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THE LONDON SQUARE: 'ISLETS IN OUR DESERT OF BRICK, SLATE AND MUD'

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The title of my lecture describes the London square as it was perceived in Victorian times, and is drawn from an essay which was published in the second edition of William Robinson's *The Parks, Promenades and Gardens of Paris* (1878). The book was an account of the author's protracted travels in France where for seven months he studied horticultural practices, visited gardens and nurseries, and attended the Universal Exhibition.

Like many well-travelled Englishmen at the time, Robinson was enthralled by Napoleon III's rebuilding of Paris. One of the great benefits conferred by this energetic project was the creation of an abundance of small garden spaces dotted throughout the densely-settled quarters of town. The originator of this legacy was the Anglophile French emperor, who had *illusions généreuses* about the positive effects that parks and gardens had on the morals and customs of the working classes. In the event, it was his prefect, Georges-Eugène Haussman, who laid out the city's new architectural framework, and Adolphe Alphand who resolved the formidable technical problems of creating the new pleasure grounds.

Robinson, who knew Alphand, opined that 'it would perhaps be difficult to find a greater contrast than that presented by the London and the Paris squares, both as regards their arrangement and management'. London's squares were, he contended, 'painful mementoes of exclusiveness' — melancholy and deserted enclosures surrounded by 'scraggy hedges of miserable privet'. The squares in Paris were, on the other hand, handsomely planted and open to the public.

What, you might ask, is the London square: what makes it so special, and what circumstances prompted Robinson's withering criticism? The square is, quite simply, a mirror of the metropolis, a reflection of the social and economic geography of the capital. As Mayhew declared in his satirical essay 'Our Square' published in 1842, the square was a 'perfect world; and consequently it is a world having a plurality of worlds', containing respectively 'A Little of Fashion, A Little of Politics, A Little of Law, A Little of Literature, A Little of Theatres, a Little of Music; in fact it contains a little of everything, including a little scandal, as a matter of course'.

Traditionally described as 'an open space or a square figure with houses on each of the four sides, and an enclosed centre, with turf, a few trees, and it maybe flowers or a statue', the square is pre-eminent among England's contributions to the development



Fig 1. 'Getting One's Money's Worth': *Punch*, 9 July 1887

She: What's the good of spending all our Sunday afternoons in walking round the Square, where there is never a soul and hardly a tree to speak of, and when there's a park close by!

He: What's the good of having to pay a guinea a year for the use of the Square, if we don't use it as often as we can, I would like to know!

of European town planning and urban form as it introduced the classical notion of *rus in urbe* — that is the visual encroachment of nature and rural associations within the urban fabric. Squares have been appreciated not merely as garden oases or open figures in the dense city fabric, but as the purveyors of light and air; their evolution is closely tied to the provision of spacious residential development and the improvement of the city's streets. Squares have, moreover, been desiderata of urban improvers since the reign of James I, have promoted novelty of design, elegance, and spaciousness in the urban plan, and through a combination of unique local circumstances — including land ownership, management agreements, legislation and the English love of nature — have come 'to represent the special strain of civilisation which Britain has bequeathed to the world'. Above all, what makes the central gardens of London's residential squares distinct from

other forms of urban pleasure grounds is that they were, and many continue to be, the exclusive resort of key-holding inhabitants who lived on the square, and who paid an annual rate for this privilege.

It was this social exclusivity of the square which galled Robinson and his contemporaries who were sympathetic to the deplorable conditions endured by the urban poor who had little if any access to public open space in the smoke-plagued and unsanitary metropolis. He was, furthermore, vexed that the guardians of the city's squares had permitted their once handsome gardens to become 'small dark grimy', 'badly kept' and 'unworthy of London'.

The aim of my presentation is to introduce three diverse themes in the evolution of the square — all of which are closely interwoven, but which I shall, for the sake of clarity and succinctness, treat independently — namely the origins of the square, followed by their



early embellishment with sculpture, and concluding with a brief examination of what the social reformer Henry Mayhew called the 'social geography' of the square.

In London two historical antecedents contributed significantly to the development of the square: the first was the wish for regular enclosure of waste fields in an effort to protect public grounds from private interests; and the second was the initiative to create a form of unified residential set-piece focused on a large 'opening' encompassed by a reasonably uniform architectural framework. The first of these long-standing issues possibly contributed to the notion that the areas in the midst of these large openings should be kept green, whilst the second led to the desire that these spaces should be encompassed by regular ranges of domestic premises.

