

The Shops of Clapham Junction

About the time he turned seven, Richard Church's parents took him from their lowly home near Battersea Bridge to have his eyes tested at a chemist's on Lavender Hill. Emerging from the shop wearing steel-rimmed spectacles, the boy beheld the pavement

sparkling like quartz in the lamplight. The lamplight! I looked in wonder at the diminishing crystals of gas-flame strung down the hill. Clapham [Junction] was hung with necklaces of light, and the horses pulling the glittering omnibuses struck the granite road with hooves of iron and ebony. I could see the skeletons inside the flesh and blood of the Saturday-night shoppers. The garments they wore were made of separate threads. In this new world, sound as well as sight was changed ... I trembled with the excitement, and had to cling to Mother's arm to prevent myself being carried away in the flood as the pavements rushed at me, and people loomed up with their teeth like tusks, their lips luscious, their eyes bolting out of their heads, bearing down on me as they threw out spears of conversation that whizzed loudly past my ears and bewildered my wits.¹

Church's personal epiphany encapsulates the contrast between the drabness of workaday Victorian Battersea and the glamour and coarse hurly-burly of the shops concentrated around Clapham Junction, still fresh in 1900. If that freshness has long worn off, energy still reverberates around the junction of Lavender Hill, Falcon Road, St John's Hill and St John's Road. It has even seeped southwards to infect Northcote Road where another shopping style, no less intensive, takes over. This overall area, sometimes known as the Clapham Junction Town Centre (Ill. 10.1), was reckoned in 2004

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as the second-largest of five major commercial centres in Wandsworth, with 35,510 square metres of retailing space in 334 separate units.² On the evening of 8 August 2011 its shops featured among the main targets of that summer's notorious urban riots.

Clapham Junction provides this chapter's focus because only here has Battersea's environment been dominated by shopping. There has never been a shortage of shops elsewhere in the parish, notably along main roads.

Battersea Park Road, for instance, was once lined with them, and York Road continued the sequence. But its frontages lacked coherence, as did shorter runs along Battersea Bridge Road, Falcon Road, Queenstown Road and the upper sector of St John's Hill. There are or were also other local or district concentrations, sometimes amounting to shopping 'parades'. As these originally served particular housing developments, they are discussed in volume 50. The shops of Battersea High Street, older in origin, are also dealt with there.

The middling shops of Victorian Battersea were geared to the needs of those who lived close by. Changes since then have been in broad line with consumer habits and demands elsewhere in London. There have been just two distinctive notes. One is the recent boutique- and café-style shopping along Northcote Road, fuelled by the gentrification that has overtaken that neighbourhood since the 1970s. The other is the commanding presence at Clapham Junction since 1884 of Battersea's only department store, Arding & Hobbs – the one emporium capable of drawing shoppers from afar before the advent of the car. In the form in which it was rebuilt after its destruction by fire in 1909, Arding & Hobbs (now Debenhams) is Battersea's one enduring monument to the architecture of retailing.

The boom of the 1880s

It took twenty years from the opening of Clapham Junction Station in 1863 before its commercial impact was fully felt upon the neighbourhood. As described more fully in volume 50, the lower portions of St John's Hill in the 1860s and 70s were lined largely with small villas and villa-pairs, while St John's Road had a smattering of houses on its west side only, of which Nos 16–20 survive vestigially behind later shops on their front gardens (Ill. 10.6).

The leader in the area's transformation was the big-scale yet shadowy South London developer-builder, Alfred Heaver. He was the main purchaser involved in the break-up after 1880 of the small villa-estates around Lavender Sweep east of St John's Road. A little later he bought from the Whiting family the equivalent frontage along the west side of St John's Road together with the back land as far west as Boutflower Road, on which to lay out his St John's Park estate; and in 1887 he acquired the Chestnuts property, small but with a valuable frontage on the north side of Lavender Hill, returning towards Falcon Road.

A frenzy of commercial development ensued along St John's Road and Lavender Hill, extending to the base of St John's Hill and portions of Battersea Rise (Ills 10.2, 4, 5a).³ The change can be gauged by the fate of what was then the area's oldest surviving building, the Falcon Inn. In 1878 the inn was hanging on, together with a triangular patch of land with trees – a remnant of its former open space. A decade later the pub and its surroundings had been rebuilt, and the triangle compressed by the need to widen the streets for trams, housed in a depot beside Clapham Junction Station. To replace the trees, that essential component of a late Victorian commercial crossroads had arrived: basement 'latrines' surmounted by a ventilating gas lamp. Today traffic lights, guard rails and minimal mid-road shelters are all there is to see.⁴ This local bonanza, together with the municipal concentration of library, vestry hall, police station and post office on Lavender Hill, gave central

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Battersea the focus it had hitherto lacked. By 1895 it could be said that in the evenings, especially Saturdays, 'some thousands of persons' went to Clapham Junction 'for marketing purposes'.⁵

In architectural terms, the shops built here in the 1880s achieved a striking coherence. On both sides of Lavender Hill and St John's Road a norm was widely observed of three full storeys in height, with Gothic-headed triplets of windows to the first floor over the shopfronts, infilled with tympana carved in varying qualities of relief (Ills 10.7, 8). The guiding hand in achieving this cohesion can only have been Alfred Heaver's.

