

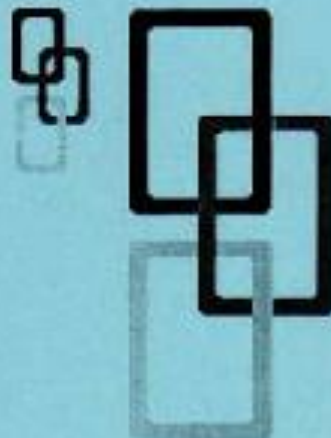


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# **Russell Square**

**a lifelong resource for teaching and learning**



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a lifelong resource for teaching and learning

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# **Russell Square**

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## **Preface**

A quarter of a century ago, in 1978, Birkbeck College's Faculty of Continuing Education (FCE, then the Department for Extra-Mural Studies of the federal University) moved to the offices that it now occupies in numbers 26 and 25 Russell Square. Then, as now, FCE was the one of the largest and most active extra-mural departments of any British university, with an enormous range of courses covering virtually every subject taught in 'internal' university departments and many more besides <sup>1</sup>. Some of these courses have, from time to time, used Russell Square as a learning resource. Many more staff and students alike have (along with thousands of local workers, tourists and residents) used the square's gardens for relaxation and recovery, without reflecting on its origins or present significance.

This Occasional Paper examines the past and present fabric of Russell Square ('the Square') as a resource for teaching and learning. It is a composite narrative assembled by FCE staff whose disciplines range from nature conservation through garden history and architectural history to social policy. It deconstructs the Square as an entity and attempts to decipher some of its 'meanings' that provide links between subjects taught within FCE.

We hope that it will stimulate discussion about the way this single 'place' – our Square - can be 'seen' or interpreted in different ways for diverse purposes, and about the way that it can be used as a resource for teaching and learning across disciplines.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to a number of people and organisations for access to information about Russell Square and/or permission to reproduce material in this Occasional Paper, in particular: Richard Knight, Lesley Marshall and Malcolm Holmes and the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre; Bridget Howlett and the London Metropolitan Archives; Anne Mitchell, the Duke of Bedford and the Trustees of the Bedford Estates; Julian Rainsbury and the Senate

House Estates Office; Jeremy Smith and the Guildhall Library; Gary Thorn and the British Museum Library; Emily Lees of Yale University Press; Negley Harte, Dana Arnold, Stephen Parrott and Carol Watts. We have made every effort to locate the originals and to secure the permission of copyright holders to reproduce illustrations contained in this booklet, but we have been unable to do this for Figure 6, Figure 9 and Figure 17. We apologise for any other inadvertent errors or omissions in this respect.

Our thanks are also due to the Friends of Russell Square for caring for it, to Paul Tropea (proprietor of the Café); to Jon Wilson of Birkbeck's Photographic Unit for reproducing some of the illustrations presented in this booklet and to Christine Davis and Michael Pullin in the Print Unit for printing it.

### **Box 1. A fatal accident in Russell Square**

An inquest reported in *The Times* November 1817 recorded a verdict of accidental death on 12 year old Charles Bainbridge. On Sunday 9 November Charles was on his way to church when he met his brother Thomas, "*billiard-marker to Mr Hardaway, the proprietor of the billiard rooms, Great Windmill Street*" who had been sent out to exercise Mr Hardaway's horse in Regent's-park.

Thomas persuaded Charles not to go to church, but to come riding with him instead, and "*they went together into the Long Fields, Tavistock Square*". Here they took turns to ride the horse until Thomas went to watch a fight, which had broken out between two young men, leaving Charles on the horse.

Thomas heard Charles shouting for someone to stop the horse. He turned around, saw the horse in full gallop and then saw Charles fall from the horse with his foot caught in the stirrup, by which he was dragged along the ground.

*"The horse continued galloping and the deceased was trailed along the ground, with his head beating against the stones, from the Long Fields to Russell Square, the distance of half a mile. His foot came out of the stirrup in Russell-Square"* but Charles was by this time dead <sup>2</sup>.

**Figure 1. The Brunei plaques.**



Photo: Richard Clarke May 2004. The two plaques symbolise the complexities, contradictions and conflicts that characterise Russell Square, past and present

## Introduction

A good place for anyone new to Russell Square to begin a visit is at the entrance to the University precinct, near the Cabbies' Shelter that stands isolated on a road triangle in the extreme north - west corner. The green Shelter, and the black cabs and their drivers that use it, symbolise the complexities, contradictions and conflicts that characterise the Square and its history.

The Shelter stands outside a Georgian terrace (numbers 25 to 29) whose facades, unlike other buildings in the Square, are virtually identical to their original construction some two centuries ago. Its refurbishment and relocation to this position in 1986 anticipated a major Heritage Lottery funded 'restoration' of Russell Square Gardens, completed in 2001.

Just to the north of no 25 (or the right hand side when facing the building from the Square) is the flank wall of the Brunei Centre, the newest building in Russell Square, completed in 1997. On the brickwork are fixed two small plaques (Figure 1). The upper one, placed there by the University in 1997, soon after its completion reads:

*The University of London hereby records its sincere apologies that the plans of this building were settled without due consultation with the Russell family and their trustees and therefore without their approval of its design*

The meta-text underlies much of the story recounted in this Occasional Paper. Almost uniquely within Europe, and certainly so for the premier university of a capital city, the ultimate sanction for what is done on the site lies neither with its owner (the University), nor with national or local government, but with a private individual.

Like most of Bloomsbury, the university estate was once owned by the Duke of Bedford and the Russell Family, who still own a good deal of the area through the 'Bedford Estate', a trust that is run from the Estate Office in Montague Street, overlooking the British Museum and built for the purpose in the 1840s. When the land on which the University now stands was purchased by the University in 1926, a proviso was included that any significant alteration in the buildings or in the uses to which they are put, had to be agreed with the Russell Family.

Russell Square forms the centre-piece of the Bedford's Bloomsbury estate and behind it lies yet another 'reading', one



which, like the history of the Square itself, links urban and rural, town and country, 'built' and 'natural'. It is a reading that has to do with power in the land.

One of the factors, perhaps the principal feature, which marks Britain out from the rest of Europe, is the enormous concentration of wealth, particularly landed capital, in the hands of a relatively small number of people. Just three thousand people own 50% of Britain's land surface (in France, 3 million people own a roughly similar proportion). As the history (and present landscape) of Russell Square demonstrates, a parallel process of enclosure to that which shaped most of lowland England, also shaped the landscape of central London. Moreover, unlike France, Britain had no recent revolution (and no Napoleon) so that the social relationships that underlay that process remain largely intact.

The lower plaque on the Brunei building, placed there a year after the first, in 1998, is a Civic Trust award for architecture. If the first part of the University's 'apology' required by the Russell trustees is an assertion of their legal rights and a determination that they should not lapse, its last could be construed as questioning the appropriateness of the building's design. In this context the University's juxtaposition of the Civic Trust with its own apology may be accidental. However it can also be read as a barely concealed riposte by the University, implying that it is not its own taste, but that of the family and trustees that is at fault.

Questions of taste have featured large in Russell Square, from the earliest design of the gardens and the buildings surrounding them, to its latest reincarnation of the gardens as a Lottery funded heritage landscape.

The London Square has been described as "*one of a number of innovative forms of public space which allowed for new forms of social interaction and were central in helping to both define and shape polite society*"<sup>3 p193</sup>. If issues of power, privilege and perception characterise the development of the Square from its construction some 200 years ago, so do those of difference, diversity and dominance (of class, gender, age and ethnicity), of different groups of people, using the space of the Square in different and sometimes conflicting ways.

These otherwise unremarkable artefacts – two plaques and a shelter, before we have even begun to examine the buildings of the

Square, or the landscape of its Gardens, suggest that there are 'stories' to be told, in particular about:

- political ecology (for example the power of long-established landed interests to exert patronage and influence even over the decisions of a great institution, the University of London)
- cultural aesthetics (in particular conflicting views of 'taste' and value in the built and landscaped environment).

They also bear testament to the contrariness of life, in particular the way that even the best laid plans never turn out quite as intended.

## **Box 2. Street names in Bloomsbury**

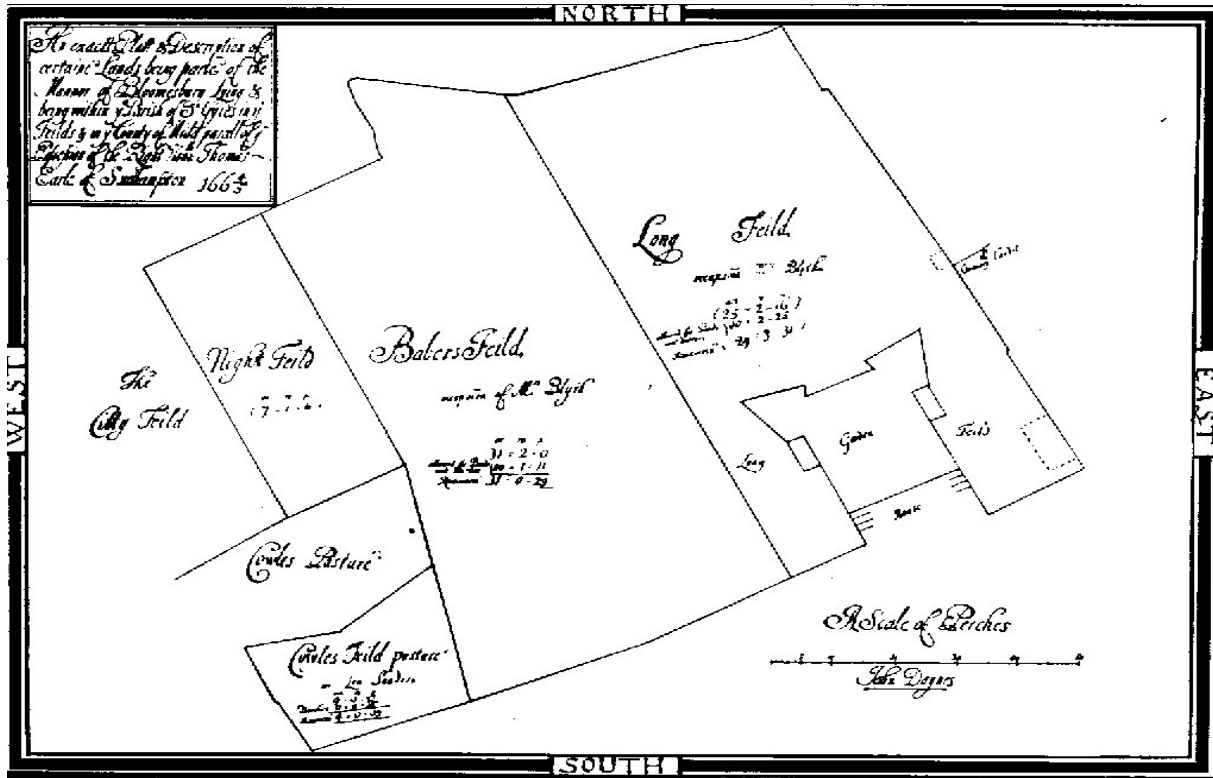
Britain is one of the very few European countries that names its streets after earlier landowners. The names of the streets and squares reflect the Bedford family, both at the time and for more than a century subsequently; ironically many of these aristocrats were created at the very time that the rest of Europe was getting rid of theirs.

Bedford Square, Bedford Place and Bedford Way most obviously refer to the family, originally Earls of Bedford who became Dukes from 1694. Russell was the family surname – hence Russell Square and Great and Little Russell Streets. In 1694 the new Duke was created Marquess of Tavistock at the same time, which later gave rise to Tavistock Square and Tavistock Place. The principal seat of the Dukes is Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, reflected in Woburn Square and Woburn Place. Their country seat in Devon, close to the Cornwall border, called Endsleigh, produced the names of Endsleigh Street and Endsleigh Gardens.

Gordon Square (1820s) was named after Lady Georgiana Gordon, second wife of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke. Malet Street, a later creation, was so called after Sir Edward Malet, who married the daughter of the 9<sup>th</sup> Duke. Gower Street recalls the daughter of Earl Gower who married the 4<sup>th</sup> Duke. Torrington Square commemorates Lord Torrington, father of the first wife of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke. Keppel Street was named after Lady Elizabeth Keppel, daughter of the Earl of Albemarle and mother of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Dukes.

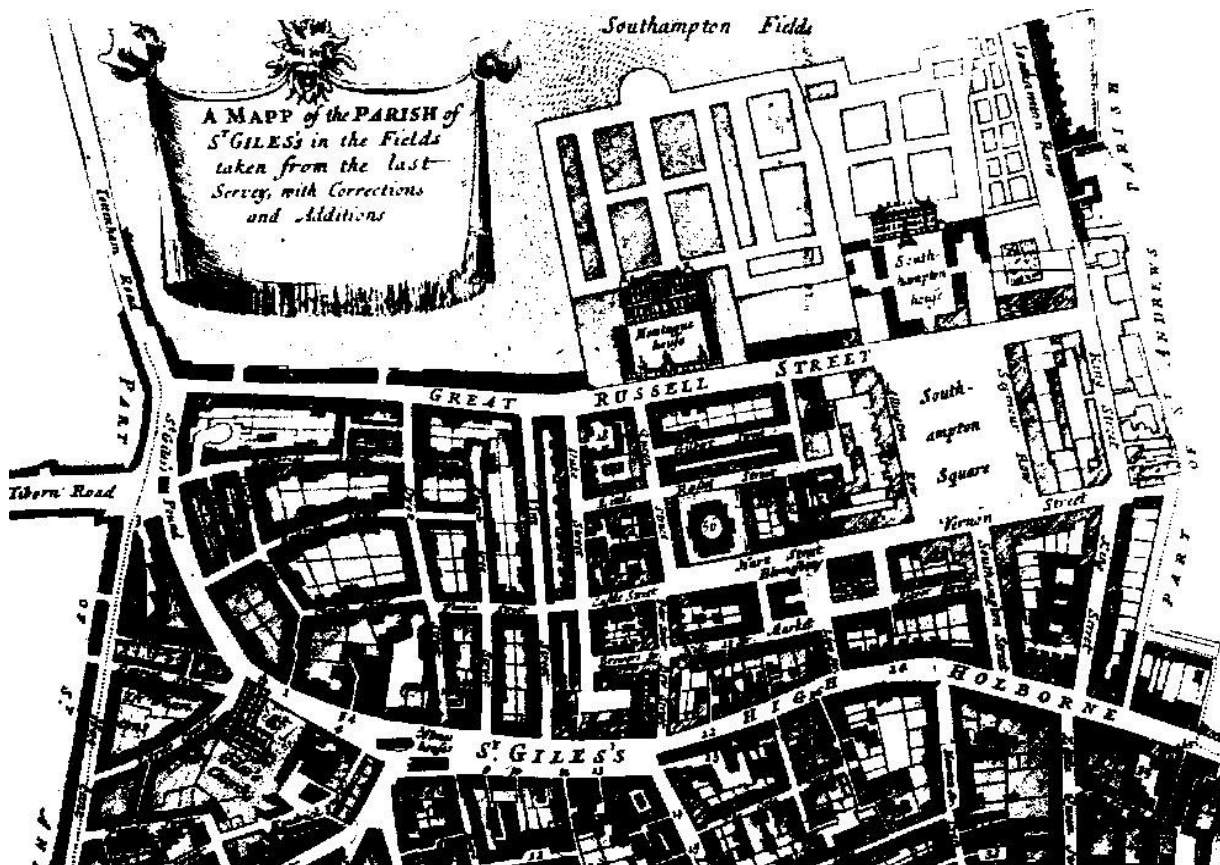
Finally, Southampton Row reminds us of the powerful union of the Bedfords and the Earls of Southampton, previously the dominant family in the area, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Figure 2. The 'long fields' in 1664



By John Daynes from the reproduction in *London Topographical Record XVII*<sup>4</sup> by permission of the British Museum. The inclosure bottom right is Southampton (later, Bedford) House and its garden.

Figure 3. The northern part of St Giles' Parish, 1720



From Strype's *Survey of London 1720* reproduced in *London Topographical Record XVII*<sup>4</sup> by courtesy of the Guildhall Library. The south side of Great Russell Street around Southampton (later, Bloomsbury) Square is now heavily developed but Southampton Fields remains open countryside.

# 1. Rus in(to) urbe: The Bedfords and Bloomsbury

Bloomsbury was 'developed' as a fashionable new residential district between the mid 18<sup>th</sup> and mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, by the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Dukes of Bedford (who by 1800 owned all the land) at the same time as they enclosed and 'improved' their extensive rural landholdings.

The Bedfords had already developed the area south of Great Russell Street from the early 1600s. Sir John Russell (a Dorset squire born c. 1486) was Lord High Steward and Keeper of the Privy Seal under Henry VIII. Following the dissolution of the monasteries, he was created the first Earl of Bedford and granted great wealth and lands, including Woburn Abbey. In 1553 he was granted an estate south of Bloomsbury and to the north of the Strand, which, prior to the Reformation had been the vegetable and fruit garden of Westminster Abbey. Here he built Russell House, in which he died in 1555. In the 1630s, Francis Russell, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bedford commissioned Inigo Jones to build London's first 'square' - Covent Garden with Russell (later, Bedford) House on its southern side, and the new church of St Paul on its west. This was one of the first developments to succeed in breaching the restrictions on building that had been introduced in a vain attempt to contain the physical growth of London. It started the movement of the aristocracy westwards, away from the confined streets of the City, first to the Strand then Mayfair, then, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to Belgravia, Kensington and Chelsea.

