

# Pillar of society

Bravery, bold plans and a good head for numbers helped Thomas Cubitt shape much of London, but he also aided schools, churches and charities, finds **Carla Passino**

**T**WO olive trees guard the door of the Thomas Cubitt pub in Belgravia, their sharp, narrow leaves silvery against the pretty sage-green front. Inside, waiters balance velvety chocolate cakes and trembling panna cottas as they weave their way among the tables and the barman plucks a bottle from a laden cabinet to work his alchemy into a cocktail. Taking in the scene from the panelled walls are two portraits of a long-whiskered gentleman clad in a fashionable black coat. He is Thomas Cubitt, the man who gave the pub its name—and much of central London its meringue-white buildings.

That he managed to do any of it is almost a miracle. Cubitt didn't have an easy start in life. He was only 19, a journeyman for a Norfolk carpenter, when his father died, leaving the family in straitened financial circumstances. Determined to improve his lot in life, he set sail for India as a captain's joiner and managed to save enough money to open his own carpenter's business in London in 1810, bringing two of his brothers—William, later an MP, and Lewis, who would go on to design London Bridge station—into the fold.

Fortune smiled upon Cubitt in 1815, when he won a contract to build the London Institution in Finsbury Circus (long since demolished). The work proved challenging—the ground was bad, the architect had not prepared the drawings in time and the workmen were not available when needed—but it gave him a new perspective on how to run his business. Unusually for the time, he decided to bring the many trades of the building industry—from bricklayers to plumbers and decorators—under his employment. 'This bold and hazardous plan was a novelty in London, and consequently astonished the old architects,' *Gentleman's Magazine* wrote in Cubitt's obituary in January 1856, noting that he had at times employed more than 2,000 men. The risk paid off, as Cubitt scholar the late Hermione Hobhouse explained in *COUNTRY LIFE* on May 22, 1969: 'The firm rapidly established

a high reputation for sound construction and conscientious workmanship, which it retained when Cubitt went into development.'

There hardly is a corner of central London in which the Norfolk-born builder didn't have a hand—from the blocky brick buildings of Bloomsbury's Gordon Square to the stuccoed villas of Clapham Park, where he himself lived with his family for most of his life—but his greatest triumph was the swathe of houses stretching from Hyde Park to Pimlico and centring on Belgravia. So strong was his association with the area that Irish novelist Sydney, Lady Morgan, who lived there herself, renamed it 'Cubittopolis'. Her memoirs give a glimpse of the way the developer worked: once, she lamented to Cubitt that a brewery close to Hyde Park pointed 'its cannons against all improvement', as its thick smoke hung heavy above the houses. 'I will buy out the Cannon Brewery,' Cubitt replied—and he did. The

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acquisition also helped (eventually) to sway the views of the Commissioner of Woods and Forest, John Ponsonby, Lord Duncannon, over plans to open a gate from William Street into Hyde Park, which he had previously opposed and for which Morgan

had vociferously campaigned. It didn't hurt that Cubitt had declared himself ready to build, at his own expense, not only the gate, but also new houses that would improve the area, 'so as to form good looking sides to the new Entrance'. He proceeded to construct two Italianate, stucco-iced behemoths nicknamed Malta and Gibraltar because 'they would never be taken'—one did, indeed, stand empty for many years (they now house the embassies of Kuwait and France). If Henry George Davis, in his *Memorials of the Hamlet of Knightsbridge*, was critical of the two buildings, dismissing them as 'tall bullies' and writing that, '[a]rchitecturally, there is nothing in these mansions to admire, notwithstanding →

**Quintessential Cubitt: the grand entrance porches of Warwick Square, Pimlico, SW1**









# London Life

the arrogance with which they force attention,' Cubitt's work was generally applauded.

The one-time carpenter's spectacular success was hardly a given: development was risky business, as the celebrated Adam brothers had experienced only a few decades earlier, facing financial disaster, despite huge acclaim (*London Life*, June 7). But Cubitt was as much at ease with numbers as with the bricks and yardstick that appear in his Pimlico sculpture by William Fawke. Story has it that Cubitt spent every waking moment 'in thinking and calculation'—and many of those moments were at night: like a novel Napoleon, he apparently thrived on strategy and very little sleep. Even when money concerns and workmen strikes taxed his mind, wrote the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 'his philosophy and courage... bore him up through the whole'. He certainly showed remarkable fortitude when his premises burned down in 1854, with a loss of more than £30,000 (roughly the equivalent of \$2.7 million): 'Tell the men they shall be at work within a week, and I will subscribe £600 towards buying them new tools.'

It's thus little surprise that Morgan called him the 'Pontifex Maximus' of Belgravia and others named him 'Emperor'. When he died on December 20, 1855, his personal estate was more than £1 million (just under \$87 million in today's money) and his will was 'the longest on record,' according to the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Yet neither immense wealth nor fame ever went to his head, even after Queen Victoria and Prince Albert called him to rebuild



**Stucco on you:** Cubitt left his mark across London, including on Millbank in Pimlico, SW1

Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, and, later, extend Buckingham Palace. He called himself a builder for his entire life, sought no official recognition (he'd probably be as surprised as honoured to discover that one of his great-great-granddaughters is now Queen) and, never forgetting his humble origins, set out to help those less fortunate than him. A 'liberal benefactor' to churches, schools and charities, according to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, he established a library for workmen and a schoolroom for their children, supplied cheap soup and cocoa to encourage temperance and 'always valued in a peculiar degree the advantages resulting to the poor from the London hospitals'. He campaigned to improve living conditions in the capital, battling the

smoke that engulfed it, advocating a better sewage system and supporting the conversion of the Battersea marshland into a park.

His popularity was such that, in 1845, the Builders' Society commissioned his portrait to Henry William Pickersgill, later engraved by George Raphael Ward. 'Mr Cubitt has done so much for the improvement of the West End of London, and has uniformly conducted his enterprises with such great liberality that he is on every ground richly entitled to this handsome recognition of his merits,' wrote *The Art Journal* in 1851. Looking at the copy of his 'very satisfactory likeness' that graces the walls of the Thomas Cubitt pub, it's time to raise a glass to the man who built more of London than just its houses. 🍷

## At home in Cubitt's London



### Knightsbridge, £14.5 million

Lowndes Square was one of Cubitt's jewels and this lateral four-bedroom flat doesn't disappoint. Spanning more than 3,900sq ft, it has 10ft-high ceilings, a vast master suite complete with dressing room and wrap-around terraces. *Strutt & Parker* (020-7225 3866; [www.struttandparker.com](http://www.struttandparker.com))



### Bloomsbury, £2.35 million

Built by Cubitt in 1822, this 2,459sq ft house in Duke's Road has preserved original features such as shutters and fireplaces. There's a one-bedroom flat on the ground floor, and another three to four bedrooms upstairs. *Knight Frank* (020-3910 9736; [www.knightfrank.co.uk](http://www.knightfrank.co.uk))



### Westminster, from £1.75 million

Although no single developer can claim the mantle of novel Cubitt, Northacre's schemes echo his sense of opulence. One of its latest is The Broadway at Orchard Place—258 exquisitely designed one- to five-bedroom apartments, plus penthouses. *Northacre* (020-7349 8000; <https://orchardplace.london>)