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STREET-MEWS-STREET

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Reams have been written about the London square and the London terrace house. But there seems to have been little scrutiny of that equally significant constituent of Georgian town-planning, the *block*. Who or what fixed the shape and size of the blocks that made up London's eighteenth-century streets, and how did they develop? This brief article endeavours to open up the topic, asking questions which it does not claim to answer, and drawing attention to one notable manifestation of Georgian development in London – the street-mews-street block. Familiar yet little remarked on, this model emerged as a tool of grid planning in the West End around 1720, and went on to be a successful formula for laying out estate developments in smart districts of British cities for more than a century.

My thoughts were drawn to this topic while coming to grips with the Georgian layout of what is now the Howard de Walden Estate in Marylebone, for the introduction to the Survey of London's forthcoming volumes on Eastern Marylebone.¹ Here, on what started in the 1710s as the Cavendish-Harley Estate and then became known between 1755 and 1901 as the Portland Estate, occurs the most forthright and memorable example of Georgian grid planning in London. A series of oblong blocks, similar in shape and size, run between Cavendish Square and Marylebone Road in one direction and Marylebone High Street and Portland Place in the other, regularly bisected on a north-south axis by mews parallel with the major streets (Fig. 1).

This grid is the upshot of some eighty years of development, as the extensive Cavendish-Harley/Portland freehold filled up northwards, block by block, between about 1720 and 1800.

At first sight the origins of this systematic plan seem straightforward. The size of the blocks and the positioning of the streets follow a pattern set out in the well-known plan published by the builder John Prince in 1719, soon after the Harley family started to develop the area (Fig. 2).² On the ground, the layout of Cavendish Square and the few blocks to its south towards Oxford Street conformed to the Prince plan quite closely, as these were the first portions of the estate to be built up. The exact alignment of the streets and blocks further north differed somewhat, as was only to be expected, since they were built up much later, from the 1750s onwards, following changes of fashion and fortune. But overall the estate managers' adherence to the formulae of the Prince plan is more remarkable than these minor deviations. Clearly from early years there was a master plan setting out the estate's potential development in gridded blocks, which was adapted as needs and policies changed.

How original was this plan, who devised it and what did it imply about the nature of development? To start with its outline geometry, there was of course nothing new at all about grid planning of cities or extensions to them. Aristotle claimed that the Greeks invented the idea; in fact grids go back even further, to prehistoric city planning. Since they offer



Fig. 1. The heart of the Howard de Walden Estate between Wigmore Street and Marylebone Road, showing street-mews-street blocks. Redrawn by Helen Jones from the Ordnance Survey map, 1:1056, first edition, c.1870.

the simplest and clearest form of dividing land, for settlement or cultivation, they became the standard medium of choice for planning colonial towns, ancient and modern.

If grids had not been in strong evidence for additions to London or other British cities before 1700, that was surely because those extensions covered only a few acres at a time. Early squares from Covent Garden onwards were premised on rectangular block divisions. But the minor streets

around them stopped too soon to set up a regular grid. Indeed, the usual placing of squares in the centre of such new developments hardly left enough space for a grid to get going before the edges of the property available were reached. Partial exceptions were the developments west of St James's Square (1665 onwards) and south of Soho Square (1675 onwards). Indeed if we search for a seventeenth-century precedent for the Cavendish-Harley/Portland grid, the streets south of Soho Square –

Dean, Frith and Greek Streets, with Bateman and Old Compton Streets as cross-streets – look like the best bet. But there are major differences. Everything is on a smaller scale and, crucially, the blocks are not perforated by mews.³

Like the block, the evolution of the mews has been curiously little studied; a short article by Andrew Byrne and part of a chapter by Giles Worsley are the best we have.⁴ To judge from maps showing seventeenth-century developments in London, urban stabling was usually tucked into corners and culs de sac here and there without much thought for convenience or sanitation. But well-off citizens and tradesmen increasingly owned horses and carriages, wanted (it seems) closeness of access and control

over them, and found that a lane running behind their back gardens was the best position. There are various occasional examples of this arrangement, for instance Whetstone Park behind the north side of Lincoln’s Inn Fields. It was not a regular feature of seventeenth-century squares. The efficient sets of stables shown behind the west and east sides of Bloomsbury Square came close. But these were tight clusters, not what became the eighteenth-century arrangement of choice: linear ranges of stables sited in open-ended mews, and each connected to a house facing the street or square in front.

