

**BIRKBECK COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF LONDON  
HISTORY OF ART & ARCHITECTURE**

**Architecture of London's Dwellings 18<sup>th</sup>- 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

**Assignment 2**

**A short history of a terraced townhouse in Beckenham, Kent.**

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**Preamble.**

A characteristic of all three dwellings that my wife Valerie and I have owned is that they have been in leafy settings, in the London Borough of Bromley in the Kentish suburbs of Greater London. For the past 30 years our home has been a terraced townhouse, in a former Victorian suburb, at No. 4, 'The Heights', Foxgrove Road, Beckenham; the name of the estate heralding its locally high position. (See Figure 1)

'Raglan Squire and Partners' designed 'The Heights' estate in the early 1960's with a developer-builder 'Wren Properties Limited'. The most succinct account of the architect Raglan Squire is his obituary ("The Times" 2004), and his autobiography (Squire 1984) that mentions the work of his firm in Beckenham with 'Wren Properties'. <sup>(1)</sup>

**Historic Context.**

The estate's name: 'The Heights' appears to have been taken from the historic fields name used by the owners of Foxgrove Manor that dated back to pre-1350. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the land was acquired by John Cator (1728 – 1806), who owned the adjoining, much larger Beckenham Manor. (Inman and Tomkin 1993 (pp 3 – 26). (See Figure 2).

Cator and his wife built Beckenham Manor, a large stone classically designed mansion in the late 1770's and the building is still a major feature of Beckenham Place Park. This park is a large wooded public open space with a golf course; the mansion being mainly used as the club house (Figure 3). 'The Heights' has a private access gate to the park.

Land was sold to railway operators for housing from 1854 onwards (Figure 4). Initially it was stipulated that the houses, for wealthy people, had to be detached on sites of a minimum of half an acre, with accommodation for servants and carriages, but soon more lines and stations led to the reduction of house sites to a third of an acre. <sup>(2)</sup> A house named "Kinloch" was built on two acres (0.81ha) on what is now the site of our house in circa 1877 (Figure 5). <sup>(3)</sup> At first roads were unmade and properties paid a share of the maintenance. <sup>(4)</sup> According to Inman and Tomkins (p.15): "...the Cator Estate was at one time considered to be the stockbroker belt of South London" (Figure 6). The Cator Estate has remained in family hands until today.

Beckenham has been transformed since about 1960 as Victorian houses were rapidly replaced by blocks of flats and in our case terraces of houses, at 15 to the acre (36 per ha) and upwards (Figures 7 & 8). <sup>(5)</sup> About this time in London, with rising densities, terraced houses for sale started to regain the popularity they once had in previous centuries, but lost in the 1920's (see Muthesius p.11).

**The Architect**

Raglan Squire's set up in sole-practice in 1937, then after World War 2 he was one of the three founders of the firm 'Arcon' (Architectural Consultants) in 1944. This gave Squire his first taste of housing on a large scale, because the firm designed (or should it be 'invented') the temporary but very popular 'Arcon pre-fab'.<sup>(6)</sup> In 1948 he founded 'Raglan Squire and Partners' and during the next 40 years the firm designed: factories, churches, hotels, university buildings and housing all around the world.<sup>(7)</sup>



**Figure 9** Raglan Squire circa 1965

In his autobiography (Squire Op.cit. p. 224 - 228) he recounts how in 1958 his housing estates, were inspired by Eric Lyons and the "Span" housing concept: *".....building and selling really well-designed, good quality housing on selected sites around London"*. Therefore Squire became the major shareholder in "Wren Properties Limited" (named after Christopher Wren). Its first development was in Beckenham at Rectory Green, a scheme which featured in "The Builder" (1961). It was an experimental scheme and the precursor of four other similar projects in the locality, including 'The Heights' all using a terrace house typology with the same plans, details for three storey buildings, laid out around communal green spaces. Each development however has its own distinct character.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **The Heights Estate.**

