

Chapter 12

Oxford Circus

The Nash circus

Circuses were introduced into English urban planning by John Wood the younger at Bath and to London by George Dance the younger at the Minories. Both were domestic in intent. But John Nash had different ends in mind for the circuses he designed along his great processional route from Carlton House to Marylebone Park, first planned for the Commissioners of Woods and Forests on behalf of the Crown in 1811. At two major intersections this route crossed Piccadilly and Oxford Street, both major traffic and shopping arteries. Extra space was needed for vehicles to manoeuvre around one another at these junctions. The concave frontages thus created were meant also to entice shoppers and shopkeepers, and so enhance the value of Crown property - the ultimate purpose of the whole 'New Street' scheme.

As the development of Regent Street (as the New Street became known) unfolded, the circuses changed too. In Nash's original project of 1811, both Piccadilly and Oxford Circuses (to use their modern names) were to be colonnaded, and the former was to be the smaller of the two. When this plan was put before Parliament as part of the New Street Bill, the colonnades were deprecated, one MP remarking that the Oxford Street circus 'would be a nuisance by day, and something worse by night'.¹ So they vanished from the whole street, except in the so-called Quadrant - the curving section north and west of Piccadilly Circus. The alignments of the two circuses also altered. Piccadilly Circus retained its original position, on the axis of Carlton House, but its relationship with the central section of Regent Street changed. Oxford

Circus was shifted eastwards, responding to the revised curving line of that central section. In the final scheme approved by Parliament in 1813, Nash contrived the geometry of Oxford Circus so that Regent Street and Oxford Street could intersect nearly at right-angles. He also reduced it in size to a diameter of about 164ft, much the same as Piccadilly Circus, no doubt to reduce the amount of land the Crown would have to buy.

The upshot was two circuses alike in scale and architecture, with four tight frontages of just over 60ft each and only three separate houses in each segment – quite different from the broad sweep of Park Crescent, also originally planned by Nash as a circus, at the entrance to Regent’s Park. The similarity was compounded by the fact that both were known during their early years as Regent or Regent’s Circus, distinguished by the suffix ‘Piccadilly’ or ‘Oxford Street’ or merely ‘South’ and ‘North’ to denote which was meant. ‘Oxford Circus’ is first met in 1836, but ‘Regent’s Circus, Oxford Street’ survived long after that.² Subsequent changes have rendered the circuses totally different. Whereas today’s Oxford Circus faithfully mimics Nash’s geometry and recalls its old idiom, of his Piccadilly Circus no trace remains.

Planning the circus

Oxford Circus was an exception to the general rule that Regent Street was designed and built from south to north.³ As a crucial node in the New Street, Nash was keen to get it going early, aware that the Commissioners were under pressure from the Treasury to drop it entirely. As late as January 1816 he had to enter a passionate defence of the two circuses against a Treasury veto, arguing that their omission entirely destroyed ‘one of the principles on which the beauty of the Street depends’.⁴

Since the dimensions of the four segments were fixed by the scheme agreed by Parliament in 1813, they could be offered to developers in principle

before a finished design was made. In December 1814 the Commissioners received an offer for all four 'corners' from William Farlar, later the developer of Brompton Square.⁵ That came to nothing. A full year passed before another offer for the whole came late in 1815 from Samuel Baxter of Carmarthen Street, St Pancras.⁶ Baxter was just then completing a pair of houses for Nash at the top of Langham Place, not on Crown land. He had no long track record as a builder, but was plainly ambitious, competent and literate. He went on to become one of the biggest developers in Regent Street, undertaking most of the frontages north of Oxford Circus.⁷ For the next four or five years his relationship with Nash was good, but it deteriorated in the 1820s after the circus was largely complete, and at the end of the decade Baxter eventually failed.⁸

In March 1816 Nash worked out the executed scheme for the circus with Baxter, slightly enlarging the plots in the process. Each elevation was to be identical, 64ft in length, making 256ft of frontage *in toto*. Behind these fronts Baxter was allowed to plan the houses, three in each segment, much as he wished, though in co-operation with Nash.⁹ All that was agreed in principle during the summer of 1816, allowing Baxter to start on site late that year after the exact path of the main sewer passing through the circus had been resolved. The Commissioners gave their formal consent only in June 1817, while the articles of agreement together with the elevations were not signed and deposited till December 1818. These latter covered also the Regent Street frontages immediately north and south of the circus, where Baxter was carrying on the same design up to the next cross streets.¹⁰ By then all four segments of the circus proper were complete in carcase. Regent Street opened officially in 1819 and in November of that year Nash was arranging for lamps to be put up in the circus and for its centre to be railed off. But much must have remained incomplete, for he was complaining in July 1821 that five of the houses still lacked shop fronts.¹¹ So the full construction dates for Oxford Circus are 1816–21.

Negotiations with traders

The process of acquiring the manifold property interests in question had commenced in 1814. The number of houses bought specifically for the construction of Oxford Circus proper were quite few, eight on the north side of Oxford Street (Nos 111–118 in the old numbering) and eleven on the south side (Nos 323–332, including a 326A). Less than half occupied the sites of the future circus frontages, the rest being needed for the new roadway. On the whole the traders on the south side of Oxford Street suffered more than on the north, both from excavations for the large sewer which preceded the making of Regent Street itself, and from a large spoil heap of old building materials on that side of the future circus.

Because of the commercial value of Oxford Street shops, treating with the tradespeople to be displaced was not easy. Nash showed typical zest and cunning in the negotiations over compensation. Aware that shopkeepers who declined to come to terms might well be awarded high sums if they took their case to a jury, he tried whenever possible to rehouse them, preferably in one of the new houses in the circus, so offering them continuity and saving the Crown from the trouble of seeking new tenants.

The details of several such dealings survive. In the case of John Saunders, fishmonger at No. 331, for instance, Nash calculated that his ‘connection’ was so considerable ‘as to entitle him to a monstrous sum as good will’ but that he might well continue uncompensated if rehoused near the same spot. That was what eventually happened, not without resentment from Saunders, who had just got established here in recently built premises and built up a clientele of ‘30 to 40 good families’.¹² Less tractable was William Doery, who had inherited a coach and waggon office at No. 324 connected with the well-known Green Man and Still at the corner of Argyll Street (just missed by the circus). With this office was associated the Worcester Coffee House. While the coffee house tenants were easily paid off, Doery hung on to

encounter Nash at his trickiest. After rejecting another old property near his own, he was briefly offered a house in the circus only for the offer to be abruptly withdrawn. By then No. 324 was in a precarious state because of neighbouring demolitions. Influential patrons procured for the anxious Doery a letter of introduction to Nash, who took care that others were present when the interview took place and prevaricated afterwards. In the end Doery threw up his business and settled for £3,150 in compensation.¹³

