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The Builder

William Willett was born in 1856; the son of a builder, he went into his father's business. Some of his early work was on the construction of terrace houses in Belsize Park, North London, but the firm began to specialise in high-quality properties and carefully planned developments. They used good materials and built large houses with an ingenious variety of styles of exterior appearance and interior design.

Residential development of the Camden estate at Chislehurst had begun in the 1850s during Nathaniel Strode's ownership. Before that time one of the few features in the area was a pathway, later known as the Kangaroo Walk, leading from the south-east corner of the common, at the top of the Old Hill, westwards through woods and across fields, to a quarry and limekilns in the valley of the Kyd Brook. From a point further down the Old Hill, Lubbock Road was laid out in a westerly direction, with a very few large houses having extensive grounds extending up to the Kangaroo Walk. This western part of the estate sloped steeply down to the embankment that carried the railway along the valley of the Kyd Brook. The lower road, parallel to the railway, was called Lower Camden and this name is also given to the small village at the foot of the Old Hill. The site of Christ Church, in Lubbock Road, was a gift from Strode; the foundation stone was laid in 1871 and the building was consecrated the following year by the Archbishop of Canterbury. From Lower Camden the Kyd Brook flows west and north-west and becomes the Quaggy River, a tributary of the Ravensbourne, one of the lost rivers of London.

The entrance to Camden Park was formerly to the north of the mansion, but Strode made a new south entrance with ornamental wrought iron gates brought from Paris in 1867 and with an avenue of lime trees leading to the house. The gates were taken as scrap metal in the 1939 war. In Strode's time were also built

some very large houses with lodges and extensive grounds in Camden Wood, where Yester Road and Walden Road were made.

In July 1860 the militia volunteers had a "sham fight" in the open ground of Camden Park; in later times this might have been called a "field day". It has been suggested that one reason for choosing this location for a military exercise was to attract attention to the excellent sites it offered for building large houses. The occupation of Camden Place by the imperial family put a further premium value on the district. In 1870 a terrace of shops was built on one side of the main street of the old village of Chislehurst. It was called Royal Parade in honour of the exiles and this also became the name of the street.

Nathaniel Strode returned to Camden Place when the Empress Eugénie left; he died there in 1890 and the property was sold at auction. The mansion and most of the land was bought by William Willett for development.

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The special rights of local residents in respect of Chislehurst Common had been recognised for a long time. In fulfilment of certain charitable bequests, a workhouse was built in the middle of the common at the end of George II's reign, and an adjacent plot of land was enclosed; this had to be specially authorised by an Act of Parliament.

The Lord of the Manor had rights to remove peat and gravel and by 1884 the parishioners had become concerned at the damage and neglect that had occurred. A preservation society promoted a scheme which became the subject of Acts of Parliament in 1886 and 1888, by which a Board of Conservators was to be elected. Among other things, this legislation provided for the West Kent Cricket Club to have continued use of the ground near Camden Park where they had

played since 1822. Later, in 1894, the Conservators of Chislehurst Common successfully negotiated with the Lord of the Manor for the extinguishment of his rights of cutting turf, peat and trees on the common and of taking gravel and sand.

* * * * *

It seems probable that Willett's intention, on becoming owner of the estate, was to build a row of houses along the eastern border of Camden Park, fronting on to what is now Prince Imperial Road. However, between his boundary and the public roadway was a strip of common land. Willett negotiated an agreement with the conservators for access across this strip which ensured the preservation of a good proportion of the trees. At that time most of Chislehurst Common was open heath and the trees at the Camden Park boundary were an important feature of the landscape. What was finally laid out to the north of the mansion was Wilderness Road, a loop of road following the irregular outline of an area of woodland; each end of the new road crossed the narrow strip of common and joined Prince Imperial Road. This development started in 1893 but progress was slow; there was difficulty with drainage and houses were built and occupied gradually over a period of many years.

From a point outside the south gates of the estate Willett laid out Camden Park Road in a westerly direction. Again, his new road crossed the strip of common, forming the multiple junction where Camden Park Road meets the two roads from Bromley and Bickley and three roads from across the common. This is known as Camden Corner, although at one time this spot was called Hangman's Corner as a gibbet stood there, now commemorated by a stone tablet.

At Camden Corner, on a site overlooking the cricket ground, Willett built a fine house for himself, The Cedars, where he lived from 1894 until his death in 1915. The imperial connection had supported a superior style of house-building, and properties in the district commanded premium prices. It had been Willett's intention to build six large houses in Camden Park Road, in succession from The Cedars, having names with the initials C, A, M, D, E, N. It seems, however, that he never got full co-operation from the owners; a study of local directories reveals the following names of the six houses, but they were not all in use at the same time:

Camden Holt
Avonhurst
Mountfield
Derwent House
Elm Bank
Naxos

A number of local residents formed a company to repurchase from Willett the remainder of the park to lay out a golf course. Camden Place became the club house and the opening ceremony was performed in 1894 by Arthur J Balfour, the Member of Parliament for East Manchester, later to become Prime Minister.