Originally 'The Heights' estate was a large scheme, divided into three phases, involving the demolition of six detached Victorian properties, 85 to 91 Foxgrove Road. My research suggests that Peter Bond, one of Squire's principal architects, played a major role in the design.<sup>(9)</sup> Our house was in the first phase of 31 houses built on the site of numbers 85 to 87 between 1963 and 1965. The other two phases on the sites of numbers 89 to 91 were built later to much more ordinary designs.<sup>(10)</sup>

The 31 terraced houses on the 'Lower Heights' consists of two rows of eleven and ten three-storey houses, with built-in garages, and a row of ten two-storey houses with a separate garage block. The terraces are laid out around a large communal garden of grass and trees, with each house having its own small private patio garden (Figure 10).

In shape the site is rectilinear and slopes about 18 metres (59 Feet) from north to south and about 5 metres (16 feet) east to west down the steep hill of Foxgrove Road. Because of this topography all the terraces are stepped.

An examination of the historic Ordnance Survey maps shows that 'Kinloch' consisted of a large house and a smaller coach house (Figure 5). It is assumed that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century they became two properties and were numbered - No. 85 with a wide and No. 87 a narrow frontage. The layout of 'The Heights' site was clearly greatly influenced by the original house boundaries, their gardens and tree lines. Several of the original trees are still on the site including two large oaks. These trees may even reflect some of the old field hedges of Foxgrove Farm.

The 31 houses were built between 1963 and 1965, and my house being on the Foxgrove Road frontage was one of the first to be completed. This is the normal practice of developers so that they can attract passers-by.<sup>(11)</sup> The house was first sold in 1965 for £7,800 on a 99 year lease. When we bought it in 1977 it was just under £24,000. Today it has reached at least sixty times the original price and has become freehold under the Leasehold Reform Act.<sup>(12)</sup> A Management Board of elected residents collectively administers the shared obligations on the estate.

#### **Number 4.**

This is a three-storey, flat roofed, terraced house of cross-wall construction, with four bedrooms and a built-in garage. From the outside it is typical of the many three-storey housing developments built in Great Britain during the 1960s (Figure 11). The house is however unusual because its three storeys are actually on six levels due to its ingenious split-level section between front and rear floors, with short stair flights between. With no doors intervening, this generates a dynamic flow of space between the floors, and is probably the house's most appealing architectural feature (Figures 12 & 13).

The split level means that the fronts of the 3 storey terraces are half a storey lower than the rear. For most of the houses, this follows the slopes of the site with front and rear gardens being at different levels. For No. 4, the front door and garage are approached down a slight ramp and the rear garden was originally terraced up the slope. These changes in level which affect all the houses on the Estate, give great variety and subtle individuality to the houses. The original floor plans and sections of No. 4 are illustrated in Figures 14 & 15.

On the 'ground' floor there is a garage, entrance hall and cloakroom with a half level up to a dining - kitchen area; below this area, at the same level as the garage, is a cellar about a metre high accessible from the garage and the garden. Some of cellars on the estate are high enough to stand up in. On the 'first' floor, across the front of the house is a living room with half level up to a bedroom and a bathroom. Finally the 'second' floor has two bedrooms at the front with up half a level to the main bedroom at the rear.<sup>(13)</sup>

The houses had a very high quality finishes for their time, hardwood veneered doors, good quality sanitary fittings and satin anodised aluminium ironmongery. All the load bearing walls are dry-lined with plaster board on battens, and the original kitchen fittings are now a collectors' piece.<sup>(14)</sup>

Externally the houses are faced in two types of brick and tiles. The front elevation has 'Lingfield Crowhurst' 'Dark Rustic' facing bricks on the ground floor and 'London Brick

Company' 'Dapple Lights' above (Figure 11), the rear elevation using the latter bricks on the lower floors with 'Redland' slate grey fishtail hanging tiles to the top floor (Figure 16). These tiles are also used to face the clear-storey on the front elevation. There is thus an unusual reversal of colour combination between front and rear. All the windows were originally bespoke timber casements, some almost spanning the width of each house at first floor level. The windows are vertically aligned and the front elevation has a classical touch, with its main living space at first floor level over the plinth like ground floor of dark brick and garage doors.

Architecturally 'The Heights' has a distinctive and organic quality. This is due to the site's topography, which has generated a stepped form in the buildings, and the now mature landscape especially the canopy of large trees which complement the buildings (Figure 17). This is particularly true of the front terrace, which in summer is almost covered in Virginia creeper.

## **Conclusion**

With passing years most of the houses have undergone modernisation. However, the tight management regulations governing the actions of residents, even though the houses are now all freehold, have controlled the external appearance. Some timber windows have been replaced by plastic, but the design and proportions have been retained, all timberwork remains white, garages doors dark olive green and the front doors are all original. Unlike some other local Wren developments which have extensive individual changes, this uniformity gives a sense of quality, stability and communality that adds considerable architectural value and grace to the estate. In my view, if the estate maintains this standard, it could in the future be listed, an accolade that would be a credit to Raglan Squire and to all those who have lived at 'The Heights' over the years.

## **End Notes**

(1) These sources have provided much of the detail for this essay, which has been partly confirmed in a conversation with Harold Morris an architect employed by the firm since 1955. The firm is still operating in a small way in Broadway, Worcestershire.

(2) The railways, as elsewhere in London, were a catalyst for change. Three stations were built within 20 minutes walk of where our house is now located, serving different parts of central London. Inman & Tonkin (1993) describe how Beckenham Junction (1857) serving Victoria and the West End, New Beckenham (1864) serving Charing Cross, Cannon Street, London Bridge and the City of London, and

Ravensbourne Station (1892) serving Blackfriars (today also carrying the 'Thames Link') were built, and the consequences. Foxgrove Farm which had replaced the 15<sup>th</sup> century moated Foxgrove Manor House in 1830 was itself demolished for housing around 1870. Fortunately, the Ordnance Survey had made a detailed map of the area in 1861, and this shows many of the farmland properties. Because of the improved accessibility and growing population the Cator Estate also quickly developed its land in the Beckenham Town Centre (then a village) for commercial premises.

(3) Other than Foxgrove Farm, no houses are shown in the Foxgrove Road area on the 1861 O.S. map, but seven properties, east of Westgate Road, on large sites are shown on Kelly's map of 1895. The first reliably scaled O.S. map found with these seven properties shown is a 1912 O.S. map. Comparing these with the street directories of Kelly, and Strong of 1878 and 1879, the map shows a large house and a stables on a 2 acre (0.81ha) site, named "Kinloch", where No. 4 'The Heights' is now sited. Some residents were also naming this part of the road as 'Upper Foxgrove Road'.

(4) The unmade roads and woody areas were regarded as maintaining a rural character. It is said locally that even after the end of the Second World War virtually the whole of the Cator Estate was still served by unmade roads. There are still a few today, including the next roads parallel to 'The Heights' boundaries - Westgate Road (north) and The Avenue (east).

(5) Currently, under the London Borough of Bromley Unitary Development Plan (2006), residential densities of up to 150 flats per ha (60 flats per acre) are now permissible in this locality

(6) The Arcon partners were a triumvirate of Rodney Thomas, Edric Neel and Raglan Squire. Neel was a brilliant young architect who tragically died in his mid-thirties; he was probably the one who conceived the 'Arcon' temporary house of which 39,000 were built between 1945 and 1949. Some were still in use in 2000. (See Squire pp 94 – 116 and 'The Times').

(7) The firm's strong background in housing was probably founded on its remodelling of all the houses around Eaton Square in 1948, converting them into flats for the Grosvenor Estate. Before the War, 90% had been single family houses with servants' quarters (ibid. pp. 116 - 121).