The first-built of these ranges, erected by the builder Thomas Spearing in 1882-3 and covering much of the east side of St John's Road (originally Nos 5-47), was in stock brick and without an attic storey. Three main ranges followed on opposite (Nos 48-64, 66-78 and 80-86). These are taller, built to a uniform design in up-to-date red brick, and have single attic windows to each unit and higher ends, canted back to mark the more eligible shops at the corners and break up the streetscape. The same design recurs little varied round the corner at 13-19 St John's Hill, and further away at 225-233 and 235-243 Lavender Hill as well as 19-31 Northcote Road. Most spirited as well as longest of these Gothic-tinged ranges is 242-274 Lavender Hill, part of the former Queen's Parade, which curls away from the Falcon Road corner and up the north side of the hill with flexible aplomb. Above the pointed triplets the units break out into Queen Anne-style pedimented gables to the half-dormers, flanked by terracotta panels bearing swags or other ornament. Queen's Parade was the work of the fertile commercial architect Frederick Wheeler, who also designed the next block eastwards, now demolished.⁶

These 'Gothic' ranges were all purpose-built as shops to let. One other composition of some ambition but different character stands further from the Clapham Junction nucleus and was probably thought of as serving the new

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streets behind it. That is the long symmetrical range at 1–37 Battersea Rise (W. Newton Dunn, architect, 1886–7), accented by pyramid-capped towers at the ends and centre (Ill. 10.4).

Other blocks started out as houses on to which shops were hastily improvised, as at Commercial Buildings, 178–192 & 194–200 Lavender Hill, four full storeys in height with single-storey shops projecting on what would otherwise have been front gardens.⁷ These projections played havoc with frontage lines and gave a ragged, non-architectural look to streets, but furnished extra retailing space. Such conversions along Lavender Hill elicited complaints in 1889, when it was stated that the tradesmen-dominated Vestry ‘simply take no notice’ of the Metropolitan Board of Works’ objections to them.⁸ Turning houses into shops went on into the Edwardian years, as on the north side of Battersea Rise, where road-widening in 1904 deprived Nos 18–48 of their protective front gardens and made them suitable candidates for commerce.⁹

In addition there were a few individually commissioned shops or commercial buildings. Three – Arding & Hobbs and Francis & Son, facing one another at the main intersection, and Munts close by on St John’s Hill – are important enough to be separately discussed below, along with Hastings Ltd, which did not get purpose-built premises till later. In origin all date back to the boom years.

The evolution of trade

Most of these shops were at first occupied in single units and covered the spectrum of local needs. Here traded and lived middling shopkeepers of the type important in late-Victorian public opinion and local politics. In St John’s Road, heart of the commercial district, out of 53 shops listed in a directory for

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1896, 20 sold food or drink and 18 clothing or shoes. Among the miscellaneous premises were a music seller and a dealer in fine arts, while there were three places of refreshment—a Swiss café, cocoa rooms and a pub. The street's speciality was drapery establishments. Arding & Hobbs led the field, but four other drapers covered more than a single unit: Evans & Hobbs (28–32), Evans & Soley (37 & 39), Johns Brothers (70 & 72) and David Roberts (86–90). Both Walter Evans of Evans & Hobbs and David Roberts were certainly Welsh-born, and the latter's contingent of two apprentices and ten assistants were mainly Welsh, conforming to the stereotype of Welsh dominance in London's drapery trade.¹⁰ In 1899 the first of the chains arrived. This was Gardiner & Co., owners of the Scotch House chain of draperies, which took over from Evans & Hobbs. As these premises were among the old low-level 1840s shops at the north end of the west side, the new proprietors naturally wished to rebuild, but objections from neighbours on grounds of light and air forced them to keep mainly to a single storey.¹¹

