. Animal bones dug up included those of red deer.

From the Saxon age remain a few shards of vegetable-tempered pottery.

Bronze Age Acton

It was, however, the Bronze Age (1500 - 400 BC) which left the strongest mark on Mill Hill Park. Burial urns from that era were discovered when, in 1882, foundations were being dug for the house 'Oakleigh' in Avenue Gardens (now number 36) by employees of the builders, James Hedges and John Goodrick.

The urns were shaped like buckets, with imprints made by the finger-tip round the rim and with perforations - small holes - together with cordon or rope-shaped strip round the

circumference. They were of the Deverel-Rimbury type, originally found in Dorset, and in this case unevenly fired in a smoky kiln, with varying surface colours. They contained small pieces of incinerated human bone and were evidently the product of Bronze Age burial rites, forming part of an 'urn field' or cremation cemetery.

A neighbour, one Samuel Cobb of Oakleigh, 36, Avenue Gardens, described the discovery: "One urn was found in an upright position as if intentionally buried where found. After about three inches of earth had been taken out, the remaining contents were small particles of bones, all of which had been burnt. As they were supposed to be human bones, they were placed in a box and buried in the garden of Langford House, opposite Oakleigh. Numerous urns were found of a similar character as this one within a few yards of each other. These crumbled into small pieces on removal".

According to the local newspaper, *The Acton, Chiswick and Turnham Green Gazette / Bedford Park and District Advertiser*, the contents of the first urn found were examined by "a gentleman" and found to include the remains of "a person full-grown", including part of an index finger and four teeth, "one much worn".

Five out of an eventual total of eight urns were displayed at a meeting of the Royal Archaeological Society in November 1882 and later presented by the Society's secretary Albert Hartshorne to the British Museum.

The Second Millennium

For the next millennium and a half after the Bronze Age, historical documentation betrays little of the fate of the land on which Mill Hill Park now lies. However, records show that 20 years after the Norman Conquest it was part of the Bishop of London's 45-hide holding in this area (a hide was between 60 and 120 acres, depending on locality). The Bishop sub-let the five hides on which it lay to one Fulchered in 1086. Today's Mill Hill Park was held by the Fitzaluf family in the late 12th and 13th centuries.

In the 1220s and 1230s Peter Fitzaluf gave about 200 acres of his Acton land to the Dean of St Paul's, Westminster, Geoffry de Lucy. It was described as part of the second manor of Acton, or 'Acton under the Wood'. It consisted of three fields: Bolebrug Meadow - which covered most of today's Heathfield Road and eventually gave its name to Bollo Lane / Bollo Bridge Road - the Little Meadow ("parvum pratum") and the large La Pulle meadow.

In 1544 it suffered the lot of many church lands and was confiscated from St Paul's by Henry VIII. For an annual rent of 54 shillings it passed to John, Lord Russell, who was Lord Privy Seal to both Henry and his sister Queen Mary. Russell was an eminent soldier and diplomat, who saw the celebrated pageant of the Field of the Cloth of Gold and who owned, besides this part of Acton, Tavistock Abbey, Woburn Abbey and Covent Garden.

On his death in 1555 he left his vast estate of former church lands to his son Francis (1527 - 85), who was governor of the strategic Scottish border town of Berwick under Queen Elizabeth I and Lord Lieutenant of the northern counties of England.

Acton's Cherry Orchards

The Mill Hill Park section of Acton then passed to Henry, 5th earl of Worcester, and to his son Edward Somerset, 2nd marquis of Worcester, whose estates were seized by Cromwell during the Commonwealth (1640-60). Later references are made to "the cherry orchards of Acton, which belonged to the Somerset family, Lords of Acton Manor".

In 1736, the 800-acre Somerset estate was bought in trust for Christopher Benjamin Lethieullier, later a Turkey Merchant, MP and director of the Bank of England. It was inherited by his nephew, Sir Henry Featherstonhaugh, Bart, reputed to be extravagant and dissolute, who broke it up and sold it off piecemeal to land speculators and local gentry.

By 1799, today's Mill Hill Park was part of the 58-acre Mill Hill Fields, mostly meadow and pasture. Mill Hill Fields are believed to take their name from a wide circular mound marked "Windmill Hill", shown on a 1799 map now in the Guildhall Library. This spot lies under 20-22 Avenue Gardens today. No documentary or other evidence of a mill there has been found. But a windmill perched on the crest of the ridge which drops away to South Acton would have been perfectly placed. Alternatively, "Windmill Hill" may have referred to the fact that from this high point another windmill was visible on the north side of the Uxbridge Road, near where today's Twyford Church of England school now lies.

