from the archive: Brent in the 19th century

Guide to Resources

This pack contains a variety of documents devised from material held in the Brent Archives. It includes facsimiles, reprints, and items edited to use for group learning.

The documents can be used to facilitate local history studies, or general curriculum History and Geography topics. Together, they illustrate how London evolved over the past 200 years, from a city surrounded by rural communities into a sprawling metropolis. Individual items can be used to illustrate the influence of government policy, transport, and private enterprise on the growth of London.

The resources can be printed at A4 size. They can also be viewed via a whiteboard or using a laptop and projector: View in Full Screen mode and use the keyboard cursors to move between pages.

A) Map of ‘Brent’ c1819, illustrating the sparse, dispersed population and predominance of agricultural land. While the area shown corresponds with the boundaries of modern Brent, the London Borough of Brent was established only in 1965.

Most of today’s main roads are evident in the map, as are the Grand Union Junction Canal (1801) and its feeder (c.1811). The feeder flows directly from the River Brent (the Welsh harp Reservoir had not been built).

(Composite based on original maps in the Brent Archives)

Question & activity ideas:

• Using a clear overlay or a copy of a modern map, find out how many roads are still the same
• How many place names can you still recognise, and how many are different?
• Count the greens and farms – what does this tell you about Brent at that time?

B) Extract from an Act of Enclosure for Willesden, 1815. A series of enclosure acts during the late 18th and early 19th century resulted in large areas of land being ‘privatised’ by wealthy landowners. Previously, ‘common’ land, such as heaths, had been available and used by local people, for example for grazing livestock or keeping small plots to grow vegetables. The policy of enclosure had severe consequences for many poorer people who were displaced from the land.
Question & activity ideas:

• Find out more about enclosure.
• What place-names can you recognise? What are their modern names?
• There are three ways of writing Brondesbury and one short version – what were they?
• Where are Mapesbury and Oxgate?

C) View from the towpath of the Grand Union Canal towards the Grand Union Arms pub on Acton Lane, Harlesden. The construction of canals in the late 18th and early 19th century significantly increased the time taken to transport goods and materials across Britain, aiding the era’s economic boom. A narrow boat can just be seen passed beneath the bridge. Just beyond the bridge were Sabey’s Wharf and the site of the future power station. Note the evidence of horsepower on the towpath. Canals did not flourish long, being quickly superceded by the railways.

(Brent Archives number: 1123)

Question & activity ideas:

• What were canals used for in the 19th century? Why?
• Organise a walk along one of the local canals and observe the changing use and environment.

D) Early photograph of agricultural workers, mid 19th century, thought to have been taken in Wembley. The steam-powered threshing machine in the background was one of many new inventions coming into use at the time. These revolutionised farming practices that had been unchanged for centuries. They reduced the need to employ large numbers of agricultural labourers, which led increasing numbers to migrate to the cities to find work.

(Brent Archives number: 2375)

Question & activity ideas:

• Where are the men working?
• What is the material they are handling? What are they doing with it?
• What are they wearing that is different from clothes workers wear now?
• What fuel was used to power the engine? Do we use this now?

E) ‘Navvies’ working on the construction of the Great Central Railway, c1903. The name navvy was derived from ‘navigator’, to identify the thousands of labourers who work on the construction of roads, railways, and canals. Hundreds of private railways were constructed during the late 19th and early 20th century, as speculators sought to profit from the new technology.

The work shown is part of the project to construct a large cutting close to where Wembley Stadium was later to be built. When completed in 1905, the
cutting carried the Great Central Railway (GCR) line from Marylebone via Neasden to Northolt Junction where a joint GCR/GWR (Great Western Railway) line continued to Birmingham.

(Brent Archives number: 2376)

**Question & activity ideas:**

- Discuss what is happening in the picture. How does it compare with construction today?
- Look at some modern tube and train maps and discuss the changes in who owns and operates London’s rail network.

**F) Special Metropolitan Railway timetable, adjusted to take account of a football match at Wembley Park.** Before the original stadium was built, football matches were played in fields around Wembley. The Metropolitan Railway opened in 1863 and had begun services to Wembley in 1893, and out to Chesham, Buckinghamshire, in 1892.

(Composite based on original documents in the Brent Archives)

**Question & activity ideas:**

- Have a look at the 1894-6 map of Wembley Park and find the place where they might have played football.
- What kind of trains ran at that time? What information did you use to work that out?
- Were the stations on the line between Wembley Park and Baker Street the same as they are now? (Use a modern tube map)
- How often were trains arriving at Wembley Park? How long was the journey from Baker Street?

**G) Plans for the construction of terrace houses on Barry Road, Stonebridge.** The houses were built by a private developer on land that had previously been farmland. The plans date to the late 19th century.

Hundreds of houses like these existed in Willesden – some still do. The three-bedroom homes were built by C Simmons of Harley Road, Harlesden for Mr W J Cooper, and were completed on 27th October 1893. The houses, and Barry Road, disappeared in the 1960’s Stonebridge development.

(Brent Archives plan number: 3051)

**Question & activity ideas:**

- Have a look at the outside of the houses (the drawing labelled ‘elevation’). Are there any houses like this still in Brent? Do you know any near where you live? Organise a local walk to take some photos.
- What sort of rooms was the parlour? And the scullery?
• Where was the toilet? (called a w.c.)
• What room is missing completely, that would be in every modern house?
• Make a plan of a modern house and label the rooms.

H) Letter, 1882, to the Willesden Local Board, addressing ‘nuisances’ at Victoria Place, Kilburn. Unregulated, speculative development of housing estates around London led to problems including over-crowding and inadequate provision of sanitation and sewage facilities.

The letter was written by a ‘rebel’ committee, formed to try and force official bodies to remedy ‘nuisances’. The only entrance to Victoria Place was through a small passageway under part of the Cock Tavern and, most unpleasantly, past the pub open air toilet. The Committee tried to provide an alternative entrance from Victoria Road as shown. Most of the buildings have now disappeared. Even the Cock Tavern was rebuilt in 1900.

(Composite based on original documents and plans in the Brent Archives relating to Willesden Green Urban District Council)

Question & activity ideas:
• Why would this ‘nuisance’ never happen nowadays?
• What are the modern words for tavern, urinal, ale, omnibus?
• What does a blacksmith do? Why were they so important then?

I) Letter, 1875, to the Willesden Local Board highlighting the public health dangers of unsanitary conditions in the new housing estates. Tainted water was a significant problem in London in the late 19th century, leading to the spread of diseases such as diphtheria and dysentery.

Victoria Place, Kilburn, and the (re-built) Cock Tavern are still standing at the start of the 21st century.

(Composite based on original documents and plans in the Brent Archives relating to Willesden Green Urban District Council)

Question & activity ideas:
• Look up the diseases you don’t know.
• What were the killer diseases in the 19th century? Why aren’t they now?
• What did most people on the chart die of? Can you find out/guess why?

J) Copy of a public notice advertising a ‘vestry’ meeting in 1888. Named after the rooms attached to a church building, often used for parish meetings. At this time, local government around London was still organised along the traditional boundaries of the church parish (the area served by a particular local church). Parish councils were responsible for social welfare programmes including the management of workhouses for the poor.
(Brent Archives relating to Willesden Green Urban District Council)

Question & activity ideas:

• Find out what the following people did: Overseers of the Poor, Beadle, Sexton, Engine Keeper, Pound Keeper.

K) Photograph of the all-male Willesden Local Board in 1887, taken in the garden of the Spotted Dog pub. The central figure in the front row is notable local resident Frederick Augustus Wood, the board chairman. As well as being active on many local boards, Wood was a keen amateur historian.

To the left of Wood, is Oliver Claude Robson, the Local Board Surveyor from 1875 to 1918, and to his left Samuel Tilley, the Board Clerk. Stanley Ball who became a well-known local historian, and eventually Board Clerk, stands behind Tilley.

(Brent Archive number: 2167)

Question & activity ideas:

• Describe the men in the photograph.
• Why do you think there are there no women?
• Find out how many Brent councillors there are now and how many are men/women.

L) Plans for the modification of a building on Cricklewood Broadway, c1910. In the early 20th century the ‘moving picture’ phenomenon had arrived, and buildings like the Cricklewood Electric Theatre were opening across London to cater to the growing audience for films. This plan proposed alterations to the existing Cricklewood Mission Chapel to make it suitable for film showings. This plan was never submitted and the cinema never opened.

According to Kelly’s directories – an early equivalent of the Yellow Pages – instead a cinema called the Cricklewood Electric Palace opened on the opposite side of the Broadway at No. 200.

(Brent Archives plan number: 3051)

Question & activity ideas:

• What was an ‘electric theatre’? Why do you think they had that name?
• What kinds of entertainment did people have before then?
• What new entertainments are there today?