

## Introduction

The fame of Oxford Street rests on its enduring appeal as a destination for shopping. Many streets of shops around the world surpass it in cosmopolitan chic, among them Oxford Street's neighbours in the West End of London, Regent Street and Bond Street. Yet none is so prolonged. Oxford Street runs for well over a full mile in length, both of its sides taken up at ground level almost entirely by shops. Other linear concentrations of retailing certainly exist, as long or even longer. But most serve local needs alone, or have sprung into being only since the coming of the car, whereas Oxford Street's shops have enjoyed metropolitan, national and international allure for over two centuries.

This volume examines how it was that Oxford Street became the most continuously prosperous shopping street not just in London but, arguably, anywhere. In the tradition of the *Survey of London*, it does so not by advancing an overall hypothesis, but by drawing together the data and details of the street's history. But a few remarks at the outset may guide the reader.

This introduction divides into two main sections, the first on Oxford Street as a road, the second on its shops. Both terms are used broadly and inclusively. The road comes first, because Oxford Street's function as a means and a focus of communication has always contributed more to its success than the specifics of its built fabric. Three stages in the road's evolution can be identified. It started out from Roman times as just one section of a major main road in and out of London. Then in the eighteenth century it became the boundary between wealthy parishes and communities that had grown up on the western fringes of London. Finally from the 1830s onwards it began to take advantage of the various means of long-distance access to its shops, by bus, cab and underground train. Without the exceptional benefits it has

derived since then from public transport, ever accumulating and changing, Oxford Street's prosperity would surely have withered in the twentieth century and beyond, as the domiciles of London's spending classes dispersed.

The second section of the introduction addresses the shops. Here the discernible pattern is a kind of arc. First coming into clear view in the 1770s, Oxford Street's early shops were small and grew out of ordinary houses, as they did elsewhere in London. After a short flirtation with bazaars, department stores began to emerge in the 1870s. They were at first privately owned, sometimes by partners, but almost all were converted into public companies towards the end of the nineteenth century. Stand-alone department stores were already in decline by the inter-war years, when multiples took the lead. In this respect Oxford Street follows the national trend traced by Kathryn Morrison in her classic *English Shops and Shopping*. But since the Second World War both the department stores and the multiples have barely held their own, and there has been a reversion to shop units of middling size. Today these are never individually owned, however. No Oxford Street shopkeeper would think now of living over the store. Customers and assistants are strangers to one another; and, as the photographs in this book prove, the public milieu of Oxford Street is more youthful and touristic than it was even fifty years ago.

There are other aspects to Oxford Street's activities and building typologies than shopping. Notably, it has housed places of entertainment. The first and most famous was the Pantheon, followed by a succession of theatres, music halls and cinemas, alongside pubs, restaurants and cafés of all sizes and types. Only one true pub survives today, alongside the usual modern chain eateries. A church was the first known building on the street, but it was demolished so long ago as to be almost without record. Since then there have been just one other church and more than one hospital, all long gone, though a Salvation Army hall marches on. There are purpose-built blocks of flats and hotels over the shops, notably at the westernmost end of the street. All these

are discussed in their place, but they hardly deserve collective space. Besides the road and the shops, the one subject singled out as a coda to this introduction is that of processions and decorations – a topic which has received curiously little attention in histories of London and its streets.

Finally here, some brief words about architecture. Unlike Regent Street, Oxford Street was never planned. Its persistent incoherence, no better or worse than along most major London streets, is a reminder that shopkeepers and freeholders have seldom felt that consumption needed more than serviceable, adaptable buildings to promote trade.

The first efforts at architectural order came from the great landlords, notably the Grosvenor and Portland Estates, who did their best to endow the street with a measure of uniformity and decorum to in a series of gradual rebuildings from the 1870s onwards, as a means of keeping up rental values. A period of greater architectural ambition followed, lasting approximately up to the Second World War and affecting above all the design of department stores, on which some remarks are offered in the section on shops. Oxford Street's finest buildings are all Edwardian, at least in origin: pre-eminently Selfridges, the grandest masonry shop frontispiece anywhere in the world – in effect, a magnificent curiosity. The former premises of Mappin & Webb, Waring & Gillow and Evelyn House, all on the north side of the street east of Oxford Circus, rival Selfridges in quality but not monumentality. At that time leading shopkeepers believed that they could use architecture to combine self-advertisement with a certain ideal of civic duty.

Later on came good buildings here and there, like the block-sized Mount Royal and Hereford House near the western end of the street, plus two contiguous stores which just miss being masterpieces – the former D. H. Evans (now House of Fraser) and John Lewis. There is just one early Modern Movement building of note, the His Master's Voice (HMV) shop of 1938–9, now shrunken in architectural value to a façade alone. It is difficult to enthuse about much that has been built recently along Oxford Street. All creative

thought today goes into temporary display, for which retailers and their backers now want bland, flexible space and a maximum of glass. There seems little or no interest in street architecture.

## The Road

### *The Roman road*

Oxford Street follows the line of the main Roman highway leading to and from London in the westward direction. From Tottenham Court Road to Marble Arch the present road constitutes an unerring straight line, one mile and 620 yards in length. The alignment is suggestive enough to confirm the route as ancient and Roman, though no definite physical trace of its Roman origins has been unearthed. Originally it formed just one section of a larger road system whose ramifications are explained in the following paragraphs. As far as can be told today, the line in the Oxford Street sector was fairly straight and level, and set out near the southern edge of a gravel terrace, with lower and marshier terrain to its south where Mayfair now stands. But this faintly perceptible sense of elevation may be due to successive layers of road-making over the centuries. The only obstacle to the roadway's level course was a former definite dip down to the Tyburn brook, around the line of Stratford Place and South Molton Street. The brook was bridged in medieval times and fully culverted in the eighteenth century, when the dip was partly but not entirely flattened out.

At its eastern end, Oxford Street originally extended no further than the present crossing with Tottenham Court and Charing Cross Roads. Unquestionably, the line of Holborn represents the same ancient westward road out of the City of London. But there was always an intervening southward break between Holborn and Oxford Street, attested by the slant

and twist of St Giles High Street. That deviation tallies with the position of St Giles' Hospital, a twelfth-century foundation which with its church and accumulating parish became the first concerted settlement west of the City along this route. In the course of time St Giles caused a bottleneck for travellers and attracted a notorious nest of slums. These were cleared after many years of debate by means of New Oxford Street, projected for the Crown by James Pennethorne and opened in 1847. Before then, only west of that obstacle did the straight line get going again. That was from St Giles' Pound, the point at which the road crossed a north-south route of uncertain date running up from Westminster: to the south Hog Lane, later Crown Street, later again Charing Cross Road; and to the north the lane to Tottenham Court. In 1921 this major crossing point was inaccurately renamed St Giles' Circus - there was never a true circus or roundabout here.

At its western end the road encountered another and more significant ancient highway. That was the route running north-westwards from Westminster along the line of the present Park Lane, formerly Tyburn Lane, and metamorphosing from the junction with Oxford Street known in due course as Tyburn, now Marble Arch, into the Edgware Road - another concerted straight line. Usually acknowledged to be Roman, this alignment has been something of a puzzle for archaeologists, since it ignores or bypasses the City of London three miles to its east. Most now accept that there had been a major pre-Roman river crossing of the Thames at Westminster, and that the Park Lane-Edgware Road line represents the Roman regularization of that older artery, connecting regions south of the river with the English Midlands. It was known from medieval times as Watling Street.

By then, and probably earlier, the main line of the westward highway from London turned sharply north-west at the Tyburn junction from Oxford Street into the Edgware Road. There was also a continuation of Oxford Street westwards along the line of the present Bayswater Road, leading in Roman times towards Silchester and Bath. But this appears to have been a subsidiary

road, since there was another route westwards out of London and Westminster further south. Oxford Street–Edgware Road was the usual main thoroughfare for Oxford, Worcester and other Midlands destinations, Roman, medieval and later.

It is a moot question whether the line from the City to Tyburn including Oxford Street should really be deemed a subsidiary part of Watling Street. But it has been so denominated since at least the seventeenth century, as in Daniel Defoe's *Essay upon Projects* (1697), which alludes to Watling Street's 'north-west turn'. The direct continuation west of Tyburn was never so called, the popular name of that route being the Devil's Highway. The historic unity of Oxford Street with Edgware Road as one route was confirmed in 1721, when the two were designated for management as a single turnpike road; Bayswater Road and Park (then Tyburn) Lane never belonged to that system. In any case Oxford Street was always part of a busy artery, bearing heavy traffic from the City both for the west and for the north-west.<sup>1</sup>

### *Tyburn*

The name Tyburn, though found in Domesday Book, is seldom in use today, when it attaches loosely to the heavily trafficked environs of the present Marble Arch. It derives from the Tyburn Brook, sometimes also known as the Ay Brook (etymologically Tyburn probably derives from 'The Ay Bourne'). Like many watercourses overrun by urban development, the precise line of the Tyburn is hard to pinpoint, but it had more than one branch. The main brook crossed Oxford Street well east of the Park Lane–Edgware Road route, close to the present line of Stratford Place and South Molton Street, on a slanting trajectory. But there was a lesser stream further west next to the crossroads, to which the name Tyburn was also sometimes attached.

Presumably for reasons of water supply, it was next to the brook's eastern branch that the original hamlet of Tyburn grew up, lending its name

also to a manor and parochial district north of the road. The beginnings of this settlement predated the Norman Conquest, when it was a possession of the Abbess of Barking. There was a small roadside church here from around 1200, on a site just east of the brook identifiable as between the two present-day arms of Marylebone Lane.<sup>2</sup> In 1400 the church was shifted further north, away from the itinerant insecurity of Oxford Street, and over time the parish of Tyburn acquired the fresh name of Marylebone, after the resited church's dedication. That shift of identity was completed in the eighteenth century, when Tyburn as a place-name shrank back to the crossroads area, by then long infamous as a major place of public execution. Naturally the promoters and incoming Georgian residents of developing Marylebone preferred the modern name.

Executions, generally by hanging, took place at Tyburn between 1196 at the latest and the 1780s. For several centuries a monitory set of permanent gallows loomed over the junction itself, clearly shown on Rocque's map of 1746. For the last quarter-century of public executions, after 1759, these were replaced by temporary gallows, usually set up a few yards further north up the Edgware Road. A tollhouse took the place of the original gallows.

The notoriety of Tyburn impinged on the road leading thither. Popular rituals attached to the episodic last journeys of the condemned from prison to Tyburn. Most prisoners travelled by open cart, but those of high status might exceptionally be conveyed by coach, as was Earl Ferrers (1760), drawn in his own landau by six horses. Very heinous malefactors could be dragged on sledges or hurdles, as was the Jacobite Archibald Cameron so late as 1753. They might be whipped as they passed as part of their official punishment, or pelted, taunted, cursed or huzzaed by onlookers, depending on the public mood. One time-honoured tradition of the parade going west from Newgate was a pause for 'St Giles's bowl' at St Giles High Street, where those about to die quaffed a final, generous drink. So prisoners and the attendant crowds might well traverse Oxford Street in degrees of drunkenness. On the slow

outward journey, sometimes taking as long as two hours, there was always some form of official escort, civil or military. But after executions chaos and bad behaviour often broke out as the crowd dispersed from Tyburn, including occasional disputes over bodies. Rarely an execution might take place on Oxford Street itself, like that of the Gordon Riots offender Enoch Fleming, who was hanged in 1780 ‘opposite and as near as conveniently may be to the end of Woodstock street’, where he had been involved in destroying a house.<sup>3</sup>

### *The unimproved highway*

So Oxford Street, later a processional route for coronation parades and visiting dignitaries, earned early notoriety as a suburban *via dolorosa*, over and above its use as a daily trade route heavily trafficked by carts, packhorses and drovers. Its emerging character, as London crept westwards from Soho around 1700, was a peppering of ribbon development – brick fields, taverns, animal pounds and the like – relieved by occasional elm trees.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Pennant, remembering the Oxford Street of his youth, recalled it as ‘a deep hollow road, and full of sloughs: with here and there a ragged house, the lurking-place of cut-throats’.<sup>5</sup> There were a few places of resort set back from the road with ample ground, like the Castle, a coaching inn close to St Giles’ Pound, and the Adam and Eve tavern with a good long garden near Wells Street. Adjacent to this last behind the main road frontage the celebrated bare-knuckle boxer James Figg around 1724 built a short-lived ‘amphitheatre’, where he fought and taught. Most of the roadside hostelries were probably scruffy and seedy. Advertisements from the early eighteenth century mention the White Hart, the King of Poland, the Cheshire Cheese and the King’s Head as venues where lost horses might be reclaimed or lottery tickets bought.<sup>6</sup>

Three separate pounds once marked the street’s course. St Giles’ Pound at the Tottenham Court Road corner was the official pound for St Giles’s

parish, while its counterpart for Marylebone occupied space in front of the former church site at the bottom of Marylebone Lane. In between, roughly where John Prince's Street now debouches into Oxford Street, stood Knib's, Nibs' or Nibbs's Pound, named in a notice of 1719 as a place where lost pigs were kept. Nibbs's Pound seems to have been transferred next to the Marylebone pound soon after that and perhaps amalgamated with it, but kept its name. A broadsheet of doubtful accuracy dated 1806 depicts it as overlooked by a hostelry, called the Two Fighting Cocks in the accompanying doggerel verse. There was a pub opposite its original site called the Hog in the Pound, which earned notoriety when its landlady Catherine Hayes helped murder her husband and was burnt for it at Tyburn in 1726. The year before, counterfeiters connected with the notorious Jonathan Wild were arrested at an address known as Paradise Row, in Tyburn Road near Hanover Square – probably close to the Hog in the Pound.<sup>7</sup>

The only structure of note before 1700 was the so-called Lord Mayor's Banqueting House, which stood back from the road just north of the bridge or causeway over the Tyburn Brook, with a stable adjacent. It had been built in 1565 by the City Corporation as a venue for the mayor and aldermen's annual inspections of the Tyburn water supply, then under their control. The care attached to safeguarding this supply was attested by a Victorian discovery below street level near the top of South Molton Street of a stout stone conduit head carved with the City's arms and dated 1627. That corresponds with the period when the so-called Conduit Mead estate, an irregular-shaped tract of land formerly leased by the City Corporation from the Crown and encompassing most of New Bond Street and Conduit Street to the south of Oxford Street, became City freehold land. There were further conduit heads on the north side of the main road, to the east of the brook around the Banqueting House itself.<sup>8</sup>

The fancy name of the Banqueting House indicated that on inspection days ample fare was laid on. In looks it was just a plain, farmhouse-like

building which after sundry additions included an inspection chamber and a keeper's house as well as a room for meetings and entertainment. According to some accounts it was pulled down in 1736, but at least the remnants of it are shown in a plan of 1772. The only reliable view of the Banqueting House is a schematic one from a lost plan said to date from 1717; later evocations, including a well-known drawing by T. H. Shepherd, should be regarded with caution. Of its interiors nothing is known.<sup>9</sup>

Until the eighteenth century Oxford Street was most often known as Tyburn Road. But the Oxford name was in established use before then, as on the Ogilby & Morgan map of 1681-2, where the route is labelled 'The Road to Oxford etc.'. The name confirms the continuity of the route with Edgware Road, since that was how Oxford was reached, not by way of what is now Bayswater Road. Sometimes alternative names such as 'the road to Uxbridge' or 'Acton road' are found. 'Oxford Road' features in advertisements from 1712, 'Oxford Street' a little later, from 1719, becoming commoner in the 1730s and standard by the middle of the century.<sup>10</sup> But the Oxford name at first applied only as far west as the Banqueting House Bridge, and was extended up to the Tyburn junction and gallows only in the 1750s. That is confirmed by the Mackay map of 1723 showing an early proposed layout of the Grosvenor estate, which labels the road west of the Banqueting House as the 'Worcester Road'.<sup>11</sup> The Oxford name certainly antedated the start of development on the Marylebone lands of the Cavendish-Harleys, Earls of Oxford, from the late 1710s. But its take-up was doubtless stimulated by bourgeois revulsion towards Tyburn and its associations, and abetted by the promoters of new building in Marylebone and Mayfair.

### *Road improvements*

The oversight and maintenance of this relentlessly busy route have always been fraught with care and controversy. Until the 1720s the frontaging

parishes were responsible for patching the rutted, potholed and unsurfaced roadway with gravel and earth as needed, a service procured from Tudor times by so-called 'statute' work or *corvée*. Intermittent highway rates allowed the parishes to outsource occasional major repairs to contractors. That hand-to-mouth system was swept away in 1721, when an Act of Parliament created a St Marylebone Turnpike Trust to manage the whole of Oxford Street and Edgware Road as a single turnpike road.

The 125 trustees appointed were selected from all the frontaging parishes, but as the trust's name betrays, Marylebone was dominant, since it occupied the whole north side of Oxford Street and east side of Edgware Road. St Anne's, Soho, St James's, Westminster, and St George's, Hanover Square (created 1724) and Paddington all had small representations, proportionate to their frontages opposite. But by one means or another Marylebone Vestry became the *de facto* and from 1770 the *de jure* manager of Oxford Street. That responsibility was confirmed by the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1857, inherited by the St Marylebone Borough Council and maintained right up to 1965, when Westminster Council took over. Despite sporadic complaints from southern frontagers, the arrangement generally rubbed along.<sup>12</sup>

The turnpike trustees soon set about the first major improvements to Oxford Street, coinciding with the initial great wave of building along its frontages. In a two-stage operation, they began by re-draining and laying on great quantities of gravel and flint, so as to raise the road by as much as two to three feet, to the detriment of existing houses. Later, with the benefit of a special paving rate allowed by Parliament in 1735, they paved the whole surface east of the Banqueting House Bridge. This second improvement was due in large part to pressure from the managers of the Cavendish-Harley estate, which in the interim had been taking rapid shape to the north of the road and needed improved access to its new houses. It was designed by John Hanway junior, then resident on his engineer-father Major Hanway's small

freehold near the east end of Oxford Street. The work consisted of laying the roadway with a cambered stone surface, probably in cobbles, and providing new 'kennels' or gutters on both sides, with space behind them for footways.

A plan of 1736 by Hanway setting out proposed changes in the Banqueting House bridge area shows that west of that point there were at this date 'ancient sewers' on either side of the road, which drained eastwards to the Tyburn.<sup>13</sup> The trustees encountered difficulties here, as the road over the bridge or causeway had previously narrowed down to twenty feet width or less, and carts were said to have been 'daily overturning'. The City Corporation, owners of a short stretch of property on either side, initially proved obstructive, in part because a conduit and garden lay immediately south of the bridge. But by 1740 the road here too had been widened to forty feet, seemingly the standard breadth further east.<sup>14</sup>

The link between these changes and building developments north of the highway emerges from a 'memorial' of 1738 written by William Thomas, steward of the Cavendish-Harley estate. According to Thomas, the state of the road prior to 1735 had caused great 'Difficulty of Access' to the new 'Marybone Buildings', and only 'the Steadiness of a few Trustees who had kept the Paving Project constantly in View, as well as the Public Clamour of the badness of that Street then scarce passable' had led to the application to Parliament for 'a larger Toll, to enable them as well to pave Oxford Street, as more effectually to repair the other part of the Road & pay the Debts contracted by the former Methods of repairing.' Thomas gave credit for their success to those MPs who championed the Bill against 'the peevish obstinacy of opponents', and singled out 'Major Hanway's Judgment & pains as well in causing Oxford Street to be carefully Surveyed by his Son, Mr John Hanway, as directing the Channells and other parts of the pavement, for which he was qualified by his great Skill as an Engineer, in which capacity he had served Several Campaigns in the late Wars in Flanders.' This measure, Thomas concluded, 'paved the way for further Improvements in Marybone Fields, not

only by removing in a great measure the Silly prejudices conceived and artfully kept up against crossing Tyburne Road, & consequently furnishing with Inhabitants the Houses already built; but also by encouraging the Building of Ground taken many years before, & taking of fresh parcels of Ground for Building; a great part of which is since built upon; And more Benefit must yearly come from this favorable Incident, if care be taken to improve it to the best advantage'.<sup>15</sup>

Along the north side the Cavendish-Harley authorities probably paid for a new deep covered sewer into which the surface water from the new streets and houses built in Marylebone directly to its north could drain. That is implied by arrangements made on the neighbouring Berners estate, when its Oxford Street frontage was built up from 1738, after building on the Cavendish-Harley estate to its west was well under way. Under an agreement with the developer, Thomas Huddle, William Berners undertook 'To build a Common Sewer from Rathbone Place to Wells Lane 6 foot high and 4 Foot Wide in the Clear' for the use of the houses to be built. The subsequent Berners building agreements also pledged lessees to erect iron railings in front of their new Oxford Street houses, to pave the footway to the breadth of six feet with Purbeck stone and to erect posts at intervals separating off the pavement from the roadway. Doubtless similar arrangements obtained on Cavendish-Harley property, with the whole covered sewer draining westwards into the Tyburn.<sup>16</sup>

The 1735 improvements did not apply to the full length of the road. West of the Banqueting House Bridge it remained unsatisfactory, and hampered by an old water main running parallel to its south side, carrying water from Paddington.<sup>17</sup>

As increasing numbers of good houses sprang up in Mayfair and Marylebone, the road and its continued use for the traditional parades to Tyburn became the subject of public petitions. One such, perhaps of the late 1750s, claimed that the movement of goods was 'very much incommoded by

the great concourse of idle and disorderly persons who usually attend all executions'. A second petition of 1768–9, endorsed by large local freeholders like the Grosvenors and the Portlands, complained that residents were prevented from going in and out of their houses and prejudiced in their property but also the public roads leading from London to Oxford and Paddington are for several hours so thronged that neither horses nor carriages can pass and repass without the greatest difficulty and danger, as the widest part of the street at the said place of execution does not exceed seventy feet.<sup>18</sup>

By the time of this second petition, however, the use of Oxford Street as a major thoroughfare for the transit of goods had been greatly relieved by the creation in the late 1750s of the parallel New Road a mile to its north. The Marylebone stretch of this relief route (now Marylebone Road) was undertaken by the selfsame turnpike trust which had been managing Oxford Street and Edgware Road. So the relationship between the two roads was well understood. The New Road, instantly successful, drew off most of the heavy goods traffic, agricultural produce and droves of animals destined for London markets, and freed up Oxford Street.

The opening of the New Road was the necessary precursor for a fresh Act of Parliament in 1770, which took away Oxford Street (but not Edgware Road) from the turnpike trust and vested its management in a new body, the St Marylebone Paving Commissioners – effectively the Marylebone Vestry under another name. The whole of the road was now repaved all the way from St Giles' Pound to Tyburn using deep granite blocks laid to camber, renewed side gutters and footways in Purbeck and York stone. This improvement, costing £20,000, was entrusted to Adams & Campbell, contractors, the road-building arm of the famous and tentacular Adam brothers, working here in partnership with Robert Campbell. Under the same Act the lighting of the street was also enhanced by adding to the number of lamps.<sup>19</sup>

These improvements endowed Oxford Street with its first modern surfaces, affording a great boost both to passing traffic and the emerging shops. This was the layout which so struck the German visitor Sophie von la Roche when she went shopping in 1786 and admired a roadway wide enough for two carriages to pass one another on either side of vehicles parked in the centre, and footways 'six people deep', spacious enough for people to gaze at the shop fronts without being buffeted by passers-by. It is probably also the paving visible in one of the earliest general views of the street, the 1815 Shepherd-Ackermann view looking west from Stratford Place.<sup>20</sup>

The 1770 paving of Oxford Street marked the critical change heralding the transformation of this section of an old arterial route into a major West End destination for consumers, comparable with Piccadilly and the Strand. It now became an urban street under local control, serving the prosperous communities of Marylebone and Mayfair. These had been rapidly filling up the hinterland behind both sides, which was thoroughly built up by the 1770s. Once the Tyburn executions came to an end in the 1780s, all social obstacles to the prosperity of the frontage between them disappeared.

In 1825 the Adams' robust granite paving of Oxford Street was replaced by 'macadam', the technique of surfacing roads with small unbound gravel, widely applied to major thoroughfares under the influence of James McAdam, surveyor to the Commissioners of Metropolis Roads – successors to the turnpike trustees and therefore responsible for Bayswater and Edgware Roads, though not Oxford Street itself. Macadam made for faster and less jolting journeys, but was far from maintenance-free. It seems that the Oxford Street resurfacing was done on the cheap, without hard core underneath. An astonishing 3–4,000 tons of fresh chippings allegedly had to be laid down each year in the early 1830s. Much of this gravel washed away into sewers, while as traffic intensified, residents and shopkeepers began to complain about noise, dust and filthy windows. A committee of enquiry found that 'the

inhabitants of Oxford street suffer much from the dust in summer and the dirt and slop in winter'.<sup>21</sup>

The Marylebone Vestry now found itself spending upwards of £4,000 per year in repairs to the roadway, little of which could be recouped from the other frontaging parishes. The issue came to a head between 1837 and 1844, when the Vestry was beset by 'almost interminable' controversies over the paving of Oxford Street.<sup>22</sup> William Kensett, prominent among the ruling Marylebone radicals, first brought forward a proposal from the contractor John Mowlem, a fellow-Marylebone resident, to repave the whole street in granite. Suspecting that this was an expensive 'job', Kensett's opponents promoted alternatives, in particular a form of wooden paving patented by David Stead and said to have been successful in St Petersburg and New York. After petitions and votes to and fro, the Vestry agreed in the Autumn of 1838 to host a trial at the eastern end of the street, from Soho (then Charles) Street to Tottenham Court Road, whereby short stretches of roadway were laid in fourteen different materials and techniques of bitumen, wood block or granite. This 'extraordinary and motley description of experiment' presented 'a most pleasing appearance of mosaic work', reported one tolerant newspaper.<sup>23</sup>

The bitumen soon proved a failure, leaving the stone paving in contention with wood block, which enjoyed powerful support among the Oxford Street shopkeepers, backed by a company that had taken over Stead's patents and set up an office in Vere Street. After further squabbling the Vestry agreed in 1841 to repave in wood from Wells Street to Vere Street, and after some delay that was carried out.<sup>24</sup> But in the long run the wood paving proved as slippery and dirty as stone surfaces, and less durable than macadam, to which the street seems eventually to have reverted. While early photographs suggest that macadam held sway up to the advent of motor vehicles, a painting of the 1880s hints that portions of the western end of the street, around the Selfridges site, were then paved in setts or blocks.

Experimentation was still going on in the early twentieth century, when parts of Oxford Street were repaved in blocks of red gum wood – unsatisfactorily.<sup>25</sup>

### *The rise of public transport*

The nub of the problem was horse manure, of which by one estimate of 1844 sixteen to eighteen tons accumulated on Oxford Street each week, cleared away by Vestry employees just twice weekly.<sup>26</sup> The main culprits were allegedly not commercial carts or private carriages, but the proliferating cabs and omnibuses. Both had profited from liberalized transport restrictions after 1829, when the Tyburn tollgate was removed and the first true omnibuses began plying the lucrative route from Paddington to the Bank. The earliest buses went by way of the New Road. But from 1832, when operators were permitted to pick up and set down at any point, an alternative service via Oxford Street was promoted. It instantly became subject to stiff competition. Within a year there was reportedly an omnibus every three minutes on both routes, carrying fifteen passengers each at a sixpenny fare.<sup>27</sup>

Though harder to chart, the growth in cab traffic coincided with that of the buses. Back in the 1780s Sophie von la Roche had alluded to rows of ‘beautifully lacquered coaches’, presumably hackney carriages, parked in the middle of the street, so there was time-honoured sanction for that arrangement. In 1846 some fuss was made about a ‘monster cabstand’, again centrally located, stretching all the way from Rathbone Place to Oxford Circus; opponents of its abolition argued that it would only be replaced by cabmen driving up and down the street plying for fares, making traffic worse.<sup>28</sup> A sketch of 1837 depicting Oxford Street on a Sunday, empty of bustle, shows a vestige of this cabstand opposite the Pantheon. Some reform or regulation must have followed, for later in the nineteenth century cabstands were generally confined to stretches of the street just east and west

of Oxford Circus. There, some bus routes terminated at taverns associated earlier with stops for mail and stagecoaches, and ticket shops sprang up.

So thriving a traffic can only have added to trade. Yet it came to be resented by the shopkeepers, who saw only the costs of wear and tear and feared that travellers along Oxford Street would bypass their establishments. In the same way, the early schemes for tramways and railways met strenuous opposition. Thus it was that the first serious proposal for a London tramline, of 1859–60, took in the western sector of the street but was defeated by Marylebone interests and had to restrict itself to a line from Marble Arch westwards along Bayswater Road.<sup>29</sup> In the event, no tramway ever penetrated Oxford Street.

Railways were likewise successfully resisted until the technology for electric traction and deep-level tubes came to maturity. The first project for an Oxford Street to City railway, in the shape of a shallow underground line, coincided with the boom of the early 1860s and the successful opening of the Metropolitan Railway. It was soon disposed of after local outcry in 1864. Arguments over trade apart, the shopkeepers had just suffered years of disruption by the laying of the Metropolitan Board of Works' middle-level sewer down the centre of the street, and would not countenance the further chaos and dirt inseparable from cut-and-cover construction and steam traction. But the debate made clear that Oxford Street along with Regent Street was by then recognized as the focus of shoppers from further afield than the immediate West End. The *Daily News* called the street 'a great market for almost every description of commodity sold in our shops', attracting consumers 'from the northern and western and other parts of London' – evidently by cab or bus. Even if customers increased, added the paper, 'as the goods they purchased would still continue to be delivered to them by tradesmen's carts and vans, the railway would not relieve the locality of that class of vehicular traffic'.<sup>30</sup>

Succeeding projects elicited similar reactions. When the Marble Arch, Regent Circus and City Subway came forward in 1884–5, it was noted as the fourth such scheme. The familiar orchestration of protesters once more helped dispose of it. Yet this railway differed from its predecessors; the subway was to be in parallel tunnels sixty feet below the surface carrying trains drawn by hydraulic power, and J. H. Greathead was the engineer involved.<sup>31</sup> Greathead became the key figure in designing the pioneer electric tube line, the City & South London Railway (approved 1884, opened 1890 and now part of the Northern Line), and then in the early initiatives for the Central London Railway. This last was the line that finally cracked the nut of Oxford Street – the Central Line of today.

The Central promotion was largely a reprise of the 1884–5 proposal, made plausible by growing confidence in deep tunnelling coupled with electric traction. All the same, it stumbled at first like its predecessors. John Lewis the shopkeeper led the Oxford Street protesters, claiming that the long-drawn-out works would spell ‘the annihilation of such concerns as Marshall and Snelgrove’s, Peter Robinson’s, and Parkins and Gotto’s businesses’, not to mention his own nascent store, while H. T. Boodle for the Grosvenor Estate insisted that ‘the railway was not wanted and would not pay’.<sup>32</sup> The Oxford Street shopkeepers and great freeholders (the Grosvenor, Portland and Portman Estates) united against the railway at the parliamentary hearings.<sup>33</sup>

The Bill was duly thrown out by the Lords in 1890, but it returned with some modifications and passed next year. Little then happened till 1894–5, when the company’s board was strengthened, financial backing secured from Sir Ernest Cassel and an Act for extension of time obtained. Site acquisition could now commence and a subsidiary, the Electric Traction Company, was created to build the railway.

The original plan broke the future Central Line into two separate main sections, from Bayswater (Queensway) to Old Quebec Street (Marble Arch) and hence to King William Street (Bank). Later the long latter section was

subdivided, so that Oxford Street became part of the tranche from Marble Arch to the Post Office (St Paul's). It was assigned in 1896 to the contractor Walter Scott (who had constructed much of the City & South London). Oxford Street was allotted no less than four stations, closer to one another than elsewhere on the railway in view of its commercial value – Marble Arch, Bond Street, Oxford Circus, and Tottenham Court Road.

There were significant difficulties only over Bond Street, a station which has always borne an inaccurate name. The original site had been planned for the top of Davies Street, well west of New Bond Street, and under the 1891 Act entailed some street improvements as well as negotiations with the sticky Boodle. From these the Electric Traction Company shied away, so the partners investigated an alternative on the opposite side of Oxford Street. In 1897 they reverted to Davies Street at the cost of some delay, so that when the line finally opened in July 1900 Bond Street Station was not quite complete, opening some months later.<sup>34</sup>

Greathead having died, the engineers for constructing the Central were Sir Benjamin Baker and Sir John Fowler, seconded by Greathead's former assistant Basil Mott. The station interiors were plain; the timber platforms, accessible only by lifts and staircases, were lined in white tiles and free from advertisements. The external elevations, single-storey at the outset but planned in American style for commercial superstructures to be added, were entrusted in 1897 to Harry Measures, a spirited freelance architect who relished the pliability of buff terracotta.<sup>35</sup> Only the Oxford Circus Station remains in recognizable form, at the east corner of Oxford and Argyll Streets. The slightly later superstructure housed the offices of the Central London Railway, strategically sited around the midpoint of the line. The Tottenham Court Road Station survived till 2009.

The Central Line was an instant success, dashing the fears of its adversaries. It was cheap – the original fare was famously 2d, hence the 'twopenny tube' – and fast, ferrying passengers from end to end in 25 minutes,

whereas buses took an hour and a quarter. It was soon supplemented by two arms of the so-called Yerkes combine, the Underground Electric Railways Company of London (UERL). The Bakerloo Line (originally Baker Street & Waterloo Railway) crossed the Central at Oxford Circus and opened its separate station there in March 1906. The Northern Line (originally Charing Cross, Euston & Hampstead Railway) followed suit at Tottenham Court Road in June 1907.

The stations of the separately owned companies were distinct, as may still be seen at Oxford Circus, where one of Leslie Green's famous glazed faience stations for the UERL lines faces Measures' lighter composition for the Central across opposite corners of Argyll Street. But they were linked for interchange purposes by subways, which also came in handy for pedestrians crossing the crowded streets. The original Northern Line station at Tottenham Court Road was entirely below ground, entered from stairwells on the north side of St Giles' Circus, so there was no chance of external display there. Connections between the lines were improved after the Central joined the UERL group in 1913; and in 1912-14 Oxford Circus, already the most crowded of the stations, was enlarged below ground, acquiring its first escalator.<sup>36</sup> The history and appearance of the four Oxford Street stations are further described in the chapters below.

### *The traffic problem*

The Central Line together with its feeders greatly boosted Oxford Street's prosperity, ushering in a heyday that lasted till the First World War and beyond. But far from solving its traffic problems, as had been hoped, they enhanced them. That became clear when Oxford Street was discussed before the Royal Commission on London Traffic in 1903. Hitherto, despite copious complaints about the nuisances caused by traffic, moving or stationary, there had been few about blockages. But by the turn of the century central London

was choking up with vehicles. In Oxford Street the focus was on its three pinchpoints, St Giles' Circus (not yet so named), Oxford Circus and Marble Arch. A census taken in June 1904 showed that during a twelve-hour daytime period 21,336 vehicles crossed the St Giles' Circus intersection, 24,228 at Oxford Circus and 29,320 at Marble Arch – the highest figure in London, just exceeding Hyde Park Corner and well above Bank and Piccadilly Circus, the notorious snarling points for London traffic. Along Oxford Street itself the figures were lower: 20,217 at Orchard Street, 17,738 at New Bond Street and 15,709 at Berners Street, confirming that the western section of the street was busier than its eastern counterpart.<sup>37</sup>

Buses that crossed or turned caused the most obstruction. Witnesses before the Commission agreed that there were too many buses. Indeed after a small drop following the Central Line's inauguration, their number had risen again, chiefly because short-stage riders preferred them to the tube. Motorization, by then in the wings, only exacerbated matters. During an era of cut-throat competition between the bus companies in 1913 another twelve-hour census revealed that a thousand more were running just west of Oxford Circus than the previous year, at the rate of one every  $12\frac{1}{2}$  seconds.<sup>38</sup> Only with the inter-war advent of monopoly in bus supply was this problem solved.

There were other obstructors besides buses, mainly parked ones. Deliveries to and from the big shops had by 1900 been relegated to back yards and side streets, lowering their tone, but vans outside the railway receiving offices at Oxford Circus and next to Harewood Gate (now Place) were complained of to the Commission. So were private carriages outside the department stores, chiefly Peter Robinson at Oxford Circus.<sup>39</sup> A police superintendent, Horace Bantick, was all for exiling these vehicles to Cavendish Square or beyond. But he had no powers to do so and was hotly opposed by the Peter Robinson management, who feared their grander clients would desert them if their carriages could not park for hours by the kerbside.

The same forces frustrated Bantick when he tried to raise the number of middle-of-the-road cabstands near the circus.<sup>40</sup> But in that case the Edwardian rise of the motor taxi soon decimated the carriage trade in favour of the nimbler type of vehicle.

Despite its gathering of data and opinions, the Royal Commission of 1903–5 was something of a white elephant; only a London-wide traffic authority with enhanced powers could have resolved all the issues, and that proved politically impossible. As regards Oxford Street, various witnesses made utopian suggestions for relief roads; one, the veteran ex-Lord Mayor Sir Henry Knight, even proposed a suspension bridge at Oxford Circus.<sup>41</sup> Few supported trams, but the London County Council's engineer, Maurice Fitzmaurice, did just toy with the hint of a four-track underground beneath the street with stopping and local lines, aping the New York subway.<sup>42</sup> In the event the LCC, the only authority with reasonably adequate powers, took up the Marble Arch congestion issue, which it sought to solve in 1908 by taking a north-eastern bite out of Hyde Park and isolating the arch itself amidst an asymmetrical island round which traffic haplessly swirled. Thus the former Tyburn junction remained, until yet more parkland was gobbled up and the present gyratory system substituted in 1961–2.<sup>43</sup>

In Oxford Street itself one small change occurred by way of new overhead lights in the middle of the carriageway, installed by Marylebone Borough Council in 1906. Hitherto the street lighting had been fairly haphazard, following the introduction of gas lamps in 1824.<sup>44</sup> Standards positioned sparingly along the pavements or, near the circus, in the centre of the road, had been liberally augmented outside the main shops and theatres, no doubt at the owners' expense. The new lights irked the LCC, which regarded them as an extra impediment to traffic, one member claiming that they had been deliberately sited to thwart any plans the superior body might have for an Oxford Street tramway. A correspondent condemned their 'incredibly contemptible design'. Nevertheless they stayed in place until

1963–4, when stronger street lamps were installed in the same central position.<sup>45</sup>

Traffic lights came to Oxford Street in 1931. After a study and recommendations from the London and Home Counties Traffic Advisory Committee, ‘control signals’ were set up at twenty points along the street, run on clockwork and co-ordinated by a director from a box at Oxford Circus. The original system, hailed as ‘the most ambitious that has yet been attempted in London’, was a simple block one: ‘when the main stream is moving, all the cross-street traffic will be stopped, and, similarly, when the main street is checked, all the intersecting streets will be open’. At the same time the Ministry of Transport, which had acquired powers to restrict traffic in some major thoroughfares under the London Traffic Act of 1924, designated various side streets as one-way streets, prohibited certain turns, banned slow-moving vehicles and imposed what for the time were draconian restrictions; these last came into force only after midday, betraying that serious shopping was an afternoon pursuit. All this was cautiously toted as experimental in the first instance, and the system’s early operations earned almost daily reports in *The Times*, as if it was of urgent national interest. Generally the verdict was that it worked well, though pedestrians caused official frustration by jaywalking instead of crossing at designated spots.<sup>46</sup> Once confirmed, the traffic lights persisted under manual control till 1954, when an electrically automated system took over, to the benefit of speeds.<sup>47</sup>

Authorities and shopkeepers during the inter-war years tended to welcome private cars in and around Oxford Street; the question was how to manage them, especially where they were to park. Some of the earliest multi-storey car parks in London had appeared in Soho during the Edwardian years. They were not directly connected with the big stores, but shoppers must have made use of them. In the 1920s a rash of bigger car parks was built, some again in Soho, others further west and linked in part with the shops. Selfridges reserved space at Macy’s Garage in Balderton Street (1925–6), but

that soon proved inadequate. In the 1930s Marylebone Borough Council more than once asked the store to cater for the cars of customers littering the streets to its north, but nothing adequate was done until Selfridges built its own car park in 1957. Debenham & Freebody and Marshall & Snelgrove, then under combined ownership, opened a joint car park behind the former's Wigmore Street premises in 1925. That was eventually replaced by Debenhams' jagged multi-storey car park at the bottom of Welbeck Street (1970-1). The final efforts to accommodate rather than discourage shoppers' off-street parking were the big underground garages of the 1960s under Cavendish Square and Park Lane.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, on-street parking had been restricted by the introduction of meters with allotted bays along Oxford Street and the surrounding area in 1958-9. Generally, the big stores welcomed these changes. Bourne & Hollingsworth, for instance, testified at an enquiry into a projected new car park in Wells Street that the operations of their loading bays and garages had been hampered by indiscriminate parking.<sup>49</sup>

Traffic speeds turned into a mania of the early 1960s, when Oxford Street became a focus for London planners and transport boffins. The starting point was pre-planning for the Victoria Line, which was to pass through Oxford Circus and threatened to increase above-ground congestion at a junction by now estimated to carry 44,000 vehicles per day. In 1960 Ernest Marples, the gung-ho Minister of Transport, offered the LCC a grant to widen Oxford Street for the short distance from the circus to Holles Street.<sup>50</sup> Next year Marples' London Traffic Management Unit brought forward a plan for one-way working, with Oxford Street carrying traffic east-west, while Wigmore and Upper Brook Streets were to bear the brunt for the return direction. The frontaging boroughs along with the shopkeepers, by now formally organized into an Oxford Street Association, helped put pay to that.<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile architect-planners too were beavering away. In March 1961 D. Rigby Childs of the pressure group SPUR (Society for the Promotion of

Urban Renewal) unveiled before the RIBA a scheme for a so-called 'High Oxford Street', in other words decking over the street at a cost of some £12 million. The deck, eighteen feet above ground, was to be supported by a structure in the centre of the road and to carry a travelator. In discussion, some experts thought the deck should roof the road over completely if it were to be contemplated at all. It was left to Marylebone's Borough Surveyor to inject sense into the proceedings: 'He condemned the attitude of many architects in regarding the street as a potential building site and pointed out that, as well as being a shopping area, Oxford Street was an important east-west class 1 road'.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless the SPUR proposals for 'High Oxford Street' found an echo in the influential voice of Colin Buchanan, adviser to Marples and author of the forthcoming *Traffic in Towns*, who in a lecture that autumn pronounced Oxford Street 'the most uncivilized street in Europe' and claimed that the opportunity to reshape it 'has largely been missed'.<sup>53</sup>

Buchanan was far from alone in viewing post-war Oxford Street as a disgrace requiring radical solutions, as opposed to Regent Street, where only palliatives seemed needed after its rebuilding in the 1920s. The Greater London Development Plan designated Oxford Street as a 'major problem area'. The consensus in the early 1970s was that only 'vertical separation' could reconcile its function as a major traffic artery with the future of commerce. Chapman Taylor Partners' plan of 1971 for the Grosvenor Estate, freeholders along the western end of the south frontage, proposed turning that whole stretch into a longitudinal mall, formed of deep shops with an indoor street running along behind and pedestrian bridges crossing the road.<sup>54</sup> The Greater London Council toyed in 1973 with an American system of lightweight minicars conveyed along an air cushion on an overhead track.<sup>55</sup> In the next decade the architect Bryan Avery reworked the flyover idea for Oxford Circus, combined with a geodesic dome for pedestrians – a project torn to pieces in *The Times* by the journalist Bernard Levin. Avery dusted off

and republicized his scheme in 2016, when pedestrianization of the street was on the political agenda.<sup>56</sup>

All these were schemes for speeding up movement, vehicular or pedestrian. More practicable were the counter-proposals for curbing traffic or slowing it down. The point of departure was a study of 1971 showing that only 16% of Oxford Street's vehicles used the street as a thoroughfare and highlighting a shocking level of injuries reported from encounters between milling pedestrians and packed traffic. To coincide with the Christmas crush that year, an Oxford Street Action Committee organized a demonstration calling for a ban on cars and resulting in 22 arrests. The young journalist Simon Jenkins weighed in to support pedestrianization: 'This street is like some huge dinosaur, surviving from the ice age of urban planning.' But where and how to divert the traffic? Jenkins simply prescribed the back streets.<sup>57</sup>

It was down to the Greater London Council, wielding transport powers which its predecessor the LCC had lacked, to make progress. The authority duly brought forward a scheme for confining the street to buses and taxis during the working day. Pushed through against opposition from Westminster City Council and the Mayfair Association, it was inaugurated between Portman Street and Oxford Circus (November 1972); Oxford Circus to Tottenham Court Road was added later (March 1974). Some tentative landscaping accompanied the scheme for the benefit of pedestrians: shrubs, small trees in tubs, and benches – some of these last even sited lengthways along the centre of the roadway.<sup>58</sup>

The GLC's scheme satisfied few people at the outset. The retailers had qualms about its commercial effects, the residents of the hinterland were disgruntled, while the professional planners regarded it as half-baked compared with the total pedestrianization embraced by some Scandinavian urban high streets.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless the strategy worked well enough, and has endured for over forty years since. During that period it has seen countless

adjustments, notably the widening of the pavements at the expense of the carriageway.

Since the GLC's demise in 1986 this approach has been supported by Westminster City Council, in whom the administration of the street is now vested. It has had its drawbacks. The number of traffic incidents and injuries remains high, and the street has become more of an aesthetic mess than ever on account of intrusive signs, street furniture and changing fashions in hard landscaping, along with the daily accumulating detritus of the consumer society, here caught in the very act of acquisition – and, too often, of profligate disposal. Latterly there has been outcry about the high levels of air pollution in Oxford Street.

A sign that the shopper or mere walker is nowadays viewed as dominant came in 2009, when a diagonal or 'scramble' crossing for pedestrians was installed at Oxford Circus, an installation inspired by the Shibuya crossing in Tokyo (though the idea goes back to earlier American arrangements). In 2018 a plan for total pedestrianization of the street sponsored by the Mayor of London and Transport for London was rejected by Westminster Council, following a spate of objections from local businesses and residents. Yet in the strategy document for the street issued afterwards by the Council, one of the principles affirmed was to 'prioritise walking as the main form of movement within and across the district'. Somehow, this had to be made compatible with other principles, such as the maintenance of regular bus services along the street, and the promise to 'embrace Oxford Street's role as an important transport corridor for the West End'.<sup>60</sup>

## The Shops

### *Shops and businesses, 1720–1830*

The glamour of shopping in Oxford Street comes over first and best in a letter home to Germany from the novelist and travel-writer Sophie von la Roche, who visited London in 1786. Her encomium has often been cited, but bears repeating in full:

We strolled up and down lovely Oxford Street this evening, for some goods look more attractive by artificial light. Just imagine, dear children, a street taking half an hour from end to end, with double rows of brightly shining lamps, in the middle of which stands an equally long row of beautifully lacquered coaches, and on each side of these there is room for two coaches to pass one another; and the pavement, inlaid with flagstones, can stand six people deep and allows one to gaze at the splendidly lit shop fronts in comfort. First one passes a watchmaker's, then a silk or fan store, now a silversmith's, a china or glass shop. The spirit booths are particularly tempting, for the English are in any case fond of strong drink. Here crystal flasks of every shape and form are exhibited: each one has a light behind it which makes all the different coloured spirits sparkle. Just as alluring are the confectioners and fruiterers where, behind the handsome glass windows, pyramids of pineapples, figs, grapes, oranges, and all manner of fruits are on show. We enquired the price of a fine pineapple, and did not think it too dear at 6s., or 3fl. Most of all we admired a stall with Argand and other lamps, situated in a corner-house, and forming a really dazzling spectacle; every variety of lamp, crystal, lacquer and metal ones, silver and brass in every possible shade; large and small lamps arranged so artistically and so beautifully lit, that each one was visible as in broad daylight. There were reflecting lamps inside, which intensified the glare to such an extent that my eye could scarce stand it a moment: large pewter oil-vessels, gleaming like silver, were ranged there, and oil of every description, so that the lamp and the oil can be bought and taken home together if one likes, the oil in a beautiful glass flask, and the wick, too, in a dainty box. The highest lord and humble labourer may purchase here lamps of immense beauty and price or at a very reasonable figure, and both receive equally rapid and courteous attention. I stayed long

enough to notice this, and was pleased with a system which supplied the common need – light – in this spot, whether for guineas or for pence, so efficiently.

Up to eleven o'clock at night there are as many people along this street as at Frankfurt during the fair, not to mention the eternal stream of coaches. The arrangement of the shops in good perspective, with their adjoining living room, makes a very pleasant sight. For right through the excellently illuminated shop one can see many a charming family-scene enacted: some are still at work, others drinking tea, a third party is entertaining a friendly visitor; in a fourth parents are joking and playing with children. Such a series of tableaux of domestic and busy life is hardly to be met within an hour as I witnessed here. How rapidly I reviewed in the course of this evening countless daily tasks of countless busy folk. How heartily I desired that every artist craftsman and worker who had contributed to the production of this mass of works of art might enjoy a quiet supper and find new vigour in refreshing sleep.<sup>61</sup>

The spirit and keen observation of this passage speak for themselves, but some commentary may be helpful. The author was impressed by Oxford Street's shops – and London's shops altogether – because they looked new, especially to a foreign visitor. Before 1725 most shops were either just in the front rooms of ordinary houses without any external display of goods, or open-fronted, with wooden shutters to close them off at night. Glazed fronts spread along major shopping streets like Cheapside in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. But they were still rare enough for Southey to remark that 'glass windows were seldom used in shops before the present reign [1760]'.<sup>62</sup> Nor had evening shopping become fashionable before improvements in the quality and safety of oil lamps in the second half of the century, notably by Argand lamps, new when remarked on in 1786.

In Oxford Street, developed mostly from the 1720s onwards, many houses were devoted to trade and manufacture from the outset. Few at first would have possessed special shop fronts; while open basement areas, standard along major streets, would have left customers at a distance from any objects in the windows. So the craze for display was still fresh when Sophie

von la Roche visited London. Nor, despite her enthusiasm, was it yet by any means universal. As late as 1815 the Shepherd-Ackermann view of Oxford Street, admittedly illustrating the stretch west of Stratford Place where many houses were still purely domestic, shows few shop fronts.

The beginnings of Oxford Street as a smart place to shop and saunter coincided with the resurfacing of 1770 and the creation of improved pavements. That was precisely when the Pantheon was planned and opened (1769–72) as a place of resort. Hitherto there had been plenty of tradesmen selling the necessities of life along both sides of the frontage, intermingled with pubs, smithies and stables or building yards, but few specialized, high-class shops. Among the first was Gillows the famous Lancaster-based upholsterers, who set up their London branch west of Duke Street on the future Selfridges site in 1769. Theirs however was not primarily a shop but an artisan manufactory combined with an estate agent's business, well placed to serve the building development then still in spate around the far west end of the street. Most of the shops admired by Sophie von la Roche will have lain further east, on longer-established sites.

That is corroborated by a directory of 1784, which lists 92 Oxford Street firms – far from a complete tally, but some guide to the smarter enterprises.<sup>63</sup> Of these only about a third were located west of the future Oxford Circus, and only a quarter were on the south side, confirming wisdom that north-side property and shops have always been the more valuable. Two-thirds of the entries represent firms along that side between Tottenham Court Road and Old Cavendish Street, quite evenly spread out.

As to the types of trades, though Sophie von la Roche is eloquent on their variety, she is silent on Oxford Street's predominant industry from that day to this – clothing. Over a third of the 92 retailers listed in 1784 belonged to the garment trade. Specialisms in such business have always been overlapping, so the fact that thirteen concerns were listed as linen drapers, eleven as hatters, hosiers and/or glovers, and six as haberdashers can only be indicative. Next in

number came three mercers, one furrier (soon to be a strong Oxford Street trade) and one lace merchant. Four of the drapers were listed as in partnerships, not yet so common at this date. The furrier too was a partnership, Farmer & Taylor, dealers also in artificial flowers and ostrich feathers, who made their Oxford Street *début* in 1779.

Among other businesses were eight upholsterers or cabinet-makers, four jewellers or goldsmiths, four booksellers (to which Pendred's directory of 1785 adds three more),<sup>64</sup> three ironmongers, three oil and colourmen and three firms in the china trade, severally described as chinaman, Staffordshire warehouseman or 'pot-seller'. The pot-seller was George Phillips, founder of the well-known Phillips china business; his shop was originally on the future John Lewis site, but he soon transferred to an address close to the Pantheon. Another long-lasting china merchant, William Mortlock, opened further west near Park Street around 1780. Mortlocks, Phillips and Gillows apart, none of the tradesmen of 1784 carried on far into the next century under their original name, for then as now most shopkeeping was ephemeral. On the other hand many shops persisted in the same trade under fresh names. Farmer & Taylor, for instance, were superseded at 90 (later 190)<sup>1</sup> Oxford Street around 1804 by the Poland firm of furriers, who remained there until about 1922.

Few perhaps of these businesses were brand-new when they opened in Oxford Street. The high cost of rents meant that shops were often taken by expanding tradesmen who had started elsewhere and went on to try their fortunes at a better address. Farmer & Taylor had been previously in Dean Street, Soho; Nicholays, smartest of the Oxford Street furriers, transferred from Covent Garden around 1804. Hugh Oxenham, patentee of the portable mangle, started out in Carnaby Market, then in the 1780s moved to an Oxford Street address near the Pantheon where his family gradually diversified the business. Yet another example was George Smart senior, father of the well-

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<sup>1</sup> Unless clearly otherwise indicated, street numbers in the text refer to the present numbering, in force since 1880.

known musician Sir George Smart. This music publisher and instrument-maker started out as a shop assistant in New Bond Street and the Strand before opening on his own account on the corner of Conduit Street and Savile Row, then migrating in 1774 to 331 (old number) Oxford Street next to Argyll Street. Weekly concerts were held at Smart's shop in the 1780s.<sup>65</sup>

For want of plans or pictures, it is hard to get an accurate sense of the size or layout of these early Oxford Street shops. Combining Sophie von la Roche's description with the evidence of directories and ratebooks, it appears that though by the 1780s many had sprouted glass shop fronts and lamp-lit interiors, most were still only one house wide and one room deep. A few may already have had first-floor showrooms. Manufacture, finishing and storage were relegated to back rooms, basements, cellars and yards. Upstairs premises might be sublet to separate small artisans or occupied by the proprietor, with children, shop assistants and servants packed into cramped attic dormitories. Even where there were shops and shop fronts, the upper storeys often remained domestic and separately let out. In 1790 the Russian writer Nikolai Karamzin rented the second floor of an Oxford Street house near Cavendish Square occupied by three sisters – 'One man with three women! How terrifying – or enjoyable!' The landlady, Jenny, seems to have taken a shine to the young Russian: 'At 8 o'clock in the morning she brings me tea and biscuits, and talks with me about the novels of Fielding and Richardson'.<sup>66</sup>

The earliest precise portrayal of an Oxford Street shop is a fetching watercolour of the ladies' shoemaker Edward Pattison's establishment, probably in the 1820s when it occupied No. 129 (later 268) in the block between John Prince's and Holles Streets (*Frontispiece*). The scene is no doubt idealized. The single-room shop is depicted looking inwards, with glass-fronted showcases against the walls and no counters. The floor is boarded but there is a central carpet, on which the pretty customer is enthroned, attended by her mother and a seated young man, all fashionably dressed. Two aproned boys help her try on shoes, watched by a standing female assistant. These six

characters are sufficient to fill the space. Behind the opaque glass door to the rear we may imagine the workshop, where Pattison and his men make the shoes.

Glimpses of working places are even rarer than of retailing spaces, but by luck two views survive of Oxford Street workshops from the first half of the nineteenth century. One is an 1811 drawing by Schnebellie of Richard George's basket workshop at No. 314 (later 287). This shows a vaulted cellar, probably under the pavement, with light filtering in from above at the back. Since basketweaving was not intricate work, the poor level of illumination was no doubt deemed acceptable. The other image dates from 1841. It is a touchingly exact record by the well-known painter, W. H. ('Bird's Nest') Hunt, of the laboratory at the back of the chemist's, John Bell, at No. 338 (later 225). Once again makeshift arrangements seem to obtain for such dangerous operations, and the lighting is from above. Here we even know the names of the apothecary depicted, John Simmonds, and his apprentice William.

