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"The Story of St. John's Wood"
written and illustrated by
Thea Doniach.

London 1955.

THE STORY OF St. JOHN'S WOOD

"The fields from Islington to Marylebone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold,
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood."

"Jerusalem" William Blake.

"To obtain a true picture of any period, both the old and the new elements must be borne in mind... There is nothing that more divides civilized from semi-savage man than to be conscious of our forefathers as they really were, and bit by bit to reconstruct the mosaic of the long forgotten past. To weigh the stars, or to make ships sail in the air or below the sea, is not a more astonishing and ennobling performance on the part of the human in these latter days than to know the course of events that had been long forgotten and the true nature of men and women who were here before us."

"English Social History" G.M. Trevelyan.

The vanished world of yesterday still pervades in spirit a great part of St. John's Wood. A mist of romance envelops this district in spite of buses and cars and the huge blocks of flats which rise like mushroom growths overnight.

Its heyday was in Queen Victoria's reign and a smug complacency typical of that time can still be felt. These were the days when St. John's Wood shared with Chelsea the honour of being the home of artists, but on a more opulent and truly Victorian scale.

Its history, however, goes back many hundreds of years, to the time of the Romans when the great forest of Middlesex covered much of the northern approach to Londinium.

The Romans built several roads through the forest, probably to ease the transport of materials for the construction of Watling Street, a straight road running from what is now Marble

Arch all the way north to Chester. One of these roads skirted the district later named St. John's Wood.

When the Roman occupation ceased, the forest returned to its primeval state and became once again the haunt of the boar, the buck and the wild bull.

In the 11th.c. mention is made of Tybourne in the Domesday Book. It was then a village close to the forest. Its church, dedicated to St. John the Evangelist fell in ruins. It was rebuilt, probably in 1400, or thereabouts, on the banks of a brook, which in Old Saxon was called a 'bourne'. Dedicated to the Virgin, it took the name of St. Mary-at-the-bourne, corrupted later to St. Marylebourne, St. Marybone and finally to St. Marylebone, the name the district bears to-day.

St. John's Wood is part of this large and prosperous borough which, only 300 years ago was still a village three quarters of a mile away from any part of the Metropolis and surrounded by fields. Macaulay reminds us that at the end of the reign of Charles II "... cattle fed and sportsmen wandered with guns and dogs over the site of the borough of St Marylebone."

Some time in the 12th.c., the Hospitallers

of St. John of Jerusalem became the owners of a part of the great forest and named this new property Great St. John's Wood to distinguish it from Little St. John's Wood which they also owned near Islington.

Ernest Low in his history of Hampton Court Palace, records that timber, mostly oak, was used in enormous quantities for the construction of the Great Hall, and was brought from Dorking, Holmwood, Leatherhead, Banstead, Bevewood and Great St. John's Wood. The construction was completed in 1538.

In 1540, on the dissolution of the monasteries and the suppression of the Hospitallers, one John Conway was appointed by Henry VIII as keeper of the Wood. It would seem that the forest, by reason of its timber and its game, was retained by the Crown and not given away to favourite courtiers as the King was wont to do with Church property.

James II continued to use it as a royal 'huntinge ground' as is evident from the record in the royal accounts of a grant of £20 per annum made to Robert Stacey for keeping the King's deer in St. John's Wood.

When Queen Elizabeth came to the throne, Marylebone Park Fields (now known as Regent's Park), bordering St. John's Wood, was also a royal hunting ground. At the time of the visit of the Duke of Anjou, later King Henry III of France to seek the hand of the Virgin Queen, the Duke and the noblemen who formed his retinue, watched an elaborate hunting display in the Park.

