

# THE HOUSES OF HOOK HEATH

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Writing in *Rambles in Surrey* in 1910, J Charles Cox, noted about Hook Heath that 'the first house built on this now popular and rapidly growing site was one called Hook Hill, erected in 1893 by the late Mr H F Cox, brother of the writer of these rambles, who included in the grounds on the slope of the hill a grand and famous old beech-tree, with much copsewood, bracken and thickets left in their wild state; it is now the property of the Duke of Sutherland'. He concluded with the note that 'this noble tree, alas, fell victim to a storm in December 1909', although happily the house survived.

The house, now divided into two and known as Whinfield and Brockhurst, was designed by the architect Horace Field, who later built South Hill in Hook Heath Road for himself. Henry Fisher Cox was the editor of the 'Examiner' a liberal leaning weekly paper and a writer on improvements for agricultural labourers. I wonder therefore, what he would have thought of the poor agricultural labourers who would have lost out when the Necropolis Company enclosed Hook Heath in the mid 1850's – or perhaps he was blissfully unaware when he bought his little eight acre plot!

Whilst Hook Hill was being built the Woking Golf Course was being developed, the first of several inland 'golf links' that were to be constructed in this area. The New Zealand followed just two years later with the nine-hole Sheerwater course in 1898, West Byfleet in 1906, Worplesdon in 1908 and finally West Hill in 1909. It was followed in 1905 by the Woking Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club (in Pine Road) – another sporting attraction for those wishing to buy a property in the area.

The Necropolis Company marketed the Hook Heath estate as suitable for mansions or cottages for both the rich or people of moderate means.

A later guide by the London Necropolis Company pointed out the benefits of purchasing a property at Hook Heath.

"Approached by a gentle hill from Woking Station, the heath stands high and dry, covered with a glorious carpet of white and purple heather and sheltered with picturesque clusters of pines, commanding such a view of hill and dale as only Surrey can present.

Right before us lie the famous Hogs Back and

Leith Hill forming a panorama of exquisite charm, while on every side are masses of golden gorse, broom and bracken which must delight every lover of nature.

Through roads have been made they have more the appearance of a well kept drive. Where land has been enclosed, gorse or holly forms the fence. No tree that can possibly be spared has fallen yet and shops and public houses, reading rooms and concert halls, are things unknown in the neighbourhood.

South Hill was built by and for the architect Horace Field who designed several houses in the area.



The most pious care in fact has been expended to preserve the natural charm of this lovely spot and the land has only been sold by the company on conditions that make any building outrage absolutely impossible.

The agent of the estate has laid down certain broad lines which, while making Hook Heath sites equally desirable purchases for the rich or people of moderate means, will preserve it for many years as a delight for those whose refinement revolts at the sordid results of modern building schemes.

In fact the line has been rigidly drawn at that absolute abomination the suburban villa, and there are many who will be thankful to know that they can come and build either a mansion or a cottage with no fear of their neighbours surrounding them with rows of jerry-built dwellings.

It must not be thought that only mansions are permissible on Hook Heath. On the contrary the writer was shown here one of the most delightful cottages that could be imagined.

Although still in the builders hands it was possible to see what a charming home such a cottage would afford, with its sloping red tiled roof, latticed windows, wrought iron door latches and cosy window seats. The whole, set in a delightfully rustic garden, forming an ideal abode for a young married couple.

To such as these Hook Heath should prove irresistible and the bridegroom who has £500 to invest can borrow say £1,000 from the London Necropolis Company and in a few years find himself the absolute owner of his house and garden in a neighbourhood continually increasing in value".

The development of Hook Heath even spilled down into the valley at Saunders Lane where in 1900 Saracens Lair was built, whilst on the hill above it the famous architect Edwin Lutyens built Fishers Hill for his wife's sister and her husband, the Lady Elizabeth (Betty) Balfour and the Hon. Gerald Balfour, M.P.

