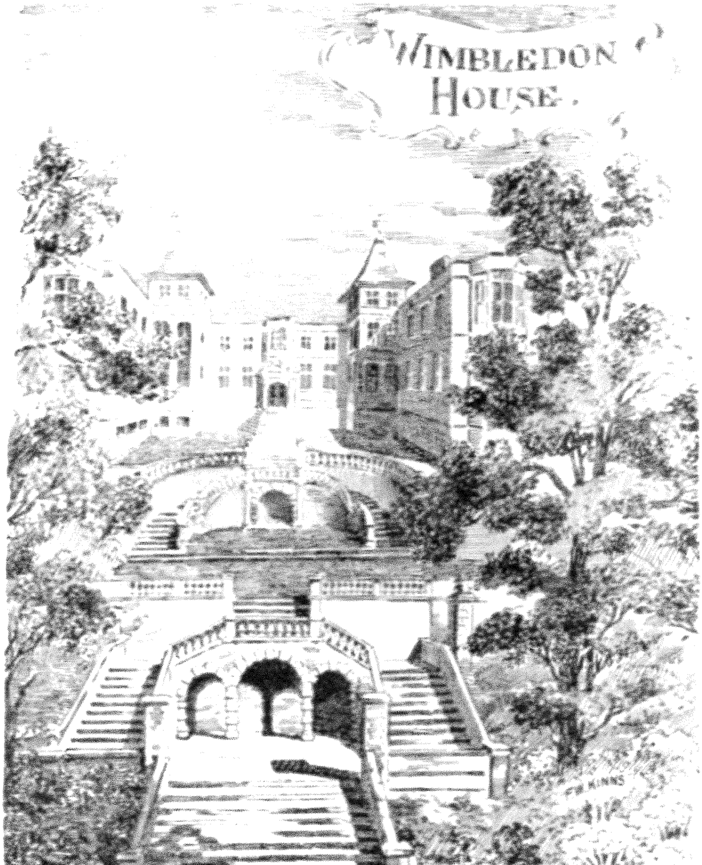
‘BYGONE WIMBLEDON and MERTON’

By

HERBERT M. ELLIS

1906


WIMBLEDON HOUSE.
F.W. KINNS

"BYGONE WIMBLEDON and MERTON"

BY

HERBERT M. ELLIS, F.S.I.

(*Member of the Surrey County Council for the Merton Division*).

All the excuse I plead for this glance back along the Road of Time is the desire to help forward those who have fallen by the way. Do not therefore lend your copy but lend your friend half-a-crown to buy one.

H. M. E.

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BYGONE WIMBLEDON

HOW few of us realize how far the present is governed by the past, the actions of the present being the outcome of the actions of those we call dead; nothing is dead, all is living, we who move to-day are carrying out the unuttered thoughts and projected actions of those who are past, and it is the scarcely realized knowledge of these facts that compel all but the most shallow-minded of mankind to take an interest in what has gone before; grant this, and grant also that a knowledge of past events helps us and guides us in our efforts for the future, and I feel my apology is accepted for telling you as well as I can know it what has gone before in this almost absorbed suburb, absorbed in the greatest, richest, poorest, most wicked, most good agglomeration of humanity that the world has ever known.

To the vast majority of its 40,000 inhabitants 'Wimbledon' just signifies a big railway station, a hill thickly sprinkled with shops and villas, and a lawn tennis championship. How different the scene and times when 1,200 years ago, or thereabouts, 'Wymbald' or 'Wibba' a Saxon chieftain, and his warriors, found their way through marsh and forest up the old Roman road, now The Ridgway, to the plateau forming what we know as the Common. Well may they have thrown down their shields, for a pleasanter, and more important still, a safer, resting place could scarcely be hoped for. To the north stretched away the Common very much as it does now, but with thicker undergrowth, more of a forest, and teeming with game; to the south and east steep forested slopes sheltering the wild boar and wolf, merged into an immense marsh horizoned by the Kentish hills and Surrey downs, while to the west a deeply wooded slowly sloping ridge tailed away irregularly towards the river at Kingston. Such, by a concensus of opinion is what we may fairly conceive was the origin of this very much lived in suburb; a military vantage ground—so it began and such it must always remain. Wymbald came, saw, and was satisfied, and 'Wymbaldune' remains, 'dune' of course being the Saxon word for 'hill.' Spelling in those days, and many days after, was a matter in which each one pleased himself, but in an old record of Edward the Confessor's time we find the name of the place spelt, perhaps accidentally, exactly as we spell it now.

All the early records make mention of a fierce battle fought in the year 568 between

Keanlin, King of the West Saxons and Ethelbert, King of Kent, in which the Kentish men were hopelessly routed, and their King, together with two of his generals, Cnebba and Oslac, slain. Some historians cast doubt on this being the site, and prefer to assign the scene of the conflict to a place near Devizes in Wiltshire. I incline to Wimbledon for this reason—England was at this era a patchwork of kingships and overlordships, each one supreme within his own little sphere, and always jealous of, and spoiling for a fight with another, therefore for the Kent kinglet to have got an army through to Wiltshire, and be still in a position to offer battle, argues a strength and hardihood scarcely justified by the result of this battle. Holinshed mentions this battle as being the first occasion on which the Saxons engaged in civil warfare after their entry into England.

Of days prior to the Conquest history affords us very few glimpses of Wimbledon and Merton, but the relations and positions of these two settlements; one could not call them towns or even villages; appear to me to have been strikingly analogous to those of London and Westminster in old time. London, the early Roman citadel, walled and guarded as a military post, and the centre of the social life; Westminster removed but two miles or so in point of distance, connected by a single causeway, and yet its life so separate and distinct, with its abbey among the marsh lands, and its thoughts intent on nought but priestly state-craft and things spiritual. So appear Wimbledon and Merton to have been in a smaller way.

