

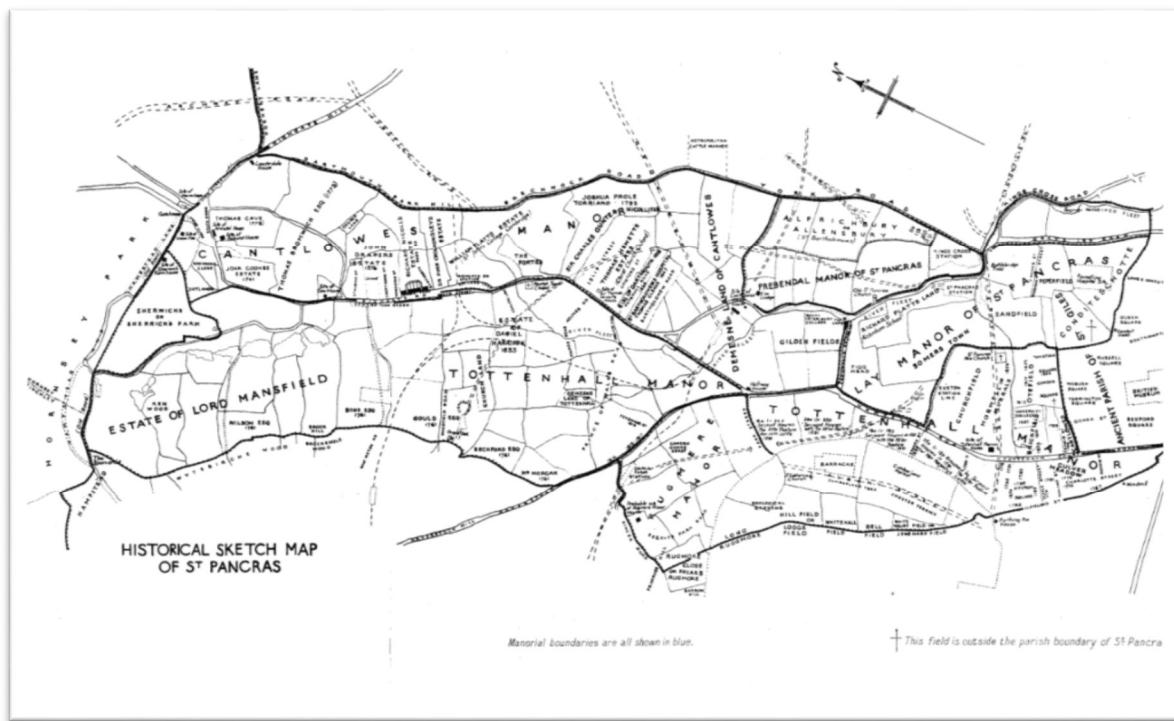
## **Notes on the History of Rochester Square Nursery Ground, Camden New Town**

**Sally Williams, 2016**

## Early history of the area:

The most extensive geological stratum in the Camden area is London Clay, and it was bricks made from local clay that were used in much of the building process when the rural landscape was transformed into the urban townscape from the early eighteenth century onwards.

In the early medieval period there were country estates in this area, with an ancient route linking St Pancras to Kentish Town and Highgate that roughly followed the River Fleet valley. There was an early hamlet around St Pancras Old Church but the church became isolated and the settlement liable to flooding. As a result the hub of the parish became the settlement at Kentish Town further to the north, where a chapel-of-ease was built by 1456. The whole of the ancient parish of St Pancras belonged to the Canons of the Cathedral Church of St Paul, London, acquired before the Conquest although the date of acquisition is unknown. When the various prebends were founded the estate was divided into Manors for the endowment of the various Stalls: being the Prebendal Manors of Rugmere, Tottenhall, and Cantelowes (aka Kentish) and the two manors of St Pancras. St Pancras Manor House, later called Mr Agar's House, was on land near the present Agar Grove.



## *Historical Sketch map of St Pancras, from The Survey of London*

The Camden Square Conservation Area is within what was the Prebendal Manor of Cantelowes, which was situated between two ancient routes, Maiden Lane and St Pancras Way/Kentish Town Road, which run north from the city. The Domesday Survey of 1086 recorded that the parish, comprising *circa* four miles of land, contained "... plenty of timber

in the hedgerows, good pasture for cattle, a running brook and two 20d. rents. Four villeins, together with seven bordars, hold this land under the Canons of St Paul's at forty shillings a year rent. In King Edward's time it was raised to sixty shillings.<sup>1</sup>

In the seventeenth century, under the Commonwealth, it was decided to sell the possessions of the Deans and Chapters, and in October 1649 a 'survey of the Manor and Prebend of Cantloes alias Cantlers alias Kentish Town' was undertaken, revealing it contained c. 210 acres of land that was mainly pasture used for cattle grazing and hay making. In 1649 the manor was purchased by Richard Utber, draper, with the manor house sold to Richard Hill, merchant of London. The lease of the demesne lands shown in the survey belonged to Richard Gwalter (Gulater?), his lease made in 1647 for 21 years; the actual tenant in 1660 was Elisabeth Nicoll, widow. At the Restoration in 1660 the rights of the Dean and Chapter were restored and the original lessees reinstated.

In 1670 the manor changed hands when the lease came into the possession of John Jeffreys Esq., uncle of the notorious 'Hanging Judge', Judge Jeffreys.<sup>2</sup> In 1734 a survey made for his son, Nicholas Jeffreys of the Priory, Brecknock, indicated that the only buildings on the land were the Halfway House (Mother Red Cap) and the manor house on the west side of King's Road where the railway now crosses, between Randolph Street and Prebend Street. In 1749 Nicholas Jeffreys' daughter Elizabeth married Charles Pratt (1713-94). The Victorian historian Edward Walford stated that 'The estate is held subject to a reserved rent of £20, paid annually to the Prebendary of St Paul's'. Under the Cathedrals Act of 1840 as the prebends became vacant the separate estates became vested in the Ecclesiastical Commission. The last prebend in the Manor of Cantlowes was Thomas Randolph, prebend from 16 November 1812 until his death in 1875.

#### **The Development of Camden and the Marquesses Camden:**

The name Camden derives from Charles Pratt's family home from c.1760, Camden Place in Chislehurst, Kent. It was named after a noted antiquary and historian, William Camden, who lived here from c.1609 until his death in 1623. A new mansion was built shortly before 1717 by Robert Weston, and there were later additions to the house for Charles Pratt in the 1780s to designs by George Dance the Younger. Charles Pratt, who was Attorney General and later Lord Chancellor, became Baron Camden of Camden Place in 1765 and then Viscount Bayham and Earl Camden in 1786.

Charles and Elizabeth's only son was John Jeffreys Pratt (1759-1840), styled Viscount Bayham 1786-94, before taking the title of Earl Camden on his father's death. He was elected MP for Bath in 1780, and held a number of appointments under William Pitt the Younger between 1783 and 1789. In 1785 he had married Frances Molesworth (d.1829), daughter of William Molesworth of Wenbury, Devon. Succeeding to his father's titles in 1794 he became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1795 but was unpopular in Ireland and his term in office culminated in the 1798 rebellion, resigning this office after it was suppressed. On 7<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by both Edward Walford, *Old and New London*, Volume 5 (Cassell & Company, 1880s), p.327 and Daniel Lysons *The Environs of London: being an Historical Account of the Towns, Villages and Hamlets within Twelve Miles of that Capital*, Volume II Part II County of Middlesex (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, T Cadell & W Davies, 1811), p.614

<sup>2</sup> According to Edward Walford, *op. cit.*

September 1812 he was created Earl of Brecknock and Marquess Camden. The family lived in Arlington Street, St James's, Westminster.

Their son George Charles Pratt, KG (1799-1866), became Earl of Brecknock from 1812-1840, then became 2<sup>nd</sup> Marquess Camden when inheriting his father's titles. He was Tory MP for Ludgershall in 1821, MP for Bath in 1830, and then MP for Dunwich in 1831. He was Lord of the Admiralty from 1828-29. He was called to the House of Lords in his father's barony of Camden on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1835, and later that year he married Harriet Murray (1813-1854), daughter of the Bishop of Rochester. She was later made a Lady of the Bedchamber. They had 11 children. Having inherited his father's titles in 1840, he was appointed a Knight of the Garter in 1846, and Lord Lieutenant of Brecknockshire in 1865. Titles passed to his eldest son, John, Earl of Brecknock, in 1866.

John Charles Pratt (1840-1872) became 3<sup>rd</sup> Marquess Camden in 1866 and entered the House of Lords. In the same year he married Lady Clementina Augusta, daughter of George Spencer-Churchill, 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Marlborough. In 1872 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marquess died young and was succeeded by his two-month-old only surviving son, John. His wife the Marchioness Camden married Captain Philip Green in 1876; she died in 1886.

John Pratt, 4<sup>th</sup> Marquess Camden (1872-1943), was briefly styled Earl of Brecknock in 1872 before succeeding to the marquessate on his father's death. In 1905 he was appointed Lord-Lieutenant of Kent, a position he held until his death. In 1889 he married Lady Joan Marion (d.1952), daughter of Henry Nevill, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marquess of Abergavenny. The marquessate passed to their eldest son John Charles Henry Pratt, 5<sup>th</sup> Marquess Camden, who was succeeded by David George Edward Henry Pratt (b.1930), 6<sup>th</sup> Marquess Camden.

#### **The gradual change from rural to urban environment:**

The Camden area was rural until the eighteenth century, with much of the land of Cantelowes Manor leased on long term agreements by the first Earl Camden and used for pasture to feed animals that provided the capital with milk and meat. At the end of the eighteenth century the only exceptions to grassland were a few nursery gardens. An area of ground near the site of Rochester Square was leased by a Robert Montgomery, see below.

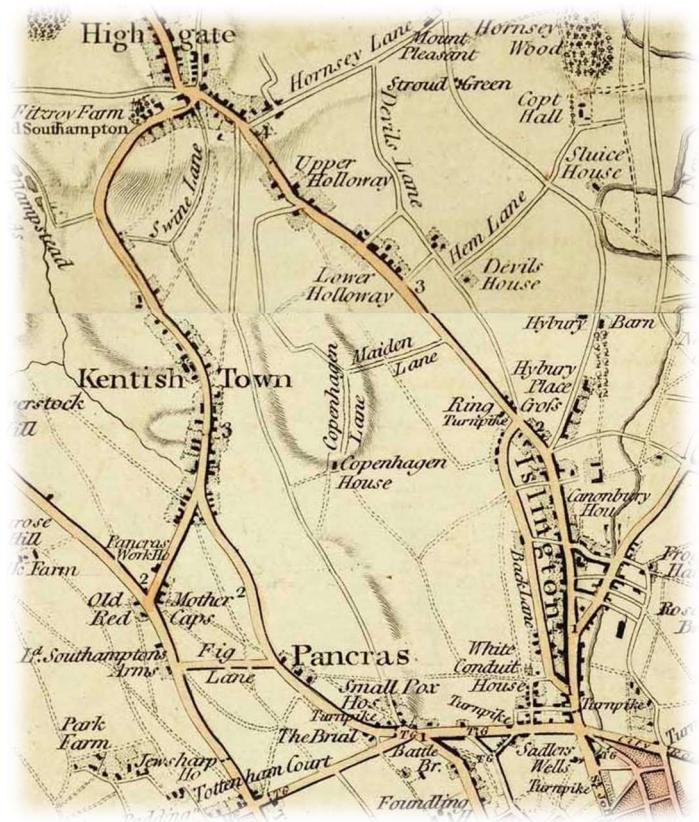
Development of the Camden estate dates from the Kentish Town Act of 1788, which allowed Charles Pratt, Earl Camden and his heirs to lay out streets on his property, with building leases for 1,400 houses. This became known as Camden Town, and was part of the massive expansion of the suburbs throughout the nineteenth century, building over the rural estates and fields.

