

Sir Charlie Chaplin

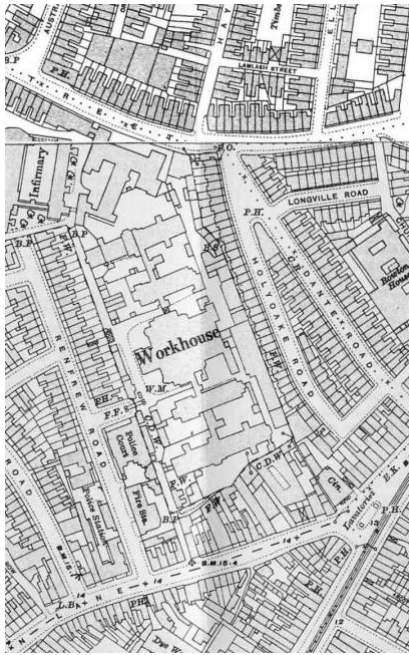


Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) was probably the most famous comic actor of all time – and almost certainly therefore Kennington’s most famous resident. He made his reputation dressed as a tramp, with smudge moustache, frock coat, bowler hat, cane and oversized shoes in silent films from the mid-1910s, mixing buffoonery with pathos and eventually combining dialogue with music.

He said that he was born in East Street – site of a still flourishing street market just off the Walworth Road – to two music hall performers, Charles and Hannah Chaplin. But this may not be true (he also once claimed to have been born in Paris). It was suggested in 2012 that he may have come from a gypsy family, and was born “in a caravan [that] belonged to the Gypsy Queen ... on the Black Patch near Smethwick near Birmingham”. Either way, he certainly had a rough early life, much of it spent in and around Kennington. His parents separated before he was 5 years old. His mother then struggled to make a living - Charlie first appeared on stage at the age of 5 when his mother was unable to complete her act – and she had a mental breakdown when he was 9, eventually ending up in an asylum. Charlie’s father was an alcoholic and, although he became a successful businessman, eventually owning a number of public houses, he died when Charlie was 12.

The result was that Charlie spent much of his time on the streets of North Lambeth, hanging around outside his dad’s pubs, and staying overnight in workhouses or with his father and his new partner. But he closely observed the local characters in an area which was both very poor and dominated by the theatre – which had yet to move to respectability north of the river. The streets of Lambeth were in effect a large open air theatre and this early experience fed much of Charlie’s later comic genius. It is not too difficult to

imagine the scene in the above photo in the streets of Lambeth at the end of the 1900s.



Whenever Charlie's mother did not even have enough money to rent a room, they stayed in the Lambeth Workhouse between Brook Drive and Renfrew Road, behind the Imperial War Museum.

This 1914 map on the left shows that the workhouse was fairly large. Its *Master's House* is still standing and now houses the excellent Cinema Museum. [More information about, and some photos of, the workhouse are here.](#)

The street running across the top of this map is Brook Drive, and Kennington Lane runs across the bottom of the map.

Charlie went to schools in Kennington Road, Hercules Road and Sancroft Street, and is said to have lived in the following premises in the Kennington and Walworth areas:-

- 39 West Square,
- 92 Barlow Street
- 39 Methley Street – said to be the inspiration for the setting of *The Kid* as well as the home of the blind girl in *City Lights*,
- a one room garret at 3 Pownall Terrace, Kennington Road, and
- 287 Kennington Road, where there is a plaque remembering him ('though it is possible that he in fact stayed next door with another part of his family, as he didn't get on with those who lived in No 287).

It is also said that Charlie last saw his alcoholic father at:

- the Three Stags pub on the corner of Lambeth Road and Kennington Road,

that the inspiration for his "tramp" character was gained outside:

- the Queen's Head pub on Black Prince Road, opposite the end of Vauxhall Walk,

and that Charlie met his first date outside:

- the railings of St Mark's Church, the Oval – which became the inspiration for the place in *City Lights* where a blind girl sells flowers.

Charlie's memoirs record his memories of West Square, just off Brook Drive:-

“West Square! At the back of the Bedlam Lunatic Asylum. This is as far back as I can remember as a child. It was there, somewhere around the age of three, we lived in a large house.

It was there I almost died through swallowing a halfpenny. I had taken my money box to bed with me. My brother had been impressing me with conjuring tricks, pretending to swallow the coin and bringing it back through his nose. Of course I did it realistically with the awful consequences. What a rumpus it caused! I have a vague memory of being held upside down, shaken, slapped and probed and brought into the glaring light of the sitting-room. Then for some reason everything subsided and I slept.

As I walk around West Square, I come upon a stationer's shop where they sell toys, sweets and tobacco. The store has an odor that awakens memories. It smells Christmasy. In the window I see a Noah's ark with painted wooden animals. I can't resist it. I go in and buy it just to get a whiff of the paint and the feel of the excelsior that's packed inside. “

Charlie's stage career began in earnest at the age of 7 when he appeared as one of a team of urchins billed as The Eight Lancashire Lads. He then joined Fred Karno's Fun Factory, based in Coldharbour Lane, Brixton, where he worked with Stan Laurel, another English comic who also eventually emigrated to Hollywood. The Karno troupe went out to the United States in 1910 ... and the rest, as they say, is history.

Charlie was in fact rather an unpleasant individual – perhaps because of his upbringing. He was extremely mercenary and he was also a womaniser. His close women friends were appalled to learn that he publicly and tastelessly described their physical attributes in detail. Chaplin's political pronouncements also caused outrage. During the Second World War, he followed the Communist propaganda line calling for a second front in the East against Germany which led to later allegations that he was pro-Red. In the 1962 witch-hunt conducted by Senator McCarthy and the American Legion, Chaplin fled to Switzerland announcing that he was "a citizen of the world". And "I have no further use for America. I would not go back there even if Jesus Christ was the president". But this also produced the revelation that he had always been British and had never become an American citizen.

Chaplin married four times. His first two divorces produced sensational newspaper headlines as did allegations of taking a minor across state boundaries for the purposes of sex, and a paternity suit in 1944.

The movie industry awarded Charlie two special Oscars, in 1928 and 1972, and he was knighted by HM Queen Elizabeth II in 1975.