



# SW1 LONDONVICTORIA

**/ Past / Present / Future**

By Graham Stewart / Wild ReSearch / Victoria Business Improvement District



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Victoria Business Improvement District

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Front cover:  
Westminster Cathedral from Cardinal Place

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## **VBID Foreword**

Big things are happening in Victoria. The Victoria District of London is now in the process of a major rejuvenation, on a scale previously unseen in its fascinating history.

Appointed and funded by local companies, the Victoria Business Improvement District (VBID) provides a platform for the businesses community to work together on improving Victoria's urban environment and shaping its future development. As Chairman of VBID, it therefore gives me enormous pleasure to introduce this timely report by the noted historian Dr Graham Stewart. His lucid, well-illustrated and compelling narrative provides many fascinating insights into Victoria's place in the City of Westminster and its significance as one of Central London's prime business locations. Our purpose in commissioning it was to provide VBID members, policy makers and all those interested in the future of the area with a detailed and scholarly perspective on the evolution of Victoria and its potential for the future.

For many, Victoria will always be associated with the railway and coach stations. But as Dr Stewart shows, these two important transport landmarks are but a small part of a much richer urban landscape, home to government departments, hotels, theatres, schools, residential developments and shops.

It is therefore fitting, during this historic year of London's Olympics and Diamond Jubilee celebrations, that we should honour the history of this vibrant district. At the same time, I hope the report will help bring to life for our business, residential and investment communities the type of transformation we have in mind for Victoria for the coming decade.

Most of all, I am delighted that Dr Stewart's research demonstrates so clearly why Victoria is such a special place for people to work, live and enjoy their leisure.

**Tom Foulkes**

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## About the Author

Graham Stewart is Associate Director of Wild ReSearch and a noted historian of Britain in the twentieth-century. A former leader writer and columnist for **The Times**, he is the newspaper's official historian and author of **The Murdoch Years**. He has been a nominee for the Orwell Prize, Britain's most prestigious award for political writing and his sixth book, a study of British politics, culture and society in 1980s, will be published in January 2013.

A graduate of St Andrews University and with a PhD from Cambridge University, he is a senior research fellow at the Humanities Research Institute at Buckingham University.

## About Wild ReSearch

Wild ReSearch is the thought leadership and advisory division of Wild Search, a boutique executive search business formed in 2010 and based in Westminster. Wild Search specialises in working with charities, educational organisations, housing providers, arts organisations and trade and rural bodies on leadership and board appointments.

Wild ReSearch provides research, analysis and project management for clients wishing to commission their own reports, in addition to organising events to launch their publications.

Wild ReSearch's publications include **Stronger Boards, Better Education** (2011) by Edward Wild and Neil Carmichael MP; **Education: A Great British Export?** (2011) by Graham Able and Fraser White; and **Robin Hood Gardens, Blackwall Reach: The Search for a Sense of Place** (2011) by Graham Stewart.  
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## About Victoria Business Improvement District

As one of six central London BIDs within Westminster and a further 130 BIDs currently in place across the UK, Victoria is one of the country's more high profile BIDs. With over 270 businesses paying a BID levy, Victoria generates over £1.3m of income per year. All of which is reinvested into the geographical boundary within which the BID operates.

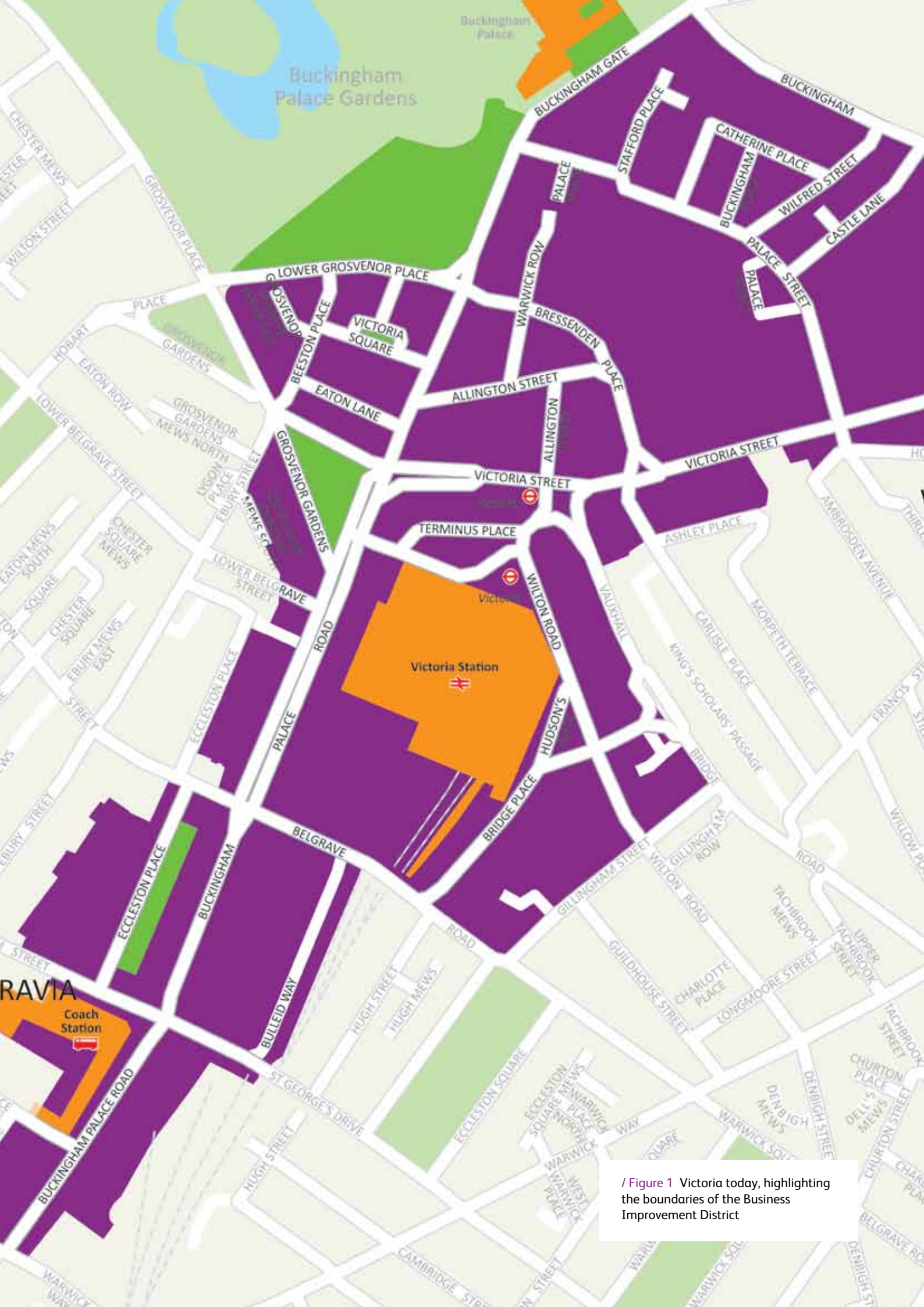
With the ever changing political landscape, BIDs are becoming firmly established as a key delivery agent working on behalf of the private sector, and through working in collaboration with other BIDs, the power to influence key government decision making processes and lobby for change is growing.

BIDs have numerous advantages for the area in which they operate including: economic growth and investment, improved social wellbeing for employees and residents and improved public realm through sustainable investment for capital projects and services. BIDs' aim to create a more appealing environment, reduce crime, market the area and provide a voice for local businesses.

The Victoria BID aims to shape the area as a destination of choice within London, showcasing all that Victoria has to offer, whilst attracting interest from the London and global economy. As the needs of the industry evolve and the opportunities for innovation increase, the value of shared delivery is evident.

As a premiere commercial district Victoria is as diverse as it is busy and also home to great history, architecture and culture. Victoria is one of London's busiest stations and is used by approximately 75 million passengers per year, with 5 million passengers using the Gatwick Express and 10 million passing through Victoria Coach Station.

Uniquely placed as a significant gateway to London, Victoria has been recognized as an area of growth and opportunity within London and as such the physical environment is being transformed to meet the growing demands of business, residents and visitors to the area.



