

# ‘Babylonian Flats’ in Victorian and Edwardian London

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The first half of this paper examines the controversy associated with the building of Queen Anne’s Mansions, London’s first high-rise flats, erected between 1873 and 1890, and a catalyst for the introduction of height restrictions in the London Building Acts of 1890 and 1894. Subsequent sections consider the building’s place in the imagination of Londoners, the marketing of the mansions, which emphasised their height and novelty, and the characteristics of residents, especially as recorded in the 1901 census. The paper concludes by positioning Queen Anne’s Mansions in wider debates about living in flats and the acceptability of high-rise buildings in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London.

In *Howards End* (1910), E.M. Forster discusses the plight of the Schlegel sisters whose London town house is first overshadowed by neighbouring ‘Wickham Mansions’ and then threatened with redevelopment to make way for ‘Babylonian flats’. Forster uses the term ‘Babylonian’ to signify not only the scale and spectacular form of luxury flats in Edwardian London but also the oppression and exploitation associated with processes of redevelopment, contrary to the interests of longstanding residents such as the Schlegels.<sup>1</sup>

Mansion flats appeared Babylonian in scale, but also ‘Babel-like’ in gathering hundreds of people of different ages, experiences and origins under one roof. This was particularly true of tall blocks of flats that could also be compared physically to the biblical Tower of Babel. Most mansion flats in Victorian London were five or six storeys in height and formed semi-continuous street frontages — for example, along Victoria Street — but one building stood out as a ‘tower’ rather than a ‘block’: Queen Anne’s Mansions. The planning controversies surrounding its construction and subsequent extension, the ways in which it was marketed and the character of its mobile, cosmopolitan population all have resonances with more recent debates about high-rise building and loft-living in contemporary London.

## Planning perspectives

The first stage of Queen Anne’s Mansions, a 10-storey, 116-foot high building, situated between Victoria Street and St James’s Park, dates from 1873–5 (Figure 1).

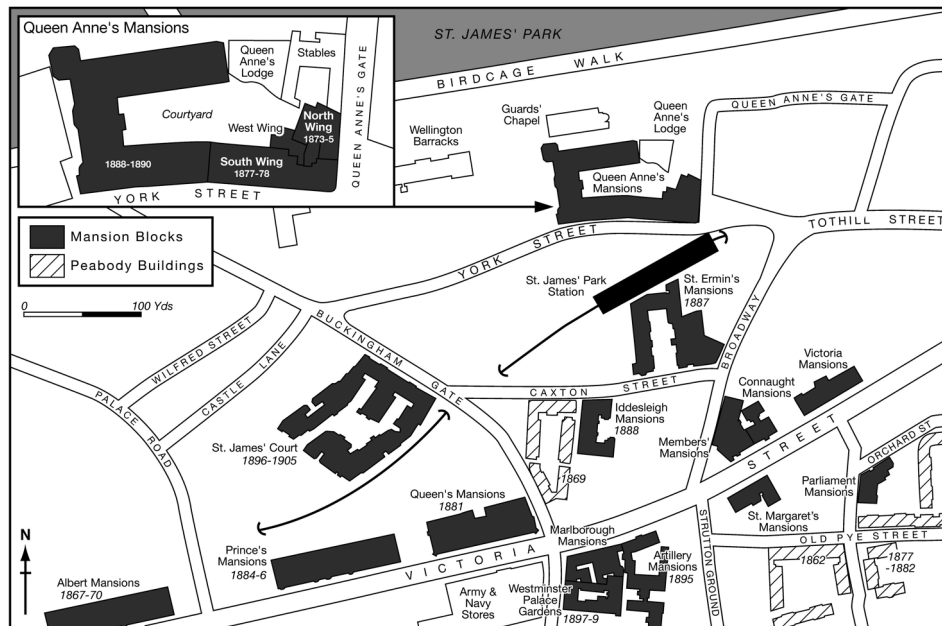


FIGURE 1 Map to show Queen Anne's Mansions and nearby mansion flats, c.1890

A second stage in 1877 climbed an additional storey to 130 feet and, in part, to 12 storeys, at least 141 feet, and a much larger extension, in 1888–90, reached 160 feet. The developer and initial owner, Henry Hankey, a merchant and City banker, was evidently expert in testing the borders of legality in his business operations. For example, in 1872 he had presented a petition designed to expedite the winding-up of the failed International Contract Company of which he had been a director, but in the course of the hearing it emerged that Hankey had himself purchased several of the outstanding claims on the company and stood to benefit personally if the petition succeeded: he would pay £20,000 as debtor-director, but receive £35,000 as creditor.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, Hankey's building encountered few problems. Under the 1855 Building Act, new buildings exceeding 100 feet in height required consent from the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW), but this was purely a safety regulation: the Board had to be satisfied that the walls of tall buildings were sufficiently thick to support their weight. Hankey's earliest application to feature in the Board's files was not made until November 1875, by which time the first part of the building was almost finished; so it appears that Hankey did not seek (and receive) the Board's approval until his building was already 100 feet high.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, a building labourer was killed by falling timber while working the 'perpetual lift' during gale-force winds and an unfinished observatory on the roof of Hankey's own private residence adjacent to the flats was destroyed by fire, events which foreshadowed fears about safety that concerned the mansions' neighbours over subsequent decades.<sup>4</sup>

