

New Covent Garden Market

New Covent Garden Market at Nine Elms, replacing the famous market of the same name in central London, was constructed in 1971–4 to designs by Gollins, Melvin, Ward & Partners. Its sprawling site of some xxx acres occupied former railway land, first built over by the London & South Western Railway and bisected by the main line from Waterloo (pages xxx). The fruit and vegetable market, south of the railway, is reached by a private road and tunnel from Battersea Park Road. To the north of the line stands the flower market, with the associated twin Market Towers where Wandsworth Road meets Nine Elms Lane (Ill. 11.1b). Both markets and the towers now fall within the London Borough of Wandsworth, though formerly much of the flower market site lay in Lambeth. At the time of writing, all these buildings are to be demolished and replaced by a single integrated market complex on the southern site (page xxx).

Though lacking the ramshackle intimacy of the old Covent Garden Market, their Nine Elms successors retain its rawness, smells and litter. If the flower market has greater appeal, the fruit and vegetable market has latterly become a popular Sunday venue for selling almost everything except fresh produce.

The history of Covent Garden Market is covered in volume 36 of the *Survey of London*. After years of wrestling with private owners, cramped facilities, archaic tolls and chaotic traffic, by Act of Parliament in 1961 the Government created a Covent Garden Market Authority, in which the central market properties and land were vested.¹ The Authority was to manage and reorganize the markets and, if necessary, rebuild them, using its property holdings as security. There was near-unanimity over the need to rebuild, but not over where that should take place. The Act did not explicitly sanction rebuilding the markets outside the Covent Garden

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area. But a concessionary clause hinted that the Government would not look askance at such an application.²

Businessmen predominated on the new Authority, backed by officers from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, including Frank Hollins, its managing director. It commissioned a report to examine suggested locations for the fruit and vegetable market at Seven Dials, Nine Elms and King's Cross; further sites at Wood Lane, Shepherd's Bush and Beckton were soon added. As 'location analysis' was a new science, there were few experts to choose from. At the recommendation of Charles Forte, a member of the Authority, the job went to Marcel De Meirleir, a Belgian who had studied under Milton Friedman in Chicago and headed relocation projects in Belgium, notably the big wholesale market in Mechelen. He was then working with Gordon Lilly as the two-man Fantus Company International Division, the subsidiary of an American firm.³

The Fantus Report, first drafted in French and delivered in Spring 1963, plumped for Beckton, where the North Thames Gas Board was about to vacate a site ten times Covent Garden in size, large enough to support an American-style, low-density 'prairie market', with potential for shipping and a railhead. But the traders were hostile. Beckton was too far east to offer adequate distribution, the road connections were bad, and it would have interfered with other markets, notably at Stratford. A market at Beckton might also have lost its prestigious national role in price-setting. In view of opposition from the Covent Garden Tenants Association, the Authority fell back on the site that had hitherto found informal favour, Nine Elms. All other sites besides Beckton and Nine Elms were now disregarded as insuperably expensive.⁴

Nine Elms, also examined in the Fantus Report, was familiar to Covent Garden traders because its goods yards included a warehouse storing fruit delivered from Southampton. British Railways was then bent on rationalizing its urban property portfolio, but there were complicating factors. The site first

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considered was very tight, of some 36 acres all north of the main line, consisting of Nine Elms Goods Yard North (around the old Nine Elms Terminus) and the so-called Brunswick Yard on the other side of Nine Elms Lane, where a private cold-storage plant was about to be built. So it was divided, partly bespoke, and less than half the size of Beckton. The Ministry of Aviation also favoured the same spot for London's proposed heliport; there was even some speculation about sharing the site and therefore the costs.⁵

In June 1963 the Covent Garden Market Authority started scrutinizing Nine Elms, using as their consultant Allan Beckett of Sir Bruce White, Wolfe Barry & Partners, engineers. Beckett produced sketches suggesting how the markets might occupy the site, or a larger one if adjacent land became available. Even with multi-level arrangements, there scarcely seemed room for the fruit and vegetable market, let alone the flower traders, who were not reconciled to moving.⁶

The situation was transformed that September, when British Railways intimated that once they had completed electrifying the Waterloo to Bournemouth line in 1968, they might release 30 further acres south of the main line, including the sheds of Nine Elms Goods Yard South and the steam locomotive depot to its west. Subsequently the railway authorities reduced the land on offer north of the line to eight acres, since they now planned to use Nine Elms Goods Yard North as a railhead, at this stage deemed essential for the markets' transport needs. In compensation they threw in the alternative of extra land on the South Lambeth Goods Yard, beside Battersea Power Station.⁷

