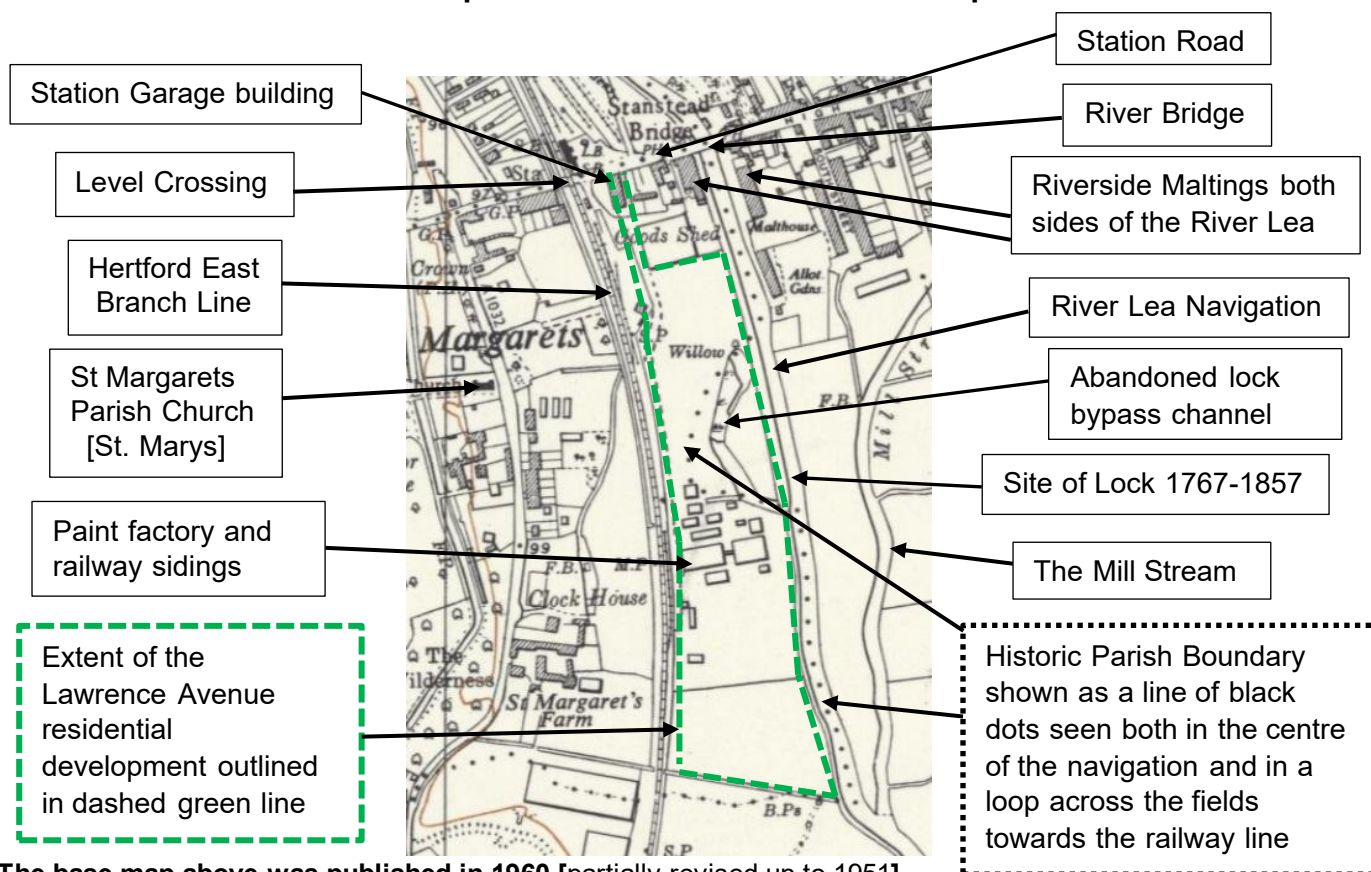


A HISTORY OF THE LAWRENCE AVENUE AREA STANSTEAD ST. MARGARETS

**BY
STUART MOYE**

This article describes the history of the modern residential development in St. Margarets known as Lawrence Avenue. The housing area also includes several cul-de-sacs which lead off from Lawrence Avenue, which forms the spine road through the residential area. The side roads are Cresset Close, Heron Drive, Lee Close, Kingfisher Close, Robin Close, Rush Close and Swift Close. Lawrence Avenue itself has a junction with Station Road about mid-way between the river bridge and the railway level crossing. The housing area stretches southwards almost as far as the bypass flanked to the west by the railway line and to the east by the River Lea Navigation. For centuries the area was used as summer pasture for cattle with the natural course of the River Lea meandering through it. In the mid-1760s the river had been straightened into its present course but the fields were still in agricultural use. The 20th century saw the development of commercial buildings on the southern part of the site served by railway sidings and a river wharf. Over the years the industries on the site included a chemical works, a paint factory, a fuel oil company and a distribution firm among others. By 1990 the land was being cleared of the industrial buildings in preparation for the modern housing development of Lawrence Avenue.

