

walk notes

Mitcham

Mitcham is a scattered community, with two greens (upper and lower) and a large amount of common land. Like many settlements, the urban development has migrated, in this case northwards to the upper part. Sadly, the older area is riven by busy main roads, and the only place to escape the noise fully is along the Wandle at the start and end of this walk.

Mitcham appears in the Domesday Book as Michelham, a large homestead or village, although it may go back to Roman times. It lists Mitcham as a small farming community, an implied estimate of 250 people, living in two hamlets: Mitcham, the area today being Upper Mitcham; and Whitford (Lower Green).

Robert Cranmer acquired the manor of Mitcham Canons in the 1650s and his family held the lordship for five generations. The Canons manor house was built in 1680 and has an even older dovecote (1511) surviving in the grounds.

During her reign Queen Elizabeth I made at least five visits to the area. John Donne and Sir Walter Raleigh had residences here in this era.

It was then that Mitcham became gentrified. The air also led people to settle in the area during times of plague.

Mitcham can make a strong claim to have the country's oldest cricket ground in continual use, with good evidence that games were being played on the Cricket Green in 1685.

In 1705 Eagle House was built just north of Upper Green for Fernando Mendes, physician to Catherine of Braganza. The grade I listed

house is now a primary school for pupils with autism and related social and communication difficulties.

From the mid-18th century large parts of Mitcham were given over to the cultivation of aromatic plants and shrubs, including camomile, poppies, liquorice and anise. The industry began when Ephraim Potter and William Moore in 1794 took advantage of Mitcham's rich black loam to grow lavender, setting up a distillery at Tamworth Farm. (Lavender features on Merton Council's coat of arms and the badge of the local football team) Others soon followed, also producing oils of rose and peppermint.

From its opening in 1803 the horse-drawn Surrey Iron Railway, strictly speaking, a plateway, the world's first railway authorised by a legislature, was used to transport Mitcham's horticultural produce to London. On starting the walk, the old station building (the first railway station building still standing in the world?) can be seen across the tracks of the tramway now occupying this part of the route.

The opening of Mitcham Junction station in 1868, a proper railway, attracted noxious industries rather than suburban homes, and helped bring large-scale lavender-growing to an end.

The perpendicular style parish church of St Peter and St Paul dates from 1822, with medieval fabric in the base of its tower. The architect was George Smith.

The open spaces of Mitcham Common were saved for public use in 1891. Shops were built

around Fair Green, where the fair continued to be held until 1923, when it moved to Three King's Piece, on the common.

Mitcham clock tower was unveiled on Fair Green in 1898 to mark Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. It has since been relocated several times.

Mitcham Common

Mitcham Common is an interesting and varied open spaces in South London, and the 460 acre space is a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation. The common is not all that it seems, however. The hills and ponds are man-made. The majority of the ponds result from gravel extraction. The hills result from landfill of inert waste in the mid to late 1900s, done to provide an income for the conservators. This destroyed parcels of valuable wet habitat, and irrecoverably altered the hydrology of the Common, but did provide vantage points for ramblers.

The Common's original oak woodland community was cleared with the arrival of early Neolithic people, and subsequently kept open and infertile through agricultural practices such as grazing. Due to the nature of the underlying gravels, the inherent soil is largely acidic and infertile. Consequently with the aid of grazing, low growing shrubs and acid grassland / heathland were dominant.

Since the 1980s the Mitcham Common Conservators have been following a management plan focussed on the conservation of the Common's many important habitats, prioritising the areas of acid

grassland and heathland, as such habitats are increasingly rare, threatened with fragmentation and lost to agriculture or development.

