



IN COMMON
ON THE COMMON

A short guide to Betts Park, Anerley SE20. Exploring the unique history and tales of the people who accidentally saved 13 acres of the ancient Penge Common

Published by the Friends of Betts Park

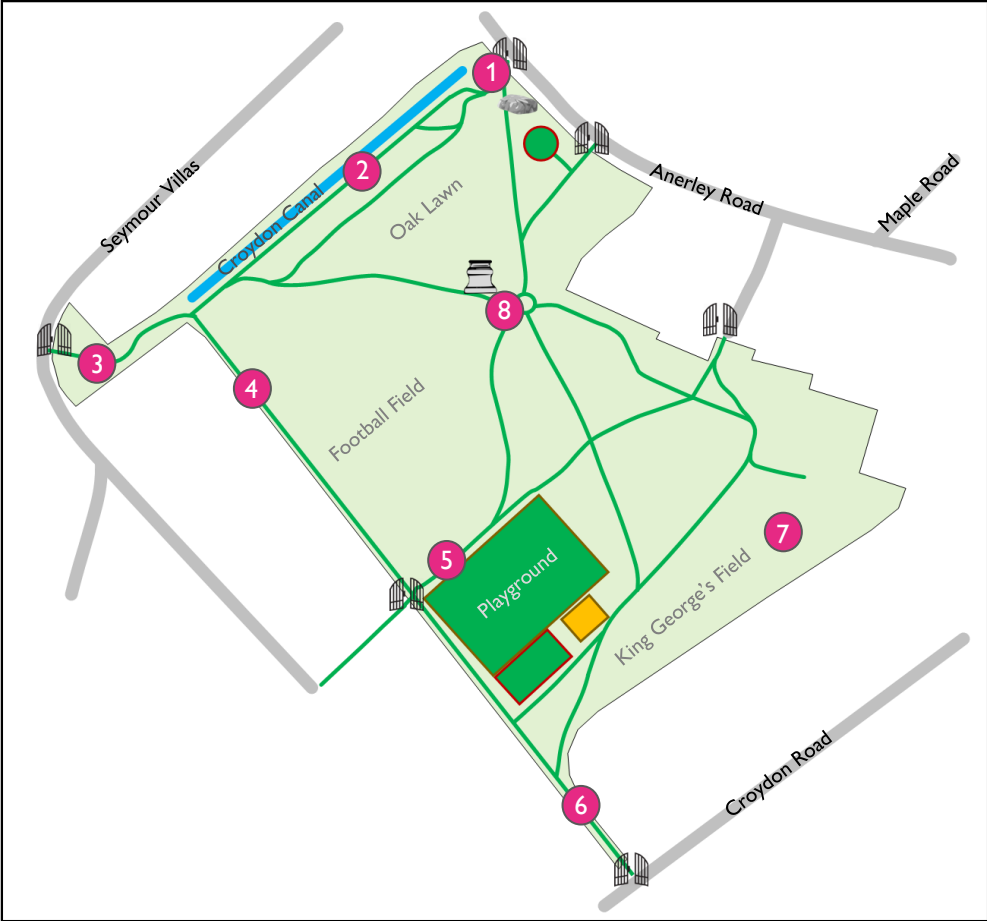
www.bettspark.com

The tales in this booklet describe the characters responsible for the existence of the public space now known as Betts Park in Anerley; anciently known as Clay Copse on Penge Common. Events are not in chronological order, because nothing in life goes as planned.

Because of the unusual administration of Penge over the centuries, there are few written sources. Most of what is included is probably true...

Friends of Betts Park

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Betts Park 2023

Mr Frederick Betts

1859 - 1944

Picture from the Croydon News 1939

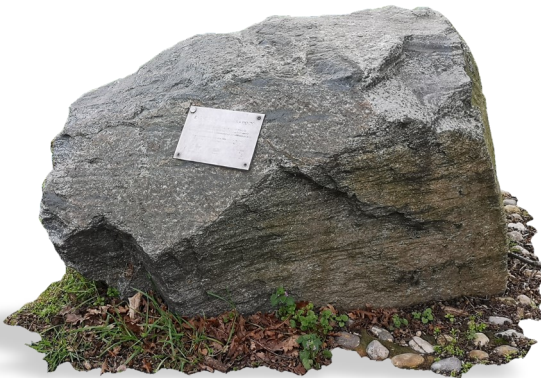


Bromley Millennium Rock

1999

"This boulder of Lewisian Gneiss from Lochinver in North West Scotland was presented to the people of Bromley by The Highland Council to commemorate the Millennium year."

