



Poles apart: some Jews fear the eruv will turn the area into a ghetto

Wanted: home within eruv, with 20ft poles

The creation of a special area to benefit Orthodox Jews is changing the face of north London – and some locals are livid, says *Ross Clark*

When Hampstead Garden Suburb was laid out, in the Edwardian age, the aim was to combine the peace of the countryside with the opportunity of the city. Since the Second World War, its broad, leafy streets and arts and crafts villas have gained an added reputation as a melting pot.

While Jewish buyers have tended to favour the suburb itself, neighbouring streets, such as The Bishops Avenue, have long attracted wealthy Arab buyers. The suburb has also been famed for its political diversity: the Sultan of Brunei and King Constantine, the exiled king of Greece, have homes there, near those previously occupied by such socialists as Lord Soper, J B Priestley and Harold Wilson. And all this in an environment that remains thoroughly English.

But all is not well in this romantic's paradise. For the past seven years its streets, all with such names as Hogarth Hill and Ruskin Close, have seen a bitter campaign over a plan to create an "eruv" — an enclosure which would allow Orthodox Jews to perform such tasks as carry bags and push pushchairs, that would normally be forbidden on the Sabbath.

In the next few weeks, the eruv will "go live" and an estimated 10,000 Orthodox Jews resident in the area, will have their Saturdays transformed. But for the opponents — a large proportion of whom are

themselves Jewish — the eruv will transform the area into a ghetto.

Defending the concept of the eruv several years ago, Rabbi Kimche made the mistake of saying that most residents of the eruv would be no more affected by its existence than they would by the area's postal code — without realising that, as far as London house buyers are concerned, postcodes have become a form of religion. If the Post Office ever dared attempt to shift the boundaries of NW3, a holy war would surely ensue.

Inevitably, the eruv will have a bearing upon the property market. "Within eruv" could soon start appearing on estate agents' particulars. The area to be covered by the eruv (see map) has obviously been chosen because it has a strong Orthodox Jewish population, but that doesn't mean that everyone will be in. The behatted, Volvo-driving Hasidim Jews of Stamford Hill will not be included. For them, the choice will soon lie between leaving the baby indoors on a Saturday or moving to within the eruv — a factor which some believe will cause a minor property boom. Isolated cases have also been reported of Orthodox Jewish buyers moving from Chelsea to Hampstead Garden Suburb to be within the eruv.

Some existing Hampstead Garden Suburb dwellers, on the other hand, are saying they will move out of the



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eruv area when it becomes established. "What we find grossly offensive," says Elizabeth Lawrence, who heads the Barnet Eruv Objectors' Group and lives in Hampstead Garden Suburb, "is any group of people making a claim for territory. It will force a change in the community. It will upset what has always been a multicultural area."

Ultimately, believes Philip Green of the Hampstead estate agency, Goldschmidt & Howland, the numbers of people selling up will be cancelled out by the numbers wanting to move into the eruv. A property boom caused by incoming Orthodox Jews is, he says, unlikely to happen.

"I'm sure many people in Stamford Hill would love to move into Hampstead Garden Suburb. Whether they could afford it is another matter. Family houses on the south side of the suburb sell for £2 million-£3 million, and on the north side they sell for £600,000-£700,000. Even one-bedroom flats cost £90,000."

Simon Edwards, of FPD Savills, agrees. "We haven't yet had anyone ask for a house within the eruv. What we are often asked for, though, is for houses within walking distance of a synagogue, because Orthodox Jews are forbidden to drive on the Sabbath. A house near a synagogue will attract a small premium."

A more noticeable effect

may well be on houses which lie along the eruv's boundary. The eruv is not just an ethereal concept; it will have a physical manifestation, too. Much of the eruv will be marked by existing physical boundaries, such as the M1, but where no natural boundary exists, such as across main roads, the edge of the eruv is to be marked by nylon fishing line, carried aloft on 20 ft poles. Planning permission has been granted for 88 poles, most of which will be planted in the pavement in residential areas. Houses, garden walls and fences will also be used to denote the boundary.

Not everyone is happy about their property attaining religious significance. It is not the eruv itself that bothers Jeffrey and Elizabeth Segall but the fact that their Cricklewood home was to form one of the boundaries. The effect, they say, would be to lower the value of their property.

"One of the poles was due to be erected 6in from my side fence," says Mr Segall. "The boundary of the eruv would have run straight through my property. We are humanists and object to our home being used in such a way. My house would inevitably fall in value because anyone who wanted to live inside the eruv would not want to choose a house right on the boundary, and anyone else would be put off by the fact that the house

was being used symbolically. The existence of the pole would also make it difficult if I wanted to repair my fence."

Dr Segall wrote to the London Beth Din — the court of the Chief Rabbi — to complain, and received a surprising response. If he didn't want his home to form the boundary of the eruv, it seemed he had only one, radical, option: "You are perfectly at liberty to demolish your house, thus causing the frontage of your house to cease to exist."

Following Mr Segall's complaints, the eruv committee did subsequently move the proposed boundary across the road. But that meant that it would pass through the home of Lorna Noble, who is even more opposed.

"If I were an Orthodox Jew it would have meant that I could have walked out of my back door but not my front door on the Sabbath," she says. "There would be two poles a foot from my house, and the fishing wire would pass over the Baptist chapel up the street. I don't understand why, in the year 2000, you need poles and fishing wire just to push a pram outdoors on the Sabbath. It would damage this street, and all to increase the value of houses in Hampstead Garden Suburb."

The eruv supporters keep saying: "Oh, but there are eruvs in America". But I go to America to stay with Jewish friends, and they

don't put up fishing wire there — they use existing telegraph poles and wires to mark the boundaries."

For outsiders, more concerned about traffic noise and graffiti, the row over the eruv may seem a lot of fuss over nothing, but that underestimates the passion with which Hampstead Garden Suburb dwellers view their homes.

Early on in the eruv dispute, Lord McGregor of Durris was forced to resign as chairman of the Garden Suburb Trust's Council — not because the bulk of the membership rejected his staunch objections to the planting of poles and wires in a conservation area but because eruv supporters had managed to obtain a long-lens shot of the rear of his home, it revealed that not all his windows were leaded in strict accordance with the suburb's aesthetic rules.

One of the flashpoints of the eruv debate, on the other hand, might be expected to be The Bishops Avenue, which lies close to the eastern boundary and contains some of the most expensive houses in London — up to £17 million.

But Arab buyers there, says Trevor Abrahams of Hampstead agent Glentree Estates, are unruffled. "Just as an indication of how apolitical The Bishops Avenue is," he says, "I as a Jewish agent managed to sell a house to the chief fundraiser of the PLO. We had some very enjoyable and lively conversations."