(8) According to Squire (ibid. pp. 227 - 228) around 1960 when he first became interested in the Beckenham area, he met Anthony Chitty an old friend who was planning consultant to Beckenham Council. With Chitty's encouragement he produced what became the Council's formal "Proposed Development Plan for the Cator Estate 1961". This became Squire and 'Wren Property's' passport to the eventual development of some 200 houses over the next five years, at densities of 10 -15 dwellings per acre (24-36 per ha.), on the sites of Victorian houses.

(9) From his autobiography one obtains the impression that by the 1960's Squire was involved mainly obtaining commissions, overseas projects and the management of his firm and 'Wren Properties'. Squire admits (ibid. p. 258) that by 1967: *"Perhaps I had become too divorced from the drawing board during the years of my success. An architect should never let this happen."* Harold Morris also told me that one of the firm's long-serving principal architects, Peter Bond, was project manager of the Beckenham developments and it is likely that he therefore played the primary role in the design of 'The Heights', albeit using a house typology that had been developed earlier.

(10) Apparently Wren Properties started to have financial difficulties because, it is rumoured by residents, the firm had spent too much money on the first phase of 'The Heights' and could not continue with the project. Wren Properties finally overreached itself on another very large project in Blackburn, and in 1968 went bankrupt. (See Squire pp. 247-249). A firm of this name still operates in northern England.

(11) Local residents have told me that the show house (No.1) was furnished with advice by Barbara Kelly, actress wife of the Canadian comedian Bernard Braden. Their radio programme "Breakfast with Braden", was popular in the 1950 to 60's.

(12) The estate is managed by 'The Heights (Management) No.1 Ltd', with a Board of residents (of which I was once Chairman). This is responsible for collecting maintenance fees and supervising the upkeep of the common parts. The current value owes much to its location and the local environment. Not only is it within 200 metres of St Mary's RC Primary School (the best performing primary in Bromley), but also within easy walking distance of Beckenham Town Centre (which still retains some of its village character), and three railway stations serving differing terminals in central London. The new 'Tramlink' to Croydon and Wimbledon also has its terminal at Beckenham Junction. Another feature is that the estate backs onto Beckenham Place Park to which there is a private gate.

(13) Most of the houses on the estate have been altered internally over the past 40 years. In No.4 for example we have removed the high cupboards and serving counter between the kitchen and dining space, and made the area open plan. On the top floor the main bedroom originally had a hand basin. We have installed a private W.C. and hand basin where the airing cupboard was on the landing outside, and may soon install a shower unit to form an en-suite. All of the built-in garages appear to be used for purposes other than a car; ours being a utility room, office archive library and general storage. None of the alterations on the estate however have been allowed to affect the external appearance, due to a strict management policy.

(14) Like many modern flat roof developments using poorly tested new materials, 'The Heights' have suffered from rain penetration. Ours are from lapped bituminous felt on 'Stramit' strawboard (structurally a weak porous board), laid at low falls, with minimal up-stands, and to shared rainwater pipes. The three-story terraces have access to the roofs via a clear-storey window, and the ensuing footfall and flexible strawboard has resulted in the need for frequent repairs, and soon complete replacement. Similar damage problems have been encountered on the two storey terraces, and most frequently on the garages.

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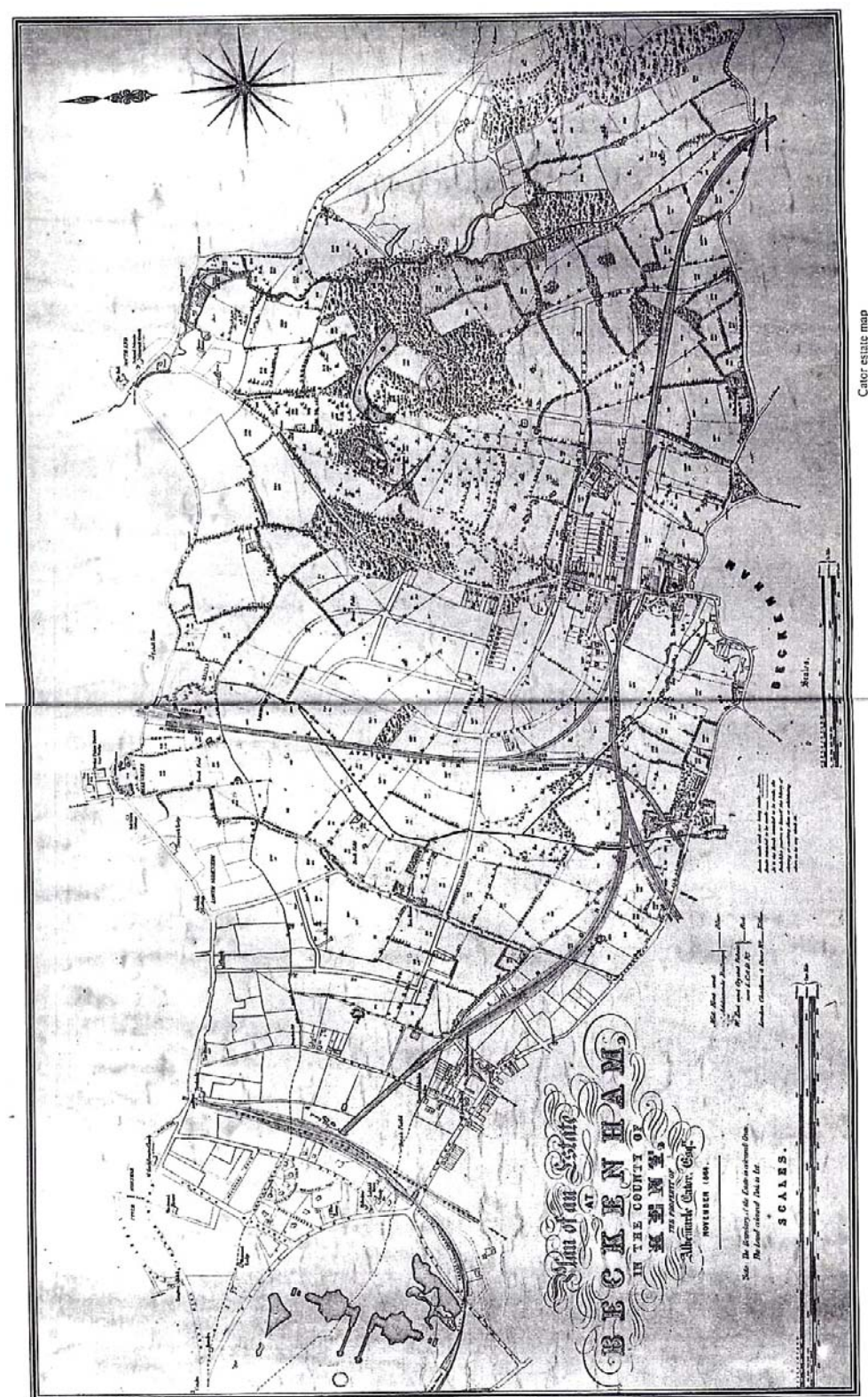
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The Times (2004). "Raglan Squire" Obituary (9 June )



