



Mayfair Times Village Visionary

WITH RESIDENTS LIKE Madonna and Viscount Linley, it is hard to imagine that The Portman Estate, stretching from Marble Arch to Selfridges in the south and to Bryanston Place and Dorset Street in the north, was once home to nothing but a herd of goats. However, as goats go, this particular herd was rather important. Without them, Sir William Portman, Lord Chief Justice to Henry VIII, might never have chosen to purchase this particular patch of farmland for his city base in 1533. Sir William's wife, you see, was allergic to cows' milk.

This history lesson is given to me by Hugh Seaborn, the genial Chief Executive of the management company of The Portman Estate. Hugh is the man charged with overseeing a £65 million refurbishment programme across the 110-acre estate on behalf of the Portman family trust, designed not only to restore many of the estate's finest properties, but also to transform what Hugh calls the "street personality" of its key shopping areas.

A case in point is Portman Village – the area around New Quebec Street and the lower part of Seymour Place, which includes around 55 properties. "It's got a very diverse eclectic character at the moment," says Hugh, whose team is refurbishing buildings as they become empty, recapturing their Georgian character and creating sympathetic shop fronts. Above the shops, offices and other uses are being replaced with high-quality residential units. "My feeling is that this is a residential, retail, restaurant and bar area – there are better areas for offices elsewhere on the estate," he explains.

Eight buildings have been completed so far and Hugh is succeeding in bringing in what he calls "characterful" tenants. "We've got one called Gustavian which is a Swedish antique and reproduction shop – it's got these wonderful grandfather clocks, like something out of a fairy tale." Again typical of the quality of retailer that the estate is attracting is Sharon Cunningham Couture, due to relocate to a permanent home at 23 New Quebec Street.

Next on Hugh's shopping list is a delicatessen. "My vision for the street is that it includes those sort of local shops that residents will find attractive. A butcher's, a baker's and a fishmonger would be wonderful if we can find them," he says.

A second key focus for refurbishment is Gloucester Place, which boasts one of the best unbroken Georgian terraces in London. Scaffolding went up before Christmas on 12 of around 50 buildings in the Portman portfolio. Hugh and his team have spent about a year working with Westminster City Council to reconfigure the mix of uses in the buildings, switching, for example, office uses from elsewhere on the estate to Gloucester Place.

"We want to end up with buildings that are all residential or all offices, so we can refurbish them right and manage them right."

Frequently the buildings are "in a bit of a state" by the time they get to the end of a long lease, since at that stage the occupier is unlikely to have spent much money on them. And then there is the challenge of dealing with buildings that are 250 years old: "Georgian buildings have lovely strong faces and facades, but sometimes they are not underpinned. So simple jobs end up quite complex," he explains. The buildings will be made fit for modern office use with IT, cabling, and data services.



THE PORTMAN ESTATE

The big nut to crack will be the traffic on Gloucester Place's fourlane highway and the estate has appointed consultant Arups to see what can be done – perhaps the reservation of one lane for bus stops, parking and trees which would make the pavements less daunting for pedestrians.

A third key area is the north side of Oxford Street between Marble Arch and Selfridges, where a £72 million refurbishment of the Cumberland Hotel is under way. "I would love, and the Cumberland would love, to see the West End of Oxford Street get the same attention as the central area," he says.

Other plans include a refurbishment for Portman Square in the New Year to make it more accessible. "I'm looking forward to it because Portman Square is such a jewel," says Hugh.

The investment programme follows the accession of the 10th Viscount, Christopher Portman, who has brought a vision to the estate that includes a greater involvement in properties and community.

Making the vision happen takes time and patience, but, says Hugh, his job is thrilling nevertheless. And there is more to come.

The departure of Marks & Spencer from its Baker Street headquarters in March 2004 will open up one of the biggest development opportunities in the West End for a decade. "It will have an enormous effect on this area of London," says Hugh, who stresses that everything the estate does is done for the long term.

He adds: "We've been here 500 years, and we are expected to be here for another 500.... It's a long-term job."

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