

LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS: PAST AND PRESENT.

BY ROBERT HUNTER.

IT is a happy accident that the largest square-garden in London lies on the threshold of the City and in the midst of densely crowded courts and alleys. From Wellington Street to Chancery Lane, there is at present no direct communication, north and south, between the two great arteries of traffic, the Strand and Holborn. Consequently we have a region of short lengths of broad streets leading nowhere, and of narrow lanes and yet narrower passages winding through a maze of small tenements. In the broader streets the houses are used, partly at least, for wholesale trade and for manufactures pursued at home; the rest of the district carries on a brisk business in second-rate eatables, and teems with children. The air is close and malodorous, and the occasional glimpse of an interior is not inviting. Already one part of the district, to the east of Drury Lane, has been cleared as insanitary, and is now occupied by lofty blocks of workmen's dwellings. Another region, between Great Queen Street and Holborn, is pronounced by Mr. Charles Booth to be vicious and semi-criminal,—the only region of the kind in central London. In yet another spot flourishes Clare Market, hard by which is a slaughter-house. From this unsavoury district the persevering wayfarer, keeping steadily eastwards, will emerge, almost at any point, on Lincoln's Inn Fields. The contrast could hardly be more striking. Squalid tenements are exchanged for lofty mansions, close streets for a broad roadway, and dirt and unsightliness for the trees and turf of a spacious garden. On one side of the Fields is the College of Surgeons. On another are Sir John Soane's Museum and the Inns of Court Hotel. On the west is the interesting façade of Lindsey House, and other mementos of the genius of Inigo Jones; at the northwest corner the huge pile of Newcastle House. On the east is the long wall of Lincoln's Inn, over which rise the library and dining hall, and, further off, the long

line of Stone Buildings. Within, the gardens are broad gravel walks and wide stretches of turf swept by the boughs of some of the finest plane trees in London. In summer, when these trees are clothed in their broad bright leaves, only the top-most stories of one or two of the highest houses can be seen from the centre of the Square. The din of London is hushed, and we may well forget that four millions of people are close-packed around us.

We have said that London is fortunate in possessing this large garden in its midst. But at present it puts its possession to strange uses. While the alleys and courts of Clare Market and Drury Lane teem with young life, while the road-ways of Lincoln's Inn Fields and its approaches—even the court-yards of its stately houses—are covered in holiday times by playing children, the gardens themselves are almost deserted. Lincoln's Inn Fields, we all know, is the haunt of lawyers. Here between ten and six the wheels of the law are set rolling by many a clever head and busy hand. But between five and six there is a general exodus. The householders of Lincoln's Inn Fields do not live there; for them it is a place of work and nothing else. During the day they are too busy to think of using their garden; in their leisure hours they are far away. A few bachelors may have chambers in the "*entre-sol* of the sparrows"; the curators of the two museums, the manager of the hotel, may perhaps have a wife and family living in the Square. With these exceptions the Square has no residents, and there is no one to be seen in the gardens. To supply a population for this beautiful pleasure-ground, keys are left for a substantial money payment to tradesmen in the neighbourhood, and a few nursemaids with their charges are thus persuaded to enter the Square. But even this device produces small results, and it is scarcely a figure of speech to say that when the pavements and the curbstones of the Square are full of children,

the garden is a desert. This strange state of things the London County Council wish to remedy by taking over the garden from its present owners and throwing it open to the public. The present ownership is peculiar and is the outcome of a history, which is not without interest to Londoners.

In old sketch plans of St. Giles's, we find on the site of Lincoln's Inn Fields a considerable open space marked Fikattesfeld, Fickets Fields, or Fichel's Fields. It seems to have had some connection with the Templars, who perhaps

seems to have furnished the plan of a square of great size and beauty, and who actually designed some at least of the houses on the west side of the present Lincoln's Inn Fields. Unfortunately private interests prevented the full execution of his scheme,—a result which leads Mr. Stowe to indulge in the following reflections:—

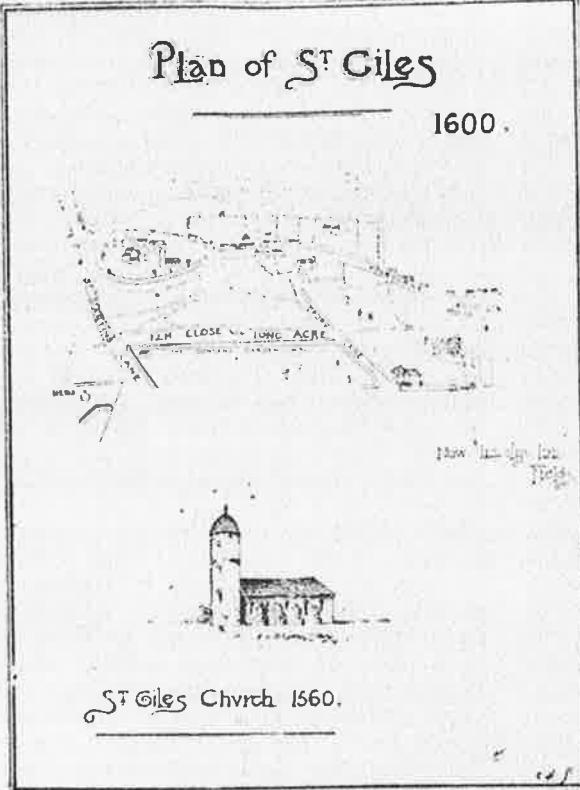
“From the Terras in Lincoln's Inn Gardens we have a prospect of one of the largest and most beautiful squares in Europe; originally laid out by the masterly hand of Inigo Jones, and intended to have been built all in the same style and taste; but, by the miscarriage of this and many other such noble designs, there is too much reason to believe that England will never be able to produce people of taste enough to be of the same mind or unite their sentiments for the public ornament and reputation.”

There seem, indeed, to have been repeated attempts to encroach upon the open area of Inigo Jones' Square. Fortunately a powerful opponent to the ruthless impulses of private aggrandizement arose in the Benchers of Lincoln's Inn, who advanced a claim which we fear would be scouted by the law of the present day. They alleged that they “were interested in the benefit and advantage of the prospect and air” of the Fields; and upon this intimation the aggressors speedily came to terms. Building, as yet, was confined to the houses on the west side, and the commencement of rows on the north and south sides; the owners proposed to continue these rows eastward towards the wall of Lincoln's Inn. To this the Benchers had no objection if the rest of Cup Field (the then name of the greater part of the Square) were beautified and adorned and kept free of further buildings. And accordingly on the 19th of June, 1657, the following quaintly worded provisions were agreed to:—

“First, that the two rows or ranges intended to be built as aforesaid should have equal proportion in front, height, breadth, strength, and beauty with Portugal Row, or in a more firm or beautiful manner; also that there should be forty feet by the standard distance between each of the two rows or ranges of building and Lincoln's Inn wall; also that all the rest and residue of the field should within two years then next, at the costs and charges of the

used it as a tilting ground. In 1376, we are told, it was a place of resort for walking and sports of various kinds, and was especially used by the clerks of Chancery, and apprentices and students of the law.¹ This use continued till the time of James I., when a Commission was issued to Lord Chancellor Bacon and other distinguished persons to ascertain how far the Fields might be built on. The Commission was assisted by the celebrated Inigo Jones, the King's architect, who

¹ See a petition to Parliament quoted in Clinch's *Bloomsbury and St. Giles's*, p. 86.



owners, be levelled, planed, and cast into grass plots and gravel walks of convenient breadth, railed all along on each side, and set with rows of trees, according to a plot or model thereto annexed; and that for the future no building, other than the said two rows or ranges, should be erected upon the said field or any part thereof (except one water house in the middle of the said field, which should not cover in proportion the breadth of ten yards square); also that the owners should at their charges build and set up in the middle of the said wall of Lincoln's Inn, a large pair of gates and freestone stairs, with a fair and easy descent out of the walls belonging to the said Society into the said field, for the use and convenience of the students of the Society."

To secure that this detailed arrangement should be carried out, the owners sold to the Benchers all the Field except the sites of the proposed rows of houses, and the Benchers in return leased the same area to the former owners for 900 years, with a proviso that the lease should be void and the Benchers might take possession, if any building took place contrary to the agreement.

