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The Survey of London: past, present and future

by

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The Survey of London is often described as the closest thing to an ‘official’ history of the capital, documenting its buildings past and present, area by area – their development, architecture, history and associations. Research involves field and archival work, photography, filming and drawing, as well as seeking the views, knowledge and memories of those who know London’s streets and buildings, in the present or the past. The resulting scholarly volumes are the most detailed, reliable and illuminating accounts of London’s built environment available – an invaluable resource for planners, historians, architects or anyone with an interest in the capital. Internationally acknowledged for its authority and accessibility, the *Survey of London* publications have no parallel in any other world city.

This article looks at the Survey’s origins, under the architect and designer C.R. Ashbee, as part of the fledgling conservation movement of the late-Victorian period and goes on to explore how the series has evolved and changed since then, as London itself has expanded and transformed. Some of the Survey’s most recent work is also described and illustrated, as are changes in governance and the continuing challenges of retaining the traditions, identity and relevance of the series while responding to London’s shifting character and fresh ideas about how its history should be researched and presented.¹

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FIRST STEPS: C.R. ASHBEЕ AND EARLY CONSERVATION IN LONDON

The Survey of London was established in 1894 as a volunteer project to record and help stem the destruction of London’s threatened historic buildings and monuments. Its founder and moving spirit was the Arts and Crafts architect and designer Charles Robert Ashbee (1863–1942) – a talented, energetic, committed and rather complex man, who, like many young artists and intellectuals of his day, was a prolific social thinker and activist (Fig. 1).²

In the 1880s Ashbee became drawn into mission work in the university settlement house at Toynbee Hall, in the Spitalfields / Whitechapel district of London’s East End, where he was shocked by the poverty, terrible living conditions, squalor and degradation of its inhabitants. Being of an artistic temperament, his main incentive was to try something creative by establishing a Guild and School of Handicraft as a way of introducing poor east London men and boys to traditional skills in making fine silverware, jewellery and furniture – thereby bringing employment to a deprived area of the city. Like his contemporary and friend William Morris, Ashbee held a strong belief that teaching people how to make and appreciate beautiful, hand-crafted objects could improve their quality of life.

Whilst in the East End, Ashbee was distressed by the degree of redevelopment then taking place there, and in other parts of the city. He was witness to the increasing loss of London’s older and more graceful architecture to make way for what he regarded as rather drab and ordinary commercial or industrial buildings and speculative housing. At this time there was no mechanism for protecting historic architecture, no listed buildings system, no heritage protection like we have today – although the *Ancient Monuments Act* of 1882 was a promising path towards future legislation. People could demolish at will, and characteristic old building types, like the coaching inns of the City and Southwark, were disappearing rapidly, without any attempt to preserve them. Also in suburban areas, from Chelsea in the west to Bromley-by-Bow in the east, traditional village patterns were being overwhelmed by intensive housebuilding.

By the 1870s and 1880s therefore a growing concern was in evidence regarding damage being done to the country’s culture and heritage. Several enterprises emerged in response to the rising heritage toll. One was the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), still with us today. It was founded in 1877 by Morris, following ideas first expressed by the artist and



Fig.1
William Strang, *Portrait of Charles Robert Ashbee*, 1903 (charcoal and chalk)
The Art Workers' Guild, London

writer John Ruskin: both were to be influential figures for Ashbee and for British architectural conservation generally. They argued strongly against the overzealous restoration of historic structures – what they called the ‘scraping away’ of later layers of fabric – in a misguided attempt to achieve some notional original state. Ruskin and Morris believed that these later alterations gave buildings their rich patina of history and should be cherished. And so their focus was essentially on the restoration or conservative repair of ancient monuments, rather than conservation *per se*. Later came the National Trust, founded in 1895 as a preservation society on a national scale to protect buildings of historic or architectural interest and land of natural beauty in England from the threat of increasing industrialisation.³

In the capital, the Society for Photographing Relics of Old London (SPROL) got underway in 1875, formed specifically by a group of friends who wanted to record old houses and coaching inns that were under threat of demolition. The photographer Henry Dixon (1820–93) is most closely associated with this group, his images capturing many significant historic structures on the eve of their destruction (Fig. 2). But SPROL’s ethos was strictly about recording what was to be lost, rather than trying to save it. A few years later, in 1880, the Topographical Society of London was formed to collect and make available (through publication) maps and other documents relating to the topographical history of the capital. However, this group met only very occasionally in the early 1880s and languished until it was revived in the late 1890s as the London Topographical Society.⁴



Fig.2
Henry Dixon and Son, *King's Head Inn Yard, Southwark*, c.1881
Royal Academy of Arts, London

Ashbee's Survey of London project was part of this wider movement, though his approach to historic buildings and conservation differed markedly from the others. For Ashbee, care for the built environment was part of a broader personal vision of the 'social welfare' of the city and its people. He had learnt from Ruskin to see art and architecture as an indicator of prevalent social conditions, and to question the value of the economic and industrial structures of nineteenth-century Britain.⁵ He placed the need to preserve historic buildings alongside the need for improved housing, for museums, libraries, parks, gardens and open spaces, in order to make London a better place for its citizens. In Ashbee's view, if properly understood and cared for, the historic fabric of the city could have special meaning for ordinary people.