Location map of the Lawrence Avenue development

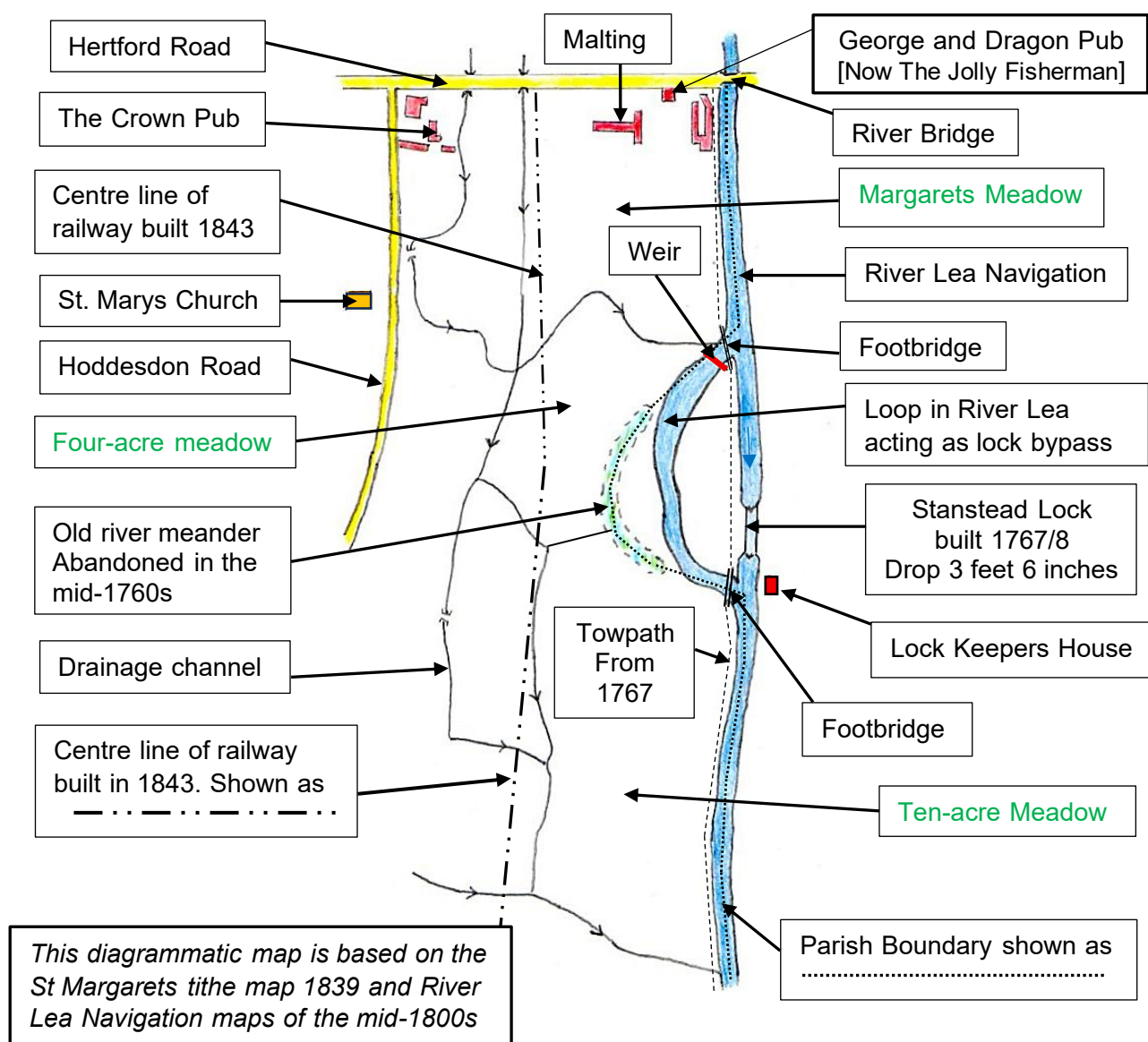


The base map above was published in 1960 [partially revised up to 1951].

That part of the parish boundary between Stanstead Abbots and St. Margarets, which is shown diverting from the river Lea and crossing the fields, followed the centre line of an historic meander in the natural course of the river. The straightening of the navigation took place in the mid-1760s along with the building of a lock and the abandonment of the meander. The parish boundary across the fields was not altered to follow the straightened channel of the Lea until the boundary changes of 1990.

Before the Norman invasion of 1066 little had been done to drain the extensive marshy areas of the flood plain of the Lea Valley. The Lawrence Avenue area was one of those wet areas on the valley floor which had little agricultural value, except perhaps potential for limited summer pasture land. The fields were at that time in an undeveloped part of the Manor of Hailey in the Parish of Great Amwell. The area we know today as St Margarets had no real value and was considered part of the 'waste' [unused land] of the Parish of Great Amwell. In the Domesday Book of 1086, we find Geoffrey De Beck was the Lord of the Manor of Hailey, although not living in Hailey but in his much more important main manor elsewhere. [Hailey was recorded in 1086 as being a very small village with few taxable inhabitants and of little value]. It cannot have been long after that when Roger De Burun became the Lord of the Manor of Hailey living in Hailey Hall; the Manor House about one mile to the WSW of the river ford. By the year 1100 Roger De Burun had built a bridge over the river Lea to replace the ford and had started to develop the area close to the bridge, by building a farm and no doubt some workers cottages. In the fields that were to become today's Lawrence Avenue he oversaw the digging of a few drainage ditches. These were designed to increase the agricultural value of the riverside meadows, albeit only in a small way. The enhanced drainage made it possible to graze cattle on these meadows longer during the summer than previously. This meant that other fields on higher ground were released for a sufficient time for the growing of spring sown crops. These could now be harvested in the early autumn before the cattle needed to leave the riverside pastures and return to the recently harvested fields on the higher ground. An arrangement that was to last for centuries. The development of the new settlement known then as Thele [today as St Margarets] never really grew to the extent the subsequent generations of the De Burun family had wished. Little was to change in these riverside pastures in St Margarets for centuries to come.