The Heights – No 1 to 31 2008





**Figure 2.** The Cator Estate, Beckenham 1864

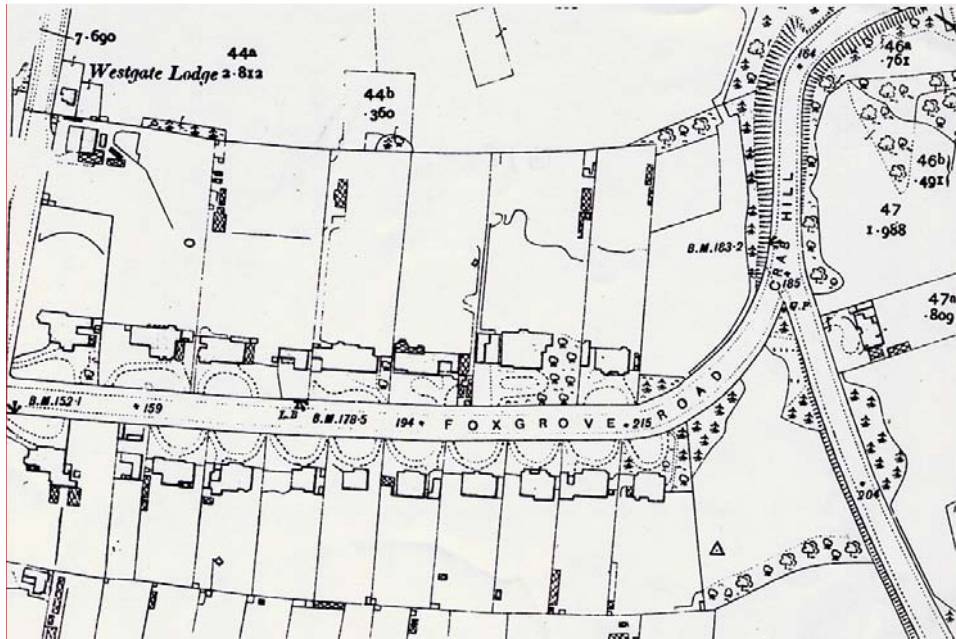




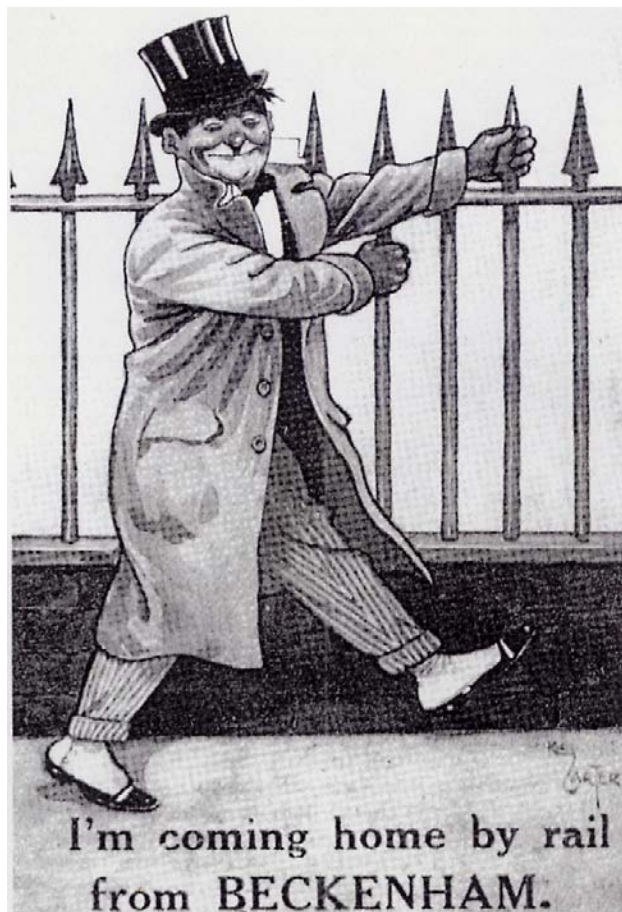
**Figure 3.** Beckenham Place (The Cator Mansion)



