

Rush Common & Brixton Hill Conservation Area Appraisal

The character appraisal below is reproduced from the Council's original designation report of 27 August 1997. It is reproduced here to provide guidance on what the Council believes makes the area worthy of its conservation area status and should be consulted by anyone wishing to undertake development affecting the conservation area.

LONDON BOROUGH OF LAMBETH

ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

**CONSULTATION DRAFT REPORT & CHARACTER ASSESSMENT STATEMENT FOR THE
PROPOSED BRIXTON HILL CONSERVATION AREA**

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January 1997

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LONDON BOROUGH OF LAMBETH ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION & POLICY CONTEXT

The Deposit Lambeth Unitary Development Plan (1992) included a commitment to consider the designation of various new Conservation Areas in areas of historic and architectural interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance (Policy CI). This commitment was confirmed within the Proposed Changes Report in October 1993 which put forward the proposal to designate eight new conservation areas in the borough. These included 3 proposed new conservation areas within the neighbourhood adjoining Rush Common, east of Brixton Hill - centred on Josephine Avenue (Proposal No. C63), Holmewood Gardens (Proposal No. C67) and Archbishop's Place (Proposal No. C68). Josephine Avenue was identified as the first conservation area to be assessed for designation.

This assessment was commenced in September 1996 with a thorough character analysis based upon the criteria contained within PPG 15 (section 4.2) and within English Heritage guidance - Conservation Area Practice (October 1995). The assessment of the area's character is derived from the different elements that contribute to its special character - this criteria includes:

- (i) the origins and development of the topographical framework,
- (ii) the architectural and historic quality, character and coherence of historic buildings and their style and materials, and the contribution they make to the special interest of the area,
- (iii) the contribution made by green spaces, trees, hedges and other natural elements to the character of the proposed conservation area,
- (iv) The relationship of the built environment to the landscape including significant landmarks, vistas and panoramas,
- (v) The extent of loss, intrusion or damage i.e. the negative factors which have exerted a detrimental impact upon the character and/or appearance of the historic area,
- (vi) The existence of neutral areas.

Early on in this assessment exercise it became very obvious that the proposal to designate Josephine Avenue and the remaining proposed designations of Archbishop's Palace and Holmewood Gardens was far too narrow in scope, completely out of context with the evolution of a wider area of special architectural and historic interest, and was a most inadequate approach to protecting the intrinsic character and appearance of a neighbourhood whose development was directly determined by the highly significant declaration and enforcement of an Act of Parliament of 1806 which protected Rush Common as inalienable land. This Act prevented any building from encroaching the common within 150 feet of the former London to Croydon Turnpike Road and also within two swathes of land along its eastern and southern boundaries. (See Plan No.1)

The protection of the Common by Conservation Area status is important because the original 1806 Inclosure Act was modified in 1947 when Parliament gave power to the local authority to enforce the 1806 building restrictions on the proscribed lands, but at the same time also removed the inalienable status of the common by giving the authority the right to consent to building on the Common if it considered any development to be acceptable. Department of National Heritage guidance in PPG15 endorses the view that conservation area designation is suitable for historic parks and gardens and other areas of historic landscape. Rush Common certainly meets this criteria - particularly since its reclamation from its earlier annexation by private gardens by Lambeth Borough Council after the Second World War and the high quality landscaping which has transformed Rush Common into a splendid linear park which extends, with only a few remaining breaks, for nearly a mile.

The designation of three isolated groups of housing therefore would do nothing to protect the overall character of a distinct neighbourhood which has developed mainly in four distinct phases beginning with the construction of large town houses along the main thoroughfares in the early 1800's, continuing with the development of artisans housing in the 1850's, then the rapid development of later Victorian terraced housing and shopping parades fronting Brixton Hill, as a direct result of the opening of the railways and tramways from about 1870, followed by the development of several large blocks of private flats in the inter-war era and local authority housing projects in the post-war years.

The three areas originally identified are just three isolated examples of housing development east of Rush Common and are not necessarily any better in terms of quality of townscape, architecture or historic interest than adjacent roads within this neighbourhood. This is particularly evident when one considers the omission of Elm Park - a thoroughfare which was laid out well before Josephine Avenue and one which has at least equal character to Josephine Avenue and certainly greater character than Holmewood Gardens. It is therefore considered essential to designate a conservation area which reflects the evolution of the neighbourhood whose development and

character was shaped by the constraints of the Rush Common Act, rather than to select sub-areas, particularly if the reason for choosing those areas is based largely on the pressure exerted by individual local residents groups with the strongest voice rather than an objective assessment based upon the criteria laid down in Central Government and English Heritage guidance.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PROPOSED CONSERVATION AREA.

From the outset it is essential to define the area of special interest which justifies designation and to define the exact boundaries of the proposed conservation area. In this case, the boundaries are generally very distinct and it is possible to select a tightly drawn area which includes all the areas of greatest character and historic interest. The most important feature which, as outlined above, has determined the historic development of the neighbourhood is Rush Common. It is therefore essential for the whole of the surviving Rush Common to be included within the Conservation Area - the Common extends up to the boundary of the existing Brixton Conservation Area to the north and down to beyond Holmewood Road to the south. (See Plan 5)

Careful consideration was given as to the western boundary of the proposed conservation area - initially this was to have run up Brixton Hill itself, however this would obviously not protect the very important frontage along the west side of Brixton Hill which exerts a fundamental impact upon the character of the 200 year old Rush Common. It therefore is important to include just the frontage buildings which directly overlook the Common, from Baytree Road southwards to Telegraph Passage. This would include a large number of significant landmark buildings such as the Grade II* Listed Corpus Christi Church, other listed buildings such as the late Georgian villas at Nos. 132 -138 (representing the only properties from this era to survive the tide of redevelopment along Brixton Hill begun by the Victorians and continued in the Twentieth Century) and several other buildings of considerable historic and architectural interest. These include several late Victorian public houses and shopping parades and five fine 1930's apartment buildings.

The triangle of buildings between the junction of Brixton Hill with New Park Road and the Telegraph Public House includes some early nineteenth century properties as well as some attractive Victorian buildings, so this block is considered worthy of inclusion within the proposed conservation area. The remaining buildings south of these properties including the 1970's Courtenay House are considered to be of insufficient merit and it is proposed that these are excluded from the designation.

The land abutting the Common north of Brixton Water Lane was developed as rather brutal looking medium rise local authority flats in the 1960's. The land facing onto the Common between

Holmewood Road and Somers Road had been similarly redeveloped by a more attractive early 1950's estate. Although these two estates do form part of the historical development of the neighbourhood, they contribute little to the character or appearance of the area and it is considered that they be excluded from the proposed conservation area. This also applies to a smaller lower rise council estate immediately to the south of Water Lane developed in the 1950's. Water Lane, with the exception of this 1950's estate forms an obvious boundary to the north (this was one of the first roads to divide the Common following the 1806 Act - it was formerly known as Cross Road) beyond which is another local authority estate (the St. Matthew Estate).

