

The fight to save Hampstead Heath

Unrivalled beauty of Hampstead Heath (Meg Game)

When enjoying the unrivalled beauty of Hampstead Heath, we would do well to remember the 19th Century public pressure that preserved the area as open space.

Sir Thomas Maryon Wilson inherited Hampstead Manor from his father in 1821, but by the terms of the will he was specifically prevented from selling any of the land or granting building leases. Sir Thomas attempted to change the terms of the will by presenting 15 private bills to Parliament between 1829 and 1866, designed to enable him to develop parts of the Heath. He might well have succeeded with his first Private Estate Bill if he had not included a clause which would have empowered him to

grant building leases on any part of land "enclosed from the Heath itself". It was this attempt to establish his right to enclose common land which created a powerful body of opposition comprising the copyholders, influential residents of Hampstead and the press.

Thwarted, Sir Thomas resolved to exercise his right to develop part of the Manor himself. Plans were drawn up for a 'park' of 28 villas and work started with the building of an access road from Spaniard's Road near Whitestone Pond. He established a brick works near the Vale of Health, bricks from which were used to build the viaduct (over the new viaduct pond) and the smaller foot bridge nearby (now known as the Bird



The area of Hampstead Heath that was nearly built on (courtesy: Michael Hammerson)

Bridge). Foundations for the first villa were laid and various preliminary works were carried out. However, Sir Thomas found that he could not afford to continue to build and he was prevented from selling or leasing. The work stopped.

Sir Thomas died in 1869. In 1871 his heir sold East Heath, Sandy Heath and West Heath (about 220 acres in total) to the Metropolitan Board of Works. This arrangement was confirmed by the Hampstead Heath Act in 1871 which provided that 'the Board shall forever keep the Heath open, unenclosed and unbuilt on' and that 'the Board shall at all times preserve, as far as may be, the natural aspect and state of the Heath, and to that end shall protect the turf, gorse, heather, timber and other trees, shrubs and brushwood thereon'. We should be forever thankfully to people who resisted development until the Heath received that protection.



The Bird Bridge today (*Layton Thompson*)

Over the years since then, further land has been acquired by the successive holders of the Heath. The City of London became guardian of the Heath in 1989. It is a responsibility that the City takes very seriously.



Athlone House Gardens - a 21st Century addition to Hampstead Heath (*Layton Thompson*)