

From Caledonian Road to Devonian Road

This walk begins at Pentonville Prison, built in 1842, to a new prison design by Captain Joshua Jebb, of the Royal Engineers. The main body of the building, which you can't see behind the walls, is Grade II listed by Historic England, but not the Governor's House which lies outside. The outer walls and gatehouses were probably designed by Sir Charles Barry, who built the Houses of Parliament and the Reform Club among many other buildings.



The Governor's House, The Drive, Pentonville Prison

The Governor's House has a strong moulded cornice below a high parapet wall, with a moulded top. The windows have kept their twelve-light glazing bars. It's a fine building, clearly not a pattern book job by a local builder. If its link to Sir Charles Barry was clearer perhaps it might have been included in the Heritage England listing.

The area behind the prison towards Barnsbury was called Copenhagen Fields. Its development was blighted by the prison, and was made worse by the building of the North London Railway along the south side of Arundel Square in 1850, then again by the building of the Metropolitan Meat Market in 1855. So, to the north of Offord Road the new housing was aimed at less grand inhabitants than the newly arrived Barnsbury gentry, and built for the Victorian lower middle classes and artisans.

One of the remaining examples of these houses is in Hides Street, built a little later than the prison. These houses show how closely packed some of these Victorian communities were between Liverpool Road and Caledonian Road, before they were cleared and rebuilt in the 1970s and 80s.



1-4 Hides Street.

These double fronted cottages are surprisingly humble for Islington. There are four of them, some in better condition than others.

We then set off for something much grander, Arundel Square, built bit by bit on an area known as Pocock's Fields. The Pococks were land speculators who bought up pockets of land in north London as it was developed, some as far away as Kilburn. This was the last of the Islington squares to be built and you can see from the north side, with elaborate Italianate detailing and Kensington style porches, that the builders had ambitions. The North London railway cut through the south side in 1850 and the east and west terraces are smaller and less ambitious, though with nice detailing. It barely feels like a square when you walk into it.



28 and 29 Arundel Square.

Walk out of the square along Arundel Place to Offord Road and turn right to a new housing development called the Barnsbury Complex. This contains one of the finest of the London School Board buildings of the Edwardian era. It was built between 1902 and 1905 by T.J Bailey and his team of architects, to a very individual Queen Anne Baroque style. The building of these schools in the 1890s and 1900s was a great municipal achievement and shows the shift from religious and charitable education to local authority schools. Boys and girls have different entrances and the main gateway onto Offord Road is magnificent. The Edwardian blocks are hard to see in full because the new development of which they are now part (2009-10) is gated and locked. It is worth walking round to the rear entrance in Barnsbury Park where you can see between the modern blocks one of the best of the old school buildings, a fine Edwardian reproduction of a Queen Anne country house.



The former Barnsbury Girls School from Barnsbury Place

Walk across Liverpool Road and down to Upper Street. Go towards the Angel from the corner with Cross Street and you pass along a parade of shops starting at number 292. These were all built after 1886, when this section of Upper Street was demolished to widen the road and a new parade of shops was built with living space above.

Their occupants over the years show the varied economic and political life of Islington since the 1880s. Number 293 was a laundry from around 1900 until 1970, losing the battle against the domestic washing machine. Number 295 was for 70 years the offices of the Islington South West Labour Party, from 1974 Islington South and Finsbury. (The local Conservative Party headquarters was for many years in a locally listed former chapel in nearby Furlong Road). Number 297 was a dairy from 1900 until the Second World War. Camden Publishing was founded in number 323 in 1904. Others included a perambulator maker, a wholesale cigar merchant and a book edge gilder. Most are now estate agents, restaurants and cafes.

Cross south over Essex Road and down St. Peter's Street and you come to the final stage of this walk. St. Peter's church itself is Grade II listed, built in 1834-5 by Sir Charles Barry in a plain Gothic style, with corner pinnacles. It clearly proved too plain for the parishioners, who quickly took on the local architects Roumieux and Gough to tart it up. This they did (1842-4) in a fantastical Gothic manner with a spindly tower, flying buttresses and Early English porch and transepts. But just before this, they built the next-door rectory and school in Devonian Road (1837).



36 Devonian Road

This is an extraordinary mixture of Victorian classical tradition design with Tudor windows and depressed arches, all dominated by pilasters rising to chimney stacks in the Vanbrugh Hawksmoor Baroque style. Behind is the former schoolroom, now a law centre. What was originally the main entrance would do justice to a Hawksmoor church, an extraordinary concoction of Baroque motifs. Roumieux and Gough clearly impressed St. James's parishioners with this building. Within a year or so they were embellishing the Sir Charles Barry Church by its side.

So, we have walked from a perhaps Barry prison governor's house in Caledonian Road, to a not quite Barry vicarage and schoolroom in Devonian Road. But he wouldn't have minded. By 1837 he had started work on the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament.