

THE ROYAL CONTRACT ESTATES

The ownership of land and property and the responsibilities thereby entailed have always played a prominent part in the Corporation's activities and it is no accident that the City Lands and Bridge House Estates Committee is considered the premier committee of the Common Council. The City Lands Committee was first appointed to manage the corporate property in the spring of 1592, but events in the reigns of the early Stuarts were to render the City a landowner on a national scale for a short period and new methods of property management had to be introduced to cope with this unique situation. The present paper is concerned with the history of the acquisition of the Royal Contract Estates, the name by which the new lands were known, their administration, and subsequent sale.

The problem of government finance was one of the greatest difficulties facing both James I and Charles I. The state itself was relatively highly organised and made monetary demands which the financial world was as yet unequipped to fulfill. There was no Bank of England to raise revenue for the Crown and it was only some thirty years since Queen Elizabeth had stopped raising major loans abroad. In these circumstances one of the places to which the King turned was the City of London and its already developed municipal institutions. Medieval and Tudor monarchs had employed the Chamber to raise many of their largest loans, but the practice assumed increasing importance in the first thirty years of the seventeenth century.

As early as 1604 the Privy Council requested a loan from the Common Council, but the history of the Royal Contract really begins in 1617 with the King's request for a loan of £100,000 for one year at ten per cent interest. Although some individuals contributed the majority of the lenders borrowed part of their contributions from the Chamber and the City also acted as guarantor for repayment. Much of the principal and interest on this loan had yet to be repaid when Charles I sought a further short-term loan of £60,000, with the interest rate reduced to 8%, in 1625. On this occasion Crown lands had to be offered as security and the money was raised from 119 contributors with the deficiency being made up out of the Chamber. Many of the lenders to both these loans were still awaiting repayment when Charles obtained a further loan of £120,000 in 1627-28, with the result that the royal debt to the City then amounted to close on £350,000, a vast sum of money for the time. The agreement reached between the Common Council and the Crown was known as the "Royal Contract" and in it the City assumed the responsibility for repaying the principal and interest on the loans in return for the grant of lands of an annual value of approximately £12,500. The lands were to be conveyed to the City's trustees in satisfaction of the loans, the total quantity being

calculated to represent a purchase price of twenty-eight times the annual value of the estates (referred to as twenty-eight years' purchase). The estates were then to be sold to repay the lenders to the various loans. The City was given a free hand with the land sales but was bound by a gentlemen's agreement, not included in the formal contract, whereby any profits arising from the conveyancing were to be returned. Later Charles I was to form the opinion that he was not dealing with gentlemen and it was certainly true that there were frequent abuses in the land sales, but Professor Robert Ashton has described the royal complaints as "sanctimonious hypocrisy".

The lands conveyed to the City covered most parts of England and Wales from Northumberland in the north-east to Devon in the south-west. They included the great lordship of Middleham and Richmond and the honour of Pontefract, which included the town of Leeds, in Yorkshire, and small manors elsewhere such as Embleton, valued at £24.1s.6d. per annum and situated in a remote corner of northern England some seven miles north-east of Alnwick. Incidentally Embleton was sold in 1633 to Lady Ann Middleton, the widow of Sir Thomas Middleton, Lord Mayor in 1613-14, and she was allowed to discount the principal and interest on the loan which her husband had made to James I in 1617 from the purchase price. It had taken sixteen years to recover the one-year loan and Sir Thomas had died almost two years before.

The administration of the newly acquired estates was not entrusted to the City Lands Committee and a special committee was appointed by the Common Council on 4 January 1628. This committee was much larger than the contemporary City Lands Committee and appears to have had about 30 members, 10 Aldermen and 20 Common Councilmen. The earliest members were drawn from the great livery companies, with the Mercers, Grocers, Drapers, Haberdashers, Skinners, Merchant Taylors, Ironmongers and Clothworkers all represented, the only exceptions being one Scrivener and two Girdlers. Very few men served on both committees, the average being about two, but it is a fact that the City Lands Committee did not meet at all between 22 March 1628 and 11 March 1629, one of the periods of greatest activity of the Royal Contract Estates Committee. No doubt the reason was the great strain placed on civic resources by the acquisition and administration of such a vast quantity of property, much of it hundreds of miles from the capital in inaccessible parts of the country and only capable of being reached after long and tiring journeys on horseback.

