

Background

Finchley has an interesting history. It lay on the edge of a 20 mile deep glacial sea which deposited heavy clay, rocks, fossils and terminal moraine from the N.E , forming gravel pits and Gravel Hill. It diverted the River Thames, formed a long ridge to Muswell Hill and lay 60' above London Clay, creating a floating water table. As the water could not easily drain away there was an abundance of rivers, streams and springs.

The area was covered with a dense forest of oak, beech, hazel and hornbeams. The earliest recorded inhabitants lived near St Mary's Church, built on the site of a Roman temple, probably on the site of a pagan shrine.

After the Norman Conquest this area was declared a Royal Forest, giving London citizens the right to hunt deer, stags and wild boar.

In 1218 it was no longer a Royal Forest and Henry 111 gave the Lord of the Manor the right to clear up to 250 acres of woodland a year. Villagers could clear small areas to keep pigs, chickens and grow vegetables. The name Finchley comes from an Anglo Saxon word 'leye' meaning a clearing in the forest.

Forest clearance continued so fast Henry VIII passed an Act in 1545 for the preservation of forests to provide timber for buildings and ships and allow for 'springe' or regeneration of trees 'to prevent great decay of timber and woods'.

Later records show tithes being paid in fruit from orchards, vegetables and geese, ducks and chickens. Many villagers were upset by the enclosures which reduced Common land for grazing animals and collecting firewood. The common was reduced to 600 acres and formed the notorious Finchley Common, frequented by Highway men. Sheep house farm was on the slopes above this and Mutton Brook below was used for dipping sheep

College Farm

College Farm is the last remaining farm in Finchley, near Henley's Corner. It was first called Sheep House Farm and was started by Adam de Basing, Lord of the Manor and a well beloved friend of Henry III. He was the King's Chief Financier, Lord Mayor of London and the King's Tailor. He was interested in the production of wool and kept sheep.

This area was part of the great forest of Middlesex and after the Norman Conquest it became a Royal Forest where citizens of London could hunt deer, wild boar and bulls. It was hard to farm but in Anglo Saxon times there were small clearings or leyes in the forest, where villagers could keep pigs, ducks and grow vegetables.

Adam de Basing was given permission to clear up to 250 acres of forest a year so that his sheep could roam freely. He was the only person allowed to keep sheep. Mutton Brook was used for dipping sheep.

When George Barham bought the Sheep House Farm a Canadian visitor described the

situation of the farm 'as just about perfect. It is among the rolling loams of Middlesex, sloping to the south, well enough timbered to make it handsome and almost parklike. The land is of that free and open kind which so willingly responds to liberal treatment. The soil is of a nature to nourish a variety of nutritious grasses with genial warmth which characterises southern counties'.

So how did it become a dairy farm? Robert Barham was a farmer who came to London at the age of 20. He married in 1830 and started working as a cow keeper. There were still meadows by the River Thames, near Westminster and Robert kept his cows there, not far from the present Savoy Hotel.

Robert's son George was born in 1836. By then London's population had risen to 2 million and everyone needed milk. In 1840 Robert bought the oldest dairy in London, dating back to Charles I and reputed to have belonged to Nell Gwyn. Lawyers from the Temple would often buy a penny glass of milk with a bun or hard boiled egg for lunch. Robert noticed that some dairies had too much milk and some too little so he worked as 'balancer' carrying excess milk from one dairy to another, in wooden pails.

When his son George was 23 He married Margaret Rainey and started a dairy in Dean Street. By then there was very little grazing left in London. Cows often lived in unhealthy surroundings and milk was often adulterated with water from the Thames, carrying disease. Punch wrote that 'a clean glass of milk, if you could get it, would be one of the 7 wonders of London.

George realised that the lush, green pastures, just north of London, would be ideal for cows. They could stand knee deep in grass, graze on good food and be milked in clean surroundings.

The nearby railway provided regular transport to the city. In 1864 George founded the Express Dairy Milk Company and used the picture of a 'puffer' locomotive as its logo. He brought premises in Museum Street, near King's Cross.

The following year a virus called rinderpest broke out in London and within a week nearly all the cows in London had to be destroyed and burnt.

Because of a shortage of milk George looked further afield to the Dales and Derbyshire. But transporting milk in pails and buckets on trains was impractical. George was also a trained carpenter and in 1866 designed the first churn in tinned steel, supported by wooden hoops in a conical shape to make them easier to trundle.

But while milk, served warm from the cow proved it was fresh, it would go sour on a long journey. George then asked a firm of brewers to modify their capillary coolers to chill the milk to 15 degrees before it was transported.

In 1882 George renamed the company the Express Dairy Company Ltd. It transported over 30,000 gallons of milk to London every night. By 1882 he owned 2 butter processing farms, one the octagonal farm in Kenwood. He ordered the destruction of the old sheep farm and Commissioned the architect Frederick Chancellor to plan and build a model dairy farm. Chancellor was surveyor to St Alban's Cathedral and usually designed ecclesiastical buildings. The work was carried out by Steed Brothers of Chalk Farm. "The buildings are well arranged, well lighted and ventilated. lofty, spacious and well aired." On one side of the Entrance Hall was a laboratory for medicines, and on the other side offices for book keeping and dormitories.

The farm was stocked with 3 breeds of cows, half Guernseys, the rest Shorthorns and Kerrys. Each cow had her own stall with her name, decorated with cards and rosettes she had won. The cows had root vegetables as well as hay and fresh grass. The farm became a showplace for sales of pedigree cows and some were exported to Australia. Barham travelled to India when he heard of primitive conditions there and even travelled to Jamaica.

George pioneered TB tested milk and door step deliveries. The farm became famous for cream teas in the beautiful dairy with blue and white Milton tiles 'for purity'. At first cream was raised in porcelain pans until he bought the rights to a centrifugal separating machine invented by Lavel.

His son Titus was responsible for developing catering for Express Dairies and these teas, served with crumpets and watercress sandwiches, were popular in Victorian days. He renamed the farm College Farm and even supplied Queen Victoria with cream and butter.

College Farm showed milk production at it's best. It had a European reputation for hygiene and animal welfare. It was used for conventions as early as 1894. It was London's first TB tested dairy and until 1963 housed the first milk bottling plant in London. It even had the first seal cone machine in 1929, putting milk in waxed cartons but the customers did not like it. George's son, Walter Nell, set up a museum of dairying with the collection of early dairying equipment. Schools loved visiting the farm and seeing the calves.

The farm closed in 1974 and the Department of the Environment bought it to exchange for the land in Barnet that was going to be used for the proposed flyover at Henly's corner. It was neglected and fell derelict. In 1976 it was seen by Chris Owers who had fond memories of visiting the farm in his childhood. He bred horses in Hertfordshire with his father and asked if he could rent the farm and cut the hay. It was agreed and he build stables and a livery yard. He started a riding school all at his own expense. He worked at the TV centre and in the 1980's he launched an appeal on Ester Ranzén's "That's life" with Spike Milligan appealing for donations to save the farm. It received an enthusiastic response from the public. He established his right to an agricultural tenancy saving it from developers who wanted to build 100 houses on the site. He was supported by the Finchley Society and College Farm Trust was formed. He introduced rare breed cattle and Jacob's sheep, and welcomed school visits again. There was a monthly Art and Craft fair with cream teas in the dairy. In 1983 the Farm celebrated its centenary and was very popular with the public, attracting 30,000 people a year.

Sadly the restrictions on farms after the foot and mouth epidemic forced the farm to close again. There is still a livery and pet shop, dog grooming and an annual circus. But it would need major work to comply with Health and Safety regulations. At present the future of this historic farm is uncertain.

College Farm Trust

College Farm Trust was formed at the end of 2006 to protect it from developers and make College Farm a well recognised , consistently used and accessible educational and recreational resource for the community in the North London area.

The Trust own the Freehold and the Ower family have a controlled agricultural tenancy , which they have held since 1976, during which time they developed the site into a rare breed farm for the public to enjoy. There was an annual attendance of over 30,000 visitors. However this was brought to an end during the foot and mouth epidemic in 2001, but with the Trust and close co-operation of the family they hoped to revive those active and exciting days once again.

The Owers run a successful shop on site which is London's largest equestrian and pet store and this will be kept separate from the farm development.

The main buildings, which are 125 years old, are Grade 11 listed and the whole 10 acre site is a Conservation area. Much repair is needed and a large area of derelict buildings will have to be re-developed. It is hoped to obtain grants from various sources, so please visit the fund raising section of the website for any up and coming events and for donations.

Initially we intend to bring the main forecourt and the south facing elevation up to standard, improve the Tea House and Toilets, built new poultry pens and buy chickens, ducks, rabbits, sheep and goats.

They were hoping to do this by Summer 2009 and would welcome any feedback from the public.

collegefarmtrust.co.uk