

# **A Brief History of Totteridge Valley**

Compiled by  
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## **Anglo Saxon Times**

This valley was once thickly wooded (probably with oak, ash and willow) with small clearings known as "leys" or "groves" here and there where wooden huts were built. The pebble drifts of Totteridge and The Ridgeway, Mill Hill, through which rain quickly filters to the impervious clay beneath, provided many ponds on high ground, giving water supply to the foresters and swineherds dwelling in the area. Two Anglo Saxon charters record a settlement at Lothersley (the old name for Mill Hill) centred along The Ridgeway near the Angel Pond, which housed six families.

## **Middle Ages**

Medieval clearance of the ancient forest was arduous and piecemeal and wild boar, wolves and deer roamed freely. The scattered huts became hamlets built along the pebble ridgeways of Mill Hill and "Taterigg" and the precious grasslands were used for breeding rabbits (introduced by the Normans) for food and pelts.

The spread of Christianity after the arrival of St Augustin in 597, gave rise to ecclesiastical foundations which became rich and powerful. When William the Conqueror landed in 1066 he found monks of Westminster Abbey in possession of "Heandum" which included Mill Hill, and they were allowed to retain it, while Totteridge fell under the jurisdiction of the Abbey of Ely. All land belonged to the King who distributed the benefits and power to the local lords of the manor, mostly notabilities with wealth and scholarship. We do not know where the Manor house of Hendon was situated but it was thought that the medieval manor of Totteridge was on the site of the present "Southernhay". The villeins tied to the local manor were allowed to farm their own "ley" and strip or two of land but had to work unpaid on their lord's demesne. Some grain was grown here and there is a record of a mill at Totteridge at this time. Records show that the valley was also given over to the grazing of cows, sheep and pigs. Each villein had the right to pasture a limited number of live-stock on the common-waste ground owned by the lord of the manor.

## **Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries**

Farmers in the valley began to realise that it was more profitable to keep live-stock on meadowlands rather than cultivate the heavy wet clay soil of the area. The "Victorian Country History" states that in 1341 "A large part of Totteridge lay unploughed". Besides the open field system many small crofts had strips of woodland left as hedgerows. As the population increased over the centuries, hay became an ever important commodity to feed livestock of the area and of the growing city of London.

