

## Chapter 14

### 61–101 Oxford Street

### Soho Street to Great Chapel Street

Few parts of Oxford Street are as visually unrewarding today as the stretch between Soho and Great Chapel Streets. The frontage is made up of just three large developments, all of the years 2013–17, ranging between glassy vulgarity, blandness and cool neo-modernism. Of previous buildings on these sites, the liveliest was the original Art Deco section of Drages, a furniture firm which built short-lived new headquarters here at Nos 73–77 in 1929–30.

#### *Early History*

Maps of the late seventeenth century show the Soho frontage between the heads of Soho (then Charles) Street, Dean Street and Great Chapel Street as continuously built up, but that should be taken with a pinch of salt.<sup>1</sup> By the time of Rocque's map (1746) the development of this part of the then Portland Soho estate must have been much more complete; Rocque delineates the blocks only as a whole, with one yard and one lane off the frontage between Charles Street and Angel Hill, as he calls the top of Dean Street (though the name is not elsewhere attested), and another yard to a White Horse Inn bisecting the short block between Angel Hill and Great Chapel Street. Horwood's map (1799 edition) is more specific, marking small houses numbered 401–412 between Charles and Dean Streets and only one entry into the back land in the centre between Nos 405 and 406. For the short block next west from Dean Street to Great Chapel Street, see further below.

These buildings were occupied over the years by the mixture of trades typical for this part of Oxford Street. For a period from 1817, No. 401 (later 87) near the Dean Street corner was the shop of the cousins Thomas & Joshua Thomas, men's mercers or woollen drapers. The future Lord Justice Sir John Rolt was apprenticed in 1818 to the Thomases, 'as honourable and high minded men as are to be found in any class of Society', he remembered. Besides training him in their trade, they encouraged him to read and better himself. After starting 'on the lowest round of the ladder of such a business with corresponding wages', Rolt 'soon gained the confidence of T. & J. Thomas; was gradually released from the worst of the drudgery, and being somewhat of an adept in figures was much employed in the Counting House'.<sup>2</sup> Next door, No. 400 (later 89) on the Dean Street corner, was a pub, the Old Black Horse.<sup>3</sup>

*Soho Street to Dean Street: Nos 61–89*

The following is a summary of what is known of the buildings on these sites before 1930, all now gone.

**No. 61** (formerly 412) was probably always a pub, known originally as the Queen's Head but from the 1860s as the Old Queen's Head. In 1880 it was rebuilt in a costly but clumsy Italian style with a stone front and quirky corner turret. It dropped out of pub use in 1959.<sup>4</sup>

**Nos 63 and 65.** These houses fronted workshops at the back. From 1793 onwards cabinetmakers operated from No. 63 (formerly 410): first Adam or Abraham White, then Francis and William Wright (1803–25). Tallis (c.1839) lists auction rooms at No. 410, and gives 'Bonham Water Closet Maker to Her Majesty' at the then No. 408<sup>1/2</sup>, i.e. behind the frontage. This was Thomas Bonham, an engineer who had been in a short-lived partnership with John

Chalklen in the 1830s. Both premises seem to have been reconstructed in 1861 when the auctioneers Jones & Bonham, hitherto in Leicester Square, built new auction rooms; the architect was Henry Baker, surveyor to the freeholders, the Glossop Estate, and Richard Batterbury was the builder. Later the firm became W. & F. C. Bonham & Sons, who used No. 65 as a shop or offices and ran auctions for furniture from the rooms behind. In the twentieth century the lower floors of Nos 63 & 65 became a second-rate restaurant, Slaters, undergoing sundry alterations including a measure of refronting. In 1971–3 the hall at the back had a brief incarnation as the Pleasurama Leisure Group's London Dolphinarium, designed by Jack Kinnair, and featuring two dancing dolphins called Bonnie and Clyde.<sup>5</sup>

**Nos 67 and 69** were rebuilt in 1892 to designs by R. J. Worley as Valdeck Mansions, with flats over a shop and the entry way to Bonham's auction rooms. The building was completely refronted and turned into commercial premises after suffering war damage.<sup>6</sup>

**Soho Chapel.** Behind the frontage of the former No. 406 (later 75) lay for a time the Soho Chapel, home to a Particular Baptist congregation between 1825 and 1885. This congregation had previously worshipped in Lisle Street near Leicester Square before moving to Oxford Street under their pastor, George Comb. The small building they took may have been the former chapel of the Spanish Embassy behind 7 Soho Square, but Comb had it reconstructed in 1835. Fifty years later the congregation was forced to leave because the freeholder wished to build business premises; they then transferred to a new chapel in Shaftesbury Avenue.<sup>7</sup>

In the early twentieth century the miscellaneous houses at **Nos 73–85** were largely in the hands of Gill & Reigate Ltd, antique dealers and upholsterers, whose main base was the premises of the former Soho Bazaar just behind, entered from Soho Square and Dean Street.<sup>8</sup>

