

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

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The earth moved – and so did our house!

By James Hood

SUBSIDENCE AND UNDERPINNING are fearful words for most London property owners. We've experienced subsidence, and our house has been underpinned. We're still here. We thought that members might be interested in hearing what happened to us, as many members are fearing that it may be about to happen to them.

We live just off Blackstock Road, at the Finsbury Park end, in an 1880's semi-detached house. About four years ago, we noticed some cracks in the external wall. Subsidence cracks, like ours, are usually near vertical or diagonal, long, and often larger near the top. They are normally detectable both inside and out (unless you have cavity walls), but the inside and out do not always match exactly. They often originate at points of weakness, such as window frames, junctions between walls, and above doors, and their location says more about the structural strengths and weaknesses of the house than about the forces causing the crack in the first place. In their later stages, they can be highly alarming—the setting sun shone through one of ours—but in fact they are rarely dangerous.

We reported our particular cracks to our insurers (Liverpool Victoria, who have been excellent throughout this process, if anyone is looking for a recommendation). They sent round a surveyor, who stuck a series of small measuring pegs on either side of each of the cracks. Over the next year, the surveyor returned at three monthly intervals to check the



CRACK THOROUGHLY EXPOSED

extent of the movement. Meanwhile we started arguing about the likely cause. Most surveyors, when they suspect subsidence, immediately blame the nearest tree, and ours was no exception. Unfortunately, the nearest tree was our lovely apple tree, at least as old as the house. We deployed logic, the surveyor deployed an arboriculturalist and a man who detected groundwater levels, and we fought back with our own arboriculturalist. The tree was eventually reprieved when the biggest crack of all appeared at the furthest corner of the house from the tree, and logic triumphed.

Part of the reason surveyors blame trees is because trees cause subsidence, but it is also because it is relatively cheap to chop a tree down. Chopping the nearest tree is both a remedial measure and a research measure—if the house stops moving afterwards then this “proves” that the tree has caused the subsidence. We say “proves” because subsidence is an uncertain science. The causes

(changes in groundwater levels, minor movements in soil level, underground workings, adjacent construction) can rarely be seen or measured accurately, and the effects happen at a distance from the cause.

This matters because modern insurers' entire approach to subsidence is governed not (as one might think) by the need to locate the exact problem and fix it, but by the insurer's need to minimise future financial risk while investing as little as is necessary to do so.

Fortunately, our insurer took, as most now do, a long-term view. It was cheaper for them to spend eighteen months considering various causes,

investing in further surveys, and getting as clear a picture of likely future movement as they could than it would be to rush to fix. In our case, it also appeared cheaper to fix the problem completely than to patch repeatedly. Fixing the problem completely meant underpinning.

Underpinning entails constructing the foundations while the house remains in place. This is not as high tech as it sounds. Two men arrived with a wheelbarrow, spades, pick-axes and a pneumatic drill. They remained in our front garden, rain or shine, for the next three months, digging a series of narrow (18 inches wide) but deep (six feet) trenches under the exterior wall. These they filled with concrete, digging another trench a safe distance away while the concrete in the first set. Aside from the lack of privacy and the noise of the pneumatic drill, the entire process was surprisingly unobtrusive (though it would not have been had they needed to go through the house to gain access to our rear wall, which had not moved). A further surprise

(continued on page 3)

Foodie Finds in Finsbury Park

By Christine Kaltoft

SOMETIMES I DREAM of living in the country, in a Grand Designs house surrounded by flowery fields with tranquil cows. I'd potter round my vegetable plot, bake bread and read lots. And probably get very bored. How would I survive without the buzz of the city?

One of the things I love most about living in Finsbury Park is the way I can nip out at virtually any waking hour, and pick up not just the odd onion or tin of tomatoes, but exotic-sounding items like rose water or freshly-baked baklava.

When we were looking for our current home, one of our criteria was to live within a ten minute walk of at least two cappuccino machines. Although quality caffeine shots were a factor in this, proper cappuccino was also an indicator of a decent café culture: a thriving social scene and respect for good food. But I'm struck by how many people living locally, actively avoid Blackstock Road, consequently missing out on some of the best things our neighbourhood has to offer.

Take, for instance, the Al Baraka butchers at 48 Blackstock Road. It is often thronging with Algerian men buying spit-roasted chickens, but

venture further inside and you'll find a treasure trove of Middle Eastern and North African ingredients. Preserved lemons, for instance, sit on the shelves amongst more common items. In season, they have top quality dates, and all year round they have bunches of Moroccan mint for fresh peppermint tea.

Having searched for years for frozen artichoke hearts, I finally found these too in Blackstock Road, in the MK Supermarket at number 18. If like me you love globe artichokes, but don't always have the time to prepare them, these are the answer. Whilst not equalling the fresh variety, they are far better than the tinned or bottled versions (and far cheaper than fresh ones).

