

CHEPSTOW VILLAS

Chepstow Villas is a pleasant leafy street that runs between Pembridge Villas and Kensington Park Road. It is intersected by Ledbury Road/Chepstow Crescent; Denbury Road/Pembridge Crescent; and Portobello Road. Only the last block between Portobello Road and Kensington Park Road (numbers 35-41 odds and 54-62 evens) is in the Ladbroke Conservation Area. The rest is in the Norland Conservation area.

Until the 1840s, the whole area was agricultural land. But in around 1840 the demand for housing began to increase and the second great surge of housebuilding began on the Ladbroke estate. The Ladbroke family, the owners of the estate, had begun to sell off parcels of land to speculators. James Weller Ladbroke retained the eastern part of what is now Chepstow Villas (numbers 1-15 odds and 2-32 evens), but the central part, up as far as Portobello Road, passed into the ownership of Robert Hall Esquire of Old Bond Street. And after James Weller Ladbroke's death in 1847, his heir Felix Ladbroke sold the western plot to a speculating parson from Bedfordshire, the Rev. Brooke Edward Bridges, and the latter then sold it on to another developer, Thomas Pocock. So there were a number of different landowners involved in the development of Chepstow Villas.

During the second half of the 1840s and the early 1850s, the street was laid out and development proceeded apace on all three parts of Chepstow Villas, as well as in neighbouring streets. The landowners signed agreements with a number of developers, who each undertook to build a certain number of houses. Many of the developers were professional builders, but there were also gentlemen and tradesmen interested in property speculation who then employed their own builders. Once the houses were built, the landowner would give 99-year leases of the houses to the developer in exchange for an annual ground rent. The developer would then sublet the individual houses in order to recover his investment. There are records of the dates on which the individual leases were granted, and from these one can work out when the houses were built. Although the landowners exercised some control over what houses were built, much was left to the individual developers, which explains the variety of styles to be found in the street.

One of the main developers, with whom both James Weller Ladbroke and Robert Hall signed agreements, was a civil engineer called William Henry Jenkins who hailed from Herefordshire on the Welsh borders. It was he who appears to have decided the names for the new streets, choosing the names of places near his home – Chepstow, Denbigh, Ledbury and Pembridge.

ORIGINS OF THE HOUSES

Between Pembridge Villas and Ladbury Road/Chepstow Crescent (Nos. 1-11 odds and 2-24 evens)

This part of Chepstow Villas was on the land which the Ladbroke family had retained in their ownership.

The symmetrical terrace at **no. 1-11 odds** on the south side was built between 1847 and 1849; the builder was George Passmore of Edware Road, a plumber. In 1850, however, Felix Ladbroke granted leases of Nos. 1-7 to an ironmonger, W. Allen of Avery Row, who presumably had a financial arrangement with Passmore. The houses are very standard half-stucco with plain porticoes, but the two end houses, numbers 1 and 11, are enlivened with pilasters surmounted by Corinthian capitals. At the eastern end of the street, where there used to stand a large villa called Pembridge House, some extra small modern dwellings have been fitted in next to number 1.

Nos. 2-24 on the south side of this part of the street are all pairs of three-storey semi-detached villas with basements. The semi-detached villas at **Nos. 2-8 evens** are the work of the builder William Reynolds, who was also responsible for a number of houses in Lansdowne and Clarendon Roads. They are of well-balanced half-stucco design with ornate cornices and porticoes supported by Corinthian columns (the latter “poorly proportioned” in the view of the *Survey of London*). John Weller Ladbroke granted leases of these houses to Reynolds in 1846.

