

GEORGIAN STAIRS



by Neil Burton

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The Georgian Group

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The upper part of the magnificent staircase in 44 Berkeley Square, designed by William Kent and built 1742-44. (photograph A F Kersting)

Back Cover:

The top flight of the main stair of a house in St. Thomas' Street, Bermondsey c.1710. (photograph Georgian Group)

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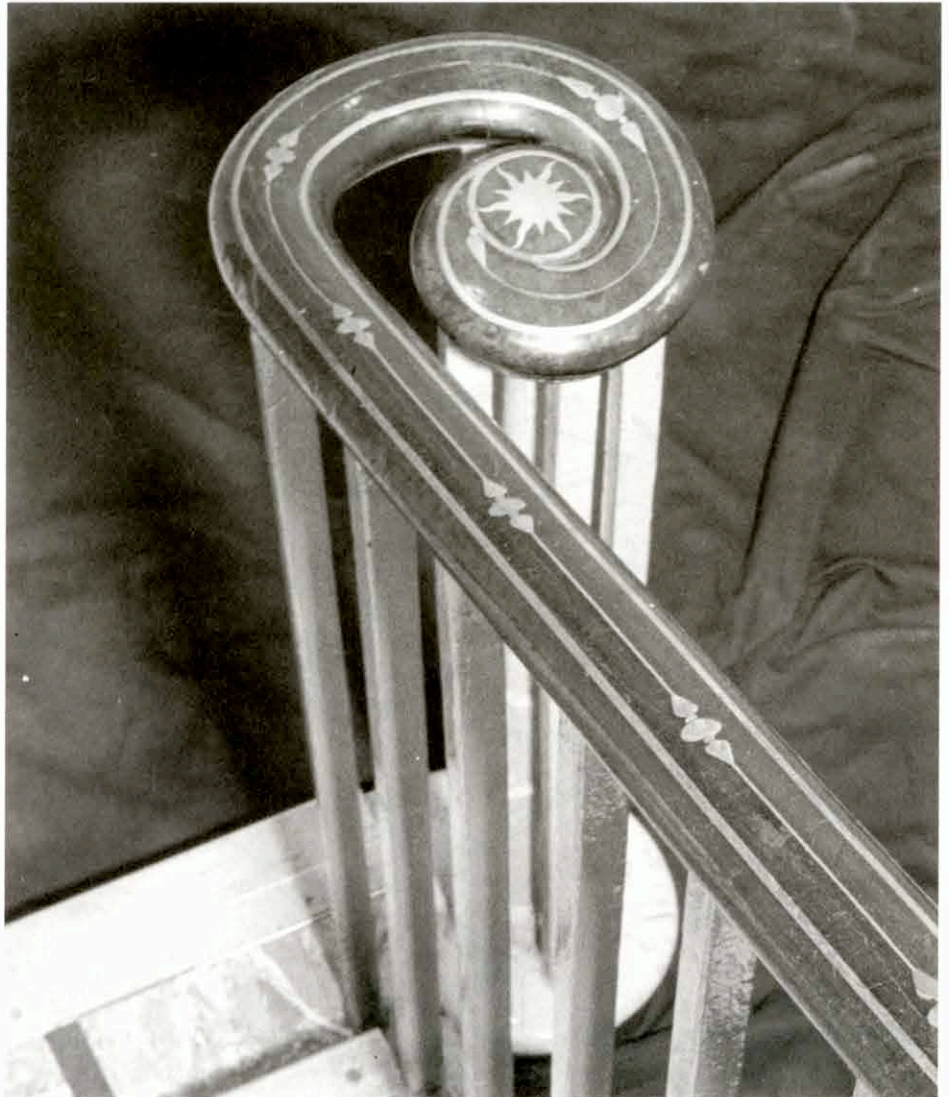
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this publication is to present a series of illustrations of English staircases in roughly chronological order, to give an indication of how these features developed during the Georgian period. As with the previous publication on chimneypieces, we have sought to give examples which can be precisely dated within a particular decade and we have also sought to give a reasonable spread of examples by region and by type. There are a few illustrations of the grandest stairs but most come from more modest Georgian buildings and represent typical examples of Georgian craftsmanship.

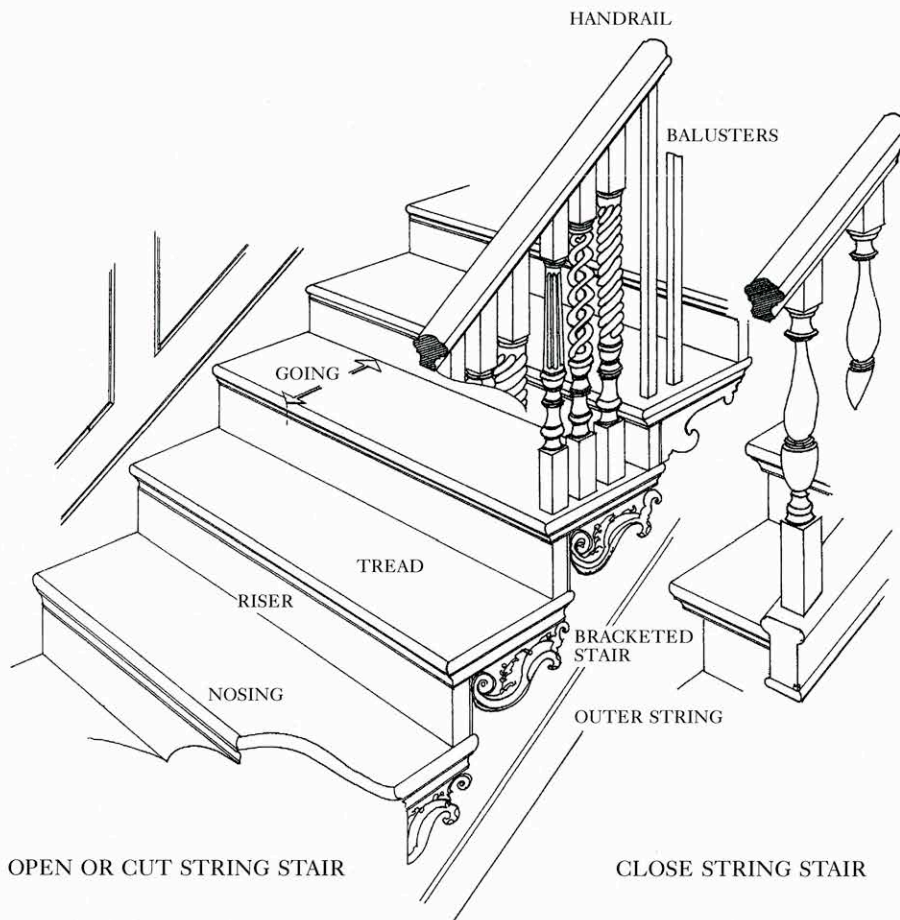


Twisted handrail end at
54 Doughty Street, London.
(photo Georgian Group)

The majority of the photographs come from the National Monuments Record in Swindon and London and from the collection of the former Greater London Council, now in the care of the London Metropolitan Archive. These collections are invaluable, and the staff of the NMR in particular have been unfailingly helpful but in neither of the collections is it possible to search by date and the chronology of the staircases illustrated here has had to be established by other means.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

A **staircase**, strictly-speaking, is the compartment in which the stair rises, although the word is often used loosely to denote the stair itself. **Stairs** are made up of individual steps. The horizontal part of a step is called the **tread**, the vertical part is the **riser**, the breadth or distance from riser to riser is called the **going**. Where the risers are parallel with each other the stairs are **straight**. Where the steps are narrowed at one end for turning a corner, they are called **winders**. The wide step introduced as a resting place in the ascent is a **landing**, and the top of a stair is called the same. Steps in a straight run are called **flyers**, hence the whole is known as a **flight of steps**. The outward edge of a step is called the **nosing**. The



sloping pieces which support the ends of the steps are called **strings**; the inner one, placed against the wall, is the **wall string**, the other the **outer string**. If the upper edge of the string is continuous, with the steps grooved into its sides, it is called a **close string**. If the upper edge is cut to the profile of the steps it is known as an **open string** or a **cut string**. When the front of the outer string is ornamented with carved brackets it is sometimes called a **bracketed stair**. Stairs in which the outer string of the upper flight stands directly above that of the lower flight are called **dog-legged stairs**, or **newel stairs**, after the **newel** or **newel post** which is an upright, usually wooden, which forms the axis of the stair. Where the upper and lower strings are separated by an interval the space is called the **well**, or **stair-well** and the stair itself an **open-well stair**. In such stairs there is often a newel post at the junction of each flight. Where there is a well-hole and no newel, and the string is continued in a curve, the stair is then a **geometrical stair**.

Besides the support afforded by the strings some timber stairs are sustained by timbers placed below the flyers called **rough strings**. The winders are supported by rough pieces called **bearers**. Many stone stairs have no such support but depend partly on the cantilever principle; the ends of the steps are set directly into the wall and each step bears on the one below. These are often called **cantilever stairs**

Most stairs have a **handrail** at their outer edge and the handrail is usually secured to the newel posts and supported on **balusters** rising from the steps. Handrails can be of wood or stone, balusters can be of stone, wood or metal and come in an infinite variety of patterns. The word **banister** (presumably a corruption of baluster) is now sometimes used as a collective noun for both handrail and balusters.

CONSTRUCTION, MATERIALS AND FINISHES

The construction of staircases was considered one of the high points of the Georgian carpenter's or builder's skill. Construction of straight timber stairs was relatively simple; the treads were borne on strings at either end and any winders on rough pieces called bearers. Towards the end of the 18th century it became common practice to add rough strings beneath the treads. Timber and stone staircases of geometrical pattern, built on a continuous curve, had no newel posts and were rather more complicated to construct. Such stairs usually had one end of each tread set into the wall and are often described as cantilever stairs, but this is not really correct. While there were a few examples of true cantilevers in which all the weight was borne by the wall, most Georgian geometrical stairs were of a type where the main load was transferred through the treads themselves to the floor or landing at the bottom of the flight. The ends set into the wall provided torsional restraint – or, in other words, they stopped the individual

steps from twisting out of alignment. This form of construction was particularly popular for stone stairs. The individual treads of such stairs were usually set no more than four inches into the wall, certainly not enough to act as true cantilevers. Stone slab landings were usually borne on timber joists but sometimes just built into the walls.

