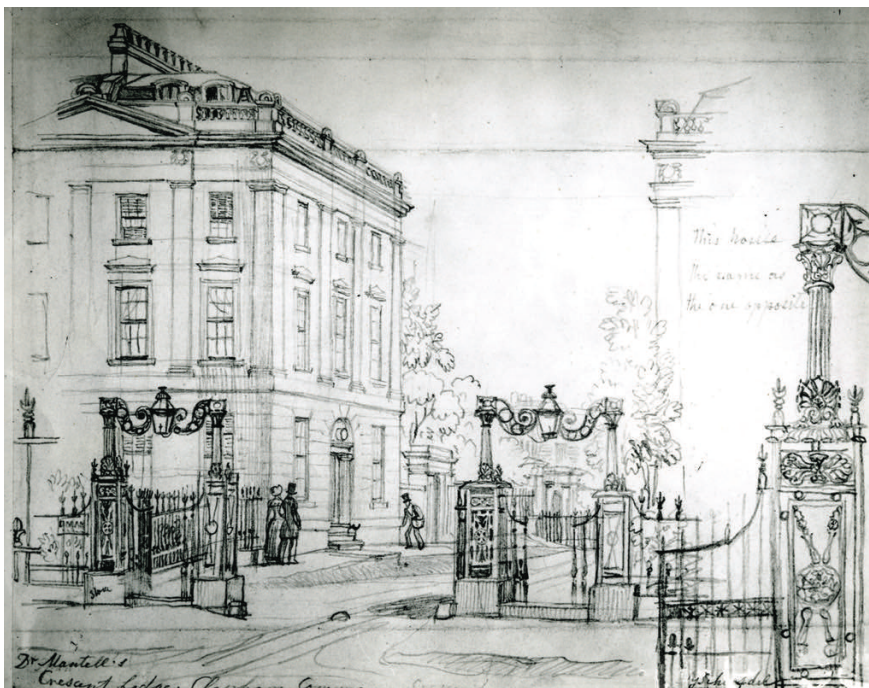


A Regency Survival  
in Clapham

# A Regency Survival in Clapham

by Hermione Hobhouse



1. Crescent Lodge. Drawing by Scharf. c.1840

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Clapham boasts in Crescent Grove one of the most interesting and attractive of surviving nineteenth century architectural groups. It is very modest compared to central London squares but retains characteristics which have disappeared from the rest of London. As it is still privately owned it has happily avoided much of the effect of municipal improvement, having suffered a long unfashionable period, and it has never been partially rebuilt or expanded, or turned over to commercial uses.

Crescent Grove was built in the 1820s by a certain Francis Child as a family investment. In 1824, he bought a house on South Side from Edward Polgill, a 'good brick house standing further from the road than the preceding ones with a large and pleasant garden overlooking Mr. Thornton's paddock'. On this site he built an estate of 39 'capital messuages', laid out in a curiously asymmetrical way with an interesting variety of houses. The layout was dictated by the need to make the best of a long narrow site sandwiched between Crescent Lane, then Brixton Lane, only recently made up from a farm track, and the Thornton estate on the east side, on which the Redemptorist College and St Alphonsus Road were later built. The variety of houses reflects the way in which Clapham was changing from a country village in which a few bankers had large houses, to a middle class suburb, and perhaps indicates an uncertainty about the type of occupier the estate would attract.

On one side – originally 'The Crescent' – there are fine London terrace houses (Fig. 2), reminiscent of the Bloomsbury squares being developed at this period, while opposite in 'The Grove' nine pairs of similar semi-detached houses, linked by two-storied coach-houses (Fig. 3), show the influence of the St John's Wood villa on suburban housing. These coach-houses seem to have had rooms over, reached by an internal staircase for a manservant, and a stable behind. The houses in the crescent, if their owners kept a carriage, managed with a stable at the bottom of the garden, on to Crescent Lane. The entrance to the estate is marked by two large blocks, designed to stand comparison with mansions like Stowey House which used to front the London to Brighton Road. At the bottom of the estate Child built a large detached house with an extensive garden known as Grove Lodge (Fig. 4).