Although an estate plan was drawn up by George Dance the Younger this was not carried out.<sup>3</sup> Earl Camden commenced development in the southern part of his estate, dividing it into plots and granting building leases in 1790 for the area abutting west on High Street. The houses were aimed at 'industrious artisans'. Edward Walford in *Old and New London* writes: 'That old gossip, Horace Walpole, [...] tells his friend, Sir Horace Mann, in 1791: 'Lord Camden has just let ground at Kentish Town for building fourteen hundred houses.'<sup>4</sup>

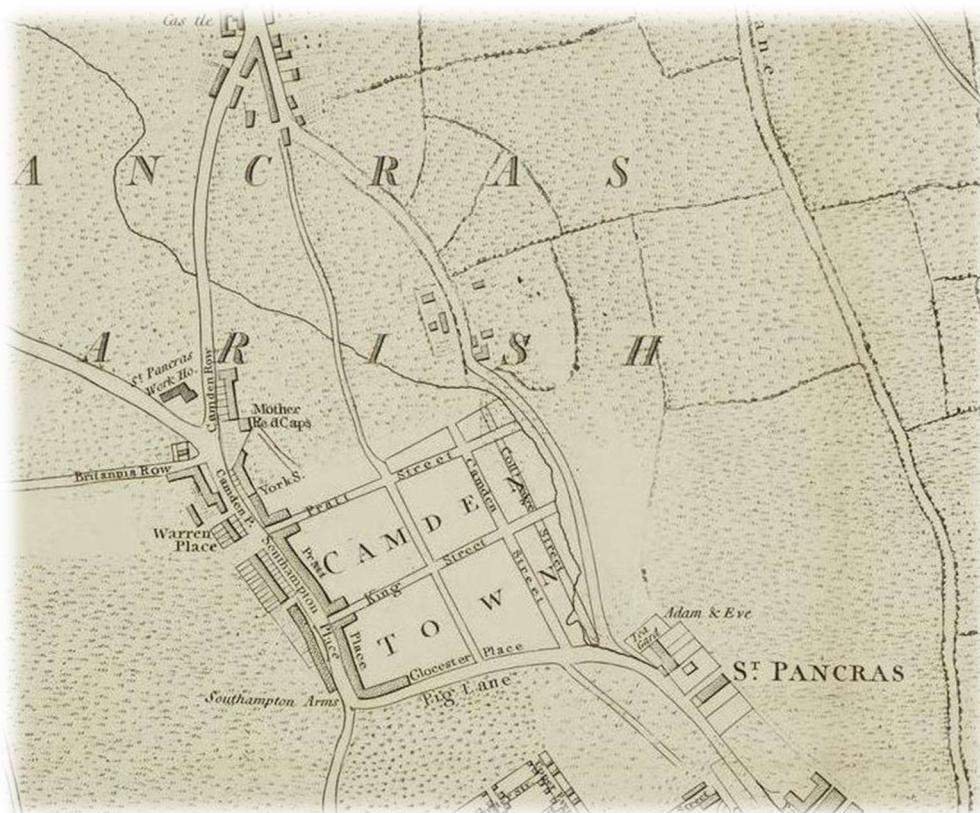
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<sup>3</sup> See research by Mark McCarthy

<sup>4</sup> Walford, *op. cit.*, p317



Extract from John Cary's Map of 15 Miles round London in 1786



Extract from Map of the parish of St Marylebone and parish of St Pancras in London, 1797

After Earl Camden's death in October 1794 building was continued by his son John Jeffreys Pratt, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Camden, later Marquess Camden. By the early nineteenth century, Camden Town had streets to the east of High Street: Pratt Street, College Street. To the west of the High Street some of the Southampton Estate had also been developed by this time.

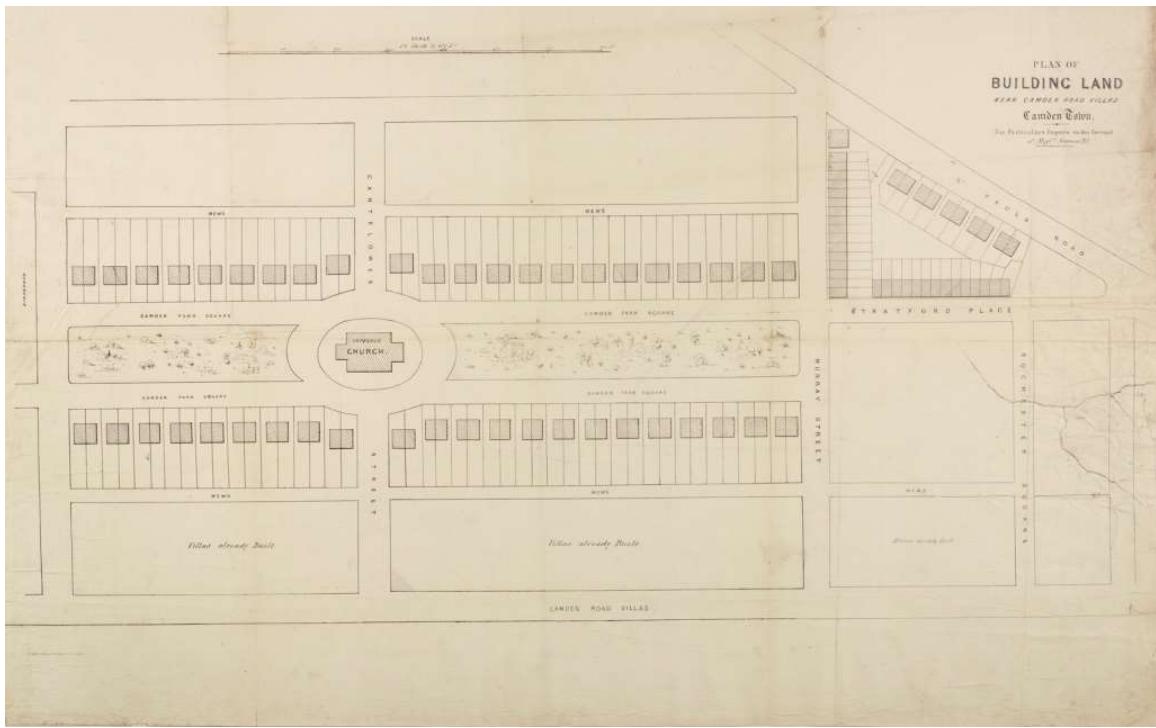
The Kentish Town Act of 1813 permitted building on the rest of the land of the Manor of Cantelawes, prior to which it had continued in use for cattle grazing and hay, with a number of fields farmed by Francis Williams and family held under 21-year leases dating from Michaelmas 1807.

In 1824 Camden Road was constructed across the fields, originally known as the 'New Road from Marylebone to Holloway and Tottenham'. About this time streets around what became Rochester Square began to be laid out, with terraces developed slowly in a piecemeal fashion by small speculative builders. The south-east end of Murray Street was first to be occupied. Many street names originate from historical associations and land ownership.

