

Chapter 15

103–125 Oxford Street

Great Chapel Street to Wardour Street

The frontage between Great Chapel and Wardour Streets occupies the westernmost portion of Oxford Street that belonged to the parish of St Anne, Soho. Today it is made up of three blocks of buildings, whose fronts date from between 1887 and 1908. Before then there was a total of eleven houses here, until 1880 numbered 382–395 running west to east.

The freehold ownership of this ground has a different history from the rest of the Oxford Street frontage in Soho. Up to one house west of Great Chapel Street the land was part of Soho Fields, developed by Joseph Girle and his descendants from the 1670s and subsequently in the ownership of the Portland family until they sold off their interests in the 1790s. But from the current No. 105 to 125 at the Wardour Street corner, the ground has been Crown freehold land since the Reformation. South of the frontage, much property was sold off by the Crown in 1722 and 1830 and became the Pulteney estate, as detailed in *Survey of London*, Volume 33. But the houses along the highway and some others stayed in Crown hands.¹

Probably in the late 1680s, a cluster of small houses was built along this part of the road centred upon an inn called the Mitre, whose presence on an ‘irregular’ piece of ground facing Tyburn Road was reported in 1715, suggesting that the development was rather ramshackle or that the inn preceded the surrounding houses. The area was reorganized and more thoroughly built up in the years after 1715, when the frontage and a good depth of land behind on the Wardour Street flank came into the control of

Allen Hollen, probably a lawyer. Hollen Street, the next street behind, takes its name from him; it had first been called Gresham Street, after Robert Gresham, a wine cooper, who may have been the original developer of the frontage.²

Rocque's map (1746) shows a deep court in the centre of this block labelled Allen's Court, named again either after Hollen or after a bricklayer called John Allen active in this area. The yard and name are also shown on Horwood's map, coming between Nos 388 and 387 (later 113 and 115). A pub, latterly the North Pole, most likely the successor to the Mitre, occupied the western corner of the court. Of Georgian houses here, all long gone, little need be said. Tallis's guide shows Nos 382–386 west of Allen's Court as regular in aspect, suggesting they may have been rebuilt around the 1820s.

The Wardour Street area became well known for its cabinet-makers and antique dealers from the late eighteenth century onwards, and these trades naturally spread themselves also along Oxford Street. Beard and Gilbert's dictionary of furniture makers lists the following cabinet-makers and upholsterers: George Capon at No. 383 (1821–6); William Grant at No. 386 (1806–16); and Joseph and Richard Reader at No. 392 (1784–1803).³ By Tallis's time in the late 1830s all these had gone in favour of a mixture of trades.

Arriving a little later, perhaps the first of the antique dealers was the Falcke family, at No. 394 (old numbering) from about 1840 in addition to 127 Wardour Street. Jacob Falcke (d. 1849), 'jeweller and curiosity dealer', described on a trade card as an importer of foreign china, glass, old paintings, armour, point lace etc., was succeeded by his widow Hannah, and then by their son Edward, whose stock, sold at auction in 1855, included a 'unique collection of Wedgwood ware of about 200 pieces ... Sèvres and Dresden China, busts and pedestals of Faience de Rouen ... life-size Lucca della Robia [sic] figures, ancient Buhl and marquetry furniture, arms and armour'.⁴

Next east at No. 395, on the western corner with Great Chapel Street, was the shop of Emanuel Marks. This naturalized Dutch Jew, whose full

surname was Marks van Galen, settled in London on the advice of the well-known dealer Edward Holmes Baldock of Hanway Street. He took the house and shop at 395 (later 103) Oxford Street with his large family in about 1848, having traded previously from Newcastle Street, Strand. He was described in 1851 as an importer of antique china, furniture etc., in which quest he travelled frequently on the Continent. Most of his five sons grew up to play some role in the trade, but it was the second son, Murray Marks, who gave No. 395 fresh status as the leading shop for avant-garde objects, notably blue and white China pots. The younger Marks was friendly with Rossetti, Burne-Jones and others in aesthetic circles, dealt also in pictures and often gave artists advice and help; he was famed for his judgement, probity and taste. In the early 1860s he ran his own shop, first in Sloane Street and then in High Holborn, but from about 1867 he returned to Oxford Street to help his father who, 'not being wholly successful in business', had sublet part of his premises to other concerns, chiefly Pickfords, who had a receiving office at No. 395.⁵

In the 1870s Murray Marks took over the Oxford Street business entirely, and it became Marks & Co. His control was symbolized by the installation in 1875–6 of a new shop front designed by his friend R. Norman Shaw and made by Shaw's favourite joiner, W. H. Lascelles.⁶ Reverting to small-pane lights in the manner of Shaw's New Zealand Chambers, interrupted by arched niches for the display of pots, the front made a sensation in the West End, as plate glass had been the norm for shop windows for a generation or more. But it cannot have proved practical, since as soon as 1879 it was reported that 'plate glass is taking the place of the small bevelled squares in the well-known and charming shop erected by Mr Norman Shaw for Mr Marks ... we fancy we like the shop better now than we did', gallantly observed the *Building News*.⁷ It played host to a famous exhibition, the display of Sir Henry Thompson's 'blue and white' in 1878. For a while Murray Marks was in informal partnership with the Durlacher brothers, also successful art dealers, and in the 1881 census two of the