The two entrance blocks were given the more expensive stucco finish, but the rest of the houses are uniformly built in yellow stock bricks, probably made locally, with a very unusual Portland stone facing to the ground floor instead of stucco, but a stuccoed basement, stucco mouldings to the upper windows, stucco cornices, and 'Portland cement' balustrading to the attic floor. The central block of the crescent has a shallow stucco pediment and pilasters, while the semi-detached houses have stucco 'acroteria' finials to the balustrading, porches with Ionic columns originally painted to resemble marble, and stucco ornament to the coach-houses. Considerable care was



2. *'The Crescent'* c.1912

taken over the external detailing of the houses, as for instance, over the stuccoed end walls to the crescent with their blind arches. The ironwork is uniform, and both the area railings, with their unique 'crescent' motif, and the iron balcony railings are of a high quality. An original 'dog railing', a relic of the time when stray dogs were a London menace, can be seen outside No. 35, and of course, in the nineteenth century, the entrance to the estate was marked by an elegant iron gate (Fig. 1).

It is not possible to identify the architect or designer of the houses: they have been attributed to Thomas Cubitt, who took the lease of a large area in Clapham in 1825 but there is no positive evidence to link him with the estate. The unknown architect or surveyor must have had considerable talent for the effect is attractive even where the careful detailing has become blurred. The uniformity of this detailing, both inside and out, makes it clear that the houses were built, either by the same builders, or by builders working to unusually detailed plans and specifications.

Once the estate was laid out, possibly even before the houses were completed, Francis Child conveyed all but four of the houses to other members of the family, which probably means that they were intended primarily as investments to be let on short leases, from which each member of the family could draw an income. Various amenities were provided in common for the enjoyment of the owners and occupiers of the houses – the roads and footpaths, the pleasure-grounds and shrubberies with their carefully chosen and unusual trees, and a water supply and mill-house. There was also a stabling enclosure with a pump and well, next to No. 32, with entrances from both the estate and Crescent Lane. Though the intention may have been for a proper mews, only the owner of No. 32 seems to have taken advantage of this by adding a single storey stable and coach-house to the end of the crescent, built up to full height in 1935.

In 1830, for administrative convenience the ownership of the common land was vested in two members of the family with the largest holdings, S.P. and George Child, who held 14 and 9 houses respectively. They had the obligation to maintain the common amenities, but were subject to the decision of the majority of proprietors who were to be consulted on such matters as the future of the private waterworks, the upkeep of the roads, and the terms on which the vacant ground for stabling was to be let.

The terms of the trust deed allowed for a very democratic constitution by which any proprietor or proprietors of three or more houses could call a meeting of his fellow-proprietors at any house on the estate or in 'any Public House or tavern or other messuage within one mile.' In return the owners of the houses undertook to subscribe to the maintenance of the common



3. 'The Grove' c.1912

amenities in certain proportions – one fortieth for each ordinary house, and two fortieths for the owner of the ‘large house at the bottom end of the Grove’. They also undertook to do no damage to the pleasure-grounds or roads, and to preserve the look and tone of the estate, agreed to maintain the external appearance of the houses unaltered, and ‘to allow the carrying on of no business whatsoever requiring an external show or appearance larger than a discreet brass plate’.

This sort of trust for the management of the roads and gardens of new developments was extremely common at the period, when local government efficiency in London was at its lowest point. The trustees were responsible also for the ‘watching and lighting’ of the estate, that is the provision of some watchman who would be responsible for the maintenance of order, and also for the provision of lamps, probably originally oil lamps, and a contract with some oil man for their lighting and regular maintenance. Both the ‘watching’ and ‘lighting’ were taken over in the later nineteenth century by the local authority, but recently the ‘lighting’ has reverted to the management of the estate.

Crescent Grove is unusual in that despite various attempts by the Board of Works and by the individual Boroughs, it has so far retained control over its own roads and gardens, and is the last small private estate in London to do so.

In the half century after 1830, the Child family interest in the area declined, and by 1879 the old system of management was clearly failing to keep up the appearance of the estate. In April 1879, therefore, Mrs Allen, the owner of Grove Lodge and 15 other houses, called a meeting to make arrangements to put the roads, footpaths, and enclosures fronting the houses in order. A committee was appointed to do this, and the common amenities were managed in this way until 1961, when the trust was revived. The estate is now managed by three trustees, with the help of a committee elected by freeholders and residents.