Another negotiation does greater credit to Nash. That concerned Richardson's silk shop, formerly at 118 Oxford Street on the north side, between Bolsover and Princes Streets. John Richardson had lately died, leaving a wife with eight children plus servants and 'shopmen', all living in the existing house. Backed by an executor brother-in-law, the voluble J. M. Richardson of Cornhill, Mrs Richardson had every intention of carrying on her fashionable business. She was perhaps the first to be offered a house in the new circus, No. 111 in the north-east segment, early in 1816 before Baxter's bid to develop the whole had even been accepted. Once the deal was formalized, Nash's assistant G. S. Repton, who was probably most concerned with the architectural details of Oxford Circus, adapted the planning of the house and liaised with Baxter accordingly.¹⁴

But when the Richardsons came to visit the nearly completed No. 111 in February 1818 they found it not to their liking, and demanded changes, including extra room for the staircase which encroached upon the selling space and, according to J. M. Richardson, impaired 'that appearance from the Street, which in a shop in the line in which Mrs Richardson is concerned is absolutely necessary'. They also asked for three extra months in the old house so that the stock could be removed gradually across to ensure continuity of business. Far from exploding, Nash patiently negotiated what adjustments he could with Baxter, including extra rooms in the attic, though extra space for a staircase on the adjacent plot was out of the question.

Next, J. M. Richardson asked for the bundled fascies Nash had designed between the shop windows to be removed in order to maximize window space – a presentiment of the later Edwardian agitation about the piers between shop windows in Regent Street. To this Nash sharply demurred: ‘I consider the Fascies essential to the upper part of the design – and that the whole beauty of the design will suffer ... I have already reduced them in size to the least possible bulk ... it is not a fact that the quantity of glass is diminished by them for the glass passes behind’. As usual he got his way in the short term. Yet by the time the shops of Oxford Circus started to be illustrated all traces of fascies had gone, in token of the ephemerality of shop-front design.¹⁵

Despite threats to withdraw, Richardson & Co., silk mercers, successfully reopened in the new No. 111, probably in 1819. When a sale of remnants took place the next year, the company boasted that ‘equipages not only surrounded that corner of the Regent’s Circus, but also extended a considerable distance in Oxford-street’. The sale announcement emphasized their location in the north-east segment: ‘in consequence of the similarity of the shops, mistakes frequently occur’.¹⁶

Architecture

As Summerson remarked, because Oxford and Piccadilly Circuses were designed early on in the Regent Street development, their architecture reflected ‘a far more disciplined and less picturesque approach to street design than the approach he [Nash] ultimately adopted in the critical years around 1820’.¹⁷ The five-bay elevations of the segments in both circuses derived from the Palladian palazzo tradition, covering four main storeys, with hidden basements below protected in the usual London manner by area railings. The ground floor was reserved for shops and given over to display windows. Above came a piano nobile on the first floor fronted by iron

balconies, then a lower second storey, the two linked by pilaster strips, and then over the main cornice a full but low attic storey. The eight returns at the corners were each marked by a wider bay, given a broad tripartite window on the first floor flanked by a doubling of the pilasters.

Whereas at Piccadilly Circus moulded strips on the upper storeys and a simple Ionic order below at shop level indicated the divisions between the houses, at Oxford Circus the pilasters aspired to the dignity of a full fluted Corinthian order with capitals of artificial stone; the line was carried downwards between the shops by the bundled fasces (of painted deal) which Nash so vigorously defended against the Richardsons. This treatment gave Oxford Circus the edge in chic, accentuated by the continuation of the same giant pilaster order along the Regent Street flanks undertaken by Baxter, as far as Castle Street to the north and Princes Street and Little Argyll Street to the south. While these extensions detracted from the self-sufficiency of the Oxford Circus design, they added a grandeur to its context missing from the equivalent flanking blocks along Oxford Street.

Baxter's agreement set out the treatment of these frontages in detail. They were to be finished in Parker's cement, jointed, coloured and tinted to resemble Bath stone. The same treatment including the jointing applied to the chimney stacks, while the entablatures, fasces and ornaments to the shop fronts were to be 'of one uniform stone colour', and the balcony and area railings bronze-coloured. Baxter and his successors covenanted not to alter the elevations without the Commissioners' consent, and to repaint the whole regularly 'so that the elevations may have one uniform appearance of newness and colour'.¹⁸

Shops being shops, needless to say, nothing of the kind happened. Tallis's street views already hint at the abrogation of the fasces in the north-east segment. By the late 1840s the silk mercer John Williams, successor to Richardson & Co., had taken over there and united the whole frontage, doubtless with fresh shop windows. Williams must have had a Macclesfield

connection, as he was Liberal MP for that silk town in 1847–52. Latterly his firm was called Williams & Hatton, and after his retirement Hatton, Ritchie & Cummings.¹⁹ Very soon Oxford Circus was a free for all as far as the shop fronts went. The upper elevations were by and large respected apart from a few unsightly protrusions in the attics, but their surfaces and windows were rapidly smothered in shop signs and placards, and all efforts to paint in one hue or at one time given up.

The Scotch pillar

According to James Elmes, always favourable to Nash's improvements, the completed Oxford Circus 'gives an air of grandeur and of space to the streets, and a free circulation of air to the houses. It affords facilities to carriages and horsemen in turning from one street to the other, and is as elegant in form as it is useful in application'.²⁰ To ensure that vehicles used the circus properly, it was hoped to rail off the centre, so that traffic did not proceed straight across. Nash was already urging the Commissioners to get on with this in 1819 at the behest of shopkeepers, who represented to him that 'their Houses will be depreciated in value and their trade injured unless carriages are compelled to come as near to their Houses as they do to the Houses in Oxford Street – that they now pass streight along and the Articles in the Shops are unseen'.²¹ Yet to judge from early maps or views, no such central railed-off area was created. Early illustrations of Piccadilly Circus show traffic traversing an empty centre, and the same probably happened at Oxford Circus despite the tradesmen's disgruntlement.

In 1842–3 a controversial proposal came forward to fill this scruffy void with a commemorative obelisk or pillar. It emanated from the pertinacious and powerful Joseph Hume, MP, then resident in Portland Place, supported

by the dominant Radical faction on the Marylebone Vestry. Riding on the fair wind enjoyed by Parliamentary Reform, Hume pursued an initiative to commemorate the so-called Scottish martyrs of 1793–4, Muir, Palmer, Skirving, Margarot and Gerrald, who had been sentenced to transportation after campaigning for universal suffrage and annual parliaments. Ample funds were subscribed, mainly from London, and an imposing obelisk to the men was duly earmarked for the Old Calton Burial Ground, Edinburgh, and agreed by the Town Council in 1842 though not erected till 1844; its designer was Thomas Hamilton.

