

## CHAPTER ONE

# Becoming Londoners

In the end there is nowhere to go but where you began, so I shall begin there. This is a journal of journeys, urban excursions, which take place both now and then, in times plural and space singular: one city, many cities, my city.

This is a book about being here and being part of this monster, this all-pervading, all-providing, all-devouring behemoth of a birthright. I am a Londoner, which means I am but a fragment. I cannot hope to tell the story of the whole, nor even begin to grasp the whole story.

There are so many different cities, and I have moved between them, yet I was born squarely into just one of them. The London of the Elmses – a working-class family making their lives from and on the streets – was sure, solid, yet without foundation. There were no known origins: we were just here and from here, which determined who we were, how we spoke, dressed, danced. There was no arrival story, no founding mythology, no doubt. The Elmses: a London mob.

I, though, have always sought stories. I need to know and tell the tale, and so have settled on the saga of Little Freddie as my personal Romulus. Because, in this and that London, I have walked the same space, along the same streets as little Freddie Elms so many times. In fact, I have retraced a few of Fred's steps practically every other Saturday for half a century, sometimes on Tuesday evenings too. *'Come on URRRs.'*

On my repeated, repeated, obsessive, compulsive journeys to football, I occasionally fancy I see Freddie along the way, flogging a Granny Smith off a barrow or treating himself to a beer. I haven't known him for very long, but he has always been there in me, pacing the Uxbridge Road.

For I, too, am a Freddie – Robert Frederick Elms, son of Albert Elms – and I've got a big brother called Reggie, which matters in a way that

will soon become clear. For all the available evidence I have been able to uncover suggests that Fred was the first of our London lineage.

I did a little distinctly amateur research into the Elms family tree, only to discover that it's all a bit bonsai. There are Elmses all around Ladbroke Grove from the end of the nineteenth century onwards: Horace and Emily, Clarence and Mary, James and Alice; namesakes all over the gaff, cousins, aunties, uncles-aplenty. But as I go back a generation or two, we seem to stop at little Fred, his mum Jane and his sister – or more probably his half-sister – Eliza.

Frederick Elms was born in 1862, Eliza a couple of years later. Both of them delivered in the Uxbridge Union Workhouse, both of them noted as 'father unknown', their young mother signing her name on the forms with only a cross. A destitute illiterate giving birth to the illegitimate, and I love her pretty bones. I have picked her as my great-great-great grandma and her two poor little Victorian bastards, sired by God knows who, delivered into gaunt penury in a punishing red-brick institution in a distant Middlesex village where I once saw the Sex Pistols, as my favourite forebears.

Having chosen Freddie as my abiding ancestor, I have invented a story of his arrival. I do not know that he tramped from the workhouse up the Uxbridge Road to Shepherd's Bush as a fourteen-year-old boy and decided to go no further, but it seems like a likely scenario. I imagine him as a likely lad, a coster, like so many of his offspring, setting out his stall where he stopped and setting up home just up the road in Notting Hill.

Once ensconced in the neighbourhood, he began begetting. There was an Albert, who in turn begat a Reggie, who in turn begat an Albert, who in turn begat both Reggie and me. (He begat my brother Barry too; God knows where that name came from.)

So Elmses came from Uxbridge – a place I once went to. Linked directly to London by its umbilical, eponymous road, it is now an outer suburb with a university named after Isambard Kingdom Brunel, where on 16 December 1977, the Sex Pistols – Cook and Jones, prime Shepherd's Bush street urchins – played their last ever London gig. Sid looking like a smack-scarred god with his top off, Lydon with a hankie on his head.

I got there by hitching a lift from outside a boozer on Bush Green while wearing bondage trousers. One ride all the way along the Uxbridge Road with my legs tied together, from a photographer for *Sounds* magazine.

That was the one and only time I have ever made that epic schlep way out west. I did it almost exactly one hundred years after Freddie presumably did precisely the same trip in the opposite direction. Turfed out of his grim institution, as he would have been at the age of fourteen – Lord knows what happened to poor Jane and Eliza – he made the fateful trek into town, perhaps sporting a battered stove-pipe hat, and never went back. He might, I guess, have hitched a ride on a coach, but more likely he footed for thirteen miles in hobnails until his sore feet would go no further. That is how we became Londoners.

