

The beautiful South

South of the river, London's skyline is slowly but surely acquiring its own gleaming office blocks and apartment buildings that even bankers might want to live in. Combine that with a little *rive gauche* cool and, as *Stephen Bayley* discovers, you have the makings of a new urban quarter

Illustration by *Oliver Polanski*

It was Anthony Trollope who abolished south London. The author of *Barchester Towers* spent his life as an official in The Post Office (where one of his innovations was the pillar box). While nowadays 'Post Office' is shorthand for slovenly chaos, it was originally a thrilling masterpiece of the Victorian genius for organisation.

In a vast and imaginative bureaucratic reconnaissance of the capital, London was construed in a 12-mile radius from the old central Post Office in St Martin's-le-Grand,

computerised postcodes were reassigned to Newcastle and Sheffield).

That Imperium's great novelist abolished it is one source of South London's collective paranoia. Problems of identity are intensified because many of the 'southern' postcodes – including Westminster (SW1) and Chelsea (SW3) – are, in fact, north of the river. Yet there are no 'northern' postcodes in the south, meaning that there is a sort of surreal metropolitan apartheid in force. When he wrote his lovely *Companion Guide to London* in 1964, David Piper, Director of the National

than a geographical qualification. All great cities have alternative districts separate from the administrative and commercial centre, but none possesses so troubled a personality as south London. Brooklyn has tough, urban, bohemian charm. Paris' Left Bank is, far from being a den of Latin vice, a super-sophisticated shopping area and throbs with intellectual *pistonage* and erotic chic. Rome's Trastevere is simply lovely. Somehow, Vauxhall and Battersea struggle in this company.

There are many reasons – practical, geological, snobbish – for the south's culture

'THE MAYOR'S OFFICE HAS DESCRIBED THE AREA AS THE LARGEST REMAINING DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY IN CENTRAL LONDON'

near St Paul's. This was divided into ten separate postal districts in 1856. Each of these had the status of an entire town: EC, WC, N, NE, E, SE, S, SW, W and NW. Further subdivisions with numbers were added in 1917, as a push for efficiency during the last days of The Great War. But long before that, Trollope had 'rationalised' the system and removed NE and S (which in the days of

Portrait Gallery, contemptuously dismissed the capital's entire south, excepting only the culturally respectable area around the Royal Festival Hall.

Conventionally, the river has always been the boundary between north and south, but that's a polite convenience and a bit of a fiction. The real frontier is somewhere else. In London, 'south' is more a state of mind

of deprivation. The great majority of London's historic internal commerce was to the north and this is where most of the railway stations were built. The Underground looks like a withered root system south of the river. In Shakespeare's time Southwark made up a lively quarter of the South Bank, but the population was composed of theatrical low-lives, market traders, cutpurses and whores. >



“TRADITION DEMANDS SE11 BE DESCRIBED AS “SURPRISINGLY CENTRAL”, USUALLY BY PEOPLE WHO WOULDN’T BE SEEN DEAD HERE”

Vauxhall had its Pleasure Gardens, but it was as famous for drunks as it was for Handel. The most significant cultural centre was Bedlam, the lunatic asylum which, with perfect appropriateness given the common thread of madness, became the Imperial War Museum.

And during World War II, south London suffered disproportionate bomb damage. Conspiracists say that the Luftwaffe was fed misleading signals so Westminster and Mayfair could be saved. Certainly, the north bank suffered much less damage from aerial warfare than the south. I feel personally connected to this: the very last Vergeltungswaffe ein landed 50 yards from my own house and the authorities did not do a terrific job of making good the damage.

As a result, there is a far greater proportion of social housing in south London, not all of it designed to the most nuanced criteria of architectural perfection. Nor is all of it maintained to the standards of a fastidious aesthete. The balance has hobbled property prices; the lack of lunchtime trade has frustrated the development of restaurants which further hobbles the middle-class version of improvement. It’s a vicious circle.

The most famous historic residents of south London were Charlie Chaplin and Vincent van Gogh, an incongruous pair of soulmates, but one which rather confirms the area’s equivocation between slapstick and angst. If celebrities count for anything, south London did not traditionally have very much to say of

a positive sort. Jerry Springer was born at the Elephant and Castle and the Afghan warlord Zardad Khan used to live in Gleneagle Road, Streatham. Each has moved away. Yet look carefully and you’ll see your less flashy sort of celebrity (your Jools Hollands, Joanna Lumleys and Andy Murrays) have moved in.