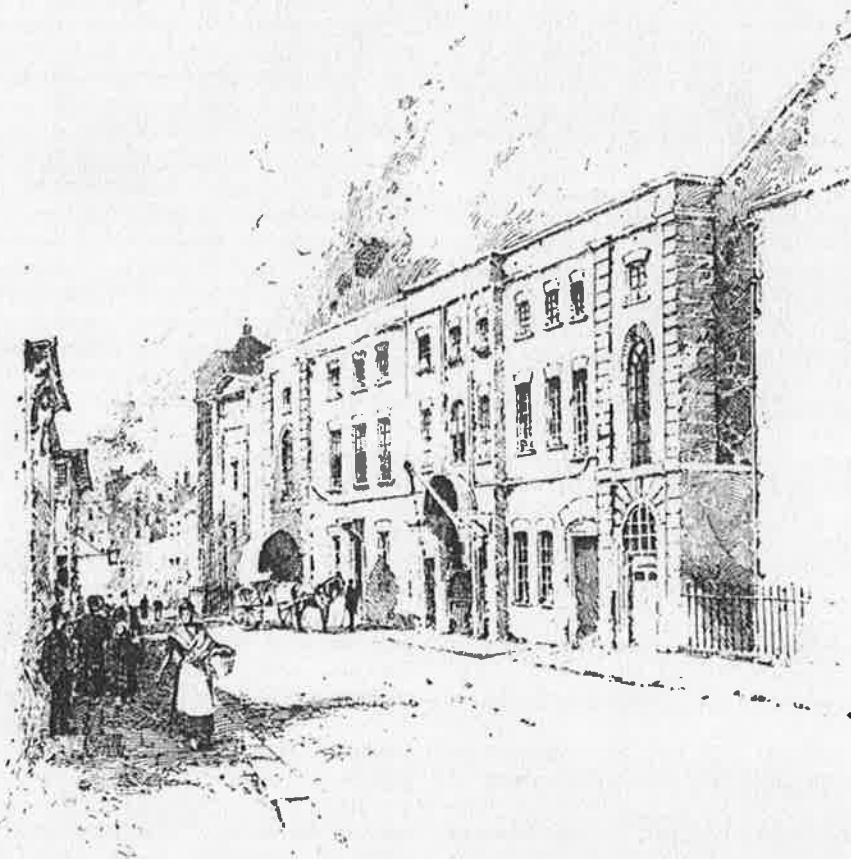
If the London of Charles II. had been watched and warded as it is now, the arrangement between the Benchers and their neighbours would no doubt have had the result of securing a charming open space to the public use. Open grass plots and broad walks between rows of trees, connected with the gardens of Lincoln's Inn by a handsome flight of steps, would have furnished a pleasant lounge for the learning and fashion of those days, and an invaluable place of recreation to the densely packed population of Clare Market and Drury Lane of our own time. Unfortunately Lincoln's Inn Fields were neglected. The houses allowed by the Benchers were built, and Cup Field, which was to be henceforth kept free of buildings, was railed off from the adjacent Pursfield. But whether the owners carried out their agreement to plant and lay out Cup Field and to build steps into Lincoln's Inn Gardens, seems doubtful. Mr. Pepys speaks of a visit to the walks then being laid out at Lincoln's Inn; but it is uncertain whether he refers to the Fields or the Benchers' own garden. Possibly for a time the Square was well kept; at any rate it attracted distinguished residents. In the time of Charles II. Lord Bristol and Pepys' patron, Lord Sandwich, lived in Lincoln's Inn Fields, while Lindsey (afterwards Ancaster) House, the handsome building still to be noticed in the middle of the

west side of the Fields, had but recently been vacated by the Berties, Earls of Lindsey and Dukes of Ancaster. In Great Queen Street, hard by, lived Lord Chancellor Finch, from whom in November, 1677, a notorious thief, one Thomas Sadler, stole his mace and purse of office. Another notable resident was the dissolute Earl of Rochester, who tells a correspondent:—"If you write to me, direct to Lincoln's Inn Fields, the house next to the Duke's Play-house in Portugal Row; there lives your humble servant." The play-house here referred to stood on the site of the Royal College of Surgeons and was originally a tennis-court. It was converted into a theatre for Sir William Davenant, who opened it in 1662 with his operatic "Siege of Rhodes," when regular scenery was, it is said, first introduced upon the English stage. Here Pepys saw "a mighty company of citizens, ordinary 'prentices and mean people in the pit." But the theatre was equally patronized by the quality, for on another occasion Mr. Pepys records "how it went against my heart to go away from the very door of the Duke's Play-house, and my Lady Castelmain's coach and many great coaches there to see 'The Siege of Rhodes'." Indeed throughout Mr. Pepys' time the Duke's theatre divided the honours with the King's theatre in Covent Garden, sometimes boasting the better company of actors. Nell Gwynne seems to have made her *dibut* at the theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, though she afterwards joined the King's Company; and for many years Betterton was the mainstay of the house. During Queen Anne's reign its boards were trod by the famous Quin; while still later it witnessed the unprecedented run of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* for no less than sixty-two nights. It finally closed its doors in 1735.

But Lincoln's Inn Fields in the days of Charles II. witnessed other scenes than the assembling of "great coaches" at the Duke's Theatre. On the 24th of March, 1668, Mr. Pepys found the Fields "full of soldiers all in a body, and my Lord Craven commanding of them and riding up and down to give orders, like a madman." The occasion of this warlike array was a tumult amongst the London apprentices, which it required all the energies of the guards and militia to put down, though there was no serious fighting. Some fifteen years later the Fields were disgraced by the execution of Lord William Russell. So far as we know, this sad

scene is the only touch of high tragedy connected with the history of the Fields, though disorder and low crime seem to have been common enough at the very

state of the Fields thirty years after Lord William Russell's execution is graphically described by Gay in his *Trivia*.¹



The Drury Theatre
in Portugal Row.

doors of the ministers and courtiers who resided in the Square. The existence of a large space unlighted at night, and unwarded at all times, brought a concourse of thieves and beggars. Lincoln's Inn "rufflers" and "mumpers" became by-words—rufflers, a name given to vagabonds who assumed the character of old soldiers maimed in the revolutionary wars, and mumpers, a term applicable to beggars of all sorts and conditions. The

"Where Lincoln's Inn's wide space is railed around,
Cross not with venturesous step; there oft is found
The lurking thief, who while the daylight shone,
Made the walls echo with his begging tone.
That crutch, which late compassion moved,
shall wound
Thy bleeding head, and fell thee to the ground.

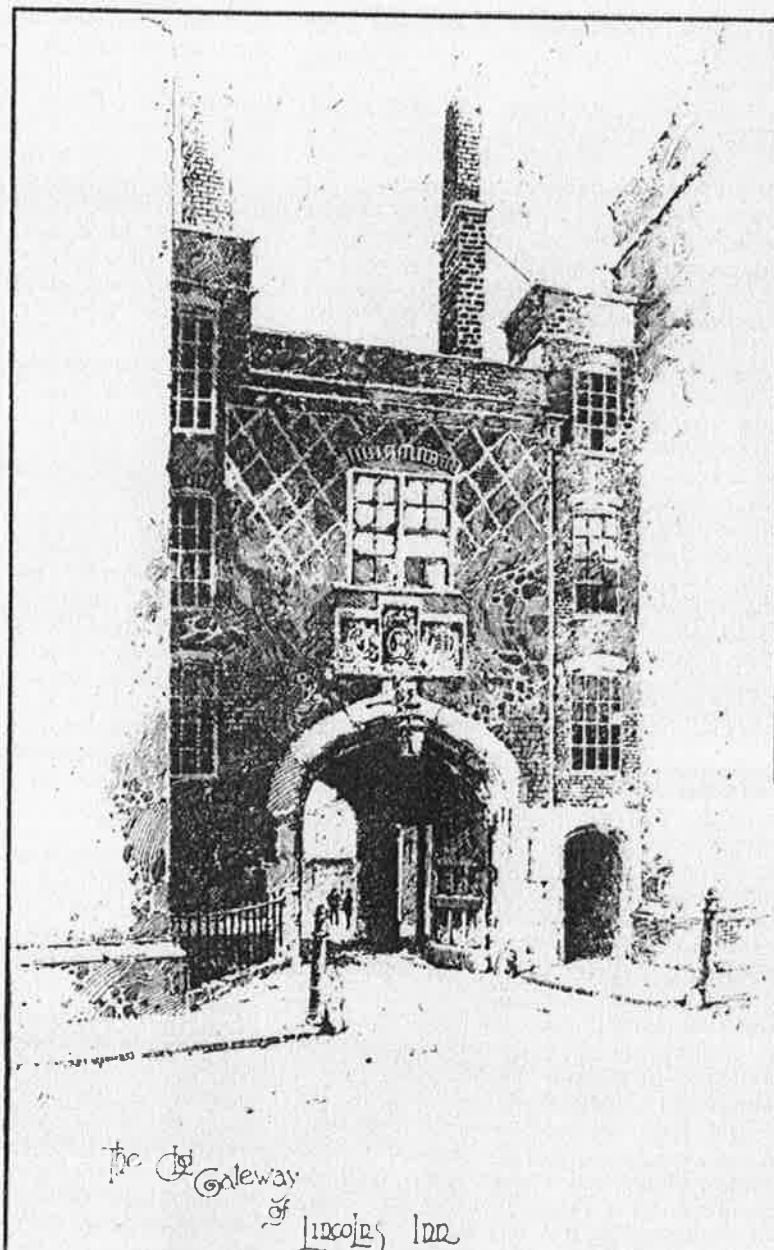
¹ Published in January, 1716

Though thou art tempted by the linkman's call,
Yet trust him not along the lonely wall:
In the midway he'll quench the flaming brand,
And share the booty with the pilfering band."

This description is echoed by the Act of Parliament which the residents at last obtained to protect themselves from the Alsatia at their doors. This Act, passed in 1735, pitifully relates that "the said great Square now called Lincoln's Inn Fields hath for some years past lain waste and in great disorder, whereby the same has become a receptacle for rubbish and nastiness of all sorts." Nay, further, "for want of proper fences to enclose the Fields great mischiefs have happened to many of His Majesty's subjects going about their lawful occasions, several of whom have been killed, and others slain and hurt, by

horses which have been from time to time aired and rode in the said Fields; and by reason of the said Fields being kept open many wicked and disorderly persons have frequented and met together therein, using unlawful sports and games, and drawing in and enticing young persons into gaming, idleness, and other vicious courses; and vagabonds, common beggars, and other disorderly persons resort therein." So bad indeed has the

condition of the Fields become that the owners, proprietors, and inhabitants of the houses "encompassing" the Fields "cannot go to and from their respective habitations in the night season without danger!" Not unnaturally therefore these proprietors and inhabitants are "desirous to prevent any mischief for the future and to inclose clean repair and beautify the Fields in a graceful manner and are willing and desirous that an



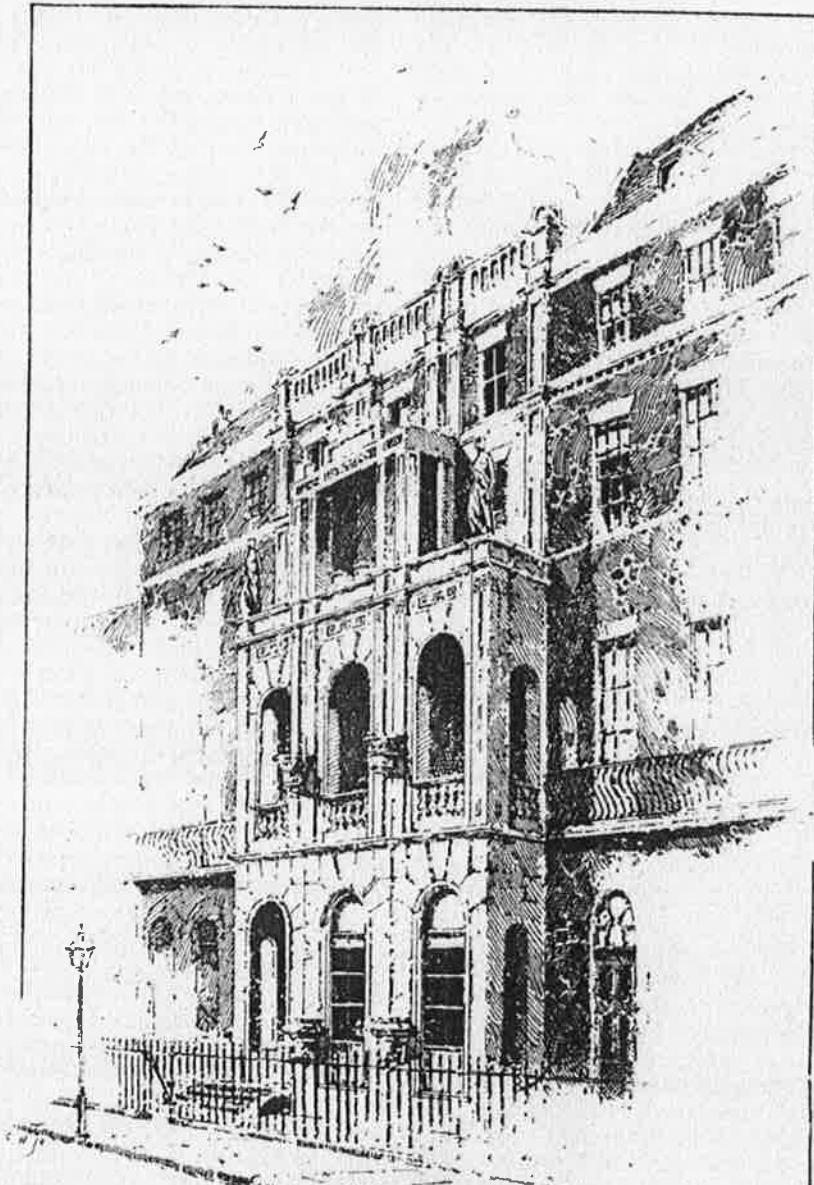
adequate contribution may for that purpose be raised by and amongst themselves."

Upon this statement the Act under which Lincoln's Inn Fields is now managed was obtained. In substance it was an Act to prevent nuisances; and inasmuch as there was then no public authority able to cope with nuisances, and no means of maintaining order in the Fields, so long as they lay open to the public, the Act authorised a certain degree of inclosure. It is a question, however, whether the total exclusion of the public was contemplated. The trustees are to direct how the Fields shall be inclosed, not against the public generally, but "from all horses, coaches, carts and carriages," while ways or passages are to be made or left open "for passengers, horses, coaches, carts, and carriages." One or two ways for foot-passengers across the Square might have been reasonably expected; but the trustees—if not at first, eventually—excluded all persons whether on foot or otherwise from the whole Square, leaving only such a roadway round the outside as was necessary to give access to the houses. In point of fact the inhabitants of the Square obtained an Act to protect themselves from nuisances, and they have used it so as to confer upon themselves the exclusive use of a spacious garden. Until the formation of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855 the inhabitants had, indeed, to repair their own roadways. The Metropolis Management Act relieved them of this burden, while leaving them in undisturbed possession of their garden; and the special rate fell from 2s. 6d. to about 6d. in the pound.

But we must turn again for a moment to the social history of the Square. In the middle of the last century it was still the residence of a Prime Minister (the Duke of Newcastle), and a place (it appears from a provision in the Act) where foreign embassies were likely to be installed. The passing of the special Act no doubt made the Square still more popular. Gradually, however, the pale cast of the law overcame the district. In 1805 we find the Attorney-General of the day, Mr. Spencer Perceval, residing at No. 57, while about the same time Nos. 35 and 36 were dignified as the houses of the Lord Chief Justice of England (Lord Kenyon) and the distinguished Whig advocate shortly to be made Lord Chancellor (Thomas Erskine).

But great lawyers, like Prime Ministers and men of fashion, moved westwards, and one by one the stately houses of Lincoln's Inn Fields ceased to be homes, and became lawyers' offices. For the last five and twenty years Lincoln's Inn Fields has had no inhabitants in the ordinary sense. The occupants and ratepayers have been for all practical purposes the lawyers practising there. Their wives and children never set foot within the garden; and, to prevent absolute disuse, the trustees have to call in the nursemaids and babies of Holborn and the Strand.

It is not surprising, then, that those who possess, but do not use, this charming garden should have been asked to admit others, to whom a garden is indeed a luxury. Some fifteen years since Miss Octavia Hill induced the trustees to allow the children from some of the crowded purlieus in Drury Lane to use the garden on one Saturday afternoon in the summer. This precedent has been intermittently followed, and from time to time the doors of Paradise are set ajar for other parties of children, duly policed by clergymen or school-teachers. But, that the blessing may be fitly prized, the doors are promptly shut again, and Paradise becomes once more a desert. Any regular periodic admission, even of children under supervision, the trustees have declined to sanction. The Kyrle Society long ago proposed that the gardens should be opened during the summer, after a stated hour in the evening and on Saturday afternoons; and they offered to guarantee the expense of watch and ward. The trustees refused to entertain the proposal, on the ground that the Act under which they held office gave them no power to admit the public. The Kyrle Society, then applied (under the leadership of the Duke of Westminster) to the Metropolitan Board of Works to arrange for a transfer of the garden from the trustees to the representatives of London. The occupants of the Square would in this case be relieved from the special rate levied for the maintenance of the garden, the expense of which would be charged on London at large. The trustees, however, informed the Board that they were not willing to negotiate for a transfer. More recently, the London County Council approached the trustees with the same inquiry, and were told that the trustees had no power of sale, and could not even consider the subject till Parliament had



Sir John Soane's
Museum

Lincoln's Inn
Fields

empowered them to do so. The County Council then introduced a Bill to enable the trustees to make over the garden to the Council. Immediately the trustees called a meeting of the inhabitants, and headed an opposition to the transfer. Parliament was petitioned to reject the Bill; and a vigorous opposition was offered before the Select Committee to which the Bill was referred. The Com-

mittee rejected the Bill on technical grounds; but they accompanied their decision by the statement that "they would see with pleasure the opening of Lincoln's Inn Fields." Acting upon this

hint, the County Council will this year ask Parliament for power to take the Fields compulsorily, and to maintain them at the expense and for the benefit of London at large.

Here then the question rests for the moment. The trustees, we may be sure, feel, though they will not publicly admit the consciousness, that Lincoln's Inn Fields must be opened to the public. Their real object is, no doubt, to make money out of the opening. They claim for the owners of the houses in the Square a proprietary right in the garden, and they will make a hard fight to secure so-called compensation for the admission of the public to their preserve. The idea that there will be any actual annoyance to the most studious lawyer is absurd. Children do not congregate in "thousands" in a place which is habitually open to them. They come, but they do not come in dense crowds, and they behave quietly and reasonably. Red Lion Square has been open for some time; it is rather drearily quiet. Who was ever inconvenienced by the shouting of children in the Embankment Gardens or in Leicester Square? In point of fact the children who now wander about the pavements and forecourts of the Square and look longingly at the trees and turf within, will be removed further than they are at present from the rooms in which family complications are being unravelled or

family estates tied up. But whether the landlords of Lincoln's Inn Fields are to have a profit on the opening of the garden, is not a question to be discussed here. We can only deal with the broad facts of the case. Originally, apparently, a place of public resort, Lincoln's Inn Fields were preserved from the clutches of the builder of the seventeenth century by the public spirit of the Benchers of Lincoln's Inn, in whom indeed the freehold of the garden still lies. For another hundred years the Fields were open to and used by the public, and they would have so remained to the present day had London been under any kind of governance in the days of the Stuarts and Georges. To obviate nuisances raising from the absence of a proper police the residents of the Square obtained powers which they have used so as to endow themselves with a private garden. This garden they do not use. A few tennis-players, a few nursemaids and perambulators, and an occasional party of children admitted out of office hours, have the exclusive enjoyment of an open space which is sorely needed by a crowded district of central London. In no other capital of Europe would such an anomaly be permitted. It is for the representatives of London to see that this beautiful city garden no longer remains sealed to the inhabitants of our huge metropolis.

