

Chapter 8

334–348 Oxford Street

Vere Street to Marylebone Lane

This short but deep block runs between Vere Street and the eastern arm of Marylebone Lane, and backs on to Henrietta Place. It is now completely taken up by Debenhams' department store, the successor shop to Marshall & Snelgrove. Unlike most Oxford Street blocks this one lies on a slant, as Vere Street, Marylebone Lane and New Bond Street opposite all meet the main road at an angle, reflecting the long-lost topography when the Tyburn brook crossed near by.

Before it was built up from the 1720s onwards, the land here included medieval burials connected with the first Marylebone church on the site next west, unearthed during construction work for Marshall & Snelgrove. Until well into the nineteenth century, the west side of Vere Street included independent and respectable houses, some fourteen in number, but over time they were increasingly taken by shops. By contrast the Oxford Street frontage comprised only seven houses, shown on Horwood's map and *Tallis's Street Views* as numbered east-west from 152 to 158, with a deep stable yard, Golden Horse Yard, intervening behind the centre. In the 1790s the shopkeepers here included a grocer, a mercer, a perfumer and a lace manufacturer. Until his death in 1804 a jobmaster, John Newport, ran the yard behind with a stock of twenty 'Job, Glass Coach, Hackney ditto, and Post-Chaise Horses', with vehicles to match.¹

Marshall & Snelgrove, later Debenhams

Marshall & Snelgrove has a claim to being Oxford Street's first full-scale department store, though it always dealt exclusively in drapery and fashions. Founded in 1833, the business grew so fast that by the time the rebuilding of the front was completed in 1878 it occupied almost a complete city block, bounded by Oxford, Vere and Henrietta Streets and Marylebone Lane. In 1919 the firm was merged with Debenhams. But the Marshall & Snelgrove name and Oxford Street premises survived until the late 1960s, when the present Debenhams flagship store replaced the old buildings.

James Marshall (1805–93), founder of the firm, was a Yorkshireman by birth, from Sherburn (probably Sherburn in Elmet, near Selby). He is said to have started out in London with some drapers at 10 Vere Street.² The usual date given for his commencement at 11 Vere Street next door is 1837, but a deed shows Marshall taking an assignment of No. 11 from a surgeon in May 1833.³ His earliest partner was a William Wilson. In 1837 a more significant collaborator, John Stinton, joined. The partnership, interchangeably called silk mercers or linen drapers, was briefly known as Marshall, Wilson & Stinton, before Wilson dropped away.⁴ In the early 1840s Marshall & Stinton also had a shop in Grey Street, Newcastle, which was not sustained.⁵ But branches in Scarborough, Harrogate and Leeds, doubtless the fruit of Marshall's Yorkshire links, proved more enduring. The Scarborough and Harrogate branches were said in the early years to have operated only during the fashionable season at those resorts.⁶

The original Vere Street shop lay some distance back from Oxford Street, close to the corner with Henrietta Street (now Place). That was the direction in which the firm first expanded, with addresses at 10–15 Vere Street and 18–20 Henrietta Street by 1843. A high-class clientèle soon established itself, to the point that King Louis-Philippe of France during his English visit of October 1844 acquired rich tartan velvets and Irish poplins from the firm,

though he may not have visited the shop in person. In 1847 Marshall & Stinton were said to be employing 40–50 female staff.⁷ When Stinton amicably withdrew from the partnership that year, the firm's capital was estimated at £17,000, two-thirds of it his. Stinton's place was taken by John Snelgrove (1818–1903), already then James Marshall's right-hand man and originally from Dulcote, Somerset, where his father was a paper maker of some repute. By the terms of the Marshall & Snelgrove partnership, formalized in August 1848, John Snelgrove managed the business on the spot and lived on the premises.⁸ He brought with him only a modest capital, leaving the rest of Stinton's capital to be paid off by a series of promissory notes redeemed at short intervals.⁹ A brother, Edwin Snelgrove, also spent time in the firm.

In 1852 John Snelgrove married one of Marshall's daughters. After her early death he in 1859 married her sister Georgiana Elizabeth (in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, doubtless because of the British legislation against marrying a deceased wife's sister).¹⁰ When the Marshall & Snelgrove partnership began, the founder's oldest son, James C. Marshall (1830–1925), had just joined the firm. In 1855 he married Louisa, John Stinton's daughter, so strengthening a web of close family and business relationships. The older James Marshall gradually withdrew, using the fortune he had made to buy first a suburban estate, Goldbeaters, Hendon, and then a brewery and estate in Huntingdonshire, Buckden Towers, which he assigned to his younger sons, Arthur and Charles Marshall. Snelgrove, though less wealthy, was certainly well-off, and became known in later life for his charitable donations and his concern for the welfare of employees in the drapery trades,

The Marshall & Snelgrove business and premises grew apace, while always adhering firmly to the drapery and dressmaking trades. 'We know what we are at,' Snelgrove was wont to say, 'and we mean to stick to it'. In 1849 the partners opened a mourning department. In the significant trading year of 1851 there followed the so-called Royal British Warehouse, giving the firm its first frontage on Oxford Street. This probably comprised a couple of

shops just east of the opening into Golden Horse Yard, with a more substantial new building behind, for which the firm acquired a 32¹/₂-year lease in 1854.¹² Adjacent premises were inexorably accumulated, generally on short leases.

Much of this expansion must have involved converting existing buildings, so that customers will have negotiated a rabbit warren, passing from one department to the next. That compartmentalization was a factor in Marshall & Snelgrove's one fleeting moment of notoriety, in 1864. The 'pocket Venus' Lady Florence Paget, freshly engaged to Henry Chaplin, was driven one July morning in her father's brougham to the Oxford Street entrance on the pretext of making some purchases; she then walked straight through to the Vere Street side where she met a representative of the rakeish 4th Marquess of Hastings, was whisked off to St George's, Hanover Square, and there peremptorily married. Variations of the story claim other points of entrance or exit, but the essentials are agreed.¹³

The year 1864 also saw the first known involvement of Horace Jones, resident close by in Devonshire Place, who designed a new block for the firm at the corner of Oxford Street and Marylebone Lane. At just this time Jones was appointed surveyor to the City Corporation, causing him to give up or delegate much of his private practice, so it is plausible that this is the same job as the Oxford Street 'warehouse' for Mr Marshall for which the builder William Henshaw then submitted the lowest tender to Thomas W. Willis, architect.¹⁴ In any case Jones went on to preside over the start of the major rebuilding of the 1870s, undertaken when Snelgrove was in the driving seat (James Marshall senior having retired), before formally passing the commission on to his colleague Octavius Hansard.¹⁵ Jones must have remained close to the partners, for when Marshall senior became of unsound mind in 1880, he was chosen as his legal representative.

The rebuilding of the perimeter, undertaken by the builders Lawrence & Sons, took place in two main phases, of about 1871-2 and 1876-8.¹⁶ It is said

to have been made possible by profits following a buyer's coup in 1870, when a representative of the firm went over to Lyons during the Franco-Prussian War and 'bought huge quantities of silk at very advantageous prices'.¹⁷ By that time Marshall & Snelgrove had grown sufficiently to control most of the frontages round the whole block, though the Vere Street/Henrietta Street corner continued to elude the firm's grasp. Jones may well have produced an overall design for the perimeter at the outset in 1871, taking his 1864 block as the starting point and extending it round to cover at least three of the fronts, Henrietta Street excepted; Hansard probably then followed his lead, revising and completing the Oxford Street front, which belonged to the second phase.

The design adopted the Second Empire style popular around 1870, with four main storeys above ground, an attic and prominent mansard roof, and gently rounded corners. The elevations were of yellow brick, with liberal Bath stone dressings and enrichments, while the symmetrical Oxford Street frontage, running the full 160ft between Marylebone Lane and Vere Street, was articulated by stone-fronted pavilions crowned by high roofs. This front responded to the wishes of the Portland Estate, which in an early aesthetic intervention asked as a condition of a new head lease for a front of 'some architectural importance, a condition which has been carried out in a commendable spirit', commented *The Builder*. The shop fronts were framed in granite and Portland stone, with bronze bands. Inside, as was still then standard, retailing was confined to the ground floor only, but this rose along Oxford Street to a height of 17 feet, allowing the costume and mantle departments to occupy double-height spaces with galleries. The deep basement, lit in part by pavement lights, was earmarked for a counting house 'and other purposes'; the first floor was for wholesale and warehousing, but the top three floors were given over to housing 250 of the employees, each room having its own fireplace and ventilator. Construction was partially fireproof, with wrought-iron main girders for the principal floors and all cast iron encased in concrete.¹⁸ The completed elevations offered a semblance of

order round the edges of the block, but its centre continued to be filled with a clutter of low-rise structures, for the shop had not taken advantage of the framed construction with top-lighting just then making its appearance in the stores of Paris. The continued lack of unity within the store may to an extent have been deliberate, since it has been claimed that in the 1890s there was a division between the Vere Street side, reserved for Marshall & Snelgrove's exclusive clientèle, and the Oxford Street side, which catered for 'less exalted customers'.¹⁹

Under arrangements contemplated in 1878 John Snelgrove withdrew from the firm in 1883, retiring mostly to Devon and leaving James C. Marshall and his son Arthur James Marshall (1856–94) in day-to-day charge. Snelgrove was paid £37,573 for his quarter interest in the London property. The annual rent for these premises came to well over £15,000, of which £6,785 was payable on six Oxford Street leases alone. The firm's reach had extended by now beyond its home quadrilateral, to take in most of the stabling in Stratford Mews behind Wigmore Street, their main depot for horses and vans; various properties west of Marylebone Lane, where vaults beneath the Marylebone Court House were rented; and two houses on the north side of Henrietta Street, with 1 Welbeck Street, which accommodated staff and kitchens and were linked to the main block by an underground passage.²⁰

A further acquisition, in 1882, was of 352 and 354 Oxford Street, just beyond Bumpus's bookshop on the so-called island site west of Marylebone Lane, in the tenure of Jane Mason, couturier. Mason's business was then in receivership, so the partners took the opportunity to buy her out and reinstall her under her own name, while managing the business themselves. This was not a new device for the firm, for back in 1851 when a branch was started in Leeds, a local salaried agent, James Radford, ran it under the name of Radford & Co. but under the complete control of Marshall & Snelgrove, who supplied all the goods from London and took the profits.²¹

In 1898 Marshall & Snelgrove became a public company. The change affected the London and Scarborough businesses but not Leeds, by then the sole other remaining provincial branch, though there was also a franchise in Brussels. Lofts & Warner, the agents involved, valued the total property exclusive of fittings at £130,000, all the London interests being leasehold. The auditors estimated that the profits of the business were enough to pay the annual interest on debenture stock of £225,000 four times over. Staff numbers had risen by then to over 800, for the most part accommodated on the premises in rooms usually with two or four beds each.²² But the firm, though thus famous and profitable, was past its heyday, with dowdy, outdated premises. The waste of space in the centre became glaring, as neighbours like Selfridges began to build deep, flexible floors lit by a combination of light wells and electricity.

In 1912 the architects Forbes & Tate were brought in to address the problem. They came up with a scheme to enlarge the selling and working space, mainly by shrinking the staff accommodation, as employees were increasingly reluctant to live in.²³ But the times were against them. Next year James C. Marshall retired, and in 1916 under wartime circumstances a working agreement was made with Debenhams, in the ascendant and keen to purchase a foothold in Oxford Street. A full merger between the firms followed in 1919.²⁴ Subsequent provincial branches of Marshall & Snelgrove, including the renamed Radford business in Leeds, had no direct connection with the London house.

For the time being Forbes & Tate were retained, revising their scheme, which included a new entrance from Oxford Street and a main stair. Little of this had been achieved when Debenhams' architects, J. S. Gibson & Gordon, took over in 1921. Photographs taken in 1923 show the appearance of the interior at that date. A first scheme for rebuilding the whole store, with a proposed tower in the centre of the Oxford Street front, came forward in 1936–7 but made no headway, so that during the rest of the inter-war period

only minor alterations took place. In 1954 Gibson & Gordon submitted a revised scheme replacing the semi-open centre with a regular grid, but without the tower. Once again the reconstruction was deferred. By the time that rebuilding finally took shape in 1968, the architects had become first Gibson, Gordon & Montagu, and then Adrian V. Montagu & Partner. It was under the latter firm, in collaboration with V. J. Syborn of George Baines & Syborn (previously architects of the Debenhams store in Exeter), that the phased rebuilding of the whole shop took place in 1969–75. Once that was completed, the store negotiated a new long lease of the site and its name was changed to Debenhams.²⁵

The external architecture of the Debenhams store as completed in the 1970s was marked by a series of vertical concrete piers alternating with narrow tiers of windows and a heavy crowning cornice. It had a poor reputation, confirming a post-war collapse of architectural ambition in Oxford Street department stores. Simon Bradley in the second edition of the Pevsner guide pronounced it 'big and dispiriting'; a later report by Donald Insall & Associates called it 'dull and oppressive ... disappointing and weak'.²⁶ The interior hardly had more character. A first attempt to redeem the store came after Sir Ralph Halpern took over Debenhams stores on behalf of the Burton group in 1985. Fitch & Co., architects, were subsequently brought in to give the interior a full-height atrium with banks of escalators.²⁷ It remains nevertheless unmemorable, and marred by a ground floor on two levels, with an awkward set of five steps up about one-third of the way back from Oxford Street.

Latterly the Debenhams group has struggled, having left the Burton group in 1998. The freehold of the Oxford Street property, which had been acquired from the Howard de Walden Estate in the inter-war Marshall & Snelgrove period, was disposed of to British Land in 2005 (along with other store sites in the group) in exchange for a lease back. More recently, in 2016, British Land sold the freehold on 'to a private investor'.²⁸ Meanwhile an

adventurous attempt to cheer up the fronts of the store took place in 2013, when the Californian artist Ned Kahn was hired to endow all the façades with one of the rippling perforated screens for which he had become well known in the United States from the 1990s on. This consists of a series of small satin-coated aluminium panels which overclad all four fronts above shop-window level and move gently in the wind. The installation was made in association with Archial Architects (latterly Archial NORR). It has generally been welcomed as a great improvement on the former concrete elevations, but internally has the effect of depriving the store of windows above ground-floor level.²⁹