

WESTMINSTER TOPOGRAPHY

II.

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It is a curious fact that in a 17th-century map showing Goring House and the surrounding fields, there is a smaller plot of ground, somewhere about where Gorrings's shop now stands, which is called "Pimlico," and it seems probable that the district between Westminster and Chelsea, now called Pimlico, took its name from this site.

The derivation of the name remains something of a mystery. Various suggestions have been made and include, among other things, the name of an innkeeper at Hoxton, the cry of an Australian bird, a textile material and an extinct race of American Indians. Of this somewhat varied assortment the most probable is, perhaps, Ben Pimlico, the Hoxton innkeeper, whose cakes, custards and ale were so famed that it is possible that similar places of refreshment came to be known as "Pimlicos"—rather as the term Lido has travelled from the shores of the Adriatic to the banks of the Serpentine.

It is to the story of the development of this district, which comprises so much of modern Westminster, that we must now turn for a few moments.

Most of this land belonged to the manor of Ebury, which formed the greater part of the older estate called Eia and from the time of the Norman Conquest until the dissolution of the Monastery in 1540 belonged to the Abbey of Westminster. The manor was in shape a kind of parallelogram, bounded in medieval times by the road leading to Oxford, the Westbourne, the Tyeburn and the Thames. It consisted of open fields and marshlands and had two clearly-defined portions. The first of these was bounded in *modern* terms, roughly, by the road from Hyde Park Corner to Albert Gate; then to the west by Sloane Street, Chelsea Barracks and so to the river; and to the east by Grosvenor Gardens, Victoria Station and Vauxhall Bridge Road. The manor house stood near the join of Ebury Street and Buckingham Palace Road on the site of the modern church of St. Philip. The other portion lay to the north of Piccadilly and was a group of fields bounded by Oxford Street,

the modern Park Lane, Mount Street and Davies Street, with Grosvenor Square (then known as Fursey Close) in the centre.

At the dissolution of the Monastery in 1540 the manor of Ebury passed to the Crown, by whom it was held until the reign of James I. The southern part—the old manor of La Neate—that is to say, most of the land between the Willow Walk and the river, was then sold and passed eventually by marriage to a Warwickshire baronet, Sir Thomas Waller. It is for that reason that, as this property was developed, we have Warwick Way, Warwick Square, Tatchbrook Street, and other Warwickshire names in this district. The northern part—the manor of Ebury proper—was also sold, and in 1626 it was bought by a certain Hugh Awdelay, the son of a mercer and himself a Master of the Bench of the Inner Temple. Awdelay was a rich man with considerable properties both in London and the country. He was himself a bachelor, but he had a great-nephew, Alexander Davies, a clever but impecunious young scrivener, whom he employed to help him in the management of his estates. The young man quickly made himself indispensable to his uncle who, a month before his death in 1662, decided to settle the whole of his Middlesex property on Alexander and his brother Thomas.¹⁵ Alexander Davies, therefore, at the age of 27, found himself the owner of the manor of Ebury. Unfortunately for him he was not content with his good fortune and proceeded to speculate further in land, with the result that, when he died of the plague three years later, he left his estate considerably involved in debt. He was buried in St. Margaret's churchyard, where his tomb can still be seen near the church tower and is, indeed, the only one which remains above the grass on the north of the Abbey. He left as his sole heir an infant daughter, Mary, and, though his estate was embarrassed, it was hoped that her minority would enable it to right itself. It was obvious that eventually she would become a lady of considerable importance. In due course the question of a suitable marriage for her arose and, after a projected alliance with Lord Berkeley had fallen through, she was married at the age of 12 in 1677 to Sir Thomas Grosvenor, a Cheshire baronet.

It is interesting to note, in view of the subsequent development of the manor of Ebury into Belgravia and the Grosvenor Square district, that at the time of the marriage the advantage was thought to be on the side of the bride. Sir Thomas

Grosvenor "was by far the richer of the two, both in real and personal property," and at that time the income of Mary Davies "was less than half that of her husband."¹⁶ Under Sir Thomas Grosvenor and his successors the possibilities were developed.

