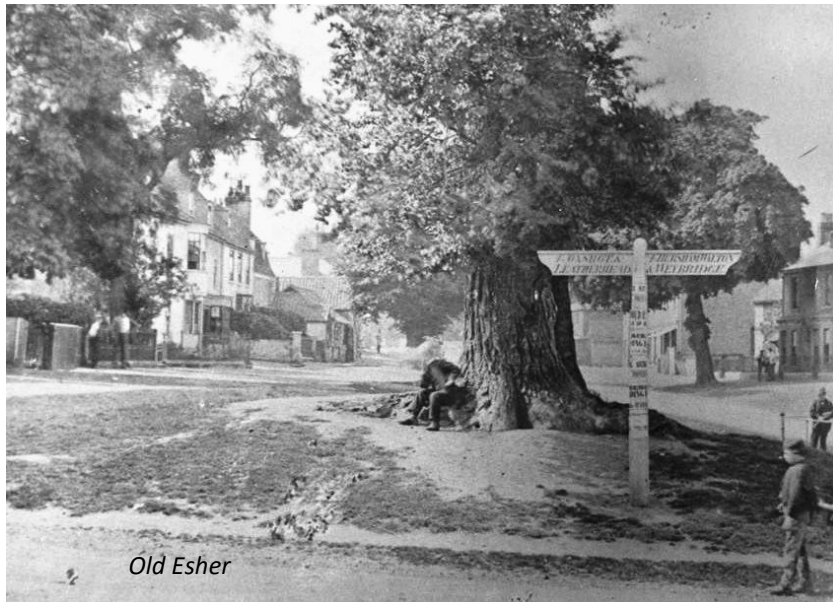


HOW ESHER CHANGED BETWEEN 1850 - 1918

by Pamela Reading



Esher in the nineteenth century was not perhaps one's idea of a typical rural village. There was some farming interest in the area but very few farm workers or agricultural labourers lived in the High Street or in the cottages around the Green. Whatever had gone before, by 1850 Esher was still a convenient staging post on the main road from London to Portsmouth, 14 miles from the capital, comprising about 1400 people most of whose homes were clustered along the Portsmouth Road and the Green. The Ordnance Survey map of 1869/71 shows the linear shape of the village.

It has been said about the county of Surrey that "its historical events are those concerning people or armies traversing its roads with the aim of reaching something beyond the county, not moving upon something in the county itself". The residents of Esher in 1850, had they been acquainted with this thought, would have related to the concept of people travelling through their village, but perhaps would have taken offence at any attempt to belittle its place in history given that Esher was probably next to Windsor in the number of royal residents and visitors; there was a tradition of royalty, the mansion and estate at Claremont having been bought as a home for Princess Charlotte, the heir to the British throne, in 1816. Although she died only a year later the house remained a royal residence until 1914 and Charlotte's successor as heir to the throne, Victoria, spent much time there both as Princess and Queen.

In the year before Victoria succeeded to the throne, Mary Howitt, a local writer wrote "Esher was only a village. You could walk for hours among pine woods and heaths without meeting a soul: you might be 100 miles from a city. It was all divided into great estates. The landowners, many of them rich London merchants, inhabited the enormous mansions hidden away in wooded parks". The landowners were not all rich merchants. Mr Martineau of Littleworth was a barrister and Justice of the Peace, Mr J.P. Currie of Sandown House was Governor of the Bank of England and John Spicer had inherited Esher Place from his father. Of John Spicer, senior, Ian Stevens writes "John Spicer has set the pattern when he bought Esher Place, for he was by Claremont's standards a 'commoner' being a stock broker from George Street, Hanover Square, who made his fortune after Waterloo and invested it in land".

Esher's role as a staging post was starting to become redundant as the London and Southampton Railway line station (known as 'Esher and Claremont' on maps up until 1933) had opened in 1837 about a mile from The Bear, the posting inn in the centre of the village. By 1850 Esher's position relative to the capital was thus closer than before and together with the cachet of royal residents and so many men of substance the ordinary people of the village must have had a confident air about them. The artisans, tradesmen and craftsmen and women who lived in more humble dwellings in the High Street and around the Green, such as the organist, the blacksmith, the dressmaker, the schoolmaster and the carpenter who lived in cottages on Cato's Hill facing the Green in 1851 were possibly no less susceptible to current fashions and ideas than their successors might be today, but in 1850 this was because of the style of living and entertainment in the numerous great houses which they could observe if not emulate. Even the farm workers and agricultural labourers who lived more on the outskirts of the village may have benefited from the fact that local farmers had to pay slightly higher rates of pay because of the effect of London on prices and wages. It is difficult to know if the gypsies on Arbrook Common derived any benefit from their wealthy neighbours.