Nos 87–89, with a deep return along Dean Street, were rebuilt in an ebullient Queen Anne style to designs by P. E. Pilditch in 1898–9, with four main storeys above ground, two more in the tall-chimneyed roof and an open corner turret. The upper storeys became Oxford Street’s largest purpose-built hotel to date, christened the Tudor Hotel (sometimes the Hotel Tudor). Among its assets was a somewhat makeshift roof garden, added in 1904, where in favourable months a gipsy band played against a backdrop of chimneypots. The Tudor operated at first in combination with the Norfolk Hotel, South Kensington, and the Clifton Hotel, Welbeck Street. After a change of hands around 1910, the name was altered to the Richelieu Palace Hotel, owned by Gerrard’s Properties Syndicate; it contained a Restaurant Richelieu, of some pretension, on the ground floor. After the First World War the humbler name of the Dean Hotel and Restaurant was adopted.<sup>9</sup> Following bomb damage, the main part of the hotel was demolished for the extension of Drages (see below), but the Dean Street flank survived and still remains in façade only.

### *Drages*

Drages Ltd, famous for its cheap furniture sold on the instalment plan, was one of the ephemeral sensations of inter-war retailing.<sup>10</sup> The business originated in Whitechapel Road, where the furniture firm of Cohen & Sons was in existence by 1903. The name had been altered to David Drage & Sons by 1907, shortly before a second branch was opened at 230 High Holborn close to Holborn Tube Station, with a nearby factory on Theobalds Road. Throughout, the firm appears to have been under the control of Benjamin and Sidney Cohen, who may have been the ‘sons’ of David Drage; at any rate they both changed their name to Drage in 1912.<sup>11</sup>

Under Benjamin Drage’s leadership, the firm began from 1922 to push its business by means of direct mailings and large display advertisements

featuring dialogues between 'Mr Drage' the salesman and his potential customers 'Mr and Mrs Everyman', urging the latter to equip their home by purchasing furniture on the instalment plan by means of 'the Drage way of furnishing out-of-income'.<sup>12</sup> More portentous advertisements followed, carrying specially commissioned drawings of seminal events or themes in British history. These coincided with the conversion of Drages into a public company in 1926, with branches in Birmingham and Manchester, which were to be 'in every respect replicas of the great showrooms in London'.<sup>13</sup>

After a short period in this public phase of the firm's existence, further capital was required to sustain its growth. So Benjamin Drage sold out in 1928, stepping down to devote his life and fortune to good causes, latterly including the rescue of Jewish refugees. The new owners were the Drapery Trust, a combine in which Debenhams Ltd had acquired a controlling interest. The transaction was interpreted in business circles as showing that Debenhams 'believe in the future development of the hire-purchase system'. To ensure continuity, Sidney Drage stayed on as chairman.<sup>14</sup>

The new management now resolved to move the firm's London headquarters to Oxford Street. As Sidney Drage explained: It has been our experience that Holborn as a shopping centre does not appeal to the passing public. In other words, the trade we do only comes to us by the force of our advertising, and your board considers that by transferring their activities to a wonderful shopping thoroughfare like Oxford-street – that is where we are going – they will be bringing their wares, for which there is an ever-increasing demand, more prominently and conveniently to the shopping public.<sup>15</sup>

Gordon Jeeves and Herbert A. Welch were chosen as architects for the new store, which in 1929–30 replaced the former Gill & Reigate premises at 73–77 Oxford Street and part of the Soho Bazaar site behind. The designers did their best to pile as much retailing space as they could on to the enclosed site by taking the building up to seven floors above ground, crammed with

furniture and other equipment. French decorators, Marc Henri & Lavardet, best known for their theatre interiors, added Art Deco touches of chrome and colour to the salesrooms, foyers and light fittings. The sweeping style of the façade, clad in slabs of polished Swedish granite interspersed with strips of stainless steel 'silveroid', probably came from Jeeves; he had recently been the executant architect on Raymond Hood's Ideal House in Great Marlborough Street, a building with a similar finish but far subtler than 'Everyman House', as the new Drages was dubbed. Up-lighters below the tiers of windows gave the front a finishing dab of flashiness.<sup>16</sup>

But 1930 was not a good moment to open a store reliant on large reserves of capital. Drages struggled on for just seven years until 1937, when it was sold by Debenhams to Isaac Wolfson's Great Universal Stores and the Oxford Street shop closed.<sup>17</sup> Wolfson in due course passed the building on to the Leeds-based chain of Montague Burton, tailors. Before much could be done with the site, war intervened, causing damage to Drages' premises but even more to its western neighbour, the Dean Hotel. That extensive site now came into Montague Burton's hands, and in 1949–50 the chain's in-house architects in Leeds under N. Martin produced drawings to extend the Drages elevation to the same design down to the corner with Dean Street, along which the return front of the hotel was retained in simplified form. The result, built in two phases using different tones of granite cladding and completed in 1952, was unfortunate, as it exaggerated the mass of the original Drages without its brio. The 1929–30 building was largely let out to the Polytechnic Touring Association of London with a large Burtons outlet at shop level, while the new Nos 79–89 became separate shops and offices.<sup>18</sup> All these buildings, by then known as Gainsborough House, were demolished in 2015.

*Dean Street to Great Chapel Street: Nos 91–101*

This short block is shown by Horwood (1799) as comprising just four houses, Nos 396–398 running east from Great Chapel Street, then a stable yard, and then 77 Dean Street on the next corner. There is no sign at that date of the White Horse Inn marked here earlier by Rocque. No. 396 at the Great Chapel Street corner was a pub, latterly the Bird in Hand. Tallis shows 77 Dean Street as 400 Oxford Street, with 399 Oxford Street to its west over the entry to the yard behind. The latter, having been in 1822 the address of a chairmaking firm, Graves & Hull,<sup>19</sup> was taken over in 1838 by the Nosottis, looking-glass makers, carvers and gilders. The principal figure in this high-class enterprise was Charles Andrew Nosotti, born in Milan, and in partnership with Francis Nosotti in New Compton Street between about 1822 and 1836. He was next in Dean Street before taking the Oxford Street address. In an advertisement of 1843 for his ‘immense plate glass warehouse’, Nosotti remarked: ‘He does not profess, as many do, to sell the lowest in the kingdom’. Subsequently he and his son and successor, Charles F. Nosotti, had supplementary workshops in Dean Street and Great Chapel Street besides their main shop in Oxford Street, continuing here after the renumbering of 1880 as occupants of Nos 93–99. Nosottis survived a bankruptcy in 1870, but a second failure in 1890 seems to have put an end to the firm.<sup>20</sup>

Nos 91–99 were rebuilt in 1903 in a florid Arts and Crafts manner, symmetrically arranged, with shop windows rising to first-floor level, arched at the ends and on the shallow return to Dean Street. There were only two upper storeys, handsomely faced in rubbed red brick with projecting bays at intervals, high crowning end gables and a lower central one. The architects were Read & MacDonald and the contractor was Walter Holt of Croydon, who often worked with good designers; the client has not been identified. Sending a photograph in to *The Builder*, Read & MacDonald apologized for the large plate glass windows they had been forced to include because of ‘the

requirements of modern shopkeepers'. No. 91 became the shop of a modiste, Madame Harbour, while Nos 97–99 were occupied by an antique dealer – indicative of the upward swing of this part of Oxford Street during the Edwardian years.<sup>21</sup>

The block suffered sorely in the Second World War. By 1954 the Bird in Hand at No. 101 had been demolished and the remnants of Nos 93–99 were a sorry sight, with a branch of the Fifty Shilling Tailors in the ground-floor shops. A plain new block of shops and offices covering the whole frontage was erected in 1956 to designs by Sir John Brown, A. E. Henson & Partners, working for Prices Tailors of Leeds, owners of the Fifty Shilling Tailors.<sup>22</sup> This was demolished in 2015 for the present building on the site, for which see below.

### *Current buildings*

**Nos. 61–67**, with 11–14 Soho Street, consist of shops, offices and a small number of flats and date from 2013–15. The architects were Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, working on behalf of Dukelease Properties and the British Airways Pensions Trust. This is an all-glazed building with rippling façades of quasi-Baroque character, made up of fluted glass panels ornamented with enamelled patterns, and rising to greater height at the corner in homage to the turret on the Old Queen's Head, the former pub on the corner site. The brash glazed treatment was opposed by local amenity groups, but allowed by Westminster Council on the basis of existing 'similar bold designs' at 187–195 Oxford Street and Hills Place by the fashionable architects Future Systems. The main double-height shopping space is occupied by the retail chain Zara.<sup>23</sup>

**Nos 69–89** with 1 Dean Street, built in 2015–17, is a large development of shops and offices sponsored by Great Portland Estates, acting through subsidiary companies. The architects were Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands.



The main building facing Oxford Street is heavily glazed with details of stainless steel emphasized. The return to Dean Street incorporates surviving elements of the old flank of the former Tudor Hotel dating back to 1898–9, which have been raised to make the floor levels compatible with the new building.<sup>24</sup>

**Nos 91–101.** This site has been developed in 2015–17 along with the new western entry and concourse to Tottenham Court Road Station. The development is divided between two buildings north and south of Fareham Street, both designed by Hawkins Brown, architects. The larger building fronting Oxford Street has shops at lower levels and flats above. It is to be fronted in polished black concrete with ‘reference to the Art-Deco glamour of the Marks & Spencer Pantheon building further along Oxford Street’.<sup>25</sup>