



## Places in Brent

# Cricklewood and Dollis Hill

### Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive

Cricklewood is situated on the eastern border of Brent. Dollis Hill is a significant geographical feature between Cricklewood and Neasden.

#### **Early history**

Cricklewood means 'wood with an uneven outline'. Recent excavations on Dollis Hill show settlement dates back to the Early Iron Age. They have also uncovered a Late Roman building, possibly connected with the Late Roman villa that appears to have existed in Kingsbury.

In 1294 there was a small settlement on Edgware Road at 'le Crickeldwode'. A larger settlement existed at Oxgate to the northwest. Childs Hill (named after a 14<sup>th</sup> century inhabitant called Richard Child) and Dollis Hill (named after someone called Dolley or Dawley) are both first recorded as settlements in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **Before the railways**

There were several farms in the area by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1754 Cricklewood and Childs Hill were both hamlets, Childs Hill being significantly larger than its neighbour. Most of the dwellings at

Cricklewood were on the Hendon side of Edgware Road. By 1792 there were some new cottages at Dollis Hill, where there had been two ratepayers in 1720. Cricklewood was divided between the parishes of Willesden and Hendon.



The horse pond opposite the 'Crown',  
around 1840

There was little development before enclosure in 1823. In 1815 waste land along Edgware Road was sold as "suitable for building" and several houses had been built there by the early 1850s. In 1845 Cricklewood was described thus: "a village one mile in length, consisting of only a few dwellings chiefly occupied by tradesmen of the metropolis ... At the northern extremity some detached residences are being erected which will much improve and benefit the place."

Overall Cricklewood profited little from its position on an important Roman road. A number of streams ran across Edgware Road, one feeding a horse pond opposite the 'Crown' inn. As a result, as late as 1798 the road was famous for "mud four inches deep after rain in summer, and nine inches deep in winter." It was also notorious for highway robberies.

## **Road and rail transport**

In 1845 coaches from Elstree, Watford and St. Albans called at the 'Crown'. These services did little to encourage speculative building and Cricklewood was still a "pretty rural tract" in 1876. Willesden Paddocks, southwest of Oxgate, was an important stud farm. The 'Crown', which is first recorded in 1751, was "an ivy-clad house with pretty tea-gardens and a skittle alley." Rather less idyllically, bare-knuckle prize fights took place in nearby fields.

In 1867 the Midland Railway was built just east of the Edgware Road and in 1870 Childs Hill (now Cricklewood) station followed. The station was named Childs Hill because Childs Hill's proximity to Hampstead made it more important than Cricklewood.

The Midland built extensive marshalling yards north of the station and rows of terraces to house railway workers. The Midland & South Western Junction Railway, a loop line to Acton, was built at the same time, and from 1875 carried passengers from Childs Hill. These passenger services were never a success, and finally stopped in 1902.

By 1875 there were 36 houses in the Willesden portion of Cricklewood, including the 'Windmill' inn. Although Childs Hill station encouraged some construction Midland local passenger services were infrequent. The opening of Willesden Green Metropolitan Railway station in 1879 gave development a considerable boost. Willesden parish's rather belated introduction of sewers also helped.

## **Cricklewood grows**

In 1889 local landowners All Souls' College, Oxford, laid out Chichele Road (named after college founder Henry Chichele) between Edgware Road and Walm Lane. More roads and houses followed.

By 1900 it was impossible not to notice "the great improvements that have taken place in the Cricklewood portion [of Willesden]." Cricklewood was now a recognisable district, with churches,

chapels and a school. In the 1890s some shops were built in Hendon parish, while the 'Crown' was rebuilt in 1889. Then, between 1910 and 1914, a 'metropolitan electric' style shopping parade was constructed along both sides of Edgware Road. The town got its own newspaper in 1900. The 1914-15 Ordnance Survey map shows a "picture palace" and a skating rink on Edgware Road.

In 1912 the Diocese of Westminster built St. Andrew's Hospital on the Dollis Hill ridge. In 1914 it became a military hospital. Some of its earliest patients were Belgian soldiers.

### **Gladstone Park**

In 1901 Willesden Urban District Council purchased the grounds of Dollis Hill House to use as a public park. It contained a children's playground, as it does today. In 1908 Willesden Council purchased the house as well, turning it into a restaurant. Dollis Hill House dated from 1825 and had been the home of Lord and Lady Aberdeen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gladstone had stayed there as their guest and loved it so much that the park was named in his memory. During the First World War Dollis Hill House also served as a military hospital.

