

Entertainment

This chapter covers the main buildings erected for amusement in Battersea. It starts with an overview of the parish's early inns and taverns, followed by an account of its robust riverside entertainments, suppressed when Battersea Park was created. Sections follow on music halls and theatres, the ephemeral Albert Palace, cinemas and obscurer entertainments. The Festival of Britain buildings and fairground of Battersea Park are discussed in Chapter 5, which also touches on some sports activities and structures. Swimming baths appear under public buildings in Chapter 1, while the standard public house attached to housing development may be found with its relevant area of housing in volume 50.

Riverside entertainments and Battersea Fields

Interest in Battersea's pre-Victorian role as a place of entertainment has focussed on the Red House (below), and as a consequence on its immediate riverside neighbourhood of Battersea Fields. But looking further back, none of the three Battersea taverns recorded before 1714 whose sites have been identified was in Battersea Fields or on the riverside.¹ All three survive in name if not in fabric. The Castle Inn in Battersea High Street is now an unassuming pub of 1965. The Plough, on St John's Hill, has been three times rebuilt, most recently in 2009.

The surviving Raven in Battersea Square incorporates fabric from the seventeenth century. It is first recorded in 1701 as the Black Raven, by which

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name it was known until the 1760s when the 'black' was gradually dropped. By then the lease included a blacksmith's shop and several acres of land in Battersea Fields.² The Black Raven is also mentioned in Charles Dibdin's 1773 play *The Watermen, or the First of August*.

A further 16 inns are recorded in the eighteenth century.³ Some of the most important were at road junctions, like the Falcon and the Prince's Head at either end of Falcon Lane; both survive in modern form. One for which some details survive is the Nag's Head, in continuous existence near the corner of York Road and Plough Road from at least 1760 to 1980. In 1799 its accommodation included a 'Welch Parlour' with dining tables and 13 chairs, a tap room, bar, kitchen, two parlours, wash-house and five other rooms (including the 'Yellow Room' with a 30-hour clock).⁴ Opposite the church stood the Star and Garter (III. 6.1), known for certain from 1778. It had a spacious coachyard, and was much used for meetings up to the 1890s, when inquests were held there before the opening of the coroner's court in Sheepcote Lane in 1902 (page xxx).⁵ Passing references to cock fighting by Battersea inhabitants and an archery contest at 'Battersea Butts' in the eighteenth century also suggest an earlier start for Battersea as a place for recreation than previously supposed.⁶

But the riverside and Battersea Fields were beginning to acquire a distinctive resort character by the mid eighteenth century. The Hoop (sometimes The Hoop and Bunch of Grapes) is first recorded in 1750. It appears, from ratebook and lease evidence, to have been located on the riverside off Lombard Road, its narrow site stretching east roughly along the line of Gwynne Road. In 1755 it featured as the fixed point in a rowing contest, much as the Red House. John Adam or Adams, landlord in the early 1750s, was said to offer the services of Mary Trefry, a prostitute, to his clients. The Hoop was inventorized in a lease of 1755 to a City victualler, Moses Richardson, when it had a garden with walks, alcoves, and a wilderness,

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embellished with urns, a sundial, a Chinese bridge and painted scenes of ruins and arches. It burnt down in January 1763, when the frozen Thames thwarted attempts to fight the fire.⁷ Other riverside inns included the White Hart (Ill. 6.2) which backed on to the river at Lombard Road near the junction with Vicarage Crescent. It is not recorded in ratebooks till 1751, but was certainly known by 1740. By the 1860s it had a large first-floor club room, a summer house and skittle alley in a small garden.⁸ At another riverside inn, the Anchor, the landlord in 1791 engaged a wind-instrument band for the summer. The music was to continue well into the night on alternate Mondays, when it would be followed by country dancing, the charge for admission including tea and coffee.⁹ An advertisement by Roger Wallen of the George and Dragon in Cornhill for ‘dinner ... at the Nine Elms, pleasantly situated on the Bank of the River Thames ... a Commodious Room ... a large Garden’ in July 1773 suggests that selected spots along the Battersea riverside may have been run as summer retreats by City victuallers.¹⁰

Battersea Fields, on the site of present-day Battersea Park and Power Station, were unfenced, unpenetrated by through roads and ill-regulated until the 1840s (page xxx). They were romanticized later as ‘a despised oasis, flanked with a few ramshackle huts, inhabited by a class of people who made day hideous and night dangerous, for it was not safe for decent people to pass “the dismal swamp” after dark, as highwaymen and footpads infested the roads’.¹¹ Certainly, the impression of Battersea Fields as a remote and desolate place is reinforced by innumerable reports of highwaymen and footpads, a suicide by hanging, and an abandoned baby. But there were already inns here – the Two Brewers, known by 1723, and the ill-starred Crooked Billet, struck by lightning in 1745 when a ‘great Part of the Chimney was ... carried by the Storm to a considerable Distance’.¹² The continuing isolation and rusticity of this once-despised morass became a boon in fact for a particular style of entertainment venue, raffish and rustic, which reached its peak of

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popularity between 1810 and 1835, when Battersea as a whole was becoming more frequented,

Its origins lay in the Sunday fairs long held in Battersea Fields, still in full swing in the early nineteenth century. These were regularly accompanied by a gypsy encampment, around which congregated popular sports like dog fighting, badger baiting and rabbit coursing, along with gambling and drinking.¹³ In the summer months booths and entertainments also featured.¹⁴ Not all of them were vulgar or small. Pierce Egan claims that the great Shakespearean actor Edmund Kean played at Battersea Fair in 1806 for John Richardson, then the leading manager of portable theatres: 'He performed "Norval" and also "Motley" in the "Castle Spectre," receiving a salary of five shillings a night. Kean would often boast that by his tumbling outside Richardson's booth he had tumbled many bumpkins inside'. The theatre rose 30ft high, had an auditorium 100ft by 30ft capable of seating 1,000 including 'boxes at two shillings, a pit at one shilling and a gallery at sixpence', and could put on a dozen performances or more a day.¹⁵

Another manager of portable theatres and travelling players, John Latimer (d.1858), may also have operated at the fair. Introducing his version of *Maria Marten; or Murder in the Red Barn*, Montagu Slater claimed the text was based on a manuscript that had belonged to Latimer 'writer in ordinary to the Queen's Theatre, Battersea'. No such theatre is known, nor is Latimer recorded as playing in London, but it seems likely that an attraction at Battersea Fair is alluded to, perhaps facetiously.¹⁶ Definitely present were James and Ann Wensdale or Websdale, who ran a 'spacious dancing booth with a large orchestra filled with musicians' at the fair and were convicted in 1845 of selling alcohol and tobacco without a licence. On one day in July 1845 most of a sitting at Wandsworth Police Court was taken up with petty crimes at Battersea Fair: gambling, pickpocketing, stealing fruit and damaging crops.¹⁷

These convictions and repeated attempts to close down the fair are evidence of an increasing moral pressure exerted against it, leading eventually to its suppression.¹⁸ In 1852 a magistrate, Thomas Paynter, told the Select Committee on Criminal and Destitute Juveniles that he had seen scenes at Battersea Fair 'such as no person could have believed to have existed in a civilized Christian country'.¹⁹ That same year the *Aberdeen Journal* opined that it was 'better that the poor artizan be allowed the elevating effects' of the Crystal Palace, then re-erecting at Sydenham, than 'resort to ordinary tea gardens or what are much worse ... the vulgar ribaldries of Battersea Fair'.²⁰ It was suppressed soon afterwards, as part of the campaign to cleanse Battersea Fields and create Battersea Park.

More or less permanent venues also proliferated. Typifying the lowest level was The Old House at Home, a thatched hut near the Red House, which in the 1830s and '40s 'answered the six-fold purpose of shop, dormitory, fowl-house, pig-sty, stable and cow-shed'. It sold 'egg flip' – a fresh-laid egg beaten up in hot ale and sweetened with sugar, popular with 'persons who preferred roaming about at midnight or in the small hours of the morning'.²¹ Reputedly the landlord had trouble convincing the authorities that this menagerie was a house, as it lacked a chimney, and had to build one in a hurry to secure his beer licence.²²

Other venues were more salubrious. The Regency Tea Gardens, known from 1822, lay back from the river on the Battersea Power Station site.²³ Renamed the Flora Tea Gardens (and perhaps identifiable with the later Rock's Tea Gardens), they were run in 1835 by George Faulkner who, in keeping with Battersea's reputation for produce, 'raised a remarkably productive and fine-flavoured strawberry' christened Faulkner's New Scarlet Pine.²⁴ Another resort close by, the Balloon Tea Gardens, had a ballroom and bowling green which in the 1840s was used for competitive walking and

running events, the course 'bedecked with coloured flags'.²⁵ Further west were the riverside Tivoli Gardens, located near what is now the north-west corner of Battersea Park, referred to as 'New' in 1841, to distinguish them from the eponymous gardens in Fulham.²⁶

The Red House (demolished)

This most celebrated of the Battersea Fields resorts, famed for aquatic sports and as a place 'where pigeons are shot continually, and sometimes men', lasted from at the latest 1723 until 1854. According to J. J. Sexby, in its prime the Red House and its grounds 'formed a second Vauxhall Gardens'. But moral commentators condemned it as the centre of the louche attractions of Battersea Fields. Here different classes consorted freely and 'noble lords shot pigeons, while the wife of the British working man drank tea and the B.W.M. smoked'.²⁷

The Red House (Ill. 6.3) enjoyed a site of over five acres with a fine prospect of Chelsea Hospital, centred in modern terms upon the area between Chelsea Bridge and the Grosvenor Railway Bridge. For William Hone, writing in the 1820s, its isolated context 'resembled a view in the Low Countries ... an old windmill ... the "Red-house", with some low buildings among willows on the bank of the Thames, thrown up to keep the river from overflowing a marshy flat'.²⁸

