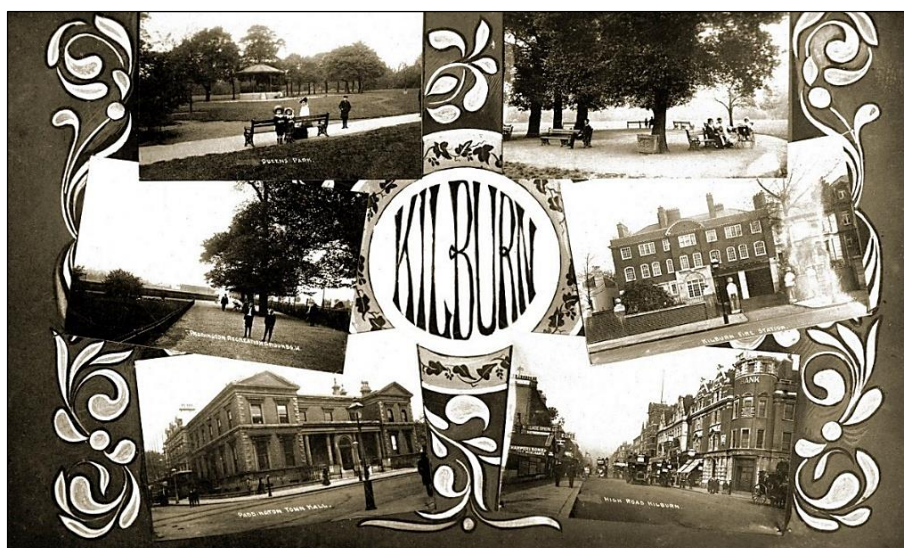


Uncovering Kilburn's History

A new local history series by Irina Porter of Willesden Local History Society.



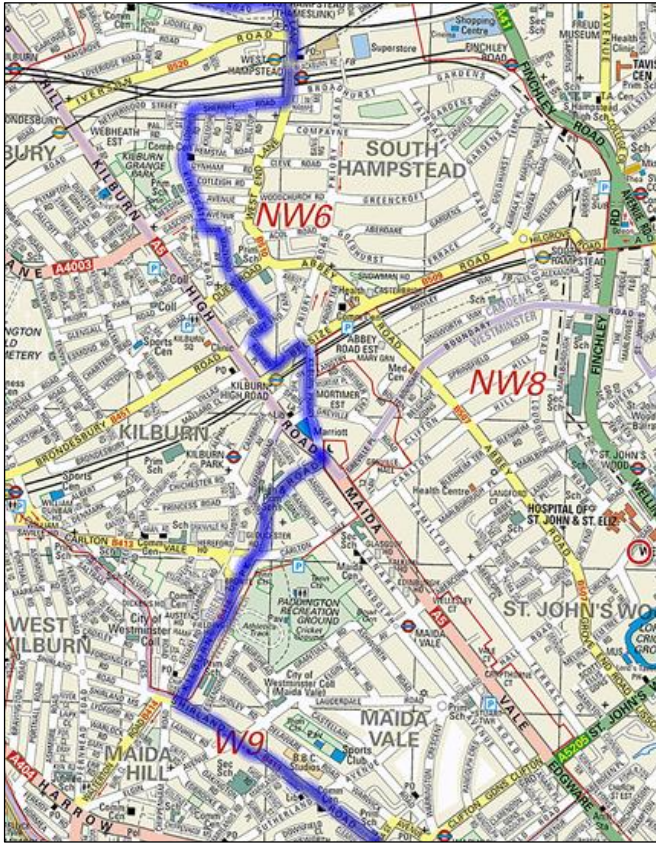
1. A postcard of Kilburn, c. 1930s. (From the internet - www.images-of-London.co.uk)

Kilburn is an area in Brent, which grew around the intersection of the Roman road known as Watling Street (Edgware Road) and a local river of the same name. Kilburn lies south west of this stretch of the ancient thoroughfare, here called Kilburn High Road, between West End Lane and Queen's Park. Kilburn has never been an administrative unit, and its boundaries are not defined. However, it has given us a rich and colourful history, which we will uncover here.



