



Masons Field as part of Kingsbury's history

Fields, like any other piece of land, have a history, and Masons Field off Old Kenton Lane, London NW9, has one which goes back at least seven hundred years. But a field is part of a wider landscape, and to discover the story of Masons Field fully, we need to see how it fits into the history of Kingsbury, the district it is part of.

When the ice sheets of the last Ice Age retreated from this area around 20,000 years ago they left behind a thick layer of clay, with patches of gravel on top of it in places. As the climate warmed, plants grew, and Masons Field was once part of a large area of deciduous woodland that covered much of the London area north of the River Thames. Stone Age hunters probably visited these woodlands, and by the Bronze Age settlers from Europe may well have been following tributaries of the Thames as they explored the area. The names of both the River Brent and the Lidding (or Wealdstone) Brook are thought to derive from Celtic, a language originally from Central Europe which would have been spoken here between two and three thousand years ago.

How long ago were people first living in Kingsbury? Tiles and other relics from a Roman period home built into the rubble walls of Old Saint Andrew's Church have led many people in the past to suggest that there may have been a Roman farm or "villa" nearby. It was only in September 2013 that archaeologists actually found parts of a ditch and rubbish pit with pottery from that period on the site of the former Blackbird Farm, near the junction of Old Church Lane with Blackbird Hill. The finds, which also included random pieces of Iron Age pottery, are still being analysed, but it appears likely that people were living here and farming the lighter gravel soils in this location by the third or fourth centuries, and possibly before the Roman invasion of AD43.

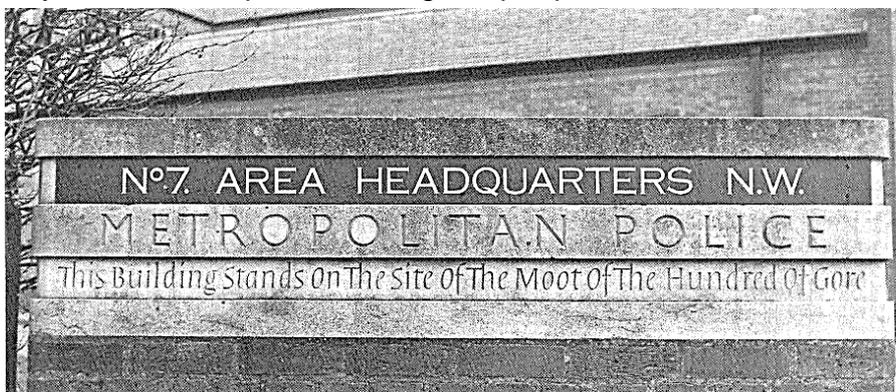
Pieces of Oxfordshire red-slipped ware from the 3rd or 4th century found at Old Church Lane in 2013.

[Photo courtesy of Archaeology South-East]



There were certainly a number of people living in Kingsbury by later Saxon times, as the name (originally *Kynggesbrig*, 'a place belonging to the King') is first recorded in the tenth century.

Kingsbury was part of the Hundred of Gore, in the County of Middlesex ('the land of the Middle Saxons'). The pre-Roman trackway, *Eldestrete* ('the old road'), separated it from Harrow in the west, while its eastern boundary, with Hendon, followed the Watling Street Roman Road. (Old) Kenton Lane was then the main track between Harrow and Hendon, also parts of Gore, and the monthly meetings of the Hundred were held in a small triangular field where this crossed *Eldestrete* (near the modern Kingsbury Circle). Villagers from Kingsbury in the south and Stanmore in the north would have used that route when attending the meetings, which debated any matter or dispute affecting the people of the Hundred, and settled it by a majority vote.

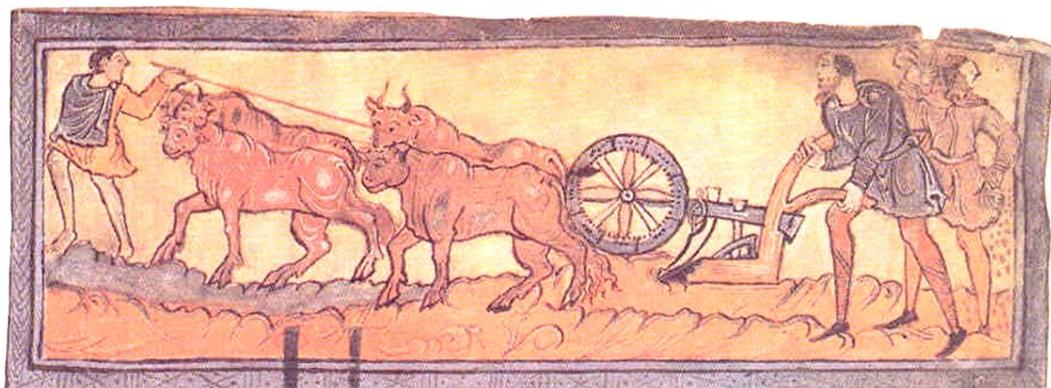


The sign which used to mark the Moot field site, at the old police HQ opposite the ambulance station in The Mall, now a modern housing development.

