THE BUILDING OF BELGRAVIA—II

EATON AND CHESTER SQUARES

By HERMIONE HOBHOUSE

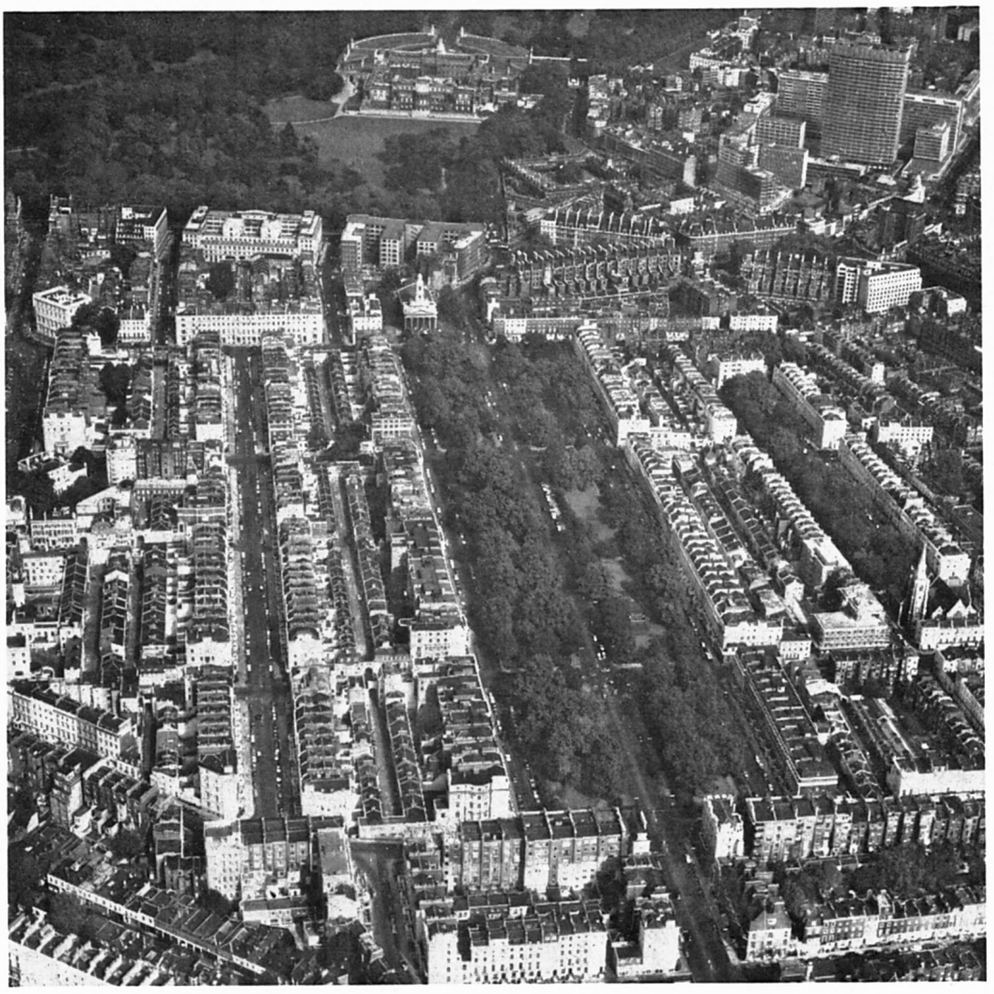
THE success of Belgravia is shown by the survival of the name itself, one of the few ingenious and pretentious names dreamt up by Regency developers to survive. It was not immediately accepted—at least by the Post Office—for a letter addressed to Thomas Cubitt, Eaton Place, Belgravia, was sent to Vienna, on the grounds that such an outlandish name could only belong to an Hungarian province.

