

DRAPERS' GARDENS

THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN BOTH ANCIENT AND MODERN TIMES

Read by John Bennett
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For some years before I retired from banking in 2005, I worked in Great Winchester Street. During that time I became very familiar with the streets and alleyways in the area. Drapers' Gardens was, at that time, the location of a very tall office block with a less than salubrious area surrounding it. It was the tallest building in the immediate vicinity and served as a training centre for the staff of the National Westminster Bank. After retirement, when I was elected as a Member for the Ward of Broad Street, I found that plans were afoot to demolish the tower and replace it with a more modern building. Ordinarily this would have been just another office development in the Ward, in which I would have taken perhaps a token interest and then moved on.

But this was not to be. During the demolition of the old tower, the now compulsory archaeological excavations revealed finds which were so amazing that they radically changed my perceptions of the area and caused me to become fascinated with its history and development from Roman, through medieval, to modern times. I would like to take you today on a journey through three significant periods in the life and development of Drapers' Gardens.

I start this journey in Roman times. In the first century AD the Roman invasion and occupation of Britain had led to the establishment of the town of Londinium on the banks of the River Thames. One of the tributaries of the Thames running through the heart of the settlement was the river Walbrook. The site of Drapers' Gardens lies over the confluence of three channels of the Walbrook which, of course, has since been covered over and built on. What now exists only in drains and sewers was once a major feature of the Roman city. The river's identity now survives in the street name of "Walbrook", by Mansion House, and the stream took a north to south path through the Ward and entered the Thames just to the west of what is now Cannon Street station.

The original Roman town with its grid pattern of streets had been razed to the ground by the revolt of Anglo Saxon tribes led by Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, and was being rebuilt in a much more haphazard manner which has resulted in the jumble of streets we are familiar with today. The area of Drapers' Gardens is within what was the upper Walbrook Valley and it was not until the end of the first century AD that this area was settled. This was because the area was marshy and very wet. In expanding the city north of the Thames the Romans began a system of reclamation which involved the raising of the ground level using

imported gravel and earth and diverting the streams of the Walbrook down artificially created ditches. This was repeated several times during a period of 20-30 years to such an extent that the ground level was raised by as much as 2 metres, over six feet. This was a remarkable feat, but it ensured that the Walbrook channels remained under control.

The archaeological excavations in Drapers' Gardens referred to earlier have unearthed an enormous quantity of artefacts from the period of the Roman occupation which provide us with a clear picture of life in Drapers' Gardens over that time. The channels of the Walbrook were constructed by lining the sides of the channels with timber planking held in place by upright timber piles. These so-called revetments have been found across the Drapers' Gardens site, particularly along a road constructed of compacted gravel over hard-core which travelled virtually north-south. They not only carried the waters of the Walbrook but also acted as roadside drainage ditches. Alongside the road timber-framed houses were built complete with timber floors. A 2nd century single roomed timber building found on the site has proved to be one of the best preserved structures of its type in London. Much of the planked floor has been preserved intact, together with the building frame, wall base and the lath ceiling which was found lying on the floor.

The archaeological evidence indicates that the buildings underwent substantial development over the course of 100 to 150 years increasing in size and sophistication, with masonry adding greater strength and longevity to the structures. An example of this sophistication is the water drainage pipe found during the excavation. It is made of bored timber with a leaded spout and it piped clean water under pressure into the buildings. Waste water was removed in wooden box drains leading into the Walbrook. Much of what was found during the excavation indicates that the area was populated by craftsmen working and living in the same buildings.

There is evidence of several trades having been practiced on the site. A wooden ruler and a hammer found on the site indicate that carpenters were at work; large quantities of leather were recovered, comprising fragments of shoes and sandals, stitched leather and leather waste, providing evidence that leather working was a principal industry in the area. The large quantity of cattle bones found suggests that butchers, bone and horn workers and glue makers also occupied the Drapers' Gardens site.