The extensive Tulse Hill estate, begun in the mid 1930's and completed in the 1940's is an impressive architectural statement, representing some of the most progressive ideas of social housing design of that period. In the future it may well be worthy of consideration of Conservation Area status on its own merits, but it is considered that it forms a distinct development which stands apart from the general character and appearance of the predominantly Victorian Brixton Hill and Elm Park neighbourhood. The estate is therefore excluded and forms most of the proposed eastern boundary of the conservation area.

The boundary south of Elm Park is also fairly straightforward to define. It is considered necessary to exclude a large portion of land between Holmewood Gardens and Upper Tulse Hill which has been developed for rather unexceptional 1930's terraces and local authority housing in the post-war years. The inclusion of the former Strand Grammar School for Boys (1912) at the southern end of Elm Park is considered very important as this fine building is a splendid local landmark and is of significant historic and architectural interest in its own right. So too is St. Matthias Church built in 1894, the adjacent former institute built in 1889, and a row of six small semi-detached townhouses dating from about the 1840's. These properties form the last surviving group on Upper Tulse Hill which was formerly lined with early Nineteenth Century residences until their wholesale demolition in the immediate post-war years.

Finally Holmewood Road and Holmewood Gardens form a distinct unit ~ a very attractive group of late Victorian terraced housing built between 1895 and 1898 around a village green style central garden. To the north and east are local authority estates of little merit and a row of indifferent 1930's private houses which do not merit inclusion, however it is considered most important to include the area between Holmewood Gardens and Christchurch Road which contains an interesting group of considerable historical and architectural importance. Most notable is the magnificent Grade I Listed Christ Church (1842) and another very prominent landmark building - Christchurch House (1938) which is a splendid example of 1930's moderne architecture with its stylish curving balconies. Together these very different landmark buildings form an impressive and very striking gateway to the proposed conservation area from the south.

Behind Christchurch House two other inter-war structures of significant historic interest survive - the first is the former London County Council Aspen House Open Air School opened in the 1920's, still in educational use as a special-needs school (now The Orchard Centre). This is a rare survivor of this type of special school for children with poor health schooled in open sided classroom pavilions. On an adjacent site, fronting Brixton Hill is the fine former Tramway Depot with its imposing brick facade completed in 1923 which has survived remarkably intact now in use as a motor car showroom. The southern boundary is therefore conveniently and distinctively formed by Christchurch Road.

CHARACTER ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSED BRIXTON HILL CONSERVATION AREA

It is essential to define as fully as possible the special architectural and historic interest which justifies the designation of this proposed conservation area. This is important both for the purposes of providing a sound basis for the designation for the unitary development plan and development control purposes which is defensible on appeal, and also to aid the formulation of proposals for the preservation or enhancement of the character and appearance of the area.

(i) The origins and development of the topographical framework

It is important to identify the surviving historical elements which have determined the form of the modern topography - in this case the long established north - south thoroughfares of Brixton Hill and Tulse Hill and inalienable Rush Common land. The fundamental influence upon the development of this neighbourhood was the Inclosure Act of 1806 which protected Rush Common. (see Plan 1) Following the passing of this Act, the development of the area can be divided into four distinct phases:

- (a) the construction of townhouses for wealthy inhabitants in a linear form along the two main roads, set back from the common, in the early 1800's (which have virtually all been demolished) - see Plan 2 (1841).
- (b) the building of a few streets of artisan housing in the 1850's, such as Archbishop's Place (begun in the early 1850's) - perhaps partly to serve the wealthier carriage-owning residents, terraces of slightly grander houses along Elm Park and Upper Tulse Hill and the construction of the magnificent early Victorian Christ Church - see Plan 3 (1862).
- (c) the rapid development of attractive Victorian terraced housing (e.g. Ostade Road and Craster Road in 1876, Endymion Road in 1881, Beechdale Road in 1891 and Arodene Road in 1891) for the artisan and middle classes and the erection of elegant late Victorian

shopping parades and public houses (particularly on Brixton Hill) following the arrival of the railways in the mid 1860's and the introduction of trams between Brixton and Westminster Bridge in 1870. These improvements in transport allowed better paid clerks and other workers employed in Central London to move into the suburbs. See Plan 4 (1894)

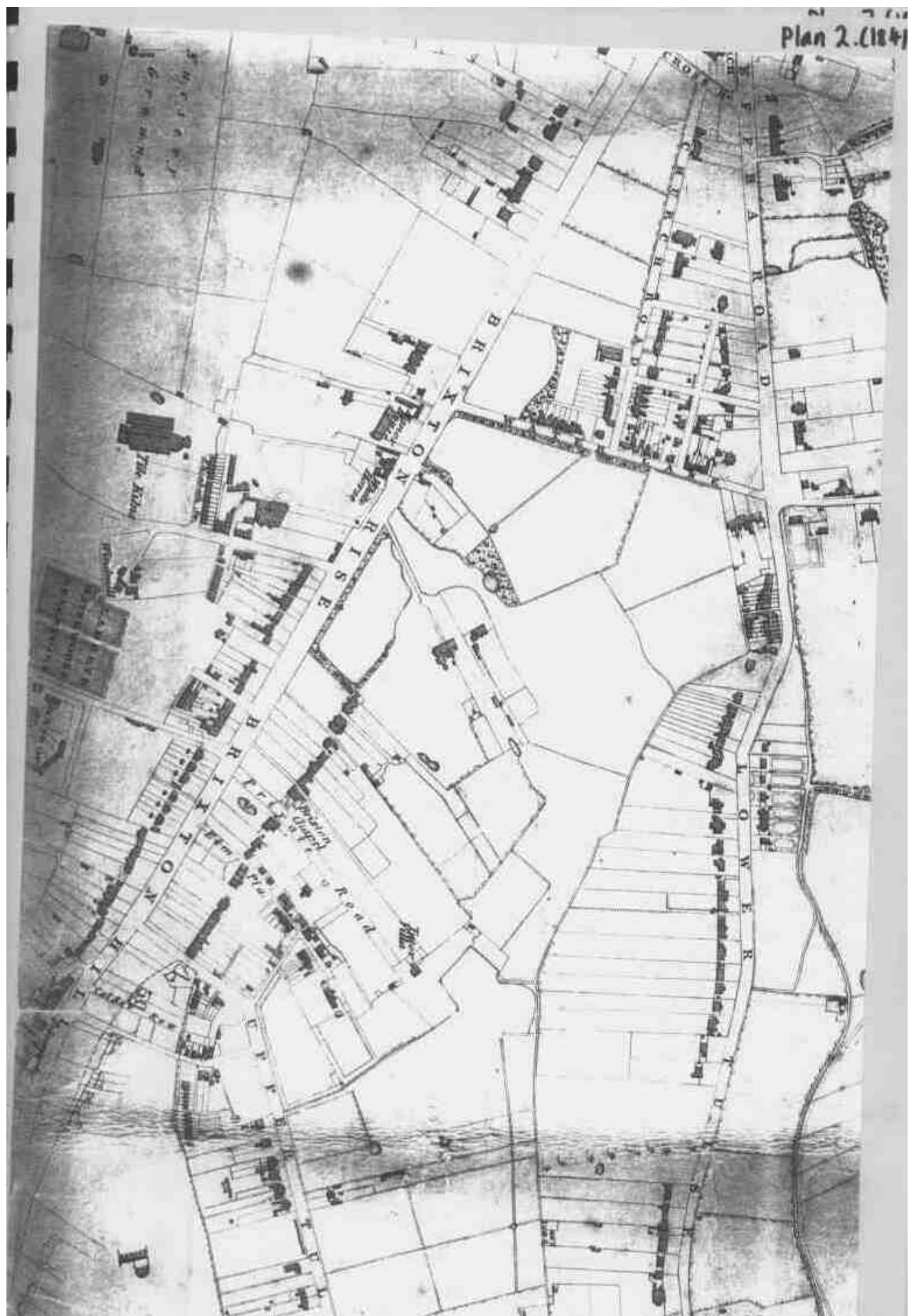
This resulted in the gradual exodus of the more wealthy 'carriage-owning classes' whose large houses were, one by one, converted into boarding houses or flats. By 1900 the area was almost completely developed and in the Twentieth Century developments were mainly confined to the building of large blocks of flats on the sites of the old Georgian villas rather than by more terraced housing.

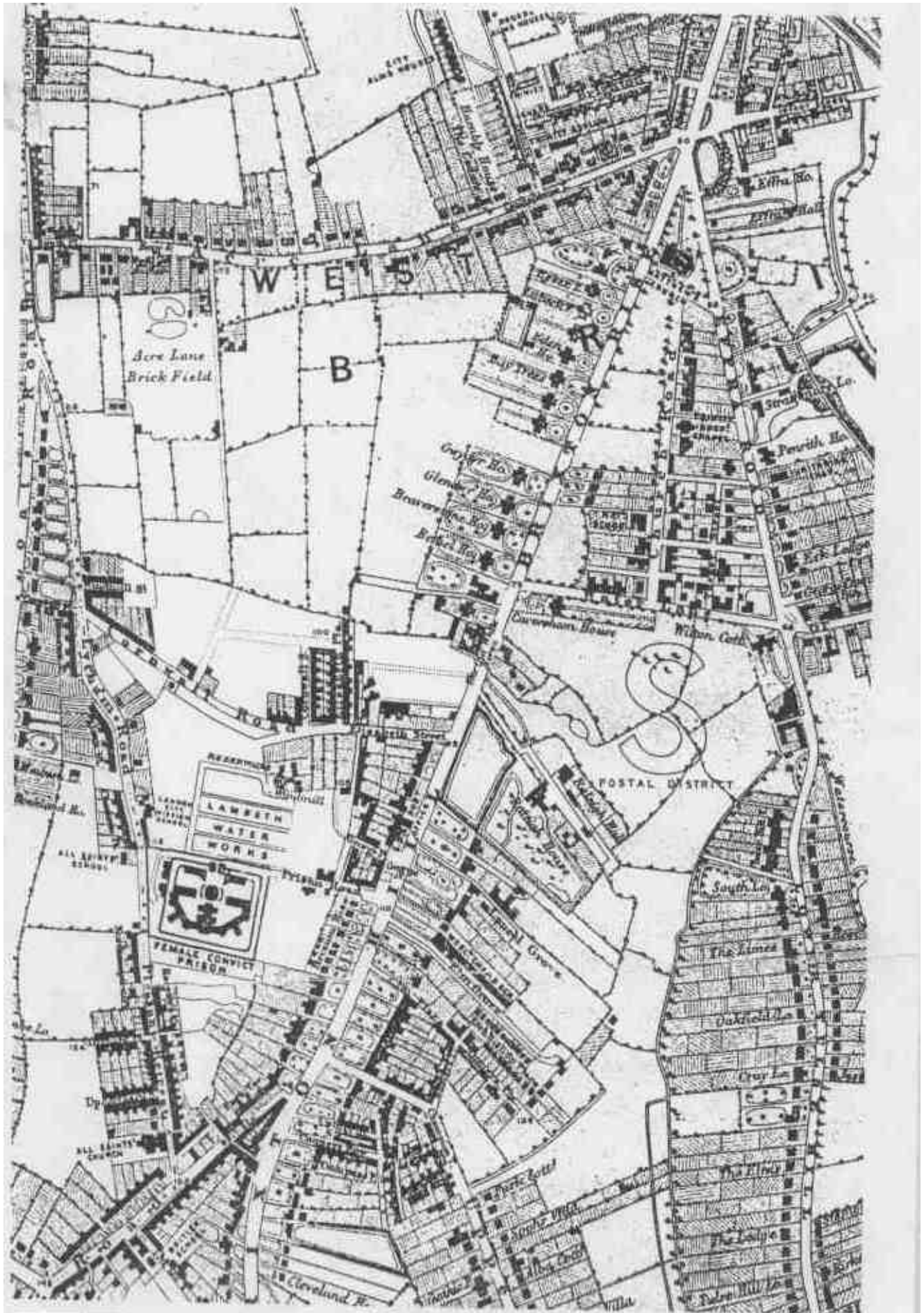
Plan 1.



Plan1 . The stippling denotes tile area where building was proscribed by the Act of 1806

Plan 2 (1841)





