

## **U3A Bikers Wimbledon, Morden Hall and the Wandle Friday 19 January 2024**

The large response to the Ride notice showed that Group members were keen to get out on two wheels again after the Festive Season.

We met at Herne Hill Station to catch the Thameslink train to Wimbledon Station where we were joined by one other rider to complete the group of 15, here assembled on the station forecourt.



Escaping the busy centre of Wimbledon, we headed down a side road, led by Mary who had diligently researched this ride.

The route continued alongside the railway line for quite some distance, interrupted by one junction with traffic that needed to be negotiated with some care before emerging in the vicinity of Raynes Park.

A cycle lane provided a good route along Kingston Road and on to Dundonald Church, our coffee stop.



This is a Reformed Evangelical church housed in a new building, opened just two years ago. Conveniently, the church runs The Coffee House.

There is no price list; you make a donations to the coffee shop which is in the foyer of the building. There is cycle parking just outside.



Along quiet suburban roads of Raynes Park we made good progress and arriving at the busy A297 we crossed on lights into Morden Hall Park.

The park has been a popular destination for the group over the years, and usually we head directly to the National Trust café but we have seldom explored it.

So, on this occasion we took the opportunity to do a circuit of the park, and along part of the River Wandle.



The river was used at one time to power a mill powered by the watermill. This has been restored, although it no longer drives the mill. In Victorian times it was used to grind tobacco, to make snuff.

The café was busy but a couple of tables were available and we were soon enjoying baked potatoes, soup (sadly not home-made) or home-prepared sandwiches.



The route back was across the park, crossing the tramway tracks by a large building with the banner "Trinitarian Bible Society" on it. As Mark remarked, the religious theme continued...



From here we followed along the route of the Wandle, pausing to look at some information boards about the river.

The four boards gave details about:

- \* Birds (cormorant, Kingfisher, grey wagtail, grey heron);
- \* Fish (eels, stickleback, brown trout);
- \* Pollution and work to clean it up;
- \* Historical landmarks along the river (Wandsworth Gas Company, Surrey Iron Railway, Williamson's Dye Works, the Upper Mill, and All Saints Church).

Just before crossing the A24, there was Merton Abbey Mills, a former textile factory near the site of Merton Abbey, and now the home of a number of small retailers.

Here too is a watermill; this one has also been restored, and today it was turning quite quickly, driven by a good flow of water down the river.

Just before arriving at Merton High Street, we passed the original site of the William Morris factory, with a commemorative plaque to mark its location.

At this site were produced carpets, tapestries, printed fabrics, and stained glass, in the patterns still well-loved today. The works continued after Morris's death (1896) and finally closed in 1940.

We left the Wandle at busy Earlsfield and proceed to climb, each at their own pace, up Magdalen Road, past austere HMP Wandsworth, and across Wandsworth and Clapham Commons and so back to Brockwell Park, the end of the ride.

*Ride Leader: Mary Burke*

*Time: about 5 hours.*

*Distance cycled: 18 miles.*

*Riders: Alex Murdock. Andrew Burke.. Chris Booth.. Daniela Walther. David Rosenfeld. Denise Davies. Irene Rosenfeld. Jane Antos. Jane Evans. John Clements. John Davies.. Julia Carter. Mark Stones. Martin Dale. Mary Burke*

*Acknowledgement: source material from Wikipedia*

*Report by John Clements, 22 January 2024*



## Notes

**The River Wandle** is a tributary of the River. With a total length of about 9 miles, the river passes through the London Boroughs of Croydon, Sutton, Merton, to meet the Thames at Wandsworth. A short headwater - the Caterham Bourne - is in Surrey, the historic county of the river's catchment. Other tributaries of the Wandle include the River Wrythe and the Norbury Brook. The name Wandle is thought to derive from a back-formation of Wandsworth (Old English "Wendlesworth" meaning "Wendle's Settlement"). The Wandle Trail follows the course of the river from Croydon to Wandsworth.

**Merton Abbey Mills** is a former textile factory near the site of the medieval Merton Priory which was established in AD1117. Thomas Becket, later Archbishop of Canterbury, and Walter de Merton, founder of Merton College Oxford, were both educated at Merton Priory. The priory was surrendered to the crown in 1538 during the Dissolution under Henry VIII. Although most of its buildings were demolished, some remained standing. The site became known as "Merton Abbey" in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The River Wandle drove watermills and provided water for a number of industrial processes in Merton. Merton Abbey Mills were established by Huguenot silk throwers in the early eighteenth century; there were already textile works nearby dating from 1667. The Abbey was restructured for textile printing in the early nineteenth century and was acquired by the artist and textile designer William Morris in June 1881 as the site of the workshop of Morris & Co. The various buildings were soon adapted for stained glass making, textile printing, and fabric, tapestry, and carpet-weaving. Morris refused to destroy existing buildings, and adapted them or built new ones. Morris employed former Spitalfields silk weavers at Merton Abbey to produce hand-woven textiles, and used the gardens to grow dye plants and the water of the River Wandle to dye and rinse his fabrics.

Liberty & Co. had been involved with the site since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as their popular ranges of fabrics for dress and furniture were nearly all made there by Littler and Co, Morris's immediate neighbours to the south. In 1904 Liberty & Co took over the Littler site, and then in 1940 the Morris facilities as well. They continued to operate the Merton Abbey Mills until 1972, and textile production was continued by other firms until 1982.

During World War II part of the site was used to construct gun-turrets for the Bristol Blenheim fighter-bomber.

Today Merton Abbey Mills is a crafts market and the site of a summer theatre and music festival called "Abbeyfest". A number of buildings from the Morris period, and even earlier, survive, and there are displays on the history of the site. A water-mill still turns in the summer, and the "colour-house", a mid-18<sup>th</sup> century industrial building is now a children's theatre. The water-mill and colour house are both Grade II listed buildings.