In February 1877, Hankey applied again to the MBW, seeking permission for a South Wing, extending along York Street (now Petty France). This block, too, must

have been well advanced by the time Hankey sought permission, for he had alluded to it in his original application fifteen months earlier, arguing that the extension would provide 'an additional exit in case of fire'. The MBW Architect's Office was getting worried about such retrospective applications, writing to the Westminster District Surveyor to suggest that such questions should be resolved 'before the walls are built'. Nevertheless, Hankey was granted permission to construct the wing, subject only to the works being executed to the District Surveyor's satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

Three months later, Hankey made yet another retrospective application, confessing that his building was even higher than intended and proposing to use concrete fireproof doors instead of the 'old fashioned double iron doors' prescribed by the Building Act. Previously, Hankey had been his own architect, but to supervise the flats' completion, he recruited John Whichcord, described by George Vulliamy, the MBW's Superintending Architect, as 'an architect of eminence and a District Surveyor'. Presumably on the grounds that Whichcord could be trusted, Vulliamy recommended approval of what would now be a 148-foot-high, 12-storey building. However, the Board was not so easily impressed and declined to grant approval, despite Hankey's increasingly anxious pleas: that his building was now far stronger than necessary; and that he had acquired land around the mansions to ensure nobody could claim loss of light or air and so that surrounding streets could be widened.<sup>6</sup>

Fire was a constant source of anxiety, especially in the wake of dramatic conflagrations in Thameside warehouses — most famously, the Tooley Street fire in 1861, but of more immediate relevance a fire at Brook's Wharf, Queenhithe, in June 1876, when it was apparent that 'the fire engines could only send the water up to the fifth storey' of a seven-storey building.<sup>7</sup> Giving evidence to the Select Committee on the Metropolitan Fire Brigade in May 1877, the Brigade's chief, Captain Shaw, agreed that his appliances would be unable to 'throw a jet of water to the top of Queen Anne's Mansions' and that 'that building would be entirely destroyed if it depended upon a jet being thrown from the ground level to the top storeys'.<sup>8</sup> Vulliamy's own evidence to the Select Committee confirmed that none of Captain Shaw's appliances would reach the 100-foot height to which buildings such as a new hotel on Northumberland Avenue were currently being erected. In the case of public buildings, such as theatres and music-halls, he would certainly take Captain Shaw's advice before granting licences, yet he did not propose extending the powers of the MBW to require licensing of 'private buildings'. And he was not pressed on whether blocks like Queen Anne's Mansions should be treated as sets of 'private' dwellings or as 'public' buildings.<sup>9</sup>

Whichcord's plans substituted additional brick-walled storeys in place of a mansard roof, perhaps anticipating the critique levelled by 'M' in *Building News* in August 1877. Among numerous criticisms of plans for the 'Mansions in the Skies', 'M' noted that:

If I wanted to build a three-story house, and should seek to erect from ground level a front thereto of wood covered with slate, just a shade out of the perpendicular so as to "cheat the devil," I should be stopped and told the Act did not allow it. But if my proceedings are bad at ground level, would they be less so if these stories are lifted a hundred feet in the air, being called a roof? Are not, in the latter case, the conditions a thousand times worse?<sup>10</sup>

Three times Hankey submitted his plans, and three times the MBW rejected them, encouraging Edward Drury, the District Surveyor, to issue no fewer than six summonses for violations of the Building Act. In a hearing in Westminster Magistrates' Court, Drury admitted that 'the work was perfectly safe and strong, and there was no public inconvenience. There would be no complaint of the exclusion of light and air.' However, the building had been raised at least 11 feet higher than agreed, so 'one story must come off'. Moreover, passages, floors and staircases were not fireproof, and openings in party walls would facilitate the spread of fire. The magistrate, reluctant to order demolition, adjourned the case, and when proceedings resumed several weeks later, Drury withdrew his summons. Hankey assured everybody that he would abide by the safety regulations, and was allowed his extra 11 feet, effectively creating a 12-storey tower.<sup>11</sup>

*The Builder* described the mansions as 'monster blocks of dwellings' and 'Babel-like structures'. To guard against fire, rooftop tanks, New York-style, contained 40,000 gallons of water, fed by a six-inch main from the Chelsea Waterworks, so that 'the entire building could be drowned . . . in a few minutes', and sufficient to power several hydraulic lifts and provide a high-pressure domestic supply. *The Times* noted that

Everything is on a gigantic scale. The elevation looks the most elevated thing in bricks and mortar since the Tower of Babel. . . . Hydraulic lifts are kept at work all day and all night, and this makes the highest floors the most popular, even at the same rental — indeed, the latest application from a well-known banker was, 'for a nineteenth floor, if you have got one.'<sup>12</sup>

A more serious clash with the Board of Works accompanied the massive extension of the mansions in 1888–89 when what had become the Queen Anne and Garden Mansions Company Limited<sup>13</sup> planned to extend the building west about 172 feet along Petty France, then north for 200 feet towards St James's Park, then back east for 172 feet, creating a central courtyard. The proposed height was 130 feet to the parapet, but about 160 feet to the top of the roof, 13 storeys in all. On the north (St James's Park) side, where the buildings abutted the Guards' Chapel of Wellington Barracks, the height would be only 112 feet to the top of the wall, two storeys less than the rest of the extension.<sup>14</sup> On this occasion, another well-known architect, E.R. Robson, was employed,<sup>15</sup> but since the extensions needed to match the original, there was little scope for Robson to design a less barrack-like structure. As in 1877, approval was required for the thickness of the walls above 100 feet in height, and also for external iron fire escapes. But even before the MBW had received an application from the builders, Lucas Brothers, it was being petitioned on two fronts to withhold its permission.

