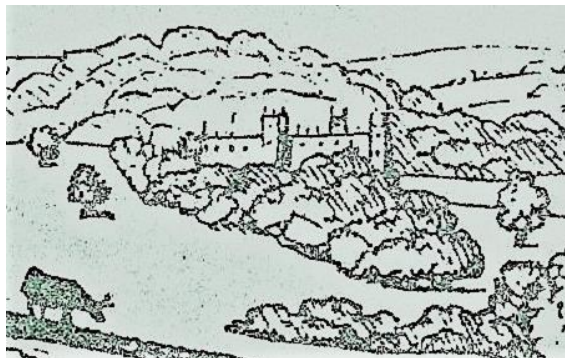


## The Wembley Park Story – Part 2

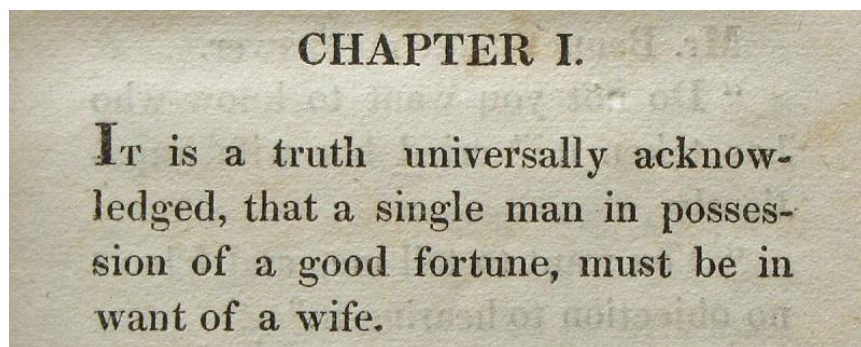
The first part of this story took us from Saxon times up to the “birth” of Wembley Park in 1793. If you missed it, “click” [here](#).



**1. Repton's sketch of his proposed mansion, in its parkland setting.** (Extract from a copy at Brent Archives)

Humphry Repton was landscaping the grounds of Wembley Park for Richard Page, but they disagreed over Repton's proposed “Gothic” designs for the mansion, which were never carried out. By 1795, Page had moved to Flambards, another mansion on Harrow Hill, that he inherited from Mary Herne. This had mature grounds, which had been laid out by Capability Brown around 1770.

When Richard Page died in 1803, his estate was valued at £400,000 (worth over £25 million now). He had never married, and his will left a “life interest” in his estate to his next eldest brother, Francis, and then down the male line. Francis Page did not marry either, nor had the next youngest of the five brothers, John, who died in 1801. The family seemed unaware of the “truth” which Jane Austen was writing about at that time!



**2. The opening line from an early edition of Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice".** (Image from the internet)

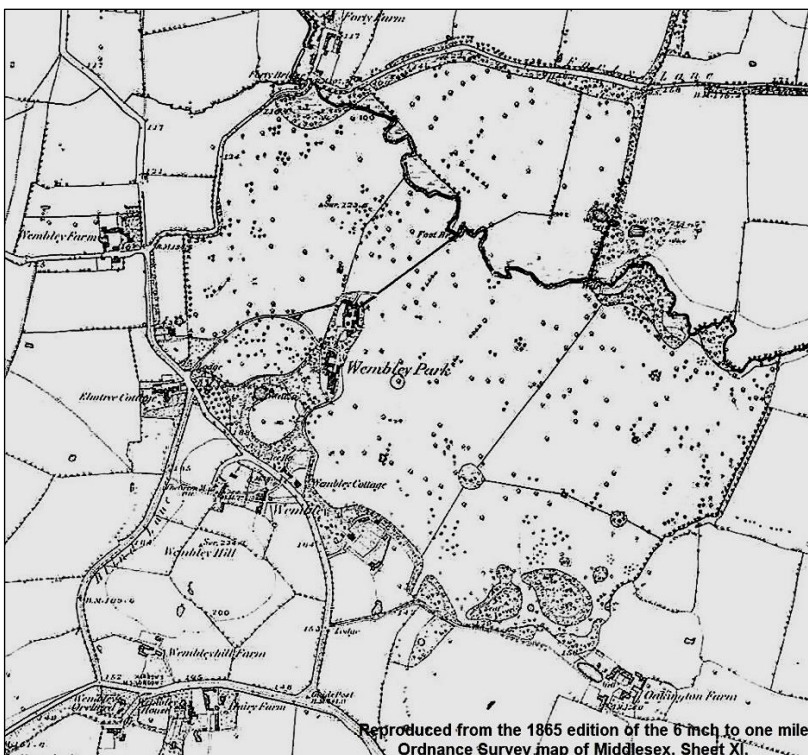
By 1809, Francis Page had sold Wembley Park to John Gray, a wealthy brandy merchant who was a Freeman of the City of London. However, as the Page family's Wembley Park legacy was to continue into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I need to finish their story. Francis died in 1810, and as he had no children, the Page estate passed to the fourth brother, William. In 1813, he and his surviving brother Henry put the management of their affairs into the hands of their solicitor, Francis Fladgate.

William Page died, without marrying, in 1824, so Henry Page inherited the estate. He had married in 1813, aged 55, but his wife died five years later, without leaving any children. Henry Young, who as a 14-year old clerk had witnessed William Page's will, had since married Fladgate's daughter and taken over the solicitor's business. Henry Page, who appears to have been feeble minded, and often drunk, allowed Young to draw up his will in 1825. When Henry Page died, four years later, the entire Page family fortune had been left to their solicitor!



**3. Wembley Park mansion, "The White House", photographed c.1880.** (Brent Archives – W.H.S. Colln,)

From 1811 onwards, John Gray did have the Wembley Park mansion modernised and enlarged, spending around £14,000 in the process. His home became known as the White House, because of its pale stucco finish, and he lived there until his death in 1828. Wembley Park passed to his son, Rev. John Edward Gray, although his father's will had said that the estate must be put up for sale. It was advertised for auction in 1834, as 'a beautiful demesne with 272 acres of rich meadow land and pasturage, including plantations', but it was not sold, and Rev. Gray and his family remained living there for the rest of his life.



**4. Wembley Park, from an 1865 Ordnance Survey map.** (from Brent Archives – maps collection)

The map above shows Wembley Park and its surrounding area in 1865. Apart from the small community around Wembley Hill, it was mainly farms, with two large Victorian houses along the Harrow Road. These had been built for wealthy men who liked to live in the country, but could take a train to the City from the London & Birmingham Railway's nearby Sudbury (for Wembley) Station [now Wembley Central], which had opened in 1844.

Wembley Park's farmland was managed for the Gray family by a bailiff, but there were no public paths across their estate, and they appear to have lived a quiet life. The area did attract some

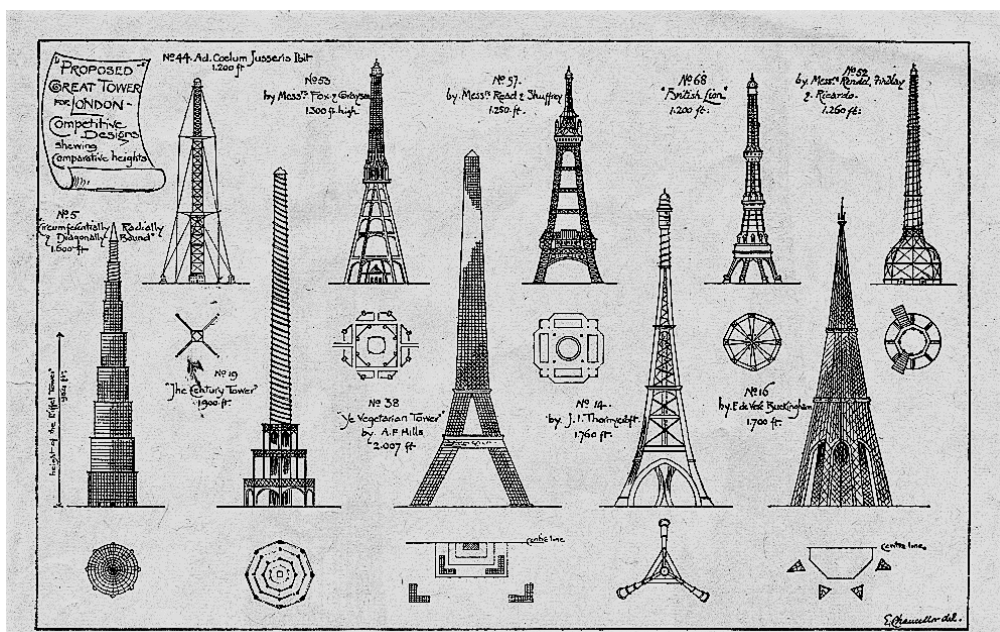
visitors, however. An 1837 guide described the “Green Man” as ‘a favourite Sunday resort for a respectable class of people.’ This popularity continued during Victoria’s reign, with its ‘panoramic view of the surrounding countryside, including the Metropolis and Windsor Castle.’ The picture of the inn below is the earliest known photograph of Wembley, taken in June 1862.



