

'THIS UNFORTUNATE AND IGNORED LOCALITY': THE LOST SQUARES OF STEPNEY
By William Palin

'The devastation of the square was pitiful to see. I only saw one man all the time I paced the square, and he had one foot in the grave. The April evening was chill and the sky overcast, but a blackbird warbled in the plane trees, introducing impromptu variations and evidently trying to keep his courage up. The half dozen Georgian terraced houses left on the North side looked indescribably weary and exhausted, their bricks crumbling and their stucco returning to sand. Grass was coming up on the pavement.'¹

When, in the spring of 1968, Geoffrey Fletcher ventured off Cable Street into Wellclose Square, he stumbled on an eerie scene. Earmarked for redevelopment and languishing under a Compulsory Purchase Order, the entire square, the oldest and most historically important in east London, was about to disappear. Its destruction, together with Swedenborg (originally Princes) Square, a smaller neighbour to the east, erased two and a half centuries of history and ripped the heart out of this remarkable enclave of forgotten London. (*figs. 53 & 54*)

A visit to Wellclose Square today is a sad experience. The outline of the square survives, together with a Victorian school building at its centre, but the surrounding buildings are gone, and where they have been replaced, it is by a hotchpotch of later development that bears little or no relation to this once elegant urban space. Rudely abutting the east side of the square is the concrete plinth of one of the three tower blocks of the Swedenborg Gardens high-rise estate, which has obliterated any trace of the neighbouring Swedenborg Square. (*fig. 55*)

Although recorded in photographs and surveyed in part by the London County Council (LCC) and Greater London Council (GLC) Historic Buildings Division, a detailed history of these two fascinating squares is yet to be compiled. And, although a good deal is known about the origin and development of Wellclose Square, the history of Swedenborg Square remains obscure. This article aims to fill some of these gaps and, it is hoped, stimu-

late more research on what is a lost chapter in the architectural history of the East End.

The growth of the eastern suburbs of London during the seventeenth century was something of a phenomenon. Even before the development boom that followed the Great Fire, busy hamlets had grown up outside the City's eastern boundary and along the northern banks of the Thames where thriving communities serviced, and profited from, growing river trade. By the end of the seventeenth century the riverside hamlets of Wapping and Shadwell had achieved parish status and these burgeoning districts were also attracting speculators. In 1656, Thomas Neale, who would later develop the Seven Dials area of Covent Garden, built St. Paul's church in Shadwell as part of a larger speculation on a triangle of land. In 1669 he obtained the lease of this land from the Deans of St. Paul's for an annual rent of £80.²

Another speculator who recognised the potential for profit east of the City was the notorious Nicholas Barbon (1640?-1698) who is said to have laid out a staggering £200,000 in building in London after the Great Fire.³ Barbon was attracted to the east, initially, by the availability of two parcels of open land, the Old Artillery Ground in Spitalfields and Wellclose, an area of ground north of Wapping. In 1682 both were leased to Barbon by the Crown. The Crown held them as Liberties of the Tower, and in 1687 their privileged status outside the jurisdiction of the City of London was confirmed in letters patent issued by James I.⁴ (*fig. 56*) Wellclose (or Well Close), took its name from the medieval well that served the Cistercian abbey of St. Mary Graces (remembered by name in Graces Alley, which runs north-west from the corner of the present square). After Dissolution, the buildings were used as a naval victualling-office, then occupied by The Mint. The Wellclose itself appears to have been in use by the Ordinance before its disposal to Barbon.⁵

Barbon intended his new development

2. M Power, 'Shadwell: The Development of a London Suburban Community...', *The London Journal*, Vol.4, No.1, May 1978, p.41.

3. John Summerson, *Georgian London* (London, 2003), p.30.

4. *Survey of London Vol.27, Spitalfields and Mile End New Town* (London, 1957), p.34.

