

# **Hampton Square Between The Wars**

**The Recollections of Reg East and George Wilding**

**Recorded and edited by Paul Rawkins and Mike Arnold-Gilliat**

**Barnes and Mortlake History Society**

## Life in Hampton Square between the Wars

Hampton Square was a concentration of mid-19thC 'two-up, two-down' terraced houses located on the plot of ground now occupied by the Sheen Lane Centre. The square was approached down a narrow lane bounded on one side by the Wheat Sheaf (public house) and a green grocer, Prestons, on the other. In the map below<sup>1</sup>, Hampton Square is delineated by William Street and Queen's Place with the Model Cottages running along its west side. Hampton Square was what we might today refer to as slum housing. By the outbreak of the Second World War areas like this were being condemned as uninhabitable and the residents of Hampton Square had already been relocated to new purpose built-housing at Chertsey Court on the newly constructed A316.



In 2008, Reg East and George Wilding, two erstwhile inhabitants of Hampton Square, kindly agreed to recount their memories of life in this community in the 1920s and 1930s. Reg was born at No. 53 Hampton Square in 1919; George arrived at No.36 a little later as the first of a number of foster children to the Hurrens. Reg recalls that there were nine mouths to feed in his family, all living in a 'two-up, two down', while it was not unusual to find two to three families living in one house. Whole generations had grown up in Hampton Square and lived cheek by jowl in the same street. George and Reg reeled off a host of immediate neighbours including the Mc Dermotts,

<sup>1</sup> This street plan is taken from The Godfrey Edition of Old Ordnance Survey Maps, London Sheet 97 for North Sheen, Mortlake and Kew Gardens in 1893.

Westerns, Snells, Penfolds and a Mrs Sculley, who was prone to throwing the contents of her chamber pot at some of her more disagreeable neighbours.

Hampton Square was a very close knit community: because everybody was so poor, people rarely ventured far from the square and intermarriage was common. As George recalled, 'people were terribly poor, nobody ever paid for anything; everything was on tick'. The main sources of employment were the council, the bus depot and Watney's brewery at Mortlake. George's foster father worked at Watney's for 40 years and brought home £3 a week in the 1920s. Reg's father was a home decorator; nicknamed 'Smacker', 'he could stretch a bit of paper just like that' and smack it on the wall said Reg. After a brief spell at United Dairies, Reg too would later try his hand at the family trade, before the war offered him an alternative occupation<sup>2</sup>.

Two pillars of the community were the Catholic priest, Father Burt, and Mr McCabe, the pawnbroker, whose establishment was situated on the north side of Mortlake High Street (note the traditional three balls in the picture opposite taken in 1910). Both administered in their own way to a common congregation. George and Reg both recollect trooping down to Mr McCabe every Monday morning with all their worldly goods and returning again on Friday or Saturday evening to 'buy them back' for the weekend. One such item that made this weekly pilgrimage was George's 'Sunday best' (suit and shoes) which had to be reclaimed on Saturday evening for a Sunday morning appearance at St Mary Magdalene's in Worplesdon Way.



Father Burt was a crusty old Irish priest who would harangue his congregation from the pulpit on Sundays and put 'the fear of God' into the 'no shows' on a Monday morning. For a number of his parishioners, however, his greatest service was pleading with the local magistrate for the release of their sons and husbands following drunken brawls at the Wheat Sheaf.



George and Reg recalled that Saturday night fights at the Wheat Sheaf were guaranteed entertainment. Apparently, a local magistrate was always on call and hapless wives and mothers would march down to the court just over the level crossing at Mortlake with

<sup>2</sup> By 1939 Reg was already a keen member of the TA (territorial army), based in 'signals' at Putney. He was 'called up' very early in the war and recalls spending his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday on the beaches at Dunkirk being 'strafed by Gerry'.

their rent book (as means of identity) and ‘half a crown’ for bail. Gambling also attracted the attention of the local constabulary (and notably one PC Richmond according to Reg) – one such popular pastime was ‘penny up the line’, where boys would ‘pitch and toss’ pennies against a wall on a street corner. To guard against unwanted intrusion, younger boys were posted as look-outs at the entrance to Hampton Square while their older siblings got down to business. On the odd occasion when an individual was caught, fines were met by a ‘whip round’, usually in pennies and ha’pennies from the other participants. Nonetheless, judging from the wry smiles on the faces of Reg and George, the Hampton Mission (adjacent to the Model Cottages) was only moderately successful in combating these wayward pastimes and was ultimately outlived by the Wheat Sheaf (which was demolished in 1962)<sup>3</sup>.

Day to day existence could be incredibly hard in Hampton Square. As a young boy, Reg recalled coming home from school on more than one occasion to find his mother in tears because she had no idea where the next meal was coming from. Nonetheless, people got by: most lived ‘on tick’, supplemented by the weekly visit to the pawn broker and raids on their gas meters. Reg noted that although there were banks in Sheen Lane and the Upper Richmond Road, nobody in Hampton Square had any reason to frequent them because nobody had any money. ‘Past their sell-by-date’ vegetables, fruit and meat off-cuts were staple fare for the residents of Hampton Square and George recalled frequent trips to the local branch of Zeiters to buy penny bags of day-old cakes and bread or a penn’orth of jam from Dawkins, the grocer.

Sheen Lane in the early 20thC could be likened to the class ladder with the poor living at the bottom and the rich at the top; still, both George and Reg remembered that there were ‘good people’ in the ‘big houses’ who were not above helping out those in Hampton Square. On the national stage, however, there was little love lost between the residents of Hampton Square and their political masters, particularly during the misery of the 1930s. Nonetheless, when a Colonel Gary (Conservative) drove into the Square in his Rolls Royce to canvass votes, George still recalled the enthusiasm with which everybody agreed to vote Tory in return for a ride in his car.

Some have argued that Hampton Square was over crowded and insanitary: Reg and George grudgingly conceded that this may have been the case. Most houses in Hampton Square had their own (outside) toilets and a copper bath hanging on the wall, but sanitation was basic and the rooms could be cold and damp. Incidents of TB were not uncommon. Hampton



Square never enjoyed the luxury of electricity and survived solely on gas for heat and lighting. Households cooked on ranges and boiled hot water in their coppers for family bath time. The

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<sup>3</sup> See page 101 in *Barnes and Mortlake Past* by Maisie Brown.

least welcome visitor was the rent collector who was invariably accompanied by a policeman knowing that his unpopularity preceded him and residents were not above pelting him with various projectiles.

Boys will be boys and money was short, so most entertainment outside of school hours was to be found on the street. Football was popular, punch ups with local gangs were not uncommon and swimming across the Thames to go scrumping in the orchards on Duke's Meadows (see picture on previous page) not infrequent. George's first memory of radio was of Bill Burton, the Hampton Square electronics whiz kid of his day, fixing up a crystal set so that they could hear Jo Johnson fighting in the World Boxing Championship from America. Although the motor car was well-established, young lads from the Square were still entranced by a coach-and-four that ran from Brighton to Hyde Park from time to time, breaking its journey at the Bull at Sheen to change horses.

Hampton Square was evacuated in 1936 and the community dispersed near and far. During the Second World War the derelict square was used for Civil Defence training exercises including by the Fire Auxiliary Services. While very few people now recall Hampton Square, George (pictured right) and Reg still live locally and hopefully the memories set down here and the longer tape recording that encapsulates them will add some colour to what was a very tight knit community in its time.

