

DORNEY AND THE CHALCOTS ESTATE

In the aftermath of the Grenfell fire, was anyone else intrigued by the names of four tower blocks in London, partially evacuated due to safety concerns? These are on the Chalcots estate in Primrose Hill, and the four high-rise tower blocks are called Dorney, Taplow, Burnham and Bray. What, I wondered, could possibly be the reason for these names?

It turns out that it's all to do with Eton College. In 1449, Henry VI who founded the College granted it the leper hospital of St James in Westminster. Among the hospital's property, which passed to Eton, was the manor of Chalcot, in the southern part of Hampstead. Although Henry VIII later forced the College to relinquish much of the former hospital's lands, they kept their Chalcots estate. This land was rented out to tenant farmers, providing the College with an income stream.

However, London was steadily moving out into the countryside, and major landowners seized the opportunities to increase the revenue from their property by building houses. The Fellows of Eton College began to develop Chalcots in the mid-1820s. Initially they sought to attract a high class of resident, and in 1829 they were advertising plots of land for secluded villas. To preserve this exclusive ambience, they successfully negotiated for the new London to Birmingham railway line to be concealed in the Primrose Hill Tunnel, opened in 1837. Development was piecemeal. By the end of the 1850s they had constructed an extensive series of streets lined with middle-class villas. Later house building was more densely packed, but most households still kept at least one servant. A further phase of building took place in the 1880s, and the estate was not completed until the 1890s. Many of the road names reflect the Eton connection – Fellows Road, Provost Road, Eton Villas, Eton Avenue.

During the 20th century, the villas and houses on the estate were gradually subdivided into flats, while bombing caused severe damage in the Second World War. In the 1960s, Camden Council redeveloped the central part of the Eton estate to become what is now known as the Chalcots Estate, and the College made an additional 5 acres of land available for this project. The social housing comprised a mix of high-rise tower blocks and low-rise terraces, and was regarded as a striking example of Le Corbusier's "Plan Voisin". The four 23 storey blocks at the western end of the estate were named after villages near Eton – hence Dorney, Taplow, Burnham and Bray. And that is how a London block of flats came to share the name of our village.