For the rest of the century Claremont was at the apex of the Esher social structure and this was reflected in the patronage and donations to the village. Even temporary residents usually royal or

ex-royal, followed the custom of contributing to village life. In 1850 the occupants were the former King Louis-Phillipe of France and his Queen, refugees from the aggressive reformism of 1848. Louis-Phillipe died in August 1850 but his widow continued to live at Claremont until her death in 1866. Also housed in Esher at this time was the couple's sixteen year old grandson, the Comte de Paris, staying at Moore Place with his mother by invitation of Lady Byron, widow of the poet.

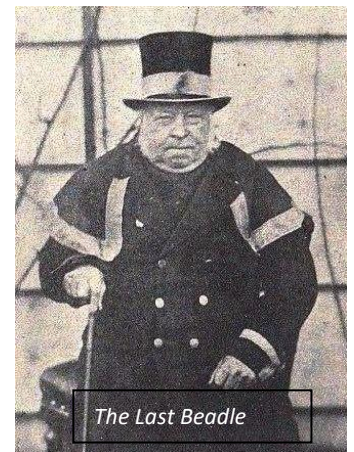
In 1864 when he married Princess Isabella of Spain he spent part of his honeymoon at Claremont and to commemorate the occasion presented the village with a water pump, sited in Esher High Street. This pump was an essential source of water supply in the days before the installation of a public mains water supply. By 1874 the original public water pump on Cato's Hill near the Green had been cut off and in 1876 the water from the Comte de Paris' pump was found to be unsafe. Fortunately another royal benefactor was at hand; a granite drinking fountain was presented to the village the following year to commemorate the fortieth year of Queen Victoria's reign and is still there today. The safe water supply which it provided was, however, funded by local subscribers amongst whom were Sir Wilfred Brett and Mr. James Few, Mr Currie (the Bank of England Governor from Sandown House), who by coincidence was also the Superintendent of the volunteer fire brigade, and Mr Eastwood of Esher Lodge.

After the death of the former Queen of France, Claremont was lived in by the youngest son of Victoria, the Duke of Albany, and continued to be so by his widow and family until 1914. Queen Victoria often visited the Duchess of Albany at Claremont and the old bridge across the River Mole at the foot of Lammas Hill (now Lammas Lane) which was improved in order to allow a safer passage for the Queen's carriage was known locally as Albany Bridge but no doubt it was a generally appreciated improvement. The village benefited in other ways from the royal presence and interest. In 1879 a school and a temporary church were built at West End on the southern edge of the community. Both of these were sited on a piece of Crown land made available by permission of Queen Victoria. The school was funded by Mrs Bailey of Stoneyhills in memory of her husband and the 'iron church', as it was known locally, by a loan from Robert Few of Wolsey Grange. As there was already a substantial church facing Esher Green and opposite it a school, it may be wondered why these additional buildings were promoted. The reason was to save the elderly and infirm churchgoers of West End and those infants, who likewise were not very strong, from the mile walk into the village proper. Christchurch, on the Green, was built in 1853 to replace the old St George's

Church which was by then considered too small. Amongst the prime movers and subscribers for this new church were Mr. Robert Few of Wolsey Grange, Mr. Spicer of Esher Place and Mr. Eastwood of Wolsey Lodge, not forgetting Prince Leopold. When Mr. Wigram bought Esher Place from Mr. Spicer he donated the church clock in 1868. It is not surprising to find that the National School, also on the Green had first King (formerly Prince) Leopold as a patron and then Queen Victoria, and that Mr. Robert Few was the Treasurer.

This was happening at about the same time of which George Sturt was writing of his village near Farnham. It seems that life for the majority of people in Esher was very different from the somewhat bleak existence of the cottages in the rural community he observed. To quote Mary Howitt again, "poverty in its squalid sense, as we knew it in the manufacturing districts, we have never seen here. People are ignorant and improvident, but the cottagers are seldom without a pig, and they all have a garden, and a right of common upon which they raise large flocks of geese, keep a cow and often a pony. They appear always employed, and whatever they have to sell, as fruit, geese, mushrooms, and such things, they ask a great price for". Admittedly this was written in the late 1830's but unlike many other rural communities Esher was not much affected by the enclosure movement which caused distress for cottagers in other areas.