There was fairly widespread agreement about the height and depth (or breadth) of steps:

“The steps ought not to be made higher than six inches of a foot; and if they are made lower, particularly in long and continued stairs, it will make them the more easy because in rising one’s self the foot will be less tired; but they must never be made lower than four inches; the breadth of the steps ought not to be made less than one foot, nor more than one and a half” (Palladio *Quattro Libri* Bk 1 1570: trans. Isaac Ware 1738)

“The Height of large Steps must never be less than five Inches, nor more than seven inches and a half. The Breadth of Steps should never be less than ten Inches, nor more than fifteen inches.” (E Hoppus *The Gentleman’s and Builder’s Repository* 1737)

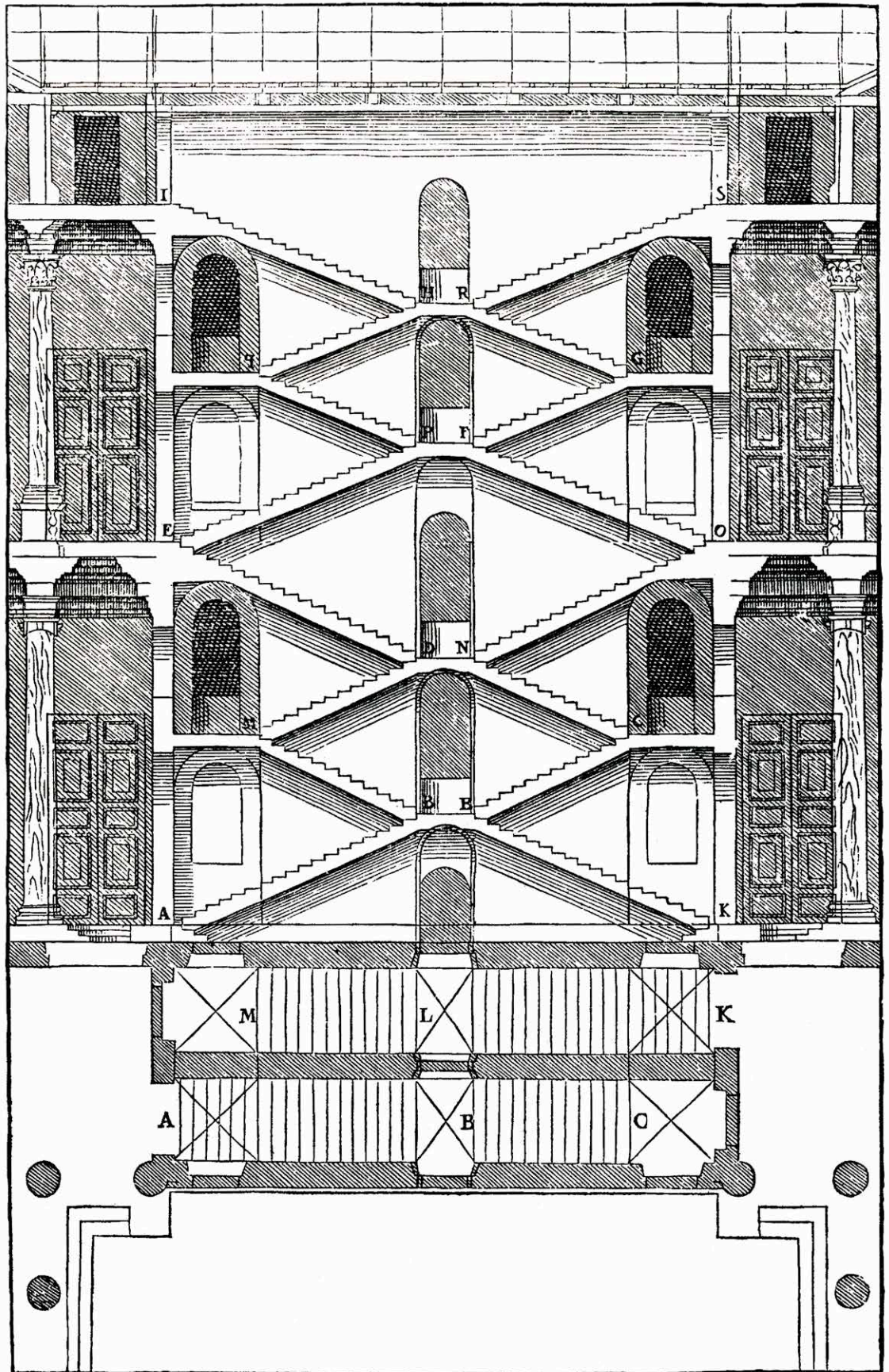
“The breadth of common stairs is from nine to twelve inches. In the best staircases of noblemen’s houses and public edifices, the breadth ought never to be less than twelve nor more than fifteen inches” (Peter Nicholson *The New Practical Builder* 1823)

Very often the stair was the most considerable and most conspicuous piece of craftsmanship in a building. Many Georgian builders’ pattern books contain elaborate instructions for calculating the dimensions of stairs, particularly geometrical stairs. The detailed nature of the instructions emphasises the fact that it was in the positioning and construction of the stair that Georgian builders had to wrestle most conspicuously with spatial geometry. The problems became even more complicated in the later 18th century when curving handrails with spiral ends became the norm.

The two principal materials for English staircases during the Georgian period were stone and wood. Stone was the more expensive and stone staircases – with steps of stone and balusters of stone or iron and handrails of stone or wood – were a high status feature. From the beginning of the 18th century wood was by far the most common material for staircases in ordinary houses and was used for steps, balusters and handrails. Pine was the cheapest wood for these purposes and elm or oak more expensive. Pine stairs were almost always painted, but hardwood was usually left unpainted as a conspicuous display of wealth. As early as the 1720s mahogany began to be used for handrails and it remained the favourite handrail material for the whole of the 18th century. Although the earliest mahogany handrails may be solid, later ones were usually made with a softwood core and a mahogany veneer.

Opposite:

An elaborate double stair from Book 1 of Andrea Palladio’s *Quattro Libri* (1570)



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In the 1750s or 1760s there was a marked increase in the use of stone for the stairs in the better sort of London terraced houses and the fashion spread steadily outwards from the Metropolis. This development coincided with a greater use of wrought iron for balusters, although the handrail remained wood. During the second half of the 18th century and for the first three decades of the 19th, throughout the country examples can be found of stone stairs with wrought-iron balusters, wood stairs with wrought iron balusters and wood stairs with wood balusters. All were common, though wood was certainly the most widespread material. This generalisation does not apply to Scotland where stone stairs were the norm. From about 1830 there was a noticeable increase in the use of cast iron for decorative balusters, although cast iron had been used for this purpose since the later 18th century.



A sculptural selection of stair parts in the Geffrye Museum, Shoreditch between the wars. (photo LMA 28/3529)

The rules for painting stairs were much the same as for other interior features. Softwood was invariably painted; the most commonly used colours for stairs during the 18th century were the drab “stone” colours, which would also be used for other joinery in the staircase like panelling and dados. There are some examples of early Georgian stairs where the newels and handrails were painted chocolate brown to imitate hardwood, which also had obvious practical advantages. Hardwood, like oak and mahogany – the most frequently used material for handrails – was usually not painted but waxed. The most common colour for ironwork during the 18th century was “iron colour” or “lead colour”, in other words a mid-grey. From about 1810 there was a marked increase in the popularity of green and bronze green for both external and internal ironwork.

CONTEMPORARY IDEAS ON STAIRCASE DESIGN

The coverage of staircase designs and construction in the architectural treatises and builders’ pattern books available in the Georgian period is curiously uneven. The former mostly deal with stairs only in passing, while the latter are usually far more informative. Vitruvius and Serlio scarcely mention stairs. Andrea Palladio devoted a short chapter to the subject in Book 1 of his *Quattro Libri* and illustrated ten examples. Some of Palladio’s comments seem almost to imply that he felt staircases were a nuisance:

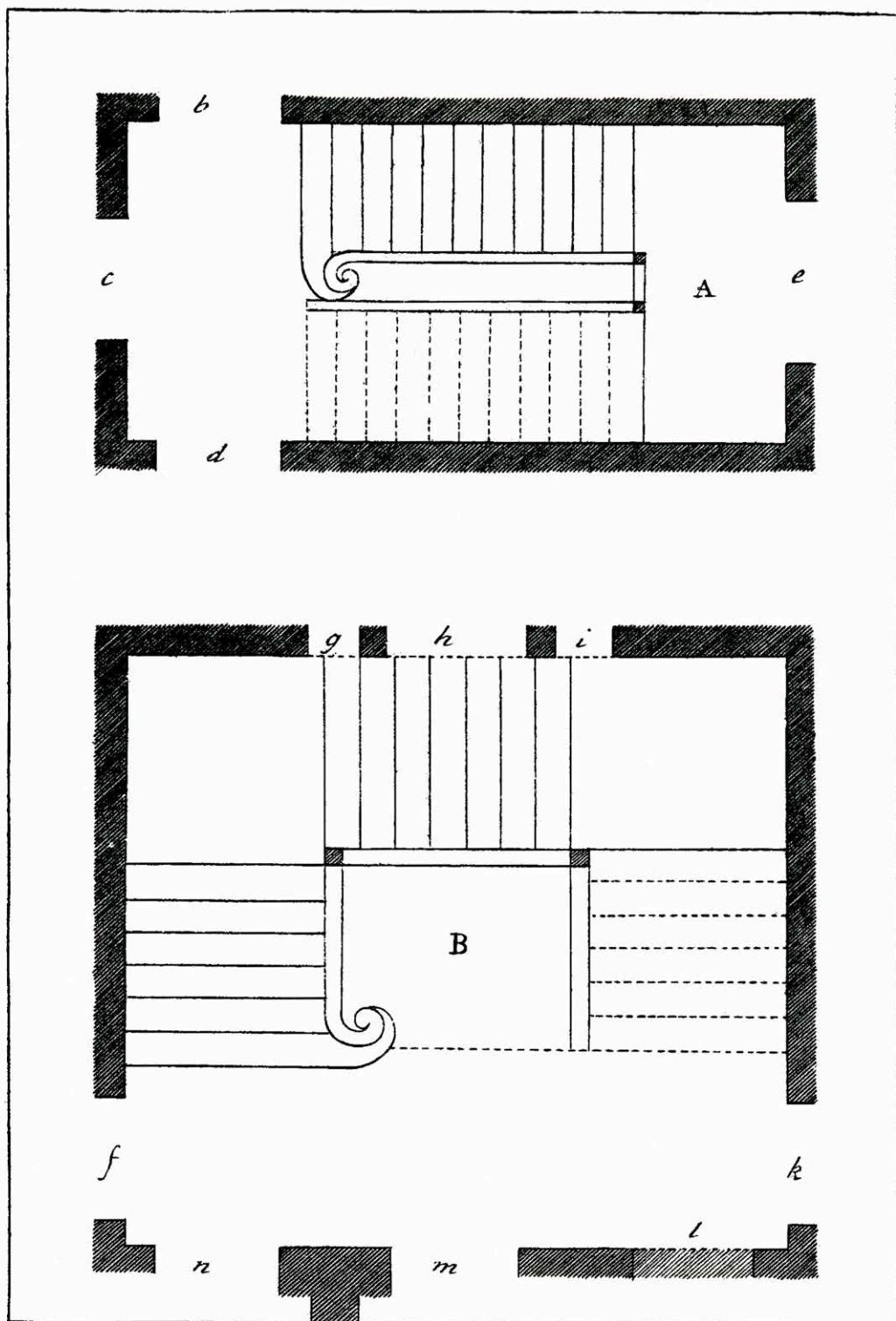
“Great care ought to be taken in the placing of staircases because it is no small difficulty to find a situation fit for them, and one that doth not impede the remaining part of the fabrick: A proper place must therefore be principally given them, that they may not obstruct other places nor be obstructed by them.”

He then went on to give a word of advice about where that “proper place” should be:

“Three openings are required in staircases; the first is the door though which one goes up to the staircase, which the less it is hid to them that enter into the house, so much the more it is to be commended. And it would please me much if it was in a place where before that one comes to it, the most beautiful part of the house was seen because it makes the house (though it should be little) seem very large; but however let it be manifest and easily found.”

Five of his illustrations are for circular stairs, and of the rest two are oval on plan, two are square and one is in straight flights. No details are given of construction and none of the illustrations shows balusters or handrails.

The major French works of the 17th and early 18th century were only a little more informative. Early in the 17th century Mathurin Jousse’s treatise on carpentry, *Le Theatre de l’art de charpentier* (1627, reissued in 1702),



F. Price inv. et delin.

Tombs sculp.

Plan of narrow and wide open-well stairs
from *The British Carpenter* by Francis
Price (1735)

described and illustrated several types of stair, with both straight and curving flights but all had close strings and heavy close-set balusters. Jean Marot showed no stairs in his late 17th century collection of architectural illustrations beyond those ascending to church or altar fronts. Much fuller coverage was given by J L Blondel in his *Cours d'Architecture*. He devoted thirty pages to the subject but spent half of that space reviewing the writings of the ancients, concluding that

“L'on ne peut pas tirer beaucoup de lumière des exemples des Anciens par la doctrine des escaliers”

The rest of his text he spent considering the best staircase forms for larger houses. He made only passing mention of more modest stairs and did not deal with materials at all. Cordemoy's *Nouveau Traite d'Architecture* (1714) gave stairs short shrift, noting only that they should be placed so as not to impede the route from the entrance to the garden. He concluded

“Je ne dirai rien de la figure qu'on leur doit donner: car elle depend de l'habileté de l'architecte, et de son adresse”.

