

THE MORFORD CONNECTION

by Karen Spink

A few years ago, in the RNELHS Journal 2006, I wrote about local ladies united in their aim to assist Belgian refugees who came to this country during the First World War. One of the protagonists was Mrs May St Claire Atkins, who lived at 'The Retreat' in Field End Road, Eastcote.

On the 21 October 1914, in a letter to the *Ruislip Northwood Courier*, Mrs Atkins wrote: 'I appeal to the kind English hearts around and about our district to help us, however small with gifts and donations... We are hoping to give sixteen people home and shelter. Gifts of clothing, furniture, groceries, or donations to Mrs Hall, Fieldend Lodge, Eastcote, or to myself will be gratefully acknowledged by yours very truly...' ¹

This was followed by another letter in November: 'Sir – May I add my thanks to those of Mrs Hall and Mrs Goschen [The Sigers] to the residents of Eastcote who so kindly responded to my house to house appeal... In those three days we have had more than enough furniture, linen, china, etc, needed for our guests' comforts. Residents also sent gifts in kind, so I think we may all agree that Eastcote has risen to the occasion... Faithfully yours, May St Claire Atkins' ²

So who was this lady? And how did she come to be living in Eastcote?

I can now reveal that she was born Mary Ann Sinclair Morford, the eldest sister of a man whose name is more familiar to us. That man was Walter Morford.

He was descended from a family of butchers in and around Folkestone, Kent. His father John was a butcher and farmer, while his

mother, Rhoda Ann (née Reynolds), described herself in 1861 as a refreshment room keeper. They had five children:

William Reynolds (b. 1854), who took his second name from his mother's maiden name; Mary Ann Sinclair (b. 1855), named after her grandmother, Mary Ann Sinclair; Rhoda M (b. 1858), Linda (b. 1862) and lastly Walter (b. 1865).

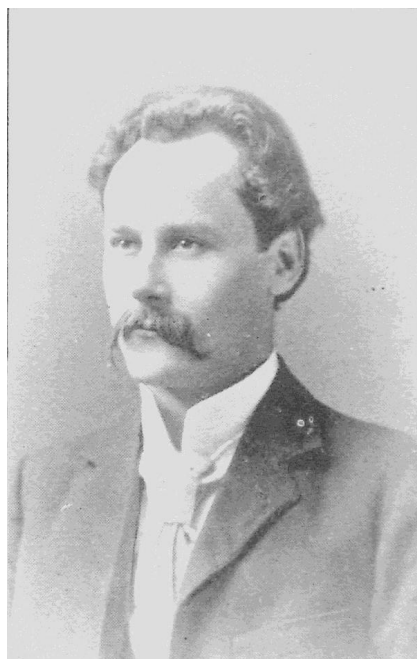
Walter Morford

We first hear of Walter Morford (below in 1897) when he, his wife Minnie Eliza (née Clayton) (Fig. 1) and their two young sons, Eric and Albert, come to Ruislip in 1899. Walter had purchased some four acres of land in Sharps Lane which included two houses with gardens and outbuildings as well as an orchard.³ The house in which Walter and Minnie settled was a sixteenth-century building known as 'The Laurels' (Fig. 2). It was without mains water at the time of purchase – this was connected in 1901 – and the house was altered and enlarged by the addition of a new wing in 1902.

This purchase seems a big leap from his more modest beginnings, but Walter had been making his mark in life from an early age. When he and Minnie married in 1889, his occupation was described as mantle buyer, and when they come to Ruislip 10 years later

he is already at 33 the Managing Director of Swan & Edgar, leading West End drapers of Piccadilly, London, having taken up this role in 1895 when the company was reorganised.

The remuneration from such an important position undoubtedly helped him in 1902 to acquire the 95-acre Field End House Farm estate, Eastcote for £6200 ⁴. This comprised 85



acres of prime development land from where is now Southbourne Gardens, in the south, to almost as far as Eastcote village in the north. It straddled the tract of land sold off the previous year to the Harrow and Uxbridge Railway Company for the extension to the Metropolitan line. Also included in his purchase were 10 acres on which stood the original farmhouse, the newer Victorian farmhouse (Field End House Farm), two Victorian villas (Nos. 3 and 4 Field End Villas) and Field End Cottage, all of which were rented out.



