

An Essential Victorian in Hampton Wick

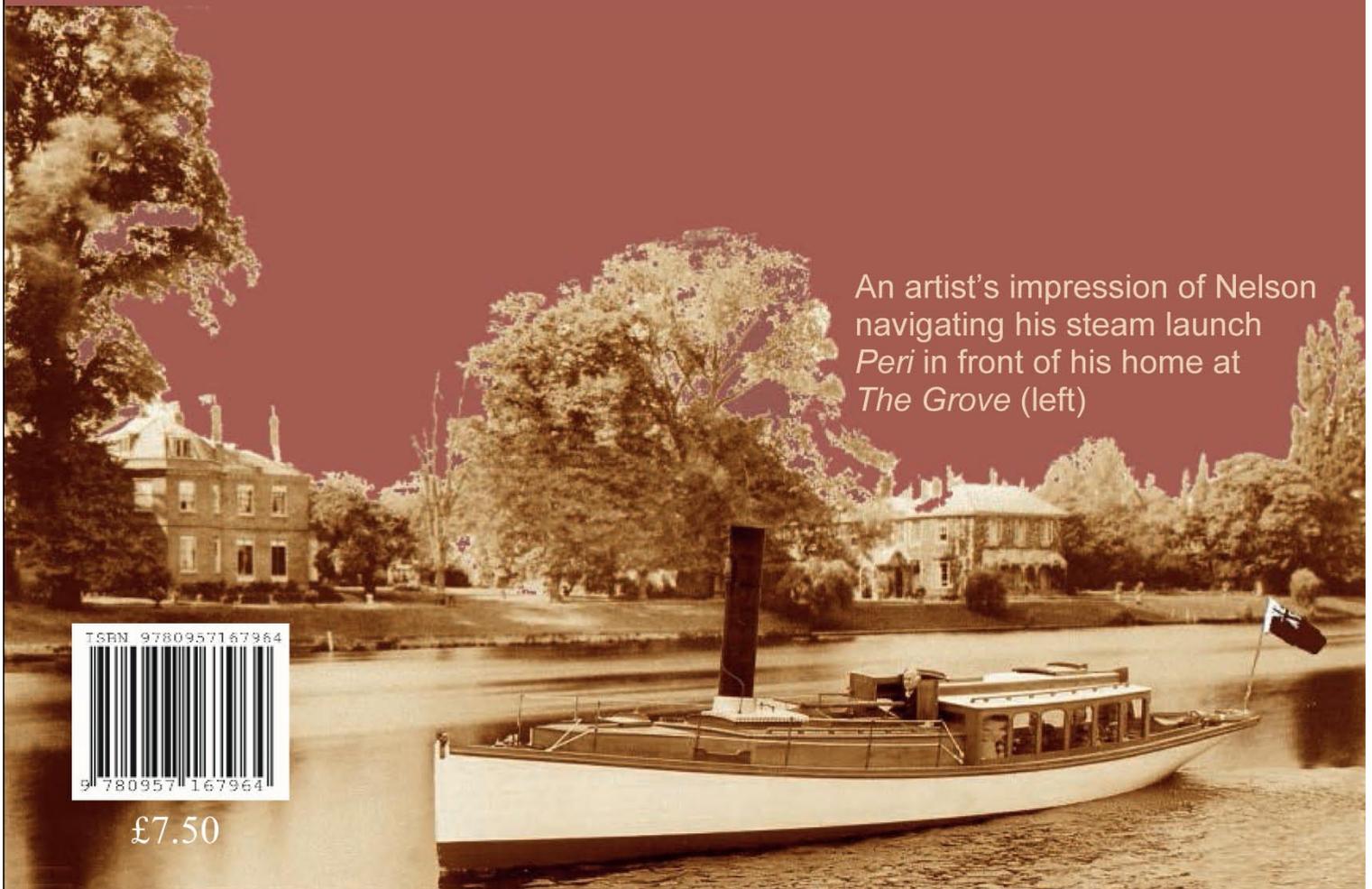


The Life and Times of Sir Thomas James Nelson

Ray Elmitt

The Victorian Era was a period of both great stability and huge change. The total population of Britain more than doubled between 1831 and 1901. The previously clergy-led Vestry system of local government with its origins in the Reformation gave way to locally-elected secular bodies to whom Central Government increasingly devolved responsibility for local health and welfare as well as law and order. This devolution pre-supposed that there were individuals who were willing and able to accept the local power and responsibility. Their existence was therefore crucial since the role they played was essential to the very operation of government in Victorian Britain.

This paper seeks to tell the complete life story of one such Essential Victorian - Thomas James Nelson - whose 25 years of local public service from 1860 to 1885 had a significant impact on Hampton Wick and the surrounding area. We examine his origins and early life, trace the many successes of his professional career as Solicitor to the City of London before focussing on his local public career. Finally we reveal what little we know of his private life which makes up in its surprising interest and variety what it lacks in depth of material.



An artist's impression of Nelson navigating his steam launch *Peri* in front of his home at *The Grove* (left)



£7.50

AN ESSENTIAL VICTORIAN
IN HAMPTON WICK

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
SIR THOMAS JAMES NELSON

Ray Elmitt

For Vicky

who, after we had been living
very happily together
in *The Grove* for more than 40 years,
finally persuaded me to find out more
about our illustrious - and intriguing -
predecessor.

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Contents

Preface	3
1. Early Years	7
2. The Family Man	11
3. The Professional Man	21
4. The Public Man	37
5. The Private Man	55
6. The Final Days	65
Epilogue	69
Bibliography	73
Notes	74



*T. J. Nelson
City Sol. 1886*

Sir Thomas James Nelson JP

*Chairman Hampton Wick Local Board
Chairman Lower Thames Valley Main Sewerage Board
Governor of Hampton Wick Endowed School
Member of the Board of Management for Teddington and Hampton Wick
Cottage Hospital
President of the Junior Kingston Rowing Club
Chairman of Teddington and Hampton Wick Conservative Association
Her Majesty's Lieutenant for the City of London*

PREFACE

The Victorian Era (1837 - 1901) was a period of both great stability and huge change. The impact of the Industrial Revolution which gathered pace in the previous century was now being fully felt. In 1838, the UK enjoyed the largest relative share of world manufacturing output and even by 1901 was still second, surpassed only by the United States. The total population of Britain more than doubled between 1831 and 1901 whilst in the period 1850-1870 alone the national income per person grew by half.

Victory over Napoleon had left Britain without any serious international rival¹ and the British Empire grew steadily towards its ultimate 1914 status encompassing almost 25% of the earth's land area and with a population of around 400m people effectively under British rule.

On the domestic political front, the country was ruled by a two-tier system: central government, exercised by a ruling political party able to command a majority in the House of Commons², and local government which, at the start of the Victorian Era, was typically conducted by a Vestry Committee - a meeting of parish ratepayers chaired by the incumbent of the parish and usually held in the church vestry. Vestries dealt with both civil and ecclesiastical affairs but, prior to 1834, their agenda had become dominated by one major responsibility - the relief of the Poor - and, at the high point of their powers, the vestries spent not far short of one-fifth of the budget of the central government. The poor relief took the form of food, clothing and/or cash and the cost was defrayed by levying a "poor rate" on the property-owning middle classes.

In 1834, in an attempt to reduce costs of relief, central government completely overhauled the existing system. They established a central Poor Law Commission to oversee the national operation of the new system and removed all responsibility from the Vestries. New Poor Law Unions were established at a local level to build and operate a workhouse in each union for the distribution of poor relief.³ The Unions were managed by a Board of Guardians with one or more Guardians being appointed from each constituent parish.⁴

This model of reform - with new responsibilities being placed on local communities and with a central agency or commission to oversee the national operation - became more commonplace. Thus the *Public Health Act 1848* allowed for the formation of Local Boards which assumed responsibility for the supply of services for water, sewerage, drainage, cleansing, paving and environmental health to be placed under a single local body. Initially the new legislation was more simply enabling rather than prescriptive: it was left to local communities to decide whether or not to adopt it - 419 communities did so. The 1858 Local Government Act, whilst further increasing the powers available to a local authority still did not enforce its adoption on unwilling communities - but a further 302 communities (including Hampton Wick) had chosen the option by 1873. A new Local Government Board was formed in 1871 to administer centrally both the local government and poor law legislation.

Meanwhile, growing central government concerns over the continuing poor standards of sanitation and the health threats of many diseases such as cholera and typhus finally led to the introduction of *The Public Health Act 1872* which required all existing local authorities to appoint a Medical Officer and Sanitary Inspector and called for the mandatory formation of

new Urban Sanitary Authorities and Rural Sanitary Authorities to cover those communities with no local board.

This increasing delegation from central government to the local community pre-supposed that there were individuals who were willing and able to accept the power and responsibility (unpaid). Their existence was therefore crucial and the role they played was essential to the governability of Victorian Britain.

Who were these “Essential Victorians”? What were their motives? The answer to the first question is straightforward in that almost all were well- educated middle-class professionals - lawyers, surveyors, bankers, physicians - or else local businessmen who were probably in control of their own diaries and able to devote the time required.

Why these individuals were willing to serve is much harder to discover. Some were probably driven by a Victorian version of the ancient chivalry of *noblesse oblige*; others motivated by a desire either to protect their own interests or, conversely, to be alert to new business or commercial opportunities arising. Many seemed to relish the rigour of debate whilst others indulged in more robust and calculating intellectual warfare. For some the opportunity to keep abreast of new political and social issues and to develop personal expertise in emerging technologies and processes would appeal. And finally tangible outcomes like power and recognition probably played a part alongside the honour and privilege of serving the local community.

This paper seeks to tell the complete life story of one such Essential Victorian - Thomas James Nelson - whose 25 years of local public service seem to have been fuelled by all of the above motivations - and more!

In the absence of any personal diaries, anecdotes or any other contemporary memoirs to steer us, we are largely reliant on genealogical data along with press reports to understand this man and his achievements. From these sources we examine his origins and early life, trace the many successes of his professional career as Solicitor to the City of London then focus on his public career - with its crucial contributions both to his local community and later to the wider geographic area. Finally we reveal what little we know of his private life which nevertheless makes up in its surprising interest and variety what it lacks in depth of material.

1. EARLY YEARS

THOMAS JAMES NELSON was born on 10 October 1826 in Hoxton Town (now part of Hackney) to Thomas and Louisa Nelson. He was christened on the following Boxing Day.⁵ The entry in the baptism register of St Leonard's Church Shoreditch records his father's occupation as "Coal Merchant". Measured in today's terms that would suggest he was a relatively humble tradesman. However his true business enterprise is revealed in successive Census returns from 1851 - 1881 where he is as progressively described as being "ship owner" then "ship broker" and finally "underwriter". It therefore seems almost certain that Thomas Nelson senior was involved in shipping coal in his own vessels and distributing it from his yard. From at least 1843 this was located at Union Wharf on the Wenlock Basin of the Regents Canal. The coal (probably from Newcastle) would arrive in Limehouse Basin at the east end of the canal and would be off-loaded onto barges for the four mile haul to the Wenlock Basin.

The infant Nelson was the first of three sons born to Thomas and Louisa over the next 11 years. The family home was located on Kingsland Road⁶, the main north-south highway through Hoxton Town, about one mile east of the coal-yard. In the early part of the century, the area had benefitted from its proximity to the City - Thomas senior could walk from his home to the Bank of England in half a hour - and many former city dwellers (including Thomas himself) had therefore moved out to take advantage of what was still open country, much of it used for pasture, market gardens, nurseries and brick fields. The exodus from the City and the housing development it fuelled inevitably reduced the appeal of Hoxton but nevertheless at the time of young Nelson's birth it remained a good place to raise a family.

In 1838 at the age of 12 young Thomas became a pupil at the City of London School still in only its second year of existence. This event marked the start of his lifelong association with the City and its institutions.

The City of London School had a fascinating origin. Property left on the death of the Town Clerk of London during the reign of Henry V had been devoted in perpetuity to the education of four poor boys from the City. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the accumulated funds from that property greatly exceeded the actual cost of educating four boys. Warren Stormes Hale, a Master of the Tallow Chandlers' Company and future Lord Mayor of London, led a campaign to have the surplus

funds diverted to the creation of a permanent school within the City. The necessary Act of Parliament was finally passed in 1834 and the new school, a neo-Gothic structure designed by the City's architect for 400 boys, opened its doors in Milk Street in 1837.⁷

Nelson remained at the school for two years and then, after receiving private tuition, was sent to complete his education at the College of Saxe-Coburg in Germany.

*City of London School
1837 - 1883 The architect was
James Bunstone Bunning.*



William Charles Clerk to Messieurs Joseph and
 William Lowless of N^o 2 Station Court Threadneedle Street
 in the City of London Gentlemen two of the Attornies of this
 Honorable Court maketh oath and saith that by Articles
 of Agreement bearing date the fourth day of November one
 thousand eight hundred and forty three and made between
 the said William Lowless of N^o 2 Station Court aforesaid of
 the one part and Thomas Nelson of N^o 127 Kingsland Road
 in the County of Middlesex Gentleman and Thomas James
 Nelson of N^o 127 Kingsland Road aforesaid son of the said
 Thomas Nelson of the other part The said Thomas James
 Nelson for the considerations therein mentioned did put
 bind and place himself Clerk to the said William Lowless
 to serve him in the profession of an Attorney at Law
 from the day of the date of the said Articles for the
 Term of Five years thence next ensuing and fully to be
 complete and ended and which said Articles were in
 due form of Law executed by the said William Lowless
 the said Thomas Nelson and the said Thomas James
 Nelson on the said fourth day of November one thousand
 eight hundred and forty three in the presence of this Deponent
 and that the name "Wm Charles" set and subscribed
 to the said Articles as a witness to the due execution thereof
 is in the proper handwriting of this Deponent And this
 Deponent further saith that the said William Lowless was
 duly admitted an Attorney of this Honorable Court in
 Easter Term One thousand eight hundred and twenty six

Sworn at the Judges Chambers
 Rolls Garden Chancery Lane
 this 17th day of January 1844

Before me
 H. H.

Wm Charles

Williams

Nelson's Article of Clerkship to William Lowless dated 17 January 1844

From his earliest days Nelson had expressed an interest in the law and, on his return from Germany, he spent a year in the office of the City of London Comptroller to put his boyish ambition to the test. It obviously passed for on 4th November 1843, Nelson and his father signed Articles of Clerkship by which the 17-year-old was taken on by the firm being run by Joseph and William Lowless, Solicitors at No 2 Hatton Court, Threadneedle Street, a highly respected establishment which had been in existence since the reign of Charles II. His articles lasted five years and on qualifying as a solicitor in the Michaelmas term of 1848, he was immediately taken on as a partner, the renamed firm being recorded in the 1851 Post Office Directory as Lowless & Nelson, Solicitors.

2. THE FAMILY MAN

Early Married Life

1 850 WAS A special year for Thomas James Nelson. Not only had he just qualified as a solicitor and been made a partner in a leading firm of City Solicitors, but in September 1850 he married his childhood sweetheart Jemima Louise Mullens who was also his cousin (his mother Louisa Nelson née Mullens was Jemima's aunt). Both bride and groom were the eldest of three siblings, Jemima being the only girl of the six. All the cousins were born and brought up within the Borough of Hackney so would have known each other well.

Jemima's father, a stock broker, was later appointed official broker to both the Government and the Bank of England. William Mullens and Thomas Nelson senior were liverymen (members of the Haberdashers and Weavers companies respectively) and collaborated in both business projects and property ownership.⁸ Thomas James' middle brother joined his father in ship broking and the youngest became a solicitor in the firm of Lowless & Nelson. Similarly Jemima's youngest brother became a stock broker in partnership with his father though her other brother William was less fortunate having been admitted to a private (so-called) lunatic asylum in Fulham soon after leaving school. He died there seven years later aged 25.

The wedding of Thomas James Nelson and Jemima Louise Mullens took place on Wednesday 4 September 1850 at the Parish Church of St John in Hackney, the entry in the register noting the bride was "under age" (she was still four months short of her majority). The couple moved into Number 3 Sheldon Villas, a new development of four terraced properties located on Upper Clapton Road. On the night of the 30 March 1851, the census return showed the newly-weds were at home and hosting Thomas' father and a brother whilst his mother was away visiting friends in the Scilly Isles.

By the time of the next census (7 April 1861) Jemima had given birth to eight children (including one set of twins) and the family had moved across the Upper Clapton Road into Number 19 Buccleuch Terrace, a row of 20 much larger properties which overlooked the pond on Clapton Common. However a much bigger change was about to take place that would see the couple leave their birthplace and set up home on the other side of London.

The undermentioned Houses are situate within the Boundaries of the												
[Page 17]												
Parish (or Township) of	City or Municipal Borough of	Municipal Ward of	Parliamentary Borough of	Town of	Hamlet or Tything, &c., of	Ecclesiastical District of						
<i>Hackney</i>												
No. of Schedule	Road, Street, &c., No. or Name of House	HOUSES		Name and Surname of each Person	Relation to Head of Family	Condition	Age of		Rank, Profession, or Occupation	Where Born		Whether Blind, or Deaf and Dumb
		In	Out				Male	Female				
60	<i>Buccleuch Terrace</i>	1		<i>Thomas Nelson</i>	Head	Mar	34		<i>Solicitor</i>	<i>Middlesex London</i>		
				<i>Jemima Nelson</i>	Wife	Mar	31			<i>do do</i>		
				<i>Thomas Nelson</i>	Son		9		<i>Scholar</i>	<i>do do</i>		
				<i>William Nelson</i>	Son		8		<i>do</i>	<i>do do</i>		
				<i>Elizabeth Nelson</i>	Son		7		<i>do</i>	<i>do do</i>		
				<i>Albert Nelson</i>	Son		5		<i>do</i>	<i>do do</i>		
				<i>Emily Nelson</i>	Son	Mar	4		<i>do</i>	<i>do do</i>		
				<i>Sidney Nelson</i>	Son	Mar	4		<i>Scholar</i>	<i>do do</i>		
				<i>Leah Nelson</i>	Son		3			<i>do do</i>		
				<i>Horace Nelson</i>	Son		3			<i>do do</i>		
				<i>Elizabeth Nelson</i>	Son	Mar	26		<i>House Servant</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>Birmingham</i>	
				<i>Caroline Nelson</i>	Son	Mar	22		<i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	
				<i>Elizabeth Nelson</i>	Son	Mar	20		<i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>Hackney</i>	
				<i>William Nelson</i>	Son	Mar	20		<i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>Hackney</i>	

1861 Census Entry for Nelson and Family

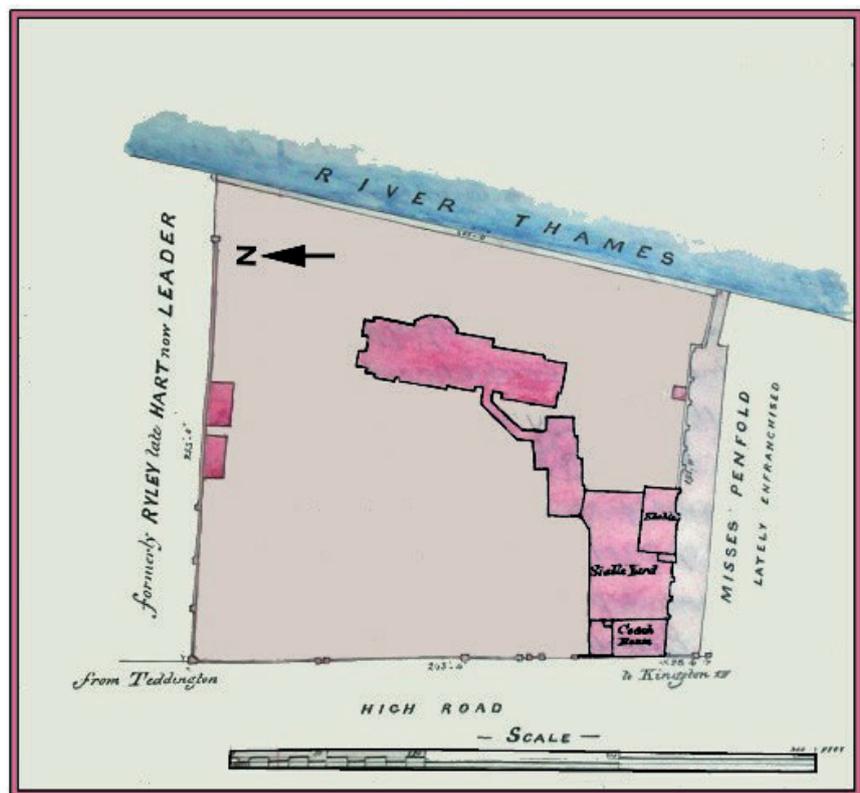
The previously-mentioned attraction caused by Hackney's relative proximity to the City led to a significant growth in its population.⁹ New housing spread rapidly and with it the demand for items including furniture and curtains with which to set up a new home. To satisfy the requirements of these new residents, Hoxton soon became a centre of the furniture trade for much of north London. This in turn led to significant infill building and industrialisation of the area and the wealthier classes took advantage of the spread of new railways to escape to more distant, healthier and less crowded suburbs.

A New Family Home

Nelson's choice was Hampton Wick, a village occupying around 1300 acres on the west bank of the river opposite Kingston upon Thames. The population at the 1861 census had been just under 2,000 and reflected the fact that almost 90% of the land was occupied by the royal parks belonging to Hampton Court Palace.

By November 1861, Nelson had signed a contract to rent *The Grove*¹⁰, a large mansion standing in an acre and a quarter of land. It belonged to Edward Lapidge¹¹, who had inherited the house from his father in 1806. However Lapidge had not personally lived there since 1831 and it had been rented out on a series of short-term contracts. Thus, when Lapidge died in 1860, and none of his family was in need of a home, they would have been relieved to have found such a suitable - and hopefully long-term¹² - tenant to take it on.

*Sketch Plan of
The Grove taken from
the margin of the
Hampton Manor
Court Roll entry of
5 May 1863 recording
"that Messuage or
Dwelling [was] now in
the occupation of
Thomas James
Nelson".*



The site of *The Grove* was on the west bank of the River Thames about half a mile downstream from Kingston Bridge. On the opposite side of the river was open farmland belonging to Ham House whilst across Swan Lane on the west boundary, the farm land had recently been acquired by a property developer and five pairs of substantial four-storey semi-detached villas were soon to be built.

The main part of *The Grove* consisted of two storeys with attics. It was seven bays wide with the three central bays on the river side canted, providing large windows overlooking the river from what, inside, were octagonal-shaped rooms. There was also a large single storey billiard room extension to the south and additional servants and kitchen quarters in a separate building linked to the main structure by a covered passage. The stables and coach house were ranged around a yard in the south west corner of the plot and had their own entrance onto Swan Lane (shown as High Road on the sketch plan). The garden was laid out informally with lawns and borders and a network of

The Grove sketched from the Kingston bank in 1935. The single-storey billiard room is to the left of the main building behind which can be seen the grove of holm oaks over-hanging the stables and coach house.





The Grove taken from the north west showing the addition of a substantial porch which was added at Nelson's request around 1880.

meandering paths. A heated glass-house and potting shed had been built against the north boundary wall.

There were many significant trees around the garden including a grove of holm oaks along the driveway from which the house derived its name. A large brick-lined ice house had been built into the ground under the shade of the trees providing easy access to a cool storage space from the kitchen building just across the carriage drive. Water was available from three wells within the grounds which also contained several cess-pits.

Already one of the most prestigious properties in this part of Hampton Wick, Nelson now added to its extensive curtilage by acquiring the plot of land on its southern boundary. This had previously contained one of the many malt-houses in Hampton Wick which he then demolished, converting the land into more gardens and later erecting an elegant



The boat house built about 1870 which housed Nelson's steam launch Peri

polychrome brick boathouse in the south-east corner.

Thomas and Jemima Nelson moved in with their eight children - all aged between one and ten - in the summer of 1861. Their live-in domestic help consisted of a cook, two housemaids and a coachman. With his work schedule and a two-hour commute morning and evening, it is doubtful that Nelson saw much of his children except at weekends.

Nelson's journey to the solicitors firm of Lowless and Nelson in Threadneedle Street would initially have been either via the London & South Western Railway's station at Surbiton (opportunistically named Kingston-upon- Railway) two miles south of the house or the same company's Twickenham station three miles to the north. However on 1 July 1863 the new Kingston Extension Line was opened linking Twickenham Station on the Windsor line to a new terminus station in Kingston upon Thames via a river bridge which was built two hundred metres south of *The Grove*¹³. A high-level station at Hampton Wick was now just five minute's walk away.

The *Middlesex Chronicle*¹⁴ recorded:

This parish, which has been plodding along in the old-fashioned style, has suddenly sprung into a new state of existence, chiefly arising, no doubt, from the fact that a new line of railway is now open, passing nearly through the centre of the village, having a very neat and commodious station, and which affords an opportunity to the residents to get to the metropolis without being under the necessity of travelling nearly two miles to the Surbiton station. The result of this additional accommodation will be an increase of traffic, and of buildings of a superior class in the immediate vicinity of the railway, the situation being, with its beautiful park, one of the most salubrious and healthy spots within 20 miles of London.

From 1 January 1869 the line was further extended east from Kingston to join the London mainline from Southampton at Malden and Coombe station (now New Malden) thus completing a loop between the Windsor and Southampton lines and doubling the options available to Nelson. All routes led to Waterloo however so he would still be faced with a two-mile journey to the Guildhall to be completed either by walking, Hansom cab or horse-bus.

On occasion Nelson may have had company on his commutes since Jemima Nelson's brother John Ashley Mullens also came to live in Hampton Wick around 1863. Mullens was engaged in his father's firm of Stock Brokers which was based in Lombard Street close to Nelson's offices.

Mullens later moved into *Old Broome Hall* by Teddington lock which was just a mile downstream from *The Grove*. The two siblings would probably have had regular social contact especially when their father moved into, was cared for, and ultimately died at his son's house.

The Family Grows Up

The 1861 census, taken shortly before the family moved from Clapton, showed all but the youngest two of the eight children were listed as scholars, possibly with home tutors and all being looked after by Jemima and a retinue of four house servants. The set-up was probably similar following the move to Hampton Wick although the older children would later be away at boarding school. This was confirmed by the 1871 census when Sidney Herbert (then aged 14) was listed at The Grange Boarding School in Ewell whilst 13-year old Laura Minnie was at a small residential language school in Brighton and the youngest son Horace Betram (aged 10) was at the York Gate House Boarding School in Broadstairs. The eldest son Thomas Augustus was now aged 20 and, having left school, was living with his paternal grandparents in Walthamstow.

If Thomas and Jemima Nelson had hopes that their children would soon settle down and produce families of their own, they were to be disappointed. Only two of the eight children married during their parent's lifetimes - and neither marriage was destined to last, although for very different reasons.

William Arthur was 21 years old when he married Susan Browne daughter of the eponymous patent medicine inventor Dr J Collis Browne¹⁵ in 1873. Earlier in the year, having served a seven-year apprenticeship with a Hackney-based firm of Auctioneers, William was employed by a Fruit Wholesaler and later became a partner in the firm. Although the couple had both lived in Hampton Wick they chose to get married in the Registry Office of St Pancras without it seems either set of parents being present. By now, Susan's parents had moved to Ramsgate and the young couple went through a church wedding ceremony in May 1874 in Christ Church, Ramsgate. Their daughter Katherine was born

in October that year but died in her infancy. The couple then briefly visited New Zealand presumably to help them overcome their grief.

Court Records show that in February 1882 William Arthur filed a petition for divorce from his wife on the grounds of her adultery with a named co-respondent. A Decree Nisi was granted in August 1882 but events then took a bizarre turn. The Queen's Proctor¹⁶ intervened in the case in March 1883 and produced evidence that the parties were acting in collusion: in return for an increased sum in alimony, Susan had agreed to be represented as the guilty party. The reality was that, not only was it William Arthur himself who was the adulterer, but it also emerged that he frequently mistreated his wife, eventually causing her to leave home (complete with "a black eye") in fear for her own safety. In the face of the evidence from the Queen's Proctor the Court dismissed the divorce petition and the couple remained separated.¹⁷

In 1877 - and in what would prove to be a complete contrast to her brother - the Nelson's eldest daughter Lelia Mary married Francis Maysmor Harvey Leader who was literally "the boy next door" to her in Hampton Wick. His father was the Licensee of the Royal Alhambra Palace theatre in Leicester Square. The bride and her parents chose to host the wedding at their former home church of St Thomas on Clapton Common just opposite Buccleuch Terrace. The decision was probably made partly for the convenience of the bride's family and friends but also to take full advantage of the £3m (today's value) refurbishment that had just been completed at the church.

Following the ceremony and honeymoon, the couple moved into their brand new home in Staines which they named *Thorndean*.

Francis was pursuing his career as a draughtsman and was also an enthusiastic oarsman at Molesey Boat Club. With Lelia expecting their first child in late summer 1878, tragedy struck the couple. Very early on the morning of Sunday 28 July Francis had complained of feeling restless and told his wife he was going fishing. His body was found in the river at 8am and, since he was prone to epileptic fits, it was presumed he had suffered a fit and fallen into the water - his pocket watch had stopped at 5.23am. He was buried in St Mary's Teddington and two weeks later, his widow gave birth to a daughter.¹⁸

At the time of the 1881 census, *The Grove* was empty save for a housekeeper and his wife whilst Nelson and his family and servants were living at an address in Manchester Square just north of Oxford Street. It seems likely that *The Grove* itself was undergoing some major form of refurbishment that required the house to be vacated. The census return includes the twins Sidney and Emily, (both 24, no occupation) and Horace (20, student) who was in his second year of studying law at Worcester College, Oxford. Meanwhile Thomas Augustus (29, Annuitant) had never moved to *The Grove* preferring instead to live permanently with his paternal grandparents in Walthamstow. Similarly Albert Edward (25, Barrister) had been permanently living with his father's brother (44, Solicitor) still on Clapton Common, Hackney.

Following typical Victorian family practice, the youngest daughter, Laura Minnie Nelson, remained at home to look after her parents.¹⁹

3. THE PROFESSIONAL MAN

THOMAS JAMES NELSON'S career as a solicitor in private practice lasted 14 years, coming to an end in late 1862 when, on 18 December, he was selected from a group of nine applicants to become Solicitor to the City of London.

His predecessor was Charles Pearson who had held the position for 23 years from 1839 until his death in September 1862. Throughout his career, Pearson had used his influence as City Solicitor to promote improvements to transport communications. Initially, he had proposed a central railway station for the City, accessed by



Nelson as City Solicitor in 1863

tunnel, that would be used by multiple railway companies enabling workers to commute to the City from further away. When this plan was rejected, Pearson promoted an underground railway connecting the capital's northern termini. The resulting Metropolitan Railway was the first underground railway in the world and led to the development of today's extensive London Underground network and to the rapid expansion of the capital. Pearson died just four months before the opening of the railway to whose existence he had contributed so much.²⁰

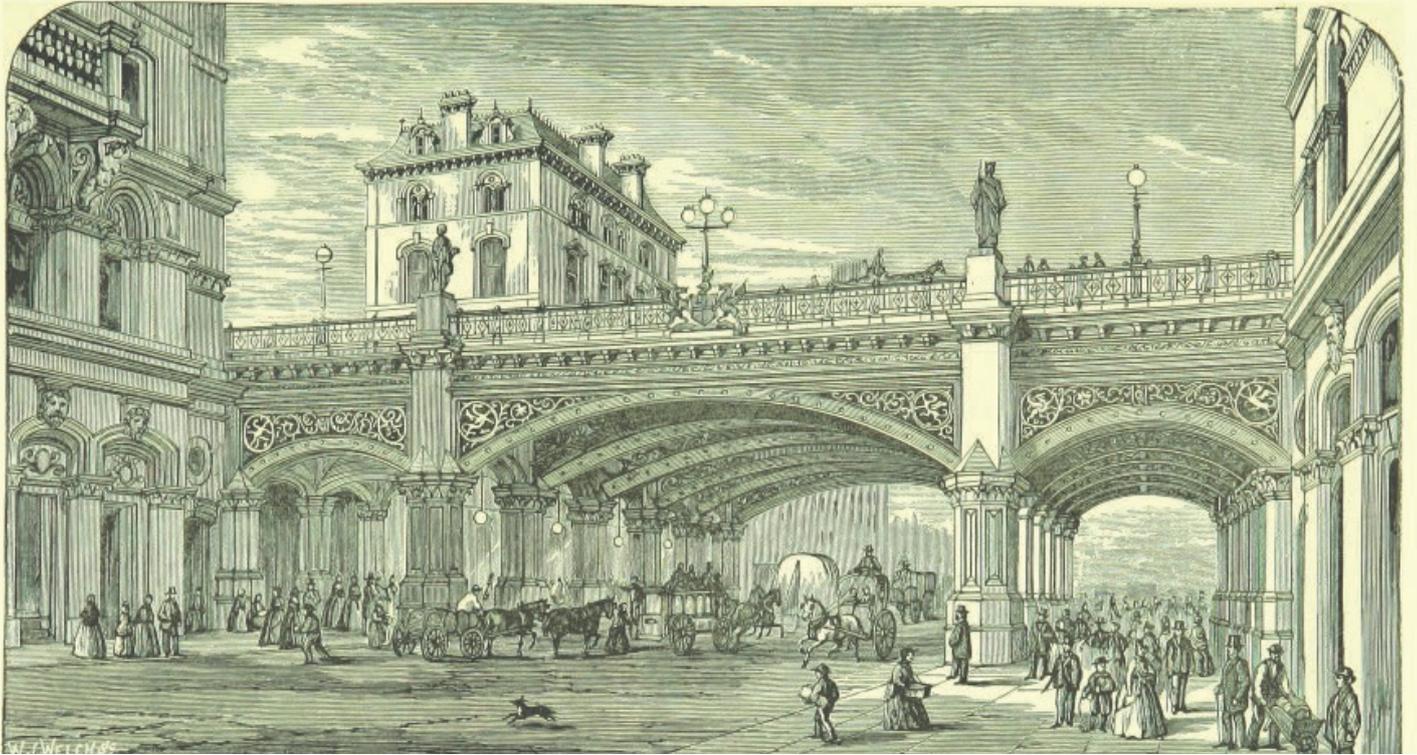
On his appointment Nelson, at 36, was almost exactly half the age of his predecessor which was clearly a tribute to the strength of his

candidacy for the post.²¹ Ironically, like Pearson, he too would serve for 23 years until his own untimely death.

