GRACIOUSLY REGAL MUSWELL HILL

by

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This paper was written after attending a Crouch End and District U3A course on local history in 2017/8. It describes the development of part of Muswell Hill between 1895 and 1920. During this time the area changed from rural with a few large estates owned by wealthy landowners to a prosperous middle class urban environment.

In particular the development, architecture and subsequent changes of the 4 main avenues are described.

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GRACIOUSLY REGAL MUSWELL HILL

I have lived in Muswell Hill for many years now. When I go to the gym I walk up Muswell Hill itself and past the library along Queens Avenue. I am intrigued as to why Muswell Hill has such regal road names: Queens Avenue, Princes Avenue, Kings Avenue and Dukes Avenue. When were they built, by whom and have they changed much?

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME MUSWELL HILL?
The name Muswell Hill is derived not only from the hill but from springs and wells from which issued the Muswell Stream. This flows east to the River Lea. The historian, Dr S.J. Madge, stated that meoss in old English means “moss” and mielle means a “well, fountain or spring”. Muswell Hill therefore means “the Hill of the Mossy Well”. The original “Mossy Well” is believed to have originated at about 40 Muswell Road. The spring is no longer visible as it is culverted.

The Mossy Well was situated on land given in 1152 by Richard de Belmeis II, Bishop of London, to nuns of the Augustinian priory of St Mary, Clerkenwell, to use as a farm. This area became known as Clerkenwell Detached. The well was believed to have curative properties after an apparent cure of a King of Scotland and a chapel with a priest’s house were built by Bishop de Belmeis to serve the pilgrims drawn to it. Their offerings were a source of income.

After the dissolution of the Monasteries, 1536-1541, the well ceased to be a place of pilgrimage.

WHY QUEENS AVENUE AND NOT QUEEN’S AVENUE?
This avenue was being built at the end of Queen Victoria’s reign [1819 – 1901]. One would expect it to have been named Queen’s Avenue in the same way that Queen’s Wood was named after Queen Victoria. This, however, would have started a discussion as to which Prince, King and Duke would have avenues named after them.

WHAT PROMPTED THIS DEVELOPMENT?
Muswell Hill stands at the edge of a plateau formed in the last Ice Age. The streams that ran off the plateau were a deterrent to development. The heavy clay soil was unsuitable for arable farming so the land was used for grazing animals and hay production.

The clean air, proximity to London and the view from the top of the hill made it a favoured country residence for a small number of the rich from Tudor times. Nevertheless until the 19th Century, Muswell Hill was mainly heavily wooded and sparsely inhabited, a rural area dominated by small estates, few farms, scattered houses and an early road system. London’s increasing population with the need for somewhere to live was the catalyst for development at the end of the 19th century.

In 1873 the newly built Alexandra Palace was opened to the east of Muswell Hill. A railway line was then constructed with a Muswell Hill station connecting it with Highgate, Finsbury Park and the City. This means of transport augmented the catalyst.

Maps before and after substantial development of Muswell Hill are shown on the next page.

WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MAJORITY OF MUSWELL HILL DEVELOPMENT
There were two developers primarily responsible for the present day appearance of Muswell Hill. They were James Edmondson and William B Collins, both from family firms. They built hundreds of homes in Muswell Hill. Edmondson was the one responsible for the “Regal Avenues”. He was born in 1857 and moved to Bournemouth in 1923 due to ill health. He died in June 1931 and was buried in Bournemouth Central cemetery.