In 1809 Featherstonhaugh sold the Acton manor to "Richard White and others" - 53 acres in all.

White's Beautiful Estate

This Richard White had a large mansion, known as Acton Hill House, constructed at the southern end of Windmill Hill. In the Acton Rate Books 1809-12, reference is made to "a house new built in Mill Hill Fields". One wing of the house is today 11 Avenue Crescent.

In the tithe awards of 1842, Richard White is shown as holding land tithe numbers 810-20, which comprised Mill Hill Lodge and garden, a second lodge and garden, Mill Hill Park, which was classified as a meadow, "Acton Hill Dwelling House, Offices, Pleasure Ground and Yard", another "Pleasure Ground", an orchard, a plantation, possibly of oak trees, and a large fish pond. White had Windmill Hill landscaped to form a wide wooded arbour.

Richard White was a celebrated lawyer. His practice, White and Blake (joined at various times by third partners Ainge, Houseman and Tylee), was at 14 Essex Street, off the Strand, and at Brick Court, Temple. He was a member of the founding committee of the Law Society, sitting on its first council and serving as President in 1833.

Both he and his wife, Mary, did charitable work in Acton. Records show that he gave £100 to the parish schools and she £500. In 1822, she bought land in Oldham Terrace, Acton, and donated it for the use of the new-style National Schools then being established.

White was prominent in the affairs of Acton parish, with a particular involvement in the setting of the local rates. According to the Acton vestry minutes for 16th January 1822, he chaired a meeting inquiring into the equality of the poor rate, which was then levied half on land and half on houses to a total of £8452 per year. He used his lawyer's skills to

outmanoeuvre Acton's chief magistrate, Sir Richard Birnie, who refused to allow Acton's poor rate because it was "unequal and unfair" to those paying it. White stood on the side of the low-income beneficiaries of the poor rate: he drew on the law of precedent, citing cases from the time of George I in Uttoxeter and Dorchester, to compel the magistrate to withdraw his objections.

In 1843 he supported Acton's interests by participating in the making of a rate of nine pence in the pound for the new railways then being so rapidly laid through Acton and its environs. These were levied from, for example, the Birmingham and London Railway Company on the basis of a rateable value of £1000 per mile of track and for the Great Western Railway Company at £700 per mile.

Land sales to the railway companies occupied him too. On 13th May 1836 he was party to an agreement with the Great Western Railway Co. to allow - if Parliament agreed - the railway to "pass over the public highways and Old Oak Common [in East Acton] and other waste land in the Parish". This came with the proviso that they paid £250 per acre for the land taken and built bridges and roads over any public thoroughfare they crossed.

Contemporary visitors to the White's home described a front terrace walk on the south side, from where there were views over fields and market gardens towards Chiswick and on a clear day the Surrey hills.

Horse-drawn coaches would roll into the grounds of Mill Hill House after passing by the eastern lodge, now demolished and replaced by De Courcey Court on Avenue Road, or the western lodge, which is still on the corner of Avenue Road and Gunnersbury Lane. Richard White's coachman was one John Alderton, of 237 High Street.

Along the southern edge of the estate, a natural barrier, possibly a grassed-over fortification from earlier times, also shown on 19th century maps as a stream or dyke, was built up into a high wall. It remains largely intact.

Mill Hill Park was described as "a beautiful estate, with a fine avenue of elms" running from Gunnersbury Lane, then known as Brentford Lane, to Acton. On Avenue Road, then called Mill Hill Park Avenue or just The Avenue, stood "the pretty cottage of Mr (Richard) Pilcher the dairyman", whose cattle grazed in Mill Hill fields. Walking to Acton High Street was known as "going into the village".

Fetes and Acton's first school treats were held in the grounds of White's great house, when children were "liberally regaled with fruit from the fine gardens". On one occasion, an eye-witness remembered, a lecture was given on bees in a corner of the grounds, with the speaker "surrounded by a net-work in which the subjects of his lecture were buzzing about him".

In 1841, according to the Census returns for that year, Acton Hill House and its dependent dwellings were occupied by White, then aged 70, Mary his wife, aged 50, and 17 others including a gardener, four agricultural labourers and a publican, who ran the Mill Hill Tavern, situated where it is today on the junction of Mill Hill Road and Gunnersbury Lane.

