

Waterloo sunrise

Gentrification may be on the horizon for the area around one of London's busiest rail stations. By Richard Holledge

Mary Portas, the expert appointed by the government to cheer up the UK's high streets could do worse than make her way to Waterloo. There she will find the diversity of shops so envied by some town planners. Remarkably, the *soi-disant* Queen of Shops will discover that all but nine stores out of the 130 are independent.

Yet, this scruffy district of south London is better known for its rail terminal than as a contender for prime market status; hardly the paradise celebrated by Kinks star Ray Davies in the 1967 hit *Waterloo Sunset*. As a boy, Davies, who has curated the Meltdown music festival as part of the Southbank Centre's celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Festival of Britain, visited the original exhibition of design, ideas and fun intended to cheer up a country ravaged by war and rations.

He asked his father: "What is this all about, dad?" His father replied: "It's the future." What came in the next 60 years was maybe not quite what dad had in mind. He might well have been impressed by cultural landmarks such as the National Theatre or the Hayward Gallery – even the monolithic Shell Centre – that came to adorn the banks of the River Thames, but what would he have made of the random array of converted office blocks, former council properties, Victorian terraces and humdrum 1970s blocks of flats that still characterise the area?

It is a hard place to pin down. As Carl Davenport of estate agents Chesterton Humberts explains: "It is such a mix of architecture and so lacking in coherence that it is like a lot of sub-districts." These districts are distinct, with east separated from west by the busy Waterloo Road and north bifurcated from south by the station and its railway lines.

The north – alongside the Thames – is the district for investors and second homers. Most popular is the Whitehouse, a mix of rental and leasehold in a refurbished former Shell office block on Belvedere Road, which has a pool, spa and gym. It is home to Jude Kelly, artistic director of the Southbank Centre and from its windows it is possible to look down on the Royal Festival Hall, the only surviving structure from the 1951 festival.

A one-bedroom flat can be rented for £435 a week (with My London Home), a studio bought for £425,000 or a two-bedroom penthouse for £1.45m. "It has proved a sound investment for those who bought off-plan 10 years ago when work started because the immediate area has improved since,"



London residential property prices

Indices rebased



Source: Knight Frank Residential Research

Change in residential property prices

(%)	Waterloo	All prime central London
Over 1 month	0.2	1.4
Over 3 months	1.0	3.8
Over 6 months	6.2	7.4
Over 1 year	4.3	8.2
Over 5 years	19.0	28.7

Rebounding Top, Waterloo in London showing the RFH and the London Eye; below, terraced houses near the station James Cannon, Photolibary



says Davenport. "But you have to beware of the hefty service charges."

Alongside the old County Hall in Forum Magnum Square, a two-bedroom flat costs £695,000 complete with underground parking (Galliard Residential) or a two-bedroom flat can be rented for £600-£700 a week rising to £1,300 for three bedrooms.

But it is on the other side of the tracks that the beating heart of Waterloo can be found. Nowhere is more attractive – potentially, anyway – than Lower Marsh, a street that runs parallel with the terminal's platform one. True, many of the buildings have weeds growing from their gutters, but this is a street jam-packed with character.

Rob Hill, director of Greater London Properties, says: "The area has always been the ugly duckling but now percep-

tions are changing. People forget how handy it is for the West End and the City by both Tube and foot and hardly anyone knows how appealing it is becoming."

"What we are finding is that many of the shops are being renovated and converted in such a way that the shops continue to operate on the ground floor but have self-contained accommodation above." GLP is handling the sale of two adjacent shops which have been thoughtfully converted, keeping the retail element while transforming the upper floors into seven flats. A two-bedroom, two-bathroom flat is for sale at £575,000 and another which occupies the entire top floor for £1.05m. Already a conservation area, Lower Marsh's progress toward gentrification will be accelerated with a £2.2m injection of cash from Lambeth and Southwark councils that will fund improvements such as clearing a car park and creating more public spaces where, says Helen Santer of Waterloo Quarter, the local Business Improvement District which helps small enterprises: "People will be able to sit and linger. There is a strong sense of community. One of the things we are keen to encourage in Lower Marsh is for people to live and work there."

Richard Pears, 37, has a two-bedroom flat above his card shop where he lives with his wife and two young children. "It was derelict when we moved here 12 years ago," he

says. "It hadn't been lived in for a while and had been messed about by squatters. It took a bit of sorting out but I was helped by my brother who owns the Café del Marsh opposite. Lower Marsh has changed since then – it's more up-market with a lot of properties which have been refurbished and places like Greensmiths which would not have been contemplated a few years ago. When I started my shop it was little more than a market stall but now I am selling cards for up to £6, £7, even £10." What the locals agree on is that Lower Marsh needs a link to the north side of the station and beyond. The key to an integrated north and south lies in the hands of architect Sir David Chipperfield, who is redeveloping Elizabeth House on York Road alongside the station, a 1960s eyesore, and whose plans include the creation of a pleasing public realm linking the station with the South Bank and Lower Marsh.

If prices are cheaper than those across the river or around Tate Modern, for example, the choice is also more prosaic. Typical is Greet Street, off The Cut, with its former council blocks where, according to GLP, two-bedroom properties with a balcony range from £250,000 to £350,000 and weekly rents are at the £440 mark.

Maybe nowhere typifies the Waterloo market more than Penhurst Place, a little row of cottages sandwiched between the calm of Lambeth Palace and the racket of the railway line. "A house here costs about £550,000," says Davenport. "If it weren't for the trains it would be like being in Kent."

Buying guide

Pros:

The Old Vic, Young Vic and National theatres; the Hayward Gallery; the Royal Festival Hall; the British Film Institute

Cons:

Railway viaducts
Busy main roads
South of the river

What you can buy for

£100,000: Nothing, head for the Old Kent Road a mile away for a one-bedroom flat.
£1m: A two-bedroom flat in the Whitehouse.

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