

The Fryent Country Park Story – Part 5

So far, our journey has brought us from Saxon times up to the late 1930s, when the land which is now our country park was first protected as “open space”. If you missed Part 4, you can find it [here](#).



1. An autumn field in Fryent Country Park.

When war broke out in 1939, it was clear that the country needed to produce more of its own food. By the following year, at least one field behind Slough Lane had been turned into allotment gardens, but most of the meadows were still grazed by sheep belonging to a farmer from Edgware. Then, in 1942, Middlesex’s Food Production Committee had 56 acres of the old hay meadows on their Regional Open Space ploughed up, to grow wheat.



2. Threshing the wheat at Little Cherrylands field in 1942. (Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Colln.)

One long-time Kingsbury resident, who was a schoolboy at the time, remembers stacking sheaves of wheat in Richards Field East, to help with the harvest, as a number of local people did. He also remembered that there was a military observation post at the top of Gotfords Hill. There is rumoured to be a bunker underneath the hill, reached through a trap door, but that was supposed to be top secret! (Recent comments suggest it was 1960s Cold War, not WW2.)



3. Muriel Jefferies helping with the harvest at Bush Farm in 1942. (Photo courtesy of Martin Francis)

In July 1944, a V1 flying bomb exploded in Salmon Street, killing a lady in a house there. One of the five others injured was blown from the top of a stack of straw, at nearby Little Bush Farm. By that time, the end of the war was in sight, and the government was beginning to look ahead to post-war problems, such as the urgent need for new housing.

Wembley Council had said that it wanted 400 of the temporary factory-made bungalows, which the government planned to produce. By November 1944, land near the southern end of Fryent Way had been identified as one possible site for these “prefab” homes. Middlesex C.C. refused permission, as this was part of its Regional Open Space. However, in 1946, after Wembley had used up all its sites at the edge of parks and sports grounds, the County Council relented, on the promise that the land would be returned to open space after the 10-15 years these prefabs were due to last.



4. A row of prefab homes at Pilgrims Way, c.1950. (Photo from Brent Archives)

Work had hardly begun on the 114-home estate when the severe winter of 1946/47 intervened. It was too cold for the German prisoner-of-war labourers to lay the concrete roadway. By April, work was underway again, and the first aluminium bungalows began arriving on site in October. All of the new homes were occupied by July 1948, and the Council had named the estate

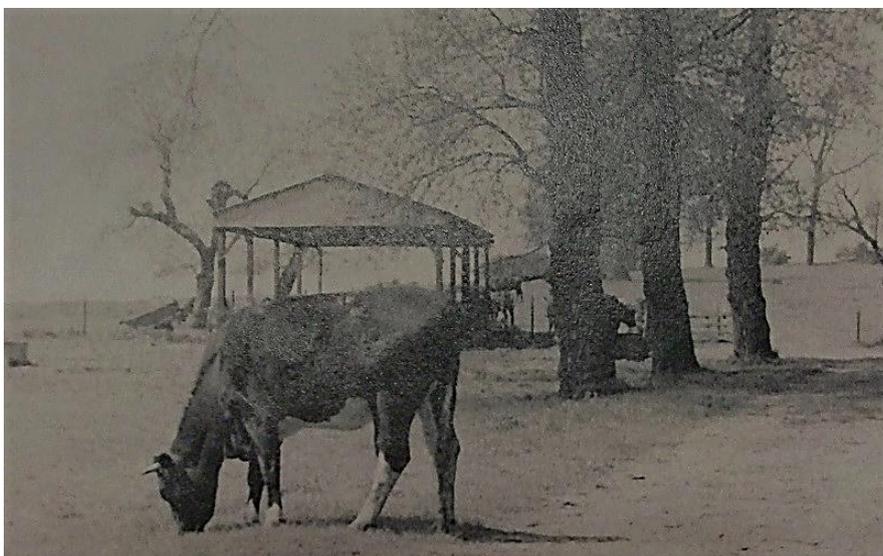
Pilgrims Way. This was because the ancient footpath (“Eldestrete”), which ran across it, was thought to have been used by pilgrims visiting the shrine of Our Lady of Willesdon, in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

One of my best sources for what the area was like in the 1950s and 1960s are the memories of children who grew up on the Pilgrims Way estate, collected as part of a “Prefabs Project” ten years ago. Maureen said: ‘it was an amazing place in which to spend the long summer hours of our childhood. A huge area of rolling hills, trees, woods and fields. Many of the fields with cows in them. At the top of Barn Hill there was a pond that was the focal point, which as a child I thought was massive. Wally me and the other kids would spend hours fishing in this pond for ‘red throats’ and other tiddlers using a jam jar with string tied around the top.’



5. Barn Hill pond, c.1950. (Photograph by Ian Stokes, courtesy of Barn Hill Conservation Group)

Paul remembered the woods and fields as ‘a child’s paradise to play in’, and not just in summer. ‘When it snowed we’d sledge at great speed down a very long steep hill next to Barn Hill pond, stopping only when the barbed wire fence of the cow’s field at the very bottom loomed into sight.’ Sheila’s summer days included: ‘just playing in the fields, making endless daisy chains, looking for grass hoppers, climbing trees, walking amongst the cows, never feeling unsafe only popping home for a slice of bread and jam then out again.’



6. Cattle grazing in a field on Barn Hill, c.1960s. (Source unknown!)

The cows belonged to a farmer from Edgware, as all of the active farmsteads along Salmon Street had gone. The farmhouse at Bush Farm was demolished around 1939, Little Bush Farm after its V1 damage in 1944, and Hill Farm to make way for housing in the 1950s. In the 1960s, the farmer began ploughing up some of the old meadows to plant crops. When he started to cut down some of the centuries-old hedges, the recently formed Brent Council put a stop to this, and ended his tenancy.



7. The Pilgrims Way prefab estate, and fields at the southern end of Fryent Way, mid-1960s.
(Brent Archives – aerial photographs collection)

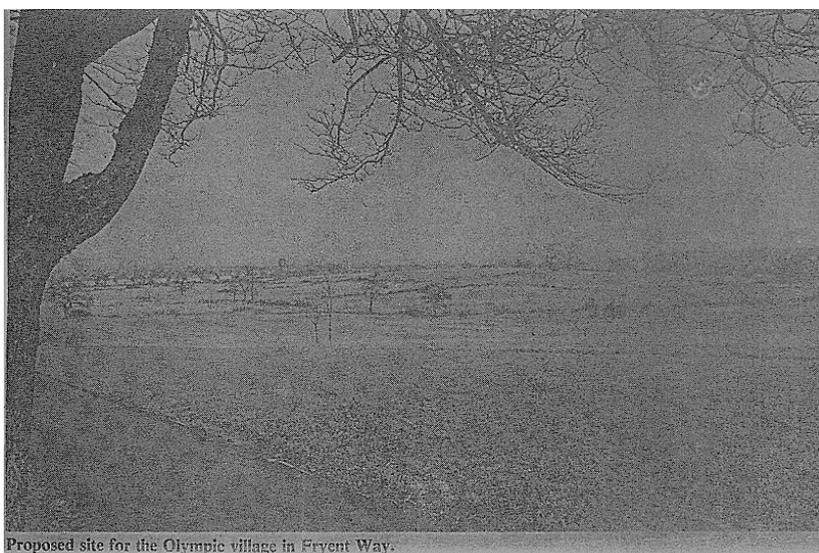
Brent had inherited the Pilgrims Way estate when Wembley joined with Willesden to form the new London Borough in 1965. Although only meant to be temporary, the last of the prefabs there remained in use until 1972. All of the land was supposed to be returned to open space, but the Council persuaded the Greater London Council (which had taken overall responsibility for this “Green Belt” land when Middlesex C.C. was abolished in 1965) to let them retain three acres for housing. A new Pilgrims Way was built, with two Closes off of it, called after old local field names, Saltcroft and Summers.



8. The “Pilgrims Way” footpath in 2019, and the old estate entrance at the top of the hill in Fryent Way.

The rest of the former prefab estate was allowed to become woodland, with its old entrance still just visible. But what should the Council do with the land they had taken back from the farmer? One group of Labour councillors, mainly from the Willesden wards, said that Council housing should be built on it. Another group, of Conservatives, thought that it should be turned into a municipal golf course. In 1973, however, Brent Council decided to retain the fields as meadowland, that would be open for the public to use.

There was one more threat to our future enjoyment of this open space that had to be overcome – the Olympic Games! Fryent Way had been part of the course for the marathon at the 1948 Games (British athlete, Tom Richards, won the silver medal, after a Korean runner ahead of him dropped out on the long climb up the hill from Kingsbury, in the final stages of the race back to Wembley Stadium). In 1980, London wanted to bid for the 1988 Games, and the fields at Fryent Way were the only suitable site for the athletes' village that would be needed. Luckily, the government decided to back a bid from Birmingham instead (which was unsuccessful).



Proposed site for the Olympic village in Fryent Way.

9. A cutting from the “Wembley Observer” about the Olympic Village site, February 1980. (Brent Archives)

I apologise for the poor quality of the picture above, but hope that, as well as its caption, it shows the sorry state the hedges were in then. Something needed to be done to improve this area of ancient Middlesex landscape. Please join me next weekend, for the final part of The Fryent Country Park Story to discover what that was (there's a clue in the title!).

**Philip Grant,
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