

U3A Bike Rides Windmills.... and a Spy-catcher Tuesday 25th February 2025

Ten of us gathered at Brockwell Lido in preparation for the ride to see a couple of the windmills that remain in the area. The group photograph was taken and we were on our way.



Out of the park and up Brixton Water Lane, we crossed Brixton Hill and turned into Windmill Gardens to find our first windmill.

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 until the construction of new buildings around it reduced the available wind and the mill was abandoned. The business was transferred to a watermill at on the River Wandle.

In 1902, the lease on the watermill expired and the business returned to Brixton; 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. The four-storey brick tower mill with a boat shaped cap with four sails has a cap that is turned by a hand wheel.

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

We set off again, on to Clapham Common and the next windmill – but only the site of an earlier one, near the Windmill Inn and Hotel.

A mill and a house once stood on or near the site of today's pub, first mentioned in a lease of 1631, but it is thought that they may have been in existence long before then. The mill itself may have been moved in about 1650 to Nightingale Lane.



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.

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 ...'

The building is a mish-mash of architectural styles. 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 harsh 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 the 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 up to 50 confirmed as foreign 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**.

Oreste Pinto was a Dutch counterintelligence officer.. 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!

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 a bar & restaurant together with two 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 through a bridge below the railway line on to Tours Passage.

We passed the north side of Clapham Junction Station, and by a succession of back roads we arrived Battersea Park and the Pear Tree Café



The sun came out and in its warmth we sat at the picnic tables beside the lake to enjoy our lunches.

Most of the group headed back with Andrew for the return ride through the Patmore Estate, and on to Brockwell Park. With Daniella and Tacey I headed for Battersea Power Station and a look at Turbine Hall B and its Control Panel; this is open to view but also it now offers audio tours, and a cocktail, at a modest fee.

Finally, some information about windmills 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: *Andrew Burke. Brian Heatley Daniela Walther. Jan Rae. Jane Evans. Jeremy Burke, John Clements. Mark Stones. Patrick Mulhern. Tacey Kobayashi*

Ride leader: John Clements. Report and photos by John, 27February 2025

Notes:

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

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Acknowledgement: *source material from Wikipedia*