

# News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

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## Blenheim and Elgin Crescents' Garden Archive - *Catherine Thompson-McCausland*



*Fig 1: Blenheim and Elgin Crescents Garden in Winter*

Garden Archive seems a grand misnomer for a collection of battered cardboard boxes and folders. Until 2000 this miscellaneous collection migrated round the Garden as the membership of the Garden Committee changed. It was only the discovery that the local history department in Kensington and Chelsea Library would store such material that caused a change in approach at the AGM of that year. It was decided to gather together all the available material to see whether anything of interest would emerge before depositing it in the Library.

This exercise proved more valuable than we could have imagined. Not only are the surviving records now going to be preserved, but

they give a fascinating insight into the evolution of the Garden and its community almost from the beginning. Early committee officers were meticulous in the records which they kept and almost continuous minute books exist from 1912, when under a Deed Poll the ownership of the Garden was vested in an elected committee. The earlier history of the Garden is less securely documented, although the first edition Ordnance Survey map for 1863 shows the layout of the Garden in six lawns as it continued for many years. Records show that in 1881 the freehold of the Garden had been purchased from a bankrupt builder for £270 and divided into twenty-seven shares, which were held by thirteen residents. One of the more extraordinary survivals is

a torn envelope with the list of these thirteen shareholders on the back.

By 1912 this informal arrangement seems to have broken down, and a group of residents petitioned the Council to take over the Garden so that it could be administered under the terms of the Town Gardens Protection Act of 1863. In this way the legal and financial framework was established under which the Garden is still maintained today. A photocopy of the relevant 1913 Deed Poll has survived.

The first records describe the garden as the Blenheim and Elgin Crescents Ornamental Garden, and the minute books show residents to have many of the same preoccupations as they do today – complaints about children's noise, dogs off leads and the poor state of the garden. In the early days, as now, the smooth running of the Garden was governed by bylaws, updated from time to time. Early bylaws forbade the playing of football and cricket on the lawns, although two of the lawns were given over to a Lawn Tennis Club where the Wimbledon champion Fred Perry played. No games, of course, were allowed on Sundays, and the Garden continued to be referred to on letter headings as 'Ornamental' until after World War II.

A shift in the running of the Garden occurred in 1930 with the election of a Mr A.E. Fairbrother to the Committee. From 1931, when he

was appointed both Hon. Secretary and Hon. Treasurer, until 1949, Mr Fairbrother dominated garden affairs. A wealth of correspondence survives, and a clear picture emerges of his passionate commitment to the Garden as well as his hounding of residents over bylaw infringements. Residents were rebuked for offending washing lines and wireless aerials, and prosecuted for unsupervised dogs. A whole file is devoted to arguments with the Council over the creation of an air raid shelter in the Garden in 1941 and its subsequent removal in 1947. In 1933 Mr. Fairbrother had been responsible for excluding residents from the lawns by the erection of six-foot chain link fences. The frustration of residents under this repressive regime is well documented and illustrated by numerous colourful incidents including one where a boy is recorded as yelling ‘Bloody Old Fairbrother’ out of the windows of 103 Blenheim Crescent.

All this changed after the War and the demise of Mr Fairbrother. The 1950s saw the dismantling of the fences, the reopening of the lawns to residents, and the establishment of the games court and the three lawns that exist today. Present bylaws, unlike the early ones, permit ball games on the lawns and the riding of bicycles on paths by young children: the adjective ‘Ornamental’ has completely disappeared.

During the last fifty years the Committee has envisaged the garden as a space for children’s recreational needs as well as one to be enjoyed by older residents, and the archive records, in the main, a successful balancing act. There are two climbing frames and a games court. There is also a distinguished collection of mature trees, recently identified and mapped by one of the residents. Although the Garden lost nine elms to Dutch elm disease, it boasts the tallest Turkey oak in

the Borough, and the Committee has renewed planting with such species as black mulberry and dawn redwood. Meanwhile there is an ongoing programme of shrub planting and general improvement.

