

SOME EARLY VIEWS OF CONNAUGHT SQUARE:
TYBURNIA'S FIRST SQUARE
By Todd Longstaffe-Gowan

Beresford Chancellor affirms in *The History of the Squares of London* (1907) that Connaught Square has 'perhaps, an interest, certainly a lugubrious one, not shared by the other squares of this district [north of Hyde Park], for on its site formerly stood Tyburn Tree and its accessories; indeed the actual gallows is said to have been erected on the very spot where No.49 Connaught Square once was'.¹

Although the latter assertion is now disputed, the square's association with the infamous gallows had in Chancellor's estimation been 'sufficient to give Connaught Square the right to be considered the most characteristic of all those [squares] in the district known for so long as Tyburnia'.²

When the square was begun in 1821 it was the first of a constellation of private communal gardens to emerge on the Tyburn Estate, which lay in the rural parish of Paddington immediately to the west of Marble Arch; it was a vanguard of what William Thackeray later dubbed a 'rush of civilisation'.³ Thackeray, like Chancellor after him, marvelled that 'polite Tyburnia...the most respectable district in the habitable globe!', that 'vast and modern city – clean, airy, painted drab, populous with nursery-maids and children, the abodes of wealth and comfort', was raised on ground that had erstwhile been sacred to the hangman'.⁴ He exclaimed:

how the times have changed!...What armies of gentlemen with umbrellas march to banks, and chambers, and counting-houses! What regiments of nurserymaids and pretty infantry; what peaceful processions of policemen, what light broughams and what gay carriages, what swarms of busy apprentices and artificers, riding on omnibus-roofs, pass daily and hourly!⁵

The redevelopment of the Tyburn Estate was precipitated by the passing of an Act of Parliament in 1795, which authorised the Grand Junction Canal Company to cut the Paddington Canal, and the Bishop of London and trustees for his lessees, to build on what later became known as the *Paddington Estate*.⁶ The Bishop entrusted the layout of his 400-acre estate to the surveyor and architect Samuel Pepys Cockerell, who had earlier made his name planning Mecklenburg and Brunswick Squares for the Foundling Estate in Bloomsbury.

Cockerell's original master plan evolved from about 1804 and made 'lavish use of space'.⁷ His grandiose scheme did not, however, include Connaught Square: it appears to have been an afterthought, and it was Cockerell's successor, the surveyor George Gutch, who made generous provision for gardens and enclosures filled with trees and shrubs and was responsible for introducing most of the Tyburnian squares, including Oxford, Cambridge, Hyde Park, Gloucester, Norfolk, Talbot, and Sussex Squares.⁸ The illustrious names given to these squares were presumably calculated to confer distinction on the newly-built district. There was, however, good cause to name the first one in honour of Prince William Frederick, Duke of Connaught (1776-1834): he was among the earliest and grandest inhabitants of Tyburnia, taking No.1 Connaught Place, the first house facing Hyde Park.⁹

The Square, like the Duke himself, was intended to help 'give identity and character'

6. *Grand Junction Canal (No. 2) Act* (35 Geo. 3. c.43). The canal opened for traffic in June 1801, and its arrival facilitated the transport of industrial goods from the Midlands to the very edge of London.

7. Gordon Toplis, 'Urban Classicism in Decline: The History of Tyburnia – I', *Country Life*, 22 November 1973, p.1526; and Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London* (1880), p.186; T. F. T. Baker, Diane K. Bolton, Patricia E. C. Croot, 'Paddington: Tyburnia', in *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 9, Hampstead, Paddington*, ed. C.R. Elrington (1989), p.192.

8. Baker, Bolton, & Croot, 'Paddington: Tyburnia', in *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 9, Hampstead, Paddington*, op.cit., pp.192-3.

9. The Duke of Connaught was the only son of William Henry, first Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh, and nephew and son-in-law to George III.

