

Barnes (1949-1961)

47 Nassau Road, Barnes, London SW13 9QG

Barnes, the most northeastern section of the borough of Richmond-upon-Thames, is bounded on three sides by a bend in the River Thames, with access to central London and the Underground via Hammersmith Bridge. Barbara lived in Barnes during her most prolific years, and it is the setting for locations featured in *A Glass of Blessings*, *No Fond Return of Love*, and *Less Than Angels*.



Back in July 1949 Barbara and Hilary had decided to move to a larger flat. They found one in Nassau Road, Barnes. ... The flat, though self-contained this time, was the converted upper floor of a house and the owner, a very 'refined' lady, whose main preoccupation was with her appearance (like Mrs Beltane, 'scented and jingling with bracelets'), lived on the ground floor. Still, Barbara and Hilary each had a bedroom and there was a good-sized sitting room, a kitchen and bathroom and a loft, which housed a rather temperamental water tank. Their journey to work (on the elusive number 9 bus) took longer, but, once they had got used to the idea of living in the suburbs rather than in central London, they found many compensations. The river was just at the top of the road and it was pleasant to walk along the towpath on summer evenings. (ALTA)

Part of *Less Than Angels* dealt with life in a London suburb – Barnes, where Deirdre and Bernard could sit and watch Mr Dulke exercising his dog by the river – a suburb where everything the least out of the ordinary ... was the subject of intense scrutiny. (ALTA)

Dulcie lived in a pleasant part of London which, while it was undoubtedly a suburb, was 'highly desirable' and 'took the overflow from Kensington'. 'And Harrods do deliver', as her next-door neighbour Mrs Beltane so often repeated. (No Fond Return of Love)

'I suppose this is what you call suburbia,' said Tom. 'It seems rather pleasant.' He had lived in London himself and had occasionally visited his aunts in Kensington and Belgravia, but he was totally ignorant of that territory in which a vast number of people pass their lives. (Less Than Angels)

What was the point of living in a suburb if one couldn't show a healthy curiosity about one's neighbours? ... The sisters had been sitting in Rhoda's bed-sitting-room, which commanded an excellent view of the next door back garden. They often did this on the lengthening spring evenings between tea and supper It was natural that they should find the unmarried and apparently rather eccentric Alaric Lydgate more interesting than their neighbours on the other side, a married couple with three young children, whose lives followed a pattern which was now familiar. (Less Than Angels)

Neighbours on Nassau Road included the notorious Paul Raymond, owner of a famous strip club in Soho and publisher of soft porn magazines, who lived next door at No. 49 in the 1960s. And Barbara once recorded in her notebook 'A station wagon draws up outside the home of the Siamese diplomats next door and out get two Buddhist priests in orange robes. ... I wonder if the appearance of two English clergymen would arouse such interest in the suburbs of Bangkok.' But, as Hazel Holt writes,

'It was not the exotic that really interested Barbara and Hilary – or, perhaps, a different kind of exotic. Over a period of time they had become aware of a little household – two young men and their dog – living a few doors up the road. They began to look out for them and gave them names.' (ALTA)

St Michael and All Angels Church, Barnes Bridge

39 Elm Bank Gardens, Barnes, London SW13 0NX

Barbara also found a highly congenial church, St Michael's, Barnes Bridge, where, in the fullness of time, she became a member of the Parochial Church Council. (ALTA)

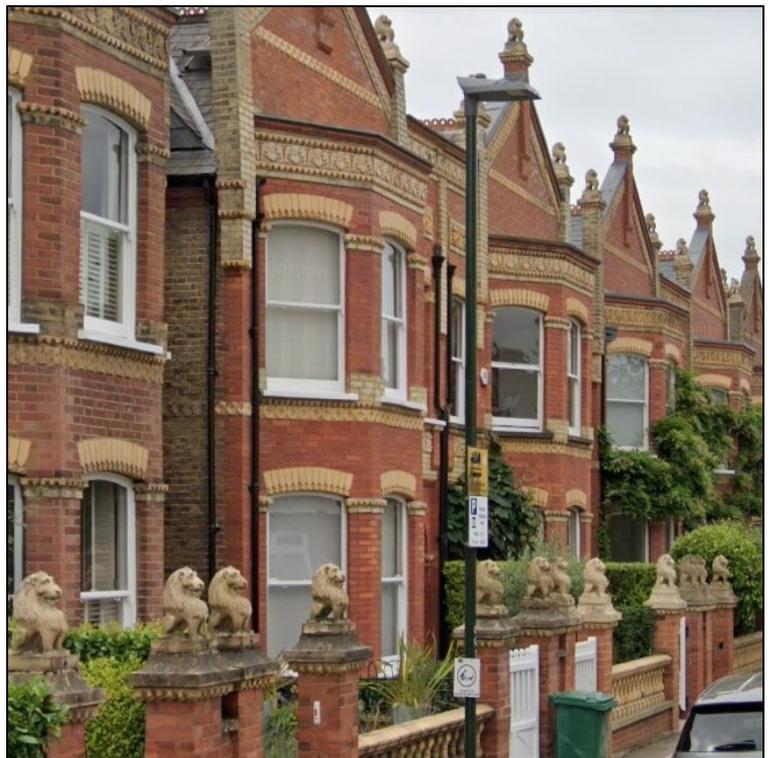
'A rather dull late 19th-century building which provided the background to services in a sound and advanced Western Catholic tradition.' (Robert Smith, 'Exploring London Churches with Barbara Pym')



The 'Lion Houses'

On the south side of Barnes Green there are approximately 80 terraced and semi-detached brick houses, dating from 1899-1903, adorned with hundreds of identical sandstone lions on their gateposts and gables. Local legend suggests that due to a clerical error the builder took delivery of far more lions than intended.

They walked in silence for a few seconds but then Catherine's attention was again caught by a row of houses whose gateposts were ornamented with stone lions. She stopped in front of them with delight and began to stroke their heads and bodies. 'Poor things,' she said, 'their noses and paws are all worn down, like soap lions might be after the first time of using.' (Less Than Angels)



Stone lions on gateposts and gables, Laurel Road, Barnes

Harrods Furniture Depository, 4 Somerville Avenue, London SW13 8HS

The Harrods Furniture Depository, on the south bank of the River Thames just downstream from Hammersmith Bridge, was a storage centre for large items that could not be taken into Knightsbridge to the famous department store. The Grade II-listed buildings, dating from 1913, also provided personal storage space for clients who needed somewhere to keep their belongings while they were abroad. In the 1990s, after decades of redundancy and neglect, the Depository was converted into more than 200 luxury flats.

Went for a walk along the river with Bob – from Hammersmith Bridge along towards Putney, past Harrods Furniture Depository. It is vast when you get up to it, pinky brown brick and ‘Grinling Gibbons’ decorations, swags of fruit etc. Many blank, blind-looking windows, some a little open. Inside what! (AVPE, 23 Oct. 1956)

We had not gone very far when a great and splendid looking building loomed up around a bend in the path. It was of rose brown brick, with minarets almost in the Turkish style. The façade was decorated with carved swags of fruit and flowers, and there were many windows, blank and blind looking, some a little open.

‘What is it?’ I asked in wonder. ‘I never expected to see such a building here.’

‘It’s a furniture depository,’ said Piers.

‘But those minarets and Grinling Gibbons decorations – it’s all too noble to be just that! ... I wonder what it’s like inside,’ I said. ‘Vast high-ceilinged rooms filled with huge shrouded bulky objects – great trunks of clothes, surely rather musty now, and books, too.’ (A Glass of Blessings)



Queen’s Park (1961-1972)

In 1956, when the Pym sisters were living in Barnes, they began investigating two young gay men, dubbed Bear and Little Thing, who lived near them on Nassau Road.

