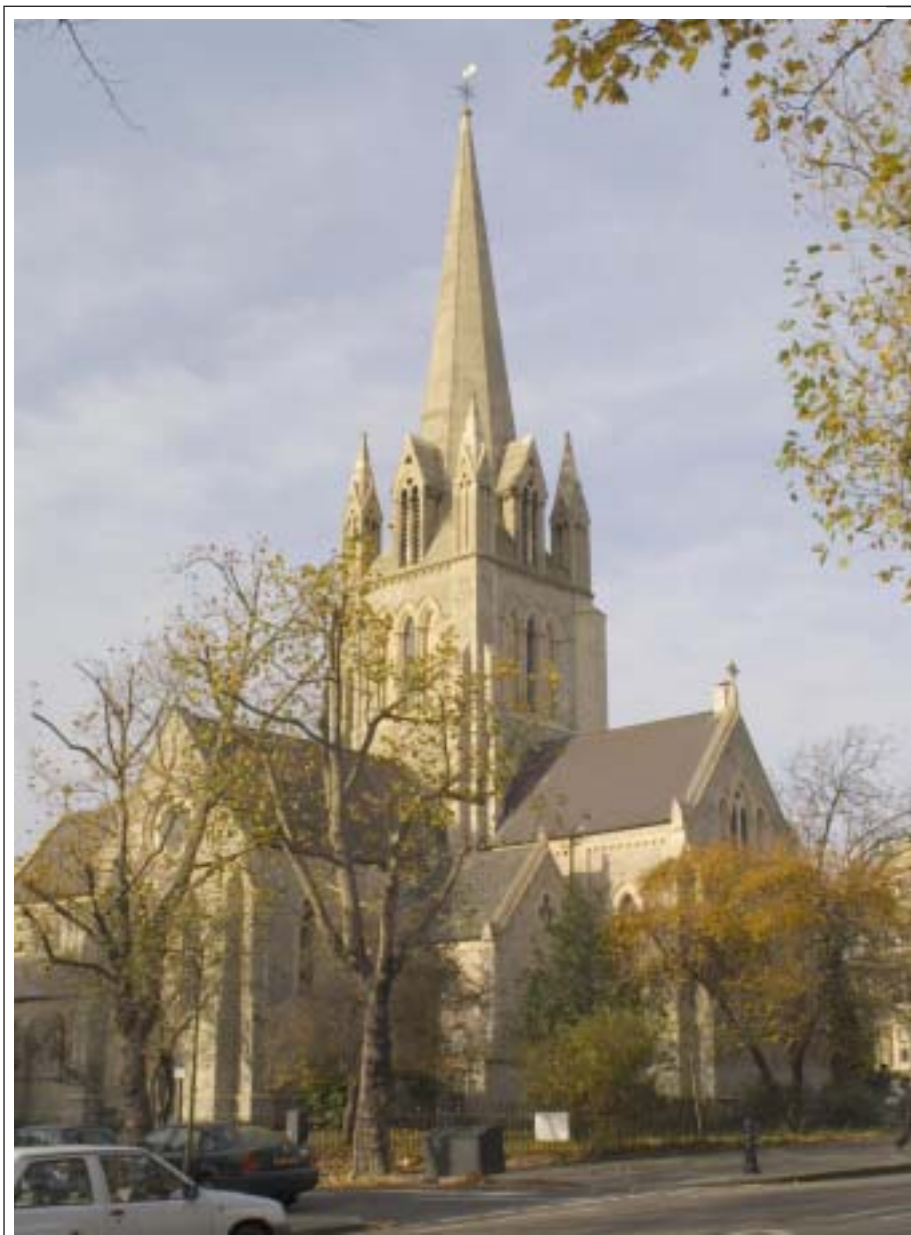


# News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

WINTER 2001

## St John's Church Spire Restored



*1. St John's Church, Ladbroke Grove, after restoration*

### The St John's Church Spire 2000 Appeal

*Rachel Kelly*

Like many children living on the Ladbroke estate, our four year-old son George loves watching St John's spire which he can spy from his bedroom window. It is not just

