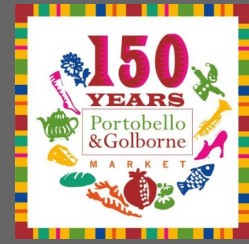


# Colville

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Blenheim Crescent



## Talbot Road/Blenheim Crescent 1900s

Portobello Road junction of Talbot Road and Blenheim Crescent facing south 1900s. This was before the arrival of the Electric Cinema in 1911 at 191 Portobello Road when the site was occupied by a woodyard. In the early 20th century the Blenheim Crescent junction hosted street entertainment and political demonstrations, including a barrel-organ playing the tune of the day, the hurdy-gurdy man with a monkey, 'Bedknobs and Broomsticks' style knees-ups, and clashes between communists and fascists when the latter held a pro-Mussolini rally in 1936.

The Colville Hotel at 186 Portobello Road on the corner of Talbot Road (now the First Floor bar/restaurant) was the Irish/West Indian local, known by the latter as 'the Pisshouse', frequented by the 'Absolute Beginners' author Colin MacInnes and photographed by Charlie Phillips in 'Notting Hill in the 60s'. This is the heart of MacInnes's literary pop dystopia 'Little Napoli', where the final scenes of 'Absolute Beginners' take place at the end of the 1958 Notting Hill race riots.

Colville Community History Project

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CITY LIVING  
LOCAL LIFE



## The battle of Blenheim Crescent 1958

In the late 50s Totobag's Caribbean café at 9 Blenheim Crescent (also known not always metaphorically as 'the Fortress') was an Afro-Caribbean community centre/ gambling den to early sound-system selectors like Duke Vin, Count Suckle and Baron Baker; a slumming attraction/cool hangout to Bohemian aristocrats, beatniks and musicians including Sarah Churchill (Winston's actress daughter, who is said to have left her chauffeur waiting outside in her Rolls), Colin Maclnnes and Georgie Fame; and a target to white rioters.

At the height of the rioting on September 2 1958, as the local mob was bolstered by Teds and fascists, Totobag's was the scene of West Indian resistance to an attack. According to the Telegraph report: 'The trouble started when a gang of white youths began demonstrating outside a house occupied by black people in Blenheim Crescent. They were met by a hail of milk bottles and a petrol bomb, which exploded on the pavement. Within minutes, black men had begun a counter-attack with iron bars. Although police broke this incident up and dispersed both mobs, sporadic fighting continued.'

In the police report, when they arrived at the scene ramming the door of 9 Blenheim Crescent with a Black Maria, around 30 black men were defending the café with an assortment of weapons. In Julien Temple's 'Absolute Beginners' film the riot scene was re-enacted as a 'West Side Story' dance sequence featuring Shark/ West Indians versus Jet/Teddy boys.

A few weeks later, the September 29 Kensington News reported another incident on Blenheim Crescent: 'Gaming House in Café Yard – Police Raid Dice Party. Police officers described a raid on an outhouse in the back yard of a Notting Hill café where coloured men were gambling with dice and cards. Thelma Williams was convicted of having the care of a common gaming house at premises in Blenheim Crescent... PC Leslie Marshall said he saw a number of coloured men go out through the café kitchen door into an outhouse in the yard where they began to play dice round a table... PC Alan Grant said he had to force the café door. He overtook the girl who was shouting in agitated tones. He then forced the kitchen door to get into the yard...

'Pleading not guilty, the girl denied knowing gaming was taking place in the outhouse. She added that it was her brother's café and on this evening he had gone out for a short time. Mr RG Mays, prosecuting, described the premises as being "of bad repute." He added that the gaming was on a fair scale because the 10 arrested coloured men had nearly £140 between them when arrested. One man had £95 of it which suggested he had either done very well or had been the banker.'

9 Blenheim Crescent has since been the furniture restoration business of the Hungarian Mr Kiss, who has preserved the premises in what looks like its 1950s condition as an 'Absolute Beginners' memorial.

## Blenheim Crescent 1968

Blenheim Crescent, between Portobello and Kensington Park Road, has also hosted the hippy Dog Shop at number 2, which became Plastic Passion/Minus Zero record shop, now Honey Jam toyshop; the long-running Mike's Café at 12; and the Notting Hill Bookshop, on the site of the Travel Bookshop at 13 (recreated by Richard Curtis at 142 Portobello Road in the 'Notting Hill' film), which now rivals Buckingham Palace as London's premier tourist attraction.

Mike's Café at number 12 succeeded the previous Blenheim Crescent cafés Totobag's, Pete's and the Continental as a celebrated hangout of street hippies and celebrities. In 1968 Mike's was described in a rave radical restaurant review in *International Times* as where 'heads gather for their daytime food in the company of housewives, workmen and other good people', and 'generally dug in the community.' Through the rock'n'roll years the café has been frequented by Tom Jones, Mick Jagger, Marsha Hunt, Marc Bolan, the Clash, Killing Joke and Blur members.