Bear had a grey car (a Hillman Husky) and on most Sundays he drove off wearing a cassock. ... Hilary, feeling like something in a movie, drove behind the Husky, across London, from Barnes all the way to Queen’s Park, near Kilburn, to the church of St Lawrence [sic] the Martyr, Chevening Road. They went inside, sitting near the back, and discovered, to their delight, that Bear was the organist. ... After that they quite often made the difficult journey by public transport, to St Lawrence’s. (ALTA)

The Bear and Little Thing saga led Hilary and Barbara to become active parishioners at St Lawrence’s, and eventually they both joined the Parochial Church Council. In 1961 they bought a house in Queen’s Park, very near the church. They paid £3,400; similar properties are now (2020) worth close to £2 million.

40 Brooksville Avenue, Queen's Park, London NW6 6TG

[Queen's Park] was decidedly unfashionable, part of London that had not yet 'come up', bounded as it was on one side by the Harrow road and on the other by Kilburn High Road. But Brooksville Avenue was in a quiet neighbourhood, and at the end of the road there was a little park... Number 40 was part of a terrace of small Edwardian houses, substantially built and with fair-sized rooms. Because the downstairs front room was rather gloomy, they made their sitting-room upstairs (with a good view of comings and goings in the road outside). This house also had a garden at the back, rather small and overshadowed, but with a fine grapevine growing against the wall of the house. (ALTA)



I had started a letter to you last weekend on my typewriter, telling you that on Friday last, 1st Feb., we had a burglary and leaving the letter in the typewriter to finish later. But on Monday, 4th Feb., the thief or thieves broke in again, this time taking the typewriter with the letter in it! So I suppose you will never get that letter. I can't remember how much I told you, except that they hadn't taken the MS of my novel, but only small items of jewellery and Hilary's camera. But on Monday they came back and took the typewriter, an electric fire and some silver. (AVPE, letter to Bob Smith, 8 February 1963)

Church of St Laurence the Martyr, Brondesbury, Chevening Road

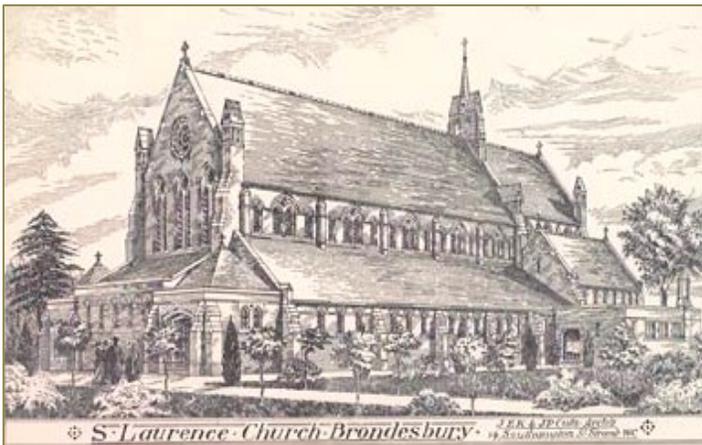
'Members of the congregation became familiar figures, and especially the hard-working organist whom [Hilary and Barbara] privately christened 'Bear,' and who was transmuted into Bill Coleman of St Luke's, Father Thames's church in *A Glass of Blessings*.' (Robert Smith, 'Exploring London Churches with Barbara Pym')

All goes well at St Laurence's – we now have a thing called the Parish Meeting which usually takes place in the vicarage with much jollity and Mrs P.C. [wife of the Vicar, Fr S. Parry-Chivers] going round with drinks. Last Sunday we had the Parish Breakfast and I was asked to pour tea at one of the tables! (Letter to Bob Smith, 1961)

We have so many Nigerians at St Laurence's now. There is a fashion for them getting baptised ... Have the CMS [Church Missionary Society] (it would be them?) failed in the Niger Delta, for I should have thought that most of them would have been baptised already. (AVPE, letter to Bob Smith, 16 October 1963)

Hilary set to work the other evening compiling a list of all the people who had 'worshipped' at St Laurence's since we came here that we could remember. We then analysed the circumstances of them leaving – if they had left – and came to the conclusion that they had been removed by Rome, Death, and Umbrage. A good title for a book, don't you think? Umbrage of course removed the greatest number. (ALTA, letter to Bob Smith)

The church was closed in 1971 and a few years later it was demolished and replaced by flats bearing the name St Laurence Close, London NW6 6DF.