**5. The "Green Man", Wembley Hill, 1862.** (Wembley History Society Colln., Brent Archives online image 714)

In 1879, the Metropolitan Railway from Baker Street had reached Willesden Green, and the company wanted to extend their line. Rev. John Gray had little choice but to sell them a 47-acre strip of land across his estate, and the railway opened to Harrow in August 1880. Seven years later, Gray died, and as he had fathered nine children, his executors sold the Wembley Park estate in 1889, so the proceeds could be shared. It was bought by the Metropolitan Railway’s Chairman, Sir Edward Watkin, for £32,929 18s 7d.

Watkin’s dream was to build a railway from Manchester to Paris - one of his schemes managed to start building a tunnel under the English Channel in 1880! He had seen Eiffel’s new Tower in the French capital, and proposed to build an even taller one in London. His Tower Company leased 124 acres of Wembley Park in late 1889, for use as a pleasure ground, and a competition was organised to design the Wembley Tower that would be its centrepiece.

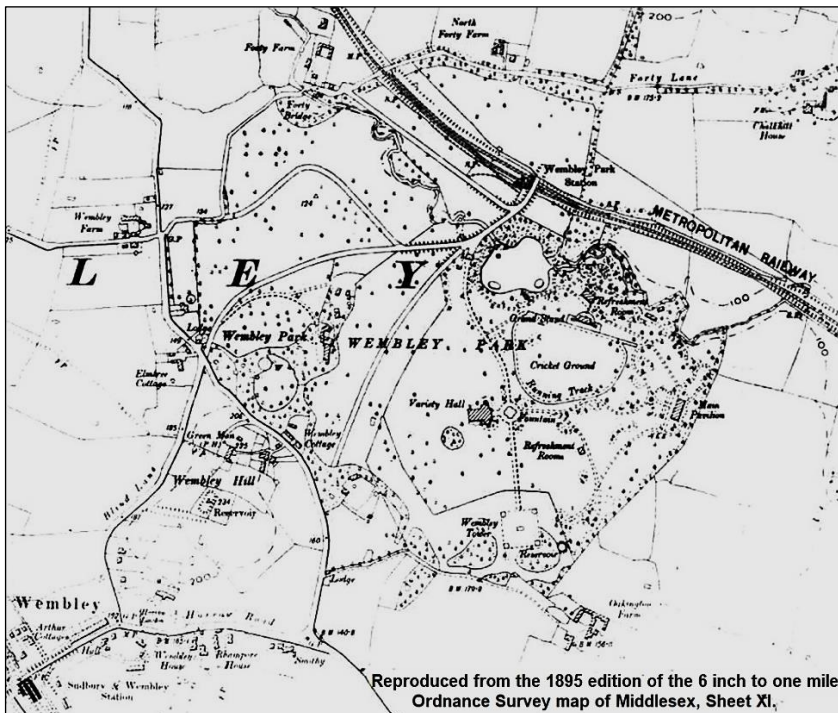


**6. Some of the tower designs from the 1890 competition.** (Brent Archives online image 4081)



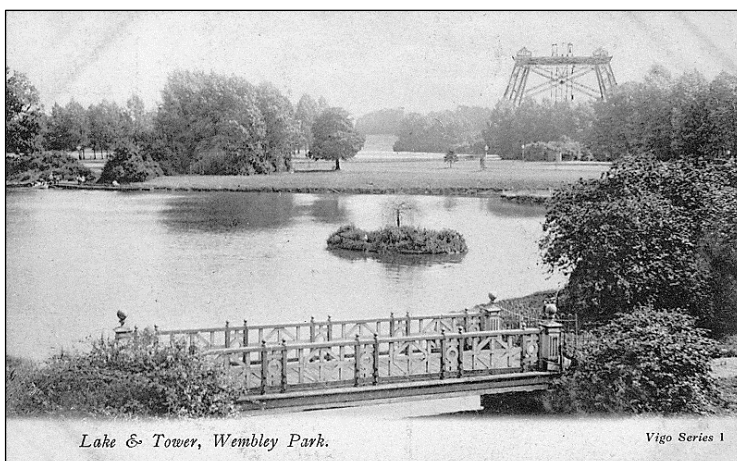
The tower had to be at least 1200 feet tall, and the first prize of 500 guineas attracted dozens of entries from Britain, Europe and North America. Although the prize was awarded to a British design, the judges thought that it needed some modification, to reduce its construction costs. When work began in 1892, the “winning” octagonal tower design ended up with just four legs, looking a lot like Monsieur Eiffel’s, but planned to be 150 feet higher.

While construction was underway on the tower, the rest of the pleasure ground was being laid out, including a large boating lake, a sports area and gardens. Watkin wanted those coming to enjoy the attractions to use his Metropolitan Railway, so a new station for Wembley Park was built. It was ready for when the pleasure ground opened in May 1894. The map below shows how Wembley Park looked then (compare it with thirty years earlier, above).



**7. A map showing Wembley Park and its surrounding area in 1895.** (from Brent Archives – maps collection)

It was May 1896 before the first stage of the tower, with a platform 155 feet above the hilltop, was opened to the public. That was as far as it got, owing to a shortage of funds and its feet starting to sink into the underlying clay. Other events to attract visitors included a cricket match against the Australian touring side in 1896, athletics and horse trotting races, and shows in the wooden variety hall, but attendances (120,000 in the 1895 season) were fewer than hoped.