There are also lots of politicians. Although irrelevant since the mobile, a large part of Kennington and Vauxhall is in Parliament’s Division Bell area. A haunting memorial to this is the window of south London’s most celebrated restaurant, Gandhi’s on Kennington Road. Here you find fading colour photographs of Geoff Hoon and Gordon Brown enjoying a biryani in those long-gone days when the times were good. >

SARF LONDON SLEBS

CELEBS WITH THE SIMPLE GOOD TASTE TO HEAD SOUTH



MICHAEL NYMAN
DEPTFORD



JOOLS HOLLAND
BLACKHEATH



TIMOTHY SPALL
HONOR OAK



GORDON RAMSAY
WANDSWORTH



JOANNA LUMLEY
STOCKWELL



JOHN TORODE
STREATHAM



VIVIENNE WESTWOOD
CLAPHAM



PHIL SPENCER
WANDSWORTH



HOLLY WILLOUGHBY
BARNES



'ELEPHANT AND CASTLE REPRESENTS LONDON AT ITS BEST AND WORST; LAYERS OF HISTORY COMPOUNDED BY PUBLIC SQUALOR'

This all sounds terrible, but I love it here. Since 1983 we have lived in a district with so fragmented a personality it doesn't know whether it's called Stockwell, Kennington, Oval, Lambeth or Vauxhall. It was the last chance to buy a big house at a modest cost in an area which, tradition demands, is always described as 'surprisingly central', usually by people who would not, or perhaps would only, be seen dead here. Estate agents say it is 'ten minutes from Sloane Square' which is not true unless you have a personal jetpack but, again, is indicative of a state of mind.

Now things are changing. It's not that Sloane Square is getting any closer in time, space or spirit, but south of the river between Lambeth Bridge and Chelsea Bridge, which includes the New Covent Garden Market, is at last acquiring a dynamic all its own. This is a huge 195 hectare site that the mayor – or, more likely, his office – describes as 'the largest remaining development opportunity within the central activities zone'.

Chief monument in this southern 'central activities zone' is the poetically inactive Battersea Power Station. Some would argue that only the grip it has on sentiment has prevented a rational decision to demolish a crumbling husk which, in turn, has thwarted

progress for a quarter of a century. Anyway, after years of muddle and overreaching ambition, a toxic combination, it is now the subject of a realistic development proposal.

Next door will be the new US Embassy, handily placed for access to the spooks of M16 in their Terry Farrell toytown extravaganza at the south end of Vauxhall Bridge. The new US Embassy will be up to 20 storeys high and brings with it a new park and improved riverside walkways (not to mention suffocating security measures). And there is, indeed, room for improvement here: presently the riparian aspect of Nine Elms is dominated by a Ready Mixed Concrete depot and the Cringle Street waste transfer facility. Boris wants a new pedestrian bridge to connect Nine Elms with Pimlico.

Ken Livingstone's London Plan identified Vauxhall's 'potential for significant increase in density' which is a complicated way of saying high-rise. On this, Boris agrees with Ken: together with Lambeth and Wandsworth, the Mayor declared in late 2009 that by 2026 there would be 16,000 new homes in the area. And that includes premium development. Knight Frank are currently marketing Neo Bankside, a glamorous new apartment building hard by Tate Modern already proving

popular with city professionals who like the idea of 'walking to work' over the Millennium Bridge. Interest has pushed up prices per square foot in the development to £1,350. The views are, of course, magnificent from the south side of the river.

Already, a cluster of towers in Vauxhall comprised of Vauxhall Tower, Vauxhall Island Tower and Vauxhall Sky Gardens is well advanced. Opinion is divided between whether these are thrilling evidence of investment and optimism after years of depressing neglect, vagrancy and indigence, or ham-fisted, greedy over-development. Be that as it may, the 50-storey Vauxhall Tower will be Europe's tallest residential building. This in area whose liveliest business is, presently, the offices of The Big Issue.

A few hundred yards away, the slimmed-down redesign for Vauxhall Sky Gardens opposite the deadly Nine Elms Sainsbury's now seems certain to go ahead. Two 46-storey towers are proposed for the vacant island site opposite Arup's Robby the Robot bus station. On the other side of the road, on Bondway, a 42-storey tower is now seeking planning permission. And nearby, on Albert Embankment, the unloved Texaco station will soon give way to a 32-storey office block >

SARF LONDON SLEBS



Photography: Dafydd Jones/REX

which will overlook Jeffrey Archer's flat (appropriately, not quite the penthouse of Alembic House).

