

Belsize Residents Association

CELEBRATING THE 40th ANNIVERSARY OF OUR ASSOCIATION

The story of how we have helped to preserve the character of the area and develop a stronger sense of community

The Belsize Residents Association can claim many achievements over the last 40 years and, despite our best efforts, there have also been a few disappointments. As with most mature organisations, we have developed and grown from all these experiences and learned what works best for us. This a summary of our story.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Belsize area was seriously threatened by a proposal to build a motorway ring road around Central London, popularly known as the London Motorway Box. The planned route, curving from the top of Maresfield Gardens through Belsize Square and down towards Chalk Farm, would have swept away great swathes of Victorian houses and split Belsize in two. A group of local residents organised a vigorous campaign against it, and together with other groups across London, helped to get the scheme dropped. This threat provided the impetus, in 1971, to set up the Three Roads Association covering Belsize Avenue, Belsize Park and Buckland Crescent. The Three Roads Association combined with other local groups to become the Belsize Residents Association.

During the 1970s BRA initiated several local campaigns. We opposed a road network scheme that would have created a maze of no-go streets across the area, whilst channeling all the traffic down a few residential roads. Instead we proposed environmental and safety improvements in Belsize village without road closures "to reduce the psychological impact of the car on the village". These proposals were mainly accepted and the pavements in Belsize Terrace were widened with trees and benches added. In the mid 1970s BRA received many requests for help from young people who became homeless when developers created flats in properties that had previously been used for bed sits. In response we set up the innovative Belpark Housing Co-operative, "to provide affordable housing for local people in need, to give people control of their housing and to make use of existing buildings which are left empty or allowed to decay". Through Belpark, BRA members worked with squatters occupying 104-110 Haverstock Hill to gain funding to stop these fine houses being demolished and to restore them as good quality housing for single people. We continue to oppose planning applications to eliminate Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and to reduce affordable housing in the area.

From 1973 the Belsize Festival, which included a very varied programme of music and other entertainment, was held in Belsize village each September, with Belsize Lane closed to traffic. The final festival in 1989 was opened by George Melly and included around 100 stalls, Morris Men, a Punch and Judy show, a steel band and a bouncy castle. For the last four years the festival included a photographic competition, followed by an exhibition around the area. But when, in 1989, wet weather washed out the festival for the third successive year, it dampened enthusiasm for organising further events. In 1979 the area covered by the Belsize Residents Association was extended in order to reflect widening interest. There was no formal membership list, but 600 to 1000 newsletters were distributed three or four times a year. A constitution, adopted in 1982, described the Association as covering "Belsize ward and surrounding areas if not covered by other residents associations." The Association set out "to preserve and improve as far as possible the amenities of the locality" and its main concerns were:

- Belsize village improvements – our village is messy
- Pedestrian safety – we recommend improvements to the Council
- Open spaces – only Swiss Cottage and Belsize Wood remain
- Tree preservation
- Appearance and architecture of new developments
- Estate agents boards
- Public transport – to preserve and improve it.

An annual membership fee was introduced. In 1991 there were 198 household members which increased to 250 in 1996 and to 400 by 2000. The 500th household joined at the garden party in 2004, and was rewarded with a bottle of champagne. As the Association grew, neighbourhood representatives and surveys were used to improve communication with members. More recently, local get-togethers have been introduced to help members meet others living in the same part of Belsize.

In 1982 BRA started a campaign to eliminate the forests of estate agents boards from the Belsize Conservation Area. A leaflet saying "Help us fight visual pollution. Estate agents boards can spoil your property and your community!" was distributed. Frustratingly, restrictions were introduced in Hampstead Village, South End Green and Swiss Cottage Conservation areas but not in Belsize. In 1994 a motion for a ban was lost by the Chairman's casting vote. It was not until 2006, after BRA had agreed to take on the extensive leg-work involved in setting up the scheme, that the boards were finally banned.

There have also been long running battles over libraries and post offices. BRA campaigned to keep the Belsize library open in 1987, 1988, 1991 and 2000. In 1987 opening times were reduced to 3 days a week, which is still the situation in early 2011, but with a further very serious threat over the library's future. We continue to work closely with the Friends of Belsize Library to campaign to keep the library open. Despite the best efforts of BRA the main post office, and then the sub post office, in Haverstock Hill and the sub post offices in Belsize Village and England's Lane all closed. In February 2005 the Association organised a march and petition to protest about the lack of progress in reinstating a post office in Haverstock Hill. About 120 members marched past the site of the original post office to the plaque commemorating Sir Rowland Hill, the founder of the Penny Post. It was not until 2010 that a new sub post office was opened in Thornton's Budgens. The Association has also been involved in various campaigns to save local police stations.

Belsize Conservation Area Advisory Committee (BCAAC) was formed at about the same time as BRA and the two organisations have always worked closely together to conserve our historic area. In 1988, after much lobbying, the Belsize Conservation Area was extended to cover the area around Howitt, Glenloch and Glenmore Roads. In the late 1980s and 90s there was considerable concern that a number of significant local buildings were at risk. These included St Stephen's Church, the Congregational Church opposite it, and Hampstead Town Hall. The Congregational Church was bought up and restored to become Air Studio. We were very active in the successful campaign to restore the Town Hall for community use and have supported Michael Taylor and his wife in their tireless work restoring St Stephen's Church. Protests about the Swiss Cottage development, including the loss of the Basil Spence sports centre and the sports pitch, were unfortunately less successful. BRA and BCAAC both campaigned for the introduction of Article 4 Directions to help preserve the distinctive character of the conservation area. These were introduced in 2010. More recent concerns include the threat to the Spence-Webster houses in Belsize Park Gardens and the proliferation of basement excavations. We continue to monitor every planning application in the area and object to those that are out of character.

Architectural walks, often organised with BCAAC, have always been popular events. Over the years they have covered most aspects of the history of the different estates that make up our area and its very wide range of distinctive architectural styles. BRA contributed to decisions about the route for the Belsize Walk that Camden introduced in 2005. We have also provided financial support to help BCAAC publish various editions of Belsize: A living suburb, a fascinating book that celebrates the history of the area.

BRA has always been keen to preserve the abundance and rich variety of trees in Belsize and this has included setting up tree warden schemes and a tree committee. After a particularly dry summer in 1996, when many newly planted trees died, members adopted trees and kept them watered. Over the years the Association has also paid for several trees to be planted. Probably our most popular event ever was a tree walk in 2004, attended by 130 people. An annual garden competition was held from 1990 to 2008 to promote the retention of front gardens and summer garden parties have been a wonderful opportunity to enjoy the lovely gardens of some of our members.

Increased pressure on parking and the congestion caused by commuters and parents dropping off their children at local independent schools, have all kept traffic issues high on the agenda. A series of surveys have been used to ensure that we accurately reflect local residents' views on these contentious issues. As a result, BRA supported the introduction of parking controls in the north of the area in 1993 and the permanent closure of Belsize Terrace to traffic after an experiment in 1994. A majority of members wanted a 20 mph speed limit and improved pedestrian crossings on main roads. BRA proposals to address the problems of the school run by requiring all schools to produce green travel plans were largely accepted by Camden in 2003. Since then school run parking permits have gradually been phased out and some school buses introduced. We are regularly involved in discussions with local public transport providers. At the end of 2010 we heard about plans to run the High Speed 2 railway under the southern part of our area.

We enjoy good relationships with local councillors of all parties, whilst ensuring that we maintain our non-political status. For at least twenty years, we have met regularly with local councillors, both to find out what is happening in the Council and to influence how decisions are made on local issues. Hustling

meetings before local elections have helped members decide how to cast their votes. In 1998 the event was chaired by Sue MacGregor, then a Today programme presenter. We also meet with the local police and the Royal Free Hospital about environmental issues.

Throughout the life of the Association we have kept members in touch with local issues through our Newsletters. In 2003 we set up a website and from 2006 have had a notice board in Belsize village. In 2011 we were granted planning permission for a second board on Haverstock Hill. Since 1982 members have shared information about Tradesmen You Can Trust.

To mark our 40th anniversary we held a survey to find out what our members value about BRA and what they would like to change. Overall the responses were very positive, basically saying „keep up the good work“. But there were some interesting variations, with the highest ratings going to our checking of planning applications, influence on planning policy, contact with councillors, the Newsletters and Tradesmen You Can Trust. Members particularly valued the ban on estate agents boards and the range of other things we do to preserve the character of the area. They also appreciate opportunities to meet like minded people and find out more about the area.

So at 40 we are still in good health. But we will no doubt continue to face many challenges in the years ahead as we seek to preserve the best in Belsize whilst responding to a changing world.

SOURCES

Information for the period from 1971 to 1990 was obtained from assorted BRA documents held in the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

Additional information on BRA campaigns of the 1970s came from the chapter “People power in Belsize – does it exist?” by Max Nasatyr and Mary Shenai in Belsize: A living suburb Belsize Conservation Area Advisory Committee 2010 - available from England’s Lane Books.

Information for the period since 1990 was obtained from copies of BRA newsletters.