Fig. 1 – Walter Morford's first wife Minnie Eliza, daughter of a Pimlico house decorator

The purchase seems to have been something of a speculative venture, as Morford sold most of the land near the railway in 1909 – three years after Eastcote Halt (i.e. the station) was opened – to British Freehold Investments, who developed Acacia Avenue, Elm Avenue, Lime Grove, Myrtle Avenue and part of Hawthorne Avenue (Fig. 3).⁵

In May 1906, Morford also purchased Ruislip Park House estate. Comprising some 41 acres, it was considered something of a snip at £9500, particularly so when he sold it to High Wycombe developers Dickens and Welch⁶ for a tidy profit of £1000 the following year. This land was adjacent to his home in Sharps Lane (Fig. 4).

Back on the Field End House estate, at the end of 1908 Walter Morford received planning permission to build a house on the orchard behind the Field End Villas.⁷ Designed by architects Emden, Egan & Co. of The Strand, London, this was a substantial detached house, rough-cast with tiled roof, comprising: hall, lounge, dining-room, kitchen, scullery, pantry and WC on the ground floor, and four bedrooms, bathroom, lavatory and WC upstairs. It also had an attic with two box rooms. Not only was gas and water laid on (still not commonplace in



Fig. 2 - 'The White House', seen here in 1982, was known as 'The Laurels' when Walter Morford lived here. It is now two residences (RNELHS)