Belgrave Square was, of course, the most expensive and fashionable part of the neighbourhood, but the squares and streets which surrounded it were sufficiently well laid out and carefully managed to attract substantial residents. Through traffic was banned from the estate, and this was enforced by the provision of bars, in Pont Street and the streets off the King's Road, attended by top-hatted barkeepers with strict instructions to turn back commercial vehicles, and unauthorised private carriages.

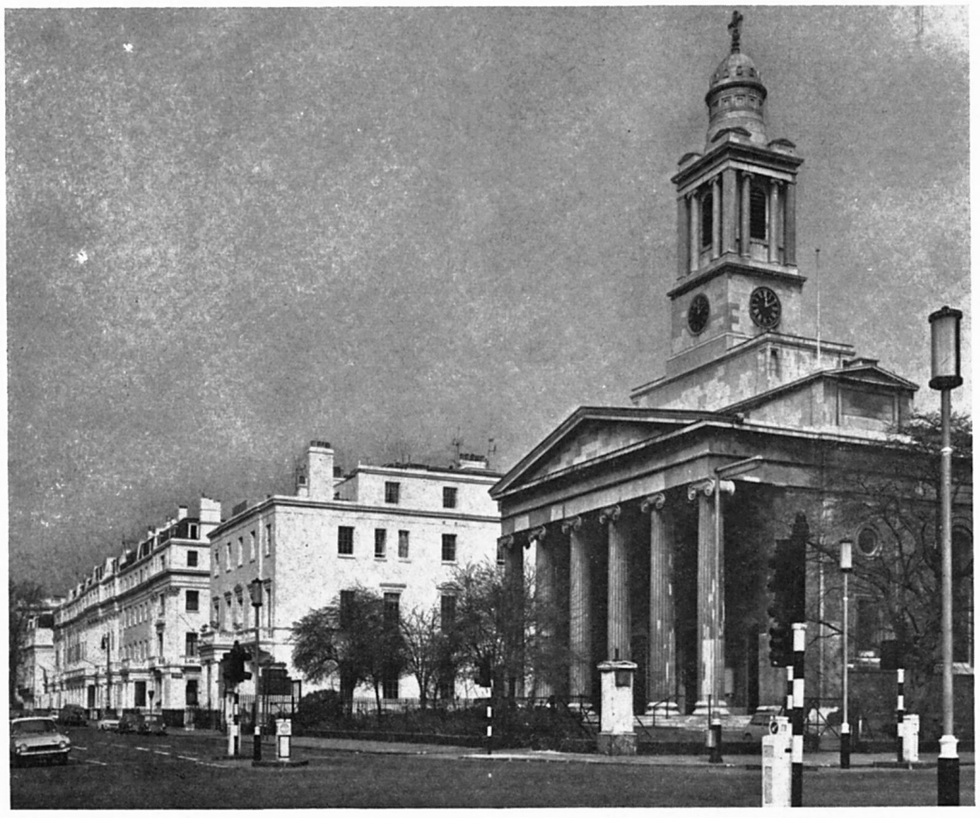
It was intended as a smart residential area, and public houses were banished to the mewses, and shops confined to the smaller streets on the outskirts like Pont Street and Charles Street. Cubitt wished to restrict his building to exclusive private houses as much as possible; Seth Smith, however, deliberately planned the creation of a bazaar or warehouse, the famous Pantechnicon, where carriages, wine and furniture could be bought and sold, as well as stored. (Fig. 4).

The real creator of Belgravia, however, was Thomas Cubitt, indeed a later nickname was "Cubittopolis", coined by the Irish novelist, Lady Morgan, who lived in a Cubitt house in William Street. Not only did he have a large stake in the original Grosvenor Estate development round Belgrave Square, but he added land taken from the Lowndes Estate, from the Cadogan family, from the Crown, and smaller pieces of Grosvenor property. His men were continuously at work in the area from 1825 till after his death in 1855.