Rear premises were the natural first place for extending shops. Many had evidently already been annexed by the 1780s. A sketch of William Holland's print shop at No. 50 (later 106), probably in 1794, shows what must be a back room with canted sides. No windows are visible, so the room most likely was toplit, a standard device from the mid eighteenth century, implying a single-storey back extension with poor possibilities for side-lighting. The technique developed imperceptibly into the toplit gallery or studio back extension, often associated with artists but just as valid and commoner for the show of shop goods requiring gradations of natural lighting. Control of lighting mattered as much as clarity, especially in the dress trades, whose fragile products would have been kept in boxes or under blinds and displayed for only short periods. Therefore the wares most featured in early Oxford Street shop windows will have been items like jewellery, confectionery, cutlery, glass, ceramics or the fancy pots and carboys favoured by chemists and medicine warehouses.

The term 'warehouse' first gained currency among retailers in the late eighteenth century. A West End warehouse, as opposed to one in the City (where the sense of a wholesaler usually obtained), seems to have meant a shop with a range of stock not made on the premises. The term was first common among upholsterers selling furnishing fabrics, so the two Oxford Street 'warehousemen' listed in the 1784 directory may have belonged to that trade. Soon there were drapery warehouses and medicine warehouses too, and in early nineteenth-century Oxford Street the name was applied wantonly to shops specializing in bonnets, hosiery, lace, linen, shawls, mourning attire, artificial flowers, furniture, stoves, patent medicines, stationery and tea. The implication is of a sizeable shop, perhaps with several 'departments' and spreading over more than one address.

As opposed to these 'warehouses', many Oxford Street businesses were concerned with *in situ* making and manufacturing, often on an industrial scale. The largest such firms, or at least those requiring most space, were the coachmakers, whose antecedents go back to the days when the street was an arterial road. Some of the biggest grew up on the south side, for instance Laurie & Marner (founded in 1801) who by the middle of the nineteenth century boasted large premises east of South Molton Street, and the long-lasting Thrupp & Maberly at No. 269 (later 425), the product of a merger between the businesses of Joseph Thrupp of George (later Balderton) Street just off the Oxford Street frontage and a Welbeck Street concern. The stretch of the street around Harewood Place enjoyed a concentration of businesses which, as makers as much as sellers, needed ample back premises. These included the wallpaper maker J. Duppa (established here about 1805), later Duppa, Slodden & Collins and later again Cowtan & Co.; and the gunsmith James Purdey, who took over the premises of his equally distinguished predecessor and master 'Joe' Manton after the latter went bankrupt in 1826. Another frontage where manufacturing firms predominated was the north side between Perry's Place and Newman Street. Here ironmongers and

upholsterers were to be found in force, reliant on a warren of workshops in alleys and yards behind.

Between these specialist shops the outlets for day-to-day trade should not be forgotten, the victuallers, greengrocers, butchers, cheesemongers and so forth, dotted on smaller sites and along humbler stretches of the street, such as the southern side towards the Tottenham Court Road end. Many were too small to get into the directories, while the street's itinerant hawkers would never have featured at all. Nor were goods alone for sale. The prostitutes of Georgian Oxford Street have their memorial in Ann, the fifteen-year old waif whom Thomas De Quincey befriended in his vagabond, opium-eating days. She vanished without trace, leaving the author to search often but vainly for her at their appointed rendezvous, a corner of Oxford Street, 'stony-hearted stepmother! thou that listenest to the sighs of orphans, and drinkest the tears of children'.<sup>67</sup>

Before the Victorian period Oxford Street's shops would have been known to their customers mainly by word of mouth, since advertising was limited. The typical newspaper notice of the 1790s was for patent medicines; a pill or other remedy was the object puffed, with prolix claims attached followed by a list of outlets in small print. But Bacon's Patent Medicine Warehouse at No. 150 (old numbering) advertised in its own right, with a list of products carried, as did R. Ward, peruke-maker, at No. 33 (old numbering). Silkmen and drapers began to insert occasional notices for ladies in the papers around 1800, to broadcast and itemize consignments of shawls or linens newly received from India.

After the Napoleonic Wars, as competition intensified, advertisements became more boastful but no less snobbish. Richardsons the silk merchants, displaced and then rehoused at Oxford Circus by the Nash improvements, claimed that their 1820 sale of remnants had been so popular that 'equipages' of customers trailed round the circus and some way along Oxford Street.

Nicholays the furriers took a subtler approach, undertaking from 1822 to store the furs of the nobility and gentry safe from moth when they left town for the summer.<sup>68</sup> But as yet the majority of drapers and other shopkeepers were advertising seldom if at all.

*Shops and bazaars, 1830–1870*

The 1830s saw a step change in Oxford Street's shops. They had now to face competition from Regent Street, where larger emporia in up-to-date premises with fully glazed shopfronts became the norm. Oxford Street never quite recovered its class, and has usually been deemed inferior to Regent Street from that day to this. Yet the smarter street's proximity was no disadvantage, and doubtless boosted trade in the sectors closest to Oxford Circus. Here it was that bigger drapery and garment establishments started to emerge and cluster, some the seeds of future department stores. Several of the new shopkeepers originated from Yorkshire, implying links with the wholesale textile trades. Among them were James Marshall of the future Marshall & Snelgrove, and Peter Robinson, both of whom started up around 1833. Joseph Sowerby, whom the draper John Williams took into partnership around 1836, was also a Yorkshireman.

The short-lived Williams & Sowerby, at the corner of Oxford and Wells Streets, exemplified the new entrepreneurial trends. After Sowerby joined they began to advertise aggressively, claiming to have established 'a colony in this hitherto unfashionable *quartier*' – in other words, well east of Oxford Circus. They puffed a new patent fabric from Paris, and were more than once accused of sharp selling practices. In 1843 they employed a first-rate commercial architect, David Mocatta, to add a fancy silk room at the back of their premises. The business ultimately covered three addresses in Oxford Street and three in Wells Street, strung together in the usual *ad hoc* way. Internally open space was maximized by means of iron columns supporting upper

storeys, and toplighting where that could be obtained – perhaps also Mocatta’s work. In due course Sowerby departed under a shade, and in 1857 Williams sold out to another firm. The premises survived till about 1900.

Alongside the boom in the dress trades came the rise of the covered bazaar for small traders, typically tucked into former yard or stable spaces behind a humdrum entry from the frontage. The Oxford Street hinterland was rich in bazaars, often deemed the forbears of the department stores.<sup>69</sup> Deriving from Parisian prototypes, the earliest examples adapted existing structures, like the Soho Bazaar, opened in 1816 behind the west side of Soho Square. Thomas Hamlet’s Royal Bazaar of 1827–8 followed on, housed in converted coachmaker’s premises in the Oxford Street block between Wells and Winsley Streets. This haphazard affair included a diorama and small art gallery as well as stalls selling ‘*bijouterie* and nic-nacs’. After suffering from a fire it was renamed the Queen’s Bazaar. But it could not make ends meet once the Pantheon on the opposite side of the road was transformed into a much more spacious bazaar in 1834. In a further conversion, essentially a rebuilding, the Queen’s Bazaar became the Princess’s Theatre. Following the closure of the Pantheon in 1814, this was the street’s first renewed advance into the entertainment industry – to assume growing importance along the eastern half in Victorian times and beyond.

For an architecturally sophisticated response to the bazaar craze Oxford Street had to await the London Crystal Palace Bazaar of 1858, masterminded by the brilliant Owen Jones. Jones had shown how to make iron and glass architecture look sparkling and colourful at the Sydenham Crystal Palace. Commercial commissions followed, notably his glittering glass showroom for F. & C. Osler at 44–45 (later 100–102) Oxford Street (1859). The Crystal Palace Bazaar, meant to be bigger and better, lay further west, squeezed by Jones on to an L-shaped site behind Oxford Circus. It was admired for its architecture but did not pay, and ended up taken into the back premises of Peter Robinson’s department store before biting the dust in the early 1920s. A

further local contribution to the genre, the Corinthian Bazaar, opened in Argyll Street in 1867 but did not last long before it was converted into what is now the London Palladium. The heyday of the West End bazaar was over by then. There was one final venture, Oxford Circus Avenue just east of Argyll Street (1886). But that was an arcade rather than a bazaar, comprising a cluster of lowly shops and offices again crammed on to the elongated site of a yard.

### *The department stores*

It is well established that the great nineteenth-century international exhibitions boosted consumption and influenced the style of metropolitan shops.

Certainly the Great Exhibition of 1851 gave Oxford Street a fillip; some of its shopkeepers were numbered among the exhibitors, while others made special preparations for the extra trade anticipated. That year, for instance, Marshall & Snelgrove opened their Royal British Warehouse – the first portion of their shop, previously in Vere Street, to acquire an Oxford Street frontage.

Marshall & Snelgrove has a good claim to qualify as the street's first department store. As a drapery concern it fits the usual pattern of growth for such stores, accumulating premises piecemeal until by the 1870s it had gobbled up most of the deep block between Vere Street and Marylebone Lane. But it also had some atypical features. Under John Snelgrove's prudent direction, the firm never diversified beyond the high-class drapery and dressmaking trades, sufficient then to create a great retailing enterprise. And unlike its Victorian rivals, it always had provincial branches in Yorkshire, firmly controlled from London.

Marshall & Snelgrove rebuilt much of their store in the 1870s to designs by Horace Jones and Octavius Hansard, but not to very impressive effect. Perhaps because they held their premises on a series of short leases, the partners seem not to have been specially interested in architecture; their new Second Empire fronts owed much to the insistence of the ground landlord, the

Portland Estate. Behind these lay a rabbit warren of departments, high-ceilinged at the front for better lighting, toplit in the single-storey centre. Retailing was confined to ground level. Wholesaling and storage occupied the first floor, above which came rooms for 250 employees (in 1878). Though ironwork was embedded in its structure, the rebuilding came just too soon to profit from the rationalized type of shop planning and construction first exemplified in the Bon Marché in Paris, with its gridded layout and plunging light wells. The drawbacks of its plan may have contributed to Marshall & Snelgrove's twentieth-century decline.

Among its competitors the closest parallel is Peter Robinson, a firm which grew up piecemeal on sites around Oxford Circus. The original shop lay on the north side of the street just east of the circus. After the usual incremental expansions, in the 1860s it acquired a rival silk mercer's concern in Regent Street just south of the circus. Thereafter the store was in two separate parts, extending to three when 204–212 Oxford Street beyond Great Portland Street were annexed and rebuilt in 1890–1. Eventually Peter Robinson depots, finishing shops and dormitories sprawled all over the back streets in the vicinity. After the First World War the store was unified and rebuilt so as to take up the whole block north-east of Oxford Circus – never however to recapture its Victorian glory days. Like Marshall & Snelgrove, Peter Robinson was family-owned until the 1890s, when flotations as public companies became the norm in order to supply the big stores with the capital they needed for further growth.

Oxford Street's other great department stores mostly followed on similar lines, as drapery businesses that started small, then gradually engulfed everything around. Among them were John Lewis (founded 1864) and D. H. Evans (1879), near-neighbours on the eligible stretch of the north side between Marshall & Snelgrove and the circus. Later and out on its own further east came Bourne & Hollingsworth, whose partners transferred in 1902 from a millinery shop in Westbourne Grove into a new-built development between

Wells and Berners Streets, then ate up the rest of the block like wildfire. Other drapery establishments, now forgotten, almost made the grade only to fall by the wayside. Among them were T. J. Harries & Co. at Nos 252–266 (c.1885–1928) and T. Lloyd & Co. at Nos 428–454 (1892–1913). Both were founded by dynamic Welsh drapers who died in mid-career; their heirs could not maintain the momentum and sold out, the former to John Lewis, the latter to Selfridges.

Two further businesses in other lines of trade came close to department-store size and status. Jackson & Graham the furniture makers and upholsterers accumulated most of the Oxford Street frontage between Perry's Place and Newman Street from 1836 onwards. In the 1870s they claimed to employ a workforce of between 600 and 1,000 depending on the season, and toyed with opening a drapery department. But the firm overreached itself and went bankrupt in 1882. The other such enterprise was the stationery firm of Parkins & Gotto. This started up in Hanway Street during the 1840s before extending round the corner to five Oxford Street addresses, slung together in the usual way. Surviving plans reveal yet another warren of pokey spaces, but one large 'gallery' and an upper-floor 'country department' for mail order. Never a high-class concern, Parkins & Gotto went into decline after the reigning Gotto died in 1894.

Remarkably, the premises of every one of these large businesses lay on the north side of the street. Though it housed many reputable firms, the south side of Oxford Street never enjoyed the same growth in scale, and it is pertinent to ask why. Sometimes the answer has been given in terms of natural lighting; north-side shops enjoy stronger light on their south-facing fronts. That can hardly have been decisive, since old summer-time photographs show that shop windows were invariably shaded by blinds and, later, by permanent canopies or valances (Bourne & Hollingsworth's of 1935 was London's first). More plausibly, the north side was better supplied with back streets which could function as service roads, at growing cost to their own identities, as with

Eastcastle Street and Henrietta Place, or even their existence, in the case of Somerset Street, obliterated by Selfridges. That argument also can be pressed too far. It may be wiser to ascribe the imbalance to chance, as John Spedan Lewis did in a letter to C. H. Reilly:

My father constantly maintained that the sunny side of a street was very far better for traders than the shady side. Nevertheless Harrod's made on the shady side one of the biggest businesses in the world. In Oxford Street traders have naturally preferred the sunny side and it happens that no very successful enterprise has been created upon the opposite. But I suspect that, if two or three of the managements, that made big business upon the north side of Oxford Street, had happened to start upon the south, their disadvantage would not have been by any means crushing. At all events, when my father by letting slip in past years opportunities to enlarge his floor-space greatly and by endeavouring to carry in his limited floor-space so many departments made the most successful of them the piece goods, and particularly the silks intolerably over-crowded, there arose on the opposite side of Oxford Street a new venture that called itself The Silk Shop. That became quickly very busy indeed and this seems to me to confirm my suspicion that a few well-managed enterprises on the south side of Oxford Street would soon support the rental value very substantially.<sup>70</sup>

By the time of this letter, several large stores had in fact recently sprung up on the south side: Drages (1930), Littlewoods (1937), and the 'Pantheon' Marks & Spencer (1938), all east of the circus, and Woolworth (1925) and C & A Modes to its west (1938). Of these only Marks & Spencer survives, perhaps confirming the shrewdness of the senior Lewis's views.

John Lewis, today the sole survivor in name from Oxford Street's great Victorian stores, was never a typical undertaking. Its Somerset-born founder advanced his business cautiously, specializing in silks and gradually building the shop up in cramped premises, as his son describes above. Because he never advertised, his store enjoyed less public notice than its rivals. That did nothing to hold back its growth. There was a streak both of the autocrat and of the rebel in Lewis, who carried over the radicalism of an earlier generation of Marylebone shopkeepers to the end of the century and beyond. He was a

harsh employer and miserly manager. Yet when in the late 1890s he employed T. E. Collcutt to rebuild his Oxford Street front, incorporating one of the first high-level department store tearooms, he was proud of it, according to his son.

Lewis's great moment came when he took on the might and majesty of his landlords, the Howard de Walden (previously the Portland) Estate, in a long-running imbroglio that lasted until 1913. That involved the wily old shopkeeper in first serving a short prison sentence for contempt of court and then defending a libel action for putting up defamatory posters in his windows. Though he lost the action, he secured what he most wanted, the full beneficial ownership of his premises – a turning point in the history of London commercial tenure. He finally ceded control in the late 1920s to his equally canny but quite different son, John Spedan Lewis, who promptly introduced the partnership policy for which the store continues to be well known today.

The Edwardian years, acme of Oxford Street's prosperity, saw the creation of three new department stores. Two, Bourne & Hollingsworth and Waring & Gillow, lay in the eastern sector of the street, which after years lagging behind the booming western sector now enjoyed a renaissance. The third and most celebrated, Selfridges, sited towards the western end at the corner of Duke Street, likewise extended the bounds of fashionable shopping.

Oxford Street's pre-eminent landmarks, Waring & Gillow and Selfridges, stand for a fresh twentieth-century scale of ambition and consumption. Their origins were linked. Waring & Gillow was the brainchild of the brashly entrepreneurial Samuel Waring junior, heir to a Liverpool furnishings business. Waring came to London in 1893, taking premises at 181 Oxford Street on the south side and making rapid headway with furnishing contracts for the hotel trade. In 1897 he bought up Gillow & Company, based at the other end of the street; and in 1901 he laid plans for a vast new store which was to amalgamate all his enterprises opposite his headquarters, eleven storeys high and taking up the whole block between Winsley and Great Titchfield Streets. Though the scheme had to be scaled back, Waring & Gillow

as built in 1904–6 to designs by R. Frank Atkinson was still London's most ambitious store to date. Its plan was unique; part inflated showroom and part shop, it for the first time invited public access to almost all the upper floors. The fronts were in a blown-up version of Wren's Hampton Court style, all scarlet brick and Portland stone dressings enriched with carving, while the window displays took the form of a semi-internal street. Since Waring was a skilled self-publicist, his creation opened to unprecedented notice. Crowds clamoured at the doors, if only to gape, for the one thing Waring & Gillow did not sell was clothing – that staple of Oxford Street consumerism.

Waring however had taken risks, and by 1910 his great store fell into receivership. Though it recovered and continued trading till 1973, it never regained its early aplomb; all that is left of it today are some façades hiding an office block. It was in any case quickly outshone by Selfridges at the farther end of Oxford Street, opened in 1909. The myth of Selfridges is that it was started alone by Harry Gordon Selfridge, arriving in London on his own in search of an outlet for the brilliant salesmanship he had learnt when managing the Marshall Field store in Chicago. But it appears to have been Waring who first sought Selfridge out, and took him on as an equal partner for a second store, based in part on the old Gillows site – still in the former's possession. Selfridge & Waring Ltd was the original name of the company, founded in 1906, and Waring played a full part in negotiating permissions for the store until his financial vulnerability forced him to resign eighteen months later. Though it was Selfridge who chose the celebrated American firm of D. H. Burnham & Co., familiar to him from Marshall Field, as architects for the new store, Waring's protégé, Frank Atkinson, was brought in to revise plans so as to fit them to the LCC's fire regulations.

Nevertheless once Selfridge was in the driving seat he made the store his own. It was revolutionary in several ways. It employed a rational, gridded plan, familiar in London from warehouse buildings but seldom exploited hitherto by British retailers. It took up American advances in metal-framed

structures and fast-track construction, and it may have been planned from the start for enlargement westwards; the original portion opened in 1909 was only a third of the final length of frontage, stretching all the way from Duke Street to Orchard Street. These were technical matters. What the public saw was a classical front of unprecedented audacity and swagger, surpassing not just Waring & Gillow but even the department stores of America, not to mention London's public and bank buildings. At a time of international emulation and exchange in urban architecture, Selfridge and his architects demonstrated that retailing was a pursuit deserving the highest dignity. That is the achievement of Selfridges, and one which it has maintained ever since in the face of a tawdry environment all around.

Though Gordon Selfridge was interested in architecture, his primary skills were promotion and selling. These he exploited to the full. There was novelty in the range of goods and services available at Selfridges. New too was the scenic artistry of its window displays and its advertisements. Most startling of all, Selfridges started out as a great department store from scratch, instead of building up by stages from a small business, as others had done. That involved a level of initial capitalization and borrowing perhaps impossible before 1900. As it turned out, despite the sensation it made and the boost it brought to the west end of Oxford Street, Selfridges was never as profitable as its founder claimed. After decades of risky expansion financed by borrowing, Selfridge was forced out of the driving seat in the 1930s. But by then his ebullience had ensured the completion of Oxford Street's grandest store – and the equal to any in Paris, New York or Chicago.

After Selfridges the grid plan, the frame construction and the classical frontage with tiers of windows became standard for department stores up to about 1930 – minus the prototype's costly monumentality. The rebuilding of the Bourne & Hollingsworth front, undertaken in 1925–8, is typical of the genre. Then came a change. Classicism was losing its universal urban validity, while in an age of brighter electric lighting the value of great windows to

upper floors and of plunging light wells within the heart of stores was dwindling. The reform of fire regulations now began to allow the open undifferentiated floor plans with little external lighting, familiar in the large introverted stores of today.

Oxford Street has or had several inter-war shops on this model, including the original section of Drages (1929–30, now demolished) and the Marks & Spencer on the Pantheon site (1938), both touched by the sleek new Art Deco taste. But its most striking monument to this transitional moment in store design is the D. H. Evans (now House of Fraser) shop, rebuilt to designs by Louis Blanc in 1935–7. Here framed construction finds outward expression in the guise of repeated vertical accents. The large tripartite upper windows are still there, and the material of the front remains Portland stone. But internally there were uninterrupted floor-plates and, for the first time, escalators from top to bottom – Selfridges had largely made do with lifts.

One other innovation from Selfridges onwards was the abandonment of dormitories for the workforce of department stores. In Victorian times it had been standard practice to house young men and women employees literally ‘over the shop’, in bleak communal arrangements and under strict controls, ostensibly for moral vigilance. The grimness of such accommodation, particularly for young women, afforded a subject for memoirs, stories and social reforming crusades. Horace Newte’s *Sparrows, The Story of an Unprotected Girl* (1909) describes how these women, desperate for freedom and fresh air after the long workday was done, added to the evening crowds on the pavement heading for the park:

Most walked in twos and threes, a few singly; some of these latter were hurrying and darting amongst the listless walk of the others in their eagerness to keep appointments with men. Whatever their age, disposition, or condition, they were all moved by a common desire – to enjoy a crowded hour of liberty after the toil and fret of the day. As Mavis moved with the flow of this current, she noticed how it was constantly swollen by the addition of tributaries, which

trickled from nearly every door in Oxford Street, till at last the stream overflowed the broad pavement and became so swollen that it seemed to carry everything before it. Here were gathered girls from nearly every district in the United Kingdom. The broken home, stepmothers, too many in family, the fascination which London exercises for the country-grown girl – all and each of these reasons were responsible for all this womanhood of a certain type pouring down Oxford Street at eight o'clock in the evening.<sup>71</sup>

As time went on, such became the value of Oxford Street space at any level that these garret dormitories gave way to better-equipped hostels in the hinterland. The best of these were purpose-built, like those of John Lewis and D. H. Evans in Bolsover Street, and two Bourne & Hollingsworth hostels in Gower and Store Streets. They were still operative between the wars, until easier commuting and a loosening of old moral and tutelary attitudes put paid to them.

#### *Smaller shops after 1870*

Leaving department stores aside, it is time to go back and trace changes in style, presentation and usage and, not least, shopping habits among Oxford Street's other shops from the Victorian era onwards. Up until about 1870 the frontages remained much as delineated in Tallis's guide of thirty years earlier – a typical London jumble of stucco or grey-brick façades over shop fronts, of scant architectural worth. There had been constant small rebuildings, none systematic or controlled. That changed when Oxford Street's two biggest freeholders, the Portland Estate on the north side and the Grosvenor Estate on the south, conscious of the high returns from their Oxford Street properties, began to oblige tenants to rebuild on specific lines as a condition of lease renewals.

The Grosvenor authorities, owners of the south side from Davies Street westwards up to Park Lane, were first off the mark. Briefly in the 1860s they

imposed the French mansarded style then enjoying a vogue in London, with elevations designed by Thomas Cundy III. Then they switched to the red-brick Queen Anne style, which enjoyed personal support from the incoming Marquess (soon first Duke) of Westminster. The Portland Estate across the road followed on along similar lines: first Italianate or French-style elevations, as at Marshall & Snelgrove, then from the 1880s one version or another of Queen Anne. Many of the Portland rebuildings were assigned to an architect well known to the Estate, Augustus E. Hughes.

Queen Anne, good, bad or indifferent, held sway in individual rebuildings up and down the street for the rest of the century. The best were T. E. Collcutt's Nos 175–181, of which only a fragment remains, and some along the reconstructed Grosvenor frontage, now also very patchy. Norman Shaw designed a quaint Queen Anne shopfront for the art dealer Murray Marks next to Great Chapel Street in 1875–6, but its small panes hardly suited the modern shopkeeper and it soon vanished. The upper stages of various scattered fronts survive from this period. Though they look tired today, at the time they gave shopkeepers improved plans and facilities. Often they left an uneven streetscape, causing the *Building News* to criticize Oxford Street's taller new buildings as having been 'carried up with a painful disregard of lateral view, the blank sides being made use of for advertising'.<sup>72</sup> A guidebook of 1880 likewise remarked on the thoroughfare's mixed look: 'Rickety, tumble-down, one-storey shanties stand next to modern mansions, and in no other street in London is there such incongruity and diversity of architecture and appearance'.<sup>73</sup>

Another rise in tone and aspiration followed. With the opening of the Central Line in 1900, and then the Bakerloo and Northern Lines (1906–7), fresh crowds of Londoners and visitors from further afar poured into Oxford Street's shops. Stone-faced buildings of cost and quality sprang up, at just the moment when Regent Street's shops were declining into shabbiness, awaiting reconstruction. Waring & Gillow and Selfridges have been mentioned; among

the smaller blocks, Belcher & Joass's marble-clad Mappin & Webb of 1907–8 and Adams & Holden's Evelyn House of 1909–10 stand out. Both lay in the revived sector of the street east of Oxford Circus.

In the Edwardian period Oxford Street's independent shops were still abundant and various. Although clothing dominated, there was a profusion of other trades: chemists, jewellers, tobacconists, glass and china dealers, tea merchants, photographers and so on. For readers, one of London's best bookshops, Bumpuses, was at No. 350, while not far to its west in 1906 the Times Book Club moved into Nos 376–384, causing a sensation almost as great as Selfridges. If art-dealers and furnishers were now migrating towards Bond Street, as Joseph Duveen had done after a few short years in Oxford Street, the venerable Morris & Company held the fort at No. 449, where they had been since 1878. Dealers in ordinary foodstuffs were few in number; in their stead a range of restaurants had sprung up, from the club-like Frascatis at Nos 26–32 to a profusion of tearooms. There were also several confectioners, foremost among them Buszards the 'wedding cake manufacturers' at Nos 197–199, 'a favourite resort of ladies during the season. They go there to eat ices'.<sup>74</sup>

To display all these goods the art of window-dressing had advanced. Gone were the days of bald plate-glass windows packed huggermugger with ironmongery or medicine bottles. Now specialist shopfitters like Frederick Sage designed deep fronts with graceful frames and curvaceous glass panels. Sometimes (after about 1905) these stepped back centrally to embrace island displays that drew customers halfway inside, like the Hanan-Gingell shoe shop at Nos 328–330, or the Savoy Tailors Guild shop at No. 500. Within, the trend leaned towards domesticity. Displays were in the round where possible and there was much colour – a feature missed by the black and white photographs of the era. If daylight was still appreciated, so too were the blessings of electricity, which did not dirty goods as gas had done.

Despite the elegance of these new shops, Oxford Street never became entirely high-class. Indeed after 1900 there were signs that as a whole it was

becoming less so, and less individual. Many shops were now tenanted by firms with more than one branch, notably in the jewellery and drapery trades. Retailing outlets in lucrative, high-rent locations such as Oxford Street began to be dominated by limited companies owning chains of shops, at growing cost to individuality. The move towards mass consumerism and the homogenization of shopping had begun.

### *Twentieth-century shopping*

After the First World War the shift in ownership and tone became marked. Previously Marshall & Snelgrove and Peter Robinsons had pitched their appeal to the upper classes, but by 1920 the latter was claiming 'to supply women and children of the middle classes with clothing and household goods of general utility'. When Drages the furniture chain opened their flashy new store at Nos 73–77 in 1930 they christened it 'Everyman House', aiming their marketing at 'that increasingly exuberant pair, Mr and Mrs Everyman'.<sup>75</sup> Now the big multiples started to arrive. The pioneer in Oxford Street was the Dutch-German C & A Modes, which took over Nos 376–384 in 1922 as its first British store. At one stage C & A boasted three separate outlets in the street, none of individuality. Where C & A led, Marks & Spencer and Woolworth followed with two stores each. The same trend could be observed in the smaller shops, as independent firms dropped away and remotely owned drapery and shoe shops piled in.