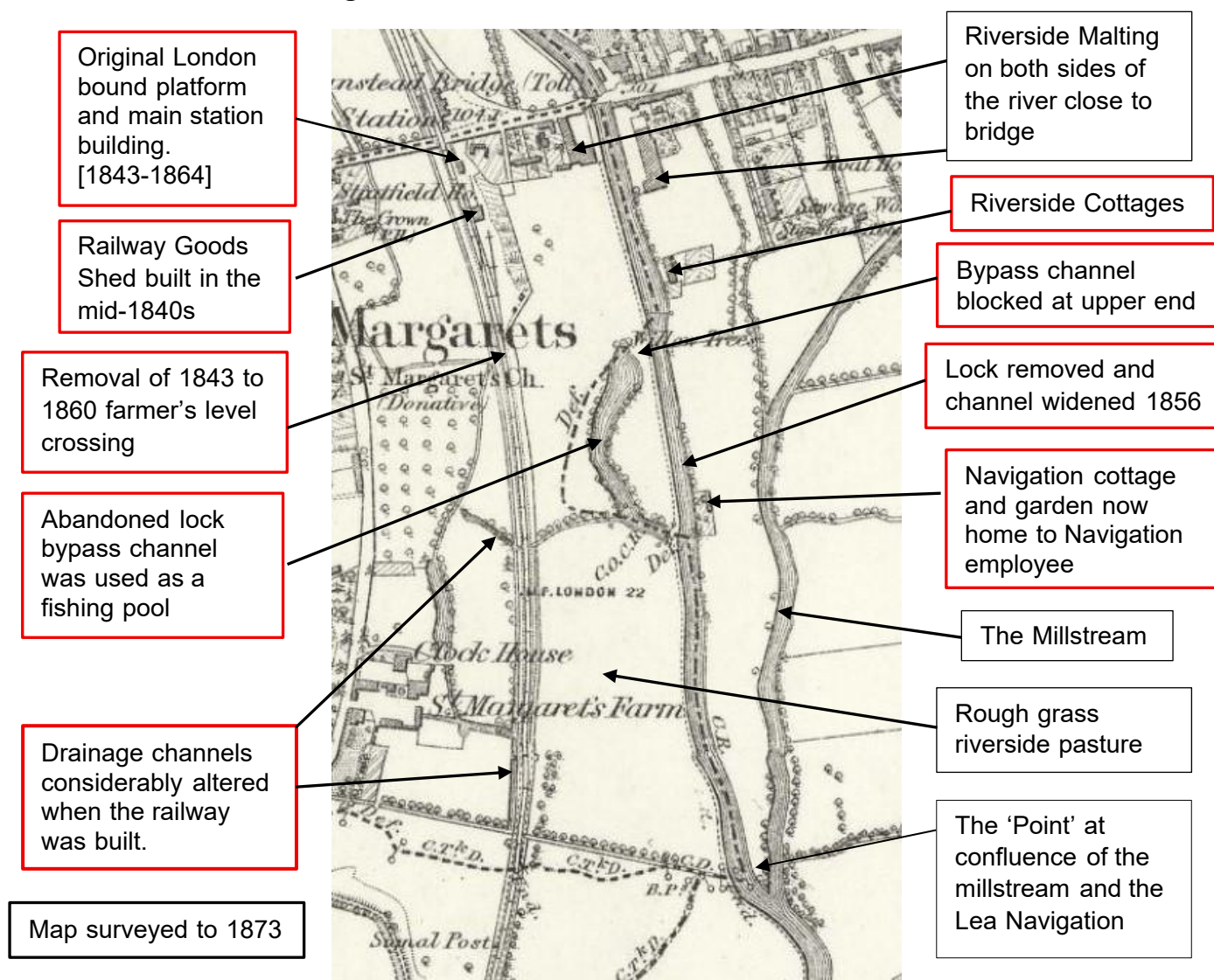
The Lawrence Avenue fields in the 1840s



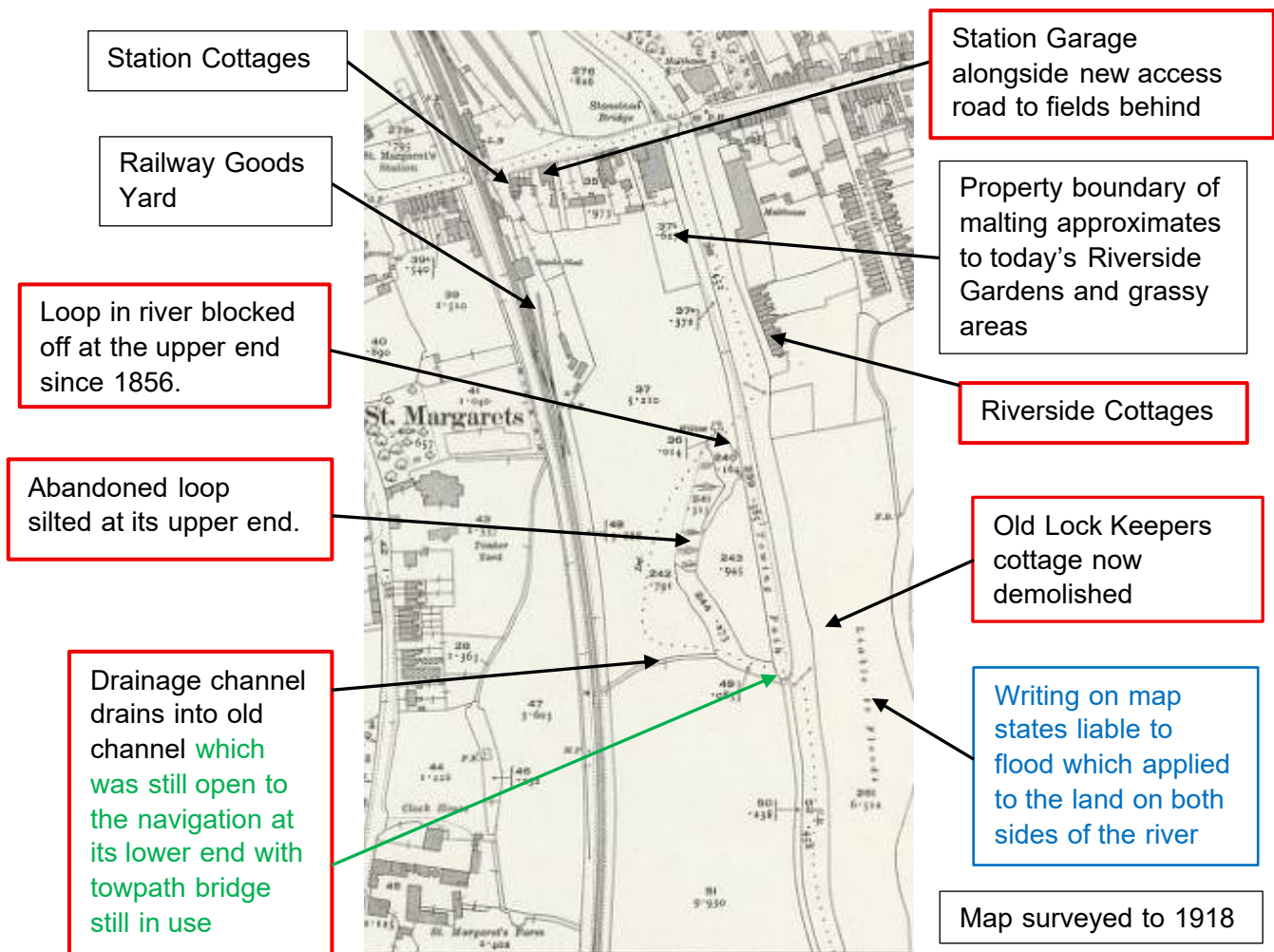
In the 1840s the area of Lawrence Avenue was riverside grassy fields liable to minor flooding in some years and subject to deep flooding every decade. The fields were still in use as summer pasture for animals usually cattle or horses as required. The eastern side of the area was marked by the River Lea Navigation with its lock, towpath and lock bypass channel I. The flow of water along the bypass channel was controlled by an adjustable weir, [*known as the Tumbling Bay*], at the upstream end of the bypass. The Lock Keeper was responsible for the operation of both the lock and the weir. This lock was known initially as Leake's Lock and later as Stanstead Lock, [*not to be confused with the Stanstead Lock of today found upstream from the river bridge*]. The navigation had been straightened during the extensive changes made to the Lea Navigation in the mid-1760s. Other changes at that time included the building of a Lock Keeper's Cottage with attached garden and a narrow walkway across the river near the Lock for use by those using the navigation. The towpath, first provided in 1767/8, crossed the bypass loop by narrow footbridges. These were designed to accommodate a barge towing horses using it without detaching the tow rope. The considerable meander that had been part of the natural course of the Lea pre-1767 was partially abandoned, the unused part becoming a haven for reeds and bull rushes and slowly silted up.

