

THE ORIGINS OF THE CITY LANDS COMMITTEE

Mr. President, I start with an apology. When, harried by the Hon. Secretary for the title of my paper for his circular, I rushed into print with "The City Lands Committee: its origins and evolution", I had not really begun research on the subject. As soon as I did, I realised that I had bitten off more than any of us could chew in a single post-prandial paper. With your permission I would therefore like to confine myself to the origins of the Committee, to touch additionally on the way in which it undertook its tasks at its inception, and to leave its evolution to another man, another day.

What are, or were, the City Lands? From very early times the Mayor and Commonalty claimed and administered fairly extensive tracts of land, particularly that adjoining the wall on both sides, and alongside the river bank.

In 1444 what had become hallowed by custom was given legal force in a Charter of Henry VI, which confirmed the Citizens' rights to "all soils, purprestures and improvements in all wastes, commons, streets, ways and other places of the City, together with the profits of the same, and they may improve and enjoy the rents of the same for them and their successors for ever".

King Henry dealt the City a pretty good hand, and in 1478 Edward IV reinforced it by enabling the City to acquire land through devise and purchase in return for the cancellation of some £13,000 of his debts. In 1638 Charles I confirmed "to the Mayor and Commonalty and Citizens all houses, messuages and edifices and their site and foundation, and all watercourses, gutters and easements which are now erected, built or enjoyed in, upon or under any void grounds, wastes, commons, streets, ways or public places and in the banks, shores and waters of Thames". A high proportion of the income of City's cash today is derived from these sites.

A full century before Henry VI's Charter legitimised the position, the Commonalty was active in preventing encroachments on the land it claimed, particularly the strips on either side of the wall — ramparts within, ditch without — which it was still felt necessary to keep clear for defensive purposes. As a source of income, however, the City's property was at that time of little significance, producing only about $\frac{1}{6}$ th of the revenue derived from freedom and apprenticeship fees. But a century or so after the Charter clarified and extended the City's lands, income from rentals had become the larger figure.

In the early Middle Ages the administration of the City was under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Mayor and Aldermen, with Commoners only summoned on an ad hoc basis and in an advisory capacity, as laid down by the Oath of the Commune in 1193. The participation of Commoners increased and became

more formalised after 1346, when each Alderman was required to cause to be elected in his Ward "8, 6 or 4 of the better men, according as his Ward be great or small, to be at the Guildhall as often as they may happen to be summoned, to treat of the arduous affairs of the Commonalty".

But the Common Council, as the new body soon became known, only met 5 or 6 times a year over the next couple of centuries, while the Aldermen met on average several times a week. Control of the City's affairs still therefore lay effectively with the Aldermen, and this included the leasing and administration of its lands and properties.

By the middle of the 16th century the Court of Aldermen had delegated their control of property to the Chamberlain and the Bridgemasters. But in 1559 they decided to resume the direct exercise of their property management responsibilities through a committee of aldermen called the Surveyors, working with the Chamberlain. Four Commoners were added to the Committee in 1563. But this may have been a special arrangement for a non-recurrent purpose, because their membership was very short-lived.

The reign of the Surveyors proved less than satisfactory. The Aldermanic representatives tended to be the most senior above and below the Chair, which resulted in a lack of continuity through deaths or accessions to the mayoralty, and not infrequently through incapacity from old age. As for the Chamberlains, there were constant irregularities in that office in the second half of the 16th century, and its reputation was extremely low.

These circumstances resulted in increasing pressure from Common Council for more direct participation in the administration of the City's lands, and on 24th April 1592 it decreed that in future all leases would be granted in the name of the Lord Mayor, Commonalty and Citizens of London, under the common seal of the City, by a committee comprising four aldermen and six commoners. Thus the City Lands Committee was born, and held its first meeting almost at once on 9th May, 1592.

It was, in fact, some time before the Committee settled down to the regular and frequent pattern of meetings of today, but it nevertheless undertook its task from the outset with great fervour and attention to detail. Each application that came before it to take out or renew on lease was individually considered for its effect on the environment, and all sorts of conditions were inserted to ensure that it complied with what was deemed to be the public interest.

In the very first of the Grant Books, for instance, in May 1596, the Committee asks itself under what covenants a lease in the parish of St. Anne and St. Agnes can be altered without prejudice to the City. One Walter Willinghall of St. Katherine Cree was to have his prospective lease "stayed from the seal till

he change the privy now used by his tenants there in such sort as the other tenants and neighbours and other passagers be not annoyed". In the same vein, in another lease "the passage of waters and other things are to be remembered". Detailed instructions about materials and dimensions for prospective buildings were issued and retribution was exacted for breaches of covenants. Short shrift was given to squatters: "John Johnson, who came to dwell in a house of the City's in St. Mary Axe wherein Widow Webb, an old woman, dwells, is charged to provide himself of a dwelling elsewhere with speed". And so on and so forth.

Whenever there was a need, the Committee went walkabout for an on the spot inspection — "Thursday come sevensnight in the afternoon is appointed for view of sundry tenements at "Chriechurch": "the gate of Aldersgate and the buildings over the same shall be viewed by all the Committees, Knights, Aldermen and others, or so many of them as can be procured to come together, against the next sitting": "Commoners who shall next go abroad to view tenements shall view the void ground under London Wall betwixt Aldgate and Moorgate and consider whether there may be a convenient room spared to build a storehouse for gunpowder". This last, incidentally, was in 1600 not 1605!

The City's lands, strategically located as they were, were originally for the most part maintained as gardens or other open spaces, and leases often gave the Corporation the right to re-enter and repossess the property in time of war. But by the time the City Lands Committee came into existence the importance of defence had diminished, and rising population and the need for increased revenue were giving rise to an upsurge in demand for commercial use — timber yards, coal stores and so on — or housing. The demand was addressed sympathetically by the new Committee. A lot, of course, was changed again by the Great Fire of 1666, but that is part of the next, or another story.

This paper should not close without a passing reference to the Bridge House Estates. The appropriation of income from property bequeathed for the purpose to the building and repair of the successive bridges over the Thames possibly goes back to Roman times, and almost certainly antedates the building of the first stone bridge in 1176. Although, as many Historians know, there were two quite separate Committees for City Lands and Bridge House Estates as recently as 1969, the leasing and administration of the Bridge House properties was in fact taken over by the City Lands Committee from its inception in 1592 — but meeting on a separate day for Bridge House business. It was not till 1818 that two Committees of different composition were set up by Common Council — to be merged again 151 years later.

Mr. President and fellow Historians, I hope that, for those of you who were

not already aware, this paper has given you a little insight into how our premier Committee came into being; and that, even if you didn't to start with, you will all now agree that its evolution is a story, or series of stories, best left for another, perhaps not too distant, day.

W.G.G.H.