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Architecture

The romances and wars of London's aristocratic squares

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Garden squares, as much as the Royal Parks, secure London's reputation as a green and leafy city. Yet from the start they were an aristocratic not a royal or civic creation. The first are generally held to be Bloomsbury Square, laid out in 1661 in front of the Earl of Southampton's town mansion (almost as a kind of forecourt) and St James's Square, created by the 1st Earl of St Albans.

The obvious precedents were Covent Garden piazza, laid out as a market by Inigo Jones for the Earl of Bedford, and Lincoln's Inn Fields, in which the Earl of Pembroke had a hand.

A key feature of most London squares is that streets enter at the corners rather than the centre — creating a greater sense of enclosure and giving the long rows of even houses precedence over any grand central vista across or through the square. Even in the later 17th century London squares were very different from the piazzas envisaged by Sir Christopher Wren and John Evelyn in their visionary plans for rebuilding London after the Great Fire of 1666. They proposed

Churchill planned to melt down all park railings for munitions

piazzas at intersections of up to six or eight converging streets which would have formed continental-style round points, not English squares.

As a result, the abiding qualities of London squares are a sense of seclusion and containment combined with a certain pleasing regularity in the architecture.

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan's absorbing new book *The London Square* is not an architectural history but an account of their layout and the emergence of leafy central gardens that are their most valued feature. The making of the book is the wonderful series of illustrations, from early prints to wartime photographs. These show that the early examples, such as Soho, Golden and Hanover Squares, had little or no planting, just simple wooden rails to keep out traffic — the first images of trees



Early public spaces, such as Hanover Square (seen here in 1769), had no planting and wooden rails to keep out traffic

appear in Grosvenor Square in 1789 and Portman Square c 1794.

Squares permeated to most parts of London. The Grosvenor Estate has the largest and grandest, with Belgrave, Eaton and Chester Squares, while those in Pimlico were cut off by the railway line into Victoria but of equally grand proportions. By contrast, the Chelsea squares along the King's Road are narrower and more intimate. Kensington has grandiose Edwardes Square, Hammersmith has St Peter's

Square and its handsome villas, Islington has Lloyd Square with delightful linked pavilion houses. In the East End there is Tredegar Square with stucco terraces (as well as the lost Swedenborg Square in Stepney) though in South London the Regency terraces of Trinity Church Square in Southwark are a rarity.

The Ladbroke is a specially English invention with the squares behind the houses not in front (celebrated memorably by Hugh Grant in the film

Notting Hill). By the mid-19th century there were, according to *The Builder*, more than 100 squares in "every shape and condition" in what is now Greater London. Today, there is a recognition that private space is often better cared for than public realm but then a heated debate was beginning over the enclosure of parks and square gardens. *The London Square* illustrates the railings around Hyde Park in 1866 being pushed over by "the mob" (among whom are men in top hats).

The architect and countryside campaigner Clough Williams-Ellis, writing in *The Times*, described the English as a nation of "railers-off and railers-in" while Churchill himself is credited with a plan in 1918 to melt down the railings round London's parks and square gardens and convert them into munitions.

Almost every square, like every country house, had a war. In St James's Square the Washington Inn, a YMCA for American officers, was under construction in 1917, followed by a Camouflage Fair in Trafalgar Square in 1918.

In 1940 the Ministry of Supply reneged on assurances that it would not take any London railings of historic interest or artistic value but faced a problem with Bloomsbury Square, owned by the pacifist Duke of Bedford and the elliptical railings around Bedford Square remained.

Residents in Arundel Square in Barnsbury, North London, were already digging their own air raid shelter in September 1938. The Dig for Victory campaign brought vegetable plots to St James's Square. But far more squares were used for morale-boosting concerts, dances and children's entertainment. The removal of railings in Cavendish Square near Oxford Circus, provided valuable lunchtime open space in working areas but elsewhere hedges were broken through, flower beds trampled on and garden seats smashed.

After the war, the architect and writer Gordon Cullen argued eloquently for "A Square for every Taste" in *The Architectural Review*. Where a square was still residential it was appropriate for it to be railed, elsewhere he argued for largely paved "collegiate" squares with priority for pedestrians.

Next came municipal squares like Russell Square, encircled by busy traffic, which were to have axial vistas, fountains and sculpture.

The pity is that for all the talk of new squares over the past 70 years, the Duchy of Cornwall's Regency Revival terraces in Courtenay Square, Kennington (not Kensington as it says in the book), built in 1913, have never since been bettered.

The London Square, by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan (Yale, £30)