



Wartime artists sometimes depicted even disrupted squares as havens, as here – Adrian Paul Allinson, *The AFS 'Dig for Victory' in St James's Square*, 1942

Gardening and property development have always been, it seems, near-vocational for the English. From the early 17th century, these twin occupations came together in the capital's squares. As a new book exploring the history of these green spaces explains, they have provided both focal points of civic activity during the world wars and welcome oases of calm amid the city's bustle. All British life is here, suggests Timothy Brittain-Catlin

LONDON'S CALLING



THERE ARE PEOPLE in far-off places who, when they think of London, think of the London square. They think of smart but slightly dusty black railings; a privet hedge; a patch of irregular lawn; one or two sandwich eaters on a bench that's missing a strut; a dog; and a duck or two, waddling out of a fountain. They think this is what London is, and they are right.

For there's nothing the English love more than gardening and property development and, as the landscape architect Todd Longstaffe-Gowan relates in his beautifully illustrated new history, the London square was born from both of these. Right from the start – that's the early 17th century – there were two types of square: the neat, organised open space that was there to add dignity to a row of houses; and the scrubby patch of muck and grass that provided a breathing space for local residents. When the Earl of Bedford turned his 'great pasture' at Covent Garden into a continental-style piazza in the 1630s, he set a standard for the former that other aristocratic landowners have emulated ever after. By designing large houses round a square, and thus charging more for them, one could finance the construction of a miniature town, with smaller streets and mews that contained houses for many classes of resident as well as perhaps a fine church at the centre to set it all off.

This was the London that so many artists have recorded, especially perhaps those who wanted to capture the essence of a place

on its way to becoming the Great City of the 19th century. So much so, that a kind of history of topographical painting can be told from the way the city emerged from the artists' images of it. The Swedish artist Elias Martin painted his *View of Hanover Square* in 1769, showing, as it happens, the very spot where the offices of *The World of Interiors* are now located, on the corner of a terrace of early Georgian houses that draw back from a foreground in which lively figures strut and flirt; a small child pats one goat while a boy, with curiously adult proportions, pokes a stick at another.

Very different is Robert Chantrell's amazingly incompetent, uninhabited view of about 50 years later, of Cartwright Gardens, near King's Cross, in which the shallow curve of houses looks twice as long as it actually is; and yet for all that he captured exactly the sense of an oasis at the edge of town. For later cartoonists the railings of a square provided a favoured backdrop to quaint 'London life' scenes, but for many, and especially it seems for wartime artists, the small patch of green in the city centre, rendered in soft and dreamy hues, could symbolise the peace of mind that was missing from everyday life.

If the London square is typically English, the ways in which it was treated were English too. All known characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon race were incorporated in it, including for example a new arena in which to display that famously unfriendly attitude to children by means of rules and notices restricting their noise

This page, clockwise from top left: a crowded merry-go-round at Bartholomew Square in Clerkenwell, March 1936; a sign at Montpelier Square, Knightsbridge, banning 'music and street cries', May 1951; workmen removing the railings round Berkeley Square in March 1941. These and many others were sacrificed during World War II to supply Sheffield's iron foundries



and fun. But, on the brighter side, the nation of gardening enthusiasts put its best efforts into the square; during the height of the 'Picturesque' craze, at the beginning of the 19th century, Sloane Square apparently resembled a 'hummocky woodland' (what a shame it doesn't now). For the gardeners of the period – the great John Claudius Loudon, and Humphry Repton – the square was an experimental zone, while for many it was a way of competing with the French. British Francophiles however could point out the shortcomings of our native habits: the well-known gardener and writer William Robinson took exception to our 'filthy and crowded marginal shrubbery' which he compared to the luxuriant foliage of Parisian parks – so much better, he said, at absorbing the 'miasmatic exhalations' of the local populace. Gardens have their role in diplomacy too, with the French architect Jean-Charles Moreux being commissioned after the last war to lay out Grosvenor Gardens in Victoria – with fleur-de-lys-shaped flowerbeds – to celebrate our wartime alliance.

As any European historian will tell you, the English are famous too for their amenity societies. The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, founded in 1882, promoted the layout and planting of squares, and, with the support of the Duke of Westminster, turned Ebury Square in Pimlico into an oasis; they also took on some of the problematic East End squares which had become little more than junk heaps for broken rubbish. In fact it was this lethal

combination of the English busybody with the English smash-it-up-if-you-can't-use-it pragmatist that resulted in the notorious campaign of demolishing railings around squares during World War II, the former aiming to break down barriers between private key-access gardens and passers-by, and the latter wanting to keep the Sheffield furnaces going. Apparently the railings were actually used for this purpose rather than being dumped in the sea, as some believe.

In fact both world wars turned the squares into a stage for Allied antics of one kind or another. Trenches and shelters were dug in them; policewomen paraded in them. A pretty wartime enclave for officers called Queen Mary's Club went up in Eaton Square, while over in St James's the Americans built a huge officers' mess. Towards the end of World War I a bizarre re-creation of a bombed French village was erected in Trafalgar Square – as good a use as any for a place which, like nearby Leicester Square, never seems to have found a decent solution. Recent times have however been good for squares, with Bedford Square, the only one to have an (almost) unspoilt Georgian architectural setting, returning to something of its original charm after the roads around it were diverted. Come and see us British in our natural habitat, in the great zoo that is London; come and see us where we feel at home ■

'The London Square: Gardens in the Midst of Town', by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, is published by Yale, rrp £30

This page, clockwise from left: a solitary passer-by crosses New Square, in the legal enclave of Lincoln's Inn, in 1932; grass cutting with scythes in Russell Square, Bloomsbury, in the aftermath of World War II; the replanting of Ebury Square garden in Pimlico (photographed here in 1907) was one of the earliest achievements of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association