Places in Brent

Kensal Green

Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive

Kensal is situated on Brent's southern border, along the Harrow Road. The famous cemeteries are actually in the Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, not in Brent.

Early history

Recorded as "Kingisholt" ('The King's Wood') in 1253, Kensal Green is first mentioned by its present name in 1550. The green was a prominent feature at the junction of Harrow Road with Kilburn Lane (known in the 17th century as Flowerhills Lane). The Countess of Richmond (the mother of King Henry VII) and All Souls' College, Oxford, owned land in the area in the middle ages.

Kensal formed the heart of the lands of the small manor of Chamberlayne Wood (named after Richard de Camera, an early 13th century priest who received income from the land) and the sub-manor of Malories. In the 17th century field names suggest sheep farming was the dominant form of agriculture between Harlesden and Kensal Green.

Kensal in the 18th and early 19th centuries

By the mid-18th century there were farms and two larger houses at Kensal Green. There was also an inn called the 'Plough'. A cottage followed before 1800.

A print of the Kensal Green 'Plough', pointing out its association with George Morland

In the 1780s the 'Plough' was a haunt of the artist George Morland, while after 1814 the green was used as a shooting range by the Cumberland Sharpshooters, a local rifle club. The well-known Willesden Steeplechases, no doubt the reason for the presence of a bookmaker at Kensal in 1829, were held on the site of the future King Edward VII recreation ground (now Willesden Sports Centre) to the north of Kensal until the mid-19th century.

The gates of All Souls' Cemetery

Early industry

Development began in the early 19th century with the coming of the Grand Junction Canal in 1801. Barges laden with cargoes ranging from iron and coal to waste paper and gravel were towed through Kensal. This traffic led to the foundation of a brick works and stimulated the growth of the village.

When it was enclosed in 1823 the green was divided up into small plots. Cottages, owned by local tradespeople and inhabited by the poor, had been built on all these plots by 1829.

Cemeteries, railways and growth

In 1832 the opening of All Souls' Cemetery, a "model cemetery" planned to replace the unhygienic burial grounds of central London, brought more employment and encouraged building. Interesting early burials include Dickens' beloved sister-in-law Mary Hogarth (d. 1837), the Duke of Sussex, (the sixth son of George III, whose interment at Kensal in 1843 made the cemetery a fashionable place to be buried), the engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel (d. 1859) and the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray (d. 1863).

The cemetery was closely followed by the construction of two railways, the London & Birmingham line to the north and the Great Western line to the south, in 1837-8. Between them the cemetery and the railways turned Kensal Green from a village into a suburb of London. They also changed the way parts of Kensal related to each other. The cemetery actually discouraged building in that part of Kensal within the western boundary of Kensington parish, while the London & Birmingham line separated farmers in Kilburn Lane from much of their land.

In the 1840s first Kensal New Town (south of the Harrow Road) and then Kensal Green (north of the cemetery) expanded considerably. A church, St. John's, was built in 1844 and a school in 1850, while more inns appeared, including 'The Case is Altered' (1843) and the 'William IV', then known for its large

bowling green surrounded by summer-houses.   A gas works, built in that part of Kensington parish effectively cut off by the cemetery, lit the streets and discouraged crime. The novelist William Harrison Ainsworth lived at Kensal Lodge from 1835 to 1841, when he moved to Kensal Manor House (both houses have been demolished). At Kensal Lodge he was frequently visited by literary friends, including Dickens.

In 1858 St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery was set up west of All Souls' Cemetery. Many of the 12,500 people buried there during the next eight years were Irish immigrants escaping the potato famine. Later burials included Sir Anthony Panizzi (d. 1879), the Italian-born principal librarian of the British Museum, who was partly responsible for the creation of the famous Round Reading Room, and Prince Louis Bonaparte (d. 1891), a nephew of Napoleon I. During the First World War two Belgian soldiers who had died in St. Andrew's Hospital, Dollis Hill, where buried in the cemetery. The plot eventually became a Belgian military memorial and cemetery and now also includes a number of graves from World War Two, including at least one woman.

Armistice Day ceremony at the Belgian War Memorial, St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery, November 2000

In 1860 the Hampstead Junction Railway was opened. A station, called Kensal Green & Harlesden, followed in 1861. In 1873 it was moved half a mile to the east and renamed Kensal Green. Willesden Junction station, on the London & North Western Railway (the old London & Birmingham), was built in 1866.

