



Places in Brent

Stonebridge

Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive

Stonebridge is situated in southern Brent, on the Harrow Road between Harlesden and Wembley.

The 17th and 18th centuries

Until 1905 the River Brent used to divide into two just north of the Harrow Road. The original Stone Bridge (built between 1660 and 1700, and noteworthy because most bridges over the Brent were wooden) carried the road over the eastern branch of the river.

In 1746 there were four buildings near the bridge, including Stonebridge Farm, which was already at least 200 years old. An inn called the 'Stone Bridge' existed by 1770, but had been renamed the 'Coach & Horses' by 1790. The painter George Morland often visited the area. The spot was popular with fishermen and a son of a former Lord Mayor of London nearly drowned there in the late 18th century.

Roads, canals and railways

In 1801 tollgates were set up on the Harrow Road. The money raised went towards maintaining and repairing the road. Somewhat later the course of the River Brent was simplified. In 1811 a small canal, a feeder for the Grand Junction Canal, was cut through the district on its way from Kingsbury to Lower Place.

The London & Birmingham Railway came to the district in 1836. Its construction was a considerable engineering achievement, involving the moving of 372,000 cubic feet of earth to build an embankment and the construction of a viaduct by George Stephenson's father Robert. It was followed by the Midland and South West Junction Railway in 1868.

The growth of 19th century Stonebridge

There had been police at Stonebridge since 1839, presumably to prevent highway robberies. A police station was built in 1851, along with eight houses.

By 1855, when the Harrow Road was straightened out to create the Craven Park triangle, a shop and a beer retailer are recorded. Stonebridge was however still a rural place, though it now began to change.

The opening of Willesden Junction station in 1866 made Stonebridge an attractive location for professional men working in the City. A select private estate was planned. Eventually known as Stonebridge Park, the estate was advertised by its developers as having views of the Surrey Hills. It was never as grandiose as its planners had originally intended, but by 1876, a year after the opening of Stonebridge Park station (closed 1902), over 60 "smart new villas" had been built, along with the large 'Stonebridge Park Hotel' on Harrow Road.



The 'Stonebridge Park Hotel',
photographed not long after it opened

Stonebridge Park became the home of many of the men who ran Willesden's local government. The best known is local historian F.A. Wood, whose house 'Hurworth' survives.

Despite the promises of the developers later housing was of less high quality. In the 1880s and 1890s houses were built west of Stonebridge Park in Melville, Brett and Barry roads. These were intended as terraces and shops for tradespeople serving Stonebridge Park. Hillside, that part of Harrow Road that descended towards the bridge, became a thriving shopping centre, as it was to remain until the late 1950s. The church of St. Michael and All Angels was built in 1891 and became the centre of a parish a year later. After 1901 there was little building, but the larger houses were divided into flats or bedsits. This process was largely complete by 1911 and the population did not grow thereafter.

Two schools opened before the First World War. The nearby 'Coach & Horses' was known for its gymnasium, and for its landlord, the 39-stone 'Jolly Jumbo' Ecclestone.

Industry and social conditions

In the early 20th century Stonebridge became increasingly industrial, and consequently increasingly working-class in character. Willesden's sewage farm operated there from 1886 until 1911. In 1902 McVitie's opened a biscuit factory nearby and by 1914 there was a brick works next to the railway. By the 1920s industry had established itself along the railways and at Barry Road. In 1899 an attempt to build houses near the sewage farm failed, but after the First World War St. Raphael's council estate was built west of the River Brent in this locality, and the North Circular Road was built.

By 1929 the streets that had been built to serve the Stonebridge Park estate had become independent of it and had developed their own character. Barry Road was an upper working-class community consisting of men in regular employment. The

"notorious" Brett Road was very different, and considered by many to be a slum. People there were poorer and lacked the pride and education of those in more skilled occupations. Many of the men were periodically unemployed. Their wives worked in the numerous local laundries.

From 1933 Willesden's Town Planning Scheme concentrated industry near the St. Raphael's estate. A railway goods depot and a trolleybus garage were probably the most important local employers at the end of the Second World War. During that war a honeycomb of air raid shelters under Stonebridge recreation ground protected several thousand people.

The post-war housing estate

In 1949 Stonebridge's population was 17,641. The road system was inadequate, many houses were overcrowded and some were derelict. The council devised a plan to redevelop some 98 acres of Stonebridge by demolishing the old houses and building 2,169 high-rise dwellings. The shopping centre on Hillside vanished and whole streets were wiped off the map. The first high-rise blocks opened in 1967. By 1978 there were many more, together with a small modern shopping precinct.



Brent North Labour Party protesting against transport cuts outside Preston Road Underground station, probably in the 1970s

Stonebridge had been heralded as "one of the most up-to-date estates in London and an area to be proud of." Yet already in 1977 the estate was notorious for broken lifts and even before it was finished the residents of the "space-age project" were threatening a rent strike. It soon became clear that the design of the estate did not meet the needs of its residents. For years the people of the estate, many of whom were black and all of whom were poor, felt that the council was neglecting them. Attempts to improve the estate were finally made in the early 1990s. In 1994 the estate was taken over by Stonebridge Housing Action Trust, which has improved the quality of life in the area.

West of the River Brent, on the way to Wembley, development came late, despite the opening of a new Stonebridge Park station in 1912. The most striking buildings here are the 21-story Station House, the first tall tower block in Brent (built in 1965), and two smaller curved blocks (built in 1975). The area is not exactly pedestrian-friendly and in early 2001 the two curved blocks appeared disused.

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