By the early 17th century, both of these issues took further direction in light of long-standing and sometimes thorny disputes between the monarch, the citizens of London and Westminster, and the city's building speculators. Earlier, Queen Elizabeth had sought to contain the physical growth of the capital and to promote the creation of dignified and ornamental buildings and public spaces within it; London citizens had wished to preserve common fields within or adjacent to the City, where they enjoyed rights-of-way and the use of these open spaces for recreation, drying clothes or pasturing cattle; and Tudor developers had wished to make as much money as possible by building streets of houses for 'persons of estate of value'. A compromise of a sort was reached in the first quarter of the 17th century when James I and later Charles I took measures to preserve some of the citizens' rights to common land by insisting that when development took place in open waste fields, 'openings' were set aside to preserve or modestly enhance the rural character of the former setting: this often meant little more than keeping a portion of the fields in grass, inscribing it with gravelled paths, and enclosing the resultant patchwork of 'Grass Platts' with post and rail fences. Charles I furthermore insisted that the new buildings encompassing these handsome new open places were to be 'clothed in the grand

Renaissance style which accorded with his ambition for a magnificent capital to impress foreign ambassadors and make a "memorable work of our time to all posterity".

Morfields, now the site of Finsbury Circus, was the first open space to be improved and laid out as 'a matter both of grace and greater use for the recreation' of the citizens of London. Galvanised by the Royal Proclamations, the Corporation of the City of London transformed the once marshy and insalubrious area into an agreeable place for public recreation. The fields were drained, laid out in 'the fashion of a crosse', furnished with paths, fences and benches, and planted with over three hundred trees subscribed by and named after individual citizens.

The significance of this example was not lost on the enfranchised citizens who lived adjacent to the nearby open land at the centre of what is now known as Lincoln's Inn Fields, and latterly the inhabitants near Leicester Fields. Both open places were, after considerable wrangling, cleared, all nuisances repressed and 'framed and reduced both for sweetness, uniformitie and comelines into such walkes, partitions or other plottes and in such sorte, manner and forme both for publique health and pleasure'.

Looming large in London's subsequent history, a precedent of forming spacious openings at the centres of new residential precincts encompassed by rows of regular houses was to develop at the same time as the desire to protect some areas of common land threatened by new development. These new openings were referred to variously as 'places' and occasionally as piazzas, and they were generally formed on open land over which the local parishioners exercised little if any rights of use. The principal aims behind their creation were the provision of convenient houses for persons of quality, and greater access to light, ventilation and views than could be found in the houses of ordinary streets in the metropolis. There was initially little interest on the part of developers to elaborate the central areas with any form of amenity, nor an express desire to exclude non-residents from crossing or using these open places. Often they were perceived at the time simply as a form of street widening.

Covent Garden was the city's first piazza. Laid out in a great, private pasture enclosed



by brick walls, and nestled between the Inns of Court and the City to the east and Westminster to the west, it was also London's first truly privileged residential quarter. By 1639 the north and east sides of the piazza were lined with large houses built in brick and stone in a strictly uniform and classical character, with front doors opening into vaulted arcades, and gardens with coach houses and stabling at the back. The western side of the piazza was enclosed by the Tuscan Doric facade of St Paul's Church. The new development owed a significant debt both to the Place Royale in Paris and the Plaza Mayor in Madrid.

The architectural uniformity and the social segregation of Covent Garden signalled a dramatic change from past building practice. Its street plan, devised before development began, further emphasised its peculiarity. Instead of forming connecting thoroughfares, like the Strand, streets were laid out in concentric squares around the open piazza, creating a reasonably self-contained and isolated enclave.

This precedent had a profound impact on the development of future squares: it established the basis for a pattern of residential development that took place after the Restoration which promoted the creation of privileged quarters characterised by regular street layouts, a more uniform standard of building, and improved hygiene and comfort, with, more generally, the preservation of utile open space within developed areas. As new residential squares were thrown up in rapid succession across the open fields of the western suburbs — commencing after the Restoration with St James's and Bloomsbury Squares from 1661, and Golden Square from 1673 — these so-called 'new townes' developed as reasonably self-contained and isolated communities.

The central areas of these early squares were, however, unelaborated and forlorn. It was only with the development of Soho Square, from 1676, that we witness the creation of a purposefully laid out and enclosed garden with a sculptural group 'in its midst'. If the creation of a central 'Garden' was in itself an innovation, so too was the imposition on the part of the developer of a rate for its maintenance. This precedent was, in fact, to become the aim of

subsequent Private Acts of Parliament, which from 1726 were passed at the behest of the inhabitants of the squares who were 'desirous to clean repair adorn and beautify the same, in a becoming and graceful Manner', to the exclusion of non-residents. This legislation, very interestingly, also eventually extended to a number of squares which were laid out on former common land, such as Lincoln's Inn and Leicester Fields.

These Acts had a remarkable effect on the development of the square: the promise of social exclusivity made the device a favourite one of landowners and developers alike. Squares promoted the advancement of taste, elegance, utility, and the conspicuous display of grandeur, and they in turn galvanised a series of material changes which raised standards of order and decency in the capital.

