

A SHORT HISTORY OF CHELSEA

BY
KEVIN FLUDE

When Bad men dy and turne to their last Sleepe
What stir the poets and ingravens keepe
By a faind skil, to pile them up a name
With termes of good and just out-lasting fame
Alas poore men such have most need of stone and epitaphs. The Good (indeed) lack none
Their own true worth's enough to give a glory
Unto th' uncanckered records of their story
Such was the man lyes here yet doth partake
Of verse and stone but tis for fashion's sake.

Tomb of Sir John Lawrence Died 1638 50 years of Age Buried in Chelsea Old Church

Origins

The location of the original settlement is around Chelsea Old Church near the present day Battersea Bridge. It was situated on a ridge of gravel above the flood plain of the Thames. The settlement had a pleasant situation on the river facing the sunny south, with fertile soils on the gradual slope up towards Notting Hill. The nucleus of the settlement would have been protected by marshland to the east and west, and the Thames provided both a route way for trade and a rich source of fish. The area was exploited in the prehistoric period, but surprisingly few finds have been recovered to date, comprising Palaeolithic and Neolithic axes, a Bronze Age Hoard, and a few other stray finds. By contrast large numbers of finds have been dredged up from the Thames which archaeologists now believe are the remains of offerings to the Celtic Gods. The most spectacular find is the Battersea Shield, now in the British Museum, which is the high point of native Celtic Art. It is of Bronze repousse work with red glass inlay. The 31.5 inch shield is beautifully decorated with a flowing living ornament that makes Classical art seem static, and stilted by comparison.

The Roman period is equally shadowy for Chelsea, although it is just possible that Julius Caesar crossed the river at this point on his armed incursion to Britain in 54BC.

Chelsea only appears in the historic record in AD 785, nearly 400 years after the Romans left the country. The name is first mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

'There was a contentious synod at Chelsea,

archbishop Jaenberht gave up a share of his bishopric and King Offa choose Hygebeht for it.'

The context is that of a dispute which was settled in a property belonging to the King Offa of Mercia, who was accepted as the overlord of England. Offa was attempting to diminish the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury Jaenberht who had close connections to the rival Kingdom of Kent, and he secured the agreement to transfer some of its authority to Hygebeht bishopric in Lichfield.

King Alfred also held important Synods in Chelsea, and it appears that Chelsea was the site of a Royal manor or palace.

Subsequently, Chelsea appears spelt in over 30 different ways including Cealhythe, Cealchyll, Chelched and Chelchaya, Chelsey, Chelsea. The Hythe part of the name shows that Chelsea was a landing place, while the first part of the name is harder to pin down, and could mean anything but possible candidates are chalk, chalice sandy /gravelly spit of land.

Land in Chelsea was transferred to the Abbot and Fraternity of Westminster in Edward the Confessor's reign but the only important record of Chelsea in this period is in the Domesday Book. The entry records:

'Edward of Salisbury holds Chelched for 2 hides. Land for 5 ploughs. In Lordship 1 hide; 2 ploughs there now. The villagers, 1 plough; a further 2 ploughs possible. 2 Villagers with 2 virgates; 4 villagers with 1/2 virgate each; 3 small holders with 5 acres each; 3 slaves. Meadow for 2 ploughs; pasture

for the village livestock; woodland, 60 pigs, and 52d too. Total value ,9; when acquired and always the same. Wulfwen, King Edward's man, held this manor; she could sell to whom she would.'

A hide is a unit of land of some 120 acres. A Virgate is a quarter of a hide (i.e. 30 acres). The villagers are villeins, the smallholders are bordars. Wulfwen is the saxon landlady who had the right to dispose of the land as she saw fit and was presumably dispossessed by Edward of Salisbury after the Norman Conquest of 1066.

The evidence points to a small and unexceptional village and manor of a ordinary feudal structure, and suggests that Chelsea had not yet become fashionable. This pattern of a rural community continues throughout the medieval period.

It is the presence of Sir Thomas More in Chelsea which begins to separate Chelsea from the other villages in the vicinity of London. More moved to the area in the early 1520's to take up residence in the area of present day Beaufort St. The attraction of Chelsea for More is described by Heywood:

'The place was wonderfully charming, both from the advantages of its site, for from one part almost the whole of the noble city of London was visible; and from, another, the beautiful Thames, with green meadows and woody eminences all around; and also for its own beauty, for as it was crowned with an almost perpetual verdure, it had flowering shrubs and the branches of fruit trees which grew near, interwove in so beautiful a manner, that it appeared like a living tapestry woven by Nature herself'.

The Dutch Humanist Erasmus gave the following description of the More Household:

'More hath built near London upon the Thames side a commodious house, neither mean nor subject to envy, yet magnificent enough; there he converseth with his family, his wife, his son, and daughter-in-law, his three daughters, and their husbands, with eleven grandchildren. There is not any man so loving to his children as he; and he loveth his old wife as well as if she were a young maid; and such is the excellency of his temper that whatsoever happenith that could not be helped, he loveth it as if nothing could happen more happily. ... I should rather call this house a school or university of Christian religion; for there is none therein but readeth or studieth the liberal sciences.

Erasmus obviously enjoyed his stay in London as he wrote:

'We meet in the street with copious kisses; in

short, whithersoever you turn, it is a whole world of osculation. If you dear friend, ever tasted how soft and sweet these are, you would desire to leave your home not for 10 years, as Solon did but as a sojourner in England unto Death.'

More is something of an enigma, a liberal who educated his daughters yet segregated his house into a male and a female wing, a liberal who believed in religious tolerance who was personally responsible as Lord Chancellor for sentencing 5 protestants to be burn at stake. In Chelsea he lived with his second wife Alice, whom he had married a few short weeks after the death of his first wife. At Chelsea he planned a tomb for the three of them. The Tomb survived the bombing of World War II and on it can be seen the Latin inscription which provides an intriguing insight into More's mind and his sense of humour:

'I cannot decide whether I did love the one or do love the other more. Oh how happy we could have lived all three together if fate and morality permitted. Well I pray that the day that heaven will bring us together, thus death will give that life could not.'

To be included on his in his lengthy epitaph was the following sentence:

'Relentless towards thieves, murderers and heretics'

However, the word heretics does not appear on the tomb, and in its place is a gap. He left out the word on the advice of Erasmus.

One eminent visitor to More's house was King Henry who walked around the garden 'holding his arm about his [More's] neck.' More was not unaware of the fleeting nature of Henry's public affection and told his son-in-law William Roper that 'if my head could win him [Henry] a castle in France .. it should not fail to go.'

His head of course did go but not for territorial advantage. Refusing to accept either the divorce of Katherine of Aragon, nor that Henry had replaced the Pope as head of the church in England, More withdrew from Public life and hoped that silence would protect him from prosecution. But the King insisted that he sign the Act of Succession and on More's refusal felt that there was not alternative but to try More for treason.

More's wife pleaded with him to sign the oath saying: *'And seeing you have at Chelsea a right fair house, your library, your books, your gallery, your garden, your orchard and all other necessaries so hand) some about you where you might in the*

company of me your wife, your children and household be merry, I must in God's name you mean here still thus foolishly to tarry.'

But he had made his peace with God, was found guilty, and sentenced to be Hung Drawn and Quartered. He was spared this most cruel of deaths by his old friend the King's 'Mercy' and the sentence was commuted to death by decapitation. More said 'God forbid the king should use any more such mercy to any of his friends.'

In 1536 the year following More's death King Henry VIII acquired Chelsea Manor. He rebuilt it and may have contracted a secret marriage to Jane Seymour, one day after the execution of Anne Boleyn. The house was given as a wedding present to his last wife Catherine Parr, and following his death, the dowager Queen lived here with her new husband Thomas Seymour. He was found fondling the 14 year old Princess Elizabeth in the house. Other queens to have stayed in the manor include Anne of Cleves who died here, and Lady Jane Grey.

Because of its pleasant location, and perhaps its Royal associations, the manor house, and More's old house were soon joined by a number of other aristocratic houses: Gorges House, Lyndsey House, Danvers House and Winchester House. The pleasant site may also have inspired Charles II to site here the Royal Hospital designed to house old soldiers broken by battle.

In the late 17th and 18th Centuries, Chelsea became a resort for Londoners to visit. People such as Pepys, and Franklin visited the taverns and coffee-houses in this most pleasant of rural retreats. Following the building of Ranelagh Gardens Londoners by their thousands swarmed into Chelsea to partake of London's most famous pleasure gardens, and to eat the famous Chelsea Buns from the Bun House.

As London encroached on Chelsea, and speculative housing was built around the soon to be demolished aristocratic houses, the area became popular with artists and writers, and became the home of Turner, Rosetti, Greaves, Whistler, Singer Sargeant, Bram Stoker, George Elliot, Oscar Wilde, and many, many more.

By this time the focus of Chelsea had moved from the Riverside to Kings Road. Once this had ceased to be the King's Royal Road shops developed along its length, and it became a fashionable shopping area reaching its zenith in the Swinging Sixties.

The Chelsea Walk

Walk originally written by Kevin Flude
for a Walk in Support of the
Cancer Research Campaign

Conventions: TL = Turn Left TR = Turn Right

Start Point Battersea Park.

History: Battersea Park. Originally part of the Battersea Manor dating to Domesday Books, used by Londoners as resort for Fairs etc. Charles II was nearly assassinated while bathing in the Thames here by Captain Blood who stayed his hand because of 'awe of Majesty'. Park Opened in 1853.

Route: Start at the Cancer Research Campaign Bus in the Centre Circle of Battersea Park. **Walk North** from Centre Circle to **riverside path**. Notice the Peace Pagoda which was erected as one of the last acts by the Greater London Council. **TL leave park and** TR over Albert Bridge

Albert Bridge

History: 1871-3 by R M Ordish a 'straight-link' suspension Bridge

Route: Cross Chelsea Embankment. TL along Cheyne Walk until you arrive at Old Chelsea Church

Chelsea Old Church

History: It may not look much since it was reconstructed after bomb damage in WWII but it has a fascinating history: . The East End Tudor Brickwork survives from the Church as known by Sir Thomas More. Inside is his family vault in which he planned to be interred with his first and second wife. Church probably dates back originally to Saxon Times but was first recorded in 1157.

