

Excerpt from
Feeling for Stones
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Chapter Three
Sitting by a Coal Fire

Neighbourhoods of Invention

In January 1981, I settled in central London, in Bloomsbury, by renting a room in a brick-faced town house built sometime after 1710. London was looking shabby and neglected that year, as was my street off Queen Square. Surrounded by high walls, the street was dark, the room dusty, and the house rundown. It was one of two houses with three small cottages behind them, all owned and managed by the same landlord. The buildings stood like creased and withered witnesses to the long life of the city. The three courtyard cottages had been colonised, inexplicably, by middle-aged bachelors working as porters in the local hotels, while the houses had two to three rooms on each floor. In the house where I lived, each bed-sitting room had a different tenant. Two elderly men – one a retired carpenter, the other a book dealer – lived in the rooms at the top where they were still using the old gas lights having never agreed on where to put the electricity meter. Other residents worked in arts or publishing. Their salaries were low, but their professional life centred on the Bloomsbury squares of the neighbourhood. Another man was a confident Canadian economist doing his PhD at the London School of Economics. In the room behind him, a well known writer came to work on whatever manuscript needed attention. I had the front room on the ground floor. Behind me was a busy single man in his forties, full of plans, but never very lucratively employed. The only bath was in the basement, tucked into a tiny plywood cubicle painted in the lurid oranges and pinks of a more frivolous decade. For the whole house there was one toilet under the basement stairs and two outhouses in the back, where the cottages lent a village air to the small paved yard.

In the years before I arrived, the houses had been owned by an elderly lady who managed the properties herself. She had had an easy-going agreement with her tenants: she would fund any repairs her tenants proposed so long as they did the work. It was, by all accounts, a successful, neighbourly contract. My neighbours also relied on the local government, ‘the Council’, for their welfare. Time and again, when I queried some arrangement, I would be told, “We must go the Council. It is their responsibility.” Often there was a tone of injured indignation, as if some basic right were about to be ignored. The

combined paternalism of the landlady and the Council, however, had created a kind of passivity, as if one's own life were someone else's affair. This passivity became a distinct liability when the landlady's nephew inherited the houses soon after Mrs Thatcher and the Conservative Party came to power. I was the first tenant he took on and quickly realised that he was planning a professional renovation of the buildings in hopes of higher rents. His apologetic diffidence hid a bald confidence in the wisdom of letting "markets decide". Month by month, under the combined assault of his more commercial ambitions and the Tory Party's local government reforms, the basic ethos of the house began to fray. Over the next few years, the negotiations and trade-offs of the old social contract became harder to maintain, forcing the more idealistic and neighbourly tenants to leave.

I felt oddly privileged to have come to the houses before the old system completely died. Dusty and run-down as the houses had become, there was a philosophy within them that had created neighbourly room for all degrees of wealth and education. There was also another wealth in these houses – the neighbourhood around them. Today Bloomsbury's squares are famous for the literary life they supported in the early twentieth century, but they also hold a story of social invention in the centuries before the industrial revolution took off in Britain.

John Summerson's classic architectural study, *Georgian London*, opens with an imaginary aerial view of the growth of London from 1615 to 1815. In 1615, at the start of Summerson's two hundred years, there were two separate towns: the walled City of London and the king's palace at Westminster – "the merchant metropolis on the east, the court metropolis on the west". Between them, stretched along the working highway of the river Thames, were the palaces of nobles and bishops as well as the Inns of Court – residential colleges where lawyers lived and trained. Inside the walled City of London were gardens set around larger houses, while the suburbs held market gardens, common fields, water mills and springs of clean drinking water. Between 1615 and 1815, however, London's population grew from 200,000 to nearly a million.¹ This forced the medieval gardens to be filled in with buildings while the suburbs were largely covered with houses and tenements for all degrees of society.²

The squares of Bloomsbury were built at this time for the prosperous merchants and professionals of the City of London. Other squares closer to Westminster attracted more aristocratic residents. Today, the surviving London squares are celebrated for their architecture and for the town planning they inspired throughout Europe and North America.³ Just as importantly, they were built at a time of social invention when the foundations for the

industrial revolution were laid down. During these two hundred years, London experienced a great civil war, a great fire and the last episode of the plague. Yet the city kept growing, inventing new social and economic forms. How did that happen and what might this history between 1615-1815 teach us about inventing ecological societies today?

