

Nicholas Hawksmoor and the Duke of Kent's Art Gallery at No. 4, St. James Square

by

JOHN WARREN

A pedimented Baroque building fronting on to the garden of one of the earliest surviving houses in St. James Square is shown to be the front of a private Art Gallery built by the first Duke of Kent, in or about 1711, when Nicholas Hawksmoor was engaged in work on this and the adjoining property, No. 3. On the basis of the remaining parts of the building and recent archaeological investigation a tentative reconstruction of the Gallery is offered and an unrecognised building by Hawksmoor is identified.

In February 1999 a somewhat ragged column of elderly gentlemen marched down Piccadilly, leaving behind them for ever Palmerston's one-time mansion overlooking Green Park. They turned down by St. James' Church and passed into St. James Square, making for No. 4 in the north east corner where a welcome cup awaited. One of the premier London Clubs, The Naval and Military, colloquially known as the 'In and Out', had symbolised its move to its new clubhouse. They had followed the Duke of Wellington's advice¹ and *got themselves a freehold* in the heart of Clubland.²

The building to which they had come was the most completely surviving mansion of all the early aristocratic houses on that most aristocratic of the London squares created in the aftermath of the Restoration of the Monarchy. It was, and is, the only house to have remained in residential use since it was built, if we except its tenancy by the Free French during the Second World War and subsequent service as the offices of the Arts Council and arbitration courts, neither of which made serious impact on its historic qualities. In that dangerous era between the Wars, when commercial pressures redeveloped much of the Square, it had survived through its fortunate purchase by Waldorf and Nancy Astor as their town house to complement Cliveden. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it had performed a similar function in relation to Wrest Park in Bedfordshire for the family of its first occupant, the 11th Earl of Kent. Socially its floreat, even allowing for the stirring political lives of the Astors, was under Earl Grey in the mid-nineteenth century. Then it was one of the foremost venues in London. As a result of this extended residential usage No. 4 retained its garden, the only house in the Square to have done so.

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Fig. 1.

The Gallery from the garden (photograph)

Prominent in, and in fact dominant over the now-paved garden with its huge London Planes stands a three storey pedimented pavilion placed as a terminal feature with wings extending laterally to the flanking walls of the plot. That this façade is the surviving fragment of an Art Gallery built for Henry, the 12th Earl and first Duke of Kent by Nicholas Hawksmoor now seems virtually certain.

To understand the series of events that brought the Gallery into being it is important to understand the history of the original house on the site. It was lost only fifty years after its construction, having the sad distinction of being the only house in the Square to have been destroyed by fire.

The plot had been sold to the 11th Earl of Kent (of the first creation)³ by an entrepreneur, Nicholas Barbon⁴ who acquired this particularly favoured site looking westward across the Square from its windy north east corner. Its special advantage was

in its immediate proximity to a secondary Square which took up the space left between the corner plots and Jermyn Street. This became Babmaes Mews or Babmaes Square⁵ and although now largely built over, it partly survives as Babmaes Street, the cranked road off Jermyn Street, terminating in Nos 7 and 9.

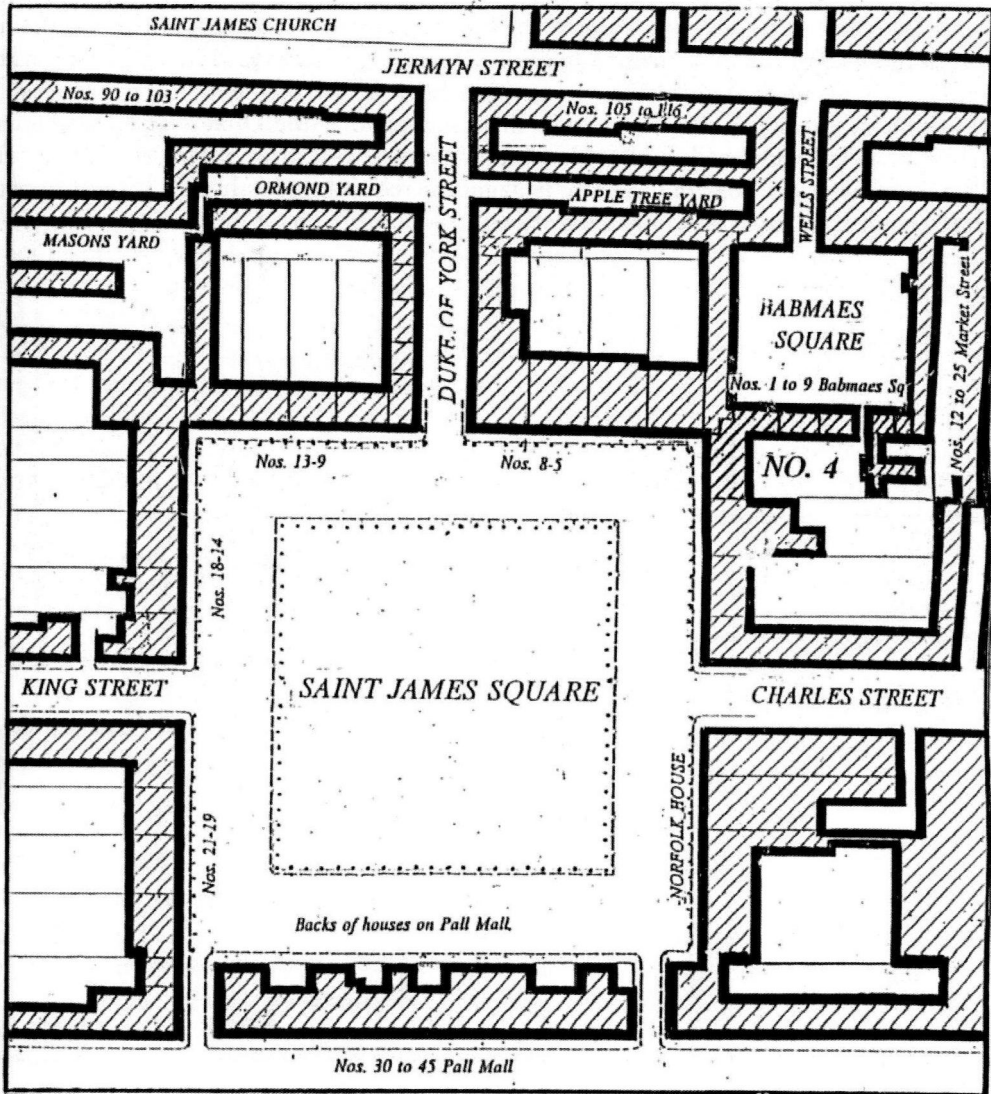


Fig. 2
Plan of the Square in 1711 (drawing JW)

These surviving houses now belong to the Club but originally formed part of the high status range of mews houses fronting north on to Babmaes Square and backing on to No. 4. They were inevitably, and quite quickly, acquired by the Earl and his son, widening their plot at No. 4, northwards and providing a wing of vital service accomodation which set this property above most in the Square. In truth these noblemen's mansions were no more than very grand terraced houses on plots often little more than fifty feet wide.⁶ Nevertheless the 11th Earl enjoyed the pleasures and status of No. 4, making significant alterations only to the service wing. On his death in 1702 it passed to Henry, his son, who became the 12th Earl, and in 1710 achieved the much-desired eminence of a Dukedom⁷. Next door, on the south side, No. 3 was then occupied by the Duke's friend and later relative by marriage, Lord Ashburnham, who at the beginning of the second decade of the eighteenth century was heavily engaged in rebuilding his house. It had proved to have been shoddily constructed and was said to have been on the point of collapse.⁸

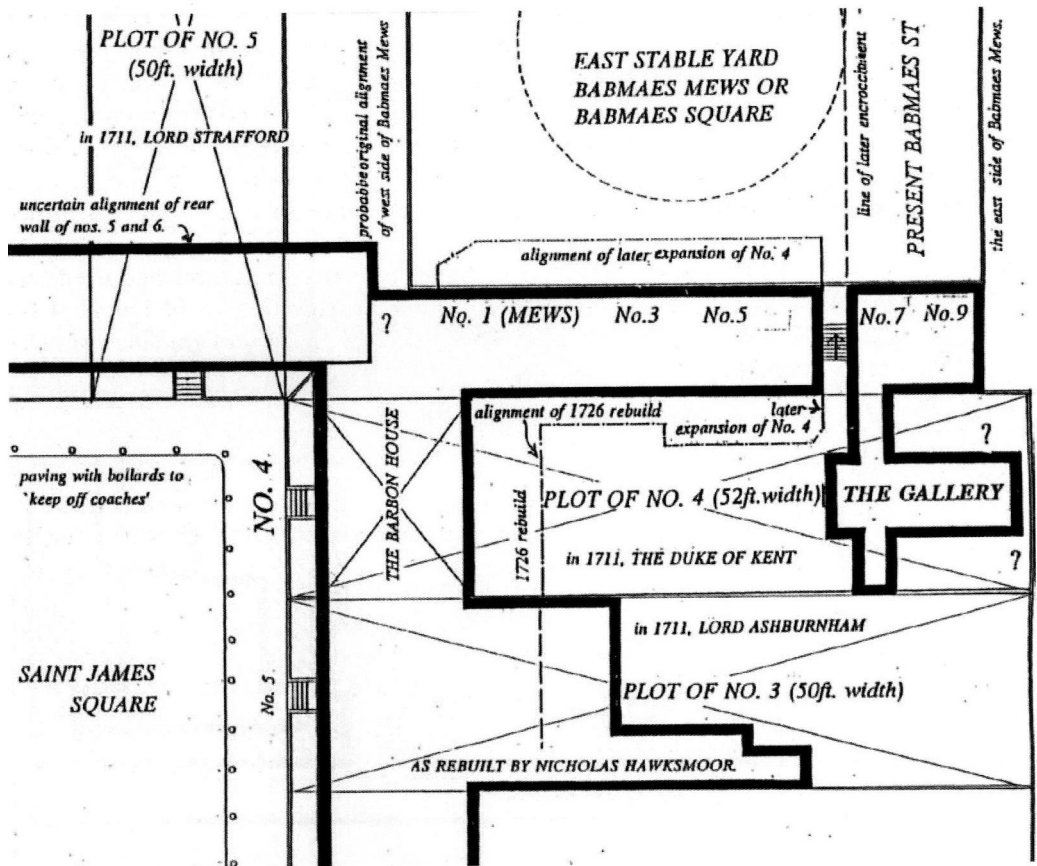


Fig. 3.
Plan of North Eastern Corner of the Square in 1711 (drawing, JW)

Henry was at this time at the height of his powers, an energetic, wealthy and ambitious nobleman who might have been expected to be in a mood of expansion in line with his titular advancement. But there is a gap in the history of No.4. in the early years of the century. This can now be filled, largely on the basis of recent archaeological enquiry⁹ and of the evidence arising from the fire which destroyed the Duke's house and left him paranoid about that risk for the rest of his life. One consequence of this traumatic event was the creation, at Henry's urging, in 1726 of a huge circular lake in the centre of the Square, 150ft. in diameter and 4'6" deep containing nearly half a million gallons of water. Under contract this was to be maintained full by the York Buildings Company and later by the New River Company, never to be reduced by drawing off more than 6" of water at any one time.¹⁰ The Royal Gardener, Charles Bridgeman was called in to construct this new amenity and part of his clay puddling reinforced with flint remains today beneath the garden in the centre of the square. The Duke had moved fast in mobilising his neighbours while the dread of lack of water to fight a house fire remained clearly at the front of their minds. His surveyor of the gardens at Wrest made plans of the Square in 1726 for this purpose. Meanwhile the Duke was overseeing the removal of the charred remains of his London house and contents. He had, it seems, been in residence on the evening of December 12th 1725 when, as is believed, a careless kitchen maid allowed fire to spread in the basement. The blaze attracted crowds. The Prince of Wales came up from Leicester House and summoned a detachment of Foot Guards to control possible looting. There was a desperate shortage of water. The insurance company's men were even bribed by neighbours to spray the adjoining properties with their pumps, and it was not until the next day that the mansion had burned itself out. The fire had been halted apparently somewhere in the service wing formed by Nos. 1-5 Babmaes Square. A newspaper reported that "The Duke's gallery of fine pictures was saved", and another that the Gallery "lay backward".¹¹

The Duke opened a new account at Hoare's Bank¹² and rented a house on the opposite side of the square from which to direct the works. As his executive architect he appointed Edward Shepherd, one-time plasterer and entrepreneur - constructor of Shepherd Market off Oxford Street.¹³ The redesign was wholesale. The entire ruin was demolished to its foundations. Materials were salvaged - brick and timber principally. Some slightly fire-damaged hardwood was found reused in the rebuilt service wing, and older bricks were certainly reused in, among other places, a new vaulted passageway built beneath the garden, above which the London Planes now thrive, for the kitchens were banished from the house for fear of another fire. They were relocated in a new service area occupying the entire space of the Art Gallery and its wings.

The Duke's daughter, Lady Glenorchy wrote deferentially to him in Jan 1726 saying that she was pleased that "The plan your Grace proposes must needs make a very good house. But yet I cannot help regretting the Galery (sic)"¹⁴ As the newspapers had reported that the Duke's Gallery had been saved the direct inference must be that Henry had made up his mind that the paintings could find wall-space in his rebuilt mansion and behind the three storeyed brick-façade that terminated his garden he could make the generous service accomodation his status demanded. Plans held in the County Record Office in Bedford, show this accomodation virtually unaltered 100 years later including the brick-

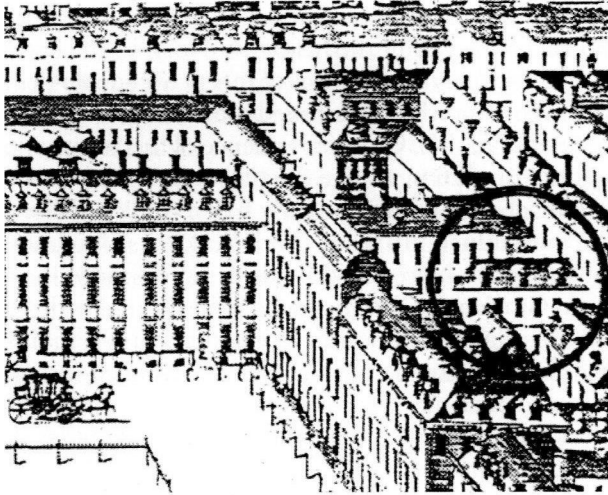


Fig. 4.
Sutton Nicholls' view of the Square second state (part).

