

BROCKLEY  SOCIETY

A walk through Brockley's Historic Mews



Wickham Mews North. Photo: Hannab Campbell

Saturday 19 and Sunday 20 September 2020

London Open House Festival 2020

A walk through Brockley's Historic Mews

Brockley Conservation Area's quirky mews are a mixture of leafy lanes and industrial units, with Victorian and interesting modern architecture existing in harmony. The cherished public right of way allows community contact with nature.

Brockley's early history

Brockley derives its name from Brûcca, an Old English word meaning 'stream' (Kentish. 'brook') and 'Leah' meaning water meadows. Brockley is recorded as a Saxon settlement in 952 and is mentioned as a small hamlet in the Domesday Book.

Brockley Green is the site of the hamlet on an old lane from Deptford to Croydon, which became known as Brockley Lane and coincides now with Tanners' Hill, Upper Brockley Road and Brockley Road.

In 1189, at the end of Henry II's reign, the Manor of Brockley was created when it split from the Manor of Sayes Court. The founding of a Premonstratensian Abbey was granted near the present St Peter's Church and the former Manor or Upper Brockley Farm at the southern end of what is now Breakspears Mews. The abbey land was requisitioned by Henry VIII in 1527.

Brockley Green agricultural settlement was fringed by the Great North Wood which stretched from Deptford to Streatham and Selhurst. The area's 'managed landscape of woodland' provided timber, charcoal, firewood, and oak bark (for tannin) until the 1797 Inclosure Act. By 1810 our area of South

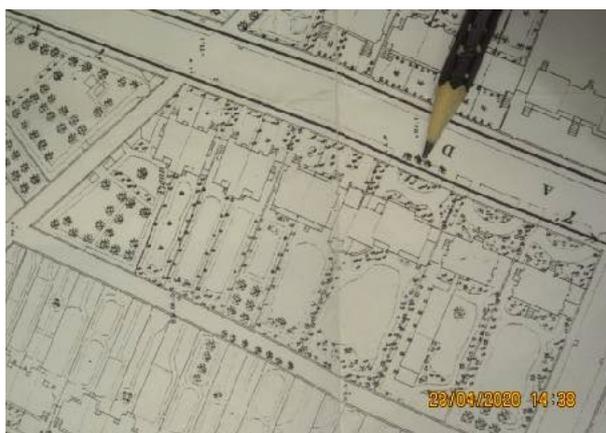
Deptford was Market Gardens, farmed by Joseph Myatt on the west and Mr. Lucas on the East. They grew mainly pears, strawberries and rhubarb. 'Night soil' imported from London fertilised Brockley's burgeoning and salubrious rhubarb industry, which won prizes!

Until the early 19th century Brockley remained agricultural with farms, nurseries, pear orchards and market gardens serving London.

Canals and railways bring development

Industrial development arrived with the creation of the Croydon Canal in 1809, replaced on closure by the London and Croydon Railway in 1836. A few years later, the London, Chatham and Dover Railway through St. John's opened up access to local brickfields and gravel pits and encouraged estate owners to develop landholdings as residential areas. By 1851 the land north of Lewisham Way had already been developed

as Deptford New Town. Land to the south in Brockley was owned by the Wickham family of Garsington, Oxfordshire. Two daughters, Ann and Mary inherited it, and via their marriage to two brothers, John



Ordnance Survey 1875: Wickham Road and Mews

and Thomas Drake of Shardeloes House in Amersham, Buckinghamshire, an association with the Tyrwhitt-Drake family was ultimately formed, such that a coordinated approach to development was possible.

This enabled Upper Brockley (the land south of today's Lewisham Way) to be laid out by 1851 with wide streets and large Italianate villas backed by free access mews service lanes for use by servants as well as horses and carriages. An Indenture from 1895 shows that the mews were intended for use as a 'Back Road by the Tenants in

Common' together with the 'free use and enjoyment ... in common with all other parties.' The mews frontagers each owned and had to maintain half the width of the mews, and allow free access at all times. This continues today.

It is believed that Edward VII, when Prince of Wales, used Wickham Mews for discreet visits to actress Lillie Langtry at No 42 Wickham Road!

