Church End and the Parish of Willesden

Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive

Church End is situated just east of the centre of Brent and is the heart of the original parish of Willesden.

St. Mary's church

Church End, once also known as Crouch (Cross) End, grew up around the church, which was located on the edge of marshland, an equal distance from the three main settlements in the area.

The whole of Willesden was in the hands of St. Paul's Cathedral by 1000. The church is first mentioned in 1181 and is first recorded as St. Mary's around 1280. There is no evidence of a Saxon church, but some of an early 12th century one. The font is mid-12th century, and a 12th century window is said to have been destroyed in 1872.

A rectory and vicarage stood next to the churchyard by the mid-13th century. The rectory was probably the chief manor in the parish. In 1502 it was leased to the Paulet family, one of whom had been rector around 1494. Later landowners in the area included All Souls' College, Oxford (from the 15th century), Westminster Abbey (from 1506) and St. Bartholomew's Hospital, which owned a house at Church End.

Our Lady of Willesden

By the early 16th century the church was known for its shrine to the Virgin Mary. The cult appears to have attracted numbers of pilgrims. Recently local historian K.J. Valentine (*Our Lady of Willesdon* [1988]) has put forward a convincing case for a famous description of the shrine being a Victorian forgery, so there is no longer any reason to believe that the shrine was particularly sumptuous. Nor is there any reason to believe that the image was a Black Virgin, despite claims to that effect by J.G. Waller in the 19th century.

Even before the Reformation the cult was not popular with everyone. In 1509 a woman, perhaps with Lollard sympathies, was punished for describing the image as "a burnt arsed elf and a burnt arsed stock" that lacked even the power to protect itself from a fire, and in 1527 Thomas Bilney, an important reformist priest, attacked the images at "Walsingham, Ipswiche or Wyllesdon" as being "but stockes and stones". Bilney's mention of Willesden ensured that it was regularly mentioned in the debate between reformists and traditionalists. In 1538, four years after Henry VIII had become became supreme head of the Church of England, the statue from Willesden was burnt at Chelsea.

St. Mary's church, about 1799

In the 1880s the Roman Catholic church in Harlesden began to venerate Our Lady of Willesden. In 1892 the Catholics dedicated a wooden statue of Our Lady, made from wood from an oak near the Anglican church. In 1903 they introduced an annual procession that provoked attacks by Protestants. Later the Anglican vicar of St. Mary's introduced another statue of the Virgin. A new and much more impressive image of Our Lady was dedicated at St. Mary's in 1972.

The village of Church End

In 1720 Church End had 13 ratepayers. The first black person recorded in Brent may be Sarah Eco, who was christened in St. Mary's church in September 1723. By the mid-18th century Church End was a small village, with a group of wooden poorhouse cottages in the churchyard. It seems to have been more important than Willesden Green. At enclosure (1823) there were 20 houses, mostly small cottages. An inn called the 'Parrot' existed by 1722. It is probably identical with the 'Five Bells', recorded in 1724. By 1790 this had become the 'Six Bells'. The change of name reflected the change in the number of bells in St. Mary's tower. In 1749 the 'White Hart' stood at the junction of Church Lane and the High Road. Before it was rebuilt in the late 19th century it was known for its pleasure gardens. The 'Six Bells' closed before the outbreak of the First World War, but there were still two pubs, as an ale-house called the 'White Horse' had opened on Church Road prior to 1860.

