

A History Of Priory Court (Part 1) The Beginning

What's In A Name?

The question that I have been asked most often about Priory Court is what has it got to do with a Priory? The answer to this is that, it once that it stood on the site of a large house that was the Walthamstow residence of the Priors of Holy Trinity, who were the ecclesiastical lords of the Rectory Manor from 1108 to 1532 when the Manor was surrendered by the last Prior, Nicholas Hancocke, to Henry VIII. Indeed, in 1532, part of what is now called Forest Road (Formerly Clay Street) was called Priorstreete.

The Priory Estate

The Priory was an early eighteenth century large mansion that stood on the site of the present Fire Brigade Station in Forest Road. It was almost opposite a large house called The Elms and the grounds extended from Higham Hill Road on the west to the Winns Estate on the east. The estate was bounded on the north by the Green Pond Farm. The mansion was an early eighteenth century building. In 1836, it comprised the house, gardens and stabling and several meadows. The estate was sold for development at the beginning of the 20th century.

Development Of The Estate.



Reproduced by courtesy of Batholomew Maps, the map sections show the Priory Estate area in Bartholomews maps of 1908 & 1940. The 1940 map shows Walthamstow Avenue FC and the area of the Priory Court development.

Part of the estate was developed in 1900 as the much loved Walthamstow Avenue Football club whose ground was situated in Green Pond Road adjacent to Priory Court. Waltham Forest Council developed public housing in the Countess Road and Millfield Avenue area after the end of WW1 and the Warner Company developed the Winns Estate between 1901 and 1930.

The area presently occupied by the Priory Court estate seems to have been a virtually derelict piece of land until developed by Walthamstow Council. It was low lying and boggy and there was a small brook that ran across the land.

The Higham Hill Common Allotments



At the end of Green Pond Road and adjacent to Priory Court are the Higham Hill allotments. Although they are not shown on the Bartholomew 1908 and 1940 maps, these are believed to be on land that once was part of the Higham Hill common and these still today form part of the boundary of Priory Court.

Courtesy of Google Maps. The picture left shows an aerial view of the present day Priory Court estate and the Higham Hill Common allotments.

The Priory Court Estate

The Priory Court Estate was begun in 1946 and comprised 414 flats mainly in six-storey blocks. This was a departure from traditional municipal housing, for, with little undeveloped land left, in Walthamstow's post-war schemes, flats and maisonettes predominated. Surprisingly, these blocks did not have names but were identified by a letter of the alphabet. The estate also had an interesting spiral numbering system that presumably was initiated by the Royal Mail. This often caused great confusion to visitors who didn't know the estate.

The New Residents

The first four blocks were occupied in 1947/8. The people who moved in came from different parts of London. Many of these came from East London, which had lost huge amounts of housing as a result of WWII bombing. The flats were considered to be very modern as they had built in kitchens with refrigerators and had generous sized rooms. The building works continued until all 20 blocks were finished in c1949.

One of the new residents was *Marion Cunningham neé Proudfoot* who tells us:

“In the Summer of 1949 I recall as a young child going along with my mother and grandma to view the new flat that had been allocated to my family by the Walthamstow Borough Council, as it was then known.

For some months my parents, elder brother and myself had been living in one room of a very large house near the Water Works in Forest Road in what was known as a ‘Halfway House’ accommodation. This term I presume was for families who were in need of being re-housed for various reasons. We were there because my mother believed she had cause to disagree with our Landlord and he had given her a notice to quit, so we had to leave.

I still remember my mother's tears of joy when a letter arrived to say that we had been offered one of the new modern luxurious flats that were being built on a new estate called Priory Court. Even as a six year old I felt the anticipation and excitement as we walked through the enormous barrier gates that had been erected in the high wire fence surrounding the grounds whilst building work was still in progress. I can remember looking in awe at these magnificent towering buildings each five stories high and as I recall, all painted in different pastel shades.

