



# Joseph Connolly

A monthly diary of sundry observations, brief encounters and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise



■ The grandeur of Fenton House and Burgh House have graced these parts for generations, but what would poet John Keats (below) make of the Hampstead of today?

## Ghost of a chance for this wish list?

The entire page this month is taken up with a dynamite journalistic coup – an absolute first: following years and years of determined pleading, I finally managed to secure an exclusive and unprecedented interview with the Ghost of Hampstead Past.

He constantly walks this earth, but manifests himself only every few hundred years, so you can imagine my excitement. At long last, the father of us all has agreed to share his unique and amazing recollections with readers of the *Ham&High*.

"I am rather fond of the paper," he told me – over a bowl of hot rum punch in the garret of the Spaniards Inn. "Of course, it all seems rather new to me. When you have been around for nearly a thousand years, time ... it plays tricks on you. True of all old people, I suspect."

Looking resplendent in burgundy velvet and long white hair, he easily settled in to his memories. "Originally I was called Harry Hamstede, then that became Homestead ... and Harry, inexplicably, transmogrified into Happy 'Appy 'Ampstead, to the lower orders – all those who didn't attend Highgate School, I suppose: that was founded nearly half my lifetime ago, so it's really quite modern.

Initially I was something of an outcast, in the middle of a field – but then following on from those two rather nasty incidents – Great Plague, Great Fire, you remember... oh no, you won't, of course – well then quite a lot of people began to come to me: my very first taste of popularity. I had

fresh air. It's still not bad, but the motor car did inflict such damage – and particularly in Heath Street.

Then Fenton House was built, and I loved to lodge there – although young Fenton was wholly unaware: already a ghost, you see – it has its uses. Soon after, Burgh House came along – and I must say I just love what they've done with the place. Kenwood was, dare I say, a haunt of mine: adored the pictures – and still I loiter frequently. Should you care for the Rembrandt, you could in your time have passed right through me.

Have you heard of Hatches Bottom ...? Awfully amusing, that. A rather evil swamp just by the Heath. They drained it, you know, and put up houses – early 1800s, I suppose: seems like yesterday. The Vale of Health they called it – that did provoke a chuckle. I never did encounter young Keats, considerably to my regret – but he was here and gone in the merest twinkling.

What else can I tell you? Oh well Fitzjohn's Avenue, of course – that rather changed things because then I was linked to London, as it were. Must have been just before dear Queen Victoria departed this earth. So loved her... though I must say I do love the new queen much, much more. Shakespeare I never knew, because I'm not sure he ever had the good sense to come to me... though Dickens and I were together all the time, of course – very often right in this very spot in the Spaniards. He sensed my presence, I could tell. I do remember that he had a joyous turn of phrase."



I just sat there, entranced by all of this. But what, I asked him, of the twentieth century? He laid down his churchwarden pipe, pulled at his punch, and narrowed his eyes reflectively. "Well now, there's a question. My chief regret is that I began to gather about me these rather hideous excrescences. By which I mean that Kenwood's Robert Adam, say, seemed to have given way to madmen who hardly knew what they were about. The 1930s were not too bad, I suppose ... Isokon, Maxwell Fry and so on ... but oh, that Goldfinger...! The planks and plate glass in Willow Road: awful. Those dreadful tower blocks in Swiss Cottage – with more to come, I hear. Someone called Ted Levy did horrible things to my village... and have you seen those two new houses

at the top of Netherhall Gardens ...? One is wilfully distorted, and the other rather resembles a gas chamber.

And as to the Royal Free... well thus far, I have steadfastly refused to gaze upon it, due to persistently swirling rumours that it does not at all resemble St Paul's... though of course they do sterling work there".

I could see that the Ghost of Hampstead Past was tiring ... but there was more that I need to know: "We have just commenced a brand new year – please do tell me all that you'd like to see".

He sniffed. "Is there more punch?" "As much as you like," I assured him. "And following that – claret and lunch at The Wells, if you like". He nodded with gusto. "Very good, Of course I remember The Wells when all you could get there was water... Very well, then: this is what I want for 2016:

■ The return of small independent shops, let at reasonable rents and with far less rapacious rates. Estate agents and phone shops can be banished to what I believe is called online. The current ludicrous property prices to be slashed by 75 per cent (this to be repeated globally – values are only notional anyway) so that Hampstead people can once again afford to live with me. I am humble – always have been. This new reputation for excess and affluence... it both distresses and embarrasses me.

■ Stop the closure of public houses, and stem the greed. I have lost so many watering holes already: The Cruel Sea, The Horse & Groom, The Coach &

Horses, The Duke of Bohemia, The Rosslyn Arms, Jack Straw's Castle, Ye Olde White Bear ...

■ Hampstead people must no longer be made to *fight* to retain the essentials: libraries, police stations, fire brigades, doctors – these are our right, as civilised rate-paying citizens.

■ The introduction of school buses – to end the clogging of all my streets with Hampstead Tractors. Some call them Chelsea Tractors, but I decline to.

■ A new and first class destination restaurant with a brilliant chef – maybe on the site of the Freemasons in Downshire Hill: garden and parking, what could be better? And an Arts Club, to cater to the returning flood of artists, writers, actors and musicians who will once more be able to afford to be here. Heath House would be eminently suitable ...

■ A total and utter ban on *all* basement excavations: they have disturbed my roots and troubled my soul for far, far too long. This to be twinned with the exile of all 'architects' – or else their entombment in a re-excavated Hatches Bottom.

■ The Coffee Cup should be awarded Grade I listing."

My dear old friend was appearing so very weary by now – I tried for a photograph to illustrate this interview, but all I got was mist. His very outline was blurring into invisibility. Soon, all that was left, hovering before me, was his beatific smile – and then in an instant, he was gone. Gone, but hardly forgotten – because we all just love Happy Hampstead. Don't we?

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel **STYLE** is published by Quercus in hardback and ebook