

MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 1

Reminiscences of “Park Place”

Mitcham

By George O. Nash - December 1969

Although I had lived in Mitcham all my life, it was not until 1919 that I first saw the interior of “Park Place”, when it was on lease to the Young Men’s Christian Association. Then past its prime, and no longer a gentleman’s residence, it was still a wonderful house, and the decor of the principal rooms impressed me greatly. I can still remember clearly the white-painted doors, the panels of which were most artistically decorated with vases of gold, full of flowers, all hand-painted. The friezes round the ceilings were also ornate, the detail being picked out in gold, whilst the pelmets and curtains to the windows were a lovely deep red velvet, with gold braid and tassels. A beautiful staircase surmounted by a glass dome led to the top floor, but this has long since disappeared, the stairs being removed, and the dome dismantled because it had become dangerous. I still have a Georgian penny which fell into the hall whilst the work was in progress.

What used to be called the domestic offices included the butler's pantry, a house-keeper's room, a very large kitchen with the biggest cooking range I have ever seen, a dairy with large slate benches and a hand pump and well below, a brew-house and a bakery. The bakery oven was heated by a wood fire, lit inside the oven itself. When it was hot enough the ashes were withdrawn and the dough placed in position with a long wooden shovel, which was later used to remove the bread when baked. A little flight of back stairs led down to the servants' quarters in the basement, cut off from the house proper by a green baize-covered door outside the butler's pantry. There was a belfry on what was the older part of the house, and the bell rope came through to the same back stairs. When the belfry was dismantled and taken to the "News of the World" the bell was found to bear the date 1776.

Of the two standard lamps which once lit the drive to the house, one still remains. The old cedar tree, which a forestry expert told me is over three hundred years old, still stands in the centre of the drive although damaged by a "doodle bug" during the war. A lovely row of elm trees, containing quite a large rookery, separated the horse paddock from the cow paddock, and an avenue of walnut trees, also now only a memory, ran out to the Cricket Green. On Sunday mornings the ladies and gentlemen from the house used to drive through this avenue on their way to service at the parish church. The little procession was quite impressive, and an old lady who lived in Church Road when she was a girl, recalled to me the grand sight of the postillions on their horses, the coachmen sitting high on the coaches, wearing black coats and white breeches and with black cockades in their top hats, and inside, the ladies in their grand dresses. I once met an old man who was a stable boy at "Park Place", and he told me he had been given many a gold half-sovereign for riding to the old post office in Lower Mitcham to fetch the mail for the guests. The "dormy house" in which the overspill guests used to sleep was on the site of No.15 Madeira Road, demolished after the war, and replaced by the present house.

The gardens of "Park Place" were still very lovely when the "News of the World" took over, and there was a walled-in kitchen garden where the bowling green is now, and an orchard on the site of the tennis courts. The horse paddock is now the cricket field, and the cow paddock a running track. When I was a lad at the Lower Mitcham school we used to go to the cow paddock to celebrate Empire Day, and then had the rest of the day off as a holiday. On other unauthorised visits, we boys used to "scrump" fruit and walnuts from the trees. If we were careless and tripped the wires set by the gardener there was a noise like a gun going off, and we used to run for it!

A wall ran along Commonside West from the South Lodge, the main gate, to North Lodge, with a row of old cottages in front which were demolished in 1936. In one of the cottages there lived Mr. Thompson, a cowkeeper. His cows used to graze on the Common, and at milking time, when he stood at the gate and shouted, they would come to be milked, and then stroll back across the road onto the Common. I might add that Commonside West was then an old dusty flint-surfaced road, and there were no motor cars! I once saw an old woman who, with her daughter, Mrs. Webster, used to live in South Lodge. Her job was to open the main gates to let the carriages in and out. The mechanism was semi-automatic - you turned a large wheel with a handle to open the gates, and weights closed them again. I also once met an old man who asked if he could look round the grounds; he explained that he had worked on the estate when he was a boy, and had emigrated to America. Before he left he had carved his initials on a tree, and last week I went again and looked at the tree, and found the date 1867 still visible.

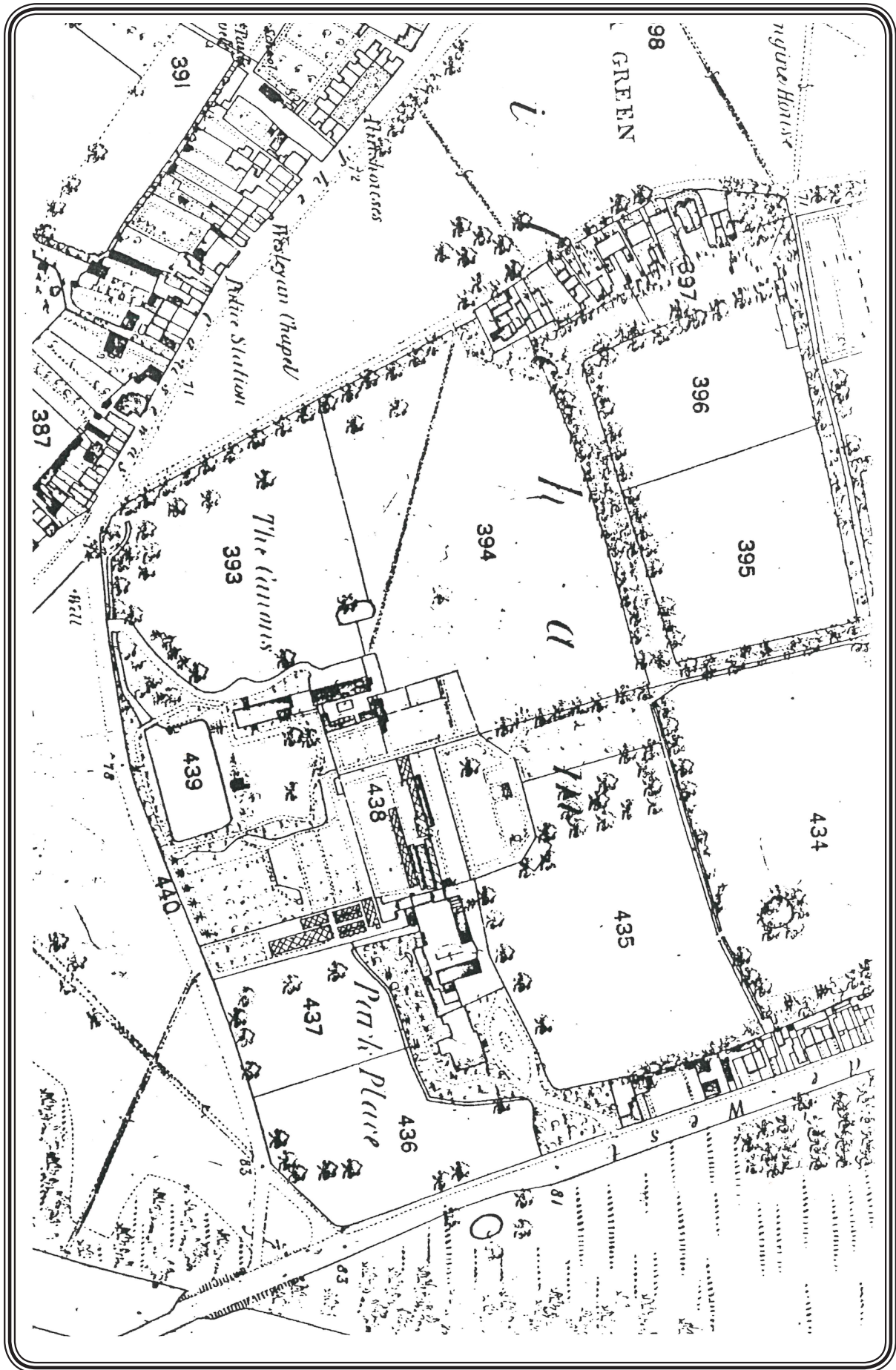
George Nash became a groundsman at the News of the World Sports Ground in the 1920s and remained there for over 40 years.

Seen from Commonside West in the half-light of a winter's afternoon in the late 1960s, and with the exercise of a little imagination, the house still looked much as it must have done in the late 19th century. The iron porch covering the steps to the front door, added by Mr. McMaster at the time of his daughter's wedding and still obscuring the elegant Georgian doorcase, helped to sustain the illusion, but in reality the changes which had taken place in the 60-odd years that George Nash had known the house and its grounds were very great. The conversion of "Park Place" from a gentleman's residence to a clubhouse and sports ground in the 1920s had necessitated quite drastic alterations, but many of the old outbuildings, like the stables and the coach house, survived until, damaged by the flying bomb, they were demolished after the war. The mid-Georgian wing of the house, once the domestic quarters, also sustained damage during the "Blitz", but was repaired. Now, with the virtually intact shell of the late 18th century house, they form a little group of buildings spanning 200 years of local history.

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Extract from the Ordnance Survey map of 1867 - scale 25":1mile
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