

U3A Bikers
Windmills.... and a Spy-catcher
Friday 16th February 2024

This ride proved to be a popular one and, exceptionally, we were able to accommodate all 21 riders who had signed up.

With the assistance of a passing park visitor we were able to capture for posterity the moment that the group was assembled at Brockwell Lido - in good order! – and ready to ride.



Out of the park and up Brixton Water Lane, we set out in three separate groups, each with a group leader who was familiar with the route across Clapham and Wandsworth Common and the back streets of Wandsworth

Our first windmill was but a short ride away, in Brixton. This was built in 1816 and leased in 1817 to the Ashby family who produced stoneground wholemeal flour.

The mill worked by wind until 1862, when new buildings around it reduced the available wind and the business was transferred to a watermill at on the River Wandle.

In 1902, the lease on the watermill expired and the windmill was again used, powered by a steam engine and, later, a gas engine. The windmill supplied wholemeal flour to West End hotels and restaurants.

The mill was restored in 1964, and with the support of the Friends of Windmill Gardens it has been preserved. It's a four-storey brick tower mill with a boat shaped cap with four sails ; the cap is turned by a hand wheel.

The mill is working, sometimes under wind power and flour is being produced for sale. See:
<https://www.brixtonwindmill.org/>



Brixton Mill (Irene Skiadopoulou)

Then we were on our way to Clapham Common and the next windmill – well, the site of an earlier one. What is here is the Windmill Inn. A mill and a house once stood on or near the site of today's pub first mentioned in a lease of 1631 but they may have been in existence long before that time.

The Windmill Inn is first recorded in the early 18th century and the present building dates from about 1790. It was used as a coaching inn, probably from the 1750s until the railway era in the 1840s and 1850s. The inn was built well off the main road and so has not suffered from road widening.

Leaving the inn, we cycled along Windmill Drive on to Wandsworth Common for coffee at the Skylark Café.

It being half-term, the café was very busy with mums and children. The sun was out and so most of the group sat outside. After coffee we walked our cycles past the bowling green along a footpath to visit the Royal Victoria Patriotic Building (or Asylum).

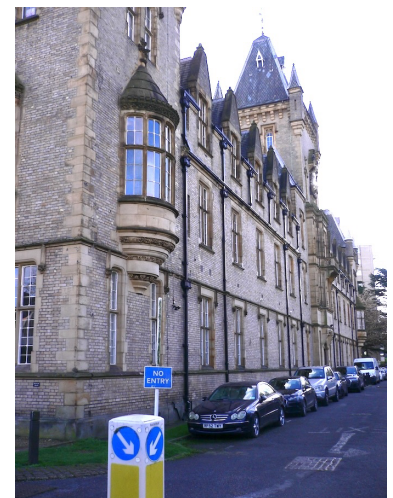
This is a Grade II* listed building, built for the 'Education and Training of three hundred Orphan Daughters of Soldiers, Seamen and Marines who perished in the Russian (Crimean) War ...'

It was designed in "a heroically ornate Gothic Revival style combining Scottish Baronial and French Châteauesque"; the foundation stone was laid by Queen Victoria in 1857 and the first phase was completed in 1858.

The orphans lived in hard conditions; they had to pump water up to the tanks in the building's towers, do all the washing, and be washed outside in cold water while being trained for domestic service.

During WW1, it became the South Western General Hospital, with a temporary railway station built in front of it and thousands of wounded troops treated (about 1800 patients at any one time). After the war, the girls' school reopened until the pupils were evacuated to Wales in 1939.

During WW2, the building was taken over by MI5, and became the London Reception Centre, where 34,000 civilians arriving from occupied Europe were questioned in order to identify potential spies and to gather intelligence. Fewer than 300 were detained further, with 50 confirmed as agents.



Even though the vast majority of those who were questioned were not spies, the information obtained from them on military and civilian matters in occupied territory was useful for many branches of government, as well as being used to challenge the cover stories of spies. One famous MI5 interrogator was the 'spy-catcher' **Colonel Oreste Pinto**.

After WW2, it was used as a Teachers Training College till 1952 and then as Honeywell Secondary Mixed School. It was restored in 1980s to include halls, as well as 27 flats, 20 studios, 15 workshops and 1 bar & restaurant together with 2 large office units in the Chapel.
See: <http://www.rvpb.com/history.htm> and RVPB photo library

A few minutes ride took us to Wandsworth Common Windmill, the remains of a smock mill constructed in the 1830s by the London and South Western Railway Company to pump water from the adjacent railway cutting of the London and Southampton Railway. The water was pumped into an ornamental lake on the Common known as the Black Sea. The mill was working in 1870; the Black Sea was drained and filled in around 1884. The mill was no longer required and ceased work, and the sails and fantail were removed.

See: <https://www.wandsworthcommon.org/friends-news/2018/4/20/windmill-renovation>

The onward route took us down a cycle path beside busy Trinity Road, and then - with a brief stop to put some more air in a tyre – through a bridge below the railway line on to Tours Passage.

Then it was on past the north side of Clapham Junction Station, and by a succession of back roads we entered Battersea Park. The Pear Tree Café was also busy but there was enough room for all 21 bicycles.

The sun came out and in its warmth we sat at the picnic tables beside the lake to enjoy our lunches. The return ride was past Battersea Power Station, the Patmore Estate, Stockwell and Brixton to Brockwell Park.

A big thank you to Jane, my back marker, and to Denise & John, and Mary & Andrew for guiding the second and third groups.

Finally, some information that may interest you:

Niesje, on a previous ride had alerted us to the fact that when a windmill's sails are at a standstill, their position has a meaning: <https://heavenly-holland.com/position-of-sails/>
<https://www.wandsworthcommon.org/friends-news/2018/4/20/windmill-renovation>



Riders: *Agama Cunningham. Alex Murdock. Andrew Burke. Ann May. Chris Booth. Christine Noon. Daniela Walther. Denise Davies. Irene Rosenfeld. Jane Andrew. Jane Antos. Jane Evans. Joe Antos. John Clements. John Davies. Julia Carter. Julie Stent. Mark Stones. Martin Dale, Mary Burke, Roman Bednarz.*

Ride leader: John Clements
Report by John, 17 February 2024

Notes:

List of London windmills: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_windmills_in_London#C_-_D

Oreste Pinto was a Dutch counterintelligence officer and Lieutenant-Colonel. His activities during WW2 in which he worked with MI5 interrogating refugees to England, resulted in the capture of eight spies (numbers reported vary!).

In 1952, Pinto published two books, *Spy-catcher* and *Friend or Foe?* (still available). These formed the basis of the 1959-1961 BBC television series "*Spy-catcher*".

Dwight Eisenhower once described Pinto as "the greatest living authority on security". Quite a compliment!

Acknowledgement: source material from Wikipedia