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Public ownership of urban land

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ABSTRACT

In most British cities a number of public bodies have become, for a variety of reasons, substantial landowners. Despite the extensive literature on land policy generally, and despite current debates about the role of the public sector in urban development there is very little published information about the pattern of urban landownership. This paper reviews the controversial nature of public landownership, discusses some of the reasons for it and examines the shortage of reliable information. It then reports on a detailed empirical study of one city, Manchester, and provides an account of the extent and pattern of public land holdings. Fourteen separate public bodies are shown to account for 65 per cent of the land in the city. The pattern of public landownership has had a profound impact upon the developing urban form.

KEY WORDS: Land, Ownership, Public-sector, Manchester

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The public ownership of urban land in Britain has had a chequered history, not least in the four decades since the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. There have been three major attempts to establish a comprehensive public landownership policy and numerous other pieces of legislation involving public ownership in more specialized situations. Renewed interest in land ownership has recently emerged in the context of debates about local-central government relations, state intervention and the 'privatization' of certain services. The ability of different levels of government to achieve certain ends through the medium of the public ownership of land has become a key issue in our understanding of the development of cities. After discussion of the public landownership issue, this paper will examine the paucity of reliable empirical data and then present some results from a detailed study of the city of Manchester.

A major review of land policy is beyond the scope of this paper, (see, for example, Bryant, 1972; Neutze, 1975; Ratcliffe, 1976; Lichfield, 1979; Lichfield and Darin-Drabkin, 1980; Healey, 1983; Barrett and Healey, 1985) but it is appropriate to examine the way in which public (especially state) ownership of

land fits into a broader framework. Government land policy is pursued in a variety of ways but following Darin-Drabkin (1977) a threefold simplification can be made, namely:

- (1) legal measures influencing private land ownership and land use decisions,
- (2) taxation and other fiscal measures influencing private land ownership and land use decisions,
- (3) direct involvement by public authorities in the form of land ownership and/or development.

In concentrating upon the third of these categories one immediately confronts the problem of defining ownership and tenurial rights. With such a long and varied history Britain has a very complex pattern of land holding, indeed Denman (1978, p. 101) suggests that 'it would be exceedingly difficult to identify and classify all tenurial systems in existence'. What is clear, however, is that land tenure is concerned with the complicated collection of rights to own and use space and it is therefore instrumental in shaping the spatial development, as well as the broad social relationships, within a community. In Ratcliffe's view (1976, p. 21)

systems of land tenure embody those legal, contractual or customary arrangements whereby individuals or

organizations gain access to economic or social opportunities through land . . . land without the dimension of tenure is a meaningless concept.

The principal forms of land holding have been listed by Bracewell–Milnes (1982) as: private property with single ownership, private property with communal ownership, state property and joint ventures including the lease of land by the state to a private person or vice versa. In Britain all land is ultimately held by the Crown and all other interests, including the freehold, are derivative. In practice, with the exception of Crown Land, the rights of the Crown are merely nominal. Crown land represents the fullest possible form of ownership of land in this country's legal system and is termed allodial, being neither freehold nor leasehold. Public access to some Crown Land is guaranteed but it is not, in any normal sense of the words, in public ownership.

For a working definition of what constitutes land in public ownership we can turn to a national survey of public landholdings, based upon secondary data, undertaken by Dowrick in 1974. Dowrick (pp. 10–11) treated land as being in public ownership where

the title is held by national or local authorities, freehold or leasehold, for the benefit of the community as a whole or some section of the community as distinct from specific individuals.

Interestingly, although Dowrick cited leasehold land as being within the ambit of public ownership he subsequently discounted leasehold estates from his calculations of the total stock of public landholdings on the grounds that another (private) owner has the reversionary interest. Two other problematical categories cited are those of roads and common lands but Dowrick decides that both come, *de facto*, within the public domain. In summary then, the term 'public landownership' is a deceptively simple one which can be interpreted in different ways (Massey, 1980; Gore and Nicholson, 1985).

The relationship between the state and landownership

In Britain, modern forms of public land acquisition stem largely from the maturing of the industrial/urban revolution in the mid nineteenth century. Since that period land acquisition policies and the extent of the public estate have reflected both the changing nature of urban requirements and the fluctuations of competing ideologies.

In the nineteenth century land ownership was very concentrated and the question of a private land

monopoly became one of the rallying points of Victorian and Edwardian radicalism. Joseph Hyder, a champion of public ownership, and the Secretary to the Land Nationalization Society, decried the way in which private property in land had 'enriched the few at the expense of the many,—hindered production and limited the employment of labour—{and} handicapped the making of public improvements' (Hyder, 1913, p. 397).

By this time the strength of the socialist reaction against private land ownership led the youthful Labour Party to include land nationalization in its programme, with the aim of broadening the spread of wealth and breaking the political power of the landowners. The sweeping scale of land nationalization which was being proposed by some socialists and reformers, together with the vehemence with which it was rejected by Tories, Liberals and the business community possibly hampered, and certainly overshadowed the more modest and pragmatic developments which were taking place in municipal land acquisition.

Following the creation of new local government structures in the 1880s, many newly founded municipalities soon began to purchase land in order to compete with private companies over the provision of power, transport and other services. The result of this competition was effectively a tie (Offer, 1981) but municipal enterprise was beginning to stir. Semi-official encouragement was given by the report of the Land Enquiry Commission which suggested that 'municipal land ownership, town planning and the building up of the system of transit will go hand in hand and each will help the other' (Land Enquiry Commission, 1914, p. 291). At the same time it sounded warnings against the dangers of civic speculation and the opening of doors to corrupt influences.

