

A historical painting of a park scene. In the foreground, a group of people in 19th-century attire are gathered on a path. Some are standing, while others are on bicycles. A man in a dark suit stands near a large tree on the right. The background is filled with large, leafy trees and a path leading into the distance. The overall style is that of a 19th-century landscape painting.

# The Common Story

## A History of Tooting Common

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Edited by Katy Layton-Jones

## Acknowledgements

This book has only been made possible due to the many hours contributed by volunteers from the Tooting area over a period of more than four years. A large proportion of the historical research that underpins this book was carried out by these volunteers and special thanks are due to the Tooting History Group for also engaging the local community in the historical research project through guided walks, talks and special events. Particular thanks are extended to Janet Smith for her commitment to the project throughout. Thanks are also extended to:

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## List of abbreviations

<b>BDANHS</b>	Balham & District Antiquarian & Natural History Society
<b>HLF</b>	Heritage Lottery Fund
<b>LA</b>	Lambeth Archives
<b>LBSCR</b>	London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway Company
<b>LCC</b>	London County Council
<b>LMA</b>	London Metropolitan Archive
<b>MA</b>	Morning Advertiser
<b>MBW</b>	Metropolitan Board of Works
<b>MERL</b>	Museum of English Rural Life
<b>MPGA</b>	Metropolitan Public Gardens Association
<b>MOLA</b>	Museum of London Archaeology
<b>PCOSC</b>	Parks, Commons, and Open Spaces Committee of the Metropolitan Board of Works
<b>POSC</b>	Parks and Open Spaces Committee of London County Council
<b>SN</b>	<i>The Streatham News and Tooting, Balham, Tulse Hill Advertiser</i>
<b>TNA</b>	The National Archives
<b>WBC</b>	Wandsworth Borough Council (formerly Wandsworth Metropolitan Borough Council, WMBC)
<b>WBN</b>	<i>Wandsworth Borough News</i>
<b>WECPR</b>	West End and Crystal Palace Railway Company
<b>WHS</b>	Wandsworth Heritage Service

# Preface

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'The Common Story' is part of the Tooting Common Heritage Project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The project aimed to provide evidence-based historical research about Tooting Bec Common and Tooting Graveney Common, which today compose 'Tooting Common'. This research is being used to improve popular understanding and interpretation of Tooting Common, inform future management plans, and ensure that its history and heritage is conserved and enhanced. 'The Common Story' brought together local community groups, individual residents, archivists, council employees, and professional historians to research and uncover the hidden history of the Common and to share their findings with the wider community. The project combined both archival and on-site research and, in the process, it offered opportunities for research training and volunteering and the chance to contribute directly to the interpretation, protection, and improvement of this historically significant public space. Free advice, guidance, and research training was provided by the project team, project consultant, and archivists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Tooting Bec Lido and the Woodfield Pavilion** - In 1906, Tooting Bec Lido was officially opened and dedicated to the public by Mr Evan Spicer, the Chairman of the London County Council. Three decades later, at a similar date to the construction of the London County Council Sports Ground on Tooting Graveney Common, the Woodfield Pavilion and recreation ground were constructed. Both the Lido and the Woodfield site are the subject of specific history projects and as such are not covered here.



## Note on terminology

Up until the late 1860s, the area that we now think of collectively as Tooting Common comprised two distinct land parcels, each under the control of a different Lord of the Manor; these were known as Tooting Bec Common and Tooting Graveney Common respectively.<sup>2</sup> No physical barrier between the two pieces of land was ever instated, although posts marked parish boundaries for centuries. However, the two commons were managed separately and their evolution was informed by sometimes quite disparate motives. The historical division of the Common has a number of implications for the historian. Firstly, it is inaccurate and sometimes actively misleading to refer to 'Tooting Common' in the singular when discussing any period before 1875. For example, the importance of parish boundaries in the distribution of poor relief during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to two poor houses being built on or near the Common, each serving a different neighbourhood, but easily confused if the distinct identities of Tooting Bec and Tooting Graveney are not acknowledged. The physical division of the Common was reinforced by natural features, such as the York Ditch watercourse, which ran alongside the eastern side of The Avenue and which served historically as the division between the Streatham and Tooting Graveney parishes.

The second implication for the historian is the impact that the division has upon the distribution of evidence across various archives. While records inherited and created by the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW) and its successor, the London County Council (LCC), are usually to be found in the London Metropolitan Archive (LMA), records pertaining to one of the two Commons exclusively can be found in a diverse range of collections, particularly parish records and deeds relating to early housing developments. Although visitors to the area often referred to 'Tooting Common' prior to 1875, for the purposes of this report and in order to ensure absolutely clarity, the term 'Tooting Common' is used here only when discussing the period post-1875.<sup>3</sup> For the period prior to that date, the commons are named individually, or, if the point in question pertains to both Tooting Bec Common AND Tooting Graveney Common, the term 'Tooting Commons' is employed.

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<sup>2</sup> To compound the confusion, Tooting Bec Common was also frequently referred to as both 'Streatham Common' and 'Balham Common' up until the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> Rocque's Map of 1746 labels the entire area simply as 'Tooting Common'.



*Dr. Johnson's Avenue (1908).  
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courtesy of the  
Patrick Loobey  
collection.*

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# Introduction

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Commons may be said to belong to the people, for... no doubt they have always used commons, like village greens, for their festivals and holiday activities, a use which has gradually extended to the wider public and is today of considerable importance (Clayden, 1985, p.1).

The history of Tooting Commons is the history not only of a piece of land, but of a community, its trades, religions, and politics. It is a story that reflects the national narratives of war, power, and social revolution, but also the personal experiences of those who visited, lived and died in the vicinity of the Commons. As with all stories, it has been infused with myths and apocryphal anecdotes, some of which owe more to romantic imaginings than to historical fact. However, even these fictions have their part to play in informing how we navigate and interpret the rich history of this landscape and the people whose lives it has shaped.

Historians have been surprisingly reluctant to engage in the history of commons. This perhaps reflects a wider hesitance to subject all green spaces, including public parks, to academic enquiry. While the ecological character of green spaces has attracted extensive academic investigation, the historical importance of those same sites has been neglected (Lambert and Williams, 2005, p. 1). However, in recent years, this historiographical vacuum has begun to be filled. As urban green spaces come under increasing threat from residential development and underfunding, their historical and contemporary significance has become the subject of greater scrutiny (Layton-Jones, 2014; CABESpace, 2004; Forest Research, 2010; Dobson, 2012; Landscape Institute, 2011; Ward Thompson, 1998; Jorgensen and Keenan, 2012; Taylor, 2004; Watkins and Wright, 2007). The growing awareness of the need to research,

record, and interpret the history of commons makes this project particularly timely and significant. Although there is a vast reservoir of knowledge pertaining to the Commons, it is currently dispersed across the wider public and there are few published historical accounts of the Tooting Commons. One of the most famous, albeit brief, records is John James Sexby's history, which appeared in *The Municipal Parks Gardens, and Open Spaces of London: their history and associations* (Sexby, 1898). Having been reprinted as a facsimile edition in 1989, it has become the standard authority. However, being over a century old, an updated account is urgently needed. Furthermore, Sexby's status as the Superintendent of Parks for LCC necessarily led him to privilege particularly positive elements of the site's history, as well as those that were of special interest to a late-Victorian readership. Nearly 12 decades later, as we face a new age in public green space provision and protection, we can afford to venture a little deeper into the complex physical, social, and political history of this ancient site.

In recent decades, recognition of 'global commons', those natural resources upon which all humanity relies, has widened our understanding of the term and its implications for ecological sustainability on a massive scale. The principle of common responsibility now defines our approach to environmental assets. Garrett Hardin's *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968) drew international attention to the vulnerability of common resources and the impact of over-exploitation (Hardin, 1968). Although that article took a global view, it was heavily influenced by the findings of the Victorian economist William Forster Lloyd, whose writings on population growth and the pressures it placed on common lands such as those at Tooting predicted many of the challenges facing all commons today (Lloyd, 1833). Thus, the historical common lands of England have shaped the very character of contemporary debates around the environment, equality of access, and the preservation of natural resources. International Law now recognizes four global commons:



High Seas, the Atmosphere, Antarctica, and Outer Space (United Nations Environment Programme). However, as a result of this shift in thinking, the term 'common' is this now applied to a diverse range of landscapes, ecosystems, and services, including rainforests, aquifers, and even the internet or 'digital' commons. It may appear that such a broad and contemporary use of the term offers little to those seeking to uncover and understand this history of Tooting Commons. However, this broader definition is perhaps more apposite than might first appear. Since they were first designated for common use following the Statutes of Merton in 1235, the commons of Tooting Graveney and Tooting Bec have performed numerous economic, environmental, infrastructural, social and even military functions in service of both local residents and the wider population as a whole. The land has benefitted all those who have drawn on its resources, whether agriculturally, industrially, recreationally, or aesthetically. In so doing, Tooting Common affirms the much-repeated definition that commons are resources 'for which exclusion is difficult' (Hanna et al., 1996, p. 88). Nevertheless, just as nation states contend to make claims over global commons, so have individuals sought to exercise private interests over common land. The Tooting Common we see today shows the physical scars of such battles as well as myriad attempts to resist them. In the twenty-first century Tooting Common serves a primarily recreational and ecological function, but this is a relatively recent chapter in its evolution and use. Thus, there is a direct correlation between the manner in which commons have been understood and valued in the past and the present. An exploration of the full spectrum of services provided by the Commons throughout their history, as well as the people and events that have shaped their form and reputation reveals the rich and sometimes surprising narrative of this unique landscape.

Contrary to popular belief, common land is not and never has been 'public' in the sense that we now understand that term. Unlike the four global commons,

common land has an owner and although that might now be a public body, such as a local authority, public ownership is not a prerequisite for common land. Nor is common land defined by any particular physical features. We are familiar with the image of a common as open green space in which nature is tolerated and protected to a greater extent than in the more-controlled environment of the urban park or garden, but which is nonetheless a site for public recreation and enjoyment. This vision of a common merely reflects the form with which British people are most familiar and which evolved informally. Historically, the significance and application of the term 'common' was closer to that applied to the global commons today and 'common land' was territory within which particular individuals and groups enjoyed specific rights of access and use. These rights were usually attached to individual dwelling houses or fields, meaning that the rights remained in the community, even if the tenant of the house or land changed. This was known as an 'appendant' right. Many commons, including Tooting Commons, are no longer subject to these historic rights and in fact any such rights had largely fallen out of use by the 1880s. As one study of that period notes, 'although there was public access to the commons by custom, Londoners had no rights in them' (Gibbon and Bell, 1939, p. 38). Nevertheless, the historical rights connected to common land did ensure their partial protection from development and consequently common rights continue to inform their ecology, use, and value. Not all rights were applicable to each common and the type of rights enjoyed by commoners was dictated by factors such as the quality of the soil and regional agricultural markets. Most of the common land that survives is poor quality in agricultural terms; hence the historical name 'common waste'. Its unsuitability for arable farming made it less profitable for the Lord of the Manor and so more likely to be identified as land suitable for common use. There were, and in some locations there remain, six rights of common: Pasture – The right to graze livestock on the common land; Pannage – The right to allow your pigs to graze for acorns on the common land; Estovers – The right to take small branches or bracken for fuel, for

repairing structures, or for providing animal litter; Turbary – The right to cut turf or peat; Piscary – The right to fish in lakes, ponds, or streams; and Common in the Soil – The right to dig sand, gravel, stone or minerals from the common. Over their long history, a range of rights in common have been exercised on the Tooting Commons. However, the rights of Estovers, Common in the Soil, and Turbary had arguably the greatest impact on shaping the topography of the landscape that we see today.

There has been comparatively little archaeological investigation of Tooting Common. As part of the Tooting Common Heritage Project, the Museum of London produced an archaeological desk-based assessment of the area, but there has been very little intensive archaeological investigation (MOLA, 2015). Nevertheless, the geology of the land and its uses before the medieval period indicate considerable consistencies with the later form and function of the Common. Prior to the establishment of Common rights in Tooting, the land now comprising Tooting Common would have been indistinguishable from the wider rural landscape and its use reflected the motivations of Lords of the Manor and, before them, successive occupants, both native and foreign. The wider area of Tooting has yielded some Paleolithic, and to a lesser extent, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age finds. While it is difficult to attribute the presence of specific communities or activities from these periods to the Common itself, the proximity of a number of archaeological finds suggests that the land may have served these civilizations (Greenwood, 2015, pp. 2-3 and pp. 8-13) in one form or another. From AD43 to the fifth century AD, Romans ruled Britain and their stronghold was in the south. During this period, two major Roman roads were constructed on either side of the area that now comprises the Common

(<http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record.jsf?titleId=2740802>).

One was later called Stane Street and the other ran towards Croydon and would lie under Streatham High Road (Saxby, 2008, p. 47 and Fuentes, 1991,

p. 23). The wider landscape was punctuated with relatively small farms.

The geology of the area is distinctive and was to inform the rights and uses of the commons in later centuries. It is primarily of London Clay, but with significant gravel deposits. Although there is little evidence of these materials being exploited prior to the medieval period, it should not be presumed that such activities did not occur (Greenwood, 2015, p. 6). With the exception of Harvey Bloom, early antiquarians and scholars neglected the prehistoric and Roman periods in their study of the Common, but this arguably reflects the prejudices and interests of the times (Bloom, 1926, pp. 3-4). Further research and archaeological investigation may deliver finds from the gravel workings on the Common as well as evidence of other early uses.

## Manorial power and property

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**Commons, heaths and village greens are some of the oldest surviving elements of the medieval landscape of Greater London (Lambert and Williams, 2005, p.4).**

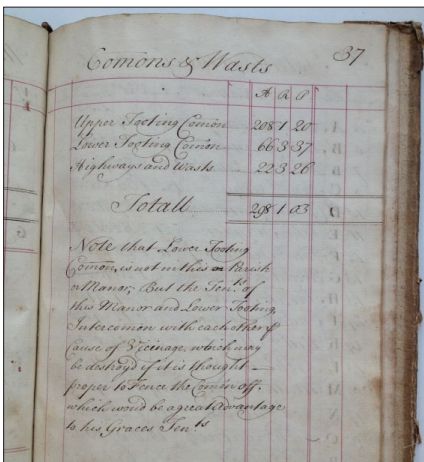
The lands now forming Tooting Common were once part of much larger medieval manors. The name Tooting Graveney originates from the De Gravenell family who were awarded the land in the wake of the Norman conquest of 1066. Two manors are identifiable on the Assize Rolls of 1255, in which they are referred to as 'Toting de Bek' and 'Toting Grauel' (Surrey Archaeological Collections, 36, 1926). The manor of Tooting Bec was under the ownership of Tooting Bec Priory, associated with the Benedictine abbey of Bec in Normandy, in modern day France. The priory was dissolved in 1315, long before the Reformation, and the land was granted to Eton College in 1440 (Malden, 1967, II, pp. 129-30). Throughout much of the medieval and

early modern periods, the environs of Tooting and Wandsworth were dominated by vast tracts of commons, each adjoining another. As J. Harvey Bloom noted in his 1926 history of Balham, 'Clapham and Wandsworth Common... passed imperceptibly into the common lands of both Tootings' (Bloom, 1926, p. 37). Although the Statutes of Merton in 1235 led to the establishment of Common rights at Tooting, the Lords of the Manor retained ownership and continued to profit from the land. Different lords exercised their powers and exploited the gravel, clay, and furze that abounded on the Common to differing degrees. The rolls for each manor reveal that, between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, the manors of Tooting Bec and Tooting Graveney passed through successive hands and were increasingly enclosed and tenanted (LMA, M/95/GRA and LMA, M/95/Bec). However, the manors remained desirable property for both established aristocratic families and ambitious politicians and professional men. The high social status of those who held the Manorial rights at Tooting is evidenced by the fame and wealth of those who visited them there.

Histories of Tooting Common and the area refer repeatedly to the visit of Queen Elizabeth I in 1600 in order to see Henry Maynard, secretary to Lord Burghley,

the Lord High Treasurer (Lysons, 1792, I, and Nichols, 1823, p. 513).

Maynard acquired the Manor of Tooting Graveney in 1595-6 and resided in Eldon House near the Commons and so it is likely that any such visit was indeed undertaken in order to visit Maynard. In the past,



Extract from the Field Book for the Manor of Tooting Beck (1729). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archive.



there has been some suggestion that the avenue of oaks along Dr Johnson Avenue was planted to mark the occasion. However, this project has uncovered no primary evidence to support the claim and most references appear to lead back to Lysons. Furthermore, a recent tree survey confirms that no trees on The Avenue are old enough to date from this period.

The eighteenth century was a period of social, political, and physical upheaval across Britain. Subsistence farmers were displaced by Lords of the Manor keen to profit from modern farming methods. Across the country commons were enclosed as the Agricultural Revolution drove tenant farmers from their fields and the Industrial Revolution drew them into cities. In May 1794, Tooting Bec Common was the site of a riot in response to the Duke of Bedford instructing his agent, Macnamara, to enclose the land and sell the furze, which had previously been subject to Common rights. Such civil unrest was not uncommon

in the late eighteenth century as landowners sought to enclose their lands. A similar fracas occurred in Melton Mowbray. However, the Tooting riot was deemed significant enough to be reported and the lack of enclosure thereafter testifies to the success of the protest (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 4 May 1794).

Notwithstanding recurrent protests, enclosure and development did occur on and around the Commons in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.



*'Among the furze' (c. 1900). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

# Serving a changing society

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The wildness of the Commons was, and remains, one of their unique qualities. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the appetite for picturesque scenery and native British topography prompted residents from London and further afield to seek out wildness in the landscape. In *The Man About Town* of 1839, Cornelius Webbe celebrated the rawness of the Tooting Commons with some humour, describing it as:

wild, but a pleasant wildness. Patrick Nasmyth<sup>4</sup> has been over these spots, for I traced him. Here we got again among the furze, wild flowers, wild birds, tame ducks, weedy ponds, tinted with mineral water (?), stragglng children, dreamy-eyed donkeys, and haymakers, winding in and out among the bushes, as they returned to the fields (Webbe, 1839, I, p. 71).

By the 1860s the neighbouring city had crept closer and closer to the Commons, increasing pressure for development. The value of the land for residential development rose year by year, but so too did the realisation that such spaces must be protected. As Octavia Hill argued, 'The more that fields and woods are closed, the more does every atom of Common land, everywhere, all over England, become of importance to the people of every class, except that which owns its own parks and woods' (Hill, 1877, p. 7). Unlike many more-central commons, the Tooting Commons benefitted somewhat from their distance from the city centre as by the time the urban sprawl reached their outskirts, there was already a vocal and powerful advocate for their protection. Nevertheless, the Commons witnessed significant and transformative change between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Nasmyth (1787 – 1831) was a landscape painter who specialised in rustic scenes, often incorporating picturesque decay.

Some of the characteristics we associate with urbanisation, such as small residential developments, new school and churches, and centralised provision for the poor, developed on and around Tooting Commons decades before the city proper encircled the area. Physical impositions, such as the arrival of new railways, transformed the common itself, but the process of urbanisation ran deeper than these explicit intrusions. One significant example of this deeper level of change was the formalisation of previously informal social, religious and environmental networks, many of which had been defined by the Commons. Perhaps the earliest to take effect was the cessation of the old outdoor relief provided through the vestry, which, along with the modest resources provided by the commons, enabled many local paupers to survive poor harvests and harsh winters. In its place arrived the workhouse; a facility that would change both the appearance and the character of the Commons.

## Streatham Workhouse

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St. Leonard's Tooting was among the earliest parishes in England to build a workhouse and the first building for this purpose was erected in 1790 on the northwestern end of The Avenue (now known as Dr Johnson Avenue) and



what is now Elmbourne Road (James Wyld, *Map of London*, 1843). It was far more modest and domestic in scale than the Dickensian factory-scale institutions that were to follow.

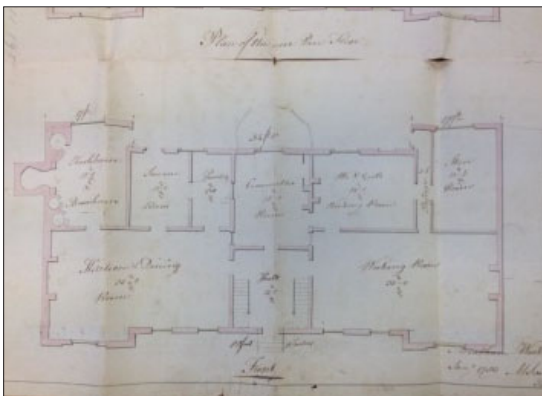
*Mr. Ray, Plan for Streatham Workhouse, (accepted), front elevation (1789). Reproduced courtesy of Lambeth Archives.*

The Streatham Workhouse was one of many changes to provision for the poor made across the country after the influential Gilbert Act 'For the Better Relief and Employment of the Poor' of 1782 (Theobald, 1836, p. 714). Traditionally, poor relief had been provided by the parish as 'outdoor' relief, where the recipient received charity in their own home. However, by the late eighteenth century, this was becoming increasingly unsustainable. Populations which had previously resided in rural villages were displaced by changes to agricultural methods, including the enclosure of common lands, and migration towards the towns and cities increased rapidly. City centre parishes were the worst to be hit as their population size became disproportionate to their resources. Although the area around Tooting experienced some enclosures, a portion of the increase in demand for parish poor relief would have come from the numerous migrants travelling to London from Kent, Sussex, and Hampshire. For neither the first time, nor the last, the Common's proximity to London was to impact on its physical form. In the case of the parish of St. Leonard's, Gilbert's Act contributed to the decision to build a new workhouse. In November 1788 the Vestry Committee of the Parish of Streatham met to discuss the proposal. Mr Robert Hunter proposed the motion: 'that the accommodation for the poor of this parish being in a most wretched state it is of the opinion of this meeting that the only effectual means of remedying this evil is to build a workhouse' (LA, P/S/2/5, 26 November 1788). The motion was carried unanimously. In January 1789, the Duke of Bedford offered a piece of the Tooting Bec Common as a potential site (LA, P/S/2/5, 3 January 1789). An Act of Parliament was required to enable the committee to raise poor rates to fund the scheme with the maximum sum permitted set at £4,000. In 1790, Parliament passed the Streatham Poor Relief Act (30 Geo. 3. C. 80 and HMSO, *House of Lords Journal*, 38 1790 pp. 568-83). However, the proposal for a poor house was not welcomed by all; the following month, Miss Mary Johnson wrote to the committee to appeal against the choice of location on the grounds that 'the

erection of a workhouse on the spot given by his Grace the Duke of Bedford and marked out for that purpose will be a great prejudice to her House situate [sic] near the said spot' (LA, P/S/2/5, 14 February 1789). Miss Johnson's objections were rejected and the committee proceeded with the project.

According to the Act, each workhouse was to be managed by a board of Guardians. In addition to the clergy who had traditionally managed poor relief, these boards also included men from the local gentry and professions of law or medicine. In 1790, a large number of Guardians (all male) were appointed to oversee the Streatham project. These included: Reverend Dr Richard Bullock (chairman), John Smith, John Bright, John Whitelock, Samuel Rush, William Wilkinson, Thomas Harrison, John Holmes, Alex Anderson, Robert Hunter, Rowland Richardson (Churchwarden of St. Leonard's), George Wolff, Henry Thomas, Thomas Holmes, William Winkworth, Richard Harrison, John Hanksey, Hugh Smith MD, Daniel Macnamara (the famous campaigner for the rights of Roman Catholics) and, perhaps most famously, Sir Abraham Pitches (spelled also Pytches) (LA, P/S/2/5, 6 February 1790). Pitches was a brandy merchant and liveryman of the City of London, who acquired considerable wealth in 1758 when he married his wife Jane Hassel and her fortune of £12,000 (*London Magazine*, 1758, 685 and *Court of Alderman*,

1768). Although he resided in Park Hill house in Streatham, his commercial interests in the city demonstrate the extent to which the



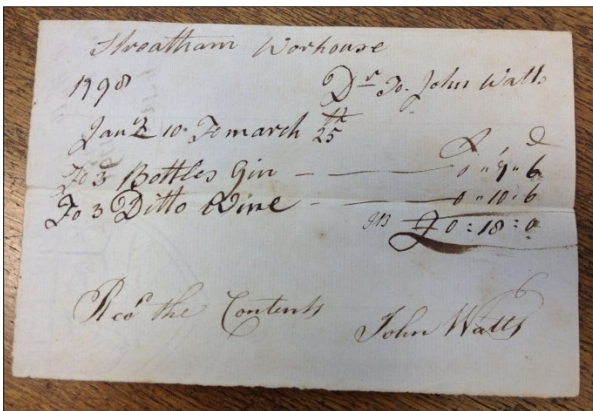
Mr. Ray, Plan of the Streatham Workhouse (ground floor) (1789). Reproduced courtesy of Lambeth Archives.



economy and society around the commons were increasingly interwoven with those of the metropolis.

Plans were commissioned for the new building in 1789. The first plans proposed by the architect were rejected by the committee and a far grander scheme was later approved. As Cornelius Webbe was to observe in 1839, 'there was some comfort still in looking at that last refuge of the destitute. It did not seem as yet a gaol. The light and air of heaven could visit its open windows, and shine and breathe on them; and the poor could yet look out of them upon the green common, and the blue hills in the distance, and hear the skylark warbling in the silent noon' (Webbe, 1839, I, p. 71). As well as housing the poor, the building included sick rooms, work rooms (in which shoes were made), a kitchen and dining room, a wash house and brew house, store rooms, a committee room, and an 'insane room', although inmates declared 'insane' were later sent to the Bethnal Green Lunatic Asylum (LA, P/S/2/62/3a). The principal contractor for the building was Samuel Killick of Mitcham, with Mr Osborne providing the masonry and John Reader as carpenter (LA, P/S/2/17). In 1792, an extension was designed comprising additional sheds, stores, and even a pig sty.

Although the Guardians oversaw the financial and administrative management of the workhouse, a Master (and later a Matron also) attended to the day to day running of the facility. In 1794, Mr Joseph Garden was appointed to the post, to be succeeded in 1806 by Daniel Pope, Isaac Hazard in 1814, and John Dangerfield in 1825. Sarah Hodson was appointed Matron of the Workhouse in 1828 (LA, P/S/2/61/10). The workhouse opened in 1791, and operated until 1836 when, in the wake of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the new Wandsworth and Clapham Poor Law Union was formed on 25 March 1836.



Bill for gin and wine delivered to Streatham Workhouse (1790). Reproduced courtesy of Lambeth Archives.

Albeit austere and an undesirable destination for the inmates, the first Streatham Workhouse reflected some of the principles of shared responsibilities and benefits that the commons had represented for centuries. For example, during a particularly bad outbreak of whooping cough in October 1818, the committee ordered that ‘an opening be made in each of the rooms in the infirmary to give free circulation of air’; the proximity of the clean air of the Common was clearly considered advantageous on such occasions (LA, P/S/2/29, 5 May 1818). Accounts and receipts also demonstrate the considerable expenses of running the institution and the cost of providing worsted cloth, shoes, groceries, coal, and even gin, were met primarily by the poor rates charged against local properties (LA, P/S/2/62/1). Large amounts of cloth were required by the workhouse as inmates were required to wear a uniform known as ‘parish clothing’. This distinctive attire would have made them easily identifiable among other residents and visitors to the Commons (LA, P/S/2/29, 7 August 1826).

According to the principles laid down by successive poor laws, the Streatham Workhouse could only admit paupers registered to that parish. This meant that some paupers from as nearby as the parish of Tooting Graveney had to

be 'removed' to that neighbourhood (LA, P/S/2/29, 7 August 1816). Thus, although by 1790, the Commons were apparently one, unified green space, the invisible parish and manorial boundaries that crossed the land continued to divide it, both bureaucratically and socially.

In 1840, the workhouse building, by then known as the 'Old Streatham Workhouse', was put up for auction along with the wider Bedford Hill Estate on which it stood (*The Standard*, 30 October 1840, 1 and LA, P/S/2/61/19). In his history of Balham and Tooting Bec, J.H. Bloom claims that the workhouse was demolished in 1839. However, this is incorrect. It appears on the auction advertisements for Bedford Hill in 1840 and 1841 and, although empty by this time, is marked on Wyld's map of 1843. Poverty continued to increase in the vicinity of the Tooting Commons, leading to the Wandsworth and Clapham Union acquiring the dubious accolade of becoming the largest Poor Law Union in London.

## **St. Benedict's Hospital (formerly Tooting Home for the Aged and Infirm)**

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The asylum known locally as 'Tooting Home for the Aged and Infirm' was effectively a workhouse. However, the term 'workhouse' had come into disrepute. The regime in the new 'home' would still have been harsh, but the focus was primarily upon caring for the elderly and sick. The building at Tooting was partially converted from the former St. Joseph's Roman Catholic College (LMA, SC/PHL/02/0156/A6447 and 'St. Benedict's Hospital, Tooting Graveney', 12 October 1934, Historic England, EPR000415). The premises opened on 11 May 1897.



*'Tooting Home'*  
(c. 1912). Reproduced  
courtesy of the Patrick  
Loobey collection.

During the First World War, the home joined the ranks of numerous similar institutions by serving as a military hospital. Between the wars, in the midst of social and economic discontent, the political appetite for punitive facilities for the poor receded and the building was never returned to its earlier purpose. In 1930, the building was taken over by the LCC and in 1931 reopened as St. Benedict's Hospital. In its final years, the hospital specialised in geriatric care. It closed its doors in 1981. Laing Homes bought the hospital as a development site in the 1980s. The original building was demolished and replaced with residential housing. The portico remains as a decorative feature within the development.

## **Tooting Bec Hospital (formerly Tooting Bec Asylum)**

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In 1887, 27 acres of land was purchased by the Metropolitan Asylum Board for the erection of a fever hospital to accommodate paupers. The proximity of the Common would have been viewed as a strong argument for locating such an institution on that site as tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases were

exacerbated by the air pollution produced by the growing city. However, in 1893 the proposal prompted vociferous objections from local people:

The common has been secured to the public for ever and it has been the aim of the authorities to make it as attractive as possible. Some thousands of pounds have recently been expended ... additional land and a fine belt of old trees have been acquired... Now a body of men... are attempting to undo the good work that has been done by placing a fever hospital on the side of a road right in the middle of the common... To attempt to establish such an institution on one of the lungs of London is an outrage on common sense that could only be perpetrated by such an irresponsible body as the Metropolitan Asylum Board (*The Times*, 3 February 1893).

The objections were effective and an alternative site was identified for a fever hospital further to the southwest. However, plans to build some form of

hospital at Tooting Graveney continued as, it was argued, 'private interest... had to give way to private need' (*The Times*, 8 March 1893).



Tooting Bec Asylum, S. W.

Despite some resistance about housing the sick in the desirable districts that surrounded green spaces, by the 1890s the parks movement had won the argument that 'green lungs' should be preserved across the country for the

*'Tooting Bec Asylum' (c. 1900). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*



purpose of improving public health. Tooting Common provided an ideal opportunity. In 1901, the Surrey Magazine remarked how 'Tooting Bec Common in this parish, and Tooting Graveney Common in the Parish of the same name' formed 'splendid "lungs" for town dwellers' (*Surrey Magazine*, July 1901).

In terms of a proposed new hospital at Tooting, it was resolved to develop an 'asylum' in place of a fever hospital. Work began in 1899 and was completed in 1903. The facility was innovative and incorporated gas-powered electricity and an electric fire alarm system. When it first opened, Tooting Bec Asylum admitted 772 people but a year later accommodated around 1000 patients. The site may have bordered the Common but it was enclosed by a wrought-iron fence over 8ft high and complaints about its presence continued into the twentieth century. In 1904, another letter was sent to *The Times*:

Here, at Tooting Common, where large numbers of people come from the congested districts in all parts of South London in the hope of getting a breath of pure air, the tall shafts of the Tooting Bec Asylum can be seen belching forth daily huge volumes of smoke, destroying utterly the sylvan beauty of the place and the purity of the atmosphere. How curious for one set of officials of the LCC to be doing their utmost to improve and conserve the rural aspect of the common, while... their colleagues of the asylum...by their utter indifference ... are doing their best to render nugatory these efforts on behalf of the public health (*The Times*, 13 April 1904).

In 1906, two extra blocks were built to accommodate growing demand and in 1914 a plot of neighbouring land was acquired enabling the asylum to expand again and double the number of patients. Further expansion plans were put on hold during the Great War. However, the conflict brought new

challenges to the establishment and it earned a reputation as a centre for specialist care of shell shock victims, a role it continued until 1923. A year later the asylum was renamed 'Tooting Bec Mental Hospital' and by that time could accommodate 1,886 people.

In 1930 it was taken over by the LCC and in 1937 renamed 'Tooting Bec Hospital'. From its initial construction and subsequent evolution through most of the twentieth century, the hospital was essentially sequestered from the Common. The facility had its own gardens which patients could access. The hospital had an internal Tooting Bec Sports Club and social facility, even a staff children's Christmas party, but these were all within the site's enclosed grounds. By the 1970s, longer-term patients were taken out for walks on the common by hospital staff, but any interaction with Tooting Common facilities such as the lido appears to be non-existent.

In the 1960s there began a radical push for Tooting Bec Hospital to close its traditional long-term residential treatment and for patients to be provided with accommodation and support in the local community. However, due to lack of the extensive resources required, this alternative approach did not happen to any real extent. By the 1980s, there were only 600 patients and by the time of its complete closure in 1995 the hospital specialised in geriatric care. The site was later developed by Fairview homes.

## Mythology and literary celebrities

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The romance of celebrity has informed the Tooting Commons for centuries. From Elizabeth I to Samuel Johnson, Daniel Defoe, and Charles Dickens (*The Examiner*, 20 January 1849), the Commons have seemed to serve as a nucleus for human drama and literary inspiration. Yet, there is precious little by way of

historical record that we can draw upon to substantiate claims of visits from famous figures. High-profile and well-documented visits, such as that by Winston Churchill in 1945 are easy to confirm, but earlier associations are more challenging to prove.

## Daniel Defoe

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For over a century, rumours have circulated that Daniel Defoe resided in the neighbourhood of Tooting. However, hitherto the archive has provided no evidence to support this claim and other scholarly histories have acknowledged the difficulty in proving any such connection (Malden, 1962, IV, pp. 102-7). If Defoe did live in the area, it seems to have had little influence on his work and he makes no reference to either Tooting or Tooting Common in his famous *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-7).

## Dr Samuel Johnson

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Dr Johnson was a regular visitor to Thrale House from c.1765 to the death of Henry Thrale in 1781 (Boswell, 1791, pp. 129-30). The association of Johnson with the Tooting Commons was well known by the mid-nineteenth century, although not everyone presented the conventional picture of a writer inspired by a natural muse. In 1863, an anonymous contributor to the *Daily News* speculated that 'we may easily imagine Dr Johnson, on some of his visits, to have been roused by the seclusion of the place to descant on the sameness of nature, and to wish himself back in Fleet-street' (*Daily News*, 26 November 1863, 4). The Avenue was only officially renamed Dr Johnson Avenue in March 1970, when the Greater London Council ordered the change to be made [Wandsworth Heritage Service (WHS)].

Another landmark connected popularly with Dr Johnson was Dr Johnson's Oak. By 1882, only a stump remained, but it continued to be referred to variously as 'Dr Johnson's Oak' and 'Dr Johnson's Elm'. A letter to the editor of the *Streatham News* (SN) in 1896 highlighted both the unclear origins of the association with Johnson and the plight of the tree, lamenting that:

Time, the Destroyer, will very soon reduce the old relic to a memory of the past...Could not the occasional correspondent, who has from time to time in our columns given interesting information...enlighten us as to the claims of this magnificent ruin to its popular name? Is there any tradition that the great lexographer, critic, and author was in the habit of enjoying the shade of this monarch of the woods during his residence in Streatham? Was it an oak indeed, or, as seems probable, a poplar? (SN, 19 September 1896, p. 5).

The correspondent was prescient and by the end of the First World War, the tree had been lost. No physical marker of Johnson's time at Streatham remains



*Ring of trees on the former site of 'Dr. Johnson's oak' (2016). Private collection.*

on the Common today although a ring of trees now surrounds the spot. In 1968, the summer house that he is reputed to have enjoyed in the gardens surrounding Thrale House was restored but instated in the grounds of Kenwood House, North London; it has since been destroyed by arson (*The Times*, 25 September 1968, p. 12). The mulberry tree that survives in the area of the old Streatham Park is popularly associated with Johnson, but no primary evidence has been found to support this.

## Thomas Hardy

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In April 1878, Thomas Hardy and his wife took a house on the corner of Trinity Road near Wandsworth Common. His publisher, Alexander Macmillan, resided nearby at 'The Elms' on the Tooting Bec Road and it is certain that both men would have been familiar with the neighbourhood and the Common (Pite, 2007, p. 247 and *Life*, 9 June 1958). Hardy lived in the area for only a short period and left in June 1881. However, three decades later in 1911 Hardy published a melancholy poem, originally titled 'Night in a Suburb', but later renamed 'Beyond the Last Lamp (Near Tooting Common)' (*Harper's*, December 1911 and Barry, 2011, p. 196). The lack of awareness about Thomas Hardy's connection with the Commons is perhaps due to the brevity of his stay and the regretful tone of the poem:

While rain, with eve in partnership,  
Descended darkly, drip, drip, drip,  
Beyond the last lone lamp I passed  
Walking slowly, whispering sadly,  
Two linked loiterers, wan, downcast:  
Some heavy thought constrained each face,  
And blinded them to time and place.

The pair seemed lovers, yet absorbed  
In mental scenes no longer orbed  
By love's young rays. Each countenance  
As it slowly, as it sadly  
Caught the lamplight's yellow glance  
Held in suspense a misery  
At things which had been or might be.

When I retrud that watery way  
Some hours beyond the droop of day,  
Still I found pacing there the twain  
Just as slowly, just as sadly,  
Heedless of the night and rain.  
One could but wonder who they were  
And what wild woe detained them there.

Though thirty years of blur and blot  
Have slid since I beheld that spot,  
And saw in curious converse there  
Moving slowly, moving sadly  
That mysterious tragic pair,  
Its olden look may linger on -  
All but the couple; they have gone.

Whither? Who knows, indeed . . . And yet  
To me, when nights are weird and wet,  
Without those comrades there at tryst  
Creeping slowly, creeping sadly,  
That lone lane does not exist.  
There they seem brooding on their pain,  
And will, while such a lane remain.

# Infrastructure

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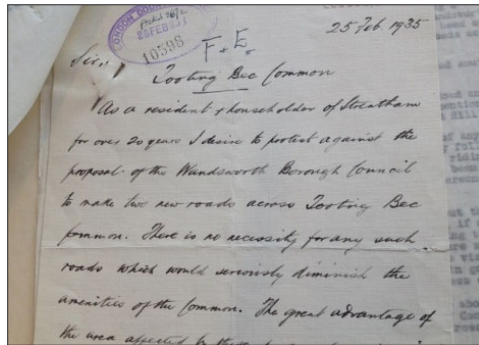
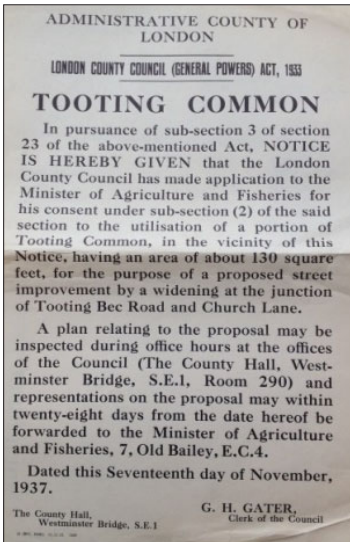
## Roads and Footpaths

As common land was defined by rights of use and access as opposed to any specific topographical features or aesthetic unity, commons have been the subject of numerous encroachments. In many ways, their form today is the product of significant interventions in the landscape, such as gravel pits and tree felling. However, as the population around the Tooting Commons rose dramatically from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, infrastructural construction had an increasingly transformative impact on the landscape.

Prior to the dawn of the railway age in the 1830s, infrastructural intrusions into the commons were limited to footpaths, bridleways, and avenues. Even then there were very few in place, with most significant additions made later in the century. In 1892 a plan for a riding track around the Common was approved by the LCC (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 May 1892).

The largest new thoroughfares and drives could accommodate horse-drawn carriages and, as the area attracted a growing number of successful professionals from London, the demand for large houses and access routes increased. In January 1825, Dr Blegborough was granted permission 'to be allowed to make a road across the common to the private road to Mr Haigh's House' (Furzedown House) (Morden, 1897, p. 109). In this instance the Common was Tooting Graveney Common and the permission was given by the Vestry Committee. The only condition on this occasion was that the maintenance of the road be the responsibility of the applicant. Objections to such low-profile changes appear to have been rare, perhaps because development of the Common was policed by the same social, political, and religious oligarchy who sought such accommodations. However, more substantial changes certainly attracted comment and condemnation.





Above: Letter opposing encroachment of roads onto the Common (1935). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).

Left: Notice of proposed street widening alongside Tooting Common (1937). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).

In the 1920s and 1930s, the rapid development of housing on land adjacent to nearly every side of the Common led to numerous proposals to widen highways and junctions such as that at Elmbourne and Hillbury Roads (1929) and Church Lane and Furzedown Drive (1939). Such schemes were often vehemently opposed by local people and organisations, such as the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA). In some instances, opponents were charged with the responsibility of protecting large portions of the Common. In July 1935, Basil Holmes of the MPGA wrote to the Clerk of the LCC challenging proposals made under the heading of 'street widening', which were in reality proposals to develop new roads within the footprint of the Common. As Holmes argued, 'These roads cannot be termed "widening" of any existing road or highway as none exists, they merely follow the route of tracks, which have been set aside for horse riding by the Council or its predecessor, and they have never been treated as roads... The Association is desirous of pointing out that these two new roads, which are termed "widening" would, if made, be highly detrimental to the Common. They would, owing to freedom from buildings and side turnings, rapidly become mere speedways for motor traffic' (LMA, LCC/CL/PK/02/089/F).

# Railways

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## Introducing the Railway Companies

The first line to be built across Tooting Bec Common was proposed in 1852 by the newly formed West End and Crystal Palace Railway Company (WECPR) to provide alternative passenger access to the popular Crystal Palace exhibition that was to be relocated from Hyde Park to Sydenham Hill in 1854. The company hoped to drive a line to the new exhibition area carrying passengers from the northwest to Sydenham, as an alternative to the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway Company's (LBSCR) new spur line (TNA, RAIL 729/4 WECPR 1852-3). Less than 10 years later, the LBSCR itself became the second company to build a railway line across Tooting Commons as part of their new main line into the new Victoria terminus, avoiding an already crowded London Bridge.

The development of these railways across Tooting Commons had been assisted by the passing of an Act in the 1840s, allowing railway companies to compulsorily purchase land to utilise for building. This encouraged greedy

landowners to sell while side-stepping more obstructive local residents.