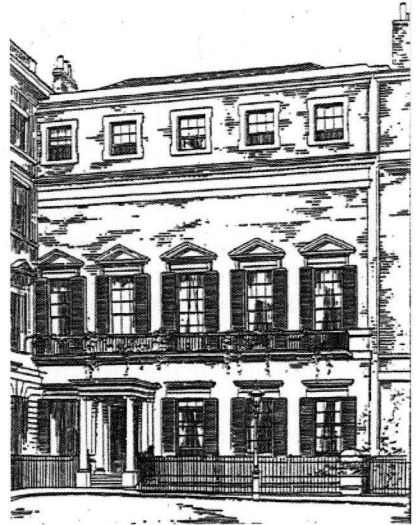
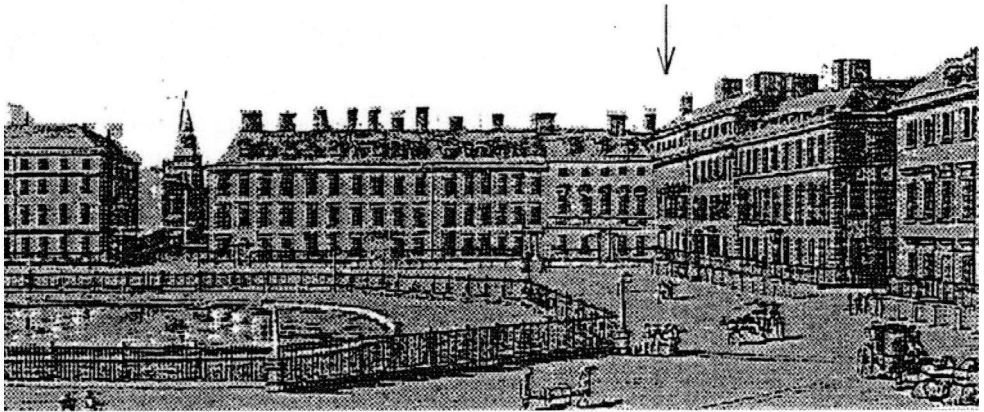
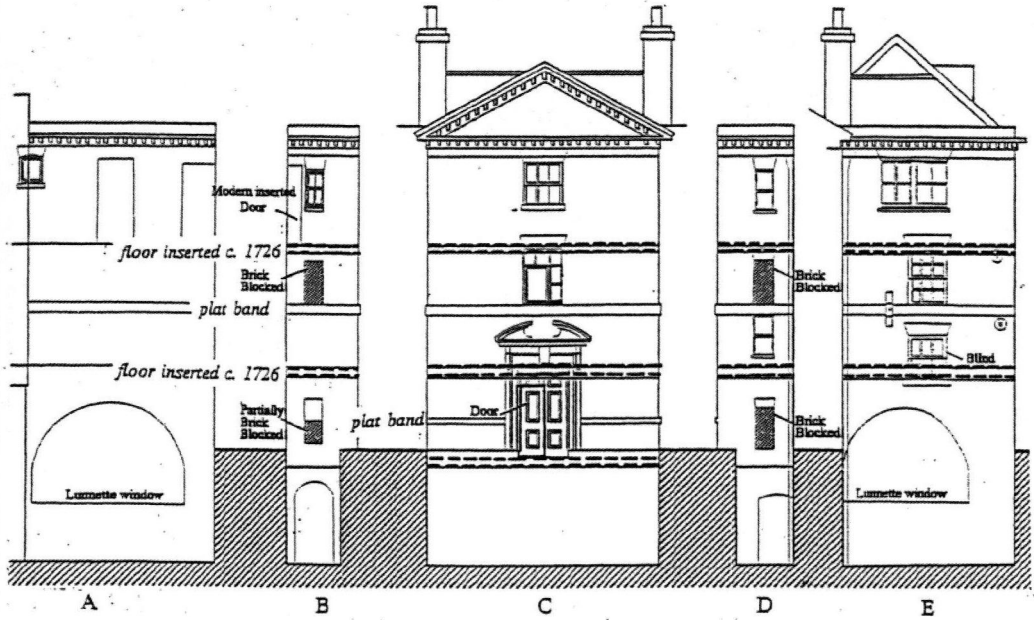


Fig. 5.
Front of No. 4, as rebuilt with Bowles' view (part).

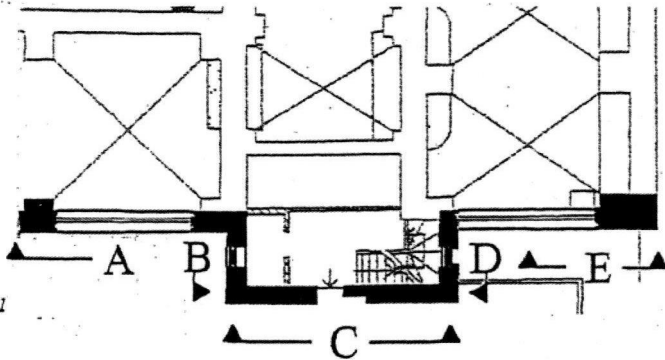


vaulted basements that remain in use. The new work included a Stable Yard, Coach House, Trap Room, stalls, kitchens, cisterns and store rooms, accommodation for grooms, ostlers, stable lads and, very separately, rooms for serving maids and laundresses and their work places. That the pedimented wall and its wings preceded this reconstruction is hardly to be doubted nor is it to be doubted that it survived. Its wounds and patches tell us so.

