

“Local History and an Interview: Wandsworth, 1851 - 2005”

Until it was hacked apart and turned into something else, my favourite local pub was the County Arms in Trinity Road, on the edge of Wandsworth Common and barely a hundred yards from Wandsworth Prison—a halfway house between one of the nicest open spaces in south-west London and one of its grimmest closed ones.

Those unsettling incongruities and strange openings into the past which the suburbs can be good at affording are rich in this area. Just along Trinity Road from the County Arms is the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum, a vast, outlandish building, all pinnacled turrets and steep gables, now converted into apartments and studios. Its original purpose was to house the daughters of servicemen killed in the Crimean War. Its grotesque grandeur, no doubt designed to be edifying, could only have accentuated the misery of being an impoverished orphan, and the girls whose fathers had died so patriotically endured an awful regime. Every morning, heads shaved against lice, they had to muster in the courtyard to be hosed down with cold water.

During the First World War the Asylum became a military hospital, a curious but pressing change of use. In the Second World War it was an internment camp and clearing centre for aliens and refugees, which meant it was also an interrogation centre for suspected spies. One of Wandsworth Prison's wartime

functions, meanwhile, was to receive spies for execution, under the Treachery Act of 1940.

The conversion of the Asylum to a large-scale hospital in 1914–18 must have particularly marked local memories. The hospital's dead lie buried in Earlsfield Cemetery, in Magdalen Road off Trinity Road, where, sprinkled among the greyly weathered, ornate civilian memorials, are many simple, pristine-white military gravestones—serial number, rank and name—like those in the great cemeteries in Belgium and France.

I don't have to walk very far from home to feel in close touch with some of the more sombre aspects of my country's history, or of its continuing sociology. Wandsworth Prison remains one of the largest and most forbidding prisons in the land. It kept a working gallows well into the 1990s, capital punishment still being applicable for treason and mutiny. The Pierreponts, for whom hanging was a family vocation, dispatched in their time over eighty Wandsworth inmates. 'Lord Haw-Haw' (William Joyce) was hanged here, as was Derek Bentley, in 1953, who should never have been hanged at all. Ronnie Kray was once a prisoner; so was Ronnie Biggs, the train robber, who escaped and sent a message on a postcard from Rio: 'Oh to be in Wandsworth.'

So too, briefly in 1895, was Oscar Wilde. In *De Profundis* he wrote that 'while I was in Wandsworth Prison I longed to die. It was my one desire.' During his transfer to Reading Gaol he was made to stand for half an hour in his prisoner's clothes and handcuffs on a central platform at nearby Clapham Junction—'Britain's Busiest Railway Station', as it proclaims itself—while crowds of rail-users gathered to mock and jeer. Let no author suppose there isn't a worse fate than their own.

The prison opened in 1851 as the Surrey House of Correction. It was Surrey, not London, then. The truth is that as the first

railways enabled London to spread quickly into the land around it, part of the initial impetus went into finding out-of-the-way sites for its unfortunates: prisons, orphanages, asylums (in the old, bad sense) and infirmaries. The terraces and villas of those seeking leafy respite from the city came soon afterwards, in some areas only to share the space with an immured underclass.

The historical ambiguities live on: homes next to former Homes; former Homes being converted into homes. Parts of Wandsworth—but only parts—have now become intensely moneyfied, which only deepens some of the dichotomies. When does local history ever easily get divided from national history? As a window on a country's soul, the place where I've lived now for over twenty-five years doesn't bear much scrutiny at all.

But I like Wandsworth for at least two reasons. First, it's on a river, by which I don't mean the Thames, though it's on that too. Wandsworth Bridge is one of the least attractive of the London bridges and the views from it (go there to see the ugliness of new 'luxury' riverside developments) don't make you pause. I mean the delightfully named Wandle, which flows north from its beginnings in Surrey to meet the Thames at Wandsworth. One of its original sources was in South Croydon. When I was a boy, representing my South Croydon primary school, I used to play cricket and football in Wandle Park. The river has threaded itself through my life.

