

THE CITY'S ESTATES IN THE 17TH CENTURY

Read by James Sewell, O.B.E., M.A., F.S.A

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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 therefore not surprising that the City Lands and Bridge House Estates Committee has such a prominent place in the committee structure with its Chairman referred to as the 'Chief Commoner'. The Committee owes its origins to the disquiet which arose in the second half of the 16th century concerning the administration of corporate lands, control of which had largely fallen into the hands of the Chamberlain and the Bridgemasters. Although attempts were made by the Court of Aldermen to assume control, the Common Council also pressed its claim and in 1592 a committee, consisting of four Aldermen and six Commoners, was established with full power to make, bargain and conclude all leases on behalf of the Mayor, Commonalty and Citizens, acting with the Chamberlain or the Bridgemasters as necessary.

In the course of a short paper it is obviously impossible to give a complete account of the history of the City's lands and property during the course of the century, so I would like to concentrate on the period around 1630 when the great series of City Rentals properly begins and at a time when the Corporation was required to administer lands not only well beyond the boundaries of the City but hundreds of miles away in diverse parts of England and Wales. Consideration will first be given to the City Lands, followed by the Bridge House Estates, and I shall conclude by referring briefly to the Royal Contract Estates, differing from the former two in that they are almost entirely no longer in the City's ownership.

The City Lands were in theory the possession of the whole Commonalty of the City. A watchful eye was kept on the 'common soil' and in 1344, for instance, the Commonalty complained that Hugh de Croydon had encroached and built upon the ground next to the City wall within Newgate to a length of sixteen feet and to the width of his tenement. The Mayor and Aldermen viewed the site and ordered that the building should be removed. In 1376 the Commonalty were complaining that some Mayors and Aldermen had granted public lands and tenements under the Common Seal without consulting them.

What was this 'common soil' about which we hear so much? In 1435 it was stated that every tenement near the walls or the gates of the City should be at least sixteen feet away, the intermediate space being the common soil, but it was not until 1444 that 'all common soils, purprestures and approvments in all wastes, common streets, ways and other places in the City and suburbs aforesaid... 'were granted formally to the citizens by a charter of Henry VI. The land granted in this way was augmented by other property acquired by devise or purchase, and by the numerous bequests by members and officers of the Corporation, some in the nature of charitable trusts.

The rental of 1632-33 is the first of the important series which survives in the City's Cash accounts, although there are some similar rentals in an earlier draft form which date from Elizabeth's reign. The lands and tenements are scattered around the City but, as one would anticipate given the nature of the common soil, it is often near the gates and along the lines of the ancient City wall. An area at the north-east end of Mark Lane, known as Blanch Appleton, had been acquired in 1478 in satisfaction of debts due by King Edward IV. About 1311 the rental income from the City Lands had

been a mere £17 10s but by 1584-85 this had risen to £836 18s 8d and by 1632-33 it exceeded £2080, forming an important part of the City's income and greatly exceeding the income from apprenticeship and Freedom Fees. It may be of interest to note that the gross income from rents in 1985 was estimated to be in the region of £11.8 million.

In the latter half of the 16th century the rough rentals which survive show almost half the City Lands as gardens. The City Lands Committee continued to resist unauthorised encroachments on the walls and attempted to preserve the bulwarks. In March 1605, for instance, a saddler named Thomas Potter was given a long lease of a bulwark near Newgate on condition that it was rebuilt and maintained. A few years earlier Nowell Sotherton had been promised some leases in the Cripplegate area on condition that he kept the ditch clear 'to the end that the ditch between Cripplegate and Aldersgate may hereafter be kept in better sort'. These well-meaning attempts to keep the ditch free from encroachments and rubbish ultimately failed because of the demand for building land, and the Committee itself eventually bowed to the inevitable and granted leases which permitted the covering of the ditch.

The original 'common soil' lands had been augmented by other ground and property given to the City in specific bequests. One of these came from Sir John Philipot, Mayor in 1378-79, under the terms of his will which was proved in the Hustings Court in 1389. The property included a tenement in Cheapside, a tenement in Lombard Street near the Stocks Market, property in Pudding Lane, New Fish Street and Lambeth Hill, Blacksmiths' Hall, and 'The Bull' at Queenhithe. The rental income in 1632-33 was £110, out of which the Chamberlain was obliged, under the terms of Philipot's will, to pay one penny a day to each of thirteen poor people chosen by the Mayor and Recorder.

The Carpenter estate was the smallest and provided an annual income of some £50. John Carpenter had been the Town Clerk or Common Clerk of the City from 1417 to 1438 and left property which was eventually devised to the City in the will of John Don of 1477. Under its terms the Mayor, Chamberlain and Commonalty were obliged to provide for the maintenance of four boys known as 'Carpenters Children' within the college of Guildhall Chapel, but the income was used in the 17th century for the maintenance, clothing and schooling of four poor children. In the 19th century the bequest was re-organised, the boys first being sent to Tonbridge School and later to the City of London School where the Carpenter Scholarships have been awarded ever since. The estate in 1632-33 included 'The Bead', 'The Crown' and 'The Peacock' in Thames Street, 'The Green Dragon' in Bridge Street, all part of the original bequest, and five acres of ground in the parish of St. Giles in the Fields which had been acquired with other property in the City in an exchange of land with Sir Nicholas Bacon in Elizabeth's reign. The St. Giles' property remained as grazing ground until the 18th century, but eventually the whole estate was let on building leases. A large block of property on part of the estate, with a frontage to Tottenham Court Road, in modern times was let at a rent of £550,000, a sharp contrast to the £4 rent for the whole in 1632-33.

The third and most substantial bequest was that of John Reynwell, Mayor in 1426-27, which provided an income of £138 10s. This included 'The Salutation' at Billingsgate, Somers Quay and the Steelyard, by far the most important portion, leased to the Hanse merchants at an annual rent of £70 3s 4d. Cannon Street Station now occupies this latter site.

In addition to these bequests there were lands granted to the City by John Costen, girdler, with an obligation to use part of the proceeds to distribute coal to the poor of the parish of All Hallows Staining, the Ratcliffe lands purchased from John Gardiner of Limpsfield in 1616 and the property formerly part of the dissolved Priory of Holy Trinity, Aldgate which the City had purchased from Thomas, Lord Howard in the late 16th century. Further revenue came from the manor of Finsbury

which the City held on long lease from the Prebendary thereof, a lease which did not finally revert to the Church until 1867.

So much for the City Lands, what of the Bridge House Estates? These had originated in pious bequests of land and money 'to God, St. Thomas and London Bridge' and the revenue was, of course, devoted to the maintenance of London Bridge. Some of the earliest bequests probably dated from the period before the great medieval stone bridge was built and these were supplemented by many later gifts and occasionally also by purchases. The estates were administered from the headquarters of the Bridge House at the Bridge Yard in Tooley Street in Southwark. They were divided into the 'Proper Rents' in the City, in Southwark and on the Bridge itself and the 'Foreign Rents' in Lewisham, Deptford, Peckham, Bermondsey, Stratford and those lands in Southwark purchased in 1550. The 'Proper Rents' provided an income of £1580, while the 'Foreign Rents' accounted for approximately £400 in 1632-33, thus providing a sum similar to the City Lands. In the late 16th century the revenue from the City Lands had amounted to less than two thirds of that from the Bridge House Estates. The gross income from rents during the mid 1980s for the Bridge House Estates was estimated to exceed £5.5 million.

The property on the bridge accounted for an income of £520 in 1632-33 but the houses on both sides at the northern end had suffered a disastrous fire in February of the latter year. The conflagration is alleged to have been started by the carelessness of a servant girl in the employment of John Briggs, a needle maker, who placed a tub of hot coal ashes under a stair before going to bed. A narrative account of the fire by Nehemiah Wallington records that 'although there was water enough very neere, yet they could not safely come at it, but all the conduittes neere were opened and the pipes that carried watter through the streets were cutt open, and the watter swept down with broomes with helpe enough; but it was the will of God it should not prevaile'. It was not until many years later that the majority of the houses were rebuilt.

It would be tedious to list all the Bridge House properties in the City but a few examples may be of interest. A tavern known as 'The Peter and Paul' in Paternoster Row was given by Peter Bylton, a bookbinder, under the terms of his will of 1455 although it was not conveyed to the Bridge House indirectly by John Bylton, his grandson, until 1513. Peter was the same man who had received the sum of 3s.4d. in 1421 'for binding a great paper' and thus contributed in practical fashion to the preservation of the Bridge House records as well as providing for the maintenance of the Bridge. He was not a native Londoner but hailed from Cherry Burton in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Other property in the area of St. Paul's, namely in St. Paul's Churchyard, in Old Change and at the west end of Cheapside was given by Edward I in 1282. Two tenements from this group, situated in Old Change and adjoining St. Paul's School, were sold for £30 in 1512 to its founder, Dean John Colet. In Bishopsgate the bridge owned the Angel Inn, acquired under the terms of the will of Gilbert Marion of 1391.

The Bridge's 'Foreign Rents' included a mill and the Bridge House Farm at Lewisham, property in the High Street there, and the property later known as St. George's Wharf, Rotherhithe, formerly part of the possessions of Bermondsey Abbey, which had been sold for £15 to one of the Bridgemasters by Thomas Pope of Bermondsey in 1544. In Peckham the Bridge House held five lots of land, of which that known as 'Carpentereshaghe' was passed to the use of the Bridge by the executors of Godard, the late Chaplain around 1294. In the 17th century it was leased to the Governors of St. Bartholomew's Hospital and was known as the Lock Hospital from its proximity to the Bridge known as the Lock. There is a record of two lepers being sent there in 1557, but it was not very large having only twenty patients in 1682. The following century it was conveyed to St. Bartholomew's in exchange for property in Newgate Street. At Stratford the Bridge House owned two mills on the

River Lee, Spilman's Mill and Saynes Mill, both granted to the Bridge in the 13th century. The history of these mills is exceedingly well documented in the records. We know, for instance, that Saynes Mill was rebuilt about 1512 by John Hollandyne, a millwright of Dartford, at a contract price of £22 13s 4d. Oak was obtained from Epping, bricks from Whitechapel, and a tileman named Philip Bocher delivered six thousand plain tiles to Stratford. A parcel of ground had to be temporarily let from John Hayward to store the timber and enable the frames of the new mill to be made.

From 1592, as we have seen, the leasing of the estates was in the hands of the City Lands Committee. The Committee met separately and kept separate records of its transactions concerning Bridge House lands when it was usually referred to as the 'Committee for letting the lands and tenements belonging to the Bridge House' or some similar title. The rents, terms and fines varied considerably and it was not uncommon for prospective tenants to be offered alternative proposals. An increased fine might lead to a reduced rent and vice versa. If leaseholders entered into a commitment to expend money in rebuilding, they would be offered more attractive terms. In 1600, for instance, Richard Wilbraham, the Common Serjeant, obtained a fifty year lease of one of the windmills in Finsbury which had blown down at a rent of only £1 a year on condition that he would rebuild the same within a year.

The maintenance of the estates involved considerable expenditure and large purchases of materials. During the year 1632-33 the Chamberlain purchased 26,500 plain bricks and 30,000 plain tiles among a wide range of building supplies. The tiles were supplied by William Freelove at a cost of sixteen shillings per thousand. More unusual payments include those for fourteen young elm trees in Moorfields and gravel for repairing the walks there and £10 14s for eleven pairs of boots for the Clerk of the City's Works and the City's three labourers, among others. During the same year the Bridgemasters paid two shillings to two labourers who helped to carry lead to the top of the red house on London Bridge and in February and March there are payments which are connected with the fire which destroyed some of the houses on the Bridge, to which I referred earlier. The weekly payments record the purchase of five wheelbarrows at a cost of 5s 6d each and two dozen 'scoopes' to quench the timber burning upon the arches. A payment to a waterman for the use of his boat to take up lead and iron out of the Thames is also recorded.

