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THE OFFICE OF THE SICK AND HURT BOARD

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Just outside the old City limits, within the Liberty of the Tower, 41 Trinity Square survives today as an unusual example of a 1770s town house in that area of London (Fig. 1).¹ Four storeys high over a basement, it is shown in Malton's 1799 print of neighbouring Trinity House towering over its neighbours, topped by a square-windowed attic over a full cornice that returns at right angles onto the side elevations (Fig. 2). The first floor has a surbase stretching across the full front and its central window is of lugged aedicule form with a pulvinated frieze under a cornice, while the ground floor has three arched openings, each arch framing a subsidiary, recessed inner arch.

Such suave handling suggests an architect as designer, yet the interiors, although generously scaled, are, on the ground and above the first floor, of the utmost simplicity. The major concession to style is a centrally placed top-lit stair against the north party wall; otherwise the first floor rooms are decorated with high quality enriched cornices, differing in each room, and there survives one chimneypiece of quality in the first floor front room. The explanation of this combination of handsome façade and generally plain interior lies in the house's construction not as a dwelling but an office for the Sick and Hurt Board of the Admiralty. However, this must not be overstated because, as with most public offices in the eighteenth century, the house combined living and office accommodation.²

The Board had been at this address since at least 1744, as *puisne* subtenants. The crown tenant was Sir George Robinson, who sub-let to a Mrs Bridget

Price, who in turn let the house as offices to the Board. In the later 1760s the board started negotiations for a building lease on the property. Some difficulty ensued with Mrs Price over the cost of assigning her interest, but all was agreed by mid-1771 and on 21 May 'The Board gave orders for Mr Swinton, the surveyor, to be immediately sent for in order to get everything ready for moving and advertisement to be made in the public papers for the Board's receiving tenders from persons willing to purchase and pull down the present office...'. Tenders were considered in June: those successful were Mr Robinson, carpenter and joiner (£750), Mr Gray, bricklayer (£500), Emanuel Williams, mason (£175), Thomas Palmer, plasterer (£160), and William Williamson, glazier (£35). Work was initially delayed while a problem of encroachment on neighbouring Nag's Head Court and various disputes with the building craftsmen were resolved, but all was completed by August 1773, when the Board held its first meeting in its new premises.

Although there is no mention in the Board minutes of an architect, all the clues are to hand to suggest his identity as Sir Robert Taylor. This is despite the minuted role of the Board's own surveyor in every stage of the house's progress from negotiations over the site to supervision of its construction; indeed he is described as 'the Surveyor for doing works at the new office'. Subsequent to Robert Adam's designing the Admiralty screen in 1760, Taylor had been championed in Admiralty circles, probably on account of his patron, Lord Howe, who had been a Lord of the Admiralty from 1763 to 1765 and was subsequently First Lord.³ Although it is not certain



Fig. 1. No. 41 Trinity Square,
Tower Hamlets, London.
English Heritage.

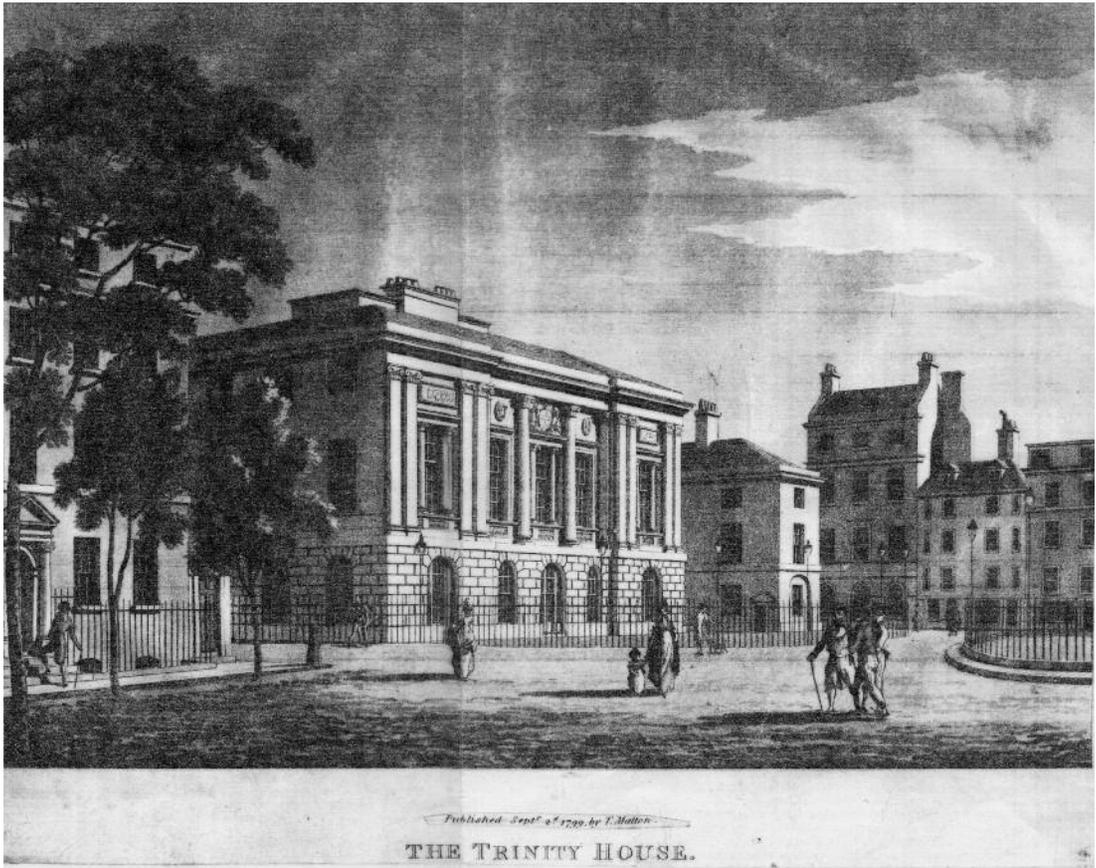


Fig.2. Thomas Malton, view of Trinity House and Trinity Square, London, 1799.
English Heritage.

by what date he was appointed, Taylor held the surveyorship to the Admiralty at his death in 1788, as confirmed in Walpole's obituary of him,⁴ and if appointed by 1769 would presumably have been asked for a design when the subsidiary Board for the Sick and Hurt decided to rebuild. Indeed, the Board minutes refer to plans against which the tenders were submitted.

The façade bears strong similarities to Taylor's documented work. It fits the cast of his town houses, which Binney describes as astylar, high-waisted, often having a triple arcaded ground floor and

(supporting an attic) a cornice that returns on the side elevations. Partial similarities with Taylor's 70 Lombard Street, 33 Upper Brook Street, Ely House, Dover Street and the house he designed for his own son in Whitehall Gardens spring to mind. The Trinity Square house characteristically has a triple arcaded ground floor, the arches springing from a running stringcourse impost, and the emphasised central window to the first floor is characteristic, as is the overall height, recalling Noorthouck's comment in 1773 about Taylor's Lincoln's Inn Fields houses seeming 'to strain at a proud exaltation above all the

buildings in the neighbourhood; and are by no means calculated for asthmatic or gouty inhabitants'.⁵

Now we may square the circle, as the combination of two of the characters documented in the Board minutes, Swinton and Gray, presumably indicates they may be identified respectively with the James Swinton, carpenter, of Greenwich, and Edward Gray, builder, of Queen Street, Grosvenor Square, both of whom were at this date involved in Taylor's development of Grafton Street, Mayfair, for the Duke of Grafton. Marcus Binney, in this connection, quotes a minute of the clerk of the Westminster Paving Commissioners as 'Mr Taylor the architect and Mr Gray the builder, of the several new houses at Hay Hill'.⁶ Again, as quoted by Binney, Gray and Swinton were amongst the craftsmen included in the building contract for No 3 Grafton Street, as builder and carpenter. Additionally the Grafton papers include two schedules of 'leases made by the Duke of Grafton to divers tenants of Ground and Houses in New Grafton Street', both of which include three to Messrs. Gray, Swinton & Barrell.⁷ Indeed Binney identifies Taylor's favourite builder as the same Edward Gray: he contracted for Taylor's Bank Buildings in 1764 and Long Ditton church in 1778.⁸

A further circumstance is that on the removal of the Board in 1787 to Somerset House, No. 41 was transferred to the Commissioners for Receiving the 6d. Duty for Greenwich Hospital. Although Taylor did not succeed to the surveyorship at Greenwich until Athenian Stuart's death in February 1788, it is plausible to wonder whether Taylor, who is known for combining architecture with estate agency, was involved in the house's transfer from one body to the other.

SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

The commissioners of Greenwich Hospital continued in occupation until 1831, using the ground floor offices as receiving room and board room, while the upper floors served as the first commissioner's

residence. The auction catalogue for the sale of the freehold in 1831 gives the following details:

Upper floor: 2 apartments and a lumber room

3 pair floor: 3 bedrooms, a drawing room and a large apartment used as a laundry

2 pair floor: 4 airy sleeping apartments, a dressing room (formerly part of one of the bedrooms) and a china closet

1 pair floor: a noble drawing room in front 24'6" x 18'6", a small boudoir adjoining, a dining room 18'6" x 17'6" fitted up with wainscoting and a library at rear

Ground floor: good entrance hall enclosed from the staircase, a spacious apartment in front formerly used as a public office and ditto at rear as a board room, 2 large closets, one forming a communication from the front room to the housekeeper's room at rear, store closet and water closet

Basement: a paved kitchen, washhouse, dark closet, pantry closet and wine cellar.

The purchaser was Henry Moses, a slop seller, who remained until 1857, when the house was bought as their head office by the newly formed Thames Conservancy Board, also serving as the Port of London Harbourmaster's office. They remained until 1894, having at some time considerably extended the house to the rear. Either the Conservancy or the next occupants, the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway Company, altered the ground floor elevation to its present appearance; the latter certainly adding the canopy over the entrance with the emblems of the company immediately over the door arch. The LT&SR, having merged with the Midland Railway in 1912, retained the house for a few more years until the mid-1920s. The house has remained as offices to date, although it was threatened with demolition in 1982, occasioning the preparation of an historical report by Greater London Council's Historic Buildings Division, now part of English Heritage.⁹ Permission to demolish was fortunately denied, and

the house, with its neighbour No. 42-43, was included in the scheme by Lyons, Sleeman & Hoare in 1985-86 to refurbish Dance the Younger's The Crescent, just behind, winning a City Heritage Society award in 1988.¹⁰

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of the information in this article is based on Neil Burton's primary research in the 1982 report on the house in the Historians' Files, English Heritage [English Heritage, HA&RT, TH53]. His report quotes the following references: London, PRO, CRES 2/877; MPE 1130 (1&2); ADM 99/43-49 (Sick and Hurt Board minutes). London, Guildhall Library, Tower Liberty Land Tax returns.

NOTES

- 1 Originally part of Great Tower Hill; Trinity Square originated with the building of Trinity House in 1792-94.
- 2 The continuation of this use into the nineteenth century is confirmed by the description of the premises in the sale particulars quoted towards the end of this article.
- 3 Such is the argument in Marcus Binney, *Sir Robert Taylor*, 1984, 37; but see also Richard Garnier, 'Speculative Housing in 1750's London', *infra*, for earlier putative Admiralty links through the residents of Great George Street. Taylor's patron, the 1st Earl Howe, is not to be confused with his predecessor, the 3rd Viscount Howe (†1758), whose monument in Westminster Abbey, executed by Peter Scheemakers, was designed by James Stuart, Taylor's predecessor as surveyor at Greenwich [Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1660-1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 942].
- 4 Cited by Binney, *op. cit.*, 26; there is no record of Taylor's appointment in either J C Sainty, *Admiralty Officials 1660-1870*, London, 1975, or JM Collinge, *Navy Board Officials 1660-1832*, London, 1978. I am grateful to Richard Hewlings for checking these.
- 5 Cited in Binney, *op. cit.*, 56.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 7 Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk Record Office, HA513 / 4 / 41 & HA513 / 4 / 333.
- 8 Binney, *op. cit.*, 62.
- 9 London, English Heritage, HA&RT, TH53.
- 10 Simon Bradley & Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, London 1: The City of London*, London, 1997, 473; I am grateful to Simon Bradley for this information.