Apart from the railway stations, Kensal Green was also connected with London by horse-drawn omnibuses. In the 1850s there were 14 services a day to London, including two buses from the 'William IV' to London Bridge operated by a Mr. Andrews, owner of the Pantheon Bazaar Stores in Oxford Street, an early department store. As early as 1890 competition from buses and trams (which first ran in 1888) was taking passengers from the railways.

Improved public transport encouraged development. Between 1861 and 1871 Kensal's population quadrupled from 675 to 2,138 and the number of houses more than doubled. Large numbers of two-storey cottages continued to be built in the following decades, many on land acquired by the United Land Company (north of Harrow Road and west of College Road) and Edward Vigers (in the triangle formed by Harrow Road and the L&NWR line).

Social problems in Victorian Kensal
This volume of construction brought urban squalor to the area, with poor sanitation made worse by the fact that many local people kept pigs. Indeed the slaughtering and selling off of a pig at the 'Plough' was one of the highlights of the week.

An exception to the general squalor was Queen's Park, situated in Paddington to the east of Kensal Green, where the Artizans', Labourers', and General Dwellings Co. built houses between 1873 and 1886. There were long waiting lists for this low rent accommodation, which enabled the tenants to be vetted for 'respectability'.   Queen's Park railway station opened in 1879.

In contrast to Queen's Park, and despite the provision of land, libraries and clubs by Victorian philanthropists, Kensal acquired

the unenviable reputation of being a near slum.   55% of the population of Kensal New Town were in poverty in 1899. One old resident, however, a schoolgirl in 1900, fondly remembered Kensal Green as being "a proper little village" with 18 shops in Hazel Road.

A Langler and Pinkham house
in Clifford Gardens

The development of Kensal Rise

After 1888, when the surrender of a farm lease allowed construction north of the L&NWR line, All Souls' College began to exploit its lands more systematically. For example it built Chamberlayne Road, which connected Kensal with Willesden Green and eventually boasted a pleasant little shopping centre, as well as some light industry. This new area of development was given the name of Kensal Rise. Kensal Green station was renamed Kensal Rise in 1890.

The All Souls' estate now stretches from Kensal Green to Harlesden. Many of the houses were built by Charles Langler and Charles Pinkham. Their most noteworthy houses are those

in Clifford Gardens (about 1897), the facades of which are decorated with quaint and curious stucco scenes.

In 1911 the population of Kensal Rise was described as ranging from "the very poor who when thrown out of work ... have little or nothing to fall back on, to those who have regular employment as clerks, accountants, salesmen, etc. in the City."

A postcard of St. Martin's Church

Churches, schools and entertainment

As everywhere in suburbia, development led to the creation of churches and schools to cater for the growing population. St. Martin's Church, Kensal Rise, opened in 1899, while numerous schools opened between 1877 and 1913. In addition, from 1916 to 1919, refugee children were educated at the King Albert Belgian School in Wrentham Avenue.

Children outside Harvist Road School, which opened in 1898

Of course construction reduced access to some pleasures. People could no longer drive along a rural Harrow Road, as Queen Victoria had been wont to do when Albert was alive, and blackberries could no longer be picked on Kilburn Lane, but a host of new leisure facilities easily made up for this. Queen's Park Rangers football club was formed in 1886 and the National Athletic Grounds, which stood on the site of the present Whitmore Gardens, were laid out in 1890.

Kensal Rise Library, 1904

Ten years later Mark Twain opened a public library at Bathurst Gardens. Kensal Green Lawn Tennis Club came into existence in 1906 and the Constitutional Club in 1909. In the same year the Council purchased 26½ acres of open land to the northwest of the

National Athletic Grounds, creating the King Edward VII recreation ground.

In 1945 a synagogue was founded in Chamberlayne Road. Yet despite all these new community centres Kensal never developed the sort of sense of identity that many suburbs developed.

