

STOW'S LONDON

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BY

PROFESSOR ROBERT ASHTON, Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S., UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

The pages of the Survey of John Stow and his two continuators of 1618 and 1633, are characterised by an ambivalence arising out of the conflict between Stow's inordinate pride in the greatness of the city which he was celebrating and his bitter nostalgia for landmarks which he remembered from his youth, but which were disappearing as the growth of London swallowed up open spaces and as old familiar buildings were demolished or modified out of recognition.

To the west of the City of London, the City and Westminster were becoming contiguous at an increasing number of points in addition to the traditional linkage in the extreme south along the line of the Strand. On the north side of the Strand, Westminster began immediately west of Temple Bar, while, on the south side, Westminster and the City of London were separated by part of the Liberty of the Duchy of Lancaster. Although by no means all of what was technically the city of Westminster was built up in this period, there was a spectacular growth of building there, some of it extending the south-western limits of the metropolis well to the west of Westminster Abbey, and much of it, despite the proximity of the Court, slum property. Although the area to the north of the Strand was by no means free from slums, places such as Covent Garden, St. Martin's Lane and Long Acre were being rapidly developed as fashionable districts *par excellence*. A return made in 1638 shows a total of 244 cases of compounding for the erection of new buildings within the fashionable parish of St. Martins-in-the-Fields alone. Further north still a line of building sped westwards along High Holborn through St. Giles-in-the-Fields, within which parish some of London's foulest slums were shortly to appear.

The growth of the built-up metropolitan area to the east of the City of London called forth some of Stow's most vivid descriptive passages. From the City the built-up area spread eastwards along three main axes. The southernmost of these ran alongside the river for a good mile from the Tower through the recently reclaimed mud-flats of Wapping, inhabited mostly by sailors and, especially after the establishment of the East India Company's dockyard at Blackwall in 1614, by shipyard workers. A little further north Ratcliffe Highway ran east from East Smithfield and Tower Hill up to and beyond Shadwell, a built-up thoroughfare, replacing, as Stow recalls, "a large highway, with fayre Elme trees on both sides". Also within Stow's own memory was the erection of the very first buildings here — a school and almshouses.

But of late yeares ship-wrights and (for the most part) other marine men haue builded many large and strong houses for themselues and smaller for Sayers, from thence almost to Poplar, and so to Blakewall.

The third and northernmost west-east axis, a wide street with many buildings, ran from Aldgate East. Here

both the sides of the streete bee pestered with buildings . . . with Cottages, and Allies, euen vp to White chappel church; and almost halfe a myle beyond it, into the common field: . . . which . . . being sometime the beauty of this City on that part, is so incroched vpon by building of filthy Cottages, and with other purprestures, inclosures and Layestalles . . . that in some places it scarce remaineth a sufficient high way for the meeting of Carriages and droues of Cattell, much lesse is there any faire, pleasant or wholesome way for people to walke on foote: which is no small blemish to so famous a city, to haue so vnsauery and vnseemly an entry or passage thereunto.

All this was noted by Stow in the 1600 edition of the *Survey of London*. The 1633 edition simply adds the building of a new chapel in Wapping in 1617 and the agitation against the malodorous alum works there in 1626-7. The building return of 1638, however, shows extensive new building in the eastern suburbs and more especially within the enormous parish of St. Dunstan's Stepney.

South of the river, Bermondsey, Newington and Lambeth were in process of becoming physically linked by building with the borough of Southwark and London Bridge, but to the north of London the prevalence of heavy clays making for drainage difficulties inhibited expansion so that northern villages such as Hackney, Islington and Highgate remained separated from the built-up metropolis by extensive open country, although along Bishopsgate in the north-east a thin line of building stretched through Norton Folgate and Shoreditch, while further west the extra-mural City ward of Farrington Without merged imperceptibly with the district of Clerkenwell in the county of Middlesex.

To us today Stow's lamentations at the phenomenon of metropolitan growth may seem to be more than a trifle overdone. The countryside remained within walking distance of the heart of the metropolis — during the 1620s the Earl of Clare frequently walked to the parliament at Westminster from his house in Clerkenwell — and, then as now, London was blessed with numerous open spaces, fields and parks, and, for the more fortunate of its inhabitants, houses with extensive gardens. The preservation and extension of such civic amenities is greatly to the credit of the Lord Mayor and aldermen of the City of London whose most notable achievement was the conversion of Moorfields from bog and fen into a public park with pleasant tree-shaded walks. This formidable and expensive operation which had been begun under the early Tudors, but discontinued before the death of Elizabeth I, was recommenced at the initiative and during the mayoralty of Sir Leonard Halliday in 1605-6, and was extended into middle Moorfield from 1610 and northern Moorfield from 1613.

