

Part Three • Metro-land

Metro-land

A script for television,* written and narrated by
John Betjeman

VISION

*Opening title
sequence: Fast run
from front of train,
Finchley Rd/
Chesham.
Subliminal
Superimpositions of
Metro-land*

METRO-LAND
with
John Betjeman

*Close-ups: Metro-
land brochures*

MUSIC

*'Tiger Rag' –
The
Temperance
Seven*

*'Build a Little
Home' – Roy
Fox*

COMMENTARY

JOHN BETJEMAN:
Child of the First War, Forgotten
by the Second,
We called you Metro-land. We
laid our schemes
Lured by the lush brochure,
down byways beckoned,
To build at last the cottage of our
dreams,
A city clerk turned countryman
again,
And linked to the Metropolis by
train.

*Four passages have been cut from the original script. The deleted material is summarized in square brackets. J.G.

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

Still: Quainton Rd

*Interior: Horsted
Keynes Station
JB walks from bar
on to platform and
gets into Met.
Carriage*

*Close-up: 'Live in
Metro-land' on
carriage door*

*Interior of carriage
JB reading
newspaper*

*Archive film: 'A
Trip on the Metro'*

Metro-land – the creation of the
Metropolitan Railway
Which, as you know, was the first
steam
Underground in the world.
In the tunnels, the smell of
sulphur was awful.

When I was a boy, 'Live in
Metro-land' was the slogan.
It really meant getting out of the
tunnels into the country.

For the line had ambitions of
linking
Manchester and Paris,
And dropping in at London on
the way.
The grandiose scheme came to
nothing.
But then the Metropolitan had a
very good idea.

Look at these fields,
They were photographed in
1910, from the train;
'Why not,' said a clever member
of the Board, 'buy these
orchards and farms as we go
along, turn out the cattle, and fill
the meadow land with houses?'
You could have a modern home
of quality and distinction –
you might even buy an old one,
if there was one left.

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Close-up: JB
Archive film*

And over these mild home county
acres
Soon there will be the estate
agent, coal merchant,
Post Office, shops, and rows of
neat dwellings,
All within easy reach of charming
countryside.
Bucks, Herts, and Middlesex
yielded to Metro-land.
And city men could breakfast on
the fast train to London town.

Close-up: Rails

*Exterior: Baker St
Station*

Is this Buckingham Palace?

*Interior: Chiltern
Court Restaurant
JB sitting at table*

Are we at the Ritz? No. This is
the Chiltern Court Restaurant,
built above Baker Street Station,
the gateway between Metro-land
out there and London down
there. The creation of the
Metropolitan Railway.

*Close-up: Brochure 'When the
Daisy Opens
her Eyes' –
Albert Sandler*

The brochure shows you how
splendid a place this was in 1913
which is about the year in which
it was built. Here the wives from
Pinner and Ruislip, after a day's
shopping at Liberty's or
Whiteley's, would sit waiting for
Their husbands to come up from
Cheapside and Mincing Lane.
While they waited they could
listen to the strains of the band
playing for the Thé Dansant be-
fore they took the train for home.

Mid-shot: JB

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

Archive film:

*'Leaving Baker St
Station'*

*High altitude shot:
Marlborough Rd
Station*

Train goes through

*JB on platform
Marlborough Rd
Station*

*Thomas Hood
house*

*Exterior:
Marlborough Rd
Station*

*JB exits from Angus
Steak House*

*St John's Wood
houses*

Early electric – punctual and prompt.

Off to those cuttings in the Hampstead Hills, St John's Wood, Marlborough Road,

No longer stations – and the trains rush through.

This is all that is left of Marlborough Road Station. Up there the iron brackets supported the glass and iron roof. And you see that white house up there?

That was where Thomas Hood died. Thomas Hood the poet. He wrote: 'I remember, I remember, the house where I was born', and the railway cut through his garden.

I remember Marlborough Road Station because it was the nearest station to the house where lived my future parents-in-law.

Farewell old booking hall, once grimy brick,
But leafy St John's Wood, which you served, remains,
Fore-runner of the suburbs yet to come
With its broad avenues,
Detached and semi-detached villas
Where lived artists and writers and military men.