Although early records make no mention of it, we are increasingly conscious of the Garden as an oasis for wild life. Sadly the resident owls disappeared with the elms, and the hedgehogs have gone, but they have been replaced by the ubiquitous grey squirrel and the occasional fox. While it is now rare to see a sparrow, we treasure our large population of blackbirds, robins, wrens and titmice – blue, great and long-tailed – and the occasional thrush and greater spotted woodpecker.

Now that English Heritage has listed the gardens of the Ladbroke Estate on their Register of Historic Parks and Gardens, there will surely be a greater awareness not only of the priceless asset that these gardens afford, but also of their history. The surviving archive has given residents of the Blenheim and Elgin Garden a fascinating glimpse into its past. Perhaps our experience may stimulate other gardens to round up their boxes and folders and see what treasures they may unearth.

*Copies of the Blenheim and Elgin Crescents Garden History booklet are available at the Garden Bookshop and Travel Bookshop in Blenheim Crescent.*

## **House Painting**

*Robert Meadows*

As Spring and Summer approach, the subject of external painting of houses becomes topical. The Ladbroke area is characterised by its painted stucco. In many cases whole buildings are covered in

stucco – we have some splendid stucco terraces. In other cases brick buildings have extensive stucco dressings such as cornices, pediments, window surrounds, porches, and sometimes the lower storeys are stuccoed. The stucco needs regular painting. The way this is done and the colour selected are important. There is no formal planning control over painting unless the building is listed or covered by an Article 4 directive.

Houses are grouped in terraces of varying length, sometimes in pairs. Terraces may be articulated with emphasis on the centre and the ends to give a grand overall unity. The aim of painting should be to maintain and enhance that unity. An unsuitable colour scheme will destroy the visual unity of the terrace. Although houses tend to be painted one by one, the colour scheme should relate to the terrace as a whole and not just to the individual house.

It is difficult to discuss colour without referring to specific examples. The use of white to emphasise architectural elements can be very effective. Strong or dark colours are seldom appropriate, except for emphasis on front doors, etc. Rainwater pipes and plumbing are better painted the colour of the background rather than the ubiquitous black. As a general rule brickwork should never be painted.

Sometimes parapet walls, copings, and the tops of cornices are covered in flashing for extra weather-proofing. This should always be painted to match the colour of the stucco. A special paint may be needed.

An interesting example of terrace painting is Kensington Park Terrace North. This is on the east side of Kensington Park Road, between Westbourne Grove and Elgin Crescent. This long terrace of three-



Fig 2: Kensington Park Terrace North

storey stuccoed houses with pretty first-floor wrought iron balconies is suitably articulated with its centre emphasised with a pediment on the axis of Arundel Gardens. Many years ago this terrace, the centre part of which is listed, was made the subject of an Article 4 Directive on the colours to be used. These were suitably varied to respond to the articulation of the terrace, but uniform enough to maintain its unity. The scheme worked well at first, but unfortunately over the years it has largely broken down due to lack of vigilance, much to the detriment of the appearance of the terrace. The central pediment, which covers two houses, even has been painted two different colours!

The scheme has worked well, however, in Royal Crescent, just outside the Ladbroke area. There is no doubt that a well-chosen colour scheme can help to maintain and enhance the basic good design of buildings.

### **William Crookes – A Glittering Mind** *Anthony Thompson*

In 1880 William Crookes moved into his new home,

a large, recently built house on the developing Ladbroke Estate. For the next forty years 7 Kensington Park Gardens witnessed an extraordinary amount of activity as Crookes established his laboratory in the basement and entertained numerous Victorian luminaries in his drawing room.

Crookes was a remarkable man of his time, of enormous intellectual curiosity and stamina, which, together with the considerable fortune he inherited from his father, a well-to-do draper established in Oxford Street, enabled him to make important scientific discoveries. His life in his new home was devoted mainly to independent scientific research, journalism, consulting and academia, and his broad range of interests, ranging over pure and applied science, economic and practical problems, and physical research made his name.