In 1843 the Northern and Eastern Railway built the Broxbourne Junction to Hertford Branch Line through the fields between the Hoddesdon Road and the River Lea; the railway forming the western boundary of the Lawrence Avenue residential area today. An occupation level crossing was provided in 1843 for farmers to move between fields either side of the railway. It was removed after a land ownership swop occurred in 1860, which meant the level crossing was no longer required. Other changes had occurred in 1856-8 when significant alterations to the Lea Navigation took place. This saw the removal of the lock and a widening of the main channel of the navigation. The bypass loop was blocked off at its upper end with the Lock Keepers cottage was kept in use as a family home for a Lea Navigation worker.

Changes 1840 to 1873 in the Lawrence Avenue area

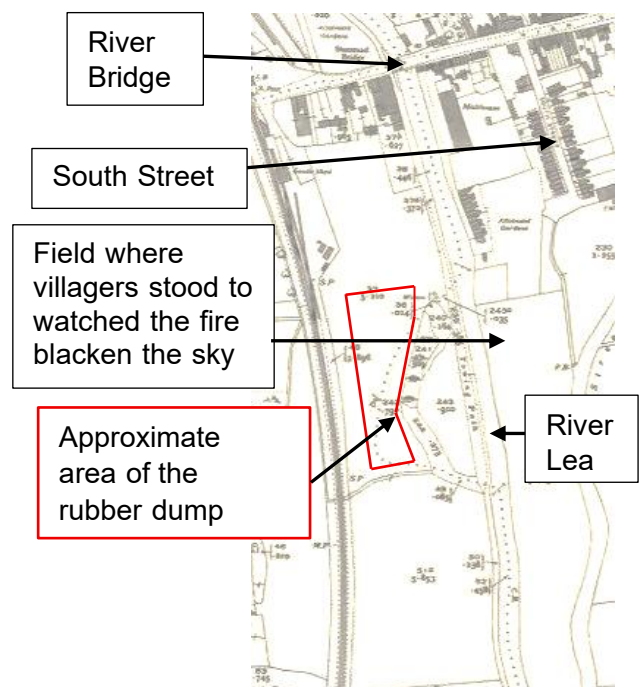


Changes 1873 to 1918 in the Lawrence Avenue area



Some changes occurred between the two world wars with agricultural use fading and industry beginning to appear in the southern part of the plot. Before 1935 a railway siding had been provided to serve this industry and an access road built from Station Road much of the way southwards to the factory buildings. Unfortunately, the updating of the Ordnance Survey maps at this time did not record these changes until well after WWII was over and even more industrial buildings had been erected.

