

MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 4

LOST COMMON LANDS

1 - Morden Common

by Evelyn Jowett

The Borough of Merton is very fortunate to have within its boundaries two ancient commons, both beautiful and refreshing stretches of wild countryside. Wimbledon Common in the north-west and Mitcham Common in the south-east were both preserved as amenities after long and expensive struggles over a hundred years ago.

Morden has some magnificent parks and open spaces but its Common has long since been given over to other purposes. Now no area of ancient heath and grassland remain here which has never in its history been submitted to the plough. At the same time there has been lost its accompanying natural habitat for wild flowers, birds and animals and the life of ponds and stream.

Morden Common was situated in the south-west corner of the parish. Its triangular shape can still be traced on a modern map. The apex lies west of Stonecot-hill in Trafalgar-avenue, Cheam, where the Pyl Brook crosses the Morden parish boundary, the latter forming the southern limit of Morden Common and the Pyl its northerly demarcation until they both meet the base lying to the west of Garth-road Depot, and the new cemetery, near the entrance to Battersea Cemetery.

As a common, this area has had a continuous history from Saxon times until the early part of this century. The earliest Saxon settlers who came to Morden some time between 400 and 600 AD are thought to have decided on this area as common: that is, a particular part of the general wilderness lying between their small fields, where all the villagers could graze their animals and gather firewood.

These continuous processes over the area eventually produced much sweet grass-land and kept it from reverting to scrub, reduced the gorse and bramble thickets, and prevented the growth of birch and oak seedlings. The flocks and herds of each peasant would be watched over by their own herdsman or shepherd to prevent straying and loss, just as still may be seen today in many rural areas of eastern Europe.

Eventually, as the manorial system superseded the simpler farming of Saxon times, the Common became part of the Manor of Morden and given with it, to Westminster Abbey, some time probably before the Norman Conquest. The Abbey's medieval records of Morden have not yet been explored and so there is no documentary evidence relating to the Common during this period. No doubt these will eventually reveal at least the usual medieval trends: a growth in population both of people and animals, leading to regulation in the manor court of the tenants' rights, for instance as to the number of animals each could graze and whether and how much firewood they could cut, with prosecutions and fines for breach of these rules.

In Tudor times after the dissolution of the Monasteries, Morden Common passed with the rest of the Manor out of the ownership of the Abbey and eventually into that of the Garth family. In Tudor times also another trend is shown by records of a legal dispute with Cheam. From ancient times, Morden Common had been part of a larger heathland area on which other villages also had their commons, notably Cheam and Malden. With increased grazing, encroachments became a problem and especially between Morden and Cheam with their mutual frontier formed only by an unfenced parish boundary.

Morden Common had always been a comparatively small area. All known plans show it to have been the same as outlined in the Tithe Award of 1839, where it is declared to be 83 acres in extent. Mitcham Common is still over 460 acres and Wimbledon and Putney Commons together comprise 1040 acres. It also had an awkward shape and remote situation. It was a long but narrow strip of land, separated from the village by the Pylbrook, a possible obstacle to its use. An ancient bridge across the Pyl by the Epsom-road in the east gave access to it and also eventually a bridge at the extreme west end in Green-lane. Otherwise animals must have had to ford the stream. By the eighteenth century local farmers had consolidated their farms and turned part of the fields to grass and later still are known to have hired grazing land elsewhere in the village instead of using the Common.

This may also account for the ease with which the earliest enclosures were accepted by the Commoners who appear to have been the Lord of the Manor and his copyhold tenants, the later successors of the medieval villeins, and not of course any and every resident in the parish. In 1805, a licence to enclose a "piece of land, part of the waste at Morden Common", was granted to the Rev George Whatley of Wokingham and Ann Whatley, widow. The land is described as "heretofore two pieces containing 3 roods" and so had obviously been enclosed some time before.

The purpose of the deed appears to have been to regularise these enclosures, make them one property, and to convert them to a copyhold tenement or life tenure. The full ceremony of the General Court Baron was invoked for the occasion. Mr Appleyard, Gentleman and Steward for the Lord of the Manor, with the consent of the tenants gave the Whatleys possession "by the rod, by copy of Court Roll, fealty, suit of court, heriot, and a yearly rent of 2/6."