### **Buses and trams**

As Cricklewood grew bus services improved. The London General Omnibus Company (LGOC) opened stables south of Lichfield Road in 1899. This bus depot had moved to its present location by 1914. By 1900 there was a bus "every few minutes" from the 'Crown' to Charing Cross and two an hour to Hendon. All LGOC buses were motorised by 1911. In 1904 trams began running from Edgware to Cricklewood. Thanks to opposition from Willesden Council, however, passengers could not continue to London. After the First World War trams also began running along Walm Lane to Willesden. The tram routes were converted to trolleybuses in 1936.

The years before the First World War saw a slump in the building trade. In 1914 the northern and Hendon portions of Cricklewood were much less built up than the western part.

After the war building resumed on the All Souls' estate. Houses and flats were built at Oxgate and Dollis Hill in the 1920s and 1930s. Bus services running between Neasden and north Cricklewood were introduced to serve them.

### **The Jewish community**

There had been significant Jewish immigration into Cricklewood from Brondesbury in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and three synagogues had opened in Cricklewood before 1934. In the 1930s refugees fleeing Nazi persecution came to the area, especially Dollis Hill. The present Parkside synagogue, a striking modern building, was built in 1938. After the war many Jewish people moved out to Harrow or Northwood.



A tram on Cricklewood Broadway, near Ash Grove, in 1910



'The Cricklewood Hotel', Cricklewood Broadway, in the 1920s or early 1930s

## **Industry**

Willesden Borough's pre-war town planning scheme called for industry to be concentrated in the north of Cricklewood and along the North Circular Road. Early industry in Cricklewood had included a windmill, built between 1784 and 1798, and a chairmaker. George Furness built the first factory in the area, manufacturing photographic plates. The presence of the Midland Railway did not however really stimulate industry until after 1900. By 1911 the Phoenix Telephone Company was in Cricklewood Lane, and Smith's potato crisps were first made in garages behind the 'Crown' in 1912. In the same year Handley Page established an aircraft factory on Cricklewood Lane.

The First World War greatly stimulated industry in Cricklewood. Handley Page expanded considerably, and the French aircraft companies Caudron and Nieuport both had works in the area. In 1916 the School of Mechanical Warfare was set up in the fields between Dollis Hill Lane and Oxgate Lane as a proving ground for tanks. Amphibious tanks were tested in the Welsh Harp reservoir.



Women workers in an aircraft factory during the First World War

In the previous year Smith's Industries had opened a factory on the Edgware Road. Initially making fuses and instruments, by 1920 they had moved their headquarters to Cricklewood and were employing 1,000 people. Famous as makers of electric clocks ("Cricklewood clocks rank in fame with Devonshire cider") they would become the town's largest employer, with a workforce of 8,000 by 1939.

After the war industry continued moving into areas opened up by munitions factories. This was encouraged by the construction of the North Circular Road in the 1920s. In 1925 mattress makers Staples & Co. established themselves at the junction of the North Circular and Edgware roads. By 1929 57 factories were situated at what became known as Staples Corner. Many firms came to Cricklewood from more central locations, for example Bentley, which moved from near Dorset Square, and Rolls Razor, which came from Battersea around 1927. Associated Automation in Dollis Hill Lane made the General Post Office's (GPO's) coin-operated telephones from 1928 to 1982. By 1939 north Cricklewood was effectively an industrial estate, with factories all the way to Burnt Oak. The motor industry was particularly prominent, and there was even a film studio in Temple Road.

In 1933 the GPO Research Station was built at Dollis Hill. In the late 1930s the Government, anticipating that central London would be totally devastated by air bombing within weeks of the outbreak of a European war, built an underground citadel for the War Cabinet in the Station's grounds. It was hardly ever used. The GPO Research Station played a much more significant wartime role than the citadel - the components of 'Colossus', arguably the world's first electronic computer, were made there before being sent to the codebreaking centre at Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire. The Research Station closed at the end of the 1970s and the site was developed for light industry and, later, good quality housing.

In 1949 Cricklewood had a population of 19,586 and a good shopping centre that attracted many shoppers from outside the area. There was little building after 1945.

### **Irish and Afro-Caribbean communities**

Irish people had been coming to the area as seasonal agricultural labourers since at least the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. After World War Two Irish immigration to Cricklewood increased, partly as people moved out of overcrowded Kilburn and partly because of unemployment in Ireland (made worse by the introduction of tractors in rural areas) and a labour shortage in England. Many Irish women became nurses, while others became domestic staff or bus conductresses, or worked in light industry, which made considerable use of female labour.

Irish men tended to work in construction, rebuilding blitzed properties and redeveloping slums. A virtual labour exchange operated outside the 'Crown' in the early morning, with rows of lorries waiting to transport hundreds of labourers as far afield as Oxford. Similar scenes can be seen in the early morning today, though many of the men are no longer Irish.

The Irish labourers sang a song that ended:

*"Yes, take him down to Cricklewood to mortar, bricks and lime,  
And let him rot in Cricklewood until he serves his time."*

On Friday and Saturday nights these new residents, most of whom were young and single, would visit Irish venues like the Galtymore dance hall.