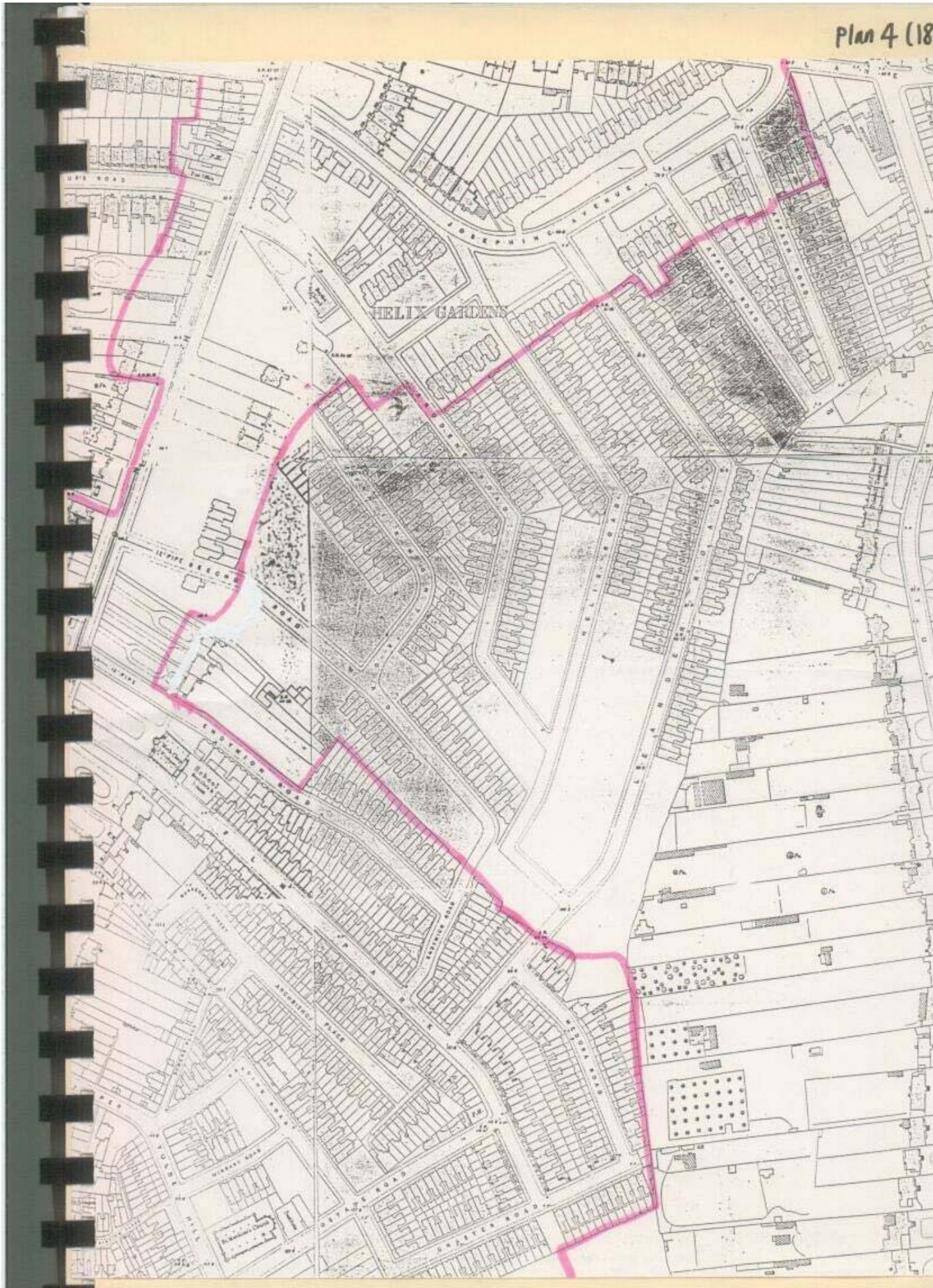
Brixton Hill: extract from Stanford's map of 1862[^] showing large houses along the main roads. Most of the land behind them was then still open fields, but the arrival of railways and

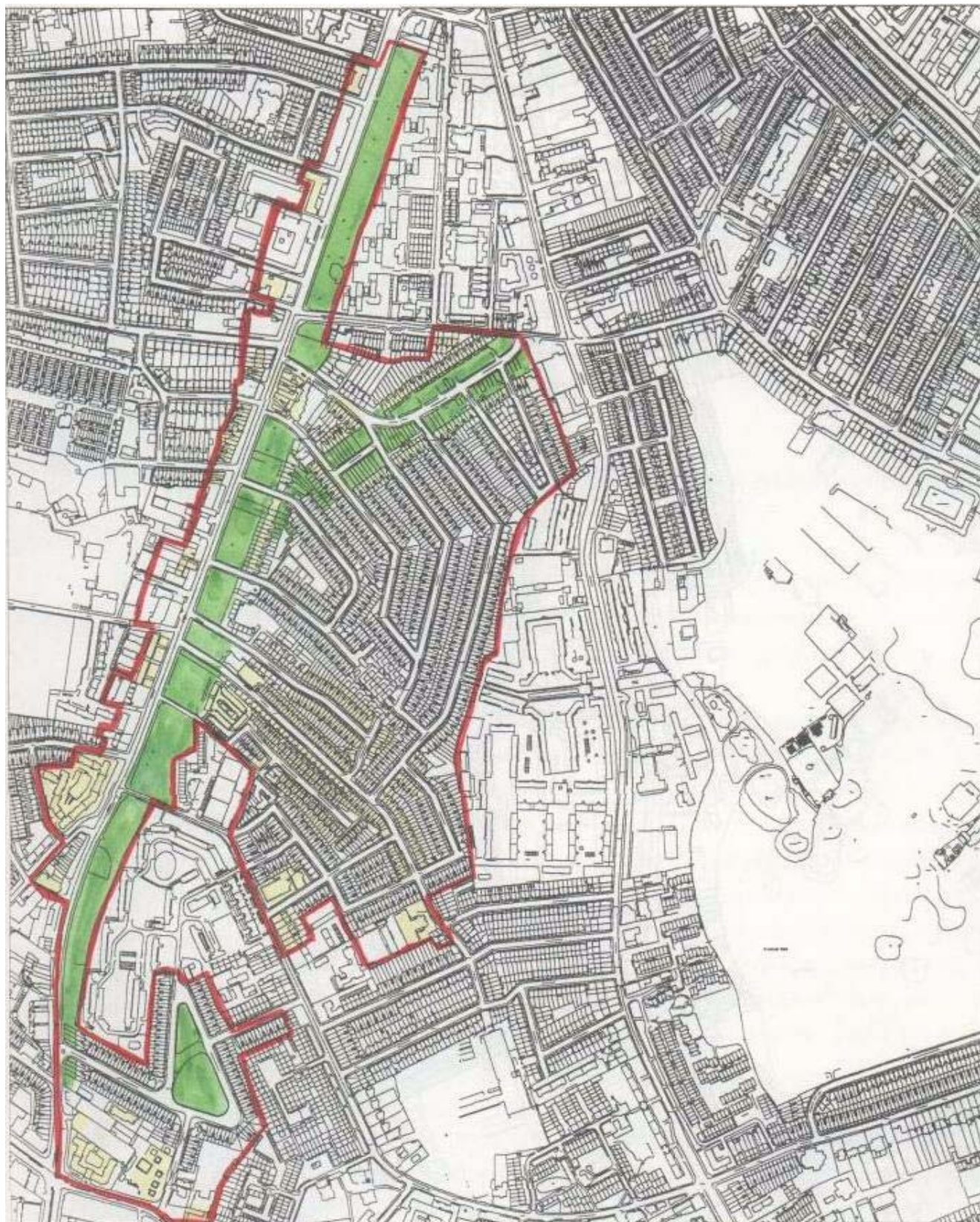
tram services would soon change that. (Brixton Society collection)



Reduced from the original Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map to a scale of approximately 1:6340 (or about 15 inches to a mile).
This Edition published by Alan Godfrey, Dunston, Gateshead in 1987.