Its name first occurs in 1723, when the 'Red House in Chelsea Reach' formed the endpoint of a rowing contest from London Bridge by two watermen.²⁹ That was eight years after the most famous of such contests was instituted by the actor Thomas Doggett for the prize of a coat and badge in Whiggish celebration of George I's accession. Doggett's was rowed between the Swan at London Bridge and the Swan at Chelsea.³⁰ For more than a

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century the Red House continued in rowing races for watermen and yachting races for gentlemen. It often featured on circular routes round a fixed point, sometimes as far afield as Hammersmith, despite, or perhaps because of, the considerable swell in the reach that saw many overturned boats and drownings.³¹ In the 1820s the actor Edmund Kean offered a wherry as a prize in a rowing race (Ill. 6.3a) terminating at the Red House, on which occasion

Here were to be seen, Poets, Pugilists, and Players, of all sorts, sizes, and degrees; *costermongers*, from Tothill Fields, and Battersea Beauties; nor was there any lack of 'wandering Melodists'. A *brace* of nymphs who perambulate London streets with a hurdy-gurdy, whose *wind* seems *spavined*, gladdened the hearts of those around them.³²

Other sports were enjoyed. William Hickey's memoirs allude to playing field tennis at the Red House in 1770.³³ Shooting for sport was known in Battersea Fields by the 1770s; in the 1820s target-shooting matches with rifles and pistols were held. Twenty years later the craze was for competitive walking matches, sometimes varied with hurdling – always for money generated by wagers.³⁴

Famously, the Red House boasted a pigeon-shooting ground, where 'swells of the highest grade' competed to kill the most pigeons (or sparrows).³⁵ Some 520ft by 490ft and enclosed by palings, it lay south-west of the Red House itself (Ill. 6.4). The activity had started here by 1805, when the Vestry wrote to the recently founded Committee for the Suppression of Vice, complaining that 'a great many disorderly people frequent Battersea Fields and places adjacent on the Sabbath day shooting birds and catching them ... to the great annoyance of the inhabitants and passengers going to and from Divine Service'.³⁶ Its heyday was the 1820s, when the pigeon-shooting club was described as London's most fashionable.³⁷ In the 1840s slumming aristocrats – the Marquess of Abercorn and Lord Chesterfield were

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mentioned – were still meeting ‘to breakfast at the tavern, then repair to the adjoining grounds to the work of slaughter’.³⁸

A long, shallow building of 14 rooms and two storeys, of red brick with white pointing, the Red House in its prime was dominated by an off-centre, full-height bay window, probably of wooden construction and weather-boarded. It lit the refreshment bar on the ground floor and the dining room on the first floor which, with a long room adjoining, enjoyed the fine prospect of the river.³⁹ In front was a small jetty with a flagpole. The portion of the building east of the bay had a separate roof and was perhaps an addition. It may have dated from just before 1794 when the Red House, freshly leased from Lord Spencer and ‘recently put into complete repair’ with ‘new-built complete Dwelling-house’, yard, stable and garden, and two houses on plots immediately upriver called the ‘White Houses’, was put up for sale.⁴⁰

By the 1830s a line of wooden drinking boxes or alcoves, common in pleasure gardens, each with a table that could sit twelve and lit at night by oil lamps, had been set up east of the building by the river’s edge. The grounds were laid out in small arbours decorated with Flemish and other paintings and ‘fancifully formed’ flowerbeds. Simmonds describes one walk ending in a trompe l’oeil painting that created the illusion of the path continuing.⁴¹ At the 1835–6 sales of Earl Spencer’s freeholds the premises were described as lately repaired and in part rebuilt, and consisted of a bar, private parlour, tap room and large kitchen, spacious cellarage, a large and small coffee room, and several bedrooms, with gardens, shooting-ground, wooden farm buildings and brick-built stables.⁴² They did not sell.

The Red House’s environs were shabby by the 1840s; the windmill had lost its sails, and the adjoining stretch of the Thames was said to be ‘saturated’ with sewage.⁴³ Pigeon-shooting continued but the aristocrats had evidently gone: ‘Sometimes there are some 60 or 70 unwashed persons near the Red

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House shooting pigeons'.⁴⁴ In 1853 it was compulsorily purchased with its five acres as part of the railway lands earmarked for the West End of London & Crystal Palace Railway (page xxx). The price was a generous £10,000, a good profit for its then owner, the builder Thomas Cubitt, who in 1841 had paid Lord Spencer less than £4,000 for more than 30 acres of land including the Red House.⁴⁵ In December 1853 first the contents and then the buildings themselves were sold for their materials. The flagpole was taken down in 1854, when the Red House shut its doors.⁴⁶ The site was first occupied by Battersea Wharf and the adjacent goods depot, and is now covered by the Centurion Building, Chelsea Bridge Wharf.

Music Halls and Theatres

From the middle of the nineteenth century Battersea boasted several music halls and by the turn of the century two theatres, which in architectural chutzpah if not dramatic sophistication rivalled the West End. Today it has only one pub theatre (Theatre 503, at the Latchmere Tavern). In addition there is lively theatrical activity at the Battersea Arts Centre, located in the former Battersea Town Hall and therefore discussed in Chapter 1.

Early music halls

As Battersea's population grew in the 1860s, so did the number of public houses, accelerating a process evident from the 1820s. Directory listings (never comprehensive) indicate a rise from only six taverns and public houses in 1824 to 11 in 1834, and hence to 12 pubs and eight beer retailers (with a more restricted licence) in 1838. With the growth of industrial Battersea, the

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number of drinking establishments mushroomed to 62 by 1852, 75 by 1862, 155 by 1871, and 207 by 1892. Most were in the northern, working-class districts, especially along main roads.⁴⁷

The mid-century population explosion also saw the emergence of some modest music halls attached to pubs. Unconnected with the raffish traditions of Battersea Fair and the Red House, they developed out of informal sing-songs into organized events in purpose-built rooms with a simple stage, pianist and chairman, who might be the landlord. Such rooms could also be hired for other events.

Typical was the Corunna Music Hall at the General Moore, Stewart's Road, licensed throughout the 1860s and '70s, where the hall was less than 30ft by 20ft. Here firemen and engine drivers of the London and Brighton railway met in 1872 to demand better hours and pay.⁴⁸ Another example, the Green Lane Music Hall (parts of which survive in the Laburnum Social Club buildings at 6-10 Vicarage Crescent), was unusual in having a small gallery, and hosted music concerts and a dance academy in the early 1880s.⁴⁹

The largest such establishment was the Magpie, also known as the Battersea Music Hall, behind the Magpie public house on the corner of Arthur Street and Battersea Park Road. Licensed from 1869 to 1880, it was run by Daniel Barrett, who in 1871 assured 'heads of families not a word or action will be permitted on the stage that might offend the most fastidious'.⁵⁰ It could accommodate 600 on its bench seating at a single level, and had a few orchestra stalls at the front.⁵¹ In 1873 it was attracting good crowds to its typical mix of comic and sentimental singers and dancers.⁵² The Magpie's final licensee, Stephen Duffield, went on to run the Commercial, Battersea Park Road (1881-8), which along with the Greyhound, Battersea High Street (licensed 1868-71), the Queen Victoria, Falcon Road (1868-85), the Park Tavern, Battersea Park Road (1870-3) and the Crown, Lavender Hill (1870-5)

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made up the total of pubs with full music licences in Battersea.⁵³ The days of these 'free and easies' were numbered, however, as the 1878 Metropolitan Management Act brought all theatres over 500 square feet under the control of the Metropolitan Board of Works, and few licensees could meet its requirements for fire safety.

Washington Music Hall, York Road (demolished)

The decline of the pub music halls following the 1878 Act left a vacuum filled in November 1886 when the purpose-built Washington Music Hall opened in York Road. Its promoter was George Washington Moore, a flamboyant American actor and manager with no local associations. 'Pony' Moore (so called because of an act where he 'rode' 40 horses at once) had arrived in England in 1859 as part of the Christy blackface minstrels, and later with his own troupe, the Moore and Burgess Minstrels, performed as Bones, a stock minstrel character, at St James's Hall, Piccadilly.⁵⁴

When Moore came to license the hall, he said that his builder (and relative), G. A. Young of Lewisham Road, had suggested that a music hall was wanted in north Battersea 'in proof of which I have handed in a petition signed by an immense number of inhabitants, amongst whom are many prominent teetotallers and members of local boards'. On visiting the Royal Standard on York Road and finding there 'only one old woman having two pennyworth of cold gin', he was at first unimpressed. But on a return visit he went up on the roof to view the district, where 'I saw more chimney-pots there than I ever saw in my life. I said, this is good enough for me'.⁵⁵

A traditional pub music hall writ large, the Washington was built behind and around the Royal Standard, a public house of the 1870s with a limited music and dancing licence.⁵⁶ Moore's architect for the new hall was

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James W. Brooker, a prolific designer of pubs and commercial buildings. The Washington is his only known music hall. The auditorium's old-fashioned arrangement (III. 6.5), with a deep gallery supported on cast-iron columns round the three sides – canted at the corners, so semi-octagonal on plan – may have been suggested by Moore, who knew nothing fancy or novel was needed for north Battersea: 'The prices are low enough to suit everybody'.⁵⁷

The pub survived, but its parlour and rear portions were removed to build the auditorium. Flanking corridors led to the hall; that to the right also housed a staircase up to the gallery, and a box office. The gallery ended each side in two private boxes, an affectation removed by 1892, although a box was added on the more salubrious ground floor either side of the orchestra.⁵⁸ Bars were arranged along the rear of the gallery and auditorium. All seating came in the form of benches except for several rows of stalls flanking the chairman's table.