During the second world war there was a large amount of used rubber that was dumped on part of these fields. This included tyres from aircraft which needed changing frequently not to mention military all-terrain vehicles which tended to wear through tyres quickly. Areas were sought to provide convenient places to dump these life expired items and the field at St Margarets was one such place chosen for that purpose. It soon became a dumping ground for a wide variety of other unwanted used rubber products, which could wait till the war was over before being disposed of more permanently. Once the war ended the dump continued to be used especially as military bases were closed down and then cleared. By, 1950 it was estimated that the piles of rubber in the field contained about 7,000 tons of used and discarded rubber products .



The Rubber Dump Fire of 1950

It was on Sunday the 30th April 1950 when this large dump of highly combustible rubber caught fire and provided the local population with a spectacular and very memorable event.



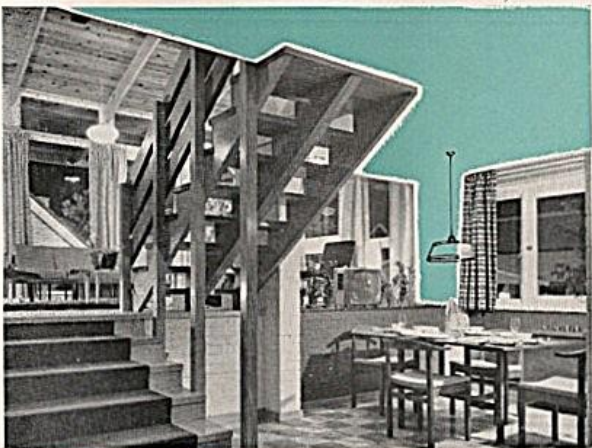
The above two pictures were taken by author's father, in the late afternoon / early evening of the 30th April 1950, from the other side of the river Lea from the rubber dump fire. Many villages particularly from South Street and the High Street gathered in what is now the boatyard field to watch the spectacle. The heat from the fire was so great that the crowd had to stand well back from the river bank.

The image to the right shows a close-up view of the fire with the fire brigade in attendance. In all 15 fire appliances attended the fire and by the end of the day had subdued the seat of the fire. Some fire engines remained longer to dampen down the hot remains of the charred rubber. The dark black cloud of acrid smoke created by the fire rose high into the atmosphere and was visible for many miles. At ground level the dark smoke blew across the railway line forcing the rail service to be suspended. The smell of the distinctively acrid fumes hung over Stanstead Abbots and St. Margarets into the next day.



After the fire was extinguished completely much of the 4-acre field was covered in the remnants of heavily charred rubber and a mass of partially fused together strengthening wires which had once been hidden inside the many tyres that had been dumped there. Although an attempt was made to remove the tangled mess after the fire, much was to remain buried just below the surface for many years to come. This was the area in the middle of the site that remained unused up to the time all the fields were prepared for the building of the Lawrence Avenue development many years later. It was by that time just one of the areas in these fields that needed to be cleared of toxic content in the soil, before the land was fit for the housing development to be built.

With respect to industrial development at the southern end of the site we need to go back to the 1930s. The OS maps were not resurveyed for the fields in question between 1918 and 1958, so the intervening years are based on earlier surveys and do not show the developments that took place. Fortunately, the London and North Eastern Railway [LNER] produced a signalling diagram for the St Margarets signal box control area in 1935. This shows a siding was in place by that date; entry to which was controlled remotely by a lever in St Margarets station signal box. Unfortunately, the name of the firm for whom the siding was constructed and the extent of the industrial development is not shown on the signalling diagram. This is the first documentary evidence so far found that shows railway goods services were available to industry in the southern area of what was to become the Lawrence Avenue development. What is better recorded is the arrival of the firm of E Wood Ltd in 1949 which specialised in the production of a variety of paints from their Talbot Works. [The firm had been established in Canning Town London in 1889.] The firm's factory at Stanstead Abbots was located close to the railway sidings and sent out a considerable part of their production to South East England and the Midlands by rail. At the opening of the works Woods employed some 75 people and produced about 55 tons of paint per week.