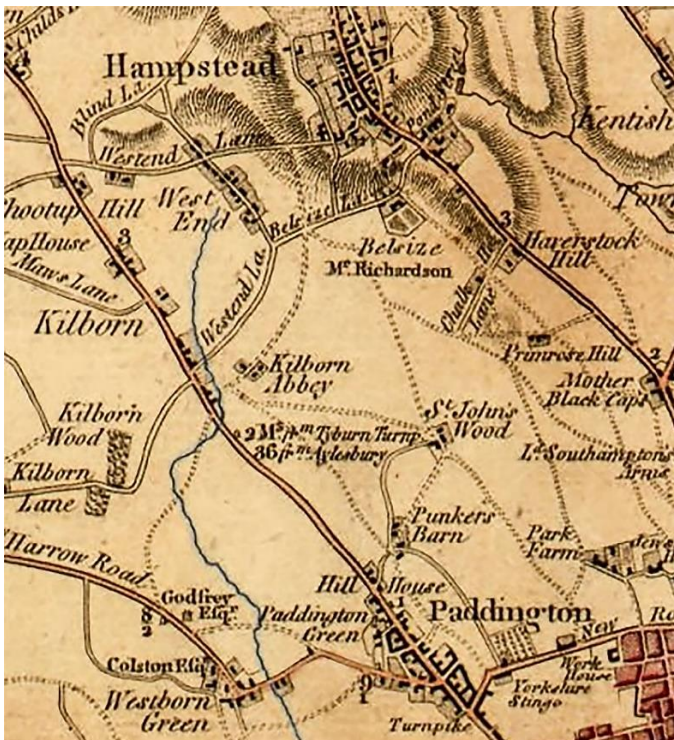
2. Kilburn, at the edge of a 1930s pictorial map of London and suburbs. (From the first AtoZ atlas and guide)

As with many a historic name, 'Kilburn' could have several origins. Some say it comes from a stream (Anglo-Saxon **Kelebourne**, which could have been 'cold bourne' (river), 'cow's bourne' or 'King's bourne'). The stream used to run into the **River Westbourne**, which flows from Hampstead to the Serpentine in Hyde Park. Or it could be named after a Saxon called Cylla, used c. 1134 as Cuneburna). A variation of Kilnbourn could come from tile making industry in the area.

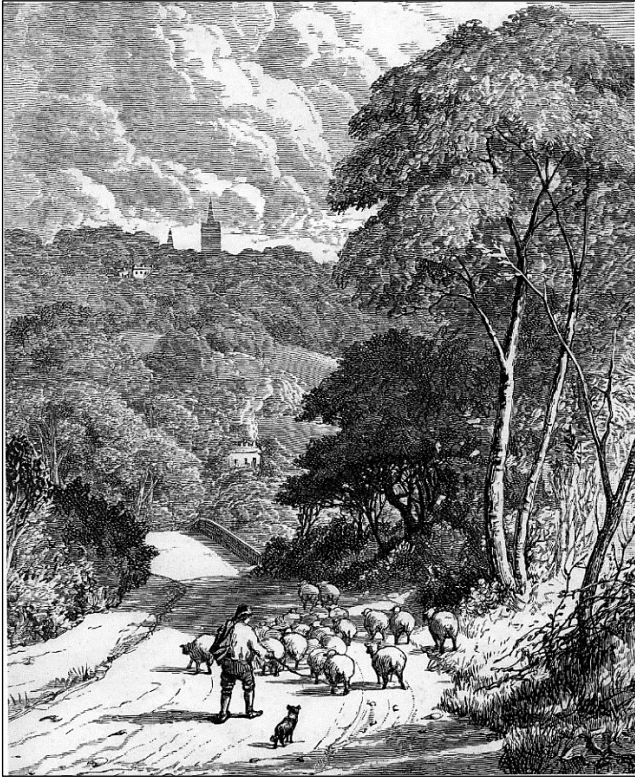


3. The course of the River Westbourne, marked on a modern street map. (Courtesy of John & Anne Hill)

The Kilburn Stream originated in Hampstead and went through what is now West Hampstead southwards. It ran parallel to the High Road along what is today's Kingsgate Rd, then it passed under the Edgware Road at Kilburn Bridge. It joined the Westbourne near today's Shirland Road, which flowed into the Serpentine and eventually into the Thames. In the 1860s the stream was culverted and became part of the sewage system.



