

Mitcham

Mitcham is famous for many things – Cricket, the Fair, Lavender, Mitcham Common, the Anglo-Saxon Cemetery, the industries along the River Wandle.



Mitcham Bridge, The Watermeads and the Wandle Mills

The Wandle, probably already in use as a convenient territorial boundary before the Roman period, was crossed by a ford from which, by the Norman Conquest, Lower Mitcham had derived its alternative name of Wicford.

It was here, long before the Domesday survey was conducted in 1086, that a watermill had been built - on a site which, over the next 1,000 years, saw many mills come and go. Until the advent of steam power presaged the demise of the humble watermill, this was the industrial heart of Mitcham, its output ranging from flour and copper goods, through paper and snuff, to felt and upholstery fillings. Even now, one mill building survives, until recently occupied by a firm specialising in chiropody products. Planning consent was obtained in 2003 for converting the building into flats, and the development of the land to the rear for residential purposes.

Remarkably, for it might well have evolved into a factory estate, the vicinity of the mill remained one of the most picturesque in the whole of Mitcham. In no small measure this is attributable to the Wandle itself, for since the Middle Ages the river's banks provided sites for several large houses, the grounds of which were to survive, substantially intact, until the social upheavals of the early 20th century.

Ravensbury

Although the manor of Ravensbury included scattered holdings across Mitcham, the centre of the estate was that part of Lower Mitcham lying on the north bank of the river Wandle between Mitcham Bridge and Morden Hall Park, and bounded on the north by Morden Road, together with a large area south of the river, stretching as far as Central Road, Morden.

Within this area is the site of one of the largest Anglo-Saxon cemeteries known in southern England.

In the Middle Ages two large houses occupied sites by the waterside. Over a period of six centuries a succession of houses

here were to be the country residences of government officials and city merchants, bankers and industrialists, each of whom made their own contribution to the life of the village outside their gates.

The grand houses have now vanished, and with them the textile printing industry and snuff and tobacco manufactory for which the area was once renowned, but the Wandle still provides a visually attractive feature through Ravensbury Park.

The Cricket Green

The unique character of Mitcham's Lower Green, the eastern half of which is today known as the Cricket Green, was recognised by its declaration as a Conservation Area by the London Borough of Merton in 1969. The Green was formerly part of the expanse of largely uncultivated heath and woodland - the common 'waste' - which formed a substantial part of the parish throughout the Middle Ages.

By the time of the Norman Conquest, still forming part of an unbroken swathe of rough grazing land extending from today's Church Road eastwards as far as Commonsides East, the Lower Green served to separate the two Saxon 'vills' of 'Witford' and 'Michelham' recorded in the Domesday Survey.

Both sanctioned and unauthorised enclosures of land on the margins of the Green have diminished its extent, but a little over eight acres (3.25 ha) survive today as public recreational space. It is conceivable that here, in the Middle Ages, stood the archery butts, close by Mitcham's earliest recorded inn, the White Hart. Skilled bowmen may no longer be needed for the defence of England, but since the late 17th century the Lower Green has been the cradle of another sport whose stalwarts were able during the great days of village cricket to throw down a challenge to all comers, including visiting Australians.

The gradual development of the land peripheral to the Green has left an interesting history of building and rebuilding, as well as a legacy of architectural styles which, although modified in their translation to a village setting, nevertheless reflect trends and fashions throughout the Home Counties.

North Mitcham

On the map of the new London Borough of Merton, produced after the reorganisation of London Government in 1965, North Mitcham

Ward was shown as an area which comprised mainly early 20th-century housing, shops and light industry. On the south-east it was bounded by what was then British Rail's Southern Region line from Streatham to Mitcham Junction. Commonsides East and the A217 London Road lay to the south and west, whilst along its northern border flowed the river Graveney, the ancient boundary between the parishes of Mitcham and Tooting. In extent this was somewhat larger than the North Mitcham Ward known since the days of the Urban District Council in the 1920s, which had ended at Renshaw's Corner and excluded the industrial estates of Streatham Road. Sadly in 1965, merged with much of central Mitcham north and east of the old Fair Green, North Mitcham lost that special political identity which had emerged in the formative years of the Urban District after the end of the 1914-18 War. The process of boundary revision since 1965 has taken this loss of identity further, and for local electoral purposes North Mitcham has disappeared to become Figges Marsh and Graveney Wards. Physically, however, it is still identifiable as the triangle created by the London Road, the Borough boundary to the north, and the railway to the east. It is this clearly delineated area which shares with Colliers Wood the distinction of being the first part of old Mitcham to become engulfed by the expansion of London in the late 19th century. The history of North Mitcham therefore has a special interest of its own.