[Nobody knows why]



1 Frederick Betts and Modern Times

Frederick Betts (1859—1944) - that's "Mr Betts" to you and me - was a tough, impatient character; he was a self-made man from an impoverished background who worked hard for everything he had and expected others to do the same. At the age of 10 his father pulled him from school, "having probably learned everything there was to learn" and sent him to work as a plumber's apprentice. Frederick hated plumbing and determined to carve his own future using hard graft, coupled with an astute talent for spotting business opportunities. With his earnings he steadily built a property portfolio, largely in Penge where he grew up. Amongst his tenants he was feared or loved, but always seen as unequivocally fair. If you were honest with Mr Betts and paid your rent, he would maintain the property and guarantee a home. If, however, the tenant didn't keep to their side of the contract he would send someone to remove the doors and windows until arrears were settled. This, he felt, was better than sending bailiffs to leave a family homeless with no possessions – at least they had a chance to recover.

In 1924, at a meeting of councillors in Croydon, Mr Betts got so irritated by other councillors complaining about the lack of public recreation grounds for people of the borough that he challenged them to donate some of their own land if they felt so strongly – rather than expect taxes to fund it. Knowing of Betts' infamous reputation as no nonsense landlord, the other landowning councillors called his bluff by claiming they would if he would. In 1925 he donated Betts Mead in Kenley as open recreational land for residents of the borough, and they had to follow suit.

Despite his tough exterior, Betts had a deep philanthropic side. He knew life wasn't easy for most people and, when Penge Urban District Council heard of his gift in Croydon and approached him to make a similar donation, he readily agreed. In 1927 Betts Park was born in the Anerley district of Penge. A combination of land purchased by Penge UDC and a villa called *Oak Lawn* gifted by Frederick Betts. His only stipulations were that the house should become a public library, that land should be open to all for recreation and fresh air and maintained "...in perpetuity without business or building", and that the park should be maintained in loving memory of his mother, Sarah Betts.

What Mr Betts and Penge Council probably didn't realise was that they were inadvertently reclaiming an ancient part of Penge Common for the free use of local people – just as had been intended 2000 years previously.



**Anerley Arms Pleasure
Gardens by B. Constable**
c1860
*Image from the Central
Library, Bromley*



Croydon Canal in Betts Park
1933

2 Earl Spencer and the Croydon Canal

When King Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in 1540 the Manor of Battersea and land at Penge was taken from Westminster Abbey and passed through several different owners until it was sold to the St John family (Viscounts Grandison) in 1610 where it remained until 1763 when it was sold to John, the first Earl Spencer. It was his son George, the second Earl Spencer, a prominent British politician, who decided to realise the value of somewhere called Penge Common. For many years there had been little value in the English timber from the woodland and income from rents was barely worth collecting. When plans for a canal joining the Grand Surrey Canal at New Cross to Croydon came before parliament, he supported the proposal and was happily obliged by an Act of Parliament in 1801 to sell a strip of the common so the canal could be built. Over the following years the second Earl Spencer proposed several acts of parliament to enable the sale of the remaining “waste ground” at Penge Common.

The Croydon Canal finally opened on 22nd October 1809. It sliced the ancient common in half and skirted the top boundary of Clay Copse (later to become Betts Park). The opening ceremony was a grand royal barge procession for King William IV and Queen Adelaide. The queen was instantly smitten with the peaceful tranquillity of Penge and spent many years persuading others to donate to building almshouses for retired watermen and lightermen, and an asylum for the widows of naval officers. Although the canal brought some trade through a wharf in Penge, it devastated the lives of families who had always lived there. Access to the top half of the common was now restricted by the canal with just one bridge on the far eastern side. Streams no longer ran down to the pools and the small river would sometimes dry out. New wealthy incomers started the buy up what little land the Earl could legally sell. One thousand years of a tough, rural existence began to vanish forever.

