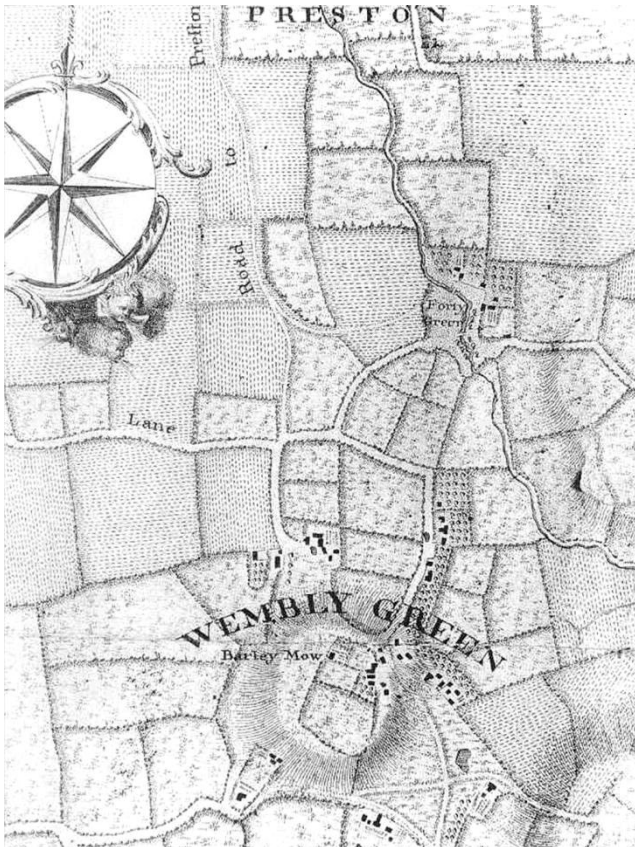


Wembley Park – its story up to 1922.

The first record of the place called Wembley dates from the year 825. Saxon people from northern Germany had occupied this part of England (still known as Middlesex – the land of the Middle Saxons). One family had settled here, and their home was known as “Wemba lea” – Wemba’s clearing in the forest. Over several hundred years, more woodland was cleared, so that by 1500 most of the Wembley area was made up of hedged fields.

It was still much the same nearly 250 years later, when the district appeared on one of a series of maps of the London area drawn and published by John Rocque. The small settlement of “Wembly Green” was to the north of the Harrow Road, and had its own High Street. This 18th century Wembley street still exists, off of Wembley Hill Road, and a footpath leads from it, past a row of narrow cottages, up to the pub on the hill top (originally the “Barley Mow”, and since at least Victorian times “The Green Man”).



The small settlement of “Wembly Green” was to the north of the Harrow Road, and had its own High Street. This 18th century Wembley street still exists, off of Wembley Hill Road, and a footpath leads from it, past a row of narrow cottages, up to the pub on the hill top (originally the “Barley Mow”, and since at least Victorian times “The Green Man”).

Part of a map drawn in 1744 by John Rocque, showing Wembley as it was then.

[Source: Brent Archives]

In 1543 the wealthy local Page family leased much of Wembley (then in the Parish of Harrow) from the Archbishop of Canterbury, just before it was seized by King Henry VIII as part of his dissolution of religious establishments. Two hundred years later the family purchased a large house at Wembley Green called “Wellers” as their main home,

making the fields around it into a private estate. The year 1792 saw Richard Page follow the Georgian fashion of having his mansion improved, and its grounds landscaped.

