

Princedale Road from the 1960s
Mary Harris. July 1990

John and I were married in 1960 and we bought, or rather acquired a mortgage on 31 Princedale Road in 1961 for £5,760 plus another two thousand for updating plumbing and wiring, and installing central heating, a condition of our mortgage. It was the top of what we could afford.

We chose the neighbourhood by putting a compass point on John's office in the City and drawing a reasonable travelling circle round it because we didn't want him to commute. I had recently returned from university in Nigeria, where I was the only white undergraduate and where I had read a lot of African history in addition to the subject I was studying, and John was still recovering from being a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese in the Far East in WW2. This is why we rejected advice from all sorts of people not to move into an area where there had so recently been race riots. My instinct was that these had not originated in the West Indian community and John knew a lot about human suffering and being on the wrong end of conflict. Anyway we liked the neighbourhood, which was more friendly than the grander parts of a borough where John's family had lived for at least 3 generations. There was a local park and school (we had one baby and were intending to have another), good transport and a pub opposite - the Prince of Wales. There was also Mrs Carolan's shop on the corner of Princedale and Queensdale Roads and Monty Wimbourne's general ironmongery store on the corner of Princedale Road and Princes Place. In between was a café that was very popular with lorry drivers. Directly behind Monty's was the film studio where they made Blow Up and I remember Monty being very nervous because the film company had asked him not to pull the chain because the noise of his flushing could be heard on set. Further on down Princes Place was a row of beautiful back gardens and I remember one in particular where a man grew the most wonderful dahlias - a real specialist. Further up the road on the right there was a row of shops including Mr Benton's shoe shop, a butcher (at one time) an electrician and the best fish and chip shop in London. This is the row where Release was.

We moved in on a Saturday, into 3 rooms at first because our money had run out and from then on it was going to be DiY as we did up a room at a time. The baby slept in the bathroom. Our house still had its wooden window shutters so curtains were not a priority and for the first year or so we got out of bed into shoes until we had saved for carpets. The pub had an extension that first night and we lay in bed, listening to the piano and the singing and wondering what we had done. The answer was simple; join them, well not that night but we always intended to become regulars. Most of the Prince of Wales windows were the original etched glass in those days, but gradually over the years we would hear a crash as another window pane became victim of a fight. It was a good pub, full of locals and it also had a jug bar so John would sometimes go over for a jug for supper. It was also used by people who came from the naval establishment that was then in the building of the police station in Sirdar Road. The police used the pub that is now the Academy wine bar on the corner of Penzance Street but it was a Watney's pub then and we didn't like Red Barrel so we never used it. But living opposite a pub became expensive so John took to making our own beer, which was very good.

Further down Princedale Road towards Holland Park Avenue, on our side of the road were a mixture of people who had lived there a long time and recently moved young couples like ourselves. Immediately next door at 33 lived Mrs Powell with her daughter and son in law, John and Joan Lowe. On the other side Coral MacDonald lived at number 29 and always had a house full of musicians so we used to get free concerts through the wall as they rehearsed. The back garden wall between us was low so four children who appeared at Corals' for a while, used to hop into our garden while our two hopped into theirs. John built a swing in theirs and a sand pit in ours for all of them.

It is difficult for those who know that 'posh terrace' in Princedale Road now to realise just how scruffy the road was then. But the big difference that does not show now, is that we all bought our houses as homes, for settling into a neighbourhood and raising a family. We did not refer to our homes as 'properties', buy them simply as investments and move out again as soon as we had made a profit. We intended to put our feet down and live there and we did, apart from 1963 - 1965, when John's company sent us overseas. That was a big problem, because our house was not in a lettable state and prices were beginning to rise in the area so we knew that if we sold it, we could not possibly afford to buy it back in two years time. For a few months we worked like fury to get it into a lettable state, and I remember sitting on the floor sewing bits of carpet together the night before we left.

