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Saving “London’s Last Village” The Role of Institutions and Societies in Highgate’s Community

There is a clear distinction between Highgate Village and its surrounding wards.¹ Besides the fact the entire village is on a hill, there is a certain tranquility to the area. Just north of central London, the village’s posh yet archaic (there are virtually no restaurant chains) aesthetic begs visitors to learn more about its history. Established in 1318, Highgate Village has grown over the past five hundred years into the quaint, yet exclusive and prosperous village “upon a hill” it is today. The residents of Highgate have historically desired privacy and little change. Archway Road’s construction in 1813 cut Highgate off from much of the east and resulted in the establishment and growth of local shops along Highgate Hill Street, now the quintessential village lane.² Since then, the emergence of community institutions and societies has taken place. Aimed at preserving “village values of community, tranquility, smallness of scale and length of memory,” these groups have served as the caretakers of Highgate’s heritage and its future.³

Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution

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² A. P. Baggs, Diane K Bolton, M. A. Hicks, and R. B. Pugh, “Hornsey, including Highgate: Highgate,” in *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 6, Friern Barnet, Finchley, Hornsey With Highgate*, ed. T. F. T. Baker and C. R. Elrington (London: Victoria County History, 1980). *British History Online*, accessed March 25, 2020, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol6/pp122-135>.

³ Andrew Martin, “Model Village,” *Evening Standard*, July 15, 1996.

In the mid nineteenth century, Literary and Scientific Institutions were emerging all over Britain, but the story behind the founding of the Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution has an unconventional side.⁴ While the “official” history on their website claims Harry Chester, a civil servant and resident of Highgate, wanted to form “a society for the improvement of the mind...in subservience to the interests of morality and the glory of God,” the Institution’s creation was also a creative tactic for a problem facing Highgate’s elite.⁵ According to Susan Trackman, HLSI’s archivist, the “great and the good” of Highgate were tired of their servants drinking too much at the local pubs—there were twenty one at the time—so they decided to form HLSI, for “if you can give them lectures and things to do in the evenings, they won’t go to the pubs.” The Institution was primarily for Highgate’s upper and middle classes, but members were allowed to have their staff join at a reduced rate. Eventually membership soon expanded to other working-class groups, especially the large farmer population, who desired an education.⁶

The first meeting of the Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution took place at the Gatehouse Tavern on January 16, 1839. The lecture was on the “Composition and Properties of the Atmosphere-Water-Heat-Light-and Electricity.”⁷ The lecture series remained in the Gatehouse until 1840, when the Institution moved into its current location in South Grove adjacent to Pond Square. Prominent figures in British society were some of the first to speak at HLSI, including Millicent Garrett Fawcett, founder of the Women’s Suffrage Movement, in 1887, and, in 1889, explorer Sir Sidney Waterlow, who donated his land (now known as

⁴ John Holmes and Sharon Ruston, *The Routledge Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Science* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 30, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Routledge_Research_Companion_to_Nine/PzgkDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

⁵ “History of HLSI,” Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://hlsi.net/history/>.

⁶ Susan Trackman, interview by author, March 5, 2020.

⁷ “History of HLSI,” Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution.

Waterlow Park) in Highgate for “a garden for the gardenless” in Highgate.⁸ Weekly evening lectures still take place today at HLSI. These lectures, given by distinguished academics—including Nobel Prize winners, Susan Trackman boasts—are “a key fixture in the social calendar of a socially influential community of...people of intellectual and professional distinction. The concentration of such a large, cultured and intellectually curious group of older people creates its own incentive for others to stay.”⁹

In addition to weekly lectures, members often spend time reading newspapers, scholarly magazines, or books in the sitting room. Because Highgate is on the boundary of three boroughs—Camden, Haringey, and Islington—no library existed for the residents of Highgate, so HLSI established a subscription library in its formative years.¹⁰ Today, the library holds a collection of over 25,000 works accessible for its members and guest by appointment; its rooms are dedicated to three of Highgate’s great poets: Coleridge, Housman, and Betjeman.¹¹

Unlike most Literary and Scientific Institutions that gradually turned into professional scientific organizations at the end of the nineteenth century, HLSI is still standing today.¹² This is in thanks to “retired women who don’t mind spending their Friday afternoons stuffing envelopes.”¹³ The encouragement of members to expand their knowledge on all topics speaks to the expectations Highgate residents have for a thoughtful and intellectual community, both in and outside of HLSI. Because the Institution has lasted for a substantial period, it has amassed a

⁸ Amanda Blinkhorn, “Heavenly Highgate,” *Ham&High*, February 7, 2003.

⁹ Richard Webber and Roger Burrows, “Life in an Alpha Territory,” *Urban Studies* 53, no. 15 (November 1, 2016): 3145, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26151273>.

