

Conservation and planning for Camden Town

Locating Camden Town

The boundaries of Camden Town remain contentious. A recent (2012) map from the Museum of London places **Camden Town** in bold lower case, similar to **Kentish Town** and **Kings Cross**, with ST. PANCRAS centrally and stations – North London Line and Underground – in smaller type (Figure 4.1). This map is chosen here, however, also because it has the outline of the postal district NW1 in light shade and other postal areas in darker shade. The northern and eastern boundary of NW1 follows the boundary of the Camden Town Estate, the fields that separated Lord Camden's land from Kentish Town.

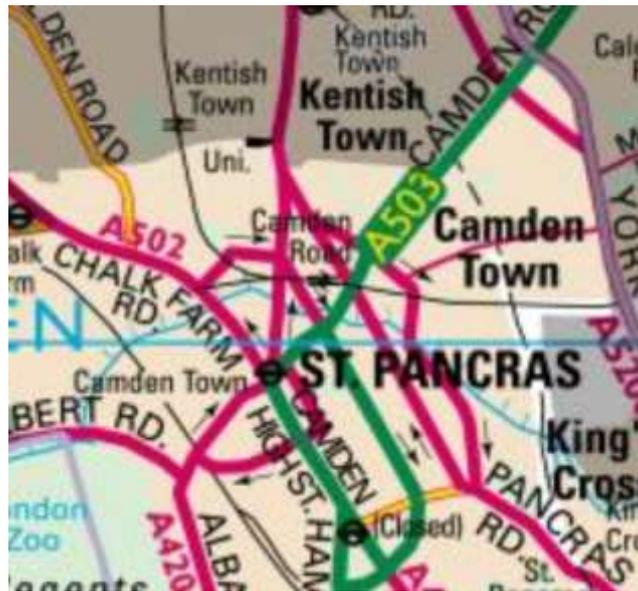


Figure 4.1. St Pancras, NW1 postcode area¹

Contrast two maps of the London Borough of Camden. Figure 4.2, a map of 'development areas', divides Camden Town: Camden Town North is joined with Chalk Farm and Camden Town South overlaps Kings Cross, but leaving much of Camden New Town out of either.

¹ Museum of London, 'Postcode map' <museumoflondon.org.uk/postcodes/places/NW1.html>



Figure 4.2 Camden Town 'development areas'

Equally, Camden Town is poorly recognised politically. Figure 4.3 shows political ward boundaries in purple, sub-divisions in mauve, the black letters are area sub-codes, with Camden Town added in orange: Camden Town divides across four wards.



Figure 4.3 London Borough of Camden central wards and Camden Town boundaries

The Borough of Camden created most of its conservation areas in the two twentieth century periods of Labour government. Larger areas of Camden Square, Kentish Town and Regent's Canal were created in the 1970s, but the newer areas from 1997 were smaller and more selective. Much of Camden Town remains unprotected, Figure 4.4:



Figure 4.4. Camden Town (line) and designated conservation areas (stippled)

Conservation became a prominent approach in London in the 1960s. The post-war period had seen substantial destruction of the nineteenth century terraces by public authorities. Camden Town saw rebuilding of bomb-damaged villas of Camden Road and Rochester Square: re-named St Pancras Way estate, the six-storey Bauhaus-style blocks gained a Festival of Britain architectural award. St Pancras Borough was among the leading boroughs in new building – Figure 4.5 shows Harold Wilson, leader of the Labour Party and shortly to be Prime Minister, opening the Borough's 5000th public-sector dwelling since 1945.



Figure 4.5 Harold Wilson, Labour Party leader, at St Pancras, 1963.²

² Harold Wilson <flashback.com/on-this-day-in-photos-september-7th-in-the-20th-century-53538>

The Labour Government from 1964 oversaw another period of demolition, this time affecting the southern parts of Camden Town between Pratt Street and Crowndale Road. Rebuilding of the small terrace and mews houses between the main roads of the original Camden Town 'grid' put front doors in the air along walkways and balconies. Yet shortly, in the period of the sixties 'counter-culture', which included the defeat of a proposed inner London motorway 'box' and a gas-explosion of a tower block in East London called Ronan Point, public opinion moved strongly away from demolition – not least because it often destroyed existing communities – towards restoration of the existing buildings, of both terraced housing and reuse of industrial buildings. As a result of significant public campaigns, such as John Betjamen's for St Pancras Station, in 1970 Parliament extended the date limit for conservation from 1840 to 1939.