Later on, the various Fredericks and Reginalds and Alberts that followed can be picked up in the census forms on Lancaster Road, Charles Street (now Queensdale Place), Cornwall Crescent and Latimer Road. Never migrating more than a few hundred yards in nearly a hundred years, around Notting Hill, or more accurately Notting Dale.

The Dale is the disreputable W10 neighbour down the claggy slope towards the Bush, always the poor bit, always the forgotten bit. Poor Freddie had found a home here and founded a West London dynasty, a QPR family. Hence my repeated visits to their decaying Fray Bentos tin-style stadium just off the Uxbridge Road, to be deeply disappointed by men in hoops. Hence why I see so many ghosts along the way.

Actually, a little further digging on my behalf has suggested that Freddie's forebears probably originated in a village in Wiltshire known as Lacock, where almost every Elms has his or her roots; leaving the hungry land for London's purportedly gold-strewn streets and winding up in a workhouse. This serves to bolster my belief that people settle in the side of the city from which they arrive. If you came up from Kent you'll be doomed to remain 'sarf' of the river, while men of Essex populate the East End, and vice versa. We came from the West Country.

That's why, for example, the Irish were in Camden Town; straight off the boat train to Euston, and as far as you can walk before you put down your suitcase and take a drink and a room. The Scots went round

the corner from King's Cross to the Caledonian Road, and the Welsh set up dairies and chapels near Paddington. It's also why Ugandan Asians who landed at Heathrow in the 1970s got only as far as Southall.

It all goes to show that all that cockney bollocks about Bow Bells is just that: Londoners are Londoners; choose these streets and they will shape you. I don't think a single member of my family had ever been east of Aldgate, but we were Gord Blimey to the apple core.

Then came the Westway.

'Luxury' and 'apartment' is currently the most reviled combination of words in the London lexicon. A plague of Bubonic virulence, its high-rise glass and steel pustules promising glamorous metropolitan living but in fact delivering little more than safety deposit boxes with balconies for the globally avaricious.

The current land grab, what some know as the Great London Flat Race, has driven out those who cannot afford millionaire price tags. Ordinary families exiled, banished to the edges, unwanted in the heart of this bright and shiny (or maybe shite and briny) twenty-first century Babylon. It is social cleansing, no doubt, threatening the cheek-by-jowl, rich-by-poor pattern of London life, which has existed since the hovels of Houndsditch were close to the mansions of Mansion House. But it certainly isn't the first time London has witnessed a centrifugal spasm of social exclusion, expulsion and expansion. It happened to the Elmses.

There may have been a touch of Victorian melodrama at play when Notting Dale was described as 'the Avernus of Kensington' – an avernus being the gateway to hell in the lurid parlance of nineteenth-century social reformers – but there's no doubt that the Dale was a strong contender for worst slum in town. Also known as North Kensington, Charles Dickens himself called it 'a plague spot, scarcely equalled for its insalubrity by any other in London'.

Adjacent to, but a million miles from, the grand and gracious houses of Holland Park, this clay-bound enclave of potteries and piggeries was said to have the highest death rate in the entire capital. It was a venal

swamp of acute poverty, chronic overcrowding and ubiquitous drunkenness, peopled originally by the product of a bout of forced social cleansing.

Many of the residents of Notting Dale had previously been turfed out of the notorious gin-soaked Rookery of St Giles. That's the one-time leper colony, plague pit and gallows breeding ground hard by Centre Point, which will feature large later in this book. The rookery was razed to the ground and New Oxford Street driven through it in a civic slum clearance scheme of the late 1840s, designed specifically to clean up the West End. So the unclean packed up their meagre belongings and headed further west to North Kensington.

The expat denizens of Hogarth's Gin Alley were joined in the then distant Dale by London's largest gypsy community. You can still see remnants of that traveller gathering in the cluster of spick and span caravans and abandoned fridges that make up the gypsy encampment under the northern end of the stained concrete confluence of the Westway. And traveller blood flows through the Elmses' veins.