And here, screened by shrubs,
Walled-in from public view,

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*10 Langford Place:
'Agapemone'*

*Lilies in stained
glass windows*

*House reflected in
pond – pan up to
house*

*'The Witch of
Endor,' 'Le Roi
David' –
Honegger*

Lived the kept women.
What puritan arms have
 stretched within these rooms
To touch what tender breasts,
As the cab-horse stamped in the
 road outside.

Sweet secret suburb on the
 City's rim,
St John's Wood.

Amidst all this frivolity,
in one place
a sinister note is struck –
in that helmeted house where,
 rumour has it,
The Reverend John Hugh
 Smyth-Pigott lived,
An Anglican clergyman
whose Clapton congregation
 declared him to be Christ,
a compliment he accepted.
His country house was called the
 Agapemone –
the abode of love –
and some were summoned to be
 brides of Christ.
Did they strew their Lord with
 lilies?
I don't know.
But for some reason this house
 has an uncanny atmosphere –
 threatening and restless.
Someone seems to be looking
 over your shoulder.

Who is it?

VISION	MUSIC	COMMENTARY
<i>Rails</i>		Over the points by electrical traction,
<i>Interior: Train, JB looking out of Window</i>		Out of the chimney-pots into the openness, 'Til we come to the suburb that's thought to be commonplace, Home of the gnome and the average citizen.
<i>Exterior: Milk float, Neasden</i>		Sketchley and Unigate, Dolcis and Walpamur.
<i>Neasden Parade</i>	<i>'Neasden' –</i>	
<i>Rows of shops</i>	<i>William</i>	
<i>Houses, milkman</i>	<i>Rushton</i>	
[Sequence: Gladstone Park, Neasden. Mr Eric Simms speaks of the Neasden Nature Trail and bird-watching.]		
<i>Met. tube train approaching slowly</i>		Beyond Neasden there was an unimportant hamlet Where for years the Metropolitan didn't bother to stop. Wembley.
<i>Still: Wembley Tower</i>		Slushy fields and grass farms, Then, out of the mist arose Sir Edward Watkin's dream – An Eiffel Tower for London. Sir Edward Watkin, Railway King, and Chairman of the Line, Thousands he thought, would pay to climb the Tower Which would be higher than the one in Paris. He announced a competition 500 guineas for the best design. Never were such flights of Victorian fancy seen. Civil engineers from Sweden and Thornton Heath,
<i>Designs of towers</i>		

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Front of brochure
Winning design*

*Still: Base of
Tower
Pan up
Still: Tower*

Still: Top of tower

*Still: Wide shot of
tower with lake*

*Interior: Wembley
Stadium
JB centre of pitch*

*Archive film:
Trumpeters and
horses
JB listening*

*'Civic Fanfare'
– Elgar*

Rochdale and Constantinople,
entered designs.
Cast iron, concrete, glass,
granite and steel,
Lifts hydraulic and electric, a
spiral steam railway.
Theatres, chapels and sanatoria
in the air.
In 1890 the lucky winner was
announced.
It had Turkish baths, arcades of
shops, and Winter Gardens.
Designed by a firm of Scots with
a London office,
Stewart, McLaren and Dunn.
It was to be one hundred and
fifty feet higher
Than the Eiffel Tower.
But when at last it reached above
the trees,
And the first stage was opened to
the crowds,
The crowds weren't there. They
didn't want to come.
Money ran out,
The tower lingered on, resting
and rusting
Until it was dismembered in 1907.
This is where London's failed
Eiffel Tower stood. Watkin's
Folly as it was called. Here on
this Middlesex turf, and since
then the site has become quite
well-known.

It was here,
I can just remember the
excitement and the hope,
St George's Day, 1924.

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Archive film: Gun salute
Flags unfurling
King George V and
Queen Mary*

Exterior: Pavillions

*Interior: Palace of
Industry*

*Exterior: Palace of
Arts (today)*

*Exterior: Palace of
Arts (archive film)*

*Interior: Basilica,
Palace of Arts
Pan up*

*JB in Basilica,
Palace of Arts*

*'Solemn
Melody' –
Walford Davies*

The British Empire Exhibition at
Wembley,
Opened by King George the
Fifth.