Nos. 10-16 evens were erected a bit later, in 1850, by a builder called John Wadge. They are also pairs of semi-detached villas, but in full stucco and plainer in design, although with touches of rustication at the corners and around the ground floor windows. A builder called William Judd was responsible for **Nos. 18-20**; Ladbroke granted leases to him of these houses in 1846. In the early 1980s, No. 20 was purchased by the architect Philip Wagner. He had acquired No. 22 next door six years earlier and the one-storey infill that he built between the two houses won an award from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (source: House and Garden May 1883). He probably also added the present Corinthian capitals to the porch of No. 20, so that it matched No. 22.

Nos. 22 and 24 appear to have been on land leased to Ladbroke to William Jenkins, as it was Jenkins who granted leases of them in 1846 to the same William Judd, “by direction of William Cullingford”, which would indicate that both Cullingford (another builder) and Judd had had a hand in erecting this rather grand pair of full stucco houses liberally sprinkled with Corinthian capitals. The bay windows on No. 24 were added in the early 20th century.

Between Ledbury Road/Chepstow Crescent and Denbigh Road/Pembridge Crescent (Nos. 13-23 odds and 26-40 evens)

Nos. 13-15 odds and 24-32 evens were on Ladbroke's land. The other houses in this sector were on the land owned by Robert Hall. Both landowners, however, had leased most of the land on which they stand to William Jenkins, and he commissioned William Cullingford to build all the houses (except possibly No. 13).

No. 13 is (according to the *Survey of London*) not mentioned in the list of leases granted by Ladbroke, Hall and Jenkins and seems curiously stuck onto the side of **No. 15**, which presumably began life as a detached villa. But it must have been built fairly soon after No. 15, as both appear on the Ordnance Survey map of 1863. Both are full stucco, but whereas No. 15 fits a standard flat-fronted pattern, No. 13 has bow windows on all three of its floors above the raised basement.

Nos 17-23 were built by William Cullingford, who obtained leases of these houses from Jenkins in 1849-50. **Nos. 17 and 19** are large detached villas and No. 19 still retains handsome balustrading along the top of the façade. The bay window on No. 17 was added at the beginning of the 1900s. **Nos. 21 and 23** are semi-detached.

On the other side of the road, there are two more pairs of semi-detached stucco villas at **Nos. 26-32**. They were built slightly earlier, as Jenkins granted leases of them to Cullingford in 1847-8. Nos. 26-28 have an interesting decorative frieze above the first floor windows. No. 28, like so many houses on the street, has gained later bay windows.

Originally, there followed two large detached villas and then another pair of semi-detached ones on the corner with Denbigh Road, probably all built around 1847 by Cullingford. One of them, No. 36, Cullingford chose for his own home. None now survives. **Nos. 36-40** were replaced in 1892-3 by the huge red-brick building that is now Thornbury Court. It was designed by Mr A. Young in the then popular "Dutch" style, to house the Convent of Our Lady of Sion. Its Italianate-style tower has long been a local land-mark. In the early 1980s it and a neighbouring building around the corner in Denbigh Road were transformed into 44 flats. The Convent still has a perch in the modern building next door that replaced the original villa at **No. 34**.

Between Denbigh Road/Pembridge Crescent and Portobello Road (Nos. 25-33 odds and 42-52 evens)

The houses on both side of the road in this sector are detached double-fronted villas, all originally erected by a builder called James Hall (apparently no relation of Robert Hall, the owner of the land) in the early 1850s. **Nos. 25-33** are symmetrical low-built structures with two floors above a raised basement level, although sadly an extra floor has been added to No. 27. Originally, these houses all had balustrades along the top

Nos. 42-52 on the northern side are more variable (or have been more heavily altered). **No. 42** is another low-built detached villa. It was the home of the Victorian animal painter **Thomas Sidney Cooper (1802-1901)**. In about 1875 he commissioned from Richard Norman Shaw, one of the great architects of the day, the studio that stands in the garden around the corner in Denbigh Road. No. 42 also has an elegant arched porch apparently erected about the same time.



Norman Shaw studio at No 42a, designed for the painter Thomas Sidney Cooper (photo 2008).