**Figure 8. Postcard of the lake and tower, c.1900.** (Brent Archives online image 1662)



9. “Benny C”, winning a 10-mile trotting race at Wembley Park in 1902. (Brent Archives online image 7384)



10. A mandolin band at Wembley Park in 1904. (Brent Archives online image 9217)

Wembley Park received some unwelcome visitors in 1900, when a group of protestors tried to claim possession of the land. A Mrs Davey had read about the wealthy family who once owned it, and had persuaded “subscribers” to back her plan to recover “The Page Millions”, in return for a share of the reward that would be due.

In 1905, a court case, in the name of James Page, distantly related to Richard Page of Wembley Park, was filed against the Metropolitan Railway and Tower Company. It claimed he was the rightful heir, denied his inheritance because of fraud by Henry Young. The case was dismissed in 1906, as anyone who felt they should have inherited the Page estate could have claimed it in 1829, or soon after. The claim would also have failed because Francis Page had sold Wembley Park to John Gray, so that it was not part of the alleged fraud by the solicitor.

The viewing platform of the Tower remained open to the public until 1902, when the lifts were deemed to be unsafe. It had already been nicknamed “Watkin’s Folly”. Sir Edward had died the previous year, but not before one of his other railway companies, the Great Central, had



built a line alongside the Metropolitan, and planned a branch line from Neasden to Northolt. The photograph shows it being constructed, past the disused Tower.



**11. The Great Central Railway branch line under construction, c.1903.** (Brent Archives online image 9253)

The short life of the Wembley Park pleasure grounds was effectively over by 1906. The company running them even had to pay £1,200 to have the Tower dismantled, by Messrs Heenan and Froude who had built it. So what next for Wembley Park? The story will continue in Part 3, next weekend.

**Philip Grant,  
Wembley History Society, May 2020.**

This article was written for, and first published on, the “Wembley Matters” blog website, but anyone is free to share it on a “not for profit” basis. Our local history belongs to all of us!