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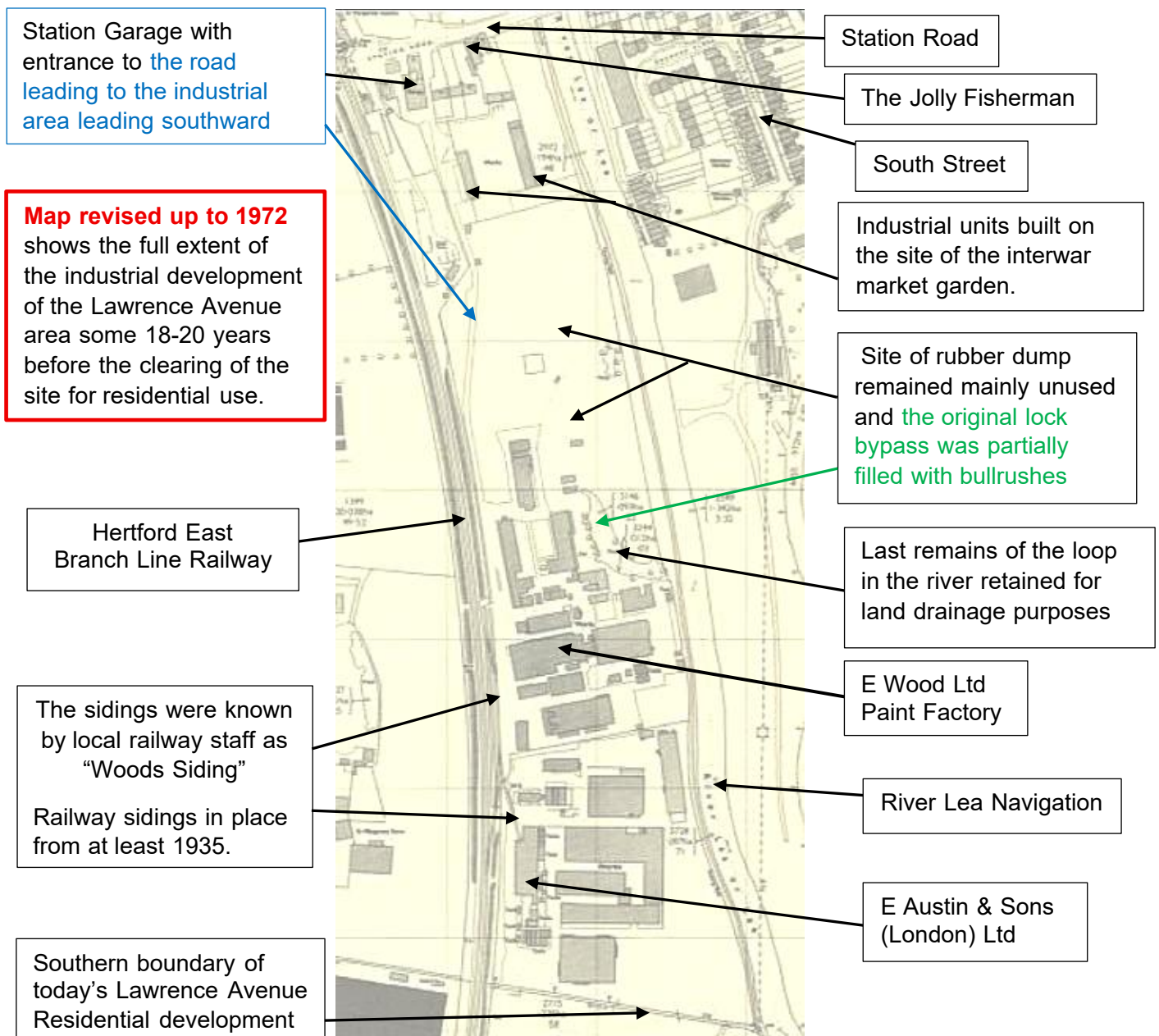
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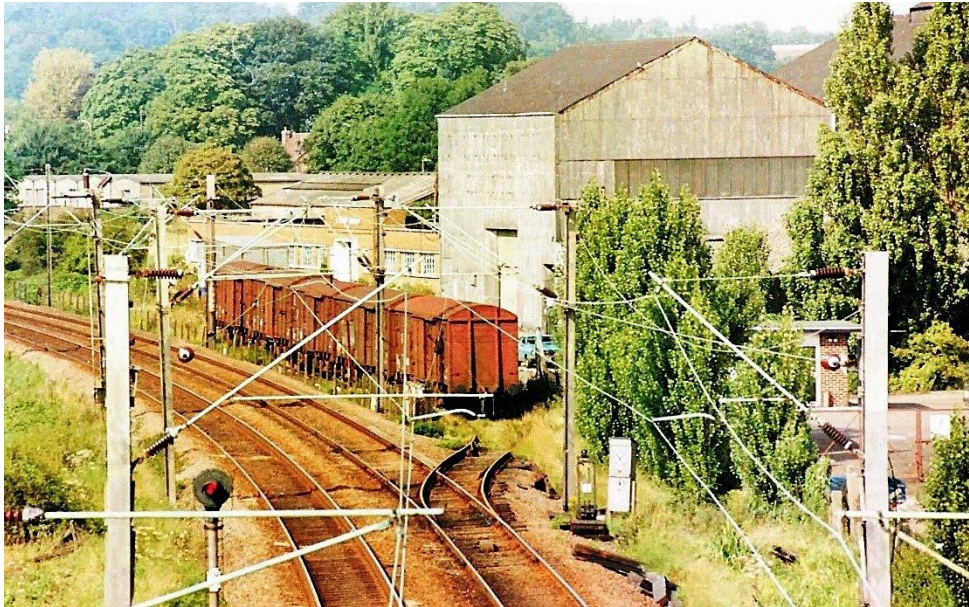
The above are a selection of E Wood Ltd advertising for their paints and coatings.
The adverts date from soon after the firm arrived in Stanstead Abbots in 1949

In 1957 E. Austins and Sons arrived on the site and was a warehousing and distribution company. Their activities included recycling of waste oil, fork lift truck hire and sales as well as the distribution of virgin oil. At first, they used their private wharf on the adjacent river Lea to transport goods to and from Tilbury docks in large capacity barges. River traffic reduced rapidly in the 1960s but the firm continued to send a considerable amount of goods via the private railway sidings serving the site. In 1958 British Railways recorded that the firm responsible for the sidings that served several industries at the southern end of the fields was Spenser, Chapman and Messel Ltd. The firm made specialised chemicals notably a range of highly concentrated acids for use in other industries. The company went out of business in 1964 and was merged into another industrial chemical firm. Another company that used the sidings was Southern Economy Fuels which gave their address as 'St Margarets Wharf, Stanstead Abbots, Ware, Herts'. They used black painted rail tanker wagons to distribute fuels oils by rail, mainly to places in south east England. The tankers standing in the siding were seen for many years by locals who commuted by train to London. Memorable because of the named local location painted boldly in white on the tanker sides.