WHERE DID HIS CAPITAL COME FROM?
James Edmondson joined his father’s building firm, already well established, to found Messrs Isaac Edmondson and Son Ltd., a private limited company from 1906. This operated from 8 The Broadway, Highbury Park, now 86 Highbury Park. James married Isabelle and they had three sons and a daughter. Two sons were killed in WW1. The firm became James Edmondson & Son Ltd. when the surviving son, Albert James Edmondson, joined the family firm in the 1920s. This successful firm built across North London from Golders Green to Winchmore Hill, also in South London and even in Westcliffe on Sea, Essex.
The Penny-Farthing cyclist. James Edmondson was an early motorist but also a keen penny-farthing cyclist. “Whilst out for a spin on his cycle the natural beauties of Muswell Hill, and the advantages as a prospective suburb, first impressed him” [Ref: William Cummins, Muswell Hill Record] (Source Ref 7)

MAPS BEFORE AND AFTER SUBSTANTIAL DEVELOPMENT OF MUSWELL HILL

Map extracted from 1894-6 Ordnance Survey map (re-surveyed 1893-4)

Map extracted from 1920 Ordnance Survey map (surveyed 1862-68, revised in 1910-13), published by the Hornsey Historical Society, 1992
WHO WAS EDMONDSON BUILDING FOR?
As London expanded in wealth, becoming a great financial centre, Londoners, particularly professional people and merchants sought country homes away from the cramped city. The architecture and regal names of the avenues attracted the “right sort of people”.

WHAT LAND DID EDMONDSON PURCHASE?
FORTIS GREEN and LIMES ESTATES. The 1894-6 Ordnance Survey map (above) shows little urban development. There were open spaces between the village centres of Hornsey, Muswell Hill, Crouch End and Highgate. The map extract only covers the Muswell Hill section.

Fortis House estate spread eastwards from Fortis Green to the Limes which, in turn, reached Colney Hatch Lane. These were two of the principal Muswell Hill properties, consisting of about 30 acres of relatively flat land. Their owner, James Hall Renton, stockbroker, died in 1895 aged 75. The properties were sold to Frederick Manson who sold them on the very next year to Edmondson for £2,300.

Edmondson’s application for planning permission to build houses was approved in 1896. He thus laid out Queens, Princes and Kings Avenues as well as many other roads.

Edmondson contributed £1,000 towards road building. He also agreed to build Fortis Green Road with a width of 60 feet instead of 40 feet.

ELMES ESTATE delayed sale. This estate on top of the hill on the east side of Colney Hatch Lane probably dates from the 18th century. In 1880 it was put up for sale, an 11 acre building site, but was not sold then. It took another 20 years before it was sold. Edmondson purchased the site, demolished Elmes House and laid out Dukes Avenue.

HOW DID THE DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS?
As Edmondson started to build a middle-class suburb, owners of surrounding existing properties realized their rural enclave would vanish. They too were willing to sell, hence Edmondson bought other estates: Hillfield, Wellfield and North Lodge. He created a suburb of wide roads, shopping parades and tree-lined avenues of substantial terraced houses. On all his estates he developed sites according to original plans so that road patterns and garden fences conformed to old boundaries.

When he began building in Muswell Hill, he set up an office in 1 Queens Avenue. In 1996 alterations to No. 1 regrettably led to removal of a manhole cover with the firm’s name.

Show Respect. The majority of the core of present day Muswell Hill was established by Edmondson in the period 1896 - 1914. Muswell Hill thus became a prosperous middle class suburb with a distinctive social code. When the conservative victory in the 1910 General Election was greeted with boos from the young liberals, their chairman was heard to call: “Stop! Remember this is Muswell Hill” [I.G. Murray] (Source Ref 6)

QUEENS AVENUE THE FIRST “REGAL AVENUE”
Queens Avenue is the most impressive avenue in the district. It is 65 feet wide, “designed to attract better middle class residents” with terraced houses having 40 foot frontages. In 1897 it was added to the junction of the road up from Crouch End leading north and one leading south to Highgate. From this junction the avenue curves northwest to the Fortis Green / Tetherdown junction.

A Congregational Church, now the United Reformed Church was built at the Fortis Green / Tetherdown junction on the north side of Queens Avenue. The church, built at No. 1 Tetherdown, was designed by Percy Richard Morley Horder.

