

Olde Old Town Kensington

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From as far back as the year 1200, Kensington has been on the map-the map of England, that is. Kensington, England, was then a farming village gathered round a church on high ground near the river Thames. As near to London as Kensington, Maryland, is to the District of Columbia, the town grew into a similar relationship with its capital city.

Just as prominent citizens of Washington journeyed to their summer homes in Kensington in the early part of the twentieth century, so was the scene in seventh-century England. The rural village, known for its produce and its nurseries, became a haven for the King's advisors, who built country estates that were conveniently close to London.

Back then, in a popular pub, the Red Lion, swordplay, for the prize of a gold lace hat, was a popular pastime. These places still stand today, crowded in among modern stores and news stands on Kensington High Street.

In Shakespeare's time, the center for the Roman Catholic church in England was the Brompton Oratory in Kensington. Its founder, Saint Phillip Neri, was convinced that music brought forth the highest and noblest emotions. He started a great musical tradition there. Only the construction of Westminster Cathedral in 1901 shadowed the Oratory's importance.

It was the fresh air and open spaces of Kensington that drew King William III, who had asthma, and Queen Mary, who had claustrophobia, to Kensington in the 1700s. William III bought a mansion and ordered it to be transformed into Kensington Palace.

Anxious to move in, the Queen would often visit the site to "hasten the workmen," as she said. After mishaps with collapsed roofs and a fire, finally, two years later, the Queen informed the King, "Kensington is ready." A member of the court described the house as "very noble, tho not greate." The court member added that the accompanying gardens were "very delicious."

Kensington Gardens is now a children's paradise, with fantastical and elaborate gardens, a statue of Peter Pan, and swings donated by the author J.M. Barrie. Also, there is the Elfin Oak, a tree trunk carved with small animals.

The gardens themselves have undergone transformations from lemon and orange tree orchards to formal dutch gardens, to gravel pits (thought to cure bladder ailments), sunken gardens, and even a revolving summer house reflecting new gardening fashions and the whims of the new monarchs.

An alcove was built in the Gardens for William's successor, Queen Anne, who later died in Kensington Palace from an attack of apoplexy caused by overeating. Her successor, George I, liked Kensington because it reminded him of his favorite part of Germany. He brought a full entourage from Germany into Kensington. Under him, a Germanic redecoration of the palace and gardens ensued.

In Kensington Gardens, Hans Christian Anderson first met his hero Charles Dickens and wrote, "He is just what I thought he would be. We understood each other at once, clasped each other's hands and talked English-I unfortunately not very well."

For centuries the Gardens were private, although in the 1700s George II used to open them on Saturday afternoons to respectably dressed people. In celebration of the Gardens, Thomas Tickell wrote this poem in 1772.

Where Kensington high o'er the neighboring lands
'midst greens and sweets, a regal fabric stands,
And sees each spring, luxuriant in her bowers,

a snow of blossoms, and a wild of flowers,
The dames of Britain oft in crowds repair
to gravel walks and unpolluted air.
Here, while the town in damp and darkness lies,
They breathe in sunshine, and see azure skies;
each walk, with robes of various dyes bespread,
Seems from afar a moving tulip bed,
Where rich brocades and glossy damasks glow,
And chintz, the rival of the showering bow.
Finally, King William opened the Gardens to all in the mid-1800s.
Meanwhile, in Kensington, Maryland, the first families were discovering new lands of their own.

Five years after King William III moved into Kensington Palace in the 1700s, John Bowack described Kensington as "...ever been resorted to by persons of quality...and is inhabited by gentry and people of note: there is also an abundance of shopkeepers and artificers...which make it appear rather like part of London, than a country village."

The Court turned the rural parish into a bustling town known for its nurseries and for a profusion of private schools. What was a footpath became Love Lane and then Victoria Road, now a major thoroughfare through West London.

The Kensington landscape in the 1800s included a huge circus pavilion that featured acrobats, chariot races, balloon ascents, and two brass bands for a sixpence admission price. When the circus folded, the land was used for London's first "airport." A huge balloon ship, 160 feet long, with a crew of seventeen "experimental sailors" garnered great publicity in the mid 1800s, but, sadly, never got off the ground.

By this time, London's grand department stores, including Harrods, were built and gave Kensington a reputation as a shopping district.
Princess Victoria was born at Kensington Palace in 1819.