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THE NEW STAIRCASE AT NO 15 QUEEN SQUARE, BATH

Donal Channer

No 15 Queen Square, was built in 1730 and was one of the earlier houses in the square. It was particularly associated with John Wood who was at one time thought to have lived there. The hall contains some very fine plasterwork thought to be by the Francini brothers. It is not known who made the original stairs but they have a very unusual construction, other examples of which are known only in Yorkshire where Wood did his training. It is said that Wood brought craftsmen from Yorkshire and this stylistic link would seem to be evidence of this.

Wood is not known to have had a particular client for this building, which has an extremely elaborate hall and had two fine rooms on the first floor while the rest of the house is comparatively plain. One explanation for this would be that he had it built as an office, with a splendid set of rooms to act as a show house in which to receive and impress potential clients.

The stairs consist of three short flights with two quarter landings. The treads and risers are of oak with strips of mahogany inlay, as is the moulded soffit. The panelling, handrail, banisters, and carved tread-ends are mahogany. The soffit is moulded to the same shape as the tread-end bracket; this is not unusual but where it occurs there is usually a rectangular panel immediately below the tread and the bracket is behind this, which allows for an outer string to be concealed. What is unusual in this stair and is found only in Yorkshire is that the tread-end bracket is immediately below the tread and no room is left for a string: the stairs are in fact cantilevered from the wall. The quarter landings have a parquetry pattern of oak and mahogany squares; the second landing soffit has an inlaid pattern of a star with lunelles between the points. The banisters are alternately fluted and spiral turned, and the fluted newels have composite capitals, while the main landing fascia is inlaid to give the impression that the banisters continue through the nosing. In fact the original designer grasped every opportunity to complicate the work.

In 1921 the house fell into the hands of Colonel Mallet who had the stairs, fireplaces, shutters and so on removed. The stairs were installed, with the top flight extended, in a house in Clifton. In 1928 they were removed from the house in Clifton by Colonel Mallet, and Sir Edwin Lutyens incorporated them, considerably altered, in Norcot Hall, Berkhamsted.

My own involvement began when I heard that Bath City Council who own the house were proposing to install a pastiche of the original stairs. I offered to make an exact copy of the original stairs for about 25% more than the pastiche. There were problems raising the extra money, which eventually came from the Bath Preservation Trust and the Cleary Fund, and also with the fact that it was thought there was not time for the council to prepare a specification and drawings of the stairs. I offered to prepare a specification and drawings and submit them to the Conservation Department; this offer was accepted. In making a copy it is vital that the person who is going to do the work examines the original in all its details; if the shapes and textures are to be accurately reproduced this cannot be delegated.

I have endeavoured to reproduce the stairs as they would have been in 1730; the stairs have been finished with linseed oil and beeswax and no attempt to colour or age them has been made. In making a copy attention to the processes by which the work is done is vital, as these determine the finished result. The boards of the original stairs would have been planed



The new staircase under construction (above) and complete, 1986.



up by hand and would have had the inevitable slight unevenness of surface caused by that process; the new boards were planed by machine but the final surface produced by hand so as to avoid the mindless precision which usually mars later works. In the same way the spacing of the original banisters was found to vary slightly on the original stairs and this has been copied on the new. The fluting on the banisters was produced by a machine devised by myself which left a rounded end to the groove and this was elongated with gouges to match the shape of the original flutes. The parquet squares of the landing are set within a framing so that the grain direction of the squares runs across that of the frame. This has resulted in the opening of the joints because of differential shrinkage, and this defect in construction has been copied. The joints of the original landing show gaps of more than a quarter of an inch in several places; it is hoped that those in the new one will not open so much because the timber used has been dried to a moisture content suitable for centrally-heated buildings.

From measuring the original staircase the rise of the steps appeared to be six and a quarter inches but when I came to measure up the site in order to fit the right number of steps it had to be six and a half inches. Either the risers had been altered when the stairs were removed or the treads sloped down from the back to the front. To check this I went round the other houses of similar date in the square and found that all the painted pine ones had level treads but that the more elaborate ones did slope detectably; so I went back to Norcot Hall with a spirit level and found that the treads were in fact level and the riser faces vertical but that the banisters all sloped backwards.

The original stairs were hung from the risers which went into the wall but the new ones are cantilevered on steel brackets. The reasons for this are that I wanted to avoid the complication of overhauling the masonry sockets, and also it was not possible to put the stairs together before installing them and the precise positions of the original risers might not have matched exactly to the boards I would have prepared. Because it was not possible to dismantle the original stairs the thickness of the new boards might not have exactly matched the original and I could have wound up with a cumulative error of an inch or more.

The stairs have a lot of carving, and carving is a very individual matter, different carvers having their own 'handwriting'. Roy Bishop who did the tread-end brackets and Ray Holloway who did the newel capitals and the banister parts took great pains to copy as closely as possible the style of the original carving.