London's squares have for over three centuries been receptacles for a wide range of curious ornament and utilitarian conceits — from fountains to gardener's toolsheds. The introduction and display of these features has, however, almost always proven to be a protracted business, and never more so than in the erection of commemorative sculpture.

Francis Russell, 4th Earl of Bedford, was the first urban landlord to attempt to raise a statue in his London square. His promise to build a 'beautiful Structure' surmounted by a brass statue of Charles I, was included in the articles of his 'first proposition' for the development of Covent Garden in 1629. Bedford presumably intended the statue as a mark of gratitude on obtaining a building licence for his new development, and possibly saw the statue as an attraction for its success.

Although the commission did not materialise, the earl's intention to embellish the centre of his piazza with a statue of a British monarch prefigured the pattern of development of subsequent London squares. For almost two centuries the projectors, and sometimes the inhabitants of several of the city's most distinguished squares, commissioned — or more frequently, let it be known that they intended to erect — statues to adorn the hubs of their new and exclusive residential precincts.

Whilst statues after the Antique were often raised by the state in public places in



towns and cities across Europe, in Britain they were more commonly underwritten by private subscription and set up in gardens that formed the centrepieces of residential developments. Nowhere were these gardens more ubiquitous than in London, and few places were littered with so many good intentions, as scheme after scheme was launched to raise 'publick and durable Memoirs of Virtue, Honour, and Valour' — most of which never came to fruition.

The inhabitants of squares had few precedents to guide them in the embellishment of their central gardens and the disposition of statuary within them. It was, moreover, difficult to achieve a consensus on the need for, or the nature of, a central statue; and it was even more difficult to encourage all the residents — as rate-paying 'frontagers' — to subscribe to what were very often long-winded and expensive undertakings. Regardless of these discouragements statuary did find its way into a number of squares from the late 17th century onwards, and its disposition and artistic merit became the subject of intense scrutiny and criticism in contemporary correspondence, newspapers, guidebooks, and topographical prints. These accounts tell us much about the vicissitudes and reception of these conspicuous works of art. They also suggest that if such statues were once invested with symbolic, political or patriotic intentions, they were, when placed in a garden context, readily stripped of their original meaning to become little more than decorative garden ornament.

Soho Square was the first London square to possess a sculptural group at its centre. A carved 'Fontaine' by Gabriel Cibber was possibly in place by 1676, and formed the central ornament to the enclosed rectangular garden at the middle of the square. Its novel design owed a debt to Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Fountain of the Rivers in the Piazza Navona in Rome.

The next allegorical group to be proposed for the centre of a London square was first mooted in 1697, when some inhabitants of St James's Square planned to erect a statue of King William III at the centre of their 'Great Square Place'. Although the square was surrounded by great and grand houses, the central area was a 'rude waste in an uncleanly state'. The scheme was, therefore, probably

intended to galvanise the improvement of the square. The residents at the time were among the sovereign's most influential adherents, who presumably wished to compliment the king, and to adorn their place of residence. The gesture was possibly made in imitation of the Place des Victoires in Paris (1686). In the event, the statue of the king was not raised in St James's Square until the 1810s. When, in 1726, the square was enclosed and improved by order of an Act of Parliament, the inhabitants had dug a large circular basin with a central fountain. The basin was a very practical conceit as it also served as a reservoir from which water could be drawn in the event of fire.

It is a great loss to the metropolis that possibly the grandest proposal for an early sculpture group in a London square was abandoned in 1717. According to John Talman, Giovanni Battista Foggini's nearly-completed, ten foot high, gilt bronze statue of Queen Anne destined for the middle of Lincoln's Inn Fields was to be the 'finest figure in Europe', and 'woud render ye town so beautifull, ... it wou'd be worth a Travellers while to come to London on purpose to see' it. Several sketch designs survive which document the proposals for the sculptural ensemble, most of which depict towering 'Architectonical Works' criss-crossed with steps, strewn with fountains and allegorical figures, and dedicated with fulsome inscriptions. Notwithstanding Talman's efforts, the commission was abandoned. The fate of the statue remains a mystery, and the Fields did not in the end receive a statue, but a large brick-lined reservoir.

Cavendish and Hanover Squares fared no better. Like Soho Square, they were conceived from the outset to possess statues in their midst. Hanover Square did not get its 'publick ornament' and remained a bald and featureless field throughout much of the century; whilst the inhabitants of Cavendish Square received neither the free-standing effigy of Queen Anne nor its accompanying basin which had been promised in 1737, and finally settled in 1766 for an equestrian statue of William, Duke of Cumberland.

Only at Grosvenor Square was a statue finally successfully raised in a central garden. Here Sir Richard Grosvenor erected 'a statue of his present Majesty George I on horseback'

at the centre of his Garden Oval. The novelty of the scheme lay in the decision to place the statue at the centre of a large garden laid out in 'the Rural Manner' — where the pleasance was planted with 'Quarters of Wilderness-Work' of elm to yield a 'New Variety of Prospect' in town. Grosvenor's brazen proclamation also has the distinction of being amongst the first 'publick statues' to have provoked an angry response from 'some villainous Persons', who in March 1727 dismembered the unfinished statue 'in a most shameful manner'.

In the ensuing years there was, however, a notable shift in taste in the deployment of such 'superficial Embellishments', and a change in the manner in which statuary in squares was perceived. With the rise of gardening in the 'Modern style', and in the picturesque taste in particular, statuary was demoted from its status as principal ornament to that of mere garden accessory: as the once open central areas of the city's squares were transmuted into lush gardens, the stone and gilded statues and their pedestals that adorned them became less conspicuous, and subsidiary in interest to the planting that enveloped them.

By the turn of the century Humphry Repton opined that all eye-catching ornaments 'tend to lessen the apparent greatness of a place; for one can seldom lose sight of so conspicuous a landmark; we are in a manner tethered to the same object'. To achieve 'perfection of modern gardening', every interference of art, however expensive, was to be studiously concealed, by which 'the natural scenery is improved'. Having recommended banishing statues to the margins of the square, he then proposed that their central position should be usurped by the 'Reposoir' — a low covered seat for the purpose of rest and contemplation. Looking out from this open-sided 'central covered seat and retreat' the key-holders could survey the transitory images which animated their square.

Henceforth the square would be foremost a garden, and not a mere foil for commemorative sculpture. The earlier centripetal layouts of most squares — where the statue was at the centre of the garden, and the focal point of the residential development — would be inverted to create centrifugal layouts where the inhabitants placed themselves

at the heart of their gardens. The reposoir became the point of convergence for the community, and the hub of the picturesque whole.

I have alluded to the fact that from the early 18th century, it became commonplace for the inhabitants of the city's squares to petition Parliament for leave to present Bills for their better maintenance. The aim of these acts was, quite simply, to 'enable the present and future Proprietors and Inhabitants of the Houses ... to make a Rate on themselves, for raising Money sufficient to inclose, pave, watch, clean, and adorn the said Square'. The reasoning behind them was invariably the same: the central spaces lay in great Disorder, and had become 'Receptacle[s] for Rubbish, Dirt, and Nastiness, of all Kinds, and an Encouragement to common Beggars, Vagabonds, and other disorderly Persons' who 'resort thither for the Exercise of their idle Diversions, and other unwarrantable Purposes'. The Acts, therefore, empowered the inhabitants to prevent such 'Mischiefs', to embellish their central gardens, and to exclude those persons who did not contribute towards their maintenance. They, furthermore, mapped out the responsibilities of the new governing bodies — generally known as trustees or frontagers — as well as the nature and extent of the improvements and activities that could lawfully be executed which were 'necessary or conducive to the accomplishing the End Design'.

Upon receipt of their Acts, the inhabitants invariably embarked upon costly improvements to their central gardens. Their foremost concern was to secure the enclosure with defensive palisades and impenetrable thorny hedges. The squares were also lit by lanterns and invigilated by a private watch force and a 'permanent Beadle'. Having secured the boundaries, the inhabitants could embellish their squares with impunity — and many were dramatically metamorphosed into informal, naturalistic scenes: new paths were cut, velvet lawns were laid, sculptures and kiosks raised, and luxuriant shrubberies and clumps of flowers and dwarf trees planted.

The enclosure and policing of squares was not, of course, solely intended to obviate infrequent and unorganised acts of antisocial behaviour, but was also an attempt to ensure



that mass intrusion or disturbance would not take place. Squares, like large open public spaces, were seen as potential sites for large gatherings of 'massive, disruptive, fiercely acute or wickedly capricious, crowds'. 'Guards of able men' were therefore routinely procured from a square's own so-called 'standing army' as well as constables of the parish to patrol and protect gardens from throngs or mobs of people which assembled in adjoining streets. Most notably during the Gordon Riots in June 1780, when the city was gripped by a calamitous mob, which in the course of a few days burnt down several prisons and damaged over a hundred houses — several in the most prominent squares — many squares were handed over to government forces for the disposition of patrols. For several days the city's garden sanctuaries became temporary garrisons.

There appears to have been, at least until the late 18th century, a widespread and genuine confusion about the accessibility to these fine open spaces. This ambivalence was probably due to the enduring memory of their former use, the great variability in their management regimes, and the novelty of their enclosure. Even authors of guidebooks to the city were uncertain as to status of many of these 'country-in-town scenes'. For example, *The Foreigner's Guide* (1740) affirmed that 'those who take delight in the Walking-Exercise' would find 'some satisfaction' in the 'many publick squares inclosed and laid out in Gardens ... free for every Person above the inferior Rank, and are constantly full of Company'. This was not, of course, true: by this time at least four of the 'most stately' squares had been enclosed by Acts of Parliament, and the use of their gardens was restricted to rate-paying key-holders.

