

Mill Road History: Cinemas, pubs, and temperance

A walking tour of Cambridge's Mill Road looking at the history of buildings that played an important part in the road's leisure scene in the 19th and 20th centuries.

On this tour we will visit places that still exist - and look at photos of what they looked like in the past - as well as buildings that are long gone but still hold a special place in the heart of Mill Road residents.

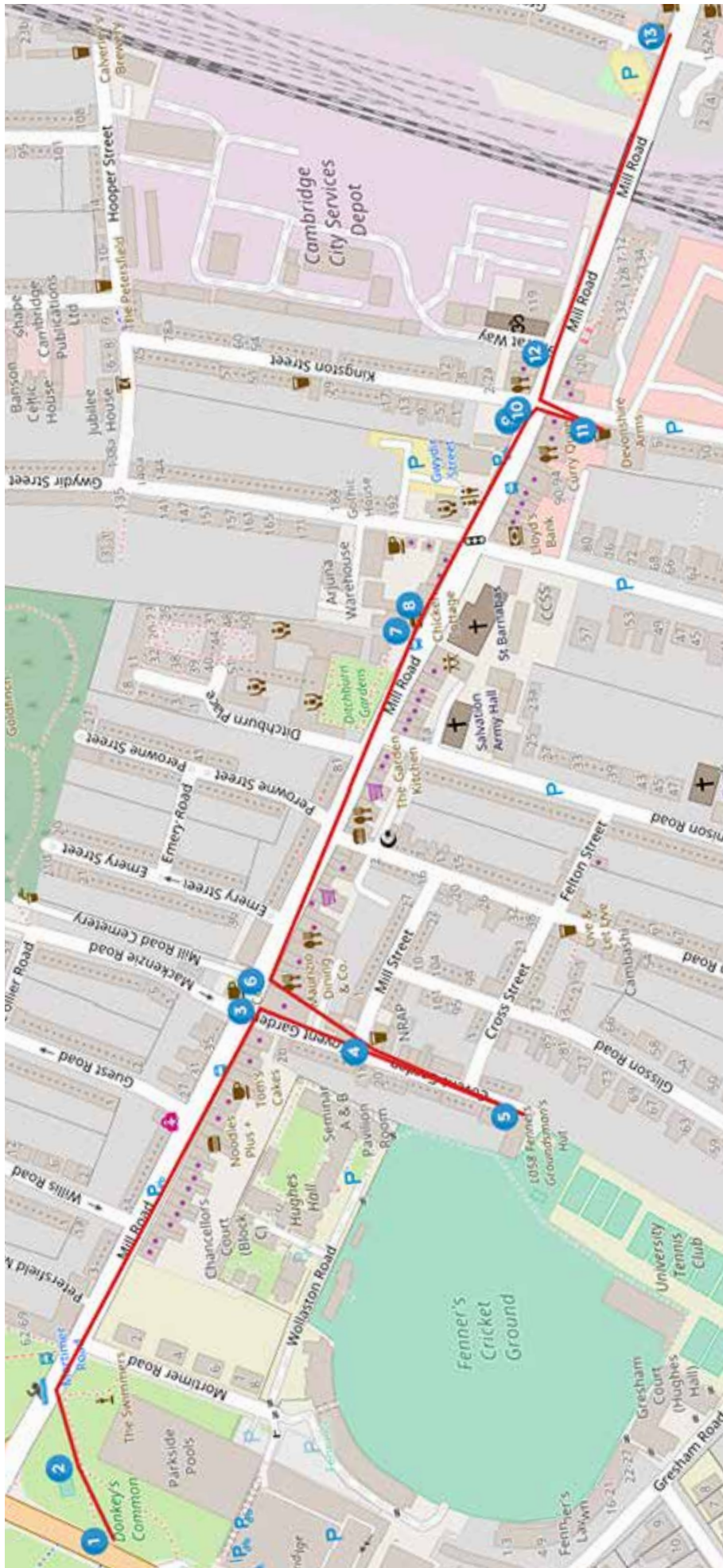
Starting point: Outside Parkside Pool, on the corner of Gonville Place and Mill Road

