

## In praise of Wren Road

Pevsner didn't think much of Camberwell Green:

CAMBERWELL GREEN still has its green, but little else of note except for some houses on the W. side (No.15, c18 with big top window with fan motif, and Nos. 7-13, an early c19 terrace). The most conspicuous building is the NATIONAL WESTMINSTER BANK of 1899 by A. Williams, in the Edwardian baroque style with a corner tower as if it were a town hall. Nothing much in Camberwell Church Street, ...<sup>1</sup>

Victorian and Edwardian vernacular architecture, characteristic of most of the Camberwell Green conservation area, was not esteemed. Its neo-classical ornaments tended to be dismissed as attempts by builders or their clients to ape the appearance of the mansions of their social superiors. H.J. Dyos, for example, wrote, "Architectural taste, like manners, travels downwards, and it must have seemed unthinkable that one's house should not bear some resemblance, however remote, to the facade and the layout of more exclusive properties."<sup>2</sup>

I think this is misleading. We can look at buildings just for what they are. They are attractive or unattractive because of their intrinsic qualities of proportion and balance, without reference to any interpretation of their place in the social struggle. The ancient models which inspired the designers of the great neo-classical buildings do not become less valuable when they inspire speculative builders or a widespread desire for their application in ordinary housing.

So to Wren Road, an uncelebrated and lucky survival; a small collection of pleasing buildings marred only (at least in my view) by the flats at the end of the street. If you shop in Butterfly Walk, then Wren Road is just the quick way from the Green, a bit dirty, too many parked cars, the odd street drinker. But it is worth stopping for moment and looking up.



Wren Road began when an eighteenth-century house known only as the Old House on the Green<sup>3</sup>, whose grounds extended as far as Daneville Road, was sold in 1850. The house was demolished, Wren Road took its place, and the grounds were split into plots for development. The Congregational Church bought a large plot and built a substantial chapel, since replaced by the Colonnades.<sup>4</sup>

**Fig.1** The Old House on the Green, possibly around 1780 with, to the left, the White House. At that time there was a pond at the south-east corner of the Green. (This image is provided by arrangement with Southwark Local History Library and Archive.)

<sup>1</sup> Cherry, Bridget and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London 2 South* (1983), pp. 626-7.

<sup>2</sup> Dyos, H.J., *Victorian Suburb A study of the growth of Camberwell* (1966), p.83.

<sup>3</sup> I have tried quite without success to find some other name for it..

<sup>4</sup> Ford, R.A., *A history of Camberwell Green Congregational Church 1774-1966* (1966), pp.13-15. I am grateful to the Rev. John Key for this reference.





The oldest of the buildings that now occupy the street is probably the Lloyds Bank corner building. It appears in directories<sup>5</sup> from 1854. Its first occupant was a bookseller, and for many years part of it was a Post Office.

At some point what is now No.13 was put up on the other side of the street. Originally it was known as Wren Cottage.

At first glance you think, "That's a nice-looking facade", but then perhaps, "No, hang on, isn't the height between the upper windows and the roof a bit too big?"

**Fig.2** 13 Wren Road, Wren Cottage as was, front view (DM 26/11/13)



The explanation for this oddity is seen in the side view. The building is unexpectedly narrow, only one room deep. To compensate for this, the builders put two rooms in the roof, each with a window on the gable end. To accommodate these rooms it was necessary to heighten the front wall.

