

Parks and Open Spaces

Before it became intensively developed for housing, the parish of Battersea was mostly open agricultural land governed by differing types of tenure (III. 5.1). Perhaps a third of it was in some form of common tenure. It was from these areas that the larger public open spaces described in this chapter – Battersea Park, Clapham Common and Wandsworth Common – have come down in the guise familiar today.

The two commons, as their names imply, occupied common land, governed by laws defining the rights of the lords of the manor and copyholders or commoners. Mainly they provided rough grazing and were exploited for brushwood and gravel. In addition there was the large expanse known as Battersea Common Field or Fields, located on more fertile ground closer to the river and subject to flooding. This was not full common land in the same sense as the two commons. It was owned freehold by the lord of the manor, leased or tenanted largely in strips, and intensively cultivated for arable farming or market gardening. ‘Lammas rights’ of turning out livestock over the fields for certain weeks of the year were held by local parishioners, while entertainment venues had become an established feature of its riverside sector by 1800. It was here that Battersea Park was created.

The perceived public interest in both types of tenure led eventually to the emergence of Battersea’s three great open spaces. But they evolved in different ways. Battersea Park came into being by a series of accidents. After endeavouring to enclose Battersea Fields and failing, the Spencers as lords of

Draft

the manor decided in the 1830s to sell the area in lots. In the chaotic sequel, the burgeoning movement to provide Londoners with parks then allied itself with local reformers and persuaded the government to create a park at Crown expense on perhaps a third of the fields.

The histories of Wandsworth and Clapham Commons are simpler. Like many commons close to London, both faced the threat of piecemeal enclosures of the kind often permitted by lords of the manor before the 1860s to make them more profitable and manageable. During this period Clapham Common—equally divided between the two parishes and manors of Battersea and Clapham—escaped with only a slight nibbling away of its edges. The main reason was Clapham’s early prominence as a favoured spot for the residences of gentlemen and City merchants, who from the 1760s adopted Clapham Common almost as their private park and defended it from encroachment.

But Wandsworth Common, originally the larger of the two, was roughly halved in extent from the 1780s onwards. This began when the Spencers granted small enclosures to villa-dwellers, followed by larger ones to institutions such as a prison and schools. The railways also made grave inroads from the 1830s onwards. Public reaction followed. The Commons Preservation Society, formed in 1865, took up Wandsworth Common as one of its causes (along with the Spencers’ other great common at Wimbledon). The Metropolitan Commons Act of 1866 led to the protection of both Clapham and Wandsworth Commons and their vesting in the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1877 and 1887 respectively. In the latter year Battersea Park too was transferred to the MBW and hence passed to its successors, the London County Council and the Greater London Council, so uniting the three spaces in a single ownership for the next 84 years. But their characters continued to differ. Just as Battersea Park had been at the heart of the public parks movement in the 1840s and 50s, so the agitation of the 1860s for preserving

Draft

the commons indicated a shift in appreciation towards a looser, less manicured landscape. The commons were devolved in 1971 to the London boroughs – Clapham Common to Lambeth Council, Wandsworth Common to Wandsworth Council, which also took over Battersea Park in 1986.

This chapter also covers one further common in Battersea, Latchmere Common, now largely submerged by housing, and some further open spaces created within the increasingly built-up parish. These include St Mary's Cemetery of 1860–1, two later nineteenth-century gardens, and three rather bleak post-war parks, created at a time when planners believed that Battersea needed yet more air and grass.

Battersea Park

After a major restoration programme in 2000–4, Battersea Park today is very much the green oasis intended by its original promoters. Occupying close to 200 acres, it is bounded on the north by the river, along which stretches an impressive terrace walk terminating at either end with a bridge over the Thames, Chelsea Bridge at the east end, Albert Bridge at the west (III. 5.2). The other three sides are fringed by roads, with mansion flats forming a dignified closure along Prince of Wales Drive, the southern boundary.

First proposed in 1841, Battersea Park was originally a royal park, the land being purchased by the Crown with money voted by government, and came under the office of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests. The initial plans for its layout were drawn up in 1845 by the architect to the Commission, James Pennethorne. The process of compulsory land purchase was protracted, and it was not until 1858 that the park was officially opened by Queen Victoria. Through the innovative planting of its first superintendent, John

Draft

Gibson, within ten years Battersea Park had gained an international reputation, in particular for its Sub-Tropical Garden, the first of its kind in England.

In 1948 the park was once again the focus of international attention with a ground-breaking public open-air sculpture exhibition. Later it hosted the 'fun' element of the Festival of Britain in 1951, with an American-style funfair and pleasure gardens. Under its current guardians and owners, Wandsworth Borough Council, Battersea Park has been gradually renovated and restored.

From fields to park

During the 1830s a movement emerged to provide parks accessible to the wider public, on the grounds that open spaces in large towns, duly organized and controlled, were necessary for a healthy and productive working class. This belief spurred a House of Commons select committee of 1833 to investigate the provision of 'public walks' in London and other large towns. It gathered evidence about such open spaces on the Continent as the Englischer Garten in Munich, the Anlage in Mainz – laid out along the banks of the Rhine – and the royal parks and gardens of Paris, opened up after the French Revolution. The committee concluded that parks were vital for public health and contentment. Unless they were provided, its report warned, 'great mischief must arise'.¹

Regent's Park, laid out to Nash's designs from 1812, had demonstrated that a park could be provided and paid for by the skilful development of its fringes. This insight was crucial to the success of future schemes in London and the industrial towns. But Regent's Park was on the edge of fashionable Marylebone, whereas new parks were most needed in poor districts where

Draft

the rich would not buy houses. Both Victoria Park (in Hackney) and Battersea Park became victims of their locations when it came to developing the surrounding land.

Pressure to create a public park in London grew in the years after the Public Walks report, and was taken up by a series of select committees on metropolitan improvements and finally by a Royal Commission appointed in 1842. Potential sites were identified, including six south of the river in Lambeth and Southwark.²

The earliest suggestion that Battersea Fields would be an ideal site for such a park seems to have come in September 1841 in a letter published in the *Morning Herald*. The author was James Phillips, longstanding churchwarden of Battersea, who lived near by in Battersea New Town. At that date Battersea Fields seemed under imminent threat of being swallowed up by building development. Its flood-prone acres stretched well beyond the bounds of the present park, particularly to its east and south. The 2nd Earl Spencer had made an attempt in 1828 to enclose Battersea Fields for modern agricultural production, but this had been successfully opposed. When the Earl died in 1834 leaving enormous debts, the family's Battersea land-holdings were reconsidered by his successor, and in the light of this recent failure the 3rd Earl opted to sell up. The sale took place in 1835. Many of the existing tenants bought the freehold of their land and properties, some lots remained unsold, and elsewhere entrepreneurs and developers snapped up lots at rock bottom prices. Speculation had therefore started by 1841.

There were complications, however. These were common fields, often divided into small strips with a multiplicity of tenants, and subject to the right of access to the land for grazing livestock at Lammas time. Furthermore, the portion of the fields closest to the Thames had a long-standing reputation, or notoriety, as a place of popular entertainments (pages xxx). These included

Draft

several riverside resorts, most famously the Red House, and seasonal gypsy fairs with their donkey rides, horse racing, swings, roundabouts, cockshies and shooting galleries, attracting large gatherings, as well as opposition from well-to-do Battersea residents and moralists.³

Phillips pointed out many advantages of Battersea Fields as a location for a major park. The meadows were level sandy gravel with no buildings or obstruction that would need to be removed. A 'noble terrace and promenade' could be formed along the riverfront and a landing place 'to vie with that at Greenwich', with a commanding view up and down the river. Chelsea Hospital lay opposite and would be seen 'to great advantage'. The land here was relatively cheap, and it was a spot already favoured by the public for recreation, since steamboats on Sundays embarked and disembarked an estimated 30,000 passengers.⁴ The site therefore commended itself not because it was surrounded by a large working-class population but because it already attracted large numbers of visitors.

The following November *The Times* reported the government's intention to turn Battersea Fields into a park, as part of a metropolitan improvement that included embanking the Thames on the Middlesex side between Battersea and Vauxhall Bridges. It was to be paid for from the revenues of the Duchy of Lancaster and called Lancaster Park.⁵ Here matters stalled. As yet there was no central body or supporting legislation for establishing and maintaining parks. The contrivance therefore used to create the first wave of metropolitan public parks was to vest them in Her Majesty's Commissioners of Woods and Forests (from 1851 the Commission of Works) and thus turn them into royal parks. The first park created in this manner was Victoria Park, which opened in 1845.

An outline scheme for Battersea Park, to be undertaken by the Woods and Forests, took shape in 1843 as part of the Thames embankment scheme.

Draft

Such a scheme was also recommended by the eminent builder Thomas Cubitt during evidence taken by the Royal Commission on Improving the Metropolis. Cubitt had been gradually purchasing tracts of Battersea land in the Fields and elsewhere, including the Red House, since 1836. Probably his original idea was to build here, as it lay between his suburban estate at Clapham Park and the large area in Pimlico he was developing under lease from the Marquess of Westminster. Part of the embankment scheme included a new bridge – the future Chelsea Bridge – the south side of which could be made accessible by a straight road (today's Queenstown Road) and so connect Clapham with the West End. Cubitt suggested that some 500–600 acres in Battersea Fields might be purchased 'at a very moderate price, and if half of it only were appropriated to the public as a park, the other half would, if let for building, most likely produce sufficient rental to pay all expenses'.⁶

The Rev. Robert Eden, the Vicar of Battersea, was also a keen supporter of a park at Battersea Fields, who wrote to the Commissioners on Improving the Metropolis in November 1843 trying to garner support. He warned that the open space would soon be covered in 'crops of houses' if nothing were done soon, and that speculators had doubled the value of the land since the Spencer sale. Houses were being rapidly constructed in the hope of profiting from compulsory purchase.⁷ But it was to be another two years before the decision was taken to form the park.

Cubitt, too, worked towards securing the ground for a park, writing to Lord Lincoln, chairman of the Royal Commission, in 1844, urging the advantages of the site, and blaming his own 'feeble manner' in proposing it the previous summer for the Commissioners' failure to take up the scheme.⁸ Support came from Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, whose daily walk to work took him from Clapham across Battersea Fields. Trevelyan wrote to Lincoln in June 1845 recommending the purchase of all the land between the river and the London & South Western Railway. In this

Draft

vision the park was to be laid out with the river as its northern boundary and detached villas akin to those of Regents Park on the other three sides.⁹

The Commissioners for Improving the Metropolis again gathered evidence regarding the embankment proposals in the spring of 1845, and Eden and Cubitt appeared once more with their suggestions for the park. Their report concluded that a park should be formed on the site of Battersea Fields in connection with a bridge over the Thames in the same locality and the embankment of the northern shore. Only these additional works, they argued, would raise the value of the building ground around the park sufficiently to render the whole scheme financially viable.¹⁰

In October 1845 the Commissioners of Woods and Forests drew up a Bill for the formation of the park. Their architect, James Pennethorne, now prepared a plan for the ground, covering some 320 acres, with about one-third left for building that in theory would enable it eventually to pay for itself (III. 5.3).¹¹ Power to form a royal park here was granted by Act of Parliament in 1846, including a provision for a bridge east of Chelsea Hospital (Chelsea Bridge) and for the further possibility of a proprietary bridge to the west (Albert Bridge).¹²

If progress had been less than rapid up to now, from this point it was painfully slow. Apart from problems with extracting money from government to purchase the ground, delays occurred while the question of Lammas rights was settled. Only in 1853 was an Act of Parliament granted to purchase and extinguish these rights.¹³ But the greatest difficulties arose because Pennethorne had to deal with compensation claims from a large number of landowners and tenants, nearly all of whom submitted wildly inflated claims.