It is paradoxical, but perhaps not surprising, that whilst the enclosure of many squares' central gardens was calculated to preserve them from the 'rudeness of the populace', these measures in many ways made the spaces more attractive to determined trespassers, who took pleasure in 'getting over the rails', whether for exercising horses, playing cricket, stealing fruit, or picking flowers. The garden enclosures in the city's squares were not only a temptation to non-residents of improper dispositions,

but they provided a secluded setting for less salubrious rate-paying inhabitants, or degenerate household servants. Some of the lawyers of Lincoln's Inn were, for instance, in the late 18th century regularly reprimanded for taking prostitutes into the Fields, and for causing gross depredations in the gardens. As John Stewart observed in 1771, when referring to the enclosure of Hanover Square, 'every convenience is railed out, and every nuisance railed in'.

Gardens with excessive plant cover — notwithstanding their secure enclosure — were, of course, at times sites of dangerous impropriety. John Papworth remarked in 1816 that Grosvenor Square 'has of late years ... been deprived of much of its shrubbery, in consequence of the cover afforded by it to the servants in the neighbourhood, whose noise disturbed the nobility and gentry during their morning repose'. Indeed, so frequent and universal were the complaints of unauthorised and frequent use of 'Gardens in the Night time' that the inhabitants of most squares were requested to lock up their garden keys when they ventured abroad to prevent their servants from entering the gardens without consent.

Keys to the garden gates were the greatest weakness of the square. Although the gates were fitted with the most up-to-date locks, and their keys carefully appointed to rate-paying inhabitants, it was difficult to staunch the flow of 'false keys': they were frequently bartered or sold by servants, and occasionally distributed by residents among friends or extended family. Even the beadle was occasionally susceptible to bribes in exchange for unfettered access to the central garden. Try as they might, and regardless of their private watch, the inhabitants found it difficult to exclude all strangers or improper people from frequenting their gardens. For example, at Portman Square in the 1790s many female inhabitants complained that they could not walk in the gardens without 'the Danger of being insulted nor could they permit their children to walk therein lest they should catch some Disorder' because 'many Children of Strangers are frequently walking in the Garden who have just had small Pox'. Children from the neighbouring slums were, in fact, occasionally dropped over the railings into the square to take exercise; and from



the early 19th century, and the advent of the Poor Laws, newborn infants born of paupers were sometimes deposited in the gardens in the hope that they might possibly be given a better life than they might otherwise receive in the workhouse.

Here I must end. Not that the social geography of the square, or the manners, customs, sports, pastimes, and idiosyncrasies of its inhabitants, and their garden sanctuaries become any less intriguing. Indeed, the square never ceases to evolve, and has, rather remarkably, never entirely lost its unquantifiable appeal as a superior place of residence in the metropolis. The square remains, in Mayhew's words, a 'perfect world' — by which he means, of course, it is hopelessly and irredeemably flawed: 'although scarcely bigger than a German principality, its population too about the same, and as proud, call it Saxe-Golden, or Maida-hill-Sedlitz, or Fitzroybad, or Eustonberg, these little precincts — equipped with their own laws, management, government, revenue, possessions, and standing army — would be entitled to a dot and a separate name on the map of Europe'. These often quiet, ill-frequented, retired spots, favourable to melancholy and contemplation, are a peculiarly rich and variegated form of social organism, and one which, rather astonishingly, was conceived, nurtured and thrived in a 'vast desert of slate, brick, and mud'.

COMMONS AND WOODLANDS IN THE LONDON AREA

Colin Bowlt

A recent report for English Heritage estimates that there are currently 122 heaths (such as Blackheath), commons (such as Ealing Common), and greens (such as Turnham Green) in the Greater London area. Just how many woods there are I have not been able to ascertain. These open spaces are the relicts of a land use system dating back to medieval times.

Domesday woodland

The Saxons seem to have done an enormous amount of clearing of trees from the

country-side. By the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086 Oliver Rackham estimates that only about 10% of Middlesex was woodland. However, one should not envisage this 10% as closely spaced trees with a fence around. The woodland then was almost certainly grassland interspersed with trees and bushes. This is what was termed the 'waste' in medieval times. It was not waste in the sense that it was surplus to people's needs and requirements — far from it — but to distinguish it from land that was farmed. The proportion of trees, bushes and grass rather depended on the amount of use it received, for the waste was an important economic resource for the local community. So important that it needed to be protected from intrusion. As an example, the parish of Ruislip contained two manors within it — one owned by the Norman Abbey of Bec, the other owned by the Abbey of Holy Trinity at Rouen. The boundary was clearly considered important enough to dig a huge ditch and bank separating the two manors, which can still be seen in Mad Bess Wood.