Within two months the property was transferred for £8.12.0 to Jonathan Acres, a carpenter of Morden. He came of an old Morden family and had a very sad life. He married twice, first to Susannah, who died aged thirty and then to Elizabeth who died aged twenty-seven in 1814. All his children by both died as infants, except Henry William who succeeded him to the property. Jonathan's brother, William continued the carpentry business, however, and died at the ripe old age of 85 in 1859. In spite of all vicissitudes, Jonathan took on much unpaid local public service, being one of the Parish Overseers of the Poor in 1810 and also a trustee of the Mary Batts Charity for the distribution of coals among the industrious local poor. He himself died ultimately in 1827 aged fifty-four.

His son, Henry William, born in 1804, succeeded to the property in 1827 and in 1861 conveyed it back to Richard Garth, the Lord of the Manor, for £100. It was then described as orchard land with houses and outhouses. Two sub-tenants, Mrs Hitchaman and Mrs Hill, are mentioned who were already there in 1839. This was not surprising as Henry William had meanwhile emigrated to Canada and is described as a farmer of Delaware, Middlesex County, Upper Canada (now Ontario). The deed was sent to Canada for his signature, a Notary Public there vouching for its authenticity and the Governor General of British North America vouching for the Notary being one duly appointed. It could have been that Acres desired the money but it seems much more likely that Richard Garth, the Lord of the Manor, had already decided on the profitable policy of buying in his copyholds with a view to their extinction and conversion to more easily saleable freeholds. By 1874 Garth was in a position to legalise the extinction of all his copyholds. This was in preparation for the sale of his Morden properties including the Common, as freeholds.

Some time before 1885, the south-west portion of Morden Common consisting of about 40 acres had already become the property of the Hatfeilds who succeeded the Garths as Lords of the Manor. In 1885 the rest of the Common was put up for sale in two lots. Lot 1, formerly the Acres property, now consisted of about 10 acres of "freehold land, being a productive market garden, well stocked with thriving fruit trees, with a brick and timber dwelling-house of seven rooms, with stabling and sheds", occupied by Mr Edmund James, the leaseholder since 1881. He was to have compensation if his garden were sold and used for building purposes. However, the time for this was not yet and Kelly's Directory for 1918 still records Edmund James, Market gardener of Lower Morden, though soon the garden had gone. Vincent Lines, writing in this paper in 1930, most nostalgically recalls it: "On Morden Common there was a well favoured local industry - a strawberry farm, where gooseberries and raspberries as well were grown in abundance and of which not a few Morden residents yet have happy recollections."