The low cost of the land at the time of the Spencer sale in 1835 led Pennethorne to fix £450 per acre as reasonable compensation, but the claims

Draft

submitted averaged £1,000.¹⁴ The Treasury had set the budget at £200,000, but by 1848 less than eight acres had been purchased for a total of £10,520, seriously adrift of the forecast expenditure.¹⁵ As Eden had warned, many people attempted to turn a quick profit by buying land or building on ground scheduled for compulsory purchase. In some cases houses were run up after the site had been fixed for the park. Messrs Smith had borrowed money to create fourteen carcasses so ‘shamefully built, as scarcely to be able to stand’, noted Pennethorne. They had found a bricklayer at Battersea to put the houses up in a fortnight while the Bill was being considered. Unable to repay their debt, they had been sent to prison.¹⁶

In February 1847 Pennethorne submitted a report on 55 properties to be purchased. Of these he singled out seven claims sufficiently high as to warrant litigation. The first four came from Charles Wright, lessee of the Red House; Andrew Duncan McKellar and Charles Chabot, both owners of timber docks and marsh grazing ground; and John Cornelius Park, a builder who held the freehold of some eight acres of garden ground, river bank and marsh land, plus a small area let on building leases. Pennethorne also thought a jury should hear the cases of John Hunt, who had built the Balloon Tea Gardens and let several pieces of ground for building ‘at very high ground rents since the Park was contemplated’; and of Henry Juer who held about 16 acres of garden ground, including a portion of river bank or dock then occupied as the Tivoli Gardens. Most of the largest claims, including Juer’s, had been orchestrated by the parish surveyor, Charles Lee, and local solicitor, Edward Pain, working together. Pain was the largest proprietor of land in Battersea Fields, holding 73 pieces of ground covering some 72 acres, and the principal culprit in Pennethorne’s eyes. He expressed himself willing to accept £1,000 an acre, though Pennethorne believed he had paid around £70 an acre for the land in his purchases since 1835.¹⁷

Draft

Cubitt himself was keen to appear as the park's promoter, and made no visible effort to speculate on the value of his landholdings within the park site. But when it came to his claim for the compulsory purchase, the businessman came before the philanthropist. Having failed to negotiate a price privately with Pennethorne he appointed independent surveyors (Henry A. Hunt and George Pownall) to make a valuation. The figure they arrived at – £49,200 for 37 acres – was much in line with what Pain had demanded. Cubitt then offered to drop the price to £40,000, but that was still over £1,000 an acre for land which he had purchased at no more than £150. He also declined to sell a portion of his land east of the Southwark & Vauxhall Waterworks which, he successfully argued, was not required for the park.¹⁸

The Commissioners of Woods and Forests expressed themselves 'utterly at a loss' to reconcile Cubitt's claim with his original statement that the land for the park might be purchased 'at a very moderate price'.¹⁹ But Cubitt had warned in 1845 that land values had already risen, and that 150–200 acres rather than the 500–600 he had originally recommended might have to suffice. Eventually a compromise was reached. Cubitt offered to sell his holdings for £15,000 so long as he was allowed to buy back within two years the riverside land east of the waterworks, where he agreed to form a public road. Although Pennethorne believed this sum was still too high, in 1851 it was accepted: the Commissioners were unwilling to go to court, for fear of the value a jury might put on land with a riverside frontage. None of the riverside plot east of the waterworks was required for the park, but it had been intended to remove some 'obnoxious and offensive manufactories' carried on there, and to provide a site for public baths.²⁰ In the end, the long legal delay before any of the ground could be purchased cost the government dearly.²¹

The original Act of Parliament for establishing the park had allowed five years for land purchases, but around a third of the ground had yet to be acquired by 1850. A new Act of 1851 extended the time by a further three

Draft

years; it also placed the park's management in the hands of the Battersea Park Commissioners, under the newly formed Office of Works.²²

During the intervening period the Commissioners were frequently hamstrung by a lack of funds. When a portion of the park site was advertised for sale in 1848, they could do no more than attend the sale and 'take notes of what passes'.²³ Not all the houses erected on the park land were in a parlous condition, and from 1848 the Commissioners employed an estate manager to look after the properties they had secured and collect rents. Similarly the market gardens continued in business, and arable land was farmed. The Sunday fairs also continued, but were finally stopped in 1852, following pressure from the local community and the press. A major police operation was mounted, and some 20 acres of land were ploughed up to stop the weekly event.²⁴ In consequence, the 'swarms of low blackguards' transferred to Greenwich Park to indulge in 'kissing in the ring' and running down the hills with apples, oranges and ginger beer.²⁵ At this low point in the park's progress a suggestion that the Crystal Palace might be removed here was not taken very seriously.²⁶

A turning point came after Disraeli castigated the park scheme during his budget speech of December 1852, as part of a broader attack on the Public Works Loans Committee, which hitherto had provided the funding:

of all the speculations that man ever engaged in, no speculation was ever so absurd as that of Battersea Park. The persons who undertook the enterprise were totally ignorant of all the circumstances with which they had to deal. They purchased a great deal of land, and made arrangements by which they left so slight a margin to the Government as a return that twenty years must elapse, even if they are successful, before they receive any rents.²⁷

Two months later, stung by Disraeli's comments and apprehensive that they would 'work upon the public mind', Cubitt put a bold proposition to Sir

Draft

William Molesworth, First Commissioner of Works in the Whig Government which had taken over since the speech. As the park had been ‘his own suggestion’, Cubitt offered to take the entire site off the Government’s hands at cost price, including ‘the Bridge with its new approach’. He ended his letter with the prediction that the district was ‘likely soon to become a very important part of London’.²⁸

The Commissioners took Cubitt’s proposal seriously enough to ask him to clarify his terms, and bind himself to reserving the open space to be laid out as a park. He then made his final offer, agreeing to lay out 100 acres as a public park and the rest for buildings. The Commissioners turned this overture down in May 1853.²⁹ What difference it had made or whether it was a put-up job is hard to say. But in the month that Cubitt was rebuffed, Molesworth introduced a Bill to extinguish the common and Lammas rights over the site.³⁰ In August a further £32,641 was voted for the formation of the park, plus £5,000 to complete Chelsea Bridge, and another £35,000 to construct an embankment and public roadway between Battersea and Vauxhall Bridges.³¹ Within a year all but one of the land purchases had been completed and work on the park could finally begin.³²

The park under John Gibson

In June 1854 the park was thrown open to the public, ‘who are now in the enjoyment of it’. The 1,000 visitors reported on one of the first days would have found only a desolate, low-lying patch of open ground to walk in. Nine years after Pennethorne had drawn up his first layout, almost no landscaping had yet been done. The houses had been cleared, trees and hedges cut down, ditches filled, and the area enclosed by a fence with entrance gates at four points: at Chelsea Bridge and Victoria (later Queenstown) Circus on the east, at the south-west corner and opposite Park(gate) Road on the west.³³

Draft

Temporary lodges ('convenient iron huts with fireplaces') were built at each of these entrances.³⁴

The design of the park evolved over a period of twelve years. The first plans were produced in 1845 and revised soon afterwards. Unsurprisingly, given Pennethorne's close connection to Nash, Regent's Park was the inspiration, with housing on the fringes of a landscaped park dissected by carriage drives and walks. The main landscape elements were open grassland and clumps of trees around a longish lake studded with islands and the riverfront dominated by a large structure planned to house a museum (III. 5.3).³⁵

At this stage there were hopes of the park attracting wealthy and high-class residents. Villas were to be set within the grounds, while grand terraces lined the eastern and western edges with plainer houses behind. The first blow to these hopes was struck by the encroaching railways. With a view to establishing a profitable 'tourist line' between the new park and the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, in 1853 the West End of London & Crystal Palace Railway Company acquired a sizeable slice of the eastern land destined for housing to support the park (page xxx). This erased Pennethorne's proposed 'Eastern Crescent' and led in time to the emergence of an industrial rather than fashionable fringe to the park along the east side of Queenstown Road.

A more economical plan of 1854 shows the new boundary, no museum building, and simpler housing comprising a mix of terraced housing, and paired or detached villas, set within the western and southern boundaries.³⁶ At this point the lake was still placed in the centre (III. 5.4). By 1857 the lake's eventual position in the south-west quarter had been established, and the first suggestion of a main east-west avenue appeared, but no wider than the subsidiary paths, nor lined with trees. A church had featured in the 1840s plan on the south side of the park but was dropped from the 1854 plan only to

Draft

reappear again now as a focal point midway along the the western boundary. On the riverside a pier was proposed and two pavilions or lodges forming part of a more formal layout here, roughly in place of the museum building, though in the end the pavilions were never built.³⁷

By the time this plan was published Pennethorne had deferred laying out the walks and plantations to concentrate on raising the ground level by importing tons of earth excavated from the (Royal) Victoria Dock. This may have been prompted by flooding during a high tide in November 1852.³⁸ But further delays to finishing the park were becoming a public embarrassment. Sir Benjamin Hall, First Commissioner of Works from 1855, had little patience with Pennethorne, whom he chivvied to complete the park in 1857 without exceeding his budget. The pace of work now picked up and the lake was finally dug.³⁹

Pennethorne now brought in John Gibson, with whom he had collaborated at Victoria Park, to mastermind the planting.⁴⁰ Gibson took over the management of the park in July 1857, leaving Pennethorne to supervise the development of the surrounding building ground.⁴¹ At this point some £300,000 had already been spent, but Gibson reported that 'as regards Landscape effect, the Park can scarcely be said to possess any claim beyond those which are usually associated with a flat surface'.⁴² In fact much had been accomplished in the previous year, including the raising of mounds planted with trees and shrubs. But some walks had still to be laid out, many needed gravelling, further earthworks were required to level or raise the ground, and twelve acres remained to be planted. The embankment, the pier and the permanent lodges were meanwhile deferred.⁴³

Gibson's challenge was to produce an impressive parkscape at a minimum cost and as fast as possible. Originally a protégé of Joseph Paxton's at Chatsworth, he was by this stage of his career experienced in all forms of

Draft

planting, well connected in the gardening milieu, and thoroughly knowledgeable about international developments in public parks. It was some years before he could bring his finer talents to bear on Battersea Park. He began by rationalizing Pennethorne's plan, reducing the number of plantations in favour of larger areas with bold outlines in better proportion with the park's size. Dense planting produced instant effect and could be followed up by thinning and extending 'until all the plants are so arranged...for their final development'. Crucially, he introduced greater variety in the levels, forming mounds and hollows which, in combination with the plantations and shrubberies, created vistas and screened one part of the park from another.⁴⁴

The first trees and shrubs were provided by five nurseries. Waterer and Godfrey of Knaphill, Surrey, were the principal supplier of rhododendrons, azaleas (1,000 plants), heathers, privet and assorted deciduous shrubs. Shilling's Hampshire nursery supplied 300 maple trees (100 each of three varieties, rubrum, Norway and pseudo-platanus or sycamore maple), 300 holly trees, 500 laurels, more privet and box. James Veitch of the Exotic Nursery, Chelsea, and Plough Lane, Battersea, provided small numbers of rarer trees and shrubs. Another local supplier was Chandler & Son, who supplied mixed ornamental trees, euonymus, box, privet and lilacs. G. H. Benney, of Stratford, supplied laurels, mahonias and 100 London planes. A large collection came from Edward Pain's nursery at Battersea. Gibson was impressed by his stock, and the Battersea Park Commissioners proved willing to do business with him despite previous friction over his landholdings.⁴⁵

In 1858–9 Gibson introduced artificial rocks to the park, as a way of economically covering the steep 14ft-bank up to Victoria (now Queenstown) Road. He proposed facing the bank with rockwork formed of brick burrs jointed with cement, and washed over with Portland cement and sand tinted with lamp black 'which forms an excellent simulation of Lime Stone, and

Draft

nearly as hard'. The park roads were given broken flint surfaces on hardcore foundations while the footpaths were surfaced with gravel taken from within the park.⁴⁶

William Cowper's years as First Commissioner of Works (1860–6) were particularly productive for Battersea Park. A keen supporter of retaining commons and open land, Cowper did much to improve the royal parks under his aegis, favoured artistic initiatives, and was responsible for introducing the custom of distributing flowers from the London parks to charities. During this time two major attractions in the park were formed: the Sub-Tropical Garden, and a Pulhamite rockwork and cascade above the lake.

