

# Awaiting discovery

Barnsbury has a secret wood and the largest conservation area in central London.

So why did the Blairs leave, asks **Anthea Masey**

**W**HO will ever forget a tousle-haired Cherie Blair opening the door of her home in Barnsbury, north London, on the morning after Labour's landslide victory in May 1997? The Blairs have reportedly been kicking themselves ever since for selling that house in Richmond Crescent for £615,000 soon after moving to Downing Street, only to watch prices in the area rocket.

The same house would now cost at least £2.25 million, but, interestingly, instead of returning to the New Labour heartland of Islington from Number 10 they chose instead to pay £3.65 million for a house in Connaught Square in true blue Westminster, opting for an

**'Gentrifiers discovered they could buy here for fraction of the price of something similar in Chelsea'**

area with none of the charm and colour of their old stamping ground.

Barnsbury, most of which was designated a conservation area as long ago as 1964, is the part of Islington west of Upper Street and east of Caledonian Road.

Between these two busy thoroughfares, there are green and leafy roads of architecturally distinguished early Victorian terrace houses and villas interspersed with fine garden squares.

Developed between 1820 and 1850, the houses were originally occupied by wealthy professionals, but pollution from factories around King's Cross soon led to an exodus of the well-to-do, and the houses declined into tawdry lodging houses and overcrowded flats. The decline was only halted in the 1960s when a generation of young gentrifiers discovered they could buy a four-storey family house in Barnsbury for a fraction of the price of something similar in Chelsea.

**T**HE squares have their own character. Cloudseley and Thornhill Squares are dominated by their churches; Barnsbury Square has two little cul-de-sacs of stucco villas at its far corners; Lonsdale Square is distinguished by Tudor Gothic architecture; while the run-down Arundel Square is about to get a face lift. There is even the hidden Barnsbury Woods, which can be found between Thornhill Crescent, Hemingford Road and Huntingdon Street, which is now a nature reserve. Open to the public for only two hours a week, between 2pm and 4pm on Tuesdays, it is claimed to be the largest wood in central London.

Paul Williams, of local estate agent Savills, says Malvern Terrace, a little cul-de-sac of two-storey, doubled-fronted cottages with pretty front gardens, is his favourite Barnsbury street. He says: "It is opposite a small park and the houses now sell for about £2 million.

"Lonsdale Square is very popular. We have sold six houses there in the last 18 months. These vary in size, so prices have ranged between £1.75 million and £3 million. And if you are after a spacious two-bedroom flat in a period conversion, prices now start at £400,000.

"Prices do fall as you head towards Caledonian Road, which is still very run down. Houses in Thornhill Square, for example, go for about £1.8 million. The guide price for Barnsbury is between £800 and £850 a square foot."

Rob Soning, of developer Londonnewcastle, is another fan of Barnsbury. The company is putting the finishing touches to The Wallpaper Factory in Offord Road, where the 24 flats are selling for between £565,000 and £1.4 million. On the site of the old Cole & Sons wallpaper factory, the block has been decorated with ceramic tiles featuring a raised motif suggestive of a wallpaper pattern.

For details, call DTZ on 020 7710 8111 or Hamptons on 020 7226 4688.

Londonnewcastle has also begun on a large development of 116 flats that will be built over the North London

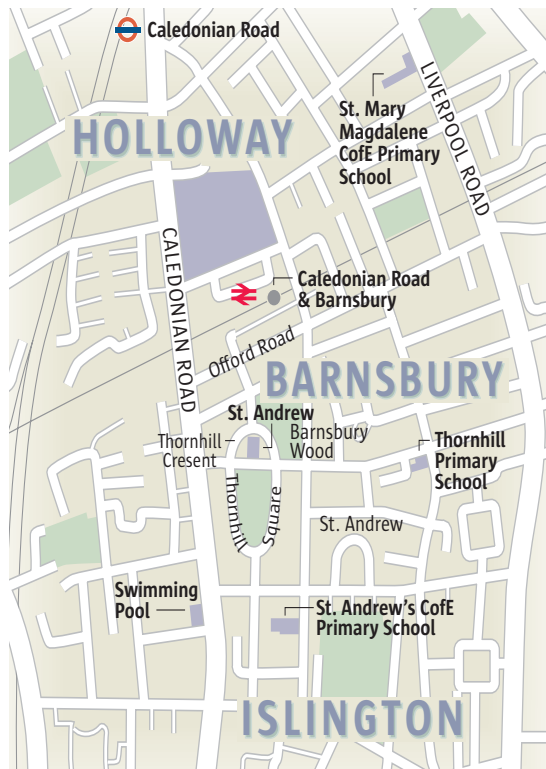
Line on one side of Arundel Square. Prices are likely to range between £450,000 and £1.1 million when flats go on sale off-plan in the near future. For details, call Chesterons on 020 7288 0330 or Savills on 020 7472 5024.



“We are giving the local council £750,000 towards the restoration of Arundel Square for the community,” says Rob Soning. “What I like about Barnsbury is the fine architecture and the feeling of being in a secret and tucked-away corner of the capital.”



Exotic: sphinxes outside a house in Richmond Square





Character  
building:  
squares such  
as Cloudseley  
have their  
own  
distinctive  
style that  
adds appeal





**Café society:** there is a wide range of places in which to find something to eat and drink in nearby Upper Street, Islington