In Elizabeth's day we are told that affairs of honour were frequently fought in the Park. According to royal and noble authors, a duel which attracted a considerable amount of attention was fought in the lonely fields of Old Marylebone Park:

"Sir Charles Blount, afterwards Earl of Devonshire, a very comely young man, having distinguished himself at a tilt, Her Majesty sent him a "Chess Queen of gold enamelled" which he tied upon his arm with

a crimson ribband. Essex, perceiving this, said with affected scorn: 'Now I perceive that every fool must have a favour!' At this, Sir Charles fought him in the Marybone Park, disarmed him and wounded him in the thigh."

"... every fool must have a favour!..."

But it was in Great St. John's Wood that in 1586, Babington, grandson of Lord Darnley, with two of his fellow conspirators hid, after the plot against Queen Elizabeth's life and his attempt to put Mary on the throne had been discovered by Lord Burghley. They succeeded in concealing themselves for ten days, until they were discovered and finally hanged.

In the twenty first year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, a wealthy yeoman and founder of Harrow School, one John Lyon, native of Preston, bequeathed by will, on trust to the keepers of Harrow School, together with 'other farm lands in Paddington, the rents and profits to be applied for keeping in good repair the common highway between London and Harrow, via the town of Edgware.'


School
Harrow

At the time of Charles' I execution, the ancient 'huntinge ground' of Marybone was disparked, the herd of deer and old timber disposed of, and what had been a favourite 'rendez-vous' of royalty from the middle of the 16th c. ceased to be kept as a royal preserve and was thrown open to the people.

But the forest of St. John's Wood itself must have been a wild and remote district as Ben Johnson in his comedy "Tales of a Tub", written in 1633, refers to it thus:

"Hilts: My captain and myself
Having occasion to come rieling by here,
This morning, at the corner of St. John's Wood,
Some mile o' this town, were set upon
By a sort of country fellows that not only
Beat us, but robbed us most sufficiently,
And bound us to our behaviour hand and
foot: And so they left us."

There is no doubt that from then on to the Restoration, these woods were an ideal hiding place for robbers, conspirators and outlaws.

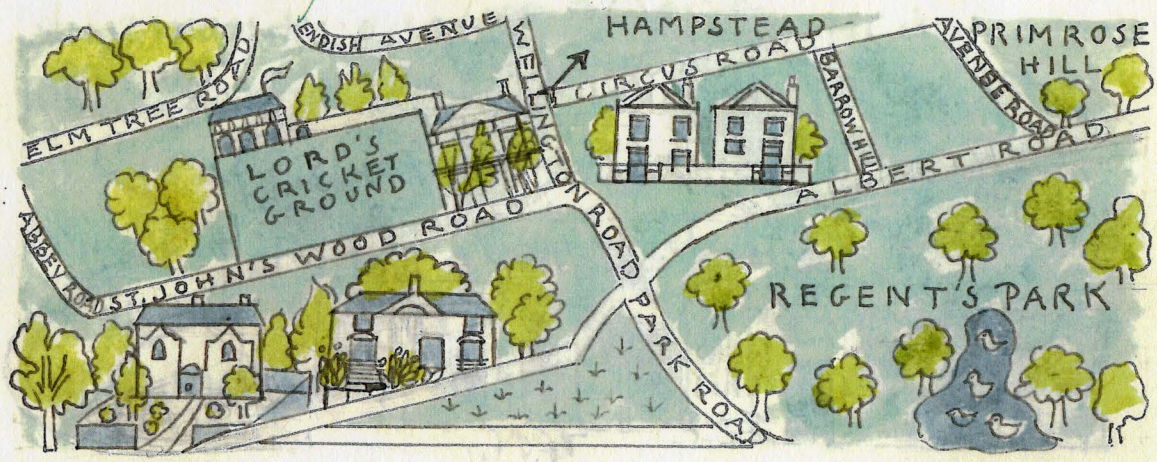
When Charles II came to the throne and the Monarchy was restored, the King resumed possession of two-thirds of St. John's Wood which had been sold. Later he bestowed these lands to Lord Wotton of Wotton who owned the Manor of Belsize close by. It was his descendant, the 4th. Earl of Chesterfield who sold it to a rich merchant of Bishopsgate, Samuel Eyre, in 1732. Most of St. John's Wood, apart from that owned by the Harrow Estate, is still in the possession of the Eyre family.