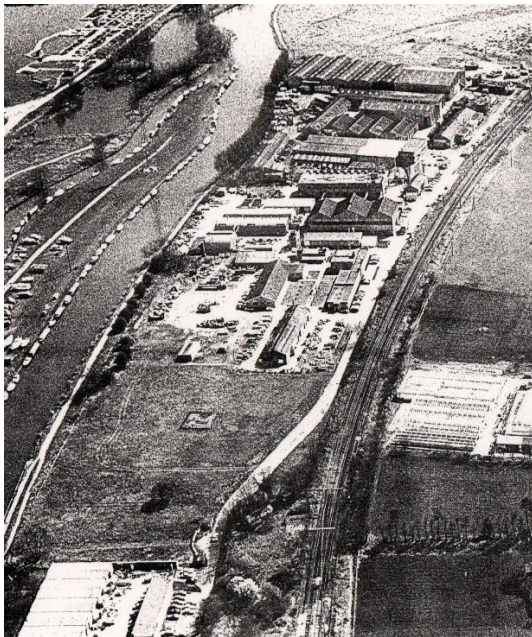


One of several fuel oil tanker wagons often seen on the sidings where houses and their gardens now stand in the Lawrence Avenue development





*A picture of the sidings and the closely associated industrial buildings taken on the 31st Aug 1987
By this time international ferry wagons were to be seen in the siding as seen in this view
The grey bulk of Woods paint factory building is seen to loom over the railway wagons in the siding*

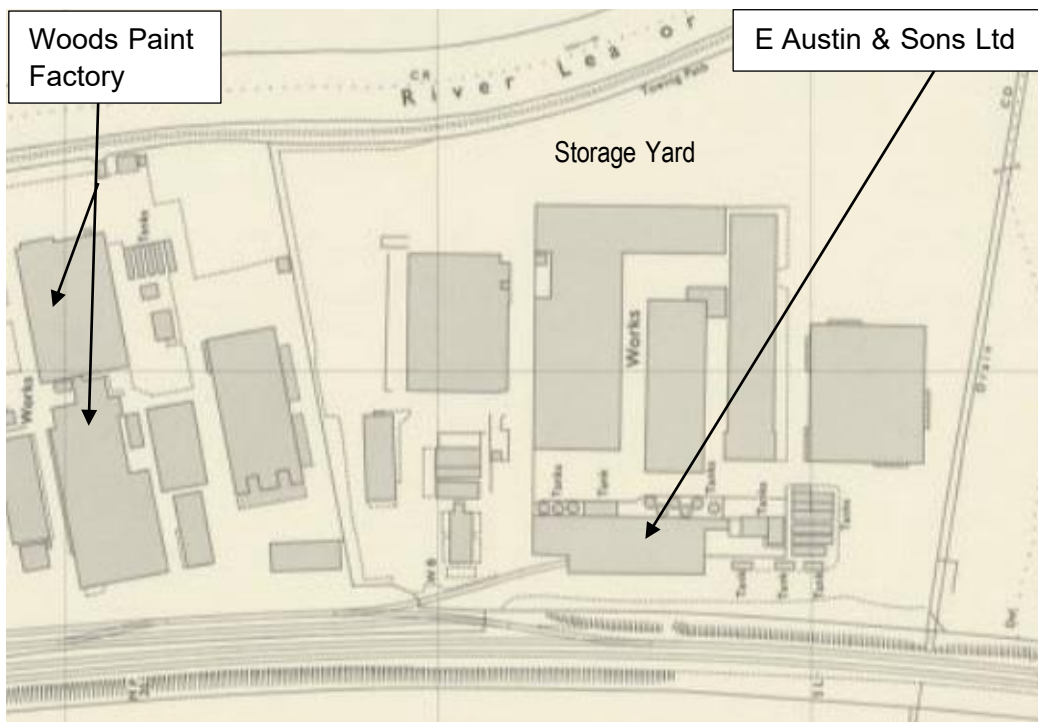


*Two images which show the extent and type of industrial buildings which occupied a large part of the southern area of what was to become the Lawrence Avenue development.
These pictures were taken in the mid-1980s when the industrial area had reached its maximum extent and not that long before it was all to disappear to be replaced by houses.*

Despite being tucked away along a private access road at the southern end of the fields between the river and railway, the buildings were very visible to locals. This mid-1950s view from the London bound platform at St Margarets railway station shows the large Wood's factory buildings in the distance. [Today the site of Kingfisher Close, a cul-de-sac off of Lawrence Avenue]



THE SOUTHERN END OF THE INDUSTRIAL AREA



The oblique air photograph and map above show the highly industrialised southern part of the fields between the river Lea and the railway as viewed from the west. The drainage channel on the right of the map marks the current southern boundary of the housing in the Lawrence Avenue development. The area depicted above as it was in the late 1970s to early 80s is today transformed into the residential area from Kingfisher Close on the left to the most southerly part of Lawrence Avenue on the right.

