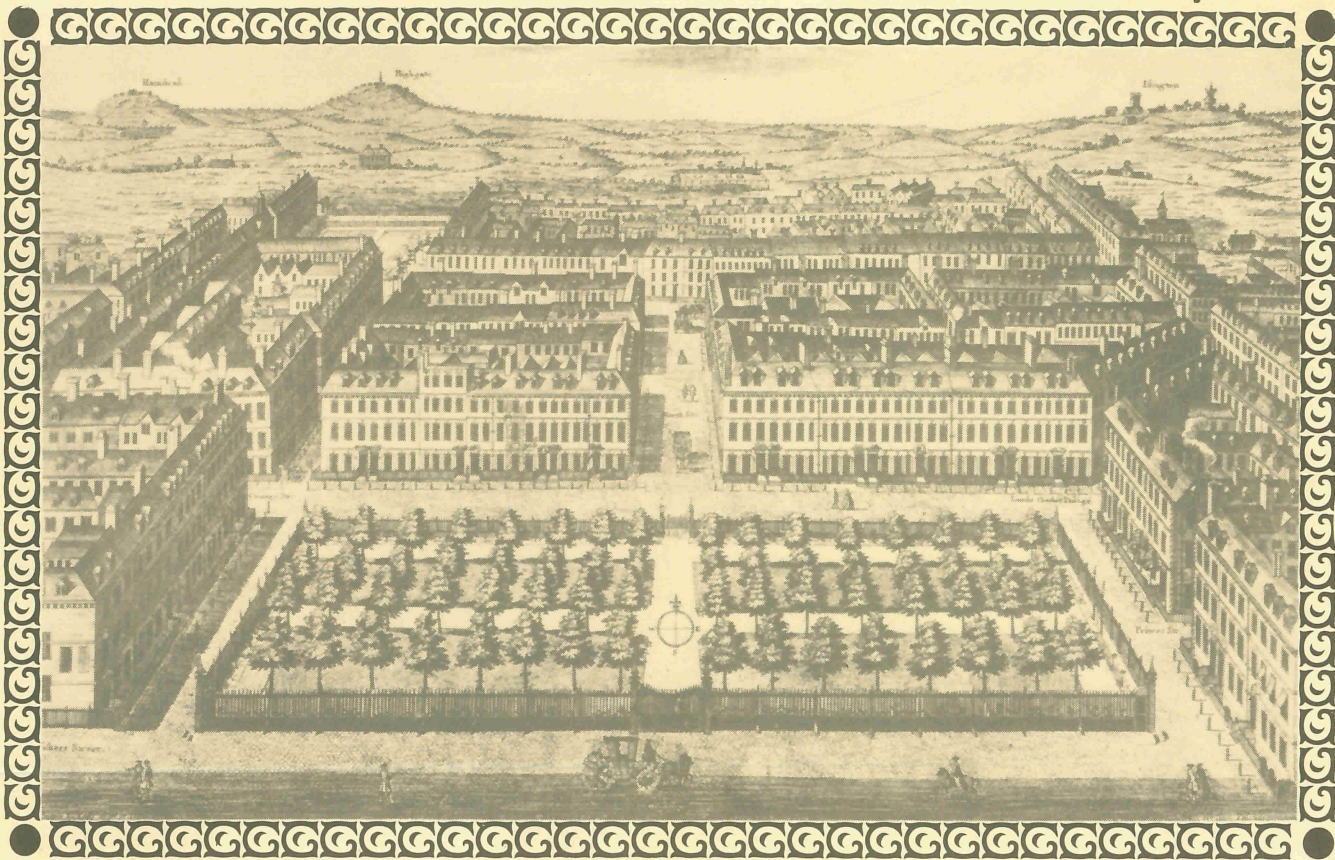


Three Hundred Years of Red Lion Square

1684

1984



T. C. Barker

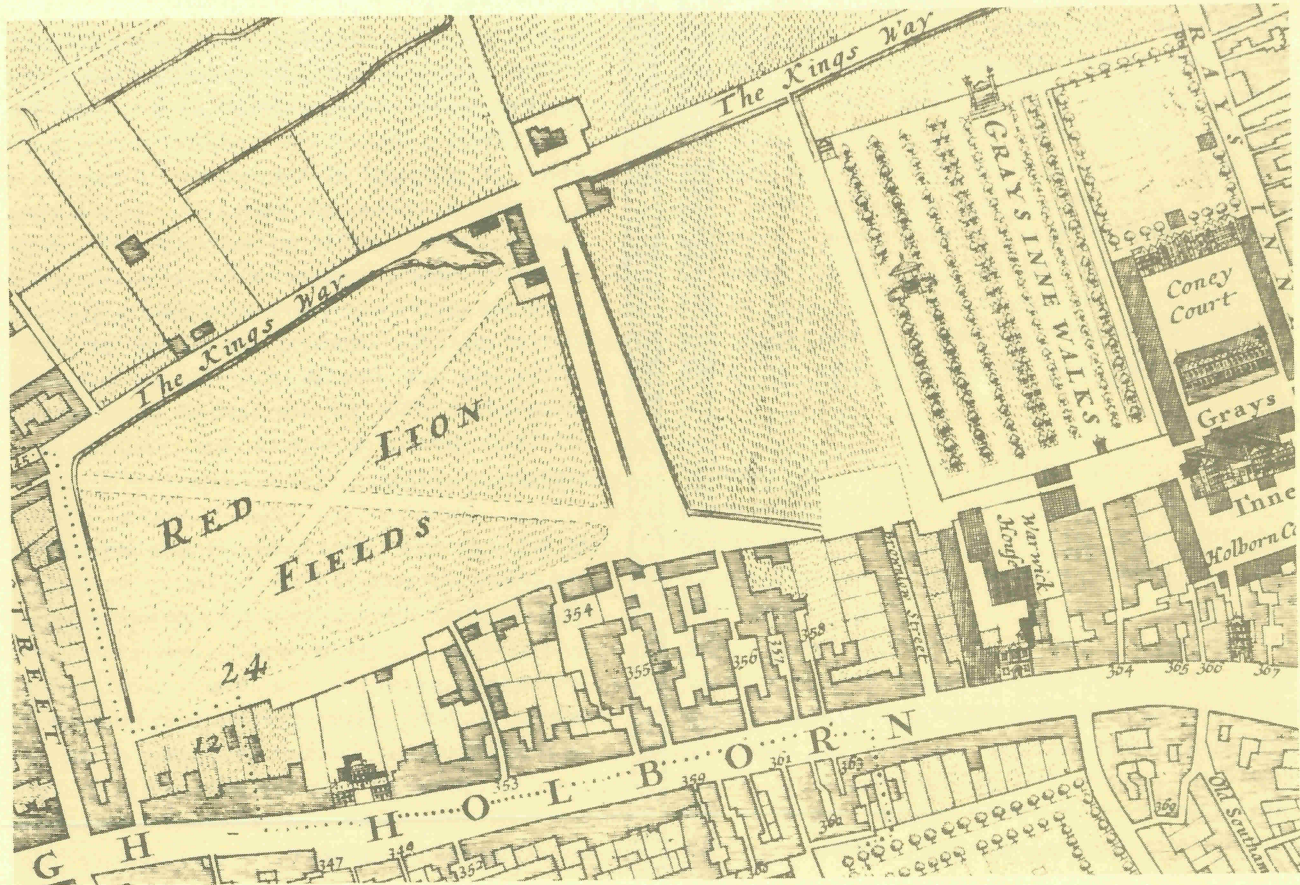
The laying out of Red Lion Square in June 1684 was marked by scenes of violent protest which obligingly enable us to date the event with some precision. As Morgan's map of 1682 shows, all the land to the north of a thin ribbon of buildings skirting High Holborn, a main thoroughfare from the west into the City, was then open country. One of these buildings was the original Red Lion Inn and the fields immediately to the rear were named after it. In better weather patrons engaged in energetic, thirst-making sports in Red Lion Fields or just took their drinks outside. The lawyers and their students at nearby Gray's Inn were also in the habit of seeking their recreation in this open space to the west of them, for, by the later seventeenth century, London's fast-growing built-up area had already reached the eastern side of what was then called Gray's Inn Lane.

The most successful building speculator of his day was Nicholas Barbon, a physician by training, who had shown a flair for dividing up new sites on the edge of the built-up area in the most remunerative way. Prestigious houses in an airy central square, for instance, were surrounded by more modest properties which, because they were more densely packed, not only produced good returns but also, by acting as a screen against meaner dwellings beyond, added to the exclusiveness, and therefore the value, of the houses in the square. In the case of Red Lion Fields, the screen was needed on the south side, for

along High Holborn passed not only horse-drawn traffic of all sorts but also animals on the hoof bound for slaughter in the City. Barbon's street plan, still recognisable today, put as much distance as it could between the road, with its commercial frontages, and the square.

When, or soon after, building had started, the lawyers and their students, furious at the prospect of losing their open recreation area a little to the west, arrived on the scene. On 11 June 1684 a battle of bricks and other building materials ensued, leading to injuries on both sides. This, however, did not deter the builders, for in a court hearing later that month the local highway surveyor complained that their carts were damaging ground in the vicinity of the road to Kingsland, immediately to the north of the Fields, used 'for his Majesty's passage to New Market'. (It was named on the map of 1682 as the King's Way.) All these protests may have delayed building a little but they did not impede it altogether. The first leases in Red Lion Square were granted in 1686 and the last in 1688.

The new square seems to have been highly successful in attracting to it men of quality as Barbon had intended. Many, indeed, came from the legal profession which had demonstrated so vehemently against the venture in the first place. Well-to-do doctors also seem to have been



William Morgan's map of London, 1682: showing Red Lion Fields before the builders arrived.

well represented among the inhabitants. An intermittent series of rate books, which starts in 1729, shows 40 houses in the square numbered anti-clockwise from the north-west corner. In that year the square could boast six knights and two titled ladies. Of the knights, Sir Robert Raymond became Lord Chief Justice and died at number 23 on the east side; and when, after his retirement, Lord Chief Baron (of the Exchequer) Reynolds, 'accompanied by a great retinue', finally left number 9, on the south side, for Bury St Edmunds, of which he had previously been Recorder and Member of Parliament, his splendid departure was considered worthy of press notice.

Although an observer writing in 1720 had remarked favourably upon the rows of trees, gravel walks and grass plots in the square, 'all neatly kept for the inhabitants to walk in', their successors were soon to complain bitterly about its neglected condition. Indeed the impressive legal presence had an Act of Parliament passed in 1737 to levy a rate upon all the residents in order to have the square's appearance improved. The fences, they claimed, were broken down and the place had become 'a receptacle for rubbish, dirt and nastiness of all kinds and an encouragement to common beggars, vagabonds and other disorderly persons to resort thither for the exercise of their idle diversions and other unwarrantable purposes'. Presumably it was at this time, or soon

afterwards, that new railings were put up round the square and rather forbidding watch houses put up at each corner. There had also been erected (exactly when does not seem to be known) an obelisk in the centre in memory of Cromwell, Ireton and Bradshaw, whose disinterred bodies were brought at the Restoration from Westminster to the Red Lion Inn, and kept there for the night prior to being drawn in public westwards along High Holborn for a final ceremonial hanging at Tyburn. The obelisk, iron fence and watch houses gave the square a gloomy look, a visitor in 1771 comparing the latter to four family vaults and the obelisk to 'the sad monument of a disconsolate widow for the loss of her first husband'. All these depressing objects were, however, soon to be removed.

As Red Lion Square grew older, it grew less fashionable. The titled had gone to live elsewhere, though during the 1780's a Baron Dimsdale occupied number 7 and a Judge of King's Bench, Sir Nashe Grose, number 5. Substantial professional families had taken over. Some were nationally known. John Harrison, the inventor of the marine chronometer, lived at the corner of what was then known as Lee Street (and is remembered by a blue plaque on the building standing on the site). Jonas Hanway, the world traveller and philanthropist (number 28 on the north side where a whole block is named after him) comes into the same category. Sometimes the professional men in

the square practised from home. A house on the west side, sold in 1802, was advertised as suitable either for a family dwelling or for such a dual purpose. It consisted of seven bedrooms with two dressing rooms; two 'elegant, well-proportioned drawing rooms'; an excellent dining parlour, breakfast room and study; a particularly good kitchen, a pantry, scullery, back kitchen and larder; very large coal, ale, beer and wine cellars, 'the latter fitted up with catacombs'; water closets, large garden and wash house. The social composition of the square may have changed somewhat; but inhabitants capable of occupying whole houses such as this were still people of substance.

Such spacious living was not to continue for much longer. Perhaps Sharon Turner, the solicitor who studied Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon in his spare time and gained a reputation by writing The History of England to the Norman Conquest, published in four volumes between 1799 and 1805 (and subsequently, and much less successfully, brought forward in time to the sixteenth century in 14 volumes), was among the shrinking minority who continued to live in the square in the old style. He had moved there in 1795 and left for Winchmore Hill in 1829, returning to his son's in the square very shortly before his death in 1847. By then most of the houses had been subdivided and were occupied by people of quite a different sort. The square's more socially varied, and

international, composition is clearly evident from the census returns of 1851.

There were then only eight solicitors or attorneys occupying whole houses with their families and servants. One even had a footman; but next door to him, at number 10, lived an ironmonger's assistant and his family. Elsewhere in the house were to be found four language professors (three of them women) and their domestic companion, plus a cook, a housemaid, nursemaid, governess, medical student and, living on his own, a middle-aged solicitor. No doubt this house had been subdivided and consisted of a language school, a main family and various lodgers. At number 5 was even greater variety: a painter and his family, three of the sons being young clerks; a pianist; an upholsterer, his wife and three daughters; a carpenter and his family, one son being an errand boy; and a second painter, his housekeeper and a daughter. And so it went round the square, with a strong French influence in certain quarters. At number 20 dwelt an importer of foreign goods with his son and father, both in the business. All were French. They had three attendants, a cook, porter and housemaid. Two doors away was someone describing himself as a Fleuriste from Paris, with his wife and six others in the business. In other parts of that house lived a flower maker, his wife and two servants; a lithographic artist, his wife and daughter;



North side of the square. c.1900's

a woman dressmaker, two daughters (one a florist) and a son (a furrier). Elsewhere in the square lived drapers, manufacturing stationers, newsagents, printers and policemen. Few had whole houses to themselves, though a Commander RN did and so did a police officer. Three houses had become institutions: the hospital for women, an important pioneer establishment at number 15 - later removed to Soho Square - which then had 13 patients; another establishment at number 26 with superintendent, matron, servant and what was described by the census enumerator as 12 inmates; and at number 31, the Co-operative Needlewomen's Association, one of the Christian Socialist producers' co-operatives, with a matron, sub-matron, eight needlewomen and an apprentice.

The character of the square had changed indeed; and it had been much enriched in the process. In a relatively short space of time the atmosphere of respectability, iron railings and watch houses had almost completely disappeared. It was into this much more versatile, commercial and workaday Red Lion Square that Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was beginning to make his way as a highly original painter and poet, made his brief appearance in 1851, aged 23, as an occupant (20 shillings a week) of the first floor of number 15 (the plaque makes his stay seem longer than it was). The landlord stipulated that the models should be kept under some gentlemanly restraint 'as some artists sacrifice the

dignity of art to the baseness of passion'. William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, contemporaries at Exeter College, Oxford, fell under Rossetti's influence. In 1856 soon after they moved to London, they chose his former studio and rooms at number 15, by then dusty and unused. Some French feather dressers carried on their business on the ground floor, and then rented the whole house and sub-let some of the rooms. It was at this period that Morris was developing his ideas of extending art to all the practical objects of ordinary life. When the company of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., manufacturers and decorators, was formed in 1861 to pursue this aim commercially, its first headquarters were at number 8. Meanwhile the needlewomen's co-operative had gone out of business and the Christian Socialists used number 31 to start the Working Men's College (now at Crowndale Road). Their leader, Frederick Denison Maurice, dismissed in 1853 from his Chair at the Anglican Kings College on grounds of unorthodoxy, became its first Principal. Other sympathisers, such as Thomas Hughes, author of Tom Brown's Schooldays, Ludlow, Rossetti and Ruskin were among those who came regularly to teach there. So the more socially diverse Red Lion Square, which had seen the beginnings of a significant new departure in the 1840's, the Hospital for Women, was the birthplace of two others in the following decade.

The opening, in 1878, of St John's Church brought a new



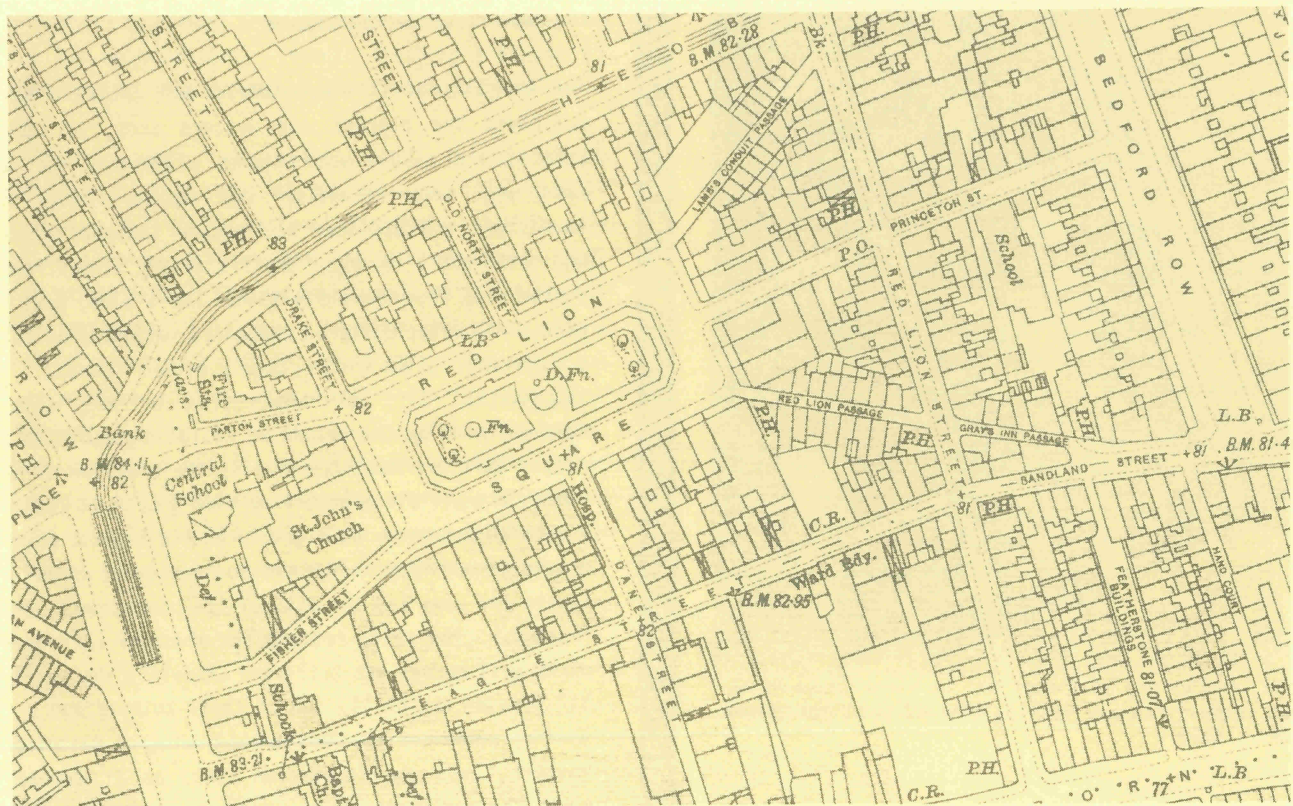
St John's Church in Red Lion Square. c.1900

dignity to the south-west of the square. William Thomas Thornhill Webber, then assistant curate in Chiswick, had, in 1864, been appointed mission priest in Holborn, upon which a recent Royal Commission on Spiritual Destitution had reported unfavourably. He set about his task of fund raising and mission organising with considerable determination. By 1869 he was in a position to buy numbers 4 and 5; number 3 (and 11 Fisher Street) followed soon afterwards. The ground was cleared and the architect, J. L. Pearson, made his name by managing to design such a lofty and impressive edifice on so limited a site. (Mr Webber later received his reward by being sent to Australia as Bishop of Brisbane.) Attached to the church were a boys' and a girls' day and Sunday schools and, remarkably, a day nursery which continued until 1920.

A large-scale map of Holborn, made just before the church was built, shows that the location and number of premises round the square had altered little since Barbon's day; but change was on the way. A garden was planted in the square in 1885 by the Metropolitan Gardens Association and it was then thrown open to the general public. The switch from domestic/office/commercial use to commercial/office use only was encouraged when transport to the square was improved and workers could travel more readily to homes outside the area. The new, wide Theobalds Road, opened in 1878, soon had a horse tramway

running down to the western end of it. This was electrified in 1906 and soon linked with the electric tramway system south of the river through the tunnel under the recently opened Kingsway. Meanwhile, what we now call the Central Line was opened in 1900 and was followed by the Piccadilly at the end of 1906. While one or two sites, such as Kingsgate (number 33), were developed as purpose-built flats, others, gave rise to offices. In his History of the Squares of London, published in 1907, E. Beresford Chancellor came to the conclusion that 'Red Lion Square can hardly be said to preserve many, if any, of its original characteristics. Its houses, many of them rebuilt, are occupied almost wholly by professional and commercial buildings... Most of its houses are freehold, and a once well-known conveyancer was wont to say, when looking at the somewhat untidy state in which the square was kept, that it was an example of the evils attendant on that sort of tenure...'. In other words, it was much more difficult for many private owners to collaborate in public improvement, unless they banded together as in 1737. Further improvement was to depend on high rates and municipal enterprise.

Change continued between the wars. The South Place Ethical Society, already well known for its Sunday chamber music concerts in Finsbury, acquired number 25 during the 1920's, and, at the end of the decade,



Ordnance Survey map of Red Lion Square area 25 inches to 1 mile. 1914 edition



Lambs Conduit Passage looking towards Red Lion Street. Street. 1930's

developed it as part of its new home, Conway Hall. Summit House, built in 1925, and Hanway House, put up just before the war, made much more obvious changes to the appearance of the square.

The war altered it completely. Air raids in May 1941 destroyed the eastern and western ends, including St John's, and caused much damage elsewhere. The western part was never rebuilt. The square ceased to be four-sided and secluded but became instead three-sided and quite open. A major traffic artery flowed round the fourth side from the early 1960s. For a time, part of the northern quarter suffered the added indignity of becoming a parking place for double-decker buses. Some compensation for the desecration of the west was, however, made by the return of resident population at the east. This was made possible by the erection of council flats, a small block adjoining Lamb's Conduit Passage and a much larger one - at night, with its lights, resembling a huge liner - dominating the south-eastern corner of the square and covering the site of its counterpart, Red Lion Passage. The tall, rectangular block of offices at the north-west corner was built for Cassell's the publishers. Sir Winston Churchill, one of their authors and a fully paid-up member of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers, laid the foundation stone on St George's Day 1956. The reclining figure of Pocahontas by David McFall, which turned so many eyes to its forecourt was, alas,

removed when the publishing house retreated elsewhere in 1982; but the bronze bust of Bertrand Russell by Marcelle Quinton, unveiled in 1980 near Conway Hall, with which Russell had many old associations, is likely to survive for much longer. Fenner Brockway's statue at the other end of the square was unveiled in July 1985.

The square, once so sedate and proper, then commercialised, then emptied of much of its resident population, and latterly nationally notorious for its one political riot as well as for its more frequent rowdy radical gatherings in the open air, has emerged from its wartime battering less of a square but more of a residential neighbourhood containing men and women drawn from many walks of life. The local authority has taken the central garden in hand, caring for the trees, planting evergreen and flowering shrubs, re-laying grass and pathways and providing seats for anyone, resident or not, who may wish to sit out in the warmer weather. Red Lion Square nowadays is an unstuffy and welcoming place.



North east corner of the square by Conway Hall showing bomb damage. May 1941

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Illustrations

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Front Cover

Red Lion Square: looking north before the
Watch towers were added. An engraving
by Sutton Nicholls from 'London Described'
issued by John Bowles in 1753

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