

No.7 Alton Road

No.7 Alton Road is a grand Victorian home, built in the late 1860s on lands and gardens formerly belonging to Manresa House. The house has changed a number of times over the last 150 years, formerly being a lodging house named 'Petronilla Villa', then becoming a family home known as 'The Briars'. The house has formerly been the home of a ground-breaking and award winning meteorologist, Charles Durst, as well as a leading early 20th century engineer, Frederick Rose.

Elevated position with fine views

Until the middle of the 19th century, Putney Hill and Roehampton were solely occupied by large country homes for the aristocracy and gentry. Homes were built here during the 18th century, including Mount Clare, Parkstead and Downshire House. Roehampton was chosen as an ideal location for "its exclusivity, its elevated situation with fine views over the Thames valley, and amenities such as Putney Heath and Richmond Park." [Putney and Roehampton Past by Dorian Gerhold]

Manresa House and new building

It was in the 1860s, after the 5th Earl Bessborough had sold the house, Parkstead and the surrounding lands that some small scale building development came to this area, now known as Roehampton Park. The house was acquired by the Jesuits who established a religious institution and renamed the house 'Manresa' after their founder's Spanish origins. At the same time they sold off small sections of land, including plots now located along Alton Road and Bessborough Road.

Carpenters and builders

A few large Victorian villas were built along sections of Alton Road, including today's No.7. The 1871 census records the house (not yet named or numbered), but it shows the first occupants were in fact a master carpenter and his family. Neighbouring houses were also home to a builder and an ironmonger, so it is possible that the first occupants were the very people who were completing the new homes in Roehampton Park.

Petronilla Villa

Unusually, No.7 Alton Road became a lodging house or 'apartments' very early in its life. By the late 1870s the house was named Petronilla Villa or Petronilla House and was run by James and Margaret Burr. The 1881 census lists Mr and Mrs Burr with their two young children, Ignatius aged two and Joseph only nine months old. The family had two live-in servants, but was also home to three lodgers. Firstly, two German clerks with the General Merchants office, Joseph Horsfall and Wilhelm Lieberoth, both from Berlin, but listed as 'British subjects' and also a 60 year old unmarried woman, Elizabeth Forshaw, with no profession.

Thriving family and business

Throughout the 1880s and 90s, James and Margaret Burr were recorded in Petronilla Villa, often also listed as 'apartments'. The 1891 census shows us that the Burr household has grown dramatically and Margaret had had four more children, William, Mary, Maggie and Maria, as well as five live-in servants, including a nurse and a gardener and again three boarders. The first, a Roman Catholic Priest, 48 year old, John Rouse, as well as two unmarried sisters from Ireland, Helen and Annie Reene.

No. 4 Alton Road

In around 1894 Petronilla House was renumbered No.4 Alton Road. James and Margaret continued as Lodging House keepers, until in 1899 James Burr passed away. Margaret continued in the house with her children (she had a further two children) and by the early 1900s her son Joseph was working as a Clerk at the Board of Works and her other son, William was recorded as an actor! The house was still promoted as 'apartments' until 1904.

20th century change – The Briars

In 1904 the house was purchased by Mr. Charles Thomas Denny – Physician. A drainage plan in 1904 shows Charles Denny as the owner and he commissioned new plumbing in the house. It was at this time that the lodging house, Petronilla Villa became a single family home and was again renamed, 'The Briars'. However, Mr Denny did not stay long and by 1909 the house was the home of Mrs Margaret Stannus.



Frederick Campbell Rose – Engineer

By the late 1920s, 'The Briars' had become the home of Frederick Rose and his wife Lucy. Frederick Campbell Rose was a noted civil engineer who had worked extensively with the Public Works Department of the Government of India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After retiring from his work with the Government in India in 1919, Rose went to work with improving the river systems in northern China. He retired from his work in China in 1927 and returned to England, at which point he moved into 'The Briars' on Alton Road.

Charles Summer Durst – Meteorologist

Frederick and Lucy Rose remained in the house until the early 1930s when the house became the home of Charles and Mary Durst. Charles Summer Durst was a noted meteorologist who particularly worked in the area of navigation and aviation. Before moving to Roehampton Park, Charles was working with the Royal Airship Works and was heavily involved with aviation industry at a time of great development in air travel. When Charles and his wife moved to 'The Briars' he started working with the Forecast Division of the Meteorological Office.

War effort and awards

In 1940, Charles Durst moved into a special investigation branch of the Meteorological Office, meanwhile his son David was actively serving in the armed forces. In 1948 Charles was appointed assistant director of the Meteorological office. Durst won many prizes and awards for his ground-breaking work in the area of meteorology and navigation, including the Air Ministry's Grove Memorial Prize in 1949 and the Institute of Navigation's Bronze medal in 1950 and 1956.

Another Doctor in the house

The Durst family remained in 'The Briars' until around 1961, by which time the house had been officially renumbered No.7 Alton Road (in 1950). In 1962 the house became the home of another doctor, Dr Raymond Wynne Hughes, surgeon and Member of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. He lived in the house with his wife Dorothy until the early 1980s.

The Profumo Affair

Alton Road also has a small connection to the scandalous Profumo Affair of the 1960s, as it was once the home of Paula Hamilton-Marshall, the flat mate of Christine Keeler. Miss Hamilton-Marshall was tried for obstructing the course of justice alongside her former flat mate, Miss Keeler, who was notoriously involved with John Profumo, the then Secretary of State for war, while she was also connected to assistant naval attaché in the Soviet Embassy.