KINFAUNS ROAD, GOODMAYES, IG3:

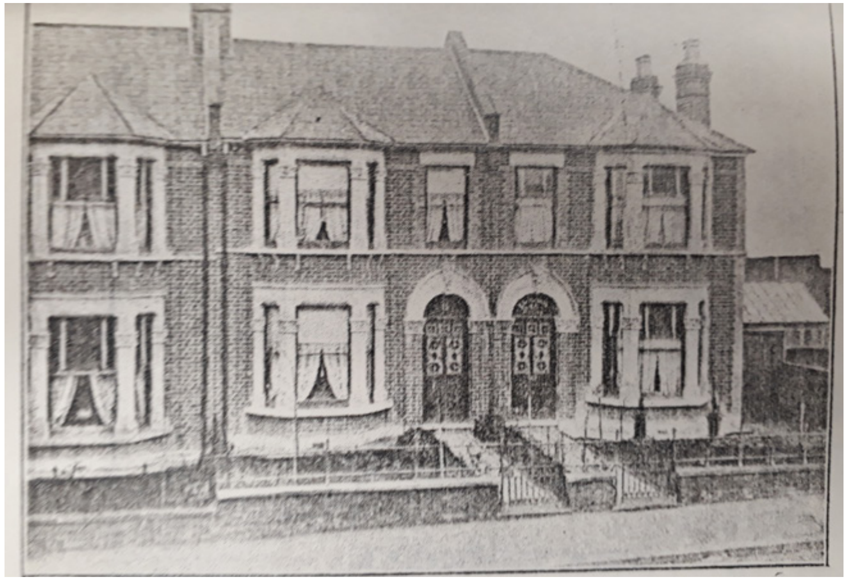
A WALK THROUGH ITS PRESENT

A WALK THROUGH ITS PAST

A note to the reader:
This essay is written in two halves. The present narrative is on the left, while the historical background – a more analytical text – is on the right. These can be read in tandem, as they follow a more or less parallel structure. Equally, each half stands well on its own and provides a more joined up picture of the time in question when read at once. I leave it to the reader to decide.

Kinfauns road is a quiet suburban street in outer London, one of the thousands of such streets surrounding the capital, and at first glance quite unremarkable. It is, in many ways, much like any other street of its kind. On a bright winter's day, walking the street as the sun goes down, one cannot deny it has a certain charm about it.

Kinfauns road was constructed in 1898 as part of the Mayfield Estate, by Archibald Cameron Corbett. Corbett was "probably the most prolific of London's suburban developers in the 1890s and 1900s" (Jackson1991; 71), responsible for much of present day Ilford and its surroundings, and Catford and Hither Green in south-east London. His estates follow a Victorian tradition of speculative suburban housebuilding, provoked by the expanding railways and growth in London's white-collar population throughout the nineteenth century, keen to have houses away from the dark, overcrowded and disease-ridden slums of central London.

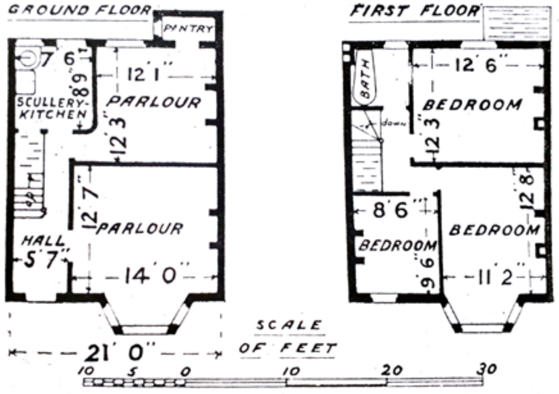


(*The Corbett Estates,* 1901:18)

The terraced houses are more or less uniform in shape: two storeys, two bay windows, one simple window, one front door. Look closely and you start to notice differences. Here and there you can see some windows in the slated roof: the telltale signs of a loft conversion within. Every sixth house, there is a gap in the terrace and garden gates between. Many houses have carved faces above the door: masculine or feminine visages nestled among leaves and fruit, clearly remnants of another time; many others have come down. Some doors have been enveloped in porch extensions: little glazed boxes with sloping tiled roofs. Almost every house has a little flashing plastic security alarm. Many have little CCTV cameras. Number 59 has 'beware of the dog' signs on the front door and the garden gate; the gap above the gate is bridged by a spiral of barbed wire.