During this period the manor of Bloomsbury was the possession of the Earls of Southampton, following its purchase by the first Earl in 1545. Southampton House was built some time around 1638<sup>4;5</sup> on land inclosed from the 'Long Field' on which Russell Square now lies. It was rebuilt around 1660<sup>6</sup> by the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl who, following the Restoration, extended its gardens northwards to include as a 'terrace walk' the trenches and palisade fortifications<sup>4</sup> built 1643 by parliamentary forces roughly along the line of what are now the houses on the south side of Russell Square, to protect London against the advancing royal army. The inclosure (the gardens terminated by the angles of the fort) is shown in a map of 1664 (Figure 2). To its south, the house became the focus for the

construction of Southampton Square, later called Bloomsbury Square, which was laid out in 1661. This was the first London Square to be so called. It was followed, in the last part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, by St James's Square (1665), Soho (then 'King's) Square (1681), Grosvenor Square (1725) and Berkeley Square (1738), then, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Hanover (1719), Cavendish (1720), Portman (1764), Bedford (1776), Manchester (1776) and Fitzroy (1790) squares<sup>7</sup>.

All of these squares were built for one purpose - profit. They were intended to enhance the capital value of the land and, once rented out, to provide the owner with revenue. In a few instances (as in Covent Garden and Bloomsbury Square) three sides of the square were built to enclose the open approach to the owner's London mansion. In most cases however, they were speculative developments on open land. In all cases development followed a broadly similar pattern:

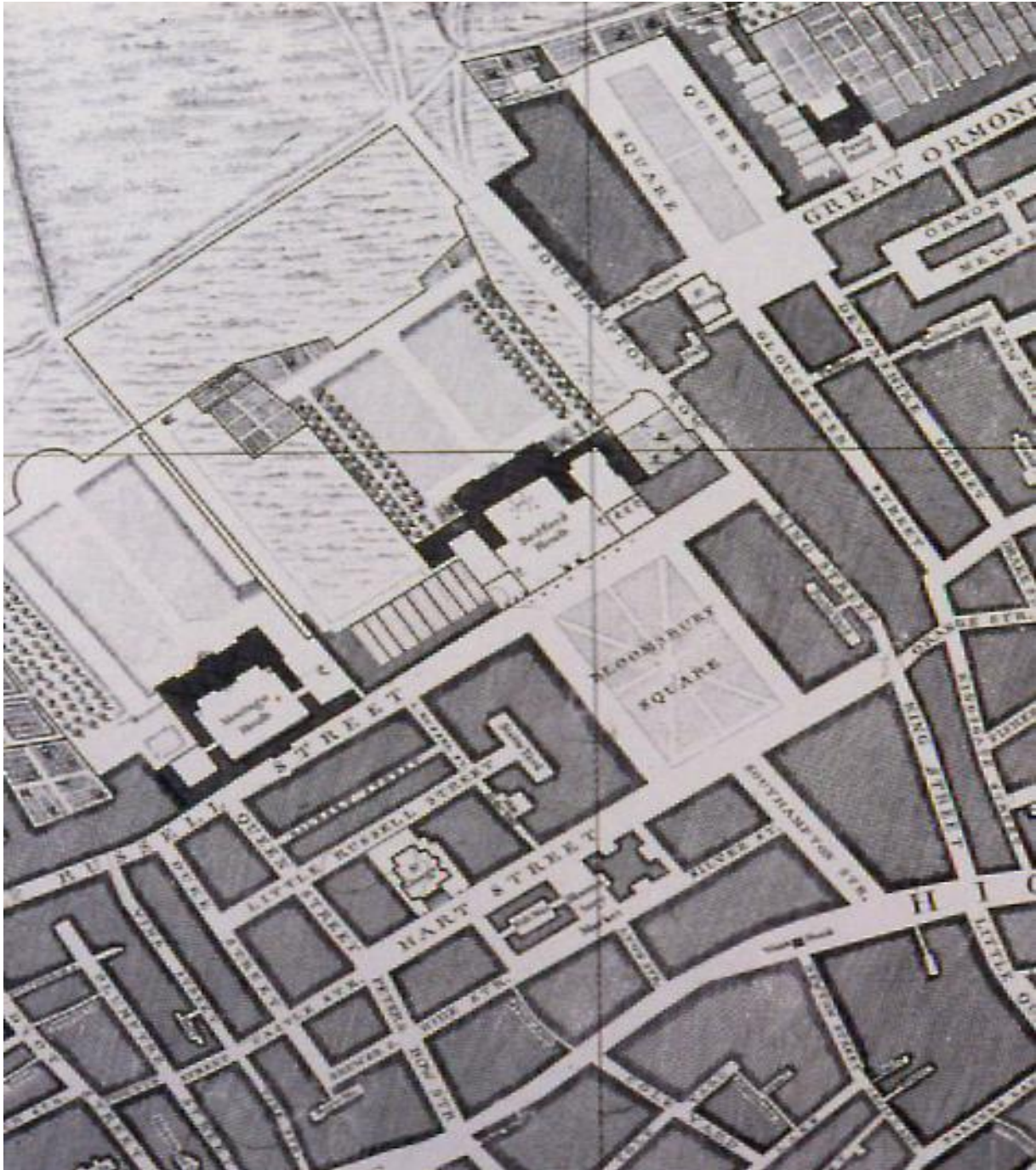
*These Georgian houses, built of dark grey London bricks and broken only by lines of absolutely symmetrical sashed windows, were reserved for the high bourgeoisie. Behind them were smaller, meaner houses, cramped in narrower streets for the lower-middle class. Squeezed in behind them were the mews and alleys, reserved for horses and servants*<sup>8</sup>  
p122

The fortunes of these squares were not constant, however. In 1670, the Bedford family established an official fruit and vegetable market in the empty space of Covent Garden. By the early 1700s, the square was occupied by wooden sheds and open stalls. By 1750 these were replaced by two-storey buildings, anticipating those erected later in the 1830s. Development accelerated the movement of the aristocracy northwards and westwards and the movement of Covent Garden downhill, as it acquired a reputation as a seedy area, frequented by prostitutes and their customers.

The area to the north of Great Russell Street (to give it its formal title, The Woburn Park London Estate) came into the Russell Family's ownership at the peak of the first phase of square-building, through the marriage in 1669 of Lord William Russell, the son of the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl (and 1<sup>st</sup> Duke) of Bedford, to the daughter of the Earl of Southampton, whose ancestor, the first Earl had purchased the manor of Bloomsbury in 1545. This union of the Bedford and Southampton families greatly enlarged the Russell's London estates. In 1704, the Russells demolished their Covent Garden

house, and moved to what was then Southampton House on the north side of Bloomsbury Square<sup>9; 10</sup>. A comparison of maps from 1720 (Figure 3, by which time Montagu House had been built, burnt and rebuilt) and from the middle of the century (Figure 4) show that development on either side was fast encroaching, but the 'Long Fields' (also called 'Southampton Fields') remained open.

**Figure 4. The northern limits of London in 1746.**

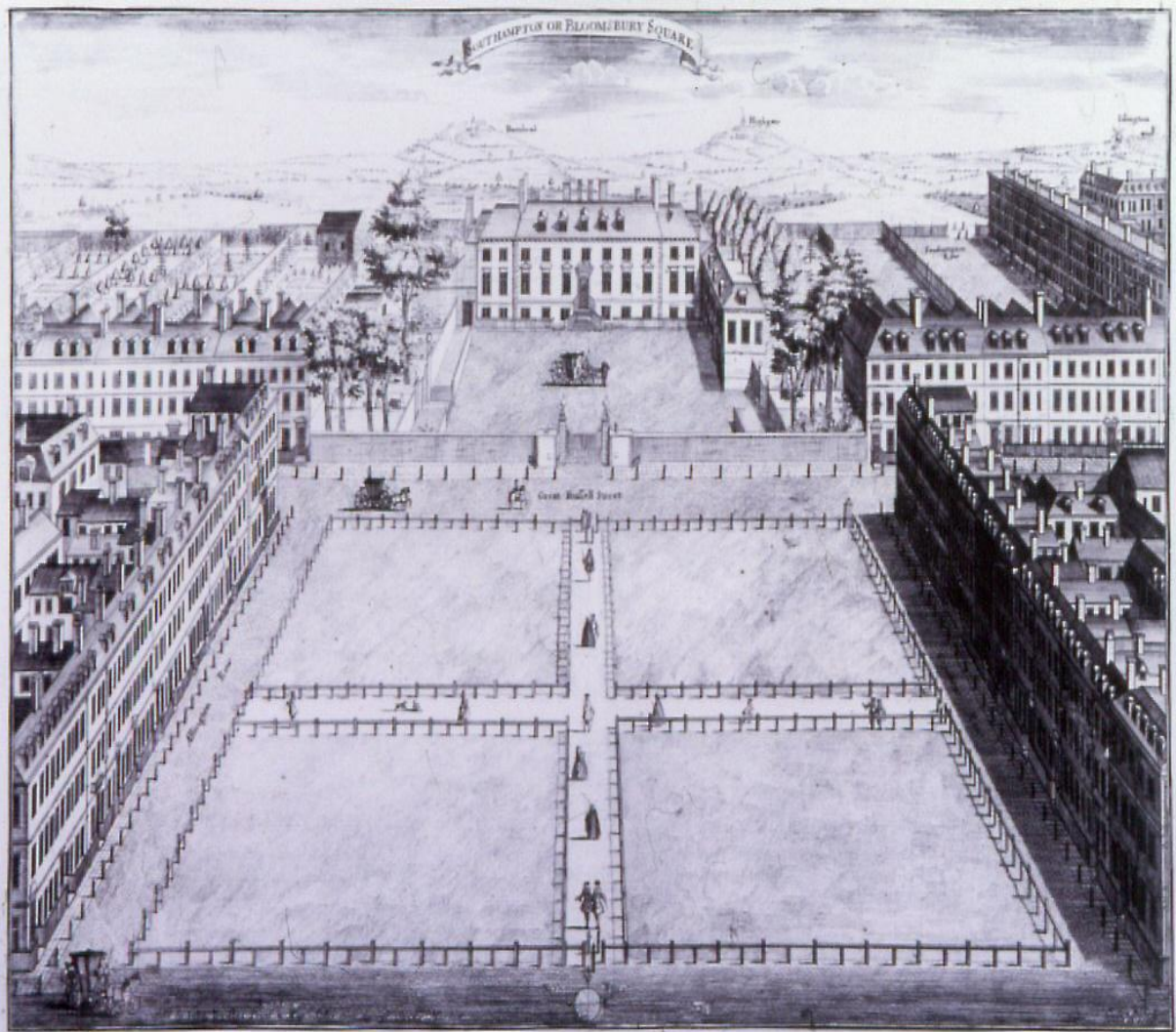


From Rocque's map of 1748<sup>11</sup> by kind permission of the Guildhall Library. Bedford House, on the north side of Bloomsbury Square retains a clear vista over its gardens to Highgate, even though the area to either side has already been developed.

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the area was at the height of its fashion. The 4<sup>th</sup> Duke hoped to build a circus in the

manner of Bath but died in 1771 before this could be carried out. By the start of the second phase of the development of Bloomsbury to the north of Great Russell Street following the granting in 1776 of building agreements for Bedford Square, the desirable centre had already moved inexorably westwards to the West End. Bedford Square, for example, although now hailed as London's only fully surviving Georgian square, was somewhat old-fashioned for its date and its houses, although of the first rate, were somewhat smaller than those elsewhere<sup>12 p23, 37</sup>. Montagu House had never been regularly used by its owners, and in 1753 it was sold to the state to become the British Museum. Rather than representing the acme of the wealthy and desirable secluded Georgian estate, as it came to be seen in the twentieth century, the story of Bloomsbury, then, as now, is really one of 'too little' and 'too late'.

**Figure 5. A view North, 1754.**



By kind permission of the British Museum. Fifty years later, Bedford Place had replaced the House, and Russell Square was laid out on its gardens and on the 'Long Fields' to the north.

The land on which Russell Square now lies remained undeveloped right to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Farmed by the

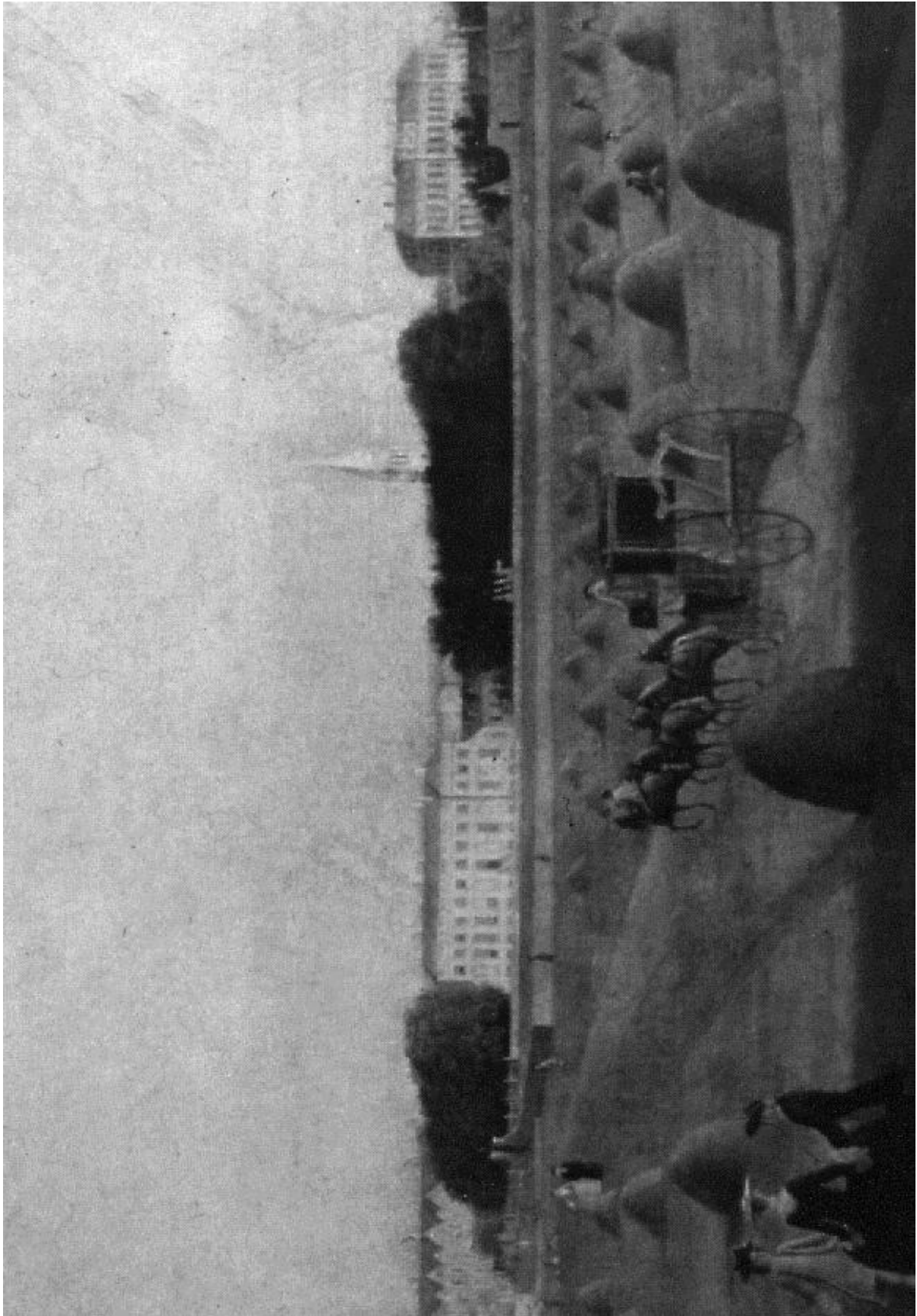
Cappers, a prominent local family, the 'Long Fields' were once arable, but were now cut for hay, criss-crossed with footpaths and heavily used for recreation. They were regarded even in 1764 according to the Public Advertiser as a venue for unsuitable behaviour by "*swarms of loose, idle and disorderly people who daily assemble... to play at cricket, tossing up &c which usually terminates in broils and is the cause of various kinds of mischief*"<sup>4 p74</sup>. The two Misses Capper who occupied the farm attempted to control this behaviour, one by riding an old grey mare, holding a pair of shears with which she cut the strings of boys' kites. Her sister would seize the clothing discarded by boys who had gone to the fields to bathe (presumably in gravel and clay pits filled by rainwater and by leakage from the New River Company's raised pipes which crossed the area).

By 1800 the Fields were described as "*waste and useless... the resort of depraved wretches whose amusements consisted chiefly in fighting pitched battles, and other disorderly sports, especially on the Sabbath day*"<sup>4 p83</sup>. Their value as development land was increased by the discovery of 'brick earth' with consequent excavations for clay and gravel used in the construction of surrounding buildings. The fields opened at their northern end onto open countryside and are marked on a 1795 map as for preservation. The reason for their survival so late was the 7<sup>th</sup> Duke's desire for open views of Hampstead and Highgate from his London seat of Bedford House (previously Southampton House) that then stood in the middle of the north side of Bloomsbury Square. By this time the land to either side had already been enclosed; to the West by developments around Bedford Square (built 1775, today the last remaining complete Georgian square in Bloomsbury) and to the east by developments around Guilford Street, including Brunswick and Mecklenburg Squares (built between 1790-1812).