5. John Charlton (ed.), *The Tower of London: its Buildings and Institutions* (London, 1978), p.149.

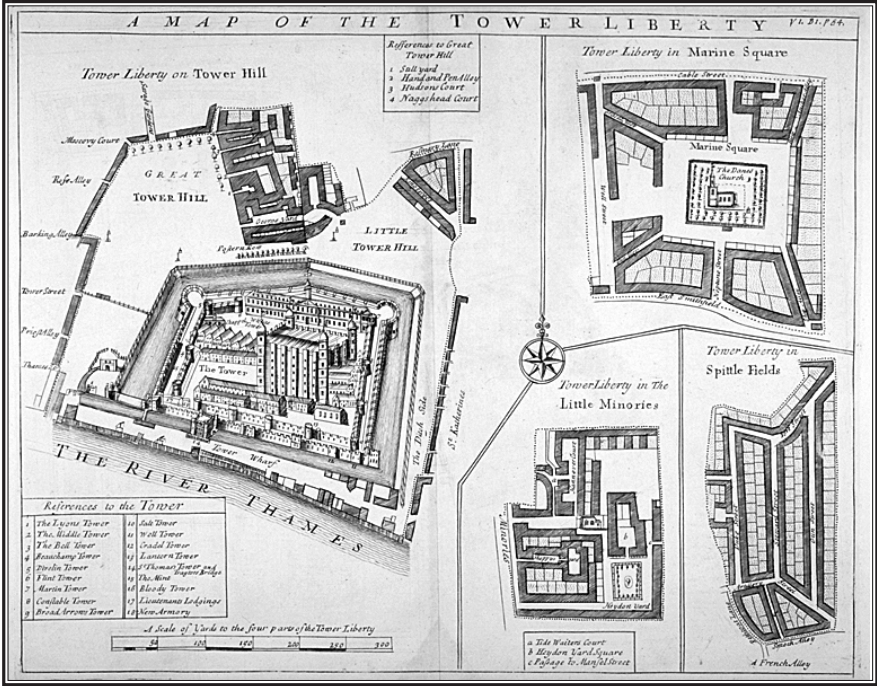
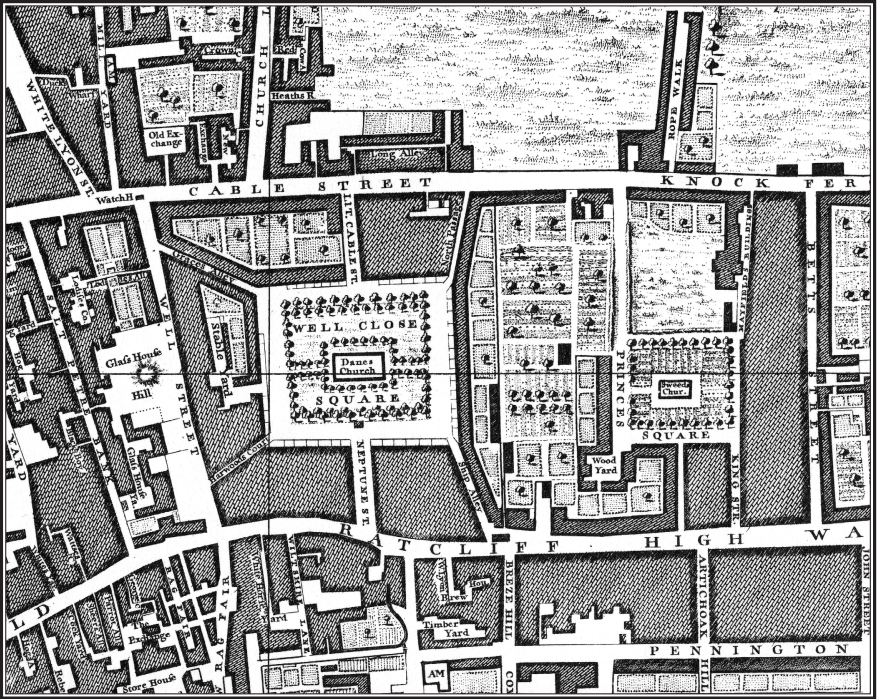
1. Geoffrey Fletcher, *Geoffrey Fletcher's London* (London, 1968), p.26.



53. The Swedish Lutheran Church, Princes Square (later Swedenborg Square), Stepney, photographed in December 1908 (COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



54. Wellclose Square, Stepney, looking east from the steps of No. 5, 1961 (COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



55. Detail of John Rocque's Map of London (1746) showing Wellclose Square and Princes (later Swedenborg) Square

56. A Map of the Tower Liberty showing the four Liberties in 1720 with Wellclose (marked Marine Square) at the top right (COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, GUILDHALL LIBRARY)

on the Wellclose to appeal to the well-to-do members of the East End's maritime community. Like Thomas Neale at Shadwell, he used the opportunity to develop a model that he would use later further west. Wellclose Square was laid out with diagonal alleyways extending from each corner and a wider access road in the centre of the north and south sides. This way Barbon was able to insulate the development from the worst of the dirt and noise of riverside traffic whilst maximising the number of lettable frontages. It is almost identical in pattern to his other London square, Red Lion Square in Holborn, developed from 1684 in the face of vigorous (and violent) opposition from the lawyers of Gray's Inn.⁶

In 1683 Barbon founded England's first fire insurance company, using the ground and new buildings at Wellclose Square and other London developments as settled security. And in order to protect this security he even took the precaution of stationing a fire engine permanently in a house on the north side of the new square.⁷ It was from this business consortium that John Butcher, a timber merchant, leased part of the ground in the middle of the square in 1693. Butcher was a trustee for the congregation of a planned Danish-Norwegian Church.

Following the Great Fire, the riverside communities had been swelled by the influx of new immigrants profiting from the rebuilding of the City. The huge demand for timber created a lucrative trade for the Scandinavians, and the Norwegians (Danish subjects until 1814) were said to have 'warmed them selves comfortably by the Fire of London'.⁸ The Danish-Norwegian community settled in and around Wapping and by the 1680s was well established and increasing in wealth.

