

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

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HIGHBURY BARN

By Mark Mason

Anyone who wonders about the reason for the decorative arcading across the top of Kelvin Road, adjacent to Highbury Barn Tavern, will be interested to know that it is a reminder of when this was the site of one of the principle pleasure gardens of London. Highbury Barn first developed as a place of leisure in the 1740s, when a tea garden was laid out as a rural pleasure resort for Londoners enjoying a visit to the countryside.



HIGHBURY BARN AS IT APPEARED IN MID-VICTORIAN TIMES

By 1762, this “cake and ale house” was a favoured haunt of Oliver Goldsmith (who was living in Islington while writing ‘The Vicar of Wakefield’). Then called ‘Willoughby’s Tea Rooms’, visitors could have lunch consisting of “two dishes, and a pastry ... at tenpence per head, including a penny for the waiter”.

In 1811, when it was known as Highbury Barn Assembly House, it is described as having a bowling green, trap-ball ground and gardens, with a hop garden to serve the “ale and table beer brewery” which had been created on the premises. The buildings were extended and it became a favoured meeting place for many clubs and societies. For example, in 1841 3,000 sat down to the licensed victuallers annual dinner.

In 1850, Charles Dickens referred in his story “Mr Booley” (featured in his weekly magazine Household Words) to “a private (dining) club called the Social Oysters, assembling at the Highbury Barn”. By this time there were supper boxes where visitors could dine al fresco, while watching tightrope walkers and firework displays. Music

festivals were held, and in 1854 there was even a balloon ascent from the gardens.

Dancing also became a popular pastime at Highbury Barn and in 1858 the gaslit ‘Leviathan’ dance-floor, that could hold 2000 dancers, was built. It was here that the dance craze ‘La Varsovana’ (a cross between a waltz and a polka) was popularised.

In 1861 the licence was taken over by Edward Giovanelli and the Barn entered its most gaudy and notorious final decade. In 1862 the old buildings were demolished and a new music-hall was built, where concerts were held, ballet and plays performed, and lavish dinners continued to be given. Among the many performers who appeared there were Blondin, the tightrope walker, and Leotard the gymnast. In 1865 the gardens, extending over five acres, were improved (boasting “half a million” lights in its advertising) and the music-hall was rebuilt as the Royal Alexandra Theatre.

But the late opening hours, noise, disturbance and petty crime were increasingly upsetting the local residents of the expanding nearby housing developments of Highbury. There was a near-riot, led by students of Bart’s Hospital, in 1869. Things finally came to a head following an apparently scandalous exhibition of French dancing by the Colonna troupe of dancers in 1870, and Giovanelli lost his licence. The whole enterprise closed in 1871 and the pleasure grounds were gradually sold off for housing development. Highbury Barn Tavern, built in the 1880s, occupies part of the site of the theatre and barn.

Other illustrations of Highbury Barn and a more detailed history of the pleasure gardens are in Keith Sugden’s ‘History of Highbury’ (published by the Islington Archaeology and History Society and available from Islington Museum). ■



THE PLEASURE GROUNDS AS THEY WERE IN 1852

Two O'Clock Club By Beatrice Sayers

The Two O'Clock Club on Highbury Fields is emerging triumphantly from a setback in November that closed it for nearly five months.

It is also hoping to overcome the threat of a huge rent increase from Islington Council, at a time when it is already struggling financially.

Builders who began work to replace decking at the club's bandstand premises – opposite the Oasis Café – found asbestos, and of course the building was immediately closed. Luckily, an inspection discovered that the asbestos was of a non-harmful type. But it still had to be removed, a process that took place



only after a three-month wait.

At the same time, a survey showed that the floor of the kitchen at the back of the inside play area was sinking. Wooden joists had to be replaced and the floor screeded. However, the main work that the club hoped to have carried out – reurfing the slope outside, so children can ride their plastic cars down it – will not be done until the summer.

In the same month the asbestos was discovered, the club's 20-year lease came up for renewal. The club had previously paid a peppercorn rent. But the Council demanded thousands of pounds annually for a new lease, far more than the club could afford. The committee is still negotiating with officials and hopes to resolve the crisis soon.

During the period when the bandstand was closed, the club operated from the basement of Christ Church vicarage, so hardly an hour's playtime was lost. Janet Gilbert, the club's co-chair and lettings officer, managed to obtain a grant in December from the Cripplegate Foundation to enable the work on the kitchen floor to be done, and a grand reopening was held on 24th March.

