

THE HISTORY OF YOUR AREA

Nightingale Lane dates from medieval times when it was part of a primitive system of tracks linking scattered settlements with Stane Street – a major road between London and Chichester built by the Romans around AD70 and now the A24 Balham High Road. In the 16th century it was called Ballum Wood Lane and was used mainly for moving cattle between Wandsworth and Clapham Commons, allowing tenants to exercise their grazing rights.

18th century improvements in transport and roads made the area attractive to the wealthy who built detached villas in substantial grounds. Their names reflected the rural location - Hawthorns, Chestnuts, Beeches - there was even a Hollywood – which still stands at number 7 Nightingale Lane.

The arrival of the railways in the 1850s had a profound effect on the area. Balham was the first station to open in 1856 and was no more than a small wooden building on a chestnut tree lined track - now Chestnut Grove. It moved to its current site in 1863. The underground station opened in 1926 and during World War II was used as an air raid shelter. On 14 October 1940 it was hit by a bomb, fracturing a water main which flooded the station. 68 people died and the event is featured in the Ian McEwan novel and subsequent film 'Atonement'.

Rapid development turned the area into a fashionable suburb within easy reach of the city. Builder Daniel Dendy built more than 80 cottages for city clerks on low incomes, naming one

street after himself and another after Kate, his daughter. Kate Street and part of Dendy Street were demolished in the 1970s and replaced with Chestnut Grove School. Close by was Fernside House with its own bowling green and lake and dating back to 1812. It was sold in 1890 and Calbourne, Fernside, Gosberton and Mayford Roads were built on its site.

George Jennings was a famous local architect living on Nightingale Lane – his trademark was his use of terracotta. He was also the inventor of the first public lavatory. Unveiled at The Great Exhibition in 1851 his 'monkey closets' received more than 800,000 visitors each paying one penny – for this they got a clean seat, a towel, a comb and a shoe shine – coining the phrase 'to spend a penny'...

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