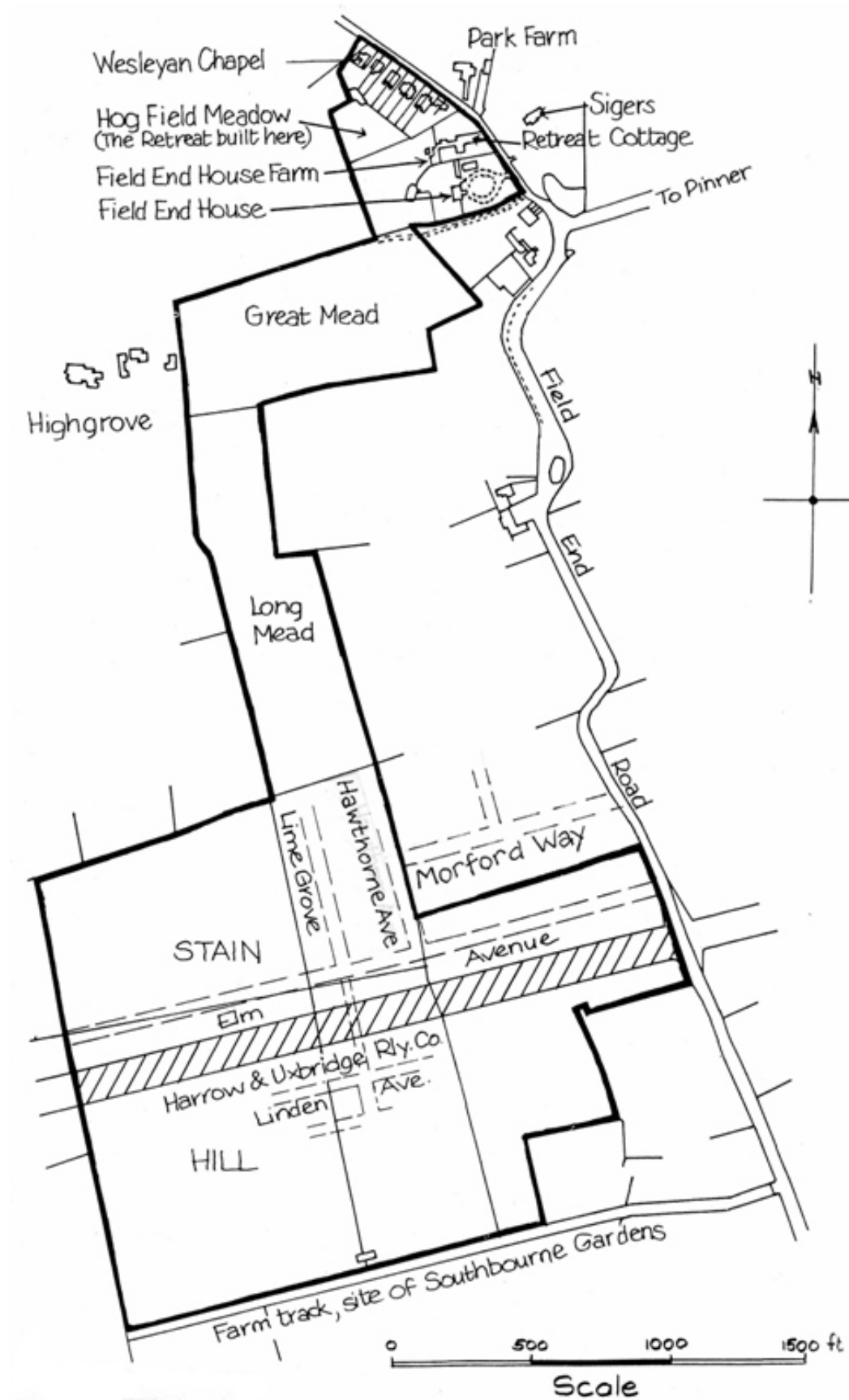


Fig. 3 - Field End House Farm estate, 1902 (James McBean)

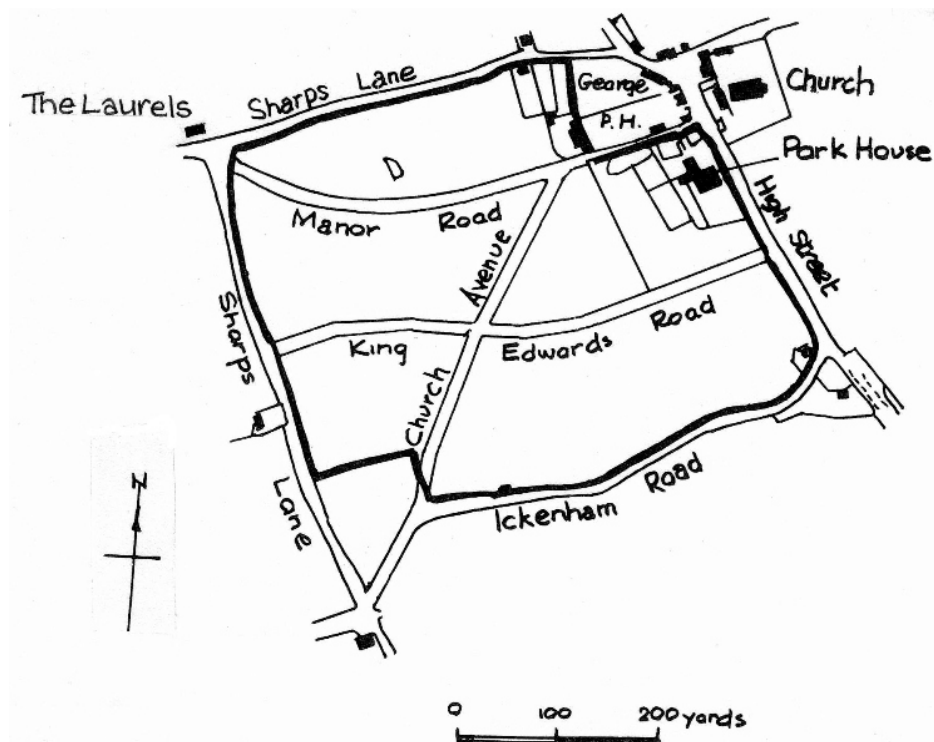


Fig. 4 – Ruislip Park House estate, 1911 (James McBean)

Eastcote at this date), it also had central heating⁸. The house became known as 'The Retreat' (Fig. 5), and it is here that Mary Ann Morford comes into the picture.