The formation in 1894 of Ashbee's 'Committee for the Survey of the Memorials of Greater London' (the original name of the Survey of London) was sparked by one particular incident – the destruction, in ignorance, of a well-preserved royal hunting lodge of around 1600 in Bromley-by-Bow, known generally as the Old Palace, or King James's Palace, to make way for a new board school. It was a warning of how little reliable historical information existed for many areas of the capital, and therefore the potential risk to unidentified or misattributed buildings of significance. Ashbee later wrote of this experience with some bitterness – and his polemical prose in the introductions to the early *Survey of London* volumes is always worth reading:

We now have on the site of King James's Palace a well-built Board School ... sanitary, solid, grey, grim, and commonplace. What we might have had with a little thought and no extra expense would have been an ideal Board School with a record of every period of English history from the time of King Henry VIII, as a daily object lesson for the little citizens of Bromley.⁶

In the end, all that Ashbee and his Survey Committee were able to achieve was to rescue fragments of the building (principally the panelling and fine plastered ceiling of the State Room) and persuade the School Board for London to buy back the carved stone fireplace, which had been sold to a dealer. All these items were acquired by the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) where they are still on display today in the British Galleries (Fig. 3).⁷

THE FIRST SURVEY VOLUMES

The Old Palace episode, as Ashbee later wrote, 'awakened the public conscience',⁸ underlining the need for some kind of list or register of monuments. So, when a similar fate threatened Trinity Hospital in the Mile End Road, a group of almshouses built in the 1690s for retired sailors, Ashbee and his band of volunteers were prepared and sprang into action, researching its history and recording the building through sketches, measured plans and photographs. Ashbee also stirred up a campaign for its preservation, eliciting support from several public figures, including William Morris and the recently retired prime minister, W. E. Gladstone. The result was the preservation of the buildings, against all the odds – one of London's first landmark conservation victories – and the publication of the first *Survey of London* volume in 1896, a monograph on the Trinity Hospital. Crucially for the Survey's future stability, the book's success also encouraged the newly established London County Council (LCC) – the body in charge of local government across London – to offer its support and to fund the publication of subsequent volumes.



Fig. 3
The State Room from the Old Palace, Bromley-by-Bow, installed at the Victoria and Albert Museum after its demolition in 1894
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

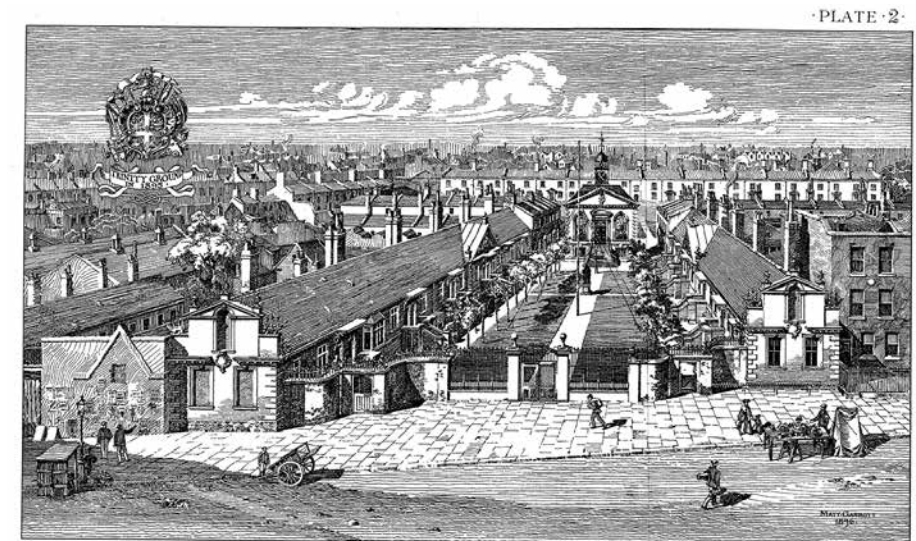


Fig. 4
'General View' of the Trinity Almshouses, by Matthew Garbutt, ARIBA, of Ashbee's Survey Committee. Plate 2 from *Survey of London*, monograph 1, *Trinity Hospital, Mile End* (1896), 4-5
All images by Survey of London unless stated



Fig.5
 'Statue of Captain Sandes'
 by Maxwell (Max) Balfour of
 the Survey Committee. Plate
 10 from *Survey of London*,
 monograph 1, *Trinity Hospital*,
Mile End (1896), 20



Fig.6
 'Two Old Captains playing
 Draughts' by Maxwell
 (Max) Balfour of the Survey
 Committee. Plate 12 from *Survey
 of London*, monograph 1, *Trinity
 Hospital*, *Mile End* (1896), 28

Ashbee gave this first *Survey* publication a rather pretentious subtitle: 'An Object Lesson in National History'. The phrase was one he had used before, in relation to the Old Palace at Bromley-by-Bow, and so obviously had special meaning for him. We get a clue to what this was from one of the first drawings in the book: a perspective view of the almshouses (Fig. 4). Rather than being an objective record of the building, this shows it in a contemporary context, surrounded by workmen's houses, and with costermongers, a flower-seller and other activities in the foreground – a slice of real life. Almshouses, like Trinity Hospital, were places of refuge; and the message of this drawing, and indeed of the whole monograph, is that not only is this a beautiful building, but moreover it represents a kind of moral purpose in architecture and urban life which Ashbee felt had been lost by the late-nineteenth century. In that sense the book is an object lesson about what we should revere and respect in buildings, not simply because of their construction or appearance, but because of the way they are used, their human function. To underline this point, in addition to the expected architectural record drawings showing and explaining the constructional and decorative details of the Trinity almshouses – the type of drawings for which the *Survey of London* was to become renowned – the publication is notable and surprising for the number of illustrations of people. Often these could be irreverent: one appears to show a dog lifting its leg and making use of a statue, while an old inmate slumbers in the background; another shows two retired sea captains playing draughts, with a shipping newspaper, the *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, at their side, being looked after by a caring society (Figs. 5 and 6). Such an emphasis on the life of the institution reflects Ashbee's view of Trinity Hospital as an expression of charity and communality, in contrast to the venal commercial and financial forces that he saw as dominating his time. Even today, after all these years, we still find this first volume an inspiring example of the importance to people's lives of their surroundings, their built environment, and why we should respect and care for it, and help others to understand it.

What is sometimes forgotten, though, is that Ashbee's ultimate objective, which he stressed in his introduction to the first *Survey of London* area (or 'parish') volume, was not simply the making of this 'paper' record – that is, the volumes – but the ultimate preservation of the buildings recorded in them. So the *Survey of London* in its early years was very much a campaigning body, a pressure group, and its work was all about saving buildings from destruction by increasing people's awareness and knowledge of them – what Ashbee referred to as stimulating the 'historic and social conscience of London'.⁹ What he proposed was a detailed list or register of all the buildings in London of historic or aesthetic interest, to be compiled and printed in a series of volumes, with photographs, measured drawings and historical notes. This may sound rather obvious to us now, but in the 1890s it was radical and far-sighted. Being based in the East End, he opportunisticly set his volunteers to work in the eastern portion of Greater London and adjoining parts of Essex. The first register, or area volume, describing the parish of Bromley-by-Bow (Fig. 7), finally appeared in 1900, its publication funded by the LCC, it by then being clearly understood that the Survey Committee's work was being done 'for the use of the London County Council'.¹⁰ Also, a logical and attractive format for the volumes was established that was to persist for many years: a map of the area covered; an introduction setting the context; then the 'register' of the principal buildings of significance (with accompanying historical notes, bibliographical and documentary references); followed by measured drawings, sketches and photographs illustrating them. But in those early days, the focus was primarily on buildings erected before 1800.

Ashbee never envisaged this register as an academic or long-term project, but as an essentially practical way of signifying the existence and importance of historic buildings, and encouraging their maintenance. Rather optimistically, even naively, he initially believed his committee could provide the LCC with a complete historical survey of London within ten years, and at a cost of around £10,000.¹¹ But in 1902 his involvement with the Guild of Handicraft took him from London to the Guild's new home in the Cotswolds, and he gradually withdrew from active involvement in the ongoing research.

However, despite having amassed much material since its inception, the Survey Committee, with its voluntary status and slender subscription funding, was unable to sustain a satisfactory rate of publication, and the project might well have petered out had it not been for the growing connection with and support from the LCC, which in its early years was progressive and enlightened in its approach to the preservation of buildings and monuments, and civic improvement.¹²

publication costs were met by the council. The first fruits of this new relationship were the first of two volumes on the parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields (1913), selected in response to the threat to Lincoln's Inn Fields from the Kingsway-Aldwych improvements, and edited by Sir Laurence Gomme for the LCC (vol. 3, 1912); and a second volume on Chelsea (vol. 4, 1913), by Walter Hines Godfrey on behalf of the Survey Committee. A further agreement of 1914 set out the preferred content and format for future volumes, which reaffirmed the focus on buildings erected before 1800.¹³ Despite this detailed guidance, differences in treatment and emphasis between the two sides began to emerge quite early on. The committee volunteers' contributions retained an amateurish, antiquarian quality, with a formulaic, inventorial form to the text and a fondness for heraldry and transcribed memorials. The LCC's professional staff, meanwhile, exercised a more academic approach. For example, volume 8, on St Leonard, Shoreditch (1922), broke with existing precedent by replacing the 'disjointed' biographical and historical notes of previous volumes with a lengthy, discursive historical introduction.¹⁴ In due course the volumes became fuller in their information and illustrations, described a broader range of buildings and began to offer a connected historical account of each area. The concentration tended to be on Westminster and central areas, and the emergency recording element of the work was still prominent, as at the Adelphi in the 1930s, where Survey draughtsmen were able to record some of the best surviving Adam staircases, ceilings and fireplaces before demolition.

A major turning point in the Survey's approach to London's built environment came after the Second World War, when the loss of so many familiar and much-loved buildings shocked Londoners. During the Blitz, a National Buildings Record had been founded (the progenitor of today's Historic England Archive), with the Survey's Walter Godfrey as Director, to record historic buildings that might be threatened by damage or destruction from air-raids or post-war demolitions. Towards the end of the hostilities, and afterwards, new legislation in the form of the *Town and Country Planning Acts* introduced not only our present planning system, giving local authorities powers to go far beyond simple war-damage repairs, but also the system we have today of protecting buildings of significance – what we know as listed buildings.¹⁵ This state-led initiative was fundamentally the realisation of Ashbee's original idea of an inventory or register of worthwhile structures, and so could have rendered the Survey obsolete. But two factors contributed to something of a post-war rebirth for the series.

The first was the winding-up of Ashbee's voluntary committee. The war years had brought a long break in its activities and a weakening of its numbers – as Walter Godfrey later recounted: 'Recruits for the heavy unpaid work which an earlier generation undertook with enthusiasm are no longer forthcoming'.¹⁶ Therefore, full responsibility for the continuation of the series was transferred to the LCC, where the Survey became located alongside other London-wide committees and departments concerned with town planning and historic buildings, at a time when the council attached great importance to conservation and the maintenance of the capital's built fabric.

The second was the appointment in 1954 of the historian Francis Sheppard as a full-time General Editor (Fig. 8). Under his leadership the Survey gave up the earlier inventoring and campaigning elements of its work to concentrate on other aspects of Ashbee's broader vision of enlightening and educating the public. It began to treat areas of London in a more holistic way, drawing together thorough scholarly research on urban development, architecture, social change and economics. It also took growing account of recent trends in modern architectural

