

# Battersea Matters

the newsletter of the Battersea Society SUMMER 2015



## Fire ravages Battersea Arts Centre

Despite the devastation, the future is bright, says BAC's development manager, Anne Wareing



**F**riday, 13 March, 2015, 4.17pm. I'm at the top of Town Hall Road with my colleagues and bystanders, and we're staring in collective shock as flames lick the roof of Battersea Arts Centre's Grand Hall. Sirens ring out from all directions to herald the arrival of the London Fire Brigade, who seem to fly into action before we can even register that they're here. Suddenly the air is thick with billowing black clouds, the flames have grown into massive, blinding waves, and my heart stops beating as the tower atop the roof collapses into itself, opening a gaping hole. Some of us break into sobs as we're ushered away by the police, as it's now too dangerous to remain on the pavement by the burning building. It's 4.28pm, and we're hit with an impossible realisation: we've lost the Grand Hall.

But somehow, just 26 hours later, the front half of the building is open, and we're welcoming

**Above: The fire consuming the roof of the Grand Hall. Below: BAC staff gather to send a heart-felt message**

hundreds of people in to see a sold-out show, to drink at the bar, to feel the heart of BAC still beating. As I stand in the foyer I can't quite believe it.

### Spirit

But just like the other times throughout its 120-year-life that our building was in peril, the community came to its aid. Kazim, the owner of Cafe Parisienne, gave tea and food to the London Fire Brigade and the

police as they fought to save the front half of our historic building; Battersea Labour MP candidate Will Martindale, let the staff team use his offices late into the night to make emergency plans; two little girls stood on Lavender Hill the day after the fire and sold cookies to raise money for our relief fund; thousands of supporters from across the world offered to help in any way we needed. And of course, the brave men and women who fought for hours to protect as much of our building as they could, who miraculously saved our beautiful glass dome and the entire front half of the building. All of these people made it possible for us to keep going.

### Battersea's motto

Even while the fire still raged, our artistic director David Jubb urged us to look to the future. I was awed by his determination and strength. He and his wife, like countless other couples, were married in the once-Grand Hall, now reduced to ash and debris. He showed us how to be brave by acknowledging tragedy while embracing opportunity. It has been – will continue to be – full of challenges. But it will also prove, many years from now, to be living proof of Battersea's motto: Not for me, not for you, but for us.

The future is becoming a little clearer every day. We can now plan to send salvage teams into the site of the fire to rescue pieces of the Grand Hall. Our architects Haworth Tompkins, working closely with English Heritage and Wandsworth Council, are starting to imagine what our future Grand Hall will look like, and the spaces we will occupy in the meantime.

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**Don't forget to visit our website: [batterseasociety.org.uk](http://batterseasociety.org.uk) for regular updates on Battersea Society news, events and planning matters**

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## From the editor



The weather may not have been very clement in May and early June, but there was so much to do that it hardly mattered. First

there was the Fringe Arts Festival, bigger and better than ever this year, closely followed by the Heritage Festival. And in the autumn we will have the opportunity of exploring local artists' studios or homes in Wandsworth's Open Studios event (first two weekends in October). As with the Yellow Book/National Garden Scheme gardens, it is always fascinating to snoop around someone else's work place! Speaking of the Yellow Book, once again there are no gardens to visit in SW11....

This issue of *Battersea Matters* opens and closes with arts centres, one in our own area, the other on our doorstep. BAC is established as a venue that puts on thrilling theatre (remember *Masque of the Red Death*, or the Good Neighbour walk?) and is also deeply involved in its local community. Its teenage Beatbox Academy gave a fantastic performance at the fund-raising evening at the Festival Hall. Omnibus, on Clapham Common, is the new kid on the block. I have been to several hugely enjoyable performances there, ranging from Chopin to *Withering Looks*, a brilliant comedy about the Bronte sisters.

By the time you read this, the Formula E racing in Battersea Park will be upon us. There has been disquiet locally about the 'chaotic' set-up phase. As you know, the Society has stated its objections

clearly to the council. Once the event itself and its dismantling are complete we will review the whole process and object to a renewal if appropriate. We'll keep you posted.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the Battersea Society's annual summer party on Thursday 16 July, 6.30 – 9pm.

[batterseasociety.org.uk](http://batterseasociety.org.uk)  
020 7350 2749

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Albert Irvin RA, OBE, my friend and neighbour of 40 years, whom I interviewed for *Battersea Matters* Summer 2013, sadly died on 26 March this year.

He left those who knew him bereft, but with wonderful memories of his joyful and sociable personality. His powerful paintings and prints are a lasting legacy all over the world.  
*Suzanne Perkins*

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## Man on the Battersea Bus

Now how to amuse them today... That's always a good starting point when writing one of these inconsequential pieces. The words are Christopher Robin's, as he chuckles gleefully at the end of A A Milne's poem *Sneezles*, a favourite of our four-year-old grandson. Introduce them early to poetry! My own long-ago career as an aspiring poet came back to me a few weeks ago when courtesy of the phenomenon called Social Media we found ourselves in Holborn in the rather austere setting of Swedenborg Hall listening to a poet reading from her new collection. She also happened to be the person who introduced us to each other forty-six years ago when we were all students involved with the university's Poetry society. We had come along unannounced, and as we came up to her she eyed us cautiously until suddenly recognition dawned and her face lit up; 'It's you two – and you're still together!'

I didn't quite feel transformed into the slim, long haired, handsome young hippie poet I once imagined myself to be, but as we shared experiences it was interesting to reflect how little we all had really

changed. The same cannot of course be said for places. The small Thames-side village that was Battersea has endured a continual cycle of change. The days when you could buy all you needed in your own neighbourhood are just a memory.

### Estate agents

Soon the only shops on our streets will be estate agents, as everything else succumbs to their lure. Even restaurants are not immune. And new establishments, like the recent arrival in Battersea Square have no menu in their windows, presumably on the grounds that if you need to ask the price, you can't afford it. While all the time Battersea marches inexorably and expensively towards the skies. One day perhaps minstrels will sing wistfully 'where have all the towers gone...' but that day will be a long time a-coming.

