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# FROM EXCLUSION TO POLITICAL CONTROL. RADICAL AND WORKING CLASS ORGANISATION IN BATTERSEA 1830S-1918

## PREFACE

In 1888 and 1892 Battersea was almost unique in the country in electing John Burns as an independent labour and socialist to the London County Council and then to Parliament. In 1894 the Progressive Alliance between the labour movement and Radical and Liberal organisations, which had been developed to elect Burns, took control of Battersea Vestry and retained that control until 1909. While the organisational catalyst was the formation of a Battersea branch of the Social Democratic Federation in 1885, the speed with which the labour movement became a powerful political player must have only been possible due to the existence of a vibrant working class organisational culture.

## Working Class Organisation in Battersea

Up to the early 1990s I had concentrated my research into the history of the Battersea labour movement from 1884. I began to turn my attention to the period before then, looking for evidence of working class organisation from the 1830s. While there was evidence of trade union and co-operative activity, the largest group of organisations that can be classed as working class or containing large numbers of working people were the friendly societies, particularly the 'branches' of the benefit orders, the Oddfellows and the Foresters, and the loan societies, particularly those calling themselves the Friends of Labour Loan Societies.

The validity of developing my interest was reinforced by Roger Logan, a local historian who has written on aspects of Battersea's history, and an active Forester. He spoke about the Foresters at the South London Labour and Co-operative Movement History Workshop which I organised at the St. Peter's Heritage Centre at Vauxhall in 1992.

I put together the material I had begun to gather for a paper delivered at the Ninth British-Dutch Conference on Labour History held in Bergen in Holland on the weekend of 2 to 4 September 1994. With further research I was able to transform the 1994 talk into one at the 'Radicalism and Unrest in the Long Nineteenth Century. Britain 1790 to 1918', organised by the Public Record Office on 4 and 5 September 1998. This paper is an edited version of that talk.

## INTRODUCTION

While organisational forms, strategies and language changed, there is a continuity of campaigning for suffrage and associated political, economic and social reforms from 1790 to 1888. The New Unionist explosion was heir to that continuity, and in turn helped shape the labour movement up to the end of the First World War. A new industrial and political agenda was forged, which echoed aspects of the programmes of the various periods of radicalism and unrest from the 1790s, and helped to ensure that three independent labour movement MPs were elected in 1892. A lot more research is needed especially into

individuals and their involvements, and in particular where they lived, to piece together the richness of that fundamental continuity throughout the period 1790 to 1918.

A key figure in New Unionism was John Burns, already elected as a socialist as one of Battersea's two London County Councillors at the end of 1888, and to be elected as its independent labour and socialist MP in 1892. This essay explores how this situation came about, and what it then led to in Battersea up to 1918.

The particular nature of Battersea's urban transformation through the century created a working-class culture that provided the base from which Burns and other activists were able to transform local working class aspirations and strategy to create a broadly based alliance of trade unionists, co-operators, radicals, liberals, temperance workers, and socialists, that provided the political and organisational base that achieved Burns' election to Parliament, and then to control the local Vestry and then the Borough Council for all but three years between 1894 and 1919. This very success, however, created new problems: how to exercise power, how to run services, how to keep electoral control. From 1900 there is a key tension in Battersea between the practical political requirement to keep a broad based alliance together as pressure increased from developments in the national movement to organise for completely independent labour representation. The tensions that were created fractured the alliance so it lost control in the period 1909 to 1912. Although it regained power the tensions were only finally resolved in 1918/1919. This essay fleshes out some of the detail to support this generalised analysis.

## **Urban Transformation**

Central to the way the labour movement developed in Battersea is the particular nature of Battersea's location on the edge of London, and of its urban transformation. Further down river is Vauxhall, to the east Clapham, to the south-east Streatham, which are districts in today's London Borough of Lambeth. To the south is Balham, to the south-west Tooting, and to the west Wandsworth Town. In the nineteenth century Vauxhall was part of Lambeth Parish. Clapham, Streatham (with Balham), Tooting and Wandsworth were Parishes in their own right. From 1900 Battersea Parish was given Borough status, and the new Borough of Wandsworth was created covering all the other Parishes, bar Lambeth's Vauxhall district. On the north side of the Thames are Fulham, Chelsea and Pimlico.

Battersea is dominated by the roads out from London, and a tangle of railway lines. The three major road stretches comprise Nine Elms Lane, Battersea Park Rd and York Rd to the north of the railway line, Lavender Hill, and Battersea Rise/Clapham Common Northside to the south. These roads are the old routes out of London through Wandsworth Town to Richmond and Kingston to the west. Lavender Hill/St. John's Hill is the Battersea extension of Wandsworth Rd running down from Vauxhall. This road parallels the Battersea border, making it an important feature in the explanation in this essay. The tangle of railway lines developed from 1838 dominated Battersea. Parts of both Clapham and Wandsworth Commons lie within historic Battersea's boundaries.

Battersea was turned from a largely agricultural and market garden area and rural retreat for the wealthy at the end of the 18th and beginning of the nineteenth century to a dense and industrial part of the Metropolis. In 1850 the industrial area of Vauxhall led into the Nine Elms District of Battersea. On the riverfront between Nine Elms and the outskirts of the Village, Battersea Park was being laid out on the northern stretch of the agricultural, market garden, common land area known as Battersea Fields. The population had grown from 5,540 in 1831 to 19,600 in 1851, and would rise to 54,106 in 1871, and to 107,262 in

1881. It continued to grow by another 160,000 by 1901, after which it begins to decline. Population growth in the neighbouring parishes was much slower.

