

# NO. 75 PORTLAND PLACE CITY OF WESTMINSTER

*The Historical Significance of the Rear Staircase*

*by*

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Historical Analysis & Research Team

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Photographs, November 2001, showing door surround from the first floor front room, and Adamesque plaster ceiling

Photographs November 2001, showing the rear staircase and brick staircase compartment

## 75 PORTLAND PLACE

### Nature of Request

*The English Heritage Inspector of Historic Buildings in the London Region, Westminster team has asked for HA&RT 's help on a proposal to remove a back staircase at 75 Portland Place. This is a grade II\* listed house of 1790, the last piece of development of Portland Place begun in the 1770s by architects Robert and James Adam. The Inspector has asked the team to comment on the content and conclusions of two historical reports by the Architectural History Practice relating to the history and fabric of the house and the staircase, and comment on the significance of the staircase.*

This short report is the result of a visit to the site by Richard Bond and Susie Barson of the HA&RT team, and Tara Draper of the Architectural Investigation team (London). Richard concerned himself with the fabric analysis, Susie with the reliability of the historical reports, and Tara with the question of authenticity of the Adam connection with the house and its decoration.

### 1. The documentary evidence

The first report, *75 Portland Place*, is a thorough piece of research based on analysis of all the relevant and available documentation in the Crown Estate records in the P.R.O., the rate books and vestry minutes in the Westminster Archives, and the records of leases in the Middlesex Deeds Registry deposited at the London Metropolitan Archives. I have retraced some of these steps and can vouch for the reliability of the author in locating and interpreting the documents. He cogently argues that, although the Adam brothers are mentioned as the second party on the lease granted by the Duke of Portland for the house in 1790, this does not mean that they had a direct hand in the planning and fitting out of the houses that were being built at this time. He argues that the builder mentioned in the lease as the third party and nominated by Robert and James Adam, Mr William Woolcott or Woolcroft, would have had the responsibility in settling on the finishes in the house. The second AHP report, *Report on the Possible Involvement of Robert and James Adam in the Design and Decoration of 75 Portland Place*, attempts to explore this further.

It should perhaps be stated clearly that nobody has yet clarified the precise nature of the role of the architects James and Robert Adam in their late developments of the 1790s, on the Portland estate, or in Fitzroy Square. Robert Adam died in 1792 and his brother just two years later, so close involvement in what was by then the tail end of the development seems doubtful. What seems likely is that the houses would have conformed to a principal design for the elevation and to the common London terrace-house plan form (front room, back room and staircase against the party wall). The fitting out of the carcass would have been left to the taste and pocket of the builder or client, but most likely following existing Adam patterns.

Clearly the historian has checked through early documents relating to the building of the house, including a thorough trawl of the Middlesex Deeds Registry volumes to identify the house and to find any plans. The one attached to the new assignment of the lease in 1865 is perhaps the most helpful piece of evidence which shows the

original flat back wall, (MDR 1865/21/463). This corresponds with the plan shown on Horwood's map of 1799, and the revised map of 1819. The 1865 plan also clearly shows the addition of the circular stair compartment at the back of the house, and an even later addition which was probably a billiard room, but which has since been demolished.

## **2. Fabric evidence**

The staircase compartment is bonded into the back wall, but this wall abuts the garden wall on the north side, which dates from after 1812 when John Nash built the three smaller houses to the north, and subsequently Regent's Circus. The back wall appears to have been rebuilt with the staircase compartment after 1812, about five feet west of the original line of the back wall, (see Richard Bond's report, appended). The question is, how much later? Clearly it was there before 1865 when it appears in the lease plan. The ovoid spiral staircase rises in the rounded brick compartment from the ground to the third storey, the stairs and landing terminating on a mezzanine floor between second and third floors. It has plain winding wooden treads, a simple, wooden, unmoulded handrail and plain stick balusters. Stylistically, it could date from anytime between 1800- 1850. The date range suggested by the AHP, 1820-30, is entirely plausible. Neil Burton's recent booklet, *Georgian Stairs*, illustrates two examples dating from 1810 with similar details, and a comparable elegant spiral rise. The AHP report does not state whether or not the addition of the stair was reflected in a higher rateable value in the rate books covering the years of the early nineteenth century.

Equally plausible is the claim that the house did not originally have a back staircase. Many first rate townhouses were built with a service stair, Chandos House by Robert Adam has a very handsome stone spiral staircase behind the main one. Isaac Ware stated that 'a good house should always have two staircases, one for shew and the use of company, the other for domesticks. The latter should be thrown behind, but the other is to be shewn.' (*A Complete Body of Architecture*, 1756). But evidently there were exceptions. Tara Draper has visited another house built by William Woolcott on the other side of the road, 40 Portland Place, 1779, which does not have one. Woolcott's other house on the west side, No 73, of 1790, does not have a service stair, nor do the contemporary houses developed by the Adam brothers on the east side of Fitzroy Square.

## **3. Adam decoration**

Another question raised by the AHP report is the question of authenticity of the Adam decoration in the first floor rooms. The report makes a convincing case for the fact that these rooms were altered in the 1880s. The case rests partly on the fact that the plaster decoration follows round the back room into the bay which we now agree not to be the original back wall, therefore must date from after the pushing out of the back wall sometime after 1812. The ceiling in the front room may date from c.1790, but Tara Draper was not convinced that it was an Adam design, but was instead a copy from one of the other house in the street, probably No 65, (see her note, appended). The scale of the frieze under the cornice was larger than one would find under an Adam ceiling, with classical motifs that he would not have used. The wooden mouldings forming panels on the walls, the dado rail, the door case into the front

room, and the jambs of the enlarged opening made between the front and rear rooms, all accord with joinery of a late-nineteenth century rather than a late-eighteenth century date. All this would tie in with the documentary evidence seen by the AHP that shows that a Mr Stanley Bird was making alterations to the house in 1883.

#### **4. Alterations**

We also saw evidence, in our site visit, of the blocked windows on the north side of the house. These would not only have lit the main rooms on the first and second floors, but also allowed views over Marylebone Fields to the north. The AHP cited compelling evidence that the windows were blocked up when Crown land on the north side of the house was built upon from 1812. We also saw a late nineteenth-century staircase linking the third floor to a new top storey, possibly added by Bird in 1883. We saw photographs of the principal chimney pieces that are now in storage, only one of which was dateable to the 1790s, and then not necessarily designed by Robert or James Adam, and not in its original location. The others were nineteenth century imports.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The back stair probably dates from some time around 1820; it is a simple, elegant and modest, certainly of intrinsic architectural, as well as historic, interest, and it is a shame that the lower half (handrail, balusters and treads) has been removed because it is rotten. In general, rear or service stairs in a listed building would be retained as a matter of course, and, anecdotally, this would account for a reasonably high survival rate. In this case, it is a matter of judgement whether, on balance, the loss of the added rear stairs, with retention of the brick compartment to house a lift, is offset by the general restoration of the house fit for domestic use after years of neglect. In our view, although the loss is to be regretted, the degree of loss of historic fabric is, on balance, not so great as to outweigh the benefits of overall thorough repair and restoration.

In sum, this is a handsome brick townhouse of the late Georgian period, with a recognisably Adam neo-classical façade, and its original main stair and plan form up to the third floor. But it has also been considerably altered, with the addition of the extra storey, much re-patching of the brickwork on the rear wall, and removal and replacement of original finishes and fittings, such as the chimney pieces, plasterwork and joinery. We recommend that if the staircase is to be removed, that it be recorded. We recommend that the list description be revised to reflect the date of completion of the house, (1790 instead of 1770); that the indirect rather than the direct association with the Adam brothers be reflected, and that a full description of the interior be added. The most appropriate time for this may be when the works have been finished and inspected by the Listing Branch.

Susie Barson  
HA&RT

## Sources

The Architectural History Practice Limited *75 Portland Place* October 2001

The Architectural History Practice Limited *75 Portland Place: Report on the Possible Involvement of the Robert & James Adam in the Design and Decoration* October 2001

Middlesex Deeds Registry 1865/21/463

Neil Burton *Georgian Stairs* The Georgian Group 2001

Tara Draper *40 Portland Place, Marylebone London* RCHME Report, May 1997

Isaac Ware *A Complete Body of Architecture* London 1756, p 325

## Notes on the early development of Portland Place

Robert Adam was born in 1728 and died 1792. When settled in London, and in partnership with his brother James, he built a large number of public and private buildings. The two men developed parts of Portland place, Stratford Place, Hamilton Place, two sides of Fitzroy Square and the Adelphi, a speculative development in which they were not financially successful.

Portland Place was the climax of the Adam brothers' speculative building scheme for the capital. It was initially intended to be a long wide street in the French style, lined with aristocratic mansions. Plans for the scheme may have been on the drawing board from 1769 and the first drawings relating to the scheme date from 1774 (in the Sir John Soane Museum), but it was not until 1776 that construction began. By then the project had been curtailed to a development of first quality townhouses behind palace style facades. The development was not completed until 1792, but from the engravings by Malton it seems clear that from the outside the Adam's palace style façade was executed in full. The whole project was undertaken in conjunction with other builders and craftsmen, the plasterer Joseph Rose, John Gibson, the Hasties, James Hilson, and William Woolcott. From the amount of internal decoration that survives in many of the houses, it seems clear that, as an Adam branded development, the brothers provided the builders with designs for ceilings and other decoration.

William Woolcott built three houses in the development. The first to be constructed was the present No 40, which survives and has some Adam decoration. It was begun in 1776, completed in 1779 and the first tenant was the Hon Edward Foley. The plan of the house is typical of the period, having two main rooms per floor with the staircase to one side (top lit), and a small closet behind the staircase. There was no evidence of a back staircase having ever been built. If Woolcott did not put in a back staircase at No 40, then it is possible that he did not put one at 75, which would explain the addition of the somewhat awkwardly placed service stair that partially survives.

It is difficult to tell how similar the plans between the houses were apart from the two major rooms per floor with staircase to the side; 75 had originally windows facing northward, which may have changed how the rooms were configured. Also, the staircase may have been top lit before the top storey was added.

### The Decoration

Today it seems that if there ever was any Adam designed decoration at No 75 it has disappeared. However both ceilings in the first floor drawing rooms are certainly in the Adam style. The one in the front room is known to be almost identical to two other ceilings in other houses in Portland Place. This could lead to a number of explanations:

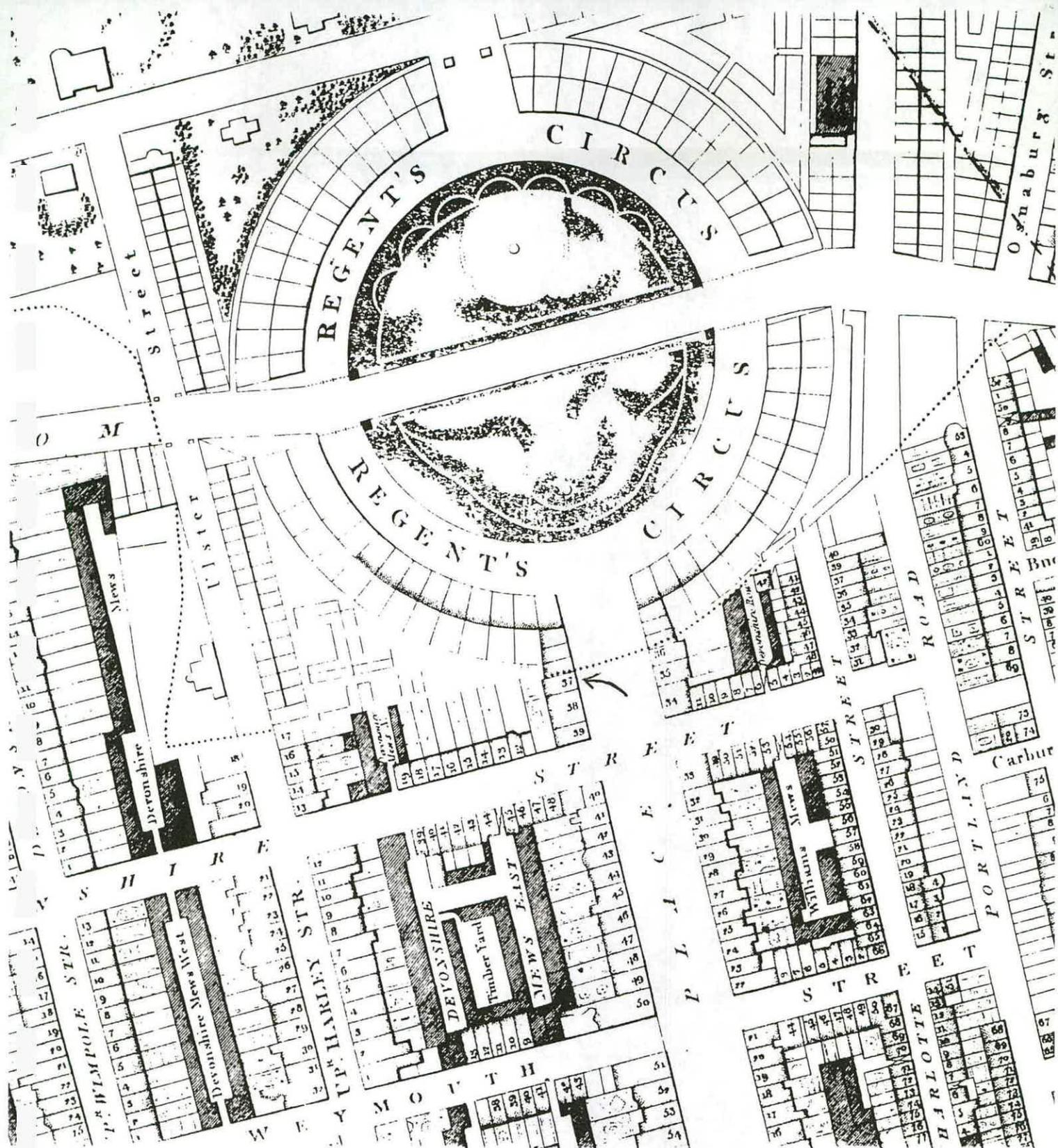
- 1) As the house was finished in the years that Robert Adam died and at the end of the project, the brothers' direct involvement may have been minimal, and the plaster moulds from an Adam ceiling elsewhere in the development may have simply been re-used. Certainly the drawings for the ceilings chimney pieces and other decoration in the development that survive in the Soane Museum seem to all be dated 1775-78, which was early on in the construction.