James Knowles, architect of the Grosvenor Hotel, next to Victoria Station, and Albert Mansions, five-storey flats on Victoria Street, and editor of *Nineteenth Century*, lived in Queen Anne's Lodge, next door to the mansions, and promptly wrote at length to the MBW, objecting on several counts. Firstly,

This vast mass or cliff . . . would totally shut out sun and air from my own house and from the whole south side of the Guards' Chapel adjoining. It would convert York Street into a mere narrow cleft or gloomy chasm . . .

Secondly, noting that 'The existing Queen Anne's Mansions are a byword for their monstrous and overgrown ugliness', he asserted that the extension would 'constitute an eyesore so offensive as would disgrace the whole neighbourhood of Westminster, overshadowing all its splendid and historic buildings, and turn this quarter of London into a laughing stock'. Thirdly, he contemplated

the awfulness of the fate of hundreds who might be caught by a conflagration in such a totally unacceptable [sic] tower of Babel as is now proposed, to say nothing of the serious risks to the whole neighbourhood which such a Babel, if on fire, would produce.<sup>16</sup>

Objections were also received from the Secretary of State for War, concerning loss of light to the barracks' chapel, which had been 'sumptuously decorated internally with mosaics, bas-reliefs, carving, and memorial windows' and partook the character of an art gallery as much as a place of worship.<sup>17</sup>

The Board of Works decided that procrastination was the best policy. Thomas Blashill, the Board's new superintending architect, recommended that Lucas Brothers' application be referred to the Building Act Committee, which in turn sought the views of the First Commissioner of Works (responsible for the royal parks). Meanwhile, the War Office negotiated an agreement with the developers, to the effect that 'no portion of the proposed building shall rise above a plane starting from the ground line of the south wall of the Garrison chapel, Wellington Barracks, at an angle of 45° with the horizon'. But when revised plans were submitted in October 1888, they appeared 'identical in every respect with that previously objected to'. At the same time, Lucas Brothers were demanding to know why the MBW had not yet approved the thickness of walls which they had already started building. In January 1889, the MBW at last informed them that under the 1855 Act, the building was an irregular one, and the District Surveyor would take proceedings against them, and in February, by which time the buildings had reached 29 feet above street level, the Board officially declined to approve the plans.<sup>18</sup>

By now, both Knowles and the War Office had taken out writs against the developers and builders.<sup>19</sup> The provisional outcome was reported at length in both *The Builder* and *The Times*:

An injunction has been granted against the company which desired to extend the vast pile of buildings called Queen Anne's Mansions. It is not possible now to compass the removal of three or four storeys from that huge eyesore; but we may at least be grateful that the Court of Chancery has stepped in to prevent its spreading westward.<sup>20</sup>

*The Times* was mainly concerned with aesthetics:

We are entirely in favour of high and stately buildings in a great city, if they are not too high and if the site favours them. But a set of 'Mansions' which emulate the Pyramids or the Eiffel Tower, which dwarfs all the neighbouring houses, and which consists merely of an infinite series of low floors and small windows, one above another, is an eyesore and a scandal. It is bad enough when the houses, without being too high in themselves, are too high for the width of the street, as is the case in Northumberland-avenue and Victoria-street. . . . But when it comes to a building so extravagant as Queen Anne's Mansions, the site hardly matters; the edifice itself passes the lawful limits of ugliness.<sup>21</sup>

The judge concluded by suggesting experimentation leading to compromise. He ‘advised that a temporary structure should be put up so that the effect upon the lighting of the chapel could be made the subject of actual observation’. *The Times* warned that:

If the builders make haste, they will get their temporary wall ready in May or June, the lightest time of the year. The other side should make allowance for this, and remember that a building which permits a picture to be fairly seen in midsummer may very likely make it invisible in November.<sup>22</sup>

In practice, the builders did make haste, but with all-too-permanent brick walls. The War Office reached agreement with the developers in August 1889, by which time the buildings were approaching 100 feet in height. Wanting to avoid a repeat of the MBW’s 1878 retreat, the Superintending Architect of what was now the London County Council instructed the District Surveyor to take out a summons ‘as soon as an offence had been committed’.<sup>23</sup> But when the summons was heard on 31 October 1889, the case was dismissed and costs (five guineas) awarded to the builders against the LCC.

The most intriguing outcome of the whole affair was the advice of the LCC Solicitor. In his opinion:

the Magistrate in deciding that the building was lawful without the sanction of the Council came to an erroneous conclusion in point of law but I do not advise an appeal because the Council now contemplates applying to Parliament to obtain jurisdiction over the height of buildings and *it will be very desirable to be able to quote [this] decision that the Council have no jurisdiction at present*.<sup>24</sup>

Instead of fighting the case, the LCC applied in 1890 for new legislation restricting the height of new buildings to 90 feet (apart from two additional storeys allowed in roof space); and this was further reduced to 80 feet (plus attic storeys) in 1894.<sup>25</sup> Queen Anne’s Mansions was a price worth paying to guarantee the passage of the 1890 Act. In the Council’s view, the mansions were still believed to be illegal, but it was easier to introduce a new law than to prove the validity and efficacy of the existing one; and the easiest way to get a new law was to accept that the existing law was inadequate.

The failure of Knowles’ private legal actions should not diminish our admiration for his mastery of publicity. When he launched his campaign in July 1888, he wrote additionally to the First Commissioner of Works, addressing him as ‘My Dear Plunket’, not only suggesting the parliamentary question he might like to receive on the subject, but also seeking advice on who might appropriately ask the question, and even providing the Commissioner with a model answer. He wrote in similarly familiar terms to the editors of *Daily News*, *The Times* and *The Morning Post*, yet again describing the building as ‘so intolerable and deformed a tower of Babel’.<sup>26</sup>

Nor did opposition subside once the building was a *fait accompli*. The new Building Acts ensured its lasting uniqueness as a 12-storey ‘skyscraper’ and guaranteed it continuing attention by architectural journalists and commentators. Lecturing on ‘The Place of Music in Education’, Dr Arthur Somervell found time for an aside to note ‘upon one of the most beautiful building sites in the world, the erection of a gigantic slum dwelling for the rich’. Lord Curzon, speaking in January 1913 on the

aims of the newly formed 'London Society' for 'the beautification of London' found it 'almost incredible that a horrible phantasmagoria like Queen Anne's-mansions should ever have been allowed to rear its head'. After the war, Sidney Colvin wrote condemning plans for a massive war memorial at Hyde Park Corner, labelling it 'a barbarism not less to be deplored, though committed with a nobler purpose, than that which in the last century allowed the gross mass of Queen Anne's-mansions at Westminster to dwarf the whole group not only of private, but of sacred and public edifices in its neighbourhood'.<sup>27</sup>

However, Delissa Joseph, an architect responsible for several blocks of 6- to 7-storey mansion flats, urged a revision of the 1894 Act, 'to allow buildings of, say, 150 to 200 feet in height to be erected in suitable open situations', such as overlooking Hyde Park or along the Embankment. He had little doubt that 'had Queen Anne's-mansions received an equally effective architectural cloak' as Hyde Park Court (another building that attracted controversy during its construction between 1888 and 1891), 'the feeling against it would not have run so high'. A *Times* editorial offered support, noting how 'the paltry twelve or thirteen storeys of Queen Anne's-mansions are dwarfed into insignificance' by New York skyscrapers acknowledged to have 'a real beauty as well as a practical use of their own'. There was nothing about sheer height that was 'inherently ugly'. It would be far worse 'if the upper ten storeys of Queen Anne's-mansions were to be taken down and spread over St James's Park, to house the same number of inhabitants as they house at present'.<sup>28</sup>

## High finance

Financing the mansions proved a recurrent problem, initially blamed on delays in completion caused by the disputes with the MBW. Early in 1878, when interest payments and the costs of providing luxury services far outstripped revenue from an, as yet, only partially functioning building, Hankey attempted to make over the building to a limited company. *The Times* reported that the buildings had been valued at £258,244 but their net value, once mortgages and unpaid interest were taken into consideration, was only £66,000, less than the aggregate of Hankey's other debts. When the general public failed to subscribe more than £10,000, a company was instead constituted by the creditors in partnership with Hankey, presumably because this was the only way in which they might ever get their money back.<sup>29</sup> In 1890, the Queen Anne and Garden Mansions Limited (and, more critically, their mortgagees) leased the building to William Robert Renshaw, proprietor of Phoenix Engineering Works in Stoke-on-Trent, and two years later, the company was wound up, while a separate company was formed to provide heating, electric lighting, power and water to the mansions (and its neighbours).<sup>30</sup> In 1896, the mansions were sold for £439,165 to a new company — The Queen Anne Residential Mansions and Hotel Company Limited — which retained ownership until the 1940s.<sup>31</sup> The new name indicated the increasing use of the building as a hotel as much as an apartment house, a fate shared with other early blocks that lacked kitchens attached to each apartment, including St Ermin's Mansions (1887), now St Ermin's Hotel, adjacent to St James's Park Station, and, most famously, New York's Chelsea Apartments (1883), now the Chelsea Hotel.

## Marketing the mansions

Queen Anne's Mansions was marketed more as a social experiment than as innovative architecture. An essayist in *Saturday Review* confessed that 'the outside of the building is not particularly attractive. It looks like a spinning mill, and from its extreme height has an unpleasant appearance of instability', a view dismissed by Hankey as 'written by a lady!'<sup>32</sup> A report in *The Times* in May 1876 acknowledged that 'the building has few architectural pretensions, but suggests comfortable rooms in great abundance' and went on to describe the regime in detail, concluding that 'It is all very novel and, socially speaking, revolutionary', by which was signified the idea of co-operative living, the absence of private kitchens and the provision of servants and communal dining and recreation facilities.<sup>33</sup> So well-known was the building that, in 1877, the promoter of a stillborn 'Kensington Gore Mansions Company' marketed his speculation in terms of 'the public convenience of mansions on the Hankey system',<sup>34</sup> as did the 'Albert-Hall Mansions Company', established in 1878 to develop the same site, immediately east of the Albert Hall, with 'mansions on the Flat System, which has been so successfully carried out by Mr Hankey at Queen Anne's-gate'.<sup>35</sup> When a farce entitled 'Flats, in Four Stories' opened at the Criterion Theatre in July 1881, a reviewer noted that it dealt with 'the conditions of life in those many-peopled abodes known as Queen Anne's Mansions or as Cornwall Residences'.<sup>36</sup>

