

## Introduction

Battersea, covering some 2,164 acres, makes up about a quarter of the area of the London Borough of Wandsworth. As the easternmost portion of the modern borough, closest to central London, it was the part first thoroughly built up. Its northern boundary is defined by the Thames, but it also runs deeply to the south, cutting through both Clapham and Wandsworth Commons and stretching at its southernmost point to a tip not far north of Balham High Road, three miles from the river. Battersea was an independent parish from around 1100 till 1855, when it lost its main powers of self-government to the Wandsworth District Board of Works. A surge in population ensued, allowing Battersea to recoup those powers in 1888 and gain borough status in 1900. It relinquished its independence once more when London's boroughs were enlarged and regrouped in 1965.

This volume covers Battersea themes and building types other than housing, which is considered in volume 50. Since many topics such as the railways, industry, public buildings and the provision of open space are discussed in the opening pages of the chapters that follow, this introduction is selective. It begins with a history of Battersea up to the 1830s, mainly from the manorial standpoint. There follow a number of themes not otherwise treated in the body of this or the next volume: communication by river and road, including Thames bridges; drainage; agriculture; and politics and administration. Battersea's demography and fluctuating social character are analysed alongside housing in the introduction to volume 50.

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## Battersea to 1835

### *Medieval Battersea*

The name of Battersea, in medieval times *Batricheseie*, *Batrices ege* or variants, probably refers to the gravel 'island' by the Thames on which the church, manor house, and principal arable field lay.<sup>1</sup> Findings from Romano-British or earlier cultures in the parish have been scanty. The most famous object is the so-called Battersea Shield in the British Museum, a major piece of Celtic art variously dated from between the fourth century BC and the Augustan period. But the shield has no certain connection with Battersea or the south side of the river, having been found in the Thames during the 1850s, probably during the construction of Chelsea Bridge.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest records concern the manor. Land in and around Battersea was granted to the nunnery of St Mary, Barking, in 693 by Bishop Eorcenwald of the East Saxons, consisting of 28 hides in *Batrices Ege*, 20 in *Watsingaham*, and 20 on the west bank of the stream called *Hidaburne*.<sup>3</sup> The grant's three parts may reflect the topography of Battersea manor and different areas of settlement. It is unclear how far west and south the land then granted extended, but the mention of *Wandsworth* (*Wendles wrth*) and of land west of the *Hydeburn* (later *Falcon*) brook shows that Battersea and Wandsworth were already interconnected. Later indications suggest that it stretched as far west as the River *Wandle* itself.<sup>4</sup>

By 1066 the manor belonged to Earl Harold Godwinson (King Harold II), and passed into the hands of William I. Soon afterwards William gave it, including the 'berewick' in Wandsworth and woodland in the detached

district of Penge five miles to the south-east, with various liberties and franchises, to Westminster Abbey. The Domesday Book states that this was in part return for a grant of Windsor to the king, but a later fabricated charter, not necessarily to be relied on, suggests it was in acknowledgement of the Abbey's surrender to William of the royal regalia.<sup>5</sup> Westminster Abbey held the manor, apart from a brief break in the twelfth century, until it was dissolved in 1540.

Battersea was one of the five principal manors supporting the monks at the Abbey. Its Thames-side position gave it a convenient connection with the Abbey and London. There may always have been a ford running from Battersea Fields to the gravel river bank at Chelsea, along the line of the later Chelsea ferry and Battersea Bridge, and by the end of the twelfth century there were also important landing places. In 1086 a large part of the manor's value consisted of its seven mills, probably all outside Battersea parish on the Wandle in Wandsworth.<sup>6</sup>

No church is mentioned in Domesday Book, though one may have existed then. The earliest certain indication of one, and therefore of a parish, comes in 1157, when Pope Adrian IV confirmed the church of Battersea, the chapel of Wandsworth and their appurtenances (such as tithes) to Westminster Abbey. Soon afterwards the abbot granted the churches of Battersea and Wandsworth to the infirmarer of Westminster Abbey.<sup>7</sup> Both were probably built to serve the abbey's estate. Eastwards, the parish and manorial boundaries seem generally to have been the same, following the line of the Heathwall sewer. On the western side, where part of the manor lay in Wandsworth parish, and along the south and south-eastern borders, which crossed mainly heath used for common grazing, the logic of the parish boundary is not discernible.

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The cultivated demesne land of the manor in 1312 consisted of 422½ acres, partly in Wandsworth. These included mowable meadow and demesne pasture land, both available for common grazing in the autumn and winter. The manor house, situated next to the church, had a courtyard, a three-acre garden producing fruit and herbage, and a dovehouse.<sup>8</sup> Parts of the house and farm buildings repaired between 1277 and 1303 included the hall and a chamber in the house, a grange, stable, dairy, cow-house, ox-house, pig sty, hay house, the east gate, and a water gate.<sup>9</sup>

The manor was held in demesne by the Abbey throughout its ownership. Though the mills and some pastures were always let, most of the land was worked and managed directly by the monks until the 1440s, making Battersea one of the last three of the Abbey's manors where the demesne was kept in hand. A beadle, reeve or sergeant supervised labour from paid servants and the obligatory works by the customary tenants. Portions leased out included the manor house site and closes in Wassingham and Rydon.<sup>10</sup> The pastures of Hese field and some other fields were also farmed out separately. When Westminster Abbey was dissolved in 1540, the farm of the manor including the rents from tenants' lands was leased out, as also were the two rectories of Wandsworth and Battersea.<sup>11</sup>

**Settlement and districts.** Medieval Battersea included several named districts, in some measure distinguished for taxation and legal purposes.<sup>12</sup> Besides Battersea itself, these included Wassingham and Hese in 1225, to which Bruges (partly in Battersea and partly in Wandsworth) was added in 1268, and Rydon in 1322.

These settlements were determined by the local topography.<sup>a</sup> The main

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<sup>a</sup> Two maps exist indicating suggested areas and locations for districts within

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one, identifiable with Battersea village today, lay south of the parish church near the Thames, with the manor house and out-buildings just east of the church. Beyond these came its large cultivated field. Long known as Battersea Field or Fields, this was laid out on an area of lower river gravels and brick-earth between the Thames and an alluvial area sweeping round in a southerly band along the line of the watercourse later known as the Heathwall sewer, from the eastern extremity of Nine Elms, to join the Hydeburn or Falcon brook which flows from the Wandsworth Common area into the Thames west of the settlement. Though at risk of flooding by high tides, the field was by no means all marshland. It was in cultivation by 693, since it formed the bulk of the 28 hides granted in the charter of that date. Here lay the main arable areas of the medieval parish, most of it cultivated in open strips until the nineteenth century.

Wassingham existed by 693. By the fifteenth century it consisted of closes lying between the Heathwall sewer and the road now known as Battersea Rise; on the west it was bounded by the Falcon brook. In modern terms, its centre lay south of Lavender Hill. In 1225 and 1312 it had ten fair-sized holdings and may have included a farmstead; Wassingham gave its name to at least one family in the parish. Its open fields seem to have been enclosed in the 1390s, when major work was undertaken making ditches and planting hedges, for which cart-loads of thorn were brought from the Abbey's Middlesex manors.<sup>13</sup>

Rydon (meaning rye hill) also lay on the higher ground, south of Wassingham between what are now Clapham and Wandsworth Commons,

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medieval Battersea. The first, of 1925, appears at the end of J. G. Taylor's *Our Lady of Batersey*; the second is an undated copy of an Ordnance Survey map at Wandsworth Heritage Services, overlaid in pen with manorial divisions. Both should be treated with caution.

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extending southwards to Nightingale Lane and the parish boundary.<sup>14</sup> It too gave its name to two or more families of tenants in the manor. There is some confusion about Rydon's history. It may originally have been part of Wassingham, but in 1482 it was described as formerly belonging to the manor of Bridgecourt.

Hese was probably the medieval equivalent of Nine Elms. It lay at the extreme eastern end of Battersea Fields, where land was reclaimed from marsh at the junction of the rivers Thames and Effra. Its name is given as Hyse, one of the bounds of Lambeth, in a copy of a charter of 1062.<sup>15</sup> A grant of 1197 refers to land lying east of the sluice of Hese, and so perhaps not in Battersea parish.<sup>16</sup> Within Battersea manor, however, there were parcels of customary land at Hese in the thirteenth century. As well as owing farming services, the tenants had to maintain the Thames wall at Hese at their own charge.<sup>17</sup> In 1356 these holdings were back in the Abbey's hands, 41 acres of demesne wheat being sown at that date. By 1455 Hese field, with its meadow and pasture, was leased out.<sup>18</sup>

The history of Bruges is more involved. It occupied a patch of river gravels on the western side of Battersea, where the Falcon brook joined the Thames at Battersea Creek, and stretched westwards into Wandsworth parish, perhaps approximately as far as the present Wandsworth Bridge. Bruges developed on a different basis from the farming communities of Hese, Wassingham and Rydon, and in due course gained importance because of the residence of the archbishops of York there. In 1225 at least two of Battersea's free tenants had land at Bruges, and three customary tenants were called 'de bruge', while in 1312 seven free tenants were listed in Bruges.<sup>19</sup>

The first known reference to the name comes in 1199 as Brug, and both Bruge and Bruges were used in the manorial survey of 1225. The name

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probably derives from the Old English 'brycg', meaning bridge, and has been linked to the bridge carrying the road from Battersea to Wandsworth across the mouth of the Hydeburn or Falcon Brook at Battersea Creek.<sup>20</sup> But the word bridge was also used to refer to landing-stages or jetties by the Thames, which would allow access to boats at low water. The earliest records for Bruges include property connected with transporting stone along the Thames, so the name may have originated from this use of the Battersea foreshore for river traffic. Its position made it the closest firm ground by the river in the manor of Battersea to the mills on the Wandle, one of the most valuable such group in the Domesday survey.<sup>21</sup> Wharves on the Thames would be necessary to bring in grain and take out flour, especially for the London market.