By the time of Marquess Camden's death in 1840 the urbanisation of this area was well underway. Descendants of the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Camden laid out the remainder of the streets as Camden New Town – so named to distinguish it from the earlier more piecemeal development – a set-piece of town planning centred on Camden Square. Joseph Kay (1775-1848) was the Surveyor / agent for the Camden Estate from the 1820s to 1848. Estate plans laid out squares, roads, building plots and house sizes. The Camden Estate intended that the new Camden Square area should be a higher class development in contrast to the earlier portions of Camden Town, which were already deteriorating, partly due to having very short leases, as the city expanded.

The Camden Estate sold leases on a wholesale basis where possible to avoid piecemeal development, and as ground landlord imposed rules about the size and general appearance of the houses in order to control the development and to attract the middle class. One of the enticements to attracting a better class of resident was the generous provision of communal open space at Camden Square and erection of St Paul's Church on the square. The original church was demolished following World War II bomb damage, but the temporary church building that replaced it still stands. This more extensive wave of house-building commenced c.1845 and by 1849 the following streets were laid out and named: Camden Road, Camden Square, Cantelawes Road, Maiden Lane (later York Way), Murray Street, Rochester Square, St Paul's Road (later Agar Grove) and Stratford Place (later Stratford Villas). Other residential streets were laid out from the 1860s and the area was fully developed by the 1880s.

In 1863 the Midland Railway (Extension to London) Bill was passed and the railway line was constructed in 1864-67. Not only bisecting Camden Square and other streets, the vibration and smoke from ventilation shafts reduced the desirability of the area, although the railway also encouraged an influx of people, and led to a greater social mix.



*Camden Square, St Pancras, lithograph c.1868, engraver J. Arresti: Plan of building land near Camden Road Villas, Camden Town (London Metropolitan Archives, Main Print Collection, image courtesy Collage)*

Victorian residents of the area included professionals in a number of fields including artists. Rochester Square's residents included painter Claude Cardon (pseudonym for Claude Lorraine Clark, born c.1864) who exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy and lived in Rochester Square from 1895-1911; Walter Gorway (1818-1899), wood engraver and illustrator who lived at 32 Rochester Square from 1877-99; artist Samuel John Hodson (1836-1908); and the painter John Skinner Prout (1805-1876), who lived at 22 Rochester Square from 1859-67.<sup>5</sup>

Rochester Square was at one time known as Rochester Gardens, and Nos. 29-36 were called Victoria Terrace until 1867. The plots here had been leased for small developments as it was during the tentative start of the development of Camden Town; consequently the mews were not developed and the space in the rear gardens of Nos 144-150 Camden Road was later filled by the Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple, an arts and crafts building designed by T. Yorke . Founded in 1926, its members included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and journalist Hannen Swaffer.

#### The 'Nursery Ground':

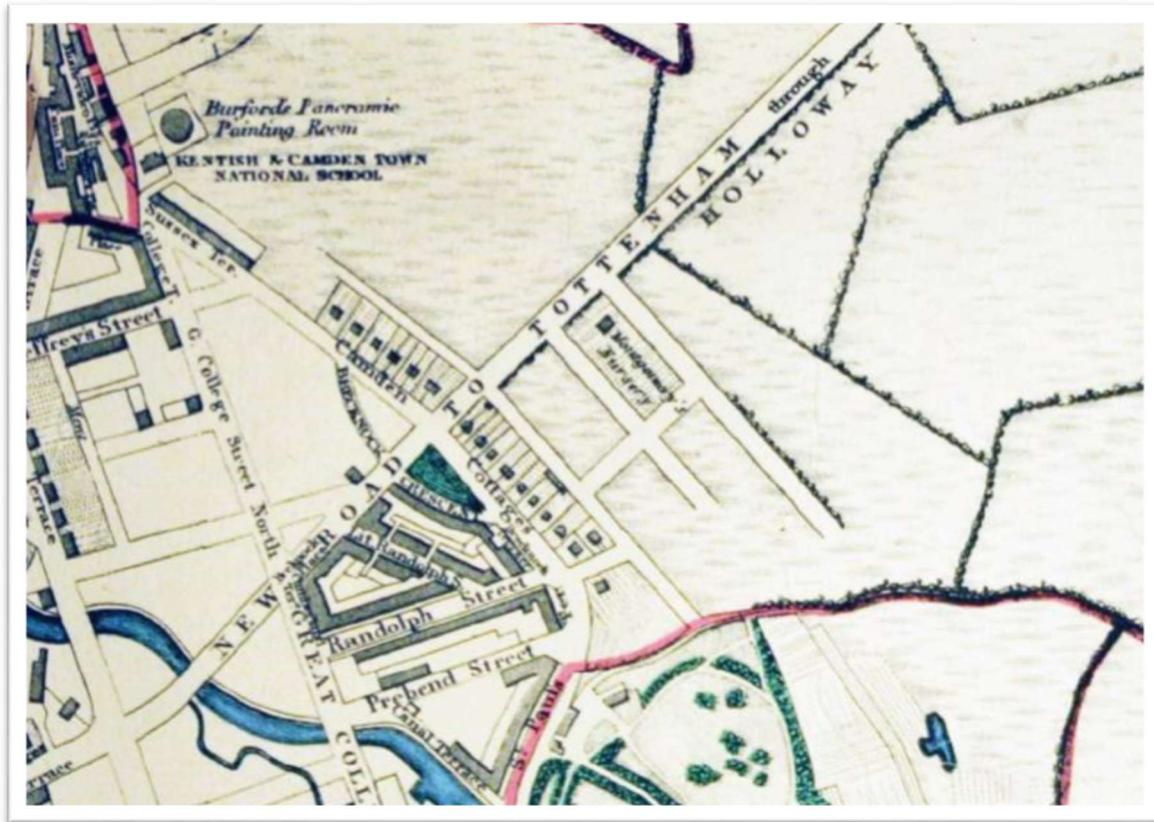
The first holder of the nursery ground at Rochester Square appears to be a Robert Montgomery. Research by Mark McCarthy has uncovered correspondence between the Camden Estate surveyor/agent Joseph Kay and Marquess Camden relating to Robert

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<sup>5</sup> For residents of Rochester Square at the time of the Census of 1881 – see <http://www.camdennewtown.info/Camden%20New%20Town/Streets.html>

Montgomery's Nursery Garden. A letter of 1828 refers to Montgomery's signature of the lease, but prior to this, on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1825, Kay wrote to the Marquess about Montgomery's proposal for a 21-year lease on a Nursery Garden with a house fronting onto the New Road and being 'tenant at will' for the remaining grounds 'to keep off the nuisance'; an unsigned sketch was attached to the letter.

