

The barrier that has split a community

A battle over a Jewish sanctuary in Barnet has lasted 12 bitter years, says **Peter Stanford**

It has outlasted even the interminable battles over extending Heathrow airport to claim the title of Britain's longest-running planning dispute. For 12 years they have been battling in the borough of Barnet, northwest London, over plans by the local Orthodox Jewish community to erect an eruv — a circular series of metal poles linked by nylon fishing line, marking out an 11-mile sanctuary within which some Sabbath restrictions, notably the ban on pushing prams and wheelchairs, can be relaxed.

Those in favour of the scheme, led by several local Orthodox synagogues, say non-Jewish residents will hardly notice the eruv at all. Opponents, however, claim variously that their area is being "invaded" and turned into a Jewish ghetto, that their human rights are being abused and that their homes will be devalued. Lorna Noble, whose Childs Hill home is on the southern rim of the eruv, says: "I don't think we

ought to be made to live for seven days a week within this boundary so that a minority can push a pram."

The idea of an eruv is an ancient one, dating back to the Talmud, the Jewish holy book of the fourth century AD, when walled cities such as Jerusalem were treated as eruvs. Almost all of London's eruv border will be marked out by existing boundaries such as the M1 and A41; poles and wire will close the circle.

The first poles went up at the end of last month — though not, as yet, the linking wires, high enough to allow all but exceptionally tall lorries to pass underneath.

The property side of the wider controversy has been much aired locally — perhaps because it makes for a more socially acceptable bone of contention than objecting to the principle of the eruv, an approach that all too easily sounds like anti-Semitism. At the public inquiry into the scheme, local estate agents were reprimanded by the chairman for talking up the effect the eruv would have on house prices by prompting an influx of Orthodox Jews into the 6½ square-mile area under its auspices.

However, Alan Goldin, of Alan Goldin Estates, based on Temple Fortune Parade in the heart of the affected zone, reports no sudden surge in demand. "For the past 10 years, this area has been popular with the Orthodox because it has the synagogues, schools and kosher shops that they want," says Goldin, who estimates 70% of his clients are Orthodox Jews. "The eruv, then, is just one more community asset as far as such people



New frontier: a local rabbi sizes up one of the newly erected poles, below left, that will mark the eruv boundary. Anushka Levey, above, will now be able to push her daughter Ella to synagogue in her buggy

are concerned. As far as affecting prices, well, they've been going up steadily for years, and I see no reason why that will change."

Edward and Anushka Levey, Orthodox Jews who have just moved into the area with their 15-month-old daughter, Ella, bear out his observations. "I am so sceptical about the eruv ever happening," says Anushka, 27, who is pregnant with her second child, "that it would have been mad to make our plans on the basis of it. If it happens it will make a difference for me because I will be able to push Ella to synagogue in her buggy, but we came here because this was the obvious place to go."

The number of Orthodox Jews who will be embraced varies depending on who you talk to. Opponents say as few as 600 people will benefit at the expense of a wider community of some 50,000. Supporters say that at least 10,000 may take advantage of the Sabbath dispensation.

The ring has been cast wide in an effort to encapsulate several closely related but distinct Jewish communities. On the southern tip are the neat and leafy streets of the prosperous Hampstead Garden Suburb. Here opposition from largely secular Jews has tended to be on aesthetic grounds — that the poles are ugly and will spoil the chocolate-box look of an area where houses often sell for more than £2m.

The spiritual heart of the eruv is around Golders Green and Temple Fortune, where observant Jews are much more visible.

Within Golders Green itself, reports Graham Gold, of Winkworth, there are certain streets and enclaves that have a particular appeal to Orthodox Jews and therefore have long commanded a premium. But as Gold explains: "Many non-Jewish people are attracted to this area for the obvious reason that it is quiet, peaceful and offers large houses at what are, by London standards, reasonable prices." Gold has no plans to start displaying a map of the eruv boundary: "I can honestly say that nobody has yet asked me where it begins and ends."



Barnet: the facts

Schools: The Jewish Hasmonian School in Hendon and the Henrietta Barnett School in Hampstead Garden Suburb are both highly rated

Prices: Four-bed houses cost about £1m in Hampstead Garden Suburb, £500,000 in the Princes Park Avenue area of Golders Green and £350,000 in Hendon

Crime: Barnet is one of the safest London boroughs



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