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Making City Histories in Museums  
(1998)

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## Croydon: What History?

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### A city but not a city

This chapter looks at some of the issues of interpretation that were encountered in making a museum in Croydon. We had to ask: where is this museum going to be? Why is it going to be? Who is it for? (And do they want it?) What should it be about? What should be in it? What should it feel like? And for how long can we sustain it?

Of course, we never looked at it quite as systematically as this; the answers to some of these questions evolved through discussion over several years. Much of that discussion took place with local people. In the process of designing the museum between 1990 and 1995 (when we first opened to the public) we conducted several pieces of qualitative research, and their words, together with the recommendations of the researchers, informed what we did. Most of the quotes reproduced here come from the very earliest, and most general, piece of research we carried out (Fisher, 1990).

'Croydon is pretending to be a city.' (family museum-goer)

Croydon is not a city, though on two occasions (in 1928 and in 1993) it has made a bid to become one. It is nevertheless the tenth largest town in England, with a population of 313,500 in 1991; larger than that of many cities. Administratively it is a London borough; one of thirty-three. Until 1965 the present London Borough of Croydon was two separate entities: to the north was the County Borough of Croydon; the south was part of the county of Surrey. These two areas had very different socio-economic and demographic characteristics which to a great extent survive today. The north is significantly poorer, more densely populated and ethnically diverse than the south. The borough has a significant working population and is a major regional shopping centre. Yet for many of the people who live and work there, or who visit, the London Borough of Croydon is the local authority, an administrative entity, but not an identifiable place.

Roughly at the centre of the borough is the town of Croydon. Unlike the borough, it is a distinct and recognizable place. From a Saxon settlement in the eighth century it grew into a sizeable market town. Its significance and status was partly due to a long connection with the Archbishops of



Figure 4.1 Wellesley Road, central Croydon  
(Croydon Local Studies Library)

Canterbury, who from the eleventh to the eighteenth century owned property in the area and used palaces in Croydon as their summer retreats. Its dramatic growth began in about 1840 with the new London and south-coast railways. Many of the northern parts of Croydon still consist of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century terraced housing built for middle-class commuters.

The development of suburban housing spread southwards, and during the 1930s large new estates were built in what was then Surrey. The greatest developments in the centre of the town took place in the 1960s and 1970s, when the local council encouraged firms outgrowing cramped London offices to move out to cheap development sites in Croydon. Much of the town centre was demolished to make way for new office blocks and roads, and Croydon was nicknamed 'Mini-Manhattan' (Figure 4.1). It is the central office and shopping centre that most people think of when they speak of Croydon, and many of them dislike it.

### The media

Anyone reading this who has lived in London or south-east England will probably know what I mean when I say that Croydon has an identity



