

A NEW ORDER FOR LONDON?

LONDON was founded for practical reasons on a gravel terrace, some two miles broad, lying north of the Thames and east of the River Fleet, and almost certainly it stood there before the Roman invasion. The Romans built a wall round it, and are primarily responsible for its commercial importance since they made it the chief centre of their road system. The Romans left London not only defensible but also accessible by roads as well as by waterways. So it became the capital first of the kingdom of Essex and then of England; it was the diocesan town of a see instituted by Pope Gregory of which the first bishop was ordained by Saint Augustine.

Who were the men who first dared or were obliged to live outside the walls, forgoing the safety and privileges these enclosed, the men who began the expansion of London? The earliest evidence of suburban building occurs in the tenth century when the Danes, whom the Londoners barred at Ludgate, made the settlement along the river strand which was to name the church of St. Clement Danes. Outcasts of one kind or another: such were most of the mediaeval suburbanites. About the eastern and northern gates—Cripplegate, Aldgate, Aldersgate, Bishopsgate—unenfranchised and poor labourers lodged themselves as best they could. The southern bank, the Borough of Southwark, was a rather disreputable quarter, for it contained both prisons and certain areas in which immunity from legal arrest was enjoyed. It was the Bohemia of mediaeval London, and maintained this character in the sixteenth century when playhouses were set up on the southern bank, the city being inhospitable to dramatic art.

But already in the Middle Ages a West End was developing. The western suburb had dignified inhabitants because, especially the Strand, it was accessible to Westminster, that is to the king's palace, to the abbey where kings were crowned and to the meeting-place of parliament. The bishops and some other magnates reared palaces along the Strand, whence they could take boat for Westminster; the Knights Templar settled in the Strand; later came the lawyers to set up the inns of court and chancery about the city's western approaches.

This West End was bounded in the first half of the seventeenth century by Holborn, Chancery Lane, St. Martin's Lane and the Strand, and was then considerably populated by noblemen, courtiers

and statesmen. Then fashion moved westward to the neighbourhood of two beautiful royal houses, Whitehall and St. James' Palace, and the exodus was marked by the first London Square, St. James' Square. The West End of the Restoration extended little north of Piccadilly, but the demand in that period for spacious houses near the city and the court was so considerable that building began in the manor of Bloomsbury and in Soho, where enriched citizens as well as some of the modish acquired mansions. About the houses of the wealthy and the fashionable, the poorer dwellings of those who served them clustered inevitably.

Meanwhile, along the great roads to the city, those the Romans had made and their branches, there were villages and country towns, deriving a growing importance from London's traffic.

Such was London, until from the eighteenth century an increase in the means of communication enlarged the area in which Londoners lived. To the boats on the Thames, the saddle-horses and the privately owned carriages and sedan-chairs, hackney coaches and chairs which plied for hire were added in the reign of Queen Anne and their number increased rapidly. Then about 1828 omnibuses were introduced into London from Paris; six years later Joseph Aloysius Hansom took out a patent for the cab he had invented. In 1863 the first underground railway was opened from Farringdon Street to Paddington; in 1890 came the first Tube—the City and South London. No longer was it the last resort of the wretched to huddle in the outskirts of the city, and no longer was it only the rich who could live in airy places although they worked in the city. Greater London was free to spread, and to carry urban comforts, as far as the railways would bear it. To a notable extent, industry accompanied residence, industries of the older villages which were absorbed being enlarged and urbanised and new industries springing up; thus there came to be industrial and partially industrial suburbs. The twentieth century increased the expansion, adding to the railways motor cars and motor 'buses and, outside the central district, electric trams, so that horse-drawn vehicles were all but superseded, and so that ribbon development began around London.