Cubitt was the son of a Norfolk carpenter, and he started work in London on his own account about 1809, when he took a workshop in High Holborn. He gradually built up a business from the usual small commissions of a jobbing builder—roof repairs, alterations and building single houses, until in 1815, he won an important contract to build the London Institution in Moorfields. On the strength of this contract, he and his brother, William, established a comprehensive building business, employing their own tradesmen—bricklayers, masons, carpenters and joiners, paviors, slaters, plumbers and smiths, painters and decorators, as well as carters and labourers. This was an unusual step in the London building trade, where sub-contracting was more usual, and it was risky for a young builder. The firm rapidly established a high reputation for sound construction and conscientious workmanship, which it retained when Thomas Cubitt went into development.



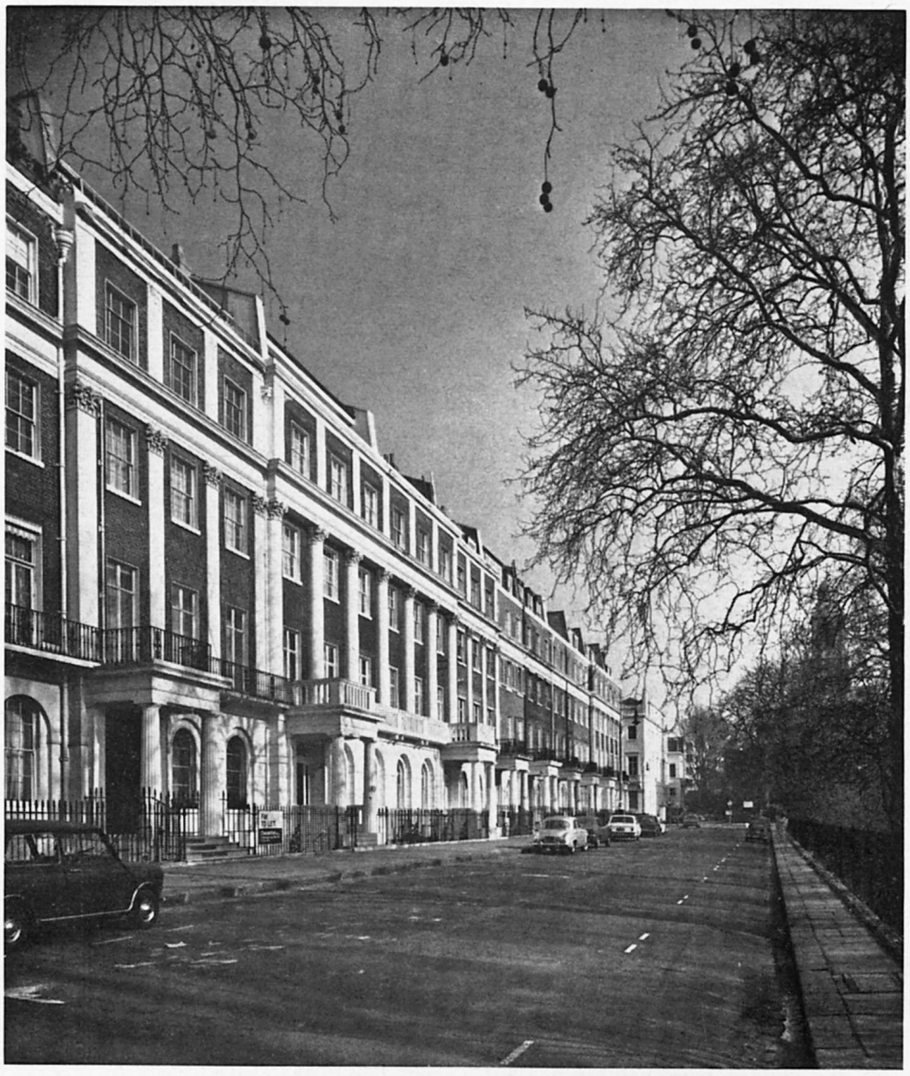
1.—AN AERIAL VIEW OF EATON SQUARE. **"It is not really a square at all, and the agreeable device of gardens in front of each terrace was dictated by the necessity of having a major route, the King's Road, crossing the district"**