The architects Gollins, Melvin, Ward & Partners (GMW) now embarked on a feasibility study of the enlarged site, at first in partnership with Sir Bruce White, Wolfe Barry & Partners, later without them, after friction arose between the engineers and the Authority. This appointment followed a report by Frank Gollins on the Covent Garden area, and advice he had given on a plan dreamt up by the flower market traders, whereby a new building for them by the engineers

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Frederick S. Snow and Partners would have obliterated the old market in the Covent Garden piazza. Once that scheme unravelled, it became clear that both markets would have to move together, as distributors who combined foodstuffs with flowers had always wished.⁸

By 1964 the Authority was committed to Nine Elms. Gollins, who with W. R. Headley took the scheme forward for the architects, had roughed out the first dispositions, which saw both markets located well west of the sites investigated by Fantus, on some 80 acres either side of Battersea Park Road. North of the road in the lee of Battersea Power Station was to be the flower market on the South Lambeth Goods Yard. On the larger site southwards, offices and covered parking north of the railway were to be linked via a tunnel to the fruit and vegetable market, with public housing beyond it stretching through to Wandsworth Road (Ill. 11.1a). This scheme encountered obstacles. The local authorities found it extravagant, and the housing element palliative. It also raised traffic issues touching the alignment and capacity of Nine Elms Lane and Battersea Park Road, and destructive spiral road ramps planned to take market traffic over a bridge across the latter.⁹

In 1965–6 the Authority promoted a Bill including sanction for buying the land earmarked by this feasibility study. During its passage some outlying parts of the site were struck out, notably the southernmost sector near Wandsworth Road, but the Authority won purchase powers for its core site. An alternative scheme promoted by Lambeth Borough Council with support from Wandsworth to rebuild the whole market in a multi-storey scheme north of the railway was rejected.¹⁰

After the Covent Garden Market Act passed in March 1966, a firmer brief emerged. Hollins of the Authority had gathered data about large wholesale market projects in gestation elsewhere, notably Rungis outside Paris and Hunt's Point in the Bronx, New York. A deputation including Hollins, his deputy Colin Allen, and Gollins now visited North America. Largely on the basis of Hunt's Point – in

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design at just this time by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, often influential on GMW – they concluded in favour of simple, compact planning; the layout of Rungis, where the markets occupied nine separate buildings, was eschewed.¹¹

Several fresh plans followed in 1966–7. The crucial change was the abandonment of South Lambeth Goods Yard for the flower market, and its transfer back to Nine Elms Goods Yard North, where the railhead area shrank in size, in token of the dwindling proportion of fresh produce moved by rail. The administration building was also resited east of the flower market, after several alternative placings. This reversion to the original site was bound up with a road scheme devised by the Greater London Council for Vauxhall Cross, whereby Nine Elms Lane was replanned in 1970–1 so as to debouch further eastwards, entailing the demolition of the Southern Railway's Granary Building (page xxx) in the process. That enlarged the ground available to the flower market and to the Market Towers, which stand on the old roadway's footprint. Meanwhile the fruit and vegetable market had reached its final configuration by October 1968, in the shape of lengthy parallel blocks just south of the railway.¹²

Though the markets had been scheduled to open in 1971, government cutbacks delayed infrastructural work until 1970. Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons won the combined building contract for both markets, carried out from the following summer. Both portions of New Covent Garden Market, as the project became known from that year, opened for business in November 1974, but the towers spilled over for another year; the Government's Property Services Agency became the major office tenant here. The Queen performed the official opening on 26 June 1975. The various buildings, designed by GMW with Clarke, Nicholls & Marcel as structural engineers, are described below.¹³

During construction British Railways abandoned the undertaking to provide a railhead to serve the market, as written into the 1966 Act. That change had been on the cards once expanded rail freight facilities at Paddock Wood and Hither

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Green, better placed for most Channel ports, reduced the value of a Nine Elms railhead. With the support of traders and politicians there was a flurry of hopes for its revival in 1974, when Britain joined the Common Market amid talk of a speedy Channel Tunnel and dedicated rail link. Once that scheme collapsed, the railhead was abandoned, leaving the markets without the connection on which the Nine Elms location had first been posited. The parallel idea of a river landing stage for freight also failed, though part of Brunswick Yard was long reserved for it.¹⁴

It remains to summarize the history of the sites connected with the markets since 1974. As the project had always relied on government borrowing, there were pressures for the Authority to pay its way. Hence the administration was finally housed in a plinth below twin tower blocks offering the promise of lucrative office rents, from market traders or others. The saga of Covent Garden, where comprehensive redevelopment was jettisoned for a conservationist approach, did not ease the Authority's financial position. Once the markets were completed, it was pressed to sell surplus land.

