



Places in Brent

Wembley and Tokyngton

Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive



Cup Final crowds at Wembley, with the Empire Pool in the background, 1937/8

Wembley is in southeastern Brent, east of Sudbury, north of Alperton, west of Neasden and south of Kingsbury and Preston. Tokyngton is in eastern Wembley, south of the Chiltern Railway line.

Early history

"Wemba lea" is first mentioned in a charter of 825. The name means 'Wemba's clearing'. The clearing the Anglo-Saxon Wemba chose, later the large triangular Wembley Green, was situated on and around a 234' hill. Wembley village grew up on the hill and on the future Harrow Road south of it. The surrounding area remained wooded for much of the middle ages. In the 13th century Wembley gave its name to a local family.

Tokyngton, southeast of Wembley, means 'the farm of the sons of Toca'. At the time of the Domesday survey the district was one of the most populated parts of Harrow parish. Tokyngton, which also had a local family named after it, is first mentioned by name in 1171. By about 1240 there was a chapel there dedicated to St. Michael. There is evidence that it had a vicar. The chapel, which was situated south of the present South Way, next to Wembley Stadium station, provided an easier alternative to Harrow church, a long walk away and situated at the top of a very high hill. But even if they worshipped at Tokyngton local people were still dependent on Harrow for their less spiritual needs. Harrow market, begun in 1261 and apparently held in Harrow churchyard, was the only one in the vicinity. It lasted until the end of the 16th century.

Initially Tokyngton was more important than Wembley. Wembley and Tokyngton manors were both submanors of Harrow. Tokyngton Manor was formed in the late 13th century from estates in the hands of the Barnville family. The Barnvilles had a house at Tokyngton by 1400, although the later manor house was built around 1500 and extended around 1600. By 1528 the manor was in the hands of the Bellamy family. By 1759, and probably as early as the 16th century, Tokyngton Manor was simply a farm.

From the 16th century to the 19th century

By 1536 Wembley Manor and other estates in Harrow parish were being leased to the Page family. The Reformation helped the Pages become the main landowners in Wembley. Tokyngton

Manor was in their hands by 1609. The family was still important in the area in the early 19th century.



The 'Green Man' in June 1862

In 1547 there were six houses at Wembley, which although small was now one of the richest hamlets in Harrow. In 1661 Wembley had nine large houses, 23 smaller ones and a population of 160 people. There was a mill on the top of Wembley Hill in 1673.

Open fields had been enclosed in the district from the 16th century, but there were still 60 acres of waste land in 1759. In the same year there were 42 buildings around the common. On the summit of Wembley Hill stood an inn. It was probably there by 1722 and was called the 'Barley Mow' by 1745. It kept this name until at least 1751, but became the 'Red Lyon' around 1774 and the 'Green Man' by 1785. The present structure was built in 1906 after a fire.

There was a general shift from arable to hay farming in 18th century Middlesex. Then hay farming went into decline in the late 19th century. The final phase of rural Wembley consisted of animal farming.

In the early 18th century the Pages built a house in Wembley Park. They landscaped the Park in 1792. By 1810 Wembley Park had passed to a John Gray.

19th century Wembley

In 1851 Wembley and Tokyngton contained five farms, Wembley Park Mansion, 26 other dwellings, a smithy, the inn and the 'Greyhound' beershop.

The Harrow Road was turnpiked in 1801. By 1826 there were two coaches a day. In 1836-7 the London & Birmingham (later London & North Western) Railway built a line through Wembley. A halt was opened in 1842, initially called Sudbury (for Wembley). It is now Wembley Central. The station had little effect on development, although buses from other villages connected with the trains.

In 1846 two local philanthropists, the Misses Copland, paid for the Church of St. John the Evangelist, built north of Harrow Road and west of the railway. It was designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott. It made Wembley a separate parish from Harrow. Like the station it was however initially seen as being in Sudbury rather than Wembley. In 1848 the ladies funded a school next to St. John's and in 1859 they paid for an extension to the church. Then in 1869 they built the Workmen's Hall in Harrow Road, intended to promote self-improvement, temperance and industry. Nearby stood Wembley's first 'hospital' (1871), again funded by the Misses Copland. Wembley at this stage was still almost wholly rural.



St. John's Church, Wembley

Development at North Wembley came early. It was partly created by the railway and partly by the horticultural trade that grew up there. By 1861 a number of cottages existed, as well as a beershop, the 'Norfolk Arms'. More housing followed, and another pub.