As that left Hume with £500 still in his pocket, in October 1842 he approached his fellow Marylebone vestrymen, requesting them to donate the site in the centre of Oxford Circus for a second monument. The Vestry at that stage had a Radical majority and a reputation for unruliness. So the proposal attracted rowdy debate but eventually passed by a large majority, to the scorn of *The Times*, which in a tongue-in-cheek leader claimed that no one in London knew anything about the men to be honoured, and that the Vestrymen had supposed the ‘Scotch pillar’ proposal was to commemorate John Knox: ‘They imagined, we presume, that the Regent-circus was a fit place for a grand national, No Popery-decorated, Etrusco-Corinthian triumphal arch, surmounted by a statue of the great Reformer, robed in the Roman toga, and surrounded by plaster images of half-denuded ladies, duly labelled “Liberty,” “Superstition,” “Britannia,” and the like’.²²

Nine designs were now received by Hume, who brought in two London-Scottish professionals, T. L. Donaldson, the academic architect, and George Rennie, the engineer, to select three which the Vestry was to choose between once the site had been confirmed. Hume himself said that because of the restrictions of the circus he wanted something plain in order to avoid accidental or wilful injury, and for that reason none of the submitted designs would do. Nevertheless No. 1, consisting of a square pillar in Portland stone with a capital and urn on top, was adopted by the Vestry.²³ On Friday 30th

December 1842 men began digging out the ground, leaving a long pole in the centre which was found the next day with the 'blood red cap of Liberty' on top, quickly removed. That same Saturday morning the Marylebone Vestry in a lightly attended emergency meeting sheepishly withdrew their support for the monument by a majority of one. That was because the Crown authorities, in the shape of the Regent Street Paving Commissioners, had finally bestirred themselves, taken legal advice, and determined that the Vestry had authority only to pave, cleanse, light and police the circus, and enjoyed no rights in the subsoil on which the monument was to rest.²⁴

Discomfited by 'the turncoat *Times* and all the little-great shopkeeping Tories of Marylebone', Hume had to withdraw his proposal.²⁵ In March 1843 it was rumoured that the Duke of Bedford was to rescue the memorial and erect it in Bloomsbury Square.²⁶ Instead it ended up in Nunhead Cemetery, where Hume in 1850 erected a granite obelisk, evidently not the same as the design destined for Oxford Circus. It can still be glimpsed from passing trains. Ever more encumbered by traffic, the centre of the circus never again became the site of any permanent structure, though from time to time during celebrations temporary structures were permitted. The most impressive was the tripartite arch of evergreens and flowers topped with flags, erected to designs by E. W. Bradwell of Great Portland Street for the day of thanksgiving in February 1872 for the Prince of Wales' recovery from illness. Finished at the last moment, it was packed with a hundred cheering schoolchildren as the Queen and Prince passed beneath, and profusely illuminated after darkness fell.²⁷ A pagoda erected in the centre to honour the procession of the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh in 1874 was less successful. Two small islands north and south of the centre are shown on the Ordnance Survey map of the 1870s, housing a drinking fountain and a lamp post respectively, but neither lasted long. The fountain seems to have been replaced on a different site in 1906.²⁸

The rebuilding of Oxford Circus

Agreeing a design

The original 99-year leases for the four segments of the circus were due to expire successively from 1917. Long before then it was clear that they would have to be rebuilt as part of the policy of reconstructing Regent Street coherently, set by the Commissioners of Woods and Forests in 1904 with the help of a fresh Surveyor, John Murray. The early years of this campaign were largely taken up with painful struggles over the Regent Street Quadrant. From that the authorities learnt that they had to take the shopkeepers with them rather than impose costly designs which the latter did not want. But Murray and the Commissioners preferred to adapt Norman Shaw's heroic design in Portland stone for the Quadrant to other parts of the street rather than discard it altogether. With that policy in mind they began to address Oxford Circus in 1909, when the rebuilding question first took practical shape. They accepted from the start that a single design had to be followed all round the circus, but had yet to resolve how it was to be procured and imposed.

Two lessees now came forward with proposals, Jays Ltd who held the whole of the south-west segment, and James Rossdale, who was in possession of most of the north-west segment. Jays had been created in 1841 by the silk mercer William Chickall Jay at 247–249 Regent Street just below Oxford Circus. For years its gloomily atmospheric 'Maison de Deuil' led the field in mourning attire and funeral arrangements for wealthy West Enders. The firm gradually extended both its range and its premises, and by the turn of the century the limited company which had taken over after Col. Jay's death in 1888 possessed most of its block including the circus frontage.²⁹ Rossdale, of German origin, was the owner of J. R. Dale & Co., a chain of ladies' tailors

with ten London outlets, of which the Oxford Circus branch (255–257 Regent Street and 236–238 Oxford Street) was the largest.³⁰

Rossdale's architect was E. Keynes Purchase, who put forward alternatives for the north-west frontage, both with a strong flavour of the Shaw designs for the Quadrant but simplified – perhaps at Murray's advice. In one, Shaw's arched mezzanine was retained along Regent Street but replaced by a trabeated treatment towards the circus proper, with doubled columns above this between second and third floor level. In the better alternative the arched mezzanine was abandoned and a giant Ionic order carried through three full storeys over the shop fronts.³¹ The Jays design for the south-west segment, by E. H. Abbott, has not survived, but Murray thought it inferior. In a thorough report he stated that if it were imposed on the whole circus, the powerful Peter Robinson might not submit to it when rebuilding their north-east segment: 'they could doubtless transfer their business to Oxford Street where building restrictions are not so onerous, and Oxford Street has now become a rather serious trade competitor with Regent Street'.³²

At the end of 1909 both designs were sent over for the consideration of the Treasury, paymasters of the Woods and Forests. A hiccup now occurred. A message came across from Downing Street that the King was taking an interest in what was happening at Oxford Circus. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury, C. E. H. Hobhouse, had picked up the issue, plumped for the Abbott design, persuaded Prime Minister Asquith to support it, secured the King's informal approval, and told Abbott his design was accepted. Behind this short-circuiting of procedure seems to have lain the Treasury's resolve not to refer the circus designs to the informal committee of architects convened by the Woods and Forests to help over the Quadrant issue, which by doughtily defending the Shaw designs 'had given the Treasury so much trouble and expense'. But why Hobhouse should have favoured the worse design does not appear.³³

The Woods and Forests now swung into urgent action. Murray wrote a memorandum stating that the Abbott design would have 'a prejudicial effect upon the rental value of the land'. Thus armed, George Leveson-Gower, the First Commissioner, solicited a meeting with Sir George Murray, Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, who allowed him to talk to Hobhouse. Further machinations behind the scenes must have taken place, for in July 1910 the Woods and Forests received an abject letter from Abbott saying that Jays had withdrawn his design on the grounds that it 'would have a very serious and prejudicial effect on the successful conduct of the Company's business'. Next month came another letter from Henry Tanner junior, stating that he was being employed by Jays over their rebuilding and asking if there would be any special requirements.