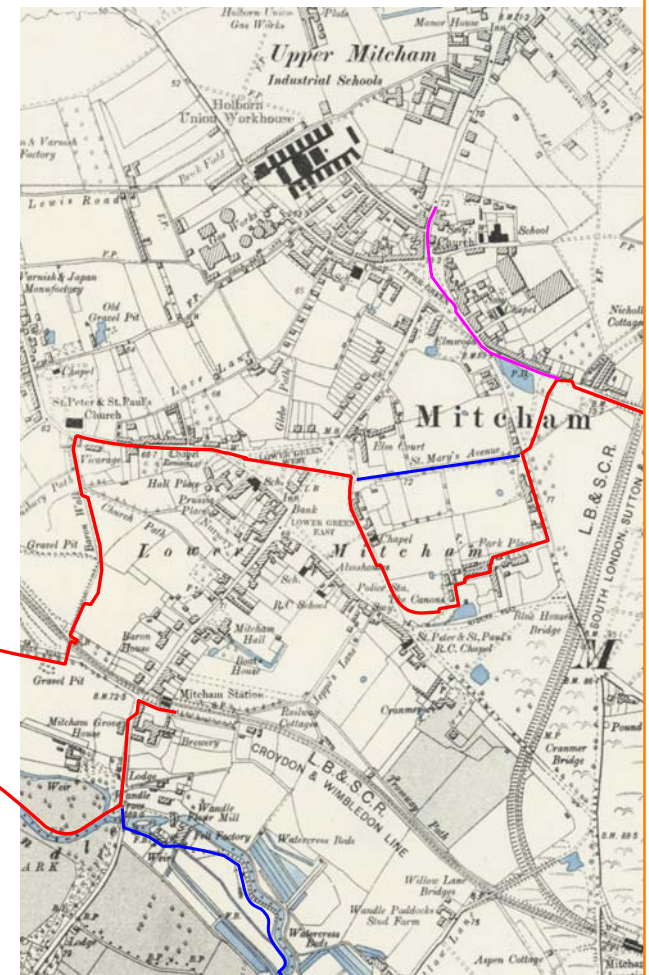
Ravensbury Park and River Wandle

The power of the River Wandle has been harnessed by watermills since the Middle Ages. Ravensbury Park was part of the medieval Ravensbury Manor, which dated back to the thirteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the site was the location of a calico mill and pleasure gardens. In 1929 Mitcham, Merton and Morden Councils purchased part of the former gardens and opened the site as Ravensbury Park. In the 17th and 18th centuries the park was part of an important industrial area with Ravensbury Mill located on the river at the western end of the current park and a calico factory to the north, just outside the current park boundary. At this time the current park formed part of the Ravensbury Park Estate of Ravensbury Manor. The Manor House stood on the northern bank of the river, immediately to the south of the present park maintenance depot. The foundations of the house can still be seen amongst dense young woodland and ivy. Old Morden Road used to pass through the current park, following the route of the existing Ravensbury Lane in front of the Manor House and across the river. In the mid 18th century the owner of the estate, John Arbuthnot, applied for the road to be diverted further west, along its present route and laid out the gardens of the Manor House and developed walks along the banks of the river. A circular walk ran around Ravensbury Meadow, the open grassland area

in the centre of the park, which may have been used for calico bleaching and drying or as a hay meadow (CRC 1996). Diversions to the river, which still exist, to supply water to the calico factory, were also made around this time. After the sale of the Ravensbury Estate in 1855 the Manor House fell into ruin and was demolished within 10 years after which a substantial mixed conifer and broadleaf woodland developed around the remains of the house and along the riverbanks. In the early 20th century the former Ravensbury Park Estate was partitioned and sold for residential development. Faced with increasing development pressure and recognising the recreational potential of the area, in 1929 the Urban District Councils of Mitcham, Morden and Merton jointly purchased the remaining grounds of the Manor House to set aside as a public park. The park was formally opened on 10th May 1930.

Watermeads

National Trust's Watermeads nature reserve was opened to the public in 2015 after being hidden behind locked gates for 100 years. Octavia Hill and her sister Miranda personally started the appeal to save Watermeads. The 11 acre site has recently had new paths, bridges and a sluice, to improve the wetlands habitat for wildlife and public access. Historically Watermeads was a trout stream and in the middle ages it would have provided winter fodder and rich summer pasture for grazing animals. Later in the 19th century there were 4 mills along its stretch and, between the two world wars, the area was planted with



cricket bat willows.

Wandle Valley Regional Park

The Wandle Valley Regional Park Trust was established in 2012 with the aim of providing leadership and coordination to improve the effectiveness, coherence, resilience and quality of the Wandle Valley.