That was a Hanoverian innovation. Where and when did it begin? It seems to be adumbrated by the Prince plan of 1719, but one must be cautious. What

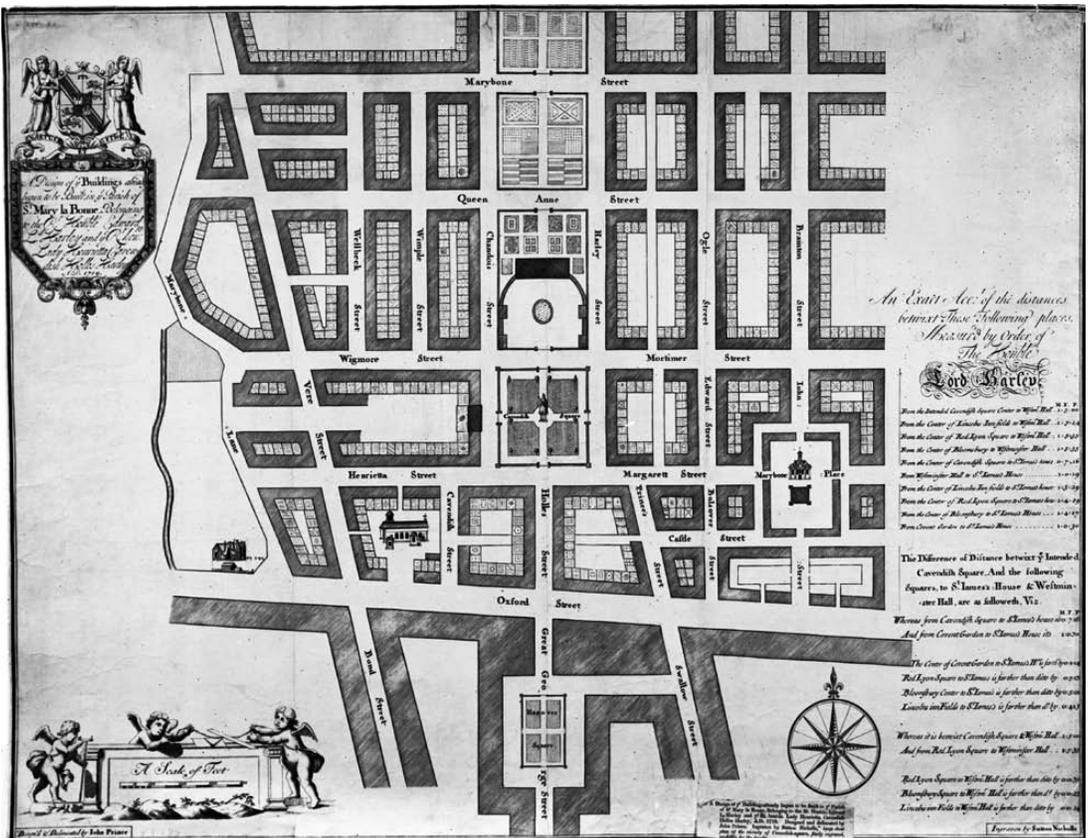


Fig. 2. John Prince’s plan for the Harley Estate, 1719.

