'All asmear with filth and fat and blood and foam'.[1] The social and architectural reformation of Smithfield Market during the nineteenth century

by

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Smithfield, lying at the heart of London is not only one of the best designed, largest, surviving retail markets in Europe; but also a well known landmark, with an historical tradition which stretches back to the twelfth century. It is appropriate to review the history of the market and its site at this time, following the recent successful refurbishment under the direction of the Corporation of London, Department of Building Services. The architects for the work were H.L.M. Architects and the contractors, Taylor Woodrow.

From the early middle ages, Smithfield had been the site of London's largest livestock market; every week, cattle, sheep and horses were sold there. Located just outside the city walls, the site had, until the early eighteenth century, suited its purpose. It was near enough to the metropolis to attract purchasers, but not intrusive upon nearby areas of residential settlement. Being north of the city, it was also convenient for the delivery of animals that had been herded to London by drovers from the farms and fields of Britain.

Once sold, the sheep and cattle had to be slaughtered nearby and the courts and alleys surrounding the market, until renamed in the spirit of Victorian propriety, had proudly proclaimed their purposes: Stinking Lane, Flesh Shamble, Cow Lane and Bladder Street. It was however, not only the blood of beasts that flowed in Smithfield; from the fifteenth century, it was a place of criminal execution and a

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Fig. 1
Bartholomew Fair
Rowlandson, 1813
Guildhall Library

convenient open-space in which to burn heretics and witches. By the seventeenth century Smithfield had become a venue for duelling and the area was perceived as a centre of general debauchery. It was also the site of the annual jamboree of Bartholomew Fair, vividly described by Ben Jonson: 'The place is Smithfield, or the field of smiths, the grove of hobby-horses and trinkets. The wares are the wares of devils; and the whole is the shop of Satan!'[2] Until it was suppressed in 1855, the fair witnessed the annual gathering of drunks, dandies, whores, rogues and rascals to feast on ale, roast pig and gingerbread and to indulge in all manner of sensual pleasures (Fig. 1).

By the mid-eighteenth century, the pressures of an expanding population in London had created suburbs all around the ancient city; Smithfield no longer lay outside, but within the very heart of the metropolis (Fig. 2). In 1766, complaint was made that the intolerable practice of holding a market for the sale of live cattle in the centre of London was not only dangerous but 'inelegant and inconvenient'.[3]

In the early nineteenth century the scenes at Smithfield on Friday and Monday market days were anarchic. The exhausted cattle driven through the public streets were 'goaded to desperation ... to the annoyance of our commerce, to the absolute

Fig. 2
A bird's eye view of Smithfield Market
Pugin and Rowlandson, 1811
Guildhall Library

danger of our persons, and the terror of the whole female sex'.[4] The confusion and crowding on market days presented 'a scene of much unavoidable cruelty to the poor animals necessarily pent up in a smaller space than is agreeable to the feelings of true humanity'.[5]

The growing sentimentalism of those willing to eat meat, but refusing to acknowledge whence it came, was principally an urban phenomenon, a result of the removal to the cities of most of the working population through industrialization. As people moved away from their rural roots and knowledge of the countryside, the sight of cattle and sheep and their sites of slaughter were deemed visually unacceptable to those inhabiting the city. Moral repugnance at cruelty to lesser creatures had as much to do with the works of such philosophers as Rousseau, as to the word of God. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals had been founded in 1824, while the Vegetarian Society of Great Britain was established in 1847. Membership of these groups was for the more radical. However, the growing belief that animals had feelings, and that barbaric cruelty was both morally and

spiritually wrong, even perhaps indicative of a corrupt society at large, became more widely accepted.

Attention focused on Smithfield, not only because it was the largest and most visible market in the kingdom, being situated in London, but because the streets around the market were awash with the attendant nuisances of slaughtering, as well as the manufacture and processing of animal by-products.

In 1827, *The Times* summed up the common mood towards the slaughtering facilities around Smithfield:

> We tolerate slaughter houses in the centre of our City, neglected by the local authorities with regard to the health or disease of cattle slaughtered for our food, as well as cruelties of a most wanton, unnecessary and horrible nature which are daily practiced with impunity.

