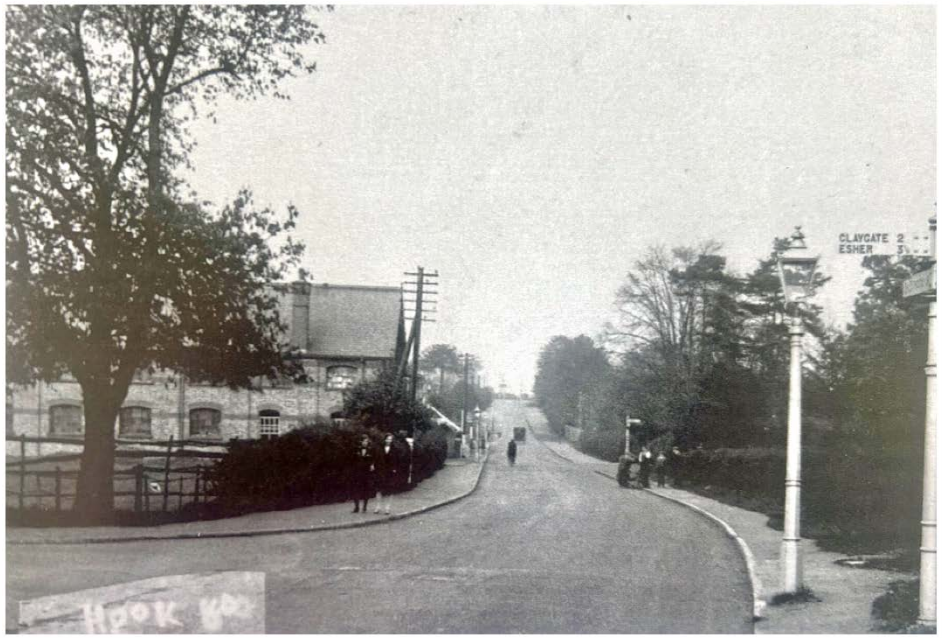
Learning about Hook and Chessington's past

HOOK

HOOK has existed for at least 800 years.
Until modern times, it was just a little village in the Surrey countryside. There were a few old cottages and houses and a lot of farms with fields where cattle would graze. Milk from these cows was taken to dairies and delivered to people's homes by horse and cart.

In the reign of Henry II, in the 1100s, the countryside began to be known as *Hoc* or *La Hoke.* Some people think this is because the land was in the shape of a long hook, but other people don't agree. One of the most important people who rented land from the king was John *La Hoke*, or *Hog*. Today there is still a stream called the *Hog*smill nearby.

* ONE of Hook's oldest lanes is Clayton Road. In Victorian times it was known as Lord King's Lane. Lord King owned a large part of the land which formed the Lovelace Estate. That is why Lovelace School in Mansfield Road has this title. There were then two old pubs in Clayton Road. One was the Cricketers, which was rebuilt in the 1930s; and The Plough beer house. The Plough was pulled down many decades ago and Bramham Gardens and new houses in Clayton Road were built in its place.



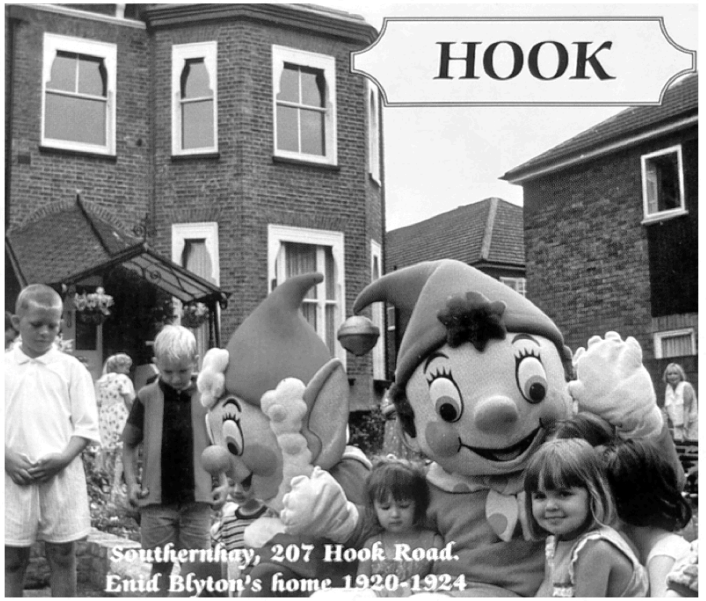
Do you recognise this view of Hook in 1915? The old building on the left was once a factory making soap, candles, mops and household goods. Originally it was a storage place for fruit from local farms. It was pulled down in the 1960s and now Sainsbury's supermarket in the Hook Road takes its place.

