



# A CORNER OF LONDON, THE HEART OF THE CAMPUS

What was Clare Market like before LSE? Was Houghton Street always bustling with activity, or once a quiet residential area? **George Kiloh** has delved into the history of the corner of London where the School now stands, discovering its agricultural and industrial heritage.

‘The first graveyard was Portugal Street, on which the hospital, and later LSE’s Library, were built. It became an unpleasant plot of land but it was nothing to the second, which provoked a serious scandal’

There is an odd triangular patch on the map of London, bordered by Kingsway, Aldwych and Lincoln’s Inn Fields. It has no collective name although often called Clare Market. Most of it is occupied by LSE. Over the course of three centuries the area has moved from agriculture, to town estate to festering slum, before being converted into a business district.

Most of the area which is the footprint of LSE was in the parish of St Clement Danes. In the late 16th century there were open fields between Drury Lane, Holborn, Lincoln’s Inn and the Strand, though all of these streets were partly developed. It was the open 14 acres northwest of the church, known as

St Clement’s Field, that Sir William Holles bought in 1531. Holles was from Nottinghamshire and became Sheriff of the City of London and then Lord Mayor in 1539. He had already bought his Nottinghamshire estate of Haughton from the Stanhope family and the name Houghton Street recalls his country house. Over the years Holles and his descendants added further property to the estate. The family’s town house, which came to be called Clare House, must have been enjoyable and convenient for the City and the Court, but an estate so close to both could not escape development. By the early 17th century Drury Lane was already built up. In the 1630s the Earl of Bedford developed Covent Garden, and by 1659 Lincoln’s Inn





PHOTOGRAPHS 1-4 FROM THE LSE ARCHIVES  
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LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES

1. The Old Curiosity Shop, Portsmouth Street, c1905
2. Aldwych, c1905, after the great clearance – the entrance to Houghton Street is just visible on the left
3. Houghton Street/New Inn Passage, 1902
4. No 3 Houghton Street, 1903: this is more or less where Wright's Bar is today. The building to the right is the Red Lion, demolished to make way for the entrance to the Old Building
5. Watercolour by TG Fraser of Portsmouth Street, mid-19th century, at the corner of Gilbert Passage, showing the George the Fourth pub



CITY OF WESTMINSTER ARCHIVES CENTRE

It became an unpleasant plot of land but it was nothing to the second, beneath the Enon Chapel, which provoked a serious scandal. In 1822 the Enon Chapel was built across the southern end of the continuation of Grange Court, just a little north of where it joins St Clement's Passage, at the top of the steps down to today's Towers.

### The Enon corpses

In addition to conducting services and Sunday schools, the minister buried the local dead – but he did so underneath the floorboards. The chapel was not a large building, so almost certainly the number disposed of did not reach the 12,000 claimed by a contemporary writer. However, it is also reported that vaults were cleared out from time to time and the remains disposed of in the Thames. Complaints were many and forthright, and associated with claims that the smells created disease. Despite regular clearances of the Enon corpses it was not long before there was only the wooden floor between living and dead. Not even copious use of quicklime could disguise the odour. It was also held that the dead had not received a Christian burial. The minister made money out of removing burial garments and re-selling them, and burnt coffin wood in his domestic hearth. Like other unscrupulous graveyard keepers, he would also have sold off the metal fittings of the coffins.

In 1835 the chapel ceased to be a place of worship. In 1844 local commissioners chose a

route for a new sewer which lay under the chapel. When digging began, the matter came to renewed official notice but nothing was done. The building was taken over by a teacher of dancing, and its later uses were as a concert room, a prize-fighting ring, a casino and a penny theatre. The bodies remained a few centimetres under the feet of the dancers and fighters.

By 1847 George Walker, known for campaigning for the closure of inner city graveyards, obtained possession of the chapel and he arranged for a mass exhumation to take place and for a decent burial to be made in what is now West Norwood cemetery.

Anyone familiar with Mayhew's work in reporting the conditions of the poor will see at once how things must have stood for the inhabitants of this crowded and miserable quarter. They were housed in the worst possible conditions. A shifting population of the casually employed was reduced to using the lodging houses which appeared, both recognised and unofficial. Disease was rife and the area lacked proper sanitation.

Charitable efforts were made to improve the situation. Two well known families connected with St Clement Danes – WH Smith and the Twining tea and banking concern – were active in trying to secure schools, libraries, health and religious education for the population, but they fought a losing battle. The remaining professional people withdrew into the New Inn and Clements Inn.

Elsewhere middle class residents moved out, as the railways and buses allowed them to work in the City but live much further away.

Charitable efforts were overwhelmed by demand, but no doubt in some cases individuals were encouraged to lift themselves from the mire around them. Many children were rescued from the very worst effects of poverty, for example, through the creation of the home for destitute boys in the Colonnade, now the site of Cowdray House.

Clare Market remained a rather mixed area. Households continued to advertise for servants, for example, and contemporary directories listed remarkably specialised trades, such as widows' cap maker and book spines gilder. There were many public houses and the general character of Clare Market was only too obvious. In the 1870s the *St Clement Danes Magazine* reported: 'I have seen miseries of poverty and sickness in the Roman Ghetto, and in the plague quarter of Cairo; but there are places in the neighbourhood of Clare Market that would beat them hollow – very nightmares of poverty and disease.'

### The great clearance

As traffic and trade increased there was discussion about better road connections between Holborn and the Strand. In 1891, following the creation of the London County Council (LCC), this became a priority. The aim was new roads, underground

transport and slum clearance. Demolition began and by 1900 the area was much improved.

However, a much bigger scheme was needed and LCC went for the grand gesture. At one point not only was there to be a grand circus like Oxford Circus along Kingsway, but space was to be found for the new county hall. The Council went public on its first scheme in 1895. After considerable discussion a Bill was introduced and the LCC (Improvements) Act was passed in 1899 setting out the development as we now know it. It gave LCC wide powers of compulsory purchase and the result was the greatest improvement scheme in the history of London. Major roads were to be driven through the heart of a residential and business district, accompanied by the mass demolition of existing property and erasure of the old street pattern.

The budget was £5.24 million, of which only £300,000 was for rehousing. Costs were to be recouped by selling the sites at a much higher price, once development had increased their value. There was no budget for rehousing in the Clare Market area because those areas scheduled for demolition were already being emptied under another Act, and at least 3,172 people were (or were shortly to be) removed. Part of the social purpose concerned alcohol. Consistent with the contemporary campaign to reduce the number of public houses, the LCC would takeover and surrender no fewer than 51 licences.

The planners were merciless. The two main streets, the Aldwych and Kingsway, were laid out without regard to the existing street pattern: in neither case was there an earlier road simply to be widened. It is curious to us now that there were very few objections to the demolition. Major road developments of later years have tended to slice through districts, leaving on either side the sides and backs of buildings never meant to be seen and their eventual replacement subject to no great plan. Aldwych/ Kingsway was different. The buildings on either side were to be faced with stone to present a triumphal appearance and each carriageway was to be lined with trees. As a result streets were lost, with their many courts, passages and yards, and Houghton Street was shortened. Portugal Street, which had formerly ceased at its junction with Portsmouth Street, was driven through to join Kingsway, removing narrow and decrepit passages.

Kingsway and the Aldwych opened in 1905; by then LSE had moved into Passmore Edwards Hall in Clare Market. ■



### George Kiloh

was LSE's academic registrar from 1996 to 2005. More about the history of LSE's patch of London land will feature in December's *LSE Magazine*.