Through the early 1900s, a succession of innovative advertisements played especially on the buildings' extreme height. Working within the existing limits of newspaper typography, a vertical advertisement was created in which each floor recorded the building's best features while the walls comprised repeated courses of the same messages: hotel and residential flats, furnished suites, unfurnished suites. Improvements in printing permitted more sophisticated versions of this page-high, multi-storey advert in 1906: 11 floors of reasons to live in what was, mostly, an 11-storey building (Figure 2). Even its owners admitted that 'Queen Anne's Mansions is an ugly building externally' and their most elaborate advertisement, in 1905, passing itself off as an informative article about problems of modern living, referred to 'Hankey's Folly' as if it was a completely different building from their own!<sup>37</sup>

Despite (perhaps because of) their ugliness, the mansions attracted representations in fine art. The American artist, Joseph Pennell, managed 'a fine bold drawing of one of the most inexcusable buildings in modern London' among his illustrations for Henry James' *English Hours* (1905) (Figure 3);<sup>38</sup> and Malcolm Drummond, a member of the Camden Town School, painted a fashionable scene viewing the mansions from St James's Park with a suitably up-to-date automobile passing in the foreground, an association of flats with modernity frequently used by commercial artists promoting luxury flats.<sup>39</sup>

Apart from the extensive range of amenities — a 'grand coffee room; a club tariff, house dinners, breakfasts, and luncheons . . . hot and cold water laid on at all hours, speaking-tubes, immediate attention to wants, perfect facilities for communication, telegraphing, the despatch of letters' in 1876; complemented by billiard room, smoking room, box office, newspapers, doctor, chemist, laundry, and telephones in every room by the early 1900s — the obvious attractions of the building were its location and its height.<sup>40</sup> For 'Bachelors of means', Queen Anne's Mansions was



SCOTTISH SOCIETY.

Prose-Scottish Society yesterday the establishment of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, where they were the president of the society, and set forth was the guests of Mr. ...

... the happy relations that exist ... of the Scotch ... and Glasgow ...

... THE ... of the ... of the ... of the ...

MOTOR.

THE GREAT CHAIR.—The Great ... of the ... of the ...

A CURE FOR ... of the ... of the ...

... the ... of the ... of the ...

The Reason QUEEN ANNE'S MANSIONS, St. James's Park, S.W., IS AN HOTEL

Second to None in London

IS

FIRSTLY. Its position is perfect for all who visit London either for pleasure or for business. It is close to Finsbury, Bond Street, and the West End Theatres; also to the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, and the new Roman Catholic Cathedral. St. James's Park Railway Station is close at hand, whereby the City can be reached in fifteen minutes.

SECONDLY. It affords perfect accommodation to single persons or families.

THIRDLY. Every Suite (large or small) has its own private bath-room, with a never-failing supply of hot water.

FOURTHLY. Its clientele is not equalled by any other establishment in London, and is not disturbed by motor omnibuses and cabs.

FIFTHLY. Although an Hotel, there is no noise or bustle, and one can reside there practically the same as in one's own home.

SIXTHLY. The Catering is of the very best and the Charges most Moderate. This combination is unequalled by any other Hotel in London.

SEVENTHLY. It has its own Laundry, a convenience no other Hotel in London possesses.

EIGHTHLY. Every Room has its Telephone, so that the occupant is in direct communication with the entire Telephone system of London and the Province.

NINTHLY. A Doctor of Medicine resides there, and is at hand if any one requires his professional services, day or night.

TENTHLY. Visitors can live in their own suite "en famille" or take their meals in the Grand Dining Saloon, and have the use of the other luxurious public rooms, including Drawing, Reading, Smoke, Billiard Rooms, &c.

LASTLY. Although "Queen Anne's Mansions" is so well justified externally, luxury and comfort reign supreme internally, and many are those who have come to stay a night who have decided to remain permanently and have taken a suite unfurnished, equipped it with their own household gods, and have thus relieved themselves of all the worry and trouble of servants, and "all Service," together with the use of Plate, Linen, Glass and China, is included in the cost for Unfurnished Suites.

For particulars apply to THE MANAGER, QUEEN ANNE'S MANSIONS, ST. JAMES'S PARK, LONDON, S.W.

FIGURE 2 Advertisement for Queen Anne's Mansions, The Times, 22 Sep 1906, 6



FIGURE 3 Joseph Pennell, 'Queen Anne's Mansions', c.1904, originally in Henry James, *English Hours* (1905), reprinted in J.C. Squire (ed.), *A London Reverie* (1928)

'not 10 minutes from all the clubs, combining the advantages of a private house, the freedom of an hotel, and the luxury of a club'. For visitors to London, 'It is close to Piccadilly, Bond Street, and the West-End Theatres; also to the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, and the new Roman Catholic Cathedral', and less than 15 minutes from the City by underground train.<sup>41</sup> In these respects, the mansions matched New York apartment-hotels like the Ansonia which also offered a combination of private apartments, full service and a relatively central location.<sup>42</sup>

*The Builder* acknowledged 'the fine panoramic view', extending from Crystal Palace and the Surrey hills in the south to Highgate and Hampstead in the north. *Saturday Review* qualified this: 'The three top flats are delightful on a fine day. Those who inhabit them will have a magnificent and ever-changing view when the Westminster fogs will allow them to see anything at all.' A generation later, when

London fogs were supposedly less intense, *Flats* praised both the view — seeing the city ‘spread out like a huge map’ — and the quality of air ‘above the smoke limit and clear of the many fogs with which the city is troubled’: it was ‘as fresh, as pure, and as sweet, as that on the downs of Brighton, or the cliffs of Scarborough’.<sup>43</sup> Yet for all these paeans of praise, no photographs of the view seem to have survived in public archives.

