

The Hay Meadows of Kingsbury

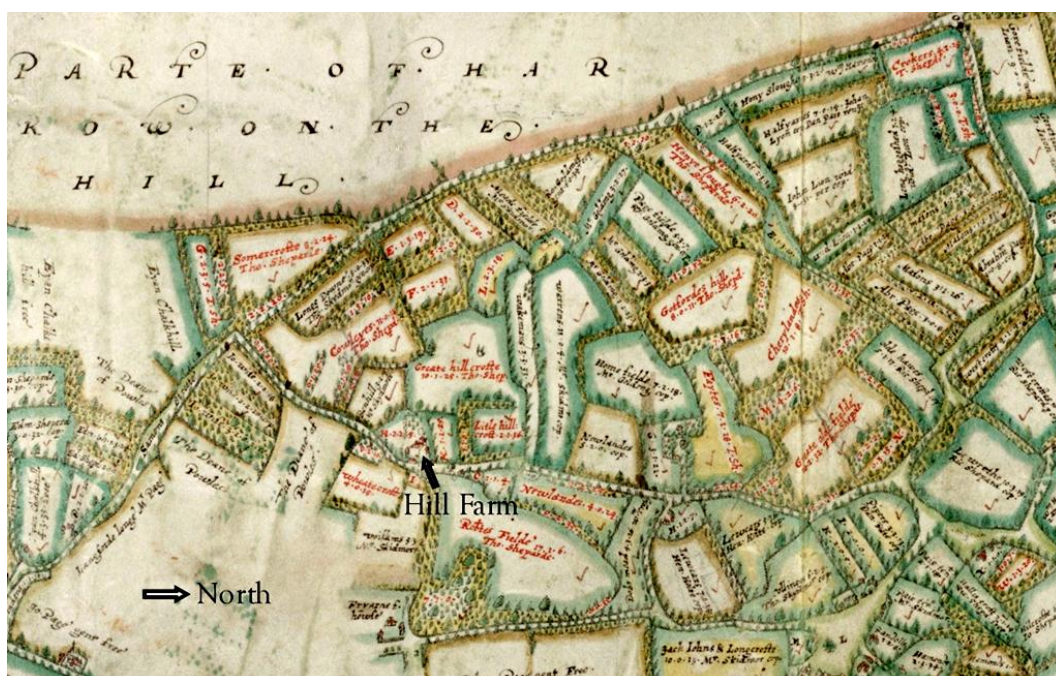
When the Domesday Book was compiled for King William I in 1085-86, the parish of Kingsbury was a mainly wooded area with small patches of farm land. It was divided into two manors, one of which was Chalkhill, an estate that had belonged to King Edward the Confessor before being given to St Peter's (Westminster) Abbey. Around 1244, about 300 acres of this land were gifted to a religious order, the Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem. To help provide food for their priory in Clerkenwell, they established a farm on Church Lane (where the Co-op now stands) which became known as Freren Farm, after the Norman French word for "the brothers" (monks) who farmed it.

By the year 1300, parcels of land from the other Kingsbury manor, Tunworth, had been let out to tenants who cleared small fields out of the woodland, a process known as "assarting". Three of these landholdings to the west side of Salmon Street became farms that lasted until the mid-twentieth century; Hill Farm (at the top of the rise near the junction with Mallard Way) and two named after the original farmers, Edwin's (later Little Bush Farm) and Richard's (which became Bush Farm, opposite the junction with Slough Lane). In 1442 the Tunworth manor was granted to All Souls' College, Oxford, which collected rents from the tenant farmers for the next five hundred years.

For more than 100 years, the tenants at Hill Farm were members of the Shepard family. The earliest surviving memorial in Old Saint Andrew's Church pictures John Shepard, who died in 1520, with his two wives, Anne and Maude, and the eighteen children he had by them. When the college had a map of its lands in Kingsbury drawn in 1597 it showed Thomas Shepard as the tenant of Hill Farm and many of the nearby fields, with Edmund, John, Richard and William Shepard among the other tenants.