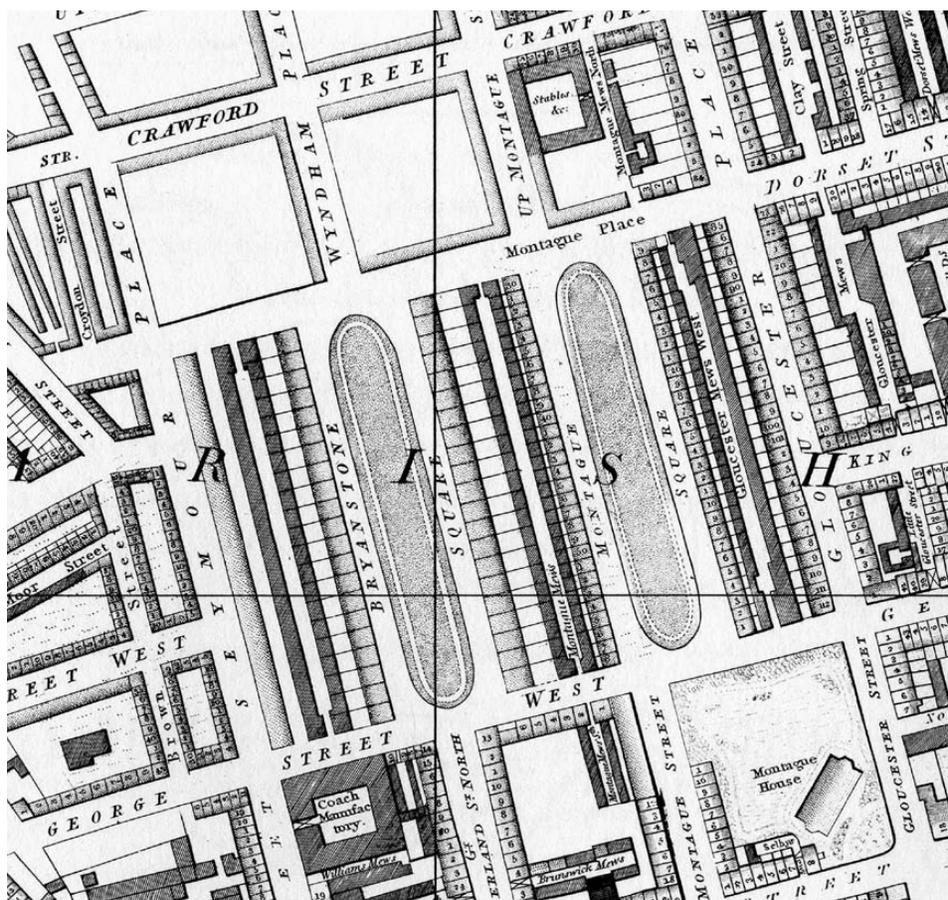


Fig. 4. Montague and Bryanston Square area, Marylebone, from Horwood's map of London, 1813 edition.

activity on the Cavendish-Harley estate from the late 1720s. Little was built north of the present line of Wigmore and Mortimer Streets until the late 1750s, and it was indeed not until that second or Portland phase of development that the mature grid with the street-mews-street block system took hold. By then the same pattern had been well established on the parallel and rival Grosvenor Estate, across the other side of Oxford Street in Mayfair. Here planning seems to have started a trifle later than on the Cavendish-Harley land, around 1720.⁵ Here too an early map, the Mackay plan of 1723, portends

what was actually built with tolerable accuracy (Fig. 3). Though drawn in a plainer style than the Prince plan, it likewise shows the Grosvenor Estate much as it was eventually laid out around Grosvenor Square in the centre, while leaving intentions for the interiors of most of the blocks vague. Only at the eastern end nearest Bond Street, where building began, are mews clearly shown behind main streets, north of Brook Street and south of Grosvenor Street.

Here the similarity stops, for whereas the Cavendish-Harley/Portland development did not take up the street-mews-street block consistently

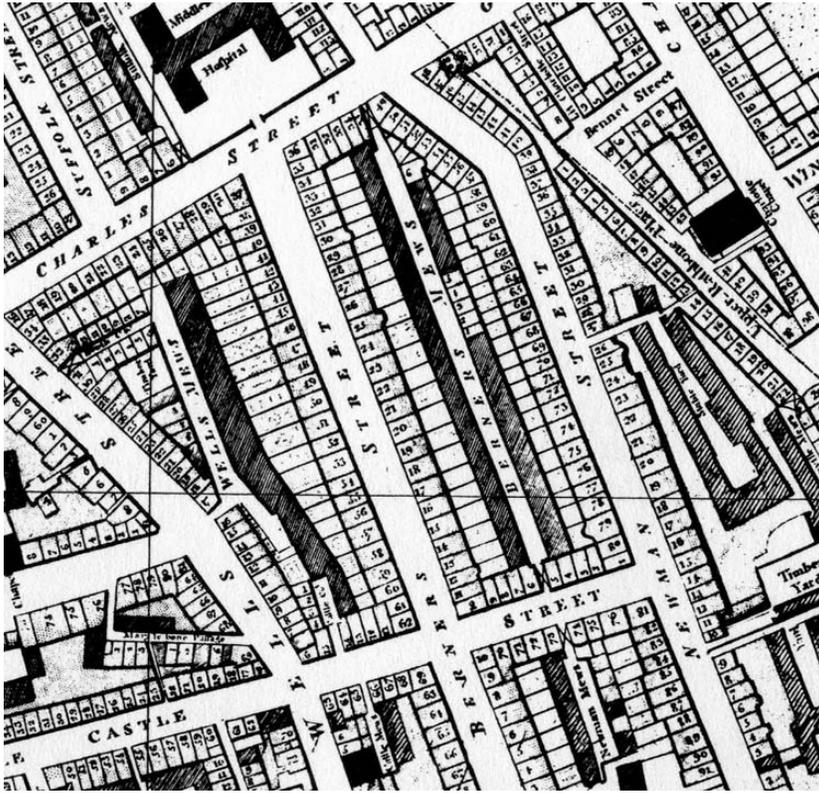


Fig. 5. Berners and Newman Street area, Marylebone, from Horwood's map of London, 1813 edition.

until the 1750s, between the principal streets on the Grosvenor Estate it was adopted quite systematically in the 1720s and '30s, allowing for some minor irregularities of alignment. If precedence for implementing the new arrangement must be given, the palm has to go to the Grosvenor Estate, despite the suggestiveness of the Prince plan. The Cavendish-Harley/Portland development then exploited and refined the practical potentials and geometry of a planning tool that had first come into play some thirty years before.

After 1760 the street-mews-street block became a standard component of major urban estate layouts, notably in London but by no means exclusively so. Sometimes the arrangement was subsumed within

an overall grid made up from a regular succession of blocks, sometimes not. Examples of the larger pattern include, for instance, the Portman Estate in Marylebone, just west of Cavendish-Harley/Portland land. There the earlier portions developed for the most part adopt the standard squareish or oblong block bisected by a mews. Then in the later sections after 1800 come innovations such as the elongated Montagu and Bryanston Squares, attributed to James Parkinson, which are both separated and flanked by linear mews of the by-then standard type (Fig. 4). Clearly an architectural effort was being made there to reconcile the hungry geometries of the square, which implied axial changes in the street pattern behind each side, with the amenities of regular street-

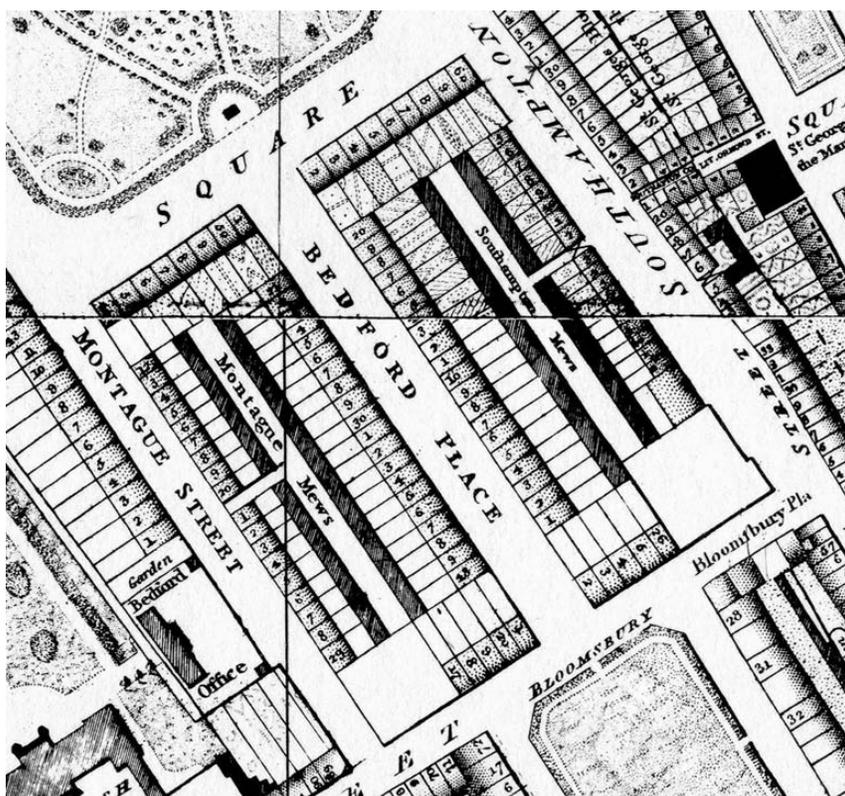


Fig. 6. Bedford Place area, Bloomsbury,
from Horwood's map of London, 1813 edition.

mews-street blocks. Similar clever combinations of open space, smart streets and mews are picked up in the later, Belgravian phases of Grosvenor Estate development, as town planning became more of an art and less of a mere exercise in efficient development, for instance in the sequence of Eaton Place, Eaton Square and Chester Square of the 1820s onwards.

