

55 Cumberland Terrace, NW1

Independent Expert Report

by

John Martin Robinson, MA, D.Phil, D.Litt, FSA

of

Historic Buildings Consultants

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## 1. JOHN MARTIN ROBINSON, QUALIFICATIONS

John Martin Robinson is a leading expert in the field and has advised on historic buildings in London and the country for over 40 years. He was Historic Buildings Inspector for Westminster in the Historic Buildings Division of the GLC from 1974 to 1986, including two years as architectural editor of the *Survey of London* volumes on the Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair. Subsequently, he was employed in the London Division of English Heritage where he was Historic Buildings Inspector for Westminster until 1989. Since then, he has been a private consultant and writer. He has advised as a private consultant on several houses in Regents Park, including 56 Cumberland Terrace, 12 Gloucester Gate and 16 and 20 Hanover Terrace. He has also advised the Crown Estates, and in 1997 wrote the brochure on the history and restoration of the Regents Park Terraces commissioned by the Crown Estate to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the saving of the Nash terraces by the government in 1947. He has written detailed Environmental Conservation studies for Covent Garden and Seven Dials. His 28 books include works on *Georgian Model Farms*, the official histories of *Windsor Castle* and *Buckingham Palace*, the *New Georgian Handbook* and the definitive biography of *James Wyatt* (published by Yale University Press in 2013). He is a regular contributor on architecture to *Country Life*. From 1995 to 2014 he was chairman of the casework committee, and vice-chairman of the Georgian Group. He has a detailed knowledge of Westminster's heritage, and listed buildings legislation and restoration in general.

## 2. HISTORY OF 55 CUMBERLAND TERRACE

Cumberland Terrace is an important feature of Regents Park, which is the most important example of Picturesque urban planning in London. The development of the area was undertaken after the lease of Marylebone Park, then open country, reverted to the Crown in 1811. Through the influence of the Prince Regent, John Nash, the Prince's favourite architect, was commissioned to produce a master plan and designs for the individual buildings. The largest comprised a landscaped park overlooked by grand encircling terraces, and dotted with individual villas. As the scheme developed, the plan was modified, a crescent and square replacing the original circus idea, opening into the Park from Portland Place and Regent Street, and the villas being greatly reduced in number. All the terraces, however, were constructed to Nash's elevational designs, and built by individual entrepreneur builders between 1821 and 1828.

The layout, roads and park were all developed by the Crown, but the individual terraces were the work of individual builders to Crown specifications and using Nash's façade designs which disguised terraces of middling-sized houses behind unified palace compositions. The builders included T.H. Aitkens, James Burton, R. Mott, W.M. Nurse, and W. Smith. This sort of arrangement with overall control by the ground landlord, a consultant architect responsible for elevational design, and construction to standard specifications by speculative builders was typical of the development of late-Georgian London, and is also a feature of Marylebone, Swiss Cottage, the Bedford estate in Bloomsbury, Belgravia and the Smiths' Charity and Thurlow estates in Kensington.

The Regents Park terraces were damaged during the War, partly by bombing, but also from requisitioning of the houses as temporary offices after the bombing of the City, and subsequent decay and lack of maintenance causing dry rot and stucco failure. After the War, demolition was considered. (St. Pancras Council – the predecessors of Camden – wished to replace Nash’s grand terraces with cheap council housing.) The architecture of Regents Park was saved by the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee’s vote in cabinet; and the Crown Estate embarked on an extensive programme of restoration over the following fifty years.

The post-War rehabilitation of the Regents Park terraces had three phases: essential repairs of the fabric in the 1950s, then a grand scheme for complete restoration of the façades in the 1960s, and the replacement of the original terraced houses behind with offices, and professional and educational institutions or flats. (Ulster Terrace is still offices and Sussex Terrace is the School of Business Studies.) Since the 1980s, many of the houses have been revived as grand individual dwellings.

Cumberland Terrace is the grandest of the Nash compositions, the elevations enlivened with Ionic triumphal arches, and the central pediment with sculpture and the skyline with statues and urns, all by James Bubb of Blashfields Terracotta, a well-known artificial stone.

Cumberland Terrace was built in 1826-8 and the executant (responsible for the interiors) was James Thomson, an obscure architect/surveyor, of whom little is known. The builder was William Mountford Nurse (who himself moved into one of the new houses on completion in 1828).

The terrace originally comprised 31 separate houses. The whole terrace was reconstructed internally in the 1960s by the classical architect, Louis de Soissons (a French Canadian), best

known as the architect-planner of Welwyn Garden City in the 1920s. He was much used by the Duchy of Cornwall and the Crown Estate in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. He was responsible for reconstructing and restoring both Cumberland and Chester Terraces in Regents Park. The stuccoed façade was restored with scholarly attention to detail, and the brick rear elevation tidied of later excrescences and made uniform. The interiors were completely reconstructed, apart from the stone cantilevered staircases which survive with their original iron balustrades. Steel structural girders were introduced, and modern materials used, including fibrous plaster cornices.

