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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Covent Garden

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Mots-clés

Coffeehouses

Commerce

Market

Prostitution

Theatre

Résumé

Covent Garden lay at the heart of the eighteenth-century metropolis, beside the major route between the Court and aristocratic Westminster to the west and the commercial City of London to the east. It was conceived as a square of genteel housing in the seventeenth century, but the intrusion of a market was followed by its remaking as a pleasure district, including many sites of sociability, such as theatres, taverns, brothels and coffeehouses. These were populated by a cross-section of London life, including actors, traders, writers and prostitutes. Covent Garden was also the place where the rowdy hustings for the Westminster elections occurred, inspiring many satirical artists.

Covent Garden is a square in the centre of London, still famous for its market and surrounding theatres. Its position on the eastern fringe of the political centre of the City of Westminster, and near to the major thoroughfare to the commercial City of London, enhanced its importance as a site of sociability at the heart of the eighteenth-century metropolis.[1]

Covent Garden's social life was most obviously fuelled by the eponymous theatre and the nearby Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, but was also served by various coffee shops, taverns, bagnios and brothels, as well as the space of the Piazza, which was a site of political meetings and mobs. This slice of London life was presided over by the church of St Paul's, situated at the western end of the square.

Covent Garden was developed between 1631 and 1639 by the landowner Francis Russell, fourth Earl of Bedford, when the Piazza, church and surrounding streets were built. Both the church and houses on three sides of the Piazza were designed in the Italianate style by famed architect Inigo Jones and the commercial and aesthetic success of Covent Garden made it a model for the many further squares that formed the heart of other suburban developments around London. The housing was initially populated by wealthy residents, but the area soon began to change. Shops and stalls started appearing in the mid seventeenth century and the market was granted a charter in 1670. The Theatre Royal was constructed to the east of the square in 1663, probably encouraging taverns and coffee houses to start trading in the area. The creative reputation of the area was enhanced by the residence of visual artists, until Soho took over as the artists' quarter from the middle of the eighteenth century. In the early eighteenth century, Bedford House, on the south side of the square, was demolished in favour of streets of townhouses, which also provided new connections to the Strand.[2] A comprehensive description of the square was provided in Strype's survey of 1720, although it was probably of late seventeenth century provenance:

> […] a curious, large, and airy Square, enclosed by Rails, between which Rails and the Houses runs a fair Street […]. On the North and East Sides are Rows of very good and large Houses, called the Piazzo's, sustained by Stone Pillars, to support the Buildings. Under which are Walks, broad and convenient, paved with Freestone. The South Side lieth open to Bedford Garden, where there is a small Grotto of Trees, most pleasant in the Summer Season; and in this Side there is kept a Market for Fruits, Herbs, Roots, and Flowers, every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday; which is grown to a considerable Account, and well served with choice Goods, which makes it much resorted unto.[3]

During the first half of the eighteenth century, the flight of the aristocracy and gentry from the square accelerated, as they moved west to newer, more fashionable suburban developments like Mayfair. The last titled resident probably quit the area in 1757. The market continued to expand and fill the centre of the Piazza, with periodic rebuildings adding further shops and stalls. The Covent Garden Theatre opened in 1732, with an entrance directly into the north-west corner of the square ('General Introduction', Survey of London, 36). Premises in the Piazza could not become victualling houses or serve coffee, chocolate, tea, beer or liquor without permission until the 1720s. The first coffee house to open overlooking the piazza was the Bedford in 1726, marking a new era for sites of indoor sociability, often frequented by writers, artists, actors and patrons of the theatre, the actor Charles Macklin

even establishing his own Piazza Coffee House in 1754. Famed literary regulars in the Covent Garden coffeehouses ranged from Joseph Addison to Samuel Johnson. The midnight revels in Tom's Coffee House were depicted in a satirical print of around 1735, showing revelry, drinking and bare-breasted women. The coffeehouses were preceded by bagnios or bath houses, beginning with the Hummums in 1683, and the innuendo that accompanied such venues as well as theatre districts was not entirely undeserved.[4]

Covent Garden developed as both a centre for streetwalkers and brothels during the eighteenth century, with much contemporary commentary focussed on the theatres as dens of licentiousness, where solicitation occurred in the lobbies, auditoria and especially the boxes.[5] From 1757 to 1795 a bestselling list of the prostitutes of the area, *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies*, was published annually, giving approximate addresses, as well as describing their physical attributes and services rendered. As the list's modern editor describes, the sheer variety of human life to be found in the area produced a unique milieu of sociability and creativity: 'Mingling, drinking, gossiping and fornicating, business and pleasure blended easily together. More than anywhere else in the capital, Covent Garden, with its eccentric mix of personalities, was a breeding ground for ideas and discussion.'[6] James Boswell's descriptions of meeting literary figures, visiting theatres, hearing sermons in the church and sleeping with prostitutes perhaps best encapsulate the breadth of experiences to be had in Covent Garden.[7] A gay subculture could also be found in Covent Garden. The Piazza was known as a cruising ground from early in the eighteenth century and there was at least one 'molly house', or gay meeting place, in the area.[8]

The theatres grew throughout the century and gave more people more opportunities for sociability. Drury Lane increased its capacity from around 700 to 2,300, before it was demolished in 1791 and rebuilt to an even grander scale.[9] Covent Garden Theatre was similarly enlarged to hold 2,170 theatregoers in 1782 and over 3,000 following reconstruction in 1792. Even as a new working-class audience was emerging, the rebuilding increased the proportion of space dedicated to boxes, while the galleries were squeezed and the size of the pit only marginally increased, a clear push for exclusivity by the theatre proprietors. Yet the boxes continued to suffer from their association with prostitution.[10] Nevertheless, a rigid system of social separation was imposed by increasing tariffs, the 'mob' inhabiting the upper gallery, the middling sorts the first gallery and the pit, while the quality took the front and side boxes. The increasing size of the auditoria naturally created a trend towards spectacular entertainments, aimed at a broad audience. Yet appreciation for the show was generally widespread, with quiet observed during the performance, even as a certain rowdiness was embraced before the curtain was raised and during the intermissions. Although behaviour within the playhouses may have embraced a degree of politeness, riots surrounding the theatres remained relatively frequent, sometimes sparked by price increases.[11] After the Covent Garden theatre burnt down and was rebuilt in 1808-9, the Old Price riots were a sustained campaign to restore previous prices as well as the mix of seating, specifically demanding a reduction in the number of boxes. The riots took on a political association with the involvement of the Westminster Radicals, who had a long association with the square.[12]

Covent Garden was the site for the hustings in the fractious parliamentary elections for the borough constituency of Westminster. Westminster had a broad franchise for the eighteenth century – the largest metropolitan electorate in the country – and although the candidates were of the highest social standing, they had to face their electorate at the hustings, along with the wider public of London, in search of entertainment as well as information.13 Its use as the site of the hustings was commemorated and disseminated via a succession of satirical prints dating from at least 1741, an early example of a hotly contested election, overturned following the involvement of troops and evidence of bribery. The Dukes of Bedford had a strong interest in the Westminster election and used a militia to drive the Tory supporters away from the hustings in 1747.14
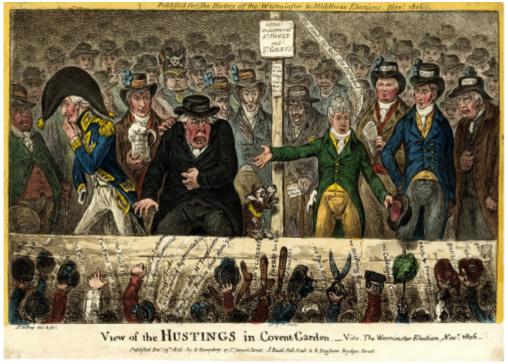

George Bickham the Younger, 'Satire on the Westminster Election of May 1741',
The British Museum, 1868,0808.3663, 1741.

From around 1769 Westminster fell under the influence of London and Middlesex radicalism embodied by John Wilkes, although it was with the election of Charles James Fox in 1780 that political issues overtook family interests as the principal driver of electoral outcomes. Fox's speeches at the hustings swayed the electorate and supercharged the satirical print market, cementing Covent Garden in the collective political consciousness. Satirical prints continued to represent new radical candidates such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Sir Francis Burdett, while the artists represent a who's who of satirists from this period, including

James Gillray, 'View of the Husting in Covent Garden', The British Museum, 1851,0901.1222, 1806.

By the early nineteenth century, the market had rendered the Piazza somewhat chaotic and the Duke of Bedford approved rebuilding to a design by Charles Fowler in 1828-30, incorporating stands, shops, pubs, coffeehouses and areas for the fruit and flower markets, the latter with heating to keep alive exotic plants.[16] Covent Garden Theatre was burnt down and rebuilt again in 1856, which forms the nucleus of the present theatre, the Royal Opera House since 1892. A new building was erected for the flower market in 1860, but was used largely for concerts instead.[17] The market buildings were extensively restored during the 1970s, when the flower market moved out to Nine Elms, south of the Thames (Thorne, chap. 3). The church of St Paul, Covent Garden continues to preside at the west end of the square.

[1]. See for instance Richard Horwood, 'Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, and Parts Adjoining Shewing Every House', 1799). Layers of London, www.layersoflondon.org

[2]. 'General Introduction', in F. H. W. Sheppard (ed.), Survey of London: Volume 36, Covent Garden (London: London City Council, 1970), pp. 1-18.

[3]. John Strype, A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster (London: A. Churchill, J. Knapton, R. Knaplock, J. Walthoe, E. Horne, B. Tooke, D. Midwinter, B. Cowse, R. Robinson, and T. Ward, 1720), book. VI, chap. VI, p. 89.

[4]. 'The Piazza: The Social Decline of the Piazza', in F H W Sheppard (ed.), Survey of London: Volume 36, Covent Garden (London: London City Council, 1970), pp. 82-84; John Richardson, Covent Garden Past (London: Historical Publications, 1992), p. 62l.

5. Tony Henderson, Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis 1730-1830 (London and New York: Longman, 1999), pp. 58-60.

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7. James Boswell, Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019)

8. Rictor Norton, Mother Clap's Molly House: the Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830 (London: GMP Publishers, 1992), pp. 66, 71, 80, 139, 144, 187.

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16. Robert Thorne, Covent Garden Market: Its History and Restoration (London: The Architectural Press, 1980), pp. 12-22.

17. Walter Thornbury, 'Covent Garden Theatre', in Old and New London, vol. 3 (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878), pp. 227-237; Walter Thornbury, 'Covent Garden : Part 1 of 3', in Old and New London: Volume 3 (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878), pp. 238-255.

Citer cet article

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