

# Finsbury Park: The Identification of a Suburban Entity

by

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*This essay juxtaposes current perceptions of a suburban district of north London with a discussion of its relatively unplanned growth, raising the question of how far a regeneration plan for a now somewhat run-down area should look to History and have a pragmatic 'non-plan' at its heart.*

## PERCEPTIONS

Government Figures suggest that between 4.4 and 5.5 million more homes will be needed in the United Kingdom by 2016, and that housing density could be raised by between 100 and 300 per cent in London without sacrificing quality or returning to the slums of the past.<sup>1</sup> The domestic potential of city centres continues to be re-evaluated and the formerly latent capacity of these areas for providing dwellings as well as business accommodation has been realised, to the point of saturation in some cases. Trapped between the core of the city and its outer limits, the suburbs are feeling the squeeze as enterprising individuals and businesses look to them for development opportunities.

The achievement of a successful evolutionary transformation, a sympathetic awakening of the suburb and a recognition of its positive qualities is dependent on many things. To approach development with conviction we need to identify a starting point; to know where we are now and how we got here. An understanding of the historical forces which brought us to our current circumstances is vital to the provision of an answer to that question, since 'if we were never there, we cannot be here'.<sup>2</sup> Historical, analytical survey based on the physical fabric of these areas is one of the foundation stones for establishing this understanding. Towards the end of its independent existence, the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England investigated three separate manifestations of the suburb: seventeenth-

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century Deptford, a town subsequently absorbed into London; nineteenth-century Finsbury Park, a residential and commercial development to the north-east of central London, and Edwardian Aldersbrook which better fulfils traditional perceptions of the suburb, since by no stretch of the imagination has this area ever come to be regarded, with Deptford and Finsbury Park as being of the inner city.<sup>3</sup>

In 1983, the Greater London Council introduced an initiative to combat the deficiencies of planning in Finsbury Park which had resulted from the division of responsibility for the administration of the area between three boroughs: Hackney, Haringey and Islington. The resulting, and continuing, Finsbury Park Area Joint Working Party includes representatives from the local authorities and community action groups, who have combined to co-ordinate the efforts of the three boroughs in producing a coherent development programme for the area. One of the most recent initiatives from the Working Party is the 1998 *Finsbury Park Area Regeneration Plan*, a consultative document which identifies numerous issues for discussion: business and jobs, housing, health, education, crime and safety, transport and traffic, culture, sport and leisure and joint area management.<sup>4</sup> These may all be classified as action points, stemming from the conviction that Finsbury Park has an identity.

This paper represents work in progress towards the definition of that identity. Profiles of the history of transport, leisure, work, occupancy, building progress, neighbourhoods and overall cultural change in Finsbury Park can help to explain the character and development of the area. Much remains to be done on questions of ethnicity and population shifts, and on the degree to which the accidental and serendipitous have conditioned the development of an essentially unplanned area. Through historic maps, census returns, electoral rolls, photographs and written accounts we may supplement, and to some extent illuminate, the evidence which is offered directly by the tangible built environment which might appear to be fractured and diverse. Neither of these qualities is necessarily negative and those who plan improvements might seek to distinguish the fissures in the fabric which people might fall down from the cracks which merely let in the light.

The tripartite division of responsibility for Finsbury Park has prevented the development of a coherent approach to planning, although as discussed below it is a feature of the area that it grew in an unplanned, opportunistic and organic manner. Whilst some elements of the physical fabric are common across the area, others are not. The formerly grand houses on Seven Sisters Road, many of which are currently in use as hotels for welfare claimants, recent immigrants, and the restricted expense account commercial traveller, are in Hackney. The most potentially alarming housing estate (acknowledged as such by its own residents), the Andover, the historic Rainbow Theatre and the streets of terraced housing between the railway and bus stations and Highbury Stadium, sit in Islington. The Park which gives the area its name is in the borough of Haringey. It is a consequence of the division of responsibility for the administration of these broad areas that residents may often feel disempowered. The council tax payers of Hackney and Islington for example, whilst living within earshot of the Park, feel unable to make their views count on the disruption and noise caused by Haringey's exploitation of

this public space as a fairground, an open-air music venue and a boxing arena. It is no wonder that locals refer resentfully to the Park as 'Haringey's Cash Cow' and look back nostalgically to the days before 1986 when this was a GLC Park, properly managed and maintained (although it is to the credit of the borough that it commissioned the *Finsbury Park Landscape History Study* in 1996).

Finsbury Park is also split by transport lines, paradoxically since communication links are great unifiers, annihilating distance and bringing the far-flung together. It is not just that the Seven Sisters Road and the railway line divide one part from another. There is a less obvious bar to the exploration of Finsbury Park as a whole through its division by London Transport into fare payment Zones Two and Three. To head north from Seven Sisters Road is to enter an Unknown Zone for many London Transport users and residents. Of the thousands of Underground, railway, and bus commuters who pass through Finsbury Park every day, the majority have no knowledge of the area beyond the platforms. Even without the problem of the 'unknown zone', the immediate environs of the stations do not encourage exploration despite the very major improvements of the early 1980s. The buildings jostle uncomfortably with one another, lacking cohesion. The bus station is split into two by the railway. Double decker buses cannot pass underneath the railway bridge which crosses Stroud Green Road, although some drivers unaccountably forget, with disastrous results, so journeys begin and end either north or south of the railway and tube station. This itself is more readily identifiable through the presence of the Arsenal Football Club shop than through the imagery of transport (Fig.1). In this respect, Finsbury Park is merely an example of a bigger iconographical problem which is most obviously manifested at Heathrow Airport where marketing appears to take precedence over flight. There appears to be no longer a generally accepted architectural language which might express the drama of departure and arrival. We would not expect to have an equivalent here of Foster's Stansted or Grimshaw's Waterloo, but as Charles Holden demonstrated in the Piccadilly Line stations of the 1930s, and as the new stations on the Jubilee Line will show, it is possible to express more through the architecture than the confusion, banality and tedium of commuting.

