

The Wyldes Farmhouse

Sandy Heath woodland adjacent to today's Wyldes Farm (Clive Totman)

In a quiet and unassuming area adjoining the Heath Extension near to Wildwood Road and Hampstead Way is found the location of The Village at North End and in particular Wyldes Farmhouse. The farm, at its maximum, comprised some 340 acres. It now lies under part of Hampstead Garden Suburb, with the remainder being the Heath Extension. Innocent sounding enough, but from shortly after 1800 Wyldes was a place with the kind of literary, cultural and political associations for which Hampstead is famous in the collective memory.

The house had been the centre of life of a working farm since the early 1600's. However, by the end of the eighteenth

century Hampstead had become a fashionable resort and the letting of rooms in the area provided a good income. The farmer in 1820 was John Collins. He carried out alterations to the property to create four rooms that he could let out, while he and his family occupied the northern end of the house.

Wyldes soon became the destination of eminent people. In the earlier part of the 19th Century several well-known artists of the day either stayed at or visited: John Linnel, William Henry Hunt, William Collins (whose son Wilkie, the novelist, used to play in the garden when a child), George Romney, John Constable and William Blake to name a few.



Wyldes Farm in the early 1900s (courtesy: Michael Hammerson)

Later, in 1837, a distraught Charles Dickens rented the property for five weeks, as an escape from the City, following the unexpected and devastating death of his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth. Dickens was, at the time, writing the *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, both of which were being serialised on a monthly basis, each having hectic deadlines. It has been suggested that Dickens knew North End well from his childhood as a secluded place because several times he had been there when his father was trying to evade creditors.

After a series of other tenants, a Mrs Charlotte Wilson, one of the first women to have gone to Newnham College Cambridge, rented the house in 1884. She had a dedicated interest in anarchism and the development of socialist movements. Shortly before coming to Wyldes she had joined a small group of middle class socialists which became known as the Fabian Society and was soon a member of its executive committee. She established a radical political study group which she named

the Hampstead Historic Club. For a time it met at Wyldes once a fortnight. The meetings attracted people from a wide range of interests: feminists, revolutionaries, reformers, rural communes, economists, marxists and anarchists. Foremost from the start were Fabians such as George Bernard Shaw, Sydney Webb and Annie Besant.

While all these events went on at the house itself the adjoining farm continued to be worked. A later occupier of the farm was Thomas Tooley. He was born at North End, in a cottage which stood opposite the Bull and Bush Pub. He died in April 1929 at the age of 89, having farmed Wildwood Farm for more than 40 years. Towards the end of his life he recalled that "as a lad of 16 I used to collect grain from a place off Gray's Inn Road, driving home past Kings Cross and up Euston Road, then called New Road. When I passed Kings Cross I used to say to myself 'Now we are out of London'".

How things have changed, but Wyldes Farmhouse lives on largely unaltered with its secrets.



The farm when occupied by Thomas Tooley (courtesy: Michael Hammerson)