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Your Own Town in History

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Epsom Parish Church 1807

In the following brief sketch, no attempt has been made to give a complete account of the history of the various parts of the Borough.

To do so would have meant filling all the available space with little more than a list of names, dates and events. Instead, the reader is invited to consider the gradual evolution of Epsom and Ewell as a place to live in, to see how the environment of the people of to-day has been enriched and to some extent shaped by what has gone before, to see the modern landscape in its historic setting.

The Days Before History

Long before written records existed, parts of our Borough were occupied by countless generations of people whose origins went back into ages so remote that it is difficult for us to grasp their significance to-day. Even archaeologists cannot agree on precise dates for the periods they have laid down for our guidance in understanding the life of the remote past, so that, although there is abundant evidence of the existence of these distant ancestors, we must remember that a mere thousand years are neither here nor there when we try to assign a date to a relic of the Middle or Old Stone Ages.

The people who lived here in the Mesolithic period, or Middle Stone Age, were hunters, and they left behind many flint implements of various kinds. They seem to have avoided the

chalky part of the Borough, and most of the discoveries have been made in Ewell Village (at Tayles Hill, Purberry Shot, and in the grounds of the Girls' School in West Street) and along the banks of the Hogsmill; one of the most important 'finds' was in Nonsuch Park, where a tranchet axe was discovered in 1938. Although this axe was made about 8,000 years ago, at about the time when Britain became an island, it could, if it were thonged to its original handle of wood or bone, still perform useful work, peaceful or otherwise.

The semi-nomadic people of the New Stone Age were farmers, and between 4,000 and 2,000 B.C. they made significant advances towards civilisation. They used roughly made pottery, and invented their own kind of immersion heaters, consisting of pebbles heated in the fire and plunged into the pot to speed boiling. Their flint implements were more carefully finished, to the extent of grinding off the flake-marks. There were large settlements of these Neolithic people at Banstead and Walton, but comparatively few remains apart from 'pot-boilers' have been found in the Borough. It is thought, however, that they have left their mark on the modern landscape, and that the track across Priest Hill Farm, part of which was, until about 160 years ago, the main road to Reigate, was used by the people of Neolithic Banstead when they came to the springs in Ewell. This track can still be seen leaving Ewell By-Pass opposite Staneway House ; on the Ewell side of the roundabout it becomes Cheam Road and then High Street.

Successive waves of invaders from about 2,000 B.C. brought with them the knowledge of the use of metal, although stone implements continued to be used; there is evidence of an extensive flint industry during the Bronze Age at Purberry Shot in Ewell. Metal revolutionised every aspect of the life of these farmers; among other things, they learnt the art of spinning and weaving.

In terms of archaeology, the Iron Age lasted from about the year 750 B.C. to the Roman occupation; but in a practical sense it is still with us, for iron is as all-pervasive in its usefulness to modern man as it was to the ancient Briton. With it, he was able to make tools of all kinds, for the manufacture of an increasing number of useful and ornamental articles. The ancient settlements at Purberry Shot and Tayles Hill were still in use during this period, and remains have also been found at two places in Nonsuch Park. These people, subdued by the Romans in the years following A.D.43, were by no means savages. They had a gold coinage from about 150 B.C., and traded with the continent; they made pottery on a potter's wheel, and farmed their arable land on the "strip" system which survived in Epsom and Ewell until the nineteenth century.

Stane Street and the Roman Occupation

Not long after the Romans came to conquer and to settle, a road from Chichester to London Bridge, Stane Street, was made. About the year A.D. 60, we can visualise slave-labourers, under military direction, driving the straight line of the road across the Borough, cutting first the two marking ditches and then filling in the space between with materials from the adjoining countryside to form a durable metalling which survives, just below the surface of the ground, to this day. Entering our boundaries near the junction of Headley Road and Chalk Pit Road, they cut through Woodcote Park and Durdans, across Church Street at Pitt Place, to Windmill End. There they changed direction slightly, passing the junction of Mongers Lane and Reigate Road, and on to the old church Tower in Ewell. In the new graveyard, another change of direction took them across Ewell By-Pass between the "Organ" roundabout and Beaufort way, and into Nonsuch Park opposite Briarwood Road. In the Park, the road continued on the line of the plantation which runs alongside the present London Road, until it

passed beyond the Borough boundary. Much of the road has been excavated at various times, but no part of it forms the foundation of any of our modern roads. A large part of it has been covered by building development, and many of those who sit and read this page in 1958 will be doing so on or near this important highway, which was built nineteen centuries ago and was used for a thousand years.