The City Corporation that Nelson joined in December 1862 was still feeling its way in the wake of some major changes in its environmental and political influence. The City of London proudly traced its political origins to the thriving trade of the Roman City of Londinium and its flourishing port on the north bank of the River Thames. Its commercial status was built on - and protected by - the formation of the craftsmens' guilds in the Middle Ages. The foundation of the Bank of England (1694), Lloyds of London (1688) and the London Stock Exchange (1697) within the City limits conferred on it additional status as the financial centre. Administered by the Corporation of the City of London, its power was underpinned by the ability to fund most of its own developments through the revenues from its jealously-guarded and much-resented privilege to tax trade in coal, wine and corn within a geographic area up to 25 times larger than the City itself.

The growth in the working population of London as a whole, fed from the 1830s onwards by railway commuting, led to the introduction of the *Municipal Corporations Act 1835*. This was an attempt to eliminate the chaos caused by the hundreds of authorities having varying fields of responsibility and overlapping geographic boundaries. The City of London succeeded in remaining untouched by this legislation but was unable to avoid being included within the jurisdiction of the new Metropolitan Board of Works. The MBW was created in 1855 to plan and execute London-wide infrastructure projects including sewage, streets and bridges together with parks and open spaces - all areas where the City had previously been completely self-determining as well as self-sufficient. Now they were reduced to having just three representatives on a governing body totalling 45 members.

Perhaps fortunately for the initial relationships between the old and new political entities, the Great Stink of 1858 (see page 45) meant



Construction of the Holborn Viaduct began soon after Nelson became City Solicitor.

that the principal focus of the MBW for the next several years would be the vast engineering project required to create a comprehensive sewage system for the whole capital including the City itself. This commitment meant that the MBW were in no position to argue when the City funded, designed and built the Holborn Viaduct (1863-69) described by one commentator as "the most ambitious and costly improvement scheme of the [nineteenth] century"²² involving some outstanding feats of Victorian engineering.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a complete chronicle of Nelson's activities in his role as City Solicitor. Nevertheless arguably the two greatest achievements of his career were the preservation of Epping Forest for the perpetual benefit of the public and the freeing from tolls of the bridges upstream of central London. Both episodes are described below and are of interest not only because they demonstrate Nelson's professional and personal qualities but also because they show how much more outward-looking the City became during his tenure. They also both involved the MBW, once as competitor and once as collaborator.

Saving Epping Forest

The term "forest" in the conventional modern understanding of the word refers to an area - usually quite extensive - of wooded land; however, the original medieval sense was closer to the modern idea of a "reserve" i.e. land legally set aside for specific purposes - in this case for royal hunting - with less emphasis on its vegetation.²³

Although the Anglo-Saxon kings were great huntsmen they never set aside areas declared to be "outside" (Latin *foris*) the law of the land. It was the Norman kings who introduced this practice (a process known as afforestation). The law was designed to protect the "noble" animals of the chase - notably red and fallow deer, the roe deer, and the wild boar - along with the greenery (*vert*) that sustained them.

Hunting across forests was an important demonstration of Royal and aristocratic power and a necessary training for war. At one stage in the 12th century, the whole of Essex had been afforested. However changing Royal interests and the rise of a professional army during the Georgian period saw Royal participation in hunting and the power of Forest Law decline dramatically. Parliamentary scrutiny of Royal finances following the Restoration saw the Royal Forest hunting rights across private land - known as Forestal Rights - begin to be sold.

In 1851, custody of the Crown Lands, including Epping Forest's Forestal Rights, was transferred to the Commissioners of Woods and Forests whose primary duty was to increase revenue for the Exchequer. This transfer led to the immediate sale of rights at Hainault Forest where, within six weeks, 3,000 acres of woodland were cleared. The area became marginal agricultural land and subsequently a significant proportion has been built

on. Public fears that a similar fate could befall nearby Epping Forest were well founded: between 1854 and 1863 the Commissioners sold for the paltry sum of £18,600 (less than five pounds an acre) Crown rights extending over four thousand out of the seven thousand acres to which Epping Forest had by then been reduced.

The outrage caused by this cumulative loss of traditional public recreational spaces was to lead to the formation of bodies such as the Commons Preservation Society in 1865 and ultimately the National Trust (“for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty”) in 1894. However it would take many years for the new organisations to gain the stature and resources to become effective in the fight to preserve these sites. The Government meanwhile was ambivalent in its attitudes toward the public interest and the public purse. After several attempts at compromise, it succumbed to pressure from all parties and in 1871 set up an Independent Public Inquiry to recommend a way forward. This was initially expected to take two years to complete so a moratorium on further sales, enclosures and litigation was declared in the interim.²⁴

The immediate problem was that, if public assets like Hainault and Epping were to be saved from the developers and other profiteers, it required an already existing body with sufficient resources both to fight them legally in the cause of preservation and, if successful in this, to then manage and conserve the now-protected assets on an ongoing basis.

In 1871, John Thomas Bedford, a member of the executive body of the City of London Corporation, recognised that the City was at that crucial time the only body with sufficient resources to

save Epping Forest. He succeeded in persuading the City to take on the challenge and to create a four-step strategy:

1. Build the war chest needed to fight the campaign.
2. Challenge the legality of the recent enclosures and force them to be resold.
3. Create a framework by which these parcels could be legally and economically acquired by the City.
4. Gain support for the City to be empowered to convert the land acquisition into a park to be owned and managed for the benefit of all.

Thomas James Nelson as Solicitor to the City of London would play a crucial role in the development and ultimate success of this strategy. At each stage his very considerable intellectual capabilities and single-mindedness of purpose were deployed to great effect.

Funding

Over the centuries as already noted an important source of revenue for the City were the Royal franchises they held for conducting the official “certified” measurement of dutiable goods (notably corn, coal and wine) for which service they charged a duty known as “metage”. Traditionally metage measurements on grain had been based on volume (bushels) but sales had increasingly become based on weight. Under a Private Bill entitled *Metage of Grain (Port of London)* presented in April 1872, the Corporation proposed a switch to metage by weight and, at the same time, significantly reduce the charge they had previously made, bringing it down to just one farthing per cwt. In return for this welcomed change the resulting Act gave the City permission to use the proceeds of this duty

*for the preservation of open spaces in the
neighbourhood of London*

initially limited to a total of £99,000 and for a period of 30 years.

Challenging the Enclosures

With the contents of their war chest secured, the Corporation set out to do battle over the enclosures by which the landowners had sought to exclude the local populace and prevent them exercising their traditional forestal rights, such as collecting firewood.

For centuries, enclosures had been used as a means of increasing agricultural output through improved efficiency in land use. But in this case their purpose was to render the land unencumbered ready for the hoped-for property development boom. Naturally, many and powerful vested interests were involved and it became clear that, without equally powerful and wealthy backing, the rights of the commoners would not prevail. However the City of London, through its ownership of land at Aldersbrook²⁵, was itself a commoner which technically gave them the right²⁶ to graze animals throughout the Forest.

This factor enabled Nelson to make a crucial breakthrough in attempting to stop the enclosures by the use of a *single* lawsuit, launched in 1871, which he brought against *all* the lords of the manors. The suit sought not only to restrain them from further enclosure but also required them to throw open lands already illegally enclosed. The legal action was long and bitterly contested over three years. A mass of evidence was produced on both sides as to the use and extent of these common rights. At length, in August 1874, after arguments before him lasting twenty-three days, the Master of the Rolls held that the

Corporation had established their case, and that the defendants by their enclosures had

taken other persons' property without their consent, and appropriated it to their own use.

Land Acquisition

Nelson's victory in the Courts paved the way for the Corporation to start buying in as much land of Epping Forest as they could. With enclosures now declared illegal, the landowners' hope of selling the land for building had evaporated but nevertheless they still made handsome profits: land they had purchased from the Government Commissioners ten years previously for £5 per acre was now being acquired by the City at more than £25 per acre. Eventually the Corporation had amassed a total area of 5,530 acres. But to secure the area for public recreation and enjoyment in perpetuity, the question of stewardship needed to be resolved.

Receiving Custody

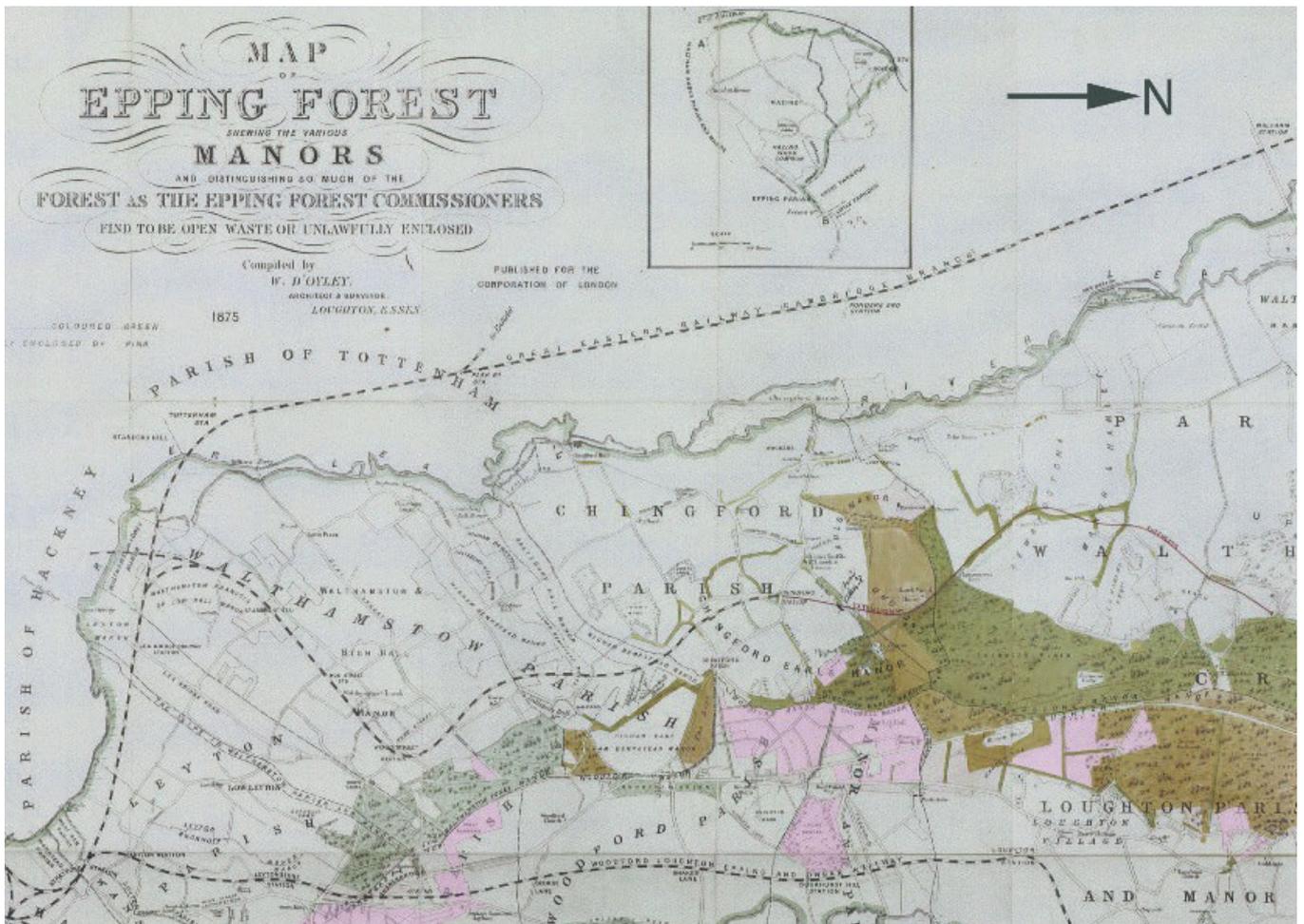
The four Epping Forest Commissioners appointed to conduct the Public Inquiry had begun work on 14 August 1871.²⁷ They were charged with understanding the current situation and devising a scheme for disafforesting the Forest and for the preservation and management of its waste lands. By this time the City of London had decided that it wished to play the lead role in the future of the forest and asked for permission, under the Act of 1871, to lay a scheme before the Commissioners and provide a fund for preserving and maintaining the Forest, but the Government refused.

Nevertheless the Corporation would cooperate closely with the Commissioners throughout their task. The vast amount of highly detailed information gathered by the City - initially as part of

their suit against the Lords of the Manors and later in support of their land purchases - would have been of immense value to the Commissioners.

By the summer of 1877, after several extensions to their term, the Commissioners had devised a draft scheme and invited final comments from the affected parties. Up to this point, the City's position in any legal proceedings had been represented by Sir Henry Manisty QC. Just days before the final hearings opened, Manisty was made a High Court judge and Thomas James Nelson personally took over the brief. A full transcript of

A map commissioned for the Corporation of London in 1875 with the then-illegal enclosures shown in pink. Nelson strenuously opposed the Epping Forest Commissioners initial proposal that these should be allowed to stand in return for a nominal fine. Instead he persuaded the Government to appoint an Arbitrator to establish fair market values for each of these enclosures and, after four years of effort, had succeeded in bringing all the disputed land under the City's ownership.

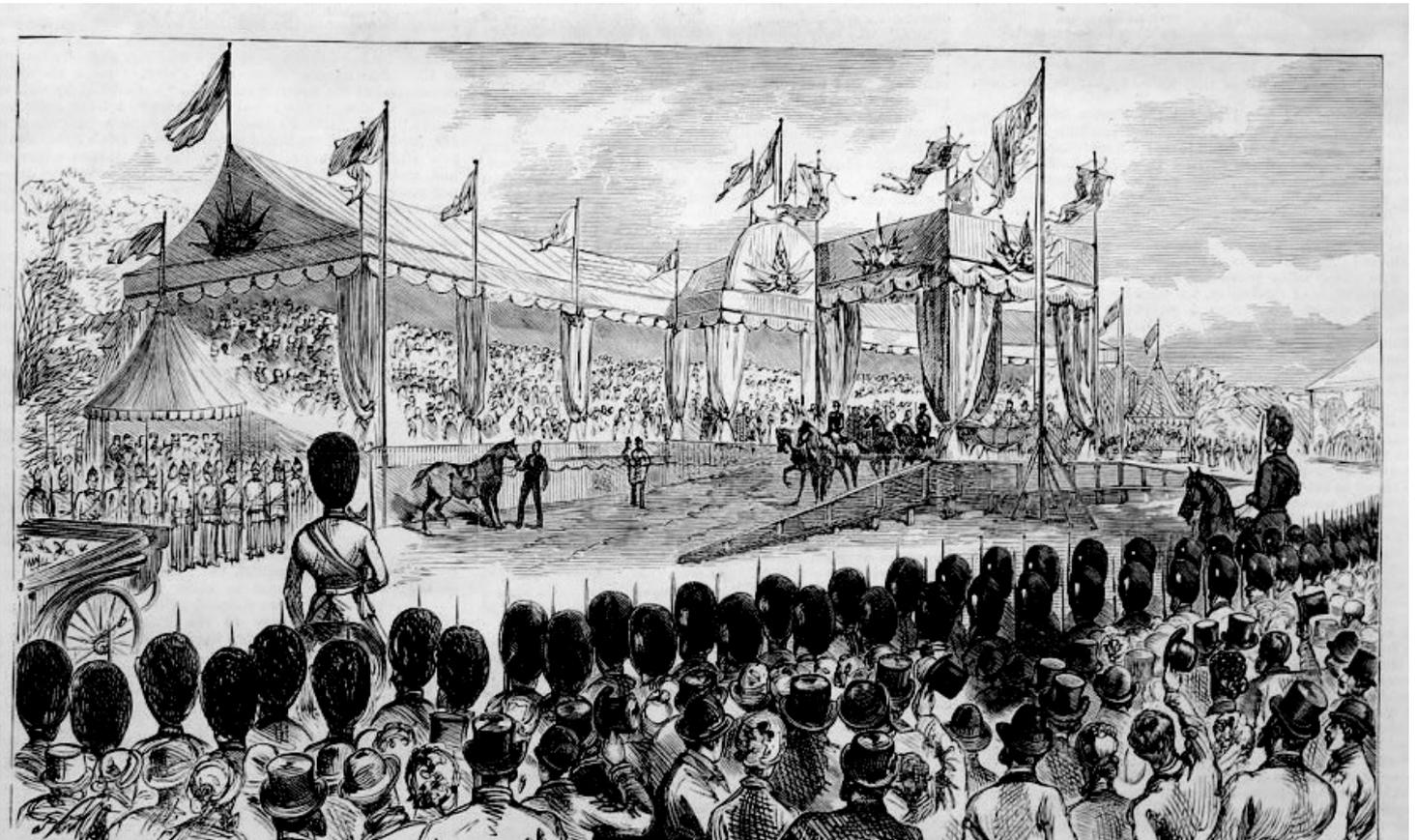


Nelson's evidence - given over three days and running to over 40,000 words - showed his mastery of detail and the rigour of his arguments. These proved sufficient to win the day.