observing the cockerel glinting in the sun, he explains, but also seeing the spire's stone change colour as it reflects the weather and light. How much more dramatic are those

changes now that the spire's once dirt-laden Bath stone has returned to its original honey-coloured gold. For this we have to thank the Spire 2000 Appeal, set up last year with the task of raising £250,000 to repair and clean the church. This September saw the successful culmination of the appeal, and there were cheers all round as the scaffolding came down to reveal the Grade 2 listed building as it must have looked when built in 1845.

Then, as now, it was the neighbourhood's landmark. The Church of St John the Evangelist was the first church built to the north of the Uxbridge Road (now Holland Park Avenue), and at first was surrounded largely by countryside apart from a terrace of houses in Ladbroke Grove and Nos 2 and 3 Lansdowne Crescent. It was intended as the focus of a new housing development, despite its distance from the fashionable West End. Its architects were John Hargrave Stevens, who designed a number of houses on the Ladbroke Estate including some in Ladbroke Square, and George Alexander. The church's Victorian Gothic design with its soaring spire complements its hill-top setting, and today it is finally the centre of a highly fashionable residential area of the kind to which Ladbroke's original developers aspired.

Some 150 years of erosion by wind and weather, as well as exposure to London's pollution, had damaged and dirtied the church's Bath stone

and Kentish Rag. Many of the stones were cracked by rust affecting the steel dowels which the Victorians used to join the stones together. Defective pointing was letting in water causing further damage. Alarming, a section of one of the tower capitals broke away, crashing down luckily without causing injury, but photographic evidence and the work of some intrepid steeple-jacks showed that further falls were possible.

An appeal chaired by Graham Ross Russell and supported by Royd Barker, Richard Duncan, Celia Elmhirst, Jeremy Lloyd and the Rev. Harold Stringer, encouraged locals to badger their neighbours to contribute. In the last eight years St John's congregation had single-handedly raised the money to build the undercroft, redecorate the interior of the church and install new lighting; this new appeal was too big a project for them to take on alone. The Bishop of Kensington, the Rt Rev. Michael Colclough, and Richard Walker-Arnott, Deputy Mayor of the RBKC acted as patrons of the appeal. Supporters including Jane Cameron of the Acorn Nursery school and her husband Euan, Peter and Sybil Pagnamenta, Herschel and Peggy Post of this Association, Richard and Victoria Strang, William and Gigi Salomon. Many others, including the Ladbroke Association, rallied round and swiftly raised the funds.

The result is a triumph. The view of the church from the streets of the Ladbroke estate has been transformed, especially that of the east end of the church viewed from Ladbroke Grove and Kensington Park Gardens. While the repairs to the spire cannot be spotted by the untrained eye, we can all appreciate its cleaning.

Now all that is needed is to plant a weeping ash as an eye-catcher when the church is seen from Kensington Park Gardens.

## ARE THE GARDEN SQUARES IN THE LADBROKE AREA UNDER THREAT?

*Niel Sebag-Montefiore*

One of the delights of life in the Ladbroke conservation area is the garden squares — not only for the many people who have access to them from their houses but also for all those who walk or drive past. These gardens have been maintained by their devoted committees as breathing holes for Londoners in the area: wild life parks, recreation zones for children and adults, arboreta and horticultural wonders. Precisely because they have existed for so long they are especially worthy of care and thought.

There is no major threat in that no-one wants to do anything so silly as to build over them, but there are a number of difficulties creeping up on us, which need to be addressed.

One of the difficulties is ownership. For many of the squares ultimate ownership is not plain even if operational ownership is vested in the garden square committees. Another is liability. Some square committees have formed themselves into companies limited by guarantee to ensure committee members are not personally liable for costs or damages. The devotion of some committee members notwithstanding, it is sometimes difficult to find residents with the time and energy to run them. Now more houses are in single occupation and their owners often lead frenetic lives, travel a lot or have second and even third homes. Committee members have to be present to function effectively.

