

Finsbury Circus Conservation Area Character Summary

Location and boundaries

Finsbury Circus Conservation Area is in the north of the City, close to the boundary with the London Boroughs of Islington and Hackney. The conservation area is bounded by London Wall in the south, Moorgate in the west, Blomfield Street in the east and South Place and Eldon Street to the north. South Place also forms part of the boundary between the City of London and London Borough of Islington which lies to the north-west. It also shares a boundary with Bank Conservation Area to the south and New Broad Street conservation area to the east.

Designation

Finsbury Circus Conservation Area was designated in 1971 and was one of the first conservation areas to be designated in the City. It lies within Coleman Street Ward.

Area Character

Historical evolution and Key features

The area lies in the Upper Walbrook Valley, a floodplain traversed by a series of tributaries. Evidence of prehistoric human activity here was confirmed by the excavation of a flint tool and associated debris from flint-knapping. An Iron Age burial was also found during the excavation of 12-15 Finsbury Circus, most probably associated with a small settlement on the western banks of Walbrook.

The Romans occupied this area and implemented a programme of land reclamation and drainage of the valley during the late first to early second century. Evidence of a Roman road from this period on a north-west to south-east alignment approximately 100 metres from the City wall has been found as well as construction dating to the third quarter of the first century, within 25 years after the founding of 'Londinium'. Although the Romans had occupied London from AD43, the city wall was not constructed until the late 2nd century. The walled defences, which denoted the boundary of the City, blocked the main channel of Walbrook and the area north of the wall was liable to flooding.

Like many areas outside the city wall, this area was used as a Roman cemetery from late first to the mid second century and a number of burials, both inhumations and cremated remains in urns, have been found here. The core of this Roman cemetery is considered to lie near the eastern side of Finsbury Circus. Some graves were cut in the banks of the streams and it is thought that this may have had a spiritual significance as the bodies were gradually washed away by the water. The cemetery remained in use until at least the third century but was abandoned in the mid to late fourth century.

The marsh or fen, which became known as Fensbury and Moor Field, prevented the expansion of the city north of London Wall and development concentrated towards the west instead. Little is known of the use of this area from the demise of the Roman occupation until the medieval period and it is possible that the area may not have been utilised. The difficulties of occupying the land led to its use as a dump for both industrial and domestic rubbish. In 1211, a ditch, outside the wall and the Roman ditch, was excavated to defend the City and drain the marsh. At 60 metres wide, it produced large quantities of brickearth which

were redeposited on the marshland and evidence suggests that this helped to reduce the flooding. In 1365, the Pelterers Guild ordered that leatherworkers should live and work in the Walbrook area to the north of the City and evidence of a tanning pit and associated debris have been found here. Large trenches, evidence of horticultural activity, have also been found in the area although it is not clear what crops were cultivated here.

There were a series of schemes to reclaim this land in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1411 the Lord Mayor ordered that all the rubbish should be cleared from the area and drainage ditches established. This was followed in 1414 by a commission from Lord Mayor Thomas Falconer to construct a new gate in the City wall called Moorgate to provide access to the area for recreation. The area was used to dry laundry by the launderers based within the city walls. Drier parts of the land were used for sports and recreation, with ice-skating as a popular pastime during winter months.

In 1477, the area was quarried for brickearth to repair the City wall and there are traces of lime burning in excavations at 4-6 Finsbury Circus. A number of brick pits have been found across the area and in excavations in the surrounding area. It suggests that brickworkers moved to an area for a short period, up to a year, dug the brickearth and then moved onto another area when the pit was worked out. This had a significant impact on the area creating large pools of standing water, some of which probably interconnected. As a result, the condition of the area deteriorated and although there were successive attempts to clear the area, rubbish continued to accumulate in the area. In 1512, the Lord Mayor Roger Ardley attempted to drain the fen again but was unsuccessful and the area remained a wasteland used for rubbish dumping, traversed by open sewers. There continued to be some light uses of the moor, such as archery practice, cattle grazing and dog kennels for the Lord Mayor's hunt which were located just north of modern-day South Place. It was not until 1527, when further efforts were made to drain the land into Walbrook, that the ground was drained successfully. In spite of this, the cycle of rubbish dumping and clearance of the ditch continued until the 17th century.

The area remained open ground until 1606 when trees were planted and a gravel path laid in a cruciform pattern to create Moor Fields, London's first public park which was very popular. The northern boundary of the landscaped area follows the line of modern-day Eldon Street and South Place. In 1666, after the Great Fire, some Londoners constructed small houses on the land whilst the City was being rebuilt. However, much of the land remained open until the late 18th century. Moor Fields was re-landscaped in a similar form to its original plan in 1730 and Finsbury Pavement to the west became a fashionable promenade across the marshy lands.