Along with this change of style in shops went one in customers. There were more of them now, arriving by Underground and packing the pavement, especially in the Christmas season. Gone were the days when elderly ladies came up from the provinces once or twice a year, took rooms in a small West End hotel, ventured out to Oxford Street to do their shopping and returned to their base laden with packages in time for tea. Now instead the typical customer was a day-tripper, who after the exhaustion of shopping could

expect to find refreshment on the street, or the bright young thing, incited by fashion magazines like *Vogue* to find fun in consumerism. All the department stores now incorporated restaurants, usually just under the roof. These might be gracious, like the frescoed salon at Peter Robinson (miraculously preserved) or simply vast, like the 1,000-capacity restaurant in the rebuilt D. H. Evans.

Alternatively there were the copious tearooms or cafés that sprang up at street level from the 1890s onwards, supplanting the beefy hostelries advertised in the 1815 *Epicure's Almanack*. The outright leader in this field was the J. Lyons chain, which by 1910 boasted ten small outlets on Oxford Street alone. The firm went on to raise its game with the multi-storey Maison Lyons near Stratford Place (opened 1916). Next came one of its celebrated corner houses at the east end of the street on the site of the old Oxford Music Hall (opened 1928) and then a second one in the Cumberland Hotel (1933) at the west end, substituted for the Maison Lyons. The allure of these capacious establishments, embellished in fresh Franco-American taste and with live music laid on, drew middle-class diners in throngs. There were humbler outlets too, like the two branches of Flemings Restaurant at Nos 68 and 307. For the working man, music hall aficionado or clerk a few pubs hung on, ever dwindling in number. Today Oxford Street boasts only a single genuine pub, the Flying Horse at No. 6 next to the Tottenham Court Road corner.

Increasingly the street was understood to be for women. By need or preference women have always done most shopping, from Sophie von la Roche to the present day. But the century from 1850 to 1950 saw the women's garment trades gobble up ever more of Oxford Street's retailing space, whether by way of specialist draperies, shoe shops, or the department stores, whose heyday was based on clothes and fabrics. The gentlemen's shops of yore – the up-market tobacconists, tailors, bootmakers, saddlers, gunmakers and so on – all once well represented on the frontages – tended to retreat to the back streets of Mayfair, Marylebone or St James. With emancipation, it had become acceptable for women to go shopping in small groups or alone.

Dawdling or gawping on the packed pavements had ceased to raise the old public fear of prostitution.

As a result Oxford Street became known between the wars by the sobriquet of the ladies' or women's mile. That hardly connoted elegance. As one inter-war observer, Paul Cohen-Portheim, remarked, Oxford Street 'is an impressive assembly of huge stores and drapers' shops, but it has a strangely suburban or provincial atmosphere, and always seems full of agitated spinsters holding hands while trying to cross the road, and red-faced stout women, with many parcels, bumping into everybody'.<sup>76</sup> Ivor Brown went further, averring that the street stank. 'The gross overcrowding of Oxford Street by domestic shoppers affects the "women's mile" with a perceptible aroma of perspiration. Behind it Wigmore Street is disinfected by its famous chemists'.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the street's decline in status, it suffered no overall loss in trade. In the 1930s it underwent a building boom, sustained not just by the multiples but also by investors in property, who began to see Oxford Street as a venue for purpose-built offices, hotels and flats as well as shops. Most affected was the westernmost end of the street. The *Financial Times* noted in 1936 that this had been 'completely transformed, and a series of great modern buildings occupies the whole stretch between Edgware Road and Orchard Street'.<sup>78</sup> Architects of stature were brought in to help style the façades of these large blocks: Sir Edwin Lutyens at Hereford House on the south side (1928–30), Sir John Burnet, Tait & Lorne for the Mount Royal flats opposite (1933–4). Retailing in all these blocks was confined to the lowest floors. A distinguished exception to this trend was the HMV shop at Nos 363–367, rebuilt after a fire in 1938–9 to designs by the best of the inter-war commercial modernists, Joseph Emberton, with retailing on four floors.

Though Oxford Street got off quite lightly from Second World War bombings compared to other parts of Central London, some stores were gravely affected, particularly during the Autumn of 1940. Peter Robinson's

Oxford Circus front was dramatically holed and Bourne & Hollingsworth endured much superficial destruction. John Lewis suffered the worst. Their front building was totally gutted by incendiaries; their brand new block facing Cavendish Square, the first phase in a rebuilding plan, was damaged too if not beyond redemption. There were other losses east of the circus on both sides. George Orwell was on hand to view the aftermath:

Oxford Street yesterday, from Oxford Circus up to the Marble Arch, completely empty of traffic, and only a few pedestrians, with the late afternoon sun shining straight down the empty roadway and glittering on innumerable fragments of broken glass. Outside John Lewis's, a pile of plaster dress models, very pink and realistic, looking so like a pile of corpses that one could have mistaken them for that at a little distance. Just the same sight in Barcelona, only there it was plaster saints from desecrated churches.<sup>79</sup>

An article of December 1940 in *Life Magazine* assured Americans that Oxford Street business was going on as usual, though now behind 'a mile-long row of neatly boarded shopfronts', the large modern windows having proved hopelessly vulnerable to blast.<sup>80</sup> Like much wartime propaganda, that painted an optimistic picture. Civil consumption and production alike had slumped, and bombed-out shops had to operate with a reduced staff, sometimes as with John Lewis in makeshift premises. Nevertheless the street developed an animated wartime life, especially after American troops with money in their pockets swarmed into London. Bars and clubs proliferated along the fringes of Soho. It was in 1942, for instance, that the future 100 Club established itself in the basement of 100 Oxford Street as a venue for jazz. Temporary exhibitions were also promoted, notably a series of 1945-7 sponsored by the Ministry of Information in huts on a bomb site next to Newman Street.

In the aftermath of war, with construction and consumption alike slow to pick up, there was anxiety about the future of Oxford Street, specially its eastern end, which had fallen back after its brief recovery early in the century. On the vacant site next to Newman Street, for instance, plans for a circus arena

had to be dropped in the teeth of shopkeeper opposition; all that could be built for the moment were single-storey lock-up shops. Near by, Bourne & Hollingsworth was in decline, despite the efforts of its chairman, Stafford Bourne.

Bourne became a leading light in the Oxford Street Association, a ginger group set up to promote the shopkeepers' interests against threats to their livelihood. It is first heard of in 1940, well after similar bodies had come into existence for the more cohesive Regent Street and Bond Street. It then lapsed, but was refounded in 1958 on Bourne's initiative and was soon responding vigorously to the various 1960s schemes for traffic management. The Oxford Street Association met only intermittently and for many years had no paid staff. But it was the focus for such important issues as Saturday afternoon opening, which was being controversially debated between the different stores as late as 1968.<sup>81</sup>

Against this sombre backdrop should be set the post-war eruption of Oxford Street shoe stores promoted by the chains. That had been partly anticipated between the wars, when Lilley & Skinner and Dolcis opened conspicuous outlets opposite Bond Street Station. The subsequent boom was much bigger. In 1957 the *Architectural Review* counted 27 shoe shops between Tottenham Court Road and Marble Arch, all bent on 'ensnaring the coupon-free shoe-hungry public in many and often subtly different ways'. Bata, Dolcis, Saxone and True Form were the main contenders. Before Charles Clore's Sears Holdings bought up many of these chains there was 'cut throat competition' between them.<sup>82</sup> Again the area close to the top of New Bond Street was the main focus. From the design point of view Dolcis and Saxone led the field. Under their in-house architect Ellis Somake, Dolcis strewed the street with lively glass-fronted outlets offering varieties of fit-out as well as footwear, including a self-service shop at No. 333 (1958). Saxones were a little earlier in the field with a split-level shop at No. 297 (1951) by their architect, Michael Egan. Bata boasted a shop by the prolific West End modernists Katz &

Vaughan, who also designed an outlet in Miesian style for Richard Shops, the ready-made clothes firm. Needless to say, all these outlets have long gone. Their authors would hardly have been surprised; everyone understood that shop design was as ephemeral as fashion itself.

Gradually the big stores caught up. The main project of the 1950s was the rebuilding of John Lewis on the island site between Holles and Old Cavendish Streets. In part because of temperamental difficulties in both Spedan Lewis and his original architect, William Crabtree, this was not the masterpiece among modern department stores which the former had hoped and planned for in succession to the applauded Peter Jones in Sloane Square, rebuilt for the John Lewis Partnership in the 1930s. As it was, their successors created a sober, serviceable building by no means devoid of aesthetic subtlety. It makes an instructive contrast with its eastern neighbour, the even larger block between Holles and John Prince's Streets (Nos 242-276). One of the biggest West End redevelopment projects of the day, this complete island was rebuilt in 1959-61, a moment when it was expected that much of Oxford Street would be reconstructed. The developers, Land Securities, and their architects, T. P. Bennett & Partners, devised a typical scheme for the time, with a large office tower at its heart and shops all round the perimeter, the best of them facing Oxford Street but set well back to allow for future road-widening. The smaller shop units, planned with plenty of depth and sufficient height for a mezzanine level, were soon snapped up by the fashion chains and fitted out by their in-house designers, as was now customary; in the centre came a larger T-shaped retailing space, taken by British Home Stores. On a podium above these was built the London College of Fashion, to designs by the London County Council's architects which made the rest of the block look stolid.

Such projects as followed these two schemes in the 1960s and '70s proved disappointments. Marshall & Snelgrove, long in the uninspired hands of Debenhams, was rebuilt in 1969-75, to functional designs which went to show how far any belief in public architecture had ebbed among large retailers since

the palmy days of Selfridges. Internal convenience and flexibility were now the determinants; external appearance counted only in terms of changing displays in the ground-floor windows at shoppers' eye-level.

How far this interiorized preoccupation had gone among retailers is illustrated by the Grosvenor Estate's masterplan for reconstructing its Oxford Street frontage, brought forward in 1971–2 in collaboration with Chapman Taylor Partners as architects and MEPC Ltd as developers. The original project envisaged deep shops with an internal connecting street or mall running east–west most of the way along behind from Davies to North Audley Streets, and linking bridges taking shoppers across the street. This mammoth scheme elicited an outcry, as its depth entailed the destruction of property to the south of Oxford Street, including blocks of working-class housing. That plus the recession of the mid 1970s forced its proponents to draw in their horns.<sup>83</sup> The final outcome, greatly reduced, focussed on the Davies Street corner (Nos 375–383) alone, where Bond Street Station had in any case to be rebuilt for the forthcoming Jubilee Line. The result was the West One development of shops and offices, opened over the new station in 1980. Cut off from the life of Oxford Street, the cramped multi-level shopping mall conveys a claustrophobic feeling.

The mall of course was an American out-of-town invention. It fared no better on Oxford Street than had the nineteenth-century arcade or bazaar. So much was proved by the lacklustre Plaza, an attempt of the 1980s to convert the defunct Bourne & Hollingsworth store to modern boutique retailing. This, the West One development and some others were all reactions to the emergence of suburban shopping malls like Brent Cross (opened 1976), which seemed to presage the possible demise of Oxford Street unless it adapted. Around 1980 there was even a whisper that John Lewis might abandon Oxford Street altogether and focus on its growing network of profitable stores on the city fringes, accessible by car. Another factor was growing anxiety over security, after the IRA targeted Oxford Street in bombing campaigns of 1973–4.

In 1985 *The Times* published an analysis of Oxford Street, enquiring why it was such a 'visual mess' and had never been systematically redeveloped. The answer, the writer suggested, lay in the fragmentation of property ownership. The Grosvenor and Portman Family Settled Estates still maintained substantial freeholds, but the Howard de Walden Estate had by then sold out all its Oxford Street holdings. The newer freeholders were mostly large insurance companies and pension funds, and under them all were layers of leaseholders, who could not be obliged to act together. For all that, shopping in Oxford Street continued to work, presenting these owners with 'rich pickings'.<sup>84</sup>

#### *Oxford Street shops today*

That is still the position today. Oxford Street is widely disliked, even disdained, yet it flourishes. The milling shoppers are younger and more diverse than they were fifty or a hundred years ago, but still they flock in, afforded more space on its pavements and whistled in by faster public transport. New buildings are brasher and glassier than ever and pay even less heed to their ambience, to judge by No. 61 at the Soho Street corner, or the elephantine Park House (Nos 455–497) at the other end of the street. Window displays, sometimes two shiny storeys high, follow in their wake. Yet many shops now make little of their fronts, preferring to lure customers in with doors flung open wide, animated interiors brightly lit, and music booming forth.

Changes to the street have been most acute at its eastern end, where the advent of Crossrail (the Elizabeth Line) created two large holes on the southern side after 2012 and with them the chance to spruce up both frontages, especially on the Soho side, long condemned as petty and frowzy. In 2013 the New West End Company, successor to the Oxford Street Association and similar West End commercial pressure groups, commissioned a retail

consultant to look at the whole frontage from Poland Street to St Giles' Circus.<sup>85</sup> The fruits of this have recently become apparent in the shape of bigger developments with glassier shops. Also in 2013, a West End Partnership Board was set up with the aim of promoting the area's future prosperity up to 2030, with plans for major expenditure on the west end of Oxford Street and completion of plans already set out for its eastern sector.<sup>86</sup>

At the time of writing (2018) there are palpable threats to Oxford Street's prosperity. With the collapse of British Home Stores in 2016 the tally of large stores has dropped again. The future of the neighbouring House of Fraser and Debenhams branches remains precarious. Sales generally are down, while online shopping is acknowledged as a present and growing danger to high streets everywhere. To address these concerns, Westminster Council announced a root-and-branch strategy and consultation in 2018, asserting frankly that 'Oxford Street's reputation is declining and high street retail is increasingly moving away from traditional shopping, towards leisure, entertainment and experiences'. One of the fifteen principles set out in that strategy is to 'enhance the area's remarkable assets'.<sup>87</sup> It is to be hoped that the present volume will help in better identifying and valuing these assets.

Despite these fears, one has only to use one's eyes most afternoons to be reminded that in material if not aesthetic terms Oxford Street remains the howling success it has been ever since the 1770s. How then did this stretch of thoroughfare manage not only to attract but to maintain prosperity for nigh on 250 years, and to hang on to its reputation as the most persistently successful main shopping street in the world?