The K Food Store at number 56 know what they're doing when they buy fruit and vegetables. Their selection of quality produce is particularly evident when it comes to mangos – I wouldn't buy them anywhere else. As skilled buyers, they'll only stock them when they're at their best (during June and July) – so if you want some this year you'd better hurry.

Another highlight for me is the delicious little Algerian almond

pastries handmade in La Princesse at number 66 Blackstock Road. These exquisite mouthfuls make a wonderful end to a meal, or a treat with a good strong coffee.

Finsbury Superstore at numbers 29-31 is an excellent all-rounder. They have a full range of dried goods, organic milk and eggs, and packets of fresh rocket or spinach. These days, when we're trying to shop locally and avoid big supermarkets, this is a regular venue for us.

But where would we be without a local 'third place' – neither home nor work, yet somewhere we feel we belong? For me, this is Good for Food, at number 16 Blackstock Road. Helena and her friendly, helpful staff don't need a doormat stating 'welcome' – their smiles, the atmosphere, the big scrubbed pine table, and shelves stocked with goodies say it all. Excellent homemade salads, organic cakes and bread, vegetarian homemade soups (when the weather gets colder), and a lovely garden are all spot on.

So for the moment living in the country will remain a dream for me. I'm not yet ready to give up the buzz of city life, the welcome of the café on my doorstep, or the vast array of cultures to learn and borrow from. I'm sure the country would have its own benefits to offer, but for now I'll continue to savour the culinary wealth of the city. ■

Artichoke, Preserved Lemon and Almond Salad

This salad makes a great starter for a summer meal – serve it with a chunk of bread to mop up the dressing. Feel free to make it in advance – this lets the flavours mingle and improve. All the ingredients are easy to find in our neighbourhood – see Foodie Finds above.

Serves 4-6

Thaw **1 packet (400g) frozen artichoke hearts**, and cut each into 6 – 8 segments.

Cut **3 preserved lemons** in half. Scoop out the flesh with a teaspoon and discard it. Slice the lemon peel.

Toast **100g whole, shelled almonds** in a dry frying pan until they just begin to brown.

Peel and slice **3 cloves garlic** and sauté them briefly in a medium sized saucepan, in **one tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil**.

Put the artichokes, preserved lemon peel and almonds in the saucepan with the garlic. Add **2 dessertspoons honey**, the **juice of one lemon**, **100ml water**, and some **salt** and **pepper**. If you like, add a couple of sprigs of fresh **thyme**. Simmer with the lid on, stirring occasionally. It will be ready when the artichokes are tender (10 - 15 minutes): check by prodding them with a sharp knife.

Spoon the artichokes, lemons and almonds into a serving dish. Boil the remaining sauce rapidly to concentrate the flavour, then pour the reduced cooking liquid plus **a little extra virgin olive oil** over the salad, and taste to check the seasoning.

The recipe is adapted by Christine Kaltoft from recipes by Claudia Roden (in 'Tamarind and Saffron'), and Rose Gray and Ruth Rogers (in 'River Café Cook Book Two').

(continued from page 1)

was the original foundations, or rather the lack of them. Our two-storey house rested on two courses of bricks, which in turn rested on bare earth. It is hardly surprising that it moved.

Attention then turned to the interior. Room by room plaster was hacked off, steel ties inserted in the walls

where necessary, the room replastered and re-decorated. Every room in the house needed attention, and we spent nearly a year with one room or another out of action, while the others resembling campsites. Camping in a house with workmen, and the lack of privacy for such a long period, was by far the most stressful aspect of the entire process.

At the end of it all, for the cost of a lot of personal disruption and our insurance excess, we have a house completely re-decorated inside and out to our specifications, resting on six feet of solid concrete. We haven't market-tested it, but we are satisfied with what we've got, and we know that this is one house that is unlikely to move again, whatever the earth may do. ■

What a Load of Rot! By Tony Miller

DID YOU HEAR Matthew Homer's talk at the HCA Annual General Meeting? He explained how all those bottles and papers that we conscientiously put into the green recycling bins are sifted and sorted and sent off somewhere else to be put to good use. But he didn't mention the little brown bins with their festering cargo of potato peelings, egg shells, tea bags and that unidentifiable bit of mouldy stuff, found lurking in the bottom of the vegetable rack, which might have been a parsnip once.

What happens to our kitchen and garden waste? Where does that go? In my mind's eye I saw a vast, mountainous compost heap, steaming gently, bordering the M25. Not far wrong, as it turns out. All our kitchen and garden waste, together with the waste from Hackney, Haringey, Barnet, Enfield, Waltham Forrest and Camden, is processed at the Eco Plant in Edmonton.

