

John Archer (1863-1932)

BLACK EUROPEANS: A British Library Online Gallery feature by guest curator Mike Phillips

Archer, John Richard, was born on 8 June 1863 at 3 Blake Street, Liverpool, the son of Richard Archer and his wife, Mary Theresa Burns. Richard was a ship's steward from Barbados, and his wife Mary Theresa was illiterate, making her mark with an "X" on the birth certificate. She was an Irish Catholic, the faith in which John grew up and remained for the rest of his life.

When he was elected Mayor of Battersea 50 years later, John opened his acceptance speech with the words that he had been born "in a little obscure village in England probably never heard of until now - the city of Liverpool". The sarcasm was prompted by a press speculation about his likely ancestry, and he went on to declare - "I am a Lancastrian bred and born".

John's declaration was characteristically pugnacious, but he had clearly been stung by reports which, guessing wildly, said that he had been born in Rangoon or somewhere in India. No surprise, given that he was actually part of the well-established black population of Liverpool. Blake Street, his birthplace, has now been demolished, but it was located in the heart of the city, at the bottom of Mount Pleasant near the Brownlow Hill Workhouse. This was an area densely populated with labourers and tradespeople, predominantly Irish - many of them sailors, or otherwise connected with shipping. In the 1860s the Archer family shuttled back and forth between No.7 and No.3 Blake Street, where John Archer was born. There were two other households occupying No.3, and the family had two lodgers: a 50-year-old sailor and a Scottish ship's keeper.

Later John Archer was referred to as having travelled round the world. The evidence suggests that during this period he was in the merchant navy; so while the newspaper speculation about his origins are off the mark, they might have been provoked by his familiarity with various different parts of the world. His wife Bertha, for instance, was a black Canadian, but it is not clear how they met, or to where the family dispersed before Archer settled in Battersea. The 1901 census gives John Archer as living at 55 Brynmaer Road, near Battersea Park, and his occupation as a professional singer. His wife's name is given as Bertha Elizabeth and her birthplace as Halifax in Canada. Living with John and Bertha was Jane Roberts, a former slave who, as a child, had been an early emigrant from the United States to Liberia in the 1820s. She went on to marry Liberia's first President in the 1840s. She died in January 1914 aged 95, but in 1906 she was still there, being described as "a wonderful old lady in full possession of her faculties".

Archer also appears to have been a medical student at the time, and it is not clear when or why he abandoned his studies, but, either by luck or good judgement he had settled in one of the districts in London which offered opportunities in public life for a black man of his background and temperament. The Nine Elms district in the north-east of Battersea had a

large Irish Catholic population, and a strong campaigning record on Irish self determination. By coincidence, the most prominent local politician, John Burns, had the same surname as Archer's mother. Burns created the Battersea branch of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation in 1885, backed by a broad alliance of support from trade union, liberal, radical, socialist and temperance organisations, which secured his election to the first London County Council at the end of 1889. In 1892 he was elected to Parliament with the intake which also brought in Keir Hardie, the trade unionist and Labour leader, whose emergence signalled the establishment of organised labour as a Parliamentary force.

Archer seems to have begun establishing himself in left-wing circles after 1900, especially as a local public speaker against spiritualism. The Battersea Trades and Labour Council, and the Progressive Alliance between the local labour movement and radical and liberal organisations were established in 1894. This Alliance took control of most of Battersea's municipal affairs, embarking on a programme of 'municipal socialist' measures, such as fair wages, and a wide range of social and leisure services provision, along with a vigorous anti- (Boer) war campaign. Archer rose rapidly within the leading organisation of the Alliance, the Battersea Labour League. During this period he was also establishing himself as part of a handful of black activists, concerned with political rights in the Empire, and he attended the first Pan-African Conference in July 1900, held at Westminster Town Hall. With Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the black British composer, he was elected to the Executive Committee of the short-lived Pan-African Association established at the Conference.

In November 1906, standing as a Progressive candidate, Archer was elected to Battersea Borough Council as one of six councillors for the Latchmere ward. At the same time in St Marylebone, Henry Sylvester Williams, a Trinidadian barrister and organiser of the 1900 Pan-African Congress, was elected as an opposition Progressive Councillor.

