

Wander About Wednesday: The Meandering Moselle

Wednesday 29 April 2020

Welcome to Wander about Wednesday: The Meandering Moselle – sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

From sunshine to rain and back again, the weather has been changeable so far this week during the lockdown. We of course heard last week about the Father of Meteorology in our midst – Luke Howard – who helped us to understand and forecast the weather. But in the long distant past we relied on what may sound like fanciful folklore to predict what the weather might be and what to expect – by looking at signs in nature and taking heed of old weather sayings. Two such local sayings would warn us of what more inclement changes in the weather might bring: “*When Tottenham Wood is all afire, Tottenham Street is all but mire.*” And also, “*Hornsey’s Rain Brings Tottenham’s Pain*”.

What these sayings tell us is that (in the past) we would need to keep a look out for flooding in Tottenham when heavy rain comes. But why should that be? Queen’s Wood in Muswell Hill, where it borders with Highgate, (seen in the beautiful and atmospheric painting below, as it looks today) will help us pin-point the reason why ...



Queen’s Wood, 2007 (oil on canvas). From the collections of Bruce Castle Museum & Archive. ©
[The artist: Emily Ault](#)

In the west of the borough of Haringey there are the Northern Heights – the hills of Highgate, Muswell Hill and Alexandra Palace (built on what was Tottenham Wood). These areas of high ground stand on hard rock about 100 metres above sea level. Tottenham, in the east of the borough, lies on lower and softer ground of sand and gravels. These shapes in the landscape were formed millions of

years ago during the Ice Age, when glaciers carved their way through these high rocks, leaving the gravel behind them.

In [Queen's Wood](#), we can find the head-streams of the tributary 'Queen's Wood Stream' rising. This is the favoured true source of the origins of the River Moselle. It is one of a number of hidden streams and tributaries that bubble up from these western hills, and flow eastwards down towards the valley of the River Lea in Tottenham.

You might not know these streams exist today as over 100 years ago they were mostly diverted (or 'culverted') underground. This is mainly because – as Greater London grew – open countryside was being built on and roads needed to be protected so that there was less flooding from these rivers.

The course of the Moselle can nonetheless be charted from this high ridge on the Northern Heights down to just north of Priory Park over to Wood Green and through Noel Park. It then runs openly through [Lordship Recreation Ground](#), then underground again over to Tottenham Cemetery where it can be seen again flowing on the surface. Then it goes underground, moving down Tottenham High Road by [Coombes Croft Library](#), where you can now see it below a glass viewing platform in the pavement, and then via different routes to the River Lea – one through Carbuncle Passage and another via Markfield Park.

Like the local sayings above warn us, Tottenham history books and local newspapers tell us the stories complaining about its severe flooding following heavy rain on the Northern Heights. The streams would swell and overflow down towards Tottenham.

As Fred Fisk recalls in his *History of Tottenham* (1913), he writes of the terrible thunderstorm and flooding in Tottenham of 1878. It is said one of Mr Gripper's sons (the family who ran the [Bell Brewery](#) on Tottenham High Road) amused himself by rowing up and down the flooded street in a boat, taking passengers at 6d each and giving the money to the Tottenham Hospital.

There is a wonderful book '[Haringey Hidden Streams Revealed](#)' (2005) compiled by Albert Pinching and David Dell of [Hornsey Historical Society](#) who diligently researched and documented the routes of all these hidden streams through Haringey, including the Moselle. At Bruce Castle, Albert and David had an enjoyable time looking through maps and the many intriguing pictures and photographs we have in our collections of the Moselle – so we thought we should share some of those images in today's post, along with an overview about the origins of the Moselle name.

If you don't know it already, we can link you up too with this fantastic walk and resource *Exploring the Moselle* (if you click [here](#), you can follow the route online, but you might like to do the walk when we are out of lockdown), compiled by Joyce Rosser and Joan Curtis and others for the Haringey Parks Forum. We also highlight here the great [A River Runs Through It](#) community heritage project and website that we partnered with [Twisted Stocking Theatre](#), led by Angela Baker and supported by Deborah Cawkwell and others, in 2013. The website connects

you with some of the local memories collected in more recent times about the Moselle, alongside the school projects and events that were undertaken.

