

Part 1

An introduction to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is the second smallest, but most densely populated, of the 33 local authorities¹ that are responsible for local government in London. Only the City of London is geographically smaller. The Royal Borough's has a population of more than 184,000 people that makes it the size of a medium-sized town, comparable to Luton, Northampton or Aberdeen. Kensington and Chelsea is also one of the most distinctive urban communities in Britain. It is the most densely-populated local authority in the country and, in the context of an urban setting at the heart of a megalopolis, it offers one of the most attractive places to live or work anywhere in the world.

The present Royal Borough was created during the re-organisation of London local government in 1965 as a result of the merger of the Metropolitan Borough of Chelsea and the Royal Borough of Kensington. King Edward VII conferred the status of Royal Borough on the Borough of Kensington in 1901 in memory of his mother, Queen Victoria, who was born and brought up at Kensington Palace. Kensington and Chelsea is therefore a relatively recent recipient of the Royal Borough status compared with other communities that carry this honour.

The Council of the Royal Borough carries out the full range of functions for which unitary local authorities in England are normally responsible. These are education, housing, social services, refuse collection, street cleaning, planning and the provision of parks, libraries and leisure services. In many parts of England these functions are divided between separate tiers of local government. County councils have responsibility, for example, for education and social services, while district councils are responsible for refuse collection, street cleaning and housing. Planning is divided between several tiers of local government (parish, district and county councils) and increasingly involves regional bodies. In London, single or 'unitary' authorities – boroughs – have been responsible for all these functions, but the advent of the Greater London Authority has given the mayor some say in major planning matters and he is now seeking more as the Government reviews the GLA's powers.

An excellent authority with a *Triple A* credit rating

Since 2000, English local authorities have been assessed by the Audit Commission in order to judge their efficiency, the quality and range of their services and the vision and leadership that they offer their local communities. This Comprehensive Performance Assessment resulted in the Royal Borough being rated as an *excellent* authority. Kensington and Chelsea is currently one of only two London boroughs and five local

¹ The 32 London boroughs and the Corporation of the City of London.

authorities in England to have been judged as *four star* authorities – the top assessment under the new inspection regime. This overall assessment reflects specific assessments made of the borough’s principal services such as education and social services.

The Royal Borough had an outstandingly complimentary Ofsted report when the Education Inspectorate assessed its performance as a Local Education Authority (LEA). The central achievement of the borough’s educational performance is the attainment levels that our children reach in national tests. Our primary schools have some of the best results in the country, in absolute terms and in terms of the relative progress that our children make in school.

Thirty years after the report by Lord Seebom that led to the establishment of contemporary local authority social services departments, a joint review was conducted by the Audit Commission and the Social Services Inspectorate. The Royal Borough was assessed as delivering *outstandingly good* services with good prospects for further improvement. In a separate inspection process, the social services department was given a *three star* rating by the Department of Health.

In addition to these assessments by central Government inspectorates, the Royal Borough has sought a commercial credit rating from the bond-rating agency Standard and Poor’s, as a result of which it now enjoys a *Triple A* credit rating.

People

The Royal Borough has been home to some of the most remarkable men and women who have shaped the history and character of contemporary Britain.

Chelsea was home to Sir Thomas More, a humanist renaissance scholar, a friend of Erasmus and the author of *Utopia*. He would have been remembered for his scholarship if for nothing else. Sir Thomas, however, served as Henry VIII’s Lord Chancellor until he resigned when the King initiated divorce proceedings against Katherine of Aragon, litigation that provoked a breach with the Holy See. Sir Thomas refused to take the oath passed by Parliament asserting the King’s royal supremacy. This led to his imprisonment, trial and execution. Like Thomas Becket, More has become the symbol of a man who placed his conscience above his personal security and his life. In 1935 he was canonised.

The great 18th and early 19th century Whig political and intellectual circle that surrounded Charles James Fox and Lord Holland was based on Holland House and was appropriately called the Holland House Set. Holland House itself was destroyed in the Second World War by enemy action, but its gardens and park remain one of the great delights of the borough.

Queen Victoria was born and brought up at Kensington Palace. In the 20th century, Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher were both residents and were given the Freedom of the Royal Borough. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography identifies 3,905 lives connected with the Royal Borough. The blue plaques on many houses in the borough commemorate remarkable men and women who have lived within this local community.

Institutions

The Royal Borough boasts an extraordinary array of institutions. The Portobello Market in Notting Hill is home to the famous antiques market as well as one of London's greatest open-air fruit and vegetable markets. The Victoria and Albert Museum, the National Army Museum, Leighton House and the Royal Hospital are all based in the Royal Borough.

