

JUDITH GOODMAN looks at

AN 'ANCIENT RELIC' AND ITS FUTURE – 100 YEARS AGO

On 7 September 1912 this letter appeared in the *Wimbledon Borough News*:

'THE NORMAN ARCH AT MERTON ABBEY

'To the Editor

'SIR - ... Since the letter calling attention to the dilapidated state of the old Norman gateway in the wall at Merton Abbey ... I have been in communication with several gentlemen interested in antiquarian objects, and there is no doubt this ancient relic will be now restored and protected... Opinions are divided as to whether the old arch shall be allowed to remain in situ or transferred to another place, but I believe I am right in saying that the gateway will be added to the new church¹, High Path ... there being a similar arch in the north side of Merton Church. Some doubt is expressed as to whether the whole of the structure dates from the time when the abbey was erected ... Was this gateway part of the Priory? I have always thought that the outer or framework of the arch is of comparatively later date – say about 16th or 17th century – because of the loose way in which it is built, fragments of red tiles being very conspicuous in the upper part, and the work being altogether very slovenly. There can be no doubt however, that the arch itself is an old Norman structure.

Henry N. LeDuc

14 Gladstone-road, Wimbledon

September 4th, 1912'

Mr LeDuc was a frequent correspondent with the local newspapers, usually on historical or antiquarian matters. The arch that concerned him was not the rebuilt one that now stands between St Mary, Merton, and the vicarage. That arch would not be uncovered until the demolition of Abbey House in 1914. No, Mr LeDuc's concern was for the arch in the old wall at Station Road.

So, in the *Wimbledon Borough News* of 19 October 1912, this article appeared:

'ANCIENT GATEWAY OF MERTON

ABBEY

ITS PRESERVATION DISCUSSED

'A gathering of those interested in the preservation of the old gateway near High-path, Merton, which is about all that there is left of the once famous Merton Abbey was held at the Church Room² opposite the Church on Wednesday evening, among those present being Mr Wilkinson,³ one of the churchwardens of Merton, Mr Richardson Evans,⁴ Alderman Simpson, Mr Cooper, the Wimbledon Borough Surveyor, Mr LeDuc, ... and several Merton residents.

'The Vicar, the Rev. J.E. Jagger, who presided, said it was evident that if the arch was to be preserved at all something must be done. The question was what steps were to be taken? Was it to be preserved on the spot or removed to some other place?

'Mr. Burke Downing,⁵ who exhibited interesting plans and drawings to illustrate his remarks, presented a report, from which it appeared that the arch was of ancient stones, and the supporting pieces were of ancient stones, but the abacus⁶ was of modern age. The roadway, since the erection of the arch, had been raised 18 inches, and the arch was much out of perpendicular and required supporting. He gave reasons for believing that the stones of the arch and supports dated from the early times of the Abbey. The stones were soft Surrey stones, like most of the remains of the Abbey buildings found from time to time... If it had always occupied its present site they could do no more than guess to what part of the building it had belonged... He would suggest that it be removed and re-erected between the churchyard and the Vicarage grounds in the form of a gateway and he estimated the cost of this at £120.⁷ An alternative suggestion was that the arch and its supports, independently of the gateway, be removed and built up against the walls of the church. This would probably cost about £60.

'Several questions were asked, Mr. Vigers⁸ and others inquiring if it were not possible to preserve the arch where it stood, but it was pointed out by Mr. LeDuc, who said he had himself done his utmost to protect the arch from the depredations of youthful hooligans of the district, that it was quite impossible to protect it as it stood. It appeared that the boys had made steps to climb up it, and even a railing would help rather than hinder them, as on account of the proximity of the arch to the roadway the railing would have to be placed quite close to the arch. If left where it was, the arch, it was said, would soon be destroyed.

'Mr. Vigers then suggested that the arch might be moved to fill one of the gaps in the wall – part of the Abbey wall – near the Wandle.⁹ The piece of ground there was very pretty and the National [*sic*] Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings might be ready to help.

'Mr. Richardson Evans emphasised what had been said as to the impossibility of leaving the arch where it stood, and he further stated that the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings would object to the arch being placed as suggested in a gap in the wall as falsifying history. He considered that it would be

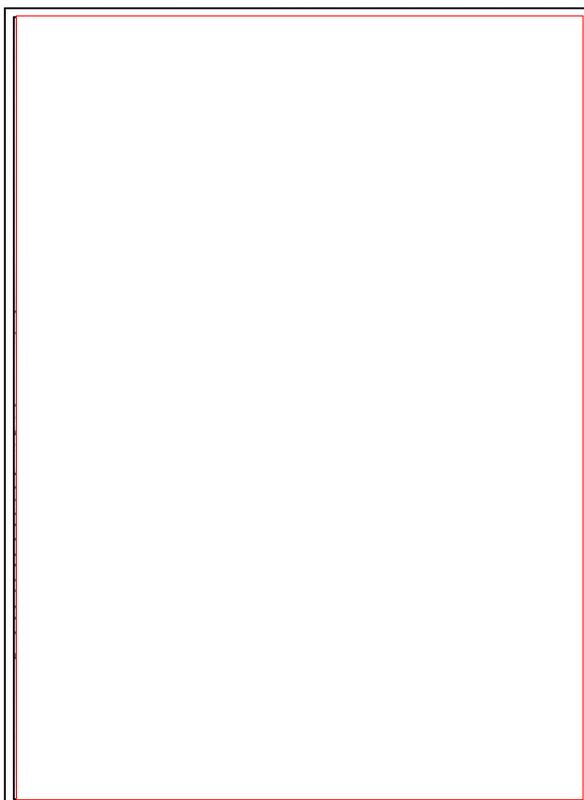
fitting that the arch which belonged to the Abbey, should be placed where the Vicar would pass through it day by day for the services in the church.

