



Enfield Museum, Local Studies
and Library Service
www.enfield.gov.uk

London Borough of Enfield Local History Sheets.

Enfield a brief history



The London Borough of Enfield was formed in 1965 by an amalgamation of the former boroughs of Edmonton, Enfield and Southgate. It comprises the two ancient parishes of Edmonton and Enfield, both formerly in the County of Middlesex. (Southgate was part of Edmonton prior to 1881.)

Enfield lies in the extreme north-east corner of the old county of Middlesex. Its eastern boundary is formed by the River Lee, on the opposite bank of which lie the Essex parishes of Chingford and Waltham Abbey. To the north, across the Hertfordshire border, Enfield directly abuts the parishes of Cheshunt and Northaw. Along its western boundary, Enfield adjoins East Barnet (Hertfordshire) and the Middlesex parishes of Monken Hadley and South Mimms.

The highest ground lies on the western side from where it slopes down to the floor of the Lee Valley. The River Lee today is a fairly sluggish affair, much reduced by over-abstraction to quench the thirst of London, and straitjacketed by flood prevention measures. However, the sheer dimensions of the valley suggest that in the past the river had been a much mightier affair. It had its origins at the end of the last ice age when the water from melting glaciers was escaping to the sea, in the process depositing large amounts of silt and gravel. (The Lee Valley gravel deposits have been extensively worked to feed the demands of the construction industry. The evidence of large-scale abstraction of gravel and brickearth is written large on Enfield's landscape.)

On the eastern side of the parish, between the Hertford Road and the Lee, the land was low-lying and, close to the river, prone to flooding; it was mostly used as grazing land. The main area of arable land lay between the Hertford Road and the Enfield Town/Bulls Cross axis where the soil, well-drained and friable brickearth, if well manured, was capable of producing good crops of grain. Significantly, this area was one of the last parts of Enfield to be built upon. The high ground of Enfield Chase remained heavily wooded into fairly recent times and the soil, a heavy clay, even with modern farming equipment, has never been particularly good agricultural land.

The other local watercourses all drain directly or indirectly into the Lee. Pymmes Brook rises in the Hadley Wood area and runs through East Barnet, Southgate and Upper Edmonton before joining the Lee at Tottenham. Salmons Brook rises on Enfield Chas, passing under Hadley Road and Slades Hill, before crossing into Edmonton near Bush Hill and joining Pymmes Brook near Angel Road Station. Turkey Brook and its various tributaries rise across the border in Hertfordshire. It passes beneath Whitewebbs Lane, Flash Lane and Maidens Bridge before running alongside Turkey Street and beneath the Hertford Road at the Woolpack Bridge to join the Lee near the Royal Small Arms Factory. (The present course between the Woolpack Bridge and the Lee is an artificial cut probably made in the early nineteenth century. The old course ran south alongside the Hertford Road, before swinging eastwards across the marshes close to Bell Lane.) The Saddlers Mill Stream rises close to the northern end of Chase Side, passing under Parsonage Lane and the New River and across what is now the Enfield Grammar School playing field. Crossing Holly Walk, it runs beneath Church Street close to the main Post Office and the across what is now the Town Park. It then goes under London Road, Village Road and Wellington Road and winds a circuitous course through the Bury Street/Bounces Road area of

Edmonton before linking up with Salmons Brook. This watercourse has now almost entirely disappeared from view, having been culverted for most of its length, though a short stretch still runs open through Bush Hill Park which can be seen from Wellington Road and Village Road

Relatively little is known of the area in prehistoric times. The remains of two earthworks at Bush Hill and Hadley Wood and a thin scattering of archaeological finds provide firm evidence of the presence of early man. However, there is insufficient evidence on which to base any very definite conclusion as to the nature of life in the area at this time.

Of the Roman period much more is known. The Roman road from London to York (Ermine Street) crossed the borough from south to north. Tottenham High Road and Bulls Cross still follow the alignment of this road. Substantial evidence of Roman settlement has been found at Churchfields (immediately south of Bury Street) at various dates between 1929 and 1971 and in the Lincoln Road/Main Avenue area of Bush Hill during redevelopment in the mid nineteen-seventies.

The Anglo-Saxon period is somewhat obscure. Enfield lay within the territory of the East Saxons whose capital was London. In the year 894 the River Lee briefly formed the front line in King Alfred's war against the invading Danes. This must have been a difficult time for the inhabitants of Edmonton and Enfield.

