

## Chapter 2

### 70–132 Oxford Street

### Perry's Place to Wells Street

From Perry's Place westwards to Wells Street, passing across the heads of Newman and Berners Streets, the three blocks along Oxford Street's north side total about 655ft in length. Apart from the former Bourne & Hollingsworth store between Wells and Berners Streets, now the Plaza shopping complex, this frontage today is occupied by minor or modern buildings. In Victorian times a clutch of furnishing businesses dominated the addresses east of Newman Street, while some chic smaller shops could be found further west, notably Oslers, glass merchants, at No. 100, and Williams & Sowerby, drapers, at Nos 126–132. The whole frontage formerly belonged to the Berners Estate, which sold off its Oxford Street freeholds apart from the Bourne & Hollingsworth block in 1934–5. Since then this section of the street has struggled to hold its own.

The history of the Berners estate is given in Volume 52 of the *Survey of London*. Consisting of two fields called Newlands, it was bought by the Berners family from 1653 and remained in largely agricultural use until well into the eighteenth century. William Berners (1710–83) inherited the property from his father of the same name in 1712, but could do nothing till he came of age. Meanwhile the Oxford Street frontages across from and alongside his own filled up with houses, leaving the Berners portion one of the last in this part of the road to attract development. That duly took its course after Thomas Huddle made an agreement in 1738 to develop the southern field and lay out the beginnings of Newman and Berners Streets. The Huddle family were already in occupation of Newlands under previous leases, and Thomas

enjoyed a reputation as a competent developer over the ensuing thirty years until his death in 1768.

Under his original agreement, Thomas Huddle undertook to build up the Oxford Street frontage and to drain it with a sewer 6ft deep and 4ft wide, while by the terms of their leases the builders and others who took plots agreed to fence their houses off with iron railings, and to make a 6ft pavement of Purbeck stone between the railings and the roadway, with posts at intervals along the curb between road and pavement. Newman and Berners Streets, later to form the spine of the once-fashionable Berners development in the 1760s, were also started, but built up only to a depth of a hundred feet north from Oxford Street. Huddle and his various tradesmen-coadjutors managed to cover most of the main road frontage by September 1740 as agreed, receiving 99-year leases as they proceeded.<sup>1</sup> Nothing survives of the houses (originally Nos 30–63) thus erected, but some sense of their scale can still be gleaned from Tallis's views of Oxford Street a century later. By then most had been heightened, many refronted and all without exception had received shop windows. Between about 1788 and 1802 the printseller William Holland had his shop at No. 50 (later 106); a drawing showing an exhibition of caricatures held there around 1794 gives some impression of his premises. Holland was imprisoned for a year in 1793 for selling a pamphlet by Thomas Paine.<sup>2</sup>

*Perry's Place to Newman Street: Nos 70–88*

Now just a humble passage to the Rathbone Square development behind, Perry's Place marks the line of division between former Rathbone–Evelyn properties to its east and Berners properties to its west. It led to one of the deeper yards which formerly serviced Oxford Street at points along the frontage. It took its name from Richard Perry, carpenter, who developed what had been previously called Huddle's Passage under an agreement of 1779

with William Aveline and his wife Catherine, née Huddle. By 1790 various warehouses, sheds, stables and sawpits lined this irregular passage, which connected with Newman Yard at the back of Newman Street. A warren of workshops grew up here, extending to another back yard, Freston Place. Most were attached to Oxford Street premises and some rose in places to three storeys. They continued in industrial use well into the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

By the time Tallis's *London Street Views* were published (1838–40), five of the nine premises depicted between Perry's Place and Newman Street were connected with the furnishing trades. At No. 30 (later 70) next to Perry's Place were Livermore & Son, furnishing ironmongers; at No. 32 (later 74) Barlow, writing and dressing case maker; at Nos 33 & 34 (later 76 & 78) Munn's Furniture Warehouse, successor to the 'furniture printer' William, who was at No. 33 from about 1811 till his firm moved further west to No. 134 in the 1820s;<sup>4</sup> at Nos 37 & 38 (later 84 & 86) Jackson & Graham; and at No. 39 (later 88) on the Newman Street corner Treherne's Furniture Warehouse.