This period (the height of rural inclosures and of the intensification of urban development) also saw a change in attitudes to urban open space. In their early development "*Londoners of all classes still considered open space in and around the city, including squares, to be theirs to use and enjoy*". However, "*that concept of spatiality began to change around 1720, as squares became private rather than public arenas... where enclosure ensured exclusion and exclusion ensured exclusivity*"<sup>3 p194</sup>. The fate of Russell Square was sealed, for the next century at least.



**Figure 6. A view South across Long Fields c. 1745.**



Reproduced from Caygill 1981<sup>13</sup>. Original and copyright holder unknown. The view is taken from what is now the N E corner of Russell Square. Southampton (Bedford) house is to the left of the picture (Bedford Place now runs through its centre) and Montagu House (now replaced by the British Museum) is on the right. St George's Church can be seen behind trees between the two buildings.

Although Bedford House and the Long Fields had survived, they could not do so for long:

*By 1800 the detached mansion had become an anachronism in London. Most of the big seventeenth-century houses in Piccadilly, like the sixteenth-century palaces in the Strand, had long since been pulled down, and their sites taken by speculative builders. Yet even they had not been set in grounds as extensive as the portion of the Long Fields, which the 1795 plan had marked for preservation. The potential value as building land was obviously too great for the Duke to ignore<sup>9 p51</sup>.*

## 2. James Burton and the buildings of Russell Square

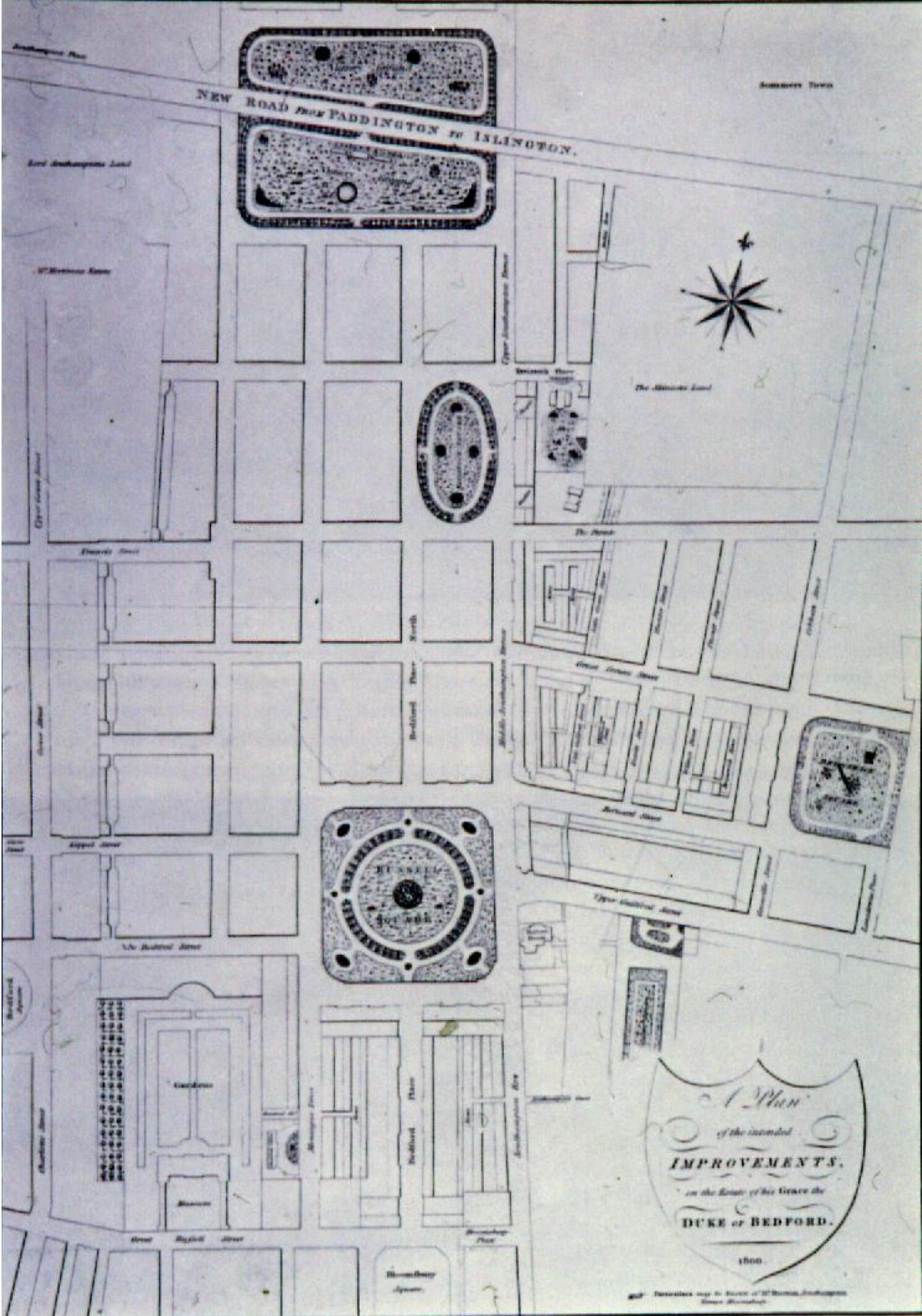
In 1799 Francis Russell, the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Bedford (1765-1802) commissioned James Burton to develop his estate. Bedford House was demolished and the Duke moved to St James's. The development of the Bloomsbury area with Russell Square at its centre had begun in earnest.

The 1800 Estate Plan (Figure 7) is virtually identical to a later plan of 1806. Both were the work of James Gubbins, the Duke of Bedford's surveyor<sup>14 p155</sup> and were issued for the benefit of potential speculators. James Burton is cited as the person from whom further particulars may be obtained.

It is clear from these plans that from the outset the layout of the scheme was focused on the now vanished Bedford House. Its memory was perpetuated through creation of a new grand axis. This ran from Bloomsbury Square in the south through the pre-eminent Russell Square and on up through a series of smaller squares; their long thin shapes determined by the need to maintain the central vista north to the New Road (Figure 16). The longitudinal axis was centred on old Bedford House while Russell Square with its position to the rear effectively commemorated the Bedford's garden, just as Bloomsbury Square to the fore had acted as a *cour d'honneur* to the great mansion.

Such a formal geometrical grid dominated by squares was beginning to be somewhat old-fashioned at this date as, under the impact of the Picturesque, other spatial possibilities such as crescents and circuses became preferred. Burton built such a crescent, named after himself, which still survives, on the adjacent Skinner's estate where he had more freedom in the layout. This reinforces once again the importance placed on the commemorative axis and that the Bloomsbury development was really an eighteenth-century one in conception, taking place after its time. The axis was continued by a rival development that of the Southampton Estate which built Euston Square straddling the New Road from 1811 "*obviously with the intention of eventually joining hands with the northward-moving Bedford layout*"<sup>14 p188</sup>.

Figure 7. The 1800 Estate plan.



By kind permission of the Marquess of Tavistock and the Trustees of the Bedford Estate.

## James Burton and Thomas Cubitt

James Burton (1761-1837) was typical of the developers who built London from the late seventeenth century onwards<sup>15; 14 p179-188</sup>. Most were self-made men who either started out as tradesmen in one of the building trades and made good, or who used entrepreneurial skills acquired elsewhere and applied them to the speculative housing market. In developing their urban estates landowners used such men to develop the ground for them on long leases of 100 years or so while they retained the freehold. In this way the estate was insulated from the financial risks of development while the developer required less capital than a freehold purchase would have entailed. It was a system that balanced short-term advantage with long-term gain, the developer reaping the initial reward from the sale of the buildings, and the estate the benefit once the leases fell in.

Burton had a background as a surveyor and architect and first came to prominence with the building of nearly 600 houses on the neighbouring Foundling Estate. He had also, in 1801, when Britain was threatened with invasion by the French, enterprisingly formed a volunteer 'home guard' of some 1,000 of his employees who he called *The Loyal British Artificers* whom he trained on the Long Fields. He was rewarded for this activity with the rank of Colonel<sup>4</sup>.

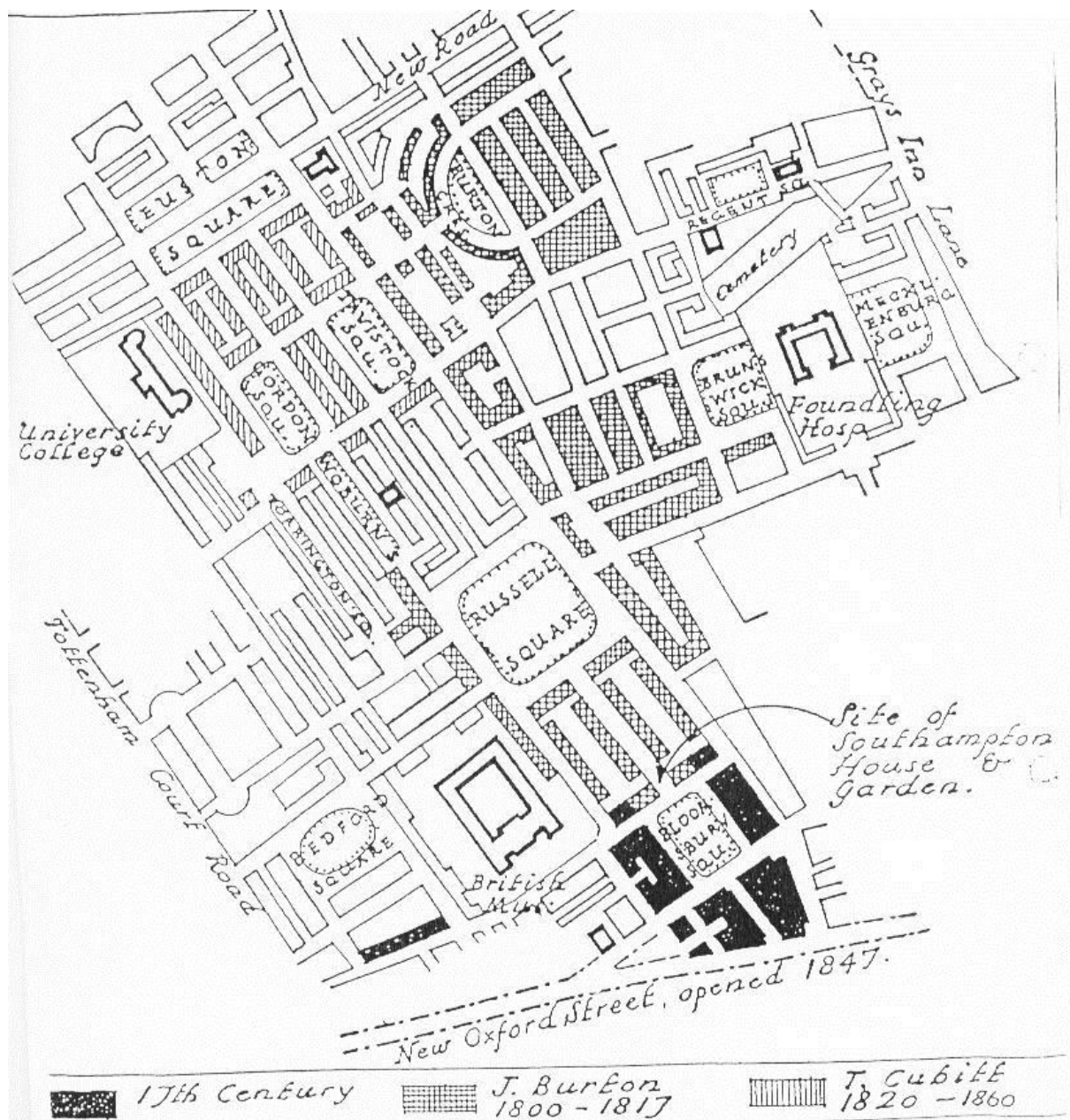
This prominence secured Burton the brief to develop the Bedford property where he was involved from the start: demolishing Bedford House, designing the house facades and building the first houses in Bloomsbury Square. Burton dominated development in Bloomsbury until 1817, acting as the principal developer, building some houses himself and sub-leasing many more to smaller builders, who he would also provide with loans when necessary. In all he built more than 1,700 houses in Bloomsbury between 1792-1814 on the Bedford and neighbouring estates<sup>15 p28</sup>. After this date he went off to build St Leonards-on-Sea where he managed to lose the fortune he had made in London. He was estimated to have built houses there to a value of £2 million. The rest of the estate was completed by Thomas Cubitt, from 1820. Cubitt was a new kind of figure in the building world, a general contractor, who employed a permanent workforce, rather than sub-leasing work to different trades in the eighteenth-century manner. He worked widely on speculative developments throughout London but is best known for creating Belgravia and Pimlico from the 1820s.

Figure 8. RHUBARB (cartoon, 1804)



Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre. The view is taken from east side of Russell Square (on the corner of Guilford Street) of a 'Turk... [who] has sold Rhubarb in the streets of the metropolis for many years'.

**Figure 9. Burton and Cubitt's works in Bloomsbury**



Sketch-map of Bloomsbury, showing approximately the areas developed by Burton and Cubitt.

Reproduced from a drawing by Alison Shepherd in Summerson<sup>16</sup> copyright holder unknown.

The rash of speculative building was by this time controlled, after a fashion, by the Buildings Act of 1774. This prescribed minimum construction standards for 4 categories, of which those in Russell Square fell into the 'first class'. Building must have started a good deal earlier than 1814 (the date to which most of the houses are attributed) and it seems that much of it may have been complete by 1803. The Middlesex Sessions from June 1801 through 1803 record a series of surveyor's affidavits confirming that that houses erected in the Square (the first is in June 1801 for houses on the north side of the Square, built by Henry Scrimshaw) meet the

requirements of the Building Act<sup>17</sup>. An 1804 cartoon of a 'Turkish Rhubarb seller' (Figure 8) is drawn as from the corner of Guilford Street and shows the outlines of a row of houses (31 to 37, as well as the end of a smaller terrace on the south side of Keppel Street, now the entrance to Senate House car park) on the west side of the Square. However work on them must have continued over a period of years; in 1803 a local antiquary declared that "*The present war has been a great check to the enterprising spirit of builders*"<sup>4 p85</sup> and the houses in the North West corner seem not to have been completed until around 1812.

Despite the Act, construction was often hasty, the quality of work poor, and not without incident. A commentator in 1890 declared: "*Who knows... that the eminently grave and respectable mansions round Russell Square were actually built out of the square itself? – the bricks being obtained from an immense pit dug in the centre, which still lies in a hollow*"<sup>18</sup>. However there is no hollow in the Square today and no other evidence of one following the landscaping of the enclosure; it is possible that the effect of one may have been due to the raised beds introduced by Repton at each corner.

An 1808 letter to *The Times* criticises the over-hasty erection and poor standards of building in the area, including the inadequate use of timber supports and the adulteration of building materials. This sometimes caused houses to collapse during construction, and this may well have been the case with the building now occupied by FCE:

*...in Russell Square, where the fall of a house of the first class, in the N. W. corner, had nearly entombed a number of the poor men employed in finishing it; but they had luckily left off work before it happened. These things have occurred so frequently of late, that I am surprised no person has ever enquired into an evil of such magnitude. It is surely time the Legislature should take some step to avert the danger with which so large a portion of the population of this great metropolis and its environs are now threatened, while houses are so **scantily timbered**, and while a large proportion of **street mud**, with the smallest possible quantity of **lime** is substituted for the real mortar, which is requisite to cement the brick work together*<sup>19</sup>.

Cubitt, by contrast, was renowned for the high quality of his buildings, even in the mass-housing market, and this, besides a



distinctive change in style, marks a clear division between the earlier and later parts of the scheme.

Burton's structures are typical Georgian houses, part of a long tradition, which had remained remarkably unaltered for a hundred years or so. The design of the houses is Palladian - deriving from the work of the seventeenth-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio, which was the dominant style in Britain from the 1720s. Palladio's designs are notable for their simplified form of classicism, their exquisite proportioning, use of local materials and 'astylarism' i.e. with no use of columns. All of these elements maybe seen in the Georgian house. The house is usually brick-built (the most notable exception being Bath where the local stone was used) with decoration limited to a few key elements such as doors, windows and balconies. Although there are no columns on the exterior its proportions are derived from a classical column, which is implied in the basement, main storeys and attic sequence (Figure 10).

This tri-partite arrangement is another hallmark of Palladianism, in which the proportions of each level reflect their place in the hierarchy of the house, the most important being on the first and ground floors with a diminishing scale thereafter through the family bedrooms and finally to the attic. The first floor was the *piano nobile*, containing the 'lofty drawing rooms' on the first floor. These communicated at least in no. 25 and probably also in no. 26 by folding doors. Those in number 25 were probably lost with the construction of the first floor corridor connecting the two buildings when it was occupied by the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies c. 1947, but photographs taken in 1976 of the empty premises of no. 26 after its vacation by IAS, immediately before its occupation by what was then the Department of Extra-mural Studies show the first floor as consisting of one large 'through room' designated the 'Parry Reading Room'<sup>[LMA]</sup>.

It is likely that the dining room and breakfast room/study were the front and rear rooms respectively on the ground floor (this was before the rear extension of either building was added). This would have left three bedrooms on the second floor, in addition to the several smaller bedrooms (including rooms for living-in servants) on the top floor. 'Domestic offices' were, of course, the food preparation, cooking and laundry areas in the basement. Being below ground level they do not really register in the visual effect of the building but are firmly relegated to the realm of 'other' along with the attics hidden behind their parapets.

Thus the architecture provides a precise reflection of the social relations within the house – the family rooms being given the greatest emphasis, particularly the more public rooms on the main floors, and the servants’ domain (the ‘domestic offices’) of kitchen, scullery and lofts being firmly subsidiary. The main service zone was in the basement with its area or airy to the front. A separate tradesman’s entrance was provided here and bulky essentials such as wood, coal and drinks could be stored in the vaults under the road, the coal being delivered directly through a coal-hole in the pavement. Water was obtained by most people from the public conduit or purchased from street sellers. For the wealthy it could be piped directly into the house by companies such as the New River Water Company that ran its wooden pipes below the streets down from its headquarters in Islington (the company had originally run its pipes across Long fields in 1742, above ground and raised on props where the ground was uneven)<sup>4</sup>. The Square also had its own water supply; a medical officer report for 1858 judges the water obtained from an artesian well in the Square to be *‘perfectly limpid’* (whilst that from the surface well in Bloomsbury Market was *“teeming with animal life, filaments of fungi, decaying vegetable matters, dirt and silex”*<sup>20 p145</sup>). A privy or ‘house of office’ emptying into a cesspit would usually be located at the end of the garden or courtyard. By the 1780s water closets were common in fashionable houses. The entire Bloomsbury estate was built with sewers.

This tall, narrow brick-built terrace house had existed in London since the 1650s and survived until c.1900, its structure and plan form essentially unchanged. The only variability was in the decoration and approach to classicism evident in the exteriors. Prior to the 1720s the house had been a mixture of indigenous feature combined with new imported classical elements. From the 1720s to the 1820s a severe type of neo-Palladianism held sway in the urban terrace and the Russell Square houses belong at the end of this tradition. But around 1820 tastes began to change and a greater variety of ornament began to appear on the Regency terraces, crescents and arcades that were being built throughout the country. This shift is evident if one compares Cubitt’s work with that of Burton. Cubitt completed the west side of Tavistock Square c.1824 in a Greek style complete with Ionic columns clustered in groups to break up the long façade. This nicely complements the neo-classical St Pancras New Church with its Athenian caryatids, which was built 1819-22 in Woburn Place to serve the expanding suburb. In Gordon Square, which wasn’t completed until c.1850,

the more Italianate style of the later houses shows us the last incarnation of the Georgian house, common throughout west London, before the Gothic took over and the Georgian was rejected as cold and mean.

**Figure 10. Numbers 26 and 25 Russell Square.**



Photo: Richard Clarke September 2004. The facades are probably as close as any to Burton's original design

Of Burton's original Georgian houses, only those in the north-west corner survive with their shells at least relatively intact. The north and south sides were altered later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while on the east side all the original houses have been completely replaced by hotels.

### **Box 3. The fabric of numbers 25 and 26 Russell Square**

Of the original buildings in Russell Square, the terrace of numbers 25 – 29 have been least altered since their construction. (together with their attached railings and lamp holder) are (like all the other houses of the period) Grade II listed. Their description, in Camden Council's list of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest reads:

*“Terrace of 5 houses. C 1814. By James Burton. Multi-coloured stock brick with rusticated stucco ground floors. Round-arched doorways; Nos 25 and 26 with plaster-jambs, Nos 27-29 with fluted Doric half columns; fanlights and double panelled doors. Gauged brick flat arches to recessed sash windows, some with original glazing bars and No.28 with 1<sup>st</sup> floor casements. Continuous cast-iron balconies to 1<sup>st</sup> floor windows except No.25 with window guards. Stucco cornice at 3<sup>rd</sup> floor sill level. Parapets above attic storey... attached cast-iron railings with urn finials to areas, No. 27 with lamp-holder.”*

Contemporary estate agent's descriptions (probably of the first time they changed hands following their initial occupation) give a better feel for their reality than today's technical architectural definition. In May 1826, the lease of no. 25 was advertised for a term of 75 years at a ground rent of £37 p.a. described as *“a spacious town residence, with coachhouse, 3 stall stable and lofts over, suitable for a family of distinction... containing numerous airy bedchambers, a suite of lofty drawing rooms of large dimensions, elegantly furnished, excellent dining room and breakfast parlour, dressing rooms, water closets, kitchens, and domestic offices of every description”*<sup>21</sup>.

In 1856, the lease of no 26 was similarly advertised for an unexpired term of 45 years (at the same ground rent of £37 p.a.), described as *“containing nine bedrooms, two drawing rooms, communicating by folding doors, entrance hall, dining room, breakfast room, study, domestic offices, and small garden, with coach-house and stabling in Torrington-Mews”*<sup>22</sup>.

Figure 11. The 1800 Enclosure Act – front page



ANNO TRICESIMO NONO & QUADRAGESIMO

GEORGI II. REGIS.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Cap. 50.*

An Act for enclosing and embellishing the Centre or Area of a certain Square, intended to be called *Russell Square*, purposed to be made in the Parish of *Saint George Bloomsbury*, in the County of *Middlesex*, and for forming and making the same into a *Pleasure Ground*, and for continuing and keeping the same in Repair. [20th June 1800.]

WHEREAS a Square, intended to be called *Russel Square*, is purposed to be made on a certain Piece or Plot of Ground, belonging to the Most Noble *Francis Duke of Bedford*, situate in the Parish of *Saint George Bloomsbury* in the County of *Middlesex*, on the East Side of which, Houses of considerable Value have already been erected, and on the other Sides thereof are intended to be erected: And whereas it would be much to the Benefit and Advantage of the Owners and Occupiers of the Houses erected and to be erected in the said intended Square, if the Centre or Area of the same was inclosed and railed in with Iron Rails, and if such Inclosure or inclosed Part was planted and laid out with Walks, and properly ornamented and embellished, and made into a *Pleasure Ground*; and if Provision was made for raising Money to defray the Expence of forming, inclosing, making, planting, [Loc. & Per.] 12 D ing,

By kind permission of the Marquess of Tavistock and the Trustees of the Bedford Estate.

### 3. Russell Square Gardens and Humphry Repton

In parallel with the construction of the Square came the development of its gardens. The gardens of Russell Square are one hectare in area and the second largest in London after Lincoln's Inn Fields. In order to construct them, an Act of Parliament was necessary, as in most cases of inclosure, whether in urban or in rural areas.

In 1800, the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke, Francis, presented a Bill to Parliament, which was passed on 20 June (Figure 11) as an *Act for enclosing and embellishing the Centre or Area of a certain Square, intended to be called Russell Square, purported to be made in the Parish of Saint George Bloomsbury, in the County of Middlesex, and for forming and making the same into a Pleasure Ground, and for continuing and keeping the same in Repair.*

By this time the eastern terrace had been built, and the same reserved for the benefit of the owners and residents of the houses round it:

*And whereas it would be much to the Benefit and Advantage of the Owners and Occupiers of the Houses erected and to be erected in the said intended Square, if the Centre or Area of the same was inclosed and railed in with Iron Rails, and if such Inclosure or inclosed Part was planted and laid out with Walks, and properly ornamented and embellished, and made into a Pleasure Ground; and if Provision was made for raising Money to defray the Expence of forming, inclosing, making, planning, ornamenting, and embellishing such Inclosure or Pleasure Ground, and of continuing and keeping the same in Repair (see Figure 11).*

To do this the Act appointed Commissioners to implement its provisions after which the *“Owner or Owners for the Time being of the Freehold and Inheritance of the said intended Square, and the Occupiers or Inhabitants of the Houses erected and to be erected within and encompassing the said intended Square... shall be, and they are hereby appointed, Commissioners”*. Any three or more of them, *“by Notice under their hands to be affixed to the principle outer Door of the Church of Saint George Bloomsbury”* could call a

meeting, which had the power to levy a rate to manage the Square. It was clearly assumed that Commissioners would all be men. Women would be allowed to vote, but only by proxy. Among other provisions, the Act provided for fines of between 10 shillings and £5 on anyone found committing theft in, or vandalising the Square.

The role and responsibility of 'Commissioners' in managing the Square, still in part applies, as a result of renewal of leases on the Gardens from that time to the present.

Burton proposed that the enclosure and planting of the Square should be either to his own design or to that of James Gubbins, the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke's surveyor. It is probably Burton himself who drew up the initial design. The 1800 and 1806 Estate plans are virtually identical and refer to Burton as their source; they may be compared with the only known description of the original appearance of the gardens in the 1804 cartoon of a 'Turkish Rhubarb seller' (Figure 8). This includes a description of the gardens, which must therefore already have been laid out by this date. They are described as '*uniform in outline*' with rounded corners; a dwarf hedge next to the railings, a grass border, a broad gravel walk, a square lawn intersected with gravel walks and a large circular plantation in the centre, bordered by a gravel walk. If this description is accurate then the 1800 (1806) plan must have been modified in execution, since the grass border and broad gravel path do not feature in it.

## **Humphry Repton**

By 1800 Repton (1752-1818) was well known as a landscape gardener (he had coined the term himself) and was the leading practitioner in the land. They were much employed by landowners to enhance the surroundings of their country houses in keeping with their growing wealth and status following inclosure and agricultural intensification on their rural estates. Repton was the successor to 'Capability' Brown in terms of a naturalistic approach to landscaping, often following where Brown had previously worked. From 1800 he made increasing use of flower gardens and shrubberies near the house, while Brown had preferred to see the house surrounded by lawn. When Repton was commissioned to design three London squares (Russell, Bloomsbury and Cadogan) he had to scale down his approach. In the case of Bloomsbury Square, his design was considerably modified, and is in any case much altered by recent developments such as the underground car park. Repton had a long and continuing association with the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Bedford from 1804, resulting in work on Russell Square (from 1804-5), Woburn

Abbey (1804-10), Bloomsbury Square (1807) and Endsleigh (1814). Although Repton had his theories and aesthetic principles, he was always willing to put the convenience and wishes of his clients first: 'Utility' was one of his favourite precepts.

In 1805 Burton engaged Repton to design and plant Russell Square at a cost of £2570. Discussions had obviously been going on for some time, since a pencil sketch by Repton is dated to 1804. Given the evidence of the 1804 'Rhubarb' image (page 18) and text it becomes apparent that Repton was modifying the existing landscape of the Square rather than producing an entirely fresh design. With regard to Repton's sketch plan, it is important to recognise that virtually none of Repton's designs (which ran into the hundreds) were executed in full, so we cannot assume that it was implemented exactly as it appears. But the general shape and design certainly were, as we can tell from an 1813 survey (Figure 12). This is backed up by Repton's remarks in *An Enquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening*<sup>23</sup>. His opening comments on Russell Square bemoan the fact that the ground had already been laid out flat at considerable expense, so it could not be changed: "*The ground of this area had all been brought to one level plain at too great an expense to admit of its being altered; and the great size of this square is, in a manner, lost by this insipid shape*"<sup>24</sup>  
p342-4

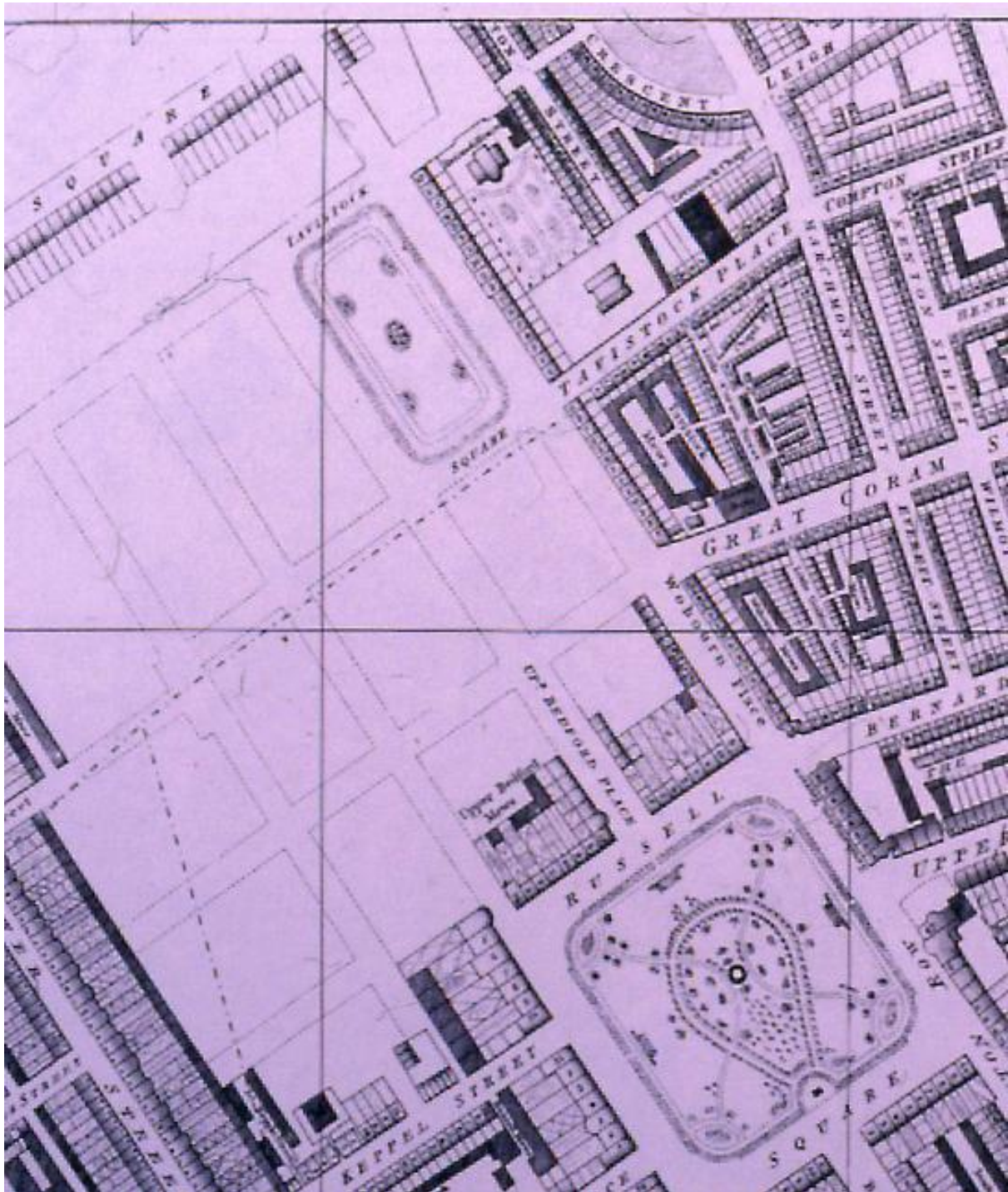
This description challenges Fitzgerald's 1890 suggestions<sup>18</sup> of a central depression in the Square; it also sounds almost as if Repton was trying to forestall criticism. Working from what was already there, we can see that he elaborated the corner beds and transformed the inner plantings. His scheme proposed, from the outside inwards: railings surrounding the square; a six-foot hedge of hornbeam and privet round the perimeter within the railings; a gravel walk just inside the hedge; elliptical beds at each corner, with mixed shrubs and herbaceous plants; open lawns for children to play on in the view of their mothers or carers; a horseshoe-shaped walk of lime trees, which were intended to arch over and form a tunnel arbour; a grove of trees and various beds of flowers and shrubs within the horseshoe; and in the centre what Repton called a 'repositor'; four low seats (benches) covered with slate or canvas for shelter and four open seats covered with climbing plants on a trellis to give protection from the sun surrounding a small courtyard in which were the gardeners' tool sheds. The horseshoe narrowed to



focus on a statue of the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke (see below), which had not yet been erected.

If this description is compared with the 1804 layout, it may be surmised that the six-foot hedge within the railings was the dwarf hedge grown taller. The broad gravel walk around the internal perimeter already existed, and the northern loop of the horseshoe was based on the circular walk.

**Figure 12. Russell Square in 1813**



Reproduced from Horwood<sup>25</sup> by kind permission of the Guildhall Library. Repton's layout of the garden is clearly shown. The house numbering of Russell Square is as it is today.

Repton explained that a square could admit some formality and regularity of design, since it was not a landscape and did not have to observe the same naturalness as a large-scale plan. However, the area within the horseshoe was described by an author in 1806 as a landscape in miniature, for which Repton had proposed a variety of planting:

*The area inclosed within these lime-trees [the horseshoe walk] may be more varied; and, as it will consist of four distinct compartments, that nearest the statue is proposed to be shaded by a grove of various trees, scattered with less regularity, while the other three may be enriched with flowers and shrubs, each disposed in a different manner, to indulge the various tastes for regular or irregular garden*

Repton concludes his remarks with a mission statement of his art, for the Square:

*a few years hence... this square may serve to record, that the Art of Landscape Gardening in the beginning of the nineteenth century was not directed by whim or caprice, but founded on a due consideration of utility as well as beauty, without a bigoted adherence to forms and lines, whether straight, or crooked, or serpentine' <sup>23</sup>.*

The realisation of Repton's vision was short lived. Even nature failed to live up to the expectations of the Square's designers. In 1803, John Claudius Loudon, then 21 during his first stay in London from Scotland whilst trying to establish himself, attacked the way that London squares – especially Russell Square - had been landscaped. Daniels <sup>26 p181</sup> states that Loudon's attack was directed at Repton, however Russell Square had not by this time been laid out by Repton. In the 1830s Loudon, by then a leading writer and practitioner, found that many of Repton's limes had already died or were dying because of heavy pollution. The London planes which are so large and magnificent today were Loudon's replacements (particularly in the horseshoe) and additions (on the perimeter), which proved tougher and more resistant.