The development of the northern part of the estate began with the laying out of Grosvenor Square in the early part of the 18th century,¹⁷ but it was not until a hundred years later that the southern part was taken in hand. In 1824 a far-sighted business man, Thomas Cubitt,¹⁸ impressed by the trend of fashion to move westward and gather round the new Buckingham Palace, took a lease from the then representative of the Grosvenor family, Lord Westminster, of about 140 acres of open ground, then known as the Five Fields, between Sloane Street and Buckingham Palace.

It is difficult for us now to realise how rural all this part of Westminster was at the beginning of the 19th century. The fashionable Mrs. Calvert, writing in January, 1810, says: "Yesterday we visited Albinia, Dowager Countess of Buckinghamshire. . . . She has built herself a house which she calls Hobart House. It is '*at the end of the world*' beyond Grosvenor Place."¹⁹ It was probably, too, to this house that Lady Maria West (d. 1870) referred when she "recollected going to a country house where St. Peter's Church, Eaton Square, now stands, and crossing a rustic bridge over a stream into the fields where the cows were being milked and syllabub was being made."²⁰ Sixty years ago there still remained a single tree in Hobart Place which Lady de Ros, who died in 1891 at the age of 96, would point out as the last relic of Lady Buckinghamshire's country place where she, too, remembered going as a girl to garden fêtes. Lady de Ros also remembered that it was considered "quite a country drive when she was taken to Cadogan Place to visit her father's blind old aunt, the once beautiful Lady Sarah Napier (d. 1826)" who, as a girl, had captured the heart of the youthful King George III.²¹

By 1829, Cubitt had laid out Belgrave Square and the adjacent streets, and had covered the area with houses. He then took a further lease of the area between Eaton Square and the river. All this land was at that time little more than a water-logged swamp. It is curious to reflect—if you will forgive a personal digression—that as a Westminster boy, I myself knew well an Old Westminster,²² then living in Eccleston

Square, who, as a Westminster boy some seventy years before, had actually been out with a gun in search of somewhat legendary snipe on the site of the house in which he was living in his old age.

Cubitt found that the subsoil of this area was gravel topped by clay. He removed the clay and made it into bricks. "To replace the soil and for filling up the reservoirs of Chelsea Waterworks he brought up the Thames the earth which was then being removed in Telford's excavations of St. Katharine's Docks."²³ The result of all this was an influx of street and square names connected with the Grosvenor family and the County of Cheshire—Grosvenor Gardens, Eaton Square, Belgrave Square, Eccleston Square, Halkin Street, Lupus Street and so on²⁴—which is only paralleled by the streets and squares on the Duke of Bedford's property in and around Bloomsbury and Covent Garden.

There remained the original Tuttle Fields²⁵—the open space roughly between the Horseferry Road and Vauxhall Bridge Road—which from the earliest times had been the scene of tournaments, fairs, horse-races and military exercises (the memory of these last is preserved in Artillery Mansions, which were built on the site of the old Artillery Ground) and sports of all kinds. Among the Abbey muniments²⁶ there is an interesting petition of the time of the Commonwealth which states that, owing to certain "disorders" and "entrenchments" which had taken place in the Tuttle Fields, the gentry were hindered at their "recreation" at "Bowles, Goffe and stool-ball"—one of the earliest known references to the game of golf as played in this country, but not, of course, in Scotland. Nor is this all. For centuries the Tuttle Fields were the haunt of Westminster boys. As such, the Fields became one of the earliest homes of cricket when that game was promoted from the village green and society decided it was a game suitable for the sons of gentlemen. In 1743, a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* noted with some displeasure that the game was now played by "noblemen, gentlemen and clergymen"; but two years later the great Lord Chesterfield wrote to Philip Stanhope, then at the school, and told him that he wished him to play at cricket "better than any boy at Westminster."