More limited examples of the pattern are legion in London, continuing into the second half of the nineteenth century. Two examples will suffice. The building-up of the 25-acre Berners Estate began with its Oxford Street frontage in the late 1730s. Then, as on the Cavendish-Harley Estate, there was a long breather before Berners and Newman Streets began to be taken quickly and concertedly northwards

from about 1758. The development created a linear block between the two streets bisected by Berners Mews, perhaps London's longest eighteenth-century mews, which was entered at the two ends only, under the customary arches beneath houses on the cross streets (Fig. 5). Further east, James Burton took on the site of Bedford House in 1800, projecting the straightforward Bedford Place to fill the gap between existing Bloomsbury Square and projected Russell Square. In this case the mews on either side were entered from the flanking streets, Montague Street and Southampton Row, so as to leave the valuable frontages to the squares unimpeded (Fig. 6).

If further confirmation of the street-mews-street block's triumph is wanted, we need look no further

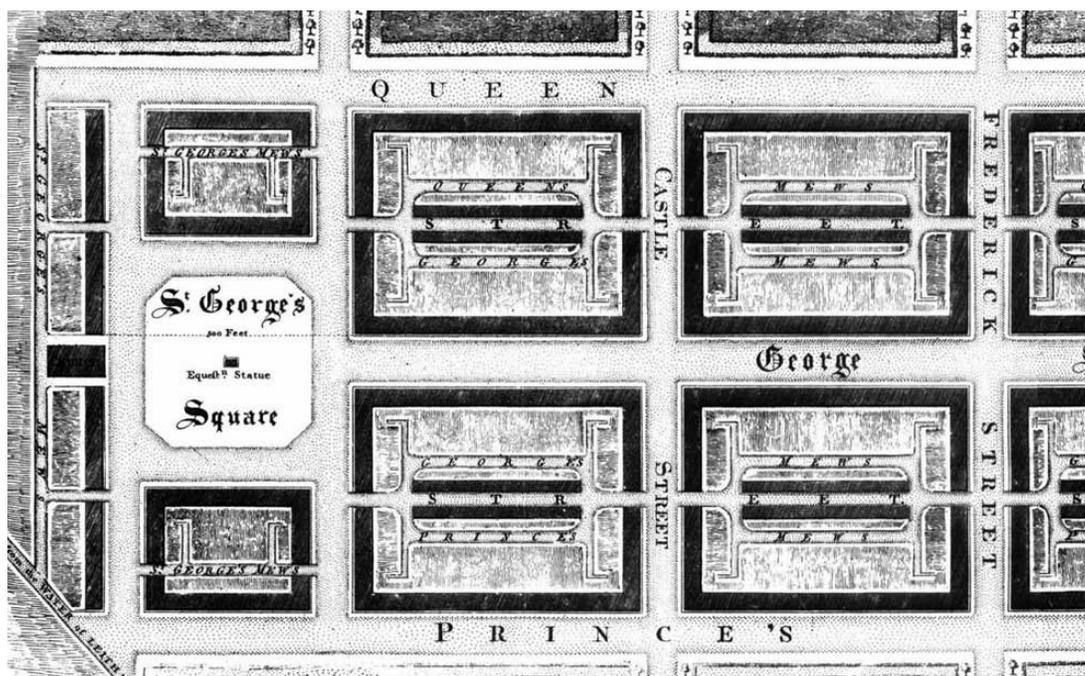


Fig. 7. Excerpt from James Craig's plan for Edinburgh New Town, 1768.

than the celebrated Craig plan for Edinburgh New Town, published in 1768 (Fig. 7). Here, because the blocks were large, they were destined to have an internal life of their own, like some of the blocks within gridded colonial towns. In the Craig plan the linear lanes within the blocks are split and then subdivided again near the ends to suggest ample provision for small dwellings, workshops and service circulation. A modified version of this pattern was indeed executed.

The street-mews-street arrangement brought a powerful and long-lasting modification to what architects like to call the 'figure-ground' relationship in major Georgian towns or cities. But can we say why it came about, whom it served, how well it worked and last but not least, who invented it? Answers to these questions can only be speculative; we simply lack the evidence. Taking first the issue of authorship, it is not for instance by any means certain

that John Prince, an obscure if ambitious builder, actually devised the basics of the plan he published, although in doing so he invoked the Harleys' name. His plan depicts and promotes a certain style of grid layout, but Prince himself was only ever involved in developing a small part of it, whatever his hopes may have been, and he quickly vanished from the Cavendish-Harley scene. The 'official' master plan would have been the property of the estate owners, not Prince's, and it is reasonable to suppose that they commissioned it. But we do not know who devised it or who later altered it, and to what brief. It is tempting to invoke James Gibbs, who was marginally involved with the early stages of Cavendish-Harley developments, for instance in designing the Oxford Chapel (now St Peter's, Vere Street). But to attribute the plan to him would be very risky; to call him the estate surveyor would be plain wrong.

The major London estates cannot be shown

to have employed regular architect-surveyors to control development and lay out new sections of their land until about the 1770s and '80s. Before that a plan seems usually to have been commissioned from a surveyor-builder, no doubt closely following the estate managers' brief. It was then up to those managers, generally lawyers or kindred men of business, to apportion and successively release the blocks to developers, working with the original surveyor-builder or another, according to occasion. In the case of the Grosvenor Estate it is fairly certain that the original layout was devised, or at least regulated, by Thomas Barlow, a carpenter who had plenty of development experience before he started working for the Grosvenors, having been involved with the building of Hanover Square. Colvin calls Barlow 'surveyor of the Grosvenor estate'.⁶ The appellation is only acceptable so long as it is not construed as implying either any kind of permanent employment or a decisively creative role in setting block shapes and sizes, let alone elevations. The whole *Gestalt* of urban development in early Georgian London was one in which lawyers, surveyors and builders sorted things out by trial and error within the simplest possible physical framework. So the likelihood is that the new block pattern evolved from negotiation between many different parties rather than being the invention of a single mind, artisanal like Barlow, ambitious like Prince, or aesthetic like Gibbs.

We may do better if we ask what the new pattern was designed to achieve. In the first place it must have been a response, proactive or reactive, to growing demand for mews premises, primarily stabling, linked with terrace houses. Undoubtedly there was such a strong demand, which the street-mews-street arrangement met very well. An example is Brook's Mews, on the Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair between Grosvenor Street and Brook Street (eastern section, east of Davies Street). This is depicted on a rare plan of 1778-9 showing the internal planning of most of two whole blocks, front and back premises

alike (Fig. 8). The majority of houses on this plan have a direct connection from their gardens or yards to the buildings facing the mews, confirming that front and back premises were held in common, with the latter serving as stabling plus servants' accommodation for the former. There are a few exceptions, particularly towards the ends of the block. At one end there appears to be a set of livery stables, while at the other end some of the narrower-fronted houses seem not to have stables at all, as one might expect.

The usage of West End mews premises varied greatly. The ideal might be stabling and servants' accommodation controlled by the lessee or tenant of the house in front, and subject to the same restrictive covenants about noxious trades and uses which well-organized freeholders tried to stipulate in leases and occasionally to enforce. But, even in smart areas, back premises could be very mixed in their use. That was particularly so where a block lay between one high-class residential frontage and another less fashionable one, given over in part to shops and trades. Berners Mews, for instance, seems to have acquired workshops from the outset at its north end, where the architect-builder John Johnson had his yard, and by the early nineteenth century it was largely given over to artisan manufacturing. That may have been because Newman Street, the eastern flanking street, was never so highly rated or well inhabited as Berners Street to its west. Likewise on the Grosvenor Estate, Adams Row (originally Adam's Mews) between the south side of Grosvenor Square and Mount Street was spilt between the stabling and coach-houses of the fashionable residents of the square, and the workshops of masons, upholsterers and other Mount Street tradesmen.

Convenient though stabling immediately behind one's house may have been, it could be a nuisance to run and maintain, especially if occupation of a town house was only seasonal or occasional. Clearly many well-off people chose to do without