#### **Box 4. Plane trees**

London Plane *Platanus x hybrida* (also *x acerifolia x hispanica*) originated c 1650 in southern Europe as a hybrid between the oriental plane (*Platanus orientalis* first introduced to Britain in the sixteenth century) and the western plane (*Platanus occidentalis* which was brought back from Virginia in 1640 by the younger Tradescant). The oldest London trees include those of Berkeley Square, planted in 1789 or thereabouts, and are a distinct form, *pyramidalis*, close to the American plane.

Over the past 200 years the London Plane has been planted widely throughout the capital. Their popularity as a street tree is due to the ability of their roots to function in compacted and covered soil, and that they are said never to be known to blow down. They are also able to withstand pollution, especially smoke and soot, partly as a consequence of their continual shedding of bark, which produces the species' most attractive feature.

Otherwise the London Plane has little to commend it. It casts one of the densest shades of any London street tree – perfect on the hottest and sunniest of days, but gloomy and avoided by most people on 'normal' days. In autumn the large leaves take a long time to decay (and prove of little value for invertebrates) and if unswept, litter the grass and streets for weeks. Its fruits look attractive but are of little value for seed eating birds. And compared to other trees – including other introductions – it is very poor in invertebrate life (although a few, like the caterpillars of the vapourer moth, are able to use it as a food source).

The Russell Square plane trees were planted by Loudon in the 1830s, along the line of Repton's original horseshoe avenue and (later) along the sides of the square. They were damaged in the Second World War, thinned in the 1957 landscaping and again by the 1987 Great Storm. In the current management plan they will be retained until they die, when they will be replaced by further sections of the lime avenue.

## Westmacott and the statue of the fifth Duke

The statue of Francis, the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke, was planned by 1806 though not completed and unveiled till 1809. It faces outwards, and the intention is clearly that it should be seen from the outside of the Square. It looks down Bedford Place to Bloomsbury Square, where later a statue of Charles James Fox by the same sculptor, Sir Richard Westmacott, was erected in 1816 so that the two face each other. The Duke is dressed as a Roman senator, to give him authority and a classical dignity (Figure 15). His role as an agricultural improver is stressed. At Woburn the 'new farming' had been practised on a huge scale and the statue celebrates his achievements as an agricultural 'improver'. A contemporary account reads:

*The south side is graced by a pedestrian statue, in bronze, of the late Duke of Bedford, by Mr Westmacott: his grace reposes one arm on a plough; the left hand holds the gift of Ceres. Children playing round the feet of the statue, personify the four seasons. To the four corners bulls' heads are attached, in a very high relief; the cavity beneath the upper mouldings has heads of cattle in recumbent postures. On the carved sides are rural subjects in basso relievo: the first is the preparation for the for the ploughman's dinner; his wife, on her knees, attends the culinary department; a youth is also represented sounding a horn; two rustics and a team of oxen complete the group. The second composition is made up of reapers and gleaners; a young woman in the centre is delineated with the agreeable features and general comeliness of a village favourite<sup>27 p116</sup>.*

The gender and role stereotyping here was the language of statuary at the time. It reveals a great deal about its social relations, mores and values.

The statue is nine feet in height, in bronze, on an eighteen feet high plinth of Scottish granite. Figure 13 shows the statue soon after its unveiling; Figure 14 shows the growth of vegetation two decades later. Repton hoped that the trees behind it would not be allowed to prevent viewing the statue against the clear sky.

**Figure 13. Westmacott's statue in 1817**



From Morland's Walks Through London (1817) Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

**Figure 14. Westmacott's statue with Punch and Judy, 1829**



Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

**Figure 15. Westmacott's statue and its symbolism, 2004.**



Photo: Richard Clarke May 2004. The symbolism says a great deal about contemporary mores and social relations as well as about the status of its subject.

## **Box 5. The Russell Square Cabbies' Shelter**

There are 13 surviving Cabmens' shelters in London, all built from the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The shelters were conceived by a Captain G C Armstrong of St John's Wood in 1874, where the first was opened in 1875. By 1908 there were 47, and by 1914, a total of 61 such shelters mostly erected at a cost of some £200 each by individual benefactors. As they were placed on the public highway, they were required by police to take up no more space than a horse and cab. They served tea, coffee, and bread and butter and were staffed by an attendant to cook the food that the cabbies brought in. The declared object was to keep London's cabbies on the straight and narrow. Rules for the customers including no swearing or drinking - all of the shelters were alcohol-free (which is probably why the cabbies gave 'pub' names to several of them).

Cabbies' shelters continued to flourish in the early part of the twentieth century, when horse drawn cabs gave way to the black motorised cab, but were gradually removed in the 1960s and 1970s. Their survival today is due to the intervention of the Greater London Council (before its abolition by Margaret Thatcher) and the Cabmens' Shelter Fund (originally established by the Earl of Shaftesbury in 1874 but now administered by the Transport and General Workers' Union, the T&GWU) <sup>28</sup>.

Pre 1945 photographs and engravings show either one or two cabmen's shelters in Russell Square, both of them on the west side of the Square (but they were mobile and may have occupied several different positions) On 9 May 1923 Holborn Council agreed to the request of the Motor Cab Trade Protection Society for the removal of the Cabman's Shelter in Russell Square to a position 'opposite Upper Bedford Place', but a 1939 engraving (Figure 19) shows the shelter to be in its earlier (1904) position opposite the entrance to the University. It seems likely that the original Russell Square shelters were destroyed during the war, however, because no shelters can be found in post-war pictures of the Square.

The present shelter was constructed, according to Camden Council's listing, in 1897, and funded by the Victorian theatre impresario Sir Squire Bancroft who 'presented' it in 1901 for the benefit of Theatreland (and to ensure that a cab would be available for his own use at any time) and it originally stood in Leicester Square, from where it was restored and moved to its present

position in 1987, and given Listed Building status the following year. In landscape terms the Cabman's Shelter serves as an 'organic' connection between the Russell Square's buildings and its gardens, because the green panelled walls and steep shingled roof of the Shelter suggests a park-keepers hut. The shelter, like most of the other buildings in the Square and like all 13 surviving London cabmen's shelters, is protected as a Grade II listed building of special architectural merit. Most people would feel that it adds to the integrity of the Square, just as the 'Hackney cab' is characteristic of the city itself. This was not always the case however.

Although the shelters date only from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, London cabs have a much longer history, for much of which their drivers were seen by 'polite' society as people to be encountered only when essential, and then only with care. For many years, the Russell family's Bedford Estate's Office succeeded in keeping bus and tram lines away from its residential streets (it did nothing to oppose underground railways which were too far underground to prove a nuisance). The same opposition was extended to cabs and taxis.



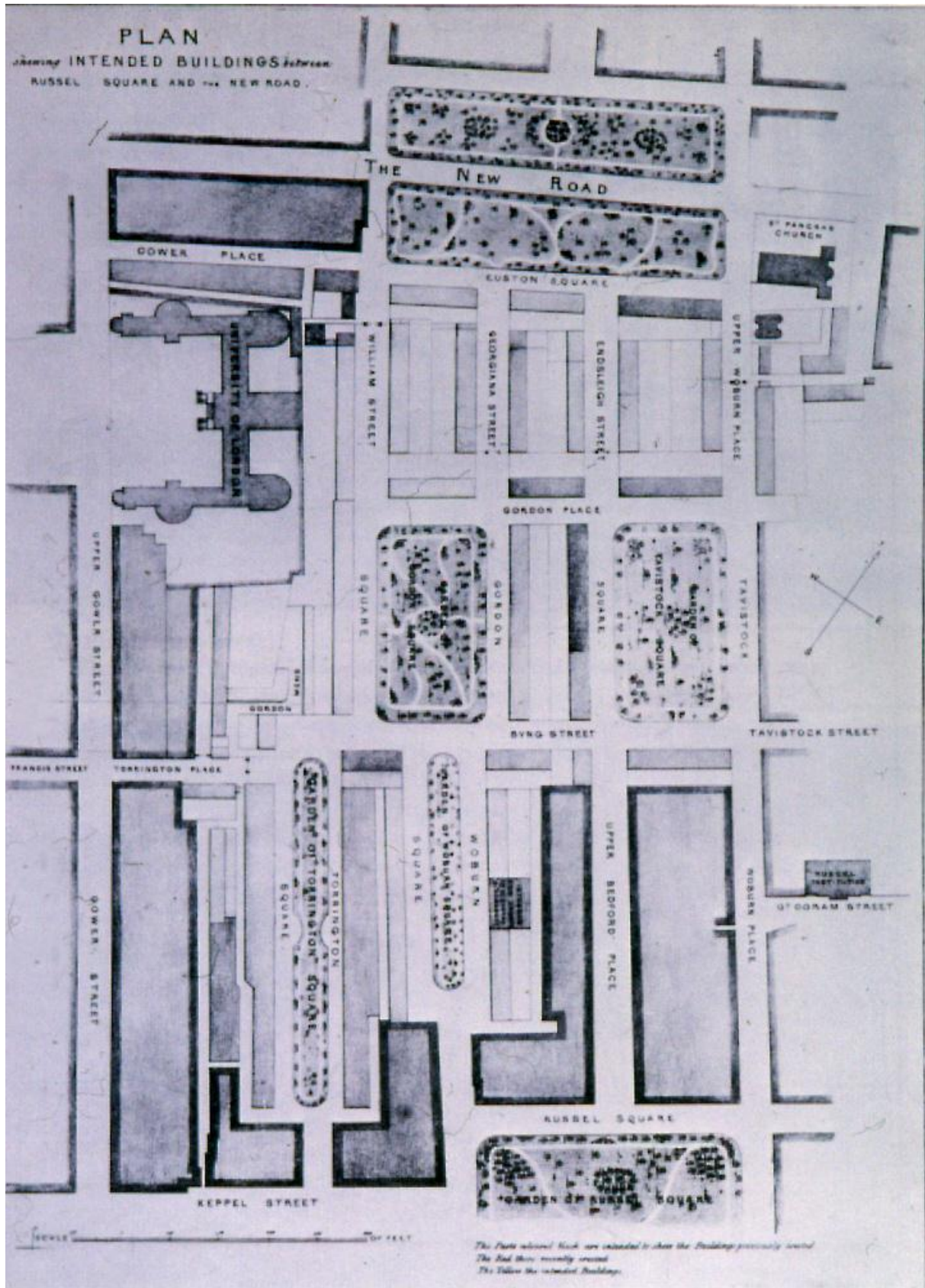
## 4. Decline: Russell Square in the nineteenth century

Russell Square's buildings, the garden and its ornaments were as 'complete' in the late 1810s as they were ever to be. An 1819 survey based on the 1813 map in Figure 12, amended to include subsequent buildings, shows the layout as it manifest the vision of the Bedfords and their contractors, Burton and Repton. However, the original character of the Square was retained at most for a few decades.

In many ways, the Bloomsbury project was, if not doomed, then at least significantly compromised from the start. The position of neighbouring estates, particularly the Foundling Hospital whose houses were intended for the middle classes, seriously compromised the Bedford's claims to exclusivity. This situation further worsened later in the nineteenth century with the development of the decidedly ungentle Somers Town and Camden areas to the north. The construction, between 1756 and 1761 of London's first ring road, the New Road (now Marylebone and Euston Roads, continuing up Pentonville Road and then south down City Road) and then the Grand Union Canal in the early 19C, laid the basis for the rapid commercialisation of the northern part of the area. Although the road provided transport links, essential for a new residential area, crucially these were orientated towards the City rather than the West End. This reinforced the appeal of the area for the professional and commercial classes rather than the gentry. When the railways appeared (Euston, St Pancras and King's Cross) Bloomsbury was too close and the fate of the Bedford Estate was sealed. This was dramatically symbolised by the building of the Euston Arch (1836-40) that formed the entrance to the new Euston Station. Sited on the Bedford axis stretching all the way from Bloomsbury Square, *"it marked, with dramatic emphasis, the end of one age and the entry into another"* <sup>14 p190</sup>.

1830 appears to have been a high point for our Square, described by a contemporary writer as  
*a favourite residence of the highest legal characters; and here merchants and bankers have seated themselves and their families, the air and situation uniting to render it a pleasant retreat from the cares of business* <sup>9 p110</sup>.

Figure 16. The 1830 Estate Plan



By kind permission of the Marquess of Tavistock and the Trustees of the Bedford Estate. The new buildings of University College can be seen on the western edge of the estate and the New Road on its north.

This was short lived. The economic slump of the 1830s saw a significant decline in the demand for 'first rate' houses in

Bloomsbury. The Bedfords tried to preserve the social exclusivity of their estate as the “*Gentlemen’s private Residence*” as they continued to develop Tavistock Square and Gordon Square (under Thomas Cubitt). One strategy was to insert restrictive covenants in the leases. In the most important streets, these forbade any trade at all. Leases for houses in more minor streets would normally include a list of prohibited occupations. A standard list of forbidden activities for the Bedford estate in the 1850s reads:

*Brewer, baker, sugar baker, publican, vintner, victualler, butcher, slaughterer, cowkeeper, chimney sweeper, tripeseller, poulterer, fishmonger, cheesemonger, fruiterer, herbseller, coffeehouse keeper, coffee-shop keeper, cookshop, distiller, dyer, pawnbroker, goldbeater, tanner, brazier, brass founder, ironfounder, diesinker, lacquerer, working smith, working tinman, farrier, dealer in old iron or in bottles, rags, bones, marine stores, dogs, birds, timber, wood, second-hand clothes, ready-made clothes, second-hand books, second-hand shoes, prints or caricatures; pipeburner, boneburner, melting tallowchandler, soapboiler, blackingmaker, undertaker, mason, bricklayer, plasterer, carpenter, sawyer, coffinmaker, trunkmaker, boxmaker, working printer, working bookbinder, working hatter, or working cooper, or ... any noisy, noisome or offensive trade or business whatever*<sup>9 p100-101</sup>.

These restrictions, like the present covenants in the University’s freehold, proved difficult to enforce. By the 1850s there were already substantial numbers of lodging houses in the area, mews were converted into workshops and infilling began in the gardens of the larger houses. In Trollope’s: *The Small House at Allington* (1864) Lord de Guest advises the hard-up John Eames to live in Bloomsbury because there, “*you can get a house for nothing*”. Bloomsbury was never in danger of turning into a slum but equally, its position east of the centre of fashion and the new transport developments ensured that the landlord’s dreams of its becoming an estate of the first sort were unrealistic even in the early nineteenth century<sup>9 p108</sup>.

Changes in the socio-economic status of the area were accompanied by deterioration of its fabric. In 1860, the Duke was disturbed by the “*unsightly state of the trees and plants in the gardens of several of the squares*” and had them replanted. In the same year, Gordon Square was completed (by Cubitt’s brother, Lewis) and the development of the Bedford estate ended. Attempts

to prevent change were accompanied by measures to accommodate it and to ameliorate its consequences. Symptomatic of these was the *"Bloomsbury Flower Show"* held apparently in three successive years, in 1863 -65 in Russell Square to *"encourage the taste for cultivating flowers among people of the working class..."*. It seems that this was the first time that the working class had been allowed into one of the large, private London squares and it was regarded as a startling innovation. The *City Press*, previewing the 1863 display declared: *"The inhabitants of Russell Square have consented to allow the exhibition to be held in their garden, which sounds as if the end of the world was near at hand"*<sup>29</sup>. Reports in the *Holborn and Bloomsbury Journal* indicate that these were inclusive events, involving as many women as men, with entries from schools and from domestic servants (in special classes for these categories); as well as specimen plants. Exhibits included models of gardens to which their owners could never aspire<sup>30</sup>. In 1864, an engraving from the *Illustrated London News* of *"The Bloomsbury Flower Show in Russell-Square Inclosure"* (Figure 18) accompanies an article that states that apart from the *"more distinguished visitors"* (including the earl of Shaftesbury) *"The company consisted, for the most part, of the poorer inhabitants of the parish"* taking advantage of *"the laudable arrangement which caused the customary barriers of exclusiveness to be thrown down for the first time"*<sup>31</sup>.

Residents themselves resented the effects of change and what they saw as neglect by the landlord. In 1884 residents of the Square complained that the plant house was in ruinous condition, although they had spent money on the garden itself.

Attempts to maintain exclusivity continued. Not only were the gardens fenced, but most of the squares were themselves gated. This caused increasing public opposition, not just because access to the amenities of the gardens was limited to the Square's residents, but also because through traffic from the north to south was prohibited. Sometimes the restrictions led to physical confrontation, and at least one death has been recorded<sup>32 p291</sup>.

In the 1880s, in an attempt to stop 'lodging-house rot', which was leading to an exodus by the better-off residents, the estate took steps to improve the estate. Gower Street was smartened up and as the original leases of Russell Square fell in, an attempt was made to 'Victorianise' the houses through the addition of terracotta ornaments and fancy ironwork (designed by Philip P. Pilditch

c.1896)<sup>14 p358</sup>. This completely changed the facades of the houses which survive on the south and north sides of the square.