The Sub-Tropical Garden opened in August 1864 at the west end of the lake, was an instant success (III. 5.5). Visitors were astonished at the number of rare and exotic hot-house plants, artfully arranged and flourishing outdoors.⁴⁷ Gibson's plan, presented in February 1863, relied on ornamental foliage plants such as canna, caladium and wigandia in large beds, interspersed with small beds of ordinary bedding plants, and ground formed into 'suitable elevations and hollows'.⁴⁸

Using plants native to the sub-tropics out of doors in an English garden was completely new, as was the use of contrasting foliage for effect rather than colourful flowers. It was a system first tried in Paris at the Parc Monceau by the municipal *jardinier en chef*, Jean-Pierre Barillet-Deschamps. When Gibson started to acquire flora for Battersea he wrote to Barillet-Deschamps proposing to establish a plant exchange. From England aralias, pines, banana plants and zonal geraniums were sent, while Gibson selected canna and solanum from Paris. He drew on his Indian plant-hunting expeditions to include species he had himself introduced to this country, such as the banana.⁴⁹

Draft

Gibson's skill and ingenuity created other striking areas within the park. Along the eastern boundary he used rhododendrons and azaleas to form an American garden; he planted an Alpine Point on a mound on the north side of the lake to show the ascending zones of vegetation from warm plain to snow-clad heights; and he laid out a rose garden near the south-east gate. More dramatically, he created a peninsula jutting into the lake, raised into a tall mound with Pulhamite rockwork over which a cascade tumbled into the water (Ill. 5.6). Work began on the peninsula in 1865 using earth excavated for constructing a gasometer at the Vauxhall gasworks. The cascade was finally completed in 1869, using water drawn from a reservoir on the north side of the lake, fed by natural springs. Water was pumped by a steam engine housed in the pump house. This had been built by James and William Simpson of Pimlico in 1861 to supply water throughout the park. The Battersea Park Commissioners supplied the plans, which presumably therefore were drawn up by Pennethorne.⁵⁰ Pulhamite rockwork featured also in three other places, of which only one, close to the pump house, can now be identified.⁵¹

Cowper also commissioned ornamental drinking fountains – the first appearance of architecture and sculpture in the park. The pioneer was a fountain by S. S. Teulon, commissioned in 1860 but now lost. Teulon's design comprised an iron superstructure resting on a base of dressed granite, featuring an enamelled basin sheltered by a canopy supported by columns, wrought-iron arches and foliage (intended to be gilded). It was executed by Francis Skidmore of Coventry, and set up in a prominent position at the east end of the Central Avenue.⁵²

In 1865 Cowper commissioned a second drinking fountain, to be placed in the 'western portion' of the park, from Philip Webb. Webb's estimate, submitted in January 1866, came in at £475, the most expensive part being a granite bowl. In June the Liberal Government fell and Cowper was

Draft

replaced by the conservative Lord John Manners. George Russell, assistant secretary to the First Commissioners, wrote to Manners about the proposed Webb fountain, in order to explain 'the beginning of our relations with Mr Webb... I know nothing of him but I can see no beauty in his design'. Manners' reply was unequivocal: 'I think the design absolutely hideous'. Webb refused any payment for the rejected fountain: 'I cannot allow myself to charge the nation for a design which it does not like'. Instead Manners commissioned a series of fountains supplied by the Metropolitan Free Drinking Fountains Association. One, designed by the association's architect, Robert Keirle, was placed in the Sub-Tropical Garden. Another followed by the Gymnasium, designed by Mr Simpson.⁵³ (It was probably the latter that was removed by the LCC in 1896, when it was described as 'an unsightly object'.)⁵⁴

Until 1866 it had been intended to follow Pennethorne's plan and construct houses within the park along the north side of Prince of Wales Drive and east side of Albert Bridge Road. It was then decided to absorb these areas into the park, thus defining the extent of the parkland as it exists today.⁵⁵

In 1867 stones from the dismantled colonnade of Burlington House were removed to the park with the intention of re-erecting them. For decades they lay in fragments near the entrance by Chelsea Bridge. Every so often there were proposals to do something with them. In 1888 Canon Erskine Clarke provided sketches to show how they might be set up at one of the entrances. The LCC applied in 1893 to the Commissioners of Works for a £1,000 contribution towards re-erecting the stones, either as a ruin or to form a shelter. Seemingly unused, their eventual fate has yet to be discovered.⁵⁶

Changes under the LCC, 1889–1939

Draft

By the mid 1880s, with mounting unemployment in the country, government funding for the London parks had become a source of grievance which culminated in MPs voting to reduce the grant for their maintenance by £50,000. This was only rescinded once assurances had been made that the necessary legislation would be introduced to place the parks under the Metropolitan Board of Works. By the London Parks and Works Act of 1887 Battersea Park, along with some others, was taken over by the MBW that November, and passed on to the LCC in 1889.⁵⁷

Under the LCC there was a shift away from lavish set pieces in landscaping and bedding. Gibson's successor, Alexander Roger, had continued the tradition of elaborate carpet bedding, but by 1900 this had become passé. Additions of the following period included a Japanese garden, a gift from the Municipality of Tokyo created in 1910 but not retained; and an Old English Garden laid out in 1911-12.⁵⁸

An early intervention by the LCC was the rebuilding of the West Lodge (III. 5.7). The original temporary lodges had eventually been replaced in the 1860s by the surviving Sun Gate and Rosary Lodges. But if the West Lodge had been replaced, by the late 1880s it was found wanting. Judged 'unsightly and inappropriate' by the LCC, plans for a mock-Tudor lodge, based on one recently built in Dulwich Park, were drawn up by the Architect's Department under Thomas Blashill.⁵⁹ The present building was put up in 1891, slightly further back from the road than its predecessor, and was occupied by the park's superintendent, Frederick Coppin.⁶⁰

The present gates are more obviously redolent of the progressive work that emerged from the LCC Architect's Department around 1900. Each of the four principal entrances were re-defined with wrought-iron gates hung from elegant stone piers touched with a dash of Art Nouveau. They were designed by A. H. Verstage and erected in 1902 (III. 5.8).⁶¹

Sculpture was introduced by the LCC in the form of memorials, the first being that to the 24th Infantry Division unveiled in 1924 (III. 5.9). This was the first major public commission for Eric Kennington. When approached in 1921, he offered to execute the work without a fee, as he had served briefly in the division. The memorial consists of three soldiers standing on a plinth: the figure on the left was modelled on Robert Graves, representing the soldier poet; the central figure, representing youthful exuberance, was modelled on Sergeant Woods, Kennington's batman, and the figure to the right, Trooper Morris Clifford Thomas, personified the experienced soldier. Kennington was assisted by a student, Lucy Sampson, from the Royal College of Art, who carved the main inscription and assisted with the regimental badges around the base.⁶²

Park life

Early visitors came to Battersea Park in their thousands. The conscious aim was to attract a social mix that might diffuse friction between the classes, and entice the working man away from the public house. Here the 'toilworn artisan, or the hard-pressed shopkeeper or tradesman' could enjoy healthy recreation, enhanced by the company of a wife or child.⁶³ Erskine Clarke reported in 1877 on the 'crowds of artisans and their families' who flocked to the park on Sundays, estimating as many as 50,000 visitors.⁶⁴ Many came by steamboat, embarking on the specially constructed pier midway along the riverside boundary. Within the park they could walk, admire the plants, take a boat on the lake in summer, skate in winter, or play cricket on the large match grounds. One of these was constructed and maintained at the expense of the Battersea Institution Cricket Club (John Burns was among the frequent and enthusiastic cricketers).⁶⁵ A carriage ride encircled the park with an

Draft

equestrian ride in parallel of about two miles' length. Cycling round the park became enormously popular in the three decades before the First World War.

The ground was divided into compartments by the drives and paths, and further subdivided by smaller walks and belts of shrubs and trees. Where the land opened up for the cricket pitches, the surrounding plantations created the 'snug, rural appearance of a country district'.⁶⁶ Out of the cricket season these open spaces could be used for large gatherings. Troops from Chelsea Barracks came for drill and exercise. They could also serve as show-grounds. One of the biggest events staged in the park's early years was the Royal Agricultural Society show held in 1862, which had a reported attendance of 124,328 visitors, including 'princes, viceroys, pachas, ambassadors, lords, amateurs, breeders, butchers, artisans, and labourers, alike eager for information'.⁶⁷

To keep both the public and nature in order there were at first five gatekeepers, three night watchmen, 'supernumeraries' to assist at the park's busiest times – on Sundays and in the evenings – one temporary fireman, a time keeper and '57-ish' men and boys as labourers. Four park labourers were selected as constables and installed in the lodges. Their duties were to enforce the park rules, which proscribed such pastimes as ball games and kite-flying away from dedicated areas. Bathing or fishing in the lake were also prohibited. Gibson was adamant that the lake was too shallow for swimming, although this had long been held to be one of the greatest assets that the park could afford and a much safer alternative to the treacherous tides that claimed many a life in the river. There was an almost constant clamour locally for swimming to be allowed.⁶⁸ In 1872 the National Swimming Baths Company promoted the idea of a huge floating baths complex on the river beside the park, but it was never built.⁶⁹

Draft

Benches were placed at suitable points to allow visitors to rest (Ill. 5.10). At first some refreshments were provided at the lodges. By 1866 there was a refreshment room near the lake, of timber construction with a wide verandah supported on rustic tree-trunk columns (Ill. 5.11), extended in 1872.⁷⁰ It was replaced by the present rotunda tea room, designed for the LCC by H. A. Rowbotham, in 1938–9 (Ill. 5.12). Still surviving and little altered, the café was designed to make the most of the view over the lake, centred on the cascade, with windows from floor to ceiling on the south-west side and a covered terrace supported on slender steel columns, originally painted primrose yellow. It was flat-roofed, and with brick walls ornamented in Dorking hand-made multi-coloured facings. The interior was done out in Art Deco colours: cream-painted walls, brick-red linoleum for the counter top and front, and glossy black-painted service doors.⁷¹ Another riverside refreshment house near the steamboat pier was replaced in 1896–7 to meet the growing demands of cyclists.

Public conveniences were built at the expense of Battersea Vestry. In 1895–6 two small blocks ‘of an ornamental character’ were put up by the Chelsea Bridge entrance, followed by the surviving Arts and Crafts building ‘in the shrubbery’ by the Rosary Gate, by Battersea’s surveyor, J. T. Pilditch, of 1898–9. The LCC Parks Committee hoped that the latter would mitigate the ‘nuisance to which the recessed entrances of the park are subjected when the gates are closed at nightfall’.⁷²

Music, particularly on Sundays, was much enjoyed. Gibson complained in 1870 that deviations from the published programmes in favour of dance music made the park look like a ‘Metropolitan Tea Gardens’.⁷³ There seems to have been little control of the bands, which were not always of the best quality. After some resistance the first bandstand was erected in 1868 in the open area north-west of the Sub-Tropical Garden.⁷⁴ A new ‘permanent’

Draft

bandstand was erected in the central avenue by the LCC in 1899.⁷⁵ This was replaced by the present bandstand on the same spot in 1988 (III. 5.14).⁷⁶

A small enclosed area had been set out as a gymnasium in 1859 near the south-west gate, principally for the use of schoolchildren. Two further children's gymnasia were provided, and the number of cricket pitches increased until there were fourteen. Football pitches were only provided after the First World War. In the inter-war years facilities for a wider range of sporting activities were introduced. These included, in roughly chronological order: a croquet lawn; a running track; hard tennis courts; a dancing enclosure; a paddling pond; a putting green; a bowling green pavilion; and a sports pavilion, this last of 1937.⁷⁷

As the surrounding area grew more industrialized, the park's importance as a 'lung' where Londoners could draw breath became ever more crucial. The neighbourhood was largely a poor one, very different from that anticipated when Pennethorne planned the park and its residential fringes. So Battersea Park ended up serving those for whom it had purportedly been formed in the first place. It was a boon to the health of the local labouring poor, particularly children. In one instance of its benefit, open-air classes for children with tubercular symptoms were temporarily established in 1917-18, using the bandstand and the central refreshment pavilion (III. 5.16).⁷⁸

Like other open spaces in London, the park was drawn into the national effort during both world wars. The entire north-eastern corner was turned over in the First World War to allotments, which remained throughout the inter-war period and were only removed in 1951. An anti-aircraft station was also built over the croquet lawn and a clothing depot set up on one of the cricket fields. During the Second World War a piggery augmented the allotments, while other areas were given over to a barrage-balloon site, an experimental radio station, and an anti-aircraft gun emplacement.

Sculpture exhibitions

In 1948 the first major public open-air sculpture exhibition was held in Battersea Park. This unprecedented public venture made an enormous impact, inspiring worldwide imitators, and paved the way for permanent sculpture parks. A second exhibition was soon planned, taking place in 1951 alongside the attractions of the Festival of Britain. Thereafter the exhibitions were held triennially until 1966, with one final exhibition staged as part of the Jubilee celebrations in 1977.

The first exhibition was the brainchild of Patricia Strauss, Labour politician, art collector and chair of the LCC Parks Committee in 1947–8. In May 1946 she put forward a suggestion for an exhibition of Modern Sculpture in ‘one of our more central parks’. Successful recent exhibitions of works by Ensor, Klee, Picasso and Braque had indicated increasing public interest in the modern art. A sculpture show, Strauss calculated, would prove popular, encourage artists and give publicity to the Council, while exhibitors from other countries would give the event an international dimension. Strauss stressed her desire for works representative of modern trends – ‘We don’t want a couple of dozen Angels of Victory’.⁷⁹ From the beginning she envisaged that the sculptures should be set off by trees and shrubs rather than placed on an expanse of open grass: ‘Rows of sculpture sticking up like Stonehenge would be awful’.⁸⁰

Kenwood, the first location suggested, was soon dropped in favour of Battersea. It was the most central of the LCC’s parks, and opposite Chelsea – ‘one of the alleged centres of modern art’, as W. E. Jackson, Deputy Clerk to the Council, remarked.⁸¹ In the event Battersea fulfilled all Strauss’s hopes, attracting a wide spectrum of the public. ‘All social sections are fairly evenly

Draft

represented as well as all age groups', commented one guide lecturer, adding that 'Elegant old ladies, men in plus fours, and bishops seem to need the least amount of time for covering the ground'.⁸²

The impetus for the exhibition emerged from the 1946 Local Government Act which allowed a fraction of the general rate to be spent on 'entertainment', coupled with the LCC's policy to restore its parks after the war, provide further spaces and introduce a wider range of entertainment.⁸³ Such an art exhibition in a public park was in tune with the post-war ideal of bringing culture to the masses. There had been one earlier open-air exhibition of 'garden sculpture' in Britain, organized by the London Group and held on Selfridge's roof garden during the summer of 1930, which included works by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.⁸⁴ Strauss had come to know Moore, having already acquired one of his sculptures; he had expressed a preference for exhibiting his works out of doors, several of his pieces being displayed in gardens.

Soon the Arts Council became involved. This turned into something of a takeover, after its Arts Panel insisted on both planning the exhibition and selecting the artists. Strauss and three colleagues from the Parks Department were outnumbered and out-gunned on the Sculpture Exhibition Committee whose members included Sir Kenneth Clark, Sir Eric MacLagan, John Rothenstein, Philip James, and the sculptors Henry Moore, Charles Wheeler and Frank Dobson. Their selection criteria extended to establishment figures such as William Reid Dick, Alfred Hardiman, Gilbert Ledward, William McMillan, and Charles Wheeler himself.⁸⁵ Leading artists from overseas were also approached to lend pieces.

In its final form the exhibition presented a review of sculpture from the previous fifty years, beginning with Auguste Rodin. Of more than forty large works, most were by either British sculptors – apart from those already

Draft

mentioned these included Dora Gordine, Barbara Hepworth, F. E. McWilliam and John Skeaping – or émigrés living in Britain like Siegfried Charoux, Georg Ehrlich, Uli Nimpf, Willi Soukop and Karel Vogel. Overseas artists were largely French or Paris-based, pooled from the established masters – these, alongside Rodin, were Charles Despiau, Aristide Maillol, Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani and Ossip Zadkine. The exhibition roused great interest among the sculptors. Hepworth thought it ‘a most important event’ and was keen to lend her latest work ‘as the exhibition is quite unique and of such very great importance to the appreciation of sculpture generally’.⁸⁶ Not everyone was happy. Epstein took offence at not having been consulted from the beginning, and Strauss had to mollify him.⁸⁷

Set up in the Sub-Tropical Garden, the exhibition ran from May to September. Almost 150,000 visitors attended (III. 5.18). Henry Moore’s *Three Standing Figures*, the centrepiece, stole the show (III. 5.19). This work had been commissioned by the Contemporary Art Society, seemingly with a view to its permanent display in a London park. The exhibition opening coincided with the gift of the piece from Sir Edward Marsh on the Society’s behalf.⁸⁸ Derived from Moore’s wartime drawings in the air-raid shelters, the stylized figures gaze out into the distance towards a brighter future.⁸⁹ The sculpture remains in the park, though it has been remounted and placed near the lake.

As to the other exhibits, Barbara Naish, one of the guide lecturers, observed that most people found Maillol dull, and described how the ‘bearded boys from Chelsea tried to explain to matter-of-fact north countrymen just what they “felt” before Matisse’. Another guide lecturer reported ‘apathy on every hand’ being shown towards the Matisse, while Dobson ‘comes off badly, the usual cross-section being worried by his obvious attempt to impose abstraction on plump wenches’.⁹⁰

Draft

The success of the 1948 exhibition ensured its repetition, originally intended for 1950 but deferred to coincide with the Festival of Britain. The number of counter-attractions was probably responsible for the diminished attendance, at around 110,000. This time the driving force came from Ruth Dalton, then chair of the LCC Parks Committee. Building on the popularity of the modern works shown in 1948, more risks were taken for the 1951 exhibition. Contemporary sculptors were selected from all over Europe, Canada and the United States, including Ernst Barlach, Alexander Calder, George Kolbe, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Constantin Meunier, George Minne, Jean Arp and Alberto Giacometti.⁹¹ The Royal Academy was also represented by Maurice Lambert's 'Pegasus and Bellerophon', derided by the Arts Council but hugely popular with the public.⁹² There were now some dissentient voices. The arrangement of the sculptures – by Charoux, Epstein and McWilliam (III 5.17) – enchanted Georges Salles, Director of the Museums of France, but came as 'a terrible shock' to Hepworth, whom illness prevented from attending the meetings. She was distressed by the 'sense of conflict, irritation and lack of space which is quite out of keeping with the lovely park'.⁹³

Later LCC sculpture exhibitions never attained the same success. Those held in 1954 and 1957 at Holland Park created a more formal setting. By the time they returned to Battersea in 1960 the art critics had become fiercer. The standard remained high, nevertheless, with works by Barbara Hepworth, Elizabeth Frink, Reg Butler, Edward Paolozzi, Anthony Caro, Epstein and Moore alongside European sculptors.⁹⁴ From the 1963 exhibition, Barbara Hepworth's *Single Form* was purchased subsequently by the LCC and placed beside the lake (III. 5.19a).⁹⁵ This is one of several versions of the piece; the best known is a larger version in the United Nations Plaza, New York, set up as a memorial to the former UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld, a friend of Hepworth's.⁹⁶ Under the Greater London Council the exhibitions became an entirely British affair, introducing works by young sculptors.⁹⁷

Festival Pleasure Gardens, 1951

As part of the 1951 Festival of Britain, almost a quarter of the park became the site of the Pleasure Gardens – a ‘light-hearted foil’ to the South Bank Exhibition.⁹⁸ Inspired by Ranelagh, Vauxhall and Cremorne, they were devised to create a spectacle of colour, with the emphasis on fun and whimsical humour. An American-style funfair operated on about half the site, while the remainder offered a range of entertainments in a newly landscaped setting with bright flower beds, shrubberies, pools and fountains (III. 5.20).

The idea of the Pleasure Gardens is credited to Gerald Barry, Editor of the *News Chronicle*, appointed Director-General of the Festival in March 1948. Barry assembled a team of young architects and designers, many of whom had worked with him on small official exhibitions during the war. The overall design was by James Gardner, with landscaping by Russell Page. Sketch plans were produced early in 1950; the main contractor, Dowsett Engineering Construction Ltd, started work in April without detailed drawings to work from and only part of the site available.

Apart from the fairground, the diverse attractions and structures included restaurants and bars; pavilions for shows and dancing; a tree-top walk and a railway to ferry visitors around the site; and an enlarged pier to receive people arriving from the river. At the heart of it all lay the formally landscaped flower gardens and grand vista leading down to the fountain lake.

Besides Gardner and Page, numerous others contributed to the design of individual structures, which were mostly of prefabricated or light construction and regarded ‘less as architecture than as stage scenery’ (III.

Draft

5.21). Guy Sheppard designed the Riverside Theatre and Grotto; Hugh Casson the Aviary Restaurant; Rowland Emmett the Far Tottering and Oyster Creek Railway; Patrick Gwynne the Crescent Restaurant; Osbert Lancaster and John Piper the Grand Vista; Lewitt Him the Guinness Clock and Nestlé's Playland; Bernard Engle the Vauxhall and Ranelagh Beer Gardens.⁹⁹ At odds with the colourful temporary buildings were two red-brick structures added by the LCC Parks Department and intended to outstay the festival: the amphitheatre and the Terrace Tea Shop, both designed by Roger K. Pullen.¹⁰⁰

Whilst the freedom afforded to designers led to original and exciting structures, it also helped send the scheme wildly over budget and behind schedule. Groundwork had to be started in one of the wettest winters on record, and the gardens were still not finished in time for the opening of the Festival on 3 May. The funfair opened eleven days later, the rest of the site at the end of the month. Even then the tree-top walk, riverside restaurant, open-air theatre and dance pavilion were unfinished.¹⁰¹

The Pleasure Gardens' popularity exceeded all expectations. One Battersea resident, Michael de Larrabeiti, worked there as a young man: 'In the Gardens things were lit from the inside, shining: it was like a brilliant dream, whereas the edges of the world we knew had been worn soft and old and grey'.¹⁰² When they closed on 3 November over eight million people had visited the attraction. Although revenue exceeded £1.25 million there was still a substantial debt to the government. Labour had lost the general election in October to the Conservatives, who agreed to retain the Battersea attraction only in the hopes of recouping some of the debt.¹⁰³ Over the winter the main Festival Gardens and funfair were closed, but the terrace walk, with the Riverside and Mermaid theatres, Terrace Tea Shop and Guinness Clock, remained open to the public free of charge. The triangle of ground around the bandstand was returned to the park.¹⁰⁴

Draft

On 24 May 1952 the Pleasure Gardens reopened and ran for almost five months. New attractions were added to entice visitors to return, including another Emmett creation, 'By-plane X-100'.¹⁰⁵ But visitor numbers were disappointing, and the debt grew. In 1953 hopes were high that the Coronation might bring back the crowds. The Grand Vista was patriotically redecorated and a Queen's Pavilion added, containing scenes from the life of the queen. A 3-D film of the Coronation procession was shown at the Riverside Theatre and relayed to 50 television sets placed in the gardens.¹⁰⁶ But the attendances came nowhere near the number needed to break even financially.

After that summer the LCC was paid £100,000 towards reinstating the park, and acquired the funfair and garden features. The funfair continued on a reduced scale, covering some six acres with a new restaurant and beer garden.¹⁰⁷ It only closed in 1974, after a fatal accident on one of the rides. Some of the garden features were kept, including the best of the shrubberies and the ornamental water in the Grand Vista, but the riverside walk was returned to grass. Only the permanent buildings were retained, the children's zoo and adjacent area being turned into a pets' corner and a playground for small children. On the rest of the site eight hard tennis courts were laid out, a cricket and a football field set amid the trees, and two acres left as open grass.¹⁰⁸ By 2000 the few remaining features of the gardens had deteriorated almost beyond recognition.

The park since the 1980s

During the 22 years that the Greater London Council had charge of Battersea Park, it continued to be well used for sports and events (III. 5.24). One of the largest was the British Genius Exhibition of 1977, part of the Queen's silver jubilee celebrations. The site remains available for temporary exhibitions. But

Draft

by 1986 when Wandsworth Borough Council took over the park there was a general air of neglect. In some compensation, 1984–5 had seen its most dazzling addition, in the form of a Peace Pagoda built by Buddhist monks in a central position behind the riverside terrace walk ([Ill. Frontispiece](#)).

