Frank Kelsall, ‘Cavendish Square’, 
CAVENDISH SQUARE

Frank Kelsall

Among the achievements of the *Survey of London* under Francis Sheppard's editorship was the elucidation of the estate development of much of early Georgian London. Notable landmarks were the four volumes on St James's Westminster (1960–63) and the two volumes on St George Hanover Square: The Grosvenor Estate (1977–1980); these followed the pioneer volume on Spitalfields, published in 1957, long before the area became trendy. But key areas remain unexplored by the *Survey*'s thorough techniques, and of these perhaps the land north and south of Oxford Street, around Hanover and Cavendish Squares, is the most obvious *terra incognita*. In recent months the Georgian Group has visited several buildings in and near Cavendish Square and this note provides some permanent record of the background to these visits, inevitably a provisional view until the *Survey* or other more complete analysis can be made.

Hanover Square was the first to be laid out. The driving force was the Earl of Scarbrough and a squad of Whig army officers. Cavendish Square was later and Tory, but from the very beginning was linked visually, on the line of Harewood Place and Holles Street. The street names around Cavendish Square reflect the recent dynastic alliance which had brought the freehold to Edward Harley, son of Robert Harley, first Earl of Oxford and the leader of Queen Anne's Tory ministry of 1710–14. Edward Harley had married Henrietta Cavendish Holles, daughter and heiress of the Duke of Newcastle who had bought the estate in 1708. The freehold later passed to the Dukes of Portland and then to Lords Howard de Walden.

The layout of Cavendish Square and the adjoining streets was made by John Prince, a builder-cum-architect whose name is commemorated in the street leading from Oxford Street to the south eastern corner of the square. Prince also built a number of houses and subscribed to Gibbs' *Book of Architecture*. As Gibbs was already working for Edward Harley at Wimpole and was involved in the design of St Peter Vere Street and other buildings on the estate it is possible that he also had something to do with the layout. Charles Bridgeman, who was the gardener at Wimpole, provided a plan for the garden within the square. Both Gibbs and Bridgeman took, or planned to take, houses in the development.

By the end of 1717 Lords Bathurst, Bingley, Caernarvon, Castleton, Dartmouth and Harcourt were all said to be ready to build in the square. These men marked the Tory character of Cavendish Square, for they were associated with Robert Harley; but Tory politicians were in decline following Harley's loss of office, the accession of George I and the failed Jacobite rising of 1715. Whereas Hanover Square was complete by the mid-1720s Cavendish Square was left incomplete as the building boom of the mid-1720s collapsed and fashionable London perhaps felt more attracted to the Grosvenor Estate south of Oxford Street. The largest house built was that for Lord Bingley (later Harcourt House) on the west side (Figs. 1 and 2); this survived until early this century, when it was replaced by a block of flats. The two plots north of that were not built over until the 1750s, while the north side of the square had a particularly convoluted history. The piecemeal development of Cavendish Square led to its being criticised in a number of 18th century publications. James Ralph's *Critical Review of Publick Buildings* (1734) condemned 'the folly of attempting great things before we are sure we can accomplish little ones' and said that it was a lesson that 'no body should undertake things of a public nature without resolving to go thro' with them'. The satirical *Critical Observations on the Buildings and Improvements of London* (1771) commented that 'the apparent intention here was to excite pastoral ideas in the mind . . . to be effected by
Fig. 1. Harcourt House in 1906, just prior to demolition (photo: English Heritage London Division).

Fig. 2. A ceiling at Harcourt House in 1906 (photo: English Heritage London Division).
cooping up a few frightened sheep within a wooden pailing . . . To see the poor things starting at every coach and hurrying round and round their narrow bounds requires a warm imagination indeed to convert the scene into that of flocks ranging the fields with all the concomitant ideas of innocence and a pastoral life.

The further development of the estate did not take place until circumstances were right for the completion of Cavendish Square itself. In the mid-1750s Foley House was built on the site now covered by the Langham Hotel, and soon after the ground to the north was taken by Robert and James Adam. An abortive scheme to build Portland Place as an avenue of great palaces came to nothing, but Mansfield Street and Portland Place were completed to a more orthodox pattern. The grid-iron of streets to the north-west of Cavendish Square, with Harley Street and Wimpole Street as its principal thoroughfares, also began to be filled up in the later 1750s and 1760s, but development on the estate did not reach the New Road (Marylebone Road) until the end of the century.

Of the earliest houses in Cavendish Square a few survive on the east side (Nos 3–5). None appears to be especially innovative in planning or detail, but they retain some good Georgian craftsmanship. The house with the most interesting early Georgian interior is No. 20, now hidden behind Sir Edwin Cooper’s stone facade of the Royal College of Nursing. This has some detail in the manner of Edward Shepherd and a fine painted staircase attributed by Edward Croft-Murray to John Devoto (Fig. 3). The best mid-Georgian interior in the square is at No. 18 (now the Saudi Information Centre). This house, with No. 17 at the corner of Wigmore Street, was designed by Henry Keene in 1756. The house is well documented and Keene appeared with many of the craftsmen employed in a conversation piece, painted 1760 and burned in 1940. There is excellent plasterwork and joinery (Fig 4).
The north side of the square has the most complex history. Intended at first for a palace for the Duke of Chandos this ground was sold freehold in 1724; a design for the ducal palace by John Price was published in *Vitruvius Britannicus*. However, the Duke's losses in the South Sea Bubble (said to be over £700,000) and his lavish expenditure at Cannons meant that the palace was abandoned and the Duke built two houses at the east and west corners (designed by Edward Shepherd), the latter for his own occupation and the former for sale. The latter survives as Coutts Bank (16 Cavendish Square); the symmetry of the north side was maintained at first by a screen wall and then by the pair of buildings in the middle (11–14 Cavendish Square), but subsequent building and rebuilding has now broken the symmetry.5

In 1747 the second Duke of Chandos sold the unbuilt central portion of the north side to Sir Francis Dashwood, acting as trustee for the Society of Dilettanti which had been looking for premises since 1742. General George Gray, secretary and treasurer of the Society from 1739–71, designed a wall to enclose the site, some foundations were dug and £200 worth of Portland stone bought. In 1751 John Vardy (associated with Gray at Spencer House) made a design for the Society but in 1753 the Dilettanti instead resolved to build on an ancient model, the Temple at Pola, and to establish their building as an academy. However, in 1756 the Society abandoned their scheme and in 1759 the site (and the stone) was sold to George Forster Tufnell, later MP for Beverley. It was not until 1769 that any building appeared on the site, when the present 11–14 Cavendish Square were in building (Fig. 5). Tufnell himself lived at No. 13 from 1770 and all four were occupied from 1772.

Who designed these buildings? Are they in some way related to the abortive Gray/Vardy scheme for the Dilettanti who sold stone as well as the site? Or are they the work of James 'Athenian' Stuart, sponsored by the Dilettanti and probably the author of the satirical
Critical Observations of 1771? Tufnell’s buildings get a favourable mention alongside 15 St James’s Square, certainly a work by Stuart and another essay in the ‘temple front’ for the London house. They retain some good detail of c.1770. No. 12 was gutted by bomb damage and subsequently repaired by Louis Osman, who designed the bridge which spans the roadway between Nos 12 and 13, and forms the background to the Madonna and Child by Jacob Epstein.6

Osman’s sympathetic work on the north side of the square is a more notable contribution to Cavendish Square than the blocks which now dominate the south side. The open space has only partly withstood the undermining of the subterranean carpark. Cavendish Square may not be the ‘very spacious and noble square’ announced by the Weekly Medley on 13th September 1718 but it still has much to interest and attract.

NOTES
1. But it should be noted that Francis Sheppard’s doctoral thesis appeared in print in 1958 as Local Government in St Marylebone 1688–1835, essential background for the area.
4. The building accounts are in Greater London Office, Accession 85. The picture of Keene and the craftsmen was reproduced in Country Life, 30th March 1945. Cf. Colvin, s.n. Keene.