In Britain, the attitude to stairs of many of those concerned with polite architecture can be summed-up in the comment by Roger North that,

“stayres at best are but an expedient to a defect, because the perfection of rooms is laying all upon one and the same floor”

North was a gentleman amateur architect writing in the 1680s, who was on familiar terms with Sir Christopher Wren, Robert Hooke, Hugh May and other leading architects of the time, and is probably a good barometer to their approach.

Of 18th century British publications, the grander works intended for architects and patrons devoted hardly any attention to stairs. The plates in *Vitruvius Britannicus*, of which the first volume appeared in 1715, the same year as Leoni's translation of the *Quattro Libri*, show staircases on plan but not otherwise. James Gibbs's *Book of Architecture*, which first appeared in 1728, neither discussed nor illustrated staircases and his *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture* (1733) included details of doors, windows and chimneypieces but not stairs. Isaac Ware's *Compleat Body of Architecture*, published in 1756, devotes a whole section to chimneypiece design but contains nothing at all on staircases, nor does Sir William Chambers deal with the subject in his *Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture* (1759). The essay on modern style in Robert Adam's *Works in Architecture* (1773) does not touch on staircases, nor do any of his plates show them. This is not to say that Adam, Chambers, James Wyatt and other well-known 18th century architects did not produce designs for handsome stairs, but they did not write about the subject.

It seems that Sir John Soane was the first British architect to tackle the question of staircase design in his Royal Academy lectures, delivered at intervals between 1810 and 1819. In Lecture VI he said:

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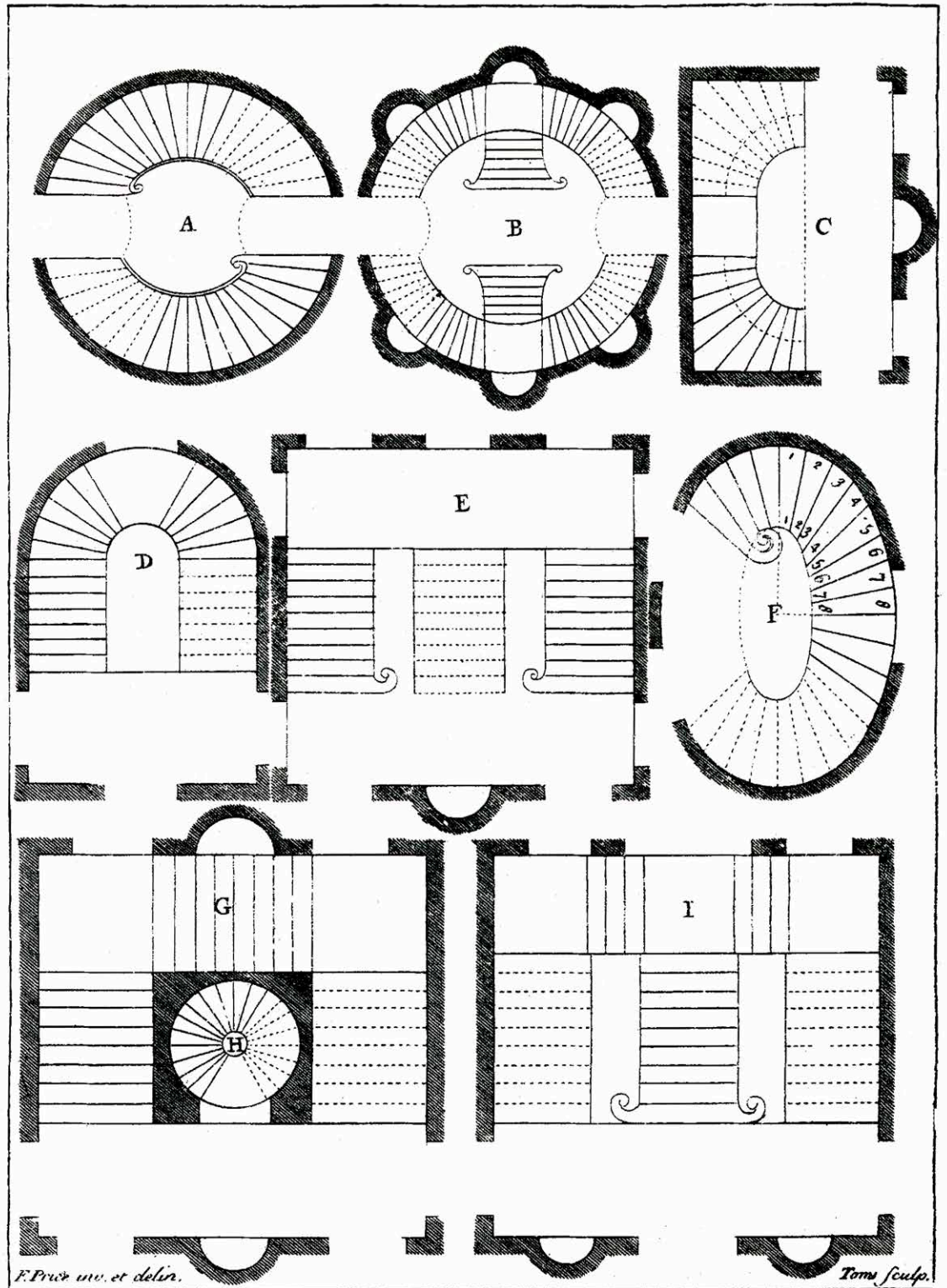
“In modern works, both public and private, staircases are the very touchstones of sound knowledge and real merit in the architect. In every building they are features of such importance that to determine their proper situation, character and extent, as well as their most suitable forms and proper decorations, requires all the experience and judgement and experience of the most able architect.”

In Lecture VIII he gave an illustrated account of staircase design, beginning with a review of the classical masters.

“In the plan of every modern building, whether great or small, public or private, the staircase is always a useful and on most occasions a very important feature. The ancients in this intricate part of our art....give us but little assistance... Vitruvius, in describing the houses of the Greeks and Romans, does not even speak of a staircase.....”



George St, Westminster.
(photo LMA 82/120/0024)



Plans of various elaborate stair arrangements from *The British Carpenter* by Francis Price (1735)

Both lectures contained examples of stairs which Soane considered particularly handsome and his choice of examples demonstrated a clear preference for Baroque forms and spatial organisation, which he underlined in his lectures by complimentary references to Inigo Jones, to whom he attributed most of the 17th century English examples shown.

“Inigo Jones...was particularly happy in his staircases. How superior is the decoration in these staircases to what we are accustomed to see in modern houses of a similar class. What comparative magnificence in the former, what poverty and meanness in the latter; whatever we have gained in lightness of effect, we have lost more in importance and character”.

The staircases of Sir William Chambers were also held up for admiration. Although Soane announced in the same lecture that he would describe the construction of staircases, he did not do so.

The whole subject of staircase design and construction was covered much better in some of the books intended for craftsmen, or devoted to the study of building crafts. Joseph Moxon’s *Mechanick Exercises*, which first appeared in 1678 (and was reprinted in 1705) covered the subject in a section devoted to House Carpentry. Moxon began by asserting that, “The manner of projecting them [staircases] is copiously taught in many books of Architecture, whether I refer you”. He did not mention any specific works but went on to set out rules for the proportions of treads and risers and outline the basic principles of stair construction. He categorised stairs into two broad types – solid newel (i.e. dog-legged) and open newel, which might sometimes be mixed together in the same stair.

“the last, viz. the *Mixt Newel’d Stairs*, are commonly made in our *Party-Walled Houses* in *London* where no light can be placed in the Stair-case because of the party walls; so that there is a necessity to let in a *Sky-Light* through the Hollow Newel: But this sort of Stair-cases take up more room than those with a single solid Newel...”

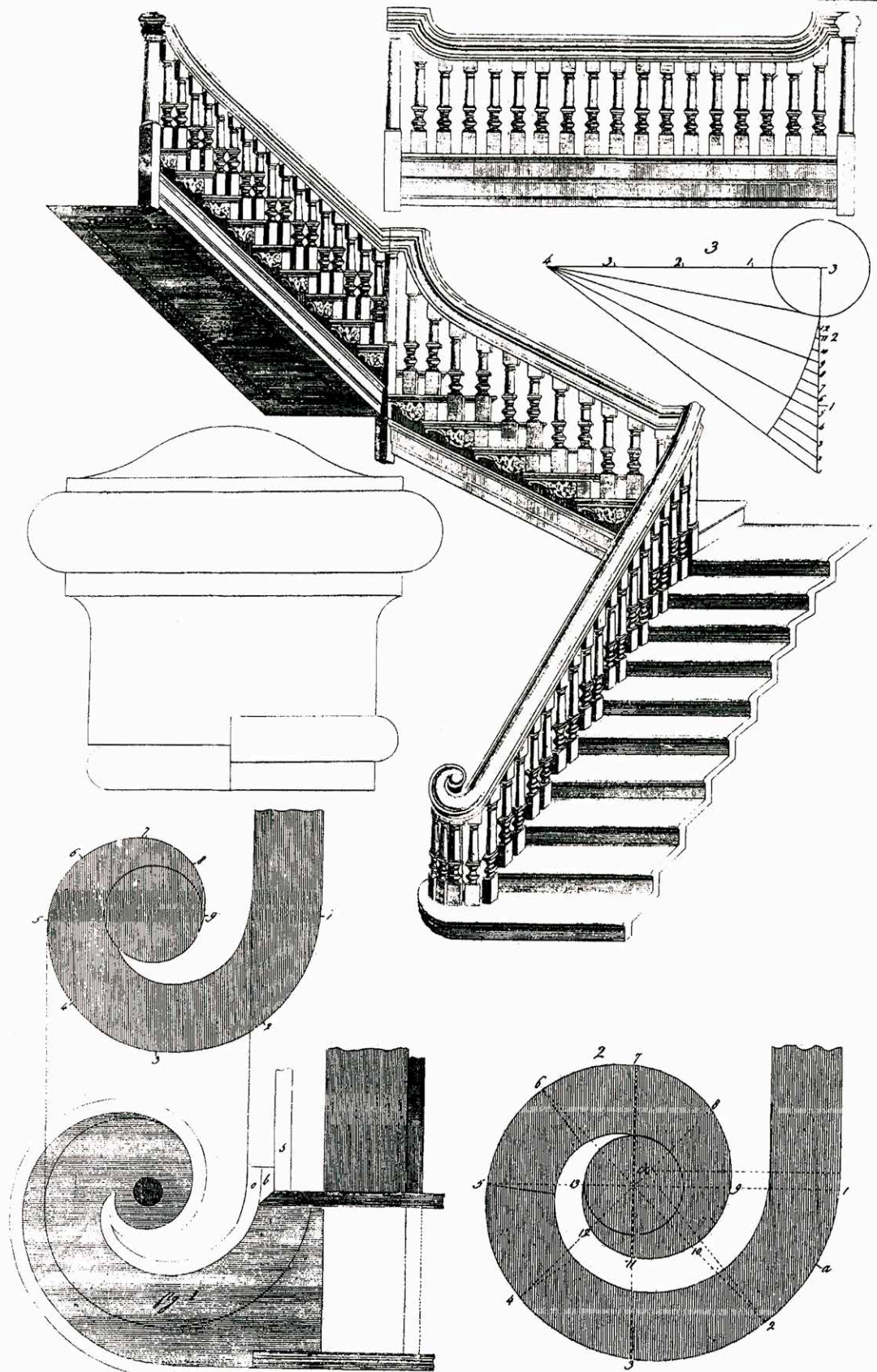
A very full account of the subject can also be found in Richard Neve’s *City and Country Purchaser and Builder’s Dictionary*, first published in 1703 and republished in 1726 and 1736. Neve gave rules of thumb for calculating the height and length of stairs and described the different forms of stair. Of balusters he noted that “Their dimensions and forms are various according to the fancy of the workmen”

A similar text can be found in *The Builder’s Dictionary*. Neither work was well-illustrated but Francis Price in *The British Carpenter* (1735) supplemented a text which drew heavily on Neve’s work with illustrations of stairs, devoting particular attention to forming the curves required for ramping and finishing handrails. Price wrote:

“I have chose to explain some principal Matters in Stairs, such as their Form, the Kneeling, and Ramp of their Rails, with a new and exact Method to square a twisted Rail, either for Stairs or other Uses; which Point having never yet been fully clear’d, I hope it will be found useful”

Opposite:

A composite plan from *The British Architect* by Abraham Swan (1745) showing a rather old-fashioned stair with heavy balusters and a heavy ramped handrail and also details of the twisted handrail end.