Ah yes, those Imperial pavilions
India, Sierra Leone, Fiji,
With their sun-tanned sentinels
of Empire outside.
To me they were more interesting
than
The Palaces of Industry and
Engineering
Which were too like my father's
factory.

That was the Palace of Arts
where I used to wait
While my father saw the living
models
in Pears' Palace of Beauty.

How well I remember the Palace
of Arts,
Massive and simple outside,
Almost pagan in its sombre
strength,
but inside ...

This is the Basilica in the Palace
of Arts. It was used for displaying
the best Church art of 1924.
A.K. Lawrence, Eric Gill, Mary
Adshead, Colin Gill and so on.
Today it's used for housing the
props of the pantomime,

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Archive film:
Pleasure Park*

*'Masculine
Women and
Feminine Men'
– Savoy
Havanna
Band*

'Cinderella on Ice' and that kind of thing. And really it's quite right because Church and Stage have always been closely connected.

King and Queen

The Pleasure Park was the best thing about the Exhibition. The King and Queen enjoyed it too – There they are.

*Debris and
desolation of
Exhibition site*

Oh bygone Wembley where's the pleasure now?
The temples stare, the Empire passes by.
This was the grandest Palace of them all.

*JB outside British
Government
Pavilion
Close-up: Lion
Zoom out*

The British Government Pavilion and the famous Wembley lions. Now they guard an empty warehouse site.

*Tracking shot along
Oakington Rd,
Wembley*

But still people kept on coming to Wembley.
The show-houses of the newly built estates.
A younger, brighter, homelier Metro-land:
'Rusholme', 'Rustles',
'Rustlings', 'Rusty Tiles',
'Rose Hatch', 'Rose Hill', 'Rose

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

Lea', 'Rose Mount', 'Rose
Roof'.

Each one is slightly different
from the next,
A bastion of individual taste
On fields that once were bright
with buttercups.

*JB at Highfort
Court, Kingsbury*

Deep in rural Middlesex, the
county that inspired Keats,
magic casements opening on the
dawn. A speculative builder here
at Kingsbury let himself go, in
the twenties.

*High-altitude shot:
Harrow*

And look what a lot of country
there is; fields and farms between
the houses, oaks and elms above
the roof tops.

*Archive film:
'Classic Harrow'
Tube train
approaching
Harrow*

The smart suburban railway
knew its place,
And did not dare approach too
near the Hill.

*JB at Harrow
Garden Estate*

Here at the foot of the Harrow Hill,
alongside the Metropolitan
electric train, tradesmen from
Harrow built in the eighties or
nineties – I should think from the
look of the buildings – these
houses. And a nice little
speculation they were. Quiet,
near the railway station with their
own Church and Public House;
and they're named reverently
after the great people of Harrow
School, Drury, Vaughan and
Butler.

*Harrow
School
Song*

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Harrow schoolboys
outside school*

Cricket match

Valiantly that Elizabethan
foundation at the top of the hill
Has held the developers at bay;
Harrow School fought to keep this
hillside green,
But for all its tradition and
elegance,
It couldn't wholly stem
The rising tide of Metro-land.

JB in Harrow

The healthy air of Harrow in the
1920s and thirties when these
villas were built. You paid a
deposit and eventually we hope
you had your own house with its
garage and front garden and back
garden.

JB in Harrow

A verge in front of your house
and grass and a tree for the dog.
Variety created in each façade of
the houses – in the colouring of
the trees. In fact, the country had
come to the suburbs. Roses are
blooming in Metro-land just as
they do in the brochures.

*Close-up: Metro-
land brochure*
*Close-ups: Houses
in brochure*

*'Sunny Side
of the Street'*
*– Jack
Hylton*

*Exterior: House in
Harrow*
*Zoom in to stained
glass window*

*Sequence of stained
glass:
sunsets, bulrushes,
bluebirds, etc.*

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Exterior: Harrow
houses*

Along the serried avenues of
Harrow's garden villages,
Households rise and shine and
settle down to the Sunday
morning rhythm.