In their final report submitted on 1 March 1878, the Commissioners testified to the great "energy, labour, and ability" which the Corporation had brought to bear upon the complicated questions of fact and of law. The Commissioners therefore agreed that the Corporation should be made Conservators of the Forest, and Parliament adopted this suggestion.

One of the Commission's recommendations that was not adopted was their proposal that enclosures made since 1851 - although illegal - should nevertheless be allowed to remain in

Queen Victoria opening the forest to the public. It was estimated by The Times that half a million people came out on the day to cheer her arrival. A stand at High Beach was constructed to seat 2,000 City of London and local dignitaries and guests. Another pavilion had been built so that the Queen's carriage could be drawn up and she could participate in the ceremony without leaving it.



existence on payment of a nominal fine to the Conservators. Nelson campaigned vigorously against this concession as a result of which Parliament - as part of the *Epping Forest Act 1878* - instead appointed an arbitrator to settle all outstanding differences. The arbitration period lasted another four years during which time the City's total landholding in the Forest was increased by a further 50%.²⁸ In Nelson's own estimation, the crown of his work in the Epping Forest campaign was the successful negotiation by which the City acquired for £8,000 the outstandingly beautiful 184-acre Wanstead Park²⁹ in exchange for relinquishing a few outlying elements of the forest totalling 50 acres.

Final Outcome

At the end of a contest lasting eleven years, the Corporation could point to a total area of 5,530 acres secured by their own means for public recreation and enjoyment. On 6 May 1882 Queen Victoria was invited to open the Forest to the public and declared

it gives me the greatest satisfaction to dedicate this beautiful Forest to the use and enjoyment of my people for all time

(Her Majesty would no doubt be amused to learn that the number of annual visitors to Epping Forest approached five million in 2017.) In recognition of his services in the Epping campaign the Corporation voted Nelson a bonus of £3,500 (now equivalent to £5.5m).³⁰

Freeing of Bridges

Since medieval times, The City of London had the right to collect dues for weighing and measuring coal entering the Port of London. After the Great Fire of London in 1666, Acts of Parliament imposed further duties on coal to help pay for the rebuilding. In 1718 the duty was converted into a Government duty and during the Napoleonic wars this was increased several times to help pay for the conflict. Government duties on coal were abolished in 1831 and the revenues reverted to the use of the City

of London though, with the formation of the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW) in 1855, the proceeds were now shared between the two authorities. The MBW used their majority share to pay for the creation of a unified sewerage system in London and for the construction of the Thames embankments. At the same time, the City's (smaller) portion of the duties paid for the building of Cannon Street and later of Holborn Viaduct.

Originally all coal brought into the capital arrived by sea to riverside wharfs, making the collection of the duties relatively easy. By the 19th century, however, there was increasing trade by canal and by rail and it became necessary to define the precise boundary within which the duty was payable. In 1845 this was



Coal Tax boundary marker.

set at a radius of 20 miles from the General Post Office (on the site of what is now BT Head Office near St Paul's Cathedral) and in 1851 an Act permitted the erection of boundary markers (left) to indicate where this boundary lay.

The *London Coal and Wine Duties Continuance Act 1861* reduced the area to that of the Metropolitan Police District (see page 34) and some 280 new marker posts were erected to show the boundary within which the duty was

payable.³¹

The coal duties had always been unpopular. Objection was taken to a tax on what was seen as a basic necessity of London life especially when there was no equivalent levy in the rest of the

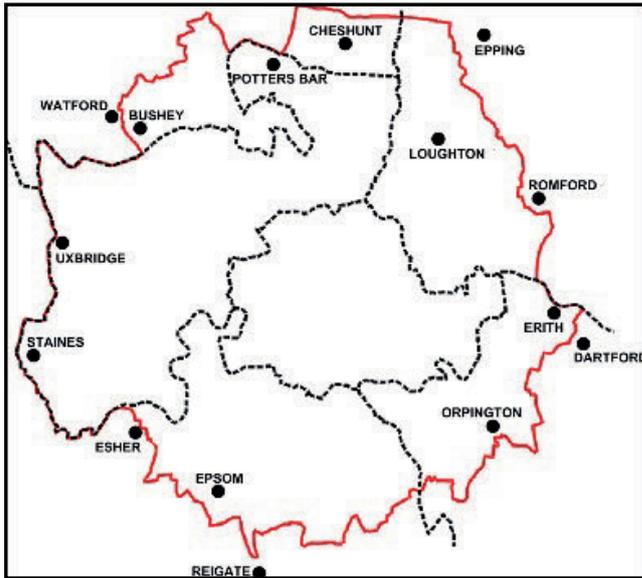


Original Southwark Bridge built by John Rennie and opened in 1819. It was notable for having the longest cast iron span (73m) ever made.

country.³² There was also increasing resentment that the money raised from a tax payable over an area of around 600 square miles was almost exclusively spent in and immediately around a tiny area of no more than 10 square miles centred on the City itself.

As a condition of passing the *Coal and Wine Duties Continuance Act 1861* which covered the next ten years of operation of the duties, the Government required the City and the MBW to apply some of the proceeds in freeing the 11 toll bridges that lay downstream from Kew.

The Act had already been passed by the time Thomas James Nelson was appointed City Solicitor but he would have been directly involved in the freeing of Southwark Bridge^(above).³³ Begun in 1813 but taking several years to complete, this bridge finally cost £800,000 (equivalent to £3.8bn today).³⁴ With the nearby Blackfriars and London Bridges both being toll-free, the maximum toll revenue from Southwark Bridge was a paltry £5,000 in its first year and fell steadily thereafter. Tolls were abandoned when Nelson on behalf of the City negotiated first to rent the bridge in 1864, and then later agreed to pay £218,868 (£470m today) for purchasing the bridge outright.³⁵



Metropolitan Police District 1840 - 1946

When the successor to the 1861 Act - entitled *The London Coal and Wine Duties Continuance Bill 1868* - was before the House of Commons, it met strong opposition. The 1861 Act had ruled that the duties should apply across the Metropolitan Police District and the proposal was now made that some compensation should be

given to all residents within this area by setting free the remaining bridges across the rivers Thames and Lea that fell within this district. This suggestion was embodied in the Act of 1868 by which the duties for the year 1888/9 - the last of the 20 years covered by the Act - were to be applied in the first instance to freeing from toll the following bridges: Kew, Kingston, Hampton Court, Walton and Staines on the Thames, and then Chingford and Tottenham Mills Bridges (including Hellyer's Ferry Bridge) on the River Lea.

By happy coincidence, the first bridge to be so freed was Nelson's

own local bridge at Kingston upon Thames. Kingston Bridge had been vested in the Bailiffs and Freemen of the town, but was mortgaged in 1826 to fund a new stone bridge to replace a wooden



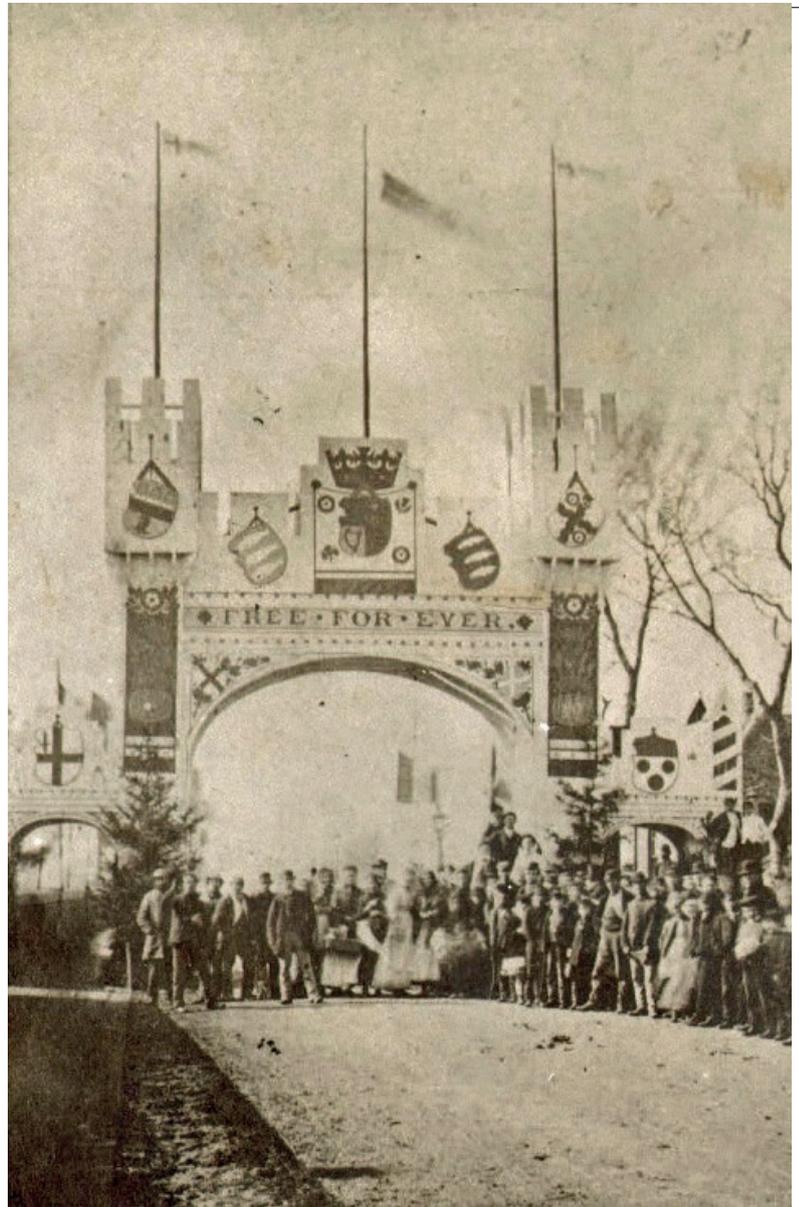
Kingston Bridge Toll Gate.

structure with origins dating back to the 12th Century. In 1870, it was thus a simple matter for the City of London to redeem the outstanding debt of £15,600.

On 12th March 1870 the bridge was opened free of toll with great ceremony. The Lord Mayor and his party arrived at Kingston Station by train and the Mayor of Kingston on horseback led a huge procession of dignitaries, Rifle Volunteer units and marching bands round Kingston town centre, under a huge ceremonial arch (above right) - erected in the centre of the bridge to celebrate the occasion) - then round the streets of Hampton Wick before

returning back over the bridge into Kingston. Nelson was in attendance at the festivities both in his capacity as City Solicitor and as Chairman of the Hampton Wick Local Board which was the local authority on the western end of the bridge.

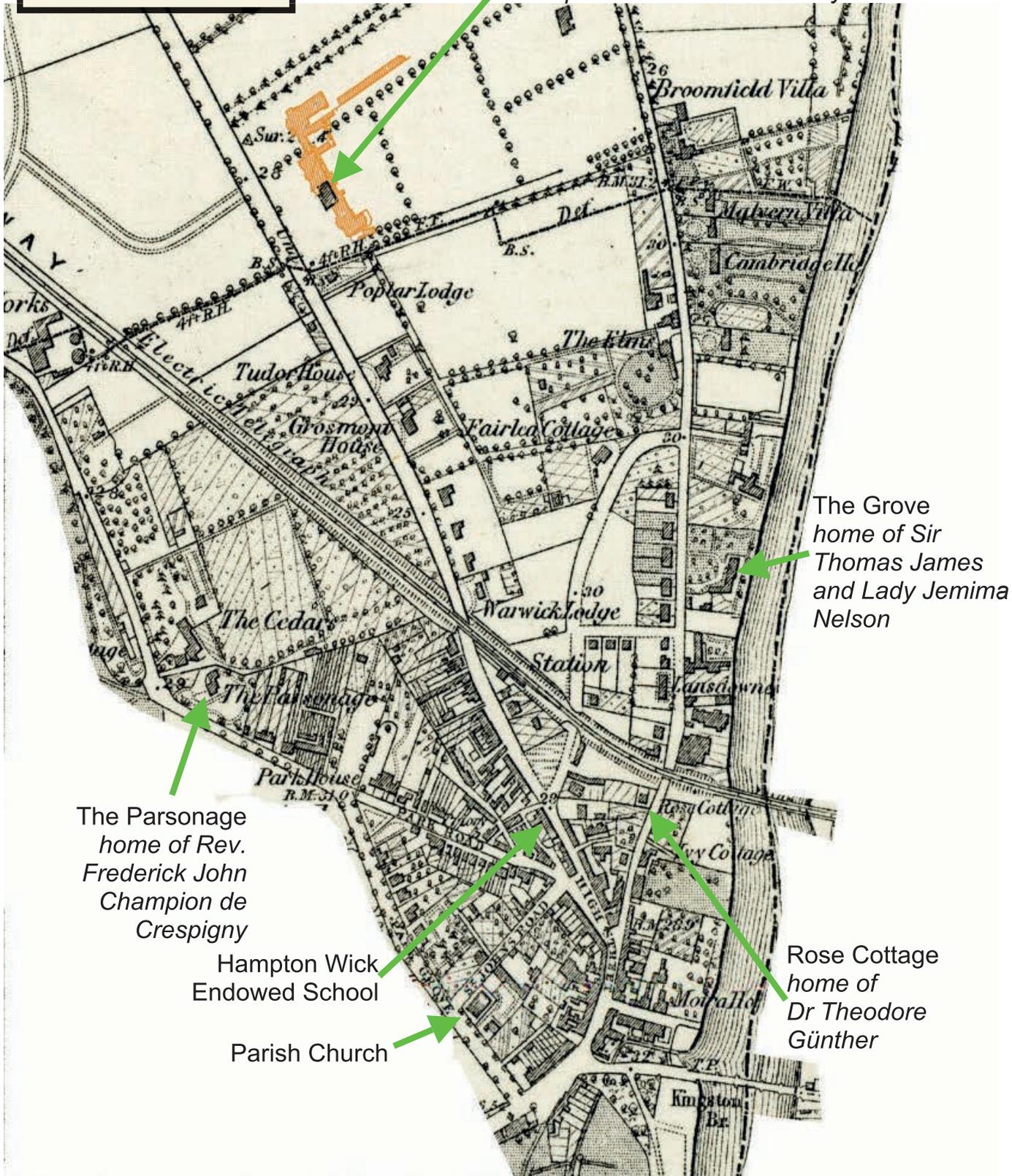
The remaining Thames bridges which were made toll-free were Walton Bridge (1st August 1870), Staines Bridge (25th February 1871), Kew Bridge (8th February 1873) and finally, Hampton Court Bridge (8th July 1876).



Ceremonial arch built to celebrate the freeing of Kingston Bridge. It bears the arms of both Kingston and the City of London.

**Hampton Wick
in 1864**

The White House home of John Langdon Down showing the final footprint of Normansfield Asylum



The Grove
home of Sir
Thomas James
and Lady Jemima
Nelson

The Parsonage
home of Rev.
Frederick John
Champion de
Crespigny

Hampton Wick
Endowed School

Parish Church

Rose Cottage
home of
Dr Theodore
Günther

4. THE PUBLIC MAN

Nelson's personal abilities and professional experience soon brought him to the front in public affairs. While still in his early twenties he was elected a member of the Hackney Trustee Board. *The Metropolis Management Act 1855* which had created the Metropolitan Board of Works to co-ordinate the construction of the city's infrastructure, also brought into existence a second tier of local government consisting of parish vestries and district boards of works. His Hackney neighbours elected Nelson to both local bodies which between them gave him first-hand comparative experience of both the traditional and newly invented forms of local democracy.

He would later put this experience to beneficial use but, on his arrival in Hampton Wick in the summer of 1861, he was immediately involved in two incidents from which he may well have felt he was somewhat stepping backwards in history into the bad old days of local government.

The Bishop of London had created the parish of Hampton Wick in 1831 by splitting off a portion of land at the east end of the existing Hampton Parish that represented exactly one third of its previous total area. The Bishop also decreed that the former parochial assets (alms and parish lands) should be now be split in the same ratio between the two new parishes. However, by the time of Nelson's arrival thirty years later, the exact details of this division had still not been agreed. It therefore became one of his first tasks on joining the Vestry to investigate the long-running issue and recommend a final resolution³⁶.