Around 1844 the bankrupt Thomas Treherne was supplanted by William Samuel Burton, of Rippon & Burton, furnishing ironmongers of Wells Street since 1820, specializing in substitutes for silver. A puffing article taken up by *The Observer* in 1848 praised the convex sweep of No. 39's corner entrance, 'sheeted with plate glass, separated by three metallic perpendicular flutings'; the front, ten feet high, extended 21 yards up Newman Street, 'so that ... we have not less than 810 square feet of plate glass ... each sheet (of which two form a pane) being five feet in height'. If a crude engraving may be credited, the slogan 'The most extensive assortment of general furnishing ironmongery in the kingdom' appeared over this glass frontage all along Newman Street. The windows below were filled with 'an immense variety of ironmongery and plated articles, metal dish covers, nickel silver in forks and dessert spoons, fenders of steel and bronze, fire irons, table cutlery, culinary utensils of every description, most superb coal skuttles for drawing-rooms'. The panegyric went on to describe the shop's interior, packed with household

items from portable baths to jelly moulds – ‘all that the peculiar manufactures of Birmingham, and Sheffield can, by their varied ingenuity, supply’.<sup>5</sup> The back of this shop snaked behind its Oxford Street neighbours to take in a three-storey annexe in Freston Place. Burton was still adding extra back premises in 1854 and died a rich man in 1877.<sup>6</sup>

Jackson & Graham’s was an altogether weightier enterprise.<sup>7</sup> Cabinet-makers and furnishing suppliers of superior class, for almost fifty years they occupied first No. 37, then No. 38 (numbering before 1880), and by subsequent stages the whole range eastwards up to Perry’s Place, plus No. 29 beyond, 18 Newman Street and extensive back premises. The firm’s founding principals were Thomas Charles Jackson and Peter Graham, cabinet-makers both thought to have come from Cumberland. Taking over No. 37 in January 1836 from J. Richards & Co., linen drapers and upholsterers, they announced a sale of existing stock prior to recasting the premises.<sup>8</sup> Their new front, covering Nos 37 and 38, was proudly shown in *Tallis’s Street Views*; an eclectic affair in stucco, it boasted Venetian display windows and, over the entrance, the badge of ‘His Ottoman Majesty, the Sultan’, earned after the young firm had won a commission from Mustafa Reşid Pasha, the Turkish ambassador, to present Mahmud II with a suite of furniture ‘à l’Anglais, tastefully ornamented and inlaid with pearl’.<sup>9</sup> So Jackson & Graham had secured Islamic connections before working with Owen Jones, the most distinguished of several high-class designers with whom they collaborated.

Jackson & Graham not only supplied but also made their own furniture on the premises, whence their need for substantial workshops. The heyday of the firm was the 1860s and early ’70s. In 1866 they claimed to have ‘Spacious Show Rooms and Galleries ... filled with an unrivalled stock, the prices of which are all marked in plain figures at most moderate rates for ready money’.<sup>10</sup> They had then just opened an ‘extensive’ and highly mechanized four-floor manufactory at 29 (later 64) Oxford Street east of Perry’s Place.

The firm's link with Owen Jones dated from the time of the Great Exhibition, the first of many to which it contributed technically outstanding work. Between about 1869 and 1874 Jones remodelled Jackson & Graham's Oxford Street frontage, which by then included the whole of Nos 29–38 (old numbering), subsequently Nos 70–86. The work began with Nos 35–37, was extended to Nos 30–32 (in progress in 1872) and finally took in Nos 33 and 34. This last phase must have included the demolition or radical adaptation of No. 34, recently rebuilt in 1859–60 with some fanfare as the West End branch of an established firm of gas engineers, Thomas Tucker & Son. Its architects had been Banks & Barry and its builders Lucas Brothers. This small but lively building was reported as 'following in the footsteps of other large manufacturers who supply the consumer direct.' It cannot have fulfilled expectations, for within a few years Tuckers had retracted to their workshop base below the Strand.<sup>11</sup>

Jones's new fronts were carried out in a workaday stucco style which he or his employers must have deemed fit for warehouse or manufacturing premises – different from the consumer-attracting exoticism usually associated with his name. Above a series of shop fronts separated by full granite columns ran a blank façade broken up only by wide windows and plain pilaster strips, the sole decoration being some flourishes in cement over the first-floor windows. The centre was a storey higher, and the whole was crowned by a conventional open balustrade of Italianate type with finials on the piers. The internal plan was of interest, though no representation of it has been found. In at least the 1872 portion each floor was arranged as a large open space, lit partly by large light wells as in some City warehouses, it was reported. Upholsterers occupied the skylit top floor, 'artists' the second, while the first floor was used for showrooms. There was much iron construction. The works were executed by Jackson & Graham themselves.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1872 extensions it was 'whispered that Messrs. Jackson and Graham intend, on the completion of the new additions to their premises in

Oxford Street' (which included further work at No. 36, later 82) 'to open them as a drapery department in their already colossal establishment'.<sup>13</sup> Around this time they were employing between 600 and 1,000 hands, the figure fluctuating according to the order books and the season. Much of their mid-Victorian output was French in taste, but with changing times they promoted a successful commercial line in aesthetic furniture, for which R. W. Edis and others supplied designs. After Peter Graham's death in 1877 they struggled with a high wage bill and an inadequate order book. Jackson & Graham collapsed in 1882, when the *Furniture Gazette* published a list of their creditors, many of them local tradesmen. Attempts to keep the concern going made no headway, and in 1885 the firm was taken over by rivals, Collinson & Lock.<sup>14</sup> In the same year a bad fire did much damage to some of the warehouses at the back, though the showrooms were not affected.<sup>15</sup>