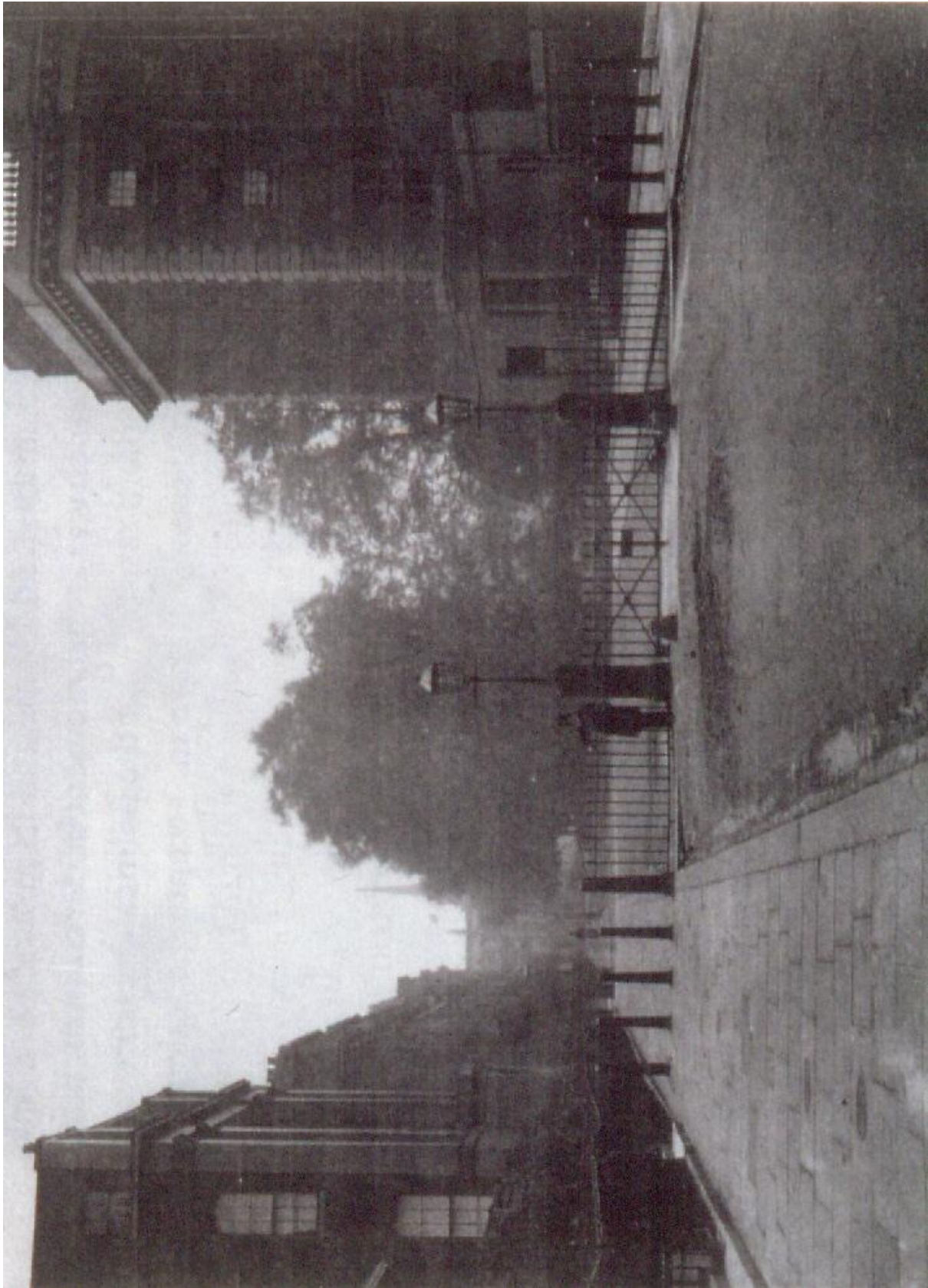
These activities achieved little to stem the tide of change. Eventually, bowing to the inevitable, the east side of the square was demolished in the 1890s and two immense hotels were built, of which only the Russell Hotel survives. This is the oldest purpose-built hotel in London and was originally built as a 'grand' for the White Star Line (owners of the infamous Titanic and previously also of the Ritz and Brown's hotels). A terracotta palace in the style of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century French chateau super-inflated to eight storeys, the Russell Hotel is now Grade II\* listed – the highest designation of any building in the Square. Its façade is decorated with coats of arms of the 'nations of the world' and niches on its façade contain statues of England's 'four great queens' (Elizabeth, Anne, and two Marys). The Russell's companion, the Imperial Hotel was replaced in the 1960s by two undistinguished modern buildings that add nothing to landscape. The designer of both the original hotels was Charles Fitzroy Doll, then surveyor of the Bedford Estate. Doll was also responsible for another terracotta fantasy - now Waterstones bookshop - on Gower Street<sup>33 p326</sup>.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the magnificence of these erections, the area continued to decline, as the eastern side of the Square became a main thoroughfare. A contemporary account of the building of the Russell Hotel declares "*The site is a good one, and will be of much more importance when the new street proposed by the London County Council is an accomplished fact, and the main road from north to south runs along this side of the Square*"<sup>34</sup>. Photographs of our Square from 1900s in the Camden Library archives show an enormous number of to let and for sale notices. At the same time the area became noted for its intellectual and literary associations, in particular with the rise, from 1904 onwards, of the 'Bloomsbury Group' of writers (now celebrated by the new statue of Virginia Woolf in Tavistock Square).

Russell Square's 1<sup>st</sup> class 'Gentlemen's Private Residences' began to be converted into hotels, solicitors' offices and (subsequently) departments of the university. T S Eliot worked for a time in 24 Russell Square when they were occupied by the offices of the publisher, Faber & Faber. A 1910 article in the *Daily Graphic* includes photographs of the remaining houses on the east side of the Square with "Site of the Imperial Hotel Extension" painted across their frontage and describes them as '*ravished sites...from*

*which the old-world houses are fast disappearing to make way for the ever increasing number of hotels<sup>35</sup>.*

**Figure 17. The Taviton Square gates and keeper, mid 19C**



Reproduced from Thorold 2000<sup>32</sup>, copyright holder unknown

**Figure 18. The 1864 Bloomsbury Flower Show**



From the Illustrated London News Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

## **Box 6. Previous occupants of 25 and 26 Russell Square**

The history of numbers 25 and 26 is as chequered as any other house of this age. Changes in its occupation illustrate the changing fortunes of the Square and of the area as a whole. *“The first mention of anybody living in [no 25 or 26] is in Boyle’s Court and Country Guide and Town Visiting Directory for 1811, Thomas Royds at no. 25. The next entry of interest is in the Guide for 1824, when Benjamin Hawes appears as the resident of No 26 where he lived until his death in 1861”*<sup>36</sup>.

*“Perhaps the most colourful person to reside at no 26 was William Roxby Beverly”* a scene painter at Drury Lane Theatre. *“According to the Dictionary of National Biography, he was the second most distinguished scene painter of the nineteenth century”* and who when a child in Manchester was thrashed for *“daubing the walls of his bedroom with soot and red lead in the endeavour to paint landscapes”*. Perhaps there are remains of later efforts still below the emulsion on the upper floors. William’s brother Henry, an actor, died at No 26 on 1 February 1863<sup>36</sup>.

In 1892, no 26 Russell Square was occupied by the Rev William Bramley-Moore. An early foretaste of the building’s later occupancy by FCE occurred on 19 September 1892 when the Rev. Professor W H Hechler, delivered a lecture *“...in the presence of a considerable number of guests... to show how remarkably the most recent discoveries in Assyria and Egypt vindicated the accuracy of the historic record of the Holy Scripture”*<sup>37</sup>.

In fact, 25/ 26 Russell Square are no strangers to religion and good works. The Annual Charities Register for 1912 carries an advert for the ‘London Biblewomen and Nurses’ Mission’ (founded 1857), with its offices at no. 25, which was called ‘Ranyard House’ after Mrs Ranyard (1810-79), a gifted writer of religious tracts who towards the end of her life employed no less than 170 ‘biblewomen’ to distribute bibles to the impoverished masses in areas such as nearby Seven Dials. In 1922 the Charities Register carries a further advert for nurses and an appeal for donations to the mission, now known as the ‘Ranyard Mission’ at this address<sup>36</sup>.

In 1926, nos. 25 and 26 were acquired, together with the whole of the west side of Russell Square, by London University. By this time no. 26 had been occupied by the ‘British Scientific Instrument Research Association’ which from 1925 to the end of the



War was engaged in monitoring technical developments in German industry<sup>38; 39</sup>.

After the War, in 1947 numbers 25 and 26 Russell Square were occupied by the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies. It was presumably around this time that the two buildings were converted into a single unit, when the first floor rooms became the Nuffield Foundation supported Library of Commonwealth Law<sup>40</sup>.

In 1975 the IALS moved to its present premises in Bedford Way. It was replaced by (the then, Federal University Department of) Extra-Mural Studies, which moved to numbers 25 and 26 from its previous premises on the top two floors of the Library Association building in Ridgemount Street.

In 1988 the 'Extra-Mural Department' of the University became a 'Centre' within Birkbeck College. It was renamed Birkbeck's Faculty of Continuing Education in 1998.

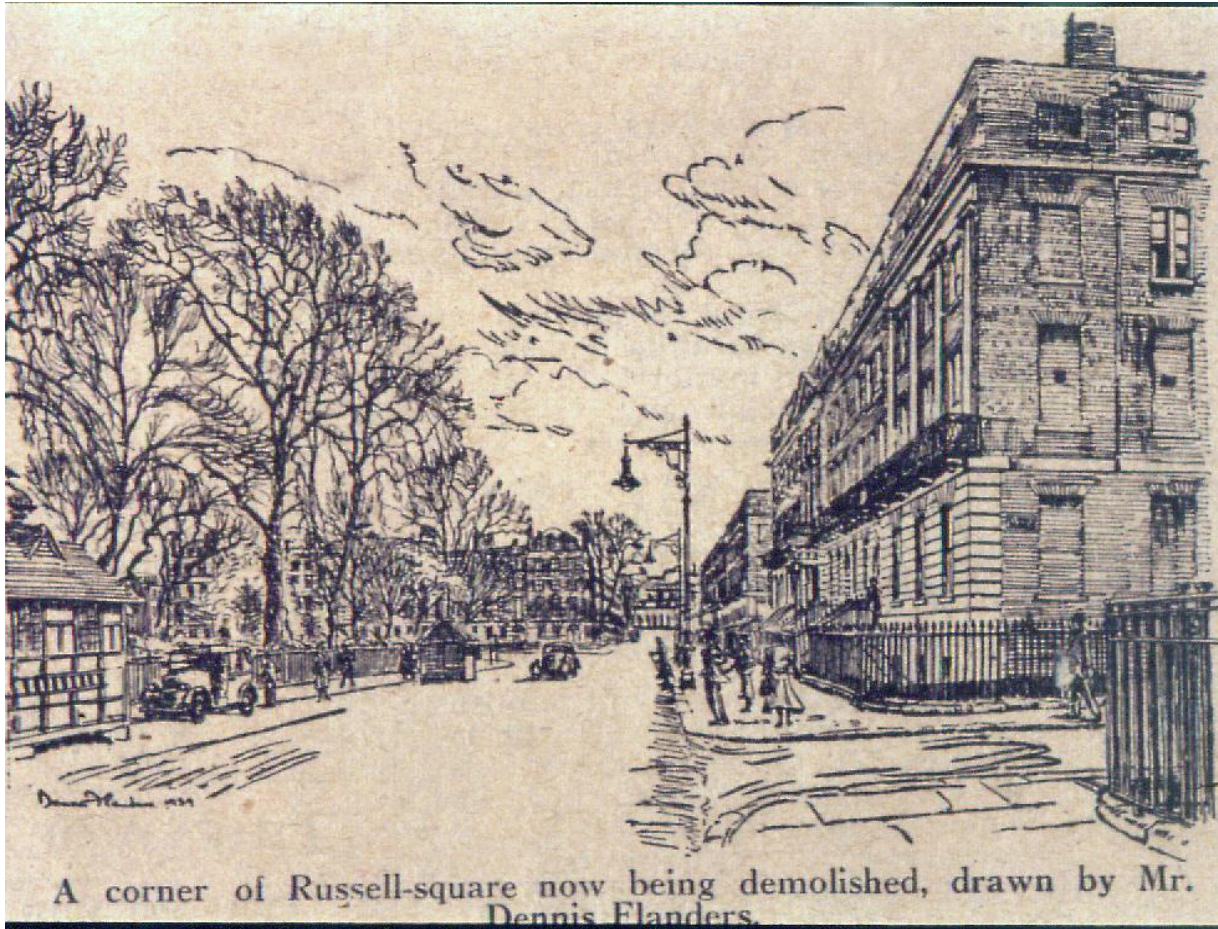
## 5. Transformation: Russell Square as public space

In 1890, despite resistance from landowners and residents the new London County Council secured and implemented a parliamentary Act which led to the abolition of gates and barriers with only modest compensation<sup>32 p291</sup>. As well as facilitating public access to the squares (but not yet their gardens) this allowed through traffic for the first time. A further milestone in public access was achieved with the 1906 Open Spaces Act, which allowed Commissioners to vote squares into the control and management of the Local Authority. A second, in conservation, was the 1931 London Squares Preservation Act, which placed (before the broader regulation of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act) significant restrictions on any development of Russell Square.

Russell Square gardens, however, remained private and the public were excluded until the 1939-45 War. Public use was severely restricted until the removal of the railings in 1941 to supply iron for munitions, permitted free access for workers who began to use the space for recreation and as a route to and from their offices. The War also caused damage, both to many of the buildings around the Square (although the destruction of numbers 31 – 37 was ironically, at the hands of the University) and to the gardens; the central Pavilion was destroyed by a flying bomb on 23 June 44 (Figure 22)

*De facto* public access to (and the removal of the railings from) the Gardens precipitated an inevitable change in their status from private to public open space in September 1943, when an agreement between the Duke of Bedford, the Commissioners and Holborn Borough Council, transferred the maintenance and management to the local authority for a period of 7 years. At the end of this period, there was a further lease commencing 25 Dec 1949 (Figure 23) from the Duke of Bedford & Commissioners of Russell Square, to Holborn Borough Council for a term of 50 years for an annual payment of Ten Pounds payable on Christmas Day.

**Figure 19. Russell Square West Side looking south, 1929**



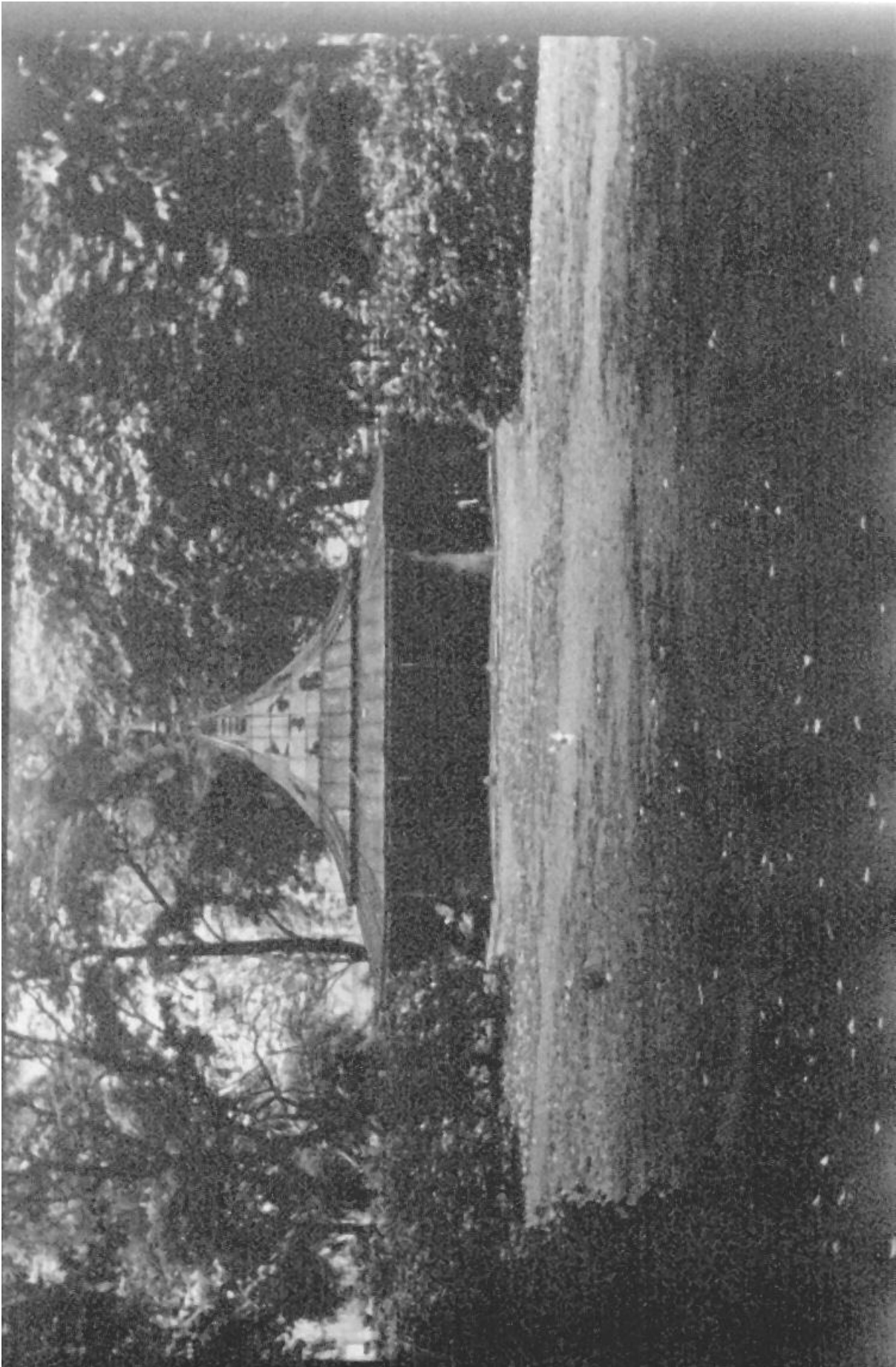
Dennis Flanders by kind permission of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

