

1 History of the area

Location and population

The conservation area is situated in Lower Sydenham between Sydenham Road (the A212) and Mayow Park. Its boundary, shown in Figure 1, is tightly drawn around the six roads comprising the Thorpes Estate, an Edwardian development on the site of the former garden of the Old House, which stood next to Sydenham Road until the early 20th century. The boundary encloses a compact area with a strong individual identity, both historically and in terms of the modern townscape.

The regional context of the conservation area is shown in Figure 2. To the west is the railway line and Sydenham Station and to the north Mayow Park. The area is

surrounded by suburban sprawl dating principally from the 19th and 20th centuries, punctuated by substantial open spaces at Bell Green to the west and at Crystal Palace, New Beckenham and Dulwich outside the Borough of Lewisham. The local topography is undulating, and the site slopes uphill from south to north, away from Sydenham Road. The population of the area is estimated to be about 770.

Origins and development of the area

The name Sydenham (early variations of which include Sypenham, Sibbenham and Cippenham) is possibly derived from the Anglo-Saxon 'Cippas' settlement', meaning the drunkard's settlement.

During the 6th century the then heavily forested area along the banks of the River Pool was cleared by Saxon or Jutish farmers moving south from Lewisham and the Thames. These colonisers settled on high ground near the river at Perry Hill, Bell Green and the eastern end of Sydenham Road. The 'drunkard's settlement' itself was centred near where Catford Hill now becomes Perry Hill.



Figure 2 The regional context of the conservation area.

Later, this was the site of Place House (also known as Sydenham Place, Sydenham Place House or Sydenham House), the administrative centre of the Manor of Sydenham, a large agricultural estate that dominated the economy of the area from the medieval period until the 17th century.

The survival of early tenements is likely, and an area stretching along Sydenham Road from the railway bridge to Bell Green, and including within the conservation area Earlsthorpe Road and the southernmost part of Queensthorpe Road, has been designated as an Area of Archaeological Priority in the Council's Unitary Development Plan.

Figure 3: The John Rocque Map of 1744. Place House is shown top right. Sydenham is depicted as a small village of farmhouses and cottages straggling west along Sydenham Road from Sydenham (now Bell) Green, which became the heart of the community following the decline of Place House and the Manor of Sydenham during the 17th century. To the east and south are expanses of unenclosed waste.

Place House itself was let to a succession of wealthy tenants from the 16th century onwards.

With nearby Greenwich a royal residence, the adjoining parishes were popular with courtiers seeking accommodation of an appropriate status. When the court abandoned Greenwich during the 17th century the demand for great houses in the area slackened, until in the 18th century improvements to local roads made commuting to London by City men and lawyers a possibility for the first time.