Nos. 44 and 46 both have raised basements with three floors above. No. 44 is flat-fronted with heavy ornamentation around the windows; No. 46 again has bay windows added at the beginning of the last century.

The original **No. 48** was demolished and replaced in the 1960s by an unsympathetic modern block of flats. This was in turn demolished and replaced in the late 1980s by the present structure, designed by the American-trained Greek architect Demetri Porphyrion. It is in fact purpose-built as flats with a central lobby, but has been carefully designed to reflect the villa structure of its neighbours. It was praised (and illustrated) in *Country Life* of 6 June 1989 as a good example of a compromise between the typical architect's belief in the Modern Movement and the public's desire for a traditional Georgian style.



No. 48: purpose-built as flats, but looks like a villa (*photo 2008*).

Nos. 50 and 52 are two more matching well-proportioned detached villas originally with two storeys above ground, although a third has been added to No. 50. Leases of all these houses were granted around 1851. Both have had a number of interesting residents since then.



52 Chepstow Villas. In the 19th century it was the home of a great-nephew of Napoleon, and in the 20th century was the childhood home of the novelist Monica Dickens (see below).
(*Photograph 2008.*)

Between Portobello Road and Kensington Park Road (Nos. 35-41 odds and 54-62 evens)

This was the sliver of land that belonged to Thomas Pocock, and he seems to have organised the building of these two handsome terraces himself rather than giving building leases. They were completed in 1850-51 and both were originally named Kensington Park Terrace.

The photograph on the right shows 54 Chepstow Villas, on the corner of Portobello Road, part of the handsome terrace on the north side between Portobello Road and Kensington Park Road (*photo* © Thomas Erskine 2006).



35-41 odds Chepstow Villas, on the south side. The Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth lived in the second house from the right (see below). (*Photo* © Thomas Erskine 2006.)

WHAT SORT OF PEOPLE LIVED IN CHEPSTOW VILLAS?

The original inhabitants of the newly built houses in Chepstow Villas were solid and respectable middle class – solicitors, barristers, schoolteachers, civil engineers, surgeons, stockbrokers and merchants. Most households had two or three servants. There were quite a few people living on their own private income from land or securities. In the 19th century census returns, they describe themselves in a variety of ways, “fundholder”, “landed proprietor”, or in one case “no profession, no trade”, clearly wanting to make clear that he did not need to earn his own living; and in another “gentleman-at-large”. One of the few foreign residents had his occupation described by the census enumerator simply as “Foreign Person”.

A distinguished 19th century foreign resident was **Louis Kossuth (1802-1894)**, the Hungarian patriot and statesman who tried unsuccessfully to establish an independent Hungarian republic in the mid-19th century when Hungary was under Austrian rule. The Austrians suppressed the republic with Russian help and Kossuth fled to Britain in 1851. He lived at No 39 from 1852-9, before leaving for Italy to join a fellow fighter against Austrian rule, Giuseppe Mazzini. Whilst in Chepstow Villas Kossuth unsuccessfully tried several times to organise mass uprisings in Hungary against Austria.

No. 52 was in the early 1890s the home of a great-nephew of Napoleon, who called himself **Prince Louis Clovis Bonaparte**, although he had no right to the title of prince as he was born out of wedlock to his father, Prince Louis Lucien Bonaparte (the son of Napoleon’s brother), although Louis Lucien did subsequently marry his son’s mother. Louis Clovis was born in 1859 and married an English girl called Laura Elizabeth Scott who also styled herself princess. He died in relative poverty at No. 52 in 1994. He left no will and there was an unseemly wrangle between Princess Laura Elizabeth and Louis Clovis’s mother Princess Clemence Bonaparte over the administration of his (very small) estate.