1. Beresford Chancellor, *The History of the Squares of London* (1907), p.316.

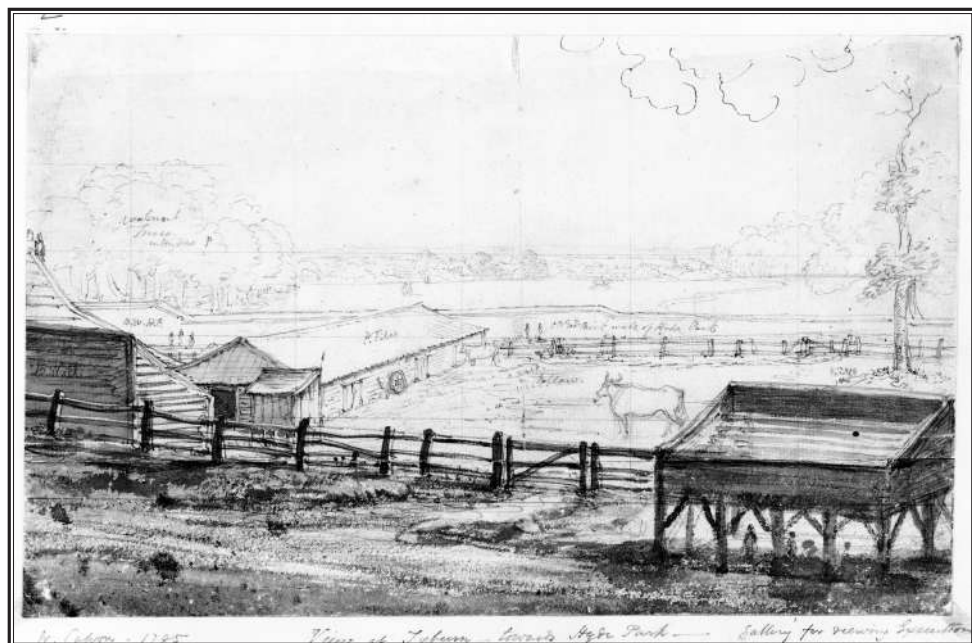
2. Chancellor, op.cit., pp.316-17. The name Tyburnia is derived from the Tyburn Brook or Tybourne which was a tributary of the River Westbourne. It ran from the vicinity of Marble Arch to the Serpentine in Hyde Park.

3. W.M. Thackeray, *Thackeray's Lectures: The English Humorists. The Four Georges*. (1879 ed.; first published in 1853), p.194.

4. Thackeray, *Thackeray's Lectures* (1879), op.cit., p.193.

5. Thackeray, *Thackeray's Lectures* (1879), op.cit., p.194.

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74. William Capon, *Old cottages on the site of Connaught Square*, pen and ink with grey wash, 1803
(COURTESY BRITISH MUSEUM)

75. William Capon, *Looking south over Tyburn Field to Hyde Park*, graphite with wash, 1785
(COURTESY BRITISH MUSEUM)

to the south-east corner of the estate.¹⁰ It was not, however, the only material enhancement to be made to the new suburb in the early 1820s: a lodge and iron gates were erected at the south end of Lower Frederick Street (later Stanhope Place), which linked the square to the Uxbridge Road (now Bayswater Road) and Hyde Park.

The square first appears on J. Butler, Junior's *Plan of the Parish of Paddington in the County of Middlesex* (surveyed in 1824), where it is labelled 'Frederick Square' (fig. 72). It is the sole communal garden to be shown on the Bishop's estate south of Praed Street. Only in 1828, when Butler's Plan was updated by Gutch, is the square given its present name, and does the estate's street pattern begin to take its present shape (fig. 73).

Chancellor later observed that 'notwithstanding their number, and the varied character of the houses forming them, it may be said that none of these [Tyburnian] squares have any particular history, and the residence of interesting people can only be traced to a comparatively few of them'. These were, he continued, squares that traced their 'lineage' from the days of William IV that could 'boast of a large size, both in superficial area and in the houses forming part of them'.¹¹ Alfred Cox was less generous in his appraisal of the new district, opining in *The Landlord's and Tenant's Guide* (1853) that its 'fine squares, spacious streets, and lofty houses, have a striking appearance; but the uninterrupted uniformity of "compo" decoration of the flimsiest kind fatigues the eye, and will not bear critical examination'.¹²

Although the general layout of the estate was agreed by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, approved building was 'slow to start'.¹³ The causes of this delay were threefold: a scarcity of capital during the war

years; drainage problems; and 'a policy of subleasing small amounts to mostly local builders, in order to ensure a high standard of housing'.¹⁴ One of the consequences of these combined factors was 'a rapid growth of labourers' shacks', most of which were built on small plots with short leases. William Capon's watercolour view of 1803 (fig. 74) depicts a ramshackle tenement that occupied the site of Connaught Square before the first terraced houses were thrown up; and in an earlier view, the same artist portrays some agricultural buildings and a 'Gallery for viewing Executions' erected 'for the convenience of the curious' that lay south of the square before Tyburn Field was redeveloped.¹⁵ (fig. 75)