Montgomery evidently signed a 21-year lease in 1828. A later letter from Kay to the Marquess in February 1844 refers to the lease for the building 'fronting on the Camden Road as well as the nursery ground behind' having been acquired from Mr Montgomery by a Mr Abbey; this same letter also refers to the proposed change of name from Rochester Gardens to Rochester Square.



*A plan of the Parish of St Pancras 1834. Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre ref 85-244. Cabinet 1, Sheet 6. Scale 3 chains (66 feet) to an inch*

A number of documents in the Camden Estate papers held at London Metropolitan Archives also make reference to the nursery ground held by Montgomery. Within a Schedule of Miscellaneous Leases at a Ground Rent,<sup>6</sup> two leases relate to Mr Robert Montgomery:

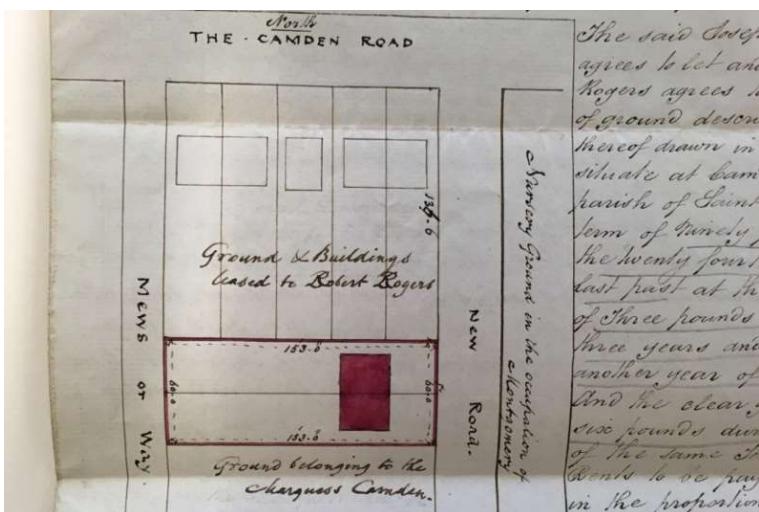
- Lease No 12 / 31 August 1827 / Robert Montgomery / Camden Town Garden Ground / Lease of 21 years from Michaelmas 1826 / ground rent of £28-00-00.
- Lease No. 13 / same date as above / Robert Montgomery / south side Camden Road, 1 house / 61 years from Michaelmas 1826 / ground rent £10-00-00

<sup>6</sup> LMA reference E/CAM/0003

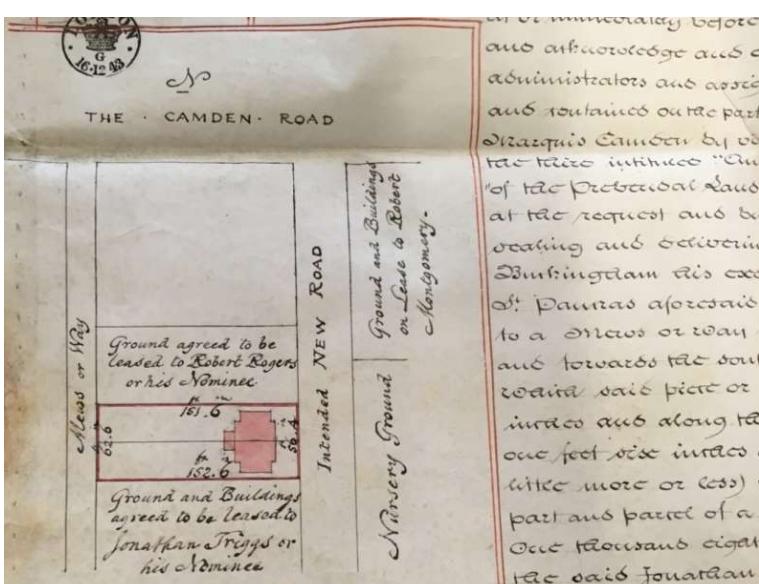
There appear to have been other sites on the Camden Estate used for purposes other than house building: two other leases of the 1820s relate to 'Meadow Land' with different lessees but no details of location. This listing also refers to leases for 'Garden Ground' granted to various lessees between the dates 1840 and 1871.

A number of other building leases that were granted by the Marquess Camden when the streets including Rochester Square were being laid out indicate that Montgomery's nursery or land holding was on the plot of land that was later developed as 144-150 Camden Road, rather than what became the site of the Rochester Square nursery:

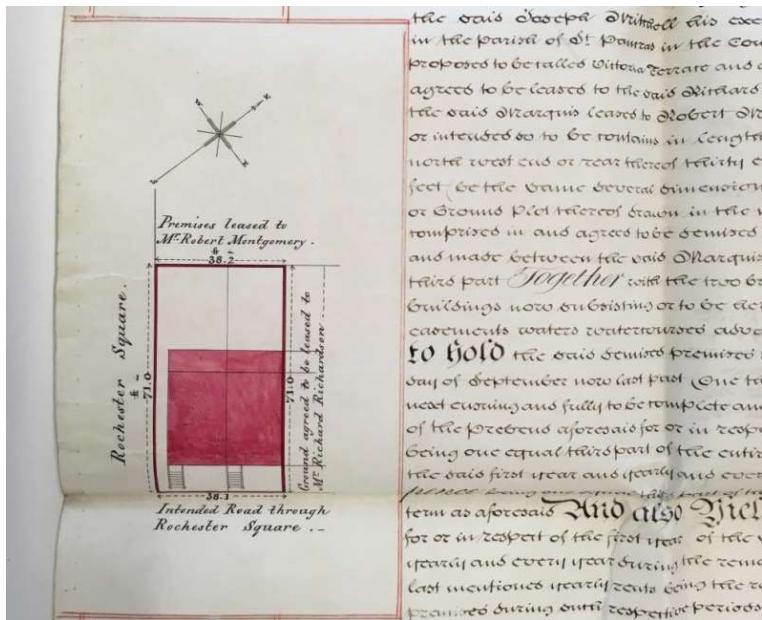
- A lease of 12<sup>th</sup> April 1842 between the agent for the Marquess Camden Estate / Prebendary and Robert Rogers concerning a plot of land for building a 'single or double [brick?] cottage – which would be 1 & 2 Rochester Square [at that point the road is marked: 'Intended New Road'] – the plan marks adjacent land as: 'Nursery Ground in the occupation of Montgomery', which shown as abutting Camden Road.



- Another lease, of 1843, for a building plot that was to be 3 & 4 Rochester Square also marks 'Ground and Buildings on Lease to Robert Montgomery' abutting Camden Road, adjacent to land marked as 'Nursery Ground'.



- Robert Montgomery is mentioned in a further lease of 1849, pertaining to building plots for 35 and 36 Rochester Square. However, this appears to contradict the correspondence between Joseph Kay and the Marquess in 1844 referring to the acquisition of Montgomery's lease by Mr Abbey.



- A Building Article for Ground in Rochester Square dated 4<sup>th</sup> October 1848 between Marquess Camden and Richard Richardson<sup>7</sup> identifies the site of the Rochester Square nursery, marked by the letter B on the plan attached to the document:



It is worth quoting from this document in full for its interesting revelation of the intended layout of a pair of houses with garden here, in some detail:

<sup>7</sup> LMA, ref E/CAM/0634

“....and also shall and will in like manner [?build] and completely finish in the centre of the piece or parcel of ground heretofore [?] described and referred to in the aforesaid Plan by the letter B one pair of [?brick/built] messuages or dwellinghouses of not less than the same rate or mass of building as aforesaid, and shall and will enclose the said piece or parcel of ground referred to in the said Plan by the letter B on the northeast, southwest and northwest sides thereof with a substantial and ornamental iron railing five feet [?height] from the surface of the Ground on a stone or iron kirb and plant the same piece of ground as and for a Garden in an ornamental manner and maintain and keep up the said iron railing kirb and garden in proper order and condition during all the said term hereby agreed to be granted.”

It is yet to be discovered exactly what transpired as a result of this lease, but a building did not materialise. The answer may lie in an undated Memorial from residents of Rochester Square to Lord Camden objecting to attempts being made ‘to let the Nursery grounds [...] as building ground.’<sup>8</sup>

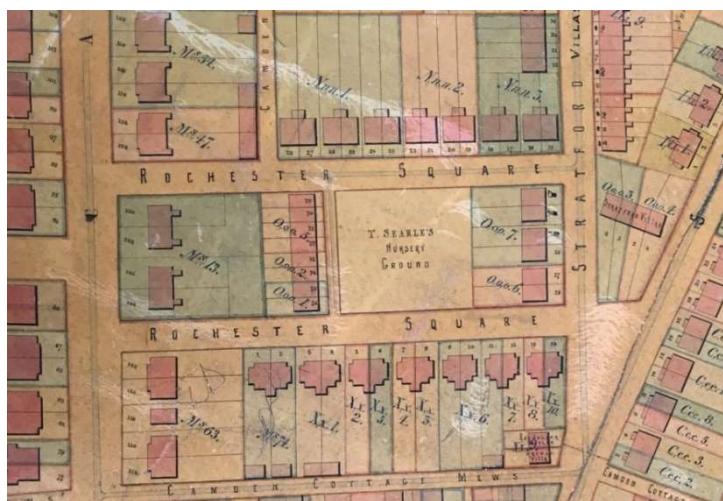
### Later Occupants of the Nursery Ground:

From 1850 onwards, details of some of the occupants of the central garden area at Rochester Square are available:

- 1850 John Charles Shailer, Nurseryman and florist
- 1855 – 1858 John Slipper, Nurseryman and florist\*
 

\* John Slipper ‘of the Villa Nursery, Rochester Square’ was appointed as gardener to Camden Square Garden Committee, with the power to enforce the rules drawn up by the Committee, but the dates of his appointment are not known.<sup>9</sup>
- 1868 -- 1898 Thomas William Searle, Nurseryman

*The Plan of Camden Town Estate, the Property of the Most Honourable the Marquis Camden, 1873* marks the site as ‘T. SEARLE’S NURSERY GROUND’.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>8</sup> This Memorandum was discovered in research undertaken by Mark McCarthy

<sup>9</sup> Papers in the archives of Camden Square Garden Committee show that there were links between their private communal gardens and the nursery at Rochester Square

<sup>10</sup> LMA ref E/CAM/1231

However, 10 years later in *the Duplicate Award in pursuance of Agreement for Partition and Exchange between The Ecclesiastical Commissioners for England and Marquis Camden's Trustees (Cantlowes Prebend Estates)* dated 24<sup>th</sup> June 1883<sup>11</sup> in the Schedule of Leases and Ground Rents the 'Nursery Ground in front of Rochester Square' is marked as '(unleased)'.

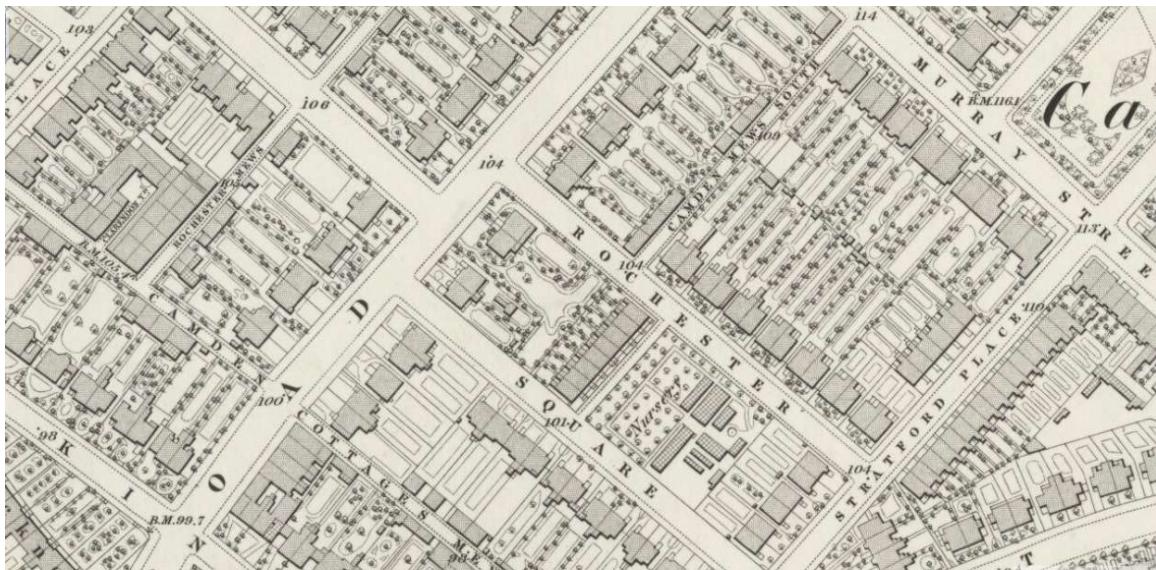
The Schedule of Leases marked on the detailed map below of 1883<sup>12</sup> shows the layout of the nursery in considerable detail and it is unclear why Thomas Searle is not recorded as having the lease at this point. 'Thomas William Searle, Nurseryman', is recorded as living at 27 Rochester Square at the time of the 1881 Census, and also appears to have lived here until at least 1897. In addition on 13 April 1895 there is an advertisement in *The Gardener's Chronicle* for a 'good JOBBING HAND, sober, Industrious Man, Apply to W Searle, Villa Nursery, Rochester Square, Camden NW'.