In the late 60s, as the nearby Electric Cinema became the centre of the hippy scene, number 2 Blenheim Crescent was the Portobello hippy headshop, the Dog Shop or the Family Dog Shop, named after the San Francisco ballroom commune of the acid guru Chet Helms. The shop purveyed 'psychedelic posters, rings and things, clothing from the East, incense, jewellery, pipes and other smokers' needs', to followers of Camel, Caravan, Hawkwind and Quintessence. Nik Turner of Hawkwind was employed as the Dog Shop delivery van driver. Upstairs was let by the beatnik landlord Bill Hopkins to the Word underground poster designers, who sent Christmas 68 greetings 'to all IT readers and heads everywhere, and new friends and old in or out of jail.' At various times the shopfront featured a giant nose and a mural of a hippo on a waterbed when the premises incorporated the Aquarius waterbed company.

Upstairs at 2 Blenheim Crescent in the early 70s, Richard Adams designed the last issues of the hippy underground papers, *International Times/IT*, *Oz* and *Frendz*, the *Index of Possibilities* journal featuring Michael Moorcock sci-fantasy stories, Felix Dennis's *cOzmic Comics* and *Kung Fu Monthly* Bruce Lee poster-mags. The premises also hosted Heathcote Williams's *Open Head Press*, Emma Tennant's surrealist quarterly *Bananas*, Tony Bennett's *Hasslefree Press* *Knockabout Comics* featuring the *Freak Brothers*, the *Legalise Cannabis Campaign*, John Michell, Lemmy, Gong and Marianne Faithfull. In the 80s downstairs became *Plastic Passion* record shop. Counter-cultural activities continued at number 2 into the 21st century with Richard Adams' design studio and *Minus Zero*, the 60s/70s punk rock specialist record shop of the two Bills, Atherton and Forsyth.





On Charles Booth's 1900s 'Life and Labour of the People of London' map, the south side of Blenheim Crescent west of Portobello is well-to-do while the north side is moderate poverty. The north end of Kensington Park Road is fairly comfortable/poverty and comfort mixed. In 'Notting Hill in Bygone Days', Florence Gladstone noted 'a very undesirable music palace' in the vicinity. E&O bar/restaurant was originally the Arundel Arms then the Blenheim and the Gate. At the height of the local Jewish community in the 20s, the area around the Notting Hill Synagogue on Kensington Park Road was known as 'Little Israel' and 'Jews' Island', the street was lined with kosher butchers and delicatessens, there was a Jewish Lads Club by the synagogue and a Notting Hill Jewish writers group. In the early 60s, when Oswald Mosley's Union Movement fascist bookshop was over the road, the synagogue was daubed with swastikas.

It was here in 1976 that the first Rough Trade punk and reggae record shop was opened by Geoff Travis at 202 Kensington Park Road, then another hippy headshop, now Shabby Chic couture boutique. Travis has said Kensington Park Road was the nearest thing he could find in London to the Bohemian atmosphere of the East Village and Haight Ashbury. But the journalist Viv Goldman recalled: "That street was not a trendy street. It was a shabby block, a lot of old dears and a grocery next door, probably an art gallery now, where people would get sarnies. It was more old style England, so Rough Trade coming in there was quite a shock, like a new generation coming up. They had hi-tech files and it was like the future had arrived in a street which practically could be in an Ealing comedy."

The Wild West 11 wagon wheel of the headshop still adorned the front and moccasin-makers worked on the premises, as Rough Trade 'step forward with new wave and reggae.' As the shop became the hub of the punk rock scene, it was frequented by Ramones, Sex Pistols and Clash members, the Raincoats and Alternative TV formed there, the Rough Trade and Mute independent labels were launched, and punk fanzines were distributed. During the 76 Carnival riot, the Supersonic Hi-fi sound-system operated from outside 202.

Kensington Park Road also featured the Star Apple shebeen/blues club on the southwest corner of Blenheim Crescent and the Karakata Caribbean store at 194 that appears in Horace Ove's 1975 film 'Pressure'. In the 90s the 192 bar next door frequently appeared in the original 'Bridget Jones's Diary' column by Helen Fielding. Today Blenheim Crescent is once more the centre of the music world with the XL label of Adele, Dizzee Rascal and the Prodigy in Codrington Mews, which previously hosted the Police manager Miles Copeland's punk independent record labels Step Forward, Deptford Fun City, etc.

Photos Nick Butt, Sue Snyder, Kensington Library Local Studies, Old Notting Hill/North Kensington History Group  
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