Location is part of the answer. Oxford Street evolved on an axis between wealthy communities. If Hyde Park had not blocked further development to its west, commerce could well have slipped further west along Bayswater Road. But to location must be added accessibility. Other thriving parts of central London developed shopping centres with stores of equal size and allure, notably Brompton Road and Kensington High Street. But none was

so easy to get to, or had its means of access so often updated. Herein lies the secret. As the Elizabeth Line prepares to open in 2020, adding two Oxford Street stops on its course to those already supplied by the existing tube lines and connecting the street with Heathrow, a fresh public vote of confidence in its future as London's most powerful magnet for shoppers seems assured.

## **Processions and decorations**

Oxford Street's history as a route for parades and display runs from the ignominy of the march to Tyburn to the gaiety and branding of modern-day Christmas decorations, by way of coronation and thanksgiving processions, political and religious marches, plus random shopping trips by princes and potentates.

It took time to efface the grisly memory of Tyburn; and so long as Oxford Street was on the fringe of the metropolitan map, there was little reason to parade along it. Nevertheless as a main road and route of entry into London, it found itself sometimes used by the great and good. It is in that connection that processions are first recorded.

The earliest may have been Louis XVIII's entry into London, following the original defeat of Napoleon. Joseph Farington records it in his diary for 20 April 1814:

Louis 18<sup>th</sup>, King of France, being to come to London this day from His residence at Hartwell in Buckinghamshire, I saw people moving in great numbers along Oxford Street towards Oxford Turnpike and Paddington. After painting till past three-oClock I walked out and proceeded through Portman sq. to Oxford st. which I found lined with people on both sides and a continued line of Carriages with Ladies and Gentlemen in them, they and their servants wearing white Cockades, which were also worn by numbers of the

lower orders of the People, Butchers servants, labourers &c. Cavalry were riding forwards and backwards to keep the middle of the street clear. The windows of the Houses were also filled with persons anxiously waiting for the arrival of the French Monarch.

Thence Farington moved up the Edgware Road 'to the half mile stone, the people very orderly'. Here just before five o'clock the procession appeared: first the cavalry, then the French nobles, then Louis XVIII, and finally the Prince Regent bringing up the rear.<sup>88</sup>

The next occasion, the funeral cortege of Queen Caroline on 14 August 1821, was notorious. Divorced by George IV and excluded from his Coronation, Caroline died less than a month later at her house in Hammersmith. Eventually it was announced that her body would be buried in her native Brunswick, and escorted through London and hence on to Harwich. Apprehensive that her sympathizers might stage a demonstration in her support and make trouble for the Government, the authorities sent Life Guards as an escort. When the procession reached Knightsbridge, the officers in charge found the way ahead blocked by a crowd at Hyde Park Corner, so they changed direction and hurried through the park up to Cumberland Gate at the end of Oxford Street. Not to be outwitted, the people raced up Park Lane in parallel, blocking the entrance to Oxford Street. Here the escort again switched its route and eluded its pursuers by riding up Edgware Road and hence along the New Road. Notwithstanding, a fracas took place at Cumberland Gate. Bricks were thrown, shots fired by the Guards after the cortege had passed and two men killed; one was taken to the General Townsend pub in Oxford Street. The cortege eventually doubled back down Tottenham Court Road to the other end of Oxford Street, struggling thence with difficulty onwards through the city.<sup>89</sup>

Decorating and illuminating urban buildings on joyous occasions, notably along the route of parade, was an age-old practice. Such occasions combined public organization and supervision with private initiative, and

gave tradesmen with good frontages the chance to mix loyal demonstrations with self-advertisement. Increasingly, newspapers regaled their readers with details of these ephemeral decorations, which altered with the advancing technologies of lighting, first by gas, later by electricity.

Oxford Street became a fixture on the route for coronation parades only in the twentieth century, but had manifested its patriotism well before then. It earns cursory mention in connection with the ‘illuminations’ for George IV’s coronation (19 July 1821).<sup>90</sup> A little more detail is given for William IV (8 September 1831), when *The Standard* noted illuminations at the Queen’s Bazaar (old No. 73), Hayward’s lace warehouse (No. 81) and the seedsmen Beck & Co., who exhibited ‘a tasteful transparency’ – a display technique by then on the wane.<sup>91</sup> For Queen Victoria’s coronation (28 June 1838), the same newspaper remarked on twenty-nine Oxford Street shops as decorating and/or illuminating. Typical features included stars, flags, crowns and VR monograms. Nicholays the furriers (No. 82), for instance, displayed ‘a brilliant gas star, of very large dimensions, entirely covering the front of the house’. A few artistic shops (Gillows the upholsterers; Wyatts the carvers and gilders) mounted loyal messages in cursive script.<sup>92</sup>

No further coronation took place for sixty-four years, but royal birthdays, christenings and weddings gave excuses for display. From the 1870s Oxford Street also found a slot along processional routes. Such was the day of national thanksgiving on 27 February 1872 for the recovery of the Prince of Wales from illness, a major metropolitan event encompassing a long parade after a service in St Paul’s Cathedral. In Oxford Street an evergreen arch was erected at Oxford Circus. ‘The lamp-posts’, stated the *Daily News*, ‘were not only embellished after the style of the Crystal Palace pillars, but bore from end to end countless paper ornaments, familiarly understood and passing by the name of Chinese lanterns’. Shops singled out included Jackson & Graham, ‘really gorgeous in the English style of decoration. In scarlet and white letters the best of good wishes were conveyed to the Royal Family, and

there were floral decorations and trophies of flags in profusion.’ At the other end of the street the front of Gillows, rival upholsterers, ‘manifested a wonderful amount of elaboration, the balcony of the handsome edifice appearing to rest upon gigantic bronze male and female figures, bearing glass globes in their hand, to be utilised at night, for the purposes of an illumination’.<sup>93</sup>

On 12 March 1874 Oxford Street welcomed Maria Alexandrovna, Russian bride of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, coming in from Windsor and Paddington Station after their wedding in St Petersburg. Canopied stages of two storeys for spectators once again ran along the street, and the lamp-posts and refuges were suitably enriched. This time Gillows decorated their front ‘in the Italian style’ using caryatids, presumably the same creatures as before, and created a balcony to hold 400 people. Marshall & Snelgrove, Mortlocks and Hindleys all received favourable mention, but some tradesmen earned scorn for displaying their names too prominently. On this occasion ‘the pageant was unhappily stripped of much of its beauty and grandeur by the inclement weather’. At Oxford Circus the effect of a gold-covered pagoda with masts in the corners was ‘not a little marred by the snow which fell persistently’.<sup>94</sup>

The last occasion for a wholly private decorative free-for-all seems to have been Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887. This also marked the advent of electricity, embraced in Oxford Street by a few go-ahead firms such as Phillips the art-pottery firm, who embellished their new building at Nos 175–179 (present numbering), with an alleged 1,000 ‘fairy light illuminations’ plus mottoes, outlines &c. Gasks the drapers on the other side of the street followed suit.<sup>95</sup>

By the time of the Diamond Jubilee ten years later, the authorities and those with a feeling for public aesthetics were starting to try and impose order on these manifestations. Innovative electrical designs using floral and ‘arborescent’ motifs were exhibited in advance by a commercial firm at the

Imperial Institute and seem to have been adopted for the limited processional route. Oxford Street was not included on that 1897 itinerary, but mounted its own loyal displays, with the Oxford Music Hall, its neighbour Frascatis, and Heath's hat shop opposite singled out for comment. The Kodak shop near the latter exhibited a large portrait of the monarch, 'typifying the triumphs achieved by photography in these later years of the Reign'.<sup>96</sup>

Few details have emerged of the Oxford Street decorations for Edward VII's coronation (9 August 1902). Again the procession avoided Oxford Street. But for George V (22 June 1911) a new system was adopted, whereby the new monarch undertook separate parades around London on days after the event. Artists were involved in preparing coherent designs for several of the streets; for instance, Frank Brangwyn advised on Bond Street. Oxford Street's turn came on 29 June, after the King had visited St Paul's. From a number of designs sent in, Marylebone Borough Council had selected a scheme with a surprisingly religious tone devised by T. E. Harrison and the firm of Waring & Gillow. Circular triplets of light-painted columns at Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Circus and Marble Arch bore life-size figures of the Virgin, St George and the patron saints of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The street itself featured further columns along its length and no less than 250 standards, each topped by a mediaeval ship and carrying a plaque inscribed with 'the name of some distinguished man or woman who once lived in Marylebone'. *The Times* pronounced the effect 'exceedingly gay'. The borough council paid for most of this, but Westminster Council put in a contribution. Private firms still also played their part. Banks and trellises of flowers were now popular. Selfridges, featuring its first display, had 'golden portcullises and chains over the windows, and wreaths and golden lions below'. Waring & Gillow, which four years previously had featured a display to welcome the Kaiser to the shop, now showed a banner shamelessly declaring the King as 'England's Business Maker'.<sup>97</sup>

The silver jubilee of George V in May 1935 marked a further advance in co-ordinating street decorations. The First Commissioner of Works presided over a preliminary conference of interested parties. As with the coronation, the plan was for the King and Queen to undertake a series of processional drives round London over the days after the official celebration on 6<sup>th</sup> May; Oxford Street was on the itinerary for Saturday the 11<sup>th</sup>. This time Marylebone Council invited tenders for decorating the street from a number of firms, from which William Whiteley Ltd's submission was chosen. Reviewing the decorative schemes, *The Times* art critic commended Oxford Street for its simplicity but thought Bond Street more elegant. For the first time Selfridges stole the show, creating a monumental frontispiece devised by William Walcot and the store's in-house architect, A. D. Millar. Medallions hung between each of its giant columns with the names of British cities beneath, while surmounting the centre rose a giant statue of Britannia flanked by lions. *The Times* found the imperial symbolism 'remarkably inclusive' but felt it betrayed a failure of inventiveness: 'A presiding artist over a festive scheme ought to be able to get all his efforts out of bunting, paper, and natural flowers'.<sup>98</sup>

Preparations for George VI's coronation (12 May 1937) were long drawn out, as schemes to celebrate Edward VIII had been well in hand before his abdication the previous December. At a preliminary conference convened by the Office of Works, Sir Giles Scott had been appointed to co-ordinate decorations in the City, G. Grey Wornum to do the same in Westminster. Marylebone Council agreed to employ Wornum as well, and in fact paid for most of the sequence in Oxford Street. The street featured for the first time on the official procession route directly after the service, and in the event turned out to be the most congested point on the itinerary.<sup>99</sup>

Once again the official efforts were outshone by the decorative frontispiece erected by Selfridges. By far the most extravagant such scheme of modern times, this cost an alleged £50,000. It began well in advance as a

commission by Gordon Selfridge from the theatrical designer and recent immigrant Ernst Stern. The original scheme was not greatly different from the final one, but when shown to Edward VIII he asked that a winged figure of Peace be substituted for the monumental St George and dragon group suggested by Selfridge for the crowning centrepiece. Then came Edward's abdication, after which Stern and his draughtsmen had hastily to adapt the design for George VI, with 'rather more use of the thistle as a motif'. They were assisted and advised by A. D. Millar and Sir William Reid Dick. In the final version, reliefs by Edwin Whitney-Smith, Walter Marsden and others depicting a 'sculptured pageant of history' covered much of the front. Allegorical groups representing the Dominions rose higher at the corners, while along the Orchard Street flank hung a gigantic tapestry-like scene depicting ports of the British Empire, designed by the American artist Clara Fargo Thomas. Reminiscing about the figure of Peace, Stern wrote: 'I am not being wise after the event, but I didn't like the lady; something seemed to warn me that she was a fraud.' E. M. Forster's comment on the totality of this scheme was succinct: 'Awful!'<sup>100</sup> Selfridges produced a special booklet for the occasion, printing thousands of copies, and kept the decorations up for months afterwards. In contrast D. H. Evans adopted an up-to-date, streamlined style for their frontispiece, well suited to that recently rebuilt store and likewise commemorated in a brochure to match.<sup>101</sup>

For Elizabeth II (2 June 1953) a route and system similar to 1937 was followed. This time to co-ordinate the public designs Westminster Council appointed Sir Hugh Casson, fresh from the recent triumph of the Festival of Britain and like Wornum a safe kind of progressive. Light-heartedness and gay colours were the flavour of the day. Casson's preliminary designs for Oxford Street had a curiously old-world flavour. Harking back to the street's early history, he proposed masts carrying 'enlarged versions of 18<sup>th</sup>-century tradesmen's signs - the Hatter, Shoemaker, Jeweller &c.,' alternating with the arms of the two borough councils. Bolder were his ideas for creating a kind of

'ceiling' over the street, while at Oxford Circus giant circular 'Rose/Crystal' features were to act as vista-stoppers. All this Casson explained to the Marylebone Council in person.<sup>102</sup>

In the event he was paired for Oxford Street with another architect, Sergei Kadleigh, best known for his utopian 'High Paddington' housing scheme. The final scheme featured white masts positioned asymmetrically along the street, carrying fronds and topped by gold crowns; at Oxford Circus and Great Cumberland Place there were now large replicas of the royal coat of arms.<sup>103</sup> Selfridges once again featured the most ornate of the Oxford Street store fronts, with an equestrian statue of the monarch in the centre by Doris Lindner and Frederick Mancini, but the extravagances of 1937 were eschewed. On this occasion the store had commissioned schemes in advance from leading artists including Edward Bawden, but none was followed exactly.<sup>104</sup>

West End street decorations since then have largely been concerned with annual Christmas illuminations in the shopping streets, devised to lure sightseers and boost sales. In this respect Bond Street and Regent Street, backed by greater unity in property ownership and traders' associations, have enjoyed the edge in flair over Oxford Street. The street has not always supported such decorations. There were none, for instance, between 1967 and 1978, when the traders agreed on a scheme that would 'not cost too much'.<sup>105</sup> As important now as the quality of the lights themselves is the celebrity of the entertainer who turns them on each November.

Finally, marches and demonstrations along the street should not be forgotten. They seem to be mostly of post-war origin, although the Salvation Army regularly marched along Oxford Street from its Regent Hall depot at Nos 275–279 from the 1880s onwards. Political demonstrations of many hues have latterly been tolerated along the street, not forgetting the well-orchestrated protest of Christmas 1971 against the state of Oxford Street itself.