End point: Just over the Mill Road railway bridge, at the Earl of Beaconsfield

Length: 1.2 km / 0.75 mi

Last updated: November 2017





Point of interest:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 1 – Donkey’s Common | 11 – The Devonshire Arms |
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1 - Donkey's Common

Our walk starts on the corner of Gonville Place and Mill Road, on a small green called Donkey's Common. The approach to Mill Road from Parker's Piece has been framed by Donkey's Common and Petersfield since the fields of Barnwell were enclosed in the early 19th century. A 1812 Inclosure Map shows that they marked the extreme south-eastern boundary of the urban area, and that Mill Road was just a track running through a virtually uninhabited rural landscape before terminating in a footpath to Cherry Hinton.

1828-1900

The original Common Pasture, of which only Donkey's Common remains, was first significantly reduced in size by the building of the new Town Gaol in 1829 (this closed in 1878, and corresponds with where Kelsey Kerridge Sports Centre, Queen Anne Car Park and the YMCA stand in 2017).

The common was constantly under threat during the 19th century, with proposals to use it to build a railway, turn it into a Church of England burial ground, as a site for the cattle market, or to raise extra revenue from building houses. None of these came to fruition, but the growing number of people using the common also led to the loss of its original role as pasture to graze livestock.



Baker's map of 1830

The presence of livestock was a reminder that the common had a different status from that of nearby Parker's Piece, and this was reinforced by complaints that the turf on the common was regularly dug up to repair the cricket pitch on Parker's Piece. While this disfigured the common, councillors saw the state of the cricket pitch as a priority!

As well as cattle grazing, one less-known popular use for the space in the 1870s was that of... carpet beating! Nearby residents complained for several years until the issue was addressed in the Cambridge Town Council Bye Laws for Commons 1880, which stated that 'Every person who beats or shakes any carpet, rug, or mat, on any of the commons except Sheep's Green and that portion of Coe Fen lying near Stonebridge, and that portion of Midsummer Common lying beyond Butt Green, and in a line with Jesus Grove [will be fined] forty shillings.'

"Can you give an instance of any town in England, besides Cambridge, where carpet shaking and beating is allowed to go on all through the livelong day in the heart of the town, in close contiguity to a public thoroughfare, and in front of high class residences?" - Extract from a letter of complaint in the newspaper in 1880 from a resident of the recently-built Mortimer Road.



Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection

Donkey's Common survived the 19th century as a green space marking the approach to Mill Road along with the neighbouring Petersfield.

World War Two and post-war (1942-58)

It is often stated that Cambridge was unaffected by World War Two. Bomb damage was light compared with that of major industrial cities, and none of the historic University buildings were destroyed. But the war was a constant presence, marked by absent servicemen and women, by the fear of bombing raids, by rationing, by troop movements, and by military quarters in and near to the town. Perhaps one of the most visible reminders of the war for many was the transformation of the green grass of Donkey's Common into a camp for the women's branch of the British Army, the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). Forty-three huts were built on the on the Common. The huts were wooden and were laid out in 'H' formations, with washing facilities in the middle of each group. After the war these were used as emergency housing units until 1958.



Donkey's Common huts from the corner of Mill Road, January 1958.

Image courtesy of Cambridgeshire Archives

Read more: [Mill Road History Project - Building Report: 'Donkey's Common and adjacent land' by Allan Brigham and James Ingram](#)

2 - Parkside Swimming Pool

In 1950 2,600 people signed a petition to the Mayor asking for an indoor pool - heaven for a city whose residents were used to swimming in the river, or at outside pools at Jesus Green or Coldhams Common!

The novelty of what Cambridge residents were asking for was highlighted when the City Surveyor reported that *'it appeared that no local authority had provided a new bath in the post war period', and that 'a number of modern indoor baths had been erected on the continent...'*

The pool was finally opened by Alderman Ridgeon on 1 April 1963 with dozens of young members of Cambridge swimming clubs who had been sitting round the edges of the pool jumping into the water 'splashing and cheering', followed by a colourful and exciting gala featuring Linda Ludgrove, the double gold medallist at the Empire Games, and several Olympic swimming stars.



Images courtesy of Cambridgeshire County Archives

Headlines in the Cambridge News described the completed pool as a *'The Cambridge Swimmer's Dream'*. As well as the promised main pool 110ft x 42ft (33m x 13m), and the Learner Pool 36ft x 20ft (11m x 6m), features included a café, seating for 532 spectators, a purification plant capable of purifying all 210,000 gallons in the main pool in just four hours, non-slip tiles, 'footbath and shower before taking plunge', and 14 miles of timber to improve acoustics.

The architect was R J Wyatt of the City Surveyor's Office, and the cost of the building was £224,620.

The pool continued in use until 1997, but in the final two decades it slowly became the centre of a major political controversy. At stake were not just the pool, control of the City Council, or Councillors' reputations, but the fate of the remaining 1.5 acres of the original common which was still open space.

In June 1997 the Lottery Sports Fund announced its biggest grant to date in East Anglia to provide 65% of the cost of the new pool, and in July the Council approved the £11 million pool redevelopment with a commitment to bridge the financial gap.

The old Parkside pool finally closed in July 1997 with the Mayor swimming the last length at a special ceremony. Draining the pool took seven days, and demolition began in the autumn.

Parkside Pool 2 (1999-)

The new pool was finally opened on 27 April 1999. The lottery had provided £7.4 million towards the cost, backed by £4 million from the City Council, making this a major project after years of austerity.

Designed by S & P architects, the pool's wavy roof line provided a visually attractive but not overwhelming gateway building to Mill Road. Among the striking features are the view from the pool across the grassed open space of Donkey's Common and Parker's Piece. This wall of glass fills the pool with natural light and, by enabling passers-by to see into the pool, helps to integrate it into the Common.



Image courtesy of Allan Brigham and James Ingram

The Naked Bathers

The once controversial statue of the naked 'Swimmers' was landscaped after the 1999 rebuilding. It is still on Donkey's Common but can now be found on the corner with Mawson Road. The sculptress Betty Rea (1904–65) taught sculpture at Homerton College, Cambridge.

Time to move on!

Walk 300 metres down Mill Road, and stop on the corner of Covent Garden, in front of Sally Ann's charity shop.

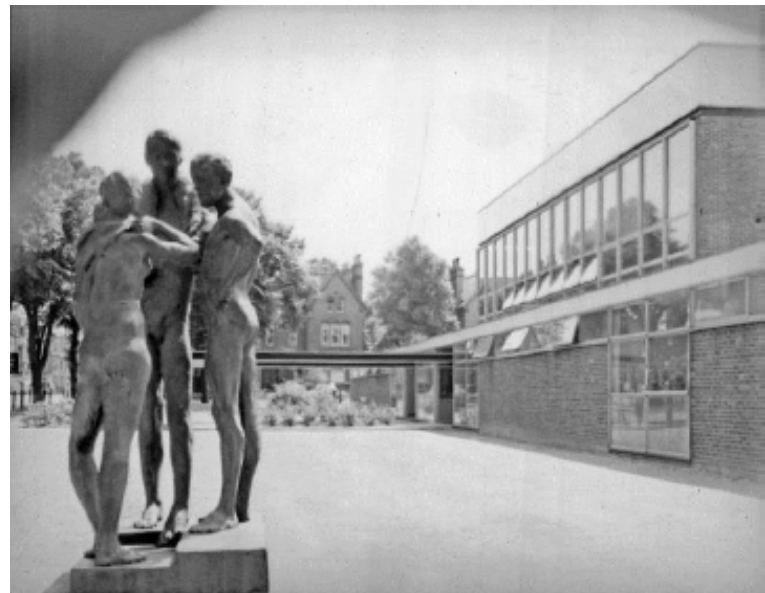


Image courtesy of Cambridgeshire Archives

Read more: [Mill Road History Project - Building Report: 'Donkey's Common and adjacent land' by Allan Brigham and James Ingram](#)

3 - 44a Mill Road

The Playhouse - Fine Fare Supermarket -Sally Ann's

The building you are looking at (Sally Ann's) is designated a 'Building of Local Interest' by the Local Planning Authority.

Films!

Between 1896 and 1912, films had been shown in Cambridge not in purpose-built cinemas but on a temporary basis at circuses and fairs and in theatres, meeting and lecture halls, notably the Arcadia Music Hall (Downing Street), Alexandra Hall (Lion Yard), Corn Exchange, Guildhall and the Working Men's Club (Fitzroy Street/East Road).

The Playhouse (1912-1956)

On 1 July 1912, Cymos Ltd of London, submitted plans for the erection of a 'Cinema Theatre' in Cambridge. The plans were approved on 11 July 1912, with the name 'Playhouse Cinema' or 'Cinema Theatre'. A new company was formed to build and operate the cinema: Cambridge Picture Playhouses Ltd, London. Cinematograph and music licenses were granted by the Borough Justices on 7 April 1913, the capacity to be 169 seats in the gallery and 602 seats in the stalls.

The 'Playhouse' opened on Whit Monday, 12 May 1913. The frontage was predominantly of red brick with white panels and featured a tower each side.

On 4 February 1916 a dancing license was granted '*for purposes of dance turns on the stage*'.

In 1927 the cinema was sold to Playhouse (Cambridge) Ltd, which operated the Central Cinema in Hobson Street.

In 1930 sound equipment was installed for the first time and sound pictures were presented.



Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection



Image courtesy of Cambridgeshire Collection



Image courtesy of Clark



Playhouse staff, Summer 1935.
Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection

In 1935, the company was taken over by the Union Cinema Co Ltd of London, only for the company to be taken over in 1937 by Associated British Cinemas Ltd (ABC). Under ABC, the Playhouse exchanged its pictures mid-week with The Tivoli (Mitcham's Corner).

Stan Howchin, who was the news film runner and later projectionist for the Playhouse in the mid-1930s, recalls:

The screen could be rolled away to make room for variety acts. Mr Dwyer was the stage electrician, and he was in charge of this operation.

[...]

I had to man the spotlights while the film was running - amber for men, surprise pink for women. (All characters entered from the left except the villains, who entered from the right.) On Monday morning of each week there was a rehearsal of the film for that week of the film change-overs and sound system. The manager at that time, Mr Mann, would sit in the back row and press a button for up or down of the sound level. The operator had a rehearsal sheet in front of him from which he worked.

[...]

There were five or six steps up into the projection room, which had a Gaumont British Sound System [...]. There were four Strand Electric dimmer pots (house lights), which had to be filled with water and special salts added that were obtained from Strand Electric in London. I also used to have to go to Boots on the corner of Tenison Road and Mill Road for film cement, and wait while they made it up.

On 24 November 1956, ABC finally closed The Playhouse and the Tivoli, blaming the entertainments tax for the decision.



Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection



Image courtesy of the Local Data Company

1956 – present day

Fine Fare Supermarket

In 1961, plans were submitted by Fine Fare Ltd. of Welwyn Garden City for Cambridge's first ever supermarket. These required the removal of the Playhouse frontage and a single-storey extension to be built to house five checkouts and the separate entrance and exit. In, or shortly before, 1963 the northern end of the building (entrance, vestibule, towers) was demolished.

Fine Fare already had a store on Fitzroy Street, but that on Mill Road was the first to be called 'Fine Fare Supermarket', and to have open shelves and checkouts. The new store was opened in 1963, and operated for twenty-two years.

Sally Ann's

The Salvation Army (Sally Ann's) Charity Shop opened on 5 August 1985. It was unusual among charity shops at the time for having its own laundry facilities and canteen upstairs.

Time to move on!

Turn down Covent Garden and walk less than 100m to The Six Bells pub.

Read more: <http://www.capturingcambridge.org/mill-road-area/mill-road/44amillroad/>

4 - The Six Bells

The Six Bells public house has stood on Covent Garden since at least 1838, probably a lot longer. In that year, its owner was Francis Eaden. Francis was perhaps a member of the family that owned the haberdashery store Eaden Lilley, which goes back to the 18th century and stood on Market Street until its closure in 1999.