**Figure 20. Russell Square West Side looking north, 1929**



Hanskip Fletcher by kind permission of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

**Figure 21. The central Pavilion (n.d.)**



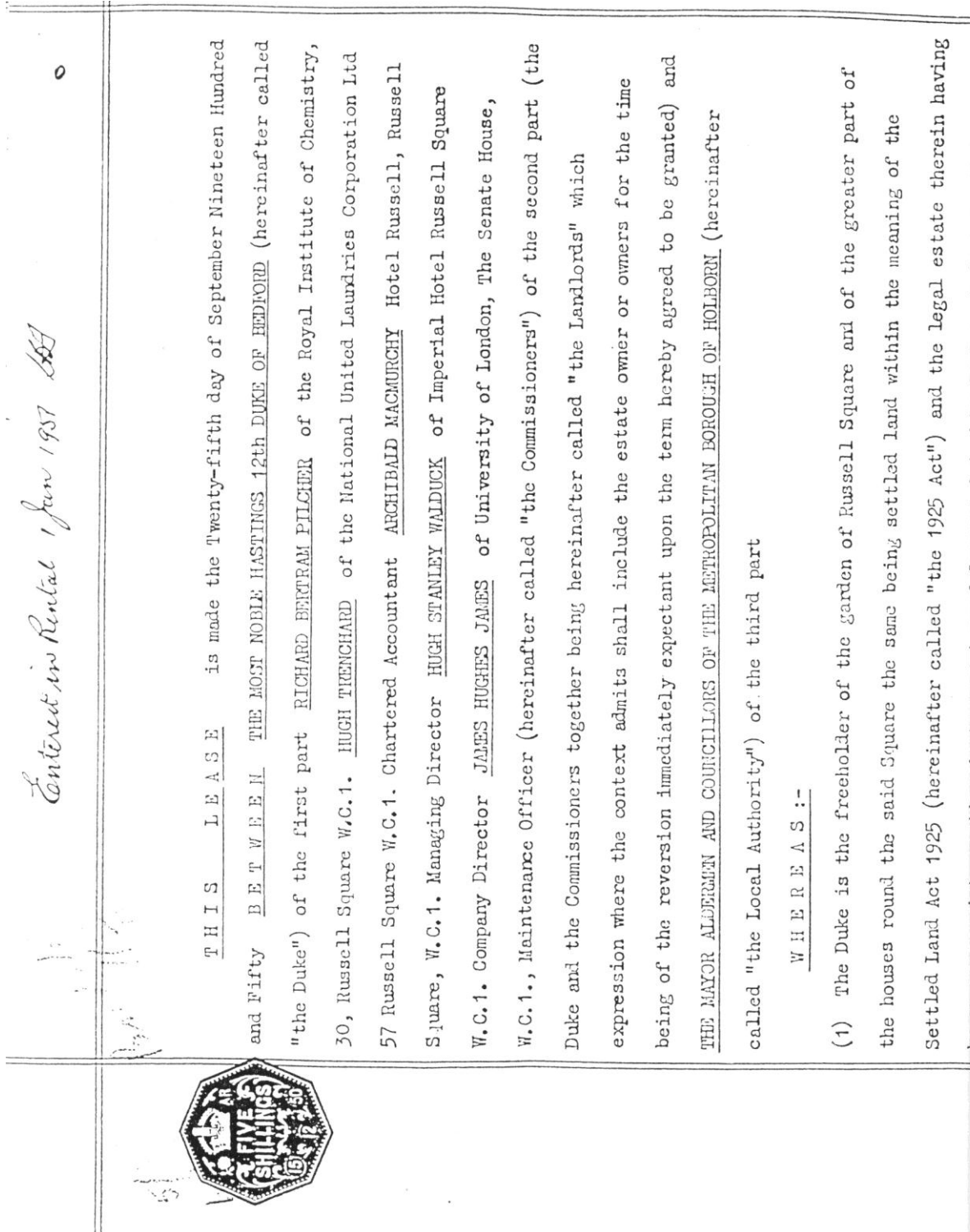
Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

**Figure 22. The central Pavilion destroyed by a bomb, 1944**



Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre.

Figure 23. First page of the 1949 lease



Under the terms of the lease, the local authority undertook to maintain the Square as an "open space and garden for the public use and for the... following types of entertainment" (open air band concerts, dramatic performances, charity fetes and pageants but not fun fairs). Entrance was to be free to the public, although a charge could be made for the use of facilities. No building was to be erected, except for shelters for gardeners, and the Authority could

provide for one canteen, which could be open from 10am to 10pm but not to sell liquor, and for a lavatory for employees and artistes but not for the public. Overall, the landscape was to be maintained as an ornamental garden *“provided that no material alteration in layout of the Square garden as a whole... nor shall any trees be felled pollarded or substantially lopped... without the written consent of the Duke...”*. The railings and other fabric would be maintained, and the Council agreed that it *“will keep the statue of the Seventh [a mistake in the lease] Duke of Bedford... clean and in good repair”*.

Perhaps because of the restrictive terms of the lease, little change took place in the landscape of the Square over the next half century. In the meantime, during the 1950s, Woburn Square joined Torrington Square as part of the University estate, whilst Tavistock and Gordon squares were transferred to the London Borough of St Pancras.

Between 1957-60 Russell Square was replanned by S A Cooke, the Borough Architect. The vision was a modern one, looking forward, not backward, of the Square as public space (Figure 26). The main changes included new paths related to desire lines, the erection of railings to replace those removed during the War, the construction of a café in the north-east corner (Figure 25) and the replacement of the central groundsman's shed (itself a temporary structure in place of the pavilion destroyed during the War) by 3 circular 'Festival of Britain' fountains in the centre, surrounded by seats and flower beds (Figure 28). These bore the inscription *“during the years 1959-60 the square was replanned and the fountains and tea houses constructed by Holborn Borough Council for the enjoyment of the citizens of the Borough and those who succeed them”*. Other changes in the 1960 renovation included reshaping of trees and felling of those damaged by shrapnel.

The 1960 additions, and the fountains in particular, were regarded with great affection by users of the Square. The fountains were cited by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Society as of considerable merit. They also came to have a certain symbolism for members of the early 'gay community'. A second fountain was constructed outside the northeast corner of the Square at the same time (Figure 27). They remained in working order at least until the mid 1980s, and were finally switched off around 1986 by Thomas Sullivan, father of Carol Watts (Box 7 and Figure 24), who first joined the staff of FCE (then, the Department of Extra-mural Studies) in 1970.

### Box 7. A Russell Square childhood

My family were re-housed from Grays Inn Road to 20b Bedford Way in 1947. The Georgian houses were leased to Holborn Council from the Bedford Estates. The block of six houses were converted into flats with a communal entrance.

As children we used Russell Square as a play ground (it was safer than the bomb sites on each end of Bedford Way). There was a play area, mainly just gravel, and at some stage the Council put in a sandpit, but we were more interested in the four humps (hillocks) which were located in the corners of the square. We rode our bicycles (those who had them) and anything else with wheels on to the top and free-wheeled down, until we were chased away from them by the caretaker. One of these humps, on the north-east corner, used to house the gardening and maintenance equipment.

A full stage and seating area were erected in the summer and my dancing school was among those who regularly performed there. I seem to remember that there were bands playing also.

In the 1980s my father was employed as a heating engineer by Camden Council. One of his responsibilities was the maintenance of the three circular fountains and also the fountain situated on the raised triangular flower bed situated outside of the square (north-east corner). When he retired, in 1984, the Council failed to find anybody to take over from him and the fountains were abandoned.

Carol Watts



**Figure 24. Carol Watts and friend in Russell Square, 1956**



Photo by permission of Carol Watts

**Figure 25. The first Russell Square café in 1961**



Reproduced by permission of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre

**Figure 26. Camden Council's 1957 vision for the Square**



Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre. The Duke of Bedford's statue is without railings and part of the 'public space' of the Square.

**Figure 27. The external fountains, 1961**



Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre

**Figure 28. The central fountains - 1961**



Reproduced courtesy of Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre

## The University

Well before the arrival of the university, Bloomsbury was known as a centre for education <sup>41</sup>. Fanny Burney attended an academy known as 'The Ladies' Eton' in Queen's Square and the area was noted for its learned societies and professional inhabitants such as doctors and lawyers, attracted by its location mid-way between the City and the West End. The housing of the British Museum first from 1754 in Montague House in Great Russell Street and then from the 1820s in its resplendent Grecian replacement, reinforced the area's cultural connections <sup>13; 42</sup>. With plenty of land available as well it was an obvious choice to be the site of a new university for the capital.

University College was established as a radical alternative to Oxbridge, admitting its first students in 1826. It was created by a group of free-thinkers led by Jeremy Bentham, Lord Brougham and the poet Thomas Campbell. Their aim was to provide 'literary and scientific education at a moderate expense' and their foundation was to be different in two key respects. First, it was to be non-residential for staff and students, as this was felt to be potentially repressive. Second, it was non-denominational – leading to its nickname as 'the godless college'. The austere neo-classical style of the Gower Street building symbolised the institution's radical agenda and secularism, in contrast to the monastically-derived Oxbridge quadrangle. However, there was strong opposition to the new college led by the Duke of Wellington and the Anglican bishops who in 1828 established King's College on the Strand as an alternative. Parliament decided not to grant one institution priority over the other but established an umbrella body, the University of London, in 1836.

This federal structure for the University was to have a lasting influence on its nature and politics. It was also to have a considerable impact on the Russell Square area in the twentieth century. From the award of its first royal charter in 1836, London University was a scattered institution, with its 'centre' housed in a succession of unsatisfactory locations. In 1910 a Royal Commission on University Education in London was appointed under Lord Haldane. It recommended that:

*The university should have for its headquarters permanent buildings appropriate in design to its dignity and importance, adequate in extent and specially constructed for its purposes,*

*situated conveniently for the work it has to do, bearing its name and under its own control*<sup>41</sup>

These were to replace the existing administration and library buildings which had been housed in the Imperial Institute, part of the rival education complex developed from the 1860s at South Kensington. Mews clearance north of the British Museum in the 1900s offered the potential of large open spaces for development but little came of this once war broke out in 1914. One structure of this period is The Institute of Chemistry (which as no 30 Russell Square is now part of Birkbeck College and houses part of FCE). Built between 1913-14 by Sir J J Burnet, the building, like the original James Burton building that it replaced, is Grade II listed.

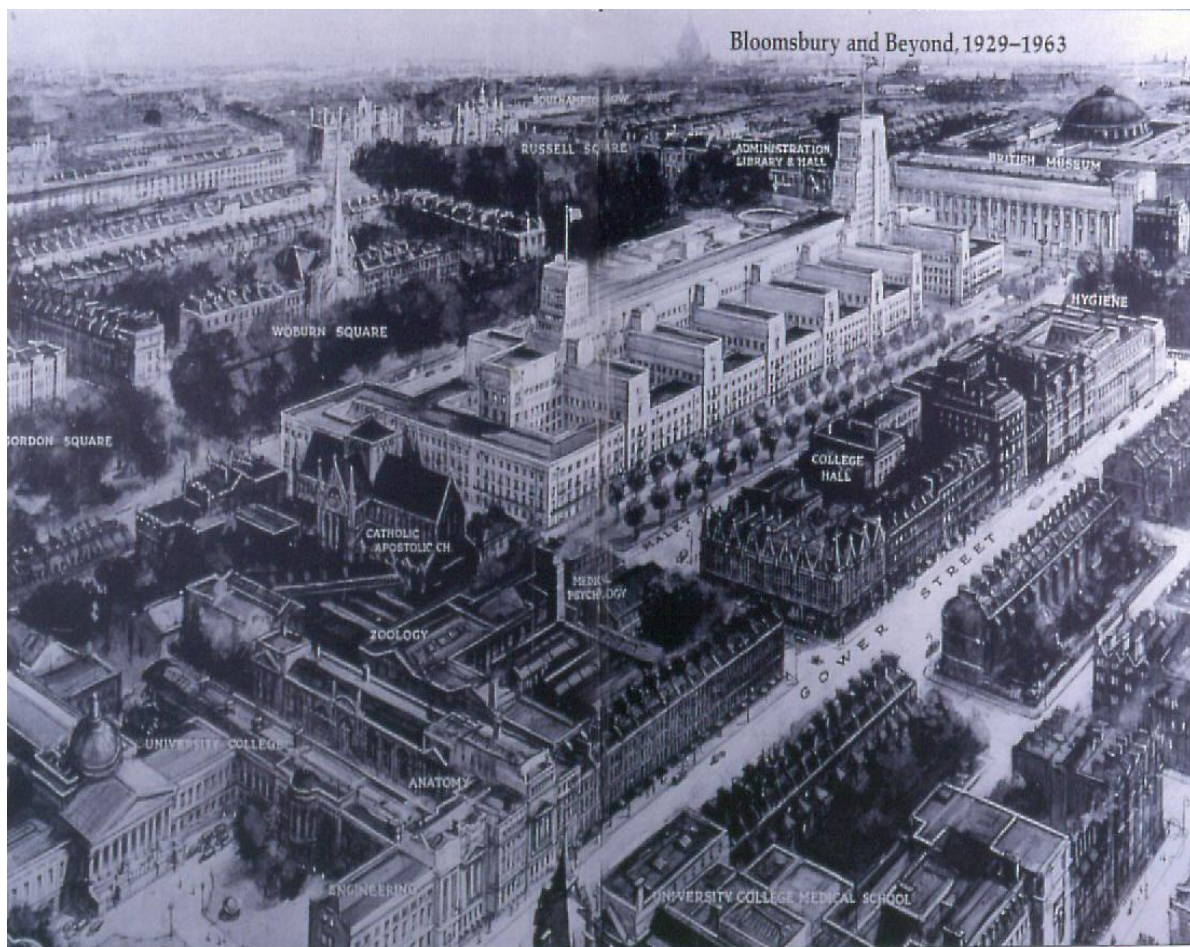
The move of the university's headquarters to Bloomsbury, however, was fraught with problems. The university had rejected a move to Bloomsbury in 1853 and it did so again in 1912 following an interim report of the Haldane Commission. The next two decades were characterised by controversy and indecision. In 1920 the government bought the whole of the present site (the area framed by Montague Place, Malet Street, Torrington Place, Woburn Square and Russell Square) from the Duke of Bedford for £425,000. The purchase was subject to a proviso that building should start before April 1926, failing which the Duke would regain possession.

Opposition within the university frustrated any agreement to the move and the property was 'sold' back to the Duke who repaid the purchase price to the government so that the money was effectively lost to the University. The Bedford estates repossessed the site and served notice to quit on the institutions, which had in the meantime housed themselves in temporary premises there. In 1926 the cleared site was sold again by the Bedford Estate to the University following a dramatic intervention by Sir William Beveridge, the vice-chancellor, who secured last minute funding from the Ruckerfeller Foundation to purchase the freehold<sup>4</sup>. It was decided that the area should house the smaller institutes and colleges, including Birkbeck, besides the central offices and library<sup>43</sup>.

In 1930 Charles Holden, architect to London Underground, was appointed to the scheme, famous subsequently for his Piccadilly line stations (and also St James' Park station) and his War memorials in France and Belgium. The brief stated that the new building was to have at its centre a tower, "*to dominate the other buildings on and surrounding the site*"<sup>44 p27</sup>. Holden conceived the

building as an 'I' plan, its central spine being the north – south axis running the whole 1,200ft length of the site along the previous Museum Avenue right up to Torrington Place. A fundamental feature of the design was that it was to retain an open thoroughfare along the line of the road that it replaced (as the part that was eventually built does today). Either side of this spine were to be cross-ribs, creating a series of courtyards (Figure 29) <sup>43</sup>. Holden liked the simplicity of the plan, which he said was without “*any tricks of the ‘Grand Manner’*”. It was approved by the University and by George V who said it looked like a battleship.

**Figure 29. The original plan for Senate House**



Reproduced by permission of the University Estate Office

The foundation stone of the new buildings was laid by King George V in 1933, however like everything else in Bloomsbury, the original intentions were never realised. Holden’s ambitious plan was progressively cut back, partly because of fundraising problems and also because the individual colleges were determined to maintain their separate identities. Preparations were made for expansion; numbers 31 – 37 Russell Square were demolished in 1939 and 400 piles placed in anticipation of the building of a Ceremonial Hall extension to the west of Senate House. This was

delayed by the War after which the funds available proved inadequate and they were used instead towards the construction of Logan Hall in Bedford Way. The Russell Square buildings were not replaced – with Stewart House – until 1983. The northern end of the scheme was covered instead with a series of utilitarian freestanding brick buildings: ULU, SOAS (1946), Birkbeck (1951) and the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes (1958) were built separately in succession from the end of the War.

Only the central tower of 215ft and two of the wings of the original Senate House scheme were completed as the administration and library area. Holden opted for a traditional brick structure with load bearing walls, as the engineers of the 1930s couldn't guarantee a long life for a steel frame. The building was faced with Portland stone (the material traditionally associated with elite buildings in London). The building's success in passing the so-called cabbie test of instant memorability led to its being applauded and denigrated in equal measure. Some saw it as London's first skyscraper, while the architectural establishment was snooty about it not being modernist enough. Pevsner found it baffling in its "*strangely semi-traditional, undecided modernism*" <sup>45 p211</sup>.