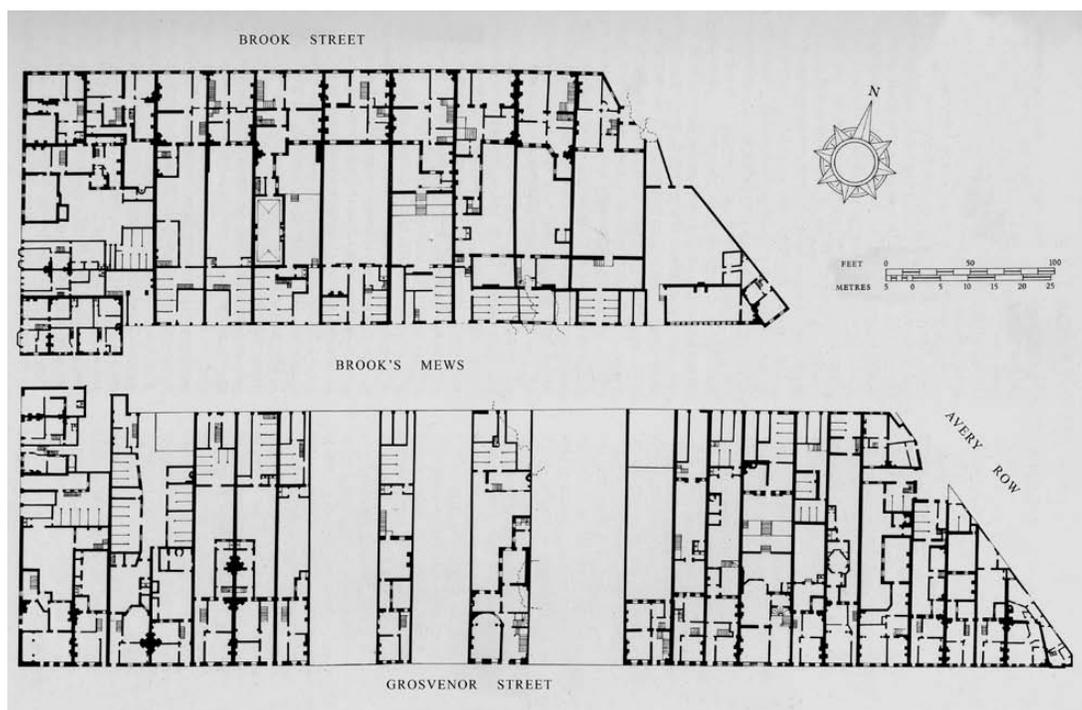


Fig. 8. Brook Street to Grosvenor Street block of the Grosvenor Estate, Mayfair, from Robert Taylor and George Shakespear's survey of 1778-9, redrawn for *Survey of London*, vol. 39 (1977). Plots shown as empty were built up but not included in the original survey.

it, increasingly so as hiring transport on demand became simpler and, perhaps, cheaper. Some mid-Georgian residents also had their own politer uses for their back premises than stabling, for libraries, music rooms, garden rooms or the like. Benjamin West the painter, for instance, bought a house in Newman Street in 1774. Its first owner had already converted the mews premises into a music room, which West then adapted as his studio, before adding a larger and grander second studio facing inwards towards the house. The gradual piling-up of extra accommodation behind West End houses was an inexorable process, culminating in a rash of Edwardian smoking, billiard or ballrooms, as stinking stables were ousted by garages or became redundant altogether.

Given these various pressures, it is striking how free from trade and other accretions most mews on the main Cavendish-Harley/Portland grid seem to have stayed till well into the nineteenth century. That may be a tribute to vigilant estate management or to the high demand in Marylebone for stabling behind or close to houses. Another relevant factor may have been block size and configuration, the final topic touched on here.

Grid planning in blocks, it has been said, allowed land to be efficiently divided up. But the dimensions and configuration of urban grid blocks, oblong or square, depended on several considerations. These included the type of dwellings or other buildings destined to be built; the amount of land estate managers deemed it wise to release for

development at any one time; the capacities of the building industry at that moment; and the relative value of different frontages.

Naturally block dimensions reflected the shape, size and use of the lots into which they were to be subdivided. Where courtyard houses were the norm, as in many hot countries, the grid responded accordingly. In Roman towns it was not unusual for the street grid to be small-scale and square, each house occupying a whole block with sides of perhaps 100 feet. Where independent framed houses were built with gaps between each dwelling and open space behind, the North American colonial norm, the block needed to be larger, ranging from 200 feet square, a common dimension, to the difficult-to-manage 660 feet square of Salt Lake City; the Craig plan for Edinburgh works out at a comparable 660 × 400 feet, but there the block interiors were formally subdivided. The famous elongated Manhattan grid of 922 × 200 feet proved remarkably elastic when building types changed from single dwellings to much bigger types, taking up half-blocks or even whole blocks. Another celebrated square grid is Barcelona's Eixample, designed for blocks of flats at 372 feet square. It is common experience that when blocks are much more than 200 feet in length they become wearisome for pedestrians, the more so when buildings are high.