Bethlehem Hospital was erected between 1675-6 on the south side of the park to the north of modern-day London Wall. Originally founded in 1247 at the Priory of St Mary Bethlehem just outside Bishopsgate, the hospital admitted 'distracted' patients from 1377. It was established as an asylum for the mentally ill in 1547. The new Bethlehem Hospital, designed by Robert Hooke and famously known as 'Bedlam', was associated with the treatment of mentally ill patients during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was demolished in 1814 by which time the building had fallen into serious disrepair.

Although development had generally expanded beyond the City Wall since the mid-16th century, it was not until 1762 that Moorgate was demolished and its stone used to stop London Bridge being washed away. The wall continued to be dismantled throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, to allow for further and more continuous development. Sections of the

City Wall survive below ground in this area. The status of the area also improved with the construction of City Road, built to the north in 1761, to improve access between Marylebone and the City.

The Finsbury Estate, situated within the London Borough of Islington, was laid out on the fields north of Moorgate as a residential suburb by the City Surveyor, George Dance the Younger, between 1775 and 1800. He was the first to introduce formal, planned crescents and circuses to London. The Estate was constructed on land leased by the City from the Prebendary of Finsbury in 1768 and had Finsbury Square as its centrepiece. Dance's plans for Finsbury Circus were not implemented until Bethlehem Hospital was pulled down in 1814 and relocated to St George Fields in Lambeth. His successor as City Surveyor, William Mountague, laid out the area from 1815-17 based on Dance's 1802 plan. The Circus is a generous oval shape and the buildings that were constructed there were influenced by the plainer houses designed by Dance in Finsbury Square to the north. In the 1840s, Finsbury Pavement was laid out to give easier access to London Bridge.

Following the establishment of the Estate, many doctors and surgeons set up practices in the area around Finsbury Pavement and in Finsbury Circus. They served the wealthy professionals and their families that lived in the area. The Royal Ophthalmic Hospital, which was founded in 1804, moved to Blomfield Street at the corner with Eldon Street in 1822 to accommodate the increasing demand for its services. It was the first hospital in England to specialise in the treatment of eye diseases. Rising rents from the increased pressure for financial services in the City in the late 19th century led to the removal of both wealthy residents and the medical profession to the West End, particularly Harley Street. The hospital moved to its current location on City Road in 1899 and whilst generally known as Moorfields Eye Hospital, it was not given this name formally until 1956.

Shortly after the establishment of Finsbury Circus, the London Institute relocated here from a house on Old Jewry. The new building, with a Grecian portico, was designed by William Brooks and housed an educational institute and private library 'for the Advancement of Literature and Diffusion of Useful Knowledge'. It stood on the north side of the Circus until its demolition in the late 1930s due to the increasing provision of public libraries and educational institutions and residential decline in the area.

After the Reformation in the 16th century, the only places of worship allowed within the City were Protestant churches of the Church of England. The area just outside the city walls therefore attracted a number of non-conformist chapels and other places of worship. The Presbyterian Albion Chapel stood at the junction of Finsbury Pavement and London Wall, a Unitarian chapel on South Place and a Welsh Baptist chapel on London Wall close to New Broad Street. A Jewish Synagogue was also located on London Wall, close to the Welsh Baptist Chapel. A Congregational chapel and St Mary's Catholic Chapel stood opposite, north of East Street. The latter was an imposing, Italianate style church, built in 1820, which served as a cathedral until the construction of Westminster Cathedral. All of these places of worship were demolished between the late 19th and early 20th centuries as congregations diminished as a result of the decline in the residential population and new churches were built outside the City. The Catholic Church of St Mary Moorfields, rebuilt on Eldon Street in 1902, is the only church to survive in the area.

The pressure to develop larger, corporate buildings in the late nineteenth century led to the demolition of many domestic scale Georgian buildings in the area. None of the Georgian

houses that once stood on Finsbury Circus remain. The area became the focus for several important British companies who designed and built headquarters around the Circus. Lutyen designed the lavish Britannic House with a Westmoreland slate roof between 1921-5 for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, later to become known as British Petroleum (BP). The elevation facing Moorgate incorporated an entrance to the Great Northern Electric Railway, now called WAGN and is also an entrance to Moorgate Underground Station. Similar to other developments in the City at this time, these buildings were classically inspired and the buildings on Finsbury Circus were amongst the largest to be built in the area at that time. Salisbury House, designed by Davis and Emmanuel in 1899-1901, occupies the south west quadrant of the Circus and had entrances on several street frontages as does London Wall Buildings on the south east corner. Whilst smaller in scale, Electra House designed in 1900-3 is a distinctive frontage on Moorgate and is now occupied by the London Metropolitan University. It was also at this time that the section of Finsbury Pavement within the City boundary was renamed Moorgate. Many of the buildings in the conservation area are important examples of Victorian and Edwardian architecture in their own right and together define the built character of the area today.

