

Suburb
Style editor
Deborah
Warland,
talks to
residents
about some
of their
favourite
things



Deborah
Warland

SUBURB

Author Past

featuring David Goldsmith

WHEN CHARLES DICKENS STAYED ON THE SUBURB...

Author David Goldsmith first lived on the suburb in 1960. He moved from Haverstock Hill to 7 Wildwood Road when he was seven. David currently lives in Holyoake Walk with his wife Jackie and daughters Lucy and Heidi. He is currently writing a book on a major snowstorm in 1836 – five months before Charles Dickens' stayed in North End – which caused massive disruption across Europe and an avalanche in Lewes, Sussex.

As the Suburb's centennial year draws to a close we can reflect on historic neighbours as formidable as prime minister Harold Wilson and screen goddess Elizabeth Taylor, but what of the man who many consider to be the greatest English writer of all?

Charles Dickens came to stay in the southern corner of the Suburb exactly 70 years before it existed. He stayed at Wyldes Farm (also then known as Collins' Farm) for a fortnight in May 1837. Sadly his short time here was a very unhappy one. In fact these may have been the most melancholy weeks of his famously dramatic and often hilarious life. He had come to mourn the devastating loss of a close female friend but also to recover from exhaustion and overwork. This was the best location he could think of near London, with Hampstead already well established as a bolthole for artists and writers.

In 1837 Hampstead Heath and its onward farmland represented deep countryside, with scattered villages and hamlets – a world away from the smoke, industry, noise, and slums of Dickens' London. London, however, was Dickens' place – a city he never tired of exploring to research characters and locations. In contrast, the rolling field of Wyldes Farm, which later inspired Henrietta Barnett to create her 'Heath Extension' and unique Suburb, was beautiful and peaceful. It could only, therefore, have ever been a temporary resting place for a vigorous urbanite like Dickens.

Charles Dickens and his young family were welcomed at the farmhouse in North End by their host John Linnell, a painter and sociable soul who had lived at Wyldes for many years. Dickens, stricken with grief and in a state of emotional collapse, had already told his publishers that he would deliver no work for two months. Only hours earlier, at Kensal Green Cemetery, he had buried his beloved sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, a vivacious 17-year-old beauty and great friend who had clearly captured his heart. Despite marrying her elder sister Catherine (they were two daughters of a newspaper editor) Mary was probably his true love and his marriage ultimately failed. In fact, Dickens was so distraught at Mary's death that he willed to be buried beside her, though eventually his national fame and status assured him a grave at Westminster Abbey.



Wyldes Farm, North End

A week before their arrival at Wyldes Farm, life for the Dickens family could not have been happier. The new family home – Charles had married Catherine the previous year and they had a baby son – was in Bloomsbury. Dickens was 25 and his first serialised novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, was winning wide fame and success. The story, published in monthly editions, had a crazed readership. Dickens' incapacity to work was therefore a blow to his readers, who eagerly awaited every word of the unfolding tale.

Pickwick had featured Hampstead in its opening chapter with a reference to its main characters (members of a jolly spoof club) reading 'Speculations on the Source of the Hampstead Ponds, with some Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats' (a Victorian fish or bird, perhaps, unique to Hampstead?). Dickens had also commenced his masterwork *Oliver Twist*, which was also suspended while the author gathered his wits at Wyldes Farm.

Mary Hogarth's death on 7 May 1837 had been sudden and completely unpredicted. Hours earlier she, Charles and Catherine had enjoyed an evening at the theatre, after which they returned to the family home. Mary was the housekeeper. She retired upstairs to bed, there was a strangled cry as she collapsed, and within hours she died in Charles Dickens' arms. From her limp fingers he pulled a ring that he wore for the rest of his life.

Unable to face a return to what had been such a happy home, to contemplate Mary's empty room and deathbed (they can be seen to this day on an upper floor of the Dickens House Museum in Doughty Street, which is the very house they occupied) the family fled to these northern outreaches of Hampstead, where Wyldes farmhouse stands to this day and is named 'Old Wyldes'.

The white weatherboarded house can be spotted on the left of Hampstead Way just before the final righthand bend, but this is the peculiar jutting rear of the building. Much better to view it from North End itself, a turning next to the Old Bull and Bush. Walk a few yards along the lane and turn left. Along the gravel track is a gate that faces you. The original farmhouse (minus its subsequent extensions) is the epitome of a generous sprawling English family cottage. It's said to have inspired the Suburb's pioneer architects, Parker and Unwin, who used it as the Suburb's inaugural office when the land was developed beyond. On the wall is a large double blue plaque which commemorates John Linnell and another famous artist who lived there, William Blake.

North End was familiar territory for Dickens. His father John briefly stayed in the hamlet after his release from Marshalsea debtor's prison in 1824. Charles was very fond of Jack Straw's Castle, up the road which was a very lively and popular coaching inn. He once encouraged his friend John Forster to join him for supper at this glory of London's summit: 'I knows a good 'ous there where we can have a red-hot chop for dinner, and a glass of good wine'. Dickens also liked to drink at the Spaniards Inn. A passionate walker, he would regularly escape the stench and confusion of London (the sewage system had yet to be installed) to breathe the country air.

That air would soon become a lot more polluted. In the very weeks that Dickens stayed on our turf in 1837 the first railway into London from another city (Birmingham) was being excavated and laid through Chalk Farm and Camden Town. Slum houses were torn down as thousands of men dug the great ditch into Euston. For this was the birth of 'Railway Mania', which would provide Dickens with plenty more to write about.

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HAMPSTEAD LAWN TENNIS CLUB

Hampstead Garden Suburb Lawn Tennis Club is small and maybe quite unique.

It caters for the need of players mainly from their mid forties and older who enjoy a medium standard of tennis in a non highly competitive environment.

Play is throughout the year on Sunday Mornings, and on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons on the two courts leased to the club in the Lyttleton Playing Fields. There is also a small club room for the exclusive use of the members there.

Play on Sunday mornings is in the form of 'roll up' and joining into doubles games. There is no need to arrange partners. The club can only accommodate a very limited number of players and at the moment can accept some 6 or so new members.

The way new members are encouraged to join is to turn up during the roll up mornings (Sundays) at about 10.30 am. They will be welcomed and invited to join in. no membership fee will be required for at least the first month during which time they will be welcome to play as often as they wish.

Currently the annual membership is £100 per annum and balls and the facility of a club room are included. Guests can be invited to play on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

For any further information, contact: Alan Cohen, 4 Church Mount N2 ORP
Tel: 8458 2831 or simply just turn up at the courts