

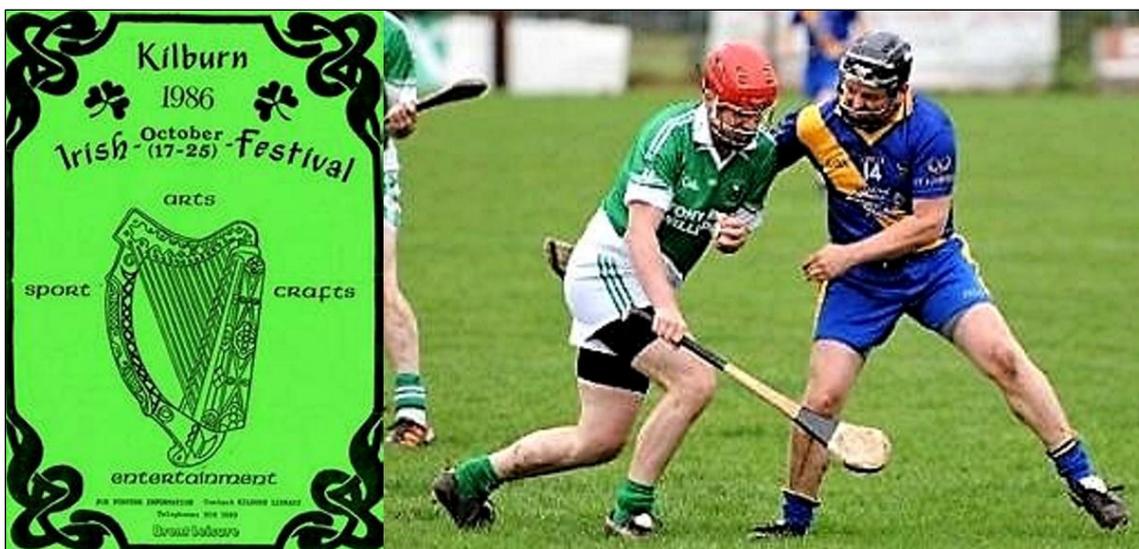
Uncovering Kilburn's History – Part 7

Thank you for joining me again for the final part of this Kilburn local history series.



1. New flats in Cambridge Road, opposite Granville Road Baths, c.1970. (Brent Archives online image 10127)

In [Part 6](#) we saw the major rebuilding that took place, particularly in South Kilburn, between the late 1940s and the 1970s. Many of the workers on the building sites were Irish. The new wave of Irish immigration to Northwest London, which reached its peak in the 1950s, was quickly transforming the area. As well as abundant work, Kilburn offered plenty of cheap accommodation, and a bustling High Road with cultural and eating establishments, many of them catering for the Irish population, who soon represented a majority in the area. 'County Kilburn' was dubbed Ireland's 33rd county.



2. Kilburn's Irish culture – an Irish Festival poster and Kilburn Gaels hurling team. (From the internet)

The Irish community, close-knit and mutually supportive, hit the headlines in the negative way in the 1970s, when Kilburn became a focal point for "the Troubles" in London. On 8 June 1974, an estimated 3,000 came out onto the streets of Kilburn for the funeral procession of Provisional IRA member Michael Gaughan. An Irishman, who had lived in Kilburn, Gaughan was imprisoned for an armed bank robbery in 1971 and in 1974 died as the result a hunger strike. Gaughan's coffin, accompanied by an IRA guard of honour, was taken from the Crown

at Cricklewood through Kilburn to the Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart in Quex Road, before being flown to Dublin for another ceremony and funeral.



3. Michael Gaughan's funeral procession in Quex Road, June 1974. (Image from the internet)

The maximum publicity stirred by the IRA only confirmed the general belief that Kilburn was becoming a focal point for the Irish republicans, and their meeting place was Biddy Mulligan's pub at 205 High Road. Dating from about 1862, the pub on the corner of Kilburn High Road and Willesden Lane was originally called the Victoria Tavern. It became Biddy Mulligan's in the 1970s, named after the character of a female Dublin street seller performed by 1930s Irish comedian Jimmy O'Dea.



4. Sinn Fein's Kilburn Branch, marching through Cricklewood in the 1970s. (Brent Archives image 317)

As claimed by Ulster loyalists later, Biddy's attracted 'militant Irish extremists, far left activists, revolutionaries and their sympathisers'. Leaders of Sinn Féin in London said they collected about £17,000 a year in Kilburn – a lot of it came from the pub collections and went across the Irish sea to fund IRA activities. On 21 December 1975 the pub was shaken by an explosion from a holdall left at its doorstep by members of the Ulster Defence Association, who said they wanted to stop the spread of IRA in England. It was the first time the UDA struck outside Northern Ireland. Out of 90 people who were in the bar at the time, a small number were hurt, but no one was killed. The perpetrators were quickly arrested and put in prison.



