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INSTITUTIONAL ELYSIUMS LONDON'S ALMSHOUSE GARDENS 1690-1810

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As the “archdeacon militant” reminded the bedesmen of Hiram’s Hospital in *The Warden* (1855), almsmen were intended by their benefactors to be “poor old worn-out labourers, men who could no longer support themselves, who had no friends to support them, who must starve and perish miserably if not protected by the hand of charity . . . such men as these should come in here in their poverty and wretchedness, and find within these walls shelter and food before their death, and a little leisure to make their peace with God”.¹

Behind the iron screens, ponderous embattled portals and buttressed walls of the City’s charities — barriers “unnecessary, one would suppose, at any time, for the protection of . . . old men, but greatly conducive to the appearance” of the institutions — lay what appeared to be invulnerable retreats from the tumultuous public world.² Within these defences, which were in most instances “never closed to anyone from six a.m. till ten p.m., and never open afterwards, except on application”, small groups of “exiles” and “misfits” in their declining years, in a setting of carefully domesticised abodes, garden seats and broad gravel walks circumscribing beds of shrubs and flowers, evoked to the passerby a paradise which was at once secure and fragile.³

London’s almshouses were complex social institutions; compact, immured, and regulated spaces where either men or women were assigned the status of institutionalised inmates: persons who were privileged to inhabit convenient and substantial accommodation, and to enjoy a walled garden setting. The gardens reflected scenes and products of a range of social, physical and symbolic orderings which were unique to the institutions: here inmates were expected to observe a well-structured and rigorous disciplinary code, decreed by their social “betters”, which was calculated to promote the cultivation of sobriety, prudence and virtue.

Many of London’s institutions were formed by the City Livery Companies between 1690-1745 to provide asylum for their own “decayed” freemen (non-working elderly members of the merchant middle class), or the city’s destitute.⁴ The “hospitals”, as they were also known, did not house the disabled or the infirm. The City livery almshouses were structured and run in much the same way as most contemporary English charities.⁵ Among the objectives of the city’s philanthropical organisations was to make the lower orders God-fearing and deferential, and to encourage in the labouring poor the petit-bourgeois ethic of dedication to industry, thrift and self-help.

For bedesmen to gain maximum benefit from the opportunities to cultivate respectability which the institutions offered, they had first to be removed from the centre of the City. The charitable trusts were, therefore, sprinkled in pockets on the outskirts of town, and particularly in the East End, along the roads which led into London; here land was cheap, and the almshouses were close enough to their respective livery companies for adequate surveillance. The distance of the almshouses from the town was, moreover, calculated to be sufficient to deter bedesmen from venturing too frequently into the metropolis.