Many vicars of Willesden were priests elsewhere at the same time. There seems to have been nepotism as well, and from 1670 to 1736 the post of vicar was occupied by two members of the Hawkins family. Joseph Wharton, vicar from 1864 to 1888, was Willesden's first non-pluralist vicar for a very long time.
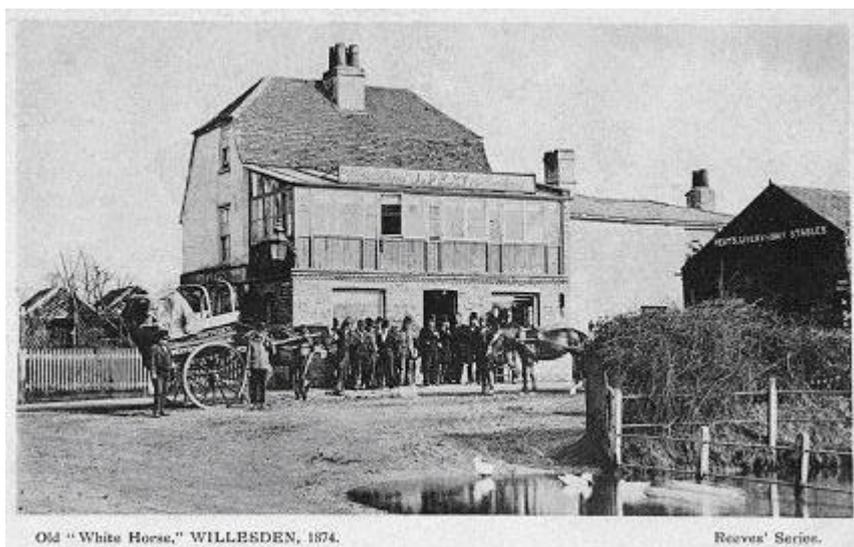
The 'White Horse', Church End, around 1874. The replacement to this pub was demolished in 1998

Willesden parish

Willesden parish was roughly triangular in shape. Its northeastern boundary was the Edgware Road, its northwestern boundary was the River Brent and its southern boundary was the Kilburn Brook and Harrow Road. This area contained a number of separate settlements that were eventually to become the suburbs of Willesden Green, Neasden, Harlesden, Kensal, Brondesbury, Stonebridge and Dollis Hill, as well as parts of Kilburn and Cricklewood. From a population of significantly less than 200 in 1086 it grew to 751 people in 1801 and 1,169 in 1811.

The parish registers begin in 1569. A constable is mentioned around 1580. Later there were two. The Poor Relief Act of 1601 made the churchwardens responsible for 'welfare', and a collector for the poor is mentioned by 1608. There were two overseers of the poor from 1678. A poor rate was levied twice a year from 1678. It was £90 in 1730. Local administration of this kind was the responsibility of the vestry. This consisted of the vicar or curate, the churchwardens, the overseers and a few others. Eventually there were monthly meetings, usually in the 'Six Bells' or the church. A vestry hall was built in 1857.

A special problem facing the vestry was 'baby-farming'. From the early 18th century unwanted infants from London were sent out to Willesden to be nursed. Mortality was high, with more than 70 infants being buried in Willesden parish between 1720 and 1730. Later in the century a lock-up was built. This building, popularly known as the Round House or Jack Sheppard's Cage, was relatively short-lived. In 1827 there were complaints that it was being used to imprison the sick and the poor rather than criminals.

In 1847 the church, which had fallen into disrepair, was saved from destruction by an unusually well-attended vestry meeting. It has been restored five times since 1852. A Sunday school opened in 1809, becoming a day school in 1818.

Church End in the 19th century

By 1829 Church End had a butcher and a general dealer. In 1834 the 'Six Bells' was doubling as a post office and was also the boarding point for a London coach.

The east end of the village became known as Chapel End after a brick Congregational chapel built there in 1820. The district was also called Queen's Town after Queen Victoria visited it in 1837. In the early 19th century the novelist William Harrison Ainsworth called Willesden "the most charming and secluded village in the neighbourhood of the metropolis." In 1839 he published *Jack Sheppard*, a novel that gave a genuine highwayman a totally spurious connection with Willesden. Another 19th century novelist, Charles Reade (d. 1884), is buried in the churchyard next to a female friend, but had no direct connection with Willesden.