5. The former Biddy Mulligan's pub in 2009. (From the internet – picture by Ewan Murray, on Flickr)

The pub remained 'Biddy's' for a few years, then it traded as an Aussie sports bar called the 'Southern K'. It closed about 2009 and today the building is a Ladbrokes betting shop.

The look and feel of Kilburn is changing fast – Woolworths, at 100-104 Kilburn High Road, which was a big feature of the area since 1920s, closed in 2008 and is now Iceland. The elegant 1930s Art Deco building at 54-56 Kilburn High Road is Primark – part of the usual mix of shops found on any major high street in the country.



6. The Lord Palmerston in a c.1900 postcard, and as Nando's, 2017. (www.images-of-london.co.uk / Anne Hill)

The Lord Palmerston, 308 Kilburn High Road, is another example of how Kilburn has changed over time. It originally operated as the Palmerston Hotel when it opened in 1869, and served as a terminus for several horse bus services. In 1977 the pub re-opened as the Roman Way, in deference to the road's historic roots. Now it is a branch of Nando's. The Cock Tavern, The Old Bell, the Sir Colin Campbell, North London Tavern, Earl of Derby and others continue the area's tradition of historic pubs, which we saw in [Part 2](#), but now alongside Italian, Japanese, Thai, Afghani, Persian, Turkish, Indian, Moroccan, Burmese eateries on the High Road.



7. A collage of some of Kilburn's historic public houses. (Photos and collage by Irina Porter)

From the 1970s onwards the Irish population started to move out of the area, and immigrants from the Caribbean, Middle East and Asia started to come in. The area is now multicultural - in 2017 the vicar of the Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart in Quex Road said that he regularly welcomed 64 different nationalities to mass. The Maida Vale Picture House at 140 Maida Vale (1913) is now the Islamic Centre of England.

Kilburn presented a bleak picture for Jamaican-English writer [Zadie Smith](#), who grew up in the area. In her book 'NW', she gives the following description:

“The window logs Kilburn’s skyline. Ungentrified, ungentrifiable. Boom and bust never come here. Here bust is permanent. Empty State Empire, empty Odeon, graffiti-streaked sidings rising and falling like a rickety roller coaster. Higgledy-piggledy rooftops and chimneys, some high, some low, packed tightly, shaken fags in a box. Behind the opposite window, retreating Willesden. Number 37. In the 1880s or thereabouts the whole thing went up at once – houses, churches, schools, cemeteries – an optimistic vision of Metroland. Little terraces, faux-Tudor piles. All the mod cons! Indoor toilet, hot water. Well-appointed country living for those tired of the city. Fast-forward. Disappointed city living for those tired of their countries.”



8. Three scenes from Kilburn High Road in 2020, still with a [W.H.Smith](#) connection! (Photos by Irina Porter)

The 1970s was not all doom and gloom, and music provided one of the bright spots. The band '[Kilburn and the High Roads](#)' (local connection unknown!) and its singer Ian Dury were one of the inspirations for the later punk rock movement. In a comment on [Part 3](#), Wembley Matters reader Trevor shared with us his recollections of growing up in Kilburn and taking part in the [The Jam](#)'s video for their song 'When You're Young' in 1979. This was filmed in Kilburn Square shopping precinct and in Kilburn High Road (with Woolworths!). The bandstand is in Queen's Park, and the 12-year old Trevor is wearing a red and blue jacket. You can see the video at: <https://youtu.be/GO-3oXkZwPq>

Another famous 1970s singer/songwriter who has lived locally was [Cat Stevens](#). He became a Muslim in 1977, having found his spiritual home through reading the Qur'an, and changed his name to Yusuf Islam. His many charitable works in promoting education, peace and mutual respect between faiths since then have included setting up the Islamia Primary School in Salusbury Road in 1982, the first full-time Muslim primary school in England. For more about musicians and music businesses in Kilburn, visit [North-West London Music Maps](#), by Dick Weindling.

Kilburn had 10 cinemas in the last 110 years, but today only one remains, and that is part of the cultural focal point of modern Kilburn, at 269 Kilburn High Road. The building dates from 1928, when it was opened as the London headquarters of the Foresters' Friendly Society, which provided financial help to members in need. In the 1930s it had a music and dance hall, on occasions hired by Oswald Mosley's fascist 'Blackshirts', who used to meet in the area. During the World War II it served as an air raid shelter and a food distribution point.



9. The Foresters' Hall and Tricycle Theatre, late 20th century. (Images from the internet)

The Foresters' stayed in the building until 1979, when they sold it, and moved into a small office nearby. The building was being used by local community organisations, when it was discovered by Shirley Barrie and Ken Chubb, who founded their theatre performance Wakefield Tricycle Company and were looking for permanent premises. In 1980 Tim Foster Architects re-designed the theatre, but in 1987 the building was destroyed by fire and the re-building took 2 years. In 1998 a new cinema was opened next to it, which also offered extra rehearsing space.



