

# INTRODUCTION TO THE LADBROKE AREA

Ladbroke Association 2024

200 years ago, the Ladbroke area was open farmland belonging to Mr James Weller Ladbroke from a rich banking family. There were only two roads: Holland Park Avenue (then called the Uxbridge Road as it led to Uxbridge) along the southern border of his estate; and a little lane leading up from Holland Park Avenue called Portobello Lane (now Portobello Road), which led to a farm of that name.

## Houses and architecture

In the 1820s, when London was expanding, James Weller Ladbroke decided to develop his estate for housing. He employed a surveyor, Thomas Allason, to draw up a grand plan for the layout – one of the earliest examples of deliberate town planning. Allason's idea was that rows of houses should be built in a series of concentric circles bisected by a new road (the future Ladbroke Grove), with "paddocks" between each row of houses – a sort of garden city. Owing to various financial crises, it took over 40 years for the area to be fully built up and Allason's original design was subject to many modifications. However, the general idea of an open semi-countrified residential area remained, Allason's paddocks becoming our sixteen communal gardens, which are open only to the residents of the houses bordering them and the originally planned concentric circles becoming today's crescents (Elgin Crescent, Blenheim Crescent, Lansdowne Crescent, Stanley Crescent, Cornwall Crescent and Ladbroke Crescent).



*Ladbroke Crescent*

The developers of the estate also aimed for open and leafy views from the new streets. They deliberately left gaps between buildings and terraces and designed many houses to have front gardens so that passers-by would have a view of greenery and glimpses of the architecture of the houses. Many people planted blossom trees in their front gardens – particularly magnolia and cherries – and the area has become known for its spring blossom. There is a particularly good group of cherry trees on the corner of Stanley Crescent and Kensington Park Gardens, and many tourists come to take photos of each other when it is in flower.



*Tourists photographing each other under the cherry blossom*

The estate planners also planned “vistas” – pleasing views at the end of streets, perhaps a church, perhaps some interesting buildings.



*Kensington Park Gardens – vista towards St John's church.*

For the houses themselves, the developers followed a variety of patterns. In some streets they built terraces – continuous rows of houses of a similar pattern like Ladbroke Crescent illustrated above); in others they built detached or semi-detached villas, or in some cases triplets of villas. Holland Park Avenue was the first street to be built up and has examples of both.



*A pair of villas in Lansdowne Crescent*

It was a period when the favoured style was “classical” – i.e. based on Greek and Roman architecture. Particularly popular features were pillars or columns and pilasters (flattened pillars built against the brickwork). Pillars were very popular for porches, and many were built with interesting and sometimes intricate capitals.



*Porch with Ionic capitals in Clarendon Road*



*Porch with Corinthian capitals on Ladbroke Grove*

While the Georgians tended to favour red brick, the developers of the Ladbroke estate wanted their houses to be built to look like stone. They therefore covered the brick with stucco (plaster), to which they gave a stone-coloured wash. The estate was developed from south to north, with the earliest houses being on Holland Park Avenue, and the façades of these are completely covered in stucco. Later, and further north, probably to save money, most houses are “half-stucco”, with only the bottom two floors stuccoed.



*These (on Holland Park Avenue) are some of the earliest houses on the estate and are full stucco*



*Half stucco houses in Arundel Gardens*

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when good external paints were developed, the stucco was painted white. Then, in the last 20 years or so, a fashion came for painting the full stucco houses different - mainly pastel - shades. These "coloured houses" are now on the tourist circuit. The best ones are in Lansdowne Road and Elgin Crescent. There are also some good ones on Portobello Road between Chepstow Villas and Westbourne Grove.