Archer now opened a photographic studio at 214 Battersea Park Road. Later on this seems to have moved to 208 Battersea Park Road. Some photographs taken by him have survived in Annual Reports of the local Trades Council, and the report covering the year 1908 credits him for photographs of the Executive Committee and of the officers. The first Council meeting after his election in 1906 appointed him to the Baths, Health and Works Committees. Later on he joined the Board of Guardians, which supervised public health and welfare, then became Chair of the Baths Committee. He maintained an interest in the Nine Elms Swimming Club for the rest of his life.

In its August 1907 issue the Socialist Council's house journal *Battersea Vanguard* commented sarcastically about Archer's interest in the writings on India of the Marxist Socialist Democratic Federation's national leader, H.M. Hyndman. It suggested that "our brilliant townsman" should take "another trip round the world to improve his political judgement". This was part of a continuing skirmish between left-wing factions in the district, and characteristic of the incessant gossipy and backbiting conflict of the adversarial politics in which Archer was now engaged. His part in the Great

Vivisection debate in Battersea offers a typical snapshot. In Battersea there was strong support for the anti-vivisection movement, led by the Trades & Labour Council, and local activists had erected a statue of a brown dog as a protest against vivisection. Pro-vivisectionists, buttressed by a crowd of vociferous medical students, campaigned to have it removed. A public meeting was held in Battersea Town Hall on Monday 13 January 1908. John Archer moved a resolution refusing to remove either the statue or its anti-vivisectionist inscription. Rev. Dr Wauschauer denounced the medical students: "If the drunkard is demoralised by drink, the medical student is demoralised by the practice of vivisection". Two pro-vivisectionists moved an amendment that the inscription was false and should be removed. This provoked the stormiest scene of a lively evening, and several medical students were in the words of *The Daily Graphic* "unceremoniously bundled out by the stewards, who numbered over three hundred". [300 stewards?]

Against a background of factional squabbling, John Archer's progress in the political hierarchy was predictably chequered. In the November 1909 Council elections the Progressive Alliance, the Labour Party and the socialist organisations fielded separate lists of candidates. The Conservative Municipal Reformers won control of the Council for three years, and John was one of the Progressives who failed to get re-elected, although he remained a member of the Board of Guardians. The loss of municipal control in 1909 was such a shock that the factions dropped their differences and the Progressive Alliance was reformed. At the 1912 Council election the Progressive Alliance re-gained control, but only by two votes. John was re-elected for Latchmere Ward, and shortly afterwards re-elected to the Board of Guardians. Following re-election the Progressive group elected John Archer as Mayor for the period November 1913 to November 1914.

As it happens, John Archer was not the first black mayor in Britain. That honour went Allen Glaser Minns, a Bahamian doctor elected in Thetford, Norfolk during 1904. He was, however, the first to be elected in London, and the first to attract so much attention. "A thrill to novelty-loving London", the *South Western Star* commented, and the press had a field day with the news, publishing letters for and against, moving in on Archer's shop and door stepping him incessantly. He refused to allow his photograph to be taken without his consent, and some newspapers retaliated by finding old photos and reproducing them. The *South Western Star* commented that "No one in Battersea would recognise the Mayor Designate from some of these productions". *The Daily Telegraph* reported that he was born in Rangoon, Burmese by birth, and that both his parents were British subjects. "His features and colouring are eloquent of his origin, but his conversation shows no trace of accent, and he is a man of good education." The *News Chronicle* reported that Archer had "the bronzed skin and black hair of a Hindu or Parsee – he laughingly declines to say to what race he belongs, but one might place his forebears among the lighter people of India – and his well-dressed, well-groomed appearance is that of a busy and prosperous business man".

"After I am elected, if I should be on Monday, I shall state what nationality I am", Archer told the *South Western Star*. He began his acceptance speech

by pointing out that he had been born in Liverpool. Archer's mixed response – of elation and irritation at the attentions of the press – was a reflection of the dilemma in which he now found himself. On the one hand he was a black man, proud of his background and committed to improving the situation of other black people throughout the world. On the other, he was a local politician whose life centred round meetings at the Town Hall, his photography shop, his domestic responsibilities, and his evenings at the Bath Swimming Club. In his acceptance speech he responded valiantly to his role as an icon of progress in race relations: "It is a victory such as has never been gained before" he declaimed. "I am a man of colour. Many things have been said about me which are absolutely untrue, but I have entered into the humour of it, because I knew they were untrue... I am proud to be. I would not change my colour if I could... my election tonight marks a new era. You have made history tonight. For the first time in the history of the English nation, a man of colour has been elected as mayor of an English borough... That news will go forth to all the coloured nations of the world and they will look at Battersea, and say it is the greatest thing you have done. You have shown that you have no racial prejudice, but recognise a man for what you think he has done."