A rather more bizarre parochial concern emerged in the summer of 1861 when it was discovered that Benjamin Regester, the assistant overseer, had absconded with around £300 (now about

£750,000) of the money he had collected under the Poor Rate assessments and was headed - it was rumoured - for Australia. Regester had been born in Devon in 1807 but by the age of 21 he was living as a newly-wed in Hampton Wick. The 1839 Trade Directory listed him as a *Perfumer*. By 1847 he owned two copyhold houses at the foot of Kingston Bridge opposite the *White Hart Inn*. He was now working as a hairdresser using the salon which formed part of the inn. He expanded his range of operation and was listed in the 1855 Trade Directory as

stationer, library, & hairdresser, collector of rates & taxes, & agent to the Atheneum fire assurance co. & to the New Equitable life assurance company

His career took one step further in 1858 when he became the licensee of the White Hart Inn itself. Regester appears to have operated his various affairs very much on his own terms. His standard of record-keeping as “collector of rates & taxes” was frequently and heavily criticised at Vestry Meetings - to the point where he finally tendered his resignation as assistant overseer. Nevertheless, at the next meeting, he was unanimously re-elected - an act about which the Vestry officers were later understandably sensitive. His last appearance at a Vestry was 4 July 1861 and he vanished soon after along with the Parish money. On 5 November 1861 Regester was duly declared bankrupt in his absence, and his property was sold the following year. It all ended with the Parish accepting Nelson’s counsel that they swallow their pride and accept that the best they could expect was compensation for its missing funds at a rate of 2s 6d in the £.

Formation of Hampton Wick Local Board

Having established his credibility within the neighbourhood - and perhaps influenced by his concern over the mismanagement of both the parish charities and the Register affair - Nelson now made a move that would lead to a significant change in the way Hampton Wick managed its affairs in future.

At a Special Vestry held on 8 April 1863 Nelson moved the adoption of the *Local Government Act 1858* within the Parish. This would result in a Local Board being established which would take over all the existing non- ecclesiastical powers of the Vestry, to which powers would be added new responsibilities including the making of bye laws and granting of planning permission for new buildings. To enable the Local Board to fulfil its obligations it also had power to levy a rate, to take legal proceedings, and to borrow money for the execution of sewerage works and water supply.

However Nelson based his arguments for adopting the Act less on these longer-term strategic benefits, choosing instead to focus on more short-term tactical gains. He explained that adoption of the Act would exempt the Parish from being forcibly included in one of the new highway districts currently being created under the *The Highways Act 1862*. Nelson pointed out that:

In consequence of the Crown keeping in repair a large portion of the road in Hampton Wick, we now manage to do with 4d. or 6d. highway rate; but if included with the neighbouring parishes in a highway district, as we are sure to be, we would not get off under 1s. rate. Would it not therefore be better to spend the extra 6d. rate if possible in their own parish³⁷?

Nelson then contended that the additional expenses they would incur under the Local Government Act would fairly be covered by a 6d. rate.

Mr Nelson explained the necessity of adopting the Act at once, since parishes having a population under 3.000 would be precluded from doing so by a new Bill Government was now passing through Parliament.

He then briefly described the useful powers contained in the Act and the motion for its adoption was unanimously carried. Nelson was duly thanked

for the service he had rendered the parish, and for merging the professional man in the parishioner.³⁸

The Secretary of State was informed with the minimum delay and, there being no objections within the prescribed twenty-one days, the adoption of the Act became effective two months later. No time was lost in arranging an election and the Hampton Wick Local Board held its first meeting on 22 June 1863. The elected candidates, one third of whom would stand for re-election each year in rotation, were:

Rev. Frederick Champion De Crespigny (aged 40), Clerk.

Henry Walker (66), Surveyor

Charles James Fenner (65), Schoolmaster.

Charles Miles (50), Proprietor of Houses

Richard William Lack (53), Civil Servant

John Plow Smith (50), Coal Merchant

Richard Coombes (44), Hotel Keeper

Thomas James Nelson (37), Solicitor

Philip May (59), Proprietor of Houses

Nelson was clearly determined the new body should not suffer any of the short-comings of the Vestry it effectively replaced and

took the initiative in nominating his own choice of a suitable chairman. The *Surrey Comet* reported:

Mr Nelson said the office of Chairman at all their parish meetings had been filled with great efficiency by the Rev. De Crespigny, but as this appointment was a most onerous one, and might necessarily bring the Chairman into collision with some of the Parishioners, he thought in justice to the rev. gentleman that they should choose some other person to take the responsibility, and he proposed, after some complimentary remarks, Mr May as Chairman of the Local Board for the year ensuing.

The proposal was carried unanimously as was Nelson's proposal for the post of Clerk to the Board. At the next few meetings, he continued to take the lead in the initial set-up of the Board. This included agreement to both combine the roles of Surveyor and Inspector of Nuisances and decide the process by which these posts would be advertised. He even gained acceptance of his own proposed design for the Board's seal.



The seal of Hampton Wick Local Board designed by Nelson.

As early as the second meeting, Nelson was also responsible for the first bye law to be issued by the new Board. As the *Surrey Comet* reported:

Mr Nelson called attention to the bathing he had noticed in the river off Messenger's Ait before 8 o'clock in the evening, of which he complained as being too early, and being indecent, as ladies were often passing at that early hour, and were compelled to turn back ... Among the powers of the Board were (those) for

regulating bathing; and he moved that it be a bye law of the Board that bathing within the limits of the Local Act be restricted to before 8 am. throughout the year, after 9 pm. in June, July, and August, and after 8 pm. in the evening for the remainder of the year. Some conversation took place as to whether Messenger's Ait would come within the parish boundary since it was in the centre of the river. Mr Nelson said there could be no doubt that when parties got into the water they would be within the jurisdiction of the Act.³⁹

Although the foundation of the Hampton Wick Local Board appeared to have passed off without any drama, a flare-up occurred during July 1863 which Nelson, as the instigator, saw as his personal responsibility to help resolve. The dispute arose because the nine members voted onto the inaugural Local Board coincided exactly with the membership of the existing Vestry Burial Board. Since the legislation allowed for Local Board to also act as the Burial Board, a Vestry Meeting was called to formalise this proposed transfer of responsibility. To the surprise of most of the 20 attendees, a motion was immediately put from the floor to adjourn the meeting for a fortnight:

in order to give the parish time to consider what it should do. They had been taken by surprise and did not understand the matter before them.⁴⁰

Although it was pointed out by several attendees that, if the two Boards co-existed, there would be a duplication of members, officers and expenses, the adjournment was carried by a very small majority in a similarly small show of hands on either side.

There was a larger attendance when the adjourned meeting was resumed and the true issue was surfaced:

that the Hampton Court portion of the parish⁴¹ were not adequately represented on the Local Board, having but one resident member on it. Doubts were thrown out as to whether that Board had been duly elected.⁴²

The objectors sought to prove that the correct procedures for the formation of a Local board had not been followed as far as the Hampton Court section of the parish was concerned. Nelson was able to firmly yet politely rebut all allegations, correcting misconceptions and disproving the existence of alleged evidence of wrongdoings. With the objectors' case in disarray, Nelson seized the initiative and himself proposed that the Local Board should take over the responsibilities of the Burial Board. With their focus now directed at a real proposition rather than an imagined misdeed, the strength of the objections diminished through debate and Nelson's motion was carried. In an attempt to placate the attendees, he closed with some personal observations, being reported as saying:

He trusted that good feeling in the parish would be restored, and he had been in hopes that he had come to a place where there was no party feeling. He had noticed a great improvement in the parish in the two years he had been there especially as to the saving of expense in poor-rate. He alluded to the changes taking place in the parish by the completion of the railway and station, and stated that the upper road was likely soon to become covered with houses of the superior description ... some such control as would be exercised by this Local Board was necessary for Hampton Wick as he could not say its roads and footpath were in that state that advanced civilisation demanded. If the ratepayers were not satisfied with the Board, they would bear in mind that one third of it would soon have to go out and then they might put new blood in it if they chose.⁴³

During its first year of existence, the Local Board of Hampton Wick held 18 meetings of which Nelson attended 13 and chaired six. Initially much of the effort and time was involved in taking over the responsibilities previously undertaken by the Vestry but in addition the Local Board developed a set of bye laws which were printed and distributed to every ratepayer. One of these involved the requirement to obtain the Board's approval to building plans before work commenced. Embarrassingly the first offence committed against this bye law involved two Board Members (one as the owner and the other as the architect of a substantial new property) but it was decided not to make an example of them since it was a first offence.

Nelson's term as a member of the Local Board expired in May 1866 and he successfully put himself up for re-election. The *Surrey Comet's* report⁴⁴ of his first meeting after being re-elected included:

Mr. Nelson saw in the fact of his being returned at head of the poll at the recent election, a sign that the outside world was with him in his desire to improve the village.

As if to prove the vigour of this desire, the same report records that, of the nine different motions put during the course of the meeting, seven were moved by Nelson.

In June 1868, following the death of Philip May the Board's first chairman, Thomas James Nelson was voted in to take his place, a position he was to hold until his death 17 years later.

The Drainage Question

Nelson's election to the chair coincided exactly with the tenth anniversary of an event which was to trigger a seismic change in sanitation policy and practice at both both national and local level. These changes came to dominate public debate but - in deference to the delicacy of its female readership - the press always referred to the issue simply as "The Drainage Question". The event itself became known as The Great Stink and referred to a period in June 1858 when the outflow of raw sewage into the River Thames in central London coincided with unseasonably high temperatures and low tides. For days on end, excrement lay baking in hot sunshine on the exposed river shore and the extreme stink - which even threatened to close down the operation of the new House of Commons built on the Westminster shore - was sufficient to bring home the realisation that the previous lack of a coherent strategy to deal with the human waste of an ever-growing population could no longer be tolerated.

The causes and consequences of this issue and the staggering scale - even by Victorian standards - of the political and engineering response it evoked are beyond the immediate scope of this paper.⁴⁵ The outcome however was that once a sanitation system had been implemented for Central London, attention inevitably turned to the almost universal use of the River Thames for sewage disposal by communities upstream of Central London. *The Thames Navigation Act 1866* which brought into existence the Thames Conservators immediately prohibited any extension to the existing practice and gave two year's notice for the cessation of all sewage discharge under the threat of draconian daily fines for non-compliance (£100 *per day* for the first day and £50 *per day* thereafter) to be imposed by the Conservators.

The Challenge of Leadership

Although the power of the legislation seemed clear enough, the public had mixed opinions on the reality of the threat it posed and on the most appropriate response to it. Nelson was faced with a cross-section of these opinions amongst his own colleagues on the Local Board. Some, like the Rev. de Crespigny, advocated the adoption of newly-invented earth closets; others believed that the Board should do nothing since they argued that the Government would either relent on their demands for action or else provide central funding for local initiatives; a third school of thought was that the Board should undertake the bare minimum required by simply providing a large communal cesspool for those 40-odd properties that were draining directly into the river. Nelson naturally had his own opinions which were based on creating a comprehensive sewer network feeding into a sewage treatment plant but for once he held back on trying to impose his preferred solution.

A Special Meeting of the Board was held in February 1869 to discuss the options. Nelson started by assuring his colleagues that he believed the threat of financial penalties for non-compliance with the legislation was very real but, having outlined his preferred scheme (which included combining with Kingston for a joint treatment works), he allowed himself to be overruled and the Board voted to set up a sub-committee to examine the creation of a communal cesspool for those properties discharging into the river. After several rethinks - and including an interim progress report to the Board deliberately timed to occur when Nelson was absent on his annual extended summer break - the sub-committee finally reported back with their proposals a year after their formation. When it emerged that the recommendations did not have the unanimous support of the sub-committee and indeed the Board's own surveyor did

not believe they were practical, Nelson decided to terminate his experiment in delegation and resume his normal practice of “leading from the front.”

An incident occurred in July 1871 which not only demonstrated Nelson’s extreme demands for loyalty but also later threatened to ruin him financially. It involved James Bussell a 44 year-old Kingston-based solicitor who, on Nelson’s own recommendation, had been appointed Clerk to the Board on its formation eight years previously. Bussell had subsequently also been appointed Clerk to both the Teddington and New Malden Local Boards. Bussell had recently stood and been successfully elected as a member of the Kingston Town Council. However during the election campaign an opponent had discovered and published evidence of a long-past moment of dishonesty on Bussell’s part. The disclosure caused the Clerk to feel the need to write to Nelson admitting to the breach but hoping that his subsequent exemplary endeavours had been sufficient to retrieve his character. As the report of the meeting records⁴⁶, Nelson told Bussell:

The board having had these facts before them, and having considered all the circumstances, have unanimously come to the following resolution

“Resolved, that this board having fully considered the facts recently disclosed affecting their clerk, are of opinion that he is deserving of their continuous confidence.”

What Nelson would have seen as this unequivocal gesture of loyalty towards Bussell was utterly betrayed in Nelson’s eyes by the latter’s behaviour over the Chelsea Water Company’s 1873 Bill seeking to construct addition storage reservoirs at Thames Ditton. Nelson had spoken against the proposal at a

Public Meeting in Kingston and then tabled the issue at the next Board Meeting at which it was resolved to raise a petition opposing the Bill. As their clerk, Bussell recorded their opposition in the minutes but, later the same week, as a member of the Kingston Town Council he spoke in favour of the Bill. This incensed Nelson who brought matters to a head by convening a special meeting of the Board:

to consider how far the position of Mr. Bussell as a member of the Town Council of Kingston is compatible with the faithful discharge of his duty as clerk to this board.

The meeting concluded there was a clash of interests and decided

that he therefore be requested to resign one of the two offices before the next meeting of this Board.

In response Bussell said he was being given the

opportunity of doing one of two things - either to resign the position as clerk to the board, or give up a position of an honorary character. Without the slightest hesitation he would give up the paid office, because he did not believe it would be to his credit to continue to act as clerk while his mouth was to be tied in another place by another person, whoever he might be.

His subsequent remarks at the meeting did nothing to defuse the situation and the fate of their future relationship was sealed when, after nobody had agreed to second a motion accepting Bussell's resignation, Nelson announced he would do so himself.⁴⁷

The Thames Conservators Threat

In the *Thames Navigation Act 1867* that gave the Conservators jurisdiction over the stretch of the river downstream from Staines, the affected riparian communities were given a two-year period to discontinue any flow of sewage into the Thames. Hampton Wick's own attempt to achieve this came to nothing (as related above) but they were not alone in their schemes and failures. Kingston (1869, 1872), Richmond (1871, 1873) Barnes, Mortlake and Kew (1874) all submitted proposals each of which was subjected to a separate Public Enquiry conducted by a Local Government Board Inspector. A soon-to-be-familiar pattern began to emerge: at each Enquiry experts and lawyers would argue the merits of the chosen site, a host of local objectors would appear, the Inspector would refuse the application, the authority would apply for - and usually be granted - an extension from the Thames Conservators and finally the high cost of the Enquiry would then have to be born by the local ratepayers.

By 1876 - ten years after the Act had been passed - there was still no Local Authority in the Thames Valley from Windsor to London that had succeeded in creating a scheme to divert their sewage from the river. However a series of events were about to swiftly unfold which would see Nelson's energies and influence - along with his sincere desires to find a solution - promoted onto a much larger platform.

Firstly, the Surbiton Improvement Commissioners proposed a comprehensive scheme whereby all the Authorities in the Thames Valley between Windsor and the western boundary of the MBW area would promote a single project to divert their sewage out of the river above London and take it through a 12-mile sewer to a point near the MBW's southern outfall near the sea. The Public Enquiry into the proposal rejected the total scheme as being "too heroic" but, in his report dated 10 April 1876 the Inspector

recommended that a more modest version involving the Authorities between Hampton and the MBW boundary should be put forward.

The second event was that, immediately following the rejection of the Surbiton scheme, the Thames Conservators began proceedings in earnest to recover the penalties against the various riparian authorities. They decided to use Hampton Wick as the test case and accordingly summoned them for penalties amounting to £98,000⁴⁸!

Nelson's response was to write a 16-page letter dated 17 June 1876 to all individual members of the local sanitary authorities:

GENTLEMEN:

Inter-communication between us ... is almost impossible; but it is both urgent and important; and as one, who for ten years has been labouring to bring about union, I take the liberty at the crisis at which we have now arrived, of putting my thoughts in writing and sending a copy to each of you. No one is responsible for them but myself, and I am very sensible that they will have no other weight than such as their reasoning may commend to your judgment.

He concluded with a proposed resolution:

"That application be made to the Local Government Board to make an order under the provisions of the Public Health Act, 1875, to form the urban and rural sanitary districts between Hampton and the Western boundary of the Metropolis, into a united district for the purpose of carrying into effect a system of sewerage for the use of all such districts."