Durlachers, Alfred and George, were listed as living here along with Charles Marks, a brother of Murray's, who had married and moved away. Later in that decade Murray Marks was trading from Bond Street, and soon afterwards the Durlachers too gave up the premises; the shop and shop front, latterly No. 103, became a branch of the Lockhart's Cocoa Rooms chain and were destroyed in 1908.⁸

The current **No. 103**, on the site of Marks's premises, is a block of shops and offices built in 1908 to designs by Philip E. Pilditch. It is an orthodox building for its date, of five storeys plus an attic, steel-framed with Portland stone fronts including a deep return to Great Chapel Street. The original tenants of the shop were the Hackney Furnishing Company, pioneers in the mass selling of cut-price furniture.⁹

Nos 105–125 consist of two separate buildings, both erected in 1887–8 and gutted behind their fronts for modern offices and shops in 1982–5. Erected on Crown freehold land, they are unusually well documented.

Nos 105–109, together with 16–18 Hollen Street at the back, were created as the purpose-built shop and factory for the firm of Henry Heath, hatters. The architects were Christopher & White and the builders Peto Brothers.¹⁰

Henry Heath, Lambeth-born, had been in business in Oxford Street since 1822, as a date on the front of the building reveals, first at No. 413 (later 55), and then from about 1837 on part of the present site at No. 393 (later 107), with a second branch in High Holborn.¹¹ The firm was history-conscious and proud of its widespread and exalted clientele. They owned – though they cannot have made – the field marshal's hat worn by Wellington at Waterloo. They had also supplied hats for Queen Victoria since the time of her accession; later it was said that 'Her Majesty the Queen makes straw and chip plait, which she entrusts to Mr. Heath to be made into hats for her little

grandchildren'. But they were most famous for top hats. At first these were made from beaver, as finials of that animal crowning the building attest, but when beaver fur grew unobtainable, napped silk became the standard material.¹²

In 1879, shortly before the rebuilding, an advertisement remarked on the firm's factory adjoining, 'employing upwards of Seventy Persons'. By then Heath's sons George and Henry junior were in charge, but the fiction of the original Henry Heath was maintained: 'His goods cannot be procured at or through any Co-operative Stores. He has always refused to supply goods to or be in any way affiliated to them. His goods are charged Cash Prices, and will compare favourably with any Store'.¹³

The rebuilding took place as part of the policy of the Crown Estate, which through the Office of Woods and Forests was reconstructing its short Oxford Street frontage in the 1880s on renewed long leases. The much-enlarged new premises consisted of a plain four-storey factory at the rear facing Hollen Street, on which the Henry Heath name and words 'hat factory' are boldly displayed, and a broad five-storey building on Oxford Street, the two connected by a lower link block. A deep open showroom occupied most of the ground floor. The first floor contained a smaller showroom, a women's workroom, and a dining and drawing room. The upper floors consisted of further living rooms, eleven bedrooms and two kitchens at attic level. These were doubtless intended for staff, as the Heaths were living elsewhere at the time of the 1891 census.¹⁴

The construction was typical for the period, with cast-iron columns on a grid, wrought-iron beams, timber board and joist floors, and load-bearing brick external walls. More imposing is the façade to Oxford Street, designed in the enriched mercantile Queen Anne style favoured in 1880s London, and made of Burmantofts unglazed buff terracotta. The ornamental work of this front was designed and made by Ruskin's protégé Benjamin Creswick, a sculptor-carver and specialist in terracotta. Four large beavers top the gables;

in the central arch spandrels are portraits of George IV and Victoria, and elsewhere are small lions' heads.

Originally there was also a fine wrought iron sign projecting from the centre (the current one is an inexact replica), and a terracotta frieze in low relief by Creswick just above the shop windows, similar in scale and busy detail to his frieze on Cutlers' Hall in the City. It showed stages of hatting history, with a figure of St Clement, patron saint of the trade, at the left-hand end, then the granting of a royal charter in 1604, and then the evolution of the hatmaking process. Modelled by Creswick and made in Burmantofts terracotta with help from the Manchester firm of E. Goodall & Co., the frieze was added slightly after the building's completion, allegedly because Creswick would not undertake the commission until he had had time to study hatmaking in Heath's works. An admirer, T. Raffles Davison, made a sketch of it in 1890 for the *British Architect*, which also carries close-up photographs.¹⁵ The Soho volumes of the *Survey of London* state that this frieze was concealed behind the modern fascia, but Jon Wallsgrove reported in 1985 that it had been destroyed after the Heath firm left and Montague Burton Ltd took over the building, applying a new fascia designed by Ashley Havinden in 1955: 'now only the head of a beaver trapper exists, discovered during restoration works'.¹⁶ For the later fate of this building, see below.

The long and heavy block of buildings at Nos 111–125 dates like its neighbour from 1887–8. Designed by H. H. Collins and Banister Fletcher senior as partners in a speculative syndicate called the Oxford Street Investment Company Ltd, it originally comprised shops and offices along the frontage, to which separate blocks at 172–186 Wardour Street and Dryden Chambers at the back were added subsequently.

The stages of the development process can be followed from surviving Crown Estate files.¹⁷ The legal hurdles once cleared, Arthur Cates, surveyor to the Office of Woods and Forests, was able in July 1885 to advertise an on-site auction of the old materials of all properties at 111–125 Oxford Street, 172–188

Wardour Street and 11–15 Hollen Street behind. Preparations also now began for letting the site by tender, and by the autumn Cates had ready a draft specification: the front elevation was to be ‘of handsome architectural design’ and faced in Portland stone, ‘fine red brick, finely and closely set’, or terracotta ‘or other material not inferior’, while for the back and side red brick, Corsehill stone or equivalent was stipulated. All ironwork was to be encased in fire-resisting material.

The successful bidder, offering a ground rent of £2,300 per annum, was Josiah Mansbridge, a speculative builder in a large way of business in West Hampstead. There he had been working with Banister Fletcher, who acted as his referee and described him as ‘respectable and straightforward’ but failed to mention Mansbridge’s bankruptcy about twelve years before. As it turned out, Mansbridge soon hit trouble again and faded from the picture,¹⁸ leaving the business-like Fletcher to refinance the development during 1886. Initial sketch plans dividing the site up were made by a close associate of his, the architect H. H. Collins, and on their basis they looked for money. In June the Oxford Street Land Investment Company was formed, involving sixteen partners, many with West Hampstead interests.¹⁹ Following a joint plan by Collins and Fletcher, the development was broken into four blocks – shops in three sections round the perimeter, and a projected ‘great hall’ in the centre, evidently suggested with an entertainment venue in mind. For the time being this hall was not yet sketched out, but a high arch was left in the centre of the Oxford Street range to act as the approach to it. A first elevation for this frontage shows a more elaborate roofline than that eventually adopted.²⁰ Revised plans for the Oxford Street frontage only went out to tender in December, the lowest bidder being Jackson & Todd (at £20,300). Leases were issued by the Crown in January 1888, allowing the company to mortgage the buildings.²¹

The completed frontage, probably designed in the main by Collins, is in a florid Renaissance style, of four principal storeys, the lower two in

Portland stone with arches over the first floor and liberal small-scale ornament, the upper ones of mixed brick and stone, with occasional bay windows and an open parapet. The upper floors were originally flats. Of the shops along the frontage, Nos 115–117 became the first British headquarters of the Eastman Photographic Materials Company, and subsequently a branch of Kodak Ltd after the former moved to Clerkenwell in 1898.²² A Capital and Counties Bank took the corner site at Nos 121–125 which was substantially altered to designs by John P. Briggs, architect, in 1915.²³

The hall contemplated in the space behind the open high arch in the centre never materialized. In 1888 the syndicate had a bite from the well-known German Reed Entertainments, and next year the architect H. D. Appleton was contemplating designing a hall on the site, perhaps for a different company, but neither lead came to anything. Meanwhile the flank wing to Wardour Street, likewise containing shops and flats, had been built in 1888 to a simplified design, probably again mainly by Collins. The central and back space towards Hollen Street had to wait until 1892–3 to be filled with Dryden Chambers, a block of plain, respectable flats in stock brick with red brick dressings, approached via the front arch and therefore numbered 119 Oxford Street. This time the architect was Banister Fletcher junior (later Sir Banister Fletcher).²⁴

The reconstruction of this block almost a hundred years later began with negotiations started between the estate agents Drivers Jonas and the Crown Estate Office in 1975, as leases neared their termination. Both parties were confident at the outset that all the buildings on these sites should and could be entirely redeveloped; the architects Sir Frederick Gibberd & Partners (Michael Coombes, partner in charge) were employed to make sketch plans to that effect. But the mood of the times was shifting in favour of conservation. Though both Nos 105–109 and 111–125 were at that time unlisted, Westminster City Council was proposing to include them in its Soho Conservation Area, and in 1979 its Planning Committee unexpectedly rejected

the Gibberd firm's first design. The partners therefore retrenched, and came up with a revised design retaining the façades of the hat factory – now denominated 'the Beaver Building'. That too failed to pass muster with Westminster, the Victorian Society and the Royal Fine Art Commission. In 1980 the Crown chose as its developer Capital and Counties Property Company Ltd, which proved disinclined to fight the conservation lobby. Coombes and his colleagues were therefore pushed into agreeing to a redevelopment in 1982–5 of Nos 111–125 behind the Oxford Street frontage, entailing the addition of an extra storey marring its skyline, and the replacement of 172–186 Wardour Street and Dryden Chambers. Nos 105–109 were more gently handled, elements of the old plan form being retained and both fronts well restored, and on that strength the building was added to the statutory lists in 1986.²⁵ At the time of writing Nos 111–125 were in the ownership of Emperor International Holdings Ltd of Hong Kong, and known as the Ampersand Building.²⁶