Collinson & Lock was a smaller furnishings firm with an aesthetic bent, founded in Fleet Street by former employees of Jackson & Graham. They took over only the central portion of their predecessors' premises, trading from 76–80 Oxford Street (the old Nos 33–35), but they also added to the back premises in Perry's Place. Their new showrooms were opened in June 1886 with a private view, electric lighting being installed soon after. A photograph of the main staircase suggests that an English and Jacobean taste prevailed.<sup>16</sup> But by the time Collinson & Lock moved to Oxford Street they had passed their prime, despite some large commissions for furnishing theatres and one for the Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin. George Lock's withdrawal from the company in 1896 paved the way for a takeover by the voracious Waring & Gillow. By 1899 the name had been dropped, and the craftsmen shifted to the Gillows site at the other end of Oxford Street. Waring & Gillow used Nos 76–80 mainly as additional showroom space, particularly for their antiques, until their new Oxford Street flagship store opened further west in 1906. A special exhibition was held here the previous year, when Nelson relics were shown to mark the centenary of Trafalgar.<sup>17</sup> Thereafter Waring & Gillow retained at

least the back premises in Perry's Place, where a four-storey building was recast in 1909–10 to house their printing, stationery and kindred departments.<sup>18</sup>

Of the buildings in this row only No. 88 at the Newman Street corner had been entirely reconstructed by the end of the nineteenth century, as the south end of Newman Mansions (E. C. Robins, architect, with Wall Brothers, builders, for Samuel Chick, 1888–9). By 1921 it housed Manfields the bootmakers up to at least the second floor.<sup>19</sup> Nos 70–86, the former Jackson & Graham premises, were on long lease to Robert B. Lavery, in miscellaneous use after years of hard wear, and probably in poor condition. No. 70 at the Perry's Place corner had the brief distinction on 17 October 1894 of hosting the first British showing of the Kinetoscope or moving camera, demonstrated by Thomas Edison's representative in London, Franck Z. Maguire.<sup>20</sup> Waring & Gillow made some changes to those fronts they controlled, then passed at least Nos 74–76 to Parkins & Gotto, the stationers recently displaced from the Evelyn House site just to the east.<sup>21</sup> Not until 1912–13 did the row undergo a thorough overhaul, when the architect T. B. Whinney recast the upper floors as offices (Commerce House). The block was sold by the Berners Estate in 1934, but did not survive long thereafter, as it suffered punishing bomb damage in 1941 and was demolished as a result.<sup>22</sup>

This bomb site enjoyed a brighter life than most. Raffish bars and places of entertainment proliferated along Oxford Street during the war, and in 1943 an amusement park was proposed for the large empty site behind the frontage. It was vehemently opposed by local shopkeepers, so for the time being the idea went away.<sup>23</sup> Instead, the Ministry of Information took the site over for a series of exhibitions, in steel huts erected by the Ministry of Works. 'Victory Over Japan', the first, was opened shortly after VJ Day 1945 by the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, and continued till Christmas. It included a striking display of 'jungle realism', with the sights, smells, smoke and temperatures of the Burmese campaign replicated, and a mock-up of an

enemy pillbox. 'Germany under Control' followed in the summer of 1946, on the work of the Control Commission in the British occupied zone in that country, which attracted perhaps 200,000 visitors; and then in January 1947 came a quite different kind of exhibition, 'And So To Work', about encouraging people to overcome disabilities and bringing them back into the workforce.<sup>24</sup>

In 1947 the lessee or sublessee regained possession and again applied to erect a circus or entertainment building, perhaps of a temporary nature, using Morris de Metz of de Metz & Birks as architect and C. J. Pell as engineers. Once more the proposal unleashed a torrent of objections from nearby landlords and proprietors, who united in articulating their fears that this part of Oxford Street had been going downhill since the war and that the values and sustainability of their businesses was in jeopardy. On such grounds the LCC refused both this application and a follow-up one from de Metz & Birks asking to erect a boxing ring to make up for the wartime loss of Holborn Stadium. They next applied to build an eight-storey block on the Commerce House site, but for the moment that went no further. Instead a series of temporary lock-up shops were erected under licence along the Oxford Street frontage in about 1953. At the same time Alec Taylor, the lessee or sublessee of the property, was using part of the large vacant site behind along Newman Street for selling cars and caravans, to further local annoyance. In 1956-7 the protesters, employing a solicitor and taking their case as far as the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, persuaded the LCC not to renew the licences.<sup>25</sup>