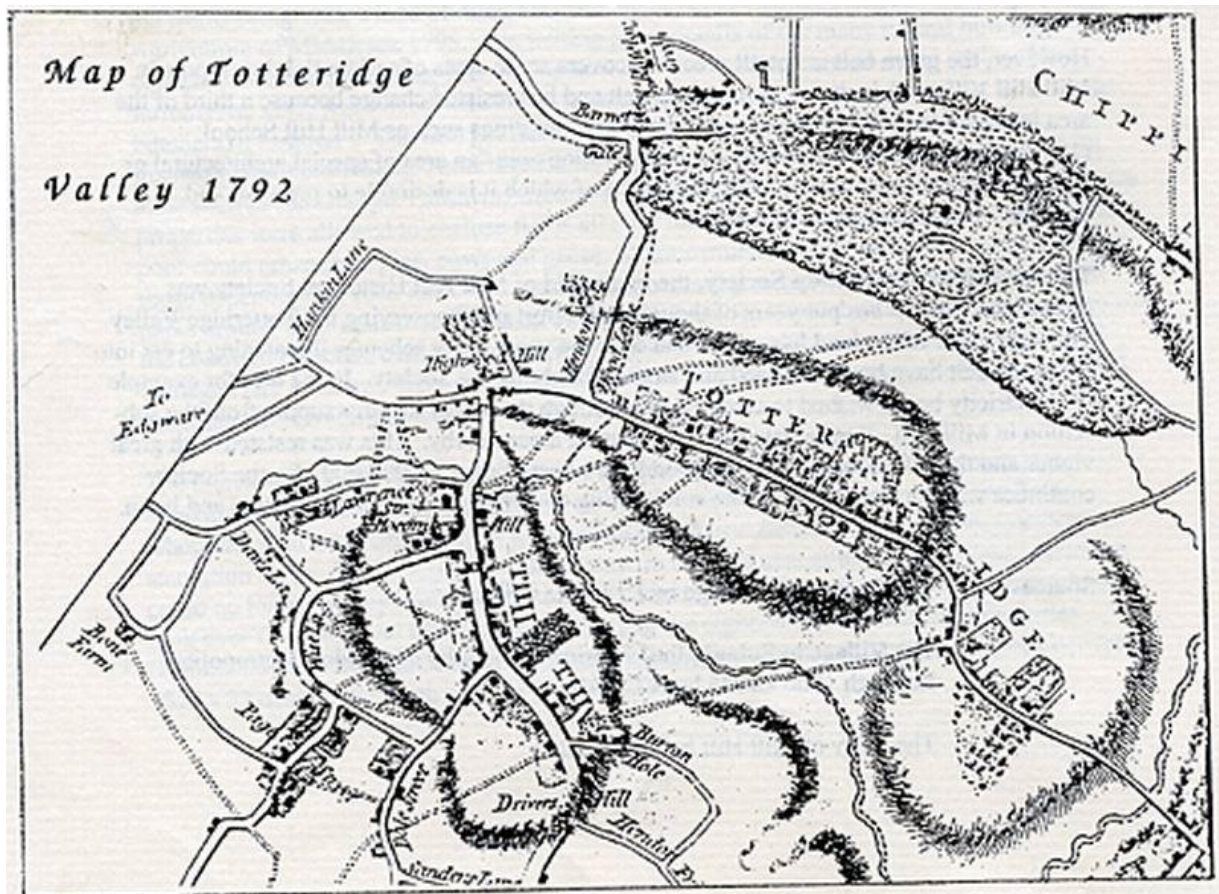
Local records do not mention the Black Death (1348-9) and it is thought the people in this valley mostly escaped the devastation of this plague that carried off a third of the country's population. But subsequent labour shortages put the workers in a strong position and a new middle class of yeoman farmers, merchants and craftsmen began to settle in the area.

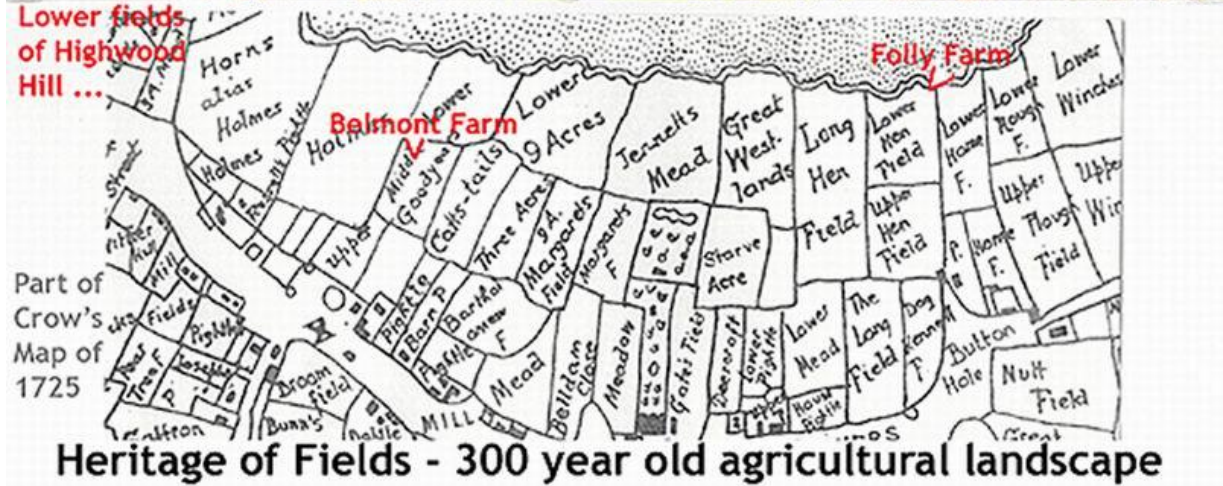
### **Tudor and Stuart Times**

Falconry and hunting were popular spots in the area, perhaps the most plentiful game being rabbits and hares. The office of Keeper of Pheasants and Partridges in Totteridge is mentioned in 1580 and again in 1611. Records show that the Abbot of Westminster would go hunting in Highwood Hill. Charles II often used to come to our valley to hunt and there is evidence that he set up a hunting lodge in the grounds of Littleberries on Mill Hill Ridgeway.