In 1827 the second Earl Spencer finally got an act through parliament to enable him to sell off all the land at Penge Common. Surveys were conducted alongside plenty of arguing as to where the boundaries lay. Locals were summoned to walk the boundaries with justices and landowners, pointing out ancient boundary markers, and claims of interested parties (not the poor tenants of course) were formally registered. The leasehold of Clay Copse was disputed but, because it was already semi-enclosed for use by the commoners, sale was allowed to go through, with a proviso that it was kept accessible to local families who still needed firewood. Of the original 600 acres of common land, just 13 would remain for the inhabitants until they no longer needed it.

By 1836 the canal had closed and the land sold to build a railway. The short stretch of canal in Betts Park is all that remains today.



The Sandersons of Anerley Lodge

c1860

Source unknown

No.	Christian Name and Surname of each Voter.	Place of Abode.	Nature of Qualification.	Street, lane, or other like place where the Property is situate, or name of the Property, or name of the Tenant.
HAMLET OF PENGE.				
2679	Adams, Richard Edward	Elm lodge, Beckenham, Kent	Freehold land	Thomas Dean, tenant.
2680	Cater, John	Beckenham place, Kent	Freehold land	Sarah Baker, tenant.
2681	Daikers, James	Penge common	Freehold house and land	Own occupation.
2682	Fox, Richard	Norwood, Surrey	Freehold house	Thomas Laker, tenant.
2683	Groves, William Thempsett	Sydenham lane	Freehold house and land	Own occupation.
2684	Hay, James	Newgate street, London	Freehold land	New road.
2685	Laurie, John	Sydenham, Kent	Freehold land	Own occupation.
2686	Lambert, Edward	South street, Greenwich	Freehold house	Crooked Billet.
2687	Miller, James	Penge common	Leasehold house and land	Own occupation.
2688	Pettingall, Charles Richard	Penge common	Leasehold house and land	Own occupation.
2689	Russell, Charles John	Penge	Leasehold house and land	Ragstone.
2690	Sanderson, William	New road	Freehold house and land	Penge common.
2691	Scott, John	Penge place	Freehold house and land	Own occupation.
2692	Willson, William	Sydenham, Kent	Freehold house	Joseph Rose, tenant.
2693	Wren, George	Sydenham lane	Freehold house and land	Sydenham lane.

Electors Register for the Hamlet of Penge

c1835

[Of the 16 people entitled to vote, only 6 lived in Penge]

3 William Sanderson and Anerley

After just six months of the Penge Act of Enclosure, the Earl Spencer was ready to sell and an auction of the plots of land was held on 30th October 1827. William Sanderson esq., a Scottish silk merchant, had been living in London with his wife and daughters for several years but hated the smog and pollution. He attended the auction as part of a buying-consortium to bid on plots of land in this rural location and hopefully build a suitable new country home for his family.

He purchased several plots, the finest being in a curve of the canal with splendid views and fresh breezes. As part of the purchase agreement new landowners had to fund the building of a road (50 feet wide) from Robin Hood Crossroads to the Vicar's Oak on the top of the hill where the borough's joined at Upper Norwood.

William Sanderson quickly got to work building a pretty rural villa in that picturesque canal bend. He named the house "Annerly", a Scots dialect word meaning only/lonely – as it was the only house on Penge Common. The road was quickly constructed in a straight line from the top of the hill until it crossed a new bridge over the canal and kinked around Clay Copse to join the road to Elmers End. The kink was probably because Clay Copse was still being used by the last residents.

Within a few years, the bridge near the new house became known as Anerley Bridge, the new street as Anerley Road and the hill as Anerley Hill. In 1836 the canal was formally closed, just as it had begun, by an act of parliament. It had never been profitable. William Sanderson found himself in the right place at the right time when the London & Croydon Railway bought the canal to build a line to London Bridge, but couldn't follow all the tight canal turns. He sold some of his land north of the house to the railway company on condition they build a station, at first named Annerly Bridge [sic] and later, simply, Anerley. A new district of London was born and rapidly developed with every yard gradually built with villas, shops, hotels, office and industries.

When William Sanderson died in 1871 his daughters put the remains of their once idyllic rural estate up for sale. Now surrounded by roads, railways, homes, industry and tourists visiting the Crystal Palace, the house was soon demolished and their part of the canal infilled. The dream of rural idyll may have died, but the name lives on.



King Eadwig “All Fair” of Wessex

941—959

Genealogical roll of the kings of England, British Library

**A Roman legion unable
to find Penge**

45-87 AD

*Los Angeles County Museum of
Art*



4 King Eadwig and the Ancient Penge Common

Penge is an ancient settlement on the southern side of the Great North Wood. For much of its history an exclave of the parish of Battersea in the county of Surrey. We know it's ancient because the name is Celtic, in fact it's the only place in Greater London with a Celtic name. Penge Green, as it was often called, was approximately one square mile of woodland and poor grazing surrounded by a horseshoe of hills on three sides with the small River Willmore separating it from the better farmlands of Kent to the southeast. There were a handful of hovels just up from the stream and the few families living there shared the common land to collect firewood and graze their livestock. It had always been like this.

The unique topography meant that the rest of the world passed around Penge, not through it. The Romans seem to have taken no interest whatsoever – why would anyone march into a claggy valley surrounded by thick woods, concealing bears and bandits and who knows what? Even the Doomsday Book fails to mention Penge. Despite being so close to London, the locals got on with their lives pretty much undisturbed by the outside world for almost 2000 years, with just the occasional change of landlord.

King Eadwig of Wessex had a problem. He was a teenager, unpopular, did stupid things, and had already lost half his kingdom to his brother. He needed supporters and, like all good politicians, decided to buy friends. In 957 he gave the Manor of Battersea and Penge Common to thane Lyfing including the woodland at the top of the hill, the main common and cottages around the outside. Woodland was valuable; it was the mediaeval equivalent of an oil-well that would never run dry with good management. What Lyfing had done to deserve this windfall is lost to history and there's no record of him ever living in Penge. It's likely that Lyfing lived in Battersea and handed this little goldmine of woodland to his descendants. The only difference the people of Penge would see is Lyfing's agent collecting rent each year rather than the Crown.

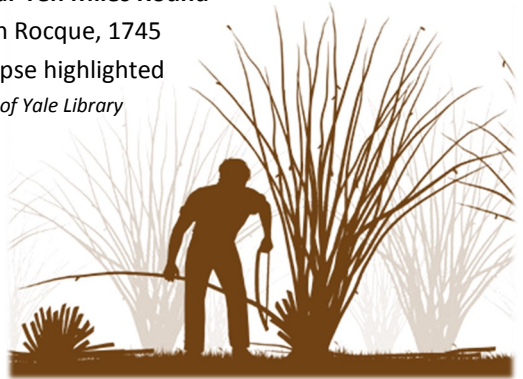
Following the conquest of 1066, William the Conqueror confiscated lands from the Saxon incumbents and redistributed them amongst his Norman barons. However, he needed a bit more to be legitimately crowned king, so persuaded the Abbot of Westminster to part with the crown jewels and perform a coronation in exchange for a few gifts - which included the Manor of Battersea and the attached called Penge Common (a nice little earner for timber). Despite becoming ecclesiastical land, the Abbey never felt obliged to bring worship to the people of Penge – it would be another 780 years before a church was erected.



The Country Near Ten Miles Round

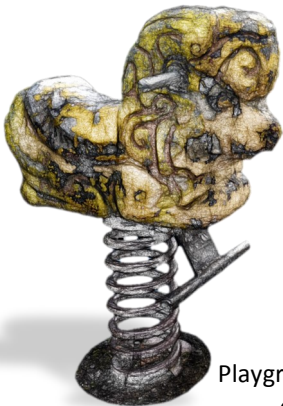
Map by John Rocque, 1745
with Clay Copse highlighted