The frontage was in the muscular 'bastard classical' style Brooker had used for the surviving Yorkshire Grey on Theobald's Road, Holborn. It made no attempt at symmetry, the portion above the existing shops being retained. In 1889 Moore turned the shops into a saloon bar, and in 1892 another prolific pub architect, H. I. Newton, raised the fly tower. In 1895 an iron and glass canopy over the entrance was added to designs by the local architect Richard Hansom.⁵⁹

Under the management first of Moore's son George and then of his son-in-law, Charles Mitchell, the Washington was successful and lively. Fights were known, and Mitchell, a professional boxer 'who could be quick to take offence', was prosecuted twice for assault.⁶⁰ As a capacious space in the heart of industrial Battersea, it also provided a forum for various flavours of radicalism, hosting many union and political meetings. It was a favourite venue of John Burns (despite his teetotalism). George Bernard Shaw lectured

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there often in the early 1890s. According to his early biographer, Archibald Henderson, 'never was Shaw's sky-rocketing brilliance more effectively displayed than in one of his orations at the Washington Music Hall'.⁶¹

The Washington was a theatre of many names. Between 1895 and 1897 it was the Washington Palace of Varieties, then becoming the Battersea Palace of Varieties (III. 6.6). In 1902, when James McGuinness took over, it became the New Battersea Empire, the 'new' being dropped after a few years until 1910 when it became the Palace Theatre of Varieties, reverting to Battersea Palace in 1917. Its final name was the Super Palace.⁶²

Probably the first cinematograph show in Battersea was put on at the Washington in 1897. The apparatus was makeshift, consisting of an iron box with a baize back hooked over the rear pit seats. After the older Moore sold the theatre in 1906, it was taken over successively by Fred MacNaghten and his sometime manager Frederic Baugh (both of whom had run Sadler's Wells). Baugh installed a proper bioscope box and rewinding room in 1913. After a brief experiment of leasing the Battersea Palace for the benefit of out-of-work actors, he converted it fully into a cinema. The reconstruction was carried out to the designs of Petch & Fermaud, architects, in 1925–6 after the licence had been taken over by Harry Percy Bloom of Supershows (Battersea) Ltd. Among other works, a new near-symmetrical entrance frontage with semicircular pediments over the side exits was created, a straight-sided balcony seating 299 replaced the old music hall gallery, the main staircase was rearranged to create a proper foyer, and decoration applied in a simplified classical manner.⁶³

In 1929 the Super Palace was said to be 'very awkwardly situated for publicity, the frontage being in a sort of by-road'. It was revamped again in 1934 by Eley & Nunn, architects, with new Art Deco doors, a streamlined canopy and neon-tube lettering and outlining to the whole frontage. The

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cinema was probably then already in decline. By 1957–8 Harry Bloom's son Alex was reporting that 'wanton damage' to seats was 'continual'.⁶⁴ The Super Palace Cinema closed in 1959 and was demolished in 1969.

Park Town Hall and Queen's Theatre, Prairie Street

Hidden away near the end of Prairie Street near its junction with Queenstown Road is a house whose lack of windows betrays its origins as the stage of the Queen's Theatre, one of just two surviving Victorian theatre buildings in Battersea (Ill. 6.7). As Victoria Hall, it began life in 1884–5 as a workroom and hall for a firm supplying embroidered embellishments to the armed services, whose owner lived at the adjoining house on the corner, originally known as Victoria House.⁶⁵

The proprietor of the business was John Thomas Virgo, a former Office of Works employee whose wife Rosa had been running a similar business in Stormont Road in 1881. He was granted a long lease by the Park Town Estate in 1884 to erect a house, office and workroom on condition that he did not use the premises for retailing, but was allowed to 'place samples for inspection' in the office windows.⁶⁶

Virgo's architect was T. J. Bailey, best known for his board schools but also the designer in 1879–80 of 102–112 Queenstown Road near by, including his own house at No. 112. The substantial Victoria House (which partly survives, as the much-altered 129 Queenstown Road) was joined to the hall with a simple two-storey office building. The hall, about 34ft square, had a northern frontage lit by three large multi-pane windows flanked by blank aedicules topped in the centre by a segmental pediment, in a jumbled, arresting composition not untypical of Bailey (Ill. 6.8).⁶⁷

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By October 1886 Virgo had extended the 'New Park Town Hall', with a 22ft-deep stage over a dressing room dug out underneath. It was described as 'one of the prettiest halls in South London'.⁶⁸ As yet unlicensed, the hall was used for the next couple of years for, inter alia, the 'Clapham Parliament' (one of several local debating societies), lectures and various classes for dance, elocution and drama.⁶⁹

A further extension to create a refreshment room, better dressing rooms, a larger stage with an iron-trussed roof and a fireproof proscenium was built in 1889 to designs by the local surveyor Harold Griffin. This was to secure the stage-play licence applied for by 'Robert' Virgo (almost certainly J. T. Virgo's wife, Rosa, as he had no relative called Robert). New exits were formed on both streets, one of which sliced off a portion of the Virgos' house with a Queen Anne-style doorcase, still visible on Queenstown Road. A dressing room block was added behind the stage wall in 1890-1. Unusually for a theatre of this type there was a licensed bar in the early 1890s, a measure perhaps of its perceived respectability.⁷⁰

The establishment was now known as the Park Town Theatre or Theatre of Varieties until 1893, when it became known as the Queen's Theatre. Its diet was one of popular dramas, pantomimes and burlesques, occasionally co-written by J. T. Virgo. In 1895, however, he closed the theatre following marital difficulties and left London, though the lease remained in his family until its expiry.⁷¹

The fortunes of the Queen's Theatre looked up briefly when in December 1895 it was leased by Andrew Melville, a well-known actor and impresario who owned nearly a dozen theatres including the huge Grand Theatre in Birmingham, and the interior was refreshed to Frank Matcham's designs.⁷² Theatrical furnishers E. Broadbridge & Sons provided orchestra stalls in electric-blue plush and pit stalls in red velvet. The walls were finished

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by the Plastic Decoration Company, the prevailing colours being blue, silver and pink 'with as much gold as could be conveniently introduced to be artistic'. There was a new act drop and safety curtain with Battersea scenes by George Tweddell. As it was finishing, the *South Western Star* described the Queen's as 'one of the most elegant little bijou theatres in the metropolis'.⁷³

All this was short-lived. The theatre reopened from March to June 1896 (at Easter it was showing the Wild West show *Black Hawks* starring the American actor Joseph Bruce, alias Arizona Joe, 'accompanied by real horses and acting dogs'). Melville then closed it to construct a gallery, but his sudden death in August put an end to his management.⁷⁴

A catastrophic fire in 1906 when the building was in use by a costume-maker and scene painter destroyed the roof, ceiling, glazing, stage and doors.⁷⁵ The lessor, Dudley Bennett of the Shakespeare Theatre, rebuilt it without a stage and rented it to the Salvation Army, which used it as a barracks and hall until the 1930s.⁷⁶ It was probably when the Army departed that the proscenium was filled in, the stage portion separated off, and a vehicle entrance brutally punched through the Prairie Street frontage into the hall. Since the 1930s the hall has been in various commercial uses, often for storage; it is now a private gallery. The stage and dressing room portion was ingeniously converted to residential use in 2003–4 by Douglas & King, architects. J. T. Virgo's Victoria House, its ground floor long since converted into a shop, has been twice heavily and unsympathetically altered, once in 1975 and again in 2008–9.⁷⁷

Shakespeare Theatre, Lavender Hill (demolished)

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The Shakespeare Theatre, built in 1896 to the designs of W. G. R. Sprague and demolished in 1957, was as close as Battersea ever came to a high-class cultural attraction. The tone was not long sustained.

In 1895 the promoters Charles Machin and William Bennett acquired a substantial semi-detached pair of villas, Cedar House and Elsinore Lodge, at 170 and 172 Lavender Hill with a view to building a theatre. Their timing and choice of site were shrewd. It lay immediately west of the town hall and not far from the library, both recently completed. Lavender Hill, close to Clapham Junction and burgeoning shopping, was rapidly becoming Battersea's de facto high street.⁷⁸

Machin and Bennett were successful provincial proprietors, singly or in partnership, but the Shakespeare appears to have been their first London venture. Their choice of architect was prescient, as Sprague was very soon to be a leading architect of West End and suburban theatres, but the Shakespeare was his first work independent of his partner Bertie Crewe.⁷⁹

Sprague's first design was rejected by the LCC, as it proposed siting the stage and auditorium at the northern end of the site, reached from Lavender Hill by a narrow and erroneously named 'grand entrance', in reality a passage 130ft long. This awkward arrangement was occasioned by the retention of 172 Lavender Hill and the lack of a public road between this house and the town hall. So in October 1896 Machin and Bennett secured a commitment from the Vestry to lay out Theatre Street along the flank of their site as far north as the line of the present Heathwall Street, and decided to make use of the site of No. 172 as well. Sprague now produced a less preposterous design for which the LCC granted permission in December.⁸⁰

The enlarged site afforded a wider, shallower footprint for the theatre (III. 6.10). Its public face was a square block fronting Lavender Hill, packed

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with all the circulating spaces, stairs and offices. The portico led into a spacious vestibule and crush hall, with access to the box office, dress circle and array of flanking exit and entrance staircases required. The first floor was largely taken up with a grand saloon with a horseshoe bar, serving the better seats, and a spacious 'enquiry office'. The upper floors housed the gallery, saloon bar and management offices. Pit and gallery entrances were from Theatre Street. The auditorium was of Sprague's preferred 'two-tier' design, with a semicircular dress circle and a gallery above, both cantilevered on concrete-encased steel joists. The seating reflected Battersea's social make-up: of a total of 1,200 seats, 875 were in the gallery or the very deep pit, which was seated with benches. The dress circle had just three rows, the stalls four. The large stage, raked slightly to enhance perspective effects, was 70ft wide and 50ft deep, and 55ft high to the grid. A dressing-room block four storeys high ran the full width at the rear, with a detached three-storey scene dock and painting room beyond.⁸¹

Sprague's Lavender Hill entrance block (III. 6.9), of red brick with Portland stone dressings, was rectilinear and restrained, the note of ebullience a double-height portico, surmounted by a pediment filled with sinuous figures in relief focussed on a bust of Shakespeare. A segmental pediment above a panel inscribed 'Shakespeare Theatre' was surmounted by an illuminated classical-Greek maiden to top things off. The rear of the building was the usual ornament-free stock-brick box.