### **Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries**

At this time great changes were brought about in farming by the introduction of mechanisation and improving farming methods of the Agrarian Revolution. The introduction of the turnip meant that cattle could be kept through the winter so that fresh meat replaced salt meat; beans and bacon were no longer the staple diet of the ordinary people. By 1796 all Totteridge Valley was under grass, creating a beautiful landscape full of wild flowers in summer, in the hawthorn-hedged 10 acre fields, many of which exist today, individually named.





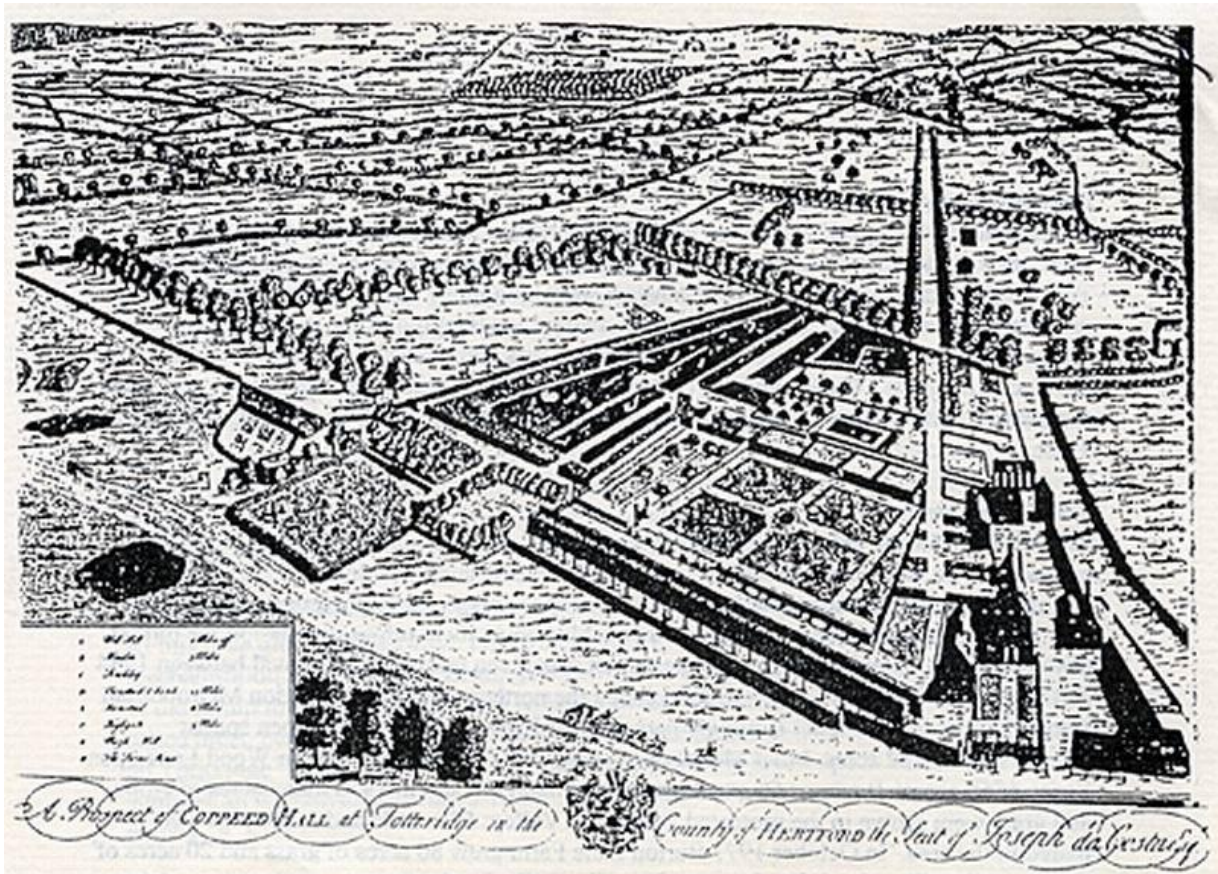
“It is no uncommon thing to see 100 loads of hay go up to London on market day and each of the teams bring back a load of dung for dressing the land”, writes John Middleton in View of Agriculture of Middlesex 1798. His writing gives details of many typical buildings concerned with hay farming, such as “open sheds” for loading carts to stand under. Hay farming, he says, was mixed with sheep farming; pig farming too “purchased fat by the hog-butchers of London”. The rich got richer (while the poor got poorer) and many large mansions were built along Totteridge Lane, Highwood Hill and The Ridgeway. Some still exist such as the Grange, Fairlawn, garden Hill, Holcombe House etc. The landlords of these properties were allowed to enclose fields all over the area and the common lands, where the poor could graze their pigs, cows and geese, became much smaller and fewer, impoverishing those dependent on such land. The gentry, dispossessing many tenant farmers, built lavish parks around their mansions, dammed streams to form ornamental waters and planted trees on the common pastures, evidence of these trees and pools can be seen today. Our traditional managed hay meadows were created by the rich at great cost to the evicted tenants. By 1815 the small yeoman farmer had almost disappeared.