*Railway across the Common (c.1930). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

## **The First Line - Across Tooting Bec Common**

### **The West End and Crystal Palace Railway Company**

The WECPR was set up in 1852, when plans to move the Crystal Palace were first agreed. The first WECPR General Company Meetings show that a local Streatham resident, Beriah Drew, was Chairman on 15 October 1852, with Francis Fuller, of Sydenham, a fellow director. The Company's other directors were Charles Geach (the local MP), Sir Joseph Paxton, Charles Rich, William Thomas, Richard Till, John Tredwell, Charles Tyndale, and Charles Webb. It was noted in August 1853 that they had raised £35,931 13s 4d and spent £4,208 0s 6d so far, and awarded themselves £500 expenses. The formal structure of the Company was in place (TNA, RAIL 729/1, WECPR 1852-3 General Meetings, Aug 1853). Beriah Drew was the 'Lord of the Manor' for the eastern end of the Tooting Bec Common, which fell in the Leigham Manor of the larger Streatham Parish. He, and another rich landowner in the Leigham area named John Tredwell, had the most to gain from the railway's path across or under their lands. Further west, towards Balham, land including the northern Tooting Bec Common had been for centuries held by the Dukes of Bedford, but they had sold their manorial lands in the eighteenth century. One of the main purchasers of this area was Mr Borradaile.

The landowners involved with the WECPR did not always see eye to eye with each other or with the Company. At a General Company Meeting on 23 November 1852 Mr Tredwell objected 'to the particular direction of the line across his [former] property at Streatham' and stated that 'similar feeling existed on the part of other inhabitants of that immediate neighbourhood' (TNA, RAIL 729/4, 1853-4). This comment indicates some hostility in local sentiment and also the close relationship between some wealthy landowners and the railway scheme.

Following the closure of the former Great Exhibition site in October 1851 and the commencement of building work at Sydenham Hill in 1852, there was considerable urgency to construct the new railway line. The WECPR applied for a Parliamentary Bill of Approval at the end of 1852, and the Act authorising a line from Crystal Palace through to Battersea was finally given on 4 August 1853. The first Proprietors' General Meeting was held on 29 August.

The WECPR appointed some of the top names in mid-Victorian railway engineering for its line. Among them was Samuel Morton Peto, a civil engineer and a major railway contractor; the detailed design and the parliamentary process were handled by George Parker Bidder, a long-time associate of Robert Stephenson, and Hamilton Henry Fulton. The architect and surveyor Richard Augustus Withall, along with a Mr Leech, handled land surveying and dealt with local land purchases.

In the WECPR Minutes of the Board Meeting for 2 August 1853 (TNA, RAIL 729/3, WECPR Minutes of the Board) there was a sense of urgency for work to begin. The appointed engineer, Mr Bidder, felt May 1855 was the earliest possible opening date, but he faced pressure and disagreements from others present. Accordingly, it was resolved that:

**the Engineers be authorised to proceed with the permanent survey and Land plans immediately and that they be directed to prepare (on the basis that the Land can be obtained by the 15th October next) Estimates for the Construction and Completion of the Line by the 1st May 1855 and also an estimate of the additional sum that would be required for its construction and completion by the several earlier periods of the 1st September 1854 and the 1st May 1854. (TNA, RAIL 729/4 16 Aug 1853)**

The Board were fully aware that the new Crystal Palace was aiming to open in June 1854. By the end of August WECPR Land Minutes show many agreements already negotiated with landowners on the route including Mr Borradaile, Elizabeth Kymer, and William and John Dixon (TNA, RAIL 729/6, WECPR Land Committee Meetings, 25 Aug 1853). The land for the line would cost approximately £50,000. Clearly, land was being acquired steadily across the summer of 1853, to the advantage of some locals and company directors.

By December 1853 the WECPR had agreed that the LBSCR would operate the trains on the new line and on 26 January 1854 LBSCR shareholders approved this arrangement. The LBSCR 'agreed to work the WECPR for 42½% of the gross receipts and to pay a rental of £8,000 per annum for the privilege of operating its own main line trains over the West End line' (Gray, 1977, p. 44). This was a fairly common arrangement, whereby more established operators gained some advantage, and useful control, over fledgling enterprises. On 8 March 1854, at the Board Meeting, Morton Peto and his associates Brassey and Betts offered to 'execute and complete' the works for £310,000 and this was recommended by Mr Bidder, who said costs had risen by 15% since the Parliamentary Bill was put forward. Mr Withall was told to go ahead and purchase the remaining land required and within a month reported that he should have possession of the land first needed by the contractors very shortly (TNA, RAIL 729/4, 6 Apr 1854). Mr Leech, one of the other land agents, recommended in May that the rest of the land should be obtained, while Mr Fuller reported that the Streatham work had begun. In respect of these land deals he added that there was 'urgency' but 'great reserve and circumspection' should be used as the Company was having problems with a Mr Adams of Norwood, as well as with Mr Tredwell in Streatham. In fact Adams, who had claimed £12,000 plus £6,000 for access to his land, was awarded just £2,750 after a jury judgment in August 1854 (TNA, RAIL 729/4, 3 Aug 1854, p. 36). All these issues were losing valuable time for the WECPR.

No			A	R	P	£	s	d
1	Elizabeth Kymer	Tooting	1	2	24	742	10	-
2	Robert Hudson & Elizabeth Kymer	Tooting	4	3	2	1905	-	-
3	Robert Hudson	Tooting	-	-	30	112	10	-
4	Samuel Waring	Norwood (deposed)	2	3	2	5000	-	-
5	John and John Spofforth Dixon		22	-	32	4440	-	-
6	Robert Hudson & Elizabeth Kymer	(farther)			5	12	10	-
	Do & Do	(timber)				25	10	-
7	Robert Hudson	(timber)				10	10	-
8	Elizabeth Kymer	(timber)				15	-	-
9	Duplicate (Hudson & Kymer)							
10	E. R. Adams	Norwood (surveyor in charge)				56	10	-
11	J & J S Dixon	Norwood (surveyor in charge)				80	-	-
12	E. R. Adams	Valuation for deposit	3	1	4	4320	-	-
13	J. Colley	Norwood	1	-	27	900	-	-
15	W. Griffith	Owner, Norwood	-	1	17	20	-	-
	Jas Thorne	Lessee, Norwood				600	-	-
			36	1	23	18240	-	-
		Add interest				135	12	5
						18375	12	5

*List of the requisitions from the solicitors for land and timber payments, the Land Committee meeting (25 July 1854). The National Archives.*

In the Land Committee Meeting for 25 July 1854 another list of the requisitions from the solicitors for land and timber payments was examined and certified for the Finance Committee.

Work was proceeding and in July 1854, Bidder reported that ‘the Embankment is advancing over Tooting Common’ and that building continued of ‘two culverts and the abutments and wing walls of a Bridge on Tooting Common which are finished up to the level of the underside of the castiron girders’ (TNA, RAIL 729/4, 17 July 1854). By August the embankment had been extended further west across Tooting Common. It was also recorded that, ‘With regard to the house on Mr Drew’s Land late in the occupation of Mr Crosier, it was now found necessary to take it down and the Contractors should have possession of it as soon as possible’ (TNA, RAIL 729/4, 17 July

1854 p. 47). This must have been very near to the site of the present Drews Cottages, on the northeastern corner of Tooting Bec Common. The Board instructed their solicitors to compulsorily purchase the property.

On 16 August 1854, a Directors' Meeting was held at Great George Street in Westminster and considered a letter from Bidder and Fulton recounting their progress, including the ongoing building of bridges, 'two upon Tooting Common'. One was across Dragmire Lane, off what is now Cavendish Road, and the other carried the line up as it entered Streatham [Hill] Station, to the east side of the Common. By 21 August this report had been printed for presentation to the shareholders at their Third Half-Yearly Meeting in Bishopsgate (TNA, RAIL 724/4, Third half yearly shareholders meeting 21 Aug). On 6 September 1854 a report to the Board from the engineer on 'the state of the works on your line' talked of the Streatham tunnel progress and said 'this excavation will go into, and nearly complete, the Tooting Common Embankment' (TNA, RAIL 729/4, pp. 49-50). It continued: 'The contractors are in possession of the Land from the west side of Tooting Common to the Norwood Station on the Brighton Railway.' So all land issues were finally now resolved.

At the Directors' Meeting on 5 October 1854 Mr Bidder reported that 'Two Bridges are completed on Tooting Common up to the level of the springing of the arch' (TNA, RAIL 729/4, 5 Oct 1854, p. 53). By 8 November the two bridges were sadly no further forwards but the Streatham Hill to Balham Hill connection was on its way. Despite all their progress, the new line to Crystal Palace was not yet ready for their intended opening in 1854 and construction dragged on for a further two years. At the Sixth Ordinary Meeting of Shareholders on 28 February 1856 the Directors reported most of the Streatham Tunnel was completed with only '30 feet remained to cut'. Finally, the Directors' Report delivered to the shareholder meeting on 29 August 1856 contained the following notice:



The Directors have the pleasure to announce that the line will be opened from the Crystal Palace to the temporary station on Wandsworth Common, including stations at Streatham, Balham and Lower Norwood, at the latest within six weeks, and that the Crystal Palace to the Norwood Junction with the Brighton Line in a short time afterwards.

The actual opening then passed almost unnoticed. At the next Ordinary 2 February 1857 the Directors announced that the line had actually opened for traffic on 1 December last (1856).

The Ninth Ordinary Half-Yearly Meeting was held at Old Broad Street on 21 August 1857 and the Directors reported of the Crystal Palace to Wandsworth line's local traffic (4 miles 54 chains) that it is:

highly satisfactory. During the seven months for which this length has been open, upward of 225,000 passengers have been conveyed upon it, and the gross receipts have amounted to £2,618 14s 11d, which, deducting 42½ per cent for working charges under the agreement with the Brighton company, and Government duty, leaves a net revenue of £1,376 14s 7d, or about £50 per week (TNA, RAIL 729/4, 21 Aug 1856).

It had taken the WECPR four years to achieve a line of just over 4 miles; but the figures certainly show that the demand had been correctly judged and their plans continued.

In November 1856 *The Surrey Comet* reported that the WECPR were preparing an application 'to enable the Company to construct a railway commencing by a junction with the West End of London and Crystal Palace Railway on Tooting Common, and passing through Tooting Graveney or Lower

Tooting and Croydon' (22 November 1856, p. 6). This application foreshadowed later LBSCR plans, which resulted in the second railway across Tooting Commons.

## **The Second Line - across Tooting Bec and Tooting Graveney Commons**

Within months of the WECPR line opening to Crystal Palace, the LBSCR had become the dominant player in railway travel to Sydenham. The rail bridge crossing the river became known at that stage as Victoria Bridge and opened in June 1860. When the two companies made a Parliamentary Application for a new line running from outside Balham down across the Commons to Norwood Junction in July 1859 it failed – due largely to local opposition. But once an LBSCR offer to buy out the WECPR was accepted, the proposed line became solely an LBSCR project. The LBSCR engineers George Bidder and Robert Jacomb-Hood then revised their plan for a possible route from Croydon to near Streatham with a spur to Norwood Junction. The LBSCR also decided to upgrade the railway to triple track, as it was realised how important this new main route would be.



*A Merchant Navy class 'Clan Line' steam excursion train crossing Tooting Bec Common (2018). Private collection.*

This proposed route would allow the LBSCR to bypass their Crystal Palace line entirely, and the new line would conveniently cross the (cheaper) open land of Tooting Bec Common and what was, by the 1860s, a neglected Streatham Park. This Park had been part of the common until the Duke of Bedford had leased the parcel off to Mr Ralph Thrale so he could build his grand house, often called Thrale House, in 1735.

The new LBSCR line received Royal Assent in the summer of 1860; it was called 'The Croydon and Balham Hill Railway Act 1860' and by August 1861 it was decided that enough land for four tracks should be bought for the new stretch (Turner, 1978, pp. 126-7). The tender was valued at £56,043 (Gray, 1977, p. 49). At a shareholder meeting in July 1861 the scientist and journalist John Herapath asked the Board about the proposed new line which he understood would run into Croydon via Norwood Junction. He was assured that that was the intention and that Norwood Junction Station was finished. After claiming that 'Balham is a place I never heard of', he mentioned the capital 'being limited initially to £7,200,000 – 'but it does not matter what the capital is provided you get a good dividend on it'. Commenting that the Company had over £10,000,000, he observed that a sum of £14,674 was listed as for additional carriages, and wondered if this was for the new line. The implication is that money for this venture seemed to be available.

Later in the same meeting, a shareholder called Mr Letchworth asked when the Croydon/Balham line would be completed. He had had the impression it would be open by autumn 1861 but it seemed:

**there is no prospect of it at present. May I ask you when you have reason to believe it will be completed and open to the public?**

The reply spoke of delays caused by their contractor W. McCormick not getting possession of the land needed in good time. William McCormick was an experienced Irish railway contractor. The Chairman hoped however that it would not be delayed more than a month or two and pointed out that digging a line over a 'suburban district...there are so many proprietors to deal with and they are not all equally ready to come to terms for the purchase' (TNA, RAIL 414/293). He also said there were 'a great number of men and horses employed on the works and they are proceeding rapidly.'

The LBSCR accounts reveal regular large payments from April 1860 on to a Sutton & Ommanney; £500 at first and £526 17s on 18 February 1861 (TNA, RAIL 414/171, LBSCR Committee of Finance and Audit No 8 Meetings Accounts, 1860-62). These were the LBSCR solicitors handling the land purchases and who had dealt with the parliamentary business for the Croydon & Balham Bill. These accounts show many more outgoing payments which Sutton & Ommanney made to landowners in the area of the route of the proposed new line down to Croydon.

On 9 August 1860 a Mr Searight received £100 and, on 13 September 1860, Beriah Drew, who had bought part of the local Thurlow Estate in 1836, received £447 12s 0d land compensation. Drew received a further interest payment of £27 5s 1d on 18 March 1861, having profited as a WECPR Director he was also able to sell more land for this line. An Elizabeth Ginsburg got £556 16s 11d on 18 February 1861 for her land in Streatham. Across the spring and summer of 1861 many LBSCR land payments are recorded: these vary from small to large, with one for Mr Telford and Mr Tagart of £855 3s 2d in the entry of 5 May 1861. The record on 10 June 1861 shows a list of 27 names, but whether they are local to the Commons is uncertain. The same accounts showed regular sums paid out to McCormick, starting in August 1861 with £3,000 as the contractor made progress. Then Sarah and Alfred

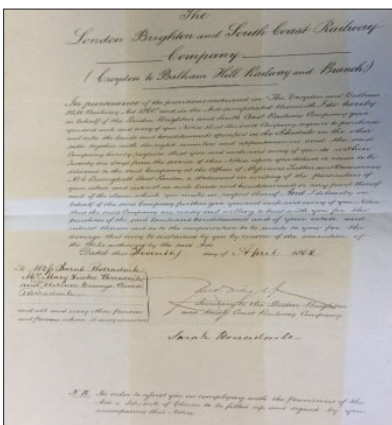
Borradaile received £850 in May 1861. The Borradailes were Common landowners. On the next line a Mr Ellison received £4,480. Ellison Road now runs next to the existing line as it leaves Streatham Common Station moving south. The two Borradailes were paid a further £3,350 in an entry for 18 September 1862.

## The Borradaile Family

There is some evidence of the profit which the family made from land and the expansion of the railways across the Commons. It appears in 1821 William Borradaile sold some Common land to Ralph Fenwick for £14,000 (LA, Borradaile IV/66/4/18). An indenture dated 25 March 1822 indicates that a William Borradaile may have originally bought this Common land from the estate of Abraham Pitches, who was a wealthy City merchant and who died in 1792. Pitches had bought the land from the Dukes of Bedford, traditional Lords of the Manor of Tooting Bec. And there is also evidence that a Richardson Borradaile bought some of the Bedford land from Thomas Graham in the 1800s, in order to develop (Gower, ideal-homes.org.uk). Richardson died in 1835 and his estate was bought by William Cubitt; a builder, he enlarged Borradaile's property, Bedford Hill House, which was located on the

western edge of Tooting Bec common.

This property would be blighted, a casualty of the nearby new LBSCR line, in the 1860s. The Lambeth Archives (LA) collection holds an LBSCR 'Notice to deliver Particulars of Claim' addressed to 'Mr Alfred Borradaile Owner' dated 9 December 1860.



From the Borradaile papers pertaining to the LBSCR plans (1862). Reproduced courtesy of Lambeth Archives.

The land required is shown on an attached map in red, and involves parcels of land numbered 32, 33 and 35, amounting to 1 acre 1 rood and 28 perches.

Another LBSCR plan of land, on blue paper and dated 7 April 1862, is headed 'No 26 Streatham Croydon to Balham Hill Railway and Branch' and gives the names of the Borradaile sisters: Sarah Borradaile, Mary Tucker Borradaile and Florence Emma Anna Borradaile. In an attached document they are told that the Railway Company 'require to purchase and take the lands and hereditaments specified in the Schedule on the other side' within 21 days and offering to purchase with compensation 'for damage that may be sustained to you by reason of the execution of The Works authorised' (LA, Borradaile, IV/66/4/18 g). Similarly a 'Notice to Owners' from December 1864 titled 'Balham to Brixton Junction Railway Session 1864-65 No 12' shows listing of land owned by John Borradaile in Streatham Parish for which the Railway Company would need to provide compensation 'in respect of your Manorial Rights' (LA, Borradaile, IV/66/4/18 h). In 1864 H. Borradaile is negotiating the sale of more than four acres – for around £3,000 – to a proposed Mitcham and Tooting railway branch.

The Borradaile papers also contain a map with Mrs Piozzi's name (widow of Henry Thrale) added in black ink, so providing the location of Thrale Hall or House on Streatham Park just west of Tooting Bec Road. The map has a stamp of the Streatham Antiquarian and Natural History Society but no date or key to the plots numbered, so this ink addition is useful. Two plans clearly show the proposed railway line route and give the best visual evidence of the disruption to the area caused by the new railway route (LA, Borradaile, IV/66/4/18 2A).

## **LBSCR Progress in Building the Second Line across the Commons**

The LBSCR appointed a 'Contract for Third Line Specification for Works... August 1862' to allow for an extra third line from the junction of the Croydon & Balham branch at Balham Hill up to Battersea. In the same document is mention of the consequent widening of the road bridge over the line on Bedford Hill (TNA, RAIL 414/521). LBSRC realised that they needed more capacity on this main line route than the usual dual rails would allow, especially as they had decided in 1861 that eventually four track lines would run from Balham down to Croydon. The LBSCR line finally opened in late 1862, at least a year later than had been hoped by the Directors. Delays in acquiring the land had put the contractors W. McCormick well behind, despite his own £2,000 stake on the line being ready by August 1862. In September 1862 the Board of Trade Inspector rejected a first application for a possible opening, and then in November there was a land slip near Balham Junction.

Finally, the Board of Trade gave their approval to open the line 'between Croydon and Balham Hill' on 25 November (TNA, MT 6/26/24 Board of Trade Railway department Minute Paper No 3950). The Inspector, Col. William Yolland, reported to the Lords of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade that he was satisfied the new line was operable. It finally opened to local traffic on 1 December; main line trains began running from 1 January 1863.

Yolland made additional comments in his report about moving signals so they would be more visible, and also that some more trees needed to be felled for the same reason. Clearly quite a number of trees would have been lost in the construction of the new lines; some of the wood was used to fence the railway from trespass, but many old oaks were felled.



At this time, people generally were beginning to focus more on the possibilities of long distance travel and commuting from locations as distant as Brighton. It was not until the passing of the Cheap Trains Act in 1883 that the potential practicality for working men of short distance commuting became widely accepted and available. The LBSCR would now be well placed for both longer journeys to the coast and local suburban commuter traffic into the West End.

Looking at the LBSCR records, back in January 1861 they were concerned about the lack of goods capacity on the WECPR lines: 'although traffic is increasing daily as one expected it would, yet up to this moment we have not been able to open any goods stations on that line,' as the Chairman's Statement put it (TNA, RAIL 414/11, 28 Jan 1861). This shows an assumption that carrying goods would be as or more lucrative than any passenger traffic could be. In fact goods was an issue which arose in the development of Telford Park; there is an agreement between the LBSCR and Fredrick Sutton and John Dudley of Telford Park dated 4 July 1881. The two named builders asked for two sidings into the goods yard at Streatham Hill Station, offering to pay rent. Access for their building materials would then be easier, and allow their planned nearby development to progress.

The new main line across the Commons was widened in 1884-5; the original footpath which had crossed the lines at Streatham Park was replaced by Tooting Bec Road bridge, just south of the original path, in 1886. The Balham–Streatham Hill Junction would later be widened when, in November 1895, Board of Trade Railway Department map plans show Saxby & Farmer had drawn up a new fourth line junction scheme. Traffic up and down from Balham to Streatham Common, and on to East Croydon plus the trains joining from Streatham Hill required extra capacity at that important junction. On 8 November 1895 the Board of Trade Railway Department received a letter from

their Inspector Col. G.W. Addison about work from Streatham Junction South to Balham Station involving rail of 1 mile, 43 chains in total. He gave details of the signal cabins needed, the levers and other details (TNA, Board of Trade 21053 No. 4). Col. Addison referred to the line widening again in a letter of 3 March 1897.

One unexpected consequence of the railway on the Common is seen in *Lloyds Weekly* on 14 August 1887, when fires were reported. Furthermore, there were complaints in 1908 that the noise from the passing engines drowned speakers' voices on the common, as the public debate space was right next to the line (*The Globe*, 26 Aug 1908, p. 1). News of this complaint even reached Scotland as the Dundee press reported: 'that passing trains interfere with their oratory [and] speakers who use the public meeting site on Tooting Common are requesting that another part of the Common should be set apart for this purpose (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 27 August 1908, p. 4). The LCC finally found another area on the common for public meetings, fairs and festivals in the 1930s.