In broad terms, public involvement in direct land ownership has traditionally been promulgated and justified for reasons of 'the common good' or 'the public interest'. These ideas found ready acceptance in many quarters during the immediate postwar period which saw comprehensive planning introduced in Britain, but they have always had their critics. Since the late 1960s it has become increasingly clear that the concept of 'the public good' is severely weakened by the multiplicity of interest groups which exist in modern urban society, (Meyerson and Banfield, 1964; Simmie, 1978).

More specifically, a large number of individual advantages have been claimed for the taking of land into public ownership during urban development.

Effectively these can be condensed into three main arguments; planning efficiency, fiscal and social equity and the provision of services.

The planning efficiency argument, which has been discussed by Hall (1976) and Roberts (1977), amongst others, suggests that where governments or local authorities own the land needed for urban development they can promote efficient and desirable land use patterns and channel growth in a rational, well co-ordinated and comprehensive manner. Kehoe *et al.* (1976) add to this the assumption that public ownership will eliminate delays in the land-use regulatory system, and Shoup (1983) points to the way in which advance public purchase of land for development can ensure the preservation of the best sites for public facilities and a favourable purchase price. The final piece in this jigsaw is the suggestion that because a municipality has both a comprehensive overview of its own needs, and ultimate planning control over its own development, it will possess better information than the market about its long-term land requirements.

The argument that public land ownership can be used to achieve financial and social equity can be put forward at a number of different levels. At the broadest level it can be advanced as part of the process of wealth redistribution. Rather more specifically it has often been suggested that taking land into public ownership is a means for both reducing the inequity between land owners who do or do not receive development permission, and for ensuring that the community gains the overall financial benefit. This latter view is based upon the assumption that it is society which creates enhanced land values and that the economic rent should therefore rest with the whole community and not, fortuitously, with the owner alone. Although widely accepted this is not without its critics; Denman for example argued that land is little different from any other commodity (Denman, 1978, p. 91). Either way, public ownership is not strictly necessary in order to recover enhanced land values, this can be achieved through betterment levies or taxes.

The third argument in favour of taking land into public ownership is that it is necessary in order to allow public bodies, especially local authorities, to perform their primary tasks of providing houses, schools, hospitals, roads and other community services. These functions were increasingly assumed by local authorities from the beginning of this century and resulted in a growing level of municipal land purchase. This culminated in the period 1959–75 when local authorities greatly expanded their land

holdings, notably by making use of housing and planning legislation. In explaining the pattern of publicly owned land in any urban area, it is these functions and powers which are of greatest importance as will be seen later. Until recently this was a largely uncontroversial sphere of public land acquisition, but with current moves towards privatization there may be a diminishing role for public bodies.

Ranged against the arguments in favour of public land ownership are a number of opposing views; once again, for convenience, these can be condensed into three, viz, bureaucratic inefficiency, private rights and land values.

The bureaucratic inefficiency argument recognizes that, even in the absence of a market, decisions about land use and development have to be made but it questions the ability of government or local authority bureaucracies to produce clear decision making or satisfactory results. Bryant (1976) for example suggests that there is no evidence that the power play between bureaucratic segments in East European states works particularly well, and Clawson (1971) feels that a public monopoly would be under a strong temptation to fall into unprogressive, insensitive and inefficient ways. Those districts of large British cities where a high level of public land ownership and a municipal monopoly over development have been the norm for the past generation do little to dispel these suggestions.

Public land ownership has been seen in some quarters as a threat to private property rights and to the workings of a free enterprise society. A complete public monopoly over the ownership of land and the granting of planning permission, together with public-sector use of the land in question is seen as a potentially dangerous combination. The third argument against public sector land holding is the fact that demand, and prices, for land can go down as well as up. For this reason many local authorities in Britain have found themselves holding an embarrassing surplus of land, often vacant or derelict, which they acquired at high prices during the land and property boom of the early 1970s.

This brief summary of the arguments for and against public land ownership reveals immediately that the main issues are ideological rather than technical. Indeed Lefebvre (1977) explicitly rejects the conceptualization of land as a scientific object which can be planned as a purely technical process; space, he suggests is inherently political. The main ideological battleground is thus drawn up. On the one side are those who advocate public ownership of land for

broad political and social reasons connected with notions of power, collective ownership and equity, and on the other side are those who defend private property, individual rights and the operation of the free market.

Different ideologies on the role and function of the state and its relationship with capital provide different rationales for public land ownership. Hallet (1979) suggests that much of the discussion of urban problems by community groups and journalists uses implicitly marxist concepts. This leads to the suggestion that capitalist land-owning interests manipulate societal 'wants' so as to achieve high rents, for example in the CBD. There is a body of literature which sees the principal role of the state in this sphere as being the maintenance of conditions favourable for capitalist production and accumulation (Castells, 1977; Dear and Scott, 1981; Saunders, 1981). In the pursuance of these aims the state is led to acquire land, particularly for the provision of basic infrastructure, housing and social facilities. These services are then charged to all capital units via taxation.

For present purposes the distinction made by O'Connor (1973) is a useful one. In his view the capitalist state has two major functions, maintaining the conditions for capital accumulation and maintaining social harmony through the legitimacy of the state. In order to achieve the first aim the state subsidizes capital, especially through investment in transport, communications, town centre redevelopment schemes and industrial sites, and it subsidizes labour through investment in public housing, urban renewal, health care and pensions. In order to maintain social harmony the State invests in law and order, and social and welfare programmes. This is a crude categorization which poses problems of allocating certain types of expenditure and which does not appear to acknowledge any degree of common interest between capital and labour; however, it has been extended by Saunders (1980; 1981) who links it to different levels of state involvement. Saunders considers that the central state is primarily concerned with production related issues and is consequently heavily involved with social investment expenditures (physical infrastructure) whereas the local state is largely responsible for consumption related issues and expenditures (e.g., housing, education). This goes some way towards explaining not only why the state is heavily involved in land ownership and development, but also why its landholdings are so fragmented. The analysis is not helped by the present

vexed relations between central government and many local authorities.