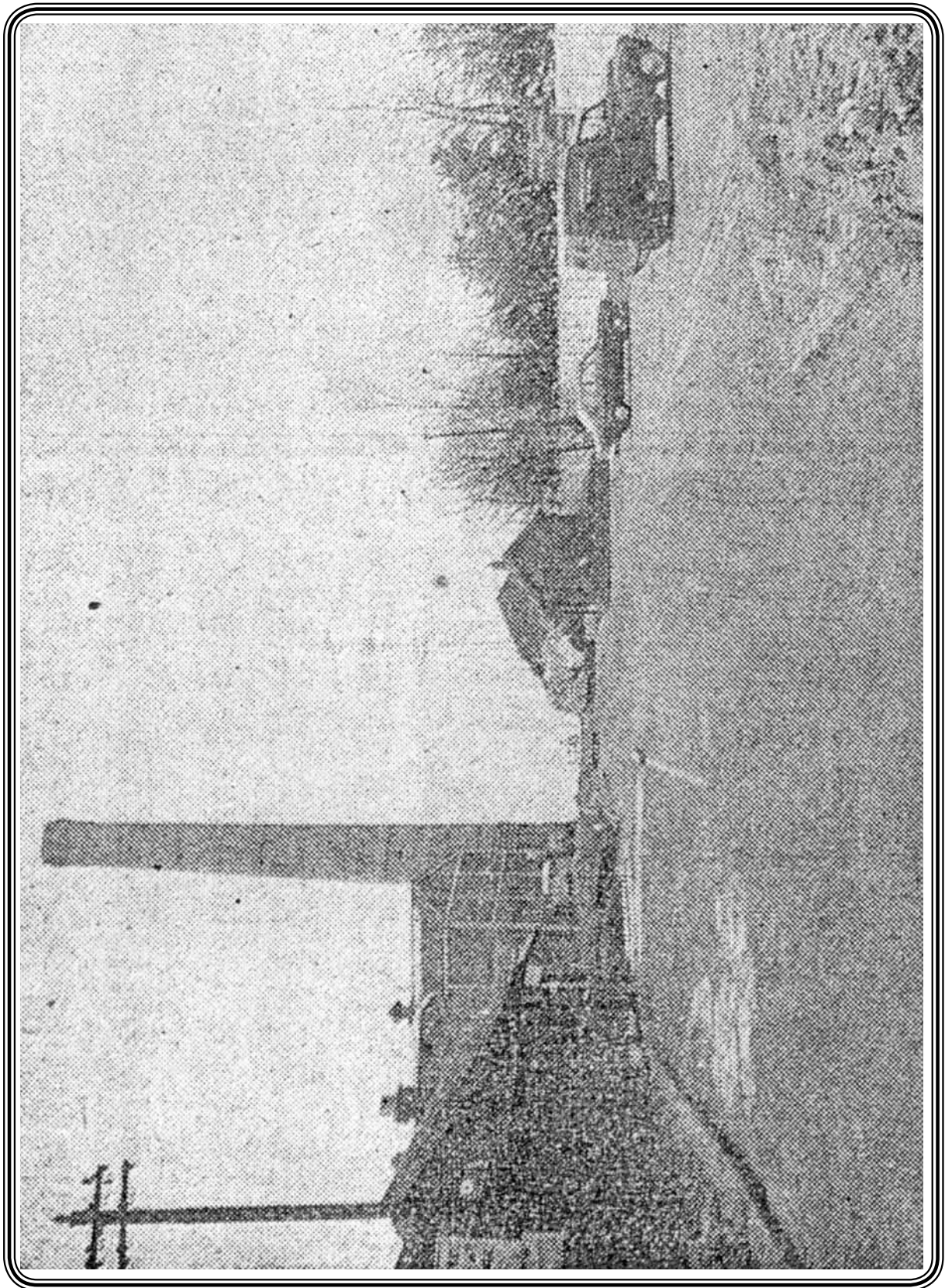
Lot 2 concerned the rest of the Common, at that time a brickfield. The Lord of the Manor had always had additional rights on the Common, including especially the right to extract materials, usually gravel, which could be very profitably sold for road repairing. Morden Common was also a valuable source of clay for making bricks and tiles. How soon the Garths exploited this right is not known but in 1768 Richard Garth granted John Ewart the right to take clay for bricks and tiles for building Morden Park House.

The Tithe Award of 1839 does not mention brickfields on the Common but some more cottages had been erected there, perhaps for brickmakers. The Common was, however, remote from a main road and removal of the bricks was difficult. But records of 1869 refer to a road leading to the brickworks, with twelve newly-erected cottages in it, and a record of 1884 confirms that this road led from the London to Epsom-road. It is now Garth-road.