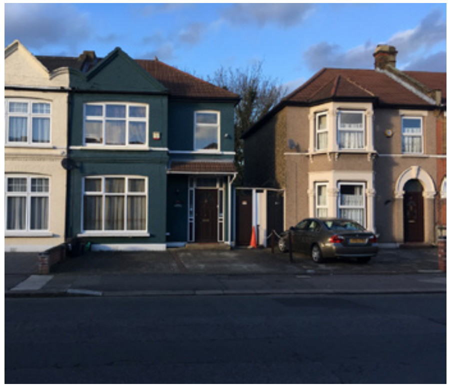
The street's architecture is typical of a late Victorian suburb, a type which evolved gradually over the nineteenth-century from the grander estates of Georgian London. The Georgian Terrace, with its narrow frontage, tall windows and railed area, assumed this form for simple economic reasons: given a piece of land of a certain size, a developer (the prolific Thomas Cubitt for example) could fit more houses on to a street if they were narrow, with no gaps between, and hence turn maximum profit. This was a particularly useful layout as there was no public transport at the time. People had to live close to their place of work to make a commute by foot or horse convenient, so increasing the number of houses on a given stretch of street was a logical step to facilitate these short journeys. Outdoor space was provided in the picturesque format of the green square, placed at the centre of the estate, like at Russell Square or Bedford Square. Park Village East, designed by John Nash in the 1820s, was a different beast, also with picturesque influence. A winding road connects many separate villas, each in their own architectural motif (gothic, Italianate, Greek...) and set within their own private grounds. Through these models, two central tenets of the Victorian house were established: the terrace and the garden.

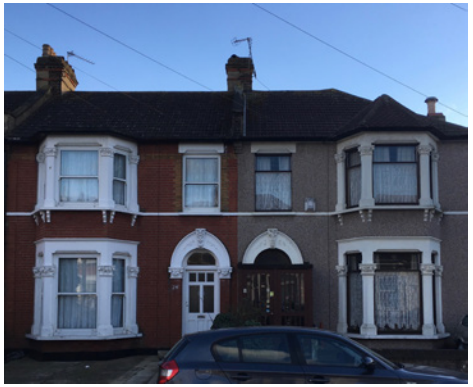
The houses on Kinfauns road are somewhat poky when compared with these grand origins, yet they would be considered bright and spacious by their owners, moving out from a cramped and coaly East End. Its 21-foot-frontage houses are the cheapest and smallest on offer in the Corbett Estate brochures from the time. The plans (identical for every house) show two parlours and a small scullery-kitchen on the ground floor, with three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. Whereas the Georgian area and basement allowed the easy movement of coal and refuse in and out, the Victorian developments had no such luxury, meaning terraces were often split into blocks, with little tracks running between them and along the backs of all the gardens. Architectural historians, when writing about this kind of estate are at best ambivalent: "Corbett was...responsible for many thousands of dull, stereotyped, but reasonably well-built houses" (Jackson, 1995:71), but this is understandable given the context in which they were built. As Edwards puts it: "Small, cheap, decent, solidly-built houses were needed in quantity, and it is not easy to devise interesting or attractive layouts for large numbers of small, cheap, decent, solidly-built houses" (1981: 70). Georgian speculators had significantly wealthier clients, and fewer of them; it is not surprising that their output might be more attractive.



House with 21 foot frontage, Mayfield estate (*The Corbett Estates,* 1901:18)

Whereas these structural differences are not all immediately apparent, the surface treatment of the houses is more obviously varied. Many examples of original brickwork remain, neat red bricks with sandy-coloured borders around windows. Scattered among these are the pebble dashed or painted specimens. The front doors, too, are painted, and these often in bolder shades. A particularly striking pair can be seen halfway along the street's south side, where number 100's cornflower yellow door contrasts the indigo of 98 beautifully.

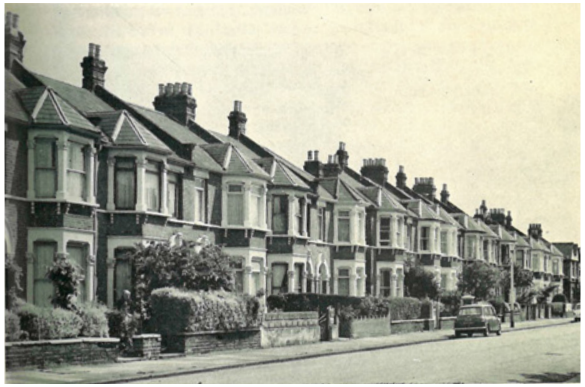




One subtle, yet defining feature of the Corbett Estates is the decorative keystones above the front doors. These sculpted pieces, usually faces of men or women, are different from house to house, some rather frivolous, some more severe. They were perhaps inspired by Corbett's grand tour of Europe as a young man – funded by his father as an alternative to university. But as Edwards suggests, these artistic touches are somewhat lost when the street is viewed as a whole:

> "Alterations of detail are futile in the context of a long straight street on a featureless level site with small houses set in rows seventy-feet apart. ... [they] come in interminable rows; they are all built to the same plan, with the same height of rooms, the same width of street, the same bay-windows, the same red bricks, the same slate roofs. ...their monotony is appalling." (1981: 73)

Interestingly, unlike the freehold ownership that we see today in most English suburbs, houses on Kinfauns road were mostly sold leasehold. This allowed Corbett to maintain some control over standards and appearance of the new properties. Leasehold agreements set out strict conditions for the use of the houses, for example, to "paint the external wood and ironwork in every fourth year, and the inside wood and ironwork in every seventh year" (*Archibald Cameron Corbett: The man and the houses*, 2018). In this way the uniformity of the houses survives well into the 60s, illustrated below – garden walls are the only discrepancy from neighbour to neighbour. It would appear that only since the 70s and its pebbledash craze, and through following decades has Kinfauns road transformed physically into what we see today. The 1990s saw the introduction of permitted development into planning policy, making small extensions like porches much easier, while shows like *Changing Rooms* brought home improvement to the forefront of popular culture. One wonders whether Edwards would find his "interminable rows" improved by the paint, pebbledash and porches of the present moment, compared to the appalling monotony he described in 1981.



"Kirfauns avenue, Goodmayes" in the 1960s, by Alan A Jackson (1991: 129). No street of this name exists today: quite possibly Kinfauns road.

Most driveways hold one or two cars, shiny and pristine-looking in the low light. BMWs, Audis, little VWs and Peugeots and the odd white van – distinctly less shiny – sitting forwards, backwards and sideways in front of all the houses. In many cases the entire "front garden" is dedicated to this purpose: smooth herringbone brick or more romantic stone flags open out straight onto the pavement, with no plant, wall or path in sight. Others are completely walled in, with trees, grass and bird baths sitting neatly in squares. A path runs from an iron gate to the front door, a border of newly sprouted daffodils beside. Some houses are undergoing transformations at this very moment, with piles of new bricks and wood in the driveway, as at number 4, or a skip full of broken cupboards, rubble and tree branches, as at number 33.

Gardening and front gardens were the place for the suburbanite to make his mark on his property. Whereas Georgian terraces had little outdoor space of their own and were arranged around large green squares, suburbs have been linked since their origins to gardens through Nash's Park Villages. The elite classes have for many centuries enjoyed expansive green estates and formal gardens, but the industrial revolution increasingly saw gardening become popular with the urban working classes. At Model villages like Bourneville and Ironville. philanthropic employers provided ample green space to workers in their housing, where tending to plants provided a welcome contrast to the more gruelling manual labour of the factories (Edwards, 1981: 56). Garages only came later, as the motor car became more accessible to wealthier families between the wars (Jackson, 1991:150-151). Until then, train, bus and tram were the more common forms of commute, leaving the street frontage free for lawns and shrubbery.

Gardens at Bourneville (Edwards, 1981: 81)

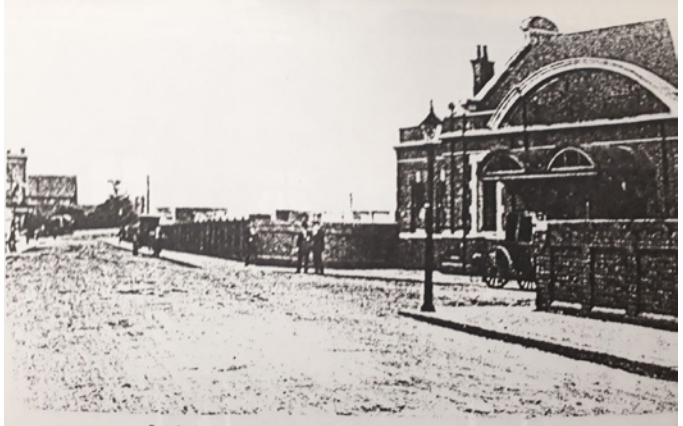
In front of all of these separate houses and separate gardens, separate lives, is the uniting stretch of pavement. It is our only territory as pedestrians and it is where responsibility for the street passes hands from the homeowner to the council. Evidence of the latter's lack of funds is evident, with cracks in paving stones and tarmac creating a sort of patchwork. Some stones are clearly new – these crop up around the bases of lampposts and presumably have something to do with lighting maintenance. The bare minimum of stones have been replaced. Rectangular blue and black recycling bins are full and in some cases overflowing. Litter drifts across driveways and along the street.

