

West of Plough Lane

North-west Battersea is not well favoured environmentally, and the area covered in this chapter is no exception (Ill. 9.1). Its public face is represented by two main roads. The portion of York Road in question, east of Wandsworth Bridge, is traffic-congested and fronted by buildings without immediate appeal, though some reward a second glance. Plough Road is emptier but anodyne, lacking positive character because the post-war housing estates on both its sides turn their backs upon it. These are the north and east boundaries respectively of the district discussed below. The railway line from Clapham Junction to Richmond and beyond sets the southern limit, while on its western side runs the old parish boundary with Wandsworth.

The interior of this 28-acre area has been as thoroughly reconstructed as its main road frontages, leaving as the only pre-1920s buildings today just three shops facing Plough Road. What architectural interest it can boast belongs to its twentieth-century housing estates. Though not large, they are varied, and three are worth special remark. At the north-east corner is Battersea Borough Council's Holgate Avenue development (1924–37), whose originality would appear to advantage if it were sympathetically restored. In the centre lies the London County Council's Wilberforce Estate, a rare municipal housing scheme by Sir John Burnet, Tait & Partners (1946–8), with interesting detailing and a former connection with the Joseph Tritton School by the same firm, now alas demolished. The small Maysoule Road development by Phippen, Randall & Parkes for Wandsworth Council (1976–9), on the south side next to the railway, demonstrates the quiet intelligence and decency which were sometimes attained shortly before the public housing programmes came to a halt.

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The first generation of buildings in this area, mostly dating from between 1840 and 1880, was demolished for reasons common all over northern Battersea, as summarized at the opening of the previous chapter (page ##). Holgate Avenue, started in the 1920s, was Battersea's first successful slum-clearance scheme. By the time that Maysoule Road was completed over fifty years later, there was little left to clear, and the Victorian houses and streets thus obliterated were starting to be not just regretted but prized.

From 1700 to 1880

Plough Road began as York Place Lane, a right of way leading in a straight line southwards from the 'lower road' to Wandsworth (York Road) opposite York Place, before splitting in two north of the turnpike road (St John's Hill) and encompassing the little agglomeration of St John's Place between its branches. Its older title is recorded in 1724, but around 1800 it took the name Plough Lane from the pub at its south end, overlooking Wandsworth Common (page ##). The northern half of this lane was little populated till well into the nineteenth century, and hedged along both sides. Where it met York Road at the top, opposite York Place and the suggestively named Pickpocket Gate, stood the Nag's Head, a cottage-style pub with tall chimneys and a high roof. A lease of 1799 lists its rooms, among which a 'Welch Parlour' boasted pride of place, with two wainscot oval tables and 13 chairs.¹

At that date the half mile westwards from Plough Lane to Battersea's boundary with Wandsworth was solidly freehold land of the lord of the manor. The Corris map (1787) shows only four fields between York Road and St John's Hill, the biggest two let to members of the Carter and Mouseley market-gardening dynasties. All that changed after the Spencer sales of 1835–6, following which the advent of the LSWR's Richmond branch in 1846–7 split

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the district in two. The present chapter deals only with the area north of the railway, in six separate freeholds at the time of the tithe map (1838). Different members of the Carter family owned or occupied all but one of these fields. The largest, of five acres, belonged to George Carter (d.1855). Its frontage ran westwards from the Nag's Head along York Road almost as far as what is now Wynter Street, with a return to Plough Lane. Further west along the parish boundary lay the holding of John Carter (d.1853), which stretched beyond the future railway right through to St John's Hill before the workhouse ate up its southernmost portion in 1837–8.

Desultory house-building along this part of the York Road frontage began in the late 1830s. It doubtless responded to accumulating industry on the Thames-side sites across the road, starting with the textile mill and long row of cottages built by John Ford (page ##) and the distillery just over the Wandsworth border. Among the first houses were a pair called Alpha Cottages leased to James Beacon Larter, miller, in 1838, and three known as Hope Cottages or Place, built by and leased to a pattern-maker, Michael Mortemour Franklin, in 1840–2. The Hope pub to the latter's east came into being around the same time. Building activity ensued all along the frontage, and by 1850 at least two of six streets off it had been started.² The only one to continue beyond the Richmond railway was Union (from 1870 Usk) Road. This had been planned by the time of the Spencer sales, but hung fire and was finally laid out further west through John Carter's holding. No doubt because it was already contemplated when the railway was laid out, it secured a bridge through the railway embankment and thus to St John's Hill, where the Union workhouse had meanwhile opened. St John's Church and School (1862–6) symbolized the completion of this poor neighbourhood and marked out Union Road as its centre. The streets on either side, Wilson Street and John Street, stopped at the railway. Further east, Hope, George and Ann Streets were even shorter, as they were blocked by land sold to the Tritton

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family. They were connected at their base by Emma Street, which had no eastward outlet to Plough Lane.