But the most amazing find of all is what is now known as the Drapers' Gardens Hoard. In August 2007, at the bottom of a timber-lined well, the archaeologists made a discovery of international importance. A total of twenty metal vessels made from copper alloy, pewter and iron were found in almost pristine condition. Coins found in the well below the hoard date the find at the end of

the 4th century, towards the end of the Roman occupation. The vessels include a water bucket, a wine bucket, a nest of three dishes, a ladle and several other bowls all of which are thought to have been used by a wealthy household. Why they were at the bottom of the well is very difficult to determine with certainty. But their careful placement, together with other artefacts, does suggest that they were put there deliberately rather than accidentally. And the fact that the hoard dates from the end of the Roman period at Drapers' Gardens does suggest that the hoard was either hidden there from the invading Northern tribes or that there is a connection to a religious festival of some sort. We will never know for certain.

The Hoard, together with many more of the findings of this dig (the archaeologists found an intact Roman door, a unique find in London, and several baby burial sites) are now housed in the Museum of London, thanks to the Drapers' Company who have donated all the artefacts to the Museum. I could continue describing the finds but I now must move on to another fascinating, but surprisingly short period in the history of Drapers' Gardens. Can we fast forward to the middle of the 16th century?

The area of Drapers' Gardens in medieval times reverted to its marshy state, but, once more, as London expanded, new buildings were erected and the Walbrook was again channelled and this time built over. Drapers' Gardens however, remained open land between what is now Throgmorton Street and the northern boundary of the City, London Wall. Many houses were built on land once occupied by the old Augustinian Friary, hence Austin Friars, and it was one of these houses that, in 1524, was bought by Thomas Cromwell.

Thomas Cromwell is one of the most important characters in Tudor history. Born in Putney in 1485, little is known of his very early life. He was a mercenary in Italy for a time in his youth and was then employed by a wealthy merchant banking family in Florence where he, no doubt, acquired his financial skills. Whilst in Italy he became fluent in Latin, Italian, and French, and was employed to handle ecclesiastical issues for an English cardinal. On returning to London he became a Member of Parliament in 1523, but after Parliament's dissolution he was employed, in the late 1520s by Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, and assisted the Cardinal in procuring the King's divorce from his first wife Katherine of Aragon and arranging his ill-fated second marriage to Anne Boleyn.

After Wolsey's death in 1530 Cromwell became ever more influential with Henry. In the years following, up to his death on the scaffold in 1540, he was appointed to position after position of power and influence: Privy Councillor, Master of the Jewels, Clerk of the Hanaper, Chancellor of the Exchequer (for life!), Master of the Rolls, Secretary of State, Vicar General, Vice Regent in Spirituals, Lord Privy Seal, Knight of the Garter, Chancellor of the University of Cambridge,

Baron Cromwell and finally Earl of Essex. Cromwell was the prime mover in the suppression of the monasteries, in severing the Church of England from the Church of Rome, and in securing a fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, for Henry. The latter feat, however, was not a great success with the King and resulted in his downfall just days after being created Earl of Essex. Cromwell was accused of treason and heresy, confined to the Tower of London, before being beheaded on Tower Hill on 28 July 1540.

However, before his demise, Cromwell became a very wealthy man indeed, and after his initial purchase in the Old Broad Street area he began to acquire further adjacent properties and over the years expanded his house and garden considerably, even, at one stage, arranging for a summer house in a neighbour's garden to be lifted on rollers and moved in order to make way for his great garden, the site we now know as Drapers' Gardens. According to the account of historian John Stowe, whose father's summer house Cromwell moved, Cromwell:

“having some reasonable plot of ground left for a garden, he caused the pales adjoining the north part thereof on a sudden to be taken down; twenty-two feet to be measured forthright into the north of everyman's ground; a line there to be drawn, a trench to be cast, a foundation to be laid and a high brick wall to be built.”

The result was a garden of splendid proportions, about 1 acres, which, in the end, according to Cromwell's bailiff was to be large enough to accommodate a bowling alley, a tennis court, and a stable. However, it is not certain what the garden looked like, other than it having the usual rose beds, herbs, knot gardens and gravel walkways.

With Cromwell's death the house and gardens passed to the King, who, having no use for them, attempted to sell them. However, during his time of ownership the King maintained the garden diligently, and finally, 3 years after Cromwell's death, in 1543, the Drapers' Company purchased the house, outbuildings and gardens from Henry for 1,800 marks, approximately £1,200. The house became the Drapers' Hall, and the gardens, Drapers' Gardens. The Hall was burned to the ground in the Great Fire of 1666, when, interestingly, the Gardens acted as an important firebreak, and prevented the spread of the Fire to the north.