4. The Kilburn area in 1790. (From an article by John & Anne Hill, in W.L.H.S. Journal No.49)



5. The bridge over the Kilbourne on West End Lane, as seen from the High Road, around 200 years ago.
(From “Kilburn and West Hampstead Past” by Dick Weindling and Marianne Colloms)

Here is an interesting fact, uncovered by Willesden Local History Society members John and Anne Hill, from an article they wrote in Volume 49 of our Journal: “Springfield Walk (near Belsize Road) has a set of very old steps that give access to Kilburn Priory. We climbed the steps and, whilst we were taking photos of the house, we noticed the sound of rushing water. In the middle of Kilburn Priory Road there is a drain cover – and **beneath this drain cover flows the River Westbourne**, Kilburn’s ‘lost river’ making its way to the River Thames.”



6. The River Westbourne drain cover, and its Springfield Walk location. (Photos by John and Anne Hill)

The area of Kilburn grew around where the Kilburn Brook crossed the **Watling Street** (now Edgware Road), which was an important route to the north since the Roman Times. Even before them, this was an ancient trackway used by the Britons (although the route may have followed Willesden Lane, Neasden Lane and Honeypot Lane to avoid the marshy valley of the

River Brent at what is now Staples Corner). Soon after the Romans landed in Kent in AD43, they paved and straightened this road as their major route to the north west, via St.Albans, which they called Verulamium. They needed a fast route to take their legions towards North Wales, where the local tribes were resisting Roman rule. Some flint blocks from the Roman road were found in Kilburn in 1923, at a depth of about six feet.



7. A map of Watling Street, overlaid on the 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica* map of Roman Britain.

As well as enabling quick movement of troops and resources within the Roman province of Britannia, Watling Street has also served as a boundary. In 878, King Alfred of Wessex signed a treaty with Danish invaders, under which Alfred kept the southern side, and the Danes established Danelaw to the north. In 1599 Watling Street is mentioned as London Way, and later the Edgware Road. Our stretch of it has become the traditional boundary between Willesden, now in Brent, and Hampstead, now in Camden.



8. The Priory, Kilburn, 1750, as shown in a book illustration from 1878. (Internet – British History Online)

A community of Augustinian canonesses, **Kilburn Priory** was set up where the Watling Road crossed the Kilburn brook in the 12th century. Now Belsize Road meets Kilburn High Road here. Around 1130 a hermit called Godwyn set up a small cell (hermitage) near a holy well (medicinal spring) here. In 1134 he gave his place to Westminster Abbey. Three nuns – Emma, Gunhilda and Christina – established a Benedictine (later referred to as Augustinian) nunnery. They were probably former maids of honour to Queen Matilda of Scotland, the wife of Henry I of England, who became nuns after the Queen died.

Godwyn remained the warden until he died, and a Chaplain would be appointed to oversee the nuns. They worshipped in the church dedicated to St. John the Baptist and prayed for the soul of the brethren who once belonged to Westminster. The priory was endowed with lands in Kensington, Kent, Southwark, Tottenham and Hendon. It also owned '[the manor of Wymbley](#)'.

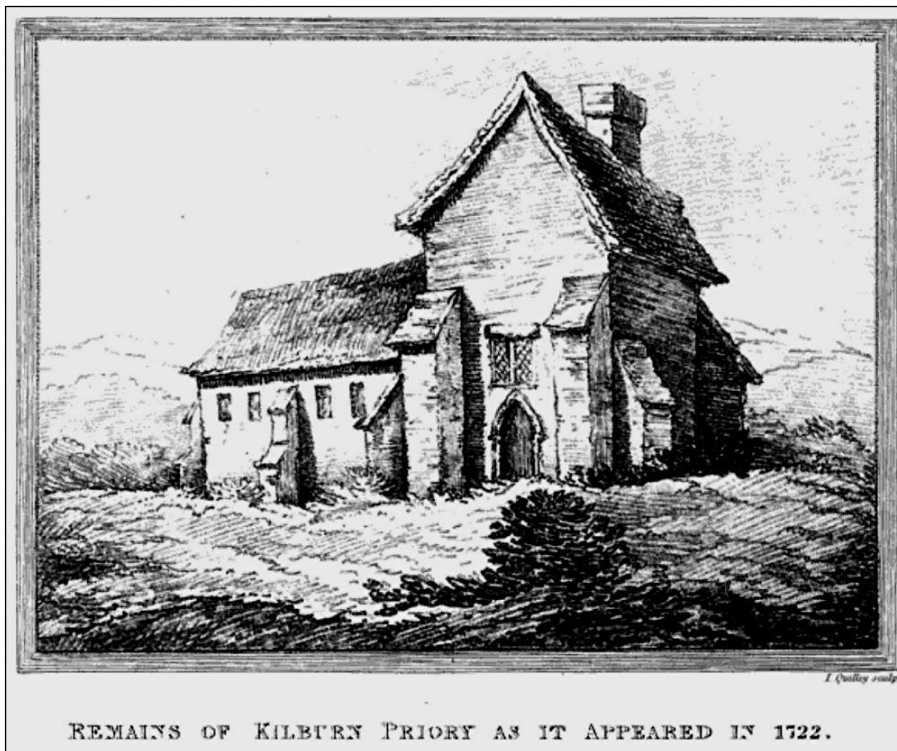


9. The seal of Kilburn Priory in 1536, and Emma de Sancto Omero, Prioress of Kilburn c.1400.
(Images from "Kilburn and West Hampstead Past" by Dick Weindling and Marianne Colloms)

The Priory was a stopping place for pilgrims on their way to the shrines at St. Albans, and later Willesden also. According to the customs of the time, it provided food and shelter to travellers, both rich and poor. Pilgrims had to travel through woods, which afforded hiding places for robbers, particularly at the foot of the nearby Shoot-up Hill, and a safe resting place was very helpful for pilgrims to form groups, so they could travel together for protection. This hospitality proved a burden on the Priory, and by the middle of 14th century it was found in financial trouble by the Bishop of London and in 1352 was exempt from taxes. By the end of the century its buildings were in decay.

The Priory continued to support travellers for 400 years, so it never became wealthy. In 1536, Henry VIII dissolved the Priory, whose seal at the time, showing John the Baptist wearing a camel-hair garment, is seen above. The inventory details the rooms and furniture for the church, house, brewhouse and bakehouse, as well as some wall hangings, candesticks, two silver chalices and goblets. There was also '*one horse of the collar of blacke*', valued at 5s.

Henry VIII gave Kilburn Priory to the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem in exchange for a piece of land in Southwark. That Order was also dissolved, four years later, and the Kilburn estate reverted to the crown. It was given to the King's courtier, the Earl of Warwick, then passed through the hands of various landowners. The Uptons, who owned the land in the 19th century, built the Church of St. Mary on a site adjoining the ancient chapel. By then the main house and surrounding land was known as Abbey Farm, comprising about 45 acres. However, nothing remained of the original priory, except a 'rising bank... and ruined walls'.



10. The Remains of Kilburn Priory, from a book published in 1814. (Image from the internet)

Dick Weindling and Marianne Colloms write in their book 'Kilburn and West Hampstead Past': "When the railway was cut through in the autumn of 1852, some pottery, a few coins and a bronze vessel, all medieval, were found at the Priory site and these were put on display at the Archaeological Institute." A sad epitaph for a historic local building!

**Irina Porter,
Willesden Local History Society, September 2020.**

A special thank you to local historian Dick Weindling, author of 'Kilburn and West Hampstead Past' and History of Kilburn and West Hampstead blog (<http://kilburnwesthampstead.blogspot.com/>).

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.