

NOTTING DALE

FROM WASTELAND TO VOICE OF RESISTANCE

How Did Notting Dale Become Known as the West End Avernus: The Mouth of Hell?



Roque's 1746 map highlights the fact that Notting Hill lay outside London.

When John Roque's map was published in 1746, Notting Dale was a rural oasis, far removed from what was then considered London. However, by 1829 George Cruikshank illustrated how the countryside was coming under attack from the growth of London, with what he described as, '*the march of bricks and mortar.*'

The clay-rich soil of Notting Dale supplied the ammunition to enable '*London going out of town.*' It was ideal for brickmaking and provided the materials for the building of James Weller Ladbroke's new estate on land he'd inherited in 1819. Brick making here was hard and poorly paid, and carried out by labourers who lived in crude, makeshift huts crammed into an area centred around a pool of fetid water known infamously as the '*Ocean.*'



An 18th-century print of rural Notting Hill, titled "Notting Hill in 1750", engraved by John Arthur Quartley, for "Old and New London".



London going out of town - or - the march of bricks and mortar! (1829) by George Cruikshank Wellcome Collection 578910i

Alongside the brick-makers were the pig-keepers. According to Mary Bayly's '*Ragged Homes and How to Mend Them*' (1855) Samuel Lake, formerly of Tottenham Court Road, was the first to keep pigs here and he was soon joined by the pig keepers of the Marble Arch area, who had been forced out of their area by building development. These people shared their pitiful shacks with their pigs and lived directly over stagnant water: the animals at one stage outnumbered people by three to one. Many of these were Irish immigrants fleeing poverty and famine, who settled in Notting Dale due to its low rents. Their arrival brought St Francis of Assisi Catholic Church (1860) and school (1863) to the area to help them. Travellers and Romany Gypsies too, were drawn to Notting Dale and pitched their caravans at Mary Place each summer.



The 'Ragged Homes' sketch of "Tucker's Cottage, the oldest house in Kensington Potteries" in 1855, depicts a quaint row of tumbledown shacks with rickety fences, a manure heap, a donkey, chickens and some pigs. Mary Bayly's 'Ragged Homes and How to Mend Them' 1855

Pigs were fed on the food waste collected from wealthier areas. This waste was part of the Notting Dale dust heap which received household waste from central London. It was sorted by women and children known as *Bunters*, who separated other waste such as cinders for brick making, bones for glue and rags for paper making.



The "West End Avernus." Poor Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies scavenge on the Notting Dale dust heap as pig keeper Samuel Lake looks on. Kate Morton

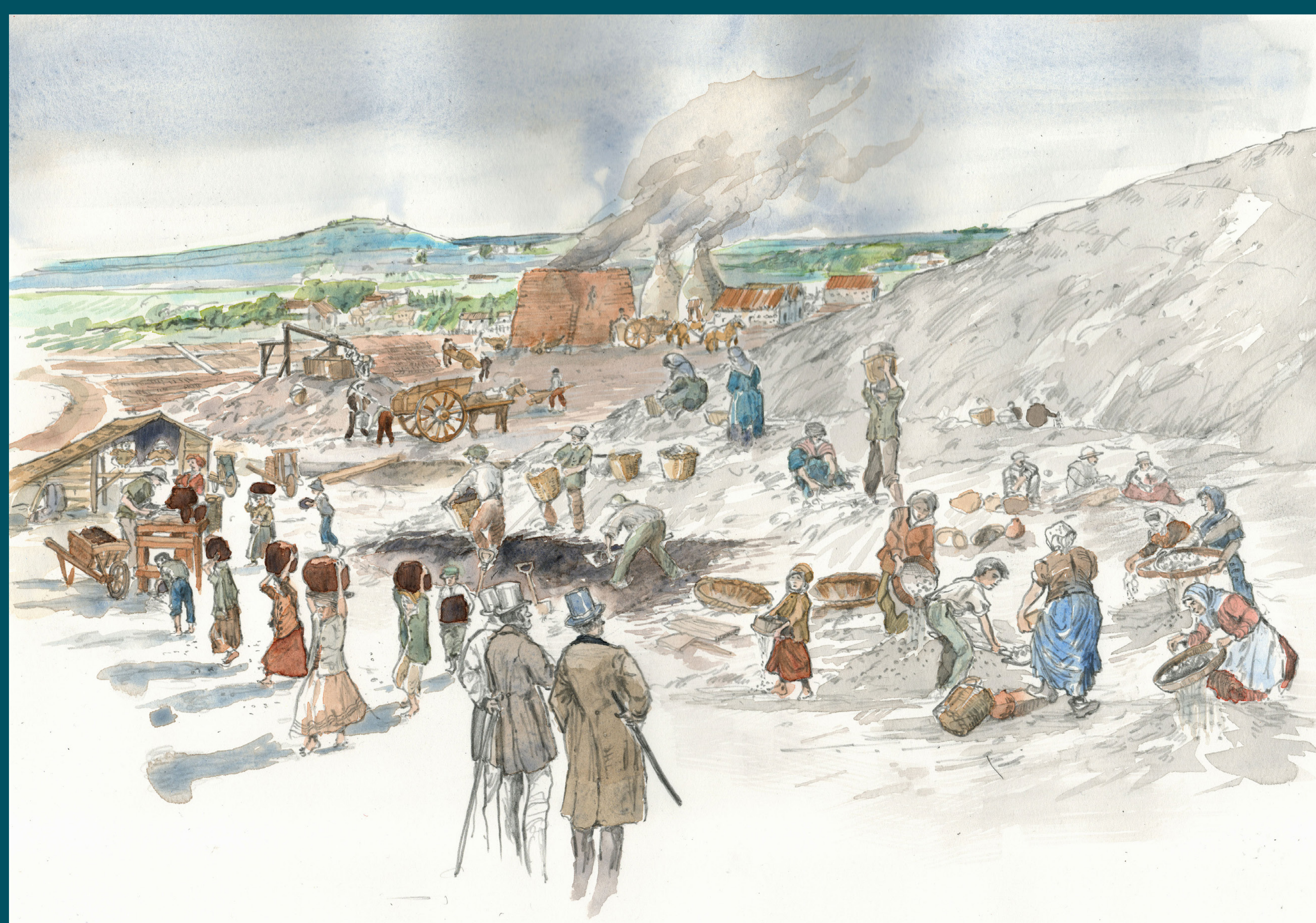
In 1849, the *Morning Chronicle* published a damning report describing Notting Dale as "the very capital of cholera." Its mortality rate in that year reached 60 per 1000 living, compared with London's average of 25.4 per 1000 and life expectancy was a shocking 11 years 7 months compared with the metropolitan average of 37 years. In 1893, The Daily News could still describe the slums of Notting Dale as the "*West End Avernus*" — invoking Lake Avernus, the classical gateway to hell.



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How Did “Golden Dustman” Stephen Bird Shape the Future of Notting Dale?



Stephen Bird supervising his workers at the Notting Dale Brickfields by Kate Morton

In the early 19th century, Notting Dale was a quiet rural area on London’s edge, known for its farmland and clay-rich soil. That changed in the 1830s when entrepreneur Stephen Bird transformed it into one of London’s most productive brick-making districts. Bird recognised the commercial value of the local clay at a time when London was expanding rapidly and the demand for bricks was soaring.

In 1837, Bird leased large areas of land across Notting Dale and established brickfields—open-air sites where clay was dug, moulded, dried, and fired in massive kilns. His enterprise employed hundreds, many of them impoverished

Irish migrants fleeing famine. Though work was gruelling and conditions harsh, Bird’s brickfields became a vital source of employment and helped shape the area’s industrial character.

Bird was more than a brickmaker — he was also a developer. Using his own bricks, he built houses for sale or speculative rental, shaping the early urban fabric of Notting Dale. However, many of his developments were poorly built, lacking proper sanitation and often prone to damp and disease.

Bird was part of a group dubbed the “Golden Dustmen,” who profited from every part of the building supply chain—owning dust yards, brickfields, and transport barges. Like Henry Dodd, the inspiration for Dickens’s Mr. Boffin, Bird turned London’s mud and rubbish into gold. This was architectural alchemy, magicking an indigenous building material for London out of the city’s own mud and rubbish. Even Buckingham Palace itself could be said to have been magicked out from the contents of London’s bins.



“Golden Dustmen,” Stephen Bird profited from every part of the building supply chain—owning dust yards, brickfields, and transport barges. By Kate Morton



Stephen Bird's grand home, Hornton Villa, also known as The Red House, was demolished in 1972 to make way for the new Kensington Town Hall. RBKC Archives & Local Studies

wooden tenements, housed over 1,000 people in conditions meant for 200. Sanitation was appalling, with only 49 toilets serving all residents, leading to filth, disease, and a death rate twice that of surrounding Kensington. Life expectancy there was just 17 years.

By the 1850s, as the clay ran out, the brickfields closed. But Bird’s legacy endured: he had transformed farmland into a dense, working-class district. His work laid the foundations—both physical and social—for Notting Dale’s future, a place marked by industrial ambition and enduring inequality.

He also won lucrative public contracts, particularly after the 1848–49 cholera epidemic. Bird built sewers for the Kensington Vestry, the foundations of Hammersmith Bridge, and worked on Brompton Hospital. His success allowed him to build a grand home—Hornton Villa—just off Kensington High Street.

In stark contrast were the dwellings he provided for his workers. Jennings’ Buildings, a set of overcrowded



Market Court in Jennings Buildings c. 1865 often called the “Irish Rookery,” it was a notorious slum owned by Stephen Bird characterized by extreme overcrowding and poor living conditions. RBKC Archives & Local Studies

