



2.11 Victorian buskers in Leicester Square

Harwood and Saint (1991: 95–7) note that many London squares did not legally achieve full privatisation until the eighteenth century. St. James's Square was one of the first to achieve this by Act of Parliament in 1726. Today, a few – for example Bedford, Fitzroy, Kensington, and Belgrave Squares – are still restricted to key-holding residents. However, the privacy of Bloomsbury went further than this 'The Bedfords maintained an unwavering course, insisting on the finest materials and the largest houses the market would bear, excluding such undesirables as tradesmen and taxis by gates and by strictly enforced regulations' (Webb 1990: 95). Bloomsbury effectively became a gated community until the end of the nineteenth century (Rasmussen 1934: 166); privatised for the exclusive use of the gentry, residents and their servants (Figure 2.10).

Later the Reptonian garden revolution and the park movement of the early nineteenth century had a profound influence on the design of the central squares, chiefly through landscaping and the addition of monuments and statues. Early examples included Grosvenor Square in the 1770s and Soho Square some years later. Still, however, they remained private gardens, for the use of residents only.

THE OPENING OF THE PARK SQUARES

Public promenades did exist at old St Paul's, but formal landscaped public spaces, such as those within the private realm of the residential squares, were not available to most Londoners. Formal 'public' walks were created in London's royal parks, namely Hyde Park, St James's Park, Green Park, and Kensington Gardens, which were all originally royal hunting grounds. The Mall in St James's Park was the first example of this, planned and planted in 1660. Despite these parks being opened to the public in the sixteenth century (apart from Kensington Gardens), official public access was not granted until the early nineteenth century when pressure for urban public space was heightened with the rapid urbanisation of the industrial revolution (Girouard 1990: 269).

Golby and Purdue (1984: 90) describe related attempts made by the middle and upper classes to 'civilise' the new working-class urbanite, attributing the philanthropy of the nineteenth century to the guilt of the middle and upper classes:

By the 1820s and 1830s there was a growing feeling, especially among reforming and Evangelical groups, that although the lower orders seemed to have an inbuilt disposition towards spending any free time they had in sexual excesses, gambling and drinking, the middle and upper classes were not entirely free from blame or responsibility for this state of affairs.

These events brought about the public park movement and access to many of the Georgian residential squares, creating in the process new 'park squares'.

Leicester Square, by contrast, became public through a story of private neglect and public rescue. In 1630 the land was granted to the Earl of Leicester who built Leicester House and laid out public walks as a condition of the grant in what became known as Leicester Fields. After 1660 the Earl undertook the development of a residential square (Kingsford 1925: 53–6). The first formal garden was established in 1727 and later an equestrian statue of George I was added.

However, by the end of the eighteenth century, Leicester Square had ceased to be a fashionable residential quarter. Rather it was becoming a place of popular resort and entertainment (Figure 2.11) which ranged from theatres, bagnios, buskers, and gaming rooms, to collections of curiosities and spectacular exhibitions, such as the Royal Panopticon of Science and Art and the Great Globe, which was built on the (by then) derelict gardens of the square. These and other ambitious ventures were short-lived and the decline of the square accelerated until the vandalism of George I's statue prompted an outcry which led to an act of parliament enabling the recently formed Metropolitan Board of Works to acquire the gardens. In the event the land was bought by the MP Albert Grant who commissioned a redesign of the gardens to a typical Victorian layout. To raise the tone further there was a statue of Shakespeare and busts of Reynolds, Hogarth, Hunter, and Sir Isaac Newton who had lived nearby.

In 1874 Grant transferred ownership to the Metropolitan Board of Works (Tames 1994: 115). By this time the square was dominated by several major theatres specialising in light entertainment which attracted respectable as well as raffish pleasure seekers. In 1894 the Purity Campaign agitated against the Empire Theatre, part of which served as a promenade for prostitutes, leading to the intervention of the new London County Council to clean things up (Tames 1994: 132).