



The Pantiles, excitingly different

Named for its striking green-tiled roof, The Pantiles is a large block of some 40 flats on the east side of Finchley Road. Like other blocks such as Belmont, Dudley, Montrose and Clarendon, it helps form a boundary to the old part of Hampstead Garden Suburb and protects the smaller properties behind it from the noise and bustle of traffic and commerce. There the similarity ends, however, for The Pantiles is an excitingly different building from its neighbours. Indeed some critics would have us believe that the cream and green 1930s block is at odds with the Suburb's celebrated character. Yet there is a close historical link with one of its most iconic buildings.

In 1923 Heathcroft, the Grade II listed mansion block in Hampstead Way was built to the design of architect J.B.F. Cowper, winner of the competition organised by the Suburb developers Hampstead Tenants. After completion of the successful Arts and Crafts building, Cowper went on to become a specialist designer of blocks of flats and in 1934 undertook the design of The Pantiles. In the twelve years between 1923 and 1935, when the Pantiles was finished, England had undergone massive social changes and these are interestingly reflected in the two very different designs from the same architect.

Heathcroft had been built to reflect the central ethos of the Suburb, that "people of all sorts of opinions and all standards of income can live in helpful neighbourliness." To that end it incorporated "a ballroom, a dining hall, central kitchens, a communal hot water supply, tennis and badminton courts, a bowling green, shared storage room and other communal activities."

The Pantiles, by contrast, was conceived as a forward-looking, largely functional dwelling for workers and

commuters who would welcome labour-saving flats, easy to maintain and convenient for modern life. The Depression had taken its toll; Edwardian ideals of community and leisure seemed out of kilter with the need for employment and solvency.

The flats were designed as mainly one or two-bedroomed, with some studio apartments. There is little internal adornment. The emphasis is on functionality. Each was designed with a fitted kitchen, including an Ascot water heater, large floor to ceiling kitchen cupboards, coat and airing cupboards in the hallway, a larder and a balcony complete with fitted coal cupboard. Yet the exterior is full of energy and excitement. Italianate influences abound in the beautiful arched windows to the ground floor, the overhanging eaves and the green glazed, pantiled, shallow hipped roofs. A more Modernist approach is discernible in the full-height glazed stairwells with profiled tracery, horizontal banding to the rear of the block and the flat-roofed staircase towers. Originally entered via the imposing front door on Finchley Road, with its flanking parapet and raised steps, this is a building which cleverly marries Modernist and Italianate influences in a way that most viewers today may identify simply as 'Art Deco'. Indeed it would not be out of place on a promenade at Bexhill-on-Sea or the English Riviera.

Today the flats are excellent as starter home, pied-a-terre, or retirement apartment. Almost a quarter are owner-occupied, the remainder being mainly let by private owners. A handful remain let under the original leases, and tenants who have lived there for upwards of fifty years have some interesting recollections of how things have changed. Most remember how well the flats were maintained in the days of a live-in porter, who would not only clean all the communal

areas and windows but also look after spare keys and wash residents' cars! The gardens were at one time 'magnificent', maintained by gardeners who were so conscientious that they would turn up on a Sunday in very hot weather just to make sure that plants were kept watered. Nowadays the gardens are still a wonderful asset, if somewhat basically maintained, and work wonders in keeping traffic noise at bay. Long gone, however, are the thirteen garages which used to be let to residents. They have now been demolished and two new houses built on the site by the present freeholders. Now the access road, recently renamed Crispin Mews, provides parking for residents only on a first-come, first-served basis. One resident remembers when the access road was so quiet that people used to set up tables and chairs on the grass verges and enjoy a cup of tea together while the children played around them. Today, there is considerable traffic down Crispin Mews, some drivers using it as a rat run at times of congestion on Finchley Road, others using it for access to the nearby school and running the risk of a £140 clamping fine if they should be tempted to park there.

A recent resurgence of interest in Art Deco has seen The Pantiles once more become fashionable. An earlier appraisal by the Suburb Trust found that poor maintenance detracted from its architectural merit. However in 2010-2011 a major refurbishment of the block at a cost to the residents of some £400,000 has seen a vast improvement in its appearance. Work included extensive repairs to the pantiled roof, the brickwork and rendering, and to the paintwork. Residents hope that the block can continue to be maintained from annual service charges and to that end they have formed a Right to Manage company.

