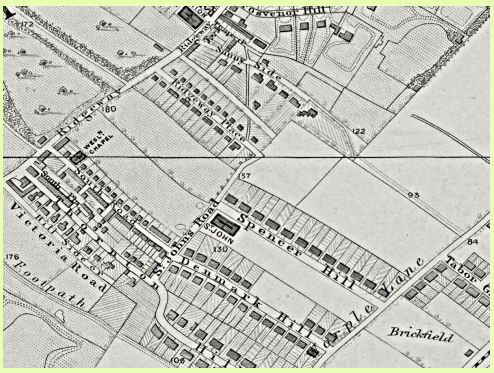
St John's Road

The History

In the mid 19th century the arrival of the railway to Wimbledon spurred on the expansion of houses south of the Ridgway, leading to the establishment of roads like St John's Road. The initial development, including the construction of the houses numbered 1-6 on the northern side, was the start of the road's residential character. With a growing population, a church in addition to St Mary's in the village was also needed. Before the railway, the land to the south of the Ridgway consisted of just fields and pasture and to the north, the back gardens of the grand houses overlooking Wimbledon Common.

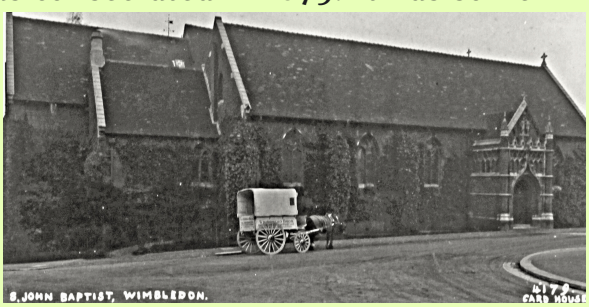


The Houses

Houses **nos. 1-6** were all built at the same time in the 1860s and **nos. 1-4** were initially connected by doors which can still be found behind the plaster board on the ground and first floors. There were no kitchens at the back and horses were kept there. One owner surmises that the building could have been a school, the classrooms now being delightful houses. There would have been no need for kitchens as the children all lived locally and would have dashed home for lunch. **No.2** has had some interesting owners including actress Margaret Rutherford, who will always be remembered particularly for her part as Miss Marple in Agatha Christie's murder mysteries. Sadly she suffered from tuberculosis and the existing balcony at **no.2** was built at her request to alleviate her night sweats. Rosalie Shann and her daughter Mandy Bruce arrived later and were both highly regarded journalists working for the News of the World and London Evening News respectively. **No. 6a** was originally owned by Henry Wells who also owned no. 31 Denmark Road. These two houses have identical porches and 6a St John's Road was numbered as 32 Denmark Road. However, in the middle of the 20th century this house was bought by a doctor who wished his surgery to be more accessible for his patients, so moved the front door round the corner to St John's Road or Avenue as it was then known. **No. 7** arrived later in the 1920s, the largest house in the road and situated opposite the church on what appears to have been the last area of substantial open green land.

The Church

This fine red brick church of St John the Baptist is the only building on the southern side of St John's Road and is of significance. As a result of the expanding population in the area, Canon Haygarth, the Rector of St Mary's, thought another church in the district would be a good idea. He launched a competition in 1867 to find the best design for the best price. Funds were not adequate so the designs were returned and a makeshift corrugated iron church was bought from St John's Battersea for £1,200 complete with font, pulpit, reading desk and altar! However in 1872 the designs were reintroduced and Thomas Jackson aged 37 was selected and the work was authorised. Jackson, who was later made a Baronet, was a pupil of Sir George Gilbert Scott and a friend of William Morris and is acclaimed for many works in Oxford and also for saving Winchester Cathedral from near destruction. He came to live in Wimbledon in Eagle House, which he restored, and he built the War Memorial. St John the Baptist Church was consecrated in 1875. It has some lovely mosaics in the Chancel, a window designed by Edward Burne-Jones, a fine pulpit, and over the striking North Porch, a beautiful but eroded sculpture of St John baptising Jesus. On entering the porch the steep steps down symbolise the descent into the waters of baptism, a feature of churches dedicated to St John the Baptist. Jackson added the rood screen in 1910. The red brickwork was painted in the 1930s which brightened the church. The organ dates from 1904.



Compiled by members of St John's Area Residents' Association (SJARA)