One of the attractions for the Balfour's was membership of the Woking Golf Club where Gerald's brother, Arthur, was to become captain of the club in 1904 (although perhaps his 'job' as Prime Minister interfered a little with his handicap)!

Woking's easy transport links to Waterloo (and therefore Westminster) appears to have attracted a number of politicians to the area. Little Frankley on Hook Heath, another house designed by Horace Field is said to have been named after the ancestral home of Alfred Lyttleton in Warwickshire. He was the M.P. for Warwick & Leamington, but was also an avid sportsman, playing cricket and football for England. Apparently when his neighbour Gerald Balfour was asked what he thought of the house he gave the obvious reply of 'frankly little'!

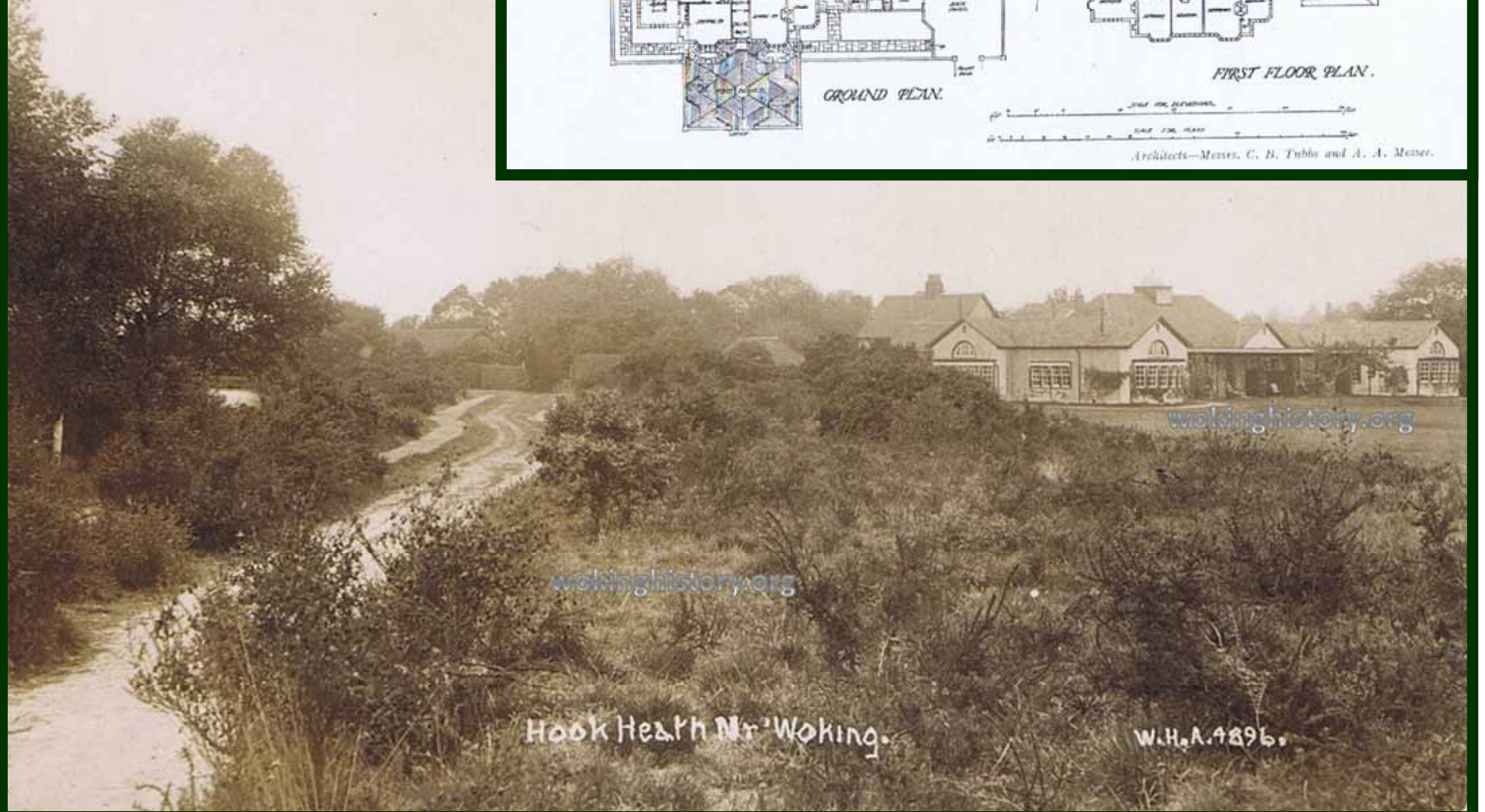
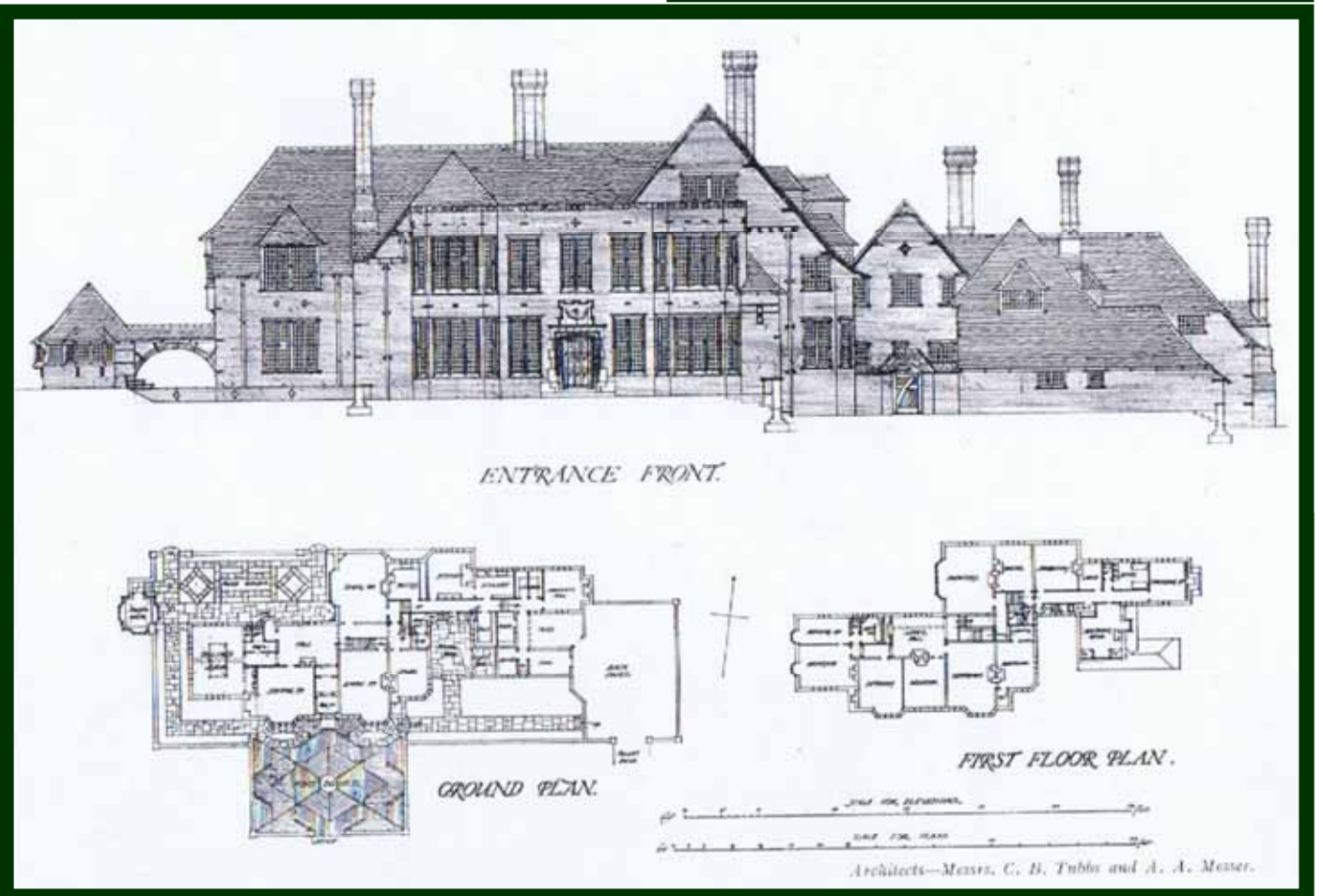
Horace Field designed a number of other properties on Hook Heath including Gorse Hill Cottage (1903) and Hook Hill Cottage (1904) for Edith Cox.