Despite the lifts, the view barely compensated for the anxieties of height. Rents were the same on all floors; the pricing of ‘suites’ (comprising two rooms and a bathroom but no kitchen) varied only with the size of rooms — £120 per annum for suites with the largest rooms, £60 for those with the smallest, plus 20 per cent to cover taxes, and £1 per week for servants provided by the management.<sup>44</sup> Even allowing for the modest size of suites, these rents were not excessive. Average rents for flats on nearby Victoria Street — not all with lifts, without the view, and almost certainly more traffic noise — were about £30 per room per annum in the 1890s, and luxury flats with views over Hyde Park commanded rents of £750 per annum for a fourth-floor, four-bedroom flat with ‘superb views’ and £850 for a top (fifth) floor, five-bedroom flat with ‘unsurpassed views’. In most blocks, where the only view was of the building opposite, rentals decreased with height (above the first floor, which was more expensive than street-level). *Flats* reckoned that where no passenger lift was provided, each floor above the first was valued at approximately 10 per cent less than the floor immediately below; but in practice, even where there were lifts, rents decreased with height.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately, newspaper advertisements for Queen Anne’s Mansions rarely specified rents, perhaps reflecting the flexibility with which rooms could be combined according to tenants’ wishes, another consequence of which was that no lists of tenants — in censuses, ratebooks, electoral rolls or directories — assigned them to numbered flats within the building, making it impossible to reconstruct precisely *who* opted for a room with a view.

### Who lived in Queen Anne’s Mansions?<sup>46</sup>

On Census Day, 1901, a total of 132 private households included 237 residents supported by 30 domestic servants living within their households. Nearly half of all households comprised only one person; and most occupied suites of two or three rooms. Several households were ‘headed’ by wives or daughters, implying male heads away on business on census night; conversely, while many one-person households comprised bachelors, spinsters and widow(er)s, several were married men, presumably using rooms in the mansions as *pièds à terre* while their families resided outside London. Surprisingly, given the general consensus that flats were no place for small children, there were as many as 15 children aged 0–9 (though this was a tiny proportion compared to the numbers living in 5- or 6-storey model dwellings, for example, in nearby Peabody Buildings). Few households retained their own personal servants because the management employed an army of servants resident in the buildings: the 1901 census identified 78 male servants, including 37 waiters, 11 pages, 8 porters, 5 lift operators and 4 window cleaners; and 98 female servants, nearly all described as simply ‘housemaid’. There were other servants who did not live on site. *Flats* in 1907 recorded 98 male staff who slept in the building, but another 82 who did not.

Members of Parliament may have disapproved of the mansions in debates in the chamber, but this did not stop them from enjoying its amenities. Directories listed 16 MPs as residents in 1895, but only four in 1910 and two in 1914. The ratebook compiled in April 1901 recorded permanent residents in alphabetical order, including seven MPs, a countess, five 'Sirs', one 'Lady', one bishop, two other reverends, a general, two majors, three colonels and a lieutenant. There was also a constant procession of visiting dignitaries, including senior diplomats and embassy staff whose arrivals and departures were regularly announced in *The Times*, some of whom used the building as a first stop en route to more permanent quarters.<sup>47</sup>

Yet there remained substantial numbers of long-term tenants. Census returns are not very useful here, since so many 'permanent' residents came and went on business or holiday and had other homes outside London. They could not be guaranteed to be present on successive Census Days. But, starting with a list of those present on Census Day, 1901, some of whom will have been hotel guests, 14 per cent of 'heads' in 1901 had been listed in the directory for 1895, while 20 per cent were still present in the directory for 1910. These persistence rates are no lower than figures calculated in the same way, and for similar periods of time, but centred on the 1891 census, for residents of two Marylebone blocks of flats — the decidedly lower middle-class Cornwall Residences and the nouveau-riche Oxford & Cambridge Mansions.<sup>48</sup> Making a direct comparison between directories for 1895 and 1910, 19 out of 103 tenants were still present 15 years later (three in the person of their widow), although only eight were also listed in the 1901 census, thereby confirming the peripatetic character of the mansions' 'resident' population. Over a shorter period, 1910–1914, the persistence rate was 59 per cent.

Reverting to census data, the population's origins were distinctive: 60 of 267 persons in private households had been born overseas (16 in Australia, 11 in India, 10 in North America) and another 11 in Ireland. Many more had experience of living in far-flung parts of the British Empire — as well as 10 army and navy officers, most now retired, there was an 'exchange broker in India' and a 'Judge, Supreme Court, Australia', both born in Liverpool, and a 'Superintendent (Survey of India)', born in Ireland. Among male servants, more than half were foreign-born, mostly in Germany and Austria (of 37 waiters, 36 were foreign-born); but female servants were nearly all British-born.

Apart from the army and navy and the legal profession, male occupations embraced business (merchants, manufacturers and stockbrokers), professional engineers, architects and civil servants, a bishop, a sculptor and several journalists. The only women whose occupations were recorded (apart from servants) were specialist teachers. There is little indication that Queen Anne's Mansions offered a home for 'new' women. Indeed, one prominently self-employed woman resident through the 1890s was the anti-feminist writer, Eliza Lynn Linton.<sup>49</sup> Mrs Linton had long been separated from her husband and, in this respect, typified the wealthy but often fractured families whose divorces and bankruptcies featured prominently in *The Times*.