Street layout in 19th century

The unique environment we appreciate today was created by the 1870s with foresight and care in layouts responding to the alignment of former country lanes, such as Brockley Lane, respecting field patterns, footpaths and streams.

Here we are discussing a walk through the main mews: Ashby, Wickham and

Breakspears. Other, smaller mews, are Manor, Garsington, Harefield, Cranfield, and Wickham Gardens Path, with other less-known paths, greenways and closes dotted around the area. (A modern residential development parallel to Lewisham Way extends Breakspears Mews, but is not part of this walk.)

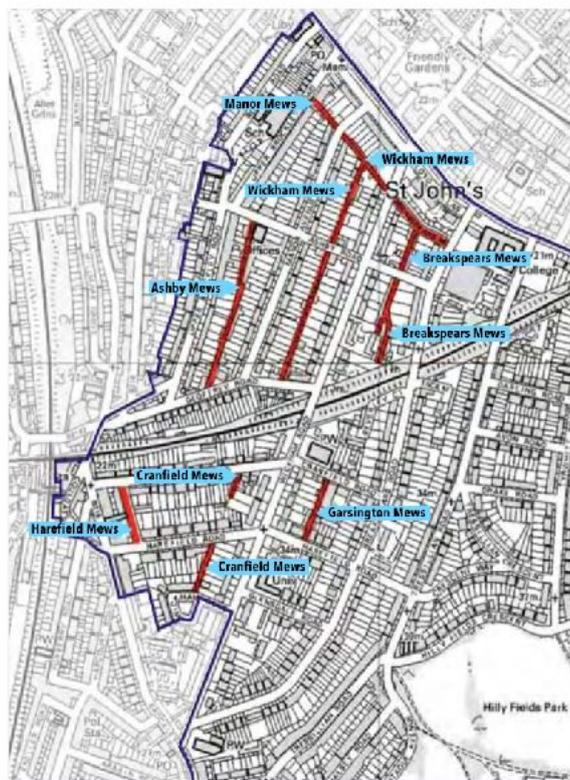
From their creation the mews were open and ungated. Around 1980 low 'gallows' gates were installed at the entrances to discourage dumping of vehicles and fly-tipping. These are locked at night with keys for the frontagers, but pedestrian access

remains open day and night. Each of Brockley's mews retains its own special character and residents relish the untrammelled free access to a long-established right of way.

Brockley's architecture

Brockley's unusually well preserved enclave of architectural and environmental history has survived into the 21st century almost intact, uniquely rich in High Victorian and Edwardian domestic architecture, historic trees and original lanes and mews. Where 1950s and 1960s houses exist they indicate WWII bomb damage. We have more stretches of Victorian white stone capping to the low front walls than anywhere else in London.

As the large houses fell into disrepair after the war they faced threats including piecemeal attack by property speculators



Brockley's mews from the Brockley Conservation Area Character Appraisal, Part 2

hoping to make a quick profit during the property boom.

Lewisham Council's 1970s plans to upgrade facilities to modern standards in Manor Avenue General Improvement Area and the related Housing Action Area included proposals to

compulsorily purchase part of rear gardens backing on to Wickham mews to build terraced council housing, complete with a tenants' hall. These proposals, plus a separate scheme to demolish Brockley Baptist Church, and the GLC's 'Motorway Box' plans for a four-lane highway between Lewisham Way and the railway, were fiercely resisted by community action. Proposals for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link under Brockley, emerging under St. Peter's Church, reignited community resistance in **BATTL: Brockley Against The Tunnel Link**.

The 1967 Civic Amenities Act created Conservation Areas. The campaign by a group of Brockley residents led to the 1973 designation of Brockley Conservation Area: the largest area of intact and unspoiled Victorian housing in south London. Brockley Society was formed around the same time to liaise with Lewisham Council over planning matters.

Brockley has remained uniquely well mixed, with different income groups, different ethnic groups, a balance of old and young



Typical Victorian house in Brockley

people, light industry in the mews, a variety of shops and pubs – all adding a quality that Brockley Society felt was worth preserving.

Building in Brockley's mews

The 2005 Brockley Conservation Area Character Appraisal

described the mews as unmade service roads behind houses, offering a calm and leafy contrast to the surrounding built-up streets and contributing to the suburban and spacious feel of the conservation area.