The monks were part of the Nipponzan Myohoji sect, which originated in Japan after the Second World War following the teachings of Guruji Nichidatsu Fujii, a campaigner against the arms race. A monastery and temple were established in the 1970s in Milton Keynes, where the first peace pagoda in the West was built. Completed in 1980, it was designed by Minoru Ohka, an expert on Japanese traditional architecture, with Tom Hancock, who was himself a Buddhist, as honorary co-ordinating architect.¹⁰⁹ Ohka and Hancock worked together once more to design the Battersea peace pagoda.¹¹⁰

Battersea Park was one of three sites originally considered along with Hounslow Heath and Thamesmead. Hounslow was the preferred option, but a 150ft pagoda there was refused planning permission because of its proximity to Heathrow Airport.¹¹¹ The pagoda is made of reinforced concrete, with a wooden superstructure constructed using traditional Japanese joinery methods, forming colonnades and supporting the balcony and decorative elements.¹¹² Its design is rooted in Japanese traditions, and comprises a central white dome sheltered by multiple roofs, covered with traditional tiling. Niches around the central tower house four gilded-bronze statues of Buddha, and two carved stone lions guard the base platform. Tom Hancock likened the form of the pagoda to

a map of spiritual life showing the five elements in ascending order...the base represents the earth and stable energy, the white central domed tower the flowing energy of water, the upward energy of fire is represented by the roofs, and the saucer dish at the base of the umbrella-shaped crown symbolises air and free energy. The jewel drop at the summit represents consciousness and eternal spirit.¹¹³

Draft

Another addition under the GLC was a new 'Brown Dog' memorial, commissioned by the National Anti-Vivisection Society and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection as a replacement for the original Brown Dog memorial of 1906 erected in Latchmere recreation ground (page xxx). The new memorial was put up near the Pump House in 1985 but moved in 1994 to a less prominent position on the north side of the Old English Garden. It comprises a sculpture of a dog by Nicola Hicks, modelled on her pet Jack Russell, standing on a 5ft-high Portland stone plinth. The wording from the 1906 memorial is repeated on the new one, together with a postscript giving the subsequent history of the memorial.¹¹⁴

Since Wandsworth Borough Council took over the management of the park, much work has been done to revive it. The Old English Garden was restored in 1989, with a pergola at the west end, wooden arbours with climbing roses to the north, and a pond in the centre with a small fountain.¹¹⁵ During the 1990s the lake was spruced up, hard edges were removed and planting round its margins and banks was renewed. In 1998 a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund enabled the Council to carry out a major restoration project. Then between 2000 and 2004 perhaps as much work was done on the site as when it was first laid out in the 1850s and early '60s. Many of the Victorian features were either restored or recreated, including Gibson's Sub-Tropical Garden and his designs for the riverside walk, based on an original sketch. Gibson's rustic bridge spanning a narrow part of the lake was rebuilt and the rosery replanted.

A renewed sense of the historic importance of the Festival Pleasure Gardens encouraged the Council to preserve what little was left. Hilary Taylor and Associates were appointed to tackle a wide area around the Grand Vista. The water features were restored, and fountains reinstated, while the arcade and towers designed by Osbert Lancaster and John Piper became the inspiration for new structures and planting serving to re-establish the vista's

Draft

lines and boundaries (III. 5.25). To the east, Russell Page's flower garden and lawn were reinstated, while to their south a new arcade has been built on a terrace, again inspired by its 1951 predecessor, serving a small tea pavilion (III. 5.26).¹¹⁶

Modern design is represented by the Millennium Stadium, put up by Wandsworth Council in 1998, and two new buildings by Rod McAllister: public conveniences by the Grand Vista, in glass brick construction; and a boathouse at the end of a new boardwalk, built of greenheart timber, steel and unpatinated copper.¹¹⁷

The commons

Clapham Common

Clapham Common is one of London's most-prized public spaces, notable for its wide-open character and the clear sense of definition and urbanity imposed by its boundaries. An essentially triangular and uniform area of some 220 acres, it has lost less ground to development than most metropolitan commons (Ills 5.28 and 29). Its preservation is due largely to the early establishment of Clapham as a choice place of residence for merchants, who appreciated an open and airy situation within easy reach of the City. From the early eighteenth century they began to erect villas on its fringes. By their wealth and influence they were sufficiently powerful to defend the common from unwanted development.

A complication in Clapham Common's history, and a possible inhibition to the depredation of its fringes, lay in the fact that it straddles two

Draft

separate parishes and manors: the boundary running north–south, roughly down its centre. The eastern half belonged to Clapham, while the western half belonged to Battersea and was formerly known as Battersea East Common, or East Heath (distinguishing it from the Battersea part of Wandsworth Common, known as West Common or Heath). Earlier still, East Heath was called Washington or Washingham Common after the area to its north (page xxx).¹¹⁸

From at least 1605 the boundary had been marked by a ditch which ran from the bottom of Wix’s Lane to the corner of Nightingale Lane and Balham Hill.¹¹⁹ Conflict between the parishes over the position of the boundary was sparked by arguments over rights of grazing, the common’s main historic use along with foraging for furze and firewood. The boundary ditch had largely disappeared by the early eighteenth century, and livestock were turned out over the entire common by Battersea and Clapham residents alike without argument. But in 1716 the Battersea parishioners complained that the Clapham livestock greatly outnumbered their own and so to protect their own rights called for the ditch to be reinstated and the common divided. This was done with the consent of Battersea’s lord of the manor, Viscount St John. Even the roads were blocked by swing gates.¹²⁰ Provoked, representatives of the lord of the manor of Clapham, the young Sir Henry Atkins (then only about nine years old), claimed the freehold of the whole of the common as his. The ditch was filled and the gates torn down.

Viscount St John took six Clapham parishioners to court for trespass, but when the case was tried in 1718 he was non-suited for failing to produce competent witnesses. In the same year a bill was filed in Chancery on behalf of Atkins against St John. Depositions about the respective manorial rights of the parties demonstrated how the common was used at that time, but failed to clarify the boundary question.¹²¹

Draft

Apart from grazing, gravel was dug periodically in these years, the larger pits later being formed into ponds; but increasingly the common was used for leisure activities typical of English commons at the time. Horse racing is documented from 1674—later restricted to a turf gallop alongside what became the Avenue, now a busy road. Archery was a popular pastime in the eighteenth century, as were boxing and hopping matches. Larger gatherings occurred when fairs were held here; from the 1780s these were restricted to Easter, Whitsun and Derby Day.¹²²

By the 1740s Clapham Common had houses along much of its north side and around the pan-handle at Battersea Rise, with just a trickle to the south (III. 5.1). A century later the edge had been entirely built up. It was during the eighteenth century that some of the main features on the common itself appeared. The principal buildings erected lie within Clapham parish and are not described here, namely: Clapham's Holy Trinity church, of 1774–9; the Windmill Inn; and a stable complex built on the site of Rookery Road by John Thornton.

Of the early man-made elements in the landscape, the ponds are the main survivors. The Mount Pond began as a gravel pit, supposedly dug for the road to Tooting along the south-east edge of the common.¹²³ It was ornamented by Henton Brown, a banker living on the south side from some time in the 1740s. He raised the Mount and erected a pagoda and summerhouse on top, linked to the common by a bridge, with a pleasure boat kept under it (III. 5.30). The pond was fenced around with posts and rails. In 1748 Clapham Vestry granted him permission to turn this into a 'close fence' but this was later rescinded. He also piped water from the pond to supply a reservoir in the grounds of his house.¹²⁴

Brown was on friendly terms with Benjamin Franklin, as was another resident of Clapham Common, Christopher Baldwin, and it was on the

Draft

common that the celebrated American first experimented in the 1760s or '70s with using oil to calm troubled waters, in the company of Baldwin, a keen amateur scientist. In 1779 Baldwin wrote to Franklin in France, reminding him of the occasion: 'Think for a moment of the pleasure we have had in smoothing the *ruffled surface* of the Pond on our Common, between me & neighbour Brown'.¹²⁵ Baldwin's description, coupled with Franklin's own that he had observed a 'large Pond' to be very rough with the wind, makes Mount Pond the most likely location for the famous experiment.¹²⁶

Christopher Baldwin was an important figure in the history of the common. A West India merchant and an Antiguan by birth, he derived his wealth largely from plantations there and in Dominica. Having moved to London, he took land on the west side of the common around 1762, where he built himself a villa, before acquiring nearly 40 acres of the surrounding land freehold in 1765 (vol. 50).¹²⁷ He was also a magistrate and Justice of the Peace for Surrey, and in that role took the lead in protecting and improving the common. It was probably Baldwin who led a preservation committee formed in 1768 to stop an attempt by a Mr Fawkes to enclose and build on a part of the common. Fawkes had already dug a trench of 166 feet, probably in the vicinity of the Windmill Pond.¹²⁸

According to Daniel Lysons, Baldwin raised subscriptions from local residents, and contributed generously to the cost of planting trees, both English and exotic, turning the heath to an open space with 'very much the appearance of a park'.¹²⁹ The romantic garden ground thus created was the subject of numerous paintings and engravings. (Ill. 5.31).

When the Board of Agriculture sent surveyors around the country in the late eighteenth century to assess the possibilities for taking common land into cultivation, they found Clapham Common to be little short of an 'ornamental paddock':

Draft

The only thing wanting to complete the scenery of the situation, would be to destroy the greatest part of the furze and fern, and lay it down to grass; to intersperse evergreens among those forest trees that are already planted there, and to scatter a few more clumps upon a better scale.

Yet the common was still much exploited for its gravel, used for roads and in gardens, while the abundant furze and ferns referred to were used as fuel, particularly by bakers. The surveyors concluded that the common was as productive in its current state as if it were enclosed.¹³⁰

The improvements made to the common doubtless encouraged further development of villas around it. By the 1790s Clapham Common was firmly established as ‘an agreeable and safe retreat for many of the most opulent merchants and bankers of the City of London’.¹³¹ Many of the new residents applied to the parish vestries of Battersea or Clapham to enclose small parts of the common in front of their houses – extending their gardens usually just with some posts and rails. Most of these requests were acceded to on payment of a nominal annual sum.¹³²

Baldwin exerted a considerable influence on the peaceful management of the common while he lived here, and during that time Battersea’s interests were unchallenged. But the balance of power tilted in favour of Clapham after the Thornton family purchased from Richard Bowyer his life interest in that manor. From the 1790s Samuel Thornton was at the forefront of common affairs. A sub-committee of the Clapham Vestry appointed in 1796 for the ‘Regulation and Improvement of the Common’ ostensibly held the same aims as that established in 1768, but it also promoted Clapham’s claim to the common in its entirety.¹³³

Draft

For the next thirty years the old grievances between the parishes flared up sporadically. Boundary posts were uprooted, and the beating of the bounds erupted in mild violence.¹³⁴ In 1821 Clapham parishioners revived an ancient custom when they ‘forcibly bumped’ two servants of Battersea residents whom they happened to meet along their way, ‘telling them to remember the boundary’.¹³⁵ That same year the Thorntons ceased to act as lords of the manor, following Richard Bowyer’s death. His son, William Atkins Bowyer, was quick to exert his rights. An outsider from Denham Court in Buckinghamshire with no loyalties to the Battersea residents around the common, he had no qualms about treating the whole common as his own. This feeling was perhaps reinforced by the fact that many of the residents around the common attended the nearby Clapham parish church rather than the distant church of Battersea. When Battersea tried to persuade Clapham to lay the case before Chancery to decide the matter one way or the other, Clapham Vestry barely acknowledged the offer.¹³⁶

When in 1827 the 2nd Earl Spencer was preparing a bill to enclose the common fields within the manor of Battersea and Wandsworth, he was advised to exclude Battersea East Common. John Shaw Lefevre, family friend and legal adviser, alerted him to the difficulty over the boundary, doubting that there was ‘satisfactory ancient documentary evidence’ to support Battersea’s claim that the boundary ran southwards from Wix’s Lane. Clapham’s lord of the manor believed that he had ‘strong Grounds’ for the boundary being considerably further west, running down the western edge of the common leaving only the pan-handle at Battersea Rise in the parish of Battersea. An Enclosure Act that included Battersea East Common might have settled the boundary and been of great value to the Spencers. However, as Lefevre pointed out, it would be extremely unpopular and might excite opposition to the rest of the Bill from ‘a very large and opulent body of persons residing around Clapham Common who are quite unconnected with

Draft

your Lordship and would have I think in general the public on their side'.¹³⁷ The Bill failed, and the boundary remained unresolved.