It went on to add that many of

> these abodes of cruelty, filth and pestilence are in underground cellars, with only a twilight gloom from a grating in the pavement, accessible only by a perpendicular step-ladder, down which the sheep and calves are precipitated.[6]

By the mid-nineteenth century new arguments, less concerned with property rights and with more emphasis on propriety, the national good and cruelty to animals, called on the City authorities to reform Smithfield Market and the slaughter houses. The impetus came from the urban middle classes. Adam Smith stated that 'the trade of a butcher is a brutal and an odious business' and the social investigators of the later Victorian era reported that slaughtermen were said to be the most demoralized class of all.[7]

In 1851, the noxious trades that surrounded Smithfield included two horse slaughterers, eight common slaughterers, thirty-two private slaughterers and two offensive (diseased meat) slaughterers. In addition, there was a neatsfoot oil factory, three cat-gut factories, a sausage maker, eight bladder blowers and two cat- and rabbit-fur dressers. Fifteen other miscellaneous offensive trades, including bone dealing, were located nearby, and allegedly twenty receiving shops for stolen goods.[8]

Some associated trades were as offensive as the actual slaughtering; the pandemonium of a cat- and rabbit-fur dressers was vividly described in the mid-nineteenth century:

> a large, dark, wooden shed, floored with mahogany dust and around its sides large tubs, red as the floor and about three feet and a half high, in each of which - twenty-three in number - was a naked human being, red as a Cherokee Indian, jumping in all sorts of attitudes.

On enquiry 'these rows of denuded humanity' were found to be kneading the skins in butter.[9]

The City to which the reformers looked for inspiration was Paris, not just to Les Halles as an up-to-date market for meat, but also to the five public abattoirs which had been established in the Parisian suburbs after the suppression of the private slaughter houses by Napoleon. Within the five abattoirs were 240 slaughter houses each containing between one and three butchers.[10] In 1847, these abattoirs were said to have 'no disagreeable smell; no disgusting sight' and were often ornate

enough for one not to suspect the purpose of the establishment.[11] The animals taken to the Paris abattoirs were also provided with hay and water until the time of their deaths.

It was remarked at this time that it was not just in Paris, but in every town in France, as well as many in Germany, Sweden and the USA, that reform of the slaughtering trade in populous areas had been achieved. It was only London, 'the largest, richest, most populous, and enlightened capital in Europe', which harboured an abuse, repudiated by the rest of the world.[12]

The main reasons for the maintenance of the *status quo* were the vested interest of the butchers and the disinclination of the Corporation of London, which controlled the city markets, actually to tackle the problem. In 1849, while the Corporation was still planning how to increase the size of the market at Smithfield, a Royal Commission was set up by the government to enquire into the market. As a result, in 1851, the government introduced a bill to remove the live meat market from Smithfield, to stop the passage of livestock through the locality and to remove the attendant nuisances. The Corporation's rival bill to enlarge the market failed to receive a second reading, while the government's bill for removal received royal assent in August 1851.[13]

In 1852, a site covering seventy-two acres at Copenhagen Fields was decided upon, and the Metropolitan Cattle Market subsequently was built on the site (Fig. 3). The new market was spacious and well designed by the City Architect, James Bunstone Bunning, with a central clock tower, from which the market superintendent could oversee activities. On 11th June 1855, Smithfield Market closed and just two days later the new live meat market was opened by Prince Albert. It was an immediate success and remained as a cattle market run by the Corporation until 1963, when the site was sold to the London County Council for the erection of public housing.

The old Smithfield site remained empty for several years pending a decision on what to do with the land. Calls for the provision of model housing for the poor were heard, but the inadequacy of the sole remaining meat market, Newgate, was evident. A new 'dead' meat market would replace the livestock market at Smithfield and would afford the 'City an excellent opportunity to erect a market creditable to the metropolis'.[14]

In 1858, *The Builder* correctly predicted:

> the quantity of dead meat which is sent to London from a distance continues to increase ... when the prejudice which exists on this subject has been put aside, it will be found cheaper to bring the slaughtered animals to London by rail.[15]

The construction of a railway station beneath the new Smithfield Market would not only prove to be an innovative move by the City authorities, but in architectural terms an unprecedented act.

In September 1864, the Corporation advertised for designs for the Metropolitan Meat and Poultry Market from the architectural profession. Premiums of £300 and £200 were to be awarded to the authors of the two designs thought most suitable, but the competition was controversial because there was no guarantee that the