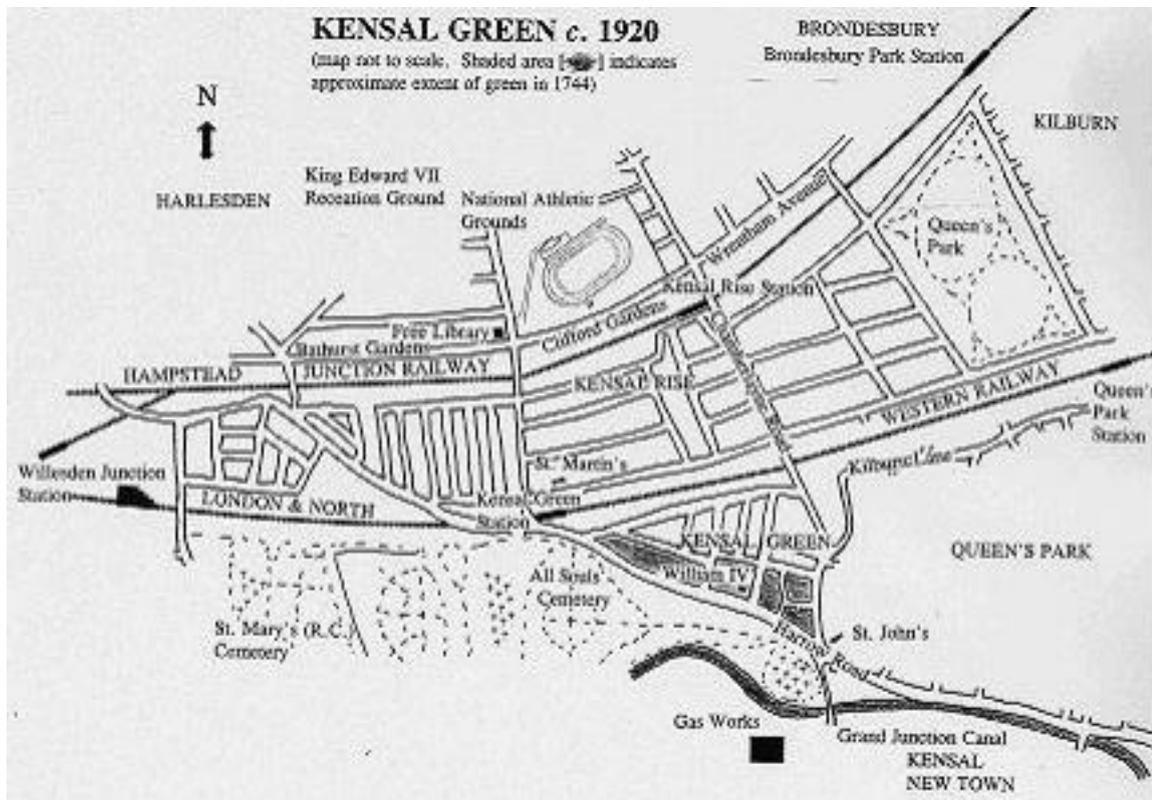## Kensal in the 20th century

Around 1904 a slump in the housing market (possibly exacerbated by Kensal's bad reputation) seriously slowed down construction both in Kensal Rise and on the Mount Pleasant estate at Brondesbury Park. Despite this break in construction a new station, Kensal Green, was opened on the L&NWR line, which was now jointly run with the London Electric Railway.

Some more houses were built after 1924, but this area was not fully to be developed until the 1930s. When it was, the semi-detached houses and flats built here were generally regarded as being the most serious attempt at good housing layout in the Borough of Willesden.

Between the wars Kensal's population declined as the number of houses increased. In 1949 its population was only 26,238. Despite this hopeful sign the 1880s terraces west of Chamberlayne Road were still overcrowded, with a population density of 176 per square acre. As late as 1971 25% of these dwellings lacked full amenities. Attempts to redevelop them in the 1950s and 1970s were half-hearted and in any case met with local opposition,
including indignation from residents whose streets were branded slums. At the same time local people criticised projects like Moonshine Community Arts, arguing that the money would be better spent on improving the area. Kensal Green profited from such stubbornness and, having avoided demolition, its Victorian houses were eventually renovated.

In the 1960s and 1970s many immigrants, especially Afro-Caribbeans, moved to Kensal, and in the 1980s some middle-

class professionals who either could not afford to live in neighbouring Queen's Park or who preferred the vibrancy of the inner city were attracted to the area as well.

KENSAL GREEN c. 1920
(map not to scale. Shaded area [ ] indicates approximate extent of green in 1744)

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