Among the most intriguing early views of Connaught Square are three watercolour sketches by Agoſtino Aglio from c.1828 that depict it in its final stages of construction.¹⁶ (figs. 76, 77 & 79) Agoſtino Maria Aglio (1777–1857) was a versatile Cremonese decorative painter and lithographer. He trained in Milan at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, and in 1803 travelled to England in the company of the architect, classical scholar and archaeologist William Wilkins, to assist him with the illustrations for his *Antiquities of Magna Graecia* (1807). From 1807 Aglio was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy, specialising in landscapes; he later published several books on scenic and architectural subjects, and executed illusionistic and fanciful murals for a variety of theatres and country houses up and down the country (now mostly destroyed).¹⁷ Aglio's most significant legacy is, however, his contribution of hundreds of hand-painted lithographs to Viscount

14. Baker, Bolton, & Croot, 'Paddington' (1989) *op.cit.*, p.182. The wars include the French Revolutionary Wars, the Second Anglo-Maratha War, the Napoleonic Wars, the War of 1812, and the Hundred Days War.

15. Annotation on the bottom right of Capon's drawing (British Museum no. 1880,1113.4583); and 'un amphithéâtre bâti près du gibet pour la commodité des curieux'. César-François de Saussure, *Lettres et Voyage de Monsr César de Saussure en Allemagne, en Hollande et en Angleterre, 1725–1729* (1903), p.133.

16. There is at least one other known view by Aglio of the environs of the square dated 1833. The drawing was formerly with Abbot & Holder in 1982. The present whereabouts of this drawing is unknown.

17. Derek Linstrum, 'Last of the Classical Decorators: Agostino Aglio', *Country Life*, 25 August 1966, pp.444–5; Ralph Hyde, 'Forsaken Fresco: Moorfields Panorama', *Country Life*, 3 November 1988, pp.232–3.

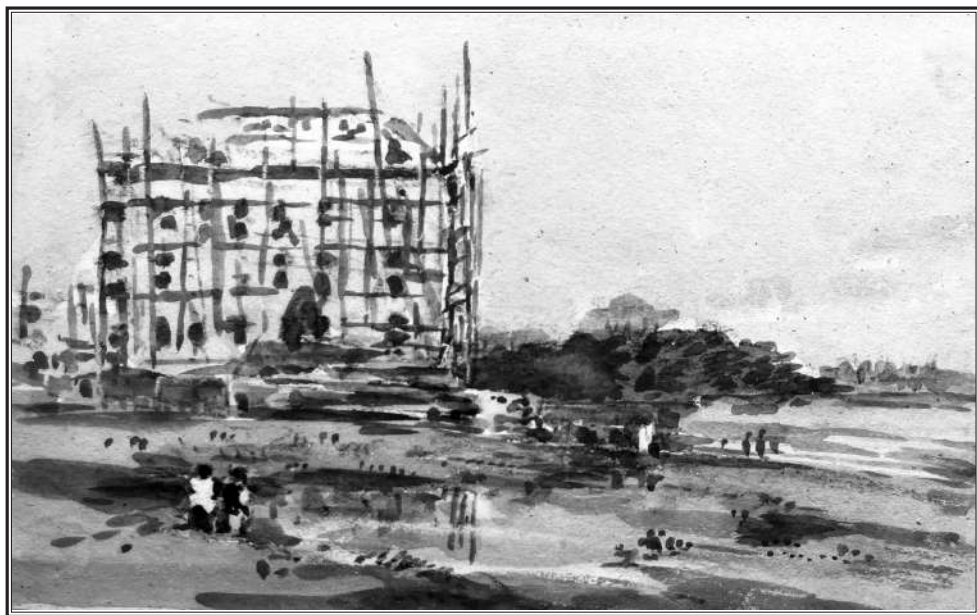
10. Gordon Toplis, 'Urban Classicism in Decline: The History of Tyburnia – I', *op.cit.*, p.1526. The field name is recorded on *A Map of all the Land in Paddington in the County of Middlesex belonging to S[ir] John Frederick Bart.* (1742).

11. Beresford Chancellor, *The History of the Squares of London* (1907), *op.cit.*, p.316.

12. Alfred Cox, *The Landlord's and Tenant's Guide: A Compendium of Information upon the Procuring, Occupying, and Disposing of Estates and Houses*, (1853), p.212.