**Figure 4.** Foxgrove Road in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century

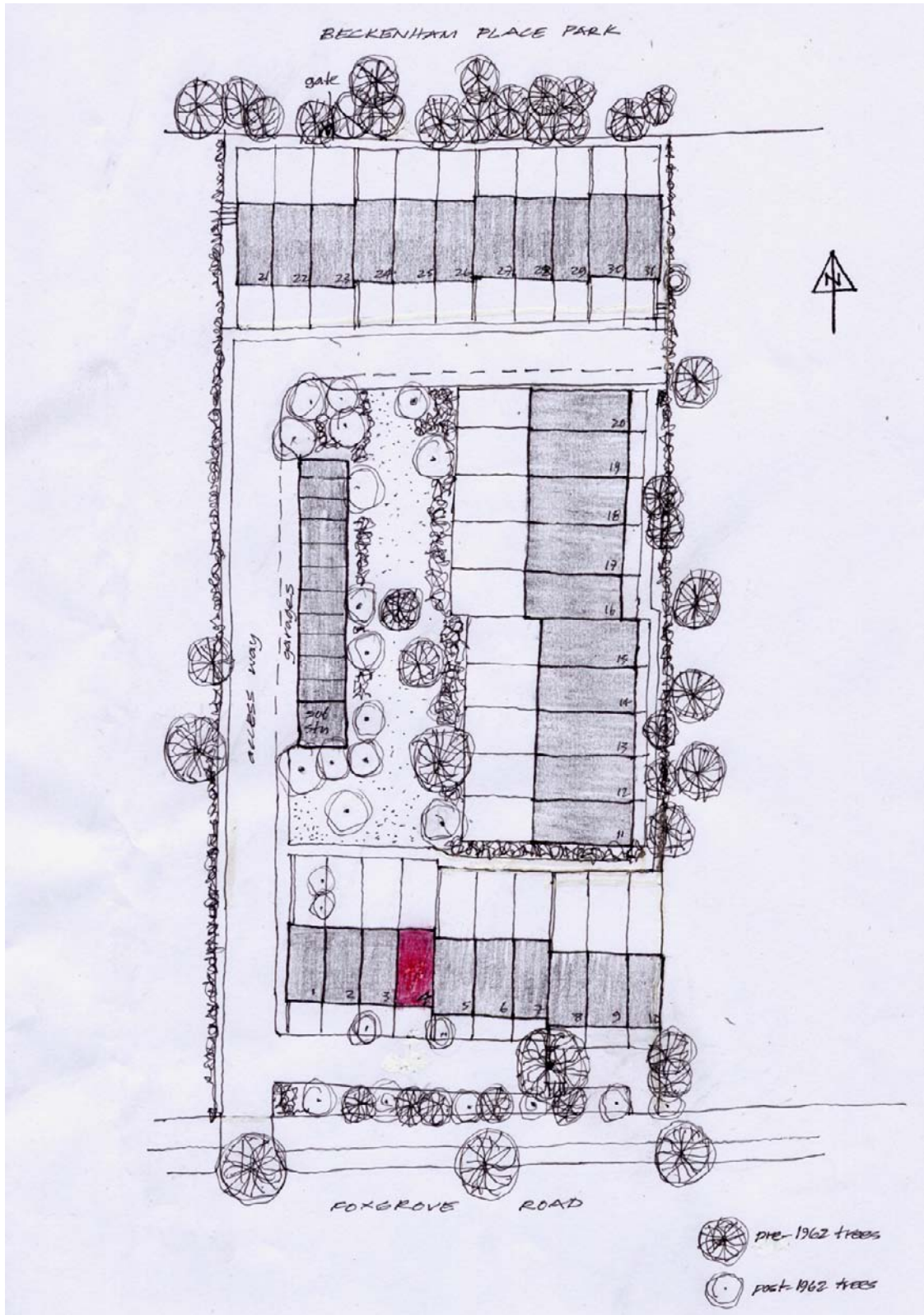


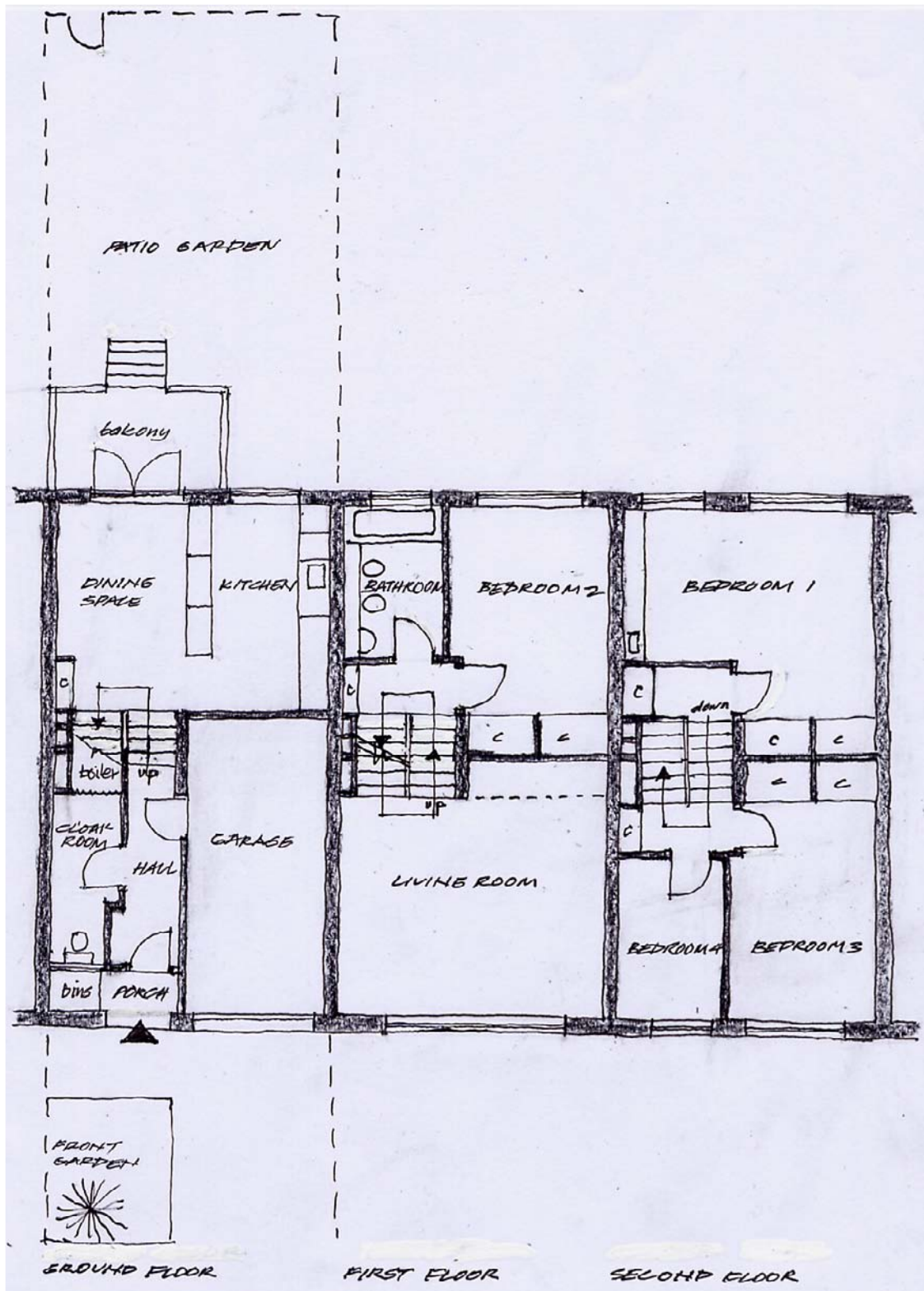
**Figure 5.** Houses in 'Upper' Foxgrove Road 1912. ("Kinloch" site outlined in red).



**Figure 6.**  
Advertising the Railways.







**Figure 14.** 4 The Heights. Original Floor Plans (Now has an en-suite & kitchen-dining room).