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Viewpoint

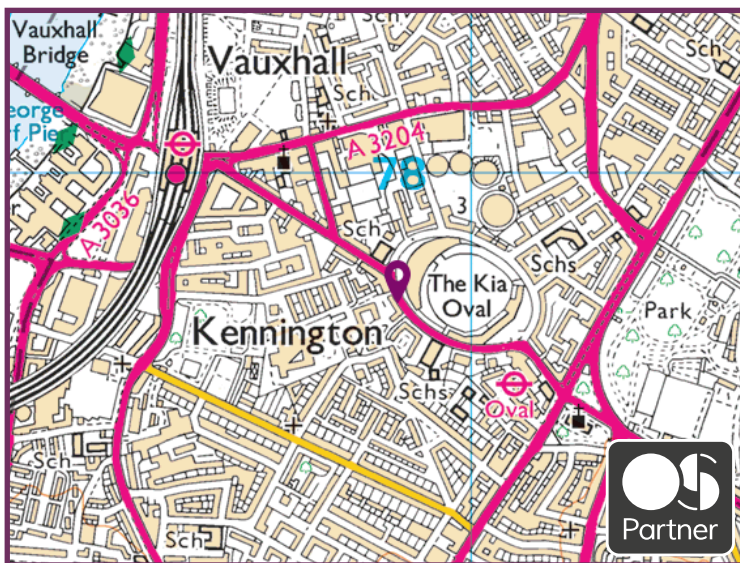
The sweet stretch



Time: 15 mins

Region: Greater London

Landscape: urban



Location:

Shrewsbury House, Kennington Oval,
A202 (continuation of Harleyford Street),
Kennington, London SE11

Grid reference:

TQ 30857 77753

Keep an eye out for:

Similar railings outside other south London estates
- including in Peckham, Brixton, and Deptford

Shrewsbury House is one of many urban estates built in the interwar years between 1918 and 1939. Look carefully at the fence surrounding the block. There's a low brick wall, with pillars every few metres. In between these are black painted panels of metal fencing.

Look closely at the metal panels. See if you can spot kinks at both ends of the poles, framing rectangles of wire mesh. These funny-shaped railings had a former life. Join anthropologist and author Mary-Ann Ochota to unravel the mystery...

What's the secret behind these South London street railings?



To find the answer we need to look back to the early years of the Second World War. From 7 September 1940 London was heavily bombed during a 9-month bombing campaign known as the Blitz.

Across the city, Air Raid Protection (ARP) wardens were tasked with helping people reach air raid shelters, responding to injured citizens and tackling fires. Officials also had grave fears that the Nazis would use poison gas, resulting in huge numbers of contaminated casualties.

So more than 600,000 steel stretchers were made for the ARP wardens to use. They were a simple design. Shaped poles created four 'feet' for the stretcher to sit on, and a steel mesh in between that the casualty could be laid on. The all-steel design meant that if a dreaded gas attack did happen, the stretchers could be disinfected and reused quickly and easily.

When the war ended the stretchers weren't melted down or scrapped. Instead they were 'upcycled'.

At the start of the war, many of the capital's housing estates had their railings removed to help provide metal for making weapons and machinery. After the war ended in 1945, someone had a bright idea about how to replace them: surplus ARP stretchers could be turned into fence panels.

Housing estates across south and east London were given these stretcher railings – you can still spot them in Peckham, Brixton, Deptford, Hackney and Lambeth.

These railings are now painted black but many of the ARP stretchers were originally green. See if you can spot any places where the paint has chipped away, revealing the original colour underneath (please don't chip the paint yourself, it'll damage the railings). You might even spot some railings where the mesh has been slightly deformed – possibly caused by the hips and shoulders of the casualties the stretcher once carried!

In recent years lots of these railings have been removed as estates have decided to replace their rusting, funny-shaped fences. A group of local historians are now hoping to make sure the survivors are maintained and protected. The fences are important parts of architectural history in the distinctive housing estates they're found in.



**Written by Mary-Ann Ochota,
anthropologist and author of
Hidden Histories: A Spotter's Guide to
the British Landscape**

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