Meanwhile the common continued to be used much as before, though with the growing building boom it was increasingly exploited for gravel. In 1823 the old Spring Well on the north side of the common near Wix's Lane was filled in and replaced by a deeper and more productive well further away from the road.¹³⁸ It was subsequently covered up and closed by the Metropolitan Board of Works.¹³⁹ Annual fairs were held, not always welcomed by the smarter local residents, who also complained of dunghills, rubbish heaps and washing hung out to dry.¹⁴⁰ Robberies by 'highwaymen' occasionally featured in the newspapers, and there were the usual episodic complaints of unseemly behaviour. In 1827 a duel took place between two surgeons, (Sir) Charles Fergusson Forbes and Hale Thomson.¹⁴¹

Better management of the common can be traced back to new leases of the manorial rights granted in 1835–6 by the respective lords of the manor.¹⁴² A management committee of the lessees was now formed with the aim of restoring Clapham Common to its natural state. They raised subscriptions for its upkeep and improvement. A list of subscribers from 1850 has 138 names, of whom 96 gave their address as Clapham Common.¹⁴³ The rejuvenation was timely. In the mid 1830s the London & Southampton Railway was gouging its way through Wandsworth Common, and other lines were soon planned. With their wealth and connections, the lessees of Clapham Common succeeded (where Wandsworth's were to fail) in opposing the projected line of the West End & Crystal Palace Railway across the common in 1852.¹⁴⁴ As a result the Select Committee on Commons and Open Spaces in the Metropolis of 1865 found Clapham Common in a far better state than most others in London.¹⁴⁵

Draft

The lessees managed the common until 1877, when it passed uncontroversially to the Metropolitan Board of Works. The two lords of the manor, the 5th Earl Spencer and Colonel Bowyer, were paid £10,000 and £8,000 respectively for their manorial rights. Much work was undertaken by the MBW in landscaping, systematizing the drainage of the subsoil, filling old ditches (presumably including any remains of the boundary ditch), cleaning ponds and planting trees. New post-and-rail fencing was erected, tidying and defining the open space, although a few parts were still covered in furze at the end of the century.¹⁴⁶

During the MBW's twelve years of management the character of the neighbourhood changed, particularly on the Battersea side. Housing development between the commons reached a peak in the 1880s, resulting in a huge rise in population and a different class of people who now used the common for their rest and recreation. At about this time the number of prostitutes on the common also drew comment. Around 30 women worked there, who allegedly bribed the local policemen to turn a blind eye.¹⁴⁷

Outdoor meetings of a political or religious character crept in, despite the MBW's prohibition. In 1878 John Burns had his first brush with the law when he was arrested for speaking at a political meeting on the common.¹⁴⁸ Sunday afternoon speakers in the years before the First World War were recalled by the Rev. J. A. Douglas, who noted meetings being held by:

Mormons to advocate the doctrines of Utah, by Tariff reformers, by the Navy League, by the forerunner of Mr. Pussyfoot...by four different kinds of feminists...by Christadelphians, by five mutually hostile types of Socialist, by the Russian Revolutionaries, and by a band of coloured men urging the equality of all races... The listeners moved round from pitch to pitch, either wearying of the particular orator or drawn by a guffaw of laughter or applause or cheering, or the sound of turbulence at another which told that

Draft

wordy warfare or something interesting was going on and drew them like a shoal of minnows.¹⁴⁹

Additional facilities, particularly for sports, were provided by the MBW and subsequently the London County Council when it took over in 1889. Cricket, football, tennis, golf, horse-riding (though there were attempts to restrict this), model yachting, fishing and bathing were all enjoyed. The Mount Pond became popular with local children for bathing in the heat of the summer. The LCC endeavoured to restrict the practice to specified times in the evening: 'In a few moments their scanty clothing is off, and the pond is a mass of nude wriggling forms splashing and paddling to their hearts content'.¹⁵⁰ By the late 1920s there was an open-air dressing enclosure with seats running round it for bathers next to the pond.¹⁵¹

One of the first additions to the common by the LCC was the bandstand (III. 5.32). A petition to provide one from local inhabitants in 1889 arrived just as the LCC was undertaking to put up bandstands at Peckham Rye and Southwark Park. There, on the recommendation of the chief architect, Thomas Blashill, two cast-iron bandstands were bought from the Royal Horticultural Society's gardens at South Kensington. They had been designed by Francis Fowke in 1861 but were being taken down and due to be sold off. As they were known to have excellent acoustic qualities, Blashill arranged for the LCC to acquire them. On the suggestion of the LCC's repairs contractor it was decided to use the Fowke design as the model for a bandstand for Clapham Common. A steep rise in the price of iron at the tender stage meant that some of the finer detailing had to be omitted, but in 1890 the common got its bandstand, as the centrepiece of a new radial path network.¹⁵² It has a timber-framed dome covered in zinc resting on a canopy supported by twin columns and decorative brackets of floral motif. The original ironwork was supplied by George Smith's Sun Foundry in Glasgow.¹⁵³ In about 1971 some repairs were done, but not enough to halt the process of deterioration. A full

Draft

restoration and reinstatement was undertaken in 2005–6 by Dannatt Johnson, architects (contractors, Killby & Gayford). The zinc roof was replaced and the finial and balustrade, lost probably during the Second World War, were reinstated, together with a new floor, ramp and improved setting.¹⁵⁴

The present café by the bandstand, just over the parish boundary into Clapham, was built by the LCC in 1924, replacing an earlier timber structure with a corrugated-iron roof. The earliest café here was described as a tent, put up by Alfred Vago in 1892. This was the first permanent and authorized place where refreshments could be obtained on the common and was presumably a success, as Vago applied to enlarge his 'refreshment bungalow' next year. He remained the proprietor until at least 1907 when the LCC took it over with a view to rebuilding. This seems to have been deferred until the 1920s café was erected.¹⁵⁵

Perhaps the most notorious event on the common was the murder on 31 December 1910 of Leon Beron, upon whose cheeks were cut two marks resembling the letter 'S'. Steinie Morrison was convicted and sentenced to the death penalty, later commuted to a life sentence. Morrison's defence had claimed that the atrocity was linked to the Houndsditch murders, committed by 'Russian Revolutionaries', two of whom perished in the Sidney Street siege. The lengthy trial was a public sensation (Madame Tussauds displayed a waxwork of Morrison), and years later was the subject of Eric Linklater's book, *The Corpse on the Common* (1971).¹⁵⁶

The LCC introduced public entertainments, from ballet and boxing, circuses and horse shows to an annual Festival of Scotland established in the 1960s. These mostly continued under the GLC (though the Surrey Union Hunt was banned).

Draft

As with most other urban open spaces during the First and Second World Wars, parts of the common were made over for allotments. Twelve acres along North Side west of Cedars Road were dug over. During the Second World War basic air-raid shelters were built around the edge of the common. An anti-aircraft battery was set up on the north-east side, with Nissen huts and ammunition bunkers, while deep shelters appeared along the route of the Northern Line. Emergency housing was erected after the Second World War, as on Wandsworth Common.¹⁵⁷

The common passed in 1971 from the GLC to Lambeth Borough Council, which owns and maintains it today. The focus of the large Clapham Common Conservation Area, it boasts a mixture of formal and informal planting, tree-lined roads, sports facilities, play areas, and broad open spaces (III. 5.33). The ponds and the bandstand are notable remnants of nineteenth-century improvements. Many of the elms were lost to disease in the 1970s and other trees fell in the Great Storm of 1987. Yet mature trees are much in evidence, and more recent replanting will ensure that this aspect of the common endures.

Wandsworth Common

Like its eastern near-neighbour, Wandsworth Common straddles a parish boundary, here between the parishes of Battersea and Wandsworth (III. 5.34). But it fell historically within a single manor, and therefore within a single jurisdiction. Wandsworth Common was much the largest expanse of common land within the manor of Battersea and Wandsworth, covering in the 1820s some 400 acres, over twice its present extent.¹⁵⁸ It stretched northwards to St John's Hill and south beyond Burntwood and Nightingale Lanes, and from Trinity Road on the west to Bolingbroke Grove on the east (III. 5.1). Until well into the nineteenth century it was surrounded by land largely unbuilt upon.

Draft

As its name implies, most of the original common lay in Wandsworth and only its eastern edge was in Battersea. Formerly this division was recognized by separate names: Wandsworth East Common and Battersea West Common. Sometimes the term 'heath' was used rather than common. Some of its best-known historic landmarks were on the Wandsworth side, and are not covered here, including the Windmill, Craig's giant telescope and the Black Sea, the private enterprise of William Wilson who in the 1830s created a picturesque network of ponds and islands as an extension to his garden.¹⁵⁹ Spencer Park now stands on the site.

Originally the common was a vast expanse of gorse-covered heath, and remained so throughout the eighteenth century. The underlying soil – good loam on gravel – might have been ripe for improvement either to grow cereal crops or for timber plantations.¹⁶⁰ But as the gravel had greater value, it was extracted until the abandoned pits turned the heath into a desolate pock-marked landscape, 'bare, muddy and sloppy after a little rain, undrained, and almost devoid of trees'.¹⁶¹

Gradually, minor enclosures were made around the edges, allowing surrounding landowners to extend their properties. Though such concessions were then standard practice, they were not uncontroversial. In 1807 the 2nd Earl Spencer sought advice concerning the legality of such enclosures, noting that within ten or fifteen years 'a great many Gentlemen's seats' had been built near the commons and that they had often 'for some trifling improvement or other' been permitted to enclose a small part of the common land. Spencer's barrister considered that the copyholders had no claim to be consulted upon these enclosures so long as there was enough pasturage left.¹⁶²

Then in the 1820s came road improvements that cut through the common at its south end. The first, made in 1825 at the behest of the 2nd Earl

Draft

and the Battersea Bridge proprietors, connected Trinity Road to the south-west with Five Houses Road or Lane (now Bolingbroke Grove), thereby improving access between the bridge and Tooting; today only the south part of this road survives, as St James's Drive (until 1939–40, St James's Road).¹⁶³ A second, east–west road was made in 1827 cutting across this, linking Nightingale Lane with Garratt Lane; this is now Bellevue Road (III. 5.35).¹⁶⁴

From the 1830s more fundamental assaults were made on Wandsworth Common's integrity. These came from railways, which obtained powers to make cuttings through its centre along the north–south axis, so splitting the common into isolated sections. The first incursion came from the London & Southampton Railway's line in 1835–8, and lay largely on the Wandsworth side. This was followed in 1855–8 by the West End & Crystal Palace line (later the Brighton line), which sliced through the eastern or Battersea side (page xxx). Between Battersea Rise and Nightingale Lane, the railway cutting was only bridged at one point by a public path, at the level of the future Blenkarne Road.

These encroachments were paralleled by large institutional ones. While revenue from the common was important to the Spencers, the majority permitted were for ostensibly public or charitable purposes. This perhaps helped ensure the acquiescence of the vestries and copyholders, whose consent – or failure to object – was a necessity before encroachments could be sanctioned. The biggest parcels of land so alienated fell within this category: Wandsworth Prison (10 acres, 1847), St James's Industrial Schools (20 acres, 1850) and the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum (52 acres, 1857). The second of these alienations lay wholly within Battersea parish, the last partly so (pages xxx, xxx). There were other, smaller losses, such as the site of St Mark's Church and School in 1866 (page xxx).

