



Heritage Statement

Project Summary

Billy Waters was the first African-American music and dance performer to become celebrated in Britain. Born in New York he enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1811 during the Napoleonic Wars, was promoted to petty officer rank, and lost a leg in an accident at sea. He went to live in London and started a family, but his pension as a disabled veteran proved inadequate and he turned to busking - which was deemed to be begging, and illegal. Wearing a judge's wig and a large bicorn-hat with feathers Billy Waters cut a flamboyant and mesmeric figure, fiddling, singing, and dancing with 'peculiar antics'. In his home neighbourhood, the impoverished St Giles Rookery, Billy was a well-loved community musician, and he became a renowned London character, depicted by leading Regency artists. The hugely successful stage production *Tom and Jerry* featured a comic actor who played the role 'Billy Waters' as a bullying and ludicrous rogue. This baseless defamation led the real Billy to lose his good name, livelihood, and identity. He was arrested several times

and his health rapidly deteriorated. He died a pauper in the St Giles Workhouse in March 1823, but his legend lived on for many years.

We believe Parnell House to be the ideal place to commemorate Billy Waters due to its historic links with the working class of St Giles. The story of Billy Waters and his integral part in London's history during the first quarter of the 19th century also deserves to be remembered and celebrated.

The heritage plaque will commemorate Billy Waters 200 years after his passing in 1823, and will recognise his historic legacy as both a former royal navy gunner, as well as the Central London "King of Buskers". The plaque will highlight a part of the rich and diverse history of Camden, and will in time become a celebrated heritage site within the borough. We hope to carry out the installation in December 2023.

Our project partners for the plaque include Camden Council, Untold London (the Mayor of London's department for public realm), and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

We intend to extend invitations to the serving mayor of Camden Council, Council officials, local organisations, community representatives, school groups, members of the public, and others who have been inspired the Billy Waters story, as well as press and media. All parties will have been consulted more than 21 days before this application.

History & Heritage

Parnell House is a Grade II* listed building house located in the Holborn and St Giles area, within the borough of Camden. The property is the earliest surviving example of flats to provide accommodation for the "deserving poor" in regular employment. The full address is Parnell House, Streatham Street, London, WC1A 1JB

It was built on part of the old St Giles Rookery as a 5 storey block of artisans flats for 48 families in 1849 by the Victorian architect, Henry Roberts. The housing project was built in three blocks around a courtyard in Streatham Street. At the time of construction each flat was fire proofed and had its own toilet, which at the time was a revolutionary feature for working class dwellings in England.

It was described as Model Housing and commissioned by the organisation The Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, for which Roberts was a founder member and the honorary Architect. The Society was founded in 1844 with Prince Albert as its President.

Roberts was also a reformer, philanthropist and part of the Evangelical Movement whose architecture influenced the design of housing for the poor not just in England but other parts of Europe for generations.

The Streatham Street Buildings as it was originally named, was built in an area known as the Bedford Estate, and in particular land owned by Francis Russell, the seventh Duke of Bedford under whose tenureship the apartment block was completed. Its two visible sides were on Streatham Street and George Street.

Most of the Bedford Estate included the area known as Bloomsbury which during the middle of the 19th century was divided into two halves. The central and north part of Bloomsbury around Fitzrovia was a restricted middle class suburb with wide streets and grand squares fit for the gentry. The very northern most part of Bloomsbury known as St Giles, was by and large occupied by the poor and underclass. Conditions were often desperate in the St Giles Rookery with many people living in slums and abject poverty. Although people would do their best to eke out a living to feed their family, whether by fair or foul means, disease and criminality were common. It was not uncommon to have multiple families sharing a single room. Within this environment Billy Waters and his family were considered better off than most because they at least had a room to themselves on Church Lane, now known as Dyott Street. Billy being an ex-Royal Navy Gunner and musician was somewhat of a novelty. He was able to make a living from his busking, eventually earning the title "King of the beggars". However, with new businesses and building complexes beginning to spring up around New Oxford Street, and the gentrification of the Bloomsbury area, the swamp and slums of St Giles and all that was associated with it were more than just an eyesore. Eventually the authorities decided to rehouse some of the poor families living within the St Giles Rookery. Some were placed in temporary accommodation, before being given one of the 48 flats within Streatham Street apartment block. It would offer better, cleaner and safer accommodation, as well as provide an opportunity for poor working class people to begin a new life with more aspirations for their families.

By the mid- 1880s the slums of St Giles and the surrounding areas had been redeveloped, and the people previously associated with the area had either been rehoused or migrated to the new suburbs.

Since its inception the apartment block on Streatham Street has been a property that provided social and affordable housing for people within the Bloomsbury area of Camden. At the South side of the property, above the entrance to the Streatham Street Buildings, on plain stucco band at the second floor level, reads the inscription "**MODEL HOUSES FOR FAMILIES**". It is now known as Parnell House.

The apartment block was restored in 1956 by the architect, town planner and landscape designer Sir Frederick Gibberd, and Partners. In 1965 the building was sold to the Peabody Trust, which later also acquired the freehold interest.

In May 1974 the building was granted Grade: II* listed status by English Heritage with the registration number 1378865.

The site for the proposed bicentenary blue heritage plaque would be installed on the west side exterior wall of Parnell House, on Dyott Street (formerly Church Lane). Dyott Street was the site of the Old St Giles Rookery where Billy Waters once lived with his family.

Organisation Behind the Plaque

Nubian Jak Community Trust (NJCT) is a Registered Charity (No. 1169656), with an English Heritage approved plaque and sculpture scheme. NJCT is also endorsed by the Runnymede Trust as a 'Real Histories' provider, and is now acknowledged as the largest deliverer of diverse plaques in the world. To date NJCT has delivered 3 public statues and 91 plaques including the illustrious heritage plaque to Ignatius Sancho, installed on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Whitehall - a Grade I listed property. There are several other properties that NJCT has successfully obtained listed consent for; the two which are in Camden are to Jazz pioneer Sidney Bechet in Fitzrovia, and to the abolitionist Mary Prince installed on Senate House, University of London.

Dr Jak Beula is the CEO of NJCT and a former consultant to English Heritage. The relationship with the Trust and English Heritage has remained up to the present day.