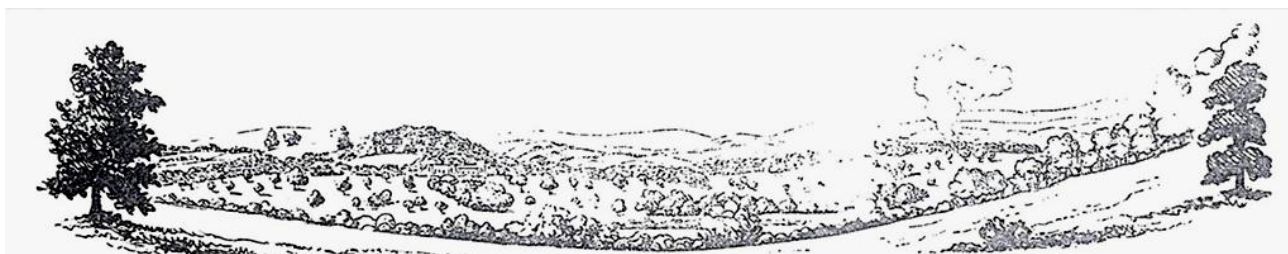
Humphry Repton, a famous landscape gardener, was given the job. In May 1793 he wrote to a friend: *‘On Wednesday I go to Lord Mansfield at Kenwood & on Thursday to a most beautiful spot near Harrow. I wish I could shew it you. It belongs to Mr Page. I have just opened the trenches & am attacking it in full force.’* Repton liked to call the land that he designed around country mansions a “park”, and work on what was soon known as Wembley Park had begun!



Humphry Repton’s Business Card (from the 1780’s).

[Source: Copy held at Brent Archives.]

Repton drew up his plans from a viewpoint at the top of Barn Hill. He proposed introducing cattle to the grass land between the hill and the mansion, as this would look more interesting than empty hay meadows. He removed many of the single trees, and planted well placed clumps of trees. So that Mr Page and his guests could enjoy the view, Repton had a tower built at the top of Barn Hill. You can see the modern view over Wembley Park today, from the same spot close to the pond. He also designed a lodge, like a country cottage, by the entrance gates to the park. His ideas for improving the mansion itself, however, were not carried out, after disagreements between himself and Mr Page.



[Fig. 31. View from the tower at Wembley, in which there is an evident confusion; and the chief circumstance attracting notice, is the smoke of a distant limekiln seen in the horizon.]



[Fig. 32. View from the tower at Wembley, in which it is attempted to show how breadth of light and shade is produced, and that fitter corrected which had been the consequence of too many trees dotted on the lawn. The attention of the spectator is no longer attracted by the smoke of the limekiln, in consequence of introducing objects within the park, by which the view becomes more appropriate and concentrated; and the distance rendered more subordinate in the general composition.]

Repton’s “before” and “after” drawings of his landscape design for Wembley Park.

[Source: Brent Archives – copies from Repton’s 1794 book “Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening”.]

In 1802 Wembley Park was sold to John Gray, a wealthy London merchant from a Quaker family, who improved and extended the main house between 1811 and 1814 at what was then the large cost of £14,000. The estate remained part of a rural area, even after the Euston to Birmingham railway line was built in 1837. This was away from the houses of the small village of Wembley, so that when a station was built in 1844 it was named “Sudbury” (it is now Wembley Central).



the small village of Wembley, so that when a station was built in 1844 it was named “Sudbury” (it is now Wembley Central).

< Gray’s Wembley Park mansion, in about 1880.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

The Lodge at the entrance to the Park’s drive, photographed about 1900 >

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]



During the 1870's another railway company, the Metropolitan Railway, wanted to build a line from Baker Street to Harrow. The then owner of the mansion (which local people called the "White House"), the Reverend John Gray, had to sell them nearly 20 hectares of land across his estate for it. The line opened in 1880, with no station at Wembley Park, but this was just the start of many changes to come. From his mansion, John Gray would have seen the trains steaming by on their way between Willesden Green and Harrow. He died in 1887 without an heir, and two years later Wembley Park was put up for sale. The estate of 114 hectares was bought for £33,000 by Sir Edward Watkin, the Chairman of the Metropolitan Railway Company.

Watkin had seen the newly-built Eiffel Tower in Paris. He wanted to build a bigger one, and the estate's hill top seemed the ideal place. In May 1894 Wembley Park station was opened to bring people from London and beyond to his new pleasure grounds. Although the tower was not ready, the park offered a variety of sports facilities, refreshment rooms, a music hall and bandstands in gardens with a boating lake. In 1895 it attracted 120,000 visitors.



