

## The Preston Story – Part 4

We left [Part 3](#) of the Preston Story in the early 60s – just before two major political changes in the area. Firstly, Preston, along with the rest of Wembley, merged with Willesden in 1965 to form the new London Borough of Brent; followed in 1974 with the creation of a new Brent North constituency which has had just two MPs since its creation in 1974: the Conservative Rhodes Boyson until his defeat in the 1997 landslide by Labour's Barry Gardiner.



**1. Preston Road, from the Carlton Avenue East junction, early 1960s.** (Brent Archives online image 8620)

Preston's population in 2001 was 12,844 – scarcely changing from the 1951 figure of 12,408 – but by 2011 it had risen by 20.48% to 15,474. The growth mainly came with the building of the Hirst Crescent estate on a brownfield site (the former GEC Research Centre) on East Lane, plus the new flats around Strathcona Road, bringing much-needed housing into the area. The Council's analysis of changes between the two censuses can be found [here](#). There is continuing pressure on housing and consequent concerns over the possible exploitation of tenants in houses of multiple occupation.



**2. Hirst Crescent, from East Lane.** (Image from Google Maps street view)

To help me look back at the last 50 years and to bring Preston's history up to date, I decide to canvass my neighbours and ask them what positive things had happened locally and what they saw as the changes to the look or feel of the area since they arrived.

One of the things that everyone mentioned was the increased **diversity** of the local population - though as we have seen, people have been moving into Preston looking for work since the early 19th century and in the 20<sup>th</sup> to find new homes in pleasant suburban surroundings. Brent Council's 2014 [Diversity Profile](#) for Preston is slightly dated but shows in 2011 that Preston had a 70.1% black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) population. Each of these communities needs a history of its own experience and, as only an outline can be shown here, I hope someone will come forward to do that.



**3. A Preston Park Primary School class c.1992, showing the diversity of families in the area.**

Many people arriving in Preston from 1970 were of Asian heritage, expelled from East Africa, first Kenya and, after the 1971 Amin coup, from Uganda. Many were middle class families – engineers, officials and shop-owners – starting new lives and businesses, and establishing religious, social and cultural communities in the most difficult of circumstances.

In the late 1980s, Preston had a substantial Japanese population, large enough to warrant a Japanese estate agent on Preston Road. Many worked for Japanese companies in the City. During the 1990s Japanese recession, most were recalled and disappeared quickly over the school holidays, leaving children wondering where their school friends had gone. In more recent years EU citizens, particularly from Poland and Romania, have moved into the area, mainly to find work.



**4. Wembley United Synagogue (rebuilt 1956), Forty Lane.** (Image from Brent Council's heritage Local List)



The Jewish Community was perhaps the first to settle as a distinct group in the 1920s, moving from poor housing in East London to modern homes and green surroundings. A United Synagogue was established in Forty Avenue in the 1930s, followed by the Harrow and Wembley Progressive Synagogue [1948] at 326 Preston Road, on the site of what was then the Preston Lawn Tennis Club. In recent years they moved to Harrow and the site is now Blackberry Court and a Pentecostal Church. A second United Synagogue was opened in Shaftesbury Avenue in 1958.

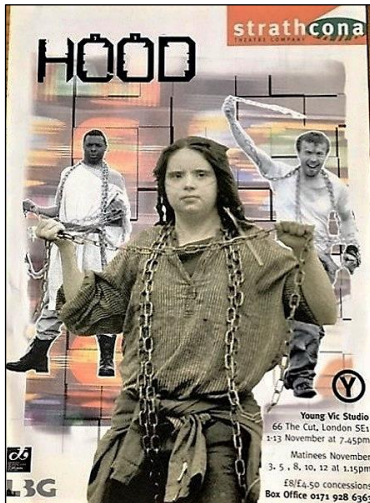
In the 1950s, political change in the Middle East decided many Jews in Arab countries to move to the UK. Members of this Sephardi tradition moved to Edinburgh House on Forty Avenue in 1970, while another Sephardi group, the Neveh Shalom Community with members from North Africa, India and the Middle East, moved to 27 Windermere Avenue in 1970 and then to 352 - 354 Preston Road in 1983. There is still a strong Jewish presence in Preston today, though the number of active synagogue members is in decline. The Jewish Free School [est. 1732] one of Europe's largest Jewish secondary schools, moved to new premises in The Mall in 2002.



**5. The Grade II listed Church of the Ascension, The Avenue, c.1960.** (Brent Archives online image 8641)

Other places of worship in Preston include the Catholic parish hall, built in Carlton Avenue East on land originally belonging to South Forty Farm in 1932. The present church dedicated to St Erconwald, a 7<sup>th</sup> century Bishop of London, opened in 1970. There are also three Anglican churches. St Augustine in Forty Avenue was built as a wooden church in 1913 but suffered damage during the Second World War and was re-built 1953. The 1957 Church of the Ascension [[see Part 3](#)] in The Avenue is notable for its stained glass by Carter Shapland. The Church of the Annunciation in Windermere Ave was built in 1938. There are also three more recent Christian Fellowship or Pentecostal Churches.

One of the more dynamic projects to come out of Preston was the Strathcona Theatre Company. Strathcona was set up in the late 1970s as a social education centre for young adults with learning difficulties, with an ethos radically different from the old adult training centres which focussed on preparing people for unskilled industrial work. The young, enthusiastic staff offered courses in drama, art, music, pottery, sports and training for independent living - uncovering talents and discovering skills in a different way.



#### 6. Poster for Strathcona Theatre Company's 1999 production, "Hood".

Its Theatre Company, formed in 1982 and running for over 20 years, staged productions at the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, at many other venues in the UK and at international festivals in Europe. In 1983, the Guardian described it as "The UK's leading disabled theatre company". The poster above was for their retelling of the Robin Hood legend, where a disparate group of eco-warriors band together to fight for their right to live in a better world. The play was devised and scripted by Ann Cleary and Ian McCurrach (Artistic Directors).

The Strathcona Centre was closed around 2012, and the adults who attended were sent to other services. The building re-opened in 2014 as Roe Green Strathcona School, an offshoot of an existing Junior school in Kingsbury. Despite protests, in October 2019 Brent Council voted to close Strathcona School in 2022 – the future of the building is unknown.



#### 7. Original 1930s decorative tilework, still visible beside a shop between the railway and Elmstead Avenue.

A negative change noticed by my Preston 'focus group' was a perceived growing lack of variety in shops on Preston Road since the 1960s – and the untidy frontages, almost destroying the 1930s faience work between each shop. They had nostalgic memories of a specialist cheese shop, *Buttons & Bows* haberdashers, a drapers', a [vinyl] record store – and the exciting new technology of Variety Videos which allowed films to be watched in your own home! A few older shops remain: *All Seasons* greengrocers, Gledhill hardware – and Parkway bakery, the lone survivor of a parade of Jewish shops. The introduction of the 223 bus route has eased access to both Preston and Harrow shops.



**8. A parade of shops on Preston Road (east side), between Elmstead Avenue and Carlton Avenue East.**

Everybody regretted the loss of the Woolworth store not just as a source of “bits and pieces”, but as a social centre where people bumped into each other. “Woolworths made it a real shopping centre”. But many welcome the new availability of Mediterranean, Indian and Middle Eastern foods in “shops that smelt like holidays” and “cafes with pavement seating - who would have thought!” In a spirit of investigative journalism, I walked the ‘mean street’ that is Preston Road and my main conclusions were that we locals must be very vain – I counted 16 hair / grooming salons [9 specifically for men] AND there must still be a healthy demand to live in Preston as there are nine estate agents.



**9. The Century Tavern, Forty Avenue, demolished for Century House. (From the [Closed Pubs](#) website)**

Other losses noted were the Century Tavern [1928] named after the Century Sports Ground and built on the site of South Forty Farmhouse on Forty Avenue - and the *Wembley Observer*, the last really local newspaper. However, there have been some ‘cultural’ gains – The Windermere, The Fleadh and the Music Room offer live music, and the Preston Community Library has author events, a weekly film club and occasional special film seasons.



**10. Preston Community Library, 2020.**



The campaign to save Preston's Library was a remarkable display of community solidarity. The area had been served by a fondly remembered mobile library until 1964, when the current library opened in Carlton Avenue East. After the Council's decision in 2011 to close 6 of its 12 libraries, campaigners in each of the affected areas came together under the banner of Brent S.O.S. [Save our Six] Libraries to fight to save the service. Public meetings were held, councillors, MPs and the Department of Culture Media & Sport lobbied – over 6,000 people in Preston alone signed a petition opposing the closure.



#### 11. Poster for the Brent S.O.S. Libraries campaign, 2011.

Brent SOS Libraries took the country's first legal action to challenge library closures in July 2011. The High Court verdict in October 2011 went against us and the libraries were immediately boarded up. An Appeal against the decision was also rejected in December and the application to take the case to the Supreme Court was denied. A full account of the judicial review and the Appeal can be found [here](#). The boarding around Preston Library became known as the "Wall of Shame" which, with its popular support from local artists and schoolchildren, became a major embarrassment to the Council over the next few weeks, and in January 2012 contractors pulled it down.



#### 12. Two scenes of the Wall of Shame at Preston Library, late 2011.

The building was then restructured internally and used for 4 years as additional classrooms for local schools, who allowed some access for library activities. In 2015, the Council formalised this access with a licence and in 2016 the building was opened fully as a volunteer-run community library. The Library is the only local non-commercial and secular space that is open to all, and it now offers a wide range of classes, events and activities as well as core library services. It was "Highly Commended" in *The Bookseller's* 2019 Library of the Year shortlist.

The Library is currently closed due to the pandemic – but will hopefully re-open in the autumn. The Council has plans to re-develop the site, but space for a new library is included.



**13. Geraldine Cooke introduces Kamila Shamsie (seated right) at Preston Community Library, June 2018.**

In June 2018, at the first public event since she won the prestigious Women's Prize for Fiction, author Kamila Shamsie visited Preston Community Library to discuss her new book *Home Fire*. The event was a full house, and the windows were wide open so people could stand outside and hear her. The novel is set in Preston, and features the library campaign. Ms Shamsie told the *Kilburn Times* "It feels right to do it here. I want the people of the neighbourhood to feel I've done right by them".



**14. A scene from the 1959 film *Too Many Crooks*. (Image from the internet)**

Allegedly, the Preston area has been used many times for film and TV locations. I have found evidence for Preston being shown in the 1959 film [Too Many Crooks](#) – in which incompetent villains use a hearse in a kidnapping. It was filmed in Carlton Avenue East, Forty Avenue and various places on Barn Hill. The photo above shows the junction of Carlton Avenue East and Preston Road. The film starred Terry-Thomas, George Cole, Sid James and Bernard Bresslaw.

Preston also 'stars' in *Gourmet Nights*, an episode of *Fawlty Towers* where Basil collects a takeaway meal from 'André's Restaurant', actually the Wings Restaurant on Preston Road, and then (famously) attacks his car when it breaks down [Mentmore Gardens]. Readers may know of other films? We have had at least one celebrity - the British, Commonwealth and European heavyweight boxing champion [Sir Henry Cooper](#) lived in Ledway Drive, and had a greengrocer's shop in Ealing Road, Wembley, in the 1960s.



**15. Wrigleys chewing gum factory, now Wembley Commercial Centre, East Lane. (From Brent's Local List)**

Only a few architecturally important buildings have survived in Preston Ward and I have covered them all in these articles. Three buildings have national Grade 2 listing: The Windermere, the Church of the Ascension and the [Wembley Park Lodge](#) on Wembley Hill Road, which was severely damaged by fire some years ago. In addition, there are three on Brent's local list: the Edwardian style houses at 299-313 Preston Road, the 1926 Wrigleys factory and the 1956 Wembley United Synagogue. For some reason, the Victorian villas, now [356-358 Preston Road](#) – the oldest surviving houses in Preston - have not been listed.



**16. 'The Pearl of Metroland', Forty Avenue, in 2018.**

We also have one popular Open House property, the 'Pearl of Metroland', a 1924 house in Forty Avenue decorated in the original style, but with a 'Mondrian' kitchen in 3 colours. And we have great open spaces – Barn Hill, Preston Park and Tenterden playing fields – secured for public use by Wembley Council and Middlesex County Council.

Go look at all these places – and be ready to protect them if necessary. Even local listing does not ensure survival, as we have seen in the recent decision on [1 Morland Gardens](#). Not everything can or should be protected – and housing needs, in particular, are pressing - but some buildings do add beauty to our environment, and help to tell the story of where we live.

I hope this series of articles has encouraged people to look about them, at the shops and streets they see every day in this very ordinary suburb, and think about the 1000s of people who were here before them – how they lived and worked and where they came from.

My thanks go to Philip Grant of Wembley History Society, to Brent Archives for help with images, and to the PCL volunteers who gave me ideas on what should go into this final Part.

**Chris Coates, Preston Community Library / Wembley History Society, August 2020.**

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.