[Photo by the late Len Snow, from his 1990 book: "Brent – a Pictorial History"]

By the year 1066, the land in Kingsbury was split into two manors, with the larger Tunworth manor held by a Saxon *thane*, Ulward Wit. It is quite possible that Wit and several men from Kingsbury were part of the Middlesex *Fyrd* (militia) that fought for King Harold at the Battle of Hastings. After his victory there, the new king William I ('the Conqueror') gave Tunworth manor to one of his Norman knights, Ernulf de Hesdin. In 1085, William ordered a survey of all of the land and property in his kingdom, the *Domesday Book*, which gives a good picture of what *Chingesberie* was like at the time. Ernulf de Hesdin's land was 7½ *hides* (about 900 acres / 360 hectares), worth £4 and held by a tenant called Albold. He kept enough land for 2 ploughs himself, while 8 villagers and a priest farmed one *virgate* (about 30 acres) each, 3 villagers half a *virgate* each, and 5 *bordars* (smallholders) each rented 5 acres. The manor also had a mill, some meadow land and enough woodland to feed 1,000 pigs.

Ploughing,
an illustration
from an
11th century
manuscript
[probably held at
the British Library].



Over the next two centuries, new fields were created by clearing much of this woodland, a process called assarting. There were thick hedgerows between fields and some woodland remained. This increase in farming activity suffered a set-back in the mid-14th century, when a great plague, carried by rats and called the "Black Death", spread across Britain killing over one million people, around 40% of the total population. The records of Kingsbury's manor court for 1350 alone show 13 deaths 'at the time of the pestilence'. The plague virtually wiped out the small farming village in the south of the parish. Kingsbury's population gradually recovered, and the first reference to Masons Field dates from 1426, when John Lyon, a mason, rented it.

Around 1442, Tunworth manor was one of many landholdings donated by the King and important church leaders to All Souls' College, Oxford, to provide income which would pay for this new college which they had set up for the study of theology. In 1597 the first accurate map of Kingsbury was produced for the College. "Masons" was then two main fields and a smaller field to the west, separated by a belt of woodland, located between what is now Valley Drive and Old Kenton Lane, or Gore Lane as it was known, which was the main east-west road at that time. The tenant farmer of Masons in 1597 was Abraham Page, a member of the family of



that surname who were major farmers and landowners in this part of Middlesex for hundreds of years up to the early 19th century. Pages had first rented the field in 1488.

Extract from the Hovenden map of 1597, showing Masons Field(s) and the surrounding part of Kingsbury

(Note: north is at the right hand Side of this map).

[Source and copyright: The Codrington Library, All Souls' College, Oxford]

On the south-eastern edge of this area was a green lane which ran south-west from Kenton Lane until it reached a field near to the parish boundary. The hedge marking this boundary, between Kingsbury and the parish of Harrow (more recently, Wembley), is now to the west of Fryent Way. The green lane, which does not have a recorded name, served fields on either side of it, providing an access route for people and for moving livestock and produce.



The green lane between Masons Field (right) and Little Cherrylandes.

[Photo courtesy of David McClements]

The last member of the Page family to hold the tenancy of Masons Field was Richard Page, who died in 1649 survived by two daughters. This was the year in which King Charles I had been executed, after a bitter Civil War with the forces of Parliament, and this may be why none of the Page relatives was able to take over the tenancy. The Pages had been strong supporters of the Royalist cause, and another Richard Page, of Uxendon, who fought as an officer at the Battle of Newbury in 1644 and had been knighted by the king the following year, had fled abroad (he married in 1651 at The Hague, where the future King Charles II was in exile). The new tenants of Masons Field were the Prujean family, whose 95 acres of farmland also included Honey Slough, at the far end of the green lane.

Masons Field stayed in the hands of the Prujean family for the next 140 years, until it was part of lands sold to George Heming, a goldsmith of Bond Street, Westminster, in 1789. Heming was not interested in farming the land himself, and records from the early 19th century show that he was letting the 13 acre Masons Field to a man called John Field, who was paying rent of £3 10s 3d a year, plus 1s 4d for a small area in the corner. The Agricultural Revolution of the late-18th century had seen the invention of new farm machinery, but the heavy London Clay soil of the Kingsbury area was not suitable for these modern farming methods, and many fields

were turned over to pasture land. Most of these meadows were used for growing hay, grass which was cut in the summer then dried and stored in large stacks for sale as animal feed throughout the year. There was a ready market for this crop in London, the rapidly expanding capital city which was only a few miles away.