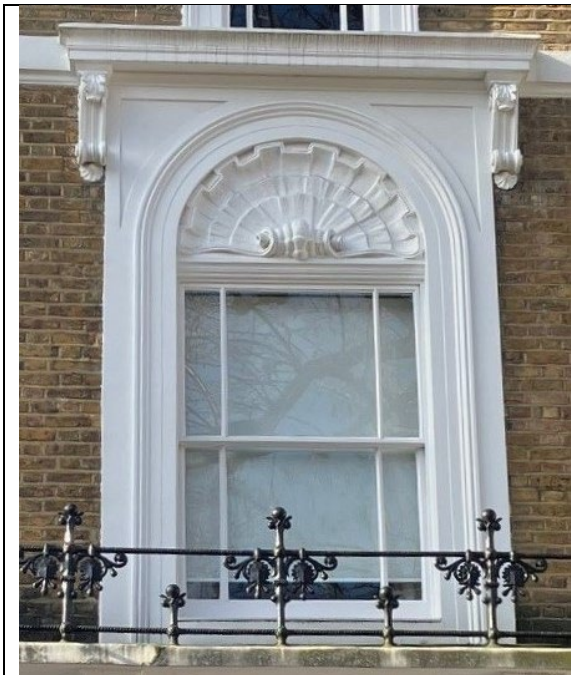


There are many architectural details well worth studying, like the iron railings on balconies, porches and window-sills. There were pattern books of railings in Victorian times from which architects could select a pattern, so one often sees the same pattern replicated. The grander houses often had plaster "bottle balustrades" instead of railings. They sometimes also had them on their rooftops and balconies.



*Decorative ironwork on porches in Stanley Crescent*

**Windows** were designed in many different shapes, some with square heads and some with round heads. They were also given a wide variety of stucco decorations.



*Window with shell decoration in Lansdowne Road*



*Window with man's head in Lansdowne Crescent*

Quite a few artists used to live in the Ladbroke area. They preferred north-facing windows for their studios, to avoid the sunlight throwing shadows. Below is an example of a house in Blenheim Crescent which housed a colony of artists and has lots of big windows on its northern side. There is also a similar enlarged north window at 117 Ladbroke Road; and two doors further on is a brick-built tower (Lansdowne House) built by a philanthropist some 120 years ago specifically to provide studios for artists, again with big windows on the northern side.



*43-45 Blenheim Crescent*

Most of the **rooflines** are flat, often with some decoration. There are, however, some unusual houses with curved gables, pointed roofs (like the pair of villas in Lansdowne Crescent illustrated above) or little towers.



*Dutch style gables on Lansdowne Road*



*A pair of villas with little towers on Lansdowne Crescent*

Another interesting structure is the cabman's shelter at the south end of Kensington Park Road.



## Mews

The Victorian families in the grander houses would have a horse and carriage, and there are several Mews in the area – little streets behind the rows of grand houses where they kept their horses and carriages. Buildings in mews typically had two floors – the stable for the horses and a place for the carriage on the ground floor and a floor above for the coachman and his family. Now, most of these buildings have acquired an extra floor and been turned into smart residences which are sold for large sums. In some cases, however, the remains of the old stable doors can still be seen – for instance on Codrington Mews, Wilby Mews, Horbury Mews and Ladbrooke Walk.



*Stable doors in Codrington Mews*



### **Churches and places of worship**

The developers of the estate were very conscious of the need for places of worship for the inhabitants of their new houses, even going to the extent of helping to finance their construction. There are now four surviving churches. The earliest ones are the two Anglican ones, St John's at the high-point of Ladbrooke Grove and St Peters on Kensington Park Road. One can usually visit the inside of these churches – St Peters has a particularly good interior. There is also a popular Pentecostal church, Kensington Temple, at the corner where Kensington Park Road and Ladbrooke Road meet; and the non-denominational Community Church on Kensington Park Road, near the junction with Elgin Crescent.



*St Peter's Church, probably our most beautiful*

At the end of the 1900s, many Jewish people came to London, fleeing the persecution of the Jews that was taking place in Russia at that time. Quite a few established themselves in the Portobello area working as tailors and in similar artisanal trades. In 1900 they purchased a church hall at 206-208 Kensington Park Road to use as a synagogue. The synagogue continued operating until the 1990s, when a falling congregation meant that it was no longer viable. It is now commercial premises, but the stars of David decoration can still be seen on the outside.

## Pubs

The inhabitants of the newly developed area also needed pubs and there are many historic pubs. The earliest ones are the Mitre on Holland Park Avenue, the Ladbroke Arms in Ladbroke Road and the Prince Albert on Pembridge Road. The majority of our pubs, however, are on Portobello Road – as it was a market area, drinking places were much in demand. There are no fewer than six between Westbourne Grove and Westway.