Generally, urban grids tend to grow bigger over time in response to bigger building-types, reducing the amount of land sacrificed to circulation, though of course roads too increase in width. That is borne out by the history of grid blocks of London terraced houses. In Soho the dimensions of the seventeenth-century blocks north of Old Compton Street (measuring frontages only, not roads) are in the region of 280–300 × 150–160 feet. When the street-mews-street arrangement arrives, the block sizes jump on the Cavendish-Harley/Portland Estate to a typical 370–380 × 250–290 feet, and on the Grosvenor Estate to as much as 510 × 360 feet (Grosvenor Square to Mount Street) and

410 × 380 feet (Upper Brook Street to Green Street). In the extreme mid-Georgian case, the Berners Street to Newman Street block, the dimensions are about 600 by 220 feet.

Interestingly, all these blocks are more or less oblong. The default position for surveyors creating grids, ancient or modern, has always been the square, because it allows greatest flexibility of circulation and internal planning. But brick terraced houses, jammed together between shared party walls, required lots of narrow frontage but ample depth. When rows of such houses were built back to back, uninterrupted by alleys or mews, that in theory would seem to favour elongated blocks. If stables and mews were then added into the equation, one might then expect lots to get deeper and blocks fatter or squarer.

But block size and shape must always have been guided by practical economics as much as by topographical calculations. To extract the maximum value from a given area of land, it was good policy to maximize the attractive frontages and minimize those from which the houses were serviced – normally, those giving access to mews. No less than today, Georgian property values were heavily influenced by the prestige of an address. A Grosvenor Street address was more valuable than a Davies Street one, and a Wimpole Street address more so than a New Cavendish Street one. To elongate blocks in favour of the prime streets and reduce the frontages facing cross streets made economic sense.

As to block size, there must have been estimates as to the optimum size of developers' 'takes', and hence the number of houses which could be built and disposed of at a given time. Cavendish-Harley and early Portland estate managers were in the habit of issuing long head leases for takes, large or small, before any building had started at all, in order to secure the ground rent at the time of first development. In deciding when to release land and how much, that would have been foremost in mind. The size of takes varied greatly, from a house or two at a time to a complete block, the latter occurring

only in general after 1750. In all cases of large takes the undertaker broke up the land into parcels, delegating parts of the development to accomplices or others.

The typical Cavendish-Harley/Portland blocks allowed for between twelve and sixteen good-sized terraced houses on each of the long sides. On the Grosvenor Estate the somewhat greater block lengths reflected a tendency for plots to be wider, but there were still seldom more than about twenty houses per block. These numbers reflected the scale of development at which most builders worked till at least the 1770s, when the industry was still financed in a hand-to-mouth way. The large-scale, brilliant but risky London developments of the Adam brothers represented a period of transition. Then with better capitalization came figures like James Burton and then Thomas Cubitt, and the opportunity to plan blocks and estates on a broader scale and in a more imaginative way. The street-mews-street arrangement responded to this change and flourished under fresh architectural direction. But in essence it was an invention of the early Georgian years, when anonymous surveyors, lawyers and builders dominated the decision-making of development. The stalwart mid-Georgian ranges of the Cavendish/Harley-Portland Estate are the most palpable testimony to this quiet innovation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Peter Guillery for suggesting and commenting on this article, and to Helen Jones for help with the illustrations.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Survey of London* Volumes 51 and 52, *South-East Marylebone*, are due to be published by Yale University Press late in 2016.
- 2 Various copies of the Prince plan are extant, e.g. in Westminster City Archives, T13, and London Metropolitan Archives, p5387759 (Collage 17560).
- 3 The St James's Square layout can be most easily studied from maps in *Survey of London* Volumes 29 and 30 (1960) and the area south of Soho Square in Volumes 33 and 34 (1966). Bateman's Buildings, the passage leading out of Soho Square between Frith Street and Greek Street, looks at first sight like a precursor of the street-mew-street arrangement, but in fact dates from 1773-4.
- 4 Andrew Byrne, 'The Georgian Mews', *Georgian Group Journal*, XXI, 2013, pp. 223-5; Giles Worsley, *The British Stable* (2004), pp. 110-1.
- 5 For the early development of the Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair see *Survey of London* Volume 39 (1977), Chapter 2.
- 6 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840* (2008 edn.), p. 97.