

HISTORY OF BELSIZE

Modern Belsize includes the manor of Belsize and the northern part of the Chalcots estate. This section summarises the history of the two estates and explains how in the second half of the nineteenth century Belsize was transformed from farmland and gentlemen's country houses to a middle class suburb. It includes maps from 1746, 1862 and 1902 that chart these changes.

The Belsize Estate

Originally Belsize was part of the Manor of Hampstead. The earliest records show that in 986 King Ethelred gave the Manor to the Abbot and Monks of the newly established Westminster Abbey. The residents of Hampstead had to provide them with timber, firewood and grain. After the Norman invasion of 1066, William the Conqueror rewarded a Norman knight, Ranulf Peverall, by giving him part of Hampstead Manor. The area that he was given was described as Bel Assis in old French, which means beautifully situated. Under Norman ownership, the local families became serfs.

Belsize was left to the Monks of Westminster and returned to the Manor of Hampstead in 1317. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, he took all their lands, but in 1550 he granted the Belsize estate to the newly constituted Dean and Chapter of Westminster. They leased the land to private citizens. In modern terms the estate extended from the top of Rosslyn Hill to England's Lane and from College Crescent to Haverstock Hill, with additional land to the east towards Parliament Hill.

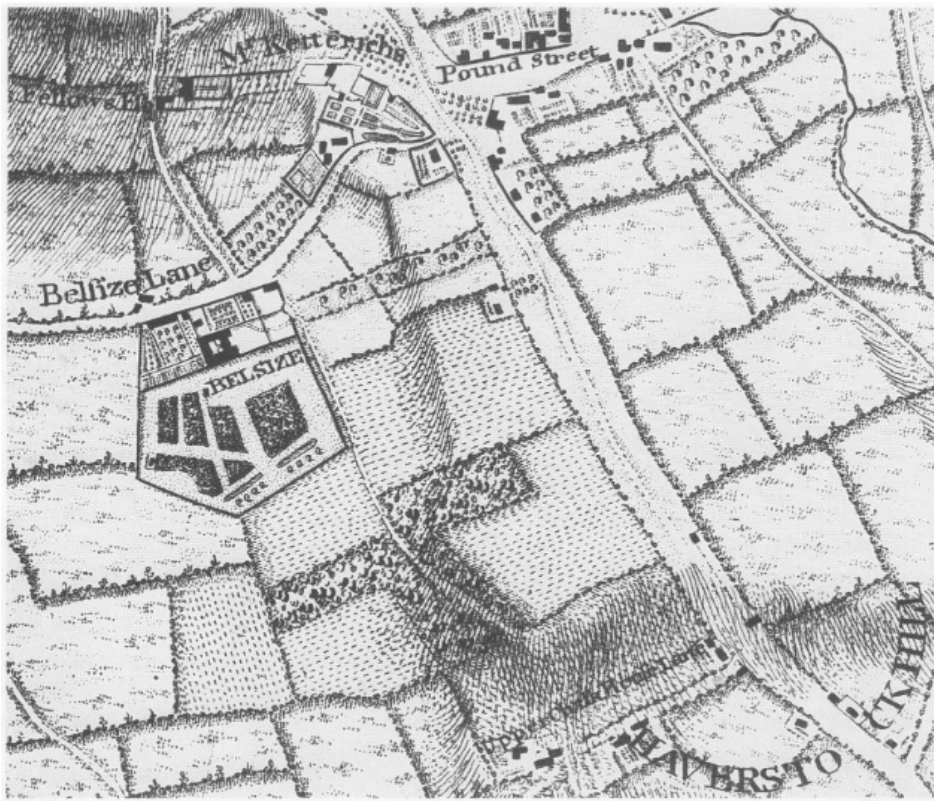
By the middle of the 16th century, the estate consisted of several farms and a manor house. Belsize House had 24 rooms including a hall, long gallery and great chamber. It was the only "aristocratic" house in the parish of Hampstead at that time. Because of its good views of London and easy accessibility, it was a very desirable country residence. The Waad family, who were eminent statesmen and diplomats in the service of their monarchs, leased it from 1557 until the Civil War when it was lost to a Parliamentarian..