In 1962, No. 55 was reconstructed as flats, like several other houses in the terrace. It was only converted back into a single house again in the 1980s. Apart from the staircase, all the interior details (cornices, doors, chimneypieces) date from this 1980s work or later. Further alterations were made in 1997 when a small brick staircase extension was erected on the back of the mews, and the interiors further re-fitted and adapted. As it survives today, 55 Cumberland Terrace retains its original elevations, restored in the 1960s, but apart from the staircase, the interior is largely later-20<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction. The little mews building at the back also survives externally from 1828, but has no original internal features, having been converted into modern garages and staff accommodation.

### 3. THE SPECIAL INTEREST OF THE BUILDING

No. 55 Cumberland Terrace is listed Grade I, as being of exceptional historic and architectural interest, and is situated within the Regents Park Conservation Area. The Grade I listing reflects the importance of the terrace façade designed by John Nash as the most flamboyant and splendid of the palatial terrace compositions overlooking Regents Park. Cumberland Terrace is an integral part of one of the most original and interesting pieces of urban planning of the late Georgian period. The rear elevation, though simpler, and of stock brick, not stucco, also survives in its original form from the 1820s. The front elevation is of prime interest, followed by the rear elevation.

The interior is of lesser interest, being originally the work, not of Nash, but of James Thomson and the builder W.M. Nurse, and now being largely 20<sup>th</sup> century replica work. The building was reconstructed as flats behind the Nash façade in the 1960s by the architect Louis de Soissons with use of steel girders and modern materials. *Circa* 1985 the building was converted back to a single house, and the present interior fittings are partly of that date, with further alterations in 1997. Apart from the original stone cantilever staircases of 1826-8, no original features now survive inside the house, and the plan form has been partly altered except for the first floor drawing rooms. The staircase and residual plan form comprise the main interior interest.

The contemporary mews building at the rear is constructed of stock brick with a slate roof, and is two storeys high. The original structure, including the timber roof joists, survives, but all the interior has been altered and modernised, with plasterboard ceilings and partitions. There is a small brick extension on the back of the mews building adjoining the link to the

main house, built to contain a staircase in 1997. The interest of the mews lies in its front and back elevations, and timber roof structure.

The prime interest of No. 55 Cumberland Terrace lies in the Nash façade. The rear elevation and structure of the mews are also early-19<sup>th</sup> century and of interest. The interior retains an echo of the original plan form; and the stone cantilevered staircase with classical iron bannister is original and of special interest. None of the internal detailing and finishing is original or of special architectural or historic interest.



#### 4. THE PROPOSALS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE SPECIAL INTEREST

The proposals are outlined in the architect's Design and Access Statement. The aim is to refurbish the house in its existing form as a single family dwelling. The main staircase will be retained, and the authentic layout of the first floor. Elsewhere modern partitions and fittings will be removed. The rear ground floor room will be restored to its original dimensions and function by removing modern subdivisions and a kitchen. Harmful additions, like the downstands containing steel girders in the ceilings of the ground floor rear room and the first floor rooms, will be removed, enabling the ceilings to be restored to their original appearance. All these proposed works are improvements in historic buildings terms and are public benefits which will enhance the listed building.

On the second floor it is proposed to adjust the dividing partitions slightly and renew the bathroom. None of these alterations affect the special interest as they are modifications of existing modern work.

The main internal structural alteration proposed is the rebuilding of the secondary timber stair to the attic floor. The arrangement of the attic stairs as a subsidiary structure to the principal staircase, from which it is screened by a pair of plaster arches, is original to the building and one which is paralleled in other Regents Park houses. The reconstructed stairs will respect this historic arrangement which reflects the hierarchy of the interior, and the separation between the main family rooms and the less important attic. The arched screen will be retained and the new stairs will reflect the character of the surviving originals in adjoining premises, being of painted timber with 'square stick' bannisters, thin Tuscan newels, and a mahogany handrail. It will be set out closer to the historic alignment, without impinging on

the front room. The existing staircase at attic level is modern, having been inserted *circa* 1997, so its replacement does not include the removal of any historic fabric.

The mews building itself is to be restored, and the upper floor (at main house ground level) will be converted into a kitchen. This will become a single space; at present it is divided into small staff rooms by modern plasterboard partitions. The removal of those and the modern plaster ceiling, to reveal the old roof above, will enable the original structure of the mews to be seen, unencumbered by small-scale, utilitarian subdivision. The transfer of the kitchen to the mews enables the restoration of the ground floor rear room to its original dimensions and function as a dining room; a substantial enhancement.

The link building to the mews is currently a 20<sup>th</sup> century stock brick construction on a line set back from the rear window of the main house. It is suitably subsidiary. It is proposed to replace the existing window in the south wall with a well-designed modern bay window to create a family room.

The work to the link and placing the kitchen in the mews allows enhancement of the main building, especially the restoration of the rear ground floor room as a dining room (currently it is subdivided for the kitchen). The structure being altered is 20<sup>th</sup> century and the proposal does not affect original fabric.

Overall, the proposals are considered to be acceptable in historic buildings terms. They chiefly affect modern fabric and fittings, and therefore will not detract from any of the

features of special interest. They will enable the desirable reinstatement of several historic areas and interior architectural details in a manner more sympathetic to the listed building. The front and rear elevations, the structure of the mews, the main staircase and the remaining plan form – the chief elements of special interest – will not be affected, while the other alterations will be improvements on the 1980s and 1990s interventions (as they currently exist).

It is considered that the works are, as an overall package, an enhancement for which consent should be granted.