Lower Green West

Although it is 40 years since Mitcham was finally engulfed by the expansion of London, becoming part of the London Borough of Merton, it still has the good fortune to retain two 'village' greens, the Upper or Fair Green, and the much larger and visually more attractive Lower Green. Both are remnants of the broad sweep of heath and rough grazing land which in the Middle Ages extended beyond the parish boundary of Mitcham into Croydon and Beddington.

At the time of the Norman Conquest the Lower Green formed a wedge of common land separating what were then regarded as two distinct 'vills' - Whitford and Mitcham. The names are Anglo-Saxon in origin, and there is documentary reference to Mitcham early in the eighth century, but widespread archaeological evidence shows the locality to have been settled extensively throughout much of the Roman occupation. Examination of early maps, supported by the evidence from limited excavations carried out off Benedict Road, suggests a possible nucleus of settlement to the south of the parish church, occupied during both the second and third centuries AD and again in the late Saxon period. Nothing further is known of the area

until the tenth century, by which time the boundary between Mitcham and the neighbouring royal estate at Merton was well established, and Mitcham and Whitford lay for administrative purposes in the Hundred of Wallington.

Both were to be embraced by the emerging ecclesiastical parish of Mitcham by the mid-12th century, and Whitford gradually lost its separate identity during the later Middle Ages, becoming known as Lower Mitcham. The two separate portions of green lying either side of the London Road were known jointly as Lower Mitcham Green by the middle of the 18th century. Well into the 19th century, however, the term 'Whitford Green' continued to be used, both by local people and in the formal proceedings of the manor of Vauxhall by which, through their courts baron and leet, the dean and chapter of Canterbury exercised jurisdiction over this part of Mitcham.

By the late 19th century the two halves of the green, Lower Green West and the Cricket Green, lay at the geographical and administrative centre of the developing township of Mitcham, a fact to which emphasis was given by the opening of the Vestry Hall on Lower Green West in 1887.

Today Lower Green West and the Cricket Green, together with Cranmer Green and Three Kings Piece, form part of a Conservation Area extending from the parish church to Commonsides East.

Lower Mitcham

Although seemingly never defined precisely, Lower Mitcham can be considered as occupying the area north of the former Wimbledon to Croydon railway line (now the Tramlink) and between Baron Walk in the west and Jeppo's Lane to the east.

It formed part of the Domesday 'vill' of Whitford, which lay between the Lower Green and the river Wandle. However, little definite is known of the history of this locality before the mid-16th century when two large houses, each the country seat of a prosperous London merchant, emerge in the records. The early Stuart period saw the division of one of these estates and the erection of two further substantial houses, but the area was to retain its essentially rural character until the closing years of the 19th century.

The dramatic transformation of Mitcham from Surrey village to London suburb gathered momentum in the late Victorian period, and the development of part of the grounds of Mitcham Hall as a select residential estate before the turn of the century heralded far more extensive changes to come.

Church Street and Whitford Lane

The origins of a village or small town are among the most fascinating facets of its history, and yet often the least known. Mitcham is no exception and fragmentary evidence can be seen of a substantial community, probably well-established by the fourth century AD, continuing into the early Saxon period. Its focal point was a ditched enclosure to the south of what became known as Church Street, close by the site of the present parish church. The early settlement was surrounded by a field system, the boundaries of which can be traced today. There was a stone-built church by the 12th century, and the names of villagers are known from the late 13th. The development of what appears to have been envisaged as a planned village seems to have halted in the 14th century. However, the later development of Church Street can be traced in increasingly copious documentation following the Reformation, survival of a few attractive 18th-century houses, and the rebuilding of the church early in the 19th century. Thereafter came decline, with urbanisation, the building of factories, and increasing traffic. It was in the belief that the remaining features in Church Street (now part of Church Road) might be saved and enhanced that in 1995 the local council included this historic part of Mitcham within the Cricket Green Conservation Area.