We were directed by a workman to N. Block which was now completed and ready for occupation. Our flat was no. 242 on the second floor. Neat lawns were being laid out flanking an attractive path that lead to heavy glass doors and into the main entrance of the building. Here were situated toilets, laundry rooms with washing machines, spin dryers and gas drying cabinets for the residents use, all to the amazement of mother and grandma whom I am sure had never seen such wondrous washing facilities before. There was a lift to whisk people up to their required floor, coal could actually be stored in a cupboard on the landing outside our front door and shovelled out via a chute that was concealed in the hallway inside the flat. (Some years later my brother had a very frightening experience when he got stuck in this chute after getting himself locked out of the flat)

There were three bedrooms, a bathroom with hot running water, no more dragging in a tin bath from the garden and filling it with water from the copper, "What a blessing" Grandma had said. There was even a separate toilet which meant no more using the outside privie or having to use a 'goesunder' at night as we had often done before.

The fitted kitchen was absolutely wonderful according to the grown ups, the delight of having every modern convenience of the day! A fridge, an electric cooker, a sink with a double drainer and even a serving hatch which led into a spacious lounge where one wall fronting the flat was mostly windows.

Glass doors led from the kitchen and the lounge onto a balcony where there were window boxes and in the following years, competitions were held to see who had the prettiest. Here on the balcony was the fascination of seeing all our household rubbish disappearing down a chute to the large bins hidden below and out of sight.

And so it was we moved into Priory Court.

Then in 1959 my parents, Jack and Milly Proudfoot had the chance to move to Canvey Island and I was heart-broken at leaving Priory Court. I had made many friends there and my special friend was Maureen Penn (now Shanks) and to this day we have kept in touch and remain best friends.



Just a few years back I returned to Priory Court, now a great grandmother and oh, how sad it was to see how it has all changed. N. Block has since been demolished and bungalows are now in it's place but I have my memories and thanks to this wonderful site I can now share them with other people and give them an insight as to how the story of Priory Court began...."

Picture left is of former Prime Mister and Walthamstow MP - Clement Attlee campaigning in Priory Court c1950

Old Peoples Quadrangle & Bungalows

In addition to the blocks of flats, there was a small separate development of bungalows for elderly and infirm people. These formed a quadrangle around a landscaped and planted area.

There were also a few bungalows that were situated either side of the shops.

Abotts House

This was a small block four storey block that was built in the early 1960's and comprised flats on three floors. In design it reflected its period and was completely different to the original Priory Court flat.



It was externally and internally refurbished by the *Mulalley Company* who provided new kitchens, bathrooms, heating system, upgraded the electrical system and replaced doors with residents in situ.

The Upgraded Abotts House

The Soviet Union Builds Its Own Priory Courts

Not long after Priory Court was built, it was visited by representatives from the Soviet Union. Like Britain, the Soviet Union had sustained severe damages from the effects of WWII and they were looking at how different countries had approached the reconstruction of their countries after the war. Apparently they liked what they saw and estates similar to Priory Court were built in some of the Moscow suburbs.

Communal Facilities

The blocks were built on stilts and each had 20 flats. Under each of the blocks were communal laundries and workshops on the ground floor. The laundries were provided because not many people owned washing machines and the workshops were fitted out with workbenches and other equipment used for household repairs. At the rear of the blocks on the ground floor were individual store sheds where tenants could store prams and cycles etc. The flats were constructed of concrete and had metal door frames and windows. This made them rather cold to live in and it wasn't long before window frames rusted with condensation and let in draughts. Heating originally was via a solid fuel open fire in the living rooms and a single electric radiator in one of the bedrooms. Each flat had its own balcony which had a metal rubbish chute.

Internal Communal Landings & Lifts

Each block had two lifts at opposite ends of the block that each served a stack of 10 flats. These were arranged two to a floor. Every flat had a coal storage cupboard on the communal

landing and if this wasn't kept locked a small child could obtain access to the flat through this cupboard

Heating & Credit Ratings

Heating was often a problem as the following extract from the Priory Court Estate newsletter "The Link" dated April 1962:

"One of the trials and tribulations of living in Priory Court is that if you live on the third floor or above you have had it where delivery of coal is concerned. Even if your order is accepted (and many firms bluntly refused to serve you), not for you the usual delivery within a week or so - more like a wait of 6 or 7 weeks. That Goliath among coke factors, the North Thames Gas Board, are no better - and if you telephone to enquire or complain the only satisfaction you will get is a chat to a tape recorder. [...] Yes, I know we could all change to gas or electricity, but I prefer a coke fire and it doesn't seem much to ask in this age that at least one coal and coke merchant could move with the times and arrange to serve the ever growing number of families who have to live in flats."