2.—LOOKING PAST ST. PETER'S, EATON SQUARE, TOWARDS BELGRAVE SQUARE. **"The Grecian church was built at a time when the style was becoming unfashionable, and it is the only classical church built in Belgravia"**

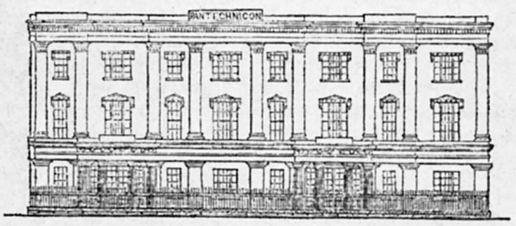
By 1825, when he signed his agreement with Lord Grosvenor, Cubitt had already undertaken work in the North London suburbs of Highbury and Stoke Newington, and on the Bedford Estate in Bloomsbury. Belgravia was, however, his most important undertaking, and was to be the most successful. He became in due course, London's best known builder—"the Emperor of the building trade"—but continued modest and unassuming, refusing a title for his work for the Queen at Buckingham Palace and Osborne, and firmly calling himself "builder" instead of the socially more acceptable "land surveyor" or "architect".

Seth Smith whose family came from Warminster was another first generation London builder. He was already established as a small builder in Mayfair, when Belgravia was opened up. He built one or two houses in



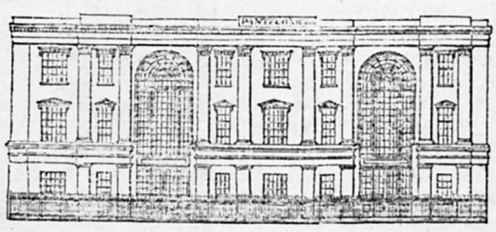
North side of Motcomb Street.

For the Sale and Warehousing of Carriages, Warehousing of Household Furniture and other Property.



North side of Halkin Street, West,

For the Sale of Works of Art, and Warehousing of Wine.



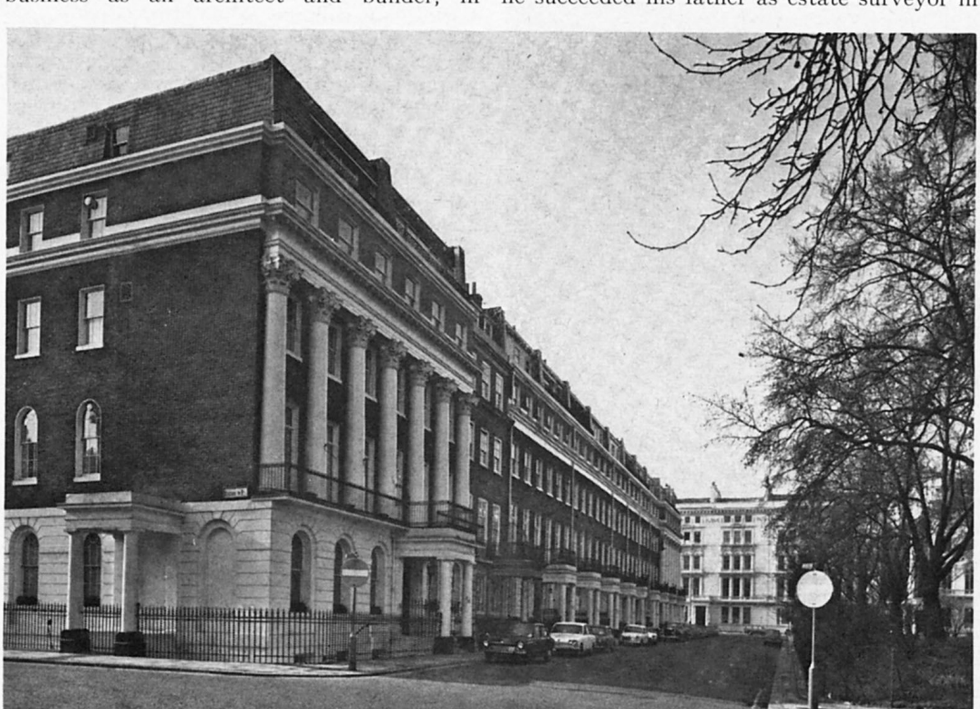
South side of Motcomb Street.

