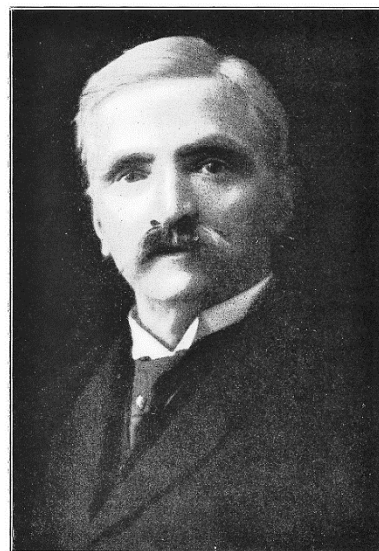


The Willesden Green Library story, 1894 to 2019.

The parish of Willesden had been a farming area since Saxon times, but its population began to grow during the 19th century. Around 20,000 people lived here when it voted to have its own Local Board in 1875, and there were more than 61,000 residents in its local government area by 1891. It was early that year when a number of residents met at the home of a Local Board member, W. B. Luke, to discuss a suggestion that Willesden should set up free public libraries for its citizens.

Mr W. B. Luke.

[Photo from "The Willesden Library Service, 1894 to 1954"]

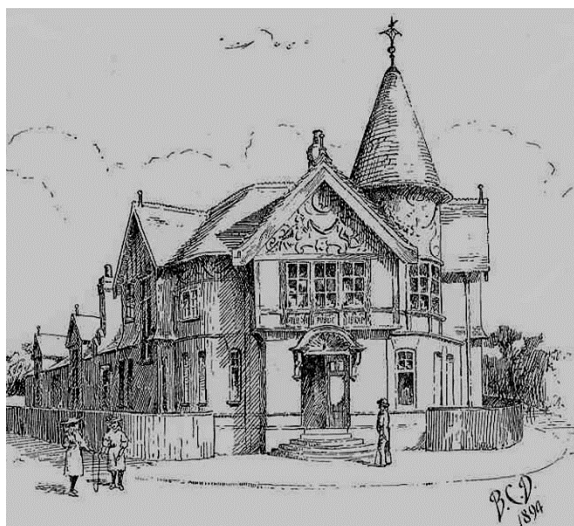


In order for Willesden to adopt the Public Libraries Acts, a majority of ratepayers in the district would need to vote in favour of paying an extra penny in the pound on their rates each year. Mr Luke and his supporters persuaded the Local Board to hold a ballot, and then campaigned for a "yes" vote. They promised that if successful, each of the three main centres in the area, Harlesden, Kilburn and Willesden Green, would have its own public library. These would:

'... provide the means of self-instruction to those who wish to learn; of recreation to the weary worker, and the opportunity of research to the studious. They furnish a place of safe and healthful resort to young people and they develop intelligence, sobriety and self-respect in both young and old.'

Despite vocal opposition from some residents, who considered public libraries to be an unnecessary waste of money, Willesden's ratepayers voted in favour, by 2,257 to 1,070, in the poll held on 24 February 1891.

Willesden Local Board set up separate Library Committees, and acquired sites, for the three libraries, and split the amount raised by the penny rate (around £1,100 a year) in proportion to the population to be served by each. Willesden Green, which had grown rapidly after the Metropolitan Railway reached the area in 1879, received 30% of the funds. Its committee held an architectural competition to design its library, and out of the five entries chose that by Messrs Newman & Newman (who also designed the hospital in Harlesden Road, and Town Hall in Dyne Road, in the 1890's).



Willesden Green Library, from Willesden Lane (soon to be renamed Willesden High Road).


[Source: Brent Archives - Drawing from 1894]

The two storey library building, with single storey wings along Brondesbury Park and Grange Road, was built by Messrs Sabey & Son of Islington. It cost £3,200, of which the Library Committee borrowed £2,700, repayable over 30 years. The Kilburn and Harlesden committees opened their public libraries on 30 January and 14 February 1894 respectively, but it was not until a few months later that the Willesden Green building was ready.