Evidence of Roman occupation has been found over a very extensive area of the Borough. The discoveries are too numerous to describe in detail, but they include pottery, coinage, a well, ornaments, tools and bricks. It has been suggested that Ewell, which was already a British settlement before the Romans came, may well have been developed by them as one of the "mutationes," or places of rest and refreshment for travellers and horses, which were established at intervals along the Roman roads. It seems probable that the old village of Epsom, centred upon St. Martin's Church, owed its position to the road; and it is interesting to note that the parish churches of both Epsom and Ewell were built on the very edge of Stane Street.

Mediaeval Times

The evacuation of the Romans between A.D. 410 and 430 was followed by invasion, plunder, destruction, slaughter and finally settlement by the Angles and Saxons. The outward manifestations of Roman civilisation were destroyed or allowed to decay, and what used to be called the Dark Ages began. Yet even in these barbarous times, lights were kindled whose radiance shines upon us to-day. The Church, fostering education and the peaceful solution of strife, survived in parts of our islands, and received a new impetus from the coming of St. Augustine in A.D. 597; government was by discussion, in township and kingdom, even though military strength was a major deciding factor and a man's rank was based on the amount his murderer would have to pay his overlord; even the shapes of the letters of our books and newspapers were settled during this troubled period. In Epsom, Ewell and Cuddington our Anglo-Saxon predecessors played their part in the gradual evolution of a nation. In A.D. 675 we have our first written evidence that all three were by then settled communities of some size, for in that year Frithwald, sub-King of Surrey, and Bishop Erkenwald gave to the recently-founded Abbey of Chertsey 20 dwellings at Ebesham and 30 at Euuelle with Cotintone. The deed recording the gift is known to us only through a copy in a 13th-century cartulary, and may well be very different from the original; for the religious houses were an easy prey for the Viking and Danish invaders, and each time they began to build anew among the smoking ruins of their cloisters, one of their first tasks would be to write from memory fresh copies of the deeds which provided their income. Frithwald's gift was confirmed by Aethelstan in 933, when Cuddington was spelt Cudintone. In 967 a deed of King Eadgar confirmed the Abbey in its possession of the 20 dwellings at Ebesham, but made no mention of Ewell or Cuddington.

Apart from these few written records, the six hundred years of the Anglo-Saxon period left little direct evidence for the present-day historian. A cemetery at Ewell House was used, both for burials and cremation, between A.D. 500 and 650. Here too have been found pottery, urns, rings, a spearhead, a knife, brooches and other remains. But otherwise we can only tell by inference that the three main parts of the Borough were thriving village communities well before the Norman Conquest, for the Domesday Survey of 1086 describes the manors not only as they were in that year, but as they had been in the time of Edward the Confessor.

After the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror rode on London with a part of his army, but did not attempt to take the city as it was too well defended. He came down Stane Street,

and his soldiers may well have watered their horses at the springs in Ewell; he linked up with his main forces near Dorking. The subjugation of the country took many years, and brought untold misery except to the collaborators. Freemen were driven to sell themselves into serfdom in order to ensure at least a meagre living for themselves and their families. The main record of the early part of this period was the Domesday Survey, which was not a geographical survey but a description and evaluation of the various manors for taxation purposes. The manors of Evesham, Etwelle and Codintone are described. Two churches are mentioned in Epsom, but none in Ewell or Cuddington; which probably means that although there were churches there, they were not assessed for taxation. Epsom had two mills, Cuddington one and Ewell two; these two were on the Hogsmill River, where the Upper and Lower Mills stand to-day.



Ewell Parish Church

The Rule of the Manors

For several centuries, the daily lives of the people of Epsom, Ewell and Cuddington were ruled by the manorial system, under which they had to earn the right to cultivate their land, by serving on the home farm of the lord of the manor. When the Normans came, they grafted on a complex system of military service from tenant to lord and from lord to overlord in a hierarchy which had the king as its head. The labour services which were customary before the year 1300 are described in a Customal of the manor of Ewell. This document forms part of the Register of Ewell, compiled in 1408, of which the Corporation has the only known copy, made about 1530.