At the time that this was written, Walthamstow Council were in the process of persuading tenants to replace their living room solid fuel open fires with gas or electric fires. As you will realise from the quote, not all of the residents wanted to replace their solid fuel open fires with gas or electric fires. Priory Court was one of a number of Walthamstow Council Estates that had a 'bad' credit rating and many suppliers were reluctant to deliver to estate residents.

In the 1970's, in the winter, in the bedrooms of our flat, it was commonplace to have to scrape ice off the inside of the windows. We often supplemented the heating by putting the gas oven on and leaving the cooker door open. Of an evening we all huddled around a sofa in front of the coal fire

Estate Communal Facilities



The estate had a lot of green space and the blocks were separated by grassed areas. There was a tennis court and rose garden with seats and separate grassed communal areas. The residents of the estate had been housed within a comparatively short time period (1946-1949) and many had similar circumstances i.e - young children, a similar economic situation and similar life styles.

Picture left c1973 from my album taken outside of P Block. The community centre is the low building in the back right hand side of the picture. The shops were just passed the bungalows in the rear left of the picture

Community Life

Resident *Lily Evans* remembers a great sense of community existed. She and other mothers used to watch the children playing rounders and she says that "It didn't matter which window you looked out of from the flat, there were always children around somewhere, playing". Other focal points for meeting people were the Community Centre, the laundrette and the shops which were then on the estate: a butcher, a grocery shop, chemist and newsagent. Many women got to know their neighbours when taking their children to and from the local schools (*Ascham & Winns Schools*)

Priory Court Residents & Community Association (PCRCA)

From very early in the history of the estate, *PCRCA* played an important part in the development of the community. The estate housed a large number of young families who shared a common economic background and life styles and many of them had previously lived in cramped overcrowded conditions.

Maureen Shanks neé Penn is the oldest daughter of *Tom and Ivy Penn* who moved on to the estate in 1949 with their two daughters aged 9 years and 3 weeks and their 5 year old son. She tells me that after they had settled in and made friends with their neighbours, *Tom Penn* got together with *Harry Pattle*, Councillor *David Weinberg*, *James Proudfoot* and other interested people who were interested in forming a tenants association.

PCRCA Is Formed

They met at William Morris school in Gainsford Road and formed the Association. In 1951 this was called the *Priory Court Residents & Community Association*. They appointed block representatives for each block. These block representatives were the primary point of contact between tenants and the Association. They collected the 6d a month membership subscriptions (Today 2½p) delivered the Association's newsletters to the residents and reported any tenant problems to the Association. Long term *PCRCA* stalwart, *Joan Earle* was a block representative for a period and reckons that out of the 400 flats, 395 were members.

Fund raising dances were held in the William Morris school hall, and fetes were held on the spare piece of land in the middle of Priory Court. Representations were made to Walthamstow Council concerning the need for a dedicated Community Centre and this was built and opened by Lord and Lady Valentine McEntee in 1953.

The Community Centre



The community Centre was run by the tenants association and at the beginning was just a single hall. Many activities took place in the centre: Keep Fit, Women's Groups, Whist Drives, a Youth club, Senior Citizen's club, a morning Toddlers club and daily Pensioners' lunches etc. The Association used to put in a Priory Court float for the Walthamstow Carnival every year and provided several stalls for the Walthamstow annual fete

The picture left shows some of the characters on PCRCA's Alice In Wonderland float. Those visible Include: Alice & the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, the White Rabbit and some of the playing cards who marched alongside the float collecting money from the spectators. There is also a dormouse who is hidden in the picture.