[Sequence: Sunday morning gardening, mowing lawns, washing cars,
etc. to the music of Family Favourites, Rod McNeil; and 'Down by
the Lazy River', The Osmonds.]

Close-up: Fast rails

*Exterior: Grims
Dyke, Harrow
Weald*

This is Grims Dyke in Harrow
Weald. I've always regarded it as
a prototype of all suburban
homes in southern England. It
was designed by the famous
Norman Shaw a century ago.
Merrie England outside,
Haunting and romantic within.

*JB goes in through
front door*

*Interior: Hall,
Grims Dyke, with JB*

With Norman Shaw one thing
leads to another. I came out of a
low entrance hall into this bigger
hall, and then, one doesn't know
what is coming next. There's an
arch and if I go up there, I'll see –
goodness knows what. Let's go
and look.

JB climbs stairs

There's a sense of mounting
excitement.
Have I strayed into a Hitchcock
film?

*JB arrives at
dining-room*

Groups of ladies

SECRETARY:
Ladies, good afternoon and
welcome to the Byron Luncheon
Club. I would like to give a very

VISION

*Pan down from
ceiling to groups of
ladies*

*Details of exterior,
Grims Dyke
Gables, windows, etc.*

Pool and boathouse

MUSIC

*'Tit Willow' –
Gilbert and
Sullivan*

COMMENTARY

warm welcome to our speaker,
Mrs Elizabeth Cooper.

[*Applause.*]

MRS COOPER:

I would like to thank you, Madam
Chairman, first of all for inviting
me to this beautiful lunch, a
beautiful room and bevy of
beautifully dressed and
beautifully hatted ladies. I think
it's the most beautiful house in
Harrow, one of the most
interesting both architecturally
and historically.

BETJEMAN:

Dear things, indeed it is.

Tall brick chimney stacks
Not hidden away but prominent
And part of the design,
Local bricks, local tiles, local
timber.

No façade is the same,
Gabled windows gaze through
leaded lights down winding
lawns.

It isn't fake – it's a new
practical house

For a newly-rich Victorian,
Strong, impressive, original.

And yonder gloomy pool
contained on May 29th 1911, the
dead body of W. S. Gilbert,
Grims Dyke's most famous
owner and Sullivan's partner in
the Savoy Operas. After a good
luncheon he went bathing with
two girls, Ruby Preece and
Winifred Emery. Ruby found she

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Train slowly
approaching Pinner*

*Archive film:
'Approaching
Pinner'*

*Long shot: Train
at Pinner. Pull out
to show High St
and Fair
Roundabout and
Church*

Ferris wheel, etc.

*Archive film:
Approaching
Sandy Lodge*

*Archive film:
Golfers*

*JB on golf course at
Moor Park*

*'Golfing Love'
– Melville
Gideon*

was out of her depth, and in
rescuing her, Gilbert died, of a
heart attack, here – in this pond.

Funereal from Harrow draws the
train,
On, on, north-westwards,
London far away,
And stations start to look quite
countrified.

Pinner, a parish of a thousand
souls,
'Til the railways gave it many
thousands more.

Pinner is famous for its village
Fair,
Where once a year, St John the
Baptist's Day,
Shows all the climbing High
Street filled with stalls.
It is the Feast Day of the Parish
Saint,
A medieval Fair in Metro-land.

When I was young there stood
among the fields
A lonely station, once called
Sandy Lodge,
Its wooden platform crunched by
hobnailed shoes,
And this is where the healthier
got out.

One of the joys of Metro-land
was the nearness of golf to
London. And Moor Park,
Rickmansworth, was a great
Attraction.

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

Prepares to drive

Now, eye on the ball
Left knee slightly bent,
Slow back ...
Missed it! [*Laughter.*]

Mid-shot: JB

Well that wasn't up to much.
Perhaps the Clubhouse is more
exciting.

*Group drinking
outside Clubhouse*

Did ever Golf Club have a
nineteenth hole
So sumptuous as this?

*Close-up: 'Reserved
for Chairman' sign.
Pan along signs as
JB walks up to
Entrance*

*Interior: Hall at
Moor Park
Ceiling, murals etc.*

*'Double
Concerti' –
Handel*

Did ever Golf Club have so fine a
hall?
Venetian decor, 1732.