One or two little peeps, however, we get which may be considered as above mere tradition, for up to the early decades of the nineteenth century there existed on the Common twenty-three barrows or mounds, burial-places of Pre-Roman date. These were situated irregularly, but within a short distance of one another near the road over the Common, from Kingston to London; the largest about 28 feet in diameter. In the eighteenth century they were partially explored by 'a gentleman from London,' presumed on good grounds to have been the well known antiquarian, Dr. Stukeley. The yield was not great as regards value, nor do the few urns of pottery containing ashes add to our knowledge. The barrows were no doubt the burial-places of an ancient people, probably Ancient Britons; the rest of their story is soon told, they were used to mend the King's highway. The only remnant of very early times, which still drags out an emaciated existence, is the spot now called 'Cæsar's Camp.' Cæsar himself probably had as little to do with the making of it as the devil had to do with the Dyke at Brighton. Cæsar and the devil often get credit in traditional history for more than they are entitled. We are always anxious in these days to ticket everything and classify it, no matter how problematical the classification may be. In earlier times the place used to be known by the country folk as 'The Rounds,' a good non-committal signification. As a matter of fact the encampment was until not many years ago an oval earthwork fortress, the centre raised and ramparted with outer breast-works and surrounded by a ditch varying from 10 to 15 feet in depth. Unfortunately, however, a question arose between the owner of the land and the Common Conservators, as to the grant of a right of way. The Conservators did not see their way to grant this, and in a fit of pique the owner had the whole of the great ditch filled in. So stupidity is continually destroying that which might otherwise defy time and the elements. The Camp may originally have been the work of Britons, Saxons, Danes, or Romans, but whichever it was it would certainly appear from the different weapons, fragments of urns, etc. found that each in their turn occupied it as a camping ground. In 1810 two regiments of Life Guards were quartered here prior to their departure to the Continental wars which ended in Waterloo, and Wimbledon Common was the last earthen pillow on which many of those brave bearded veterans slept in their native land. We still go from Wimbledon to Waterloo, but with aims more prosaic. Near this spot, up to the end of the 18th century stood the gallows, that gruesome ornament which was considered a necessary adjunct to the beauty of every heath or open ground, or cross roads.

Now let us leave our local highlands and push our way down the track. The turnpike era has not dawned here yet, the King's liege subjects still, except when their way lay along the old Roman military roads, have to content themselves with pack horse tracks and footpaths. Down we go through the oaks and underwood near the brow to the more sparsley timbered lower slopes, and pick our way, guided by the sound of "Angelus" bell, across the marsh that separates us from the great Abbey of Merton.

Merton or Meretown, in the derivation of which name we find no difficulty, signifying as it does simply the town of the Mere or lake, of which the Mill Pond recently purchased for dedication to the public is probably the remainder, seems to have had quite as early an origin as its sister town on the hill. It certainly had a Pre-Conquest existence, not only in name, but as a civilized community. I cannot positively date the earliest mention I find of it, but it is well authenicated, and relates to a feud existing in the family of Kenwulf, King of the West Saxons. A fair Saxon damsel was the cause of his undoing, for while on a visit of dalliance to her he was treacherously attacked and slain by Kindard, who resented, or was jealous of his amour. Previous to the Conquest the Manor was vested in Earl Harold, and passed amid the spoils of the Battle of Hastings to William the Conqueror. At this early period it boasted a Parish Church, and to this fact no doubt it owed in some measure its choice as an ecclesiastical centre.

Merton possessed certainly one indispensable requirement for every religious house, that is, proximity to a river, a river too, that with its shallow, clear stream, afforded excellent trout fishing. Our Augustine brother was not, we may be sure, insensible to such gastronomic advantages, and in all probability, the lamprey, another piscatorial delicacy, was to be found lurking under the big stones of the stream; not to mention the every day fare of pike, perch, roach and eels, from the meres and dykes of the marshlands. Add to this the opportunities afforded for obtaining all the lesser kinds of game, wild fowl in abundance, and good pasturage for their cattle. Lastly the proximity to London—then no doubt easily reached on the bosoms of Wandle and Thames, untrammelled by weir or wheel—and it is easy to believe that Merton was a pleasanter place of residence then than it is now.

In the year of our Lord 1115, scarce fifty years after the battle of Hastings, Merton, then the property of Henry I., was sold by him, together with its manor and entire revenue, to Gilbert the Norman, at the price of £100 in silver and 6 marks in gold. Gilbert's intentions were pious, and he at once set about to found an Abbey, which he dedicated to, and placed under the special protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary. His first buildings were of timber, and hither he inducted Robert Bayle, subprior of a monastic house of Augustine Canons at Huntingdon, who took up his residence with a few brothers. Two years later a new site close by was chosen, the permanent flint and stone buildings, of which the remnants still remain were erected, and in 1117 the prior and fifteen Canons entered into possession, passing in procession singing 'Salve Dies.' Meanwhile the revenues had to be provided, but in those days this seems to have been the simplest part of the whole business. It is impossible to give here anything like a complete enumeration of the benefices, lands, rights and privileges gleaned by the new Abbey. Beginning with a mill of 60s. rent, two carracutes of land

and certain tenants in villenage, funds flowed in grandly; the revenues of parishes from Berry Pomeroy, in far off Devon, to Harrietsham, in Kent, including many in the immediately surrounding counties, were assigned to it, and many folk of high rank and wealth joined the brotherhood. In 1121 some fine new buildings of stone were erected, Gilbert the founder, laying the foundation stone, as the chronicler says 'with very great solemnitie.'

The ordinations of the Abbey of Merton, drawn up by William of Wykeham, for the proper government of the Abbey, are now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, together with the Chronicles of the Abbey, and probably form the completest of any such records existing in England. The Canons seem to have been for the most part very merry men of God, fond of manly as well as spiritual exercises, as it was found necessary to prohibit them from hunting, or keeping dogs for sport within the Priory, 'on pain of being restricted to a diet of bread and ale during six holy days.' A little later Henry de Woodlock Bishop of Winchester, to whose authority Merton was alone accountable, by special grant, visited the Priory and rated the Canons roundly 'for that they did not attend Mass as they should do, but did spend their time hunting with bows and arrows;' and Henry of Winchester evidently understood men, for he prescribes certain punishments, all of which are designed to appeal to the heart by way of the stomach, the severest punishment to be a diet of bread and water, and the lightest a diet of bread, ale and pulse. The above strictures, however, probably applied to some of the gayer and more flippant spirits, for Merton stands out pre-eminent at this time as the place where the great prelate and statesman, Thomas à Becket was educated. Here also Walter de Merton was born and bred, who became afterwards Bishop of Rochester, and Chancellor of England in 1274, and immortalized as the founder of Merton College, Oxford. He died in 1277, and his body found rest in the cathedral of his diocese. The considerable property at Malden, Kingston and elsewhere hereabouts, belonging to Merton College, still testifies to Walter's munificence, though we do not remember any instances of these absentee landlords having helped the charities of the places whose lands swell their revenues.

In 1232 a quarrel between Henry III. and his Prime Minister, Hubert de Burgh, resulted in the latter fleeing to Merton for sanctuary. Henry thereupon called the Lord Mayor to his aid, and required him to proceed to Merton with a band of armed citizens and bring Hubert by force before a council at Lambeth. On the intercession, however, of the Earl of Chester and the Bishop of Chichester, Henry was pacified and Hubert pardoned. In 1236 Court and Parliament assembled here with due pomp. Ambassadors were received, and our somewhat sad suburb became for a time the capital of the kingdom.

During this sojourn of the court at Merton were framed the famous Statutes of Merton. It was desired by the Prelacy to alter the then existing, and still existing law, and to relieve from disabilities children whose parents married subsequent to their birth. Do not fear that I am going to discourse on a subject fraught with so many arguments, but it indeed seems sad that the mutual jealousies of Prelate and Baron should have prevented for all these centuries such a common act of human justice. However, so it was, and the Barons' unanimous declaration, 'Nolumus leges Angliæ mutare' has rung down the ages as a stentorian and menacing assertion of their determination to rule.

Merton how reached to the pinnacle of its fame, it became what was known as a Mitred Abbey, and as such its Prior had a seat in Parliament—now it only has a Parish Council. Its charters were confirmed by successive monarchs, and thenceforward its course appears to have been quietly progressive. Here and there no doubt a breeze ruffled its calm, as when Robert, Archbishop of Canterbury, visited it in 1304 to make enquiry into thirty-seven articles of complaint against Edmund de Herrierd the Prior. Apparently the Archbishop came suddenly, and poor Edmund had no time to put his house in order, for he 'resigned.' In all thirty-three Priors watched over the fortunes of Merton Abbey, beginning with Robert Bayle in 1115, and terminating with John Bowley, who in response to Henry VIII's summons, thought discretion the better part of valour, and surrendered the Priory to the King on April 16, 1538. As a reward for this treacherous complacency Bowley received a pension of £200 per annum for life, and was made a Canon of Windsor. He died on August 15, 1558—'Thus passeth away the glory of Merton.'

The revenues of Merton Abbey at the date of its surrender amounted to the very considerable sum of £1,039 . 5 . 3 per annum, without considering the votive offerings continually pouring in, which no doubt swelled up to a good round figure. The rest of the history of Merton is a history of slow decay and degradation from its former high estate. Queen Elizabeth granted the estates to Gregory Lovel, whose wonderfully perfect tomb, with kneeling effigies of Gregory, his two wives and six children, still adorns

Merton chancel; from this family it passed to Lord Howard of Effingham, the great Catholic admiral, who assisted so much in the destruction of the Armada. Lord Howard appears to have held it at a quit rent, and this quit rent formed part of the dower of Henrietta Maria, queen of Charles I.; poor Henrietta of course lost it among her other goods and chattels at the revolution, and during the ensuing civil wars the Abbey was seized and held by the Cromwellians. It seems, however, never to have played any warlike part in the struggle, the mere presence of the Parliamentary Ironsides being found sufficient to calm any ultra-royalist feelings in the surrounding district. Its beautiful buildings were considerably demolished about this time, Pepys asserts that the bells of its chapel were removed to the belfry of St. Mary Overy in the City of London.

In 1680 the Abbey buildings and lands were advertised to be let, and described as containing several large rooms and a very fine chapel. Vertue visited the Abbey in 1730, and says that the chapel was built in a style of architecture prevalent in England antecedent to the Conquest. I have only been able to find one engraving of the chapel, and that a miserable thing surrounded by ordinary wooden sheds that no real idea of its dimensions or architecture can be obtained.

As the star of Merton's glory sets, Wimbledon appears for the first time to raise itself into a place of considerable social importance. Hitherto it has remained little more than a collection of about 40 to 50 mud and wattle houses—habitations of very modest pretensions—inhabited by the commoners, peasant farmers, shepherds, etc. Not that sheep seem to have been plentiful, pigs appear to have been far more common; in fact the records all go to support my contention that our forefathers owed more to the pig and chicken than to the ox, and that 'the roast pork of old England' might well be substituted for the beef tradition.

The Manor of Wimbledon was originally merged in that of Mortlake, or 'Mortelage' and the earliest owners of it as a separate Manor seem to have been the Archbishops of Canterbury. In the reign of Henry III. Robert de Wymbledon held lands from the see of Canterbury valued at one-third of a Knight's fee. In the ownership of the see of Canterbury it remained for centuries. The Archbishops had a residence at Mortlake, and their interest in Wimbledon seems to have been limited to getting what revenues they could out of it. The records of the Manor have been well kept, and afford us many little details of interest. At the succession of a new Lord of the

Manor each tenant or commoner of the Manor had the compulsory privilege of making what was called 'a gift' of £6 . 13 . 4, called 'Palfrey *money*' *or* 'saddle silver.' Probably a payment towards the maintenance of the Archbishops' stable, in Carlyle's 'Past and Present' we read of the 'Rep silver' payable to the Abbot of St. Edmundsbury, in lieu of service in reaping the Abbey cornfields. They had also to provide and keep in order the standard weights and scales, the stocks and the whipping-post. For the most part, however, the Court Rolls consist of endless recitations of fines and punishments such as: 'On Friday, on the feast of St. Martin, in the 3rd year of Edward IV., Peter Vercary is cited before the court for that he permitted his pigs to go at large upon the Common unrung, to the prejudice of the Lord and his tenants, and that this same Peter collected the acorns of the Lord and carried them away without licence, also wood of the Lord and carried it off; against William Wight and his wife Isabella it is urged that not being tenants of the Manor, did unjustly collect crabs and wyldyngs (wild apples),' and at a Court held on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross they are duly summoned, and as duly punished. In fact it never seems to have occurred to either party to entertain any plea but that of guilty. The misdemeanors of which these rolls afford such fruitful evidence were over agistment, firing the underwood, taking timber and furze, and many other similar offences, and were invariably purged by fines.

By the seventeenth century these amercements for petty thefts gave place to the more serious questions of trespass and enclosement, and during the 17th, 18th and early 19th century, in spite of many actions at law, much land was either wrongfully enclosed, or granted for little or no consideration.

Windmills in days gone by appear to have been common round about Wimbledon, the present representative of all these stands, to the best of my belief, on the site granted to John Watney on August 13, 1799. It is difficult to realize that up to within a few decades all the flour we consumed was ground by wind or water power.

Wimbledon Common in the eighteenth century witnessed one of the most beautiful episodes in the life of a great man, when Linnaeus, a Scandinavian by birth, and the greatest botanist of any age, saw here for the first time the wild gorse in full bloom, saw, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning eloquently expresses it in 'Aurora Leigh'—

> 'Every common bush afire with God.'

and in an ectacsy of delight knelt and thanked the Almighty for the good and glorious sight. It was a botanical effect of color which the flora of his native land did not vouchsafe him.

Various quaint names for measurements of land were used in this district, though not exclusively so. Hide, Carracute and Virgat were some of them. A 'Hide' was a somewhat arbitrary quantity, that is to say it was of no specific acreage, though generally it amounted to about 100 to 120 acres, and even up to 240 acres, according to the amenableness of the soil to the plough. It comprised a small farm of mixed pasturage and arable land, with just so much of the latter as one man was able to keep ploughed by his own labour. 'Hide' was a word of Saxon origin, of which 'Carracute' was the Norman equivalent, the present word, and a very suitable one is 'plough-land,' and 'plough-lands' therefore indicate a district devoted to small farmers. A 'Virgat' was a quarter of a Hide or Carracute. There was also the 'Bovate' or 'Oxgang,' two of which went to one Virgat, reminding us of the almost exclusive use of oxen in those days for ploughing purposes.

A well-respected surname in the neighbourhood, which no doubt took its rise from one of its forbears having owned or held such a plough-land, still exists in the name of Halfhide. A

Halfhide, under the thin disguise of Halfhead, was in the list of commoners of the Manor in 1641, and a Halfhide carried on a calico printing works at Merton in the eighteenth century, about 1742. Very few surnames of old survive, but there are the names of 'Armerer,' and 'Aris,' or 'Arise,' old commoners of the Manor. The former I take to be represented by Mr. Amoore, in business in High Street, and the latter by a building firm of Aries & Son, now or very lately carrying on business in the Upper Richmond Road at Putney.

But we anticipate somewhat, and to find Wimbledon in the brightest of its bygone days we must step back to the spacious times of the Tudors. The Manor being the property of the Church, in the persons of the Archbishops of Canterbury, in succession, not unnaturally became the subject of tender enquiries by Henry VIII., and it is said to have been 'exchanged' with the King for certain other lands. The record of what these lands comprised I cannot find, and probably they existed only in Henry's imagination; nevertheless the result was that Wimbledon passed into possession of the Crown. Henry VIII. granted it to brief and brilliant Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex; before whom Papal supremacy fell at one swoop; the land throughout its length and breadth, hitherto dominated, administered, and well cared for by the monastic communities was stripped, and the Ecclesiastical Manor of Wimbledon fell to Cromwell's share. Thus this strong willed man, whose principles veered with his master's requirements, became lord of a Manor, within the boundaries of which his father had been well content to follow the trade of a blacksmith. A survey of the Manor taken in 1617 locates his birthplace as 'an ancient cottage called the Smith's Shop, lying west of the highway leading from Putney to the upper gate, and on the south side of the highway from Richmond to Wandsworth, being the sign of the Anchor.' Rising by leaps and bounds to the dignities of Earl of Essex and Lord High Chamberlain, his fall was even swifter than his ascent, and he died amidst the shouts of a Tower Hill crowd on July 28, 1540. Reversion to the Crown followed, and Henry gave Wimbledon to that most discreet among his wives, Catherine Parr; this Queen Consort of England, and Lady of the Manor of Wimbledon, deserves more appreciation than she generally receives. She was in her second widowhood when she became Queen of England, and at Henry's decease she became wife to Sir Thomas Seymour. On her death in 1548, the Crown resumed possession of Wimbledon, and thus it remained during the brief reign of Edward VI. Mary, in her turn bestowed it on Cardinal Pole for his life, but he survived his royal benefactress for only one day. On her accession, Elizabeth presented the park of Wimbledon, but not the Manor, with a new master, Sir Christopher Hatton. He, however, does not appear to have set much value on its possession, for in 1576 he sold it to Thomas Cecil (afterwards created first Earl of Exeter), son of Cecil, Lord Burleigh the great Treasurer of Queen Elizabeth and hero of the romantic poem by Tennyson, concerning 'Burleigh House, by Stamford Town,' and a collateral branch of the family now holding the Marquisate of Salisbury.

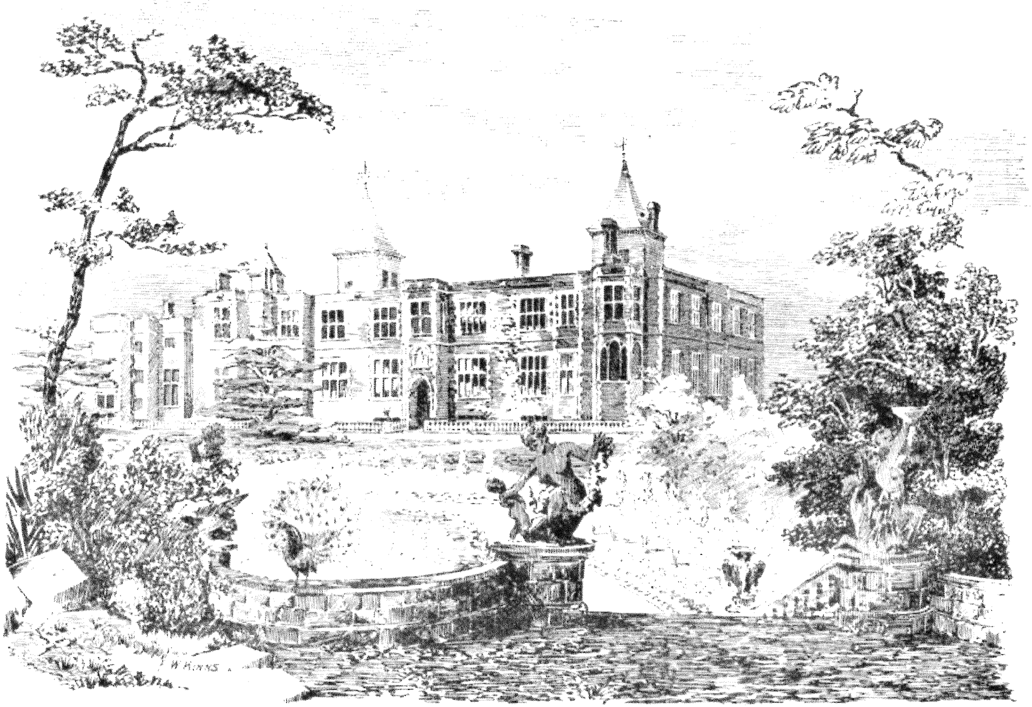
To my lord of Exeter, Wimbledon owes one may almost say its present existence, inasmuch as he first recognized its advantages as a place of residence, his first step was to improve the road from London, thus paving the way for the erection of the great house built in 1588, the year of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, which for many years stood alone as the glory and wonder of the surrounding shires, as one historian says 'being reckoned equal to and by some superior to Nonsuch.' It was built of good red brick with stone mullions, coigns and dressings of ashlar stone, and is thus described in the seventeenth century. 'The house of the Cecils very sumptuous, comprises centre (main building we should call it) with spacious wings extending at right angles, having square portions at the inner corners surmounted by high turrets, each pyramidically roofed and terminated by two fair gilded weathercocks perspicuous to the country round about.' A description of the interior gives one a more accurate idea of its dimensions. On the ground floor was the Stone Gallery 108 feet long, pillared and arched with grey marble, wainscotted with oak, varnished green, and decorated with stars of gold, and in the midst a grotto wrought with sundry sorts of shells of great lustre and ornament, formed into shapes of lions and serpents, antique forms and other rare devices. I think the great oak wainscotted Hall appeals to me more than the 'rare devices.' On the second floor was the great Gallery 110 feet long and 21 feet broad, floored with cedar, with a very fair and large chimney-piece of black and white marble, adorned with coats of arms and curiously wrought gilded statues of alabaster. Between these great Halls on the first floor were the King and Queen's apartments, and a Hall 62 feet long. We are also told of a Summer Chamber 45 feet long by 20 feet broad, floored with cedar, its ceiling of fretted work with a picture of a flying angel in the centre, and of a room known as the Den of Lions, inasmuch as it was painted all round with lions and leopards; also a 'sweetmeat room' next the Queen's apartment, which contiguity reminds us of a famous occasion when—

'The Queen was in her parlour eating bread and honey.'

The house was served with two large staircases each 20 feet square, the westernmost having eighty-two steps and the other seventy-seven steps. The Chapel is also mentioned as being paved with black and white marble and adorned with landscapes.

The chief attractions to the Earl of Exeter were probably the beauty of the site and its accessibility from London. He took full advantage of the opportunities the situation offered, and the approach up the slope of the hill must have been truly magnificent, with the successive ascents by seventy winding, balustraded steps, each step being 8 feet 9 inches broad, the spacious paved and fountained terraces and courts between each ascent, and from the commencement of these ascents an avenue of elm stretching away for a distance of 231 perches, or nearly a mile long, to the entrance to the domain. There appears to be no really good picture of Wimbledon, the one or two rather feeble engravings in 'Lyson's Environs,' after Winstanley, conveying no more idea than a written description affords, without allowing scope for one's imagination.

Such is the small glimpse we can obtain



South Aspect.

of this palace at Wimbledon, the groves of which for nearly one hundred years resounded to the merry laugh and song of a courtly age, and whose halls and chambers were the abiding place of the joys, loves, plots and sorrows of kings and statesmen. Hither came Queen Elizabeth to confer on my Lord of Exeter the distinguished, but ruinous, honour of a visit on her way to Nonesuch Palace. The accounts of Kingston afford some attestation of this visit by the entry, 'Payde 20d. for the mendynge of the roads when the Queene went from Wimbleton to Nonesuch.'

On the death of the Earl of Exeter, in 1622, Wimbledon, as one of his lesser properties descended to his third son, Sir Edward Cecil. Being a third son he would appear scarcely to have expected so fair a heritage, and had adopted the profession of the sword, seeking his fortunes wherever the clang of arms was to be heard. The clang at this time was loudest in the Low Countries, and here he saw much service and gained good reputation. A great favourite with his king, James I., and a comrade in arms of Geo. Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, he was given a high command in the expedition against Cadiz in 1625. His ill-success brought him into great disfavour, though more with the people than with his king, who rewarded him with the titles of Viscount Wimbledon and Baron Putney. In 1625, a very few years after coming into the enjoyment of his inheritance, Lord Wimbledon had a curious experience, his house in town and his Wimbledon home being respectively burnt down and blown up on the same day. The circumstance comes down to us in a letter from a Mr. Beaulieu in London, to Sir William Pickering, dated November 19, 1628, in these words :—

> 'The Dutch Ambassadors here have this day had their house, which is Cecil House in the Strand, burnt down to the ground by a sudden violent fire that took in it at four o'clock in the morning, so that the ladies had much ado to save themselves. This misfortune happened to my Lord Wimbledon, the owner of the house, and came to me as one of Job's messengers at the heels of a greater calamity, news of which he received yesterday, by the blowing up of a part of his fair house at Wimbledon, which happened by the mistaking of some maidens who, instead of a barrel of soap, opened a barrel of gunpowder which lay in the cellar, and let a spark of the candle fall in. But the greatest loss which he is reported to have suffered therein is of his evidences and papers, which are reported to have been burnt.'

One is tempted to enquire more about the maidens than the manuscripts, but possibly there was not much left of them to enquire about. In this year of 1628 Lord Wimbledon was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, a member of the Privy Council, and Captain and Governor of Portsmouth. His wars and wanderings did not prevent his lordship from giving some attention to pursuits of a more tender nature, and he attended three weddings in the wholesome capacity of bridegroom. His first wife accompanied him to the wars, and died in Holland, and is buried in the cathedral at Utrecht. He died on November 16, 1638, leaving his property to his four daughters by his first marriage, his other children having died in infancy. There exists an engraving of this first and last Lord Wimbledon, by Simon Pass, a fine craftsman of his time, but it is very difficult to obtain. There is now one in the Wimbledon Free Library. You must pardon so many of my pages being more a history of Lord Wimbledon than of Wimbledon itself. My excuse is that he was the first resident of note, and it is from his time onwards that Wimbledon became anything beyond a loose collection of thatched dwellings. You are probably acquainted with the only relic still remaining to us of these days, namely the Cecil chapel at the Parish church of St. Mary's. Lord Wimbledon's tomb of black marble is there, in perfect preservation, the Viscount's coronet suspended over it, his armour hanging near by, with quaint little memorials of his family let into the plaster wall, one to his daughter being plaintively inscribed :—

> 'Dorothy Cecill, unmaryed as yet.'