1663 version of Belsize House in engraving of about 1780

In 1661, after the Restoration, the Dean and Chapter of Westminster handed the lease of the estate to a wealthy Royalist, Colonel Daniel O'Neill. He started rebuilding Belsize House in 1663. The front of the house was about 120 feet wide and situated between the present-day St Peter's Church and the junction of Belsize Park and Belsize Terrace. The grand carriage driveway from the house to the Great Road to Hampstead ran along the present-day Belsize Avenue. The house was in 25 acres of garden and park enclosed in a 1,400 yards pentagonal wall.

By the early eighteenth century Belsize House was sublet and in 1720 it opened as a pleasure garden. From six in the morning to eight at night visitors could dine, drink, listen to music and dance or enjoy fishing, hunting and racing. In 1721 the Prince and Princess of Wales dined and hunted there. But in 1722 a satirical ballad was published exposing the "scandalous, Lew'd House" called Belsize and the magistrates took action to prevent unlawful gaming and rioting. The fashionable set rapidly moved on. Despite protests from "respectable" residents, events continued in the park until 1745.



Detail of John Rocque's map of Belsize dated 1746

Belsize House was rebuilt in 1746 as a private residence, with a further version completed in 1812. By then a number of other large villas had been built around Haverstock Hill for wealthy lawyers and merchants wishing to escape from the polluted city. But most of the estate was still farm land.

In 1808 the Belsize Estate was split into 8 leasehold estates to meet the increased demand for mansions set in parkland. One of these mansions, Hunters Lodge, a "castellated Gothic house" built in 1810, remains at the upper end of Belsize Lane. The Dean and Chapter of Westminster having surrendered most of their freeholder rights, the leaseholders determined when land was released for housing development.

The Chalcots Estate

The manor of Chalcots consisted of 243 acres of land in the southern part of Hampstead which the Crown granted to Eton College in 1449. The name Chaldecotes first appears in records in 1253 and became Chalcotes in 1531. A 1680 map of Middlesex shows Upper and Lower Chalcotes farms. Upper Chalcotes farm, on the northern boundary of the estate, was located where the fire station now stands in Lancaster Grove. Lower Chalcotes farm was on the southern boundary near Primrose Hill. It was this farm that first became known as Chalk Farm. In modern terms, the estate was bounded on the east by Haverstock Hill and on the west by Swiss Cottage.

The Chalcots estate remained as farm land until the nineteenth century. Because it was more low-lying than Belsize, it was less in demand for elegant residences. The land was used for hay meadows to feed the horses that provided London's transport. In the mid 1820s the Fellows of Eton College were encouraged to develop the estate as an extension of the prestigious new developments in Regent's Park and St John's Wood.

The development of suburban Belsize

The development of Belsize began along the main road from London to Hampstead. Between 1815 and 1830 Edward Bliss attracted gentleman commuters to 38 assorted mansions, villas and terraces on the west side of Haverstock Hill to the north of England's Lane. Terraces of houses from the 1820s remain at 129-133 Haverstock Hill and at 26-38 Belsize Grove.

In 1829 Eton College advertised plots of land for secluded villas on the lower slopes of Haverstock Hill and in the following year began to build an axis road between Haverstock Hill and Finchley Road. The new road was named in honour of Queen Adelaide. Because of a building slump and proposals to run the London to Birmingham railway through the estate, little progress was made in the 1830s. The College successfully negotiated for the railway line to be hidden in the Primrose Hill Tunnel. During the 1840s semi-detached villas of the "school of John Nash" were built at the eastern end of Adelaide Road and in a triangle around Provost Road and Eton Road. Adelaide Road was finally completed in 1853 and parallel and side roads were gradually added.