And yonder dome is not a dome
at all
But painted in the semblance of a
dome;
The sculptured figures all are
done in paint
That lean towards us with so rapt
a look.
How skilfully the artist takes us
in.

*Interior: Moor
Park*

What Georgian wit these classic
Gods have heard,
Who now must listen to the
golfer's tale
Of holes in one and how I
missed that putt,
Hooked at the seventh, sliced
across the tenth

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

But ended on the seventeenth all
square.

*Exterior: Moor
Park*

Ye gods, ye gods, how comical
we are!
Would Jove have been appointed
Captain here?
See how exclusive thine Estate,
Moor Park.

*[Sequence: Gate-keeper chats to lady Member in car at entrance to
Estate; admits her, but turns away non-Member at barrier.]*

*JB sitting in train
carriage looking at
brochure
Close-up: Fast rails*

Onwards, onwards,
North of the border, down
Hertfordshire way.

*Pipe Band
approaches, floats,
etc.*

Pipe Band

The Croxley Green Revels
A tradition that stretches back to
1952.
For pageantry is deep in all our
hearts,
And this, for many a girl, is her
greatest day.

*[Sequence with music: Croxley Green Revels. Procession of the
Queen of the Revels. Crowd shots. The Queen is crowned. Speeches.]*

*Archive film:
Chorleywood
Village*

Large uneventful fields of dairy
farm,
Slowly winds the Chess brimful
of trout,
An unregarded part of
Hertfordshire
Awaits its fate.

And in the heights above,
Chorleywood village,
Where in '89 the railway came,

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Met. train on line –
pan left as horses
come from under
bridge and gallop
across Common*

*Common with
Church and School
in background
Children playing
rounders in
foreground*

*Exterior: 'The
Orchard',
Chorelywood. JB
goes through gate
and up to house*

Details of house

And wood smoke mingled with
the sulphur fumes,
And people now could catch the
early train
To London and be home just
after tea.

This is, I think, essential
Metro-land.
Much trouble has been taken to
preserve
The country quality surviving
here –
Oak, hazel, hawthorn, gorse and
sandy tracks,
Better for sport than farming, I
suspect.

Common and cricket pitch,
Church School and Church,
All are reminders of a country
past.

BOY: Mrs Hill, we've got eight
rounders now.

JB:

In the orchards, beyond the
Common, one spring morning in
1900 a young architect, Charles
Voysey, and his wife decided to
build themselves a family home. I
think it was the parent of
thousands of simple English
houses.

'All must be plain and practical' –
That sloping buttress wall is to
counteract
the outward thrust of the heavy
slate roof.

Do you notice those stepped tiles
below the chimney-pots?

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

Detail of 'The Orchard'

They're there to throw off the driving English rain,
And that lead roof ridge is pinched up at the end for the same reason.
Horizontal courses of red tiles in the white walls protect windows and openings. It's hard to believe that so simple and stalwart a house was built in Queen Victoria's reign.

JB at front door

Voysey liked to design every detail in his house. For instance that knocker, Voysey. A typical curious shaped handle, Voysey. And this handle or iron hinge with what seems to be his signature tune, the heart. It's there at the end of the hinge, it's here round the letterbox, it's also round the keyhole and it seems to be on the key. That's a Voysey key, and in the house he did everything down to the knives and forks. The plan of the house radiates out from this hall.

JB in hall

Extreme simplicity is the keynote. No unnecessary decoration. The balusters here for the stairs, straight verticals, giving an impression of great height to this simple hall. But as a matter of fact, it isn't a particularly high house; in fact, it's rather small. I knew Mr Voysey and I saw Mrs Voysey; they were small people and in case you think it's a large house,

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

I'll just walk – I'm fat I know, but
I'm not particularly tall – and I'll
stand by the door here and you
compare my height with the
ledge and the door.

JB in dining-room

A round window on the garden
side of the house. A typical
Voysey detail.
This pane which opens to let in
the air from beechy Bucks, which
is just on the other side of the
road, over there.