The increasing wealth of the privileged of the area meant that the manorial system was breaking down as land was sold off to individual farmers. But the poverty of the farm labourers, who often only had the seasonal work of harvesting the hay, was frequently at starvation level. Many migrant workers came to the area also at harvest time. Incomes could no longer be supplemented by the traditional industries such as weaving, as machines took over this work and the extreme poverty of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries culminating in the risings of 1830 – 31. Rick burning occurred repeatedly in the area between 1825 and 1831 despite the death penalty for such a crime.

## Darlands Lake Nature Reserve

A large mansion, Copped Hall, sited south of St Andrew's Church, Totteridge, is first mentioned in the sixteenth century. An early eighteenth century print of Copped Hall in Totteridge Library (see map) shows the estate stretching into the valley and laid out as a formal garden with a deer park. Later a more rural, natural landscaping of the grounds was designed by Humphrey Repton. But the old house was demolished in 1928 by George Kemp, a biscuit magnate. The grounds of Copped Hall became a nature reserve in 1971 and were designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest, managed by the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust.



## Twentieth Century

London continued to grow and expand ever outwards into the suburbs and the price of land escalated. The War was indirectly responsible for establishing a wide and continuous green belt in place of the tentative and inefficient open space preservation measures of the 1930's. The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act enabled councils to refuse permission for further development of specified areas. The green belt was given ministerial approval between 1954 and 1959. The belt 5 – 15 miles wide included the northern part of Hendon Metropolitan Borough (now in the Barnet Borough, namely Mill Hill). It preserved as open spaces Scratchwood's 182 acres, Moat Mount open space of 217 acres and Hendon Wood Lane open spaces of 56 acres. It preserves much agricultural land too and in 1956 many acres of crops and grass were grown in the

protected Totteridge Valley; 576 cattle and 1,374 pigs were reared in the area. In October 1977 Burton Farm grew 80 acres of grass and 20 acres of maize, while still maintaining 5 acres of woodland. Today the farm concentrates on dairy farming.

However, the green belt is not all green. It covers some areas of residential development: Mill Hill Village is included in the green belt and has resisted change because a third of the area is occupied by institutional and educational buildings such as Mill Hill School (15 acres). 347 acres of Mill Hill is a conservation area "an area of special architectural or historic interest, the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance" with its 44 listed buildings.

**The Mill Hill Preservation Society**, the brainchild of the Mill Hill Historical Society, was founded in 1949; it has put years of thought and effort into conserving the Totteridge Valley. The high value of the land has meant that over the years many schemes threatening to eat into the green belt have been proposed and stoutly fought by the Society. In the 60's for example the electricity board wished to erect pylons through the valley to carry supply from the sub-station in Mill Hill, Partingdale Lane, to housing areas nearby. This was resisted with great vigour and the cables were put underground at a cost of over £1,000,000. So the Society continues with its aim to protect the surrounding countryside from encroachment and harm.

#### **Acknowledgments:**

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