Anglo-Danish connections had been strengthened by the marriage, in 1683, of Princess Anne (later Queen Anne) to Prince Georg of Denmark and it was Georg's father, King Christian V, who supplied most of the funds for the construction of the new Danish Church at Wellclose Square. Designs for the church were drawn up by Thomas Woodstock, a master carpenter who had worked for Christopher Wren at St. Paul's.⁹ On

Woodstock's death in the summer of 1694, the project was taken over by the Danish sculptor Caius Gabriel Cibber (1630-1700). The Italian-trained Cibber was the son of the King of Denmark's cabinet-maker and appears to have settled in London at some point prior to the Restoration. His architectural work had, until now, been confined to a surveyorship for the rebuilding of the Hanseatic Steel-Yard in the City. As a sculptor, Cibber had worked for Wren at St. Paul's as well as at the Monument where, during 1673-5, he carved the relief on its base. However, he is perhaps best known for his figures of 'Raving and Melancholy Madness' made for the entrance to the Bethlem Hospital in Moorfields.¹⁰

Cibber's new Danish Church at Wellclose Square was completed in 1696 and was engraved by Kip that year. (fig. 57) Kip's view shows the church enclosed by a wall with piers separated by alternating brick panels and railed sections. The building itself is of a simple baroque style in the manner of Wren's City Churches. The interior, also engraved by Kip, is more striking, incorporating a vaulted ceiling with a distinctive circular central boss fringed with ornament. Nicholas Hawksmoor was to reproduce a very similar design some thirty years later in his Vestry Room at Christ Church, Spitalfields.¹¹ It seems likely that Hawksmoor would have visited Cibber's church, which was, after all, on the doorstep of St. George-in-the-East, one of his three stupendous Stepney churches.

The new Danish church and its congregation of sea captains and merchants excited curiosity and ridicule among the native population. The *London Spy* Ned Ward relates a friend's unflattering account of a visit to the church:

Such a parcel of wainscot-fac'd Christians they were enough to scare an English parson out of the pulpit, were he to ascend amongst 'em, and stunk so of pitch and tar that as soon as ever he had clapp'd his nose in to the church he thought himself between decks. There uncomb'd locks, tobacco breaths, and seafaring apparel, added such a further fragrancy to the former that no rats that had taken sanctuary in a Cheshier chesse could have smelt more frowzily.¹²

The architect of the church and his sec-

6. John Summerson, *op.cit.*, p.33.

7. F P C Rhodes, *Centenary, St Paul's School* (Pamphlet, 1971), p.10.

8. Millicent Rose, *The East End of London* (London, 1973).

9. Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*.

10. The figures are now in the Museum at the Royal Bethlem Hospital at Monks Orchard in Bromley.

11. *Survey of London Vol.27, op. cit.*, p.172.

12. Kenneth Fenwich (ed.), *The London Spy* (London, 1955), p.257.

ond wife Jane Colley, mother of the playwright Colley Cibber, were buried there. Cibber's monument to Jane was lost after the church was demolished in 1867 to make way for St. Paul's School, but four baroque statues in wood attributed to Cibber are now at the Danish Church of St. Katherine's in Regent's Park. Three more figures in lead, also by Cibber, representing Faith, Hope and Charity, were briefly placed above the door of the new school but sold to the Ny-Carlsberg Glytoteik in Copenhagen in 1908 after attempts at their theft.¹³

Kip's exterior view of the Danish church shows the surrounding square to be well-formed. On the east side is a neat terrace of three-storey houses and on the south two larger mansions are visible. The cosmopolitan feel of the square must have been somewhat at odds with its location, which was still considered to be fairly remote from civilisation. Defoe, visiting in the 1720s, recalls the area's less salubrious recent past:

Well Close, now called Marine Square, was so remote from houses, that it used to be a very dangerous place to go over after it was dark, and many people have been robbed and abused in passing it; a well standing in the middle, just where the Danish church is now built, there the mischief was generally done.¹⁴

In Joel Gascoyne's 1709 survey of the parish of Stepney, (*fig. 58*) Wellclose Square (or 'Marine Square' as it is marked), is the only significant example of planned residential development in the entire parish,¹⁵ standing out from the more chaotic growth of the river-side hamlets and the piecemeal development creeping north and east across the fields of the old Manor.¹⁶ A number of the original seventeenth century houses on the south side of the square survived until the 1960s and photographs and surveys show them to be of good quality, exhibiting typical Barbon features including well-proportioned panelled rooms, and staircases with twisted balusters.¹⁷ (*fig. 59*)

13. F.P.C. Rhodes, *op. cit.*, p.12.

14. Daniel Defoe, *A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain, divided into circuits or journies*. Letter 5 (London, 1726), Part 1: Overview and Suburbs.

15. The square at this time sat partly in the parish of Stepney and partly in that of St Mary's Whitechapel.

16. The only comparable speculation of this period in the eastern suburbs of London is Hoxton Square in Shoreditch, where one surviving (heavily restored) late seventeenth-century house recalls the lost Barbon houses on Wellclose Square.

On the west and north sides the houses were larger, resembling those in Barbon's Denmark Street development in the western parish of St. Giles-in-the-Fields.¹⁸

The church apart, the most important and beautiful building in the square was the Old Court House, on the corner of Neptune Street on the south side. (*fig. 60*) It is also the best recorded, both in photographs, and in a series of detailed drawings made by the LCC in 1949. The Court House was built after 1687 as the seat of Justice for the four Tower Liberties and, until the late nineteenth century, housed a Court of Request (which functioned much like a County Court).¹⁹ Its fine staircase with dense newel-post-clusters of twisted balusters and rooms of bolection panelling identify it as part of Barbon's first development. Its destruction in the 1960s deprived east London of one its most beautiful public buildings.²⁰