Kensington and Chelsea has one of the greatest concentrations of scientific scholarship anywhere, with the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum and the Wellcome Institute all located on Exhibition Road. Our principal local hospital, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital Trust, is one of the medical schools for Imperial College London. In addition, the Royal Marsden cancer hospital and the Royal Brompton, the national heart and lung hospital, are both sited in the borough. If a town were home to just one of these remarkable institutions – let alone all of them – it would, as the Michelin Guides advise, be worth a detour.

Literary and artistic heritage

Kensington and Chelsea has been home to, and the inspiration for, many writers and artists. G.K. Chesterton wrote *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, while several of Muriel Spark's novels, including *The Girls of Slender Means*, *The Bachelors* and *Memento Mori*, are set in the borough. The Royal Borough is also home to many other successful and popular novelists, among them the crime writer P.D. James, now Baroness James of Holland Park.

The Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square revolutionised British theatre with its angry young men and kitchen sink drama. The Royal Court continues to produce new writing, and its commitment to innovation has been at the heart of the success of London theatre over the past 50 years.

North Kensington was the setting, along with nearby Shepherds Bush, for the BBC television comedy series *Steptoe And Son*, which explored the lives of father and son rag and bone men (or 'totters', as they were known). Rag and bone men travelled around the borough with horse drawn carts, making a living by collecting unwanted furniture and household goods. Even as late as the end of the 1980s they were a colourful feature of local life, and there were stables for their horses off Ladbroke Grove.

The film *Notting Hill*, starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, captured the contemporary imagination and has turned the Portobello Road and the Travel Bookshop in Blenheim Crescent into world famous cinematic icons.

Many famous painters, such as Whistler, Millais and Lord Leighton, have lived in the borough, which continues to be the home of many artists and art galleries. The Chelsea Festival was founded in 1992 and takes place in June, offering a wide range of concerts, exhibitions and lectures in some of London's finest artistic venues, such as the Cadogan Hall and the Chapel of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea.

The Council sponsors a summer opera season in Holland Park, set in an open-air theatre formed from the ruins that remained when Holland House was bombed in 1942. Holland Park Opera has won serious critical acclaim and has created a niche for itself in the musical life of England by specialising in some of the less well-known operas. The Notting Hill Carnival, held at the end of August each year, is not only Europe's largest street festival but also Europe's biggest celebration of Afro-Caribbean artistic and musical culture.

Architectural and urban heritage

Those of us who live in the Royal Borough are fortunate in having some of the most beautiful and unusual buildings in London, as well as some of the loveliest parks and garden squares in the metropolis. Among them are Kensington Palace, the Royal Hospital at Chelsea, Holland Park, the Kensington Garden Squares, the Chelsea Physic Garden and Brompton and Kensal Cemeteries.

The borough covers five square miles, 70 per cent of which is a conservation area. Kensington and Chelsea has been described as a Victorian Citadel, and there is no doubt that it contains outstanding examples of Victorian architecture. There are also many fine examples of Georgian architecture, such as Kensington Square, and important examples of modern buildings such as the Michelin building on Fulham Road and John Barker's famous shop in Kensington High Street. The Electric Cinema in Portobello Road was opened in 1910 and is now London's oldest and best-preserved purpose-built cinema.

All communities experience difficult challenges

In many ways the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is a very fortunate area, home to some of the most attractive residential property in London. Although this good fortune is reflected in the price of property and in household incomes that are almost twice the national average of £25,000, it should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there are still genuine problems within our community. There are acute examples of poverty and deprivation and the social stresses that go with them.

A quarter of the Royal Borough's homes are in the hands of social landlords, owned and managed either by the local authority or by voluntary organisations called housing associations. In the part of the borough around Notting Hill and North Kensington, more than a third of all housing is in the hands of social landlords. Seventy per cent of our residents in council housing depend on means-tested social security benefits.

Kensington and Chelsea has an unusually high proportion of privately rented accommodation. The condition of this rented property and the service provided by private landlords is very variable. Although many landlords are excellent, there have been local examples of bad ones. Among them was Peter Rachman, the notorious landlord who owned and managed a great deal of property around Notting Hill in the 1960s. Rachman's conduct was so unpleasant and notorious that 'Rachmanism' has become a widely-used term synonymous with cruel and rapacious landlords. His behaviour led to the establishment of the Milner-Holland Inquiry into private rented accommodation that concluded in 1965 that Rachman was, in the main, the unacceptable exception rather than a typical example of a private landlord. It also found that well over 80 per cent of tenants were satisfied with their landlords. The Rachman experience has ensured that the Royal Borough has since worked consistently on behalf of private tenants and has sought to protect people from bad landlords through advice, practical support and legal remedy.

