

FIGHTING FOR LONDON'S GREEN SPACES

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From where you are standing, you can see three green spaces: Woburn Square, Gordon Square, and Tavistock Square. All three are open to the public—take a walk through them.

London is unusual in having a large number of public green spaces in the centre of the city. The capital's squares and parks feature in films and novels about London life and decorate a huge range of tourist merchandise. You can buy mugs and t-shirts, caps and keyrings, toys and teddy bears displaying black railings and lush greenery, with Georgian townhouses somewhere in the background.

How did these spaces come into being? How did they survive the city's expansion from a medieval town to a modern metropolis? The story of London's parks and squares is a story of three powerful forces which made the capital what it is today—aristocracy, popular movements, and law.

Almost all of London's green spaces were once part of aristocratic or royal estates. These squares, like the rest of Bloomsbury, once belonged to the Russell family. The Russells were hereditary Dukes of Bedford, one of the most powerful landowning families in Britain from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. The family's history boasts Tudor generals, Victorian prime ministers, and twentieth-century philosophers. When London was still a small town hugging the river Thames, the Russells owned most of the land to the north-west of the city. In the eighteenth century, as the capital expanded, they turned this land into a huge private property venture, laying out the squares we see today, surrounded by high-end houses for rent which brought the family an enormous fortune. The green squares were reserved for residents, who were granted keys along with their tenancies.



“The Mob Pulling Down the Railings in Park-Lane”: artist unknown, public domain, Illustrated London News, 4 August 1866. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

This followed a model established by the British monarchy further to the west. The royal parks—Hyde Park, Green Park, St James’s Park—were once royal hunting grounds. Henry VIII and Elizabeth I hurtled around them on horseback. The parks were fenced to keep the deer in and the common people out. When civil war broke out in the seventeenth century, the parks were opened to the public by Parliament in a deliberate attack on royal privilege. After the civil war, the parks remained open, but only to those who paid for entry or were given their own keys—mostly members of the royal family and aristocrats who lived nearby.

In the nineteenth century, these exclusive green spaces were opened to the people by law. A royal commission declared that access to parks and squares was necessary for London’s physical health and moral rectitude. Wholesome outdoor recreation would keep the poor out of trouble and push them to behave respectably in the presence of their social superiors. But once they were granted access, Londoners used these spaces for more than leisure. Radical political groups organized open-air meetings of thousands of people to call for the right to vote and protest against

unpopular legislation. The parks of the royals and the Russells became the people's parks.

This popular takeover was not without a struggle. Police were frequently ordered to prevent public meetings in parks and squares, leading to violent clashes with protestors. Punches were thrown and railings pulled down to secure the right of public gathering for political purposes. Eventually, governments gave up the fight. In the early twentieth century, legislation was passed guaranteeing the continued existence of London's squares against infringement by property developers, for the benefit of the city's residents.

From Gordon Square ...

... why not stroll down to Torrington Place and visit Waterstones, which has an excellent selection of books on the history of London?

About the author

Jonah Miller is a research fellow at the University of Westminster. He is the author of *Gender and Policing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), as well as articles and essays on a variety of topics in British history from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. He is currently working on migration, housing, policing, and political campaigning in Victorian London. His next book, *The Police Outrage*, will be published by Penguin.

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Further Reading

For more about the Victorian battle for London's public spaces, see:

Taylor, Antony. "'Commons-Stealers', 'Land-Grabbers' and 'Jerry-Builders': Space, Popular Radicalism and the Politics of Public Access in London, 1848-1880." *International Review of Social History* 40(3) (1995): 383-407.