In April some of you braved the rigours of the seating at Theatre 503 when I led an expedition to see a dystopian black comedy called *Animals* envisaging a world where elderly people need a certificate to prove they're not ready to be



dispatched by the 'utility inspector'. It was an ambitious – and timely – idea, though a few in our party felt that it had lost its way a little. But I relished the picture of a world where the older members of the society fight back tenaciously against the establishment which has written them off, even to the extent of following the lessons of Mrs Lovett in *Sondheim's Sweeney Todd*.

We have just returned from rural Hampshire after a week in a large and rather eccentric house surrounded by woodland, in the company of our daughters and their families. The big hit for our grandchildren was a heated outdoor swimming pool.

My own highlight came during a visit to nearby Chawton House, where Jane Austen spent the last years of her life. It was here that she finished her greatest novels, their publication bringing her the only money she had ever earned. By the front window of this modest cottage on the village street was a small octagonal table. It was from here that she kept an eye out of the window at life going on outside, while writing with a quill pen. It was strangely moving, life-enhancing to think of her sitting there. And I suppose – in her own way – she used to wonder, 'how shall I amuse them today'.

## BAC fire

*continued from page 1*

And we are developing a business model that will see us through the unknown challenges ahead, while we continue to be a home for world-class theatre and for the local community. It will take three years of hard work to bring the Grand Hall to life again. When it rises from the ashes it will be a monument to the strength of our community and a home for everyone.

### Phoenix Fund

Fortunately, the bricks and mortar, our technical equipment, and two years of revenue loss will be covered by our insurers. However, this will not be enough on its own, as anyone



who has been affected by this kind of disaster will know. That's why support from our incredible funders, support from the government (secured brilliantly by MP Jane Ellison and former Culture Secretary Sajid Javid) and from the wider BAC family is so important. So far, we've raised over £810,000 for the Phoenix Fund, which will help the organisation face the challenges that come from the loss of so much of our home. For the

next three years, we will be without our most valuable space, but we are determined to keep all our activities going throughout. As David said in his blog in March, the fire has made us 'fight even harder for what we believe in,' rather than forcing us to throw in the towel.

Ongoing support from incredible people enables us to continue to be a cradle for creativity, to inspire people from all walks of life to take creative risks, to shape a better future.

*If you'd like to know more, or to support Battersea Arts Centre, visit [www.bac.org.uk](http://www.bac.org.uk) or contact Anne Wareing at [annew@bac.org.uk](mailto:annew@bac.org.uk).*

## The £10 lunch: Soif

Carol Rahn enjoyed the melt-in-the mouth chicken

Inserted in the line of restaurants along Battersea Rise that serve Generation Rent is Soif, younger sister to the well-regarded Terroirs wine bar and restaurant near Trafalgar Square. All in aid of *Battersea Matters* readers, I ventured there recently with two fellow Battersea Society members to try out the £10 Chef's Special lunch. Available Tuesday through Friday, this includes one entrée, along with a glass of wine and a cup of tea or coffee.

### Sourdough

On offer on 14 May was chicken schnitzel, resting on rocket, courgette, capers & lemon. Our expectations were exceeded almost immediately after ordering, when a basket of bread appeared. Even better, the bread proved to be excellent sourdough and those who wished to indulge themselves could

slide their knife into top quality butter with tiny crystals of salt.

If it hadn't been the lunch special, chicken schnitzel would not likely be my choice. Oh, but what a delicious choice it proved to be – biting into a crust that any cook would envy – melt in your mouth soft, yet still with a crunch. The chicken it was wrapped around was perfectly cooked and moist. The courgette, to be fair, was barely discernible, more texture than taste. But the rocket and capers brought the right piquancy to rich olive oil. Not a morsel remained on any of our three plates, despite the generously-sized portions. Both the red wine and the white wine on offer were well chosen to suit the food. The macchiato that followed, I'm told, was just right – plenty of froth, without milk. The espresso, too, passed muster.

The décor at Soif is a slightly



rustic, eclectic collection of French café tables and wooden school chairs. There are a couple of tables outside; inside there are tables and a bar in the front room, and a further few tables with a view into the kitchen down a short flight of stairs. Service is relaxed, friendly and professional. At lunch, not many other diners vie for attention but Soif certainly offers a £10 lunch special that we would recommend.

*Soif, 27 Battersea Rise, SW11  
020 7223 1112*

### HOW PERCY WON HIS PRIZE

The *Wandsworth Historian* (spring 2015) gives a fine example of the amount of information that can be gained from a simple label inside a book found in a second-hand book sale. It revealed that the book was a prize awarded in 1879 to Percy Taylor,

a 10-year-old pupil at Sleaford Street School, Battersea. He won it not for excellence in English or mathematics but simply for turning up. Parents frequently expected their children to go out to work and attendance was only 80% in the 1870s. The authors of the article mined yet more information from the label about life

in Victorian working-class Battersea.

Another article in the *WH* looks at a scouring powder made on St John's Grove in the 1920s that poisoned its makers.

*The WH is obtainable from its editor,  
Neil Robson [ngrobson@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:ngrobson@tiscali.co.uk)*

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## L'Entente Cordiale in Wandsworth

Did Battersea help win the Battle of Waterloo?  
Find out with Catherine Rawlinson

Battersea has become a popular destination for French people wanting to live and work in the UK; in 2012 over 3,000 French people were registered to vote in the local elections in Wandsworth. But how new is this phenomenon?

Ever since the Norman Conquest the French have been coming to London. After the conquest, new monasteries were implanted in England by French religious orders. One was built in Tooting by Benedictine monks from Bec Hellouin Abbey in Normandy, which was at the time very prestigious and influential. The word Bec, in the name Tooting Bec, derives from that Abbey and is all that is left of its former presence in this now multi-cultural part of London.

