

A HISTORY OF BELLEVUE GARDEN MANSIONS

289 – 307 Clapham Road • Stockwell • Lambeth • London SW



A fascinating but forgotten detail from the past is that the buildings in the distinctive ten-block Victorian terrace on Clapham Road in Stockwell were once known by a rather poetic name - **Bellevue Garden Mansions**.

In today's always-in-a-rush, everything-as-short-as-possible modern era, the original name of the grand houses has fallen into disuse. But the buildings we live in have a distinguished past and are now considered a unique part of local architectural and design heritage. So we have revived and adapted that original name for our community association name.

You might like to know some of the history of the buildings and the name - drawn from deep research in local archives.

The buildings originated in 1839. This was just two years into the Victorian era.

The starting point was the construction of three imposing mansions along a short section of what we now know as Clapham Road. Throughout the 19th Century and half of the 20th Century - up to 1954 - the short stretch of the main road on which we live was titled "Bellevue Gardens".

The Victorian (1837-1901) and Edwardian (1901-1910) eras and their aftermath were periods of great growth throughout London. Stockwell in the Borough of Lambeth evolved into an elegant middle-class suburb. In the eight decades between the 1840s and the first twenty years of the new century there was continual construction. And over those years the three original houses on that stretch of road were slowly joined by seven more buildings of similar height and style.

At the start of the Great War in 1914, a project started by which all ten buildings became integrated and transformed into a single elegant terrace - spanning the entire one tenth of a mile between Grantham Road to the north and Clitheroe Road to the south. There was considerable refurbishment work put into the entire row of ten buildings - incorporating the ethos of the then-flourishing design style known as the "Arts and Crafts Movement".

(The Arts and Crafts Movement was an international trend in the decorative and fine arts that began in Britain and flourished in Europe and America broadly between 1880 and 1920. The movement championed traditional craftsmanship using simple forms and often used medieval, romantic, or folk styles of decoration.)

The restoration of the ten buildings was completed in 1916. To commemorate this the architects placed a simple salute noting the year of the project's completion on the frontage of the central building of the terrace. Which is why you see the year "1916" proclaimed in the large oval-shaped façade at the very top of the building that spans Numbers 299 and 301.

In addition to the work on the buildings, a verdant floral area was created between the houses and the main thoroughfare. So when it was determined that there ought to be a new collective name for these ten buildings - the natural choice was Bellevue Garden Mansions.

But the street name that inspired the building's handsome designation then came under threat from faceless bureaucrats. The Ministry of Transport Act of 1919 ordained the renaming of many major British roads. And in 1923 the London-to-Portsmouth Road that ran through Stockwell under a variety of names - became the less poetic "A3". The one-and-a-half-mile stretch of that A3 road that ran from Kennington Oval to Clapham North (just half-a-mile from Clapham Common) was renamed rather bluntly "Clapham Road". However - acquiescing to the strong popular demand of our antecedents as residents - our section of the A3 succeeded in retaining the name "Bellevue Gardens". And the ten blocks that comprised Bellevue Garden Mansions had street addresses of 7 to 16 Bellevue Gardens.

But 31 years later the denizens of dull uniformity finally crushed local sentiment. The Metropolitan Borough of Lambeth Act 39 Part 2 of 1954 ordained: *"Will you please note that the London County Council have an order dated 9th April 1954 made by them under the provisions of section 6 and 11 of the above mentioned act which will take effect from and including the 1st June 1954, assigned the name Clapham Road to the street known as Bellevue Gardens, abolish the subsidiary name Bellevue Gardens and number the building therein as Numbers 289, 291, 293, 295, 297, 299, 301, 303, 305 and 307 Clapham Road."* By such bulldozing tactics much of the local colour of the area was extinguished.

However, the Bellevue Garden Mansions terrace of ten grand buildings continued to be highly-regarded for its neo-classical architecture. And it became home to some prominent entertainers and artists during the decades between the 1920s and 1970s.

In the mid-1970s, there was a downturn in the area's fortunes. and the buildings came under the supervision of the local council. Initially the local authority paid little heed to the distinctive architectural and design qualities of the buildings. There was a grim twenty-year period when the magnificent Victorian interiors of many of the apartments were stolen or vandalized.

Fortunately a revival eventually came about - and Lambeth Council refurbished most of the blocks - giving the buildings some of the respect and attention they were owed. In 1997 the Council sold the ten mansion blocks to a for-profit property conglomerate.

There are now 62 apartments that are home to a mixture of owner-occupiers who own long-term leases - and to many rental tenants. Some of the residents have lived in the building for over half a century.

As of 2024 that company has a scheme to completely demolish all ten Victorian mansions and parlay the 4.7 acres of land into 650 far more profitable "residential units"

All of us residents are guardians of this magnificent Victorian terrace imbued with over 180 years of London history.

Bellevue Garden Mansions is listed by "Historic England" - the British public body tasked with protecting the historical environment of England - and by the "Greater London Historic Environment Record" which fulfills a similar role for London.

The last word on the buildings goes to Douglas Black - Head of Conservation & Urban Design for the London Borough of Lambeth:

"Bellevue Garden Mansions is certainly something of a rarity - we don't have any other examples where a Victorian terrace has been successfully refurbished in an Arts and Crafts style. It may well warrant inclusion on the Local Heritage List."

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