The opening of Willesden Green Library by Irwin Cox M.P. (the member for the Harrow constituency, which included Willesden at that time) was celebrated on 18 July 1894, with a musical evening in the Reading Room. The library had a stock of 4,968 books, many of which had been donated by local residents (including 783 from Mr W. North, one of the original supporters of the public libraries campaign). Other donations included works of art for the walls of the Reading Room, and weekly or monthly newspapers and magazines for readers to enjoy there. The library's lending department was not available until November 1894. Readers did not have access to the book shelves, but had to choose what they wanted to borrow from a catalogue, then hope that it was not already on loan to someone else!

The programme of music for the opening of Willesden Green Library on 18 July 1894.

[Source: Brent Archives]



Willesden Green Public Library.
Opening Ceremony 18th July, 1894.

Programme of Music.

Piano Solo - *Blasodie Hongroise* - Liszt
 MRS. WOODLEY STOCKER.

Duet -
 MR. FREDERICK WHITAKER & MR. SWABEY RUSSELL.

Song - - - *Boys' Warlin'* - Hope Temple
 MISS BESSIE ELLIOTT.

Song - - - *The Promise of Life* - Cowen
 MR. FREDERICK WHITAKER.

Solo Violin { a. *Gondoliera* - - - Ries
 { b. *Marurka* - - - Wieniawski
 MISS CLARA FISHER.

Song - - - *A Song of Thanksgiving* - Allitsen
 MR. SWABEY RUSSELL.

Song - - - *The Irish Piper* - Molloy
 MISS BESSIE ELLIOTT.

Piano Solo - *Benover Steppens* - F. Schytte
 MRS. WOODLEY STOCKER.

Duet - - *Such Merry Men are we* - Marzials
 MR. FREDERICK WHITAKER & MR. SWABEY RUSSELL.

The Pianoforte kindly lent by Mr. W. G. THOMAS, 7 Park Terrace, and the Flowers and Plants by Mr. H. WRIGHT, Station Terrace, Willesden Green.

The committee had appointed 21 year-old Frank Chennell as Willesden Green's Librarian. He



lived in a small flat on the first floor of the building, and actively promoted the use of the library by local people. As well as the usual library services during the day, the Reading Room was used in the evenings for talks, discussions and for concerts (*'Proceeds to be devoted to the Purchase of New Books'*).

Drawing of Willesden Green "free library", from the "American Architect" magazine, May 1896.

[Source: Brent Archives]

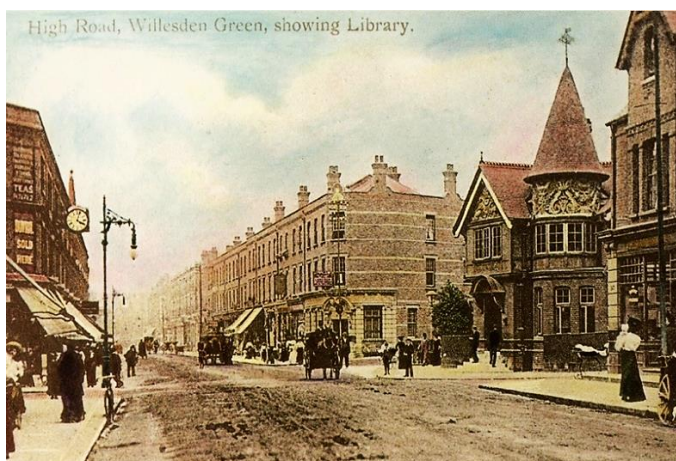
Even before the new public libraries had opened, the "Willesden Chronicle" published a letter urging them to preserve and catalogue local records: *'... every parish throughout the kingdom contains within its limits certain books and documents of the highest value, which it is the duty of this generation to hand down in a good condition to their successors. Every scrap of paper, whether it be a Vestry minute or only a placard on a hoarding, will, if faithfully preserved, become in two, three or five hundred years time a historical document of immense value.'* Frank Chennell took this advice, and began collecting local material which still forms a valuable part of the Brent Museum and Archives collections today.

Part of the High Road, including the library, from the 1898 Kelly's Directory of Willesden.