Draft

Private enclosure also took place on a bigger scale than heretofore. In 1848–53 the wealthy local landowner Henry McKellar, who resided at Wandsworth Lodge, off Burntwood Lane, enclosed a salient of some 20 acres of land at the common's south end to add to his estate, apparently without proper authority. After his death this land was sold and the houses between Bellevue and St James's Roads built on its site.¹⁶⁵

For a brief period the common was managed on a similar basis to Clapham by a lease from the Spencers. This was granted in 1839 for 21 years. The five lessees all lived close by: Alexander Gordon, Joseph Kaye, William Nottage, Henry McKellar and William Wilson. However, the lease was terminated in 1851.¹⁶⁶ Improvements made during that time were no longer evident by the mid 1860s when the Select Committee on Open Spaces in the Metropolis examined its poor condition. In the intervening years a combination of enclosures and excessive gravel-digging had drastically reduced the common's size and impaired the surviving ground, which was frequently flooded in the winter. All but one of the public footpaths had been stopped up, and an area formerly used as a cricket ground had become useless.¹⁶⁷ The resultant Metropolitan Commons Act of 1866 gave a renewed impetus to preservation.¹⁶⁸

As elsewhere around London, local opposition to enclosure and development on Wandsworth Common had been gathering pace during the 1860s. The key figure here was John C. Buckmaster, a local activist who orchestrated much of the campaign, and whose colourful autobiography dwells at some length on this period.¹⁶⁹ The prospective development of land at the north end of the common provoked concerted action. A sizeable piece of ground owned by the London & Brighton railway company was sold by them for building – the first plot advertised for sale in 1862 fronting Battersea Rise. After a further plot fronting Bolingbroke Grove was sold in 1867, a lively public meeting at the Spread Eagle that August resulted in a committee of

Draft

residents being elected as the Wandsworth Common Preservation Society. A protest was held on the common in September, reputedly attended by between four and five thousand people.¹⁷⁰

Wandsworth Common was evidently more vulnerable to development than its counterparts at Clapham or Wimbledon, where the numerous wealthy residents could afford potentially costly litigation to assert common rights. But amongst the few affluent inhabitants around its edge were two or three lawyers, including John Anderson Rose who gave evidence to the Select Committee on Open Spaces in the Metropolis. He knew better than most the futility of attempting to defeat development on legal grounds, and the high costs involved. Only copyholders were recognized as having any rights, and of the few remaining within the manor none had the wherewithal to bring a case against Lord Spencer, the railway company and the developers.

One such copyholder, James Smith Digby, was persuaded to file a case in Chancery. An agricultural labourer with little or no education, Digby was not the best choice for a stooge, quickly crumpling when he appeared in court.¹⁷¹ Similarly, attempts to interest the Metropolitan Board of Works in protecting the common were unfruitful. But under the terms of the 1866 Act, the local community could band together to protect an open space by electing conservators and raising money on the rates. This was the course that was taken for Wandsworth Common. Lord Spencer agreed to transfer his rights and profits to the conservators for an annuity of £250, reserving to himself only the area of the Black Sea (modern-day Spencer Park).¹⁷²

Though opposed for technical reasons by the MBW and, less surprisingly, by the railway companies, the Wandsworth Common Bill passed through parliament in 1871 with only minor amendments. There were eight conservators: three nominated by official bodies (the Home Department, the Office of Works and the MBW), the remaining five elected by the ratepayers.¹⁷³

Draft

For the next sixteen years the conservators managed the common, but with limited funds at their disposal, improvements were also limited. Money from the rates was used for protecting trees, turf and gorse, and stopping further removal of gravel. Various nuisances were dealt with, notably clearing away rubbish, such as detritus dumped from the building trade and road-making, and removing unauthorized livestock and people, including 'encampments of gypsies, itinerant photographers and vendors of goods'. Gypsies had long been present on Wandsworth Common, contributing to local folklore in the form of the gypsy wife of a boxer, Jack Cooper, famed for having 'knocked West Country Dick to pieces' and killing Paddy O'Leary the 'pot Boy'. She was the subject of a Romany song and a portrait by Constable's friend and biographer, C. R. Leslie, painted *c.*1830.¹⁷⁴

More expensive improvements were paid for by subscription: new paths were formed, existing ones restored, and trees planted, including Wellingtonias and cedars of Lebanon as well as many other ornamental species. Also, seats were put up, and, more humbly, four sites were laid out for carpet-beating. The new Spencer Cricket Ground was paid for by the club itself.¹⁷⁵ In addition a storm-relief sewer was constructed by the MBW in 1884–5.¹⁷⁶

Chief among the reasons for the conservators' eventual demise was the development of the neighbouring 'between the commons' area east of Bolingbroke Grove and the break-up of the five houses that formerly edged the common there. With an influx of new residents faced with steeply rising rates, even the modest amount devoted to the common was a bone of contention. The conservators themselves appeared aloof and increasingly ineffectual. Matters came to a head over the former farm attached to the Patriotic Asylum. In 1885 this and 20 acres of surrounding ground were let on lease to George Neal who laid out a roadway to it from Trinity Road. The Wandsworth Common Protection Association – seemingly a disaffected rump

Draft

of the former Preservation Society – claimed that if the land was no longer required for the asylum’s purposes, it should revert to the common, and blamed the conservators for failing to stop Neal.¹⁷⁷

A deputation of ratepayers from Battersea and Wandsworth petitioned the MBW to take over control and management of the common.¹⁷⁸ The conservators agreed, and in 1887 the common passed to the care of the Board. Shortly after the London County Council inherited it from the defunct MBW, plans were put in hand to widen the Brighton railway line across the common. ‘Cat’s-back Bridge’, which carried the footbridge over the line, was rebuilt in 1893, partly funded by the railway company and partly by the Council. It was an open iron lattice structure, more than twice the width of the former footbridge.¹⁷⁹ This remains the only footway that crosses the rails along the entire length of the common between Bellevue Road to the south and Battersea Rise to the north.

In 1911 Neal’s farm was put up for sale. The LCC Parks Department was keen to buy the land and take it back into the common in order to provide much-needed playing fields. In 1913 the Council took possession of the ‘Wandsworth Common extension’, and drew up plans for laying out the ground, including forming a bowling green, and adapting the existing buildings for use as dressing rooms, refreshment rooms, tenements for the staff, conveniences and a bothy. The work was postponed during the First World War, when the ground was used for staff accommodation for the third London General Hospital, which had taken over the Royal Victoria Patriotic School.¹⁸⁰

Wandsworth Common passed from the LCC to the Greater London Council in 1965, but was transferred to Wandsworth Council in 1971. Long seen as the poor relation of its counterpart at Clapham, the common in the early twenty-first century is well-used by local residents for sport and leisure.

Draft

The area east of the railway is largely flat, and mown for use as a sports field, while west of the railway the planting is denser, with more trees and the main lakes (Ills 5.36). The detached triangle south of Bellevue Road, by Wandsworth Common Station, has a different character; the grass here is left uncut and dotted with trees. A smaller triangle north of Battersea Rise, even further adrift from the rest of the common, is somewhat blighted by traffic, as well as by ugly railings along the west side shielding the railway lines. Yet together with St Mary's Cemetery to the south, it creates a pleasant setting for St Mark's Church, which was built on the eastern point of the triangle in 1873–4 (page xxx).

Latchmere Common and Recreation Ground

Latchmere, formerly Latchmoor, Common was a minor tract of common land, situated south of Battersea Park Road and east of Latchmere Road, to use modern road names (see Ill. 0.2 ?). The bricks made at Latchmoor in 1639 for the tower of St Mary's, Battersea (page xxx), presumably came from here. Since then the common may have been reduced by encroachments, but its boundaries remained constant from the 1760s until 1835, when it was enclosed by Battersea Vestry under an Act of 1831 empowering churchwardens and overseers to enclose and cultivate waste land.¹⁸¹ Its sixteen acres were turned into smallholdings or allotments, the rents contributing to the poor rate. At that time Battersea was still a predominantly rural parish, with a population of around 5,500. Most of the poorer parishioners were employed on the land, so providing allotments made sense. But those who lost pasturage on the common contested the enclosure, and tried forcibly to assert their rights to its use in 1836. The resulting legal cases dragged on till 1838.¹⁸²

Draft

Over the next fifty years the local market gardens and small farms largely disappeared, along with the agricultural labourers. The revenue from the allotments amounted to only about £16 a year, and the explosion in Battersea's population, particularly of the poor with little time or ability to tend an allotment, led to the conclusion that better use might be made of the land.

In 1877 Battersea Vestry began to consider building housing for the poor, or artisan class, on the site and applied to the Local Government Board for assistance. During the 1880s a chunk of the Latchmere acres was taken for Latchmere School and a more sizeable proportion reserved for public baths (pages xxx, xxx). As to the housing, after years of inconclusive discussions over the legal position, the newly independent Vestry sidestepped the Board and authorized the churchwardens and overseers to promote a Bill in Parliament permitting the development. Presented in 1888, the Bill was thrown out, opponents contending that the ground should be preserved as an open space. Amendments to the Bill to provide for part of the land being turned into a public recreation ground still failed to win over the detractors.¹⁸³

The scheme was revived in 1894, with a modified Bill that would have provided an area of open space alongside the housing development with all profits being devoted to the poor. The Local Government Board still refused to help, and the Vestry would not proceed without the Board's backing. It was revived once more in 1900, this time successfully, because of the perceived need to provide more working-class housing in this poor and overcrowded district of Battersea. John Burns was among those who argued that Battersea urgently needed small housing units, not extra open space. The soil was unfavourable for flowers and vegetables, he argued, and vitiated by its industrial surroundings, while corners of the allotments had become a tip, 'a receptacle of fowls that die not always a natural death, and dogs and cats that mysteriously disappear'. J. T. Pilditch, the Vestry surveyor, added that the

Draft

shooting of rubbish had been permitted because the allotments were up to five feet below the surrounding roads, and 'invariably under water'. In response, one of the allotment holders claimed that Burns in his evidence 'put the pot on there a bit'. Nevertheless, legislation to enable the allotments to be built over was granted as part of an LCC General Powers Act of 1900. Eight acres were taken for housing, while the remaining area, just over three acres in extent, was to be laid out as a recreation ground.¹⁸⁴

Work on the housing went ahead swiftly, the Latchmere Estate being formally opened in 1903 (vol. 50). The recreation ground, north of the housing, was meanwhile postponed and then reduced, as Battersea Borough Council's Housing Committee applied to take some of the space for more houses. Percy Thornton eventually pressured the Council into getting on with the recreation ground in return for his support for clauses in the LCC (General Powers) Bill of 1904 that would allow for the further development of the estate. The small park was finally completed in 1906 according to plans supervised by the Cemetery Committee, which administered all Battersea Council's public open spaces.¹⁸⁵

While these plans were being formulated, Battersea Council was offered a drinking fountain by the International Anti-Vivisection Council, and the recreation ground chosen as a suitable site. When the park opened, the fountain was unveiled and, as a memorial to the so-called 'brown dog', soon became a focus of protest. In 1902-3 medical experiments had been conducted on a brown mongrel at University College Hospital. One of these was attended by two Swedish students, the Countess Louise Lind-af-Hageby and Leisa K. Shartau, who claimed that the animal had not been properly anaesthetized and was clearly suffering. Their account of the experiment was published as *The Shambles of Science* by Ernest Bell, a trustee of the Anti-Vivisection Hospital, lately established in Battersea (page xxx).

Draft

The medical team involved in the experiment denied any wrong-doing, but Lord Coleridge (another of the hospital's trustees) gave an inflammatory speech to the National Anti-Vivisection Society in May 1903, accusing the scientists of torturing the animal. William Bayliss, one of those who experimented on the dog, sued Coleridge for libel and won. Public opinion was divided, but there was strong support for Coleridge from liberals and radicals. Anna Louisa Woodward of the International Anti-Vivisection Council, and briefly a trustee of the Anti-Vivisection Hospital, proposed a public memorial, raised subscriptions and commissioned the sculptor Joseph Whitehead to produce a bronze statue of the dog. It sat atop the drinking fountain, with a water trough for horses and dogs below (Ill. 5.37).

Together with the borough's radical sympathies, the presence in Battersea of the hospital and of the Battersea Dogs' Home, with its long-held anti-vivisection stance, made the Latchmere site an obvious choice for the memorial. It was unveiled in September 1906, when George Bernard Shaw and Charlotte Despard both spoke.¹⁸⁶ The inscription on the memorial was provocative:

In Memory of the Brown Terrier Dog done to Death in the Laboratories of University College in February 1903, after having endured Vivisection extending over more than two months and having been handed from one Vivisector to another till Death came to his Release. Also in Memory of the 232 dogs vivisected at the same place during the year 1902. Men and Women of England, how long shall these things be?

This had already drawn a protest from the Council of University College in 1904. Once erected, the statue became the focus of protests from medical students, who also tried to attack the Anti-Vivisection Hospital. What became known as the Brown Dog Riots took place in November and December 1907, and a police guard was mounted on the statue.¹⁸⁷

Draft

When the Conservatives gained control of Battersea Council in 1909, they resolved to remove the memorial. Despite further demonstrations, a petition and a rally, it was taken down in the early hours of 10 March 1910, with a large police presence, and later destroyed.¹⁸⁸ In 1985 a new Brown Dog Memorial was erected in Battersea Park (page xxx).

Other open spaces

St Mary's Cemetery

This cemetery, laid out in 1860–1, occupies an L-shaped plot with frontages to Battersea Rise and Bolingbroke Grove (see ill 5.34). Its burial ground and twin mortuary chapels served the whole parish, with a larger consecrated area for Church of England burials and a smaller area for others.¹⁸⁹ A lodge was built at the north-west corner of the site, and the whole enclosed by walls and gates. With the rise in Battersea's population a second burial ground was established in Morden in 1890, although this one continued to be used up to the 1960s.¹⁹⁰

The Burials Act of 1853 prohibiting interments in churchyards within the metropolis did not insist upon new grounds being provided within the home parish, and in many cases vestries elected to contract with a private necropolis outside London. But in the mid nineteenth century Battersea still possessed a wealth of open spaces, and the then vicar of St Mary's, J. S. Jenkinson, was keen to find a site within the parish.

In 1855 a Battersea Burial Board was appointed, composed of the vicars of St Mary's and St George's and members of the Vestry. Burials had already

Draft

ceased in the churchyard of St Mary's but under the terms of the Burials Act they could continue at St George's until 1858. Jenkinson had consulted Charles Lee, in his role as parish surveyor, about the possibility of acquiring a piece of Wandsworth Common, but when plans emerged for the extension of the West End & Crystal Palace railway across the common, the Board began to look elsewhere.¹⁹¹ A ten-acre site near Christ Church was nearly purchased, but fell through for lack of consensus.

Next, another piece of land on the common close to the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum was nearly acquired, but objections from its directors put paid to that option. The timely sale of the Bolingbroke Grove House estate in 1858 finally solved the question. A number of plots offered at auction had failed to sell, and the Burial Board entered into an agreement to purchase three of these lots totalling a little over eight acres.¹⁹²

Approval was granted by the Secretary of State and the Burial Acts Office by the end of July 1859. Charles Lee drew up plans 'of a simple and inexpensive character' for laying out the ground and for the two chapels, entrance lodge and dead house.¹⁹³ Building costs were estimated at £3,000 and the Board applied to the Vestry to sanction a loan of £8,000 to cover all their expenses. Usually a formality, this proved a major source of conflict, as some vestrymen strongly opposed providing a parish cemetery at all. At a rowdy meeting, sanction for the loan was refused.¹⁹⁴ Members of the anti-burial ground faction now stood for election to the Burial Board. As one-third of its members were supposed to retire annually, it did not take long for the opposition to establish a foothold on the Board. Before they managed to gain the ascendancy the other faction successfully lobbied the Home Secretary to issue a warrant allowing the Board to borrow the money needed to proceed, without the Vestry's sanction. The warrant came through in November 1859 but there were still delays, and the purchase of the ground was not completed until June 1860.

Draft

Building had begun by October 1860. Contracts were awarded for drainage to Alfred Stacey of Mile End, and for the buildings to Adamson & Sons of Putney. The first burials in the unconsecrated portion of the ground may have taken place around this time, before the buildings had been finished. Permission had loosely been given by Dr Grainger, Inspector of Cemeteries, in response to a plea from the minister of the Battersea Chapel, Israel May Soule, who had learned of three recent cases where ‘persons in humble circumstances’ had to bury their dead a considerable distance away.¹⁹⁵

By the end of the year the buildings had been largely completed and a bell for the chapels ordered from Warner & Sons. The appointment of a superintendent was deferred, but John Ambrose became sexton and started living in the lodge from March 1861. That May the Board was ready to apply to the Bishop of Winchester to consecrate the ground. This coincided with the annual election of members to the Burial Board at which the anti-cemetery faction gained supremacy.

Too late to give up on the cemetery, the new board members scrutinized the dealings of the Board and uncovered a number of financial irregularities and falsification of documents by Thomas Reynolds, its solicitor. Reynolds absconded in 1863 owing a considerable sum to the Board. He was later taken into custody, declared bankrupt and committed to debtors’ prison.

The little twin mortuary chapel range remains the chief feature of the cemetery, a building of simple charm and quiet Gothic details. The chapels, one for Anglicans, one for other denominations, are placed on either side of a tall pointed archway above which sits a meagre bellcote. Each chapel is lit by a lancet at one gabled end, a rose window on the other, but these are switched round so that the east and west elevations are asymmetrical (III. 5.38).

Draft

Among those to have been buried here are John Burns (d.1943); Henry Meyer (d.1865) the ornithologist who published *Illustrations of British Birds* in 1835–43; Sir William Anderson Rose (d.1881), MP for Southampton and Lord Mayor of London in 1862–3; William Bishop (d.1961) who established the Wellcome Historical Medical Library and published works on medical history; Kaikhoshru Puntheki, a Parsee lawyer from Bombay, whose gravestone bears a large urn; and Battersea's two long-serving vestry and borough surveyors, J. T. Pilditch (d.1903) and T. W. A. Hayward (d.1937).

The finest of the burial ground's memorials is to the sculptor Horace Montford (d.1918), father of Paul Montford, whose work adorns Battersea Town Hall and other local buildings. It also commemorates Horace's wife and his two other sons. A seated female figure of 'Alma Mater' by Horace Montford himself surmounts a pier carrying on one side a roundel with a bas-relief likeness of Gilbert Oscar Montford (d.1900, aged 15) and Horace Louis Montford (d.1930); the later style and dress of the relief suggest it was executed by Paul Montford (III. 5.39).

Christ Church Gardens, Battersea Park Road

When Christ Church, Battersea Park Road, was built in 1847–9 (pages xxx), it was provided with an ample area of ground, never used for burials. Following the development of poor-quality housing around it, it was decided to use the occasion of some road-widening to turn the westernmost triangle of this ground, between Battersea Park Road and Cabul Road, into public space. In 1884 the Rev. Herbert Sprigg granted a lease of this site to the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association with a view to laying it out as a children's playground. This was soon broadened to be more simply an open space and garden. The ground was enclosed except on the east side next the church; two gateways allowed access and a drinking fountain was provided.¹⁹⁶ The garden

Draft

was formally opened in May 1885, when Lord Brabazon (later Earl of Meath), chairman of the association, emphasised the importance to public health of such gardens. He quoted Octavia Hill's evocative description of them as 'out-door drawing rooms for the poor'.¹⁹⁷

With no endowment to maintain the ground the hope was that Battersea Vestry could be prevailed upon to take over the garden. The Vestry finally did so in 1889.¹⁹⁸ A feature of the garden was a rustic oak shelter, which became popular, particularly with the elderly. This was one of the casualties of the bomb damage which destroyed the church in 1944. After the War, Battersea Council was keen to reinstate the open space and the shelter. As a stop gap, a temporary shelter was put up made up of Anderson shelter parts, but the longer-term aim was to redesign the garden and put up a new structure of dignified design as a memorial to the war dead. Local enthusiasm for the scheme was not dented by the delays in dealing with the War Damage Commission, or in seeking the necessary approval of the Minister of Health. Pressure was brought to bear on the latter by the Chairman of the Council and Douglas Jay, MP, and approval finally given in March 1950. The new shelter, with glazed oak screens and a copper roof, was designed by the Borough Engineer and Surveyor. A public subscription more than paid for a bronze plaque to be placed on it, with incised cream enamel lettering commemorating those who lost their lives in the War. An unveiling ceremony was held in July 1951. The garden retains its simple character and charm, but the memorial plaque was stolen in 2007; a granite memorial has been put in its place.¹⁹⁹

Vicarage Gardens

Situated beside the river, this small open space was laid out as a public recreation ground by Battersea Vestry in 1896. It arose out of a long-meditated

Draft

plan on the Vestry's part to connect Lombard Road with Battersea Village by means of what became Vicarage Crescent, on land purchased from St John's Training College (page xxx). As part of this plan, a strip of the foreshore was reclaimed and a concrete river wall constructed at Battersea Wharf. This was carried out in 1893-4, but although the ground was then thrown open to the public, it was not laid out straight away. The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association contributed to the costs, but the simple design was drawn up in house by the Borough Surveyor, J. T. Pilditch.²⁰⁰

Post-war open spaces

Measures to provide more public open spaces formed a part of the LCC's County of London Development Plan of 1951. New parks were to be created with the co-operation of the borough councils, in areas of slum-clearance and as a component of new housing schemes. With an existing provision of 3.3 acres of open space per thousand people, Battersea was better off than most boroughs,²⁰¹ but it also had 'deficiency areas'. The LCC believed that open spaces were of greatest benefit if they adjoined housing, giving the residents a pleasant outlook.

Five of the seven Battersea sites proposed in the development plan were expansions from pockets of bomb-damage. These included the south end of Tennyson Street on the Park Town estate; Beaufoy Road, south end; Dorothy Road, west side; the site of the destroyed Christ Church, which the LCC hoped could be thrown into the existing Christ Church Gardens; and Vicarage Crescent, south side. All but the Christ Church proposal went ahead, if not in their original form, but many took years to carry through. Following opposition, the Tennyson Street scheme was reduced from almost four acres to the little Montefiore Gardens on the bombed site itself (vol. 50). At Vicarage Crescent, Fred Wells Gardens, less than two acres in extent, was created by

Draft

Wandsworth Council from the former Battersea Greyhound Stadium and the sites of cleared houses and prefabs. An adventure playground was opened in the late 1970s and in the early 1980s the site was made into a landscaped park with a tennis court and children's play area, named after a councillor for Latchmere Ward who died in 1982.²⁰²

Two larger schemes adumbrated in the 1951 Plan merit longer notice. The bigger was the future **Falcon Park**, together with the **Shillington Street Open Space** to its west. These sites, previously occupied by housing in Latchmere Grove, Shillington Street and Stainforth Road, lay at the heart of what was diagnosed as an extensive 'deficiency area'. The eastern half (Falcon Park) was completely enclosed by railway lines. Some of the bomb-damaged housing stock had already been cleared to make way for emergency prefabs. No housing was planned in connection with the park, but sites were reserved for schools along its western edge.²⁰³ As usual it took far longer than expected before the new park became a reality. In 1964 the LCC was still acquiring property. The Falcon Park portion, comprising about five and a half acres, opened in 1966.²⁰⁴ Apart from its seclusion between railway lines, it is almost characterless.

When the two spaces were transferred from the GLC to Wandsworth Council in 1971, plans for laying out the western ground had still to be finalized. Families continued living in temporary accommodation on the Shillington Street space and gypsies were in 'unauthorized occupation'. In 1977 landscaping was scheduled to start and plans had been prepared for a multi-purpose games building, now the George Shearing Centre, to be built in the south-west corner next to Este Road. Northwards, shifting requirements led to three of the seven acres being given over for the Sacred Heart School, postponed in the event until 1988–90 (page xxx).²⁰⁵

Draft

The second open-space project of some size was **Heathbrook Park**, straddling the borders of Battersea and Clapham parishes north of Wandsworth Road and east of St Rule Street, and connected with the Westbury Street housing estate to its south, just outside Battersea. The proposal began life as the Roundell Street area, but was also referred to as the Chalmers Street Open Space. Battersea slum streets destined for clearance here included Chalmers and Motley Streets and Gonsalva Road. The process of compulsory purchase ran slowly but quite smoothly. By 1968 the state of the remaining houses in St Rule Street was so bad that the residents petitioned the Council to buy them out. But objections received led to the exemption of the Shaftesbury pub at the top of that street, as well as the premises of some builders at the top of Gonsalva Road.²⁰⁶

The Westbury Street housing had been built but the park was not yet laid out when the GLC transferred both to local authorities in 1971. The park site fell to Wandsworth Council, which presented plans to apathetic local residents in 1973. The centrepiece of the park was to be a refreshment kiosk, WCs and an aviary. Diamond, Redfern & Partners were appointed architects for a games room towards St Rule Street. Landscaping work took place in the summer of 1974. It includes ornamental trees near the entrances, a large football pitch, and games areas.²⁰⁷

A final large open space connected with housing was due entirely to Wandsworth Council. This is the eight-acre, somewhat featureless **York Gardens**, opened in 1972 adjoining Wandsworth's York Road and Winstanley Estates and stretching between Wye Street and Plough Road. Architects for the scheme were Howes, Jackman & Partners, who designed the few structures.²⁰⁸ The library and pumping station occupying portions of this site are discussed on pages xxx and xxx respectively.