George Sturt's village may have had what he calls 'villa people' who employed some of the villagers but in the 1870s and 1880s Esher still had a goodly number of what can be called gentry who actively contributed to village life. Mr Few and his wife were "among the gentry present" on a summer day in August 1873 when the pupils of Esher School celebrated their annual feast by being "marshalled by the e in his gorgeous apparel and marched to Esher Lodge where the procession was welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood". The newspaper report also records the presence of Lady Brett. The Beadle was employed to impound stray cattle on the Green and to get rid of vagrants as well as leading any local ceremonial. A photograph of the last Esher Beadle, James Bowler, in his uniform, is in the possession of Elmbridge Museum. He died at the age of 80 in 1930 so he could just have been the Beadle in August 1873.



Later that year when the school cricket team had played the last match of the season, the team with their headmaster "adjourned to Esher Place where a substantial supper was provided for them by Mr. Wigram". Mrs Wigram also played her part as she was the President of the flower arrangers for Christ Church. From contemporary newspaper reports of village activities and from the local organisations and societies listed in Trade Directories of the period one gets the impression of a largely self-motivated community with leisure time, the facilities to enjoy and make use of that time with the support and patronage of the wealthier of their neighbours. The Kelly's Directory of 1887 lists the Esher Lawn Tennis Club (this was instigated by Mr. Martineau of Littleworth), Esher Village Cricket Club (founded in 1863 with Sir Wilford Brett as President), Esher Royal Brass Band, the Cottage Garden Society, a branch of the Primrose League and a Village Hall (it was under the guidance of Mr. Eastwood that the Village Hall Ltd. was launched) for the Societies to meet in when the school room was not available. Although the annual fair had petered out (did it get a bit too rowdy?) there was an annual flower show.

All this involvement of the wealthy people of Esher leads one to consider the possibility that Esher was a 'closed' village at this time. Although the existence of Claremont was dominant, it is not at first sight obvious whether Esher was a closed village at this time or not. Most of the staff at Claremont, judging by the Census returns of 1851 and 1861 were not of local origin, very few properties were provided for workers outside the estate and as for the inhabitants and visitors to

Claremont being generous to the village, they could have been acting simply in the manner expected of people in their position towards those less fortunate; as G. Kitson Clark has written "Victorian England was no doubt to a large extent the creation of the political and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century, but the order of society, which had existed for centuries before those revolutions, lasted robustly into, and in some matters after, the third quarter of the century".

Not only were the wealthy inhabitants generous with their money and time as in the examples quoted but there was the Beadle to keep away any undesirable element. Judged by the criteria used to differentiate closed and open villages Esher does score highly in the closed categories. For instance there was a cricket team but not a football team (not organised anyway), there is a village green, a village hall, little waste land, certainly an Anglican emphasis as far as church attendance was concerned not withstanding a Quaker and Baptist presence and a Methodist Chapel in 1889. Control was present if not oppressive.

By 1880 a picture emerges of Esher as a well ordered community basking in the shadow of its royal connection, spiritual welfare provided for by a variety of churches, a National School to provide basic education for the children of the poorer inhabitants and a new county-brigade fire engine to deal with conflagrations. Not all of these came into being without some local misgivings but the development which seems to have united the population, now grown to about 1800, happened a few years earlier when a scheme was promoted to develop part of the farmland attached to Sandown House into a racecourse. It was inevitable that the land was to be sold and when the choices were shown to be a large residential development, a lunatic asylum or a racecourse, pragmatism won and the Sandown Park Racecourse Company was born. The Chairman of the Sandown Park Racecourse Company was one of the band of local residents mentioned earlier, Sir Wilford Brett.

The Esher residents' fears about a race course were understandable given the nature of race courses at that time and the kind of unsavoury visitors they attracted. The grounds were not fenced, there was no fee and if ladies attended at all they remained in their carriages on the edge of the proceedings. What the promoters of Sandown did was to create a wholly enclosed area with admission by fee only and what proved to be the key to making Sandown a new and socially acceptable venue for entertainment - the forming of a club to which ladies could be invited as guests.