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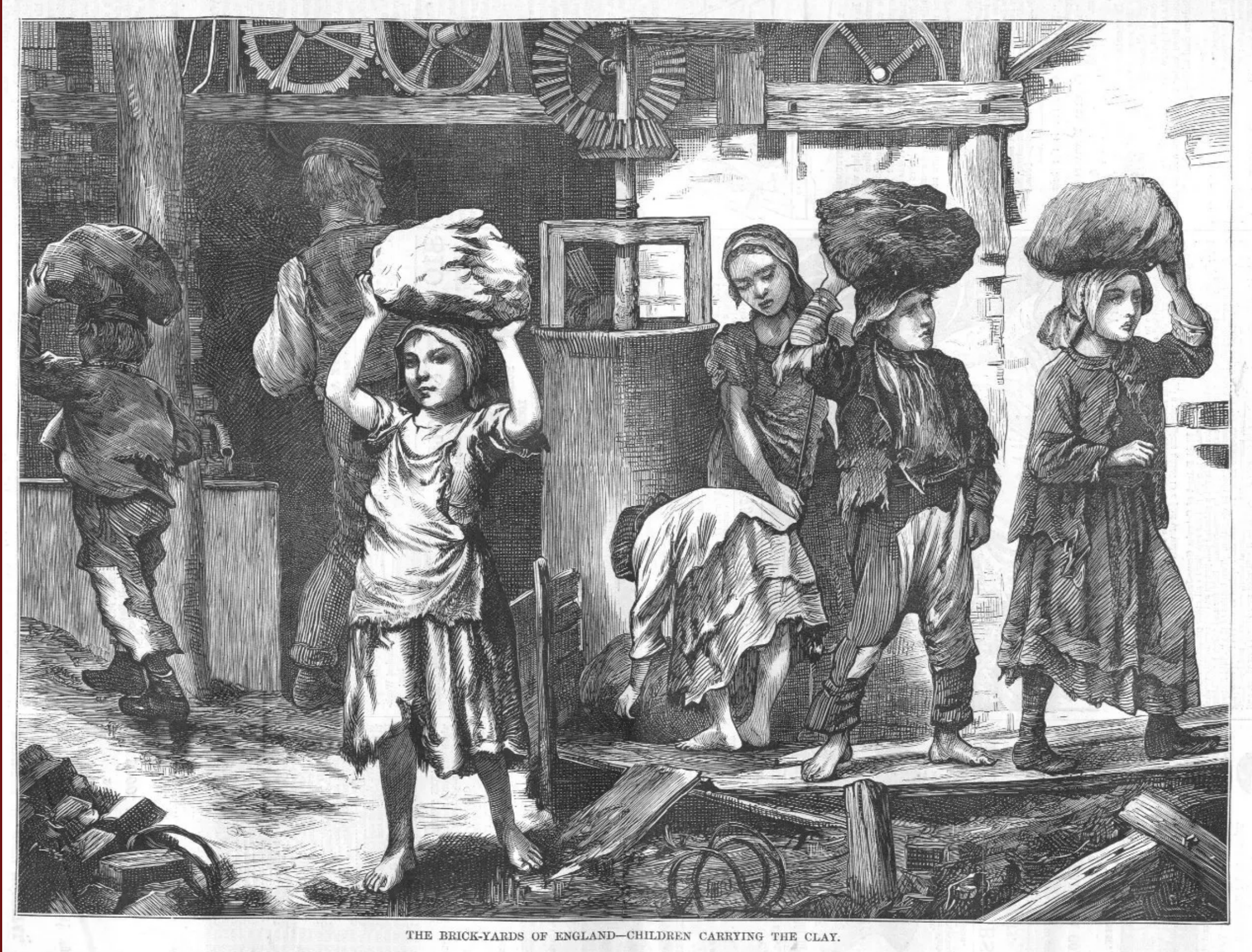
“Sanctuary and Struggle: The Irish and Gypsy Communities in Notting Dale”