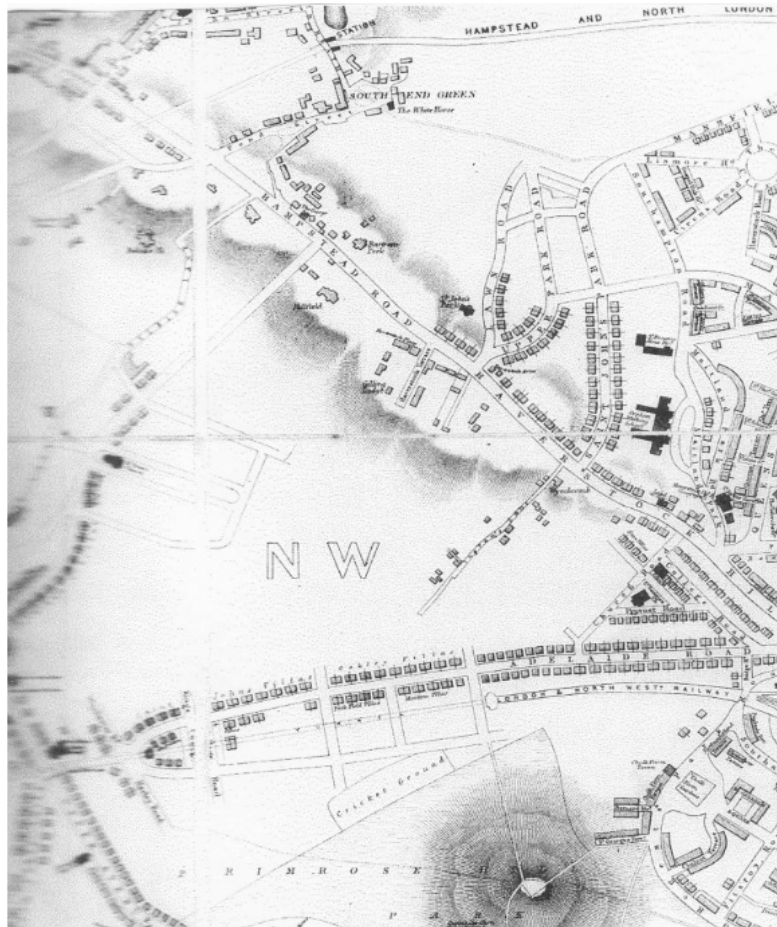
Primrose Hill Tunnel which opened in 1837

In 1851 William Lund proposed to create a high class district, known as the St John's Park Estate, on Belsize estate land to the west of Haverstock Hill. Existing field hedges were used to lay out the curved lines of Parkhill, Upper Park and Lawn Roads. The lower lying land by the Fleet brook was to be used for shops and mews. Building of substantial and "unobtrusively classical" grey brick and stucco houses began at the Haverstock Hill end of the roads. Lund's plans for the northern part of the estate were blighted by problems with the Pond Street sewer, reluctance to build over the Midland railway tunnel and the opening of a smallpox hospital near Lawn Road in 1870.

By the middle of the nineteenth century Belsize House and park were run down and neglected. In 1853 the leaseholder decided to demolish the house and planned to develop a secluded elongated square within the park walls.

Daniel Tidey became the main builder. In 1864 he gained agreement to build on the land to the south of Belsize Square and to link it to the Eton College estate. As a result the old park walls were pulled down and the development became less exclusive.

Tidey aimed to bring the fashionable styles of Kensington and Bayswater to Belsize. He built conventional classically styled 8-10 bed roomed semi-detached houses with large porticos and lavish stucco to attract the wealthy middle classes. During the 1850s and 60s he completed about 250 houses in Buckland Crescent, Belsize Square, Belsize Park Gardens, Belsize Crescent and Belsize Terrace. By 1870 tastes had changed and Tidey went bankrupt.



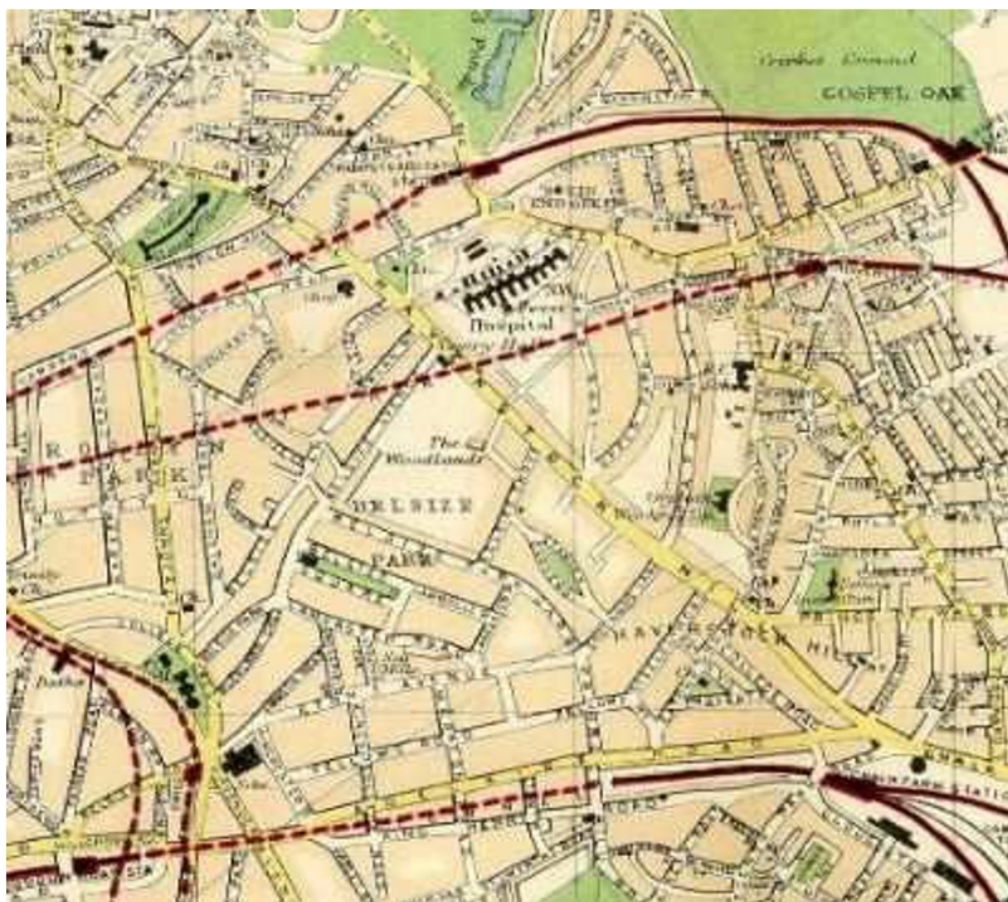
Belsize in 1862, mapped by Weller.

In 1853 agreement was reached to develop the Rosslyn Park estate. However builders were deterred by plans to build a railway tunnel under the centre of the estate and competition from other housing developments in Hampstead town and Belsize Park, Eldon, Lyndhurst and Thurlow Roads were laid out in the early 1860s with house building continuing into the 1870s.

As housing was developed, demand for other facilities grew. St Saviour's church, completed in 1856, became the focal point of the Chalcots estate and St Peter's church, consecrated in 1859, the centre piece of Belsize Square. The Adelaide Tavern opened in 1842, and was followed by the Eton Hotel and Belsize Tavern in the 1850s and the Washington Hotel in the mid 1860s.

Shopping centres were developed in Belsize village and England's Lane from the 1860s. Railway stations were opened at Hampstead Heath and Finchley Road on the North London line in 1860 and Swiss Cottage on the Metropolitan line and Finchley Road on the Midland line in 1868.

From 1873 the chief builder in the area was William Willett, helped by his son. In the early 1880s, they took on the challenge of reviving the Eton College estate by developing Eton Avenue and its link roads. He moved on to Lyndhurst Gardens and Wedderburn Road. His houses were solidly constructed and set a new artistic standard for speculative architecture. They were inspired by English "Queen Anne" design of the late 17th century and built in red brick with steep pitched roofs, tall chimneys, dormers, gables, ornamental glass and elaborate ornamentation. Each house was unique.



1902 map from Bacon's Up to date Pocket Atlas & Guide to London

In the 1890s it became harder to sell large leasehold houses because the middle classes were being seduced by city centre apartments and freehold properties with large gardens in the outer suburbs. The Willetts bucked the trend by building longer, lower more suburban houses in “Old English” style with innovative interiors designed to meet changing domestic requirements.

Most of the remaining mansions, that had become marooned in their gardens, were redeveloped in the 1890s and 1900s. The largest of these developments was the construction of Howitt, Glenilla, Glenloch and Glenmore Roads in the grounds of two gentlemen’s residences. The houses were smaller in scale and from 1907 had easy access to Belsize Park tube station.

Averil Nottage

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For further information consult:

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Information about further reading can be found under Books about Belsize on this website