The well-known local builder, W.G. Tarrant built several properties in the area including 'Hembury Knowle' in Hook Heath Road, 'Homewood' in Pond Road (1897), and 'Corner Cottage' in Firbank Lane (1923). Other large properties in the area were constructed by another local building firm – W. Drowley & Co – who built Little Widbury, Hurstgate, High Housen, and Woodside in Hook Heath Road and Lingdown, The Links and Comeragh Court in Golf Club Road.

Some of these have now been divided, whilst others, unfortunately, have been demolished to make way for new housing development, such as Comeragh Court which was used by Surrey County Council as a sanatorium for a short time in the 1950's before it was demolished to make way for Comeragh Close.

Comeragh Court, like a number of large 'Tarrant Style' houses, was actually built by W Drowley & Co, of Church Street in Woking.

Membership of the Golf Club (and later the Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club) was part of the attraction of a home in Hook Heath.



## MR INGRAM'S SINKING FEELING & MR MOBBS DEFEATS THE SNOBS

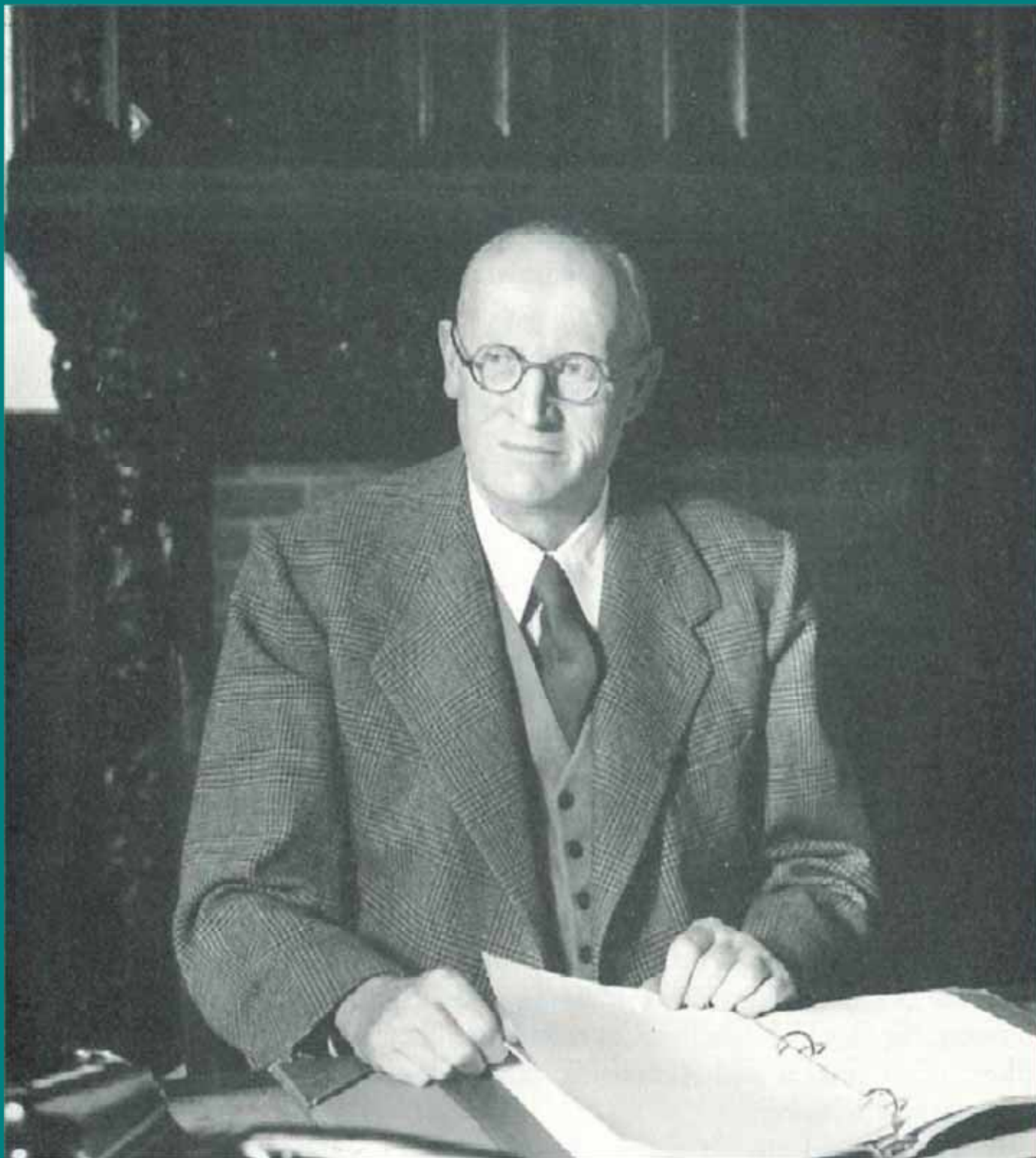
In 1910 a successful insurance underwriter called John Ingram decided to build himself a grand mansion on Hook Heath. It was called Gorse Hill and was designed by Edward Prioleau Warren, who was according to some reports 'much influenced by the style of Sir Edwin Lutyens'.

Mr Ingram's speciality was apparently in underwriting insurance on transport, in particular shipping, and one of his clients was the prestigious White Star Line.