By then plans were afoot to fill the frontage at Nos 70-88 with a prosaic ten-storey office block with shops on the ground floor built by Token Construction to designs by Trehearne & Norman, Preston & Partners in 1959-60. The developers were first named as Prince of Wales Theatre (Properties) Company, later as City & Central Investments Ltd. A concrete-framed structure with Portland stone cladding, it was first called Colgate-Palmolive



House after the first tenants, but later became known as Oxford House and was numbered simply as 76 Oxford Street.<sup>26</sup> This building was demolished in 2018, and at the time of writing was in the process of being replaced with a fresh block of shops and offices, scarcely more distinguished in design, by Orms Architects, working on behalf of Pontsarn Investments, a subsidiary of Great Portland Estates.<sup>27</sup> The same developers were responsible for the very large Rathbone Square complex on the former Western District Post Office site immediately behind, completed in 2017.<sup>28</sup>

*Nos 90–114*

**Nos 90–92.** This gawky corner site building, erected in 1899–1900, bears the stamp of John Slater, then surveyor to the Berners Estate; the builders were Holloway Brothers. It is of red brick with stone dressings, multi-storey bays towards both Oxford and Newman Street, and a high turret topping off the extruded rounded corner. The original lessee was E. W. Perry of John Perry & Son, watchmakers previously established on the site, but the shop was first tenanted by a succession of clothing firms.<sup>29</sup> The layer of shop windows added later at first-floor level does not improve the proportions. These were probably inserted when the outfitters Horne Brothers took over the shop as their new Oxford Street branch in 1914.<sup>30</sup> The current shop front is coarse.

**Nos 94–98.** The current building on this site, which links through to 92–94 Newman Street, is a plain block of shops and offices erected to designs by Clifford Derwent & Partners, architects, in 1962–3. The clients were J. Lyons & Co., who from about 1903 had a shop at the previous No. 94 extending backwards behind Nos 96 & 98. All three properties had belonged to the local businessman Samuel Chick, who in 1917 acquired from the Berners Estate a 999-year lease, no doubt bought later by Lyons.<sup>31</sup> The former buildings on these sites had mid Victorian compo fronts with much conventional

ornament; their shops were tenanted together in the 1890s as out-stations of John Hooper, draper, whose main emporium was at No. 110 (formerly 52).<sup>32</sup> They may have embodied vestiges of the first houses built here, previously Nos 42–44 (consec.).

**Oslers and Century House, Nos 100–102.** A colourful watercolour offers rare evidence for the most scintillating of Oxford Street’s Victorian shop interiors, formerly the London showroom of F. & C. Osler, manufacturers and retailers of ornamental glass. It was designed by Owen Jones in 1859 and mostly survived until 1928.

Oslers’ London shop was an outlet for the inventive products of a Birmingham firm started in 1807 by Thomas Osler and partners as Shakespear & Osler. Outstanding in craft among the Midlands glass-makers of the Industrial Revolution, the company owed its early success to an improved method for making glass drops for chandeliers and other ornaments. In 1831 Osler handed over the business to his sons Follett and Clarkson Osler, who introduced new machinery for precision cutting of flint glass and diversified into vases, decanters and fancy articles of many kinds.<sup>33</sup> By the early 1840s the brothers had developed an international market, notably in India, where they had a showroom in Calcutta.<sup>34</sup> In 1845 they took a shop at 44 Oxford Street just west of Newman Street, advertising ‘glass chandeliers, table glass, etc. ... made from rich and exclusive designs, a great variety of which are constantly on view’.<sup>35</sup> Next year a grand chandelier made by the Oslers for a mosque at Alexandria elicited a visit to their Birmingham works from Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt, who ordered another, over 17ft high. This was shown at Oxford Street and led to a commission from Prince Albert for a pair of candelabra for Osborne House as a birthday present for Queen Victoria.<sup>36</sup>

The high point came when Oslers were commissioned to create the monumental ‘crystal fountain’ at the centre of the Great Exhibition in 1851. This drew the firm into the circle of Owen Jones, whose subsequent

experiments with glass and colour in the Alhambra Court at the Crystal Palace (as reconstructed at Sydenham) earned him a run of glamorous commercial interiors in the West End. Jones's rebuilding of Osiers succeeded the firm's acquisition of the neighbouring No. 45 and a new lease of both properties in 1858, and came just after his Crystal Palace Bazaar further west on Oxford Street.<sup>37</sup>