1870





LAMBETH
ENVIRONMENTAL
SERVICES

job title

PROPOSED BRIXTON HILL
CONSERVATION AREA

proposed boundary

Rush Common &
other green spaces

buildings of
particular interest

job number

DES/PP/378

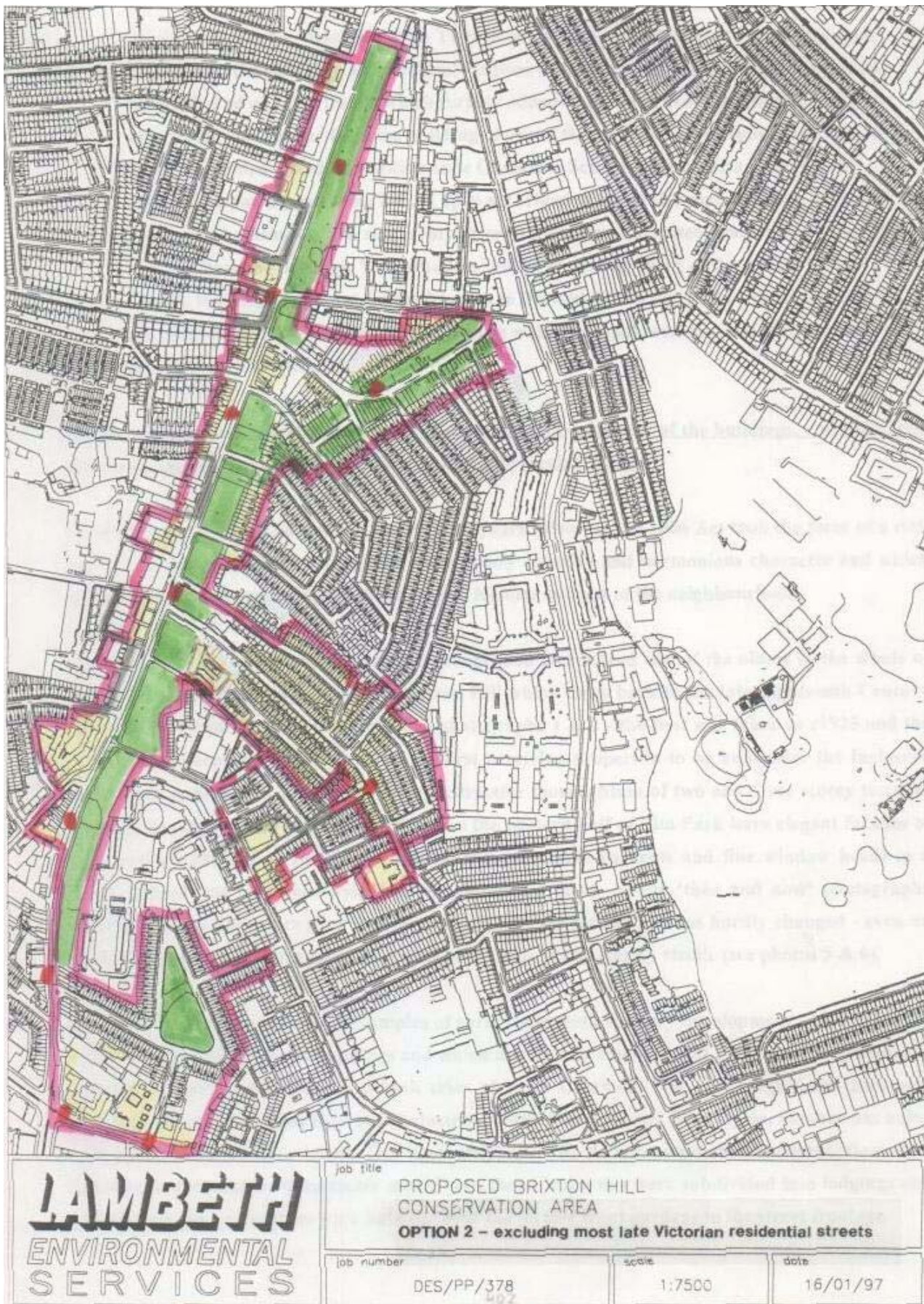
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date

16/01/97

Plan 5a



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- (d) the contribution to the character of the neighbourhood by a number of prominent developments in the first half of the Twentieth Century - many of which represent good examples of the changing architectural fashions of that era and also the important social, economic and cultural trends which further added to the richly varied urban fabric of the area. These include the frontage building of one of the very earliest purpose built cinemas in South London, a grand Edwardian-style Grammar School, a beaux-arts style electric tramway depot, a pioneering L.C.C. open air school of the 1920's and five huge private apartment buildings which represent the great diversity of architectural styles of the 1930's, ranging from the nostalgic 'Tudorbethan' idiom at the beginning of the decade (Tudor Court), to classical and art deco references in the mid 1930's (e.g. Effra Court) followed by the progressive modern movement influence which had gathered momentum by the end of that era (eg. Christchurch House).

(ii) The architectural and historical quality, character and coherence of the buildings, and their style and materials, and the contribution they make to the special interest

The development which followed in the 90 or so years following the 1806 Act took the form of a rich variety of housing types which together form a very cohesive and harmonious character and which make a fundamental contribution to the special historic interest of the neighbourhood.

The oldest residential property in this neighbourhood and indeed one of the oldest in the whole of Brixton, is the small cottage at No. 95 Brixton Hill which dates back to the late Eighteenth Century and is now a Grade II listed building. (See photographs 1 & 2 ~ the first was taken in c1925 and the second is a present day view). Some of the first surviving properties to be built after the Inclosure Act include dwellings in Elm Park - a very attractive thoroughfare of two and three storey terraces begun in the 1830's. The properties which line the western half of Elm Park have elegant facades of rusticated ground floors, roofs concealed behind prominent parapets and fine window heads in a simple refined late Georgian style, (see photographs 3 & 4). As the 'then and now' photographs taken in 1916 and 80 years later in 1996 clearly show, the streetscape has hardly changed - even an old hand-painted sign advertising the wares of the shop is still clearly visible (see photos 5 & 6).

On Brixton Hill stand four good examples of early Nineteenth Century development - Nos. 132 - 138 which are all Grade II listed buildings and which are the sole reminders of the elegant late Georgian style townhouses which once lined both sides of Rush Common. One is a magnificent Italianate stuccoed villa with an unusual pierced balustrade resting on a ground floor loggia, another has a fine ionic porch below a stucco frieze, (see photographs 7 & 8). As was common in the later Nineteenth Century, as the wealthy inhabitants moved out, these properties were subdivided into lodgings and single storey shop extensions were built out over the former front

gardens to the street frontage.

A few years later in about the 1840's, Nos. 43 - 53 Upper Tulse Hill were developed - a group of six attractive two storey-with-basement early Victorian semi-detached houses, again built in a simple late Georgian style with overhanging eaves and set back behind generous front gardens, (see photograph 9). In the early 1850's the charming Archbishop's Place was begun - small two storey semi-detached cottages in a simple vernacular style set back from the road behind generous country cottage style front gardens, (see photographs 10 -12) They were reputedly built for the staff of a large old house called The Elms which stood halfway along the present Elm Park.