By the 18th.c. the disafforesting of Middlesex was complete and the great forest had given place to arable lands and to farms. But Samuel Eyre's tenants do not seem to have prospered greatly as, at the time of his death in 1754, most of them were 2½ years in arrears with their rents.

Better days however were in store for St. John's Wood. The Prince Regent was dreaming of a palace in the centre of Marylebone Park. All eyes were turned towards the north-western approaches to the capital. The plan was never realised but Nash built his famous terraces and crescents round the Park, which he redesigned, and which became known as Regent's Park, bearing the name of the Prince who sponsored the scheme.

Meanwhile, the Eyre Estate had planned a complete scheme for developing St. John's Wood. The plan, put forward by Spurrier and Phipps and called after them, included the usual elements: squares, crescents, streets, markets, but the remarkable and entirely new departure was that the whole development consisted of pairs of semi-detached houses with gardens. Until then, the usual formula for big towns had been the terrace house.

It is the first recorded scheme of this kind and was to become universal in the 19th.c., though the plan itself was never carried out as originally conceived in 1794. It was, as John Summerson points out in his "Georgian London", the first part of London and indeed of any other town, to abandon the terrace house for the semi-detached villa, "a revolution of striking importance and far reaching effect." The house in its own grounds appealed to the new middle classes, anxious to ape the country squire. As a residential area, St. John's Wood was now on the map.



In 1814, St. John's Wood Chapel (now known as St. John's Church), was built by Hardwick on the site of an old plague pit where thousands had been buried in 1665. It stands at the cross roads leading into St. John's Wood, an imposing structure with white pillars and well proportioned windows. The church is surrounded by a disused burial ground where children play on roundabouts and swings: and flowers grow among the crumbling gravestones. Close by is Regent's Park and the zoo. As you sit quietly in these gardens, you may wonder if it is the roar of the traffic going North, or the lions that can be heard...

Strange people are buried here, among the respectable or the famous, in this old burial ground. One of these is Joanna Southcott, a religious fanatic who believed she was to be the Mother of a future Messiah: 'The Bride and the Lamb's wife'! She made many converts, until finally the would-be prophetess was laid to rest, a broken old woman of 62, while her disciples waited for a Babe to be born and held onto a casket they believed contained secret and holy relics.

A little further down the road is the famous home of the M.C.C. which Thomas Lord, an enthusiastic cricketer and a Yorkshireman founded in Dorset Square in 1787 and which bears his name. When the lease expired in 1810, he was obliged to leave and eventually bought land in St. John's Wood in 1814. The building is 'a jumble without aesthetic aspirations' as Nikolaus Pevner puts it in his "Buildings of London;"

but it is to 'Lord's' that cricket enthusiasts flock in their thousands from all parts of the world. For them, St. John's Wood is a remote district of London whose unique claim to fame is that one of the finest sports is played on its green fields.

Meanwhile the 'Wood' was discovered — Mrs. Siddons, the famous actress who lived on its southern edges had sung its praises, and, between Waterloo year and the end of the reign of George IV, thousands of

small detached and semi-detached villas with walled in gardens had been built there.

Soon it became fashionable to own a 'country house' in the new suburb. It was fairly remote, yet accessible from town and several ladies of great beauty, with rich and influential friends, made it their home.

During his exile, Louis Napoleon came to St. John's Wood where he shared the home of Elizabeth Anne Hargett, alias Howard, a famous beauty of the time. When he became Emperor of France, he rewarded her for her help and the financial assistance she gave him during his exile by making her a countess and giving her the Château of Beauregard. Later, she used to embarrass the Emperor Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie, by staring at them as they drove in their 'caleche' and she in hers down the Champs Elysées and the Bois de Boulogne,

now, alas, only a pathetic old woman at whose feet a Prince had once kneeled!...