Patently, Tanner was the Woods and Forests' own choice. Thirty-four years of age, he was well connected as the son and former pupil of Sir Henry Tanner, chief architect at the Office of Works, and a subsequent assistant to Aston Webb. He had won a student competition for rebuilding a major street front with shops in 1900, and had carried through the design of Oceanic House on the prominent wedge of Crown land between Cockspur Street and Pall Mall East with dispatch in 1906.³⁴ Taken up now by the Woods and Forests in connection with Oxford Circus, he was to become the foremost contributor to the rebuilding of Regent Street.

But first a fresh contender had to be beaten off. In April 1910 Edgar Cohen, managing director of Louise & Co. in the south-east segment, came in for an interview. This milliner's concern specializing in bonnets had been founded around 1870 by Mrs E. A. Thompson ('Madame Louise'), and built up by her and her children. Oxford Circus was its principal West End shop, but there were other branches in both Regent and Oxford Streets. The Thompsons had sold their interests to a limited company in 1895, since when Louise & Co. had experienced ups and downs.³⁵ Its renewed impetus came from the forceful Cohen, a serial promoter of companies, including the

conversion of Harrods and D. H. Evans, and the founding of the London General Motor Cab Company. Cohen expressed his strong objections to both Abbott's and Purchase's designs 'on account of the space taken up by the stone piers and columns' – the usual shopkeeper's complaint; he said he would be employing Frank Verity to make a design of his own.³⁶

Tanner was shown the Abbott and Purchase designs and went away to improve on them, submitting drawings in October 1910, followed by a perspective. Meanwhile Cohen and Verity continued to press their claims, sending in two alternative designs. Murray sat in judgement on them all in December, and unsurprisingly opted for Tanner. The Verity designs were 'Greek Classic' in derivation, he said, and would have a tendency to look massive. But Tanner's offering took its inspiration from French Renaissance and enjoyed 'a certain lightness that cannot I think be regarded as other than reasonably suitable for shop architecture in this position'. With the shopkeepers on his back, Murray was much concerned to marry acceptable dimensions for the shop fronts and storey heights with good proportions, and specially keen to ensure sturdiness at the eight corners of the circus, where the piers were to enjoy a minimum of four feet of breadth to each face.³⁷

It took six more months for the Tanner design to be accepted by the Treasury and the shopkeepers all round the circus, but by June 1911 it was a *fait accompli*. Cohen and Verity made one more vain effort to swing things their way, Purchase and Rossdale accepted gracefully, while in the north-east quadrant Peter Robinson, who had neglected an earlier invitation to participate in the circus design, submitted without much complaint. Tanner's accepted design for the Jays segment was published without fanfare in *The Builder* that September.³⁸ Under the agreement made, he received a fee of 550 guineas for the basic design, on top of which the proposed lessees paid him for the use of his drawings as and when they built their segments. Models of the details were made by the carver C. H. Mabey junior, and then borrowed

for a further fee by the contractors working on each segment, so that the architectural and sculptural detail could tally precisely.³⁹

Those details confirm Tanner's inspiration as coming largely from eighteenth-century France, notably from Ange-Jacques Gabriel, whose architecture was just then enjoying a vogue in England. The giant Ionic order surmounting the middle storeys, with fluted and reeded pilasters against the end pavilions and three-quarters columns against the deeper segments facing the circus, with garlanded drops below the capitals, is of evident Louis XV origin, but the high mansard over an attic suggests an earlier period of French architecture; this top-heavy feature, repeated all along Regent Street for the sake of cramming in a full fifth storey, does much to detract from the street's grace. Along the return fronts to Regent Street, the expressed order falls away and the façades are given only occasional mini-pediments over the second floor to enliven the alternation of Portland stonework and window. There is however, as Murray noted, a certain lightness to the circus design, and one note of wit, in the form of the pouting or squinting putti heads atop the cartouches on the end and corner piers, oppressed by the deep cornice over the shops. The cartouches look like borrowings from Selfridges, recently completed further west along Oxford Street. They were presumably meant to be inscribed with the names of the shops, but that never happened. Tanner's design was certainly felicitous, but it is hard not to sympathize with E. Keynes Purchase, whose second design made a year earlier was similar in proportion and modelling. All in all, the result was a judicious replacement of Nash's run-down circus fronts.

The circus rebuilt

The reconstruction of the four segments took place either side of the First World War. First off the mark was the south-east segment, where the hustling Cohen itched to get on with rebuilding. That happened in 1911-12; here

Tanner's elevation fronted a graceful plan by Frank Verity, who devised a central entrance to upper office suites reached by a sweeping staircase at the back, and shops on either side. There was some quibbling over details, for instance some marble name tablets for the shops which Verity wanted to design but Murray disliked. Louise & Co. occupied only the ground floor of 268–270 Regent Street together with No. 266 round the corner. On the other side of the entrance to the suites, 249 Oxford Street was taken by a jeweller. The upper storeys, known initially as Paris House, were let to various firms, but Spirella & Co., the modern corset company, soon became the dominant tenant, so that in due course the name was changed to Spirella House. Verity's central entrance and stair at the back were removed in 1975 in order to cram in more retailing space.⁴⁰

Jays in the south-west segment, at 243–253 Regent Street and 251–255 Oxford Street and only a shallow depth of site backing on to Swallow Place, should have come next. Tanner was ready in October 1913 with drawings and a plan to rebuild in two stages. Delays followed because of the First World War, and were prolonged afterwards until the formal Declaration of Peace in 1921. With Tanner still in charge, Jays finally rebuilt in two sections on a conventional plan in 1922–4, the Regent Street side coming first, the Oxford Circus portion second. The latter incorporated the semi-autonomous International Fur Stores, previously in a separate Regent Street shop. In 1926 the shoe shop W. Abbott & Sons took 255 Oxford Street at the corner of Swallow Place, for which Tanner designed a new shop front. He remained Jays' architect throughout the inter-war years.⁴¹ The firm was taken over by Great Universal Stores in 1946 and continued in the circus, diminished in status, till 1961.⁴²

A rebuilding scheme for the north-west segment, designed by Mewès & Davis jointly with E. Keynes Purchase for the women's outfitter James Rossdale (trading as J. R. Dale & Co.), was approved by the Crown in August 1920. By 1922, with work under way, Purchase had dropped out. At that date