Thwarted. Edmondson had planned to build a licensed hotel opposite the church on the south side of Queens Avenue. He was thwarted by the temperance movement despite him donating the land for the church in 1897. This property is now a block of 7 flats, Queens Mansions, built by Edmondson in 1901.

United Reform Church

Queens Mansions
(Queens Avenue on the left)
The architecture. (Source Ref 4 for this and similar subsequent sections)
The Avenue has a pattern of houses of two storey projections with gables above and set-backs at first floor to provide timber balconies. The upper sashes of the windows are sub-divided into small panes. Many of the original front doors remain. The houses were built in brick.

No 3 has a garden wall partly built with white stones from the demolished Fortis House.

Conversions. There are now 3 hotels: Queens, National and Roseview. Nos 8, 10 and 12 have been converted into 18 flats whilst maintaining the outer structure of the properties.

Bomb damage. No 18 was bombed on 16th October 1940, killing one person and wounding six (Source Ref 2). As the property was semi-detached, both Nos 18 and 20 had to be rebuilt. There is now a 1950's-style two-storey brown brick replacement building. It has an attic storey in a concrete tiled mansard roof. (Definition 1 at end).

No 45 is an example of a house of a semi-detached property with a semi-circular porch and slate roof with fish-scale bands. (Definition 2) There is also decorative plasterwork to the gable.

The 2008 Council's local list of buildings of merit includes all houses 41-58.

No servants in the fire station. An Edwardian Fire Station at the southern end of Queens Avenue was built on land sold by Edmondson in 1898 to Hornsey Urban District. The 1911 census shows virtually all households in the avenue had servants. One notable exception was the fire station where the Station Fire Officer lived with his wife and three children (Source Ref 3). In 1926 a modern fire station was built in Fortis Green Road. The one in Queens Avenue was then used a council depot. In 1930 the land adjoining the council depot was bought by Hornsey Borough Council.

The Muswell Hill Library was opened in 1931 after the old fire station was demolished. The library was designed by W. H. Adams, Hornsey Borough Architect. It is Neo-Classical, of two storeys, with a flat roof, raised attic and built in brown brick. At the entrance, above the hood of the staircase is a Portland stone panel. It bears the Hornsey Borough Council arms “Fortior Quo Paratior” (The better prepared the stronger) and the year.

A successful campaign. In 2016 Hornsey Borough Council proposed to move the library to a new building on the site of the Green Man Public House. A campaign prevented this as it is has been a listed Grade 2 building since the 1990s. It has original panelling and murals painted by the Hornsey School of Art 1937-8. In 2016 David Frith, Conservation Officer Hornsey Historical Society, augmented the campaign with a detailed Conservation report (Source Ref 5a). “The chewing gum artist” Ben Wilson, also contributed. He produced an intricate tiny “Why Save Muswell Hill Library” painting on the pavement to the right of the entrance. (He has been taken to court for painting on the pavement. He won his case as he does not deface property since he paints on discarded chewing gum, so is not breaking any law) (Source Ref 5b).
An 18 foot granite statutory listed **cattle trough** (shown on the right) is on the opposite side of the road from the library. Engraved “Metropolitan Drinking & Cattle Trough Association”, it previously stood on the roundabout for the benefit of horses and dogs.

**PRINCES AVENUE, THE SECOND “REGAL AVENUE”**

Princes Avenue runs parallel to Queens Avenue linking the centres of Muswell Hill Broadway and Fortis Green Road.

**Presbyterian Church.** At the corner of Prince’s Avenue and the Broadway, Edmondson sold a site for half its actual cost to build the Muswell Hill Presbyterian Church. It was designed by George Baines in late Art Nouveau Gothic with a corner tower topped by a copper spirelet. The building consists of white flints contrasting with the red brick of the Ruabon Terra–Cotta Co. Ltd of North Wales. A temporary church, designed by Arthur Beeds was built at the rear of the site. It opened in 1898. When the main church was opened in 1902 the two churches merged; the temporary church becoming a church hall.