In the 1980s, the increasing need for more homes, the decline in rail transport for goods and the building of a bypass all conspired to accelerate the changes to the local planning rules for these St. Margarets fields. For some time, local authorities had increasingly encouraged the movement of industry into designated industrial estates well separated from residential areas. In addition, the industries located in these fields had seen growing concerns from the local councils and residents with regard to the toxic nature of some of the raw materials and final products that were stored on the site. It was also thought likely this would prevent future housing development being allowed in close proximity to these factories. The industries found themselves under pressure not to introduce additional equally toxic substances on to the site. Also, concerns were raised about the possible pollution of the soil and therefore the groundwater. British Railways was at the same time moving away from relatively small volume goods transport towards lengthy block trains moving between two terminal places. The importance of the rail connection to the factories at St Margarets thus became less financially viable as each year passed.

In the area of East Hertfordshire land within walking distance of railway stations for London commuters was beginning to attract high prices if planning for residential development was forthcoming. A factor at play locally was Stanstead Abbots bypass which came into use in 1987. This opened up advantageous planning opportunities for land between existing homes and the bypass to be granted planning permission for residential use. Developers saw these fields so close to the railway station and local shops as a very inviting site for housing development. All these factors led to plans being pondered that proposed a range of homes to be built on the site, in large part but not exclusively targeted at London commuters.

The site of the future Lawrence Avenue development however was not without its challenges. The area had historically been at frequent risk of flooding but the extensive work carried out on the River Lea and associated channels in the mid-1970s had turned the major flood risk from a 1 in 10-year event to a 1 in a 100-year event. That problem may already have been solved but the buried tangle of wires, a legacy from the rubber dump fire, and the possible need for removal of considerable polluted soil in some of the factory locations would add additional costs for any residential developer. However, such was the increase in demand for homes and the prices people were prepared to pay for them that a viable residential development application was put forward. The planning permission granted included the need for the decontamination of the site to acceptable levels. It was not that long before the site was cleared and prepared for the building of the residential homes. In 1990 the parish boundary between Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets was altered to follow the centre line of the 1767 straight Navigation channel; placing the whole of the housing development in the Parish of St Margarets. The houses in Lawrence Avenue and associated side roads saw residents moving in and a new post code allocated during 1993.

THE CHOICE OF NAME



On the road sign at the entrance to Lawrence Avenue from Station Road is a list of the seven side roads that lead off from Lawrence Avenue. In addition, the Leaside Works, is also mentioned. This set of small industrial units is located on Lawrence Avenue close to its junction with Station Road.

The main spine road through the new residential development was named Lawrence Avenue after a former Lord of the Manor of St Margarets. He was Colonel Henry Lawrence [1600-1664] who had played a significant role in the government of the country under Oliver Cromwell. He had been one of those who opposed the execution of Charles I, which protected him to some extent when the restoration of the monarchy occurred in 1660. When Charles II came to the throne Colonel Henry Lawrence was allowed to retire peacefully to his manors of St Margarets and Hailey [The Goldington Estate]. He had inherited the Goldington estate on his son Edward's death in 1657. Henry died on the 8th August 1664 and was buried in St Margarets Church beneath the altar.



A view of the Leaside Works industrial units not far from the entrance to Lawrence Avenue. This was built after the second world war on the site of what had been a market garden. It houses a variety of small businesses and is advertised as being conveniently located to the railway station and bus stops.



A picture taken outside the Leaside Works showing the housing in Lee Close on the left. The houses in the distance mark the point where the road turns towards the river. Behind the trees to the right is hidden the Hertford East railway branch line.



The above image taken from the river tow path showing some of the homes in Lawrence Avenue that enjoy the benefit of facing onto the River Lea Navigation.



Taken from further south along the towpath, this image shows how the development included an area of grass in the overall plan; providing some open-air recreational space for residents.

At Doomsday in 1086 these fields were considered to be part of a wider area of waste land in the north east corner of the Manor of Hailey. Then for some eight centuries they provided summer pasture for the nearby farms in St Margarets. It was only in the C20th that industry rudely invaded these quiet riverside pastures, a change that proved to be short lived. The growing demand for more homes towards the end of the C20th saw the area developed into a sought-after residential area. The location being close to St Margarets railway station made these fields a very financially attractive house building site. It is interesting to note that in 1790 the population of the whole of the Parish of St Margarets was 79 persons in total. Many more than that now live in just the Lawrence Avenue residential development. A rather dramatic change from a herd of cattle grazing on these riverside fields in the summer sunshine.

Stuart Moye October 2025

Additional Points of interest.

1. *Before the area was removed from the Manor of Hailey, [to form the new parish and manor of Thele], it had been part of the parish of Great Amwell. The Parish and Manor of Thele (later St Margarets) came into being sometime between 1265 and 1294.*
2. *In the second half of the 1500s the name of Thele was gradually replaced with St. Margarets. The name of St. Margarets is thought to have been chosen from the dedication of the Chantry Chapel that once existed at the church of St Mary at St Margarets. The dedication of the chantry chapel originating from Lady Margaret De Burun, (Lovelot), (Goldington), in later life the wife of Sir William Goldington; one time Lady and Lord of both the Manors of Hailey and Thele.*
3. *The Manor of Goldingtons seems to have been adopted by many locally as an abbreviation for the jointly held manors of Hailey and Thele; both once held by the Goldington family. This has continued down the centuries despite the changing names of the owning families.*
4. *In the mid -1850s the removal of the old Lock downstream of the river bridge saw the river level lowered upstream of the lock by 3 feet 6 inches [Just over 1 m], all the way back to the new Stanstead Lock that still exists today. This was just one of many incremental changes over the centuries that reduced the severity of the frequent floods experienced on the valley floor in St. Margarets and Stanstead Abbots, from time immemorial.*