Historic maps showed that development in the mews, such as coach housing and stabling, was never widespread as people were more likely to use the new train network. Shortly after, the motor car became available. Because few such buildings were present, those remaining today are rarities of significant historic

value, making a positive contribution to the overall character of the area and therefore meriting preservation. Some of the early outbuildings that still exist in Breakspears and Wickham Mews are fairly derelict, but good examples exist in Ashby and Wickham (north) Mews.

Mews buildings later became garages, workshops and storage and provided rear access



Wickham Mews looking south

to houses. Setts were a feature of the mews at least in part, with areas ill-maintained or ripped up, though a few have survived, such as in Harefield Mews.

The modern garages built at the ends of gardens, are small, single-storey buildings with flat roofs which still allow views across the long rear gardens to rear elevations of the Victorian housing and the abundance of mature trees which contribute to the character of the conservation area.

Inadequate storm water drainage and lack of electrical and sewage connections made the mews unsuitable for residential buildings, which were resisted in favour of light industry and storage. Developers nonetheless pushed energetically to build houses and some unsuitable developments were given piecemeal permission. Modern houses at the junction between a mews and a street impact the street pattern and surrounding historic built form: they block views and have a negative effect, not conforming to the conservation area's character and style. To help discourage negative development a mews Design Guide was created in 1987.

Modern buildings in the mews

In 2006 the Brockley Supplementary Planning Document further protected the mews by pointing to constraints that made development undesirable, such as no lighting or road surfacing, unsuitability for modern refuse vehicles which would in any case alter the calm leafy and open character

of the mews. The document states a presumption against residential mews development to preserve the appearance of the mews with their trees, views across gardens to rear elevations and the tranquil character of the conservation area. But small-scale single-storey garden buildings, ancillary to the use of the main building, or single-storey garaging have been built.

Since 2000 the concept of live/work, a different planning class to residential, has developed and has been embraced in the GLA's London Plan. Three live/work units were given permission in Harefield Mews in 2001 and more recently several have been permitted in Ashby Mews, with planning obligation agreements fixing the live/work status in perpetuity.

As a result some striking modern architecture has been constructed in Ashby Mews: parts of a large and dreary industrial building, formerly a warehouse for

publishers Hodder and Stoughton, have been converted into eye-catching live/work units. A coach house has been preserved with a modern addition. Other smaller developments have been built further down Ashby Mews alongside older workshops and former long-standing businesses. A single two-storey house was given planning permission many years ago for puzzling reasons. At the bottom end of Ashby Mews a block of

flats has replaced the 1950s Graham Platna electro-plating works.

A striking modern house exists at the entrance to Breakspears Mews. Because it faces on to Ashby Road, planners



Ashby Mews looking south

considered it did not qualify as a mews residential development. Its solitary position enables its bold design to contribute to the conservation area and enhance its rather regrettable surroundings.

Ashby Mews has the greatest proportion of businesses, artists' studios and industrial units, but there are also some in Breakspears and Wickham Mews. Ital-Cutlery Services in Wickham Mews has been there for many decades.

Brockley's mews now

Some issues have recurred in the mews time and again over the last 47 years: irresponsible or unlicensed businesses taking advantage of light oversight, creating noise, pollution or litter, and endemic fly-tipping. Brockley Society's newsletters record nearly half a century of continual battles to clear rubbish from the mews and stop anti-social businesses.

Breakspears Mews used to be the most problematic.

A serious gas explosion, long-term anti-social and unlicensed businesses, spray painting, night-time working and weekend noise and continual fly-tipping led local residents to approach Brockley Society in 2010 for a community campaign to reclaim the mews.

Working with Lewisham's councillors and officers, the police, fire brigade, responsible tenants, and volunteers, the mews were cleared of 450 dumped tyres, nine dumped

vehicles and mountains of rubbish.

Lewisham Council granted the 'change of use' and a lease for the land in 2012: Breakspears Mews Community Garden was created. Now raised vegetable beds exist in a strip of the mews where once there was only rubbish and desolation.