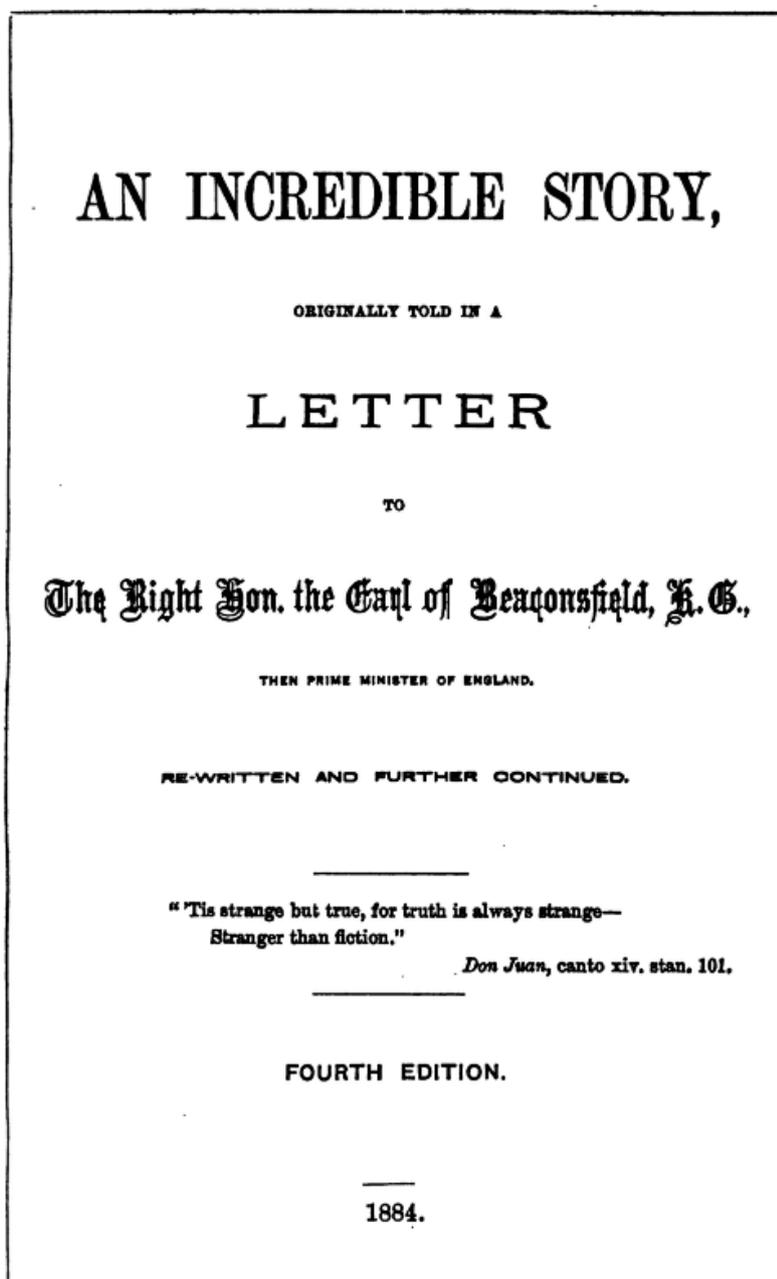
Despite a mixed reception to his proposal - which varied from qualified support from Surbiton and Richmond to outright

hostility from Kingston and Twickenham - Nelson and the Hampton Wick Local Board went ahead and submitted their scheme to the Local Government Board. The Public Enquiry opened in January 1877 and the Inspector had concluded his report by 3 March in which he recommended adoption of the scheme. The Local Government Board accepted the recommendation, steered the necessary Provisional Order through Parliament and the Lower Thames Valley Main Sewage Board (LTVMSB) came into existence on Michaelmas Day 1877. They were given three years to accomplish their task. The Provisional Order specified that the 10 authorities would supply a total of 25 elected members with a further five ex officio members from the largest bodies.

The constituent boards duly elected their representatives and they, along with the ex officio representatives all took their seat at the inaugural meeting of the LTVMSB held on 5 December 1877 in the Kingston Council Chamber. Nelson was immediately elected chairman - unanimously and unopposed - and thus began a term of office which was to be renewed and extended unbroken for the next seven years.

Once again it is beyond the scope of the current paper to detail the various and onerous activities undertaken by Nelson and the LTVMSB during this period especially since, as we shall shortly see, Nelson himself documented them in such a concise and eminently readable way (available to read online - see note 50 on page 82). Suffice to say that the first scheme put forward by the Joint Board met with fierce opposition from East Molesey (where the sewage treatment works were to be sited) and from Kingston. The scheme had incurred additional heavy expense through the unexpected requirement of a Private Parliamentary Bill which in the event was defeated by 168 to 146. One of the leaders of the opposition to the Bill was James Bussell who, six years previously, had been forced by Nelson to resign as Clerk to the Hampton

Wick Local Board (see page 47). Seemingly bent on revenge, Bussell now personally masterminded a vicious scheme that resulted in a ruling in the Court of Chancery preventing the LTVMSB from signing off the expenses associated with the failed



The cover page of the fourth edition of Nelson's An Incredible Story published at his own expense.

Private Bill. This left Nelson and a few other members collectively and personally liable for around £7,000 (now £12m) of bills. The intent was clearly to deter members from serving on the LTVMSB and thus bring about its demise.

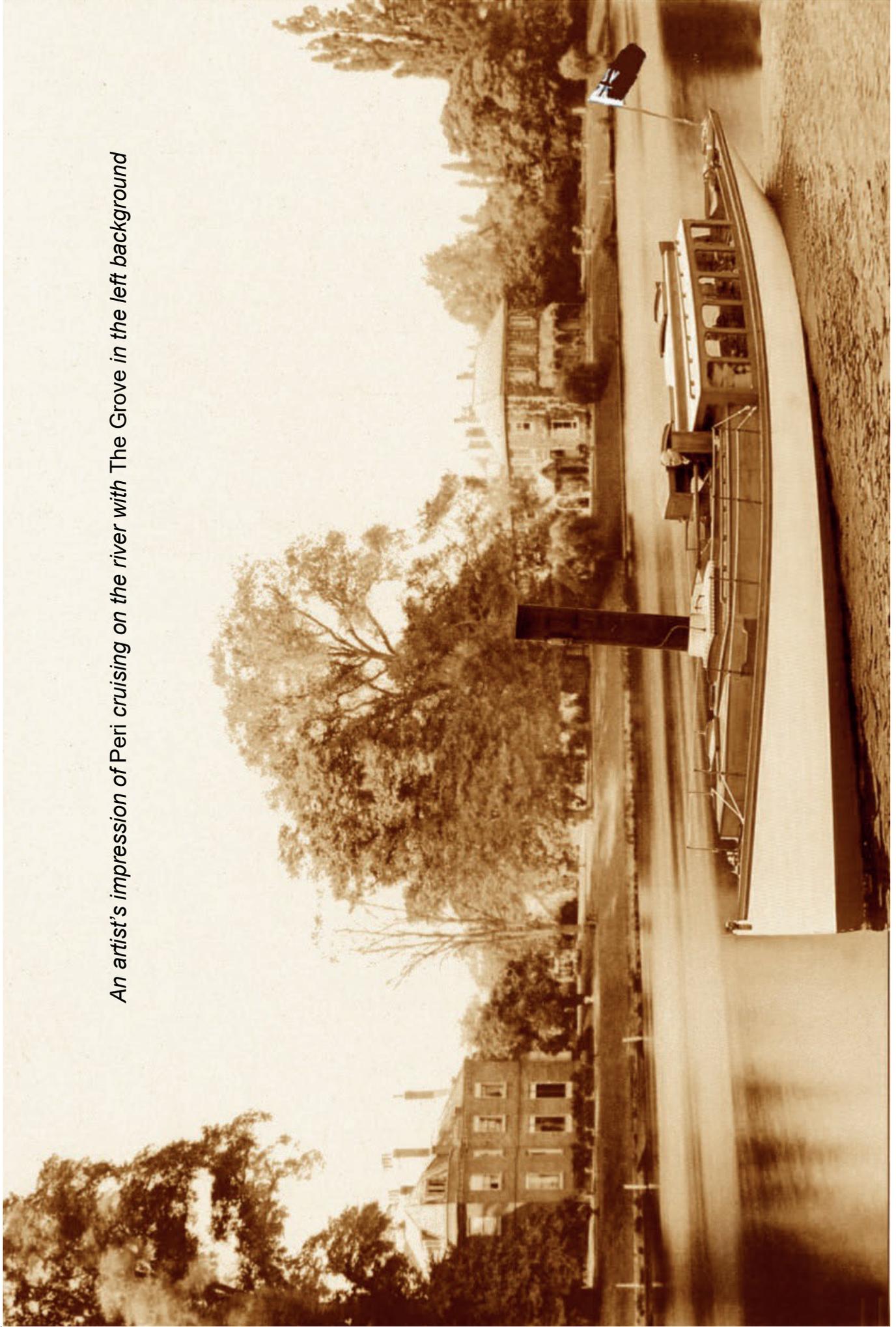
Nelson's response was to write a lengthy open letter to the Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (by now Earl of Beaconsfield) entitled *An Incredible Story* (see facing page). In its almost 5,000 words he detailed the history of sanitary legislation and its impact on the Thames Valley communities, summarised their individual attempts to comply and outlined the background to the formation of the LTVMSB. He explained their current difficulties and ended with a very direct appeal:

My Lord, will you allow us, without helping us, to be punished with pecuniary penalties for thus serving our country? Nay, may I ask further whether any person of means and position is likely to take any further steps to carry out the duties of the Board if it is to be attended with personal responsibility for thousands of pounds. Already members are resigning their seats, and the end of the year may find Board without members.

It is not known how Disraeli reacted⁴⁹ to this assault on this particular group of "Essential Victorians" but it is probably no coincidence that, on losing the General Election the following April, Disraeli included Nelson on his resignation honours list and the Queen was pleased to confer a knighthood upon him.

Sir Thomas Nelson decided to maintain the structure of *An Incredible Story*, rewriting it to remove direct references to Disraeli (who died in 1881) and updating it several times to reflect the continuing efforts by the LTVMSB to resolve the Drainage Question. The fourth edition running to 30 pages was published in June 1884 at which time Nelson was expressing cautious optimism that a solution was finally within reach ⁵⁰...

An artist's impression of Peri cruising on the river with The Grove in the left background



5. THE PRIVATE MAN

NELSON'S PROFESSIONAL AND public responsibilities may not have left him much personal time but there are occasional glimpses of how he used what little remained.

Personal Interests

It was Nelson's practice to take long summer breaks and he apparently used these as an opportunity to travel widely in Europe. On several occasions he claims extensive knowledge of European cities and of their museums and art galleries - usually to justify his contention of the moment. Thus, whilst speaking at a Public Meeting in Kingston in 1865 against Queen Victoria's proposal to move the Raphael Cartoons from Hampton Court Palace to the Victoria and Albert Museum, he listed the various galleries he had visited in Germany, Italy and Spain. Similarly, in his speech to the Epping Forest Commissioners in November 1876, he claimed London to be a "*fairer capital city than the majority of those in Europe*" adding "*and I have visited most of them*".

One of his personal lifelong interests was his membership of the Worshipful Company of Weavers, the oldest Livery Company in the City, which traces its origins to the early 12th Century. Nelson's father was a member of the Weaver's company and his three sons all became Freeman of the City. Nelson sought to pass on this family tradition to those of his sons who wished. He himself held the top honour as Upper Bailiff of the Company in the year from October 1873.

Another lifelong - and more recreational - interest was in the river flowing past his garden. As previously noted, Nelson had acquired the plot of land to the south of *The Grove* on which he had built a substantial boathouse. In 1872 he commissioned James Messenger of Ferry Lane, Teddington to build a large

steam launch which was designed by Nelson himself, with suitable dimensions to fit into his already-existing boathouse. Named *Peri*, she probably had a cabin for overnight accommodation and would have required a two-man crew of helmsman and deckhand to operate - he may have engaged these either from Messenger's yard or closer at hand at Burgoine's yard by the railway bridge. According to the *Surrey Comet*:

When time could be snatched from his multifarious official and public occupations, he delighted in recreation upon the river, and there are probably few towns or villages upon its banks where his handsome steam launch Peri was not known. He also held the office of President of the Junior Kingston Rowing Club and took a great interest in the annual regattas.

RAINFALL IN 1866.
TO THE EDITOR.

SIR,—I subjoin the results of the rain gauge kept by me for the last year.

It will be seen that although the most rain fell in February, there were more wet days in September, and that the largest amount on any one day was on the 22nd day of June. The greatest amount of rain which fell at any one time was on the first five days of June, when 1'94—nearly two inches of rain came down. The register is taken at 9 a.m. for the preceding 24 hours.

If there be any observer on Surbiton Hill he will perhaps be good enough to favour you with a copy of his record in the same form, that the difference between the hill and the valley may be seen.

I am, Sir, yours, &c.
T. J. NELSON.

The Grove, Hampton Wick,
Jan. 2nd, 1867.

RAINFALL IN 1866 AT HAMPTON WICK.

Rain Gauge { Diameter of Funnel, 6in.
 { Height of Above Ground, 13in.
 { of Top of Above Sea Level, 27ft.

Month.	Total Depth.	Greatest Fall in 24 hours.		Days on which 10 or more fell.
	Inches.	Depth.	Date.	
January . . .	2 51	50	11	17
February . . .	3 98	49	12	20
March	1 34	44	24	15
April	1 80	59	29	17
May	1 35	35	11	11
June	3 73	99	22	14
July	2 19	89	1	13
August	2 35	55	30	18
September . .	3 42	47	14	25
October	1 51	42	10	15
November . . .	1 47	38	9	16
December . . .	1 96	45	6	17
Total	27 63	197

Nelson rainfall readings

in the locality would offer their own sets of rain gauge readings

It is worth recounting one final personal interest which gives an insight into his love of routine and precision. Nelson installed a rain gauge in the garden of *The Grove*. Readings were taken at exactly 9am every morning which, with Nelson himself being away at work, meant that Jemima and the servants (or gardener?) would be responsible for making sure this happened. At the end of each year Nelson would tabulate the readings and send them with an accompanying commentary on the results to the *Surrey Comet* for publication. In his early submissions, Nelson expressed the hope that like-minded individuals

for comparison but he later seemed to accept that he was maybe alone in his enthusiasm for publishing his precipitation studies. Nelson's letters accompanying the tabulated readings were usually dated 1st or 2nd of January so were clearly part of his New Year routine. It was perhaps an indication of his declining state of health that his readings for 1884 were not sent until 10th January 1885, less than a month before his death.

Personal Finances

The steam launch was one of the very few overt signs of Nelson's wealth. It seems that he did not own any of the houses in which he and Jemima lived although this was not an uncommon state of affairs in Victorian England. Nevertheless he acquired land and built several properties locally and also owned houses in Kingston and further afield. He sometimes used his personal investments to ensure he got his own way with the Local Board.

From his first arrival in Hampton Wick, Nelson had been pressing for the Board to acquire and demolish some of the poorest quality slums that existed between Park Road and the High Street, and to use some of the land thus gained to create a new road connecting the two thoroughfares. For several years he was unable to persuade his colleagues to go along with his scheme, so he eventually acquired much of the land on his own account. He then offered it at cost to the Local Board who, with most of their objections thus pre-empted, finally concurred with his proposals.

Similarly the agreement by his colleagues to build the impressive new office for the Local Board on the High Street - another long-held Nelson ambition - was greatly facilitated by his ownership of a suitable plot of land coupled with his offer to provide a personal loan on very favourable terms to finance the purchase at cost.

Social Life

Despite his high level of engagement in the local government affairs of Hampton Wick and the wider area, it appears Nelson was not much involved in the social life of these local communities. He neither participated in the twice-yearly Venison Dinners nor are he and his wife ever mentioned in connection with other functions, fetes and charitable activities in the village.

Aside from his local public responsibilities, he remained a very private man. The one exception to this was a tradition that the Nelsons initiated soon after moving to Hampton Wick which was to last for the rest of his life. This involved the whole Nelson family entertaining the local church choir annually to supper at *The Grove*. This was their way of acknowledging and thanking the choir and organist for their especial efforts over the Christmas period. The following report from the *Surrey Comet* gives an insight into the mood and format of these gatherings:

On Friday evening last week, the choir of St. John's church, numbering 28 men and boys, were kindly entertained at supper by Sir Thos. J. Nelson, at his residence ... The usual generous fare was provided, and the host, together with Lady Nelson and family, did their utmost to make their guests comfortable. After supper, Sir Thomas Nelson spoke in complimentary terms of the services of the choir; and Mr. S. Taylor, the organist and choirmaster, returned thanks on their behalf, expressing their indebtedness to Sir Thomas for his kindness. Some music was then given, and the party left shortly before 11 o'clock, after giving three hearty cheers for Sir Thomas and Lady Nelson.⁵¹

Three Friendships ... and a Royal Acquaintance

If friends are people who turn to each other in times of need, then it appears that Nelson had three such associates in the local community. The first of these was Rev. Frederick John Champion de Crespigny, Vicar of St John the Baptist Church in Hampton Wick. He had been appointed in 1858 and was well established in the community by the time Nelson arrived and the latter's immediate involvement in Vestry affairs would have brought the two in contact. It seems as though the friendship between Nelson and de Crespigny was based on the divergence rather than the similarity of their respective interests. The latter was natural *bon viveur*, never more at home than when serving as the popular chairman of the twice-yearly Venison Dinners where he set the standard for the wit, good humour and courtesy with which the after-dinner speeches were always delivered. He was also very interested in English field sports, especially excelling at cricket⁵³, and was instrumental in obtaining Royal approval for the establishment of the Hampton Wick Royal Cricket Club within the boundary of Bushy Park in 1863. Finally he was a staunch supporter - and chaplain - of both the local lodge of Freemasons and the Kingston Division of the Fifth Surrey Rifle Volunteers. Nelson did not seem to share any of these interests being more intellectual and political than sporting and social. Moreover, with one exception, neither he nor his family appeared to be closely connected with the church events.