### Hat making

The French often came to London as refugees. Principal among them were the Huguenots, the French Protestants persecuted in Catholic France for their religion. From the middle of the 17th century, Huguenots settled in Wandsworth along the river Wandle, where the special quality of the water was good for dyeing. Hat making was already a major trade in Wandsworth and the Huguenots improved it when they arrived, producing very high quality hats which were exported to Europe. Ironically the Catholic cardinals in Rome had their scarlet hats made by the Huguenots of Wandsworth! The Huguenots also had other businesses, such as market gardening along the Thames in Battersea, Wandsworth and Chelsea.

It is estimated that at the beginning of the 18th century, up to 20% of Wandsworth's population was of French origin. There is a reference to the Huguenots on the Wandsworth Coat of Arms, where the blue drops on the shield's yellow square represent the tears of their great suffering in France. They are also represented on the frieze at the top of the town hall building, which tells the history of Wandsworth. The Huguenots contributed considerably



Mount Nod cemetery

to the economy of this part of London.

A French Huguenot chapel was built in 1682 on the site of a chapel opened by Protestants from the Low Countries in Chapel Yard (near the Southside centre). Rebuilt in Victorian times, it is now the National Opera Studio and a plaque reminds the visitor of the Huguenot connection.

The Huguenots are also remembered around Mount Nod, the burial ground which is a little island of peace in the middle of the South Circular (Huguenot Place, Huguenot Bridge, the Huguenot Rendez-Vous coffee-shop...). Many French Huguenots were buried in this cemetery and a plaque at the entrance tells their story. Unfortunately the names on the tombs are now very worn and difficult to read.

### Work ethic

Most Huguenots who came to England were quickly integrated. They brought their ethic of hard work and their skills to England, which was a great loss for France. It is said that one third of English people have Huguenot blood.

In the 18th century, the great French philosopher Voltaire came as an exile to London. He stayed for three years, in part in a house, now destroyed, belonging to a rich merchant, Everard Falkener, in Garatt Lane. Voltaire learnt English with a young Quaker in Wandsworth and spoke it fluently. He started writing his *Lettres philosophiques*, also called *Lettres anglaises*, in which he greatly admires the tolerance he found in

England. They were considered scandalous in France.

Another famous French Battersea resident was Sir Mark Isambard Brunel. A royalist, he left France in 1793, went first to New York and came to England in 1799. A brilliant engineer, he invented many machines for very varied projects. He had sawmills along the Thames, near Battersea Bridge. There he also built a factory for the efficient manufacture of boots in different sizes, for Wellington's armies during the Napoleonic wars. We may wonder if the battle of Waterloo was not won thanks to boots produced by a Frenchman in England! His son, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, inherited his father's engineering talents and was one of the most important engineers of the industrial revolution in England.

### Interrogation

During the Second World War, the imposing Royal Patriotic Building on Trinity Road was used as a British interrogation centre for refugees to make sure that there were no spies or traitors among them. French people who wanted to join de Gaulle and the Free French were interrogated here too. The interrogation was very severe. Fake refugees discovered to be spies were put in a dark cell under the building or sent to Wandsworth Prison to be hanged. The women were interrogated in a school at number 101 Nightingale Lane.

Many agents of the SOE (Special Operations Executive), the organisation set up to sabotage behind enemy lines, were recruited during these interrogations. Among them, about 300 were French.

The French are still coming to London today. Twenty years ago, an annexe of the French Lycée opened in Wix's Lane, off Clapham Common North Side, and the French language is often heard around Clapham Common and in Battersea.

*Les Français a Londres, de Guillaume le Conquerant à Charles de Gaulle by Isabelle Janvrin and Catherine Rawlinson is available from La Page and The French Bookshop in South Kensington and on Amazon. An English translation will be published soon.*

## Planning Matters: Formula E and other concerns

We win some but lose some more, says Monica Tross

For the moment the overbearing proposals for the Looker's site in York Road have been refused planning permission (2014/7103). The Council planners had proposed the plans be approved but the Planning Applications Committee (PAC) disagreed. However any short term elation we may have felt about this was knocked back following the May PAC when plans for the Gasholders' Site (2015/0591) and 12 – 14 Lombard Road (2014/6909 and 6957) were approved – despite the latter still being a matter of concern for those operating the Heliport. You can see our letters on these on the planning section of the Society's website.

Smaller applications to which we had also objected as unneighbourly and unsuitable within the conservation area were also approved, together with plans to turn a single family home in Rosenau Road into a number of flats including, of course, a new basement – 2 Kersley Mews (2015/1080), 62 Ingelow Road (2015/1096) and 43 Rosenau Road (2015/0650).

The jury is still out on proposals to add four storeys to one of the blocks at 346 Queenstown Road (former Marco Polo building, (2015/1218)). We and the Friends of Battersea Park (FoBP) have both objected to this plan to add height to an already overbearing development – as have many others.

Plans for Formula E racing in the park are generally progressing well

although we and the FoBP have expressed concerns both at the Community Forum and in letters about some aspects of the planning and the work being undertaken. (2015/1995). Our main concern currently is the inclusion of future FE events put forward by WBC within a long list of events in the Park (2015/1887). We have always understood that no decision would be taken on a continuation of the event until a full assessment of the effects on the park and on neighbours of this current year's event has been made public. The inclusion of FE within the current planning application (2015/1887) runs counter to that and we have objected.

### BASEMENTS

It seems that the Council are generally prepared to allow basements but with certain provisos about the quality of the building work proposed, the effect on neighbours and on the amount of garden space left clear of development. We have commented on draft guidance prepared for those considering adding a basement.

These notes are generally helpful but we had some reservations about their clarity – you can see our comments on our website.

### NOTEWORTHY BUILDINGS

Old Battersea House in Vicarage Crescent is due for an upgrade with ambitious plans put forward via planning applications 2015/1953 and



**The Alchemist, formerly the Fishmongers' Arms**

1992. The architects are Wintersgill and the garden designer Tom Stuart Smith, both of whom have good reputations so subject to any comments from English Heritage this looks like good news. Equally interesting buildings in Latchmere Road, North and South Lodge, are to be restored to private use having previously been houses in multiple occupation and then unoccupied (2015/1677 and 1678). Again the plans look respectful. The owners are the Thackeray Estate and the architects Studio Pike.

But to end on a shocking note – Battersea now has its very own demolition scandal with the destruction of The Alchemist pub in St John's Hill, formerly the Fishmonger's Arms. No warning was given of the owner's plans for this building within the St. John's Hill Conservation Area. The Council are pursuing this.

*Are there applications we should know about? If so, please alert us via [planning@batterseasociety.org.uk](mailto:planning@batterseasociety.org.uk). Or do you take a different view on an application? Tell us please, we like feedback.*

## Town Hall Talks

BAC's Jessie Wyld introduces a series of free lectures

Battersea Arts Centre is running a monthly series of talks inspired by the history of the building and the local area, from radical politics to art, architecture and organs. Each event will feature two visiting speakers and will take place on the last Wednesday of every month. There is no charge but as May's event, 'Battersea's political heroes' sold

out in advance, it's worth booking in plenty of time.

June's talk will look at plans for the rebuilding of our Grand Hall, which was destroyed in a fire on 13 March.



### DATES AND THEMES

**24 June: Architecture: the old Town Hall and Battersea's metamorphosis**

**29 July: The art of mosaics**

**30 September: Battersea's literary landscape**

**28 October: The organ, an instrument of inspiration**

**25 November: The changing role of town halls in the community**

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## Great Bus Journeys of the World No 14

Mike Roden travels hopefully from Wandsworth Road in search of Kensal Rise on the 452



It's not often you get the perfect early summer day – the sun shining from a flawless blue sky with just the briefest whisper of a breeze. And of course it was not like that as I waited by the bus stop near Wandsworth Road Station for the next 452 to set off from its bus stand in search of Kensal Rise. The wind came from the Urals blowing the fitful rain into my face.

The 452 is one of the new kids on TfL's block. It was a route which came into being in 2006 to provide extra services across the newly created Western Congestion Zone extension. The extension was abolished but the route survived and the bus arrives, and sets off with just me on board.

### Asalache house

Surprisingly the National Trust has had a foothold here at 575 Wandsworth Road since 2010. This was the home of Khadambi Asalache (1935-2006), a Kenyan-born poet, novelist and philosopher, who bought the house in 1981 while working as a civil servant at the Treasury. He fixed pine floorboards to the wall of the basement dining room hoping to disguise damp. Over twenty years he embellished almost every surface in the house with exquisite fretwork patterns and motifs, which he hand-carved from reclaimed pine doors and floorboards.

The house stands as he left it, and the rooms are furnished with his handmade furniture and carefully arranged collections of beautiful and functional objects. You'll need to book well in advance to see this fascinating place. Tours are limited to 54 visitors a week, with a maximum of six people at a time.

We're back in very familiar Great Bus Journey territory now as we turn up Queenstown Road, and passing Queenstown Road Station we reach Battersea Park Road. Over to the right is the vast building site that Nine Elms has become, with many of the buildings heading for completion.

We speed alongside the Park and over Chelsea Bridge. The Chelsea barracks are now little more than a deep hole waiting for Qatar City to rise to the skies, watched over (fittingly perhaps) by the Royal Hospital's Margaret Thatcher Infirmary.

Into Sloane Square, once the home territory of the Sloane Ranger. The phrase was coined in 1975 by young writer Peter York (today something of a style guru) and broadly described the wealthy young women he'd observed round here wearing Hermès or Liberty silk head scarves distinctively tied just below the mouth, masking much of the face. The bus crawls up Sloane Street towards Knightsbridge Station and Harvey Nichols. Doormen (or bouncers) stand outside the posh shops to prevent the riff-raff coming in.

### Harrods

We leave the realm of impossibly expensive shopping behind and turn past Knightsbridge station – down Brompton Road we glimpse Harrods. After a long period of ownership by the Fayed brothers, the store recently became the property of (surprise surprise) a Qatari investment company.

The bus heads along Knightsbridge past the massive Hyde Park Barracks. Princes Gate is home to a group of African and Middle Eastern

embassies – Ethiopia, Tunisia, Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates and Iran which is at number 16.

### Siege

It was here on the May bank holiday Monday in 1980 that the final events of a five day siege unfolded as the SAS stormed the building to end the occupation by a group demanding autonomy for the oil rich province of Khuzestan. PC Locke, the constable on embassy guard duty when the siege started was the hero of the hour, Mrs Thatcher showed that she would not falter in the face of terrorism, and it boosted the career of Kate Adie a young reporter covering the siege for the BBC. Khuzestan remains firmly under Iranian control.

It would be hard to miss the iconic shape of the Albert Hall, though reputedly German bomber pilots were instructed to leave it alone as it formed a useful wayfinder for them. Its official name is the Royal Albert Hall of Arts and Sciences, and it was opened in 1871 as a memorial to the life and work of the Prince Consort who had died ten years before. The BBC Promenade Concerts have been broadcast from there since the late 1940s, with this year's season running from July to September.

Traffic snarls to a halt as we enter the maelstrom of Kensington High Street. We get a good view of Kensington Palace from here. This is the official London residence of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Prince Harry, and other more minor royals. Visitors to the public part of the Palace (run by Historic Royal Palaces) will sometimes see one of the royal personages walking their

**Sights to see: Khadambi Asalache's house, Wandsworth Road; Harrods, the Iranian Embassy; St Mary Abbott's church; the Gate Theatre, Notting Hill; antique silverware, Portobello Road market**



dog (or perhaps their toddler) in the grounds.