## **The effects of the Railways on the Commons**

Railways were not always popular. At an LBSCR meeting in January 1861 a Captain Young appealed to the Board not to run trains on Sundays; this was a long-running national issue which he and many other concerned Christians raised again and again. His focus was on the Christian angle of a day of rest, but a look at newspapers from the same decade shows that the disadvantages of the railway and subsequent building expansion were beginning to be felt and discussed more widely.

The *Daily News* of 26 November 1863 reported that the Commons were 'one of the most secluded and picturesque of all the commons in Surrey...there is

little about this common to suggest the existence of a great and crowded metropolis within six miles. At all seasons it is beautiful'. The piece continues with an appeal 'to prevent Tooting Graveney being desecrated'. The threat of both building and railway development on this 'irregularly shaped piece of land, formed of Tooting Beck and Tooting Graveney, which latter comprises only about 60 acres' was a clear contemporary issue.

On 26 December 1863, *Bell's Weekly* ran a piece discussing enclosure and headed 'Tooting Common' it reports that:

[the] manor of Tooting Graveney, which comprehends a considerable portion of Tooting Common, has just been purchased for the sum of 3650l. The new lord of the manor... made an application to the Enclosure Commissioners for leave to enclose about 63 acres, with the intention of converting it into building land'

The article goes on to report the resistance of the local residents who formed a committee, raised money and tried to buy the manor back. When this failed they appealed to the MBW. Mr Doulton (of Doulton Pottery) was one of the local leaders in this fight back.

In the following year *The Daily Mail* gave an account under parliamentary reports of debates the previous day headed 'Open Spaces In and Around the Metropolis'; this debate was opened by Mr Doulton, the prominent Tooting Common resident who continued trying to extend the protection of the MBW to spaces like Epping Forest, Hampstead Heath and Mitcham and Tooting Commons. Mr Locke observed that:

A railway had been allowed to cross Wandsworth-common, and he presumed that every other nuisance would follow. Close by

was Tooting-common, which had been enclosed; and portions of Streatham-common had also been taken in (*The Daily Mail*, 29 June 1864, p. 2).

Sir W. Fraser added 'No one could ride in the suburbs without being struck by the rapid disappearance of the open place that formerly existed'.

In *The Cardiff Times* for 29 January 1864 another concerned writer lamented:

I very much doubt whether there is now anywhere on the outskirts of London a single common, or open space whatever which some railway or other does not threaten, and yet the public, for whose benefit these places should be preserved, are strangely apathetic about the matter' ... 'In the same way Tooting Common, Wimbledon Common (famous in the annals of our riflemen) and many other places are similarly threatened (29 Jan 1864, p. 8).

Complaints about the loss of open accessible land continued, with some progress being made. In 1868, the Gravesend Reporter contained the following advertisement:

Three Gentlemen, inhabitants of Streatham, have secured Tooting-common, which comprises 144 acres, as a place of public recreation for the inhabitants of the metropolis, at a cost of £10,000. The Metropolitan Board of Works have resolved that a contract be prepared for the payment of £10,200 on a proper title being shown to the land (25 Apr 1868, p. 6).

Had they acted sooner, the LBSCR might have taken a different route and saved the two commons and their ecology from effectively being cut into two.

Another article the same month in the *South London Press* asked if the MBW could acquire Tooting Graveney Common as well, and if so, how it should be kept as 'at present Tooting Graveney is a mere undrained swamp' (11 April 1868, p. 9).

As early as March 1867 a document advertised the auction sale of The Elms, a residential property close to Streatham Common, and 'Near to Two Railway Stations'. There are multiple 'frontages to the High Road, Potter's Lane and the New Road from the Railway Station', and the 15 acre estate would offer land opportunities for 'building purposes' (La, Borradaile Papers, IV/66/4/18 k). So the LBSCR lines through the area have already contributed to urban development. There are countless more property and land advertisements in local papers over the following 50 years which extol the proximity of the railway and their stations around the Commons.

In 1891 Mr Thomas Macquoid, who lived in Lucien Road at 'The Edge, Tooting Common' wrote in *The Daily News*:

**At the present time there are six acres of land with some fine old trees upon them adjoining Tooting Bec Common... Tooting Bec Common is a favourite resort on a holiday for the Londoner... open spaces in the neighbourhood of London are yearly becoming less (6 Nov 1891, p. 5)**

Given his address this could be the strip which the LBSCR had cut off from the main Common area in 1862 or is it perhaps the edge of Tooting Graveney woods. Macquoid was appealing for £12,000 to add the land to the Common after locals' efforts had not been successful. He and his wife, Katharine, were a prominent local family; he was an artist, she a successful novelist. Their son Percy was the foremost historian of English furniture and it unclear if he ever managed to secure these six acres.

The 10 years between 1853 and 1863 were momentous ones for the Tooting Commons, as railway construction by both the WECPR and LBSCR companies over this short time brought huge changes, both to the Commons themselves and to the surrounding area and occupants. The Commons were sliced into three segments. The WECPR line separated the northern edge from the body of Tooting Bec common as it drove from east to west. The LBSCR line then cut through both the Commons, across from the northwest to southeast, again separating a large triangular slice of the Commons land, this time on the eastern side. Some locals at the time of construction, the Drews, Borradailes, Kymers, Hudsons and Tredwells, made good profits from the Companies' line constructions, both from land and from selling timber to the Companies; others like Henry Doulton, Thomas Macquoid and many local users of the open spaces fought a losing battle against the railways and their ongoing effect on the whole area.

In the longer term, the railways opened up the district, and led the way to the complete urbanisation of the surrounding areas; Telford Park, Drewstead Road and the Mortimer Estate, Bedford Hill and the Heaver Estate on the northern fringes and, to the south, first Streatham Manor, then Furzedown district, built in the early 1900s. The area east of the Commons also was quickly developed from the 1880s, while west saw the building of Tooting Bec

Asylum and the Totterdown development by the LCC in the 1900s. Many of the new inhabitants of this first council estate were to be heavy users of the new lido facilities, when it was opened in 1906.



*Railway bridge for the West End and Crystal Palace line (1930). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

# Utilities

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It is not only visible infrastructure that has altered the way in which the Common serves the local community. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards 'hidden' infrastructure has also been introduced. From 1875 onwards, the MBW installed a series of new drains to prevent flooding on the low-lying areas of the Common and the newly developed surrounding area. In 1926 a 26" gas main was laid in a trench across the Common and in 1989 a water ring main was installed (WHS, Deeds/2013). In both cases, the pipelines were covered over again, but nevertheless testify to the gradual urbanisation of the area.

## Mr Thompson and the last battle against the Lord of the Manor

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In 1861 the Manor of Tooting Graveney was put up for sale by public auction. A large portion along with the Manorial rights was purchased by Mr W.S. Thompson (LMA, MBW minute book, December 1863). In April 1863, Mr Thompson made an application to the Inclosure Commissioner, indicating his intention to enclose a large portion (approximately 25 acres) of his newly acquired land (LMA, M95/GRA/1), but Thompson's ambitions were ill-timed. In April 1863, the MBW instructed their Superintendent Architect to identify specific open spaces across the capital where public rights of access should be protected. Among the potential sites mentioned were the Tooting Commons. Thompson's intentions were also received with shock and anger by many local residents. On 13 June a meeting was held between the landowner and local people but Thompson refused to withdraw his application for enclosure and on 6 July the Inclosure Commissioner held a meeting at the Mitre Tavern to



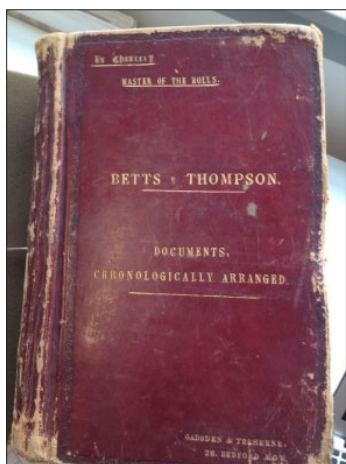
consider the case. The London press reported that at that meeting Thompson declared the Common a 'nuisance' on account of the gypsies who camped there (The Standard, 27 May 1863, p. 2 and Penny Illustrated Paper, 30 May 1863, p. 3). The historical record suggests that the commissioner's conclusions were not recorded and in fact in 1864 the MBW itself was informed that the case was not mentioned in the Annual Report of the Inclosure Commissioners. However, it is likely that the case remained unresolved as many common rights were disputed by Lords of the Manor on the grounds that they were not exercised. The subject attracted public attention across the capital and beyond. The Commons Preservation Society took particular interest and assisted the local community in their battle against Thompson (LMA, PD/45/6). On 26 November 1863, an opinion piece appeared in the Daily News, praising the natural character of Tooting Common and the necessity to protect it from enclosure:

Among the tracts of wild open land in the vicinity of the metropolis which it is most desirable should not be allowed to become the spoil of the builder there are large commons and there are small. It is important that the latter as well as the former should be preserved for the recreation and health of the toiling millions of London. Indeed they require to be specially looked after, because inclosures which at Wandsworth and Wimbledon may termed only encroachments, when practised on the smaller commons destroy these altogether, and leave us, instead of a delightful little piece of gorse and heather shadowed with elms, a melancholy circle of eligible villas, with nothing but prosaic 'green' in the centre.

Tooting Common is now threatened with this kind of improvement, though it has been accessible to the public from time immemorial, and is one of the most charming spots in the neighbourhood of the metropolis... the seclusion of such a spot is

the very thing which brains overworked in the whirl of London want to have within easy reach...It is important, then, to the public to know that their interest and, we may say, their right in this common is endangered. A vigorous effort is required to prevent Tooting Graveney being desecrated, and in fact absorbed by a circle of villa residencies... If Parliament should now give its sanction to the scheme for the building of this beautiful common, Parliament will simply give the proprietor power to make a profit of 1,000 or 1,5000 per cent upon his investment, at the cost of depriving the public of a right they have always had, but which they will never be able to recover if they once allow it to be wrested from them ('Tooting Common', Daily News, 26 November 1863, p. 4).

In 1866 the Metropolitan Commons Act stated explicitly that any remaining metropolitan commons should be protected. However, by 1868 Thompson had proceeded with his plans, prompting local residents to tear down the fences he erected. At the same time, a local man, Mr Betts began legal proceedings against Thompson for what he deemed the illegal enclosure of common land (LMA, 'Betts vs. Thompson', M95/GRA/1).

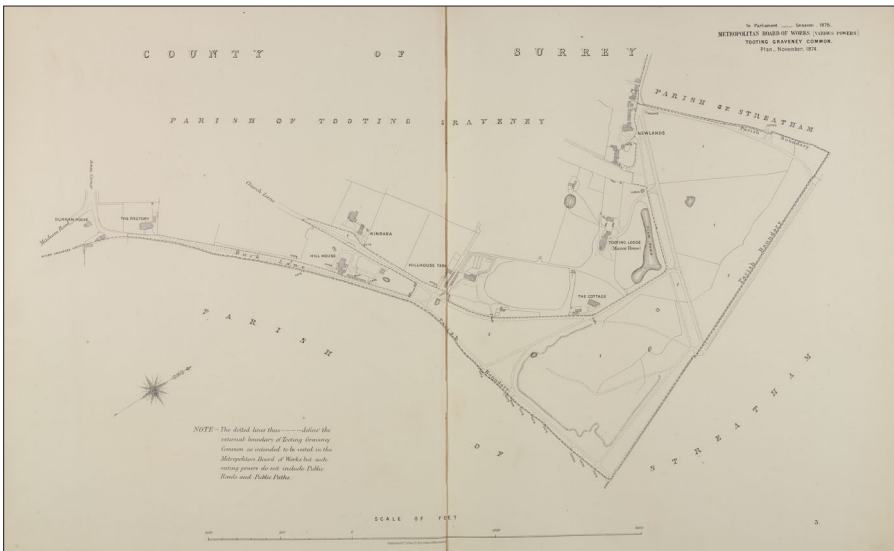


The legal dispute dragged on. Even the possibility of the Common passing into municipal hands was cause for some unease, albeit with tentative hope for the future. In April 1868 the *Oxford Times* expressed ambivalently, 'Tooting Common is now about to disappear as a common,

*Bound papers of the Betts vs. Thompson case (1868). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

though it is to be hoped it will re-appear as a recreation ground' (*Oxford Times*, 11 April 1868). In 1870 an injunction was passed against Thompson which prohibited the Lord of the Manor from interfering with common rights of inhabitants.

As liberal newspaper *The Graphic* reported, 'Judgment has been given in a suit against the Lord of the Manor of Tooting-Graveney Common. The plaintiff claimed the commonable rights of pasturage, gravel-digging, gorse-cutting, etc. The Court considered the case established, and an injunction was issued restraining the defendant from interfering with the rights claimed. The defendant had to pay costs' (*The Graphic*, 30 July 1870, p. 118). However, the case went to appeal and was only finally settled on 2 August 1871 when the Lord Chancellor found in favour of Mr Betts. Thwarted in the courts, facing considerable legal expenses, and given clear evidence of political will in favour of protecting common land, Thompson finally gave up his battle to enclose



Plan of Tooting Common from the Act of Parliament conferring the ownership and management of Tooting Graveney Common to the Metropolitan Board of Works (1875). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).

Tooting Graveney Common. In 1875 an Act of Parliament was passed confirming the ownership and management of Tooting Graveney Common by the MBW (LMA, MBW, 1875).

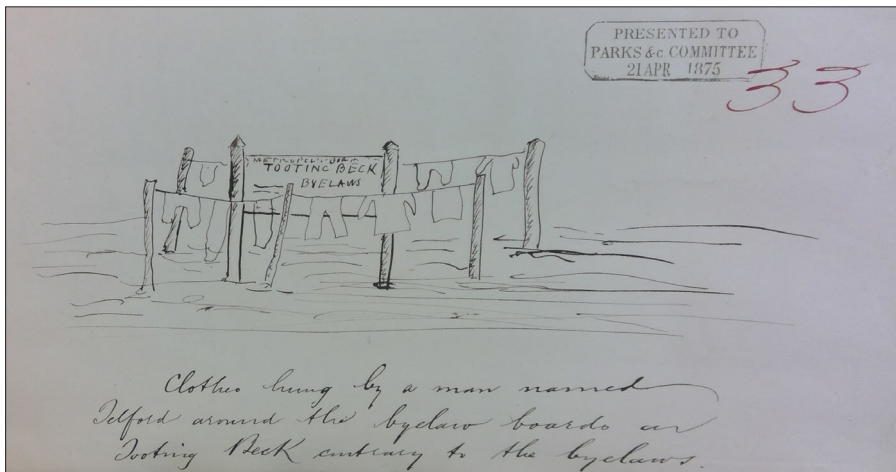
By 1873, the MBW had also acquired fully the manorial rights to Tooting Bec Common, at that point comprising 144 acres, from Robert Hudson. For some, the price paid of £10,200 represented reasonable compensation to the Lord of the Manor. However, as David Owen noted in his study of the government of London during this period, the sums involved although 'reasonable enough if one assumes that the lords' interests had any substance, were excessive if the lords' rights were valueless' (Owen, 1982, p. 148). Whether too expensive or too cheap, the Tooting Commons were finally united in ownership and management and protected against future enclosure or development. Ownership of the Manor did not automatically afford the MBW full rights over the land and some local people continued to push their claim. In January 1873, the Inclosure Commissioners wrote to the Parks Committee of the MWB clarifying their position as to a number of queries and contested claims. A Mr Rymer had made a claim to the Commissioners regarding his perceived rights to a portion of Tooting Bec Common. However, Rymer ceased to respond to their correspondence and so his rights were deemed lapsed (LMA, MBW 982, p. 123).

## Municipalisation

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In many ways the municipal ownership of the Tooting Commons represented a positive step forward in the long-term protection and accessibility of the landscape. As a metropolitan common, the site came under section 5 of the Metropolitan Commons Act of 1866, which prohibited the Secretary of State from accepting any application for further enclosure. However, protection of

the net size of a common did not automatically protect it from significant and sometime undesirable change. In other cases, such as Kennington Common, industrious local officials set about 'improving' the common with formal bedding schemes and prescribed uses that effectively transformed the landscape into a conventional municipal park. Fortunately, at Tooting the shift in ownership heralded a conclusion to decades of vulnerability to enclosure development but comparatively little immediate change to the physical landscape. The immediate impact of municipal ownership was the unification of commons and their management. Once united, the two commons made up 217 acres of open land.



'Clothes hung by a man called Telford around the bylaw boards on Tooting Bec, contrary to the bylaws' (1875). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).

In 1873, the MBW appointed William Covington the first Common Keeper of Tooting Bec Common. His salary was to be 25 shillings a week and he was afforded a policeman's uniform (LMA, MBW, minute book, November 1873). In many respects Covington was essentially a park keeper and the MBW's decision to appoint a Common Keeper would certainly have reflected the conventions of public park provision across the country at that time.

Compounding this comparison was the introduction in 1874 of byelaws pertaining to public behaviour on the Common. However, where the municipal management of Tooting Common differed significantly from that of public parks was in the evident resistance to compartmentalising the landscape.



*Keeper's lodge, Tooting Bec Common (c.1920). Reproduced courtesy of Wandsworth Heritage Service.*

On 3 February 1873, the Inclosure Commissioner recommended to the MBW that their plan to erect a small fence on the Common would be acceptable only if the 'fence put up were of such a character as would not interfere with pedestrians and riders, say posts and chains' (LMA, MBW minute book, February 1873). Towards the end of the year a visit was made to Tooting Bec Common by the MBW Engineer and Superintending Architect, who then compiled a report on the initial works required to the Common, with the assistance and guidance of the Superintendent of Southwark Park. The report was presented to the Parks, Commons, and Open Spaces Committee of the Metropolitan Board of Works (PCOSC) on 19 November 1873, and listed their recommendations for infrastructural changes, which encompassed levelling

the Common, draining clay areas, laying gravel paths, and replanting dilapidated tree avenues (LMA, MBW/0983, p. 343). The inclusion of the Superintendent of Southwark Park in this process shows an inevitable standardisation of London's open spaces under the management of the MBW. With only one Engineer, only one Superintending Architect and cross-consultation between open spaces managerial staff, increased uniformity of these spaces would have been inevitable, affecting both the Common's physical appearance and usage.

This period saw dramatic physical changes to Tooting Common, with many of the features introduced by the MBW still being recognisable today. The laying of paths, levelling of ground, and formation of the artificial pond following gravel digging all contributed to the formalisation of the landscape. Land that had previously been deemed uncultivable and thus worthless by landowners was now being transformed into a green haven; a destination for Londoners seeking tranquillity. These changes were most pronounced on Tooting Bec Common, as the higher-density woodland and shrubbery of Tooting Graveney Common was left relatively untouched. In the month following the appointment of Covington in 1873, the Reverend J.R. Nikell applied for permission to lay out cricket pitches on the Common, a feature welcomed in many new municipal parks. The MBW turned him down on the grounds that it 'cannot set apart any spot for the use of any particular portion of the public' (LMA, MBW minute book, December 1873). The principle of not permitting the Common to be converted into sporting facilities was reiterated in February 1894 when the relatively young LCC formally withdrew permission to play golf on the Common. Golf had been played there since 1888 and the first Parliamentary Golf Tournament was played on the Tooting Bec course in 1891. However, it was decided to relocate the club to Furzedown in 1892 (*Croydon Advertiser and East Surrey Reporter*, 26 June 1926, p. 2 and *Morning Post*, 29 October 1900, p. 2). It was reported, perhaps rather wryly

that the step would be 'particularly felt by members of Parliament, for whom the Common is very convenient when the House is in session' (*Derby Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 1892). The acceptance of formal sporting facilities on one area of the Common was finally resolved in 1935 with the construction of the running track on Tooting Graveney Common.

The minutes of the MBW highlight the initial concern among local people regarding potential changes to their usage rights of Tooting Bec Common following its purchase by the MBW. Many people wrote to the MBW requesting copies of the byelaws for Tooting Bec Common throughout late 1873 and early 1874. There were significant delays in the return of the approved byelaws from the First Commissioner of Works, caused by political upheaval following the victory of Benjamin Disraeli and the Conservative Party in the 1874 general election. During these months, Covington was forced to singlehandedly implement the new rules applying to the Common without any official legislation underpinning his authority. Repeated incidents of the same offenders turning out livestock onto the Common are reported to the committee. A lengthy legal battle ensued concerning the construction of a post and chain fence on common land bordering a householders' private property (LMA, MBW/ 0984, p. 386.) A local resident was told that after decades of using the Common to dry clothes for his laundry business, this would no longer be tolerated (LMA, MBW/0984, p. 320).

It is clear that the legal changes implemented by the MBW affected many of the local residents, largely regardless of their social standing. Naturally the volume of complaints received in writing would be more representative of the wealthier residents, whereas the reports from Covington focus on the activities of the poorer members of the local community. It becomes clear



however, that apart from the case of horse riding, the policies of the MBW target 'typical' behaviours of the upper and growing middle classes as those they wish to promote, and discourage those who wish to use the Common for personal gain or self-sufficiency.

The MBW PCOSC minutes provide a detailed insight into how the various user groups of the Common were viewed, and how certain behaviours were policed. As this was the first time the Common had been managed by a body who were supposedly acting in the public interest, the initial changes can help gain a picture of which purposes the MBW wanted the Common to serve. In an age of increasing urbanisation, the MBW acted to shape the public engagement with open and green space. They implemented a series of 'improvements' to draw visitors to Tooting Common from a wider, more metropolitan community than what had been seen under manorial ownership.