Other buildings of note in the square included Nos. 20 & 21 on the west side, which once housed the Danish Embassy. (*fig. 61*) The two charming sculpted reliefs (erroneously attributed to Caius Cibber) featuring *putti* practising the arts and sciences were removed after 1934. Also on the west side stood two extraordinary relics of eighteenth-century maritime London: at the corner of Stable Yard was No. 26, a timber framed weather-boarded house, complete with Venetian window.²¹ In the yard behind there survived until after the war a five-bay boarded house which, in photographs, recalls a North American east coast colonial mansion. (*fig. 62*)

By the early nineteenth century the square was losing its social respectability, an inevitable consequence of its close proximity to the docks and the gradual industrialisation of the East End with the accompanying population explosion. Also, the enclosure of the

17. John Summerson, immune to the charms of the Barbon house, refers disparagingly to 'houses ...economically planned to the point of meanness, with coarse ornaments which repeated themselves over and over again. The design of the panelling and staircases of his houses never varies, and his carpenters must have turned out thousands upon thousands of the twisted balusters whose slick modernity was calculated to engage the eye of the bumpkin in search of his first town house.' Summerson, *Georgian London*, *op. cit.*, p.30.

18. *Survey of London*, Vol. v, *St Giles-in-the-Fields*, pt 11, pp.142-3.

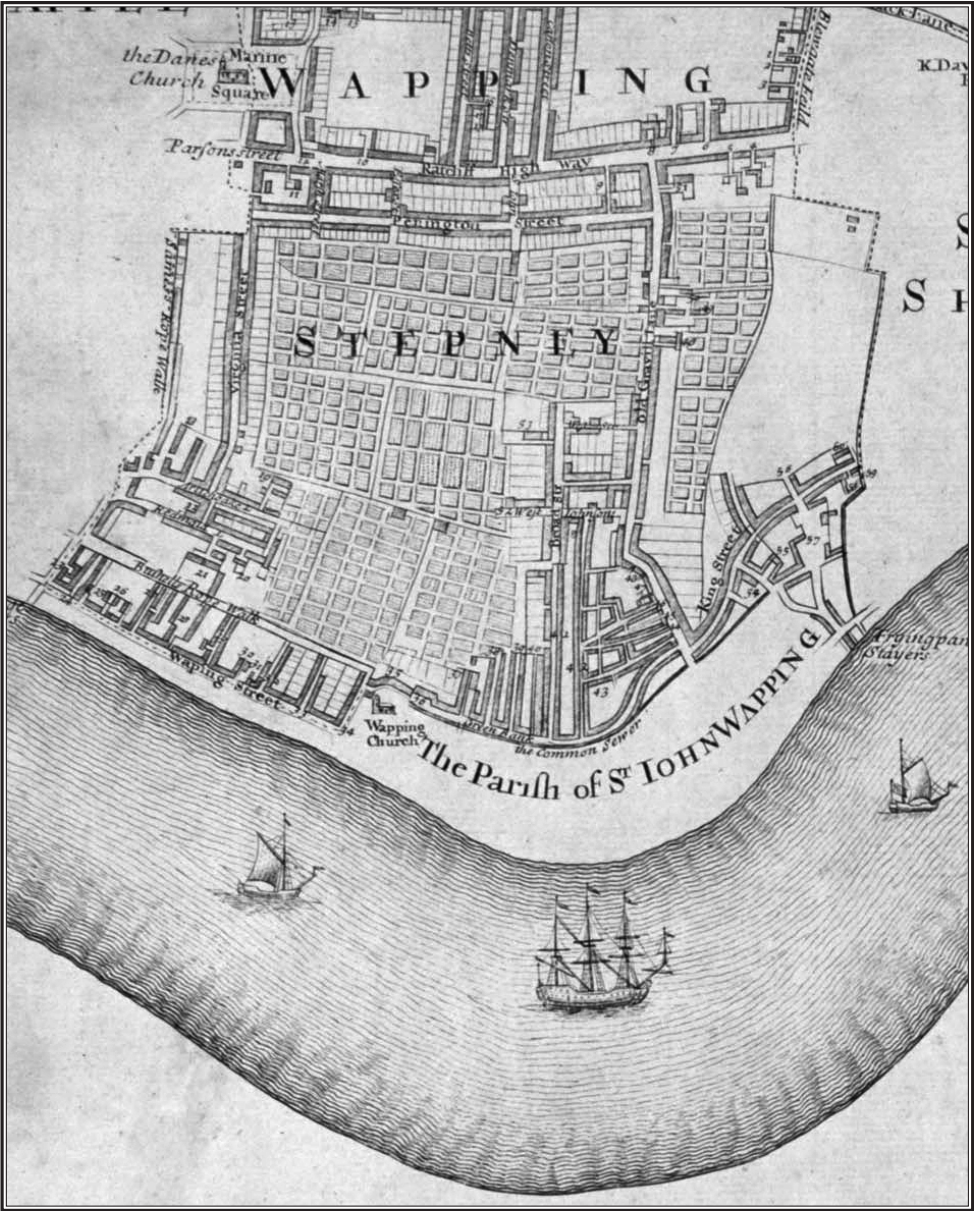
19. In the nineteenth century the prison at the Court House enjoyed a period as a freak museum.