The name 'Moselle'

The Moselle is known as the 'River Moselle'. But through history it has also been known as the 'Brook'. Its name and spelling has had different variations through time. It has been known as the Mose, the Mosewell, the Muzzle, and even the Muscle.



Photograph reproduced from a lantern slide by Dr W. Draper, c.1904, entitled: 'The last state of the Mus Well.'

The wall on the right belonged to the house 'Fairview', now 38 Muswell Road.

© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

As the sound of the name suggests, its origins can be connected with Muswell Hill but its source is not from the Mus Well (featured in the photograph above) as is commonly thought (this is in fact the source of a smaller water course called the Muswell Stream). The source of the River Moselle comes from the water of five smaller tributaries becoming the bigger water course, as they merge between Highgate and Muswell Hill, where Southwood Lane and Muswell Hill Road are today, and the head-streams evident in Queen's Wood.

The earliest references to the name 'Moselle' is in 1467 from a document relating to the manors of Tottenham. We can also, of course, see it marked out as it meanders across (in blue) the 1619 map of Tottenham (detail of the map below; we highlighted this [beautiful map](#) in an earlier post).



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Twenty years after this map was produced, the [Reverend William Bedwell](#), the Vicar of Tottenham at All Hallows Church, was writing his history of Tottenham in 1631 (the first local history book of the area written) and described his parish: “First therefore it is diuided [divided] into two partes by a little brooke, which issueth out of Moswell-hill in Hornsey parish, and therefore we will call it Mosa, or if you please Mosella: this riuélet [rivulet] falling from this hill, passing along between Hornsey & Tottenham wood. And running through the middest of the town in a meander fashion, or after the manner of the Greek capital Omega, leaving the parsonage & vicarage upon the north, runneth along by the high way, until it come to the great stone bridge, (at Scotland Green) where it suddenly maketh a right angle & falling under the same.”

A Briefe Description of the Towne of Tottenham Highcrosse in Middlesex by Wilhelm Bedwell, 1631

It can also be seen on the 1818 Parish Map of Tottenham (below) from the 1798 Wyburd Survey, published by William Robinson in his [History and Antiquities of the Parish of Tottenham](#). This sections shows the Moselle loop going by the farm at Broadwaters, onwards towards the north of Bruce Castle (where the Tottenham cemetery is today).



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

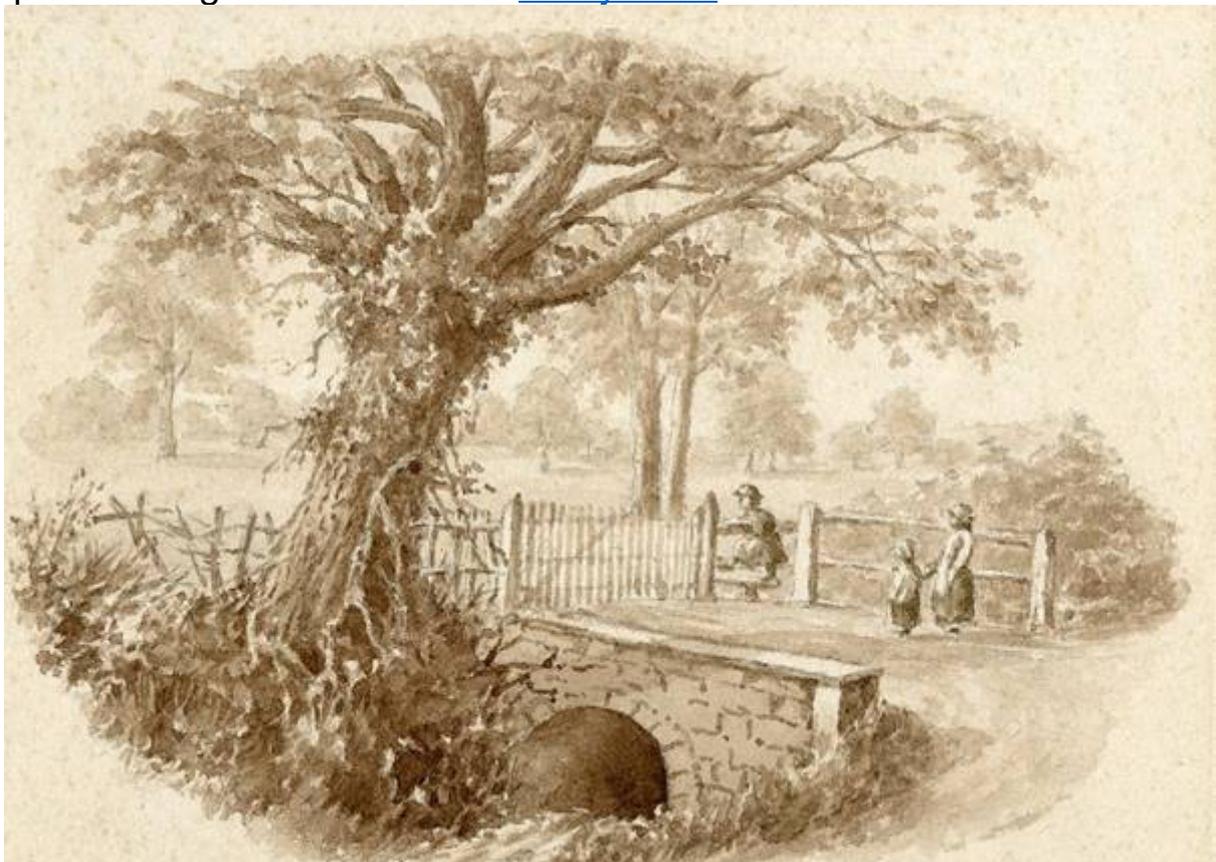
One of the earliest images we have, which shows pictorial evidence of the Moselle passing through the area is shown here (below), was also published in Robinson's *History of Tottenham* in 1818. It shows Tottenham Hale with a partially culverted Moselle flowing through the west side of The Hale:



Painted from an Original Drawing for the Supplement to Thomas Sturges's Annals of Peterham, 1846

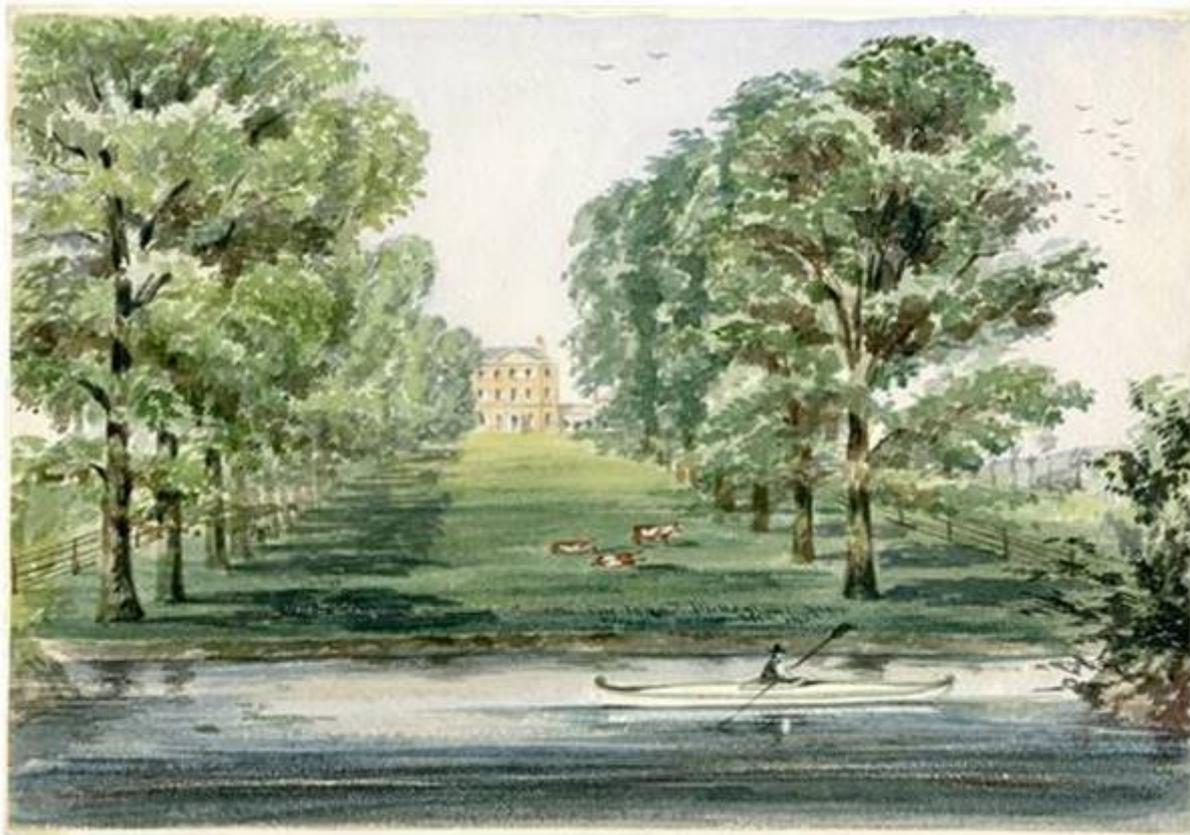
© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Most of the paintings of the Moselle from our collections are 19th century. Here we have a sweet sepia watercolour (undated) of what is described as the 'Footpath leading East from end of [Priory Road](#)' in Crouch End.