By 1846 a terrace, a large farm and two large houses had been built at Queen's Town. According to the 1841 census a number of people in the parish, presumably seasonal labourers, lived in tents. It is possible that they were Irish. In the late 1860s a new house, 'The Elms', was built opposite 'Mead House', another large house.

Queen's Town, with the chapel in the distance

In 1866 the churchyard was extended and the poorhouse cottages pulled down. In the same year the London & North Western Railway opened Willesden Junction station. This was a long way south of Willesden, but the company ran buses from Church End to meet the trains. In 1868 the Midland & South West Junction Railway's Acton branch line was constructed to the west and north of the village. The vestry ensured that the line was built at least 170 yards from the church, insisted that trains did not interfere with church services and saw to it that a station was built so far away from Church End as to be virtually useless.

The railway did nonetheless have an effect on development. Inspired by the coming of the railway the United Land Company bought land at Chapel End in 1869. This became the Meyrick Road estate in the 1870s. At the same time more land was sold. By 1875 there were 73 houses in Church End and Chapel End, with the latter boasting seven shops and a new chapel three years later. The company laid out more estates in the 1880s, with building almost complete by the mid-1890s. Buses now ran between Church End and Kilburn. Other developers built houses in the early 20th century, although the Jewish cemetery (1873) and the new Willesden cemetery (1893) prevented expansion to the southeast and the railway restricted growth to the west. Church End did however spread south towards Craven Park Road.   In 1895 another Anglican church, St. Matthew's mission church, was founded in St. Mary's Road northwest of Harlesden. It became a permanent structure in 1901.

From parish to Borough

The changes that came to Church End in the 1870s had already begun in the south of the parish as early as the 1850s. The parish, which had a population of only 3,879 in 1861, grew to 15,869 in 1871, 61,057 in 1891 and 154,214 in 1911. These changes affected both the ecclesiastical parish, which shrank rapidly as new churches were built to serve the growing population, and local government. From 1871 to 1875 there was a power struggle within the vestry between the urban south, which wanted to establish a Local Board, and the rural north, which wanted to keep things as they were. The south won, and Willesden Local Board came into existence in 1875. The north-south split, however, continued within the Board for over 20 years. In 1894 Willesden became an Urban District. From 1891 there was a purpose- built Town Hall in Dyne Road, Kilburn. In 1933 Willesden became a Borough, and immediately switched to Labour control.

Industry at Church End

There were stables at Church End in the 1870s. In 1872 Willesden Volunteer Fire Brigade was established, with its main station at the 'White Horse'. By 1890 there were flourishing shops on Church Road. Initially there was no industry apart from laundries.

A fire engine races past the chapel at
Queen's Town

From the mid-1880s small-scale industry developed at Church End, mainly makers of blinds, picture frames and cabinets. J.H. Dallmeyer, manufacturers of lenses and scientific instruments, moved to Denzil Road in 1907. By this time Church End was largely working-class and one of the poorest parishes in the Diocese of London, despite the efforts of successive vicars to combat poverty. It is not surprising that Willesden's first Socialist councillor, Dave Barrett, a trade union official with connections to Irish politics, was elected by Church End ward in 1904.

The First World War brought more industry to the district. . By 1915 a cricket field north of the church had been replaced by factories. Later Dudden Hill Farm disappeared as well. The new Willesden Borough's plans to build council houses were interrupted by the war, but council properties were built north of Denzil Road and at Curzon Crescent in the 1930s. Willesden Technical College opened in 1935.