For the Sale of Works of Art, and Warehousing of Wine.

3.—THE TERRACE ADJOINING THE CHURCH. Built between 1826 and 1830, it was the first to be undertaken, and is similar to Cubitt's work in Bloomsbury. (*Right*) 4.—WOODCUTS OF THE PANTECHNICON. One of the few commercial enterprises permitted

Mayfair, and a few in South Belgravia, south of Buckingham Palace Road, but his main sphere of activities was Belgravia proper.

The Cundy family's influence on Belgravia was all-pervasive. Thomas Cundy the Elder (1765–1825), of Cornish origin, set up in business as an architect and builder, in Ranelagh Works, at the east end of Ebury Street, being appointed Grosvenor surveyor in 1821. His two sons, Thomas the Younger, and Joseph, took land from Lord Grosvenor when the area was laid out, though Thomas withdrew from speculative development when he succeeded his father as estate surveyor in 1825. Joseph (1795–1875) continued with his stakes in Buerton Street, now South Eaton Place, and on the south side of Chester Square, but proved unsuccessful. He finally went bankrupt in 1845, leaving a good deal of his land in Belgravia itself unbuilt upon, though he completed a number of houses in Ranelagh Grove, and in Belgrave Terrace. His son, Thomas Syson Cundy, was employed as surveyor to the Grosvenor Place Improvement Trust, the local authority responsible for roads, and the lighting and cleansing of the area.



5.—THE SOUTH-WEST TERRACE BUILT BY SETH SMITH. While it is similar to Cubitt's terrace next to the church (Fig. 3), the Corinthian column and other details are bolder and more impressive

Thomas Cundy the Younger (1790–1867) exercised a long and important influence on the development of Belgravia for which he designed several churches. His son, "Thomas the Still Younger" (about 1820-95), joined his father in the estate office, after a gentleman's education at Oxford. In 1864 he participated in, and won, a limited competition for the rebuilding of Grosvenor Gardens and parts of Grosvenor Place. He succeeded to the estate surveyorship on his father's death in 1867, and held it for 23 years.

The three generations of the Cundy family span the development of Belgravia—the first planned it, the second supervised its building, and the third superseded it with his enormous mansions in the French style, said in 1873 to have eclipsed the houses in Eaton and Belgrave Squares.

The first streets to be built were those communicating with the new square—Wilton Place in the north, and Belgrave Street, linking the two squares, to the south. Cubitt was successful in finding very rich and important tenants for this last street—amongst them the Duke of Wellington's eldest son, members of the banking family of Smith, and the Earl of Munster, the illegitimate son of William IV, for whom No. 13, the house next

door to the church was built (Fig. 2).

Eaton Square is not really a square at all. The agreeable device of gardens in front of each terrace was dictated by the necessity of having a major route, the King's Road, crossing the neighbourhood. There is no overriding unity of design in the square, and it seems unlikely that the Grosvenor Board or the developers ever intended any.

As in Euston Square, the church was placed at one end (Fig. 1), and St. Peter's, like Inwood's St. Pancras, is in the Grecian style (Fig. 2). The building committee chose a Classical rather than a Gothic design from amongst those provided by the architect, Henry Hakewill, but the style was already unfashionable, and this is the only classical church built in Belgravia. Thomas Cundy's churches are all the Gothic style—not only more pious but cheaper.

The church was the only essential public building for a Regency development, and Lord Grosvenor himself laid the foundation stone in 1824. St. Peter's was consecrated on 20 July 1827, being given its own district in 1830.

