

The Portrait: Visual Anthropology and Fiction

Pimlico by Emily Ricard

Single Exterior Portrait



Unlike what some people might think, Pimlico is definitely not an aging area: indeed, 30-44 year olds represent 29.2% of the population, proving a favourite with young professionals thanks to its central location and proximity to Victoria station (UK Census, 2011). Charlotte, 27, has lived in Pimlico for 5 years, 2 of which with her boyfriend. With her family's help, she bought a first floor flat in one of the Cubitt houses that are icons of the area, especially in the Pimlico Grid: one of the most desirable places of the neighbourhood. Charlotte forms part of the 17.7% of homeowners in Pimlico (UK Census, 2011). She loves the traditional aspect of the area and how green and nature-filled it is, with private gardens (behind her) and squares, giving her many different places to walk her French Bulldog.

Interior Group Portrait



Nickie and Alex have lived in Pimlico since the 90s and on one of the squares since 2002, meaning that their children, Harry and Georgia, have always called the area home. Nickie is a local councilor and Alex is a civil servant in Whitehall, thus they both have a unique, political view of Pimlico. “House prices have squeezed families out. A lot of couples need to move once they start having children as they can no longer afford the area,” says Nickie. Alex also notes that the student population has drastically diminished and ‘City types’ have moved in, with the addition of a lot of properties being solely investments. The children agree that Pimlico is a melting pot and a friendly area where they see the same faces on the way to and from school. “The issue now,” says Nickie, “is to make sure that Pimlico, which was split from Belgravia by rail, doesn’t become split in its own right and become a community of extreme wealth and extreme poverty.”

Exterior Group Portrait



Fatima, 15, Ahmad, 13 and Abdul, 11, live in Campbell house, on Churchill Gardens estate. The two eldest siblings were born in Kuwait and upon coming to the United Kingdom, lived briefly in Dagenham before moving to their current home in Pimlico. Their brother Abdul was born here and their daily life is based in Pimlico, as they attend the neighbouring Pimlico Academy. “A lot of older people live on the estate. It’s also quite dangerous and can be scary, drug dealers hang out on the stairs all the time, not just at night. You have to be careful,” Fatima tells me. “I like the playgrounds here,” says Abdul, who then goes on to tell me that the rest of their family lives in Kuwait and they miss them quite a lot, despite visiting them when they can. I ask them what they would like to do when they grow up: Fatima wants to be a chemist, Ahmad would like to explore art and photography and Abdul isn’t sure yet, as he has too many ideas.

Environmental Demographic Portrait



There are council estates resembling small towns in Pimlico, such as Churchill Gardens, built to provide much needed housing following World War 2, which was designed to house 5000 people (Municipal Dreams, 2014). Churchill Gardens is known in the area for being a drug hub and can be starkly contrasted to the white stucco houses, like the one that Frenchman, Chris, 58, lives in. "I love the diversity in Pimlico and the fact that it's not solely a bubble of wealth like Belgravia. I only recently found out about the number of estates in the area actually, as I travel a lot and only spend a matter of days here. Walking my dog allows me to explore my area more and see how fantastic it is. It's true however that there can seem to be a divide at times, which is a pity."

Single Interior Portrait



Kristian is 35 and has worked in Pimlico for 5 years. Retromania is a well recognised second hand vintage shop, not just in the area, but also in London. Indeed, Pimlico has developed a strong reputation among bargain hunters as one of the best second hand shopping areas in the city. “I get to know people very well here as we have a lot of customers. But it’s a tiring job. There’s a lot of theft, mostly every day. We also get a lot of mental patients from the hospital next door who come in and dealing with them can sometimes be hard,” notes Kristian. Indeed the Gordon Hospital is known for its care of severely ill mental patients and is located on the border of Pimlico and Victoria. “Pimlico used to be very groovy, but they’ve tried to clean up the area and it’s not as trendy and indie as it used to be. But as it’s so central, it’s always going to be a destination area.”

Self Portrait



It can be challenging to find some time away from the bustle of London and the urge to seek refuge in an empty place, all too necessary. Despite having lived alone since the age of 16, penetrating into the bunker-like basement and former air raid shelter is the closest thing I have to real social and material isolation in the heart of Europe's largest capital. Outgoingness and eccentricity isn't confined to the clothes on my back: it is also in my thoughts and dreams, all of which I can abstractly paint the broad lines on the empty canvas I am lucky enough to have underground.

Fictional Story



It is a little known fact, even for Pimlico residents that MI6 owns multiple safe houses in the area, due to the proximity of the organisation's headquarters. This particular case was a tabloid sensation for many months and still remains mysterious: spy Gareth Williams was murdered at 36 Alderney Street in 2012, with his death leading to multiple conspiracy theories (Sengupta, 2012). In time, the street returned to normal. But couriers can sometimes be seen dropping off packages within the Pimlico Grid. One of the couriers, Tony, who asked to use a different name and not have his face shown, says, "it's true that there are often many different people in the same houses, never at the same time though. We never ask questions about what we're delivering and they're pleasant people. But I'm not stupid, I can see when something is unusual. I've only just found out about the spy thing through a colleague."

Strange Story



“I’ve lived here since 1962. My cousin had a flat in Lupus Street that was only costing me £10 per week. It wasn’t a good area though, it was actually a red light district back then.” Julia, 81, doesn’t want to show her face or give her last name as she has received suspicious letters and mild threats in the past from strangers, possibly due to the fact that her and her husband, formerly working in Whitehall, have the title of Lord and Lady, something that Julia feels marks her out as a target. Julia and her husband bought a house in 1964, “before the underground was built. There were signs to the shelters still and Pimlico had been terribly bombed. They were aiming for Victoria of course, but like you see now, a lot of buildings are new or copies of originals.” Julia adds, “Pimlico was very poor. But we had our 2 children here and they attended the local school. [...] I’ve been living in this flat for 10 years now and I would never leave. I do get terribly irate when proposals to build all these new fangled cycle bridges from Vauxhall to Pimlico go through as they will affect the area horribly.” What about the people here? “It’s varied, there are a lot of council houses. The bad thing is that people ostracize themselves within their communities. A divide like that is never good news.”

A Reflection of the Area: the Face reading as a Map



Despite being representative of London's ethnic diversity, Pimlico has a mostly white (43.6%) and female (52.3%) population (UK Census, 2011). Candice, 60, has been living in Pimlico for 6 years now in an apartment located on one of the area's many squares. She recognises that Pimlico is an expensive location for buying and renting property, with a notable increase in property prices over the past decade, meaning that those electing to live there must have the financial means to do so.