Beyond the station, for those who would penetrate the hinterland, the rest of Finsbury Park is, in contradistinction to its representation and administration, far more coherent. Here are streets and districts of distinctive character. The scale may change between the large semi-detached houses, converted into flats and hotels in Queens Drive and Seven Sisters Road, and the smaller terraced houses, whose evolution is discussed in greater detail below, but they are recognisably of the same genus, the larger tending to be bigger versions of the smaller, without any commensurate scaling-up of the detailing. This is not subtle architecture. Nevertheless, if these big houses with unimpeded views of the Park were in Highbury, they would be single residences or divided into large flats for the prosperous professional rather than low to mid-price hotels. The Lanark Hotel is typical of the three-storey hotels on the south side of Seven Sisters Road with, apart from four lanes of traffic, an unobstructed view of the Park (Fig.2). The

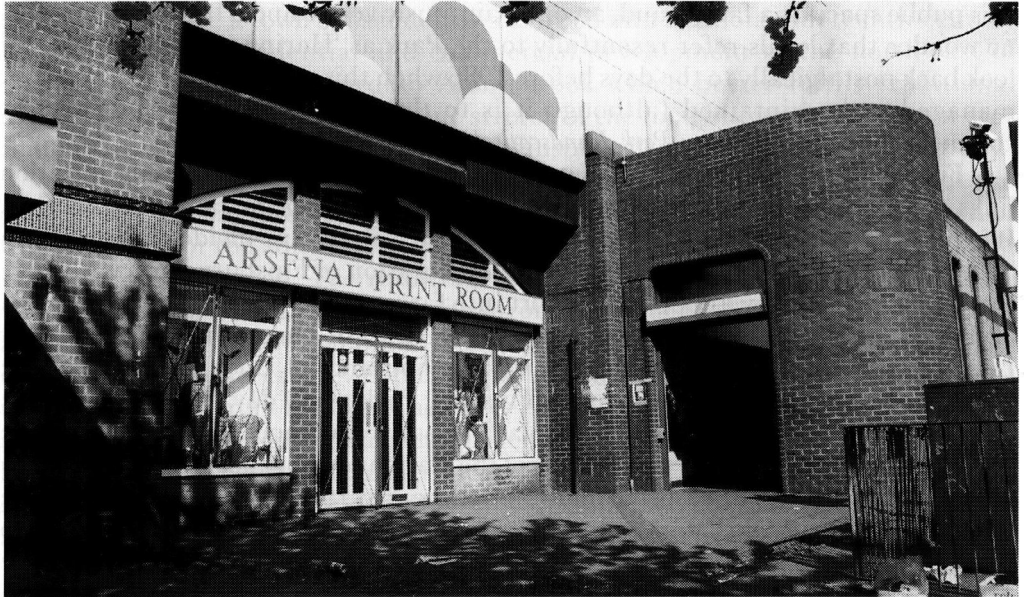


Fig. 1  
Arsenal shop and Finsbury Park Station entrance



Fig. 2  
Lanark Hotel, Seven Sisters Road, nos. 348-50 (right to left)

building itself, a large, rendered brick, semi-detached house, probably of the 1880s, is of no great architectural merit, but together with the similar buildings nearby it represents a missed opportunity. The size of the buildings, and their location, have offered the possibility of grandeur which either has been spurned or is lying dormant. This is a district with a dilemma, a location which appears to offer possibilities and then denies them. It is capable of improvement. Wouldn't this be a great place to live, with a fifteen minutes journey on the Finsbury Park to Moorgate line to and from a good job in the City? Or wouldn't it make a prime hotel site for big-spending tourists who wanted 'A room with a view of historic Finsbury Park, conveniently located for concerts and trips to central London'? Such investment can engender or reinforce a powerful local identity. But within a dynamic, urban environment it is neither possible nor desirable to be wholly prescriptive, particularly when there are such striking examples of social prescription only a few hundred yards away from these putative luxury hotels and apartments.

Beyond the standard nineteenth-century houses, an area of thirty-five acres to the west of the station is comprised of groups of twentieth-century blocks of flats, ranging from a small number in four- and five-storey blocks of 1934 to the high rise tower of the 1970s redevelopment of the area. These are the Andover Estate, Six Acres Estate, Clifton Court (Fig.3) and Haden Court. Considered at length in a report by Esther Caplin, they represent a marked instance of the way in which architecture can define neighbourhood identity.<sup>5</sup> Currently this area which is so clearly identifiable visually is vilified by the residents of adjoining areas as well as by many of its own inhabitants. Disciples of Alice Coleman might go so far as to say that the architecture defines the neighbourhood by dictating negative characteristics.<sup>6</sup> Some of Caplin's interviewees would agree – '[Andover]'s badly designed. Very, very badly designed. Whoever done it they were blind because it is terribly badly designed. There's too many alley ways and even for children that live here themselves it's dangerous...when it gets dark about four [o'clock] and children are coming from school in the winter time, those children have to be met by somebody'.<sup>7</sup>

Even within the quieter residential streets, Finsbury Park has failed to achieve twentieth-century gentrification at the speed of other parts of Islington, Hackney and Haringey – Barnsbury, the De Beauvoir estate and Crouch End. The commercial sector is concentrated in four streets – Seven Sisters Road, Blackstock Road, Stroud Green Road and Fonthill Road. Each of these is a hot-spot for a different kind of shopping. Each is made up of mid- to late-nineteenth-century terraces, many purpose built as shops. Only in Fonthill Road, a centre of the rag trade, have the houses been significantly altered or replaced in order to accommodate the specific sewing and showroom needs of the industry (Fig.4). On Saturdays there is an un-English bustling vibrancy here with hoards of shoppers filling the pavements. Most of the owners are Cypriots who built up the business themselves, without significant municipal intervention: 'I opened the first shop 25 years ago. The council should be proud of us. I went to Paris last month, looking for new ideas. We knock spots off them'.<sup>8</sup> Currently some parts of the area are moving up-market and planning



Fig. 3  
Clifton Court



Fig. 4  
Fonthill Road, nos. 93-111

policy may guide these into uses which contribute to the district as a whole, provided that a proper balance is struck between strategic guidance and the individual initiative and endeavour which lay behind the development of Finsbury Park in the first place.

#### HISTORY

When Henri IV of France wished to encourage economic development and to underline the close relationship which he intended between the crown, the city and the country, he caused the image of Paris to be reinvented. In Nicolay's map of 1609, the east-west orientation of previous maps was abandoned and north-south was reversed in order to give prominence to the opposite ends of a powerful diagonal axis running from the new commercial development, the Place Royale, to the Louvre and Tuileries.<sup>9</sup> The estate agents, Michael Morris, have attempted something similar in Finsbury Park by producing a map of the area which places the eponymous Park in the centre and in so doing gives the surrounding area the cohesiveness which pages 30, 45 and 46 of the *A-Z* fail to impart. Situated at the edge of three London boroughs this is an area at the edge of mapping, the edge of consciousness and the edge of responsibility, which has always evaded municipal centrality. It was not treated as a single entity in either Booth's survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1902) or in *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* (1930-5). For Booth, the area did not lend itself to treatment as a whole, cut up as it was by great thoroughfares and railway lines.<sup>10</sup> It requires at least six entries in the *Buildings of England* to cover the area<sup>11</sup> and within just the part which is situated in Islington it occupies two of the borough's twelve 'neighbourhoods', Tollington and Highbury Quadrant. Perceived almost from its beginnings as first and foremost a traffic interchange, bisected north-south by the main line to the north from King's Cross and east-west by the Seven Sisters Road, we might wonder how this unplanned, fractured area has come to be the diverse but coherent entity with which its population is familiar (Fig.5).