*'View near Streatham, Tooting Common' (c.1900). Private collection.*



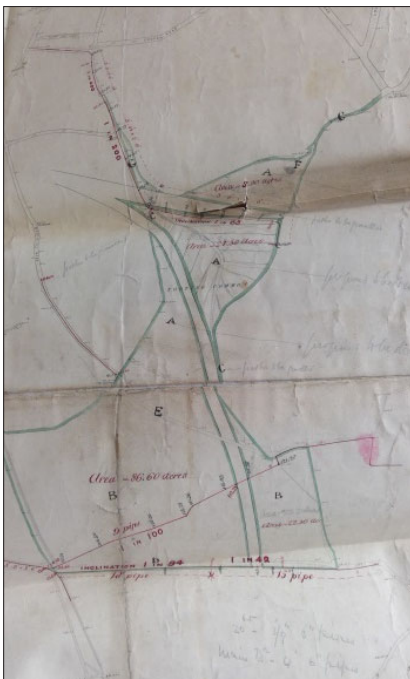
*'When the heart is young, Tooting Common' (c.1905). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

After the initial outcry from the gentry regarding the infringement upon riding rights across the Common, the Horse Ride was established as a designated area for equestrian pursuits. The formation of the artificial pond, the drainage and levelling works, and the planting and replanting of tree avenues were intended to make Tooting Bec Common more visually pleasing. Recreational activities were promoted through the formation of gravel paths upon which walks could be taken, and additionally through the provision of sporting facilities; over the next 50 years the running track, sports pavilion, tennis courts and bathing pool were added to the Common's facilities.

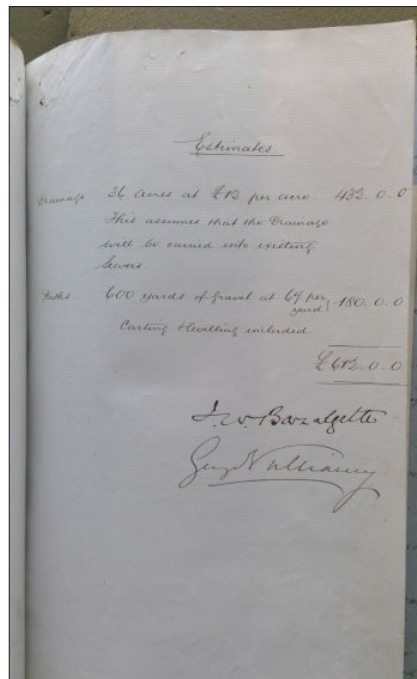
The array of infrastructural 'improvements' harmed the diversity of wildlife, commented upon by Frederick Frohawk, a notable Victorian bird and butterfly specialist. He studied the species on the Common during the years 1887-1894, and commented that at the end of this period many nesting birds and other creatures were no longer present. Frohawk blamed these localised

extinctions on infrastructural schemes started by the MBW, and carried out throughout the late 1880s and early 1890s (Chatfield, 1987, pp. 31-2). From the minutes it is clear that little to no concern was taken for the preservation of biodiversity on the Common by the MBW, resulting in these losses. Instead of preserving a 'wild' landscape, the committee acted to make the space more ordered, and more suitable for recreational purposes.

Priorities were clearly shifting in how commons and other open spaces should serve Londoners. The increased population density brought with urbanisation pushed the government to protect commons from enclosure, however the changing access rights for residents dramatically changed how this land looked and was used. The changes listed in the MBW PCOSC minutes



Plan for improvement works on Tooting Common (c.1880). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).



Estimates for improvement works on Tooting Common, signed by Joseph Bazalgette (c.1880). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).

highlight how the Commons lost any sense of individuality from other open spaces. In the case of Tooting Bec and Graveney Commons many of the former uses of the space would be actively forbidden, and the landscape would be altered to mirror the changing needs of London's evolving demographic. The minutes reveal substantial correspondence between the wealthier visitors to the Tooting Commons and the MBW, and it is this engagement that pushed the increased focus on recreational use of the land. Despite the intention to create a better recreational space, many residents were unhappy with the changes implemented by the MBW.



*'Tooting Common' (c.1925). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

The formalisation of the landscape aligned the Common with other parks and open spaces under MBW management, which had a noticeable impact on the wildlife in the area. The introduction of byelaws actively denied many local residents the rights to use the land in ways they had once enjoyed under manorial ownership. As a result of centralised management by the MBW, the individuality of Tooting Common lessened, as the direct relationship between

the green space and the immediate local community was lost, and the physical appearance of the land was standardised.

## Staff, standards and training

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When the LCC took charge of London's parks and open spaces in 1889, it allocated 10 permanent staff to Tooting Common. By 1909, this had risen to 13, including a full-time attendant for the Bathing Lake, plus a small number of temporary seasonal staff (LMA, LCC Services & Staff, 1909-10 0/1909). In 1905 the Parks and Open Spaces Committee of London County Council (POSC) decided to re-designate the men as Keepers and Under-keepers. Keepers had previously been designated as gardeners (including tree-pruners and propagators) while Under-keepers were originally under-gardeners. The new and less-specific designation would allow the LCC to deploy staff on a wider range of duties.

The men were issued with uniforms as follows:

- 1 tweed coat and vest
  - 1 velveteen jacket and vest
  - 1 pair of velvet cord breeches
  - 1 pair of pigskin leggings
  - 2 pairs of boots
  - 2 felt hats per year
  - 1 overcoat every two years
- (LMA, LCC Minutes 26 June 1906)

### Promotion

In order to gain promotion from Under-keeper to Keeper, it was necessary to pass a written examination. The difference in weekly pay was between two and three shillings (10p/15p).

<b>Post</b>	<b>Weekly Pay</b>
1 Head Keeper	40 shillings
1 Keeper	30 shillings
9 Under-keepers	27 to 28 shillings
1 Boy Labourer	12 shillings
1 Bathing Attendant	30 shillings

The examination paper from 1906 survives, along with the results and the comments of the examiners (LMA, LCC/MIN/8872/30 Mar/123). The three-hour written paper was set by the Royal Horticultural Society. It took place on Thursday 11 January 1906. Candidates were required to sit it in the imposing Great Hall of the Society's premises in Vincent Square, Westminster. In addition, there was a 20-minute viva voce or oral examination. It is not clear when this took place but presumably on the same day. Ninety candidates employed across London entered their names but, come the day, one failed to turn up and another was taken ill during the examination. A third was disqualified for cheating.

The paper consisted of 16 questions, some of them made up of several parts, and candidates had to answer at least eight. Question 16 was compulsory. Candidates therefore had around 20 minutes for each question. Given that the candidates were manual labourers, unused to written work, the Royal Horticultural Society made one concession, that 'conciseness and terseness will be acceptable'. The questions themselves demanded a mixture of knowledge, thought and imagination. Some required a drawing, too.

Question 5 asked candidates to give the Latin names of a number of trees to be found in London's open spaces:

*Give the botanical names of the London Plane, Sycamore,  
Hawthorn, Hornbeam, Lombardy Poplar, Common Birch, Lilac,*

*Mock Orange, Common Elm, Wych Elm, Silver Lime, Evergreen or Holm Oak, Beech and mention the native country of each.*

Question 9 was more complex:

*Describe the most effective (1) hardy, (2) half hardy and (3) annual plants for (a) spring, (b) summer and (c) autumn effect, giving an example of twelve in each section in order to produce the most harmonious and pleasing effect in combination. Mention twelve of the best sub-tropical plants (including some half-hardy palms) and state the most effective way of grouping and arranging them. Give short directions as to the time and manner of propagating the above plants.*

The compulsory Question 16 was perhaps the most taxing:

*Imagine yourself to have from 30 to 40 acres of land to lay out as a public park, three-quarters of the land being rough meadow, one quarter arable.*

*(a) Lay down, on the plan provided, a sketch of what you would propose; but the details specified on the plan must be strictly adhered to by all.*

*(b) Write a sketch-report, dated May 1st, of what you would have accomplished at the end of 12 months with an estimate of the amount of labour, and of material, and an idea of the approximate cost of different items.*

It is not known where the pass-mark was set, but fewer than half the candidates passed. The results were given in two divisions: A and B (Senior and Junior). Within these two divisions, there were three classes of pass, with only first- and second-class qualifying candidates for promotion. Only one man in Division A secured a first-class pass, and five men in Division B. Arthur

George Barnes of 1 Gassiot Road, Tooting managed a second-class pass in Division A, while Frederick J. Waterman of 60 Moring Road achieved the same level in Division B. They were the only Tooting men who passed. We do not know how many others from Tooting attempted the exam.

The six examiners were scathing in their comments which were published with the results:

the answers, both written and *viva voce*, revealed a distinctly remarkable absence of observation and thought, combined with by no means too high a degree of ordinary education. Most of the candidates appeared to possess a rough and elementary knowledge of the subjects inquired of, but were unable to give expression to their ideas in coherent and intelligent language. This may be accounted for perhaps by the fact it was, to the great majority, their first experience of an examination, and many of them showed evidence of a quite unnecessary degree of nervousness.

They urged the unsuccessful candidates to observe and think more and to ask their superiors questions. The examiners themselves acknowledged that the candidates were not well-educated men. The difficulty of the questions they set for candidates not used to expressing themselves in writing seems clear. The low pass rate suggests that the examination was, in today's terms, not 'fit for purpose'.

## **Ongoing challenges**

By 1906, the same year of the exam, the LCC owned a total of 110 parks, gardens, churchyards and open spaces in London, covering nearly 5,000 acres (LMA, LCC, 1906, p. 13). Despite the evident increasing in active management of the Common in the years immediately following



municipalisation, the minute books of the Parks and Garden Committee suggest that Tooting Common occupied a relatively small portion of the members' attention. Blackheath, Finsbury Park and the new Victoria Embankment were the subject of far greater discussion than the new acquisition at Tooting.



*Magic lantern slide depicting trees on Tooting Common (c.1900). Reproduced courtesy of MERL.*



*Magic lantern slide depicting naturalistic shrubbery on Tooting Common (c.1900). Reproduced courtesy of MERL.*

Clearly, the principles of the Commons Preservation Society had some impact on the strategies employed in the management of the Common immediately following its transferral into public ownership. Rare magic lantern photographic slides held in the Commons Preservation Society archive illustrate the rural character of the Commons in the first few decades of the twentieth century. There is evidence of considerable use as paths are worn into the grass and between shrubs, but these remain informal routes rather than the formal macadam footpaths that had become a feature of the more consciously designed municipal parks. Nevertheless, the urbanisation of the district and the negative impact that had on the biodiversity of the Common continued to be a subject of concern and in 1894 *The Standard* dedicated an entire report to the sadness that the nightingale could no longer be heard on Tooting Common (*The Standard*, 31 May 1894). In 1926, J. Harvey Bloom evoked a similarly

nostalgic vision in his claim that ‘many years ago a friend of the author listed 73 different birds. Among them the pheasant was not unknown. Hawfinches nested in the bushes by Streatham Hill Station, woodpeckers were common, woodcock and snipe haunted the Common, several kinds of owls... Hares were frequent. Rabbits abounded’ (Bloom, 1926, p. 48). Certainly, the introduction of new facilities, including public conveniences, altered the Common in the years following municipalisation (SN, 5 August 1899, p. 5). However, such changes did enable a larger cohort to enjoy the facility with the costs generally borne by the MBW and later, the LCC.

By the late nineteenth century, the advent of street lighting and policing provided some reassurance if not actual protection from crime.

## Old estates and new developments

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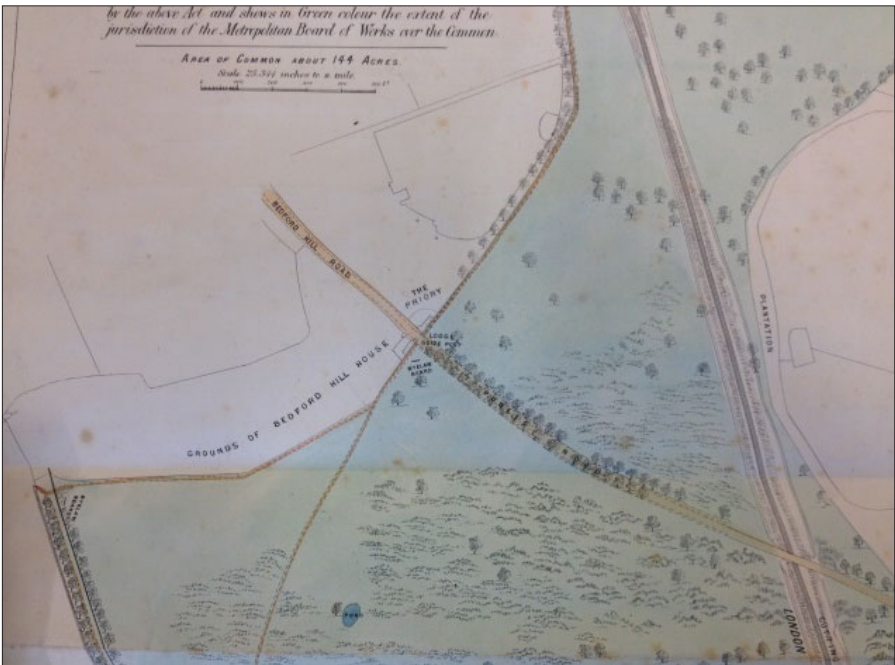
### **Bedford Hill**

The Duke of Bedford’s estate in Balham included a large farm of 166 acres, known as Covy’s Farm until 1756. That year it was leased to the Charrington family and thereafter referred to as Charrington’s. In 1802 the Duke of Bedford sold Charrington’s to Thomas Graham, a merchant from London. Graham sold it on to Richard Borradaile, who built Bedford Hill (known also as Bedford Hill House) on the land between 1802 and 1815 (WHS, Wandsworth Notes Scrapbook 2, p. 83).

Borradaile was a ‘self-made man’, typical of the new economic elite who relocated to Tooting in the early nineteenth century. Originally from Cumbria, he had begun his career in the City of London as a hatter and furrier but made his fortune in insurance and shipping (an area of significant growth as a result of Britain’s manufacturing industries). Between 1826 and 1831 he was MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme in the Midlands, but retained Bedford Hill



*'Tooting Common, Bedford Hill end'* (c.1920). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.



Map showing the proximity of Bedford Hill House to the Common from a plan of produced to accompany the Common Supplemental Act (1873). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).

House. In 1835, after Borradaile's death, the property was purchased by the famous builder Sir William Cubitt, who enlarged the house. In 1855, the West End and Crystal Palace line of the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway cut across the northern edge of Tooting Bec Common. The views from the desirable Bedford Hill Estate were thus spoilt by the embankment, prompting the eventual abandonment of that property and its redevelopment as higher-density housing. Furthermore, the close proximity of the infamous Priory, the site of the Charles Bravo murder in 1876, would not have improved the reputation of the area. The house stood empty from c.1891-7 and the Heaver Estate was gradually developed around it. The house was demolished in 1897 to make way for Veronica Road (originally to be called Corisande Road).

## Hyde Farm

The arrival of the railway in 1855 effectively severed the Hyde Farm Estate owned by Emmanuel College, Cambridge from the bulk of the Commons. Although the area was not yet developed with residential housing, the manner in which the line divorced the estate from the remainder of the Commons made later development easier to rationalise.



## Furzedown Estate

Furzedown House was a villa in the fashionable model of an Italian Renaissance Palazzo, erected in 1794 on the southern end of the Tooting Commons. Its original owner, the Rt Hon

*Clough Bromley, Hyde Farm, Tooting Bec Common (1885). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

Lord Redesdale, was typical of the political class who were increasingly making their home on the edge of the Commons in the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1802, the property was put up for sale by auction. The particulars describe a fine house with considerable lands and gardens:

The estate consists of a capital, modern-built villa, erected upon a judicious plan and handsome elevation; the principal apartments elegantly fitted up, excellent domestic offices of every description; coach-house and stabling, possessing every accommodation suitable for a family of distinction, delightful pleasure grounds, plantations and shrubbery walks laid out with superior taste, in an improved and greatly admired style, kitchen garden, encompassed by lofty walling, and the surrounding enclosures of excellent meadow, pasture, arable and woodland, in a high state of cultivation, lying very compact, within a ring fence, ornamented with thriving timber, pleasingly disposed, and containing upwards of 182 acres, with a good Farm Yard, Bailiff's Messuage, Bullock Lodge, and proper buildings for the business of husbandry. (Particulars of Furzedown House as advertised for auction in the *Morning Chronicle*, 23 June 1802, p. 4)

The property was eventually purchased by Daniel Haigh who set about improving the facilities even further. Furzedown Park Farm was extended and developed by Haigh and by the 1880s it had grown to a considerable size, benefitting from the increasing demand for dairy products for the city nearby (Gower, 1990, p. 7). Haigh was Master of the Old Surrey Hunt from 1820 to 1836.<sup>5</sup> Following Haigh's death in 1846, the estate was purchased by Phillip Flower who extended the house in the 1860s using the architect James Knowles. Knowles added the distinctive lodge at the Common end of the

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<sup>5</sup> A portrait of Haigh on his horse called Kitten is held in a private collection but viewable online at: [www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/c/cooper/horse1.html](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/c/cooper/horse1.html)

estate. By the twentieth century, Furzedown House and its gardens were increasingly surrounded by the expanding town. As with all the large estates surrounding the Common, the land was ultimately developed for more modest and numerous houses. At Furzedown the process had begun as early as the 1820s when Ralph Blegborough built five villas. By 1824 these were serviced by an access road, which evolved into Furzedown Road. However, the pace of development was to increase. In 1875 Charles Seeley purchased the estate and it passed to his son of the same name upon his death. In 1905 Charles Seeley junior sold the estate and the pace of development increased rapidly. Between 1901 and 1911, Moysers, Pendle and Pretoria roads were developed by the builders F.J. Meech and George Gay. As one observer notes, 'It was announced that over 300 houses were to be built on the Furzedown park area. The builders, who had just completed the last house in Birchwood Road, received praise for adopting a 'rustic style of architecture' ('Tooting Jottings', *Tooting and Balham Gazette*, 1914). The First World War led to an interregnum in building, but in the 1920s a second phase was initiated by Wandsworth Borough Council (WBC), including Furzedown Road.

## **Thrale Hall**

Thrale Hall, referred to also as 'Moorefields', 'Thrale House', 'Thrale Place', and 'Streatham Park' was leased in part from the Duke of Bedford. The house was built in the 1730s for Ralph Thrale, owner the Anchor brewery in Southwark. Upon his death, both the brewery and the house passed to his son, Henry Thrale. Henry became even more influential than his father and after a few aborted attempts, he eventually became an MP for Southwark between 1765 and 1780 ([www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790)). During these years, Thrale Hall was the destination of many of the area's most distinguished, including Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Johnson. As James Boswell recalled, there was 'a constant succession of...the society of

the learned, the witty, and eminent in every way' (Boswell, 1791, p. 130). Although the house was not on the Common itself and stood 90 yards back from Tooting Bec Road, the grounds did include portions of common which had been enclosed (LMA, E/BER/5/E/05/003-6).

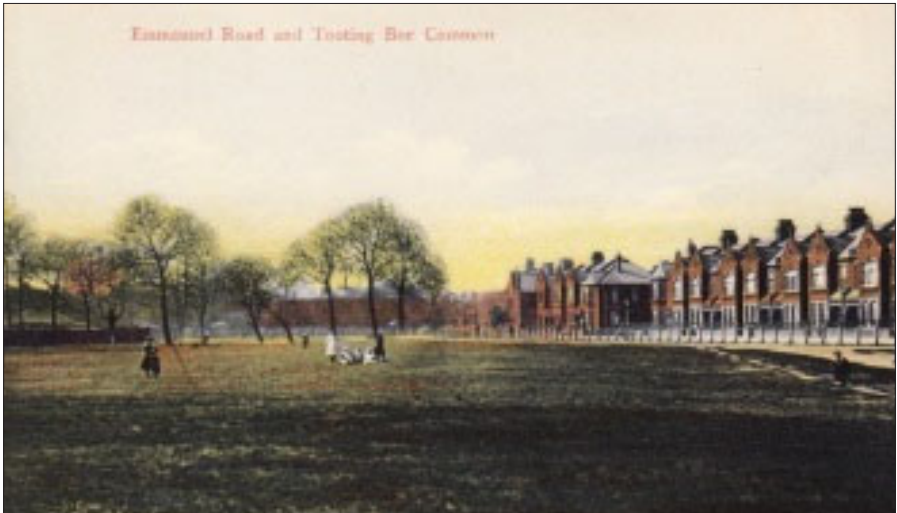
Following Henry Thrale's death in 1781, his widow married Mr Piozzi. The house was reputed to have been leased to William Petty, Lord Shelburne, who was Prime Minister from 1782 to 1783. In the 1820s, the house was passed between various owners. In 1822 it was inherited by Lady Keith (Henry Thrale's daughter) and passed to Michael Shepley in 1825. In 1826 it was purchased by Leonard Phillips for £10,100 (Surrey Archaeological Collections, Vol 59. 1962). By the time of Phillips' death in 1834, the grounds were reported to be in 'a ruinous condition' (*Bucks Herald*, 18 October 1834, p. 1).

In 1863 Thrale House and its contents were put up for sale (*South London Chronicle*, 2 May 1863, p. 4). Following the sale, the house was pulled down and a new dwelling erected. In 1872 the leasehold on the new house was put up for auction (*London Standard*, 14 June 1872, p. 2) and again in April 1874 (*Morning Post*, 18 April 1874, p. 8). Today, Ullathorne Road follows the line of the carriage drive to Thrale House and marks the northern border of the kitchen gardens, orchards and rickyard complex, created by the Thrales in order to grow melons and pineapples (WHS, paper D201 and *Daily Telegraph*, 5 July 1923). Portions of the estate were developed throughout the 1880s, one street at a time (WHS, D201).

