

# Small Boy on a Kentish Town Tram

Comments on a Betjeman poem by Coral Ann Howells

## PARLIAMENT HILL FIELDS

Sir John Betjeman

Rumbling under blackened girders, Midland, bound for Cricklewood,  
Puffed its sulphur to the sunset where that Land of Laundries stood.  
Rumble under, thunder over, train and tram alternate go,

Shake the floor and smudge the ledger, Charrington, Sells, Dale & Co.  
Nuts and nuggets in the window, trucks along the lines below.

When the Bon Marche was shuttered, when the feet were hot and tired,  
Outside Charrington's we waited, by the "STOP HERE IF REQUIRED",  
Launched aboard the shopping basket, sat precipitately down,

Rocked past Zwanziger the baker's, and the terrace blackish brown,  
And the curious Anglo-Norman parish church of Kentish Town.

Till the tram went over thirty, sighting terminus again,

Past municipal lawn tennis and the bobble-hanging plane;

Soft the light suburban evening caught our ashlar-speckled spire,

Eighteen-sixty Early English, as the mighty elms retire

Either side of Brookfield Mansions flashing fine French-window fire.

Oh the after-tram-ride quiet, when we heard a mile beyond,  
Silver music from the bandstand, barking dogs by Highgate  
Pond; Up the hill where stucco houses in Virginia creeper drown  
—And my childish wave of pity, seeing children carrying down  
Sheaves of drooping dandelions to the courts of Kentish Town.

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Sir John Betjeman's poem 'Parliament Hill Fields' is a very interesting piece of local history, as well as being a very fine poem. Basically, it is the account of a tram ride he took as a boy in 1913 or 1914 from Kentish Town up to his home in Highgate at 31 West Hill. As he recalls a very different area from the one we know today, mentioning so many places now gone, reading the poem is like having a glimpse into an Edwardian childhood in a country whose details have vanished, but whose skeletal outlines remain tantalisingly familiar.

A close reading of the poem helps to fill in the picture so that next time you travel on the 214 bus to Parliament Hill Fields you may be able to see the final stage of the journey through Betjeman's eyes as he saw it from the No. 7 brown

rumbling through the tunnel. It is rather difficult now to see down to the left beside the stop because of the huge billboards in the way, but behind these boards is the large patch of railway land to which he refers, full of criss-crossed lines and a cutting, along which the trains still rumble.

Going from Kentish Town station under the road, they rumble through the cutting, then through a mile-long tunnel under Belsize Park to West Hampstead, then on again to Cricklewood, Mill Hill, and all the stations to Bedford, via St Albans and Luton. This was Betjeman's Midland Railway route, which still operates now under the control of British Rail. In 1862 it had been called The Tottenham & Hampstead Junction Railway, a "struggling concern" which passed in '1864 under the control of Midland and Great Eastern Companies.

As Betjeman remarks, the stop is outside a coal merchant's with the resoundingly Dickensian name of Charrington, Sells, Dale & Co. For the poem, the name is totally appropriate, though for the local historian it raises a slight problem. There certainly were coal merchants there until about three years ago, a firm called Hickling & Co., with "nuts and nuggets in the windows", until the shop was removed to enlarge the gateway for the Tartan Arrow lorries.

There used also to be another coal merchant's two doors away (Carrick, Davis & Partners) in a single storey shop which is now a letting agency, while Charringtons

LCC tram before the first World War.

I was so fascinated by the poem that I wrote to Sir John asking for more details about the places he mentions; and he replied in a charming letter which is in itself not so much a commentary on the poem as an extension of it in prose. From time to time I shall refer to statements in this letter, for it now seems to me an indispensable part of the poem.

The poem opens with a description of what the small boy sees as he stands waiting at the tram stop in Kentish Town Road opposite Kentish Town railway station (just before the road forks into Highgate and Fortess Roads). Everything is moving: in front the trams are rumbling along the road while underneath the trains are

had a place at Gospel Oak station, with several other depots and offices at Kings Cross, Grays Inn Road and Pancras Road. Charringtons, indeed, still operate as Coal, Coke & Fuel Oil Distributors with many offices, including one at Cricklewood; but so far as it is possible to ascertain from street directories up to 1920, they did not have an office in Kentish Town Road. It is such a marvellous name, however, that though it is worth noting as a query for historical interest the poetic appropriateness as a name evocative of a whole social ethos is in no doubt at all.

There is mention of the Bon Marche where the boy and his companion have been shopping — a draper's shop with about three fronts, on the site of the present Woolworth's, though what possibly interested Betjeman more was a Penny Bazaar just past the Bon Marche, which was there until 1918. The Bon Marche and Daniel's, "a kind of Selfridge's" near the corner of Prince of Wales Road, were probably the biggest and the best known of a large number of drapery shops along the High Street between Camden Town and Kentish Town at the beginning of the century.

Looking through the 1904 photographs of the London Transport Collection, I counted six drapers' shops, as well as several Dressmakers and an umbrella-maker's. It was an area of small service industries — bootmakers, picture framers, small grocery shops, shops that sold oats and corn forage, cheap dining rooms of the "Chops from 12 till 3" variety, shops that sold gas mantles and lamp oil, and even a taxidermist who sold bird-seed as well (but he was nearer to Camden Town).

Having climbed into the tram, the journey begins as they "rock past Zwanziger the bakers" and up into Highgate Road, As Sir John remarks in his letter, Zwanziger's "always smelt of baking bread" and that gentleman also ran a small café on his premises, which was not uncommon. Next door to Zwanziger's was an establishment

called Fred's Dining Rooms. The place is still in the food line, though now it is a fish and chip shop; Zwanziger's name had vanished by 1919. In fact, the family changed their name to Cordingley during the 1914-18 war. (I am indebted to Miss Gillian Tindall for this piece of information.)

The "terrace blackish brown" was the row of late Georgian brick houses on either side of the church of St John the Baptist, just as you go up into Highgate Road. Part of one is still there, between the Bull & Gate pub and what is now the Forum Dance Hall (formerly a

cinema built in 1934 on the site of some of the terrace houses). All the others have been demolished, some as recently as last year.

For details of the parish church of Kentish Town I quote from Sir John's letter: "It was rebuilt in Norman style in 1843 by J. H. Hakewill and seems to have no dedication. It was very low." There is a common assumption that it was dedicated to St John the Baptist, though Mr Charles Lee, an expert on St Pancras churches, supports Sir John's statement when he says that it was dedicated "without legal authority".

The church replaced the old Kentish Town Chapel which had occupied the site since 1784, becoming a parish church in 1868. Further additions and alterations were made to it in 1889. It is interesting that Betjeman should call it Anglo-Norman, when the Victorian architect had referred to the Gothic cathedrals of Lincoln and Rheims as his models; but, of course, Betjeman is not to be faulted on church architecture. If you look carefully you can see the strong Norman influence in the rounded arches over the doors and windows. It is, in fact, a typical Victorian *mélange*; certainly it *is* a "curious Anglo-Norman parish church".

On the last part of the journey the tram speeds up, passing by the grim Maple's warehouse, up past "some rather grander shops with a definite feeling of suburbia". It goes rollicking past the tennis courts at Parliament Hill Fields and the plane trees with their irresistible bobbles, until the "ashlar-speckled spire" of St Anne's Brookfield comes into view over the trees — and Betjeman gives us the details, "Eighteen-sixty Early English".

The church was built in 1853 by a Miss Anne Barnett in memory of her brother Richard, who died in 1851; she had the church built at her own expense and Baroness Burdett-Coutts gave the church a peal of bells. In her will, Miss Barnett left her house next door to the church to be used as a parsonage. The good lady died in 1865 at the age of 85 and St Anne's became a separate parish church in 1868.

On the other side of the road is Brookfield Mansions, built around 1902. In his letter, Sir John also comments on the Metroland Villas in Glenhurst Avenue, which were new when he was a child. He says:

"I remember thinking how beautiful the new bits of Metroland Villas were, and my father telling me they were awful. Then there were the redbrick gloom of Lissenden Gardens and Parliament Hill Mansions. I was born at 52 but moved to West Hill as a baby, so cannot now recall the flats. Where the school is now, there were trees but they were not part of Parliament Hill Fields."

In the last stanza the boy walks up Highgate West Hill, where everything is cool and leafy and quiet. Across the Heath he hears the music from the bandstand beside the pond near Millfield Lane; brass and silver bands used to play there on summer evenings by arrangement with the LCC, the forerunners of the present GLC concerts.

By contrast with Kentish Town, West Hill was very countrified and, as he nears home, a sudden wave of pity surges up in him for the poor children of Kentish Town going home from the Heath, carrying bunches of already drooping dandelions, back to the noise and dirt which he has left behind.

We have in *Parliament Hill Fields* a precious historical record, which is memorable because it is so much more as well. There are obviously sociological implications in the little middle-class boy's reaction to the under-privileged of Kentish Town. But I think what is most attractive is that we have here the record of what a boy has seen and felt about the place he lives in, as he moves from detailed observation to the quiet homecoming feeling and to compassion for those who have to go back to the rumble and thunder and the blackish brown terraces.

The poem is an imaginative reconstruction of the past, giving us that characteristic Betjeman combination of historical accuracy plus his own feeling for the particular place, which helps us to see it more clearly and to perceive its value.

I think the last word must be with Sir John Betjeman, from his letter, which ends something like the way his poem ends:

"My greatest thrill was to walk with my father down a place in Kentish Town called Faulkner's Lane. I then thought it was a slum but now realise it was charming Middlesex Cottages. It was a little village south of the Great Eastern and on the east side of Kentish Town Road. I remember going with my mother to visit a 'poor family' in Anglers' Lane, Kentish Town. The only toys the children had to play with were pieces of wood from a bundle of kindling."

*Zwanziger's the Bakers*  
A photograph from the Camden Libraries' London Transport Collection, 1903/4 — a record of house-fronts above the proposed Northern Line, taken in case of later complaints about cracks.

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