By 1911 only a few individual traders still lived over the St John's Road shops. (Dentists' surgeries proved a popular replacement, while today solicitors seem largely to have supplanted the dentists.)¹² Among the survivors was George Farrow at No. 50, manager of Farrow's below. This had been founded in 1907 by his younger brother Thomas, a lay preacher with no financial experience but an ambition to found a national 'movement to supplant the 60 per cent usurer'. The bank flourished at first on high interest rates, a large membership of clergymen and an appeal to women ('Every woman her own chequebook').¹³ But it failed in 1920 following revelations of a fraud which bolstered the interest rates but had not personally benefited the modest-living Farrow family. Nevertheless Thomas Farrow was sentenced to four years in prison and the depositors, including many in Battersea, lost more than £2 million.¹⁴

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By 1924 clothing and shoe-shops in St John's Road had risen to 33 establishments, but food and drink had dropped back to eleven. Consolidation into larger units was now well forward. Arding & Hobbs had gobbled up several of its neighbours, while the advent of further national chains had accelerated the process of high-street homogenization. Boots the chemists enjoyed two addresses on the east side alongside Home & Colonial Stores (No. 45) and Marks & Spencers bazaar (No. 47), while Saxones (Nos 12-14), Lyons' refreshment rooms (No. 24), Woolworth's bazaar (recent arrivals at Nos 36-38 in the former Biograph cinema) and Freeman, Hardy & Willis (No. 52) had premises opposite. An employment exchange occupied Nos 79-85. To its south near the Battersea Rise corner, the Buck's Head was converted in the late 1920s into minor shops with a new frontage. The single-storey shops at the corner (now hidden by an ugly fascia), along with adjoining premises in Battersea Rise, were scheduled in 1930 for rebuilding as a Lloyd's Bank with a curving neo-Georgian frontage by Oliver Hill.¹⁵ That came to nothing – a sign that by the time of the Depression the best days of St John's Road were past.

Lavender Hill, a longer and older street than St John's Road, had already developed an intermittent shopping frontage before the boom. It boasted a tradesmen's club by 1879, and was marked out two years later as soon to become 'an important commercial thoroughfare'.¹⁶ But when development of its western stretches took place, it transcended shopping. A library (1889), town hall (1893), police station (1896), Shakespeare Theatre (1896), post office (1898) and telephone exchange (1902) – all but the first on the north side – offered a counterweight to commerce, imparted the feeling of a mature town centre, and doubtless enriched the sensations absorbed by young Richard Church.

Outlets for clothes and shoes were the predominant early shops here, especially on the south side. Some were quite large. At Minnis's, a draper's at

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Nos 307–309, a fire caused by a naked flame in a window decorated with pampas grass led to the deaths of two assistants in 1891. The coroner found that there were 22 young women then working on the premises as assistants or in millinery and dressmaking at the time of the fire; the escape provisions had been neglected.¹⁷ Further east on the same side at the Lavender Gardens corner (Nos 235–239) was one of two local branches for the business of Isaac Stanley, supplier of ‘machine-made’ bread and provisions for weddings, dinners, balls and routs. In 1899 Stanley moved his bakery from industrial-sized premises in Lavender Gardens to an even larger site behind 119 Altenburg Gardens and the Battersea Library. Converted into offices, the buildings survive as Bakery Place.¹⁸

Not all of Lavender Hill was dignified. Across from Lavender Sweep the last remaining old houses on the north side had given way by 1911 to ‘roundabouts, swings, coconut shies, etc’. By a grandiose scheme of that year these were to be replaced by the ‘Clapham Imperial Club and Arcades’, comprising shops, flats, a concert hall and much else designed by J. S. Gibson, Skipwith & Gordon, fresh from getting Arding & Hobbs back on its feet.¹⁹ This heavily puffed project soon evanesced, leaving half the site to be filled by the Pavilion Cinema (page xxx).

There was much turnover hereabouts in the early years. Queen’s Parade, Lavender Hill, was known as ‘Bankrupt Parade’.²⁰ In 1890 the *South Western Star*, puffing Clapham Junction as the potential ‘Regent-street of South London’, hailed the arrival of a branch of Knowles Brothers, whose butchers’ shop marked an ‘immense improvement’ to the parade’s appearance, and of G. F. Darby & Co., iron merchants fleeing high rents and cramped accommodation in the City. Darby’s looked forward to using Clapham Junction’s ‘splendid railway facilities’ for their country customers, and boasted of a large order about to be dispatched to Burma.²¹ Neither firm lasted long.

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Most varied in profile was St John's Hill, possibly because of its proximity to the station. Among the first new buildings at the base of the hill after Clapham Junction Station opened was the factory of Stevens & Son, billiard-table makers, vestigially preserved behind the present No.1 (1874-5).²² Here food and clothing shops were a minority. In 1896 there were six auctioneers ready to batten on the local property market, two dining-rooms and two 'ham and beef warehouses' (in modern terms, fast-food outlets), as well as makers of umbrellas, billiard tables, pianos and fishing tackle, a bank, a long-established photographer, an electrical engineer, a billiard room and a telephone call room. Munts at Nos 9-11 sponsored the South Western Conservatoire of Music, while at No. 27 was the battalion headquarters of the East Surrey Regiment in a converted villa.²³ In 1900 the building of the Grand Theatre at the Severus Road corner confirmed the lure of entertainment along the Lavender Hill-St John's Hill axis, while in 1905 the West End property firm Hillier & Parker added another auction room behind that of Arding & Hobbs, who had taken over the billiard-table factory.²⁴

The central shopping area since 1965

Until well after the Second World War shopkeepers around Clapham Junction traded on with little self-examination. In St John's Road, Marks & Spencers had spread and rebuilt at Nos 45-49 in 1937 (W. A. Lewis & Partners, architects). Woolworths opposite followed suit in 1957-63, rebuilding in a plain, boxy austerity style which took in the returns to Eckstein and Severus Roads.²⁵

Bombing had holed the Lavender Hill frontage west of the library, but was made good around 1960 with replacement blocks of small or medium-sized shops or banks (Nos 279-297 with flats over on the south side, Nos 230-

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240 on the north). Then in the late 1960s planning threats – notably the Greater London Council’s abortive motorway box which would have taken 55 acres around the station for an interchange – alerted people to the need to defend and reinvigorate the retailing district. The Battersea Society, recently formed, undertook the pioneering investigation, published as *New Life for the Junction* in 1972. This confirmed Clapham Junction as then Wandsworth’s most important shopping centre, but judged that it suffered from ‘excessive elongation’.²⁶

The remark applied chiefly to Falcon Road north of the railway, whose shops had never been integrated with the district further south, though Arding & Hobbs had started their Battersea career here in 1881 (see below). Two sizeable and old-established shops still occupied stretches of the east side here: Walters Ltd, a small department store at Nos 15–27; and David Thomas, drapers (founded around 1890 by the fervent Pentecostalist of that name), at Nos 43–59. They increasingly served old people ‘who cannot and do not want to go up the Junction’, as a councillor remarked in 1978. When Walters closed in 1981, a director was blunt: ‘There is no real shopping area round here anymore and no incentive for people to come to the shop’.²⁷

Wandsworth’s Planning Committee took up a ‘comprehensive approach’ to the area in 1973. St John’s Road, whose buildings were said to ‘have a hidden quality that is not immediately appreciated’, was to be safeguarded and perhaps closed to traffic. The area northwards was more problematic. Merbridge Investments Ltd, a subsidiary of the British Land Company had assembled the land between the Falcon and the station, and submitted planning applications through Richard Seifert & Partners in 1967 and 1969. Both were refused by the GLC, leaving the southern approaches to the station blighted for twenty years. Further east, attempts by Wandsworth Council to secure the derelict Falcon Lane Goods Depot were unavailing. By a plan approved in 1976, that area was to be reserved for light industry, and the

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demand for new shops met on a deck spanning the station platforms at Clapham Junction and giving access also to the office blocks still sought by British Land.²⁸

British Land finally pulled out in 1984–5, selling their holdings for a fraction of their supposed value to Compact Retail Developments. At the same time the Council was able to make shopping the main element in a scheme for the goods depot site by Charterhall Properties Ltd. Here a new Falcon Lane was laid out, leading principally to a Gateway (later Asda) supermarket opened in April 1987. The Clapham Junction redevelopment followed on under Holder & Mathias, architects, reconfiguring the street pattern in front of the station, inserting a small shopping arcade and including new offices for the Civil and Public Services Association (now the Public and Commercial Services Union or PCS) at 160 Falcon Road.²⁹ These developments did more for the area's prosperity than for its attractiveness. The surroundings of the new Falcon Lane, and the gaping void on the north side of Lavender Hill looking on to a sea of parking in front of the banal Asda store (Ill. 10.18), are both dispiriting. A hotel (Husband & Carpenter, architects) was erecting in 2012 at the Falcon Road and Falcon Lane corner, reduced from the sixteen storeys first proposed to eight.³⁰ The Clapham Junction approach is friendlier but now looks worn. While these volumes have been in preparation, there have been various plans to replace it.

In the streets to the south, most of the buildings of the 1880s shopping boom are still there, but they nowadays have to work hard to express the area's individuality. Like everywhere else, the mismatch between architectural style and garish shop fronts, signs and street furniture is sharper than ever. Where values are highest, as on St John's Road, few shops can truly be called local. Here Boots (at Nos 21–23), and Marks & Spencers (at Nos 45–49) are the oldest survivors, along with the old warhorse of Arding & Hobbs, rebranded as Debenhams. Many shops occupy two units, but the only one

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covering three is Waitrose, which replaced Woolworths at Nos 40–44 in 2008 and is one of just two shops in the street selling non-prepared food. In 2009 there were six outlets for mobile phones, six boutiques or small clothes shops, three coffee shops but also three charity shops. The relentless replacement of shopfronts has not been redeemed by anything of value. Round the corner the eastern stretch of Battersea Rise presents a different picture. Here out of about 30 shops, once of varied type but including the large Edwardes Furniture Depository at the corner of Webb's Road, some 16 are now restaurants, cafés or bars, many of them stretching over several units.

During the Clapham Junction riot of 8 August 2011, it was St John's Road that was most systematically targeted by looters and vandals, since here lay the shops stocking the clothes and consumer durables of intensest popular appeal. Debenhams too was looted. Though most of the structural damage was minor, 272 Lavender Hill (half of the Party Superstore) was entirely burnt out. The greater damage done to the area's reputation was partly redeemed when hundreds of people came out to clean up the streets with brooms the next day. The brooms of Clapham Junction (Ill. 10.19) swiftly became national symbols of amends and recovery.

Northcote Road

Northcote Road, currently the centre of Battersea chic (Ills 10.16, 17), differs from the shopping streets to its north. Its shops are small and without architectural interest, but its location has allowed it to profit from the influx all round of young families with spending power.

It took time for Northcote Road to establish itself as a shopping street, and indeed a few stretches have never succumbed. When first laid out over the course of the Falcon brook after 1869, it was neither intended nor

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construed as a major thoroughfare, though buses were using it by 1900. It then boasted over 90 commercial addresses, slightly less than half dealing in food or clothing. The other trades were mainly domestic, such as blindmaker, chemist, dentist, hairdresser, oilman, stationer, tobacconist, undertaker, upholsterer and watchmaker. There were also three builders, a cycle warehouse, a plumber, a printer, a surgeon, a surveyor, an architect and a sculptor. The Northcote Hotel, still there at the western corner with Battersea Rise, was the only pub.³¹ One firm, Doves the butchers at No. 71, has had an enduring presence since 1889, while the plumber F. Richmond persisted at No. 53 from the 1870s until the 1990s, latterly as a builder's merchant.

From a number of open markets in Clapham Junction shopping streets, only Northcote Road's remains, an enfeebled survivor of sporadic opposition from shopkeepers. It occupies the west side towards the north end (III. 10.15). In 1975, when Wandsworth Council proposed a stiff rise in rents for the 42 barrow pitches, some stallholders were already stocking 'exotic foods' in token of changing times. The stalls were down to 14 in 1993 and have barely held their own since.³²

Photographs of the early 1980s portray Northcote Road as a drab streetscape dominated by minor branches of 'multiples'. The visible change began around 1990 when, with gentrification advancing 'between the commons' and estate agents already prominent, a café and boutique culture mushroomed. By the millennium this had become widespread enough to draw publicity, and for the sobriquet 'Nappy Valley' to take hold. A 'mother' then remarked: 'I've heard the place being called nappy valley and I think it's sarcastic. People are making fun of all the young mothers hanging out in the cafés. The area has become so one-dimensional. It's just so boring now'.³³ Later came 'genuine concern that the road will become an extension of St John's Road, with its big brand stores such as Costa Coffee and Waitrose'.³⁴

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Northcote Road received the accolade of a 'chicklit' novel in 2004. Looking back, its author recalled that the street was 'noticeably well stocked with babies' bottoms. The queue for the baby-changing in Starbucks was almost as long as the one for butterscotch lattes and Marshmallow Twizzles ... But now [2009] all the kids I see around the place are in school uniform. They're getting so tall! Their voices are breaking!³⁵ The evident youth of the population reflected the demographics of Wandsworth, which had the highest growth in birth rate in Europe in 2004 over the previous four years, a rate confirmed by later figures; over 40 per cent of the borough's residents were between 25 and 39 years of age in 2011.³⁶

The street's plethora of baby clothes outlets, café chains and pizza restaurants are housed mostly in one or at most two units of quite ordinary Victorian houses. An exception is No. 35, where a bar called 'The Bank' indeed occupies a handsome stone-clad former bank, unusually confined to a single storey. But there remain a quantity of plain, serviceable shops, as well as a library. This balance helps explain Northcote Road's success. In this respect it differs from Webb's Road a few streets eastwards, where a handful of day-to-day shops had largely given way by 2004 to specialisms such as diving equipment, antiques and osteopathy.³⁷