The outline history of these humble streets, where the original housing has all now gone, is as follows, running east–west (Ills 9.2, 3).³

Hope Street. On the line of a track into George Carter’s garden between the Hope pub and Hope Cottages. Houses mainly of 1855–62, on land sold by Carter’s executors and developed under Frederick Cock, a local builder; Charles Gadd, a chemist from Vauxhall; and William Peter Holland, a Kennington ironmonger.

George (later Hibbert) Street. Some houses here built around 1845 under leases from George Carter, after whom the street was presumably named, unless it commemorated George Bass, their builder. More were of the 1858–63 period under W. P. Holland and others.

Anne (later Linda) Street. East side developed under George Carter and then James Oliver by George Bass, the most prolific builder in this area, and William Winks, 1847–50. West side followed from 1850 under Carter and, following his death, Elizabeth Wheeler of the Hope Tavern, again involving Bass. This street has been obliterated.

Wilson (later Wynter) Street. Laid out on the line originally intended for Union Road. Promoted by William Henry Wilson of Battersea and developed in 1854–9 at a good width with pairs of semi-detached ‘villas’ given individual names. Wilson soon lost control to his mortgagees, including the solicitor Henry Virtue Tebbs senior. Photographs show all-brick pairs on two storeys with shallow pediment-style gables and no basements (Ill. 9.4).

Union (later Usk) Road. Developed from 1851 under John Carter and after his death in 1853 under his five children, who divided the freehold between them. The houses were very modest; the earliest recorded lessee was a labourer in the local starch works. For those south of the railway see Chapter 16.

John Street (later Petergate). East side only in Battersea. Doubtless called after John Carter, under whom development began in 1850, mainly through the agency of George Stent, builder. Building on the west or Wandsworth side of the street was delayed till about 1880.

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This portion of York Road matured into a typical Victorian main-road frontage of two-storey shops, neat in appearance but punctuated by pubs, mostly at street corners (Ill. 9.6): chiefly (running from east to west) the Nag's Head (rebuilt 1880–1), the Jolly Waggoners, the Hope, the Builder's Arms, and at the corner of Usk Road, the York Tavern, recast in the blowsy Queen Anne manner of the 1890s and a survivor from the post-war decimation of this frontage until 2003, when a showroom with flats over for Persimmon Homes (BUJ Architects) replaced it.⁴ There are no longer any pubs here.

The Plough Lane frontage was slower to develop. At the top, on George Carter's land south of the Nag's Head, a pair of cottages (Bell Cottages) appeared in 1851. Field Place, a short road with alleys off, was laid out after Carter's death c.1858–63, followed by a longer cul-de-sac called Britannia Place.⁵ These were to deteriorate into slums. But here, at the south corner of what is now Holgate Avenue, survive the sole remnants of nineteenth-century development in the area, a short run of shops at 36–40 Plough Road. Nos 38 & 40 are Bell Cottages of 1851, deprived of their front garden.

Next south in 1836 were a house and good garden owned by William Carter senior, and beyond that again a meadow of the Tritton banking family, whose house lay further south by the bifurcation at the top of St John's Place. Probably in the early 1840s, Joseph Tritton bought both William Carter's land and the southern portion of George Carter's five acres to add to their holdings. On the former site he in 1843 built a villa and garden, Olney Lodge, to complement the family home where his mother and older brother Henry lived. It was this area's only villa but short-lived, since the Richmond railway line soon slashed ruinously through the enclave. Tritton moved away, and Olney Lodge succumbed around 1867–8 to a compact development of four flat-fronted, artisan streets (Benham, Stockwood and Tritton Streets, linked by

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Wayford Road behind), to a layout by J. R. Gover for the National Industrial Land Society (Ill. 9.5). A substantial pub, the Gladstone Arms, was included at the corner of Tritton Street and Plough Road (Ill. 9.7.). That still left further Tritton-owned ground to the south, split by the railway. It became available for building only from 1880, when G. R. Butt promoted his Clapham Junction Estate on both sides of the line. The north side consisted of Maysoule Road, a double street looping round and connecting at the west end with Linda Street. It was named after Israel May Soule (d.1873), minister of Battersea Chapel and husband of Joseph Tritton's sister Amelia. Like almost everything west of Plough Road these houses, of about 1880–1, have been demolished. They looked much like those built in Harbut Road south of the railway.⁶ The course of the northern portion of Maysoule Road alone remains.

Housing Estates since 1920

Holgate Avenue and surroundings

The battered appearance of Holgate Avenue's flats today is a poor tribute to an intriguing small housing estate, built by Battersea Council between 1924 and 1937, largely to the designs of Henry Hyams, architectural assistant to the Borough Surveyor, T. W. A. Hayward, and designer of Battersea's Reference Library in Altenburg Gardens. To their north, Blake, McManus and Wilberforce Houses facing York Road also belong to this scheme. Wheeler House, Plough Road, was added in 1960–1, completing an irregular quadrilateral.

In 1920 Battersea Council identified Britannia Place and the narrower Field Place off the west side of Plough Road as one of three insanitary areas to

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be extirpated and rebuilt under the 1890 Housing Act. Two years later the Plough Road initiative received priority, but on a curtailed site. After a Ministry of Health enquiry in 1923 Hayward presented alternative schemes. The Housing Committee made it clear that it would have preferred to build two-storey houses, 'following the practice of the Council', but had to concede three-storey tenements because of Battersea's acute shortage of land. In February 1924 the committee chose one of three slightly differing layouts submitted to them, comprising eleven blocks for 396 people. Eight were to face Britannia Place and three York Road.⁷

What was then approved is uncertain. A drawing published in 1927, signed by Henry Hyams and labelled 'Plough Road Improvement Scheme 1920', shows the Britannia Place (Holgate Avenue) composition much as built, consisting of short, extensible blocks of six tenements, with garden-suburb style elevations (Ill. 9.8). But Hyams did not start working at Battersea till January 1924, and can hardly have influenced layouts approved so soon afterwards. So the date 1920 must refer to the scheme's inception, not its design; Hayward or members of his staff had probably arrived at the basic layout for the flats before Hyams gave them their romantic veneer.⁸

Work started on the south side of what was still then Britannia Place late in 1924, proceeding one block at a time. Battersea's Works Department undertook the construction, as in the Council's pre-war housing schemes. Much was made of the provision for electric cooking and heating as well as lighting, thereby saving the cost of flues, claimed the Borough's proselytising Electrical Engineer, F. A. Bond. These features were contested by vote in the Council and, at first, by the Ministry of Health, which also fired warning shots over perceived extravagances as work went on. The scheme was thought to be sufficiently go-ahead to be shown to a visiting delegation from Russia in December 1925 consisting of Messrs Popoff, Saffronoff and Zhmukhoff.⁹

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Seven blocks in Britannia Place had been completed or started by March 1927. The walls on both sides were faced in stocks enlivened by diapering, and the mansard roofs were green-slatted, but the south side is better designed and detailed than the north, suggesting the scheme may have been squeezed. In the eighth, ninth and tenth blocks facing York Road a different approach was taken. Here the three blocks are grouped into one composition, touched with Renaissance taste by means of red-brick giant pilasters rising to broken modillion pediments on either side of the end entrances. The result, finished about the end of 1928, was christened Wilberforce House. A small recreation area was tucked behind this block, reached via the stub of Field Place, renamed Play Place.¹⁰

In the 1930s changes to the overall scheme took place. Britannia Place had remained a cul-de-sac, but it now became possible to buy a factory site separating it from Hope Street as well as a back alley, Holtby Place. These purchases allowed Britannia Place to be finished coherently and rechristened Holgate Avenue (after Archbishop Robert Holgate of York House, which had stood nearby) in 1931. An extension also led to the addition along York Road beyond Wilberforce House of the pinched Blake House at the corner of Hope Street (1933–4), and then of McManus House (1936–7), similar to Wilberforce House and named after Dr L. S. McManus, a Battersea vestryman and councillor who had established the Borough Milk Department, ‘the first of its kind in London’.¹¹

The final piece in the quadrilateral could not be tackled till after the Second World War. This was the old Nag’s Head site and its environs at the corner of Plough Road (Nos 28–34) and York Road (Nos 195A–201). Under the County of London Development Plan they were zoned for extending the recreation area, but Battersea Council managed to have them rescheduled for housing. A four-storey block of brick flats with balcony access from the back was built here in 1960–1 by Battersea’s Works Department, perhaps to the

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Borough Surveyor's designs. It was named Wheeler Court after George Wheeler, a local councillor, and included a child welfare office.¹²

Holgate Avenue still stands out as the only housing scheme in Battersea to be touched by the ideals and styles of Raymond Unwin. But it has suffered severely from loss of detail, and by execrable window replacements – worst perhaps in Wilberforce and McManus Houses.

Wilberforce Estate

Six blocks of five-storey walk-up flats set end-on to the north side of Maysoule Road constitute the core of this estate, built for the London County Council to designs by Sir John Burnet, Tait & Partners in 1946–8 (Ill. 9.9). Two outlying buildings also belong to the scheme: Chalmers House, York Road, and Milner House, Hope Street.

The streets between Plough and Usk Roads were among the main targets in Battersea under slum clearance legislation of the 1930s. A rectangle of just over nine acres came before the LCC's attention for compulsory purchase late in 1937. Known as the Hibbert Street area, it encompassed also Emma and Linda Streets, and contained 1,058 people in poky, two-storey housing. The plan was to replace these streets with 270 dwellings in blocks, to house 1,350. Unusually for the LCC at that date, it was agreed to farm the design work out to private architects. Burnet, Tait & Lorne (the pre-war name of the firm) were probably chosen on the strength of their recent housing for the Four Per Cent Industrial Dwellings Company in Hackney. A school facing Wynter Street was included in the scheme; for this too T. S. Tait was reserved as the LCC's architect, though like the housing it materialized only after the war, as Joseph Tritton School.¹³

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By November 1938 the architects had plans ready for eight blocks covering only five of the nine acres yet totalling 268 dwellings. War then intervened. The scheme was resurrected afterwards and built, seemingly without revision, by Holland & Hannen and Cubitts Ltd from 1946 onwards. It was named the Wilberforce Estate, the blocks commemorating public figures who alongside William Wilberforce promoted or supported the abolitionist cause: hence Burke, Buxton, Clarkson, Chalmers, Fox, Milner, Pitt and Ramsey Houses.¹⁴

The six blocks along Maysoule Road adopt the standard arrangements of LCC inter-war balcony-access housing, differing only in grouping themselves in pairs round elongated internal courts and in certain details akin to those on T. S. Tait's pre-war Howwood Road Estate in Johnstone, Renfrewshire: windows are drawn together in horizontal runs, for instance, and the pitched roofs are half-hidden by parapets.¹⁵ The outliers assume a somewhat different style. Milner House, Hope Street, has a strong oversailing hipped roof, while Chalmers House, York Road, looks more imposing by virtue of its length and its prolongation next to Wynter Street with a flat-roofed extension on a slight curve, emphasized by horizontal balconies (Ill. 9.10). An empty corner site at 61 Holgate Avenue north of Milner House was reserved for the Anchor pub, previously on the opposite side of Hope Street on part of the site of Burke House. It started out as a single-storey pub in austerity style, c.1948, but was given a Regency dress and an extra storey in 1962.¹⁶

The building of Joseph Tritton School in 1952–4 between the Maysoule Road blocks and Chalmers House no doubt helped give the estate coherence. Later, further maisonette blocks on the same scale were added along York Road: Nos 251–265 in about 1955–6 by the LCC, and Sheridan House, Nos 267–337, with a return to Hibbert Street, in about 1967–9 by the Greater London Council.¹⁷ The second of these at least was designed by Sir John

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Burnet, Tait & Partners. The school's demolition in 2000 has once again left the Wilberforce Estate fragmentary.

Usk Road area

Usk Road now runs only a short distance southwards out of York Road. Successive clearance and housing schemes have amputated the street.

The LCC was the first authority to build municipal housing around this street. It started with two small blocks south of the railway in the late 1930s (page ##). To its north, the Council set its sights on clearing a long 44-house terrace on Usk Road's west side in 1939, but could make no progress till after the war, when it became possible to extend the area westwards to Petergate. Collcutt & Hamp, appointed architects in 1950, designed a scheme comprising 71 flats in five blocks of essentially inter-war type with a few distinctive details, built by Unit Construction Ltd in about 1951–3. Regarded as an outlying portion of the East Hill Estate on the other side of the tracks, they took their names from Britain's more bracing seaside venues. Dungeness, Filey and Lerwick Houses rise to five storeys, Bridlington House to only two, and Saltburn House (on the Wandsworth side of Petergate) to three.¹⁸

The Greater London Council was still picking away at clearances here in the late 1960s, against mounting opposition. The coup de grace for the remaining older houses came in the 1970s, when it was decided to stop off Usk Road well north of the railway, build housing stretching across from Petergate to Wynter Street, and create a hummocked and landscaped open space to its south. Hatched in 1972, the project hung fire, to the dismay of tradesmen along York Road: 'the population is being wiped out and we are left here to rot', complained a butcher.¹⁹ Following a petition beseeching the GLC to build 'only houses with gardens', the development, entrusted from

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1976 to Sir John Burnet, Tait & Partners, took a polite, low-rise character. To the detriment of the street lines the blocks are staggered, no doubt in order to get in the maximum number of units, 75 in all. To their north, against York Road, is Doris Emmerton Court, opened in 1980, a four-storey block of sheltered housing placed at an equally obdurate angle to the streets (Ill. 9.11). It commemorates a headteacher of the former Joseph Tritton School.²⁰

Wayland Road Estate

This small estate of 3½ acres facing and behind Plough Road, dating from 1969–71, covers the former National Land Company's development of a century earlier, the former Benham, Stockwood and Tritton Streets and Wayland Road. Its clusters of low-rise and low-key flats are a far cry from the demonstrative Winstanley Estate on the opposite side of Plough Road, designed by the same architects, George, Trew & Dunn.

The previous houses on this site had 'outlived their usefulness', Wandsworth Council was told in November 1966, when George, Trew & Dunn were appointed to create a new environment, with W. V. Zinn as engineer. Whatever the architects' first ideas, by the time they presented their scheme in April 1968, housing fashions had shifted. They therefore proposed very plain flat-roofed blocks of four storeys, built in load-bearing brickwork. These are staggered in plan, informally grouped round two service roads, Benham Close and Wallis Close, and incorporate a minor pedestrian precinct, Jansen Walk. The contractors were Thomas McInerney Ltd.²¹

Maysoule Road

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The thin block between Maysoule Road and the Clapham Junction to Richmond railway line, bounded eastwards by Plough Road and westwards by Wynter Street, contains a disciplined small housing estate built by Wandsworth Council to designs by Phippen, Randall & Parkes around 1976–9.

This site first came before the council in 1972, when Wandsworth's Director of Development reckoned 175 dwellings could replace the 90-year-old houses of Maysoule Road, said to be in very poor condition; tenants claimed it as 'the most atrocious street in Wandsworth ... the damp's rising and the masonry's falling'. Compulsory purchase powers came through in March 1974 and the architects' detailed design was completed by October of the following year.²² Under the plan then advanced, the southern arm of Maysoule Road was expunged and a narrow alley, Tours Passage, created beside the railway. The consolidated site acquired five terraces of housing, broken up by the stubs of three short access roads: Beverley, Kennet and Windrush Closes. They adopt a neat brick style with raked joints and closely capping slate roofs. Towards Maysoule and Plough Roads, some play is made with roof levels. At the Wynter Street end is a day nursery, and at 86 Plough Road is Holmleigh Court, a sheltered housing block opened in 1980.

Threshold Housing, Chillington Drive and Great Chart Street

The Joseph Tritton School north of the Wilberforce Estate was replaced in 2003–4 with two substantial five-storey blocks of red-brick flats, designed for Threshold Housing and Support by BPTW Architects and built by Higgins Construction. They are arranged around landscaped courts and reached by new roadways off the east side of Wynter Street, named Chillington Drive and Great Chart Street. There are 131 dwellings in all, including twelve 'supported units'.²³