

WHERE GATES ONCE STOOD

By Ian Welland



William Cross lit his lantern and bid a passer-by good day.

‘You take care now Jack, these nights are drawing in fast.’

‘You too Will. See you at the Tantivy?’

‘Not tonight; his Lordship wants me to keep watch on some poachers over at Grove Mill.’

William noticed the warm autumnal feel that had dominated September, had been firmly replaced by a rasping air that was seasonally moving the park toward winter’s veil. The leaves, golden and crimson, were now felled. The ground, inky and damp. William pulled his thick collar up around his neck and tucked his scarf securely into his coat. Making his way to the small gates on the far side of the park, he called to a stranger gazing from the bandstand toward the River Gade.

‘Sir, time to take your leave. If you want Watford Met, I’m about to close the small gates.’

‘No thank you Watchman,’ said the stranger. ‘For I seek lodgings in town.’

‘In that case, I will come by and light your way to the ramparts.’

After securely locking the small gates, William made good his promise to the stranger by lighting their path toward the triumphant castle-esque rampart gates that led to the town.

'These gates were put 'ere when Great Britain joined Ireland in an act of union. 'Tis said that King George himself admired these gates; so much so, he wanted a similar archway for Buckingham Palace.' William chuckled. 'Probably old wives tale, but I like it.'

'They are magnificent,' said the stranger. Repton?'

'Aye, Sir. Repton and Wyatt to be precise. His Lordship's grandfather saw to their construction. I've lived here with my family for a while now; let's see, must be around nine summers at least. I keep watch on the park day and night. I'm down at the Old Mill House this evening. It can get a bit spooky down there.'

'You must see the park in all its finery?'

'I do indeed, Sir. Autumn's my favourite season. Starlings enjoy the blackberries and intermingle with Greenfinches. Swifts and Swallows are off south now of course, and it won't be long before the Bullfinches flee our countryside. But there is still plenty of other animals. I watched a weasel the other day help himself to the cracked chestnut seed shuck. Not sure he was hungry though, just stockpiling. Plenty of bounty for Squirrels mind; they like the hazelnuts best. I'm looking forward to the early morning mists down by the river. The Kingfisher is a brave one and will seek eels racing up stream. Soon be bonfire night.'

The crackle of leaves underfoot reminded William to warn the stranger. 'Be careful as you walk 'ere, Sir. The path is a little rutted.'

They reached the gates.

'You come back tomorrow, Sir; and you will see these gates in all their glory. The Virginia Creeper is turning with the season, but only enhances the majesty of the turrets. I didn't catch your name, Sir?'

'Edward. Edward Thomas.'

500 words

Images:

'The Park Gates, Cassiobury Park, Watford.' 1902. Postcard. Hertfordshire Archives.

'The Ghost of the Gates. The Entrance to Cassiobury Park on the site of the Gates. Watford.' 2020. Photo by Louise Welland.

Author's Note:

William Cross was the Park Watchman at the turn of the 20th century and lived in the accommodation at the Cassiobury Park gates.

Edward Thomas (1878 – 1917) was an English essayist, writer and journalist before the first world war; and subsequently a famous war poet. Thomas specialised in writing articles and books on the English countryside prior to the war years. He died of wounds whilst on active service on the Western Front at Arras, France, 9 April 1917.

Whilst there is no documentary evidence of a meeting between William Cross and Edward Thomas; I would like to think Thomas may have visited Cassiobury Park.

The gates were designed and built on the order of George Capel Coningsby, 5th Earl of Essex, by Humphrey Repton and James Wyatt in 1800 – the same year as the Act of Union which joined Great Britain with Ireland.

The gates and ramparts were demolished by order of Watford Borough Council in 1970, to enable the widening of Rickmansworth Road!

Since the removal of the gates, the people of Watford have campaigned to have the gates, or a replica of the gates, reinstalled on the site of the original gates.