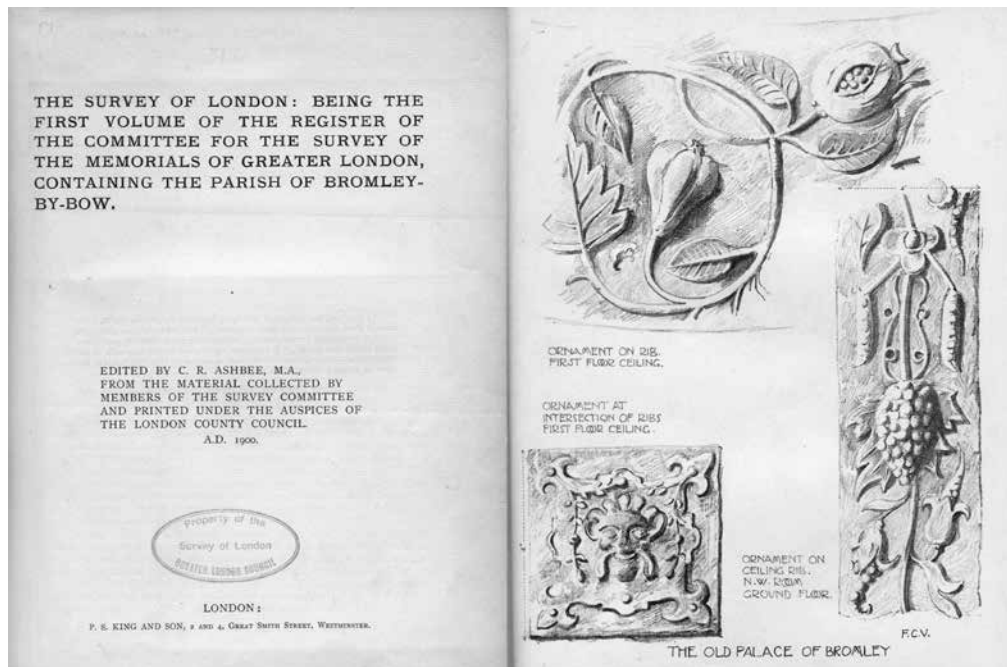


Fig. 7

Title page of the first Survey of London parish volume, Bromley-by-Bow (1900), with a page of detail drawings by F.C. Varley from the same volume.

THE LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL AND GREATER LONDON COUNCIL YEARS: THE SURVEY AND THE METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT

In July 1910 an agreement between the Survey Committee and the LCC formalised their cooperative working arrangement, whereby parish volumes were prepared alternately by the LCC and the committee, which also continued producing monograph studies of individual buildings. All



Fig. 8

Francis Sheppard (1921-2018), General Editor of the *Survey of London* between 1954 and 1983, photographed shortly after his appointment

and urban history, in particular the study of estate development – a significant theme in the history of London, where much of the land is owned by estates of one kind or another – and began to cover a wider range of buildings, including Victorian speculative housing, a subject until then rarely studied in architectural history. The first Sheppard publication, on South Lambeth (vol. 26, 1956), took the Survey far from the historic core of London and into largely Victorian suburbia, challenging the definition of what was conventionally regarded as historic buildings (this was in advance of the formation of the Victorian Society in 1958).

This widening of approach chimed with the changing attitude towards buildings in London in the thirty years or so after the war. Londoners who beforehand showed little interest in the fabric around them now came to see their historic environment as something not to be disturbed without good reason, and began to realise that new and radical plans for post-war redevelopment threatened their city far more than the

damage they had seen inflicted by wartime bombing. The creation of Conservation Areas from the late 1960s was a signifier of this changing attitude to historic fabric and local identity.

The role the Survey still had to play in this wider conservation movement can be seen in what happened shortly afterwards at Covent Garden. After Sheppard's early foray into the underexplored depths of Lambeth, the powers at the LCC asked him instead to concentrate research on central, historic core areas – particularly areas where the historic fabric was known to be under real threat. This resulted in volumes on Spitalfields (vol. 27, 1957) and a large part of the West End, including St James's, Soho and Covent Garden (vols. 29-32, 33-34 and 36, 1960-70). At Covent Garden, the famous, centuries-old markets had become housed over time in a variety of buildings of considerable interest, all set within the wider historic context of the Piazza – London's first square, laid out originally by Inigo Jones in the early seventeenth century (Fig. 9). These structures were later joined by theatres, the Royal Opera House (also covered by the *Survey*), and many small shops and businesses, all contributing to the area's unique and varied character. The decision in the late 1960s to move the markets out of central London to Nine Elms in Battersea left the area devoid of activity and prompted the Greater London Council (GLC, the successor body to the LCC from 1965) to plan a comprehensive redevelopment scheme, which would have destroyed Covent Garden's historic character. This was one of many wide-ranging modernist changes being planned across London at the time and coincided with beginning of this new study of the area.

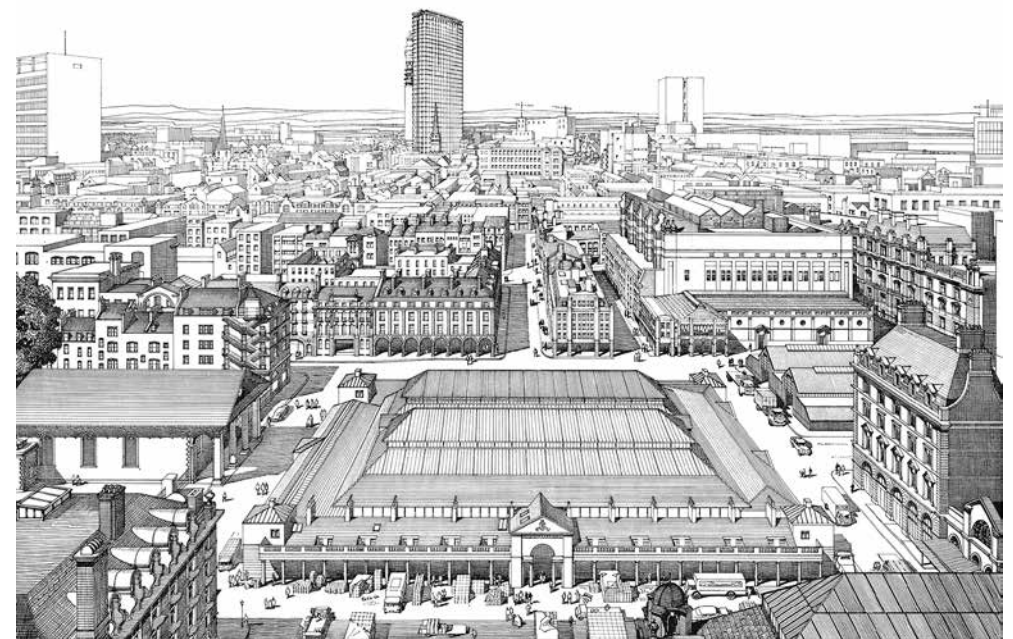


Fig. 9

Bird's-eye view of the Covent Garden Market area drawn by F.A. Evans and T.P. O'Connor. Fig. 19 from *Survey of London*, vol. 36, *Covent Garden* (1970), 148

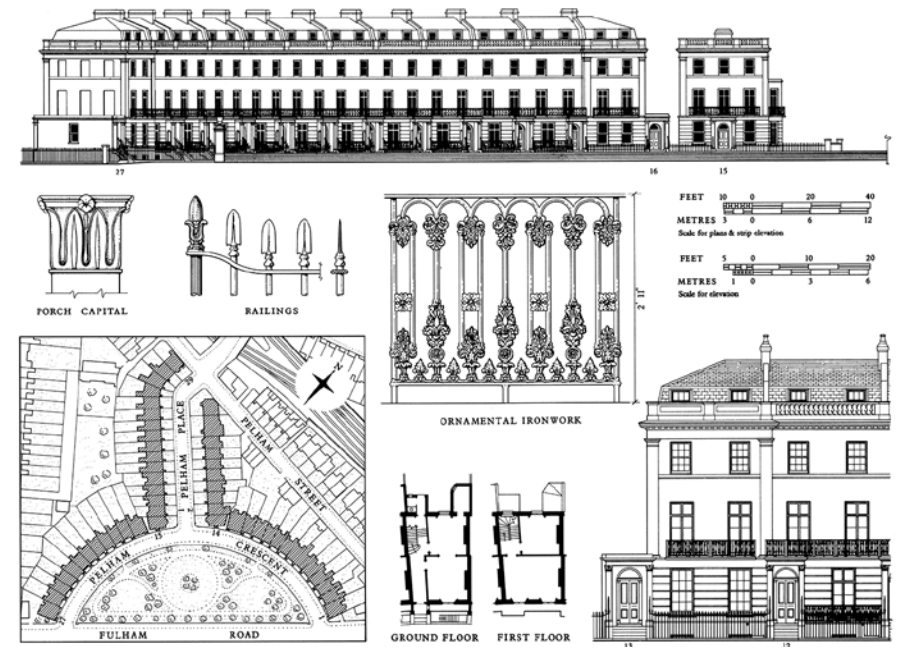


Fig. 10

Pelham Crescent, site and house plans, elevations and details, drawn by John Sambrook. Fig. 24 from *Survey of London*, vol. 41, *Brompton* (1983), 95

Local opposition brought about a public inquiry in 1971, by which time the Survey had published its account. In the preface to that volume, Raine, Countess Dartmouth (later Countess Spencer), chair of the GLC's Historic Buildings Board, said she hoped that 'Dr. Sheppard's wonderful record of the past will inspire the town planners of the future'.¹⁷ In the event, the government approved the redevelopment plan, but at the same time listed more than 250 buildings all over Covent Garden – to a large degree informed by the new volume and inspired by the widespread public opposition – and this made any redevelopment impossible. But such an impact in terms of conservation has been difficult to replicate since.

Under Sheppard the *Survey* embarked on what was to become a four-part study of Kensington. This included accounts of the museums and cultural quarter of 'Albertopolis' at South Kensington, but perhaps its biggest impact was offering new insights into classic Victorian suburban speculative building developments and the relationships between the various figures involved – landowners, architects, builders, lawyers and mortgagees. The *Survey* continued to become increasingly discursive and analytical in its approach, refining and developing the methodology of urban and suburban history pioneered at Leicester University by Sheppard's friend H. J. Dyos. At the same time, its illustrators became more imaginative in finding ways of presenting this information visually, with annotated maps explaining landownership patterns and attractive arrangements of drawings showing the various plan forms, elevations, decorative details and street planning of the housing, all together in one place (Fig. 10).

The volumes also became more integrated and comprehensive by bringing the story up to date, including recent developments and changes to the fabric as well as the historic. Sheppard's legacy was to leave the *Survey of London* transformed from a 'sporadic and selective record of London's historic buildings [...] into a model of urban topographical recording', which cemented its reputation for accessibility and authority, and made it increasingly influential in the study of London and architectural history, and in conservation.¹⁸

SURVIVAL AND EVOLUTION: THE POST-GREATER LONDON COUNCIL ERA

After Margaret Thatcher's government abolished the GLC in 1986, the Survey was transferred to the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME), a national body with similar working practices, being also concerned with recording historic buildings and publishing its results in a series of volumes. By then, under Hermione Hobhouse as General Editor, the Survey had embarked on two new projects: a study of the East End riverside district of Poplar and the Isle of Dogs, and a survey of County Hall, which as the former headquarters of the GLC was then facing threat from conversion and substantial change.

Published in 1991, the monograph on County Hall presented an important record of a building of unique significance in the history of London and was in many ways a homage to metropolitan government under the LCC and GLC, which for so long had nurtured the Survey of London. The decision to cover the docklands parish of All Saints, Poplar, was more controversial, removing the Survey's team of historians from the West End (where over several years it had accumulated new skills and techniques in the research, analysis and exposition of swathes of residential central London) to an industrial east London district then undergoing rapid and

dramatic transformation. It was a return to the Survey's roots in the East End and also in part to its original ethos of responding to serious threat to a district's building fabric, and also to a changing way of life. A large part of the Survey's study area lay within the Enterprise Zone of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), where normal planning restrictions had been lifted to encourage regeneration on an unprecedented scale. In retrospect, perhaps the Survey came to docklands too late, but it was a brave and worthy attempt to bring insights to a completely different type of urban area and expand the skills of the team, who in the course of their researches pioneered new sources and methodologies for dealing with such areas. The result – published in 1994 as volumes 43 and 44 – was an inclusive study looking at both historical building fabric, much of it demolished or soon to be demolished, and the brand-new, such as Canary Wharf (Fig. 11). Both volumes were well-received by reviewers and the local population alike. A spin-off publication focusing solely on the area's new architecture, *Docklands in the Making: The Redevelopment of the Isle of Dogs, 1981–1995*, was prepared by the Survey the following year, with support from the LDDC.

In 1999, a merger of the Royal Commission with English Heritage took the Survey there, to the national body for the oversight of the historic environment. While with English Heritage the Survey completed work on a variety of areas of London – west, north and south – beginning with fashionable Knightsbridge (2000), a long-intended adjunct to its four Kensington volumes which completed its study of the area south of Hyde Park. Then came a three-part publication on the rich and varied ancient city-fringe district of Clerkenwell, where the fabric ranged from the remains of monastic houses to Georgian terraces, Victorian warehouses and some of the country's most significant modernist architecture. A pair of volumes in the parish series (vols. 46 and 47, 2008) covered the former medieval and industrial heartland and suburban and later developments, whereas the Charterhouse, on account of its substantial historic remains, size and complexity, was dealt with as a separate study in the monograph series (No. 18, 2010, Fig. 12).