In 1617 the gentlemen of the Inns of Court and some of the neighbouring parishes devised a similar project to convert Lincoln's Inn Fields into pleasant walks "after the same maner as More Feildes are now made". Although not so extensive as Moorfields, this unimproved area, roughly bounded by High Holborn, Chancery Lane, the Strand and Drury Lane, was much larger than the decorous square which bears that name today. The King and Privy Council supported the scheme, hoping that it would "frustrate the covetous and greedy

endeavours of such persons as daylie seeke to fill upp that small remaynder of ayre in those partes with unnecessary and unproffitable buildinges'', and contributions were invited not only from the chief potential beneficiaries but also from the City of London. The City refused to have anything to do with the scheme ''in respect the said feildes bee farr of [Sic] from the cittie of London . . . and that . . . the Cittizens of London shall have little or no pleasure there. And for as much as the Inhabitanes thereaboutes dwelling . . . did noe way contribute towards the making of Morefelde walkes''. There could be no more eloquent testimony to the prevailing parochialism in the metropolis and the absence of any sense of commitment to the idea of a greater London, and during the late 1630s the development of the Fields as a residential district began under William Newton, an entrepreneur who also played an important part in the development of nearby Great Queen Street. Newton's operations were a small and relatively minor aspect of the building activities consequent upon the tendency for the centre of gravity of fashionable London to shift perceptibly to the west, where property developers, including great aristocratic urban landlords such as the Earls of Salisbury, Bedford and Clare, were rapidly creating whole new residential districts. The desire of the country gentlemen and their families, who flocked in increasing numbers to London, to be as near as possible to the centre of things, which to the world of fashion meant Westminster rather than the City, offered hitherto unprecedented opportunities to the property developer in the rapidly burgeoning west-end.

This process had already begun in Stow's lifetime, though the main development of the westward expansion of fashionable London, the building of courtly and fashionable houses in streets such as St. Martin's Lane, Long Acre and Drury Lane and in Covent Garden, took place after his death. He would almost certainly have disapproved of the new-fangled urban development schemes of the third Earl of Bedford in Covent Garden in the 1630s. However, it is not, I think, at all fanciful to argue that those who deplore the demolition in the 1930s of the last surviving examples of what a seventeenth-century observer described as ''houses and buildings fitt for the habitacions of Gentlemen . . . of ability'' in the Covent Garden piazza are reacting in the proper Stow tradition to a particularly shocking example of twentieth-century municipal vandalism.

The lure of the west-end saw not only the expansion of gracious and fashionable dwelling houses but also the growth of a number of shops west of Temple Bar, and more especially of establishments selling luxury and semi-luxury products. For instance, despite the attempts both of the government and the City of London to restrict goldsmiths' shops to Cheapside and Lombard Street within the City, considerable numbers of both goldsmiths and silversmiths were still to be found in Fleet Street and the Strand. Similarly, although an outstanding silkman like the celebrated Sir Baptist Hicks, who was also a notable moneylender to the world of fashion and who himself ended his days as a peer of the realm, would never lack fashionable customers at his shop in the City, there was a growth of similar establishments as well as of high-class tailors' shops further west. The fears of some city interests that they were bound to lose from the increasingly westward orientation of the world of fashion find their most striking expression in the howls of protest which were elicited from the shopkeepers of the Royal Exchange within the City at the Earl of Salisbury's project in 1608 to erect his so-called New Exchange on the site of the former stables of Durham House in the Strand. The City shopkeepers viewed Salisbury's creation of what was in effect a fashionable shopping centre, managed by a single contractor with separate

premises let to a number of shopkeepers, as the thin end of a wedge, which, when rammed tightly home, would “drawe Mercers, Goldsmithes and all other cheefe Traders to settle themselues out of the Cittie in those partes.” Their petition to this effect was passed on by the Lord Mayor to Salisbury, whose reply is a masterpiece of sustained ridicule and carefully calculated invective against City interests which profited enormously from the fact that the Court resided and the law Courts met in Westminster and which therefore ought not to begrudge to Westminster “some small portion of comodity for such a neighbourhood, though it were drawne directly from themselues.” At a cost of £11,000 to himself he claimed to have provided not only a much-needed economic, but also a visual, amenity of great distinction.