Mewès & Davis's plans, for a department store with four floors of showrooms and a fifth-floor restaurant, were taken over by Magasins du Louvre Ltd, a newly established subsidiary of the well-known Parisian store Grands Magasins du Louvre. The shop, numbered 255–261 Regent Street and 236–238 Oxford Street, opened with some publicity in May 1922, but the firm never made its way. In 1930 it announced the closure of its unprofitable retail business, though it continued in the wholesale trade.⁴³

The external architecture of this segment once again faithfully follows the Tanner design, but the ground floor was modified in the 1960s, when the furriers Swears & Wells took over as the main shop tenants. That old-established firm had moved from Regent Street to 374 Oxford Street when the former was being rebuilt, and had grown considerably from the 1950s.⁴⁴ The works coincided with the rebuilding of Oxford Circus Station to accommodate the Victoria Line, and the diversion of the main sewer from the centre of the circus. In return for sacrificing shopping space on the ground floor facing the circus in favour of a short covered passage or arcade at this corner, Swears & Wells were allowed to take in 240 Oxford Street and 1 and 2 John Prince's Street. This work, planned from 1959, took place in 1964. No. 240, which continues the Tanner design by an extra bay westwards to the corner of John Prince's Street, seems to have been an addition of 1925; it was reconstructed behind the front, but the adjacent Nos 1 and 2 were wholly rebuilt, to designs by Alister MacDonald & Partners.⁴⁵ Swears & Wells were bought by United Drapery Stores in 1970 but gradually run down later in the decade. The present shop tenants, Hennes & Mauritz (H & M) have been there since the 1980s.

The north-east segment of the circus belongs to 1920–3 and the history of Peter Robinson; it is therefore dealt with below under the account of that store.

After almost a hundred years of wear and pollution, the Oxford Circus fronts look sharp and fresh, in tribute to the quality of the materials with

which they were constructed. Apart from a period during the Second World War, when national propaganda banners of various kinds were displayed across the corners,⁴⁶ advertisements have never been allowed to sully the circus buildings. The bomb damage which badly holed the north-east segment in September 1940 was promptly and well repaired.

Great Portland Street to Oxford Circus

The block between Great Portland Street and Regent Street is largely taken up today by the clothing store Topshop and offices of the retailing company which owns it, the Arcadia Group, with entrances towards Oxford Street, Oxford Circus and backs towards Great Castle Street. Its weighty buildings date from 1920–4 and were erected for the department store Peter Robinson, which is covered below. But first some account is given of the site's earlier history.

Before the advent of Regent Street, this was a typical enough Oxford Street tradesman's frontage, with twelve shops of sundry kinds numbered 102 to 113 between John Street (as the bottom of Great Portland Street was called till 1858) and Bolsover Street, the narrower predecessor of Regent Street. Behind them in the centre of the block lay two large sets of livery stables. In the first decade of the nineteenth century the John Street corner (No. 102) was a grocer's and the Bolsover Street corner (No. 113) the Old King's Head pub. Between them came less workaday shops including a toyman, an umbrella maker, two hatters, a silversmith, and a laceman (John Richardson at No. 112).⁴⁷

The carving-out of the north-east segment of Oxford Circus reduced the shops to ten, and by the time of *Tallis's Street Views* of c.1839 the grocer and pub had gone and Peter Robinson had made his début at No. 103 close to

the eastern corner. Subsequently his expanding business took over and rebuilt most of the premises to its west, but Nos 109 and 110 (after 1881 Nos 230 & 232) resisted encroachment till about 1900. Both acquired showy mid-Victorian fronts with generous stucco detailing, notably the miniature No. 110, which displayed two versions of the royal warrant. Its mantle-making owner, Robert Beardall, styled it a *magasin de nouveautés*.⁴⁸

The London Crystal Palace Bazaar

For seventeen and a half short years from 1858 the advent of the Crystal Palace Bazaar behind the frontage touched this section of Oxford Street with a note of glamour. This was the most ambitious of several commercial projects in the West End masterminded by the architect Owen Jones, subsequent to his *succès d'estime* in overseeing the décor for the second version of the Crystal Palace, rebuilt at Sydenham and opened in 1855. All were to be ephemeral.

Bazaars and markets in London had been much boosted by the Great Exhibition, which stimulated trade of all kinds as well as innovations in architecture and product display. Previous bazaars in the West End now looked stale and dowdy. Jones and his backers clearly felt they could bring more space, light and colour to sites like those occupied by predecessors like the Soho, Queen's and Pantheon Bazaars, namely the enclosed interior of a block with access from one or more shopping streets – in this case Oxford Street and Great Portland Street.

The prime mover may have been Jones himself, then at the top of his creative abilities. Alternatively the idea perhaps began with or involved the furrier and Radical J. A. Nicholay of 82 Oxford Street, who most likely knew Owen Jones, himself the son of a London furrier, through mutual connections with the Great Exhibition. At any rate Nicholay in 1857 held a long Portland lease of the bazaar site, then a large L-shaped livery stable with one entrance between 108 and 109 Oxford Street (old numbering) and another in Great

Portland Street. That year Nicholay agreed to devise the property to one George Gold, who soon passed it on to Frederick Futvoye, a Regent Street jeweller. Futvoye was to turn out an unsatisfactory partner, incapable of finding the money to build the Crystal Palace Bazaar himself, meddlesome and litigious; he raised £2,000 on mortgage from Jones himself, but not long after the bazaar opened, he failed.

The ultimate main backers of the venture were the Kennard brothers, variously described as ironmasters, iron merchants, and consulting and contracting engineers.⁴⁹ There were at least four Kennard brothers, all sons of R. W. Kennard, MP, banker, owner of the Falkirk and Blaenavon ironworks, and proprietor of a wholesale iron warehouse in Upper Thames Street. The family had done well from railway investments and armaments manufacture during the Crimean War. Best known is the oldest son, Thomas Kennard, famous for designing and constructing the Crumlin Viaduct in South Wales, opened in 1857. That same year Owen Jones, who counted Thomas Kennard among his many engineering friends and acquaintances, designed a house for him near the viaduct, Crumlin Hall. Soon afterwards Thomas Kennard left to work for some years on railways in the United States. His involvement in the design of the Crystal Palace Bazaar before he left for America cannot be ruled out, but the practicalities must have been left to his brothers, all of whom took a share in the family's engineering and contracting business, co-ordinated from a London office in Great George Street. The next in age after Thomas was Howard J. Kennard, London-based in 1861. Then came Arthur C. Kennard, up in Falkirk at that date, and lastly Henry M. Kennard, who ran the Welsh interests after Thomas had left. H. J. and A. C. Kennard were certainly involved with the Crystal Palace Bazaar as mortgagees, as was the father's firm, R. W. Kennard & Co.⁵⁰