**Church to Pub to Steakhouse.** When the church became redundant the remaining Presbyterians in 1972 joined the Congregationalist Church in Tetherdown Avenue. This created the United Reformed Church to which a church porch was added, (see first photo in Queen’s Ave on page 4). Plans to demolish the Presbyterian Church for redevelopment prompted protests. In 1978 the Department of Environment Enquiry gave it a grade 2 listed building due to its style and materials. In 1995 permission was granted to convert it into the O’Neil’s pub. In 2017 the pub was converted into a Miller and Carter Steakhouse.

**The famous Cedar tree.** At the junction of Princes Avenue and Fortis Green Road, on the north side, stood a mature majestic Cedar of Lebanon tree. Edmondson donated the space on this corner on condition that it remained a permanent public garden to preserve the tree. The cedar was removed when it died. A silver birch tree has since been planted, the area paved and benches added.

**Architecture**

Princes Avenue is shorter and narrower avenue than Queens Avenue, however its buildings are also of consistent design.

Many are semi-detached red brick houses with gabled ends, first floor balconies and ground floor bays. Some have distinctive timber semi-circular headed porches supported on brackets e.g. Nos 28 & 26.

Another group of semi-detached properties are connected with a central set back, each house having a half-hip roof (*Definition 3*). Some of these have oriel windows (*Definition 4*) below the hip, also projecting bays with decorative coving woodwork to the entrances e.g. Nos 16 & 14.

**The former Presbyterian Church Hall** became Old Chapel Place, converted into 10 flats. It is built in red brick with contrasting stone detailing and is aligned with its gabled end to the road. The cupola is visible on its roof. The spire of St James’s Church (179 feet high) is visible in the distance.
**Bomb Damage.** Opposite the cedar tree on the south side of the Princes Avenue/Fortis Green Road junction a bomb fell on 16 Oct 1940 (the same date as that in Queens Avenue) killing 2 people, wounding 3 and destroying 2 properties. The site was initially cleared for a temporary garden. In 1959 permission was given to build the **John Baird pub**. John Baird was a television pioneer at Alexandra Palace. His life is described on the plaque on the pub wall as shown on the right.

**AVENUE MEWS**

This is a through road between Princes Avenue and Queens Avenue serving the Broadway. Horse-drawn carts were able to supply goods to the back of the shops. It was lined on the north side with buildings for carts and horse stables. Access for residents to their flats above the shops is now via the Avenue Mews. A small open area at the rear of the public library in Queens Avenue is used for parking.

**KINGS AVENUE, THE THIRD “REGAL AVENUE”**

Edmondson purchased this land which had been part of the grounds of Fortis Cottage. This large building was reported to be derelict and had disappeared by 1894. The curving Kings Avenue connects Queens Avenue with Tetherdown Road. The builders were J. Pappin of Stoke Newington and T. Woolnough of Crouch End.

**Architecture**

Most of the properties are semi-detached. The repetition of similar house types along Kings Avenue gives consistency. They are mainly red brick semi-detached houses of two storeys with an attic storey. The front elevations have a two storey forward projecting shallow square bay with a parapet above eaves level. The ground floor has an inclined bay and an entrance porch with white painted turned timber.

One sees wide triple-sash gable-ended dormers aligning above the bay. The first floor triple-sash windows in the projecting bays are set within a cambered arch opening. The original windows have the upper parts of the top sash sub-divided by bars into small panes. An example is in houses Nos 9 and 11.

**Muswell Hill’s secret.** Edmondson donated the enclosed land within Queens Avenue, Kings Avenue and Tetherdown Road for a bowling green. The access to the Muswell Hill Bowling Club, founded in 1901, is from a narrow alleyway beside no.36.

Nos.18, 20 and 22 are situated on the sharp bend of King’s Avenue. They were compressed at the back to accommodate the bowling green. They have two-storey bays, gables, separate porches and pitched roofs.

