

In a series of guided Heritage Walks around Woking, and in these articles, we investigate the stories behind H G Wells' famous science-fiction novel

## 'The War of the Worlds'

Iain Wakeford 2016

# CHAPTER ONE - THE EVE OF THE WAR

In *'The Eve of the War'* we learn that the war happened early in the twentieth century, with the Narrator recalling the events six years after *'the storm burst upon us'*.

He talks of lights being observed on Mars that were probably the casting and firing of a great gun sending ten cylinders to earth.

He recalls that *'during the opposition of 1894 a great light was seen on the illuminated part of the disc'*, and notes that *'I might not have heard of the eruptions at all had I not met Ogilvy, the well-known astronomer, at Ottershaw'*.

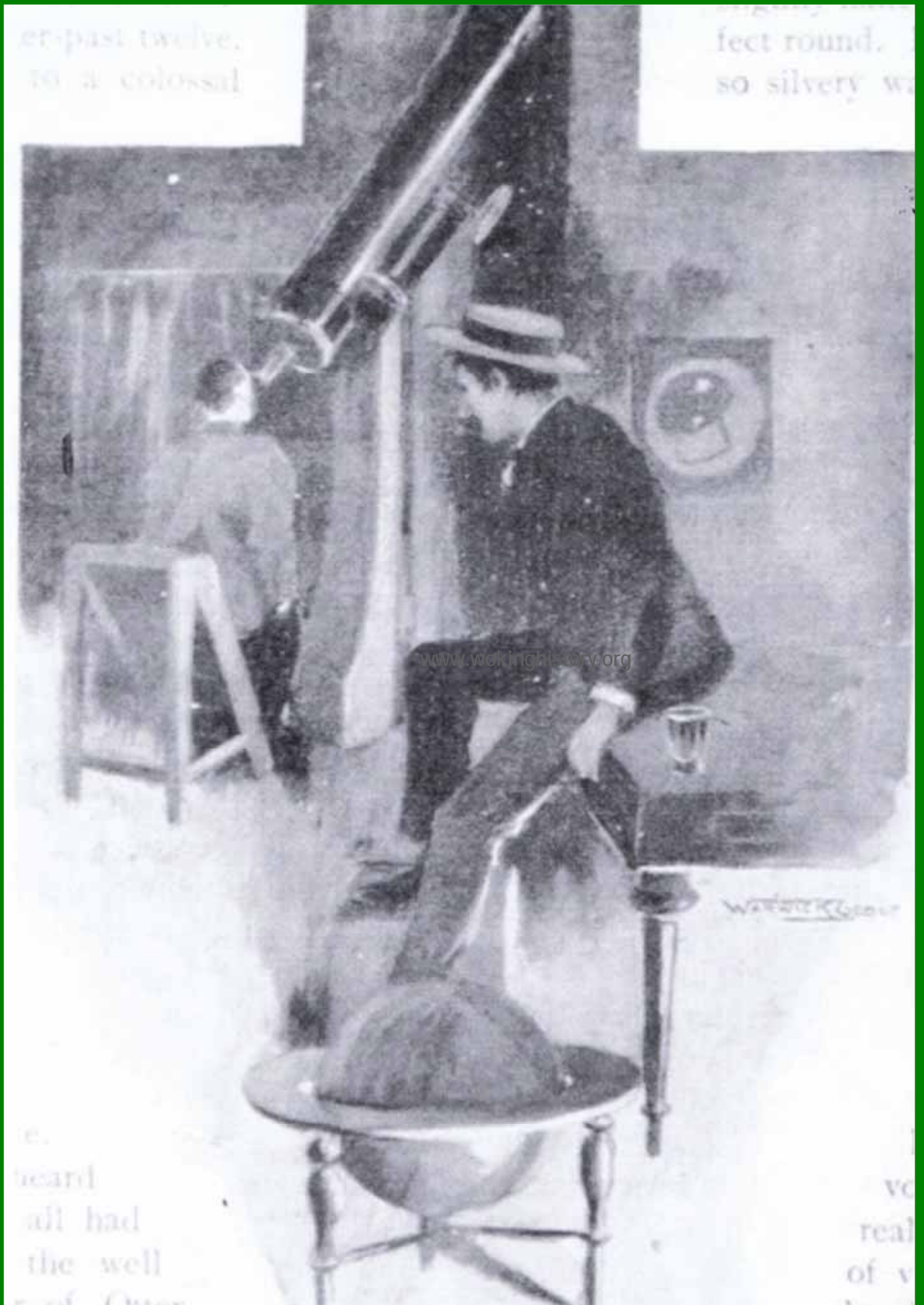
Ogilvy invited the Narrator to *'take a turn with him that night in a scrutiny of the red planet'*, the two walking up from Ogilvy's house to the *'black and silent observatory'* where *'down below in the darkness were Ottershaw and Chertsey and all their hundreds of people, sleeping in peace'*.