As a consequence, we have our sprawling town. From the top of a 'bus, travelling north, south, east or west, you can discern the vestiges of what this London has assimilated—here the straight line of a Roman road; there an old church, a fine house or two and a patch of soiled grass marking what was a village; or again, to indicate the gradual urban extension, a shabbily graceful Georgian or Regency square with the sordid remnant of a mews somewhere near it; or else rows and rows of the big ugly houses inhabited by pros-

perous and much served Victorian Cockneys. You can trace the process of absorption in some of the excellent illustrations of the COUNTY OF LONDON PLAN, prepared for the London County Council by two distinguished architects, Messrs. J. H. Foreshaw and Patrick Abercrombie.¹ The London which has so greedily devoured acres of quiet country, many villages and market towns, has digested them carelessly. It is asymmetrical; its design is haphazard; its space is uneconomically disposed; many of its buildings have been perverted to uses for which they are ill suited. There is very little that can be said for this muddled London except that it is scored and rescored by history, replete with surprises and infinitely various, except that it is romantic.

Hitherto modification of the lines of London and of the localisation of the classes of its population has depended almost entirely on individuals, who have adapted themselves to changing conditions, profiting by them or making shift with them. The chief exception to this rule occurred in the late seventeenth century, when the West End and certain parts of Bloomsbury and Soho were built to a deliberate plan and were successful in attracting residents of the class for whom they were designed. But these planned areas occupied spaces which had previously been, on the whole, rural. A contemporaneous attempt to make the city within the walls a planned area, after it had been burnt down by the Great Fire in 1666, was a failure. Sir Christopher Wren, whose ideal was decorum rather than convenience, would have made a logical and grand city, something like the New Town of Edinburgh, but was frustrated by the obstinacy with which the citizens held to their property rights, and in the event the city was rebuilt along its ancient lines. Here is a moral for the modern planners, who find their opportunity in the devastation wrought by German bombers as Wren did in the ruinous effects of the fire. Will their plans be defeated by vested interests and by the individualism of Londoners? Time will show. They believe that the interests of the multitude can be made to-day to prevail over the selfishness of the few, and to the individualists they hold out the bait of convenient, healthy and sociable living conditions. Something will be lost, inevitably, if London be reconstructed either on the COUNTY OF LONDON PLAN or on another. Something is always lost when the product of multifarious impulses and conditions is cleared away in favour of a unified plan, for variety is in itself an element of beauty and vitality. The authors of the COUNTY OF

¹ 'County of London Plan,' prepared for the London County Council by J. H. Foreshaw and Patrick Abercrombie. (Macmillan, 12s. 6d.).

LONDON PLAN rightly appreciate the fine churches Wren built. Yet those churches are, in their sum, less alive and beautiful, a less rich treasure, than were the churches they replaced, which were the work of numerous craftsmen of many ages. St. Helen's Bishopsgate, St. Olave's Hart Street, lovely All Hallows Barking, and the wonderful St. Bartholomew's Smithfield, survive, and we have not forgotten the nobility and purity of the Temple Church: by these we measure the void which Wren, the planner, filled so greatly, but in which he could put only the work of his own genius.

It is disquieting to find the authors of the COUNTY OF LONDON PLAN offended because certain residential areas are 'peppered' with factories and workshops, often small. (They like large factories better than small.) Need a district be homogeneous? The authors have a firm preference for local homogeneity: they would localise Londoners in this or that district according to their avocations. But may not the result be dull? They wish moreover to decentralise London, strengthening or setting up anew local centres for social and economic life. They have, in fact, a nostalgia for provincialism. Is it a feature appropriate to a metropolis?

They are shocked by the general architectural incoherence of London. Its correction should be undertaken very warily. Sameness is too dead to be coherent and is not preferable to muddle. There is too a danger that a new, ordered and fashionable ugliness may be substituted for outmoded ugliness and beauty.

To offer criticism and warning to the reformers is not to deny that London has serious defects, pointed out by the authors of the COUNTY OF LONDON PLAN—inconvenient and perilous congestion of traffic, lack of unification of the means of transport, wretchedness of housing in some areas, exiguity and ill distribution of open spaces. This plan tackles the problem of remedying these defects, with full knowledge of them, with daring and with inventiveness. This project for building a new order on London's confused and storied territory may not be wholly practical and does not rule out misgivings, but it is certainly interesting.

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