

The Fryent Country Park Story – Part 3

If you have already read the first two parts of this history of our local country park, welcome back. If not, you can find them by “clicking” on [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).



1. The pond on Barn Hill.

We left the story in the late 18th century, when most of the fields on what would become the country park had been turned over to growing hay. Some of the local landowners, though, did not need to rely on this seasonal crop for their income.

The Page family had been farmers in the Wembley area since at least 1534, when John Page rented land from Archbishop Cranmer (and later purchased some of it, after King Henry VIII had taken it from the Church in 1545). They had become wealthier over the centuries, and when Richard Page inherited another fortune from a spinster aunt in 1792, he wanted to show off his estate in the most fashionable way.

Page hired the famous landscape architect, Humphry Repton, to create beautiful grounds for his home, which he planned to rebuild into a mansion. As well as his fields to the south of Forty Lane, he also included the Barn Hill section of his Uxendon lands. Repton drew up a planting scheme that would frame the hill with a line of oak trees, which have been a feature of the landscape ever since, with many still there.



2. Humphry Repton's sketch of what the view of Wembley Park from Barn Hill would look like.

Repton believed that having grazing cattle would 'enliven the scene' when viewed from the Wembley Park mansion, as hay meadows lacked interest. He also built a 'prospect tower' on top of Barn Hill, from which Mr Page's visitors could enjoy the view across his estate, 'as well as forming a dwelling house for those who should have the care of the prospect rooms, and the dairy'. It is likely that he also had the pond created on top of the hill, close to the tower and dairy, so that the cattle had plenty of water to drink.

The 1793 plans for Wembley Park were never fully completed, after Richard Page fell out with Repton over his designs for the mansion. The history of the Page family does not end well, but that's another story!

The Pages were exceptions to the rule, and with small farms let on short leases and a single basic crop, the hay farmers of Kingsbury did not become rich men in the 19th century. They hired casual labour to help with the haymaking, and in years when the weather was bad at harvest time, they often went into debt. It didn't help that, at times of agricultural depression, the local parish rates were higher, to provide [relief for the poor](#).



3. A modern view of the Kingsbury meadows at haymaking time.

One unfortunate farmer was William Nicholls of Bush Farm. He had been declared bankrupt, and his belongings were sold to help pay his debts. An advertisement in March 1842 lists his farm equipment. This included 'two capital road waggons, nearly new', twelve hay, dung and other carts, hay making machines, a heavy pasture roller, a large number of rick cloths, two stack scaffolds, plus ladders, hay racks and forks.

By the late 1840s, many haymaking labourers were itinerant Irishmen, who had left their homes because of the potato famine. Bishop (later Cardinal) Wiseman was head of the recently restored Catholic church in London, and in 1849 he asked the Passionist religious order to send over priests from Dublin, to minister to these agricultural workers. They rented a barn at Hyde House Farm in Kingsbury (where the writer, Oliver Goldsmith, had lodged from 1771-74), before moving to a house in Wood Lane three years later.

When the Ordnance Survey published a booklet in 1865, giving details of all the land shown on their 1:2500 map of Kingsbury, all but two of the 200 fields in the parish were meadows. Almost every farm had a plot of land, generally of between a half and one acre, specifically described as "stackyard and sheds".

Some of the meadows were put to other uses as well. John Elmore, who farmed at Uxendon in the mid-19th century, held popular steeplechase races across his land. The Wealdstone Brook ran through his fields, and provided a 'sensational water jump'. Even after Elmore's death, this course was used occasionally as part of long-distance horse races from the Old Welsh Harp tavern, until an Act of Parliament in 1879 banned unlicensed race courses within ten miles of the centre of London.

While Kingsbury was still a rural backwater, it was beginning to be recognized as a place for recreation. From 1870, people in the crowded Metropolis could take a train to Hendon, and an 1880s book, "Our Lanes and Meadowpaths", encouraged them to enjoy Saturday afternoon walks in nearby countryside, after their 5½ days of labour. Its author, H J Foley included several routes through Kingsbury.



4. Haymaking near Kenton c.1880. (An illustration from H J Foley's "Our Lanes and Meadowpaths")

For one walk he tells his readers to '... make for Piper's Barn just beyond the Green Man.' From there, he describes a footpath to Harrow, which for nearly four miles 'simply threads its way through one meadow after another, round the base of a big green hill.' That was Barn Hill, and the path can still be followed today, from alongside St Robert Southwell School in Slough Lane. This "meadowpath" is all across fields, until the bridge over the Jubilee Line leading to Shakespeare Drive, apart from where you cross Fryent Way, near the end of Valley Drive.