Early in the 19th century the Dean and Chapter decided to develop this property, but the then Dean, Dr. Vincent,

himself an Old Westminster and a former Headmaster, was alive to the interests of the boys and determined that they should have a proper playground reserved for their exclusive use. Accordingly he ordered that 10 acres of the Fields should be marked out with a plough and this ultimately became known as Vincent Square. The story in its details has been doubted, but recently among the Abbey muniments I came across the original receipted bill of Jonathan Green, dated November, 1810, in which he acknowledged the payment of £3 1s. od. "for marking out 10 acres of ground in Tothill Fields as a Play Ground for the Westminster Scholars, and for the use of his Team of Horses and Plough for two days . . . to mark the said piece of ground with a deep furrrough."²⁷ I may add that to this day no Westminster ever speaks of Vincent Square, but always of "Fields"—the last relic of the old name.

One other curious and little-known incident connected with the Tuttle Fields may perhaps be mentioned. At the time of his coronation in 1821, King George IV was so unpopular and the attitude of the crowd outside was so threatening that, as the long ceremony of the Coronation Banquet in Westminster Hall drew to a close, grave fears were expressed whether it would be safe for the king to return to the Palace by the ordinary route. In this dilemma, Lord de Ros, the young officer in charge of the escort of Life Guards, offered to pilot the royal carriage through the lanes and tracks of the Tuttle Fields, of which, as an old Westminster boy, he knew every inch. The offer was accepted and by a devious route which took him down Millbank, Vauxhall Bridge Road, the Willow Walk, the swamps near what is now Eccleston Square and the Five Fields, the king made an undignified return to his palace, which he finally reached at 11 o'clock at night.²⁸

Two further developments remain to be very briefly mentioned. It is just over a hundred years ago that the land adjoining the old Royal Mews by Charing Cross was laid out as Trafalgar Square. Finally, also, just a hundred years ago the mass of small streets, slums and courts stretching from the west door of the Abbey to what is now Victoria Station was largely swept away and the unlovely Victoria Street was built and opened to traffic in 1851.²⁹ At the time it was thought—and in fact was—a great improvement.

It is, however, very interesting to see that in the scheme for

replanning London put forth by the London County Council, one of the suggestions is that, coming from Victoria Station, Victoria Street should be cut short at the Army and Navy Stores and traffic diverted to the left and right, thus leaving an area of comparative peace, with the Abbey as its centre, into which area only traffic bound for the locality itself would be admitted.

If this most admirable scheme should materialise, the wheel will have come full circle. Once again the main approach to the Abbey Church from the west will be, as it was for centuries, by way of Tothill Street, and once again the Abbey, the Palace and the School will be set in a sanctuary on a new Isle of Thorney, not, indeed, surrounded by streams of water, but by streams of traffic, which will pass it by and leave it in a superb setting as the centre of Westminster and of the Empire.

NOTES

15. Thomas Davies, as a result, prospered and was eventually able to become, in 1672, Lord Mayor of London.
16. Gatty, *op. cit.*, I, p. 203.
17. Gatty, II, pp. 208 *seq.* Cf. Wheatley, *op. cit.*, II, p. 164, under Grosvenor Square, etc.
18. Cubitt subsequently designed Osborne House for the Queen and the Prince Consort. His son was created Lord Ashcombe in 1892.
19. *An Irish Beauty of the Regency*, by Mrs. W. Blakie, p. 153.
20. *Recollections of Sir Algernon West*, Chap. VII.
21. *Life of Georgiana, Lady de Ros*, by S. R. Swinton, p. 10.
22. The late Sir Clements Markham, K.C.B.
23. G. W. Tallents, *Man and Boy*. Cf. Wheatley, II, p. 323, under Katherine's (St.) Docks.
24. General Tom Ashburnham walking with Sir Algernon West down Grosvenor Place, "where at the cross-roads had recently been erected a fountain, said, 'Ah, a dear old friend of mine lies there; we were at school together; and, after he had murdered his father and cut his own throat, he was buried at midnight at these cross-roads.'" (Sir A. West's *Recollections*, Chap. VII.)
25. See, for a brief account, *Westminster School, Its Buildings and Associations*, by L. E. Tanner, pp. 78-81.
26. W.A.M. 25188.
27. W.A.M. 52519-52528.
28. Lord Albemarle, *Fifty Years of My Life*, I, p. 326 *seq.* Also J. E. Smith's *Parochial Memorials of St. John's*, p. 314 *seq.*
29. Wheatley, III, p. 435.