

Seven Dials - urban regeneration in the city centre re-inventing a lost neighbourhood

An exemplar of modern conservation, that brought the local community, the conservation bodies and the local council to work together on the restoration of an important urban landscape in the heart of London. by **David Bieda** Chairman, The Seven Dials Trust

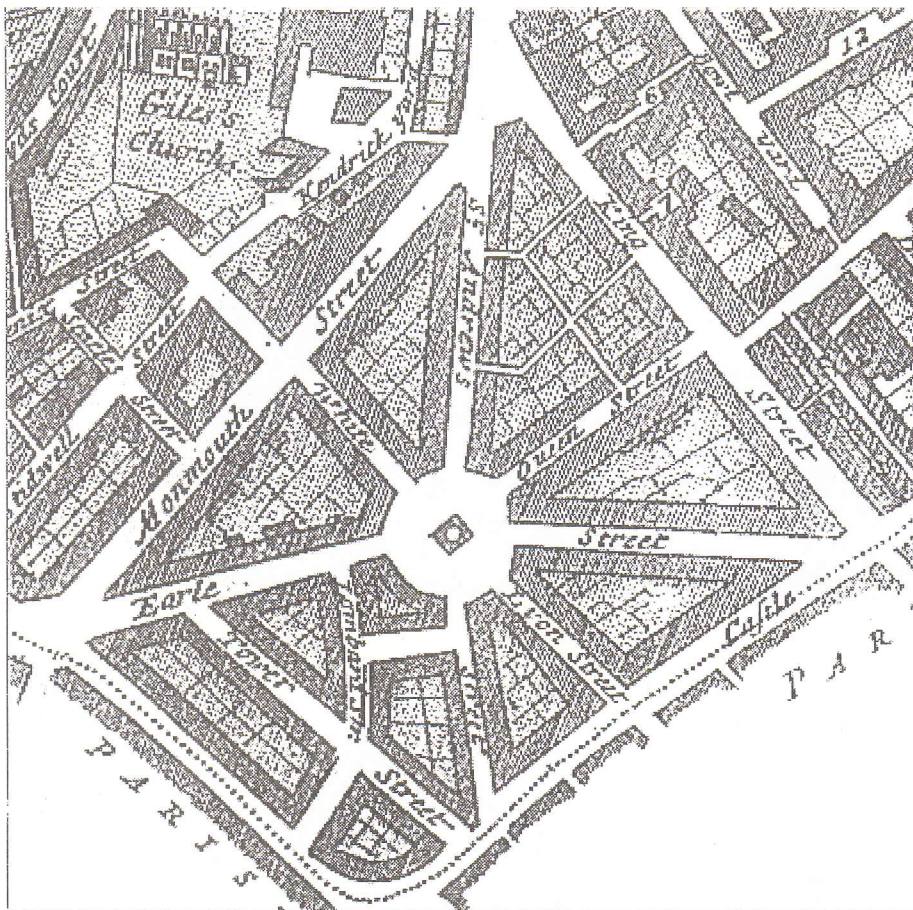
Seven Dials in the West End is the only quarter of London remaining from late Stuart England. In the creation of our capital city we have a small pantheon of well known architects, but those who actually laid it out and created it in the 17th and 18th centuries are now largely forgotten – whether Thomas Neale in Seven Dials or John Meard Senior and Junior in Soho – famous at the time and now forgotten.

By the early 1970's Seven Dials had lost its identity and population. Over 90% of the area's residential units had lain empty for more than 40 years in the expectation of wholesale demolition and if you mentioned 'Seven Dials' you were likely to be referred to Agatha Christie's novel of the same name. In spite of the plethora of late 17c houses, the magnificent early 19c ex brewery buildings in both Camden and Westminster, and the unique layout, this was a forgotten neighbourhood.