Perhaps not surprisingly, close to the City of London, there appear to have been fewer areas with trees, as is indicated by mapping the woodland recorded in the Domesday Survey. For Middlesex the woodland was given in terms of numbers of pigs: *eg* Chelsea; woodland, 60 pigs (Fig 2). This is a curious measure! We immediately think of the number of pigs that could be supported on the acorns produced in a particular piece of woodland. But acorns only fall in the autumn — and then not even every year; it is well known that the acorn crop fails in some years. What did the pigs eat during the rest of the year? In other parts of England the Survey uses different measures for woodland: *eg* lengths and widths in leagues for Yorkshire. But however pigs translated into actual areas of woodland, it seems reasonable to assume the more pigs the greater the amount of woodland.

The larger pig totals (and hence woodland) were in the north of the county. (Fulham and Stepney may really refer to the Bishop of London's parklands at Hornsey to the north.)

The waste

These woods were part of the waste in a

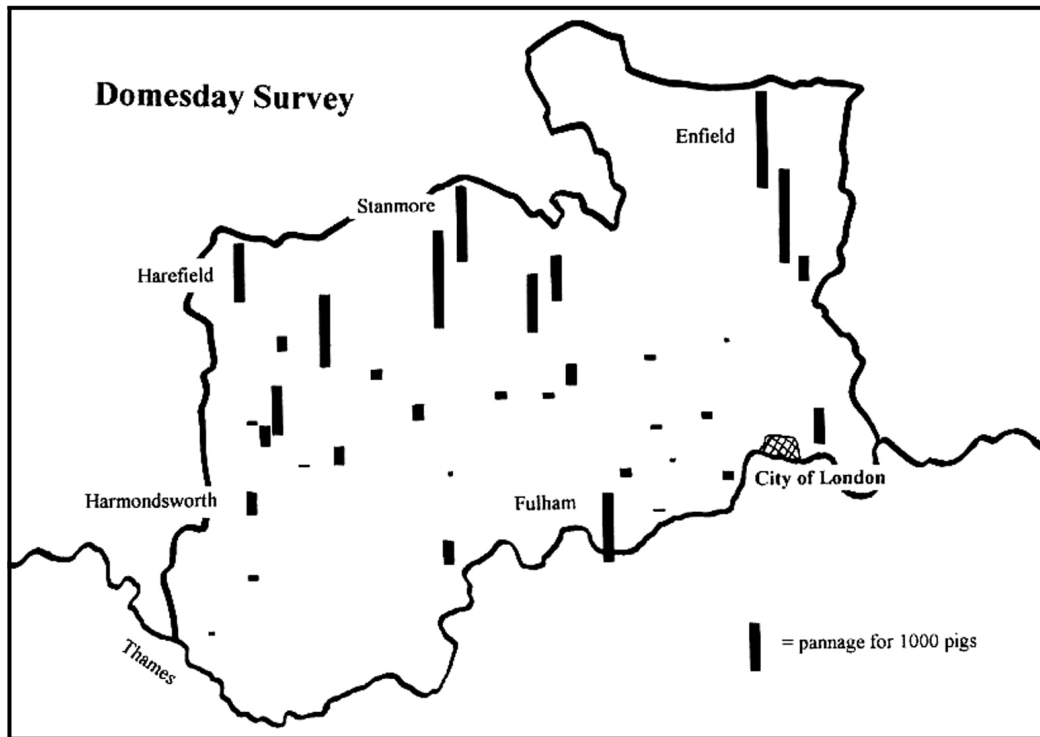


Fig 2. Map of woodlands in pig numbers given in the Domesday Book for Middlesex

form that would now be referred to as wood pasture. Indeed the Yorkshire Domesday Survey refers to woods as wood pasture (*Silva pastilis*). Little of the woodland was fenced at this time. Certain local people had common rights on the waste. They varied from place to place, but included the right to graze a specified number of animals, remove bracken and furze, take branches from trees, and cut turf. The waste officially belonged to the local lord of the manor, but its use was governed by the manor court to control and guard the commoners' rights. It was an important part of the local economy, supplementing what people grew with fuel and free grazing.

The commons and woods of today, now largely public amenity open spaces, are the survivals from this wood-pasture waste. In many places only the lord was allowed to fell trees on the waste — commoners could only cut branches. Branches cut out of reach of grazing cattle could regrow to produce another crop of wood. This is termed pollarding. This

system still continues at Hatfield Forest, Essex (Fig 3). However, even pollarded trees do not live forever. If there is heavy grazing, as is more likely close to habitation, seedlings will be eaten and gradually the area will become treeless. This is probably what happened at an early date on Hounslow Heath.