20. The prison cell from the Court House now survives as a ghoul-ish exhibit in the Museum of London.

21. See Peter Guillery, *The Small House in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2004).



57. The Danish-Norwegian Church in Wellclose Square, engraved by Johannes Kip (1653-1722) in 1696
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, GUILDHALL LIBRARY)



58. Detail from Joel Gascoyne's *Survey of the Manor of Stepney*, 1709
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, GUILDHALL LIBRARY)

docks and the fact that seamen could now leave ship during the unloading and loading of cargo meant that the ship-owners and captains began to move away. With the little Watch House, (fig. 63) built soon after the formation of the square, left unmanned, the 'profligacy, filth and vice'²² that was becoming synonymous with the surrounding area could no longer be held at bay. 'Houses of ill-fame are swarming,' complained a contemporary Wesleyan missionary, 'the neighbourhood teems with lazy, idle, drunken lustful men, and degraded, brutalised hell-branded women, some alas! girls in their early teens.'²³ As the numbers of lodging houses, pawn shops, pubs, and music halls²⁴ multiplied, so did the sugar refineries. These refineries (or 'bakeries') had first appeared in the area in the 1760s. Manned mainly by poor German immigrants, and belching sickly fumes into the air, they did not help to improve the desirability of the neighbourhood. The first sugar bakery appeared in the square in 1794 and, by the 1850s, there were at least five refineries operating in and around the square.²⁵ (fig. 64)

Danish influence in the area was also in decline. The disastrous alliance with France during the Napoleonic Wars, the capture of its fleet by the British in 1807 and the subsequent loss of many of its territories including Norway led to a reduction in trade and the return of many of its merchants and dignitaries to Copenhagen. Those who stayed gradually moved away from the Wellclose Square area. In 1816 the church was handed to trustees for charitable uses in aid of Danish and Norwegian seamen in London and, in 1856, the building became a mission under the control of St. George-in-the-East. The church must have retained a significance for the Danish community, however, because in 1862 a special service was held there to celebrate the visit of Prince Vilhelm of Denmark. Its final demise was orchestrated by an energetic clergyman, the Rev. Dan Greatorex of St. Paul's, Dock Street. In 1861, Greatorex opened a pri-

mary school at 21 Wellclose Square (the Old Danish Embassy) which then moved to larger premises at No. 12. Seeking more space, Greatorex purchased, with the help of £2,000 from the Bishop of London, the ground in the centre of the square, including the Danish church. Detailed plans were drawn up for converting the church for school use (these are the best surveys we now have of Cibber's building) but, typically, this approach was deemed uneconomical and the decision was taken to demolish and rebuild. On 26th February 1869 the contents of the church was advertised for auction in *The Times*.²⁶ The new St. Paul's School was opened by the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1870.

The early success of Wellclose Square inspired another Scandinavian community to undertake a similar development. On 1st March 1727, articles of agreement were written up between three builders from Wapping, James Brittain (carpenter),²⁷ James Mayfield (bricklayer)²⁸ and Thomas Southwood (carpenter), and a 'London merchant' Charles Brander, for the leasing of an area of ground called Princes Square immediately to the east of the Wellclose. Princes Square was a piece of copyhold land held by the Manor of Stepney and the agreement states that 'the said parties have already erected and build several messuages and tents upon part of the said ground and intend to make it a complete square'.²⁹ The agreement also states that 'Brander [presumably a Swede] has contracted for part of the ground rent 100' in length and 70' in breadth lying in the middle of the square as the same is already staked and set out in order to build a church for the service of the Swedish nation'.

Princes Square was laid out on a piece of land about half the size of Wellclose Square and the luxury of front areas to the houses had to be dispensed with, but the principle of the development was the same. The square would enclose a garden with a church at its centre, this to serve the Swedish community (in particular the Swedish seamen using the London Docks). The pastor of the Swedish congregation was Dr (later Bishop) Jacob Serenius, who

22. 'Down the Highway' from the *East London Advertiser* (10 October 1857), p.2.

23. F.P.C. Rhodes, *op. cit.*, p.10.

24. The most celebrated of these, 'Wilton's Music Hall', can be found on Graces Alley, the only surviving relic of the old square. It was established in 1857 by John Wilton, proprietor of the Prince of Denmark public house.

25. Sugar Refiners and Sugar Bakers Database, see: <http://home.clara.net/mawer/intro.html>.

26. *The Times*, 26 February 1869, p.12.

27. Brittain's name is remembered in Brittens Court on the south side of the square.

28. Mayfield gave his name to Mayfields Buildings running north from the north east corner of the square.

29. Swedish Church, Harcourt Street, Records Box O II/I Volume containing original deeds.



59. Wellclose Square, south side, 1961
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)

60. The Old Court House, No. 33 Wellclose Square, 1911
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



61. Nos. 20 & 21 Wellclose Square (the former Danish Embassy) with bas reliefs depicting the arts and sciences, c.1930
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)