10. The opening plaque on what is now the Kiln Cinema, in Buckley Road. (Photos by Irina Porter, 2020)

The [Tricycle Theatre](#) was successful and acquired a reputation for political and outspoken, diverse and innovative plays. One of the best known was the Colour of Justice (1999), based

on the Stephen Lawrence inquiry and directed by Nicholas Kent who became Artistic Director in 1984. In 2018, after another re-design project, the Tricycle re-opened as The Kiln, with a new café, rehearsal rooms, improved accessibility, better sightlines, comfortable seats and flexible stage. The Kiln has a 300-seat cinema and a slightly smaller theatre complex.



11. The 60s/70s South Kilburn today, with Crone Court and the OK Club (left) and Dickens House (right).
(Photos by John Hill, and from Facebook on the internet)

Despite the hopes of planners, and like the [Chalkhill](#) and Stonebridge estates elsewhere in Brent, the South Kilburn estate of typical 1960s brutalist style high density housing, in low rise flats and 11 concrete tower blocks, did not deliver an ideal neighbourhood. In 1988, unemployment in South Kilburn was 20%. The estate was plagued by crime, shootings, gun and drug trade. There was ongoing rivalry with gangs from the nearby Mozart Estate, just across the borough boundary in Westminster. Several high-profile police raids in 2007 and 2011 and the shootings of innocent by-standers as the gangs wage their wars against each other continue to contribute to the adverse reputation of the area.



12. Network Housing's Kilburn Quarter, in a computer image and 2020 photograph. (Internet / Irina Porter)

In 2004 Brent Council started working on a 15-year plan of drastic demolition of much of the estate and creating a new living environment, at a cost of £660 million. The demolition of the old estate started in 2014 with two of the 18 storey housing blocks, to be replaced with 4 'smart' blocks and amenities for the local community. Several different housing associations and architects are involved in the project, which so far has resulted in an overall loss of council housing, as many of the flats are for private sale. Despite the council's efforts to improve the quality of the area, it continues to be plagued by problems connected to its history of gang violence and drug dealing, as well as issues with [maintenance of the newly built homes and cladding for fire safety regulations](#).

One effort aimed at engaging with young people on the fringes was the Signal Project in 2004. The mural they sponsored under the bridges at Kilburn Station brought together graffiti artists and the local community. The subjects painted reflected Orwell's 'Animal Farm', H.G. Wells's 'War of the Worlds', the Gaumont State and Kilburn's Irish heritage, and it won Time Out magazine's best mural award in 2006.



13. Some views of the murals under the bridges at Kilburn Station. (Photos: Irina Porter x3 / John Hill)

In recent years Kilburn has been regarded as on the way up – as have been many London locations which are within easy transport links to Central London. The long-suffering South Kilburn estate is not without its crime problems, and occasionally developers cause an uproar too, as in the case of the Carlton Tavern, a pub in Carlton Vale on the border of Kilburn and Westminster. This dated from 1921 and was the only building on this part of the street to survive the Blitz during the Second World War. In 2015 it was bought by an Israeli property developer and demolished overnight, without permission, while being considered for Grade II listing. Westminster Council ordered the developer to rebuild the public house, recreating the exact facsimile, which has been done, but as of October 2020 it still has not re-opened.



14. The Carlton Tavern, after its 2015 demolition, and in 2020 after being rebuilt. (Internet / Irina Porter)

Brent was chosen to be London's Borough of Culture for 2020, and one of its highlights was to be a summer festival on Kilburn High Road, with a mile-long street party. Unfortunately this

was cancelled due to the Covid-19 situation. Kilburn does, however, have [two Brent Biennial artworks by British-Filipino artist Pio Abad](#), just off the High Road in Willesden Lane and Burton Road. There is also the premiere of Zadie Smith's debut play, 'The Wife of Willesden' at The Kiln theatre to look forward to as part of the delayed LBOC 2020 celebrations.



15. Pio Abad's two Brent2020 Kilburn artworks, and a Borough of Cultures sign. (Internet / Irina Porter x2)

Whatever Kilburn's future will bring us, I hope you have enjoyed discovering its rich and colourful past, which this series will remain as a record of.

Irina Porter,
[Willessden Local History Society](#) , November 2020.

A special thank you to local historian Dick Weindling, co-author of 'Kilburn and West Hampstead Past' and History of [Kilburn and West Hampstead blog](#)

This article was written for, and first published on, the "Wembley Matters" blog website, but anyone is free to share it on a "not for profit" basis.