

## PJC BOOK REVIEW 15

### Boxed set:

A. Saint (ed.), *Survey of London, Vol. 49* –

*Battersea Part 1: Public, Commercial and Cultural*, pp. 480

ISBN 978-0-300-19616-0 (hdbk)

C. Thom (ed.), *Survey of London, Vol. 50* –

*Battersea Part 2: Houses and Housing*, pp. 500

ISBN 978-0-300-19617-7 (hdbk)

(publ. for English Heritage by Yale University Press, London, 2013)

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although the message is unchanged.*

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To call these two large Battersea volumes, in their boxed set, a sumptuous production is a gross understatement. Yale University Press has done the editors, the contributors and the sponsors, English Heritage, absolutely proud. The two books are elegantly designed and admirably supported by plentiful maps, clear diagrams, and superb illustrations, both in colour and in black-and-white. As a paired set, they offer a cornucopia of invaluable information about all aspects of Battersea's topographical and architectural history.

True, these weighty volumes are not light reading, in either sense of the phrase. They follow the *Survey of London* format in their Victorian dedication (the series began in the 1890s) to amassing immense detail, much for reference

as well as for analysis. As a result, some of the general wood does get lost in the trees. And a lot of social/cultural history is glimpsed, rather tantalisingly, in the oblique gaze of the architectural historian, rather than confronted directly. Yet it is churlish and also pointless to demand of a long-established research series that it be something other than it is. So this reviewer has delved into the volumes to survey the Survey, especially as it will interest Battersea residents.

Volume 49 starts with a short overview of the area's long history, observing correctly that 'The Thames holds the key to Battersea's origins as well as to its industrial development' (Vol. 49, p. 11). It ranges from early manorial history, speeding on to the political career of John Burns, the first working-class man to gain cabinet office in Britain (he gets rather short shrift in this account), and on to the gentrification of the area in the later twentieth century.

In a welcome innovation for the Survey, the chapters in this volume are arranged not topographically but thematically. They survey in turn: Battersea's public buildings, especially, of course, the impressive Town Hall; its buildings for health and welfare; its churches; and its educational institutions. Among these, there is a very brief notice of the pioneering one-room infant school built at St Mark's in 1866 (Vol. 49, p. 124) – which is now in urgent need of care and attention. Two good chapters then resume the tale with information about parks/open spaces; and buildings for entertainment, before a weighty trio punch out more data relating to railways; industry and engineering; and the ever-photogenic Battersea Power Station.

There are plenty of fascinating snippets for local history quiz questions. Readers, do you know that the footwear worn by Wellington's troops at Waterloo were made in Marc Brunel's high-tech Battersea boot-factory and that the coming of peace left him bankrupted with an excess of unwanted boots? Well, read about it, in Vol. 49, pp. 342-3.

Hardly pausing for breath, the Survey's attention then turns to commerce. Shopping in Clapham Junction is an obvious theme; as is the infrastructural role of the relocated New-Covent-Garden-Market-in-Nine-Elms. Close to the end, the heliport gets a brief two pages. And this volume offers a final six pages on current plans for the redevelopment of Nine Elms, with the cautious verdict 'too soon to judge'.

Volume 50 slices the cake topographically. That makes it good on local detail, while making it more difficult to keep the overall picture in mind. Hence the introduction (Vol. 50, pp. 1-31) provides an essential framing to the two big periods of building boom: the later nineteenth century and the later twentieth century, continuing, especially along the riverside, into the twenty-first century. The history is well told.

However, there is one striking omission in the general account of the 1970s turnaround in the area's residential desirability. The disappearance of the once-notorious 'Battersea Smell', once the 1968 Clean Air Act came into implementation, is not highlighted. (It appears as a detail in Vol. 49, p. 358 but nowhere else in either volume). But the passing of the 'Battersea Smell' was crucial in freeing the area for more fashionable residential development, even while it signalled the disappearance of many industrial jobs. The odour was a true blight, which seemed to cling to the skin. It was compounded from a mix of factory effluents, brewer's yeast, oil-refinery fumes, laundry vapours, coal-dust, smoke, gas, traffic exhaust, and smelly rubbish depots, all bound together by the particularly cloying, sickly, viscous stench from Garton's Starch Factory. Phew! Once smelt, never forgotten.

Then, in calm detail, Volume 50 divides its material on Houses and Housing topographically, starting with North & East Battersea, before moving onto South & West. The well-studied and well-loved Shaftesbury Estate gets a fine chapter to itself (Vol. 50, pp. 251-75) while shorter sections deal, turn by turn, with less famous areas – such as the Poyntz Road Triangle, 'an oasis of

1870s houses’ with its ‘pinched mid-Victorian workers’ houses ... now quite rare’ (Vol. 50, pp. 181, 185-6).

Between them, the efforts of landowners, builders, developers, speculators, industrialists, traders, service-professionals, an array of public institutions (both secular and religious), the utilities, the municipality, and the various layers of planning controls, plus of course the successive generations of residents, including those who neglect and those who redevelop whether airily upwards into loft conversions or downwards into basements in the Thames gravel-beds, have produced a pell-mell history of change, which shows no sign of ceasing. But there are also continuities, partly dependent upon the terrain and location, which emerge throughout the interstices of the story.

Lastly, a note on tone: the brisk chapters all appear to be written by middle-class outsiders to the area, who view themselves as somewhat intrepid social explorers. Thus the contributors to the volume generally have kind words for owners-occupiers, who care for their buildings, while tending to be a bit sniffy about tenants, especially on the Council estates. (See for example, its account of the Doddington Estate in Vol. 50, pp. 175-7). The fact that great cities need an industrial, commercial and service workforce which also forms an integral part of any urban community is underplayed. Battersea is said, accurately enough, to have lost its old socialist tradition, created in the early twentieth-century by the workers employed en masse on the industrial riverside. But the area is also declared, challengingly, to have lost since then its ‘sense of independent identity’ (Vol. 49, p. 25).

Perhaps that’s what things look like from north of the river. Yet Battersea residents do not regard the south bank as dangerous *terra incognita*. It is a fascinating area with more than one identity today – and maybe in the future its multiple identities may be reforged into one.