By an agreement of December 1857 Futvoye agreed with the Kennards to raise £8,000 with which they undertook to build the bazaar and maintain it for a year. Futvoye was to be installed as manager when it opened, but

because he failed to come up with the money, this arrangement soon had to be varied, giving the Kennards a share in the profits, and in the event they probably shouldered almost all the burden. Construction under their aegis took place in 1858, with John Lamb as clerk of works. The bazaar was well advanced by August, made available to the press in early November and opened to the public at the start of December, in good time for the Christmas market.⁵¹

In basic architecture and structure the London Crystal Palace, as the bazaar was affectedly known, resembled many iron and glass buildings of its era, and can have given Jones and the Kennards little trouble. Galleried halls of identical width and height, one running about 230ft east-west, the other about 130ft north-south (the dimensions cited differ and no plan seems to survive), intersected to form an L-shaped composition, with a short overlap west of the junction. Some care had to be taken with the party walls, which were probably of brick.⁵² But the main structure of the halls and galleries was of cast iron, with columns at 12ft centres supporting semi-circular iron ribs which created a tunnel vault with an apex at 36ft above ground. An open stair in the short hall gave access to the galleries, which ran round three sides and were nine feet deep, with coved ceilings above them covered externally with corrugated iron. The main entrance was from Great Portland Street, where there was a colourful three-storey frontispiece, probably all of iron and glass, culminating in 'a surface-work of interlacing pointed arches, and a gabled sky-line surmounted by a honeysuckle ornament'.⁵³ The ancillary rooms – an aviary, a conservatory, a 'photographic establishment', and two refreshment rooms – were mostly on upper levels at this end. But the main access from the porch was straight into the long hall down a few steps. The alternative entrance on the Oxford Street side was just a small doorway between flanking shops.⁵⁴

The glory of the building was the inner roof, which together with end clerestories furnished the sole source of light. At the Alhambra Court of the

Sydenham Crystal Palace, Jones had had to create his sensationally coloured Moorish interiors beneath Paxton's ridge and furrow glazing, but here and at his other West End commissions of the 1850s he could control the lighting. To do so he broke the vault of the roof into twelve longitudinal sections, six each side of the ridge, with wooden purlins between the sections. Between the cross-ribs, which were flanked by ventilation panels, every section was then subdivided into equilateral triangles each inscribed with a hexagonal star pattern, using a framework of patent cast plaster made by Jones's regular collaborator L. A. Desachy and liberally painted in bright colours. The lower segments may have been left opaque, but the middle segments were filled with smaller stellar patterns of translucent ruby, topaz, sapphire and amber glass, while the topmost segments next to the ridge were finished in ground white glass. An outer roof of patent glass above this whole inner vault diffused the coloured light and prevented untoward shadows on the merchandise below. After dark the halls were lit by gas pendants in the form of stars attached not far below the ridge beam. The effect is impossible to gauge from contemporary views, but a surviving photograph from 1906, albeit black and white and taken long after the bazaar had lost its original purpose, gives some sense of the spectacular exoticism of this ceiling. Not everyone admired the effect. *The Spectator* criticized the lighting as 'somewhat veiled'. For the majority of the stall-holders in the main halls it was probably sufficient, but under and within the galleries there were complaints of inadequate light.⁵⁵

The history of the Crystal Palace Bazaar in use was inglorious. After the initial excitement, and despite some puffing ('the vaulted roof resounds with music, which ever and anon swells grandly above the babble of the many purchasers'),⁵⁶ it cannot have answered commercially. Advertisements soliciting applicants to take stalls appeared in the papers with some regularity. It was up for sale in 1866. Finally 'after a somewhat unprosperous existence', it was sold in 1876 to its booming neighbour Peter Robinson, which

took the bazaar into their premises, made minor changes to it in 1882 and fully incorporated it into their main store in 1889. Plans of 1913 show remnants of the halls still embedded in the store. They disappeared along with the rebuilding of the main block of Peter Robinson in the early 1920s.⁵⁷

Peter Robinson

Peter Robinson was a household name among West End shops for over a century. A typical drapery business which mushroomed into a department store, it persisted longer than its rivals in operating from multiple sites. Its flagship store at Oxford Circus, rebuilt in 1920–4, is mainly occupied today by its successor Topshop, part of the Arcadia Group.

The founding date for the firm usually given is 1833, but the entry ‘Peter Robinson, haberdasher and draper, 103 Oxford Street’, is absent from directories before 1838. Robinson was a farmer’s son from Womersley near Pontefract, Yorkshire, born in 1804. He had served an apprenticeship in Paddington and presumably worked in the trade for some years before starting out on his own.⁵⁸ He confined himself to this single address just west of Great Portland (then John) Street and had a staff of under ten (men, women and apprentices) till the time of the Great Exhibition, when he began advertising new showrooms carrying ‘every novelty of the season’.⁵⁹ By 1860 the business had grown westwards to encompass six addresses, and around then the premises were recast by the architect A. H. Morant, a specialist in shops.⁶⁰ These buildings were conventionally Italianate and stuccoes. Next, Robinson leapt across to the east side of Regent Street just south of Oxford Circus, taking over Hodge & Lowman’s silk mercers’ shop at Nos 252–262 around 1865. These premises, supplemented by freeholds acquired in Argyll Street behind, became the famous ‘Black Peter Robinson’, a leading London emporium for mourning costume.⁶¹

In 1874 Robinson died at his Hornsey villa. His will split the firm, leaving Regent Street to his oldest son Joseph and Oxford Street to his second son John Peter Robinson (1837–95).⁶² The latter soon bought his brother out and emerged as the dynamo behind the continued growth of ‘Peters’ along Oxford Street and the streets behind.⁶³ Among acquisitions west of Great Portland Street was the failed Crystal Palace Bazaar (see above), bought in 1876 and fully integrated into the showrooms in 1889.⁶⁴ By then the original shop covered 216–228 Oxford Street (new numbering), 272 and 282–286 Regent Street, and 1–9 Great Portland Street. Staff dormitories sprang up in Margaret Street near All Saints’ Church, and further depots and workshops in and around Phoenix Yard beyond Oxford Circus.⁶⁵ But the main new building was at the eastern corner with Great Portland Street, where J. P. Robinson’s architect, Augustus E. Hughes, rebuilt 204–212 Oxford Street in 1890–1. This shallow block, accessible also from Market Place behind and connected with Nos 216–228 by a subway under Great Portland Street, was lumpen-looking, with a corner dome and fancy French cresting. It included a passenger lift, fairly novel for its date but actually the second in a Peter Robinson building.⁶⁶

John Peter Robinson died a millionaire in 1895, owning a house in Esher, another in Paris and development land at Margate.⁶⁷ None of his children wished to sustain the business on a private basis, so it became a limited company, less individual in leadership; in Gordon Selfridge’s view, Peter Robinson was ‘run by accountants’.⁶⁸ The major event of the Edwardian years was a refit in 1904 of fifteen saloons, probably all in Nos 216–228, undertaken by Waring & Gillow and puffed as the first time the ‘Adams style’ was applied to artistic shopfittings.⁶⁹ But illustrations of Peter Robinson interiors around this time indicate a wide variety of finishes.

After 1911 the Crown’s plan for rebuilding Regent Street and Oxford Circus prompted the firm to abandon its ‘mourning warehouse’ south of the circus and consolidate in its Oxford Street properties, to be completely reconstructed. Dealing with the main or western block proved arduous. The

company did not at first control all the shops, and the freehold was split between the Crown-owned sliver facing Regent Street and the circus, and the larger Howard de Walden property extending to Great Portland Street and Great Castle Street. The elevation by Henry Tanner junior imposed by the Crown for the circus and Regent Street stipulated a taller ground storey than the company wanted (17ft 6in) but a restriction on overall height; this naturally affected plans for the rest of the store. The smaller eastern block beyond Great Portland Street, only twenty years old, was also scheduled for rebuilding in the same lapidary Regent Street manner.⁷⁰

The architects first employed to handle these tasks were the brothers Tom P. Clarkson and E. S. Clarkson, grandchildren of the original Peter Robinson via his daughter Addy; Tom Clarkson was the first-named trustee of his uncle J. P. Robinson's will and a director of the company. The Clarksons were making minor changes to the premises in 1913, presumably as the company's in-house architects, but negotiations with the Crown fell mainly to its solicitors and its chairman, the accountant Richard Rabbidge. An agreement for rebuilding the Crown frontages was close when war broke out, and finally signed in 1916. Meanwhile Peter Robinson Ltd had also negotiated a 999-year lease with the Howard de Walden Estate for the rest of the Oxford Street frontage, and progressed with plans for the eastern block, whose rebuilding was to follow on from its western neighbour.⁷¹

Around 1915 H. Austen Hall, an experienced winner of architectural competitions, came in to abet the Clarksons, doubtless to design the fronts of the new Peter Robinson buildings. Negotiations restarted in 1919, and construction on the Crown site began a year later, only to be delayed by the national stop on commercial sites so that building labour could be diverted to housing. Despite use of a steel frame, progress was slow. Once the Crown section had opened early in 1923 the rest of the main block up to Great Portland Street proceeded, carrying on well into 1924; John Mowlem Ltd were the builders. Construction dates for the eastern block at 200–212 Oxford Street

appear to be 1924–6. Austen Hall's role ceased around 1922, suggesting that he did not supervise construction. After him Tom Clarkson looked after the work, without his brother.⁷²

Architecturally, the main block of Peter Robinson is a hybrid. The Regent Street front follows the gentlemanly French-classical design for Oxford Circus devised for the Crown by Tanner back in 1910. All that is set aside along Oxford Street and Great Portland Street in favour of costly and bombastic colonnades running through the three upper floors, over a high granite base for the lower two storeys hollowed out at intervals with double-height entrance arches. According to Stuart Gray, this base derives from Lord & Taylor's Fifth Avenue store in New York, which Hall appears to have noted on his travels.⁷³ But the superstructure is not tall enough to warrant such a high base, whose rationale must be to carry display windows of the width the big shopkeepers preferred – prohibited by the Crown along Regent Street. In Great Castle Street the base is maintained, but in Portland stone, and drawn upwards into two pavilions. The fifth-floor windows on these fronts are recessed and dignified by Roman fenestration patterns.

The original interior finishes were discreet. One report mentions the use of well-matured Cuban mahogany for the fittings in the Regent Street section, while a Canadian journalist, Elizabeth Montizambert, offered this description: The ground floor is paved with unpolished blocks of marble after the fashion of the floor in Milan cathedral, and opposite the lifts the zodiacal signs are inlaid in a large circle. All the wood used in the building is walnut of a very fine beautiful grain, and as much care and ingenuity have been expended on the cash desks as if they were pieces of elaborate furniture. The lifts remind one of inverted tea-caddies only with the lacquer inside instead of out – sealing wax red, with black bands picked out in gold. The doors are bronze faced round with pale green marble.⁷⁴ The high point was the top-lit restaurant, where the coxes of the vault were decorated with paintings of

scenes from opera by George Murray; these survive, along with the lift lobbies and stair at 216 Oxford Street, the principal entrance.⁷⁵

The smaller eastern block, though not exactly aligned with the western block as the company had wished, is more disciplined, resembling a Mannerist palazzo. Above the same double-height granite base come compartments articulated by giant, flat-faced pilasters and rising to a plain frieze and deep modillion cornice.

Peter Robinson in its heyday was solid but not smart. 'The business of the Company is to supply women and children of the middle classes with clothing and household goods of general utility', explained its secretary, William Massey, in 1920.⁷⁶ Yet another employee rated the shop as above the 'general trade', represented by Selfridges or Bourne & Hollingsworth: 'We were family drapers ... the carriages would drive up and the duchesses would step out. Customers would discuss Sunday's sermon with you, give all their family news, and say their married daughter would be in during the afternoon'.⁷⁷

The firm's later history is inglorious. The Oxford Circus front of the main building was badly holed in September 1940, but doubtless owing to its steel frame it survived. A combination of war damage, the requisitioning of floors by government departments and the restrictions of post-war trade severely limited retailing. The eastern block, requisitioned for use by the BBC in 1941 and known as 200 Oxford Street, played an important role in overseas broadcasting during the central years of the Second World War. In 1944 it was sold to the London Co-operative Society, which traded there for over a decade, recasting the interior in 1958–9.⁷⁸

Peter Robinson itself was making modest profits when it was sold in 1946–7 first to Greatermans of Johannesburg and then on to the Burton Group. The latter scrapped the firm's ambitious reconstruction plans (which had involved a visit by its architect, J. S. Beaumont, to America) and limited retailing in Oxford Street to a few profitable departments operating from the

ground floor alone.⁷⁹ Under Raymond Burton's management from 1955 onwards, Peter Robinson became mainly a brand name for some of its new stores, notably a building (designed by Denys Lasdun) in the Strand. Out of this chain in 1964 emerged Topshop, aimed at the younger market by then so important; eventually the Peter Robinson name was suppressed. Topshop and the Arcadia Group (the name of the Burton Group after 1997) continue to be housed in the main Oxford Street block, at the time of writing in the ownership of Sir Philip Green. Also included here since 2001 has been a Miss Selfridge shop, that chain having been acquired by Green and the Arcadia Group two years previously.⁸⁰

Oxford Circus Underground Station

Oxford Circus is one of the busiest stations on the Underground network, at the interchange between three lines. So it is a surprise that its two original station buildings survive in use, if now at one remove from the main concourse area. These are those of the Central London Railway (the Central Line) and of the Baker Street and Waterloo Railway (the Bakerloo Line), opened respectively in 1900 and 1906.

Answering one another on the south side of Oxford Street at the head of Argyll Street, both were built on land just east of the area requisitioned for the original layout of Oxford Circus. The Central's station took the place of the previous 237 and 239 Oxford Street, at the eastern angle with Argyll Street. The frontage here had been curtailed by one house in early Victorian times in order to widen the top of Argyll Street. The missing house, the erstwhile No. 331, had for many years from 1774 belonged to the music seller and instrument maker George Smart senior, an important figure in London's

musical life; here in 1776 was born his son, later Sir George Smart.⁸¹ The next house eastwards was a pastry shop around the end of the Napoleonic wars, 'fitted up very tastefully in the rural or grotesque style'.⁸²

Like other station sites along the course of the Central London Railway, this one had been earmarked by 1895. Harry B. Measures was appointed architect for the station superstructures along the line in 1897. Next year the company decided to build single-storey structures only in the first place, so the idea of housing the company's offices over the Oxford Circus Station was postponed. That project resurfaced in 1901, the year after the station's opening, and finally went ahead in 1903-4, again to Measures' design (some authorities have mistakenly attributed the superstructure to Delissa Joseph); Messrs Nightingale were the builders. The completed composition is typical of Measures' lively handling of brick and terracotta, with bay windows, gables, finials, a corner turret and ornamental details, similar in idiom to the houses he had designed for William Willett in Hampstead, Kensington and Hove. The station proper occupied the ground floor and levels below; there were just three ticket windows and four lifts, with exits from them directly into Argyll Street. The main floors of the building acted as the headquarters of the Central London Railway until the company lost its independence, and were subsequently used as London Transport offices.⁸³

The Bakerloo Station was from the start a somewhat bigger affair, reflecting the growing scope of the early tube railways. In the enabling Act of 1893 that authorized this line, the company had provided for a station on either the north or the south side of Oxford Street, but then found dealing with the Portland Estate too restrictive, so opted for the south side, Nos 241-247 at the western corner of Argyll Street. The corner itself (No. 241) had been the site of the former Green Man and Still, one of Oxford Street's coaching inns, well known in pre-railway days for its Banbury cakes and as a gathering point for cricketers preparing for excursions. According to cricketing scholars,

here 'cricket's "underworld" used to gather, mixing with the players, planning and rigging matches as well as individual performances for the benefit of the few'. Behind the inn stretched a warren of yards, used both before and after the Green Man and Still's closure in the 1880s as receiving points for railway parcels and freight.⁸⁴

After some delays the sites were acquired in 1899. Plans were then agreed with the authorities and clearance took place in 1901. Following some progress with tunnelling works, the Bakerloo company underwent a financial setback from which it was rescued in 1903 by the syndicate which became Underground Electric Railways Company of London Ltd. In December of that year Leslie Green was appointed that company's architect. Revisions followed to the complex station layout below ground, which included a connection with the Central Line. Once these were fixed, Green could go ahead with a design for the surface works. Again this was to consist of the station only in the first instance, but so contrived as to allow a full building on top to follow on. Built in 1905-6, the station proper is typical of Green's manly designs for the UERL lines, of two storeys rather than one to allow for the lift overruns, with arched elevations faced in ruby-red glazed terracotta supplied by the Leeds Fireclay Company. As with the Central's station, the entrance was from Oxford Street while the three lifts disgorged exiting passengers into Argyll Street. There was room for small shops on the corner, one of which during the latter half of the First World War was used as an American soda fountain.⁸⁵

The superstructure over the Bakerloo Line station was added a full decade later, in 1916, to designs prepared two years earlier by Delissa Joseph, working for W. J. Fryer. Oxford Circus House, 241-247 Oxford Street, as it became known, is a tightly packed office building on an L-shaped plan, following the configuration of the station below. The structure is steel-framed with a cladding of stone, and there is a heavy cornice at an intermediate point on both elevations.⁸⁶

The history of Oxford Circus Station in the half-century from 1910 is one of piecemeal expansion and co-ordination below ground to cater for growing passenger numbers, while the surface-level buildings underwent various recastings but externally remained much as before. The Central and UERL lines were brought into formal association by an agreement of 1913. Even before that, a start had been made on completely reconfiguring the Bakerloo station; a new booking hall was constructed at basement level, and the first pair of escalators in a West End station built, opened in May 1914, claimed as the longest in the world, capable of moving 90ft per minute and carrying 27,000 passengers per hour. War delayed further improvements. Then in 1923–5 the new booking hall was greatly extended eastwards to form what was effectively a concourse under Argyll Street, and a second pair of escalators leading from it to the Central Line installed. Thereafter the Central Line surface station became of secondary importance. One further escalator was added in 1928. None of these measures could keep up with overcrowding. A report of 1939 estimated passenger numbers entering the station annually as 13,550,000, excluding interchange traffic, making it the eleventh busiest station in the world. The report recommended total reconstruction: ‘Oxford Circus is a medley of tortuous subways and inadequate ticket concourses’. But the position of the surrounding buildings, roads and sewers made the difficulties all but insurmountable.⁸⁷

A solution to these issues had to await the construction of the new Victoria Line. The planning for this line, at first ‘Route 8’, latterly ‘Route C’, became fixed in 1949. Parliamentary approval followed in 1955, but final authorization and funding had to wait until 1962. The postponements gave London Transport’s engineers the time to study the problem. Shafts dug on the south side of Cavendish Square provided access for the tunnelling and other deep-level work. For the station itself, the answer was a completely new concourse under Oxford Circus, on similar lines to the circular Piccadilly Circus concourse of 1925–8. Access was obtained by covering most of the

surface of the circus with a ramped deck or 'umbrella' of steel, erected in 1963 and for five years a fixture in the Oxford and Regent Streets landscape. In 1966 the umbrella was extended eastwards to facilitate construction of passages between the old and new concourse; at that point the north end of Argyll Street closed permanently to vehicles. Stairs from each quadrant of the circus gave access to the new concourse. This was opened in September 1968, before service commenced on the Victoria Line in March of the following year. As finally completed, the station was served by twelve escalators, at that time the largest number in any station.⁸⁸

Oxford Circus Station underwent its last major renovation at lower levels in 1982-5, when the 'snakes and ladders' motif appeared on the platform walls of the Central Line and a maze motif on the Bakerloo Line, based on sketches by Nicholas Munro. A serious fire took place on the Victoria Line side in November 1984, but was contained without loss of life.⁸⁹