It is clear from later descriptions that Ogilvy also had a clear view of Horsell Common, which narrows the search for his home down to four possible locations. Unfortunately none have apparently ever had an observatory (or a 'well-known' resident astronomer), so it is impossible to be certain which was the house Wells was envisaging as Ogilvy's, but I believe Queenswood on the road from Ottershaw towards Chobham is the most likely candidate.

Its owner and occupier was Robert Henry Otter (from about 1885 until his death in 1914), who would have been in his late fifties at the time that Wells was in Woking. Whether Otter had an interest in astronomy (or whether he and Wells ever met), I have no idea.

The other three 'candidates' for Ogilvy's house are Ottershaw Vicarage, Ottershaw Park and Foxhills, but there are certainly no records of the Vicar (Rev Baron Hitchen), having an interest in star gazing, nor of Lawrence James Baker at Ottershaw Park or Major General Edward Thomas Henry Hutton at Fox Hills having a telescope. Indeed Hutton was probably not even in the country at that time as he was commandant of the military forces in New South Wales (1893-6).

Apart from Queenswood best matching the criteria of being able to view Ottershaw and Chertsey *'down below in the darkness'* as well as Horsell Common, my other reason for thinking that it was probably Ogilvy's house is what could best be described as the 'Goldilocks Theory'. The Vicarage looks too small to have an observatory and both Ottershaw Park and Foxhills look too grand to be the home of Ogilvy!



The Vicarage (left) was probably too small to have been Ogilvy's house, whilst Ottershaw Park (below as it would have looked in Wells' time - before being rebuilt in the early 20th century) and Foxhills (right - now a Golf and Country Club) would probably have been too large.

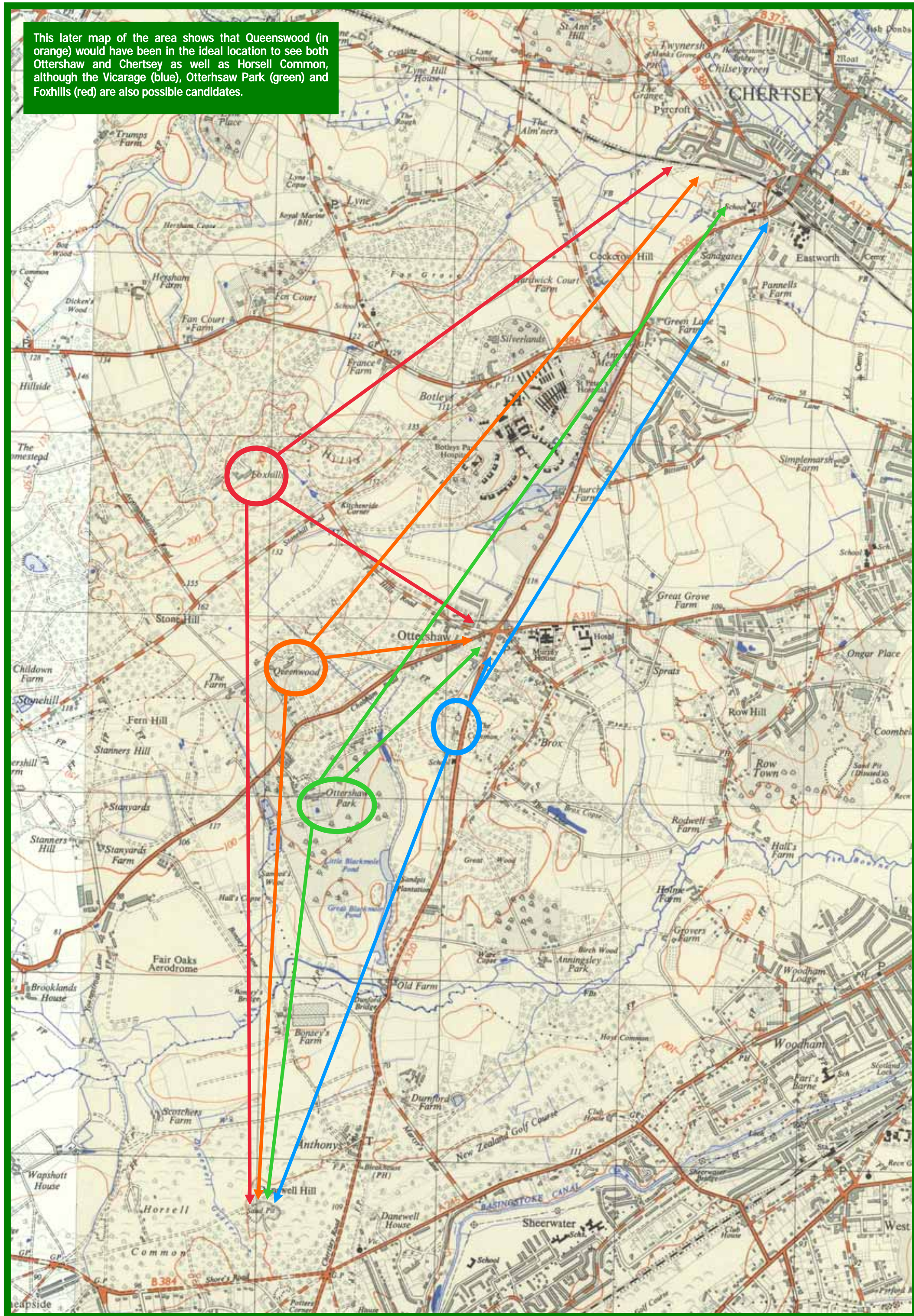
This illustration from Pearsons Magazine shows Ogilvy and the Narrator in Ogilvy's observatory at Ottershaw, looking at Mars through his telescope.

There are no records of any houses in Ottershaw having an observatory at that time.