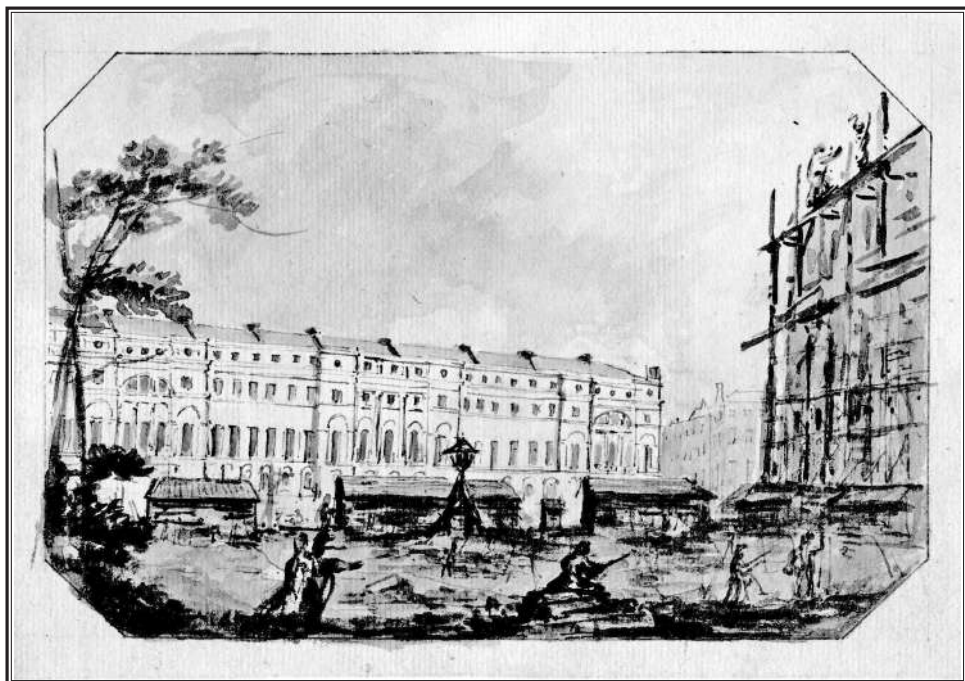
13. Baker, Bolton, & Croot, 'Paddington' (1989), *op.cit.*, p.182.

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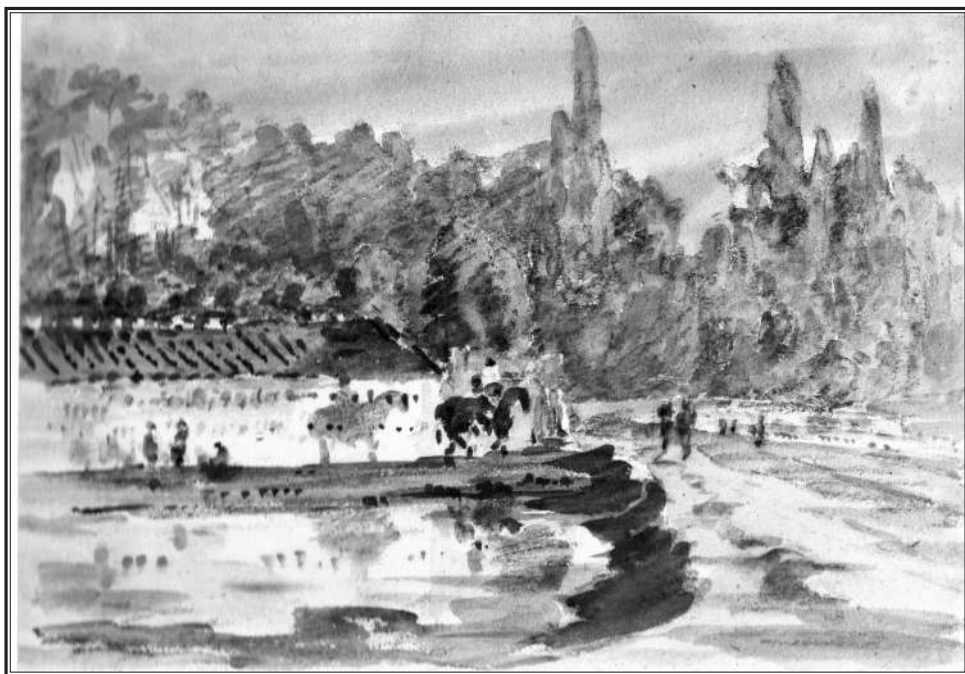


76. Agostino Maria Aglio, *Connaught Square*, watercolour, c.1818
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

77. Agostino Maria Aglio, *Connaught Square with large reflective puddle in the foreground*, watercolour, c.1818
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)



78. Edward Dayes, *Fitzroy Square under construction*, pencil and ink with watercolour wash, c.1793
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)



79. Agostino Maria Aglio, *Connaught Square with two figures and puddle in foreground*, watercolour, c.1818
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

Kingsborough's monumental *Antiquities of Mexico, Comprising Facsimiles of Ancient Mexican Paintings and Hieroglyphics* (1830-48).