The chapel which surrounds these tombs is a square, cold, ugly little resting place. It was probably never gorgeous or even beautiful from an architectural point of view, but as it is now it is painful. Let us scan the inscriptions on the Lord of Wimbledon's tomb, and I will let him rest, though indeed they are there for you all to read for yourselves :—

> Here resteth Sir Edward Cecill, Knight, Lo. Cecill, and Baron of Putney, Viscount Wimbledon of Wimbledon, Third sone of Thomas Earle of Exeter, and Dorothy Nevill, of the Coheyres of the Lo. Nevill of Latimer, and Grandchild of the Lo. Treasurer Burghley
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> ———
>
> Who followed the Warres in the Netherlands, five and thirty years, and passed the Degrees of Captaine of Foote and Horse, Collonell of Foote and Collonell of the English Horse, at the Battell of Nieuport in Flanders
>
> ———
>
> Who was Admiral, and Lo. Marshall, Lieutenant-Generall, and Generall against yᵉ King of Spaine, Emperor in the service of King James, and K. Charles the First,—and at his returne was made Counsellor of State and Warre, and Lo. Lieutenant of this County of Surrey and Captaine and Governor of Portsmouth
>
> ———

Lastly comes one of those pathetic prayers of mingled hope and intercession which compels an instant reverence in reading many of the tomb inscriptions of old time :—

> And after so many Travels returned to this patient and humble Mother Earth, from whence he came with assured hope in his Saviour Christ, to rise again to Glory Everlasting.

The present site of St. Mary's Church has probably been occupied by an ecclesiastical edifice from very early days. Some historians incline to the belief that here was situated the church mentioned in Domesday, as appertaining to the ancient parish of Mortelage or Mortlake.

The earliest historical mention of the rectors of Wimbledon takes us back to the reign of King John, when Master Philip occupied the benefice, and reaped from it an income of 20 marks. Later on, as indicated in a letter from Adam de Mariscus to Robert Grostete, Bishop of Lincoln, came 'Peter, rector of the church at Wybeldon, physician to the Queen, a man of great skill in literature, and of great probity; then John de Ausone, a favourite with King Edward I.; and on July 8, 1298, Walter Reynolds, or Reginald, is instituted to the living. He also owed his preferment to royal favour, and though son of a Windsor miller, was appointed tutor to Prince Edward, afterwards Edward II., becoming in succession Canon of St. Paul's, Bishop of Worcester, Lord High

Treasurer of England in 1307, Chancellor in 1311, and Archbishop of Canterbury in 1314.' After a life high in the counsels of kings and popes he died at Mortlake in 1327, and his dust still lies at Canterbury. Many worthy names succeeded this most exalted of Wimbledon rectors, and the benefice has evidently been at all times a coveted one. In 1660, on October 17, Nathaniel Pace was struck dead of a palsy immediately after cursing Master Syms, the minister at Wimbledon. I trust Master Syms made good use of this most opportune calamity.

The earliest registration of baptism is on January 13, 1538, when Elizabeth Wight was received within the fold of holy church. Poor little mite, perhaps you would have silenced your squeals on that cold January morning, if you had been aware that you were inaugurating the Wimbledon Baptismal register.

The situation of St. Mary's comprehends, or rather did comprehend up till a few years ago, one of the most beautiful landscapes in beautiful Surrey. It is just such a site as was invariably chosen for a church, and also by the pagan Saxons for their altars. The one idea was to build on a hill. Old Morden and Old Malden churches are both instances of this near at hand. They are, like Wimbledon, both on very ancient foundations, and in positions of remarkable similarity, and are probably three of the oldest ecclesiastical sites in this part of Surrey. Of the church as it now exists nothing needs to be said. It is better than a great many of those upon which it looks down in all directions, and though of greater pretensions, is doubtless inferior in simple beauty to those whose foundations it stands upon. There are some interesting remains of stained glass, one of which at any rate may be assigned to the reign of Edward III. The present church dates from 1843.

Reverting to Wimbledon Park, we find that Elizabeth visited and James I. stayed there frequently, and that, by purchase from Lord Wimbledon's daughters, it became, with the adjacent lands, the property of Henrietta Maria, Queen of Charles I. Henceforward, for a few merry years Wimbledon held its head very high. King Charles and his Queen lived and kept court there, received ambassadors and gave feasts and fêtes. The gardens were improved and became renowned for their beauty. The King and Queen were good gardeners, and during her sojourn at Wimbledon, the Queen wrote to her mother, the great Marie de Medicis, asking for certain plants and seeds to be sent to her. In this connection it is curious to note that so little did poor Charles take his people seriously, that only three days before he was arraigned before his judges, he was busying himself concerning the planting of some Spanish melon seeds at his Wimbledon home. But the brief happy years speed on, and the red glow of Revolution blots out the memories of these days of pomp and festivity. The sound of the fall of the headsman's axe outside the Whitehall Banquetting House had scarcely reverberated through England, and the poor Queen reached once more her mother's arms, than the Protector's men were making an inventory of the royal goods and chattels at Wimbledon. This inventory is extant, and provides most interesting reading, but it is too long to be included here.

Pass on thy destiny, Wimbledon, and now it is the stern remorseless puritan, General Lambert, who reigns here, no more revelry, but bitter plot, counterplot and intrigue, with, however, a bright ray even on this dark day, for Lambert too is a gardener, and works and spends diligently and lavishly, so that the great orangerie is not desolate, the rare fruit walks still redolent with perfume and fruit, and the parterres and glades well kept and beautiful; one of the historians informs us that here Lambert is said to have had the finest nursery and flower garden in England, and proceeds :—

> 'Here he might at ease contemplate the beautiful confusion to which his prosperous arms had reduced

> a nation in its meridian glory. Here he could reflect on his triumphs over the most noble, generous, pious, learned, gallant spirits that Britain could ever boast of. Nor were his slumbers interrupted by images of guilt or remorse, so successfully had these visionaries prayed and preached and talked themselves, and one another, into a privilege of changing the nature of good and evil.'