The debate about taking land into public ownership does not, of course, exist at a theoretical level only. In Britain the past 40 years have seen intense controversy as the political pendulum has swung to and fro and successive governments have attempted to translate their ideologies into policies dealing with land ownership and development.

Since the Second World War there have been three major, but short lived, attempts to establish comprehensive public landownership policies to deal with development land. First, following the recommendations of the Uthwatt Committee (on Compensation and Betterment), the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 effectively took all development rights and values into public ownership. A system of planning permission was introduced for the whole country. Owners of land with development value became entitled to payments from a newly established Central Land Board and a betterment levy (or development tax) was payable to the Board when permission to develop was granted. The whole scheme achieved little success and it was repealed in 1953.

A second attempt followed in 1967 with the establishment of a Crown Land Commission which was to take into public ownership by agreement or by compulsory purchase, any land needed for development. Like the Central Land Board, the Crown Land Commission was created as a central government body, largely because local authorities were thought to lack the necessary entrepreneurial skills. This scheme was even shorter lived than its predecessor, being abolished in 1971 after having bought just 1538 ha and sold only 324 ha.

Finally, in 1975, the Community Land Act (CLA) enabled local authorities in England to acquire and develop land with the ultimate aim that they would have a duty to consider buying all development land (with minor exceptions) at current use value. Associated with the CLA was Development Land Tax designed to tackle the compensation/betterment issue. Between April 1976 and April 1978 the CLA was responsible for the purchase of 924 ha of land in the whole of England, and the disposal of just 69 ha (Sant, 1980). By the end of 1977 the CLA had lost all impetus and credibility (Barrett, Boddy and Stewart, 1978) and it was repealed in 1980 by the Local Government, Planning and Land Act.

Each of these major pieces of legislation can be seen very much as products of their time, especially

the 1947 Act which owed much to the residual war-time feelings of consensus and centralized planning. The 1975 Act can be seen largely as a direct result of the excesses of the early 1970s land and property boom. As well as having practical planning advantages and disadvantages each of the proposals carried strong political and ideological overtones; each was introduced by a Labour administration and repealed by a Conservative one. That all three failed in their objectives can be put down to a mixture of a lack of funds, political opposition, a heavy and inflexible bureaucratic structure and, most significantly, an inability to ensure a steady supply of land or to promote development.

All three of these programmes attracted intense controversy and produced coalitions of interests for and against public ownership. Those in favour included broadly the political left, most planners, managers of nationalized industries, the Trades Unions and some local authorities. Those against were the political right, landowners, builders/developers, financial interests, private industrialists and the growing population of home owners. The failure of all three attempts at land nationalization suggests that the idea is not politically neutral, but it also reveals something about the relative strengths of the interest groups involved.

Each time that a Labour administration in favour of land nationalization was replaced by a Conservative administration, rapid changes took place. These largely reflected contrasting views on the role of the state. The Conservative governments of the 1950s were non-interventionist, as was the administration of Edward Heath in the early 1970s. After 1979 however a new era of active withdrawal from intervention took place. The incoming Conservative government identified the public sector as an undue burden upon the wealth producing sector and it determined to return many state services to the market. As far as land and planning were concerned the first major step was the Local Government, Planning and Land Act of 1980. This gave land policy a firm push away from public ownership by its encouragement of the sale of council houses and by the requirement for local authorities to establish registers to promote the sale of their vacant and surplus land. Subsequently the policy has been strengthened by the effective demotion of local authorities in certain areas through the use of Enterprise Zones and Urban Development Corporations, and through the continuing programme of privatization. These policies have proved to be just as controversial as the previous programmes for land

nationalization. Opposition still comes broadly from the political left, and includes all of the traditional objections, plus the newer argument that public servants are imbued with a public service ethos and loyalty which leads to an effective performance of their duties (Ascher, 1987).

Throughout the ebb and flow of these major political programmes there have been, and remain, many other more restricted schemes designed to deal with specific situations. In the 1930s for example land was taken into public ownership for the creation of London's Green Belt and after the war large areas were acquired for the New Town programme. Currently, many local authorities and other public bodies are involved in purchasing and developing land in association with a variety of urban renewal and partnership schemes and derelict land clearance programmes. In the majority of these cases however the local authority land measures can be seen as complementing, not competing with, private development (Needham, 1983); in effect they are filling gaps in the market.

Lack of empirical information

Despite the voluminous literature on land policy, especially concerning the issues of betterment and land nationalization, and the present debate about the involvement of the public sector in land ownership and development, there has been a marked lack of empirical study. There is consequently an almost complete absence of reliable and comprehensive information on urban land ownership. Only in a few relatively specialized areas of concern, such as derelict land or vacant land on the local authority land registers, are even partial figures on public ownership available.

This lack of information relating to the form, extent, nature, location and structural relations of landownership has proved to be a fundamental problem affecting the evaluation of many aspects of land policy; a point that has been identified by such diverse writers as Denman (1974, p. 46); Massey and Catalano (1978, p. 4), Flatt (1982, p. 329), Norton-Taylor (1982) and Goodchild and Munton (1985).

Even where information has been collected it is very rarely entirely comprehensive, wholly reliable or freely available. Short-comings are identified for example by Harrison, Tranter and Gibbs (1977, p. 14):

All the studies yet made of landownership have been restricted almost entirely to the establishment of elementary facts. Their basic statistical coverage has varied widely, both in terms of the samples employed and the categorization of ownership adopted which has nowhere

begun to match the complexity occurring in practice. Consequently almost nothing can be concluded on which normative and policy making decisions can be based.

It should be remembered that this suggestion is based upon a study of agricultural land and that even these 'elementary facts' are nearly always absent in urban areas. More recently Barrett and Healey (1985, p. 12) raised the point that:

Many practising surveyors possess a store of detailed knowledge of land and property transactions which would be invaluable, not only to land-use planners, but to social scientists, especially in England and Wales, where we lack systematic information on land and property ownership and values. Such material is rarely published in any systematic form, as opposed to anecdotal form.

This lack of empirical information and its poor quality is undoubtedly a handicap to informed debate and rational decision making. Ratcliffe (1976, p. 11) suggests that:

Despite the fact, however, that land is a resource of primary consequence in the economy of any country it is either left out of national aggregates, or included as a homogeneous unit.

Equal concern is shown by Barrett, Stewart and Underwood (1978, pp. 46–7):

Ownership: insufficient is known about either patterns of ownership or the behavioural factors affecting shifts in ownership . . . we believe that further understanding of ownership behaviour would shed light on a number of current problems,—vacant land, land banking.

In addition, there is a small, but impressive, body of literature within the mainstream of urban geography which stresses the importance of land tenure in determining the timing, direction and nature of urban morphology, (Conzen, 1960; Ward, 1962; Dyos, 1968; Mortimer, 1969).

Two reasons go a long way towards explaining the shortage of data. First, there exists in England, a centuries old tradition of confidentiality over land ownership. Edwards and Lovatt (1980, p. 3) for example, remark that:

Despite prolonged political concern, there is a paucity of knowledge about the way the land market works. In part this reflects the exclusive, confidential, character of private transactions in land.

The detailed cadastral surveys available in other European countries have no direct counterpart in England and the severely restricted access to the centrally held records of HM Land Registry has hampered research into land ownership and related issues. Many politicians, researchers and bodies, including the Royal Town Planning Institute (1979, pp. 11–12) and the Law Commission (1985), have recommended or campaigned for more open public access to these records. It is to be hoped that the moves which have been made since 1985 towards computerizing the records of HM Land Registry will help in this process.

Secondly, although local authorities and other public bodies collect a great deal of information on the use, development and ownership of their land, most of this is undertaken in a very fragmented and ad hoc manner. Most property information systems are unique and are designed to undertake a specific task with few, if any, additional functions. Very few local authorities have computer based systems for storing and processing such data and consequently very few have systematic retrieval facilities. The, perhaps surprising, consequence of this is that the majority of local authorities are unable, quickly and accurately, to identify their overall landholding positions. The fragmented nature of acquisition and holding policies, and the lack of co-ordinated information means that it is extremely difficult to make either straightforward measurements or comparative statements.

Existing surveys

Given the byzantine complexity of individual local authority records, little is known about the overall nature of public land ownership in urban areas. Merlyn Rees (1973, p. 231), Denman (1978) and Lichfield and Darin-Drabkin (1980, p. 105) have all stressed the dearth of statistics and it appears that more was known about land ownership in this country in 1086 than at the present time.

One of very few investigations into public land-ownership was that undertaken by Dowrick (1974) who used figures supplied by local authorities. He estimated that in 1972/73, approximately 2.7 million hectares of land were in public ownership in Great Britain, some 11.7 per cent of the total (Table I). This however is a conservative estimate and by adding roads, common land and leasehold land, Dowrick's total estimate for the public sector rose to 4.13 million hectares or 18 per cent of the total. He suggested that it was possible to obtain national figures for local

TABLE I. Public landownership in Great Britain 1972/73 (after Dowerick 1974)

Public body/ Institution	Area freehold land (million ha)	%, total land in Gt. Brit.
Crown and central government	1.62	7.0
Local authorities	0.61	2.6
Nationalized industries	0.25	1.1
National Trust and other	0.22	1.0
Total	2.70	11.7

authorities only by making crude projections based upon the detailed figures which were available for only a few local authorities. For example, he showed that in 1973 the Corporation of Newcastle-upon-Tyne owned 2358 million out of a total in the city of 4614 ha (51.1 per cent), and in 1970 Nottingham Corporation owned 4092 ha out of an administrative area of 7432 ha (55.1 per cent) plus a further 1490 ha outside the city.

Elsewhere only piecemeal evidence is available. In the nineteenth century many rapidly growing cities, including Manchester, Nottingham, Liverpool and London, made use of private parliamentary acts to make *ad hoc* purchases of land. As the range of municipal services grew during the present century, cities began to provide bus services, housing estates, schools, theatres and a wide range of other activities which required land. After the war large scale programmes of urban reconstruction further enlarged the municipal estate. Bryant (1972), in a study of municipal landownership suggested that the City of Coventry owned approximately one third of the land within its boundary, and that for Brighton the figure was 60 per cent. Given that there is much variation between local authorities, such figures can only be coarse approximations of the overall picture.

In conclusion, there exists no comprehensive and accurate survey of public landholdings encompassing such bodies as central government departments, local authorities, nationalized industries and statutory undertakers. The reorganization of local government in 1974 encouraged many public bodies to compile an inventory of their land holdings, but many remain incomplete or unreliable. A further move towards such documentation was provided by the Local Government, Planning and Land Act of 1980 which

required certain public bodies to prepare and make available registers of their unused and under-used land, but these provide only a partial record. What is known about public landownership in urban areas is thus very limited and very imprecise but it would not be entirely unfair to condense it into three broad statements, viz:

- (1) In large urban areas the majority of land is in public ownership with the local authorities alone commonly owning more than half of the total.
- (2) Many different public bodies and institutions have become involved in urban landownership, for a wide variety of reasons, and the resulting pattern of ownership is very fragmented.
- (3) In line with the increasing scope and complexity of both central and local government functions, the public ownership of urban land increased rapidly in the postwar years, most especially between 1959–75.

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP OF LAND IN MANCHESTER

Against this background, which has attempted to show both the importance of the public land ownership issue in urban planning and the marked absence of reliable information, the second part of this paper presents some results of a detailed case study of public landownership in Manchester.

Many reasons contributed to the choice of Manchester as a suitable case study area, among them were the following:

- (1) The area within the administrative boundary of the city of Manchester is almost wholly developed and exhibits a wide range of urban uses and activities.
- (2) The local authority area was relatively unaffected by local government reorganization in 1974 and therefore offered a largely continuous record of landholdings.
- (3) By virtue of its size and regional importance the city has many public bodies, in addition to the local authority, involved in land holding.
- (4) Preliminary enquiries revealed the local authority to be a major landowner.

Data collection was undertaken in two phases, the first being concerned with the landholding records maintained by the Estates and Valuation Department of Manchester City Council, and the second involving other public bodies which owned land in the city.

Manchester City Council, in common with many other local authorities, maintains a terrier system of maps at 1:1250 and 1:2500 scale together with schedules and muniments files which identify land acquisitions and disposals and give brief details of site area, land use and the legislation under which it was obtained. Although this provides a detailed record, it does contain inconsistencies and it is extremely unwieldy; for example to establish the precise status of any individual site it is necessary to read two maps (one for acquisitions and one for disposals) which are spatially referenced, whilst constantly cross-checking with detailed muniments files which locate sites by postal addresses and are chronologically referenced. There are also significant gaps in the record, for example it is almost impossible to identify the exact details relating to a large number of sites totalling 954 ha of land acquired through housing compulsory purchase orders in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Terrier systems were also operated by the North West Regional Health Authority and by the Greater Manchester County Council which had a partially computerized set of records. In addition, the Planning Department of Manchester City Council had an effective, computerized record of site availability. All other public bodies had extremely rudimentary records of their land-holdings, with the exception of British Telecom (then a public body) which, uniquely, had a fully computerized system providing a complete on-line enquiry service.

Throughout the present survey gross areas were recorded and only freehold land was included. Individual site details were aggregated by 1 km grid squares on Ordnance Survey base maps at 1:10 000 scale and this facilitated the use of interactive computer mapping (CHORO) and data handling packages.

Land owned by Manchester City Council

Since 1815 Manchester City Council and its predecessors have been actively involved in the acquisition, and to a much lesser extent the disposal, of land in order to fulfill an increasing range and number of local government functions and services. As a result the most distinctive morphological elements of the city, including the Town Hall complex in the centre, Heaton Park in the north and extensive local authority housing estates in the Wythenshawe area to the south, are easily recognizable as being publicly owned. However in Manchester, as in other cities, the true extent, nature and location of the city council's freehold land, both inside and outside of the

borough, is rarely realized and had not previously been independently quantified.

In general terms the amount of land owned freehold by the Manchester City Council at 1st July 1982 totalled 8458 hectares. Of this total, 1696 ha (20.1 per cent) were located outside of the administrative area of the city, principally in the form of housing overspill schemes and agricultural land at Chat Moss, although the latter has now been disposed of to a private company. Consequently, the City Council owned 6762 ha of land within its own boundary and this amounted to 57.9 per cent of all land in the city. (These figures relate only to freehold land, if leasehold sites and properties were included, the totals would be significantly higher).

Given the enormous changes that have taken place in municipal government since the nineteenth century, and the ever changing pattern of committees and responsibilities within local authorities, it is not easy to quantify fully the earlier public land purchases. The earliest freehold purchase by the city appears to have been in 1815 but acquisitions on a significant scale really started in the middle of the nineteenth century when the Parks Committee began to establish such parks as Philips Park in the Bradford district (1845 and 1856) and Chorlton Park in 1872. Local and national legislation, connected especially with housing and sanitation, increased the rate of land acquisition in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and by the turn of the century the city owned 1400 ha (Fig. 1). By far the largest single block of land within this total, was the purchase in 1895 of over 1000 ha at Chat Moss outside of the borough. Originally used for peat cutting, this land soon became a major site for sewage and refuse disposal although it has since been reclaimed for agricultural use.

Before the First World War, the city slowly continued to expand its landholding and although there is no regular pattern discernible, the purchase of 88.2 ha at Blackley for the city's first major municipal housing estate clearly signalled the coming trend. During the inter-war period the extent, nature and location of land purchases changed dramatically and the total City Council ownership more than trebled, rising from 1778.3 ha at the end of 1919 to 5594.7 ha in 1939. During this period, the population of Manchester reached its zenith and this, in combination with rapid increases in the number of separate households, the suburban aspirations of a growing middle class, the desperate need to clear the worst of the nineteenth century slums, and new legislation and

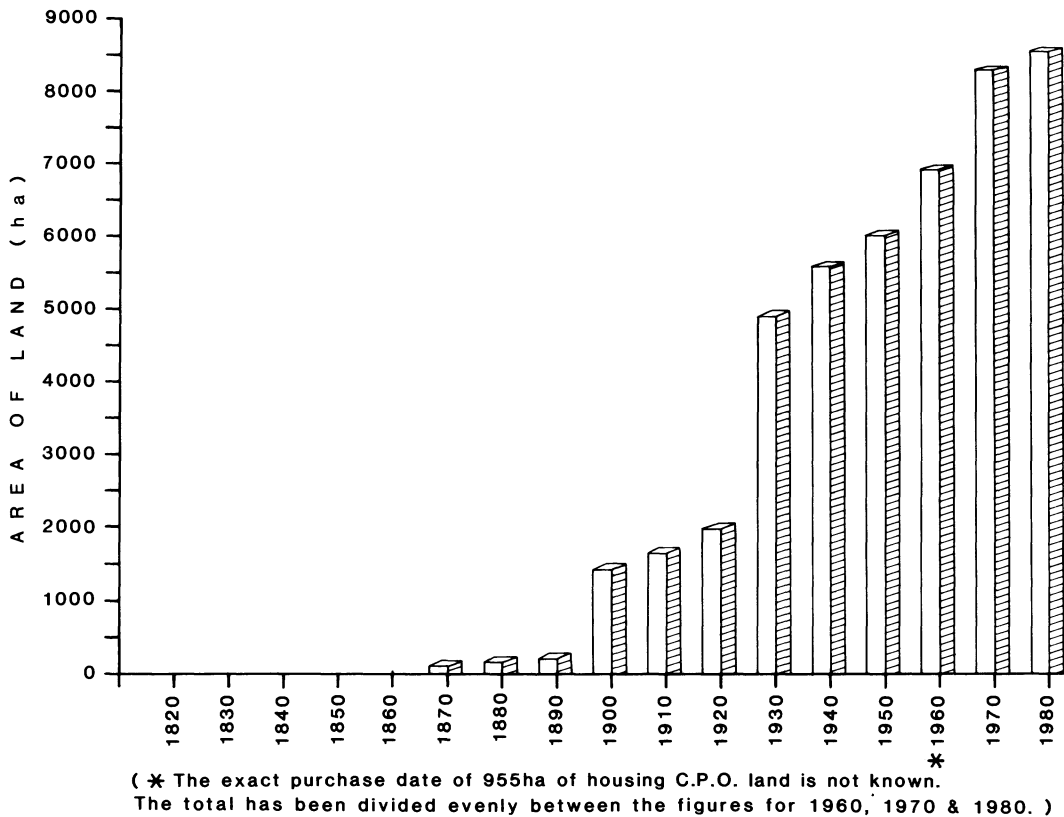


FIGURE 1. The growth of municipal land ownership in Manchester, 1820–1980

increased finance for public-sector housing, all lead to a phase of massive outward urban expansion. Principally this consisted of large scale, low density council housing development which involved the City in purchasing large tracts of land in (then) peripheral locations such as Moston, Crumpsall, Didsbury, Burnage, and above all in Wythenshawe in the late 1920s. Alongside these purchases for housing, there were large scale acquisitions of land for public parks to complement the new housing estates—e.g., Heaton Park (1925) and Wythenshawe Park (1926).

In the postwar period Manchester's total landholding continued to grow (Fig. 1), although there is a problem with the records in that the exact purchase dates of 954.7 ha, acquired in housing compulsory purchase order areas is not known. For the sake of completeness, in Figure 1 this land has been allocated evenly to the period between 1950 and 1979, the major era of housing clearance and redevelopment. Two distinct phases can be recognized in the postwar land dealings of the Manchester City Council. First,

pre-1970, during which purchases far exceeded disposals and resulted in an increasing net total, and post-1970 during which rising levels of disposals and falling purchases resulted in the first ever falls in the net yearly totals. From 1978–82, only 36.4 ha were purchased, against disposals of 126.7 ha.

Although many interpretations are possible, the substantial change which occurred in the early 1970s can be accounted for mainly by two broad issues; one concerns the evolving nature of housing demands and policies and the other involves the changing financial, organizational and political context within which local authorities operate.

As far as housing is concerned, the immediate postwar period in Manchester saw a continuation of earlier trends, that is the construction of large local authority estates (albeit mostly overspill estates outside of the city) and major slum clearance and redevelopment programmes in inner areas such as Hulme and Moss Side. As a result of these schemes the City Housing Committee alone purchased

approximately 1850 ha of land between 1948 and 1972. By the early 1970s however Manchester was experiencing conditions common to most other large cities; the major slum clearance programmes were complete, there was a swing away from comprehensive renewal towards piecemeal redevelopment and rehabilitation, the birth rate was falling, cities were decentralizing and private home ownership was growing. As a result the need to acquire land to increase the municipal housing stock became no longer a major priority.

The organizational context of local authorities has changed in many ways since the early 1970s. First, the reorganization of local government in 1974 resulted in land used for services and functions no longer provided by the city council being vested in the new body or authority. In this way, certain land held for future highway schemes was transferred to the Greater Manchester Council and properties held by the Health Committee were handed over to the North West Regional Health Authority. Secondly, by the mid 1970s central government was attempting to reduce local authority spending. Thirdly, as discussed earlier, after 1979 there came increasingly direct pressure from central government to persuade local authorities to reduce their landholdings through such policy initiatives as land registers and the sale of council houses to their tenants. This period since the early 1970s has therefore been one of declining land purchases coupled with the beginnings of land disposals on a modest scale, and the three years 1979–81 saw a net decrease of 63 ha in the City Council's land holding.

The pattern of land owned by Manchester City Council in mid 1982 is indicated in Figure 2 which has been prepared by calculating the City's ownership in each of the 1 km grid squares which fall wholly or partly within the administrative boundary. It can be seen that the pattern is a very uneven one, with a strong bias towards the southern part of the city. The major determinant of this pattern is the authority's housing programme and it is the Housing Committee which is the council's largest landholding committee, being responsible for over one third of the total (Table II). Closely following in second place is the Land and Development Committee (now the Economic Development Committee) with 27.6 per cent of the total. This committee is principally concerned with the purchase, development and management of land for the benefit of the city. All land purchased under Town Planning legislation is held by this committee which now effectively possesses a land bank which

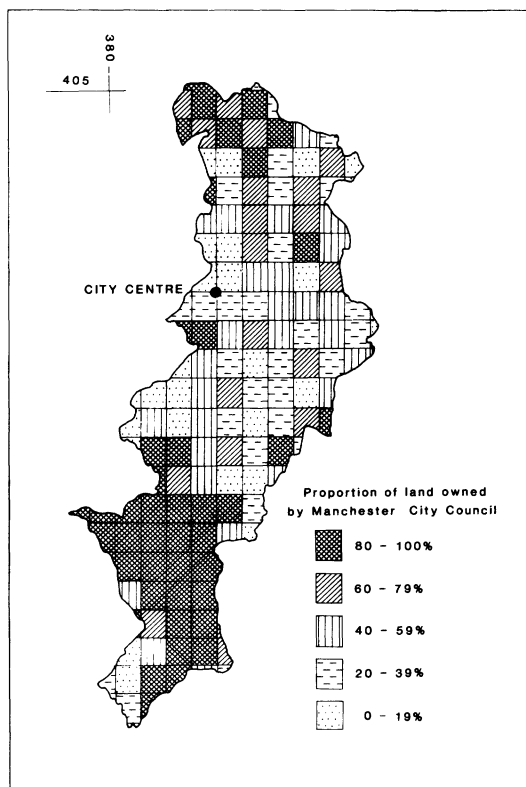


FIGURE 2. Land owned by Manchester City Council in 1982

TABLE II. Landholdings controlled and administered by Manchester City Council committees, 1982

Committee	Area (hectares)	% of total city council land
Housing	2862.4	33.8
Land and development	2335.7	27.6
Recreation	1097.1	13.0
Cleansing	1080.7	12.8
Education	508.4	6.0
Joint Airport Authority	403.0	4.8
Other	171.0	2.0
Total	8458.3*	100.0

*Includes 1696 ha outside of city boundary

can be used for a wide variety of purposes. For a number of historical reasons, the Land and Development Committee also controls (although it does not

manage) large areas of residential land, notably in Middleton, West Houghton and Wythenshawe.

Through these two Committees the City Council has large land-holdings, especially in the south of the borough, in Northenden, Wythenshawe, Baguley, Sharston, Withington, Rusholme and Peel Hall. Around the city centre are scattered concentrations representing inter-war council housing estates (e.g., Barlow Moor, Didsbury, Levenshulme) whilst areas such as Longsight, Ardwick, Hulme, Moss Side, Harpurhey and Higher Blackley represent the main thrust of large-scale post-war urban redevelopment. In addition to its housing land, the Land and Development Committee runs a small industrial land holding account and acts as 'co-ordinator' in some of the City Council's development programmes.

The third largest land controlling committee is the Recreation Committee which, in 1982, had 1097 ha or 13 per cent of the total. In addition to its obvious task of managing parks and sports facilities this committee is also responsible for public halls, including the Free Trade Hall and the Wythenshawe Forum, and for cemeteries and crematoria. A very similar total is controlled by the Cleansing Committee although the great majority comprises the Chat Moss area outside of the city. These few committees control nearly 90 per cent of the land owned by the city council, the balance is controlled by nine other committees—Education, Joint Airport Authority, Environmental Health, Agriculture, Social Services, Markets, Policy, Cultural and Direct Works—whose purposes are mostly self explanatory. In response to new legislation in 1986, Manchester became the first airport authority to form a public limited company. Manchester City Council and nine other local authorities retain all of the shares in the new company which thus remains firmly in public ownership.

Other public landholding bodies

Manchester City Council accounted for approximately 89 per cent of the publicly owned land in the city (Table III) in 1982, but the balance, representing 873 ha, was the responsibility of more than a dozen other bodies.

Largest of these in landowning terms, was the British Railways Board with an estimated total of 337.5 ha (almost certainly an underestimate due to incomplete data). This land is concentrated within a 5 km radius of the CBD, reflecting the way in which the Victorian core of the city became ringed about with railway stations and yards. Due to the contraction and restructuring of the railways in recent years a

TABLE III. *Land located within the City of Manchester owned (freehold) by public bodies, 1982*

<i>Public body</i>	<i>Area of land (ha)</i>	<i>% of total city area</i>	<i>% of total landholding</i>
Manchester City Council	6762.3	57.9	88.6
British Railways Board	337.5	2.9	4.4
N.W. Regional Health Authority	160.3	1.4	2.1
Greater Manchester Council	134.2	1.1	1.8
University of Manchester	74.6	0.6	1.0
U.M.I.S.T.	43.6	0.4	0.6
British Waterways Board	35.4	0.3	0.5
N.W. Gas Board	26.0	0.2	0.3
Gtr. Manchester Passenger Transport Executive	18.6	0.2	0.2
Central Electricity Generating Board	15.6	0.1	0.2
British Telecom	15.4	0.1	0.2
N.W. Postal Board	7.0	—	0.1
N.W. Electricity Board	3.3	—	—
B.B.C.	1.5	—	—
Total	7635.3	65.4	100.0

high proportion of this land is unused or underused and in 1983 60 ha were on the D.O.E.'s Register of Public Bodies' Land. The North West Regional Health Authority was the third largest public land owner in the city, with an area of 160.3 ha. The scale and location of this land is readily explained by the needs of thirteen major hospitals plus a large number of clinics, day centres, ambulance stations, offices and residential homes. Four hospitals alone (North Manchester General, Manchester Royal Infirmary, Withington and Wythenshawe) account for nearly two thirds of this total.

Only one other public body possessed more than 100 ha of land in 1982 and that was Greater Manchester Council. Upon its formation in 1974 as one of the six metropolitan county authorities, Greater Manchester Council (GMC) had vested in it, 84 ha of land as a result of the transfer of services, mainly highways and refuse disposal together with some planning functions. Major land acquisitions in 1979 and 1980 for a refuse pulverizer, tipping site and for the development of a linear park on the old Chorlton-cum-Hardy to Heaton Mersey railway line plus a number of small purchases, brought the GMC's total to 134.2 ha by 1983.

The abolition of the metropolitan counties in 1986 brought about changes to the land previously owned by the GMC. Some of this land is still being managed by the GMC Residual Bodies until such time as they

can dispose of it. Other lands and buildings have been passed to the District Councils where they have been delegated as lead authorities for such functions as Highways, Waste Disposal and Pension Funds, and some lands have been returned to the Districts in which they are situated.

Table III lists all of the public bodies which own land in Manchester. Apart from those discussed above most of these organizations have holdings which are essential to the discharge of various statutory undertakings and services, but they comprise small plots widely scattered throughout the city and they have little impact upon the overall urban morphology. There is however one other category of major significance and this is higher education. In Manchester, as in many other major cities, higher education has provided one of the most dynamic components of urban growth in recent decades, and the Manchester Educational Precinct, covering 113 hectares to the south of the city centre, is one of the largest such concentrations in Europe. In addition to the University and U.M.I.S.T. (both of which have large areas of land elsewhere in south Manchester) the educational precinct contains Manchester Polytechnic, The Royal Northern School of Music, the College of Adult Education, Manchester Royal Infirmary, St. Mary's Hospital, the Royal Eye Hospital and the Dental Hospital.

Total public land ownership

When the figures for all of the public bodies owning freehold land in Manchester are added together, (Table III), the total for 1982 comes to 7635.3 ha representing 65.4 per cent of the area of the borough. This figure is certainly a conservative total in that it does not include the majority of roads or streets, nor does it include land held by public bodies in the form of leasehold, tenancy agreements, user rights or easement agreements.

The distribution of the total stock of land in public ownership (Fig. 3) does not differ substantially from that of land owned by the City Council and it reflects that body's dominant position. The general pattern is overwhelmingly the result of land acquired for public housing schemes, above all in two periods, the 1920s/1930s and 1950s/1960s, whilst more localized concentrations can be explained by the presence of public utilities and statutory undertakings in the inner industrial areas of Ardwick, Longsight, Gorton, Bradford and Miles Platting or by specific activities such as the higher education precinct, individual large hospitals or the international airport. In other words,

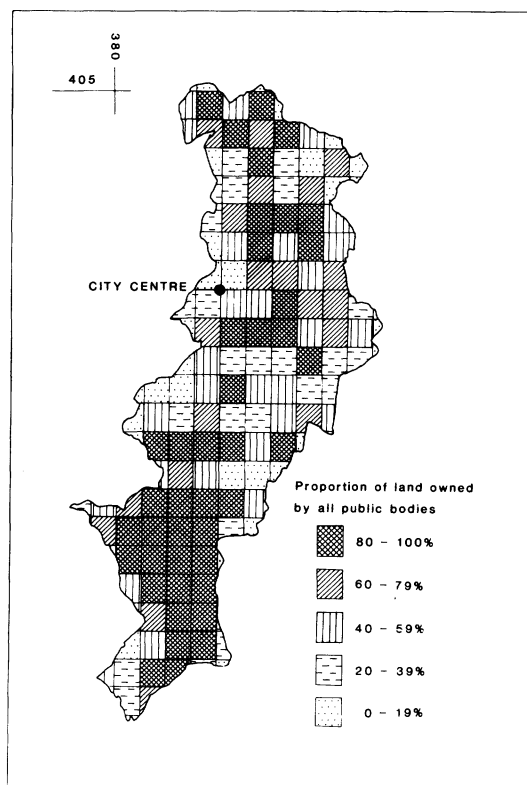


FIGURE 3. Land owned by all public bodies in Manchester, 1982

despite the arguments about land acquisition for reasons of planning efficiency or social and fiscal equity, almost all of the publicly owned land in Manchester has been acquired to enable the City to provide day-to-day services such as housing, education and recreation.

Notable gaps in the pattern of public ownership occur in the CBD, where the majority of land and property remains in private commercial or individual ownership, and in the owner-occupied suburban housing areas, although in the case of Manchester many of the newer estates in this category lie outside of the city boundary.

CONCLUSION

The results presented here relate to only one major urban area but they provide a measure of empirical precision in a field where previously only partial calculations and widely ranging 'guesstimates' were available.

In general terms the public sector is shown to be a very large landowner in Manchester, being responsible for the freehold ownership of 65.4 per cent of the

land within the city boundary. This land is very fragmented both in terms of its spatial distribution and its ownership. Fourteen significant land-owning bodies have been identified but the City Council is overwhelmingly dominant being responsible for 88.6 per cent of all publicly owned land. The records of the City Council reveal that a very complex and fragmented pattern of ownership has evolved over a long period of municipal history. As local authority functions have become increasingly elaborate so more land has been required; in 1982 thirteen committees of the City Council owned land, but just two, Housing and Land and Development (which included major areas of housing), were responsible for more than 60 per cent of the Council's total. The overwhelming majority of this land has been acquired in order that the city may provide a full range of municipal services. There is no evidence here to suggest that the three, short lived, attempts to nationalize development land had any significant effects.

Publicly owned land has made a major impact upon the urban morphology of Manchester, most notably in respect of the large local authority housing schemes of the inter-war and post-war years and the large inner city redevelopment projects which dominated municipal enterprise in the period 1955–1975. The total landholding of the City grew in every year from the first acquisition in 1815 until the early 1970s when it stabilized, but in recent years it has begun to fall very slightly. Several reasons help to explain this reversal. By the mid 1970s Manchester had largely completed its ambitious and very pressing housing schemes and later in the decade the sale of council houses began to gather pace. In the 1970s also the continuing loss of population from the city caused the Council (and other public bodies) to review and restructure many of its operations. Above all however, the purchase and disposal of land by public bodies was affected after 1975 by tightening financial constraints and after 1979 by the new political imperatives of privatization and shifting of the balance in favour of market conditions. The effects of these changes will take some time to work their way through the system but, almost certainly, the 1980s will turn out to be one of the most profound periods of transformation in the sphere of public landownership.

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