- 2) Ceilings may have been provided by someone like Joseph Rose who held leases in Mansfield Street and Portland Place and was still alive (d. 1799).
- 3) The ceilings may have been inserted in the nineteenth century, which has been suggested by the Architectural History Practice Limited, and certainly Adam style decoration has been an institution of the decorating trade for the last 200 years, with continuous revivals in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

My feeling was that they were of the Adam style but did not appear to be fully 'Adam'. That does not seem to mean that the ceilings were not installed when the houses was built, as Woolcott's other house, No 40, had Adam style ceilings, as did most of the houses in the development.

Tara Draper  
Architectural Investigation





Horwood's map of Marylebone, 1819

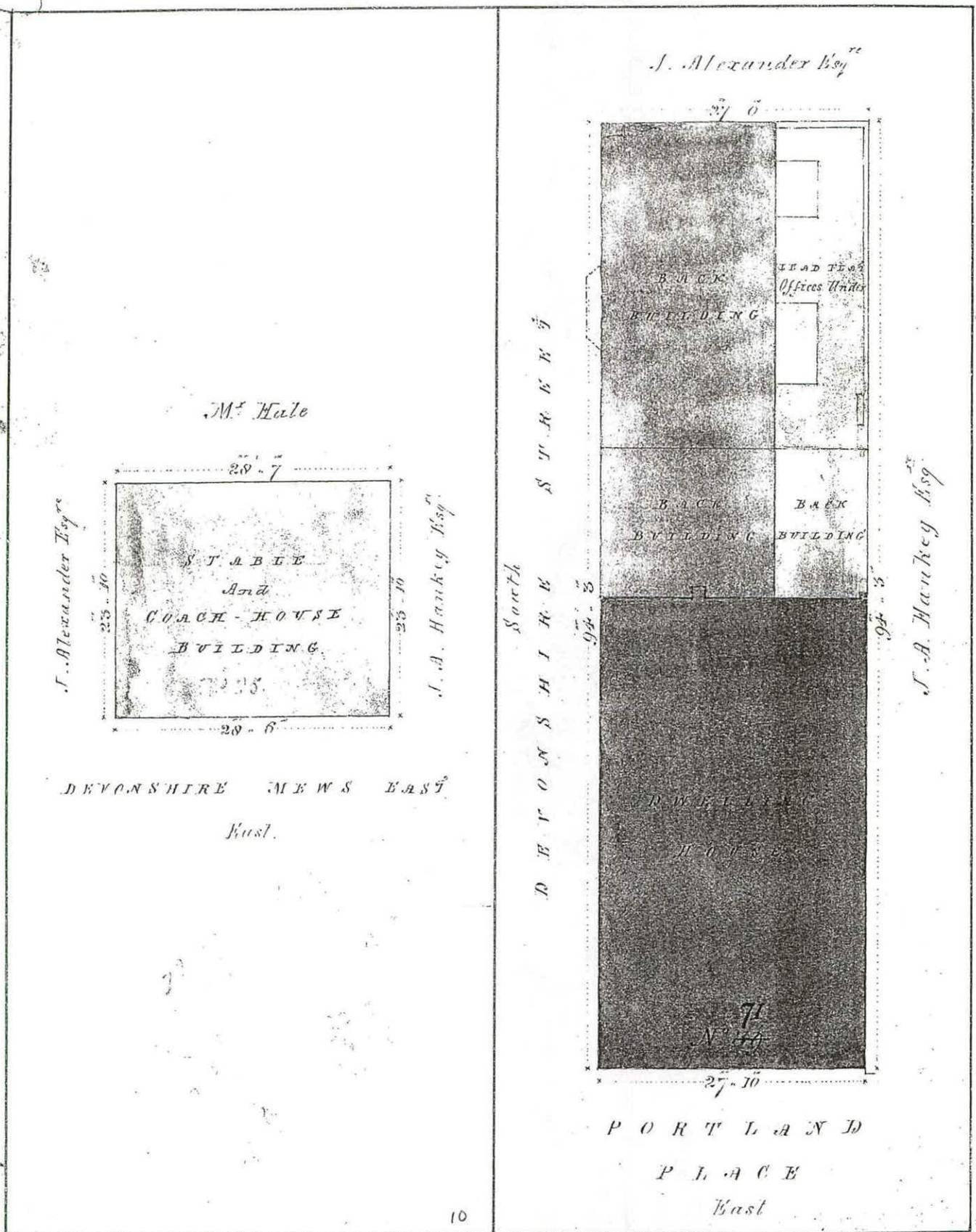


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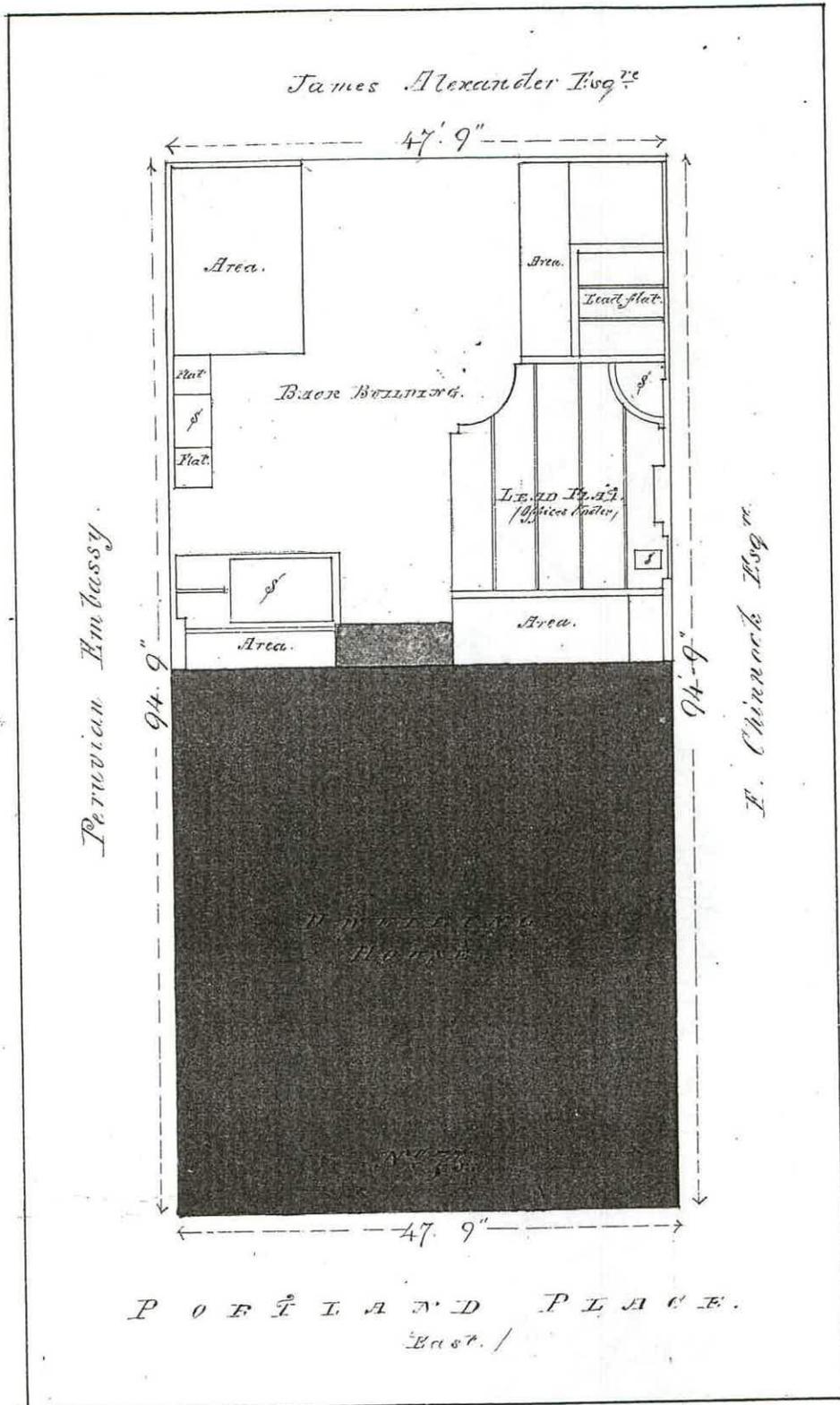
Ordnance Survey map, 1875

Langham House

Map labels include: Park Crescent News West, Park Crescent News East, Upper Wimpole Street, Great Marylebone Street, Cavendish Street, Mansfield Street, Queen Anne Street, Bulstrode Street, Bentinck Street, and various building names like 'Langham House' and 'Chapel of St. Mary'.



E.T. 10. <sup>71 form<sup>9</sup></sup> West side of Portland Place & North side of Devonshire Street, & Stable & Coachhouse Building West side of Devonshire Mews East. [1866] Block plan of 71 Portland Place, showing the original flat back wall ~~Northward Manuach~~ W. Tebb Esq<sup>r</sup> 2211



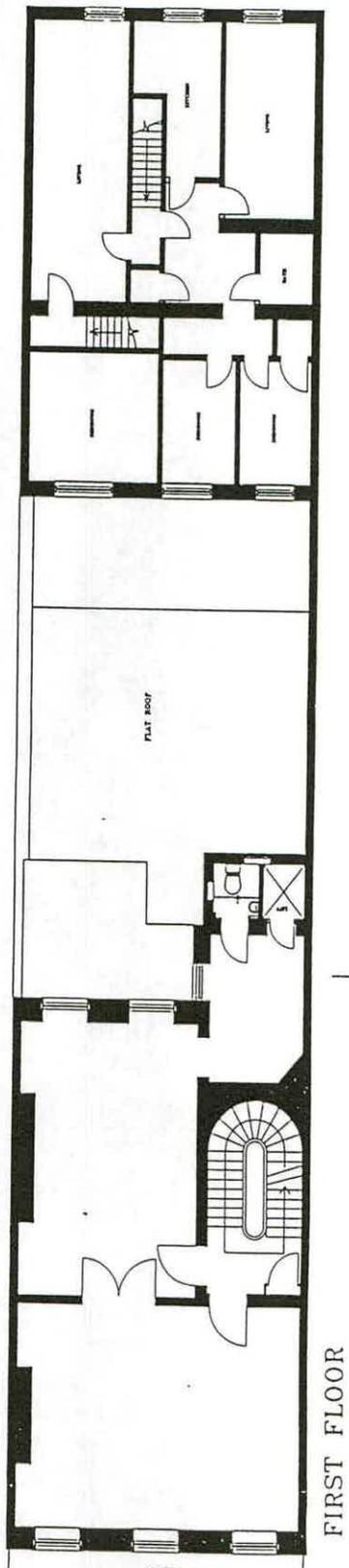
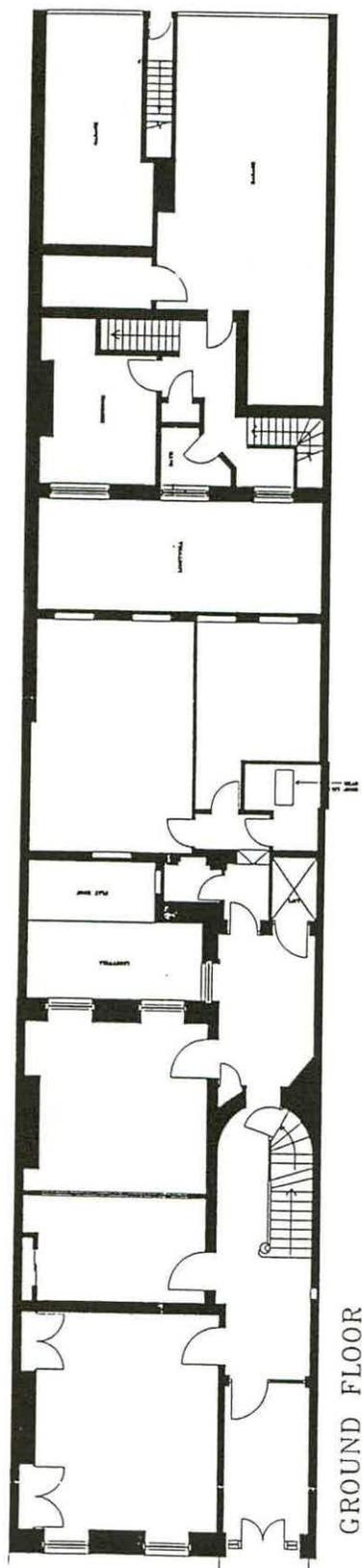
11

