

BROWNLOW HOUSE, 24 BETTERTON STREET
COVENT GARDEN
CITY OF WESTMINSTER

HERITAGE ASSET STATEMENT

by

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December 2014

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I. INTRODUCTION

The house was built on the Brownlow estate, off Drury Lane. The property in the area of Drury Lane was bought by Sir John Brownlow of Belton, Lincolnshire, in 1647, with a large house, later called Lenox House, there. He died in 1679. The estate then passed to his great nephew Sir Richard Brownlow who immediately started to develop the property, demolishing Lenox House and letting plots on building leases for a term of years expiring in 1728. The new building leases were dated 1682. The development involved the laying out of two new streets: Belton Street called after the Brownlow's family seat in Lincolnshire (now Endell Street) and Brownlow Street (now Betterton Street, the name being changed in 1872). No. 24 is the only survivor of Sir Richard Brownlow's building development. It dates from c. 1682 with some internal features and plan-form of that date. A degree of remodelling took place on the surrender of the original lease in 1728 and the simple Georgian panelling in some rooms was introduced then.

Brownlow House, No. 24 Betterton Street is included in the statutory list at Grade II*. It merits a 'star' by reason of its date, its unusual plan-form and many surviving internal features, notably the late-17th century type dog-leg staircase with 'barley-sugar' balusters and substantial square newels and handrail. Many of the rooms retain panelling of late-17th century and early-18th century date. The proposal is to restore the building to its original purpose (always the best use for a listed building) as a single family dwelling. In the late-19th century the building comprised a shop on the ground floor and a rooming house above.

Though the building was largely reinstated as a family house about 20 or 30 years ago, the works were crudely done, and the basement was left in separate occupation.

The current proposals are for a more sensitive and historically informed reinstatement of the interior to the designs of HILL MITCHELL BERRY (Drawing Nos. P01, P05-P139, P205-P339 & P350)

with advice on the interior by Hugh Henry of Mlinaric, Henry & Zervudachi, and historical details by John Martin Robinson.

The name Brownlow House commemorates the old street name, changed to Betterton Street in the 20th century.

SHORT HISTORY

The history of No. 24 Betterton Street is, in view of its undoubted interest, surprisingly sparse. It falls just outside the *Survey of London* volume on Covent Garden. (St. Paul's, Covent Garden). The volume on *St. Giles-in-the-Fields* merely includes a sketch of the front door. And the list description is inadequate (see Appendix), and inaccurate, reflecting this lack of basic research.

There seems to have been two stages of historic architectural development at the house reflected in the pattern of the internal panelling. It was originally built in the late-17th century as a wide-fronted symmetrical design with central entrance door and side wings, now removed. The unusual plan-form with central hall and staircase and flanking front rooms, with smaller rear closets, and substantial internal chimney stacks survive from that date. The staircase, and the bolection-moulded panelling in some of the rooms (notably the ground floor East room) is late-17th century. The spacious centralised plan reflects the original setting in the loose suburban fringe of 17th century Covent Garden and Seven Dials with their denser layouts. This spacious setting of gardens and fields changed with the development in the late-17th century and early-18th century of the Mercers' Company Long Acre Estate to the North West and the Earl of Southampton's Bloomsbury Estate to the North. Subsequent to that development, the side wings were demolished and the rest of Betterton (originally Brownlow) Street was built up with smaller houses, leaving the house as a lone survivor of a more spaciouly planned age. Internal panelling of the 1720s or 1730s marks the alterations to the

house at that time following the removal of the wings. The present elegant reeded door-case was added to the front *c.* 1790 and thin-barred double hung sashes replaced earlier window joinery, and Welsh slates replaced the original red tiled roof.

In the 19th century the property descended in the world (like much of the parish of St. Giles-in-the-Fields) becoming a lodging house. Cheap and makeshift alterations followed: cutting new doors here and there in the partitions, and removing sections of panelling. This stage and the war-time history of the house are comparatively well documented (see Appendix material).