The interior, 'decorated, upholstered, and generally equipped in a manner to compare with any of the West End theatres', was in what became Sprague's usual Renaissance idiom. The fibrous plaster decoration featured pneumatic female terms flanking the dress-circle boxes (III. 6.11). The upholstery was of golden-brown Utrecht silk velvet and plush. The shallow saucer dome was painted in a jaunty, sub-Tiepolo manner with scenes from Shakespeare, while the act drop, by the scenic artist and sometime D'Oyly

Draft

Carte baritone, W. T. Hemsley, depicted four scenes – of Stratford-upon-Avon, the Globe, and ‘the artist’s dream’ of Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies.⁸²

The building of the Shakespeare Theatre was an event of some local éclat. The ‘commemoration’ stone was laid on 24 June 1896 by the West End star Johnston Forbes-Robertson, and Mrs Patrick Campbell broke a bottle of champagne over it. John Burns delivered a speech in which he said he ‘resented the familiar description of Battersea as a place devoid of artistic aspirations’. By this time construction (by Charles Gray Hill of Coventry, who had built the Opera House there for Bennett in 1889) was well advanced; 5,000 people that day came to view the progress.⁸³

The theatre finally opened on 16 November 1896.⁸⁴ The premiere was George Edwardes’s popular hit *A Gaiety Girl*. William Bennett’s son H. G. Dudley Bennett soon took over the management and introduced fringe novelties. By 1898 the audience was allowed ‘free use of the telephone’ and the first-floor enquiry room had been converted to ‘a handsome apartment with paper and envelopes’. In 1899 the same room was in use as a ladies’ lounge offering free tea and coffee, and Bennett arranged a service whereby playgoers booking seats at the box office could also pay for a cab to collect them and deliver them home afterwards at a fixed tariff.⁸⁵

The Shakespeare seems to have been a success, for the Bennetts in 1898 engaged Sprague to design the even larger Royal Duchess (later the Hippodrome) in Balham High Road.⁸⁶ In the early years the attractions were distinct from the variety offered at the local rival, the Grand. Though popular musical comedies predominated, there were also productions from reputable West End theatres; even Shakespeare occasionally featured. The seats too cost twice or more than at the Grand.⁸⁷

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The proliferation of cinemas in Battersea just before the First World War made lavish theatre productions uncommercial and caused Dudley Bennett to convert the Shakespeare. Films had been shown at the Shakespeare from time to time since 1899, from the usual temporary iron projection chamber set up at the back of the balcony. In 1911 Sprague built a permanent film operating and rewinding room, and the Shakespeare was given over to 'continuous cinema shows', though a stage-play licence was retained until 1915, when Joseph Clozenberg of the Metropolitan Picture Company took over as licensee. Later alterations included the insertion of an organ in 1919. Newly stringent fire rules meant that increasingly large areas of the building were not in public use. By 1930, when the cinema architect George Coles converted the projection room for talking pictures, the Shakespeare was entirely in cinema use.⁸⁸

Substantial war damage closed the Shakespeare in 1940, but when in 1946 the lessees were refused a stage play licence, it was largely because of outmoded wiring, gas fittings and security features. In 1948 the architect Gordon Jeeves drew up an abortive scheme for redeveloping the site with a utilitarian office block.⁸⁹ Four years later Provincial Cinematograph Theatres Ltd wanted to build a modern cinema on the site. However Battersea Council by then had it scheduled for compulsory purchase for a new civic centre replacing both the town hall and the Shakespeare. By 1956 the Council was in possession, but the civic centre never materialised (page xxx). The theatre was demolished in 1957 and the site became a car park for council employees until 1982-3, when the office block currently known as Shakespeare House was built on the frontage. Blocks of flats occupy the site of the stage and scene dock behind.⁹⁰

Grand Hall of Varieties, St John's Hill (demolished)

Draft

This building, known at different times as Munt's Hall, the Grand Hall of Varieties, the Imperial Cinema and the Ruby Cinema, had the distinction of being the first true variety theatre in Battersea as well as its last cinema.

The history of Edward and William Munt's piano business, which established itself in new premises at 9–11 St John's Hill in 1889–90, is given on page xxx. Included at the back on an upper level was a large hall, designed like the shop and showroom by Henry Branch and opened in November 1890. Branch's design included two floors intended for piano workshops over the hall, which had a concrete and steel ceiling, as did the basement which was also intended for workshops but this use had to be dropped as a condition for securing a licence for the hall.⁹¹ Even so, it took until 1894 for Edward Munt, the more entrepreneurial brother, to secure a full licence for public performances in the hall; before then it hosted only the occasional lecture.⁹² He then leased the hall to the Grand Hall (Clapham Junction) Ltd, a company formed that year by a syndicate of music-hall artistes and friends, fronted by the comedians Herbert Campbell and Fred Williams. The leading role in this company was taken by Jesse Sparrow, who was to be the manager here and later at the New Grand (below). A shady but evidently charismatic character, Sparrow had served 18 months' hard labour for embezzlement in the early 1890s, Fred Williams having been among the victims.⁹³

When it opened as the Grand Hall in October 1894, its decoration had been transformed.⁹⁴ The entrance through an iron and glass porte cochere led to a small foyer (Ill. 6.12), all clad in 'muraline' (a proprietary cladding) variously amber, pale turquoise and crimson. The hall itself, with a refreshment bar beneath the balcony to the rear (unlicensed), was hung with cream and gold Japanese wallpaper over an Indian-red dado. The stage had been deepened to 40ft, perhaps in anticipation of scenery for pantomimes. The deep-blue, purple and grey curtain, carpeting and blue plush tip-up seats

Draft

were by A. R. Dean of Birmingham. The building work was by J. McLachlan and Son.⁹⁵

Clapham Junction proved ready for a palace of varieties, so much so that the refurbished hall paid on occasion 25 per cent to its investors. Its self-promotion as ‘the perfect drawing room music hall’ reflected not only its compact size but also its aspirations to respectability, unlike the Washington in artisan North Battersea.⁹⁶ But the premises were far from satisfactory. As early as 1895 the syndicate had acquired Crosby Lodge at the corner of St John’s Hill and Severus Road where they built the New Grand (see below). Munt’s Grand saw its last performances in October 1900.⁹⁷ Even before the departure of the music hall the building had been used for more genteel entertainments, including an art exhibition in May 1897 graced by a visit from the Lord Mayor (Ill. 6.13)

Despite a commitment to ‘tear up’ the old music and dancing licence when the New Grand opened, Edward Munt tried to renew it in 1902, at least for music. He confirmed that ‘all the accessories of scenery gas battens, etc’ had been removed, and the seating was now half of what it had been as a music hall, and the stage would now just be used as a concert platform.⁹⁸ Munt claimed that he was only interested in ‘high-class music’ and wished to establish ‘a place similar to Steinway-hall’ confined to concerts and musical entertainments. His pleas were unheeded.⁹⁹ The LCC had never thought Munt’s Hall suitable for public performances, with all but one of its four exits opening into alleyways or yards, and had only renewed the licence on the understanding that the New Grand would soon replace it.

Munt’s Hall, fronted by a simpler iron and glass hood, suitably inscribed, instead of the larger porte cochère, was now used just for lectures, exams, art shows, religious services, and occasional concerts and film

Draft

displays. In 1909 it provided emergency space for Arding & Hobbs when their premises burned down.