From the middle of the nineteenth century to the interwar years, the periphery of Tooting Common was developed by a number of property owners and speculative builders. Each section was developed separately, leading to very distinctive identifies for the different estates and even individual roads. The grounds of Streatham Park and Furzedown were



developed piecemeal, but almost no area of the Common was left unaffected by residential development. Two of the major housing developments to the north of the Common were the Hyde Farm Estate and the Heaver Estate. During the medieval period, the Hyde Farm Estate was a large field. In 1587 it



*Emmanuel Road (c.1910). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*



*Bleakhall Lane (c.1910). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*



was purchased by Richard Martyn who gifted it to Emmanuel College, Cambridge. The college leased the land as a farm until 1896 when the land was leased for development. Between 1896 and 1916 a series of residential roads were developed comprising a range of housing including terraces, large villa-style townhouses and semi-detached dwellings (Lambeth Council, 1996). The Hyde Farm Estate was not the only development to take place to the north of Tooting Bec Common. To the south of the West End and Crystal

Palace line, the Mortimer Estate was laid out. The impact of this estate was considerably less than some of the other developments, but the proximity of planned housing is evident on plans dating from the 1920s.



*Plan showing the Mortimer Estate and edge of the Common (1928). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

At the same time as the Hyde Farm Estate was undergoing development, the Heaver Estate was constructed. Laid out between 1888 and 1898 on land previously occupied by Bedford Hill House and its gardens, the estate was named after its developer, Alfred Heaver. The Heaver Estate was to be his final and most ambitious scheme; Heaver was murdered by his brother-in-law in 1901. The map from *Kelly's Directory* (1902-3) provides a useful 'snap shot' of the progress of housing developments around the Common by the close of the nineteenth century. Furzedown was yet to be developed, while Streatham Park has been partially filled with domestic housing. The east side of the Common is largely still open around the Triangle and along Garrad's Road.

# Music, dancing and display

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In addition to physical changes, the transferal of the Common into municipal ownership heralded an age of change in how the land was to be used and enjoyed by visitors. Performances by brass bands were a popular feature of



*'Scouts on Tooting Bec Common' (c.1915). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

formal public parks from the late 1840s onwards, but they were not traditionally a feature of the more natural landscape of commons. More frequent was the sight of military drills and parades. In the summer months of 1886, the 'W' Division of the Metropolitan Police gathered on the Common for the purposes of executing a military drill. Local newspapers advertised the event as a public attraction, but the availability of a large open space provided a practical opportunity for the police as well as an entertainment (*Norwood Review and Crystal Palace Reporter*, 26 June 1886). Notwithstanding the delay in Tooting Common hosting musical performances, by the 1890s, bands were introduced to perform on Tooting Common (LMA, CL/PK/1/113). There was

no bandstand (indeed there would be no bandstand until 1947 and that was to be only a temporary arrangement), but records for the period 1891 to 1912 testify that a series of ensembles performed for the general public. In 1894 the LCC's own band performed six times on Tooting Common. There was then a pause of nearly a decade, after which, in 1903, band performances became a regular Wednesday evening event between 20 May and 12 August. The 21st Middlesex Military Band was the first to perform and was paid a relatively generous £7 10s for their efforts. The summer band season continued until 1907. The final concert was given on 14 August 1907 by the Kensington and Chelsea Cottage Homes School Band (LMA, LCC/CL/PK/01/109).

In the 1920s, a temporary dancing enclosure created considerable friction between the LCC and some local residents. In June 1926 Mr Heaver junior presented the LCC with a petition signed by residents of Hillbury Road and Bedford Hill Road against the close

proximity of the enclosure to their houses. Their complaint did not prompt a positive response, leading to a second letter dated 6 July 1926 in which the solicitors representing Mr Heaver lamented that he 'has not received the sympathetic attention he would have expected'. In this instance, the municipal ownership of the Common raised new questions about how the Common should be used:



*'The Lovers' Walk, Tooting Bec Common' (c.1910). John Brown collection.*



*'Sunday parade, Tooting Bec Common' (c.1910). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

It would seem that allowing the dancing to take place the Council are catering for the amusement and pleasure of many people who are probably not rate payers in the District at all and if they are rate payers they are only so in respect of property considerably removed from the Heaver Estate...during the Summer evenings the peace and quiet that the Residents [sic] expect when they are sitting in their private gardens is absolutely spoilt by the discordant noise of the Jazz Band and the voices of dancers (LMA, LCC/CL/PK/02).



The Second World War would put an end to dancing and music on the Common, at least until the arrival of a temporary stage in 1947.

*Site of the temporary dance enclosure (1947). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

# Crime, criminality, and punishment

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Crime, criminality and social transgression have been recurrent features of life on the Common since records began. Some of the earliest offences recorded include tenants cutting brushwood without permission (1415), illegal removal of gravel from the pits (during the reign on Elizabeth I), and the theft of eels from the pond on Tooting Bec (1569). Although Commons afford certain rights to tenants and landowners, those rights were not universal and theft of natural materials or illegal grazing of livestock were recurrent problems facing the Common Keeper in the seventeenth century. The fines issued by the Keeper c.1660 are recorded as:

For every beast within the manor and parish to be found trespassing upon the Common after the first of November as followeth. For every horse, mare, gelding or cow 4d, and for the same cattle of every stranger 1s; for every hog unringed 4d, and for every hog ringed 2d, if they be taken upon the Common or elsewhere. For every sore of sheep 6d, and so after the same rate for fewer, and double to strangers. And that the same field keep and common keep shall have the power and liberty from time to time to impound the same cattle which are there to remain until the same penalties be paid and the parties trespassed satisfied for the wrongs done to them (Sexby, 1898, pp. 213-4).

In addition, rights were specific to each Common and those who crept from Tooting Graveney to Bec and vice versa to cut gorse or furze were subject to severe fines. Some of the perpetrators of such thefts were surprising. In 1741, Richard Bullock, the Rector of Streatham was fined for cutting turf and removing it from Tooting Bec Common.

By the late eighteenth century, management of natural materials had become an ecological necessity. In 1668 it was forbidden to cut the furze for three years on Tooting Graveney, most probably to enable the growth to recover. In 1790 the use of carts for the gathering of furze was banned and it was decreed that nobody should gather more than they could carry on their shoulder. Similarly, even the legal removal of large quantities of gravel threatened to destabilise the ground and pose a danger to the public. In 1818 gravel diggers were accused of endangering the lives of His Majesty's subjects by digging too near to the highway and footpaths.

Vagrancy and gypsy encampments on the Common prompted complaints from local residents from the late eighteenth century onwards. However, the presence of these figures also led artists such as William Collingwood Smith (1815 – 1887) to paint romantic scenes of the Common with such characters adding a sense of nostalgia for the rural character of the Common that was progressively eroded by suburbanisation.

## **Robbery**

Robbery from individuals was always a problem on and around the Commons. In one of his many letters, Samuel Johnson referred to Tooting Bec Common as a 'haunt of highwaymen' (Malden, 1967, I, p. 92). Streatham was a particularly notorious location for highwaymen in the sixteenth century and instances of thefts by highwaymen and 'footpads' (highwaymen without horses) are recorded in the surrounding area as late as the nineteenth century. One such robbery was reported in the Morning Advertiser in 1808:

On Friday evening about 6.30pm as Mr Sampson of Walworth was returning home across the Common between Tooting and Streatham, he was overtaken by two men well dressed, who enquired of him their way to London, stating that they were

strangers, and from their genteel appearance, did not hesitate to reply, as the night was fast approaching he would be very glad of their company, as he himself was coming to town; this being agreed upon, they had not proceeded more than 200 yards when, to his great astonishment, they demanded his money, and after robbing him of three guineas, with some silver, and wishing him a good night, they then made their escape towards Clapham (MA, 14 March 1808, pp. 2-3).

Minor thefts continued to occur throughout the nineteenth century, but there is no evidence that Tooting Common was any more dangerous than every other poorly-lit park or street throughout the expanding metropolitan area. The increased occupation and use of the Common during and just after the Second World War provided not only greater opportunities for thieves, but also an increased chance of getting caught. In 1947, Arthur Reginald Harold Burland robbed Alberta Law of her handbag containing £8 16s, an identity card and a ration book. The attack occurred near the temporary war-time allotments and was witnessed by PC Harris nearby, who chased the assailant and arrested him (SN, 31 January 1947, p. 1).

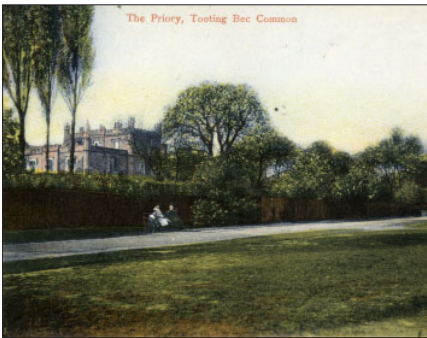
## **Violent crimes**

Over the centuries, a number of violent crimes have been committed on the Commons. In some instances, these attacks were relatively minor and would now come under the heading of 'anti-social behaviour'. In 1895, the SN reported a 'dastardly attack' on a carriage conveying ladies across the Common, during which a group of 'roughs' bombarded the carriage with stones (SN, 9 March 1895, p. 4). However, some instances of violence were more serious.

The Charles Bravo murder is one of the most famous crimes associated with



Tooting Common. Charles Bravo (1845 – 1876) was a barrister living in The Priory, a crenellated white villa in Balham, just off Bedford Hill and visible from the Common. In April 1876, just four months after his marriage to the wealthy Florence Ricardo, he collapsed at home from antimony poisoning and died three days later. The first inquest returned an open verdict, but a second inquest held on 11 July returned a verdict of wilful murder but did not identify a perpetrator. The case was a cause célèbre covered widely in the popular press ('The Balham mystery - Poisoning of Mr Bravo', *Illustrated London Clipper: Police and Criminal Court Gazette*, 1876, Number 96). Florence, her former lover, and the housekeeper were all the subject of speculation. Nobody was ever charged with Bravo's murder and Florence died two years later in Southsea, Hampshire having succumbed to alcohol poisoning.



'The Priory, Tooting Bec Common' (c.1900).  
Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.

One of the most famous assaults to take place on the Common itself occurred in 1904. Miss Florence Royale, a 25-year-old governess living and working at 107

Streatham High Road was accosted by her former fiancé, George Ritson, while she took her charges for a walk on Tooting Common. George held a glass of oxalic acid in one hand and a revolver in the other. He shot Florence twice, once in the back of the neck, before absconding. Florence survived thanks to the assistance of the local Dr Brock. Four days later, George was arrested at his mother's house in Moss Side, Manchester and charged with attempted murder (SN, 23 April 1904). George Ritson was sentenced to five years' penal servitude. In an additional sad epilogue to the case, one of the expert



witnesses in the trial, the gun-maker Richard Wallis of Bermondsey, shot himself following the stress of the trial and the appearance of his name in the newspapers.

Firearm offences have been relatively rare on and around the Commons. However, in the 1950s there were two in relatively close succession. In July 1950, 18-year-old Ronald Rampling was shot crossing Tooting Bec Common and five years later an air rifle was fired at a car on Garrad's Road, smashing the rear windscreen. These occurrences may have been part of a wider problem of gang violence and anti-social behaviour among local young people that blighted the Common throughout the decade. On 6 July 1956 there were mass arrests when approximately 60 young men and boys aged between 15 and 20 years of age 'rumbled' on Tooting Bec Common.

## **Suicide**

Sadly, the Common seems to have been a favoured location for people to take their own life, as there are many references to suicides on Tooting Common in the local press. Various methods were employed. Shooting, hanging, and throat cutting were the preferred means of men, whilst women tended to opt for poison.

Some individuals may have resided in the local area, but others clearly made a special journey to the Common with the intention of ending their life. In 1878, the South London Press reported one such instance:

**Man, name and address unknown, found lying on Tooting Common by Police constable 98W on Sunday morning about 2am. Policeman first thought he was drunk but found he was wounded (bullet wound near the heart) a revolver was by his side. Man still**

alive, moaning, gave a couple of false names and addresses... he was taken to St. Thomas's Hospital where he died on Tuesday. The revolver was a six-chambered one: 5 chambers charged. A pocket book with papers and a coloured handkerchief, papers, a key, a pair of glasses, and a knife were found on him. He was wearing a dark tweed suit, striped shirt, Wellington boots and white socks. The last words he said before he died were that he didn't want his friends to know anything about it

Another sad tale is that of 29-year-old Charles McArthur Stevens, a diamond cutter who took his own life on the Common in 1910. Stevens was shortly to be married. He poisoned himself with cyanide near Soames Bridge. At the inquest it was speculated that he was motivated by financial difficulties connected to his wedding (*SN*, 11 June 1910, p. 5). A year later, in 1911, 33-year-old Private Clement John William Foster, who had seen service in India, was found hanged from a tree near the asylum. He had been discharged from the army a month earlier due to a change in regulations (*SN*, 9 December 1911, p. 8).

War and economic depression led to spikes in the number of suicides. During the First World War, Mrs Kathleen Baxter of Streatham took her own life on the Common by taking poison. Her husband testified that she had been living in an asylum for a year and suffered from delusions brought on by the war (*SN*, 25 May 1917, p. 5). The crash of 1929 affected every strata of society and in the course of just one week in April 1931 two men were found hanged from trees on the Common. In November of the same year, Mr Albert Norris, a retired naval architect was found having shot himself. The local press reported that he 'had lost lots of money' (*SN*, 6 November 1931). The deaths continued throughout the 1930s.

## Sex crimes

While it is likely that sexual assaults, paedophilia, and 'flashing' occurred on the Commons throughout their existence, the expansion of newspaper publishing and literacy increased awareness of such crimes throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1886, Samson Richard Stuttaford, retired Church Warden of All Saints Church, Clapham, pleaded guilty to indecent assault in the presence of a little girl named Betsy Robertson. In that instance, the recent death of his son was taken in mitigation (*Norwood Review and Crystal Palace Reporter*, 18 April 1886). However, two years later in May 1888 he pleaded guilty to assaulting young girls on Tooting Common and was sentenced to six weeks' imprisonment (*Wandsworth Borough News*, 5 May 1888, p. 3). In 1911, the *WBN* reported another, similar case:

A grey-bearded old man, John Soulsby Anderson, aged 83, was charged with indecently assaulting Dorothy Watts (aged 11). He had previously met her and said he would give her twopence and her brother a penny if she met him on the Common the next day. She told her parents and a trap was set. A policeman hid in a tree, the girl's father watched through his opera glasses 150 yards away. She went to meet the man and he tried to kiss her.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, public attention became increasingly focused on the 'immoral behaviour', both consensual and non-consensual, perpetrated by 'Beast Men' on Tooting Commons (*SN*, 3 July 1925). Tooting Bec Common was deemed to be the more difficult to police because it was more wooded and therefore provided more opportunities for perpetrators to conceal themselves. In 1906, POSC received a complaint from a local father that his daughters were frequently followed across the Common by men. The committee resolved to approach the police about increasing their

presence (LCC/MIN/Parks and Open Spaces, 6 July 1906). In 1919, policewomen began to patrol the Common in an attempt to 'abate some of the disgraceful behaviour' (*SN*, 8 August 1919, p. 5). However, their presence was seemingly ineffectual as in February 1925, the same newspapers reported:

On Wednesday at 4pm an eminently respectable Streatham woman who has been married 20 years was walking along the asphalt path over Tooting Graveney Common from The Avenue in the direction of Thrle Road when a man jumped out of the bushes completely exposed and attacked her. He used the most filthy and obscene language and tore her clothes. Finding that his attempts were unavailable, he punched her severely in the chest. It was pouring with rain at the time and the woman had her umbrella up so did not see the man until he jumped up and pulled it down.

In July of that year, the Streatham Representative on the LCC contacted the POSC in response to a number of complaints he received from women who had been accosted by men on the Common. Although there is little evidence that crimes were frequent, they did occur from time to time in the decades that followed. In 1930, a waiter named Oscar Beard was charged at the South Western Police Court for violently assaulting and outraging a girl he knew on Tooting Bec Common (*SN*, 1 August 1930, p. 4).

Local residents were not only concerned about crimes against the public. In 1956, the conspicuous presence of prostitutes in the vicinity of the Common at night led residents of Garrad's Road to ask the local police to patrol the area in the evening (*SN*, 18 May 1956). There are records of prostitution taking place on Tooting Common at least as early as 1900, when British Army troops were camped on the Common while they awaited deployment to

South Africa. However, as the activity became increasingly visible and blatant throughout the twentieth century, it created considerable conflict between local residents, sex workers, clients, and the police.

## **Illegal Burial**

Aside from crimes perpetrated on the Common itself, the bushes, pond, and wooded groves provided an ideal location for depositing bodies of those who had died, naturally or otherwise, elsewhere. In particular, the first five decades of the twentieth century saw a number of illegal burials of children and young babies on the Common. One of the earliest cases reported in the press occurred in 1895:

Mr G P Wyatt, district coroner, held an inquest at the town hall on Tuesday last on the death of a newly born female child whose body was discovered on Tooting Common. James Gorman, 21 of Tooting Grove, said that he was picking up paper on the Common on 30th June (Sunday morning) when he noticed a parcel in the furze near Tooting Bec Road. He got it out by means of his stick and, on opening it, found a child's body wrapped in a petticoat. He sent for a constable and the body was taken to the police station. Dr Ernest Henry Brock, divisional surgeon, saw the body on Sunday – it was of a newly born female child and had been dead about 3 days but presumably had never lived. It was in an advanced stage of decomposition. There were no marks of violence upon it and it was probably still born. (*SN*, 6 July 1895, p. 5)

Similar occurrences were reported in 1914, 1919, 1922, 1925, and 1956. In all instances where the cause of death could be determined, it was identified to be stillbirth or occurring very near to the time of birth. In no cases was infanticide recorded.

# Policing and Punishments on the Common

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Early records indicate that the Commons were a site of public punishment as early as 1258. In that year, the Abbot of the St. Mary of Bec Benedictine Abbey ordered gallows to be erected on Tooting Bec Common. In 1756, Streatham Parish Vestry petitioned the Lord of the Manor to erect a cage and stocks on that Common to punish 'casual ill-doers'. Permission was refused. However, in 1828 permission was granted and two sites were made available, one near the pond in Tooting Lane and the other to the south on land belonging to John Lucas Esq.

In the nineteenth century, the approach taken by the MBW to managing the commons was twofold: they undertook measures to physically alter the landscape to promote certain 'desirable' uses of the space, and they introduced regulations to prevent 'undesirable' behaviours. Under the new jurisdiction of the recent byelaws, many behaviours that had previously been encouraged were now illegal. The MBW PCOSC minutes include reports from William Covington concerning both extreme acts of vandalism, and menial criminal offences. The struggles in enforcing the byelaws are apparent in the reports from Covington listing frequent offences by local residents in turning out cattle, riding across the common, hanging clothes, cutting turf and trees, and constructing fences and posts on common land.

Some of the more extreme criminal acts seen on the Common during the MBW era of management include deliberate vandalism, most notably through the starting of fires among the vast swathes of furze on Tooting Bec Common. Covington reports that on 9 February 1876 two acres of furze was

burnt by the pond, an area that had already been burnt in June of the previous year (LMA, MBW/0986, p. 40; p. 413). The furze was highly flammable and had historically been used by the manorial tenants as fuel. Its presence on the Common was significant to the local area, and the parish south of Tooting Graveney Common is still called Furzedown today. Acts such as the deliberate burning of the furze on Tooting Bec Common pushed the MBW to grant Covington greater powers as a Special Constable in December 1873 to assist him in enforcing the byelaws.

## Features and amenities

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### **Nature - real and constructed**

The landscape of Tooting Common has changed many times over its lifetime. Today there remain the vestiges of a number of avenues of trees across the Common as well as more naturalistic coppices and thickets. Contrary to what many may assume, the most naturalistic and unkempt areas are relatively recent features. Following municipalisation, and in part as a result of the emphasis placed upon nature and conservation by the Commons Preservation Society, areas previously coppiced were left to grow wild under a policy of benign neglect. The combination of the dense furze that had characterised the Common historically, presented new challenges for a landscape increasingly surrounded by the town. In 1906 the Keeper of the Common recommended that the furze be cut down to a height of 3ft to 'prevent much indecency and nuisance'. In addition, the desire to create a more naturalistic setting increased the risk of fire. Newspaper reports from the twentieth century suggest that an increase in access, combined with this increase in undergrowth, led to a number of fires (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, 13 April 1912, p. 6).

The remains of some of the grander, historic avenues of trees can still be seen, but most are now shorter or thinner than when originally planted. The avenue of oak and horse chestnut trees at Garrad's Road and the double avenue of elms that ran parallel to Tooting Bec Road can be traced at least as far back as 1729, although their origin may be earlier.

Falcon Brook, called Hildaburna until the seventeenth century, rose near the Furzedown end of Tooting Common (Trench and Hillman, 1993, p. 52). The brook irrigated the gardens of Bedford Hill House (WBC, 2010, p. 12). Redirected and covered up by the MBW in 1865 as part of their improvements to the Common, it is now completely covered over. Elmbourne Road is named after a small stream that once ran alongside the Common. Again, this is no longer visible above ground and is likely to have been lost during the rationalisation of waterways and drainage ditches that accompanied the development of the surrounding area.



*'Elmbourne Road' (c.1910). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*





*'Tooting Bec Common' (c.1905). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

In 1900 the LCC committed to building a 'dog pond' on the Common, on which model yachting was to be allowed. The site chosen was southeast of the boating lake and the cost of the work was quoted at £289. Despite its



*'The pond, Tooting Bec Common' (c.1900). Reproduced courtesy of Wandsworth Heritage Service.*

small size, the dog pond represented a considerable outlay (*Dundee Evening Post*, 26 October 1900, p. 2). A few years later, the LCC added a yachting pond to the west of the site. The decision to invest in such additions suggests much about the changing character of the wider area. Model yachting was already a tradition in many London public parks and associated particularly with the middle classes. The decision to introduce it to the Common may therefore have reflected the changing demographic of the area and the social aspirations of new suburban residents. The popularity of model yachting meant that it was not restricted to the dog pond (as the image below indicates).

