

INTO THE PRESENT CENTURY

The 1894 Ordnance Sheet shows the rear part of the Blacklands garden developed as Guinness Trust dwellings. Also shown is the development of stables between Richard's Place and Bull's Gardens as tall housing blocks. Over the next twenty or thirty years, the demolition of the earlier buildings on Chelsea Common and their replacement by the 'Sutton Model Dwellings', by the Samuel Lewis Trust Dwellings and, later, by larger private schemes was to transform the fringes of what is now the Conservation Area. By 1901 the population of Chelsea was about 74,000 and a strong contrast had been set up between the tall blocks north of Cale Street and the surviving small-scale buildings southwards to King's Road, and round Coulson Street and Milner Street. Jubilee Place, Astell Street and Burnsall Street, all Cadogan Estate properties, were largely rebuilt over the next thirty years, perhaps the most attractive single development being 32-46 Jubilee Place. In 1935 'The Gateways' were built to designs by Wills and Kaula; the Chelsea Society, formed eight years previously, commented favourably on the scale of the development and its "individual and attractive features" (Annual Report 1934-35, p.30).

The Second World War brought a new sort of destruction to the area. St. Luke's Church suffered several incendiary attacks during the autumn of 1940, including one bomb which landed in the belfry. The greater part of the damage to the remainder of the area occurred during four raids in the first half of 1941. The raid on the 11th January affected The Pheasantry, the southern end of Jubilee Place, the northern end of Godfrey Street and properties in The Gateways and Elystan Street. Markham Square and Elystan Street properties were damaged on 8th March. The raid of 17th April, in which Chelsea Old Church was bombed, also destroyed six properties in two groups on the west side of Sydney Street – the sympathetic rebuilds can be easily identified by their modern balcony railings – and the high explosive bomb which dropped on 74 Cale Street is probably responsible for the present gap site and the rough gable wall of number 70. Damage on 11th May was more random, but may have precipitated the redevelopment to form 26-30 (consec.) Markham Street. Incendiary damage to 72 and 108 King's Road and 23 Coulson Street happily did not affect the ultimate appearance of these terraces.

Whatever else the war brought to this part of London (the digging up of St. Luke's Gardens for vegetables by Council gardeners and the siting of a food office in Astell Street can be mentioned), it probably saved 10-17 Anderson Street and the fabric of 108 King's Road. A road-widening line was established in 1939, which would have caused the demolition of these properties, presumably to connect Sloane Avenue in suitable style to the King's Road. Although the line was not abandoned until 1970, the climate was sufficiently

altered – financially and aesthetically – for the road-widening scheme not to be implemented after the war.

By 1951, Chelsea's population had dropped to 51,000. Rebuilding of Cadogan Estate properties continued, much of Astell Street and St. Luke's Street being of post-war date. The Congregational Church in Markham Square was demolished in 1953; the Chelsea Society at the time regretted the loss of the building and its 138 ft. spire.

A greater threat to the character of the area surfaced in 1959 with the Oratory School's plans for expansion onto the west side of Sydney Street, requiring the demolition of 77 houses. A Residents' Association was formed in Sydney Street to fight the proposals, which were eventually dropped. The school has since moved from the site, and its buildings and those of St. Wilfred's Convent have been taken over by the Royal Marsden Hospital. Only a few years later, Sydney Street was facing a new threat from hospital expansion on a much larger scale, most of the western side of the street being earmarked for part of what would have been the largest hospital complex in the country. Local opposition was again mobilised, but the scheme was in any event too costly. Discussion on the siting and design on a Cardio-thoracic unit for the site directly opposite St. Luke's Church has continued for some considerable time.

The redevelopment of the Pheasantry has a history of almost equal length and complexity. The original proposal, submitted in 1969 for an eight storey hotel on the site of the Pheasantry, would have had an adverse impact on the character of the neighbouring streets. The scheme eventually built is undistinguished, but blends in quite well with adjacent streets within the Conservation Area. A large parking and service area at the rear has been successfully screened by rear wings pierced by archways.



The rebuilt archway to Stowells Brewery

The latest large development within the Conservation Area concerns the site of Stowell's Brewery on Britten Street. Houses at the end of Burnsall Street remain to be built at the time of writing. The rebuilding of the brewery archway on Britten Street next to the new offices is a welcome and attractive feature.



The north side of Chelsea Green, demolished this century to make way for Leverstock House



A Victorian photograph of Cale Street looking east, with the Blenheim public house on the right



THE SHOCKING DEATH OF 'THE FLYING MAN'

The most dramatic event involving St. Luke's and the Burial Ground came in 1874. From its early days as a pleasure garden, entertainments at Cremorne Gardens (near to where Lots Road Generating Station now stands) had featured parachutists and balloonists. The need for increasingly spectacular displays brought the 'flying man' M. Vincent de Groof, variously described in contemporary newspapers as a Frenchman and a Belgian, and his flying machine to Cremorne on June 29th.

The flying machine was in fact a glider of cane and waterproof silk, 'flown' by operating the wings and tail from a caged platform slung in the centre. Initial ascent was achieved by attachment to a balloon, and de Groof intended to cast himself loose from the balloon at a suitable height and fly back down to the Gardens. On June 29th, however, the balloon — the 'Czar', flown by Mr. Simmons — was carried away to Brandon in Suffolk where de Groof was supposed to have made a successful descent. Another attempt was organised, with much publicity, for 9th July, and

again de Groof and his machine were hoisted from the Gardens by the 'Czar'. After hovering over the Gardens the balloon was blown close to St. Luke's Church, and the crowd was then treated to the awesome spectacle of de Groof and his machine plunging out of control to crash on to Robert Street, now the part of Sydney Street by the church. De Groof was rushed to Chelsea Infirmary where he died from his injuries.

The balloon, suddenly freed of the weight of man and machine, rose so sharply upwards that Simmons lost consciousness. When he came to, he was again being carried eastwards over London, this time towards Springfield in Essex. Simmons attempted to land but his grapnel dragged and he came down on the Great Eastern Railway line. A passing train stopped to avoid collision, and the engine crew helped Simmons in the last few feet of his descent.

Public opinion and the Press were much exercised over the affair, and the desirability of people risking their necks to experiment and to entertain. Simmons felt the need to write to the main papers, thanking the Great Eastern Railwaymen and denying any responsibility for de Groof's fall: according to Simmons, there was never any communication between the two men except for bi-lingual confirmation of their altitude and the signal de Groof was supposed to give when he was about to sever contact with the balloon. At the public inquiry, Simmons said his first intimation of the turn of events was a sideways pull on the basket; when he looked over the side he saw de Groof and his machine commencing their fall, already hopelessly tilted and out of control. Later in the inquiry, estate workers at Brandon cast doubt on the successful flight on June 29th, and it is possible that the flying machine had never been properly tried at the time that de Groof met his death. The verdict was death by misadventure, no blame being attached to Simmons or the Gardens' managers.

More skilled men than de Groof were later to die testing gliders in the development of manned flight, men like Otto Lilienthal and Percy Pilcher; there was, however, a prophetic footnote to the sensational affair in the Daily News, July 11th 1874:

'Flying Machines, properly devised and driven as they must be driven, if they are to fly at all, at enormous speed, may be among the most advantageous modes of conveyance of future times.'



*King Street, now St. Luke's Street, looking south towards the brewery in Victorian times.
The Parochial Schools are on the right.*



The Britten Street elevation of the former Stowell's Brewery

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