## **The Development of the Railway Tangle and Industry**

The opening of the railway to its terminus at Nine Elms cut the parish and Wandsworth Common into two in 1828. The London & South Western Railway then built a locomotive depot in Battersea turning out its first engine in 1843. 1846 saw the railway from Richmond link with the main line. In 1848 the line was extended from Nine Elms to Waterloo. In 1853 a line from Crystal Palace cutting Wandsworth Common into three sections was completed. A company partnership then crossed the river to open Victoria Station in 1860 using the Grosvenor Canal Basin. Clapham Junction Station was opened the same year. A line was then driven from Victoria through to Clapham. In 1863 another partnership developed the West London Extension line from Clapham Junction to Willesden in North West London. This line enabled several companies to build goods depots in Battersea: the London, Brighton & South Coast, the London and North West, the Great Western and the London, Chatham and Dover Railway companies. The last opened its Longhedge engineering works. (1)

By the mid-1850s industries on or near the riverfront between the Village and the Wandsworth boundary comprised flour mills, a sugar factory, chemical, vitriol, vinegar, and oil works, a boat repair yard, a dry-dock, a timber yard, starch and glutton manufacturing, candlemaking, an ornamental ironwork manufacturers, and a crucible company.

Even so Battersea was still being described in the 1850s as suburban, almost rural with orchards, market gardens, cornfields and meadows, piggeries, gravel pits and lavender fields. (2) Most of the population lived in and around the historic Village, some in and near Nine Elms and in Battersea New Town, while the more well-to do lived around Clapham Common, and shortly in the blocks of housing being built around Battersea Park. (3)

In 1854 the Morgan Brothers Patent Plumbago Crucible Company purchased a porcelain factory, and started manufacturing crucibles. The company later became Morgan Crucible, a world leader, and major Battersea employer. (4) Price's Candle Factory was located on York Rd opposite Plough Lane. Its process used cocoa-nut oil produced on its own plantations in Ceylon, and palm-oil from West Africa. The York Rd operation remained fairly small until the early 1860s.

Further industrial developments took place in the 1860s. Price's candlemakers sold its main works in Vauxhall, and began to expand its Battersea York Rd site. By 1877 it was producing 147m candles, and large quantities of other lighting products and soaps. By 1892 it employed 1,400 people.

In 1863 the London Gas-Light Company closed its Vauxhall works in favour of developing its newer Nine Elms site which had started producing gas from December 1858. By the 1870s the works covered 20 acres and employed 500 men. From 1877 it developed its own dock to enable 1,000 ton colliers from the Northumbrian & Durham coalfield to be unloaded.

## **Housing Development**

The 1860s begin to see significant housing developments, especially the start of the Park Town Estate, spanning the two sides of Queenstown Rd, the Louvaine area west of Clapham Junction, and in South Battersea between the Commons. (5) The latter area was being developed largely for middle-class occupancy, the Conservative Land Society being particularly busy. The Doddington area off Battersea Park Rd developed into an area largely inhabited by railway workers. (6)

The number of houses rose from 8,000 in 1874 to 21,500 in 1895. For the development of working class politics the most significant development was the Shaftesbury Park Estate built on the 40 acre Poupart Market Garden from 1872. The original plan was to build 1,200 houses with gardens for clerks, artisans and labourers, a lecture hall, a co-operative store, school rooms, baths, wash-houses, and three acres for recreation and pleasure grounds. Lord Shaftesbury laid a memorial stone 'Healthy Homes the first Condition for Social Progress.' Most of the plans were implemented. Due to financial difficulties the proposed open space was developed as a small block of tenements. The Estate lies between Lavender Hill, Latchmere and Tynemouth Rds, and the railway line running into Clapham Junction from Vauxhall. (7)

In sharp contrast to Shaftesbury Park, Victoria Dwellings on Battersea Park Rd near the railway line, was built at the same time. It comprised four 4-storey blocks of basic tenement flats, the smallest sharing toilets. John Walter, the Editor of *The Times*, who opened the block, lauded the aim of building upwards to the clouds.

With this growth also came the building of shops, churches, public buildings, pubs, places of entertainment, and schools. Industrial companies continued to set up in Battersea, like the Projectile fulfilling defence contracts, and a number of laundries. The Battersea Polytechnic was built on the site that had housed the Albert Palace from 1885, the Crystal Palace type complex shipped over from Ireland. By the turn of the century Battersea became so dense, that there was no room for the railway companies to expand their works and depots. In 1910 the transfer of the Nine Elms Works and most of its workforce to Eastleigh in Hampshire was completed.

### **Socio-economic Trends**

Up to the early 1870s a significant number of heads of households were born in Battersea, Lambeth, Southwark and other parts of Surrey. Later a lot of households moved across from Fulham, Chelsea, Kensington and Pimlico. By 1871 80.2% of the population was classified as being in skilled and unskilled jobs. In Battersea New Town this was as high as 93.2%. (8) That year the Nine Elms railway works alone employed 1,348 men, and 100 were employed at Clapham Junction.

This dramatic transformation brought social problems in its wake. The 1860s and early 1870s saw outbreaks of cholera and diarrhoea. By the 1880s Battersea was called the 'Sink Hole of Surrey'. (9) While it had been regarded as a parish with few poor in the early 1860s, unemployment and poverty became a constant threat. The Bridge Lane area became known as 'Little Hell'. (9) The Thames side areas, especially Nine Elms were subject to frequent flooding. (10) Nine Elms, described as 'an island of shabby streets' developed into a slum. Its population was largely Irish.

### **Political Status of Battersea**

The political status of Battersea is also an important consideration in explaining the way in which the labour movement developed. From 1855 to 1888 it had a select Vestry with few powers. The main locally based local government body was the Wandsworth District Board of Works, to which the Battersea vestrymen were entitled to appoint members. (11) From 1888 the Vestry was given extended powers, and in 1900 was replaced by Battersea Borough Council. In relation to the Poor Law Battersea was covered by the Wandsworth & Clapham Union of Guardians. The electoral basis for the Vestrymen was tiny, as was the electorate able to take part in the elections for the Parliamentary seat of Mid-Surrey up to 1885, when the Parliamentary Borough of Battersea and Clapham was created, the Clapham constituency taking in better-off areas of Battersea south of Lavender Hill and the Clapham parish. The establishment of the Battersea Parliamentary seat presented both Liberals and Conservatives with a serious political and organisational challenge. They had to quickly re-organise their structures around the new Constituency boundaries. Because Battersea had been going through such a fast rate of change, the local establishment had no deep rooted methods of social control and was unable to keep pace with the changes.

