

THE COSTAINS AND KINGSWOOD

ON THE face of it, they would seem to have nothing in common: modern-day Kingswood, one of the wealthiest enclaves in the south of England, and a family of poor Victorian farmers driven from their island home in ruination after the failure of potato crops in the 1860s.

Yet the relationship between our community and the Costain family endured for nearly a century until it was finally and formally ended in 2020.

So how did this unlikely relationship come about and, indeed, why did it last so long? To understand that, we must go back over 150 years to the farming community around Colby on the Isle of Man. Among them were the Costains, a Manx family who had worked the land there for centuries. Yet by the 1860s a series of poor harvests and potato famine had brought a deep depression to the agricultural industry and Richard Costain, now in his 20s, decided he had to break with the family's long farming tradition if he was to escape the grinding poverty of rural island life.

So it was that he became apprenticed as a joiner and, after learning his trade and qualifying on the island, he headed for the mainland with the Richard Kneen, the man who was to become his brother-in-law. The two went into partnership and established themselves as jobbing builders on the outskirts of Liverpool. Their business flourished, as did the young Costain, who had in the meantime married his partner's sister, Margaret Kneen, by whom he had had five sons and two daughters.

But when Richard Kneen and Costain separated (amicably, it must be said) as business partners in 1888, Richard Costain was determined to make the business a successful family concern.

Before long, his second son, William Percy, had joined Richard Costain and Sons Ltd., as the company was then known. Another son, John, emigrated to Canada where, having started as a bricklayer's labourer, he later formed his own company and returned home not only having acquired useful technical expertise but also having accrued enough capital to invest in the family firm.

Costain's eldest son, also Richard, had initially opted for a career in finance but by the start of the 1920s had returned to the fold. With the three sons in charge, the Costain business had been going from strength to strength, first in the Merseyside area, then further afield in the North of England. And, as building sites in the Liverpool area became more scarce, Richard Costain's three sons decided that the time had come to look further afield to expand.

It was by sheer chance that their choice fell on Kingswood for the next stage of their firm's development. Richard was visiting family on the Isle of Man when he spotted an advertisement in *The Times* offering building land for sale in Kingswood, Surrey. He sent off for details, but it was some time before he heard back from the agents acting on behalf of the Walton Heath Land Company. It transpired later that they had delayed their reply because they could not believe that somebody from the Isle of Man would be seriously interested in buying land in Kingswood!

William Percy Costain was deemed the best suited to develop the company's new venture and thus it was that in 1923 he travelled south with the intention of acquiring a plot of land for himself in Kingswood. What he found didn't impress him very much. In his dealings with the agents for the Walton Heath Land Company, he discovered that very little progress had been made since the latter had acquired the land for development in 1911. He decided there and then to take matters in his own hands and to take control of the company. This he achieved through one of the partners in Costain's

main timber suppliers in Liverpool, who had expressed an interest in investing in the Kingswood project.

This wasn't the only 'outsider' who was to play an important role in Costain's Kingswood project. Dick Harrison had been with the company since leaving school in 1902 and when he was asked by William Costain whether he would 'go south and build', he readily agreed. Dick Harrison kept a diary for several years and this is his account of what happened next:

'[William Costain] had been down to Kingswood, Surrey, and bought some land, and a few houses had been built but none sold as they were large houses, with inside woodwork of mahogany. So it was decided I would go and build some a little smaller . . . I started in Waterhouse Lane and Furze Hill. I took with me from Liverpool one foreman, Jack Holmes, two joiners and two local labourers. We built up Furze Hill and all the ground that side of the railway line, with shops close to the station. When we had one or two special houses in hand, I would stay around and find buyers. It was a new district and it was not so easy to get them to decide, as we had only steam trains and a poor service to Kingswood.'



Some of the early houses being built in Kingswood



. . . although it is not clear where these houses are

Richard Costain and Sons did not, as a rule, use estate agents to sell their properties because it was felt that the best people to sell houses were the men who built them and were proud of their workmanship. They also knew that, to attract new residents, Kingswood needed not just houses, but also some amenities. Train services had, by this time, started to improve, making it easier to find buyers and, as Dick Harrison mentioned in his diary, a shopping parade was built in Waterhouse Lane, next to what was then the Station Hotel.

The family was gradually turning Kingswood into the kind of fully-fledged 'modern' community that made it such a desirable place for wealthy businessmen and commuters to live.

In 1926 William Costain commissioned the apprentices of his firm to build a hall for the Tadorne Masonic Lodge, of which he was a Master. This later became the Kingswood Village Hall, passing into the ownership of Banstead Urban District Council just before the outbreak of the Second World War. It is still a valuable community asset to this day, run by Kingswood Village Community Association (KVCA) and playing host to a whole variety of diverse activities.

A year earlier, in July 1925, the village got what would be one of the outward badges of its success: its own tennis club. The Kingswood Tennis Club was officially set up through the creation of a Limited Company, its capital of £300 divided into 60 shares of £5 each. The annual subscription for the first 50 players was set at two guineas. Tennis courts were built on a plot of land specially set aside by the Costain company in The Glade, and a workmen's hut was left on site to become a makeshift clubhouse.

That other requisite of middle-class social standing, the golf club, made its appearance two years later. Kingswood Golf Club was built on the site of the old Kingswood Warren farm estate which had been purchased, together with 300 acres, from successful mill owner Joseph Rank when he put the Kingswood Warren estate up for sale. The scheme was sponsored by a group of businessmen, which included William Costain's eldest son, Richard, himself a keen golfer and sportsman.