Brockley's mews are part of 'Greater Brockley', which came second in the 2019 Rambler's Association Annual Award for the Best Walking Neighbourhood, citing Brockley's innovative conservation projects, well-integrated walking network, variety of green spaces and community-friendly feel.

During the coronavirus lockdown the mews have been appreciated by many, but particularly by families with children who have walked, learned to cycle, discovered

butterflies and wildflowers, and looked at buildings, trees and greenery.

Our mews are quirky, eclectic and all different. They have rough paths, overgrown wilderness, scruffy areas and, regrettably, rubbish and fly-tipping, but also careful planting, street art, large

trees in adjacent gardens, a mixture of buildings, and views of the long gardens which are such a feature of Brockley Conservation Area. The mews provide a contrast to the formality of the fronts of houses and streets and for over 150 years they have been recorded in literature and more recent reminiscences as a preferred short cut, the route to an errand, or a place to enjoy nature. **Long may it so continue.**



Breakspears Mews Community Garden Open Day 2020.

Photo: Michael Peacock

A walk through Brockley's mews

Our walk starts at the Wickham Arms, at the corner of Upper Brockley and Ashby Roads, SE4 1TF. Behind it is Ashby Mews' northern entrance.

Go south down Ashby Mews, noting its eclectic mix of old and contemporary buildings, with views over back gardens and trees.

At the bottom turn left on to Geoffrey Road. Cross Manor Avenue, passing two examples of modern architecture, left and right.

Turn left into the overwhelmingly green Wickham Mews by BA Blues Autos.

Walk along the leafy track past wild plants, magnificent trees in back gardens and buildings which vary from dilapidated to smart storage.

Ital-Cutlery and five small modern houses are at the end. Cross Ashby Road and continue north past several working units.

At the end you will see garages and former stables to the left. Turn right, passing on the left the former coach house, now residential, and small modern houses on the right.

At the end, the entrance to the modern residential Breakspears Mews (not

part of this walk) can be seen opposite. Turn right on to Wickham Road, walk to the corner and cross the road.

Turn left on to Ashby Road. The small northern section of Breakspears Mews contains unremarkable garages and sheds. The unmistakable, COR-Ten steel-clad 'Rusty House' marks Breakspears Mews' southern entrance.

Turn right into Breakspears Mews, which contains storage and several working units in the first section and right-hand fork, and views into the long gardens and trees on the left.

Take the left fork to access the unconventional Breakspears Mews Community Garden.

Alongside the garden are a working business and an out of commission Victorian building, storage units, and a privately owned, dilapidated coach house on buddleia-resplendent land. The garden is framed by magnificent tall trees along the railway line. Displays of the mews' recent history, when it was full of fly-tipping, dumped tyres, and abandoned cars will show how dramatically it has changed.

Note: During Open House 2020 Breakspears Mews Community Garden will be open only 12-4pm. The lease requires committee members to be present.



From top: Ashby Mews looking north; 'Invisible House' and Cedar Mews in Geoffrey Road (between Ashby and Wickham Mews); 'Rusty House' at entrance to Breakspears Mews

Sources:

We are grateful for material from Gillian Heywood MBE, Chris and Juliet Johnson, and Jenny and Noel Varney, Brockley Society's historians and founder members. Compiled by Clare Cowen

Brockley Historical Walk 2020

led by **Gillian Heywood, MBE**,
Sunday 15 November, 11am-12.30pm.
Meet: Pistachio's cafe on Hilly Fields, SE13
7JN. Walk through Brockley Conservation
area and some of its mews

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Spurgeon, 1997

Brockley Society's website:

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Report of Brockley Society conference,
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Lewisham documents available at
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areas/brockley-conservation-area](https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/planning/conservation/conservation-areas/brockley-conservation-area)

- Map of Brockley Conservation Area
- Brockley Conservation Area Character Appraisal – Parts 1, 2 and 3
- Brockley Conservation Area Supplementary Planning Document

Breakspears Mews Community Garden:

a fly-tipped rubbish dump became a
community garden in 2012 through two years
of community action and cooperation:



*From top: fly-tipping in 2010; preparation for raised beds;
earth to fill beds; first Open Day 2012; Ashmead School
children enjoy a lesson in Breakspears garden*