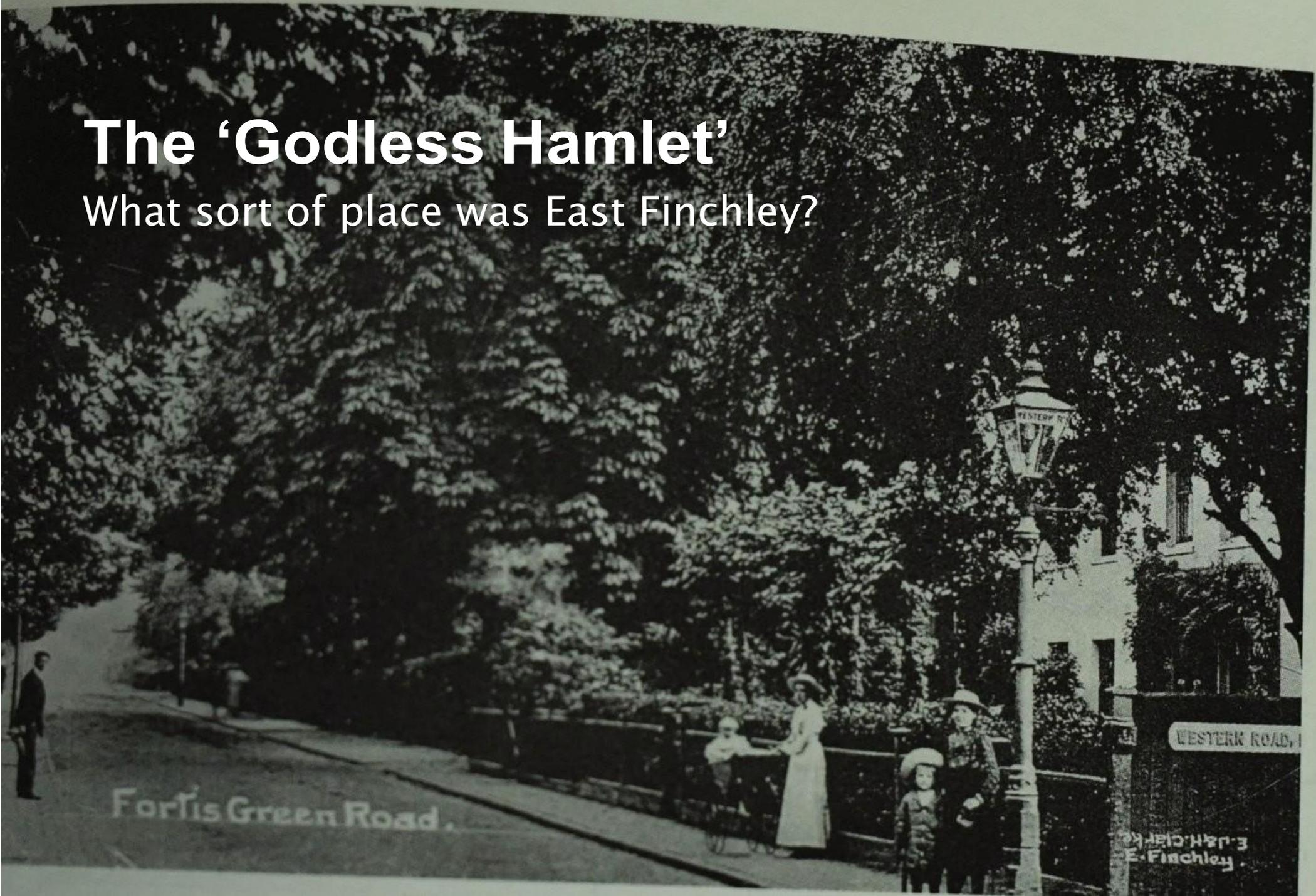


The 'Godless Hamlet'

What sort of place was East Finchley?

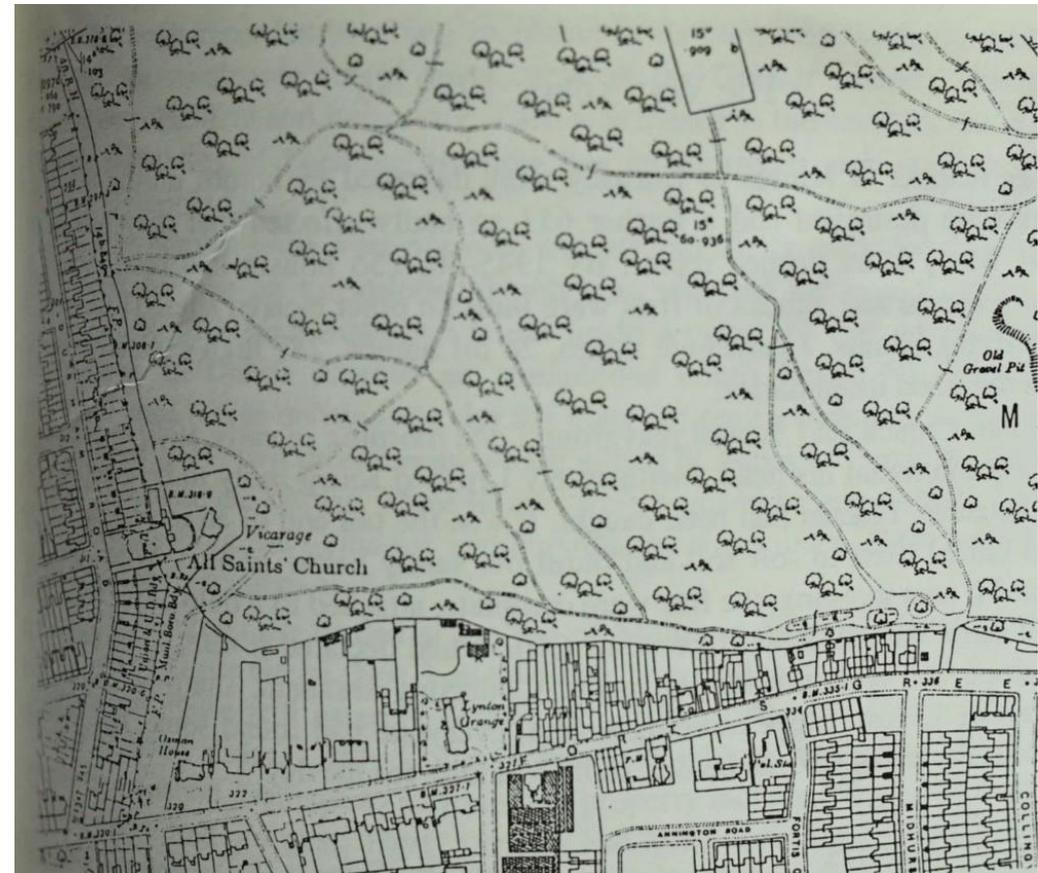




In the years before the arrival of the railway in 1867 what is now called East Finchley was known as 'East End.' East End Road is one of the last reminders of the lost name.

For centuries there was just one church which had been built in the 12th century, St Mary-at-Finchley. A report in 1813 described the area as mired in 'deplorable ignorance.' Eliza Salvin, the daughter of Anthony Salvin, the prominent architect who lived on Fortis Green (and designed Holy Trinity) said East End village was 'Godless', a place where 'drunkards abounded.' There was, she said 'no moral restraint, no orderly rule.'

It is hard now to try to picture just what sort of place East Finchley was in the nineteenth century. Imagine perhaps a walk from what is now East Finchley tube station. To your right would have been the 'Dirt House' which has now been replaced by the White Lion Pub. It was a place with a dubious reputation as a meeting place for local farmers and the 'nightsoil men' who would bring their carts of urban fertilizer to be spread on the nearby fields. The tollgates of the old turnpike that began at the bottom of Stag Hill were still standing. Market Place behind what is now the High Street was an area devoted to raising and selling pigs. We were well known for swine.





The area was still largely rural. Local haycutters were reported to be unhappy about the arrival of threshing machines. What is now the Fuel Land allotments were the remains of the common land; the farm rents were used to help the poor pay for fuel, fuel that they would have in previous centuries gathered by right for free.

In the previous century it had been known as a place where highwaymen lurked as carriages made the slow journey north. Finchley Common was also used to rally troops or hang miscreants. There used to be a gibbet in what are now the county roads.

Henry Stephens, the vicar of Christ Church in North Finchley said Sunday mornings were well known as the time for drunken fights. Dick Whittington knew what he was doing when he decided to turn back on Highgate Hill.

When the church finally tackled the 'deplorable ignorance' and established Holy Trinity and then in 1847 built the first 'industrial school' on East End Road; the boys were trained in animal husbandry and the girls learned the skills needed for domestic service.

But if you walked up the toll road to the Bald Faced Stag you would begin to see to your right, just beyond the brick works, new houses along Park Hall Place (now Fortis Green Road).

Park Hall, Cranleigh, Summerlee and Fairlawn were large houses and a sign that the city was beginning to encroach. Below them lay the fields of Dirt House Wood (now happily renamed Cherry Tree Wood).

Of course it is worth noting that Fortis Green is more than just a little suburban road, it marks the end of the ice age. The huge wall of ice that had carved out the landscape of northern Britain had come to a halt in East Finchley leaving behind a rocky sludge of boulder clay. Fortis Green Road was the southern limit of the ice, a natural track between ice and clay.

Of course, while terminal moraine is thrilling for geographers it is less than popular with structural engineers wanting to erect a new church.

Walk around East Finchley and you will see signs of houses that have shifted their weight, it is a place of creeping cracks and under pinning.

There is in the minutes of the All Saints' PCC a brief mention in the early 70s that the chancel was 'still sinking' – a situation that seems to have caused little or no concern, so familiar was the issue.



When during services I find myself staring at the strange glowing light from the Lady Chapel that seems to suggest a friendly presence my eye is always drawn upwards to the infill above it.

It is the job of every churchwarden to cast an anxious glance at where the last crack was dealt with and hope a quick prayer will ensure that it does not reappear elsewhere.

For a neighbourhood that seems to be a model of Victorian solidity there is something distinctly unsteady beneath it all.



