

The GEORGIAN

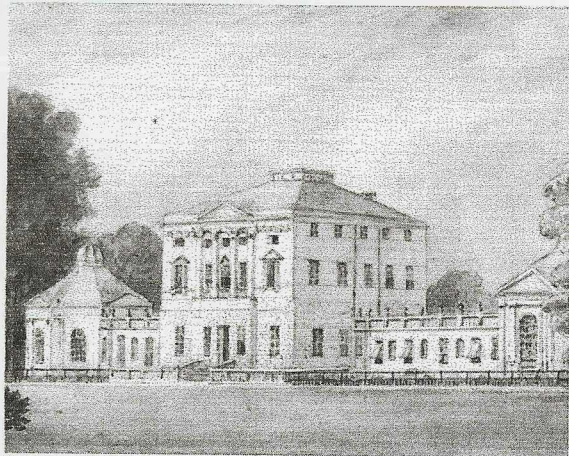
The Magazine of the Georgian Group

Spring 2003



GEORGIAN LONDON SPECIAL ISSUE

Bridget Cherry and Michela Rosso look afresh at Summerson • Giles Worsley explores the London mews • David Watkin assesses two hundred years of Albany • Plus your chance to study Georgian London with Sotheby's - summer school place worth £900 on offer inside



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Robert Bargery

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The Georgian Group is a registered charity and a statutory national amenity society in England and Wales. It exists to protect Georgian buildings, monuments and parks and to encourage understanding and appreciation of the Georgian heritage. Among the Group's publications are campaigning reports, guides on different aspects of house restoration and an annual journal devoted to Georgian architectural history. Lectures, walks and tours are organised for members. To join the Georgian Group, please contact the Membership Secretary. Annual subscriptions: £30 (individual), £42 (joint), £20 (Young Georgian - aged under 30)

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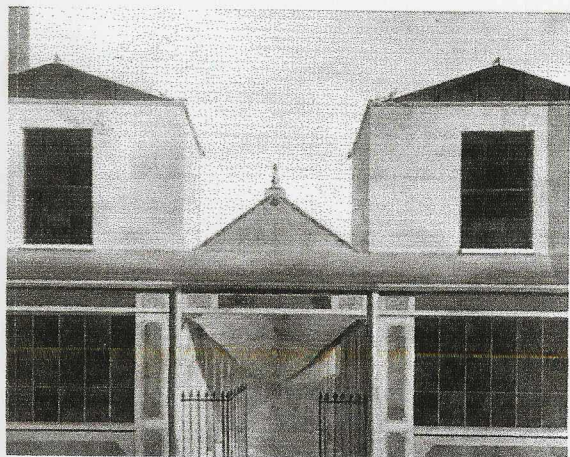
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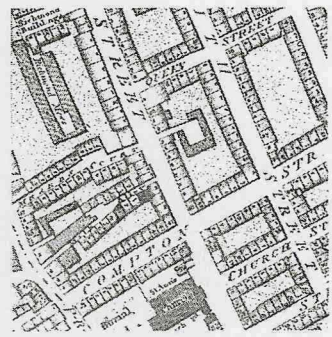
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SOHO MASOCHISM

David Bieda on the pleasure and pain of restoring 68 Dean Street in London's Soho



By August 1993, 68 Dean Street had been on the market for around eight years. Between then and June 1996 I didn't have a bath and for three rather cold winters I learnt the pleasures of coal fires and an outside loo. On my first day in the house, my electrician

cut the 1880s wiring ('I don't want a dead client before invoices are rendered'). When we turned the water on, the display from the lead pipes was reminiscent of Versailles in its heyday, albeit without the controlled choreography. On day two, London Electricity removed the main fuse board, gleefully describing it as a museum piece.

On day three I pondered John Martin Robinson's advice, screamed down the telephone: 'You have to buy it, it's unique, it's the chance of a lifetime'. Well perhaps, but I was rather happy in Seven Dials, looking out of my window at the new sundial pillar which I and my colleagues had spent so much time resurrecting. Later on there were of course compensations: I had the pleasure of seeing my builder's son disappear into a cesspit, discovering hidden attic rooms and finding hibernating frogs three feet down in the servants' cesspit under the street.

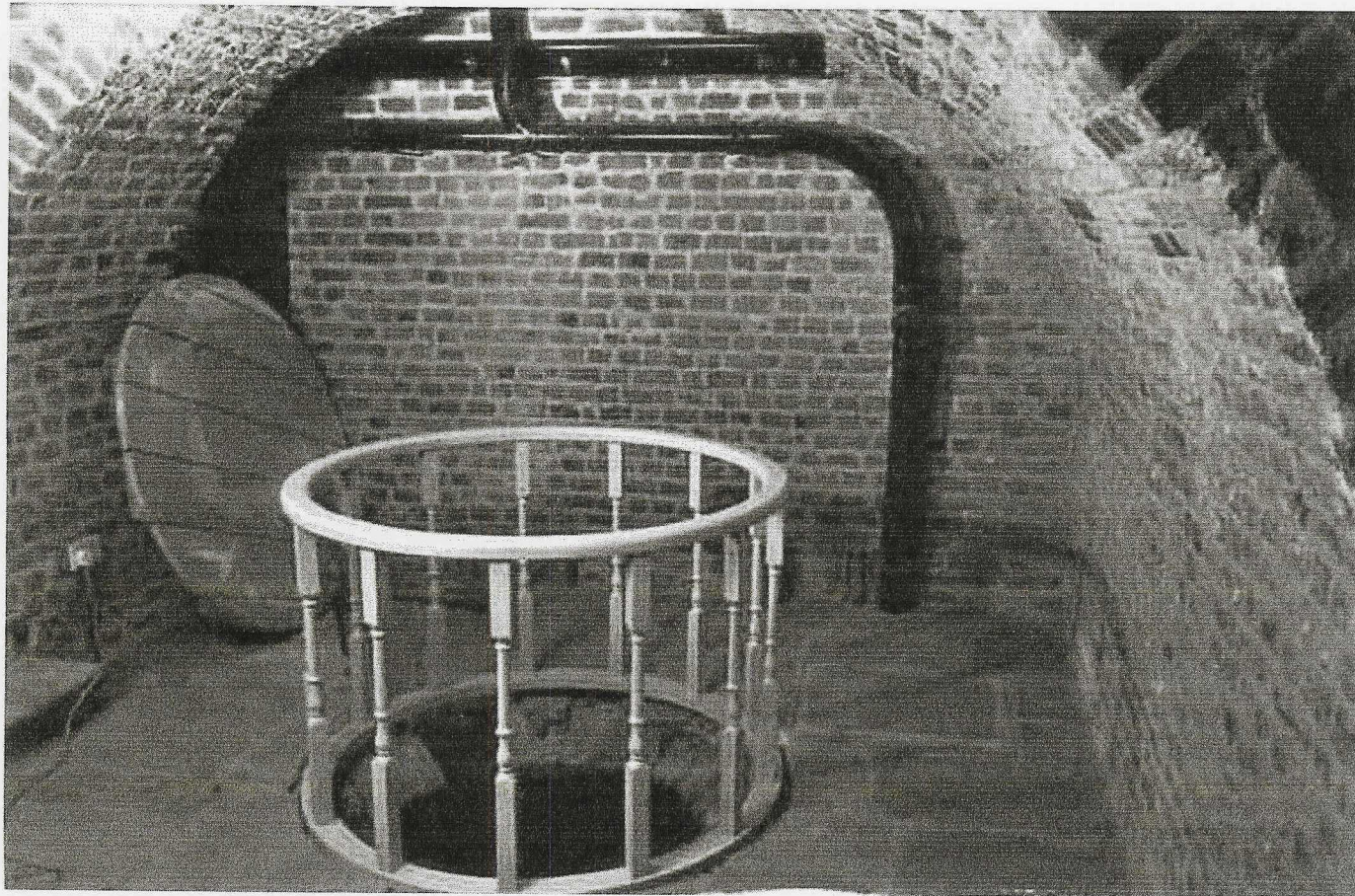
68 Dean Street was built around 1732 by the great (and entirely forgotten) builder-carpenter John Meard as the finale of his development of Meard's Street (1720-30). He bought two houses in Dean Street (built circa 1681 as part of the Pitt Estate) and two in Wardour Street; and then (*plus ça change*) he built on their gardens, creating a street of about thirty-six houses in three groups of increasing size.

Meard was apprenticed to his father, described in Guildhall records as 'John Meard Citizen and Turner', on 6 August 1700 and on his father's death inherited a substantial estate comprising St Anne's Court plus about twenty other houses. His workshop was in Bouchier Street and at the height of his career in 1735 he was elected Master of the Carpenters' Company, succeeding the architect John James. The St. Paul's Cathedral archives from 20 August 1720 record his receiving 'one hundred and fourteen pounds and five shillings...for carpenter's work in making the scaffold from the Whispering Gallery up to the Intablature', one of many such entries over a long period.

What is instructive here is how well-known a few London architects are and how far we have forgotten and failed to record those who actually built much of London in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Who today has heard of John Meard? Though responsible for laying out and in part building one of the most famous urban villages in central London, he is not commemorated by so much as a blue plaque.

One of the reasons that No. 68 had stayed so long on the market was a surveyor's report suggesting, amongst other potential dramas, that the flank wall was unstable. So my first task was to commission an accurate structural analysis from an engineer who understood the dynamics of an early eighteenth century timber frame house. I selected Colin Utting and decided to proceed with trying to buy the house only after his investigations showed the existing report to be inaccurate. The other major problem was that whenever





it rained, the entire basement showed inexplicable signs of severe damp on both the York stone and the floorboards. We decided to overlook this problem after helpful research by Westminster City Council, who recorded my Victorian drains with CCTV and inspected the adjacent sewers.

The other key task, as with any restoration project, was to schedule and cost it. Experience had taught me that one needs exact and separate schedules for each trade, not a master schedule to pore over and try to interpret. I also decided to act as the main contractor. This was cheaper and had the advantage of allowing me to choose and vet each of the sub-contractors. On the downside, it was extremely time-consuming. In retrospect, I would have paid the general builder (one of sixteen contractors) extra to organise and schedule aspects of the work.

Restoration of an early eighteenth century house is not the same as new build: it needs a series of craftsmen and the end product depends upon their skills, their level of interest and on the quality and detail of the works schedule. They may well (as the pointer Brian Whiter, the turner Peter Maynard and others did here) know aspects of their craft better than either the architect or English Heritage advisers, and thus feel able to come up with their own ideas within a general restoration framework.

Even the best architects can fall back on standard solutions and at No. 68 I was given an expensive schedule for tanking the basement. Trudy Hughes, an English Heritage

historic buildings adviser, suggested instead that we lift the basement floors to investigate further. They were all built on joists on dwarf walls to promote air movement: and so we repaired them, at the same time enhancing ventilation throughout by clearing debris from the bottom of all the panelling. A proposal from James Edgar, my English Heritage case officer, to run the services up the back of the house in a wooden box painted invisible green was equally helpful. Both of them, plus Mike Stock, the main English Heritage technical adviser, played a signal role in helping my architect, James Dickinson, devise some ingenious solutions.

A narrative about 68 Dean Street would be incomplete without reference to cesspits and hidden rooms. The rear cesspit was rediscovered by my builder's son who (largely) disappeared into it carrying the last piece of York stone out of the rear vault, which had been leaking for years. We had to lift the York stone in the yard above and tank it, and then re-lay the vault Yorks onto dwarf walls. This led to a month of archaeology carried out by University College London, who were too fey to dig out the cesspit, which I did myself after a precautionary tetanus jab. Among the found objects were hundreds of long thin bottles, a few still intact. I am still waiting for English Heritage to analyse them. The archaeologists described them as scent bottles but a more interesting interpretation was offered by the head parfumer at Guerlain, who described them as body cleansing

bottles originally containing spirit with a small perfume base. When empty, these bottles were thrown into the cesspit, which effectively doubled as a rubbish chute.

Dan Cruickshank told me that there would have been a separate servants' cesspit. When I cleared out the left hand vault under Dean Street, I noticed a missing section of Victorian paving and dug a hole which revealed an odd brick construction. Another month of archaeology, this time by the Museum of London Archaeology Unit, revealed the servants' cesspit-soakaway and a tiny vaulted sewer into Dean Street, the latter for liquids as well as solids. The conversion of this vault into a coal cellar and the installation of the Victorian drainage system was dated by the fortuitous find of a marmalade jar inscribed 1862. Notwithstanding my tetanus jab, I decided not to sample the rather cessified remains of the marmalade. The vault had a narrow hole up to the street so that, in the absence of public gutters, water taken upstairs to clean the street fell back down and hit a chute linked to the cesspit. (In the wealthy West End, house occupants were required to light and clean their sections of street).

I daresay that most people restoring eighteenth century houses dream of finding hidden treasures to help with bills. Here we found hidden attic rooms not listed in the estate agent's details, much to their chagrin. I had in fact already applied to put rooms into both attics, but English Heritage

had refused on the grounds that there were no other examples in London townhouses of the same period. However, when the structural engineer insisted on removing both 1950s ceilings on the third floor, to facilitate re-triangulation of the roofs, floorboards were revealed above the rear ceiling. We then made a small hole in the attic partition and through it could see a tiny plastered room covered in dust and cobwebs, with a door only four feet high leading to the rest of the attic. An urgent fax to English Heritage saying that I had found hidden rooms elicited a suspicious and dismissive response and a restatement of the refusal to create a new room in the attic. When they realised I was serious and had relaxed enough to investigate (in fairness pretty quickly), they commissioned a survey that showed these rooms to be early eighteenth century, reached via a staircase from the third floor rear room. My neighbours, Glen and Phillipa Suarez at 5 Meard Street, have found a complete servants' quarters in their attic together with an original fireplace, and No. 3 has the fireplace but no rooms left.

If you walk down Meard Street today you will see plenty of window shutters. This was not so ten years ago. When I took it on, No. 68 appeared to have none, but investigation revealed a shutter to have been screwed back into the panelling and filled in. If you had walked down Meard Street during the few months following this discovery, you would have seen houses full of people scraping away around shutters. Meard Street and 67-8 Dean Street had been owned by the Sutton Settled Estate for over two hundred years and I imagine that all these shutters were closed and infilled at the same time to avoid maintenance costs.

If there is anything about the fully restored No.68 that is exemplary it is thanks, first and foremost, to John Meard, who created the house and much of this quarter of London without the benefit of an architect, using the pattern books of the period. Secondly it is thanks to the quality of work and attention to detail of my architect and sub-contractors. I also benefited enormously from advice from English Heritage, Francis Golding, Dan Cruickshank, John Martin Robinson, Duncan Wilson and Patrick Bary. Grants from English Heritage and Westminster City Council facilitated work which I could not otherwise have afforded and ICI assisted with paint, as the house was used for research for their heritage paint range. All I did was to have a minor nervous breakdown dealing with sixteen sub-contractors and about thirty-six suppliers, in addition to organising endless supplies of Charrington's coal.

MEMBER VISIT

David Bieda will be leading a members' tour of 68 Dean Street on 2 August. See p 61 for details.

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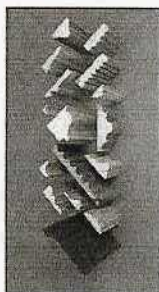
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