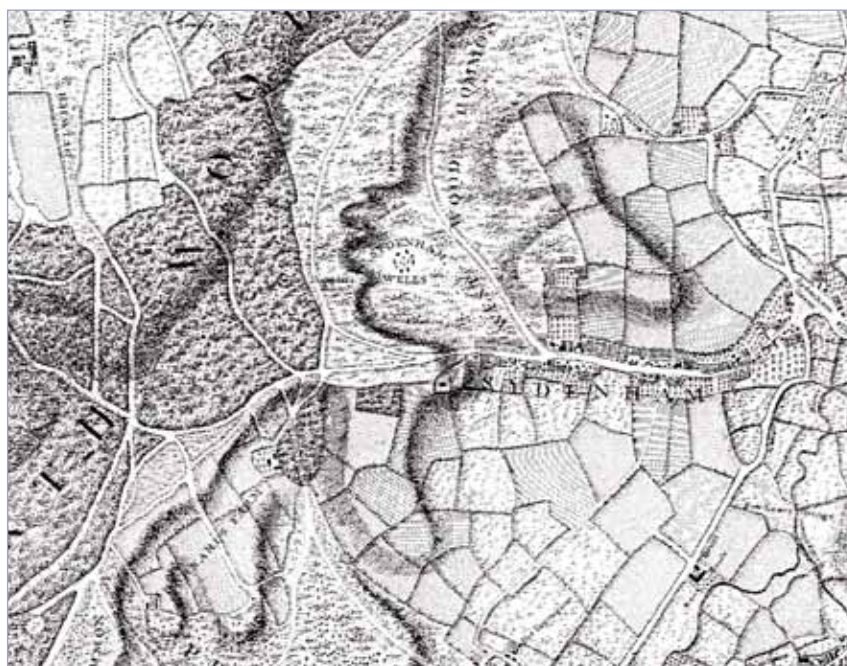


Figure 3 John Rocque's map of 1744

Local landowners were keen to exploit the revived demand for property in the area and large houses were built for leasing to a new class of wealthy tenant. Substantial detached villas continued to be built in the area until the mid 19th century, although Sydenham remained primarily a farming community.

Figure 4: An 1815 map by the royal geographer W Faden. It shows the local road network at the beginning of the 19th century. The main London to Kent coaching route runs from New Cross in the north through Lewisham to Bromley, and passes close to Sydenham. The development from the 18th century of a system of good roads between Lewisham and London introduced a new class of wealthy commuters to the area. Another development in local transport came at the turn of the century, with the digging of the Croydon Canal, which passed directly through Sydenham.

Until the 18th century Sydenham Road was bordered by open fields and a series of small farms and cottages. From 1750 to 1850, however, a number of grand houses such as The Lawn and Hanover Lodge were built beside it; in addition old houses and farmhouses such as Home Park were extended or rebuilt to suit the needs of the growing population of wealthy commuters. At the same time, a concentration of shops, chapels, schools, public houses and forges grew up along the central section of Sydenham Road. To the north side of Sydenham Road, from Mayow Road to the former Greyhound Public House, stretched the Old House Estate,