The suburban locations of the institutions served to reinforce the dignified

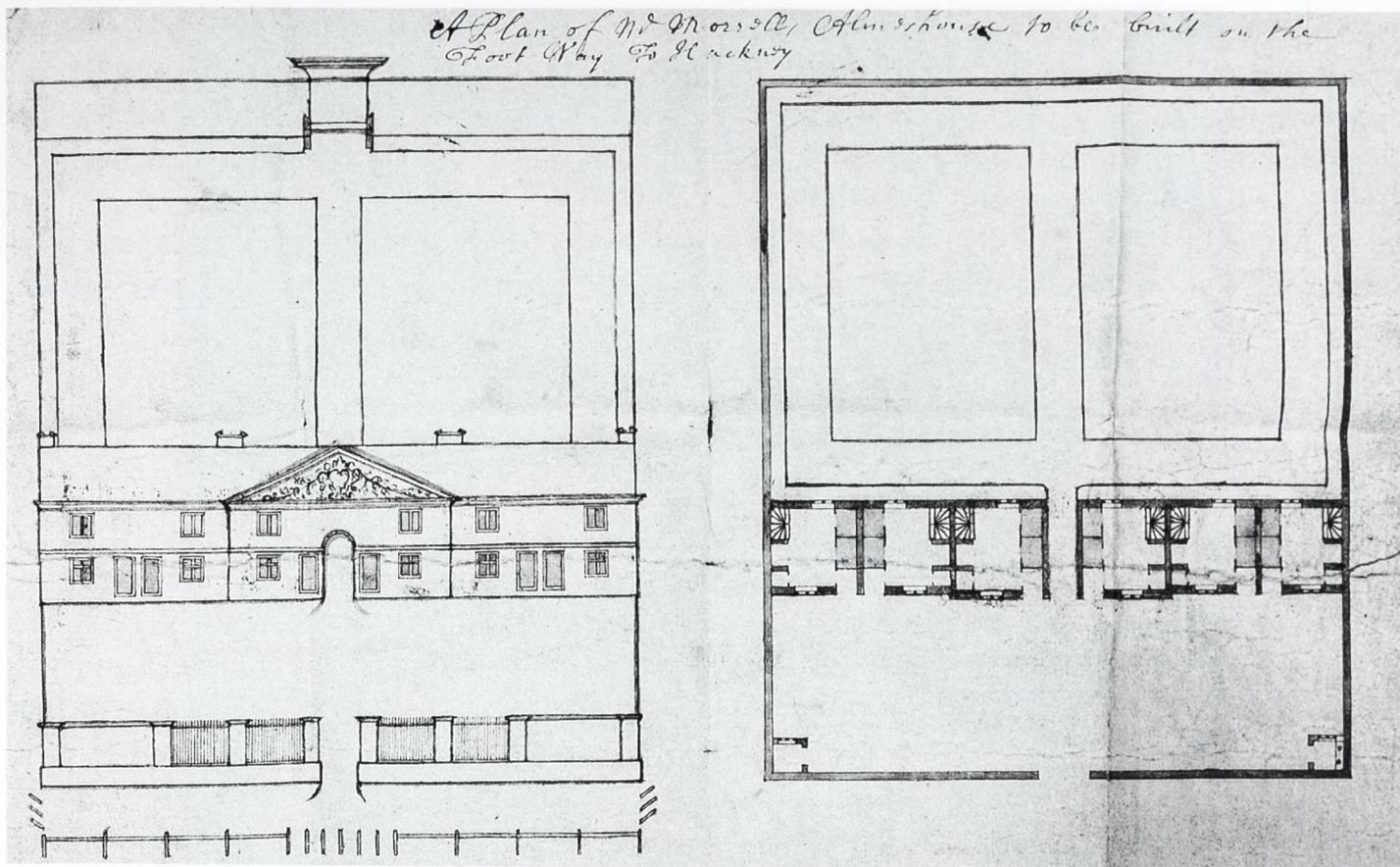


Fig. 1. Plan of the John Morrel Almshouses in Hackney, by John Bird (1705) (Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths).

insulation of their inhabitants. London's urbanised élite viewed the almshouses as places of modest gentility and rusticity. Here the labouring classes were repatriated to the soil, and protected from the potential distractions and dangers of the city; sheltered also from the perils of promiscuous sociability, bedesmen were encouraged to commune merrily with nature, and live a simple life. Such scenes gave substance to the sermons of spokesmen for Christian charity, such as James Hervey, who, vaunting the benefits of the garden, proclaimed ardently "what a living picture is here of the beneficial effects of industry! By industry and cultivation this neat spot is an image of Eden".⁶ By virtue of their semi-rural seclusion and the gardens attached to them, almshouses were invested with both picturesque and sentimental attractions: they offered the city dweller the gratifying sight of a quiet, sober and orderly existence.

Gardening and horticulture were promoted by the charities as a means of achieving a degree of social control; the pursuits also encouraged industry, which in turn promoted discipline, honesty and virtue. Most bedesmen were to some extent experienced in subsistence gardening and amateur horticulture and took an interest in the cultivation of fruit, flowers and vegetables for pleasure, and occasionally for profit.⁷ Almshouse gardens were, therefore, perceived as symbolic of harmonious sociability; the regular and orderly grass plots, the networks of neatly rolled and raked paths, conveyed a reassuring air of rustic contentment.

The Richard Morrell Charity is in many respects typical of the many institutions of this period. The almshouses were conceived in 1703 for the habitation of six decayed liverymen of the Company of Goldsmiths. (Fig. 1) The builder John Bird describes in drawings and text that in 1705 a double row of almshouses were erected on a 47½ perch field in Goldsmith's Row, Hackney. A row of six dwellings, each with four rooms, straddled the breadth of the site (100ft). The central pedimented block of the range opened into a broad forecourt, from which "a passage [was] to be set out in the midst of the said

building five foote wide and twelve foote high arched over for a prospect from the front path through the said building to the lower end of the garden where is to be placed an ornamentall alcove seat ten foote wide and twelve foote high . . .”⁸ Each dwelling was to have windows which opened into the back and front gardens. The back gardens had no direct access; they were reached by travelling from the front doors.