There have been a number of changes in the 175 or so years since the first inhabitants moved in. The original Grove Lodge, or Holmwood, as it was finally called, was demolished in 1936, and its large garden built over to provide headquarters for both Builders’ and Post Office Workers’ Unions, while South Lodge, a small nineteenth-century addition to the eastern entrance block (Fig. 3) was replaced just before the war with a block of flats (which was also named Grove Lodge). In common with other London squares, Crescent Grove lost its square railings for salvage during the 1939-45 war – its ornamental gates had vanished long before, leaving its entrance sadly dilapidated. Despite residents’ protests the original lamp posts were replaced by higher concrete standards in 1962-3 by the local authority, but



4. *Entrance to the original Grove Lodge, 1851.*  
*Watercolour by H. Hopley White*



20 years later the estate raised the money to install replica Victorian lamp posts. In 1964, the decision was taken to sell the former site of the stables, then the 'children's garden', for a building site, in order to raise money to put the road in repair. In the course of these repairs the original macadam road, made of flints and gravel bound with chalk, was surfaced with asphalt. Two low level houses, Nos. 34 and 36, were constructed on the building site.

In a century and a half, Crescent Grove has changed less than its surroundings – Mr. Thornton's paddock has been covered with houses, on the other side of Crescent Lane his brother's magnificent garden temple has been reduced to a damaged façade, along the Brighton Road speed buses and heavy lorries instead of stage coaches and slow carriers' wagons, but behind its stucco entrance, Crescent Grove remains an agreeable backwater, an almost perfect Regency survival in twenty-first century London.

## Postscript

The 37 years since this piece was written have naturally seen changes in Crescent Grove. The private residential element has been increased with changes at the bottom of the hill, where the Post Office Workers' Union have amalgamated with another union, and have moved, leaving another house to be taken over by a family. This has also meant that the original boundary of the Child estate had been reinstated, so the Grove is now again a cul-de-sac, as originally laid out, with greater privacy for the rest of the inhabitants.

As the area has been designated a Conservation Area, and the houses are individually listed Grade II, there has been little opportunity to alter the appearance of the houses. In the semi-detached Grove there has been considerable conversion of stable blocks to elegant little mews houses. The facades have been restored, and flower beds planted alongside the pavements. This has echoed the beds in the central garden, so magnificently maintained by the veteran Bob Bates, for a long time a staunch supporter of Crescent Grove's independence.

One of the most marked changes has been the continuing return of a large part of the houses to single occupancy. The houses with lodgers living in bedsitters have become family homes, and many fewer are divided into flats. This is reflected in the way the houses and surrounding grounds are enjoyed and maintained. The unusual group of trees in the central garden has been carefully tended, though one or two have reached the end of their time. A circular bench has been provided, and further planting is planned.

*Hermione Hobhouse*

**The reprinting of this booklet has been made possible by a legacy left to Crescent Grove Private Estate by Mr Robert G Bates.**

*Bob Bates moved into 26 Crescent Grove with his wife Betty shortly after World War II and they spent the rest of their lives there. They met during the war, when he was a Spitfire pilot and she worked for the ambulance service. Bob became closely involved with other residents of Crescent Grove in improving the environment, which had become somewhat run down and neglected during the war years. He was Secretary to the Trustees of the Estate from 1966 to 1975, having been a member of the Management Committee since the late 1950s. He put a lot of effort into the Grove restoration project which was started in 1966, and for which this booklet was first produced in May 1967.*

*The author, Hermione Hobhouse, lived in Crescent Grove at the time. The vision was to raise money to restore the paving and the central gardens, lamp posts, railings and gates around the gardens and gates at the entrance. Not all of these ideas were supported by other freeholders, but Bob's enthusiasm to campaign to take them forward never waned and he was instrumental in achieving many substantial improvements. As Secretary he took a leading role in considering the constitution of the Estate, drawing up the first Rules and Byelaws in the 1960/70s, and he volunteered to take part in another constitutional committee set up in 1999. His wife Betty was equally committed to Crescent Grove. She was a keen gardener and maintained some of the beds in the central gardens for many years.*

*Betty and Bob died within a few weeks of each other in 2003, and left a legacy to the Estate which the Trustees have resolved to put towards projects which would have been likely to appeal to them. The updating and reprinting of this historical account of Crescent Grove has been made possible as a result, and seems an appropriate place to record a tribute to the contribution Bob and Betty Bates made to conserving and improving Crescent Grove.*

*Parts of this account were first published in Country Life, 16th December 1965. Photographs by permission of: Fig.1, The Trustees, British Museum ; Figs. 2 & 3, Ron Elam; Fig. 4, Lambeth Archives (Clapham Antiquarian Society)*

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