Crookes's life was one of unbroken activity. Before his arrival in Kensington Park Gardens he had in 1854 worked on and improved the collodion process of photography and by 1857 become the Secretary of the Liverpool Photographic Journal, founded the *Chemical News* in 1859 discovered thallium in 1861, (using his own invention of a spectroscope), and contributed this

new element to the periodic table. Shortly after 1880 he embarked on research on the passage of an electrical discharge through rarefied gases and discovered what are now known as cathode rays, believing he had discovered a fourth state which he called 'radiant matter'. Crookes's theoretical views on the nature of 'radiant matter' proved mistaken, but nevertheless his experimental work in this field was the foundation of discoveries which have changed the whole conception of chemistry and physics.

Crookes built tungsten filament lamps as part of his probing of the boundary between matter and ether and he actively promoted electric light, claiming it to be more economic and cleaner than gas. He patented his designs for incandescent lamps, and by 1891 had become a director of the Notting Hill Electric Light Company, set up to provide electric light and power schemes for the bourgeoisie. At this time he was giving public shows and demonstrations at the Royal Institute showing what matter can do, and how light can come out of darkness.

As a man who believed all phenomena worthy of investigation, and refusing to be bound by tradition and convention, it is not surprising that he was attracted to the accelerating interest in psychic



Fig 3: 7 Kensington Park Gardens

phenomena which had begun in America in 1840s. The well-known medium Daniel Dunglas Hooime (1833–86) had returned to England from the United States in 1855 to conduct séances in homes of the wealthy. Scientists of the time were unwilling to attend séances or examine the phenomena under controlled conditions. The exception was William Crookes, who embarked on a five-year investigation of spiritualists and mediums, including Home, Florence Cook and Anna Eva Fay. 7 Kensington Park Gardens was the setting for numerous séances, and attracted a number of curious visitors including Charles Darwin, Madame Blavatsky, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Houdini and Lord Lytton. The most famous of all ‘materialisations’ witnessed at No 7 was the so-called Katie King, seen at intervals over three years by Crookes and photographed by him several times.

It is not known exactly how the rooms at 7 Kensington Park Gardens were used by Crookes. Photographs of Crookes in his library show him seated in book-lined room with a rather distinctive rectangular panelled ceiling. The only room to still have this type of decoration is the large ground-floor room at the front of the house, but the panels are much larger than shown in the photograph and the room taller. It is possible that his library was on the first floor, with his laboratory in the basement. Several years ago building work revealed copper pipes and electrical junctions in the under-street store rooms which had been used as a coal cellar. It is possible that it was here that the coal fired generators were located.

The séances are recorded as having taken place in Crookes’s front drawing room and the dining-room. Contemporary accounts mention crossing a passage from his library to the dining-room; and being in a long room divided by a curtain into a library and drawing-room.

The current large ground-floor room at the front of the house has a magnificent fireplace with an over-mirror surrounded by bronze roundels of signs of the zodiac and containing bronze panels with cupid figures holding and surrounded by various scientific instruments including one of Crookes’s lasting inventions: the radiometer.

## **Extension of the LADBROKE CONSERVATION AREA**

*Robina Rose*

We are delighted that the Ladbroke Conservation Area has now been extended to the north to include a substantial part of Ladbroke Grove up to the Westway flyover and a network of streets including Westbourne Park Road, to the east to include both sides of Portobello Road, and west to include Cornwall Crescent and Ladbroke Crescent, still with its roofline intact. Important buildings in the new conservation area include the Electric Theatre and the former Synagogue, the Camden Institute and adjacent public library on Lancaster Road. Pubs include the former Elgin on Ladbroke Grove, now renamed the Frog and Firkin, which sadly recently lost its magnificent etched glass windows, and the Kensington Park on the corner of Lancaster Road, with its double-doored entrance, as well as the former Warwick Castle and Duke of Wellington on Portobello Road. The Council is in the process of producing guidelines on the conservation of pubs, so it is to be hoped that in future development of these great buildings will be more sensitively handled. In the past the Association has been responsible largely for residential architecture; now it has to care for a substantial number of commercial properties, both pubs and shops.