Because these wharves were a significant resource, the free tenants of Bruges in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were mostly leading lay officials connected with Westminster Abbey. Two principal estates emerged here. One belonged to William Pentecost, also known as Pentecost of Wandsworth, who in 1200 was confirmed in ownership of a hide in Battersea including a messuage, wharf and eight acres. Pentecost's holding lay just west of Battersea Creek, on or near the site of the later York House.<sup>22</sup> He was also involved in land and legal transactions further afield, and granted a plot by Battersea Creek to the abbey of Waltham, thought to have been used to transship building stone to Waltham.<sup>23</sup> One side adjoined the creek, and another either adjoined the Thames or lay close to it, and the plot lay next to Pentecost's court and garden, which suggests he had a house there, almost certainly on the York House site.<sup>24</sup> Other transactions by Pentecost in Cheam, which had important chalk-pits, and in Reigate, where stone quarries supplying Waltham and Westminster abbeys were located, suggest that his ownership of wharves on the Thames was connected with the trade in building materials, notably Reigate stone, the great building stone of medieval London.<sup>25</sup> His son and heir Geoffrey, active by 1208, confirmed

Pentecost's grant to Waltham Abbey, and had inherited by 1224–5, when he held manorial land in Battersea and Wandsworth parishes.<sup>26</sup>

The other large freeholding in Bruges later had the name Bridgecourt attached to it. It belonged in the late twelfth century to Richard de Dol.<sup>27</sup> He was reeve of the Abbey's manor of Westminster in the 1190s, subsequently steward to the abbots, and also held land at Loseley near Guildford.<sup>28</sup> The property remained in the Dol family until it was purchased in the 1390s by Westminster Abbey, which seems to have been occupying it before that. Here lay probably the garden in Battersea which was being rented by 1387 to store Reigate stone for the nave of the Abbey: and 10,000 tiles were procured in 1393–4 for the 'domo petrarum apud Bryggecourt'.<sup>29</sup> Around then the whole estate was described as including a toft, 144 acres of land, 5 acres of meadow, and 50 acres of pasture.<sup>30</sup>

By the end of the fourteenth century, the freehold in Bruges had been largely or wholly acquired by Westminster Abbey. Yet by the 1460s most if not all of Bridgecourt had come into possession of Lawrence Booth, Bishop of Durham and later Archbishop of York.

**Population and changes in landholdings.** Manorial sources provide a rough idea of the number of households in Battersea before the fourteenth century. Land measurements in the grant of 693 suggest that Battersea manor then had 68 landholding families. In 1086 it had 45 villeins, 16 bordars, and 8 serfs. It is usually assumed that before the mid fourteenth century customary or villein tenants were obliged to live within the manor;<sup>31</sup> their houses would have included a farmstead with outbuildings and curtilage, and possibly also a garden and orchard. Overall, in 1225 Battersea had at least 55 such tenants holding a half-virgate or more and likely to have included a farmstead, in addition to which five free tenants held a hide or a virgate or more, and one

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other held a messuage, which suggests it included a house. Freeholders included Geoffrey Pentecost, whose father had had a court and garden at Bruges, most likely with a house.<sup>32</sup> In 1312 the figures are 57 customary tenants with a half-virgate or more, and 24 free tenants specifically holding a messuage, tenement, or house. These figures can only give an idea of the minimum number of dwellings in the medieval parish: they do not include residents who were not manorial tenants, nor the tenants of the freeholders.

While the number of customary tenants in Battersea remained stable in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, free tenants increased noticeably between 1225 and 1312, particularly those holding small amounts of land and individual houses, which suggests either new building or fragmentation of holdings. Some freehold land transactions in the thirteenth century indicate residences, and many more occur in the fourteenth.<sup>33</sup> This increase may be explained by the acquisition of freeholdings by the Abbey,<sup>34</sup> or by land sales and the division of the freeholdings. But there is no sign that the Abbey had turned customary land into freeholdings in the early fourteenth century, as seems to have happened later that century, when it was letting out a number of free and customary holdings which had fallen in hand, often in smaller parcels.

By the mid fifteenth century there was an active land market and demand for property in Battersea, the old system of customary holdings having disappeared, together with the use of customary labour. Many Londoners bought land, and some built up large estates and had houses in the parish. Battersea was also affected by the desire of noblemen, courtiers, royal officials, and lawyers to have property within reach of Westminster, preferably on the Thames. For example, lands and tenements in Battersea and Bridgecourt were leased to Sir Thomas More and assigned to William Roper, while the farm of Heseffeld and four pastures totalling 35½ acres were leased

to John Leigh of Stockwell.

By about 1550 the tenurial position in Battersea had been greatly consolidated. There were only two principal estates in Battersea, the manorial demesne and the property of the archbishops of York, and only 7 freeholds and 33 copyholds remaining in Battersea manor. Apart from the estate of the archbishops of York, both free and copyhold, in Wandsworth, Battersea and Penge, there was only one freeholding of any substance, a messuage, garden and 2 acres with another 14 acres in the fields. This was held by Richard Holte, who also had another freehold kitchen and garden as well as substantial copyhold interests.

### *From the Dissolution to 1763*

When Westminster Abbey was dissolved in 1540, the manor of Battersea and Wandsworth passed to the Crown and was annexed to the Honour of Hampton Court. It was then under lease to Henry Rydon of Battersea, yeoman, for a money rental plus eight quarters of oats and two quarters of barley. The Rydon or Roydon family, who may have lived in the manor house, provides the link between the pre-Dissolution pattern of landholding and the aristocratic manorial tenure of the next two centuries. The lease was renewed in 1541 to his son Henry Roydon junior. In the year of his death, 1568, his daughter Joan married Thomas Holcroft(e), said to have been a client of the Cecil family and perhaps a son of Sir Thomas Holcroft of Vale Royal, Cheshire. Holcroft, a Battersea churchwarden, died in 1591. Next year his mother-in-law and his widow secured from the Crown a renewal of the manorial lease to run from 1613. Soon afterwards Joan Holcroft married Oliver St John (1559–1630), from a Wiltshire branch of the prolific St John family.<sup>35</sup>

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It is to the 1590s that the rebuilding of Battersea Manor House beside the parish church is most plausibly ascribed, just before or after this marriage. Oliver St John was living in Battersea early in his marriage, but from 1600, when he was knighted, he was much in Ulster. There he held various official posts, took part in the plantation movement, and served as lord deputy of Ireland in 1616–22, becoming Viscount Grandison in 1621. The augmented fortune of this branch of the St Johns probably derived from his Ulster interests.<sup>36</sup> Oliver St John had no issue, but an older brother, Sir John St John, died in 1594 leaving seven dependent children. Some of these nieces and nephews came to help populate the manor house around 1600. The household cannot have been entirely easy; in the earliest personal reference to a Battersea resident, Joan St John, Lady Grandison, has gone down to posterity through a remark of Lucy Hutchinson, the daughter of one such niece, that ‘her cruelties to my mother exceeded the stories of stepmothers’.<sup>37</sup>

Grandison spent some of his last years again at Battersea, and in 1627 secured the manor by sale from the Crown. On his death three years later it passed formally to his great-nephew John St John (b.1615), but for all practical purposes to the latter’s father and Grandison’s nephew and executor, Sir John St John (1585–1648), who was created a baronet in 1611. He promptly commissioned the east window in the parish church, commemorating the St Johns’ ancestry and asserting their newly bought rights over the parish. Most of Sir John St John’s many sons predeceased him (three, including John, the legal owner of the manor, fighting for the Royalists in the Civil War). His heir was Sir John St John (1636–56/7) his grandchild by his oldest son, Oliver. This short-lived 2nd baronet seems to have had little to do with the Battersea property, which next descended to the 1st baronet’s oldest surviving son, Sir Walter St John, 3rd baronet (1622–1708). Around the time of their father’s death Walter and his brother Henry (1628–79) married their cousins Johanna

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and Katherine St John, daughters of yet another and more famous Oliver St John, the leading Parliamentarian and Chief Justice during the Interregnum. Both couples appear to have been at first domiciled in Battersea, but Henry and his wife left for Ireland around 1664.<sup>38</sup>

These family alliances and descents confirm that the seventeenth-century St Johns were divided in matters of politics. It may be added that the vicar of Battersea between 1634 and 1657, Thomas Temple, had Independent leanings, yet was appointed by his cousin the first baronet, whose sons died for the royalist cause. His successor, Simon Patrick, a noted writer and preacher and later Bishop of Ely, was Sir Walter St John's private chaplain for three years before he was appointed to the living at the urging of Lord Chief Justice St John. Patrick describes Sir Walter as 'a religious gentleman', and Lady Johanna as 'very pious'. A latitudinarian, he reverted to Anglican forms of worship at the Restoration and noted that 'my patron and his lady ... had no scruple about conformity, but entirely complied with me in all things; which was an excellent example to the parish, where they were much respected'.<sup>39</sup> Another author and connection by marriage, Lady Mary Rich, lauds the couple as 'eminent for owning and practising religion'. That is borne out by the establishment of almshouses 'near the pound' by Sir Walter around 1675, and by the enduring memorial of Sir Walter St John's School, endowed in 1700 towards the end of its patron's life but perhaps also inaugurated in the 1670s.<sup>40</sup> More pragmatically, there is testimony that Sir Walter looked after Battersea's difficult drainage, or at least the Falcon brook, at his own expense and 'kept it in brave order'.<sup>41</sup>

The character and habits of Sir Walter and Lady Johanna come to life from her surviving letters, which show the couple shifting between Battersea and their Wiltshire estate at Lydiard Tregoze, with Sir Walter generally staying near London during parliamentary sessions so long as he sat as a

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Whig MP. Less can be gleaned about Battersea as a whole during their long lives, but it was in transition from the time of the interregnum. Nine Elms, closest to London, had a brewhouse and a whiting works by the 1640s, while sugar refining and brewing had grown up in the Lombard Road area near Battersea village by the 1670s. Altogether 279 houses are recorded for Battersea in the hearth-tax returns for 1663, of which slightly over half were chargeable, in other words of a good standard.<sup>42</sup> The population may therefore have stood at around 1,000. J. G. Taylor interpreted a registration book for the years 1695 to 1705 as showing that most heads of household were gardeners or agricultural labourers, with watermen the next commonest trade, but his conclusions can be questioned.<sup>43</sup> There was already a definite smattering of 'gentlemen'. Surrey probate inventories of Battersea residents from between 1660 and 1700 include several houses with half a dozen rooms and more, though it cannot always be certain that the house inventorized was in the parish. Richer inhabitants naturally had London connections. Such for instance were Rowland Trapps (1559–1616), citizen and mercer, churchwarden of Battersea, and leading contributor to the parish church's north aisle, who built a house probably in the High Street area;<sup>44</sup> and Sir Nicholas Millett, knight 'of Battersey', who died in 1674 leaving a large house with a tapestried parlour. This may have been in Battersea, but equally could have been in Tower Street where he owned '12 ruff dyamonds'.<sup>45</sup>

With Sir Walter St John's death in 1708 ends all sense of a lord of the manor present and active in Battersea. His eldest son, Sir Henry St John, 4th baronet (1652–1742), from 1716 1st Viscount St John, though even longer-lived than his father, possessed (in Taylor's words) 'an idle and purposeless temperament' and made no impact on the parish.<sup>46</sup> His own oldest surviving son and successor was of a different stamp. This was the celebrated Tory politician Henry St John, from 1712 first Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751). Bolingbroke's mother died after he was born, so his early childhood was

spent with his Battersea grandparents. He seldom visited there during his ascendancy under Queen Anne, probably because he did not get on with his father ('Old Frumps'), though he paid a visit when his grandfather died.<sup>47</sup> Unofficially exiled to France following the Jacobite rising of 1715, he passed briefly through Battersea on his return in 1723, but when not in town lived at Dawley Farm, Uxbridge (1725–35).

