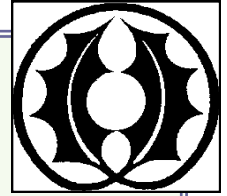




The John Innes Society Newsletter

Issue No 301

January 2024



FOR CONSERVATION IN THE JOHN INNES ESTATE AT MERTON

Registered charity 803759

johninnessociety.org.uk

BIRD BOX TEAM IN ACTION

The Bird Box Team was in action in the John Innes Park, Glebe Fields and the Churchyard in late November 2023. The annual task is to clear the various bird boxes of old nests and debris to make them ready for the Spring nest building season in 2024. The freshened up boxes can also be used by many birds to roost in during extremely cold nights and days.



The boxes had a very successful season. We had 10 out of 12 boxes that had nests in them and possibly therefore used to raise chicks. There were only 2 boxes that had not been used. Even the woodpecker box in the Glebe Field had feathers in it that were red, black and white. So it is highly likely that the Greater Spotted Woodpecker had used the box.

In the Churchyard a Nuthatch had used one of the boxes. We know this because if the entrance hole is too big, the Nuthatch will plaster it up with mud until it is a suitable size. Also a squirrel had taken residence in the Owl Box in the Churchyard.

So a very successful year for the local birds. This also encourages us to continue making the effort to clean the bird boxes out each year

If you would be interested in helping our local birds in any way, please contact Viv Tuley.

Email: vivien.tuley@btinternet.com

T: 020 8540 0403

The Birdbox team

Simon & Viv Tuley, John Harding, Michel Julien, Davinia Miln (Photographer) and Lucy

JOIN US FOR ANOTHER SPLENDID SPRING PLANT SALE!

The date for your diaries is **Saturday, 11 May** for the annual **Spring Plant Sale** at 5A Sheridan Road.

It's the wide variety of interesting plants members contribute which makes this event such an important fundraiser for the Society. So please think about plants which will generate cuttings for propagation or benefit from dividing so that you can donate them. If you are planting seeds or ordering and growing on plug plants, please plant a few extra and bring them along.

We have great success selling unusual varieties of

vegetables and herbs which are difficult to buy in garden centres.

Please label donations so buyers know what they are getting.

We'll also be selling annual bedding plants and some herbaceous plants bought in at wholesale prices, so make sure you check our stock before buying from expensive garden centres.

Closer to the day Ingrid will be requesting volunteers to help on the day and bake cakes etc If you have any questions she can be contacted on ingrid@holtz.co.uk.

Subscriptions for 2024 are now due

Membership subscriptions are due for renewal on 1 January 2024 unless you have previously bought a three-year subscription which includes 2024. Rates are:

	ONE YEAR	THREE YEARS
SINGLE PENSIONER	£ 6	£15
ALL ADULTS AT ONE ADDRESS	£15	£40
LIFE MEMBERSHIP AT £250	—	—

You can pay by credit/debit card via PayPal (you do not need a PayPal account) or use your PayPal account if you have one at www.johninnessociety.org.uk/options2024. Alternatively complete the form enclosed with this newsletter, scan it and email to memsec@johninnessociety.org.uk or post it to the Membership Secretary and make a bank transfer to Sort Code 20-96-89, Account Number 43851281 and use the first part of your address

for the reference number (e.g. 21 Poplar). Or, to pay by cash or cheque (payable to The John Innes Society), send it with this completed form to: Ann Redfearn, Membership Secretary, The John Innes Society, 21 Poplar Road, SW19 3JR.

Please help by paying promptly and save us having to chase.

Ann Redfearn

Are we SO different now? (Discuss!)

The London Evening Standard of July 15th 1987 published this wonderful article about Merton Park entitled "The Innes Crowd". With apologies to long-term residents who have no doubt squirrelled copies of this away, I thought that a few extracts might amuse members who have moved in since then.

It kicks off with "*In other parts of London*

they might swap wives. In Merton Park they just swap plants". Well, no change there as far as the plants are concerned but that's as much as we need to know. The Society gets a mention ... "*Merton Park people are addicted to the memory of John Innes and none more so than the John Innes Conservation Society (known, I'm told, as the Merton Park Mafia)*".

(Continued on page 3)

SMILE PLEASE!