White died on 14 April 1847, leaving the property to his widow. His will stipulated that £50 should be set aside for his burial in "the churchyard of Acton" if he died "within 10 miles of that place". He was laid to rest in a vault in the north--eastern corner of St Mary's churchyard. White left to "my dear wife Mary, for her absolute use, plate, linen, household furniture, books, pictures, manuscripts and life effects - not including money - and all freehold and copyhold land in Acton". She continued to live at the house.

The 1851 Census shows a much depleted household, consisting of Mary White, her sister-in-law Lucy (widow of Richard's brother William) and six servants.

Developed by Willetts

Eventually, in 1859, Mary sold the estate to Walter Elliot Whittingham and the British Land Company. The fields north of today's Avenue Road, including Mill Hill Road, were bought for house building. A year later, the house itself and its grounds - the area south of Avenue Road - were taken by Messrs Edward C Buxton and J W Previte. Buxton, a mercantile wool broker, made it his family home, living there with - according to the 1861 Census - his wife Therese, who was from Leipzig in Germany, two children Therese and Edward, an unmarried sister-in-law Henrietta Oldenbourg, also from Leipzig, and a parlourmaid, cook housemaid, groom and gardener, the last of whom lived in the "Gardener's House" on the estate. On his death, Buxton was buried in the Churchfield Road cemetery in Acton, where a memorial to him stands today.

Still known as Acton Hill House, the property together with its grounds was sold in December 1877 to the builder and property developer William Willett.

Almost immediately, Willett laid out three new roads (Heathfield Rd, Avenue Crescent and Gardens) and began to build houses on the land. Number 1 Avenue Gardens, for instance, was advertised for leasehold "from Michaelmas 1877 at the annual ground rent of £8, with a coach house and stabling for two horses".

Richard White's 'great house' itself was partly demolished, leaving only one wing, where the dining room is believed to have been. It was renamed Hanmer House and refronted with an ornamental portico at the main entrance ('false-fronting'), while the west end was decorated with bargeboards (ornamental boards running along the gable-ends). This is largely how it is today. Many features of the original style remain unchanged, including paired glazing bars in the windows of the east end.

William Willett (1837 - 1913), the son of a Colchester coal merchant and his son, also William (1856 - 1915), made a "remarkable reputation", says the Dictionary of National Biography 1912 - 21, as builders of first-rate houses. These they built not only in Mill Hill Park but in South Kensington and Chelsea (Sloane Square and the Cadogan, Holland and Hans Place estates), Hampstead, Hove and Chislehurst. Their head office, the Willett Building, occupied the south side of Sloane Square.

The Willetts became the most prominent house builders in both Hampstead and Kensington in the late 19th century. In Hampstead they built on the prestigious Belsize Avenue, with its "sprinkling of carriage folk, businessmen and wealthy widows". The houses, some of which

had their own stables and coach houses, changed hands in some cases for over £3,000 - very high prices, when 6 to 8-bedroom houses in good areas could be had for £1,000 and under.

They built too on Eton College land in Hampstead, including what was in 1890 the Eton and Middlesex Cricket Ground. They used the shape of the cricket ground to create a self-contained layout - like that of Mill Hill Park - and established more than 100 houses in a "garden suburb" of leafy curving roads which were very different from the stiff, straight residential roads of the mid-19th century. Again, the parallel with Mill Hill Park is self-evident.

The Willetts netted a considerable fortune from their building businesses. Willett the elder transferred house property to his son worth over £500,000 in 1903, with mortgage liabilities reducing that sum by about half. By 1906 they had a joint liability-free fortune of at least £338,000.

High Quality Houses

The Willetts employed a permanent architect in their offices. The two principal ones were Harry B. Measures of Brighton who worked for them 1883-91 and Amos B. Faulkner, 1891 - 1940. From time to time they engaged outsiders (Ernest Newton for a development in Chislehurst, J J Stevenson for the Grosvenor estate in Hampstead). But they also took exceptional pains to oversee much of the constructional and design detail themselves. They strove in particular to achieve interest and variety in the shape and elevation of each house, creating deliberate contrasts between neighbouring houses and using good quality bricks, tiles and Portland stone and taking great care with interior planning.

In effect, the Willetts built homes in the upmarket style of the great Victorian architect Norman Shaw, but in production-line manner. Their preference for gables, tiled roofs, bay windows, red-brick exteriors and elegant ornamentation signalled a decisive abandonment of the previous uniformity of town housing.

For the Mill Hill Park development all these merits were enhanced by the participation of a master carpenter and joiner called Baker, to whose key supervisory role was ascribed "the excellent woodwork of the brick houses".

