

Chapter 16

127–159 Oxford Street

Wardour Street to Poland Street

Wardour Street marks the boundary between two parishes, St Anne's, Soho, and St James's, Westminster. From here westwards as far as Swallow Place, just beyond Oxford Circus, the southern frontage of Oxford Street belonged historically to the parish of St James. Wardour Street was formerly an old lane called Coleman Hedge Lane (sometimes merely Hedge Lane) connecting the Charing Cross area with the Tyburn Road. It was already a boundary when St Anne's parish was separated out from St Martin's in the Fields in 1678. Before building development overtook the district in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, it was to the northern half of this lane that the name Soho, sometimes Old Soho, was most specifically applied, and indeed Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1681–2 marks the lane itself as Soho. Along and around it there had grown up a scatter of cottages, reported as totalling 66 according to the Parliamentary inventory of Crown property in Westminster made in 1650.¹ But there is no reason to suppose this development extended significantly along the main road. If Ogilby and Morgan are credited, what building there had been further eastwards along Tyburn Road petered out at Wardour Street.

That changed soon after their map was published. To explain the progress of development along this part of Oxford Street from the 1680s, a little must be said about land ownership, epitomizing a fuller account in the St James's North volumes of the *Survey of London*. The land between Wardour Street and a little beyond Poland Street (in modern terms to the eastern edge

of the present Marks & Spencer on the Pantheon site) consisted till the late seventeenth century of two fields or closes in separate ownership. From Wardour Street past the top of Berwick Street to the boundary between the present 151 and 153 Oxford Street was the northern edge of Doghouse Close. This, like most of Soho proper, was Crown freehold land until 1698, when it was granted in reversion to the Earl of Portland once leases expired in 1734. The next field west, Little Gelding's Close, was much narrower – more like a strip; it is represented by the present-day sites of 153–167 Oxford Street and the top of Poland Street. The freehold of this close had passed from Crown ownership in the sixteenth century through various hands before being bought in 1679 by Sir Benjamin Maddox.²

Building started on both these closes through the activity of James Pollett, 'a former cook who turned property speculator and became closely involved in the development of the land in the north-eastern corner of St James's parish'.³ In or around 1683 Pollett acquired long leasehold interests in both closes, and by 1687 there was a short range of houses along the Tyburn Road frontage of Doghouse Close and a much longer one stretching down the west side of Wardour Street. On the smaller Little Gelding's Close, Pollett was at work along the frontage by 1689. The most significant of the seven houses built here was the King of Poland pub, doubtless named after John Sobieski's then-recent victory over the Turks. It stood on the site of the present 161 Oxford Street at the western corner with the new Poland Street, and is covered in the next chapter.⁴

Like other of the seventeenth-century houses built along the south side of Oxford Street, these were generally in a bad way by the 1730s, when the Portlands came into their inheritance of Doghouse Close. Most of their portion of the Oxford Street frontage was rebuilt on fresh leases around that time, and the Little Gelding's Close houses probably followed suit.⁵

Wardour Street to Berwick Street

The block of nine Oxford Street houses between Wardour Street and Berwick Street, numbered 373–381 running west to east from the 1770s but renumbered 127–143 (odd) in the opposite direction from 1880, seems to have had a humdrum history. No notable tradesmen are recorded, nor were there back alleys or yards here suitable for workshops. At the Wardour Street corner, No. 127 (formerly 381), stood a pub, called the Queen's Arms until about 1900 when it was renamed the Canadian by Henry Finch, a licensee who rebranded a number of West End pubs.⁶ It remains to chronicle the present buildings on these sites.