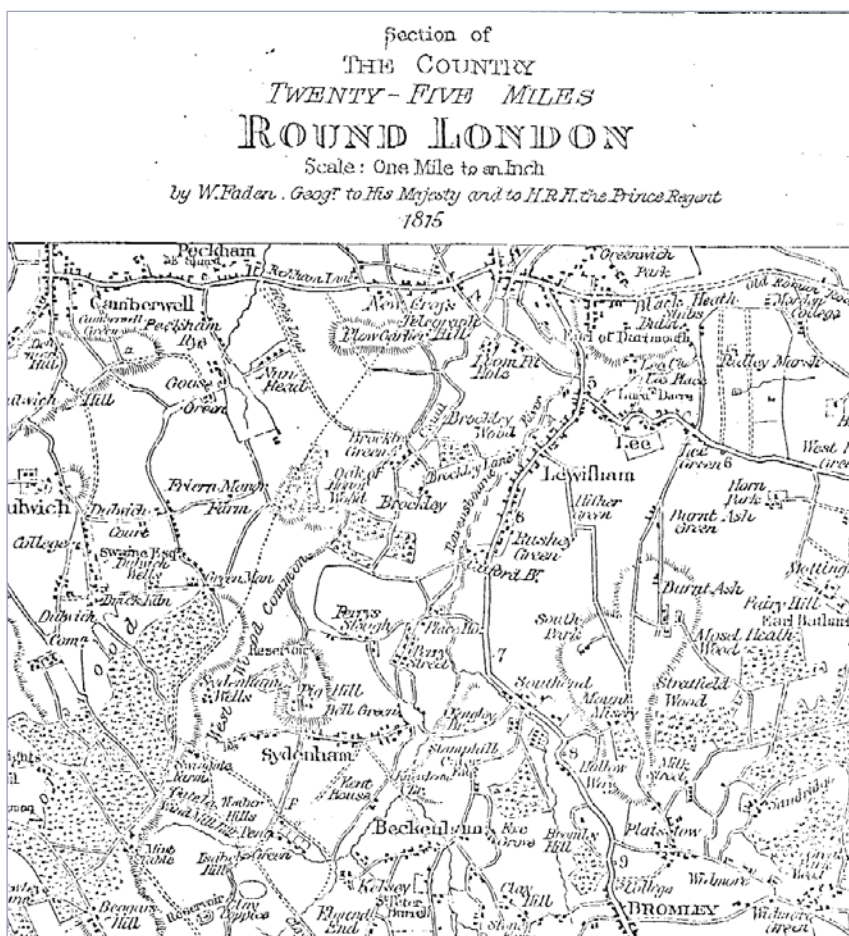


Figure 4: W. Faden's map of 1815

which at its greatest extent was Sydenham's largest. The Old House was formerly known as Brookehouse Farm, after a 16th century tenant. In 1713 the farm was sold to a wine merchant, Edward Hodson, who added to its lands and rebuilt the house, which then remained much the same until its demolition. This house occupied a site now roughly equivalent to the back yards of the shops at 85–95 Sydenham Road; the Thorpes Estate lies across part of its former garden and grounds

Figure 7: Sydenham Road from the 1843/4 Tithe Map. Although the road is still surrounded by fields, a number of grand houses are now apparent along its length. The Old House is at plot number 3071. The relatively clear frontage to the grounds may be evidence of the active clearance of buildings from the vicinity of the house by the 18th century occupants, the Hodsons, in order to enhance the privacy and grandeur of their property. To the centre of Sydenham Road, however, the early 19th century saw the growth of a concentration of shops, schools, public houses and forges. To the left of the map, running north-south, is the line of the tracks of the London and Croydon Railway, which opened in 1836 following the route of the old Croydon Canal. The new

station at the west end of Sydenham Road was one reason why the centre of local gravity shifted westward during the mid-19th century from Bell Green to the junction of Kirkdale and Westwood Hill.

In 1786 the bulk of the Old House Estate, including Old House itself, was acquired by a lawyer named Mayow Wynell Mayow. The property then remained in Mayow hands until the end of the 19th century, and was further enlarged. The Mayows came to own most of the land between Sydenham Road and Perry Vale. It was the great growth of the gardens and grounds of the Old House under the Hodson and Mayow families that prevented intensive development in the area until the late 19th century.



Figure 5: The Old House – a late 19th-century view taken from Sydenham Road.



Figure 6: The west side of the Old House, probably in the 1890s. The grounds to the rear are now covered by the Thorpes Estate.



Figure 7: Sydenham Road from the 1843/4 Tithe Map.



Figure 8: The lawyer Mayow Wynell Mayow, who acquired the Old House Estate in 1786.



Figure 9: Mayow Wynell Adams (1808-98)

For Sydenham in general, however, the 19th century was a period of great change and growth. In 1810 an Act of Enclosure was passed affecting the whole of Sydenham Common, a large area of previously undeveloped open land stretching from modern day Westwood Hill in the south-west to London Road in the north and to the railway line and Silverdale beyond in the east. However, development of the land was slow for a number of reasons, and at least 75% of the land was still in agricultural use 40 years after the passing of the Act.

Indeed, in 1835 Sydenham was still a charming Kentish village, with farms, cottages and a number of grand houses and villas, some, such as the Old House, at the centre of substantial estates. Only wealthier commuters could afford the expensive coach services to London.

In the next 30 years all this was to change for two reasons – the opening of the railway linking Sydenham with London, and the re-erection of the Crystal Palace on a hill above the village.

The Croydon Canal had been dug at the turn of the 19th century. It was, however, only after its demise that the canal had a significant impact on the development of the area. In 1836 it was purchased by the

London and Croydon Railway Company, which laid tracks along its general route and at some points along its bed (see Figure 4 on page 7). Two stations at Sydenham and at the Dartmouth Arms (Forest Hill) were opened in 1836. Sydenham became fully integrated with London by a rapid and regular train service. This had a galvanising effect on the development of the area, with the majority of the new houses being built on the Common and on the site of the old canal reservoir. An earlier emphasis following the 1810 Act on building cottages for the local working classes gave way to houses aimed specifically at the commuting middle classes.