### **Working Class Organisation in the 1830s and 1840s**

The main evidence for organised working-class activity in Battersea before the 1850s is in the establishment of collective self-help organisations, particularly friendly societies, like the Oddfellows and the Foresters. Given the close connections between Battersea and Clapham it is possible that building workers in Battersea may have joined the Union Society at the Sun Inn in Clapham set up in 1824. There had been organised subscriptions in Battersea and Clapham for Richard Carlisle and Rev. Robert Taylor in 1831. Three building workers who contributed lost their jobs as a result. (12) Of particular significance is the establishment of the Belmont Benefit, the Sherwood and the Cocoa Nut Friendly societies in Vauxhall, all actually or likely to have been associated with the Price's workforce.

In 1838 the parish Rector regarded the majority of the population, 'the operatives' as he described them, to have been very radical. (13) Yet there does not seem to have been a Chartist organisation in Battersea. This could be due to the fact that its proximity enabled Battersea Chartists to take part in the Wandsworth Town meetings of the Wandsworth & Clapham Working Mens and Female Charter Associations which were active in late 1838 and 1839. Alternatively they may have crossed the river to take part in the Chelsea Association. (14) Very few people in Battersea signed on as special constables in the lead up to the 1848 Chartist demonstration in Kennington Common, compared with the other Parishes. The London & South Western Railway did require its 800 officers and workmen to be available to protect company property and if necessary assist the authorities. (15) 660 signed on in Clapham, including just over 100 workers at Thomas Cubitt's Clapham Park housing development, presumably under pressure. (16)

The 1840s see some interesting developments among railway workers. The London & South Western Railway Company set up a Friendly Society in 1844. The majority of the Committee was elected by the workforce, two-thirds from Nine Elms. This worker involvement in decision making resulted in a rapid improvement in the scope of benefits provided by the Society. (17)

The Company Directors were less inclined to listen to requests for improvements in pay. In 1845 the porters at the Nine Elms Depot, who worked a 16 hour day for 18-20/- per week, petitioned for shorter hours or overtime pay. The Directors out-manoeuvred them. The

Company's Chief Clerk travelled on a special train along the line to Southampton collecting signatures from porters at each station to a new agreement which accepted the existing rates of pay and conditions. The Nine Elms porters were presented with this and told to sign. 39 refused to do so and were sacked. (18)

### Organisational Diversity 1850s-1870s

It is in the 1850s that working-class organisational development begins to take off in Battersea and on the fringes of the surrounding districts: more lodges and Courts of the Oddfellows and Foresters, several Friends of Labour Loan Societies, and co-operative initiatives, notably Price's Workman's Stores among the candlemakers. The builders' strike and lockout of the 1859 and 1860 led to the development of building workers trade unionism in the area. The 1860s are marked by continued growth of friendly and local society branches, and attempts by railway workers to unionise, culminating in the formation of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Workers in the early 1870s. On the political level the Reform League was actively supported. On the divide between collective self-improvement and politics there were initiatives to establish workingmens' clubs. There was also a measure of working class support for temperance initiatives.

By the mid-1870s when the first residents of the Shaftesbury Park Estate moved in, there already existed in Battersea a vibrant range of collective self-help organisations, experienced organisers and activists.

The list of organisations in and around Battersea contains the names of the lodges of the various Oddfellows Unities, and the courts of the Ancient Order of Foresters. Among the affiliated benefit order societies, the Foresters gained more support than the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows in London than in many other parts of the country. In 1861 they had 18,614 members in an 8 mile circle in London against the Oddfellows 11,186. This was partly due to the existence of rival Unities to Manchester. (19)

The Friends of Labour Loan Societies were a particular form of loan society certified under the Loan Societies Act of 1840. They have rarely received a mention in labour movement history writing. The first was started in 1851 by a group of North London workers, putting into practice an idea of a Chartist supporter who had been on Kennington Common in 1848. Its rule book explicitly recognised that working men were dependent on capitalists for their means of labour, and needed to unite to protect themselves from privation and suffering and end the dependence on usurious money lenders. It was known as the parent Association, and other Friends Societies were set up as branches. They published a monthly *Circular* between 1859 and 1863. (20) There was also another paper associated with the Friends. By December 1859 it was estimated that 30,000 working men in London had enrolled. Although their length of existence is not known by February 1860 the 262nd branch had been established, by May 1861 there were over 400 branches with about 50,000 members. A year later it had risen to over 500 with a total estimated membership of 80,000. They then spread throughout the country. Several were established in and around Battersea. An important part of the Friends' collective life was the social functions and special fundraising events, and then cross-branch excursions. Other loan societies were also set up not linked to the Friends often with Labour or Workingmens' in their titles. (21)

Although the rules forbade political and religious debate, an appeal was made on behalf of the striking/locked out building workers in 1859. The *Circular's* editorial talked about Friends feeling themselves morally bound 'to give their support in aid of the victims of

'Giant Capital.' George Potter, a leader of the strike, was on hand to speak to Friends branches. The other Friends newspaper, however, was more critical of the building workers, and advised against support for the nine hours movement. In 1860 the *Circular* ran an editorial drawing the lessons for working men of the co-operation of the rich, and talked about the Friends being involved in co-operative credit. (22)

As with all forms of organisations loan societies had problems. By 1869 Pratt, the Registrar of Friendly Societies, who also oversaw loan societies, proposed their abolition because he thought they were generally started by publicans, and were swindles. Friends activists were outraged. The relatively new newspaper covering the range of working-class organisational affairs *Labour & Unity* published letters of protest, including one by J.L. Turner, the Chairman of the Hand-in-Hand and Surprise Societies based in Wandsworth Rd. The Hand-in-Hand unanimously rejected Pratt's analysis. Loan societies continued to exist well into the twentieth century, a good example being the Vauxhall Friends. (23)

At its first anniversary supper the Hand-in-Hand in Wandsworth Rd toasted *The Beehive* and *Labour and Unity* newspapers. (24) In September 1869, Chairman Turner expressed the hope "ere long he should have the pleasure of seeing their interests properly represented in the British House of Commons by such men as Odger, Guile, Allen, Applegarth, &c." (25)

There were a number of attempts to establish workingmen's clubs. The first opened in 1863, but it is not clear how long it existed. (26) The second, the Battersea Workingmen's Institute, had several hundred members, and its premises were the registered office for the Battersea Co-operative Industrial Society formed in 1872. (27)

## Co-operatives

Co-operation in Battersea started in 1854 when the Price's Candles workers set up the Belmont Amicable Unity at Vauxhall and Price's Workmen's Stores at Battersea. (28) The Belmont operated until it was wound up in 1873, presumably because of the consolidation onto the Battersea site. (29) George Bean, a founder member of the Belmont, was involved in helping the Wandsworth Co-operative Society from 1866 to 1869. (30)

At first the Workmen's Stores operated solely for the candlemakers. It started with 312 members, and slowly expanded the range of goods for sale. In 1865 it opened up its membership to people who did not work for Prices. The Society began to promote itself, for example through a public meeting addressed by Henry Solly, of the Working Men's Club Union, and by John Buckmaster, a local radical politician. In 1873 the Stores changed its name to the Battersea & Wandsworth Co-operative Society. The leading figure in the Stores and Society was Thomas Webb who had been a Committee member from 1854 to 1860 and Chairman from 1860. He became involved in the Co-operative Printing Society from 1866. (31)

## Building Workers Trade Unionism

The builders' strike and lock-out in 1858/60 particularly affected firms based in Chelsea, Pimlico, Lambeth and Clapham. It led to the establishment by existing trade clubs of the London Amalgamated Society of Carpenters & Joiners in April 1860. (32) Battersea resident Mark Meade was Treasurer of the Amalgamation Committee, and of the committee that drew up the constitution. (33) This had a clear political perspective. A link was made between the provision of benefits not only to the support of workers and their

families experiencing difficulties, but also contributing 'to their social, moral and intellectual advancement', and 'by strict adherence to rule and discipline, acquire a knowledge of business which qualifies them for positions of responsibility and trust.' The constitution also had a clear view on the crippling effect of debt and looked forward to 'the universal establishment of the principle of co-operative mutual insurance societies'. It also envisaged working men being able to meet 'in public halls or private rooms where by the establishment of libraries, and listening to the voice of the lecturers on all subjects' workers could 'become respectful and respected, and make rapid progress in the onward march of reform.' Meade became Secretary of the Pimlico No.2 branch. A Battersea branch was set up in 1863.

## **The Formation of the Railwaymen's Trade Union**

A wide range of friendly societies, and social and cultural organisations were established for and by railway workers. The London and South Western Railway Co-operative operated from 1855 to at least 1866. (34) Still existing today by the side of the Vauxhall Cross road system, Brunswick House Club & Institute building was to provide a meeting place for many of these organisations. (35)

1865 saw a series of meetings among railwaymen to set up trade unions. At one among signalmen, pointsmen and switchmen, John Pilcher, a Battersea signalman, gave a speech which led to his dismissal. He maintained that he was the first victim for freedom of speech on the railways. He managed to secure another job on the West London Extension Line. In 1867 400 drivers unsuccessfully struck for three days for the 10 hour day.

The railwaymen of Battersea and Nine Elms took a leading role in the formation of the new Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants in 1871. Battersea's Robert Whitmore organised crucial meetings in Lambeth and Battersea to promote the new Union. By the end of December it had 300 members. In 1872 there were enough branches to form a London Executive Council on which Battersea was represented by 6 members. By 1873 Battersea alone had 302 members, and two years later the No. 1 Battersea branch was the largest of the Union's branches with 357 members, while Nine Elms was fourth with 237. They were also successful financially, and in 1875 the Battersea branch was able to financially help the Clapham Junction branch with the costs of three members against whom legal action was being taken. (36)

In 1875 the London and South West enginemen successfully won a reduction in hours to 10 and an increase in pay. That July John Pilcher, a member of the Clapham Junction branch, became a member of a Union Committee preparing a case for better pay for Sunday working. In 1878 and 1881 he served on the Union's Executive Committee. By now he was an active member of the Battersea & Wandsworth Co-op, later becoming its Secretary, and writing a column on co-operative matters in the Union journal.

In 1874 there was a strike at the Chatham and Dover Railway's Battersea Engineering works, where many workers belonged to the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. One activist Thomas Atkinson was victimised for his role in that strike. He had been a rivet boy in George Stephenson's fitting shop from 1825 to 1830, and had worked on the building of *The Rocket*. In 1836 he had escaped arrest for trade union activities by rowing down the Thames.

The activists setting up the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants chose as the President from January 1872, J. Baxter Langley, the radical doctor and journalist, who



had worked on Ernest Jones's *People's Paper*, and been on the national Executive of the Reform League. He was also Chairman of the Artizans Dwellings Company which built the Shaftesbury Park Estate. (37)

### **Radical and Secular Organisations**

Battersea had had three branches of the Reform League, sharing the same Secretary, J. Ratcliffe. They met at the Washington Coffee House, the Park Tavern and the Royal Standard. Thomas Rule, the Chairman of the Friends of Labour Loan Society that had met at the Park Tavern since 1860, represented the Washington Coffee House branch on the Reform League's national committee. (38)

Radicalism continued to find support in Battersea through the 1870s. A Battersea branch of the Mutual Help Association set up in 1874 with the aim of establishing co-operative villages, had W.N Armfield as Secretary. The organiser of the Association, the Republican William Harrison Riley, lived in Clapham and acted as Secretary of the Clapham branch. (39) There was an active branch of the National Secular Society, a member of which was John Burns.

Burns had joined Price's workforce in 1868 as an apprentice aged ten years old. He was sacked because of his political views. He obtained another apprenticeship working under Victor Delahaye, a Paris Commune socialist exile who lived in Battersea. Delahaye introduced Burns to the ideas of continental socialism. In 1878 Burns was arrested and acquitted for defying a ban on public speaking on Clapham Common. In 1879 he completed his apprenticeship and joined the Amalgamated Society of Engineers.

### **John Buckmaster and the Campaign for Wandsworth Common**

Although not eligible to stand for election to Battersea's elected Vestry, a key figure in its affairs from the 1850s through to the 1870s was John Charles Buckmaster. Born into a very poor agricultural labouring family, he started work as a small boy, became a carpenter and then paid agitator for the Anti-Corn Law League. He settled in Battersea in 1853. He immediately became involved in local affairs. He was a member of the Committee that decided to build the Lammas Hall as a public hall using compensation paid by the Battersea Park Commissioners for the loss of common land rights in Battersea Fields. He started proposing lists of liberal minded men to be elected to the Vestry from 1858. From 1866 he became an ex-officio member due to his position as a parish churchwarden. From 1865 he started a campaign to protect Wandsworth Common by tearing down a fence blocking a public path. That campaign saw him addressing outdoor public meetings of up to 5,000 people. The campaign was successful in 1871. (40) He also lectured in Battersea and supported the Co-operative at a public meeting.

He worked closely with people who identified themselves as Liberals, especially Samuel Poupard and Henry Juer, both market gardeners of Huguenot descent. Battersea did not have organised party political organisations until 1871, when the first Liberal and Conservative Associations were established.

### **The Importance of the Shaftesbury Park Estate**

Poupart sold his market garden farm to the Artizans Dwelling Company for the development of the Shaftesbury Park Estate. The Company had been founded in 1867 by a group of workers to provide good quality housing for working people. It identified with the

co-operative movement and regularly advertised in the *Beehive* and the *Co-operator*. (41) William Swindlehurst, the Secretary, had been involved in the Preston branch of the Chartist Land Co in 1848, and in 1858 had been Secretary of the Wandsworth Workingmen's Co-operative. (42) Baxter Langley was recruited as Chair, and support obtained from the Earl of Shaftesbury.

The development of the Estate was crucial to Battersea's political development. It attracted the better-off and radically inclined workers and artisans. Swindlehurst lived on the estate and was involved in helping to organise activities. Other radical residents included the printer J.C. Durant, John Vooght (a member of the Clapham Vestry in the 1860s), George Harris, and William Willis. In 1877 Swindlehurst and Baxter Langley were convicted of fraud on an Artizan's land deal in North London. There was a short-lived effort that year to use Swindlehurst's house to set up a Workingmens Club & Institute. (42)

The scene was now set in Battersea for an escalating growth in working-class organisation, and the flexing of political muscle. Even though most of them could not vote, during the 1880 Parliamentary election the Shaftesbury Park tenants showed their political preferences when they used a Conservative election meeting to overwhelmingly endorse the Liberal candidates. (42)

### **Liberal and Radical Organisations**

The early 1880s saw the establishment of the Battersea Liberal Club, the Battersea Liberal Association, and the Battersea Park Democratic Association. Because the Parish curate Escreet, was a member, the Guild of St Matthews held lectures. Three Battersea and three Clapham radicals became life subscribers of *The Radical* newspaper, including Armfield. (43)

In December 1883 the Shaftesbury Park Club & Institute was established under the leadership of Vooght. Later it moved onto Lavender Hill where it still operates today. By the mid-1880s the Estate had a complexity of organisations including a Band of Hope, a Dramatic Club, a Friends of Labour Loan Society, a rifle corps, a sport team, an annual flower, and a Lodge of the Good Templars. After a co-operative store on the Estate failed in 1881, the premises were taken over by the Battersea & Wandsworth Society, which later transferred the business onto Lavender Hill. George Harris was involved in organising pressure for Battersea to have a Free Library, public swimming baths and the Battersea Polytechnic. At least two residents were Secretaries of Forester and Oddfellows organisations in neighbouring districts.

Political issues taken up by the radical and liberal organisations included the case for Borough status, against Government policies in Ireland, and for land nationalisation. Two Battersea Liberal Club activists Eagles and Winchester were on the platforms at the Anti-Coercion Demonstration at Hyde Park in February 1881. (44) Local radicals were involved in supporting the Land Nationalization Society, including Durant and Armfield. When the Society split in 1882, the Land Nationalization League's Provisional Council included Durant, Eagles, and another Battersea radical William Worley, and Richard Smith of Clapham. (45) About 5,000 marched from Battersea to a Hyde Park Reform demonstration in June 1884.

The Battersea branch of the National Secular Society, continued to be very active. It censured the Government's policy towards Ireland, and those present loudly cheered the idea of a United States of Europe. (46) In the early 1880s its members included William

Willis, the old Chartist Lond, who was the Vestry roadsweeper, and John Burns. Burns had settled in Battersea following a period working in Africa, marriage, and travelling in Europe. In 1884 he joined the Democratic Federation (later Social), and was elected to its Executive.

Radicals had begun to get elected to the Vestry, including Thomas Webb from 1882 to 1891, and his Co-operative Society colleague, H. Gitsham. Webb was also on the District Board of Works from 1885 to 1888.

1885 is a watershed year. Firstly, the radical James Tims joined the Vestry. Tims had been born in Paddington in 1851. As a young printer working in London's Shoe Lane he had been sacked for organising a party of fellow workers to take part in the 1868 Great Reform demonstration in Hyde Park.

Secondly, the Radicals and Liberals had to re-organise themselves because Battersea had become a Parliamentary constituency in its own right. The Battersea Liberal & Radical Association and the Boro. of Battersea Club were set up. Tims was a key figure in both. Willis, Vooght, Durant, and Burns were members of the Club. The Liberal Octavius Morgan, Director of Morgan Crucible, was elected as Battersea's first MP.

Thirdly, a talk by Burns on the causes of poverty at the Secular Society had a dramatic effect on the audience, which included the radical engineer Tom Mann, newly settled in Battersea. As a result the Battersea branch of the Social Democratic Federation was established, with Burns as first Secretary.

### **The Battersea SDF**

In a few short years, the work of the SDF branch transformed working-class politics in Battersea. It gave Burns a base, and was a training ground for many other activists. Members included Tom Mann and John Ward, Lond, the old Chartist, and from 1888 the seventeen year old William Sanders. (47)

Like the SDF as a whole, the branch membership was divided in its attitude to practical palliative reform activities, particularly in the trade union sphere. Mann's particular interest was in reducing hours of work to ease unemployment, to break down barriers between skilled and unskilled, and between organised and unorganised, and give workers more leisure time. In 1886 he failed to convince the Battersea SDF, partly because Burns opposed him. Undaunted Mann and his supporters set up the Battersea Progressive Society which in turn established an Eight-Hours League. In June he published his highly influential pamphlet "What a Compulsory Eight-Hour Day Means to the Workers." (48)

At the end of 1886 and beginning of 1887 there is an almost pre-revolutionary mood. Ward trained the comrades for possible physical-force eventualities. Burns stated that he would rather take up a musket on behalf of his fellow workers, and sack the bakers' shops. Burns organised a demonstration by the unemployed outside the Parish Church. Escreet had now moved on, and in 1886 and 1887 the new Curate, Dennis Hird, later Principal of Ruskin College, preached socialism from the pulpit.

While the story of Burns' involvement in the November 1887 demonstrations in Trafalgar Square is part of the history of British socialism, it is less well known that Tims was a key organiser as Secretary of the London-wide Metropolitan Radical Federation set up in 1886.

Battersea SDF strove to develop an effective political strategy. It was pluralistic and undertook practical as well as campaigning activities. Speakers at its internal meetings came from a wide spread of socialist thought from Hyndman, the founder of the SDF to George Bernard Shaw, the Fabian. Its practical activities ranged from organising the unemployed, running a co-operative store, and an athletics club. It regularly attracted 1,000 people to its open-air meetings. By 1888 it had developed sufficient support to have members elected as Vestrymen. (49) It unsuccessfully ran John Ward for the School Board election, (50) and then put Burns forward for one of the two Battersea seats on the newly created London County Council.

Tims, who also stood, played an important role in obtaining the backing of the Battersea Liberal & Radical Association for Burns. The Conservatives failed to put up a candidate. The other four candidates all represented different strands of liberal and radical thinking. Burns topped the poll with 3,071 votes, with Tims second on 2,307.

Burns' election gave him the opportunity to put into practice some of the theories he had long advocated in Battersea Park and on Clapham Common. He had undergone a remarkable change in outlook since the neo-revolutionary position in the winter of 1886/87. Ambition is not an adequate explanation, because by itself it does not achieve realisation. The disintegration of Trafalgar Square demonstrations into disorder and rioting may have made him realise that forces could be released especially among the 'non-respectable' which could not be controlled by leaders like himself. Battersea SDF's exploitation of Vestry elections, and continual demands on the Vestry showed that effective action could be undertaken to change the system. To be elected to the LCC required the development of political support and organisation, and that in turn depended on supporters and activists sharing a common political view of how social change could be influenced.

A wages fund organised by William Sanders was set up to support Burns by the SDF and then a wider body the Battersea Workmen's Representation Association. (51)

His position on the LCC gave Burns added authority in his role in supporting the Dock Strike in 1889. The role of Burns and Tom Mann in the story of New Unionism is well known; John Ward's less so. For both Burns and Ward their involvement represented a major change in attitude towards trade union action. Burns started off supporting the Matchgirls' Strike in 1888,

While the gasworkers' strike started at the Beckton Works, the first meeting to promote the newly formed National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers, and the first mass strike meeting were held at Battersea Park gates. Burns helped local workers organise, including the Gas Union's Vauxhall and Nine Elms branch. Rev. Morris, a curate working in South Lambeth, who ran a club for working men, was a supporter. John Ward was Chair of the Battersea branch.

There was a flurry of union activity in Battersea. During the Dock Strike, workers refused to unload colliers at Nine Elms, until they were paid 8s a day. (52) In May the Battersea branch of the London District of the Amalgamated Union of Operative Bakers and Confectioners was created by absorbing some local clubs, like one based in Queens Rd. (53) Tom Mann supported a meeting of employees of the South London Tramway Company held at the Battersea SDF's Sydney Hall to encourage them to enrol in the Tramway and Omnibus Union, which many did. (54)

Some company managements conceded demands from their workforces. The workers at the London South Western Railway's carriage department won a nine hour day in October 1889. (55) Towards the end of the year the company's signalmen won some of their demands, although the uniformed staff did not. (56) Burns, de Mattos (a middle-class socialist living in Battersea) and Ward helped set up the General Railway Workers Union in November 1889. Burns and Mattos were among the first Trustees. (57) In its first year it enrolled 10,827 members among porters, vanmen, railwaymen and workshop workers, with a strong nucleus in Battersea. (58)

John Ward was particularly active among general workers. He helped to found the Navvies, Bricklayers Labourers and General Labourers Union, and the National Federation of Labour Unions. Within 2 months the Federation had 13 branches mainly in south-west London.

Barge-builders on both sides of the river gained increases in pay. (59) Within a month of finding a recruitment leaflet issued by the Factory Operatives & General Labourers Union on the factory floor the Directors of Morgan Crucible reduced the hours of work to 54 a week, and later holiday with pay. The Union's Secretary was a Battersea man, J.W.Senior. (60)

Meanwhile as representative of the Battersea Engineers Tom Mann had been working to transform the London Trades Council into a Labour Parliament for all London's workers. He was instrumental in the Council taking part in the first May Day Demonstration in 1890, in which at 200,000 people took part. Mann chaired one of the platforms, and Burns spoke from another.

### **Political Re-organisation**

The pace of events and the level of activity was such that you can almost sense the collective adrenalin pumping round, with activists heady with success that events were going their way.

On the LCC Burns was advocating the 8-hour day, direct employment in place of the use of contractors, a formal housing policy and the adoption of a Fair Wages Clause in all Council contracts. He worked closely with the radical/liberal Progressive Councillors.

In August 1889 Burns announced his intention of standing for Parliament. (61) The Liberals and Radicals had to face the prospect that a three way contest, would let the Conservatives win. In the second General Election of 1886 Morgan had seen his share of the vote drop to 51.3%. Tims was again actively involved in helping to win over Radical and Liberal support for Burns. It took a lot of persuasion and manoeuvring. To help the process the Workingmen's Association was replaced by the Battersea Labour League to run the wages fund and to secure the return of working men to all local bodies and to Parliament, not in the interests of any political party, but solely for the sake of labour matters.

Burns explained that its purpose was "the means of pioneering new social, municipal and Parliamentary activity throughout the whole metropolis." The launch meeting was chaired by Tims, and the resolution of support was proposed by the SDF Secretary. (62)

The establishment of this broadly based League effectively outmanoeuvred Liberals who were still sceptical of Burns. The support he achieved also represented a significant

change in activists' outlooks that Burns noted in an article in the March 1892 issue of the journal *The Nineteenth Century*. "Much that was considered utopian and impractical three years ago is being secured, and much more is on the verge of realisation." (63)

By the time of the announcement of a General Election for June 1892 Burns was a charismatic leader with a strong machine in the League. Burns did not compromise in obtaining Liberal support. He made it clear that he was standing as an independent labour candidate and as a social democrat. His manifesto was by no means tame. He was elected with 5,616 votes to the Conservative's 4,057, a majority of 1,559. (64)

Between 1889 and 1892 Battersea activists were in the forefront of setting a new agenda for the organised working class. That agenda was not limited to the need for workers to organise to improve their conditions at work, but also for wider social change, labour representation and a new role for local and central government. The practical implementation of municipal socialism as more than just a combination of municipal liberalism and enterprise, was in part made possible by the new form of political organisation that emerged as a result of New Unionism. Burns and the others helped create opportunities and openings for decisive political action, if others in the movement had the vision and energy to exploit them. New unionism was a seed bed for new political, economic and social developments.

Even though by 1892 Burns had left the SDF, and several Battersea members like Sanders had done likewise, relations with the Battersea branch continued to remain good. The branch remained a pioneer. In 1892 it set up the first Socialist Sunday School, organised by one of its women members, Mary Gray.

The SDFers and the League both continued the successful strategy of putting pressure on the Vestry especially over the issue of fair wages and work for the unemployed. One of the lasting achievements of the SDF Vestrymen was the proposal to build of Battersea Town Hall. (65)

Burns and the SDF, however, fell out in 1893 over the choice of LCC candidate after Tims was imprisoned for fraud. Burns supported William Davies, the nominee of the Liberal and Radical Association, rather than the candidate supported by the SDF and some of the trade unions. Davies was elected.

Despite this Burns did not lose his vision for the further development of the local movement. Towards the end of 1893 he suggested that there should be an organisation that co-ordinated trade union and labour interests. In 1894 the Labour League initiated the Trades and Labour Council. Members included the League, the SDF, radical/liberal organisations and both 'old' and 'new' trade union branches. The next goal was the 1894 Vestry elections. The Trades Council established a local election committee with the Liberals, which fielded a united slate of candidates standing as 'Progressives', and won control.

Among those who elected were Alfred Sellicks, the son of a Hampshire agricultural labourer, who had been a member of the Executive Committee of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in 1874, becoming its President and Chairman in the 1890s and early 1900s; (66) and Arthur W. Raynor a carpenter and joiner born in Battersea in 1866, who was Secretary of his Battersea Lodge, and who was to play a leading role in his union at national level.

## Control of the Vestry

From 1894 the movement faced a new set of challenges related to exercising and retaining local political control, running services, and setting the rates, as well as continuing the basic work of trade union organisation and defence and improvement of working conditions. There was also an awareness that while the aim of employing direct labour had great merits, there were also potential dangers if workers developed negligent attitudes.

There were inevitable tensions, disputes, and fallings out within the Alliance and the Trades Council. The SDF split off from the Alliance after 18 months. (67)

The Trades Council remained active in its own right on trade union and general issues affecting the working class, as well as being the leading force within the Alliance both on the Vestry and the Board of Guardians, which it considered the Progressive and labour members helped to humanise. It backed the anti-vaccination campaign from 1896. It supported local, regional and national trade union struggles in Britain, like the Engineers and South Wales Miners. It took an interest in international affairs, and affiliated to organisations like the Workman's Housing Council and the National Federation of Workmen's Trains Committee. (68)

By the end of Sanders' Secretaryship of the Trades Council, its membership had increased fourfold. He regarded the Council as "the pioneer of working class organisation and of a new social order." One of the main reasons for his departure was that he had been changing the direction of his socialist priorities. He was to become an active ethical socialist. A Battersea Ethical Society was established in 1897. (69)

Whatever their differences on local political issues, the activists found that on some issues they could co-operate, such as in their united opposition to the Boer War through the Battersea Stop the War Committee which included the SDF, the Labour League, and the Liberal and Radical Association. (70)

During the period of the Boer War the Vestry was replaced by the Battersea Borough Council, which the Alliance also controlled. The Borough Council also opposed the Boer War, and named one of the streets on its Latchmere Estate after Joubert, a Boer General. It refused to sign a loyal address on Edward VII's Coronation in 1902. (71)

Meanwhile, the Battersea & Wandsworth Co-operative Society had been continuing to grow and expand its range of services and activities, and support other co-operative developments like the Permanent Building Society and the Co-operative Women's Guild. (72) Thomas Webb's son Arthur and daughter Catherine became active respectively in both these organisations. Pilcher, the railwayman was an active member, and was writing on co-operative affairs in his Union journal. Born into a local co-operative and trade unionist family Albert Mansbridge, supported by his wife Frances, set up in 1903 in their Battersea home the association which became the Workers' Educational Association in 1905. (73)

The Borough Council meanwhile had been having a running battle with the district auditor over its expenditure on the sterilising milk plant; the Local Government Board allowing the alleged illegal expenditure to continue. By 1908, however, it incurred several items of expenditure which the auditor regarded as surchargeable, including expenditure on helping the unemployed raised by an additional rate levy. The Council went into deficit. It was only able to secure a bank overdraft with the help of the Conservative Municipal

Reform opposition, who exacted a reduced rate and budget cuts. Taking place in 1908, it was one of several factors in the Alliance losing control in 1909.

### **The Collapse of the Progressive Alliance**

Two other major factors were the way in which national developments, affected the local movement.

Firstly, there was tension over the relationship with the Labour Representation Committee (later Labour Party) from 1900. Burns and several Battersea trade unionists had been at the inaugural Conference. Being against the formation, Burns did not become one of its nominees. The Trades Council did not join until mid-1902, despite the rule against co-operation at local level with other parties in Parliamentary candidatures.

Secondly, in December 1905 Burns accepted appointment to the Liberal Cabinet becoming the President of the Local Government Board. The Trades Council was disaffiliated by the Labour Party in April 1906. This expulsion led to a polarisation of attitudes. A Battersea branch of the Independent Labour Party was started at the end of 1906 which worked with the Social Democrats through the Battersea Socialist Council. They fielded joint candidates in the Borough elections in 1906 against the Progressives. In 1908 Battersea Labour Party was established. Free Church, Temperance and Liberal-Radical Progressive organisations also began to organise separately. In the resultant turmoil the core of the Progressives found themselves opposed by SDF/ILP, Liberal and Battersea Labour candidates. They were routed in 1909 by the Municipal Reformers, retaining only two seats.

A further complication in the dynamics of local politics had been underway since 1906 when the Women's Social & Political Union began to target Battersea as part of the campaign for votes for women and disrupt Burns' public meetings because he was in the Government. Now an LCC Alderman still living in Battersea, William Sanders' wife Beatrice was the WSPU office accountant. After the split off from the Union, the Women's Freedom League, led by Charlotte Despard, who lived in Nine Elms, campaigned against Burns. (74)

Even the Battersea & Wandsworth Co-operative Society was adversely affected. The fractious quarrelling in the wider movement is mirrored within the Society, which began to experience a membership decline, leading to its collapse in 1908.

The Trades Council was slow to recover from the electoral defeat. It failed to produce Annual Reports in 1909 and 1910. Morale seems to have improved as a result of the renewal of industrial unrest, strikes, the development of syndicalism and industrial unionist ideas from 1910. The Council proudly reported in its 1911 Report its assistance to the printers and transport workers struggles. (75)

### **Progressives Regain Control**

The Progressive Alliance was re-formed, although a number of socialists and trade unionists stood against it including the Trades Council shop worker activist Duncan Carmichael. The Alliance did regain control of the Borough Council. In the short period before the First World War, it chose Thomas Brogan as the Borough's first Irish Catholic Mayor in 1912. In 1913 it selected as John Archer, a black Catholic Liverpoolian and Pan-Africanist, who had originally been elected as a Councillor in 1906. (76)



The record of the Progressive Alliance on the Vestry and Council between 1894 and 1909 and from 1912 onwards was impressive. A 48 hour working week and improved employee wage rates had been introduced early on. It opened Direct Labour Workshops. (77) The Department built library extensions, the Nine Elms swimming and slipper baths, a public laundry, a sterilised milk depot, an electric light station, and the Latchmere housing estate. (78) The facilities of Latchmere Baths were expanded. (79) It was the first London Borough to set up a health visiting service. Its Medical Officer of Health played a leading role in the maternity and child welfare movement. (80) The appointment of an electoral registration officer had helped to ensure a high electoral roll among the working class. It sponsored Borough Concerts and Lectures, and University Extension Lectures. The facilities built up by the Vestry/Council were regarded by the labour movement as positive achievements needing defending and improving. Battersea earned the title of 'The Municipal Mecca'.

The Progressive Alliance could not withstand the pressures of the social and economic effects of the First World War. Two factions split off in 1915 in a row over a rate increase. In 1918 the Trades Council reorganised itself as the Battersea Trades Council & Labour Party affiliated to the national Labour Party. Battersea Labour became an alliance of trade unionists, co-operators and socialists. (81) The local Liberals accepted the National Liberal and Conservative Coalition in the 1918 General Election. Its candidates defeated Labour's Charlotte Despard and Col. Arthur Lynch. (82) A year later Labour won control of the Borough Council. Many of the pre-War activists, like Duncan Carmichael and John Archer went on to play significant roles in Battersea labour movement politics in the 1920s.

## Conclusion

Different districts have different dynamics for political and social development. From the early 1850s to the early 1890s Battersea's urban growth has an almost frontier like atmosphere, giving an urgency and vibrancy to Battersea's working class organisational and political development. Because of the limitations on voting and the inclusion in Battersea of non-working class areas it was not possible for independent working class political organisation to take control of local institutions by itself, so appropriate strategies and tactics to influence local politics had to be developed, which in turn created a new set of problems and dynamics, until finally an independent working class organisation was able to take control in 1918. Battersea's experience may not have been mirrored in many other areas, but it cannot be denied that it made an earlier breakthrough into local and national politics on a very specific working-class economic, social and political agenda, than in most other places, and despite a range of problems had a record of proud achievement in developing services for its working class base.

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80. The Medical Officer of Health was G.F.McCleary, author of *Early History of the Infant Welfare Movement* (H.K.Lewis, London 1933) and *The Maternity Child Care Movement* (P.S.King, London, 1935). John Burns was patron (see Robert W.J.Dingwall. *Collectivism, Regionalism and Feminism: Health Visiting and British Social Policy 1850-1975*. (*Journal of Social Policy*, part 3, July 1977).
81. Chris Wrigley. 'Changes in Battersea's Labour Movement 1914-1919' (Battersea & Wandsworth Labour & Social History Group); revised edition included in 'Republicanism and War in Battersea' (Wandsworth History Workshop 1993).
82. Arthur Lynch had fought with the Boers, and was elected an Irish Nationalist MP. He could not take his seat because he was condemned for treason. He was subsequently pardoned and became a recruiter in the First World War. See entry in *Dictionary of National Biography 1931-40*, p. 551-2; his autobiography *My Life Story* (London 1924); and Sean Creighton 'Arthur Lynch' in *Battersea Notes & Sketches 1850s to 1930s* (Wandsworth Community Publications Group, July 1982).