Clayton Road, Hook, more than 100 years ago. Some of these old cottages are still standing today, including Jeffs Cottages on the right. The Plough pub on the far right was demolished nearly a century ago

Harvest time in the cornfields next to Hook Parish Hall, Hook Road, in the 1920s

*A major new road was built in the 1920s. This was the Kingston Bypass (Hook Rise North and Hook Rise South). Soon after it was opened in 1927, a popular restaurant with a swimming pool was built next to it. The restaurant was called the Ace of Spades and quite a few famous people visited it, including the Second World War hero Douglas Bader. He lost a leg in a flying accident in 1931 but learnt to fly again, using artificial limbs. He became a wing commander in the war. The restaurant was next to today's petrol station near Southborough College

At first there wasn't too much traffic at the Ace of Spades roundabout but by the 1950s, there were long queues of cars, lorries and buses each day. Eventually an underpass was built in 1959. To prevent ice forming on the road surface, it was heated underneath. This cost a lot of money, so it was stopped soon afterwards.



*King George V drove along the new Kingston Bypass at Hook, watched by crowds of local people in 1929. He was on his way to Bognor Regis to stay. He hoped the sea air would help improve his poor health but he died five years later in 1936.
This unusual traffic light signpost (above) stood at the Ace of Spades roundabout in Hook after the new Kingston Bypass was opened in 1927.

*Famous author, Thomas Hardy, lived at 13 Hook Road for five months in 1874 and 1875. His most famous novel is Far From the Madding Crowd.

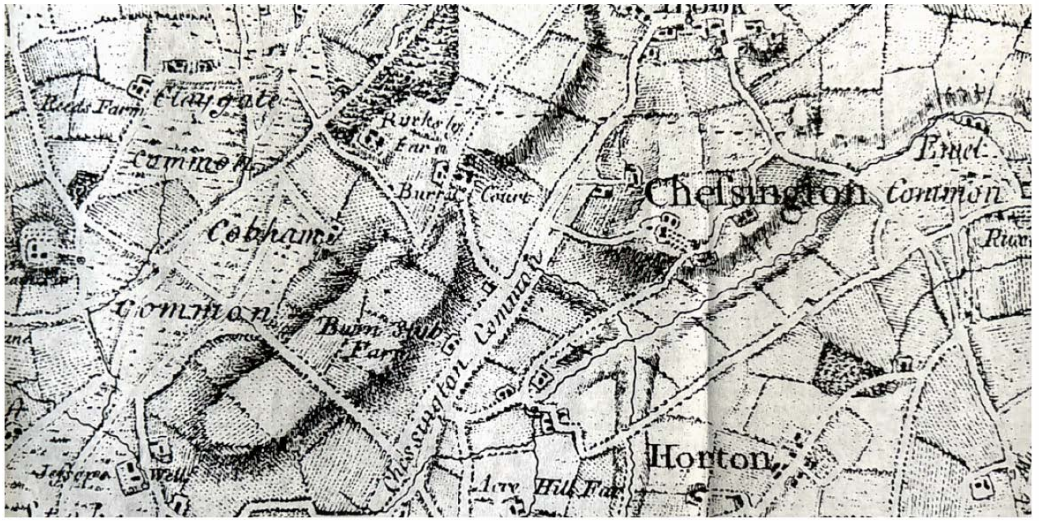
* Harry Hawker, a famous pilot, lived in Hook Road next to Hawkhurst Gardens. He is buried in the cemetery at St Paul's Church. He died in 1921 aged just 32 in a flying accident. He flew at 12,900ft above sea level in 1912, which at that time was a world record. Many other flight records were broken.

*One of the world's best known children's book authors, Enid Blyton, lived for four years in Hook. She stayed with the Thompson family at 207 Hook Road, and taught a class of up to 12 children. Her first book, Child Whispers, was a collection of poems about imps and fairies and it was written while she lived in Hook. She once had the children gathered around the roaring fire in the classroom and told them a story about blue imps which went up the chimney with the flames and smoke. If she saw that the boys and girls liked the story, she would use it in a new book. Enid Blyton lived at the house from 1920 until 1924.

CHESSINGTON

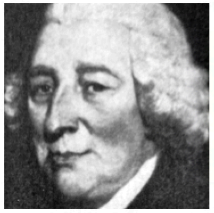
CHESSINGTON goes back many hundreds of years and St Mary's Church is more than 1,000 years old.