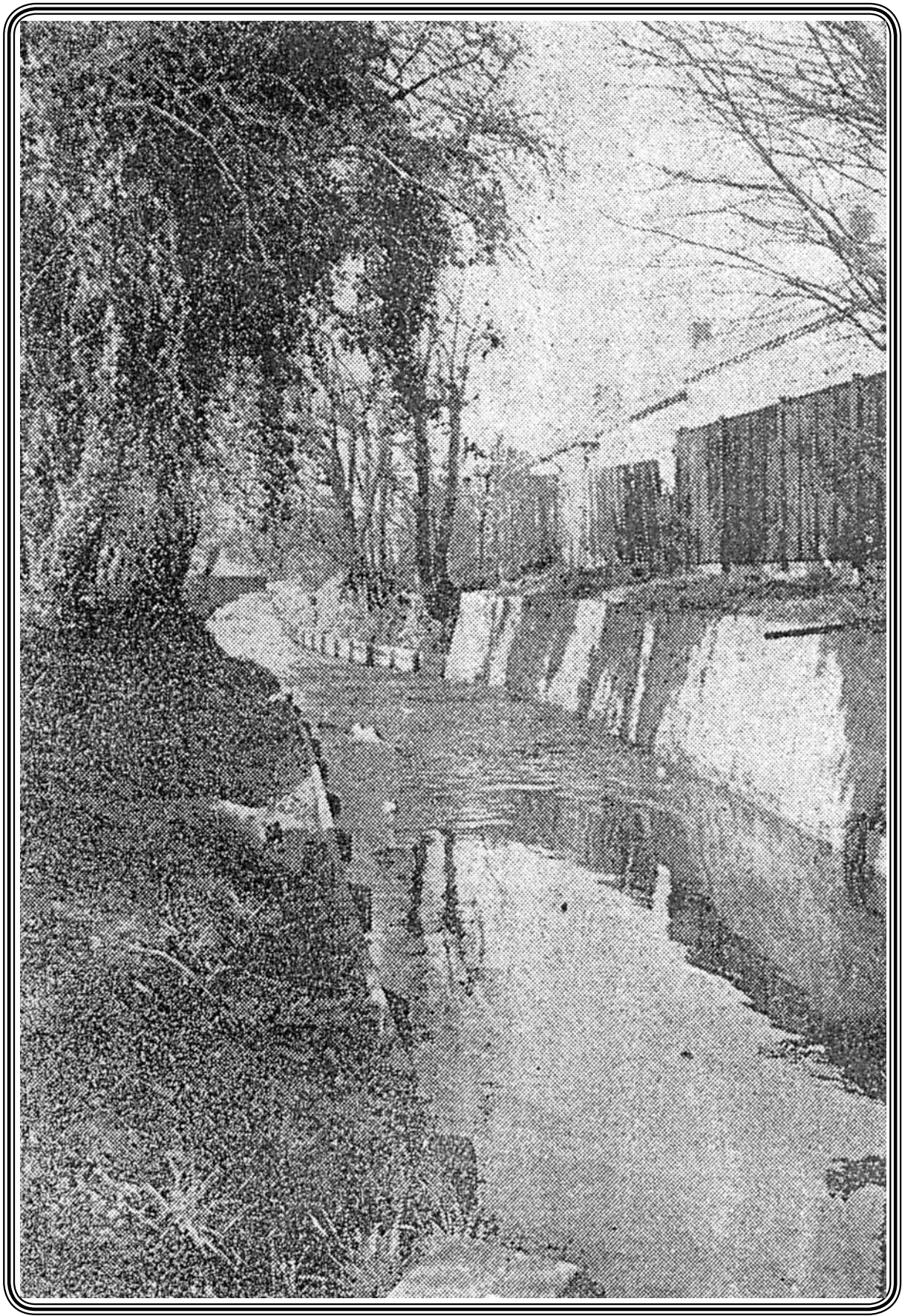
The brickworks were offered for sale by the Garths in 1873, but the sale of 1885, when they were sold for £2,150, gives the greatest detail. They were a freehold of over 24 acres with a large quantity of brick earth, drying and moulding sheds, an engine house, stable, offices and kilns. The plant included an engine and a pump and the Sutton Water Company's main was laid on. There were also ten brick and timber cottages each with four rooms and a garden. No proprietors are named and it is described as "recently in full work." It continued to be operated later, however, by the Trendell Bros who were still in business there in 1918.

Suburban development came to this area late, not taking place until after the first world war, in the 1920s. Writing in 1930-31 in this paper, Vincent Lines recalls how the Common had "even now a rather wild appearance, gipsy caravans lie in the hollow and small barefooted boys ride huge carthorses barebacked." He also recalls "Whack" Clark, a popular character who lived on Morden Common in his "Lodge", a wooden house on wheels, in which he also journeyed about Surrey. The local farm labourers, he continues, used to collect rushes from the Common, and one of them, very skilful in plaiting them, made a weathervane in the form of a peacock for Peacock Farm.