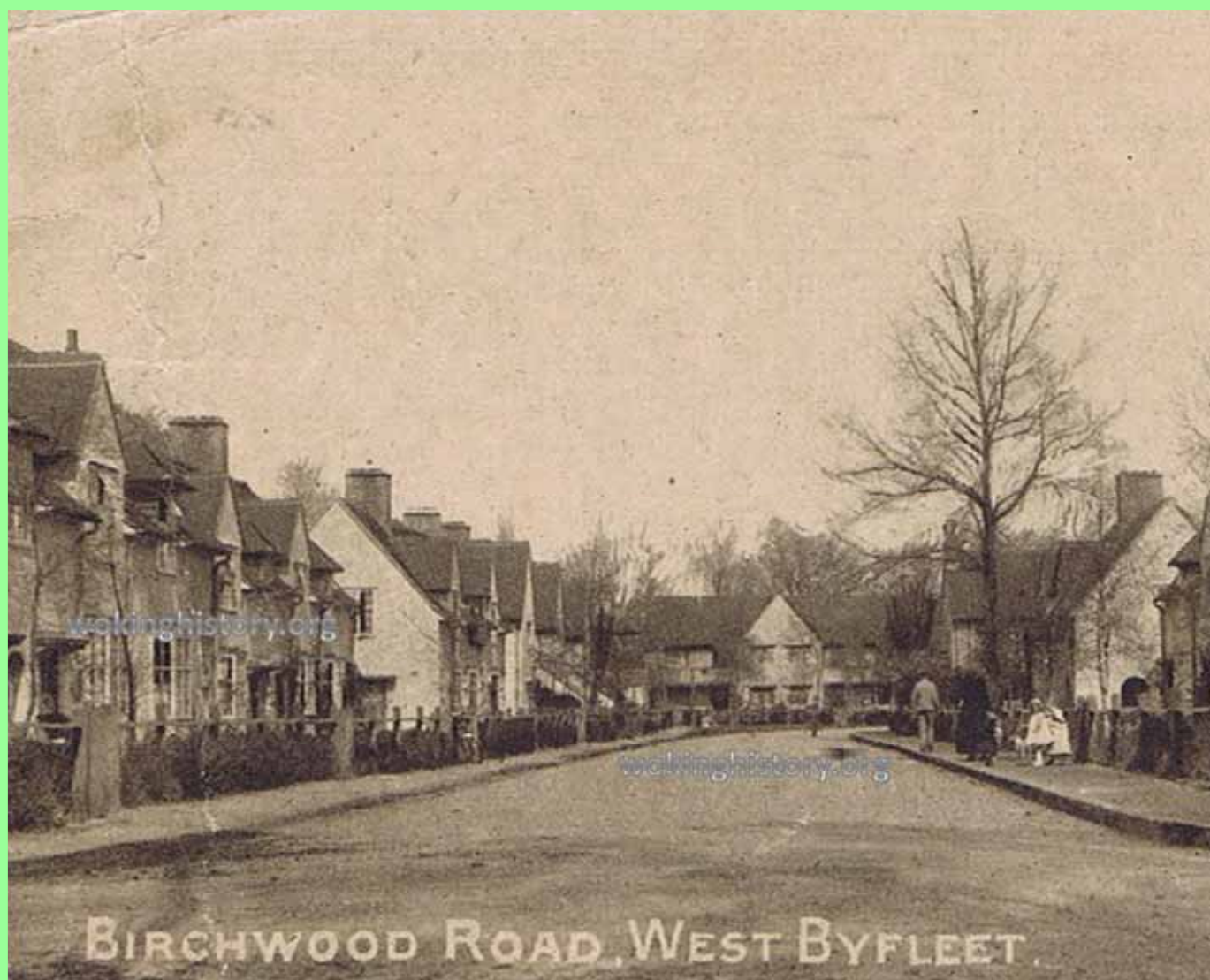
In 1912 he was probably rubbing his hands in glee when he helped to insure their latest 'unsinkable' ship, but very shortly after his glee must have turned to despair when the 'Titanic' hit its iceberg! Gorse Hill was eventually sold, although whether that was to help cover some of his losses, I do not know.

The house overlooked Woking Golf Club and apparently came with almost automatic membership – except for the next owner, a gentleman called Noel Mobbs (right). It was rumoured that he had made his fortune as a 'scrap metal dealer', but worse than that it appears that he was actually a sort of second-hand car salesman!

The Golf Club's refusal to allow such a man to join apparently prompted him to later buy his own course in Buckinghamshire, and the ire of the Woking members was probably made worse after the Great War when he set up the massive Slough Trading Company, and gained a knighthood for his service to industry (after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War).



## THE BIRCHWOOD TENANT COMPANY



Whilst the large houses of Hook Heath were being built, in 1910 at West Byfleet another estate that now has Conservation Area status was also being constructed by a company formed by the wealthy local oil-baron, Frederick Cornelius Stoop.

It was not exactly on the same scale as the 'Necropolis' estate at Hook Heath, nor Mr Stoop's early property venture in West Byfleet at Dartnell Park (on land that his wife had apparently inherited), but the clientele of the Birchwood Tenant Company were slightly different.

These were built for the workers of the area, long before the local authority or 'housing associations' stepped in to build affordable homes for local people.

According to the Council's listing the architects of the scheme were 'Messrs Barry Parker and Raymond of Hampstead' (for which I assume they mean Richard Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin – designers of both the Letchworth Garden City and the Hampstead Garden Suburb) and built by Messrs Moss and Sons of Loughborough'.