Arding & Hobbs

The drapery firm of Arding & Hobbs started business in Fairfield (then North) Street, Wandsworth, in 1876. Henry Arding (1844–1918) and his co-founder James Hobbs (1848–1908) had met as buyers or assistants in a Tottenham Court Road shop. In 1881 the buoyant partnership expanded into Battersea, opening at the corner of Falcon Road and Battersea Park Road. Half a mile south they added a third set of premises in 1884 at the south-eastern corner of Lavender Hill and St John's Road close to Clapham Junction Station,

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on land previously earmarked for a public hall (page xxx).³⁸ Costing at least £8,000, this became their flagship store. Friends had twitted Arding for his 'unjustifiable rashness' in moving to so raw a vicinity, he later claimed, but he 'saw that Clapham Junction with its great railway system, must eclipse Wandsworth'.³⁹ When this shop opened, the three branches had about two dozen assistants between them.⁴⁰ In due course they were amalgamated on the new site.⁴¹

The architects for the original Clapham Junction store were Tolley & Son, while the builder was William Marriage. The two James Tolleys, father and son, ran a busy commercial practice and were also employed by the London and South-Western Bank (Arding & Hobbs's bankers), designing the nearby branch at 3–7 St John's Hill. They added various extensions between 1886 and 1890, starting with stables and workrooms. These were entrusted either to Marriage or R. Jewell, who in 1891 built the firm a furniture repository designed by the Tolleys in Musjid Road off Falcon Road some way to the north.⁴² The plethora of these early works conveys rapid growth. Drapery was Arding & Hobbs' mainstay, with over half the 40 staff listed as living at the Clapham Junction address in 1891 working in that trade. They were then described as house furnishers, carpet warehousemen and general drapers.⁴³ An auction room and estate agency came into operation at about this time, run from separate premises.⁴⁴

The earliest photographs of the store show a five-storey block, one bay longer towards St John's Road than towards Lavender Hill, with a then-unusual double tier of shop windows surmounted by the legend 'Arding & Hobbs for the Million' (Ill. 10.9). Above these rose red-brick upper storeys liberally dressed in stone, used in part as dormitories for shop assistants.⁴⁵ A French-style ovoid dome faced in scaled slates with a round clockface in front crowned the corner. Already there were lower extensions along both flanks, three bays along St John's Road and one along Lavender Hill. Internally,

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Illustrated London noted 'a complete system of the American "cash railway"'.⁴⁶ From 1896 Arding & Hobbs started to encroach upon the west side of Ilminster Gardens behind, replacing or reconstructing recently built houses with warehouses and dormitories of five and six storeys. The third and last instalment of such blocks rose in 1906.⁴⁷

Hobbs having retired in 1905, the firm came under the family control of Henry Arding and his sons, Herbert and Stanley.⁴⁸ They suffered a devastating setback on 20 December 1909, when in the space of an hour most of the premises burnt to the ground in one of London's most sensational shop fires, with the ultimate loss of eight lives. Considering the crowds on an afternoon before Christmas, with 366 employees and further close-packed shoppers on the premises, the toll was not high. The disaster was ultimately if not conclusively attributed to a light globe bursting in a window dressed with Christmas decorations and lace and silk goods, igniting celluloid combs laid on a bed of cotton wool. Despite the extent of damage, the store's construction was not at fundamental fault; some fire doors held, and walls and stairs survived in Ilminster Gardens, though roofs burnt right off. Arding & Hobbs' subsidiary premises in St John's Road (Nos 11-13 & 17-19) were spared, but nearby shops were badly damaged by the heat, notably Francis & Son opposite, where Christmas turkeys on outside display were roasted through.⁴⁹

The Ardings quickly rallied, taking temporary retailing space in nearby premises as well as at their own furniture depository.⁵⁰ Many employees had to be released, but a relief fund was well subscribed to, and fair numbers were rehired after the rebuilding. That happened expeditiously. By April 1910 the builder James Carmichael was on site, allowing the store to reopen for the Christmas trade in early December. In culmination of the renewal, the firm became a limited company in 1912.⁵¹

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The designers of the new Arding & Hobbs were J. S. Gibson, Skipwith and Gordon. The principal in the partnership, James Gibson, was an architect of versatility and brio best known for the Middlesex Guildhall building in Parliament Square. More pertinent was Debenham & Freebody's monumental store in Wigmore Street, erected to Gibson's designs in 1907–8. His Clapham Junction proposal was allegedly accepted from many designs submitted after the fire.⁵² But as there is no evidence for a competition, Gibson was probably chosen for his track-record.

Given the urgency, some coarseness in the façades is unsurprising. The new store follows its predecessor in emphasizing the clock-faced corner, flanked by street fronts of red brick and Bath stone, once again over two tiers of shop windows. The disparity between upper and lower halves is greater than in the old store because of Gibson's weighty architectural language, mingling Italian mannerism with French baroque. The upper portions have a staccato quality, with heavy hoods over all the second-floor windows, and swag-framed cartouches on the storey above insistently inscribed with the firm's initials. Aedicules with segmental pediments – two to St John's Road, one to Lavender Hill – relieve the long cornice line. This monumentalism sits uncomfortably atop the small-scale Georgian display windows of the first floor with their pseudo-fanlights, supplied by Pollards of Clerkenwell. But the whole is redeemed by the stone-clad octagonal angle tower, stouter and stronger than its counterpart in faience at Debenham & Freebody's, and one of Battersea's memorable architectural moments (Ill. 10.10, 11). The short sides boast full aedicules with free-standing columns, the long sides carry cartouches surmounted by crowns, and the whole is topped by a scrolled and gilded feature. The canopy over ground-floor level all round is an addition of 1972.⁵³

As the fronts betray, the structure was steel-framed (the girders coming from the Battersea Steelworks of Drew-Bear Perks & Co.), while the floors

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were constructed on the Kahn reinforced-concrete system.⁵⁴ The plan has been greatly changed now, the original main staircase, light wells and 'island' shop windows on the ground floor having vanished in renovations of 1961 and 1972-3.⁵⁵ The drapery and other clothing departments were mostly on the lower floors, but the ground floor also contained a flower shop, a writing room, a post office on the model of similar branches at Harrods and Selfridges, for which a member of the Arding family always acted as sub-postmaster,⁵⁶ a removals and warehousing office, an estate agent's department, and a restaurant 'where Ferrier's Blue Viennese Band will perform daily'.

Retailing reached up to the second floor, above which came workrooms and staff dining-rooms. The decoration, few passages of which survive, was in a workaday 'Adams' style, while the original floor-coverings were linoleum and Axminster carpet in a soft green. The *Wandsworth Borough News* enjoyed the Lamson pneumatic tube system for conveying cash and messages, putting an end to 'balls rolling on inclined planes, with the large and ungainly framework that is necessary'.⁵⁷

The reconstructed Arding & Hobbs had no greater length of frontage along St John's Road than before the fire, but the Lavender Hill elevation ran up to the corner with Ilminster Gardens, where the former staff blocks were rebuilt on three storeys in a plainer brick style, apparently as stock rooms; here a pretty set of leaded windows survives on the ground storey. South of this at 20-26 Ilminster Gardens, J. S. Gibson & Gordon in 1928 designed extra shopping space with a restaurant and reception rooms on two upper floors. Revised in 1930 to cope with Arding & Hobbs' forthcoming absorption of Francis & Son's provision store, this scheme was constructed in two phases. Public access via an arcade at 13 St John's Road (taken over in 1914) led to new grocery, meat, poultry and fish departments. Above these, the restaurant and the 'Ardington Rooms' for banquets and balls, complete with a masonic

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temple, were entered from a plain brick front in Ilminster Gardens. The restaurant is now the store's café, top-lit from a domed skylight with coloured glass, while the temple has been integrated into the selling area but retains its handsome plastered ceilings.⁵⁸

The final extension to Arding & Hobbs took place in 1960–1 on a bomb-damaged site at the western corner of Ilminster Gardens and Beauchamp Road, south of the Gibson & Gordon block. This plain building provided a carpet warehouse over a car park and loading dock. It was designed by George Watt of Morden, who had made other post-war alterations to the store.⁵⁹ It has now been demolished and replaced by flats and houses at 60 Beauchamp Road and 22-36 Ilminster Gardens, built in 2004–5.⁶⁰

After 1938 Arding & Hobbs ceased to be controlled by the Arding family, passing first to the John Anstee Group and then in 1948 to United Drapery Stores.⁶¹ It had depended for its early éclat on shoppers arriving by tram, bus or railway. But by the post-war period, with a tight site and negligible parking space constricting operations, it had failed to match the scale, for instance, of Bentalls at Kingston or Allders at Croydon. It was indeed Allders that took on the store after the United Drapery chain broke up in the 1980s. Plans were announced in 1988 to gut the main store (the 'matriarch of south London retailing') in a phased development proposed by the Building Design Partnership. This envisaged rebuilding the St John's Road frontage south of the 1910 block all the way to Beauchamp Road.⁶² Trading areas were to be reduced by one-third, releasing space at the south end for the restaurants and 'upmarket shops' for which an Allders spokesman diagnosed a 'very strong demand' at Clapham Junction.⁶³ That did not happen. Following the asset-stripping of the Allders group, Arding & Hobbs passed to the Debenham Group, which at the time of writing runs the store as a reduced operation, the southern end of the old store having been franchised to another retailer.