By the time of the Domesday survey of 1086 both Edmonton and Enfield were well established. Both parishes were then held by Geoffrey de Mandeville. (The de Mandevilles later became Earls of Essex. Their principal land holdings were in Essex and included castles at Pleshey and Saffron Walden.) Edmonton had been held before the conquest by Ansgar who had held the office of Constable to King Edward the Confessor. The entries for both parishes provide clear evidence of the large amount of forest that survived at that time. Each had sufficient woodland to support 2,000 pigs. (Nearby Tottenham had only enough woodland to feed 500 pigs.) The woodland in Enfield subsequently formed the basis of Enfield Chase, which was enclosed in 1136.

In 1290 Enfield and Edmonton witnessed the funeral procession of Eleanor of Castile, Queen of King Edward I. She died at Harby, Nottinghamshire while travelling north to join the king who was engaged in military operations in Scotland. The body was brought back for burial at Westminster Abbey. The Eleanor Cross at Waltham Cross commemorates one of the overnight stops on the journey back to London.

The Black Death hit Enfield during 1349. The devastation was such that in December of that year in the Manor of Worcesters alone there were sixty acres of land for which no tenant could be found. There is no evidence of Enfield's participation in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. However, as Essex was one of the principal areas of insurrection and there were major outbreaks of violence as close as Hertford, St. Albans and Barnet, it is unlikely that Enfield was completely unaffected.

In the next century the Wars of the Roses saw three major battles in the area immediately north of London. There were two battles fought at St. Albans in 1455 and 1461. Even closer to home was the battle of Barnet, fought on Easter Sunday 1471 on the edge of Enfield Chase close to Monken Hadley village. The result was an overwhelming victory for the Yorkist forces under King Edward IV and the death on the battlefield of the Earl of Warwick ('the Kingmaker'). The impact on Enfield must have been considerable, as it is known that after the battle Lancastrian fugitives were hunted down through neighbouring villages.

The Tudor period made a considerable impact on the area. The dissolution of the monasteries resulted in a wholesale redistribution of land. At this time an estate in Southgate, formerly belonging to the nunnery of St. Mary Clerkenwell, passed into private hands, becoming the Arnos Grove Estate. (The last remnant of this survives as Arnos Park.) The early sixteenth century saw attempts by landowners to enclose land from the common fields. These attempts provoked fierce resistance from the commoners of Edmonton and Enfield.

The sixteenth century also saw the first serious attempts to improve the navigation of the River Lee. The river had always been navigable after a fashion but there were problems during times of drought when the water level fell. In 1571 an Act of Parliament was passed for improving the navigation from London to Ware. The work involved cutting back of osier beds, removal of obstructions from the river bed, and, at Waltham Abbey, the construction of the first ever pound lock in England. The improved river was used mainly for the carriage of malt from Ware into London. As this traffic had previously gone by road, many Enfield maltmen suffered a dramatic fall in income. The resulting unrest culminated in 1581 in the attempts to cut the banks of the river near Green Street and to destroy the lock at Waltham.

Owing to the proximity of the area to London, many people prominent in the affairs of state in the Tudor period had connections with Enfield, Sir Thomas Lovell, Chancellor to Henry VII and Speaker of the House of Commons, lived at Elsynges, a large house formerly standing to the north of Forty Hall. He died there in 1524. William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Secretary of state 1558/72 and Lord high treasurer 1572/98, was a major landowner in Southgate and Edmonton. (The principal property held by Cecil in Edmonton was the Pymmes Estate, now Pymmes Park.) Also, Sir Thomas Wroth and his son, Sir Robert Wroth, prominent M.P.s in the reign of Elizabeth, both lived at Durants Arbour, Ponders End.

King James I passed through Enfield in 1603 on his journey south from Scotland to assume the throne. One of his favourite residences was Theobalds which he acquired from the Cecils in 1607. It was here that he died in 1625.

In 1632, the people of Enfield put into effect a market charter previously granted by King James I. A house called 'The Vine' was pulled down and the space used to create a market place.

By the early seventeenth century, as the Thames became increasingly polluted, London was desperately short of clean drinking water. Hugh

Myddelton, a Welshman from Denbigh, devised a scheme to construct a canal to bring fresh water from springs near Ware to a reservoir on the outskirts of the City at Clerkenwell. The New River, as it was called, was complete by 1613.