Willesden Borough at war

The Second World War proved to be a severe test for Willesden Borough. Because of the concentration of industry and railway lines the area was a natural target for air bombing.   In October 1940 a greater tonnage of bombs fell on Willesden than on East Ham, while weekly death rates remained in double figures from September to mid-November. At the outbreak of war Willesden's civil defence preparations were unusual for London, being concentrically based around a series of decentralised 'hubs'. This system proved so successful that it was adopted throughout London. By the end of the war 372 civilians had been killed and 2,108 injured. The memorial in Willesden New Cemetery commemorating 72 dead who had no relatives to claim them (in at least one case because an entire family was killed by one bomb) and who were buried by the Council is probably unique in London. Willesden helped the war effort by purchasing a Spitfire and at least one bomber. The Spitfire was named *Borough of Willesden* and flown by a Polish squadron (No. 302 *City of Poznan*) at the Borough's request. On 30th December 1941 the Polish ace Czeslaw Glówczinski shot down a Messerschmitt fighter while

flying *Borough of Willesden*. The aircraft was lost in June 1942, while escorting some bombers to Le Havre after having participated in a fighter sweep over the Pas-de-Calais. Its pilot, Flight Sergeant Antoni Lysek, was never found.

Flight Sergeant Antoni Lysek (**left**) was killed flying Willesden's Spitfire. Flight Sergeant Eugeniusz Nowakiewicz (**right**) also flew the aircraft

Photograph courtesy Wojtek Matusiak

Post-war Church End

Despite inter-war improvements most of the housing in Church End was thought fit for redevelopment by 1949. In 1963 the Council bought property in the west of Church End ward. Redevelopment, in the form of maisonettes rather than high-rise flats, started in 1971.

From the 1960s Church End was hit by industrial decline. In 1992 Church End ward's unemployment was high even compared to neighbouring wards.

In 1998 Brent Council transferred housing estates at Church End and Roundwood to Fortunegate

Community Housing, a local company that had been formed to regenerate them. As part of the regeneration plan Fortunegate Community
Housing are demolishing the Church End Resiform Estate and returning the area to a more traditional street pattern. The new street names have been chosen in consultation with the Grange Museum and Brent Archive.
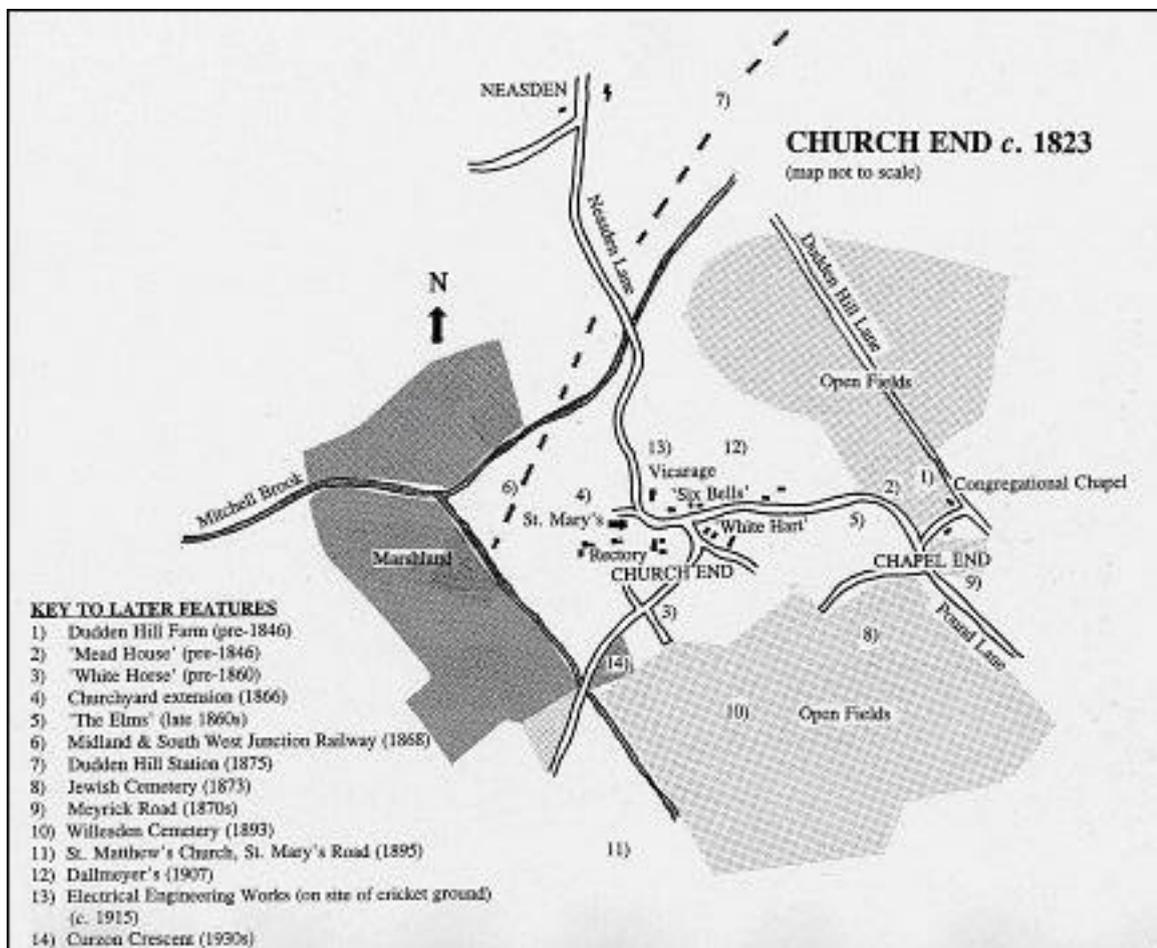
The London Borough of Brent

