



London viewed from Primrose Hill

JAMES AUGUSTUS ST. JOHN AND ST. JOHN'S WOOD

'North Bank' and 'South Bank' in St John's Wood are so called because they are north and south of the Regent's Canal which was constructed between 1812 and 1816. Immediately to the north is Lord's Cricket Ground.

To the West is Maida Vale and Little Venice - which forms the basin of the canal. To the east is Regent's Park. Further to the north lies Hampstead and, just north of Regent's Park, is Primrose Hill with its famous vista of London.

The whole area has long been the haunt of writers - including James Augustus St John and his family.



PRIMROSE HILL



The view of London to the South



Towards St John's Wood - the north west

THE 'NORTH BANK' AND JAMES AUGUSTUS ST JOHN.

A letter dated June 23, 1851 gives the address of James Augustus St. John as 18 North Bank, St Johns Wood. The letter is addressed to Rupert Brooke, the white Rajah of Sarawak and concerns J. A. St John's pleasure at his son, Spencer's employment in Sarawak.

Mr St John writes: 'Allow me, for my own satisfaction, to add, that instead of repenting of having placed by son under your authority, I have everyday more and more reason to rejoice at it, and to express my gratitude to you for the undeviating kindness and generosity with which you have treated him. Trusting you will excuse this expression of my feelings, I am, my dear Brooke, Most faithfully and gratefully yours, JAMES AUGUSTUS ST. JOHN.'¹

His son, Spencer St John had left the family home and embarked for Sarawak some years earlier. On Saturday, February 5, 1848, The 'Hampshire and Sussex Chronicle' reported the departure of James Brooke and his Secretary, Spencer St. John to Borneo on the ship 'The Meander' Spencer was 23 years old.

PORTSMOUTH
Saturday, February 5, 1848

*'His excellency, James Brooke, Esq, the Governor of Borneo,
arrived here at the George Hotel, on Tuesday evening, and*

¹ The Private Letters of Sir James Brooke, K.C.B., Rajah of Sarawak: Narrating ... - Page 299

dined with Sir Charles Ogle Bart, at the Admiralty House. On Wednesday afternoon, at two o'clock, his Excellency, with Mr Spencer St John, his Secretary, the suite and attendance, embarked from the Victoria Pier, and were conveyed on board the Meander, Captain the Hon. Henry Keppel, and in the evening that frigate put to sea. The Meander is to call at Madeira to land dispatches for the Queen Dowager, then proceed to the Cape of Good Hope and Borneo. a number of navel and military officers and other persons, came to the port to see Governor Brooke before his departure. Among them were Rear-Admiral Sir Thomas Cochrane, the late commander -in-chief in India, Capt. Rodney Munday, late of Her Majesty's ship Iris, and the Hon, Mr Digby.'

At that time, James Augustus St John lived at a different address at the 'North Bank'.

'Boyles Court Register' notes that 'Mrs St John resides at 9 North Bank.'² The register also notes that, one year later, in 1846, Mr J.A. St John resides there,³ Perhaps Mrs St John had chosen the location and her family had followed her the next year?

Another son, James St John, left for Sarawak in 1851, The 'Daily News' of Monday Dec 1, 1851 records his appointment in the 'COURT' section of the paper.

'Earl Grey has, we perceive, just appointed James St John, son of James Augustus St John, to be Surveyor-General to the colony of Lebuau, where his brother, Mr Spencer St. John already holds the high office of Her Britannic Majesty's commission to the Sultan of Borneo, and the princes and independent chiefs of the Indian Archipelago.'

Perhaps, the move down the street had been due to a decrease in the size of the household? But James Augustus St John, his wife, daughters and sons, lived at 'North Bank' from 1845 until 1853.

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² Boyles Court Register 'Westminster Archives

³ Boyles Court Register Westminster Archives

Little of 'North Bank' is shown in a contemporary A to Z' of London. Part of the road was demolished in 1895 to make way for the 'Grand Central Railway'. It was the time of a rapidly developing London - the age of Charles Dickens and the age of railway mania.

One of the houses at 'North Bank' was called 'The Priory,' 'The Priory' had been the home of 'North Bank's most famous resident, George Eliot. Her house was thus swept away by the encroaching railway and its termination at Paddington Station.