The Upper or Fair Green

Although no buildings survive predating the close of the 18th century, the road pattern suggests that from the earliest times this must have been a primary focus of settlement in what became the parish and later the Borough of Mitcham. If we cannot describe the Upper Green as the actual village centre, it was clearly the commercial heart of the community for a very long period. As such, it provides a fascinating study in local history, telling us much of the evolution of the township.

The Upper Green was the site of Mitcham Fair until 1923.

Phipps Bridge

At Phipps Bridge the River Wandle marks the ancient boundary between Mitcham and Merton. The first reference to 'Pypesbrige' is in a Tudor document, but there is evidence of a settlement nearby in Roman times. Valued for its fishery and waterfowl in the Middle Ages, the river also became a focus of industry. 'Pippesmoln' was mentioned as early as 1263, to be followed centuries later by calico bleaching and printing works, a silk mill and eventually paint factories, all of which have now gone. Today an industrial estate

occupies the west, or Merton, bank of the river, whilst in Mitcham housing estates cover the former watermeadows and bleaching grounds. A bridge remains, however, giving access to the Wandle Trail, an attractive walk following the entire course of the river.

Colliers Wood or 'Merton Singlegate'

An outlying settlement within the future parish of Mitcham, Colliers Wood can be identified with a Saxon estate, and a substantial house may be traced back to the mid-15th century. Straddling the old Roman road to London, the hamlet had developed close to the Wandle crossing, and for its livelihood the community was oriented more towards Merton priory and Tooting than to its 'parent' village. By the 17th century the river was attracting textile processors, and a century later mills on the former priory site were major employers. Further industrialisation followed the extension of the railways. Colliers Wood House was not demolished until 1904, but suburban villas and terrace houses already covered much of its grounds. The last of the water-powered industries survived into the mid-20th century, and the character of the area is now predominantly residential, with a strong retail component.

The Cranmers, The Canons and Park Place

For some 250 years the Cranmers and their descendants the Simpsons held the lordship of the manor of Mitcham Canons and were major landowners in the parish. Two of the three large houses which branches of the family occupied during this period still survive. Among those who lived in them were East India merchants, a Cavalier, Huguenot emigrés, officers who served in the American War of Independence or in the Napoleonic Wars, a leading churchman and botanist, and many others. Each has a place in the story of Mitcham, and yet sadly few are remembered today. Only the Cranmers have been commemorated, in the name of the school now on the site of their mansion, the Green overlooked by all three houses, and two local roads.

Nearby lies the Three Kings Piece which, with adjacent roads, lies within the Cricket Green Conservation Area.

Willow Lane and Beddington Corner

The history of what became the Willow Lane industrial estate in the 20th century can be traced back to the Romano-British period, but it was from the late 16th century that industry was attracted to this part of Mitcham, where the Wandle was a source of pure water and, above all, power. In their time textile bleaching and printing, the production of dyes, leather manufacture, copper and flour milling

were to be found here, but all have now gone, to be replaced in the last century by a diversity of businesses. During the Victorian era, before development had commenced, market gardening and watercress growing were also major activities, supplying the London markets. This book is an attempt to bring together, as a coherent narrative, elements in the complex history of what still remains for many a little known corner of Mitcham.

Upper Mitcham and Western Road

Upper Mitcham and Western Road, the final volume in the Mitcham Histories series, is concerned with a relatively small area of Mitcham, and yet one of the most fascinating, with evidence of continuity over 2000 years. Archaeology indicates a farming community here well before the Roman period. The place name is early Saxon, and eighth-century title deeds survive. A pattern of land tenure had evolved long before the Norman conquest, and the influence of medieval strip holdings can be detected in Victorian street patterns. The last medieval farmhouse was not demolished until the late 19th century. By the reign of Elizabeth government officials and city merchants saw Mitcham as an attractive place to live, and one of their mansions can still be seen. New inns and beer houses attest to increasing traffic and industrialisation proceeded apace. By the early Victorian period the character of Upper Mitcham had changed dramatically, with a gas works, a large workhouse and orphanage, and workers' cottages crammed onto the smallest of vacant lots. Virtually all have now been swept away, to be replaced by new housing estates and light industry. One major feature of old Mitcham remains, the tract of common land known as Figgs Marsh, which separates Upper Mitcham from South London suburbs to the north, and is now in municipal hands, managed as public open space.