

# Head for the hill

One of London's most desirable boroughs started life as a small hilltop settlement. Carla Passino delves into the archives of Islington's past



## N1 LITTLE BLACK BOOK

**Twentytwentyone**  
This Islington stalwart has been furnishing homes with modern designer pieces since 1996 (274–275, Upper Street)

**12:51**  
James Cochran's brilliant restaurant is offering Around the Cluck, a delivery service starring his signature buttermilk Jamaican jerk chicken (107, Upper Street)

**Little Angel Theatre**  
This unusual theatre combines some of the best puppet shows with puppetry courses. Be ready when it reopens (14, Dagmar Passage)

NO memory remains of the mysterious Gisla, whose 'dun' (hill) Islington was, beyond the moniker he bequeathed to the village that flourished here in Saxon times. 'We assume Gisla was a farmer or a landowner,' says Mark Aston of the Islington Museum. 'Gisla's dun eventually morphed into Islington.'

Recorded in the Domesday Book as a small hilltop settlement, it saw its first boom during London's expansion in the late Middle Ages, with monasteries, in particular, embarking on a building spree across the area. Among them was St Bartholomew's Priory, whose prior, William Bolton, built a new tower in Canonbury Place in the early 1500s. Soaring above the neighbouring houses, the 60ft brick building looks forbidding enough to belong to a fairy tale—fittingly, because it was the setting of a late-16th-century romance. When the Lord Mayor of London, Sir John Spencer, found out that his daughter, Eliza, had fallen for the spend-thrift Lord Compton, he locked her up in the tower. Undeterred, the crafty girl

managed to lower herself down the length of the building in a basket that Lord Compton, disguised as a baker's boy, carried away to safety. The two married and Sir John promptly disinherited his daughter—until Elizabeth I stepped in and made the two reconcile.

By then, Islington had become a pitstop on the road that took livestock from the north of England to Smithfield. Liverpool Road had pens and sheds to accommodate the incoming animals, as people found shelter in the many inns that surrounded the High Street. One of these taverns went on to give a part of Islington its name: The Angel.



Nothing remains of the galleried inn captured in Hogarth's *The Stage Coach* engraving, but the cupolaed building that replaced it still surveys the corner with Pentonville Road. Inside, it has a plaque marking the day that businessman Victor Watson and his secretary, Marjorie Phillips, stopped there for afternoon tea during their 1935 tour of London to choose locations for Monopoly's British edition. They must have had a good time because they decided to include The Angel. ►



At the time, Islington had been in decline and was still run down when George Orwell and his wife, Eileen, moved to a flat in Canonbury Square. It's from there that the dystopian author published *Animal Farm* and made a start on *1984*, possibly drawing inspiration from the war-ravaged streets around him.

## 'We assume Gisla was a farmer or landowner. Gisla's dun eventually morphed into Islington'

A few steps from where Orwell used to live stands another local landmark—the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art. American sociologist-turned-art dealer Eric Estorick found two of his life's greatest passions through chance encounters: his wife, Salome, and modern Italian art, which the couple discovered during their honeymoon. 'For Estorick, it was like a lightning bolt,' says gallery director Roberta Cremoncini.

The pair spent the following years amassing an unparalleled collection—from Carrà's disquieting heads to Boccioni's fluid shapes and De Chirico's metaphysical figures—which

they eventually brought to Islington. The Estorick opened in 1998, in the Georgian Grade II-listed Northampton Lodge.

It was in the Georgian era that royalty and aristocrats flocked to the local baths, Sadler's Wells and Islington Spa. Sadler's Wells went on to become Islington's most famous theatre, having survived financial crises and the unsavoury episodes that led Charles Dickens to dismiss it as 'in the condition of being entirely delivered over to as ruffianly an audience as London could shake together'.

The palm for the most intriguing venue must go to the King's Head, a pub-theatre in Upper Street, whose eccentric founder, Dan Crawford, didn't like decimalisation. 'He gave you the bill in old money,' recalls Mr Aston. 'He would

say: "That would be one pound, 10 shillings," although, of course, you paid in new money.'

Islington has always attracted people who didn't quite conform to the norm, from Thomas Paine, who may have penned *Rights of Man* at The Angel, to Walter Sickert, whose penchant for painting dark nudes led crime author Patricia Cornwell to name him as a prime Jack-the-Ripper suspect.

'It feels as if there's a freedom to express oneself here,' suggests Mr Aston. Certainly, the area's friendly, supportive atmosphere has been a particular comfort during lockdown. 'The past few months have been fantastic examples of how everyone pulled together. When we all come out of this, Islington's make-up will be stronger.' ↩

### THE UPS AND DOWNS

#### Residents love Islington's eclectic mix of culture, style and architecture, according to Hamish Allan of Winkworth

Residents like having equally easy access to open spaces (Regent's Canal, Highbury Fields) as to urban bright lights (the West End or, via the nearby Eurostar terminal, Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam)

#### Residents could do with a greater selection of schools at secondary level

## At home in Islington



### Duncan Terrace, £4.25 million

Set behind Camden Passage, this Grade II-listed house spans 2,940sq ft across five floors. A large reception area, dining room, kitchen, study and garden room take up the lower floors. Upstairs are a sitting room and three bedrooms, including a master suite that occupies the entire second floor and a top-floor bedroom with terrace. *Savills* (020-7226 1313; [www.savills.co.uk](http://www.savills.co.uk)) and *Chestertons* (020-7359 9777; [www.chestertons.com](http://www.chestertons.com))



### Aberdeen Park, £1.875 million

This lateral conversion on the raised ground floor of a Victorian villa is in the borough of Islington, but over the area 'border' into Highbury. The 1,408sq ft, three-bedroom flat has many notable features, including the fine fireplace and beautiful ceiling mouldings in the elegant reception room. The kitchen and dining area opens onto a balcony, below which sits a part-paved garden. *Knight Frank* (020-3657 7340; [www.knightfrank.co.uk](http://www.knightfrank.co.uk))



### Arlington Square, £2.3 million

Overlooking Arlington Square, which has won an RHS medal for London in Bloom, this Grade II-listed Victorian house combines contemporary details and period features. Arranged across four floors, it has two reception rooms on the raised ground floor, an open-plan dining room and kitchen on the lower-ground floor and three bedrooms upstairs, with the master suite spanning the entire top floor. *Dexters* (020-7483 6373; [www.dexters.co.uk](http://www.dexters.co.uk))