When David Profumo and I wrote our introduction to *The Magic Wheel* we gave due place to the Wandle. It's very likely that the poet Donne once fished it. Nelson certainly did, despite having only one arm, when he lived (scandalously, with Lady Hamilton) near its banks at Merton. In the early nineteenth century Sir Humphry Davy, in his *Salmonia: Or Days of Fly Fishing*, sang its praises; and it's ironic that Davy, with his links—as a great

chemist and as the inventor of the miner's lamp—to the industrial world, should have extolled a water soon to fall literally foul of industry.

Writing in the 1860s, in *The Crown of Wild Olive*, John Ruskin (who, with a Croydon mother, was something of a Croydon boy too) complained that, 'Twenty years ago, there was no lovelier piece of lowland scenery in South England, nor any more pathetic, in the world, by its expression of sweet human character and life, than that immediately bordering on the sources of the Wandel.' And he was decrying only the start of a process. The picture shown on page 379 was painted also in the 1860s and—with its central dead tree, chimney in the background and ambiguous title—is caught between nostalgia and prophecy.

Until quite recently the Wandle was a filthy and wretched river: polluted first by nineteenth-century mills—making anything from snuff to gunpowder—then by twentieth-century industry and by a general disrespect that it still suffers. In Wandsworth it is obliged to tunnel, like Acheron, under the central shopping mall, under branches of Waitrose, Argos, Superdrug and Boots, before re-emerging beyond the High Street, by the old Young's Brewery, for its final grubby lap to the Thames. It's a general dumping zone. In its never-deep waters I've seen mattresses, fridges and whole rusting motorbikes.

But it remains that marvellous thing, a river that rises through chalk. Though polluted, it runs persistently clear and with a millwheel-driving vigour. Green tresses of weed sway in its current, even just before it slips from sight in Wandsworth. Sunlight catches patches of tawny gravel on its bed. It's possible to look at it through half-closed eyes and see again what it once must have been: the quintessential dream of a trout stream.

All the reports are that the Wandle is getting cleaner, that it

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supports again a few plucky trout. Rivers are supreme survivors, they live vastly longer than we do and, by and large, they can see off a lot of human abuse. But I feel for the Wandle as for some sick, if recovering, child. It still elicits some of Ruskin's lost-paradise sentiment. It's a small river, scarcely ten miles long. For all that it's known and endured, there remains something infant, innocent about its unsuppressed assertion of its right to be there. Its presence, in its sleeve of vegetation, amid so much brick and concrete, is a perpetual, heart-tugging surprise.

I was asked once in an interview what I would like to do if I wasn't a writer: a challenging if entirely theoretical question. I said I'd like to have charge of a stretch of river, maybe just two hundred yards or so, I'd like to be a river-keeper. I recently found this remark worked, with due acknowledgement, into the fabric of a new novel by Michael Ondaatje: a special instance of how things you say in interviews can (not always so pleasantly) come back at you. It had been a rather capricious answer to a fairly capricious question, but such questions sometimes find you out. Rivers get to me, they get in my veins. I don't see why they don't get to everyone.

It's not quite the same primordial thing, but I'm also very fond of Wandsworth Common. I live just a hundred yards from it and I walk across it or by it almost every day. Unlike the exposed and sometimes windswept prairie of Clapham Common, half a mile to the east, it has an intricacy, a sheltering fragmentedness, even bits of sylvan semi-rusticity. When it was still a true common, providing common grazing land, Thomas Hardy, turning forty, lived for a while on its fringes, at 172 Trinity Road. He must have walked now and then over the common, perhaps mulling over some work-in-progress or work-to-be. He may have popped into the County Arms. *The Return of the Native* came out when he'd

just moved here. It's a bizarre elision: Wandsworth Common and Egdon Heath.

How do you achieve that tingling sense of palpable contact with a writer you would otherwise know only through their work? You don't associate Hardy at all with the London suburbs, but he wrote two novels, *The Trumpet Major* and *A Laodicean*, while living in the area, and it's not so far-fetched to suppose that it was on the common that he had his first premonitions of the Wessex settings of some of his later books. Those trees that E. M. Forster said *The Woodlanders* 'rustles with', were they really the trees alongside Trinity Road?

