Places in Brent

Kilburn

Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive

Kilburn is situated on the southeastern borders of Brent.

Early history

Kilburn may be named after a Saxon called Cylla, or it may take its name from the Saxon for 'the cattle stream'. It certainly does not mean 'the cool stream', as was believed in the past. Kilburn grew up where Roman Watling Street crossed the Kilburn brook. Kilburn Priory, probably a community of Augustinian canonesses, was founded in 1134. It stood where the High Road meets modern Belsize Road. Henry VIII dissolved it in 1536. By 1814 nothing remained of the structure except for a "rising bank."

That part of Kilburn that was in the parish of Willesden belonged to the manors of Bounds, Brondesbury and Mapesbury. All were the property of St. Paul's Cathedral. Mapesbury (named after Walter Map, an early medieval priest) and Brondesbury ('Brand's manor') were respectively situated north and south of Mapes (later Willesden) Lane.

From the 16th to the 18th centuries

The 'Red Lion' and 'Cock' inns may have been founded in the 15th century. The 'Bell' existed by 1600. The 'Black Lion' may date from 1666. By 1677 several houses had been built along Edgware Road. Road conditions were so bad that a turnpike trust was set up in 1710. The gate was situated near the 'Queen's Arms', Maida Vale, at the entrance to Willesden parish. In 1864 it

was moved to the end of Willesden Lane and later to the top of Shoot Up Hill, before being demolished in 1872.

In 1714 a chalybeate spring (a spring where the water is impregnated with iron) near the 'Bell' was enclosed in a brick reservoir. By 1733 this well was being exploited by the proprietor of the 'Bell' as a cure for stomach ailments in imitation of Hampstead Wells. Despite later adverts targeting "the politest company" he may also have wanted to attract custom from nearby Belsize House, a notoriously immoral place of entertainment. If so he succeeded, for dog-fighting and bare-knuckle bouts became common. Water was still being sold in 1841, but by 1814 the wells were in decline, although the 'Bell', now called 'Kilburn Wells', remained popular as a tea garden. The pub was demolished and rebuilt in 1863.

Kilburn Wells in the 18th or very early 19th century

Seasonal agriculture did not encourage settlement by the poor and highway robberies and a lack of good views kept the gentry away. In 1762 there were only 10 houses, seven cottages, the tollhouse, a smithy and three inns on the Hampstead side of Kilburn. In 1749 a terrace called Elm Row had been built on the less populated Willesden side.

Kilburn became a notorious duelling spot in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Nonetheless the area was described as "more rural and tranquil than might be expected" in 1816.

The early 19th century

In 1815 a Thomas Buckley built seven large houses along the west side of the Edgware Road, just north of Willesden Lane. He named them 'Waterloo Cottages' after Wellington's victory. They were inhabited by wealthy and professional people until they were demolished in 1885.

By 1819 houses were being built on the Kilburn Priory estate, bordering St. John's Wood. In the 1820s development spread along the Edgware Road, but mostly in Hampstead and Paddington parishes. In 1829 the Willesden parish segment was still largely rural, the only serious development being at Kilburn Square, around St. Paul's Chapel, which had been built in 1825. The chapel was demolished in 1934.

By 1839 much of the new construction in Kilburn consisted of "beautiful villas and houses" aimed at middle-class professionals. In 1834 the novelist William Harrison Ainsworth was living in Kilburn and from 1839 to 1856 the newsagent and future First Lord of the Admiralty W.H. Smith lived with his father at Kilburn House, just north of Kilburn Square.

Public transport

The London & Birmingham Railway was built through Kilburn in 1837. Kilburn High Road station opened in December 1851. Further north the Hampstead Junction Railway opened Edgware Road (later Brondesbury) station in 1860. In 1879 the Metropolitan Railway opened Kilburn & Brondesbury (today Kilburn) station. None of these stations stimulated the growth of Kilburn. The main cause of growth was ribbon development along the Edgware Road. This was encouraged by constantly improving bus (and later tram) services, but one old resident recalled that around 1870 many men walked to their offices in the West End.

In 1839 there was a horse bus from Kilburn to Bank. In 1856 22 omnibuses a day ran to London Bridge and by 1896 south Kilburn was served by over 45 buses an hour. A limited motorbus service to Oxford Circus began in 1903. Underground railways came to Kilburn in January 1915 when the London Electric Railway opened Kilburn Park station.

The growth of 19th century Kilburn

By 1851 most of the frontage of Edgware Road was built up. In the 1850s large middle class houses began to be built in south Kilburn (Kilburn Park). This scheme was not a success and Kilburn Park became a poor area, but from 1857 the builder James Bailey nonetheless began a development nearby. From 1861-7 Bailey built a series of roads and houses around a triangular space called Cambridge Gardens, an attractive estate that never met with the success it deserved. From 1866 estates east of Edgware Road began to be developed. The roads were named after places in Kent near the landowner's family seat, Quex Park.

Between 1861 and 1871 Willesden's population rose from 3,879 to 15,869. Most of this rise can be accounted for by the growth of Kilburn. By 1870 south Kilburn was engulfed in houses. North Kilburn still had relatively few.

Brondesbury and Mapesbury

Some houses had been built on Willesden Lane in Brondesbury as early as 1847. The elevated site was thought to make the land suitable for the better kind of villa and in the 1860s the first entirely new suburban development in Willesden was begun here. In 1866 the parish of Christchurch, Brondesbury, was formed, the first new parish within the original parish of Willesden. Nonetheless Brondesbury was still underdeveloped in 1896. Furthermore a slump hit the housing market in 1904. Western Brondesbury was not built over until 1920, and Brondesbury Manor House only succumbed to the developers in 1934.

Development in Mapesbury came later than in Brondesbury. Shortly after 1901 houses were built north of the Metropolitan Railway.
Mapesbury House, south of the Metropolitan, survived until 1924.

Kilburn's rapid growth brought problems, dividing an urban south Willesden from a rural north. The district gradually got modern amenities. Limited street lighting came in 1849, and was extended in 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. The destruction by fire of Mapesbury Mill (1863) led to the creation of a volunteer fire service.

Places of worship

A number of churches were built as development progressed. The Catholic Sacred Heart church, Quex Road, was built in 1878-9. This became an important place of worship for Irish people, some of whom were already in Kilburn by 1841. A number of non-conformist chapels appeared in the 1880s and '90s.

The Anglican Church in Kilburn was seriously split between High and Low Church, the High Church having an affinity with Roman Catholics and the Low with Protestants. This could lead to tension between vicars and congregations and even to the founding of new churches where there was no population growth to warrant them.

Jewish immigration to Brondesbury started in the 1870s, with people moving out into the suburbs from the East End, or coming directly from Eastern Europe. Initially Jews in Brondesbury had to walk to synagogues in St. John's Wood or Hampstead, but a temporary iron synagogue was built in 1902 and a permanent synagogue in 1905. The Jewish population grew rapidly in the years before the First World War, and Brondesbury Synagogue had 413 male seatholders by 1914. Later the Jewish population

declined as people moved out to Willesden, Cricklewood, Dollis Hill and beyond. The synagogue closed in 1974 and is now part of a Muslim school.

Manchester Terrace, Kilburn, 1884

Life in 19th century Kilburn

In 1853 a militia unit, the Rifle Volunteers, was created to face a perceived threat from Napoleon III. Until it was built over, their practice range was next to the National School, which had been founded in 1847. A Catholic school existed from 1872 and a number of Anglican Church schools appeared in the 1880s in opposition to Board Schools. Willesden Polytechnic was founded in 1876. For a time H.G. Wells was a teacher at Henley House, a private school.

Many people in Kilburn were "fairly comfortable", although the district never became as select as some builders had hoped. Several newspapers came into existence, the first ('The Kilburn Times') in 1867.