To assure a steady supply of high-quality internal and external fixtures and fittings, the Willetts set up in 1900 a factory in Parson's Green, SW (Rosamond Lane then, 2-6 Heathman's Road today), just south of the Parson's Green District line station, which supplied decorative and functional stonework, marble, woodwork and plasterwork for his own and other building developments.

A contemporary brochure for "William Willett's Workshops" advertises "marble floors, mantles, wall linings...", "internal and external stonework, stone mantel decorations..." and "oak panelling and ceiling decoration.... made from well-seasoned wood and with the best workmanship".

In some cases, the Willetts leased plots of land to local building firms to build the houses on. But they exercised close supervision to ensure high-quality results.

Their 234-paragraph Rule Book for foremen and contractors established rigorous standards. Rule 91 for example laid down criteria for plasterers' work: "See that the pricking up is perfectly dry before the floating is begun ...test the work with a long straight-edge when the setting is done." Rule 165 stipulated "All nails are to be steel...for best pitch pine floors use oval wire nails". Rule 212 strove for a policy of continuous improvement: "Report to Mr Willett every suggestion for improvements which may occur to you, or which may be made by persons when looking over houses".

In particular, the Willetts tried to create ample window light in the homes they built. Rule 43 of the Rule Book read: "In all houses see that the basement especially is well lighted, and that all basement and staircase windows are kept up as high as they possibly can be. All passage staircase and hall windows require great care and attention, so as to obtain all the light possible. In London houses the heads of all windows on the basement, ground and first floors must be kept high".

Daylight Savings Bill

Light was the keynote of the younger William Willett's life. He had an almost obsessive interest in it. He invented, or at least gave his name to, an electricity generator on the weights-and-pulleys principle of the grandfather clock, which would provide power to "20 light bulbs". A similar machine was the Willett Petrol-Air-Gas Light Generator, with its lighthouse logo, which appeared in 1914 and which was sold from the Willett head office in Sloane Square, also styled their "Petrol-gas showroom".

It was William Willett junior who first advocated putting the clocks forward to take advantage of extra daylight in the summer - in a word, British Summer Time. The idea apparently came to him as he cantered on horseback over Petts Wood near his Chislehurst home one early summer morning and noted that many blinds were still drawn although the sun was well up. The Willett Rule Book for his craftsmen (rule 221) enshrined the principle: "From October 1st to March 1st gradually shorten and lengthen the working hours, so that men work only while it is light".

He wrote a pamphlet ("The Waste of Daylight", 1907), which went into 20 editions, arguing for a change in the law. The pamphlet cited countries where clocks had already been seasonally adjusted, by 20 minutes in Australia for example and 16 in South Africa. Every year 210 extra hours of light would be gained if Britain and Ireland followed suit, Willett argued, with savings in gas, oil, electricity and candles worth £2.5 million a year. The proposal had its social and even military benefits: "The use of parks and open spaces will be doubled and opportunities for rifle practice created... [for which] the nation may some day have cause to be thankful".

There was a personal and spiritual side to it too: "Light is one of the great gifts of the Creator. While daylight surrounds us, cheerfulness reigns, anxieties press less heavily, and courage is bred for the struggle of life. Even the blind keenly realise the difference between light and darkness. They are always cheered by the former and depressed by the latter".

His proposal would mean people would enjoy more than a thousand days of extra light over their lifetimes: "At 28 a man will have gained a whole year of daylight, at 50 two years, at 72

three years". He lobbied MPs and urged others to do the same: "Every voter should send to every MP a postcard asking for a six-month trial".

The first Daylight Saving Bill was introduced in the House of Commons in 1908 but was defeated, despite support from the Home Secretary, Sir Winston Churchill. From outside the House came criticism. Farmers said that nothing would be gained because it would be impossible to start harvesting till the morning dew was off the grass. It was claimed that cricket matches would end too late for newspapers to print the results and that there would be disputes over hereditary succession if twins were born in the hour that the clocks were changed.

But King Edward VII made a sympathetic gesture by having the clocks at Sandringham put forward half an hour; and the South Western Railway claimed it could save £92,000 a year by making the most of the sunlight.

Even so, the Bill only became law in 1916, as an emergency wartime fuel-saving measure in the face of coal shortages - a year after Willett died, aged 58. Winston Churchill announced that a grateful nation would erect a statue to him - which was done near Chislehurst, his original home - and would lay sunflowers at its feet on the longest day of the year.

Chelsea Borough councillors planned to commemorate Willett's daylight-saving interests with a standard clock in Sloane Square or a pendant clock on the Willett Building, and to have his portrait painted and hung in the council offices.