Inclosed woods

To counteract this treelessness, areas of the waste began to be inclosed with a bank and ditch, and probably a hedge or paling. Often this seems to have been a piecemeal operation, with adjoining bits gradually being added. Evidence of this is sometimes still visible as redundant banks within woods. Actual historical dates for early inclosures are few. Within inclosed woodland not only could seedling trees be protected, but also trees could be cut close to the ground since new growth was protected from grazing animals. This is termed 'coppicing' (Fig 4). This was much easier than pollarding as it



Fig 3. Pollard hornbeams in Hatfield Forest, Essex



Fig 4. Coppicing hornbeams in Park Wood, Ruislip, Middlesex, leaving stools to regrow and standard oaks for timber



did not need a ladder or a cart to stand on. Inclosed woodland was owned by the lord (or equivalent) and was lost to commoners. In a few instances commoners were allowed grazing after a stipulated time (about seven years) after the coppice was cut, when the regrowth would be sufficiently mature to be safe from the animals.

Most inclosed woods operated a 'coppice with standards' system. The standards are the large trees grown for timber for building purposes, as opposed to the coppice, which produced wood largely for fuel. Timber trees were allowed to grow up for perhaps 70 or 80 years until they were large enough to provide posts, beams and planks suitable for the construction of houses, barns and carts. Coppice wood was cut every 5 to 20 years. An outstanding example of a timber-framed building is the Harmondsworth Barn, the largest barn in the London area erected in 1423+/-3 (worryingly under threat from the projected third runway at Heathrow).

Wood products

Apart from supplying local needs, there are records of timber being sent to more distant places. For example, Keepers of Finchley Wood complained in 1545 that timber had been taken from their wood for the Tower of London, Westminster Palace and the new Ordinance House; or again, 120 oaks sent to Westminster from Enfield in 1546. Coppiced wood also not only supplied local needs, but, importantly, fuel for London. It has been suggested that up to c.1300 the availability of wood within easy reach of London was the limiting factor on its growth. The drop in population following the Black Death reduced the demand for fuel and by the time the population had recovered in the 16th century, sea coal had replaced any shortfall of wood.

Depending on size, wood was sold under a variety of names such as faggots, bavins, and billets. Faggots were bundles of thin branches (lop and top) used for giving a quick fierce blaze. They were used particularly for heating bread ovens, but also, as Rackham says, for burning heretics! Work at the Centre for Metropolitan History has determined the maximum distance from which it was economic to transport wood to the London

market — 14 miles overland before the Black Death, reduced to 8.5 miles afterwards. Where water transport could be used, more distant places, such as Henley, were in the supply zone. Charcoal was an important fuel, not only because it was largely smokeless, but also for certain trades, such as iron working, glass making and gunpowder production. References to charcoal occur at Southgate in the late 16th century, when 40 acres were set aside annually for its production. Hewers felled the wood at Michaelmas. The colliers at Southgate were mostly part time. The industry seems to have died out there by 1850. Weight for weight charcoal has a greater calorific value than wood. This meant that it was economic to transport it over a greater distance to the London market, from Hatfield Broadoak in Essex for example — 26 miles from the City.

Inclosure of common land

There was always pressure throughout the ages to encroach upon common land and to nibble bits out for cottages and gardens. Inclosed woods were not safe if the owner thought more money could be derived by grubbing up and farming it.

However, woods sometimes disappeared for other reasons. A curious example is that of St John's Wood. Sea coal had been increasingly imported into London, chiefly from the Newcastle region, since the 14th century. During the Civil War the Scots crossed the Border and invaded Newcastle at one stage, interrupting the sea coal trade. A 1649 Parliamentary Survey of St John's Wood reported that 'we have been enformed by the neare Inhabitants that in the years 1644 and 1645 when there was a great scarcitie of Coale in London, the greatest part of all the underwood standing upon the ground was carried away by the poore people of London, and other adjacent places ...'. So now you know why when you emerge out of St John's Wood Underground station you are met by houses rather than trees.

The reasons for the sizes and distribution of commons and woods is often obscure, and probably like so many things subject to a large element of chance. In the parish of Harefield in the north-west of Middlesex, research has shown that over the last 700 years



or so, in addition to two large woods, there have been many small ones, widely scattered, which seem to have come and gone. Some of these may have been secondary woods — that is new woods developed on former farmed land. By contrast, the woods in the adjoining parish of Ruislip have consisted mainly of three large, ancient woods, closely contiguous, whose boundaries hardly altered until the 20th century. In other areas, some woods have existed for a long time, but have changed their boundaries and shape during this period. Oxhey Woods, near Watford, are a mosaic of ancient and secondary woodland. One part called Abbots Wood (once owned by the Abbot of St Alban's Abbey) is ancient woodland. It contains relict coppiced oak. Oak was coppiced in a number of London's woodlands, principally for its bark, which was required for tanning. The wood was cut in the spring when the rising sap made stripping the bark easier. Bark was valuable for this purpose until chemical methods of tanning replaced it. Although Abbots Wood is ancient woodland, other parts of Oxhey Woods have not been continuously wooded even during the last 250 years.