When Wembley Park Station was opened on the Metropolitan Railway in 1894, it did more than just bring visitors to the new Pleasure Grounds there. By the following year, the Wembley Golf Club's course had been laid out on the Barn Hill section of Repton's century-old landscape. The second of the 18 holes on the 4,500-yard golf course had the tee on one side of the hilltop pond, and the green on the other!

At the start of the 20th century, Kingsbury had become an Urban District, but hardly deserved that description. Its total population at the 1901 census was just 757 people, and many of these were still involved in agriculture. At Little Bush Farm, for example, the two adult males living there were listed as a "carter" and a "hay loader".

The last entry on the census return gives the address as 'Encampment at Salmon Street', and lists three "households". One was headed by Miss L. Sanders, a licensed hawk and pedlar, aged 41. She had two sons, aged 5 and 3, born at Uxbridge and Hampstead, and a male

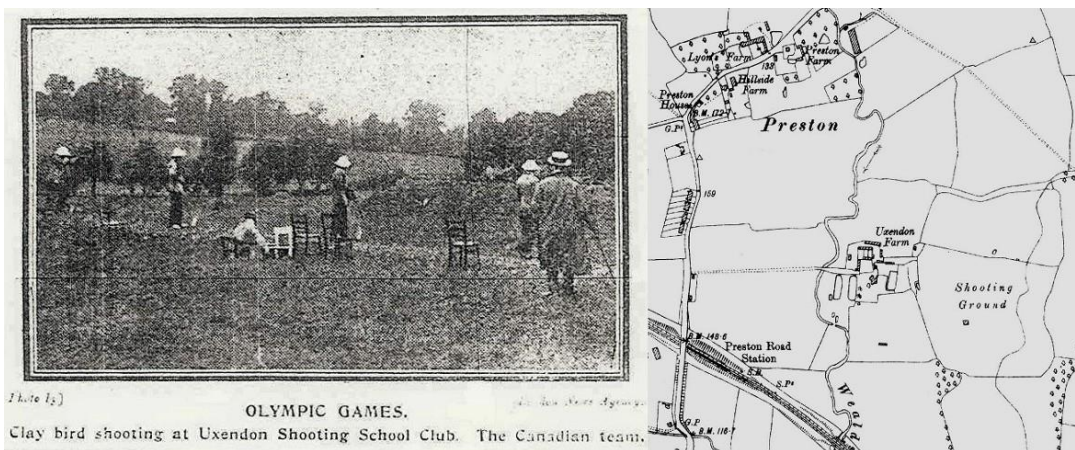
“boarder”, aged 22, whose occupation was ‘clothes peg maker’. Both of the other family groups included pedlar/hawkers, and all had been born at various locations around London.



5. A gipsy camp at Alperton, early 1900s. (Photo by Bertram Wickison, from “Kingsbury & Kenton News”, 1952)

I can remember, as a child in the 1950s, when gipsy women would sometimes visit our estate, and go door-to-door selling clothes pegs, and sprigs of “lucky” white heather. That was probably what this group were doing, camping for a time on a piece of common land beside Salmon Street, and getting the wood for their peg-making from the local hedgerows. By chance, a local newspaper’s reminiscences feature in 1952 included a photograph, taken at Alperton in the early 1900s, which may well show Miss Sanders!

By around 1900, Most of Uxendon Farm’s fields had been taken over by Preston Farm, and the remaining part was used as a shooting school. When the [Olympic Games](#) came to London for the first time in 1908, the farm became the venue for the clay pigeon shooting competition. Because Uxendon was hard to get to along untarmacked lanes, the Metropolitan Railway was persuaded to open a new “halt” for its trains at Preston Road.



6. Uxendon Farm, in a 1908 Olympics photo (“Evening Standard”), and on the 1920 edition O.S. map.

The map above, surveyed just before the First World War, shows fields, farms and the edge of Repton’s belt of trees around Barn Hill (also visible in the photograph). It also shows a small new development of houses on Preston Road, the start of a period of major change which will continue in the next part of the Fryent Country Park Story. Look out for it next weekend.

Philip Grant, Wembley History Society, April 2020.