

53 BEDFORD SQUARE AND 35 BEDFORD AVENUE
LONDON WC1

Alterations to house and associated mews building.

HISTORICAL STATEMENT

Listing

No. 53 Bedford Square is listed Grade I, being included within the listing that covers the south side of Bedford Square ie. Nos 40-54 (consecutive); Nos. 33 and 35 Bedford Avenue are also included within the same listing. No.35 is the mews house to No.53 Bedford Square.

Historical Statement

The site was leased by the Bedford Estate in 1777 and the square was finished and fully occupied by 1784. The design of the square was of uniform symmetrical terraces with a stuccoed, pedimented centre and balustraded end houses. The best houses were on the east side where their gardens originally backed onto those of Monatagu House before its site was developed for the British Museum. The houses on the north, west and south sides were served by mews houses, some fronted with pedimented elevations to terminate the private gardens. The architect is not certain; No.13 was leased and completed by Thomas Leverton in 1781-82 and he lived there from 1795 until his death in 1824. Leverton certainly worked for clients at Nos.6 and 10, but his involvement might have been restricted to the grandest houses, and the less skilled classical detailing on many houses suggests that others were responsible elsewhere. It is likely that Bedford Square is primarily the work of Robert Palmer, the surveyor for the Bedford Estate, working with Robert Grews and William Scott, the carpenter and brickmaker, who leased the majority of the plots.

The internal arrangement of the houses varied depending on the requirements of the first occupants. The quality of the houses, with planning often incorporating curved walls and the standard of the finishes with fine decorative plaster ceilings, several containing painted panels by Angelica Kauffman and her circle, and fine stone staircases with delicate iron balustrading, reflected the gentility and well-being of the occupants who generally were leaders in the City or the Inns of Court rather than the aristocracy whose houses were more focussed around Berkeley Square.

The success of the square resulted in the infil of some gardens between the houses and the mews buildings to provide additional domestic accommodation by the middle of the

19th century. By that time, however, Bloomsbury was beginning to decline in popularity as a well-to-do district. Although the best squares retained their attraction, there was some reduction in social standing with several houses occupied by architects and doctors rather than by lawyers. The real change of Bedford Square from a residential haven of choice started in the 1890s. The removal of the gates that controlled access to the Bedford Estate had allowed commercial traffic through the Square, and from 1901 onwards houses were adapted as offices. This accelerated after the First World War and by 1938 just six houses remained in private occupation; there were no private residents left after the Second War.

Changing social patterns also resulted in the development of Caroline Mews as Bedford Avenue at the end of the 19th century. The south side of the mews was cleared and replaced in the 1890s with a development of seven storey high blocks of flats known as Bedford Court Mansions designed by Purchase & Martin and Allan Vigers. On the north side, the mews was cut back to widen the street and the truncated plan of the mews houses was given a smart new facade. As mews accommodation was becoming redundant, the reduced space was used as stores and no access was provided from the buildings out to the street. It is likely that the catalyst for this development by the Bedford Estate was the end of the original building leases of the houses in Bedford Square.

Following the death of the 12th Duke of Bedford in a shooting accident on his Tavistock Estate in October 1953, the south side of Bedford Square was sold by the Trustees of the Bedford Estates to mitigate death duties. Nos. 43-53 were subsequently carefully restored and adapted as modern offices complete with lifts and new cloakrooms by Ellis Clarke and Gallannaugh for Abbey Life Assurance; the work was carried out to the individual houses between 1970 and 1992 when the leases became available. In parallel to the refurbishment of the original houses, the mews buildings were totally rebuilt to provide supplementary office accommodation behind the retained rear facades.

53 Bedford Square and 35 Bedford Avenue

No.53 is one of the simpler houses in the square and was clearly completed to a limited budget. The plan originally took no advantage of the corner site, in contrast to the houses at the entrance to Montague Place, nor did it contain the curved walls or other planning complexities found in the better houses. The decorative detail was also limited and there is no surviving evidence of enriched ceilings. However, the stone staircase is elegant with its wrought iron 'S' balustrading, and the arrangement of the doors to the ground floor rooms was enhanced by coupling them with a central arched recess. Like other houses, the front room facing the square was larger than that at the back and was approached through the rear section of the space that would have been treated as a subordinate bay. No door led into the room from the hall which extended from the front door to an opening near the foot of the stair. The stair ran up to the second floor; there was no lantern and it was lit by windows at each half landing. From the second floor, the access to the third floor was via a separate attic stair set to the north of the polite stair.