[Source: Brent Archives – Kelly's Directories]

STREET DIRECTORY—1898.		HIG
HIGH ROAD,		Cook William (Gor-
Willesden Green. MAP C4,		hambury)
B4, A4.	63 Newman Henry,	
From Walm lane & Wil-	chimney cleaner	
lesden lane to Willesden	65 Stevens Josph., blacksmith,	
Church.	69 COWLEY & DRAKE,	
SOUTH SIDE.	builders & decorators	
1 Morling Chas. Hy., dyer	95 <i>Willesden Green Public</i>	
1 & 278 Beckett E. & Co.,	<i>Library</i> ; Frank E.	
coal merchants	Chennell, Librarian	
3 & 138 PEMBERTON &	<i>Fire Alarm</i>	
MALCOLM, chemists	<i>Fire Escape</i>	
3 Stringer & Stringer,	<i>Grange rd.</i>	
solicitors	97 Warrington Harry,	
3 Stringer G. R. H., com-	bootmaker	
missioner for oaths	99 Burch John, greengr.	
5 LONDON & SOUTH	101 Gilbert Philip W., hair-	
WESTERN BANK	dresser	
LIMITED (Willes-	103 Madden Jas., furn. dlr.	
den Green branch);	105 Bedwell Wm., dining	
S. Victor R. Scott,	rooms	
manager	107 Heron John, tobac.	

By 1901, the population of Willesden had grown even faster. It was the largest of any Urban



District in Middlesex, with around 114,000 people (by contrast, the neighbouring Districts of Wembley and Kingsbury, which would combine with it 64 years later to form the London Borough of Brent, only had around 4,500 and 750 inhabitants respectively). Willesden Green's population had doubled since 1891, with the public library at the heart of its busy High Road.

The High Road and library, early 1900's postcard.
[Source: Brent Archives online image 7862]

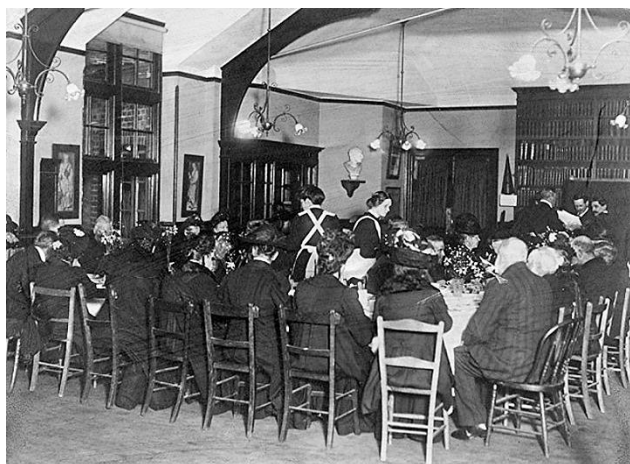
The rising population meant growing pressure on its library service. Even after two small rooms above the entrance were adapted for public use in 1900, the library was often congested, lending 70,000 books a year. The committee knew its share of the penny rate was insufficient to fund an extension, so made a request for financial help to the philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie was a Scottish immigrant, who had made a fortune from steel manufacture in America, and spent his last 20 years giving away most of his wealth to good causes.

Andrew Carnegie had already donated £3,000, to extend a small reading room at Kensal Rise (opened in 1900 by the American author Mark Twain) into a full public library, and agreed to give the same amount to Willesden Green. The two wings of the building were increased from one to two storeys high, and the enlarged Willesden Green Library was opened on 26 April 1907.



The library in 1907, showing the Grange Road side of the new extension.
[Source: Brent Archives]

The larger library building continued to host events, as well as providing a place where any local resident could read or borrow books. Stanley Ball had come to work for the Local Board in 1875. He was a keen photographer of local scenes (in those days using glass plate slides to take his pictures). By the early 1900's, he was Clerk to Willesden Urban District Council, and



used to give talks about the area, illustrated with his "magic lantern" slides. He also donated pictures to the library, and organised parties for elderly residents in the Reading Room. When he retired, after the First World War, he gave the library his glass plate photographs (they have since been digitised by Brent Archives).

Stanley Ball's tea party for elderly residents, in the Reading Room at Willesden Green Library, April 1914.

[Source: Brent Archives online image 7615]

In 1920, Willesden U.D.C. considered how its public libraries, which were still run by three local committees, could be organised better. The following year it appointed Frank Chennell as the District's Chief Librarian, under a co-ordination scheme aimed at making more efficient use of staff and books, and providing a better service to the public. Willesden Green Library was made the Central Library, and headquarters for the combined library service. The local collection of historical material was also brought together there.

Postcard showing the High Road and library in the 1920's.

[Source: Brent Archives online image 1464]



An important change introduced under the co-ordination scheme was the "open access" system. For the first time, library users would be able to choose the books they wished to borrow from the shelves! It took until 1929 before this modern idea was fully in use at Willesden Green Library. The population of the District, which had already grown to 165,000 by 1921,



continued to rise, with new housing developments, especially in the north of the area. To ease the pressure that this put on the Central Library, new branch libraries were built at Cricklewood (1929) and Neasden (1931). Frank Chennell finally retired in 1937, leaving the recently-formed Borough of Willesden with a library service it could be proud of.

The Reading Terrace at Neasden Library in 1931, looking over the Recreation Ground and Welsh Harp Reservoir.

[Source: Brent Archives online image 2926]

In the years after the Second World War, not a lot changed at Willesden Green Library. There were minor extensions on a very limited site. From the 1950's onwards, the Council began to acquire properties behind the library, with a view to future expansion. However, when Willesden joined with Wembley in 1965, to form the London Borough of Brent, the library buildings were much as they had been since 1907.

The Reading Room at Willesden Green Library in the 1960's.

[Source: Brent Archives]





Although the Council was aware that a larger library was needed, the situation at Willesden Green remained the same throughout the 1970's. Overcrowding was a real problem. When local people were consulted about the area's needs, the message was clear: *'Residents ... requested that the library facilities should be improved.'*

The Children's Library at Willesden Green, early 1970's.
[Source: Brent Archives online image 781]

Some internal improvements were made, such as better lighting, carpets and modern shelving that allowed more space. However, when the Council's Willesden Green District Plan was published in 1980, its "Leisure and Recreation" section admitted that: *'the Central Library ... is quite inadequate for its present function.'* The Plan promised: *'It is Brent Council's intention to improve and expand the Library facilities in Willesden Green and to include a range of associated community facilities.'*

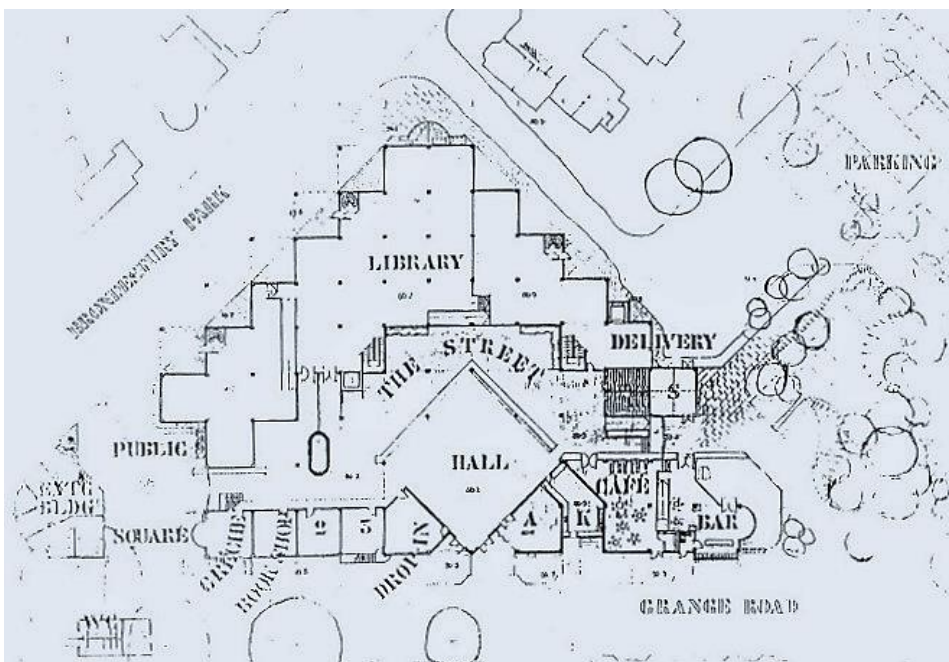
A view inside the library, after some 1970's improvements.

[Source: Brent Archives online image 10751]



In December 1983, the Council's Development Department published its proposals for Willesden Green Library, after further consultation with the local community. Although the "wings" of the existing building would be demolished, it was planned *'... to preserve the little building on the corner, with its turret.'* Behind this would be a public square, then the new and larger library and community centre, with a landscaped area and car park behind that. The plan said that *'high priority has been given in the design to create a feeling of space*

and landscaping – to put back the "Green" in Willesden.'



