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A Brief History of the London Borough of Brent



Chesterfield House (Brent Council offices), Wembley, 1970s

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The Brent area has been settled since prehistoric times. The name Brent is a pre-Roman Celtic one, coming from the name of the goddess *Brigantia*. Edgware Road is of course the Roman Watling Street, and there is evidence for a large Late Roman villa near Salmon Street, Kingsbury, with a building connected with it on Dollis Hill. Virtually all the place-names in Brent are Anglo-Saxon, however.

Apart from Queensbury, which is modern, most of the districts in Brent began as small communities in forest clearings. The original Anglo-Saxon names of these communities very often had meanings relating to local people or to the nature of the terrain, for example:

Wembalea meant 'Wamba's forest clearing'

Neosdune (Neasden) meant 'the nose-shaped hill'

Wellesdune (Willesden) probably meant 'the hill of the spring'

Cyngesbyrig (Kingsbury) meant 'the King's stronghold'

Kelebourne (Kilburn) meant 'the cattle stream'.

For most of its history the Brent area consisted of a collection of small villages and hamlets. Willesden had its own church and formed a parish. Wembley was part of Harrow parish, though there was a chapel at Tokyngton by about 1240. Kingsbury had its own church, St. Andrew's, which resembles a Saxon church but post-dates the Norman Conquest.

Land ownership differed between Willesden and Wembley. In Willesden, the Church held much of the land. In Wembley the Page family and the Lords Northwick were the major landowners. All Souls' College, Oxford, owned a lot of land throughout the Brent area.

In 1350 Kingsbury parish was heavily affected by the Black Death. Houses were abandoned and property and population became concentrated in northern Kingsbury. Southern Kingsbury shrank from a village to a church and one or two farms and never fully recovered.

Kilburn Priory, a convent, was established in 1134 and was used as a stopping place by travellers and pilgrims. In the 15th Century Kilburn inns such as the *Red Lion* and the *Cock* also came into being to serve travellers on the Edgware Road. St. Mary's church, Willesden, became a centre of pilgrimage in the late 15th Century. Both Kilburn Priory and pilgrimages to Willesden came to an end at the Reformation.

The Reformation also brought problems for the Catholic Bellamy family who owned the manor house at Uxendon, near Preston, north of Wembley. They sheltered both a plotter against Elizabeth I and a Jesuit priest, and as a result lost all their lands by 1608.

Someone who did rather better out of the politics of the 16th and 17th centuries was Sir William Roberts of Neasden House, who was an active Parliamentarian during the Civil War. He was given confiscated Church lands, and though these returned to the

Church after the Restoration they were still leased by the Roberts family.

The appalling state of the Harrow and Edgware roads led to gifts from benevolent gentlemen like John Lyon (the founder of Harrow School) to aid their upkeep. Another problem was highway robberies, though Willesden's connection with the thief Jack Sheppard comes from a Victorian novel and is totally fictional.

Private generosity was not enough to improve the roads and in 1710 a turnpike trust was established to repair the Edgware Road from Kilburn to Stanmore. The toll gate was on the Maida Vale border until 1864, when it was moved to the end of Willesden Lane. Later it moved to Shoot Up Hill. It was demolished in 1872.

In the early 18th Century the *Bell* in Kilburn became a fashionable spa due to the discovery of the special qualities of the Kilburn Wells spring, which contained iron. This eventually led to dog-fighting

and bare-knuckle bouts as the springs ‘dumbed down’ to poach clientele from nearby Belsize House, a notoriously immoral place. Also in the 18th Century, Oliver Goldsmith wrote *She Stoops to Conquer* in Kingsbury.

In 1816 Willesden parish was described as "a peaceful country area, ideal for the retirement of citizens." The rural nature of the Brent area started changing in the 19th Century with ribbon development along the main roads and the coming of the railways. The growth of London and the coming of the railways led to a shift to haymaking by local farms to supply London's horses. Railways depended on horse-drawn transport to load goods trains, so railways actually led to an increase in the use of horses.

The Welsh Harp Reservoir, named after an old public house that stood on the Edgware Road, was created in the 1830s to supply the Grand Union Canal. From about 1850 to 1900 the reservoir and the public house were popular places of recreation and

entertainment. The proprietor of the *Old Welsh Harp* pub created Kingsbury Race Course which attracted “thousands of the scum of London” until racing was banned this close to London in 1878. The *Old Welsh Harp* even had its own railway station until 1903.

By 1870 Kilburn’s location on the Edgware Road, and the opening of railway stations, had made it a thriving commercial centre. The first new parish in the area, Christ Church, Brondesbury, opened here in 1866. Kilburn's rapid growth brought problems, dividing Willesden into an urban south and a rural north that had to be dragged into the nineteenth century. The area near Kilburn Bridge was lit, but lighting was not extended elsewhere until 1861. Kilburn, being part of Willesden, fell outside the area of the Metropolitan Board of Works, but nonetheless used the Board's sewers, overloading the system. The rest of Willesden relied on open ditches.