The early development of the house had meant that the garden had been built over by 1799 with a single storey structure separated by basement areas on its north and south sides from both the canted rear elevation of the house and the face of the mews building. The front and rear buildings were connected by a corridor at ground floor level on the west side set above an open passage below. The square room might have served as a kitchen and a flue rose on its south side. It was on top of this that the house was extended with a large room at ground floor level, with two windows onto Bloomsbury Street, shown in place by 1874; again separated by the existing areas from the house and mews and approached from the west by the ground floor corridor.

The mews building belonging to No.53 was larger than the others in Caroline Mews (renamed Bedford Avenue at the end of the 19C), as it and the building opposite, projected forward from the building line. Not only did this form a gateway into the mews, but it allowed the doors into the building to be concealed around the corner from the polite views in Charlotte Street (now Bloomsbury Street).

The redevelopment of Caroline Mews as Bedford Avenue in the 1890s, reduced the size of the mews building serving No.53 considerably, removing both the projection that formed the gateway as well as cutting back the stabling; the result left only a storage space as with the rest of the north side of the street. The new elevation also meant that the house had no relationship to Bedford Avenue as there were no doors in its new red brick and Portland stone elevation, designed to provide a suitable setting for the new mansion flats on the south side of the road rather than enhance Bedford Square houses.

The professional use of No.53 in the 20th century resulted in the division of the house with a new entrance facing onto Bloomsbury Street to give access to the commercial premises in the house that were now numbered No.54 Bedford Square. Edward Stanley Hall, occupied no.54 as an architect in 1910, and it is possible that the Gibbsian doorcase on the side elevation dates from this time. Inside, the rear room of the 18th century house provided a reception space for the offices whilst a door from it through the dividing wall gave onto the front room which was subdivided to form offices and a corridor. A door by the canted south bay led to the ancillary accommodation. The upper floors of the house were independent of the offices and approached from the front door of No.53. The introduction of bathrooms on the upper floors led to the opening of blind recesses on the east elevation to form sash windows on the second and third floors. The same appears to be true of that on the ground floor which comes as part of the early office adaptation of the house.

The redevelopment of the building by Abbey Life as modern offices was approved in 1972. The major work was the demolition of the mews building and its replacement with a new, four-storey, office block behind the retained 1890s facade to Bedford Avenue. Each floor was treated as an open plan office and the new staircase was planned to provide a protected means of escape in case of fire; the final exit was to Bedford Avenue through a new door formed by lengthening one of the sash window apertures. The building in the courtyard was removed, and its elevation to the street was rebuilt as a screen wall complete with its radiused copings and two blank openings that

recall the 19th century windows. Behind this the new court was paved, and the corridor on the west side was replaced with small paned timber framed structure, on a narrower plan, at ground floor level above an open passage.

The main alteration to the house in the office refurbishment was the construction of a service tower and lift shaft to the south of the staircase. Previously, the staircase had windows on each half landing facing south, except between the first and second floors where the window had been lengthened to give access to a 19th century lavatory extension that bridged between the two external flank walls. The stair, thus, became internalised in the 1972 modernisation. To compensate for this, to get natural light back into the stair and to improve accessibility to the third floor offices, the main staircase was extended up to the top floor by incorporating the attic room above it as part of the stair shaft and a modern lantern was constructed on the roof. The original attic stair was removed and the space released supplemented the offices on the second and third floors. The basement, ground, second and third floors were repartitioned. The alterations involved opening of a further blind window, the introduction of new rooflights and the relocation of the dormers, all on the third floor. The historic doorways to the ground floor rooms were modified with a new door from the hall to the front room being made and the original door to the back room blocked up. The screen defining the original entrance hall was removed and the present, reduced, vestibule was formed.

Alterations by Imago Planned Interiors Ltd were approved in 1980 to adapt the buildings to the specific needs of a publishing house for Addison-Wesley Publishers Ltd. This focussed on the partitioning of the new mews building, but further subdivision of the house was also implemented. A new door leading direct from the vestibule to the ground floor front room dates from 1980.

The recent change of use, returning No.53 and its mews house to domestic accommodation, was designed by Scott Brownrigg in 2007 and was completed as a speculative development in 2012. Partitions were removed and reformed in both the new block as well as the house. The work recovered large spaces within the main building and reconfigured the mews . The corridor through the courtyard was rebuilt as a glass structure enclosing space at the basement and ground floor levels. The principal change was the introduction of sanitary accommodation suitable for a large house.

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Peter Inskip + Peter Jenkins Architects Ltd
19-23 White Lion Street, London N1 9PD
T: 020 7833 4002

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