Finsbury Park, of 115 acres, was one of the earliest of municipal parks, opened in 1869 to provide fresh air for those who lived and worked further into the city. It occupied the site of part of Hornsey Wood, a well-known duelling ground. As described in 1876, the Park, designed by Alexander McKenzie and laid out in landscape garden style, afforded some pretty views, 'and would be pleasant if there were a little shade, and walking were not confined to the gravel paths'. The author considered the name foolish for a place which had always been known as Hornsey Wood: 'it tends to the confusion of local tradition, historical records and topographical accuracy thus to obliterate, or transfer and confound, local names of well-defined and long-standing usage'.<sup>12</sup> Later famous for its annual chrysanthemum shows in a purpose-built glasshouse, this was a Park which was intended for display and for activities: 'every possible provision in the way of games and recreation is made for the rapidly increasing population'.<sup>13</sup> The space provided for the Park was a fraction of that which had been intended in 1850 by those inhabitants of Clerkenwell and Islington who had sought parliamentary approval for an expanse of 500 acres

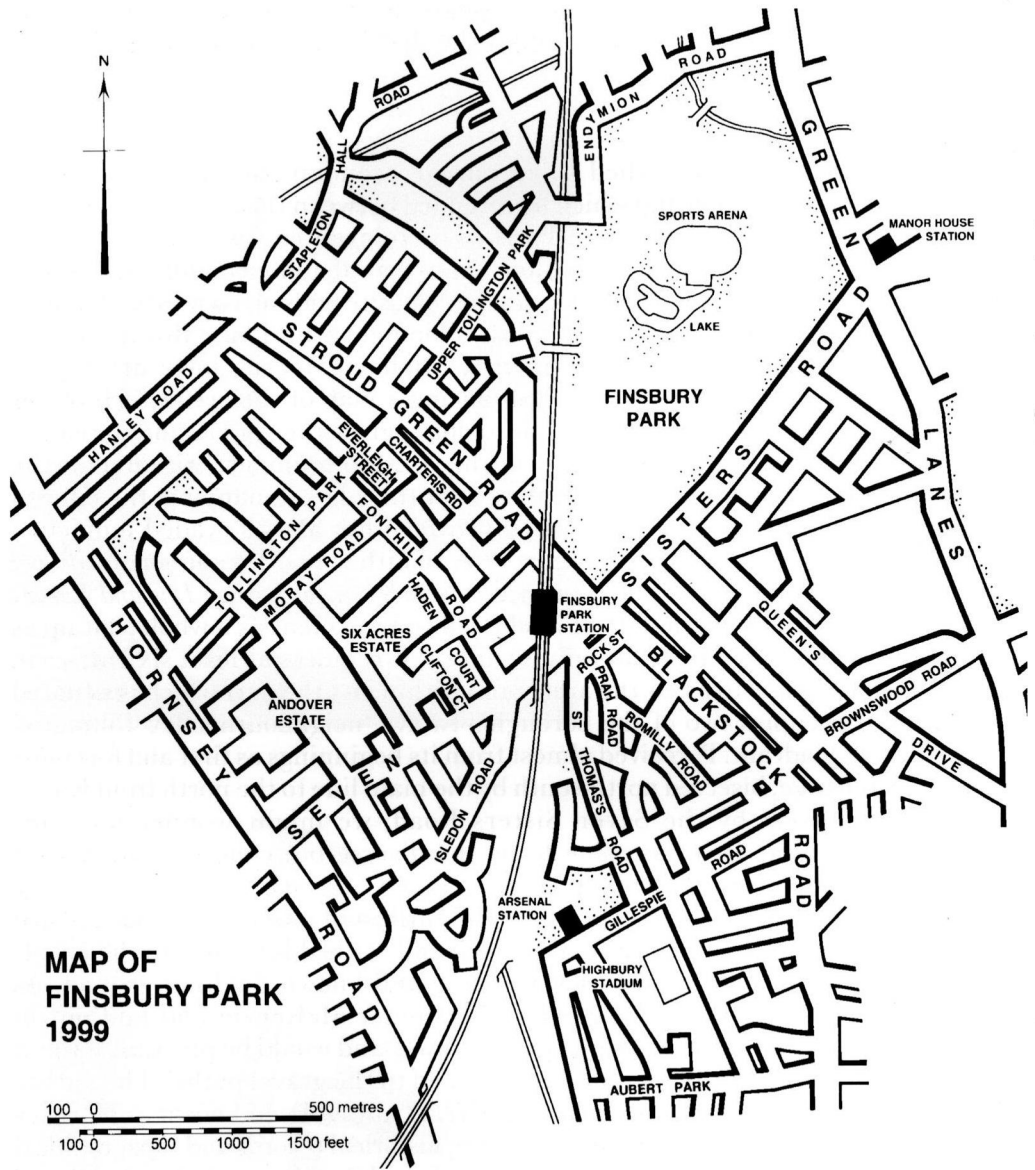


Fig. 5  
Map of Finsbury Park 1999  
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stretching from Highbury Grove to Green Lanes. A change of government delayed the proposal and speculative building filled the void.<sup>14</sup> At the opening of the Park, Sir John Thwaites of the Metropolitan Board of Works noted that the district would soon be covered with houses and 'such a fine and beautiful open space would become invaluable', open parks being 'not only conducive to health but to the moral improvement of society'.<sup>15</sup>

The railway station, initially known as Seven Sisters Road station, also was established in 1869 and the underground railway followed in 1906. The streets around the station, to the south and west of the Park were laid out during the extraordinary speculative building boom of the 1850s, '60s and '70s, which saw the suburbs pressing on north-eastwards from Holloway, to provide two and three storey properties for rental by the lower-middle and skilled working classes who were coming into this new part of London from all over the country. In his masterly study of the development of the notorious Campbell Road, which ran north from Seven Sisters Road, Jerry White has argued that: 'the social structure of Holloway altered faster than bricklayers and carpenters could cover the ground. Between conception and completion the demand for houses in streets like Campbell Road changed from single-family occupation by clerks to proletarian tenants renting half a house or less. Property speculation supplied too much housing for the lower middle-class market which was already having second thoughts about Holloway and looking elsewhere for its suburban ideal'.<sup>16</sup> Within this overall picture however, there was scope for considerable variation, as White acknowledges. The story of the evolution of the area is not one of unrelieved decline. The buildings themselves, given the speed at which they were built, and the relative lack of close regulation or supervision of their assembly, apart from the attentions of the district surveyor, have proved in most cases to be remarkably durable and their off-the-shelf, mass-produced plaster and artificial stone detailing has maintained its appeal. There have been some casualties. The fronts of several houses facing Seven Sisters Road and Stroud Green Road, in the triangular block opposite Finsbury Park Station, were so badly built that they fell into the road;<sup>17</sup> other houses in the area of Hornsey Lane were too badly built to survive. Later, Campbell Road, the 'resort of the worst characters in the neighbourhood'<sup>18</sup> and the streets to the west of it were demolished in slum clearance programmes, to be replaced in the 1960s and '70s by the Andover and Six Acres estates.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, a great deal of the fabric of the 1850s-70s suburb survives.