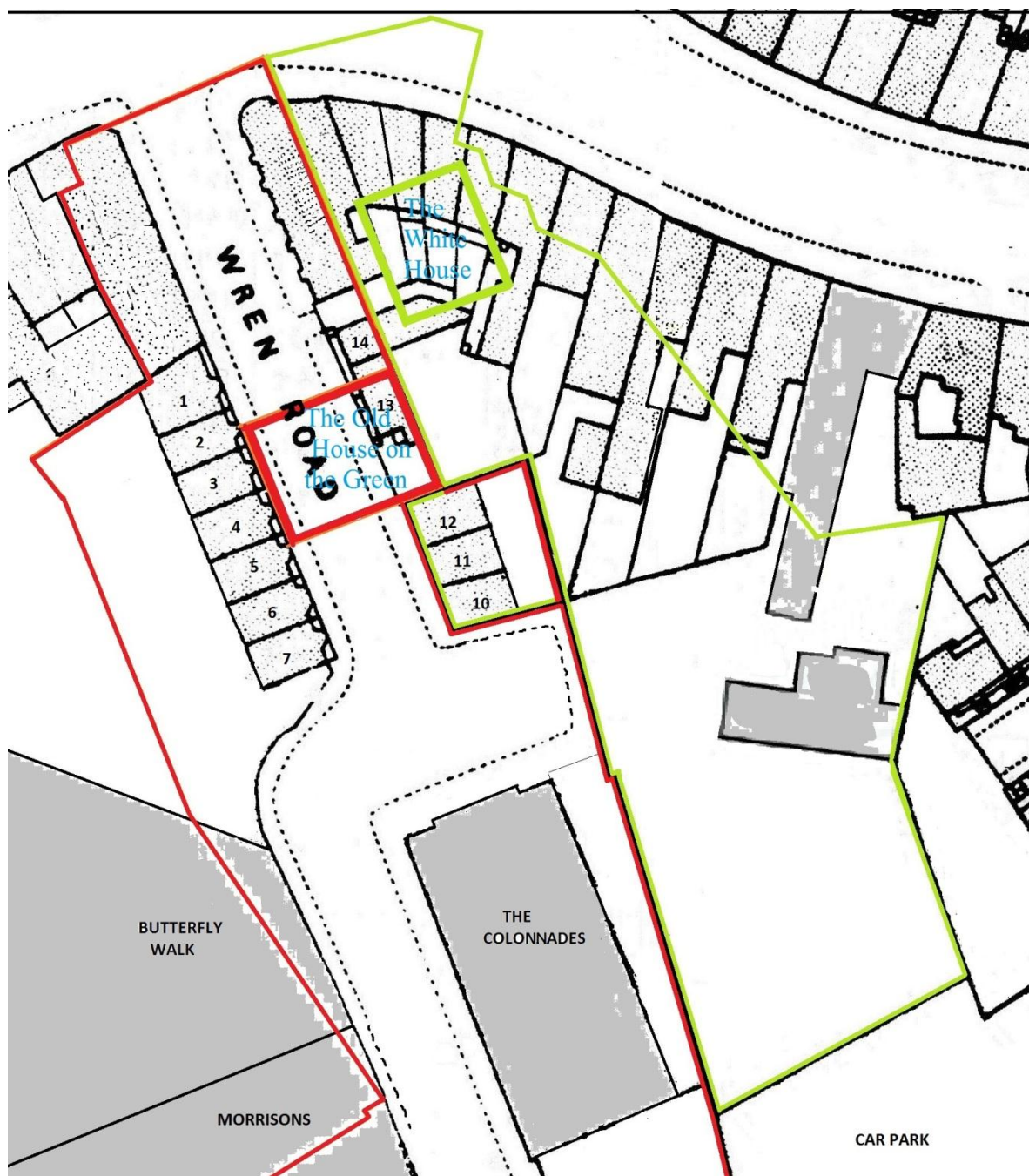
A building that could possibly be it is shown on the 1861 Dispatch atlas and also in the 1862 Stanford atlas, but these are both clearly very inaccurate. Then there is a mention of it by name in 1869.<sup>6</sup> In the last decades of the century the censuses show that it was occupied by the chapel keeper.

**Fig.3** 13 Wren Road, Wren Cottage as was, side view (DM 26/11/13)

<sup>5</sup> Directory references are to Kelly's/PO London or London Suburban series.

<sup>6</sup> *The Era*, 10 Oct. 1869, p.9, British Newspaper Archive, accessed through findmypast.co.uk. This is one of four references in the same year.

The sites of the Old House on the Green (in red) and the White House (in green) are shown on Figure 4, along with the corresponding property boundaries.<sup>7</sup> I assume that the developer planned from the outset to put up the terrace that became Nos.1-7. Allowing space for that, and for whatever was required for the road, left just a narrow strip on the east side, into which Wren Cottage was tucked.



**Fig.4** The site of the Old House on the Green, and the boundary of its property (red), and similarly for the White House (green), superimposed on the 1894 Ordnance Survey map, which I have updated as necessary.