By 1871 the population of Wembley had risen to 444. It consisted of agricultural labourers, railway workers and a few professional men. Wembley's first Asian citizen was probably His Highness Rajah Rampal Singh, who lived at the Dairy Farm south of the hill for a short while after 1882.

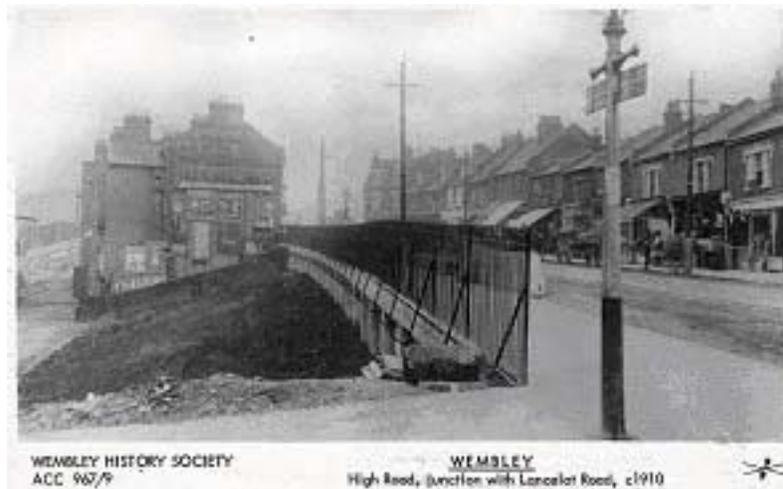
Until 1884 Wembley was dependent for water on wells in Sudbury and Alperton. Thereafter development was encouraged by the availability of piped water. Sewerage followed 10 years later.

Railways and trams

The first truly urban development started around the station. The 'Railway Hotel' existed by 1877. There were shops in Wembley by 1882. Before they came people had had to walk two miles to Harlesden. From 1895 suburban housing began to be built. There was significant poverty and overcrowding in some terraces.

In 1901 a Roman Catholic burial ground and chapel were consecrated south of Harrow Road.

From 1894 to 1917 five things occurred that greatly improved access to Wembley. In 1894 the Metropolitan Railway, which had been built through the district in 1880, opened a station at Wembley Park.



The bridge over the railway on Wembley High Road, about 1910

Around 1900 the country lanes around the green were improved, becoming proper roads. In 1906 the Great Central opened a line between Neasden and Northolt Junction [South Ruislip] and opened a station at Wembley Hill [Wembley Stadium]. In 1908 electric tram services began, followed by the electrification of the L&NWR in 1917.

Wembley Urban District

The Wembley area merged with Kingsbury to become Wembley Urban District in 1894. Kingsbury temporarily regained its independence in 1900. In 1891 the population of the Wembley district (excluding Kingsbury) was 3,023. This was not a large figure and population growth remained slow until after the First World War, although the population had grown to 4,519 by 1901. In 1895 Wembley received an antiquated manual fire appliance from Harrow. It was stationed in a wooden shed in St. John's

Road. In 1910 a police station opened in Harrow Road. By 1920 building was continuous between both Wembley and Sudbury and Wembley and Alperton, and by 1924 Wembley High Road was an important shopping centre.

Development on Wembley Hill itself began around 1906. There were shops in Wembley Hill Road by 1913, when Wembley was described as a "beautiful and salubrious little suburb."

Wembley Park

Wembley Park station had been built specifically to serve an ambitious pleasure gardens. The Wembley Park estate had been purchased by the Metropolitan Railway and its chairman, Sir Edward Watkin, between 1881 and 1889. Watkin planned to build a 1,200 foot octagonal steel tower to rival the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The tower would be the focal point of a park that contained tea pagodas, bandstands, a lake, a wooden Variety Hall and a number of sports facilities. Watkin's Metropolitan Railway placed all this within 12 minutes of Baker Street.

The park could be visited from 1894. In 1896 the first stage of the tower, 150 feet off the ground, was opened to the public. The rest of the structure was never built, partly because the site was unsuitable marshland, and demolition work began in 1904.



Wembley Park, with Watkin's tower in the distance

Before 1907 the Tower Company had become the Wembley Park Estate Company, with the aim of developing the area around the park as a residential suburb of "high-class residences". In 1913 the Council bought King Edward VII Park to complement this scheme. South of the Great Central, in Tokyngton, the Oakington Manor Estate began being developed along similar lines. The garden suburb plan at Wembley Park was halted by the Government's post-war decision to hold the British Empire Exhibition (BEE) at Wembley, but the Tokyngton scheme, with significant alterations, continued to be developed until 1932.