Despite the increasing attractiveness of the west-end to the world of fashion, a large number of prominent courtiers and officials continued to live east of Holborn and Temple Bars. For instance, within the two liberties of St. Bartholomew the Great and Less, West Smithfield, there dwelt at one time or another in the early seventeenth-century, the favourite of Henrietta Maria, Henry Earl of Holland; Secretary of State Sir Ralph Winwood; Lord Chief Justice Sir Henry Hobart, builder of Blickling Hall near Norwich; Sir Horatio Vere, the later Lord Vere of Tilbury, the greatest English soldier of his day; Sir George Manners, the later seventh Earl of Rutland; and Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex, who came to live in what later became known as Middlesex House in 1630, six years after his fall from power. Lady Anne Sackville (née Clifford), Dowager Countess of Dorset, was also living in Great St. Bartholomew in 1629 immediately prior to her second marriage to the earl of Pembroke. The prodigality of her first husband had enforced the letting of part of the Dorset town house within the liberty of Dorset (formerly Salisbury) Court off Fleet Street to Sir John Suckling, the Comptroller of the King’s Household, though the whole house was later re-occupied by the fourth Earl of Dorset.

In the precincts of Whitefriars and Blackfriars, the former lying immediately to the west, and the latter not far to the east, of Dorset Court, were a number of fine houses. Among those dwelling in Blackfriars at one time or another were the Earl of Pembroke, Lord Cobham, Lord Beauchamp (the later Earl and Marquis of Hertford), Sir Edward Hoby and Sir Anthony Van Dyck, the great court painter. In the far east of the City we find the Earl of Northumberland, whose family had already disposed of two City houses, renting a house in 1623 in the liberty of the Minories near the Tower from Sir Richard Morrison, the Lieutenant of the Ordnance. Cheaper rents and house prices were probably the most important reason why many of these aristocratic residents failed to move to the more fashionable west-end.

In contrast to the situation today when only a tiny minority of those whose business takes them daily to the City of London actually resides there, all but a handful of the citizens lived in close proximity to — and often at — their places of work. However, a small minority of citizens lived in the country within easy reach of the City. Thomas Sutton, the famous moneylender and founder of Charterhouse, lived for a time in Stoke Newington, and, after the death of his wife, in Hackney. Also in Hackney dwelt Sir George Whitmore, who became Lord Mayor in 1631, and who had built his splendid country house, Balmes House, at Hoxton in that parish in 1630. It was here that, in November 1641, the Lord Mayor, aldermen and commoncouncilmen met Charles I on his return from Scotland, and conducted him to the City via a road which had been cut through Whitmore’s estate specially for the occasion on account of the foulness of the ordinary highway.

But citizens dwelling in the country during their business careers, as opposed to those who set the seal on their social respectability by purchasing estates on or just before retirement, were exceptional. And of course, the latter's houses in the City were often impressive. Most of them were probably one form or another of what Sir John Summerson has called the *unit-house*, 'with a narrow frontage to the street, rooms back and front on each floor, and a long court or garden at the rear,' with the ground floor often consisting of a shop and kitchen. For city grandees an extended or multiplied version of the same house-plan was common. Although Stow records with great pride some of the solid and dignified houses built by the wealthier citizens, his account is spiced with the occasional cautionary tale of the fate of builders with ideas above their stations, such as Sir John Champeneys (d. 1556), who had been Lord Mayor in 1534-5, and who was punished with blindness for building a brick tower, "the first that euer I heard of in any private mans house to overlooke his neighbours in this Cittie." A similar fate befell the merchant-tailor, Richard Wethell, who

became in short time so tormented with goutes in his ioynts, of the hands and legges, that he could neither feede him selfe, nor goe further then he was led, much lesse was he able to climbe, and take the pleasure of the height of his Tower.

Apart from the disastrous consequences to the builders, such details have an oddly familiar sound to the modern observer, even if the modern City equivalents of the towers are neither built of brick nor the creations of over-mighty individuals. However, if Stow is to be believed, demolishing ancient towers was likely to be attended with even more terrible retribution than building new ones. Such was the fate of a grocer named Buckle, who, after a few years before Stow was writing, took down Cernets Tower in Bucklersbury,

meaning in place thereof, to have set vppe and builded a goodly frame of timber, but . . . a parte thereof fell vpon him, which so sore brused him that his life was thereby shortened: and an other that married his widdow, sett vppe the new prepared frame of timber and finished the worke.

Stow's conservatism, which is so strikingly exhibited in these stories about the social as well as the physical dangers of building too high and of demolition of ancient structures, is no less apparent when he tells of the fate of some of the great City houses which were deserted by noblemen as a result of the westward movement of the world of fashion. Some of these houses were purchased by the more opulent citizens. For instance, one of the Earl of Oxford's finer town houses in Walbrook Ward was purchased by the great Elizabethan merchant prince Sir John Hart. A few such houses were acquired for civic purposes of various sorts. Such was Bergavenny House in Ave Mary Lane, the former town house of the Earls of Pembroke and later of Lord Bergavenny, who sold it to the Stationers' Company, who used it as their hall, 'converting', relates Stow approvingly, 'the stone-work into a new faire frame of timber and applying it to such serviceable use as themselves have thought convenient.' A similar fate attended the house which had been built in Throgmorton Street by the great Thomas Cromwell, which had been acquired by the Drapers Company for use as its hall; a development which Stow no doubt approved the more since his own father had been deprived of part of the garden of his house as the result of the creation of gardens for Cromwell's mansion, for, as he drily observed, "the sudden rising of some men causeth them to forget themselves."