Now that the club is back home, a grant from *Help a London Child* is to be used to help revamp the outdoor toys and to start baby toddler gym sessions in the summer. Plans are also afoot for the club to operate in the mornings as well.



Set up back in 1981, the Two o'clock Club opens its doors to Highbury's pre-school children every weekday afternoon of the year, except bank holidays. It is now looking forward to staying put for at least another 20 years.

The organisers are grateful for the support the club has received from the community. But volunteers are always needed to help on the committee: there are currently vacancies for a secretary and, to relieve Janet of one of her responsibilities, a lettings officer, to manage letting the club for parties. ■

Week-end hire for under-five parties @£60 summer & £50 winter. Ring 7354 5644 for information or to offer to help on the committee.

TRADERS LOSE OUT

"The Council's policy is killing our trade – where is the sense in favouring supermarkets over local shops?" Chris Godfrey, of Frank Godfrey's Butchers at Highbury Barn, is furious that Islington Council has built car parks using compulsory purchase orders in the past for Sainsbury's at Chapel Street and Safeway in the Holloway Road; and is now sending traffic wardens out to relentlessly ticket his customers in the Highbury Barn Shopping Parade, without providing short-term parking bays. *"It is so illogical. In Barnet people can pay 50p to park for 20 minutes near the local shops and are ticketed if they over-stay. This road could safely be marked up for staggered bays, which would not obstruct the flow of traffic. The wardens even ordered our Scotts Meat lorry to move on. The driver had just arrived from Orkney on*

his weekly delivery run! It is unbelievable stupid of the Council not to protect the local shops. We are already suffering loss of trade and it will be the residents who lose out if the Barn shops die."

His sentiments are shared by every shopkeeper at the Barn. The Council's campaign to clear the Barn of cars was stepped up in March. The rules were changed making parking on Saturday illegal, which has caught a lot of people out. Mike Long, of the Highbury Pharmacy, watched a couple of wardens with a motorbike 'minder' on a ticketing spree one busy Saturday and saw the street and pavements empty of customers. *"Randomly parked cars do cause blockages for the buses and other traffic but they also slow the traffic down. Having a clear run like this is causing the traffic to speed through. It is not safe for pedestrians."*

Further down the hill in Blackstock

Road, Colin Small who owns and runs the joinery shop, Small Restorations, despairs of the Council's attitude to local traders. *"How are we meant to conduct a business, serving local people, loading up vans and receiving deliveries of heavy materials if we have no right to load or park outside our premises?"* Paying for visitor permits which last only an hour is not the answer – nor is feeding a meter. *"The glazier next door to me is losing trade too, we have got to have some joined-up thinking here or Islington will become a place with no services and no shops and we shall all have to earn a fortune working in the City and driving to out-of town superstores. Hardly sustainable planning."*

If you value your local shops in Blackstock Road and Highbury Barn, please email hcanews@hotmail.com or ring 7359 5731 with your suggestions for a more workable traffic plan. ■

Highbury Anti-War Meeting Packed Out

Angela Sinclair initiated and chaired a meeting about the Iraq War on 8th April in Christ Church, Highbury Grove, which saw close to 70 people squeezing into the Vicarage basement. Fellow organisers, Lorie Karlin and Andrew Mitchell, who arranged the publicity and leafleted Highbury streets, were pleased that so many people turned up.

Speakers, Pat Arrowsmith from CND, Simon Matthews of the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, Rob Murthwaite from the Stop the War Coalition and Fadi Itami from the

Finsbury Park Muslim Welfare Society made powerful speeches and answered questions. Angela Sinclair said *"We're in the process of deciding how to take this forward. We could join the Cally Road Group or the Whittington Group. We would need a larger venue, maybe the Union Chapel, which would be convenient for us in Highbury."*

The organisers aim to get in touch as soon as possible with the people who signed in at the meeting. They would welcome any secretarial or other organising help.

Please email hcanews@hotmail.com or ring HC News on 7359 5731 and your name will be passed on. ■

HCA AGM & Party

HCA will hold its sixth AGM in **Christ Church**, Highbury Grove on **Saturday 10th May at 7.30 pm**.

HCA member, Dionne van der Waal, will give an illustrated talk on the work of the Myositis Trust and her own work with abandoned children in the town of Bârlad in Eastern Romania. Myositis Trust exists to provide health services to the most vulnerable people of that town.