/ Figure 1 Victoria today, highlighting the boundaries of the Business Improvement District

# 1. In Search of Victoria

**London is a vast uniform mega-city only to those who haven't spent much time in it. For a city with a population that now exceeds eight million and which is – by most reasonable definitions – the largest urban centre in the European Union, it has nevertheless retained a remarkable degree of diversity. Road and rail links that help unify London into a cohesive whole and make it more navigable have rarely succeeded in erasing the distinctiveness of its districts. For the most part, London remains a city of interconnected villages.**

In this, we are fortunate that as the sprawling city enveloped London's outlying habitations in the nineteenth century it tended to embrace rather than devour them. Despite being pulled within the city boundaries, Hampstead is still definably Hampstead, Richmond unmistakably Richmond. Such an absence of civic uniformity has survived the expansion of municipal utilities and the overseeing authorities to go with them. It has even survived the most zealous schemes of a post-war generation of urban planners whose endeavours to bring conformity and reduced journey times with the help of the bulldozer, the underpass and the flyover succeeded in blighting a few areas that found themselves 'in the way' but cannot be said to have comprehensively ruined London's delicate and beguiling inconsistency.

But where does Victoria SW1 fit in to this urban tapestry? Nobody acquainted with it would deny it is a distinctive district, but it would take an impressive leap of the imagination to describe it as one of London's 'villages.' There is, as we shall see, an interesting back-story to the area in the centuries before it started to take what is now its discernible form, but here is not to be found a tale of an ancient settlement retaining its look and identity while being pulled further and further into London's embrace.

In searching for the origins of Victoria the clue is in the name. Whatever the practice of honouring saints, local grandees and warrior-kings in place names derived in the Dark Ages and the Medieval era, the habit of

christening places after real people in the centuries after the Renaissance (or renaming existing places in their honour) continued wherever in the world Britain's colonial settlers went, but ceased to be regular practice at home. To simply give the name – without so much as adding a 'ville' or 'town' – of the reigning monarch to an entire area of London tells us much about how little the identity of the place had implanted itself in the popular consciousness before the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne in 1837.

Yet, revealingly, the designation 'Victoria' was not the consequence of some state diktat or the handiwork of a sycophantic local worthy or politician seeking to curry favour with the royal court. The christening followed rather than anticipated the two great works of infrastructure that effectively created the area as we understand it today: the construction of a major new east-west road and the opening of a vast railway terminus. Because the street (which came first) was named after the young queen, the station followed suit, as much to proclaim its proximity to Victoria Street as to honour Her Majesty. Naturally, therefore, the area around which Victoria Street and Station converged became known as Victoria.

So here was not an ancient community being plugged into the modern world and promoted with the imprimatur of royal trappings, but rather something far closer to the creation of a new neighbourhood whose name demonstrates its very modernity. In particular, it needs to be kept in mind that while reference to Queen Victoria may nowadays conjure up an austere and elderly royal matriarch ruling – somewhat remotely – over vast imperial domains, this was not the relatively youthful thirty-two year old woman the builders of Victoria Street were honouring in 1851. At that time, in the year of the Great Exhibition, the name Victoria represented novelty, freshness and innovation rather than a rather stolid, if reassuring, stability and weighty permanence. It could scarcely have been a more fitting name for an up and coming neighbourhood in the nation's capital.



## 2. Victoria before Victoria

**Why were the remnants of what previously occupied Victoria's site seemingly held in such slight regard in the mid-nineteenth century and what remains of this habitation can still be discerned in the streets and ambience of the area today? The first complete semi-accurate representation we have is the panorama of London, Westminster and Southwark made by Anthony Van der Wyngaerde in 1543, during the last years of Henry VIII's reign. It shows very clearly the royal palace, parliament buildings and abbey of Westminster occupying their familiar stretch along the west bank of the river Thames but implies that beyond them to the west – in the area that is now Victoria – there were merely fields dotted with sporadic hedges and clumps of bushes. The only nearby marked structure is the old leper hospital of St James the Less which was, at that time, undergoing conversion into St James's Palace. Neither formally laid out gardens at St James's Park (then a royal deer park) nor any habitations to the south are depicted.**

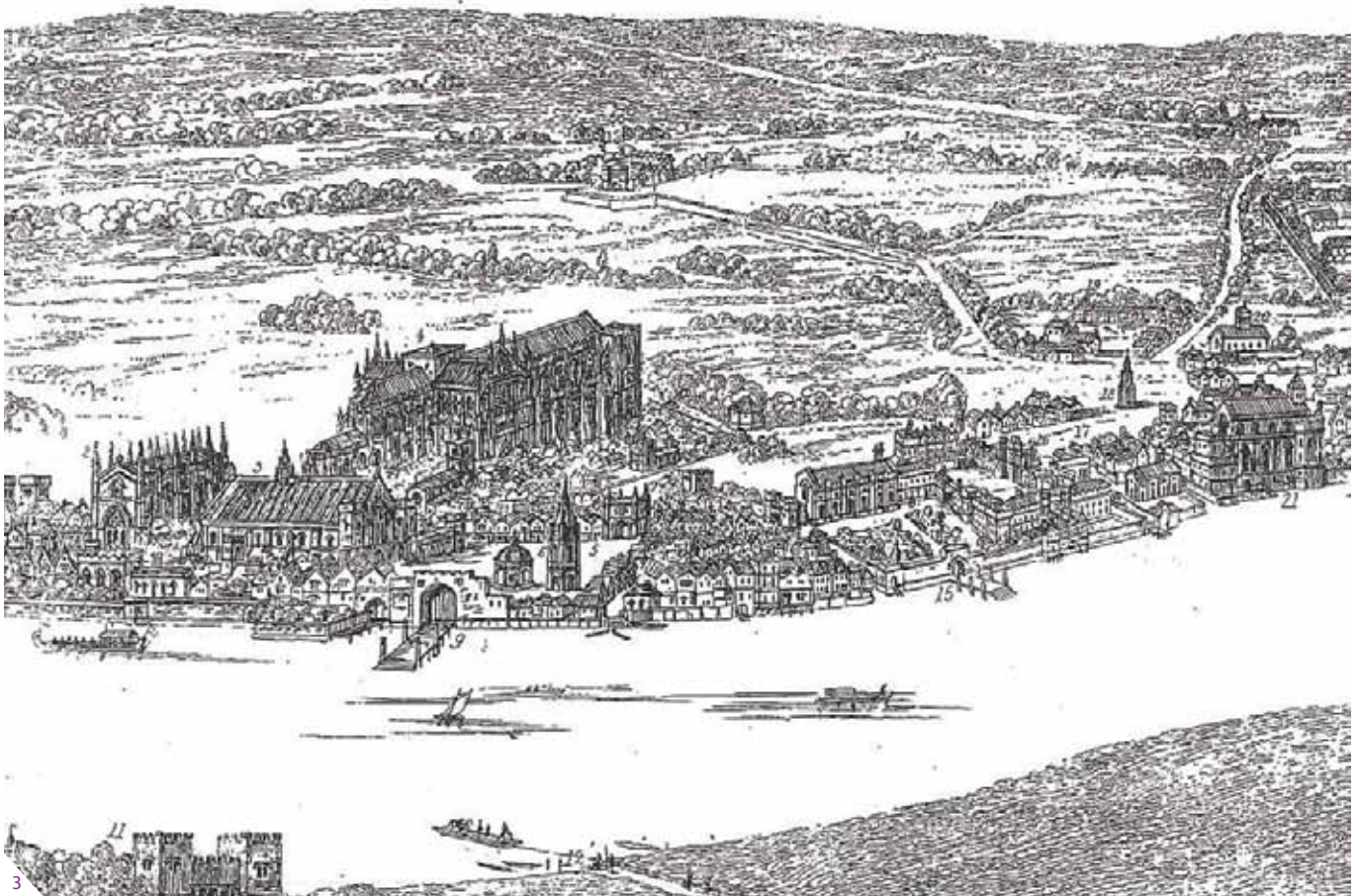
It may be thought surprising that a place of such centrality to England's national church and state as Westminster was not approached from the west by a sizeable build-up of houses. But houses would have followed a road and there was no road cutting across the fields towards Westminster, the city being, instead, reached either by riverboat or from the north through what was becoming Whitehall. Crossed by the Tyburn stream, it was the mostly boggy nature of the fields to the west that prevented Westminster being approached from that direction. The one landmark above this marshy wasteland was Tot Hill ('tot' meaning 'look out'). Long since levelled, there is no trace of Tot Hill today but the survival of Tothill Street identifies an approximate location. In, or before, the fifteenth century a chapel dedicated

to St Armel was built close to Tot Hill. The structure itself was demolished in the sixteenth century, but the name continued in corrupted form as St Ermin and survives today through what in 1899 became the six-hundred room St Ermin's Hotel off Caxton Street.