'The Times' obituary, meanwhile, singled out the celebrity of his reputation as "a builder of beautiful houses" - one of which he owned and occupied in Avenue Crescent between 1887 and 1894, Hatfield House (number 16).

"He was an artist", the paper said, "and he inspired or improved architectural designs always with an eye to internal convenience as well as to the fitness of the exterior for its surroundings".

The building company established by Willett later split into two spheres of interest, construction and estate agency. One half is today part of the Trafalgar House group. Along with Cementation Construction Limited and Monk Construction, it forms Trafalgar House Construction (Regions), one of Britain's biggest regional construction companies. The other half has become part of Barnard Marcus, London estate agents.

Willett also operated a brickfield in Acton, from which bricks came for his property developments in Mill Hill Park and elsewhere in London. He made high quality red brick in coal-fired Scotch kilns at the Clifton Brick Works in Acton Vale between 1878 and 1891. Red brick in 1891 retailed at 42 shillings per 1,000, compared with 28 shillings for stock bricks, and Willett produced at least a million and a half per year. The output from his field, together with that of some 20 other Acton brickmasters, supplied much of the fine brickwork - moulded brick, hung tiles, terracotta decorations, glazed brick, polychromatic work - which distinguishes the park estates of West London. Besides Mill Hill Park, these include Springfield Park and Cumberland Park in Acton, Bedford Park in Chiswick and others.

Social and Cultural

Some of the flavour of life in Mill Hill Park 1890-1920 is conveyed by the household papers of a resident of 16 Heathfield Road, Charles Alexander Buckmaster, who was Assistant Secretary at the Board of Education, an Acton magistrate and Governor of Acton County School.

For instance, his accounts for the early 1880s show per annum payments of £2 and 5 shillings for 'inhabited house duty', £7.10 for gas from the Brentford Gas Company, £9.2.6 pence for coals and coke, £2.12.6 for the poor rate, which included poor relief, the police and the school board, 11 guineas for a £500 life insurance, £9.7.8 for '5 1/2 dozen of wine and spirits' and £1.13. over two years for the Park Keeper's Fund.

As chairman of the fund for a time, bills for the upkeep of the three roads passed through his hands. In 1904, one was for payments to the Grand Junction Waterworks, to workmen for repairing the roads, for "ballast and cartage" and for the cleaning of "channels and gullies".

He and his wife employed several domestic staff. There was a nursery governess for his young son - Fraulein Wenger from Germany 1897/8 - cooks, nurses and a housekeeper. Several others came from overseas. In 1890 two Norwegian girls worked as cook and housemaid, later leaving for North Dakota; Anna Borstelmann from Germany was "recalled" to tend her father's illness; two Swiss came from Vitznau in 1892, Ernestine Eysebeuys from northern France in 1897-9 and Teresa Feliziani from Italy in 1900. Others arrived from Holland, Jersey, Orkney and Ireland.

One, nurse Jeanie Forbes, left to set up a boarding house in Canonbury. Many seemed to get on well and stay; a few did not, to judge by Buckmaster's notes: "Dawson stayed two months - an old dear with no memory left"; "Cross is a singularly bad domestic - first cook, then demoted to housemaid"; "Bridget Dineen - an awful cook".

His sensitivity to culinary standards may have been because he was an expert; he lectured for the Universal Cookery and Food Association on such subjects as "Cooking for the People", "Making an Omelette" and "The Cultivation of the Potato".

An account of one of his lectures describes him as "discoursing on plain melted butter, boiled soles and sweet omelettes...on tapioca soup and cherry water ice". As a leading member of the National Training School of Cooking, he was unenthusiastic about English food but keen on French, writing: "The average Englishman and the savage are the only human beings to whom cooking means simply warming meat at a fire", and "When we pity the poor French for their constant revolutions, their want of a King, Lords and Commons, their irreligion, licentiousness and so on, let us at the same time remember that the Frenchman at any rate dines well every day of his life".

Buckmaster recorded the purchase of furniture, repairs and renovations. After buying the house and land in 1881 for £1,200, he invested in a walnut and satinwood bedroom suite for £52.10 in 1882. In the same year he had a gas fire installed for the first time, in his study.

1887 was momentous: he was burgled and got married. In 1889 gas was piped to all the bedrooms; in 1890 a wine cellar was excavated under the dining-room; in 1897 T. Nye of

Ealing painted the whole of the outside of the house for £12.14.0. Later he got T Poore and Son of Acton to repaper and paint the house and fit new 'felt carpets' instead of matting in the front bedroom and dressing-room.