The OS Maps from the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1865/70 (see below) and subsequent Editions show Rochester Square occupied by a Nursery, with the same layout of built structures indicated. The site appears to have been variously known as Rochester Nursery or Nurseries, or Villa Nursery.

<sup>11</sup> LMA reference E/CAM/0001

<sup>12</sup> LMA reference E/CAM/0002



By 1914, the nursery was evidently held by a family called Lent since the archives of Camden Square Garden Committee report on discussions about contracting 'Lents of Rochester Square nursery' to maintain their garden, but in the end their fee of £70 per annum, plus the cost of bulbs and plants for a spring and summer show, totalling £91 2s, was deemed too much. Following the resignation of their own gardener in 1915/16, the maintenance of Camden Square Garden was briefly in the hands of Rochester Square nursery, but the arrangement soon failed, apparently due to wartime shortage of labour.

In 1928, the lease of Rochester Square was still held by a Mr G. Lent, as recorded in the Report of the Royal Commission on London Squares.

#### **Royal Commission on London Squares and the London Squares Preservation Act:**

In 1927 a Royal Commission was appointed '*to inquire and report on the squares and similar open spaces existing in the area of the administrative county of London with special reference to the conditions on which they are held and used and the desirability of their preservation as open spaces and to recommend whether any or all of them should be permanently safeguarded against any use detrimental to their character as open spaces and if so by what means and on what terms and conditions*'. The outcome of the Commission's work, 'The Report of the Royal Commission on London Squares', was presented on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1928.

Within the 1928 report is *Entry 376. ROCHESTER SQUARE (0.52); Camden Road. Owner: Marquis Camden. Leased at a rent of a peppercorn to Mr. G. Lent. Unexpired lease: 18 years. Relevant Acts/Orders in Council: 3 Geo. IV. Cap. 82 (1822) and St Pancras Order in Council, 1901. Restrictions and Restrictive Covenants: subject to rights accruing under Act of 1822. Arrangements for maintenance and control: used as a nursery ground. Views of owners on the question of permanent preservation: The enclosure should be permanently preserved as open space. Brief notes on present character and appearance:*

A square-shaped area flanked on three sides by roads and on one side by the rear of the curtilages of houses. Enclosed by a low wall with iron railings on top, and surrounded by a thick privet hedge. Used as a nursery garden with glass hot houses. Overlooked by dwelling-houses.

In 1931 the London Squares Preservation Act was passed: 'An Act to provide for the preservation and for restricting the user of certain squares gardens and enclosures in the administrative county of London and for other purposes' (31<sup>st</sup> July 1931).

Listed in *Schedule I*, under the Metropolitan Borough of St Pancras is the following:

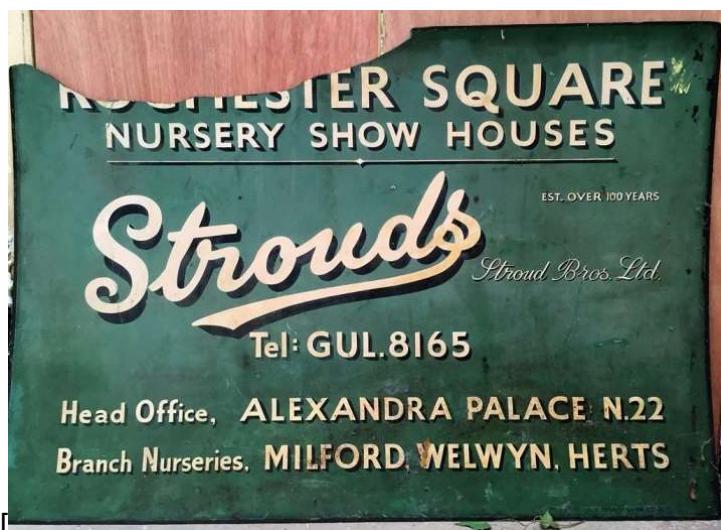
- *Name of protected square*: Rochester Square
- *Description*: Garden enclosure bounded on the south-east by dwelling-houses and the roadway of Stratford Place and on other sides by the roadway of Rochester Square.

### **Recent History and Strouds:**

The first four decades of the twentieth century brought little change to the area. Damage was caused by World War II bombing, often targeted at the railway, and this destroyed the large semi-detached houses on the south-west side of Rochester Square. This led to loss of the south-west aspect of the square, and was replaced by a local authority estate of tall blocks. The latter part of the twentieth century brought restoration work and new building, and the area once again became desirable.

Long-standing residents who have lived near Rochester Square for several decades remember Strouds as being the last company to carry on a business at Rochester Square. A company by the name of Stroud Brothers Limited was registered on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1920, the Directors being James Henry Stroud (Chairman/Secretary), Frederick Stroud and Alfred George Harvey. In the Shares Document of 1921, occupations of both Stroud brothers are given as 'Florist', with Harvey listed as 'Artificial Flower Manufacturer'. A company address is not given other than home addresses for the shareholders, who included Lydia Stroud and Gertrude Stroud, wives of the two brothers – 52 Berkshire Gardens, Bowes Park, N22; 182 Green Lanes, Finsbury Park, N4; and 36 Newington Green Road, N16, respectively.

Stroud Brothers also had premises at Alexandra Palace and in the home counties, as displayed on a sign recovered from the property in 2016. The 'GUL' (Gulliver) dialling prefix was the London Directory Exchange for Kentish Town, which was in operation from the 1920s until the 1960s.



In a letter dated 16<sup>th</sup> April 1931, solicitors Gisborne & Co. wrote to Major William Percy Maule confirming the details of the purchase of shares in Stroud Brothers from a woman named Mrs McMullen, whose husband had passed away. It is not known how the McMullens came to own shares in Stroud Brothers or what happened to the original Stroud brothers. Major Maule's niece, Sue Martin, recalls that the Major fought in World War I and had latterly become a Director of Coutts Bank. He passed away in 1958 and Stroud Brothers passed to his wife Isobel ("Issy") Maule, who was involved with the business for many years following her husband's death and until she herself passed away in 1998.

Isobel Maule had close ties to William Gresham-Thompson (who passed away in 1981) and his son Graham, and these three individuals feature on the boards of several companies that were established and associated with Rochester Square from the 1960s onwards (Stroud Brothers, Strouds of London, Priorlarge Limited, Stroud of London Palmiers Ltd, AIM Securities Limited). At some stage, most probably in 1989, legal ownership of the land transferred to Menston Holdings Limited of Liberia, Africa – which is where it remained until it was sold in 2016.

In the 1960s until the 1980s the business at Rochester Square was variously described in official records as 'Agricultural service facilities', 'Cultivation of plants for use in theatre', and 'Landscape Service Activities', but it became best known for renting and supplying film props, in particular palms, for theatrical and television productions. It was said to have been a successful business during this period, with liveried delivery trucks coming and going from the square, and its customers included the 'Carry On' films and Elton John. The palms are no longer there but a number of fibreglass trees, plastic flowers and other props remain at Rochester Square as evidence of its past history.



29-36 Rochester Square, 1975 (London Metropolitan Archives, LCC Photograph Library, image courtesy Collage)



*Rochester Square, photographs c.1975*



*View of Rochester Square from the rear of No.9, photograph courtesy John Cowley*



1986 accounts for the Strouds refer to a 'slump in the film production business' and it was around or slightly after this period that Stroud's activities at the square began their slow but terminal decline.



*Strouds of London, Rochester Square, August 2002, photographs Sally Williams*

#### **The twilight years:**

As the film prop business wound down and eventually ceased, the land and buildings at Rochester Square nursery were neglected and became derelict.

Around 2007 a Mr O'Shea set up a new British company named Menston Holdings Limited. He then attempted to defraud the true owner of the land (Menston Holdings Limited of Liberia) by requesting that the Land Registry update address and contact details. His attempt almost succeeded but was discovered after a sharp-eyed registrar became suspicious and triggered an investigation that led to Mr O'Shea's arrest and imprisonment.

In its state of abandonment the site became a focal point for anti-social activities, especially drug use, and later on squatters began occupying the land and buildings. Evictions took place but without ongoing activity to 'keep off the nuisance' – as the Marquess put it in 1825 – the square was always swiftly reoccupied.

The most recent squat occupation began around 2013 by a group who became known as Rochester Square Community or Come-Unity Garden. These new occupants had high ambitions and a visitor in 2013 (Friederike Hanisch) described it:

*'Entering the site, it becomes quite obvious that the square has been unused for a long time. In some part nature has taken over completely (which is amazing to see!)! Looking a bit closer one can however also see how much work has gone into creating something new...'*

*'Great things like organic food growing, a people's kitchen, a weekly cinema night and different workshops are happening already at the Rochester Square Come-unity Garden. The collective aims to take all this to a much bigger scale and has a strong*

*vision of creating a new hub of sustainable living and action in the midst of Camden’.<sup>13</sup>*

However, others were less impressed. Freddy of Camden Community Radio visited the Rochester Square Community over the course of a couple of months and reported that:

*“I definitely was deflated and slightly cheated to boot. I had been promised something that didn’t exist. There was no utopian garden. Had I been tricked by the PR of a wily group of hippies? Was the truth that this was a squat and nothing else? .... As soon as Alphonso [a founding member of the 2013 squat] and his merry men took their first steps in creating their magic garden by seizing Rochester Square and declaring it outside the normal social rules, in rushed people in need of refuge from normal social rules. They settled in and turned the gardeners into campsite organisers. And what choice did those original gardeners have? To turn away the people that came to them for help would have been against all the ideals of the utopian garden that was not to be.”<sup>14</sup>*

Despite considerable pressure by local neighbours and Camden Council – including legal action - to at least clean up the nursery and deal with what had become blight, the situation was challenged on many fronts and only continued to deteriorate. The prolonged ill-health and then death of Menston Holdings’ owner in 2014, minimal or no interest from garden centre operators or property developers in taking on a site with such rehabilitation requirements and development limitations, and stretched Council resources meant that a solution to the problems at Rochester Square would be neither obvious nor speedy.

By the end of the most recent set of squatters’ tenure at Rochester Square nursery, few of the people who originally occupied the site in 2013 were left and relations with the local community and amongst the various factions of newer arrivals had reached a bitterly low ebb. In addition to frequent disturbances, police and / or social services were regularly required to attend to noise complaints, altercations and assaults between squatters, and even instances where young children including a baby had been brought to live in makeshift shelters onsite.

In early 2016 a local couple, Francesca Anfossi and Eric Wragge, decided to take on Rochester Square as a personal project and formed Rochester Square LLP to purchase the land from Menston Holdings. Following a period of failed negotiations with the squatters who lived on the square when they purchased it, they undertook an eviction and completed an extensive clean-up operation later that year and, as the time of writing, are consulting with the local community and others to form plans for the future.

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<sup>13</sup> Source: [http://www.projectdirt.com/project/10725/#!/journal\\_entry/22385](http://www.projectdirt.com/project/10725/#!/journal_entry/22385)

<sup>14</sup> Source: <http://radiofreddy.co.uk/squatters-paradise/>



Rochester Square, 2015/6. *Imagery ©2017 Google. Map data ©2017 Google*)

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And with grateful thanks to:

- John Cowley for sharing chapters from his unpublished history of Camden
- Mark McCarthy for sharing research undertaken in 2016
- Members of Camden New Town local history group
- Eric Wragge for recent history