University of Yale Library



Copping the timber

Creative Commons



Luther Lion no.358

Playground spring rocker c.1955

Courtesy of Alan Pottinger

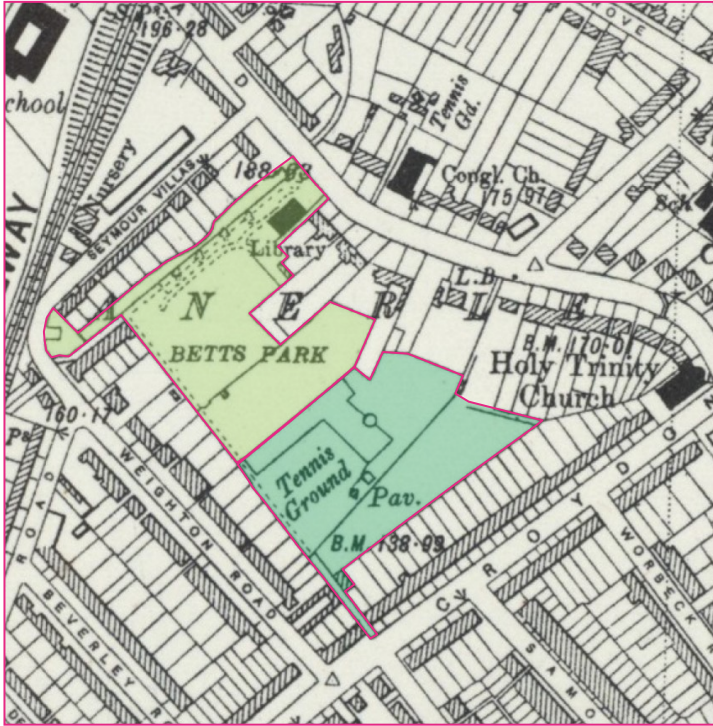
5 Clay Copse and the Copyholders

The Hamlet of Penge was an exclave of the Manor and Parish of Battersea, Surrey for around 1000 years. It largely comprised of a big common with a few meagre dwellings in the southeastern corner. Most of Penge Common wasn't suitable for farming, being on steep inclines of clay that were sodden in winter or rock-hard in summer. Crops wouldn't grow, but trees loved it. The freehold of Penge was held by the Lord of the Manor of Battersea and some parts were leased over the centuries to various tenant farmers. There was no church, no estate office, no poor house or gaol. One tavern, known as the Crooked Billet, served every secular purpose and folk walked across the Kent border to attend church in Beckenham – when they felt like it.

“Common” land in England is not land without an owner. It's land that historically people living alongside had the right to use by ancient agreement. These rights were sometimes written in a tenancy agreement and sometimes existed purely by tradition. Tenants often inherited their home on payment of a heriot to the Lord of the Manor when a parent died, but they never owned it or leased it. In return for the right to collect firewood or graze cattle, local folk paid rent each year or made their labour available to the landowner – they were called *copyholders*. Failure to comply meant fines or worse: homelessness. Penge Common was available by tradition to all the people of Battersea to graze livestock or collect brushwood. As it was highly unlikely anyone would haul a goat 9 miles from Battersea each day, Penge Common was left alone for the handful of locals.

On the south side of Penge Common tenants constructed an area for coppicing, known as Clay Copse. The modern Betts Park almost exactly follows the outline of the ancient Clay Copse. Coppicing was a form of woodland management where trees were cut at the base and allowed to regrow in many smaller branches, rather than one large trunk. Every 10 years or so a section of the copse would be harvested for logs of a much more practical size – much easier than cutting through a main trunk or pollarding the crown of a tree to reach the smaller timber. Different trees produced different stems for different uses. The long flexible pieces of hazel, for example, made good fencing; ash was good firewood, oak for strong frames and elm for furniture, carts or utensils. The problem with coppicing was that deer would often eat all the young shoots, so recently harvested parts of the copse would be surrounded by a rough fence of hurdles maintained by the commoners.

When Penge Common was put up for auction, John Morgan of Beckenham claimed to hold a lease for Clay Copse. The dispute lingered because the documents were inconclusive and, although the land was sold, buildings were not erected because of the uncertainty and the dwindling remaining commoners kept using the land.