At the beginning of this century, Lily Langtry, the well known music-hall actress, used to receive Edward VII secretly in her house in 'the Wood', and for many years afterwards, the district was known as "The Abode of Love and the Fine Arts". But though, up to the second world war a faint air of impropriety clung to its name, St. John's Wood has other greater claims to fame.

It is here that George Eliot wrote most of her novels; in her drawing room that men and women gathered on her famous Sundays to exchange ideas in all realms of thought; that some of the greatest thinkers of the time came to sit at the feet of this gifted and extraordinary personality. Her house at North Bank, where she lived with her devoted 'husband' G.H. Lewis, was surrounded by a garden full of roses. Alas! a railway now runs through the grounds where they once blossomed.

Thomas Hood, the poet, lived and died in St. John's Wood, Herbert Spencer, philosopher and educationalist made it his home, and the great scientist, Thomas, Henry Huxley resided there for over forty years. This interesting story is told about him:

After the appearance of "The Origin

of Species", a dinner was held by the British Association at Oxford, when the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, a wit who prided himself on being a scientist, made a sarcastic attack on Huxley saying that rock pigeons were what rock pigeons had always been. Huxley then, at the end of a peroration that has become famous, a reasoned defence of the Darwinian theory, made this retort:

"A man has no reason to be ashamed of having an ape as his grand-father. If there was an ancestor whom I should feel shame in recalling it would rather be man — a man of restless and versatile intellect, who, not content with success in his own sphere of activity, plunges into scientific questions with which he has no real acquaintance, only to obscure them by an aimless rhetoric and distract the

attention of his hearers from the real point at issue by eloquent digressions and skilled appeals to religious prejudice."

A virulent battle raged throughout the latter part of the 19th.c. between upholders of religion on the one hand and those of science on the other. The 20th.c. has recognised that, as Trevelyan puts it: "the whole truth about the Universe cannot be discovered in the laboratory or divined by the Church."

"...A man has no reason to be ashamed of having an ape as his grand-father..."

Amongst the first artists to make St. John's Wood his home was the animal painter, Edwin Landseer. His house became a 'rendez-vous' of some of the leading personalities of the day. Many amusing stories are told about him, he loved a joke, though sometimes the joke was on him. Dickens, who was a friend of Landseer, recounts the following incident: during one of the artist's famous gatherings, his faithful servant William came in and asked: "Sir, did you order a lion?" The guests were greatly dismayed, and so was the host, until the lion was found to be a dead one sent by the Zoo. It had passed away that morning and, as it had been a favourite model of the artist, the authorities thought that he might like to have it!