It was from 'The Priory' that George Eliot presided over Sunday afternoon 'salons.' George Eliot had succeeded Charles Dickens as England's premier novelist and invitations to her well appointed villa with a rose filled garden were much valued.

In "A Short History of St John's Wood' Cecil Smith explained what happened to the remains of the road: 'About 1900 the Central Electric Supply Company's power house, transformer and generating plant were erected on the banks of the Regent's Canal, south of Lodge Road, and to all intents and purposes, removing all the houses and streets not demolished by the railway company, bounded by Lodge Road on the north side, Park Road on the east side, Grove Road on the west side, and Rossmore Road on the south"⁴

But, in 1878, Edward Walford, in 'Old and New London' was able to use the poetry of Cowper:

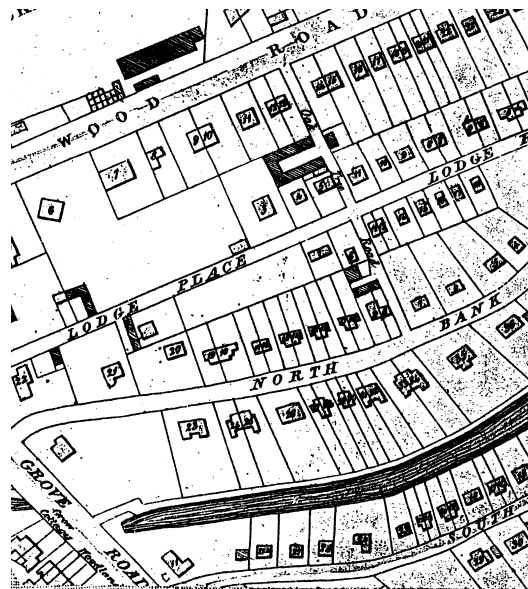
*'Suburban villas, highway-side retreats
That dread the encroachment of our streets'*⁵

to describe the area surrounding 'North Bank' - the gardens of which sloped towards Regent's Canal. Walford comments on the; 'trim gardens', lawns and shrubs, towering spires, banks clothed with flowers; indeed all the elegances of town and the beauties of the country are at this spot happily commingled."⁶

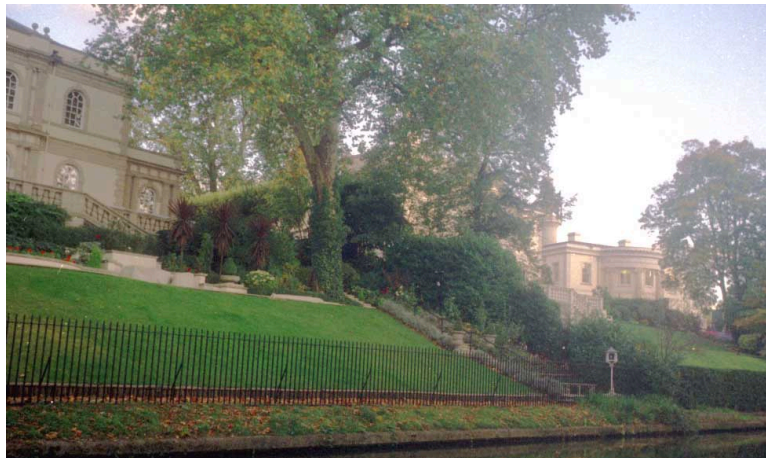
⁴ 'A Short History of St John's Wood' Cecil Smith 1942.

⁵ Edward Walford, in 'Old and New London vol 5' british-history.ac.uk

⁶ Edward Walford, in 'Old and New London vol 5' british-history.ac.uk



A segment of an early London map indicates the numbers of the houses at 'North Bank' and also reveals large garden plots with detached villas. It was these villas that led to St John's Wood being described as a suburban arcadia, James Augustus St John lived on the north side of the road.