The history of the descent of the three manors, from the time of Edward the Confessor to the present century, although of absorbing interest, would occupy more than the whole of the space at our disposal. Suffice it to say that Epsom, which belonged to Chertsey Abbey before the Conquest, passed to Sir Nicolas Carew of Beddington on the suppression of the monasteries in 1537-38. After the manor had changed hands many times, the manorial rights came into the possession of the Corporation in 1955. Horton was originally part of the manor of Epsom, but was separated during the reign of Henry VI; it was eventually bought by the London County Council from William S. Trotter. Brettgrave, another part of the manor, went through a stormy period about 1346, for the Abbot's tenant sold the place as if he had owned it, and when the Abbot tried to regain possession of his land, the tenant so persecuted him that he was forced to sign a release of the property. However, matters were eventually put right, and the Abbot was awarded damages. Brettgrave appears to have been merged with Horton in 1652.

Ewell manor, administered from Worth Court or Ewell Court, which was in Meadow Walk opposite West Mead, had three subordinate manors: Fitznells, Batailles and Ruxley or Shaldeford. Fitznells consisted of the property granted to Chertsey Abbey in the year 675. One of our most important early records is a Latin cartulary of Fitznells covering the period 1250-1450, with an English survey of the manor made in 1476. A royal manor at the time of the Conquest, Ewell was granted to Merton Priory in 1156, and it passed into lay hands when the Priory was dissolved. In 1755 it was bought by Edward Northey, whose family held it until recent times, when the remaining land was sold for building.

The manor of Cuddington belonged to Earl Leofwine, brother of the ill-fated Harold, and, after the Conquest, to Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, half-brother of William the Conqueror. Henry VIII bought it from Richard Codrington in 1537, and demolished the village and church to make way for Nonsuch Palace. A small part of the manorial land remained outside Nonsuch Park, and the manorial rights followed the same course as those of the manor of Ewell.

With changing conditions, subservience to the lord of the manor was gradually reduced. Labour services were slowly replaced by money rents, and this process was hastened in Ewell by the Black Death in the late 14th century, which brought about an acute labour shortage with the changing value of money, payments from manorial tenants became in time little more than a token, but they survived into the present century, and there are many properties still standing in the Borough which were originally "copyhold", that is, held from the lord of the manor by a title-deed which was a copy from the court roll of the manor. The daily life of the manors thus provided the background against which were enacted the more stirring events of which we read in our local histories; turning now to a brief account of these highlights and famous names, we should not forget the unnumbered thousands whose lives and work, in field and farmstead, smithy and carpenter's shop, brickyard and mill, have contributed so much to our heritage.

Landmarks in our History

The building of Nonsuch Palace, which began in 1538, was the first event of national importance to bring fame to the Borough. Hitherto, Ewell had been a more important place than the villages of Epsom and Cuddington; now Cuddington was wiped off the map, and Ewell was overshadowed by the blaze of splendour surrounding Nonsuch. During its brief 140 years of life, it sheltered and entertained kings and queens, courtiers and courtesans, statesmen and philosophers. The laying out of the Little and Great Parks dictated the shape of much of the modern road system of the northern part of the Borough. London Road and

Kingston Road were made to replace older roads, closed by Henry's mandate. Newbury Gardens, the footpath linking it with Delta Road, and the Royal Avenue, mark the line of the old road from Ewell to Kingston, via Old Malden and Tolworth, which became a roadway in the Great Park, and Walsingham Gardens marks the boundary of the Park. The ancient highway from Leatherhead to Ewell, Cuddington Village, Cheam and beyond, known as Portway, which survives as Pound Lane, Epsom, Mongers Lane, Ewell, and the road leading to the Cheam Gate of the Park, was blocked by the fence of the Little Park near Castle Avenue. The resultant diversion produced the present Cheam Road, which makes a semi-circular detour from Ewell round the southern boundary of the Little Park, to link up with the line of the old road at the Cheam Gate. The Palace was demolished shortly after 1670, and the materials were sold for building.