It is not known why the artist chose to document the building of the square. Views of London squares in the process of development are rare.¹⁸ Perhaps like many contemporary topographical painters, Aglio was attracted by the rural scenery of Hyde Park? He is known to have produced 'slight but alluring drawings of donkeys and cows' in the park.¹⁹ It is, however, more likely that he took an interest in the new development because for several years he lived in a newly-completed square a few miles away in Kensington. Aglio resided in Edwardes Square between 1814 and 1820 and had been responsible for the ingenious design of its garden enclosure. John Loudon reports in his *Encyclopædia of Gardening* (1822) that the 'eminent landscape painter' laid out the square in 1819 'in groups and winding walks, in a manner different from most other squares'.²⁰

Aglio was a 'skilful watercolourist', and the liveliness of his views of Connaught Square suggests that they were *plein air* sketches.²¹ They were painted hastily in watercolour, without underdrawing, and capture with striking immediacy the everyday character of a typical London building site.²² In *figure 76*, labourers toil behind guard rails on the topmost platform of a towering scaffold; ladders lean against it, and piles of bricks are stacked at its base. A large puddle in the foreground mirrors part of the building carcass. *Figure 77* also depicts the buildings forming the square, though possibly from a slightly different angle. Here, too, the foreground is dominated by a large reflective pool of water, and the building site resembles the environs of Fitzroy Square as they were depicted in c.1793 by the topographical painter

and engraver Edward Dayes (*fig. 78*).

Figure 79 is the most dramatic of the three views; this south-facing view depicts the building site in the late afternoon, its baldness contrasts sharply with the luxuriance of the tall trees of Hyde Park in the background. The horse and rider – deftly portrayed by a few artful splodges of paint – cast prominent shadows on the long pale wall of the shed in the middle ground, and both are reflected in the immense pool of standing water in the foreground that attests to the poor drainage of the site.

Aglio's views not only supply us with an insight into the development of the first square in what was referred to facetiously in 1865 as *Tyburnia Felix*, *Tyburnia Deserta* or *Tyburnia Snobbica*:²³ they also serve to remind us of the impact of what a contributor to the *Ragged School Union Magazine* (1849) described as the 'advance of the wealthy' on the 'masses of poor' who were 'driven...to less favoured and more distant localities': 'cottages and huts' in 'by-gone years...inhabited by the lowest orders' were displaced by 'squares and mansions', and sites upon which 'dog-fights, bull-baits, and pugilistic contests took place' were now occupied by 'stately mansions overlooking Hyde Park'.²⁴ Latterly this 'whirlwind of squares, crescents, villas, detached and semi-detached' would also spread further westwards to Notting Hill and the Norland Estate, and was compared variously to 'another destruction of Pompeii, a flood of lava – concrete' which overwhelmed a 'sweet valley by the banks of the Bayswater river [brook]', and to the 'ponderous but certain progress of the mountain glacier, forcing before it all the stony and earthy particles of the district'.²⁵

18. Among the best is Edward Dayes' drawing depicting Fitzroy Square under construction, c.1793. See Longstaffe-Gowan, *The London Square* (2012), p.70.

19. 'Art Bargain Hunting', *The Field*, 1 December 1984, p.84.

20. John Loudon, *An Encyclopædia of Gardening* (1822), p.1189.

21. <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/agostino-aglio-italian-1777-1857-on-the-road-betw-142-c-1de40e9966>; 'Agostino Aglio' in *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*.

22. It appears that there was once a 'group of London scenes' by the artist (possibly contained in an album), and that one of these views depicted the environs of Connaught Square ('Near Connaught Square', 1833). This album was last seen in 1982.

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23. James Camden Hotten, *The Slang Dictionary: or, the Vulgar Words, Street Phrases, and 'Fast' Expressions of High and Low Society* (1865), p.264.

24. 'The Pioneers of London', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, January - December 1853, p.403; and 'A Brief History of the Kensal New Town Ragged Schools', *The Ragged School Union Magazine*, vol. 13, 1849, p.41.

25. 'The Pioneers of London', *op.cit.*, pp.161-2.