Two Common Fields

By the time I moved to London, my savings were largely spent and I was living on borrowed money. To keep my debts low, I took a small job in a literary agent's office in Carey Street which I reached by walking through a square called Lincoln's Inn Fields. I was cheered by the January snowdrops which appeared much earlier than those in New York and amazed by the tangled black branches of the old plane trees outlined against the sky. There were no railings around garden square in 1981, only the stumps of railings which had been removed to provide iron for the Second World War and never replaced. But the gardens were perfect, with lawns and beds well-maintained. Each time I walked through Lincoln's Inn Fields I left behind the tense lonely gamble of being in London and took in the rich damp smell of well-tended soil.

What I could not see was the history of the gardens. Nor did I know that these were once common pastures, part of a much older rural system before hedgerows and fences enclosed the land. The medieval landscape that had included these pastures was more open and subject to common rights. While all the land in the medieval system was owned by someone, the owner did not have exclusive rights to everything on the land; other people living in the community could use it for particular purposes. These purposes might include the right to graze animals in field stubble or pasture, to collect fuel from a woodlands, to share the hay from a meadow or to let pigs forage in a forest. These were called common rights and were subject to constant negotiation and mutual oversight.

Arable fields of crops were also part of this system. These large open fields were laid out around a village and were shaped in part by the heavy ploughs used to tackle stiff soils. The ploughs were so heavy that they needed eight oxen to pull them and could not be easily turned around. Two things followed from this primitive technology. First, no one in a village was wealthy enough to own eight oxen so ploughing and other large tasks were done communally. Second, the boundaries of the open fields were not defined by ownership, but by the amount of land that could be ploughed in a single day without turning the eight oxen around. Each open field was then subdivided into strips under the control of individual families who owned the harvest from their strips and were responsible for weeding, sowing

and other tasks. In order to share the risks and rewards of good and bad land, each family's strips were in various locations. As a result, each family's yield depended on the cooperation of its neighbours, not just in the shared ploughing but also in keeping the whole field free of weeds.

This system – with its mosaics of rights and responsibilities – affected woodland, marshes, meadows and cropland and had many variations across England. It was governed by local rules, established and enforced locally by either a manorial court, or more often by a village meeting. The two most important people in the system were often elected by the farmers. They were the foreman, who would oversee farming activities, and the pinder, who was responsible for impounding stray animals.⁴ While it lacked much of the agricultural technology known today, it did have a very sophisticated social technology of rules and agreements, much like the customary rules I read about in the Sahel. In England, such agreements depended on the fact that the group which managed the landscape of open fields, woodlands and pastures was usually a community who knew each other well; common property rights were not given to everyone, but only to those who belonged.

Over time, this system began to break down under a variety of pressures. For example, in some places there was not enough labour to work the fields, thanks to repeated attacks of disease. Landowners would then put a fence around open fields, converting them to pastures for sheep whose wool was an important commodity at the time. This often destroyed the livelihoods of remaining villagers who then moved to London or other large towns. As the population of the towns increased, the urban market for agricultural goods grew. Better markets in turn led to more enclosures as landowners sought to increase the productivity of their land in order to gain profits from the new urban consumers.⁵

As more people moved to towns, they required new houses. Here, the habits and mosaic rights of communal activity survived. John Summerson, writing about London's eighteenth century architecture, notes that the speculative builders of London – *“the mainspring of London's expansion for three hundred years...”* – were a varied lot.

Sometimes he [the speculator] has been a lord, sometimes little more than a labourer; sometimes a substantial capitalist, sometimes a craftsman, with only his skill and time to adventure; sometimes an architect, sometimes a bricklayer or carpenter; sometimes a lawyer, a mechanic, a schoolmaster, a quack, or an actor – indeed, almost any class, trade or profession.