Route: Cross Church Street to

Crosby Hall

Crosby hall

History: The hall of the medieval **CROSBY PLACE**. It was carefully removed to Chelsea in 1908 and is now part of the hostel of the British Federation of University Women. It has a wonderful wooden roof, and the

hall appears in Shakespeare's Play Richard III where Richard heard the 'news' of the deaths of the Princes in the Tower. The Hall stands in grounds once owned by Thomas More.

Route: Walk up Old Church Street, Cross Road and TR into Justice Walk. At end TL into Lawrence St, TR into Upper Cheyne Row, and TR into Cheyne Row, Walk along to:

Carlyle's House 24 Cheyne Row

History: You have been walking in the centre of the original Chelsea, which because of its beautiful setting, and clean air became fashionable. House built in 1708, the house is run by the National Trust and is left much as the famous Historian left in when he died in 1881.

Route: Continue along Cheyne Row. TL back along Cheyne Walk. Cross Oakley Road and continue along Cheyne Walk.

Cheyne Walk

History: One of London's most prestigious roads. Here have lived Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Gabriel Rossetti, Keith Richards, Bram Stoker, George Elliot, John Getty, Jane Asher, Gerald Scarfe etc. etc.

Route: Continue Along Cheyne Walk until Royal Hospital Street. Cross Road and continue along Riverside along Embankment, until you pass the:

Chelsea Physic Garden

History: The second oldest physic garden in the country, after Ox) ford, was established by the Society of Apothecaries in 1676 (see F7). Contains around 5000 species of plant and is still an important centre for their study.

Route: :Continue along Embankment to the huge Grounds and Classical Buildings of:

Chelsea hospital

History: Built by Sir Christopher Wren in 1682-9 as a home, rather than a hospital, for 'men broken by war and old age'. Over 400 'Chelsea Pensioners' live here, and their distinctive dress is a popular sight in the area.

Route: Walk through the Grounds, to fence and around the House and out at the other end into Royal Hospital Road. TL and walk past the hideous but interesting (If you like that sort of thing) National Army Museum, cross Road and TR into:

Tite St

History: Late Victorian Red Brick Houses. In this street lived Whistler and his one-time friend Oscar Wilde. He lived here with his wife while he was tried for his homosexuality.

Route: Continue to end TR into St Leonards Terrace, past Bram Stoker's House, Lawrence Olivier lived at No 7. TL up the gravelled:

Royal Avenue

History: A leafy boulevard designed to link Kensington Palace with the Royal Hospital, never completed. This 'was' James Bond's home address.

Route: Continue to King's Road TR

King's Road

History: Originally the road reserved for the King and his Servants, it had toll gates along it and you needed a token (or a bribe) to be able to pass. It was used to connect Royal Palaces in Westminster with those along the River at Kew and Hampton Court. Became serious Bohemian in mid 50's, it Swung in the 60's, and was invaded by Punks in the 70's.

Route: Walk along Kings Road past no 120 which was the shop of Thomas Crapper WC inventor, and along to:

Duke of York's HQ

History: Originally the Grand Old Duke's School for army orphans, built 1801 now used by various army units.

Route: Continue along King's Road to Sloane Square Tube Station

Sloane Square

History: Home of the Sloane Ranger. Named after Sir Hans Sloane, founder of the British Museum, laid out in the 1780's, Cricket used to be played in the centre. Royal Court Theatre where the Swinging 60's started with John Osborne's Look Back In Anger.

Route: For the energetic we finish with a circuit around Belgravia Start by going into Clivedon Place, just beyond Sloane Sq Tube Station and continue straight on along Kings Road and Eaton Gate (Upstairs, Downstairs was set here) and on into Hobart Place. TR into Grosvenor Gardens (part of the 17th Century Grosvenor Estate. TR into Buckingham Palace Road, past Victorian Station, and Coach Station. TR into Ebury Bridge Road (named after Ebury Farm. TR onto Chelsea Bridge Road

Continue along Chelsea Bridge Street to :

Chelsea Bridge

History: This bridge is by Rendel, Palmer and Tritton and built in 1934. The original was opened in 1858 and paid for by Tolls. This is also the site of the remains of lots of iron age metalwork possibly thrown in as sacrifices to the Celtic Gods.

Route: Cross Bridge to:

Battersea Power Station:

History: Now a wreck with its stunning 30's interior pulled out in order to (possibly) make it into a Theme Park. Designed by Sir Giles Scott, famous for the Red Telephone Box (and Liverpool Cathedral) as a Power Station. 30's Brutalism, mellowed by familiarity.

Route: Walk up Queenstown Road and enter Park

Battersea Park: Back where we started!

Kevin Flude 249 Evering Road London E5 8AL

Email: kpflude@chr.org.uk

Web site: <http://www.chr.org.uk>