

### **A walk round some of Islington's villas**

This walk takes in some of central Islington's finest villas, in Canonbury and Highbury. It continues Andrew Clayton's series based on the updating of Islington's collection of Locally Listed Buildings, recently completed by a group of volunteers.

These villas, built in an intense period of activity between 1840 and 1860, are concentrated in a comparatively small area, bounded by Canonbury Road, the New River and St. Paul's Road, with a detour to Highbury Crescent. The walk gives us a chance to look at the work of two of Islington's most important Victorian developers, James Wagstaffe and Charles Havor Hill, who built many of the villas in this area, some compact and homely, others large and imposing. Islington is perhaps best known for its residential terraces, but its villas are just as important.

We begin on Upper Street, opposite the Town Hall, at No. 176. This is now a shop, perhaps originally a dwelling, converted in the 1830s or 1840s. It was occupied in the 1840s and 50s by James Wagstaffe, described in the lease as estate agent, auctioneer and surveyor. He was also an architect and developer, with a builder's yard at Highbury Corner. The upper floors are decorated with Italianate stucco window surrounds which may have been added while he occupied No. 176. Walk north along Upper Street to Canonbury Lane, through Canonbury Square and Canonbury Place to Alwyne Villas.



*A pair of Wagstaffe's Alwyne Villas.*

Wagstaffe had a development lease from the Northampton Estate for the area between Alwyne Villas and the gardens of Canonbury Park South, which had been developed earlier in the 1840s. Nos. 2 & 4 were the first of his villas, begun in 1848, and are locally listed. The remainder on this side of the road, the even numbers up to No. 16, are nationally listed Grade II. Wagstaffe usually built his villas in pairs, with grand entrances. He varied the details to give each group individual appeal. These Alwyne Villas houses are on a slightly smaller scale than those round the corner in Alwyne Road, for example, and Nos. 2 & 4 are a little plainer than their neighbours. They have two main stories, with a stucco semi-basement and dormers in the roof. They have stucco side entrances and grand front doors, with rectangular fanlights above. No 16 has an elaborate porch, perhaps added later.

At the end of the road turn left onto Alwyne Road, walking past pairs of Grade II listed Wagstaff villas on either side. Cross Willow Bridge Road, to a sequence of locally listed villas which show Wagstaffe at his grandest, Nos. 20 to 24.



*One of Wagstaffe's Alwyne Road villas.*

These show all the strengths of the James Wagstaffe Canonbury and Highbury villas. They are well proportioned, with individual detailing. The entrance bays are set back slightly, with curved stucco mouldings above. The ground floor windows have segmental pediments supported by brackets, and there is a strong cornice at roof level.

Retrace your steps to Willow Bridge Road and turn right towards Canonbury Place. Here there are two groups of locally listed Wagstaffe villas, Nos. 16 – 22 and Nos. 1 – 5. Wagstaffe developed his lease of Northumberland Estate land between 1848 and 1860. These villas come towards the end of that period and the stucco decoration has become more elaborate, particularly around the doorways. The entrances are now on the main façade, rather than recessed to the side, though this doesn't make them any less opulent.

At the junction take the second road on the right into Canonbury Park North and step a few years back to the early 1840s. Here we come to a development by Charles Havor Hill who laid out three roads, Canonbury Park North and South, and Grange Grove, and built 50 villas on them. Like Wagstaffe he offered these mainly in pairs, generously spaced, with front and back gardens. Their simplicity makes a marked contrast with the more florid and Italianate Wagstaffe villas, with no stucco round the windows, and the doorways more purely classical in their detail. The best of them are some of the most distinguished buildings on this walk.



*No. 44 Canonbury Park North*

Almost all of these Havor Hill villas are nationally Grade II listed and the locally listed houses are mainly those built under a second round of leases granted in 1850 which may have been distributed

to other builders. Nos. 49, 51 and 53 for example are more elaborately decorated than their neighbours.

Turn left at the end of Canonbury Park North into St. Paul's Road and you come to three groups of villas which rise rather gloomily behind the trees. These are of the Wagstaffe type and date, three storeys plus semi-basement, though much more sparingly decorated than those in Alwyne Road or Willow Bridge Road. They are nonetheless handsome, though you don't often get more than a glimpse of them in St. Paul's Road's busy traffic.



*Nos. 41 & 43 St. Paul's Road*

Most of the surviving terraces on the right-hand side of St. Paul's Road as you walk towards Highbury Corner are locally listed. But pass them by to get to the grandest of all Wagstaffe's villas on Highbury Crescent. The best are the first ones you come to, Nos. 7 to 12. Of these Nos. 7 and 8, and 11 and 12 are nationally listed Grade II. That leaves Nos. 9 and 10 locally listed.



*No. 9 Highbury Crescent.*

These are large semi-detached villas dating from 1848-50, developed by Wagstaffe and James Goodbody, and probably designed by Wagstaffe himself. They are generously spaced and richly decorated, leading towards Fieldway Crescent, where the pairs either side of the junction have towers. These villas show James Wagstaffe at the height of his powers, placing him securely in the list of Islington's greatest 19<sup>th</sup> century architects, along with Sir Charles Barry, Roumieu & Gough, and George Truefitt. Charles Havor Hill perhaps made less of an impact, but No. 44 Canonbury Park North (illustrated) is the building that leaves the strongest impression at the end of this stroll round some of Islington's villas.

You can either return to Upper Street via Fieldway Crescent and Holloway Road, or go back the way you came to Highbury Corner.