



Places in Brent

Harlesden

Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive

Harlesden is in south Brent, south of Willesden, northwest of Kensal Green and southeast of Stonebridge.

Early history

Harlesden, originally "Herewulf's Tun" ('Herewulf's Farmstead'), began as a Saxon settlement on an elevated and well-watered woodland clearing. Recent archaeological excavations have found little evidence of the Saxon hamlet, although an unidentified piece of pottery may date back to the 5th or 6th centuries AD. A charter mentioning Harlesden that supposedly dates from 939 is generally regarded as spurious, but Harlesden is mentioned on a list of men manning a ship around 1000. In the Domesday Book Harlesden ("Hervlvestvne") is listed as a manor that "was in the lordship of the Canons of St. Paul's before 1066 and still is." 22 villagers and 100 pigs are recorded. The size of the manor had declined by 1215 and its other main asset, the lordship of the hamlet of Harlesden, had lapsed by the reign of Elizabeth I.

The 16th, 17th and 18th centuries

For a century after 1438 a brick and tile works thrived at Harlesden. In the 16th century Harlesden was a linear village with at least seven houses following the edge of a green that bordered Harrow Road. One of the houses was the main farmhouse of the estate that All Souls' College, Oxford, owned here by 1474. Although in the parish of Willesden, Harlesden had a separate

identity from quite early on. By 1720 23 local people were rich enough to pay rates.

In the 17th century a Harlesden inn called the 'Anchor & Cable' issued trade tokens. By the mid-18th century the village had two inns, the 'Crown' (perhaps the old 'Anchor & Cable') and the 'Green Man'. At this time there were a number of farmhouses set in orchards around the green and more farms to the northwest. A network of roads led to places like Acton and Willesden Green.

When the open fields were enclosed in 1823 there were some 30 houses, several of them described as "desirable."

The beginnings of public transport

The village grew slowly after enclosure, although a number of cottages, built by tradesmen and occupied by the poor, were built around the green prior to 1834. By 1839 the London-Harrow coach passed through Harlesden every day. The village had a blacksmith, a grocer, a shoemaker and a new inn, the 'Royal Oak'. An omnibus service to London was running from the 'Royal Oak' by 1855. Nonetheless, major development only came as a result of the arrival of the railways.



The 'Royal Oak' (left) and the 'Green Man' in the 19th century

In 1837 the London & Birmingham, which became the London & North Western Railway (L&NWR) in 1846, was built to the south of the village. A station called Willesden was briefly opened at

Acton Lane in 1841, and re-opened in 1844, but Willesden Junction replaced it in 1866. The story that the first Willesden station was built so that Captain Huish, manager of the line, could travel into London is false. The Hampstead Junction Railway also opened a short-lived station called Kensal Green & Harlesden, half a mile west of the present Kensal Green station, in 1861. Willesden station, with six trains a day in each direction, provided the impetus for the construction of Chapel Terrace, opposite the 'Crown'. It was named after a Wesleyan (Methodist) chapel opened around 1847. The two stations also encouraged the building of villas. It was the new Willesden Junction station, however, that really kick-started construction.

Harlesden grows

From 1869 the United Land Company bought estates in Harlesden. Cheap houses could be built in Harlesden as, being in Willesden parish, it was not subject to London's strict planning regulations. This could also cause difficulties. Harlesden ratepayers had to put pressure on Willesden vestry, a largely rural body used to relying on open drains for sanitation, to provide the town with a sewer. Sewerage finally arrived in Harlesden in 1871.



A garden party in Roundwood Park, 1900

By 1876 one writer claimed that Harlesden had been "utterly spoiled." This was not then true, but in the following decades farmland was sold off to developers. Some developers built quality housing intended for commuters, others built terraced cottages. In Harley Road the L&NWR built houses for its own workforce.

The number of houses in the new All Souls' parish increased from 399 (housing 2,390 people) in 1881 to 1,666 (housing 9,929 people) in 1891. By 1894 there was no true open countryside between Harlesden, Church End and Stonebridge Park, although there were still dairy farms in the area. This rapid development led to sanitation problems, especially as some of the builders were unreliable.

In 1900 All Souls' College built Wrotesley Road and began leasing land to builders of middle class housing. This estate was hit by a slump in house building from about 1904, causing cheaper houses to be built, but despite the slump housing was continuous between Harlesden and Kensal Green by 1920.

Late 19th century Harlesden

The turn of the century was Harlesden's heyday. The population was mainly middle class and had a strong sense of civic pride. The town had nine churches and chapels, including the impressive Anglican All Souls' (1879). There was a Catholic convent in Crown Hill Road from 1886, with an associated Catholic girls' school from 1888. Until 1901 Catholics from Wembley had to come to Harlesden to worship. Apart from churches and schools (in the mid-1880s the issue of schooling in Harlesden brought the Willesden School Board into conflict with Whitehall, which insisted that education should be provided by Willesden) there was a petty sessional court, a library and a sub-fire station.

The famous Jubilee Clock dates from 1888. Originally planned in 1886, in 1887 it was decided to use it to commemorate Queen

Victoria's Jubilee. In fact it was not erected until 1888, but the inscription misleadingly says that it dates from the Jubilee year. In 1895 the Council turned land near Roundwood House into a park, described as "26 of the loveliest acres round London", while a telephone exchange began operating in 1896. The High Street was rebuilt in the Edwardian period and the Willesden Hippodrome, a large music hall, opened in 1907. Several cinemas also opened in Harlesden in this period.



The Willesden Hippodrome, photographed shortly before it opened in 1907

In 1907 electric trams came to Harlesden, improving an already excellent public transport system. Horse trams (the first in northwest London) had been operating since 1888, and as early as 1888-90 there had been a horse bus every five minutes from Paddington to Harlesden and one every 12 minutes from Harlesden to Charing Cross. In 1912 the L&NWR built a new, electrified line, opening Harlesden station near the site of the old Willesden station. Electric trains to Watford began running on this line in 1917.



Tramlines and a motor bus near the Jubilee Clock shortly before the First World War

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Roundwood House in its heyday, probably around 1890

Industry

The railway also brought industry to Harlesden. Small firms set up factories in the 1880s. By 1890 products such as washing machines, bicycles and antiseptic fluid were made in Harlesden. In 1902 McVitie & Price opened their Edinburgh Biscuit works in Waxlow Road, East Twyford. In 1909 it employed 1,150 people. Eventually it would be the largest biscuit factory in the western world, employing 2,600 people in 1978. By 1919 there were three large factories in Acton Lane, including the North Metropolitan Electric Power Supply Company's generating station, which began operating (under Council control) in 1903. This industrial growth led the middle classes gradually to abandon Harlesden,

allowing working class families to move into larger houses. Harlesden Working Men's Club (Manor Park Road) was founded in 1909.

Many of the working class population of Harlesden lived in considerable poverty. A report in the 'Willesden Chronicle' (7th February 1908) mentions the "nearness to starvation" of the poorest residents of Harlesden, Stonebridge and Lower Place. Poverty however was not the motivating force behind the anti-German rioting that broke out in Harlesden following the sinking of the Cunard liner *Lusitania* in 1915. Beginning at about 10.30 p.m. on 12th May 1915 outside a baker's shop (N^o. 269, High Road, owned by a Mr. Holm), the disorder spread to other Cricklewood shopping centres, notably Kilburn and Willesden Green, and was renewed on the following evening when, despite rain, several hundred youths smashed shop-fronts in Stonebridge. In some suburbs a small number of soldiers in the Middlesex Regiment played a part in the disorder.

Harlesden after 1945

In the inter-war years Harlesden became an entirely working class area and in 1936-7 Willesden Council built their largest housing estate, Curzon Crescent, between Harlesden and Church End. By 1939 the last of the really large Victorian houses, Roundwood House and Knowles Tower, had both been demolished by Willesden Council. In 1949 Harlesden had 3,782 houses and 1,121 flats.

Although the population declined from 39,527 in 1951 to 26,970 in 1971 much of Harlesden remained densely populated. Harlesden developed a reputation as an unpleasant place to live, but the post-war need for housing made it impossible to redevelop it. Prefabricated houses for those made homeless by wartime bombing remained on Harlesden Road until the late 1960s and redevelopment, including the construction of new flats, did not occur until the 1970s.



Acton Lane, Harlesden, in 1983

Traffic movements soared, so that by the mid-1980s congestion had earned the town the nickname of "Horrible Harlesden." By the 1960s the Curzon Crescent estate was becoming celebrated for poverty and consequent vandalism. In the same decade immigration, mainly from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent, led to racist articles in a national newspaper. This brought a swift response from the people of Harlesden, whose sense of community was clearly still strong. The demise of south Brent's manufacturing industries and the growth of out-of-town shopping centres such as Brent Cross hit employment in the area hard.

In the mid-1980s rising property prices did nothing for most local people. There was a genuine fear of social unrest in some quarters.