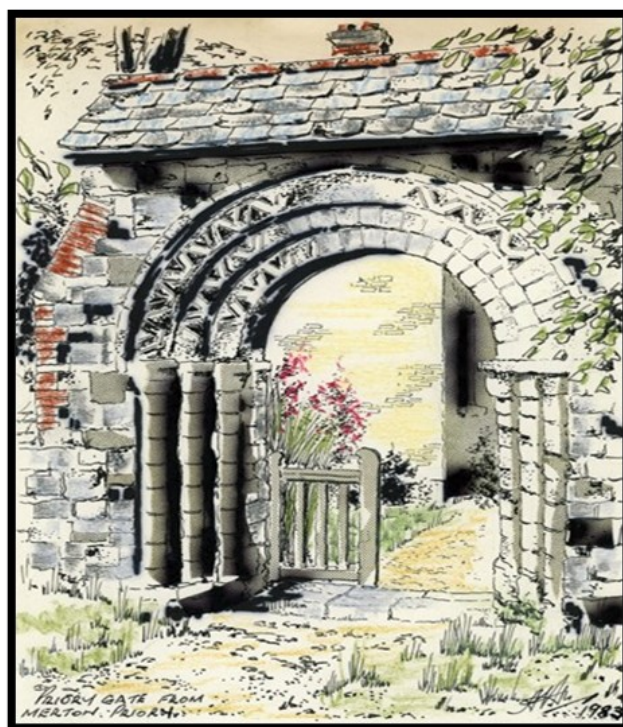


Four hardworking gardeners setting out bedding plants in the John Innes Park

JOHN INNES SOCIETY HERITAGE WALK

Do you know whereabouts this arch is in Merton Park? Would you like to know where in Merton Park the quote ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge’ appears or about the origins of some of the cottages in the bottom part of Church Lane? You need the new Heritage Walk booklet. The John Innes Society has produced a guide for a walk around Merton Park, starting and finishing at the Coach House. After a short introduction to the history and development of the ‘garden suburb’, the walk pinpoints places of interest which are noted on the accompanying map. You can discover the influence of John Innes and the architects Henry Quartermain and John Brocklesby on the charm of the area and the links with Admiral Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton.

The walk takes one and a half to two hours and can be shortened as necessary. The



booklet costs £2.00 and copies are available from Alison Cousins at

alisoncousins@googlemail.com

Ann Redfearn

Are we SO different now? (continued)

The John Innes “obsession” with holly, according to the author, is fiercely protected and she relates the saga of a family who pulled out their holly hedge and replaced it with a Spanish-style wall. They were sent to Coventry and moved away soon after. The Society’s antipathy to **“a vista of garage doors”** reflected its planning concerns. For example, **“when a garage MUST go up it goes up with a tile-hung pitched roof or it doesn’t go up at all”**. Community spirit is noted and **“Merton Park women are the Miss Marples of this world. They don’t walk through life – they stride”**. The author felt that there was **“a high density of purposeful professional women ..they work in publishing, science, education, broadcasting and journalism. Messenger**

boys with Jiffy bags full of books to review hum around these roads.” Residents are also seen as a bit frumpy – making few concessions to trendy fashion. **“They prefer something passed down the family, sofas that sink in the middle and objets d’art picked up by an aunt on her lecture tour of Turkey”**. When Ronnie Wood of the Stones lived in the area the author suggests that his fans would never dream of looking here. While shops were buzzing with crowds and doubling their profits during Wimbledon fortnight, **“in Merton Park they just go on planting out and perusing planning applications.”** And why not ??

Alison Cousins

A history of Wimbledon Chase Conservation Area

A critically minded resident of Merton Park noted, in a letter to the local paper, that his neighbourhood had fast become overbuilt. By the time of that letter in 1909, scores of houses had indeed gone up in once rural Merton; and of these, some of the most recent were on the Polytechnic Estate, a speculative development which comprised Chatsworth, Richmond and Quintin Avenues and which is now known as the Wimbledon Chase Conservation Area. The area is remarkable for its fine architecture and its unusual history.