Today Chessington is a busy suburb of Kingston borough with thousands of cars, lorries and buses roaring along the A243 Leatherhead Road each day as drivers make their way to and from the M25 junction just south of Malden Rushett.
But it was only about 70 years ago that the roads were much quieter and the only roars that people heard were those of the lions in Chessington Zoo. These roars could be heard on quiet nights a mile away in Hook.
Originally, Chessington was part of a dense forest. The Romans had a tile factory in Ashtead Woods very close to Malden Rushett. Good quality tiles were sent all over the country to make roofs for Roman villas.
The dark woods which grew in the thick wet clay soil were homes to wild boar, bears, wolves and millions of midges and mosquitoes. The settlers may have arrived by boat on the Hogsmill River which was likely much deeper those days.



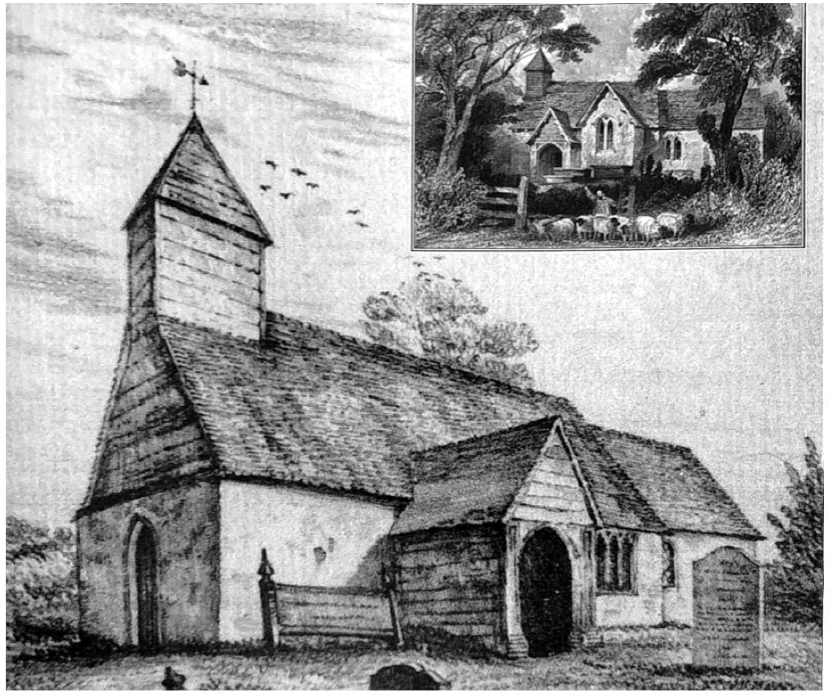
A map of Chessington in 1786

*The first people to make their homes in Chessington may have been the Celts. Two off-duty policemen using metal detectors found four gold Celtic (Iron Age) coins in 1999 on farmland near the zoo. But a few Bronze Age tools found indicated that people made their homes here even earlier than the Celts. They probably lived in timber huts.
Chessington had a number of different spellings. *Cisendune* is one such spelling in Saxon times and this probably meant gravelly hill.
Early dwellers would have cut down the many trees to clear the land for farming and may have grown wheat, rye, barley, oats, peas or spring barley.



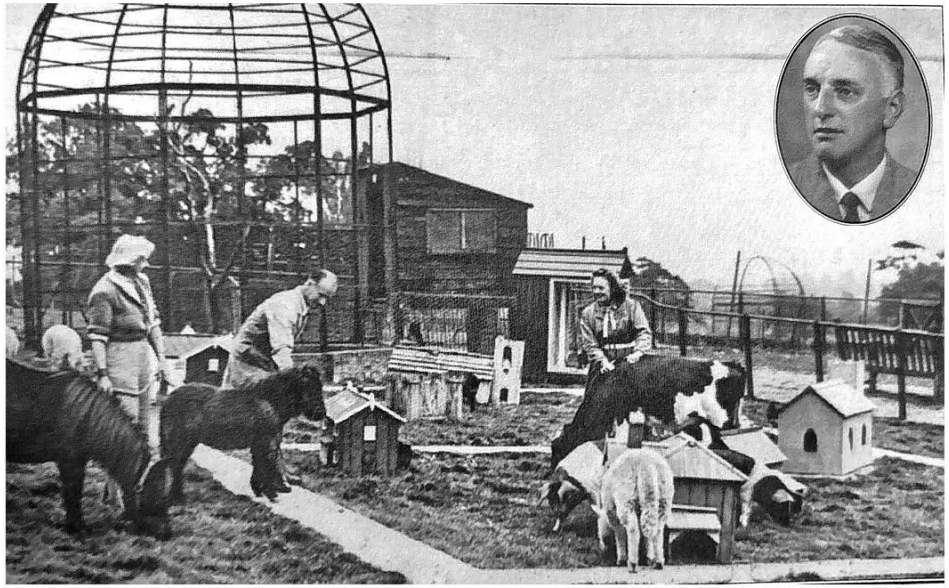
Fanny Burney, Samuel Crisp and Fairoak Lane in Victorian times