¹⁰ Susan Trackman, interview by author, March 5, 2020.

¹¹ Amanda Blinkhorn, “Heavenly Highgate.”

¹² Holmes and Ruston, *The Routledge Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Science*, 31.

¹³ Amanda Blinkhorn, “Heavenly Highgate.”

great deal of records and photographs documenting Highgate's history's evolution.¹⁴ So many people have come to HLSI to learn about their house that the Institution published a booklet titled "Discover the History of Your House in Highgate" in 2014. Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution ensures the needs of its members are met while simultaneously encouraging remembrance of Highgate's heritage.

Highgate Society

There is a duality in the function of the Highgate Society. While much of its resources are devoted to activities and clubs similar to the Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution, a large part of its role in Highgate's community is overseeing the planning and development of the village. Through this work, the Highgate Society was founded in 1966 when Highgate Preservation Society combined forces with the Save Highgate Action Committee to prevent government plans led by Transportation Minister Ernest Marples to route heavy northbound traffic through Highgate Hill Street, the heart of Highgate Village. From its creation, the Highgate Society's purpose has been the preservation of Highgate.¹⁵

With an attendance of over four hundred fifty at the Society's first meeting at the Highgate School, it was clear that Highgate's residents desired a group to safeguard their interests.¹⁶ As previously stated, Highgate is on the border of three boroughs, making it difficult for residents to advocate for themselves within the city of London. Therefore, "It is the Society's vital role to maintain a high profile for the village and neighbourhood with all these authorities to highlight the needs and concerns of the local community."¹⁷ After successfully diverting the

¹⁴ A great deal of these records come from residents of Highgate who "donate" old files to the Institution. When visiting the archives in March 2020, there were several file cabinets in addition to stacks of boxes—all filled with the history of Highgate.

¹⁵ Tamar Karet, "In the Beginning: The Origins and Aims of the Highgate Society," *Buzz Magazine*, 2016.

¹⁶ "Vigilant in the Village," *Ham&High*, May 6, 1966.

¹⁷ Brendan Nolan, "Highgate Society," *Alley* magazine, March 2001.

transportation crisis to nearby Archway Road, which, when walking around the area, clearly has suffered compared to the thriving shops on Highgate Hill Street, the Society focused their attention on saving the local Witanhurst mansion. London's largest private home was successfully saved in 1983, although disputes rose again in 2009, in which the Highgate Society lost their battle against redevelopment.¹⁸

Besides their work on the Witanhurst mansion, Highgate Society's Planning Committee (previously called the "Environmental Committee") protects public and private buildings from development through work with local planning authorities, and has been involved in virtually every change in the village—from encouraging a boycott of a pub chain that had purchased a local pub to submitting plans for the revitalization of Pond Square.¹⁹ In 2001, *The Evening Standard* named the Highgate Society one of the top five "amenity" societies in London, a strong indicator of the extent Highgate's heritage has been preserved.²⁰ The Planning Committee celebrated a large win in 2015 when plans to redevelop the Athlone house were scrapped. One of the hundreds of Highgate residents who supported the Society in their efforts was Monty Python star, Terry Gilliam.²¹ To ensure nothing gets past the Committee in their maintenance of Highgate's classic village feel, Highgate Society's Planning Group offers "free design surgery" for houses undergoing renovations.²²

Outside of the "formidable" Planning Committee, the Highgate Society has offered support and services for all of Highgate. Reporting on the Society's 25th anniversary in 1991,

¹⁸ Paul Erlam, "Menuhins Tune Up for Heath Battle," *Evening News*, June 11, 1973; Ed Caesar, "House of Secrets: Who Owns London's Most Expensive Mansion?" *New Yorker*, May 23, 2015.

¹⁹ Sara McConnell, "Guarding the Changes," *Evening Standard*, October 8, 1997; "Residents Square Up for Open Space Battle," *Ham&High*, November 1, 2007.

²⁰ Sara McConnell, "Guarding the Changes."

²¹ "Highgate Society Celebrates Half a Century," *Haringey People*, February-March 2017; Ben Morgan, "Python Star Helps Save Historic House," *Evening Standard*, June 9, 2015.