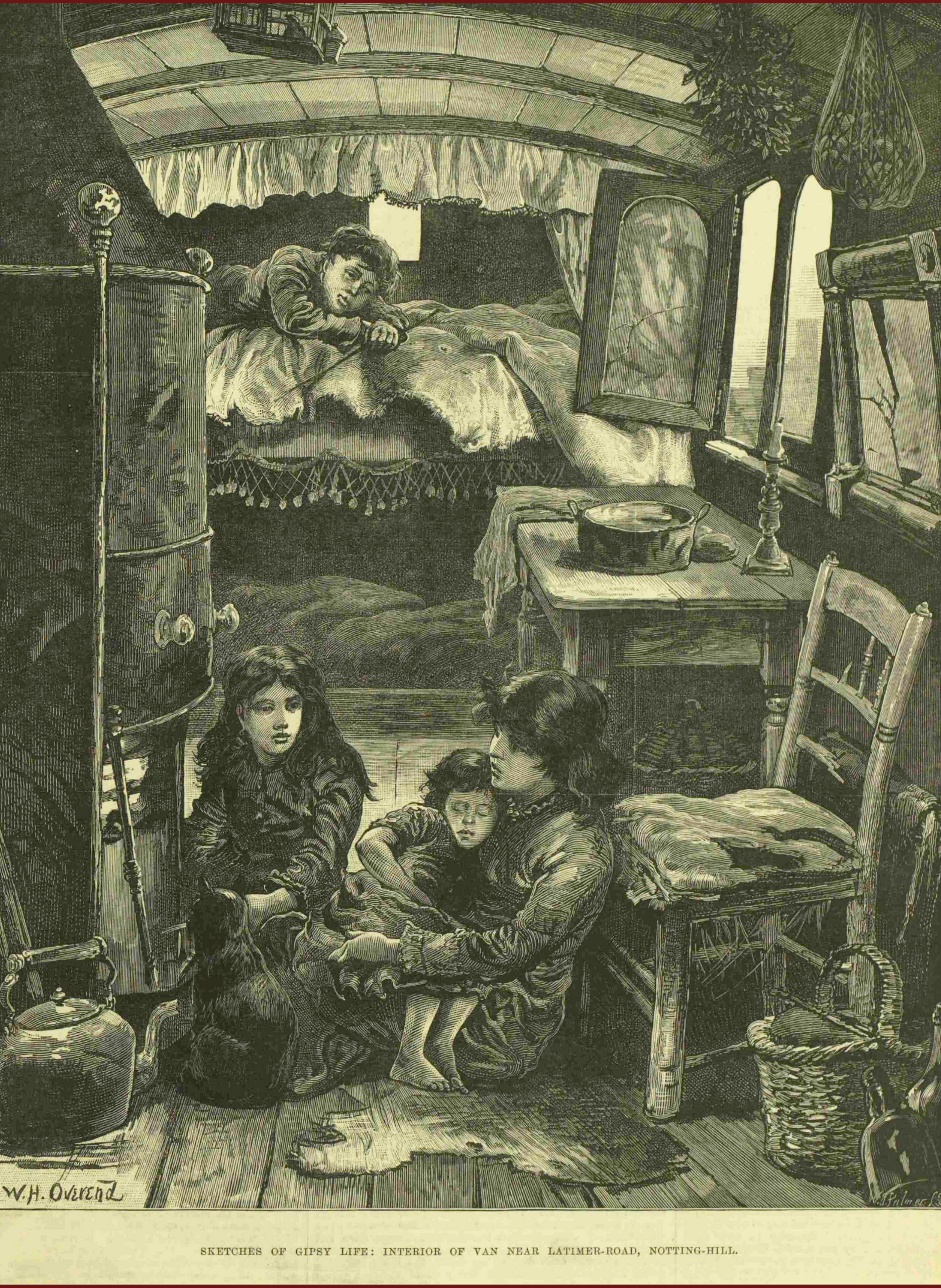
A mother begs for money to bury her baby at Clonakilty during the Irish Famine 1847. Illustrated London News

In the mid-19th century, Notting Dale became a refuge for some of London’s most marginalised communities. The area, still semi-rural and dotted with brickfields and pig farms, offered cheap lodgings and the possibility of work to newly arrived Irish immigrants fleeing famine and persecution. Soon after, Romany Gypsy and Traveller families also settled in the district, living in encampments and working as seasonal labourers, hawkers, and horse dealers.

Both communities faced deep prejudice, harsh living conditions, and extreme poverty.



The Brick Yards of England, Children Carrying the Clay George Smith -1871



An illustration for George Smith’s Gipsy Life (1880) that revealed this discrimination against Travellers and Romany Gypsies. Illustrated London News - Saturday 13 December 1879

The Irish, many of whom were Roman Catholic, arrived in large numbers following the Great Famine of 1845–1852. Often crammed into overcrowded tenements or makeshift huts, they endured squalor and disease. Cholera outbreaks were frequent, and the area became notorious for its insanitary conditions. Meanwhile, the local Romany Gypsy families were subject to eviction, discrimination, and exclusion from education and medical care. Their presence was tolerated but never welcomed. This was highlighted by child poverty campaigner George Smith, who visited Notting Dale before writing *Gipsy Life* (1880) that revealed this discrimination. This book built on, ‘*The Cry of the Children* (1871)’ that had inspired Lord Shaftesbury to regulate juvenile and female labour in the brickfields.

In this landscape of hardship, St Francis of Assisi Church and its adjoining school offered hope and dignity. Founded in 1860 and led by Franciscan friar Father Tasker, the church offered a lifeline for the poor of Notting Dale. It provided food, clothing, and charity for the destitute, regardless of background. Importantly, it also served as a cultural anchor for the Irish community, preserving their faith and identity in a hostile environment.