A developer built an unofficial town hall in Belsize Road in 1876 (it later became a music hall). True municipal buildings were built in the 1890s, including Willesden Town Hall, which stood in Dyne Road from 1891 until it was demolished in 1970. Edgware Road,

named Kilburn High Road in the 1880s, had more than 300 shops. Kilburn shopping centre was surprisingly cosmopolitan, with a number of shops owned by foreign nationals, some of them Jewish immigrants. This appears to have been particularly true of Willesden Lane.

Kilburn High Road in1886

The New Empire music hall opened in 1909, by which time cinemas had also appeared in the suburb. Foyle' s bookshop began life in Kilburn, moving to its present premises on Charing Cross Road in 1926. Celebrities such as the cat caricaturist Louis Wain and the Zionist writer Israel Zangwill lived in the area, but Kilburn was never as arty as Hampstead.

Behind this prosperous facade there was considerable poverty and overcrowding. In 1875 Kilburn was prone to disease and had high infant mortality. In 1887 bad weather and unemployment caused great distress to the poor. Around 1890 20% of families in Kilburn were classified as living in poverty and the slump before 1914 made matters worse.

Industry
Tilemaking is mentioned at Kilburn from the early 16th century. The earliest industries in Kilburn were probably tile and

brickmaking, and the windmill. By 1890 there were coachbuilders, bicycle manufacturers, monumental masons (for Paddington Cemetery) and a railway signal factory. Light engineering and printing were also established by 1914. The First World War stimulated

industry and employment. Even before the turn of the century the middle classes had been migrating from Kilburn and the wartime upturn led them finally to abandon most of the district. Only Brondesbury, where several large houses had served as hostels for Belgian refugees during the war, was still middle class by the late 1920s.

Kilburn between the wars

Few houses were built in Kilburn between the wars, partly because there was nowhere to build them. In the 1930s flats replaced some houses east of the High Road and at Shoot Up Hill. Around 1932 the RSPCA War Memorial Dispensary opened in Cambridge Avenue. A shopping parade was built on Kilburn Bridge in 1933 and the State cinema, the largest in the British Isles, opened in 1937. Today it is a bingo hall. Another branch of the Bakerloo line began serving the north in 1939, when Kilburn station was rebuilt. Kilburn suffered much bomb damage in the Second World War, including a V1 hit on Canterbury Terrace that killed 16 people.

After the Second World War

After the war the Greater London Plan called for the reduction of industry in Kilburn, much of which was in obsolete premises, and the replacement of overcrowded slums with flats. This started in 1951 in Kilburn Vale and 1954 in south Kilburn, where the average population density was 10 people to a house and where some houses were actually falling down. Flats were also built at Shoot Up Hill. Many of the building labourers engaged on these schemes were Irish. Despite earlier Irish immigration it was now, partly because of the large number of furnished rooms available for rent, that the suburb truly became 'County Kilburn'.

In the early 1960s Kilburn Square was replaced by a shopping precinct and 17-storey "pocket skyscraper." In the early 1970s an

estate was built for people who were moved from slums in the Palmerston Road area. The problems such blocks could cause were not immediately apparent, while population density fell from 133 per acre in 1949 to 61 per acre in 1971.