One practical confirmation is that the Gallery stands off-centre in the garden, a very unlikely arrangement for so classical a design. However, it is exactly centred on the original 52ft. wide plot. The eccentricity derives from a widening of the rearward wing which can be dated confidently to 1726. Until that time it stood centrally. So the Gallery preceded the fire: but by how long? Part of the answer lies in its construction.



ELEVATIONS



PLAN

surviving work of 1711
shown solid: work of
1726 shown in line

Fig. 6.
Plan and elevations of the Gallery as surviving, JW based on OA.

The Duke and Edward Shepherd were forced to raise the principal floor to accommodate the new fire-proof brick vaults with the consequence that their new first floor level cut across the entrance door at three quarters of its height. No matter. The double leafed doorway was amended. One leaf was fixed and the other made openable only in its lower section. As an entrance to servants' quarters that was sufficient and so it remains, inconvenient but practical - irrefutable evidence of the radical alteration adopted by the Duke. The new vaults were lighted into 'areas' by giant half-round windows inserted into the wings below planting level. On the south side, however, the insertion did not go smoothly. There was settlement. The brickwork had to be tailored into the new arch and this was done so skilfully that the tapering courses are barely apparent. The new floor levels also left windows wrongly positioned, particularly on the staircase. Some were simply bricked up and new openings made but one window of some visual importance in the south wing was simply blinded, and its blind simulacrum survives. None of this work would have been necessary if the Duke had not been intent on keeping the façade of the Gallery as the divisor between his garden and his new service quarters. The newspapers are proved correct. The Gallery did survive the fire but not the Duke's ambitions in 1726.



Fig. 7
Kip's view 1714 (part).

Some documentary evidence helps in determining how much earlier the Gallery was built and point to its architectural origins. In the sale of the effects of Nicholas Hawksmoor soon after his death, one of the many items offered was a set of twelve drawings 'for the Duke of Kent's house at No. 4, St. James Square'.¹⁵ The drawings are thought not to exist so their subject matter cannot be verified. But Hawksmoor did not build the original Barbon house, nor its reconstruction in 1726-7. This leaves little other option. The Duke's preferment is dated to 1710 so the title of the drawings gives a clear initial terminus. A closely corresponding final terminus arises from events at No. 5, the immediately adjoining house set at right angles round the corner.¹⁶ That house had been bought in 1711 by Thomas, Earl of Strafford, soldier, diplomat and ambassador extraordinary to Berlin and the Hague. By 1713 Thomas was seeking to extend his house into its garden but was advised against the idea by his friend, Lord Berkeley, because the extension would darken the house and reduce his garden space. Instead his Lordship proposed that the Earl should consider building a separate Gallery '...like the Duke of Kent's' next door. The seed fell on fertile ground for his Lordship even went so far as to obtain plans from his own architect.¹⁷ Whether the proposal ever became reality hardly matters here. The existence of the Duke's Gallery in 1713 is attested leaving a period of only two years for its construction.

Significantly this was exactly the period when Nicholas Hawksmoor and Sir John Vanbrugh were collaborating on rebuilding Lord Ashburnham's adjoining house, No. 3. Many years later, after the fire, Sir John would claim that it was the fireproof construction that he and Hawksmoor had employed on No. 3 that allowed it to survive the conflagration without even 'one shilling's damages'.¹⁸ Despite the boast it is clear that the bulk of the architectural work on No. 3 fell on the shoulders of Hawksmoor. It is also clear that not only was the Gallery itself constructed at No. 4; major alterations to the house were also undertaken to provide an attic storey similar to the design adopted for No. 3.

Two topographical aerial drawings of West London appeared about this time - Kip's view of c.1714 (Fig. 7) and Sutton Nicholls' (see Fig. 4) which came in two versions, in 1722 and 1728, the latter having been altered to include the great basin with its octagonal enclosure of high railings and stone piers, but without amendment to the buildings. Kip's drawing is of no assistance over the Gallery. The viewpoint is too low but it does show the frontal aspect of the two houses, nos. 3 and 4 in similar detail. The reconstruction for Lord Ashburnham at No. 3 stands out clearly with an attic storey rising above the cornice while next door at No. 4 a run of five dormers provides accommodation within the roof at this same level. However, a decade later Sutton Nicholls shows No. 4 with a full attic storey like its neighbour. Also clearly shown is a longitudinal building in the garden of No. 4 precisely where the Gallery stood, although the wings are not included.

It is hard to resist the conclusion that Nicholas Hawksmoor was employed in concert by both owners, whose relationship was in any case close. Lord Ashburnham later married one of the Duke's daughters. There would have been a further reason for collaboration for building purposes. Access from the highway to the garden of No. 3 would most readily have been obtained off Babmaes Square by the route between nos. 5 and 7 which survives today (as a stairway) and runs exactly in front of the Art Gallery, predetermining its position. Collaboration between the adjoining owners, the employment



Fig. 8.
The door case. Photograph JW.

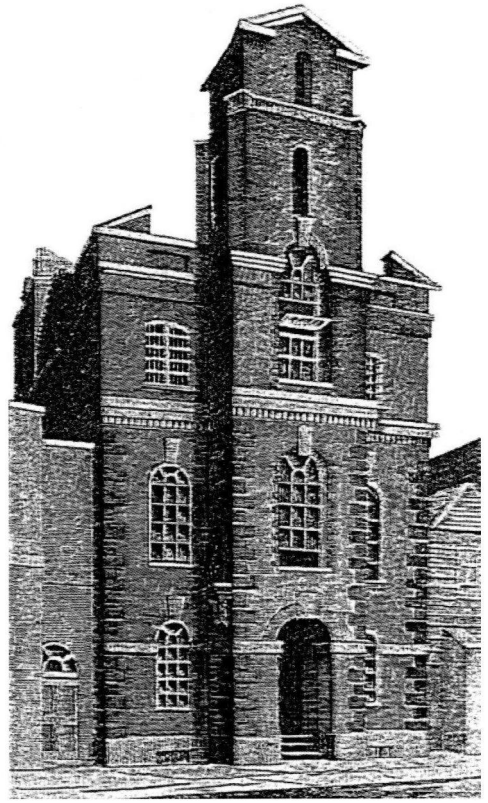


Fig. 9
Kensington Charity School.

of the one architect and the execution of similar works to their houses seems entirely likely in the building campaigns of 1711 and 1712.

The test of style also suggests Hawksmoor's involvement. The Gallery is by any standards a very agreeable and characteristic, if undramatic, example of that gentle English Baroque which preceded the architectural purifications of Lord Burlington. Its cornices are carried on dentils or modillions, the curved pediment over the door is cleanly broken, (see Fig. 8) exaggerated voussoirs form the keystone over the doorway and platbands (string courses of Roman cement) tie together the wings and central pavilion. If anything in the architect's oeuvre invites direct comparison it is the more idiosyncratic and now demolished (c.1875) Kensington Charity School, built at exactly the same time¹⁹ (see Fig. 9). Hawksmoor was resident at Kensington at this period and was a Trustee of the Charity School, built to his designs. Here also a projecting central bay, dentilled cornice, over emphasised keystones and platband occur in a brick building and bring the Gallery within the ambit of Hawksmoor's stylistic vocabulary at the time of its construction. Hawksmoor remained Clerk of Works at Kensington Palace until 1715.

One further intriguing stylistic feature supports both date and authorship. The surviving top flight of the Gallery stair has balusters which are more robust than those on lower flights which must postdate the fire. This is entirely to be expected. Evidently it proved possible to retain part of the upper floor of the Gallery. This gives us a floor level and the top of the staircase where Hawksmoor's detailing was more substantial than the chaste style which followed under the influence of Lord Burlington.

Documentation, propinquity, probability, date and style all support Hawksmoor's authorship of this fragment of the charming, if undervalued Art Gallery that still provides an appropriate terminal feature in the garden of No. 4. Recovery of the original drawings would provide the final evidence. Failing this good fortune, any reconstruction of the original building must rely heavily on the evidence of Sutton Nicholls' view. The most that can reliably be drawn from this, the only visual source of knowledge of the Gallery apart from its surviving front, is its general form - a rectangular building extending towards the back of the site, with a storey of high windows on the south side and a windowed floor above overridden by three dormers in the roof. Even this evidence is imprecise. Understandably, in view of the complications it would have caused, the draughtsman omitted the lateral wings entirely and provided a most improbable hipped end to the roof where the pedimented gable stands as it must have stood from the outset. Nevertheless the form he gave us is clear. An entrance vestibule with a double height single room behind as exhibition space. To this can be added the precise evidence to be derived from the surviving part. The stairs can be restored with some confidence from the altered