The bus heads uphill along Kensington Church Road, once a twisting lane that joined the Roman roads from Bath and Oxford to the City of London. We're in the ancient heartland of the parish of Kensington. Settlement goes back to Saxon times, and the Domesday Book lists 18 farms and 240 inhabitants living in the rural village near St Mary Abbots church. There's been a church here since the early twelfth century but the present building dates from 1872 and was designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott. It's said to have the tallest spire in London.

There are many examples of Grade II listed Georgian and Victorian buildings along here, but for the most part the street is lined with four- or five-storey mid-19th-century terraces with exposed brick and sash windows. There is no thankfully no shortage of delicatessens, dressmakers, dry cleaners or estate agents!

### **Saxon**

At the top we turn left along Notting Hill Gate. The origin of the name is uncertain though it was recorded in 1356 as Knottyngull. There was long thought to be a link with Canute (Cnut), but it is now thought more likely that the name derives from the Saxon name Cnotta. Development of this once rural area got going in the early nineteenth century, with the main landowner being the Ladbrooke family, a name borne – confusingly – by many streets in the area.

We pass Notting Hill Gate station which opened in 1868 and turn up

Pembridge Road. Notable here is Jamie Oliver's Recipease – a very large store and café, a world away from its small sibling which recently departed from St John's Road. Nearby is the Gate Theatre – 'a home for anarchic spirits, and restless creative ambition.' Sounds just like the Battersea Society! First launched near Covent Garden in 1925, this small 70 seat theatre has won numerous awards.

### **Antiques**

At Elgin Crescent the mystery voice instructs us to alight here for Portobello Road Market. This began as a fresh-food market in the nineteenth century; antiques dealers arrived in the late 1940s and '50s, and there are now a substantial number of them trading mainly on Saturday mornings. It is the largest antiques market in the UK. Towards the north end the market focuses on second hand clothes as well as trendy couture.

Turning left, then quickly right, we're now heading north west on Ladbrooke Grove, past Ladbrooke Grove Station (currently the focus of a stallholders' campaign to have it renamed Portobello Road) and under the elevated section of the A40 known to us all as Westway and blighting the landscape since 1970. There is nothing much more to report on this stretch of road as we approach Sainsbury's massive Ladbrooke Grove Store.

We're almost at journey's end now. I look at the map and consider what is left of this trip which has already taken over ninety minutes. More of the same, it seems. The terminus is

Kensal Rise station, but on the way there I see few highlights, apart from the Moberley Sports Centre and a Tesco Express. So dear reader you'll have to imagine the final stages while I get off the bus and march to Sainsbury's in search of urgently needed relief and refreshment.

### **The Battersea Society**

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## 'This is a brilliant constituency'

Jane Ellison, Battersea's MP, talks to Jenny Sheridan

Jane Ellison was delighted to be re-elected with an increased majority on 7 May. 'This is a brilliant constituency to represent,' she says. 'There is such a mix of people, and people care about each other.' Ms Ellison is known as a hard-working and committed constituency MP even with her additional responsibilities as minister for public health (she has been re-appointed since the election).

When I interviewed Ms Ellison in a café in south Battersea, I came armed with a list of questions suggested by Battersea Society members. She was forthcoming, indeed passionate, about some, unable to comment on others due to her ministerial position, and offended by a few.

*You have been a prime mover in the struggle to end FGM (female genital mutilation). How did you get involved?*

Long before I got into Parliament, I read the story of Waris Durie, the supermodel who was one of the first to tell the truth about FGM, and it made me feel quite queasy. Later, when I was researching Battersea for the election campaign, I saw a poster outside the Lavender Hill Police Station about it being illegal, and it dawned on me that this was a domestic issue. When I became an MP I wanted to protect girls. After all, if it was white middle class girls going abroad on holiday and coming back with a finger missing, we wouldn't hesitate to act.

One of the things I was able to bring in, with colleagues at the Home Office and DfID, is the so-called FGM passport, which parents or girls can show to relatives when they go back to see them in Somalia or Sudan or other countries. It shows them that FGM is illegal in the UK and that applies abroad too if a UK citizen is involved. It has proved immensely popular.

The NHS used not to record data on women who had undergone FGM. It now does and that enables us to commission services to support these

women and in future to track girls who may be at risk. FGM really is one of the missions of my life.

*Should there be a third runway at Heathrow?*

Well, certainly not in the location that was proposed in the last Parliament. Views in Battersea are actually quite mixed; some people suffer from the noise, but people in business feel there is a need for more airport capacity in the south-east. In my submission to the Davies Commission I said I could not support anything that would result in more noise and disruption for my constituents. We'll just have to wait for Davies.

*When will we meet the EU targets on air pollution?*

I don't know but that will be an issue in the mayoral election next year. Boris has made a good start with the buses.

*At the Battersea Society/ KLS hustings, housing was clearly an important issue. Can we have a healthy economy if only the rich can live in London?*

That's a ridiculous question. The rich are not the only people who can live here. London will always be a mixed economy. There is a huge amount of social housing across the borough, both council and housing association. The issue is the supply of housing across the board; we need to build more homes but the important thing is that it needs to be right across the market. It is a government priority – there was a manifesto commitment of over £1 billion to bring brownfield sites into use more quickly.

On the doorstep, housing wasn't the most important issue – that was the economy.

*Should there be some revision of the council tax rating bands, particularly at the higher levels?*

I'm not sure. That's a policy matter and as a minister I wouldn't comment about policies outside my portfolio.

*Are you worried about inequality locally?*

I have spent the last five years championing the health of some of the poorest women in our community so the idea that I don't care about inequalities actually offends me. One of the reasons Labour lost this election is that they don't understand that things like keeping taxes low, making it simpler to start new businesses, making it easier to employ people: all these are different means of tackling inequality. Just because you have different ways doesn't mean you don't care.

*This issue of Battersea Matters includes an article on the closure three small shops on Northcote Road. Rents were the problem there but business rates can also be an issue. Is there an appetite for changing the rating system?*

We are already looking at this. George Osborne has announced a comprehensive review, which I welcome, so let's wait and see.