These fenced woods were privately owned where management could be strictly controlled. In contrast, use of the open commons often seems to have been difficult to regulate. The enormous area of Hounslow Heath was shared by several surrounding parishes, which must have led to problems. Finchley Common ran for more than two miles on either side of the Great North Road between Fortune Green and Whetstone. In the 16th century there was direct conflict between the pasture rights of the commoners and the timber rights of the lord, the Bishop of London. Judgement was given for the Bishop. The Great North Road over Finchley Common also gave rise to problems. Drovers on their way to Smithfield let their cattle graze on the Common.

The latter part of the 18th century saw the start of the great Inclosure Acts. There was pressure to grub up commons and cultivate them. John Middleton in his 'View of Agriculture of Middlesex' report of 1798, for the Board of Agriculture, commenting on Finchley Common, wrote, 'On this Common there are several thousand pollards of hornbeam and oak, which can never produce

a shilling to the lord of the manor, so long as they are allowed to occupy their present situation. Their numbers must annually decrease, as no new ones are permitted to rise, and I observed that several had been grubbed up. By taking the whole down at once, the proprietor might unquestionably put several hundred pounds into his pocket'. At what cost to the commoners is not considered. The remaining 900 acres were finally inclosed in 1816. There had been an Act as early as 1545 to inclose the whole of Hounslow Heath, but in the 18th century it still covered an enormous area of largely rough grazing. Agriculturalists lamented the evil example of this waste so near the capital.

The parish of Stanwell was the first to respond with an inclosure award in 1792. Other parishes followed with the last inclosure by Hampton in 1827. Surprisingly some commons continued to be traditionally managed until at least the mid-19th century. Wormholt Wood Common is now better known as Wormwood Scrubs. The manor courts were still being held in 1856 to organise the cattle grazing. There are six resolutions of the Court Leet and Court Baron. Curiously, the sixth resolution states 'That no horses be admitted with hind shoes on'.

19th- and 20th- century changes

In the 19th century increasing appreciation by the public of the open spaces as places in which to spend their leisure time led to moves to preserve the remaining areas. The Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society was formed in 1865. The recreational use of commons and heaths was formalised by the Metropolitan Commons Act in 1866. This prevented development on such areas without the consent of the Secretary of State. The preservation of Hampstead Heath was one of the most high profile cases. The lord of the manor sought extensive powers to use the heath for his own purposes (*ie* make money) through successive Estate Bills, which fortunately were all defeated. This went on for more than 40 years until he died when his heir quickly came to an accommodation for its sale. It was acquired for the public in 1871 and taken over by the Metropolitan Board of Works. Since 1989 it has been run by the Corporation of



London. The other great preservation was that of Epping Forest (which was largely wood-pasture). This originally had been part of Waltham Forest. The lord of the manor here enclosed a large area, leading to a long drawn out legal and Parliamentary struggle by the commoners. It lasted 16 years, finally resulting in the Epping Forest Act in 1878. It was officially opened by Queen Victoria in 1882 as Metropolitan Common and placed in the care of the Corporation of London.

But inclosed woodland too was coming under threat as the economics of woodland products became less attractive, compared with selling for development. In 1802 timber was no longer regarded as a profitable crop for most of the land at Edgware. Another example, the Ruislip woods had been owned by King's College, Cambridge, since 1451. They had always been leased out, but in 1872 King's College decided to retain the woods in hand and appoint a woodman to look after them. The College appears to have wished to be able to sell them when the opportunity arose. This occurred at the beginning of the 20th century when large pieces of Park Wood and Copse Wood were sold and built upon. Fortunately this stimulated the newly formed Residents' Association to initiate negotiations, which led to the purchase of the remainder of the woods for public use. Curiously in the 18th and 19th centuries, when many ancient woods were being threatened, the sporting interests of many gentlemen farmers resulted in the planting of game coverts, but these were kept and clearly no-go areas for the public.

With the great decline in the traditional use

of commons for grazing and fuel collection over the last 50–100 years they have become increasingly overgrown to the extent that many have reverted to woodland. This is particularly so with many Surrey commons. We now have the situation of having to pay to have woodland coppiced and scrub cleared from commons to maintain them in the state which resulted naturally when they were net sources of wealth and benefit to the local community. Perhaps when fossil fuel supplies finally run out the woods and commons will come into their own once again to help future generations to survive.

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