We began life as the 'Seven Dials Housing Action Area' Committee (1977-1984) became the 'Seven Dials Monument Charity' (1984 – 2003) and are now the 'Seven Dials Trust'. The process of regeneration has been long and is ongoing. Our interesting journey has involved history, architecture, gnomonics, conservation, horology, street improvements, lighting, battles against demolition, establishing a partnership between the voluntary sector, local authorities and the private sector and much else.

Creation - Thomas Neale

Seven Dials was one of the many creations of Thomas Neale, MP (1641-1699), 'The Great Projector'. An extraordinary man, one of the most influential figures of late Stuart England, and one of the least chronicled. An MP for 30 years serving on 62 parliamentary committees, Master of the Mint and the Transfer Office and Groom Porter under three kings, gambler and entrepreneur and husband to two of England's richest widows. His projects ranged from the development of Seven Dials, Shadwell, East Smithfield, and the Pantiles, to land drainage, steel and papermaking, and mining in America. He was involved in writing numerous tracts from the idea of a National Land Bank, the year before the Bank of England was founded, to issues relating to coinage. The range of his



St. Giles Parish Map of 1723 by John Strype, showing the final layout of Seven Dials and the orientation of the Sundial Pillar. Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, London

interests and activities in a short life of 57 years is difficult to comprehend.

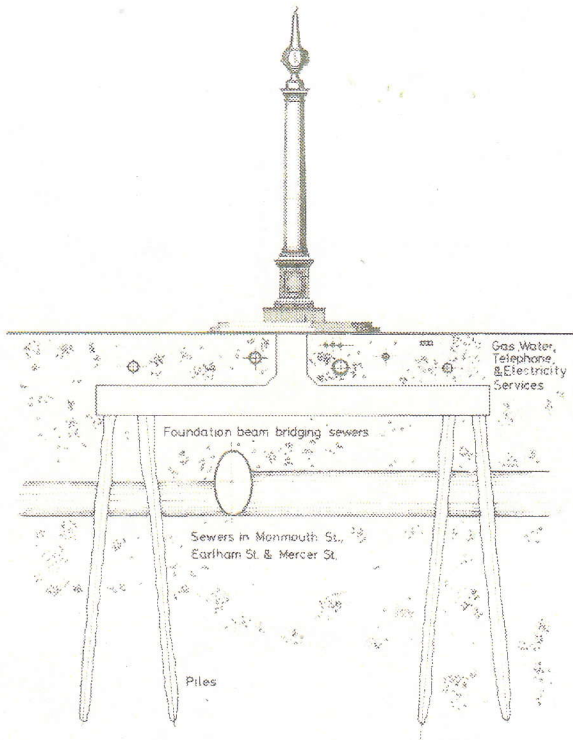
By the early 1670's he was described as 'a person of Vast Estate and of great Interest as well at Court as in the City and Country'. He was one of the small group who went to welcome William of Orange (William III) on his arrival in England on November 5th 1688, hence the unveiling of the new Sundial Pillar at Seven Dials in 1989 by HM Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands as the finale of the 1988/9 William & Mary Tercentenary celebrations.

In 1690 William III granted him the freehold of the land then known as 'Marshland' or 'Cock and Pye Fields' (after a public house on the site) in return for his raising over £1m for the Crown via England's first lottery – 'the talk of the town' according to Pepys and based upon 'lotteries after the Venetian manner' – also leading to Venetian sash cord windows.

A clever design to maximise value

Plans for a building licence submitted to Sir Christopher Wren, the Surveyor-General, in 1692 showed six streets, at least 311 houses and an estate church but Neale cheated by adding a street and failing to build the church, thus increasing his land value without providing the "social facilities"! The streets were forty feet wide and the Sundial Pillar forty feet high. Neale did not copy the then fashion for squares because rents were charged by frontage and this layout maximised rentals and thus the land value.

Neale commissioned England's leading stonemason, Edward Pierce, to design and construct the Sundial Pillar in 1693/4 as the centrepiece of the development. He laid out the area in 1692/3 but the development was not completed until 1713 and Neale sold out 1695.



The drawing showing the Pillar's foundations

The ingenious solution can be seen in the drawing above with the Pillar's foundations three times as deep as its height of 40'.

The Pillar was made largely by hand, as in 1693/4, using traditional wooden mallets to drive fine sharp steel tools. Machines were only used on the larger stones to cut the blocks for the outline shapes. It is made from 'Whitebed', one of the finest natural beds of Portland Stone, chosen because of its weathering qualities and for the ease of working some of the finer details. The bulk of the work was carried out by trainee masons at Vauxhall College and Ashby & Horner Stonemasonry Ltd, one of the largest youth training projects for many years in England. Caroline Webb designed, carved and gilded the Dial-faces in her studio in Wiltshire, each face carved exactly to the astronomer's calculations.

The erecting process alone took two and a half months and planning consent had to be obtained. It was essential that the Dialstone, weighing 1 tonne, was placed accurately so that each face enables different hours of the day to be read. Three days were spent with the astronomer on site, raising and lowering the Dialstone, with the result that each of the 6 faces is now accurate to within ten seconds.

Unveiling ceremony by HM Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands

The unveiling ceremony was performed by HM Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and Prince Claus, to mark the UK finale of the year long 1988/9 William & Mary Tercentenary celebrations. The reconstruction of the Sundial Pillar and a great deal of media coverage began the process of restoring the name Seven Dials and thus re-creating its identity. Beyond that it also began the process of re-creating a more civilised public realm – as the AJ wrote:

'The re-erected column now serves as a wonderful object lesson in the creation of urban space and of street life. What had degenerated into a mere crossroads has once again become a Classical circus and, thanks to the built-in stone seating at the base of the column, it has also become a popular place for meeting, sitting and conversation.' (AJ - 27.07.1989).

The Seven Dials Renaissance Project 1992 Façades | Streets | Lighting | Public Spaces

Although Seven Dials was a Conservation Area with Outstanding Status, had been a HAA and within the CG Action Plan none of these mechanisms provided an overall and holistic mechanism for improving the totality of the public realm and the mostly privately owned building façades.

We decided to explore the possibility of a comprehensive mechanism to encourage all the property owners and authorities to co-operate in works which are historically appropriate to enhance the character of the area as a whole.

Praise for a ground breaking Environmental Study

An Environmental Study of the area was commissioned and a multi-disciplinary team, including architect and town planner, Peter Heath, and architectural historian Dr. John Robinson, was appointed, with funding from the Kleinwort Benson Property Fund. The first version of the Study was published in 1992 and, to the Charity's surprise, was described as the first publication of its kind in the UK, followed by a short congratulatory debate in the House of Lords. The study sets out a holistic action plan for every element of the built environment from façades to street furniture, lighting, footway and carriageway treatments. It also includes a major exhibition – 'Architecture, History, Horology', which is available on free loan (36 display boards). It attracted praise from all quarters:

'If the proposals for Seven Dials were carried out they would lead to a national show-piece and something to which many could turn as a source for guidance.' The RTP1

'... this is the first time an holistic approach has been adopted to provide a detailed framework for the development of the total environment of an historic district of London... for this reason it could act as a model for other historic areas across the country' EH
And from Camden Council (rather unusually for a local authority):

'I write to congratulate the Seven Dials Monument Charity... this initiative... is a first for Camden and I believe for possibly for Greater London... It seems the financing of a Study by local interests can produce a degree of discussion on issues affecting the character and appearance of an area, and a commitment to proposals for enhancement, which the received wisdom of the Local Authority preparing proposals for consultation, will not match.'

Ironically just as the study was published P&O Properties applied to demolish half of Monmouth Street South and half of Earham Street East – which would have destroyed the area. At the subsequent appeal this work played a key role in the Inspector's decision to reject the appeal. Shaftesbury PLC bought the sites and much else in the area and our success has much to do with their unusual and enlightened approach to managing their West End estates including China Town and Carnaby Street.

The Study was re-written and re-published in two volumes in 1998 with the aid of a three year grant from the Department of National Heritage/ Department of Media Culture & Sport, and the Foundation for Sports and the Arts, as a national exemplar. This led to similar nearby studies – 'Caring for Covent Garden' (the Covent Garden Area Trust, 1996 and 2003), and 'Historic St James's' (the St. James's Conservation Trust). It falls into three broad sections – a historical



lay empty and in a state of dereliction - quite difficult to recall today. Many of the houses in Monmouth Street still had (charming) gas lighting and my own house at No. 1 Shorts Gardens had one cold tap in the rear yard in 1976.

Resurrection

In 1974 and after much lobbying, Seven Dials was declared an Outstanding Conservation Area (only 36 existed in the UK out of 7,000) and in 1977 a Housing Action Area, within the GLC's Covent Garden Action Area. Between 1977 and 1984, the HAA Committee (6 residents, 6 businesses and Camden Council Officers in partnership meeting every six weeks for seven years) brought back into use all 198 vacant residential units, encouraged major private and public housing schemes and new businesses began to move in. Both the housing and employment base of the area were regenerated as a sustainable community. The HAA was an exemplary partnership and the most successful of the HAA's in Camden at the time. The population increase was maybe 5/600% with many examples of outstanding housing and was a national exemplar of economic regeneration through active conservation of the built heritage.

Re-creating the Identity & the Space The Sundial Pillar at Seven Dials

The Seven Dials Monument Charity was established in 1984 at the request of Camden Council, to restore the Sundial Pillar, and to promote major environmental improvements on the expiry of our Housing Action Area. Our first task was the Pillar – the first project of its kind since Nelson's Column in the 1840's.

The search for the Pillar

Every book on London says that the Pillar was pulled down by the mob in 1773 in a search for buried gold. Our founder trustee Sir John Summerson told me I would be wasting my time researching otherwise and I was pleased, as an ex history student, to find the truth after three days going through newspapers at the BM. The Pillar was deliberately pulled down by order of the Paving Commissioners in 1773 in an (unsuccessful) attempt to rid the area of undesirables who congregated around it as recorded in the 'Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser' in June 17th, 28th and July 10th 1773, and to considerable protest at the removal of 'this great public ornament' (Morning Chronicle 10.07.1773).

Its remains were eventually purchased via public subscription and re-erected on The Green at Weybridge as a memorial to the Duchess of York. Various attempts were made in the last century to have the Pillar returned to its original site in Seven Dials, but Weybridge DC refused to return it, especially when we persuaded Camden to write demanding proof of purchase from 1842!

Fortunately, Edward Pierce's original working drawing from 1692 was held in the British Museum. However our architect AD 'Red' Mason (Whitfield Partners) found that neither the drawing, nor the marked dimensions, nor the remains at Weybridge quite tallied. One of the greatest problems was how to design the foundations so as to satisfy all the authorities whose services ran underneath. For example, how could the main sewer be repaired without the Pillar falling down?



Top: Seven Dials by William Hodges c. 1775, just after he returned from Captain Cook's second expedition to the South Seas in the Resolution
Above: The only known portrait of Thomas Neale on a rare Medalet of silver and copper *Courtesy The British Museum*

Decline

The first inhabitants were "respectable," gentlemen, lawyers, and prosperous tradesmen. However by the middle of the 18th century, 39 night-watchmen were needed to keep the peace. By the early 19th century the area became famous, together with St. Giles to the north, as the most notorious rookery in London, shown on Charles Booth's poverty map of 1889.

In 1974, when the Covent Garden Fruit and Vegetable Market moved after two centuries, many of the buildings in Seven Dials

analysis and the current planning context; a survey and drawings of each façade with individual recommendations and sections dealing with signage, paint colours, shopfronts etc; a section with proposals for street improvements, furniture, lighting etc. We are in the process of up-dating it for our website.

