

The Architectural History of the London Borough of Brent

by Geoffrey Hewlett

[**N.B.:** This article was originally a page on the Planning pages of the London Borough of Brent's website. No attempt has been made to update it.]

THE DESIGNATION PROCESS

The designation of Conservation Areas in Brent has been relatively sporadic. Recognising the limited staff-time of one officer, areas were designated when staff-time was available to pursue design guidance or as a result of threats to an area, as at Neasden Village and Old Church Lane (now St Andrews), or as part of a comprehensive survey.

The Unitary Development Plan has enabled the first comprehensive Borough wide conservation survey. This has enabled a consistent approach whereby the best areas, representative of certain key forms of development (i.e. architect designed garden suburbs), have been/are proposed for designation. Therefore the date of designation is in no way representative of the relative quality of the area.

There are 32 Conservation Areas in Brent. They range enormously in character, from the stucco Victorian Villas of South Kilburn to the thatched cottages of Buck Lane. The Council's first Conservation Area was designated at Roe Green Village in 1968. The Borough is particularly blessed with attractive and unusual suburban estates, such as Sudbury Court, Mount Stewart and Northwick Circle, built during the expansion of London in the '20s and '30s. From an earlier period, attractive Victorian estates are protected in areas such as Mapesbury and Queens Park.

In the past, Brent has not received recognition for its attractive architectural styles. The Borough hardly rivals the Chesters or Yorks of the country in terms of heritage but there has also been a deplorable ignorance about and lack of appreciation for suburban architectural style until comparatively recent years. In this regard, the wealth of architectural style to be found warrants further commentary.

A BOROUGH OF CONTRASTS

The London Borough of Brent forms part of London's suburban fringe but a closer inspection of its architectural and historical development will reveal a complex and varied mix of styles linking and sometimes obliterating earlier village settlements. There is a wide range of architectural styles from the simple to the ornate, from Victorian Italianate and Gothic Revival to Garden Suburbs and planned "village" settlements. Such a diverse heritage is an essential part of the character of the Borough. Furthermore, street scenes and leafy lanes, with their trees and gardens, have matured in the course of sixty or so years to give a variety of residential environments, some of which are particularly attractive and worthy of retention.

The Borough's development was largely, though not exclusively, a reflection of its accessibility from London. The British Rail lines and the Metropolitan Railway encouraged suburban development between 1863 and 1914 and again between 1924 and 1939, aided

and abetted by the British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley Park in 1924-1925. Such was the intense inter-war development, that in the 1930s Middlesex was the fastest-developing county in the country.

The architectural styles of Brent therefore date from these periods and reflect the architectural styles of the time. The intensity of development means there is a wide range in the art of architects to be seen and enjoyed. The art and craft of the architect and developer before 1914 emerged from the war years in a much-changed form with the advent of a new house-owning middle class, competitive house styles and prices, and with changes in bye-laws and financing all influencing construction. There was also a fundamental change in house-construction methods.

The Victorian builders of Brent, for the most part, constructed small groups of terraces of houses, their work being interspersed by that of other builders. No doubt financing construction played a part in this. Occasionally a builder would have tackled a street block entirely on his own. Estates were rare.

James Bailey had developed the Ecclesiastical Commissioners estate at Kilburn Park in 1861-1873 but became bankrupt in the process. The Mapesbury estate of Mapes House, with its cohesive Victorian designs of 1895-1905, was in fact the work of at least 12 builders. The Queen's Park estate, unified by the central open space, was similarly the work of numerous builders, but over a twenty year period. The process of construction was also different from that of today: builders received their materials by horse and cart, a labour intensive and slow process.

Building materials were temporarily held up immediately after the war, but the suburban developments of the 1920s and 1930s were large scale enterprises by well-organised firms. Materials were delivered by convoys of lorries and estates were developed over 5 to 8 years. The improved efficiency of technique was reflected in firms like John Laing who could construct a house on the Queensbury Estate in 1934 from start to completion in only 4 months. Moreover, the impact of town planning - the garden suburb movement in particular - influenced lower densities, narrower roads, open space and gaps between buildings, essential ingredients of the 1930s suburbs.

DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

To put many of the architectural styles in Brent into a historic context, it may be helpful to review some of the domestic architectural styles which flourished in the period 186-1940. In this I am grateful to and rely heavily on *Suburban Style* by Burrett and Phillips. In the same, way that old photographs can be dated by the style or costumes worn by people in the picture, so a building can be dated from its outward dressing, whether it is from a knowledge of bye-law regulations, which until 1914 required party parapet walls above the roof plane, or of architecture fashions

Speculative builders of the late Georgian period built many rows of houses lacking decoration and whose beauty lies in the uniformity and dignity of the group as a whole. Strictly speaking, "Georgian" refers to houses built after 1714 but before 1837, when Victoria ascended the throne.

The rising middle classes of the 1840s and 50s quickly demanded rather more of their houses in terms of comfort and prestige; they rejected the severe and undecorated Georgian forms in favour of the more ornate Italianate and Gothic styles. The inspiration for the Italianate style was the palaces of Renaissance Italy. It was popularised by Prince Albert (Osborne House was built in 1849) and in the 1850s numerous pattern books appeared to guide builders in the new fashion.

Features adopted for the Italianate villa style (of which many examples survive in South Kilburn - originally Kilburn Park) include the shallow pitch roof with overhanging eaves supported on brackets, the horizontal string courses delineating each storey, the use of the rounded or Romanesque arch for the windows. Grand houses' style incorporated a tower based on the "campanile" of medieval Italian villas. (Note the two examples at Stonebridge, which are all that survive of the projected "Stonebridge Park".)

The Gothic Revival style of architecture (or "Gothick") grew in popularity alongside the existing taste for the Italianate with the works of Pugin and Ruskin in the 1840s. By the 1860s, the Italianate style was on the wane. The Gothic style in Brent appears in suburban development from the 1870s. There seem to be three major reasons for its popularity: - firstly, the rapidly expanding middle classes were seeking more decorative styles to show off their wealth, secondly, the religious revival of the mid 19th Century favoured the style with its long ecclesiastical associations, and thirdly, publications and pattern books provided easy guides.

Elaborately carved stone capitols for porches and bay windows, pointed arches, elaborate bargeboards and a faintly ecclesiastical feel are therefore the essence of the Gothic ornamentation of suburban houses. Steep pitch roofs, more suitable for the wet climate, were clad in grey slate, which was cheap because of the development of the Welsh slate industry and the local railway network.

To offset its drabness, ornamental ridge tiles of red clay and, on better quality housing, some rows of slates would be laid in "diamond" or "fish scale" patterns to break the monotony. Most suburban houses contented themselves with a simple gable or semi-turret over what was a major feature of the house style - the bay window.

In the last quarter of the 19th Century, the vernacular tradition quickly became the dominant factor in house design. The term "Queen Anne" is in some ways a misnomer, since the new style did not attempt to copy the buildings constructed during her reign (1702-14). Instead, architects, possibly inspired by Norman Shaw (1831-1912), developed a style which, while deeply rooted in tradition, was highly original.

The vernacular influence is evident in many features: tile hanging on the walls, dominant tiled roofs, usually hipped, massive chimneys, gables, dormer windows, decorative plaster work (an old East Anglian craft known as pargetting), and the constant rise of red brick. Brondesbury Park, being developed about this time, provides a number of examples, but the style is widespread. Note Kingsbury Manor at Roe Green Park by W. West Neve, a pupil of Norman Shaw.

Also evident is the builders' "classicism" of the 17th Century town house: broken pediments over windows, and door with six panels under simple canopied or shell shaped porches; plenty of white stone dressings and white painted woodwork offsetting the red brick. Dutch gables are another common feature of the style, and the windows are, if anything, Elizabethan in feel, large to let in plenty of light, but without the large panes of mid-Victorian housing; instead they have small panes within white-painted glazing bars or lead strips.

The Queen Anne style was hugely influential and survives today not only in houses but also in many pubs, libraries, fire stations, churches, and other smallish public buildings of the 1880s and 1890s. By 1900, however, even the speculative builders of suburbia were abandoning the fussy details of the style in favour of the much simpler and more fundamental vernacular forms of the Arts and Crafts movement which a new generation of architects had developed. Undoubtedly the greatest of these was C. F. A. Voysey (1857-1941). Voysey's own house displays horizontal window and leaded lights and a steeply pitched roof and sweeping gables that influenced much inter-war housing.

The low sweeping gable, common on suburban semis, was inspired by Voysey, who used it frequently. The pebble-dashed walls and exposed roof timbers are in the Arts and Crafts tradition, but the corner window is a "moderne" touch.

The archetypal suburb of the 1920s and 1930s, with each house or "semi" set in its own garden, owes many of its "traditional" features to the Garden City Movement at the beginning of this century. The ideals behind a garden city were established in the writings of Ebenezer Howard in 1898. It was the architects Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker who first implemented Howard's ideas at Letchworth in 1903. To this period belongs Roe Green Village, planned in 1916 and built at the end of the First World War.

Much of the speculative-built suburban developments of the 1920s and 1930s simply adopted many of the more obvious visual features of the Garden Suburb, leaving much of the subtlety behind.

From the late 1920s, a cottage style based on the Arts and Crafts vernacular appeared in the form of "Mock-Tudor", typified by half timbering, herring bone brickwork, leaded windows, gabled porches and red brick or pebble dashed walls. As at Sudbury Court, the jettied upper storey, pegged beams and Tudor roses show the exuberance which the mock-Tudor style sometimes inspired.

After about 1930 the Modern Movement began to make its distinctive mark. A few properties at Wembley Park were built in the uncompromisingly functionalist International Style. The stark outlines of this style were modified in Suburbia where a compromise form or restrained modernism became common, called "suntrap" because of the curved window designs to receive as much sunlight as possible. The suntrap house is the simplest version of suburbia's response to the International Style. It compromised on a number of features, notably the roof, which is pitched to appeal to the conventional tastes of most buyers.

Just before the Second World War, a new form of the moderne style, incorporating Mediterranean influences, reached Britain via California, or more precisely, Hollywood,

hence the term "Hollywood Moderne". Elements of the style included white rendering and a pantiled roof in either green or blue.

THE DESIGNATED CONSERVATION AREAS IN BRENT

Reflecting such a heritage, the designated Conservation Areas which set out to conserve the best of the Borough's built heritage represent different architecture styles and fashions and settlement patterns. Background information on each area is available here or via a link attached to the title of each.

The Borough's Conservation Areas may be classified, according to type:-

1. REMNANTS OF FORMER VILLAGES NOW SURROUNDED BY URBANISATION

- **Sudbury Cottages**

(Designated in January 1993)

A satellite settlement of Sudbury once on the edge of Sudbury Common. A small group of eighteenth and nineteenth century cottages survives at the junction of medieval lanes in an otherwise suburban setting.

- **Butlers Green**

(Designated in January 1993)

The oldest buildings surviving in Sudbury are Victorian, which the designation links with a remnant of Sudbury Common called Butler's Green. This wedge of open land forms an attractive entry into Sudbury and Wembley beyond.

- **Kenton**

(Designated in July 1985)

Kenton Grange (1805), with its Victorian stabling block and lodge houses, stands alongside Woodcock Park. This provides an attractive setting for a post-war cottage estate and inter-war housing which incorporate surviving remnants of what was once the old village of Kenton.

- **Wembley High Street**

(Designated in March 1990)

The original hamlet of Wembley but the properties were rebuilt about 1880.

2. ESTATES OF VICTORIAN / EDWARDIAN HOUSES, TOWNHOUSES AND VILLAS

- **Mapesbury**

(Designated in December 1982)

Builders include Charles Cheshir, John Neal and Company, Callow and Wright, CWB Simmonds, GAC Bridge.

One of the largest of the Conservation Areas in Brent which comprises a mostly unaltered town-house development of 1895-1905. Parts of the estate, however, date from the late 1870s and other streets from 1920. The attractive brick houses with their pleasing detailing are set in a well treed street scene of low front boundary brick walls and tall square entrance pillars. Design Guide and Article 4 Direction in force.