By the Reformation, the extent of the urban community west of the Palace and Abbey of Westminster was contained in a few alleys around Tothill Street and the Abbey's almonry from where charity was doled out to the destitute. The names of the surrounding streets gave a sense of their role and of their occupants: Petty France, where French wool merchants congregated, the Sanctuary where monks offered protection to fugitives from justice



**/ Figure 2** Guarding the entrance to St Ermin's Hotel: Built close to where the medieval chapel of St Armel stood until the sixteenth century, the hotel was used by Britain's Secret Intelligence Service in the 1930s and by the Special Operations Executive (SOE) to plan sabotage missions in occupied Europe during the Second World War. St Ermin's Hotel has recently undergone a major restoration and refurbishment of its elaborate late nineteenth century neo-rococo and art nouveau inspired interiors.



/ Figure 3 Anthony Van den Wyngaerde's panorama of 1543 shows little sign of urban life west of Westminster Abbey.

and (doubtless related to attracting such a fraternity) Thieving Lane. Criminals were, however, not far from the long arm of the law since the Gatehouse Prison occupied the spot between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries that since 1861 has been marked by the column to Westminster School's fatalities in the Crimean War at the junction where Victoria Street leads into Broad Sanctuary. A city it may have been designated, but Westminster was one whose extent did not stretch much beyond modern Horseferry Road, which follows the route for the horse ferry, the service that was for horse and wagon traffic the principal means of crossing the Thames at Westminster until the construction of Westminster Bridge in the 1740s.

To the south and west, what is now Millbank, Pimlico and Victoria remained mostly the wasteland of Tothill Fields, a bleak scrub where in the seventeenth century plague victims were quarantined and a shooting range was established (hence Artillery Row). Parts of the area were still sufficiently reedy and pocked with ponds for ducks to become the marksmen's targets and, in greater earnest, for duellists to settle matters of honour beyond the city limits. The fields were also used for gentler entertainments, including the construction of a bowling alley and a maze as well as a providing a spot for the hosting of fairs.

It was also in the seventeenth century that Rochester Row and the Willow Walk causeway (now Warwick Way)

were constructed to form the first footpath connecting Westminster with the village of Chelsea. To the north of this tree-lined avenue (modern-day Victoria) remained boggy land, but to the south (modern-day Pimlico), better drainage towards the banks of the Thames allowed for market gardens to be cultivated with crops of asparagus and artichokes among the vegetables grown in the eighteenth century.

At that time 'Pimlico' commonly described the whole area not just to the south of St James's Park towards the river but also south and west of Buckingham House (later Palace) in what is now Victoria. It even included parts of Belgravia. The name, the first surviving documented use of which dates from 1626, was probably adopted in imitation of another Pimlico in Hoxton which was also famous for its pubs and bawdy pleasures though why Hoxton should have had somewhere as continental-sounding as Pimlico remains unclear. We can, however, determine why the area around the current Pimlico Road was in the mid-eighteenth century known as Rumbillo. Far from being exotic, this now forgotten term was an effort to conjoin Rumbeloves' field with the nearby Strombolo House.

The clustering of pubs and places of entertainment in Pimlico and Rumbillo continued apace during the second half of the eighteenth century as an overspill from one of the capital's most popular amusement destinations – Ranelagh Gardens which opened in 1742 as an upmarket





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/ Figure 4, 5, 6 The Stag Brewery perpetuated traditional crafts in the heart of Victoria until 1959.

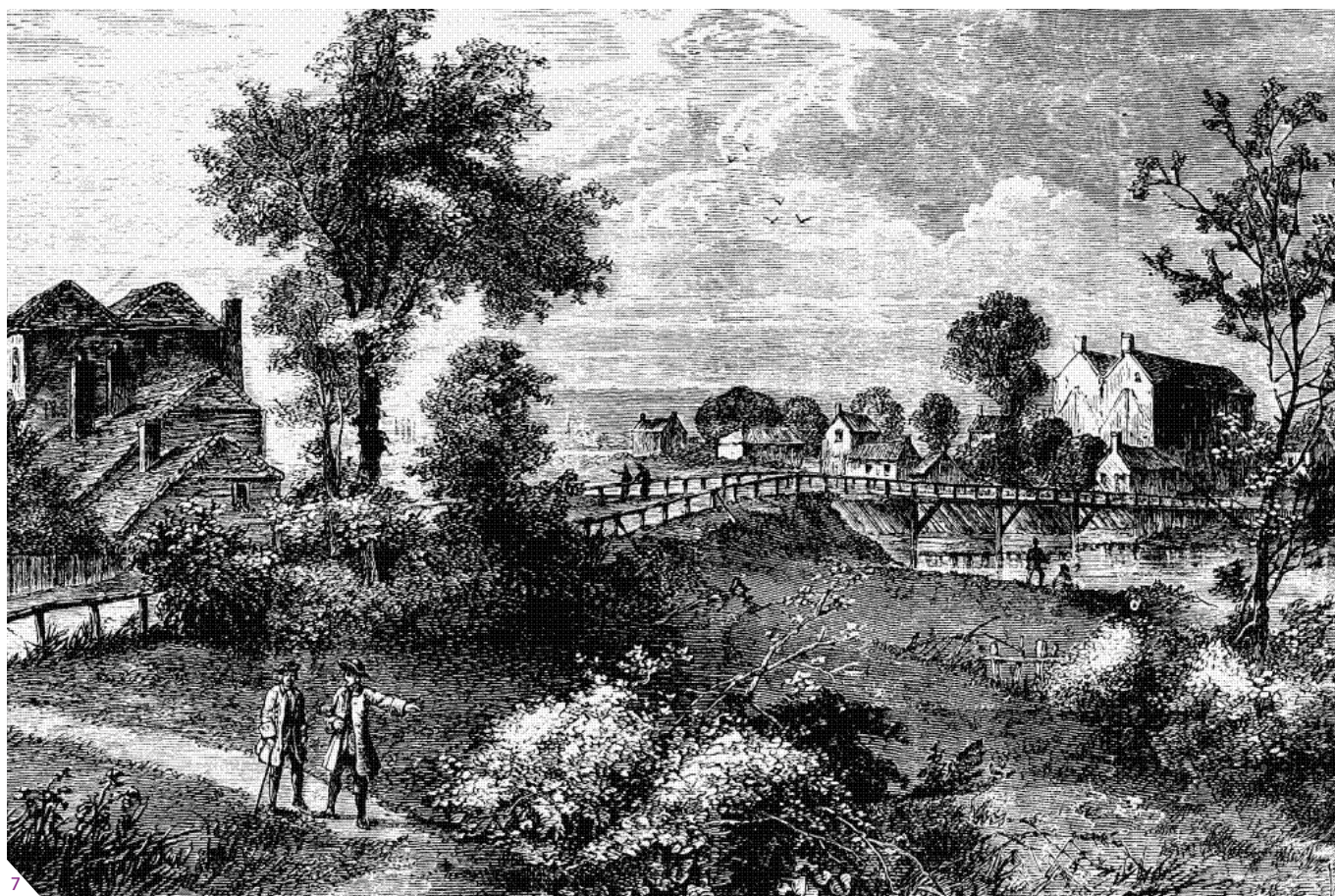
rival to the pleasure gardens across the Thames at Vauxhall. Occupying the ground to the east of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, Ranelagh’s offerings included an opulent rotunda in which the child-prodigy Mozart was among the performers and a Chinese pagoda. Its fame as a place for romantic assignations eventually contributed to its falling into disrepute and to closure in 1805.

The association of the area with drink and entertainment had deep roots for it was in the construction of a brewhouse in the seventeenth century – next to a stream leading into the ornamental pond of St James’s Park besides which cows were put out to pasture – that industry first took hold in the district. Over time, this brewhouse developed into the Stag Brewery, one of London’s major producers of porter and a variety of ales under the ownership of Watney’s, a brewing firm that by 1935 was so significant that it was listed on the Stock Exchange as among the FT index’s thirty leading companies. It was not until the Stag Brewery’s closure in 1959 that employees ceased to arrive in Victoria in order to spend their working days engaged in such timeless occupations as overseeing malting, mashing and fermenting, as coopers banging together barrels or as drivers of horse-drawn carts.

While by the early nineteenth century Westminster’s streets had still scarcely sprawled westerly much beyond Petty France and the area was showing further signs of descending into squalor, the land to the west and south of the Stag Brewery might have continued to be deemed insalubrious and destined for factories and distilleries but for a decision taken by the landowner to chart an alternative course and, in doing so, to substantially create modern Victoria, Belgravia and Pimlico.

The critical decisions were taken by the Grosvenor family whose property – along with Mayfair – the land had been since a propitious marriage to a twelve year old heiress in 1677. Reaping the benefits from developing Mayfair first, the Grosvenors then turned their attention to transforming the prospects for their inheritance south and west of St James’s Park. In 1724 Sir Richard Grosvenor had licensed out a tidal creek on his property to the Chelsea Waterworks Company so that it could use it – supplemented first by a mill and later by a steam pumping station and by adjacent reservoirs – to supply fresh water to Westminster and beyond. In 1824, following the expiry of the lease, the Earl of Grosvenor decided to transform the creek into a canal to the designs of the engineer, John Armstrong. The result was the Grosvenor Canal, a channel which as well as continuing to be used as a supply for fresh – or more accurately freshish – water could be used by barges able to take coal and other materials from the lock





*Figure 7* Where Ebury Bridge Road now stands was in the eighteenth century Jenny's Whim Bridge, surrounded by pubs and pleasure gardens that were frequented by all classes.

on to the Thames all the way to the basin which in 1860 was filled in to become the site of Victoria railway station.

While barges made their way up and down the Grosvenor Canal, the Earl of Grosvenor engaged Lewis Cubitt and others to transform his previously low value land to the canal's north and west into one of Europe's most desirable residential areas – Belgravia. Cubitt's stucco-fronted squares, crescents and terraces successfully carried on the Regency Classicism that had been established in London by John Nash, the architect whose conversion of Buckingham House into a much expanded royal palace in the 1820s did much to enhance the social standing not only of the chosen style but of the whole area that began rising in imitation.

The laying out of modern-day Pimlico in a similar if only slightly less grand fashion than Belgravia was primarily undertaken by Lewis Cubitt's brother, Thomas. Emerging as a builder-turned-developer, Thomas Cubitt proceeded to buy out some of the other minor leaseholders who were intent on building gimcrack

dwellings. He drained and raised the level of the land and laid out a grid-pattern upon which the stucco-fronted terraces and squares of Pimlico rose between the late 1820s and the 1860s. While it could not attract quite the social elite who were taking residence on the north-western side of the Grosvenor Canal in Belgravia, Pimlico emerged, nevertheless, as a comfortably middle class area, unrecognisable from the marshes and alcoholic watering holes that had, until that point, provided the principal distinguishing features of Tothill Fields.





A Scale of 5000 Feet, making one inch equal to 5000 feet.

A Scale of 200 Paris Toises, making one inch equal to 200 Paris Toises.

- Abbreviations**
- |                                       |                             |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A. or All. <i>Alley</i>               | H. or Hm. <i>House</i>      |
| Al. or H. or A. D. <i>Alley House</i> | H. or Hm. <i>House</i>      |
| A. M. <i>Alley Market</i>             | I. M. <i>Iron Market</i>    |
| B. <i>Build</i>                       | L. <i>Land</i>              |
| B. or Bk. <i>Bank</i>                 | K. <i>King</i>              |
| C. <i>Church</i>                      | L. or Lk. <i>Lake</i>       |
| C. or Ck. <i>Church</i>               | L. or Lk. <i>Land</i>       |
| Ch. <i>Chapel</i>                     | M. or M. <i>Mill</i>        |
| Ch. or Ch. <i>Church</i>              | N. <i>North</i>             |
| Ch. or Ch. <i>Church</i>              | O. <i>Old</i>               |
| Ch. or Ch. <i>Church</i>              | P. or P. <i>Post</i>        |
| Ch. or Ch. <i>Church</i>              | Q. <i>Queen</i>             |
| Ch. or Ch. <i>Church</i>              | Q. M. <i>Queen's Market</i> |





/ Figure 8 John Rocque's map of 1747 shows the extent of the tidal creek used by the Chelsea Waterworks Company. In 1824 it was converted into the Grosvenor Canal and in 1860 it was filled in so that the railway lines could run over it to the new Victoria terminus which was built over the dock basin at the canal's head.



### 3. The Making of Victoria

**The grace and elegance of the Grosvenor Estate's fashionable new residences in Belgravia and of Cubitt's cheaper, but still impressive, development going up in Pimlico threw into starker contrast the dilapidated nature of Westminster. Its streets were in a poor state of repair, its sagging and bulging houses over-crowded, not least with thieves and prostitutes.**

It was while describing the most notorious part of this area to the south of Tothill Street around Old Pye Street – what Charles Dickens called the Devil's Acre – that the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Wiseman, first coined the modern meaning to the word 'slum' when, in 1850, he warned:

Close under the Abbey of Westminster there lie concealed labyrinths of lanes and courts, and alleys and slums, nests of ignorance, vice, depravity, and crime, as well as of squalor, wretchedness, and disease; whose atmosphere is typhus, whose ventilation is cholera; in which swarms a huge and almost countless population, nominally at least, Catholic; haunts of filth, which no sewage committee can reach – dark corners, which no lighting board can brighten.

Reaching the dark corners was possible, but the process of slum clearance was nevertheless a long one. Sometimes demolition succeeded only in shifting the problem elsewhere, but the arrival of prototype housing associations run by philanthropist-capitalists such as the Peabody Trust and the Metropolitan Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Industrious Classes made a discernible difference. By erecting apartment block 'model dwellings' for the deserving (as distinct, according to their supposed criminal or slovenly behaviour and character, the undeserving) poor, these tenements offered a chance of respectability for many who were otherwise condemned to insanitary conditions, rogue landlords and daily confrontation with vice.

The other major initiative in the clearing away of some of the worst slums was achieved not through private philanthropy but by act of parliament. This was the decision to cut a new road through the old network

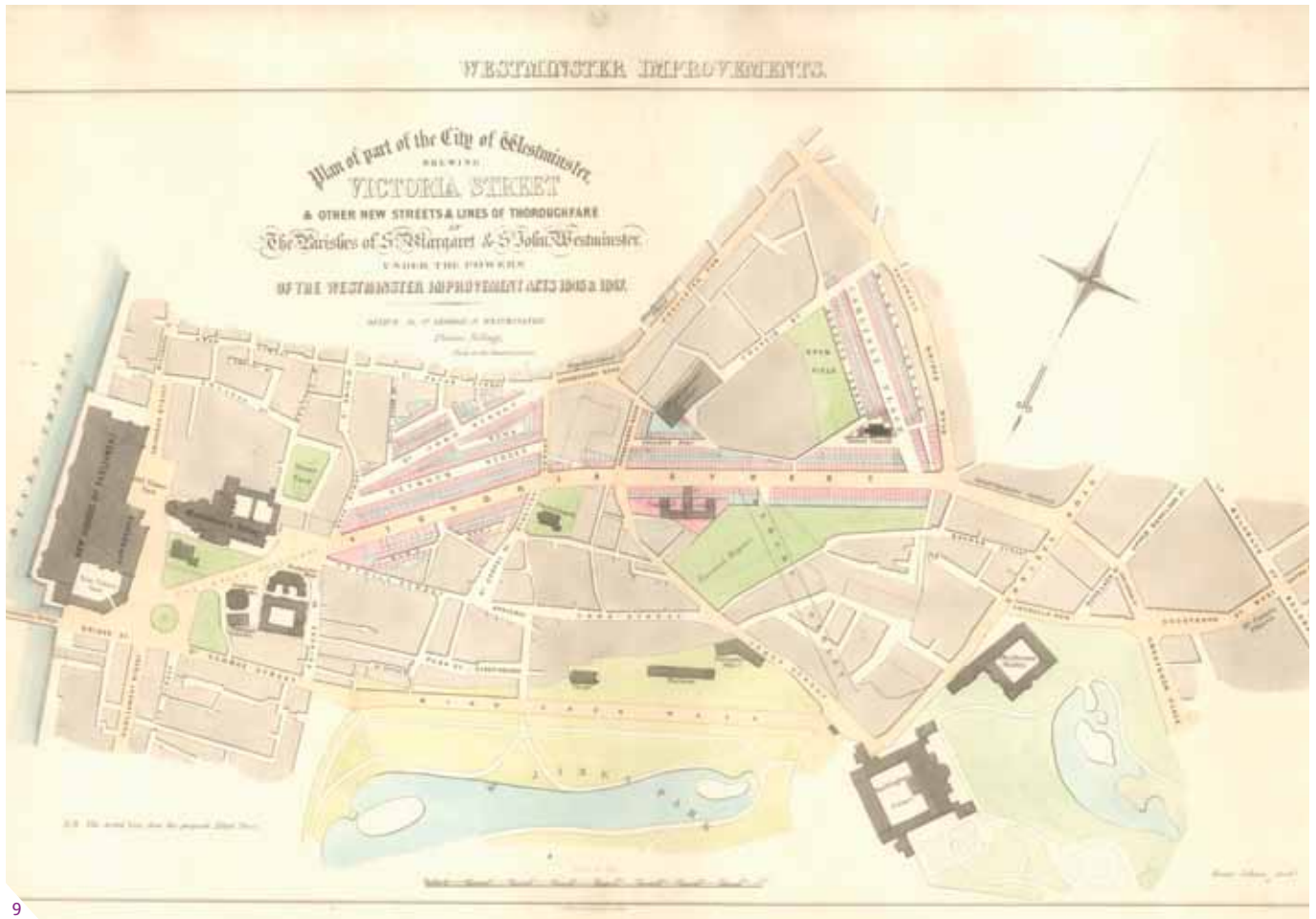
of alleyways to the south of Tothill Street in order to create what until that moment had always been lacking – a stately approach from the west to Westminster.

Obtaining the powers and resources to purchase compulsorily properties earmarked for demolition and build the resulting great boulevard of Victoria Street first necessitated the passing of the 1845 and 1847 Westminster Improvement Acts. Even with these in place, it was another five years before the street started to take shape, with construction continuing throughout the 1850s.

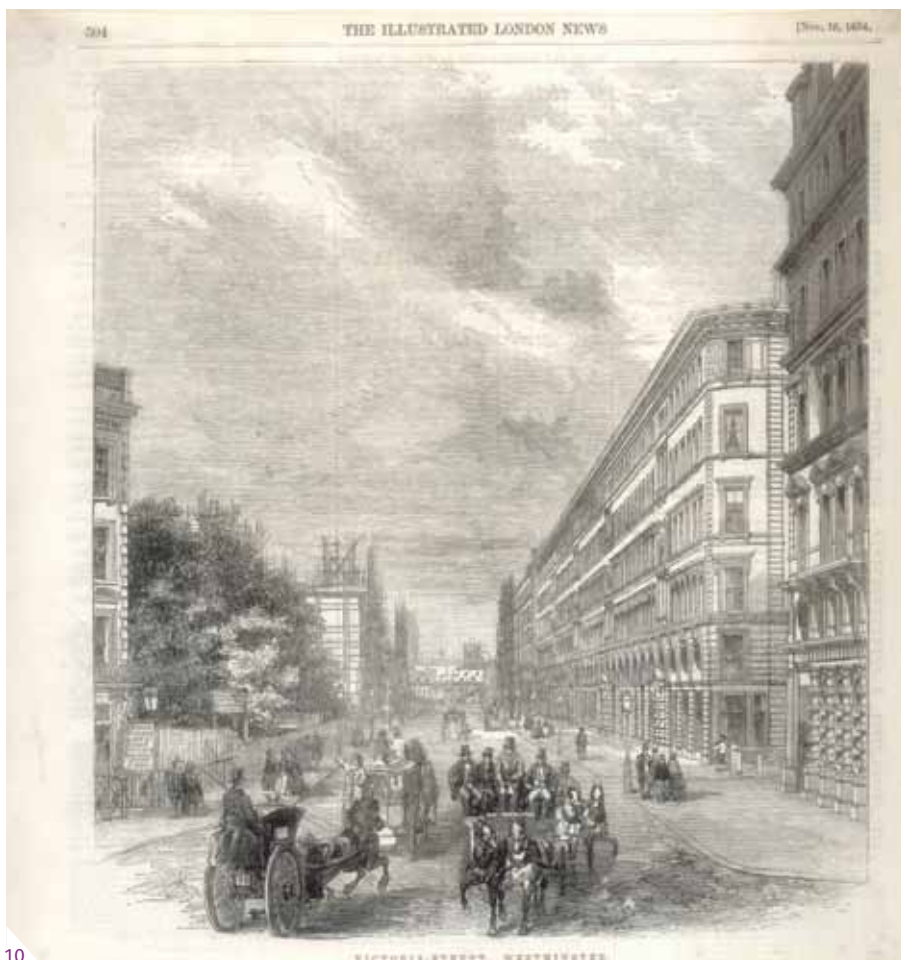
Victoria Street was not initially built with the intention of becoming an avenue of shops. Only in 1872 with the opening of the Army & Navy store – a co-operative society for those with an armed forces background that initially focussed on selling groceries, drapery and tableware before expanding into a general department store – did retail start to make its presence felt. Because Victoria Street contained so few premises designed to serve as shops, the Army & Navy established itself into a vast distillery building whose exterior vaguely resembled that of a scaled-down St Pancras Station. Nevertheless, despite the Army & Navy's success and the creation of a cluster of shops near Victoria Station, it would be the best part of another fifty years before Victoria Street could really be said to be lined with retail emporia.

Instead, the street's mid-nineteenth century developers focussed upon attracting two sorts of tenants – offices and residents. Victoria Street's proximity to Parliament and government departments naturally made it an ideal location for anybody with a professional or commercial interest in being close to the country's decision-makers. The offices of railway companies seeking to petition for new lines to be cut through town and country, of engineering companies and of inventors keen to be close to the patent office, indeed, all those seeking to lobby legislators for commercial gain were among the first generation of businesses taking out tenancies along the new street. The construction of 'gentlemen's chambers' and multi-occupancy office buildings aimed to cater for them.

Of no less long-term significance was the means through which the developers sought to make Victoria Street a residential area. Previously in London, the notion of middle class people choosing to live in apartment flats rather than in houses was scarcely entertained. Taking 'rooms' was for



/ Figure 9 The master-plan for the construction of Victoria Street. Note the intention to create a second broad avenue, Albert Street, which would lead directly to Buckingham Palace. Instead James Street was widened and became Buckingham Gate. Chelsea Road was renamed Buckingham Palace Road.



/ Figure 10 The new Victoria Street shortly after completion in 1854. Imposing blocks for offices and private apartments rise along the route. Not a shop in sight.



commercial travellers and those of limited means and very much seen as such. Where grander buildings were subdivided into smaller apartments signified declining value and a neighbourhood on the slide. Yet, what was built in the 1850s and 1860s along Victoria Street, Carlisle Place, Morpeth Terrace and Grosvenor Gardens was an effort to revolutionise the way middle class Londoners thought about status and property, for here were 'mansion blocks' and 'chambers' purpose-built as apartments aimed at prosperous occupants. The idea was slow to take off, but once it did it spawned imitators, revolutionising housing in the metropolis and the social composition that went with it.

When it was planned in the 1840s, it was envisaged that Victoria Street's purpose would be to create a broad,

direct and stately east-west link between the buildings of the legislature and executive at Westminster and the new desirable area of Belgravia. But in the 1860s the street gained a new purpose, connecting west London to southern England (and thereafter the continent) through the opening at the western limit of Victoria Street of the Victoria railway station.