After another spell in France, Bolingbroke came back at the age of 64 to claim his inheritance following his father's death. He found the manor house 'an old and decayed habitation',<sup>48</sup> but had it in good enough order to invite the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Marchmont and his close friend Alexander Pope for extended stays from November 1743 till just before the poet's death some months later. Pope reported the newly installed Bolingbroke as 'busy about inclosing a Common, & improving his Estate here, about Battersea & Norwood'.<sup>49</sup> These improvements were not sustained, probably because in time he and his French wife both became ill. On the childless Bolingbroke's death the manor passed to his absentee nephew, Frederick, 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount Bolingbroke and 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount St John (1734–87). That profligate and indebted rake married Lady Diana Spencer in 1757.<sup>50</sup> It was during the decade of their marriage (which ended in a notorious divorce) that he sold the manor of Battersea and Wandsworth in 1763 to her cousin, Viscount Spencer.

There is scant sense of direction about Battersea during most of this period. The manor house was let; Sir Walter St John's School stagnated; York House, the archbishops of York's seat further west was also given up for industry. It cannot be accidental that the Vestry began to stir in this period, setting up a workhouse in 1733 under the new Poor Law Act, and meeting monthly from 1742. But most of Battersea's land was as yet under manorial control. Estate business carried on desultorily. Under the first Viscount St John leases of no more than 31 years were assigned, usually by himself but

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sometimes by his son, Lord Bolingbroke, suggesting that relations between them were not quite broken.<sup>51</sup> After Bolingbroke inherited there was some effort at renewal, as hinted in Pope's letter quoted above. The idea of replacing Battersea ferry with a bridge was resurrected, and two roads had been laid out by 1746 with that purpose seemingly in view.<sup>52</sup> From about 1755 longer terms of up to 61 years were offered by the 2nd Lord Bolingbroke, perhaps because the City merchants now trickling into the upland areas insisted on more security for the houses they were just starting to build. Meanwhile industry began to accumulate along the Thames foreshore, with mills, malthouses and, notably, the short-lived Battersea enamel works at York House (1753–6). But the shaky finances of the St Johns seem to have prevented them from taking advantage of these fresh opportunities, so they decided to sell.

## *Battersea under the Spencers*

The Spencer family are not normally counted among the great London landlords. But in the south-western suburbs their properties were at one time extensive. They owned the park of Wimbledon from 1744 until 1846, and have been continuously the lords of Wimbledon manor ever since. To these they added an estate in Wandsworth in 1758 and then in 1763 the manor of Battersea and Wandsworth, with substantial freeholds in both parishes. Other rights in Wandsworth parish were acquired in 1792 and 1816, when the Spencer properties and influence in suburban south London reached their peak. The Battersea and Wandsworth properties were sold off from 1835, followed by Wimbledon Park in 1846, leaving only manorial and other residual rights. The sole remaining formal connection between the Spencers and Battersea today is Earl Spencer's right to nominate the vicar of St Mary's. Nevertheless for a critical period in Battersea's development, before it took its

modern shape, they were the parish's primary authority.

The family's involvement with south-west London goes back to Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, who bought Wimbledon Park and built a Palladian house there in 1732–3. By her will this estate and much else passed under trust to her favourite grandson, John Spencer, who outlived the duchess only briefly, dying in 1746.<sup>53</sup> His heir was John Spencer (1734–83), 'the wealthiest schoolboy in the land',<sup>54</sup> Viscount Spencer from 1761 and first Earl Spencer from 1765. This eligible young man was able to spend and travel liberally. The grandest fruit of his patronage was Spencer House facing Green Park, built to crown his marriage to Georgiana Poyntz in 1755. Two stipulations in his managing grandmother's will curbed his freedoms. Neither he nor his father was permitted to seek public office under the Crown; and the basic wealth of the old duchess had been left in the hands of trustees, with instructions to invest in land when they thought it opportune. This fortune seems to have been well managed, for even after outlays on property in Battersea and Wandsworth, the trustees could in 1766 advance £32,000 to the first Earl in retrospective payment for Spencer House, to secure it for future generations.<sup>55</sup>

The growth of the family estates around Wimbledon began in 1758, when Spencer acquired from the Duke of Bedford the freehold of much of Dunsford manor, in neighbouring Wandsworth parish.<sup>56</sup> The enlargement and landscaping of Wimbledon Park followed.<sup>57</sup> Then came the purchase of the Bolingbroke estates in Battersea and Wandsworth. Adding these lands, north-east of the Dunsford property, was presented by Lord Spencer to his trustees as a plan to invest £42,000.<sup>58</sup> An agreement was signed in 1761, followed by the formal conveyance in May 1763.<sup>59</sup> The total price seems in fact to have been just over twice that sum: £85,000, calculated as £68,540 for the estates and the rest for the manorial rights, the advowson and other incidentals. £10,000 was paid immediately, with the rest following on in tranches; a

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mortgage of £30,000 back to Lord Bolingbroke formed part of the deal.<sup>60</sup> To reduce the cost, Spencer retained only the core of the St Johns' Battersea lands. Before the purchase had even been formalized, some tracts of ground in the Nine Elms area were alienated.<sup>61</sup> Further sales of 1763–5 disposed of most or all of the St John freeholds between Clapham and Wandsworth Commons.<sup>62</sup> Among the purchasers were early villa-dwellers such as Christopher Baldwin and Isaac Akerman. The break-up of the old landholdings here into smaller estates had a major impact on that district's future development.

The principal in all these arrangements, as in connection with Spencer House, was Thomas Parker, Spencer's lawyer and London manager.<sup>63</sup> Parker's name crops up regularly in the administration of the first Earl Spencer's Battersea and Wandsworth estates. There is no evidence that Spencer took a personal interest in the district. The manor house, already neglected, remained let until it was largely demolished in the 1780s. A hard-nosed attitude manifested itself when the parishioners asked in 1767 for their new lord to pay for repairs to the Falcon brook sewer, as Sir Walter St John always had done, but were peremptorily refused by Parker.<sup>64</sup> The most important development that took place under the first Earl was the making of Battersea Bridge (1771–2), on which more is said below. But he was not present at its inauguration, and the only later contribution he and his son are known to have made to the bridge's affairs was an annual present of venison to the proprietors' dinner.<sup>65</sup> Nor did Spencer take much interest in the rebuilding of the parish church (1775–7), Parker once again representing him in negotiations with the Vestry.

The first Earl Spencer died in 1783. The relationship of his successors, the second and third earls, to their Battersea and Wandsworth holdings was different. Both were front-rank Whig politicians and landowners with many commitments, estates and mansions (notably Althorp in Northamptonshire,

and Wiseton in Nottinghamshire) and a love of rural pursuits. Spencer House was the main family seat in London; Wimbledon was little visited between the destruction of the Duchess of Marlborough's house by fire in 1785 and its replacement (to designs by Henry Holland, the 2nd Earl's regular architect) in 1801.<sup>66</sup> After that the Spencers were more often in south-west London, and there is evidence that the 2nd Earl stopped off occasionally in Battersea, en route between Wimbledon and Green Park.<sup>67</sup> In any case, the growing diversity and value of the Battersea and Wandsworth holdings required closer management. The state of the Thames banks, supposedly repaired and maintained by the Spencers 'at a very heavy Expence' but damaged by those who floated timber along the river, surfaced as an issue in 1792, while in 1796 there was a lawsuit between landlord and tenants about the upkeep of Battersea Bridge Road.<sup>68</sup>

In 1781–2 government commissioners earmarked 80 acres at Battersea Rise as the site for a grand 'National Penitentiary'. The plan did not then materialize, but the threat came back in 1792–4 when Jeremy Bentham lobbied hard to build the penitentiary in the form of a panopticon, causing the growing community of villa-residents to mobilize against the project. In fact the 2nd Earl Spencer never intended to give up this land.<sup>69</sup> He did offer as an alternative a marshy patch in Battersea Fields, but his agent then fobbed Bentham off, informing him that Spencer was 'a willing Buyer but an unwilling Seller, in that and the adjoining Parish'.<sup>70</sup> So much is confirmed by the 2nd Earl's purchase of further manors in Wandsworth parish, Down in 1792 and Allfarthing in 1816.<sup>71</sup> In addition he paid the Archbishop of York over £10,000 in 1814 for the freehold of land in Battersea and Wandsworth which previously had been leased to the Spencers.<sup>72</sup>

Thomas Parker having apparently retired around 1779, Thomas Harrison and his son John were the 2nd Earl's agents for some forty years

from the 1780s. Like Parker, they seem to have served the Spencers well, and knew the South London properties intimately: in 1807 John Harrison noted that he had visited some premises frequently 'and very minutely'.<sup>73</sup> He also tried to redeem what he could from the failure of John Ford, an engineer who had invested thousands on a grand woollen mill and adjacent cottages at York Place, only to fail in 1823–4. His endorsement of Ford's plea for remission of rent in view of his 'great Expenditure and Misfortunes' casts John Harrison and his master in a sympathetic light.<sup>74</sup>

The 2nd Earl's closer oversight of Battersea is suggested by the appointment of his confidant and religious adviser, Joseph Allen, as vicar in 1808. Few of Allen's surviving letters to the Earl focus on the parish, but its affairs, agricultural or spiritual, come up often enough to prove their recipient's interest.<sup>75</sup> Allen's main achievement in Battersea was reforming Sir Walter St John's School, which Spencer, religious in later life, must have approved. He was no ally of his neighbours, the famous Clapham evangelicals, and confided to the Earl his suspicion of the promoters of the new church of St George's, founded to serve Nine Elms.