Even more important, however, to the growth of Lewisham into the fashionable London suburb that it was in the mid to late 19th century, was the news in 1852 that Crystal Palace was to be re-erected on Sydenham Hill. The number of new houses built in the area each year doubled, and the size of the average house also grew. This boom lasted for 20 years. The most significant developments during this period included South Sydenham Park, the project of the local architect Alexander Gordon Henell, which transformed the northern part of the Mayow estate, substituting roads (including Mayow Road, Dacres Road and Inglemere Road)

and substantial villas for fields and meadow.

It was the final occupant of the Old House, Mayow Wynell Adams, who was responsible, with Henell, for the development of this part of the estate. A younger branch of the family simultaneously developed Silverdale with the same architect. Mayow Wynell Adams also sold the land for Mayow Park, originally called Sydenham Recreation ground, which opened to the public in 1878.

Figure 10: The 1870 OS Map. This map shows the Old House Estate in the last decade of its prime. The Old House itself can be seen to the bottom of plot number 1493. To the west is the railway line and Sydenham Station. To the west again, roads and grand villas have proliferated. Development of a rather meaner kind can be seen to the north of the central section of Sydenham Road – otherwise the landscape to either side of this road seems very similar to that shown in the 1843/4 Tithe Map (Figure 7), with a series of cottages and larger houses, some set in substantial grounds, backing onto open fields. This situation was to prove short-lived.

Figure 11: The 1894-96 OS Map. The Old House and its immediate grounds are shown surrounded by a sea of roads and villas. The final

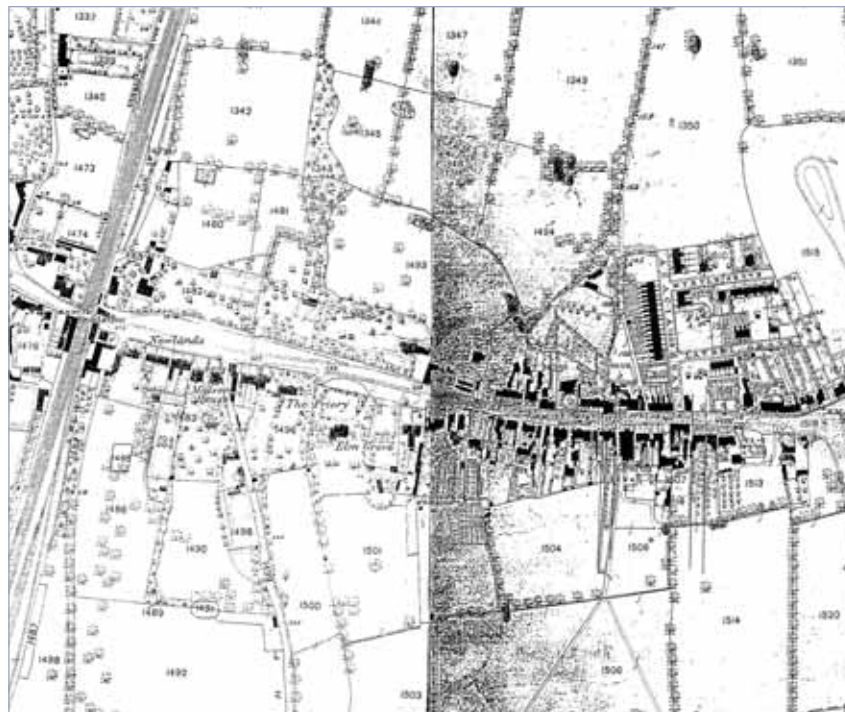


Figure 10: The 1870 OS Map.

occupant of the house, Mayow Wynell Adams, in conjunction with a younger branch of the family and a local architect, had undertaken the development of the majority of the estate in a fairly grand style during the second half of the 19th century.