More properly, it was the Victoria railway stations, for the terminus housed the sheds and platforms of two separate railway companies: one was the London Brighton & South Coast Railway whose station opened in 1860 while the other, opened two years later in a wooden fronted structure whose entrance was to the side on Wilton Road, was the station of the London Chatham

/ Figure 11 The Illustrated London News was impressed by the new station's 'light and elegant, though substantial roof'.

/ Figure 12 Victoria Street in the High-Victorian Age: This photograph from circa 1890 gives a sense of the mansion blocks that lined the route until they made way for mostly utilitarian office blocks between the 1950s and 70s. On the right is the original Army & Navy store (now the site of House of Fraser). Of all the buildings in the foreground, only the smaller, four-storey Albert pub on the left survives.



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/ Figure 13 Victoria Station shortly before the First World War. The original Grosvenor Hotel on the right has expanded across to also occupy the new, 1898, front of the station. Alighting from steam power, travellers then had a choice of continuing their journey by motor or horse power.

and Dover Railway (who also gave access to the Great Western Railway). With these side-by-side stations, the West End of London was at last coupled to the 'permanent way,' an arrival that came more than thirty years after Stephenson's Rocket had demonstrated the superiority of steam locomotion at the Rainhill trials.

The stations' terminus was built on top of the filled-in basin of the Grosvenor Canal and the railway lines largely followed the course that the canal had taken (only the creek opening to the canal still exists, though it is now an ornamental water-feature for the Grosvenor Waterside development along the Thames at Pimlico). At first the intention had been to call the new terminus the Grosvenor Station to mark both the previous waterborne transport system it was superseding and to honour the local landowner. But 'Victoria Station' was the name that stuck because it connected directly into Victoria Street.

To accompany its completion, one of the first 'monster railway hotels' was built down the western elevation of the station. This did honour Grosvenor in its name. Designed by J.T. Knowles, the Grosvenor Hotel was built on the grand scale, its light brick and bath stone frontage articulated in an Italianate style, with medallions containing the busts of the leading political and cultural figures of the age in the spandrels of the arches. On top of it curved a French pavilion roof. The effect was – and remains – stunning. This French influence was carried on when the north-west front of the station was rebuilt in a Hôtel de Ville style in 1898.

## 3. Victoria Replanned

**In the twentieth century, three principal factors conspired to make Victoria a less appealing environment in which to live and work.**

The first was, in effect, a sign that in becoming a transport hub Victoria was a victim of its own success. Victoria Station and, after its opening in 1868, the underground station connecting it to what became the District Line, created the busiest commuter inter-change in west London. In 1932, the opening of the Victoria Coach Station adjacent to the railway terminus on Buckingham Palace Road brought charabancs to the area and added to the perception of Victoria as being one massive transport inter-change – a place for passing through on the way to somewhere else – as much as a destination in its own right. The consequences of this will be examined more fully in the final chapter.

The next factor – though one hardly unique to Victoria – was bomb damage during the Second World War. Like all strategically important stations, the tracks, shed and terminus at Victoria were targets for the Luftwaffe and endured multiple hits but Victoria Street and its immediate neighbourhood were also heavily peppered with bombs. The Army & Navy store was severely, though not irreparably, damaged. Worse was the damage done at the Westminster end of Victoria Street to Victoria Chambers and St Margaret's Mansions which was on such a scale that they both had to be demolished. Elsewhere, many buildings were hit but were repairable.

Whether post-war developers wanted them to be repaired was another matter. The aesthetics of Victorian architecture had fallen out of fashion and the opportunity to replace the existing line of buildings along Victoria Street with new modern blocks, into which more office floor space could be fitted, was an opportunity that seemed too good to miss. But it was to prove the third factor in Victoria's declining appeal.

Overwhelmingly the new developments were speculative rather than being built to order for a client. But they filled a need for more office space from corporate and public sector tenants whose expansion was frustrated by the shortage of suitable space in post-blitz London. Oil companies and, in particular, one of the great areas

of post-war growth, government bureaucracy, moved in. In consequence, Victoria became second only to Whitehall as the primary location for the siting of government departments. In catering for this influx, developers benefited from the almost unbridled support of both Westminster City Council and the London County Council. While the new structures went up piecemeal, the ultimate ambition was for the total redevelopment of the entire area. As late as the 1970s the aim remained to leave none of Victoria Street's pre-1940 building standing.

Although Victoria Street had started off in the 1850s as an avenue of offices and apartments, by the Second World War it had become a genuinely mixed-use area, with a variety of shops joining the residential and office tenancies. The post-war redevelopment erased this mix, turning Victoria – and Victoria Street in particular – into what was overwhelmingly an office mono-culture. Most of the new blocks – Kingsway House was an exception – were designed without the capacity to lease shop space on the ground floor. Those who developed and let the new Victoria seemed indifferent to how a diverse and vibrant local economy and community might be funded and sustained.

Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s the Victorian mansion flats, chambers and offices were systematically bulldozed and in their place rose some of the most startlingly unimaginative buildings anywhere in post-war London. The practice of Sir John Burnet, Tait & Partners was responsible between 1960 and 1966 for Mobil House, the long horizontal slab of Kingsgate House and the high vertical slab block of Westminster City Hall. The latter was generously described by the modernist-loving architectural historian, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, as 'an impressive plain slab of nineteen storeys' and it was certainly impressive in the sense that it imposed itself.

At the same time, fresh from his experiences in Chicago, Max Gordon designed in steel, granite and glass another speculative office development which in 1967 became home to the Metropolitan Police. Pevsner hastily proclaimed it 'excellent.' On a longer view, the best that could reasonably be said for the building in question, New Scotland Yard, was that it demonstrates clean lines. No other articulation to break-up its wearisomely faceless





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/ Figure 14 Coming down – the Stag Brewery



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/ Figure 15 Going up – Stag Place





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/ Figure 16 Unlike many of the new blocks lining Victoria Street, Kingsgate House at least made an effort to cater for shops on its ground floor. Unfortunately the design gave the impression the shops were at risk of being crushed under the weight of the offices bearing down on them. Westminster City Hall is the tower block on the right.

banality was attempted. At pedestrian level, the ground floor treats the passer-by with thoughtless indifference.

Such buildings (among them the similar Department of Business, Innovation and Skills block at the eastern end of Victoria Street) showed almost total disregard for the civic environment. Facades were faceless and impenetrable. Decoration and detail were banished because they were deemed at odds with the modernist dogma that the only valid form was one that followed function. There was no effort to engage or turn a welcoming aspect for the passer-by; no interest was created at street level. This was a cityscape that jettisoned the notion of the shared or civic space. Here was not a place to gather with friends or to pleasurably amble around. There was just road traffic and buildings, with little thought given to the communal spaces in-between.

The disregard for the pedestrian was as great as the lack of interest in creating any sense of place. Ease for the car or taxi to either access or bypass remained the priority. In 1971 there was even a plan to construct a concrete 'cabtrack' on stilts above the pavements along the entire length of Victoria Street (and across other prime sites in London too), an idea that would have cast shadow across ground, giving the streetscape the permanent aspect of a dark and damp underpass.

Thankfully, the cabtrack never took flight and the recession of the 1970s (together with the launch of the conservation movement) happened just in time to prevent the remaining Victorian buildings being bulldozed. What Victoria Street was left with was a singular achievement: bland buildings that nonetheless succeeded in making the people who passed them look marginal and insignificant.

The result of these developments was to deprive the area of its sense of street life, of living spirit and community. In particular, the decision to ensure the domination of office space over both retail and residential properties at a major commuter inter-change meant that outside the rush hour at the start of the working day and the rush hour at the end of it, there was little sign of life in Victoria. A prime location in the greatest city in Europe was at night left to resemble a ghost town.



/ Figure 17 New Scotland Yard – for the pedestrian it would be hard to imagine how the architect could have made passing it a less stimulating experience.

/ Figure 18 The eastern end of Victoria Street offers an architectural master-class in how to kill street life. True, a vista survived, though sadly it managed not to include the view of Westminster Abbey the top of whose towers can just be discerned despite the best efforts of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to block them out.