A heavy stone lintel, placed above the front door of 16 Heathfield Road during his tenure, is still there. The massive ornamental B denotes the Battersea St. John's Trade School, whose apprentice stonemasons carved the work for the senior civil servant at the Board of Education.

His wife took a leading role in the social and cultural life which the community of Mill Hill Park built up for itself. Among her husband's papers is a card sent from 28 Avenue Crescent inviting her to a Shakespeare reading at Hanmer House one afternoon. The characters assigned to her in a performance of 'Julius Caesar' were Julius Caesar, Messala, Marullus, Lucilius and Dardanus. "Acts I and II to be prepared," the invitation concluded.

The Rural Character

By 1925, more houses were being built, this time by Francis W Ferris of 39 Willcott Road (Acton builders until today). Again, approval for the architectural design was given by The Willett Estates' chief architect Faulkner. The houses by Ferris were advertised at £795 upwards. The Park committee wrote asking him to make sure that restrictions on the development of the estate should be retained and its amenities preserved. Ferris agreed to hand out the Park's printed rules to prospective buyers of his houses (built on land conveyed to him by Messrs Willetts). Later he was asked to give the park keeper a gratuity for extra work occasioned by 30 new houses.

In the 1920s, the Park as an institution came under mild commercial and administrative pressure. Difficulties were anticipated in, for instance, clearing the roads of fallen leaves in autumn and moving them for burning to behind the houses on the north-south leg of Heathfield Road. In June 1926 the Park committee decided to write to the Acton borough engineer to ask if Acton Borough Corporation would do it for them. There were rumours in the *Acton Gazette* that Willett, who had now sold all but five houses on the estate, wanted the corporation to take over the upkeep of the three roads. But in December 1927 the council wrote that it would one do this when the roads had been "made up at the expense of the owners and approved by the borough engineers". The proposal was rejected by Willett's company - now run by the Daylight Saver's son, Basil Rupert (who had been offered but had turned down a knighthood for his father's work).

The committee continued to press hard to retain the "rural character" (1927) of the estate. They wrote for example to one John Rushill of 12 Avenue Crescent asking him to fit a silencer to his motorcycle. They told a Mr Martin of 13-15 Avenue Gardens that his proposal to put up six garages at the rear of these houses was a 'breach of conveyance'. They protested at the "unsatisfactory state of the paths left behind by the Telephone and Electric Light authorities".

By 1929, they were able to report that the "residential value and private character of the Estate" were still being retained. As late as December 1935, the park keeper fund was still in operation.

Tennis and Cricket

Mill Hill Park also had its private lawn tennis and cricket clubs.

The cricket club fielded two teams, Mill Hill Park and Mill Hill Park 2nd. In May 1901 the second team were to be found playing one match on grounds in Gunnersbury Park against Great Western Railway 2nd team and another against Boston Park. In 1903 a fixture was arranged with an army team, Shoeburyness Garrison. The club held benefit matches for Acton Cottage Hospital on Gunnersbury Lane, as well as social events such as dinners, concerts and 'Cinderellas' (annual dances). A ball at the Priory Constitutional Club in 1901 was described as "in every way satisfactory".

Formed on 20 June 1884, the tennis club had members from all three roads and from further afield - Holland Park, Hammersmith, Bedford Park, Ealing, even Fleet Street. Club colours were blue and white. The annual subscription for "gentlemen players was £1.1.0, for "lady players" 10/6d, and for "a gentleman and all the ladies of his family" £2.2.0.

The grounds were where Mill Hill Gardens are today. In the club's first years they included land where nos. 23-35 Heathfield Road were later built in 1909-12, the whole making a reverse L-shape bordered closely by trees. The club had four grass courts and a golf putting and croquet area in the lower portion of the ground. Ground rent of £5 was paid in 1888 to William Willett by the "captain" of the club, one Major Michod; in 1908 it rose to £10 and in 1909 to £20. Shears for cutting the grass on the courts were provided by T Poore, founder of today's Acton firm, as well as grass seed, wire, cord, "Eureka hooks", "Holland" for the tennis net tops and 15 yards of canvas for hammock chairs. Presidency of the club was held by the Reverend W Paton Hindley (1884) and later (1909) by Leopold de Rothschild of the banking family, who lived at Gunnersbury House.