Senate House's notoriety was increased by its occupation during the War by the Ministry of Information with its 999 employees. Many writers, broadcasters and journalists were employed there who used the building in their subsequent works. It became the model for Orwell's Ministry of Truth in *1984* and for Graham Greene it became the 'Ministry of Fear'. Evelyn Waugh used it for a setting in *Put Out More Flags* in which a lunatic with a bomb ticking in a briefcase is referred from one department to another clutching his time bomb all the while, the building serving as a Kafkaesque symbol of the idiocy of bureaucracy. John Wyndham had Senate House as the last bastion of civilisation in his *Day of the Triffids*. The building has featured much in television series, as an American hotel in *Jeeves and Wooster* (with Hugh Laurie and Steven Fry) and in *Poirot* (with David Suchet).

Bloomsbury suffered severe bombing during the Second World War. This, combined with the neglect into which many buildings had fallen, led to calls for the demolition of the Georgian buildings. It had become more 'bury' than 'bloom'. The Bedford Estate tended to restore (rather than replace) its buildings, probably because it felt the area was not sufficiently prosperous to merit new schemes. The University by contrast planned a great new future for itself, spurred

on by competition from the new campus universities of the 1960s such as East Anglia and Sussex. In 1959 the architect Leslie Martin produced a plan for integrating the disparate existing buildings into a larger secluded University precinct that could rival the spacious layouts of out-of town sites. In order to achieve this much of the existing Georgian landscape would need to be demolished. This met with great opposition both inside and outside the university and the scheme was only approved after a tense vote in a specially convened meeting of Convocation in 1969 <sup>14 p375</sup>.

The scheme was eventually partially implemented at SOAS (1973) and the Institute of Education (1975-9) by the architect of East Anglia University, Denys Lasdun, resulting in the demolition of most of Woburn and Torrington Squares. He incorporated key elements of Martin's master plan: the limitation of through-traffic, the retention and expansion of the gardens, underground parking and service routes, and the provision of raised walkways to bridge existing streets (unfinished).

Like Holden, Lasdun was asked to create a strong presence for the university in the area and this he achieved through an extension of the university precinct to the east. The massive concrete forms of the Institute of Education provided the new unmissable landmark building in contrast to the restrained simplicity of the SOAS extension designed at the same time. The newly landscaped areas continued the green zone of Russell Square threading it through the heart of the university; a theme which would have been more dominant if the planned arterial walkway linking Russell Square with Gordon Square had been completed.

The complex made its biggest impact on Russell Square at its southern end where the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies abuts the square itself, while the massive concrete curtain wall along Bedford Way now formed the channel for the axial vista to the north. Mention should also be made of another modernist megastructure, the Brunswick Centre, (1965-73) by Patrick Hodgkinson the third ziggurat (along with Senate House and the Institute of Education) to surround the square.

Even in the 1960s these changes did not go unchallenged and the failure to fully implement Martin's plan can be attributed as much to the increasingly conservationist climate of the 1970s as to the limitations of the university coffers. In 1966 Ian Nairn, a noted anti-modernist critic, wrote:



*As anything more than an area on a map, Bloomsbury is dead. Town planners and London University have killed it between them - a notable academic victory. The splendid plane trees are still there to soothe. ... But instead of their gay yet discreet stock-brick surroundings, there are doughy intrusions like the droppings of an elephant. The original was built to make a profit and be an enjoyable part of London as well. The replacements are designed from God knows what backwater of the intellect. If this is progress, then I am a total abstainer*<sup>41</sup>

Today in 'post-modern' Britain, elephant dung is a well-known component of art (in the paintings of Chris Offili) and we are perhaps more inclined to welcome the architectural collisions and contrasts that the Russell Square area offers. The reproduction Georgian of the Stewart building (constructed in 1983 on the site of numbers 31 to 37) is (like the Lottery funded 'restoration' of the gardens) perhaps a relatively inoffensive example of 'heritage' re-creation, although they were not seen in this way at the time. Charles McKean, Architecture Correspondent of *The Times* declared of the plans for the Stewart Building "*We are faced with a flabby, spineless and unattractive neo-Georgian reconstruction of a Russell Square that probably never was*"<sup>46</sup>. A letter in the *Telegraph* called the Stewart extension a *miserable travesty, unworthy of its splendid site*"<sup>47</sup>.

The contemporary contextual approach to design is well-represented by SOAS's 1995 Brunei Gallery by Nicholas Hare on whose outer wall are located the plaques with which this essay opened. It uses Georgian proportions and scale to harmonise with its surroundings but at the same time makes a telling play of modern materials and structure to announce its twentieth-century creation. Russell Square one might argue due to its immense generosity of layout has stood up to the surrounding behemoths extremely well. It is still the centrepiece of Bloomsbury and represents in its juxtaposition of university, commercial and domestic buildings the balance of interests that characterise and control the area.

### **The 'restoration' of Russell Square gardens**

In the late 1990s, as the 1949 lease came up for renewal, a decision was made to bid for £1 million of Heritage Lottery funding to 'restore' the Square's gardens to the Repton 1805 landscape design. A Friends' group was formed in 1994 to partner the Commissioners and Council, who contracted Land Use Consultants to develop a landscape strategy (1996) and proposals for

restoration. This was done initially without the knowledge of the Bedford Estates, who responded by resurrecting an earlier proposal (made originally in 1971<sup>48</sup>) to put in an underground Car Park (as they had done some years earlier in Bloomsbury Square). The HLF bid (submitted in 1996) was successful and work began on the restoration project in September 2001 under the HLF Urban Parks Programme. Following the transfer of management of the Square to Holborn Council in 1949, the role of the Commissioners had lapsed. In order to bid for HLF funding it had to be revived, with new Commissioners appointed.

At the same time, a new lease was concluded (in 2001) between the Bedford Estates and the London Borough of Camden. This lease is under largely the same terms as the 1949 lease, though for 25 years, at £5,000 per year payable to the Commissioners; with the Tenant (Camden Council) agreeing to carry out restoration works to a specification and times agreed with NHMF and the landlord, the Bedford Estates.

Space precludes any real discussion here about the reconstruction of the Square, but it could be argued that the outcome is 'vaguely Reptonian' rather than any real rehearsal of Repton's vision. The avowed aim of the restoration of Russell Square from 1999 was to bring it back as far as possible to Repton's 'original' design. One problem, as we have seen, with 'Repton's original design' is that Repton's wasn't the original design, and that his design as drawn may not have been fully executed anyway. In the event, the restoration has been based on a plan that conforms to Repton's 1805 layout and observes some historical elements but compromises in some key matters.

The most obvious of these are the dominant feature of the Square, namely the huge plane trees, which have been retained (though considerably thinned since the 1987 Storm). Uplighters have been installed below key trees. The planes postdate Repton; most are of Loudon's planting, and are not only non-Reptonian as a species but were planted in non-Reptonian positions, particularly on the perimeter. The planes also make for a much darker, shaded effect than the openness that Repton sought to contrast with his more restricted plantings. Those of the planes which *were* in Reptonian positions, namely in the horseshoe walk, are at odds with the limes that were originally there; under the current scheme it is planned to complete the arch of pleached limes (presently only

planted on the north section) around Repton's 'horse-shoe' path "*in future decades as the existing mature trees die back*"<sup>49 p16</sup>.

A second major change to Repton's intended layout is the reduction of four corner flowerbeds to two (in the interests of pedestrian traffic). In the NE and SW corners, Repton's oval plantings have been substituted by pathways joining the 'Celebratory Gateways' which acknowledge "*the importance of the 20<sup>th</sup> century desire line from the Underground to the British Museum*"<sup>49 p15</sup>. Other (perhaps more minor, but therefore more arbitrary) deviations from Repton's design include the railings around the Gardens. The new high railings are quite unlike the original much more modest (and easily scaled) railings shown in the pre-Repton 'Rhubarb' cartoon (Figure 8) and also in the post-Repton 1817 engraving (Figure 13). Both engravings include an interior set around the Duke of Bedford's statue, which are absent from all later maps and illustrations of the gardens, including the Council's 1957 vision. Since their past and present function cannot be to keep the Duke in, they can only be to keep the public out.

Other major elements in the HLF funded 'restoration' concern post-Repton additions to the Gardens. Unlike the plane trees these have not only been removed but (arguably, worse) replaced by modern features. This particularly applies to the artesian fountains, which dated from the late 1950s. Those in the centre of the gardens (which themselves replaced the pre-War circular shelter destroyed by a flying bomb which was on the site of Repton's original central *reposoir*) have now been replaced with a central 'plaza' a 'walk though fountain' with "*individual jets recessed into a York stone paved circle, programmed to perform a variety of displays*"<sup>49 p15</sup>. The fountains outside the gardens, on the NE corner, have been replaced by a computerised public toilet. Finally, a brand new, larger, café building (for which the tenants pay a substantially higher rent than previously and have increased their prices correspondingly) has replaced the 1970s building, itself on the site of the first café erected in 1960.

Together, these 'deviations' from Repton's vision illustrate the impossibility of absolute objectivity or of 'authentic' reconstruction. Russell Square, like all landscapes (rural and urban) is a palimpsest, the manifestation of accretions of human activity (and its interaction with natural process) through time. Authentic restoration to any particular point in history is well nigh impossible and risks ending up as pastiche. All heritage management involves value

judgements; decisions about what to keep, what to remove, and what to attempt to recreate.

Sometimes the decisions may be pragmatic – there would be great local opposition to any proposal to remove Russell Square’s plane trees, which are anyway protected by planning legislation; the tendency of people to walk where they wish means that desire lines usually triumph over other management considerations. Sometimes decisions may be driven by money, or the lack of it. Just as the Russell Square restoration could not have been undertaken *without* HLF funding, there is always a concern that unnecessary works are carried out simply because Lottery money was available and had to be spent. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between arbitrary decisions by planners and deeper motivations. The destruction of the Square’s Festival of Britain fountains cannot be justified by any appeal to Repton (the LUC plan talks of problems of maintenance but gives no reason for their replacement by a late-Tesco theme park design); the degree to which it was motivated by their association with the use of Russell Square as a gay cruising ground can only be a matter of conjecture. An alternative (but with HLF funding in the offing, minority) ‘vision’ for Russell Square was to accept it as a landscape with ‘time depth’, meriting the preservation and interpretation of as much as possible of its fabric.

The HLF funded make-over for Russell Square was also contested, though from a rather different direction, by a gay opposition group, the ‘Night-time Users of Russell Square’ who wanted the gardens to be kept open all night for ‘cottaging’. In this respect the restoration appears to have been rather more successful than the Misses Capper who almost 250 years previously in 1764 tried direct action to combat the behaviour of what they considered to be ‘depraved wretches’ in the area.

### **Interpretation and site based learning**

Interpretation is required as a condition of HLF funding. However the purpose, content and effectiveness of the signage and interpretive boards at each corner (there is no interpretive leaflet) is itself worthy of examination. There are some factual errors. Repton's date of birth is given as 1725 (it should be 1752); the date of death for the 5th Duke is given as 1805 (it should be 1802) and it was his successor, the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke (not the 5<sup>th</sup>) who employed Repton to work on Russell Square and who was “*obviously pleased with the results of Repton's work on the Duke's Woburn Estate in*

*Bedfordshire*” which, contrary to the statements on the boards, was carried out **after** the landscaping of Russell Square, not before. 'Sir' Francis Russell was never knighted (and he would have been “Your Grace” to his servants). More important than these simple mistakes, and as the questions raised above demonstrate, the garden has **not** “*been restored to its original splendour closely following Humphry Repton's plan of c.1805*”. In this context, the use on the boards of the Bedford Estate Plan of 1866 “*indicating Repton's Russell Square layout*” (which it doesn't) may also be questioned, since what the 1866 plan does include (which Repton's own drawings do not) are the later plane trees which are such a feature of the Square today.

Beyond the simple errors (of omission and commission), lie deeper questions about heritage, its creation, management, and interpretation. Heritage is not ‘found’, it is created, *forged* by people and organisations. It is culturally mediated, embodying particular purposes, perceptions or values, explicit and implicit. It is not ‘universal’ but necessarily partial, with regard especially to class, as well as gender, age, and ethnicity. Its mediation to the public (to the visitor to Russell Square, or to the reader of this booklet) should not therefore be used “*to conceal the present under layers of the past*”<sup>50 p30</sup>. It should be as objective as possible, however the presentation of ‘facts’ is necessarily as selective as the restoration of landscapes and objects. It should therefore make its biases explicit, whilst trying honestly (as should all education, formal and informal) to use our knowledge of the past to inform an understanding of the present. This occasional paper has tried to do just that.

## Box 8. Agricultural and urban 'improvement' then and now

The Bedford's development of Bloomsbury went in parallel with their activity as major agricultural 'improvers' of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both rural and urban activities involved inclosure of land for income and profit. However, whilst rural improvement was directed primarily to increasing the agricultural productivity of land, their concurrent participation in the rapid development of London was primarily directed towards increasing the value of land as a capital asset.

The London fortunes of the Russell family declined with those of the Square. In the 1880s, the Bedford Estate included holdings of some 285 acres from Covent Garden to the north of the Euston Road. Although only 20<sup>th</sup> in the ranking of London landowners by area, they were the second most profitable estate, producing £339,000 per annum (some £33 million today) in rental<sup>51 p154</sup>. Today the Duke of Bedford's London holding is reduced to just 20 acres, though this still amounts (at market values of some £400 per square foot before the property 'boom' of the mid 1980s) to a sizeable capital of some £348 million<sup>52</sup>.

The Russell family remain major rural landholders, however. The present Duke of Bedford has an estimated personal wealth of £370m. He also has the distinction of being Britain's largest recipient of the largess of the Common Agricultural Policy. A study in 2003 by Kevin Watkins, Head of Research at OXFAM showed how *"Large landed estates, created several centuries ago during the feudal era, have become lucrative sources for the collection of agricultural subsidies under the CAP"*<sup>53</sup>. The study used data from the government's Rural Payments Agency to demonstrate how EU farm subsidies go disproportionately to the very rich. In 2003, the Duke of Bedford is estimated to have received £382,000 in EU subsidies for his 5,400 ha farm estate at Woburn Abbey, which itself is just part of a total landholding of 23,000 acres. The report's author was quoted in the *Independent* as follows: *"The picture that emerges is one of a perverse system of social welfare, with billions of pounds in taxpayer finance benefiting some of the UK's richest families and wealthiest agricultural regions... The CAP subsidies continue disproportionately to reward those with wealth and assets, diverting public finance from urgent public priorities such as environmental sustainability and rural development"*<sup>54</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion and afterword

We hope that this Occasional Paper will provide a starting point for examination of the ways in which Russell Square can be used as a focus for life long learning over a wide variety of themes. Our first draft of this booklet included (as appendices) a list of 'learning points' for which the Square might be used in adult classes as well as an outline of ways in which the Square has been used as a resource for one subject 'desk' (the environment desk) within the Faculty. However, our work on the content of this paper, especially on the history of the Square, has shown it to be infinitely richer as a resource than we realised at the outset, and we would invite other colleagues to join us on what we hope will be an ongoing debate on these topics.

In place of a conclusion, therefore, it is perhaps fitting to return to our starting point, not to the plaques, but to the cabmens' shelter outside FCE in the northwest corner of the Square. The lowly cabmens' shelter (Box 5, p 35) is equally as significant as the valued architecture of Burton's original buildings (and the grandeur of later ones) and the 'heritage landscape' of the neo-Reptonian gardens; and it is the principal vernacular structure in the Square.

As early as the 1760s the Duke of Bedford tried to remove a Hackney coach stand from Covent Garden. In 1806, just after Russell Square was opened, a Bloomsbury Square Act forbade Hackney coaches from standing for hire in the square or within 300 feet of it. The Act was only repealed in 1980, following a recommendation of the Law Commission, prior to which London taxis plying for hire in the area risked a fine of £2. In 1874, after installation of gates restricting entry to the squares themselves, a cab driver died after a fracas with gate-keepers (see Figure 17) in Bloomsbury<sup>32 p291</sup>. In 1886, the Bedford Estates attempted unsuccessfully to eject the cab ranks that had just been established in Tavistock and Russell squares<sup>9 p152</sup>.

A hundred years later, in 1986 when the restored cabbies' shelter was installed in Russell Square, the then Principal of London University (himself a Commissioner of the Square under the 1800 Act) wrote to every academic member of staff asking them to protest to Camden Council opposing its installation, on the grounds that it was not in keeping with the Square, and would be likely to attract an undesirable clientele. How many acted on his advice is uncertain, but the shelter was installed. The outcome is the presence of a

small piece of London's 'heritage' that embodies the narratives of the larger Square – patronage and political ecology, taste, culture and class.

Our built environment <sup>55</sup> and the natural are socially determined. Their ownership is contested, as is their use. Also problematic is their 'nature', the way we 'see' them. Russell Square is a case in point.

We hope that this - apparently simple, narrative - history and description of the Square as an entity will stimulate discussion about the way that it can be used as a resource for teaching and learning, and that this in turn will provoke thought about linkages between subjects taught within FCE. We hope that it will stimulate discussion about the way this single 'place' can be 'seen' or interpreted in different ways for diverse purposes. At the very least, we hope that it will add to its readers' appreciation and enjoyment of 'our' Square.



**Figure 30. The north-west corner of Russell Square**



Photo: Richard Clarke, May 2004

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