To realise the action plan we formed a partnership between the parties who have the power to implement it – the area's main freeholders and the local authority on the Camden side. Initial works were carried out in 1991-3 and Kleinwort's who funded the original study voluntarily increased their then S.52 planning agreement from £100,000 to £450,000 to fund works in Shorts Gardens and Earham Street.

The Study has encouraged private investment of c.£3million by Shaftesbury using the Study recommendations for all their many façades and we began on the final stages of the project in 2001 with the support of Peter Bishop who became director of planning and culture at Camden.

Major improvements to Monmouth Street using traditional materials are mostly completed funded 50/50 (£760,000) by the Trust & Camden Council and will be followed by improvements to Earham Street Market and the Dials in 2009-10. The Monmouth Street works using multi-coloured dressed setts has won a number of awards and the template has been copied by Westminster in Long Acre and TfL in Shaftesbury Avenue. These works take place under the Clear Zones banner and aim to combine our Study's objectives with improving pedestrian movement and spaces.

We have eschewed the fad for pedestrianisation which usually does not work in the West End and instead gone for traffic management and a reduction in through traffic. In high density mixed use areas in the city centre the dis-benefits were apparent in Neal Street which was overwhelmed by illegal street trading and more recently with the ill-fated Soho traffic management scheme where Old Compton Street became a mega outdoor bar until the early hours.

The lighting group

As well as our environment group we set up a lighting group in 2002 and have designed our own 'Windsor' style lantern. The group

includes Westminster, EH, the Corporation of London and the Mercers' Company and the tender was won by Lefebvre SA in France. This is a very complicated project on both a technical and aesthetic level and after many meetings and three prototypes should come to fruition later this year. All the lamp columns throughout Seven Dials and down to Long Acre will be replaced by the magnificent façade lantern designed by our colleague Paul Draper, probably with sugar bowl refractors and not the standard glaring pot optic. The lighting engineers from the three authorities have played a key role on the technical and maintenance issues – their main concerns hinge around sustainability. We have the funding for our lighting project – around £96,000 - but completion of all the remaining street works will cost around £1.3m.

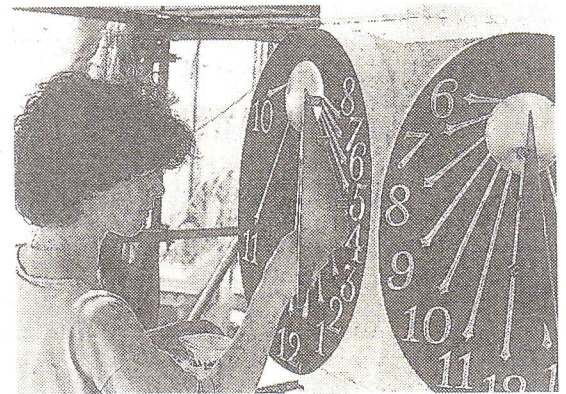
So we hope, somewhat later, as these things do take time, to prove that the RTPi were correct!

A tribute

Finally we should pay tribute to our partners who have not just helped finance this project, but who have done so with enthusiasm and long term commitment. Shaftesbury PLC: who made major donations and also employed their planning consultants and surveyors who played a key role on a wide range of technical work. Creating a cross border lighting partnership was made possible by Cllr. Robert Davis at Westminster and Cllr. Sue Vincent at Camden and much valuable support was given by officers at Camden, including David Reidy, Forward Planning and Martin Reading Head of Highways Engineering.

What are the lessons?

Have a clear and holistic vision based upon a detailed building and spaces analysis and ensure that you have an open and transparent partnership to implement it so it does not sit on a shelf as so many studies do. ■



Top: The repaving of Seven Dials, 1986. Camden Council, with Government support completely repaved the circus and created a new island for the Pillar's reconstruction

Middle: Caroline Webb gilding the sundial faces

Bottom: The unveiling of the re-erected monument in 1989, performed by HM Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands