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## Catastrophe on Church Street

There is a town in Colorado called Central City. It was a gold rush town, which in 1874 was more or less completely destroyed by fire. The authorities ruled that the replacement buildings should be of brick or stone; and so was created a lovely new town, uniformly Victorian neo-classical, which still survives. Rather similarly, Napier in New Zealand was destroyed by an earthquake in 1931. The architectural style then fashionable was art deco, and Napier today is an extraordinarily well preserved art deco town. Thus disasters can produce effects that we enjoy long after the tragedy has passed.<sup>1</sup>

The catastrophe on Church Street was less terrible and didn't, as far as I know, kill anyone. But it had a similar effect of bequeathing to us a very pleasant and stylistically homogeneous collection of buildings, covering the whole of the north side and part of the south side.

The agent of change was the Metropolitan Street Improvements Act of 1877<sup>2</sup>, one of a series of Acts sponsored by the Metropolitan Board of Works that gave it powers of compulsory purchase to enable it to widen the capital's streets. The Act included in its provisions,

The widening of Church Street, Camberwell, on its north side, commencing at the south-east corner of Camberwell Green and terminating forty yards or thereabouts to the west of Vicarage Road, all in the parish of St Giles, Camberwell, in the county of Surrey.<sup>3</sup>

It is not hard to imagine that Church Street in the 1870s was as busy as it is now, but in places it was little more than 30ft wide, frontage to frontage, and it accommodated a tram line. The Board was advised by its Works Committee, in turn advised by a surveyor, an architect, an engineer and a solicitor. In the end it did considerably more than originally laid out in the Act.

In November 1879 the Committee had a letter from Mr Keene at No.66 on the south side, asking if he would be affected by the widening. The surveyor quickly advised that he wouldn't be, but the engineer paused. He pointed out that while the original scheme had been to create a width of 50ft, in front of Mr Keene's house it would only be 41ft, which would be squeezed up to 44ft if Mr Keene's steps, which extended over the public footpath, were pushed back. What he preferred was to extend the north-side widening to Vicarage Road and indeed beyond, which would entail purchasing more buildings, including the "Stirling Castle". At the same time, evidently having the bit between his teeth, he proposed widening

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<sup>1</sup> A further example, which I owe to Wikipedia, is Val di Noto, in Sicily, which was destroyed by the earthquake of 1693 and was rebuilt in a homogeneous late Baroque style.

<sup>2</sup> 40 & 41 Vict. Ch. ccxxv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6. There was also included "the widening of Camberwell Road on the east side from the house No.285 in that road to Camberwell Green" (which led to the present Father Red Cap and the terrace running north from it) and "the widening of certain parts of the Peckham Road and High Street and Queen's Road, Peckham ...". There is a copy of the original plan for the widening in the Surrey History Centre, QS6/8/866/1, Plan No.15, and another in the Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PB/3/plan 1877/M15, Plan No. 15.

at the Camberwell Green end of the south side. In the absence of the plans, which unfortunately have not been preserved with the minutes, we cannot be sure where exactly he meant but the most likely seems to be that it was a matter of purchasing No. 2 and some of the garden of the White House in order to round off the corner.<sup>4</sup>

Following further discussions and reports from the officials it was decided to go even further – to purchase the extra buildings on the north side, and some of the Vicarage garden, and also those on the south side from 2-20, as well as part of the garden of the White House. The Board agreed.<sup>5</sup>

The Committee had already been negotiating the compulsory purchase of properties in the original scheme on the north side. There had to be valuations for freeholds, leaseholds and tenancies, sometimes all three on the same property. Usually, it seems, the Committee's valuations were accepted. Negotiations continued through 1880, but in December the architect reported on the extra cost implied by the enlarged scheme agreed in February, and a majority of the Committee didn't like it, so it was decided to abandon the south side widening at the Camberwell Green end, though still to keep the extended north-side widening. But the decision only lasted a week. At the next meeting the solicitor advised that matters had progressed so far that legally the Committee could not now draw back. Indeed it had to go further since it was at least arguable that it could not compulsorily purchase just a portion of the garden of the White House, it had to purchase the whole property, a proposal which the engineer had already favoured.<sup>6</sup>

Demolition started in January 1881, and in April there remained only four unsettled cases on the north side. Thus in the spring and early summer the scene was of houses destroyed or half destroyed, and piles of rubble, as though indeed an earthquake had struck. By July the architect could report that the demolition materials had been sold and removed and the engineer could proceed with widening the road, at least as far as the "Stirling Castle".<sup>7</sup>

The residents were not pleased with the situation. In September the Camberwell Ratepayers' Protection Association wrote to the Camberwell Vestry urging quicker progress, this following many similar complaints, and the Vestry agreed to write to the Board. Complaints continued and the Vestry wrote again in February.<sup>8</sup> It is notable that in the 1880 directory many of the addresses originally planned for demolition on the north side are not recorded as being occupied, so the bad effect on business started well in advance of the work.

In October 1881, perhaps inspired by the wide open spaces created by the demolition, the engineer and the surveyor proposed a further enlargement of the widening scheme, to increase the width from 50ft to 60ft all the way along, which could be done at little extra expense and entailed only buying the milliner's shop on the corner of Wren Road, No.26 Camberwell Green, and this was agreed. The Vestry had evidently urged the same plan –

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<sup>4</sup> London Metropolitan Archive, Metropolitan Board of Works, Minutes of the Works Committee, MBW1208: 398 (24 Nov. 1879); MBW1209: 74-75 (15 Dec. 1879).

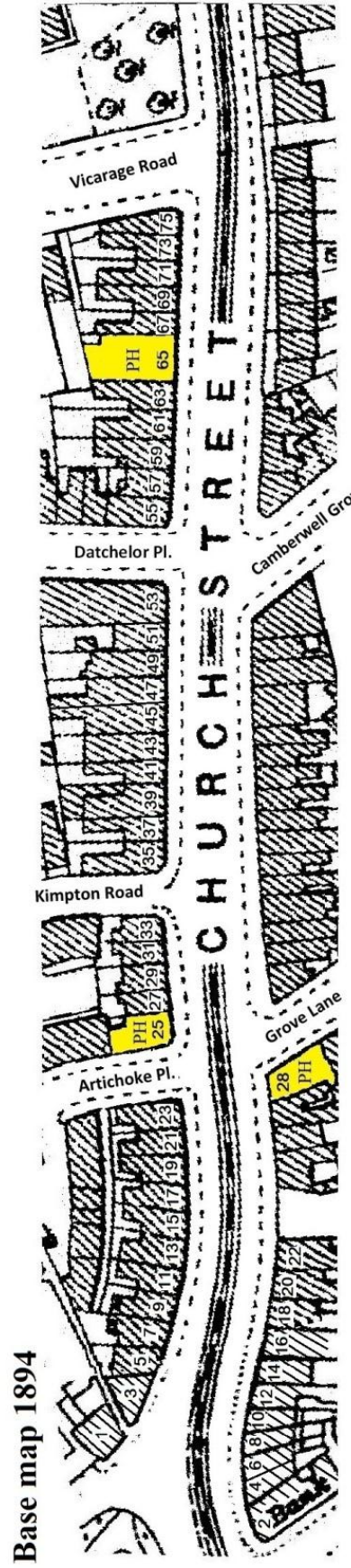
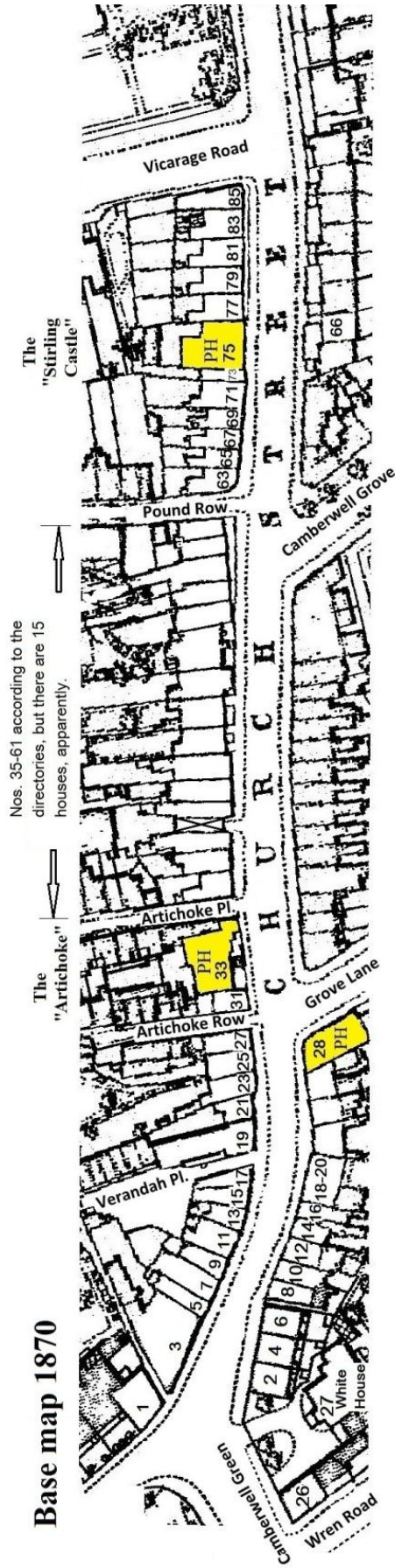
<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, MBW1209: 172-74 (5 Jan. 1880), 478-79 (19 Jan. 1880), 693-94 (2 Feb. 1880); MBW1210: (9 Feb. 1880, item 34).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, MBW1216: 363-66 (13 Dec. 1880), 528-32 (20 Dec. 1880).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, MBW1216: 635 (10 Jan. 1881); MBW1218, 374-75 (4 April 1881); 1219: 655-56 (18 Jul. 1881), 675 (25 Jul. 1881).