Haymaking in the local meadows,
from H.J. Foley's 1880's book:
"Our Lanes and Meadowpaths".
 [Source: Brent Archives]

In 1865 the Ordnance Survey published its first large scale map of Kingsbury. In the "Book of Reference to the Plan of the Parish of Kingsbury", which was produced to go alongside the new map, Masons Field was the parcel of land numbered 99. Its area was given as 12.423 acres, and its use is shown as arable. Of the 200 fields in Kingsbury, there was only one other "arable" (ploughed) field in the parish in 1865. The map also shows a smithy, or blacksmith's forge, located by the junction of the green lane with Kenton Lane, at the corner of the field.

Extract from a map, showing
Masons Field edged in green,
reproduced from the 1865 edition
of the Ordnance Survey six inch
to 1 mile map of Kingsbury.

[Source: Brent Archives
 – maps collection.]



The smithy was run by the Jones family, and would have made and fitted iron horse shoes for all of the district's horses, as well as small iron tools and fittings required by the people of what was still a mainly agricultural area at the beginning of the 20th century. The population of the whole of Kingsbury parish was only 750 people when it was made an Urban District in 1900. Kenton Lane, together with Hyde Lane to the east of Kingsbury Green, was renamed Kingsbury Road by the new Council, but it was still a narrow lane of gravel placed on top of the underlying clay, as it had been since at least Tudor times. Road

maintenance involved simply spreading more gravel or “clinker”. In 1902, Mr Jones the blacksmith complained to the Council about the poor quality of the ashes which their workmen had used to repair the road outside his smithy, sending them a parcel of nails and glass he had picked up in Kenton Lane as evidence.



Kingsbury Road, near its western end, in 1910.

[Photo courtesy of Geoffrey Hewlett, from his 2010 book: “Kingsbury Through Time”]

It was 1912 before part of Kingsbury Road was given a tarmac surface, and even after the First World War (when Masons Field was still owned by the Heming family) it was still just a narrow winding lane. It was because of the poor state of this road that plans in 1920 for a bus route between Golders Green and Pinner had to be abandoned. Kingsbury Road was finally widened and straightened between 1922 and 1924, including a new section of road between Roe Green and what is now the drive through the park up to the Walled Garden. This by-passed the narrow section of Kingsbury Road past Masons Field, which was renamed Old Kenton Lane. The London General Omnibus Co. finally began their Number 183 bus service from

Golders Green to Pinner in February 1927, and later the same year the Company bought Masons Field. In 1928, after building a groundsman’s cottage and pavilion, they opened it as a sports ground for their employees, with football and cricket pitches, tennis courts and a bowling green.

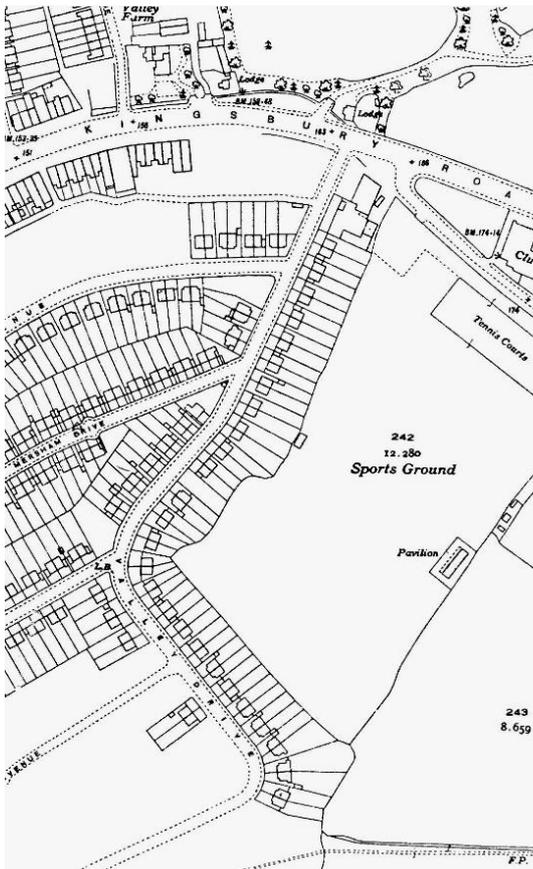
A London General No. 183 omnibus outside the Metropolitan Railway’s recently opened Kingsbury Station in 1933. Both companies were soon to become part of the London Passenger Transport Board (“London Transport”).