<sup>7</sup> The Old House and White House plans, sufficient for locating the houses and the property boundaries, are preserved in beautiful tracings of the 1842 Tithe Map in the National Archives made by Stephen Marks in the 1970s. He referred to the plans in the *Camberwell Society Newsletter* No.19, p.4 (Apr. 1974). His tracings are in the Society archive. I am grateful to Margaret Powley-Baker for allowing me access to this archive.





**Fig.5** 1-7 Wren Road  
(DM 27/10/13)

Nos.1-7 probably went up in the 1860s. They don't appear in the 1860 directory, but individual buildings are mentioned from 1867.<sup>8</sup> The Church apparently sold the freehold in 1871.<sup>9</sup>

I particularly like the windows on the upper stories.



**Fig.6** 10-12 Wren Road (DM 30/11/13)

In 1881, as part of its widening of Church Street, the Metropolitan Board of Works bought the White House and its grounds.<sup>10</sup> This immediately enabled the building of Nos.10-12. The history isn't quite straightforward. The land on which they stand is shown unambiguously in the Congregational Church's deeds as part of the grounds of the Old House on the Green. On the other hand, the 1870 OS map shows it equally unambiguously as part of the grounds of the White House – hence the alternative boundaries in Figure 4. I can only suppose that the proprietor of the White House took advantage of the sale of the Old House on the Green to make an offer acceptable to the developer,

<sup>8</sup> *TheTimes*, 26 Aug. 1867, p.1, The Times Digital Archive, accessed through Southwark Council Libraries, Online Reference Library. The houses were originally built with back extensions and individual back gardens.

<sup>9</sup> *London City Press*, 18 Feb. 1871, p.8, British Newspaper Archive, accessed through findmypast.co.uk . Eight houses were advertised for sale, so by that time No.8, adjoining No.7 and set back somewhat, had been added. For many years there was also a No.9, adjoining No.8, but now of course we jump from No.7 to No.10 on the other side of the street.

<sup>10</sup> London Metropolitan Archive, MBW1221, pp.195-6, 5 Dec. 1881.

and so enlarge his property. In any event, Nos.10-12 were up by 1888.<sup>11</sup>

These are my favourite buildings in the street. The windows politely reflect those of the terrace opposite. Then, somehow, the combination of the proportions, the absence of bay windows, the curved corner, the windows in the end wall and the off-centre chimney stack create a building of great charm.

At the same time as it bought the White House, the Metropolitan Board of Works bought the narrow corner property neighbouring Wren Cottage<sup>12</sup>, which enabled the creation of a much wider building plot on the corner of Camberwell Green, where the very tolerable London and South-Western Bank building opened for business in 1885.<sup>13</sup>

This left two oddly-shaped plots backing at an angle on to the new houses in Church Street. The current long, thin, and quaint No.14 was in place on one of the plots by 1894. The adjoining plot seems now to house only gate posts, clearly part of the same building event, and definitely an ornament to the street.



**Fig.7** 14 Wren Road (DM 26/11/13)

The next of the existing buildings to go up was the Lloyds Bank building.

<sup>11</sup> Directory. Like Nos.1-7, the houses were originally built with back extensions and individual back gardens.

<sup>12</sup> London Metropolitan Archive, MBW1221, pp.8-9, 21 Nov. 1881.

<sup>13</sup> *South London Press*, 14 March 1885. There is a copy of the *SLP* account, including an engraving, in the Minet Library.



Lloyds bought the buildings on the plot in around 1925. It retained the 1850s corner building, but demolished whatever was between it and Nos.1-7. It employed Edward Maufe to design a much larger structure, one which very successfully harmonizes with the original 1850s structure.<sup>14</sup>



**Fig.8** Lloyds Bank building (DM 27/10/13)

Finally, the flats at the end, the Colonnades. The side elevation is fairly harmless, what you see from Morrisons but tend not to notice. The end elevation, however, which naturally dominates the view up the street is, I think, misconceived. The apparent attempt to echo the chapel doesn't really work. What should soar, simply squats.

More practically, a minor tragedy in the long process of replacing the chapel is that one or more of the earlier designs included provision for a library.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Information from Sylvia Gallotti, Lloyds Banking Group archivist. The Edward Maufe papers are in the RIBA archives, but I am assured by an RIBA archivist that they contain nothing about the Camberwell building.

<sup>15</sup> *Camberwell Society Newsletter* No.81, p.11 (Nov. 1988).