But ! again the cry of war startles Lambert from his flower beds, and marches him off up the great North Road to offer battle to the restorer Monk. Forsaken by his troops, not even to have the satisfaction of a last stand, Lambert flys, and Wimbledon sees him never again. Henrietta returned, and Wimbledon was given back to her, but, as a chronicler says, 'she found it smell too strong of a rebel,' and in June, 1660, Royalty and Wimbledon parted, and George Digby, Earl of Bristol, entered into possession. The Earl had been throughout the troubles a staunch Royalist and had undergone many trials, imprisonments and exile in consequence. Charles II. made a Gartered Knight of him and restored him his possessions, and for the third time in succession Wimbledon's owner was a good gardener. John Evelyn, the diarist of Wooton and Deptford, came to stay with him and help him, and in his diary says :—

> 'I went with my Lord of Bristol to see his house at Wimbledon, newly bought of the Queen mother,

to help contrive the garden after the modern. It is a *delicious place for the* prospects and the thickets, but soil cold and weeping clay.'

In this last respect, if in no others, Wimbledon has remained the same.

The Earl of Bristol was succeeded by Thomas Osborne, Marquis of Carmarthen, a son of a Royalist general during the Cromwellian wars, and kinsman of the Cecils. He *rose to* great honour in a very short time, being made Lord High Treasurer in 1673, and receiving, besides the Knighthood of the Garter, a perfect shower of baronies and earldoms, culminating the Dukedom of Leeds. In spite of his achievements Horace Walpole bears witness that he died unloved and unregretted.

With the reign of Queen *Anne* dawned an era of dandies, duels, speculations, stage coaches, and highwaymen, and in literature, high flown verse and ribald prose, during which the ancient domain of Wimbledon is being sadly encroached upon, and grants of common lands are many.

Sir Theodore Janssen, director of the famous South Sea Company, enters on the scene, and destroys the scene he enters on by entirely pulling down and demolishing the grand old Cecil Mansion, monument of the craftsmen of Queen Bess;

'Those golden *palaces*, *those* gorgeous *halls*
With furniture superflously faire,

> Those stately courts, those sky encountering walles,
> Evanished all like vapours in the air.'

Nevertheless Sir Theodore dispenses lavishly and is well loved, while the flagon and dish remain well filled; his chief claim, however, to fame is his South Sea bubble reputation, and when the bubble bursts, a kind oblivion folds him in her arms.

However, at the price of £15,000 the vacancy caused by the bursting of the bubble is soon filled, and by no less a person than the great Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, widow of John Churchill, the great Duke and bosom confidante of Queen Anne. Sarah must show her independence, so down comes Sir Janssen's half-built mansion, to be replaced by a heavy pedimented and pillared residence, somewhat removed from the old site; but this not all at once. Her friend, the Earl of Burlington, designed this for her, but even her lordly architect found her difficult to please, for two attempts were made before he succeeded in completing a building to her liking. Here she lived for about twenty years, and when she died at an advanced age in 1744, the estate passed to her grandson, and afterwards to her great grandson. While in the occupation of the latter it was destroyed by fire on Easter Monday, 1785. The present house was erected in 1801.

Hannah More was a visitor here in 1780, as the guest of the Bishop of St. Asaph, to whom the owner was in the habit of lending the house as a summer residence, and in her *Life* is to be found the expression of her opinion, that she 'did not think there could have been so beautiful a place within seven miles of London. It is as un-Londonish as if it were 100 miles out, and I enjoyed the violets and birds more than all the Marechal powder and the music of this foolish town.'

The park, which in Cecil's time had been seven miles in circumference, and contained about 1,200 acres, became very much cut up as time went on. Large slices went to form the grounds of Wimbledon House, demolished a few years since, 'Rockingham House,' afterwards known as 'Belvedere,' just demolished, and Eagle House. Of these Eagle House only now remains, and is, I think, the oldest house in Wimbledon. I have lately seen it stated in the local press that Lord Nelson, in days prior to his connection with Merton, lived at Eagle House. Eagle House was erected in or about 1615, and was occupied for many years by the Betensons, a family allied to the Cecils, then by a Marquis of Bath, and various other folk till about 1820. I find therefore no authority for the supposition that Nelson ever lived, though he may have stayed there, though of course I am open to correction. While talking of Nelson it may be well to dispel the prevailing notion that the house lived in by Nelson, Merton Place, with its pretty, roomy, rambling house, and beautiful bosky moat-encircled gardens still exists. It is completely blotted out, but you can still live where Nelson lived, and walk in his old garden, at a rental of 8/- a week.

From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards Wimbledon became the home of many well-known personages. Let us look quickly round and steal a brief acquaintance with them. Enter Horne Tooke, fiery prince of Pamphleteers. 'You are getting weary of political satire and strife, are you not? And here you come and live and die at the house we know as Chester Honse, a brilliant crowd of wits, litterateurs and ministers surrounds you, healthy air and country sights delight you; but it was not ever thus. Pass before us please—a plethora of Education at Westminster and Eton lands you as an ill-paid usher, to a Blackheath pedagogue next, holy orders and a benefice at New Brentford, combined with a travelling tutorship to the son of Elwes the miser, then your opportunity, and friends and foes respectively rejoice or writhe under your biting satires. Full of fire, wit and energy, some say unprincipled, you are a necessity of your day, and a power in the State. You are hailed as the author of the mysterious letters of Junius; but now let us rub our eyes. Arrested and tried at the Guildhall for the crime of obtaining subscriptions for the relief of the relatives of those slain by our British troops at Lexington and Concord!! In the year of our Lord, 1777 this is treason; have we not a little improved? we saw no one in the dock and fined £1,200 for succouring the families of our late opponents in the Transvaal. Never mind, Tooke comes up smiling, alternately enriched and ruined by his caustic pen, the friend of Pitt, the enemy of Fox, the Parliamentary nominee of Lord Camelford for Old Sarum. Lord Temple moved his exclusion on account of his cloth, but he sat out one Parliament, when a bill was passed making clerks in holy orders ineligible for a seat in the Council of the people, and Tooke was squeezed out. March 18, 1812, dawns and passes, and Horne Tooke passes with it.

