

## **Memories of Norland and North Kensington in the 1960s**

Meriel and Ian Tegner moved to 44, Norland Square in 1961. There were only three family houses in the square; otherwise the houses were in multiple occupancy. No 44 had been converted into four flats in the 1940s and they lived in the top two floors. Their next door neighbours were an Irish couple in the basement on a controlled rent of 7/6d per week. In the middle of the house were 38 newly arrived West Indians. The top floor was occupied by a blonde prostitute whose clients would queue up along the chicken wire fence of the Square gardens (there were no railings then as the original ones had been removed for the war effort). Clients would wait their turn before being despatched 20 minutes later. The Irishman told Ian that he “should not be bringing a nice young bride to this part of London”.

This was “north of the park” and not long after the Notting Hill Riots. Although houses in Clarendon Road, at the Holland Park Avenue end, were prosperous with long term family residents, and Addison Avenue and St James’s Gardens also mainly had family houses, in the north east section of St James’s Gardens and elsewhere in the area most of the houses were in multiple occupancy. Friends of the Tegn timers who had tried to buy a house on the east side of Norland Square in 1958 for £8,000 had been refused a mortgage as the area was thought too dicey. There was also still a possibility that the houses on that side of the Square would be demolished for an extension northwards of the new Abbotsbury Road.

No 43 Norland Square was owned by a clergyman’s widow, whose agent was a crook. He would meet the boat trains at Victoria station to offer accommodation to newly arriving immigrants from the West Indies. Typically, further north in the area, rooms were divided with 3 tiers of bunks on each wall let out in 8 hour shifts. There was a property off Westbourne

Grove, owned by Peter Rachman, where the police found 160 people living in the same house. There was no security of tenure.

Meriel worked at St James Norland School as a volunteer Care Committee worker for the LCC (and subsequently for ILEA). She acted as the liaison between school and home. She would be sent to find out why a child was not at school: did he or she need money for shoes and clothes, or free school meals? She would help the family to apply for these things. If a child couldn't get to school because they had to look after the baby, she would liaise with the social workers to get help with the family's health and other problems. The overcrowding and living conditions were appalling. The rooms were sodden, with damp peeling walls, and bronchitis was widespread. In Lancaster Road the basement floors were made of mud.

Meriel had to attend school medicals and saw the skinny bodies, bruises and the nits. Many children were ill because of the living conditions and overcrowding.

She also worked as a volunteer for the Children's Country Holiday Fund. Children were allocated to generous hosts living in the country who would have them to stay for a fortnight, giving them experience of fresh air and country life. For many it was a glimpse of another world and different opportunities - a life-changing experience.

Some families were hopeless and feckless, but it was amazing how many mothers, living in terrible conditions managed to send their children to school in a clean white shirt.

As well as the immigrants, there were gypsies living in Princedale Road. They came to live there for the winter months and went travelling in the

summer. They would return from hop picking in the autumn too late to enroll for the new school year – and would be angry if there were no places. Miss Sims (the splendid head mistress of St James Norland School) always tried to keep some places back for them but it was difficult to plan numbers in advance. One mother, back from the hop harvest, gave Meriel an apple that she had picked during her time in Kent. She was touchingly proud to be able to give a present.

One day Meriel (then very pregnant ) went to Princedale Road to visit a family. An argument was going on upstairs. Two huge fighting men came tumbling down the staircase, dominating the space. She did suddenly wonder if she was wise to be there! Women also fought and she remembers two girls fighting in Golborne Road in the street with their fingernails. A lot of beating up of wives went on, and of course on payday (Fridays) women needed to seize the money quickly from their husbands, otherwise the cash required for food and rent went on drink. In those days there were plenty of pubs in Norland itself - now there are almost none.

December 1962 saw one of the last terrible smogs that had plagued London since the industrial revolution . A solid wall of fog crept inexorably across Norland Square and into the house, turning everything black . The choking, lethal, impenetrable Great Smog of 1952 had caused many deaths and the Clean Air Act of 1956 (later revised in 1968) was one of the best laws enacted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In January / February 1963 there was a Big Freeze - everything froze including house water supplies. There was a stand pipe by the letter box in Norland Square where everyone went with their kettles and jugs to collect water. Then the standpipe itself froze and they had to try to thaw it with

lighted rolled up newspapers. But everyone coped, made friends and remained good humoured.

Even in Norland Square, there was one house which was so decrepit that one could see daylight between the bricks, and the drainage from the roof flowed down a wooden trough inside the house.

In old Princes Place (with its charming cottage gardens) the garden walls of St James's Gardens formed the back walls of the cottages, so there was no through ventilation. But there was great community spirit with the families talking over their garden gates. By the 1970s these houses no longer met new housing criteria and, in spite of their visual charm, were redeveloped by Rowe Housing Association.

Some of the worst multi-occupation conditions were in St Stephen's Gardens while the north ends of Princedale and Portland Roads and Clarendon Cross were also dire. Children played in the street with go carts. One family with children might be living in a single room, a paraffin heater under the cot (with food, clothes and toys) the only means of heating. For washing and cooking there would be a shared cold water tap on the landing, a shared cooker, and one shared inside loo on the landing or even outdoor privy in the garden. Security of tenure was virtually non-existent.

In response to these terrible housing conditions, as well as exorbitant rents, a small group of worshippers at St Helen's Church, including Ian and Meriel, started the Latimer Housing Society in August 1964. They would buy a house on which the Council granted a 90% mortgage, the Society having to raise the rest. They would then convert the house, and install families. The whole aim of the Society was to give security of tenure to the tenants at genuinely

affordable rents. As time went on, they bought more houses and Meriel would, with two small children in a pram, visit the tenants weekly and collect the rents in cash. She always felt safe and it never occurred to her NOT to go out alone at night.

In the Norland Road Market there were food stalls, including vegetables and “wet” fish. Amongst the other shops was a woman who strung tennis rackets for Wimbledon shops. On Queensdale Road was a greengrocer, a dairy, Mrs Winsley the Chemist, and Carolan the grocer (who later retired to Ireland). At Clarendon Cross were a greengrocer, a grocer, and a butcher. Monty Wimborne had an excellent hardware shop on Princedale Road. But the National Front had its headquarters across the road, from which martial music blared out during their Sunday meetings. They regularly attacked poor Monty (who was Jewish) until he eventually could take no more and had to close his shop and leave the area. Later on The Early Music Centre started in Princedale Road which struck a more harmonious note.

On Holland Park Avenue there was a Post Office, Starkeys the Chemist, Budgen (groceries), and Sketchley Cleaners. Lidgate was always expensive but there was another less grand butcher further along the Avenue, as well as Brennan the Electrician and a branch of Barclay’s Bank (before the days of ATMs).

The Milkman did his round every day and paraffin was delivered to the door for the numerous paraffin heaters. Until banned by the Clean Air Acts, coal was delivered to coal holes in the pavement going down to people’s basements - where now people store their wine. The rag and bone man came with his pony and cart (from stables off Latimer Road) calling “rag’n’bones”. He did good business.

The W11 Children's Opera was founded in 1971 by local mothers, in St James Norland Church. This group, later to become famous, was an inspired initiative by Serena Hughes – a much loved musician, piano teacher and mother, living in St James's Gardens, - who commissioned and organised operas to be performed by local children living in W11, embracing all income groups and a rich ethnic diversity.

Norland has seen enormous changes since 1961, but remains an exciting place to live.

**This is a transcript of an interview with Meriel Tegner conducted in 2017 on behalf of the Norland Conservation Society by Catherine Wilson with much help from Ian and Meriel.**