

TWO EVENTS sparked off the first wave of modern development in Kingswood – and both of them feature at their heart the grandly-named and larger-than-life figure of Sir Henry Cosmo Orme Bonsor, Bt.

As chairman of the South Eastern Railway Company, in 1897 Bonsor oversaw the extension of the company's train operations from Purley to Kingswood, thus opening up the possibility of commuting daily from the area to work in London.



*Kingswood Station in the early days*

The other crucial event was his decision in 1906 to sell the vast Kingswood Warren estate with its sprawling, crenelated manor house and 2,100 acres of grounds. The house, along with the Lordship of the Manor of Kingswood, had been acquired in the 1830s by Thomas Alcock, MP, who had set about rebuilding it to create a suitably grand country seat, while continuing to buy up land in the surrounding area. At his death in 1866 the estate was sold by his executors, but the new owners were soon embroiled in a series of legal battles with neighbouring landowners which eventually bankrupted them. In 1885 Bonsor bought the estate, but it was a short-lived venture. By 1906 he was finding it too expensive to maintain and decided to put the Kingswood Warren estate on the market.

The estate did not, however, sell as one lot at auction and was gradually broken up over the ensuing years. In March 1911, the Walton Heath Land Company acquired a portion of 640 acres, including the mansion house, for which it paid £40,000. The mansion was sold on, together with 102 acres, to Joseph Rank, at the time one of the country's biggest mill owners and bakers (the name lives on today in the Rank Hovis McDougall brand) for £21,336. The rest of the land was earmarked for development.

Already new houses were beginning to appear in the area around Waterhouse Lane as early as 1907. They were of substantial build and all designed by reputable architects. Among these was a notable exponent of the Arts and Crafts movement, R. Paxton

Watson, many of whose houses were characterised by long, sloping (so-called ‘catslide’) roofs.

Within two years this building activity had spread to the lanes adjacent to Waterhouse Lane, namely Forest Drive, The Chase and The Glade, where several Paxton Watson houses helped to influence the decision by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council to create a Conservation Area within that part of the village in 2009.

By 1912, the estate agents Slade & Church had acquired offices on Station Approach and were handling the sale of some of these new properties from there. From their brochures of the time, you can get a taste of what the area was becoming:

*‘Kingswood, which is situated about 1½ miles from Tadworth, and between that place and Chipstead, by reason of its charming, undulating, and well-wooded country, is growing in favour as a rural residential district. The residences already erected, and in course of erection, are all of an attractive design of detached house, standing in prettily wooded grounds. There is no suspicion of the suburban type of house, the architecture generally being in keeping with the rural surroundings. The beautiful Kingswood Warren Estate has lately come into the market and offers an exceptional opportunity of securing sites for the erection of residences to suit the requirements of intending purchasers. No prettier country can be found anywhere in Surrey, and the distance from London being only 18 miles, with an excellent service of trains to the City and West End, makes it an ideal spot for residential purposes.’*

*‘To the City man who desires to live in the quiet seclusion of the Country, yet within easy reach of the Metropolis, it would be difficult indeed to find a more delightful spot than Kingswood.’*

*‘Rents vary from about £90 per annum to £150 and over, while prices range from £1,500 to £3,000 or more, and land can be had from £300 to £500 an acre freehold.’*

Trains from Kingswood to London Bridge and Cannon Street ran half-hourly at rush hour, but rather less frequently during the day, and the last train back left London Bridge at 11.46 p.m., allowing enough time to attend a show or the theatre in London before making one’s way home. A first-class return ticket cost 4s. (four shillings) and



*The old ‘slamdoor’ trains, whose doors could not be opened from the inside!*

a third-class ticket 2/2d. (two shillings and tuppence). At today's values, a first-class ticket cost our Edwardian City gent just under £23!

It is quite clear that right from the outset, developers were keen to preserve the rural character of Kingswood while attracting a well-heeled middle-class clientele who aspired to lead the country life while still being able to pursue a career in the City.

Mrs Marjorie Richardson French, an American who for some years lived in a relatively modest house in Copt Hill Lane, wrote a fascinating, and at times very humorous, account of life in Kingswood just before and during the First World War.

In those days, middle-class ladies all had servants and therefore never had to do any housework. A lot of them were interested in gardening but, there again, they had gardeners to do the heavy work. It would seem that time was mainly spent paying calls and being called upon, for which one had to overcome the hurdles of a strictly laid down protocol in order not to be found socially wanting. Other activities included attending or organising tea parties and, less often, dinner parties. Marjorie Richardson French writes:

*'We always "dressed" for evening parties large or small. The men put on dinner jackets and the women the conventional evening dress of the period made of silk or satin with floor-length skirts, low-necked and sleeveless. It was somewhat of an ordeal to leave one's fireplace, change from woolly pullover and cardigan into one of those gowns and eventually enter someone else's rather chilly drawing-room, knowing that, unless one was early, the chairs near the fireplace (the only warm spot in the room) would already be occupied. It was not considered correct to bring a small shawl or scarf.'*

Practically every house in the neighbourhood had a tennis lawn and from early April until late September tennis parties would be held every Saturday afternoon, and



*Dressed for a tennis party: how the Edwardian lady players would have looked*

tournaments organised throughout the summer. It was not the done thing, though, to play tennis on a Sunday. Winter entertainment was provided by musical evenings and occasional card parties. There was an attempt at starting a debating society, but that was short-lived.

Like everything else, building in the area was interrupted by the war and never regained its momentum until the 1920s, when Richard Costain and Sons Ltd., a firm of general contractors and house builders based in the north-west of England, came on the scene quite by accident, after spotting an advertisement in *The Times* offering building land for sale in Kingswood, Surrey. Family representatives travelled south and very quickly reached two conclusions: the Walton Heath Land Company was not fit to fulfil the role of a major developer in the area and, secondly, what Kingswood needed was smaller, not bigger, houses.

The seal was set on a relationship between the Costain family and our village that was to last for almost 100 years . . .

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