Planning London's future

Character

The public body concerned with the interests of local history is the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England – known in short as Historic England. It is tax-funded and different from its ancestor English Heritage, which is now a charity tasked with managing the asset of 400 historic buildings and sites (and the blue plaques scheme). Historic England oversees listing of 400 000 significant sites and holds archives of seven million items relevant for local history. Nevertheless, because it is a government organisation, Historic England is not in close contact with the public (in comparison with English Heritage). Historic England works through providing advice, undertaking research and presenting the case for 'environmental heritage' in the political arena.

While Historic England is concerned with the past, its main concern is protection and enhancement for the present and future. Instead of 'heritage', there is growing use of the expression 'character', which combines understanding of period with concern about form and function. Historic England states that 'Research questions that will help our mission include ... How can we use historic local character and distinctiveness of urban areas to inspire and guide future land use, development and design?'³ This forms an intersection with local history: by retelling the past in the present, historians can contribute to discussion of planning for the future.

The Mayor of London consulted on a spatial development strategy, the London Plan, in 2017. The Plan provides statutory guidance for the coming fifteen years. It continues spatial plans of the 20th century, such as the Greater London Plan of 1944, by Abercrombie and

³ Historic England, 'Urban and public realm heritage'

historicengland.org.uk/research/current/discover-and-understand/urban-public-realm

Forshaw. The Plan responds to policies and forecasts, particularly the continued high net balance of migration into London. The policy choice is for greater density of housing within London's boundaries and continued transfer of use from ex-industrial to housing and offices, while maintaining open space.⁴

How should new building of housing be managed?⁵ Two reports commissioned for the Plan give contrasting approaches. The structural engineers Ove Arup recommends increased density (ie higher buildings, less open space) with greater proximity to (existing) public transport – effectively, the concentric circles of London's growth. The second, by architects Allies and Morrison, identifies areas of London related to their period of buildings and proposes development that promotes local character. The Arup approach is the current standard for London, based on business priorities – maximising commuting to work. The character approach would celebrate variety, locality and quality of life.⁶

Historic England has promoted a character approach with the 32 London boroughs – of which 18 have made formal 'character studies'. These borough-wide studies broadly take two approaches: a typological analysis – classifying land use, built form, townscape and historic origins; or those with an area or community-focussed approach, setting out the history and character at the local level. The study undertaken for Camden Borough took the first approach, placing a strong emphasis on existing land use but only for land outside existing conservation areas. In a delicate critique of Camden Borough's study, the consultancy Land Use Consultants suggests "The patchwork created by excluding greenspace and Conservation Areas sometimes creates a fragmented picture that perhaps slightly lacks a common thread."⁷

In Historic England's assessment, the meaning and implications of character studies for planning are not well understood by boroughs and are insufficiently used for specific planning decisions. Allies and Morrison have taken their consultancy work further with the Boroughs of Hackney and Lewisham, for the first time including assessment of the implications of character analysis for local planning.⁸ The London Boroughs have borough-wide local plans which regulate Council planning decisions. Planning is therefore part of a system controlling perception of character and also a framework for decisions influencing character in the future. Moreover, Historic England is (though slowly) moving from primary concern with the physical aspects of buildings, their design and how they relate to

⁴ Mayor of London, 'New London Plan'
<london.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning/london-plan/new-london-plan>

⁵ See also recent essays in Peter Guillery, David Kroll, eds, *Mobilising housing histories: learning from London's past*, London, 2017.

⁶ Ove Arup for Historic England *London plan review no.2 report*, London, 2016. Allies and Morrison for Historic England, *London's local character and density*, London, 2016.

⁷ LUC for Historic England, *Characterisation of London's historic environment*, London, 2016:11,74.

⁸ Allies and Morrison, 'Character and density research'
<alliesandmorrison.com/up-projects/local-character-density-research/>

movements in architectural history towards including concern with area, place and setting, the range of dimensions of the local as well as its uniqueness.

This offers a stronger role for the local historian whose rationale is identification of the particular within the general. Local historians are by nature archivists – most local history centres, supported by public authorities, hold local records that form the backbone of the local history studies. Local history is allied to micro-history, concerned with close reading, identifying detail and constructing new perceptions. In a recent call to reinstate thinking about 'the public future', Guldi and Armitage propose: "History's power ... lies in explaining where things came from, tacking between big processes and small events to see the whole picture, and reducing a lot of information to a small and shareable version".⁹ The authors encourage putting history into clearer arguments and public forms, including visual and digital, and linking detailed studies with policy issues.

⁹ Jo Guldi & David Armitage, *The history manifesto*, Cambridge 2017:13.