New residents in the area often mean that views on the management and use of communal gardens increasingly diverge. Reconciling what they all want with what they all can or will pay is not easy.

Conservation issues themselves are also more problematic than before. Gardening programmes on TV make everyone a qualified amateur and raise new questions of, for instance, planting newly fashionable plants. Or should the gardens be kept in tune historically with the architectural surround? Wild life concerns, the selection of new trees, their density and lopping, and light rights all can give rise to high levels of emotion.

To assist garden committees wrestling with such questions and keep them informed of what is now considered best practice, the Ladbroke Association has called a Garden Squares' meeting at the end of November at which two representatives from each square will attend as a forum for discussion.

These gardens must be conserved like the buildings that surround them.

## TREES IN LADBROKE

One of the great glories of the Ladbroke Estate — both in the squares and on the streets — is its trees. Indeed, it might be argued that they *are* its glory; without them where would 'Leafy Ladbroke' be? Magnificent classic landscape trees are so integral a part of the design and conception of the area that it would be unimaginable without them.

And yet, bit by bit, as if by stealth, the unimaginable becomes imaginable: trees are disappearing. Who might be the perpetrators of this barbarism? What vandals or viruses do we need to eradicate? Unfortunately the threat is internal, not external.

The original layout of the Ladbroke Estate used the principles of 18th-century landscape design to emphasise the topography of the area. A series of dramatic vistas are centred on St John's Church at the top of the hill. Streets are planted as grand avenues, each with its own species

of forest tree. London planes (*Platanus Hispanica*) were planted in Ladbroke Grove, Ladbroke Terrace, Ladbroke Crescent and Lansdowne Road, spectacularly in St John's Gardens around the church and in Holland Park Avenue. Limes (*Tilia Europaea*) line Elgin Crescent, where they were sited in front gardens, or the more recently planted run of *Tilia Euchlora* in Ladbroke Gardens. The bird cherry (*Prunus Avium*) was established in Blenheim Crescent outside every second house, thereby creating a rhythm.

The squares themselves tended to have a dominant species: elms in the Lansdowne/Elgin Garden, ashes in Montpelier Garden, 'trees of sorrow' (weeping trees) grace Stanley Gardens South. The trees reach up over hedges creating 18th-century style 'wildernesses' as part of the streetscape.

The enemy within is the inhabitants themselves. Having bought into 'leafy Ladbroke' some people fail to make the connection between leaves and the trees needed to support them. Recently whole front and back gardens have been dug up to create underground utility rooms, wine cellars, gymnasias etc, often necessitating the removal of trees, and certainly precluding their future planting. Applications for such alterations do not necessarily have to pass through the tree department at all since planning permission overrides tree protection. Furthermore, the Council controls only the first two and a half feet of land beneath the public highway and pavement, that being enough to cover the needs of the various utilities. The land below is therefore up for grabs by whoever might want to extend the basement of their property; apparently this is the result of a ruling by Lord Denning. The implications of this ruling for the survival of street trees is dire. Not only are private gardens vulnerable, but the planting of trees in the street,

in the public domain, theoretically controlled and protected by the Council, is under threat. Recently a newly planted street tree directly outside a house was killed by underground excavation; the planning system failed to protect it.

Similarly, the 1931 Garden Squares Protection Act has failed to protect the subsoil of the squares, leaving them open to exploitation as underground car parks etc. This has occurred recently at Earls Terrace resulting in the loss of half the trees in an area listed in the 1931 Act, now replaced by 'poodle parlour' style designed gardens of potted palms and topiary. As if this were not enough, some residents seem to suffer from a form of tree phobia, displaying a preference for 'light' to air. Apparently oblivious to the health benefits of great trees in the city — where they form a filter for noise and pollution and create literally a micro-climate beneath their canopy. Within months of moving in, new residents remove magnificent specimens or prune them into lollipops or scraggy tufts so that they don't obstruct their windows and concrete terraces.

Even where subterranean developments have not taken place, residents have replaced the large, elegant and uniform species in their front gardens with randomly chosen short-lived diminutive trees such as flowering cherries or even palms, thus destroying the intended integrity of architecture and landscape. In some squares trees have been removed or mutilated beyond recognition in pursuit of light. If trees are replaced it can be by wholly inappropriate species, often arbitrarily sited without adequate reference to the original planting plan.

The statutes on the books at present are inadequate. The Council's arboricultural department does not always take into account the effect of removing one tree from a street originally planted to enhance the architecture. Clearly there is an art to protecting and enhancing an historic environment, and we must work with the Council to see that it is done.

### **AWARD FOR LANSDOWNE/ CLARENDON GARDENS**

The restoration of the Lansdowne/Clarendon Gardens was commended by the Royal Borough



2. The new railings and planting in the Lansdowne Road/Clarendon Road Gardens

environment award scheme of 2001. The Judges commented that the restoration of the railings to their original design and the re-planting at each end of the garden 'significantly improved the ambience of part of the Ladbroke Estate, in faithful repetition of the original design concept'. The designers were the architects Andrews Downie & Partners; Art of Cast was responsible for the casting of new railings at either end, and the planting of shrubs and a liquidambar tree was the responsibility of GD Landscapes. The railings at the north end had been in an advanced state of dilapidation, leaning at an alarming angle and boarded up, so that there was no view into the gardens; the railings at the north end had been replaced with an ugly fence. The impetus to restore the gardens came from Raymond Andrews, architect and long time resident of Clarendon Road; very sadly he did not live to see the scheme completed, but the new railings and planting stand as testament to his love of the gardens, and his widow, Jill Andrews, was in the Mayor's Parlour for the presentation of the award.

## EXCAVATIONS IN THE LANSDOWNE/CLARENDON GARDENS

*Paul de Rivaz and Jane Martineau*

In September the drainage on the west side of the communal gardens was renewed which involved a number of excavations to put in sumps. It was probably the first time that the soil had been disturbed since the houses were built in the 1840s. Nicholas de Rivaz, an eight year-old with a keen interest in palaeontology and archaeology, watched the progress with interest. He holds a Crown licence to search the Thames foreshore, and regularly drags his parents to the river



3. *Nicholas de Rivaz with some of the clay pipes found in the gardens*

at low tide, where his finds include clay pipes, a medieval bone knife handle, fossil sea urchins, and an 18th-century fisherman's billing hook.

Nicholas reports 'I had found clay pipes in the gardens before — usually stems and a few broken parts of bowls. When I looked where they had been digging I found quite a few whole bowls of clay pipes. There were a lot of broken parts of pipes.



4. *Pipes and oyster shells found in the gardens.*

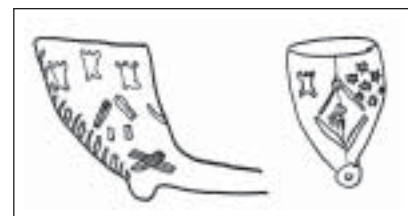
'The pipes date back to the late 18th century. A lot of the bowls are plain with leaf patterns at the edge. One of the most interesting was covered with patterns of castles and stars. The size and shape of the bowl can tell you how old a pipe is — the earliest I have found date from the 1600s, in the mud near old pubs in the City. Old pipes have smaller bowls because tobacco was much more expensive in those days. I have pictures from the internet that help me tell how old they are.

'The pipes in the garden might have been left by the people working on the houses when they were built or by people watching the races when the gardens were part of the Hippodrome racecourse.'

Along with the pipes, a remarkable number of oyster shells were found. Although we now regard oysters as food for the rich, in the 19th century they were eaten by everyone including, presumably, the labourers who built the houses on the Ladbroke estate. When Mr Pickwick walked along Mile End Road with Sam Weller — 'Not a very nice neighbourhood' — Sam remarked: 'It's a very remarkable circumstance... that poverty and oysters always seems to go together. ... the poorer a place is, the greater call there seems to be for oysters. Look here sir; here's a oyster stall to every half-dozen houses.

The street's lined with 'em. Blessed if I don't think that ven a man's very poor, he rushes out of his lodgings and eats oysters in reg'lar desperation.' (*Pickwick Papers*, chapter 22). Dickens's novel was issued in

monthly parts in 1836, about a decade before the Lansdowne and Clarendon Road houses were built.



5. *Pattern on a clay pipe found in the Lansdowne/Clarendon Road Gardens.*

## INSIDE NOTTING HILL

Miranda Davies and Sarah Anderson with Annabel Hendry, (Portobello Publishing, 2001)

*reviewed by Jan Brownfoot*

Notting Hill, the film, has made Notting Hill, the area, famous globally. Numerous tourists visit from all over the world, seeking the famous blue door and being photographed outside The Travel Bookshop. And many new residents have moved in. Without some guidance how can they get to know the area? *Inside Notting Hill* provides the answer.

This new guide book is helpful, practical and informative. Defining the district by the broadest possible boundaries, from Notting Hill Gate to Kensal Green Cemetery and from Westbourne Grove to Latimer Road, the authors subdivide it into five main sections. Within each they describe the streetscape, significant buildings and a selection of notable former and current residents. They list restaurants, accommodation, and places to pamper mind and body, plus where to shop for food, fashions, flowers and antiques (to name a few). Finally they include a selection of writings by various writers connected with the area dating from 1767 to 2000.

Social history, a linking thread throughout, is one of the book's strong points. In Part Two, Annabel Hendry has managed to telescope into just fourteen pages a wealth of facts and detail on Notting Hill's broader history. This moves chronologically from a description of the likely Saxon origins of the name, through the poverty and social problems of the 19th and 20th centuries, to the beginnings of the Carnival, the gentrification of the area and the phenomenal rise in house prices.

Much of *Inside Notting Hill's* authenticity derives from the fact that

both authors are local residents. Sarah Anderson set up The Travel Bookshop, the catalyst for the film which has given rise to so much of the recent interest in the area. Working with Miranda Davies, and talking to numerous local people, Sarah's aim was to produce a helpful guide book which would show a much culturally richer and more diverse district than a film could possibly illustrate. The result is the most comprehensive guide to Notting Hill yet published.

Regrettably, however, the book has some major gaps. It does not consider the hugely important subject of conservation and does not mention the Ladbroke Association.

Both authors acknowledge these omissions and will rectify them in any second edition.

Meanwhile, *Inside Notting Hill* is an important contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the area, whether resident or visitor.

Read, use and enjoy!

## TOPIARY TREASON

*By our gardening correspondent  
Gloria Mundi*

The art of topiary - the clipping of shrubs into shapes fantastical or geometrical - is ancient and honourable. Pliny the Younger, writing in the 1st century AD enthuses about the clipped box hedges 'cut into different shapes', including figures of animals, at his country house in Tuscany. Enthusiasm continued unabated over the next millennium, culminating, nearer our own time, in topiary gardens like those at Vaux-le-Vicomte in northern France, designed by André le Nôtre in the 1660s, and Levens Hall in Cumbria, originally designed at about the same date by Guillaume Beaumont, one of Le Nôtre's pupils, who also worked for James II at Hampton Court. These are wondrous, harmonious places to behold, but the sight of them makes one recoil even more strongly from what is happening all around us today.

Across London, and particularly in this part of West London, like something from *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a fungus of ill-conceived topiary has spread. Once limited to the occasional, usually confinable outbreak, the clipped box thing is now a positive plague: porches, front steps — and on some ill-advised occasions, front parapet walls — are host to cluttered examples of tortured topiary (aided neither by nurture nor nature, I surmise) ranging from relatively inoffensive balls to strange vertical zig-zags (where did those come from?), and very vertically and horizontally challenged animals and birds. Far too many balconies are host to at least one sickly clipped bay tree looking, at best, like a cheap tutu on a bandy-legged ballerina. And then there are the pots — galvanised zinc being this year's must-have — totally inappropriate, followed closely by those resin or fibre-glass swagged Greek urns which compete for the



6. Example of Topiary

most ghastly prize with the russet coloured plastic champagne-cooler pots complete with plastic handles. The worst thing about this ever-green forest is that, with the odd honourable exception, they are all horribly out of proportion and balance to the buildings which they adorn: occasionally too large, but mostly much too small. It is obvious that each shrub or tree was bought without regard to its eventual position. Originally topiary was used in garden design to pull an area together, to act as punctuation or to introduce a moment of pause before entering another part of the garden; their role was never to adorn a labour-free window box, and it ill-befits them to be treated thus. Pliny the Younger would turn in his sarcophagus.

## PLANNING

*Robert Meadows*

**Conversion.** Many of the larger houses in the Conservation Area are converted into flats. Fortunately Victorian houses lend themselves quite well to conversion. But skill and sensitivity are required to maintain the original character and to avoid the cutting up of the main rooms and spoiling the proportions. One of the buildings with a rather special character is at Nos 43-45 Blenheim Crescent.



7. 43-45 Blenheim Crescent

It appears that this building was designed to provide four artists' studios with domestic accommodation. The studios face north and are characterised by their tall windows on the street elevation. There is now a proposal to convert this building into six maisonettes. These are quite cleverly arranged to maintain the studio windows and part of the double height space in the living areas. Of course, ideally, this building would be restored to its original use as artists' studios.

**Mobile Phone Aerials.** These now proliferate on tall buildings and on masts in the countryside and have largely escaped planning legislation. The Lodge, Kensington Park Gardens, at the top of the hill on Ladbroke Grove, is one of the tallest buildings in the area, so it has been much sought after by the various mobile phone companies as a good site for their aerials. A number of aerials have been fixed to the top of this building. We have consistently opposed them, and the Planning Authority has sought ways of controlling them - especially through the building work associated with them. Recently a Planning Appeal was dismissed -- this marked an important advance in the control of these things. A more recent application proposed hiding the aerials in false chimney-stacks!

**79 Ladbroke Grove.** The planning application for a building of a so-called 'minimalist' design on this important corner site has generated a lot of interest and controversy. The current position is that the Application has been withdrawn for amendment, so we await further development. In the mean time the scheme has generated interest more widely, and *The Independent* published a piece about it under the heading 'Minimalist architect's "mausoleum-like" flats anger rich neighbours'. According to the report, unsurprisingly, other architects have given support. Lord

Rogers has described it as 'an exceptional piece of architectural design', and a local architect, Jeremy Lever, says 'it looks like a reasonable building to me. I would rather it was for people of lower incomes. This area is becoming one which relies on people with an awful lot of money.'

The saga continues!

## THE COMMITTEE

The Officers and Committee at present are President: Sir Angus Stirling; Chairman: Niel Sebag-Montefiore, Hon Treasurer and Secretary: Paul Bastick, Jan Brownfoot, David Campion, Anne Chorley, David Corsellis, Jean Ellsmoor, Charles Levison, David Marshall, Jane Martineau, Robert Meadows, Peter Mishcon, Alexandra Ouroussoff, Thomas Pakenham, Malcolm Pawley, Peggy Post, Robina Rose.

*Hon Auditor:* Guy Mayers

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*Photo Credits:*

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## JOIN THE LADBROKE ASSOCIATION

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I would like to join the Ladbroke Association. I enclose a cheque/postal order for £5.00, payable to ***The Ladbroke Association.***

Name:.....

Address:.....

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To: Paul Bastick, Hon. Treasurer,  
The Ladbroke Association,  
75A Ladbroke Grove, W11 2PD