The largest area was some six acres of former sheds and stabling on the west side of Wandsworth Road. This site (in Lambeth), at one time scheduled for the Brixton School of Building, was sold to Sainsbury's for a supermarket in 1978, after Wandsworth had declined to countenance one beside the main market entrance road and tunnel off Battersea Park Road. A cash-and-carry warehouse and some smaller operations took this latter site. There was also the so-called 'riverside strip', originally part of Brunswick Yard on the north side of Nine Elms Lane. Here various development proposals were made by GMW; luxury flats were mooted, and at one time there was a plan to rehouse Westminster City School here, but Wandsworth Council rejected these suggestions. After a lengthy planning enquiry and appeal the site was sold in 1978, the flats of Riverside Court being subsequently built here. As for Market Towers, the Authority hoped to hold on to them, but was obliged to sell by the Conservative Government in 1980. The change led the Covent Garden Market Authority to build a wall between the flower market

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and the towers and to move its offices to Covent House, midway between the markets and south-west of the Sainsbury's site.¹⁵

At the time of writing, plans are advancing as part of the Nine Elms regeneration programme (page xxx) to concentrate both markets on the Fruit and Vegetable site in a complex of five buildings designed by Neil Tomlinson Architects, adding some housing on left-over land. The northern site with the Flower Market and towers is also to be entirely redeveloped. Here Foster & Partners have been chosen as architects of altogether six buildings providing some 1,750 homes. Two of these are designed to be 'book ends' at the entrance to the proposed Nine Elms linear park.¹⁶

The buildings

The **Fruit and Vegetable Market** consists of two parallel, symmetrical ranges 1,250 feet in length (Ill. 11.3), constructed on a steel frame with blockwork walls. They are separated by a roadway but linked by two glazed bridges with crosswalks beneath, dividing each range into three. The bridges carry through just above roof level and are expressed on the ranges' outside faces to mitigate monotony, while blockwork staircases protrude at the ends. The ranges have a continuous apron and overhanging fascia on both sides, for loading and unloading. Behind the apron come trading units, originally of four different sizes. These units are single-height on both external faces, but break down internally to two levels, with an office above and a display space below; this gives on to an enclosed and toplit central corridor known as the buyers' walk, once the main focus of interchange. The main change since 1974 has been the replacement of the patent glass fascias used all round the building.¹⁷

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On the north side of the market the western bridge is projected out to become a pedestrian link to the seven-level **parking garage** on a concrete frame, with a glazed administration building attached.

To the north-east of the main building is a low-rise, steel-framed building formerly known as the **Growers' Pavilion**, now just as the Pavilion. Intended for small traders selling from vans or lorries, it was open externally on the long sides, though equipped with kiosks. It is now enclosed and used for storage.

The **Flower Market**, square in plan with sides of xxx feet, is the most memorable of New Covent Garden Market's buildings (Ills 11.4, 5). Glimpses of its waffle-style roof may be had from road and railway, while its interior offers the spatial generosity of the railway sheds which it replaced, along with distinctive colours and odours. The market is arranged as a large top-lit open hall, with offices on two storeys round the perimeter served on the upper level by cantilevered and glazed corridors. The traders occupy flexible open positions on the floor (Ill. 11.6). There are canopies, entrances and vehicle access for loading and unloading all round, but the main dock is on the east side.

The Flower Market's chief architectural feature is its space-frame roof. Metal space-frame coverings had then been in fashion for some years, not least for markets. More unusual was the choice of GRP (glass-reinforced polyester) sections for the roofing, selected because they allowed a balance of translucence and insulation for inspecting and safeguarding flowers. These were first proposed in 1970, when the Market Authority agreed to use them only after rigorous testing.¹⁸ The units proved satisfactory in performance but not in cost or speed of manufacture. The makers, Mickelover Transport Ltd, tendered higher than anticipated and soon fell behind with deliveries. Had it not been for a national building strike in 1972 which allowed the GRP sections to catch up, the project's timetable could have been affected.¹⁹ Internally the roofing units are carried by struts connected to light steel girders; these in turn are braced by frameworks

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connected to the heads of six rows of round columns on the floor of the hall. The units are double-skinned, presenting a flat base with bevelled corners internally and a tetrahedral 'bucket' profile externally giving vigour to the perimeter. These buckets again have bevelled edges, braced by external framing which, like all the steelwork, is painted green. Some alterations have been made to the roof.

East of the flower market and connected with it by another long glazed bridge are **Market Towers**. A low podium building, originally containing the offices of the Covent Garden Market Authority as well as some shops and catering facilities, runs north and south of the two towers, which are connected but staggered in plan. They are of steel-framed construction with glass cladding on the long side and lifts and staircase towers expressed in concrete. The towers are entered from a later concourse facing east on to Vauxhall Cross.