A few of the remaining 'Nash' villas on the 'South Bank'

A history of London canals also suggests that Nash, whose white terraces crown Regent's Park, also built, along the North Bank: 'Nash houses were a common view along the Regents Canal's summit level, and the grand master had designed and built another elaborate canal side estate at Lisson Grove to complement his Park Village scheme. However these, known as North Bank and South Bank, have long since gone'⁷

⁷ www.londoncanals.co.uk

Ann Saunders, in book called 'Regent's Park' notes that the The 'Eyre Estate' - through which the canal had been built - required: 'houses of a superior caste to be built down the canal banks.'⁸

The few remaining 'Nash' villas are certainly of 'a superior caste' but there is another memory of 'North Bank'

Cecil Smith, in his 'History of St John's Wood', published in 1943, writes: 'North and South Bank, have charming, if somewhat dilapidated streets of small villas standing in their own gardens, that ran down to the water and towpath each side of the canal. Incidentally, these streets, owing to the eccentricities of some of the inhabitants, and the secrecy provided by the high walls of the gardens, had acquired a somewhat sinister reputation. '⁹

It would seem that quite a few early Victorian net curtains in 'North Bank' and 'St. John's Wood' twitched with sedition. Long before George Elliot moved there - in 1863 - the road had acquired a literary reputation.

Walford mentions James Augustus St John in 'Old and New London ' when he notes with two other Victorian journalists who lived in the St. John's area: 'Cyrus Redding lived in Hill Road; Mr J.A.St John, too, was a resident in St John's Wood; as also was Douglas Jerrold, who lived in Kilburn Priory.'¹⁰

But Walford omits one famous 'North Bank' resident in his book On 23 March 1836, Mary Shelley; "removes Percy Florence from Harrow, employs a private tutor, and moves with her son to 14 North Bank, Regent's Park.'¹¹ Mary Shelley lived at 'North Bank' for one year.

Cecil Smith records more writers who had lived at the 'North Bank': At No.6 lived Beatty Kingston, journalist and author of many books of thrilling adventure, born in London, 1814.

⁸ 'Regent's park' 1962 Ann Saunders

⁹ 'A Short History of St John's Wood' Cecil Smith 1942.

¹⁰ Edward Walford, in 'Old and New London vol 5' (British history.ac)

¹¹ www.rc.umd.edu/reference/chronologies/mschronology/chrono.html

He was brought up at Oporto, where his father was in business. He was a zealous volunteer, and worked actively for the improvement of the conditions of seamen, but from 1850 his chief occupation was writing books for boys. In 1851 he achieved signal success with *Peter the Whaler*, and wrote more than a hundred similar books, *The 'Three Midshipmen, etc[;];* and 'At 14 North Bank lived John Hollingshead. journalist, author and theatrical director, born London, sept 1827. He wrote for 'Household words', Charles Dickens; magazine which ran from 1850 to 1859.'¹²

Thomas Henry Huxley also lived at 41 North Bank in the 1850's and it was from here that some of his correspondence with Charles Darwin was sent. But the most famous resident had been George Eliot. In 1863 Eliot and her husband, Henry Lewes buy the Priory, 21 North Bank, Regent's Park. She lived there until 1880.

Another local history mentions the 'North Bank' of 1836 in connection with some scandal and notes: '...at this point the East India Company whose employees were fairly thick on the ground in St John's Wood...'¹³ (It is not known if this had any bearing on James Augustus St John and his involvement with the 'Oriental Herald'.)

With its semi-detached villas, the development of St John's Wood prefigures the outer London suburbs of today. Concerning George Eliot's move to 'North Bank, Lady Cork - one of the haute monde - commented; 'Of course, poor dear, where else could she go?'"¹⁴

By living with a married man who had not obtained a divorce, George Eliot had committed a sin against society, and been banished to the suburbs and it would seem she had been banished to 'bohemia' as well! However, it was the London of Lady Cork that was being gradually sidelined; though George Eliot was not 'comme il faute' and still might not have received Lady Cork's visiting card.

'St John's Wood' prefigures the suburbs of today and, with its wide public streets, it also anticipated the boulevards of the soon to be re-built Paris, Its Palladian inspired villas and terraces reflected a growing Imperial city. A new London was being constructed. Was it

¹² 'A Short History of St John's Wood' Cecil Smith 1942.

¹³ 'St John's Wood and Maida Vale Past' Richard Tames. Historical Publications (p59)

¹⁴ 'The London Rich' Peter Thorold' (1999) p257

by chance that so many radical writers congregated in its streets and instigated a similar transformation of the class structure?

In 1853, James Augustus St John moved from the 'North Bank.' He re-located just round the corner to 'Grove End Road' and was, geographically and socially, at the centre of events transforming London.