May St Claire Atkins

Born Mary Ann Sinclair Morford, in Elham, near Folkestone at the end of 1855, she married, on the 28 February 1880, James Frederick Gannaway Atkins. The ceremony took place at St Mary's Parish Church, Hornsey, Middlesex. By now she was commonly known as May, a diminutive of Mary, and the family name Sinclair had become the more distinguished St Claire, a device that would be used by other, later members of the Morford family. May gave her address as Notting Hill, and her husband, James, described himself as clerk of Highgate, son of James Atkins, a barrister. May and her husband initially set up home in south London, in East Dulwich, where she gave birth to a daughter, Wynn timer Christine, and then a son, Leslie C. Following a subsequent spell in Hampstead, they moved in 1910 to Eastcote.

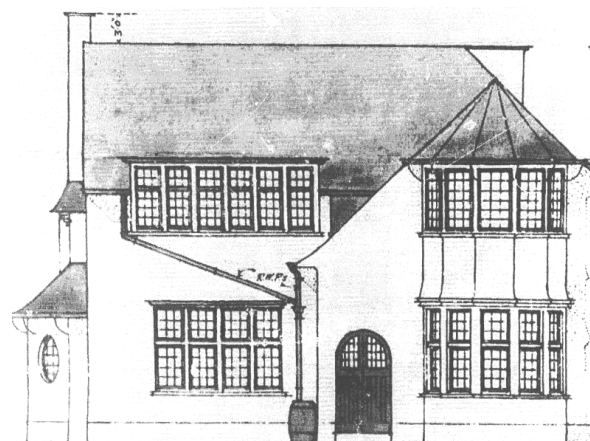


Fig. 5 - The architect's drawing of the front elevation of 'The Retreat'
(LBH Planning Dept. microfiche records)

In the 1911 census, James Frederick Gannaway Atkins is shown as the head of the household, and described as a retired insurance official born in Kingston, Jamaica, a former West Indies resident. He was aged 59. Living with him and May at 'The Retreat' were their daughter Wynn timer, who had been married for seven years to Mohammed Aly-El-Manzalaoni, and their grandson, four-year-old Gerald Hussein Manzalaoni. Wynn timer's husband was not present on census day.

So, the question arises, did Walter Morford help out his eldest sister by building a property for her and her family in rural Eastcote? The Atkins paid him an annual rent of £40 (1913) for 'The Retreat'.⁹ As is evident from references in the *Ruislip Northwood Courier* regarding assistance given to the VAD Hospital at Field End Lodge during the First World War, they were also one of the few Eastcote families at this date to own a motor car.

There is another aspect to May's life on which Walter may have had an influence, certainly a connecting interest. During the First World War, while May was addressing the public through her letters to the *Courier*, she was also writing a column under her pen-name, May St Claire. (See Fig. 7 – Pg. 26)

This began in December 1914 as a kind of wartime Mrs Beeton, with items on fashion, food and maidservants. But as the war progressed, May St Claire also turned her hand to verse, from rhymes on how to look after babies (*Baby Brighteyes*) to life and loss and comradeship during the war. Most of her pieces filled a full-length column, some 1500 words. They first appeared on the 11 December and continued until the 11 June 1915.

A prominent figure

It is not surprising that a man of Morford's standing and position in business would take on roles in his trade, notably Director of the Drapers Mutual Fire and General Insurance Company, and Vice-president of the Drapers' Chamber of Trade.¹⁰

In Ruislip he was a trustee and Chairman of the Warrender Institute (a men's club in Eastcote Road opposite St Martin's Church), Chair of the Sports Committee, and Chair of the Ruislip, Eastcote and Ickenham Conservative and Unionist Association. He was a local councillor¹¹ and stood in 1910 on the RNUDC (Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council) Public Health Buildings and Sewerage Committee, which was essentially concerned with planning applications and environmental issues, such as refuse, drains

and water. He also stood on the new Housing and Town Planning Committee.