Here as a quiet servant of the soil, an unobtrusive genius, though at this time only an under gardener at the big house, toils the future Sir Joseph Paxton, and is it not fitting that renowned for its gardens as Wimbledon was, it should have fostered England's most famous gardener. Who is this fine gentleman of foreign aspect, whose questions young Paxton is respectfully answering? None other than Monsieur de Calonne, late finance minister to the unfortunate Louis XVI. of France. Poor de Calonne, witty, unprincipled connoisseur. De Calonne, whose spectral show of plenty in the midst of misery and nothingness, whose taxes and chicanery gave a few more months of false sunshine for the courtly butterflies of Tuileries and Trianon to bask in; and then—Cataclysm, and the roads of Calonne and his master part—one to exile, the other to the Place de la Revolution. His residence here was Wimbledon House, recently demolished, where he was succeeded by various princely and noble residents, the Marquis of Stafford in 1792, in 1810 another French exile in the person of Louis de Bourbon, Prince of Condé, late master of Louis XV's household, a brilliant soldier in the seven years' war, a litterateur and historian of his ancestor, the great Condé, an architect of great talent. He spent about fourteen years in England—four years at Wimbledon where his wife died—he himself died in Paris in 1818.

The next occupant is interesting from a literary point of view, being none other than the father of Captain Marryatt; joyous imaginative fellow, how many hours of our boyhood you have to answer for! William Wilberforce, whose noble destiny it was to make an end of slavery, lived almost opposite Rushmere. He inherited the house from his uncle in 1777, where foregathered Pitt, Horne Tooke, and many others. Pitt, though never a resident at Wimbledon, was a frequent visitor.

As a near neighbour of Wilberforce lived John Murray, the friend of Byron and Scott, and founder of the 'Quarterly Review,' and his first editor, Giffard. At Gothic House, on or close to the present site of King's College School, lived Lady Anne Barnard, authoress of 'Auld Robin Gray.' Others round about included clever, wicked, sympathetic Charles James Fox, Lord Lyndhurst (thrice Lord Chancellor of England), the Duke of Cannizaro (a foreign exile) who, aided by the wealth of his English wife, occupied the fine old mansion which was recently destroyed by fire, but now stands re-built, much in the same style as formerly, and still bearing his name.

But now, though it might go on longer, the procession of nobles and unennobled noble men who made Wimbledon a fashionable resort of high repute in the olden time must cease, and we will look at the manners they brought with them, not only manners but pistols, and many the lumbering coach that deposited its occupants as near as possible to the glades round Queensmere, Wimbledon, in fact has been the scene of some of the most notable duels in England. Here on a May morning in 1789 the Duke of York, brother of the King met, and had his hair singed by the fire of Colonel Lennox. Also in May, year 1807, Sir Francis Burdett, then a resident on the Common, called out Mr. Paull, and each went away with the other's bullet inconveniently, but not dangerously inserted in his person. In September, 1810, a lady—no doubt a beautiful one—was the means of Mr. George Payne, a wealthy gentleman, and a Mr. Clark meeting to arrange their differences by the arbitrament of gunpowder. Mr. Payne got more for his breakfast than he found easy of digestion, and died at the Red Lion Inn at Putney the following day. On March 21, 1829, the great Duke of Wellington being insulted in the public press by the Earl of Winchelsea, called him out, and at 8 o'clock at 15 paces the Duke fired and missed, the Earl fired into the air. The peculiar part of this duel was that the offender, his lordship of Winchelsea, at once produced a written apology from his pocket, and having altered it somewhat to suit the Duke's requirements, they return to town, the better for the airing, and none the worse for the pistol practice. On June 13, 1839, the Marquis of Londonderry and Henry Grattan, M.P., took an early coach to Wimbledon, and having emptied their pistols at one another without effect, returned home satisfied.

The next duel is necessarily my last, because it was the last duel fought in England. In took place on September 21, 1840, between the Earl of Cardigan and Captain Henry Tuckett. The latter was very severely wounded, and the Earl was tried by his peers, but owing to a conveniently arranged quibble as to the identity of his apponent he was acquitted. There were several points connected with this last ordeal of lead which served to bring duelling into disrepute. It was at best a clumsy method, and the justice of its result was even more uncertain than our present methods of righting wrong in a Court of Law.

It must not be supposed that prospective duels were the only reasons for having pistols in the travelling carriages in those days. Wimbledon Common from its loneliness, together with its proximity to the great hiding place, London, offered many temptations to the horse-backed villains known as highwaymen that time has surrounded with a halo of romance. The only one whose escapes and villainies seem to have gained for him a measure of fame in this particular part of the country was Jerry Abershawe, whose favourite retreat was 'The Bald-faced Stag,' a house on the Kingston and Wandsworth Roads, at the north-west of the Common. Many stories of his successful effrontery were the gossip of the country side. After various vicissitudes he terminated his career satisfactorily on the gallows on the Common, where he was hanged in chains on August 3, 1795.

The years have carried us on to a period with which perhaps familiarity has bred contempt, besides which, we are arrived at a time when the individuality of localities has become a thing of the past. No longer do the same families inherit the same callings, and live in the same houses for generations, passing on the traditions of their race and dwelling place, old customs, peculiar manufactures and arts, indigenous forms of architecture; even the flora and fauna have become confused and indistinctive.

I have not touched some points on which you may have expected me to try and throw light. Notably that period, not a long one, but as interesting as it was unconventional, when Merton was the stage on which one of the most romantic love stories of great men was played. It is not my desire to explain the play, still less to criticise the actors. England's great naval hero here gained a happy respite from his public cares and inspiration to great deeds from a kindred spirit. The other parties intimately concerned do not appear to have worried themselves as regards the details of the plot, and the second Lord Nelson, the Admiral's brother, took the title of Viscount Merton in addition to his others, and it is still held.

I would gladly see Merton now as it was in Nelson's day—rush green fields, alder and willow shaded streams and ponds abounding, one quaint, straggling village street of tiled cottages, with the few good old houses 'mid large walled gardens. No, Merton's old title to importance has long since departed. Its last claim on an ungrateful generation has been the workshops of William Morris, whence from amid the crumbling walls of the old abbey have been scattered broadcast the finest works of art created in England since the fifteenth century. But abler pens than mine have dealt with this subject. The authorities on the history of Wimbledon are diverse and scrappy—Lysons, Aubrey, Manning and Bray, Brayley, Salmon, Bartlett, 'Reads' Annual,' 'The Gentlemen's Magazine,' 'The Annual Register,' various MSS. in the Bodleian Library and Merton College, Oxford, and others, all afford some information; and to the memory of these authors I take off my hat, and tender them my respectful acknowledgements.

Wimbledon will continue, but I have finished, Wimbledon's pedigree entitles it to your interest, give it of your best in whatever way you can.

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