Francis & Son

The forthright corner block numbered 2–12 St John’s Road (Ill. 10.13) carries a cartouche high on the canted angle labelled ‘Francis & Son, A.D.1889’, referring to the South London firm of provision merchants which built it. The concern had started in the 1840s as a small grocery business in Lambeth before moving to Brixton as John Francis & Son. The firm operated its buying and selling alike under a strict Cash System, ‘to which system the firm rigidly adheres in all its particulars’.⁶⁴ It was the younger John Francis, Welsh-born, who promoted the expansion to Clapham Junction in 1887–9. He purchased the freehold and erected the present tall premises, in an orange-red brick with pilastered stone dressings round the windows and shaped gables to the dormers; there was formerly a pyramid roof crowning the corner. The architect was Robert Cruwys, also from Brixton, and the builder Charles Kynoch, while the shopfronts in mahogany and brass were by Plosky of Merton. Besides food of all kinds the new shop stocked drugs and patent medicines, and soon also stationery, ironmongery, china and glass.⁶⁵ It was always subsidiary to the Brixton headquarters. As food-shopping in the area declined, its momentum was not maintained. The shop shut in 1931, when Arding & Hobbs opposite absorbed its departments and most of its staff.⁶⁶

Hastings Ltd

The curving block faced in artificial stone at the junction between Lavender Hill and Falcon Road dates from 1935–6 and was designed by Harold Branch and his partner Smith as the headquarters store of Hastings Ltd, dealers in furniture. It was formerly assigned to Falcon Road but is now numbered 274–286 Lavender Hill.

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Hastings Ltd was founded in Victoria Street, Westminster, in 1890 by J. Allpass as a shop specializing in baby carriages and accessories. The reason for its name is unknown. By 1892 Allpass had moved its 'domestic machine depot' to the portion of Queen's Parade, Clapham Junction, numbered in Falcon Road. He quickly added another shop in the parade to sell pianos and musical instruments, then others as they became available, soon making six in a row. By 1910 he had a cluster of shops on both sides of Falcon Road selling chiefly furnishings, as well as branches at Brixton, West Norwood and Fulham.⁶⁷ The main premises in due course became inconvenient and outmoded, so C. J. Allpass, in succession to his father, rebuilt the entire store to the designs of Henry Branch and his partner Smith. The design, though not distinguished, is Clapham Junction's only specimen of inter-war commercial architecture. At the time of the rebuilding Hastings had seven subsidiary branches in London. After the Second World War the shop declined and eventually closed.⁶⁸

Munts (demolished)

Nos 9-11 St John's Hill with premises behind, now demolished, were from 1890 until the 1930s the site of a warehouse and hall built for the piano manufacturers and retailers Munt Brothers.

This firm was started around 1873 by two brothers, William Munt, who made the pianos, and his younger brother Edward, the salesman.⁶⁹ In 1882 the brothers built a workshop at Falcon Terrace off the east side of Falcon Road.⁷⁰ When early in 1886 the local architect Henry Branch came forward with a development plan for the land in St John's Hill immediately west of the Falcon Brook Sewer, covering the present Nos 3-19, the Munts evidently bought the sites of 9-11. To their east there were plans for a post office with a

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sorting office behind.⁷¹ These failed, and instead the London and South-Western Bank built here in 1888–9 to designs by Tolley & Dale.⁷²

Next door the increasingly entrepreneurial Munts had incorporated and were ready to build in 1889, using Branch as their architect. On the St John's Hill frontage they built an ambitious, symmetrical building with capacious piano showrooms; the ground-floor showroom projected out to the pavement and was entered from a recessed porch covered by a semi-dome. At the back behind Nos 5–7, they took advantage of land not needed by the bank to create a public hall. Munts Hall or the Grand Hall, Clapham Junction, as it was alternatively called, opened in November 1890. It was reached by a tiled passageway between the bank and the piano showrooms. Its history as a venue for entertainment is given on page xxx.⁷³

During the 1890s the Munts transferred their manufacturing to a spacious factory in Eltringham Street, Wandsworth, where they turned out some 2–3,000 pianos a year.⁷⁴ In 1911 they sold their retailing interest here to Arding & Hobbs, and shortly afterwards moved round the corner to 15–17 St John's Road, next to that store, where they retained the Munts name and nominal independence till 1924. The St John's Hill site was sold to the Marcus family in 1913.⁷⁵