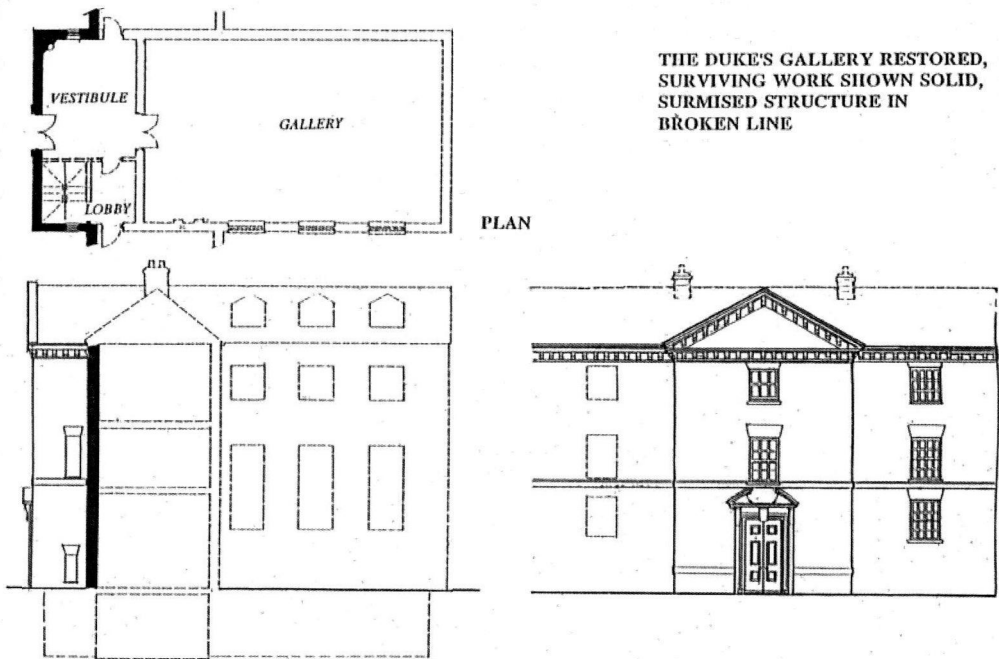


Fig. 10
Plan and Elevations of the Gallery restored.

structure. They were a tightknit tower with so many winders as to be a near spiral suitable only for servants. The top flight presumably gave access to the upper floors of the wings, although how these functioned is uncertain. At the lowest level the now blinded window in the southern wing is placed unusually high - a clear indication that it was part of the service accomodation and so was designed with its cill above eye height. Windowing on the east and north sides of the Gallery seems unlikely both on grounds of necessity and practicality, the outer space presumably being pressed into domestic service, perhaps as a stable yard. It is difficult to conceive of the dormers being of practical use unless they provided high level lighting to a dormitory. One fireplace position survives and another, in the Gallery, is presumed. Little more can be gained and so a tentative reconstruction is offered on this surmised basis.

However, the function of the Gallery itself is readily understood: - a stroll down the garden after lunch, an obsequious footman with a decanter and glasses, discussion of the latest acquisition and the prices fetched by the London and Venetian masters, a little one-upmanship or perhaps more than a little, tolerance of the views of the ladies and pontifications on the changing tastes in art. The concept of a Gallery as a purpose-built place for the enjoyment of art had come to London, memorably, with Inigo Jones' two storeyed wing leading towards the river at Somerset House²⁰. In St. James Square, the Duke's contribution is part of a pattern leading from Royal and aristocratic patronage to national collections. If an early equivalent of Horace Walpole had seen and published his comments on the pictures, our understanding of the Gallery would have been richer: and indeed Horace, himself, probably did see many of these paintings, rehung in the rebuilt No. 4 when he visited in 1761. He remarked on the Rysbrack statue of Inigo Jones, standing, as it stands yet, in a niche on the great stair.²¹ But the original contents of the Gallery remain an enigma.

One final event in the history of the Gallery may be recorded: the intervention of another architect, Paul Phipps, nephew by marriage to Nancy Astor, who was asked to alter the dining arrangements and improve the kitchens.²² In front of the Gallery he excavated new cold rooms, vaulted and hidden beneath the garden which he repaved. Some of the spoil, however, he buried under the paving which was raised and now laps like a rising tide uncomfortably high against Hawksmoor's carefully proportioned elevation. Conversely the Gallery seems to have sunk.

Although it has survived in part the centuries have not been entirely kind to this minor work of one of England's great architects of the Baroque. Its melancholy surviving fragment deserves sensitive care and recognition of its place in history. And maybe one day English Heritage will reconsider its ban on reopening the second leaf of its entrance door now that it is no longer simply used by servants but accomodates in perpetuity members of one of the most distinguished Clubs in London.

FOOTNOTES:

1.forthright advice given by the Duke of Wellington to the founding members of the Oriental Club....'get yourselves a freehold....'
2. The Naval and Military Club had for nearly a hundred years held a lease on the house in Piccadilly originally owned by Lord Palmerston which gained the soubriquet In and Out from the directions to coaches painted on its two gates. With the expiry of the lease, the acquisition and alteration of No. 4 was led for the Club by its Chairman, James Russell and by the Chairman of its Building Committee,

W. Leslie Weller who remarked perceptively, on introducing the project to me, that the courtyard contained 'a charming little Wren building'.

3. After the title had died out a second creation was instituted. This has been reserved to the Royal Family.
4. Nicholas, son of the Puritan 'Praise God Barebones', prudently pursued medical studies on the Continent for some time after the Restoration but then returned to London as an entrepreneur and developer gaining a reputation for less-than-good construction.
5. Baptist May as a proxy or Trustee for Lord St. Albans, together with Abraham Cowley received the grant by Charles II of the freehold of the field east of St. James Palace on which St. James Square and adjacent developments now stand. The grant was made on 1st April 1665 and extended to twelve acres, three roods and 'two and twenty' perches. Baptist May continued in post until 1684 and probably received the land on which Babmaes Mews was built in recognition of his services although the story of its acquisition is not clear. The text of the Deed of Grant is given in full in Dasent, Appendix B.
6. Rateable values recorded by Dasent for single plots, e.g. nos. 6 and 7 were £6.13.4 and for No. 3, £8.0.0., while No. 4 stood in at £9.6.8. Only double plots exceeded this figure. Likewise in 1676 the yearly rent for No. 3 (a plot of 50ft. frontage) was £23.4.4. and No. 4 (52ft. frontage) was £28.12.8.
7. Preferment was achieved at the expense of giving up his place as Lord Chamberlain, Forrest D. *St. James Square*. p. 41. Henry had become a Marquess in 1702.
8. A more explicit assessment is to be found in Survey of London Vol. XXIX, p. 84.
9. Findings associated with the building work at No. 4 have been brought together by Oxford Archaeology in its report on the work of conversion 1995-7 (see Sources below)
10. Forrest D. *St. James Square*, p. 30. The pond became a garden when in the nineteenth century reliable mains water supplies became available. Whether the resource was ever needed is not known. Fires quickly extinguished are not news; but no other mansion in the Square ever succumbed.
11. L.C.C. Survey of London Vol XXIV, p. 89.
12. Coincidentally, and happily the same company of bankers assisted in the rebuilding of 1995-7.
13. The accounts with Hoares Bank reveal a payment of £367 to Edward Shepherd, Survey of London, *ibid* p. 90 addendum.
14. *Ibid* p. 90.
15. Downes Prof. K. Burlington Magazine, vol XCV, October 1953 pp. 332-5. The sale included 1800 drawings by Hawksmoor and about 200 by Wren, Vanbrugh and Webb in lots generally between 12 and 60 items.
16. No. 5 had had a chequered history of ownerships and tenancies. It, like Nos. 3 and 4 had been speculatively built and was wholly rebuilt before 1750 by Matthew Brettingham. Its new owner in 1711 had been a prominent negotiator of the Treaty of Utrecht when Gibraltar and Newfoundland came into the emergent British Empire.
17. Nicholas Launce, by origin a plasterer. Survey of London Vol. XXIX, p. 100.
18. Sir John Vanbrugh's remarks were addressed to Lord Carlisle. Survey of London Vol XXIX p. 84. Hawksmoor's drawings at auction (see note 15 above) included 12 drawings for Lord Carlisle's Yorkshire House, Castle Howard. Charles Howard, 3rd Earl of Carlisle succeeded in 1692 and died in 1738. It was he who invited Sir John Vanbrugh to design the new house. Sir John then brought in Hawksmoor as his amenuensis.
19. Illustrated in Downes Prof. K., Hawksmoor London 1969 pl. 51.
20. Attributed to Inigo Jones or to Webb by John Harris. Inigo Jones, complete architectural drawings. New York 1989, Fig. 56. I am grateful to Prof. Graham Parry F.S.A. for drawing my attention to this reference.
21. Pictures seen in the house by Horace Walpole on his visit in 1761 may have included some of the contents of the Gallery and are recorded in the Walpole Society Vol. 16 1928 pp. 39-40. However there was a continual exchange of pictures with the holdings at Wrest and it seems most unlikely that the contents of the Gallery can be identified with any certainty.
22. This instruction can fairly be dated to about 1921-2 on the basis of the establishment of the practice of Milne and Phipps.

SOURCES:

The absolutely indispensable published source is the L.C.C.'s detailed and scholarly *Survey of London*, Vols. XXIX and XXX (plates) and attached maps. On this platform of research most other documentation rests. It was preceded in 1895 by A.I.Dasent's *History of St. James Square* (London, Macmillan and Co.) a volume mixing much respectable research with anecdote and romantic speculation. This pioneering effort was more recently updated and augmented by the very readable and thorough *St. James Square, People, Houses and Happenings* by Denys Forrest (London 1986, Quiller Press). Prof. Kerry Downes' seminal research on Nicholas Hawksmoor was published by Zwemmer and then by Thames and Hudson (London 1969). In 1953 Prof. Downes published his researches on the sale of Hawksmoor's papers in the *Burlington Magazine* Vol. XCV.

My architectural work on No. 4 was greatly assisted by Oxford Archaeology (Julian Munby) whose comprehensive report on the building is entitled *4, St. James Square (including 7-9 Babmaes St.), Westminster London. Building Investigation and Watching Brief*. I am greatly indebted to them and to helpful colleagues at English Heritage as well as other interested historians who took time and trouble to visit and comment upon this extraordinarily interesting building.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS:

1. The Gallery from the garden. (photograph). JW.
2. Plan of the Square in 1711. Drawing by JW.
3. Plan of the North Eastern corner of the Square in 1711. Drawing by JW.
4. Front of No. 4 as rebuilt with Bowles' view (part).
5. Plan and elevations of the Gallery as surviving. JW. based on Oxford Archaeology Report.
6. Brickwork over the southern lunette. Photograph, JW.
7. Kip's view 1714 (part).
8. The door case, Photograph. JW.
9. Kensington Charity School. (courtesy Prof. Kerry Downes.)
10. Plan and elevations of the Gallery restored. JW