If house building speculation was not just the reserve of wealthy men, what enabled less prosperous men to participate? I suspect it was the negotiating skills of rural communal life, translated to the new opportunities of town, most notably among the building craftsmen, who substituted their labour for finance. Working together, they would take a lease on some land and then use their complementary crafts to build a house or houses, bartering time with each other until the job was done. To encourage such building works, the owner would only ask for a small ‘peppercorn’ rent on the lease while the house was being built. Once the house was ready for sale, the landlord’s rent would rise to his benefit, while the profits of selling the house would be shared among all the builders.⁶ In short, it was a new system of mosaic rights in land, buildings and profits based on the political skills of the rural commons where people routinely made and respected complex agreements. Such skill was a substitute for the financial capital that was in short supply.

The story of Lincoln’s Inn Fields is part of all this history. Before the 1530s, the fields were known as Purse Field and Cup Field and were owned by two religious orders, the hospitals of St. John and St. Giles, who leased them out as pastures to various tenants. The fields were also common land and used as playing fields by students training to be lawyers at nearby Lincoln’s Inn. However, starting in 1536, Henry VIII seized all monastic wealth in the country. Designed to improve the ruinous finances of the Crown, this seizure of church land and property was a grand theft and a significant, if unintentional, land reform. Over the next fifty to one hundred years, the vast monastic holdings of the church, accumulated over hundreds of years of bequests and purchases, amounting to perhaps 20% of all wealth, was redistributed to the king, his henchmen, local landowners, the church and others in society.⁷

Purse Field and Cut Field were among the Crown’s booty in the 1530s. In 1630, the king’s office leased the fields to a developer who wanted to build thirty-two houses on the land even though common rights remained. When the developer petitioned Charles I for permission to build on common land, the Society of Lincoln’s Inn objected. While the King would have been aware of long-standing common rights, he was also a man of artistic temperament who had hired Inigo Jones to help him bring the classical traditions of the Italian renaissance to London’s architecture.⁸ The Crown therefore granted the licence to build, but stipulated that the main part of the fields should “for ever and hereafter be open and unbuilt.”⁹ In the following decades, Lincoln’s Inn Fields became one of the most prestigious addresses in London, while the fields in the centre remained open, even rural, land.

In 1735 this openness became problematic and the residents of the square sent a petition to Parliament to have the fields fenced off.

... by reason of the said Fields being kept open many wicked and disorderly persons had ... met together therein, using unlawful sports and games ... enticing young persons into gaming, idleness, and other vicious courses, and ... where many robberies, assaults, outrages, and enormities had been and continually were committed ...

Their petition succeeded. Fences were built and only surrounding residents held keys to the garden gates. This was the first enclosed square in London and “with that action, the urban common-field tradition quietly died.”¹⁰ Other commons fields in the suburbs of pre-industrial London were also enclosed: among them Leicester Fields, Moorfields, Red Lion Fields, all of which were renamed as squares. Elsewhere, new squares were created on private land, gated and shut from the beginning. Only in the late nineteenth century did some of these private and privatised squares open to the public again, with Lincoln’s Inn Fields being reopened in 1894¹¹ and the fences removed completely during the second World War.

After the second World War, the British government invested in the welfare state – public housing was widely available, the national health service was open to all, and universities offered free tuition to anyone who qualified. In Lincoln’s Inn Fields, this broad definition of community meant that the garden’s fences were not restored. Instead, the square was a public park maintained by the local council. Without the fences and gates, it returned to its medieval status of open common land.

However, each time I walked across Lincoln’s Inn Fields during the 1980s, I watched the lawns and beds of the garden deteriorate under the pressure of several hundred homeless people who were camping out in small tents. They appeared when the government’s housing policy changed, forcing many people out of public housing and into the more expensive free market. As the tents and people became permanent, the snowdrops failed to surface in the spring, unable to push through the hard compacted soil. I missed the spring flowers, but knew from my own lodgings off Queen Square how thoroughly the social contracts had changed. I found it hard to condemn those who had moved into the commons of Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

Those who leased the buildings around Lincoln’s Inn Fields, however, petitioned once again to have the fences restored: assaults and rape were more common and the conditions of the garden were deplorable. A few years ago, in the mid-1990s, a new high fence was erected and the tent people were evicted from Lincoln’s Inn Fields. The gardens have now been dug over and replanted. The spring flowers are blooming as I write, but the commons have been privatised once more.