Islington grew at extraordinary speed. The Green Lanes had been 'green throughout' and 'the new River meandered peacefully and openly through the locality spanned here and there by rustic bridges'.<sup>20</sup> Then the great expansion of 1841-61 shattered the rural idyll and later developments merely compounded a situation in which unfettered over-building ate up the ground: 'Eligible building sites were marked out in many directions, houses multiplied rapidly and were as rapidly occupied by City men and there was withal an absence of official regulation and inspection which makes it matter for congratulation that the houses were so substantially built, and the streets for the most part made so wide open and

breezy'.<sup>21</sup> The population by the end of the nineteenth century, of *c.* 340,000, made the borough with its 120 miles of streets and sewers the equal of all but half a dozen towns in the rest of the country. Notwithstanding the rapid growth and great population, Islington at this time gave the clergy occasion for a 'chorus of satisfaction' at the good health of the people. The death rate in 1897 was sixteen per 1000, lower than almost all big provincial towns and two per 1000 lower than London as a whole.<sup>22</sup> The apparent youthfulness of the population might well have had a bearing on this figure, since investigation of the census returns for a highly selective number of streets suggests that the Finsbury Park area at least was a zone of transition with young families and limited continuity of tenure at this time. In Hackney particularly, it was remarked, 'the outward drift of the wealthy and the well-to-do' could be observed, with their replacement by a poorer class driven for the most part from central London by the natural growth of population and the extension of business premises.<sup>23</sup> Shoreditch was a particular source of potential residents of Islington as the worst courts and rookeries were pulled down, the incomers precipitating the departure of the well-to-do residential class which fled up the hill before the 'advance of the jerry builder', to Hampstead 'and other more popular neighbourhoods'.<sup>24</sup> This process was regarded by the investigators as the first stage in an inexorable decline. Houses once tenanted by the prosperous, now with their projecting bays hung with muslin or brightly-coloured curtains, had cards in nearly every window advertising lodgings to be let out in single rooms or by the floor.<sup>25</sup>

But was the situation really so bleak in Finsbury Park, which had, after all, apparently entertained fewer of the prosperous to begin with? Having less far to fall, it seems in fact hardly to have fallen at all in the later years of the nineteenth century, notwithstanding the comments of Booth's investigators. The area to the north of Seven Sisters Road and the west of Stroud Green Road was characterised as 'considerably deteriorated', with 29.5% living in poverty.<sup>26</sup> This area included Campbell Road, where thieves and prostitutes congregated and there were 'unkempt women talking in loud voices',<sup>27</sup> but even so, this one street should not itself have been enough to skew the overall picture to this extent. To the south of Seven Sisters Road, the investigators found only 17.3% to be living in poverty, with 'many long streets inhabited by fairly comfortable to well-to-do people, some keeping servants'.<sup>28</sup> These generalisations provide useful, broad indicators of trends, but the conclusions must be questioned through further investigation of the primary evidence, which does not indicate extraordinary differences across the area or lead us to believe that it suffered precipitous decline. There is of course a disposition which nestles in the most hard-bitten of hearts to find a romantic dislocation and decay in the social fabric in response to the march of time. This sentimental reading must be borne in mind when considering social trends.

There are two short streets between Seven Sisters Road and Tollington Park – Harrington Grove and Everleigh Street – which offer a particularly striking picture of late nineteenth-century developments in the Finsbury Park area. They contain two-storey houses which now would be regarded as both interesting and desirable.

To the south of Seven Sisters Road, the similarly desirable street of three-storey houses, Prah Road, is equally instructive and capable of giving the lie to any easy assumption of inevitable and inexorable decline.

Harrington Grove was one of the earliest developments in the Finsbury Park area, begun in 1848-9, its wood palings later separating it from Moray Road to the south (Fig.6). After 1894, the palings were removed and this rather charming late Georgian street of two storey houses became part of the quintessentially Victorian Charteris Road, a street of three storey houses begun in 1869 (and narrowly saved from demolition in 1975 only after the formation of a residents' association and a Neighbourhood Tenants' Co-operative).<sup>29</sup> Harrington Grove was long in the completion, its twenty-one houses not being all present until the census of 1871. Its occupants, many with large families with young children, tended to be of either the skilled working or lower middle classes: labourers, an accountant, clerks, bricklayers, plasterers, a grocer, a teacher of dancing, an organ builder, tailors, a jeweller, a gardener, a turf cutter, printers and railway workers. Almost all of the houses were occupied by single families, some quite large with up to five children and extended family members. In 1881 only three of the houses had two family units whilst one had three units; two houses had servants and five had lodgers, none of which represented a significant change over previous years. Continuity was limited: one family remained in residence between 1861 and 1871 and four between 1871 and 1881, including the gardener from Yorkshire, his wife and four children, two of whom had been born in this house.

The adjacent Everleigh Street (Fig.7), originally known as Barrowcliffe Street, laid out as a cul-de-sac in 1870-1 was built by Charles Gillatt, a local builder who reserved the large, double fronted Everleigh House at the end of the street for his own occupation.<sup>30</sup> By the time of the 1881 census, Gillatt had moved on and the house was lived-in by Ellis Cutlow, his wife, three daughters and a son. A carpenter from Devon, Cutlow had arrived here after a period in Wales. He seems to have prospered since he was at the same address ten years later, by which time he regarded himself as a builder. His carpenter son had moved on and he shared the house with just his wife, one daughter and a servant. The same broad group of occupations as in Harrington Grove was represented in the other houses in the street in 1881: clerks and commercial travellers, an accountant from the West Indies, a school teacher, a carpenter and a bank clerk, a fish salesman from Liverpool, a draper's assistant and a woman with private means from Ceylon who was accompanied by two daughters, both stationer's assistants, two sons who were clerks and a third son who was a professional musician. Three houses had a servant each and three had lodgers, one of them, that of the school teacher, being home to two lodgers – railway clerks from Glamorgan – as well as to the teacher's wife and five children. Ten years later, apart from Ellis Cutlow, only one family still lived in the street, the bank clerk and his wife who in 1881 had five children and a servant. Promotion to cashier appears to have enabled him to support nine children by 1891. The newcomers included people in the building, painting and decorating trades, a printer compositor, a railway clerk, salesmen, a German journalist and a



Fig. 6  
Charteris Road (formerly Harrington Grove), nos. 56-62 (right to left)



Fig. 7  
Everleigh Street, nos. 1-15 (right to left) and no. 17 (detached)

store fitter for Jones Drapers (founded by William Jones who came to London in 1867 and with his brother John opened a small shop which grew into the now much lamented Jones Brothers department store of 1899 on Holloway Road).<sup>31</sup> All of these houses were occupied by single families, with the occasional lodger or servant, apart from one which in 1891 housed an accountant and a widow with private means. Although according to Booth, this area north of Seven Sisters Road was, broadly speaking, 'considerably deteriorated' by the time of his survey,<sup>32</sup> the decline does not appear to have been overall. In the later 1920s, when the *New Survey of London Life and Labour* was carried out, one of the investigators visited number 12 Everleigh Street. Described as a two-storey house with an attic, with four bedrooms, kitchen, parlour and small yard, without a bath, this was home to a spring-blind maker, who earned £4 per week, his wife and family of five, two of the daughters being dressmakers and a son who was a shop assistant. The weekly rent for this house was 18s.<sup>33</sup> The house is now gone, one of the even-numbered side of the street which was demolished after the war, permitting the formation of a green, perhaps because of damage caused by an incendiary bomb which fell on the night of 18th-19th September 1940.<sup>34</sup>

Prah Road also was subject to wartime damage and to later clearance. A Post Office sorting office, which was shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1894, was succeeded in 1910 along with numbers 2-16 St. Thomas's Road by Frank Matcham's Finsbury Park Empire which survived until 1960.<sup>35</sup> It was replaced in 1967 by Vaudeville Court, a block of thirty-five two-bedroom flats and one single-bedroom flat. This partly occupies the site of numbers 2-10 Prah Road which might have been demolished after a high explosive bomb had landed near the Empire on 8th-9th September 1940.<sup>36</sup> Finsbury Park was in fact fortunate during the war, although the station was an obvious target for attack, suffering far fewer deaths and much less damage than the East End.<sup>37</sup> Prah Road and the adjacent streets to the south were considered by Booth's investigator to be reasonably congenial (Figs. 8 & 9). Escorted by Police Inspector Dyball, he was given a detailed tour, proceeding in a southerly direction south of the Seven Sisters Road. In Rock Street, the houses of six to eight rooms with wash-houses all took lodgers, some of them shady, but just around the corner, Prah Street (*sic*), Romilly Road, Plimsoll Street (*sic*) and St Thomas's Road had a higher class of occupant: 'clerks, city men, some mechanics and a great many railwaymen of the better sort, head ticket collectors etc'. As Dyball pointed out, there was great demand from both working and middle class occupants for the smaller two-storey houses in particular in these entirely residential streets: 'before the outgoing tenant is well out of the door they are taken'.<sup>38</sup> These tended to be taken by single families, sometimes with lodgers. The three-storey houses on Prah Road were built in stages between 1876 and 1878, by builders who rented the ground from the local landlord John Rock, owner of the Blackstock Park Estate (who died *c.* 1877) and his heirs. The builders, with the exception of Herbert Yardley of Bloomsbury who built the pair of substantial semi-detached houses at the corner of Prah Road and Romilly Road, were local men. Philip Boughen, B. E. Campbell and John Oldis built the houses in groups of two, three,

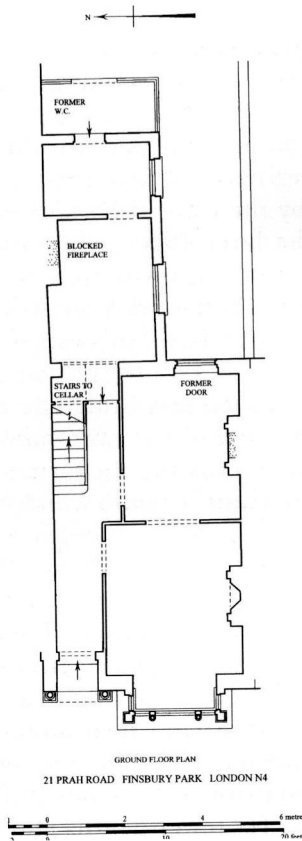


Fig. 8

21 Prah Road, ground floor plan  
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Fig. 9

Prah Road, nos. 19-23

four and five. Boughen appears to have over-reached himself, receiving permission to lay out numbers 13-23, but having to confine himself to just three of these, leaving another local firm, Paramour and Long to build numbers 19-23.<sup>39</sup> It may be significant that these three houses were among the few which were in multiple occupation from the beginning; the supply of three-storey houses here in 1878 might temporarily have begun to outstrip middle class demand. Number 19 was occupied in 1881 by a jeweller from Germany, his wife, two sons and a servant, and by a commercial traveller and his wife, daughter and two sons. Numbers 21 and 23 were more crowded, number 21 being occupied by three families: a butcher's clerk, his wife and three small daughters; a railway porter and his wife; and a dispenser of medicine, his wife and four daughters between one and five years old, recently arrived from Sonning in Berkshire. Next door, a tutor in a private school, his wife, one year old son and nine weeks old daughter shared the house with an

extended family of ten: a verger and his wife with two sons and three daughters, one of whom was a pupil teacher, his mother-in-law, and a railway-signalman nephew and his wife. By 1891, the tutor had moved on and the extended family had taken over the whole house, the verger, his wife and three children living in one part and the signalman, his wife, daughter and sister occupying the other. At number 19, the commercial traveller was still there but the jeweller had been replaced by an engine driver, his brother and two sisters. In between, at number 21, there was a reversal of the normal expectations of social decline from single family to multiple occupation. The three young families had all gone, to be replaced by a stock and share dealer, Constantine Gialousey, a naturalized British subject born in Turkey, his young wife and daughter and his wife's mother and grandmother, both of whom were women with their own means. The changes in the number of family units within a house does not seem to have had any great architectural impact. The houses which are known to have had multiple occupation were not subdivided. The upper floors were reached by the same single, common staircase, with rooms opening off the landings. The physical compartmentalization of houses such as these, which destroys their internal integrity, appears to be a more modern phenomenon.

The thirty-seven houses in Prah Road saw changes but no seismic shifts on the social scale between 1881 and 1891: six of them had more than one household in 1881, nine in 1891; nine had living-in servants in 1881, ten in 1891; six had lodgers in 1881, eight in 1891. Four houses had the same families during the period whilst the others changed although the occupants were drawn from the same broad group of middle-ranking occupations which characterises the entire area: commercial travellers, salesmen, butchers, clerks, printers, railway workers; a packing case maker from County Cork; a master cabinet maker with a wife and eight children who employed fourteen men and two boys; and a builder-contractor from Bristol who employed twenty men. This seems to have been a cosmopolitan area which people tended to pass through. Not only were there several families from the further-flung parts of Britain, for many of whom Finsbury Park provided their first home in London, there were also, in addition to the immigrants from Germany and Turkey, a French artist/musician, a Prussian wine-merchant and a student of civil engineering from Japan.