What the two men did have in common were their positions as leaders - spiritual and secular - within the community. Both served on the Local Board without interruption from its formation in 1863 until their respective deaths just two years apart. Their ability to discuss Board issues in private from their differing perspectives must ultimately have been of benefit to the Community.

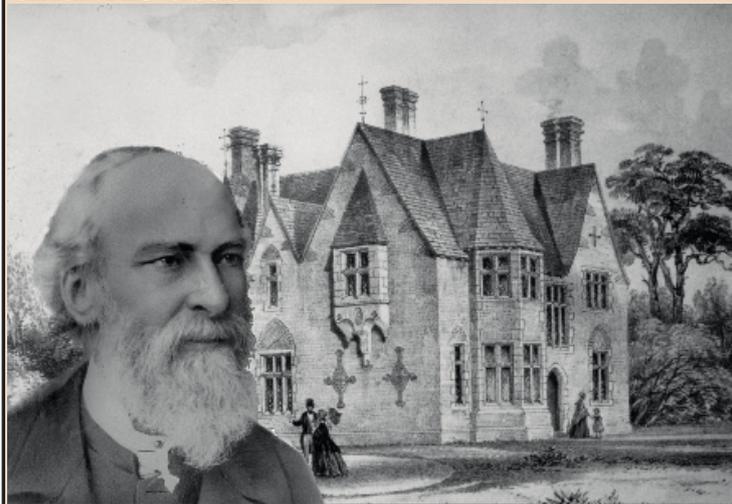
Rev. Frederick John Champion de Crespigny

The Champion de Crespigny family were of Norman origin. They had fled from their Chateau in France in 1687 to avoid the Huguenot persecution and in 1717 built Champion Lodge in Camberwell within its 25-acre park as the new family seat. The Prince Regent visited Champion Lodge in 1804 and the following year Claude, great-grandson of the original refugee, was made First Baronet Champion De Crespigny.



Rev. Frederick John Champion de Crespigny was born in 1822. His father (left) was Augustus James RN, the youngest of three sons of the Second Baronet, and who fought under Admiral Lord Nelson and Collingwood in the Battle of Trafalgar at the age of just 14.⁵² Frederick was just two years old when his father died and nine when his mother married one of his uncles.

After graduating from Magdalen College Cambridge and being ordained a priest in the Church of England, Frederick John became Vicar of Hampton Wick in 1858 - a post he was to hold until his death.



Rev Frederick John Champion de Crespigny with his vicarage in the background.

The second friend of note was Dr Theodore Günther who was to set up his Hampton Wick medical practice in 1865 in a house close to *The Grove*. As their nearest doctor, the residents of *The Grove* would certainly have got to know Dr Günther in a professional capacity and, given his own - albeit brief - time in a German education establishment, Nelson would have had something in common with the younger man.

When, in response to the death from cholera of a local resident, an emergency meeting of the Board was held in August 1866, Nelson had no hesitation in proposing that Dr Günther should immediately be appointed medical officer of health to the Hampton Wick Local Board.⁵⁴ He remained in this post for the rest of his professional life and the two men carried a high professional regard - and genuine affection - for each other throughout. Nelson would have particularly approved of

Theodore Günther had been born in 1834 near Stuttgart Germany, the younger of two sons of a barrister. The family had wished the boys to train for the ministry of the Lutheran Church at Tübingen University but whilst there first Theodore and later his elder brother Albert switched from theology to medicine. Their father had died soon after the brothers had been born and their mother subsequently moved to England. Albert joined her after completing his studies and the 1861 census shows them having set up home in Maple Road Surbiton. By now Albert was working at the British Museum and later was appointed Keeper of Zoology at the Natural History Museum. Theodore followed his family to England and by 1864 had moved into *Rose Cottage*, Hampton Wick, where - having received his licence from the Royal College of Physicians of London in February 1865 - he set up his doctor's surgery just 200 metres from the Nelsons at *The Grove*.

Günther's meticulous record-keeping and analysis - skills which Nelson himself possessed in abundance - which underpinned his twice-yearly reports on the state of Hampton Wick's health.

The third significant friend of Nelson was Dr John Langdon Down who, with his wife Mary, had arrived in 1868 to establish *Normansfield*, a private "asylum for the feeble-minded". The enterprise soon grew rapidly and became a major feature of the local community both commercially and socially. However it was an altogether more serious affair that led Langdon Down to call on Nelson's friendship and support in August 1883. He and his wife had just caught the boat train to France to attend a Medical Conference. In Paris, the awful news came to them that their eldest son Everleigh had been in a fight with his younger brother Reginald, and had died from a wound inflicted with a



Normansfield as it stood by the time of Langdon's death in 1896. The White House is seen on the right, with major developments on both sides.

John Langdon Down,

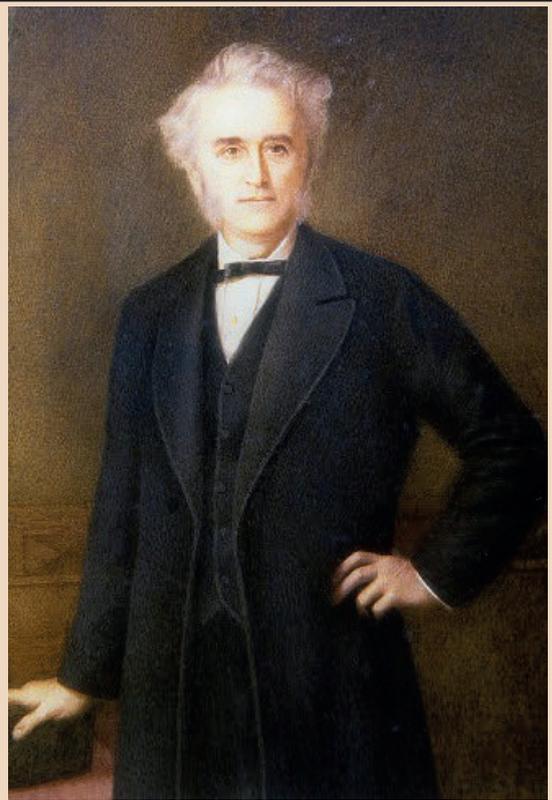
though born in the same year as Nelson, shared none of his advantages in early life. As the sixth child of parents living in Torpoint, Cornwall, he left school aged 14 to work in the family grocery business. However when he was 18 years old he came to London to pursue a medical career.⁵⁵

One of the best basic science courses was offered by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and he registered as a student although it was not his

intention to practice as a pharmacist.⁵⁶ The death of his father in 1853 left him free to return to his chosen career in medicine.

On qualifying at the medical school of the London Hospital in 1858, he was appointed Medical Superintendent of the Royal Earlswood Asylum for Idiots where he and his wife Mary transformed what had been a place of horror where patients were subject to corporal punishment and kept in dirty conditions and unschooled, into a happy place where all punishment was forbidden and replaced with kindness and rewards.

In 1868 the Langdon-Downs decided to apply this successful and enlightened approach in an enterprise of their own. They bought a newly completed but speculatively built property called *The White House* standing in five acres of potato field on the border between Hampton Wick and Teddington. They opened with 19 patients sharing the house - which they renamed *Normansfield* - with their own family.⁵⁷



sharp chisel. How this injury occurred - maliciously or accidentally - was unclear but, although Dr Günther had arrived within half an hour, Everleigh had already lost so much blood that he died the following afternoon. Langdon-Down had immediately returned from Paris to attend the inquest which was called for the following day. He specifically asked Nelson to support him at the inquest by sitting immediately alongside him during the hearing.⁵⁸ The jury heard the case and returned a verdict of accidental death. Two unusual aspects of the case were: firstly that the inquest itself was held in the Dining Room at *Normansfield* which must have intimidated the jury somewhat; and secondly that the police were not informed and no statement taken from either of the two sons.⁵⁹

A chance passing remark by Nelson in 1872 suggests he may also have had at least one Royal acquaintance:

*The Chairman ... said that it was known there had been an epidemic in his house. His daughter and one of the servants were first attacked, and the day afterwards four other of the occupants of the house became ill. All showed symptoms of blood poisoning, and upon coming to the board that evening he intended to make a statement on the subject, as he did not wish it thrown at him that he had not done so ... In reply to Mr. Saunders the Chairman said his well had existed for years, but when the Prince of Wales was ill, the well was opened, and the drainage of the house looked to.*⁶⁰

6. THE FINAL DAYS

ON 5 JANUARY 1885 Nelson chaired the first meeting of the Hampton Wick Local Board to be held in their new purpose-built offices on the High Street (next page) although he was clearly in a poor state of health.⁶¹ He used the opportunity to give his personal appraisal of what he saw as the achievements - and failures - of the Board in its 22 years of existence and particularly during the 18 years of his chairmanship.

He started by referring to the improvements in public lighting, footpaths and the availability of a public water supply to replace wells. Also that



Nelson in 1882

Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

they could now go into Kingston without having to pay a toll each way. The accident of his residence in the neighbourhood removed that difficulty, to the advantage of Hampton Wick, and to the still greater benefit of the Kingston people, who were thus enabled to gain free access to the parks.

Finally he highlighted their recent success in at last ridding the village of its worst slums - a cause which he himself had first highlighted at one of the very first Local Board meetings. However ...

There were two objects which at present they had been unable to attain. They very much needed a burial ground ... the appeals that they had made to the dominant landowner - the Crown - which held more than twelve-thirteenths of the soil of the parish, to abstract a very small proportion of land from the rearing of horses to the absolute necessity of burying their dead had been without avail, and they were still without such a place ... the result was that their dead had to be taken to other cemeteries to find their last home. The last and most painful subject of all was the provision of proper means of sewage disposal.

He spoke of

the last 18 years of burden and anxiety which rather increased than diminished as years went on. What might be the end he did not know.

Hampton Wick Local Board Offices, first used in January 1885



He reminded them that it was through their instrumentality that the Joint Board [i.e. LTVMSB] was formed,

whose efforts had hitherto alas been so fruitless except in the expenditure of money.

He concluded

There was no place he went to with such repugnance as to the Joint Board offices because he felt that their labours had been like those of Sisyphus, endless and profitless.

This uncharacteristic public admission of failure is probably testimony to Nelson's own low spirits brought about by his illness. Certainly when he chaired the monthly meeting of the Joint Board two days later he admitted to the members:

he was exceedingly unwell, and got out of bed to come and discharge his duties there and he appealed to them not to keep him there any longer than was absolutely necessary.

Nevertheless he maintained his usual tight control of the meeting and himself tabled two motions - one reining in the destructive actions of Kingston Council in trying to have the Board dissolved by Parliament and the other preventing Richmond Vestry from attempting to set up their own separate sewage works. In both cases his robust arguments and assured position as Chairman carried the day.

By the weekend, Nelson had recovered sufficiently to write his usual annual letter to the *Surrey Comet* with his rain gauge readings and commentary for 1884 and all seemed back to normal.

He chaired the 4 February Joint Board meeting as usual with the only indication that anything was untoward being a remark by Nelson ...

that he could not go on for ever, and unless something was done speedily someone else would have to take his place. At present it appeared only to be like the poor prisoners on the treadmill, working on and on and getting no further forward.

Three days later, he was dead.

The *Surrey Comet* reported

At about 4 o'clock on Saturday morning Lady Nelson was suddenly awakened and found Sir Thomas on the floor in a semi-conscious condition. He was got into bed and Dr Günther was speedily in attendance but from the apoplectic stroke from which he was suffering the patient never rallied and died at twenty-five minutes to nine o'clock.⁶²

EPILOGUE

SIR THOMAS JAMES Nelson was buried in Teddington Cemetery: Hampton Wick never did get its own burial ground, He was later joined in the grave by his wife Lady Jemima (1890) and his two eldest sons Thomas Augustus (1924) and William Arthur (1889).

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His estate, proven on 19 March 1885 by Lady Jemima and his fourth son Sidney Herbert as executors, amounted to £30,998 5s. 8d, (£41,200,000.00 today).

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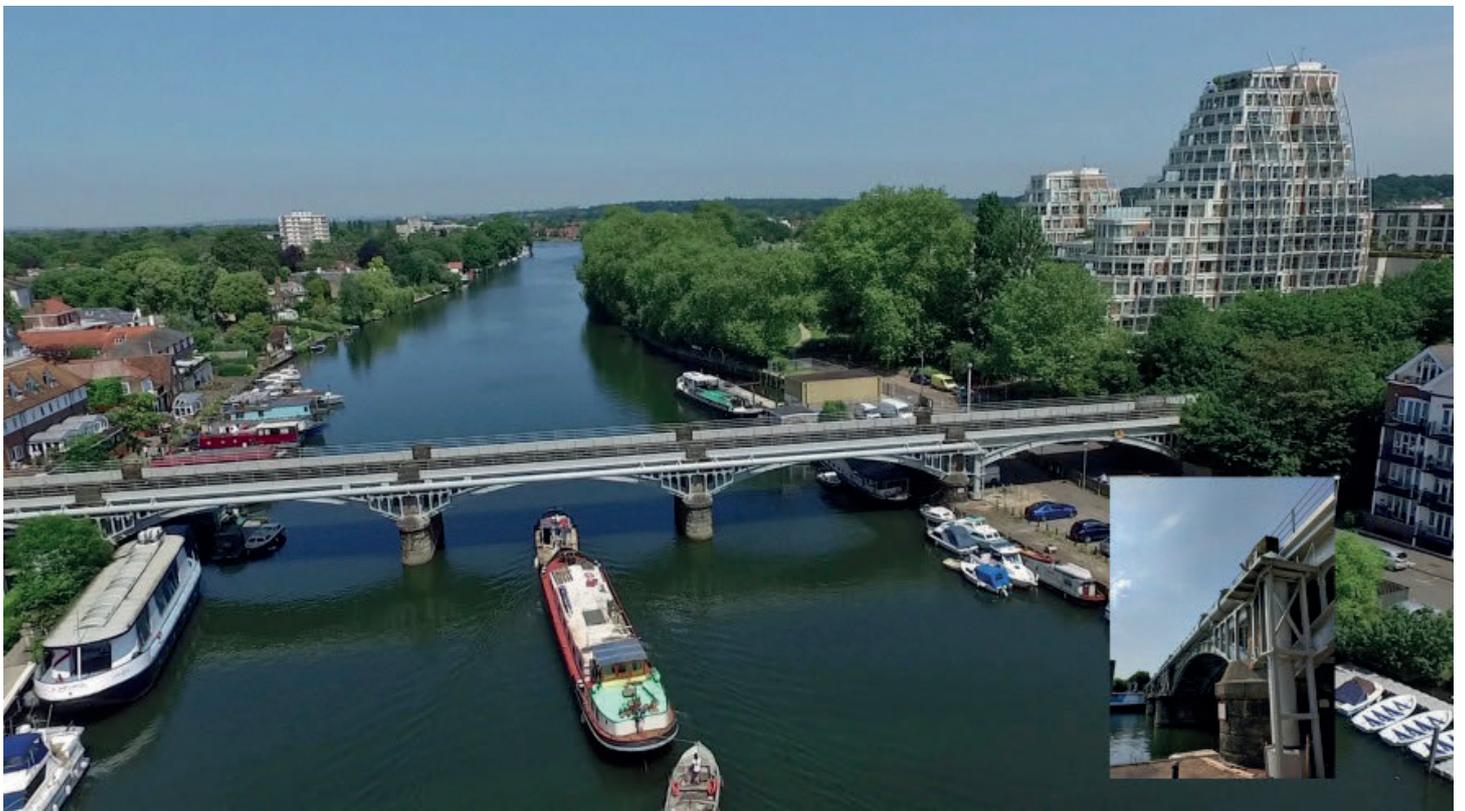
The Lower Thames Valley Main Sewage Board was dissolved four months after Nelson's death as a consequence of Kingston Town Council's determined opposition. In finally acceding to this dissolution Arthur Buckley, Nelson's immediate successor as Hampton Wick Local Board chairman, successfully negotiated with Kingston Town Council to receive and treat all the sewage from Hampton Wick - an arrangement that amazingly continues unchanged to this day.

—

Nelson's youngest son Horace Bertram continued to live at *The Grove* after his father's death. He became Chairman of Hampton Wick Urban District in 1900 but stood down in 1909, vacated *The Grove* and went to live in his Chambers in Lincoln's Inn Fields. His departure severed the final Nelson family links with Hampton Wick.