In 1913 the site was bought by Hannah Marcus, who converted Munt's Hall into the Imperial Cinema to designs by Ewen Barr, with two private boxes to the reconstructed balcony. The interior was very red – crimson-plush tip-up seats, crimson carpet and crimson and gold plasterwork. It reopened in February 1914 offering 'a large and well-selected Programme of high-Class Pictures (no padding)'.¹⁰⁰ The minor hall in the basement was converted to a rifle range in 1915.¹⁰¹

From 1961 the minor hall was run as the Imperial Bingo and Social Club, later called the Casino Bingo Club. A visitor in 1969 found the Imperial still 'redolent of the 1914 period'.¹⁰² The lessee, Fred Clark, took over the running of the cinema, renaming it the Ruby in 1973. Battersea's last cinema, it closed on 22 August 1981.¹⁰³ The whole site was cleared and redeveloped with a blank red-brick office block and shops for Barclays Bank in 1983–4.¹⁰⁴

Clapham Grand (formerly New Grand), St John's Hill

The cliff of orange brick that greets travellers emerging from Clapham Junction Station (Ill. 6.14) has had a chequered life as a palace of varieties, cinema and bingo hall. Currently run as a nightclub and music venue, 'The Grand Clapham', as it now styles itself, has survived repeated attempts to demolish and redevelop it as, among other things, a petrol station.¹⁰⁵

When it opened on 26 November 1900, the theatre was known as the New Grand, a reflection of its origins in the Grand Hall, the former Munt's Hall, close by (see above). The Grand Hall syndicate had acquired Crosby

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Lodge, an 1850s villa, as early as 1895, but it did not start work on its purpose-built theatre here till 1899. A new company was set up in 1900 to run the new theatre, once again under the management of Jesse Sparrow. More than half the shareholders were employed in the business; they included the comedians Herbert Campbell (the company's chairman), Harry Randall, Fred Williams, George Chirgwin ('the white-eyed kaffir') and Dan Leno. Their architect for the New Grand was Ernest Woodrow, who had designed Camberwell Palace in Denmark Hill for the syndicate.¹⁰⁶ Although the Grand and the Palace are Woodrow's only known full-scale theatres, he was an expert on the type. Having trained with C. J. Phipps, he worked in the theatres sections of the MBW and the LCC's Architect's Department, and helped Edwin Sachs to produce his *Modern Opera Houses and Theatres* (1896–8).¹⁰⁷

Woodrow's designs were largely finalized by January 1900.¹⁰⁸ The corner site enjoyed frontages of 87ft to St John's Hill and 170ft to Severus Road (Ill. 6.15). The main entrance was through five doors on St John's Hill, segregated according to class of accommodation. The auditorium was on three levels with a steeply raked pit, a serpentine-fronted dress circle with three private boxes on either side, and a gallery above.¹⁰⁹ The stage, though 68ft wide, was shallow at 28ft deep, reflecting its use for variety acts needing little or no scenery.¹¹⁰ Ample service rooms, dressing rooms and offices occupied the eastern flank.

The theatre frontage is unusual. Redolent of Colcutt's Palace Theatre of 1891, it may also reflect Woodrow's travels in 1885 to India and Ceylon where he would have been exposed to Anglo-Indian architecture.¹¹¹ The result is a composite mixture of Mediterranean Renaissance and Indian styles. A first design had been conventionally neo-baroque, with plenty of stone dressings and a pair of semi-octagonal towers sprouting from the first floor. In the revised project, ranks of small windows marked each storey, the dressings of pink Mansfield stone were restricted to a few central features,

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and the towers turned into twin open belvederes with copper-clad ogee tops. In keeping with the turn-of-the-century enthusiasm for lettering buildings, large plaques bearing the theatre's name appeared between the towers and above the iron and glass entrance canopy.

Inside (III. 6.16) the Grand was unrestrainedly exotic. The fibrous plaster decoration adopted the Chinese style, using emblems loosely based on Chinese ceramics and furniture, while the shallow domed ceiling was decorated as a willow-pattern plate. The six boxes were a frenzy of music-hall oriental jollity, topped with festoons and semi-cupolas in the shape of pagodas, each box fronted by a dragon's head, eyes lit with electric bulbs. The decorative scheme was by Campbell, Smith & Company, with the upholstery, draperies and curtains in 'a sort of tomato red' plush by H. Lazarus & Company. The main contractor was Charles Gray Hill, who had also built the Shakespeare Theatre and the Camberwell Palace.¹¹²

The Grand was technically advanced. Woodrow made much of the building's resistance to fire by means of concrete floors, asbestos felting beneath the slates of the auditorium roof, fire hydrants, and concrete and iron flues. The two tiers were entirely cantilevered, to make for the best sightlines, the gallery being supported on the 'heaviest girder that has ever been used in a similar building'.¹¹³ Electricity was supplied by the theatre's own power station, engineered by Hancock & Dykes with two dynamos and a boiler house behind the stage. When the dynamos were in operation the auditorium could be heated by their exhaust steam. Electricity was used for on-stage lighting, and for some decorative highlights in the auditorium and on the exterior, but gas was used for primary lighting and oil lamps for secondary, reflecting fears about the reliability of electricity supply. Ventilation of the auditorium was augmented by electric exhaust fans and a 'sliding roof'. Unusually the Grand was also fitted from the first with a "plug" at the rear of

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the auditorium to power a cinema projector. Film performances were part of variety shows here from at least March 1901.¹¹⁴

In its early years the LCC judged entertainment here as 'above the usual standard of suburban music halls', although in 1906 'the immobile Cumedean' was caught singing a song containing 'one innuendo which might be objected to'.¹¹⁵ But how successful the Grand really was is questionable, since in 1904 the building was leased for 21 years to Walter Gibbons, a former music hall singer and cinema pioneer who went on to found the London Palladium.¹¹⁶

Variety shows, acrobatics, comedy, singing, pantomimes and other live performances continued at the Grand right through to the late 1940s when a twice-nightly programme of 'revues, variety and West End play successes' was on offer.¹¹⁷ But cinema gradually came to dominate the programmes. In 1927 a larger cinematograph chamber and rewinding room were added adjoining the boiler room behind the theatre, and extended in 1931.¹¹⁸ This back projection, although common, was unsatisfactory. As a former projectionist recalled, 'the film had to be laced emulsion forwards, and the sound head ... modified to get the sound to function'.¹¹⁹ To tackle this, a chamber for conventional projection from the rear of the auditorium was built in 1936.¹²⁰

In 1950 the Grand was sold to Essoldo and operated purely as a cinema.¹²¹ For a time it was used as a showcase for Essoldomatic projectors which could automatically change over 20-minute film reels and open and close the screen curtains.¹²² Between 1963 and 1979 it was a bingo hall. During this period a crude false ceiling was inserted above the circle level.¹²³ But the Grand was lucky to survive at all. Essoldo tried three times to secure permission to demolish and replace it with, variously, a filling station, an office block or a supermarket, offices and flatlets.¹²⁴

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From 1979 the Grand was dark for a decade. Inquiries, rebuffed by Wandsworth Council, were made in 1983 about conversion to a leisure centre and sports hall.¹²⁵ Its saviour in 1989 was the impresario Vince Power, whose group spent a claimed £1.5 million adapting the theatre for musical events. The scheme nearly foundered over difficulties in securing a liquor licence, due to opposition from local residents and Wandsworth Council. As Power put it, 'The Council had this idea that the young people who would go to the venue were mainly undesirables, into drink and drugs, who would molest their children and urinate in their front gardens'.¹²⁶

Power and his architect, Stephen Donald of Madigan & Donald, sought to restore the most exuberant of Woodrow's decorative elements, while introducing contemporary features, notably for sound-insulation purposes. The false ceiling in the auditorium was removed, the decorative plasterwork was repaired and dragon's eye lights were replaced, but minimalist perforated steel light fittings were added and a geometric ticket booth was installed in the foyer. Signage clutter and the canopy were removed from the front so as to reveal the entrance arches, and 'The Grand' lettering was reinstated in the original style. The whole building reopened in 1992.¹²⁷

The music venture was only a limited success and the Grand soon changed hands again. In 1996 the Wetherspoons chain fought a long and unsuccessful battle with the planners to convert the theatre into a pub. Meanwhile funding issues thwarted attempts by Moving Theatre, a group that included the actor Corin Redgrave, with Levitt Bernstein as architects, to reinstate the building as a theatre.¹²⁸ In 1998 the Grand was acquired by a property company which leased it to Howard Spencer, who converted it to a nightclub to designs by Marian Black of Architectural Aspirations, a South African firm, with an illuminated glass floor in the auditorium, new bars in place of the sound stage and at circle and balcony level, and fridges and

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waitress service in the boxes. It currently hosts a range of club nights, comedy, big-screen sport and live music.¹²⁹

Later theatres in Battersea

With the conversion of the large former music halls and theatres to cinema, Battersea was without a live theatre venue for much of the twentieth century until the opening of Battersea Arts Centre in 1980 (page xxx). The next decade then saw the advent of two small live-theatre venues. The Bridge Lane Theatre opened in the former Congregational Church on Battersea Bridge Road in 1982. The group Moving Theatre, before unsuccessfully bidding to take over the Grand (see above), produced two plays at Bridge Lane in 1994, but the venue closed later that year.¹³⁰

More lasting has been Theatre503, a studio theatre seating 65 at the Latchmere public house at 503 Battersea Park Road, the integration of theatre with a food and drink venue being key to its character. It was created in 1981–2 by John Burrell, architect, for Lou Stein, artistic director of another pub theatre, the Gate, Notting Hill, extending the first floor of the Latchmere Hotel.¹³¹ Its programme consisted of adaptations (the first, of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, transferred to the West End), new plays and revivals, with late-night comedy and film shows, and exhibition space in the foyer. Its original name of the Gate at the Latchmere changed under new management in 1985 to the Latchmere Theatre, which produced a similar mix of productions, plus children's theatre, some from 1987 by a resident company, the London Actors' Touring Company. Its name changed again in 1992 to the Grace Theatre at the Latchmere as the previous artistic director, Chris Fisher, claimed the right to the name Latchmere Theatre and later registered it, and resisted attempts at reinstatement, the theatre relaunching instead as Theatre503, a home for new writing, in 2002.

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Reviving Battersea's music hall tradition, in 1983 the Jongleurs Comedy Club was opened by Maria Kempinska in the former banqueting hall of Stanley's restaurant at 51–53 Lavender Gardens, by then part of the Cornet of Horse public house.¹³² It was in the vanguard, like the Comedy Store in Covent Garden, of venues providing a platform for the alternative comedians of the 1980s.¹³³ It closed in 2009, having spawned a chain of Jongleurs clubs; the premises are now a theme pub.