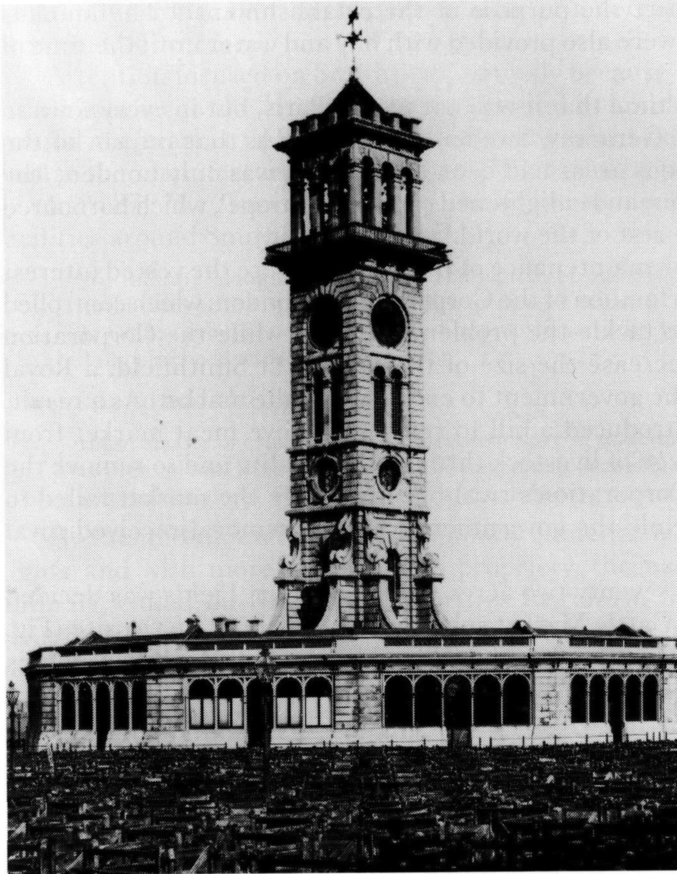

Fig. 3
Metropolitan Cattle Market,
Copenhagen Fields, Islington
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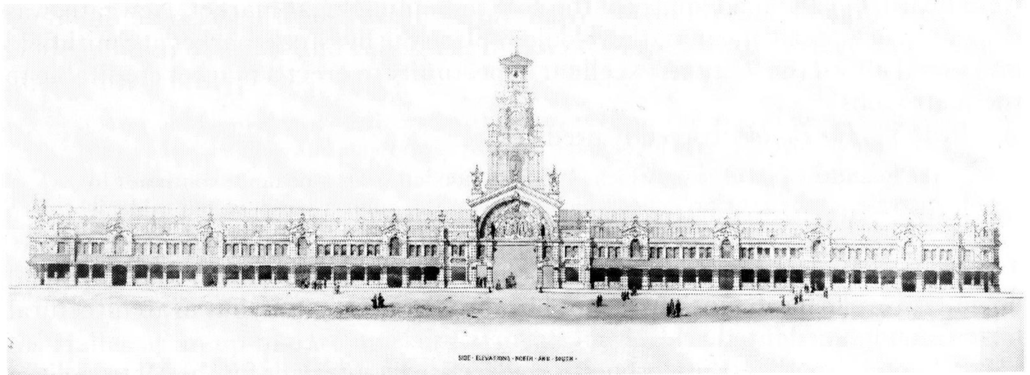

Fig. 4
Competition design 'A Key' by Knightly and Mew
Corporation of London Record Office

winning design would be built. Although these designs would become the copyright of the City, there would be no commitment to the plans, nor to the employment of the responsible architects to carry out the work. In early December 1864, the Markets Improvement Committee examined the seven designs submitted anonymously under mottoes. Overall the quality was not of a high standard. Both the committee and *The Builder* considered the design 'A Key' to be the best submitted (Fig. 4) and in June 1865, this design entered by Knightly and Mew of Cannon Street was awarded the £300 premium.[16]

The winning design was rather confusingly described as resembling the 'German or rather the recent French version of Greco-Italian'. The market was of the 'open' type (i.e. the shops would be open to the street), but the major fault of the design, was the incorporation of a central tower as the main architectural feature. Because of the construction of the underground railway beneath Smithfield, the support of a central high tower or dome would have been a practical impossibility. The competition failed to produce a design that the Corporation thought worthy of construction. Thus in summer 1865, the responsibility to design a suitable meat and poultry market passed to the City Architect, Horace Jones (1819-87), who had succeeded Bunning in this position in 1864.

Towards the end of 1865, Jones presented several plans and elevations of both 'open' and 'closed' markets, which the Markets Improvement Committee, in consultation with the meat trade, considered. In December a design was chosen, the architect estimating that the market proper would cost £61,700 and the upper rooms a further £60,000. Throughout the first half of 1866, detailed plans were prepared, as were a contract and highly detailed specifications. Tenders were invited in early November; eighteen companies applied for the work and Browne and Robinson, who had put in the lowest tender at £134,460, were awarded the contract.

The design which was finally constructed consisted of a number of equal parallelograms, formed by dividing the area in half by the central roadway (north-south) and secondly by the central avenue (east-west)(Fig. 5). Each quarter had three avenues running north to south. The resulting small blocks contained sixteen shops, measuring 36ft deep and 15ft wide. Altogether the building was 631ft long and 246ft wide.

Horace Jones described the market as 'Italian' in style, adding, ambiguously, that it was a type 'more nearly allied to the Renaissance architecture of France, than the more severe Palladian school'[17] (Fig. 6). The dominating feature was a series of arcaded recesses between doric pilasters, fluted on the upper two-thirds and elevated on pedestals. Portland stone was used for the pilasters and dressings, while the plain walls were constructed of red brick. The architectural press approved of the choice of building material as 'the stone greatly preponderated and the building seems rather to be of stone relieved by brick than brick dressed in stone'.[18]

The resulting design and chief points of architectural effect are the four towers, constructed in Portland stone with bell-shaped cupolas. Originally, the cupolas were covered with decorative leaf-punched copper tiles, which glinted in the sunlight(Fig. 7). The façades facing the public roadway which passes through the market from

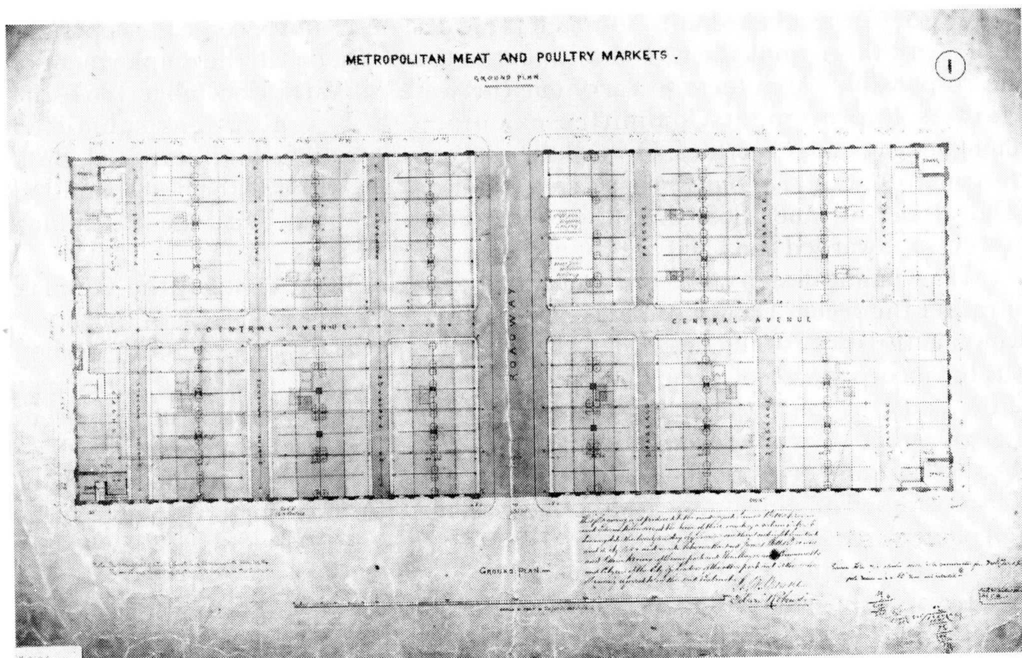

Fig. 5
Ground plan of Metropolitan Meat and Poultry Markets by Horace Jones
Corporation of London Record Office