Chessington's ancient parish church dates back to Saxon times, but it has been much altered over the years.
One of the first mentions of the "Chapel of Chissendon" was between 1174 and 1189 during the reign of Henry II. For centuries, the Chessington church was the "little sister" of the church of Malden (Meldona) and served the tiny village of Chessington. Chessington was part of Malden and that is why Malden Rushett is so named. Since 1938, Chessington Church has been separate from Malden Church (at Old Malden).
The split was made because it was very difficult for people to travel between Malden and Chessington owing to very muddy lanes and tracks.
Chessington had several pieces of land which usually had a large house and some cottages for farm workers. These were called manors. One of the manors was named Chessington-at-Hoke (Hook).
The manors became part of Merton College, Oxford. The college still owns large areas of land in Chessington and Malden Rushett. In the 1550s, when Henry VIII got rid of monasteries, much of the Chessington land passed to the Crown. There is still a large area of woodland at Fairoak Lane which comes under royalty's Crown Estate.
The 16th century "Fream" manor house was called Chessington Hall and it was near the top of Garrison Lane. It was pulled down in 1833 and rebuilt. The mansion had 23 rooms. The rebuilt house survived until the 20th century.



How St Mary's Church, Chessington, looked in 1823

A writer of plays, Samuel Crisp, lived there in the 1700s.
He was a bit of a character. A young family friend called Fanny Burney, visited him often and she loved the place. She worked for King George III and was the wardrobe caretaker for the king's wife, Queen Charlotte, in London. Often she couldn't get to Chessington because her horse and carriage would get stuck in the deep muddy ruts in Leatherhead Road. It was a real problem in wet winters.
Fanny wrote a successful book called Evelina and danced around the mulberry tree in the grounds of Chessington Hall when it was published.



Pets Corner at Chessington Zoo in the 1940s. Inset: Reg Goddard, the founder

THE zoo in Chessington opened in 1931.It was started by Reginald Goddard, a businessman who ran a slate and slabs firm in Battersea, south London. He manufactured billiard tables and leased out halls. One hall was rented by a pet shop for housing rare species of animals. Mr Goddard saw that the public were fascinated to visit the hall to see the unusual creatures. Realising how interested the public were, he bought some land in Chessington and opened the Surrey Zoological Gardens.

It opened within weeks in 1931 and soon had elephants, bears, monkeys, giraffes, zebras and sea-lions. A disastrous fire in 1935 killed five ponies, including Nancy and Squib, and a zebra, Charlie.

There was also a circus with performing animals. The circus continued until more modern times. Tigers arrived in 1938.

During the Second World War, restrictions meant that the zoo had too close to prevent large crowds forming at venues in or near London. Animals were transferred to a zoo in Devon.

Over the years, the fairground rides increased and the name was changed to Chessington World of Adventures.

More facts about Hook and Chessington

* In 1946, Chessington Zoo's 1,500 animals daily consumed 30 tons of meat, 60 boxes of bananas, 40 boxes of oranges and required 20 tons of bedding straw.

* A bomb fell on the zoo in 1944 during World War II. Three people were killed. An injured ostrich died. Several monkeys escaped but were later recaptured.

* Copt Gilders was a centuries-old farm in Hemsby Road. It was pulled down in the 1930s and its 250 acres were turned into a housing development.

* Part of the Star pub,Malden Rushett, used to be a school in Victorian times.

* The population of Chessington in 1851 was 229 people. Hook in 1821 had a population of 222.

* Singer Petula Clark lived as a girl in Salmons Road, Chessington and performed at a VE party in Vallis Way, Hook. Actress Julie Andrews often spent time at Roebuck Road, Chessington, as a girl.

Compiled by Mark Davison, author of Hook Remembered, Hook Remembered Again, Chessington Memories & More Memories of Old Chessington

CDRA Chessington District Residents' Association

Local and Community History Month - May 2026