The only evidence of a little local unpleasantness coming to ruffle the surface of Edwardian decorum is the exasperation expressed by neighbours when tennis balls repeatedly landed in their gardens. A letter from 12 Avenue Crescent in 1909 to the club committee read: "We have been very annoyed with some females coming here asking for tennis balls. Should anyone else call here asking for them, every ball found will be instantly consigned to our kitchen fire and destroyed...but so long as no further annoyance is caused, balls found here will be immediately thrown over [back into the courts]".

Like the cricket club, the tennis club held social events, among them an annual fete and "cafe chantant". One was reported in the *Acton Gazette*: "The grounds presented a most charming appearance, outlined with hundreds of fairy lights and Chinese lanterns. Chairs were arranged around little decorated tables, so guests could be seated or promenaded. Entertainments included performances by the Blue Viennese Band, a cornet solo, such recitations as 'The telegram' by Miss Florence Watson, and a special mime act, the Living Marionettes."

Another cafe chantant in July 1901 featured a cornet solo, "The Queen of the Earth", a musical sketch, "Our Cycling Club", a duet by Miss Violet Ellis and Mr B W H Carter, "Life's dream is o'er, farewell", a violin and mandolin duet, a song "The scent of the lilacs" by Miss Musgrave, and a humorous song, "The languid man" by Mr Franklyn Vernon. Refreshments were provided by Mr Doust of High Street, Acton.

Many of the residents of the Park attended All Saints' Church in Bollo Lane (a high Anglican church); others went to the Baptist Church in Bollo Bridge Road; others again to the Methodist Church in Gunnersbury Lane or the Berrymead Gospel Hall at the bottom (east end) of Avenue Road.

In the late 1930s the population consisted chiefly of the 'professional and middle classes', including teachers and owners of laundries in South Acton. Several were grammar school teachers; one, of 15 Avenue Gardens, was able to employ a housekeeper and send her children to private schools, Haberdashers and Clement Danes.

Some households had groceries delivered from Baker's stores in Acton High Street and from Sainsbury's of Ealing twice a week.

One pleasant rural aspect of the garden of 45 Avenue Gardens, where the town houses of Roman Close now stand, was the free-range hens and chickens reared there.

There were still no pavements on the estate, but gravel running from side to side of the roads, lending them a sense of greater width. Next to no. 49 Avenue Gardens ("Nettleby"/"Florine", now demolished) and where the Avenue Gardens town houses lie today, lived Margaret Dovaston at no. 51. Dovaston (1884 - 1954) was a versatile and successful artist best known for genre paintings of great accuracy set in the 18th or early 19th centuries, but who also produces other historical scenes and recorded both World Wars. The very substantial studio, now also demolished, had a large rooflight to facilitate her work and a gallery inside which featured in many of her paintings. It was designed by her brother, the architect John Dovaston, with wooden cladding in the style of a Canadian log house and an array of French windows. It was approved for construction on behalf of the Willett estate in 1924. She moved into Mill Hill Park in 1925, living there until her death.

Second World War

During the Second World War, the Park suffered bomb damage. Soon after the 'blitz' started, houses in Heathfield Road where James Welch Court now stands were reduced to rubble as bombers tried to destroy the railway depot and engineering works near Acton Town station. The ornate gate pillar on the east side of Heathfield Road was lost at the same time. An anti-aircraft battery with a 'Big Bertha' gun was stationed in Gunnersbury Park for defence purposes and the noise from it was easily audible in the Park. An air-raid warden's post was set up on the edge of what was then 51 Avenue Gardens (today Roman Close) under a large ash tree. A number of incendiary bombs were also dropped, although no great damage was done.

At the rear of numbers 51, 53 and 57 Avenue Gardens, a breach was made in the wall between the Park and South Acton to act as an emergency escape route in the event of bombing. Some residents used it to visit shops in South Acton for items out of stock in Acton itself, notably children's tonics and medicines like haliborange and rose-hip syrup, available from the chemists Egglestaff and Oliphant. Rationed to three bottles a shop, such commodities had a slower uptake in South Acton because some residents were, according

to contemporary observers, "exceptionally poor and ignorant about the health effects of vitamins".

The breach was also used by employees at a vitreous enamelling factory just the other side of the wall as a short cut to and from work; when the factory was pulled down, the opening was filled in by the local authority.

Many of the houses became vacant during the war as residents, notably civil servants, moved out of London. The houses were requisitioned to accommodate families made homeless by air raids on other parts of Acton.

After the war, the railway line connecting Acton Town Underground and South Acton mainline station was closed. Earlier, a three-coach train known as the "jinny" ran regularly between them.