Thoughts then turned south of the river, which had been neglected by the Survey since the 1950s. At this time the staffing numbers were relatively healthy and so it was decided to adopt a two-area, twin-track approach, to help facilitate a more regular programme of publication. Two riparian areas were selected, each with much to offer in its varied heritage. The first, Woolwich, is a district of great historic richness, with a strong naval and military presence, a town centre with proud municipal and cooperative traditions (Fig. 13), and some significant post-war housing estates, yet by the late 2000s was poor and run-down, and experiencing new development pressures and the first throes of gentrification. Such a diverse and complex backstory made it an ideal subject for the Survey, especially given the continuing eastwards shift in London's centre of gravity. The resultant volume (vol. 48, 2012) was praised as 'exemplary' for showing how vital is the continued flourishing of the Survey not just to the history of London, 'but to our national prestige as a country producing top world-quality urban history'.¹⁹ *Woolwich* was also the first *Survey* volume to have its text disseminated freely online in draft form before publication, to invite comment and stimulate interest, something that had been impossible before the digital age.

The other area was Battersea, to the west, then on the cusp of extraordinary change in Nine Elms, at its eastern end. Battersea presented several characteristics that made it eligible for a more experimental approach in terms of presentation. It has a proud and interesting municipal



Fig.11
Canary Wharf in 1997
Derek Kendall



Fig.12
Master's Court,
Charterhouse, 1997
Derek Kendall, *Historic
England Archive*

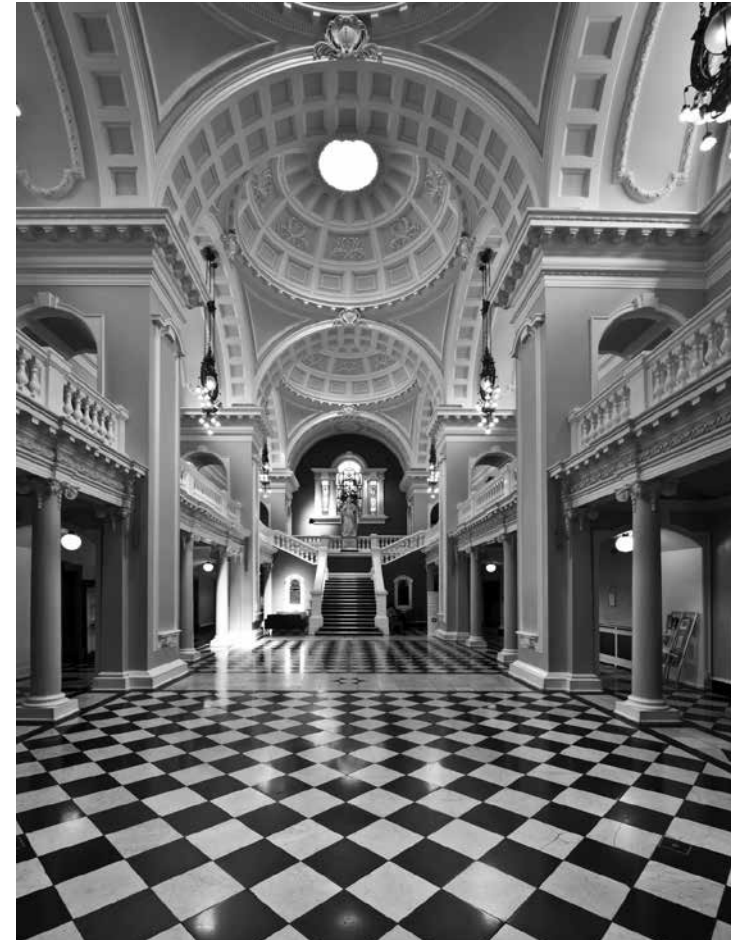


Fig.13
Woolwich Town Hall, 2011
from *Survey of London*, vol.
48, *Woolwich*, 2012
Derek Kendall



Fig.14
Battersea Power Station, 2011 from *Survey of London*, vol. 49, *Battersea Part 1*, 2013
Derek Kendall

story, manifest in many surviving public buildings; there is a collection of fine churches, mostly Victorian; an important railway network (including Clapham Junction), which is a powerful constituent of the area; and the remains of a once thriving industrial past (Fig. 14). Therefore, in a departure from the *Survey*'s customary methodology, these and other significant themes and building types were treated typologically in the first of two volumes (vol. 49), allowing for a more *a priori* mode of intellectual analysis; whereas the area's housing was dealt with in a second volume, arranged along more traditional *Survey* lines, topographically (vol. 50).

As work on the Battersea volumes reached completion in 2013, the *Survey* of London was once again put at considerable risk, courtesy of the then Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government's cuts to the English Heritage budget. Yet, fortunately, we were offered a new home by University College London's Bartlett School of Architecture, which recognised the value of the *Survey*'s ongoing research and publication programme. This opportunity offered the *Survey* 'a more sustainable future than most other publicly funded institutions' and saw the potential of drawing on the specialisms of the research team in its degree courses.²⁰ So, for the first time, the *Survey* of London is now working from within a university, where, as well as continuing with the preparation of the volumes, we are also engaged in teaching and other research work.

When the *Survey* joined the Bartlett a decade ago, we had already chosen to return our attention to the West End, namely to southern Marylebone (that is, south of Marylebone Road) and Oxford Street, to try to fill in some of the 'missing gaps' in our coverage of Westminster. Also, we felt there was a common misconception that these areas were already well known and understood, which was not altogether the case. One of the *Survey*'s strengths is its capacity to analyse and record the building fabric of the often-complex historic estate developments in the central districts of London, where there are most listed buildings, from the eighteenth century to the present. These latter forays into the West End have thankfully been supported by the two major landed estates in the areas we have been studying – the Howard de Walden Estate in the south-east and the Portman Estate in the south-west. Two volumes on south-east Marylebone (vols. 51 and 52), covering the gridded streets of the Howard de Walden Estate and west to Marylebone High Street, and including such celebrated addresses as Cavendish Square, Harley Street, Wimpole Street and Portland Place, appeared in 2017. In the following year the project won the prestigious Colvin Prize, awarded by the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, in recognition of it being an outstanding work of reference on an architectural subject.

A comprehensive study of Oxford Street, the longest continuous shopping street in Europe since the eighteenth century, followed in 2020 (vol. 53). This was another first for the *Survey*, taking the form of a linear volume covering both sides of the street from Tottenham Court Road to Marble Arch, describing the varied architecture of its many department stores and boutiques, and its phenomenon as an attraction for shoppers and tourists (Fig. 15). A companion volume on south-west Marylebone, continuing west to Edgware Road, is currently nearing completion.

The eight *Survey* volumes published between and including *Clerkenwell* in 2008 and *Oxford Street* in 2020 – a period of exceptional productivity – were produced under the editorship of Andrew Saint, who, like Ashbee, is a man of vision, and with similar levels of energy and commitment. It was Saint who negotiated the publication of *Survey* volumes through Yale University Press. Yale, along with the generous support for many years from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art who have underwritten publication costs, offers huge advantages of the highest qualities in design and printing. So the look of the volumes has become far



Fig. 15

Selfridges main entrance, Oxford Street, 2018
Chris Redgrave, *Historic England Archive*

more sophisticated since Ashbee's day, and even since Sheppard's time. New colour photography and archive images are now fully integrated in the text, alongside the drawings, rather than being confined to a signature at the back of the books, allowing us to present architectural information in a way that was previously impossible, and to suggest comparisons and contrasts. Since the demise of the GLC and the illustrative support that body provided, the *Survey* has been very fortunate in being able to work alongside two of London's finest architectural photographers, Derek Kendall and Chris Redgrave. It is also fortunate to have as its in-house illustrator Helen Jones, whose elegant line drawings continue the tradition begun under Ashbee and advanced under Sheppard (Fig. 16).

London continues to change rapidly, and with it the world of architectural and urban history, so at the *Survey* we are always on the lookout for new approaches to studying the city's built environment. In 2016 we again returned to East London to work on Whitechapel, a place then witnessing huge change (Fig. 17). At the same time Whitechapel is a place with its own long and fascinating history of immigration that has strong architectural expressions. Thanks to a generous Arts and Humanities Research Council grant of around £750,000, secured by Peter Guillery of the *Survey* in partnership with University College London's (UCL) Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA), we were able to take on extra staff and combine our research with a bespoke, participative map-based website covering the area's history – 'Histories of Whitechapel' (designed by Dr Duncan Hay of CASA) – to which anyone could upload their own research, their thoughts, memories, photographs or films. This was a big departure for the project, involving a higher degree of engagement with local communities, using 'crowd sourcing' as part of our research methodology, and bringing together official and unofficial histories in a way that acknowledges Ashbee's original mission. Public collaboration was enriched by workshops, exhibitions, oral history interviews and the organisation of a local history festival, and the project made a significant contribution to awareness and knowledge of Whitechapel's history.²¹

The website closed for contributions in 2019 and now serves as a public virtual repository, with scholarly text, personal memories, images and voice recordings (Fig. 18).²² Major historic



Fig.16

Langham Hotel, Langham Place. Line elevation by Helen Jones (from *Survey of London*, vol. 52, *South East Marylebone Part 2*, 2017)

sites get a full *Survey of London* treatment, such as the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, a remarkable place where the manufacturing of bells continued from the 1740s until its controversial closure in 2017. Although the foundry is a well-known site of major historic importance, our account is the first based principally on documentary research, and it contributed to the debate and planning enquiry about the site's future. Influencing change in this way is far harder now than it was in Ashbee's day, such is the power of the developers in the present planning system. The information gathered for the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project also contributed towards the research and writing for two *Survey* volumes on the area, published in 2022 (vols. 54 and 55).

Now that the Survey is firmly established in the university, we contribute directly to academic debates in urban history and take account of current academic concerns, many of which resonate with Ashbee's founding ethos – for example, the pursuit of fairness, equality and spatial justice; diversity and the impact of colonial and postcolonial immigration; the democratisation of heritage and history for all. These themes are all demonstrable in the recent work we have undertaken in post-industrial areas such as Woolwich, Battersea and Whitechapel, and will again be to the fore when we embark on our next intended 'parish' area of study, in Bermondsey and Rotherhithe – former industrial inner-London riverside suburbs now dominated by the architecture of council and social housing.



Fig.17

Fast-moving change in Whitechapel: Alie and Leman Streets, from the southwest, 2016
Derek Kendall



Histories of Whitechapel

Welcome to the Survey of London's Whitechapel project, where you can share and explore the many histories of Whitechapel's buildings and places.

On our map you'll find information about every building in Whitechapel in 2016, including photographs, stories and research, film clips and audio recordings added by historians, local people and others with an interest in the area. It has grown in content since then, a collaborative work in progress made up of the Survey's own research alongside material that many others have contributed.

This is an experiment in the making of the history of a place. Sharing our knowledge and experiences will help us to understand the histories of buildings, streets and neighbourhoods, and through them the lives of the people of Whitechapel. To start exploring, go to the map and click on a building to see content about that site, or you can explore buildings related to a particular historical period or theme.

If you have any information, research, images, or memories of Whitechapel, you can sign up and start contributing them here.

Building of the Month



St Philip's Church Library and the Royal London Museum

Similar Places
Naggal House, site of George Yard Ragged School
Whitechapel Gallery, 77-82 Whitechapel High Street
Whitechapel Idea Store

Fig.18

The Survey of London's 'Histories of Whitechapel' website, at <https://surveyoflondon.org/>

THE FUTURE

The Survey must retain its ‘impressive tradition of investigating the unknown or the difficult’, and embrace boldness and versatility in its future coverage.²³ We must tackle areas of the capital that have changed or are about to change. We must focus attention on the underappreciated places, with special regard for those where demographic conditions have meant that the value of local history has not been sufficiently supported by institutions or money, and where deprivation and poor investment threaten the building fabric. But at the same time, we must not ignore the more historic and affluent central districts, some of them still poorly understood, where gentrification and careless redevelopment usually pose the dangers. Readers in future may therefore expect to find the *Survey* moving around the capital more fluidly when time and financial support permit, and to see more space devoted to aspects of social history and human experience that impact on London’s built environment.

One question we face continually is how best to bring this valuable work to a wider audience. The team prides itself on the contribution it makes in feeding into conservation in the long term, but to continue to do so successfully requires greater visibility. Each volume has a small print run and is relatively expensive and, at present, there is no readily available online equivalent of our latest books. But we do have an online presence. Thanks to a generous English Heritage grant when we were attached to that body, all the volumes up to and including those on Clerkenwell, which date from 2008, are freely available online via the University of London’s *British History Online* (BHO) website.²⁴ This includes all the text and drawings, but not all of the photographic images, for copyright reasons; nor does the format used suggest the great care we take in the layout and appearance of the volumes, their high production values. For more recent publications, which are not on the BHO site, we have made draft texts or PDFs available via our own UCL website.

But this piecemeal online presentation of our published work is unsatisfactory.²⁵ We have therefore begun planning a new, integrated digital platform aimed at bringing together all of the Survey’s previous and future research in one place online, using our recent *Oxford Street* volume (printed copies of which sold out quickly) as a test case. The website will consist of a graphic map-based outline of London with the boundaries of the Survey’s research projects marked up within it, making it easy to find a volume at the click of a switch (Fig.19). This is only at an early stage and will need extra funding and specialist staff, but we are determined that this is the way forward. In combination with the Survey’s other outward-facing work in research and teaching, such a resource will reaffirm our mission, making public history more accessible and widening the understanding of London’s built environment.

NOTES

- 1 In many places this essay draws on previous historical assessments of the Survey of London, principally Hermione Hobhouse, *London Survey’d: The Work of the Survey of London 1894-1994*, (London, 1994); Hermione Hobhouse, ‘Ninety Years of the Survey of London’, *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 31 (1987), 25-47; Professor Andrew Saint’s lecture on ‘The Survey of London’, delivered at Gresham College on 20 November 2012 (<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/survey-london>); and Philip Temple’s ‘A short history of the Survey of London’, written for the Survey’s website (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/architecture/research/survey-london/short-history-survey-london>).
- 2 Alan Crawford, *C.R. Ashbee: Architect, Designer, and Romantic Socialist*, (New Haven and London, 1985) is an invaluable source.
- 3 See for example Melanie Hall, ‘The Politics of Collecting: The Early Aspirations of the National Trust, 1883-1913’, *Journal of the Royal Historical Society*, 13, (2003), 345-57.
- 4 Stephen Marks, ‘The London Topographical Society: a brief account’, *London Topographical Record*, 24 (1980), 1-10.
- 5 Crawford, *Ashbee*, 11.
- 6 C. R. Ashbee, ‘An Introductory Note on the Folly of Destroying the Old Palace’, *Survey of London*, Monograph 3, *The Old Palace of Bromley-by-Bow*, (1902), 9.
- 7 *Survey of London*, vol. 1, *Bromley-by-Bow*, (1900), xiii, 38-9.
- 8 *Survey of London*, Monograph 3, *The Old Palace of Bromley-by-Bow*, 9.
- 9 *Survey of London*, vol.1, *Bromley-by-Bow*, xvi.
- 10 *Ibid.*, iv.
- 11 *Ibid.*, xxv.
- 12 In 1900, in his 4th report on the Survey Committee, Ashbee estimated its haul hitherto as comprising 200 completed building forms, and 2,000 photographs, drawings and plans, covering some 30 parishes on the east side of London and in parts of Essex adjoining, all mounted and arranged in ‘great albums’, similar in concept to the Crace Collection in the British Museum. Survey of London archive, C. R. Ashbee, ‘4th Report of the Committee for the Survey of the Memorials of Greater London’, (June, 1900).
- 13 The ‘Detailed Instructions’ of 1914 ‘as to the Content and Format of the Parish Surveys’ are transcribed in Hobhouse, *London Survey’d*, 76-9.
- 14 *Survey of London*, vol. 8, *Shoreditch*, (1922), 1-90.
- 15 John Summerson, ‘Walter Hindes Godfrey 1881-1961. Obituary’, *London Topographical Record*,



Fig.19

Early draft proposal for a new Survey of London website designed by Sarah Dowding and Duncan Hay

- 25, (1965), 127-35: *Town and Country Planning Act, 1944* (7 & 8 Geo. 6, Ch. 47); *Town and Country Planning Act, 1947* (10 & 11 Geo. 6, Ch. 51).
- 16 W. H. Godfrey, 'The London Survey Committee, 1894-1952', *London Topographical Record*, 21, (1958), 90.
- 17 *Survey of London*, vol. 36, *Covent Garden*, (1970), viii.
- 18 Andrew Saint, 'Francis Sheppard obituary', *The Guardian*, 12 Feb 2018.
- 19 M. H. Port, review of *Survey of London*, vol. 48, *Woolwich*, in *London Journal*, 38, No. 3, (Nov. 2013), 281.
- 20 Survey of London archive, 'Business Case: Proposed TUPE Transfer of Survey of London, English Heritage to University College, London', (2013).
- 21 John Bold, 'Review Essay: Survey of London: Whitechapel' in *Journal of Historic Buildings and Places*, vol.2, (2023), 138-48.
- 22 For the Survey of London's 'Histories of Whitechapel' website, see <https://surveyoflondon.org/>
- 23 Bridget Cherry, 'The Centenary of the Survey of London 1894-1994', *London Journal*, 20, (1995), 106
- 24 For the Survey of London pages on *British History Online*, see <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/survey-london>
- 25 The Survey's current web pages offer access to all the digitised volumes published up to 2008 on *British History Online* as well as to PDFs or Word drafts of those published since then. See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/architecture/research/survey-london/survey-london-volumes>