<sup>8</sup> Southwark Local History Library, St Giles Camberwell Vestry Minute Book, v.23: 60 (28 Sep. 1881), 129 (26 Oct. 1881), 405-06 (22 Feb. 1882).

# Before and after the street widening



## Notes

1. What had been No.1 Church Street, now Haarts, later became 27 Camberwell Green, and No.3 Church St. became Nos. 1-3.
2. Nos. 2-12 started as Nos. 1-6 Bank Buildings.

when the Board's decision was received the Vestry attributed it to "the indefatigable exertions of the Chairman".<sup>9</sup>

By the beginning of 1882 the Committee was ready to start thinking about rebuilding. In February the surveyor proposed a plan of building plots for the land so far cleared.<sup>10</sup>

On the north side the effect of the plans would be:

- to abolish Verandah Place;
- to move Artichoke Row to the west, greatly to widen it and change its name to "Artichoke Place";
- to resite the "Artichoke" public house to the corner of the new Artichoke Place;
- greatly to widen the old Artichoke Place so that it became a continuation of the existing Kimpton Road.

In March the solicitor submitted a draft tender document for the leases of the plots on the north side between (using the new street names) Artichoke Place and Vicarage Road, excluding the "Stirling Castle" site and the block which was to include the new "Artichoke". The tender process moved quickly, but must have been disappointing in its outcome. Only the tender by R&H Pickersgill, of 6 West Street, Soho, for the block west of Artichoke Place, exceeded the architect's rental valuation. This was accepted. In addition, Mr C. Bird of Park House, South Norwood, who had tendered for all of the plots, was to be invited to raise his tender for those to the east of Artichoke Place; and, failing that, a similar invitation in relation to the last four plots before Vicarage Road was to be made to Messrs Mansell Brothers of 84 Church Street (owners of the *Camberwell and Peckham Times*).<sup>11</sup>

In the event neither Bird nor Mansell Brothers was willing to raise their offer, so the Committee finished up with only 12 plots let out of 32, and in June even those seemed threatened, when Pickersgill delayed (but only delayed) signing the final contract.<sup>12</sup>

No further progress was made in letting during the next twelve months, and in July 1883 the remaining plots on the north side, and now also the plots on the south side near Camberwell Green, were put up for auction. Even this was not a great success. The plots on the south side were all sold, but the north side remained a problem, 9 of the 17 lots not finding a tenant. They were disposed of in ones and twos by private treaty, somewhat painfully, in a process that dragged on until at least October 1885.<sup>13</sup>

The Committee did much better with the "Stirling Castle", the lease of whose site was auctioned on 28 February 1882 and went to James Watney at a price, £4,890, more than 60% above the reserve. But what happened with the "Artichoke" is obscure. In May 1882 a Mr Lowther offered a rent of £150 for the land between Artichoke Place and Kimpton Road. The Committee decided that indeed the several plots should be sold as one, but also that that should be at auction. There does not appear to be a record of such an auction, and there was a

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<sup>9</sup> London Metropolitan Archive, Metropolitan Board of Works, Minutes of the Works Committee, MBW1220: 351-54 (17 Oct. 1881); MBW1221: 7 (21 Nov. 1881). Southwark Local History Library, St Giles Camberwell Vestry Minute Book, v.23: 104-05 (26 Oct. 1881).

<sup>10</sup> London Metropolitan Archive, Metropolitan Board of Works, Minutes of the Works Committee, MBW1222: 428-29 (27 Feb. 1882)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1223: 53-54 (27 Mar. 1882), 288-91, 302-06 (24 Apr. 1882).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1223: 392 (1 May 1882), 505 (8 May 1882); MBW1224: 132-33 (12 June 1882), 217-219 (19 Jun. 1882), 425-27 (3 Jul. 1882).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1228: 305 (4 Jun. 1883), 564 (2 Jul. 1883), 674-75 (16 Jul. 1883); MBW 1229: 119-20 (2 Aug. 1883); *The Times* 27 Jun. 1883, p.20, col. 5.



reference to a “difficulty”. In June 1883 the plot seems still to have been unlet, with the rent still at £150. Then in March 1884 plans for the buildings adjoining the pub were submitted by a Mr Wetherby.<sup>14</sup>

The successful bidder for the tenancy of a lease was required to put up buildings meeting certain standards and to a certain value within a specified time. Building plans had to be submitted to the Committee for approval, which approval was not granted automatically. There is a mention, in relation to part of the work at Peckham, of the desirability of “buildings of a uniform and distinctive character”, suggesting that the Committee, certainly in the persons of its staff, was interested in the aesthetic qualities of what was to be put up.<sup>15</sup>



In line with their having had the first leases to be agreed, the first buildings to be erected were Nos. 3-23, forming the fine curved terrace that makes such a large contribution to the overall attractiveness of the area round the Green.

Messrs Pickersgill had them up by August 1883.<sup>16</sup> And in the previous May they had got approval for “3 houses and stabling on Plot 65 in rear of their shops in Church Street ...”, which I take to mean what is now Artichoke Mews.<sup>17</sup> It seems that Camberwell’s gain was Messrs Pickersgill’s loss, since by 1885 they were bankrupt and had to forfeit leases on the south side that they had successfully bid for at auction. At the same time they forfeited the land behind Nos.3-23, so Artichoke Mews would have been built by their successor on the site.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> London Metropolitan Archive, Metropolitan Board of Works, Minutes of the Works Committee, MBW1223: 163-4 (3 Apr. 1882), 491 (8 May 1882), 610-11 (15 May 1882); MBW1228: 265-66 (28 May 1883), 433 (18 Jun. 1883); MBW1231: 148 (31 Mar. 1884).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1222: 428-29 (27 Feb. 1882).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1229: 184 (6 Aug. 1883)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1225: 221-22 (7 Aug. 1882) ; MBW1229: 184 (6 Aug. 1883); MBW1228: 160 (7 May 1883)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1233: 479-80 (16 Feb. 1885); MBW1234: 144 (27 Apr. 1885), 290-91 (18 May 1885).



Artichoke Place

Kimpton Road

Nos. 25-33, including the “Artichoke” public house, formed a single terrace – so either Mr Wetherby built the pub as well as the four adjoining houses, or one of the architects or builders politely followed the other. The pub has the date “1884”, which doesn’t really point either way.



Kimpton Road

The next group, Nos.35-41 were put up by a Mr James Kent, of 95 Milton Street. He first bid successfully for 35 and 37 at auction, then acquired the other two by private treaty, and buildings were finished by June 1884, the designs for the second two having been accepted in April. They built quick.<sup>19</sup>



Nos. 43-47 were again the result of architectural co-operation. No. 47 was first acquired by private treaty by a Mr H.S.E. Davis of 4 Stratford Road, then Nos. 43-45 similarly by a Mr Willis, of 217 Cromwell Road. No. 47 was completed by April 1885. In the absence of a record it is reasonable to assume that the others were completed at around the same date.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1229: 119-20 (2 Aug. 1883); MBW1231: 34 (17 Mar. 1884), 313 (24 Apr. 1884); MBW1232: 153 (21 July 1884).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1230: 232 (14 Jan. 1884), 422 (4 Feb. 1884); MBW1234: 113 (20 Apr. 1885).





Datchelor Place

We are really getting very handsome. Nos. 51-53 went to a Mr John Mackie of 195 Camberwell Road at the auction. No. 49 was acquired later by a Mr W. H. Cooper. The roundel on the top storey has his initials. Nos. 51-53 were finished by October 1885.<sup>21</sup>

A Mr Moule acquired Nos. 55-57 some time after the auction (there is no record). In January 1884 he submitted plans, which the Committee rejected. This is the only case I have seen where there was such a rejection. He came back in March with revised plans, which were approved. Personally, I'd have rejected the revised plans too. The buildings were completed October.<sup>22</sup>



Datchelor Place



Unlike Nos. 55-57, Nos. 59-63 are at least inoffensive. But perhaps that is also the best that can be said for them. They were the last plots on the north side of Church Street to be disposed of and, fittingly, their history is obscure.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1229: 119-20 (2 Aug. 1883), 660-61 (26 Nov. 1883); MBW1232: 505 (20 Oct. 1884).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1230: 197 (7 Jan. 1884); MBW1231: 46-47 (17 Mar. 1884); MBW1232400: 6 Oct. 1884).

It was agreed in November 1884 to offer the three plots, and the one on the other side of the “Stirling Castle” to a Mr Henry Clarke of 33 Stamford Hill. Then, after various comings and goings, in October 1885 the Committee agreed to sell the plots on either side of the pub to an unnamed client of Mr Stimson, the auctioneer. The architectural detailing is just consistent with Nos. 59 and 61 having been built together and No. 63 separately. By this time the Metropolitan Board of Works was embroiled in financial scandal – perhaps everyone was losing interest in Camberwell.<sup>23</sup>



The “Stirling Castle”, No. 65, gave no difficulty. Watneys did not mess around, and their plans were accepted in May 1882. I haven’t found a record of the building’s completion, perhaps some time in 1883.

Finally on the north side, as regards Nos. 67-75, the solicitor’s report of the auction was clear that the plot for No.67 had gone to Canning and Mullins, 128 Newington Causeway, and the other four to a Mr William Stubbs, Phoenix Wharf, Lambeth. This leaves a puzzle in relation to the unnamed client of Mr Stimson who apparently bought No.67 later. Anyhow, Stubbs’s plans for Nos. 69-75 were approved in March 1884; and whoever had No.67 used the same architect, or at least followed much the same design.<sup>24</sup>



<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1232: 680-81 (17 Nov. 1884); MBW1235: 230 (12 Oct. 1885); Wikipedia “Metropolitan Board of Works”.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1229: 119-20 (2 Aug. 1883); MBW1231: 102 (24 March 1884).



The south side got going some time after the north side, but the work was completed more quickly, if we don't count the wide plot left vacant at the east end of the road widening. The tenancy of this plot, including the land behind that had been the grounds of the White House, went at the auction to a Mr Charles Bryant, a builder, of 32 Highbury New Park.<sup>25</sup> Oddly, it seems that he did nothing with it, and there is no record in the Committee minutes of its having been forfeited. The plot seems to have been left unbuilt on until the police station was put there. For many years afterwards the land behind, with its entrance on Wren Road, was shared between the police and Thomas Tilling's coach factory.



The plots that became Nos. 18-22 were acquired at auction by Messrs Pickersgill. On Pickersgill's bankruptcy they were taken over by a Mr C.Kynoch, whose buildings were completed in September 1885.<sup>26</sup>



The site of No. 14 was acquired at the auction by a Mr T. L. Lassam of 276 Camberwell Road, but there is no further mention of him and his plot appears to have been taken over by a builder called William Downs of Hampton Street, Walworth, who had got the adjoining plot at the auction. The plans were approved in May 1884 and buildings completed a year later. One can lament the intrusive 1930s addition to No. 14.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1229: 119-20 (2 Aug. 1883).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*; MBW1233: 479-480 (16 Feb.1885), 710 (23 Mar. 1885); MBW1235: 111 (28 Sep. 1885).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1229: 119-20 (2 Aug. 1883); MBW1231: 486-87 (19 May 1884); MBW1234: 242 (11May 1885).



The last portion of the terrace, Nos. 2-12, one is scarcely aware of as being an architecturally uniform group. Facing north, in parts still darkened by, presumably, the smoke from decades of domestic coal fires, and adorned at street level by some of Camberwell's more unlovely fascias, it is easy to ignore. It was apparently formed, in a way that is not very clear, from three plots got at the auction by the London and South-Western Bank combined with the adjoining plot acquired at the same time and apparently developed by a Frederick J. Upton, a hatter of 68 London Road, Southwark. His, No.12, is a little wider than the others but at the very least he followed the Bank's architects, Messrs J. and J.S. Edmeston, of Old Broad Street. The Bank's plans were approved in January 1884. Mr Upton's building was up in May 1885, and the new bank and adjoining terrace in the following month. Mr Upton did not open a hatting business in his building, and Nos. 2-12 were first known as 1-6 Bank Buildings, which may suggest that the Bank took over from him at some stage.<sup>28</sup> The



<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* MBW1229: 119-20 (2 Aug. 1883); MBW1230: 305 (21 Jan. 1884); MBW1234: 242 (11 May 1885), 457-58 (22 June 1885).



contemporary illustration is from the South London Press of 14 March 1885, from a copy in the Minet Library. The accompanying description makes mouth-watering reading.

So what do we have? To repeat, a very pleasant and stylistically homogeneous collection of buildings, basically neo-classical but with little oddments thrown in. Central City, Colorado, and Napier, New Zealand, have been carefully restored. The scale of Church Street is more modest in every respect. Nonetheless it deserves better, I think, than the lack of concern for its original architectural coherence, the dirty walls, the decorative decay and the plants growing from the gutters that characterize much of it today.