The publican of the Six Bells in that same year (1838) went by the delightful name of Israel Haggis!

In 1841, Israel Haggis, aged 25, was still living and working at the pub, with his wife Sarah, aged 20, maidservant Mary Bell and manservant James Langley. Israel and Sarah (née Hankin) had been married in 1836. But in 1843 Sarah eloped... [Read more about what the local paper said about this.](#)



Image attribution unknown Date: probably 1970s.

Israel wasn't the only publican on Covent Garden in 1841. Joseph Pledger owned the garden opposite the Six Bells and also ran a 'beer-shop'. Covent Garden was evidently a riotous place in those days!

Stan Howchin from the Playhouse recalls:

"On birthdays, the staff [from the Playhouse] would go to The Six Bells (where we were less likely to be caught out than at The Locomotive) in the morning."

Time to move on!

Carry on down Covent Garden to the end of the street, which is a dead end.

Read more: www.capturingcambridge.org/mill-road-area/covent-garden/six-bells/

5 - Covent Garden Hall

The most widely known building in Covent Garden is probably what was for many years known as the 'Drama Centre', the building at the far end of the street.

It has an interesting and varied history.

1906 – Hall built by St. Barnabas Church, used by the Boys Brigade Band

1909 – St. Barnabas School for girls and infants

1925 – St. Margaret's School

1956 – St. Margaret's School leaves

1985 – Boys Brigade Band disbands

1986 – The Drama Centre

2005 – Anglia Ruskin University Dance and Drama Studio

The hall was built in 1906 with money donated by St. John's College (£1,545). It was to serve as a hall for St. Barnabas Church, Mill Road or, as the Vicar stated, to provide '*a more commodious institute for the young men of St. Barnabas Parish*'. Opening it on 6 November of that year, the Vice Chancellor of the University '*urged the young men to, amongst their other pastimes, take up boxing, which, he was sure, produced a friendly spirit amongst the various combatants*'.

Time to move on!

Walk back up Covent Garden to Mill Road and turn right. Stop just past Sally Ann's.

Read more: www.capturingcambridge.org/mill-road-area/covent-garden/covent-garden-hall/

6 - 44 Mill Road: The Locomotive (1850-2008)

The Locomotive public house (still standing, though renamed, currently as a restaurant), dates from 1850 (the railway arrived in Cambridge in 1845), and before that date was most probably The British Admiral, a public house that was in existence before 1839 and sold in 1842.

By June 1839 The British Admiral had been abbreviated to The Admiral and was the venue for a meeting of the East Barnwell Reform Association. A month earlier this association had met at The Six Bells in nearby Covent Garden. The Beer Houses were a product of the 1830 Beer House Act, enacted to wean the public off gin. Both were small, and it is likely that the landlords had other occupations. But both flourished as Mill Road grew.



c.1900, Image courtesy of Cambridgeshire Archives



1960s or perhaps 70s, Image courtesy of Cambridgeshire Archives

Time to move on!

Continue 200m down Mill Road until you're standing outside St Barnabas Church.

Read more: [Mill Road History Project - Building Report: Mill Road in the 1830s, Allan Brigham](#)

7 - 83 Mill Road: The Durham Ox (?-2000)



Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection



Image courtesy of Barry Hurt

8 - 85-89 Mill Road:

Sturton Town Hall – Empire – Kinema – Scholars House

Next to where the Durham Ox used to be is now Scholars House, a student residence. That was built in 1996, but it had several guises before then.

1882 – 1884 Sturton Town Liberal Hall

The area of Cambridge known as Sturton Town grew rapidly in the second half of the 19th century and was considered a degenerate area by some. To counter this St Matthew's Church (1866), St Barnabas Church (1880), and various Co-Operative and Temperance Societies were built.

On the initiative of journalist James Drake Digby, Sturton Hall was built as a branch of the Reform Club and Junior Liberal Club, a substantial brick building, officially opening on 29 May 1882. The hall was built behind the existing cottages (originally numbered 46,47,48 Mill Road): the tenants were requested to give up a portion of their gardens and were only given one month's notice of the building work. No. 47 (which became 87) was unoccupied and soon purchased. The lower part was to become the main entrance to the hall, and the upper part committee rooms.