In the early 60s there were few cars (we drove John's clapped-out van bought because it could hold a cricket bag) and our front doors were open so that children played together in the street. We liked it that way. I remember making a large dalek out of cardboard, with lights that could be switched on an off from the inside and a pea shooter arm. For a while I was a popular local Mum as various children took turns to exterminate passers by. The corner of Princedale and Queensdale Roads was dangerous though because cars used to come down Princedale and turn right into Queensdale, their near-side wheels actually cutting the pavement outside Mrs Carolan's. We got used to the squeal of breaks. This was years before the barrier was built across the bottom of Walmer Road and the route was a rat run that cut out the traffic in Ladbroke Grove and Holland Park Avenue.

Where Crossways now stands there was another terrace like ours where a man we got to know in Monty's was doing his own DiY like we were. But the whole terrace was purchased by compulsory order and he got no compensation because there was something wrong with his damp proof course. We were very scared for a while that the same would happen to our terrace because we were still doing major things to our house and there were plenty of technicalities that could be held against us in a compulsory order. Later, when Crossways were built, the council extended the pavement outside it and planted trees there. When John asked why they had done this, he was told that local residents had been consulted and said they wanted it. John called on all the houses and flats that surrounded the area and could not find a single resident who had said they wanted it. Council attitudes to consultation on planning matters has changed now and there is a bit more transparency, though many of us remain rather cynical.

Our house had two coal cellars under the pavement and we had half a ton of smokeless coal delivered into one of them soon after we moved in. Before the clean air act came in, our first winter was very smoggy and we could not see our car parked about 5 yards from the sitting room window. We didn't discover that the floor under the cellar contained a second U bend, between the road and the one our builder had checked when he checked our drains, until the second bend caved in under the weight of the coal, and our drains backed up into what we were intending to become our dining room. Since John had flu that weekend, I shovelled half a ton of coal from one cellar to the other one. We were very lucky to find, via Monty, a sewer man who did not mind digging out the second U bend by hand: there was no room in the cellar to swing a pick in a space that was also far too small for any of the mechanical diggers of the day. When the council came to relay paving stones in the street, he used to lay a thick layer of polythene under the sand overnight and replace the sand, so that when the workmen returned in the morning they didn't see it and just laid the paving stones on top. That way our cellar was dry and John began to store his beer and wine in it.

We did not notice the Nazis at first. Their shop front didn't reveal anything to begin with. It just looked dirty and closed. But one day very offensive things began to appear in their window; a huge swastika, copies of Mein Kampf, and I particularly remember a spine-chilling notice saying "Hitler was right". We were as angry as any of the locals who had given their all to fight in the last war. Sometimes people would come out of the pub on a Saturday night, walk up the road, see the swastika and throw the nearest hard object through the window. We then had to watch the police protecting them from us, which enraged us further. As the Nazis became a more aggressive presence, demonstrations against them began and I remember one evening seeing people coming down the road collecting empty milk bottles from doorsteps. We put up the shutters and sat tight. Another day, there was a lot of publicity because Colin Jordan was going to marry and mingle his blood with his bride's on the 'altar of naziism'. A big crowd collected to boo the happy couple and in the middle of it all came a coach load of elderly women on an outing, whose driver had got lost. The police at first thought that they were demonstrators and it took a while to sort it all out. Mr Benton, who ran the shoe shop next door to the nazis could not get house insurance any more. People used to come up Pottery Lane which runs behind both houses and throw things through the windows, hitting the wrong one.

I remember a comment about the 'altar of naziism' from the Hoover man who once came to fix my washing machine. The nazis had called him to fix their vacuum cleaner which was standing in the middle of an empty room with a huge picture of Hitler on the wall. The Hoover man said that he was not going to get down on his knees in front of that thing, to be told that if he didn't repair the hoover in that room Jordan and co would complain to Hoover and have him sacked. I asked him what he did and enjoyed his response. "I turned my back on the picture, took down my trousers and bent down to mend the hoover."

