Blackbird Farm, Kingsbury.

The site where Blackbird Farm stood is beside a trackway (now Blackbird Hill) that has probably existed for over 2,000 years. Iron Age migrants and Julius Caesar’s Roman legions may have passed by before Saxon settlers arrived in the area, naming the track Eldestrete (the old road) and using a length of it to mark the boundary between Kingsbury and the neighbouring parish of Harrow. Around AD1100 a church was built nearby (see the article “St Andrew’s Old Church, Kingsbury”), and it was at the junction with the lane (now Old Church Lane) to this church that the farm was later established.

We don’t know when there was first a farm here. There were at least five “villagers” cultivating small areas of land in this part of Kingsbury at the time of the Domesday Book in 1085, but old records suggest that many local inhabitants died during the Black Death plagues of the mid-14th century. About 100 years later, in 1442, there is a mention of what may have been a farm on this site, and when a detailed map of the parish was drawn in 1597 it clearly showed a property called Findens here, a group of buildings around a yard with a strip of land, just over an acre, attached. The large field behind it is shown as being leased to John Page, gentleman, by St Paul’s Cathedral (‘The Deane of Powles’), while the land on the opposite side of the main track was held by Eyan Chalkhill, who also had a watermill (marked “C”) on the River Brent. In 1640, Findens was a 12-acre smallholding.

An extract from the 1597 Hovenden Map, showing Findens and the surrounding area (note that north is on the right hand side, not at the top).
[Source and copyright: The Codrington Library, All Souls’ College, Oxford]

By the time of John Rocque’s map of 1745, there were farm buildings and orchards on both sides of Old Church Lane. These would come to be known as the upper and lower yards of Blackbird (or Blackbird Hill) Farm. Whereas the original farm, or smallholding, was probably growing a mixture of crops, mainly to support the farmer’s own family, by the mid-18th century the map shows most of the fields as pasture land. This was probably for raising livestock, some of which would be driven to London to help provide meat for the capital’s fast-growing population. By the early 19th century, many of Kingsbury’s fields were producing hay for the capital’s horses.

An extract from John Rocque’s 1745 map of London, showing the farm (unnamed) bottom centre.
[Source: Brent Archives]
In the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign, the farmer at Blackbird Farm was William Avis Warner. One of his sons, William Perkins Warner, who grew up here and trained as a butcher before serving in the army’s Commissariat Department during the Crimean War, became famous as the landlord of the Welsh Harp Inn from 1858 until his death in 1889 (see the article “The Welsh Harp Reservoir”). The earliest photographs of the farm date from 1880, by around which time the farm was mainly being used for dairy cattle. The upper yard contained the farmhouse and various outbuildings, while the lower yard had housing for farm workers and the main cow sheds.

Blackbird Farm House in the upper yard, c. 1880.
[Source: Brent Archives]

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Old Church Lane, with the lower yard and cottages, c. 1880.
[Source: Brent Archives]

Years later, one elderly local resident recalled the story that Blackbird Farm had delivered milk to Buckingham Palace on a daily basis, ‘until the day that Queen Victoria saw her churn on the same cart as a load of manure’.

Kingsbury Lane (Blackbird Hill) and Blackbird Farm’s lower yard in 1897.
[Photograph courtesy of Geoffrey Hewlett]

By the start of the First World War in 1914, Thomas Noad was the farmer here. The area around Blackbird Farm was still rural, as was much of Kingsbury, even though it was classed as an Urban District for local government purposes, with Mr Noad serving as one of the Councillors. The map (aside) which shows this was surveyed in 1913, although not published until 1920.

Reproduced from the 1920 edition of the Ordnance Survey 6 inch to one mile map of Middlesex, Sheet XI. [Source: Brent Archives]
Thomas Noad died in 1915, at the early age of 54, and like generations of farmers before him was buried in the nearby churchyard. His son took over as tenant of Blackbird Farm, looking after the dairy herd with the help of a cowman, Walter Cook, who lived in one of the lower yard cottages. It appeared that things would continue much as they had before, but major changes were soon to occur.

**The Noad family grave in Old St Andrew’s churchyard.**
[Photograph by Philip Grant, December 2010]

In 1921, the disused pleasure grounds at Wembley Park were chosen as the site for the British Empire Exhibition. Kingsbury Lane was soon widened, and its steep gradient up from the river evened out, to become a modern highway with a tarmac surface. Church Lane was also widened, with a new section built (Tudor Gardens) to provide a better connection to Forty Lane, and cut out the winding narrow stretch which ended at the farm. These improved road connections, as well as the publicity about the area resulting from the Exhibition, which was to open in 1924, attracted the attention of property developers. When foot and mouth disease broke out at Blackbird Farm in 1923, and all of the cows had to be shot, that was the end of it as a working farm. Although the Noad family continued to live in the farmhouse, the rest of the land was sold off for housing. The 1924 edition of the “Metroland” brochure already saw an advertisement for the “Kingsbury Hill Estate” (Blackbird Farm).

**The advertisement from the 1924 edition of “Metroland”.**
[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

Houses were soon being built on the farm’s former fields, in new roads like Queens Walk and Birchen Grove, as well as along the improved existing roads.

By 1936, the buildings on the lower yard had been demolished, and replaced by a parade of shops in the half-timbered mock-Tudor style so popular at the time. The old farmhouse itself had been “dressed-up” with applied timber beams, and remained as a picturesque relic of Kingsbury’s rural past, housing tea rooms run by Mrs Elizabeth Noad, while a timber outbuilding at the corner of the farmyard was used as a boot repair shop by Thomas Laney.

**A sketch of Blackbird Farm in January 1927,**
by local amateur artist, L. Hill.
[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]
In the late 1930’s the brewers, Truman Hanbury Buxton, submitted plans to build a public house on the site of Blackbird Farm. The outbreak of war in 1939 meant that the idea was not pursued then, but fresh proposals were put forward in the early 1950’s. The recently formed Wembley History Society was among the objectors wishing to see the farmhouse retained and reused. It also hoped to carry out some archaeological work at the site, but there is no record of what was found if any such work went ahead. The farmhouse was demolished in 1955, with “The Blackbirds” public house built around 1957.

A cutting from the “Wembley News”, 15 January 1953, about the controversy over the future of Blackbird Farm, with its yard then used by a motor trader.
[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

“The Blackbirds” proved to be a popular pub with both local people and with visitors coming to Wembley for football matches. However, by the time the old Wembley Stadium closed in 2000, other leisure activities meant that the traditional English public house was going out of fashion. A “re-branding” in the mid-2000’s as an Irish-themed pub, the “Blarney Stone”, kept the hostelry on Blackbird Hill in business for a few more years, but by 2010 a planning application was submitted to redevelop the site for a block of flats.

“The Blackbirds” pub sign beside Blackbird Hill in 1973 >
[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Colln.]

< The “Blarney Stone”.
[Photograph by Philip Grant, July 2009]

Planning permission for the proposed development was given by Brent Council in March 2011, but one of the conditions for this was that there should be a proper archaeological excavation of the part of the Blackbird Farm site which had not been disturbed when the pub was built. The “Blarney Stone” has since been demolished, and the excavation by Archaeology South-East is due to take place shortly. If anything of interest about the history of the site is uncovered, this article will be updated!

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