The 3rd Earl Spencer, or Viscount Althorp as he was styled during the long years before he succeeded his father in 1834, is described by G. M. Trevelyan as 'one of the most attractive and characteristic figures in all our long Parliamentary annals'.<sup>76</sup> An austere widower with a deep sense of honour, he was Earl Grey's main lieutenant in ramming through the Great Reform Bill.<sup>77</sup> In religious affairs he has been claimed as 'to all intents and purposes an evangelical'.<sup>78</sup> On acceding he saw to it that Allen, his old tutor, was promoted to a bishopric, and replaced him in Battersea with an aristocratic Whig of the same ilk as himself, Robert Eden. This he then capped by selling off the family property in Battersea and Wandsworth.

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In retrospect that action looks puzzling and imprudent. The London & Southampton Railway was in the pipeline, the building-up of the district was already prophesied, and land values were bound to rise. But the 3rd Earl was determined to deal with the debt which had accumulated since his grandfather's day and spiralled under his acquisitive, book-collecting father.<sup>79</sup> Already in 1826, during the 2nd Earl's lifetime but perhaps at Althorp's initiative, a rising Whig lawyer, John Shaw Lefevre, had been brought in as an intimate adviser to examine the Spencers' holdings and finances. He assumed special responsibility for the South London properties, living at first in Balham and from 1828 in Battersea at Terrace House (later Old Battersea House).<sup>80</sup>

The upshot was the promotion in 1827–8 of a Battersea and Wandsworth Inclosure Bill, aimed at an obligatory redistribution of the 942 acres of 'common fields' (about half in each parish) in order to make them fully productive and valuable. The prospectus claimed that these fields were:

as much the exclusive property of the owners of the soil as any Inclosed lands can be ... It cannot surely be for a moment contended that by any length of time or constant usage the public have acquired the right to ride and walk over fields of this Nature – over Meadow Grass, Standing Corn, and Asparagus Beds; in short, over land regularly cultivated for private purposes. Yet clear as this point is, there has been, notwithstanding, as much said in favour of the Public on this occasion as if the lands to be enclosed had been a Cricket Ground or a Bowling Green, and exclusively devoted to public amusement.<sup>81</sup>

The bill was opposed on several grounds: objections to giving 'wealth to the wealthy'; a fear that the fields and the commons alike would be covered

with housing; and a petition against it from Clapham parish.<sup>82</sup> Its failure may have determined the 3rd Earl to sell, once he inherited. Shaw Lefevre remained his adviser, and in March 1835 confirmed that policy, though with 'much anxiety' for Spencer's interests.<sup>83</sup> A first auction took place later that year, with sales trickling on until 1838. Shaw Lefevre hoped to raise £160,000, but the Earl's agent Anthony Spedding was less optimistic.<sup>84</sup> Substantial sums also accrued to the Spencers from land sold to the London & Southampton Railway around the same date. But the paucity of records for the 3rd Earl precludes an exact reckoning. Even the Spencer shares in Battersea Bridge were disposed of and the annual present of venison for the proprietors' dinner stopped, Shaw Lefevre informing them that the Earl had sold all his deer to the King.<sup>85</sup> The sale of Wimbledon Park followed on in 1846, after the 3rd Earl's death.<sup>86</sup>

The failure of the 1827 bill and the subsequent 1835–6 sales are seminal in Battersea's history. They led to the creation of Battersea Park, in circumstances described in Chapter 5, and to the building-up of former manorial land in small parcels, without an organizing mind or management. The 4th and 5th Earl Spencers' involvement with Battersea was necessarily narrower. As lords of the manor they presided over decisions on copyhold property and on the fate of Clapham and Wandsworth Commons. Both these great open spaces fell partly in Battersea parish, but only Wandsworth Common was wholly under Spencer control. That it was more radically encroached upon than neighbouring Clapham Common may look due to their laxer management. But the circumstances of the two commons were different. Nor can the values of the 1870s be read back upon the 1840s and '50s, when neither manorial lords nor vestries yet looked on the commons round London as spaces for preservation and public recreation.

The 5th Earl Spencer, as significant a Liberal politician as his uncle the

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3rd Earl, took an equally serious view of his public responsibilities, but still viewed the commons in some measure as his personal property. That was most clearly expressed in relation to Wimbledon Common, which he sought to enclose in 1864, turning a portion into a public park and reserving the rest as building land, to include a large house for himself.<sup>87</sup> But by then such projects were becoming politically impossible: and by the 1870s all three commons had passed out of the Spencers' hands and become lodged in public bodies. That decade saw the effective end of the family's major interests in Battersea, though the earls continued to appoint its vicars; Canon Erskine Clarke, for instance, installed in 1872, was as careful to keep the 5th Earl abreast of his plans as Joseph Allen had been with the 2nd.

## Battersea since 1835: selected themes

### *River, roads and bridges*

The Thames holds the key to Battersea's origins as well as to its industrial development. In time, roads and railways took over, marginalizing the river's importance to the parish's prosperity and communications. This process was gradual. Around 1700 over thirty Battersea residents were watermen, ferrying goods and passengers along the river.<sup>88</sup> Intensive passenger traffic survived into the era of steamboats and mass commuting, while one of Battersea Park's attractions when it opened was its accessibility to boat trippers. As for commerce and industry, water was long safer and quicker than land for all heavy loads. Copious Thames water was also crucial for most manufacturing processes, for extraction, power or cleaning. As late as the 1920s the siting of

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Battersea Power Station depended on all these factors. And when Covent Garden Market relocated to Nine Elms in 1971–4, there were repeated calls for produce to be brought in and out by river as well as by rail and road. That road alone eventually prevailed there symbolized the post-war shift in the logic of commercial transport around London.

Upriver industry in the metropolitan area has not been comprehensively studied, but it has ancient origins, as the mills of Wandsworth attest. The use of the York House site as a point of medieval interchange and storage for Reigate stone en route from land to river has been mentioned. The limited size of craft able to negotiate the great crossings (London Bridge and, after 1750, Westminster Bridge) presented no obstacle to the industrial build-up of the Thames south bank most of the way from Southwark to Wandsworth over the two centuries after 1660. Battersea's part in this bigger picture, and its reliance on the river, are explained in Chapter 8. Though most of its mills and factories depended on importing their raw materials and exporting their produce through the Pool of London, its industrialists appear often to have chosen their upriver location as a strategic one for supplying the West End, while for nearly a century after the railway came to Nine Elms in 1838, increasingly elaborate interchanges developed between rail and river, with yards and plants thronging the parish's northern fringe to expedite the transition.

The development of road communication in Battersea requires more explanation. The site of the original settlement, manor house and church corresponded to the first good ground west of the fertile but flood-prone Battersea Fields, and to the proximity of a safe river crossing to Chelsea opposite. (Why the settlement lay westwards of the main ferry point, which seems always to have occupied the present line of Battersea Bridge, does not appear.) Yet by reason of the marshes to its east, and of the bend in the

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Thames as it turns from Battersea Reach to Chelsea Reach, Battersea village was isolated from natural through-communication by land. Direct routes from London to Wandsworth and hence to Putney or Kingston beyond bypassed it in a pocket to their north. As a result, already by 1751 only half of Battersea's population lived in the village itself, a much lower proportion than in Putney or Wandsworth.<sup>89</sup> Major road traffic avoided the village. In 1825, for instance, Wandsworth was the terminus of ten short-stage coaches from the City, Clapham of 21, but Battersea could boast only one, though some passing stages stopped there.<sup>90</sup>

Roads are hard to date, but three east-west thoroughfares of considerable antiquity pass through Battersea. The earliest definitely attested follows the line of Clapham Common North Side and Battersea Rise. This existed by the end of the fifteenth century, and in the early eighteenth was known as the Canterbury Way or Road, suggesting that it was a regular link via Clapham between Kingston and the main route from London to Canterbury.<sup>91</sup> It was eventually supplanted in importance by the present line of Wandsworth Road, Lavender Hill and St John's Hill, which became part of the Southwark to Kingston turnpike in 1717.<sup>92</sup> Entering Battersea from the east where Lavender Hill begins, that artery held high, dry ground all through the parish except where it dipped down to cross the Hydeburn or Falcon brook at the 'wash way', now the intersection next to Clapham Junction Station. There were no turnpike gates in Battersea parish. The third major east-west route, on lower ground to the north, is represented by the long line of Battersea Park Road and its continuation as York Road. The eastern end of this road, beginning from Nine Elms, was the old land route to Battersea Village. At a certain point it veered north-westwards through Battersea Fields and became Surrey Lane. The making of Battersea Park destroyed this connection, so the road was diverted southwards along the track of a lesser lane and enhanced in the 1850s. It was at first known as the Lower Wandsworth Road, but in

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1871 became Battersea Park Road.

As for major north–south routes, probably the oldest line began with the present Bolingbroke Grove (Five Houses Lane in the eighteenth century), turning east along Battersea Rise, then north along the course of the Falcon brook up the present St John’s Road and Falcon Road. Pubs marked the crossroads along this route: the Falcon at the intersection with the turnpike, and the Prince’s Head where Falcon Road connected with the south end of Battersea High Street and the lower road described above. From the latter, Battersea village could be reached to the north or York Place to the west along what is now York Road.

Many smaller lanes in the low-lying northern portion of Battersea are depicted on Rocque’s 1746 map of the environs of London and the earliest parish map of c.1760. The most prescient are a pair of straight, modern-looking lanes running east and north from the village through St John property and marked ‘Road to the Ferry’. Represented today by the eastern half of Westbridge Road and the northernmost stretch of Battersea Bridge Road, these must relate to the ‘new road leading to the new bridge’ confidently mentioned in an advertisement of 1752. There had been talk of a bridge here, promoted apparently from the Chelsea side, as far back as 1661.<sup>93</sup> But this was evidently a new initiative, perhaps dating from the 1st Lord Bolingbroke’s return to Battersea in 1743. For the moment nothing more occurred. Then came reports in 1760 that his successor was to apply for an Act to build the bridge, and that Robert Mylne, victor in the recent competition for Blackfriars Bridge, would be his surveyor.<sup>94</sup>

Battersea Bridge was destined to be realized not under the indebted Bolingbrokes but at the behest of the new lord of the manor, Earl Spencer, who privately obtained the Act of 1766. For the Spencer family, frequent

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travellers between the West End and Wimbledon, the bridge was a personal convenience. But the arrangements for its creation and management were commercial. Fifteen proprietors shared the costs of this cheap timber toll bridge, just 22ft wide in the clear. The Spencers and their representatives took four shares, City investors and Battersea or Clapham property-owners nine, while the other two went to the builders, Henry Holland senior of Fulham and John Phillips; the designer was the young Henry Holland junior. It cannot be coincidental that in the year the bridge was built, 1771, the Hollands took a tract of Lord Cadogan's land in Chelsea as a speculation.<sup>95</sup> At £15,662 the bridge cost a third more than had been hoped, but its efficient construction pleased the proprietors, and may have started off the younger Holland's lifetime career as the Spencers' architect and adviser.