By 1890, the growth of the newer suburbs to the north and east of Finsbury Park resulted in an increase in trains passing through its station, the focus of the suburban system and a point of interchange, to every three minutes at the busiest times. The track had to be doubled and then trebled to cope with the demand. By 1895 there were about twenty-five million single journeys per year on the suburban lines of the Great Northern Railway, with a growth rate of about one million per year. The clerks who ten or twenty years before might have been moving into Finsbury Park were now moving to the leafier purlieus of Walthamstow, equally accessible for jobs in the City at the price of a return fare of 3d or 4d depending on the time of travel. In addition to the trains, the first electric trams began a service from Finsbury Park to Tottenham in 1904 and in 1906 the Piccadilly Line opened

between Finsbury Park and Hammersmith.<sup>40</sup> The confluence of the transport networks at Finsbury Park, made worse by the unregulated competition between separate tram companies and independent bus companies, by the mid-1920s was causing the enormous congestion which eventually prompted the extension northwards of the Underground (Fig.10). The noise, activity and the opportunities provided by plentiful transport shifted the emphasis of the area towards commerce, crime and entertainment: theatres, music halls, public houses and, from 1913, Arsenal Football Club. The only theatre surviving in its original form, although it is on English Heritage's 'Buildings at Risk' register, is the Astoria, later the Rainbow, notable for its wonderful Hispano-Moorish fantasy auditorium.<sup>41</sup> Built to the designs of Edward Stone in 1930, it is currently occupied by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

Although the residential streets remained in Finsbury Park, they were perhaps not all as desirable as they had been just a short time before the expansion of commerce and traffic. St Thomas's Road, next to the railway line, was one of the first streets to be laid out south of the Seven Sisters Road, in work which began in 1867 and was carried out in phases until the 1880s.<sup>42</sup> By 1871, twenty-eight three-



Fig. 10  
Station Place in 1923  
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Fig. 11

St Thomas's Road, nos. 43-69 (right to left)

and four-storey houses had been built, all but one in single family occupation and almost half of them with a living-in servant (Fig. 11). The majority of the occupants were clerks, but there were also surveyors, a Baptist minister, a civil servant, a restaurant manager, an engineer and such skilled craftsmen as a compass maker and a piano forte maker as well as an 'artist in wood'. Twenty years later, there were about 120 houses, nine of them subdivided and twenty-eight with sub-let rooms, and twenty years after that, forty-six of them housed lodgers.<sup>43</sup> These figures may be interpreted as representing a slow, gentle decline in status away from single family occupancy.

Inspector Dyball explained the workings of the rental system in the late nineteenth century to Booth's investigator, as it applied in cases of multiple occupation. A three-storey house might be let at £36 to £38 per year. The tenant and his family would take three rooms and the kitchen on the ground floor, letting out the rooms above. The front, back and narrow box rooms on the first floor would be let for 7s per week (£18 4s per year), the front room being a bed sitting room, with the box room also serving as a bedroom. There would be a range for cooking in the back room. Upstairs, one room might be let unfurnished to a single old lady for 4s (£10 8s per year) or perhaps to two single men, furnished, at 5s or 6s depending on whether they shared a double bed or slept in single beds. Since many of the three storey houses, unlike Dyball's example had two rooms on the second floor, it is clear that a lessee could live virtually rent free by letting out the

upper floors of the house. A little more money could be made by providing Sunday dinner to the hypothetical young men, who had all their other meals out. Dyball's little old lady cooked her meals over her own fire and on the rare occasions when she had a pie or a joint of meat she would be allowed the free use of the landlord's oven.<sup>44</sup>

Thirty years later, the *New Survey of London Life and Labour* recorded multiple occupation, rising rents and overcrowding. Islington by this time was 'a vast complex of streets ranging in social scale from comfortable middle class to slum, but with a large preponderance of rather decayed middle class and working class areas'.<sup>45</sup> The Finsbury Park area was characterised as particularly working class, south of the Seven Sisters Road, although in terms of deprivation it did not begin to equal the slums near Pentonville Prison in the west of the borough. The investigators preferred the north side of Seven Sisters Road for its more open views towards the green heights of Highgate and the greater number of middle class streets. In view of its enormously rapid expansion in population, from 96,000 in 1851 to 335,000 in 1901, some cracks in the social and architectural fabric were almost bound to appear. By 1928, the population had fallen slightly, to 325,000, but 19.4% were living in overcrowded conditions, a situation aggravated by the almost complete lack of public open spaces within the borough (Finsbury Park itself lay immediately to the north-east). The borough also had the distinction of having both birth and death rates which in 1928 were higher than the average for London as a whole. Approximately half of the population was in employment, with only 4.3% unemployed, similar to neighbouring Hackney (4.2%) and considerably healthier than Bermondsey (9.3%) and Poplar (8.7%). Of the 105,000 employed males, a remarkable 21,200 were transport workers, 9,400 were metal workers and 8,000 were clerks. Of the 55,850 women in work, 14,200 were in 'personal service', 9,200 in textiles and 7,900 were clerical. Despite the growth of the outer suburbs, Islington at this time was still a dormitory for the City. Of the 91,000 who travelled out of the borough to work, 20,000 of these went to the City and 14,000 to Finsbury, mid-way between the two.<sup>46</sup>

We may gain some small idea of the nature of life in the Finsbury Park area from the survey notes made by the investigators in the later 1920s. They appear to have sampled in a random manner, but compiled useful information on occupations and rentals in St Thomas's Road. At number 73, an electrician with a weekly wage of 70-80s occupied one floor of the three storey house together with his wife, son and daughter, paying 35s rent per week, subletting the top floor for 17s 6d per week to a tram conductor who earned 72s per week. Number 133, the first of the two-storey houses, said to be of a good class with seven rooms, was rented for £2 per week by a dairyman earning £5 per week. He occupied a bedroom, parlour, kitchen and scullery on the ground floor, with his family, sub-letting the two upstairs rooms, with a boxroom fitted as a kitchen, for 25s per week to a bus driver earning 90s per week, and his wife and son. At number 104, Ernest Reed, unusually at this time, owned the three storey house himself. A self-employed

decorator, earning over £5 per week, he let the top front room to two old age pensioner sisters for 9s per week and the two first floor rooms to a charabanc driver and his wife, earning £5 per week, for 15s per week. At the north end of the street in a four storey house, number 44, a book keeper earning 80s per week occupied the ground floor and first floor back room with his wife and three children, paying a rent of 32s 6d per week and recouping 7s 6d per week from the letting of the first floor front room to two female old age pensioners and a further 15s per week from the baker's roundsman and his family who rented the three rooms on the top floor. In the street running parallel to St Thomas's Road, Prah Road, only one house was investigated in the course of this survey, number 12, a three storey house which had maintained its middle class status, being lived in by an accountant who earned over £5 per week and paid rental of £70 per annum. The top floor, which might have been expected to have been sublet, was vacant since the house was in the process of being sold to its incoming tenant.<sup>47</sup> It was during this inter-war period that owner occupation of the houses in this area began slowly to develop, although some like the Botwright family are said to have bought their two-storey house in Plimsoll Road as long ago as about 1907.<sup>48</sup>

In her reminiscences, Mrs Botwright recalled a golden age when neighbours 'used to knock and go in and help if someone was queer or something. You'd bake a cake or make a meal and take it in. You didn't have to ask'.<sup>49</sup> But other memories, no less romantic in their way, are not quite so rosy. When Don McCullin, the outstanding photo-journalist was being brought up in Fonthill Road, following his return from wartime evacuation, parts of Finsbury Park were in serious decline: 'All of us returning from the country experienced great difficulty settling back into our impoverished urban homes. I know the smell of poverty as well as I know the stink of bomb-shelters and chicken houses'.<sup>50</sup> He characterised the notorious Campbell Road, 'home to thieves, punch-up artists and every other known type of criminal', in a powerfully resonant phrase as 'a place beyond poverty'.<sup>51</sup> But as Jerry White has shown, 'Campbell Bunk' was peculiarly disastrous. As Booth's investigators had observed, they could find no reason for this street where thieves and prostitutes congregated becoming so bad. Whilst the unusually philosophical and observant Inspector Dyball had noted a rise in crime as the end of the century approached, it being the general experience that there was 'more crime in periods of good trade than in hard times', there was little to account for the phenomenon of Campbell Road.<sup>52</sup> Prostitution, a profession which was still giving non-participants cause for concern in the early 1980s, was very prevalent in Finsbury Park, but far from uniquely. Although there were several 'suspected houses' north of the Seven Sisters Road,<sup>53</sup> this was a matter of general suburban concern. As the pre-eminent commentator on such matters, 'Walter' recorded the closure of 'bagnios' in central London, for reasons of 'public purity', although this was not in his view to the betterment of public morals, and noted that 'the cosy haunts of Venus, are now nearer the suburbs',<sup>54</sup> a possibly unlooked-for aspect of unregulated growth.

More generally acceptable commercial activity abounded in the Finsbury Park and Holloway districts. Near Jones's drapery store on Holloway Road, Beales

Restaurant, with assembly rooms attached, did a large luncheon and tea trade with shoppers. It catered for others as well, being licensed and remaining open until 11pm. There were also a number of coffee houses. By the time of Booth's investigations, Holloway Road was well established on the evolutionary ladder, well above Seven Sisters Road. The first stage in the development of the shop was identified by Booth as the pre-shop, semi-detached house with a long garden in front. Onto this, in stage two, a long single-storied shop could then be built. The third stage involved the demolition of the whole and its rebuilding as one huge shop with rooms for work people, or flats, above. Seven Sisters Road was in the second phase in the late nineteenth century whilst the east side of Holloway Road, the Jones Brothers side, was in the third, climactic stage.<sup>55</sup> Distance up the architectural evolutionary ladder did not guarantee continuous commercial success. The small shops on Hornsey Road were said to do better business with the surrounding neighbourhood than better shops on the major thoroughfares since they offered credit.<sup>56</sup> On Blackstock Road, the shops were less good than those on the Seven Sisters Road, which in turn were of lower quality than the new shops on Stroud Green Road (Fig.12). Blackstock Road was perhaps more notable for its light industrial enterprises than for its retailing, with a considerable number of factories, piano works and bedstead works positioned behind the houses and shops.<sup>57</sup>

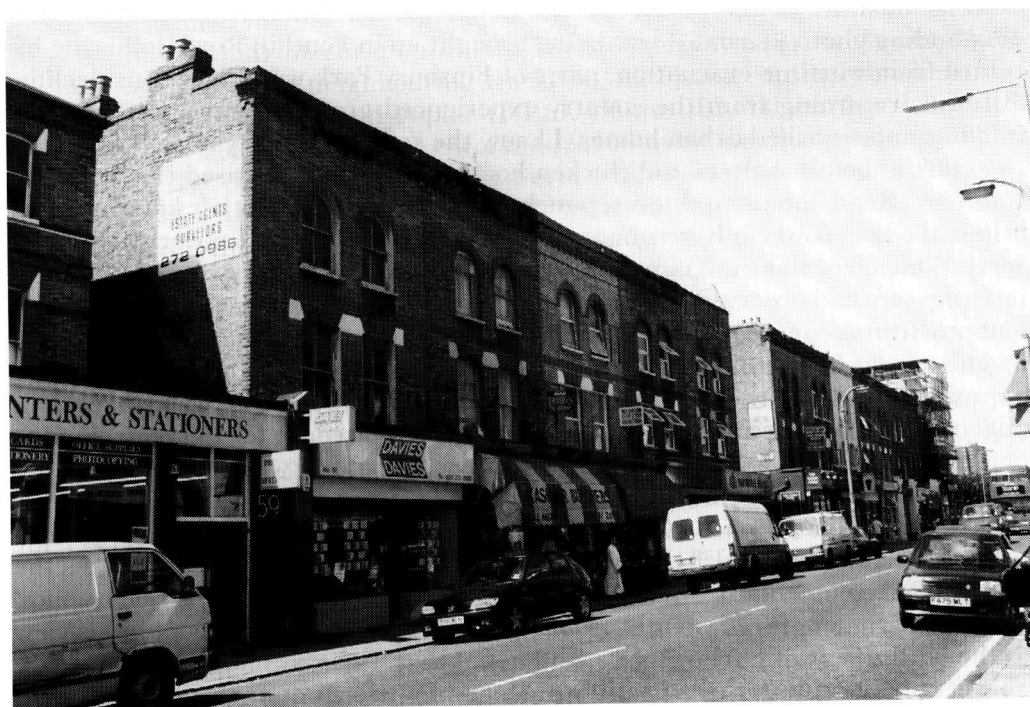


Fig. 12

Stroud Green Road, nos.59-85

## FINSBURY PARK TODAY

Despite a very considerable and consistent fall in population in Islington from its highpoint in the early years of the century, to 164,686 in 1991, the borough was still more densely populated at 110.7 persons per hectare than inner London as a whole, the green space elsewhere helping to reduce the average density to 78.1 persons per hectare. Within households there was still significant overcrowding in parts of the borough. In the Tollington neighbourhood, the part of Finsbury Park which is north of the Seven Sisters Road, the figure of 6.9% of households having more than one person per room was higher than the 4% in the area to the south, Highbury Vale, which includes the notably more prosperous Highbury area. Within the latter neighbourhood, owner-occupation stood in 1991 at 38.5% , with council housing at 36.3%. In Tollington the respective figures of 25.3% and 50.9% reflect the large population within the Andover and Six Acres estates.<sup>58</sup>

While Finsbury Park remains an area with a reputation for transience, Islington as a whole actually appeared to be slightly more stable in 1991 than the rest of London with 13.1% of borough residents moving addresses one year before the census and 13.7% within the city as a whole. Finsbury Park is also an area which is perceived as being home to a wide range of well-defined and well-established ethnic groups, but in this respect it does not differ greatly from the rest of inner London. Contrary to popular perceptions, a remarkably small percentage of people identified in the census had been born outside the United Kingdom. The figures for population and working activity also tend to show a broad similarity with the rest of the inner city with overall employment standing at about 50%, and within that population, a little over 50% being employed in management, technical and skilled non-manual work. There are no obvious indicators showing significant differences between Finsbury Park, the rest of the borough of Islington and inner London as a whole.<sup>59</sup> But there remain perceptions of difference and it may be that these are a function of a basic human desire to classify, to distinguish and to maintain individuality whilst remaining secure within the confines of the group. That there was some decline in the quality of life in the Finsbury Park area during the middle years of the twentieth century seems to be clear, although more research is needed on the period, but it may be that either its extent has been exaggerated or recent improvements have been more dramatic than has so far been recognised.

There is a strong element of determinism in the social commentaries of those who have carried out surveys within London, an expectation of inevitable decline which is especially noticeable in discussions which relate to or bear upon suburban Finsbury Park. This may be a strategy designed to inure the investigator from disappointment. As Paul Barker remarked recently, 'Even the pigeons look tougher than in other streets'<sup>60</sup> and Charles Jennings wondered whether he had identified a 'depressed self-effacement ...a kind of terse reclusiveness' within the area.<sup>61</sup> Many of the current residents who appreciate the landscape beyond the railway lines and main roads, and have themselves done much to improve the quality of local life, would not share these sentiments. Booth's investigators however would at least have recognised them: 'Of the Tufnell Park area, from which the rich are

now going, it is said that if the new houses are of the same kind as have been put up in Corinne and Hugo Roads, the whole neighbourhood will inevitably go down rapidly; for the poor and rough will press into it from all sides'.<sup>62</sup> The poor and rough, like water finding its level, or a bacillus or invasive weapon threatening all tissues in its path, inevitably will press in and find a way, in this reading, wittingly or otherwise to undermine the social fabric and wreak havoc on the body corporate. But being pray to the forces of history is a condition of human existence rather than a factor in an ill-disguised class struggle: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.<sup>63</sup>

History may also, in an optimistic reading, provided that its context and evolution are understood, be a liberating dream and act as a springboard for future action and development. As the three local authorities – Hackney, Haringey and Islington – begin at last to work together on a Regeneration Plan for the Finsbury Park area, we may hope that the weight of history and tradition which help to sustain a long engendered sense of place, proves to be more inspiration than burden. It should also offer a warning. One of the factors which has caused the area to take the form which it has and has helped it to adapt, survive and accommodate has been, arguably, an absence of planning. Perhaps a regeneration plan for Finsbury Park should have at its heart a humble non-plan which is predicated on a perception which appears to be seldom understood by either national or local governments, that 'it is very hard to know what is good for other people'.<sup>64</sup>

#### SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The census returns for 1851-91 are on microfilm in Islington Central Library; the Vestry of St. Mary Islington Surveyor's drainage plans are in the Islington Borough Surveyor's Department. Both the Booth and *New Survey of London Life and Labour* papers are in the archives department of the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics. Cuttings, papers and postcards relating to the Park are in Haringey Local History Library, Bruce Castle, Tottenham. Photographs of Finsbury Park as transport interchange are in the London Transport Museum. We are grateful to the staff of these institutions and we are indebted to our colleague at the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, Dr Ann Robey, for her considerable help with the research which was carried out therein. We are grateful also to our colleague Andy Donald for drawing the map and ground plan.

#### NOTES

1. *Building Design*, (30th January 1998), 1 & 6.
2. Marcus, G., *The Dustbin of History*, (London 1997), 23.
3. The tangible results of these initiatives have included photographic exhibitions in Deptford and Ilford (1999) and the following publications: Bold, J., 'If we were never there, we cannot be here

- Suburban thoughts', *Vernacular Architecture Newsletter* (USA), 74, (1997), 7-10; Bold, J. and Guillery, P., 'Historical Assessment of Suburbs', *Urban Design Quarterly*, 66, (1998), 24-7; Morrison, K. and Robey, A., *One Hundred Years of Suburbia*, (London 1999); and a substantial unpublished report: Guillery, P. and Herman, B., *Deptford Houses: 1650 to 1800*, (London 1998), a summary version of which will be published in *Vernacular Architecture*, (1999). P. Guillery is continuing to carry out survey work on London's smaller suburban houses of the eighteenth century.
4. It may be a source of regret that the local authorities like the government use a very narrow definition of culture. All of the topics in this list are culturally determined.
  5. Caplin, E., *Tollington: The Contemporary History of a Neighbourhood*, (London 1998).
  6. Coleman, A., *Utopia on Trial – Vision and Reality in Planned Housing*, (London 1985).
  7. Caplin, *op.cit.*, 38.
  8. A shop owner quoted in Barker, P., 'Observations', *New Statesman*, (26th September 1997), 73.
  9. Ballou, H., *The Paris of Henri IV*, Cambridge, (Mass. and London 1991), 220-33.
  10. Booth, C., *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 3rd series, 1, (London 1902), 115.
  11. Cherry, B. and Pevsner, N., *London 4: North*, (Harmondsworth 1998).
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  13. LCC, *London Parks and Open Spaces*, 1906, quoted in Beresford, C., *Finsbury Park Landscape History Study*, (1996).
  14. Hinchcliffe, T., 'Highbury New Park: A Nineteenth-Century Middle-Class Suburb', *The London Journal*, 7/1, (1981), 29-44; and 'The Park that never was', *The Finsbury Parker*, 42, (1983); see also Dr Hinchcliffe's PhD thesis, *The Housing Market in Islington between the Wars*, University College, London (1991).
  15. *The Times*, (9th August 1869).
  16. White, J., *The Worst Street in North London*, (London 1986), 12.
  17. Williams, M.N., 'Rural Finsbury Park', *Hornsey Historical Society Bulletin* 25, (1984).
  18. Booth papers, A37.
  19. Caplin, *op.cit.*, 12-15.
  20. Booth papers, A37.
  21. *Ibid.*
  22. *Ibid.*
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. Booth papers, B324.
  25. *Ibid.*
  26. Booth, C., *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 1st series: Poverty, 2, (London 1904), 24.
  27. Booth papers, A36.
  28. Booth 1904, *op.cit.*, 23.
  29. Surveyor's drainage plans 15/5881; Caplin, *op.cit.*, 16-17; VCH, *A History of Middlesex*, VIII, (Oxford 1985), 37.
  30. Surveyor's drainage plans 17/6608-9, 6336, 6428.
  31. VCH, *op.cit.*, 76; Macpherson, H., ed., *John Spedan Lewis 1885-1963*, (1985).
  32. Booth 1904, *op.cit.*, 24.
  33. *New Survey of London Life and Labour* papers, card no. 1364.
  34. Islington Central Library, bomb damage cards.
  35. Willats, E.A., *Streets with a Story – The Book of Islington*, (London 1987).
  36. Islington Central Library, bomb damage cards.
  37. Caplin, *op.cit.*
  38. Booth papers, B348.
  39. Surveyor's drainage plans 22/7942, 8023, 8032, 8092, 8137, 8161; 23/8333; 24/8499, 8511, 8561, 8642; 25/8827.
  40. Barker, T.C. and Robbins, M., *A History of London Transport*, I, (London 1975), 214-8; II, (London 1976), 31 & 211; Rose, D., *The London Underground, A Diagrammatic History*, (London 1986).
  41. English Heritage, *Buildings at Risk* [in Greater London], (London 1998), 125.
  42. Surveyor's drainage plans 13/5299; 14/5508, 5647, 5728; 24/8476, 8478, 8540; 25/8700.

