

A visit to Totteridge: 13 September 2011

In 1797 George Canning installed his mother, Mary Ann Hunn, in a house in Totteridge, a suburban village near Barnet. She wanted to be close to him in London, but her scandalous past was an embarrassment and he wanted her to live far away, in Exeter or Plymouth. Totteridge was a compromise, which satisfied neither of them. Within a year she had moved out.

Ever since I became interested in Mrs Hunn I have been meaning to go to Totteridge, and on a recent trip to London I took advantage of a spare day to make the visit. I wasn't sure what to expect, and I hadn't done any preparation. I have subsequently studied the *Totteridge Conservation Area Character Appraisal Statement* (Barnet Council, 2000), which contains a clear description of the layout of the village. It would have been helpful to have read this more carefully beforehand.

Overground and Victoria Line took me from Haggerston to Euston, where I changed to the Northern Line. Totteridge and Whetstone is the last station before the end of the line at High Barnet. It took less than an hour. The station is just like many other suburban stations on the Underground. It's not underground, of course, but in a deep cutting, and has two platforms with steps leading up to a small ticket office that gives onto an unremarkable suburban shopping parade. Having no map I was not sure whether to go up or down the hill. The view uphill was of shops and terraced houses. Downhill seemed more open, so that was the way I went, soon reaching a green area with a tempting footpath going towards Dollis Hill. There was a noticeboard with a map I couldn't read because I had the wrong glasses. Reluctantly I rejected the footpath and carried on down the road in the direction of Mill Hill. This turned out to be the right way, as I soon found that the road I was following was Totteridge Lane, which later became Totteridge Village and eventually Totteridge Common. On consulting a map later on I found that I had been walking roughly East to West.

The houses were already looking more prosperous than in the immediate neighbourhood of the station, with two-storey semi-detached and detached houses, dating I would guess from both pre-1914 and inter-war years. The pillar box was EVIIR. There were some new buildings, including a mock-Georgian apartment block called Vardon House. Harry Vardon, six times Open champion before his health and his putting let him down, was the professional at Totteridge Golf Club for more than thirty years. Totteridge Lane was uphill now, and the houses amongst the oak trees were getting larger. There were some locked gates, and notices everywhere announcing high-speed crime response.

On the left (South) was Totteridge Green, where I might have sat to eat my lunch if the weather had been less threatening. I decided I would explore the Green on my way back. There was an oval pillar-box here (GR—I think this is George V) which had once had a stamp-dispenser attached to it, a feature of pillar-boxes that I remember from my childhood but have not seen for a long time now. Beyond the Green were large twentieth century detached houses, along with older remnants including an old brick wall and what I guessed was an older house on the corner of Northcliffe Drive. It was beginning to rain quite hard now, so I sat on a low wall under some trees on Northcliffe Drive, listened to the chattering of magpies in the branches above me, phoned Anna and ate my sandwich, without getting wet. There is also a Harmsworth Way, but there is nothing in the DNB to explain what exactly

the connection was between the Harmsworths and Totteridge, except that Northcliffe was buried not far away, at North Finchley.

My notes suggest that by the time it reaches Northcliffe Drive to the West of the Green the road is called Totteridge Village, but the map in the *Appraisal Statement* says it is still Totteridge Lane. When the rain eased off I returned to the main road to look at a house whose name, Mannings, had caught my eye. William Manning was an acquaintance of George Canning, a Pittite MP and director of the Bank of England. His London residence was in Spring Gardens, making him and George neighbours. George consulted him on the practicalities of life in Totteridge during his mother's stay there, and possibly beforehand as well. When Mrs Hunn gave up the Totteridge house, Manning took over the lease on behalf of a member of his wife's family. The Mannings lived at Copped Hall, located according to the *Appraisal Statement* to the west of the Green. The Hall was demolished in the 1920s, with substantial houses being built on the site. It is likely, I suppose, that Mannings is so named in remembrance of the family – probably not George Canning's friend, but his more famous son, the Cardinal.

St Andrew's church is at a junction where a lane leads off the main road, going North towards Barnet. There was an older church, and in the churchyard is an ancient yew tree, but the present building was new in Mrs Hunn's day. The nave was completed in 1791, although the tower and wooden spire are earlier; the weather-vane says 1706. There is a Tithe Barn and a scattering of houses roundabout, all dating from the 18th century. Plaques inside the church commemorate John Puget, the main local land-owner, who died in 1805, Sir Alex Maitland, son of the Earl of Lauderdale, who died in 1820 aged 97, and numerous 18th and 19th century members of the Pepys family, collateral descendants of Samuel.

The road turns north for a short distance, then west again, going uphill towards Totteridge Common, past old farmhouses and cottages, and also past Totteridge Park, the only one of the village's four large mansion houses to survive. The Common is a ridgeway with views north towards Barnet and South towards Hampstead. You can't see much from the road itself, only glimpses between the woods and the houses. From these snatches I had an impression of so much green that I became confused as to directions, convinced that what I now know to be the southern view must be away from London towards the open country. There are very large houses here, including some built within the last decade or so. When I reached the Long Pond, where a solitary fisherman sat under an umbrella, I turned back. I was some two miles from the station. It was three o'clock and the sun was out.