Proposed Layout Plan for the new Willesden Green Library Centre.

[Source: Brent Archives – "Willesden Green Library", Brent Council Development Dept., December 1983]

Keeping part of the original 1894 library was a controversial issue. In April 1984 the Council decided, by just two votes, to demolish the whole building, as it was said this would save £100,000. However, Councillor Len Snow (who later wrote a number of books on Brent's history), supported by local residents and other Council members, suggested revised plans for the new library centre. He pointed out that: *'If the square was protected by an interesting frontage it would be a haven of peace, and on a sunny day a delight to sit in. The frontage is a charming little building, and it could still be put to good use.'* His arguments finally won the day at a Council meeting in July 1984.

Newspaper report of the Brent Council meeting when the 1894 High Road frontage of the library was saved.

[Source: Brent Archives – cuttings folders]

WTBC 20-7-84

Library frontage has been saved

THE frontage of Willesden Green Library was saved from demolition by Brent Council on Monday.

This follows two years of wrangling about whether or not to demolish the frontage, after the leisure services committee decided in June 1982 to demolish it.

The arguments about the retention of the library frontage have been both in terms of finance and of the look of the building.

Councillor Terry Hanafin said the financial problem had solved itself, because the scheme to develop the library was not on a smaller scale than had been originally thought and would cost only £4 million instead of the originally proposed £5 million.

Also because of the smaller scale of the development it would not be necessary to buy the Mecca building in nearby Grange Road, this would save £80,000.

Councillor David Harvey said that the library was one of the few points of interest in a somewhat dreary road.

Councillor Len Snow supported this view. He said: "I think the old and the new buildings can live handsomely together."

Mr Hanafin said there was a strong local feeling for keeping the old frontage. He said: "Once we decided that we were going to pull it down there was a big reaction."

Chapel End tenants and Residents Association organised a petition urging the council to preserve the library frontage.

**Cutting from the
"Willesden & Brent
Chronicle",
20 July 1984.**



Although the planning application for the new Library Centre, on a larger site behind the existing library, was approved in October 1984, the project suffered from delays and difficulties. It was not until May 1988 that the "wings" of the old Willesden Green Library were demolished, and the remaining part of Victorian building, on the side facing the new open space, sympathetically rebuilt. It had originally been suggested that the old building could be used by Brent's Grange Museum, but instead it was rented out to local charities, including the Brent Irish Advisory Service.

The Victorian library building, 1980's.

[Photo from the "Kilburn Times"]

Willesden Green Library Centre finally opened in October 1989. It was hailed as *'a space-age library for the 21st century'*, and Brent had borrowed £5 million, repayable over 60 years, to finance it. As well as the lending library on the ground floor it had a large reference library and study area on the first floor. (I remember driving my daughters there on Sunday mornings in the early 1990's – it was then the only Brent library open on a Sunday - so that they could do research for their homework, as there was no internet then!) The building also had halls which could be hired for meetings, an art gallery, a privately-run bookshop and a café, and there was a children's play area and open air performance space in the landscaped area behind it.

**Willesden Green Library Centre –
front of the building, from the square.**
[Source: Brent Archives online image 2930]



The library services, and privately run bookshop, were very popular, but the meeting rooms



did not get as much use as those planning the centre had hoped. This led to some changes in the building, including the opening of a small Belle Vue Cinema in the 1990's (the only one in Brent at the time). A "One Stop Shop", where residents could speak to Council staff about any queries or problems with Council services, was also opened in the early 2000's.

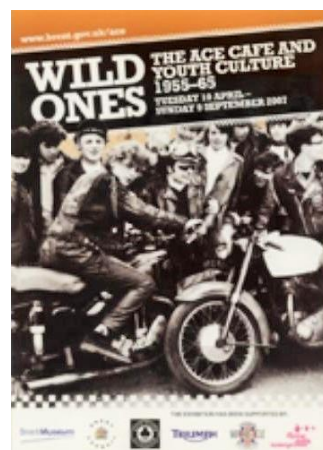
Willesden Green Library Centre in 2007.