Betts Park c.1938

- = the original park and library donated by Frederick Betts in 1928
- = King George's Field added in 1938



Heraldic panels still visible at the Mitre Gate



6 King George V and World War II

On 20th January 1936, King George V of the United Kingdom, Emperor of India, died. Sir Percy Vincent, the then Lord Mayor of London, formed a committee to determine a memorial that was not solely based on the idea of a statue. They arrived at the concept of funding and erecting a single statue in London and setting up the King George's Fields Foundation with the aim:

To promote and to assist in the establishment throughout the United Kingdom of playing fields for the use and enjoyment of the people.

Each of the playing fields would:

Be styled 'King George's Field' and be distinguished by heraldic panels or other appropriate tablet medallion or inscription commemorative of His Late Majesty.

Some money was raised by Penge Urban District Council to buy the land, with a grant made by the foundation. The completed park reunited the parts of the ancient Clay Copse on Penge Common. After purchase the land was passed to the National Playing Fields Association, (now known as Fields in Trust) to "preserve and safeguard the land for the public benefit in perpetuity". To this day the whole of Betts Park is protected from development and commercial activity by deeds held by Fields in Trust. It is the only park in the London Borough of Bromley with such legal protection.

The "new fields" (as they were known locally) included tennis courts, a pavilion, an entrance to the south and a triangle of the original Penge Common which had never been developed, containing an ancient oak and the reputed site of the last resident of the common.

Before improvements could be made to King George's Field, World War II began. A public air-raid shelter was built beneath the old canal bridge and much of the new fields, including the tennis courts, was given over for *Dig for Victory* allotments. The top of the park was retained as open land for Air Raid Precautions (ARP), Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) training and the few public events available to boost morale.

Penge and Anerley were very heavily bombed throughout the war with many homes and both churches around the park being destroyed. Three bombs are recorded as having exploded inside the park with a further 6 on the periphery. Many of the Victorian villas surrounding the park were destroyed or severely weakened by the bombing. In the 1960s and 70s a programme of slum-clearance removed many of the Victorian houses and replaced them with the estates which stand today.

Study from Nature
by W.P. Rogers

1825

Subtitled "Betty Saville
collecting her share of
brushwood from Penge
Common"

Image from the National Archive



Quercus ilex

Holm Oak

*Known locally as the
Home Oak or Gypsy Oak*

7 Betty Saville and the Gypsy Oak

In 1827, when Penge Common was sold, many of the poorest tenants and copyholders found themselves without homes and without the land to graze animals or collect firewood. Compensation was restricted to leaseholders – including John Morgan who was eventually bought out of his claim to lease Clay Copse – so the rest had to leave their family homes to seek a life elsewhere. Many of the families had lived here for generations, undisturbed for a 1000 years - it wasn't revolution or famine that defeated them, but the modern world finally catching up with Penge.

Probably the last commoner was Betty Saville, born and raised in Penge. A widow of the Napoleonic War, she had been one of the folk summoned by the inquest to determine the boundaries of the hamlet so it could be auctioned. As a poor widow with no family Betty had taken to illegally living on the common in an old waggon. She could have claimed poor relief from the parish, or requested compensation as a war widow but, because of the peculiar administration of Penge as an exclave of Battersea, both tasks would have meant travelling over the hill to London with proof of who she was and proof of her marriage to a deceased soldier. It's unlikely illiterate Betty had proof of either, and the thought of swapping country air for life in the smog of a London workhouse was beyond terrible.

As the common was sold and new owners claimed their sites, Betty and her waggon home were moved to Clay Copse where she could, in theory, live quietly as Penge grew around her. Even after the dispute around ownership of Clay Copse was resolved, it appears that Betty was allowed to remain amongst the ancient oaks – at least one of which survives from the Common and is known as the Home Oak or Gypsy Oak at the bottom of Betts Park.

The last we hear of Betty Saville is about 10 years later when her waggon was again moved, this time through the new streets of Penge to Kent House Road on the opposite side of the hamlet. In a small ceremony the waggon was placed on a little plot of land and the wheels removed to guarantee she would never be disturbed again. It's believed she lived out her days as the last original resident of Penge on that plot of land.

Throughout it seems that no-one wanted to get on the wrong side of Betty. Whether she was allowed to stay because she was much-loved or much-feared, we will never know.



