

RUFFORD STREET, Kings Cross, London N1 0AP – A (SKETCHY) HISTORY

[draft – any errors are mine, corrections welcome – William Perrin – william@cankfarm.com]

1841

Area known as Stroud's Vale - Robert Creighton survey OF 1841 shows open fields and possible market gardens running up towards Copenhagen pleasure gardens (where Market Estate now stands). Mr Randell's tile fields to the North.

There is an excellent write up of the Tile Yards by Pat Cryer at

<http://www.colepotteries.btinternet.co.uk/islington-earthworks.htm>

London was then expanding rapidly but had no natural stone. Houses made of wood were banned since the great fire and railways to transport bricks were only embryonic. So bricks had to be made and fired locally from clay fields to build the expanding city. The picture is of brick kilns in the 'Clerkenwell area' – the river could have been the River Fleet which flowed roughly where the Kings Cross gasholders are now and frequently flooded.



Survey shows market-garden-type plots roughly where the North-South section of now is Gifford Street. On future site of Rufford street some large detached buildings that are probably private houses.

'West of Caledonian Road what seem to have been detached or semi-detached villas and cottages were built in Bemerton, Lyon, and Gifford streets, and in Buckingham (later Boadicea) Street c. 1845 near the canal, with terraces between the latter and Caledonian Road, besides a small terrace on the south side of Randell's Road.....'

...By the mid 1850s the rest of Barnsbury was almost completely filled. West of Caledonian Road the detached villas planned or built in Bemerton Street were replaced by terraces, except in Sutton Gardens west of Upper Bemerton Street, which was laid out with detached or semi-detached houses. T
Victoria county history

At this time, Islington East of the Caledonian Road was paving over rapidly as the Barnsbury/Thornhill estates build-out. East of the Cally things were different. The Victoria County History - A History of the County of Middlesex' 1985 describes well the reason for decline in Rufford St area:

'West of Caledonian Road the tile kilns and pollution from industries at Belle Isle in the early 1850s exasperated householders who had moved there for fresh air and perhaps accounted for a particularly quick decline. Problems were exacerbated by poor drainage. Houses in Great and Little William streets suffered from damp basements and sewage oozing through the walls; farther east an open sewer behind Mountfort Terrace and Lofting Road complained of in 1848 was still a health hazard in 1853. In Storey Street piles of builders' rubbish prevented it from being paved for several years after the houses were occupied. Many of the defects, not unique to Barnsbury, were the result of quick growth and discouraged from staying those who could afford to move farther away. The occupants of most of the large terraced houses fronting Caledonian Road, between Lyon and Copenhagen streets, changed from private residents to tradesmen and craftsmen between the beginning and middle of the 1850s.'

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=8923>

1861

Funeral train station and mortuary built at corner of Rufford Street and Randell's Road. Economically disastrous attempt to run a funeral railway service out to large new cemetery at New Southgate to alleviate overcrowding in North London cemeteries. Also had social objects to store bodies hygienically. Great Northern London Cemetery Company builds special complex opening onto Rufford Street with own railways sidings.

'...the surrounding land was then, as now, somewhat run-down. "The Builder" gave a review shortly after its opening describing the dilapidated surroundings, with mud and squalor all around. The building itself was impressive with an unusual spire at its southern end which was wedge shaped. The entrance was on the upper story which gave direct access from street level. There were separate entrances for coffins and mourners. The platforms were on the lower level, with a flight of stairs for the mourners, and a hydraulic lift for the coffin. A mortuary was provided free of charge by the company in an attempt to encourage the populace to remove bodies quickly from their homes.'

http://homepage.ntlworld.com/ms.draper/FNRM_SoE/Talks_Reports/my0800.html

Cemetery train service only traded successfully for two years, last train probably ran in 1863. South London Necropolis Railway fared better and its legacy is moderately famous today. Cemetery sidings were removed in 1876 as the mainline was widened. Chapel building survived until 1962 but historic significance not understood and was replaced by concrete factory.

1871-1894

1871 OS map shows what is now Rufford Street marked as James Street with detached buildings/houses set back from the road and the odd tree .

During this period the whole area North of Bingfield Street converted from detached buildings with gardens or open fields to terraces and industrial buildings.

1878-9?

The Beaconsfield Buildings were built by the Victoria Dwellings Association at the East end of James Street and the eastern half of Bingfield park. The Beaconsfield Buildings housed at least 1,000 people and were 'New Model Dwellings' an attempt to alleviate over crowding. They were five-storied walk-ups with external balconies, slightly higher than Rufford Street. The architect was Charles Barry jnr. son of Sir



Charles Barry. An accomplished architect he was perhaps more famous for grandiose public buildings than his social housing.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Barry_\(junior\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Barry_(junior))

1890-91

Willats 'The Book of Islington' records James Street becoming Rufford Street. It appears that the street plan changed – straightening and broadening between the 1871 and 1894 Ordnance Survey maps. Rufford Street was unusual for the area in being a four-storied terrace of conventional design (most terraces were three stories at most) but was slightly lower than the five-storied and galleried Beaconsfield buildings.

It is a reasonable guess that the current Rufford Street buildings were put up in 1890-91 replacing what may have been large villas on the 1871 Ordnance Survey that would have become uneconomic in what had rapidly become a very poor and difficult area. The South side of Rufford Street was occupied by a rather more elaborate block of buildings Clarendon Terrace – five storeys high. Photos of these exist in the Library collection. They have plenty of architectural detailing and were far more elaborate than the buildings that survived.

1897

This was a bad area, even by the standards of the day. Charles Booth walked what the area with the local police Inspector Mann on 6 December 1897. His notebooks are available at http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=list_walks_by_district&arg0=15 see page 84-85 of the digitised notebooks.

Overall Booth comments on the area:

'a very rough district. Seems worse now than 10 years ago'.

On Rufford Street Booth describes

'four-storied houses on North side let out as flats'

Booth noted of Clarendon Terrace, the South side of Rufford St:

'attempt at ornamentation of the buildings here – as poor a class of inhabitants but less rough – says Mann'.

In Booth's poverty map of 1898-99 this section of Rufford Street is recorded as 'Lowest class. Vicious semi-criminal.' – the most extreme rating. The Bemerton area was pretty bad according to Booth 'Very poor, casual, chronic want' but Rufford Street was worse, given the most extreme rating. Booth expanded:

'The lowest class which consists of some occasional labourers, street sellers, loafers, criminals and semi-criminals. Their life is the life of savages, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and their only luxury is drink'

1901

Census shows severe overcrowding – over 30 people living in each house, many families in one room with perhaps three children (see notes at end of document). A house would have had one privy and one tap. As many as 500 people living on Rufford Street. Employment was in manual labour – in the railway yards or in local engineering.

1903

Photos of 1-4 Rufford Street show that the yard at 1 Rufford Street was a livery yard for Simmonds a horse and cart/cab business. Hay and



presumably oats in sacks are being delivered. Otherwise the street is recognisable as it is today.

1906

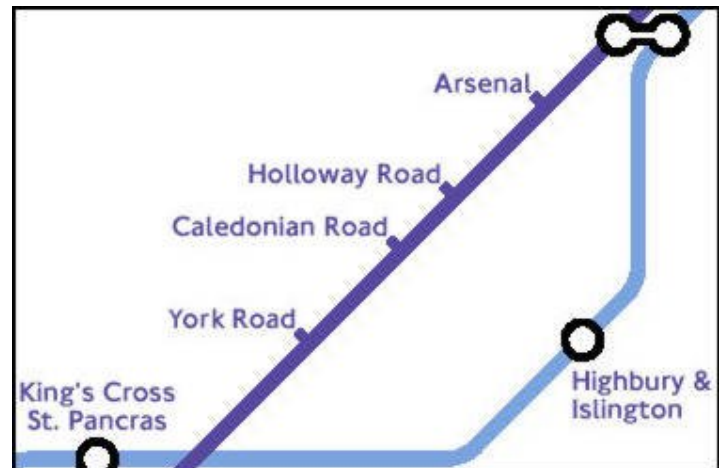
York Road station opens on the Piccadilly Line at the end of Randell's Road (Architect Leslie Green)

1932

York Road station on the Piccadilly line closed. The Piccadilly Line suffered from an excess of stations and several closed. The York Road station never recovered from the downturn in business following the General Strike.

http://www.pendar.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/Tube/York_Road_station.html

This left Rufford Street a ten minute walk from the tube at Kings Cross or a similar distance from Caledonian Road.



WWII

Bombs apparently missed Rufford Street but probably did hit the end of Randell's Road where ruined buildings are recorded on the 1952 Ordnance Survey.

[DN need to check what happened to Clarendon buildings]

1961 ?

The RMC Concrete factory was originally refused planning permission by the GLC:

'the proposal would adversely affect the amenities of the occupiers of adjoining residential properties by reason of increased noise due to the processes to be carried out and the increased traffic that would be attracted to the site'

Unfortunately RMC won on appeal in 1961. According to press reports the RMC QC Sir Derek Walker Smith said that *'an expert had been engaged to see that the noise was not appreciably increased above the normal level.'*

The factory built in 1963-4 replaced the mortuary complex of the funerary railway that was pulled down during June-July 1963. The heavy duty brick retaining wall is apparently the original wall of the mortuary.

1967 (and for following twenty years)

Substantial redevelopment and slum clearance with knock-on effects on Rufford Street. London's population was falling as manufacturing left the capital. In Kings Cross employment in the railway lands diminished as lorries replaced rail freight and palletised loading reduced the need for manual labour for trans-shipment from rail to road.

The Victoria 'History of the County of Middlesex' covers the fate of the Beaconsfield Buildings at the end of Rufford Street:

'Beaconsfield Buildings was acquired by the G.L.C. in 1966; the 383 flats, known as one of the worst slums in the area and nicknamed the Crumbles, were cleared over seven years from 1967. The site became Bingfield park and an adventure playground, with the Crumbles play castle put up in 1975 by children and architectural students and described as an adventurous example of local self-help.'

Charles Barry Jnr did not quite intend this end (photo 1969).

1970
Slum clearances in full swing causing havoc in Rufford Street as poor families renting there were marooned amid acres of rubble. They spoke to the press:

*'Plight of 'forgotten' families
'...their homes are in Rufford Street a tiny street off Caledonian Road. They are surrounded by the empty ruins of Beaconsfield Buildings, Clarence Terrace and a rubbish dump...GLC officials say they have never heard of Rufford Street and have no record of anyone living there...the flats are owned by a firm of office cleaners and are about 80 years old... most of the ground floor flats are boarded up because of dampness...tenants have complained about health dangers, rats and fear of attacks....there are fires every week and rats have been seen on the street'*



(publication unidentifiable – cutting in Local History Centre Archives)

1974 ?

Islington planners begin development of Bingfield open space. Initially it was just the area from the Randell's Road barrier to what is now Crumbles. This was subsequently extended North to take in the space cleared by the Beaconsfield Buildings and Clarendon Terrace on the south side of Rufford

Street. The site of one of the Beaconsfield Buildings embedded in Rufford Street becomes playground for Gifford Street School.

1984

4 Rufford Street converted into flats. Unclear what configuration the building had previously – possibly single rooms like 5 and 6.

[little info for mid-80s to late 90s – can others help?]

1980s

5 and 6 Rufford street a Lambeth Council hostel for young men.

2000?

5-6 Rufford Street hostel for asylum seekers.]

2002

Redevelopment of 2 Rufford Street yard complex into apartments begins two years of messy building.

2002

Dozens of cars abandoned on Rufford Street and Randell's Road as rogue drivers from car towing firm C&S Autos use street to dump vehicles for cash. Fly tipping also endemic encouraged by abandoned cars. Cars frequently set alight and broken into. Chronic scooter theft and racing in Bingfield Park and out onto Rufford Street by local youth. Use of street by sex workers.

2003

Controlled Parking Zone comes into force changing character of street from car park for dozens of Kings Cross commuters into residential street. But puts up costs for residents with cars.

2003

Circle33 (now Circle Anglia) Housing Association replace site of Beaconsfield model dwellings. Rufford Street extended once more by this building on site of old playground. Two more years of works by inept building contractors, street a mudbath.

Plans approved for refurbishment of Bingfield Park after consultation with local residents and play groups.

2004

2 Rufford Street complex opens, substantially increasing population of street and changing social mix.

Gifford Rufford and Randell's Residents Association (GRRRA) formed.

2004

Rufford Street has resident caravan and drug dealer for several months and is frequently visited by stretched limousines. Dealer eventually forcibly taken out of business by aggrieved party.

2004

A columnist for The Guardian newspaper comments unhelpfully on the area:

'the Bemerton Estate, a vast high-rise gulag of a development built by Islington council in the late 1960s'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,,1354082,00.html>



2004-5

CTRL bridge across East Coast Main Line shoved into place on Xmas day.

York Way closed, viaduct demolished and ground reworked causing much noise and dust over many months into 2005

Massive decline in anti-social behaviour, fly tipping and waste issues brought under control by concerted action from Council, Police, childrens play groups, Crumbles and residents.

2005

£300,000 refurbishment of Bingfield Park completed. Huge improvement. Children now play in the park rather than commit crime there.

2005

New medical centre opens around the corner in Bingfield Street

2006

Population of Rufford Street about 60 people. Employment of residents varies widely in highly diverse community: lawyers, students, teachers, photographers, driving instructors.

Application and work expected to convert 5 and 6 Rufford Street from bedsit rooms into flats.

2006

Planning decisions likely on 14-storey buildings, leisure centre and supermarket, on 'Islington Triangle' across railway tracks from Rufford Street.

2007

November – the CTRL will commence running at speed, bringing new noise to the area.

Sources

Islington Local History Centre

Victoria County Histories

Booth online archive

1901 census

Wikipedia

Cromwell, Thomas

Walks Through Islington Comprising An Historical And Descriptive Account of that Extensive And Important District, Both In Its Ancient And Present State: Together With Some Particulars Of The Most Remarkable Objects Immediately Adjacent (1835).

Embellished with numerous engravings by J. & H.S. Storer.

Rufford Street 1901 Census

The houses on Rufford Street are three storey tenement buildings, now split into about five flats. The real example below shows how a building was used 1901. The 1901 census shows seven families living there, 34 people in fourteen rooms. This was typical for the time. Each landing had three doors off it into separate rooms – today the three rooms make up on modern flat.

The most impoverished lived one family to a room in appalling conditions. The building would probably have had only one privy and one tap. In the main these are impoverished young families. The degree of overcrowding is striking especially for the White family.

In this house, lived according to the census record:

William Daniels who made shoes and boots. He was a widower living with his spinster daughter Elizabeth who took in washing for a living that she did at home. They could afford two rooms. William was born in St Giles (where Centrepont is now) which was one of London's worst slums.

Henry White his wife and five children living in two rooms. The eldest daughter Alice was 16 and working as a tailoress. Henry's occupation is illegible.

Henry Penney his wife Mary and their four children. Henry was a 'Carman', presumably a railway worker. Mary was a 'artificial florist' working at home, presumably making silk flowers or similar. The building now York Central was at this time an artificial flower factory. They had two rooms.

Eliza Aldridge with her two children –in one room. She also does not work but is recorded as married. Her husband was probably away on census night.

Fredrick Willmot a 24 year old hairdresser originally from Reading with his wife and three young children. They had two rooms.

William Costen a 59 year old railway worker with his wife, adult son, the son's wife and infant child and probably a lodger. They had three rooms. William the elder was originally from Stroud in Kent. William the son was a 'goods car man', probably working in the huge railway goodsyards complex on the other wide of York Way. The probable lodger was Henry Milehell a young man of William's age who also worked on the railways. He may have rented the third room.

Edwin Bowyer his wife and three young children lived in two rooms. He was aged 35 and a journeyman plasterer. His eldest child was born in Kentish Town, the youngest two in Islington.