One immediate difficulty facing the City was the fact that many of the lands were let at uneconomic rentals and often the so-called "annual values" did not represent their true economic worth. It was therefore imperative for surveys to be carried out to ascertain the true value of the

manors. As early as August 1628 Alderman Nicholas Rainton was appointed "to undertake" for the manors in the Honour of Pontefract and Sheriff Hutton in Yorkshire and Arnold Child of Gray's Inn was desired to accompany him with a promise of an allowance of a mark (6/8d.) a day and £6 towards the provision of horses. On 4 October Rainton and Child wrote to the Royal Contract Estates Committee relating their proceedings in Yorkshire in September and later Arnold Child wrote an account of their observations which still survives in the City's archives. In it he speaks of the ancient market town of Leeds:

It standeth pleasantlie in a fruitefull and enclosed vale; upon the North side of the same River of Eyre, over or beyond a stone bridge, from whence it hath a large and broad streete (paved with stone) leadinge directlie North and continuallie ascendinge. The houses on both sides thereof are verie thicke, and close compacted together, being ancient meane and lowe built; and generallie all of Tymber, though they have stone quarries frequent in the Towne, and about it; only some fewe of the richer sort of the Inhabitants have their houses more large and capacious; yett all lowe and straightened on their backsides.

The following year saw Child engaged in much similar work with William Smyth, a Common Councilman of the City and a member of the Mercers' Company. Smyth had some experience of surveying because he acted as a viewer for the Company in the middle and late 1620's and in 1627 he was elected Upper Warden which meant that he also acted as one of the surveyors for St. Paul's School, whose duties included the supervision of the Colet estate. In the spring of 1629 the two men conducted surveys in Wiltshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight and on 9 July they were appointed to survey lands in the Lordship of Middleham and Richmond and in the Bishopric of Durham. In August and early September of that year Smyth and Child visited Durham and they then continued their journey northwards to survey some scattered manors near Newcastle and in more inaccessible parts of Northumberland. Here the two surveyors encountered severe difficulties as they were unable to hold courts of survey to assess the economic worth of the manors and Child wrote a somewhat jaundiced account of the indigenous population:

The people also heere are as rude, as the ground seemes uncouth, and live most upon breed of young Cattell, for greater these grounds will not feed. But what cattell to day they do enioy they cannot presume of to morrow. One night makes a great alteracion, and alters the propertie of the owner: And he that is best allyed and strongest in this part of the Countrey fares comonly the best: for his Cattell are safest ... And the greater number of these people hereabouts are still papists: and for theft, which they account but as a veniall sinne, they know, they may be assoyled thereof at their next Confession. And that flesh, which being kild, they will not eat, upon payne of Damnacion and the Churches curse, upon a friday; the same flesh, were it living, they would not be so curious to marke for their owne, upon the same, or any other day (if oportunitie serve)

maugre [i.e. despite] all lawes or Religion. And it is yet used as a common phrase amongst them upon the death of any of their friends; That, he was an honest man; onely he would have taken a little geese now and than.

Notwithstanding the "obstinate willfullness" of these and other local inhabitants the City's surveyors were able to surmount most of the difficulties they faced and the sales of lands and repayments of the lenders proceeded at a rapid pace for some time. By December 1629 lands of an annual value of approximately £3,000 had been sold for a total price of £111,000; in a further period of heavy selling between 1629 and 1632 a larger sum of £195,000 was received. Naturally these lands offered the most attractions to potential purchasers and, as time proceeded, it proved more and more difficult to dispose of the remaining properties. The Civil War further interrupted the sales, especially of property in royalist territory, and by 1657 neither the sales of lands nor the repayment of the lenders had been completed, thirty years after the last loan. Attempts were made in the late 1650's to sell off the remaining lands and William Eles was appointed in 1659 to survey all the unsold estates, many of them in Yorkshire and Lancashire. Some were disposed of as a result of Eles's activities but others remained and it was not until about 1700 that a comprehensive investigation was undertaken. On 26 July of that year the Remembrancer, William Bellamy, was appointed to investigate the parts of the Royal Contract Estates yet unsold and he was granted one quarter part of all manors, lands, rents and arrears yet undiscovered and for or out of which the City had not for the last ten years received any profit or advantage, and one quarter of monies due for lands sold or contracted for and not yet paid. With such a strong financial inducement Bellamy did his work well and it is known that he himself visited the North of England to assess the situation on the City's remaining estates. Before the lands could be sold it was necessary to appoint new trustees as none survived and an Act of Parliament for the purpose was obtained in 1701. Within a few years the remaining lands in Durham, Herefordshire, Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and Wales were sold off. One estate remained in the Corporation's possession and still does, and that was the Conduit Mead property, not far from the City itself in another part of London on a site now bisected by New Bond Street. It had been sold by the trustees to the City for the small sum of £200 in 1629 and remained an insignificant plot of land until the surrounding estates commenced to be developed later in the century. The history of the Conduit Mead estate is another story, but it is worthy of note that the leases of Conduit Mead property approved by the Common Council today preserve the link with the other Royal Contract Estates long since sold and forgotten.

J.M.K.
28.06.77