The brass memorial to John Shepard in Old St Andrew's Church, Kingsbury
[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2010]



Part of the 1597 Hovenden Map of Kingsbury, showing the area between what is now Fryent Way (top) and Church Lane, with Kingsbury Road to the right. The location of Hill Farm and a north arrow have been added.
[Source and ©: The Codrington Library, All Souls' College, Oxford.]

The Hovenden Map (named after the Warden of the College) gives a fascinating picture of the irregular fields with their thick wooded hedges between, together with the wonderful old field names such as Half Yards Meade, Little Cherrylands, Short Down and Great and Little Hillcroach. This 1597 field pattern has been maintained, and reinstated where necessary, in the present day Fryent Country Park.

Little Hillcroach (or Hillcroft) field, seen from the Salmon Street to Fryent Way footpath

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2010]

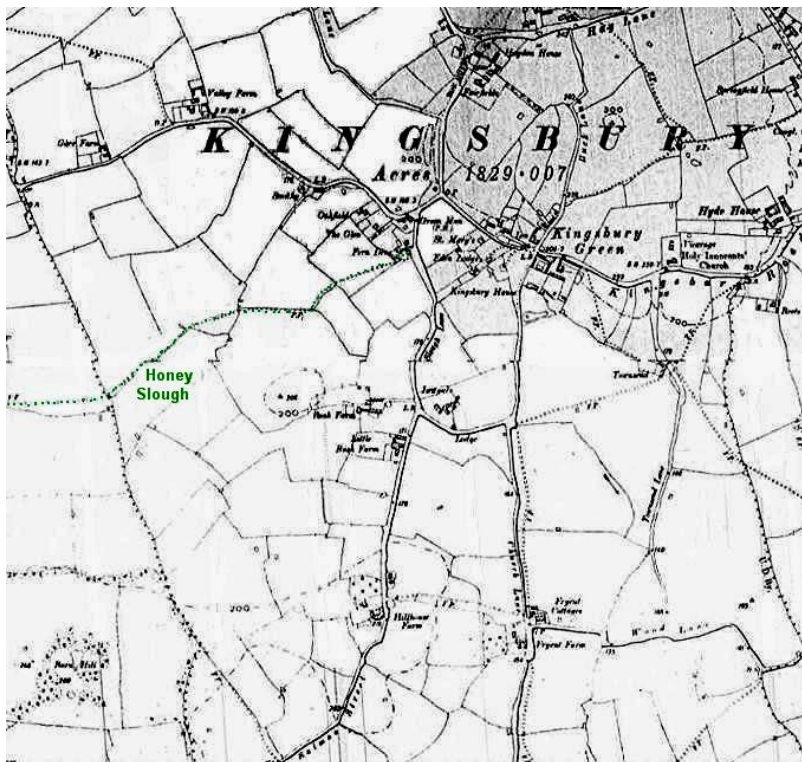


Most of the field names from this map remain the same in another document, produced for the Duke of Chandos (a notable local landowner, living at Canons near Stanmore) around the year 1730. At this time “Hill Farme” comprised 107 acres, including 76 acres of meadow and 28 acres of arable (ploughed) land in addition to the house, barnyard, garden and orchards. The tenant also leased 55 acres of woodland, mainly small local woods and thick hedgerows. A good illustration of the extent of these original woodland relics is the hedge around Honey Slough, a field now crossed by Fryent Way just south of Valley Drive. The area of this meadow was 7.5 acres, while the woodland hedge around it was let separately as *“one parcel almost round Honey Slough – 3 acres, 3 roods and 22 perchs”* (almost four acres).

The agricultural revolution of the eighteenth century saw the invention of new farm machinery, but the local heavy London Clay soil was not suitable for these modern arable methods and even more of the fields became 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. The fast growing capital city of London was only a few miles away, and this was home to many thousands of horses, both for riding and for pulling carriages and carts. So the farmers of Kingsbury sent their waggons up to the Hay Market, near Piccadilly, with food for the city’s horses, and came back with loads of dung from the stables to fertilise their fields.