Again, after the war, several members of the expatriate community of Poland settled in the Park; they had left their country for London after Britain declared war on Germany in accordance with a UK-Polish non-aggression pact. Just after 1945, three Polish army generals were living in Heathfield Road, at numbers 17, 20 and 40.

Since then, many residents have put considerable resource and energy into preserving the original character of their properties and upholding the appeal and quality of Mill Hill Park.

Let's hope they long continue to do so. The Park lives on!

More about Richard White

May 2009 was the 200th anniversary of the formation of the Mill Hill Estate in Acton. It owes its shape and layout to Richard White, whose purchase at auction of various plots of land gave birth to the estate.

Richard White's family came from Hampshire, where he was probably born in about 1767. He was the second son of William and Ann White, who lived for a while at Heckford, where his sister was born, and then in Southampton. As well as his Acton property, Richard owned some land - probably inherited - at East Meon in Hampshire.

Richard was related to the famous naturalist Gilbert White of Selborne, also in Hampshire. Gilbert's brother Benjamin (the bookseller and publisher of the phenomenally successful *A Natural History of Selborne*) was named as executor in Richard's father's will. Although we do not know Richard's exact relationship with Gilbert, they were probably distant cousins.

The White family was relatively prosperous and it is likely that Richard went to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1785 and then went on to study law at the Inner Temple in 1790. He became a very successful solicitor and worked for many years in Essex Street, off the Strand and opposite the Old Bailey, in partnership with several other solicitors including a nephew, Edward Tylee. He won a silver medal in 1812 for inventing a method of filing documents on a spike which meant that any attempts to tamper with them could be readily detected.

Richard was a key founder of the Law Institution, the forerunner of the Law Society. He was also a member of the founding committee of the Law Society itself, and his name is mentioned in their first Royal Charter. He was their President in 1833 when aged 65 – the same year he married for the second time in Paris (see below). According to his will he was also the Proprietor of the Law Life Assurance Society.

In old age Richard's portrait was painted by the fashionable and prolific portrait painter George Richmond. No fewer than 170 of Richmond's portraits are now in the National Portrait Gallery, but sadly they do not include the one of Richard White, which was bequeathed to Richard's nephew William White. We would love to know if this still survives somewhere.

In May 1809 Richard purchased lands at Acton and this was what shaped the Mill Hill estate. He built a large house here very soon after, and laid out an avenue (now Avenue Road) with a lodge at either end. The east wing of his large house survives as 11 Avenue Crescent. One of the lodges survives (though much changed and enlarged into a two storey house) on the corner of Avenue Road and Gunnersbury Lane.

Richard lived here in 'Acton Hill' for 40 years until his death in 1849, aged 81, from cancer. He is buried in our local church, St Mary's in the centre of Acton, in a vault in the north-east corner of the churchyard.

He married twice. We do not even know the name of his first wife, who had died before 1833. In 1822 she is believed to have purchased some land in Oldham Terrace for use as a school - the tiny school building and inscription of 1837 are still there, set back between the Clare Inn and the new mosque. There is no mention of any children in Richard's will.

As a widower of 65, Richard married again, to a wealthy and well-connected widow, Mary Hatsell (née Matthews). The marriage took place in the British Embassy Chapel in Paris in 1833. Mary had two children by her first husband, but they both died fairly young - her daughter Sophia lived at Mill Hill House with her stepfather Richard White from 1833 until she died in 1847, when she was in her late 20s. Sophia, her brother, and their mother Mary, are all buried in Kensal Green Cemetery.

After Richard's death in 1849, Mary stayed on at Acton until 1859 when she moved to Clifton near Bristol, and died there in 1860. She left £160,000, much of this fortune deriving from her first husband's uncle who had been Clerk to the House of Commons. The Acton estate was sold in 1859 and plots were auctioned off for building on soon afterwards. The estate was rapidly built up in the decades which followed, much of it due to William Willett, who lived at 16 Avenue Crescent for 12 years and is chiefly remembered today as the originator of the Daylight Saving scheme which entails changing our clocks twice a year.

The Authors

The two authors of this history, Nigel Middlemiss and Jerome Farrell, are members of the Mill Hill Park Residents' Association. Nigel Middlemiss wrote the following sections in 1992: *Origins; Bronze Age Acton; The Second Millennium; Acton's Cherry Orchards; White's Beautiful Estate; Developed by Willetts; High Quality Houses; Daylight Savings Bill; Social and Cultural; The Rural Character; Tennis and Cricket; Second World War*. Jerome Farrell contributed the final section: *More about Richard White* following the 200th anniversary, in 2009, of the formation of Mill Hill Park.