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Hatch End: A Place of the Mind

Invited Article

David H. J. Morgan

Late Professor Emeritus, University of Manchester, UK

Michael Erben

University of Southampton, UK

Contact: mde@soton.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper is concerned with what is now the north-east London suburb of Hatch End and the feelings thoughts and memories it had for the author during his formative years. It deals with the quotidian and the reflections it can arouse. There is no attempt to produce a formal local history of Hatch End but rather there is employment of the author's autobiographical memory to record how temporal change influenced (and to a degree formed) him as an individual. The mix of perspectives to perform this task involves, in the main, considerations of physical and symbolic space from (a) solid and identifiable features of Hatch End (housing, public buildings, transport links, recreational spaces, etc) to (b) the meanings of countryside, family life, social class and modernity. For the author Hatch End does not carry with it the freight of being a place with deep historical roots or of having a high public profile. In general critiques of suburbia Hatch End could be classified as dull and uninteresting. In fact, the author ventures that Hatch End could be regarded as "no particular place". This is not however how the author personally regards Hatch End. For him there was in Hatch End plenty of exciting material for the construction of a self in a real place. As he says, "no particular place" can be, autobiographically speaking, a rather special place.

Note

David Morgan (1937-2020) was a co-founder of the Auto/Biography Study Group and its great, loyal, and cherished friend for some thirty years. The piece below has its origin in a paper given at the Auto/Biography Summer Conference of 2014 at Wolfson College, Oxford. The present version was among David's papers and his widow, Professor Dame Janet Finch, asked Michael Erben to make it ready for publication. The piece has required only light editing (slight changes coming from notes made by David and notes by Michael Erben of conversations with David over the two years 2014-16). Those many who are familiar with David's style and scholarship will be able to hear his voice as they read.

Keywords

Hatch End, Place, Space, Practical, Imaginary, Symbolic, Autobiography, David Morgan

Introduction

I was not born in Hatch End, Middlesex. I was actually born in the Royal Free Hospital, Islington but my parents moved there shortly after my birth and just before the outbreak of the World War II.¹ By then it was a small but developing suburban area between Harrow and Watford, a station on the Bakerloo Line from Queen's Park or the main line from Euston. The house that we moved into was part of a small, leafy private estate, the roads lined with almond and crab apple trees. It was located in a small cul-de-sac, Felden Close, and seemed to be about ten minutes' walk from most things that we might need: the station, the shops, the doctors and the school. Only the Methodist Church required a longer walk or a short bus ride to Pinner.

In this paper I want to use some notions derived from Lefebvre, perhaps at some distance, to explore my experiences of Hatch End and its place in my biography (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005: 73-90; Lefebvre 2002). I consider Hatch End in terms of practical space, symbolic space and imaginary space and the interactions between them.

Practical Space

Some of the practicalities I have hinted at already. Most amenities (shops, the post-office, the station, a pub, the Anglican Church etc) were within easy walking distance, an important fact in the days when car ownership was only beginning to take off. We never possessed a car and my parents never learned to drive. The station (an attractive building) boasted some six (or was it more?) working platforms.² This was commuter country, and it was a common sight in the mornings to see commuters dodging between platforms to attempt to get the fastest train into central London. In addition to the train there were also reasonably frequent buses to Pinner and North Harrow. 'Conveniently placed' might be a term used to describe both Hatch End itself and our house within it.

Symbolic Space

The development of Hatch End, previously little more than a small village, was clearly part of the development of the commuter belt around London. Workers of various kinds could be expected to be in the centre in under an hour, aided by what were called "Workman's" tickets. But these practicalities revolved around symbolic considerations. These can be briefly listed:

Countryside

In common with developments from the mid nineteenth century onwards, Hatch End reflected a belief in the symbolic value of the English countryside, with an abundance of greenery and open spaces. There was some reality in this. Working farms were within walking distance and, in my early childhood, it was possible to walk along the lanes and across the fields to the edge of Watford. Residents seemed to go along with these ideas; the shopping area strung out along the main Uxbridge Road was frequently referred to as 'the village'.

