

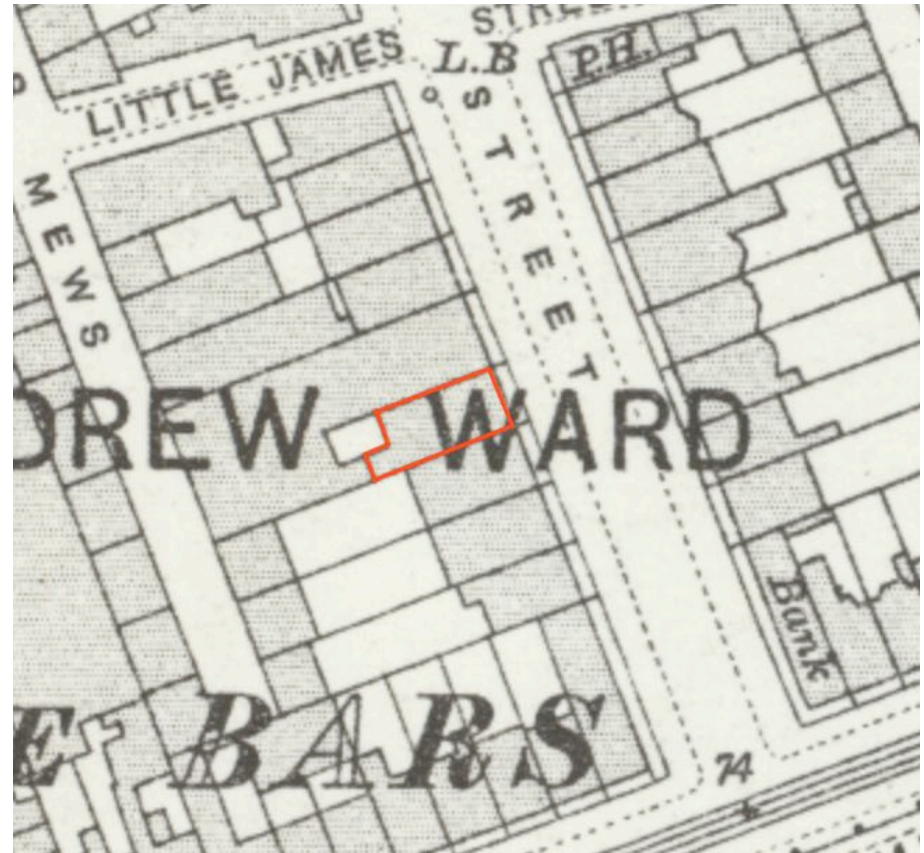
**34 John Street, London**

**Decorative Plaster Survey**

February 2017

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OS map of John Street 1892 – 1905. Showing number 34 in red.

## **1.0 Brief**

1.1 To survey existing decorative plasterwork in the house, and produce a report on the significance of the work.

## **2.0 Introduction**

2.1 The survey was completed on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2017 by Ben Bosence, for Bosence Building Conservation. There was full access to all rooms, and a ladder available to inspect the cornices.

2.2 No. 34 John Street was built in the 1750's as part of a row of 9 houses. They were listed as Grade II in 1951 and are within the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

2.3 The house was damaged by World War 2 bombs, and extensive structural re-building occurred as a consequence on the front and rear elevations. There are also visible internal structural interventions in the rear rooms of the house. The structural re-building has been dated to the 1950's.

2.4 From the 1950's the building was used for offices. A recent conversion back to residential use has helped to re-instate the original function and approximate layout of the house.

## **3.0 Decorative Plaster Survey**

3.1 There are no surviving decorative ceilings or ceiling roses in 34 John Street. The hallways and principle rooms (excluding the basement) have cornices of 5 different designs.

3.2 The purpose of this survey is to identify which cornices are original and therefore of high significance to the building. This report will suggest a timeline for the decorative plasterwork, which can inform future alterations and repairs.

3.3 A report in 2007 by Alan Baxter & Associates looked at both 34 and 35 John Street, prior to conversion back to residential use. The report shows that there is a decorative plaster ceiling in number 35, and confirms that some of the cornicing matches that seen in number 34. The ceiling could be full or at least partly original to the building.

Ground floor

3.4 Entrance hall



This fluted, enriched cornice is 6 inches high x 2 inches deep. It frames the entrance hall well, and stops as seen in the photo to the left as the cantelivered stairway begins.

3.5 The cornice is original and in good order, except the internal mitre above the front door. Possibly a section has fallen, and the repair has not re-aligned the mitre detail.



### 3.6 Rear room

This room has suffered worse than other areas of the house from the post-war structural interventions. 4 steel and timber flitch beams run East/West through the ceiling, and a large ceiling partition that conceals further structural steel work runs North/South.



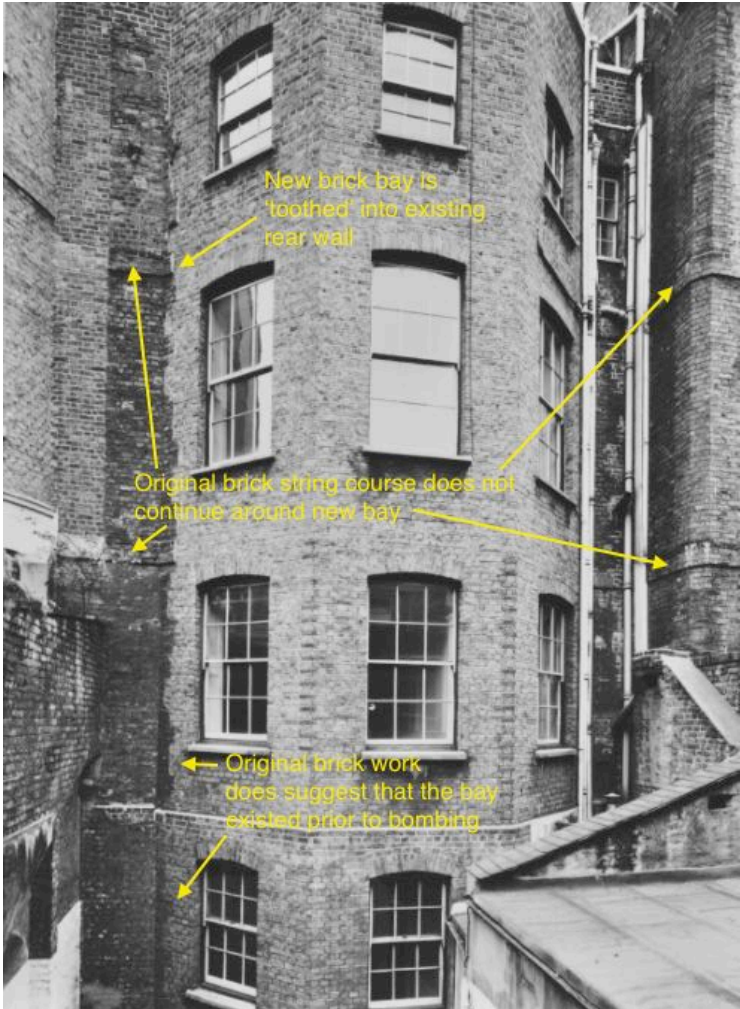
3.7 This photo shows the flitch beams, West facing bay windows and corning.

3.8 The cornice is 9 inches high by 9 inches deep. It is a classic Georgian cornice with enriched modillion blocks, egg and dart and water leaf designs.

3.9 The flitch beams sit at 2 different heights. The 2 central beams are lower and the 2 outer beams are higher in the ceiling.



3.10 This rear room is a reconstruction of the original design. The rear brick bay was re-built in the 1950's, as shown in the left-hand image. There does however appear to be evidence that suggests the bay did exist prior to the bomb damage, so is not a new design.



3.11 The image to the right shows the internal brickwork in the bay is laid in a cement based mortar, rather than a lime mortar. This helps to date the repair to the 1950's. The bricks are also machine-made, rather than hand-made, clamp fired london stock bricks of the front and rear external elevations.



3.12 The cornice is probably the original design, but is currently a fibrous cast rather than a solid, run in-situ moulding of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Possibly, a section of the original cornice was saved from the bomb damage and used to form a new mould for the fibrous plaster cornice. Or a mould could have been taken from next door at number 35. Either way the paint was not removed prior to the mould being made, so each cast has the appearance of an old moulding, rather than a crisp new cornice.

3.13 The 4 flitch beams are covered with timber paneling, forming small framed divisions along their length. This attempt to disguise the structural work distracts from the decorative cornice, and is at odds with any other moulding or detail within the house. There are also awkward junctions where the beams meet the cornice, as seen in the image below.



The 2 modillions have been lowered to allow the beams to continue into the wall.

3.14 We would recommend that a more honest aesthetic approach is required for these beams, and the decorative cladding is removed and a plain plastered surface is applied.

3.15 Image (on right) showing fibrous cornice, rather than solid 18th century plasterwork.

3.16 The ceilings are also new, constructed of 2 layers of 12mm plasterboard.



### Front room

3.17 The small front room has an egg and dart cornice approximately 7 inches high x 7 inches deep, with a large prominent drip detail and water leaf design. This cornice is original to the room.



3.18 This room seems to have been unaffected by the bomb damage and subsequent office and residential conversions. It is well proportioned, although it feels small due to the space required for the cantilevered stairway and hall.

### First floor landing

3.19 The cornice here matches the ground-floor front room.

3.20 The image on the right shows the landing cornice, and a small mitred repair that possibly used to extend to the timber work.



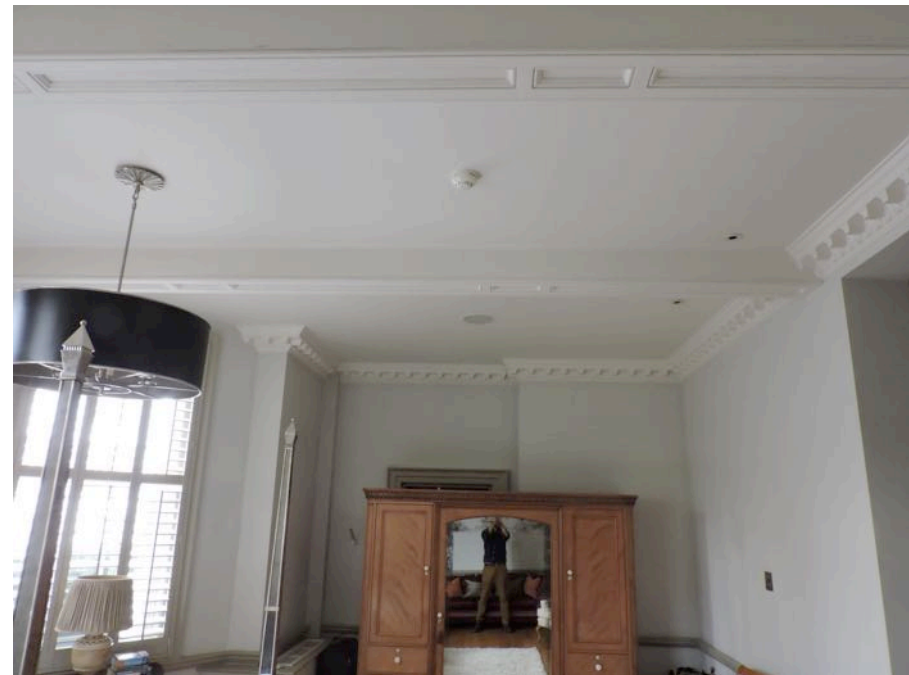
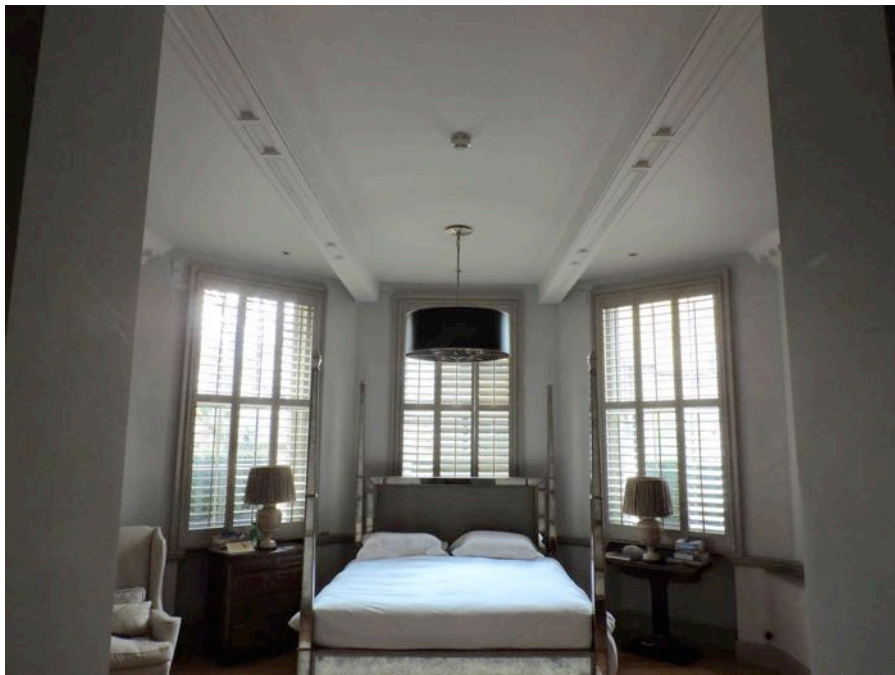


