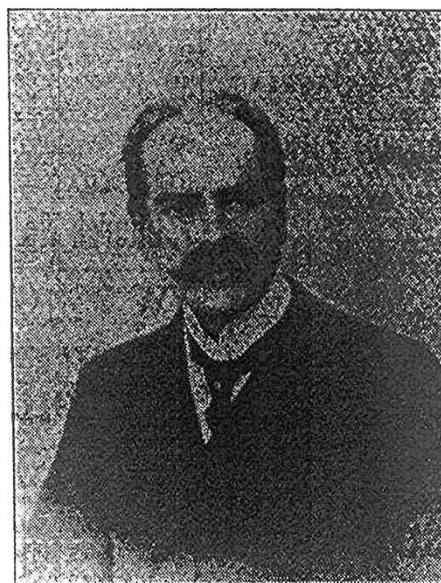


José Diaz – the Spanish Chairman

José Diaz (or to give his full name: José Genaro Diaz y Tezanos) was born in Cadiz, southern Spain, in September 1855, but he moved to England as a young man to sell the sherry produced in his family's vineyards. He married an English woman, and by 1881 they were living at "The Grange" in Willesden. José and his wife, Mary Ann, had two children, but both died in infancy; a daughter, Mary Ann, in 1884 when she was just 2 days old, and a son, José Rafael, in 1887, aged 4½ years.

A Photograph of José Diaz from the "Hendon & Finchley Times", 12 May 1905.

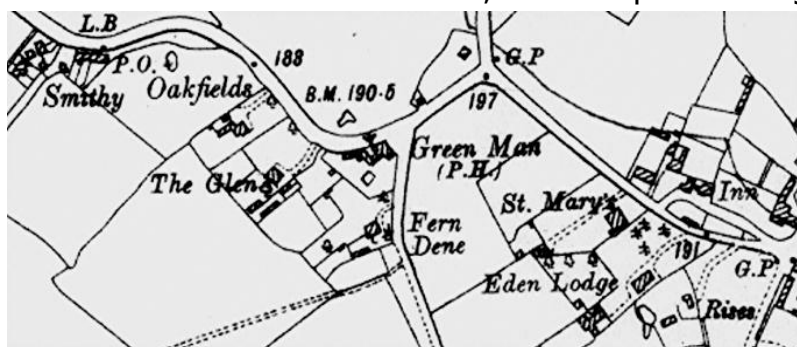
[Source: Barnet Local Studies and Archives Centre - local newspaper microfilms]



JOSE GENARO DIAZ, J.P.,
CHAIRMAN OF KINGSBURY DISTRICT COUNCIL, 1905.

It was not uncommon for children of even reasonably well-off parents to die young in the 19th century. Although the Medical Officer's report for 1887 to the Willesden Local Board stated that the figures for the year '*...shew a most decided improvement in the matter of Infant Mortality*', 55.2% of deaths in the area were still among children under five years old (down from 62.5% in 1886). The main causes of these deaths were bronchitis, diarrhoea, convulsions, premature birth and measles.

In 1888 Mr and Mrs Diaz moved away from the Willesden High Road area. Perhaps it was the rapid urbanisation of the area after the extension of the Metropolitan Railway from Baker Street to Willesden Green in 1879, or the hope of raising more children in cleaner country air which prompted them to move. Home for the rest of their lives was "Ferndene", in rural Kingsbury.



Extract from a 1913 Ordnance Survey map, showing "Fern Dene" in Slough Lane, near the Green Man pub.

[Source: Brent Archives – maps collection]

Kingsbury had been a small farming parish for centuries, running its own affairs (see the articles on "The Hay Meadows of Kingsbury" and "The Poor of the Parish"), but after the establishment of Middlesex County Council in 1889, local government within its area was modernised. Kingsbury was originally included as part of Wembley Urban District when that was set up in 1894, but after arguments between councillors for the two areas, Kingsbury split off to form its own Urban District Council in 1900, even though its population was only 750, and it could hardly justify the "urban" description. Wembley Urban District at this time was home to around 4,500 people, while nearly 115,000 lived in the Willesden Urban District.

José Diaz was one of a number of business and professional people who lived in substantial “villas” that were built in Kingsbury in Victorian times. These became particularly popular after the Midland Railway station at Hendon (just a short carriage ride away) opened in 1868, giving easy access to the City of London. Mr and Mrs Diaz were well respected in the area, and it was probably their paddock, opposite Ferndene in Slough Lane, which was used for Kingsbury’s celebration of King Edward VII’s coronation in 1902. José was invited to stand for the local Council in April 1904, and he was one of several candidates returned unopposed.