Sandown Park was a success from the beginning and in 1883 Edward Walford included a colourful picture of the atmosphere in his book, *Village London*. As there is considerable difficulty in being elected a member of the Sandown Club, and as members cannot admit male friends under any pretext whatever, the gatherings become altogether unique. Ladies are admitted by members on payment of ten shillings for the day, or they may become members themselves... There is a very pretty royal box in the members enclosure and the Prince and Princess of Wales are generally there... One particular feature of these gatherings is that the 'correct cards of the races' are sold by pretty little girls verging on their teens, in fancy costume, sometimes as Vivandieres, or fish-wives, or the Directoire dress, which is very becoming". Although the coming of the racecourse brought trade into the village and was of much benefit to the local economy one can only speculate as to whether the "pretty little girls" came on the train from Waterloo or were recruited locally.

Nevertheless Sandown racing was a society event and the royal connection continued after the death of Victoria. A few years ago an elderly lady recorded her memories of race days for the Esher District Local History Society: "Sandown racecourse was of course much a feature of Esher life; and when King Edward attended the races...accompanied by a large suite of ladies and equerries, all very much dressed up for the racing, Esher was in a state of excitement and badges for the members' and

other stands were at a premium... Esher Green was crowded with spectators when the King drove past on his way to Esher Place, where on race days he always lunched with Sir Edgar Vincent (later Lord d'Abernon)". Very much as people had done in his Mother's day.

The sale of land at Sandown House was an early indication of the changes which really were to affect Esher both in size and character by the end of the century. The Sandown estate was only one of several which were sold in lots in the 1880's and developed with sizeable houses with two to three acres of ground. Up until now the "prosperity of the village was largely dependent on the great houses, although it was fast becoming a dormitory for city gentlemen, retired stockbrokers and elderly Empire builders". Suburbia was certainly starting to take over by 1899 for by then there was electric street lighting, mains water supply, a main drainage supply throughout the parish and local government in the form of an Urban District Council which was convened in 1895. A certain Mr. Martineau was one of the Councillors, to become Mayor in 1913.

One of the first matters raised by Mr. Martineau in the Council shines a little light on a sector of the community which has not been mentioned, mainly because there is not much evidence, namely the poor and needy of whom there must have been some. At around the same time that the new local government came into being, three families were found living in squalid conditions in cow sheds at Manor Farm. Councillor Martineau raised "the question of the desirability and best means of promoting the building of labourers' cottages by the Council. The Council did have 20 houses built in Lower Green Road but they were for the use of the Sewage Plant workers and Council employees only. Some other properties were acquired but by the mid 1920s there were still only 28 houses owned by the Council. Private residential property was being built, however, and not just the large houses with grounds. The Ordnance Survey Map published in 1913 shows the new roads filling the land between Lammas Lane and the High Street and development beginning to creep along Claremont Lane towards Arbrook Common, and of course the Sandown Racecourse.

The population which rose by about 150 a year over the first half of the century was now rising on a steeper curve. Many of the newcomers were commuters working in London or retired from professional life. Esher was still a pleasant and civilised place to live, away from the dust and noise of the city but near enough to feel connected. The changes had been slow and almost imperceptible as authority moved from private patronage to public accountability. Perhaps it was gentler because often the face of authority had the same name.

The first garage in the village would open in 1915, marking a quickening of the pace of change, but more disruptive events were taking place by now, events which would prove a watershed for the whole country. During the Great War, Claremont became a convalescent home for wounded officers, the racecourse was dug up to grow food and more than 378 men from the village area went to war. Among them there must have been some who had practised at the rifle range at West End a few years earlier, under the command of one whose name is now included on the village war memorial on the Green, Captain F.B. Eastwood of Esher Lodge.

In the half century between 1850 and 1900 the pace of change had been slow and regulated by the people in big houses, like the Bretts, the Eastwoods, the Fewes, the Talbots, Wigrams, Martineaus and Spicers. From 1900 to 1914 life in the village was marking time; after the war Esher would begin a new chapter but the names of the men and women who exercised benevolent power which controlled its growth are still alive in the village. As Ian Anderson wrote in 1948 "they sold their estates to financiers and syndicates" but "gave their sons to the casualty lists, left their names on the gateposts of the new villas and on the new avenues and roads... and on the war memorial".

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