

LIFE MEMBERS: STUART GRAY

Earlier this year the Hampstead Garden Suburb Residents Association, appointed as Honorary Members Jean Henderson, Brigid Grafton Green, John Enderby, Kit Ikin, Stuart Gray and the late Ted Hoblyn. The Suburb News continues its profiles of these remarkable local residents whose in work caring for this lovely Conservation Area and its community has been outstanding.

In 1932 a newly-wed young architect and his bride moved into Midholm Crescent on Hampstead Garden Suburb. Though he did not know it at the time, their decision to live there marked for (Alec) Stuart Gray the start of a lifelong fascination for the lovely conservation area bordering on Hampstead Heath.

His profound interest in the district, his penetrating architect's eye and scholarly detective work, coupled with a passion for meticulous recording of detail, has, over the ensuing years, created a fund of information that is invaluable to both architectural and local archives. The chances are now that if you want to know anything about Hampstead

Garden Suburb, Residents Association members will recommend: 'You would do well to ask Stuart Gray.' If you take this advice, and ask Mr Gray how it all began, you have let yourself in for a marvellous time...

Now eighty-five, living in Temple Fortune Hill, and with an undiminished zest for architecture and the Suburb, he cheerfully admits: 'I am still learning... still trying to sort it all out...' There follows a host of fascinating, often very funny, sometimes tragic but always historically important stories of buildings, their sponsors or designers. Included are 'a grand cinema building I worked on at Bath... my work in Trinidad... the vernacular Mill Hill cricket pavilion which I drew in detail many years ago... and Gordon Selfridge. I met him when I was working on the extensions of his department store...'

Then quietly, Mr Gray, now a widower, mentions: 'I married a local girl, Avis Radmore. She was well known on the Suburb. I had lived most of my life at Hendon and Belsize Park... I went to Mill Hill School... I knew very little about the Suburb when we moved here. I was introduced to it when I was extending my education, attending evening classes at what was then the Central School of Arts and Crafts, where I later taught. A fellow student was A. L. Osborne, who lived in Erskine Hill. He told me about the Suburb. I began to walk round it... to look at everything. I had to pick up my information, for people like Brigid Grafton Green had not then begun writing their books. But when I was attending other classes at the Royal Academy Schools, some of the academicians came to our drawing boards. Edwin Lutyens came to mine, and I have some drawings he did for me.'

He continues: 'You know, the suburb is a strange place. You can live here for a long time and never see it. The it gradually dawns on you. If you walk from here to Golders Green Station, it is amazing what you can learn.'

Mr Gray's increasing knowledge of the area soon won him recognition as an expert, and he began writing about it. His series of walks published by the Residents Association are invaluable to the newcomer, throwing lights on the many subtle facets which make the area so important historically.

It was his research into the area's architectural history when writing *Edwardian Architecture* which has, perhaps proved his most important contribution to architectural and local history. Published by Duckworth in 1985, it was hailed by leading reviewers as 'the definitive book... the Bible of the period...' It contains a chapter on Hampstead Garden Suburb. When gathering his information, Stuart Gray discovered in a damp Westminster cellar many valuable papers and drawings pinpointing much of what was then generally unknown about the district. As well as being of great use to scholars, the drawings are now used in exhibitions.

With Dr Mervyn Miller, Mr Gray is now writing a book on the Suburb commissioned by the Hampstead Garden Suburb New Trust, and likely to be published fairly soon.

Says Mr Gray: 'Dr Miller is concentrating on the history. I am contributing portraits of



streets and houses... you could call them vignettes.'

With the book virtually complete, Mr Gray has been invited by Eileen Whelan, the RA chairman, to identify some of the problems that he fears threaten the very fabric of the Suburb. High on his list of eighteen items comes the pathway from Asmunds Place to the Finchley Road shops. This, he stresses, is unusable. 'It is being invaded by the boots of cars overhanging the pathway. The cars are actually parked in the car park of a new block of flats, but the overhang is so great that even one person

pushing a pram cannot get through.' Then he continues, 'We should restore the farm gate which once stood at the entrance to the wood at the top of Temple Fortune Hill. It is important for people to know they are entering this sanctuary.'

But perhaps of the greatest concern to him is the fact that many new residents are pulling out much of the Suburb houses' interiors. Broadminded, and with an architect's view that peoples' needs change with the times and, to some degree, buildings along with them, he none the less fears that 'too much is being destroyed here.'

People are restricted by law as to what they can do to exteriors of the houses, but there is little or no control over what they can do with the interiors. 'I can't understand them. Today, things like our old fireplaces are elsewhere considered valuable to retain... they are being restored... not torn out. Here, they do away with them. I only hope that in ten years' time, they do not regret it, for they are destroying the very features which make our houses so lovely; the very things that make them want to come here to live.'

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