Waterloo is being refreshed and after years of bargaining, the Lifschutz Davidson 43-floor Doon Street tower is being built. Megastructures by Renzo Piano and Ian Simpson will eventually appear at London Bridge and Blackfriars.

Beyond this central area, there is the Thames Gateway. This is a presentational term for the wastes of Dagenham and some desolate marshland, now imaginatively rebranded a 'wetlands national park' by masterplanner Terry Farrell.

But nothing else is so emblematic of the new south as the Elephant and Castle. Here is London at its best and worst; layer upon layer of history compounded with public squalor and official neglect. Erno Goldfinger's heroically sinister 1950s concrete brutalism was only ever enjoyed by eccentric aficionados of the Soviet-era Constructivism which inspired it. But the scruffy shopping centre which now dominates the traffic interchange brings the Third World into disrepute and makes the KGB-style authoritarianism of Goldfinger (who inspired Ian Fleming's antihero) look as pretty as the Petit Trianon. It's amazing that something so dirty, horrible and ugly as the Elephant and Castle could be allowed in a G7 country.

Yet now, the filthy, wheezing old Elephant has a glittering howdah. The Strata is a 43-storey block by Hamiltons Architects; visible from all over London, it literally makes a landmark for the area. On top are three 9m diameter wind turbines which will power the building. Bizarrely, Bill Clinton praised its carbon-correctness at a climate conference. Currently stalled, the whole area is scheduled for rebuilding, rebranding and re-launching. The over-excited call it South Westminster.

To the west, an enterprising developer called Iqbal Latif has opened an ecologically intelligent hotel in Battersea among the Ballardian dystopia of ziggurat apartments and gyms. Unfortunately, unintelligent modes of transport are necessary to reach it, but Latif's ambition to stimulate London's *rive gauche* with luxury and culture is, if a bit uncertain, not to be mocked. There have been misfired ambitions in the south before. Sure, the Wandsworth one-way system is not yet the Boulevard Saint-Germain, but reach should exceed grasp, or what else is heaven for? Trollope would be amazed. And maybe one day soon Sarf London will mean something other than an odd accent. ■

EXCLUSIVELY ONLINE
Where to eat, drink and dance
south of the river



V SOUTH BANK RIVE GAUCHE

THEY MAY BE SMARTER, BUT WE ARE WAY COOLER

LONDON EYE A Millennial institution	LANDMARK	TOUR EIFFEL Shorthand for Paris
BATTERSEA PARK Home to the Peace Pagoda	PARK	JARDIN DE LUXEMBOURG A flaneur's dream
TATE MODERN Formerly a power station	ART MUSEUM	MUSÉE D'ORSAY Formerly a train station
MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY & THE PIT BAR AT THE OLD VIC Thespy hotspots for star spotting	CAFE	CAFE DE FLORE & LES DEUX MAGOTS Most favoured intellectual hangouts
HOTEL RAFAYEL Eco-lux hotel with cupcakery on site	HOTEL	L'HOTEL Boutique home to Le Restaurant
FOYLES South Bank outpost of trad indie	BOOKSHOP	LA HUNE Beloved by les philosophes
KEW A botanical treasury	GARDENS	JARDIN DES PLANTES Dusty but charming
BOROUGH Gastro-heaven for chefs and foodie voyeurs	MARKET	BON MARCHÉ Department store with an epic food hall
ANCHOR AND HOPE Chattering class gastro pub	BRASSERIE	BRASSERIE LIPP Belle Epoque celebrity hangout
NEO BANKSIDE A striking residential development designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners to be completed this year	NEW BUILD	CITÉ DE LA MODE ET DU DESIGN From concrete warehouse to creative showcase
SOUTHWARK CATHEDRAL London's most venerable cathedral building	HOLY SITE	EGLISE ST-GERMAIN-DES-PRÉS The oldest church in Paris dates from 543AD
BERMONDSEY Warehouse living, foodie pubs and the Globe on your doorstep	COOL QUARTIER	ST GERMAIN As hip as Paris gets, even if Verlaine has been replaced by Vuitton
THE MILLENNIUM BRIDGE A London favourite (after a wobbly start)	FOOTBRIDGE	PASSERELLE SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR Paris's famous feminist footbridge!
MINISTRY OF SOUND Opened in 1991 in an old bus garage, still going strong	CLUB	LE BATOFAR Former lighthouse boat converted to floating nightclub