While at 'The Laurels', Minnie gave birth to a daughter, Ruby, but the Morford's marriage did not last much longer. Walter and Minnie divorced in 1903, with Minnie receiving a generous settlement which included a large house in Guernsey for herself and the three children. Walter remained at 'The Laurels', and in 1905 married Eva Spry. Shortly after their wedding, however, they were the victims of a bizarre hoax when a rogue announcement appeared in two leading newspapers, alleging that a wedding had taken place between Miss King and Mr Morford, solemnised by the Rev. Mr Spry. Who did this or why is unknown. A follow-up piece reported that 'the hoax is rendered all the worse by the fact that it alleges bigamy against Mr Morford, taking into account his actual wedding just celebrated'.¹²

Eva bore Walter a daughter, Eva Leone, and they lived on at 'The Laurels' until 1911 when his health, which had never been good, forced him to resign his local duties, and the family moved to Nashleigh House in Chesham, Buckinghamshire. He retained his city address as 45 Regent Street at Swan & Edgar.

Robust he may not have been, but in 1909 Walter put up 'articulate and pugnacious'¹³ opposition to a proposed redevelopment of John Nash's Piccadilly. He, along with other shopkeepers, was very upset by proposals, using Norman Shaw's designs, planning a unification of style along Regent Street. This would include Swan & Edgar (Fig. 6), and as he told his shareholders: 'Your directors... are absolutely certain that to extend the building which exists... on the same elevation would spell ruin to us... I would almost... say that rather than have such a building... we would remove or shut up shop'.¹⁴ The proposal was not approved. Swan & Edgar was not rebuilt until 1925-27, and then to a design by Reginald Blomfield.



Fig. 6 - Swan & Edgar, 39-51 Regent Street, Piccadilly, London when Walter Morford was Managing Director

By this time, however, Walter Morford was no longer there, having died in 1915 at the relatively young age of 49.

His death and the funeral at Ashley Green cemetery, Chesham were noted in the *Ruislip Northwood Courier*, which also published the following fulsome tribute.

AN APPRECIATION by one who knew him

On Friday, October 8th, at his residence, Nashleigh House, Chesham, Mr. Walter Morford passed away at the age of 49, regretted by a large circle of personal and business friends. He was a man who by his interesting personality, his generous disposition, and his untiring efforts for the betterment of those around and about him had endeared him to all. His was a kind and beautiful nature, and although at times handicapped with ill-health allied to a great pain, he was always bright.

During the many years of his residence at Ruislip, his heart and purse were ever open to the needs of those around him – few sought his help in vain. Many of the poorer residents had cause to bless his name, and yet his help was given quietly and unostentatiously to any who required it. He was a lover of art and all that was best and beautiful in nature. The breezy uplands and peaceful woodlands appealed to him more than the noise and the din of the great City. He would

spend hours in the pretty woodland copse attached to the grounds of Nashleigh House, where he had resided during the last seven years (sic), and there all the wild things of the woodlands found sanctuary. But I think he was best in his own home, where he and his devoted wife were perfect as host and hostess, and one would meet many clever and interesting people at their hospitable board. He was a man who had travelled much, his health requiring constant change. He had made an extended tour around the world with recurrent visits to many climes, and this made him entertaining and interesting at all times.

In the large Company he so ably controlled he was greatly loved by all. Ever ready to right a wrong, he would give an impartial and fair hearing to everyone. His keen intuition was hardly ever at fault, his business perception great, and all who had the privilege of knowing him, especially the employees at Swan & Edgar's, and those who sought his advice will revere and cherish his memory.¹⁵

In his will, written in 1910, he left provision for his wife Eva and all his family, including his first wife and his mother. His total assets were £44,874 5s 5d.¹⁶ According to his wishes, the remaining land of his Field End House Farm estate was offered for sale to Robert Masson Smith, associated with developers British Freehold Investments, and was duly sold by his executors.

What happened to May and James Atkins, I do not know. They stayed on at 'The Retreat' till 1924, when Morford's executors sold the house to William Glur. The two Field End Villas were also sold in 1924 and the remaining two farms were finally sold in 1928.

Postscript

The Morford name lives on in the streets of Morford Way and Morford Close, Eastcote. Now part of the Morford Way Conservation Area, these arts and crafts houses were built in the 1920s on land adjacent to that once owned by Walter Morford.

The Ladies Column by May St Claire

Some samples

Fashion was the key theme of May's Ruislip Northwood Courier columns. She started optimistically:

11 Dec 1914. *'To counteract the depression [of winter and war], fashion has decreed that the brightest colours shall be worn. For winter, bright brown still remains, and warm tones of blue, green and red will bear it company...'*

'I saw a little boy yesterday, who looked pretty in loose knickers made of dull green velvet worn with a cream silk shirt. He looked a perfect little Bubbles... but for everyday wear, their garments should be the loose and plainly made variety, with full play given for the little limbs without restrictions...'

Next year, as the war progressed, she was more down-to-earth:

15 Jan 1915. *'For country wear the neater and plainer our attire, the more becoming it is... A walking skirt should never be extremely tight.'*

9 April 1915. *'... the extremes of fashion matter little to us... kilted skirts are very fashionable...'*

and then realistic:

11 June 1915. [extolling the] *'great advantage [of wider skirts] giving freedom of movement... navy blue is the predominating colour.'*

On more practical household matters she wrote:

11 Dec 1914. *'... the nursery should be for preference at the top of the house, where merry play and laughter can abound... Never keep a boy tied to his mother's apron strings.'*

In the kitchen:

11 Dec 1914. *'One hears so much these days of bad or incompetent maids... there should be more give and take between mistress and maids...'* A maid should be allowed to have a friend or relative to tea.

12 Feb 1915. *'I saw a most useful apron the other day...'* followed by the somewhat contradictory: *'This country is indeed a woman's world today.'*

On the plight of single girls with too few men at home to marry, she is more forthright:

26 Feb 1915. *'In America the bachelor girl has a place of her own... she is better educated as a rule, has more freedom, and is considered the equal of her brothers. Our girls receive an education inferior to that of the boys, because they are not supposed to earn their own living...'*

'If woman cannot enter the marriage state, she can turn to the arts – The arts which beautify and dignify the world.'

A week later May heard Miss Sylvia Pankhurst talk at a suffragist meeting in Chorleywood, and when in March a plea went out from the government, calling on women to register themselves for paid employment to release men for the war, she retaliated:

2 April 1915. *'But if women fill the men's places they should be paid at the same rate as the men they are replacing.'*

May also wrote long and florid verses. Apart from *Baby Brighteyes*, a poem in six verses on how to look after babies, she published three very long war poems: *The Woman's Part*, *Greater Love Hath No Man Than This*, and the 14-verse *Cockney Will* on friendship and support among men fighting at the front.

Fig. 7

Acknowledgements

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References

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- 3 1902 Ratebook transcription, RNELHS archives
- 4 Field End House Farm estate sale details (in writer's possession)
- 5 Eileen M. Bowlt, *The Goodliest Place in Middlesex*
- 6 *ibid*
- 7 RNUDC Minute Books, Uxbridge Library
- 8 Valuation Office records: The Finance (1909-1910) Act. The National Archives
- 9 *ibid*
- 10 *Ruislip Northwood Courier and Uxbridge Gazette*, 15 October 1915, Uxbridge Library
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- 12 Unidentified newspaper cutting, Uxbridge Library
- 13 Hermione Hobhouse, *A History of Regent Street*
- 14 *ibid*
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- 16 Probate Indexes, Principal Registry of the Family Division, Holborn

Other references include:

Births, Marriages & Deaths Registers

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Electoral Rolls, Uxbridge Library

Extract from Uxbridge Rural District Minute Books (held at Uxbridge Library)

19 August 1904. An application from the Post Master General for permission to erect Telephone Poles from Haydon Hall, Eastcote to the Ruislip Post Office, was agreed to, subject to ornamental poles being used.