E. 6. 11. A: 73 West side of Portland Place & stable and Coach house building  
the West & South sides of Devonshire New House.

[1870]

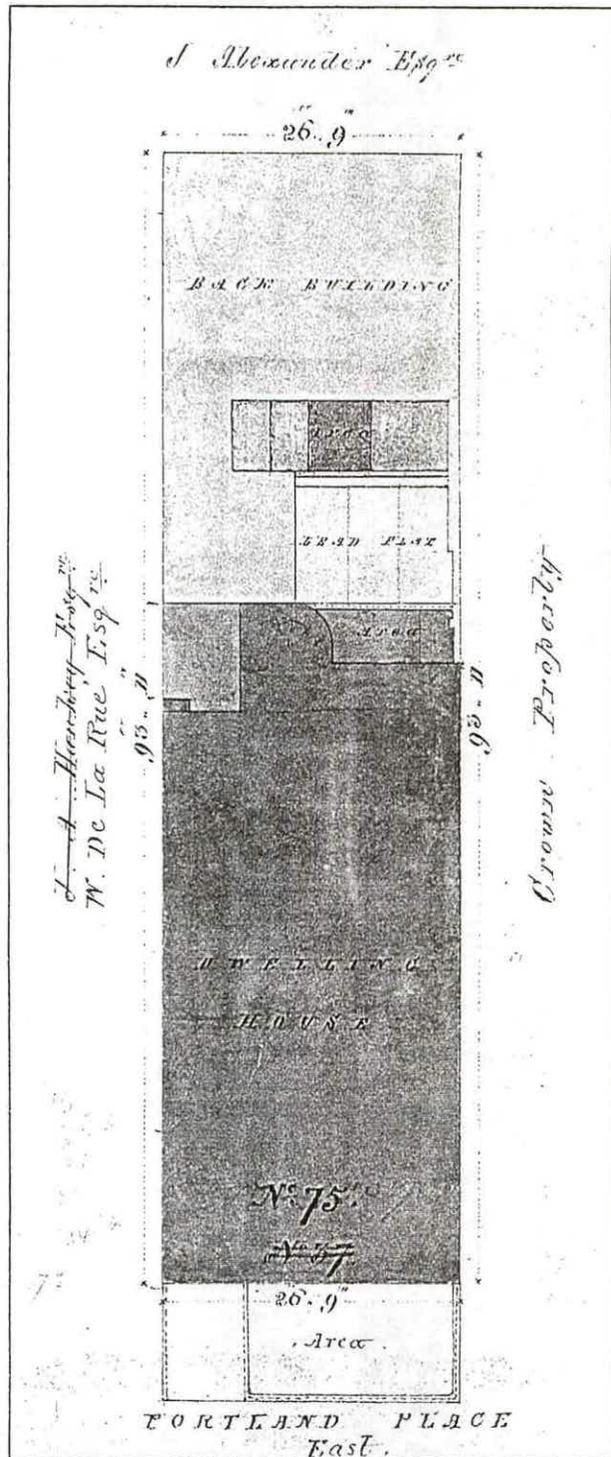
Block plan of 73 Portland Place, showing the original flat back wall

11877



*No. 40 Portland Place, plans of the ground and first floor*

Plan of 40 Portland Place with added wing, now housing lift and toilets



May 1885.  
 Redrawn on Skins  
 with the Stables N<sup>o</sup> 25  
 Devonshire News East  
 & Abutals Se as altered  
 in red Ink.  
 ( See 7929. )

26.9

Scale  
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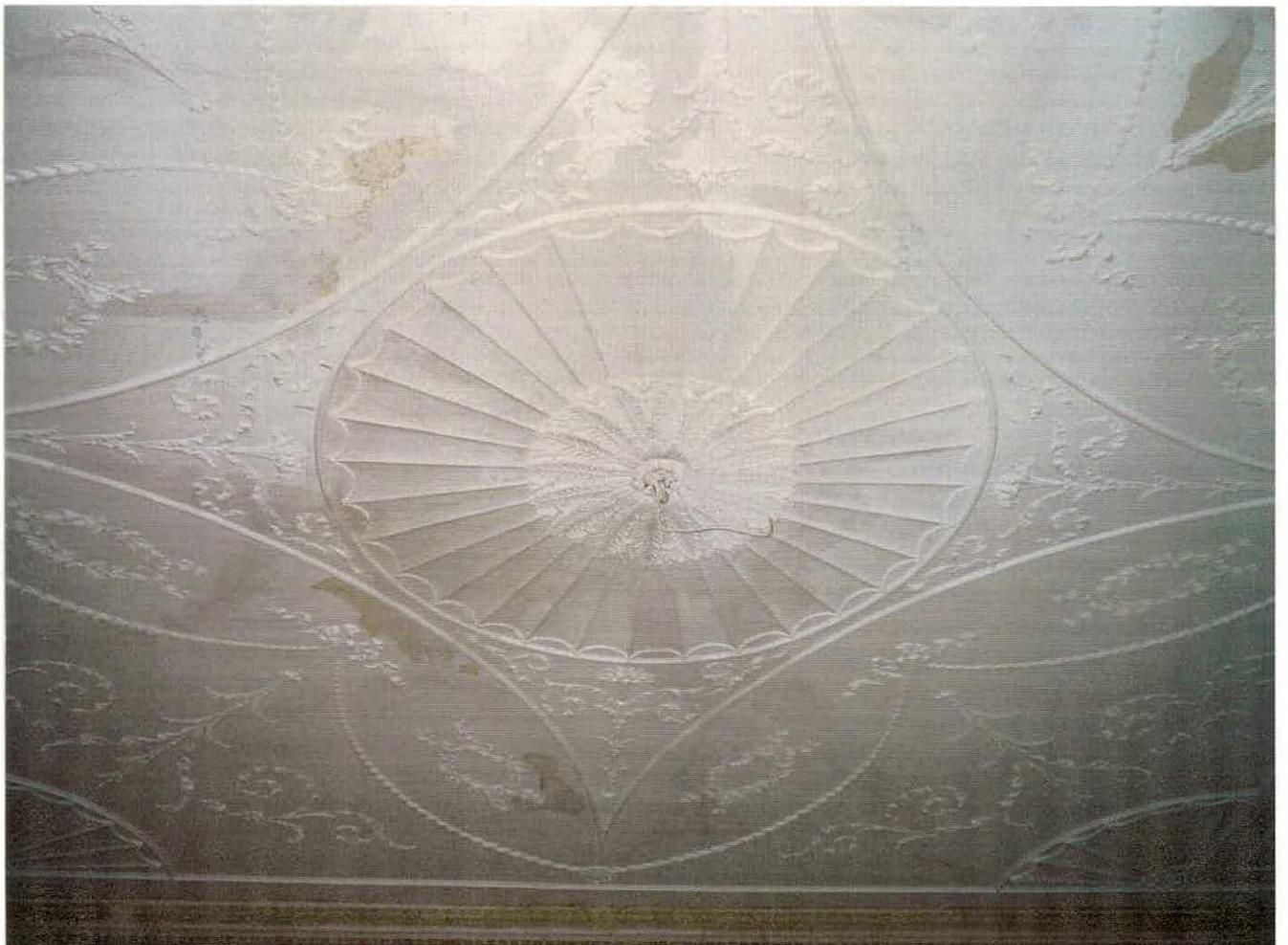
E. 6. 12. N<sup>o</sup> 75. formerly N<sup>o</sup> 57. West side of Portland Place

( Ex<sup>t</sup> & term. )

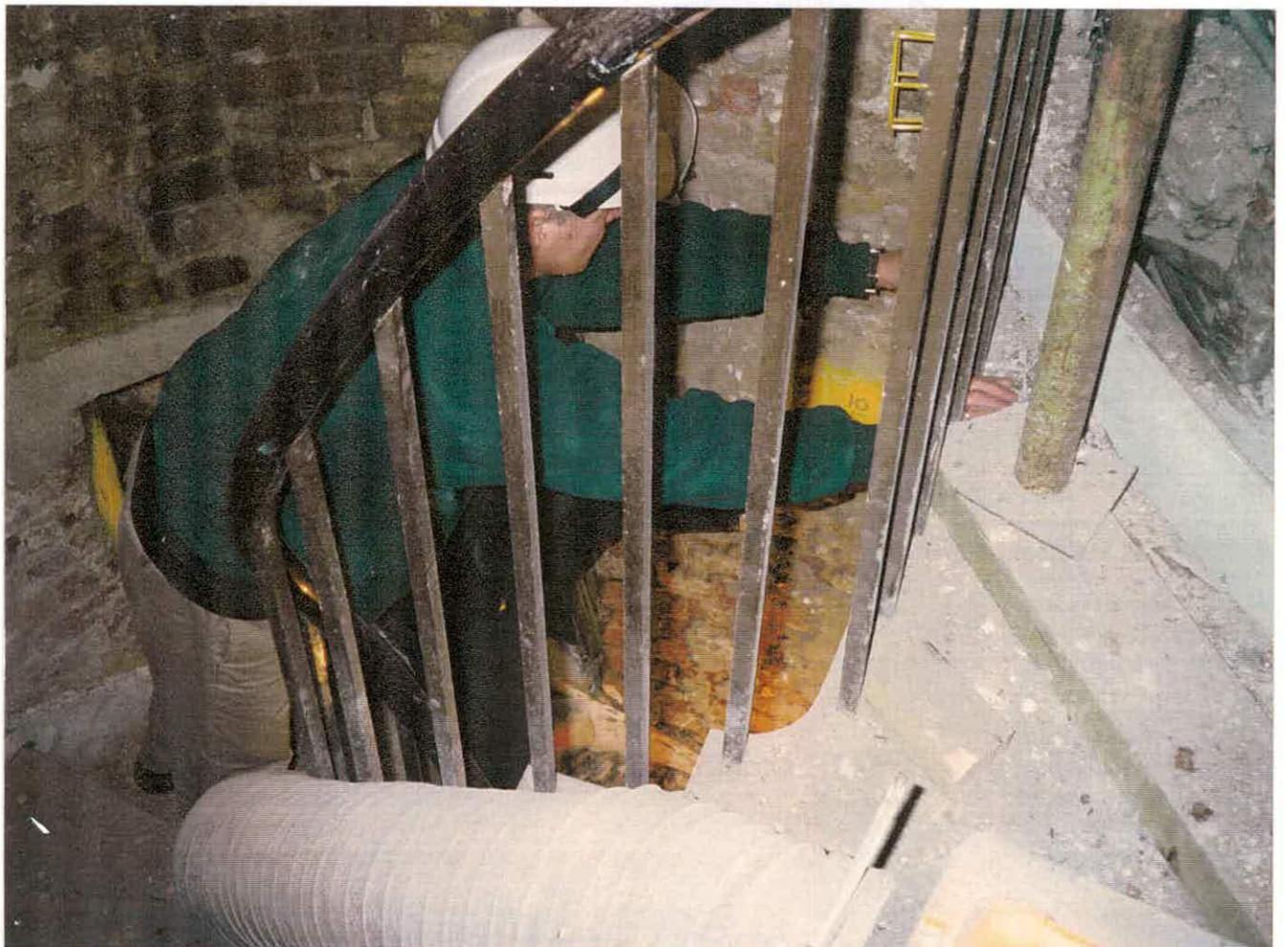
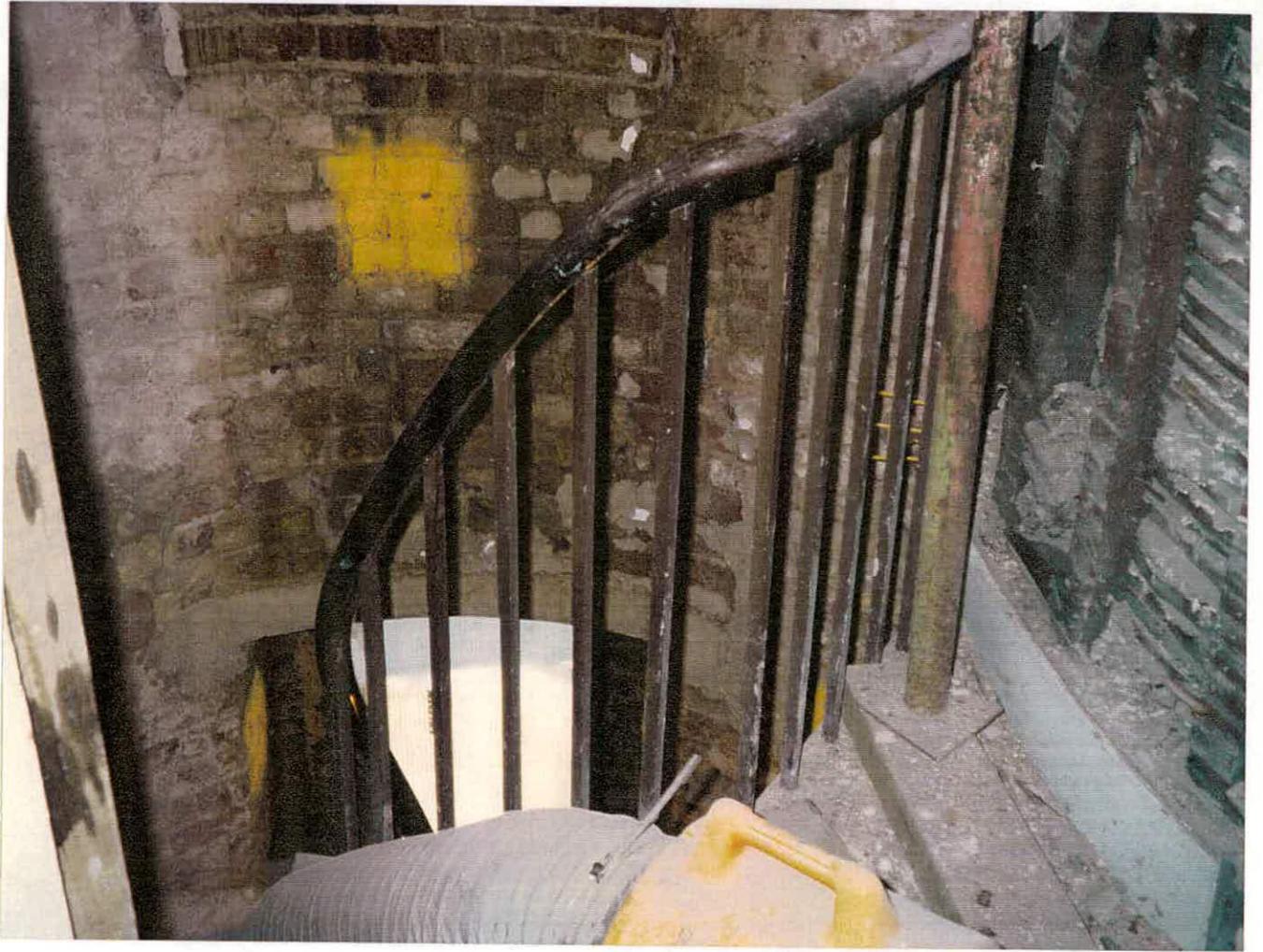
Stanley Bird Esq. 1928