The course of the New River runs through Enfield from the Enfield/Cheshunt boundary at Bullsmoor Lane to the Palmers Green/Wood Green boundary south of Bowes Road. The course has been considerably shortened over the years. An abandoned loop, much of it still holding water can be seen, in Whitewebbs Park. Its most spectacular feature was a timber and lead aqueduct crossing the valley of Salmons Brook at Bush Hill, later replaced by an embankment.

During the Civil War, Enfield and Edmonton, along with most of the Home Counties, strongly supported the parliamentary cause. The nearest action took place at Brentford in autumn of 1642. One local casualty of the Civil War was Rev. William Muffett, Vicar of Edmonton from 1631. Muffett was a royalist faced with a congregation that was predominantly puritan and parliamentary in sympathy. In 1642 he was expelled from the living. A contemporary pamphlet accuses him of being 'a common frequenter of alehouses and taverns, and a common swearer, curser, and blasphemer'. Nevertheless, Muffett was re-instated in 1660 and remained Vicar until his death in 1679.

During the Commonwealth period large parts of Enfield Chase were enclosed and allocated to former parliamentary soldiers. This upset local people who had been used to exercising grazing rights on the Chase. Matters came to a head in 1659 in the form of violent confrontations between the commoners and the soldiers. After the restoration in 1660, the soldiers were removed and the Chase was allowed to revert to its former state.

The main event of the eighteenth century was the enclosure of Enfield Chase. This had been a royal hunting ground since it had been acquired by the future King Henry IV through his marriage to Mary de Bohun. The Chase was enclosed following an Act of Parliament of 1777. Although the bulk of the land remained in Enfield, parts of the Chase were allocated to Edmonton, Monken Hadley and South Mimms in lieu of grazing rights formerly exercised by those parishes.

Road maintenance had been a parish responsibility since the mid-sixteenth century. With limited resources from a highway rate, the parish authorities could keep the local roads in reasonable order, filling in the worst of the pot holes, but the task of maintaining heavily used trunk roads, such as the Old North Road through Enfield, was manifestly beyond them. The fact that the majority of the road users came from the outside the parish was hardly an incentive to greater efforts on the part of the parish officials.

A precedent was set in 1663 with the establishment of what later became the Wadesmill Turnpike Trust. This body took over a stretch of the busy Old North Road in Hertfordshire with powers to improve the road and recover the costs from users in the form of tolls. In 1713 an Act of Parliament established the Stamford Hill Turnpike Trust to take over a substantial section of the same road from the northern edge of Shoreditch through to the Middlesex-Hertfordshire boundary at Waltham Cross. The Trust later took over Green

Lanes from Newington Green to Enfield Town and some link roads such as Church Street, Edmonton. Standards of road maintenance improved considerably and journey times between Enfield and London were much reduced. The Stamford Hill and Green Lanes Turnpike lasted until 1826 when its powers were transferred to the newly formed Metropolis Turnpike Trust.

The eighteenth century also saw the construction of the present Rive Lee Navigation following an Act of Parliament of 1766. The work was carried out under the supervision of John Smeaton who was also responsible for building the third Eddystone Lighthouse.

Enfield attained brief prominence in 1754 as a result of the Elizabeth Canning kidnapping case. Early in 1754 Elizabeth Canning, an eighteen-year-old servant girl, turned up at her mother's home at Aldermanbury in a dishevelled, and emaciated condition. The girl claimed to have been set upon by two men at Houndsditch who, after robbing her, dragged her several miles to a house, where she had been held against her will and attempts were made to force her into prostitution. She had eventually escaped by prising loose a board covering a first floor window and jumped down to the ground and had then found her way back home.

From Elizabeth's description the place of her imprisonment was identified as Mother Well's house at Enfield - this was a house of ill repute, formerly a pub which stood on the corner of Ordnance Road and the Hertford Road, opposite the Sun and Woolpack. The house was searched and Susannah Wells, Virtue Hall and a gypsy woman called Mary Squires, who had been sentenced to death, was in the event pardoned. There then followed an even more sensational trial in which Elizabeth Canning found herself in the dock accused of perjury. Found guilty, she was sentenced to transportation to the American Colonies. The Canning case remains controversial, having inspired many books over a long period. The truth will probably never be established.

As the eighteenth century moved on, the movement for agricultural improvement gained momentum. The pressures of war at the end of the century gave an added incentive to the maximisation of agricultural production. Enclosure Acts were passed for Edmonton in 1800 and Enfield 1801. The result was the extinction of the open field system of farming which had existed since at least the Conquest, in favour of more modern farming methods.