‘... Several gentlemen expressed the opinion that it would be impossible to raise £120, but Mr. Richardson Evans suggested that Merton College, Oxford, which owed so much to Merton Abbey, might be appealed to for help, as well as residents of Wimbledon and Merton.

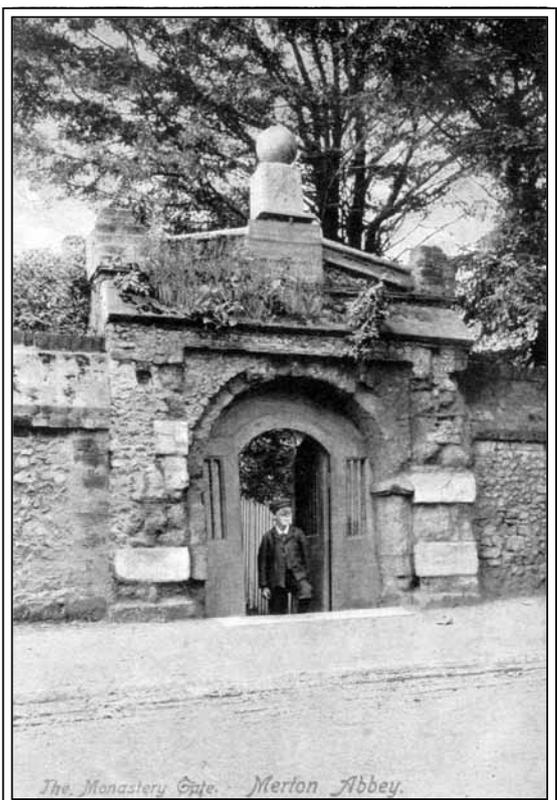
‘... After further discussion a resolution was carried, on the motion of Mr. Johnson,¹⁰ seconded by Mr Whitmore,¹¹ expressing the opinion that the arch could not be protected in its present position and should be removed to a place of safety in the vicinity of the church. A committee was formed to take the matter in hand, consisting of the Vicar, Messrs. Downing, LeDuc, Johnson, Whitmore, Thurgood,¹² Rumble,¹³ Bateson,¹⁴ Maton,¹⁵ Liberty,¹⁶ Jackson,¹⁷ Piers, Druce,¹⁸ Richardson Evans, Sir Francis Fox,¹⁹ Mrs. Quartermaine²⁰ and Mrs. Wells.²¹’

And what dramatic rescue of the arch did this high-powered committee achieve? Not very much, it would seem, as the rather battered arch survived in situ until recent times, when its stones were ‘stored’ for safekeeping, and lost. Some of the timber from the doorway was rescued and is housed in the Wandle Industrial Museum. A few feet from its original site stands a bland pastiche arch of 1988.

1. St John the Evangelist
2. Old Church House, demolished 1923
3. An error. It was Mr Whitmore. See below.
4. Of The Keir, Common West Side, Wimbledon. A distinguished pioneer of conservation.
5. Henry Philip Burke-Downing was an architect. He had designed Singlegate and Pelham Schools, and would go on to do St Barnabas in Gorringe Park Avenue, and, on a smaller scale, the Merton war memorial.
6. The flat slab forming the top of the capital
7. This would be what was done with the arch discovered in 1914 when Abbey House was demolished.
8. Allan Vigers lived at Spring House, on the site of the present flats of the same name. He was an architect and designer.
9. Presumably the remains of the wall beside the Pickle
10. Ernest William Johnson was the Merton boys’ school headmaster.
11. William Whitmore of 223 Kingston Road was a churchwarden.
12. Henry Thurgood of Merton Cottage was the other churchwarden.
13. B T Rumble was the secretary of Merton Park Estate Company Ltd.
14. Dr William Bateson FRS was the director of the John Innes Horticultural Institution in Merton Park.
15. Possibly representing the Mackrell estate, which owned the land. The Matons were family connections.
16. Arthur Lasenby Liberty was the proprietor of the Regent Street shop and the textile printing works at Merton Abbey.
17. Probably Thomas Graham Jackson (he was created a baronet in 1913), well-known architect, who lived at Eagle House, Wimbledon.
18. Piers has not been identified, but Druce was the Wimbledon Borough Surveyor.
19. Fox had just been knighted. He was a prominent engineer, mainly of railways and bridges.
20. Widow of H G Quartermain (no final ‘e’), Merton Park architect.
21. Widow of John Wells of Merton Farm, Kingston Road



Left: Drawing dated September 1912 by H P Burke-Downing. Reproduced courtesy of the Wimbledon Museum of Local History.



Right: Presumably not a ‘youthful hooligan’, but the photographer’s boy. Edwardian postcard (JG)