

Chapter 5

242–276 Oxford Street

John Prince's Street to Holles Street

A block-size commercial development dating from 1959–63 dominates this section of Oxford Street today, stretching back to encompass frontages facing John Prince's and Holles Streets and half the south side of Cavendish Square. Very typical for its period, it consists mostly of offices and shops. The presence of the London College of Fashion over the Oxford Street front adds a dash of more adventurous architecture.

Early history

This was among the first sections of the Cavendish-Harley estate to attract building, early in the reign of George I. In connection with the plan to begin that development in and round Cavendish Square, the whole block was leased in 1719 by the Cavendish-Harley trustees to John Prince, so-called master builder, and the Estate's steward, Francis Seale. But Seale soon died, and Prince's ambitions seem to have gone unrealized, though he was still active in the 1730s. As a result it took the best part of two decades for the block to be completed by the usual variety of building tradesmen.¹

An undated plan shows the layout as first completed, with the apportionment of property between Seale's executors and Prince apparently indicated. The first development along the frontage may have been inhibited by existing buildings around Nibbs's Pound at the corner of John Prince's Street (Princes Street until 1953); it seems that the pound continued in

existence for some years thereafter, though eventually the Nibbs name was transferred to the pound at the bottom of Marylebone Lane. The centre of the block was occupied by a T-shaped stable yard, usually known as Phoenix Yard after the Phoenix pub, which lay on the west side of Princes Street. There was a secondary access lane or passage to this yard from the middle of the Oxford Street frontage. Originally Phoenix Yard partly served houses on the south side of Cavendish Square, but as trading and manufacture along Oxford Street flourished it became commercialized.²

Directories show that by the 1780s this stretch of Oxford Street, then numbered 119–132 (though with some repetitions of number within that range), possessed a variety of good shops. The *Universal British Directory* of the mid 1790s lists fourteen different tradesmen, including J. H. Bielefeld, toy warehouseman, at No. 127; John Williams, ‘sadler to His Majesty’, at No. 128; John Berry, printseller, at No. 129; Samuel Babbs, music seller, at No. 131; Daniel Durtnall, goldsmith and jeweller, at No. 131 (bis); and John Turner, perfumer, at No. 132.³ As elsewhere in the locality, there was a rapid shift of lessees and tenants in the shops. Bielefeld, for instance, who is usually misspelt in the directories, seems to have oscillated between several premises; he is mentioned in newspapers first as a broker of some sort, then as a music seller (at No. 131, then 129) and finally as a toymaker at No. 127. Discrepancies and mistakes in numbering may mean he hopped around less than appears.⁴ But to take another case, between 1818 and 1836 No. 129 passed in succession from an oilman to a coachmaker, a cabinet-maker or fringe manufacturer, and hence to a jeweller.⁵

It is probably to this block that the charming painting now at Wimpole Hall belongs, affording a rare if idealized glimpse of a pre-Victorian Oxford Street shop interior (Frontispiece). The shop in question was that of Edward Pattison, ladies’ shoemaker, and the style of dress and furnishing makes it likelier that the painting represents the former No. 129 (later 268), where

Pattison was based between about 1821 and 1834, than No. 74 further east, where he then moved.⁶

Rebuildings, 1873–1914

The renewal of Portland leases in the 1870s and '80s led to the near-complete rebuilding of this block in small increments. The corner buildings came first, setting an eclectic tone. Nos 274–276 (originally 132–133) at the Holles Street junction was a fussy, angular effort of 1873–4 by Tolley & Dale, architects, and Newman & Mann, builders, sporting the mixed materials commercially fashionable at the time: Bath stone facings, but Portland cornices with terracotta brackets, and red Mansfield for columns and panels. The building lessee was Thomas Brandon, a milliner and artificial flower maker with a shop in the block next west at the Old Cavendish Street corner. The ground floor was taken by the National Bank.⁷ The counterpart at the Princes Street junction, calmer but also with a corner turret, was Nos 242–248 (originally 119, 120 & 120A) of 1879 by C. F. Hayward, architect, with Langmead & Way, builders: this was occupied by various tenants but in due course amalgamated by A. Stedall Ltd, drapers, who occupied premises on both sides of Princes Street by 1910.⁸ The smaller shops in between were mostly of the 1880s, excepting Nos 268–272, a classical stone block of 1909 by Lionel Barrett for the estate agent and speculator James Boyton.⁹