In 1965 Willesden joined with Wembley to create the London Borough of Brent, named after the river that divided the two old boroughs. The word Brent probably derives from *Brigantia*, the name of a Celtic goddess. It is the only Celtic place-name in the Borough. Most of the others are of Anglo-Saxon origin.

From the 1960s Brent, which already had a large Irish community, became the most culturally diverse borough in the country. In 1981 37% of the population had been born outside Britain. By the 1980s there was a rich mixture of communities and interest groups within Brent. There was also a divide between richer, Conservative, Wembley and poorer, Labour, Willesden. Nationally Brent was the third highest spender per head of population and the second highest spender on social services. Up to 75% of its council tenants were on housing benefit. Yet it also had the highest number of owner occupied homes of any Labour borough except Camden.

The population was becoming increasingly divided between a well off north and east and a deprived south where there was high unemployment, especially among young black people. This geographical divide (in some ways similar to that in late 19th century Willesden) was reflected in the council chamber, where there was heated debate and a balance of power that enabled individuals to control the fate of parties. In 1983 Labour lost control as the result of a single defection. It regained power in 1986, but lost it once more in 1990 because of a tiny splinter group. Five years later a single bye-election defeat brought down the Conservatives.

After 1979 the Council received less and less money from the government. At the same time Brent was hit by a major recession, which sent unemployment rocketing. British political life was disturbingly polarised in the 1980s. Brent's knife-edge politics, combined with the post-1986 Labour administration's emphatic support for equal opportunities policies, led to acrimony in the council chamber and adverse coverage in the generally right-wing national press. These were the days of the so-called 'loony left'. Throughout the period, irrespective of who was in power, the Borough's finances worsened. It needs to attract investment or receive increased funding from central government.

CHURCH END c. 1823
(map not to scale)

KEY TO LATER FEATURES
1) Dudden Hill Farm (pre-1846)
2) 'Mead House' (pre-1846)
3) 'White Horse' (pre-1860)
4) Churchyard extension (1866)
5) 'The Elms' (late 1860s)
6) Midland & South West Junction Railway (1868)
7) Dudden Hill Station (1875)
8) Jewish Cemetery (1873)
9) Meyrick Road (1870s)
10) Willesden Cemetery (1893)
11) St. Matthew's Church, St. Mary's Road (1895)
12) Dallmeyer's (1907)
13) Electrical Engineering Works (on site of cricket ground) (c. 1915)
14) Curzon Crescent (1930s)

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