[Source: Brent Archives online image 5726]

More major alterations were made in 2005, with the help of a £1.3 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, to create space for a museum and exhibition gallery on the first floor. This allowed Brent's local history museum, originally opened at The Grange (an old house in Neasden) in 1977, to be moved to Willesden Green in 2006. The special exhibition gallery was soon being used for regular displays. In 2009, one end of the reference library was converted so that Brent Archives (which had been moved from the Grange Museum to Cricklewood Library in the 1990's) could be housed alongside the Museum again.

A poster for Brent Museum's "Wild Ones" exhibition, which attracted many visitors to the Library Centre for five months in 2007.

[Source: Brent Archives online image 8549]



Although Willesden Green Library Centre was originally meant to serve the area for 100 years, questions over its future were already being raised by 2010. A survey showed that the building needed essential repairs that would cost around £700,000, and the Council's Regeneration Department considered that it was *'poorly designed and inefficient to run'*. Various options were put forward on how to deal with the problem, but Brent's Director of Regeneration suggested that the best way forward would be to redevelop the site, in partnership with a private developer, including a new library.



In January 2012, Brent's Executive (Cabinet) agreed his proposals for *'a new cultural centre in the south of the Borough, equivalent in quality to the new civic centre in the north, at net zero capital cost to the Council.'*

The 1894 library building, with 1989 library centre behind it, in February 2012.

[Photo by Philip Grant]

Brent Council signed a development partnership contract with Galliford Try Plc in February 2012. Under this agreement the developer would construct a new building (to the value of £10.5 million) for the Council on 30% of the site, in return for being given 70% of the site on which it could build flats for sale (planning permission was later given for 95 flats, none of which would be “affordable housing”). When the outline plans for the new Cultural Centre were published, the Victorian building did not form part of them. Willesden Local History Society launched an online petition objecting to this, which soon gathered 1600 signatures.

Architect's drawing showing original proposed frontage for the Willesden Green Cultural Centre.

[From consultation documents issued, February 2012]



**» Library demolition
Leaders' decision
is sheer vandalism**

Since I heard the news that the old Victorian Willesden library is to be pulled down I have been trying to think of another single feature which characterises Willesden. I can't think of one.

I would imagine that most local people, when asked what to include in some kind of logo or emblem to represent Willesden, would almost certainly include this iconic building with its round tower and ornate moulded details.

If the building were to be vandalised in some way tomorrow, members of Brent Council would no doubt express their utter scorn for the thugs who could do such a thing.

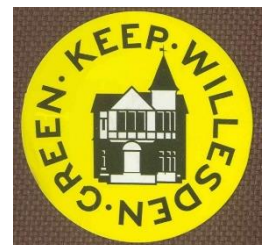
Yet their decision to demolish it is tantamount to institutionalised vandalism. The elected councillors who have approved this to happen on their watch should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

**Brigitte Peyrac
Willesden Green**

Public consultations were held on the redevelopment proposals in February and March 2012, and it was clear that there was significant opposition to them. As well as a strong local feeling that the 1894 library building should be retained, people objected to the loss of the Willesden Bookshop, the car park, and the *'much-needed open space'* which the 1980's rebuilding had created. It was also felt that the proposed temporary library facilities, while the two-year rebuilding was in progress, were inadequate (especially as the Council had already closed six of its twelve public libraries, including Cricklewood, Kensal Rise and Neasden, as part of its unpopular “Libraries Transformation Project” in 2011).

**< A letter published in the
“Brent & Kilburn Times”,
1 March 2012.**

A sticker for the Keep Willesden Green campaign >



A “Keep Willesden Green” campaign group was formed, which launched its own petition against the Library Centre proposals by Brent and Galliford Try. The petition, with over 4,000 signatures, was presented to councillors at a meeting in April 2012. The Council's Executive ‘noted’ their views, and protestors were told that the petition would be treated as an objection to the forthcoming planning application.

**Keep Willesden Green supporters, collecting petition signatures
outside Willesden Green Library Centre, March 2012.**

[Photo from the “Brent & Kilburn Times”]



As part of the consultation process, local people had told the Council and its development partner that demolishing the remaining part of the 1894 library building would breach both Brent's own, and national, planning policies. It was a Locally Listed building (for both its architectural and heritage significance), and an important part of the streetscape in the Willesden Green Conservation Area (which had been designated to preserve its late-Victorian High Road character). Despite this, when Galliford Try's planning application was submitted in early May 2012, it was unchanged from the proposals rejected in the consultation, and still included the demolition of the 1894 building.