The new front was chaste, the *Building News* reported: 'the moulded jambs and soffits of the windows are worked within the thickness of the walls, and the principal cornice of the elevation has a very simple projection compared with those of the Palladian type'.<sup>38</sup> Within the new shop, opened in July 1859, splendour prevailed. A three-arched vestibule paved with Minton tiles led to a showroom 106ft long and 24ft wide. Its walls were lined with 14 mirrors on each side and a crimson paper, and the whole was top-lit by a glass roof divided into three sections, a high semi-circle in the centre raised over lower quadrants. Heftily ornamented ribs divided this roof into 1,456 star-shaped panels of blue, amber, white and ruby glass, much like those in the roof of the Crystal Palace Bazaar. The room terminated in a 'monster looking-glass', 24ft 9in by 12ft. The goods were ranged on mahogany counters along the sides, and on central tables. The contractor for these works was John Willson, while for the decoration Jones employed his regular collaborators: Jackson & Graham for the fittings, Desachy for the mouldings and enrichments of the ribs (in his patent 'staff'), and James Sheate for colouring and gilding.<sup>39</sup>

In 1862 Jones added an extension at the back, probably towards Newman Street, which the *Art Journal* claimed surpassed the original gallery.<sup>40</sup> Here perhaps were shown the glass 'temples' made to his design and shown in Oxford Street that year in conjunction with the International Exhibition, prompting the *Illustrated London News* to class Osiers among 'the great sights of London'.<sup>41</sup> Later, the firm failed to keep pace with changing taste and lost its avant-garde status, though it continued to do good business.

By the early 1880s Jones's arcaded shop front, of which no record seems to survive, had been replaced by bald plate glass.<sup>42</sup> The coloured glass was removed from the roof and plain tints substituted around 1900, on the grounds that the latter were more suitable for the metal and glass electric light fittings which by then were Osler's main product.<sup>43</sup> In 1908–9 the architect George Hornblower made further extensions, inserting a sweeping double staircase at the back of the long room, leading to upstairs china showrooms, all in a staid Arts and Crafts style.<sup>44</sup>

In 1925 the firm amalgamated with Faraday & Son Ltd to become Osler & Faraday Ltd. They promptly rebuilt the premises in two different halves, both to designs by Constantine & Vernon (builders, Bovis Ltd). The slimmed-down Osler & Faraday took the new Lanthorne House, 89–91 Newman Street, which adopted a conventional neo-Georgian mode. The Oxford Street frontage, by now No. 100, (Osler's address from 1880) and therefore known as Century House, but strictly 100–102, was a commercial speculation intended for showrooms over shops. It expressed its framed construction by means of a giant pilaster order in stonework between all-metal windows and spandrel panels, and a heavy cornice above the third floor.<sup>45</sup> Osler & Faraday ceased trading in 1965 and went into liquidation in 1976. The Newman Street frontage has since been again rebuilt, but Century House survives.

The basement of Century House contained a restaurant from 1927, at first the Winona Restaurant, later Mack's Restaurant. From 1942 a jazz club was held here on Sunday evenings, called the Feldman Club after its founder, a Soho pattern cutter called Robert Feldman. Famous names played here, and dancing to jazz, not yet common, took place. Restaurant use faded out in the 1950s, when the 100 Club, as it now became, kept up with changing post-war styles of music and management. In 1964 its ownership passed to the Horton family and here from around 1976 punk rock developed. Because of its good claim to be the longest surviving venue in London for live music of its type, the 100 Club has been much celebrated in the annals of music.<sup>46</sup>

**Nos 104–108** make an interesting comparison to Nos 100–102, being of similar scale, size and date, and likewise intended for shops and showrooms. This block was designed in 1930 by Slater & Moberly, the Berners Estate's architects, at a time when A. H. Moberly was largely in charge of the firm's design work. The result is a mannerly, well-proportioned front in Portland stone, without the attached pilasters and wide metal windows of its neighbour.<sup>47</sup> The previous buildings on this site dated from around 1839, when the previous Nos 49–52 (later Nos 104–110) had been pulled down and rebuilt; Nos 49 & 50 were the premises between the 1850s and 1878 of John W. Sharpus's china and glass warehouse, a shop much advertised in the papers.<sup>48</sup> From the 1890s there was a minor Oxford Street hotel here, the Queen's, under the management of Frederic Houssier, over a long-established jeweller's shop, Wheaton & Bennett.<sup>49</sup>

**Nos 110–114.** The east corner site of Oxford and Berners Streets, originally No. 54, later No. 114, was the first known address of Dickins & Smith, drapers, ancestors of the later Regent Street store of Dickins & Jones. Alison Adburgham gives their foundation date as 1790, but they are not found at this address till 1811.<sup>50</sup> After they moved to Regent Street around 1835, for nearly fifty years No. 54 was the West End base of Battam, Craske & Coleby, later Battam, Heywood & Hanks. This concern, first established in Cheapside, began as painters and decorators, evolving later into upholsterers and furniture dealers with some international reach. A photograph taken just before this firm decanted in 1889 shows that its corner shop then sported two timber fronts, crawling with grotesque carving in the Vredeman de Vries manner. If parts were ancient, most was evidently a modern fake, created by the local architect Frederick Hering around 1840.<sup>51</sup>