Redevelopment destroyed attractive Victorian architecture, notably much of James Bailey's estate around Cambridge Gardens.
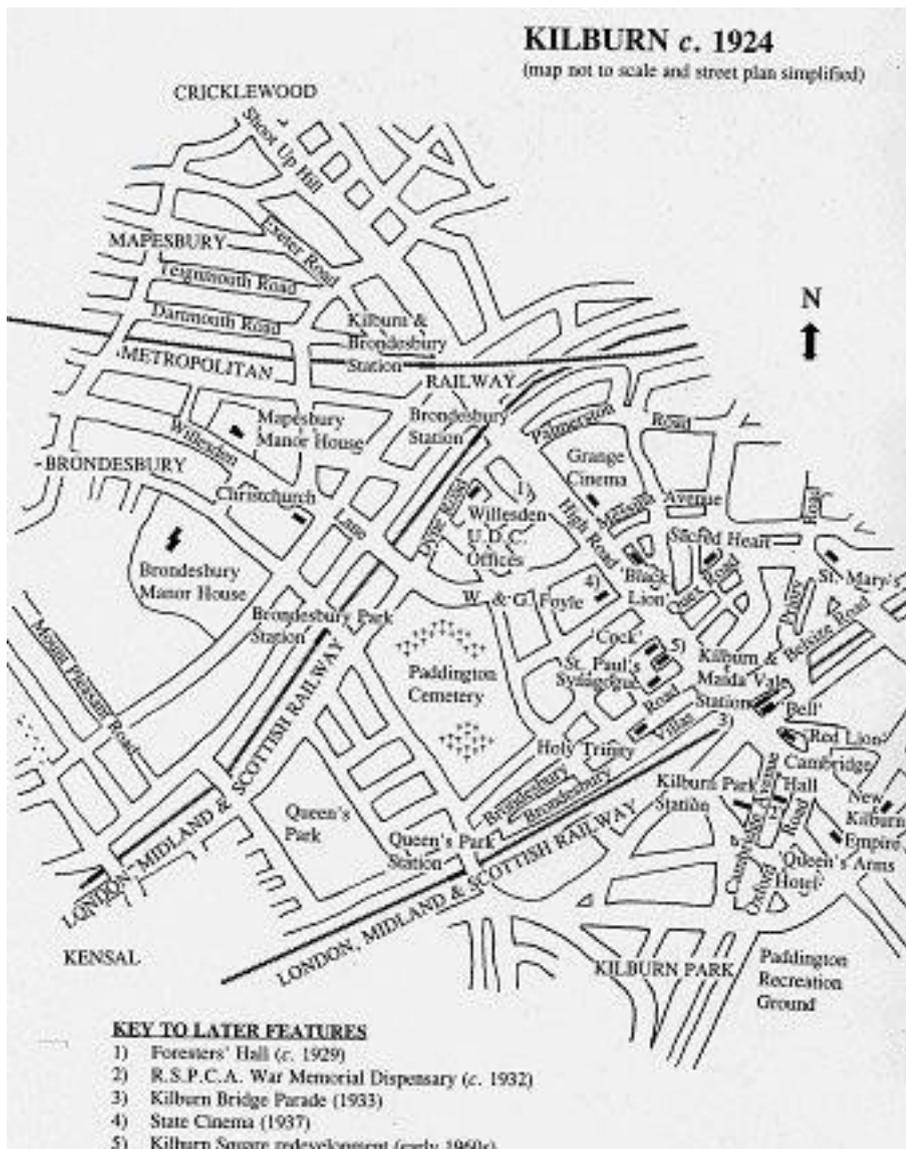

The 'pocket skyscraper' when new

The Irish nature of Kilburn has declined as more recent immigrants, many from the Indian subcontinent, have moved into the area. A Hindu temple has joined the numerous places of worship in Kilburn.

Kilburn High Road is the only London street to have given its name to a rock band (Ian Dury's *Kilburn & the High Roads*), and it is fitting therefore that there should be something of an effort to turn Kilburn into 'Music Mile', London's Greenwich Village. Although unemployment in south Kilburn stood at 20% in 1988

this policy seems to have met with rather more success than regeneration schemes elsewhere. Helped by the presence of the Tricycle Theatre Company at Foresters' Hall from the late 1970s, the Kilburn Festival from 1982, 1980s 'gentrification' as West Hampstead became unaffordable and a strong cultural mix, Kilburn today perhaps deserves the reputation for artistic Bohemianism that it never quite lived up to in the past.

KILBURN c. 1924
(map not to scale and street plan simplified)

KEY TO LATER FEATURES
1) Foresters' Hall (c. 1929)
2) R.S.P.C.A. War Memorial Dispensary (c. 1932)
3) Kilburn Bridge Parade (1933)
4) State Cinema (1937)
5) Kilburn Square redevelopment (early 1960s)

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