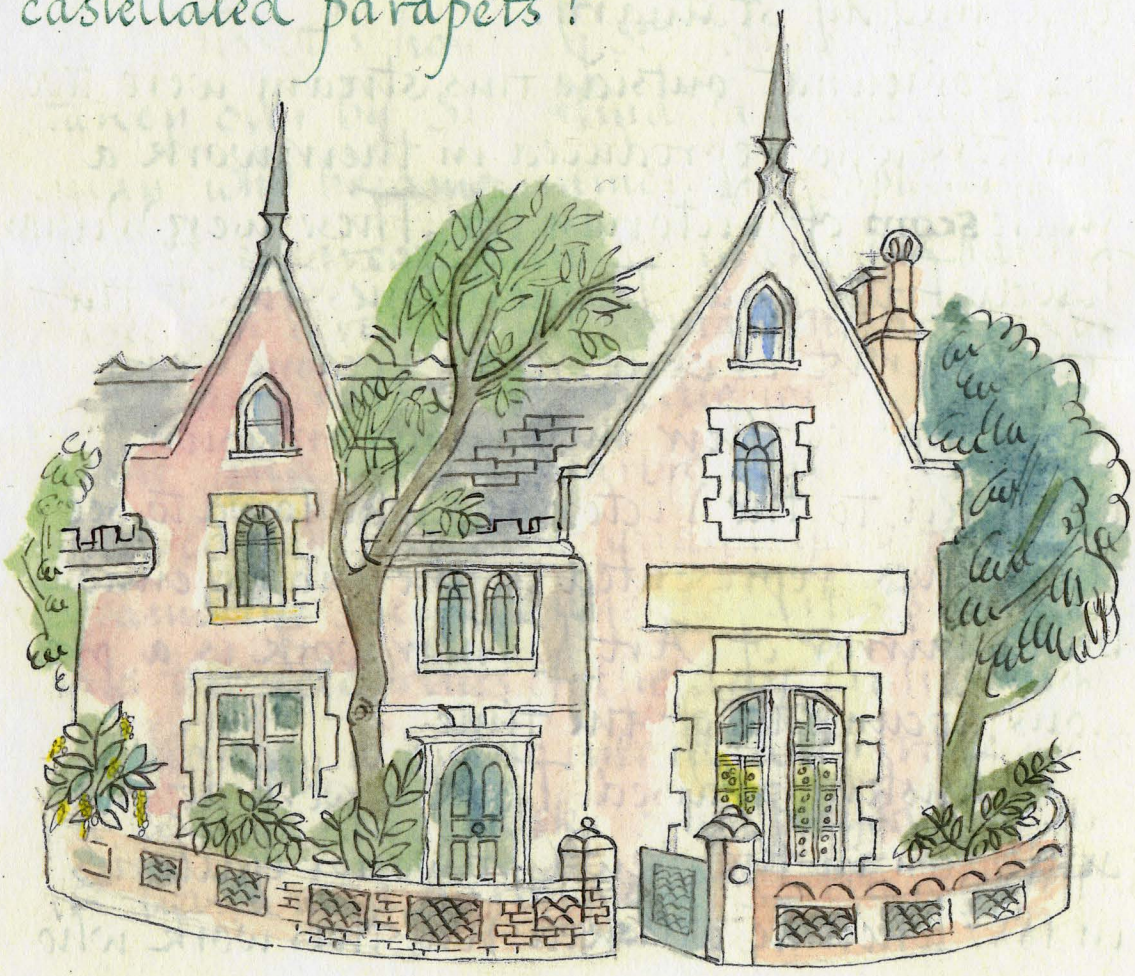
When Landseer's famous lions at Trafalgar Square were unveiled in 1867, "The Times" wrote this extravagant tribute:

"The lions were uncovered yesterday

afternoon, and we may say confidently that no street, no square in this metropolis boasts of any finer work of art. Never before has the king of beasts been so nobly and so truthfully treated in sculpture and it is difficult to know which to admire more, the vitality of this creation or its majesty... we but echo the general feeling when we express our pride in this monument being a national possession..."

In those days, almost every house in St. John's Wood boasted a studio where artists could work undisturbed amongst the shade of trees and blossoms 'far from the madding crowd'. A new generation of rich merchants had arisen who had made fortunes in the North. They were anxious to acquire the trimmings and appearance of culture. A recognised measure of their gentility was the number of square yards of paintings on the walls of their new mansions and they were willing to pay large sums of money for these. An essential for success in a picture was that it should have a poetic or dramatic theme, that it should tell a story. Subjects from contemporary life were considered 'low', so the painters of the 19th.c. turned to mediaeval days for inspiration, under the influence of Walter Scott and Wagner... They painted knights and troubadours,

dragons and distant castles enveloped in mist. This escape towards the past inspired Ruskin to want a railway station to look like a church and a factory to look like a castle. Nearly every house had to have a pointed arch, gothic windows and castellated parapets!



Artists and sculptors catered for these clients who paid well. Amongst them were Sir Alma Tadema, McWhirter, John Adams-Acton, Briton Rivière and many others. They all lived in St. John's Wood where there was room in their studios for those large canvases and mighty statuary.

Somewhat outside this stream were two painters who reproduced in their work a microscom of Victorian life. These were William Powell Frith and Jacques James Tissot, the French artist in exile. Both became very fashionable; their meticulous precision appealed to the Victorians who loved to see themselves represented in the magic, ennobling mirror of Art! Their work is a precious document of the time.

Ruskin praised Tissot's work at the exhibition in the new Grosvenor Galleries in 1887 when he attacked Whistler's work who

later sued him in the libel suit which became famous. An unhappy love affair is said to have turned Tissot from a 'man about town' to a religious convert. He went to Palestine to paint Bible scenes in their original setting. He ended his days in a monastery in France.

Tissot's house in St. John's Wood was taken over by Sir Alma Tadema, a Dutchman who became immensely popular and who took great pains to make his paintings, based on Greek and Roman themes, historically accurate. His studio with its silver dome and green marble walls, its burnished copper staircase and playing fountain became the social centre for artists, musicians and the celebrities of the day. In his huge studio was a piano inlaid with rare woods on which Paderewski often played. Inside its lid was a parchment scroll where the

distinguished musicians signed their names. In the garden of his house still stands a Corinthian colonnade which Tissot had copied from one in the Parc Monceau in Paris. It is now crumbling, a sad memorial to the rise and fall of the great.

Near by stands the house where John Adams-Acton lived. His name is now almost forgotten, though his effigies of Cardinal Manning, Mr. Gladstone and Queen Victoria still adorn public squares, cathedrals and churches all over the land. There is an amusing story told about him and Millais. One day, the painter who was visiting him, asked him why he did not take pupils as this was a remunerative occupation. Acton answered that this would be a bore and a waste of time. "Not at all," said the painter; "all you have to do is to put your student downstairs in one of your studios, give him a lump of clay, and every time you pass by, give him a kick!"

...“and every time you pass by, give him a kick!...”

John Adams-Acton had a remarkable wife called Jeanie. She was born on the Island of Arran, illegitimate child of Douglas, Duke of Hamilton. Though busy with a large family, she wrote many books for children, including "The Story of a Perambulator," an account of how she walked from "Sunnyside," her home in St. John's Wood, to Scotland, with two nannies and six children, including a baby in a pram! The journey took seven weeks. Quite an achievement for a middle class lady living in Queen Victoria's days...

Garden view of "Sunnyside" now.

The Queen died, and Edward VII succeeded her and life for the middle and upper classes continued to run on well oiled wheels. The rumble of the Great War was still too distant to be heard, and battles raged over more trivial causes.

A group of artists who called themselves the "Gridirons" lived in 'the Wood'. Linked by two common aims: to criticize each others work truthfully, and to become R.A's, they painted, with sublime confidence in the rectitude of common ideas. They were therefore greatly perturbed to discover the existence of a rival brotherhood of artists, the Pre-Raphaelites, who did not share their views. Stacey Marks, mouthpiece of the group opened war on them. The Pre-Raphaelites hit back with those lines:

"Of that school Marks his horror discloses,
Yet paints, we are all well aware;
Mediaeval old cocks with red noses,

But objects to young girls with red hair!"

Alas, grimmer wars have been fought since those far-off days when peace and good-will could be won over a glass of beer or a game of darts at the "Eyre Arms Tavern" round the corner! From its roof all London could be seen and there were no buildings to hide the fine view. But the clouds of war gathered – and one night a bomb fell, the precursor of many more... "The Eyre Arms" has gone and many houses in leafy gardens, hidden by tall walls behind which laburnum and lilac grew have vanished. Smug pseudo-georgian houses now stand in their place, and huge blocks of flats where children grow, enclosed by walls, in a 'new world' which has ceased to be 'brave' and is merely frightened of the dark future.

But close by, large schools are rising; they are streamlined and airy and are

surrounded by lawns and flowers. There, children from all classes work and play together. Every one of them stands a chance to acquire and to enjoy the good things of life, denied to all but the few in the 'good old days'.

Perhaps the world's problems will be solved by these children, the citizens of tomorrow.

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