In the front yard a well and a pump were formed; and in one corner of the space was erected a “convenient seat covered over” where bedesmen could sit and survey their gardens, as well as watch traffic on the London Road. The back garden was to be bordered round with good boards two foote two inches from the walls and round the two grass plotts, which are to be laid out so and as the gravell walks may be six foote broad all round, the said border boards to be sound yellow deal without sapp, the stakes to be oake & set foure foote distance from each other and well painted, the front yard and all the walks round the garden between the border boards and the passages between the front wall and common foot path [Goldsmith’s Row] to be laid out with sharpe red gravell well rowled.⁹

According to the next detailed survey (1808), numerous changes had occurred to the charity’s gardens.¹⁰ Most notably the large communal gardens had fragmented into small individual plots. (Fig. 2) The forecourt was subdivided into six small gardens, each separated by a low pale, which described a conventional layout of a grass plot circumscribed by narrow beds. The back garden was, likewise, apportioned into a corresponding number of equal-sized palisaded fruit and vegetable allotments. The wash house and privy had been relocated from the front yard to the far corners of the back gardens. The first major changes to the back gardens took place in the spring and summer of 1739/40 when William Sheppard supplied and planted 317yds of box to enclose the allotments; the paths were finished with gravel the following summer by one John Randall.¹¹

At the Morrell almshouses, like others, the warden supervised and assigned garden duties. Some basic duties were, however, prescribed in the ordinances which were published on broadsheets. Among the ordinances enforced by Goldsmiths’ Court of Assistants, it was decreed: “that every Alms-man shall daily before the hour of ten in the morning sweep and make clean the pavement and walk before his dwelling”, and “that the ground in front of the Almshouses be kept neat and free from weeds, and the grass mown when necessary, and the pump-yards be also kept neat and clean . . .”¹² Chores which were not included in the ordinances were ordinarily executed in rotation, and supervised by a superintendent (a senior inmate who was appointed by, and reported to, the warden). Some weekly, seasonal and difficult gardening chores were carried out by jobbing gardeners whose wages were paid either by revenues raised by annual subscriptions (deducted directly from the bedesmens’ pensions), or, more commonly, met by the trustees. Labourers were engaged to scour ditches, and empty bog houses.

The responsibilities assigned to the gardener of the Goldsmith’s charity at Acton were as follows:

to prune in due season all the Fruit Trees Bushes and Shrubs in & about the Garden & Fore-court belonging to the sd Company Almshouses . . . and nail them where required & replace those wch may from time to time die or decay supply other of the same kind — to keep the sd Garden from time to time properly dug up and cultivated and sown as has been accustomed & the same Fore-Court free from Weeds — to pick or dig up all the Gravel & other Walks in & about the sd Premises at