* * * * *

William Willett also has claim to fame as a campaigner for daylight saving. Until the middle of the nineteenth century every town used its own local time as determined by the noonday sun crossing the meridian. The development of a countrywide railway network necessitated a uniform system; Greenwich Mean Time was adopted and was given the force of law by an Act of Parliament in 1880. In any case, however, the use of the same standard throughout the year meant that the time of sunrise was very early in summer. During his morning rides on the common in the summer of 1907 Willett is said to have been struck by the thought of the number of daylight hours lost by people who were still in bed. He issued a pamphlet, "The Waste of Daylight", in which he proposed that clocks should be advanced by one hour from the third Sunday in April until the third Sunday in September. 154 hours of useful daylight would thus be gained during these 22 weeks, hours of sleep would more closely correspond to hours of darkness and expenditure on artificial light would be reduced. The matter went before parliament in 1908. It was of course opposed by farmers, but also by the entertainment industry, as it was thought that the public would be reluctant to go to theatres while it was still light. The scheme was not adopted until 1916, a year after Willett's death in Chislehurst. It was renewed annually as a temporary measure until permanent legislation was passed in 1925.

In 1927 part of Petts Wood, to the south-east of Chislehurst, was acquired to be preserved as an open space in memory of William Willett. At a ceremony on May 21st of that year the Lord Lieutenant of London, the Fourth Marquess of Camden, declared the Wood open; he accepted the deeds and handed them to a representative of the National Trust.

In a clearing in Petts Wood is a granite memorial stone with a sundial calibrated in British Summer Time. Some sundials have the inscription "Horas non numero nisi serenas" (I only tell the sunny hours): Willett's monument has the words "Horas non numero nisi aestivas" (I only tell the summer hours).

It might be thought incongruous that one who made a career of constructing houses should be commemorated by open land acquired to prevent further building development. However, this was the land that he rode across on those summer mornings while he formed his ideas on daylight saving and shaped a plan for its implementation.

John Winter-Lotimer
© March 1991

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Morrell Builders Ltd of Bromley

The Morrell brothers came to Bromley from Herne Hill in South London in 1933. Though not among the largest builders in the borough they still built a good number of houses and estates in Petts Wood, Coney Hall, Chelsfield and Orpington. In Kelly's Bromley in 1933 their address was 12 High Street but in 1934 it changed to 60 High Street, I don't know if they moved or if the numbering of the High Street changed.

The Coney Hall estate was built on farm land owned by the Coney Hall Farm in Gates Green Road and also the Hawes Farm land. This land was former land of the Lennard family who lived at Wickham Court, this was sold with their consent in 1933. The land formed an area of 200 acres.

The building of houses on the Coney Hall and Petts Wood estates started in 1933 and by September of that year a few people were in occupation of their new houses. The cost of these new houses, by today's standards, seem giveaway prices. They started at £479 to £895 in Coney Hall and £595 to £895 in Petts Wood, with 10 types of houses to choose from.

In Coney Hall by February 1935, 800 houses were completed and the estate was finished by the end of 1935. The mortgage for the houses again makes strange reading by present repayments. A £479 house repayment at eleven shillings eleven pence (old money) and the £895 house at twenty two shillings four pence a week for a 95% mortgage. These mortgages were an arrangement between the building society and the builders.

As an added incentive to house purchasers there were no road charges or stamp duties and a free removal service up to 25 miles and free rail tickets to view the estates. All Morrell houses were built no closer than eight to an acre of land. Gardens in Coney Hall were 120 feet up to 200 feet in length.

The roads of both estates were concrete surfaced with grass and tree lined pavements. The concrete roads have lasted very well, but in recent years the

council have tarmaced some of the roads on Coney Hall estate, which to me does not seem quite the same.

For Morrells, after a good start to their estates in Bromley, things started to go wrong, with complaints of bad workmanship in the houses. These had to be put right, with small profit margins and contributions to the building societies pool for house purchases; also Morrells provided the Coney Hall estate with a free bus service to Hayes Station, from 7.30am to 10pm. The death of the younger Morrell brother in a road accident did not help the management of the company. It went into liquidation in 1936, which left the house owners with outstanding repairs to cope with themselves.

This led to the Borders case in 1937; they took over the Coney Hall Residents Association and led the revolt against paying the building society payments on mortgages taken out by residents. They took the building society to court, winning the first case but losing the following cases up to the House of Lords. The Borders claimed their house in Kingsway, Coney Hall was falling down about them. This all proved false as the house is still standing today and has been extended. Having taken this into account, some complaints about the houses were justified. This led to a reputation of the Morrell houses being a bad buy, but when one looks at some of the 1960s housing that has been pulled down, the Morrell houses have stood the test of time and until the down-turn in the housing market sold very quickly on the Coney Hall estate.

Very few of the Coney Hall houses still have their original lead light windows. Most have been replaced by sealed double glazed units, which fit into the 1930s houses quite well. Many of the roofs are now being retiled as recent gales have exposed their age, but like the double glazing, fit the houses very well. Quite a lot of extending of the houses has taken place, making 2 bedrooms into 3 and 4 bedrooms and 3 bedrooms into 4 and 5 bedrooms. Most of these extensions fit in quite well, but some do not match the 1930 style.

Some new development has taken place in Coney Hall since World War II, in Harvest Bank, Gates Green Road, Colin Court and Monarch Close off Queensway, but the estate is much the same as it was built, surrounded by West Wickham Common to the east and farm land to the south and west.

I can never make out why Morrells called Petts Wood a garden estate, to me Coney Hall today seems more like a garden estate than Petts Wood, but that may be because I'm an original Coney Haller. I moved here with my parents at the age of five in 1934 and my mother, who died in 1992 aged 91 years, must surely have been the oldest original Coney Haller and that says a lot for the area and Morrell's housing.

Leslie Stevens

Perry Hall Working Men's Club Orpington 1902 - 19

Built for Mr F W Austin, who with his brother were owners of the hall, the foundation stone was laid into position by Mr Austin's six year old son, Lawson Walton Austin, in 1902, the year that the club opened.

The name changed shortly after opening to that of Perry Hall Social Club, which was run by a committee consisting of among others Messrs Austin, Borrowoughs, H W Taylor and J Lunn.

It was a success from the start and was well supported; every week there were either variety acts, singing groups, stage plays or dramas performed. Apart from these, wrestling matches were also held, one in February 1908 between two local men had the following billing: Sid Gauntlet of Bromley, wrestler Jack Harrod of Hayes, to the best of three falls. Boxing also took place there; tournaments of two bouts, the winners boxing each other for the outright winner.

The hall was also hired for dances, plays, social evenings, talks and music. All these activities were going strong until in 1909 the committee decided that the hall would be better used for the latest craze of the day - that of roller skating. So, after a brief closure whilst a maple wood floor was laid, on the 9th December 1909 the hall opened for roller skating at 6d per session. These sessions were three times daily 10am - 1pm, 3pm - 5.30pm and 7pm - 10.30pm. Roller skates could be hired at the hall and season tickets were issued for this popular sport. After one month of opening the hall was closed to enable builders to enlarge the floor space to double the size - reopening date was 14th January 1910.

After two years another craze came along to entertain the people and the committee set about getting the hall ready to meet the new craze - moving pictures. It is said that a management team ran the cinema, though it is also said that Messrs Lawson and Dolomere purchased the hall on 4th August 1911. With the name changed to The Palace and the Orpington building firm of Mr Howard engaged to carry out the alterations, the opening date was set for bank holiday Monday 18th August 1911.

Prices for those far off days were 3d and 6d. There was also a 1/- per seat charge for which you could have your cycle or mailcart (pushchair) stored free whilst you watched the programme. The local papers carried the times and prices, but not the titles of the films, during these early days. There were two shows daily, at 6pm and 8pm, with afternoon showings at 3pm on Thursdays and Saturdays.

Mr Boulton, the headmaster of Chislehurst Road School, arranged with Mr Lawson to show some special films to some of the pupils. These were mainly of the travel and nature type, such as 'Waters of the Nile'.

Mr Lawson continued to run The Palace until he handed it over to the new owner, Mr Spencer May, in 1913. Mr May continued to improve the cinema and during the 1914-18 war he arranged for films to be shown to wounded soldiers in Orpington Hospital. Programmes issued during the war carried a note informing patrons that the cinema had an early warning alarm system in event of air raids. This was formed by a group of plane and airship spotters who would signal by means of flags from distances as far as Poll Hill. This gave reassurance to those troops who were suffering from shell shock after serving in the front-line in France. Though what should happen in the event of such a warning was not given on the programme!

After the 1914-18 war was over The Palace returned to normal and the service continued to improve. In the 1930s, sound was added; gimmicks such as a rock garden built around the front of the stage were introduced, as well as sprays in the building which would waft exotic scent over the audience from time to time.

In 1933, Mr Spencer May, who had also taken over a couple of Orpington builders, decided to open another cinema in the High Street to cater for the growing community. This one was called The Commodore. The old Palace continued, though films were changed twice weekly here. The Palace also had a change of name, this time to The Carlton, but even with this posh name it was still affectionately known as the Bughutch.

Surviving yet another war in 1939-45, The Carlton continued, with two changes of film programme weekly, later adding another on Sunday only. However, during the 1950s audiences slackened and a decision was made to close the Carlton - so in 1959, with the showing of the film *The Admiral Crichton*, The Carlton closed as a cinema. The building was used as a store for spare parts for cars, then as committee rooms for the Liberal Party campaign of 1962. During July of 1964 the old building caught fire and hampered by cars parked on the forecourt, there was little the firemen could do to save the building. All that remained the next day was the burnt-out shell and a lot of memories of the old Bughutch.

The site was soon built on and Bejam Frozen Foods traded there for some years before moving out and Fads Decorators Supply Shop took over.

W Morton