Walking back towards the village I passed the entrance post, erected for the coronation in 1953, showing the Totteridge coat of arms. The supporters are rampant stags bearing the St Andrew cross, and the motto is 'Trust and fear not'. I walked quickly back past the church to the Green, where I looked at the Orange Tree public house. A sign said it was established in 1755; parts of the building may go back that far, but the main impression is of a sprawling road house for inter-war motorists.

The Green is surrounded by small groups of houses of different ages, with a very nice old farmhouse at the far end from the road. I got a better look at the houses here than along the main road where much was hidden behind fences and hedges. There were several in the Arts and Crafts style. Everything looked in very good repair. Little notices here and there were signed by the TMA, Totteridge Manor Association,

which seems to be responsible for the upkeep of the Green. We are instructed not to feed the ducks in the pond, but only on dry land.

A plain white house on the Green struck me. As with many other houses, I felt unable to decide whether it was genuinely old or merely in the Georgian style. If genuinely old, it had been recently restored and extended, with the original entrance blocked up and a new front door added at the side. All this underlined the impossibility of identifying Mrs Hunn's house. There is no reason to think that this was the one, but I speculated as I looked at it—as I had speculated several times before in the course of my walk. It must have originally had four rooms upstairs and four down, plus attics, which would have been, as she says her house was, too large for her requirements and for her budget, but not so large as to make it entirely unreasonable for George to have taken it on. The only hint she gives as to where she lived is that she says the reason why she couldn't easily exchange visits with a family called Gason was that they lived at opposite ends of the village. A house on the Green would have placed her at one end of the old village.

On the corner of Totteridge Green and Totteridge Lane was a large black car or van, with darkened windows, and a burly young man at the wheel. I don't know how long it had been there, but I saw it when I set off to explore the Green, and it was still there when I returned to the main road some 25 minutes later. A sign in the window referred to the high-speed crime response. It had quite a menacing feel to it, and I wondered whether the man would object to my noting things down in my notebook as I passed. So much for Trust and Fear Not, I thought in my priggish way.

Soon I was walking back up the hill towards the station, the small suburban streets and a large square office block. Although this was not an attractive prospect, there was a touch of relief at getting away from the affluence and good taste of the Village. What sort of people occupied those expensive houses (prices in the Estate Agent's windows went up to £5,500,000)? One hint came as I was crossing the Green and I heard an old man and a little girl conversing in what sounded like Russian. Exiled oligarchs might afford the prices and might also appreciate the seclusion and obscurity of the place.

William Manning warned Mrs Hunn that Totteridge was in those days the prettiest but least social of the suburban villages. His family, he said, found all their society in London. It was perhaps an early manifestation of the dormitory town, although it could only come into its own as such with the arrival of the railways half a century later. A London-based working and social life was compatible with living in Totteridge only if, like Manning, you could afford a London home as well. It was some such arrangement (chambers in Town for working days, staying with her in Totteridge on holidays) that Mrs Hunn hoped her son George would adopt, but he had no wish to do anything of the sort. He believed her disappointment on this score was the main reason why the experiment of living in Totteridge was a failure.

Another reason was the lack of an agreeable social life. She describes the rituals of paying calls and exchanging invitations. When she gave a little party she felt the lack of a respectable manservant to distribute her cards, and when returning a call she had to knock at the door herself, which was humiliating when visiting families with a suite of servants to pass her from room to room. Without a carriage she could not attend formal evening engagements, and there was no informal socialising. Nor could she send to Barnet for provisions, which in the absence of local shops left her at the mercy of the tradesmen who brought their carts to Totteridge. Now too there are

no shops except the meagre parade around the station. There are buses and the Northern Line is within easy walking distance, but for most Village residents a car probably seems every bit as necessary as a carriage seemed to Mrs Hunn; there were certainly a lot of large cars everywhere one looked.

Would a latter-day Mrs Hunn find it easier to settle there? There are many more inhabitants, many more potential companions, and no-one nowadays would be shocked by stories of her past, but it didn't strike me as a convivial place: no library, no shops, no cinema, only one over-sized pub, little coming and going in the streets. Even when the sun had come out I passed very few people on foot: one or two women (mothers or nannies, I couldn't tell) fetching children from school, and a few workmen engaged on house-repairs. I missed the teeming swing-parks that I had got used to in Hackney and Brockley. No doubt behind the hedges and fences parents provide their children with their own swings, trampolines and climbing frames. There is a golf club and a cricket club, the school and the church. The Residents Association and Manor Association testify to the care people take of what is still a very pretty place. These offer only a very thin social life. More must go on than was apparent to the casual passer-by, but one suspects that Totteridge residents still bring in their society from elsewhere, as the Mannings did.