



ECCLESTON SQUARE GARDEN LIMITED

HISTORY OF THE GARDEN



Before the residential development of Pimlico, in the early 19th century, the area was cultivated as a market garden, known to produce as many as four crops on the same soil every year. Two factors helped this amazing productivity: firstly, the land was part of the original Thames flood plain and the water table was normally only a few inches below the surface; and secondly, in the period before the advent of the car, horse manure was in plentiful supply and the land was easily re-fertilized between each crop.

The actual site of Eccleston Square was next to the original 'fresh water' reservoir that served the west side of the expanding city of London. The site of the original reservoir is now Victoria Station, which was opened in 1860. The 'fresh' water was run in from the river after the salt water tide had retreated, the sluices were then opened and the rising tide pushed the river water into the reservoir. On entry into the system the water was run into a series of small canals and allowed to settle. Between these small canals there were banks on which willow shoots, 'withes', were grown. The withes were used to make round baskets in which the vegetable produce, from the adjacent market gardens, was transported. It was on the original site of the 'withes' beds that Eccleston Square was eventually built.

The whole of Pimlico was developed by Thomas Cubitt (1788-1855) under a leasing system granted by the Grosvenor family on Lady Day, 1828. In the letter of agreement Cubitt undertook to build a series of garden squares '...to let a little of the country-side into the town'. It seems that industrial relations were no different back then, for as soon as notice was served on the nurserymen who had been farming the area, they started to raise objections to the plans, and barricades were built on the access tracks to keep Cubitt's men out, but, eventually, alternative land was found for them in Lincolnshire and, with the development of the railways, vegetables could be transported from this greater distance, to London.

The first buildings in this gigantic Pimlico development scheme were completed in 1832; they were 1-3 Eccleston Square. This was not an auspicious completion moment as it coincided with a slump in housing demand, so they stood empty for a while and caused the development of the total project to slow down for a few years. The Square was eventually completed about 1850.

We have no precise date for the actual laying out of the garden but it is generally assumed that it would have been built to coincide with the completion of the first houses. Ever since the garden was first opened, in about 1832, it was constituted to be run by a committee of residents, although the freehold of the land was owned by the Grosvenor family, until it was sold off in 1953. In due course, the garden was acquired by a property company who wanted to dig the whole thing up and put a car park underneath it. The Garden Committee and the residents, saw off this threat and some years later were able to buy the freehold of the land. The Square is now owned and held in trust for the use of the residents, as a garden, in perpetuity, which seems right and fitting as Eccleston Square was designed from the start as a community garden for the residents of the surrounding houses, as the houses have no back-gardens.

One interesting by-product of Cubitt's development of Pimlico is the superb soil that we have in Eccleston Square. Although this is possibly partly because of all the nurserymen's activity, the level of the land is some six feet above the original ground level, possibly soil was imported. At the time that Cubitt was working on the Pimlico project he was also building docks on the south side of the river. It would have been easy for him to import the mud from the dock excavation by barge, using the canal off the Thames, to bring the soil right up to Eccleston Square.

On 16th October 1987 the Square was severely hit by the Great Storm, a tornado with estimated wind speeds of up to 90-100 miles an hour. Overnight, seventeen trees came down including seven of the original, 150-year-old London planes and large sections of the railings were destroyed. The roads on both sides of the Square were completely blocked by fallen trees and debris. In the clearing-up process 160 tons of wood had to be craned out of the site. The large earth/tree moving equipment added to the damage in the garden and eventually all the lawns, large sections of the hoggin paths and the tennis court had to be re-laid. The Garden Committee called an EGM, which was attended by more than 100 residents, and a special, one-off garden rate was unanimously agreed to raise the funds needed to restore the garden.

Since that time, the Garden Committee has always maintained a substantial capital reserve against any further natural disasters.

Roger Phillips has been managing the garden since 1981. He is responsible for making sure that the soil quality was improved and is continually maintained at the highest level. Having improved the soil he has concentrated on replanting and experimenting with interesting and special plants, plants that can thrive in our very special microclimate. He wrote a book about the garden in the form of an exchange of letters between himself and Leslie Land who owns a garden in Maine, the book, entitled 'The 3,000 Mile Garden' was published in 1992 by Pan, it was picked up by Channel Four and a six part series of programs was broadcast two years later. We are hoping to be able to make a disc of the TV available in the near future.