And in 2013 we introduced a £1,000 rebate for small retail businesses. Almost all the small shops in Battersea qualify for this.

*Wandsworth council has approved several very tall buildings, at odds with its own policy. What is your view and how can an MP influence the decisions of a council?*

As an MP clearly I'm not a member of the local planning authority. But I have regular conversations with council colleagues and will always represent the views of constituents (and my own) on major planning issues. With York Road, for example, where there are several sites, I called for the council to produce a masterplan to look at the sites together.

*How will you be voting in the EU referendum, and why?*

I have always been open about my belief that Britain would be better off inside a reformed EU. I'm confident that the Prime Minister will be successful in his negotiations on some important issues and I will be campaigning for an in vote on that basis. It's such an important issue that it is right to have a referendum and I think we will have a good debate.

*There is a shortfall in primary school places across London. What is the situation in Wandsworth and what*

Jane Ellison





*should be done to ensure every child gets into their chosen school?*

The government is actively addressing the shortfall. The last government allocated a disproportionately large chunk of funding for expanding London school places. Wandsworth has an outstanding record on children's services. Nearly all its schools have been rated good or outstanding.

*On a more personal issue: as a health minister, what do you do to keep healthy?*

Well, I cycled here this morning and I wear a pedometer and try to do my 10,000 steps a day. I'm a great advocate of walking: it's certainly the cheapest and easiest way to build exercise into your day – and you notice so much more. One of the first things I did since the election was to walk from Clapham South to

Westminster with Wandsworth Living Streets. I really feel the benefit of being slimmer and fitter, particularly as I get older.

*Do you have any time for hobbies?*

I've sung since I was 12 years old and now I sing in the Parliament choir. And I like watching sport. My husband and I like cricket and our first day out after the election we went to watch the England/New Zealand match at Lords (he's a New Zealander). And I enjoy gardening.

I never thought I would get used to spinning so many plates in the air. I thought I was busy as a backbencher but since I've been a minister it's a whole new level of busyness. My civil servants worked out that I'd been in 50 debates in 18 months. But it is all so interesting it makes it all worthwhile.

## GENERAL ELECTION: CONSERVATIVES HOLD BATTERSEA

7 May 2015, results were:

Conservative (Jane Ellison) 26,730  
Labour (Will Martindale) 18,792  
Liberal Democrat (Luke Taylor) 2,241

Green Party (Joe Stuart) 1,282  
UKIP (Christopher Howe) 1,586  
Jane Ellison retained her seat, as did the candidates in adjoining constituencies: Justine Greening for the Conservatives in Putney and Sadiq Khan for Labour in Tooting. At 67%, the turnout in Battersea was typical of the country.

All the candidates answered questions from a Battersea audience at the hustings at the York Gardens Community Centre, organised by the Battersea Society together with the Katherine Low Settlement.

## Northcote Road loses three more small shops

High rents and rates are driving away the shops that give high streets their vitality, says Jenny Sheridan

Local residents around Northcote Road are mourning the loss of three independent shops. Harry and Mary's friendly newsagents has gone, according to the local grapevine because the rent was increased to £50,000 'and you can't afford that on fags and mags'.



And Dandelion, the health shop that served Northcote Road for 30 years, closed at the end of April.

### High rents

As we all know, it is important to make use of small shops to ensure they survive. But when leases change and rents go up or, as in Dandelion's case, when the building is sold, even customer loyalty is not enough. Rents are high in Battersea, as are business rates, which stack the deck against shops selling useful, but relatively low priced goods (see Carol Rahn's article in *BM* Summer 2013). Chains of coffee shops or fashion boutiques may be able to offset their losses here against lower costs elsewhere, and estate agencies benefit from the

skyrocketing prices of the homes they sell, but independents have no such cushion.

Claire Bateman, who for seven years co-owned Dandelion with Kate Sawyer, said they would hugely miss their loyal customers. Claire and Kate bought the business from the previous owner in 2008; Kate concentrated

mainly on the cooked food/deli side while Claire, a trained nutritional therapist, focused on dietary advice and supplements. The shop also stocked organic fruit and vegetables.

'We looked at ways to try to continue,' said Claire. 'But it just wasn't possible. The rent is so high we couldn't have absorbed it without hugely increasing our prices.'

'Retail is hard work. We're on our feet all the time and the hours are long. But I love it; no two days are the same and we got to know our customers well. And we have had a great staff team.'

'The Northcote Road fête in July, organised by the business network, is

brilliant, and I wish all the businesses in the road would realise that and contribute. But it is hard when everyone is working flat out.'

What is next for the two? Claire is taking a job in a health shop in Surrey, near her home. Kate, who is also an actor, will be pursuing that role and also writing a cookery book based on the recipes used for Dandelion's take-away food.

On St John's Road, one of the two useful discount shops has also closed due to a large rent increase.

### Friendly

Sometimes it is not rent or rates that cause shops to close. Mr and Mrs Marwari, the friendly and helpful owners of Image 2 Image, a framing and photo shop, are retiring. They aim to spend more time with their grandchildren.

People who can afford the rent

or mortgage flood to live in the Northcote Road area, attracted to its community atmosphere and the character of the shops.

But what is a high street with nowhere to buy fruit and vegetables, newspapers or sweets apart from a generic supermarket?



## 'We are the champions!'

Jenny Sheridan meets two women involved in the campaign to end a harmful practice

Hanan Almahdi sits on the sofa in her small house in Battersea and, as her young daughters eddy about her, she talks about FGM (female genital mutilation).

A warm, friendly woman, Hanan was born in England where her father was studying but has spent most of her life in her parents' native Sudan, where FGM is widely practised. She arrived here as a refugee in 2004.