As usual we shall be holding a party afterwards - with a **raffle** this year.

New members welcome!

Why Highbury?..... Why? When? What now? What next?

HCA interviews Shubhas Patel whose family left Idi Amin's Uganda in the 1970's and who now runs Five Boys Health and General Store at Highbury Barn.

HCA – Why is your shop called Five Boys?

Shubhas – I have four brothers, so there are five of us in total. We need a large family to run this! My sisters-in-law and niece work here. We check the stock and order new goods and products every day. It's a continuous and very time-consuming process as we sell such a variety of goods and foods. We have a computer programme which is meant to help but the suppliers change the codes constantly so it is actually easier and quicker to do it all manually.

HCA – When did you open this store?

Shubhas - Fifteen years ago I bought the freehold from a clothing factory and took down a partition to make it bigger.

I moved from running a Londis on this side of the road just opposite where the current one is now. We had 3 shops then, including one in Kensington and one in Blackstock Road. This one at Highbury Barn was one of the first in the area to specialise in offering vitamins and minerals, homeopathic medicines, Bach Flower Remedies, organic foods, herbal teas and so on. Not many shops did this sort of 'health food' that is so popular now. We are successful because we keep our stock totally up to date, our chill cabinet has fresh

foods and drinks; and we have a wide range of hair and beauty products too. We also try to help customers if they want something ordered specially that is not already in stock. We are always busy!

HCA – What's happening now?

Shubhas – The last few weeks I have noticed that there are fewer customers coming into the shop. My feeling is that customers find the different parking restrictions here confusing. That is what they say anyway. Round the corner there is free parking, but because the Match Day signs are up people think that means no parking, when it doesn't unless it is a Match Day. There is now no parking on the main road on Saturdays, which is our busiest day. A few months ago parking was possible that day, I do not know why they changed it. Right outside our shop there is a very long bus stop – the longest I've ever seen anywhere! It is the length

of three buses and so there is less space for our vans to unload safely. It does make trading difficult.

HCA – What do you plan to do next?

Shubhas – I have no plans to move away and will be here until I retire! My son is not coming into the family business now – he is looking for a job in IT and at the moment there is enough family to keep the business going. I like it because I know hundreds of the locals and no two days are the same. ■



SHUBHAS POINTS OUT HIS WIDE RANGE OF FOOD SUPPLEMENTS

HCA GOES CULTURAL!

Two HCA members are hoping to arrange interesting visits for members in the near future.

London Guide, Abigail Lawson, is arranging a tour of the **House of Commons**, possibly in June.

Susannah Harrison has offered to arrange a visit to the recently relocated **Coles Wallpaper factory**. Coles, famous for its hand blocked papers, has been in business since 1875; and only recently moved from Barnsbury.

Places may be limited and we need to gauge interest - So, avoid disappointment and be sure to ring HC News on **7359 5731** or email hcanews@hotmail.com, and let us know if you want to go - or even if you just want to be notified of the arrangements.

ARSENAL PUTS STADIUM ON HOLD

February – CPO Public Inquiry told by Council that Arsenal had financing ‘virtually in place’ and would be announcing agreements within weeks.

March – Arsenal defers its interim results to the stock-exchange for second time. Results were due out in February. Arsenal says it has agreed deal with house-builders Wilson Connolly and social housing provider Newlon. Director Ken Friar tells London Assembly that costs are now ‘well in excess of £300 million.’ One of the two lead Banks announces it has withdrawn from arranging AFC’s funding.

April – Ashburton Grove builders laid off. JCBs taken off site. Work at Ashburton Grove to demolish buildings and bore piles scaled down. Arsenal announces stadium will not be opened by 2005/6. Director says the delay is only a temporary problem.

Arsenal continues to re-negotiate the planning applications already approved. There are rumours of plans for more and denser housing.

Check ISCA campaign website: www.RedCard.org.uk

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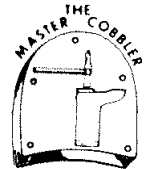
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Highbury Community Association

The HCA represents 750 residents and businesses, on all aspects of living and working in Highbury, Lower Holloway and Finsbury Park. Run by volunteers, it relies on donations. Send cheques to HCA Treasurer, 75 Highbury Hill, N5 1SX made out to ‘Highbury Community Association’.

Send letters or articles for next issue to: HC News, 83 Highbury Hill N5 1SX or email hcanews@hotmail.com

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