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18

## 4. Victoria Rejuvenated

**‘The planning brief set out in 2011 by Westminster City Council pointed out that Victoria was ‘unique as a central London artery in that it has changed completely since the Second World War.’ The result was a ‘lack’ of ‘coherent sense of place and of urban quality.’ It was little wonder that the council, therefore, welcomed the current plans to restore that sense and quality.**

As Canary Wharf has demonstrated, it is perfectly possible to develop a new business-orientated area which although dominated by offices and office workers nevertheless retains a sense of place and purpose beyond being merely a day time venue to sit at desks and tap at keyboards. The extent of Canary Wharf’s retail turnover at the weekends shows what can be achieved when the attraction of the right mix of clients and uses turns a place to do business into a richer, more varied experience, one to which customers and visitors wish to return outside normal office hours.

If a (but for a few converted warehouses) essentially new development like Canary Wharf could manage this, what might be achieved by a rejuvenated Victoria with all its natural advantages of a well-connected central location that is just within the border of the West End’s theatreland and next both to the country’s political quarter of Westminster and to the green space of St James’s Park?

Having lapsed from the 1960s onwards into becoming merely a venue to which commuters arrived, worked and then commuted back home again without greatly engaging with local amenities and entertainments, Victoria is finally in the process of rediscovering what makes a successful business district really tick.

One of the rediscoveries is a renewed interest in urbanism – the interplay of people with the built environment around them. In Victoria this is taking a number of forms, among them: the redesign of open spaces to make them more agreeable for the pedestrian and – related to this – finding ways to alleviate traffic congestion; the re-examination of the quality of public realm architecture; efforts to restore a mixture of uses and the attraction of shops catering for both general and

specialist markets, restaurants and other attractions so that Victoria’s heart continues to beat beyond rush hour.

All this, of course, is easier said than done. The street layout of Victoria is not (and since its development in the 1840s has never been) generous with its open spaces. This is a reality that needs to be accepted and worked around. But given the almost total indifference of the post-war developers to the public realm, any improvement, no matter how small, makes a difference. Some changes may seem almost trivial but actually make substantive improvements to the day to day experience of those circulating round the area on foot. The objective is to ensure pedestrian circulation is visually led, rather than sign led. Removing some of the unnecessary traffic sign ‘clutter’ and remodelling the pavements and street furniture in order to make walking around a less halting and vexing experience is at the core of the strategy. The Grosvenor Estate has led the way in showing what can be achieved by removing the barriers that used to give Buckingham Place Road something of the aspect of a fortified defence line. Grosvenor has also been responsible for repaving and improving the street furniture in Mount Street and Elizabeth Street (now one of the most agreeable avenues of high end shopping down which to promenade anywhere in London). The de-cluttering there has included the removal of unnecessary traffic lights. Far from this proving a danger to pedestrians, the reverse has proved to be the case. Traffic is flowing more smoothly while the subtle blurring of the distinction between pedestrian and vehicular zones has made both for more careful driving and for the greater ease with which pedestrians are able to cross roads.

Not only does this make the public realm a more agreeable place to roam and Victoria a pleasanter place in which to spend time, it has beneficial effects for the local economy. A place that encourages the human desire to wander, to amble, to browse, is well set to have a flourishing commercial sector through an increasing foot-fall in its shops, cafes and restaurants. This is a virtuous circle, since the more there are such amenities to visit, the more pedestrians will want to stay and explore.

However, the public realm is challenged by the quantity of transport and commuters arriving and passing through the area. Its central location and its profusion of transport



links (the rail station; the circle, district and Victoria underground lines; the buses; the Victoria coach station) have gifted the area with being a relatively easy place in which to commute to work. But the sheer weight of numbers passing through Victoria is also part of the problem.

There are three main transport issues. The first two concern the railway and underground links. At the moment, Victoria is second only to Waterloo as Britain's busiest railway station: 73.5 million travellers entered and exited it every year. These figures are projected to grow by 20 per cent by 2020.

As owner and manager, Network Rail wishes to redevelop the station concourse, designs for which are currently at the master-plan stage. Development will have to fit in with the station's listed status but, given the now rather tired look of some of the retail kiosks on the concourse, there is much that can be done to improve both the look and circulation flow of the station without defacing any of the station's Victorian and Edwardian grandeur. A small example of what can be achieved has been demonstrated with the unblocking of an archway previously occupied by a branch of Boots the chemist. More fitting for an archway, it now proclaims a new pedestrian walk way in to Wilton Road.

In recent years it has become clear that Victoria underground station can no longer cope with eighty million passengers every year. As it is, access to the platforms has to be restricted and even closed for periods during rush hour as part of the efforts to prevent dangerous overcrowding. That projected future usage suggested further strong growth meant that congestion would only get worse unless action was taken to increase capacity. Action is now being taken, with over £700 million invested in upgrading the underground station and its facilities. The most important aspect of this is

the building of a new north ticket hall next to the Palace Theatre on the corner of Victoria Street and Bressenden Place with an entrance leading on to the street, opposite Cardinal Place. This will ensure that employees, visitors and customers to the offices and shops on the north side of Victoria Street and to Cardinal Place and new Victoria Circus in particular, will no longer have to navigate their way across the traffic of Victoria Street in order to get to the tube.

Beneath the street a new tunnel is being excavated which will connect this north ticket hall to an enlarged south ticket hall serving the Victoria line and ease the flow of passengers. Nine new escalators are being installed along with lifts allowing step-free access not only from the street to the ticket halls and platform levels but also between the Victoria, District and Circle lines and the National Rail platforms of Victoria Station, the latter also connected by a wider staircase.

Construction of the upgrade is now underway. The north ticket hall is due to open in the summer of 2016 with the entire upgrade to be completed two years later. As a result, Victoria Underground Station will be 50 per cent larger than it is currently while offering a considerably less congested and more accessible experience to its users.

Victoria's third major transport issue concerns the Victoria Coach Station. Built in 1932 and extended in the 1980s, it has separate arrival and departure terminals facing each other on the corner of Buckingham Palace Road and Elizabeth Street. What is more, by 2026, it will be primarily responsible for an expected 500,000 coach movement in Victoria per year. The problem of traffic congestion that the congregation of so many coaches converging from long distance British and continental European pick-up points present to the area is of a different order to that created by the busyness of Victoria's mainline and underground network. While trains, the tube and indeed buses convey workers, visitors and customers to Victoria, helping to make possible the success of the area as a destination, this is much less the case with the coach terminal. Typically, its customers are at the budget end of the market and arrive in Victoria not because they have reached their work destination but because that is simply where the coach terminates. Beyond passing trade in convenience stores, even the footfall they bring to Victoria's retailers is disappointing.

Consequently, the Coach Station contributes less to making Victoria a destination and more to making it an area whose main arteries are clogged with through-traffic and transitory travellers for whom Victoria is merely the point from which they find themselves having to re-embark their journeys onwards to somewhere other.



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/ Figure 19 How the new north ticket hall entrance to Victoria underground station will look after its completion in 2016.



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/ Figure 20 Cardinal Place – its lightness and focus upon presenting a recognisable streetscape avoided reproducing the sterile, artificial atmosphere of some indoors shopping malls.



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/ Figure 21 Cardinal Place has brought to Victoria a choice of some of the high street's most popular and higher end brands.

The constraints of its site, part of which is owned by Transport for London and part of it by the Grosvenor Estate, would make the Coach Station's expansion to meet anticipated future demand problematic on the grounds of physical reality alone. Given the neighbourhood, space and access are unyielding obstacles and the EU's health and safety laws call into question how the viability of increasing coach volume in the departure terminal could be attempted.

Both Grosvenor and the Westminster City Council are open to exploring if and how London's principal coach terminal can be relocated away from Victoria. Various alternatives present themselves. One is an expansion of the coach terminal at Heathrow which is already the second biggest in the UK. An alternative posits replacing the current focus on coaches converging upon Victoria with the creation of several medium sized coach terminals, each suitable for a different area of London, thereby increasing the destination choices for travellers and spreading more equitably the traffic load among different boroughs. Perhaps most importantly, the uncertainty about the future of the current site and the potential for expanding the bus terminal in Stratford offers those who live and work in Victoria what is now the clear hope that the end is in sight for the blight caused by long distance coach congestion. It has certainly become one of the greatest priorities.

Away from transport, the most exciting aspects of Victoria's rejuvenation are manifest in its return to being a place that mixes business, residential and retail uses, rather than merely being a commuter-friendly repository of dull utilitarian office blocks.