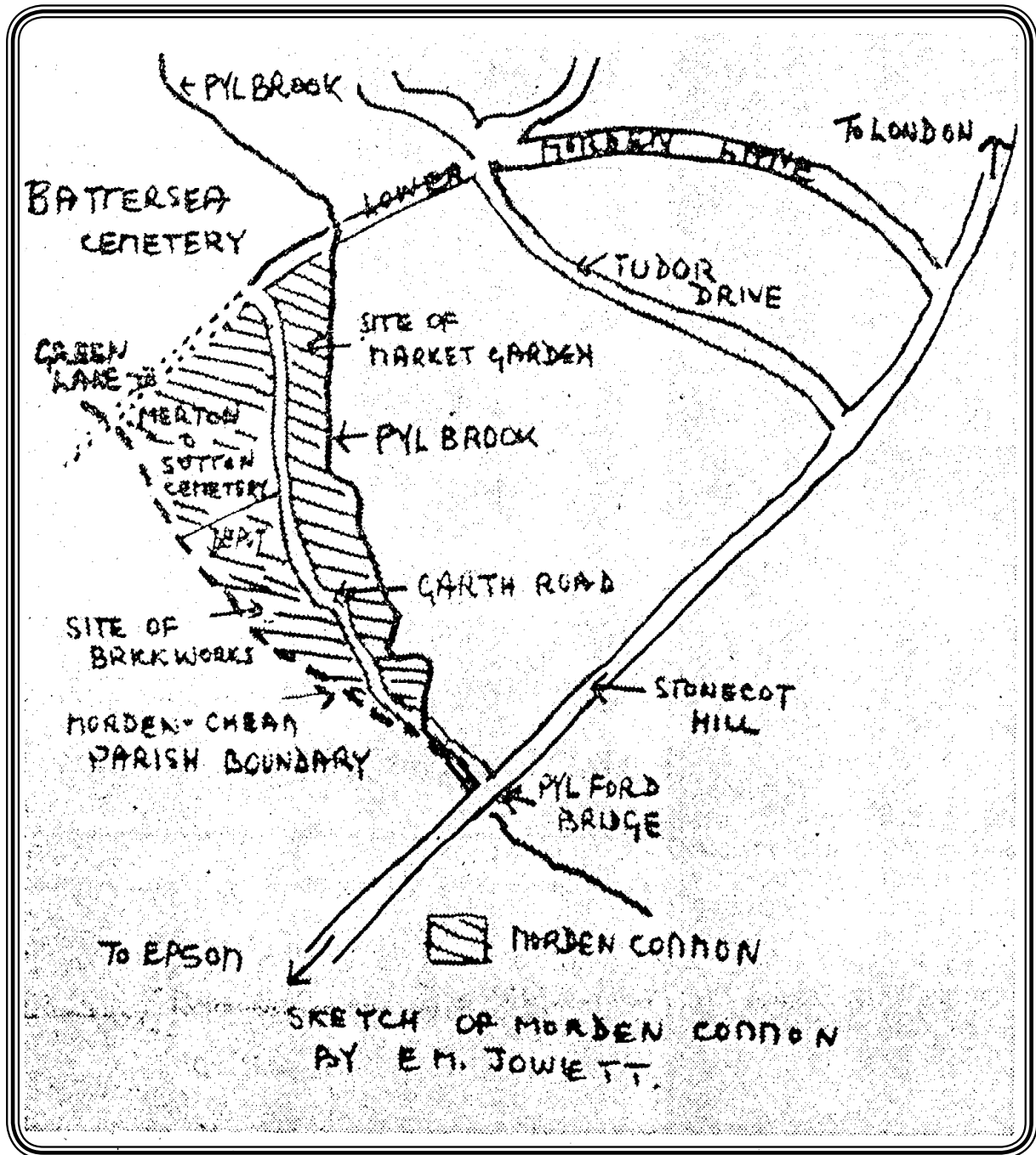
The Common finally disappeared as open land when the local council in 1926 bought much of it for the Merton Morden and Carshalton Cemetery (now the Merton and Sutton cemetery) and, later, more land for the Garth-road Refuse Disposal Depot. Building developers bought the rest. Soon Garth-road was lined with houses and an extensive modern industrial estate replaced the old brickworks.



Garth-road depot from entrance gate looking west over the premises once widest part of Morden Common - 1974



**Pyl Brook at Garth-road, Morden where it crosses the parish boundary
and forms the northern limit of Morden Common - 1974**



This article first appeared in the *Merton Borough News* as part of the series 'The Merton Story' on 8 March 1974. Miss E M Jowett, Vice President of the Society, died in August 1990.

ISBN 1 903899 28 1

Further information on Merton Historical Society can be obtained from the Society's website at www.mertonhistoricalsociety.org.uk or from Merton Library & Heritage Service, Merton Civic Centre, London Road, Morden, Surrey. SM4 5DX