If that was at all how Hardy's mind worked, then it chimes with my own experience. It may just be hindsight, but I suspect that the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum might have something to do with Kessling Hall, the Norfolk country house turned Great War convalescence home in *Waterland*; or with other 'homes' that feature in my work. Opposite the Asylum, on the other side of a railway line, there still stands, remarkably, a wooden windmill, minus its sails. The road running by is Windmill Road. I'm not sure that this windmill wasn't the origin of the ruined one in *Waterland* where the young Tom Crick and Mary Metcalf have their trysts. At least it enabled me to check out how big the base of a windmill is and to confirm that the hollow stump of a disused windmill might be a handy place for clandestine sex. *Waterland* also features a brewery, with a chimney-cum-clock-tower destined, halfway through the novel, spectacularly to collapse. One day, not trusting to guesswork, I phoned up Young's Brewery to ask the height of its chimney.

I'm not sure, either, that I'd have written *The Light of Day*, a novel centrally featuring a prison, if I didn't so frequently pass by a prison myself. I'm quite often stopped by people asking the way

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there: new visitors going to see someone inside. I'm sometimes stopped by people with more disoriented questions: 'Which way is King's Cross?' They're prisoners who've just been let out.

Until its recent evisceration, I was very fond of the nearby County Arms, a big barn of a pub divided up into a set of inviting separate enclaves by a wealth of old glinting mahogany and delicately engraved glass panels. All of this was ripped out (perhaps to be sold on as decor for somewhere else) and replaced by ersatz stuff designed, one supposes, to evoke the 'feel' of an old pub. Warders from the prison used to drink regularly in the County, their belts draped with chains. I don't know if they do any more, but the refurbished 'gents' has become a little museum of prison memorabilia: you can read a framed certificate of execution while taking a leak.

Oddly, not long after the County metamorphosed, the high modern brick wall that used to hide the entrance to the prison, and must have had some serious material purpose, was taken down, so that you can now behold the original fortress-like frontage in all its stern glory. It was as if the prison itself—a fully working and full-to-bulging prison—had decided to come out as a piece of heritage.

But this is perhaps the way it's always been. History gets turned, sometimes very quickly, into furniture. The prison, or House of Correction, opened in 1851 (the same year that the Crystal Palace opened for the Great Exhibition). The County Arms (they couldn't quite call it 'The Jailers' Arms') was built in 1852. Then there was a Crimean War. Then the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum was built, and the row of tiny, charming, rose-wreathed cottages that still stands between the pub and the prison got named Alma Terrace, after a battle by the Black Sea.

I often chose the County as a handy and congenial spot for

interviews: anything from the *South London Press* to the *Guardian*, to meeting emissaries from foreign literary magazines, of whom it was asking a lot that they find their way to Wandsworth. The first interview I gave there was when *Waterland* was published in 1983. Most of that novel was written (incongruously enough) in Balham, but it was finished soon after moving to my present house, which at the time was little better than a ruin. The room in which I wrote the final chapters, which would become the 'study' in which I'm writing now, was stripped back to floorboards and bare bricks and reeked of dry-rot fluid. Rather less pleasant than a prison cell.

The interview that follows has for me the sentimental distinction of being the last one I gave in the old venue. I must have been making only hesitant inroads into the writing of *Tomorrow*, since the novel-in-progress referred to as involving fifty per cent a male narrator and fifty per cent a female narrator was to get eclipsed by one that would be a hundred per cent female.

The author interview is now a routine tool of the publishing process, one of the ways in which writers have emerged from the background in which they mostly existed when I began writing, and one of the ways in which readers may feel they can get to know better the person behind the book. How effective that process is I've no idea. In practice, most interviews occur around a book's publication and are driven by journalistic and promotional pressures. Putting it crudely, they're a system which fills spaces in newspapers and provides publishers with free advertising. The author, who may not have spoken to the press for some time, will suddenly have a series of media encounters and come out of it feeling, at worst, that they've been merely put through a process, or else feeling frustrated that they were only just getting into their stride, that they never said the things they meant to say or they

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said things they hadn't meant to say. What goes on the record can be highly subject to mood and chance.