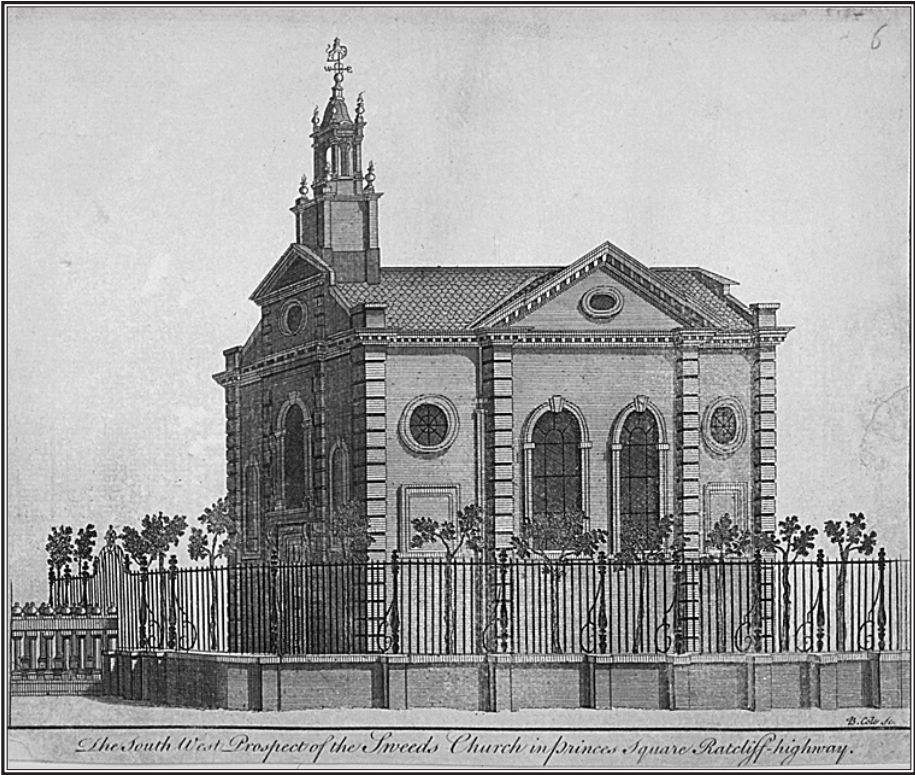
62. View of No. 27 Wellclose Square past the 'Wooden House' at No. 26 (on the corner of Stable Yard)
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



63. The Watch House on the south side of Wellclose Square, 1935
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



64. Watercolour view of the Danish and Norwegian Church, c.1845, by unknown artist.
By this time the square was no longer a genteel address
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, GUILDHALL LIBRARY)



65. Swedish Church, Princes Square, engraved by Benjamin Cole c.1760
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, GUILDHALL LIBRARY)

66. Swedish Church, Princes Square in 1919
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)

had come to London in 1723.³⁰ The church Minute Books of 1728 record that, on 15th May 1728, Serenius contracts a 'Master Goodman' for £200.³¹ However, a week later a Mr Brant Lofernen appears to be taken on as 'Surveyor'.³² 100,000 'grey stock' bricks and 200,000 'place bricks' are recorded as having been ordered in April from 'Mssrs Mary and Elizabeth Fish'.³³ The building appears to have been partly designed by Serenius himself, an amateur architect of sorts who was concerned that an English master-builder would be 'more anxious about his gain than his reputation'. Although the first church service was held in September 1728, the building was not finished until the following year, at the cost of £1,714.³⁴ The Swedish Church survived until 1923 and photographs show it to be little altered from the building in Benjamin Cole's engraving of c.1760. (fig. 65)

The Swedes' church was very close in design to that of the Danes and was obviously modelled on the earlier building. It is in a similar 'Wrenish' baroque style but is slightly plainer, shorter by one bay and has a pitched roof rising from a low parapet. Its original feature is a triangular pediment on all four sides. Like the Danish church it also sat inside a railed burial enclosure with high gates (shown in a mesmerising photograph from 1908, see fig. 53). The interior was also plainer than that of its neighbour - with a coved flat ceiling rather than rib vaults. However, as one would expect from a community founded on the timber trade, the interior joinery was of high quality, including a beautiful altar-piece and pulpit. The square itself was obviously well-kept for, when the Trustees of the church negotiated the purchase of the area outside the railed enclosure of the church in 1746 'together with trees and shrubs', there is a record of two gardeners, 'Osborn and afterwards Gould', being in occupation.³⁵ Rocque's map shows both Princes and

Wellclose Square with trees neatly spaced around the perimeter (see fig. 55).

By the time the square was renamed in 1938 after the Swedish mystic, Emmanuel Swedenborg, who had been buried in the vaults of the church in 1772, the building itself was but a memory.³⁶ The beginning of the end had come on 11th April 1908 when the Trustees offered it up for auction together with the land in the square. There were no takers and in 1911, when the Swedish congregation moved west to a new building at Harcourt Street in Marylebone (taking with them the altar-piece, pulpit and font) there was still no sign of a buyer. At this stage the local community was hopeful that the LCC or Stepney Borough Council would step in and that 'both the open space and the building may be preserved for the benefit of the local residents, and the Church perhaps adapted as a Concert or Recreation Hall, or some such purpose'³⁷ but although the council appeared willing to take on the ground they were not prepared to take on the building.