This pattern continued into the nineteenth century, but with small farms let on short leases and a single basic crop the hay farmers of Kingsbury did not become rich men. They hired itinerant labour (often Irish) to help with the haymaking, and in years when the weather was bad at harvest time or the local parish rates were high (to pay for relief to the poor – see the article: “The Poor of the Parish”) they often went into debt. An advertisement in March 1842 for the sale of the belongings of William Nicholls, a farmer who had been declared bankrupt, lists the equipment he used at Bush Farm. This included *“two capital road waggons, nearly new”*, twelve hay, dung and other carts, hay making machines, a heavy pasture roller, a large number of rick cloths, two stack scaffolds, plus ladders, hay racks and forks. Another notice, just after the harvest in August 1847, advertised the sale at Kingsbury Green of *“...400 loads of hay under a distress warrant for rent. 8 stacks of prime meadow hay. Sale of as much as necessary to realise the amount required.”*

A good overview of Kingsbury parish in 1865 is provided in a booklet published by the Ordnance Survey to accompany their 1/2500 scale map. Each plot of land on the map is numbered and described, and out of two hundred listed fields only two were in arable use, the rest being pasture totalling 1641.7 acres, virtually 90% of the area of the parish (1829.1 acres). Ten plots, generally between 0.5 and one acre each, are specifically described as “*stackyard and sheds*”, where hay would be stored, including those at Bush and Little Bush Farms, Fryent (the modern version of Freren) Farm and Blackbird Farm (at the corner of Old Church Lane and Kingsbury Lane – now called Blackbird Hill). Honey Slough field, referred to above, was still pasture, but its area had increased to 10.8 acres, showing that most of the woodland hedge around it had been cut back since 1730.



Map showing the meadows and farms of Kingsbury in the 19th century, with Foley’s path and Honey Slough field shown in green. Reproduced from the 1895 edition of the 6 inch to one mile Ordnance Survey map of Middlesex, Sheet XI.

[Source: Brent Archives – maps collection.]

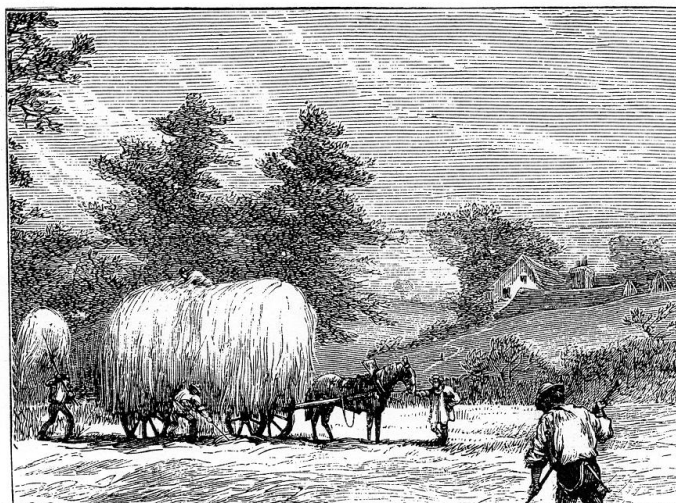
Kingsbury at this time has been described as a rural backwater, but it was also beginning to be recognized as a place for recreation. Writing in “Our Lanes and Meadowpaths”, an 1880’s book which encouraged workers

from the Metropolis to take Saturday afternoon walks in nearby countryside after their 5½ days of labour, H J Foley included several routes through the parish. In one he tells his readers to:

“... make for Piper’s Barn just beyond the Green Man. Beside this building a long meadowpath begins. From here to Harrow, a little under four miles, no guidebook is required to answer our inquiries; for there is little else but picturesque scenes of natural beauty to suggest any. Our path simply threads its way through one meadow after another, round the base of a big green hill.” [Barn Hill]

This path can still be followed today, and from Slough Lane until the bridge over the Jubilee Line leading to Shakespeare Drive the view across the meadows from the path is much as it was in Foley’s day, apart from Fryent Way running across it.