[Source: Brent Archives]



From the mid-1920’s onwards, much of Kingsbury was developed for suburban housing. Permission was given in 1928 to build four semi-detached houses in Old Kenton Lane, next door to Masons Field, although the smithy on part of the site continued until 1933 (latterly as a garage) before it was demolished. In 1930, work began building parades of shops in Kingsbury Road, close to where a station was planned for a branch line of the Metropolitan Railway, which was being constructed from Wembley Park to Stanmore. In the same year work started to build homes on the Valley Farm estate, in the fields west of Masons. Fryent Way was constructed in 1934/35 on behalf of All Souls’ College, who wanted to sell more of the fields which they still owned to developers. However, before houses could be built on what is now Fryent Country

Park the land was acquired by the County Council as a Regional Open Space, to preserve it as one of the few remaining areas of old Middlesex countryside.



Map showing Masons Field sports ground in 1935, next to the partly-built Valley Farm Estate. Reproduced from the 1935 edition of the Ordnance Survey 1:2,500 map of Middlesex, Sheet XI.5.

[Source: Brent Archives – maps collection]

During the Second World War (1939-1945) the country had to produce more of its own food. In 1942, Middlesex’s Food Production Committee ploughed up 56 acres of the old hay meadows in the Regional Open Space to grow wheat. Although the London Transport sports ground was not ploughed, a mobile Bofors Gun battery was stationed there for a time during the war.



Threshing wheat in Little Cherrylandes field (next to Masons) in 1942.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

After World War II a number of temporary “pre-fab” bungalows were built opposite Masons Field, on the spare land between Old Kenton Lane and Kingsbury Road. These were replaced in the early 1960’s with permanent Council housing, including Westcroft Court, named after the field shown there on the 1597 Hovenden map. Further developments locally included Masons House, a block of offices with flats above built at the corner of Old Kenton Lane, Kingsbury



Road and Valley Drive in 1972, and named after the adjacent field.

Housing at Sedum Close, seen from Larkspur Close.

[Photo by Philip Grant, August 2014]

The largest scheme, however, came after London Transport closed its sports ground in 1987, following a major drop in its workforce brought about by the privatisation of London Buses. In 1995 Brent Council gave LT

outline permission for five acres of Masons Field to be developed, in return for the remaining land being handed over to them as public open space. By the end of the following year, Paddington Churches Housing Association had applied to build over one hundred homes on the five acres, with a mixed development of public and private houses and flats. These were built as Larkspur Close and Sedum Close, with the seven acres of land behind them (originally part of Masons Field, then the sports ground) added to the Council's Fryent Country Park.

Since the early 2000's, Brent Council has worked with the local community and Barn Hill Conservation Group to restore Masons Field as a hay meadow. The meadow is being brought back to life by a combination of techniques including additional cutting, planting of perennial plugs of wildflowers, and the sowing of meadow plant seeds to areas where the ground has been disturbed. The Heritage Lottery Fund awarded a grant to the project in 2011, and Brent Council have provided partnership funding.



Volunteers at work in Masons Field in November 2013 >
[Photo courtesy of David McClements]



< The access ramp to Masons Field from Little Cherrylandes.

Traditional apple varieties ripening in the Masons Field orchard.
[Photos by Philip Grant, August 2014]



The first hay harvest in Masons Field during recent times (and probably since at least the 1920's) was on 5 September 2013. The grass is cut in late summer to encourage the growth

of wild flowers and the butterflies and other insect life which feeds on them. The field has been reconnected to the Country Park by an access ramp across the green lane to Little Cherrylandes, and bird and bat boxes have been attached to some of the hedgerow trees. A small orchard has also been planted in an area at the southern end of the field. Information



boards and wooden seats have also been put at places around the field recently, to help welcome visitors to Masons Field.

A group of local volunteers who helped with the restoration of Masons Field.
[Photo courtesy of David McClements]

After a story which has spanned at least seven hundred years, Masons Field continues to play a part in Kingsbury's history as a Local Nature Reserve, and an accessible open space for the whole community to enjoy. If you have not discovered Masons Field yet, I hope you will visit it soon.

**Philip Grant,
Wembley History Society,
September 2014.**

With thanks to Barn Hill Conservation Group, who have been helping to look after Fryent Country Park for the past 30 years – visit their website at: www.bhcg.btck.co.uk to find out more about what they do, and how you can get involved if you would like to.

Thanks are also due to Brent Archives for their assistance over the years with my local history research. Visit their website at: www.brent.gov.uk/archives, where you can search for old photographs of your area in the online catalogue, or read a variety of illustrated articles in their local history resources section: www.brent.gov.uk/services-for-residents/brent-museum-and-archives/local-history-resources/local-history-documents/.



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