Between the Romany settlers and the Rookery survivors, they created a rollicking redoubt of totters and tearaways, costermongers and scrap dealers, horse traders and numbers runners, washerwomen and brothel keepers, which wasn't entirely unrecognisable by the time my own dad, Albert mark two, was born there in 1924. He arrived in a house at 345 Latimer Road, which has long since gorn.

Latimer Road was once twice the length it is now, running almost all the way to Shepherd's Bush and was as close to a high street as lowly Notting Dale ever got. It was here, a couple of years after my father's first appearance, that one of my favourite tales from that era also emerged.

I have made it a life-long mission to collect arcane London stories, the history in the margins, and the case of the missing monkey jazz band of Latimer Road is a pretty good one. It centres on the activities of one Thomas Murphy, a travelling showman of Irish origin who made his final fortune from building and running dog tracks in the 1930s, and whose eternal mausoleum lies over in Southeast London amid the remains of his long gone Charlton stadium. But it is no surprise that he was originally based in W10.











The area, with its strong gypsy connections and its myriad stables for all the local totters (*Steptoe and Son's* Oil Drum Lane and their horse Hercules were actually in the Dale), always attracted fairground and circus folk. I can still recall peering through the fence of a local yard where the carnies stored their gaudy equipment well into the '70s.

There had even been a short-lived racecourse, the Notting Hill Hippodrome, the footprint of which can still be seen on maps and the memory of which is kept alive by a short street called Hippodrome Place. It failed because of the quagmire nature of the soil, which meant the going was always heavy, and so were some of the local characters. The well-heeled followers of the sport of kings didn't much like mixing with the local vagabonds, slum-dog residents of what was then known as Cut Throat Lane.

Anyway, before Mr Murphy invested in racing dogs, he had a thing about monkeys, specifically monkeys who could play jazz. Jazz bands were the big craze of the Roaring '20s, so obviously Thomas Murphy put together a troupe of thirteen simian swingers to entertain the happy flappers. I have to say at this point that I have no idea if there was some kind of awful racist joke going on here, nor do I have a clue exactly what sort of racket these animals actually made, but I do know that when they escaped from Murphy's yard on Latimer Road in November 1926, it became a major national news story.

It seems that the syncopated apes were released inadvertently when a gang of hardened chicken rustlers raided the gaff, thinking it was a full of potential Sunday lunches, only to discover that their foul crime had actually let the monkeys out of the bag. Mayhem ensued, with the freedom-intoxicated primates storming a corn chandlers round the corner on Bramley Road and scoffing twenty-eight pounds of biscuits before a team of eight coppers, armed with whistles and handcuffs, managed to round some of them up.

But a few evaded capture for days and held the nation enthralled. Two of them settled under the arches at Latimer Road station and would not be enticed out, while Bimbo the drummer boarded a train bound for Ealing. The intrepid band leader Franko made it as far as



Rugby in the Midlands, where the fugitive jazzer was finally captured in a local pub, the Saracen's Head. The report in the *Guardian* read, 'The captured monkey travelled to Rugby by train and was seen to jump out of the window of a first class carriage. He then walked sedately towards the barrier, and treating the ticket collector with scorn, cleared the barrier with a flying leap.'

Nowhere in the papers does it ever question quite why a bloke in Latimer Road had a troupe of Dixieland monkeys, nor can I ascertain if they ever performed again after their great escape. But I do cherish the idea that my infant father, perhaps even sitting outside his house in his pram, as was the way in those days, might have actually witnessed this splendid brouhaha.

Quite where on Latimer Road this occurred I have no idea. Because that area has been so remorselessly bashed about it's hard to pinpoint exactly where anything was. I learned a little more when my own son Alfie started playing football for QPR's Centre of Excellence as a half-decent, ten-year-old centre half in the early 2000s.

Every Thursday evening for years I had to take Alf for training on the plastic pitch, the one you see way down on your left as you swoosh past, high above on the eastbound elevated carriageway of the A40 approaching Paddington. It looks like you need a parachute to get there, but actually it's in the atmospheric warren of rain-streaked concrete under-crofts behind Ladbroke Grove, which utilises the space beneath the flyover.