When Battersea Bridge opened, it was the only such crossing between Westminster and Putney. The proprietors' readiness to invest in the major risks of a Thames bridge must have been based not just on the modest profits of the existing ferry, but on confidence in potential traffic. The first annual tolls indeed came to over £1,000, rising to almost £1,800 at the end of the century;<sup>96</sup> the net profits were less spectacular, because the timber bridge needed heavy maintenance. Horse, chaise and cart traffic brought in less revenue than tolls from foot passengers.

Access to the bridge on the Chelsea side was straightforward, as it debouched into Beaufort Street which led straight to the King's Road. But on the south side existing roads from the ferry were short and connected only with the inconsequential Marsh Lane or with Battersea village, and hence via the High Street and Falcon Lane to the turnpike. Tensions between the bridge proprietors and Battersea Vestry arose because construction traffic for the bridge had damaged this latter route. The proprietors therefore sought to improve Battersea's road system by driving a 50ft route directly southwards

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from the bridge to the turnpike via Latchmere Common. An estimate was made for this in 1772.<sup>97</sup> But lacking powers of compulsory purchase, they managed to prolong the bridge road by only a few hundred yards southwards as far as Surrey Lane, which at least allowed a connection via the lower road to Nine Elms. At that southward point Battersea Bridge Road ended until the 1840s. Before then, however, Pig Hill Lane emerged as a makeshift route between the lower road and Lavender Hill, foreshadowing the making of Latchmere Road along this line in the 1860s, so at last completing the connection between Battersea Bridge and the former turnpike.

Despite this failure to forge a direct route to the turnpike, the proprietors continued to press for better signposting and access to their bridge, especially from the Battersea side. In 1807 they were contemplating estimates for various new roads and repairs, some well south in the parish.<sup>98</sup> And in 1825 they embarked on what became St James's Road (now Drive) across Wandsworth Common, so that traffic could come up from Tooting via Bolingbroke Grove.<sup>99</sup> By then the significance of the Battersea Bridge crossing was waning. Much south-western traffic through to the West End had been drawn away by Vauxhall Bridge, opened in 1816, allowing the proprietors to claim compensation for loss of revenue.

The final pieces of the road framework within which residential Battersea developed fell into place after the railways had begun to distort its topography. Foremost were the river crossings and roads generated by Battersea Park: Chelsea Bridge (opened in 1858) to the park's east, leading to Queen's (later Queenstown) Road; Albert Bridge (opened in 1873) to its west, leading to Albert (later Albert Bridge) Road; and Prince of Wales Road (later Drive) to its south, originally meant to run all the way from Surrey Lane to Nine Elms but curtailed east of the park because of railway developments.

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A river crossing at what is now Chelsea Bridge today seems an inevitable accompaniment to Battersea Park. Yet it was pursued almost lackadaisically. First mooted in 1843, the idea followed from the government's proposal to embank the north side of the Thames from Vauxhall Bridge to Battersea Bridge and build a road along its length, starting from the east with the present Grosvenor Road. Chelsea Bridge Road was conceived as a prolongation of Sloane Street down to this new embankment, so as to create 'a communication in a direct line from Belgrave-square and the adjacent neighbourhood'. What was first announced as the 'Ranelagh Suspension Bridge', a privately funded toll bridge, then took this line onwards into Battersea.<sup>100</sup> The park did not feature in these early discussions, nor was it clear what roads would lead away from it on the south bank. But Charles Lee, a fixture just then in Battersea developments, was the bridge's intended architect, implying active involvement from that side, with Clapham as the probable target. The proposal was taken up officially in 1845 and enshrined in an Act of Parliament next year in parallel with the Act which sanctioned Battersea Park.<sup>101</sup> As a result the Commissioners of Woods and Forests took over the suspension bridge project and assigned it to the engineer Thomas Page, already involved in the embankment improvements.

Although Chelsea Bridge was thus funded officially, it was slow to realize (1851–8) and opened as a toll bridge, despite much petitioning, including a deputation to Lord Palmerston. 'A toll on Chelsea-bridge is virtually the imposition of a payment for entrance to the Battersea-park', argued the protesters.<sup>102</sup> At first the charge was complained of as preventing working people in unhealthy neighbourhoods north of the river from coming to live in the clean air of Battersea, as its vicar, J. S. Jenkinson, put it to Palmerston.<sup>103</sup> Later it became cited as a factor in the slow take-up of workmen's houses locally: 'many people living in Battersea worked in the Middlesex side, who, of course, had to pay every time they crossed the

bridge, and could not have their dinners sent them from home like other working men without the toll being paid'.<sup>104</sup> The tolls on Chelsea Bridge were not abolished till 1879.<sup>105</sup>

Queenstown Road, leading southwards from the bridge, was laid out by the Crown only as far south as Battersea Park Road. Further south it was delayed until the 1860s. Its contorted course shows what damage the railways could do. First planned as a straight line aiming for Cedars Road and Clapham, Queenstown Road ran foul of a bevy of railway bills, and was forced to negotiate three sets of railway bridges and as many twists before resuming its axial directness through the Park Town estate. The effect of the railways on local communication in Battersea is discussed at greater length in Chapter 7.

In the case of the Albert Bridge, the road came first. The Battersea Park Act of 1846 had allowed for a second bridge on the west side of the park. That was enough to ensure the layout of Albert Bridge Road from Battersea Park Road to the river's edge, but the second bridge formed no priority for the park commissioners, and so was postponed for private enterprise to take up. The Act finally granted in 1864 allowed for a connecting road from Culvert Road near the bottom of Albert Bridge Road through to Queenstown Road – never undertaken. It also provided that the new Albert Bridge Company should have the option of buying out the Battersea Bridge proprietors, since the two bridges were close and the wooden crossing was increasingly decrepit and irrelevant – except to the painter's eye.<sup>106</sup> Even so, the company delayed work until 1871, when the Metropolitan Board of Works had embanked this section of the river.<sup>107</sup> It may also have wished to wait until building development had got to the point when it could be sure of a fair return from tolls. In the event Albert Bridge was a toll bridge for less than six years, until the MBW bought out the company and freed all the local bridges. If never heavily used, it is the

prettiest and most popular of London's upriver bridges. It is certainly the most eccentric in structure, the Albert Bridge Company having after long prevarication decided to build R. M. Ordish's semi-suspension, semi-cable-stay design, first published in 1865. Happily it escaped the rebuildings that ushered first Battersea Bridge (1886–90) and then Chelsea Bridge (1934–7) into the era of modern road transport.

Nearly all of Battersea's other roads were constructed for local building development, covered in volume 50. It remains to add a word on the growth of public road transport. Horse-trams were resisted by the Wandsworth Board of Works throughout its domains, but by Acts of 1879 and 1880 the South London Tramways Company obtained authorization for routes first along York Road and the full length of Battersea Park Road to Nine Elms; from Chelsea Bridge to Lavender Hill along Queenstown Road; and along St John's Hill, Lavender Hill and Wandsworth Road, with a connecting line along Falcon Road to the Battersea Park Road line. The earliest of these routes opened in 1881. According to Henry Hansom, one of the local district surveyors, the tramways raised the value of property along Battersea Park Road by as much as forty per cent. They also confirmed the main roads in general and Clapham Junction in particular as shopping venues. Gradually extended and improved, they generated a series of road-widenings and two tram depots, a larger one between the railway lines off Queenstown Road, a smaller one at Clapham Junction. The Queenstown Road route was the scene for an experiment with battery-operated trams in 1885. Regular electrification did not occur until 1906 onwards after the London County Council bought up most of the South London system, beginning with the Battersea Park Road line.<sup>108</sup>

*Agriculture*

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Until the 1850s Battersea was predominantly an agricultural community, with a tenacious tradition of strip-farming. On the parish maps of the 1760s, strip after narrow strip is shown in its northern sector, for most of the way between Nine Elms and Battersea village. Here lay Battersea Field or Fields, part of an ancient common or open-field system which dominated the alluvial lowlands of Battersea and Wandsworth. Such a system could be enduring in districts close to London where the soil was fertile and a good living could be wrung from it.

These areas of strip cultivation were broken up into 'shots', encompassing from half a dozen to over thirty strips. The divisions of Battersea Fields ran mostly north-south and cut the land into holdings of about one acre, sometimes two, but seldom more, tenanted by a multiplicity of cultivators. The Spencers' enclosure prospectus of the 1820s computed the two parishes as having 'not less than 800 long strips of land, not one of which is by the side of another belonging to the same owner ... the number of Titles under which they hold is far more numerous'.<sup>109</sup> After the harvest, each of the shots was opened up for grazing in accordance with traditional Lammas rights, when the divisions between the strips were for all practical purposes ignored.

The common fields stopped at the line of the Heathwall sewer, south of which there was no strip farming at the time of Corris's map of 1787. Even in the northern sector the open-field system had its limits. It was most continuous around what is now Battersea Park Road. But to its south, the enclosed fields of the 250-acre Longhedge Farm occupied the district around the present Queenstown Road from at least the 1640s, while next west lay the smaller Piddo's or Poupart's Farm. Near the Battersea ferry, later Battersea Bridge, was another set of enclosed fields on freehold land of the St Johns.