**Always in the sun.** Because the area of the bowling green is so large, with houses set well back, the sun can reach the ground at all times of day. It opened in 1901 and celebrated its centenary in 2001. The pavilions are available for hire for special events. The picture to the right shows 18, 20 & 22 Kings Ave in the bowling green corner.
DUKES AVENUE, “THE LAST REGAL AVENUE”

In 1900 Dukes Avenue was added to the roundabout at the top of the hill. The intention was to name it Station Avenue as it was to be built alongside the railway leading to Alexandra Palace. Edmondson did not consider this title prestigious compared to Queens, Princes and Kings Avenues. Station Avenue thus became Dukes Avenue. It is the longest of the graciously regal avenues. Some properties in Dukes Avenue were built by T. Woolnough. Dukes Avenue is a winding up-and-down route from Muswell Hill centre eastwards to the back of Alexandra Palace, seen in the distance in the photograph.

Efficient delivery. Edmondson arranged with the railway authorities to have building materials delivered to his own siding close to the new avenue using his own engine. He left space for a path between Nos 26 and 28 sloping down from the avenue to the siding for this purpose. The railway closed in 1934 and a school, the Muswell Hill Primary School was built on the siding in 1960. The path is now an entrance to the school for pupils, parents and staff.

Baptist Church. Edmondson donated land for a Baptist Church on the site of the old Elms Mansion. This is next to the main Muswell Hill roundabout. The church was designed by George Baines and built by Mattocks Brothers. It is a red brick building, built on a slope, with a spirelet and space provided for class rooms under the church. Mrs Edmondson uncovered the foundation stone in 1901 and the church opened in 1902. [James Edmondson was a Congregationalist, not a Baptist, unlike his wife]. The church is a statutory listed building.

Architecture

The houses have different Edwardian period decorative features. Those on the north-west side are distinguished by pargetted gables, mainly two storeys in height and terraced, generally in red brick with a pitched slate roof, decorative plasterwork and timber work. Circular bays with conical roofs are used to turn the corners. Added to this, Nos 25 and 27 have pyramidal roofs forming corner features at the junctions with Wellfield Avenue and Elms Avenue.

Nos. 31 and 33 form a two storey terrace with oriel windows on the upper floors. They also have semi-basements that lift them above the street.

Nos 28 and 26 are located either side of the footpath down to the school, just visible. They are mirror images of each other, but the brickwork of No 28 has been covered.

Nos 76 and 74 are examples of smaller scale single-fronted properties. They are lifted in relation to the street. They have gables with circular windows within them. The gables align with two storey projections and ground floor bays below. Each elevation has a rendered upper floor and decorative timber porch.
Alexandra Palace at the end of Dukes Ave

UPDATE

Over 100 years after development, the houses of the Regal Avenues remain relatively unaltered. The area is distinctly Edwardian. A major change concerns the roads. Gone are the gravel roads. These were churned up with horses' hooves and their droppings. Tarmac was introduced as a road covering, and then asphalt, positive improvements. Motorized traffic replaced horse-drawn transport. Now we have increasing traffic congestion, road markings, traffic lights, traffic islands, pedestrian crossings, bus lanes and vehicles parked where ever they can, including in front gardens. One wonders how Muswell Hill will be in another 100 years.

DEFINITIONS

1. Mansard roof: a roof having two slopes on all sides with the lower slope steeper than the upper.
2. Fish-scale bands: a variety of overlapping “scales” in a regular arrangement.
3. Half hip roof: a roof with a gable but the upper point of the gable is replaced by a small hip, squaring off the top of the gable.
4. Oriel windows: bay windows projecting from a wall supported by projections jutting out from the wall.
5. Quoins: masonry blocks at the corner of a wall. They exist in some cases to provide actual strength for a wall and in other cases to make a feature of a corner, creating an impression of permanence and strength.

SOURCES

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