Despite the middle class nature of places like Brondesbury, there was considerable poverty and overcrowding in 19th century south Willesden. Infant

mortality was high. Around 1890 20% of families in Kilburn were classified as living in poverty.

Kensal Green's growth is connected with the cemetery, which opened in 1832. Development at Harlesden was kick-started by the opening of Willesden Junction station in 1866. The railways brought people and trade, and people and trade encouraged the railways to enlarge their services. People came to find work and with them came speculative builders. At first Harlesden was a middle-class suburb, as was Stonebridge Park to its west. However, growing industrialization soon led to these areas becoming predominantly working-class.

The most important influence on the growth of Willesden was the Metropolitan Railway, which opened Willesden Green station in 1879. This station also played an important part in the development of Cricklewood. The population of Willesden soared from 18,500 in 1875 to 140,000 in 1906. Wealthy city merchants began building their houses at Willesden Green and Brondesbury Park

and local farms were bought up and laid out as housing estates. Willesden became an Urban District in 1894.

When the Metropolitan was extended to Harrow in 1880 it set up a depot at Neasden. Commuters on the Metropolitan, and the creation of the North Circular Road in 1922-3, were to make Neasden the by-word for inter-war middle-class suburbia, but it was always industrial as well. The Great Central Railway also established works there, and there was a lot of light industry nearby.

The munitions and aviation industries in the First World War, and the creation of the North Circular Road, encouraged industrial development in Cricklewood and Park Royal. The latter was the site of a failed attempt to create a permanent show ground for the Royal Agricultural Society in 1903-5.

In the 1880s Sir Edward Watkin, the Chairman of the Metropolitan Railway, acquired Wembley Park. He planned to turn into ambitious pleasure gardens

served by Wembley Park station. Watkin intended to build a 1,200' octagonal steel tower to rival the Eiffel Tower in Paris in the south of the park. The scheme did not succeed, and the half-built tower was demolished in 1907. Meanwhile the Great Central Railway began serving Wembley and Sudbury, though its influence on development was never as great as that of electric railways and trams.

After the First World War Wembley Park was selected as the site for the British Empire Exhibition. Wembley Stadium opened on the site in 1923. The Exhibition itself was open in 1924 and 1925. It is the Exhibition that was primarily responsible for the rapid development of Wembley, which although it had a number of Victorian and Edwardian buildings off the High Road, and had been an Urban District since 1894, was still largely a rural area. Approximately 27 million people visited the Exhibition and many sought to settle in the countryside around Wembley. Roads and bus services had been improved for the Exhibition, making suburbanisation easier. Wembley's

population rose from 203 in 1851 to 48,500 in 1931. By the early 1930s the hamlets of Preston and Kenton to the north of Wembley were become suburbs too, served by stations opened between 1908 and 1933 and by new motorbus services.

The growth of the settlement at Kingsbury Green led to the building of a new church, Holy Innocents', in 1883. The British Empire Exhibition and the coming of the Underground in 1932 led to Kingsbury's centre-of-gravity moving once again, while the population soared. During this period a competition came up with the name Queensbury for the newly developed area north of Kingsbury.

Kingsbury's growing population led to calls for a new church. This was accomplished in 1933 by moving another St. Andrew's church from Wells Street near Oxford Street and transporting it stone by stone to Kingsbury. It was rebuilt next to old St. Andrew's Church, in the heart of medieval Kingsbury.

By the 1930s both Willesden and Wembley were highly populated areas, with a combined population of around 238,000. Willesden became a Borough in 1933 and Wembley in 1937. Kingsbury, originally part of Wembley Urban District, had been an independent Urban District from 1900 to 1934 but had rejoined Wembley in 1934.

Willesden was heavily bombed in the Second World War. It experienced over 1,000 air raid warnings between 1939 and 1945. In October 1940 a greater tonnage of bombs fell on Willesden than on East Ham.

The population of the area peaked at around 316,000 c. 1951. It then began to decline as people moved away, some to New Towns like Hemel Hempstead. In 1965 Labour Willesden and Conservative Wembley joined to become the new Borough of Brent. Unfortunately industrial decline hit Brent hard from the 1970s onwards and many jobs were lost. The population also continued to decline, from 296,000 in 1964 to 243,000 in 1990.

In the second half of the 20th century Brent, became one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in London. The area already had a significant Jewish population, who had come to Britain to escape 19th century *pogroms* and 1930s Nazism. Irish people had also been coming to Kilburn and Cricklewood as seasonal labourers since the early 19th century or earlier. However it was Irish labourers doing post-war reconstruction and slum clearance after the War who led to Kilburn being called 'County Kilburn'.

After the war many people came from the Caribbean, and later from the Indian sub-continent. In 1981 37% of Brent's population had been born outside the UK and by 2002 the majority of its population came from ethnic minority backgrounds.

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