The north side of Eaton Square was all built by Thomas Cubitt's own men, or by builders who took single plots from him. The first division next to the church, built 1826–1830, is very similar to Cubitt's work in Bloomsbury, and is attributed to him and his younger brother Lewis. It is faced in stock brick with shallow stucco pilasters on the projecting central and side blocks. The ground and basement floors are stucco-faced, and there is a very plain stucco string course and parapet (Fig. 3).

The central terrace is much grander in design and conception (Fig. 6). It is stuccoed throughout with a fine central portico, a continuous line of porches with fluted doric columns forming an arcade over the area at street level, and pedimented porticoes on the return walls. The central portico is crowned, in rather a curious way, not by the usual pediment originally intended but by a balcony serving the third floor. This terrace took considerably longer to build, the leases being granted between 1830 and 1847, but very strict control was exercised over the façades, and the unity of the terrace was preserved.

The third terrace, also from Cubitt's office, breaks away from the traditional classical style into robust Italianate in the style of Barry (Fig. 7), an early "commercial" essay in the style, for the first lease was granted in 1841. Again the device of the continuous portico is used, and the terrace is stuccoed throughout, the swagged and dentilled cornice and the pediments over the windows, all being "compo" or stucco ornament worked over brick and stone profiles. The western end of the Square up to and including the north end of Eaton Terrace was taken by Cubitt in the 1840s after the failure of the builder who had originally offered for it. The blocks are extremely plain, with little of interest about their design, except the way in which the attics and third floor have been merged in the rest of the façade with the disappearance of the string course and the mansard roof.

The south side of the square was taken in 1824 by Seth Smith, who started work on the middle and western divisions in 1825, and on the eastern division in 1830. He had difficulty in completing his terraces—he had other commitments in the area, and the years 1826–1835 saw a serious slump in the London building trade. In 1840 Smith came to an agreement with Charles James Freake, who later achieved both a fortune and a baronetcy from his South Kensington developments. Freake finished off the western division, and took several sites in the central block.

Seth Smith is known to have employed an architect called Jopling elsewhere, and Jopling may have designed part of Eaton Square. He was probably the civil engineer, Joseph Jopling, who published several works on perspective, and on the study of Greek columns.

The earliest division is executed in the same stock brick with stucco dressings as Cubitt's block next the church though the Corinthian columns and other details are bolder and more impressive. The central division is stucco with a very simple central feature of Corinthian half columns surmounted by an entablature with a triangular pediment above the third floor, pierced by a curious segmental opening, to light the attics behind. The eastern division, begun in 1830, shows the rapid strides made by the fashion for stucco. It is very plain, with shallow ornament, the earlier houses with elegant balconettes, the later with projecting porches.

The site of Chester Square was originally laid out as streets. In July 1828, however, Seth Smith, Joseph Cundy and a man named Watkins, who had taken some of the land in Ebury Street, approached the Grosvenor Board with a "plan for forming a new oblong Square between Eaton Square and Ebury Street for the purpose of building 2nd rate houses . . ." This application was a tribute to the social success of Belgravia, and was immediately granted by Lord Grosvenor. The resulting square is modest and agreeable—the stuccoed façades have been kept reasonably uniform, but show the usual range from balconettes to Doric porticoes in deference to the changing taste of customers. The most interesting decorative feature is the elaborate and substantial design of the balcony railings, and the almost *art nouveau* flavour of their curvilinear pattern.

Illustrations: 1, *Aerofilms Ltd.;* 4, *Westminster Public Library.* (*The first part of this article was published on May* 8)

6.—THE CENTRAL TERRACE ON THE NORTH SIDE. This is much grander in conception than Cubitt's earlier terrace (Fig. 3), and is stuccoed throughout

7.—CUBITT'S THIRD TERRACE. "This breaks away from the traditional classical style into robust Italianate in the style of Barry"