The process is something like this. The waste is shredded and mixed (at least 40% must be green garden



WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

waste). Then it's loaded into vast tunnels, which have forced air ventilation ducts in the floor to help the composting process. It stays there for three weeks, being heated up to 60°C. At this stage it is 'sanitised'. Then it's transferred to second-stage tunnels where the process is repeated for another three weeks. Finally it is 'matured' in, yes, a vast, mountainous compost heap for ten weeks, where it cools to 40°C. So not steaming – much.

The finished product is a coarse compost. It has a certain pungency but it's not stinky. It's an excellent soil conditioner, rich in nutrients and

humus, for agricultural use or in city parks and green spaces. The plant has a capacity of 30,000 tons per annum. That's an awful lot of brown bins.

With renewed enthusiasm I resolved to search out every scrap of organic matter and fill that brown bin until it burst. I knew I had been keeping that "thing formerly known as parsnip" for a good reason. I tossed it into the brown bin thinking, "That's the last I'll see of that."

But no. On May 15th the Council had a Greener, Cleaner, Safer Day on Highbury Fields. As part of the festivities they brought a huge pile of compost – yes, our very own compost. And it was free! Take away as much as you want! The Fields were a scene of frenzied activity as Highbury's gardeners helped themselves to this windfall. Several people returned for second and third helpings. Even so, it took about three days for them to demolish the pile. What an imaginative public relations coup for the Recycling Team!

Will there be another compost bonanza? They tell me that there might be. So keep your eyes open and follow your nose. ■

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Trees in London: trees in Highbury

By Gill Shepherd



RAYMOND ASH — A SORRY SIGHT

STREET TREES HAVE been an important part of London's urban planning since Georgian and Victorian times when parks and squares were established in the inner city, and trees planted along major roads. It is estimated that there are now close on half a million street trees across Greater London, 7 million counting all those in parks and woodlands. In all, an estimated 20 per cent of London's land area is under a canopy of individual trees. Since the average figure for the whole of the UK is only 10% tree cover, London at one level is doing very well.

However, the recent report commissioned by Darren Johnson, chair of the Environment Committee of the London Assembly ('Chainsaw Massacre: a review of London's street trees' May 2007) shows there is no room for complacency.

Data collected from the boroughs shows that over the past five years 40,000 trees have been lost, against 48,000 trees planted in London. Islington comes well out of this survey with the third highest percentage increase in street trees after Hackney and Newham over the last five years (14%, 13% and 11% respectively).

The report notes several worrying trends, but its future plans are admirable if they can be carried through.

Negative trends

There is a tendency, when larger trees such as plane-trees, field maples, limes etc, have to be replaced, to replace them with smaller ornamental trees which cannot provide shade or transform otherwise bleak urban landscapes, as taller trees can do.

Trees are being too readily lost as a result of subsidence claims from the house insurance industry.. Often subsidence is caused by a combination of the clay soils found in much of London, vibrations from traffic, speed-bumps, and a variety of other factors, as well as the trees themselves.

Many trees have been damaged and killed in recent years when commercial companies have repeatedly dug up streets to lay pipes and cables.

Most Councils now contract out such tasks as the regular trimming and pollarding of trees in their care. Not all contractors conduct this work well, or at the right time of year.

Sometimes members of the general public seem to be hostile to individual trees near their homes, complaining of leaves in gutters and bird-mess on car-roofs, and councils have sometimes been too ready to accommodate such complaints.

Positive Trends

The report also shows that where the public is consulted about trees, involved in the selection of species, site-selection and in after-care, trees flourish and residents become their sponsors. A very successful scheme in Hackney was cited. The report recommends greater consultation with the public about existing trees, as well as tree-planting.

The London Tree Officers' Association will produce a Best Practice Guide to tree maintenance and pollarding and this will in future be used as part of the contracts established with sub-contractors taking on this work for Councils.

Councils are being encouraged to be far less ready to fell trees at the request of members of the public, and to do all in their power to protect their existing stock of trees as well as augmenting them.

All this has particular resonance in Highbury because the double row of trees in Drayton Park, planted in 1988 and completely transforming the area, is threatened with felling and replacement. A meeting was held on 12th June at the Ecology Centre in Drayton Park, at which Jake Tibbetts, the Arboricultural Manager at Islington Council's Greenspace and Leisure Services explained the problem which has led to this, and possible solutions.

The species originally chosen for Drayton Park was American Raywood Ash, a species which has proved over thirty years in London not to be a very successful urban tree. Its worst fault is that it does not respond with vigorous new growth when trimmed or pollarded, in the way planes and limes do. It can readily develop splits, and drop branches unexpectedly, and cannot easily be reshaped if it does.