From Saxon times to the Georgians, the land in this area was open countryside with a handful of small buildings rising up and disappearing through the successive ages. Much of it was

later consolidated as Merton Hall Farm. In the 1880's, 27 acres of that farm were acquired for the use of Regent Street Polytechnic. The "Poly" was then a household name, and renowned for its work as a charity and youth organisation. It offered its members, who were typically young men working in industrial trades, with an exceptional range of classes, training, social meetings and athletic clubs. The fields of Merton Hall Farm were repurposed into playing grounds, which the sports teams affiliated to the Poly used weekly for their



Photo credit: Angela Burton

matches. The success of the organisation was due to its founder, Quintin Hogg. Hogg, whose fortune came from the sugar trade, had devoted his life to improving the prospects of the young in London. In Covent Garden, where child poverty was rife, he began by opening a small school; that school spurred him into founding a young man's institute; and that institute expanded into one so multifaceted and popular that Hogg was impelled into buying the extensive Polytechnic building in Regent Street to host

the many facilities which served its fifteen thousand members. The playing grounds at Merton Hall Farm, acquired by Hogg, were of important use for this institution.

By 1901 the sports clubs were moving elsewhere, and Hogg sold his land

in Merton. The buyer was the Polytechnic Estate Company. It was a newcomer to property development. And whilst its name referred to that famous Regent Street charity, the company was otherwise unrelated to it and working solely for profit. The seven shareholders who owned this enterprise didn't seem the kind for risky speculation. Ernest Morgan worked in photography; Leonard Hickley in law; Harry Hammond was retired from drapery; William Morgan from manufacturing.

A history - Wimbledon Chase Conservation Area (continued)

No one apparently came from the housing trade. But they embarked on their scheme with ambition and boldness. Three avenues, which each started from Kingston Road, were laid out towards Wimbledon Chase. Garden plots were marked out on those avenues and houses built. To provide the estate with power and light, the company built its own electricity station. That reliable source would have been useful to J.H. Martin, a pioneering filmmaker who set up his studio at 2-4 Quinton Avenue.

Martin used local sites and local people to make his highly regarded comedies and dramatic shorts. His commercial premises were in strange contrast to the rows of elegant houses on the estate. Transportation in the area was also provided. In 1904 the company established a private bus service running just for its tenants. Commuters caught the buses going from the estate to Wimbledon Station

and back again on weekdays, while more leisurely passengers took the ones running on Saturdays. These vehicles were themselves something of an innovation. An old car was stripped down to the chassis, onto which was grafted a new bodywork capable of seating half a dozen passengers and a driver. One of these repurposed

machines was parked on parked on the incline of Hartfield Road when, the brake having released itself, the vehicle rolled away and crashed through a shop window. That aside, the buses got by pretty safely.

The Polytechnic Estate, with its range of attractive properties and modern infrastructure, seemed fit to compete with rivalling developers. But it had one vulnerability. The estate was heavily indebted. The money which it had used to buy land, build houses and pay expenses was largely raised through mortgages secured on its own possessions. For years the estate had been able to repay those loans; but at some point it could pay no more. By 1911 the company was broke. The lenders foreclosed on every bit of land the company possessed; and even that left much outstanding. William Morgan and a few creditors rallied to salvage their business from bankruptcy. But the Polytechnic Estate Company, revived in 1916, had by 1922 sunk back into



Detailing on Richmond Avenue.

Photo credit: Angela Burton

dissolution.

If the estate was a failure financially, it succeeded in leaving an architectural legacy which is rich and distinguished. Quintin Avenue starts at the south with houses notable for their quality masonry and heavy stone arches. Northwards, the semi-detached houses are made with the steep pitched
(continued overleaf)

A history - Wimbledon Chase Conservation Area (continued)

gables, the roundel windows and the attractive use of rendering and tiling which is all reminiscent of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Chatsworth Avenue carries on that theme in its homely properties. Nearly every one has retained its own front garden; and to see a front garden with greenery and flowerbeds in London is a sight as uplifting as it is rare. The very best architecture is to be found at the top of Richmond Avenue, where the houses bear the richest quality of workmanship and design. Numbers 27-29 are good examples. Although practical features, the bargeboards at the top of each house have been ornately carved into "icicle" designs; while the ground floor porch bears its own examples of decorative carpentry. Above the porch is an unusual oriel window, curving outwards in a half-cylinder shape and replete with glass stained with a brilliant array of colours.