## Conclusions

The history of Queen Anne's Mansions exemplifies much of the history of flat-living in London, but in exaggerated form. Flats and their inhabitants were regarded

sceptically and negatively by most Londoners.<sup>50</sup> But only at Queen Anne's Mansions and a few other relatively high blocks in Kensington and Knightsbridge was there the virulent opposition, often based on fear of depreciating property values, which typified many North American cities.<sup>51</sup> One critical difference was that most Londoners were tenants. If a skyscraper or a soapworks was proposed next door, the easiest solution was to move. In North America, outside Manhattan, owner-occupiers whose wealth resided in their property were quantitatively and politically more significant, and more sensitive to neighbourhood change.

Apart from articles specifically directed at reviewing the mansions, there was little mention of them in debates about living in flats running in architectural journals in the late 1870s and 1880s.<sup>52</sup> Evidently, Queen Anne's Mansions were a freak abhorrence that did little to help the cause of middle-class flat-living compared to the legion of five- and six-storey blocks comprised of adjacent 'houses', each with its own staircase serving one flat on each floor, which were less disruptive of established middle-class social and architectural values. Given how easily Hankey and his successor company managed to ride roughshod over rudimentary building regulations then in force, it may seem surprising how few high flats were built in 1880s London. But the finances of large-scale buildings were rarely straightforward: two other relatively high-rise residential developments — Hyde Park Court (between Knightsbridge and Hyde Park) and Whitehall Court (overlooking the Thames) were both entangled in fraudulent activities associated with Jabez Balfour and the collapse of the Liberator Building Society.<sup>53</sup>

Queen Anne's Mansions survived as an architectural dinosaur, taken over by the Admiralty in 1940 and eventually replaced by another 'monstrous' building, Basil Spence's Home Office, in the 1970s. During the 1920s, it was, however, joined and even dwarfed by another proto-skyscraper, the London Transport headquarters across the street at 55 Broadway.<sup>54</sup> Its sophisticated step-backs and external sculptures only served to emphasise the crude utilitarianism of the mansions' plain brick exterior. Had they displayed a fraction of the architectural quality of 55 Broadway, London's high-rise history might have developed differently in the early twentieth century.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910, 1989), 117.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 12 Mar 1872, 11.

<sup>3</sup> London Metropolitan Archives (LMA): MBW/BA/23744; MBW Minutes of Proceedings, 26 Nov 1875.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 8 Oct 1875, 7; 14 Oct 1875, 9; 11 Nov 1875, 5.

<sup>5</sup> LMA: MBW/BA/24348; MBW Minutes of Proceedings, 9 Mar 1877.

<sup>6</sup> LMA: MBW/BA/23744, 24348.

<sup>7</sup> For reports of the Brook's Wharf fire, see *The Times*, 16 Jun 1876, 5; 17 Jun 1876, 12. The quotation is from *Select Committee on Constitution, Efficiency, Emoluments and Finances of Metropolitan Fire Brigade*, Minutes of Evidence, 1877 (342), 375.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 214.

<sup>10</sup> *Building News*, 3 Aug 1877, copy in MBW/BA/24348.

<sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 10 Jan 1878, 12; 31 Jan 1878, 12; and Briefs for the Complainant in *Drury v. Hankey*, in MBW/BA/23744. There are some intriguing personal issues lurking beneath the surface in this case. The magistrate, E.H. Woolrych, had been Clerk and then Legal Adviser to the MBW, 1855–61; Whichcord was elected president of the RIBA in 1879, in which capacity he attacked the misdeeds of architect-members of the MBW, one of whom was F.H. Fowler who twice seconded motions refusing