However, by the 1890s, as this map indicates, the heyday of Sydenham as a fashionable suburb had passed, and substantial villas had given way to terraces and semi-detached properties designed to suit the lower-middle rather than the upper-middle classes. This change, which was not dramatic, began in 1877 when the Newlands estate was sold to the British Land Company, who built the first intensive development of small houses at this, the fashionable west end of Sydenham Road. Part of the estate can be seen bottom left of the figure in mid-development. Mayow Wynell Adams also sold the land for the Sydenham Recreation Ground (now Mayow Park). The original arrangement of paths shown in this figure survives, as do most of the oaks, which long pre-date the park, and indicate the boundaries of fields belonging to the former Perry Vale Farm.



Figure 11: The 1894-96 OS Map.

Having reached the heights of wealth and fashion in the 1860s and 1870s, Sydenham and Forest Hill began to decline in the latter part of the century. New intensive developments of small houses mirrored a change in the class composition of the local population from upper to lower-middle class, and ensured that other big houses would be demolished or converted for institutional use as soon as they became vacant.



Figure 12: The 1914 OS Map.

Indeed, following Mayow Wynell Adams' death in 1898, the heir to the Old House estate decided that it had become an anachronism given the changing circumstances of the area and sold it by auction in 1900. The house and land were acquired by Edmondson and Sons, a firm of developers, who began to build the Thorpe Estate across the former gardens. Two years later the Old House was demolished. The six roads of the Thorpe Estate were built between 1901 and 1914, and on the demolition of the Old House a long parade of shops was built on Sydenham Road.

These houses were at the more substantial end of the scale of contemporary developments, and were aimed at the more affluent members of the new lower-middle class population. This is reflected in the size and form of the houses themselves, as well as the quality of the design and detailing. The layout of the area demonstrates the planned nature of the development, and the groupings of houses of different designs is evidence of the gradual nature of the process, which took 13 years to complete. These factors are all discussed in more detail in the following pages.



Figure 13: Bishopsthorpe Road, probably taken in 1913.



Figure 14: The west end of Bishopsthorpe Road



Figure 15: Queensthorpe Road in about 1905, looking up the hill towards Bishopsthorpe Road. Very little has changed since this photograph was taken.



Figure 16: Earlsthorpe Road in about 1907, looking towards Mayow Road Hall. This view is much the same today

Figure 12: The 1914 OS Map. In 1900 the heir to what remained of the Old House Estate gave in to the climate of the times and sold it by auction. It was acquired by the developers Edmondson and Son, who rapidly began building a small estate (the Thorpes Estate) across the garden, which was completed by 1914. In 1902 the Old House itself was demolished and a row of shops facing on to Sydenham Road built in its place. As comparison of this map with Figure 1 illustrates, little has changed within the conservation area or its setting since.

Figure 13: Bishopsthorpe Road, probably taken in 1913. This view looking north shows the road in mid-development. Construction of the houses on the south side of the road between Princethorpe Road and Mayow Road has not yet commenced.

Figure 14: The west end of Bishopsthorpe Road, looking towards Silverdale. The large pair of houses shown in the distance on the left was demolished in about 1937 to make way for Thorpe Close.

Sydenham's fortunes continued to decline in the inter-war period, particularly following the destruction by fire of Crystal

Palace in 1936. Many large houses were converted into lodgings. The heavy bombing of the area during the Second World War, together with war-time shortages, caused the accelerated decay of those that survived. Houses which fell empty were often requisitioned by the Council for conversion or earmarked for redevelopment.

After the war bombsites and derelict homes made prime sites for new blocks of flats and during the 1950s and 60s several new council estates grew up in the Sydenham and Forest Hill areas.

To the north of Mayow Park, for example, the original grand villas and gardens have been replaced by large blocks of flats and the Forest Hill School.

However, although the character of some parts of the surrounding area may have changed greatly during the 20th century, that of the Thorpes estate remains very much as it was in the Edwardian era. This period feel is part of its special interest, and is discussed in more detail below. The area bears a fascinating testimony to an important period in the development of Sydenham, and to the architectural preferences, attitudes and domestic aspirations of the Edwardian middle class.