Liquor Licence & Bar

In 1971, funding for these activities became difficult and a liquor licence was applied for so that a bar could be set up. The community centre was expanded until eventually it comprised: A main hall that could be partitioned by using a large folding screen. A large stage (Where a local drama club performed regular plays) A large store/dressing room at the rear of the stage area.. A bar and back bar area and a kitchen.

PCRCA committee members were anxious that the Community Centre would not become a cheap drinking club and bar prices were set at the prevailing local level. Although *PCRCA* had a full Liquor Licence the decision was made that the bar would only be open for 5 out of the 14 available sessions. In the same vein it was decided that, although they would be a good money earner, there would not be gambling machines on the premises.

The bar revenue provided a basis for more facilities to be provided to the community and enabled even more social activities with the formation of Male and Female Darts teams, a Camera club, Bingo, Disco and live entertainment family evenings and a new Youth Club. Membership of *PCRCA* was not confined to Priory Court residents and there were a number of people from outside of the estate who were members and took an active part in running the Association.

During the 1970's the Community Centre was used extensively to provide social and other facilities to Priory Court residents and for other local people. It operated seven days a week and was only closed for a half day per week to allow proper cleaning of the Centre. (Appropriately long term resident, pensioner and *PCRCA* founder - *Harry Pattle* - undertook the cleaning) Every morning there was a privately run Children's Group that was followed by a Waltham Forest Council Pensioners Lunch Club. Most afternoons were given over to Pensioner Clubs. Mon-Thursday evenings hosted different clubs e.g. Darts, Drama, Camera & Youth Club and Friday evening was the venue for very popular Bingo club.



estate in the 1970's.

On three out of four Saturday nights *PCRCA* provided family entertainment that were a mixture of free discos and live entertainment. This entertainment varied between live bands such as *Mike Berry & the Outlaws*, the ever popular *Chas & Dave* and Old Time Music Hall. One Saturday per month was reserved for the use by individual members for family events. Sunday evening was a family social event with a fun Bingo session.

The picture left taken from P Block shows part of the

An Overview of Priory Court 1950 -2000

1950's - The Austerity Years

Although, the 1950's were years of austerity, Priory Court predominantly was a young estate. It was full of young families from similar economic and social backgrounds and many close and lasting friendships were made between tenants and their children.

1960's - A Time of Stability

In many ways, the 1960's was a time of stability on the estate. The national economic situation had improved and there was much local employment available. Children who had moved in onto the estate with their families the 1960's, were now nearly grown up and were looking to form new relationships with others and move away from home. For many residents, the Priory Court Residents & Community Association provided a social forum that cemented community spirit.

1970's - Years of Change

The situation changed quite radically in the 1970's. This was a period of many changes on the estate. There were now many households where the children had grown up and moved away leaving only their parents in occupation. Numbers of residents had transferred into smaller accommodation in other areas and many of those still living on the estate were anxious to be transferred elsewhere. This process accelerated in the end of the 1960's and beginning of the 1970's when a new local housing estate (Chingford Hall) was built and many Priory Court tenants moved to this estate. This new situation, where Priory Court estate was absorbing a new generation of people often with different backgrounds and lifestyles, tended to create tensions between some of the older residents and the new residents. Adding pressure to this situation was the obvious continuing physical deterioration of many of the properties.

1980's - The Estate in Decline

By the 1980's, it was apparent that all was not well on the estate. For a number of reasons that included the loss of activists and the development of alternative social facilities, the Priory Court Residents & Community Association was in decline and was becoming a sports and social club. The deterioration of estate properties had now reached the point where it was imperative for the Council to undertake urgent remedial works.

1990's - Remedial Action is Undertaken

In the early 1990's, the Council faced situation where they knew that they needed to take urgent action to address the repair problems but they didn't have the money undertake the work. The government were not prepared to make extra finance available to Local Authorities for such works and had made it clear that their preferred option was for local authorities to obtain funding was via a quango called the Housing Corporation. This organization could make funding available providing that the Local Authority entered into a partnership with a private sector developer or social housing landlord to carry out the work. Accordingly, Waltham Forest Council entered into an agreement with the Circle 33 Housing Trust to obtain the finance to carry out the works.....