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

This delightful watercolour view (below) shows Downhills House, Tottenham c.1870 looking south from the lake alongside the Moselle through the avenue of elm trees towards the house. The lake and the surrounding parkland are now part of Lordship Recreation Ground, where the [Moselle still flows openly](#) through. You can read all about the Moselle and its recent restoration from the Friends of Lordship Rec, [here](#).



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

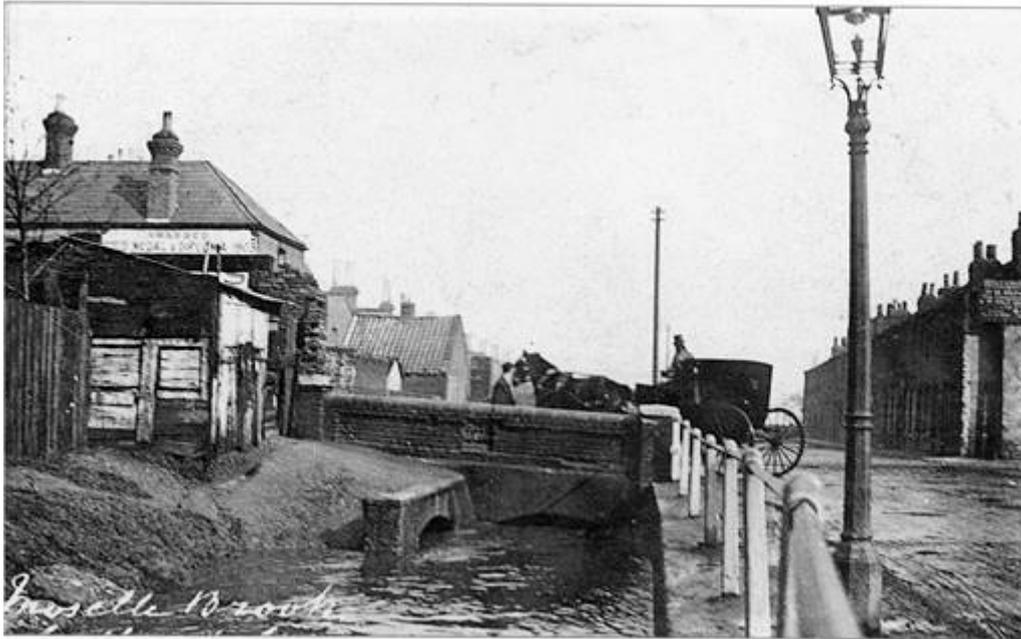
The peaceful watercolour (above) was chosen for the front cover of Albert and David's book. This rural view is surprisingly from the 20th century, painted in 1920 by H.J. Griffin (who lived in Woodside Gardens) and shows the sluice on the River Moselle at Broadwater Farm, as seen from [Wimbourne Road](#) in Tottenham.



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Photographer, author and bookseller Fred Fisk took this photograph (above) in 1906, showing the bridge over the entrance to the Moselle culvert alongside White Hart Lane, near its junction with today's [Beaufoy Road](#) in Tottenham.

The photograph below shows a horse-drawn cab crossing a bridge over the Moselle at [Scotland Green](#) in Tottenham, just to the east of Tottenham High Road, as it flows on its last stretch towards the River Lea. The photograph was taken before it was culverted at this point in 1906. The carriage is heading along the former Kemble Road.



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We have also found some recollections about Blenheim Grove (which led off Blenheim Road), Wood Green in 1947, which reveal a little more about the Moselle and its impact on the building considerations of the area. Until the 1970s (when Wood Green Shopping City was built and the road was cleared), a short section of the stream ran in the open along the north side of the road:

‘There were nine houses in the Grove, No.1 to No. 4 on one side and No. 6 to No.10 on the other... But there was no number 5. Instead, there was a patch of grass fenced off with a staked wooden fence, and known to all the kids as the field. This led into the back garden of number 6 (next door to us). I can remember various reasons being discussed among all the neighbourhood kids as to what had happened to no. 5. It surely must have existed at some time, after all, the space was there and No. 5 was missing, so perhaps it was burnt down, knocked down or even fell down, who knew? In fact, the reason probably was that that Moselle brook flowed beneath the green grass of that field, and the builder must have been a wiser man afterwards!’