- **South Kilburn**

(Designated in February 1979)

Builder James Bailey

Part of the Kilburn Park estate of stucco and stock brick villas dating from 1861-1873 many of which are listed. They display ornate architectural designs of Italianate origin which the builder took from pattern books of the period.

- **Queen's Park**

(Designated July 1986, extended July 1995)

Attractive late Victorian and Edwardian houses (1895-1905) complement the character of a 30 acre park, opened in 1887. The surrounding streets of mixed pleasant design provide a "frame" defining and enhancing the park itself.

Design Guide and Article 4 Direction in force, in part.

- **Brondesbury**

(Designated in March 1990)

The Conservation Area represents a slice through Victorian suburban development in the period 1872-1899: townhouses of decorative and attractive designs for the emerging middle classes.

- **Kilburn**

(Designated in January 1993)

Designers include Solomon Barnett, George German, AC Hendry, Watkin and GH Wickes.

Part of the Brondesbury Estate, which was developed in four different periods, between 1850 and 1899. The pedimented doorways in Brondesbury Road (by Wickes) and Watkin's terracotta work are particular features. The Victorian architecture is attractively varied.

- **North Kilburn**

(Designated in December 1982)

Designers include George German, George Grover, Thomas Stephens and WJ Watts.

Redevelopment of the Waterloo Estate between 1886 and 1896, comprising an enclave of Victorian properties of striking appearance with ornate mouldings contrasted against brick.

An Article 4 Direction has been in force since 19th May 1996. This severely restricts the permitted development rights to development land or buildings in the area.

- **Stanley Avenue**

(Designated in March 1995)

Architects were Culcutt & Hamp and CH Worley.

Builder was Henry Haynes and others.

A late-Victorian estate of architectural note, developed by the founder of modern-day Alperton.

3. COTTAGE ESTATES FOR WORKERS

- **Woodheyas & Gresham Road**

(Designated in March 1995)

Builders: Sabey and Son.

A community of 154 cottages built in 1898-99 for workers of the Great Central Railway.

- **Neasden Village**

(Designated in March 1995)

This is a village state of two-storey, stock brick terraced houses built in 1882-83 and 1904-05 to house workers of the Metropolitan Railway and Power Station. The grid-iron street pattern is now providing the setting for a new housing development by Paddington Churches Housing Association.

Design Guide and Article 4 Direction in force

4. HISTORIC CEMETERIES AND ASSOCIATED BUILDINGS

- **Paddington Cemetery**

(Designated in January 1993)

Cemetery by Thomas Little

The cemetery with it's listed chapels and ornate buildings in Willesden Lane (including James Brooks' school) form an important Victorian group.

- **Kensal Green**

(Designated in March 1990)

This area includes a grouping of Georgian properties, the earliest being about 1820 but the majority date from the opening of the cemetery (1832) which lies opposite.

5. WELL PRESERVED VICTORIAN TOWN CENTRES

- **Willesden Green**

(Designated in January 1993)

A Victorian commercial centre with buildings of note by several well-known architects: James Brooks, Newman and Newman and Gabriel contributed St. Andrews Church, the library, and the bank premises respectively. Sexton's Spotted Dog (1881) and Clark's faience-tiled Met. Station of 1924 are worthy of note.

- **Harlesden**

(Designated in March 1994)

Architects include Harrison and Ward, T.E. Rickard and E.J. Tarver.

One of the earliest commercial areas in Brent; the oldest building is the chapel which dates from 1869. The conservation area includes attractive listed buildings as well as period Victorian terraces. All Souls church (1879) and the Royal Oak are noteworthy.

A Design Guide is nearing completion.

6. AREAS ASSOCIATED WITH ARCHITECT E. G. TROBRIDGE

- **Buck Lane**

(Designated in February 1979)

- **Slough Lane**

(Designated in February 1979)

Both these areas contain work by Ernest George Trobridge (1884-1942), a local architect active between 1921 and 1937. His castellated flats and thatched timber cottages are of highly individualistic design and include much decorative detailed work of considerable quality.