First World War veterans of the Wembley British Legion, 1924

The first Wembley cup final

The BEE required a vast number of buildings in a variety of styles. To simplify construction, all the structures were built of ferro-concrete. Much of the construction work was carried out by ex-servicemen who had previously been unemployed.

The BEE plan included a large sports stadium. The first turf was cut, on the site of the old tower, on 10th January 1922.

The Football Association showed interest in the Stadium from an early date, and chose it as the venue for the 1923 Cup Final, Bolton Wanderers v. West Ham. The crowd was vastly larger than had been expected and the fans, many of whom had no doubt been to local pubs such as the 'Greyhound' before the match, completely overwhelmed the Stadium staff. The official attendance was 127,000 (a capacity crowd), but apparently over 210,000 people entered the ground. 900 were injured (happily none seriously) and the match was delayed for 40 minutes, during which PC George Scorey and his white horse 'Billie' became a national legend. Bolton Wanderers won 2-0.

The British Empire Exhibition



Aerial view of the Stadium and the British Empire Exhibition, 1924

The BEE itself opened in 1924. Wembley Park station was rebuilt and a new station, Wembley Exhibition, was built on a spur from the Great Central. Visitors to the Exhibition could travel on experimental railways, visit an amusement park, shop in exotic surroundings, inspect a coal mine, travel by rail through the Rockies, walk through an Australian sheep station, see a model re-enactment of the April 1918 Zeebrugge raid and eat at Lyons' restaurants. It was the Disneyland of its day.



An 1852 room set in the
Palace of Arts at the BEE

Suburban growth

The BEE greatly encouraged suburban development. An outfall sewer was constructed, completing work begun in the 1890s. Many roads in the area were improved. Forty Lane became a main highway, bringing Wembley and Kingsbury together. Traffic signs appeared and bus services began operating. The Exhibition introduced people to the area and many later moved to Wembley when houses had been built to accommodate them. Most of the wealthier residents fled from the Exhibition and its consequences. Wembley was to develop as a fairly homogeneous suburb.



A Buddhist Temple at the BEE

Building was continuous from 1925 to 1939, and was further encouraged by industrialisation bringing workers to the area. From 1921 to 1931 Wembley's population increased by 200%. The shopping centre increased considerably in the 1920s and 1930s. Social facilities already existed to meet the needs of the growing population. For example, Wembley had had a cricket club as early as 1880.



Suburban development in Clarendon Gardens between the wars

Wembley and Kingsbury were re-united in 1934, and in 1937 became the Borough of Wembley.

The growing suburb was so large that shops were needed elsewhere than in the High Road. In 1926-9 a shopping parade was built at the junction of East Lane and Preston Road.



A postcard showing suburban Wembley

Another was built at Forty Avenue, just north of Wembley Park station, and a third south of the station near Oakington Avenue. From 1931 flats were built on both Empire Way and Forty Lane, and in 1934 local builders Haymills advertised houses that "capture the modern spirit" (flat roofed structures that made a change from the usual 'Tudorbethan') on Forty Avenue.

In 1912 a mission hut had been established at Wembley Park. In 1926 a permanent church, St. Augustine's, was opened. Tokyngton had a temporary church from 1926 and a permanent one from 1933. In 1925 a Methodist church opened in Park Lane and in 1927 another appeared in Ealing Road. The 1920s also saw the opening of Wembley Hill School and of a modern hospital. In the 1930s a proper fire station in Harrow Road replaced the unimpressive wooden building in St. John's Street. There had been a sub-post office at Wembley since 1878, but a new building opened in 1929-30. In 1929 the Majestic cinema replaced the cottage hospital on the High Road and in 1937 the Regal Cinema opened near Montrose Crescent.

The station was given an impressive and modern new frontage in 1934-5, including an arcade of shops. In 1932 the Council

opened the Vale Farm open-air swimming pool between Wembley and Sudbury. By 1937 Wembley even had an operatic society.



Wembley (now Brent) Town Hall when

Between 1935 and 1940 Wembley Borough built an impressive new town hall on Forty Lane in what had been Kingsbury.