Family

The newly developed semis reflected an organisation of domestic space which, in the 1950s, came to be identified with the ideal of companionate marriage. Parents were able to sleep apart from their children and the houses and gardens were constructed as shared spaces.

Gender

At the same time the development of Hatch End and places like it, reflected the wider and gendered division between home and work. There was a predominance of men in the daily commutes to London while during the weekday, Hatch End was predominantly, apart from shopkeepers, a place of women and children.

Class

As with other suburban areas there was some distinction between the 'established' (or relatively established) and 'the outsiders'. So, our new estate (which my mother told me was sometimes referred to as a slum) contrasted with the larger and older houses on "The Avenue". Our immediate neighbourhood was probably quite mixed in terms of occupation and social origins but despite these differences there was a key theme of 'respectability'. This sense of respectability probably became reinforced immediately after the war with the development of 'the prefabs' (on a supposed temporary basis) which housed families from the centre of London. They were considered rough and we respectable.

Modernity

From a present-day vantage point, the identification of the new estates in Hatch End and similar places with modernity might seem a little quaint. Our house, for example had a coal fire and a stove in the kitchen to heat the water; there was just a two-bar electric fire in the dining room. Yet at the time, the clean uncluttered lines of the new houses, the space, the electric light and the gas street lights must have seemed at the front edge of the modern age. Some houses had garages and those that did not had a drive that was wide enough to take a car at some unspecified stage in the future.

To summarise, the symbolic space of Hatch End at the time I was growing up was anchored around notions of the countryside, modernity and family. Gender divisions remained apparent but there was some blurring of class lines in the face of a concern with respectability and finer divisions of status.

Imaginary Space

Trains stopping at Hatch End were greeted with a sign which read: 'Hatch End: For Pinner'. As a child I remember feeling resentful about this sign. Why did not Pinner Station (which had fewer platforms than Hatch End) have a sign which read: 'Pinner: for Hatch End'? But did I really feel resentful? I probably didn't. Even as the thought passed through my mind, I almost certainly realised that Pinner had justice on its side. Pinner looked like a real place, the sort of place someone might go to rather than pass through. The High Street rose up past some old shops and dwellings to a striking parish church and a shady green. Pinner had several pubs and cafes and a cinema as well as small bus station and an Annual Fair which went back for centuries. It was older, more established, more affluent and appeared to have a strong sense of local identity, expressed in a regular publication called, appropriately enough, 'The Villager'. Pinner was very much located in Metroland as immortalised in John Betjeman's BBC film of 1973. It was the Metropolitan Line that took commuters from Pinner to Baker Street in about 30 minutes. In contrast, Hatch End seemed to be on the edge in several aspects. This is not the 'Edgelands' as graphically described by Farley and Roberts (2011). It was not quite Metroland; it was probably not old enough, middle-class enough or quirky enough to attract the attention of a Betjeman. Although, especially

in my early years, there were clear elements of countryside, it did not feel like the countryside. It lacked real drama and houses all too quickly came into view. Perhaps the grandest piece of open space was virtually out of bounds as it belonged to Pinner Hill Golf Club, although you could pick blackberries on the bordering bushes.

If Hatch End was not properly country, it was not properly urban either. True, London was not far away but it did not belong to us. I felt slightly envious of the Cockney accents which I heard in the Ealing Comedy *Hue and Cry* or, for real, from some of the inhabitants of 'the prefabs'.³ Hatch End speech was a mixture of a softened form of Cockney with echoes of rural Hertfordshire, genuine or assumed posh and God knows what else. The nearest towns were Harrow or Watford, which had more or less what was needed (choice of cinemas, swimming pools and department stores) but little real urban excitement.

Later, in the RAF, I listened to some of my fellow National Servicemen, talking in accents which were clearly anchored in solid places about Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester or Sheffield. Hatch End provided slight competition. When asked where I came from, I would usually say 'near London' or 'somewhere between Harrow and Watford'. When I spoke of Hatch End it was with large ironic quotation marks. These wider questions of geographical identity did not concern me much in my childhood. Hatch End seemed to be good enough, able to provide me, and my friends, with a degree of freedom and opportunities for excitement and the development of the imagination. In the immediate post-war period, there were a few half-bombed houses to explore or the little network of underground shelters that were still accessible from the recreation ground. Friends or friends of friends could identify the ponds that were good for frogspawn or newts or the best sites for blackberries or bluebells.

One area which was clearly identified by the boys of my generation was known as 'The Bumps'. These were the remains of some ancient earthworks (or so we were told) known as Grimsdyke. My school took its name from these earthworks. These were a set of small steep hillocks, then largely covered with brambles and other weeds or small trees. They were where a pre-war housing estate came to an end and were close to the main railway line. It was an area adaptable enough for improvised games, picnics or, on summer evenings, sex (or so I was told). One day, during the summer holidays I learned from a friend that some boys from Pinner Green had declared war on Hatch End and that the site of the battle was to be 'The Bumps'. I can remember walking towards the battlefield with John Webb. 'It is going to be very dangerous' he said as we picked up dustbin lids to act as improvised shields. There was a goodish crowd of boys already there when we arrived, most of whom I did not recognise. I am not sure how long it took for us to realise that the advertised battle was not going to take place and that the enemy hordes were not to come advancing across the fields. Some of the older boys started wrestling among themselves and the rest of us drifted away to other pursuits. The battle that did not take place can be seen in terms of construction of masculinities, the environment of post-war Britain or in various other ways. But, on reflection now, it was also a fleeting attempt to transfer a 'No Place' into 'Someplace'.

Growing up involved the recognition that Hatch End was not much of a place. When I went to Harrow Weald Grammar school, I found that some pupils there saw Hatch End as 'rather posh'. However, people in Pinner tended, I was told, to see it as rather down-market. I realised that the other parts of Harrow, Wealdstone or Harrow Weald seemed to have more of an edge to them, with common points of reference (a football ground, swimming pools, cinemas, shops). And with each venture into worlds beyond the place where I grew up, this sense of being on the margins increased.

Discussion

We all come from some-place but some are more placed than others. To come from an Edinburgh, a Liverpool or the East End of London is to come from a place with a strong public identity and a tightly knit nexus of overlapping stories with which most people can identify and in whose telling most people can participate. We may be talking about places with some, real or imagined, historical depth:

My own golden age was spent in a picturesque village on the banks of the River Dart. Most villagers then were from old Devon families of farmers and fishermen whose ancestors' gravestones in the churchyard stood witness to their antiquity...

'It [another village recorded by Richard Hillyer] was a village unchanged since Saxon times, where work was governed by the 'immemorial rhythm' of the seasons and social life revolved mostly around church and chapel and cricket pitch. It was an essentially feudal world in which the lives of the poor were dictated by the various local gentry' (Bowker in Hillyer 2013: 5).⁴

'Some-place' therefore has some historical depth and a set of overlapping stories. Or it may be a place with a strong public identity, even if, at times, the number of visitors is greater than the number of residents. Or, in some unhappy cases, that identity may be thrust upon it: think of Dunblane, Lockerbie or Hungerford. 'No-place' or no-particular place has none of this.

We may think about coming from a particular place, possibly of belonging to a particular place in terms of the distributions of social and cultural capital. For those who come from the kinds of communities described in these quotations, we are talking about the social capital that bonds, to the past as well as to present, close-knit social networks. To those who come from, largely urban, areas with a high public profile and wide recognition we are talking more about a kind of cultural capital that has a value on the open market. Cockneys, Scousers and Dubliners are possibly assumed to be more knowing, more streetwise and wittier than the rest of us. Or consider Brighton with its historical associations with the Prince Regent and dirty weekends and *Brighton Rock* and its more recent links with Gay Pride and Green politics. To come from Brighton is to be able to draw upon a stock of cultural capital that is denied to residents of other, possibly equally attractive, seaside resorts.

However, many people born in this country have neither the deep historical roots of rural or long-established communities nor the cultural resources of some of our urban areas. (I am excluding here, those who are nomads either within or across our national borders). They come from 'no particular place'. These may be suburban areas on the edge of large cities or small towns that many people pass through on the way to somewhere else. While such places may have important historical roots, many of these may have been obscured as a result of the Second World War and post-war development or various strands of modernisation. From the garden on my second home, now on the borders of Hatch End and Pinner, you could see what looked like a French chateau built by a local eccentric with a liking for such things. It was called Tooke's folly or, simply, the Towers. It was pulled down before I completed my teens with just the clock tower being preserved.

Almost certainly Hatch End had historical roots although there was, apart from the farms on the outskirts, little evidence of them by the time my parents moved there. No doubt there was plenty of material for local historians even here. I have shown how, as an outer suburb, it was composed of a mixture of practical and symbolic space. The trouble was that the symbolic space was not always that positive in the light of numerous critiques of suburbia with its associations of dullness and conformity. Much work, therefore, was left to the elaboration of imaginary space; the rather

dull looking 'Railway Tavern' became a local, Anglicans went to the local church and thespians put on regular performances at the un-prepossessing St Anselm's Hall.

For a young boy, unaware of sneers about subtopia, there was plenty of material for the construction of imaginary space. The rows of shops on either side of the main Uxbridge Road did not look like a 'real' village but this did not matter. We had The 'Rec' and The 'Bumps' and, in the immediate post-war period there were half bombed-out houses and underground air-raid shelters to provide adventure and opportunities for dares and competitive masculinity. If the adventures of Swallows and Amazons or even the Famous Five seemed rather remote, there was at least one role model. William Brown, the hero of numerous books by Richmal Crompton, lived in a not dissimilar setting even if his family were much more securely located in the middle-class than was the case with me or my friends⁵. If William and the Outlaws could do transformative work on his suburban setting, then why couldn't we do the same? William's construction of imaginary space was incorporated into our construction of imaginary space.

Growing up entails the realisation that these carefully constructed imagined spaces are, after all, 'no particular place'. Today I, like many other people, pass through Hatch End at some speed on the stretch of railway line between Watford and Euston. You catch a glimpse of the depleted station, the rather shabby looking Commercial Traveller's School, a supermarket which was not there when I was growing up and the usual back-gardens and allotments. As Goffman (1959) described in his discussion of role-distance, imaginary involvement becomes detached irony. But still 'no particular place' can be, autobiographically speaking, a rather special place.

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Notes

1. Hatch End was situated in Middlesex until 1965 when it became part of Greater London, within the borough of Harrow.
2. "... a charming Wrenish pavilion with steep roof and clock turret" (Cherry and Pevsner 1991: 279).
3. *Hue and Cry* of 1947 is regarded as a valuable piece of historical reportage as well as being funny.
4. These two quotations are from Gordon Bowker's preface of 2003 to a new edition of Richard Hillyer's *Country Boy* by Slightly Foxed.
5. The William stories by Richmal Crompton (1890-1969) with their great appeal to, among others, children 'of no particular place', first appeared in 1919 and the last, published posthumously, came out in 1970.

ORCID iD

Michael Erben <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6125-5670>

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Authors' Biographies

David H. J. Morgan was Professor Emeritus in Sociology, University of Manchester. David founded the Morgan Centre for the Study of Everyday Lives and was President of the British Sociological Association (BSA), 1997–1999. His work varied but he is most well-known for studies on sociology of the family, gender, men and masculinities, workplaces, auto/biography, and more recently through two books on neglected topics within sociology: acquaintances, and snobbery. His books have included: *Social Theory and the Family*; *The Family, Politics, and Social Theory*; *Discovering Men*; and *Family Connections*.

Michael Erben was for many years Director of the Centre for Biography and Education at the University of Southampton (UK). He was a founder member of the BSA Auto/Biography Study Group and has published widely in the area of biographical studies and narrative. His most recent book, co-authored with Hilary Dickinson, is *Nostalgia and Auto/Biography*. He is now largely retired and is, contentedly, an independent scholar while holding an Honorary Fellowship at the University of Southampton and preparing (with Jenny Byrne) an extensive study of British postwar (1945-51) lives.