The event for us has been the closing of St Laurence's. It closed at the end of September without ceremony, but last Wednesday the Bishop of Willesden came and gave us a Sung Mass and quite a lot of people came. (AVPE, letter to Bob Smith, 31 October 1971)

Our church has become 'redundant' and been closed! There's something I should like to write about. Now I can go around from church to church with no particular attachment. Neither my sister nor I really want to get involved anywhere at the moment, having had enough of all that to last a long time. (AVPE, letter to Philip Larkin, 7 November 1971)

Keats House, 10 Keats Grove, Hampstead, London NW3 2RR

A wet day. Hampstead, Keats' House. A pity it looks out onto some ugly modern houses. Inside it is rather austere and simple. The engagement ring he gave to Fanny Braun is a red stone (almandine: 'a garnet of violet tint' Concise Oxford Dictionary) set in gold. The curator has filled the conservatory with begonias, pelargoniums, geraniums. 'We try to keep it a thing of beauty,' he says. There are bunches of grapes hanging from the vine. How full of vines altogether Hampstead seems to be. (AVPE, 14 August 1963)

On a wet afternoon recently I went to Keats' house in Hampstead (never having been there before) and saw that he had written two poems at least—inside his Ben Jonson and another book—Shakespeare, I think. (AVPE, letter to Philip Larkin, 23 August 1963)

Barbara incorporated her visit into *The Sweet Dove Died* (written in the 1960s and revised by her before its publication in 1978), where James, Leonora, and Ned visit Keats's house on a wet summer afternoon:

Leonora came out to the car in the beautiful iridescent raincoat she had worn when she went to meet James at the air terminal. One was not at one's best in the rain, obviously, and one needed to be that now as never before...

'We shan't be walking about outside,' said James, 'so there's no need for any of us to get wet.'

All the same, the overcast skies and dripping rain spread a pall of sadness over the little house, with its simple bare rooms. There was nobody else looking over it except for a middle-aged woman wearing a mackintosh pixie hood and transparent rainboots over her shoes. She was carrying a shopping bag full of books, on top of which lay the brightly coloured packet of a frozen 'dinner for one'. ...

*Leonora moved over towards a small conservatory where some late flowers, begonias and pelargoniums, were still in bloom. Bunches of grapes hanging from a vine reminded her of Phoebe's cottage. ... Depression overwhelmed her and seeing James and Ned some distance away, talking together in low voices, she felt as if she were already defeated. She wished now that she hadn't come. Keats meant nothing to her except Ned's voice on that Sunday afternoon, quoting those horrible lines about the dove. (*The Sweet Dove Died*)*

Barbara brought back the villainous American Ned, with his gnat-like voice, and the visit to Keats' house for her short story 'Across a Crowded Room', commissioned by *The New Yorker* and published in July 1979:

But then she remembered Keats's house in Hampstead and a visit there one day, long ago with somebody she had been in love with (or fancied she had been in love with). 'Of course you must have been to Keats's house,' she said. 'Very charming and sad, isn't it?'

'Yes, I remember the first time I went—1968 or '69 it must have been—a wet day and certain tensions in the air.' He smiled.

*It was difficult to do much with that, she felt, the kind of remark accompanied by an intimate smile that hinted at things she couldn't possibly know about. She could hardly ask him what the 'tensions' had been... (reprinted in *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings*)*