Arthur Elvin saves the Stadium

No-one had planned what to do with the BEE buildings after the Exhibition was over. Most of them were highly impractical and only usable as warehouses. They were sold as a lot, including the Stadium. The purchaser, an entrepreneur called Jimmy White, employed Arthur Elvin, an ex-Royal Flying Corps officer who had been reduced to running a tobacco kiosk concession during the Exhibition, to get rid of the buildings. Elvin demolished some and sold others. He also saved the Stadium by buying it and forming the Wembley Stadium and Greyhound Racecourse Company.

The survival of the Stadium after the closure of the BEE in 1925 gave English football a permanent home. From December 1927 there was greyhound racing at Wembley, while speedway began in 1929. In their heyday the Wembley Lions were one of the country's most successful speedway teams.

In the 1930's Elvin decided to stage ice-hockey matches at Wembley. For this he commissioned the Empire Pool, a large covered swimming pool that could be used as an ice rink. It opened on 27th July 1934.

Industry

There was a laundry in Llanover Road as early as 1892. Larger scale industry had come by 1907, when a motor works is recorded in Lancelot Road. During the First World War there was an aircraft works and flying ground near North Wembley station. In 1918 the British Oxygen Company opened a plant here and others followed in the 1920s. In 1922 the aircraft works site, which had gone over to car production, was taken over by GEC. In the same decade the closure of the BEE led light engineering and luxury goods manufacturers to move into the disused concrete 'palaces' of Wembley Park. By 1965 some 70 firms employed 6,300 at Wembley Park.

The Second World War

One of the first buildings destroyed in Wembley in World War Two was Tokyngton Manor House, which was blown up in an ARP exercise in 1939. Air raid precautions did not however extend to the wholesale evacuation of children, as was the case in Willesden and other boroughs nearer to London. The war initially led to the closure of Wembley Stadium, but the Government later reversed this decision, realising that it had a demoralising effect.

During the war 9,000 bombs fell on Wembley, killing 149 and damaging over half the houses in the Borough.

Wembley's citizens hit back by buying a Spitfire fighter and, later, by helping to pay for the destroyer HMS *Whelp*. The present Duke of Edinburgh was an officer on *Whelp* when the ship witnessed the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay on 2nd September 1945.

After VE Day a Thanksgiving Service was held in the Empire Pool. In the late 1940s a number of prefabricated houses were built along East Lane.

The 1948 London Olympics

In 1948 Wembley hosted the 14th Olympic Games. This was the second time the games had come to London. Olympic Way was built at a cost of £120, 000. The Empire Pool, never a great success as a swimming venue, was used for this purpose for the last time. Since 1948 the Stadium and the Pool have been the venue of a wide variety of events, ranging from boxing to the 1985 Live Aid concert.

Places of worship

In 1958 a permanent synagogue was built at the junction of Forty Lane and Oakington Lane. In 1918 there had been 120 Catholics in Wembley. By the early 1950s this had risen to 1,650, a significant number of who were Irish people moving out of Willesden or, in some cases, coming directly from Ireland. The Catholic chapel was far too small to cope with such numbers and was replaced by the present St. Joseph's Church in 1956.

A less successful religious structure was the Park Lane Methodist church. In the early 1960s, when the original church had to be replaced because of subsidence, a manse was built alongside a new church. The ground remained unstable, however, and the manse had to be demolished. Much more recently, a Mormon building was constructed on Wembley Park Drive.

Post-war Wembley

The Borough's population peaked at 130,800 in 1951 and declined thereafter. This was partly because of a move out to the New Towns. Nonetheless Wembley was the fourth most populated borough in the country in 1953, mainly because of its large size. In the 1950s offices moved out into Wembley from inner London, and in 1956 a new pub, the 'Torch', opened near Wembley Park station. From the late 1950s there was a property

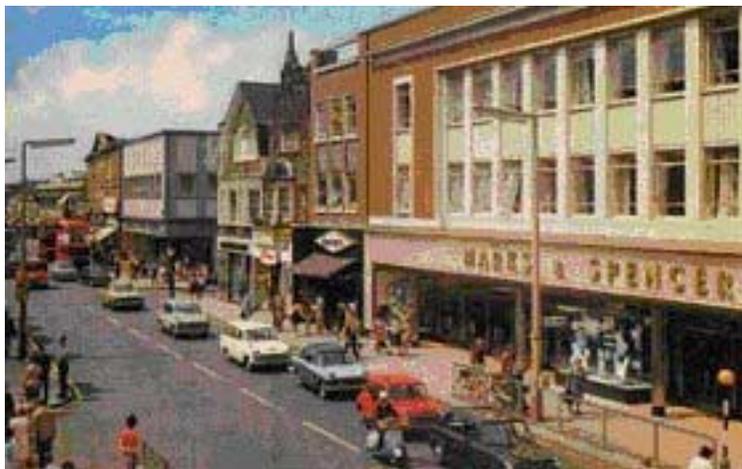
boom. As a result flats replaced larger properties in the 1960s and there was a great deal of reconstruction, including the building of the nine-storied Brent House.

In the 1970's there were further developments, including the opening of the Conference Centre in 1977 and the construction of modern hotels. A new police station was built, and a new post office. An unpopular development was the creation of a Bakerloo line depot at Tokyngton in 1973.

The rise and fall of the shopping centre

From the later 1960s Wembley's industry declined, leading to much light industry being replaced by warehouses and out-of-town DIY stores. Both of these developments adversely affected the shopping centre. During the same period many of the BEE buildings were lost, although the Palace of Industry survives.

In 1965 Conservative Wembley and Labour Willesden were united as the London Borough of Brent. The two groups almost immediately squabbled over the plan to build a large council estate at Chalkhill in Kingsbury. The virtual balance of power between the two main parties helped make Brent a byword for extremism. In the 1980s some of the more right-wing Conservatives in Wembley started calling for Wembley to secede from Brent. In fact, by 1971, 50% of Wembley's population had actually moved there from Willesden.



Wembley High Street in the 1960s

In 1954 Wembley High Street was "the mecca of local shoppers". During 1950s Cup Finals the men would watch the match while their wives would shop in the town. Wembley was considered a 'posh' suburb, and people moving in from poorer areas felt obliged to keep up appearances in order not to appear out of place. Shopping floorspace increased greatly between 1961 and 1970. The High Road was perhaps the fastest growing shopping centre north of the Thames.

Parking had become a problem as early as the 1950s, and between 1963 and 1965 a disused railway goods yard next to Wembley Central station was roofed over, creating an underground car park and an open shopping precinct called Central Square. Drawings from this period show that the architects envisaged a pleasant and lively market place that never fully materialised. Economic decline, changing shopping patterns and, one suspects, the British weather, defeated the hopes of the planners, and today Central Square is a sorry sight. Experience elsewhere (for example the 'Pavilions' precinct at Uxbridge) would suggest that the first step towards revitalising it would be to roof it over.

In 1971 the High Road was seen as being the 11th best place to shop in London. By 1987 it had fallen to 24th place. Successive plans to improve the shopping centre by building a bypass, pedestrianising the High Road or building a new shopping plaza have all so far come to nothing. Meanwhile the smaller shopping parades have also fallen on hard times.

Wembley today

Wembley appears to have become an unattractive architectural hotchpotch, but it should be remembered that people were complaining about the "ghastly muddle of sheds and what-nots" at Wembley Park as early as 1933. Furthermore, despite its decline, Wembley's shopping centre is far from dead. It still has a Marks & Spencer's, a Woolworth's and numerous smaller shops. Asian

immigrants have revived Ealing Road by opening jewellery shops there and there are several pubs on the High Road. Wembley Stadium station, although a pathetic shadow of its former self, is now served by Chiltern Railways services to Birmingham. Meanwhile Wembley Park station is in the process of being improved, attractive new flats have been built at Copland Road near Wembley Central station and Wembley may be the site for the new National Stadium.

And for all the changes of the past 100 years, in one or two places, for example near St. John's Church or at High Street on Wembley Hill, one can still get a feel of the way Wembley must have been before the inter-war building boom.



A selection of commemorative medals from the BEE in the collections of the Grange Museum of Community History and Wembley History Society

- 10) Methodist Church (1925)
- 11) St. Augustine's (1926)
- 12) Shopping Parade (1926-9)
- 13) Shopping Parade (late 1920s)
- 14) New 'Greyhound' (1929)
- 15) Majestic Cinema (1929)
- 16) Post Office (1929-30)
- 17) Raglan Court flats (post-1930)
- 18) King's Court flats (post-1930)
- 19) Empire Pool (1934)
- 20) Station Forecourt (1934-5)
- 21) Town Hall (1935-40)
- 22) 'Harrow' pub (1936)
- 23) Regal Cinema (1937)
- 24) 'Torch' pub (1956)
- 25) Synagogue (1958)
- 26) Brent House (1960s)
- 27) Central Square (1960s)
- 28) Chalkhill Estate (1960s)
- 29) Conference Centre (1977)

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