A photographic postcard of the Coronation Day games in Kingsbury, 1902.

[Courtesy of Geoffrey Hewlett]

The following year José Diaz was made Chairman of Kingsbury Urban District Council. Disagreements over policy had led to a split on the Council, with three members on each side. There was stalemate over who should take charge, until one of the opposing faction arrived late at a meeting to find that Mr Diaz had been elected, 3-2. He presided at a meeting on 26 July 1905, but suddenly resigned from the Council three weeks later.

The reason for this was soon explained, when a Court hearing to revise the list of electors received objections to Mr Diaz being included, on the grounds that he was an alien. The subject of “aliens” was often in the newspapers at the time, with fears over the number of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe leading to The Aliens Act of 1905 being passed, the first British law aimed at restricting immigration. The local Overseers submitted that José Diaz was a Spanish merchant, who had not been naturalised.

Mr Diaz, who was away on business, wrote from the Railway Hotel in Birmingham to say that his name had been on the voters’ list for seventeen years, and that he regarded himself as a

IS MR. DIAZ AN ALIEN ?

The Kingsbury lists were first considered, and among the ownership claims was that of Mr. J. Diaz, of Ferndene, Kingsbury.

Mr. Harper at once rose and said that the Overseers objected to the name of Mr. Diaz being included in the list on the ground that he was an alien. Notice of objection had been given.

The Barrister asked what evidence there was that Mr. Diaz was an alien.

Mr. Harper: He is an alien, and not a naturalised British subject, and as such he has no claim.

The Barrister: Who gives you the information?

Mr. Harper: He is a Spanish merchant domiciled in England, but he has not taken out letters patent to become a naturalised British subject. The records at the Home Office have been searched.

The Barrister: Do you know where he was born?

Mr. Harper: In Spain.

British subject. The Revising Barrister decided that his name must be taken off the list. Mrs Diaz, who had voting rights herself in local elections as an occupier of property, was also removed from the list, the Barrister saying that ‘...*this followed as a matter of course*’ because she was married to a man not qualified to vote. José Diaz applied in August 1905 for British citizenship, but his Certificate of Naturalisation came through too late for him to be included on the voter’s list.

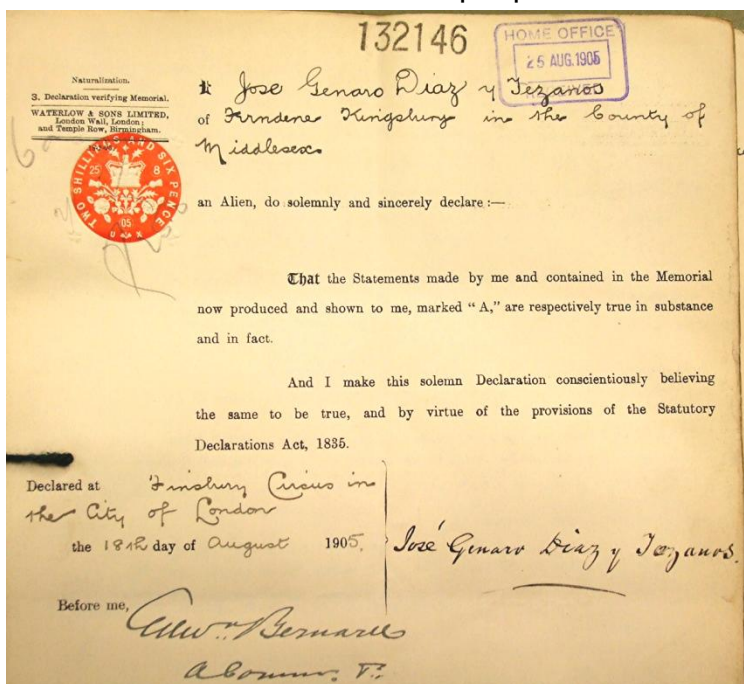
Extract from the “Hendon & Finchley Times”, 6 October 1905.

[Source: Barnet Local Studies and Archives Centre - local newspaper microfilms]

Diaz's naturalisation documents (reference: HO144/797/132146 at the National Archives, Kew) give an interesting insight into British life at the start of the 20th century. His own application had to be supported by sworn statements from five other people. The Roman Catholic Rural Dean of Hendon, his priest since he moved to Kingsbury 17 years earlier, confirmed that Diaz had been resident in the United Kingdom for at least five years. Four other 'natural born British subjects', including a Liverpool Alderman and Justice of the Peace who had done business with him for 30 years, said that they could 'confidently vouch for his loyalty and respectability'.

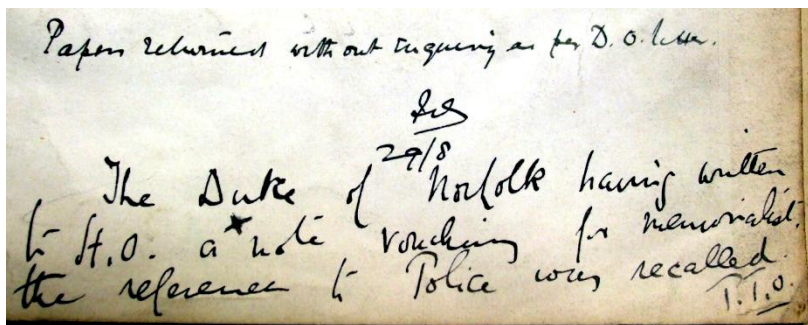
The signed declaration on Diaz's naturalisation application form.

[Source: National Archives, Crown copyright]



Notes on the file cover show that the Home Office passed the papers to the C.I.D. (Special) department of the Metropolitan Police Office. This was presumably part of the normal procedure, so that "Special Branch" could ensure that applicants did not have a criminal background and were not a threat to national security. However, the papers were returned without checking a few days later, after the Home Secretary had received a letter from the Duke of Norfolk, a former minister in the Conservative government of the time and

a prominent British Catholic, vouching for José Diaz, whose naturalisation was quickly approved.



A note from the naturalisation papers file cover about the Duke's letter.

[Source: National Archives, Crown copyright]

After Mr Diaz stood down from Kingsbury Council there were other resignations, and local government in the District fell into chaos, as with only two out of six councillors in place there was never a quorum to make decisions. The Council even received a court summons for unpaid bills, because no one could give the authority to pay them! Middlesex County Council held an enquiry in 1906, to decide whether Kingsbury should cease to be a separate Urban District (then probably to be merged with Hendon), or whether it should be revived and given more councillors. Its order for the latter course took effect in March 1907, and elections were arranged to fill all nine seats on the new Council.

There were still deep divisions between key local citizens about what policies the District should pursue, and Mr Diaz and his supporters put forward candidates for all of the seats, calling themselves "The Solid Nine". Although the Liberal and Conservative parties fought national elections at this time, these party names were not used locally. José Diaz, who used

the Union Jack as his emblem in case anyone still had doubts about his Spanish heritage, topped the poll, with 93 of the 138 electors voting for him in an 82% turnout, and his eight colleagues were also elected.

The election manifesto for Mr Diaz's "party" from the "Hendon & Finchley Times", 22 March 1907.

[Source: Barnet Local Studies and Archives Centre - local newspaper microfilms]

At the new Council's first meeting, Mr Diaz was elected Chairman, a post which he was to hold for more than eight years, and with great vigour. An electric tramway between Edgware and Cricklewood had recently been completed, and the Council encouraged the electricity company to extend its wiring into Kingsbury so that local homes had the chance to install electric lighting. Kingsbury Council, however, continued to use gas for its street lamps. In 1908 the Council was approached by: *'... the Post Office authorities, who asked permission to erect Telegraphic Poles along the Kingsbury Road, from the Edgware Road to The Cottage'* [now "Kingsbury Manor"]. Kingsbury UDC gave its permission, in return for the Post Office agreeing to install a public telephone at the Council Offices (a former classroom on the first floor of the Board School at 12 Kingsbury Road, which had been taken over when the Council was set up in 1900).

One of Mr Diaz's main achievements was to persuade the County Council, with evidence from a local traffic census that he organised in 1908, to finance half the costs of improving and maintaining Kingsbury Road, which was then still a narrow lane with a surface of loose stones. Local roads were so poor that when Kingsbury UDC had discussed the new Motor Car Act in 1903, it had recommended to Middlesex C.C. that the speed limit throughout Kingsbury *'... be restricted to TEN MILES an hour.'*

Census Road traffic in Kingsbury road.

On the 29th July last I wrote a letter to the County Council signed by the Assistant Clerk claiming a subsidy for our principal road, Kingsbury Road, upon which we have spent a considerable amount, and which is now in a proper and efficient condition. I made that application under sub-section 10, Section 11, of the Local Government Act 1888, and in order to comply with the requirements of the County Council, a census of the traffic of the said road was taken by the Police authorities on the 3rd, 4th and 5th August last, from 8 A.M. to 8 P.M. and on the 13th 14th and 15th of the said month from 8 P.M. to 8 A.M., showing that through the said road, a length of 1 mile 5 furlongs 74 yards, 283 Motor cars, vans, and omnibuses, 3581 Bicycles, and 5935 pedestrians had passed during the time above mentioned. The return of that traffic with a map of the said road was duly sent to the County Council on the 27th August last, and I was informed by the County Council that the matter had been referred to their Highways Committee which meets on the 7th October next. Our Clerk will now read the Correspondence thereon to you.