In the same vein as his acceptance speech, Archer received and replied to a plethora of messages from well-wishers throughout the world. Predictably, African Americans were enthused. In his journal *The Crisis*, W.E.B. DuBois featured the result with photographs of Archer and his wife Bertha, saying that Archer "fears no man, and brooks no insult because of the race to which he is proud to belong". Later on he quotes Archer's reaction to his first official banquet with the Lord Mayor: "It filled my heart with joy to walk in the procession of mayors in that old historic building – the first time that one of our race has done so as mayor".

On the other side of the coin, Archer was clearly shocked by the intensity and the kind of hostility his election also attracted at home. At a meeting only one month later at the Town Hall, his tone is plaintive: "Do you know that I have had letters since I have been Mayor calling my mother some of the foulest names that it is possible for a mother to be called. ('Shame') Three weeks ago I received a postcard. I may be able to put the finger of the law on the writer and then I will make him suffer. ('Hear, hear') I can't understand why there should be this opposition to me. Before I was Mayor I received no opposition on the Council. I have been made to feel my position more than any man who has ever occupied this chair, not because I am a member of the Council, but because I am a man of colour. My dead mother has been called in question because she married a coloured man. ('Shame') Am I not a man, the same as any other man? Have I not got feelings the same as any other man? I may be wrong when I come here and meet this opposition, but would not any other man in my position think the opposition was because of his colour. If it's not then I say, as a man, I apologise to you."

In the months following his election as Mayor, Jane Roberts died and was buried in a plot in Streatham Cemetery belonging to Archer's wife, whose name is recorded as Margaret on this occasion. At some stage between 1915 and the spring of 1919 the Archers moved to 214 Battersea Park

Road, presumably living above the shop. They seem to have had lodgers in the early 1920s, as William G. George is recorded as living at 214 in 1921, Edward Bates in 1922, and Arthur Cousins in 1923. Bertha only appears on the electoral roll for the period 1924 to 1929, and is thought to have died some time soon after that date. There are no children.

From the period of his election as Mayor, Archer increasingly threw himself into local politics, becoming identified with the struggle to improve local conditions through the Borough Council and the Board of Guardians. There is an interesting glimpse of his style at the first council meeting in November after his election - "His pose was dignified, though he betrayed a little nervousness. This nervousness disappeared when the proceedings became slightly ruffled... The Mayor was instantly alert. Now and then he commanded attention by a sharp rap with his mallet. His fighting spirit was roused." There was a minor scandal about his refusal to attend church services as a matter of course, but his term as Mayor was a generally successful one in which he distributed charity relief, made speeches at local occasions and, on the outbreak of the Great War, organised an appeal and a march through Battersea for aid to alleviate distress caused by the war.

By 1919 John Archer had become an insider and a stalwart in the brew of shifting loyalties and organisational change which characterised local politics in the Borough. He became election agent for the Parliamentary candidate in North Battersea – who was Charlotte Despard, a suffragette, Irish nationalist and socialist. John was Despard's joint nominator, and chaired at least one of her election meetings. Her manifesto appropriately included the demand for Justice for Ireland and India, and the replacement of Empires by Federations, each member possessing its own domestic autonomy. In the municipal elections of November 1919 Labour swept the board, and Archer was re-elected to the Council and the Board of Guardians. At the same time he was taking part in the spurt of black political activity which followed the end of the Great War. The African Progress Union was formed in 1918, with the aim of promoting "the general welfare of Africans and Afro-Peoples" and spreading knowledge of black history. In February 1919 John attended the first post-war Pan-African Congress organised by DuBois in Paris between 19 and 21 February 1919. On 16 June, in his capacity as President of the African Progress Union, he led a deputation to Liverpool to discuss the recent race riots in the city, and the Union contributed to the fees of the Guyanese lawyer Edward Nelson, who defended the black men arrested in the riots in Liverpool.

In July 1921 Archer introduced the Indian left-winger Shapurji Saklatvala in a session on colonial freedom at the second Pan-African Congress organised by DuBois on August 20, 1921 at Westminster Central Hall. He was to be the election agent for Saklatvala in 1922, 1923 and 1924, brokering a deal by which his candidate was uniquely unopposed by Labour.