- to approve Hankey's and Whichcord's plans and who, a decade later, was one of the principal targets of the Royal Commission investigating corruption in the MBW. See D. Owen, *The Government of Victorian London 1855-1889* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).
- <sup>12</sup> *The Builder*, 2 Jun 1877, 556; 18 Feb 1888, 128; *The Times*, 20 May 1876, 12. On lifts, see R. Turvey, 'London Lifts and Hydraulic Power', *Transactions of the Newcomen Society*, 65, (1993-4), 149-64.
- <sup>13</sup> So called because another building on the site, Garden Mansions, 'a chateau pavilion with a tall polygonal tower sprouting out of it', was to be demolished to make way for the extension. See N. Taylor, 'Unheavenly Mansions', *Architectural Review*, 139, (1966), 310-12.
- <sup>14</sup> LMA: MBW/BA/38442.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Builder*, 18 Feb 1888, 128.
- <sup>16</sup> Letter from Knowles to MBW, 21 Jun 1888, copies in MBW/BA/38442 and in J.T. Knowles, Letter Book, Ref. 716/120, City of Westminster Archives Centre. See also P. Metcalf, 'At Home in Westminster', *Architectural Review*, 155, (1974), 135-8; idem, *James Knowles: Victorian Editor and Architect* (Oxford, 1980).
- <sup>17</sup> LMA: MBW/BA/38442; *The Builder*, 27 Apr 1889, 314; N. Wilkinson, *The Guards' Chapel, 1838-1938* (1938).
- <sup>18</sup> LMA: MBW/BA/38442; MBW Minutes of Proceedings, 22 Feb 1889.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 15 Dec 1888, 16; 4 Mar 1889, 3; 11 Mar 1889, 3.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 18 Apr 1889, 9.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* For the full judgment, see *The Times*, 18 April 1889, 13.
- <sup>23</sup> LMA: MBW/BA/38442.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
- <sup>25</sup> C.C. Knowles and P.H. Pitt, *The History of Building Regulations in London, 1189-1972* (1972).
- <sup>26</sup> J.T. Knowles, Letter Book, Ref. 716/120. *The Times* and *Hansard* record questions asked by Shaw Lefevre of Plunket (on 3 Jul 1888) and of the Secretary of State for War (on 27 Nov 1888).
- <sup>27</sup> *The Times*, 10 Jan 1912, 4; 14 Jan 1913, 9; 16 Jul 1920, 8.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 10 Jan 1920, 6; 24 Jan 1920, 13.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 3 May 1878, 6; 4 May 1878, 8; 7 May 1878, 7. See also *Building News*, 29 Mar 1878, 333.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Times*, 27 Jun 1891, 13; 29 Jun 1891, 14; 16 Dec 1892, 3; 10 Jul 1893, 3; 18 Jul 1893, 13; 27 Sep 1893, 4.
- <sup>31</sup> Taylor, 'Unheavenly Mansions'.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Living on Flats', *Saturday Review*, 23 Oct 1875, 515-6, reprinted in abridged form in *The Times*, 26 Oct 1875, 3; for Hankey's comments, see MBW/BA/23744.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Times*, 20 May 1876, 12.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 2 Jul 1877, 12. By 'the Hankey system' was clearly meant not the style of architecture or the height of the building, but 'the purpose of alleviating the troubles of ordinary housekeeping' and 'the advantages of co-operative housekeeping'.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 26 Mar 1878, 13. The company's prospectus promised 'a restaurant (to which no strangers will be admitted other than the friends or guests of a tenant), thereby relieving the tenants from one of the greatest difficulties attending housekeeping in the present day, and combining the advantages of a private dwelling with those of a hotel'. For further details of Albert Hall Mansions, see *Survey of London Volume XXXVIII The Museums Area of South Kensington and Westminster* (1975), 342-5.
- <sup>36</sup> *The Academy*, 30 Jul 1881, 97. The play, adapted by George Sims from a French farce, was advertised in *The Times* throughout July, August and September, culminating in a performance at Bertram and Roberts's Great Annual Day and Night Fete at the Crystal Palace on 4 Oct. Cornwall Residences was a slightly older (1872-5), undistinguished terrace of middle-class flats backing onto Baker Street Station: see R. Dennis, 'Buildings, Residences, and Mansions: George Gissing's "Prejudice Against Flats"', in J. Spiers (ed.), *Gissing and the City* (Basingstoke, 2006), 41-62.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Times*, 17 Jan 1903, 9; 27 Jan 1906, 4; 22 Sep 1906, 6; 5 Apr 1905, 11.
- <sup>38</sup> Subsequently reprinted in J.C. Squire (ed.), *A London Reverie* (1928), Plate XXVIII, from which the quotation is taken.
- <sup>39</sup> Reproduced in *Burlington Magazine*, Oct 1979, 672.
- <sup>40</sup> *The Times*, 20 May 1876, 12; 5 Apr 1905, 11; 'Illustrated Review of Queen Anne's Mansions, S.W.', *Flats*, (Jan 1907), viii-xi.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Times*, 27 Oct 1879, 14; 27 Jan 1906, 4.
- <sup>42</sup> E.C. Cromley, *Alone Together: A History of New York's Early Apartments* (Ithaca, 1990).
- <sup>43</sup> *The Builder*, 2 Jun 1877, 556; 'Living on Flats', 515; 'Illustrated review'. On theorising the view from above, see M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984); L. Nead, *Victorian Babylon* (New Haven, 2000).
- <sup>44</sup> *The Times*, 20 May 1876, 12.
- <sup>45</sup> Figures derived from advertisements in *Flatland*, Apr 1894, and *Flats*, various issues 1897-1921.

- <sup>46</sup> This section based on analysis of 1901 and 1891 census returns, ratebooks and Post Office Directories, all in City of Westminster Archives Centre.
- <sup>47</sup> See, among many examples, *The Times*, 3 May 1910, 13; 1 Mar 1911, 11; 22 Apr 1908, 8.
- <sup>48</sup> Note that directories were compiled in the year preceding publication, so the periods being compared here are 1894–1901 and 1901–1909. Comparative figures are discussed in more detail in R. Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge, 2008), 252–3.
- <sup>49</sup> *The Times*, 16 Jul 1898, 12.
- <sup>50</sup> J.N. Tarn, 'French Flats for the English in Nineteenth-century London', in A. Sutcliffe (ed.), *Multi-Storey Living* (1974), 19–40.
- <sup>51</sup> For other examples, see *Survey of London Volume XLV Knightsbridge* (2000), 42, 54–8, and *Volume XLII Southern Kensington* (1986), 69–70, 104. For North America, see K. Baar, 'The National Movement to Halt the Spread of Multifamily Housing, 1890–1926', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 58(1), (1992), 39–48.
- <sup>52</sup> For references to this literature, see Tarn, 'French Flats'; D.J. Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna* (New Haven, 1986); S. Marcus, *Apartment Stories* (Berkeley, 1999).
- <sup>53</sup> G. Stamp and C. Avery, *Victorian Buildings of London 1837–1887* (1980), 146–8; D. McKie, *Jabez: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Rogue* (2004), 105–7.
- <sup>54</sup> S. Bradley and N. Pevsner, *Buildings of England, London 6: Westminster* (2003).

## Notes on Contributor

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