Part of the Chairman's Report by Mr Diaz in the minutes of Kingsbury UDC for 23 September 1908.

[Source: Brent Archives – Minutes of Kingsbury Urban District Council, Volume 2, 1903 to 1915.]

KINGSBURY DISTRICT COUNCIL ELECTION.

KINGSBURY,
March, 1907.

Friends and Fellow Electors,

We have been requested by a large number of Electors to offer ourselves as Candidates for the forthcoming Election for the Urban District Council of Kingsbury.

The objects we seek in asking for your support are not unknown to you. They are the following :-

1. To provide a competent, peaceful, and decorous administration.
2. To do away with the present extravagant expenditure.
3. To reduce the rates.
4. To encourage individuals to reside in Kingsbury, to spend money in the district, to beautify and develop it, and to help their poorer neighbours.
5. To procure the building of proper workmen's dwellings by private enterprise.
6. To procure the application of the Harvist and Lyon Fund to the benefit of Kingsbury.
7. To procure a proper and equitable assessment.
8. To procure the proper and equitable administration of the charities.
9. By an orderly, efficient, far-seeing, and economical administration to aid in bringing about lower rates, lower rents, constant employment, and general peace and prosperity.

We are all united in our aims, and shall regard it as a pleasure and an honour to devote our time and ability in aiding to carry out the above objects and in promoting the welfare of the whole district.

Trusting to receive your votes at the poll,

We are,

Yours sincerely,

JOSÉ DIAZ,
H. JOHNSON,
A. LAWRENCE,
A. McINTYRE,
T. NOAD,
A. SHEFFORD,
F. A. TRENDLE,
J. J. WALKER,
J. W. H. WHEELER.

VOTE FOR THE SOLID NINE

(ONE VOTE TO EACH).

POLLING DAY: MONDAY, MARCH 25th, 1907.

The Council made the most of the County subsidy it could get, and by its meeting in September 1912 Mr Diaz was able to report that: *'...part of Kingsbury Road has been recently made up and covered with Tarmac, which is a hard and durable substance and while making a splendid road is economical and cheaper in the long run....'*

During his time as Chairman of Kingsbury Council, Mr Diaz also served as a Justice of the Peace (local magistrate), a manager (governor) of the local school, a member of the Hendon Board of Guardians (looking after the poor of the district) and a trustee of the Kingsbury Charities. In addition, he represented Hendon South-West Division on the Middlesex County Council for four years, and was a member of its Pension Committee.

After the death of his wife, Mary Ann, in November 1913, Mr Diaz cut down on his civic duties, but still carried on his Kingsbury UDC work. With the outbreak of the First World War he was active in encouraging local men to volunteer to fight "for King and Country", as well as raising funds to provide a house in Kingsbury as a home for Belgian refugees.

On 15 July 1915 Mr Diaz returned from Nottingham specially to chair a Council meeting, and spent the next day with Kingsbury's Clerk and Surveyor discussing the work needed during the summer recess. He called out "good night" to the Council's roadman on his way home at about 8pm. The following morning he was found dead on his bedroom floor, poisoned by cyanide of potassium, which he kept because of a problem with wasps.



At the inquest, held three days later in the dining room at "Ferndene", there was some evidence that Mr Diaz had been depressed at times since the death of his wife. The jury's verdict, however, was that he had taken the cyanide accidentally, mistaking it in the dark for the aspirin he frequently used for headaches, and which was kept in a similar bottle. This allowed José Diaz to be buried alongside his wife and infant children at St Mary's Roman Catholic Cemetery in Kensal Green, although his name does not appear on the gravestone, perhaps because any surviving relatives still lived in Spain.

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The Diaz family grave (No. 2276) at St Mary's R.C. Cemetery.
[Photograph by Philip Grant, August 2009.]

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September 2009 and May 2013.

This is a more detailed version of a "Secret History" article written for the October 2009 edition of the "Brent Magazine".

With thanks to my fellow local historian, Geoffrey Hewlett, and to staff at the National Archives and at the Records Office at St Mary's Roman Catholic Cemetery, Harrow Road, London NW10 5NU, for their help with my research for this article.