The old Nos 112 & 114 were then supplanted in 1889–90 by the present building, originally the Oxford Street branch of the London & Westminster Bank. The architect was the competent F. W. Hunt. The qualities of this sturdy

red brick and terracotta corner block, discreetly Gothic at gable level with some pretty ornamental detailing, have been sapped by over-painting.<sup>52</sup> In due course the bank, by then the Westminster Bank, saw fit to expand eastwards. To that end 110 Oxford Street was rebuilt in 1931 by Harry Neal Ltd to designs by Slater & Moberly.<sup>53</sup> A quiet Tudor idiom in red brick was chosen, no doubt to harmonize with Nos 112 & 114, but the effect of painting the latter has been to leave No. 110 in stylistic isolation. Neither of these buildings is now in bank use.

#### *Nos 116–132*

Nine addresses are shown on *Tallis's Street Views* between Berners Street and Wells Street, covering the then 55–63 Oxford Street. All were shops, of mixed usage and permanence. No. 55 at the Berners Street corner had been a drapery for forty years or more up to about 1825. In advertising his muslins and cambrics William Cooper, the linen draper in possession between about 1802 and 1807, advised ladies to note down his name and number so as not to get confused with a rival draper at the opposite angle, No. 54.<sup>54</sup> But by Tallis's time neither corner was a draper's. No. 56 was then part pub, the White Lion, and part coffee room at the back, known as the American, perhaps acting as a London depot for an American newspaper; it was still called the American Stores in 1866.<sup>55</sup> No. 59 was Mrs Stovell's straw and mourning bonnet establishment, the proprietress claiming to stock mourning bonnets from Paris suitable for any occasion 'as complimentary or otherwise';<sup>56</sup> and No. 63 at the Wells Street corner (also 66 Wells Street) was Hannay & Dietrichsen's patent medicine warehouse, a partnership which came to an abrupt end after Lionel Dietrichsen cut his throat in the drawing room over the shop in 1846, as a result of stress brought on by a Chancery suit.<sup>57</sup> But the liveliest and sharpest shop in the early 1840s was Williams & Sowerby, linen drapers, at 'Commerce House', Nos 61 & 62, stretching round behind No. 63 to enjoy an extra showroom facing Wells Street.

**Williams & Sowerby.** This firm went back to 1828, when John Williams, draper (not to be confused with John Williams, silk mercer of 111 Oxford Street), claimed to have started out, probably at 61 Oxford Street.<sup>58</sup> By 1836 Joseph Sowerby had joined him there; he was almost certainly from Hull, and that year the partners advertised in Hull newspapers for milliners and dressmakers to come down and select from their fashions and patterns in French fancy goods. Soon calling themselves silk mercers, they featured in an insolvency case involving Barbara O'Sullivan Addicks, a minor American author prone to buying things she could ill afford. In 1840 Williams & Sowerby said they were investing £10,000 in patents and machinery for the production of 'Parisian glass cloth' or *tissue de verre*, a process involving the mixing of silk with glass fibres, and first prominently used for covering some chairs at Chesterfield House. They specially devoted their new 'saloon' facing Wells Street, opened in 1844, to displaying this material.<sup>59</sup> They claimed to be pulling up Oxford Street's reputation, and to

have succeeded in establishing a colony in this hitherto unfashionable *quartier*, to which resort vast numbers of ladies of rank and distinction (as may be seen by the splendour of their equipages), perhaps not as settlers, but at all events as frequent visitors.<sup>60</sup>

Around this time *tissue de verre* was specified for some furnishings at St James's Palace, allowing the firm to make play with the royal connection.

Williams & Sowerby, or Sowerby in particular, was not above sharp practice, and did not look good in the case of a rich gentleman's gullible mistress who had been plied with fancy furniture and fabrics.<sup>61</sup> In 1851 the partners split, John Williams & Co. continuing at 60–62 Oxford Street (No. 60 had been taken in in 1849) and 3–5 Wells Street.<sup>62</sup> For a while the Williams firm went on successfully, and reportedly made a successful showing at the Paris Exhibition of 1855.<sup>63</sup> Sowerby on the other hand took a new shop, Sowerby & Tatton, at Oxford Circus, later adding a branch in Hull. He was

soon in old kinds of trouble for dubious sales practices, defaulted in 1861 and fled to America.<sup>64</sup>

Some evidence exists for the internal layout and appearance of the Williams & Sowerby shop. Both the 'silk room' at the back of the shop and the extension into No. 60 were designed by David Mocatta, and some of his original drawings survive along with a specification and three illustrations. As originally created in 1843, the saloon or silk room ran laterally along the back of the shop in the form of a gallery entered from Wells Street, with cast-iron columns slightly inset from the walls, leading to a central dome and an apse, all top-lit to leave the walls free for showing merchandise. Typically for Mocatta, the style of this room was in Soane's idiom updated, using iron construction and a richer Corinthian order than Soane himself would have bestowed on commercial premises. Mocatta later altered this room, suppressing the Wells Street entrance in favour of a big west window, no doubt to improve the lighting. A view of this room dating from 1856 shows it in its revised form; Williams & Co. now claimed their silk department as 'undoubtedly the largest in the Metropolis'. Another view of the same date gives a glimpse of the general shop facing Oxford Street, with rows of columns stretching from front to back, profusely laden counters and shelves along the sides, and hints of top-lighting.<sup>65</sup>

In 1857 Williams & Co. sold out to the partnership of George Grant and Charles Gask, who announced a big sale of stock.<sup>66</sup> Respectably if with less flair, they continued at Nos 58-62 and 3-5 Wells Street until 1869, when the firm became Charles Gask & Co., silk mercers, drapers etc. The Gasks according to a family tradition were from a family of Lincolnshire smallholders who walked to London where they established their drapery.<sup>67</sup> The firm was still flourishing in the 1890s, when the old Williams & Sowerby premises had become 122-132 Oxford St (finally gobbling up the corner shop) and 1-5 Wells Street.<sup>68</sup> But the whole site was subsumed in the rebuilding



around the turn of the century of the block which became Bourne & Hollingsworth.

*Bourne & Hollingsworth*

The block fronting Oxford Street between Berners and Wells Streets and stretching back to Eastcastle Street consists entirely of buildings erected in stages between 1922 and 1958 for Bourne & Hollingsworth. This department store grew from a nucleus facing Oxford Street in 1902 into one of the West End's best-known shops, then fell back in the post-war years, closing in 1983. The buildings survive as offices and shops, notably the Plaza Shopping Centre.

The families of Walter William Bourne (1864–1921) and Howard Hollingsworth (1871–1938) were already acquainted in their native Staffordshire. Both men were apprenticed to a firm of Birmingham drapers before migrating to London, where they worked separately for a while.<sup>69</sup> After a spell back together at Pontings in Kensington, they in 1894 set up their own shop in Westbourne Grove, describing themselves as 'French and English milliners'. Their alliance was cemented when Bourne married Hollingsworth's sister Louisa in 1896. Bourne was adroit in buying and selling, while the articulate Hollingsworth presented the partnership's public face. Both were to make fortunes and acquire sizeable houses outside London. Bourne chose Garston near Watford as his home, and went in latterly for driving and showing hackney ponies. The bachelor Hollingsworth became a benefactor of Lowestoft, his adopted town.

In October 1902 the partners took the east end of 116–128 Oxford Street, a range freshly built in two phases between 1898 and 1901 as an investment by Salaman & Co., ostrich feather merchants, to designs by the Berners Estate's surveyor, John Slater. Four shops were thrown into one, with brass-framed windows, green-painted woodwork and sunk lettering in gold.

In about 1905 the westernmost of these shops, No. 122, was connected through to join 68–70 Berners Street. The partnership also opened a branch in Croydon, followed later by one in Southampton, but Oxford Street became the flagship store. Relentless expansion during the Edwardian years brought the full frontage up to Wells Street and further properties on the side streets under the partners' control. They were able also to erect two exemplary hostels for the Bourne & Hollingsworth staff, Staffordshire House, Store Street (1906) and the larger Warwickshire House, Gower Street (1912), both designed by Slater and his pre-war partner, J. Melville Keith. These hostels greatly raised living standards for department-store staff; Warwickshire House even acquired a swimming pool in the inter-war years.

Before the First World War the partners were already planning to take over the whole block back to Eastcastle Street with a view to rebuilding. They realized this ambition in 1921, just before Bourne's death. As a preliminary, Slater & Keith designed and G. E. Wallis & Sons of Maidstone in 1920–1 built a four-storey garage and five-storey factory for the firm, sited contiguously at 12–13 and 14–17 Wells Mews, north of the Oxford Street block, and still extant.

As usual with department stores, the rebuilding of Bourne & Hollingsworth took place in phases. It was complicated by the fact that the partners never owned their freehold, but depended on their landlord, the Berners Estate, and at first also on the head lessees of the Oxford Street range, the Salaman family. Though Stafford Bourne became a director after his father's death, the main decisions were taken by Hollingsworth, who retained the services of the Slater firm and the builder F. G. Minter throughout.

First came the north-west sector of the main site, fronted by Slater & Keith in an eclectic brick-and-stone style and dated 1922 at the Eastcastle and Wells Street corner. A symmetrical stone-faced range facing Berners Street followed straight on.<sup>70</sup> From 1924 the next generation of architects took over under the style of Slater & Moberly, with Arthur Moberly providing the main

design input for J. Alan Slater. The Oxford Street frontage, not then thirty years old, was replaced in 1925–8 by a new block with deep returns to the side streets. The style in the main is a subdued version of the Selfridges idiom, whereby stone pilaster strips alternate with tiers of windows divided by bronze spandrel panels. The Oxford Street block has a deep cornice over a neo-Grec frieze and a token central pediment within the high mansard. The supporting steel frame was designed by Reade, Jackson & Parry, engineers, and supplied by Dorman, Long & Co.<sup>71</sup> Inside, the main feature was an open atrium with a hanging clock by Gillett & Johnson, installed in 1927 and now to be seen in The Brooks shopping centre, Winchester. Later, in 1935, a continuous canopy was added round the main frontages, the first such feature allowed for a department store by the London County Council.<sup>72</sup> The reconstruction of the whole block was then still incomplete, as some older properties remained in Wells Street together with vestiges of the former Castle Mews which, following ‘certain sordid and repulsive events’, Hollingsworth had gated and finally acquired in 1936 after protracted arguments with Marylebone Borough Council. The mews was then built over, allowing escalators to be introduced for the first time. The Wells Street properties remained until 1957–8, when Minters inserted a new frontage picking up the idiom of the north-west corner.

Despite its position well east of the most fashionable stretch of Oxford Street, Bourne & Hollingsworth ranked among the top inter-war emporia. The *Drapers’ Record* referred to it in 1937 as ‘perhaps the most outstanding of all retail enterprises’, ascribing its prosperity to dogged perseverance and understanding of customers’ needs.<sup>73</sup> Beneath its clock, it was later remembered, ‘ladies from the suburbs would meet when they came for the day to choose a wedding dress for their daughters and to lunch in the genteel restaurant’.<sup>74</sup> The store had some special quirks, cramming its display windows as densely as possible, and declining special promotions. There were however causes for concern. Hollingsworth latterly was at odds with the

younger Bournes over some of their policies, and professed in 1934 to Alan Slater that he was 'very very worried as to the future of B & H ... I don't want to finish my career as a "cheap Jack" Titchfield Street trader'. The main difficulty in his eyes was the Berners Estate's indifference to Bourne & Hollingsworth's fortunes and development.

The store incurred blast damage during the Second World War. As with other large shops, upper floors were given over to the war effort, here the stitching and packaging of supplies for the American Red Cross. Post-war trading resumed normality under Stafford Bourne, chairman of the firm from 1938 to 1972. But the earlier drive had faded and the limitations of the business gradually revealed themselves. With the end of Retail Price Maintenance in 1964 and the continuous rise of the multiples, Bourne & Hollingsworth lost headway and by the early 1970s its custom was declining year on year. However the managers declined to take space at the ex-urban Brent Cross Shopping Centre.

Instead, after a takeover bid had been rejected, Christopher Bourne in 1972 promoted a strategy for redeveloping the site and shop to plans by Richard Seifert, but this came to grief once more over the uncertainties of the firm's leasehold tenure.<sup>75</sup> Despite some improvement in sales during the mid 1970s, a further downturn induced the Bourne family to sell the store in 1978. The purchasers, the clothing consortium Raybeck Ltd, appeared to have secured a bargain, especially after they acquired the freehold from the Berners Estate and sold it on to Equitable Life under a sale and leaseback arrangement.<sup>76</sup> But despite changing the store's name to Bournes and introducing franchises, Raybeck failed to reinvigorate its fortunes. In 1981 outline permission for redevelopment was obtained, and after a prolonged sale the store finally closed in August 1983.<sup>77</sup>

After some failed initiatives the planning permission was taken up in 1985 by Glengate Holdings, specialists in shopping centres, with the intention of creating such a centre, the Plaza, behind the retained Oxford Street

frontage. British financial institutions were reluctant to fund the scheme, so Glengate brought in the Japanese construction firm, Kumagai Gumi Co. Ltd. The project went ahead in 1985–8, with Archer Boxer Partners as architects. The strategy, commented the *Financial Times*, was ‘to go for youth and avoid the reputation for retailing tat which has plagued Oxford Street east of Oxford Circus’.<sup>78</sup> The shopping centre consists of a vesica-shaped atrium with four levels of trading floor accessible from Oxford Street and Berners Street, retailing units along Oxford Street, and offices (Colegrave House) occupying the rest of the block. It is small by modern standards and has struggled to meet commercial expectations, despite changes in 1995–6, including a flashy statue on the front by Michael Rizzello entitled ‘Dancer with Ribbon’. A larger reorganization of the whole building took place in 2017.<sup>79</sup>