Farm buildings were converted into a golf clubhouse, some of which can still be seen today


The old farm buildings were converted into a clubhouse by the company, while the design of the course was entrusted to the legendary James Braid, who at the time was the professional at neighbouring Walton Heath Golf Club. The new 18-hole course was described in Costains' sales brochure as having a total length of 6,500 yards and including 'some exceptionally sporting holes'.

When the Kingswood Warren mansion and some 57 surrounding acres were put on the market by Joseph Rank the following year, it was purchased by the Walton Heath Land Company – now effectively under Costain control, and subsequently conveyed to the company Richard Costain & Sons Ltd.


THE TIMES THURSDAY MAY 11 1933

RURAL SURREY, RESTFULLY UNSPOILED
SURROUNDS THESE DISTINCTIVE HOMES AT
KINGSWOOD


BUILT TO
OWNERS'
REQUIREMENTS
FROM
£1,250 to £5,000



SHOPPING AND EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES ADJOIN THE ESTATE.
40 MINUTES FROM LONDON.
ADJOINING GOLF COURSE,
TENNIS, BADMINTON, SQUASH.



GOLF COURSES: KINGSWOOD (on Estate), Walton Heath, 14 mile, BANSTEAD, 2 miles, CHIPSTEAD, 2 miles.
KINGSWOOD LAWN TENNIS CLUB, on Estate.
Southern Electric Train Service to Charing Cross, Cannon Street, London Bridge and Victoria.
Season Tickets (Three Months), 1st £7.9.0. 3rd £4.14.6.



The country homes of Kingswood are as refreshingly varied and unsterotyped as are the rustic beauties of Surrey which surround them. They are built from plans adopted, or adapted, which seek to preserve the natural charm of meadow and woodland on which they stand. Standing 500 feet in altitude on chalk subsoil Kingswood Estate is off the main Brighton Road—twist city and sea—with its own station on the Estate. A twenty-minute service of fast electric trains connects it with London. This non-suburbanized Estate offers sites and exceptionally well-planned houses to those who want the individuality and privacy of the self-contained plot, together with moderate price and small capital outlay (about 10%). Road access, Gas, Electricity, and Company's Water are connected to the many choice sites available, and a free planning service enables prospective buyers to adopt a design which meets fully with family requirements at an equitable figure.

The finest of building service and materials, which include complete decorations, electrical installations, all fittings, fencing, &c., are covered by the price of the home chosen. Some fine examples are now in course of completion, and a visit is recommended. Interested readers are invited to pin the attached request slip to their letterheading and post for suggested plans, district map, purchase terms, and a brochure describing the amenities of Kingswood Estate.

TO REACH ESTATE.—Book to Kingswood from any Southern Railway London Station. Estate Office adjoins station. By car, take main Brighton Road from City, branch left two minutes after passing Burgh Heath (see signpost "To Kingswood Station").

LONDON 40 minutes from KINGSWOOD.

REQUEST SLIP FOR PLANS
(FOR ADOPTION OR ADAPTATION)
Kingswood Estate, Surrey.

Signature.....
Attach to your letterheading and post in unsealed envelope (1d. stamp) to
RICHARD COSTAIN & SONS, Ltd.,
7 & 8, Norfolk Street, Strand, W.C.2.

By 1933, Costain advert extolling the virtues of Kingswood were appearing in *The Times*

William Percy Costain had died in 1929 at the age of only 55, and both of his sons were called upon to help fill the void left in the company by their father's death. Richard, the eldest, was barely 27 when he was virtually put in charge of his firm's London branch, albeit with some back-up. His

brother, Albert, eight years his junior, replaced him as general foreman of the Brentwater Estate, a Costain development in North London. In 1933 the company was restructured, with the London branch becoming a public company, Richard Costain Ltd., while the Liverpool company, R. Costain & Sons (Liverpool) Ltd., remained private.

In December 1933 Albert Costain married Joan Mary Whiter at St Andrew's Church in Kingswood. The young couple moved into the family home in Woodland Way, where they remained for the rest of their lives.

Richard Costain moved to Walton-on-the-Hill in 1936. Apart from their involvement in the management of the company, both brothers developed considerable outside interests. Among other activities, Richard Costain became Chairman of the Harlow Development Corporation in 1950 and in 1954 he was knighted for his work on this project and his contribution to the industry in general.

Albert, for his part, pursued a successful career in politics and served as Conservative MP for Folkestone and Hythe for some 24 years. He was also active in village affairs and was for several years president of the Kingswood Village Community Association. He, too, was knighted.



The Costain family burial site in the graveyard of St. Andrew's Church

When Richard died suddenly in March 1966, Albert succeeded him as chairman of the Costain Group. He retired from that post in 1969, but continued to sit as an MP until the General Election of 1983. He died in March 1987 after a long illness. His widow, Joan, survived him for another 13 years and died in October 2000, aged 92. The Costain home in Woodland Way was subsequently sold and pulled down to be replaced by a development of five new houses.



Richard Costain, who died in 1966



... and his brother, Albert

In the intervening years, the Costain group still held a major interest in the village, through their continued ownership of most of the private roads and verges in Kingswood. With the transfer of those interests to three resident-owned companies earlier this year, that link has finally been severed.

Our thanks to local resident Pia Chamberlain for the research and information contained in this document.