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The tradition of Battersea strip cultivators growing cash crops for sale in London markets was probably very old. Market gardening on the Dutch model seems to have taken hold in the early seventeenth century, which tallies with the record elsewhere around London. A parish terrier of 1636 refers to 'the new made gardens', producing peas, beans and root crops,<sup>110</sup> while in 1639 Battersea's 'gardeners, husbandmen' and other parishioners asked for legal redress when Sir Thomas Southwell and a Mrs Peel set up posts which obstructed a route used 'for conveyance of dung, &c. from the waterside', suggesting that the boats taking produce to market were returning with urban manure.<sup>111</sup> Much further back, in the 1290s, about thirty boatloads of manure or night-soil had been brought to Battersea manor every year, probably for similar purposes.<sup>112</sup> A bequest of 1682 is recorded for 'six poor women that work in the gardens'. A parish registration book of 1695–1705 suggests that gardeners and labourers were then the commonest trades. But Taylor's deduction that labour-intensive market gardening had by then 'almost entirely ousted general farming' may be an exaggeration for Battersea as a whole.<sup>113</sup>

There were always specialities among what these gardeners grew. A seventeenth-century saying addressed to a fool, 'go to Battersea, to be cut for the simples', refers to the 'simples' or medicinal herbs once grown locally which the London apothecaries came once a year to inspect.<sup>114</sup> This may go back to Hugh Morgan, among the foremost of Elizabethan apothecaries, who lived in Battersea for some years up to his death in 1613 and seems to have had a physic garden there.<sup>115</sup> Richard Steele records picking up melons at Nine Elms on a summer boat-trip of 1712 to Richmond, probably from a specialist grower named Cuff.<sup>116</sup> At least one Battersea nursery specialized in flowers, for some notes on gardening made around 1720 refer to Mr 'Jure' as 'the famousest Man in England for Anemones', and lists species including the

'Battersea-Red' and the 'Ld. Bullingbrook'.<sup>117</sup> The holdings of the Juer family (the normal spelling) were among the parish's biggest and longest-lasting; their name is recorded as early as 1641, and theirs was the only local market garden listed in a trade directory of 1840.<sup>118</sup>

Anemones were among the Battersea specialities noted in the 1720s by the botanist Richard Bradley in his *New Improvements of Planting and Gardening*. Bradley also mentions the Battersea Bean (a dwarf variety of kidney bean) and Battersea Cabbage, and is the first to single out the local asparagus ('the largest I have yet seen').<sup>119</sup> Asparagus became the parish's proverbial crop, renowned for its size. The heads of the 'Battersea bundles' elicited angler-style rivalry and boasting, some allegedly weighing in at 'more than 32 pounds'.<sup>120</sup> Other parishes vied for primacy in cultivating this summer delicacy, which one newspaper of 1794 claimed could earn the right ground £2,000-4,000 per year.<sup>121</sup> But it was the vaunt of a character in Samuel Foote's *The Mayor of Garratt* (1763), that in the 'manufacturing of sparagrass: Battersea, I own, gentlemen, bears, at present, the belle'.<sup>122</sup> Another locally-set comedy, Charles Dibdin's *The Waterman* (1774), features characters called Mr and Mrs Bundle.

Notes by James Theobald, probably of the 1750s, are the first to give details about methods of cultivation in Battersea Fields. 'Much of it has of late years been turned into garden ground', he says, 'which they plough instead of digging; and having plenty of dung, both by water and land, the lands are fruitful beyond most others ... The common field, called Battersea Field, is constantly cropped with peas, beans, wheat &c., and great numbers of Welshwomen, who come annually from that principality, are employed all the summer season by the gardeners, and save sufficient to keep them in their own country, to which they regularly return, during the winter'.<sup>123</sup> Precise data become available from the 1790s, following researches by advocates of

reform in English farming. To Lysons we owe an oft-cited description of the parish's market gardens covering 'above three hundred acres' and divided between about twenty cultivators who rented from 'five or six, to near sixty acres each'. He confirms the employment of seasonal workers, women especially, who travelled on foot from Shropshire and North Wales. 'The soil of the ground occupied by the gardeners is sandy', Lysons continues, 'and requires a great deal of rain'. Besides asparagus, he mentions the fame of the local cabbages.<sup>124</sup> Vegetable seeds also paid 'remarkably well', Clapham gardeners preferring to get their seed from Battersea.<sup>125</sup> Rents paid for land in the Battersea and Wandsworth common fields were the highest in Surrey during the 1790s for this type of tenure, and more than twice the county average.<sup>126</sup>

Mylne's land-use map of 1800 shows the market gardens evenly scattered across the north of the parish, with a cluster around Battersea Bridge and another west and north of where Clapham Junction now stands. They were then already on the wane. By 1811 the area cultivated by market gardens was down to 260 acres or less.<sup>127</sup> Joseph Allen told the 2nd Earl Spencer in 1813 that Battersea gardeners had been severely hit by competition from Essex farmers, 'who for the last two years have so overstocked the London markets with those vegetables, which are commonly cultivated in our Parish, that they have really been unsaleable'.<sup>128</sup> Later 'the noxious vapours of chemical works, smelting furnaces etc.' caused problems for the remaining market gardeners.<sup>129</sup> But the basic reason for their disappearance was the higher value of building land. Eventually even the most successful farmers sold up. An example was Poupart's Farm, a large, well-organized market garden on the site of the present Shaftesbury Estate sold up for development in the 1860s. By the time John Poupart founded the trading firm of that name at Covent Garden Market in 1895, its produce came not from Battersea but from Twickenham and another family farm in Essex.<sup>130</sup>

It would be wrong to focus exclusively on market gardens. Along the river edge, osiers for the London basket trade were a lucrative crop, sufficiently so for one basket-maker with seven and a half acres of ground near Battersea Bridge to lose 300 bundles to theft in 1787.<sup>131</sup> The lavender of Lavender Hill (the name is not recorded before 1774) was grown to flavour honey, perhaps too to protect against disease. There was plenty of animal husbandry and pasture land on higher ground, while along the river from about 1790 quantities of both cattle and hogs were fattened up each autumn in sheds attached to the distilleries, on a mash of grain and distillery waste.<sup>132</sup> Lucerne was also grown for fodder. Crop returns for 1801 show nearly 300 acres in Battersea given over to cereals – 145 acres of wheat, 104 of barley, 39 of oats and 8 of rye. These figures tally with those for Lambeth, but the proportion of barley in Battersea was higher than that in both neighbouring Wandsworth, which devoted 360 acres to cereals, and smaller Clapham, with only 110.<sup>133</sup> They also agree with data of 1773 for John Harman's 30-odd acre estate at Battersea Rise, where fairly equal proportions of wheat and barley are indicated, plus some ground for potatoes.<sup>134</sup>

Cereals were grown in the alluvial Battersea fields as well as on high ground. But the traditional strips, cultivated by smallholders, impeded large-scale arable and dairy farming of the kind practised at Longhedge Farm. Growing up south of Longhedge in the 1820s, Sir George Grove the musician remembered the landscape northwards as 'almost entirely unoccupied ... It was entirely open space, a good deal of it given up to corn and the rest to grazing fields, which were inhabited by an enormous herd of cows. We always believed there were a thousand'.<sup>135</sup>

It was mainly in the interests of grain cultivation that the advocates of enclosure sought an end to the traditional tenure of the fields. The strips were

ploughed in one uniform way and sown with one uniform round of grain, one source recorded, without fallowing. The light soil was then heavily manured, which promoted good yields, but the earth was 'invariably foul' and prone to couch grass and other weeds.<sup>136</sup> After the Spencers' enclosure bill failed, John Shaw Lefevre's view of Battersea agriculture's future was bleak: 'I cannot perceive that there is any great possibility of any material increase in the cultivation of corn at Battersea. On the contrary the course of events rather tends to the ultimate extinction of these crops so near the metropolis – and if market garden cultivation should cease to be profitable I apprehend that the land will be converted to grass'.<sup>137</sup> Nevertheless after the sales of the 1830s there was still cereal cultivation in the 'fields'. As late as 1853, when Battersea Park was getting into shape, wheat and rye were still growing to its east on the path of the impending railway line into Victoria <sup>138</sup>

## *Drainage*

Like much of riparian south London, the lower parts of Battersea lay well below the level of high tide on the Thames before development. Varying estimates for Battersea Fields give the drop as between four to six feet or seven to ten feet.<sup>139</sup> In winter they were frequently flooded or mud-ridden for months at a time. Thomas Carlyle, who took occasional constitutional from his Chelsea home in this direction, reported in February 1843 that he was 'going over the river, to crawl about on the Lethe Flats of Battersea'.<sup>140</sup>

Before the river was embanked, reed beds and inlets absorbed much of the water, while the maintenance of such river defences as existed was a costly part of proprietors' obligations.<sup>141</sup> Two main watercourses through Battersea had also to be maintained: the Heathwall, which demarcated the low-lying lands from the higher ground of Lavender Hill and beyond; and the

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Falcon brook, which flowed northwards from Balham via Nightingale Lane along the dip where Northcote Road now runs and hence into Falcon Lane before veering westwards to Battersea Creek, this final portion being known as the York Place Sewer.<sup>142</sup> If these were not kept clear, the low-lying lands once again became waterlogged. In 1766–7, for instance, following failures of repair along Falcon Lane, blockages and breaches in the bank shielding the roadway from the watercourse had to be made good, and after consulting the Surrey and Kent Sewers Commission the Vestry's delegates ordered that the brook's course between the Falcon Inn and the Thames should be 'effectually made, Scower'd Clensd and open'd'.<sup>143</sup> As elsewhere along the south bank, these watercourses discharged into the river at a low level, and were protected by sluices, which acted as reservoirs during high tides and were opened wide during storms.