²² Richard Webber and Roger Burrows, "Life in an Alpha Territory," *Urban Studies* 53, no. 15 (November 1, 2016): 3151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26151273>.

local newspaper *Ham&High* wrote, “according to its members, perhaps more important than the facilities it offers is the sense of community, the village atmosphere, which the society provides. With a membership of nearly 1,000, it can claim to be representative of the area and its character.”²³ Gordon Forbes, Highgate Society's chairman in 2008, discussed programming outside of planning issues, including a Monday club for the elderly, a bridge club, coffee mornings, and [a] barn dance.” He stated, “These are good things in the village. And it's important to remember Highgate is a village.”²⁴ These types of programs are essential for maintaining the strong community a village is supposed to provide for its residents. Though the Highgate Society is a private society, it is known by all in Highgate, and currently has over 1,200 members, or approximately ten percent of the village.²⁵

Lauderdale House

Though the Lauderdale House as it functions today began in 1971, the Grade-1 listed house itself has a significant history. The tale goes that Nell Gwynn held her and Charles II's bastard son out of a window in the Lauderdale house, threatening to drop the baby if Charles did not grant him an aristocratic title. The King replied, “God save the Earl of Burford!”²⁶ The house itself was built in 1582 and was held by private owners until Sir Sidney Waterlow donated the house along with its land (now Waterlow Park) to the London Country Council. Until a fire in 1963, the house was used as a tea room for park goers. In 1978, residents of Highgate, including Highgate Society's first president, Yehudi Menuhin, came together to form the Lauderdale House Society, and the ground floor of the house was turned into an arts and education centre.

²³ Paul Waugh, “Jubilant Jubilee for N6 and High Society,” *Ham&High*, June 5, 1991.

²⁴ Tan Parsons, “Looking After High Society,” *Ham&High*, March 28, 2008, <https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/etcetera/looking-after-high-society-1-627536>.

²⁵ Although, the Highgate Society's membership policy is, “if you think you live in Highgate, you live in Highgate.”

²⁶ “A Private Escape for a Cheating Couple,” Lauderdale House, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://www.lauderdalehouse.org.uk/about-us/our-history/nell-gwynn>.

Over time, the house's programming grew to include classes, exhibitions, fairs, music events, and a café, in addition to serving as an event venue. In 1998, the house's outreach programs began, starting with a project with local primary schools.²⁷

Beginning a few years ago, the Lauderdale House Society holds an annual Heritage Weekend to encourage residents of Highgate to embrace their village's fascinating history. Highgate's 2019 Heritage Weekend had the goal to change the reputation that Highgate "doesn't like to shout about its history," while launching the "pink plaque" project to highlight the "remarkable women" who have lived in the house and Highgate.²⁸ The 2020 Heritage Festival had the Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution as one of its co-sponsors, providing valuable documents and pictures from its archives.

Saving "London's Last Village"

There is a growing divide between residents of Highgate and people who simply live in Highgate; the latter group primarily consists of the "uber-rich" looking for a high-end and sizable home that overlooks London. Influx of the uber-rich into Highgate is correlated to lack of interest in Highgate's heritage and community. Michael Hammerson, a vice president of the Highgate Society and dedicated member of the Planning Committee stated, "Highgate has always been a resort for the super-rich. But in the past the owners recognised that they were part of the local community. They had a sense of noblesse oblige. Now this is all lost. They want to be fenced off."²⁹ In accordance with Hammerson's displeasure, membership records for HLSI and Highgate Society both display few of Highgate's elite newcomers within the organizations,

²⁷ "Our History," Lauderdale House, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://www.lauderdalehouse.org.uk/about-us/our-history>.

²⁸ Harry Taylor, "Lauderdale House Heritage Weekend Set to Shout About Highgate History as 'Pink Plaques' Launched," *Ham&High*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/news/heritage/highgate-s-heritage-lauderdale-house-heritage-festival-to-launch-pink-plaque-plans-to-mark-notable-women-1-5901401>.

²⁹ Batty, David. "Fenced Off: How London's Super-Rich are Destroying the Soul of Their Community."

implying little interest in Highgate's community from outsiders who fail to appreciate the importance the town places on its history.³⁰ In addition to a growing lack of community activity, the elite's immigration into Highgate has resulted in planning disputes, most notably over the previously mentioned Witanhurst mansion and the Athlone House. Thankfully, when archives and heritage fairs fail to instruct developers the importance of Highgate's historic real estate, there is always the Planning Committee to put its foot down.

Combining the resources and efforts of the Highgate Literary & Scientific Institution, Highgate Society, and the Lauderdale House in joint projects like Highgate's Heritage Festival encourage Highgate's newer and possibly estranged residents to realize there is more to the village than its fresh air, posh Georgian real estate, and breathtaking views of central London. "Plan for the future on the past," Highgate Society's first president, Yehudi Menuhin, once advised.³¹ This recommendation is as pertinent—if not more so—as it was in 1972. The work of Highgate's societies and institutions, especially their use of history, has awarded the town the bittersweet title of "the last living village."³² Let's hope it lasts.

³⁰ Webber and Burrows, "Life in an Alpha Territory," 3148.

³¹ "'Plan Future on Past'-Menuhin," *AGM*, May 26, 1972.

³² Andrew Martin, "Model Village."

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