In the 1940s and early 1950s one of the most notorious and influential episodes in English criminal history took place at 10 Rillington Place (long since bulldozed and built over). Following the murders of a number of women and a baby in the house, two men, Timothy Evans and Reginald Christie, were convicted of murder and hanged. The conviction of Christie at the Old Bailey in 1953 has never been challenged, but the conviction of Evans in 1950 for the murder of his baby daughter Geraldine was believed to be unsafe. This was the result of evidence that emerged during the trial of Christie that suggested that he might have been responsible for the murder of the baby girl rather than Evans, who later received a posthumous Royal Pardon.

These dreadful events and the pardon that came too late had a lasting significance for the English criminal justice system. The potential miscarriage of justice that had taken place played an important part in the debate that led to the abolition of the death penalty in Britain in 1965.

In the 1950s Britain experienced its first wave of large scale Commonwealth immigration. The first immigrants, from Jamaica, came on a passenger liner, the *MV Empire Windrush*, leading to the people who

came to Britain at this time being affectionately referred to now as the 'Windrush generation'.

To ignore the social tensions and distress of this period would be to offer a misleading picture of the way the Royal Borough has evolved. In 1958 there was a riot in Notting Hill that lasted for four days. In the 1959 General Election, Sir Oswald Mosley, the former leader of the British Union of Fascists, stood for Parliament in the North Kensington Constituency and tried to exploit racial tensions in the community. While Sir Oswald Mosley achieved little in the way of electoral success, he did manage to provoke a great deal of trouble locally.

As a community, we have come a long way since then. The Council has worked hard over many years to promote good community relations, helped a great deal in this respect by local voluntary, church, faith and community organisations. All have worked together to produce practical results that have made a genuine contribution to ensuring people have happier and more comfortable lives. Good examples of this partnership working are the Pepper Pot Club and the Oremi Centre. The Pepper Pot Club is a day centre and luncheon club for older Afro-Caribbean people, while the Oremi Centre is a mental health day centre that offers a service for black people with acute mental health difficulties. It is a centre of excellence that shows what can be achieved in the field of mental health in a community care setting.

The Royal Borough's civic buildings

Whenever the Council has commissioned new buildings there has been a great deal of controversy. In the 1950s the Royal Borough of Kensington built a new borough library in a neoclassical architectural style. This resulted in so much criticism, particularly from contemporary architects, that plans for a town hall in the same style were abandoned.

Sir Basil Spence, one of Britain's most famous post-war architects and the man who had designed Coventry Cathedral in the 1950s, was instead asked to take over the project. The result is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea's current town hall in Hornton Street, completed in 1977.

The sale and demolition of the former Kensington Town Hall in Kensington High Street stimulated even greater controversy. It had always been the Council's intention to sell the old town hall and to use the proceeds partly to fund the costs of the new building, and it had been understood that it was likely that not only would the building be sold but that it would be pulled down and the site redeveloped. There was, though, significant opposition within the local community to the idea of demolishing the building.

As with many significant planning sites within the borough, it took some time for the owners of the building (in this case the Council), potential developers and the Royal Borough's Planning Committee to reach agreement on an appropriate way forward. When, after considerable delay, it looked as though a realistic planning scheme was about to be agreed, the Council became concerned that the Greater London Council (GLC) might decide to designate the location of the town hall as a conservation area.

Not only would this have been an unusual action for the GLC to take without the agreement of the local borough, it would have made it difficult for the building to be demolished – and it prompted the Leader of the Council, Councillor Nicholas Freeman, to take action. To make sure that the Council would be able to realise the full value of this significant asset, he decided that the best course of action was to demolish it, work that started late at night on 11 June 1982.

The demolition of the town hall provoked controversy and received extensive coverage in the national press. The Victorian Society, the Royal Fine Arts Commission and other people expressed annoyance at a decision they felt bordered on the intemperate. There was a debate on the issue in the House of Lords, tabled by Baroness Ewart-Biggs. In the event the Local Government Minister, Lord Belwin, explained that there was no statutory obligation on Kensington and Chelsea to consult the Secretary of State for Environment and that it was essentially a local matter for the planning authority involved.

The new town hall was built on the site of The Red House. This large villa itself had an interesting history, having been built in 1835 for Stephen Bird, one of the finest brickmakers in Kensington. Herbert Hoover, who was to become the 31st President of the United States, lived in the house between 1914 and 1917 when he helped to coordinate the repatriation of stranded American tourists after the outbreak of the First World War and organised war relief funds for the people of Belgium. The Red House and Niddry Lodge were demolished to allow for the construction of the new town hall in 1972.