Other former noble houses in the City became inns or taverns, which was the fate of one of the former town houses of the Prior of Lewes in Southwark after the Dissolution of the

Monasteries. One of the two town houses of the Earls of Northumberland had been used as a gaming establishment and bowling alley, though by the accession of James I it had been converted into what were rapidly becoming slum tenements, perhaps the most usual fate of these once great aristocratic town palaces; another example is the former town house of the Earl of Worcester in Palmer's Lane near the river. Sometimes such houses were wholly or partly demolished to make way for slum tenements or cottages. This happened to the famous house known as Coldharbour near the river in Dowgate Ward, the former town house of the Talbots, Earls of Shrewsbury and a cold harbour indeed for the indigent, where at least 125 people were living in 1637; also to the former Tower-Royal in Vintry Ward and to another of the Earl of Oxford's former town houses in Lime Street Ward. The latter house had passed by marriage to a Suffolk gentleman, Sir Robert Winfield, and through him to the great Norfolk lawyer, Sir Edward Coke, who at that time was Attorney-General. After Coke's ill-fated marriage to the formidable widow of Sir Christopher Hatton with her splendid house in High Holborn, a second town house might well appear superfluous. At any rate Stow remarks that the Earl of Oxford's old house had become

greatly ruined of late time. For the most part [it] hath been let out to Powlters, for stabling of horses and stowage of Poultrie, but now lately new builded into a number of small tenements letten out to strangers and other meane people.

Stow's regret for the decay of smart aristocratic houses in the City and his dislike for the ostentatious creations of parvenus perhaps prompts a comparison between his City conservatism and the complaints levied in his time against the prodigy houses being built in the countryside to advertise the wealth and status of their owners. These 'country' conservatives usually set the values of the Country over and against that of the Court. Ben Jonson praises that sturdy Elizabethan parliamentarian Sir Robert Wroth who

though so neere the citie and the court
art tane with neithers vice, nor sport

Similarly Robert Herrick praises his brother who

Could'st leave the City, for exchange, to see
The Countrie's sweet simplicity:
And it to know and practice; with intent
To grow the sooner innocent.

The City, hardly less than the Court, was regarded as the centre of innovation and corruption, drawing to itself the wealth of the provinces, and increasingly attracting gentry and their families from their country estates and their duties of local hospitality and magistracy to a life of indolence and luxury. John Stow, no less a traditionalist than those who sang the virtues of the Country as opposed to the City, shows himself conscious, in the eulogy of the City with which he ends his Survey, of the need to refute "the opinion of some men which think that the greatness of that Citie standeth not with the profit and securitie of this Realme." Yet his own conservative values had much in common with those of the many critics of the City he loved, not least in his sentiments about the duty of hospitality and charitable activity incumbent upon the great. If he at one point, as we have seen, condemned Thomas Cromwell for his ruthlessness and arrogance, he was yet prepared to praise him for his benefactions, having "seen more then two hundred persons serued twice every day with bread, meate and drinke . . . for hee obserued that auncient and charitable custome as all

prelates, noblemen or men of honour and worship — his predecessors — had done before him.’’

Stow's failure to record every detail in the churches of his beloved City — every commemorative tablet or monument — cannot be ascribed to his lack of interest in recent notabilities and his antiquarian preference for the remote past. Among the monuments which he deliberately omitted from reference were those to persons whom he described as ‘‘worthy to be deprived of that memory whereof they have injuriously deprived others,’’ referring to the all too common practice of removing ancient monuments and even corpses from churches in order to make room for new ones. As C. L. Kingsford remarks in his introduction to the 1600 edition of the *Survey*, there is something especially poignant in the fact that John Stow, the hammer of such vandals and desecrators, himself became posthumously their victim when a century and a quarter after his death his body was removed from its tomb in this church to make way for another. In this church if we require a monument, we have only, literally, to look about us — to the splendid monument in alabaster and marble that was erected by his wife, and restored three centuries after his death in 1605 by his company, the Merchant Taylors. No-one understood better than Stow — unless it was William Shakespeare himself — the function and value of such monuments. If his work has a particular appeal for any group of people in our own time, it ought surely to strike an especially responsive chord in the hearts and minds of urban conservationists, whose noble, and too often unavailing, work to preserve our architectural and historical heritage, he would — I like to think — recognise as the true descendant of his own. Unhappily, if we require a monument to this too, we have only to step outside this church and look around us.