*Close-up: Trees. Mix
to River Chess*

Back to the simple life,
Back to nature,
To a shady retreat in the reeds
and rushes
Of the River Chess.
The lure of Metro-land was
remoteness and quiet,
This is what a brochure of the
twenties said:
'It's the trees, the fairy dingles
and a hundred and one things in
which Dame Nature's fingers
have lingered long in setting out
this beautiful array of trout
stream, wooded slope, meadow
and hill-top sites. Send a postcard
for the homestead of your
dreams, to Loudwater Estate,
Chorleywood.'

*House names and
houses at
Loudwater Estate*

*'Build a
Little Home'
– Roy Fox*

*Children in
swimming pool*

O happy outdoor life in
Chorleywood,
In Daddy's swim-pool, while Old
Spot looks on
And Susan dreams of super
summer hols,

VISION	MUSIC	COMMENTARY
		Whilst chlorinated wavelets brush the banks.
<i>JB walks up to Len Rawle's house</i>		O happy indoor life in Chorleywood Where strangest dreams of all are realized,
<i>Interior: shots of organ</i>	<i>'Crimond' – Len Rawle</i>	Mellifluating out from modern brick The pipe-dream of a local man, Len Rawle, For pipe by pipe and stop by stop he moved Out of the Empire Cinema, Leicester Square,
<i>Cutaways of pipes, effects, etc.</i>	<i>'Varsity Drag' – Len Rawle</i>	The Mighty Wurlitzer Till the huge instrument filled half his house With all its multitude of sound effects.
<i>Stills of steam engines intercut with organ</i>	<i>'Chatanooga Choo Choo' – Len Rawle</i>	Steam took us onwards, through the ripening fields, Ripe for development. Where the landscape yields Clay for warm brick, timber for post and rail, Through Amersham to Aylesbury and the Vale.
<i>Archive film: Train to Amersham, then present day</i>		In those wet fields the railway didn't pay, The Metro stops at Amersham today.
<i>Mix to pool at 'High & Over', Amersham</i>		In 1931 all Buckinghamshire was scandalized by the appearance high above Amersham of a concrete house in the shape of a letter Y. It was built for a young

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Exterior: Various
shots of 'High &
Over'*

professor by a young architect,
Amyas Connell. They called it
'High & Over'.

'I am the home of a twentieth-
century family,' it proclaimed,
'that loves air and sunlight and
open country.'

It started a style called Moderne –
perhaps rather old-fashioned
today.

Surrounding estate

*'Everything I
own' – Bread*

And one day, poor thing, it woke
up and found developers in its
back garden.

Good-bye, *High* hopes and *Over*
confidence –

In fact, it's probably good-bye
England.

*Exterior: Quainton
Road Station.
JB walks up steps
and leans on bridge*

Where are the advertisements?

Where the shopping arcade,
the coal merchant and the parked
cars? This is a part of the
Metropolitan Railway that's been
entirely forgotten. Beyond
Aylesbury it lies in flat fields with
huge elms and distant blue hills.
Quainton Road Station. It was to
have been the Clapham Junction
of the rural part of the
Metropolitan.

*Long shot down the
line
Quainton Road sign*

*JB sitting on bench
on Quainton Road
Station*

With what hopes this place was
built in 1890. They hoped that
trains would run down the
main line there from London to
the midlands and the north.
They'd come from the midlands
and the north rushing through
here to London and a Channel
Tunnel, and then on to Paris. But,

VISION

MUSIC

COMMENTARY

*Still: Verney
Junction*

*Still: Quainton
Road*

Still: Brill tram

*JB leaning on fence
at Verney Junction*

Turns to camera

*Turns and looks
down line*

alas, all that has happened is that there a line curves away to the last of the Metropolitan stations in the country in far Buckinghamshire, which was at Verney Junction. And I can remember sitting here on a warm autumn evening in 1929 and seeing the Brill tram from the platform on the other side with steam up ready to take two or three passengers through oil-lit halts and over level crossings, a rather bumpy journey to a station not far from the remote hill-top village of Brill.

The houses of Metro-land never got as far as Verney Junction. Grass triumphs. And I must say I'm rather glad.

Superimposed: Closing credits. Fade to black.