

# *Centenaries: Hampstead Garden Suburb*

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*by David Lewis*

How many of you Hampstead people really know much about Hampstead Garden Suburb, just up the road and across the Heath? I certainly didn't during the 23 years I lived in Downshire Hill. Indeed I can't remember ever visiting it or knowing anyone in my adult life who lived there. Whitestone Pond might well have been Check Point Charlie at the Berlin Wall.

If you read the Ham & High regularly, maybe you've noticed that there is something going on here this year: The Suburb celebrates its 100th anniversary. I use capitalisation advisedly: has



[www.hgs.org.uk/centenary](http://www.hgs.org.uk/centenary)

*Artisans quarter today*



anyone heard of any other suburb which actually has the name Suburb in its title?

Hampstead Garden Suburb isn't special just for the accident of its name. It is special

because most of the people who live here reckon it is the closest thing to an urban utopia anywhere in London, if not the world. This may seem an exaggerated claim, and I must declare my interest as chairman of the Residents Association, but I can assure you that the tranquil beauty you will find in many parts of the Suburb can be breathtaking. What's more we have a thriving community, more akin to a country village than an area of 5,200 households with a population exceeding many small towns

I won't waste your time explaining why things are so good here – you need to come and take a look for yourself. If you know someone who lives here ask them to take you for a tour; if you don't, join one of the guided walks organised by the Heath & Hampstead Society, the National Trust, the Proms at St Jude's, the North London Hospice or the Residents Association. I hope to put a complete list for the rest of the year on the Suburb Centenary web site by the time you read this.

Don't even think of making your tour by car – you will undoubtedly get lost. You may also feel a little intimidated – unfortunately some of our residents can be a little impatient, especially when they can't squeeze their BMWs or 4 x 4 s between parked cars on both sides of the roads and little Will is late for a birthday party. Nor can you appreciate the beauty at speed.

While I have no idea why Suburb is part of our name, I reckon that Hampstead is part of it because it was Hampstead people who inspired Hampstead Garden Suburb, rather than the fact that you are just down the road.

Hampstead Garden Suburb is the result of one woman's vision to put into practice the ideals of every Hampstead liberal - to help people worse off than themselves.



*Dame Henrietta Barnett*

Henrietta Barnett was only different in that she decided to help out on her own doorstep. In those days she didn't even have the vote.

After 20 years working amongst the poor and deprived in the East End of London, with a

country cottage in Hampstead for weekends, she determined that her utopian vision would be an area where people of all classes can live together. She also reckoned that she might be able to subsidise the smaller houses by charging the richer people significantly more for their plots.

The idea of people of different classes living together being something new may strike you as strange. After all in Hampstead there are Council estates and housing association properties dotted about all over the place, cheek by jowl with private housing. Not so in 1907. The only way you were likely to be living near someone working class or indeed lower middle class at that time would be your servants. The likes of builders, shop assistants, clerks, train drivers and the unemployed would be somewhere else, usually to the East.

The planning and building of the Suburb was the genius of architect and town planner Raymond Unwin. Unfairly the credit is often attributed to Edmund Lutyens who was undoubtedly brought in for his celebrity status at the time and whose main lasting contribution is the distinctive St Jude's parish church, named for its namesake in the East End.

Well what about Hampstead Garden Suburb today? One of the traditions we have here is to perform Pageants; the first was performed in 1910. The Garden Suburb Theatre is still at it. The Pageant performed this year to packed houses at the Little Wood Open Air Theatre described the history of the Suburb and brought back the ghost of Henrietta Barnett to make her judgement on how we are doing. Her conclusion was: "It'll do." Actually I think we are doing a lot better than that but there is no harm in modesty.

*Right: The first two cottages today*



*Below: An early view of the Suburb*



## *Hampstead Garden Suburb (cont)*

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Now I come to the third word in our name: Garden. That was an integral part of the original concept. Before the Suburbs came about, few houses in towns actually had gardens. Every house in the Suburb has its own garden – surprisingly large by urban standards either before or afterwards. Two and three bedroom cottages with gardens 100 ft long are the rule, not the exception. There are blocks of flats here too - about 1,500 of the dwellings are flats; some look like houses and a few are larger scale and these too have large communal gardens. The Horticultural Society, still going strong after 100 years, attracted 400 visitors to its open gardens day in May.

Public open spaces abound, not least the Hampstead Heath Extension which is surrounded by the Suburb, Lyttelton Playing Fields, Northway Gardens, Big Wood, Little Wood and Willifield Green, designed like a traditional village green and adjoining one of the local primary schools. There are allotments, tennis courts and footpaths, called twittens, hidden all over the place.

Our Centenary Celebrations started on 2 May with residents Donald Sinden, Jonathan Ross and our MP Rudi Vis. On 17 June we attracted over 1,500 people to our Big Birthday Party and Picnic in Central Square with residents Robert Winston, Martin Bell and Claudia Roden participating. We have been visited by the Duke of Gloucester, the Chief Rabbi and the Bishop of Edmonton. More will happen in the Autumn.

In an enthusiastic message of support, former resident Elizabeth Taylor wrote: “The happiest days of my youth were when my brother and I would run through the woods...It was heaven for this child and her brother.” I’m happy to report that not much has changed.

*St. Jude-on-the-Hill*



*The Garden Suburb Dairy*