**Haymaking in the local meadows,
from Foley’s 1880’s book
“Our Lanes and Meadowpaths”.**
[Source: Brent Archives]



By the end of the nineteenth century the hay trade was declining, in part due to the import of cheaper foreign hay. New uses were found for some of the pastures, including horse breeding and dealing, with stud farms at Roe Green and at Kingsbury House (opposite Kingsbury Green, where the dairy depot now stands), while Fryent Farm was used for dairy cattle. A few fields were sold for building country villas and houses for the well off, and by 1896 there was a Kingsbury Polo Club (on the Kingsbury High School site in Bacon Lane), with polo grounds on what is now part of Roe Green Park. But hay growing was still the main agricultural activity, and by way of illustration the 1901 census lists the occupations of the two adult male workers living at Little Bush Farm as “*carter*” and “*hay loader*” respectively.

The first half of the twentieth century saw the motor vehicle replace the horse as the main method of transport, and with the expansion of London’s suburbs in the 1920’s and 1930’s many former fields became housing estates. Luckily Middlesex County Council understood the need to preserve some green areas, and acquired the ancient fields east of the newly-built Fryent Way in 1938 as a Regional Open Space, to save them from the developers. When the Second World War broke out the fields were being used for grazing by an



Edgware farmer, but in 1942 Middlesex’s Food Production Committee ploughed up 56 acres to grow cereal crops, as the country could not import all of the grain it needed.

Threshing wheat at Little Cherrylands in 1942, with Gotfords Hill and Barn Hill in the background.

[Source: Brent Archives – on-line images collection, No.481]

After the war, a major priority was housing, and Middlesex reluctantly agreed to allow Wembley Council to build a temporary “pre-fab” estate on Summers Croft field. Over 100 factory-made aluminium bungalows were erected there on concrete bases in 1947-48, and these were used by local families until 1972.



The Pilgrims Way “pre-fab” estate, alongside Fryent Way in the 1960’s, with Great and Little Cowlays and Long Down fields in the foreground.

[Source: Brent Archives – aerial photographs]

Since the war there have been other proposals for using this open space land, apart from renewed calls to build houses. At various times these could have meant the area becoming a municipal zoo, a golf course or an athletes' village (if a proposed bid for London to host the 1988 Olympics at Wembley had been successful). The land continued to be farmed until the



early 1970's, mainly as pasture. Some of the fields were ploughed up again in the late 1960's, when the tenant farmer tried to cut down a number of the hedges until stopped by the Council.

A farmer from Wiltshire, baling hay for his organic dairy herd, on fields behind Valley Drive in August 2004.

[Photograph by the late Ian Stokes, from the Barn Hill Conservation Group collection.]

Fryent Country Park during the hay harvest, looking from the top of Short Down towards Gotfords Hill.

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2010]



In 1973 Brent Council decided to retain the fields as meadows, open to the public as part of what has become Fryent Country Park. Under an environmentally friendly management plan, the old hedges have been restored to their 1597 lines (with the help of volunteers from the Barn Hill Conservation Group) and the hay meadows have been returned to their former glory, being awarded organic status by the Soil Association. With one summer cutting to encourage a wide variety of native grass species and wild flowers, and a large butterfly population that thrives in these conditions, the hay meadows of Kingsbury are not only a reminder of the historic landscape of this part of England but also a nature reserve of regional importance. Just as important, they are a beautiful local area that everyone is welcome to enjoy throughout the year.

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[The first version of this article was written for Brent Archives in June/July 2004. A version was also published in the "Wembley Observer" newspaper on 5 August 2004, in conjunction with a report and photograph of that year's hay harvest on Fryent Country Park.]