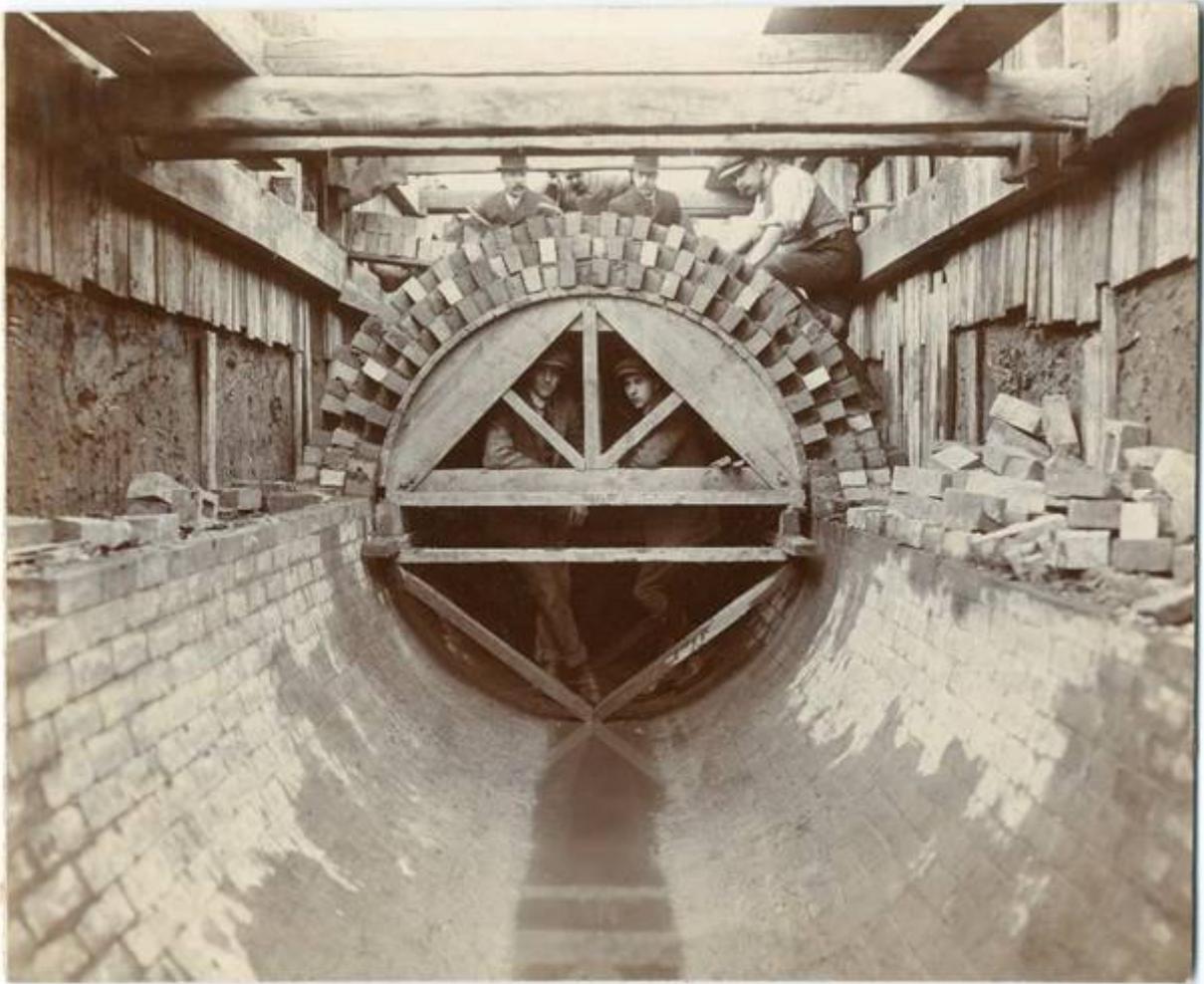
Builders and architects have had to consider the Moselle and the potential of its flooding in building plans – the building of the shop Argos has a wide alleyway next to it to accommodate the river’s route and the 1960s tower blocks of Broadwater Farm estate were designed high with no residential accommodation on the ground level, given its setting within the Tottenham flood plain.

The Moselle is all around us - whether we know it or not. Evidence of its existence pops up here and there, whether its willow trees growing along its underground route or the remains of parapets of bridges (in [Vincent Road](#), Noel Park in Wood Green). It can be found in the names of streets and roads from around the borough; it gave its name to old houses long gone or Georgian houses that survive today (as the one in the photograph below, showing Moselle House). It was the former name of the [school](#) for children and young people with Special Educational Needs in Tottenham, and it gives its name to the [Moselle](#)

[Room](#), still in use today at the old Tottenham Town Hall, with its exquisite Moorish-Jacobean ceilings.



[Moselle House](#), 707 Tottenham High Road, seen here in 1957, dates from c.1714. This façade faces the High Road set far back from the main road, with its entrance facing Church Road. The River Moselle runs underground in the area in front of this grand house. © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



© Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

And so we end today's post with two things. This amazing photograph (above) demonstrating the great engineering techniques that went into culverting the Moselle – here carrying the Moselle under the London County Council (LCC) built estate on Lordship Lane in 1906 (now the [Tower Gardens Estate](#)).

The final (sung) word comes from pupils of St Francis de Sales and Noel Park Primary Schools who, back in 2013, came to Bruce Castle to make a living willow sculpture (the Mossy Eel) and learn a 400-year-old song from our Archive at Bruce Castle, all about the Moselle: *The Tottenham Toad*. Just click [here](#) on the website *A River Runs Through It*, and listen.

Remember to check out the [walk](#) and try it out, when we are all able to wander about our borough again!

Do look out tomorrow too (Thursday 30 April) for the #MuseumFromHome [social media, TV and radio initiative with the BBC](#) to celebrate our amazing museums – if you are on Twitter, please do re-tweet.

Until then, take care, keep well
Best wishes
From us all at Bruce Castle

Deborah Hedgecock
Curator

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