1884 – 1910 The Salvation Army

Unfortunately, the successful completion of the scheme – the building of committee and reading rooms – depended on more shares being taken up and the successful rental of the hall. But, for unclear reasons, a request for a liquor license for the hall was refused by the Mayor, and following the failure to renew the theatrical license, in December 1884 the hall was let exclusively to the Salvation Army. They had the lease of the hall until 1913, by which point they were only holding Sunday Services there.

1910 – 1916 The Empire

In June 1910 Frederick William Hawkins requested to hire the hall for movies and plays and wished to rename it The Empire, and a license for Cinematograph and Music and Dancing was granted. The Empire officially opened in October. In 1910-1912 it was known as the Empire Picture Theatre, and between 1912-1916 it was the Empire Palace of Varieties.

A review of the first night of the Empire in October 1910 reports that *"A handsome and commodious stage and proscenium have been erected; body of hall fitted with comfortable seats; all excepting the back ones being the tip-up variety."*

On 9th March 1912 an ad in the Cambridge Daily News proclaims that a new Cinematograph machine has been installed giving absolutely 'Flickerless, Rock-Steady Picture Plays'. And an article in 28th October in the same paper says that the Empire have installed a Fuller Generator enabling them to produce their own electric current, greatly increasing the power and steadiness of the light.

1916-1950 The Kinema under A.J.Pointer

After a refurbishment, in late 1916 it closes and reopens on 11 December as The Kinema to a packed crowd and showed films exclusively, although with live entertainment between shows.

In June 1926 Arthur Negus & co install electric lighting in the hall. At the back of the cinema screen were small rooms that were used as dressing rooms for the live acts, and the hall walls were decorated with what appeared to be giant oil paintings depicting Cambridge scenes such as Garrett Hostel Lane.

In August 1931 the Kinema was the last Cambridge cinema to install sound equipment and switch to the 'talkies'. Apparently the Kinema became known as 'The Kinny: Home of the Serial'.

1950-1966 The Kinema under George Webb

The Kinema seated 422 and sometime before 1963 Cinemascope equipment was installed. Leslie Halliwell described the entrance to the hall in the early 1950s as *"pink stuccoed and known as the Tunnel of Love"*.

On 12th March 1966 the Kinema closed suddenly - the last films shown were Shenandoah, starring James Stewart, and The Golden Blade, starring Rock Hudson.

1966-1968

Following the sudden closure of the Kinema a group of local businessmen, including the existing manager Alfred Pink, formed Prize Entertainments for the sole purpose of running the Kinema as a part-time cinema and bingo club. The Kinema reopened for bingo only a couple of weeks after it closed as a cinema. The proposal was public cinema 2 nights a week, private cinema 1 night, bingo Thursday to Sunday. The last regular film screening reportedly occurred sometime in 1979. Anecdotal reports suggest that the last ever film shown at the Kinema was as part of the Cambridge Animation Festival in summer 1985. The Kinema had closed its doors for good before the end of the year.



Images courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection



Image courtesy of Ann Horn and the Suzy Oakes Collection

Time to move on!
Continue 150m down Mill Road
until you're at the corner of
Kingston Street

Read more: <http://www.capturingcambridge.org/mill-road-area/mill-road/kinema/>

9 - 109 Mill Road: The White Swan

The 1851 census records The Spotted Cow which, by the 1861 Census, appears to have become The Three Swans and later The White Swan.



Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection



Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection

10 - 112 Mill Road: Mill Road Coffee Tavern - Great Eastern Hotel

Directly opposite the White Swan, on the corner of Devonshire Road, is another building of interest with a long and varied past.

- Mill Road Coffee Tavern: 1881-1895
- Great Eastern (Temperance) Hotel: 1900-1915
- Norman Bradley & Co, clothiers, jewellers and general salesman: 1919-1920
- Olivers, milliners etc: 1924-c1945
- GG Ingram & Sons Ltd, ladies and children's outfitters and drapers: c1945-c1950
- Cambridge & District Trustee Savings Bank: c1953-c1970
- Maxpeed Printers: 1970-c1975
- Elitian Limited, Printers: pre 1985-current



Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection

The first mention of the property that was to become 112 Mill Road is in 1881, where Spalding's Trade Directory records "Mill Road Coffee Palace (building)".

An article in an 1886 edition of 'The Coffee Public-House News and Temperance Hotel Journal' records...

'Mr Hardy then accompanied us to the Mill Road Tavern, within a few minutes' walk of the Midland Railway. This house was built by the Company [University and Town Coffee Palace Company Limited] and is its freehold. The bar is fitted with a pitch pine counter with marble top. The rooms are all nice and lofty; it has three bedrooms with fine beds, and cleanliness is the order of the day, which reflects great credit on the manager and his wife.'

The purpose of the Company was to establish houses, rooms etc which would offer 'all the attractions of ordinary public houses, except that no intoxicating drink will be sold or drunk on the premises'. By 1907 the property is known as the Great Eastern Temperance Hotel.

Time to move on!

Turn down Devonshire Road and walk 50m until you're standing outside the Devonshire Arms.

Based on a report by Ruth Rule and Gordon Clark

11 - The Devonshire Arms

Now owned by Milton Brewery, at the turn of the century it used to be the Midland Tavern / The Star Brewery:



Railway workers in 1919. Maybe striking.
Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection

Time to move on!

Walk back to Mill Road. Cross to the other side of the road and continue up Mill Road until you're at the foot of the railway bridge. Look left.

12 - Mill Road Library - Bharat Bhavan

Cambridge was one of the first towns to adopt the Public Libraries Act of 1850, when town councils were made responsible for building and maintaining 'Free Libraries' for the use and benefit of the growing population.

The Mill Road Branch library was officially opened on Wednesday 2nd June 1897, by Mayor Horace Darwin. The Cambridge Chronicle newspaper described 'a light, handsome building ... admirably constructed' in red brick and Mansfield stone, topped with an octagon cupola with amber glazing. It also reported on the opening ceremony where 270 local dignitaries attended a buffet and art exhibition. The building was decorated with fairy lamps and coloured lights spelling 'VR' in a crown, in honour of the Queen.



Opening, c.1897

A poster of 1897 described the new building as, 'One large room, one half forming the Reading Room and the other half the Lending Library. Every provision has been made for the comfort and convenience of borrowers and readers, and separate tables are set apart for the use of the ladies.'

The first Librarian, Mr Henry Robinson, was paid £65 per year, with a deduction of £5 for the cleaning. The library was open Monday to Saturday. Books were issued to borrowers either to read in the reading room or to take home, and in its first year it is recorded that 19,052 books were borrowed.

The library closed in 1996. The building now houses the 'Bharat Bhavan' community centre run by the Indian Community and Culture Association's (ICCA).



Library staff, c.1955



Read more: www.capturingcambridge.org/mill-road-area/mill-road/bharat-bhavan/

13 - 133 Mill Road: The Earl of Beaconsfield (?-)

Just on the other side of the railway bridge, on the corner of Great Eastern Street, is The Earl of Beaconsfield pub.

The pub was owned by Joseph Turner Bailey, a local character whose story can be found on the Mill Road Cemetery website. When he died in 1917 he left the Earl of Beaconsfield to Stephen Thompson who had been a friend and employee for many years.



Image courtesy of the Cambridgeshire Collection

A pet parrot named Bob who was known for his catchphrase "*Bob wants a bit*" lived there.



Bob the Parrot and friends, round the back of the Earl of Beaconsfield, c.1916.
Images courtesy of Mary Naylor

The walk ends here but there are plenty more pubs - and certainly more coffee houses than in the 19th century! - to investigate if you continue down Mill Road into Romsey. It's probably time for a drink anyway...

This walking tour is a late product of the Heritage Lottery Funded Mill Road History Project, which ran from 2012 to 2015, the Project's purpose being to study the heritage of Mill Road, its sites, buildings (residential, commercial and industrial), institutions and community – work that the Mill Road History Society now continues.

Curated by Emily Boldy.