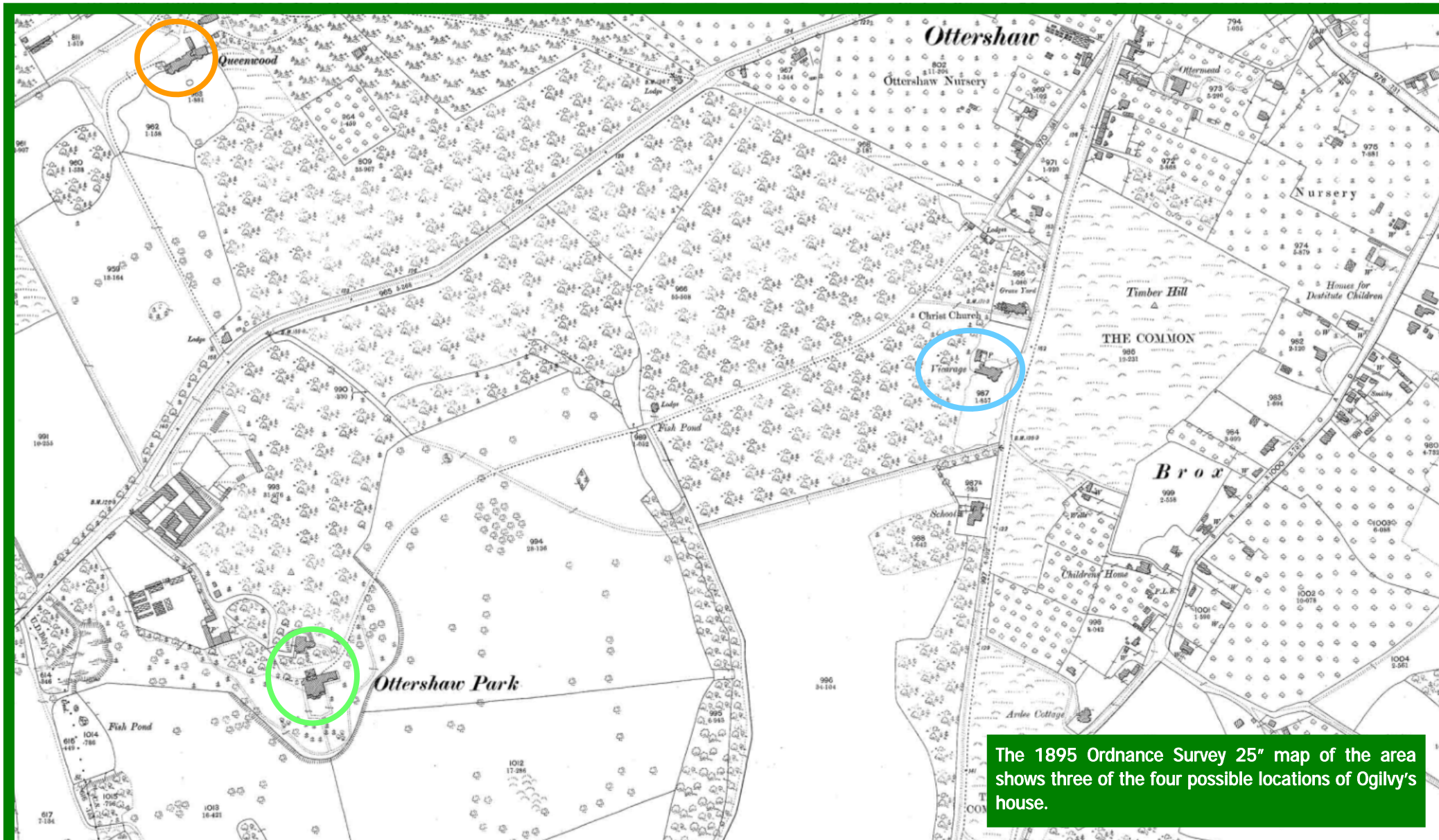




This later map of the area shows that Queenswood (in orange) would have been in the ideal location to see both Ottershaw and Chertsey as well as Horsell Common, although the Vicarage (blue), Ottersaw Park (green) and Foxhills (red) are also possible candidates.







Meanwhile, back in Woking, Wells concludes the first chapter of the story with the Narrator going for a night-time walk with his wife sometime just before the first cylinder landed.

*'It was a warm night. Coming home, a party of excursionists from Chertsey or Isleworth passed us singing and playing music. There were lights in the upper windows of the houses as the*

*people went to bed. From the railway station in the distance came the sound of shunting trains, ringing and rumbling, softened almost into melody by the distance. My wife pointed out to me the brightness of the red, green and yellow signal lights, hanging in a framework against the sky. It seemed so safe and tranquil'.*

Unfortunately I have not managed to find a contemporary view of the signalling at Woking Station (the closest is the one on the insert below), but for Wells and his wife living in Maybury Road the sound of the trains would have been more than familiar - they would have been 'ringing and rumbling' right opposite their front room windows!