In 2003 The Pantiles was awarded Grade II listed status.

A dawn round with Milson

No, I am not about to report on a round of golf, but an enchanting experience of joining our milkman on his daily round.

As most Suburb residents retire to their beds for the night, one person's day is about to start. Milson, our friendly milkman who has been delivering milk on the Suburb since 1990, makes his way from his home to the depot in Edmonton at midnight. Probably, the only time many of us see him is when he collects the money about once a month.

I thought I would join him one morning on his round to experience life on the Suburb in the small hours. He starts at this hour so that he can complete his round before the early morning traffic. I had a 'lie-in' on the morning I joined him by sleeping until 4.00am when a sharp knock came to my door. Drat, I had overslept! I leapt to my feet, jumped into some warm clothes and then onto the milk float. It was a frosty March morning, the sky was a clear with only a crescent moon to offer some comfort. The silhouette of St Jude's was simply stunning in this light.

Our journey took us to all corners of the Suburb, including some quiet turnings which I didn't know exist. He delivers a variety of milk products to some 400 homes.

'Stripeys' seemed to be the milk of choice, and that is of course the half-fat variety. We would stop in each road and he would instruct me to drop, sorry deliver, two stripeys to this house and one blue to that one. I soon got into the rhythm of this task and apart from my frozen fingers, I was beginning to enjoy my role as a milkman's mate.

In fact, by five am the temperature seemed to drop and Milson said that this happens most days. Perhaps an informed Suburb resident might enlighten us on this phenomenon!

Over his years as a milkman, he has witnessed meteor showers lighting up the night sky and in 1997 enjoyed a stunning view of Hale-Bopp with its tail which he said was estimated to be one million miles long!

Milson said that this is a Saga week as residents cancel their milk before they depart on their breaks to beat the school holidays. When I asked what he enjoyed most about his job, he replied 'Meeting the residents.'

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He seemed to know everyone and followed families as they moved house over the years.

During the night, he does of course witness a few odd instances. On a previous round, he delivered to a block of flats only to discover that a fire had started and he was able to save all but one poor resident who sadly died in the disaster. He sees from time to time single people walking the streets at night and trying the car doors. Perhaps he has discovered the phantom car thief!

I asked Milson whether he was offered a hot drink on his round and he said 'no' but on one cold morning, he found a youth lying on a bench near Central Square and plied him with his own hot tea from his flask. Notes from residents are a regular form of communication. He once found a note which asked for two pints and a new husband! Another note asked him to shut the gate to keep out the birds!

When stepping off the milk float at one house he took his torch and explained that in the dark he had tried to place two pints on the step and managed to land them on a sleeping cat which leapt several feet into the air, throwing Milson to the

ground. Another time he went head first over a newly installed black gate, which was almost invisible to the unsuspecting milky. Sounds like a real comedy act!

Wildlife is of course in abundance, with foxes and hedgehogs a regular feature. The birdsong is of course a delight, but many residents complain that birds pecked at their milk bottles and insist that Milson covers them with beak proof plastic cups. The unused milk at Brookland school seemed to provide the birds with a lactic feast as they managed to devour anything which was left over. This meant that stringent measures were required to protect today's delivery.

By six thirty, the Suburb was waking up and I was frozen. The round was finished and Milson headed off to Edmonton. Before we departed I asked him whether the job was stressful and whether he would do it again if he had the chance. His answers were an emphatic 'No' and 'Yes'.

I enjoyed my round with Milson and will continue to enjoy my daily pint which is always delivered cold and fresh to my doorstep. Milson can be contacted on 07904 072 852

PAUL WENHAM



Gerald Dickens with Susie Gregson and Henrietta Barnett girls who took part in an HBS Literary society evening during which Gerald Dickens gave readings from his great great grandfather's works.

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Winter Fair in aid of



Saturday 3rd November 2012

11am-3pm, Free Church Hall, Northway

Vintage items, Collectables, Household, Crafts, Jewellery, Books, Home-made Cakes/Produce, Combat Stress Christmas Cards, Raffle, Children's Books & Toys, Refreshments - NEW: Tombola, Plants, Children's games & activities and lots more!

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