## The Fossil Tree

The Tooting Common fossil is the remains of the base or stump of a tree from the famous Jurassic Purbeck Fossil Forest of Southern England, which formed about 145 million years ago. The fossil is significant because it represents a



*'The lake and fossilised tree trunk, Tooting Bec Common' (c.1920). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

major element of the forest that formed in Southern England at a time when dinosaurs still roamed the land. Originally, the tree stump would have been fossilised in an upright position, and it had a slightly flared base. This is partly missing now, as are the roots. Some of these features were undoubtedly lost when the stump was originally excavated, but comparison with a photograph taken in the 1920s indicates that some damage has been incurred since the specimen was placed on the Common.

Fossilised tree trunks of this type are commonly found during the quarrying of building stones, notably Portland Stone, which was widely used in many London buildings such as Buckingham Palace and St. Paul's Cathedral. They have been collected and placed in parks and gardens since the early nineteenth century. The fossil tree was originally put on display here in 1898. It was the gift of the celebrated local Victorian builder and property developer Alfred Heaver (c.1841-1901). In 1897, he contacted the Balham & District Antiquarian & Natural History Society (BDANHS) to offer them 'a large stone of unusual size' (LMA, LCC/MIN/8832/5). It stood in the grounds of the nearby Bedford Hill House, which was demolished at about this time to make way for the Heaver Estate. Heaver said the stone was 'believed to be Arrogonite' (a mineral) from the Isle of Portland in Dorset. In a letter to the LCC, seeking permission to display the stone on the Common, the BDANHS described it simply as 'a natural curiosity of a rare kind and worth preserving' (Ibid.). A geological expert declared it to be 'the finest specimen of its kind' he had ever seen. Messrs Lordon & Son of Trinity Road, Upper Tooting were contracted to transport it from Bedford Hill Park to the Common and to set it in a bed of cement. Railings were later added by the LCC.

Scientists from the Natural History Museum in London carried out an assessment of the tree itself in 2015. Their report confirms that the stump comes from the Purbeck Fossil Forest of Southern England; it is likely to be a

commonly occurring wood found there, *Protocupressinoxylon purbeckensis*. This dates it to the late Jurassic period, about 145 million years ago, during the age of the dinosaurs. The stump is formed of microcrystalline quartz and is thought to be part of a fossilised conifer from a variety that is now extinct (*Cheirolepidiaceae*). It originally had a wider base and would originally have had roots attached. It stands about 1.4 metres high and has a circumference of 3.2 metres at its widest point. It is estimated to weigh between 2 and 2.5 tons. Other nearby examples of fossilised trees can be found in Crystal Palace Park and Syon Park.

The fossil tree's derelict enclosure was restored in 2018 as part of the Tooting Common Heritage Project with the aim of enhancing the value of the fossilised tree trunk as a local heritage asset. Unsympathetic park furniture and vegetation were removed in and around the enclosure. The old railings were then removed and the ground was regraded to create a level platform with step access. A newly fabricated fence was subsequently installed which completely encircles the fossil with a gate that remains unlocked. An interpretation panel, giving more detailed scientific and historical information, was affixed to the new railings.

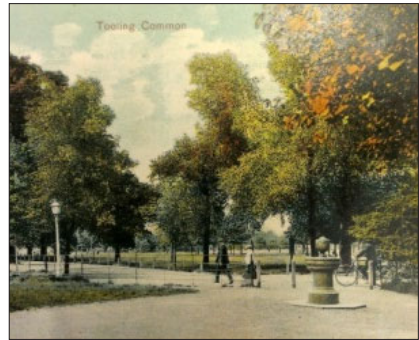
## **Drinking Fountains**

Between the 1830s and the 1860s, cities across Britain were struck by a succession of deadly cholera epidemics. In 1859 Samuel Gurney MP founded the Metropolitan Free Drinking Fountain Association. This step was part of the same movement towards municipalisation and reform of the urban environment that had led to the growth of the Commons Preservation Society, the public parks movement and other philanthropic endeavours. The need to improve the 'healthful' character of towns and their environs prompted the donation of drinking fountains to parks and commons across the country. The

era of drinking fountain provision coincides directly with the period during which the two Tooting Commons were united in municipal ownership. There were two drinking fountains on the Common, the earliest of which was in the shape of a classical urn. Some accounts claim it was located closer to the café, while others locate it on Tooting Graveney Common. It is no longer on either site. In 1988, Wandsworth's *Tooting Common Management Plan* proposed that 'the two drinking fountains would be brought back into use', suggesting that as late as the 1980s, the fountain was deemed salvageable. Sadly, the restoration was never undertaken (WBC, 1989 – 90, p. 57).



*The granite drinking fountain in the snow (c. 1930). Reproduced courtesy of Wandsworth Heritage Service.*



*The granite drinking fountain, Tooting Common (c. 1910). Reproduced courtesy of Wandsworth Heritage Service.*

The second and most famous drinking fountain on the Common was dedicated to the architect and builder Joseph James Jones of 58 Streathbourne Road (and later of 1 Huron Road). Jones was responsible for building hundreds of houses in the area and so shaped the surrounding neighbourhood. The wealth he accrued enabled him to found and support a number of local charities, particularly those pertaining to the improvement of the health and recreation of local boys (with one exception - St Mary's School, Balham - girls were excluded explicitly from benefitting from the bequests). Upon Jones' death on 15 September 1931, a fountain was donated to the



Common in his memory. Designed by F. Leonard Poole FRIBA (Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects), it reflects the popularity of the Flemish or 'Dutch' gable in domestic architecture between the wars. The drinking fountain was unveiled at the corner of Dr Johnson Avenue and Tooting Bec Road on 12 December 1938 and exhibits a plaque which reads: 'Erected in 1938 to the memory of Joseph James Jones who founded a trust to encourage the playing of organised games by boys of local schools' (Brown, 2013, p. 36). Sadly, the arrival of war less than one year later would have limited its use for the next seven years. However, oral testimony and photographs testify to its functionality well into the 1960s.



*Drinking fountain being carved by Joseph Allen (1938). Reproduced courtesy of Jill Simpson.*



*Newly restored drinking fountain, Tooting Common (2018). Credit Johnny Armstead.*

The Jones drinking fountain was restored in 2018 as part of the Tooting Common Heritage Project with the aim to bring it back to public use. During the restoration, the drinking fountain was partially dismantled to allow for the original bronze fittings to be replaced with bespoke new ones. The original

fittings were sent to a foundry for the new ones to be cast. The new fittings have been installed, plumbed and tested and the stonework has been reinstated and steam-cleaned. The restored fountain was officially opened by Environment Cabinet Member, Councillor Jonathan Cook, on 15 February 2018.



*'The kiosk, Tooting Bee Common' (c.1908). Reproduced courtesy of the Patrick Loobey collection.*

## **Refreshment house or 'Kiosk'**

The main café on Tooting Common has also been referred to as the 'kiosk', 'refreshment house', and 'tea room'. Plans for the new refreshment house were approved in 1897, and the building officially opened on 1 September 1898. Of the 110 public green spaces under the care of the LCC by 1906, only 23 had a refreshment room or house. Where such facilities were on offer, the LCC owned the buildings but they did not provide the refreshments. Instead, the day-to-day running of refreshment concessions was contracted out to private companies and individuals. Licences were granted initially for

one year but later for three, five or even seven years. An annual fee was payable to the LCC, usually in quarterly instalments.

The organised sale of refreshments on Tooting Common started very simply. In 1893, Mr D Braden, a milkman from Merton, Surrey, was given permission to take a milk can and a basket on to the Common. The following year he wrote to the LCC to ask if he could erect a tent (LMA, LCC/MIN/8818, 27 April 1894, p. 29). Instead of simply agreeing to his very modest proposal, the LCC decided on a tendering process. To their surprise, no-one made them an offer. However, after the deadline had passed, they received two letters: one from Braden himself and another from a Mr John Barry of Wandsworth, both offering to pay £10 for the concession (LMA, LCC/MIN/8818, 8 June 1894, p. 32). No doubt to the annoyance of Braden, whose idea it had been in the first place, the Council decided in favour of Barry. Their reasons are not recorded.

It is not known exactly where John Barry pitched his tent but we do know that he had to buy it himself. He says as much in a letter he wrote to the Council from his home in Thorparch Road, Wandsworth in 1896:

It is now nearly 2 years since the council gave [me] permission to erect a tent on Tooting Common. The tent is now in a very bad state through exposure and is likely to be torn to pieces by the wind at any minute. The tent cost me £30 and it would be to [sic] expensive to erect another one of the same kind ... to ask the council if they will allow me to erect a more substantial building or whether they would erect one themselves, and let it to me at a fair rent. Hoping you will bring the matter forward at your earliest convenience (LMA, LCC/MIN/8826, 26 June 1896, p. 58).

The POSC agreed that the sale of refreshments from a tent was 'a very unsatisfactory arrangement'. Just over a year after receiving Barry's letter, they





Original design for the refreshment house, Tooting Common (1898). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).



Specifications for the construction of Tooting Common refreshment house (1898). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).

recommended to the full council that a 'suitable house should be erected where visitors to the Common could obtain refreshment with some amount of comfort' (LMA, LCC/MIN, 16 November 1897, p. 1207). Although Barry's letter appears to have prompted the LCC to take action, it arrived at a time when they were already expanding their catering facilities in London's parks and commons. A similar, but much grander, refreshment house had been built in Battersea Park in 1897 (LMA, LCC/CO/CON/02/1955) and a smaller one was erected in Myatt's Fields, Camberwell, in 1898 (LMA, LCC/CO/CON/02/2084).

For Tooting, the LCC's in-house architect was instructed to submit designs and estimates for 'the erection of an inexpensive structure, suitable for a refreshment house'. The architect estimated the cost at £320 but this figure was contested by the Manager of Works as being too low and he estimated the cost at £338 (LMA, LCC/MIN/8832, 5 November 1897, p. 111). On 16

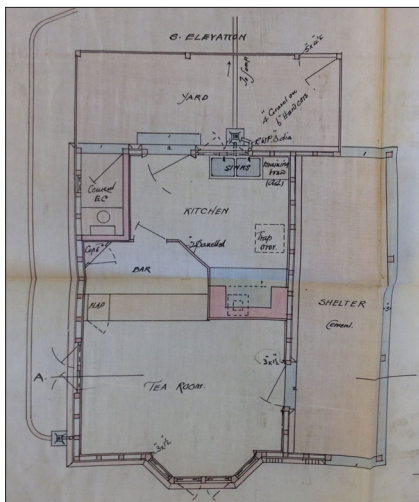
November 1897 the council approved the invitation of tenders to construct the new refreshment pavilion.

## The Building

Of the eight tenders received, J. Garrett & Son, Builders of Balham, came in lowest at £319, strikingly close to the architect's own estimate (LMA, LCC/MIN 1898, p. 272). The contract was signed by both parties on 16 March 1898. The LCC stipulated that the building had to be completed within three months of the start of work or the builders would face a fine of £5 for every week that they overran. They were also required to pay all employees Trade Union rates: 10d an hour for skilled tradesmen and 7d an hour for labourers and navvies. The men were not allowed to work more than 50 hours in any week.

The contractors were to be paid in three instalments: 40% after half the work had been completed; 50% after the building had been finished; and the final 10% six months after completion to ensure that the building was in good working order. Hand-written notes added to the contract show that Garrett &

Son were paid £125 on 13 July 1898; £157 on 2 November 1898; and £45 4s 5d on 20 May 1899, which brought the project in approximately £10 over budget (LMA, LCC/CO/CON/02/2081). From the payment dates, it is clear that the refreshment house was not ready for the summer season, which must surely have been the aim. They also



*Original floorplan for the refreshment house, Tooting Common (1898). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

suggest that the builders did overrun but they do not appear to have been fined. Thomas Blashill (1831-1905), the LCC's Superintending Architect of Metropolitan Buildings, was nominally in charge of the project and could demand changes at any time.

With its pitched tiled roof and walls of timber, cement and red brick, the building was very much in the Arts & Crafts style, made popular by William Morris (1834-1896) in the late nineteenth century. It brought a suitably rustic touch to the Common. The main materials used were Portland cement, red Suffolk brick and a mixture of oak, deal and pine for the timberwork. Inside, the accommodation was very basic. It comprised just two rooms: a tea-room with a yellow deal floor and a kitchen with a bar or counter in between (LMA, LCC/CO/CON/02/2081). The building was connected to the gas supply but one important fitting was missing, which would soon become a problem: a proper toilet. The only provision was an earth closet in the back yard for the use of the licensee and his staff.

## **John Barry**

Once building work had started, Barry offered his services as the first licensee at a suggested annual fee of £25. The LCC had the decency to accept and Barry formally took up his post on 1 September 1898 (LMA, LCC/MIN/8762 /176). His initial contract ran until 31 March 1899, when all refreshment licences were due to be reviewed (LMA, LCC/MIN 1898, p. 1147). At that time it was renewed for another year until the end of March 1900 (LMA, LCC/MIN 1898, p. 1539) and then for a further year until 31 March 1901 (LMA, LCC/MIN, 19 December 1899, p. 1840).

According to the 1901 census, Mr Barry was a 65-year-old married man living in Thorparch Road, between Stockwell and Vauxhall. He and his wife, who was 10 years younger than him, were both from Luton in Bedfordshire. A 16-year-old son lived at home with them, suggesting that the Barrys had married

late in life. Barry's profession is given as 'master baker, bread-maker'. The former suggests that he held a recognized qualification but at that time there were hundreds, if not thousands, of bakers living and working in London and probably very few of them possessed a formal qualification. A contemporary list of London traders devotes no fewer than five pages, each of three closely printed columns, to bakers (Kelly's Directory, 1902). John Barry baked his own bread for sale to his customers. Prospective licensees were required to state on their application forms what they would be offering under the first-class menu. In 1901, instead of doing this, Barry wrote:

Sir, As regards the first Class Tariff I fail to see where I can introduce it in my case, as I make my own bread & pastry, therefore can vouch for their excellence of quality. And my customers being thoroughly satisfied would [hesitate?] in paying a higher tariff. Yours Respectfully, J. Barry  
(LMA, LCC/MIN/8845, 1 March 1901, p. 112).

Barry did not win the right to renew his contract this time.

Although the refreshment house must have been a big improvement on his tent, Barry was not entirely happy at Tooting Common. In early 1899, only a few months after he had started his contract, he asked the LCC to fit a range in the kitchen. This suggests that he wanted or needed to expand his menu. The LCC were not willing to help as work such as this was deemed to be the responsibility of the tenant (LMA, LCC/MIN/8762, p. 254). The contract signed by the licensees was weighted heavily in favour of the LCC. All refreshment houses had to open every day of the year; any staff working on a Sunday had to be given another day off in lieu; tips could not be accepted or requested; a first- and second-class menu had to be offered with the latter being stipulated by the Council; the contractor was responsible for all the fittings and was

required to repair or replace any that were damaged; and the premises could be inspected at any time by the Chief Officer of Parks or an authorised member of his staff. The Council had the right to terminate the contract at any time with four weeks' notice, but not the licensee. This led to several instances of bad debts and licensees asking to be released from their contracts.

## **The Refreshments**

The LCC tried to keep a tight control on the quality of food and drink on offer. Everything sold under the second-class menu had to be of 'good and unadulterated quality'. Most items on this menu cost a penny or '1d', including: a mug of tea, coffee or cocoa; a bread roll; a pat of butter; cakes (some were cheaper); and a tumbler of lemonade. More expensive items included: large cigars at tuppence; a packet of cigarettes (from 3d); and an ounce of tobacco (4d). If you wished to sit down (where this was possible) and use crockery and cutlery, there was a supplementary charge of a halfpenny.

The first-class menu, the quality of which had to be 'equal to that of firms of known standing in light refreshment vending', was determined by the licensees themselves. This was where they could realistically make a profit. The 1901 menu from Tooting survives and included: a pot of tea priced at tuppence; boiled eggs (1.5d); ham sandwiches (1.5d); a plate of ham (6d); and ices (up to 6d each) (LMA, LCC/MIN/8845, 1 March 1901, p. 112).

The difficulty in making a profit from the Council's refreshment houses was acknowledged by the Chief Officer, John James Sexby, in a report dated October 1903. The present system was 'unsatisfactory', he stated. Trade was 'uncertain due to the weather and throughout the winter, [contractors] could not rely on any custom at all'. In wet summers (such as in 1903), 'many of the

contractors have been practically ruined'. They complained that the ordinary tariff was set too low for them to make a profit. The LCC could have authorised an increase in prices but instead Sexby made two very different recommendations: that the accommodation be made 'more attractive to the public' and that the contractors be more closely supervised, 'preferably by a lady' (LMA, LCC/MIN/8871).

## Albert Ruby

In March 1901 Albert Ruby won the tender for the Tooting Bec Common café. He had bid £30 for the contract - £10 more than John Barry. On his application form he gave his address as 76 Charing Cross Road in central London but his later addresses were nearer to the Common: 5 Ramsden Road, Balham (LMA, LCC/MIN/8877, 18 January 1907, p. 164) followed by 28 Tooting Bec Road, Upper Tooting. Ruby had previously held the licence for one of the five refreshment houses at Victoria Park in east London from May 1896.

*Signature of Albert Ruby. Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

An ongoing problem at the Tooting Common refreshment house was, unfortunately, the cesspool at the back of the premises. All waste from the kitchen was drained into this and it doubled-up as a toilet for the licensee, and possibly for his customers too. In the summer months, it had to be drained twice a week at the contractor's expense and the LCC acknowledged that the smell was 'the cause of frequent complaints'. It was agreed to replace the cesspool with a proper drain connected to the nearest sewer. The works were carried out in 1905 at a cost of about £120 (LMA, LCC/MIN, 18 April 1905, p. 1544).

The following year a very different problem arose. Tooting Bathing Lake, now known as Tooting Bec Lido, opened on 28 July 1906. The pool, measuring 100 x 33 yards and containing one million gallons of unheated water, was free to use and was instantly popular with local people. For Ruby's refreshment business, it meant that the new focal point was at the opposite end of the Common from where he was trying to make a living. He showed great enterprise by asking permission to sell refreshments at the Bathing Lake as well. The LCC were reluctant to provide a second building but during the summer of 1906 Ruby was given permission to erect a tent near the entrance to the pool (LMA, LCC/MIN, 12 October 1906, p. 55). Ever resourceful, as well as selling refreshments, Ruby was able to earn a little extra money by keeping an eye on swimmers' bicycles (LMA, LCC/MIN, 26 April 1907). The experiment must have been a success because in the spring of 1907 the LCC relented and agreed to build a second refreshment house, after all.

The new refreshment hut was to be a simple structure and would cost around £170 (LMA, LCC/MIN, 26 March 1907). It appears to have been completed by the summer because on 9 July 1907 the LCC took the unusual step of extending Ruby's licence for seven years from 1 April 1908 for an annual fee of £52 for both refreshment houses (LMA, LCC/MIN/8766, 28 June 1907 and 9 July 1907, p. 174). Ruby must have been delighted at this breakthrough: not only did he have two outlets on the same Common but he also had a degree of security right up to 1915. Life was looking good for Ruby and it has to be hoped that he enjoyed his moment in the sunlight, for in the following year, disaster struck. On 26 June 1908, aged just 42, Albert Ruby died at his home in Tooting of pneumonia and heart failure. He left behind a widow, Claudina Ellen, and a daughter, Winifred Josephine, who had been born just two weeks earlier.

## **Claudina Ellen Ruby**

In the days before the welfare state, this turn of events left Mrs Ruby in a very precarious situation. She was a single mother with no known means of earning her own living and no state benefits to support her. In common with other public bodies, the LCC had a policy of not employing married women. But as a contractor, Mrs Ruby was not a direct employee and a number of other married women (who may or may not have been widows) held refreshment licences. Within a month of her husband's death, Mrs Ruby applied to the LCC to be allowed to take over his licence. They agreed but reduced its duration from seven to two years, terminating in March 1910 (LMA, LCC/MIN 1908, p. 443). Before the two years had expired, however, the POSC were persuaded of her ability to run the tea-house, concluding that 'Mrs Ruby has undertaken the supply of refreshments at the Common in a satisfactory manner, and we think she should be permitted to continue to execute the privilege until 31 March 1915' (LMA, LCC/MIN 1909, p. 1088). It must have been difficult for Mrs Ruby to manage to run two refreshment kiosks and look after a baby. Licensees, although not permitted to sub-contract, were allowed to employ staff who were often family members. Her father, Mr Fissi, was also in the catering business and had run the refreshment house at Kennington Park from 1891 to 1898 when his contract was terminated due to a bad debt (LMA, LCC/MIN 1898, p. 1515). Mrs Ruby may well have been able to call on his experience and her financial success in running the refreshment house cannot be doubted. This is evident in her decision to take an eight-month-long trip to New York with her 17-year-old daughter, sailing from Southampton on 19 September 1925. They returned to Tooting in May 1926 and resumed management of the café.