Watching schoolboys trap and pass, trap and pass, trap and pass, for week after week, gets deeply dull, so I would often wander off searching for memories. I scoured the scrambled and disjointed ways, exploring the dead ends and blind alleys made by the imposition of a vast concrete barrier across these old streets, trying to picture what was there when we were, before the Westway was.

Today there's a splendid if ramshackle array of bizarre endeavours beneath the roaring road, including tennis courts, fives courts, horse paddocks, skateboard runs, guerrilla gardens, graffiti walls, shooting galleries, art galleries, dance studios, crack dens, breakers yards, rubble

. . . loads of rubble. It is an above-ground yet still subterranean other-world, where time has somehow stood still since this leviathan on stilts crashed into the landscape. I was searching amid all this for family traces, some sense of the life lived here before the cataclysm, but never quite finding them.

Then one weekend I told my mum, Alfie's doting Grandma, that her boy was playing for Rangers, the team her beloved husband had loved so dearly. Her accent had one of those old London quirks which rendered an A as an E.

'Where does Elfie train?' she asked, pleased but not particularly surprised that Alf/Elf should have been chosen to wear the holy hoops, as if somehow this was his birthright. I told her it was on the astroturf pitch off Barlby Road, a space she would once have known so well.

'Show me on a map,' she said, so I did. 'That is almost exactly the spot where the house your Dad was born in used to be.'

And it is no longer there, because of the Westway.

If luxury and apartment are the current pox upon London life, then back in the 1960s it was 'town' and 'planning'. London has traditionally been resistant to *Grand projets*, the overarching schemes that have shaped other more malleable cities. Paris is essentially the product of Haussmann's monomania; Manhattan a carefully considered grid. But when the Great Fire razed the City of London, Sir Christopher Wren's proposal to rebuild the whole lot on a rational, ordered masterplan, with wide boulevards and symmetrical squares, was thankfully stymied by the fact that Londoners wouldn't wait for high-minded architects and bureaucrats, so they began re-constructing their houses, shops and taverns along the twisting, claustrophobic medieval street pattern that survives to this day.

This city has a mind of its own, organic and anarchic, at its best when it grows from the gutter up. But in the futuristic, car-crazy '60s town planning was all the rage, and the part of town that has every reason to rage against the planners was poor old W10. For the neighbourhood Frederick Elms chose as his own was pretty much obliterated



by men with bow ties and sharp pencils. They decided that it would have a motorway or two driven through it, high-rise council estates placed upon it and its close-knit inhabitants hounded out in a petty diaspora to Perivale, Northolt, Greenford and other far-flung ‘overspill’ estates way out west on the Central line.

From W2 to W12, Bayswater to the Bush, a swathe of charismatic inner West London was devastated, divided like some little Berlin by this flyover, which showed no mercy as it took out whole communities all around it: town planners made the Luftwaffe look benign. Paddington, once the most densely populated place in Britain, never really recovered, Ladbroke Grove was split into two and Notting Dale essentially disappeared.

My mum and dad – who had met while jitterbugging at the Hammersmith Palais, courted while the bombs fell during the Blitz, running across Westminster bridge holding hands to avoid a doodlebug, who had survived an offer of accommodation from John Christie at nearby 10 Rillington Place, shouted down Blackshirts at Speakers’ Corner, navigated double-deckers in pea-soupers and witnessed the notorious Notting Hill race riots at the end of their road – opted for a two-up, two-down council house on the Watling Estate in Burnt Oak. They chose to live at the end of the Edgware Road, on the outer reaches of the Northern line, where nothing ever happens. And truth be told, they were happy to go, because don’t forget: ‘Notting Hill is a slum.’

It is important to acknowledge that poverty is never nice and rarely romantic. Notting Hill/Dale was certainly not an aversus by the time my mum and dad were living there. The worst areas of nineteenth-century deprivation and overcrowding, especially around the notorious Bangor Street section, had already been cleared and cleansed, replaced by a pleasant little park and blocks of early social housing named after Charles Dickens’ son Henry, a local councillor and social reformer. But well into the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s, this was still a run-down and deeply deprived part of London.

The housing stock was made up largely of threadbare and careworn

three- or four-storey, early Victorian terraced houses, which had been degraded and divided and divided. They squeezed in more and more rent payers, most of whom lived with outside toilets, shared cooking facilities, leaking roofs and windows, rotten floorboards and damp in all directions.

This was one of the few parts of London where the signs did not always read 'NO Irish, NO Blacks, NO Dogs', so consequently there were lots of all of those. Add in a large Spanish community, in exile after the Civil War, and a smattering of Italians, Africans, Cypriots and Maltese, all attracted by the cheap rents and crammed into those tiny rooms, and you have arguably the first example of true multiculturalism anywhere in Britain.

But it was the influx of fantastically well-dressed West Indians in the wake of the *Windrush* which would define Notting Hill for generations. These newcomers, with their tilted trilbies and languid gaits, gave the area a natty sway and a swagger. Caribbean music coming





from every basement blues and open window; exotic herbs hanging in the air; exotic fruit and veg – okra, breadfruit and plantain, which the costers dubbed ‘queer gear’ – appearing on the barrows.

In West London, it was largely Trinidadians and small islanders – St Lucians, Antiguan, Guyanans – who settled in those blistered and blackened terraces. The new Jamaican arrivals tended to congregate over the river in Brixton. That’s why Carnival, a Trinidadian tradition, but never a Jamaican one, found its natural home in Notting Hill. And long before Carny started in 1962, there were blues, steel bands and calypso ringing in the air.

But it wasn’t only West Indian life. Shebeens, spielers, showbands, rock’n’roll and dog crap were all part of the everyday as the cultures entangled, even if they didn’t always get along. Add to that mix the effluent peddled by one Peter Rachman, whose name became a synonym for evil slum landlords everywhere. His dubious career started in an office in Shepherd’s Bush and his malign practices served to further diminish the reputation of the wider Notting Hill area. (His enforcer was one Michael X, who will also pop up again later in this book.)

The neighbourhood was blighted by bad housing and even worse landlords, and among the litany of slogans which adorned those grimy walls was a graffito on a wall in Notting Hill for years, which read ‘Not Lords of the Land but Scum of the Earth’. There were others saying ‘KBW’ – ‘Keep Britain White’.

There were undoubted tensions, particularly between young West Indian lads and indigenous local youths, the latter perhaps enraged and envious of the sexual success of the former. This famously flared up in 1958, in what have become known as the Notting Hill race riots. More accurately, they took place in Notting Dale. Local Teddy Boys, including brothel-creeper-clad relatives of mine (I take no pride in the prejudice), egged on by Mosley’s fascists, fought it out with some of the local West Indians (augmented I’m told by Jamaican reinforcements from down south) over three nationally shaming nights of violence.

Overcrowding and poverty, as well as the all-too-prevalent racism of the time, were undoubtedly major factors and W10 was certainly in

need of some severe TLC. But did it really need knocking down? Town planners back in the '60s were of the absolutist, year zero persuasion. Call in the bulldozers, drive through the motorway.

The idea that the car should take precedence in the urban pecking order is now deeply unfashionable, but in the '60s, the prevailing paradigm suggested that the future belonged to the automobile. The centre of the city, town planners decided, was no place for decent, modern, middle-class people to abide. Heavily influenced by American suburban ideals, the idea took hold that inner London would primarily be a place to work; a high-rise downtown where you would drive in to your swanky office on a network of lovely new motorways from your outlying home in leafy Acacia Avenue. The poor sods that did stay in the centre would be decanted into tower blocks between the *autostrade*.

It has always struck me as somehow a bit sneaky that nice bourgeois academics and architects convinced working-class people that the houses they lived in were unfit for human habitation, then moved into them like a shot once the oiks were cleared out. The streets that survived the wrecking ball in W10 and W11 are now among the most valuable on earth. A four-storey gaff in Portland Road, where my cousin once lived, is roughly six million quid a pop, quite a sum for a slum. But I am prepared to accept that actually the motives of most of the slum clearance schemes were honourable.

The Utopian urges and socialist motives behind the big brutalist blocks like the large Lancaster West Estate and Erno Goldfinger's handsome Trellick Tower, which replaced the notorious but glorious Southam Street area in Kensal Town, just north of Notting Dale, were admirable. People originally loved having indoor toilets, fitted kitchens and central heating. But smashing apart a community to build a road in the sky is perhaps less benign. Doing it twice is surely close to criminal.

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde: 'To lose one house to a motorway scheme may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose a second is bleeding ridiculous.' But that is precisely what happened to the Elmses. The Latimer Road abode was subsumed beneath a football pitch beneath a flyover, but



by then my dad's mob had already moved a little further west-southwest, back towards Shepherd's Bush, where Freddie first arrived from Uxbridge. They settled in a short, rather pleasant no-through road called Norland Gardens. At least it was pleasant until some brainbox dreamed up the London Motorway Box.

The nominal head of the Norland Gardens house was my dad's dad Reg, always known as Grandad Weenie because of his tiny stature, but it was really run by Aunt Glad, my father's eldest sister and a phenomenal character, despite also being a shade less than five feet in height. (The diminutive stature of that generation of the old Elms clan is what makes me assume Freddie was also little.) Glad and her husband ran a fruit and veg business in Norland market, played honky-tonk piano in the local boozers, cleaned local schools and smoked thousands of fags a day.

Aunt Glad became my *de facto* grandma after my dad's actual mum, a fiery, red-haired Romany lass, prone to rolling up her sleeves to fight her corner, died just as I was being born. Glad was the absolute epitome of the caustic, caring, all-encompassing working-class woman, quick of wit, sharp of tongue, full of love. When I think of Notting Dale, I think of Aunt Glad, the embodiment of a largely lost world.

Her place in Norland Gardens was the house my dad called 'home', even though he lived in exile with his half-Yiddisher wife and three sons, half-a-dozen miles and two bus rides away on the Watling Estate. My mum's family 'home', the abode of the Biffens, was on the White City estate, just the other side of the Westway, and even closer to QPR. So every Saturday, without fail, and for much of the school holidays, we would make the pilgrimage from Burnt Oak back to the ancestral homelands to see both sets of families. These weekend trips back 'home' were a feature of estate life for most Burnt Oak families, who maintained their ties to their old inner London communities in Islington, King's Cross, Paddington and Notting Hill. Everybody had a 'home' to go to in town.

My abiding memory of those Saturdays is of waiting for countless

eternities for a Number 52 at Cricklewood bus garage in the freezing cold, snuggling beneath my mum's coat for warmth. We didn't have a car to drive up that modern flyover, which had wreaked such destruction, so we were doomed to wait for buses that never came. But despite the cold and the wait, it was worth it. For somehow I knew, even then I knew, that we had been banished from what I thought of as *real* London, *proper* London, *our* London.

This was now the soon-to-be-swinging '60s, yet there was not even a hint of modernity in the vocabulary of those dark, brown and still essentially Edwardian West London interiors we visited every weekend. A litany of splendidly archaic words such as: Anaglypta, antimacassar, scullery, scuttle, doily, spittoon, bolster, meat safe, tin bath, outside privy, front parlour, linoleum, Lincrusta, candlewick, winceyette, eider-down, counterpane, chamber pot, Izal, Omo and carbolic.

Being at both of those deeply old-fashioned West London homes also involved arcane rituals. Tanners were pressed into palms upon arrival; bacon sarnies proffered, always doused in malt vinegar; milk bottles kept in buckets of cold water were produced to drink. The best bit was running age-inappropriate errands; placing a bet for Grandad Weenie at the bookies and fetching beer from the offie counter in the General Smuts pub for Grandad Biffen.

My mum's mum's little house was part of the sprawling White City site, which had originally been constructed in 1908 for a huge Franco-British Exhibition and the first London Olympics. It was the gleaming vision of one Imre Kiralfy, an Austro-Hungarian burlesque impresario, huckster and conjurer. Kiralfy was a protégé of P.T. Barnum, and he decreed a vast white marble-clad Xanadu (hence the name 'the Great White City'), stretching from Shepherd's Bush roundabout virtually all the way to Wormwood Scrubs. The showgrounds (as it was still known to older locals) was later used for a series of Empire exhibitions and trade fairs and boasted scenic railways, ferris wheels, vast pavilions, lakes, waterfalls and exotic themed 'villages' displaying the wonders of the rose-hued world, all in gleaming white.

In its day, the Great White City attracted hundreds of thousands

of chaps in boaters, and ladies in fancy bonnets; one of the wonders of the age. But each exhibition and fair was a little less successful than the last, and it slowly dwindled to desolation. Its grand proscenium arch entrance could still be seen by Shepherd's Bush bus garage, rotting gracefully away, leading only to a collection of breakers' yards, dodgy car dealers, dubious lockups and shabby light-industrial units. It was finally demolished in 2005 to make way for the gargantuan twenty-first century pleasure dome called the Westfield shopping centre. I think that's called progress.

The royal box at the White City Stadium, the largest stadium in the world when it was constructed for the 1908 Olympics, was exactly 26 miles, 385 yards from Windsor Castle, where the marathon running race started, which is why all marathons are now that precise distance. (There is, at time of writing, still a line in the pavement, in between Tesco Express and Starbucks, next to a nondescript 1980s BBC building, marking precisely where the finish line was).

Later, the White City Stadium became the home of British greyhound racing, a car-coat and flat-cap mecca, a cathedral of broken dreams and torn betting slips, which was within jogging distance of QPR's much humbler, but longer lasting ground at Loftus Road. This was evidenced by the fact that Stanley Bowles, the shaman of Shepherd's Bush, the greatest footballer ever to grace the hoops, a carefree maverick and an inveterate gambler, could occasionally be seen running from White City to Loftus Road, with a mac over his kit and a biro behind his ear just moments before kick-off.

The White City housing estate itself was built on the site of the decaying showgrounds in the 1930s and became a bastion of tough, working-class QPR stalwarts. Always an estate with a reputation, it was once filled with my cousins, uncles and aunts, shouting to each other over the balconies of the curvilinear five-storey blocks, peopled by a mix of old London, Irish and Caribbean families. But when that generation of White City-ites moved out, there was a stark, dark, decline.

Allowed to run down, its walkways strewn with rubbish, old cars



fester in the drives, it became regarded as a sink estate, neglected and notorious for crime, crack dens and 'problem' families. I always felt perfectly safe walking through the flats to football and stopping for a pint, felt most of its inhabitants were decent people living in tough conditions. But I had to smile recently when strolling past a fancy hoarding just over the road from the estate. It was wrapped around one of the plethora of swanky new luxury developments going up in the area, and it boasted in big letters 'WHITE CITY LIVING'.

My mum's mob, the Biffens, started their bout of White City living when the estate was first built. They moved to one of the slightly 'superior' houses on the fringes of the estate from their two rooms in Pimlico in 1930–31. Perhaps they chose there because my nan and grandad had gone to Kiralfy's Great White City while courting. The last Biffen present was my Aunt Joyce, my mum's youngest sister, who had a photo of Doctor Kildare on her bedroom wall and always called me her 'little gammon rasher'. She died alone in the house in 1998. So for nearly seven decades there were Biffens at 9 Bentworth Road.

The most exciting thing about that little house as a kid was its proximity to QPR, but also to Wormwood Scrubs prison, which was directly behind it on Du Cane Road. A grim Gothic institution, there was a bell which would be rung whenever a prisoner escaped, warning the locals to shut their back door, as they may come prowling through your garden in a Magwitch fashion. I've convinced myself I was there the day the bell rang for the Cambridge Soviet spy George Blake, who went over the wall en route to Moscow in 1966.

I could also have heard a rather special piano being played. Ivor Novello spent a couple of months in the Scrubs during the war for forging petrol coupons. He clearly had special privileges as he was allowed to bring in his baby grand so that he could compose a few bars behind bars, which he then donated to the prison chapel where it still sits today. Such stories made my nan's little house seem a little more glamorous, but other than that it was a fairly anonymous two-up two-down council house. Or so I thought.

It was only years later, when I was doing some research into the history of Kiralfy's original White City, just as the last vestiges of it were about to be subsumed by the brute leviathan of the Westfield shopping centre, that I discovered something fascinating about that house. I saw a map indicating that Bentworth Road had once been on the site of the Grand Indian Pavilion, the jewel in the colonial Expo crown. This boasted turbaned Maharajas, uniformed sepoy, fakirs with snakes and a family of elephants that had camped exactly where Nan's back garden was. I wish I had been able to tell that to the Bengali family who moved in a few doors away.

Apart from the rare thrill of the prison bell, the greatest excitement of time spent at Nan's was the considerably more commonplace pleasure of being sent to collect Grandad, Isaac Silas Biffen, from the General Smuts. This boozer, named after a Boer, is now an Egyptian restaurant, shisha bar and even a little impromptu Masjid for the many Muslim inhabitants of White City. But it was once a truly rollicking local. Its denizens divided between the Irish and the West Indian, both of them dressed in suits, many in ties, both drinking the Guinness, one lot watching the racing, the other lot playing raucous dominoes, everybody smoking copiously, swearing furiously; 'Bludclot' and 'pogue mahone'. This place was rich.

I would be dispatched there at tea time to get Grandad Biffen – a solitary, grumpy, hard-drinking, usually tight-fisted man who would have to be prised out of the saloon bar of the Smuts. Despite being a famed tightwad he would occasionally bribe me half a crown if I let him have another beer and maybe a chaser before heading home. That allowed me, aged maybe eight or nine, to revel in the wanton, lubricated air of the place, rank and rowdy, thick and male. To this day I like pubs like that far too much. I like the very smell of them. Sadly there aren't too many pubs like the smelly Smuts left anywhere in London.

And I really liked going to Aunt Glad's too. The house in Norland Gardens felt tumultuous, teeming, but even then it seemed to me like an endangered species of an abode. It was actually an early Victorian

terrace, four storeys including a basement, steps up from street level, an 'area' below, each floor full of family. The place was always busy with cousins and aunts, and a man known as Charlie Percy who was some sort of in-law who liked rum. There were kids everywhere, parties aplenty, a piano for Glad, a front parlour used only for wakes, and a telly in the kitchen, where Weenie sat in a collarless shirt watching the racing in fuzzy black and white. There was a backyard, which itself backed on to a totters' yard where they kept the horses.

There was also an air of cash money affluence, a typical cockney pride in always having a few bob in your pocket, 'fruit in the bowl and no one's even ill'. Grandad Weenie had been a street angler, a man who knew how to make a shilling. Aunt Glad's husband was a market trader and shouter of wares, and compared to the parsimonious smallness of my mum's mum's council house a mile away in Bentworth Road, it felt like money and song and life flowed in Norland Gardens. Us kids, especially myself and my second cousin Lee-Ann, Glad's granddaughter, ran a kind of sweet riot. The line between the house and the street was blurred, permeable, in and out, games that started in the yard often ended in the Bush. My favourite memory of Aunt Glad's house is of escaping it to run wild on the debris with the local herberts.

The whole family went to both houses most weekends when I was a small boy, and then we didn't. The family wasn't whole any more. My father, Albert James Elms, Freddie's distant heir, was a soft, hard-left, building-site trade unionist, and a tender, loving husband and father of three. Intensely proud of the contribution he made to his city as a skilled steel erector, reconstructing his bombed-out town, perched atop tall scaffolding. He would reel off a list of the jobs he'd worked on from hospitals to gas holders, council estates to the Festival of Britain. He was part of the crew that constructed the Festival Hall on the South Bank and with other local comrades helped drive Mosley's fascists from their base in Kensington Park Road. My dad was steeped deep in the London he helped to build.

Albert Elms went to work on a building site in Park Royal one rainy



day and never returned. He was forty-one, and my mum was thirty-nine; I was about to be seven. Perhaps it's a good thing he never got to see his city rebuilt again by Mammon & Co, callously reshaped by the market and those who do its bidding. But it is tragic that he never got to see his three sons become men.

He was taken away by a sudden, unheralded heart attack, and I have missed him every single day since. The cause of death of my father in 1966 was given on the certificate I found among my mum's effects as 'aortic stenosis of rheumatic origin', which is now described as a condition 'rare outside the developing world'. His death left my mum bereft and me bewildered: why would such a good man go?

We would still go west most weekends. My mum now on her own with three sons, working two or three jobs, but still making that tortuous cross-town schlepp to keep the fraying family ties together.