Later there was also immigration from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent, though Cricklewood's first recorded black resident was in fact the potman at the 'Crown' in the 1830s. In 1981 21% of Cricklewood's population was of recent Irish origin, 10.9% was Afro-Caribbean and 14.4% was Asian. Many smaller communities also existed. The collapse of Communism has led to further immigration, notably from former Yugoslavia.

### **Industrial decline**

In 1960 Staples Corner alone employed 10,681 people. Yet despite improved road access in the form of a series of unsightly flyovers, Cricklewood's industry was already in decline. Young black men were by far the worst affected by the mass unemployment that followed.

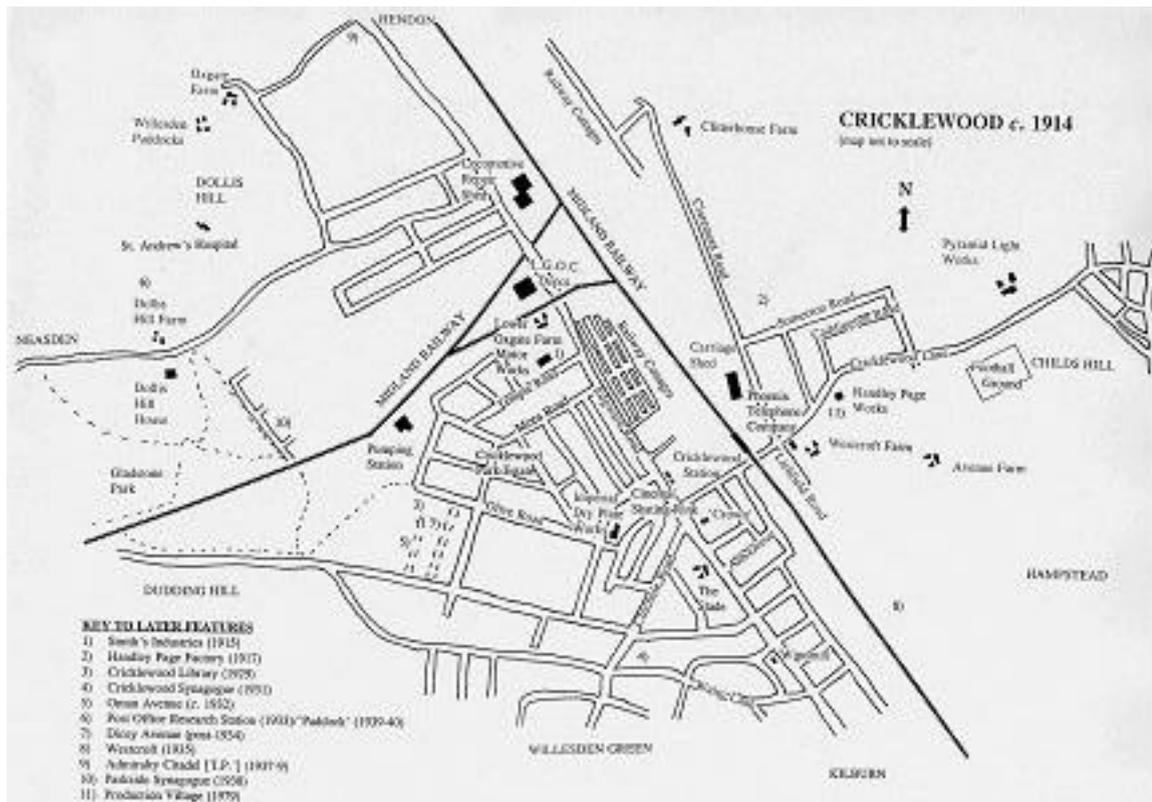
Homelessness also became a problem, and from about 1984 it became common for homeless men to sleep in Cricklewood Lane. By the 1990s most jobs were in the service sector or in small workshop-based manufacturing.



Sacked workers protesting outside  
Smith's

Local attempts to cope with change varied. In 1979 the Samuelsons, owners of a firm manufacturing film equipment, founded the Production Village, a television studio and entertainment complex set up in part of the disused Handley Page factory. A number of films were made in Cricklewood, including the first of the *Hellraiser* horror series. The Production Village has since disappeared. A health club now stands on the site.

The Samuelsons also organised the Cricklewood Society, an organisation that appears to have had a curiously pre-war view of Cricklewood. Other citizens opposed a Tesco superstore. One of the happier achievements of this period was the creation of the Cricklewood Festival. In the 1990s Cricklewood, no longer famous for clocks or mattresses, became something of a household name because of the comic books of the writer Alan Coren and the popular BBC television comedy series *Goodnight Sweetheart*.



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