The expiry of leases signed in the late 1960s and 1970s on many of the post-war slabs has provided an opportunity for their redevelopment. Not only that, the switch in government policy towards decentralising staff – wherever tenable relocating civil servants' jobs out of London and into locations in the rest of the country – has provided the opportunity to seek new private sector clients. Whatever their qualities, civil servants enjoyed or endured a reputation for being somewhat parsimonious in their working week spending habits. Besides the sheer lack of retail facilities provided in the designs by the 1960s architects, this trait may have explained the correlation between the high number of public sector employees working in Victoria with the relatively disappointing array of shops, restaurants and related facilities. While around 90 per cent of the rental value of buildings in Victoria is typically generated above the first floor (i.e. in letting to offices rather than to shops), the sort of private sector companies now interested in making Victoria their base



also tend to appreciate a more enticing and varied local environment. Led by Land Securities' new developments, the area is adapting to these requirements, demonstrating how the commercial imperative can rejuvenate an area. As a result, Victoria is regaining its *joie de vivre*.

The process was given a major boost through Land Securities' development of Cardinal Place. Designed by EPR Architects and opened in 2005, its erection was no simple task: it rests on rubber shock absorbers in order to prevent the district and circle lines underneath causing tremors. Among the clients who quickly established themselves in its 563,000 square feet of office space were EDF Energy and Microsoft UK. It also brought 27 retail shops, among them some of the country's leading brands, to Victoria; its airy and dramatic arcade avoiding what can be the rather sterile atmosphere of some indoor shopping malls and the construction of a roof garden increasing the accessible public spaces of the area. It is thanks, partly, to Cardinal Place, that the number of restaurants and cafes along Victoria Street has increased from 14 in 2002 to 25 six years later.

Opposite Cardinal Place, directly east of the Westminster Cathedral piazza, at 123 Victoria Street, Land Securities have refurbished the former Ashdown House. What was previously a tatty 1970s block has been transformed into a range of sparkling cubes, glistening in the light and offering over 170,000 square feet of office space above shops at street level. Perhaps its most attractive feature is that because of its slender width it enjoys excellent natural light. Among the clients taking advantage of this is Jimmy Choo who has moved its headquarters into it from its previous location in Kensington. In choosing Victoria for its HQ, Jimmy Choo is far from being the only luxury fashion house to see the advantage in moving to a rejuvenated SW1. LVMH, Burberry, Tom Ford and Richemont have all done likewise.

Meanwhile, on the north side of Victoria Street, Cardinal Place is being joined by other major redevelopments by Land Securities. Next to Westminster City Hall, the 13-storey prism-like structure of 62 Buckingham Gate, conceived by architects Pelli Clarke Pelli and Swanke Hayden & Connell, creates



22

/ Figure 22 The rejuvenation of 123 Victoria Street, like the new prisms of 62 Buckingham Gate, demonstrates what can be achieved when office buildings relate properly to the shifting shades of natural light.

252,400 square feet of new prime office space, with high-profile retail units at ground level. What makes the building particularly intriguing is the way in which the movement of the sun catches its slanting surfaces, changing the colour reflected as the day goes on.

Even grander plans are taking shape on the 2.5 acre site framed by Victoria Street, Buckingham Palace Road, Bressenden Place and Allington Street. What was for three hundred years until 1959 the Stag Brewery became thereafter a traffic island populated with mostly uninspiring Sixties architecture of which the Thistle Hotel proved to be an exemplar. That this eyesore fronted on to the Royal Mews of Buckingham Palace added insult to injury. Now Land Securities has begun to transform the site into Victoria Circle, a mixed use (office, retail and residential) development, the first phase of which will be completed in 2016 with the second phase following two years later by which time it will be served by the new north ticket hall entrance to the Victoria underground station.

Other than the drabness of their architectural offerings, the greatest error of Victoria’s post-war developers was to forget the need to keep the area as a tapestry of interweaving fabrics. The failure to honour this ensured that it seemed as if all activity expired when, every weekday evening, the office lights were switched off. Here, in particular, a lesson has been learned. For the current redevelopments involve not only business premises

and retail outlets but also the new accommodation that makes this corner of SW1 once again a place to call home.

Housing for key workers is part of the mix in the development of Victoria Circle and the pre-existing but vacant and dilapidated cottages on Castle Lane and Palace Street are being renovated by Land Securities. Once restored and extended, they will be set aside to provide affordable housing. Meanwhile, at Buckingham Gate, 59 high-end apartments are being built in Wellington House, bringing back – albeit in a modern garb – the style of the mansion blocks that did so much to make Victoria a desirable address before the war. Where until recently the depressingly unimaginative office block slab of Kingsgate House deadened the mood between Cardinal Place and Westminster City Hall, Patrick Lynch’s design will create two new buildings which breaks up the former horizontal monotony, creating a new north-south axis and access to the previously obscured Westminster City School and St James’s Hotel. By the time of its completion in 2015, it will have added 102 new apartments to Victoria’s renaissance as a residential quarter.



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/ Figure 23 Wellington House – a modern reinvention of the Edwardian mansion block.



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/ Figure 24 How part of Victoria Circle will look from Allington Street. The design incorporates the listed front of Sutton House.





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Finally, there is Victoria's full re-absorption into London's West End. During the decades in which poor planning and letting decisions did their best to suck the life out of Victoria in the evenings, the Palace and Apollo theatres nevertheless continued to put on some of the most popular musicals of the past thirty years, including *Starlight Express*, *Buddy* and *Billy Elliot*. Serious drama, however, perished with the closure and then fire that in 2002 swept away the Westminster Theatre on Palace Street. Ten years later, in September 2012, the phoenix finally rose from that fire with, on the same site, the opening of London's first newly constructed theatre for thirty years. This is the St James Theatre. With 312 seats in its main auditorium, supplemented by a further 100 seat studio theatre, it fills a gap in London's market, being in size between the very small stages typically found in revue bars or above pubs on the one hand and, on the other, the much larger West End theatres whose need to fill their larger capacity and balance resulting costs mitigates against creative risk taking. Thus the St James's aim is to showcase promising drama that might, with acclaim, thereafter transfer to the larger West End theatres. As such, it has the promise to be one of the most significant promoters of the craft of playwriting in Britain. It also includes a restaurant, to which diners enter in style – what must surely be the most extraordinary staircase to grace a brasserie anywhere in London, crafted in 200 tonnes of Carrara marble to the design of the sculptor



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/ Figure 25 St James Theatre

/ Figure 26 Marble staircase in St. James Theatre

Mark Humphrey and called, fittingly, 'final encore.' It is emblematic of Victoria's renewed sense of arrival.

Future generations may reflect on how odd it was that an area right in the heart of the greatest city in Europe could have been considered unfashionable and soulless for much of the second half of the 20th century. It may seem inexplicable to those reflecting on the Victoria that graced London from the second decade of the 21st century onwards, with its profusion of popular and high end shops, its theatres and restaurants, its desirability as a residential address and as a location in which some of the era's most famous creative industries, including Microsoft and Google, as well as some of the country's leading fashion houses, chose to have their UK headquarters.

In truth, the promise that Victoria held was there long before the vision and investment was found in the 2010s. A place that can claim for its own the neo-Byzantine basilica of Westminster Cathedral and the magnificent Victorian and Edwardian facades of its railway station, Grosvenor Gardens and the Goring Hotel in addition to being within walking distance of the stucco fronted classicism of Belgravia and Pimlico, the royal residence of Buckingham Palace and of St James's Park, of the House of Parliament and of Westminster Abbey, was always in line to succeed. She has long been a lady-in-waiting, but finally Victoria is able to plan for her coronation.

## **Acknowledgements**

For their help and advice, the author would particularly like to record his thanks to Ruth Duston and Tom Foulkes of the Victoria Business Improvement District, Graham King at Westminster City Council, Lady Lucy French of the St James Theatre, Nigel Hughes of the Grosvenor Estate, David Atcherley-Symes at Land Securities, Paulien Hosang at Soapbox, Edward Wild, Rose Hall and Alix Harmer at Wild Search and the staff at the City of Westminster Archives Centre. The opinions expressed in this publication are the author's own.



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