The Drapers' Gardens have remained in the ownership of the Drapers' Company to this day. For the next three centuries the Great Garden, as it was now called, continued to be developed as a garden. The Drapers' Company made major improvements to its fabric and design, and allowed access to the public. At the turn of the 17th century it was a favourite haunt of City "toffs", who were described by a writer in *The London Spy* as the kind of handsome young fellow who:

“dines every day at the tavern; goes to the playhouse every night; stirs nowhere without a coach; has his fencing master, dancing master, singing master, French master; and is complete a City beau as you shall see in Lombard Street church on a Sunday or in Drapers’ Gardens an hour before dinner time”.

The climax of the gardens fortunes during this time was the City of London Flower Show of 1874 when HRH Princess Louise presented the prizes. But by then the Drapers’ Company had decided that the gardens should be let on building leases, such that by the end of the 19th century the Great Garden was covered in offices for stockbrokers, jobbers and wine merchants, and, strangely, the Persian Consulate General.

Although these buildings were required to be of good quality they were not particularly distinguished, or distinguishable from all the other buildings in the area. We have to move forward again to the latter part of the 20th century when Drapers’ Gardens enters another significant period of its development.

In the mid-1960s work began on an office building which would tower over the immediate area. It was designed by Richard Seifert and was described by that august journal, the *Concrete Quarterly* as “one of the best towers that post-war London has seen.” Opened in 1966, the Drapers’ Gardens building was a 29 storey, 100 metre tall structure built around a reinforced concrete service core. Like many buildings constructed at that time it had a two storey podium level, which, it was claimed again by *Concrete Quarterly*, “related it well to the surrounding Victorian buildings”. As a product of the Seifert architectural practice it is, perhaps, second only to his iconic office block in Tottenham Court Road, Centre Point, now a Grade II listed building, but at the time a source of great controversy, as the developer, Harry Hyams, left the building unoccupied for several years, waiting for a single tenant who would be prepared to pay the rental he demanded of £1,250,000 per annum.

The Seifert tower had convex sides and concave ends and was clad in white mosaic and had green tinted windows, all of which made it a highly distinctive building in an otherwise unexceptional area. Seifert regarded the tower as one his proudest achievements and the Twentieth Century Society wanted it to have listed building status. But before this could be achieved permission was granted for the building to be demolished. Its small floor plate and uneconomic use of space meant that it was regarded as not fit for purpose in the 21st century. Demolition commenced in 2006, 40 years after its opening, resulting in the massive archaeological dig described earlier in my paper and the new building on the site was completed in late 2009.

The new Drapers’ Gardens, at its tallest in the west, is only 15 storeys, half the height of the Seifert structure, and just 5 storeys in the east, with a middle section 12 storeys high. It’s more of a “groundscraper” than a skyscraper with

much larger floor plate areas than its predecessor, more appropriate for the trading floors of today's banks and investment firms. In total there is 270,000 sq ft of floor space with individual floors reducing from 25,000 sq ft on the lower levels to 12,000 sq ft at the highest levels.

The stunning stepped profile of the building makes it a landmark in the Ward. The façade is fully glazed with triple glazing and integrated louvered blinds which automatically adjust to the heat generated through sunlight. It's a highly energy efficient building with excellent ecological credentials. The developers have created a small park on the Copthall Avenue side, providing an oasis of calm, featuring water, trees, raised beds planted with flowers and, high on the walls, nesting boxes for birds and bats. Also, up on the stepped profile of the building there are roof gardens at two levels where the building reduces in size. These gardens, like the old Great Garden, contain flowering trees, lawns and box hedges and provide space for staff relaxation and client entertaining with spectacular views over the east of the City and beyond to Canary Wharf.

You could say that Drapers' Gardens has regained some of its old self and perhaps the ghost of Thomas Cromwell would be well pleased, if not amazed, with what Drapers' Gardens is today.

I am very pleased to acknowledge the great assistance I have received in researching and preparing this paper from the Drapers' Company, the London Metropolitan Archives and Pre-Construct Archaeology, together with the developers of the new Drapers' Gardens, Canary Wharf Limited, and I must not forget, of course, the original developers of Drapers' Gardens, the Romans.