Hanan is a community FGM champion. She is part of a team of 11 local women originally from East Africa who have been selected and trained to raise awareness of the harmful practice among other women and men. The project, funded by the Home Office, is managed by the Katherine Low Settlement in Battersea High Street, which has a long history of working with newly arrived communities. Sarah Rackham, community worker at KLS, says 'They are a great team, and there has been a lot of mutual support, which is vital with such a delicate topic. Many of the eleven had been cut themselves.'

### Without anaesthetic

Hanan has not been cut, though many friends of around her own age (38) have been. 'It's awful, it's against humanity. It is usually done to little girls when they are between seven and ten, though in some cultures it is done when they are babies. It's usually done without anaesthetic.'

FGM can cause severe problems for women, both physically and emotionally. There can be infections, difficulty in passing urine and especially problems with sex, periods, pregnancy and childbirth.

Hanan says the training for the champions was useful in helping them understand the emotional pain suffered by many women and it also gave them confidence in approaching and talking to communities. When she was at university in Khartoum, she was part of a group trying to do similar work with rural women, 'but they treated us as though we were from outer space! It was such a strong part of the culture, and they thought it was a religious obligation but it's not.



**Wandsworth's FGM Champions: Hanan Almahdi on the left, Sarah Rackham, second from the right**

It is purely cultural and women who are more educated, like most people here, can understand that. Here it is unusual for people to support FGM. I have an Egyptian friend who does, but fortunately her kids are boys.'

Sarah Rackham explains that while little is known about the extent of the problem locally, there is concern over girls who are taken home in the summer holidays after they leave primary school. She says, 'Our champions were very enthusiastic about the Home Office's FGM passport. They take it with them when they travel as they see it as a way of reassuring customs officers that they have no intention of harming their daughters. The printed statements were one of the achievements of our MP, Jane Ellison, and we deeply appreciate the lead she has taken in working to end FGM.'

### Presents

Hanan comes from an influential Sudanese political family and says no-one in her family was forced to be cut; her grandfather in particular disapproved of the practice. However her mother underwent FGM 'because she wanted the celebration and the presents – they can't imagine how horrible it is.'

Hanan has delivered her champion's message in two settings: Shaftesbury Park Primary School and Elays Network, a local Somali community organisation. 'All the mums I spoke

to at the school were interested. They see this as an important issue and none of them wants to have their daughters cut. (Though of course if they did, they might not come forward as it is illegal and parents can go to prison for up to 14 years).

'At Elays the women just wanted to talk about what had happened to them and what they suffer as a result. They felt both sad and angry. Many of them could remember the face of the woman who cut them, although it was over 20 years ago.'

### Grant

Sarah takes up this point. 'There are big psychological issues for many women. On top of this, sometimes a husband will leave his wife because sex is painful or even impossible for her. We have got a grant to run fortnightly peer support groups for women who have survived FGM.'

If anyone involved in the project has reason to believe that a girl is at risk of undergoing FGM, they have a duty to report it and social services will intervene. This hasn't happened to date.

'What is very positive,' says Sarah Rackham, 'is that there is a real determination to end FGM, both here and in Africa. Many of the women who have attended our champions' sessions want to get involved themselves.'

'When FGM is done, it's because the parents don't know the harm they are doing, because they lack knowledge' says Hanan. 'That's what we champions are doing: spreading knowledge.'

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## Did a house on Clapham Common inspire a great novel?

Janice Morphet investigates the local influences of E M Forster

The writing career of E M Forster (*A Passage to India*, *Howards End*) was heavily linked to the sale of Battersea Rise House, on Clapham Common West Side. Built in 1770, the house had been purchased and extended by his great-grandfather, banker and MP Henry Thornton, in 1792. It was also home to Thornton's cousin William Wilberforce when both were engaged in leading the anti-slavery campaign as part of the Clapham Sect between 1790 and 1830.

Forster's mother's family came from Clapham. His grandmother was a young widow with ten children. One of these children, Lily, was introduced to Marianne Thornton, Henry's daughter, who adopted her, funding her education. Later Lily married Marianne's favourite nephew, Edward Morgan Forster. When his father died after four years of marriage, Forster, an only child, became his great aunt Marianne's favourite nephew and eventually a beneficiary of her will.

### Death duties

Battersea Rise House was passed to Thornton's eldest son and Marianne's brother, also Henry. Henry's family was more concerned with wealth than the house's history. On his death, the family could no longer afford its upkeep or the payment of succession (death) duties and family bequests. The house was sold to Edward Evans, the Lavender Hill estate agent, who demolished it and built 475 houses between 1908 and 1915, creating Muncaster Road and surrounds. However



before the house was demolished, its importance in the anti-slavery movement was recognised. Evans offered to sell the house and two acres of land at cost price to Battersea Council, but because he was a prominent Conservative and the Council was in 'Progressive' hands, the offer was rejected and the demolition went ahead.

### Legacy

Marianne Thornton's legacy to Forster enabled him to attend Cambridge, travel and start writing, providing full financial support until 1925. Forster was then able to live on the income produced by his novels. After this he wrote no more novels but he did write other books including, in 1956, one about his great aunt Marianne Thornton, who grew up in Battersea Rise House. Forster subtitles his eponymous book *A Domestic Biography 1797 – 1897* and it records much of the minutiae of daily life at the house in family letters and from Forster's recollections from his mother and great-aunt.

In this book, Forster quotes Marianne's memories of Battersea Rise House when she was three, 'being carried into the library... and being put down by a glass door to watch the men rolling great balls of snow...' and Forster remembers visiting the house when he was a boy. He records the loss of the house, 'it kept out London, until it fell and it fell

suddenly. The estate was broken up in 1907. I have identified the area with difficulty. It is completely covered with very small two-storied houses. A couple of roads run through it, north to south, intersected by crossroads. The site was cleared at a time when development was unusually ruthless. Not one tree survives. Clapham Common survives, but so messed about, so full of roads and railings and notices and huts and facilities and infelicities, that Marianne and her mama would nor recognise it for the countrified tract through which they drove'.

Some of Forster's anger at the loss of Battersea Rise House found a fuller expression in *Howards End*. In this, at the end of her life, Ruth Wilcox tries to save Howards End, a house with a long tradition and connections, by leaving it to her friend Margaret Schlegel, who is being evicted from her own house by a developer. Ruth's family destroys the note making this last bequest and are more interested in the house's development value. As the plot unfolds, the house is saved and eventually is left to Margaret by Ruth's widower (Henry) and then, through her, to her nephew, the son of Leonard Bast, a character strongly assumed to be based on Forster's father.

*Howard's End* is wishful thinking about saving Battersea Rise House. It could not stop Battersea from 'London's creeping'. If Forster had had his wish, would we still be visiting it now like the other country houses in parks saved by the LCC? On the other hand, its development was able to provide financial support for Forster for twenty years and inspired a memorable novel. *Howards End*, 1910  
Marianne Thornton, *A Domestic Biography 1797 – 1887*, 1956

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### Obituary: Edward Barrett

Edward Barrett died on 20 March 2015, aged 80, following a lengthy period of illness. He was, together with his wife Di Di, a long-standing member of the Battersea Society and a regular participant in many of the Society events. He was also a strong supporter of The Friends of Battersea Park and he and Di Di enjoyed regular walks around the park. He knew the Latin names of many of the trees.

Edward was born in Birstall, Leicestershire. At school he excelled in languages and was awarded a place at both Oxford and LSE. However, following National Service, he decided upon a short career in the Army followed by a return to civilian life.

Edward was a man of many parts. He spoke several languages fluently and had a wide range of interests, one of which was a passion for motor racing and old motor cars. At one time he owned a yellow Kalam Maserati,

followed by a 1935 Alfa Romeo, which he sold back to the original owner, and then a HK1 Roadster Jaguar XK120

Although a man of many talents, he appeared to most people to be an unassuming character. One of the many tributes paid to him was that he was a man who had concern for others together with a warm and cheerful countenance, despite often being unwell.

# Macbeth's witches toil on Clapham Common

Jenny Sheridan walks across the common to enjoy a new arts centre

In law, the hypothetical 'man on the Clapham omnibus' is considered to be a reasonably intelligent and educated average person. The audience for the Omnibus arts centre in Clapham fits this description pretty well. Largely from south-west London, and a little younger than the typical West End theatre audience, it appreciates the eclectic mix of theatre, music, talks and comedy on offer.

The building, on Clapham Common North Side, overlooks Holy Trinity Church and was for 125 years the Clapham Public Library. In 2006 Lambeth Council closed it to open a new one on Clapham High Road. A passionate campaign to open an arts centre in the building was launched by local people including opera singer George Owen and actor Miriam Margolyes. They raised £130,000 and presented a 2,000 strong petition to Lambeth. Despite being pitted against 13 property developers, Lambeth accepted the campaigners' proposal, and Omnibus was born.

## Family festival

'It's a wonderful building,' says artistic director Marie McCarthy, 'it's flexible and can be used in so many different ways. There's a performance space which seats 90 people and the café bar next to it can also host a variety of work and can be hired out for external events. And there's space outdoors in the front we can use, not to mention the common. We started our production of *Macbeth* there, with the audience following the cast from the paddling pool, where they encountered the three witches, back to our building. And in July we are presenting the Grasshopper Festival on the common, an arts festival for all the family.'

Children and young people have a strong presence in Omnibus's activities. There are free drop-in art history classes for 13 – 14-year-olds on Monday afternoons and the youth theatre runs classes for kids from five upwards. 'The under-sevens wrote a play which was put on by professional actors. They got the entire audience

dancing. It was a hoot,' says Marie. A production called *Colour* based on a Rossetti poem and designed to aid children's language development will tour Lambeth libraries in the autumn. Other community outreach includes work with the local St Mungo's homeless hostel and with Trinity Hospice.

The main performance space works well for either music or theatre, says Marie. 'In both music and theatre, we like to present classical work but to give it a contemporary twist,' she says. Flamenco, tango, jazz and folk have featured as well as a sold-out evening of Chopin and George Sand's letters and diaries, read by Harriet Walter and Robert Glenister, interspersed with Chopin's music.

## Starry

Another recent celebrity event was an audience with Sir Michael Gambon, and in May Timothy West and Prunella Scales were in conversation with Xan Brooks, a *Guardian* film critic. On 21 June the Endellion Quartet played Schubert and Beethoven. For a relatively small and new venue (the centre opened in November 2013), Omnibus has attracted some starry names.

When no events are on, the building retains the quiet but welcoming and friendly air of a well-loved library. 'People still turn up sometimes, wanting a book or parking vouchers or bin bags,' Marie says. 'We take them on a tour of the building and hope they will come back for a performance.'

Funding is always the fundamental concern for all arts venues, especially new ones with a limited history to offer to potential donors.

Running costs cannot be met by ticket sales alone. 'We have no core funding, but we will be able to apply for Lottery funding in 2018,' says Marie McCarthy. 'We manage to get funding for projects, and we hire out the spaces and we are starting to attract some sponsorships but we would love to have some more.'

## Volunteers

We have just four full-time staff and many volunteers. It's a great place to be a volunteer, as you can really get stuck in and learn how the arts work. But it's vital that we attract funding to develop our education, outreach and participation work.' Omnibus aims to raise £150,000 this year. Their membership scheme starts at £25.

This summer, Omnibus will host Latin dance, an evening with radical comic Mark Thomas, a wine tasting and *Crocodiles and Cream*, a celebration of Lewis Carroll.

Our area is well served with arts venues. Omnibus is different in style and programming from Battersea Arts Centre but like them it looks both to its local community and to the wider world. For south Battersea dwellers, it is just a walk away, or a hop on the 35, 137 or 345 bus for those in the north.

[www.omnibus-clapham.org](http://www.omnibus-clapham.org)

David Rubin,  
performing in *Woyzeck*