The outstanding success along this frontage was T. J. Harries' drapery store. Thomas (Tom) Harries was one of eleven children of a farmer of staunch Methodist and Liberal persuasion from Llansteffan, Carmarthenshire.¹⁰ He migrated to London as a young shop assistant, working first for Wallis of Holborn, then as a buyer for D. H. Evans, before at the age of about 28 setting up on his own around 1885 at 260 Oxford Street. Harries gradually bought up neighbouring shops, according to one anecdote with some help from John Lewis, by then well established on the next block

west. At the time of his early death in 1900 Harries' store covered Nos 258–266, parts of which had been rebuilt or refronted to designs by T. H. Watson.¹¹ The business had been built up without advertising. It became a limited company under professional management in 1902, the shares largely owned by Harries' brothers. With the introduction of some advertising T. J. Harries & Co. continued to grow, soon extending to Nos 252–256, until with the purchase in 1920 of Stedalls at the Princes Street corner it set fair to dominate the block.¹² Following a serious fire in 1922 Trollope & Colls reconstructed the whole of the back behind Nos 252–260 to designs by A. E. Hughes, also a shareholder, allowing the Harries firm to acquire one of the new 999-year Howard de Walden leases of these rear premises.¹³

This rapid expansion stopped abruptly when Spedan Lewis, whose father had always had his eye on Harries, bought the owners out in 1928, for a price announced as £542,000.¹⁴ The name survived briefly, but soon enough the shops were turned into the East House of John Lewis. They played a crucial role in the history of that firm, which despite severe bomb damage at the western end of the frontage was able to concentrate its retailing in this block after the wartime destruction of the main John Lewis premises. After the rebuilding of that site, the firm's interests in the East House could be disposed of and the whole block redeveloped.

The East Island Site Building

At the time of the bombing of the main West House site of John Lewis & Co. in 1940 the ownership of the two large blocks east and west of Holles Street was involved. The company held the freehold of most but not quite all of the so-called west island, plus various leases on parts of the east island, including the 999-year term for a section of the former T. J. Harries premises, and short leases of 32, 33 & 35 Cavendish Square, three of the ten surviving houses at the back facing the square. The freehold of that whole block was the one

remaining part of the historic Howard de Walden estate along Oxford Street which had not been sold off between the wars. In 1941 John Lewis and the Estate agreed in principle that the former would receive the remaining freeholds of the west island not yet in its possession in exchange for its interests in the east island. Nevertheless in its early rebuilding plans the company intended still to continue occupying parts of the east island. It subsequently decided to retract to the west island alone, but trading from the East House continued until its new West House building was completed in 1959.¹⁵

Confirmation in 1955 of the sale of John Lewis's East House assets opened the door for the Howard de Walden Estate to sell the whole east island. In May 1956 *The Times* announced that it was to be sold to Mappin & Webb, but in December came the correction that the buyer was Harold Samuel's Land Securities Investment Trust and the price about £2.5 million.¹⁶ Land Securities now negotiated one of the largest post-war redevelopments in the West End, designed by T. P. Bennett & Partners, architects, to take advantage of the plot-ratio rules of the day, which allowed developers to build high behind lower street frontages. A series of structures of varying height and contour was to combine retailing space at lower levels, principally towards Oxford Street, with three high office blocks at the back, notably a 238ft tower aligned north-south and entered from Cavendish Square. The multi-storey blocks were mostly set back behind a lower curtain round the periphery, which the planners stipulated was to be faced in Portland stone.

The shops facing Oxford Street were to consist of smaller individual units and a larger T-shaped space in the middle for a department store, with a main frontage at Nos 252-258 and side entrances from Holles and John Prince's Streets. British Home Stores Ltd, expanding strongly in the late 1950s, agreed to take this space as their West End flagship. Above and behind this frontage of shops, following negotiations with the London County Council, Land Securities reserved space for a six-storey block, rising to about 80ft. Here

was to be sited the former Barrett Street Technical College, reorganized and upgraded as the London College of Fashion and Clothing Technology, and entered from John Prince's Street. That part of the development was delegated to the LCC's architects and is separately discussed below.

At the back, the National Bank was relocated from the former 274–276 Oxford Street to 28 Cavendish Square at the Holles Street corner, while the Phoenix pub, formerly at the entrance from John Prince's Street into Phoenix Yard, took the equivalent north-east corner of the block, becoming 37 Cavendish Square. A branch of the Halifax Building Society occupied part of the Holles Street frontage. The primary tenant of the tower, now 33 Cavendish Square, was the Iraq Petroleum Company, then riding high on profits from the Kirkuk oil field before the Iraqi Government embarked on attempts to control its assets. Negotiations had gone far enough for development to start in 1959, and the National Bank opened for business in December that year. The whole development was constructed by Taylor Woodrow Ltd. The commercial sections were completed in 1961, leaving the London College of Fashion block to be added.¹⁷

The outcome is a consistent set of structures in the bland manner of the Shell Centre, at that moment London's ruling idiom for commercial architecture. Over steel frames the blocks are dressed in flattened profiles, with flush windows set off by spandrel panels, corners and blank ends in Portland stone. Towards Cavendish Square the office bulks break up into varying heights and planes, but the end of the central tower thrusts forward with a more assertive rhythm of fenestration. The smaller Oxford Street shops, planned as narrow and deep units with open mezzanines, were mostly snapped up and fitted out for branches of fashion shops with multiple high-street outlets. The British Home Stores likewise had their own in-house designers to fit out their large space, which extended to a full upper floor of retailing at the back behind the College of Fashion. Their shop opened in March 1961.¹⁸

Other oil concerns beside the Iraq Petroleum Company took offices here in the early years, while the BBC took four floors of the tower. Later Great Portland Estates, the property company very active with development in this part of Marylebone and founded by cousins of Harold Samuel of Land Securities, moved their headquarters and boardroom to 33 Cavendish Square. The freehold of the block passed in due course from Land Securities to the National Coal Board's Pension Fund.¹⁹ In the Panama Papers revelations of 2016 it was disclosed that Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the United Arab Emirates, held ownership of the British Home Stores section of the East Island site, but the nature of his interests was not revealed. Around the same time it was announced that BHS would sell or sublet its Oxford Street premises into smaller units following trading difficulties. The store closed that August, some months after the winding-up of BHS was announced.²⁰

The London College of Fashion

The London College of Fashion, now part of the University of the Arts London, had its origin in the Barrett Street Trade School for Girls, set up in 1915 by the LCC in underused school premises some two hundred yards west of the present site. Its original purpose was to train unemployed dressmakers in the bespoke trade for methods of wholesale and factory production, which were then expected to increase. The school was loosely linked from the first with the Shoreditch Technical Institute in the East End.²¹

Between the world wars the school matured and expanded, and following the 1944 Education Act it confined its courses to older students. By 1951, when Gwen Hiscocks took over as principal from Ethel Cox, the Barrett Street Technical College (as it had now become) was operating from three separate annexes in Bolsover Street, New Cavendish Street and Picton Place

besides its main base in Barrett Street, which had been bomb-damaged. The following year the college became mixed-sex.²²

Against a context of expansion and reorganization of LCC colleges, and with a growing influx of British Commonwealth students under scholarship schemes into training for the post-war fashion and clothing industries, Miss Hiscocks set about looking and lobbying for new premises. A first idea was to rebuild in Duke Street just west of Barrett Street, but that proved impossible. According to one source it was she who identified the East Island site; at any rate the suggestion was taken up in 1957 by the LCC's Planning Division, which was keen to see a mixture of uses in the Land Securities scheme. The Ministry of Education, soon drawn in, gave the unusual project its blessing. To prepare the brief for the new building, Hiscocks visited France, Sweden, Germany and the United States, taking special note of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, opened in 1944 and housed in purpose-built premises from 1959.²³

The project was assigned by the LCC to the Schools Division of its Architect's Department under Michael Powell, who with one of his assistants, Douglas Stark, was present at the earliest meetings.²⁴ Building on top of a commercial development was an unusual challenge for the LCC architects and involved some suppression of the avant-garde modernism favoured by the Schools Division around 1960, but Powell made sure the result was a cut above the surrounding offices and shops. As a first step one of the team, probably Stark, named as the architect in charge of the building, was assigned to Barrett Street to study the college's ways of working.²⁵ The plan was straightforward, involving a six-storey slab atop but set back from the Oxford Street frontispiece, with a series of teaching rooms off a central corridor. The hub of activities lay at first-floor level, where administration and lecture rooms and the like were positioned, while a double-height assembly hall convertible into a gym occupied part of the John Prince's Street side. The poky main entrance was also from John Prince's Street, whence a typically

detailed LCC timber stair rose to the principal floor. Upper floors were reached by staircases of similar type which helped to break up the Oxford Street front. No living accommodation for students or staff was provided. But there was a small garden at first-floor level which like the Oxford Street balcony soon became a venue for fashion displays and shoots.

Construction, undertaken like the rest of the East Island Site by Taylor Woodrow, took place in 1961–3. There were various technical problems, tackled largely by the engineers for the overall development, Bylander, Waddell & Partners. Because the shops below were already in occupation, access and hours for the builders were restricted. A second slab was superimposed on the roof of the shops below, leaving a narrow box in between for services, and the concrete structure of the college rose independently from the upper slab. Overall height restrictions kept the storeys lower than the architects would have liked, and there were problems of noise to overcome by means of double glazing, infrequent at that date, and acoustic ceilings. In elevation the college presented itself as a continuous, disciplined grid of windows at 6ft centres framed in Portcrete Ltd's Capstone mullions, between zones of Portland stone cladding at the base and along the top to harmonize with the rest of the development. To break up the fronts, the staircase and WC zones were differentiated by a smaller scale of concrete tracery mullions in alternate shapes, filled with panes of glass in primary colours of the type introduced to the LCC by Ernö Goldfinger from the late architecture of Auguste Perret; many of these have now been replaced by clear glass. In several places the front curtain over the shops was cut through to give views of Oxford Street from the balcony. Just one demure mosaic panel in tones of blue adorns the front near the Holles Street corner. It depicts scissors, ribbons, a screw and patterns; its authorship has not been ascertained.²⁶

The rebuilt college opened as the London College of Fashion and Clothing Technology in Autumn 1963 with a complement of some 450 full-

time students and 250 part-timers, not counting the many more who attended evening classes, and 50 full-time staff. It was divided into four main departments: dressmaking; clothing; hairdressing and beauty; and general studies. Under the LCC's overall control, the college governors included representatives of business, trades unions and various associations and magazines connected with clothing and fashion. A ceremonial opening followed when the Queen Mother visited on 11 February 1965.²⁷ That year the college's management passed to the Inner London Education Authority. Two years later the Shoreditch College for the Clothing Industry was fully incorporated with the college, and various amalgamations of facilities subsequently took place.²⁸ The premises remain essentially as they were first designed, though the hall and catering area next to John Prince's Street have been entirely recast. On the abolition of the ILEA in 1986 the college became part of the London Institute, subsequently the University of the Arts London.