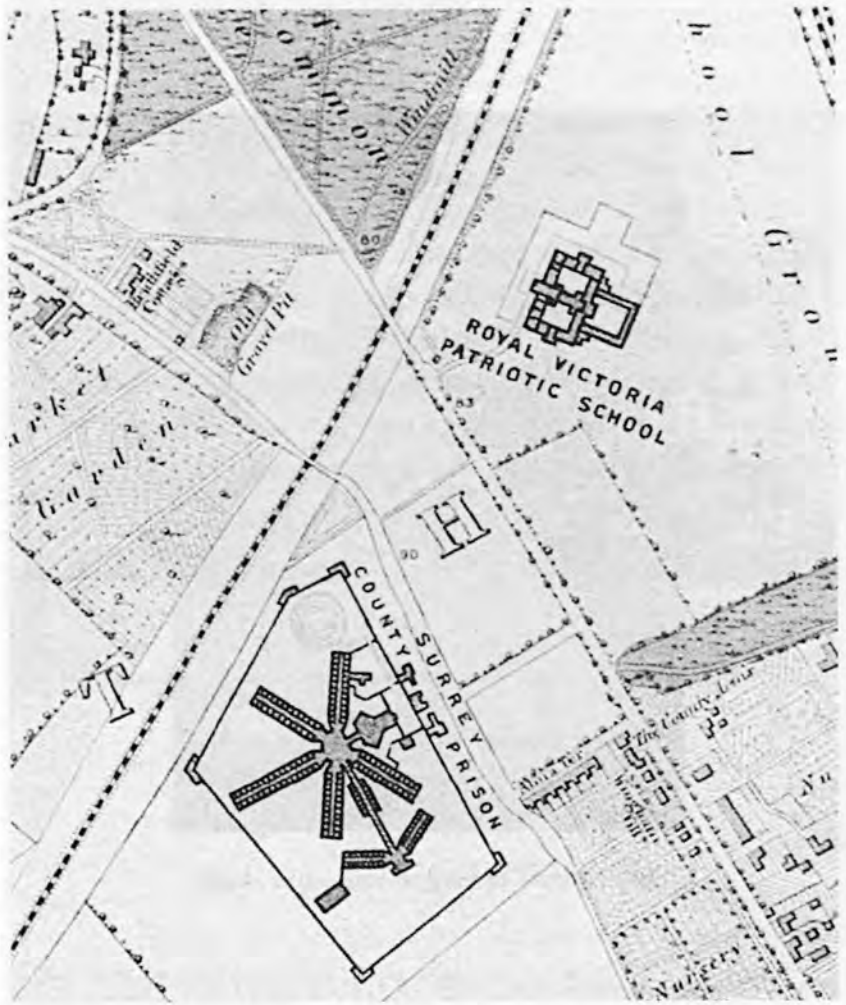
I wonder how important these interviews really are. They've become such a currency that they're assumed to fulfil a need. Did Hardy give interviews? Would he have met journalists in the County Arms? No, he lived before the age of interviews—lucky him, perhaps. Would I get from reading an interview with Hardy the same sense of exciting proximity that I get from picturing him walking over Wandsworth Common? I'm not sure I would. And that picture is more than just a pleasing image. The common then would still have been a place of grazing sheep, but also a place starkly overlooked by a new prison. In that dramatic configuring of social change and social difference, that bringing together of the pastoral and the penal, there seems something distinctly Hardy-esque.

The most satisfying interviews, perhaps, are the ones authors give between books, when they're not committed to plugging a new title and can feel freer to talk about the business of writing at large. But, whatever the pretext, the best kind of interview is one that forgets it's an interview and becomes just a conversation, public in purpose but candidly private in feeling (though this can have its dangers), even a benign sort of confession in which you can find yourself saying things, you realize later, you couldn't have said in any other way, either directly to some audience or—rather surprisingly, since you're a writer—if you tried formally to write them down.

The interview printed here, for a collection of writers' interviews, *The Way We Write*, took place in the spring of 2005 and has been condensed to take out some material covered elsewhere in this book. It was conducted by Barbara Baker, who has the interviewer's gift of skilful self-effacement, starting out with banally

practical questions—Do you use a pen? When do you start your working day? (but I like such questions, they're easy to answer)—then letting the interviewee find their specific course. Her way of presenting the result was also self-effacing, dispensing entirely with the question-and-answer apparatus and shaping the content so that it comes across as a single, meandering declaration: the unattended, unlocated voicing of the author's thoughts. Though it was actually a pleasant chat in the County Arms.