1928

Block plan of 75 Portland Place, which first appeared with the assignment of lease in 1866, and revised in 1883



Photographs, November 2001, showing door surround from the first floor front room, and Adamesque plaster ceiling



Photographs November 2001, showing the rear staircase and brick staircase compartment

## 75 Portland Place, Westminster: Notes and observations following site visit 13<sup>th</sup> November 2001

### *The layout of the original house, c. 1790*

As originally constructed in 1790, the house comprised a basement storey, a ground floor with entrance hallway, a first floor '*piano nobile*', a second floor where the bedrooms were located, and an attic storey. The house had one main staircase linking the ground, first and second floors. The service rooms in the basement were entered via a doorway situated under the main entrance to the house. It is assumed that there must have been a staircase linking the basement with the ground floor for bringing food and dishes to and from the kitchen and dining room, however its position within the former house plan is uncertain.

### *Construction of the present rear staircase and rear wall, 1810-1883*

At some date between 1810-1883, the present rear staircase was added and rear wall rebuilt on a line some five or six feet to the west of the original rear wall. The staircase provided access between the basement and second floor, whilst the pushing out of the rear wall allowed for internal doorways to be constructed between the staircase and rear rooms. There is clear evidence in the present fabric to show that the staircase and rear wall were built at the same time as one another, and that they were added following the construction of the original late C18th house. The principal indications are as follows:

- There is a vertical construction joint in the brickwork, visible at ground floor both inside the house and externally, at the junction between the northern end of the exterior rear wall and the party (formerly garden?) wall dividing the house from the adjacent property, no. 77 Portland Place. The walls were built using different types of brick, and are not bonded together. The face brickwork of the party/garden wall can be seen extending eastwards behind the brickwork of the rear wall, and therefore pre-dates the construction of the rear wall of no.75. Consequently the 'earliest possible' date for the construction of the rear wall/staircase is c.1810, i.e. some time after the construction of the adjoining row of terraced houses, designed by John Nash. The 'latest possible' date for the alterations is 1883, the date of a plan drawn up to accompany a new lease taken out on the property, and which clearly shows in outline the both the rear staircase and area of the rear extension.
- The brickwork of the projecting staircase compartment and rear wall is, by contrast, all of one piece, with the exterior face bricks forming the internal angle all properly bonded together and the coursing lines carried through from one side to the other. The staircase and wall are therefore both of the same date and built during a single period of alteration. The evidence is clearest at basement level in the exposed brickwork at the bottom of the exterior wall face.
- The brick arch to the period I window lighting the first floor landing of the main staircase (i.e. at first to second floor mezzanine level) has been partially built over and concealed at its northern end by the south wall of the rear staircase compartment.
- Inside the rear staircase compartment at second floor level can be seen a section of what was originally the exterior rear wall face. The formerly external surface of brickwork is sooted and somewhat eroded through exposure to the elements, and has struck mortar joints between the brick courses. The wall face was plastered over and made into an interior wall following the addition of the rear staircase.
- The plaster frieze presently extending around the front and rear rooms at first floor level also continues into the window bay in the rear wall lighting the rear room. Since the window bay was constructed when the rear wall was extended and rear staircase added, the plaster frieze (and by implication, the plaster ceilings, also) must also date to after 1810. It has already been established that there originally existed a much smaller communicating doorway (probably a double door opening) between the front and rear rooms at first floor, and that this was at some time removed and replaced with the present enlarged opening. Whether or not this work was carried out at the