What does the story of Lincoln's Inn Fields tell us about the process of systemic social invention? First, Lincoln's Inn Fields reminds us that industrial society required a new definition of property rights, especially in land, before it could succeed. Moreover, these rights developed slowly, test by test, over a long time. In the process, land use changed and the distribution of wealth changed, benefiting some people greatly while others lost out. Thus, fundamental social change was, and still is, rooted in changing definitions of who has rights to what resources. These rights not only define our relationships with each other, but with the land that supports us all.

Second, the story highlights the role of personal skills in making and keeping new agreements. I suspect that many of the building agreements in London were not written down, but verbal. Trust, a keen assessment of character over time, opportunity and ordinary greed all shaped those agreements, while their enforcement depended in large part on the fear of losing one's reputation as a reliable investor. While it has been said that verbal agreements are not worth the paper they are printed on, in fact, governance and accountability are not abstract concepts, but even today begin with our reputations among the people we know.

The third important aspect of the history of Lincoln's Inn Fields is that critical changes in land rights were not solely subject to private agreement; they had to be ratified by the King or Parliament. The compromise agreement that allowed part of the field for development while leaving the rest for shared use was clearly shaped by the local players, but this agreement eventually required ratification by someone in power.

This leads to one final stretch in the story: what happens if we rename the Norman invasion of England in 1066 a "colonial" expedition, using the language of Africa's past to see the English experience with new eyes? Like the Tuareg leadership, Anglo Saxon society was decapitated by the Norman invaders who then put their own men in power. However, the new regime continued to rely heavily on the previous system while building up the authority of the king. Arguable, the roots of invention in pre-industrial England lie in these two places: the increased central authority of the Norman kings and the common rights skills first developed during Anglo Saxon times. After surviving the traumas of conquest, the conquered Anglo Saxons blended their ways into the new Norman administration, creating a new social and political system based on the legacies of both peoples. Eventually, the grassroots political skills of the Anglo Saxon legacy together with the strong central power of the Norman throne became the joint political keystones of social invention in England.

Property rights, popular political skills, and a connection to power: what might this history mean for any ecological revolution today? First, what changes in property rights are being tested now, or might we see in the future? Second, where are the political, negotiating skills necessary to experiment with new rights or how might they be developed? Third, if experiments in new rights begin to succeed, what is their connection to power? How and by whom might new ideas be ratified? Fourth, who will benefit from any changes and who will be left behind? Finally, are there any similarities between this ancient colonial history and the more recent experience of conquest and survival in Asia, Africa and Latin America? If so, are there any signs of ecological inventiveness emerging in these societies today?

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Endnotes

¹ Population figures from Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: the transformation of the agrarian economy 1500-1850*. (Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.138.

² John Summerson, *Georgian London*. (Penguin Books, 1978 revised edition) chapter 1.

³ See Henry W. Lawrence, “The Greening of the Squares of London: Transformation of Urban Landscapes and Ideals” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, March 1993, p. 90-118.

⁴ Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: the transformation of the agrarian economy 1500-1850*. (Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.23-26. See also Leonard Cantor, *The Changing English Countryside 1400-1700* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London & New York, 1987) chapter 1 for a good description of the variations on this system in different parts of England.

⁵ See W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder 1500-1547*. (Longman, London and New York) 1976, chapter 3: “Rural Society and Agrarian Change”, *passim*.

⁶ John Summerson, *Georgian London* (Penguin Books, revised edition, 1978) p.38 and 43.

⁷ Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: the transformation of the agrarian economy 1500-1850*. (Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.168 & 205. See also See W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder 1500-1547*. (Longman, London and New York) 1976, p. 134-137.

⁸ John Summerson, *Georgian London* (Penguin Books, 1978), chapter 2, *passim*.

⁹ Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert, *The London Encyclopaedia*, (Macmillan, London, 1983), p. 471-472.

¹⁰ Henry W. Lawrence, "The Greening of the Squares of London: Transformation of Urban Landscapes and Ideals" in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, March 1993, p. 99.

¹¹ Henry W. Lawrence, "The Greening of the Squares of London: Transformation of Urban Landscapes and Ideals" in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, March 1993, p. 114.