No. 127 is a somewhat featureless building of 1938, a late product of the architectural practice of Henry Tanner junior, working for Salmon & Gluckstein Ltd, the parent company of the J. Lyons chain. It is faced in a yellowish artificial stone, with ribbed spandrels under the windows.⁷

Nos 129–131 is a five-storey building in a simple modernist style sporting bands of windows. It dates from 1953 and was built to designs by J. Newton-Smith, architect, working for Alexandre Ltd, the Leeds-based clothing chain. The Alexandre firm was the vehicle of the successful tailor S. H. Lyons, who had turned it into a public company in 1937. When this branch was built, the firm was enjoying a post-war boom and opening fresh shops under the aegis of two sons, Bernard and Jack Lyons. Soon afterwards in 1954 they amalgamated Alexandre with United Drapery Stores, though the name was retained for some years.⁸

Nos 133–135, at the centre of the block, is also its tallest and best building. Six full storeys high with an extra seventh in the roof, it was built in 1910–11 to designs by the partnership of Simpson & Ayrton, for whom Maxwell Ayrton

was the primary designer. The ostensible client was the Great Portland Street auctioneering firm of Jubbers & Co., no doubt acting for investors. The two lowest storeys act as a horizontal base to the building, with a shop at No. 135 to the right of the office entrance. Higher up, the elevation is smartly if precipitously organized. Tiers of windows rise through three storeys left and right, flanking set-back bay windows in the centre graced with ornamental leadwork. The top storeys are recessed and crowned by shaped gables at the ends. The building is of framed construction with cladding of unpolished faience or cast stone supplied by the firm of Gibbs & Canning.⁹

The compactness of this front is deceptive, as the block stretches non-orthogonally east and west behind the frontage to take in 201 Wardour Street and 53–54 Berwick Street. On both these sides there are subsidiary entrances and façades, clad in similar materials; the Berwick Street side is the more formal of the two. Most of the separate small offices originally housed here were in the long arms of the T-shape thus formed.

The name and history of this building have been complex. At first called Pembroke House, it was partly requisitioned in 1917 and a wartime restaurant opened in the basement. Later it was known as Swan House. Then Pathé Pictures Ltd of Wardour Street acquired it after the Second World War as a base for their flourishing news division. The cinema architect William R. Glen made extensive alterations in 1947–8; the newsroom and editing suites were on the ground floor of the Wardour Street wing, while the Berwick Street wing opposite housed a film theatre. During this period the building was known as Pathé House, but after the newsreel industry retracted and Warner Brothers bought the Pathé organization, Ilford Ltd took it over in 1960 and renamed it Ilford House, intending it 'as a show-place for new products and as a centre in which amateur photographers could discuss problems'.¹⁰

No. 137, squeezed between larger neighbours, dates from 1883. It is in minimal Queen Anne style with end pilasters, now painted. The architect was Richard Creed.¹¹

Nos 139–143, Berwick House, is a bluff and weighty building with stone fronts, an effective corner turret and a high mansard roof. Its ponderous French style is old-fashioned for its date, which is given as 1886 in a flourish of ornament in a circular cartouche over the former corner entrance. On both fronts the windows are sunk behind arches and piers of stonework, the latter set closely together. The building was favourably noticed in the *Building News*, but the architect was not named. A good candidate could be the veteran architect Robert Kerr (district surveyor to St James's parish, 1860–1902), who with his son R. H. Kerr had an office suite here from its first years. So too did the younger practice of Herbert Read and Robert F. MacDonald (here for some years from 1891), but the architecture is remote from their manner.¹²

In 2018 this whole block was subject to a redevelopment application submitted on behalf of Daejan Investments Ltd, part of the Freshwater Group, which had purchased Nos 139–143 some years previously for £12.8 million. If approved by Westminster Council, the plan is to demolish and totally rebuild Nos 127–131 and 137 to designs by Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands, architects. Nos 133–135 and the corresponding fronts in Wardour and Berwick Streets are to be redeveloped behind existing fronts, while Nos 139–143 are to suffer the indignity of being jacked up and raised in order to allow for floors to run through from the neighbouring buildings.¹³

Berwick Street to Poland Street

This block, numbered 145–159 since 1881 but previously 366–373, is of similar mixed character to the frontage next east. It includes at either end two houses (Nos 145 and 159) which at least in carcass pre-date 1840.