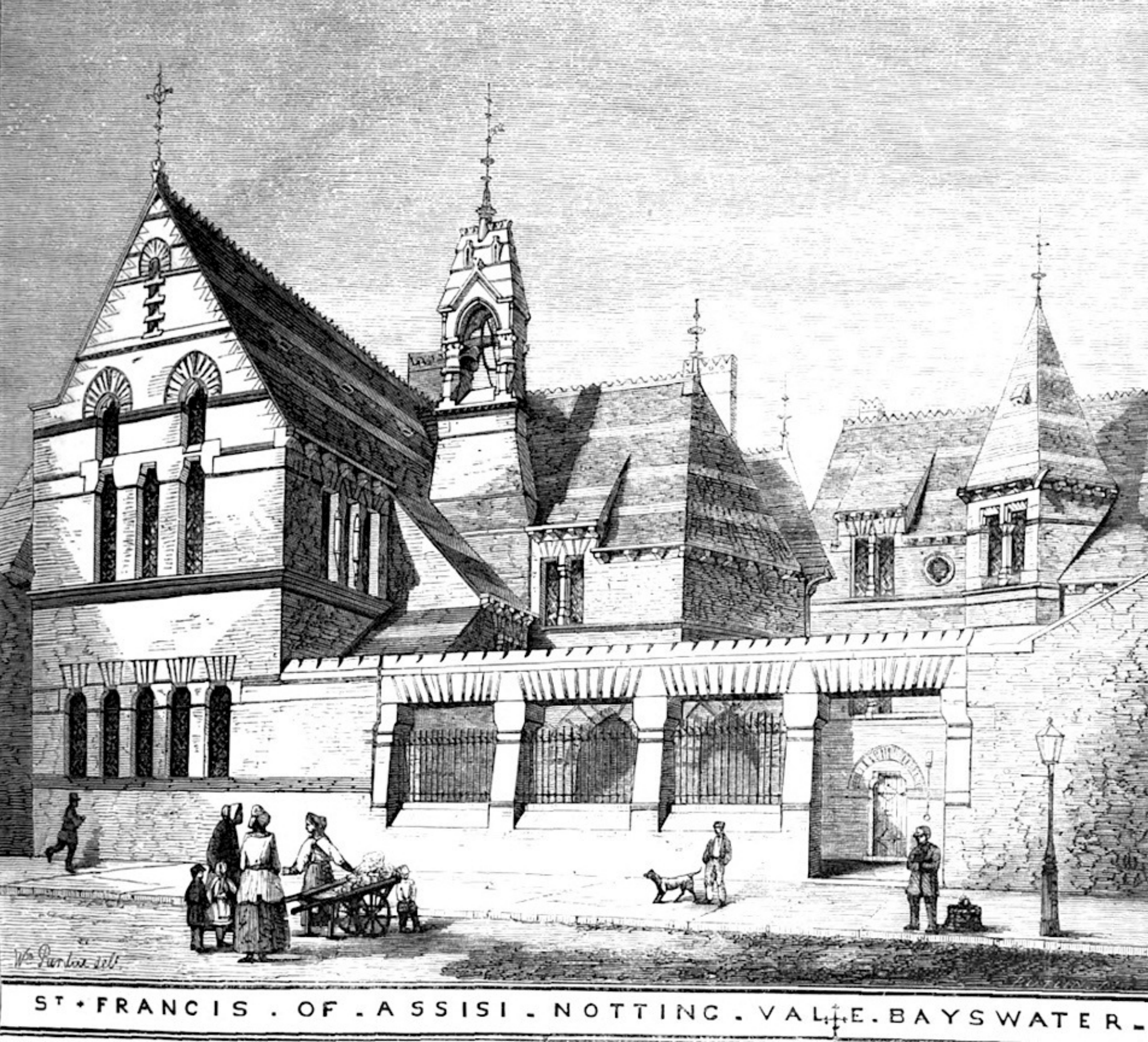


The original school at St Francis of Assisi church, Notting Dale 2025, Peter Daniel

The parish school, opened shortly after the church and welcomed Irish, Gypsy and other children who had been turned away from mainstream education. Teachers went to extraordinary lengths to support pupils so that they had a stable environment to learn.

Over time, the presence of St Francis helped knit together a fragile but enduring community. Community events, including the 1888 Avondale Park campaign brought people together. Through faith, education, and practical help, St

Francis of Assisi Church and School played a critical role in lifting generations out of poverty—and in shaping the social fabric of Notting Dale.



“The Schools and Baptistery of St Francis of Assisi, Notting Hill, Bayswater.” The Building News and Engineering Journal, Vol. 10. 16 January 1863: 44–47.

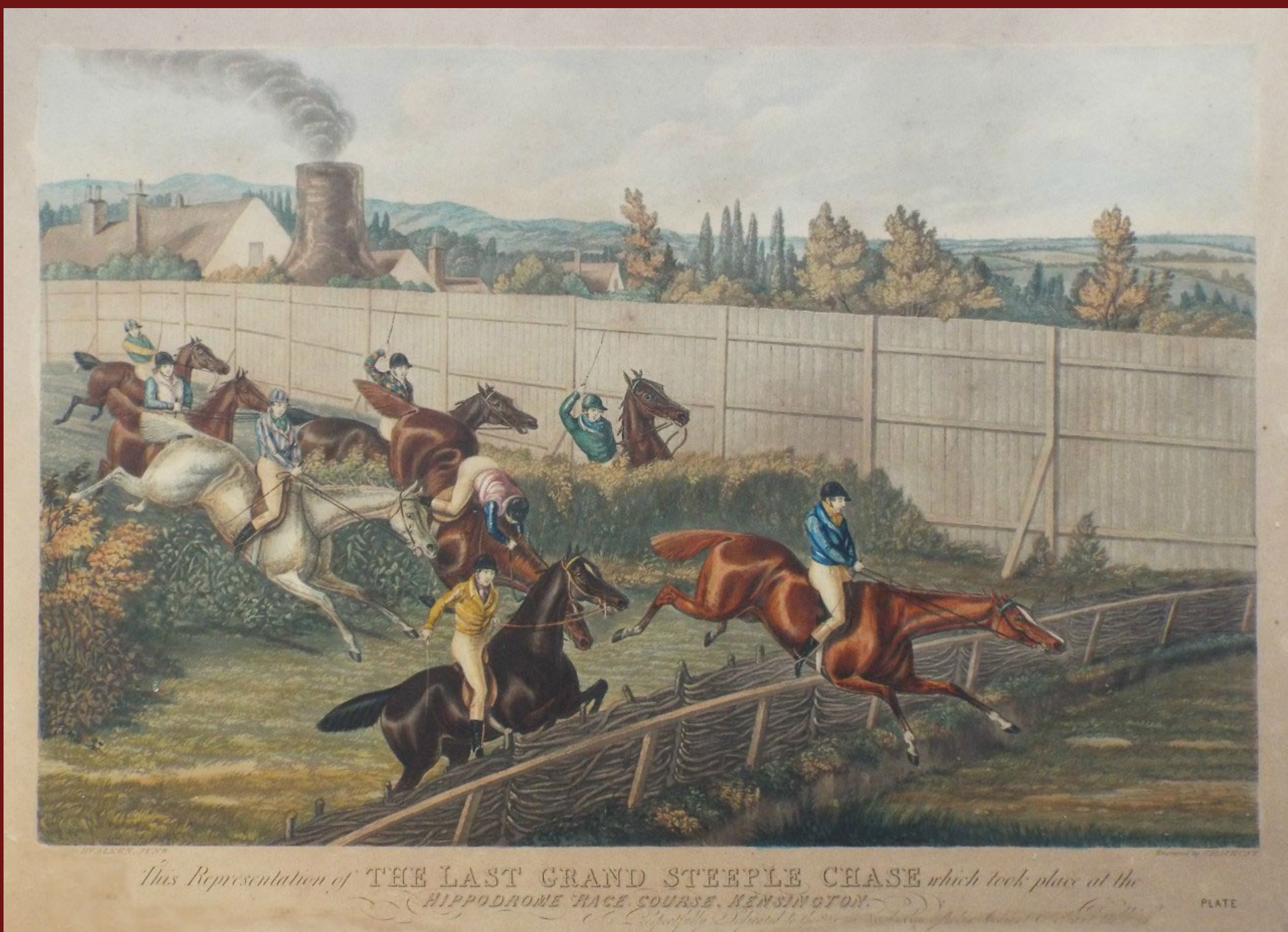


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“How Has Community Resistance Shaped the Fight for Justice and Dignity in Notting Dale?”

In the 1830s, entrepreneur John Whyte built the Hippodrome racecourse across the open land of Notting Hill, enclosing common ground long used by the poor for grazing and gathering. Local residents quickly resisted the enclosure, tearing down fences and clashing with guards to reclaim access to land they had used for generations. A major riot in May 1837 forced Whyte to call in police reinforcements, and under growing public pressure and financial losses, the racecourse closed by 1842. This early conflict highlighted deeper tensions over land rights, public access, and class inequality—struggles that would continue to shape the area.



The “Last Steeplechase at the Hippodrome” showing the final race at Kensington Hippodrome racecourse in 1841. The bottle kiln in the background remains to this day just outside the gates of Avondale Park. Henry Alken Junior and engraved by Charles Hunt. RBKC Archives & Local Studies



Protestors gather outside George and Dragon Hall, Notting Dale before marching to Kensington Town Hall to protest against the dust destructor October 30th 1888 by Kate Morton

By the late 19th century, neighbouring Notting Dale had become overcrowded and impoverished. When the Kensington Vestry proposed building a “dust destructor” (an early waste incinerator) in the heart of the community, residents pushed back, fearing it would threaten their health and dignity. Local campaigners like Dr Richard Daniell and vicars Rev CET Roberts and Rev Dr Thornton led the opposition, drawing on the Vestry’s own reports to support their cause. Vestry minutes recorded the resistance: “They would have no destructor... they, their wives and their children, should breathe freely, and... obtain a glimpse of the blue sky of heaven.”

On 30 October 1888, Rev Roberts led a protest march from St George and Dragon Hall to Kensington Town Hall, joined by the St Clement’s brass band and laundresses of Latimer Road, who feared the destructor would make them redundant. In 1889, Roberts appealed to the Vestry for children to have an open space to play. This led to the transformation of the disused brickfield site chosen for the ‘dust destructor’—into Avondale Park, which opened in 1892. As one of the area’s first public green spaces, it symbolised a victory for public health, recreation, and environmental justice.



The opening of Avondale Park on 2nd June 1892 by Kate Morton

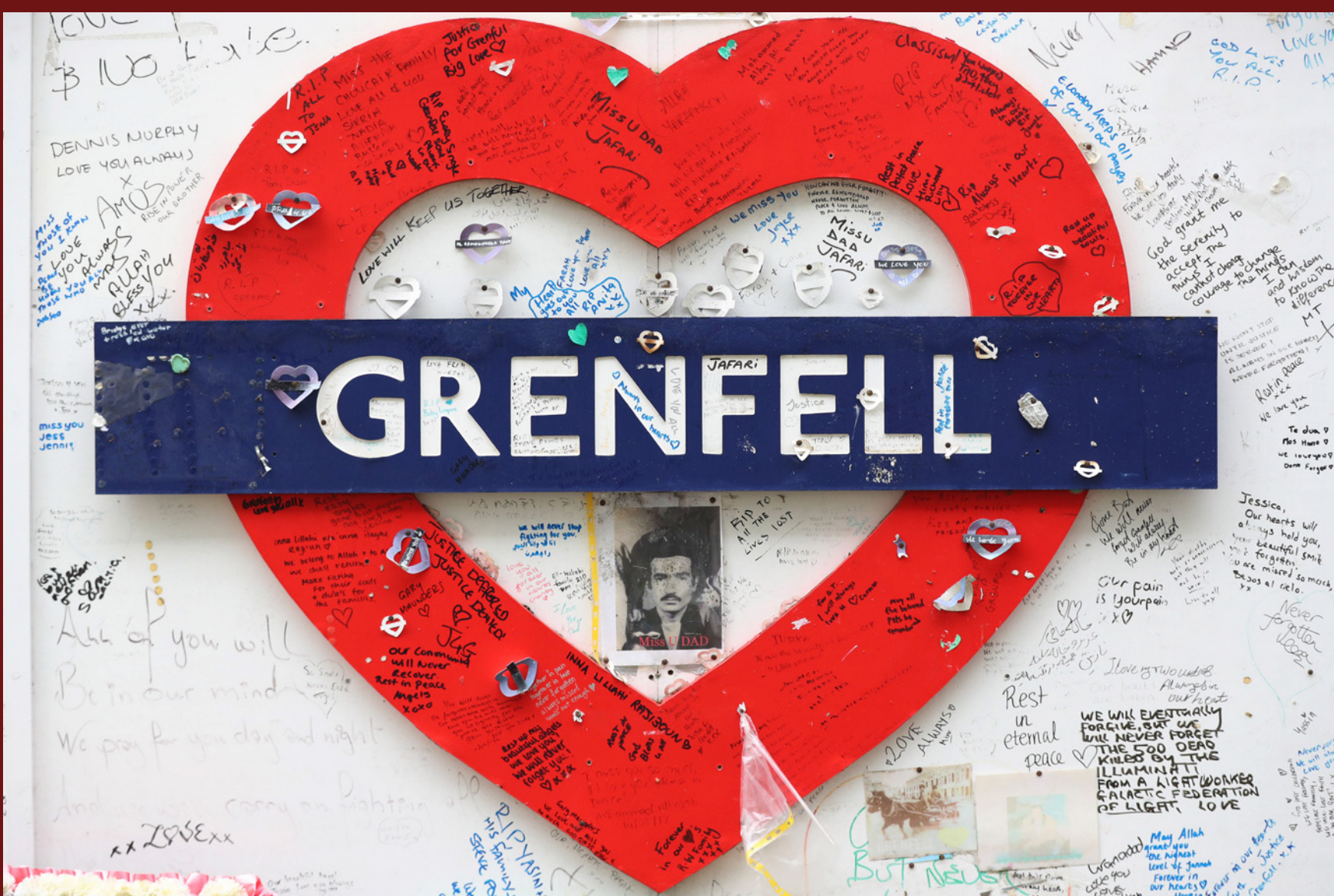


Republic of Frestonia visa stamp. RBKC Archives & Local Studies

This legacy of resistance continued into the 20th century. In 1977, residents of Freston Road declared the “Republic of Frestonia” in protest against gentrification and housing insecurity. With 94% voting for independence from the UK, the community captured national attention. Decades later, the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire reawakened the area’s activist tradition, with residents demanding justice and systemic reform.

of defiance—creative, united, and deeply committed to justice, dignity, and community.