Josephine Avenue was carefully planned in the late 1860's to respect the building exclusion zone as laid down in the Rush Common Act 60 years before, resulting in a broad tree lined avenue with communal gardens lining the central avenue and properties fronting onto access roads. The terraced properties are large three storey houses with two storey bay windows incorporating Corinthian capitals which also support the elegant recessed front porches. The white painted bay windows, porches and moulded corbels supporting the eaves and the window cills provide an attractive contrast with the plain stock brick of the facades, (see photo 13) The mature horse chestnut, lime, plane and oak trees play a fundamental role in defining the character of this particularly spacious thoroughfare, as do the enclosure of parts of the long detached gardens with tall arrow-head railings. (see photo 14). This generous layout was continued westwards later in the Century when Helix Gardens was laid out in the 1890's, although these terraced properties are of a much more elaborate design with gothic arches above the first floor windows filled in with decorative vertical clay tile hung spandrels, (see photos 15 -17) This design is continued along the northern end of Arodene Road. (see photo 18)

At the eastern end of Elm Park later Nineteenth Century development of the c1870's took the form of some very impressive terraces of 3 storey houses with grand 4 storey gabled sections at intervals and on the corner blocks which have added decoration in red-brick contrasting with the stock brick facades and elaborate gothic style porches, (see photographs 19 - 21) Photographic evidence from the early Twentieth Century suggests that the tower features on the corner blocks were surmounted by unusual and rather picturesque turret features which could one day be reinstated. A splendid example of this turret feature still exists - forming a striking landmark on the corner of Medora Road and Leander Road. (see photograph 22)

The residential roads between Helix Gardens and Elm Park were rapidly developed in a very short period between about 1875 and 1895 - they consist of a rich variety of styles, but are of a similar construction, size and layout - generally of 2 storeys with a full height front bay window and porches recessed behind an arched entrance, often supported on elaborately decorated columns

and consoles. Most have attractive eaves detail in contrasting red-brick, with slate roofs and prominent decorative finials above the bays. These avenues represent an excellent example of late Victorian inventiveness -the final flowering of the gothic influence before the Queen Ann and neo-Georgian styles became more popular in the later 1890's. These include Arodene Road (1891) - (photos 23 & 24) and Leander Road (1876-88) (photos 25 & 26) - the latter showing some particularly fine decorative brickwork on the gable ends of contrasting yellow brick headers and red brick stretchers. Generally they are all set back behind very small front gardens with a variety of means of enclosure ranging from dwarf walls, railings and privet hedges. Most properties retain a wealth of original decorative features including beautiful ceramic tiles within the porch recesses, front paths of black and white chequerboard tiles and ornate stained glass within the fine panelled front doors.

A particularly attractive domestic architectural group stands at the eastern end of Endymion Road which was laid out in 1881 - beautifully detailed two and three terraces of stock brick with an orange-red brick used as a highly effective dressing material, both contrasting with the white painted sash windows - most of which have survived intact (photograph 29). Another archive photograph - this time taken halfway up Endymion Road and dating from c1921 illustrates very well how little the historic urban fabric has changed in the 75 years since that time. (see photos 27 & 28)

Holmewood Road and Holmewood Gardens follow a similar pattern to roads such as Arodene and Helix - reflecting the popular architectural styles of the last decade of the Nineteenth Century. However Holmwood Gardens has a very different character created by the grouping of its terraces around a central communal garden - large enough to resemble a small park and enclosed by railings with attractive soft landscaping further enhancing the setting of the terraces, (see photos 30 - 32).

In the mid 1890s a long line of substantial three storey terraced villas of redbrick and stone dressings, known as Raleigh Gardens were erected fronting onto Brixton Hill, but set well back behind very long front gardens to respect the Rush Common Inclosure Act (see photographs 33 & 34). These properties were built in the grounds of the Raleigh House - a fine old mansion which was pulled down following the sale and break-up of the estate in 1887. Negotiations were begun in that year by the Lambeth Vestry to purchase the grounds to form a major new public park for the Brixton area. This would have resulted in a neighbourhood of a very different character, however this proposal was dropped when the newly created London County Council identified the far larger Brockwell Park estate as a more suitable municipal park, acquiring the land in 1891.

On Brixton Hill there are several good examples of late Victorian public houses (photographs 35 - 37) ~ the White Horse with its carriage entrance leading to former stables behind, the Telegraph

which commemorates an experimental telegraph system set up nearby in c1815, and the splendid George IV public house - a late Victorian extravaganza with charming ironwork, stone balustrades and a jolly copper-clad turret topped by a flying seagull weathervane. There are also several fine shopping parades dating from this era, exemplified by Nos. 100-112c with its attractive frieze of ceramic tiles (photo 38) and the imposing Blenheim Mansions with its original grand entrance and bulls-eye fanlight (photo 39). In front of the post office at No. 108 Brixton Hill stands a very rare example of the large size Royal Mail pillar which bears the initials of the uncrowned King Edward VIII and has another increasingly rare feature - an enamel Post Office directional sign. (Photo 40) Endymion Road, c. 1921. The delivery van is labelled 'Express Parcels Service of SECR' (South Eastern & Chatham Railway).

Brixton Hill, c. 1921. The White Horse pub, here squeezed between shops, stands historic pub site which dates from the early eighteenth century. An interesting group of waterworks buildings stand just behind the George IV Public House and the listed regency style villas - the Lambeth Water Works opened in 1834. The earliest surviving buildings appear to date from c1850 and are of a simple stock brick design similar to a stable block of that era. The most imposing building is perhaps the grand beaux arts style pump house (c1930) which stands on Jebb Avenue - a large structure with classical style elevations of red brick with Portland stone dressings. The administration building (c1925) on Waterworks Road is also of interest, again it has classical references with a fine stone porch.

Towards the southern end of Brixton Hill there is another long parade of late Victorian shops with flats over with attractive elevations of redbrick and stone dressings, a much earlier stock brick terrace (probably dating back to the early Nineteenth Century) with single storey Victorian shops built out to the pavement over the former front gardens (the parapet to these shops is topped by a distinctive classical style balustrade) and another good example of a traditional inter-war Georgian style apartment building - New Park Court built in 1938 - the same year as the far more modern Christchurch House. The entrances to the flats are particularly fine notably the green ceramic tiles, original front doors and stone surround.

The whole neighbourhood was virtually built up by the turn of the century, however six prominent examples of apartment block housing developed in the Edwardian and inter-war eras are of note - all of which front onto Brixton Hill with views over Rush Common. The first to be built was the five storey Renton Close, originally known as Briscoe's Buildings, erected in 1906 by the L.C.C. architects department, reflecting their influence by the arts and crafts movement. Of particular interest are the ceramic tiles on the ground floor plinth and the art nouveau style doorway heads (photographs 41 & 42). The remaining five are all privately built apartment buildings developed in the 1930's - perhaps the finest example is the moderne style Dumbarton Court, designed by Couch and Coupland and built in 1939 (photographs 43 & 44). It has an elegant horizontal

emphasis with bands of brickwork in contrasting colours and the original wrap around Crittall windows.

Tudor Close, which fronts onto Rush Common, is another interesting example of the blocks of privately rented service flats which became very fashionable in the 1920's and 1930's. It was one of the largest apartment complexes in the area, consisting of over 100 flats designed to accommodate a very different market of occupiers from the inhabitants of the older Victorian terraces ~ i.e. the younger generation, single people and couples of the inter-war years rather than the extended Victorian household and its servants. It is a 3/4 storey complex designed by A.W. Reading and built in 1933 with large half-timbered Tudor-style gables, grouped around a central courtyard with a fountain, flower beds and lawns and offered its original occupiers facilities such as a swimming pool and tennis courts, (see photographs 45 & 46)

At the southern end of Brixton Hill stands the six storey Christchurch House which was aimed at a similar market, but which is of a very different architectural style, representing a very good example of what in 1938 was the very latest contemporary continental moderne style with prominent curving white painted balconies, attractive two-tone brickwork and Crittall windows. (See photographs 47 & 48). The remaining two blocks of flats are at the northern end of Brixton Hill - Effra Court and Brixton Hill Court - both having elegant red brick facades with stone dressings in a classical manner - very similar in style to apartment buildings of the same era in the Americas. (See photographs 49 & 50)

(iii) The contribution made by trees, open spaces and other natural elements to the character of the proposed conservation area

Although the destruction in the 1940's and 1950's of the old Georgian houses which fronted the common is in many ways very regrettable, the demolitions did allow Lambeth Council to return large sections of the Common to a beautiful public open space by removing the old privately owned front gardens which had, illegally, carved up the common for over a century. The Common has now matured with many fine long established trees, mostly of native origin which include species of yew, sycamore, hawthorn, ash, Lombardy poplar, the locust tree and the evergreen holm oak.