The church, stripped and empty, deteriorated quickly. Photographs from 1919 show the windows broken and the railings torn down. (fig. 66) The vandalism continued until 1921 when the Town Clerk wrote to the council voicing concern over the dangerous state of the building, 'I suppose it is lack of funds that has led to the existing state of things on what used to be - for this neighbourhood - rather a charming spot'.³⁸ Finally, in April 1923, with the church in ruins, an agreement was reached between the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, Stepney Borough Council and the LCC to raise £3,500 for the purchase of the site from the Trustees of the Swedish Church. The conveyance was completed in November that year and the site was subsequently cleared for a children's playground, which the council agreed to lay out and maintain.³⁹ (fig. 67)

With the church gone, the square's principal points of interest were the surviving terraces of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The east, west and south sides had been developed in the late 1720s and most of the

30. Jacob Serenius, D D Bishop of Strengnes was 'a man of considerable learning, and author of a dictionary of his own language', after quotation from Daniel Lysons, *The Environs of London*: vol. 2 (1795).

31. Swedish Church, Harcourt Street, Minute Book I, Fol. 64.

32. Swedish Church, Harcourt Street, Minute Book I, Fol. 87.

33. Swedish Church, Harcourt Street, Minute Book I, Fol. 90.

34. GLC/AR/HB/02/0291 (MLA). Historical note in the Records & Museum sub committee of the London Museum (statutory planning file), 5 May 1911.

35. Swedish Church Records Box 011/I Vol. court Copies deeds, 10 June 1764.

36. The mystic's remains were returned to Sweden in 1911 where he was reburied at Upsala Cathedral.

37. Swedish Church Records Box 011/I Vol. court Copies deeds, 10 June 1764.

38. *Ibid.*, 26 May 1921.

39. LCC Deeds L & P Dept, 30 November 1923.

substantial original houses still stood until the 1960s. The terrace on the north side had been developed in 1826, between two larger corner houses of 1802. Like at Wellclose Square, the south side contained some larger houses, one of four bays and the other five bays wide.

The 1720s terrace on the west side of the square was one of the most interesting of its date in the country. (*fig. 68*) Five storeys in height with fine Doric doorcases, the houses were distinguished by an exceptionally high basement level, which left the ground floor window strangely elevated. This was, perhaps, to allow the houses to be serviced from the street independently of the front door, or possibly merely a way of creating a habitable basement level on shallow foundations. In section, the houses are shown to have front staircases with a partition against the centre of the front wall (hence the blank windows) and the ground floor rooms accessible via a half landing.⁴⁰

The council obviously understood the architectural importance of the square and, immediately after World War II, the houses were surveyed by the borough architect 'for the purpose of ascertaining whether the whole square should be included in the Historic Records file and whether any photographs should be taken'.⁴¹ In his view, which contrasts dramatically with the language of the succeeding years: 'Taken on the whole the buildings in the square are in good order excepting for want of attention due to the war.' This was followed by a letter to the LCC recommending reuse and stating that the buildings were 'worthy of preservation on architectural grounds ...in no case do they appear to be beyond restoration.'

An observation from the Historic Records Section in 1949 recommended that Nos. 33-35 'should be carefully restored to their former appearance' and work appears to have been carried out on these and other houses in the square. Certainly, a comparison of photographs taken in 1945 with those of the late 1950s and early '60s show that many of the buildings have been carefully rehabilitated. (*fig. 69*)

From 1949 onwards the planning file for the square makes depressing reading. Criticism from the Architects Department at

the Ministry of Works about the poor quality of restoration work is followed by the issuing of a number of Dangerous Structures notices. Then in March 1959 comes a chilling memo from the LCC Valuer that 17 Grade II and 12 Grade III buildings in the square have been declared a 'SLUM'. This change in the way the buildings were perceived must be seen against a background of political change and pressure for removal of the older London neighbourhoods in favour of modern, planned estates. The LCC had by this point drawn up a plan for redeveloping the entire area, and a further memo states that the square and its surrounding streets, a total of nearly 4 acres, was now earmarked for destruction.⁴² The cost of purchase was estimated at £93,000 and a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) was set in motion. The development was calculated to involve the rehousing of 76 families. The last hurdle, the London Squares Preservation Act (1931) was cleared by assurances that a new, and larger 'square' within the planned housing development would replace that which was to be lost.

On 12th April 1961 a Public Enquiry was held to decide the fate of the listed buildings of Swedenborg Square. There were a number of objections, mainly from owners unhappy with the assessment of their properties as 'unfit for habitation', and the low compensation that would result. The Minister was not swayed, finding that the listed buildings in the square 'should remain in the Order [CPO], as they were past preserving and had long since lost any charm they might have had, owing to decay and neglect'.⁴³ And then the death blow:

The Minister has given careful consideration to all the arguments put forward, both by the objectors and the council. He accepts the views and recommendations of the Inspector, and notes with regret that the listed buildings were not capable of preservation.