Victorian pubs have their own distinctive architecture. They were usually built on corners and sometimes have a flattened orb rounded face on the corner where decorative signage can be painted. They are also often grander and higher than neighbouring buildings.



*Pub on the Portobello Road with rounded corner*



*The Mitre on the corner of Holland Park Avenue and Ladbroke Grove, our oldest pub*

## Theatres and cinemas

The area used to have three theatres, unfortunately all now closed..There was an old music hall at 291 Westbourne Grove, later known as the 20th Century Theatre, the entrance of which can still be seen. The Mercury Theatre at the east end of Ladbroke Road next to Kensington Temple is now a private house, but the outline of the theatre can still be seen. There was also a pub theatre above the Prince Albert pub on Pembridge Road.



*The former Mercury Theatre with Kensington Temple behind (the theatre started life as the church hall of the Temple).*

There is one cinema, the Electric Cinema on Portobello Road, which dates from 1910 and is said to be the oldest purpose-built cinema in the country.

## The Portobello Market area

“Portobello Lane” was a country lane leading up from Notting Hill Gate to Portobello Farm in what is now the Golborne Road area. From about 1850, it began its transformation into what is now one of the most famous markets in the world. At first there were just a few stalls selling foodstuffs and serving the wealthy residents of the elegant crescents and terraces nearby (the antiques came 100 years later). Developers realised the need for shops and in the 1860s began building the three storey buildings that are there now, with purpose-built shops on the ground floor and two floors above for the shopkeeper’s family (although these days most of the upper floors have been transformed into flats). Originally most of the shops were grocers, butchers and the like; now they sell all sorts of things and many have been turned into cafés and restaurants. There were also shops and stalls selling second-hand furniture and bric-brac and then antiques. By the 1950s, the southern part of the area was becoming well known as an antiques market.



*Shops in Elgin Crescent, just off Portobello Road, with two floors above for the shopkeeper's family*

The market stalls selling antiques and bric-a-brac are between Chepstow Villas and Elgin Crescent, and are there only on Saturdays and to a lesser extent Fridays. But further north there are stalls open every day except Sunday (with early closing on Thursdays) selling food but also increasingly clothes and craftworks. The Portobello market remains one of the most picturesque sources of street scenes in London.



*Vegetable stall on Portobello Road*

## The bad years

The houses built by the developers of the Ladbroke estate were mostly large, often with five or six storeys. They were aimed at the Victorian middle classes – lawyers, senior army officers, accountants, entrepreneurs – who tended to have large families and several servants. After the First World War, many could no longer afford such large dwellings. The houses began to be divided into flats or seedy bedsits, often owned by rapacious landlords. They ceased to be properly maintained and gradually began to decay. The middle classes moved out and various largely immigrant communities moved in – in particular Caribbeans of the Windrush generation after the Second World War. They were often badly treated by their landlords, including the infamous slum landlord Peter Rachman, and faced much discrimination. The situation was inflamed by groups such as Oswald Mosley's Union Movement, with the slogan "Keep Britain White" (the Movement was also anti-semitic and defaced the synagogue). Increasing violent attacks were made on black people in our area in 1956, leading to the Notting Hill race riots of that year. Racial tension with continued rioting in and around Portobello Road continued for some years. In 1959, local West Indian residents initiated a song and dance festival hoping to mitigate racial tension and gain recognition for the Caribbean community. This tradition grew and became the Notting Hill Carnival.

## Recovery

Relations are now greatly improved, and over the past 50 years the area has come to be seen to be a desirable place to live. New people with money to spare began to buy up the dilapidated flats and bedsits and renovate them, turning them into desirable family residences. House prices rocketed and some of our grander streets are among the most expensive in London, sadly affordable only by multi-millionaires. However, a number of housing associations own buildings in the area, so not all the grand buildings are occupied by the super-rich.

Meanwhile, the Carnival It is still going strong and a large part of it takes place in the Ladbroke area. The Portobello Road, which used to be a market for local residents, is now a major international tourist attraction, helped by the film "Notting Hill" which was filmed in and round the market (the famous Blue Door is actually just off Portobello Road at 280 Westbourne Park Road).



*The blue door from the film of Notting Hill*