Other developments, such as the expansion of the Underground, also impacted on the area and in 1864, the Metropolitan Railway cut a tunnel through the gardens at Finsbury Circus. The local street pattern was affected by the growth of the commercial banking sector in the City. In 1901, London Wall was widened on the south side resulting in the demolition of the nineteenth century buildings which had previously stood there. However, on the west side of Moorgate a number of early nineteenth century buildings have survived; 83 Moorgate and 118a London Wall which are late Georgian, 63-73 Moorgate designed by Smirke when the road was cut through in the 1830s and 87 Moorgate by Henry and John Lee from the same period.

The gardens within Finsbury Circus were maintained as an open space by a committee of leaseholders who contributed to their upkeep. However, as the area became more commercially orientated, the Corporation sought to obtain the land and open it to the public. This was secured through an Act of Parliament in 1900. A pink granite drinking fountain was constructed in 1902 with a shelter inspired by the well head designed by Philip Webb for the Red House in Bexley Heath, the home of William Morris. The Metropolitan Drinking Fountain and Cattle Trough Association erected another drinking fountain made from Peterhead granite with brass spouts in the gardens next to the bandstand close to the west entrance. The gardens were re-landscaped in 1909 but retained the serpentine paths and plane trees established in the early nineteenth century. In 1925, a bowling green was added in the centre of the garden and extended in 1968. The pavilion which serves this was built in 1966 replacing earlier twentieth century garden structures on this site and adapted for wine bar use in 1985.

The gardens are enclosed by railings and the boundary is largely encompassed by shrubbery with trees and planting beds. The large mature Plane trees give contrasting patterns of light and shade over much of this space throughout the seasons and provide scale against the buildings surrounding the Circus. In some measure the trees contribute to lowering the noise level within the garden. The gently sloping grassed area with formal flower beds in the central eastern area of the gardens is one of its main features and there are further grass areas and flower beds throughout the space.

Finsbury Circus is the only space in the City which is similar in scale and character to other 'London Squares'. Essential elements in this formal composition are the frontage lines, buildings heights and unity of the architectural design. The planting of the central garden and the tall mature Plane trees are important and one of its most attractive features. It is the largest public open space in the City at 0.5 hectares. The gardens are very popular with City workers throughout the year, particularly at lunchtime, and music festivals are hosted here during the summer months using the bandstand that was erected in 1955 close to the west entrance.

The area is dominated by fine, classically inspired buildings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These buildings are mostly designed in Portland stone with steeply pitched slate roofs although there are other materials, such as brick used in some buildings on Eldon Street reflecting the lower and more domestic scale of the streets between Finsbury Circus and Finsbury Square. There are a number of late twentieth century buildings which have sought to respect the scale and pattern of development in this area. The frontages to Finsbury Circus are set back from the back edge of the pavement by front areas, some of which are defined by railings. Many of these buildings have raised entrances and grand scale ground floors although the impact of these are off-set by the solid to void ratio, regular window openings, rusticated columns and other detailing such as string courses. In general, the scale and proportions of the buildings respond to the classical proportion and layout of the Circus.

Both London Wall and Moorgate are key routes through the City and the retail activity along them contributes to the character and vibrancy of the area, distinguishing it from the offices and banks in the southern part of Moorgate towards the heart of the City and the Bank of England. The scale of the buildings is offset by the relative width of the streets. This is in contrast to the Circus itself, where the scale of the buildings, the largely continuous frontages together with the extent of the gardens, their shape and planting, the street widths and York stone pavement all contribute to a sense of intimacy and seclusion. From within the gardens to the east and the south, along Circus Place, there are glimpses of the City beyond this area, but generally its impact is reduced by the sense of enclosure. Whilst formal in its design and composition, the gardens are used informally throughout the year particularly by local office workers and the lawns are very popular for picnics in the summer months.

Listed Buildings and Scheduled Monuments

1-6 Finsbury Circus

Drinking fountain and shelter, north side of gardens, Finsbury Circus

Park House and Garden House, 16 and 18 Finsbury Circus

London Wall Buildings, 25 Finsbury Circus

Salisbury House, 31 Finsbury Circus

137-141 Moorgate

76-92 Moorgate

Additional considerations

Finsbury Circus is registered listed as a Registered Garden (grade II on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens) and is protected under the London Squares Preservation Act 1931.

This character summary should be read in conjunction with the Finsbury Circus Management Strategy which sets out how the City seeks to preserve and enhance the character and appearance of the conservation area.