Archer's involvement in local politics continued with a bitter struggle over unemployment relief. He was unsuccessful in his attempts to stop the Council reducing maximum relief to the unemployed to the level of the national scale. He was also defeated in his attempts to prevent young

people being sent away to a workhouse run by the Fulham Guardians in Surrey, which Archer referred to as a "penitentiary". The bitterness of the arguments continued well into 1923. In October the Chairman suspended all the Labour members. Archer was seized by the head and the heels, and dragged out of the room, with his colleague Rev. Prichard protesting vehemently that they had no right to "assault an ex-mayor of Battersea in the Boardroom". On another occasion, during a Council meeting Labour Councillor Powell reacted to being called a "dirty swine" by a Municipal Reformer by inviting him to come outside, and then lifting him out of his seat and dropping him on the floor. John indicated that if the culprit had called him a "dirty swine" he would have knocked him out of the Council Chamber.

The conflicts in the Chamber were mirrored by other splits. In the early 20s the Labour Party imposed a ban on members also belonging to the Communist Party. Battersea, in keeping with its traditions opposed the ban, which specifically affected its MP Saklatvala, and was the local Labour Party was disaffiliated from the national Labour movement. Saklatvala had the whip withdrawn in 1924 and from then on sat as a Communist MP. At the start of the General Strike he was arrested for sedition and jailed. When he emerged Battersea and John Archer continued to support him, until in 1926, the police, raiding the Communist Party HQ in Battersea, discovered a letter from Saklatvala outlining plans to undermine the Labour Party. Archer set up a new affiliated North Battersea Labour branch in his shop, and organised the campaign of a new candidate, William Sanders, who fought and defeated Saklatvala in 1929.

Archer went on to be agent for the Party's candidates for the March 1931 London County Council election, and he continued to be annually re-appointed as Alderman until he was re-elected to the Council in November 1931 for the Nine Elms Ward, and became Deputy Leader of the Labour Group – although he never surrendered his links with the Nine Elms Swimming Club.

Archer had been an indefatigable attendee at council and committee meetings, packing in the governorship of Battersea Polytechnic, presidency of the Nine Elms Swimming Club, chair of the Whitley staff committee, and trusteeship of the borough charities. During 1931 he began to experience chronic ill health, and the following year he missed the full Council meetings in April and June. The Council sent him its best wishes for a speedy recovery, but his health continued to deteriorate and he was admitted to St James Hospital, where he died on Thursday 14 July 1932, a few weeks after his 69th birthday. His death certificate states the cause of death as cardio-renal failure. His brother Albert was at his bedside when he died.

His funeral was held at the Church of Our Lady of Carmel in Battersea Park Road on Tuesday 19 July, with Mass said by four priests. The mourners included his brother Arthur, various representatives from the Council and the Nine Elms Swimming Club, and the Hearts of Oak Benefit Society, his insurance society. He was buried in the Council's cemetery at

Morden. The funeral procession was an elaborate and affecting tribute. There were 50 wreaths. A crossbearer, several clergy and acolytes led the way in an open carriage. Behind them came 10 limousines and a hearse laden with flowers. The procession wound its way slowly along Battersea Park Road, past Archer's old photography studio and his home, past the Headquarters of the North Battersea Labour Party, "up Latchmere Road, and round Eland Road into Lavender Hill. The Municipal Buildings and Town Hall were passed at a very slow pace. Many of the Borough Council officers were waiting outside the building to see the cortege pass". *South Western Star*, 22 July 1932

Officially noting his death on 20 July, the Council expressed its deepest sympathy to Archer's relatives. The Labour Leader said that John Archer had been "a very ardent worker for the benefit of coloured races and particularly of the negro races. He was most pleased at being elected Mayor as it was a recognition of the equality of coloured races... On the Board of Guardians he was always ready to take up the case of those who had to ask for assistance. He was persistent in his arguments for the maximum help for the needy... there was no venom in his attacks on those who opposed him. There was always a streak of humour in whatever he said and when he hit hardest, there was no barb left behind to rankle".

Writing in the *South Western Star*, the MP William Sanders said that Archer "was one of the largest hearted men I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. The poor had no better friend; he spared neither himself nor his substance in giving help to those in need. His public spirit had no bounds, and it may be that he would have lived longer if he had thought less of his fellow creatures and more of his personal interests. But it can be said that he had his reward, for he left behind him a multitude of friends and not a single enemy. He was one who deserved well of the community, for he had served it well".

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