

**Peter Hawley, of the Whitchurch and Goring Heath History Society, gives his thoughts on the history of the building known as Eastfield House, soon to be Cedar Lodge.**

This is a tribute to the residents of Eastfield Lane and their visitors who have been suffering the dire effects of construction traffic and inconsiderate development at the proposed Cedar Lodge Care Home through the hideous winter of 2024/5 and an even longer period of anxiety. The site is an important one, once part of Duchess Close, and entwined into various parts of village history.



Contrary to common belief the name Duchess Close originally referred not to the charming High Street buildings of that name, or to the small gravelled entrance way which serves them, but in fact to an adjacent field running through to Eastfield Lane, made up of strips once owned by Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, bounded by a side stream of the Thames once alongside the Lane (but now inadequately piped), later providing the sites of the present Ashdown, Brookside and Eastfield House and Lodge.

The whole complex was sold to the wealthy Whitchurch village doctor Edward Blyth in 1879 who was already tenant of most of the Duchess Close buildings and conducted his practice from there. In 1882, following his sudden death, his bachelor brothers Charles and Benjamin went on to build Eastfield House on part of the original Close and it has been an essential village landmark ever since.

It was typically Victorian and much more bulky than the other properties which followed in the Lane. Perhaps surprisingly it was not given listed status under the original Town and Country Planning Acts, but it was of such character that the Village Conservation area was extended to it. The present developers have claimed to maintain its essential character in their proposed rebuilding and to restore its handsome grounds, all of which remains to be seen.



It is possible to track down on the internet the 1840 Will of Benjamin Blyth, a distinguished organ builder of Isleworth, Middlesex. Almost certainly he was the grandfather of the brothers who built

Eastfield House. In the generation between was another Benjamin Blyth, Doctor of Music, whose son Benjamin (1825 to 1883), was one of Eastfield House's builders and, having been the Director of Music at Magdalen College Oxford, retired here and brought his college choir (distinguished organist J Stainer) to celebrate the rededication of St Mary's Whitchurch in 1858. Their cousin, James Blyth, another organ builder, later lived for a time at Coombe Park Mansion and is buried at St Mary's.

Such was their importance to the village that at least one of the Blyth family was a donor of the stained glass windows at St Mary's and the family probably met much of the cost of restoring the Church at that time and enlarging its magnificent organ. Meanwhile Dr Edward's medical practice at Duchess Close was taken over by my late wife's great grandfather Dr Francis Bateman, hence our special interest in the site. For many years now, even as a nursing home, Eastfield House and its residents have contributed a lot to the village community and we must hope that the new Cedar Lodge will maintain its fine tradition.

Peter Hawley, March 2025.