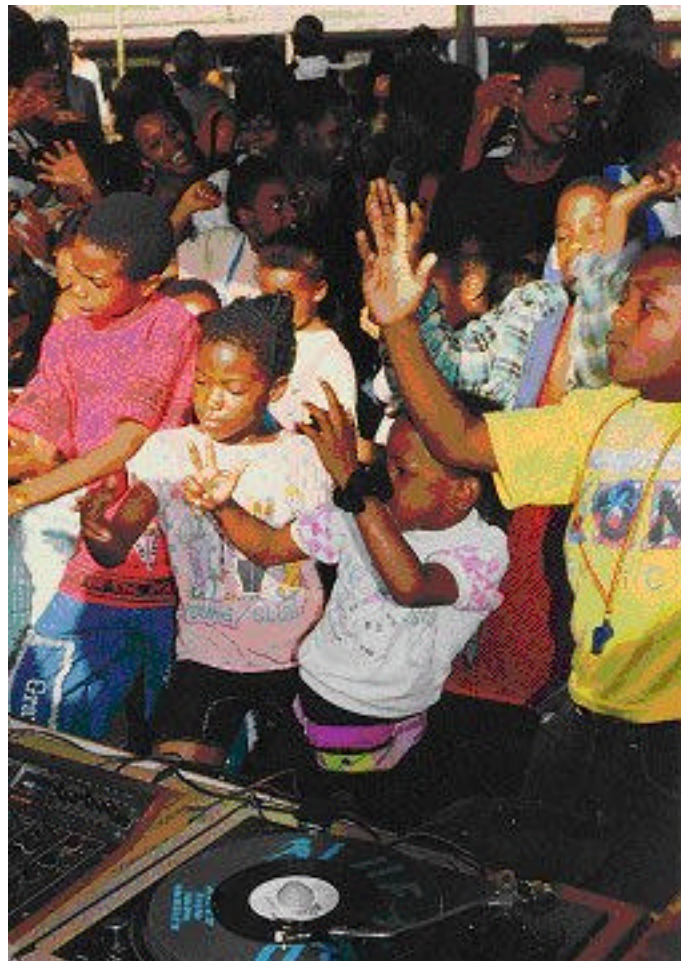
Renovating Harlesden

Numerous plans to build new shopping precincts or revitalise Harlesden in other ways have appeared since the 1970s, one of the most recent being Harlesden City Challenge. The Jubilee Clock was renovated in 1997. Other recent positive

developments include Harlesden Plaza and the conversion of an old cinema, the 'Coliseum' in Manor Park Road, into a pleasant J.D. Wetherspoon's pub. The 'Coliseum' dates from 1912.

Harlesden has become the centre of Brent's large African-Caribbean community. It is a major centre of the black music industry and is said to rival Kingston, Jamaica, in terms of its productivity. It has even been the setting for a musical film, *Babymother*.

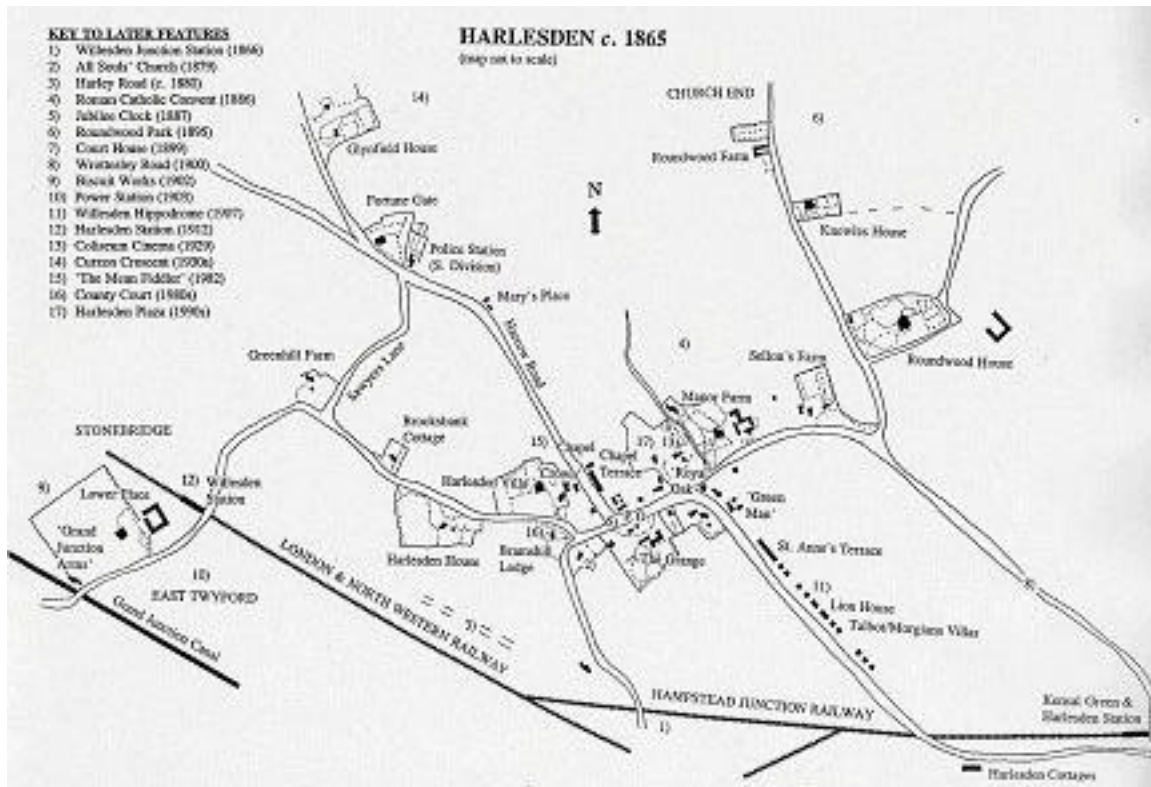
In the first year of the 21st century Harlesden was the subject of a BBC television documentary series, *The Heart of Harlesden*.



Street carnival, Harlesden, 1992



Shopping in Harlesden



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