The house was restored largely as a single family house (with a separate flat in the basement) in the 1980s. Sadly the work done at that time was insensitively carried out with much stripping of woodwork, cheap partitions and fittings and the introduction of stripped pine four-panelled doors and chimneypieces and inappropriate cast iron stove-grates garnered from second hand/salvage shops. Enough of the late-17th century and 18th century fittings survive however (staircase, odd doors and stretches of panelling) to enable an accurate restoration and repair to be carried out.

III. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Exterior

The front and rear elevations survive with multi-coloured stock brick, brushed red brick gauged arches and largely late-19th century double hung six-pane sashes and neo-classical doorcase with narrow reeded pilasters.

The third floor and roof are largely reconstructed following wear and tear damage and there are three iron tie beams holding the front and back together at third floor level. The rear elevation is much patched with some semi-blocked windows. The back door is UPV and unauthorised.

Interior

The basement is entirely modernised and retains no features of particular interest. The ground floor retains much of its special interest. The hall has a modern inner draft porch, and is opened up to the West front room. The East wall is 17th century and includes an original door, now sealed shut.

The East room is the best preserved interior and retains late-17th century bolection moulded panelling and door architraves. The four-panelled North door and the chimneypiece are both modern and inappropriate.

The rear East Closet retains simple unmoulded panelling and a little Carrara marble ship early-18th century fireplace surround, the only old fireplace to survive in the house. The huge square internal chimneystack between the front and back rooms is an original 17th century feature, and very unusual in a London terraced house. The West front room is plain, having been converted to a shop in the 19th century (the shop window survives). The panelling has all been removed. The black marble Victorian chimneypiece is a recent insertion.

The Rear West Closet room has been converted to a bathroom and retains no features of interest.

The staircase on the central axis is the best preserved 17th century feature in the house. It rises opposite the front door, and has a dog-leg plan with barley-sugar bannisters. There is a panelled dado up to the second floor. It rises the full height of the building.

First Floor

The East Rear Closet has simple early 18th century panelling. The chimneypiece has been removed. There is a 'salvage' stripped pine door recently inserted, to the staircase.

The front East room has a timber box cornice and original panelling, part 17th century pattern with bolection moulding, simple unmoulded early-18th century on the East wall. There is no chimneypiece (just a brought in Victorian iron grate, with modern mirror glass over).

The Front West Room

17th century pattern bolection moulded panelling survives only on the front wall. The timber box cornice has been replaced in replica. The Victorian chimneypiece with dinky iron cooking range is a recent intervention and inappropriate. So also are the pine double doors, and four-panel stripped pine door to the stairs.

Rear West Closet Room

This has been converted to a modern kitchen and is largely stripped out, though simple early-18th century panelling survives in part behind kitchen fittings. The door from the staircase (though stripped) is a precious survival. It comprises two panels and has original iron L-hinges. This provides a model for accurate reinstatement elsewhere in the house.

Second Floor

The West Front Room has simple panelling. The iron cooking grate in a modern 'Regency' surround are recent.

The Rear West Closet is stripped out for a modern bathroom.

The Rear Front Room has simple panelling and a replica box cornice.

The Third Floor (Attic Rooms)

These are all reconstructed with plain modern spaces and no features of special interest.

IV. IMPACT OF THE PROPOSALS

It is proposed to restore all the panelled rooms retaining the original joinery and reinstating missing sections on the evidence of the original, and to replace all the modern stripped pine doors with replicas of the surviving original two-panelled door on the first floor. New chimneypieces of appropriate bolection design will be reinstated in the principal rooms. All the original features and the staircase, identified as being of special interest in this report will be retained and conservatively repaired.

In the ground floor West room, the old shop window will be retained as part of the history of the building. The inappropriate double sliding doors to the hall will be replaced with better detailed new ones.

On the first floor, the principal change is the moving of the kitchen from the rear West to the front West. The central opening in the internal wall and the cooker range sited against this modern structure. Elsewhere the panelling will be retained, and the new kitchen fittings designed as furnishing.

On the second floor missing sections of panelling will be reinstated to complete the original scheme. The new bathroom is fitted in a room which has been completely modernised.

This is an admirable restoration scheme which will restore the building more closely to its

true form. Ugly and inappropriate recent intrusions will be removed. None of the new works will affect features of special interest.

APPENDICES

1. List Description
2. Historical Material