same time as the rear staircase was added is uncertain, however it seems logical to suppose that the works formed part of a single major remodelling of the house in the period 1810-1883. If that assumption is correct, then the work would also have included the heightening of the house and addition of the present upper storey; the blocking of the windows in the north (party) wall, made redundant after the adjoining Nash terrace was built in *c.* 1810; and the large-scale renewal of the fireplaces throughout the building.

Richard Bond  
Historical Analysis and Research team  
English Heritage

November 2001

## 75 PORTLAND PLACE, WESTMINSTER

Photographs and notes taken during a visit to the building on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2001, to assess the historical and architectural significance of the rear staircase and decorative plasterwork within the house. The advice was requested by English Heritage London Region following an application for Listed Building Consent to take out the existing 19<sup>th</sup> century staircase and install an electric lift inside the shell of the staircase compartment.



**Figure 1**

View of west side of Portland Place, looking north. Group shot showing no.75 (third building from the far end, its façade hidden behind plastic sheeting) with later terraced row by Nash standing beyond it to the right.

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**Figure 2**

View of the exterior elevation of the rear wall at basement level, looking east.

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**Figure 3**

Photograph of the exterior elevation of the rear wall at basement level, showing the junction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century staircase extension and rear wall. A new door opening has been inserted in the rear wall and consequently much of the original brickwork has been lost. However the close bonding of the brickwork at the angle of the rear wall and projecting staircase wall (hidden behind the drainpipe in the above photograph) and use of the same type of bricks and mortar shows clearly that the wall and staircase were built at the same time.

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**Figure 4**

View of the inside of the rear staircase compartment, looking down towards the basement from third floor. The staircase extended up to second floor only, and was accessed via the main staircase (via doorways at mezzanine, or half-landing level), and from the rear rooms. The brick shell of the staircase compartment was extended upwards to form a closet for the rear room at third floor. The uppermost of the doorways leading off the main staircase can be seen at the lower left hand corner of the photograph.

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**Figure 5**

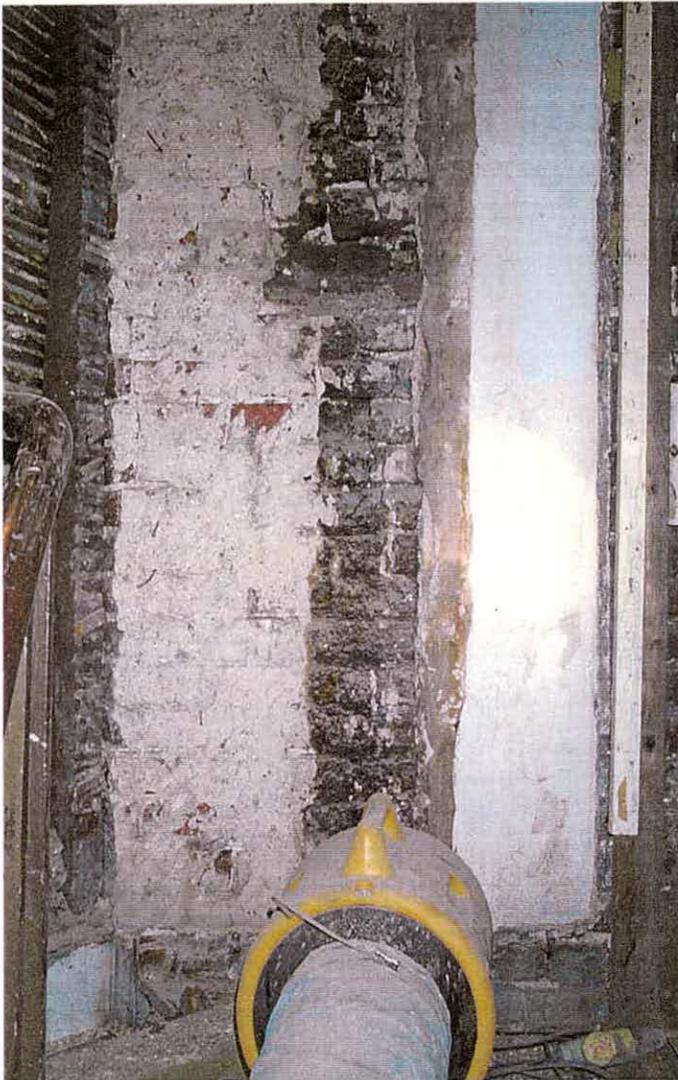
Photograph taken inside the rear room at basement level, showing the junction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century rear wall of no. 75 (to the left) and the c.1790 party wall dividing the house from the adjoining house on the north side, no.77 Portland Place. As can clearly be seen in the photograph, the brickwork of the later rear wall abuts, but is not bonded into, the brickwork of the earlier party wall. Prior to the construction of the rear wall on a line some five or six feet to the west of the original rear wall line of no.75, the section of party wall shown here was external, and perhaps formed part of an original garden wall.

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Historical Analysis and Research Team  
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Photographs and notes taken during a visit to the building on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2001, to assess the historical and architectural significance of the rear staircase and decorative plasterwork within the house. The advice was requested by English Heritage London Region following an application for Listed Building Consent to take out the existing 19<sup>th</sup> century staircase and install an electric lift inside the shell of the staircase compartment.



**Figure 6**

Photograph taken inside rear staircase compartment at second-third floor mezzanine level, looking eastwards (i.e. towards the interior of the house) at the west face of the original rear wall of the house. Following the addition of the rear staircase and rebuilding of the rear wall, this section of the wall became an internal wall. As can be seen in the above photograph, where the later plaster has been removed, the surface of the brickwork is heavily stained with soot.

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Historical Analysis and Research Team  
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**Figure 7**

View of the rear room at first floor, looking west towards the rear wall. The plaster ceiling and frieze extend into and across the area of the additional curved bay, and must therefore be contemporary with (or post-date) the construction of the present rear staircase and rear wall.

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