Together, these events reflect Notting Dale’s long-standing spirit



Grenfell Fire Community memorial wall. RBKC Archives & Local Studies



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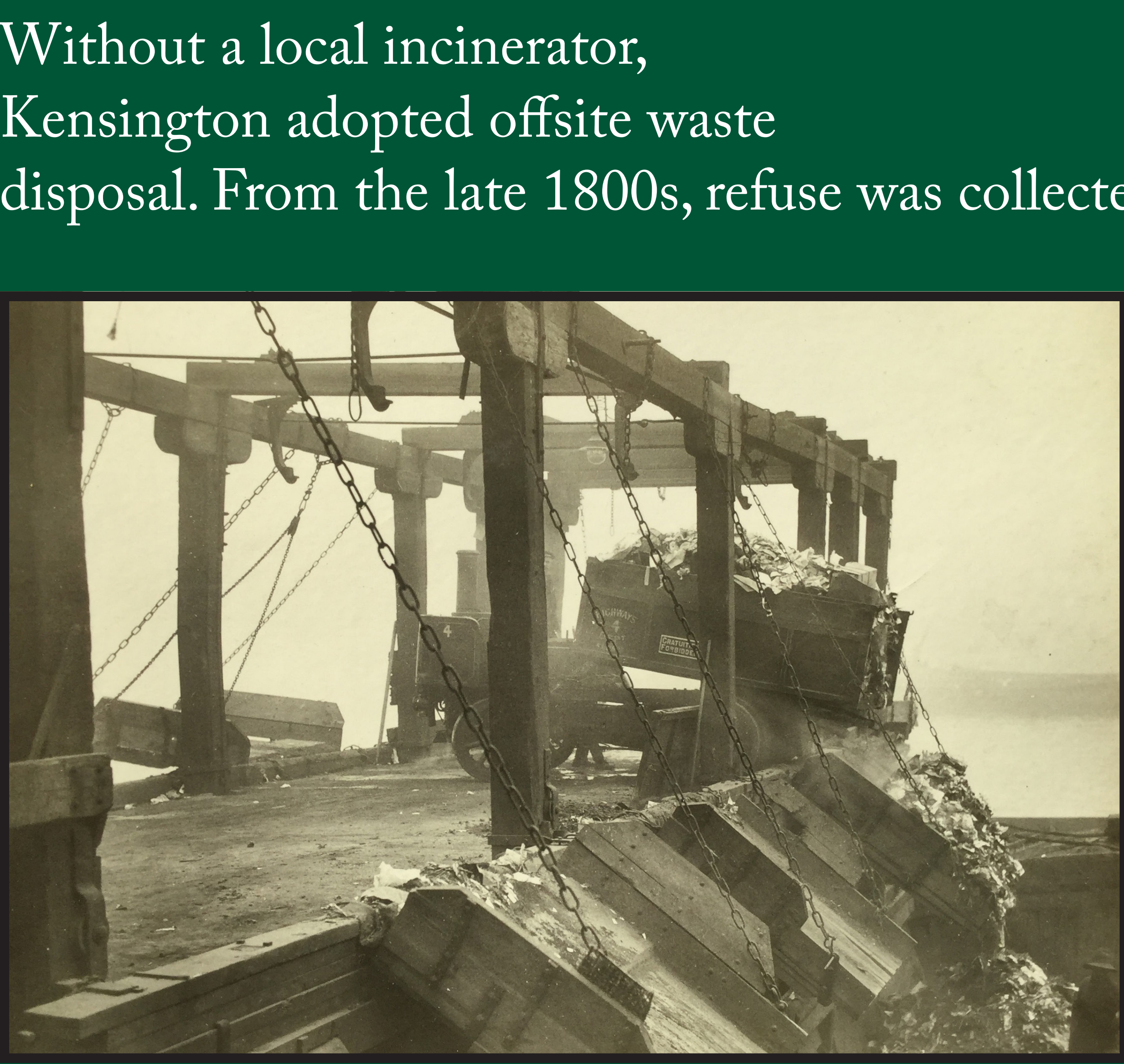
FROM WASTELAND TO VOICE OF RESISTANCE

What Happened to Kensington’s Rubbish After the Dust Destructor Plan Failed?

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, rapid population growth and industrialisation in London created a major waste management crisis. To address it, many boroughs introduced “dust destructors”—early incinerators meant to reduce landfill use. Kensington Vestry proposed one near Lancaster Road, but public opposition over pollution, smells, and falling property values halted the plan. Instead, the site became Avondale Park.



Kensington’s waste went by barge along the Thames to Mucking in Essex by Kate Morton



Kensington’s waste was collected by barges to be taken to landfill at Mucking in Essex. Westminster Archives

Without a local incinerator, Kensington adopted offsite waste disposal. From the late 1800s, refuse was collected and sent to local depots before being loaded onto barges via the Grand Union Canal. These barges transported the waste to the Thames and then downstream to landfill sites in Essex, particularly the Mucking marshes—one of the UK’s largest landfill sites. This barge-based system remained in place well into the 20th century, with Kensington and Chelsea’s waste taken to Gatliff Road by the Grosvenor Canal in Pimlico and then to Mucking. This method was economical, avoided road congestion, and helped delay the need for local incineration.



Kensington’s waste went to landfill until laws passed in the 1990s meant rubbish barges took the borough’s waste for incineration.

Victorian incinerators were primitive, producing toxic smoke with little environmental control. Today, however, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has turned back to incineration—this time in a much more advanced form. In partnership with Cory, a waste-to-energy (EfW) company founded in 1896, the borough sends its non-recyclable waste to Cory’s Belvedere Riverside facility.



Kensington and Chelsea’s waste is taken by Suez’s dustcarts to the waste transfer station at Battersea and then transferred by barge to Cory’s Energy from Waste plant at Belvedere, Kent.

While waste-to-energy is considered cleaner than landfill, it remains controversial. Critics cite concerns over air pollution, carbon emissions, and the potential to discourage recycling. Still, proponents argue that modern incineration is far more efficient and environmentally managed than its predecessors.



Waste combustion furnace at Cory Riverside, Belvedere, Kent. Photo: Digital-works.

Kensington’s current strategy echoes its Victorian past—prioritising waste reduction and logistical efficiency—now updated with energy generation and sustainability goals. Its success will be judged on environmental outcomes, public health impacts, and how well it complements broader efforts to meet the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 12: to reduce, reuse and recycle to protect the planet.