The above evidence illustrates the extensive experience of the City in the administration of property, experience that was to be greatly in demand following a huge acquisition of Crown lands under the terms of the 'Royal Contract' of 1627-28. This has been described by Professor Robert Ashton as 'the most intricate financial transaction' of Charles I's reign. Short-term loans raised mainly in the City and advanced to James I in 1617 and to Charles I in 1625 were still outstanding in 1627 and the following year an agreement was reached whereby the King conveyed estates to the Corporation, with the latter subsequently selling the lands thereby obtained and using the proceeds to reimburse both the lenders of the two earlier loans and the contributors to a further advance of £120,000. The lands granted were of an annual value of £12,500 and were scattered throughout most of England and Wales from Northumberland in the north-east to Devon in the southwest. They included the great lordship of Middleham and Richmond and the honour of Pontefract, which included part of Leeds, in Yorkshire and small manors elsewhere, such as Embleton, seven miles from Alnwick, described by its surveyors as 'very fertile for production of Corne'. It possessed a common, two mills and a coalmine but the latter was at the time disused and 'of small value by reason of the thinnesse of the bedde'. When it was sold, with other lands in Pembroke and Durharn, to Lady Ann Middleton the executrix of Sir Thomas Middleton, in 1633 for £722 5s 0d., she was allowed to discount the principal and interest owed to Sir Thomas on his original loan of 1617. It had taken sixteen years to recover the one year loan and Sir Thomas himself had died almost two years previously.

The administration of the newly acquired estates was entrusted to a special committee which was appointed on 4 January 1628. It had about thirty members, ten Aldermen and twenty Common Councilmen, and was much larger than the contemporary City Lands Committee. The latter did not meet at all for a year from March 1628 and we can speculate that this was almost certainly due to the great strain placed on civic resources by the acquisition, administration and sale of the Crown lands.

Despite such difficulties the land sales proceeded quickly. By December 1629 lands of an annual value of £3,000 had been sold and between 10 December 1629 and 6 May 1632 a sum of £195,000 was received. Naturally the more attractive properties were sold rapidly but, as time proceeded, it proved more difficult to dispose of the lands. The process was interrupted by the Civil War and by 1657 neither sales nor repayments had been completed, some thirty years after the last loans. Attempts were made in the late 1650's to sell off the remainder of the estates, many of them in Yorkshire and Lancashire, and these met with some success, but it was not until about 1700 that a comprehensive investigation was undertaken. In that year the Remembrancer was appointed to investigate the unsold lands and, with the substantial financial inducement of one quarter of all manors, rents and arrears undiscovered and one quarter of monies due and not yet paid, he did his work well. 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, the Conduit Mead in the area of the west end of London now bisected by New Bond Street. It had been sold by the Royal Contract Estates' trustees to the City for £200 in 1629 and it remained a relatively unimportant property until the surrounding estates began to be developed later in the century. From that date it has a long and complicated history beyond the scope of the present talk, but present day leases of properties there do remind us of the City's link with those many other former royal estates long since sold and forgotten.

This has been no more than a general introduction to the City's Estates in the 17th century, but I hope it has proved of interest in showing the great extent and diversity, of the City's land ownership, the importance of the income generated thereby, and some of the responsibilities which the ownership of particular properties entailed. In discharging these great responsibilities, the civic authorities did not forget their employees. Perhaps I might end by drawing your attention to an act of charity by the Court of Aldermen in December 1632. Thomas Lewis, a workman for the Bridge House for fourteen years, had been killed while erecting a scaffold for the repair of a house on London Bridge, falling at least one hundred feet 'whereby he came to a sudden and lamentable death, haveing the scull of his heade dashed into many peeces.' The Bridgemasters were instructed by the Aldermen to provide his wife with a pension of 2s a week for life on account of her poverty and children.