- **St. Andrews**

(Designated in December 1983; extended in January 1993)

Attractive street with mock-Tudor buildings by Simmonds, one of the Mapesbury area architects, and fanciful brick flats with exquisite detailing by Trobridge, similar to his Buck Lane style. Also included is a 13th century church with medieval ditch and embankment. The conservation area, which includes a cul-de-sac of bungalows by P. Rains (1927) and flats of the Kingsbury estate by Samuel Yeo (1937), is centre around the "new" church of St. Andrews, a striking church of major importance by Daukes, transferred from the city to this site in 1933-34.

7. ARCHITECT-DESIGNED GARDEN SUBURBS

- **Roe Green Village**

(Designated in November 1968)

Architect: Sir Frank Baines

An estate of two storey cottages built in 1918-20 by the Government's Office of Works in a Garden Village style. The mixed use of materials - bricks and render, tiles and slates - and details of design, including rainwater goods, chimneys and cottage windows create an attractive village scene.

Design Guide and Article 4 Direction in force.

- **Wembley Hill Garden Suburb**

(Designated in March 1990)

Builders: Callow and Wright

The estate represents the earliest example of a town-planned suburb in the borough (1913). Houses of different designs built between 1914 and 1927 are set in spacious tree-lined street scenes.

Design Guide and Article 4 Direction proposed.

- **Manor Close**

(Designated in March 1990)

Builder: George Cloke

A cottage style development of 1934-36 comprising two-storey terraced and semi-detached houses along a cul-de-sac. The street scene includes attractive hedgerows.

Article 4 Direction applied since 19th November 1976. Design Guide proposed.

- **Homestead Park**

(Designated in January 1993)

Designer: William E. Sanders

An unusual cluster of twenty cottages this, arranged in triplets (1926). The hedgerows are an outstanding feature of the layout.

Article 4 Direction in force.

8. SUBURBAN ESTATES BY RENOWNED INTER-WAR DEVELOPERS

- **Barn Hill**

(Designated in March 1990 and January 1993)

Builders: Haymills

Mock-Tudor housing estate of 1926-29 on a steep hillside on which remnants survive of a landscape by Repton (1792). The street scenes, landscaping and views between buildings are especially important.

Design Guide and Article 4 Direction in force.

- **Preston Park**

(Designated in January 1993)

Builders: Clifford Sabey and F & C Costain.

An attractive and pleasant planned residential suburb of 1927-37 where Sabey's cottage style houses in narrow roads contrast against Costain's grander semis.

- **Mount Stewart**

(Designated in January 1993)

Builders: F & C Costin.

Part of the John Lyon Farm Estate developed by the Costins using their pattern book of high quality mock-Tudor designs. There is an extensive range of bay windows, leaded lights and brickwork and a high standard of joinery.

Design Guide and Article 4 Direction in force.

- **Northwick Circle**

(Designated in January 1989)

Builders: F & C Costin.

An excellent example of suburban town planning in mock-Tudor style, incorporating a focal point and radiating street pattern. Substantial gardens add to the open character.

Work on a Design Guide and Article 4 Direction are underway.

- **Queens Walk**

(Designated in January 1990)

Builders: C. W. B. Simmonds.

An attractive street on Kingsbury Hill estate of whitewashed detached and semi-detached houses dating from 1926.

- **Sudbury Court**

(Designated in January 1990 and January 1993)

Builders: Comben and Wakelin.

This is one of the best mock-Tudor estates in the borough. Dating from 1929-1935, the houses have a distinctive appearance with many fine features. Mature hedges, trees and shrubs are a significant feature of the street scenes of this garden suburb.

Design Guide and Article 4 Direction in place.

- **King Edward VII**

(Designated in July 1995)

Builders: Comben and Wakelin.

Earlier than Sudbury Court (see above) this estate was laid out in 1926-29 adjacent to King Edward VII Park. The street pattern, its landscaping and roundabouts provide an attractive setting of a suburban village character.

- **Lawns Court**

(Designated in July 1995)

Builders: Welsh, Cachemaille-Day and Lander.

An estate of 50 flats built in the "Moderne" style in 1932-33. The juxtaposition of buildings around a green and the mature landscaping provide an attractive setting for the buildings.