Within a decade Swedenborg Square had disappeared completely beneath the Swedenborg Gardens and St. Georges Housing Estate. The old square was simply erased from history. At Wellclose Square, the houses went down but street pattern was retained, creating a strange non-place. Forty

41. GLC/AR/HB/02/0291 (MLA). Memo in statutory planning file, 4 June 1945.

42. GLC/MA/SC/3/902. Concurrent report by the Comptroller of the Council, 8 October 1958.

43. Letter from Clerk to the Minister of Housing (12.4.61) GLC/MA/SC/3/902.

40. National Monuments Record Archives LCC/GLC MD96/01763.



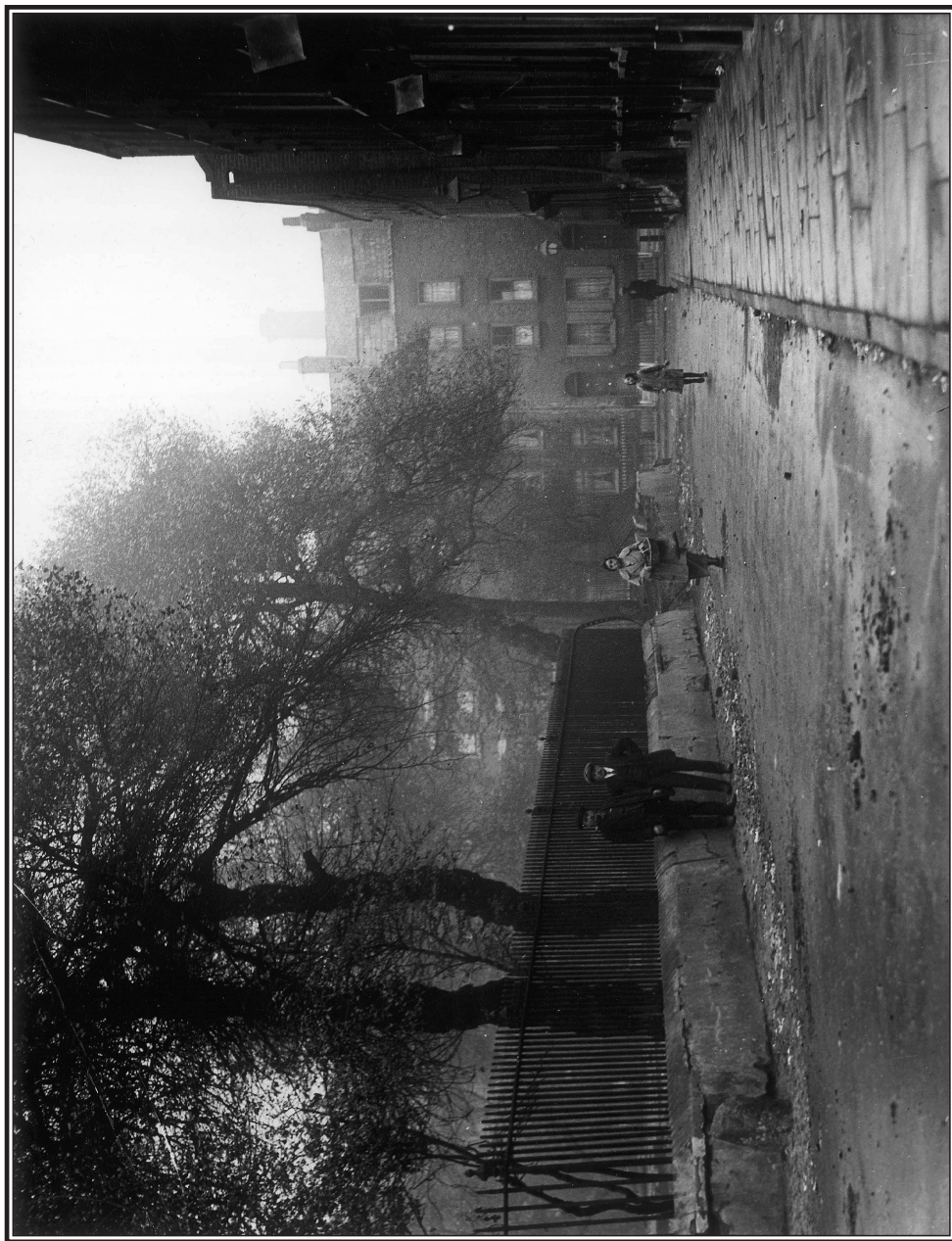
67. Swedenborg Square (formerly Princes Square), children's playground on site of Swedish Church, 1961
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



68. Swedenborg Square (formerly Princes Square), west side, 1945
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



69. Swedenborg Square (formerly Princes Square), west side, 1961, showing rehabilitated houses
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)



70. Swedenborg Square (formerly Princes Square), south side looking east, 1921
(COURTESY CITY OF LONDON, LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES)

years on, the south side of the square remains empty and, on the site of the Old Court House, is a sad wasteland stretching down to the busy Highway beyond.

Visiting in 1966, with the squares on their last legs, the historian and journalist Ian Nairn, who wrote so perceptively about the 'soft-spoken this-is-good-for-you castration of the East End',⁴⁴ summed up the terrible plight of these two architectural jewels:

Embedded in it [Cable Street] are the hopeless fragments of two once splendid squares, Wellclose and Swedenborg, built for the shipmasters of Wapping when London began to move east. Those who could care about the buildings don't care about the people, those who care about the people regard the decrepit buildings rather as John Knox regarded women: unforgivable blindness. Nobody cares enough, and the whole place will soon be a memory. (*fig. 70*)

F I N I S

44. Ian Nairn, *Nairn's London* (London, 1966), p.161. He continues: 'All the raucous, homely places go and are replaced by well-designed estates which would fit a New Town but are hopelessly out of place here. This is a hive of individualists, and the last place to be subjected to the kind of large-scale planning.'