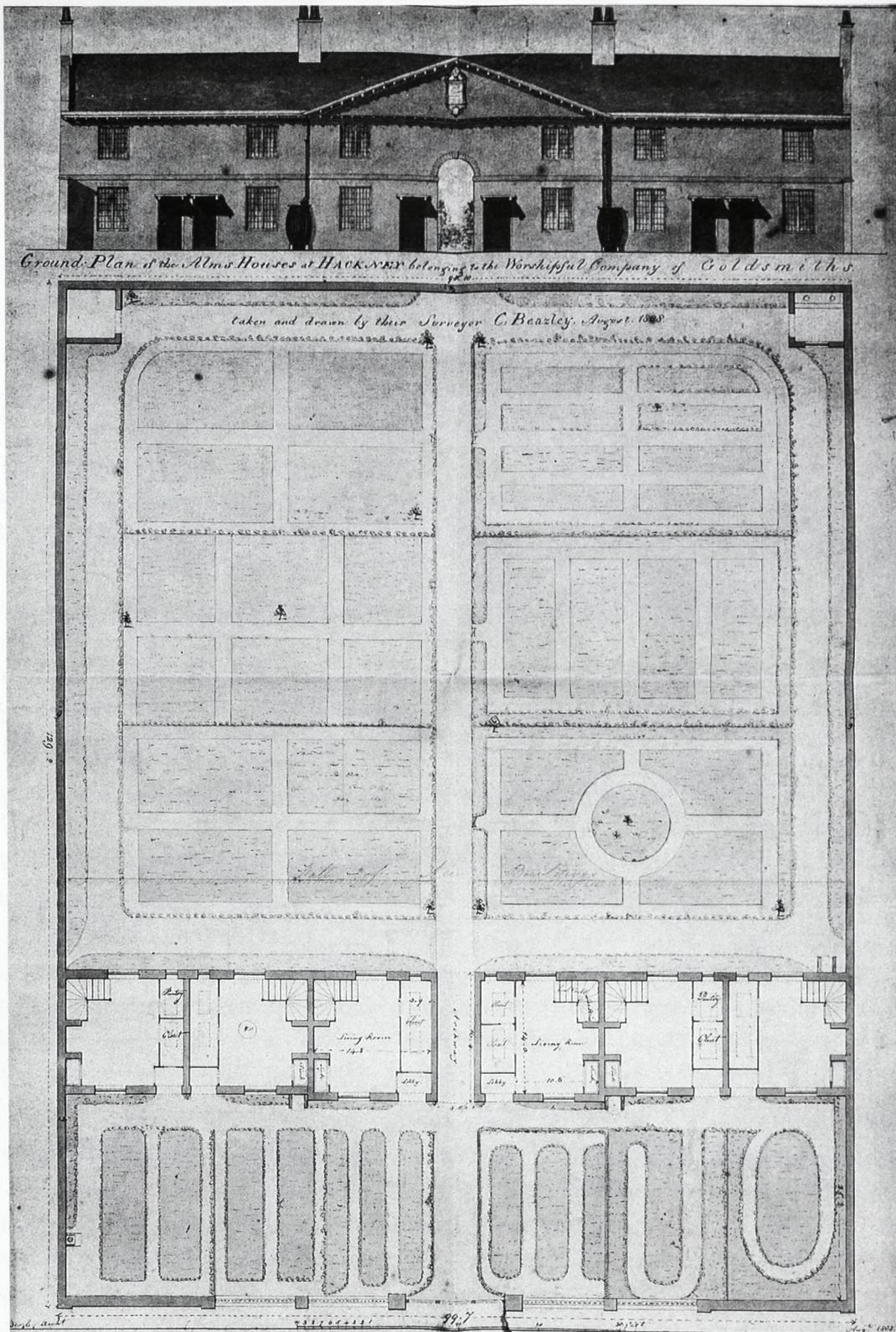


Fig. 2. "Ground Plan of the Alms Houses at Hackney belonging to the worshipful Company of Goldsmiths taken and drawn by their Surveyor C. Beazley, August 1808". (Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths).

seasonable times as often as it shall become necessary & new lay fresh Gravel where requisite & roll or rake the same fit for walking thereon — keeping the same & the borders free from weeds & to trim & keep in good order all the Border-Edgings the Box (if any) or other Quick edges & take up and preserve the Roots of all bulbous Flowers and plant them again in their proper season.¹³

The widespread regular employment of gardeners from the early 19th century marked a change in the symbolic structure of the charities. Bedesmen were recalcitrant in the face of the official demands made upon them to perform an ever-increasing list of

gardening duties. Henceforth, the gardener was assigned the task of maintaining the overall appearance of order and industry; in fact, by the mid 19th century the gardener came to be regarded as a servant of the bedesmen. While the broad walks, the well-mown lawns, the hedges and the beds were assiduously maintained by the gardener, the bedesmen retreated to their garden seats, thereby enhancing, in a less arduous manner, the general impression of dignity and genteel composure.

NOTES

1. Anthony Trollope, *The Warden*, 1986 ed., 43.
2. *Ibid.*, 45.
3. *Ibid.*
4. A variety of City livery companies and their charitable trusts have kept and preserved voluminous records which document their stewardship of London almshouses. Their respective legacies of manuscript building plans, working papers, and inmates', wardens' and trustees' correspondence provide us with the best available evidence of the ordinary lower-middle-class experience of gardening in the 18th-century city. This evidence is, however, subject to a variety of peculiarities which distinguish the institutional experience of almshouse gardening from that of everyday life.
5. See Neil Burton, *The Geffrye Almshouses*, London, 1979.
6. James Hervey, "The Flower-Garden" from *Meditations and Contemplations*, Baltimore, 1833. First published in 1736.
7. Both gardening and horticulture had long flourished in stable working-artisanal and merchant-class communities. The proliferation of florist societies, particularly among the merchant classes across 18th-century England, is testimony to the ubiquity of gardening as a popular instrument of recreation and socialisation. From the early 18th century the recreational activity became increasingly commercialised, to such an extent that all classes of people became acquainted with local gardening activity.
8. *Articles of the Agreement of the 5th June 1705 between the Company of Goldsmiths and John Bird, Brewer of London*, ref. Goldsmiths' Company, GC, R III (138).
9. *Articles of the Agreement of the 5th June 1705 between the Company of Goldsmiths and John Bird*.
10. Charles Beazley, *Surveyor's Report*, 1808, Goldsmiths' Company, ref. GC B III.9 (1).
11. *Ledger of the charities of the Company of Goldsmiths*, vol. I, 1729-46, 142, 192.
12. The broadsheets affixed to every inmate's sitting room wall for easy and regular inspection. *Rules and Regulations to be observed by such persons as shall be permitted to inhabit the Goldsmiths Company's Almshouses, At Acton*-by order of Thomas Lane, Clerk to the Company, August 7, 1812. Goldsmiths' Company, ref. GC B III.9 (9).
13. *An Agreement for taking care as Gardener the Garden & Fore-court of Acton Almshouses*, between Richard Ledsham and the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, March 1826. Goldsmiths' Company, ref. GC B.III.9 (6).