Everything combines into an appearance which is immediately pleasing at first glance, but which rewards a more patient look by revealing its subtle decorative touches. The architect cannot be named with certainty. But he probably was Joseph William Start. Start was a capable architect, and he was among the founding shareholders of the company.

Every avenue winds down to meet the pathway which ribbons in a long line from Merton Hall Road to the turning point of Kingston Road. Just beyond the pathway stands a fine row of sycamore, chestnut and

plane trees. These form a natural barrier between Wimbledon Chase school and the avenues. And the oldest trees, which were likely growing in the days when Hogg and his cricket team played on the fields in the summer, have since matured to a lofty height and a thriving state of foliage that, when in full bloom, creates a picturesque backdrop to the landscape of the neighbourhood.



A local roundel window.
Photo credit: Angela Burton

Conservation status was granted to the area in 1990. This designation acts to acknowledge the unique and historic architecture in all three avenues, and to safeguard its built and natural environment.

The area has a long and intriguing history. It was once that rural and unfettered land which was loved, and sometimes lamented, by old Mertonians. Acres were bought up by Quintin

Hogg, who, like his neighbouring landlord John Innes, sought to use his great wealth to benefit the disadvantaged – ideally through their own schemes. And the Polytechnic Estate Company, perhaps inspired by what Innes had gained from his housing development in Merton Park, came tantalisingly close to success in their own property speculation, before losing it all to debtors and lawyers. That company is long gone; but the houses it made nearly all remain today as interesting examples of Edwardian architecture.

Nicholas Burton

HOW WE LIVED

As 2023 drew to a close Chris Abbott handed over the "How We Lived....." mantle to **Gafyn MacMillan**. Chris has been writing the popular feature since 2016, having taken over from the original author Judy Goodman. Chris will now focus on his other historical writings, including his latest book on old Theatres, as well as directing the Parish Players latest play.

Before resuming this popular local historical series, Gafyn looks more generally, and nationally, at how we lived 100 years ago.

1924 started with the sound of Big Ben's chimes being broadcast to the nation for the very first time. A new year's eve tradition we have since grown very used to. However, a century ago, how we lived was very different in many ways. There was no internet, no televisions, no mobile phones, no microwave ovens, not even any selfie-sticks! Telephones and commercial flights were very much in their infancy and not something local people were likely to have experienced by then. Other recent developments included (some) women being permitted to vote, and primary schools being made free for all children.

The first half of the roaring twenties, as the 1920s were called, was a time when recovery from the Spanish Flu pandemic and WWI that preceded it, turned into a period of optimism and ambition. There were huge advances in science and technology, the British economy thrived, and a boom house building phase ensued. More locally, the Northern line underground extension to Morden opened which sparked the rapid development of the southern half of Merton Park.

The most common occupations in Britain at the time were: agricultural labourer, clerk, domestic servant and coal hewer. While the most common baby names were John, Joan, Mary and William. A hundred years ago the average number of children per family continued to fall from its Victorian peak, to around 4 - but still far higher than today.

1924 started with the death of Vladimir Lenin and the first ever Winter Olympics. Later that year Britain elected its first Labour prime minister (R MacDonald). Other key events from the '20s include the discovery of Penicillin, the first publication of the crossword, and setting up Britain's first radio station.

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HAVE YOUR SAY!

Please send your submissions for the next issue of the Newsletter to mail@johninnesociety.org.uk by Wednesday 6 March.

It will be distributed on Saturday 23 March.

SAVE THE DATE!

AGM: Tuesday 16th April at 8pm at
Merton Park Primary School Hall, Church Lane, SW19 3HQ

SPRING PLANT SALE: Saturday 11th May between 10am-12pm
in the garden of 5A Sheridan Road, SW19 3HW

THE JOHN INNES SOCIETY OPEN GARDENS DAY: Sunday 9th June 2024

MUSIC IN THE PARK: With the Merton Concert Band on Sunday 30th June 2024

At the Coach House

Bridge Club: Mondays at 7.30pm

Bridge Classes: Thursdays at 7.30pm

Coffee & Social Mornings: First Friday of the month. 11am - 1pm

Friends of the John Innes Park Gardening Group: Second Friday of the month at
9am by the mulberry tree

The John Innes Society Contacts

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