In front of the private sanctuaries of home and garden, streets and paving were the responsibility of the landowner. Corbett's company set out the street and responsibility for its maintenance did not involve local authorities. A brochure of the time paints this scenario as a good thing:

> "Serious expense is often incurred by purchasers of houses ... to make unexpected payments for paving, &c., when the Local Authority takes over the roads. On these estates this cannot take place, as the freeholder makes the roads and footpaths in accordance with the directions of the Local Board, and the purchasers of houses are exempt from all such charges." (*The Corbett Estates.* 1901:3)

Yet, these streets were not without their teething problems. Street lighting was not introduced for many years, and the road surface was just dirt as the first houses were sold, leading to impassable quagmires in the winter and clouds of dust in the summer (Jackson, 1981: 67).

All these thousands of outer London houses were only desirable because of their direct links to London, through the wonder of rail travel. Corbett situated his estates along the line of the existing Great Eastern Railway, which already served Ilford from Liverpool Street in 1839, continuing through Essex to Colchester and Norfolk beyond. In an astute bit of business, Corbett secured good rail service to his houses at the same time as building got underway. He guaranteed £10,000 worth of season tickets to the GER over the first five years, if they would agree to open a station at Seven Kings to serve his new Downshall estate there in 1899. A similar arrangement was made a couple of years later at Goodmayes and Mayfield, and the new station here opened in 1902, right in the middle of Corbett's new masterplan (Jackson, 1981:41). Just 20 minutes from the heart of The City, Corbett's new inhabitants could enjoy the income of central London with the wholesome lifestyle of the suburb.



Goodmayes Station in its first year. 1902

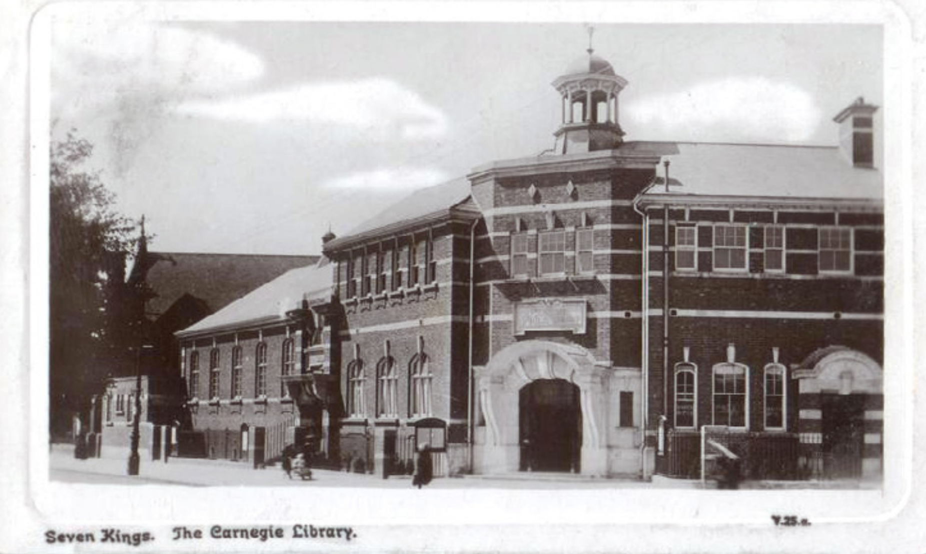
(Foley, 1995: 28)

The road leads straight off the High Street, with a Baptist church on the corner. More institutions are close by: St Cedd's Catholic Church on the High Road holds a weekly mass in Polish; the old British Telecom Exchange is now a Gurdwara temple, and the old Carnegie Library is now Al-Ihsaan Academy, for Islamic worship and teaching. In the opposite direction is Goodmayes Park, where on a Sunday afternoon a man can be spotted drinking a can of beer behind the sign on the gates that reads "ALCOHOL FREE ZONE … MAXIMUM FINE £1000". There are a lot of signs of a similar nature around. No fouling, no dumping, no spitting, no advertising of goods or services without permission. Neighbourhood watch. One is left with the impression that suburbanites are a rather unruly bunch, but the authorities aren't giving up on orderliness just yet.

No dog fouling - clean it up
No Spitting
Redbridge

Redbridge
DON'T DUMP
Use our FREE bulky waste collection service
020 8554 5000
Fly tipping is a crime, you could receive an unlimited fine and a criminal record
www.redbridge.gov.uk/flytipping

One of Corbett's key concerns in Mayfield was not shared by all Victorian developers: a philanthropic ambition and the desire to encourage healthy and moral living. As well as the generous gardens of the houses, Corbett dedicated large chunks of land to open green space, surviving to this day at Goodmayes Park and Westwood Recreation ground. He was also a strong proponent of the temperance movement and enforced a "ban on the sale of intoxicating drink" on all his estates (*Archibald Cameron Corbett: The man and the houses*, 2018). In this way Corbett followed the tendency of other housing philanthropists in drawing a line between the 'deserving poor', who might access their housing, and the 'undeserving', who would not. Several churches and schools quickly emerged as the population grew. The high road from Ilford to Goodmayes was lined with shops, spilling over to other corners when space ran out. Carnegie opened a grand library at Seven Kings in 1909, completing the transformation of Goodmayes from sleepy Victorian farmland to enriching Edwardian town.


Seven Kings. The Carnegie Library.
V.25.a.

(juliac2, 2017)

Back on Kinfauns road, perhaps the most satisfying of all observations is yet to be had: the comings and goings of the people who live there. A father shepherds his two teenage boys, wearing kufis, kurtas and JUST DO IT backpacks, towards the station. A tall man with dreadlocks shuffles past in the opposite direction. The three men laying new paving on the driveway at no.125 shout to each other in an Eastern European language. Life gently ticks on, and as we walk from one end of the street to another we glimpse a fragment of all the parallel lives between number 1 and number 142; yet we understand none of them deeply. The magic of suburbia is that it exists as much in our imagination as it does in geography[1]… and on a bright winter's day, as the sun goes down, there is no better place to be walking.

The new homeowners here were a fairly homogenous bunch: good English men in steady employment in the city, with charming wives and children. Willing to abstain from alcohol and other moral ills; likely Christian, churchgoing men, who enjoyed spare time at home or in the garden, while wives maintained the house and satisfied the physical needs of the family.

> "there was a very powerful urge for people of like condition to want to live in the same neighbourhood with their kind, to decline to be mixed up with their inferiors ... to keep away from noxious, unhealthy or otherwise unpleasant areas. These were strong tides making for segregation." (Edwards, 1981: 30)

The repetition of the same size of house along a whole street or set of streets provided the economic parallel to these social structures, almost guaranteeing that the suburban occupant would not bump into anyone too far removed from his own image.

Whereas the physical makeup of London's residential suburban streets has remained largely intact, its social and economic makeup today is almost unrecognisable from its origins. Huq writes:

> "the suburbs today [are] shaped by diversity at every level. Shifting demographics, altered and technologically-driven work and leisure practices, new migratory trends and changing patterns of consumption, make them far more complex than their old pattern as clusters of housing for strictly nuclear individual families" (Huq 2013: 194)

London's centre has undergone a radical transformation over the last thirty years from "those inner-cities" of the Thatcher era – crime-ridden, dangerous and decaying – to the most desirable and expensive territory of the Metropolis. The suburb, meanwhile, has been hit by relentless cuts to local authority funding, rising costs of living and slow wage growth. Dual-earner households are now the norm; precarious working, the gig economy and remote working also have an effect. Suburbs have played host to riots and extremism; the Ilford Recorder reports shootings and stabbings every week or two. Meanwhile schools in Redbridge are among the best in London, and the average resident's access to transport and green space remains outstanding. The suburb is not easily quantified, and "there is no such thing as a typical suburbanite" (Huq, 2013: 16) ... but that is precisely what makes the place so interesting.

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[1] Huq, 2013: 29

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