Each author Barbara interviewed was asked to choose a short passage from their work to preface the interview. It's not reproduced here, but I chose the final paragraphs of *The Light of Day*, simply because at the time they were the last words of fiction I'd published. It struck me later that it wasn't a bad passage to have picked for an interview that took place just round the corner from a prison.

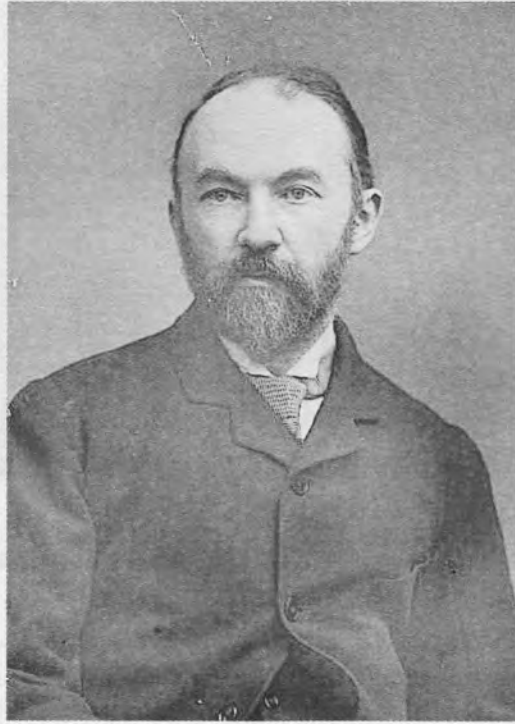


Trinity Road, in a map of 1862, running from top left to bottom right, through Wandsworth Common, past the Patriotic Asylum (or School), the Surrey County Prison (as named here), Alma Terrace, the County Arms and, a little off the map to the south and some years in the future, Thomas Hardy's home.



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE SURREY HOUSE OF CORRECTION AT WANDSWORTH.

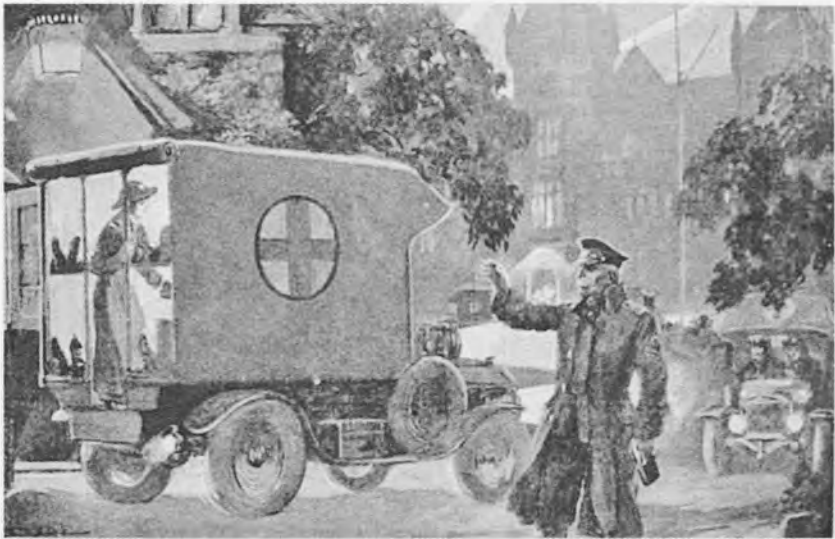
The view of prisoners' dreams, also from 1862.



Hardy at the time he lived in Trinity Road.



The County Arms in the summer of 1912.



Soldier's sketch of the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum in use as 'The 3rd London General Hospital'.



The same scene, at a quieter time, photographed in the winter of 1918. The snow makes the building look particularly eerie. The gateway is still there.



Another gateway that's still there. Prisoners being discharged from Wandsworth in the 1940s.