

PLACING CANONBURY – piecing together a house’s history

By a Canonbury Terrace Resident

I have been curious about the history of **18 Canonbury Place** from the day that we bought the house way back in 1979.

We bought from Irish builders who had renovated the terrace comprising of 18, 19 and 20 Canonbury Place. As a child I remember the terrace as being derelict and rather haunting. The ramshackle villas were known for their fox dens and steady flow of the homeless - our wooden floors still bear the burn marks where the occupants built fires to keep warm. When we first bought the house we had quite a few of the old inhabitants banging on the front door in the night trying to get in!

In the Local History archives I found a series of black and white pictures showing the sorry state of the terrace.



The abandoned terrace in 1975. The road ran directly in front of the house and the garden of no. 18, on the far right, wrapped around the side of the house.

Shortly after this the Council compulsorily purchased the terrace due to its neglected state. The builders bought the three houses from the Council for £50,000. They renovated them and sold them on in April 1979 for just over £100,000 each. There was a banner headline in the *Islington Gazette* asking, 'Have house prices gone mad? £100,000 price broken in Canonbury', with a big photograph of the terrace.

I then turned to finding out when the terrace was originally built and who built it. My starting point was the London Metropolitan Archives and books on Islington which included Samuel Lewis's *The History and topography of the parish of St Mary Islington*, in the county of Middlesex, published in 1842 (free online version available from googlebooks).

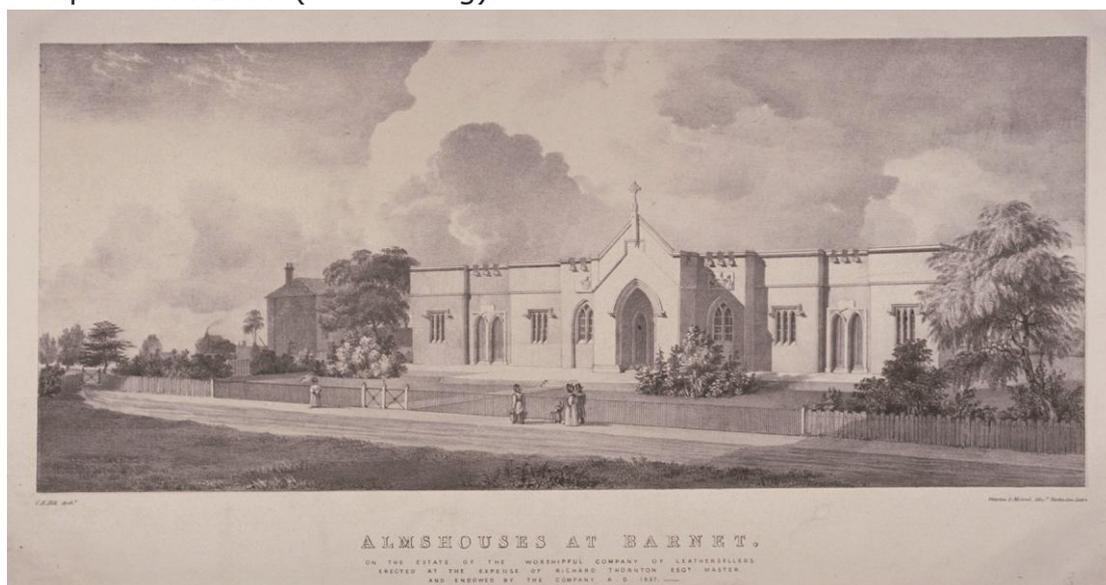
In 1837, Charles Hamor Hill (1785-1863), took out the lease on Canonbury Tower from the Marquess of Northampton, Spencer Alwyne Compton. Samuel Lewis wrote:

The old tower, being detached and surrounded by pleasant fields and gardens, and in a most salubrious air, was, until taken by the present tenant, Mr Charles Hamor Hill, bailiff of the manor, for a long period occupied during the summer by persons whose affairs do not permit them to be far from town, and who come hither for retirement or the benefit of health.

As early as 1780 an advert for these lodging rooms in the Tower highlighted Canonbury's closeness to the city:

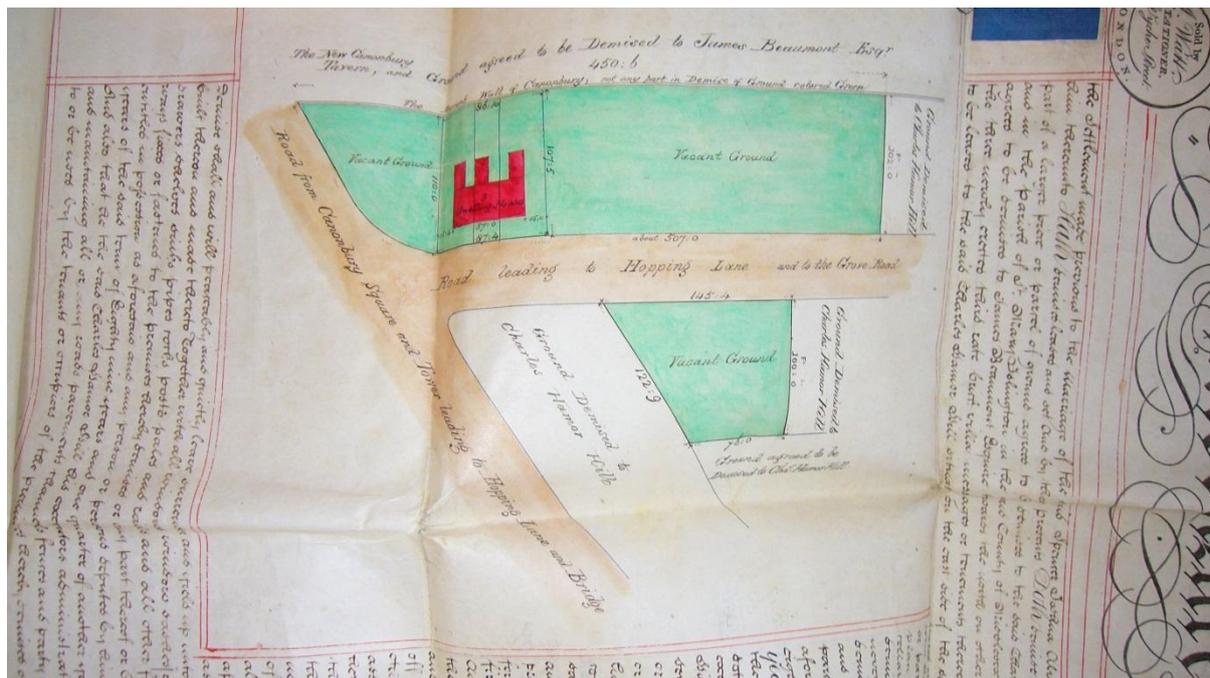
'Its contiguity to the principal parts of the metropolis, and the convenience of a sixpenny stage every hour to the City, Holborn, Temple Bar, and parts adjacent render it exceedingly convenient.'

Hamor Hill was a man of standing. He was a London District Surveyor for 20 years and Surveyor for the Leathersellers' Company for nearly four decades until his death aged 77. He had been responsible for several projects, including the building of the Leathersellers' almshouses for the poor in Barnett which were completed in 1837 (see etching).



Charles Hamor Hill designed these almshouses in 1836-37. These were paid for by Richard Thornton, a very wealthy businessman and benefactor who was Master of our Company that year, and initially they were called the Thornton almshouses. They were later extensively enlarged and remodelled, and are now known as Leathersellers' Close.

At the same time as taking up residence in the Tower, Hamor Hill negotiated a licence with the Marquess to build three roads in the surrounding meadows which became Canonbury Park North and South and Grange Road (now Grange Grove). The document below shows the contract made between Hamor Hill and the Marquess in 1837. The plots of land have to be described in great detail as the roads were yet to be built and named: 'All the piece of ground situated in the west side of a Road leading from Canonbury to a Road formerly called Hopping Lane but now called St Paul's Road.'



Detail from the 1837 contract between Charles Hamor Hill and The Marquess outlining the land in Canonbury on which Hamor Hill was to build.

By 1850 Hamor Hill had constructed 50 elegant villas, generously set out in twos and threes, with front and back gardens. 18 Canonbury Place was one of those houses. Sadly, little remains to tell us about the early years of the house but there are some documents relating to 20 Canonbury Place. In 1848, 20 Canonbury Place was leased, according to the original deed, to a Mr Henry Tucker by Charles Hamor Hill and The Marquess. I presume that the construction of all three houses was completed around this time. Documents show that no. 20's lease reverted to the Marquess's estate on Tucker's death in 1935. During his leasehold he would have rented the house out to many people.

In 1841 Islington's population was 55,690 and by 1861 it had nearly trebled to 155,341. In 1861 the census data for 18 Canonbury Place has eight people living in the house. The Head of House is a 36-year-old Master Mariner called William Owen from Beccles in Suffolk. His wife, Barbara, from Scotland, and her two unmarried sisters lived with them along with William Owen's mother from Ipswich, and his 17-year old cousin who appears to have been apprenticed to him. The household is looked after by two female domestic servants from Scotland.

By 1901 there are two Heads of House on the census form which suggests that the house was partitioned or that one was subletting to the other. The first Head

of House was a 62-year-old married lady, Jane Nash from Kensington, and her 32-year old son, Gasson. They are described as living on 'their own means'. The household also included a domestic servant from Smithfield.

The second Head of House is John Hood, aged 36, who is an Analytical Chemist from Scotland. They might have been separate units or one could speculate that John Hood may have been connected to the Nash's in some way.

Unearthing these details has been at once rewarding and revealing. It has been a compelling journey that has not ended. I wanted to share my discoveries to see if there are other Canonbury residents who would be interested in recounting their own houses' histories. We plan to post these stories on The Canonbury Society website to build up a history of the neighbourhood. Please email the newsletter team at rosemary@canonburypark.plus.com if you are interested in taking part.