Local evidence of the one-time existence of the extraordinary person that was Sir Thomas James Nelson remains in three places:

1. the handsome Council Offices - now a Grade 2 Listed Building - on the High Street (see page 66)
2. an attractive polychrome brick boathouse on the banks of the river just upstream from *The Grove* (see page 16)
3. The iron pipe fastened to the upstream side of the railway bridge which still carries the Hampton Wick sewage across to Kingston (below)



SURREY COMET EDITORIAL 14 FEBRUARY 1885

The sudden death of Sir Thomas Nelson has been felt in this neighbourhood as a calamity. We have lost one of the most able and active of our local public men, and feelings of sincere and profound regret are expressed by all parties and sections of society. These feelings are intensified on account of the circumstances of his death. He was a man of strong opinions. For some time worry and anxiety had tired a brain naturally inclined to be excitable. Indomitable in courage, and fearless of work, he was a man with whom difficulties only brought out the determination of his character; yet he was remarkably sensitive. He never forgot a kindness, if he found it sometimes difficult to forgive a personal insult, and could not with any philosophic equanimity accept defeat in a purpose on which he had set his mind. The battle he fought for the Corporation of London against the encroachments on Epping Forest, and his success in winning it for ever for the public, was the great triumph of his official career as City Solicitor. Even in the composition of the best of us, there is just a vein of self-pride, or some infirmity of temper that unconsciously mars the singleness of our purpose, or the full measure of our usefulness, and, if the public life of Sir Thomas Nelson may not always have been marked with the most delicate discernment of good taste, he always knew what he was about, and went straight to the point. As he never spared either cost or pains to master a subject, he rarely lacked that clear recognition of a position, and that grasp, which enabled him to direct a debate, and generally to win the contest. For years he had devoted much of his

time and much anxious thought to the great sewage difficulty which has affected, and, unfortunately, still does, so seriously affect, this neighbourhood. We are afraid that to some extent his end may have been accelerated by the anxieties attending this vexed and troublesome question. No man in the whole of the Thames Valley has striven so valiantly to obtain a system of sewerage for this large and important district. If sometimes he appeared rash and regardless of cost in the pursuit of his aim, none can doubt his sincerity. It was something honourable, at any rate, to have attempted with such persistent determination, the solution of a question that has baffled the most experienced. The labour and the worry however, were becoming exhausting. "I cannot," said Sir Thomas Nelson at the very last meeting of the Joint Board, a day or two before his death, "go on for ever, and unless something be done speedily some one else must take my place" These touching and prophetic words were surely significant of an energetic mind, wearied with repeated failure.

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NOTES

1. Other than Russia in Central Asia against whom it fought the Crimean War (1853-6) - which was also the only significant conflict during the Victorian Era.
2. Various Reform Acts - especially those of 1832 and 1867 - had had the effect of reining in the undue influence of senior aristocracy in controlling the selection of parliamentary candidates whilst at the same time broadening the franchise of those who could vote for them.
3. Rather than the cash handouts to the needy that had been previous practice by Parish Vestries, the intent of the new legislation was to make entry into a workhouse - with its intentionally harsh conditions - a prerequisite for the receipt of any relief thus, it was argued, discouraging people from claiming unless desperate.
4. The Kingston Poor Law Union - whose workhouse opened in 1839 on the site of today's Kingston Hospital, covered 13 local parishes: Hampton, Hampton Wick, Teddington, Kingston, Ham, Hook, Long Ditton, Thames Ditton, Esher, East and West Molesey, Wimbledon and Malden.
5. This was the last of 96 baptisms to be recorded over the three-day Christmas holiday.
6. Now part of the A10 from London Bridge to Kings Lynn.
7. A larger site on the then recently-reclaimed Victoria Embankment became available and the School moved here in 1882. It moved to its present site on Queen Victoria Street in 1986. Former pupils of the school are known as Old Citizens.

8. The size of their respective estates makes an interesting comparison. At today's values, Nelson's was an impressive £20m but Mullens topped this by leaving over £250m.
9. In the first half of the 19th Century there was a three-fold increase in population of the area equivalent to today's Borough of Hackney.
10. The house had been built in 1757 by George Montague Dunk, second Earl of Halifax when he was Ranger of Bushy Park. He died in 1771 with heavy debts and no funds to provide dowries for his four daughters. A fire sale of his considerable estates was conducted via a private Act of Parliament promulgated by his nephew Lord North in 1776 and by 1793 *The Grove* had passed into the hands of the Lapidge Family with whom it remained through (just) three generations until 1948.
11. The architect of Kingston Bridge (1828), St John the Baptist Church in Hampton Wick (1831) and many other local churches in Hampton and Ham.
12. They were not disappointed - the tenancy remained in the Nelson family until 1913.
13. The bridge took three years to construct so Nelson would have been able to monitor progress from his bedroom window.
14. *The Middlesex Chronicle* Saturday, August 1, 1863.
15. J. Collis Browne's Mixture containing morphine and peppermint oil is still stocked by Boot's the Chemist for "relieving the symptoms of coughs and diarrhoea in adults, the elderly and children over 6 years."

16. The Queen's Proctor (or King's Proctor) is a solicitor representing the Crown in the courts of probate and divorce. His or her powers include the power to show cause against a *decree nisi* being made absolute, usually on receipt of information indicating that the court has been misled into granting a decree.
17. Even this outcome did not bring the unhappy episode to an end. William Arthur began suffering from depression and some years later, whilst on a recuperative visit to *The Grove* for consultations with Dr Günther and Dr Langdon Down, he drowned himself in the river aged 37. Susan Nelson died just two years later of "heart failure".
18. Following the death of her husband, Lelia moved with her daughter to be nearer her parents and in-laws. The 1881 census shows her living very near the railway station in Teddington just one short stop away from Hampton Wick. Later still she moved to a newly-built house in Hampton Wick itself - which she named *Thorndean* like her original married home in Staines. She later remarried but on her death in 1930, she rejoined her first husband in his grave at Teddington.
19. Following the death of her mother and now aged 35 (and without the benefit of advice from her parents nor, it would seem, siblings), Laura made a disastrous marriage with an elderly sailor by whom she had two children. Her husband and son pre-deceased her, both dying in the Steyning workhouse while Laura herself died of acute bronchitis at age 53.
20. Transport writer Christian Wolmar considers Pearson to have "*by far the best claim*" to be the first to propose the idea of an underground railway to deal with London's congestion problem.

21. One of his earliest duties on his appointment was to pose for an album of 47 framed cabinet photographs of the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and officers of the Corporation of London which was presented in March 1863 to Edward VII (then Prince of Wales) to mark his coming of age.
22. Jerry White. London in the Nineteenth Century: "A Human Awful Wonder of God." London: Cape, 2007. At first sight it is difficult to appreciate how - at £2m - what appears to be a single bridge could cost more than Bazalgette's three Thames Embankments. However, as a contemporary article in *The Builder* recorded "*The improvement is so grand and yet so simple, and the direction taken by the new road is so obviously the easiest and the best, that difficulties of construction and engineering details are in a manner lost sight of, and it is not until the work concealed from the eye is dived into, that the true nature of the undertaking is understood*".
23. Exmoor, which is almost completely devoid of trees, was nevertheless once designated a Royal Forest.
24. The Board consisted of four Commissioners - at least two of whom had bought manorial rights in the area. They were assisted by a full-time Clerk. In 1873, 1875 and 1876 the time allowed for making their final report was extended, and they eventually produced it in March 1877.
25. Since 1856 Aldersbrook - just south of Wanstead Park - had been the site of the City of London Cemetery.
26. Known as "intercommonage".
27. On the same day, the Corporation of London, using their own body, the Commissioners of Sewers of the City as Plaintiffs, instituted a suit in the Court of Chancery against the lords of manors within the Forest. The timing was

deliberate: since the terms of the Inquiry included a moratorium on litigation, by instituting their suit before the Commissioners had officially started work, the City were able to ensure that theirs was the only lawsuit allowed to proceed and no counter-suit could be permitted.

28. The arbitrator made his final award in 1882 after 114 public sittings all of which Nelson attended personally.
29. Originally the gardens for Wanstead Hall a Tudor mansion which was purchased in 1685 by a former Governor of the East India Company. The grounds were first landscaped at huge expense and planted with formal avenues of walnut trees trees by George London (1640–1714), one of the leading garden designers of his day. Later landscaper Humphry Repton (1752-1818) was invited to improve the gardens - some of his informal planting remains today. Subsequently the Hall was replaced by Wanstead House a Palladian mansion said to rival Blenheim which was built in 1722 and demolished in 1826. Of this second creation, only the buildings known as the Temple and the Grotto, both built in about 1760 remain.
30. It was at Nelson's own suggestion that the City ask Parliament for a special Act enabling them to continue to apply the proceeds of grain metage to the purchase of open spaces within 25 miles of the City. During the remainder of his career Nelson was involved in purchases worth £375,000 (now £600m) including Burnham Beeches and the churchyard of St Paul's Cathedral.
31. Over 200 of these are still extant.
32. In point of fact, Newcastle itself placed an *export* duty of 2d. a chaldron (c.2,670 kg) on coal sent to the metropolis.

33. The freeing of all the other 10 bridges was deemed to be the sole responsibility of the MBW for which the capital cost was £1,448,777 (£3bn today).
34. By comparison, the whole of Crossrail is projected to cost £11.8bn.
35. The bridge was a financial failure because it attracted very little vehicular traffic. Apart from the fact that Blackfriars bridge upstream and London Bridge downstream were toll-free, it suffered from approaches that were too steep for horses drawing loads - a fact still evident today.
36. The *Surrey Comet* for 13 May 1865 , in reporting the Vestry meeting from which the formula for resolving the dispute was finally agreed, remarked that “*Mr Nelson had brought with him a formidable mass of books and papers*”. These included several Parish Book dating as far back as 1654 along with a Chancery Decree of 1772. Nelson had clearly done his homework and, it might be suspected, took particular pleasure in being able to meticulously detail the long and convoluted history of the dispute as well as highlighting the various legal errors and oversights that had been made by several previous prominent local solicitors who had been involved in the matter.
37. *Surrey Comet* 11 April 1863
38. Nelson’s involvement in the City meant he was always in a position to advise those involved in local government as to what was going on in the world outside and how this might affect them. Some of this intelligence would have come to him by the City Remembrancer, an officer whose official role gave them ready access to the affairs of Parliament as well as of the Sovereign and her Royal Household.
39. *Surrey Comet* 29 June 1863

40. *Surrey Comet* 11 July 1863

41. When Hampton Court Palace was first established in the early 16th century it stood remote from the neighbouring villages of Hampton and Hampton Wick and separated from them by the medieval field systems which later became royal parks. As the palace grew, first under Thomas Wolsey and then Henry VIII and his royal successors, a number of dwellings sprang up immediately outside the palace walls to house the expanding number of people serving the palace itself and, from the 1820s an ever-growing population of tourists who came to visit the palace, its gardens and Bushy Park. This community would understandably have considered itself to be a village in its own right although it was in reality just part of Hampton parish which was centred on the church of St Mary's.

When the old Hampton parish was split to give Hampton Wick its own separate parochial identity, the new parish boundary ran straight through the centre of the "village" of Hampton Court. The western section continued its connection with Hampton whilst the east side now found itself a reluctant adjunct of Hampton Wick. With their focus either being on the inner workings of the palace itself or on its commercial potential as a tourist attraction, the inhabitants failed to ensure their interests were represented either on the Vestry or later on the Local Board. Significantly, of the two major hoteliers based at Hampton Court, Richard Coombes of the *Greyhound Inn* got himself voted onto to both bodies whilst Richard Luce of the rival *Kings Arms Hotel* did not and thus was the leader of the current protest.

42. *Surrey Comet* 25 July 1863

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Surrey Comet* 9 June 1866
45. More detail is contained in *Down the Drain* BOTLHS Paper 97 (see Bibliography page 73). That publication details the efforts undertaken by the Hampton Wick Local Board (for many years under Nelson's leadership) to meet their statutory obligations. To avoid repetition, the current paper will attempt to focus on how Nelson discharged his leadership responsibilities to achieve this and what this reveals about the man himself.
46. *Surrey Comet* 8 July 1871
47. Nelson insisted that the stance he was taking was based purely on the principle that the Clerk should not be allowed to express in public an opinion in conflict with the decision of the Board he served. However some of his colleagues believed he was incensed because Bussell had dismissed Nelson's speech at a recent public meeting as "*bosh, absurd and sensational*"
48. The penalty of £100 per day applied to all communities regardless of their size. Therefore the decision of the Conservators to start with the smallest (and arguably most helpless) of them seems somewhat crass especially since, the whole rateable value of Hampton Wick being a mere £11,000, the Conservators were unlikely to prevail.
49. The bills remained unpaid for several years
50. See <https://tinyurl.com/ydz9r5md>
51. *Surrey Comet* 8 January 1881
52. Six years later Augustus, by now a Lieutenant serving as a volunteer midshipman in the gunboat service in Cadiz, was

personally responsible for saving the lives of seven men - twice by jumping from a boat to rescue individual sailors and once by taking to a small boat and *"pulling into the very muzzles of the enemy's guns, and evidently saving five men that were near drowning ... he not only gained the admiration of the whole flotilla but the envy of the French Commanding Officer, who at last ordered his men to cease firing on him."* For these exploits he was awarded a medal by the Royal Humane Society; but his luck finally ran out when as Commander of the HMS *Scylla* he died of yellow fever at the age of 34 whilst stationed in Jamaica.

53. Including three first-class match appearances and a top score of 20 not out.
54. The meeting had been convened at short notice in response to the sharp increase that had recently occurred in the weekly London death rate due to a fresh outbreak of cholera. The six attendees were greeted with the news that a case of cholera had just been discovered in Hampton Wick itself which had proved fatal. Nelson immediately took charge of the situation and, as well as pushing through Günther's appointment, persuaded his colleagues that they should meet daily until the crisis was over and set up an emergency fund to ensure that contaminated clothing and effects were immediately destroyed.
55. In an address to the Christian Union in June 1879, John Langdon-Down recounted how, at the age of 18, he had what might be described as a mystical experience. A heavy summer shower drove the family to take shelter in a cottage. *"I was brought into contact with a feeble minded girl, who waited on our party and for whom the question haunted me - could nothing for her be done? I had then not entered on a medical student's career*

but ever and anon the remembrance of that hapless girl presented itself to me and I longed to do something for her kind."

56. He went back to Torpoint and, with his newly acquired pharmaceutical knowledge and skills, he developed a very successful series of over-the-counter products which boosted the turnover of his father's shop. Local directories described the enterprise as that of *grocers, chymysts, druggists, linen and woollen drapers*.
57. 14 years later they had over 180 patients and had built up a country estate of some 40 acres within 30 minutes of the centre of London. And a measure of both the shrewdness and immense energy of the couple was that, by the time of John's death a further 14 years on, not only was the entire enterprise debt-free, he also left today's equivalent of £25m to his widow.
58. Nelson himself had also been called - and was acting - as a member of the coroner's jury.
59. It is possible that Nelson used his influence to ensure that any scandal that could have arisen from the incident was largely avoided. Dr Günther - who had decided not to call in the Police - would also probably have had an empathetic relationship with Langdon-Down since his then 7-year old daughter was classed as an "imbecile" in the 1881 Census.
60. *Surrey Comet* 8 June 1872
61. The *Surrey Comet* reporter remarked that "*the chairman was very indistinctly heard.*" After the meeting Nelson claimed that the room was still too damp for use. Two days afterwards he suffered an acute attack of bronchitis.
62. *Surrey Comet* 14 February 1885

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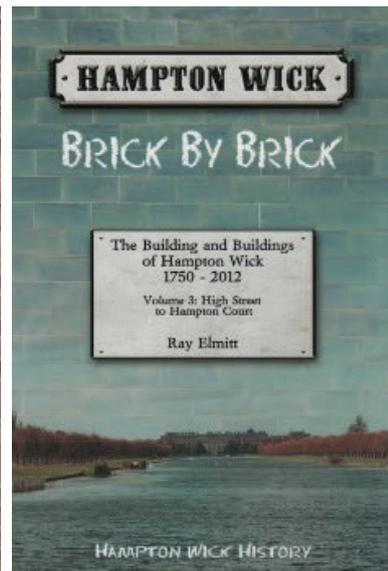
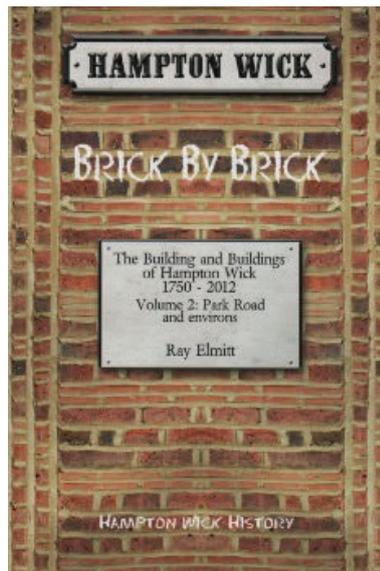
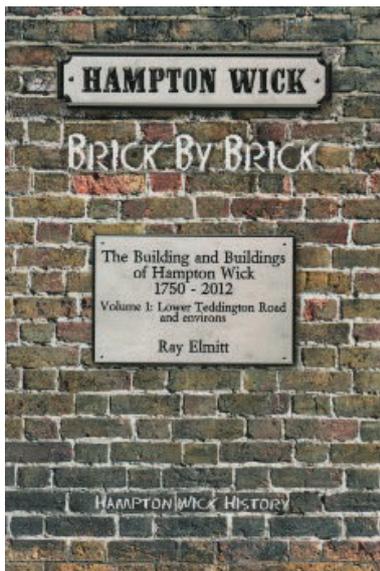
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