

LONDON SQUARES AND OPEN SPACES

By George Crosor

For some time past London has been in danger of losing many of its open spaces. Not, of course, the public parks, but the privately owned squares. Termination of leases, and other circumstances, lead to rebuilding of the houses surrounding the square, and the increased value of land makes it profitable to replan the estate and to cover the open portion with buildings.

The most prominent example of building upon one of these open spaces is that of Endsleigh Gardens (generally regarded as the southern half of Euston Square). But as there are, and will shortly be, other considerable examples the matter has attracted public attention. A memorial to the London County Council upon the subject has recently been prepared by certain associations and signed by Earls Crawford and Meath, Lord Eversley and other influential persons.

The matter has lately been the subject of articles and correspondence in the *TIMES* and other London papers and the necessity for legislation has been strongly urged. A noticeable communication to the *TIMES* (29th June) from Sir Edgar Bonham-Carter gave an excellent summary of the case.

COMPENSATION, LEGISLATION, TAXATION

Sir Edgar Bonham-Carter regards the amount of compensation, under existing laws, as practically prohibitive, and he thinks that, without amendments to the law, the squares and open spaces are doomed to extinction. Parliament *might* prohibit building upon the open spaces, but is not likely to do so. The problem may be partly dealt with under the London Building Act and others, but the result would only be small. What Sir Edgar regards as most important will be seen:—

It is of urgent necessity . . . to create an improvement fund from some new source of revenue . . . As the provision of open spaces tends to increase the value of land in the neighbourhood, both directly by the amenity afforded and indirectly by withholding land from the market, the fairest method of raising the funds required for the preservation of the squares would be by the taxation of land values in the neighbourhood of such squares. This is not a revolutionary proposal. It is already in force in some American cities.

PURCHASE FOR OPEN SPACES

The question of the public purchase of land, which has a building value (as it usually has in these cases) for the purpose of making it an open space, is a more intricate matter than is usually realized. Suppose that £100,000 is spent in the purchase of land for a public park. That land, being dedicated as an open space, brings in no revenue (but probably expenses for maintenance), it therefore ceases to have a selling value.

What has become of that value?

The people who might have built upon that land must obviously go further out, the value is therefore transferred to other land adjacent. The position is then that the purchasing authority is left with a debit of £100,000 without an asset to balance it, and the amount is presented to the surrounding landowners as a free gift. It may even go to the same landowner who sold the land for the park, provided that his estate be large enough to embrace all the land affected. This has certainly often occurred in part, if not as a whole.

Perhaps nothing could be a stronger condemnation of private ownership of land than this. But if the State owned the whole value of the land, or even a

considerable part of that value, it could make open spaces where they were most needed, confident of recouping itself elsewhere for the apparent sacrifice. Widening or alteration of roads would be facilitated and errors or faults in the growth of towns could be remedied with comparative ease.

Yet there are people who think that the land question in towns is of little importance.

SANITARY INSPECTORS AND SLUMS

The housing question was discussed at some length at the Annual Conference of the Sanitary Inspectors' Association in Liverpool. The *MANCHESTER GUARDIAN*, 11th September, reports:—

Mr. A. Longstaff, of Birkenhead, in a paper on slum clearance and rehousing, referred to the serious economic difficulties which to-day prevented more active slum clearing enterprises. In addition to the difficulties created by the poverty of the slum dwellers, the high cost of many slum sites and the heavy burden of rates and taxation, he said, there was the grave shortage of housing accommodation for families that were not slum-dwellers.

Mr. R. Jump, of Burnley, said that local authorities were in a dilemma. In many instances they could not afford to clear their slum areas. And yet they could not afford to leave them as they were.

Alderman W. Muirhead defended the Liverpool rehousing scheme in connection with which ten-storey tenements are projected. It was all very well to suggest the building of cottages on the outskirts of the city, he said, but the casual nature of work on the docks made it imperative that dock workers should live in the city within easy reach of the docks. It had to be remembered, too, that the sites on which it was proposed to rehouse the people were very valuable and would bring great prices for commercial purposes.

Mr. W. G. Kershaw, of Hampstead, said that those who thought that the shortage of houses would ever be met by subsidies to builders or by the Government or local authorities erecting houses deceived themselves and wandered in a jungle of illusion. To find an effectual remedy we must probe deeper into fundamental causes. To solve an economic problem it must first be cut free from the entangling incubus of sentiment. The shortage of houses would never be overtaken until the private investor—it might be largely in the form of the resident owner—was once more attracted to bricks and mortar.

These speeches all make good "copy" for an exposition of the arguments in favour of Taxation of Land Values.

In a letter to the *TIMES* of 22nd September, Mr. Francis D. Acland, ex-M.P., who is associated with Mr. Lloyd George's new land campaign, wrote: "It is certain that any constructive effort by the State which increases the value of land tenure must on a change of tenure pass to the landowner. The benefit of the first halving of rates on agricultural land has, for instance, already passed to the owner in full, and that of the second more recent halving is fast going the same way; for the simple reason that the tenant offers, and a landlord accepts, the rent which he can afford to pay after reckoning his probable incomings and outgoings."

Mr. Acland was one of the Liberals who voted for the Agricultural Rates Act of 1923 that increased this "benefit to landowners" by reducing rates on agricultural land from one-half to one-quarter of the rates levied on all other properties.