By the end of the 19th century, the street appears to have become less grand. A number of tradesman are recorded among the occupants, and some of the houses were no longer single family dwellings, but had two or three families or lodgers living in them. In 1881, both No. 31 and No. 37 had been turned into small girls’ schools, each with eight or nine boarders. The general trend towards multi-occupation continued through the first half of the 20th century. The houses were mostly divided into cheap flats and the street became deeply unfashionable. The novelist **Monica Dickens (1915-1992)**, who was brought up in No. 52, gave a graphic description of the street in an interview in the Evening Standard in 1973. *“It was a very bad neighbourhood. When my parents bought the house in 1912, it was quite respectable. Then it became like Clapham right on the edge of the slums. In the unlikely event of any guy asking to take me home, I would be too ashamed to say I lived in Chepstow Villas.....In my day most of the houses had degenerated into rooming houses, full of alcoholic boxers. There was a brothel across the street. Ours was the only family house on the block, very shabby genteel. The streets began to be a centre for all kinds of strange occult sects, with weird signs on the doors; failures and revolutionaries and penniless students and odd potty people lived there”*. She also recalled how a “little Italian guy”

used to sell his paintings on Saturday morning outside the house, lining them up against the garden railing. Her parents' house and the neighbourhood can be recognised in her novel *The Heart of London*.

Even throughout its most downmarket period, however, the street was home to some notable residents, especially from literary and artistic circles. Monica Dickens' father was a barrister, **Henry Charles Dickens (1882-1966)**, a grandson of Charles Dickens. He and his wife Fanny came to No. 52 as a young married couple in 1912 and remained there for over 50 years. **Florence Gladstone (c.1856-1928)**, author of *Notting Hill in Bygone Days* (1924) was living at No. 19 between 1909 and 1917. **Sir Steuart Wilson (1889-1966)**, singer and musical administrator, was another distinguished resident who lived in the street during its unfashionable phase, first at No. 23 (from about 1926) and then after the Second World War at the rather grander No. 19.

During the Blitz in the autumn of 1940, a number of bombs fell on Chepstow Villas, mostly causing only minor damage to roads and gardens. But an incendiary bomb on 15 October 1940 damaged the top floor of No. 46; and on 8 December 1940 Nos. 19 and 20 were damaged and two people had to be evacuated, according to air warden's reports.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Chepstow Villas began a steady ascent to renewed fashionability. An early sign came in the mid-1960s, when the Conservative MP **Julian Critchley (1930-2000)** moved into the detached villa at No. 50. He was shortly joined by his friend and fellow politician **Michael Heseltine**, who kept the house until the mid 1970s. By that time the street had become quite sought after, and Heseltine sold the house to a Saudi princess. She did not move in immediately, and the house (by then valued at some £200,000) became the subject of a famous squatting case. A group of squatters called "Mustard" or "Multiracial union of Squatters to alleviate Racial Discrimination" moved into the house, announcing that they proposed to stay there until the owner was ready to move in. The Saudi princess finally obtained an eviction order in 1976.

No. 18 Chepstow Villas was the home of a succession of private theatre clubs (such clubs were a way of avoiding the heavy-handed censorship of the Lord Chamberlain). Between 1941 and 1943 the "Threshold Theatre Club" was operating there; that was succeeded by the "Gateway Theatre Club"; and in 1949 or 1950 the "Chepstow Theatre" took over. It subsequently went through several changes of name and management. In 1958, as the "Tempo Theatre Club" (formed by a group of "Method" actors) it put on a performance of Macchiavelli's comedy *Mandragora* at No. 18 Chepstow Villas which attracted a review in the Times.

Sources include:

Survey of London, Vol XXXII Northern Kensington (Greater London Council 1973)

Ordnance Survey maps 1862-5, 1893

Census returns

Electoral Registers

Post Office Directories

The Times Archive

Second World War wardens' reports on bomb damage (Kensington and Chelsea Local Studies Library).

Notting Hill and Holland Park Past, by Barbara Denny (Historical Publications, 1993).

Richard Norman Shaw, by Andrew Saint (Yale University Press 1976).