



FOUR REDISCOVERED SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY VIEWS OF LONDON PARKS
BY MICHEL VAN OVERBEEK
By Jonathan Yarker

One of the immediate impacts of the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was an influx of tourists from the Continent. Although travel was by no means forbidden during the interregnum, the prospect of patronage from Charles II and his new court prompted the arrival of a number of painters in England during the 1660s. One little known visitor was the Dutch artist Michel van Overbeek who made a small number of pen and ink studies of his journey from Dover to London. The purpose of this note is to re-introduce four of these views, which were in the collection of the renowned scholar and connoisseur the Rev. Dr Henry Wellesley (1794-1866), nephew of the first Duke of Wellington, and have recently appeared on the art market. The sheets depict two views of Hyde Park and two of St James's Park, offering a rare glimpse of the Royal parks shortly before the campaigns of formal planting would transform them from Tudor hunting grounds into public pleasure gardens.

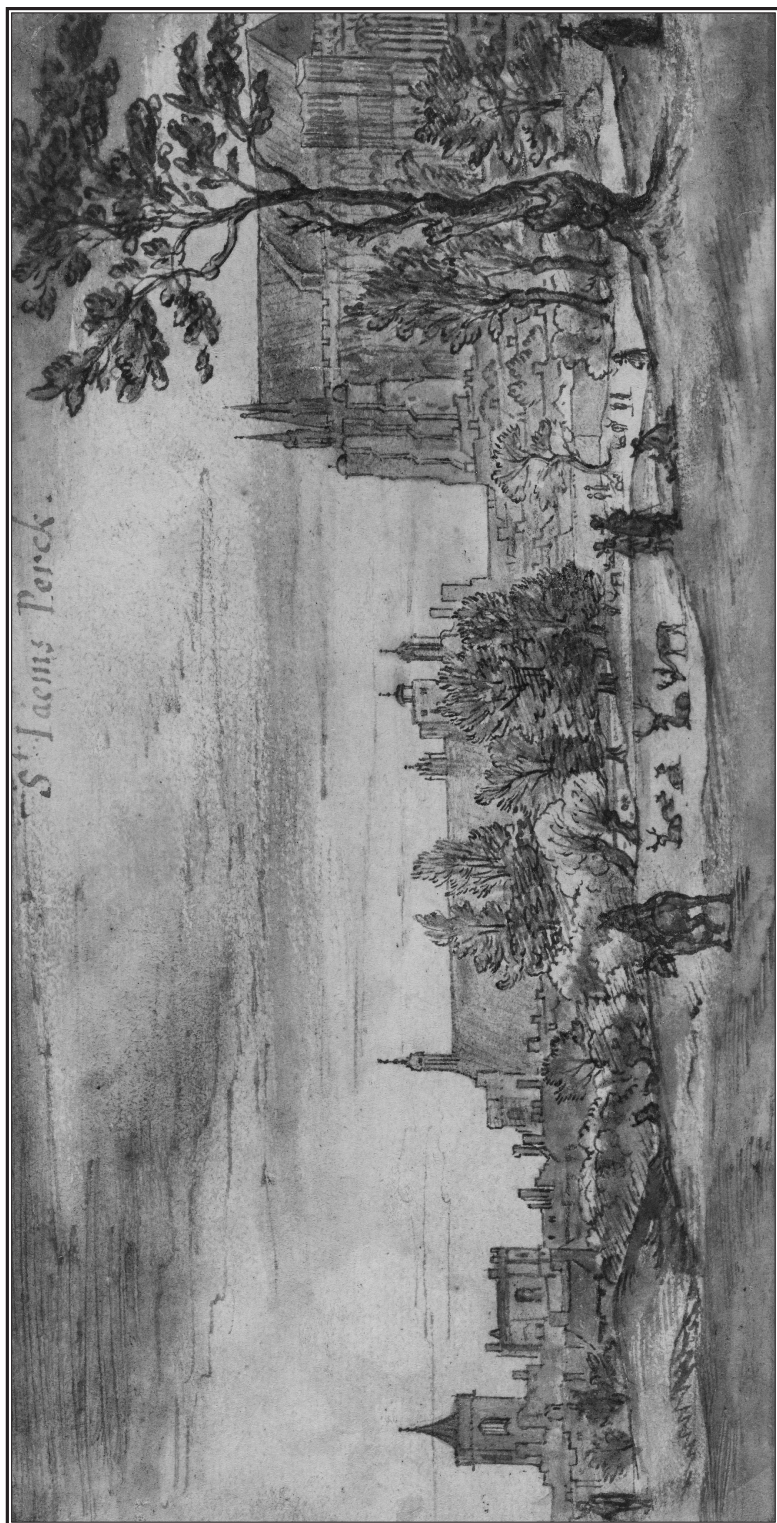
Michel van Overbeek was a Dutch painter and dealer, the nephew of the topographical draughtsman Bonaventure van Overbeek. Overbeek senior was born and died in Amsterdam, but was most celebrated for his publication of Roman ruins, *Les restes de l'ancienne Rome*, which was completed in 1709. Dedicated to Queen Anne, the book was, according to Arnold Houbraken, published posthumously by Michel van Overbeek. Like his uncle, Michel seems to have travelled extensively in France and Italy, and made what appears to be a brief stay in England from

about 1663 until 1666. Both Christopher White and Celina Fox have concluded that he was in London by 1663 as a distant view from Greenwich (Royal Collection, Windsor Castle) shows the tower of Old St Paul's covered with scaffolding, which was in place from August 1663 until the church was destroyed by fire on 4TH September 1666. However in Overbeek's *London* view in the collection of the Louvre, the tower is uncovered, which suggests either that the artist was already in London by August 1663 or that he transcribed the details of the tower from another source. He seems to have remained an established figure in the art world in the Netherlands, and is recorded testifying to the suitability of the Dutch merchant, Jan van Beuningen to appraise a collection of paintings in 1703.¹

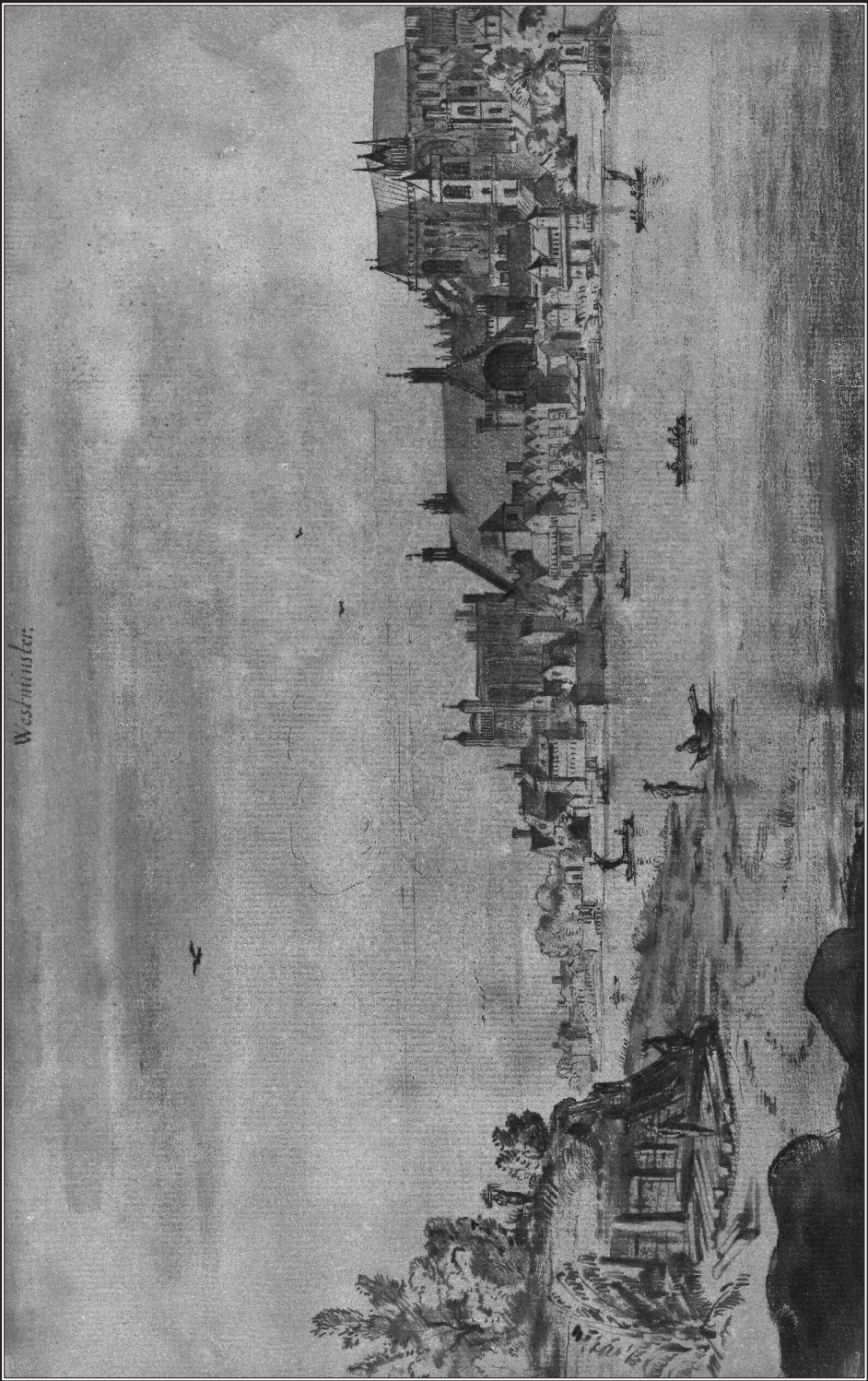
The work from Overbeek's English tour precisely accords with the contemporary convention of topographical travel views, such as those prepared by the Bohemian etcher, Wenceslaus Hollar in the 1640s.² The same-size, oblong, ink drawings, which probably come from a single sketchbook, are prominently titled, suggesting Overbeek had some kind of publication in mind. It would seem from the internal evidence of the extant British drawings that he landed at Dover, probably from France, and travelled up to London. Amongst the five English views by Overbeek in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (formerly in the collection of Sir Bruce Ingram), is a drawing of Dover Castle as well as a view on the Medway. Once in

1. See K. Jonckheere, *The Auction of King William's Paintings 1713: Elite International Art Trade at the End of the Dutch Golden Age* (Amsterdam, 2008), p.54-5.

2. For Hollar's illustrations to Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel's tour of 1636, see A. Griffiths and G. Kesnerová, *Wenceslaus Hollar Prints and Drawings*, exh. cat. (London, British Museum, 1983), p.21.



7. Michel van Overbeek, *St Jaens Perck* c.1663-66, pen, ink and wash
(COURTESY LOWELL LIBSON LTD)



1. Michel van Overbeek, *View of the Palace of Westminster and the Abbey seen from across the River Thames*
c.1663-66, pen, ink and wash on brown prepared paper
(© TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM)

London, he completed a number of conventional views of the city and its environs, including a fine drawing of the Palace of Westminster from the Thames now in the British Museum (*fig. 1*), a prospect entitled 'About Greenwich' (Fitzwilliam Museum) and two further views of Westminster (Westminster Public Library). Overbeek seems to have travelled to St Albans, a view of which survives in the British Library, as well as a view of Kingston showing the Copper-mills at Kingston (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven). The largest concentration of studies seems to have been of London's parks; two studies of Hyde Park are in the Fitzwilliam Museum and a further drawing was recorded in the Robiano sale of 1926.

Overbeek's focus on the parks to the west of London perhaps reflects the re-orientation in the life of the nation away from Parliament and the City following the Commonwealth, back to the King, aristocracy and court, who were based at St James's Palace. Recreation became a conspicuous element of metropolitan life, and London's parks were used not only for relaxation but, as documents such as the diary of Samuel Pepys reveal, forums for political lobbying and intrigue.

Hyde Park had been acquired by Henry VIII in 1536 from the monks of Westminster Abbey; in Overbeek's views, the inclusion of herds of deer suggest its initial use as a hunting ground (*figs. 2 & 3*). In common with other Royal parks, it was opened to a limited public by Charles I in 1637 and then sold in three lots to private buyers during the Commonwealth. At the Restoration, it reverted to the Crown and rapidly became a fashionable public space on the western limit of London. In March 1668 Pepys noted:

...to Hyde Park, the first time we were there this year, or ever in our own coach, where with mighty pride rode up and down, and many coaches there; and I thought our horses and coach as pretty as any there, and observed so to be by others.³

In one of the drawings, which shows an extensive landscape looking north from the park, a coach can be seen followed by several fashionably dressed riders. Earlier in the

century a ride had been created called 'the ring'. A late seventeenth-century writer observed that:

here the people of fashion take the diversion of The Ring. In a pretty high place, which lies very open, they have surrounded a circumference of two or three hundred paces diameter with a sorry kind of balustrade, or rather with postes placed upon stakes but three feet from the ground; and the coaches drive round this. When they have turned for some time round one way they face about and turn t'other: so rowls the world!⁴

Overbeek's other surviving views of Hyde Park, in the Fitzwilliam Museum, underscore its renewed importance as a recreational space on the edge of the metropolis (*figs. 4 & 5*).

St James's Park had been acquired from Eton College by Henry VIII in 1532; initially an area of marshland, traversed by the Tyburn, it lay to the west of York Palace, which had belonged to Cardinal Wolsey. James I had the land drained at the beginning of the seventeenth century and turned into a park where he kept exotic animals, including camels, crocodiles and an elephant, as well as aviaries of exotic birds (remembered today in the name Birdcage Walk). In 1611 Robert Carr was created Viscount Rochester and appointed Keeper of the Palace of Westminster, part of his duty being to 'keep and preserve wild beasts and fowl in St James's Park'.⁵ During the Commonwealth the animals were dispersed and far from becoming more accessible, the Park was locked at night, the land was divided into several lots and sold, leaving it 'little more than a grass park with a few trees irregularly planted, and a number of little ponds'.⁶

Overbeek's views show the park following its restitution to the crown, but before it was transformed by Charles II with more formal planting by the French landscaper André Mollet. This included the creation of the large canal and avenues of trees, the most famous being designed for the King's favourite

4. R. Dodsley, *London and Its Environs Described* (London, 1761), III, p.189.

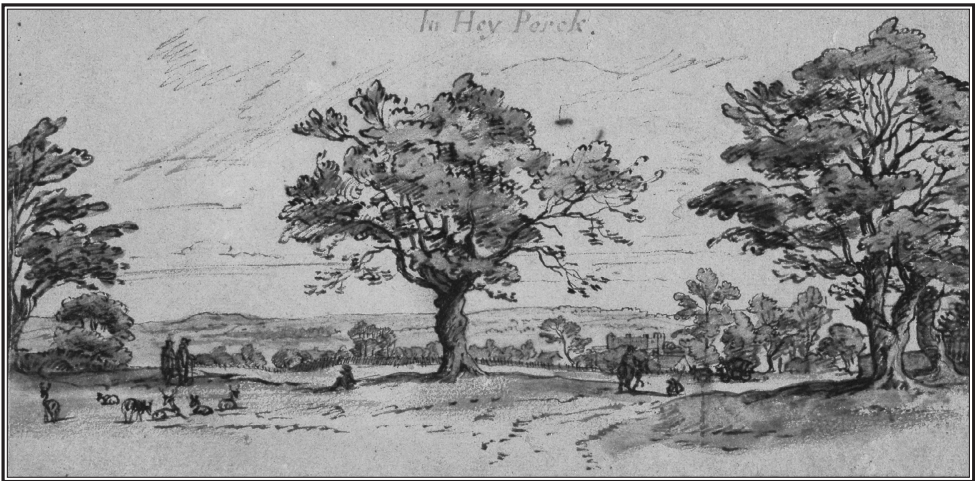
5. H. Wheatley and P. Cunningham, *London Past and Present* (London, 1891), III, p.293-4.

6. W. Pritchard, *Outward Appearances; The Female Exterior in Restoration London* (London, 2008), p.115.

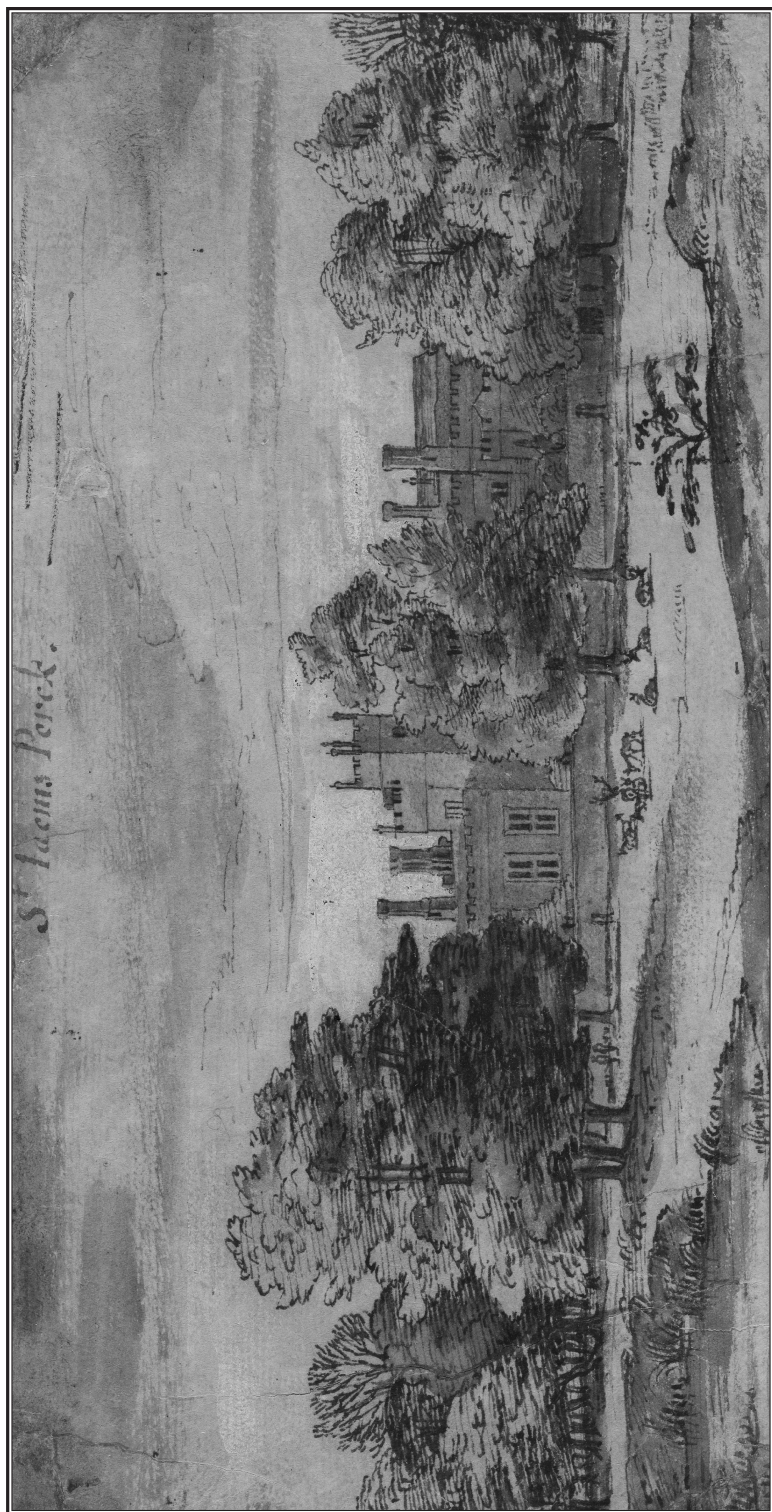
3. Samuel Pepys, 18 March, 1669. Ed. R. Latham, *The Shorter Pepys* (Berkeley, 1985), p.999.



2. Michel van Overbeek, *In Hey Perck*, c.1663-66, pen, ink and wash
(COURTESY LOWELL LIBSON LTD)



- 4. Michel van Overbeek *A view in Hyde Park, London*, pen, ink and wash on tinted paper
(© THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE)
- 5. Michel van Overbeek *A view in Hyde Park, London*, pen, ink and wash on tinted paper
(© THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE)



6. Michel van Overbeek, *St Iaems Perck* c.1663-66, pen, ink and wash
(COURTESY LOWELL LIBSON LTD)

courtly game, a kind of boules-*cum*-croquet named pell mell. Following these alterations, St James's Park became indelibly associated with two conflicting sides of Restoration culture, represented by two great poetic works. The first, Edmund Waller's poem *On St. James's Park as Lately Improved by His Majesty* of 1661, which depicted the park as a cultivated idyll and location of genteel courtship. The second, John Wilmot, 2ND Earl of Rochester's *A Ramble in St James's Park* of about 1673, exposed the park's status as a locus for imagined and actual sexual congress. The narrator leaves his companions in the Bear Tavern and goes to St James's to 'relieve' his drunkenness with lechery. Rochester offers a catalogue of the types to be found in the Park: 'Great Ladies, Chamber Mayds, and Drudges...Divines, Great Lords, and Taylors Prentices, Poets, Pimps...doe here arrive, And here promiscuously swive.'

Overbeek's views, both labelled 'St Iaems Perck', show the roofline of St James's Palace from the south and Westminster Abbey, Westminster Hall and St Margaret's apparently from the north (figs. 6 & 7). The latter view is not topographically accurate and raises questions of the purpose of these drawings and the circumstances of their execution. The skyline clearly shows the massive bulk of Westminster Abbey on the right, the long, low roof of Westminster Hall to the left and, framing the composition on the far left, the spire of St Margaret's Westminster, an incompatible combination. Furthermore the title, 'St Iaems Perck', is misleading. St James's Park is somewhat to the north of the viewpoint of this scene and Overbeek was more likely to have been standing in Tothill Fields, although it would never have been possible to have seen this precise combination of buildings from any angle. If they were executed in preparation for engravings, this topographical inaccuracy seems inexplicable. It is more likely, therefore, that they formed a private record of Overbeek's trip, which may have been linked to his activities as a dealer in art rather than his practice as a painter. A merchant's record of his journey to London rather than an artistic proposition in their own right.

PUBLIC PLEASURE GARDENS IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND: SPRING GARDENS IN WESTMINSTER AND PARIS GARDEN IN SOUTHWARK

By Paula Henderson

Up to the end of the sixteenth century the heavily built-up area of the City of London was surrounded by open land, used by Londoners for a wide variety of purposes. Many of these activities are shown in detail in the Copperplate map of c.1555, particularly the sheet preserved at the Museum of London showing the area north of Bishopsgate (fig. 8). In addition to mundane tasks, such as drying laundry, driving pigs to market and grazing cattle, men are practicing archery and musketry, considered imperative for honing military skills. Men, women and children, some with little pet dogs, are strolling along lanes and through the fields. There are no people shown inside the walls of London, so the map-maker was clearly emphasizing the amenities of London's extramural open lands. However, all of this was going to change, and by the end of the century London was rapidly expanding outward over that land, something that was much lamented by John Stow in his *Survey of London*, first published in 1598:

This Hogge Lane stretcheth North toward Saint Marie Spittle ... and within these fortie yeares, had on both sides fayre hedgerowes of Elme trees, with Bridges and easie stiles to passe over into the pleasant fieldes ... for Citizens therein to walke, shoote, and otherwise to recreate and refresh their dulled spirites in the sweete and wholesome ayre, which is now within few yeares made a continuall building throughout¹

Some public and semi-public green spaces would remain within the built-up area: a few large fields (Moorfields and Lincoln's Inn Fields), churchyards, the gardens of the Livery Companies and of the Inns of Court. The latter would be increasingly inaccessible because of security and a growing desire for

1. C. L. Kingsford, ed., *A Survey of London by John Stow, reprinted from the text of 1603* (Oxford, 1908), 1, p.127.



3. Michel van Overbeek, *In Hey Perck*, c.1663-66, pen, ink and wash
(COURTESY LOWELL LIBSON LTD)