Poster for the Wembley Park pleasure grounds, from the late 1890's, showing the Wembley Tower as it was intended to be when completed.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

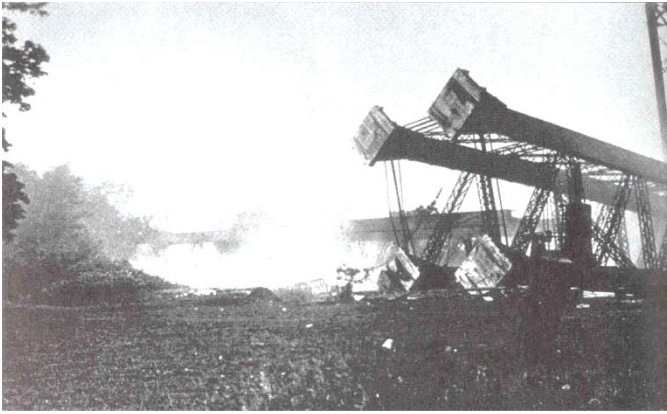
May 1896 saw the first stage of the tower open. Visitors could take a lift to a viewing platform 47 metres above the hill top. The final height of the tower was meant to be around 350 metres, but work stopped after its foundations started sinking.

Wembley Park and Tower, around 1900.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]



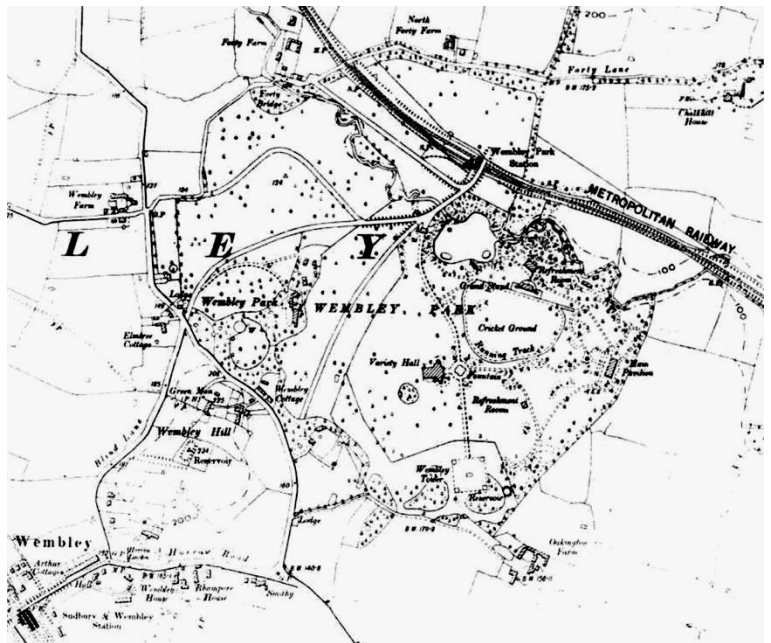
Even before Sir Edward died in 1901 there was no money left to carry on with the project, which was already being called “Watkin’s Folly”. Demolition of the tower began in 1904, and ended with the foundations being blown up with dynamite in September 1907.



Part of the demolished Wembley Tower, photographed in 1907.

[Source: Geoffrey Hewlett’s book “Images of London – Wembley”.]

Not all of the land bought in 1889 was used for the pleasure grounds. As the 1895 map shows, the Metropolitan Railway’s property company had begun to build roads spreading out to the south-west of its new Wembley Park Station. The company sold off plots of land along these roads for house building. By the early 1900’s a number of large family homes had been built for people who wanted to live near the countryside, while being able to travel easily to work in Central London or the City. As this side of the business became more profitable, Wembley Park mansion was demolished in 1908 to make way for another new road, called Manor Drive.



Map showing Wembley Park as it was in 1895.

Reproduced from the 1895 edition of the 6 inch to one mile Ordnance Survey map of Middlesex, Sheet XI.

[Source: Brent Archives]

Although no longer as popular, Wembley Park remained open, and part of the pleasure grounds was turned into a golf course. The park finally closed during the First World War, and soon after this ended plans were made for a large exhibition. The vacant Wembley Park was chosen as its site in 1921 (see “The British Empire Exhibition, 1924/25”), and by January



1922 work was underway on a national stadium which would form part of it (see “Wembley Stadium – Old and New”).

© Philip Grant, 2009 and 2012.

The shape of the Empire Stadium (Wembley Stadium) emerges in 1922, surrounding the four craters left by the demolished Wembley Tower.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]