Exhibitions

The Albert Palace (demolished)

On a square site bounded north and south by Prince of Wales Drive and Battersea Park Road briefly stood the Albert Palace, a large Victorian exhibition hall or 'people's palace' of the Crystal Palace type. After opening in 1885 it flourished very briefly before the crowds stopped coming and financial failure loomed. It was put up for sale in 1888, but attracted no buyer. Within a few years it had become a shattered ruin, removed in 1894.

The original version of this huge building was erected for the Dublin Exhibition of 1865 to a design won in competition by Alfred G. Jones, a local architect, and reused for the exhibition there in 1872.¹³⁴

In 1882 the Albert Exhibition Palace Limited was formed with £60,000 share capital. It proposed, at a cost of £41,000, taking down the iron portions of the Dublin building (the masonry parts remained there) and re-erecting them on a site next to Battersea Park which though leased to the Victoria

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Dwellings Association had not been used and had therefore been reacquired by the Crown.¹³⁵ The company's managing director was Sir Edward Lee, who had run the Dublin buildings. Much was made of the fact that Prince Albert had reputedly wanted to re-erect the Crystal Palace buildings on this site in 1852; other attractions were the proximity of Battersea Park and ready access by road, tram, rail and river.¹³⁶

Work began in 1883. The following year the company was re-formed – perhaps a portent of its financial instability – as the Albert Palace Association Ltd, with share capital of £150,000.¹³⁷ The Crown now granted the company a 93-year lease of some six acres, which included space for the palace, gardens and building ground on the west side (west of Macduff Road).¹³⁸ The Albert Palace finally opened in June 1885 (III. 6.20).¹³⁹

The Dublin building had to be radically adapted to fit its new site. The plan turned the former L-shape into a long nave, 473ft long, 84ft wide (including the inner aisles which came with the original structure) and 60ft high at the crown. There were new outer aisles of varying height and width, while the polygonal apse from Dublin came halfway along the north or park side (Ills 6.17–19). At the west end was a cross arm known as the Connaught Hall, 163ft north to south, 119ft wide and 58ft high, with aisles and galleries either side, intended for concerts and seating nearly 4,000. The contractors for this 'gigantic Chinese puzzle' were F. Braby & Company, zinc roofing manufacturers, who completed the task in around six months under the supervision of F. J. & H. Francis, architects, and the engineers Bell, Miller & Bell of Glasgow. They altered the construction with their own patent putty-less glazing, adding pale-yellow glass with blue borders to the central barrel-vaulted section of the roof, put in place by Bussell & Gibbs.¹⁴⁰

On the south side, beyond the outer nave aisle ran a new two-storey masonry entrance building by the Francises, with an iron and glass roof, its

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'tame and uninteresting Classic façade' enriched with pilasters and round-headed windows.¹⁴¹ It contained dining and smoking rooms and a 40ft picture gallery, 'one of the best-lighted in London'.¹⁴² This work was undertaken by G. H. & A. Bywaters. Portland stone from the Old Law Courts at Westminster, then being demolished, was used to face the south front, while a dozen veined white-marble Corinthian columns on either side of the large dining hall came from the Kensington mansion of Baron Albert Grant, serial bankrupt and a founder of the original Albert Exhibition company. Christopher Dresser, who in the 1870s had been involved with Sir Edward Lee at Alexandra Palace, contributed stencilled decoration to the interiors.¹⁴³

The Connaught Hall was intended for 'musical entertainments of a high class'. A vast Bryceson organ of more than 4,000 pipes was installed, designed by W. T. Best and originally built for Nathaniel J. Holmes, electrical engineer, organist and inventor of the maritime air-horn, for his house in Primrose Hill. Its size and cost had probably contributed to Holmes's bankruptcy in 1878.¹⁴⁴

Pleasure gardens were laid out on the south side of the palace fronting Battersea Park Road, with paths and flights of steps flanked by urns, cheered up by a Moorish 'band kiosque'.¹⁴⁵ Plans to extend the palace to the west with a large conservatory, aviary and hippodrome 'on the model of that in Paris' were never carried out, but a 'café chantant' or open-air theatre was added in the gardens in 1886.¹⁴⁶

The 'Art Department' was under the care of C. Wentworth Wass, who had held a similar post at the Crystal Palace, and the musical director was Alfred Caldicott, composer of light music and professor of harmony at the Royal College of Music.¹⁴⁷ The picture gallery contained 500 works, none of 'commanding interest', though the display of Louis Desanges' popular paintings of Victoria Cross heroism and sculpture by C. B. Birch were noted.¹⁴⁸

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By the autumn of 1885 Sir Robert Carden the chief debenture-holder, had put the Palace into liquidation to protect himself, although the enterprise struggled on for a couple of years. This, according to Sir Edward Lee, was its downfall. He and the original promoters aimed for 'improving' and 'rational' amusements, the 'physical, moral and intellectual improvement of the masses'.¹⁴⁹ This tone was quickly compromised as commercial realities took over. One unedifying display was an 'Indian Village' of artists and performers from the subcontinent, created by Liberty's as a promotional venture. They were cheated of adequate payment and accommodation and obliged to wear unexotic overcoats and scarves as the palace's heating failed.¹⁵⁰

Under William Holland's management in 1886-7, variety performances and sensational displays – a 'Mythological Living Mermaid' etc – continued alongside baby, cat and pigeon shows and billiard tournaments, political rallies, and grand concerts in the Connaught Hall, but the building was already in the hands of the receiver by the time Holland arrived.¹⁵¹ By October 1887 the premises were reported 'closed and there is no one in charge'; they never reopened.¹⁵² The property was put for sale at auction in 1888, but there were no offers. Nor did a plan to use the buildings for the projected Battersea Polytechnic prove practicable (page xxx).

In 1892-3 an Albert Palace Acquisition Committee, supported by the Prince of Wales and John Burns, attempted to secure the building using an offer of £20,000 from an anonymous donor (later revealed as John Passmore Edwards). Burns's vision of a gymnasium with free concerts and exhibitions within and a bicycle track without came to nothing when the LCC, to be responsible for its upkeep with the Battersea Vestry, would not commit to Edwards's condition that access be free.¹⁵³

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In these circumstances the Office of Works sold the palace's contents for around £1,000 in August 1893.¹⁵⁴ The organ was sold to Charles Henry Walter, who offered it to the Vestry for the new town hall, but it proved too large.¹⁵⁵ Eventually it made a laborious journey from London by special train and steamer down Loch Ness to the Benedictine abbey in Fort Augustus, Inverness-shire.¹⁵⁶ It was removed in 2000 after the abbey closed, and parts were re-erected at St Peter's Catholic Church, Buckie.

Years later Bernard Shaw, who had known the Dublin building in his boyhood, recalled walking through Battersea Park 'one cheerless evening' and coming upon the ruin of the Albert Palace: 'There was something spectral and tragic about it; for all Battersea's boys had thrown all Battersea's stones ... at its million panes, leaving nothing unshattered save its monstrous and miserable skeleton'.¹⁵⁷ The palace was sold for scrap at auction in 1894, the 800 tons of ironwork fetching £900.¹⁵⁸

The grounds were carved up while the palace was still standing, Warriner Gardens being extended eastwards across the site to meet Lurline Gardens, as had been intended before the scheme was dreamed up. The palace site itself was leased in 1894 to C. J. Knowles who built Albert Palace Mansions on the north part and Prince of Wales Mansions on the south in 1898–1900.¹⁵⁹ York Mansions was erected on the northern part of the building land west of Macduff Road and Battersea Polytechnic on the southern part.

Dream City

Not far from the Albert Palace, but even less successful in that it never emerged from the drawing board, was the Dream City, a grandiose amusement park proposed in 1907–8 for the 15-acre Metropolitan Water Board site later occupied by Battersea Power Station.¹⁶⁰

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The flavour of the enterprise was American. Based on Dreamland, the first of the Coney Island amusement parks, it was the brainchild of John Walter Frink Bennett, a young American civil engineer.¹⁶¹ His architect was another American expatriate, Francis S. Swales, designer of the frontage of Selfridges in Oxford Street, who like Bennett had worked on the Ritz hotel.¹⁶²

As with Dreamland on Coney Island, Dream City had a formal layout, the long narrow site dominated by a 'brilliantly illuminated' 200ft tower. The southern third consisted of a lake with ferro-concrete bridge across, and a 'shoot the chutes', a common attraction at American amusement parks including Dreamland, consisting of a ramp down which a flat-bottomed boat slid down into the lake.

Raised walkways were to give access to Battersea Park Road Station and across the railway lines to Chelsea Bridge Road. Bennett's syndicate proposed to concentrate the principal buildings at the northern and southern extremities of the site. These included the first-class restaurant, a long reinforced-concrete building fronted with giant-order columns, à la Selfridges, with a flat roof serving as a raised promenade, set behind a 40ft-wide riverside walkway and landing stage for steamers. In the north-west corner was to be a switchback or scenic railway, cunningly following the contours of one of the old filter beds.

Sites along the long, shallow east and west flanks of the gardens were to include a roller-skating rink and a venue for Hengler's Circus (soon to be ejected from Argyll Street for the new London Palladium), a group of 'exotic' villages and 'The Days of Queen Elizabeth Pageant'. Smaller plots at the south end were to house open-fronted booths for both traditional and non-traditional amusement-park attractions – coconut shy, Aunt Sally, rifle range, cinematograph, phonograph, etc.

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Swales's perspective (III. 6.21) suggests Dream City was to be in an Edwardian wedding-cake Beaux-Arts manner redolent of his training in France and the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition at White City. The style, with large metal windows, also reflected the light-steel construction of this and the syndicate's other proposed buildings. The framing was to be cased up to 6ft 6in in solid concrete or plaster blocks, above which the front facings were to be in 'staff' – a mixture of combed manila fibre and plaster of paris, standard for exhibition buildings. Side and rear walls, however, were in humble corrugated iron.

The LCC approved the idea in November 1907 but by April 1908 it had foundered. Perhaps the prospect of the Franco-British exhibition, opened the following month, offered too much competition: boosted by Olympic Games, hosted on the same site, the White City exhibition attracted eight million visitors.¹⁶³

Cinemas

As a suburban transport hub and, until the last quarter of the twentieth century, a predominantly working-class district, Battersea had its fair share of cinemas. These evolved in a typical way from 'exhibitions' in fairgrounds and 'turns' on variety programmes, through the first permanent cinema buildings in converted music halls and shops to small purpose-built electric theatres to the final manifestation, at least in Battersea, in the shape of the sleek curves of the Granada on St John's Hill. The second half of the twentieth century saw a rapid decline in cinema-going in Britain from a peak in 1946 to a nadir in 1984. By the time of the 1990s revival, Battersea's last cinema had closed. Across London the inner suburban cinema has never recovered.

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The earliest recorded showing of a film in Battersea was in 1897 at that most traditional of music halls, the Washington in York Road (see above). This pattern of a temporary cinematograph machine erected in a more-or-less fireproof iron booth was followed also at the New Grand and Shakespeare Theatres. Following on from a tradition of educational magic-lantern shows given in church halls in Battersea from the mid 1870s, the cinematograph was also popular for instruction, and it was mainly for this purpose that ‘oxy-hydrogen lantern illustrations and animated photographs’ were exhibited in the main hall of Battersea Town Hall from 1899.¹⁶⁴ Presentations of ‘animated pictures’ were also made in the hall of the Polytechnic between 1901 and 1910 by John Nevil Maskelyne, the famous illusionist, Battersea resident and inventor of the pay toilet, and his partners George Cooke and David Devant.¹⁶⁵

Some evidence of circus and fairground cinema shows in Battersea also survives. In February 1908 **Purchase’s travelling menagerie** was installed at Manley’s Yard, Cabul Road, then home of a gypsy encampment.¹⁶⁶ As well as lions, wolves, hyenas, monkeys and camels, Purchase’s displayed an American Bioscope Show, which had formed part of the Purchase family’s entertainments since at least 1899.¹⁶⁷ An equally casual arrangement for showing films – which in the Purchase menagerie case was in a naphtha-lit canvas tent with wooden benches for 200, the projector unprotected – was found at Frederick Gray’s showground of steam roundabouts and swings in 1910–11 on a site behind 222 Lavender Hill.¹⁶⁸ This canvas and wood tent did at least have a projection booth lined in iron, which earned it its LCC licence.

By this time, however, cinema was already establishing an independent identity and its first permanent buildings. Battersea’s first full-time picture theatre was also one of its longest-lasting. Beginning life in 1880 as the Bolingbroke Hall, an assembly room built behind shops at 7–13 Northcote Road, the **Bio-Picture Palace** was opened in 1907 by Frank Ogden

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Smith, who had various businesses in St John's Hill and Northcote Road selling sports goods, records, fireworks and cinema equipment, among other things.¹⁶⁹

More typical of Battersea, indeed of London, were the 'profusion of small, cheap and somewhat rudimentary cinemas' which sprang up in converted premises, mostly shops. These small, relatively low-cost, low-key shop conversions made little splash on the street, with simple arched, open frontages and a tiny paybox.¹⁷⁰

Such were the **Surrey Bioscope** and the optimistically named **Albert Picture Palace**, both on Battersea Park Road (Ills 6.22, 23). Despite its tiny size the Surrey Bioscope, which opened in 1909 at 222 Battersea Park Road, near the junction with Albert Bridge Road, ran to a raconteur to interpret the silent films. The Albert Picture Palace at 229 Battersea Park Road was just 14ft wide and 54ft deep, partly in the former shop's projecting bungalow shopfront. Originally, in 1909, it sported the usual double ranks of seats either side of a narrow gangway. There was no rake to the rows of seats, and its owner, David Mabey, complained that patrons seated to the rear were wont to stand on the seats for a better view. To placate the LCC in 1910 Mabey had improvement plans drawn up by the Clapham architect E. W. Collins, with the seating all to one side of a wider gangway. In the middle of the room were to be two smarter rows of tip-up seats in the middle, and a gramophone placed centrally for sound effects – there was no room for a piano or organ. A new operating chamber was to be built against the shop's rear wall in a yard that also housed an outside WC. The films were projected through a former window to a screen by the entrance door. It was a constant battle to render such buildings fireproof: this was especially difficult here as the basement and first-floor flat of No. 227 extended laterally under and over the cinema. The LCC committee seems not to have enforced the rules as rigorously as with larger enterprises and often seems to have given small cinemas time to make

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amendments, a reflection also of the difficulty of making such operations profitable: Mabey appears never to have implemented Collins' design.¹⁷¹

There were other conversions that did have more pretensions. The **Junction Picture Palace** at 311 Lavender Hill offered uniformed commissionaires and a frontage lit with three arc lamps, 'quite the most striking signals on the hill'. Both the **Biograph** at St John's Road and the **Electroscope Palace** founded in 1908 at 156 Falcon Road had brightly lit frontages with carved decoration reminiscent of a fairground.¹⁷²

Purpose-built cinemas were not long in coming. Within a space of 18 months three had arrived within half a mile of Clapham Junction. The Electroscope was rebuilt in 1909 to seat 800.¹⁷³ The Clapham Junction Cinematograph, later known as the **Empire**, opened on part of the old LCC tram depot site at Clapham Junction in 1910 (Rice & Son, builder), after various grandiose schemes, which would have covered the whole site with a skating rink, ballroom and cinema to seat around 2,000, had failed. The Empire, although it had only a narrow street frontage as it sat on a tapering site, was a plush and decorative building with 800 'extremely comfortable tip-up seats', a mark of its relative luxury.¹⁷⁴ On a similar scale was the Gem, or **Lavender Hill Picture House**, at 103 Lavender Hill – a corner site in front of the Essex wallpaper factory – which was built in 1910 for Picture Exhibitions Ltd, who 'proposed to give a high class cinematograph exhibition accompanied by a pianist, also singing pictures'.¹⁷⁵ It was designed by Freeman & Company, surveyors, of Belgravia, who modishly treated the corner site with giant Ionic columns in antis to the domed circular pavilion entrance and the two frontages.

Between 1914 and 1918 at least nine cinemas in Battersea closed but the exigencies of war were only obliquely responsible. The reason was partly economies of scale as patrons demanded increasing, and expensive, comfort: the numbers that closed in 1917, following the introduction of the 1916

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Entertainments Tax, suggest that profit margins were tight. The tax, a wartime measure that persisted until 1960, at first disproportionately affected the cheaper venues prevalent in Battersea. Yet not only the tiny shop conversions but also their plusher, large-scale rivals succumbed; the Gem, the Empire and Fabbro's had all closed by 1930.¹⁷⁶

Emblematic of cinema's development in Battersea and London at large was the Electric Pavilion, usually known as the **Pavilion**, which opened on the site of Gray's fairground at 222 Lavender Hill in the unpromising year of 1916.¹⁷⁷ Its imposing triumphal-arch frontage to Lavender Hill, 65ft wide (Ill. 6.25) – a south London Arch of Constantine – was designed by Harry Harrington.¹⁷⁸ Despite its sober, stripped-classical character, it was as much a fairground confection as the Electroscope's shiny façade, and within a few years bits were dropping off on to Lavender Hill. Moreover it led not into some echoing aula but a low, top-lit foyer. Using the fall of the land away from Lavender Hill, Harrington squeezed in two storeys behind the foyer, accommodating a café and WCs on the ground floor; offices, staff, caretaker's and projectionist's rooms above; and beyond these an auditorium accommodating 1,300, decorated in a similar George V classical manner.

Plans for a grand extension by Frank Matcham & Company in 1926–8 – comprising a huge balcony that would have increased the seating by nearly 1,000 and jazzed up the décor – came to nothing.¹⁷⁹ A Compton organ was, however, added, reflecting the desire of cinema managements to diversify their entertainments. Audiences were no longer satisfied with a raconteur or gramophone accompaniment. When talkies arrived at the end of the 1920s, several cinemas added proper stages and dressing rooms and added or enlarged orchestra pits and projection rooms. Those best placed to respond to the changing world were the converted theatres and music halls that had space for these embellishments. The Globe in Northcote Road (the former Bolingbroke Hall) was rebuilt in 1929–31 to seat nearly 900, with stage

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and dressing rooms for ‘occasional’ music hall acts, a late work by Bertie Crewe (job architect, W. W. Gibbings).¹⁸⁰

The Radium, a converted workshop and stables that opened in 1910 at 105–107 York Road, survived as a cinema through the 1920s, probably because it was in the heart of working-class north Battersea. It closed in 1931, but enjoyed an afterlife as the first home of the Battersea Central Methodist Mission, which later moved to new premises (with cinema facilities) on the other side of York Road (page xxx).¹⁸¹

Apart from the converted theatres and music halls, only the Pavilion, Northcote Road Globe and the Granada (see below), survived to the Second World War. Along with all public entertainment venues, the Pavilion closed at the beginning of the war, reopening in 1941 only to be largely destroyed by the bomb that fell near by on Lavender Hill at lunchtime on 29 August 1944; this would have killed considerably more than the 28 who died, if the cinema had been open. The Globe became the Century in 1951 and closed in 1963 to be converted to a small supermarket; none of its cinema features survives.¹⁸²

The last cinema in operation in Battersea was the Ruby, the former Munt’s Hall at 9 St John’s Hill, which hung on until 1981 (see above). Running it a close second was the more prominent Granada at the corner of St John’s Hill and Plough Road, which opened in 1937 and closed as a cinema in 1980. The Granada qualifies as Battersea’s only supercinema, but it might have had a major rival if an Odeon planned for Clapham Junction had not been thwarted by the war.¹⁸³

Granada Cinema, St John’s Hill

The departure of Battersea Grammar School to Streatham in 1936 (page xxx) freed up this spacious corner site above Clapham Junction. That year the

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architect Frederick C. Mitchell submitted plans for a 'variety cinema' on behalf of Samuel Harrison and Henry Defries, a partnership typical of the small firms for whom Mitchell designed cinemas in the 1930s. The plan was to offer films and live entertainment in a building to accommodate 3,000, with a curved entrance at the corner of St John's Hill and Plough Road, full stage and fly tower at the east end of the site, three floors of dressing rooms, a scene dock and a double-height main foyer overlooked by an upper balcony (III. 6.27).

Excavation was underway by Bovis in 1937 when the Bernstein Group, owners of the Granada chain, took over the project from Harrison and Defries. Mitchell at first continued as their architect, submitting revised plans with better sightlines and a slight reduction in the seating to increase legroom. The new design provided for a first-floor café to seat 150 (later reduced to 100) over the corner entrance, lit by a ribbon of tall windows. Then, just two months before the cinema opened, Leslie C. Norton and his assistant H. B. Horner took over as architects. When the cinema opened on 8 November 1937, it was the third largest Granada after Tooting and Walthamstow, on a par with the Granada in Woolwich.¹⁸⁴

Mitchell's brick exterior was in a spare *moderne* manner with discreet streamlining (III. 6.28). The inside was quite different, the work of the Russian émigré theatre producer and stage designer Theodore Komisarjevsky, master of inter-war cinema decoration (III. 6.26).¹⁸⁵ Komisarjevsky had worked for Sidney Bernstein, Granada's owner, since 1927 and partly because of Bernstein's distaste for modernism had evolved a fantasy-palace manner, variously Gothic, Moorish, Renaissance – even, on occasion, De Stijl.

Battersea had never seen a cinema like the Granada for scale or lavishness. Though less startling than the Gothic tours de force at Tooting and Woolwich, it featured Bernstein's favoured heavily mirrored foyer. The decoration was in Komisarjevsky's lush Renaissance manner, the plaster

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stone-coloured, the mouldings lifted by touches of red, green and gold leaf. Rising up in front of the stage front was an eight-rank Wurlitzer organ.¹⁸⁶

The stage facilities and sixteen dressing rooms allowed the Granada to operate as a proper variety cinema into the 1950s and feature regular pantomimes, and occasional opera and ballet productions. Parts of the public areas were hived off for offices in 1962–3, reflecting falling cinema attendances. Permission for conversion to a supermarket was refused in 1968.¹⁸⁷

In 1973 the building became the first Granada to be converted into a three-screen cinema, by walling off the under-balcony area to make two smaller screens. Nevertheless it closed in 1980, when conversion to a bingo hall saw the auditorium reinstated as a single space.¹⁸⁸ The bingo hall closed in 1997. In the ensuing years the building stood empty, occasionally vandalised during illegal raves. Then in 2003–12 came a protracted redevelopment.¹⁸⁹

The first scheme, of 2003, by Assael Architects for Grange Estates, proposed a giant semi-circular roof extension. This was gradually revised from 2007 under new owners, Henley Homes, to a more respectful glass box of flats over the central part of the auditorium roof, with a smaller box over the fly tower, also converted into flats. Further flats have been built along the blank north side. The roof extension ‘floats’ over the auditorium, supported on long steel trusses and concrete columns. Windows have been inserted in the north-east walls, and a new staircase tower has been built on the east. Much of the ancillary space around the auditorium was intended for offices and retailing, to finance the restoration of the auditorium, which was adapted in 2010–12 by Cameron Black, contractors, to the designs of TMD Design Consultancy for a Nigerian church, the Deeper Christian Life Ministry. Acoustic screens beneath the balcony create discrete office and prayer space. The stage has been extended to incorporate a large walk-in baptistry in the

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position of the orchestra pit, while Komisarjevsky's painted plasterwork has been cleaned and repaired.¹⁹⁰

Other places of entertainment

As in other predominantly working-class areas of London, the story of popular recreation in Battersea since the late nineteenth century is dominated by the rise and fall of cinema. Other amusements tended to be more transitory. There were brief periods – the late 1870s was one, around 1910 another – when for a year or so Britain was gripped by ‘the rinking craze’, and venues converted for roller skating. A rink in Vardens Road attracted complaints on the grounds that it was a residential area and the noise from hundreds of people skating around a wooden rink was considerable. It later became a billiard hall. A 1909 scheme for a large temporary iron building to house a rink at Gray’s showground behind 222 Lavender Hill (see above) came to nothing.¹⁹¹ Ten years earlier the Felix Institute on the same site offered cycling lessons and boasted ‘the finest track in London for learning’.¹⁹²

Wessex House, 1–3 St John’s Hill

This warehouse-like building set back from St John’s Hill behind single-storey shops has operated as an entertainment venue since the 1880s.¹⁹³ It began as a billiard-table factory, erected by a Lambeth builder, William Read, in 1874–5 for Arthur Stevens, a partner in Stevens & Sons, a firm with premises in Villiers Street and Great Scotland Yard.¹⁹⁴

Stevens retired from the partnership in 1889, when the business acquired further quarters in the West End and works in Chatham Road, but

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he personally retained the St John's Hill premises. That year they were largely rebuilt to include a public hall at the rear (Crichton Hall), used for dances, meetings and lectures, with a billiard hall and workshops on the floors above, and a pair of single-storey shops extending forward to align with Francis & Co.'s new premises next door.¹⁹⁵ By 1907 Crichton Hall had become Arding & Hobbs's second-hand furniture department, and the top floor its workshops for repairing carpets and making soft furnishings. The billiard hall was then still operating in between, but by 1925 it was a banqueting hall.¹⁹⁶

In 1933 the site was acquired by Express Dairies for whom the architects William Woodward & Sons altered the buildings to approximately their current form, opening up the rear of the western shop to make a tea-room for the sale 'of light refreshments and dairy produce', and converting the banqueting hall into 'Express Hall', a dining and dance hall with sprung maple floor. Surviving woodwork and coloured glass date from this time.¹⁹⁷ After several years of semi-dereliction, the buildings were converted in the mid 1970s as a masonic hall, nightclub, dance and exercise hall, and amusement arcade, and given the name Wessex House.¹⁹⁸ A project to replace the building with a mixed-use scheme by Nagan Johnson, architects, in 2004 was rejected by the planners.¹⁹⁹

Temperance Billiard Hall, 66C Battersea Rise

Until 1995 this site was occupied by a spacious billiard hall, built in 1922 for Temperance Billiard Halls, founded in Manchester in 1906 as part of a movement to prise the game away from its traditional home, the pub. They also had a hall in Vardens Road in the 1930s, in the former roller-skating rink, and their headquarters survive in a mutilated state at 638-640 Wandsworth Road, Lambeth. By the Second World War the company had 26 halls, but the movement was on the wane. The Battersea hall was built on the site of some

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cottages behind 60–64 Battersea Rise to the designs of George Spencer & Wildman, architects, in the jaunty, old-fashioned, Art Nouveau-ish manner favoured by the company (Ill. 6.30).²⁰⁰ The symmetrical frontage gave access to the billiard hall via a passage between shopfronts. It was tiled in green, black and white, with a semicircular pediment, a dentil cornice and an octagonal tower with a copper dome. The hall itself, with a frontage of alternating bands of brick and roughcast to Limburg Road, was a single-storey squareish building with an asymmetrical metal-trussed M-roof lit by a low, wide rank of dormers; the hall housed seventeen tables – a fact recorded on the Battersea Rise frontage.

Though it became a Mecca bingo hall in 1967, it reverted in 1982 to almost its original use, as a snooker hall.²⁰¹ In 1995 the whole building was demolished and replaced by a pub and leisure building with four new terraced houses designed by Assael Architecture.²⁰² The houses facing Limburg Road are in an unexpectedly pleasing post-modern manner in stock brick with triangular bays and gables, while the single-storey Battersea Rise frontage closely replicates the billiard hall. The pub is currently called The Goat.

Battersea Stadium, Lombard Road (demolished)

For a few years in the 1930s the site that is now Fred Wells Gardens operated as a modest greyhound-racing track. Backing on to the railway, the former builder's yard at 15 & 17 Lombard Road had been a running track (the Star Athletic Grounds) in the 1890s. The dog-track opened in 1933 despite opposition from the Vicar of Battersea and the warden of the Katherine Low Settlement, who complained that it would affect the 'morals' of people living there and bring in undesirables.²⁰³

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Not that there was ever much to the so-called 'Stadium', which normally attracted a crowd of around 200, although it could accommodate 700.²⁰⁴ As the site was wider at its east end, the track was irregular and various small structures, including kennels, were clustered near the Lombard Road entrance (Ill. 6.31). As well as greyhound racing the stadium hosted boxing matches. Despite the amenity of a covered steel-framed stand, added on the railway embankment side in 1935, it closed the next year. Application was made to renew the licence in 1939 but withdrawn, apparently because the military opposed the reopening: the railway bridge by its entrance was considered a sabotage risk. In 1942 it was being adapted as a recreation ground by boys from Battersea Central Mission.²⁰⁵ It was used for storage and light industry for many years, before being laid out in the early 1980s by Wandsworth Council as a public open space (page xxx).