No. 145 is by appearance one of the oldest surviving buildings in Oxford Street, probably of late Georgian date. Three broad windows wide and four storeys high, it has a deeper flank towards Berwick Street where it abuts the Green Man pub. The Tallis street guide shows the same arrangement as obtains today, confirming the building's authenticity. The old numbering was muddled hereabouts; Tallis shows it as one of two properties numbered 371, but it then more logically became No. 372 before acquiring its present number in 1880. It has undergone a miscellany of uses, and probably the flanking property and the Oxford Street frontage were at times separately occupied. In about 1880 a reputable shoe- and bootmaker, J. Parker & Co., mentioned in Baedeker's guide, moved in here from the opposite corner of Berwick Street. Around the turn of the century the main shop came into the possession of Theobald Alexander, tailor, who defaced the upper half of the building for many years with the words 'Alexander the Great tailor' in large capital letters.¹⁴ The building underwent a major refurbishment in the hands of the Rolfe Judd architectural practice in 2016–17, when a mansard roof was added on both faces. It was reported at the time of this application that the interior had been gravely altered, but that the basement contained 'very interesting and extensive vaults'.¹⁵

No. 147 is a coarse and florid building in a Franco-Flemish commercial version of the Queen Anne style, so liberally dressed and ornamented in stonework as almost to hide the red brick of its facings, and culminating in a fancy high gable. It was built in 1897 to designs by Gordon, Lowther & Gunton, architects, working for John Robbins & Co., the 'operative chemists' previously on the site, who however seem not to have reoccupied the premises. From about 1904 the shop was tenanted by Rashleigh Phipps & Co., electrical engineers and contractors previously at No. 102 on the opposite side of the street.¹⁶

Nos 149–151 is a block of shops and offices dating from 2012–14 and designed by ESA Architecture for the Co-operative Insurance Society. The site is deep, stretching sideways at the back to include 59 Berwick Street.¹⁷ The previous buildings here had separate histories. No. 149 (formerly 371) is mentioned in *The Epicure's Almanack* of 1815 as Pressy & Co.'s 'foreign warehouse' for the supply of imported goods and wines.¹⁸ It was rebuilt in Queen Anne style with an all-stone front in 1901 to designs by R. H. Kerr, the shop becoming the showrooms of Crane & Sons, piano dealers. Though it survived the bomb which destroyed its western neighbour, No. 151, it may have been badly damaged, as it was rebuilt or reconstructed in a plain modern style around 1958–60 by Justin Alleyn, architect, working for Westway Estates Ltd.¹⁹ Little is known of No. 151 before it was demolished following bombing, but it included a yard at the back latterly used as a railway receiving office. The post-war rebuilding as the usual shops and offices was undertaken in 1954–5 by the Wembley office of the Birmingham architects Cotton, Ballard & Blow, working for Dorlaw Investments Ltd, and connected at the back to 59 Berwick Street. The ground floor became the West End flagship of Bata Shoes, for whom Katz & Vaughan designed a slick shop with a recessed front and mirrored staircase.²⁰

No. 153 is a narrow individual building of similar date and type to No. 147, but in a much chaster Tudor style of red brick with stone dressings, dated 1895 on the front. The current large first-floor window does it no favours.

Nos 155 & 157 is a seven-storey building with a plain stone front which appears to have been built in 1916, an unusual date. The applicant for permission to drain the new building was F. L. Griggs of Catford, writing on behalf of the builders Griggs & Son of Cubitt Town.²¹

No. 159 (formerly 366) at the corner of Poland Street is a four-storey building fronted in mid-Victorian stucco style, doubtless concealing an earlier carcass, as the window arrangement accords with the building shown by Tallis in the late 1830s. The shop was a bakery for almost the whole of the nineteenth century. Its tenant from at least 1808 to 1846 was Christian Dill, probably of German origin, and then for a few years afterwards his widow Mary Dill. As accredited bakers to Queen Adelaide and Queen Victoria, the Dills loyally illuminated the front of their building on royal birthdays and other occasions for public rejoicing. Dill also according to his will owned the leases of three neighbouring shops, the former Nos 357, 367 and 368.²² Dill's successor John Elphinstone, baker, also illuminated from time to time.²³ In 1904 a restaurant was tacked on to the bakery but it did not last long, and by 1909 garment traders had taken over.²⁴