Bob Barton
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Dear Mr Barton,

27 Russell Square, London WC1
Assessment of Internal Partitions

The above property was visited by Dr Michael Shapland of Archaeology South-East on Monday 5th July 2016 in order to assess the nature and date of the floor structure to the upper three storeys of the front range of the house.

27 Russell Square was built *c*.1814 by James Burton, a prominent property developer, on land leased from the Bedford Estate, as one of the last portions of the scheme (begun in 1805) to be constructed. Turning to the 20th century, land in Bloomsbury was purchased between 1921 and 1927 for the relocation of the University of London, which appears to have included the western side of Russell Square. The imposing new Senate House building was constructed immediately to the west 1932-36, largely obliterating Torrington Square, followed by the Institute of Education and the School of Oriental Studies, but the onset of the Second World War prevented the original much larger scheme from being fully realised.[1] These events, followed by post-War shortages of money and building materials, probably explains why 27 Russell Square and its neighbours were spared from demolition and instead converted by the University for academic use.

Structure of Second Floor Stair Landing

To provide a comparison with the floor structures of the building's front range, that of the stair landing at second floor level was investigated, as it is not thought to have been previously modified or replaced. It consists of joists measuring 240mm deep by 60mm broad, spaced *c*. 300mm apart: one of the visible joists was slightly broader, but this may be due to the structural

[1] Karol, E., 2008. 'Naked and unashamed: Charles Holden in Bloomsbury'. The Institute of Historical Research: *Past and Future*, issue no. 4

demands of the adjacent stair. They run north-west/south-east between the building's party walls. Some of the joists were sawn, others appear to have been split and then dressed square. They bear pine floorboards 200mm wide. The substantial depth of the joists, the use of pine and the width of the floorboards are all consistent with the building's early 19th century date, making it likely that they are original to its construction.

Structure of the First Floor

A small area adjacent to the rear wall of the front room at first floor level was available for investigation. The floor joists consist of sawn lengths of pine, measuring 250mm deep by 50mm broad, spaced *c*. 250mm apart. They run north-west/south-east between the building's party walls, and are very similar in size and appearance to those of the second floor landing, and as such are likely to be original to the building. Their floorboards, however, are only 150mm wide and are probably later 19th or early 20th century replacements, since this room (the *piano nobile*) would have been used for grand receptions, and so would originally have been fitted with the finest, broadest floorboards in the house.

Structure of the Second Floor

A small area towards the south-western end of the front room at second floor level was available for investigation, adjacent to an early/mid-20th century partition wall. The floor joists consist of sawn lengths of pine, one measuring 190mm deep by 65mm broad, the other only 100mm deep by 90mm broad, spaced *c*. 150mm apart. The upper face of one of the joists has been made up with smaller pieces of wood to provide a level surface for the floorboards. These joists are therefore of quite different character to those seen elsewhere, and they run north-east/south-west along the building, which is perpendicular to the direction of the visible joists across the rest of the building. The joists have been further stiffened by secondary timbers of various sizes running across the space in between, some lapped into the joists, others simply nailed.

The visible floorboards are vary in width between 150mm and 210mm, so are likely to consist of a mixture of re-used boards original to the house and later material brought in from elsewhere.

One interesting aspect of the floor is the presence of two visible metal strengthening plates, an older one of iron (which has begun to corrode) and a newer of steel. These run perpendicularly between the main joists, into which the newer strengthening plate appears to have been cut.

Overall, the original floor structure has been wholly replaced, apparently over at least two major phases of work, using heterogeneous timbers and floorboards of various sizes rather than to a single consistent design. The timbers used in this way are not sufficiently visible or distinctive to be dateable in their own right, but their use of nails with rectangular shanks is indicative of the 19th or early 20th centuries. Both the timbers and the nails may, of course, have been re-used. The earlier (iron) strengthening plate uses screw-thread nuts and bolts, dating it to the late 19th or early 20th centuries; the steel strengthening plate appears to be a mid-20th century or later insertion.

Structure of the Third Floor

A small area adjacent to the rear wall of the front room at third floor level was available for investigation. The floor joists consist of sawn lengths of pine, measuring 220mm deep by 60mm broad, spaced *c*. 300mm apart. Their marginally smaller size and wider spacing is explicable by the floor's location at the top of the house, within what was originally the servants' quarters, which may not have been considered to have needed to have been as sturdy as the floors lower down. The joists run north-west/south-east between the building's party walls, and are similar to those of the first floor and second floor landing, and as such are likely to be original to the building. The floorboards are relatively broad, at 200mm wide, so are also probably original.

Discussion

No. 27 Russell Square seems always to have experienced structural deficiencies. Despite their handsome appearance, Bloomsbury's Georgian townhouses were not generally very well built, erected as they were by speculative developers to last for only the 99-year term of their lease. The western side of Russell Square appears to have been a particularly infamous example: a letter about building standards to The Times of 5 January 1808 claimed that in Russell Square 'the fall of a house of the first class, in the NW corner (i.e. in the vicinity of No. 27), [would have] utterly entombed a number of the poor men employed in finishing it; but they had luckily left off work before it happened'.

There are two likely contexts for the apparent replacement of the second floor structure to No. 27. The first is the expiry of the house's original 99-year lease, probably in 1904 (Burton acquired the development plot in 1805). At this time the house would presumably have been placed on the market, and any pressing repairs carried out.

The second likely context for the floor's apparent replacement is the building's conversion to academic use by the University of London. As discussed above, although it probably acquired the site in the mid-1920s, the original plan would probably have been to replace the house with a new institutional structure. The University's plans were halted by World War II, meaning that after 1945 its residual stock of Georgian houses were converted rather than demolished. Any obvious defects would presumably have been rectified at this time, using whatever materials were available in post-War London, which may explain the rather makeshift appearance of the visible part of the structure. The structural problems inherent to these houses would seem to have been well known: in 1948 Willi Steiner commented that such were the weaknesses of the floor to nearby No. 25 Russell Square that 'guests had to be asked not to congregate in one area of the room but to disperse'.[2] However, the nature of the visible part of the floor, which is of generally later 19th or early 20th century appearance, precludes its confident ascription to a particular decade or date.

[2] Steiner, W., 2000. *The Institute for Advanced Legal Studies of the University of London, 1947–1976*. London: Institute for Advanced Legal Studies.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Michael Shapland

Senior Archaeologist (Historic Buildings)

Floor structure of the second floor landing, looking south

Structure of the first floor (front range), looking south-west

Structure of the second floor (front range), looking north-east. Note the steel plate running perpendicular to the main timbers.

Structure of the second floor (front range), looking north-east along the joists. Note the corrode iron plate running perpendicular to the main timbers.

Structure of the third floor (front range), looking south-west.