Perhaps energized by her travels, Mrs Ruby began pressing the LCC for 'increased accommodation for service purposes' and for the installation of a



proper toilet for her staff. She even offered to pay an extra £15 a year rent for the improved premises. In December 1929, the Council finally agreed that the work should be carried out as 'a matter of urgency' and allocated £250 to the project (LMA, LCC/MIN 1929, pp. 830 and 853). The contract was won by the firm of H. Somerford & Son in early 1930 with a bid of £234 (LMA, LCC/MIN 1930, p. 892 and LCC/MIN/8871, pp. 71 and 73). The work must have been carried out some time during 1930-31 because in February 1932, Mrs Ruby was paid a rebate of £10 'in respect of loss of trade' at 'the two refreshment houses at Tooting Common' (LMA, LCC/MIN 1932, p. 193). This may point to disruption of her trade due to building work. Mrs Ruby's licence at Tooting continued to be renewed at regular intervals up until 1930 when she was awarded a 3 year licence for the final time. Shortly after extending her premises Mrs Ruby died of a brain haemorrhage on 4 May 1932, at the age of 59. By then, she had run the refreshment house on Tooting Common for nearly a quarter-of-a-century. Together with that of her husband, the Ruby tenure had lasted 31 years. When her successor, Mr F. Whetter, took over the



*The refreshment House, Tooting Common (2016). Private collection.*



*120th birthday party for Tooting Bec Common Café (August 2018). Copyright Paul Tanner.*

lease on 1 July 1932, the fee nearly doubled from £80 to £130 a year (LMA, LCC/MIN 1932, p. 273).

### **The café today**

Since 2015, the café has been run by San Remo Catering UK Ltd, a small family-run business based in Slough, Buckinghamshire and specialising in park cafés in the London area. It financed a major refurbishment of the premises in 2017 costing around £200,000. The firm holds the lease until 2030. As its name suggests, San Remo has Italian roots and offers a menu including many Italian dishes and, of course, Italian ice-cream. This links the café with its very early days: the redoubtable Mrs Ruby was the daughter of an Italian immigrant so 100 years ago there was also an Italian connection. On 27 August 2018, a birthday party was held at the café to celebrate 120 years of serving the people of Tooting. The event was attended by the Mayor of Wandsworth and some 200 local people.

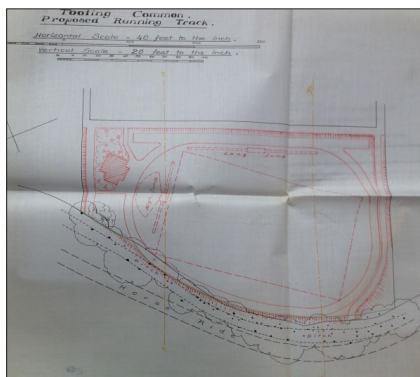
# LCC Sports Ground

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During their custodianship of the Common, the MBW had introduced many changes and not all of them were welcomed by the surrounding community. However, where the MBW had generally held to the principles laid down by the Commons Preservation Society, their successor, the LCC forcibly challenged them. The LCC were certainly more robust in their efforts to transform the Common and introduce new facilities and functions. In 1935 they obtained the LCC (General Powers) Act, which gave them greater power to alter the landscape of the Common. The Act directly challenged many of the protective powers put in place by the Metropolitan Commons Act of 1866. For example, Part 5 conferred on the Council powers for the provision and maintenance of miscellaneous recreational facilities. This new power was put into practice immediately, with the enclosure of a portion of Tooting Graveney Common and the construction of the Sports Ground in 1936.

The Sports Ground was a contentious and divisive addition to the Common. There were some who challenged the legality of the enclosure, citing the provision made in the 1935 Act 'that while a part is not in actual use for field

games the power to preclude anyone from entering that part does not apply'. Clearly, the LCC were prepared to stretch the Act and potentially challenge its limitations. In response, the Streatham Antiquarian and Natural History Society made



*Proposed running track on Tooting Common (1935). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

formal opposition to the scheme and letters of objection to both the LCC and the local press were numerous. One example from G.F. Clucas is typical of the strong feeling expressed:

Assuming that the LCC has a legal right to enclose a common or part of a common, there remains the indubitable fact that the Council holds the ground in trust by virtue of its position, and that the moral duties regarding any trust are stronger than the legal. The moral duty in this case was to protect the common land of the common people and keep it open as it was when it came into their hands (SN, 6 March 1936).

There were some notable supporters of the scheme. An A.M. Salmon of SW17 wrote to *The Star* in February 1936 arguing, 'Tooting Graveney Common throughout the winter months is a morass and during the summer is unfrequented, as there is little to attract anyone. I think the LCC should be complimented on at last putting to a good use this wasted, ugly piece of land'



*Running track, Tooting Common (1966). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

(*The Star*, 15 February 1936). Sports societies and clubs were unsurprisingly supportive, with letters of support being sent from Hercules Ladies Athletic Club in the same month asking when they would be able to book the facility (LMA, LCC/CL/PK/02).

Despite opposition before and after, the scheme was approved and the *SN* reported: 'Ready Go! – Work commenced on Monday on the new sports track which the L.C.C. intend to put on Tooting Graveney Common, a temporary fence being placed round the ground' (*SN*, January 1936). The *Times* and other newspapers published photographs of the fences being erected around the area, and reported that the 'decision of the London County Council has been resented by many people in the neighbourhood who consider that the sports ground will seriously affect the amenities of the Common' (*The Times*, 4 February 1936). The symbolism of erecting a fence on the Common was apparent to many as it was a very direct and visible act of enclosure in direct contravention of the principles of the Metropolitan Commons Act of 1866.

## **Conflict and community: Tooting Commons and the World Wars**

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As with parks, gardens, and commons across the country, Tooting Common was called into service in numerous ways throughout the First and Second World Wars. From food production to rehousing, it served as an essential resource with which to support the local and metropolitan population.

### **World War I**

In July 1915, Tooting Common, along with those of Streatham and Wandsworth, was used as a recruiting station (*SN*, 16 July 1915 and 25 July

1919, p. 5). The 'Patriotic Recruiting Campaign', as it was called, continued in various forms throughout the conflict and many local men volunteered or were conscripted into service. However, not all changes to life on the Common during the Great War were military. In the same year as the recruiting station was situated there, Tooting Common played host to a cricket match umpired by a lady as a consequence of a shortage of men for the purpose (*Birmingham Daily Mail*, 4 May 1915, p. 7). Nevertheless, most changes were more intrusive.

In 1916, allotments were established on the Furzedown Estate to the south of the Common to increase food production in response to the war. A newspaper report from the 1920s suggests that this was the first estate to be adopted for such a purpose (*Tooting and Balham Gazette*, 13 August 1921). The land in this area was south facing, but nevertheless, gardeners would have faced challenges in growing substantial crops. Common land was usually selected for the purpose precisely because it was the least fertile or easy to cultivate due to flooding, uneven terrain, or other topographical inconveniences. Therefore, the land on and around Tooting Common was not especially well suited for the cultivation of food. Nevertheless, the allotments at Furzedown made a contribution at a time of national shortage. The popularity of the allotments resulted in the formation of the Furzedown Cultivation Society who, in 1919, petitioned WMBC for the allotments to be retained. At that time, the Furzedown Cultivation Society argued that 'vegetables were provided for over 2,500 persons', as well as pigsties built by volunteers (Tooting, Balham, Mitcham and Colliers Wood Gazette, 13 August 1921, p. 3). However, the Council rejected their request and the land was given over for housing development in a similar manner as occurred across the London suburbs from Wimbledon to Wembley. Some of the allotment holders were accommodated on the Bell Estate, but not all could be provided for and some lost their access to an allotment.

In 1919 a Peace Gala was held on Tooting Bec Common for children from the surrounding area. Schools provided sports and entertainments and each child received a commemorative medal from Mr Lane-Mitchell, MP.

## **World War II**

In the run-up to the Second World War, the question of land use and amenities on the Common was particularly contentious. A trial of strength between the LCC and local residents had already played out in 1936 with the construction of the sports ground on Tooting Graveney Common. But later in the 1930s, locals saw the perceived threat from the LCC and its new powers in even starker terms. In 1938, the Bressey Report, looking at transport in Greater London, advocated a radical redesign of road infrastructure in the capital, including greater use of tunnels, elevated routes and high-speed arterial and ring roads. The LCC's Parks Committee in January 1939 reported that the Streatham Ratepayers' Association had passed a resolution 'that the Council and Wandsworth Metropolitan Borough Council be asked to offer uncompromising opposition to anything that may reduce the area or affect the character of Tooting or Streatham Commons in the Bressey Report' (LMA, LCC/MIN/8717). Given this mounting concern, it is something of a paradox that the war which started only months later transformed the face of the Common for years to come and, in its own way, just as dramatically as any schemes originating in the LCC or central government might have done. By 1946, the sections of the Common not occupied by allotments, air defences, air raid shelters and prefabs was relatively small. Many of the few remaining 'grassland' areas of the Common were worn away by overuse.

As had occurred in the First World War, one of the first contributions made by the Common towards the war effort was as a site of recruitment and training. In June 1940 Mr C.W.E. Remnant of nearby Aldrington Road launched a



scheme to provide military training and drill to men aged between 18 and 65. Remnant was an architect who had been turned down for active service and in response he devised this scheme and 'paraded Streatham High-road' in his car 'exhibiting a home-made placard announcing the inaugural meeting' (SN, 28 June 1940, p. 1). The men who attended were those who had not been called up, or who would not be as a result of their advanced years, but who might be asked to serve in the future either in the mainstream services or the Home Guard. Although not an official recruitment technique, by conducting their activities on the Common, Remnant's men would have been a highly visible symbol of community participation and mobilisation.

LCC minutes during the war years highlight the pressure on common land, particularly for cultivation as food shortages took a firmer hold and the Battle for the Atlantic reached its grimmest phase up to the spring of 1943. An LCC entry from 27 March 1942 states:

**The food position in the country is serious and it is felt that the Committee, with the facts before them, should decide whether more grassland in the Council's parks and open spaces should be released for allotments. This can be done on an appreciable scale only by the sacrifice of games areas, used for the most part for cricket and football (LMA, LCC/MIN/8717)**

Tennis courts were explicitly exempted from this suggestion, allegedly because they were likely to be drained, and so less useful as allotments. Clapham, Tooting, and Wandsworth Commons were named as examples of the type of open space where such land reallocation could (and perhaps should) take place. Allotments covered large swathes of Tooting Common, but even those lucky enough to be able to supplement their family's diet from their own plot faced challenges. It seems that, when creating this new space for cultivation, little thought had been given to practicalities. Yet another letter referred to in



the LCC Parks Committee minutes (February 1943), this time from a Mr E.A. Armsworth, seems to indicate particular problems for the section of Tooting Graveney Common bounded by The Avenue, Tooting Bec Road and Elmbourne Road. According to the report, there was ‘no existing water main crossing the fields in Tooting Bec Common (Hospital side) upon which his plot is situated to which connection could be made to enable a supply of water to be more readily available to plot holders’ (LMA, LCC/MIN/8717). Transferring water from tanks near the drinking fountain (at the bottom of The Avenue) or from the pond further west on Tooting Bec Road was judged too inconvenient, largely because of the shortage of gates in the fence around the perimeter of the allotments. The entry in the minutes concluded that an ‘additional gate will be fixed in the enclosing fence on the pond side’ and the ‘possibility of placing a storage tank near the Head Keeper’s Lodge, which would benefit the plot holders at this end of the field, will be investigated’. Despite the impact of the ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign during the war, the reduction in available open space and, presumably, greater demand on civilians’ time to tend the growing area of allotments, the Common continued

to play an important leisure role.

Notwithstanding the importance of the Common as a site for recruitment, training, and food production, arguably the greatest impact of the conflict came in the form of enemy bombing. Throughout the Second World War, the Common was divided into five air raid districts: H67, H68, G63, K94, and H75. The

*Air-raid districts around Tooting Common (1939-45). Reproduced courtesy of Wandsworth Heritage Service.*



boundaries were purely for administrative purposes, but they do demonstrate the ongoing perception of the Common as a series of 'zones', each 'belonging' to a discreet neighbourhood. In contrast to many of London's green spaces, Tooting Common received comparatively few direct hits from high-explosive and incendiary bombs ([www.bombsight.org](http://www.bombsight.org)). Nevertheless, the Air Raid Warden logbook makes reference to a number of strikes and incidents on the Common itself. The presence of two railway lines did make the area as a whole a strategic target for the Luftwaffe. Housing along the Croydon and Balham line south of the Common was particularly badly damaged and high-explosive bombs are recorded as having landed between the railway line and Emmanuel Road in October 1940 and April 1941 (WA, Air Raid Warden logbook, H74). In October 1940 an oil bomb dropped 'near shelter 495 Tooting Bec Common', indicating that there were air raid shelters on the Common itself (WA, Air Raid Warden logbook, H68). There were in fact two shelters serving the northern portion of the Common; one at the corner of Emmanuel Road and Rastell Avenue and the other opposite Cavendish Road.

Providing shelters in parks was usual practice in areas of London where tube stations were distributed more sparsely and large areas of green space were accessible. Other famous examples include Greenwich Park in the southeast. These refuges tended to be trench shelters, which were particularly vulnerable in the event of a direct hit. In the same month that the oil bomb dropped near the Tooting Common shelter, a trench shelter in Kennington Park suffered a direct hit, resulting in the greatest loss of life in Lambeth during the war. It is possible that the lack of extant evidence about the shelters on Tooting Common results from their relative abandonment in the wake of the Kennington tragedy. Nevertheless, the Common continued to fall victim to enemy bombardment.

The Common and its vicinity did not go undefended during the war. Tooting Home Guard and Streatham Home Guard both served on Tooting Common. In August 1940 the Streatham Home Guard participated for the first time in a battalion inspection on the Commons. As one observer later recollected, 'Most of them were in mufti and their claim to martial significance was the fact that they were in military formation and each one had a stout heart and also his civilian respirator' (SN, 13 August 1943, p. 1). Their contribution was not to remain merely symbolic and Tooting Home Guard manned the 187 Z Rocket Anti-Aircraft Battery based on the Common. The task was dangerous and accidents occurred. On 1 October 1941, an unexploded anti-aircraft shell, fired from one of the guns installed on the Common, landed on The Avenue (now Dr Johnson Avenue) (WA, Air Raid Warden logbook, H68). Anti-aircraft guns were just one type of air defence installed on the Common during the war. In addition, a barrage balloon was tethered in the northern portion, and the balloon itself would have been visible from the entire Common. Thus, although not a target for enemy bombers in itself, the Common was transformed visually and physically by the war effort.

The greatest physical damage to the Common occurred in the later months of the conflict. Having lost air supremacy, the Luftwaffe's bombing raids tailed off in 1941. However, on 13 June 1944, a new weapon was unleashed against Britain. The Vergeltungswaffe 1 (V1), dubbed 'doodlebugs' by Londoners, and its successor, the even more deadly Vergeltungswaffe 2 (V2 rocket) were unmanned and more powerful than previous bombs and incendiaries. Both kinds struck the Common in the closing months of the war (Saunders and Woolven, 2005 and Bomb Census Survey, 1940 – 1945, region 5. NA, HO 198). Most did little damage to property. However, on 11 July 1944, a flying bomb struck the allotments located in the H67 district (WA, Air Raid Warden logbook, H67). In order to protect civilians, a number of institutions around the Common were evacuated for the duration of the war.

In 1941 Furzedown College was evacuated to Cardiff and the building given over to the Fire Brigade (Thomas, 1986). The conservatory of Furzedown College was damaged by enemy bombing.

Bombing and evacuation were not the only way in which the Common was affected by the war. At some point between 1942 and 1945, the former lunatic asylum Newlands House, 185 Tooting Bec Road, was converted into a prisoner of war (POW) camp (LCC/CL/GEN/08/C/95 /1032). There is some indication that the initial residents were Italian POWs (Hellen, 1999, figs. 3, 5, and 8). However, the only primary sources encountered relate solely to its use as a German camp, known as Lager 125. Lager 125 was a 'German Working Camp' housing prisoners who had already been processed (Thomas, 2003, p. 30). The house faced directly onto the Common but was a secure facility. The prisoners produced their own newspaper titled *Die Sanduhr Monatsblatt*, which translates as *The Hourglass Monthly Paper* (Imperial War Museum, E. 78946-9). By 1948 the majority of POW camps across Britain had been closed, and Newlands House was among them. The site was subsequently redeveloped with a local authority block of flats.

During his campaign tour ahead of the 1945 General Election, Winston Churchill visited Streatham and travelled through the Common (See also LA,

Streatham Antiquarian Society, photograph 2174). In 1945, Churchill was at the height of his fame and, although he was to lose the forthcoming election to Clement



*Newlands House, 185 Tooting Bec Road that served as the prisoner of war camp, Lager 12 (pictured in 1960). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archive.*



*Winston Churchill campaigning by Tooting Common (1945). Reproduced courtesy of Lambeth Archives.*

Atlee's Labour party, he remained a hero to many Londoners. Locally, the Streatham seat was held by the Conservatives, but the Balham and Tooting seat fell to Labour.

Nationally, voter turnout was nearly 73% and the outcome was to reshape British society and have a

lasting impact on the Common and its vicinity.

### **Post-war: a landscape for a new society**

The impact of the Second World War upon Tooting Common continued long after VE Day. Lager 125 was still in use in 1947, and as late as 1951, the former anti-aircraft gun sites were still to be dismantled. The delay in removing such installations was due, in part, to LCC's claim against the Ministry of Health for a contribution to assist in the substantial costs incurred. As one report explained, 'it is not practicable to start the work because the evidence on which the Council's claim must be judged would therefore be destroyed' (SN, 22 December 1950, p. 4). Such delays were not uncommon in the years immediately following the war when financial pressures on the LCC were compounded by the demand to meet the needs of thousands of 'bombed out' families and returning veterans. Tooting Common played its part here also with 74 temporary homes or 'prefabs' erected on two sites: 32 prefabs were put up alongside Emmanuel Road and 42 were erected alongside The Avenue (now Dr Johnson Avenue).

WBC minutes described each home as consisting of 'Either two or three bedrooms, a living room, kitchen and WC. Baths are available in a proportion of the bungalows, and cookers and sink water heaters will be installed' (WBC<sup>15</sup>

Minutes, September 1946). When this borough council entry describes the first group of prefabs as a 'huttid camp', the emphasis on their temporary status could well reflect a much wider sensitivity regarding the likely longevity of these structures, both on and off the Common. Pressure on housing in London had been growing ever since the Blitz, spanning the end of 1940 and beginning of 1941, but compounded by the V-weapons campaign, which started in June 1944. In October 1944, the Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act passed into law, facilitating the acquisition of land for the construction of prefabs. But in June 1945, alterations to the Act were added which turned the focus from cleared bombsites to parks and open spaces. In the meantime, it appears that London borough councils had been lobbying ministers (and especially the Minister of Health) to legislate for this change. As recently as 1936, the Housing Act had stipulated that parks and open spaces could be appropriated for housing only through the lengthy procedure of obtaining a Provisional Order. In late 1944, the LCC were still arguing that it was 'undesirable' for parkland to be used for temporary accommodation 'unless there is no alternative' (WBC Minutes, October 1944).

The new Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act laid down apparently strict time limits on the erection and longevity of temporary housing. Authorisation

for temporary structures would only be given within the first two years from the Act coming into law.

Moreover, the Act stated that such authorisation could not be for more than 10 years. In fact, prefabs all over London and beyond stayed in



*A rare glimpse of the prefabs alongside The Avenue (c.1955). Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, (City of London).*

existence for much longer than 10 years, and Tooting Common was no exception.

Not all families were so lucky and some made a less conventional home on the Common. In 1946, two families were reported to have taken up residence as squatters in disused huts. The Thomas family and the Hill family had both moved into the huts following the men's demobilisation (LMA, LCC/CL/PK/02/090). Both families claimed that the Council could do nothing for them at that time and so they were forced to find some accommodation (SN, 30 August 1946, 1). Four years later, in 1950, the local newspapers reported that families were still living in the disused gun site huts despite promises by the LCC to rehouse them (SN, 10 March 1950, p. 5). Their actions suggest that despite the large number of prefabs introduced to the Common, there were still not enough to provide for every returning veteran. The huts were finally demolished later in 1950.

Despite the practical pressures on the LCC, local charities, and residents in the late 1940s, steps were taken to improve the general morale of the nation and this extended to the Common. By 1947 a new bandstand had been erected between the prefabs and the tennis courts. Although temporary, the facility was a significant gesture in the spirit of post-war celebration and reward for a population who had endured six years of war.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Tooting Common suffered from the same budgetary pressures and challenges to local government as all other urban green spaces. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the Common continued to be valued and used by local people. However, it also acquired a reputation as a site for prostitution, drug use, and crime. The introduction of compulsory competitive tendering in the 1980s created additional pressure on many parks departments and the budget for maintaining the Common fell as

they did for all parks across the country. Today, Tooting Common is a valued and historic greenspace that stands as testament to the successive generations who have lived alongside it, visited it, and profited from its raw materials as well as its beauty. The overall strategy for Tooting Common, as outlined in the Tooting Common Management and Maintenance Plan (2015), is to:

Retain, enhance and de-urbanise the Common to conserve the essential character of the Common. Restore the historic and natural heritage of the Common whilst integrating recreation and landscape conservation. Restore biodiversity and habitats, heritage features, improving access and the visitor experience. Increase the levels of awareness, learning and engagement reconnecting people with the heritage of the Common so they understand its special qualities and character as a Common as opposed to a park.



# Tooting Common Features Map

## Facilities and features

- 1 Acid Grassland
- 2 Amphibian Pools
- 3 Bird Sanctuary
- 4 Café
- 5 Car Park
- 6 Changing Rooms
- 7 Childrens Centre and Natural Playspace
- 8 Children's Playground
- 9 Contractors Yard
- 10 Contractors Depot
- 11 Cycle Path
- 12 Drinking Fountain
- 13 Events Site
- 14 Fossil Tree
- 15 Lake
- 16 Running Routes (1km)
- 16 Running Routes (3km)
- 16 Running Routes (5km)
- 17 Sports Pitches
- 18 Tennis Courts
- 19 Tooting Bec Athletics Track & Gym
- 20 Tooting Bec Lido
- 21 Woodfield Pavilion
- 22 Woodfield Recreation Ground



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[www.tootinghistory.org.uk](http://www.tootinghistory.org.uk)

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# The Common Story

## A History of Tooting Common

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