A Swan inv et delin. Pub. according to Act of Parliament Feb. 9 1743

Chesler, s.

In the preliminary digest of *The British Architect* (subtitled *The Builder's Treasury of Staircases*) which first appeared in 1745 Abraham Swan referred to staircases as “those most useful, ornamental and necessary parts of a building, though never before sufficiently described in any Book, Ancient or Modern”. Swan did devote fourteen folio plates to staircases and their details, but his text was no better than that of Neve or Price and his plates are curiously misleading. All his stairs have heavy balusters, rails and newels which were quite out of fashion by 1745, while his tread-ends are wholly rococo.

All the foregoing works dealt with stair construction as a branch of carpentry and their examples were all of timber. It seems that there was no published guidance on stone stairs until well into the second half of the 18th century. This is shown very well in the successive published works by William Pain. In *The Builder's Companion*, first published in 1758, all the plates are of timber stairs. In *The Workman's General Assistant* (1774) they are a mixture of timber and stone and in *The British Palladio* (1786) a fuller version of the same mixture. This seems to support the conclusion that stone stairs became more common in modest houses after the middle of the 18th century. Of late-Georgian pattern books, those written by Peter Nicholson seem the most thorough in their coverage of stair construction. Nicholson's magisterial *New Practical Builder* of 1823 provided what is perhaps the fullest account of stairs and their construction in any pattern book, though it is interesting to see that he devoted more space to the forming of handrails than to any other branch of construction.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GEORGIAN STAIRCASE

The functional purpose of all stairs is to communicate between different levels in a building, but both the form and the appearance of Georgian staircases varied widely and were affected by changing stylistic fashions. The arrangement and decoration of the various parts was principally governed by cost constraints and by ideas of hierarchy and status. In the smallest storeyed buildings the stair was usually of the simplest type and squeezed into the smallest space to maximise living room. In grand buildings the stair became a major component of the conspicuous display of wealth. Between the two extremes was a sliding scale of elaboration, which was also evident in parts of the same building serving different uses. Within most houses, for example, the rooms themselves would have a status dependant on their use; the principal reception rooms had the highest status, family living rooms rather less status, bedrooms less still and accommodation for servants lowest of all. The status of any particular part of a building was shown partly by its size but even more by its decoration. The main parts of the principal staircase, linking the principal living rooms, would be ornamented while the upper and lower parts serving bedrooms,

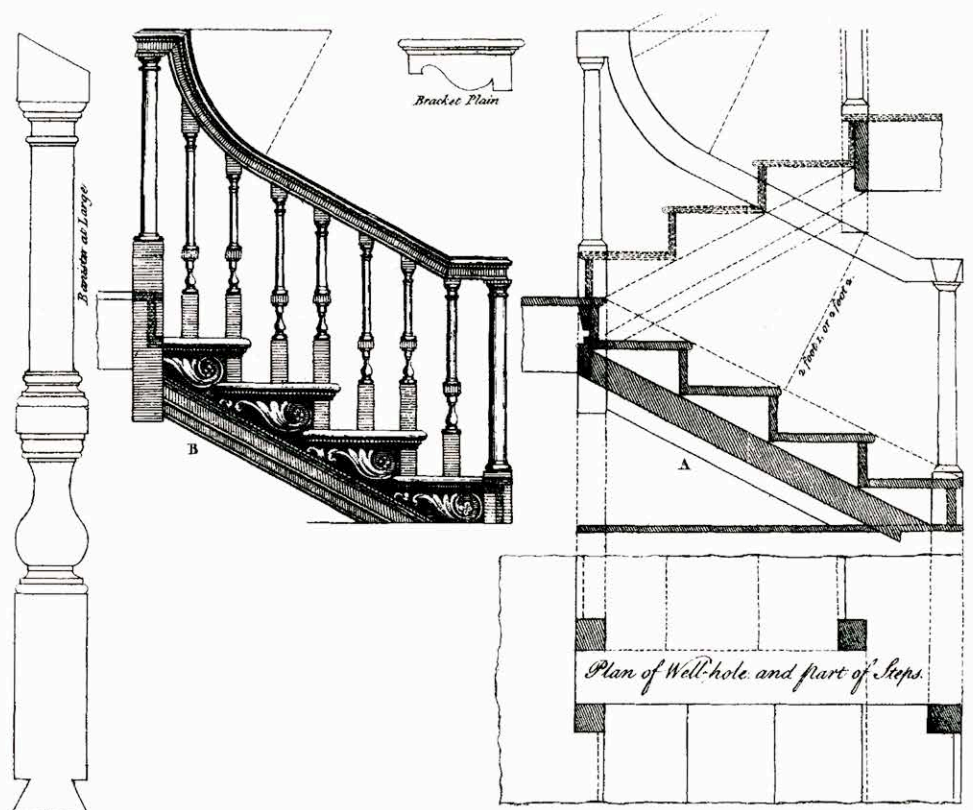


Plate of staircase details from *The Builders Pocket Treasure* by William Pain (1763)

attics and basements would be more simply treated. For example, in many larger early Georgian town houses the principal staircase ran from ground to first floor only and occupied a large staircase hall space. Much smaller and simpler stairs serving the other parts were tucked away out of sight. In Georgian houses of any pretension it was commonplace to provide front stairs (for the family) and back stairs (for the servants). Some sort of hierarchy can be found in most Georgian buildings, from grand country houses to modest terraced houses and also in public buildings.

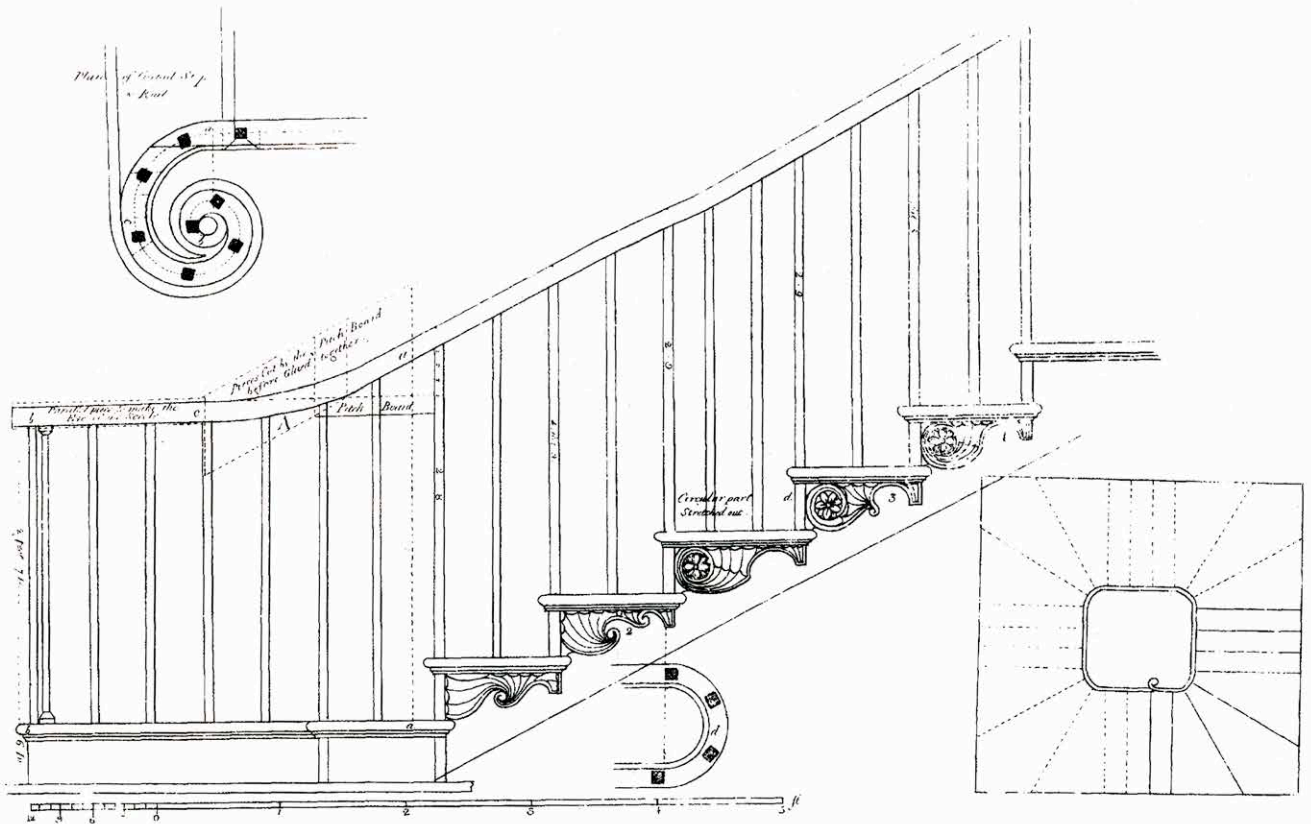
The Georgian stair, particularly the Georgian timber stair, is a particularly English phenomenon which developed out of the native carpentry tradition. In 16th century English manor houses the skills of the master carpenters, previously lavished on the roof, were transferred to the staircase and other decorative parts. The framed timber staircase was developed in England and spread into Wales; it is hardly found in Scotland, where oak was not plentiful and is not nearly so widespread in France and the Netherlands. A framed staircase could be fitted into a smaller space and was potentially more flexible in design than a stair built into the main fabric; with boards for treads and risers, rather than solid blocks of wood or stone, it could be supported on posts rather than parallel walls, or even cantilevered out from the walls.

The most common staircase pattern of the later 17th century had broad handrails and turned balusters which were mostly either “gouty” or bobbin-like set on a closed string, which was often heavily moulded. The size and

form of the various elements were essentially the same whether the stair was made of stone or timber and were dictated by stone examples. The most notable differences were in the forms of balustrading. At the top end of the social scale, many country mansions had stairs with the handrail supported on elaborately carved acanthus wreaths. One notable exception was Inigo Jones's Tulip Staircase in the Queen's House at Greenwich which was an early example of a stone geometrical stair with delicate wrought-iron balustrading, and which may have been derived from the stairs designed by Andrea Palladio for the Palazzo Capra in Vicenza and the Carita monastery in Venice. Towards the lower end of the social scale there were many examples of what were known as splat balusters, in other words balusters cut out of flat planking which generally followed familiar forms in silhouette. Both in the 17th and the 18th centuries, the humblest houses had their stairs cramped into the smallest possible space, often next to the chimney stack. Such stairs seldom had any balustrade or handrail, or indeed any ornament at all.

In the decades of the English Baroque style which span the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries many of the grandest country houses boasted elaborate stairs, almost always in straight flights. At Chatsworth House in Derbyshire William Talman designed a stone cantilever staircase, but such structural innovation was unusual. The Chatsworth stairs had elaborate wrought iron balustrades, designed in this case by Jean Tijou; such balustrades were certainly fashionable in the Baroque period and can be found in many of the grandest private houses like Boughton, Cottesbrooke, Drayton, Easton Neston and Grimsthorpe. Stone remained a preferred high status material but wood was far more common. Shortly after the turn of the century the rather heavy standard stair type of the Restoration period gave way to what became the standard early Georgian type, of which the distinctive characteristics were thinner ornamental turned wooden balusters, open or cut strings and decorated tread ends. The early Georgian baluster was distinctly more slender than most late 17th century types and usually had a shaft rising from a slightly bulbous turned base; sometimes the shaft might be fluted or twisted or the whole shaft might be arranged to taper, usually upwards but sometimes downwards. There was an almost infinite number of variations on the basic form, and doubtless some forms were peculiar to individual craftsmen.

In late 17th century stairs, the balusters were set in a continuous row on top of the close string which covered the side of the stairs; in most early Georgian stairs the string was cut sawtooth fashion to allow the individual treads to sit on top of it. The balusters were then set onto the individual treads, sometimes with one baluster to each tread but commonly with two or three. In such cases it was a common practice to have two or three different baluster patterns in the same stair. The cut string emphasised the importance of the individual tread ends and it became common in the better stairs for the ends to be ornamented with carved decoration. The stairs themselves were usually in straight runs with winders at the turns, or



A composite plate showing a plain stair with stick balusters and various tread-ends from *The Builder's Golden Rule* by William Pain (1788)

dog-legged. The extensive use of winders encouraged another distinctive feature of the early Georgian stair, which was the ramping of the handrail in a marked upward curve to meet the newel post at its cap. The handrails themselves were for the most part fairly substantial, more or less square in section with a moulded upper surface. Mahogany makes its first appearance as a material for handrails in the 1720s, but pine was the most common material.

The introduction of the Palladian taste in the 1720s did not have an appreciable effect on staircases. As we have seen, Palladio himself had given little guidance on the appearance of stairs. In the first English neo-Palladian villas like Mereworth and Chiswick, the staircases were negligible, spiral and functional and many later Palladian country houses had timber stairs with turned balusters of the same kind as their Baroque predecessors. In the decade before 1750 there are some signs of a move towards slightly more refined forms, notably in a slimmer handrail, and also of a more frequent use of curvilinear wrought iron for balustrades. This trend becomes more pronounced after 1750, although the stairs themselves were still usually in straight flights with winders or landings. In the 1760s there are indications of a fashionable taste for more elegant geometrical stairs, which mirrors the neo-classical vogue for bows, apses and circular or oval rooms, and by the 1770s geometrical stairs had become fairly common. A timber geometrical stair was much more complicated than a stair in straight flights and was more likely to be made by a joiner than a carpenter



Dean St, Westminster (1732)
(photo LMA 59/2208)

and there is some evidence that in fashionable Georgian towns like Bath there were teams of staircase specialists. As the form of the stairs themselves became more complex, the ornamental parts like balusters and tread ends became simpler. In the last decades of the 18th century the majority of stairs had simple “stick” balusters of rectangular section, which might be either wood or iron, usually set two to a tread on open strings with flat tread ends cut to a curvilinear profile and supporting a slender, usually mahogany, handrail ending in a curve over the bottom newel.

In the first decades of the 19th century, the impact of the Picturesque movement on architectural taste became pronounced. One direct consequence was a liking for the more exotic styles of architecture, Egyptian, neo-Norman and Gothic. This flourished alongside a continuing taste for classical architecture, which might at this date be either Greek classical or Roman classical. Perhaps because neither true Norman or Gothic buildings, nor the buildings of Greece or Rome provided many examples of staircases, designers in the larger more expensive buildings indulged their fancy in design. The general forms remained fairly traditional, but in many buildings there was clearly an attempt to make the

stair into a piece of architectural drama. Architects like James Wyatt, and Thomas Hopper created some truly startling effects. Classical and non-classical elements were freely mixed. For example, a curving geometrical staircase with a mahogany handrail might have Gothic balusters made of cast iron. But alongside this drama, for the whole of the late Georgian period, simple staircases with stick balusters remained the standard type and can be found in town houses, in farm houses, in cottages and in the servants' quarters of country houses. Such stairs were the equivalent of the reeded chimneypieces with corner roundels and can often be found combined in the same building, together with shallow moulded cornices as the hallmarks of late-Georgian builders' architecture.

The Industrial Revolution also had an effect on Georgian stairs, chiefly through the use of cast iron. Even in the last decades of the 18th century there was occasional use of cast iron for balusters and by the 1820s the use of this material was steadily increasing. Cast-iron balusters were often elaborate and florid in their outlines and a tendency towards greater heaviness continued until the end of the Georgian period and beyond. Most Georgian cast-iron balusters were mounted on top of the tread, in the conventional way, but an alternative arrangement was to fix the baluster to the outside of the tread. This had the advantage of maximising the width of the tread, but obscured the side of the stair. Iron girders were also used with increasing frequency for strengthening stairs, especially the more elaborate constructions.

CONCLUSION

Stairs are remarkably enduring. Considering the amount of daily wear than many of them have to bear, a very large number of Georgian stairs still survive in their original location and more or less in their original state. One thing which emerges from this short study is the wide distribution and long endurance of the classic type of early Georgian timber stair, with its cut string and turned balusters. Such stairs could be found in modest town houses and expensive country mansions from 1700 to the 1760s. Other points are the dominance of the mahogany handrail in the second half of the 18th century and of the stick baluster in the half century after 1790. But most noteworthy of all is that, within these and other constraints, there was an endless variety of individual fancy displayed in staircase details, so that it is not possible to talk of a "standard" Georgian staircase. Such variety of ornament within defined limits and a generally high standard of craftsmanship are among the characteristics which give Georgian buildings their particular interest.

1700
1710

1.
GLEGG'S HALL,
CHESHIRE
A steep timber open-
well stair with heavy
turned wooden
balusters sitting on a
closed string. The
massive handrail and
extremely plain
newel posts may be
later alterations.
*(photo NMR
AA63/7311)*



2.
EDGWORTH HOUSE,
MILL LANE, NEW
WINDSOR
A dog-legged stair
with a closed string
and turned balusters
of a more elegant
profile than many of
the period. The
moulded handrail and
square newel post
with a moulded cap
are typical.
*(photo NMR
AA61/1208)*



1700
1710



3

3.
KING STREET,
WHITEHAVEN,
CUMBRIA.
Part of a straight
flight of stairs with a
closed string,
moulded handrail and
twisted balusters.
(*photo NMR YO772*)



4

4.
ALBURY STREET,
DEPTFORD, LONDON
A section of a
cramped open-well
staircase in a modest
town house, with
winders used to turn
the corner rather than
a landing. The square
wooden newels have
simple caps, the
handrail has a slightly
more elaborate
moulding, the twisted
balusters are closely-
set.
(*photo LMA 71/11691*)

1710
1720

5.
NORTH SIDE,
CLAPHAM COMMON,
LONDON
A handsome
unpainted oak
staircase with a cut
string, ornamental
tread-ends and three
balusters to each
tread. The moulded
handrail is ramped up
where the stair turns
and coiled at the
bottom and all the
newel posts are
fluted, as are the
corner posts on the
panelled dado.
(photo NMR BB97/6)



6.
GUINEA STREET,
BRISTOL
An open well stair of
painted softwood
with a closed string,
but also with the
attenuated balusters
which were
displacing the goutier
type. Both handrail
and the caps of the
newel posts have the
same moulding.
*(photo NMR
A42/5836)*



1710
1720



7

7.
WILMER HOUSE,
FARNHAM SURREY
A hardwood stair with
a cut string and
ornamental tread-
ends which are both
inlaid and carved; the
underside of the
stairs is also moulded.
Two balusters to each
tread, the balusters
having tapering fluted
shafts, the handrail
moulded and ramped
up to the corner
newel posts.
*(photo Surrey CC
P3503)*

8.
LANCASHIRE COURT, LONDON
A short run of steeply-raked stairs in a
modest town house, with a
completely plain newel post,
moulded handrail and a closed string
with three different balusters, of
which the middle one is the original
pattern.
(photo Georgian Group)



8

9.
HANOVER SQUARE,
LONDON
The lowest flight of a
town house staircase,
probably made of
softwood, with a cut
string and carved
openwork decoration
to the tread-ends.
There are three
balusters to each
tread and the
balusters have shafts
which taper towards
the base and support
a moulded handrail.
(photo LMA 62/2685)



9

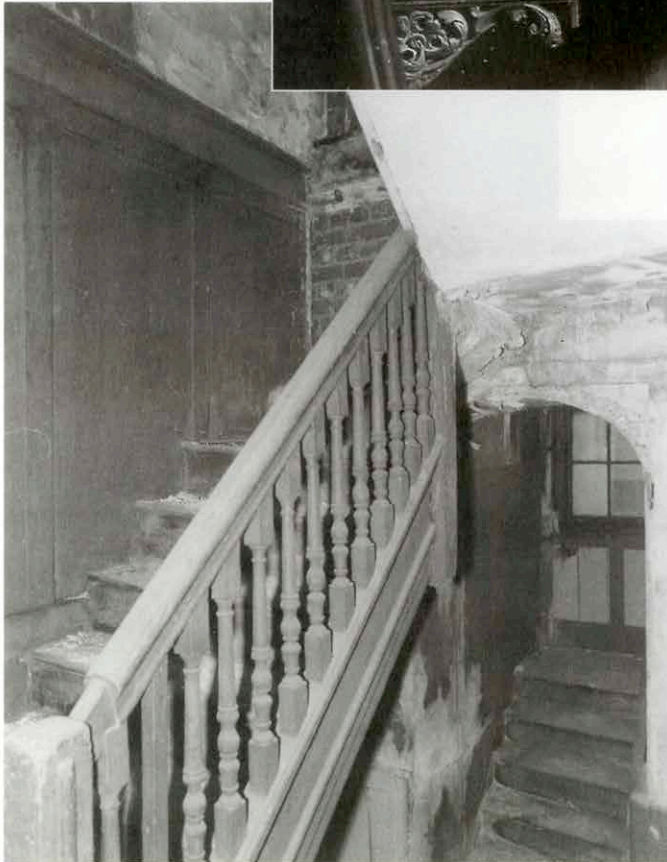
1720
1730

10.
FYDELL HOUSE,
BOSTON, LINGS
An excellent example
of a high quality early
Georgian staircase,
made of oak, with
delicately-carved
tread-ends and three
balusters to each
tread, all of a
different pattern.
(photo NMR AA/6522)

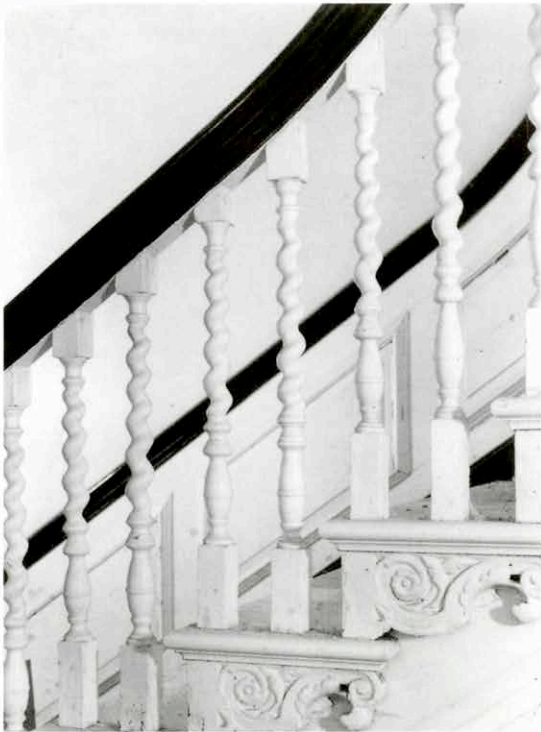
10



11.
WILKES STREET,
SPITALFIELDS,
LONDON
The upper flight
(second floor to attic)
of a London town
house which follows
an old fashioned
form, with a closed
string.
*(photo LMA
80/120/2097/3)*



11



12

12.
WESTHOPE, MARLOW, BUCKS
The principal flight of a provincial stair with two balusters to each tread and twisted balusters with slightly elongated bases. The moulded handrail is matched by a moulded rail above the painted panelled dado.
(photo NMR. BB77/3)



14

13.
WIDCOMBE MANOR
HOUSE, BATH
A handsome main stair, three twisted balusters to each tread. The handrail is ramped up to the landing and ends with a twist onto the bottom newel. The steps have moulded nosings, typical of the better stairs.
(photo NMR DD50/201 Messrs Batsford)



13

14.
THE RECTORY
FOURNIER STREET,
SPITALFIELDS
In this house designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor the stair is a conspicuous feature, thanks to the proliferation of the closely-spaced balusters on the stair and across the window opening.
(photo Georgian Group)

1720
1730

1730
1740

15.
ROSEWELL HOUSE,
KINGSMEAD SQ.
BRISTOL

A rather plain version
of the early Georgian
main stair; the simple
carved tread-ends
have the guttae or
stylised pegs of the
Doric order, which
was thought the
proper order for
entrance halls.

*(photo NMR
BB32/878)*



15

16.
CROSS STREET,
WHITEHAVEN,
CUMBRIA

This northern stair
has a clumsy newel
post, substantial
turned balusters of a
single type and plain
tread ends set on a
continuous moulding.
The handrail is
mahogany, the rest of
the stair softwood.

*(photo NMR
BB82/13939)*

16



1730
1740



17

17.
MANOR HOUSE,
RINGWOOD, HANTS
Although the various
elements of this stair
are slightly crude
they are highly
decorated. The fluted
newel post supports
the end of the
hardwood handrail
which is splendidly
scrolled and carved.
*(photo NMR
BB82/118)*

18



18.
TAVISTOCK STREET,
LONDON
The attic flight of a
dog-leg stair made of
softwood with
painted graining. The
closed string is an
early feature but the
tapering balusters and
turned newel are
typical of the 1730s.
(photo Georgian Group)

1740
1750

19.
ROPER STREET,
WHITEHAVEN,
CUMBRIA
A refined design with
uniform fluted
balusters and a fairly
thin handrail,
although the carving
of the tread-ends is
vigorous.
(photo NMR YO779)



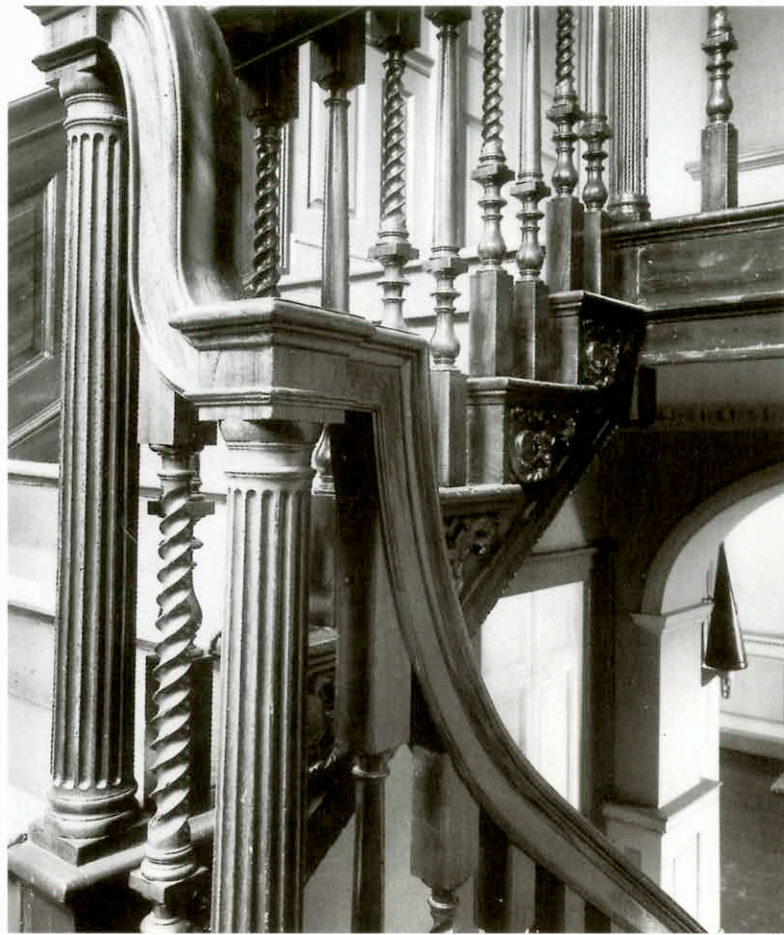
19

20.
CLIFTON HILL
HOUSE, BRISTOL
A stone stair with
magnificent high
quality wrought-iron
balustrading
supporting a
mahogany
handrail. The form of
the stair itself with
straight flights and
ramped handrail is
wholly traditional.
*(photo NMR
A4212299)*



20

1740
1750



21

21.
SIR PETER
THOMPSON'S HOUSE,
POOLE, DORSET
A close-up of the
stair-rail junction at a
landing on a
handsome stair. The
material appears to be
hardwood, but may
be softwood with
high-quality graining.
The handrail is
sharply ramped.
*(photo NMR
CC80/187)*



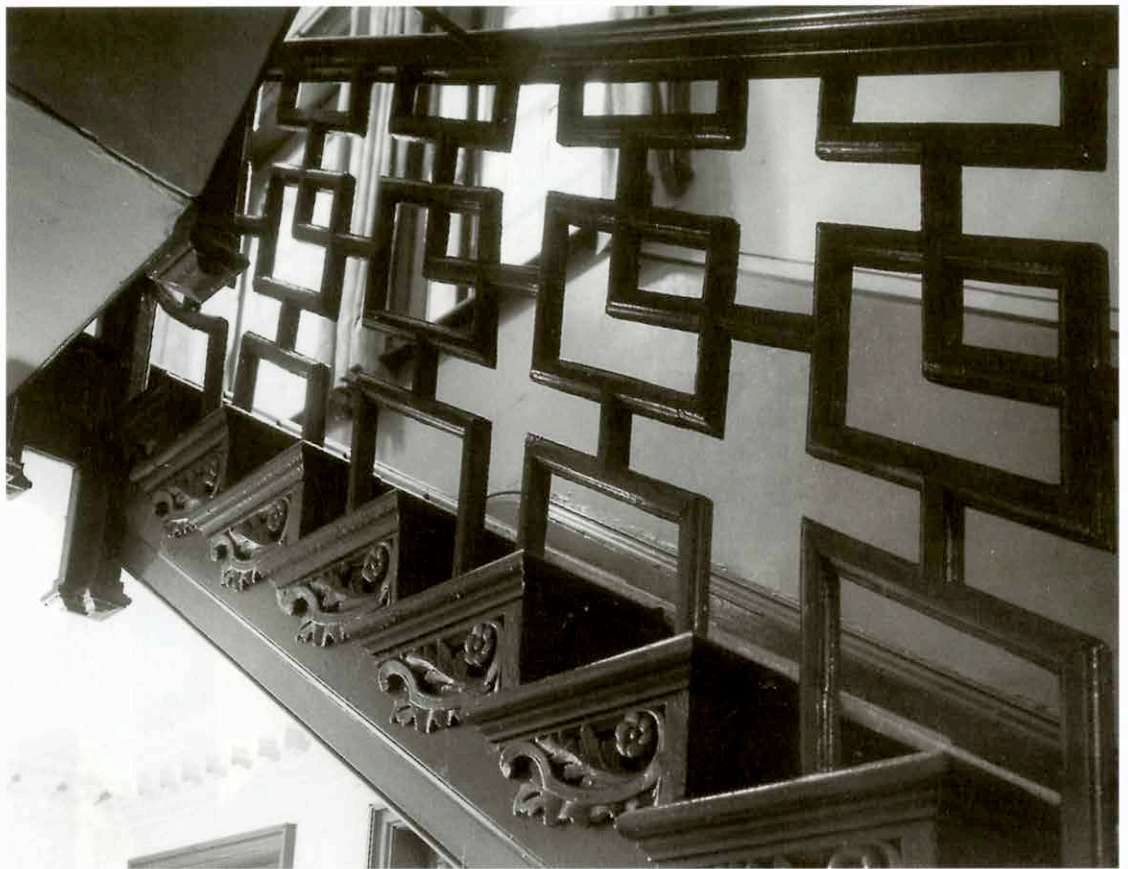
22

22.
SOUTHAMPTON
PLACE, LONDON
A plain but handsome
timber stair in one of
a row of London town
houses on the
Bedford estate which
was probably
designed by Roger
Morris. The tread-
ends have boldly-
carved scrolls and
foliage; the balusters
(three to a tread) are a
version of the
standard mid-18th
century type, the
lowest flights are
curved and the
handrail elegantly
twisted.
(photo LMA)

1750
1760

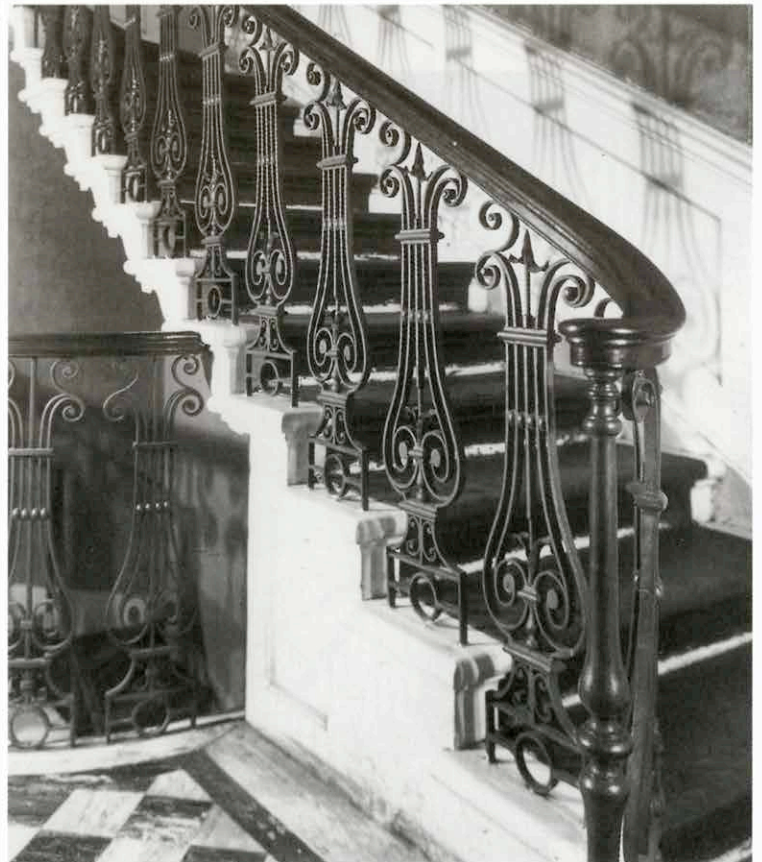
23.
THE GROVES, OLD
PLACE, CHESTER
A Chinoiserie stair
with oriental pattern
wooden balustrading
and tread-ends which
combine traditional
rosettes and acanthus
leaves with picrust-
like decoration which
is wholly Rococo in
style.
*(photo NMR
AA62/4256)*

23



24.
ABINGDON STREET,
WESTMINSTER
The principal flight
of this stair, ground to
first floor, is of stone
with wrought-iron
lyre-shaped balusters
supporting a
mahogany handrail.
(photo LMA B6294)

24





25

25.

ABINGDON STREET, WESTMINSTER

The second floor and attic flights of the same stair as No 24; the stair has an open well and the details get simpler as the stair rises; an open string with carved balusters gives way to a close string with plain turned balusters. The handrail is the one element continuous from top to bottom of the stair.

(photo GLC B6294)

1750

1760

26.

COUPAR HOUSE,
BLANDFORD FORUM

A heavy main stair with very elaborate tread-ends, panelled and with decorative carving below the actual treads. The heavy handrail is scrolled and carved, like the Ringwood example (No.17).

*(photo NMR
BB74/3374)*

26



27



27.

OLD FORD ROAD,
LONDON

The ground floor flight of this stair in an east London house has a closed string, with plain turned balusters. A short flight leads down to the back door.

(photo LMA 67/9711)

1760
1770

28.
BERNERS STREET,
LONDON
A stone geometrical
stair in a London
town house built by
Sir William
Chambers. The
involvement of a
leading architect in
the building probably
accounts for the
elegance of the
details, notably the
thin handrail and the
wrought-iron "S"
curved supports.
*(photo LMA
57/3/HB/45F/1163)*

28



29.
HOWGILL STREET,
WHITEHAVEN
A reminder of the
survival of traditional
forms; this Cumbrian
stair still has a close
string and substantial
rail; the balusters,
though elongated, are
not a very elegant
shape.
(photo NMR 82175)



29

30



1760
1770

30.
BLOSSOM STREET,
YORK
A rather plain stair
with box-like tread-
ends and two plainly
turned balusters per
tread; the lower
newel is hidden, but
appears to be merely
a slightly fatter
version of the
balusters.

*(photo NMR
BB71/8275)*



31

31.
ROYAL CRESCENT,
BATH
This stone
geometrical stair has
alternating plain rods
and wavy floral rods
supporting the
handrail; probably
both types are of cast-
iron.

*(photo NMR
A46/6028)*

1770
1780

32.
THE MANSION,
CHURCH STREET,
ASHBOURNE, DERBYS
A flight of stone stairs
with an unusual
interlace pattern for
the supports of the
mahogany handrail:
note the plain
underside of the
steps.
*(photo NMR
BB82/11484)*



33.
ROYAL CRESCENT,
BATH
An elaborate
geometrical stone
stair in which the
underside of the
stone steps carries
through the shape of
the tread-ends. Pairs
of plain iron rods
alternate with
variegated wrought
iron supports for the
mahogany handrail.
*(photo NMR
A46/6032)*



34



1770
1780

34.
HANOVER SQUARE,
LONDON
This stair rises in a grand town house entrance hall. Each stone tread bears one plain rod topped by a rosette and one more elaborate support topped by an urn. The handrail is clearly veneered with mahogany; the metal tie crossing the base of the urns is probably a later addition. The shaped tread ends also bear rosettes.

(photo LMA HR994)



35

35.
BEDFORD SQUARE,
LONDON
A very plain but elegant stone geometrical stair with plain iron rods and a slender hardwood handrail.

(photo LMA 81/10536)

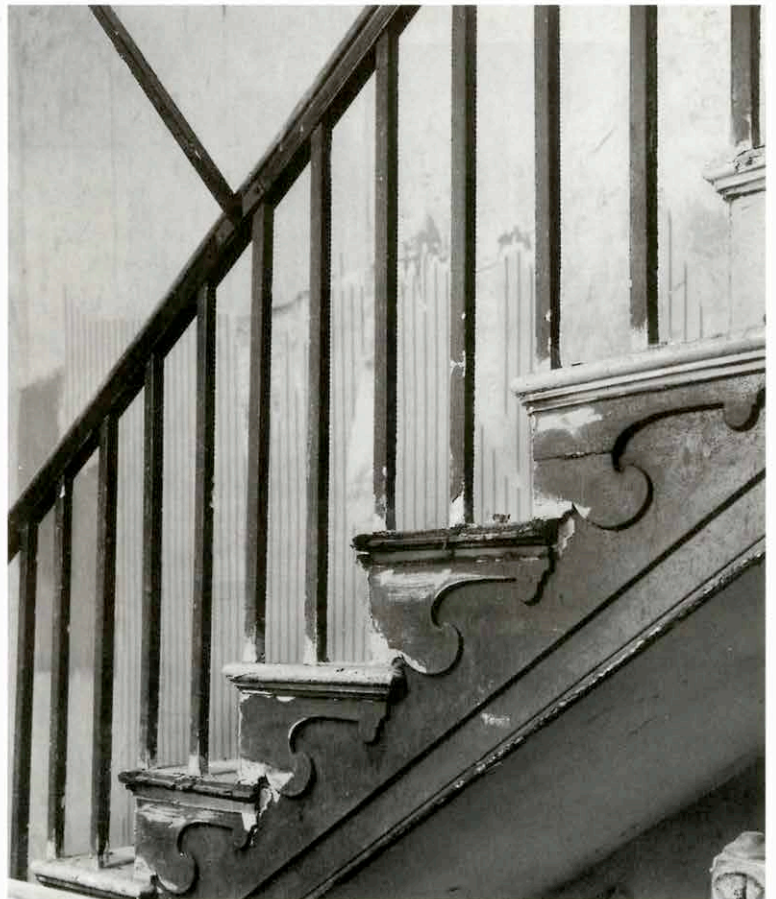
1780
1790

36.
ESTCOURT HOUSE,
SHIPTON MOYNE,
GLOS
In this handsome
country house hall
the stone stair itself is
very simple and
elegant, in keeping
with its Greek
Revival surroundings,
but the cast iron
balusters have almost
an Egyptian quality.
*(photo NMR
AA63/7096)*



36

37.
RICHMOND TERRACE,
BRISTOL
A plain softwood
timber stair in a town
house, with simple
shaped tread-ends
and two stick
balusters to each
tread.
*(photo NMR
BB93/25221)*

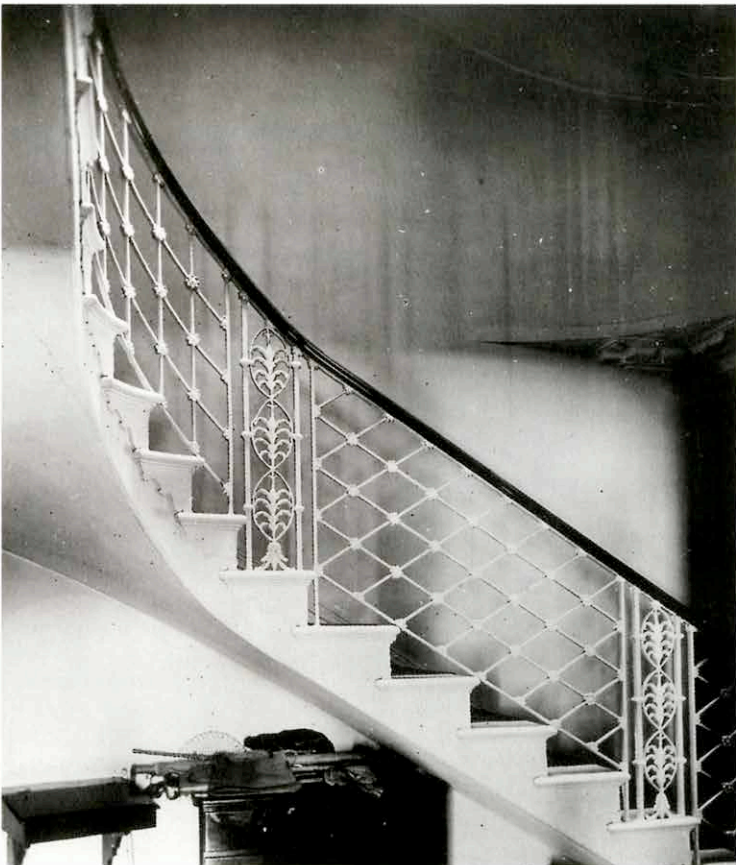


37



1780
1790

38.
EASTGATE HOUSE,
EASTGATE STREET,
GLOUCS
This open-well stone
stair has stick
balusters of cast iron
paired on each tread
with ornamental
supports which are
probably also cast
iron. The handrail is
still ramped up to the
landings in a slightly
old-fashioned way.
The ornamental
underside of the
stone treads is
exposed.
*(photo NMR
BB63/1151)*



39.
PORTSMOUTH
DOCKYARD, HANTS
A timber stair, steeply
curved, with a narrow
handrail supported at
intervals by
ornamental standards
between rails
spanning four steps
without any fixing.
*(photo NMR BB71/290
© Crown Copyright
1942/MOD)*

1790
1800

40.
THE ROUND HOUSE,
HAVERING ATTE
BOWER, ESSEX
This dramatic top-lit
oval stair lies at the
centre of an oval villa.
The stair and the
stick balusters are
made of softwood,
the handrail is
mahogany.
*(photo LMA
76/3/4442)*

40



41.
THAMES STREET,
POOLE, DORSET
An elaborate stair
serving three levels.
The tread ends on
the upper flight have
the carved ornament
typical of the mid
18th century but the
elegant mahogany rail
and iron balusters are
clearly later 18th
century.
*(photo NMR
BB83/1215)*



41

42



1790
1800

42.
MONTPELIER ROW,
LEWISHAM, LONDON
Despite its plainness,
this wooden stair has
touches of elegance
in the nosings of the
steps and the slender
newel.

(photo LMA 63/0350)



43

43.
SOMERSET PLACE,
BATH

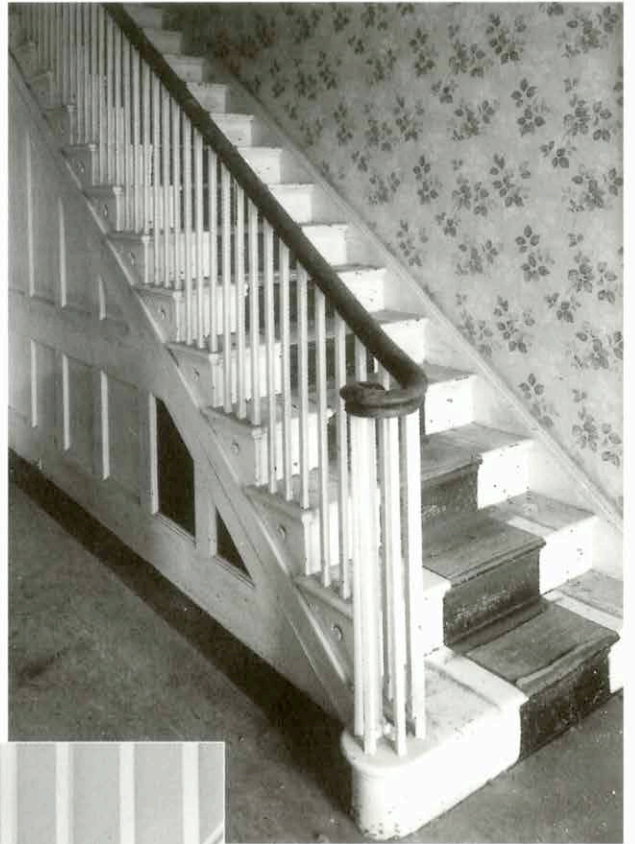
Although similar in
general form to
No 42, this stair is of
stone and iron, with a
single touch of
ornament in the lyre
support on each
landing.

*(photo NMR
BB76/4457)*

1800 1810

44.
BOWCOMBE ROAD,
CARISBROOKE, ISLE
OF WIGHT
A flight of timber
stairs with three stick
balusters to each
tread. At the bottom
of the stair the
scrolled rail is
supported by a thin
iron rod, almost
concealed by timber
balusters. This was a
common arrangement.
*(photo NMR
BB81/8341)*

44



45.
HOLLINS HALL,
FLAUNDEN, HERTS
A timber secondary
stair in a large house
which has all the
characteristics –
shaped tread-ends,
stick balusters, slim
turned newel - of a
principal stair in a
modest town house.
*(photo NMR
BB78/8665)*



45



1800
1810

46.
CLAPHAM ROAD,
LONDON
In this stone and iron
London stair the
plain stick balusters
alternate with
uprights of two
different patterns.
One unusual and
slightly clumsy detail
is the way that one of
these patterned
uprights is bent
round the curve on
the landing.
*(photo Peter
Powlesland)*



47

47.
SYDNEY PLACE, BATH
The upper part of a
very delicate
geometrical stair
made of stone. The
mahogany handrail is
the thinnest possible;
hardly thicker than
the iron stick
balusters., enlivened
by S-curve panels and
iron lattice work on
the landing.
*(photo NMR
A46/6142)*

1810
1820

48.
HILDERSHAM HALL,
CAMBS.
The slope of this stair
is unusually shallow.
The handrail is
turned not on the
lowest step, but on
the first step up. The
thin square section
balusters with their
central knobs are
probably of cast iron,
but may be wrought
iron.

*(photo NMR
BB78/5130).*

49.
TREGOTHNAN,
CORNWALL
A handsome imperial
stair (rising in one
flight and returning
in two) at the centre
of William Wilkins's
influential neo-
Jacobean mansion.
The stair itself is of
stone, the balusters
of iron in traceried
Gothic patterns. Such
Gothic balusters were
very popular in the
late Georgian period.
(photo Country Life)

48



49



1810
1820



50

50.
LEIGH COURT,
BRISTOL
The long double
staircase rising in the
central hall of this
country house has a
heavy cast-iron
balustrade
foreshadowing
Victorian types; the
balusters support a
mahogany rail inlaid
with brass dogtooth.
The shallow rake of
the stone stair
suggests that it is
almost certainly
supported on iron
beams.

*(photo NMR
BB84/1400)*



51

51.
ST THOMAS'S STREET
SOUTHWARK,
LONDON
A standard London
stair made of
softwood, with plain
treads and plain stick
balusters. The only
ornaments are the
turned newel posts
on their high bases
and the curving
mahogany rail.
(photo Georgian Group)

1820 1830

52.
TREDEGAR SQUARE
The first to second floor stair in an East London terraced house. The plain stick balusters, newel and handrail are all painted, though the rail is probably hardwood. Both the soffit of the stair and the skirting on the wall-side have touches of elegant curvature.

(photo LMA 73/2870)

53.
PORCHESTER
TERRACE
The principal stair in one of a pair of semi-detached houses designed by John Claudius Loudon, the champion of suburban architecture. The main elements of the stair, with its simple turned newel and moulded mahogany rail are typically late Georgian but the turned wooden balusters are of a type more typical of the 1860s; they may be a later alteration.

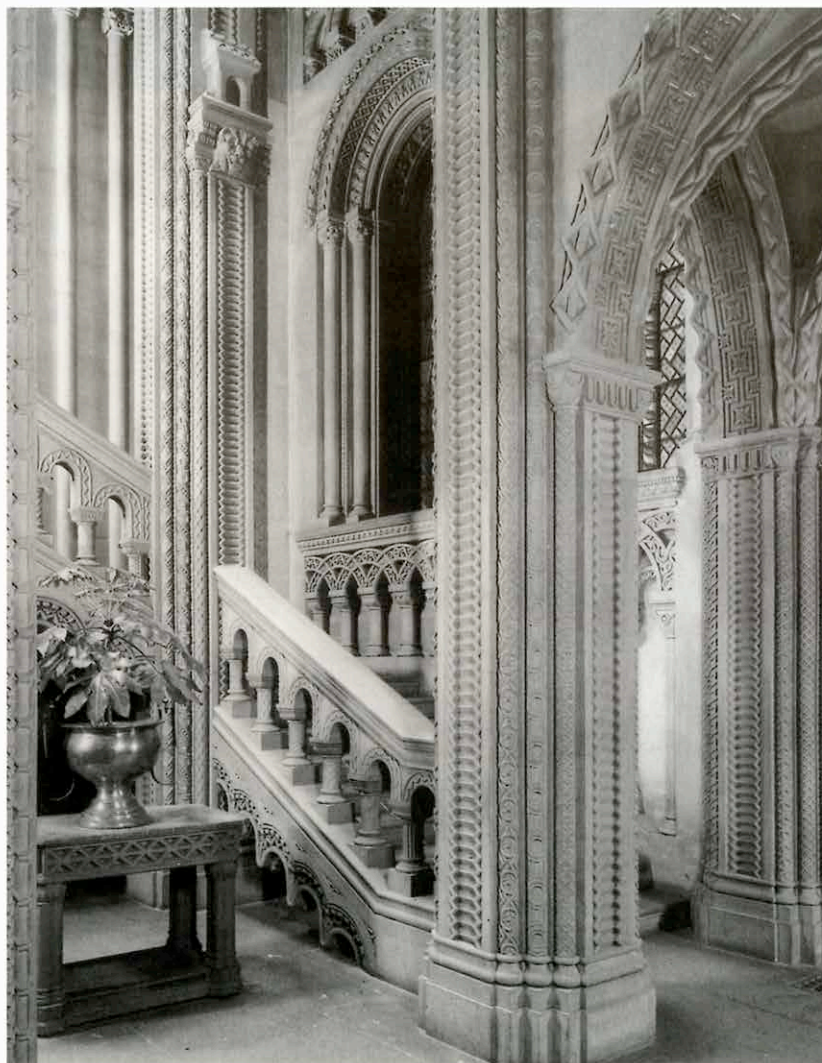
(photo LMA 77/1692)



52



53



54

54.
PENRHYN CASTLE,
NR BANGOR
N WALES
Historical Revival gone mad in the Neo Norman stair at Penrhyn, made entirely of stone and with Norman detailing.

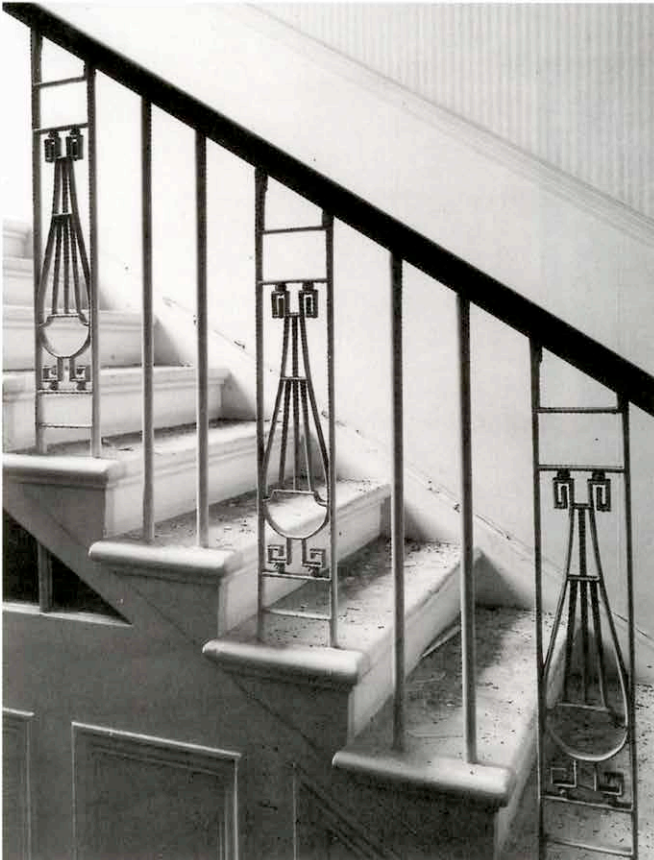
(photo National Trust)

1820
1830



55

55.
GORDON SQUARE
The principal flight of a central London terraced house stone stair with cast-iron balusters of alternating pattern and a thin mahogany rail. The bottom curl of the rail rests on a cast-iron newel of vaguely neo-Grecian design.
(photo LMA 70/9380)



56

56.
WOBURN SQUARE
A stone stair in one of the terrace houses built by James Burton, with iron balustrading in which stylised lyres alternate with pairs of plain rods.
(photo LMA 69.6.HB.6701)

1830
1840

57.
THE RECTORY,
NEWTON LONGVILLE,
BUCKS

The upper flights of a secondary staircase with a very old-fashioned appearance: a dog-leg arrangement, steep rake, close string, massive paired newels and very substantial balusters. This stair is a timely reminder that appearances can be deceptive.

(photo NMR
BB63/1177)



57

58.
MONTPELLIER
CRESCENT,
WALLASEY,
MERSEYSIDE

A stone stair with elaborate cast-iron balusters of two forms supporting a plainly-moulded wooden rail. Unusually with stone stairs, the tread-ends are carved.

(photo NMR
BB82/7052)



58

1830
1840



59

59.
CARLTON HOUSE
TERRACE, LONDON
The principal
features of this stair
are the heavy iron
balusters with their
square central knobs.
The mahogany rail is
also very substantial.
*(photo NMR
BB64/2076)*

60



60.
LLOYD STREET,
ISLINGTON, LONDON
The plain timber stair
of the late Georgian
decades; a type found
throughout England
and Wales.
*(photo LMA
73/120/346B/2)*

1840
1850

61.
THE CROWN HOTEL,
SCARBOROUGH, N
YORKS

The main and upper flights of this hotel stair show the class distinctions being perpetuated, with wide cast iron balusters on the main flight and turned wooden balusters on the upper flight. The heavy square timber newel is probably not original.

*(photo NMR
BB81/5684)*



61

62.
CHURCH ROAD,
ALPHINGTON, DEVON

The plain stick balusters and carved tread ends of this modest Devon stair could be of almost any date after 1780.

*(photo NMR
AA77/1454)*



62

1840
1850



63

63.
BIRCH HALL, ESSEX
A handsome example of an early Victorian Imperial stair in a small country house, now sadly demolished. The stair is of stone, the massive newels and balusters of cast iron and the individual balusters are fixed to the sides of the treads in a typically Victorian way rather than the to top surface of the tread which was the customary Georgian arrangement.

(photo Georgian Group)

64



64.
MONKGATE, YORK
A broad free-standing stone stair with two cast-iron balusters to each tread of completely different pattern. The result is heavy, both in appearance and weight. It is more than likely that the stair has iron reinforcements underneath.

(photo NMR YG1728)

A SHORT READING LIST

EARLY WORKS

Mathurin Jousse: *Le Theatre de l'art de charpentier* (Paris 1627)

Joseph Moxon: *Mechanick Exxcercises* (1627)

Richard Neve: *The City & Country Purchaser and Builder's Dictionary* (1703)

Francis Price: *The British Carpenter* (1735)

Abraham Swan: *The British Architect* (1745)

William Pain: *The Builder's Companion* (1758)

William Pain: *The British Palladio* (1786)

Peter Nicholson: *A Treatise on the Construction of Staircases* (1820)

Peter Nicholson: *The New Practical Builder* (1823)

MODERN WORKS

James Ayres: *Building the Georgian City* (1998)

Andrew Byrne: *London's Georgian Houses* (1986)

Dan Cruikshank & Neil Burton: *Life in the Georgian City* (Viking 1990)

Walter Godfrey: *The English Staircase* (1911)

Francis F Johnson: *Historic Staircases in Durham City* (City of Durham Trust 1970)

N W Alcock & Linda Hall: *Fixtures and Fittings in Dated Houses 1567–1763* (Council for British Archaeology 1994)

Sam Price: *Cantilevered Staircases* (in *Architectural Review Quarterly*, Spring 1996, pp.76–87)

Russell J P Taylor: *Stone Cantilevered Staircases* (unpublished Architectural Association thesis 1989)



(photo Georgian Group)

The top flight of the main staircase of a house in St. Thomas Street, Bermondsey.



The Georgian Group exists to save from destruction or disfigurement Georgian buildings, townscapes, monuments, parks and gardens. The Group welcomes new members, donations and legacies to assist its work.

Full details of the work of the Group are available from:
The Georgian Group, 6 Fitzroy Square,
London W1T 5DX · Telephone 020 7529 8920

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