

In the Beginning:
The Origins and Aims of the Highgate Society

by Tamar Karet

In the early 1960s there were concerns about the potential increase in traffic along the Archway Road which would result from the newly completed M1. Ernest Marples, then Conservative Minister for Transport, conceived a plan to make the main artery for northbound traffic Highgate High Street into North Road and on into Falloden Way; southbound traffic would use Archway Road.

Both roads would have to be widened substantially for this purpose, so it isn't surprising that residents nearby protested vehemently. Not only would there be a huge increase in noise, danger, congestion and pollution from the increased traffic, but the historic houses on the east side of Highgate High Street would have to be demolished, and many other buildings along the routes would be endangered.

Work on the project duly began. The Wellington roundabout at the bottom of North Road and the Archway gyratory were created, and road widening began on the southern portion of the Archway Road. However, at this point bipartisan opposition to the plan became so vociferous that work had to be halted.

Meanwhile, local residents who had worked together to oppose this plan had also realised that they had a great deal in common. In 1966 they formed the Highgate Society and, at the suggestion of Ronnie Bernstein, the Society's first Chairman, it fused with the Save Highgate Committee, an offshoot of the Highgate Preservation Society. The framed signatures of the founding members can be seen hanging in 10a and there is a photo of them on page 8. The violinist Yehudi Menuhin, then a resident of The Grove, was invited to serve as President. Copies of his handwritten appeal for funds to launch the Society and find a home for it were circulated widely.

The Society's aims were to make Highgate and its neighbourhood a better place for people to live and work, to ensure that any changes made in the environment enhance the amenity of the area, and to encourage sound planning and improve public transport. In addition, they immediately went on to found seven committees: traffic, social and entertainment, community services, arts and crafts, a consumer group, membership and administration, and finally 'amenity and planning.' Although we no longer have active arts, crafts and consumer groups, the amenity group has developed into our Environment Committee which still does such wonderful work preserving the structure of our community.

To learn more about our first fifty years, see the order form in this issue for *LIFE IN A LONDON VILLAGE: the Story of the Highgate Society 1966-2016* compiled by Peter Woodford and edited by Richard Webber.