In 1992, at the instigation of the Unitary Development Plan,

Portobello Road was classified as a ‘principal shopping area’, like Knightsbridge or Kensington High Street, rather than being designated as a local shopping street. Presumably this was because of its status as a market of international fame on Saturdays. This ruling did not take into account its normal function for five days of the week as a market catering for an extensive local community. In fact, part of its attraction to the foreign visitors who flock to Portobello on Saturdays is its strong local identity.

The importance of local shopping centres is underlined in the UDP: priority should be given to ‘retaining, protecting and encouraging the provision of premises ... to serve the day-to-day needs of ... residents’; ‘all shops in such locations are likely to be essential to the centre’s shopping character’. Such protection is not afforded to ‘principal shopping areas’, where coffee bars and mobile phone companies set up shop, often driving up the rents by doing so, as has been the case at Notting Hill Gate.

It is interesting to note that Richard Rogers in his book *Cities for a Small Planet: Cities for a Small Country* refers to Notting Hill as a shining example of an area with local identity. He writes ‘Historically, London, unlike the walled cities of its European counterparts, developed around a multitude of centres, and it is still a collection of distant towns and villages – Notting Hill to Limehouse – each with its own local character, visual identity and history. Instead of allowing this polycentric pattern to erode, we should actively reinforce these neighbourhoods as compact, sustainable nuclei’. The Ladbroke area has for years been one of the best urban villages of London with plenty of corner shops and post offices. Now that Westbourne Grove and Clarendon Cross have been largely taken over by boutiques we must work to protect the surviving small traders.

## Robert Meadows: Living in Ladbroke for Fifty-four Years

*Rachel Kelly*

When Robert Meadows first considered moving to the Ladbroke area, he found Stanley Crescent on the map and thought it too remote. 'It seemed like the back of beyond', he remembers. Yet fifty-four years later he doesn't regret swapping his Pimlico flat in St George's Square for a ground and basement maisonette in a tall thin house in the crescent where he set up house with his wife, Joyce, and baby Matthew. Later Victoria and Bridget were born there.

As an architect and town planner, Robert Meadows appreciated both the Victorian architecture of the area and the layout of the Ladbroke estate. 'I think the outstanding characteristic of the area is the combination of the soft and hard landscaping', he says. 'It is a spectacular success, a brilliant piece of planning'. In particular, he enjoys the architectural vistas in the area: the sweep down Stanley Gardens to St Peter's Church, or that from St John's down Kensington Park Gardens. Robert remembers post-war Notting Hill as run down, the stucco crumbling



*Fig 5: Robert and Joyce Meadows*

and the grass uncut. 'The area was full of rooming houses', he recalls. Rather than letting a house or a flat, the houses were split into individual rooms run by landladies and often let to the elderly. The Meadows quickly adapted their philanthropic and community-minded approach to local life: Sundays were spent delivering pre-cooked 'Meals on Wheels' to housebound locals. Such an ethical approach is unsurprising: Robert's forbears were an old Suffolk family – squires and clergy, including some dissenters – and his father was a Christian missionary. He himself was born in Yorkshire and went to the ancient grammar school in Beverley, and was trained in architecture and town planning.

His wartime service was in the Civil Defence during Hull's many blitzes and casualties; after the War he settled in London.

On the Meadows's arrival they found the Stanley Crescent communal garden had run wild, the shrubs overgrown, the borders unkempt, with rotting bedding-frames dumped unceremoniously on the circular lawns. The saving grace was that the garden had kept its railings during the war. 'The total income of the garden was £80 in the early 1950s. That was around £2 a house, really quite inadequate for the garden's needs. I started a campaign to get the running of the garden taken over by the Borough who set a garden rate, and collect it with the rates. Under the Kensington Improvement Act, we needed to get two-thirds of the households to agree to the change. And we did'. A garden shed, gardening equipment and gardener swiftly followed. Robert Meadows recalls children's tea parties in the back garden and his three rushing out to play as soon as they returned from school. He was responsible for setting up the garden's fireworks night and remembers the summer dances to West Indian steel bands when young and old twirled late into the balmy night. I grew up on the same garden in the 1970s, and we both remembered Noel, a well-



*Fig 4: Stanley Gardens*

