

MINOR MYSTERIES OF MALDEN

A paper by David Henry (with minor revisions of April 2022)

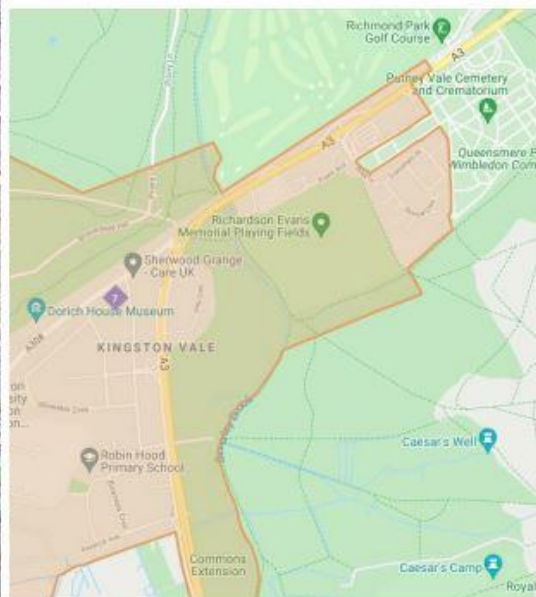
Introduction

As a change from my systematic approach to matters Coombe and Maldens, (which I have termed "our area" throughout this paper), I have assembled in this paper a set of minor mysteries that I have encountered on my perambulations.. These were all mysteries to me when I first encountered them: they may not be mysteries to readers with greater local knowledge. In each case, I've recorded my efforts at solutions and musings on the subjects. I've divided my subjects into two broad groups based on what I always advise the urban wanderer: LOOK UP! LOOK DOWN!

LOOK DOWN!

Parish the thought!

In tracing the boundary of our area in search of boundary markers to supplement those noted by Julian, I came across this stone beside the Beverley Brook in the far north. Clearly a parish boundary stone, but why was it placed at this particular location? I investigated and discovered it marked the boundary between the parishes of Kingston Vale and West Wimbledon at a point where that boundary turns sharply. There remains the mystery of the very peculiar line of the northeastern boundary in Putney Vale Cemetery.



Stamped Out?

Our delightful new footpath which runs alongside the railway from New Malden Station to Raynes Park has, on its north side near the Station, a small area of bricks set in the ground that appear to have been painted or stamped with white paint. Are they a remnant of a building that used to stand there? Or some recent decorative project related to our new path? A mystery!



A Hard One

As you stroll down Graham Road, pause outside No. 39 and gaze down. You'll see something rather strange. Set into a pavement slab are metal letters which spell out "Aberdeen Non Slip Adamant". I've not seen anything like this anywhere. Clearly it is the manufacturer of the paving slabs proudly advertising his product. But to what purpose? Is the casual pedestrian going to be inspired to buy such slabs? Did the manufacturer have the permission of the Local Authority for this advertisement? And who was the manufacturer?



The answers no doubt lie somewhere in the Council archives. I have endeavoured to identify the manufacturer through internet searches: unsuccessfully. Aberdeen is known as "The Granite City" because it was built from granite quarried close to the city. After over 300 years of operation, Rubislaw quarry was closed in 1971 and is now filled with water. It is one of the largest man-made holes in Europe. Granite from there was used to construct the terraces of the Houses of Parliament and Waterloo Bridge.

Granite is a hard, igneous rock. Our paving slabs have a rough surface, hence "non slip", but do they incorporate granite? They are called "Adamant", a curious word which means unbreakable and which is also used metaphorically to mean firmly set in an opinion. It derives from "adamantine" that is both a noun and an adjective. I am blessed and cursed with an elephantine memory and seeing the word cast my mind back over sixty years to when I first saw it. A precocious lad, I was reading John Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost" and came upon these lines:

Him the Almighty Power

Hurls headlong flaming from th'Ethereal Skie

With hideous ruine and combustion down

To bottomless perdition, there to dwell

In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,

Who durst defie th'Omnipotent to Arms.

Adamantine, as an adjective, has various meanings: in the context of Milton's poem it means "unbreakable", just the kind of chains we want Satan to be in. And just how we'd like the slabs of our pavements to be. But when used as a noun, it is a particular mineral, a form of corundum, and very hard. So, who's the manufacturer? And what are the slabs made from? Mysteries!

More Scottish Mist(eries)

And what of "Montrose Gardens"? The houses here, and a few identical ones on nearby Elm Road, are different from others in The Groves: smaller and terraced, and with "egg and dart" decorative brickwork. Montrose is a small town in The Borders, famous for its Abbey. Was the builder evoking that splendid building? Or did he come from there? Or was it meant to evoke Sir Walter Scott, a very popular Victorian novelist and poet, whose home, Abbotsford, is close by? Scott's works found their way into housenames for example "Waverley" in Rodney Road. Or was it simply the builder's surname?



Montrose Gardens has a passage which goes under a house, providing a southern pedestrian exit. Was this for the convenience of residents or, as I suspect, necessary to preserve a right of way?



Hay! I May Have (partially) Solved This One!

Suburban roads tend to be named rather unimaginatively, sometimes after places their inhabitants would rather be, sometimes after plants, and sometimes - most egregiously in my view - after local politicians vainly seeking immortality. There are honourable exceptions: those

named for our local VC winners come to mind as does the rather imaginative Painters' Estate. But there is one, in the very south of our area, which intrigued me. It is a short road that links two of the longest roads in our area, Leyfield and Highdown: it is called Lady Hay. Simply that: no "Road" or "Street" has been appended. There, among the prosaically-named, was this curious anomaly. Who was Lady Hay?



It often gives me pause for thought that one of the Wright Brothers, pioneers of powered flight, had lived long enough to have met Neil Armstrong after his moon landing: what a conversation they would have had! Alas, it didn't happen. But it throws into sharp focus the technological strides made in aviation and rocketry during the first sixty or so years of the last century. Major driver were the two World Wars. I've already alluded to our local VC heroes of these World Wars. But between the two Wars, there were pioneers of flight - Alcock and Brown's first transatlantic flight, the follow-up solo flight by Lindburg come to mind - and some of these received special attention by the press: the aviatrixes. The combination of glamour and sheer daredevil was irresistible. We've all heard of Amy Johnston, of course, but I'd not heard of Lady Hay. Not all glamorous ladies who flew were pilots, however: some were passengers.

Lady Hay was born Grace Marguerite Lethbridge in Ireland in 1895. She was the eldest daughter of Sydney Thomas Lethbridge, managing director of Spratt's, the dog food company. In 1920, aged twenty five, she married Sir Robert Hay Drummond-Hay, almost fifty years her senior, and became Grace Marguerite, Lady Hay Drummond-Hay. Her husband died six years later. By profession, she was a journalist and wrote articles about her glamorous adventures in the air for American publications. She was not herself an aviatrix but she did have a singular claim to fame. She was the first woman to circumnavigate the world by air. She did this in 1929 in the eponymous Graf Zeppelin, the sole woman among its 20 passengers. Now famous, her adventurous life continued and this beautiful, intelligent woman covered wars in Abyssinia and Manchuria for Randolph Hearst's newspapers. During World War Two, she was interned in a Japanese camp in the Philippines until being repatriated to America in 1943. She died in 1946: at her funeral a precious gem given to her by Emperor Haile Selassie was placed on her corpse.

Her ashes were returned to Britain. But I can find no connection between her and our area. So, the mystery is this: was there one? Or was the road named merely on the whim of an admiring builder?

Doing The Lambeth Walk

Our pavements and roads are strewn with a wide variety of metal covers giving access to water stopcocks, sewerage pipes, gas and electricity supplies, and, most recent of all, cables for broadband connection. Most water stopcocks now have "Thames Water" or simply "Water" on them. There remain many older, smaller ones with "MWB" (Metropolitan Water Board) on them. But the one I found, the only example I've so far seen, is different. It has "Lambeth Water Wks" on it and I discovered it in the pavement towards the A3 end of Albert Road.



"Lambeth"? But then I recalled the story of Dr John Snow, the founder of epidemiology. The London of the 19C was plagued with deadly cholera: indeed, Prince Albert, Consort of Queen Victoria, had died of it. The prevailing theory was that it was caused by bad air - miasma - and the heavy drape curtains of Victorian houses were a vain attempt at self-protection from it. In those days, a few streets would share a lever-action public water pump which drew water up from a depth. Arrangements for the disposal of sewage were primitive, often a cesspit. Sometimes the content of the latter leaked and found its way into the water being pumped for drinking, cooking and washing. Water for such purposes was, however, in some cases pumped from the Thames. The further upstream it was drawn off, the cleaner it would be.

Snow conducted the world's first epidemiological study. It was quite simple but revolutionary in its effect. In a small patch of Soho, it happened that some streets took water from a parish pump while others were supplied by water from the Thames. He recorded cases of cholera and was able to demonstrate the much higher incidence among households that used the parish pump. Whatever was causing cholera was waterborne. This finding paved the way for a huge

increase in the infrastructure required to collect, filter and pump water from the Thames far upstream of London. Seething Wells was a major part of that initiative and it was constructed and run by the Lambeth Water Works. Presumably they also supplied at least part of our area. So there's an albeit tenuous link between our area and the founding of epistemology, a science so important to us today. The mystery is whether any other such stopcocks survive in our area. And what will happen to it when the one I found is inevitably replaced.

Ban Rock 'n' Roll!

Another momentary mystery was coming across this patented "Ner Roc" cover in the road: you'll find many like it on our streets. Rather like the music fan who, on hearing the music of "The Lone Ranger" TV series, immediately thinks of Rossini, when I read this cover, I immediately thought of the voyages of Sinbad and his encounter with a gigantic bird, the Roc, which could pick up an elephant in its claws and fly off with it. The legend no doubt arose from the encounters of Arab seamen with the so-called Elephant Bird of Madagascar, a tall and bulky flightless bird that was hunted to extinction.



But I swiftly realised that "Roc" was ad-speak for "rock" as in a rocking chair. So this cover was designed not to rock when a vehicle drove over it. But how? Simple: it employs the principle of the milkmaid's stool (her seating equipment that is...). The cover is supported on only three points and so, like the milkmaid's three-legged stool, doesn't rock. Having noticed that one, I kept an eye open for similar three-point support. I soon found them. The older ones were triangular and had similar names: I found "Non Rock" and "Kanot Roc".

But some, more modern ones, were less obvious: very often an apparently simple rectangular cover was in fact comprised of two triangular sections as a careful examination of these pics will show.



One of these is called "Silent Knight" so preserving the tradition of witty names. ! "Pam" with a bridge which you'll see on one of them, is the logo of a French firm that has its drain covers in over a thousand cities world-wide.

The same triangle principle is applied to some road-drain covers but, for some reason, the idea seems to have taken a long time to percolate through to their design. While the division into triangles is usually obvious, some such drain covers are much harder to spot!



But what's the mystery? Well, I also came across six-sided covers and cannot see what advantage accrues to that shape yet I'm sure that it's not named the "CHALLENGER" for nothing.



"It's disgusting!"

Oh, how often I've said that about the discarded chewing-gum I've seen trodden into so many of our pavements! So much of it, in fact, that its prevalence puzzled me so I investigated further. I discovered that the "chewing-gum" is in fact a lichen, *Lecanora muralis*, which is found all over the world.



LOOK UP!

Crenelated Georgian

Elm Road has a pair of houses that are very different from others in the road and, indeed, within our area. They look Georgian, the low-pitched roofs an indicator, but Georgian-inspired would be a better description. But why are their porches crenelated? They are out of keeping with the rest of the structure. Most peculiar!



Canine Conundrum

Not far distant, high on a house in Elm Road you'll see a small, black, shiny patch. On closer examination it'll be seen to be a metal dog. Why is it there? A beloved pet remembered? And how long has it been there? A mystery!



Off-Line

On the south side of Beaconsfield Road is a short terrace of houses that are offset from one another, thus giving rise to a saw-tooth effect. My speculation is that it probably has something to do with the builder wanting to make full use of a plot that was not rectangular but there might be some other explanation. It's a mystery to me!



Man Of Mystery (with apologies to The Shadows)

At the north end of Poplar Road are three houses, a semidetached pair and on one house of a pair opposite, each decorated on the keystones above their first floor windows with the identical head of a bearded, smiling man who appears to be wearing a beret.



I've not seen him elsewhere locally but, on checking my vast archive of pics I've taken over the years, I found him on a rather smart house...in Paddington! And he was not alone as he had a companion on an adjacent window of the house, the same face but with a different expression! What kind of chap is he meant to represent? I thought perhaps a seagoing fisherman. And how did he come to be on these particular houses some ten miles apart? A mystery!

Fancy that!

At the other end of Poplar Road, hidden behind a hedge, is this doorway. It's remarkably fancy for an otherwise ordinary suburban house. Why is it there? How long has it been there? Mysteries!



An Angel Among Us?

Another mysterious head! What of this angelic face on a house in Rodney Road? Unlike the rather stiff, leafy capitals we see elsewhere, this has an air of grace and refinement. I've seen nothing like it elsewhere in our area. Was it a special request of the original purchaser? Does it represent or commemorate a particular individual? A mystery!



Case(ment) Solved

In Cambridge Road, I saw this oriel window, the underside of which was beautifully decorated in plaster. I'd not seen its like elsewhere. There was also a simple but attractive bowl of fruit. But it did not remain a mystery long as a woman emerged from a neighbouring house, politely curious as to why I was taking photographs. I responded with equal civility and we engaged in conversation. It seems I had been looking at the work of the present owner, an artist named Peter, who, she assured me was "a lovely man".



Devoted

Nearby, inset into a house, is this small, dish-shaped piece of sculpture of three boys apparently at their religious devotions? Who is it by? When was it placed there? And why? Mysteries all!



Closing Time?

Was this house in Cambridge Road once a pub? Or perhaps a shop? Or was this area high on the corner a place where the name of the house was painted? It's odd that the delicate decoration still remains: it has the freshness of good maintenance, too. But whatever else was once written there has gone. I feel sure that a long-term resident or the Society's members will know the answer to this mystery.



Anonymous Architect

Not far away is a house with an unique frontage. Architects, like artists, tend to sign their work. But generally you wouldn't expect to find such a signature on a humble suburban terraced house. But here is an exception. While the date is clear, the letters are not: they may even be incomplete. The facade of the house is very unusual but clearly the architect was proud of his work. But who was he? It's a mystery!



Retail Remnant

Now stroll with me down Northcote Road. The first of my mysteries there lies at the junction with Elm Road where we see what appears to be the remains of a shop-front. It consists of two vertical wooden panels, one now plain, the other with an elaborately carved top. My guess is that some readers will remember and be able to identify the former shop. But the mystery is this: why were these two pieces of wood left in situ?



What's In A Name?

The naming of houses has long been popular. These days, the owner tends to name them, often after a plant in the garden or with some weak wit: "Dunroamin" comes to mind. But in Victorian and Edwardian times, the developer or builder - often the same person - would name a house, often placing the name either on a plaque high up on a wall or, later in this trend, in the glass in the front doorway. Such names are usually sentimental or related to plants or holiday places.

But there are some in Northcote Road that have an element of mystery. One such is "Willie's Cottages". Who was Willie? The builder? His father? Or son? A mystery!



It's All Greek To Me

And what about "Eudora Villas" nearby? Eudora is of Greek origin (the prefix "eu" denotes "good" as in euphemism (good expression), euthanasia (good death), eulogy (good words) etc while "dora" comes from "doron" which means "gift" (as in Theodora (god's gift)). In Greek mythology, she was one of the seven nymphs, sisters known as the Hyades. They were eventually placed in the sky as stars: look up at night and you'll see them, a V-shaped cluster in the head of the constellation of Taurus. They are the nearest open star-cluster to us, a mere 153 light-years away! There are in fact hundreds of stars in the cluster but only seven are visible to the naked eye. But look for Taurus only in Winter and Spring as it doesn't rise during the rest of the year. (Note that these are not "the seven stars in the sky" of "Green Grow The Rushes, O!": those are the much brighter Pleiades, another group of Greek nymphs). But who was this modern Eudora?

A clue might lie in the name on a nearby pair of houses, "Myrtle Cottages", where the name is set in a plaque of the same design so presumably by the same builder. Were Eudora and Myrtle his wife and daughter? Or perhaps two daughters? A mystery!



Michigan Mystery

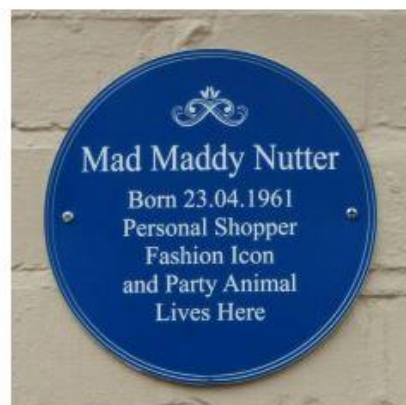
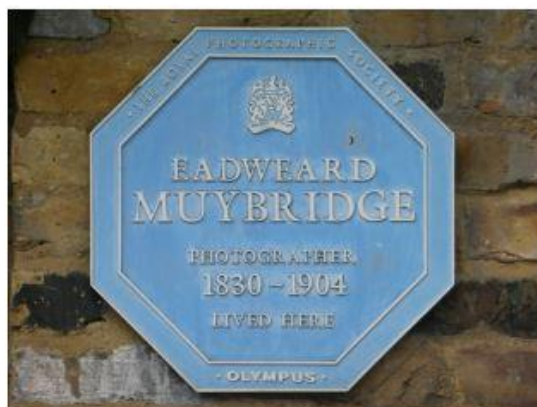
And what of the names on this semidetached pair of houses. "Monroe": it sounds Scottish but what an odd name for a house. The mystery deepens when we look at the name of the other house in the pair: "Detroit". Detroit? Mo-Town? The car-building capital of America? I can find no other Detroit, (I was spurred to do this because a few years ago on holiday in Mull, we came across a hamlet called "Calgary": the Canadian city was founded by emigres from there). But, no: just one Detroit, taking its name from the French for a "strait" which runs into Lake Erie. So had our builder once worked in Detroit?

And what of Monroe? Could there be an American connection? There is a Monroe City 25 miles south of Detroit and it is the largest city in Monroe County. Could that be the link? Another possibility came to mind: two Americans named Monroe. The house was built too early to be a homage to the film star but the other Monroe was a possibility. President Monroe gave rise to a famous doctrine of American foreign policy. Under the Monroe Doctrine, the USA reserves the self-given right to involve itself in the affairs of nearby countries if it feels its security is at risk. Was our builder an admirer of that President? Or was it simply that the builder's surname was Monroe? A mystery!



Peaches On Toast

For many years, there has been a desire to record the residence of an illustrious resident by attaching a plaque to a house. Sometimes these are by special groups, as in the case of the Muybridge plaque in Liverpool Road, and sometimes an individual will erect his own plaque as for example this amusing example I found in Worcester Park.



But by far the most prestigious plaques are those erected by English Heritage: we have just one in our area. As you walk past New Victoria Hospital on Coombe Lane West, glance over the road where you'll see on a large house the only English Heritage blue plaque in Coombe and the Maldens. It records the relatively brief residence there of a singer I might describe as the Madonna of her day. Here lived Dame Nellie Melba.



She was an Australian opera singer, who, among other achievements, sang from Marconi's Chelmsford Works on 15 June 1920 in the first preannounced broadcast of public entertainment. And how many singers have had even one, let alone two, foodstuffs named after them: Peach Melba and Melba Toast?

Born Helen Porter Mitchell in 1861 in Melbourne, Australia, she was advised to take the name "Melba" (from Melbourne) because it sounded Italian and Italian opera singers, notably Adelina Patti, were the stars of the period. In due course, after failing to be a hit in London, she found success in performing in Paris and Brussels. Now an established star, she returned to London and, from 1888, was a resounding success here too. She continued to perform on the Continent and later in New York. She made frequent, professional visits to Australia. In 1909, she bought a property near Melbourne and extended the cottage that was already there. During the First World War, she raised about £100,000 for war charities, work recognised in 1918 by her being created a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Like Sinatra, she made many farewell concerts and, when she died in Australia in 1931, it was international news. Her

headstone was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and bears Mimi's farewell words in La Boheme: "Addio, senza rancor" (Farewell without bitterness). Such is her renown that she appears on the Australian \$100 banknote. Her cottage and its grounds are a memorial to her and open to the public. And its name: Coombe Cottage, after her rented house in our area.

The mystery? Why would anyone name a home after what I trust I've demonstrated in this paper is such an uninteresting place!