*Nonsuch Palace (1538-1675) as seen from the London Road Ewell.
The original spelling of NONE SUCH was adopted as the motto for the
Borough's coat of arms.*

(Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge)

Nonsuch stone and ornaments were used over a wide area, particularly in the new town of Epsom, which was rapidly growing up around the High Street, some distance from the old village. The town owed its sudden popularity to the Wells, whose medicinal properties are said to have been first realised by Henry Wicker in 1618. At first the waters were used externally, but they were being drunk by 1645, and after the Restoration the spa became fashionable, both as a resort and as a place of residence. It was visited by royalty, by both high and very low society, and by the citizens and merchants of London with their families. Dancing, gambling, cockfighting, riding on the Downs and drinking coffee were among the more reputable ways in which the visitors whiled away their time. The spa was in its heyday from 1660 to about 1705, when it was gradually abandoned by the élite in favour of Bath and Tunbridge wells. Recent research indicates that the decline had begun before Livingstone opened his spurious New Well near the present "Albion" in 1706. However, if the more distinguished clientèle had gone elsewhere, Epsom continued to be a popular resort for another 20 years or so, and the place had become firmly established as a salubrious and charming place, reasonably near to London, in which to live. Woodcote House, Woodcote

Park, Durdans, Woodcote Grove and Pitt Place were among the mansions built as a result of the visits of the aristocracy and gentry to take the waters. For the greatly increased traffic from London, which included a daily post (the earliest outside London) in 1684, the old country road from Gibraltar in Ewell to St. Martin's church via Windmill Lane was both inadequate and circuitous, and so the present Epsom Road from Ewell High Street was made. At the same time, New Inn Lane (now South Street) was constructed as the principal approach to the Wells from the town.

For another fifty years, Epsom settled down to a period of comparative quiet. It would never again be an obscure country village sheltering under the Downs, but few of its townspeople in the middle of the 18th century could have forecast that these same Downs would become a centre of interest for the whole world. Horse races had been held on Epsom and Banstead Downs from Tudor times, but the Oaks, instituted in 1779, named after the seat of Lord Derby at Woodmansterne, and the Derby, founded in 1780, rapidly acquired such importance as national events that everyone who could possibly get there, including parliament itself, moved to Epsom for the summer meeting. A new "industry" was born, and the building of racing establishments on the approaches to the Downs contributed much to the charm of the Epsom of today.

Yesterday and To-day

Meanwhile, with the spread of education and trade, scientific knowledge and material wealth were gradually being applied to the business of living. During the 18th century our main roads, which had hitherto been rutted, miry strips of grassland, were dealt with under Turnpike Acts, which provided for the making up of the roads and their subsequent maintenance out of funds collected from road-users in the form of tolls. Eighteen centuries after the coming of the Romans, we learned again, through the work of Macadam, the art of constructing a compact, durable road surface; and we are fortunate to-day in that the Turnpike Trustees were able to take over wide and reasonably straight stretches of the 'King's highway' whose course had been laid down during the natural evolution of the Borough. The main roads were completed by 1834, when the length of London Road between St. Mary's Church, Ewell, and Bourne Hall was built to by-pass Church Street. Since then, the only major change in a road system which owes so much to Nonsuch and the wells has been the construction of Ewell By-Pass in 1931-32.

Another vital factor in the shaping of our present landscape was the radical change in the system of land-tenure brought about by the Inclosure Acts. These brought to an end the system whereby the land cultivated by each family consisted of a number of isolated strips in various places in the common fields. This wasteful system (which had, however, the advantage that both good and bad lands were shared out) had been gradually encroached upon by the enclosure of large fields by a single owner, but in 1801 the cultivated common fields and open commons in Ewell covered 1,200 acres, and it was not until 1869 that the last 414 acres in Epsom were enclosed. The green expanse of Priest Hill, and the open spaces around Epsom College, are our heritage from the vision of the legislators of the early 19th century, and from the destitution which enclosure brought to the smallholder.

The coming of the railway in 1847, when the line from Sutton to Epsom was opened, brought the latest thing in scientific progress through the heart of the quiet countryside which had been the "noble prospect about the House" of Nonsuch. By December of that year no fewer than six trains a day ran from Epsom to London. In 1859 the Wimbledon line was laid, across open fields where kings had hunted, in the Great Park of Nonsuch, and past a Saxon mill and

the home farm of the Saxon Manor. A steady rise in population inevitably followed the opening of the two railways, but it is remarkable that even by 1931, the population of Ewell only numbered 7,798, whereas Epsom in that year had 27,089 inhabitants. The peak period of expansion was the decade prior to the outbreak of the second world war. In the process of development, much of our historic heritage was swept away or obscured; but it is almost a truism that life cannot stand still, that "the old order changeth, yielding place to new." The present generation owes a great debt of gratitude to those who in the past, took steps to safeguard so many relics and sites which remind us of bygone days: so that to-day, he who had eyes to see can, in imagination, walk with king and commoner along historic highways and byways, and feel himself part of a living tradition which stretches back to man's first groping towards the idea of community life.