Lambeth Council have undertaken several enhancement projects over the years with an interpretative tree trail for nature-lovers, seating, lighting, additional tree planting and the enclosure of most of the common with a dwarf brick wall with an attractive and suitably robust coping.

Elsewhere in the area, there are a number of roads which benefit from street trees which, together

with front garden hedges and flowering shrubs, contribute to an arcadian character. The most notable tree lined thoroughfares are probably Josephine Avenue and Helix Gardens which have an excellent range of long established mature trees including horse chestnuts, lime, plane and a flue old oak tree. The Orchard Centre School is set within a particularly beautiful walled garden - surrounded by a variety of trees including the weeping willow. The front gardens of Archbishop's Place have a very rural character consisting of flowering shrubs, roses and small trees enclosed by country cottage style hedges and picket fences. Holmewood Gardens has been well landscaped within recent years and now benefits from a village green style character with rolling lawns and maturing deciduous trees.

(iv) The relationship of the built environment to the landscape including significant landmarks, vistas and panoramas

The special character of the neighbourhood is shaped by several very distinctive local landmark buildings or buildings which form an important social focus. An important reason for designating the whole of the historic neighbourhood is the social and economic history of the area which is reflected in several buildings of significant character and historic interest. The vistas into the area are also important - the most obvious is the panorama from the bottom of Brixton Hill with the splendid natural beauty of Rush Common unfolding southward for as far as the eye can see. There are fine views of local landmarks such as Lambeth Town Hall, St Matthew's Church and the Prince of Wales Public House which can be glimpsed through the trees. (See photographs 51 - 56) Numerous other fine vistas are evident as one climbs Brixton Hill - views down the procession of roads leading off the Common unfold through the trees.

Firstly, the important active role the different churches played in social improvement and welfare within the area is well represented by several landmark buildings of note. This was prompted by a strong movement amongst many clergy from the middle years of the Nineteenth Century to reclaim

the growing urban population that was beginning to lose its traditional religious habits. This led to the building of churches and chapels - the earliest and finest being the striking early Victorian Christ Church on Christchurch Road which was designed by James William Wild and built in 1842. The church dominates the streetscape with its imposing tall Italian Romanesque style campanile and splendidly decorated nave. (see photographs 57 - 59)

Another magnificent church is the outstanding Grade II* listed Roman Catholic Corpus Christi on Brixton Hill, designed by the architect of Westminster cathedral and completed between 1886 and 1904. It is described within the Survey of London as 'a free interpretation of Early Decorated Gothic, realised in brick with a generous use of Bath stone' (see photos 60 & 61). Only the

easternmost part (the chancel and transepts) of what would have been a much larger church was ever built. Other religious buildings in the neighbourhood include St. Matthias on Upper Tulse Hill built in 1894 and its adjacent church institute (now occupied by the Hindu Caribbean Society) built a few years earlier in 1889. (see photographs 62 & 63) The Survey of London discusses the building of the church at some length, describing 'the plain redbrick sparingly dressed with stone, the lancet windows and the tall gabled vestry' which replaced a temporary iron church.

Another Victorian church building stands on Elm Park - the Brixton Hill Methodist Chapel - the chapel itself was rebuilt in a well detailed, restrained mid-Twentieth Century Georgian/Scandinavian style in 1957 after the original 1860's church was destroyed in the Blitz. However the adjacent mid Victorian Sunday School on Elm Park (1874) remains as a splendid local landmark with its attractive London stock brickwork decorated with fine redbrick detailing and very colourful stained glass windows, (see photographs 64 & 65)

One of the finest secular building in terms of its architectural quality and character is the very grand Edwardian style former Strand Grammar School near the southern end of Elm Park, built by the London County Council (Chief Architect W.E. Riley) in 1912-1914. The building has a warm red brick frontage decorated with Portland stone dressings and enlivened by a magnificent central stone arched window incorporating a fine sculpture, (see photos 66 & 67). On a smaller scale are two public houses of particular character and individual merit, both on prominent corner sites. The first is the Elm Park Tavern (c.1870's) which has retained its historic mid Victorian painted timber frontage and appears very well maintained, (see photo 68) It provides an important central focus to this part of the neighbourhood, along with the range of shops with flats above of a similar date. The second is the King of Sardinia - a jolly essay in an extravagant c1920's style - a riot of well detailed decorative features dominated by the barley-sugar and ziggurat style chimneys and columns supporting a slightly protruding first floor, (see photo 69)

Other commercial buildings which contribute to the character of the area include the row of shops fronting Brixton Hill (Nos. 89 - 111) - this group is notable for its infringement of the general exclusion zone which forbade any buildings from encroaching upon Rush Common. This appears to have stemmed from the existence of a tiny Eighteenth Century cottage referred to earlier, which already stood on the site at the time the Inclosure Act was passed in 1806, and which was therefore exempt from the new legislation. This cottage still stands and is now a Grade II listed building - see photo 1. In 1880 the Metropolitan Board of Works approved the erection of single storey shop on the forecourt of the cottage and during the next 20 years other buildings were developed on either side of the original cottage - presumably permitted because their sites were considered to be part of the exempted curtilage of No. 95. These buildings survive today - the finest being perhaps Nos. 107 - 111 built in 1900 which have largely retained their original

fenestration on the upper floors which include an elegant corner feature, (see photo 72)

In the centre of this group stands what is one of the very earliest cinemas in Lambeth - the former Montague Pike's Cinematograph Theatre, opened in 1910 which survived as a popular local 'fleapit', renamed The Royalty and later The Clifton, showing films until 1959. The unusual frontage with its curved gable (once a broken pediment topped by a fine ornamental urn) and half dome above the shopfront style entrance survives in its basic form and could easily be restored at some later date. Although the former auditorium was tragically demolished in the 1970's the large, deep foyer has survived with much of its fine original decorative Edwardian plasterwork. (see photos 70 & 71)

The west side of Brixton Hill has already been described in detail, particularly the late Georgian style listed properties which have amazingly survived the waves of demolition and redevelopment over the last century and more, the well detailed late Victorian shopping parades, the splendid late Nineteenth Century corner landmark public houses and the grand 1930's apartment buildings.