The group walked the line of trees discussing with Mr Tibbetts how these trees might be replaced (piecemeal or in larger blocks over the next three

years) and with what.

A preference was expressed for trees that would grow as tall as the Raywood Ashes in due course. Mr Tibbetts said that tall trees more robust than the Raywood ashes would probably grow more slowly, but would have greater longevity. He also said that not only would the two lines of trees on the east side of Drayton Park be retained and gradually replaced, but that new trees would be planted on the west side of the road once the construction of apartments was complete and the cranes and heavy vehicles had gone.

Further consultations will take place by email with the list of people who expressed an interest in the Drayton Park trees. (The small turnout at the

meeting on 12th convinced Mr Tibbetts that this would be a better consultative mechanism) These will be to discuss possible tree species to be planted in the Autumn after some preliminary felling takes place.

Incidentally, the Drayton Park example has, Mr Tibbetts reports, been a real learning curve for the Greenspace and Leisure Division. The division is now taking on three more members of staff, so that consultation with the public over trees and public spaces can be given a much fuller role in the future. ■

See www.highburycommunity.org for updates.

London Assembly's report: www.london.gov.uk/assembly/reports/environment.jsp.

FinFuture: the new Finsbury Park Partnership?

IN MARCH 2006 FinFuture took over the work of the Finsbury Park Partnership.

FinFuture is a membership organisation receiving funds from a variety of sources totalling some £600,000 pa. It is committed to represent and lobby on the Finsbury Park area's behalf, ensure that services delivered by the statutory organisations in the

area are co-ordinated, and to identify gaps in services and work with partners to find the necessary resources.

Town centre manager, Cathy MacBride will explain more in the next HC News. ■

Check www.finfuture.co.uk or contact James Hood or Christine Kalfoft, HCA representatives, via hcanews@hotmail.com.

Ashburton Grove Phone Masts Petition

Islington Council refused to grant planning permission for the 32 phone masts to be attached to the Ashburton Grove stadium. The network operators appealed and a Planning Inspector was appointed. He over-ruled the Council and granted the planning permission earlier this year.

However, Arsenal Football Club are a private company and do not have to have the masts on their stadium if they don't want to. In fact they will receive rent if they do agree.

One of the Gillespie ward councillors, Theresa Debono is collecting signatures for a petition to the Council and the Club asking them not to proceed with this. ■

If you would like to sign it, please contact Theresa: Theresa.Debono@islington.gov.uk



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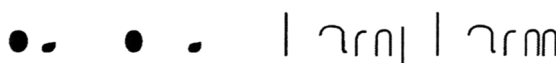
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Letter

Dear HCA.

OUR FORUM'S CHAIRMAN, George Durack told me today he had been given one of the 8 computers funded by HCA and provided by Islington Age Concern. He told me he was very pleased, and as he often works from home for the Islington Pensioners' Forum, it will be far more convenient for the rest of the committee if he is in computer touch. I asked him if he was used to typing: he said yes, when a union rep for the CWU. He also has a computer competent daughter who will help him.

This gift may prove a valuable initiative, by introducing an intelligent and influential pensioner to using a computer, which he would never have acquired on his own! While many pensioners are adept in computer use, I reckon the percentage of these is quite small: I would guess a maximum of 30%, at least amongst the 'older old' aged 70 plus. The others exclude themselves, mainly by ignorance and lack of confidence, to adventure into a new technological domain, from new interesting kinds of social contact. An encouraging example such as this may get them going, and could certainly enrich their lives!

So thank you very much for a valuable gift which may well lead to the enrichment of more older people's lives than this individual recipient of your computer.

Warm thanks

Angela Sinclair,
Secretary, Islington Pensioners' Forum

Community Speedwatch Pilot

ISLINGTON COUNCIL'S ROAD safety unit and the Metropolitan Police are setting up a pilot "Community Speedwatch" scheme for Drayton Park and Aubert Park. If it is a success, it will be extended to other roads.

It's run by Community volunteers (that's you and me) who monitor traffic speeds using equipment provided by the Council. Drivers who are 'caught' aren't prosecuted, but they do receive a warning letter from the Council and the Police

jointly. If they are subsequently prosecuted for a 'real' speeding offence, the warning mitigates against them.

The scheme needs volunteers who'd like to try monitoring traffic speeds. These two streets have been selected for the trial because it is thought speeding is frequent here and there is a school in one and a nursery in another. ■

To volunteer contact Ben Changa on ben.changa@islington.gov.uk or 0207 527 2000.

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, c/o 83 Highbury Hill, N5 1SX, made out to 'Highbury Community Association'. Send letters or articles for next issue to hcanews@hotmail.com or HCA News, 83 Highbury Hill, N5 1SX. Visit www.highburycommunity.org
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