



Joseph Connolly

A monthly diary of sundry observations, brief encounters and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise

Home is where the heart is

Hampstead. What does the word mean to you? Well, if you are 'one of us', all it means is simply 'home'. But to the rest of the planet, Hampstead has long been more of an adjective than a locality – this to mean anything they want it to really, though always it is delivered with a sneer.

Only in England could 'Hampstead Intellectual' be a put-down. The Hampstead Novel (and still it is my ambition to call one of my own that very thing) is lazy shorthand for the doings of the insufferably smug, this to take in not just adultery but also Ocado, wok skills and excessive sauvignon.

'Hampstead Lefties' is rather more interesting because of the paradox of their often also being conservative with a small 'c', and hence their love of the old place. Now, though... Hampstead is an aspiration, synonymous with big money. Because it is big money that has rather bugged me up – and more of that in a minute.

In the old days, wherever one was brought up, one tended to stay. People didn't particularly 'aspire' to being anywhere else – but only to a nicer house, maybe. Central heating, crazy paving... they were about the sum of the aspirations.

I was born in Hampstead as a result of my mother unhappily living in neutral Ireland during the war.

She hated Ireland so vehemently that she came on her own to London at the height of the Blitz. The boat, she said, was empty – everyone was going the other way, fleeing the bombs.

She went to Primrose Hill because the only Londoner she knew – a cousin – was living there. Then she got a job in a hush-hush



■ Hampstead is still beautiful... but no longer easily affordable

location in Hayes inspecting 25-pounder field guns (as you do) while looking for a bedsit of her own. One evening during the blackout – supplemented by a pea-souper – she emerged into utter blackness from Chalk Farm station with an address in Regent's Park Road where she due to view a room.

Having wandered blind and for hours in God knows how many directions, she simply stopped and sat on a garden wall, frozen with the cold and utterly lost. A friendly off-duty soldier appeared with a tiny torch, looked at her scrap of paper and said she was way off course, which she knew she must have been.

The pencil beam also lit a small notice in the window of the house in Adelaide Road where she had pitched up: Room to Let. She

went inside, took the room, and remembers liking the landlord. Years later... reader, she married him. And he was my father. Had my mother's cousin lived in Pimlico, all would have been different.

A house in Hampstead did not cost much more than the equivalent in Belsize, which in turn was hardly more expensive than Chalk Farm. Camden Town, however, was viewed as a no-go area known only for doss houses and meths drinkers: houses there cost next to nothing. Artists, writers and actors lived in Hampstead because it was beautiful and easily affordable: a room above a shop, a basement – two or three quid a week.

Independent shops abounded because rents were similarly low – and so Hampstead people shopped

in Hampstead: why would you not?

Well ... we have all seen what has happened. It has become 'aspirational', and therefore attainable only by the super rich, while commercial landlords – especially Camden – have made shop rents increasingly ludicrous. The few remaining independents are held in great affection... but how can you properly shop in Hampstead any more? Unless you want to buy a house, a phone or a dress... how can you?

And so now, Hampstead is known only for the grotesquely high prices of houses, and the rich and famous people who live in them. And most people who, by accident, were brought up here... have vanished.

The planet now views Hampstead as an extremely desirable place to be. And is it still.



Irish breakfast, circa 1888, was just marvellous

Mention of Ireland and talk of filthy lucre reminds me of a nineteenth century recipe I recently happened upon: Dublin Lawyer.

It was waggishly called this due to its three ingredients, working on the premise that Dublin lawyers are rich (lobster), fat (cream) and drunk (whiskey). The 1888 cookbook says that it makes for a marvellous breakfast.



■ Corbyn keeping it casual

Why I won't be bearing my legs any time soon

A fashion article in The Times asks "Do you dare bare your legs until November?" Well, on the whole ... no, I don't really think I do.

Quite apart from not sharing Jeremy Corbyn's taste for shorts, I have a feeling that it might entail a bout of pogonotomy (that's shaving, since you ask).

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel *STYLE* is published by Quercus. www.josephconnolly.co.uk



■ Roald Dahl would surely have approved of this cut-throat encounter

This shaving business is all a bit weird

Are you a pogonophile? Or a pogonophobe? Beard lover or hater? When I met Roald Dahl, I didn't have a beard – largely because I was fifteen years old. He was the uncle of a school friend who brought me to Dahl's very magical house in Buckinghamshire.

I was a huge fan of his (adult) stories, and he happily signed a copy of *Kiss Kiss* for me. Then he gave his fifteen year-old guests a huge Havana cigar apiece (my very first – and I did not gag and go green, but loved it) and a large Cognac by way of accompaniment.

It's good I met him then,

because it transpires from a newly published essay that he despised beards above almost all else. "A beard," he writes, "is nothing more than a studied and reprehensible act of vanity ... a man should not even be thinking about his face, but accept it as it is". Er ... shurely shome mishtake? Bearded men do accept it as it is – I really do believe that people forget that this is the natural state, and that slavishly shaving it back every day is actually as weird as women each morning applying artificial vandykes or muttonchops to their peachy complexions.