Until 1810 the Surrey and Kent Commission had been mainly concerned with sewerage along the river, but it now became drawn into the general drainage of South London, despite opposition from Battersea Vestry.<sup>144</sup> Between 1805 and 1846 Joseph Gwilt was the long-serving surveyor for its western division. Battersea featured less than fast-growing Lambeth and Brixton among his tasks. But Gwilt was proud of a new sluice he created at the Heathwall mouth in 1821, which he later claimed solved the worst of its flooding problems and opened up Battersea Fields for development: 'since its drainage a church [St George's] and many other buildings have been erected on it, which theretofore could not have been prudently done'.<sup>145</sup>

As Battersea built up, the drainage issue assumed larger dimensions. It was dawning by the 1840s that housing on low-lying land without full sewerage soon became unfit for habitation. This was among the reasons for making Battersea Park, which excluded the most sunken land from development, raised it by several feet and protected it with an embankment

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wall. Neither the Surrey and Kent Commission nor its short-lived successor, the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers, had powers enough to tackle the accumulating problems. The latter's surveyor reported in 1849 that there were many Battersea streets 'without any drainage whatever, that in wet weather the surface was swimming with filth, that the back yards of the Houses were mostly overflowing with soil from the Cesspools and Pigsties, that the Wells that supply the Inhabitants with Water were impure, owing to the foul fluids which filtered through the ground'. Three years later nothing had been done.<sup>146</sup> Part of the difficulty was ownership. For instance Battersea Creek and its sluice gates, into which the Falcon brook debouched, were both in private hands.<sup>147</sup>

London-wide drainage and sewerage were the crucial issues leading to the creation of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855. Instead of sewer commissions, south-western parishes now came under not one but two boards of works. The Metropolitan Board was charged with creating a unified system for draining London, while the supra-parochial Wandsworth Board looked after minor sewers, house connections and other day-to-day infrastructural tasks during Battersea's peak years of development. The interconnecting Heathwall and Falcon brook sewers, by now heavily overburdened but still partly open and unfenced, fell to the Metropolitan Board. In its early years it bore a chorus of complaint about their noxious state, including a run of articles in the *Building News* which claimed that the Heathwall was 'in a worse condition than any other sewer in or around the metropolis'.<sup>148</sup> The MBW responded that little could be done until its system of intercepting sewers was in place, when the local ones too would be rebuilt.<sup>149</sup> As late as 1865 Jeanie Senior (writing under her husband's name) fulminated to *The Times* about the filth of the Falcon sewer, 'black as ink and as thick as gruel'.<sup>150</sup>

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The Battersea portion of the MBW's Southern Low Level Sewer, along the line of Nine Elms Lane, Battersea Park Road and York Road, as designed chiefly by its engineer, Joseph Bazalgette, was built in 1864–5 (William Webster, contractor). Hard on its heels in 1865–6 came the covering-in and partial rebuilding of the Heathwall and Falcon brook sewers (started by W. Moxon, contractor, succeeded by Thomas Pearson for the former, and by J. W. Hiscox with James & Samuel Williams for the latter). The suppression of a third watercourse, the Lord Spencer open sewer near Battersea Park, followed. <sup>151</sup>

These works made it possible to cover the remaining ground of lower Battersea with housing. They were not completely effective. Many new houses had already been built with basements which were too deep and therefore seldom free of water; on the Park Town estate, for instance, complaints about flooding persisted. Continuing difficulties with storm water were tackled by adding the Falconbrook Pumping Station at Battersea Creek (1878–9), and the Heathwall Pumping Station (1897–8); both have since been rebuilt, the Falconbrook station twice. On the whole later Victorian houses in north Battersea are without basements. Yet dampness remained endemic. It was the fault invariably diagnosed when swathes of small Battersea houses were sentenced to destruction in the mid twentieth century.

## *Government and politics*

The modern political history of Battersea commenced in March 1888, when its Vestry regained the independence it had enjoyed since regular meetings began in 1742 but lost in 1856. Between those dates the parish had been governed by what in theory was an 'open' Vestry, which all ratepayers were eligible to attend. In practice the attendance was seldom over thirty and

sometimes less than ten. As many vestry meetings took place on weekday mornings, they tended to be 'select gatherings of those whose financial or occupational standing was such as to allow them to attend meetings frequently'.<sup>152</sup>

With Battersea nearing 12,000 in population such an administration was no longer tenable. Under the Metropolis Management Act of 1855 the parish was relegated to 'Schedule B' status and corralled into the Wandsworth Board of Works for the purposes of improving its infrastructure, along with Clapham, Putney, Streatham, Tooting and Wandsworth.<sup>153</sup> But as London continued to push outwards, Battersea's population shot up at a faster rate than the further-flung parishes of the Wandsworth Board, reaching 107,000 in 1881. Despite proportional increases in its representation from 12 out of 57 to 36 out of 81, it came to be a cuckoo in the Board's nest, with its own problems and priorities. After local agitation, the Metropolis Management (Battersea and Westminster) Act of 1887 allowed it to escape the Wandsworth Board and even, cuckoo-like, to oust it from its headquarters in Battersea Rise, which became the first seat of a reinvigorated Battersea Vestry.<sup>154</sup>

If amateurish by later standards of local government, the Wandsworth Board of Works had not done badly by Battersea. Aided by a conscientious surveyor, J. T. Pilditch (who transferred across to Battersea in 1888), it bore the brunt of regulating the infrastructural works forced upon it by the press of development. But it had not addressed the calls that began to be heard from the 1880s for welfare provision – for baths, cemeteries, dispensaries, laundries, libraries and mortuaries, and for purpose-built premises to house the machinery of administration.

Some services, like police and fire stations, lay outside the remit of

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either the Vestry or the local Board of Works, while over poor relief the Vestry had only indirect control, through representation on the board of guardians. It had already been pressing for expanded municipal activity before its reincorporation. Both the Latchmere Baths and the Lavender Hill Library were already in the pipeline. But they had progressed slowly, and most municipal building activities, notably the symbolic Battersea Town Hall on Lavender Hill, could be realized only after 1888.

Battersea became 'progressive', in the sense of opting for better municipal services rather than low rates, before most London vestries, and certainly before a majority of explicitly Progressive councillors took control of the Vestry in 1894. Several reasons may be suggested: the fresh start of 1888; the newness and rootlessness of much of the parish; the emergence of an artisan class, keen to better itself and increasingly unionized, notably the railway workers; and below them, many casual workers and their families, prone to unemployment and deprivation. Two men played critical roles in Battersea's embryonic transformation from an insignificant vestry to a standard-bearer for Progressivism. One was John Buckmaster, who had spearheaded the local agitation against building on Wandsworth Common and encouraged radicals to stand for the Vestry since the 1850s. The other was Andrew Cameron, an Aberdeen-born local businessman, who harnessed the incipient radicalism of the revived Vestry to practical ends, only to fall ill and die in 1894, aged 51.<sup>155</sup>

The reincorporated Vestry also came into being at a time of change in London politics. A year later the Metropolitan Board of Works gave way to the London County Council. The radicalism of the reformed Battersea Vestry and its successor after 1900, Battersea Borough Council, was symbiotic with that of the LCC up to 1907. The two were linked by the personality of John Burns (1858–1943), Battersea's representative on the LCC from 1889 to 1907,

its MP from 1892 to 1918, and one of the outstanding politicians and activists of his day.

In many eyes, not least his own, Burns was synonymous with Battersea – a view summed up by a *Punch* cartoon of him bestriding a map of the place. Yet his relation to his adopted parish (he was born just over the border in Lambeth) was often oblique. His father, Scottish-born as was his mother, worked as an engine driver; from about 1867 the family lived at various addresses in the lowly new streets north of Clapham Junction, his father's base.<sup>156</sup> Burns attended Christ Church National School, and was a choirboy at Christ Church itself.<sup>157</sup> From his early years he was a self-educator and wide reader, acquiring in the process a passion for his native London. But the large family must have needed extra income: hence the lad's episodic work as a potboy at a local pub and, in 1870, at Price's Candleworks.

These were the only jobs Burns ever held in Battersea. By 1874 his family was back on the Lambeth side of Wandsworth Road, and Burns had begun an apprenticeship with a Millbank engineer.<sup>158</sup> He may not have been a Battersea resident again until after his marriage (at St Philip's, Queenstown Road) in 1882; he then lived in the borough for the rest of his life.<sup>b</sup> Until his election to the LCC he held various jobs in construction and engineering, latterly as an assembler of machines.

Burns was probably introduced to radical politics by Victor Delahaye, a refugee from the Paris Commune. He had his first brush with the police when addressing a meeting on Clapham Common in 1878. With his forceful voice and instinct for rhetoric he came to the fore through outdoor speaking,

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<sup>b</sup> He lived successively at 56 Wickersley Road (c.1885–90), 108 Lavender Hill (c.1890–1906), 37 Lavender Gardens (1906–14), and from 1914 until shortly before his death in 1943 at Alverstoke, 110 Clapham Common North Side.

important to the agitations of the 1880s. His diary for 1888 shows him moving on Sundays from morning meetings at the gates of Battersea Park to afternoon ones on Clapham Common. It also reveals that Burns had a wider culture than he is usually credited with: that year he read Shelley, *Adam Bede* and *Robert Elsmere*, visited the Royal Academy exhibition where he was critical of the latest Burne-Joneses, saw *Tosca*, relished the beauty of William Morris's Kelmscott House, and admired the 'sturdy common sense' of a speech by Oscar Wilde.<sup>159</sup>

Burns was involved with Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation from 1884. A Battersea branch was formed soon afterwards; Tom Mann, another prominent activist and briefly a Battersea resident, was also an early member. It met in Sydney Hall, York Road, described by Stephen Sanders, Burns's youthful right-hand man, as a shabby upper chamber 'situated above a waxwork show of an inferior kind not uncommon in those days, and flanked by a yard in which gipsy caravans found temporary sojourn'.<sup>160</sup> Sydney Hall was also the venue of the first socialist Sunday school. Another meeting place convenient for the industrial workers of north Battersea was the Prince's Head at the corner of York and Falcon Roads.

In 1887 Burns led a crowd of socialists and unemployed to St Mary's, Battersea, engaging in a respectful stand-off with the vicar, Erskine Clarke, who preached from the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>161</sup> This episode took place between the two famous Trafalgar Square demonstrations of February 1886 and November 1887. Burns's prominence on these occasions gave him metropolitan and national standing. The six weeks he served in prison following the November clashes ('Bloody Sunday') made him the best-known of the working men to secure a seat on the LCC in 1889. Already active in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, he enhanced his reputation in the successful Dock Strike later that year.

By then Burns was moving away from Hyndman and the SDF, and aligning himself with the Progressive or 'Lib-Lab' current in London politics, a tradition which took root in Battersea.<sup>162</sup> During his earlier years on the LCC he watched vigilantly over its works connected with Battersea. But as he was never a vestryman or councillor, his role in promoting local policies was indirect. His power-base was the Battersea Labour League, created to provide Burns with support and income during his early years on the LCC and in Parliament. He is said to have commanded special loyalty on the Shaftesbury Estate, whose artisans responded to his combative charisma and his vision of a disciplined teetotal working class.<sup>163</sup> He spoke often at local public meetings, and was wheeled out to defend Battersea after *The Times* in 1902 devoted one of several hostile articles on municipal socialism to the borough's record. Once he became a cabinet minister in the Liberal Government of 1906, he was widely construed as having deserted Battersea as well as his working-class roots. His most intimate biographer, William Kent, judged: 'I think Burns treated Battersea badly. It lavished upon him an affection he did not deserve. He owed it a debt that was never repaid...in the long run, Battersea did much more for Burns than Burns for Battersea'.<sup>164</sup>

In the first years of the reformed Vestry, the 'little band of red flaggers who used to plot at Sydney Hall' badgered members with 'letters and deputations on every conceivable subject and on every possible occasion'.<sup>165</sup> Electors were still restricted to high-rated male leaseholders or freeholders. The SDF's adherents tried to influence the choice of vestrymen and hence policy by packing the yearly public meetings at which one-third of the members were chosen, and shouting out their views of candidates, so qualifying as 'the most lively participants in the ceremony of appointing our aediles'.<sup>166</sup> An Act of 1894 abolished this ritual. It coincided with the break between Burns' supporters and the SDF, and with the formation of the

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Battersea Trades and Labour Council, an alliance of radical interest groups. In the Vestry election of that year 80 Progressive candidates were returned, giving them a majority on the Vestry and Council maintained until 1909, when the secession of a separate Battersea Labour Party let the Tories in for three years. In 1912 the Lib-Lab coalition was renewed, retaining power till 1919, when Labour took long-term control of the Council.<sup>167</sup>

Even before the Progressive victory of 1894, the Vestry was pursuing advanced policies on labour and unemployment, running a labour exchange and obliging its surveyor to reserve certain winter jobs for men likely to be unemployed at that season.<sup>168</sup> But the heyday of municipal socialism in Battersea was 1895–1902. In these years the Vestry (later Council) transformed its maintenance staff into a fully fledged Works Department, to which major building contracts were awarded; won powers allowing it to generate and distribute electricity from a station in Lombard Road; and planned two cottage estates of its own council housing, the sizeable Latchmere Estate and a smaller group behind the town hall. These activities followed lines laid down by the Progressive LCC, where Burns had been the spiritual father of its Works Department. But politically Battersea Council was bolder than the LCC, taking a public stand against the Boer War and even naming one of its streets on the Latchmere Estate after General Piet Joubert. Its direct-labour tradition also lasted far longer.

From about 1902 the political temperature dropped. Some disillusion set in, symptomized by *The Times*' invective against the extravagance and featherbedding of the Works Department. Sanders condemned the 'serious moral temptations' into which he felt a materialistic interpretation of socialism had led some of the local working classes, and went over to an 'ethical' politics.<sup>169</sup> But apart from the interlude of 1909–12 the Progressive alliance held, if sometimes shakily. It was in these years that John Archer,

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famous as Britain's first black mayor when he took office in 1913, rose to prominence.

After the First World War, Battersea's political groupings changed. With the full employment of wartime, Labour came into its own on the borough council and the Progressive alliance dissolved.<sup>170</sup> Parliamentary elections and candidates now drew more interest than local ones. Burns resigned as MP in 1918, having lapsed into wartime torpor. His constituency had never encompassed the whole of the parish or borough of Battersea, as the district south of Battersea Rise and much territory east of Queenstown Road fell within the Clapham parliamentary seat. Under a redistribution his old seat became Battersea North, and the southern area Battersea South. The former generally returned socialists, and the latter Conservatives, mirroring the borough's divided communities. Battersea South fell to Viscount Curzon (not the famous viceroy of India, but the racing-driver heir to the 4th Earl Howe).

In Battersea North the Catholic and feminist Charlotte Despard, who had devoted years to the poor of Nine Elms, stood in 1919 unsuccessfully as a Labour candidate on a pacifist ticket. In 1922 she passed the progressive torch to Shapurji Saklatvala, a wealthy Parsee who had settled in Britain before the war. Saklatvala joined the British Communist Party, formed in that year. As Communist candidates were initially accepted by the Labour Party, he was not opposed on the Left and narrowly won Battersea North that November. In succeeding elections Saklatvala first lost the seat and then regained it, holding it till 1929. Both campaigns were beset by claims of communist influence and, allegedly, gangsterism. In 1923 the *Daily Telegraph* claimed that Battersea was 'one of the nerve centres of the Communist Movement', and strengthened the charge next year: 'Battersea is known as the Mecca of Communism'. Preposterous though that was, Saklatvala certainly inflamed

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sentiments by his high-flown rhetoric and his whetting of 'rowdyism' among the unemployed. The Communists had some direct support in the railway yards but their membership was miniscule. His electoral success was largely due to the endurance of Battersea's old progressive alliance in a new form. When that collapsed in 1929, his vote plunged, the successful official Labour candidate being the Battersea veteran Stephen Sanders, who held the seat until 1931 and again from 1935 to 1940.<sup>171</sup>

Post-war Battersea's dominant MP was Douglas Jay, who occupied the northern seat from 1946 to 1983. Unlike his predecessors, Jay was an outsider and a middle-class intellectual. He described the Battersea Labour Party as blessedly free from extremists, cranks and theorists. As the area changed during Jay's tenure, the railwaymen and factory workers who had been the main party activists gave way to university graduates.<sup>172</sup>

Local politics in these years were bound up with housing and reconstruction, an account of which appears in the introduction to volume 50. Suffice it to say here that the area remained solidly Labour so long as industry and its workforce continued to populate the north. Under the intimidating Sydney Sporle in particular, Battersea pursued one of the most relentless rebuilding policies of any London borough. The break-up of the 1900 system in favour of larger boroughs from 1965 disappointed many locals, accompanied as it was by the transfer of the name and seat of power from Battersea to Wandsworth. But the first Wandsworth Council was dominated by Battersea councillors, personnel and policies. Though the Conservatives won the new borough in 1968, this looked like a flash in the pan, as Labour returned to local power for 1971–8.

In 1978 the Conservatives won back the council and have never lost it since. Wandsworth became a model Thatcherite local authority, cutting taxes,

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reducing council services to what it viewed as an efficient minimum, hiving off housing, closing schools and selling sites, often controversially. As these policies persisted, a more affluent class trickled into Battersea, while its working classes, industry and sense of independent identity all fell away. The sequence speeded up from the 1980s. Labour now lost ground in most elections, as mordantly observed from the perspective of the Queenstown Ward Labour Party in John O'Farrell's *Things Can Only Get Better* (1998). For most of this time Battersea itself remained solidly Labour. It returned a Labour MP for both the north and the south constituencies from 1964 until 1983, when the seats were amalgamated. Labour's hold on the combined Battersea seat continued until 2010, when the narrow defeat of Martin Linton seemed to suggest the end of the area's long socialist traditions and pride.

## Reading and other sources

The earliest historical accounts of Battersea appear in broader works like Daniel Lysons' *Environs of London* (volume 1, 1792) and the histories of Surrey by Owen Manning and William Bray (volume 3, 1814) and E. W. Brayley ([volume x, 184x](#)). The first figure to devote exclusive attention to the parish was Henry S. Simmonds (1829–92), a layworker for the London City Mission, who lived with a large family in modest circumstances at Palmerston Terrace off Battersea Park Road. His *All About Battersea* (rare first edition, 1879, enlarged in 1882) is packed with information of all kinds. Though strong on religion, Simmonds is broad enough to include lively sections on geology, industry and the railways, as well as on Battersea's remoter past. The next book entirely on the parish, Sherwood Ramsey's *Historic Battersea* (1913) is of lesser account.

Self-conscious scholarship arrives with J. G. Taylor's *Our Lady of Batersey* (1925). The headmaster of Sir Walter St John's School, as his father had been, Taylor ferretted out the history of the parish church and of the St John dynasty in painstaking detail, but was less interested in modern Battersea. The result is an unwieldy but rich and fully referenced book of over 400 pages, much relied on by all later authors on Battersea and for these volumes. Taylor handed on his high academic standards to Frank Smallwood, also a teacher at Sir Walter St John's, who became the school's meticulous historian. Smallwood also cleared up the myths which gathered around Old Battersea House in the wake of the romanticism of A. M. W. Stirling, long-time tenant of the house and author of *The Merry Wives of Battersea* (1956) and other amiably belle-lettrist books.

Battersea has received generous attention since urban history emerged as a field of endeavour in the 1970s. Early products of this movement include Janet Roebuck's *Urban Development in 19th-Century London, 1838–1888* (1979), covering Lambeth and Wandsworth as well as Battersea, and Priscilla Metcalf's pioneering estate monograph, *The Park Town Estate and the Battersea Tangle* (1978). Around the same time the publications of local history societies became plentiful and professional. The old-established series of occasional papers by the Clapham Antiquarian Society, eventually merged into the Clapham Society, often took in Battersea topics. In 1977 the society published *The Buildings of Clapham* (revised edition, 2000), whose last two chapters cover portions of Battersea street by street. A more discursive account of southern Battersea's development now appears in Timothy Walker's book *Twixt the Commons* (2010).

The Clapham Antiquarians' counterpart for Wandsworth, the Wandsworth Historical Society, has been publishing papers on Battersea

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regularly in the *Wandsworth Historian*, inaugurated in 1971. Among the main contributors has been the late Patrick Loobey, who also co-ordinated *Battersea Past* (2002), an exemplary short history, and other publications making use of his personal photograph collection. Another has been Keith Bailey, who was the founder-editor of the *Wandsworth Historian* and has produced a stream of articles ever since. Many explore Battersea's fragmented Victorian estate development and the careers of the speculators and builders involved. Much of this information is drawn together in his doctoral thesis, 'The Metamorphosis of Battersea 1800–1914' (Open University, 1995). Bailey's most recent work at the time of writing is *Aspects of Battersea History 1770–1910* (2010). There have also been excellent publications about the political life of Battersea in the era of John Burns and William Archer, with Sean Creighton as their most prolific author. These flourishing networks of local-history writing have been an invaluable support to the present volumes.

Also worth singling out are some exceptional memoirs of Battersea lives, obscure or almost so. Specially informative are those, in near-chronological order, by John Buckmaster (writing pseudonymously as John Buckley), William Evill, Arthur Newton, the poet and essayist Richard Church, Edward Ezard, James Guttridge, Harry Wicks, Michael de Larrabeiti and John Walsh. On the other hand Battersea has not been richly blessed by its showing in art or literature. A famous series of paintings convey the silhouette of its industrial foreshore from Chelsea through the impressionistic palette of Whistler and his disciples, the Greaves brothers, but these are views from an indefinite distance. Among novels, Joseph Hocking's *All Men Are Liars* (1895) features two chapters luridly contrasting the dissipation of Battersea's streets and pubs on a Saturday night with the ensuing Sunday's religious gloom; while Philip Gibbs's *Intellectual Mansions* (1910) portrays life in the flats around Battersea Park at a time when a few authors and artists including G. K. Chesterton toyed with living south of the river. *Up the Junction*

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by Nell Dunn, first issued in 1963, about a posh girl who crosses the river to find a more honest life among the working classes of Battersea, is better known for the television version directed by Ken Loach (1965) and the feature film of 1968. Many other films have scenes set in Battersea, but *The Lavender Hill Mob* is not among them.