Fig. 6
Metropolitan Meat and Poultry Market, Smithfield
Chromolithograph commemorating the opening, 1st December 1868 - view from the south west
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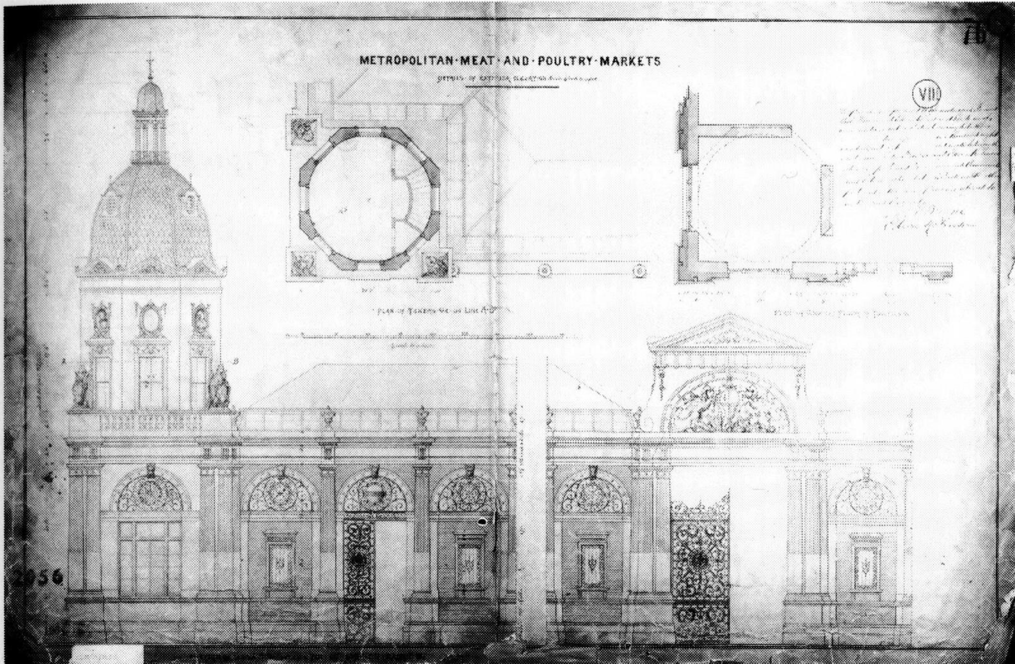

Fig. 7
Details of elevation and plan of towers
Corporation of London Record Office

north to south, with their ornate cast iron frontispieces, were surmounted by statues of women representing the major cities of the United Kingdom: London, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Dublin. The pedimented gateways to the east and west fronts are also the gateways to the central avenue. These are flanked by coupled pilasters, with an elliptical arch filled-in with the city arms, cut in the tympanum with an ornate pediment over the opening.

Apart from the architectural design, the two most notable features of Smithfield derive from necessity - the ingenious design of the roof and the extensive and striking use of ironwork in the construction of the market, about which *Building News* considered 'the market will owe not a little of its pleasing character to the ironwork which enters so largely into its adornment'[19] (Fig. 8).

The roofs of the market were an adaptation of a mansard, the lower portion filled with glass louvres, which admitted light and air but prevented the direct rays of the sun. On the upper portion of the roof were louvred dormers. The roof was supported on wrought iron girders with ornamental spandrels. The cast iron pillars and girders were painted 'light lavender', with the capitals of the pillars and some rivets of the spans of the girders being picked out in gold.[20]

The new market was greeted with much acclaim:

> a thing to be proud of for it exactly suits the purpose for which it was designed and embodies the latest ideas of fitness and convenience in such structures.[21]

Fig. 8
View of central avenue in 1921
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The use of such words as 'sumptuous', 'splendid', 'magnificent' and 'gorgeous' was rejected as unnecessary by the *City Press:*

> it is a market and therefore not a palace ... Mr Horace Jones has given us a great block composed of brick, stone and glass, warm in colour and chastely furnished.[22]

The opening ceremony in November 1868 was a grand occasion, presided over by the Lord Mayor and the City worthies who marched from the Guildhall. The Metropolitan Meat and Poultry Market was declared open, and the 1200 invited guests moved on to the main event, the feast, a suitably carnivorous spread, comprising barons of beef and boars' heads.

The new market, had been long-awaited since the closure of the Smithfield cattle market in 1855. The Markets Improvement Committee of the Corporation after some government pressure had succeeded in producing a design and a market of which the City could be proud. At last 'a further step in raising London to a level with other capitals' had been taken and the opening of the market put 'at the disposal of the citizens of London a market that will be worthy of the greatest city

Fig. 9
At work in Smithfield in 1987
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in the world'.[23]

Smithfield survives today as one of the most handsome market buildings in Europe (Fig. 9). It is to the credit of the Corporation of London that the decision made in the 1980s, to retain the market and to incorporate up-to-date sanitary and refrigeration facilities, while sympathetically refurbishing and maintaining the architectural integrity of the building, will enable Smithfield to continue to sell meat into the next century. London's other great retail markets - Covent Garden, Billingsgate and Spitalfields - have not been so lucky. Surviving but forlorn, the commodities which their roofs were built to shelter have long been removed to locations more convenient for road transportation. But London is fortunate in retaining at least one major public market that continues to fulfil its original function. Long may Smithfield continue to be '... the true centre, the true heart of London. Bleeding heart, of course, on account of the meat'.[24]

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