The application, which attracted over 400 objections, was due to be considered by Brent's Planning Committee in July 2012. However, shortly before the meeting, it was announced that the application had been withdrawn, *'to allow for further consultation'*. When a new planning



application was submitted in November 2012, the High Road frontage for the proposed Cultural Centre included the 1894 building. (I am proud to have played a role in the campaign to save this part of Willesden Green Library's history.)

The revised artist's impression of the Cultural Centre by AHMM (Alford Hall Monaghan Morris) architects, November 2012.

[From a press release issued at the time]

In March 2013 the revised plans were approved by Brent's Planning Committee, and an application made by a local resident to register the open space, between the 1894 library building and 1989 Library Centre, as a Town or Village Green (used by local people for recreation for at least 20 years) was rejected after a Public Inquiry. Willesden Green Library Centre was closed to the public soon afterwards, and the site handed over to Galliford Try by the end of June 2013.

The Library Centre site, from Grange Road, during demolition, 31 August 2013.

[Photo by Philip Grant]



While work proceeded on the site, library and Archives staff provided the best service they could, across Grange Road, from temporary facilities on the ground floor of George Furness House. By January 2014, the structure of the new flats (in Newman Close, named after the architects of the 1894 library) was taking shape, and construction of the new "Cultural Centre" had just begun.



Work underway on the library site, January 2014.

[Photo by Philip Grant]

One year later, most of the main structural work on the building had been completed, and its finished shape was beginning to emerge. Although local artists were without the gallery that the former Library Centre had provided, they did take the opportunity to use the green hoardings around the site to add some artwork to the scene. The annual “Willesden Green Wassail” event had even left a poem there!

The old and new library buildings about to combine, January 2015.

[Photo by Philip Grant]



When the proposal to redevelop Willesden Green Library Centre had been announced in early 2012, it was hoped that its replacement would open in April 2014. However, it was the summer of 2015 when the new cultural centre, which the Council had decided to call “The Library @ Willesden Green”, finally opened.

The Library at Willesden Green, August 2015.

[Photo by Philip Grant]

The wide entrance lobby, with access from both Brondesbury Park and Grange Road, spans the space between the 1894 library and the new building. It has room for small community exhibitions, which can be enjoyed by visitors on their way to other activities. The ground floor of the new building includes the children’s library and reading area, the art gallery and a café. At the centre of the building is a triangular vertical space, with a staircase at one side, which gives the inside an open feeling and allows air and natural light to reach all areas.

A view inside the ground floor of the library, March 2019.

[Photo by Philip Grant]



As well as a larger adult library area, the first floor of the building includes a performance space, used for films and live events, and an IT learning area. Because of the lottery funding



provided to move the Grange Museum to Willesden Green in 2006, the new building had to include a museum of similar size. The new Brent Museum is on the second floor, along with a gallery for temporary exhibitions, an education room and the Brent Archives search room, where visitors can access a wide range of local history material.

Brent Museum, on the second floor of the library, March 2019.

[Photo by Philip Grant]

The top floor of the building provides office space for library, heritage and other Council staff. The original 2012 redevelopment proposal was partly based on the need for a new “hub” for Council services in the south of the borough, with an enlarged customer contact centre where the public could engage with Council staff face-to-face. However, the new library only has a customer contact point, where the computers and Freephone telephones available can be used to make enquiries to the Civic Centre in Wembley.

The Library at Willesden Green attracted 420,000 visits in 2017/18, with around 200,000 books being issued to borrowers. Its 120 study spaces, 66 public computers and free wi-fi make it a popular place for students, as well as the wider local community. As users enter the building they pass the Reading Room, the shell of the original 1894 library, now opened out inside to provide a bright modern event space.



The Reading Room at the new library.

[Photo from the Brent Libraries website]

While the inside of Willesden Green Library may have changed beyond recognition, the public face of the library on the High Road is little changed from when it first opened in Victorian times. As the much-loved building reaches its 125th anniversary, it still carries a plaque on the outside, reminding us that we have this free public library because local people voted for it.



The plaque on the front of Willesden Green Library.

[Photo by Philip Grant]

Philip Grant, Wembley History Society, March 2019.