A lot of us who lived in Princedale Road at that time were very aware not only of the nazis but of the condition of local housing, particularly in the area of the Portobello market, where I shopped regularly and still do. We knew about the jerry building because that is how our house was and John and I had bought it from a couple who were running it as a lodging house. And we knew about Rackman and were as angry about him as we were about the nazi message coming out the house up the road. A neighbour who we knew well then because his children were the same age as ours, was one of the people who worked to set up what became the Notting Hill Housing Trust and a lot of us were supporters who helped with fundraising. I remember being angry that neighbours in Norland Square were getting council grants for replacing their perfectly adequate railings with some of the original style, while on the corner of Princedale Road and Penzance Place was a house newly done up by the GLC (I think) as short-term accommodation for people without homes at all. I have been angry about the disparity between the rich and the poor of the borough ever since.

We talked long and hard about how we could get rid of the nazis. I am not too sure how it all came about but Judge Clerk who lived in Norland Square said he would find out what could be done and one day the prosecution of the Nazis began on the grounds that they were running a quasi-military organisation. One of the people called to give evidence was Monty Wimbourne from whom we had bought all our DiY and garden materials since we moved in, so we knew him and his wife Eileen well. Monty had sold the nazis the fertiliser from which bombs could be made, so he was given a hostile roasting by the nazi's defence lawyers. They attacked Monty on the grounds that since his real name was Weinbaum and not Wimbourne, and since he was Jewish, his evidence was not valid. Monty was confronted by whatever horror he had escaped from to live peacefully in England, and it broke him. Soon after the case, Monty and Eileen shut up shop, moved out of London and Monty died. I have always laid that at the door of those horrible people whom we were all so glad to be finally rid of.

As Holland Park Avenue and the neighbourhood went up in the world, we in Princedale Road found ourselves between 2 conservation areas which John rather rudely called the "Nice for Norland Club" and "Nice for Ladbroke Club". It appeared that both were happy to use our road as their service road, for parking and for the back entrance to a succession of café's and shops in Holland Park Avenue. The bottom of Princedale Road is one-sided in that the houses opposite our terrace are actually the backs and the gardens of houses in Portland Road. This meant that the houses in Portland Road also had garages, opening into Princedale Road, which added to our service nature while adding hugely to the value of the houses in Portland Road. There was a car dealer in Holland Park Avenue which used to annoy us all by using the road to store their unsold cars. This was before parking control came in. They would wait until we had gone, then park their unlicensed, untaxed cars, filling the road so there was no space for us to come home to, and just leave them there until they were cleaned up to go into the showroom. Eventually I wrote to the police enclosing a photograph and a few days later the road filled with policemen and all the showroom cars disappeared.

On the western corner of Princedale Road and Holland Park Avenue, where the rug shop now is, was Atkinson's Batteries when we first moved in. It sold car parts and did a lot of trade with the garage where Princes Yard now is. Shops on that corner never lasted long. I remember a bank at one stage, and even a bit of Biba but there were others, which I have forgotten. Pushing a pram down that part of the road was always difficult because none of the side entrances into it (Norland Place and the garage) had pavement edge slopes, and the pavement on the other side of the road was not wide enough. It amuses me that only now, when I am pushing a shopping trolley 50 years later, has the council thought to slope the pavement edges.

Holland Park Avenue, the bit that is now trendily called 'Holland Park Village' really was a bit of a village then. Lidgates was always there and David Lidgate and John used to talk rugger. The pharmacy, now completely rebuilt, was Starkey's the chemist with the Post Office in the back, where there were traditional chemist's bottles full of green and blue liquids in the windows and where Ruth looked after our bumps and bruises. There was another garage too where Tesco now is. I can't remember the other shops but we used to buy our veg from Ginger, who was just round the corner from the Avenue into Portland Road. He later moved to the bottom of Clarendon Road where there is still a greengrocer. I moved to Treadgold Street in 1994 when John had to go into sheltered care (the PoW experience again). He died just before Christmas 2000. But I did not mind leaving a neighbourhood which had lost its community feel and whose row of shops by then contained two patisseries that sold single pieces of chocolate cake for what seemed to me to be the price of a whole meal out in a pub.