### First floor Bedroom

3.21 This room has suffered a similar fate to the room below, with new structural interventions in the ceiling. The cornice looks newer than the others in the house, with less build up of paint and no obvious repairs.

3.22 It is an enriched cornice 7 inches high x 7 inches deep, with plain modillion blocks and an egg and dart detail.

3.23 The 2 images below show the room with the 2 new structural beams, and no cornice present in the bay.



3.24 The window heights do not allow the cornice to continue onto the bay walls. Possibly the new bay allowed for larger windows on this floor, or the cornice was never continued onto these walls.

3.25 The cornice has been applied without much thought for the mitred details. These 3 photos show how the positioning of the plain modillion blocks have not been planned, and the free-hand modeled egg and dart corner detail is crudely done:



3.26 These odd details are indicative of a newly added scheme, rather than the original cornice.

3.27 This room has a dividing wall that corresponds with the structural ceiling partition in the room below, and must be part of the same re-modeling from the 1950's.

3.28 The alcove in the North wall was a doorway that connected to number 33. This could be a remnant of when the buildings were offices. The cornice follows the line of this doorway.

3.29 The en-suite bathroom for this main bedroom is situated at the front of the house, and retains the original proportion of the room. The cornice is modern and matches the main bedroom design.

#### Second floor landing

3.30 This is the top of the original main staircase. It has much lower ceilings, so the cornice is more visible. It is original, though may have been reapplied on the front elevation wall, as this was re-built in the 1950's.

3.31 It is a plain cornice with enriched modillion blocks. 7 inches high x 7 inches deep.

3.32 The image on the right shows an area where a detail has been damaged by cleaning with a wire brush to remove layers paint and limewash.



## 4.0 Summary of significance

### 4.1 Timeline of decorative plasterwork:

Original to the house 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Reproduction of original Applied in 1950's	New addition to the house Applied in 1950's or newer
Ground floor entrance hall	Ground floor rear room	First floor rear room
Ground floor front room		First floor front room
First floor hallway		
Second floor hallway		

4.2 None of the original cornices are under threat due to lack of repair, or insensitive remodeling of the house. They have been repaired many times and show a thick build-up of paint that is obscuring some of their details. But they are the correct mouldings for the house, and the Georgian period. The ground floor entrance hall cornice is especially well designed, and suits the area well.

4.3 The reproduction cornice in the rear ground floor room is part of the slightly confusing reconstruction of this room. The large ceiling partition that cuts across the room is unfortunate, and the aesthetic treatment of the 4 structural beams and their junctions with the cornice are poorly designed. The wall paneling may be original (or at least Victorian), but the scheme is only present on parts of 2 walls, and may have been moved to these areas. Old photos from number 35 John Street do show the same paneling in position along with the same enriched modillion cornice.

4.4 The first floor rooms cornice is an addition, and seems newer than the 1950's work. It may just be that it was done at this time, but the cornice was a crisp new cast rather than made from a mould of an old detail. The structural beams in the rear room ceiling have again been clad with timber paneling. They sit slightly better in this space than the ground floor room, as there are only 2, they don't meet the cornice in the bay, they are both the same level and they meet a partition wall rather than a ceiling partition.

## 5.0 Conclusions

5.1 There has been considerable damage to this house, which it has survived, along with several changes of use. It feels now that the character and proportions of the original house are largely intact. There is still original historic plasterwork in the rooms, and there has been an obvious desire to keep and repair what is left at present. The full extent of the decorative schemes in this house may never be known, but what is important now is to continue to maintain and respect the retained historic features.

5.2 If there is a desire to alter the ground floor rear room, it requires careful and sensitive design in order to make sense of what is a slightly confusing space at present. The cornice dates from the 1950's in materials, but is a visual reference to what was possibly originally used in the space.

5.3 Recommendations for the ground floor rear room:

1. A more honest and simple aesthetic treatment of the 1950s structural work, with a plain plaster covering rather than current timber paneling design.
2. Exploration work to discover if any of the newer ceiling features can be reduced in scale and impact.
3. To remove the cornice from the bay, and apply new cornice 'stop returns' at each cut end. This will match the detail in the first floor room, and will help show that the bay was re-built. It also removes the uncomfortable junction between the lower fitch beams and the cornice in the bay.

5.4 The addition of new items of decorative plaster, such as ceiling roses could help to unify some of the historic spaces. These need to be sensitively designed and attached in order to not distract from the original cornice work.

### Notes on conservation works

1. Maintaining the significance and integrity of the building will depend on high quality conservation and regular maintenance.
2. All conservation work should be carried out in accordance with conservation principles and conservation good practice, as outlined in national guidelines and international conventions.
3. All conservation work should be specified by suitably qualified professionals and executed by suitably qualified and experienced craftspeople.
4. Preventative maintenance practices should be undertaken regularly in accordance with a maintenance plan established for this purpose.

### Disclaimer

The repairs suggested in this survey need to be completed by skilled craftsmen, with a history of working on historic buildings. In publishing this report we do not guarantee the work that is done.



March 2017

34 John Street, London

## Decorative Plaster Design

Ceiling Rose: 700mm diameter

Ground floor front room, first floor bedroom and first floor bathroom

Design of rose shown below



Installation design (room and rose are different to John St)



## Ceiling Roses second floor landing

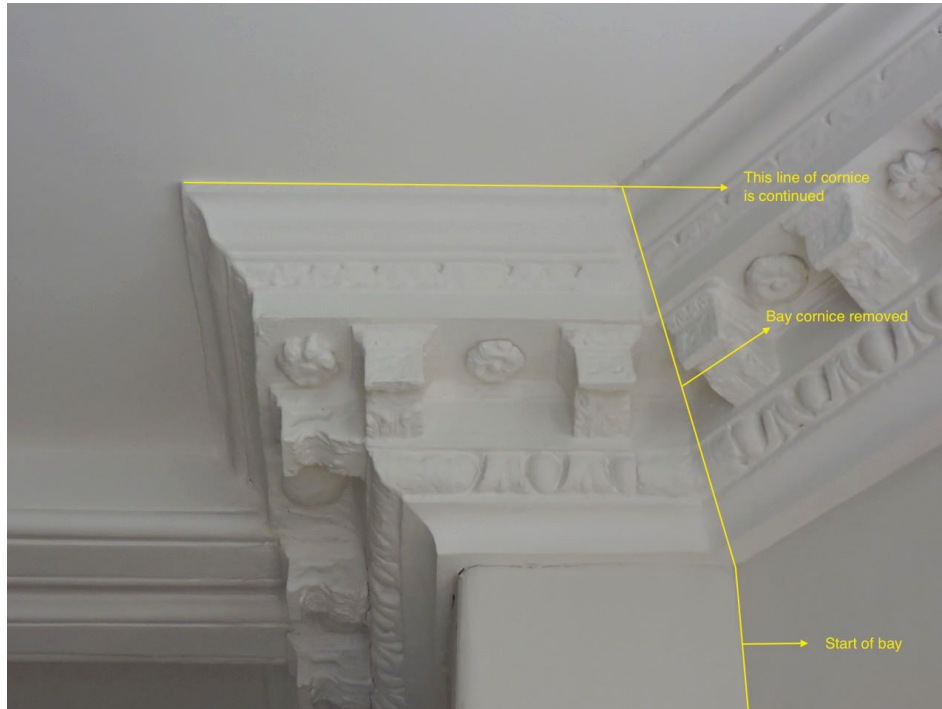


Drawing of 2 ceiling roses at 400mm diameter each.

The light fitting will be suspended down to first floor level.

The plaster design will be a simplified version of the larger proposed rose. With the same detail of the flat sections of rose matching the height of the ceiling line.

Cornice detail  
Ground floor rear room



The image on the left shows what needs to happen to the cornice in this area in order to match the detail in the first floor bedroom (image on right).