Urban District Council of Penge

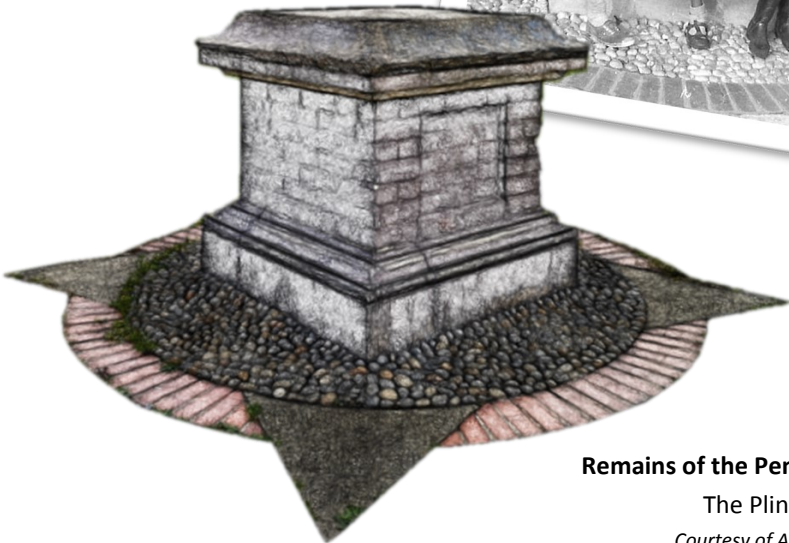
Seal 1900 to 1965

Courtesy of Penge Heritage Trail

Penge Jubilee Sundial

The Francis Brothers, 1961

Courtesy of Roysie Francis



Remains of the Penge Jubilee Sundial

The Plinth 2023

Courtesy of Alan Pottinger

8 Sir Edwin Herbert and the end of Penge

For over 1000 years Penge had been an exclave of the Parish of Battersea. Before Penge Common was sold this hadn't been a problem - the few families who lived here worshipped across the Kent border in Beckenham, paid their dues to the Vicar of Battersea for the Lord of the Manor, and carried on life as it had always been.

When Penge Common was auctioned off in 1827 life changed forever. The shared land disappeared, streets and houses quickly appeared, and modern life caught up with this sleepy hamlet. In the 50 years from 1821 to 1871 the population increased from 228 to 13,202 persons. Municipal life descended with the Borough of Croydon looking after education, census and the poor, the Lewisham District Board of Works in charge of water and roads, the County of Surrey overseeing development, and the Parish of Battersea still in charge of eternal souls. By 1855 life had become so muddled that a vestry was constituted to collect all the services in one place and appoint vestrymen to try and run the hamlet. In 1878, Penge Vestry Hall was built on the Anerley Road to provide a home for the vestry business.

In 1900 a Penge Urban District Council was founded to try and resolve the endless administration issues. Penge finally broke its links with Battersea becoming a council in its own right and transferring from Surrey to Kent. The vestry hall was expanded becoming known variously as Penge Town Hall or Anerley Town Hall, although there never officially was a town of Anerley or Penge.

Sixty years later, having survived two world wars and the destruction of a main source of income: the Crystal Palace, the council proudly erected an armillary sundial in Betts Park to celebrate their diamond jubilee. But the writing was already on the wall. As the smallest district in England, the council always struggled to raise funds to maintain the area, World War II was particularly tough and rebuilding had fallen a long way behind its more affluent neighbours. In 1965 Sir Edwin Herbert presented his new plans for the governance of London, and Penge was absorbed into a new London Borough of Bromley.

For the first time in 1000 years this isolated outpost of Surrey, undeniably part of London and Battersea, was forced to turn 180° towards the leafy fields of suburban Kent and relinquish its odd historic isolation.

The armillary sundial lasted just 5 years before fading into history, although its plinth still remains – waiting for a new memorial to the common people of the “lonely place”.



**FRIENDS OF
BETTS PARK**



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FESTIVAL OF
ARCHITECTURE

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In memory of Sarah Betts.

With thanks to the London Borough of Bromley, Fields in Trust and His Majesty King George V, without whom none of this would exist.

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