At the top of Brixton Hill stands the former tramway depot - built in a simple monumental style with beaux arts influences - carefully massed stock brickwork with a central arch into the depot over which is an unusual Georgian style window of painted and riveted metal. It was opened in 1923 to accommodate the electric tramcars introduced in 1904 along Brixton Hill which terminated at Westminster Bridge. The depot had a relatively short working life as trams were withdrawn after the Second World War in 1952. (see photograph 73)

Behind the old tramway depot stands the former Aspen House Open Air School (now the Orchard Centre School) opened in the early 1920's and run by the L.C.C. This is a rare survivor of considerable historic interest which remains in use as a special school to this day, its historic fabric little changed, (see photos 74 - 76) It was opened for children with poor health who were taught in individual classroom pavilion blocks which are raised 0.5 m above ground level, originally with wooden walls only up to waist level - open to the eaves without any glazing to allow maximum ventilation and sunlight to reach the children within (the open sides were later glazed).

Adjoining platforms of duckboards were built for completely open air lessons in fine weather so that the pupils could benefit from the maximum amount of sunshine - a fundamental part of the health conscious doctrine of the inter-war years. Children were taught in the open sided classrooms all the year round - moving their desks into the centre of the classrooms during extreme weather to keep dry. A large exercise area was also provided - essential to keep the children's circulation going -particularly in the winter months! The blocks still enjoy a quiet, secluded walled garden setting with mature trees - shielded from the adjoining roads by attractive brick walls and a much older former coach house with decorative barge boards which still serves

as the administration building.

(VI The extent of loss, intrusion or damage to the special character of the proposed conservation area

Most of the neighbourhood is relatively well maintained, consisting of privately occupied terraced houses, the majority of which remain in single household use. So too are the private blocks of flats and the places of worship. The two schools have obviously suffered from minimum repair budgets over recent years, as have several commercial properties. Most houses have been thoughtfully repaired and renovated however there are several exceptions. The main areas of opportunity which could benefit from the additional controls that the status of a conservation area brings are as follows.

- (a) A small minority of properties have suffered from crude and insensitive alterations e.g. the erection of artificial stone cladding (see photograph 77), the painting-over of brickwork (particularly in a lurid bright red colour, presumably to look like new brickwork - see photograph 78), or ugly re-pointing and the installation of inappropriate replacement windows and doors, (see photograph 79)

The erection of satellite dishes without thought to the appearance or proportions of some properties is also problem in a few isolated cases, (see photographs 78 & 80)

- (b) Similarly some front garden boundaries have been unsympathetically altered with the use of alien artificial materials or the total loss of the original means of enclosure (see photo 80), however the latter problem is considerably less evident than many other historic residential areas because most of the terraced housing is too close to the highway to permit the construction of unsightly and obtrusive parking forecourts.
- (c) The replacement of some of the original 19th Century cast iron street name plates with standard modern plates.
- (d) There are a number of very poor and unsightly modern shopfronts inserted into elegant shopping parades e.g. on Brixton Hill - (see photos 72 & 80), Upper Tulse Hill - (see photo 81) and Elm Park) - these include shiny plastic fascia boards, crude aluminium shopfronts, tacky plastic Dutch blinds and large internally illuminated neon box signs.
- (e) Both Rush Common and Holmewood Gardens have benefited from considerable investment in their landscaping in recent years, there are further opportunities for planting of street trees and other soft landscaping works - particularly to soften the sometimes obtrusive and stark impact of many of the post-war blocks of flats.

- (f) Perhaps the most damaged and unsympathetically altered group of buildings is the terrace of Nos. 75 - 83 Brixton Hill - a five storey mid Victorian terrace built in c1880 which has particularly fine curved headed porches supported on Doric columns with Corinthian capitals. This terrace has suffered from the rendering over of sections of brickwork, loss or mutilation of front boundary walls, the complete loss of one of the porches and worst of all, an appalling c1955 rebuilding of the northern end of the terrace destroyed in the Blitz which ruins the whole symmetry and appearance of the terrace. Similarly at the other end of the terrace, the site of the southernmost property, also destroyed in the blitz, still remains in a derelict state, disfigured by a crude corrugated-iron enclosure, (see photograph 82)
- (g) The part of the proposed conservation area most obviously in need of enhancement after years of neglect is the west side of Brixton Hill which is blighted by appallingly maintained pavements and cluttered, unkempt private forecourts in front of historic buildings, many of great character. This highly prominent approach into Brixton is in desperate need of upgrading which could include repaving works, tree planting, provision of benches, measures to prevent cars mounting the footways, removal of redundant or unnecessary street furniture and the encouragement of property owners and occupiers to improve their front boundaries and forecourt areas - several of which are little better than rubbish tips. The same applies to an ugly corrugated iron fence adjacent to Beechdale Road. (See photos 72, 80, 83-85, 87 & 88)
- (h) There are a few sites which are occupied by uses which detract from the character and appearance of the conservation area - the most obvious being some of the motor car showrooms which display tightly packed vehicles on unrelieved tarmac forecourts - some actually encroaching upon the public footway itself. Certain buildings also detract from the character of historic streets, especially those built in the post-war years on Brixton Hill such as Nos. 116 -120 (See photo 85), No. 75, Austin House (see photo 86) and the Raleigh Clinic. The designation of a conservation area which included such sites could ensure that a far higher quality of design be achieved from the outset of negotiations between the developer and the planning authority for the development of such sites.

(vi) The existence of neutral areas

The boundaries of the proposed conservation area have been carefully drawn to exclude areas not thought worthy of designation, nevertheless there are certain sites within the proposed conservation area that have been redeveloped in the post-war years which are not particularly compatible with the historic character of the neighbourhood. Whilst almost all of the post-war public housing estates have been excluded from the proposed conservation area, one medium

rise local authority housing block - Calidore Close does lie within the boundary - this is of a design of its time and exerts a neutral rather than a detrimental impact upon the character of the proposed conservation area.

Other post-war buildings may not respect the scale or proportions of more historic buildings, but they may be relatively good examples of more recent architecture and do not necessarily exert a detrimental impact upon the character of the area. Examples of this scenario include Olive Morris House which has a long frontage on Brixton Hill and could be argued to be a good example of 1970's office architecture with its effective use of red brick and a staggered elevation set back behind balconies, and Brixton College which again uses very different materials and methods of construction than its older neighbours, but epitomises the ethos of 1950's college design (the 1961 fountain within the internal courtyard is currently recommended by English Heritage to be listed grade II) - the main criticism of this complex is that it is far too low in height in relation to the remainder of Brixton Hill - a building of say four stories would have been far more appropriate.

CONCLUSION

It is considered that the designation of this conservation area would recognise the special historic and architectural interest of this neighbourhood which contains buildings which reflect over two centuries of social and economic history of the borough. The unique character of Rush Common and the Brixton Hill neighbourhood which grew up as a result of the Inclosure Acts, which have protected the Common for nearly two hundred years, should be preserved and enhanced for the benefit of future generations of residents who can now enjoy this attractive green open space. The designation of this area including the important Brixton Hill approach into Brixton town centre, can form the basis of a much needed upgrading of the environment which in turn could contribute to the regeneration of the local economy. This should assist in the transformation of what currently is an unacceptably shabby arterial corridor to Brixton into a fine gateway into the heart of the borough.

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