The early nineteenth century saw the first signs of industrialisation in the form of Grout and Baylis' crape factory at Ponders End (1809) and the Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield Lock (1815). The latter was to become one of the most important single employers in Enfield.

The first railway line reached Enfield in 1840 with the opening of the first section of the Cambridge main line from Stratford to Broxbourne. There were stations at Water Lane (Angel Road) and Ponders End. A single track branch line was opened from Angel Road to Enfield Town in 1849. In 1872 the Great Eastern Railway opened the direct line to Enfield Town, via Bethnal Green and Hackney Downs and in 1874 opened a new City terminus at Liverpool Street.

On the other side of district, in 1850, the Great Northern Railway opened the main line from London to Peterborough with a station at Colney Hatch (New Southgate). In 1871 a branch was opened to Enfield with stations at Palmers Green and Winchmore Hill. The line was later extended to Cuffley (1910) and to Hertford and Stevenage (1924).

The contrasting policies of the two railway companies were to have vast and largely unforeseen consequences for the area. The Great Eastern specialised in exceptionally cheap workmen's fares and, wherever it went, attracted working class commuters in large numbers. The Great Northern, by way of contrast, was very much a first class season ticket line. This was to accentuate the social differences that were already emerging between the eastern and western sides of the district.

From the early eighteen-fifties onwards the population began to rise as commuters settled in the area. This process continued until after World War II, by which time the district was more or less fully developed. The houses that were built for Victorian commuters still figure prominently in the borough's housing stock.

The uneasy relationship between the affluent western part of Edmonton and the poorer eastern district blew apart in 1881. The citizens of the western side led by Sir Ralph Littler of Broomfield House, Palmers Green, obtained a private Act of Parliament creating the new district of Southgate.

The first tramway locally was a horse tramway from Stamford Hill to Edmonton opened in 1881. Electrified in 1904, it was then extended along the Hertford Road reaching Waltham Cross in 1908. Along Green Lanes another electric tramway reached Winchmore Hill in 1907 and was extended to Enfield Town in 1909.

Education became a local government responsibility only after the 1870 Education Act. The Edmonton School Board was set up in 1880, followed by the Enfield School Board in 1894. Many of their school buildings are still in use. The 1902 Education Act saw the abolition of school boards with their powers transferred to local authority education committees.

World War I saw the creation of large numbers of munitions factories in the Lee Valley. After the war they were mainly sold off as ready-made factory units. Two major industrial estates (Angle Road, Edmonton and Wharf Road, Ponders End) started out in this fashion. Further factory sites became available alongside the Great Cambridge Road and the North Circular Road, which were both constructed in the twenties.

The opening of the Cockfosters extension of the Piccadilly Line (1932/3) resulted in a building boom along the western side of Southgate which had hitherto remained relatively rural. By 1939 large amounts of farmland had disappeared forever beneath neat rows of semi-detached houses.

During World War II Enfield suffered extensive bomb damage. German and Italian prisoners of war were held locally - Trent Park became an officers' interrogation centre. Local furniture factories made parts for the Mosquito bomber which was constructed almost entirely of wood.

Since World War II, the Green Belt laws have prevented further expansion of development into rural areas. There has been considerable re-development in many parts of the district. The fifties and sixties saw major local authority housing schemes, particularly in Edmonton, East Enfield and New Southgate. In the private sector, many larger Victorian houses, particularly in Southgate, Bush Hill Park and the Ridgeway area, have been demolished to make way for blocks of flats.

The most dramatic change of recent years has been the construction of the M25 motorway, completed in 1986. This road, the initial plans of which were prepared as long ago as 1924, has dramatically improved communications, with the result that the area has now become very attractive to companies specialising in warehousing and distribution.

FURTHER READING

DALLING, Graham
Enfield Past. 1999.

DALLING, Graham
Southgate and Edmonton Past. 1996.

DUMAYNE, Alan
Fond memories of Winchmore Hill. 1990.

DUMAYNE, Alan
Once upon a time in Palmers Green. 1988.

DUMAYNE, Alan
Southgate: a glimpse into the past. 1987.

PAM, David
A history of Enfield. 3 vols. 1990/94.

PAM, David
The story of Enfield Chase. 1984.

VICTORIA County History of Middlesex.
Vol. V. 1976.