



The Georgian Magazine A Resilient Estate

The Portman Estate in London has survived for almost half a millennium. Sebastian Deckker finds its Georgian buildings adapting successfully to the demands of the twenty-first century.

1999 ushered in a new era in the 470 year history of The Portman Estate: Christopher Edward Berkeley Portman, described as "an energetic and vibrant man in his forties with a vision of improvement, sense of stewardship and history", succeeded to the title of 10th Viscount Portman on his father's death; and a year later he brought in Hugh Seaborn, previously a director of investment management at a large West End surveying firm, as his new Chief Executive.

The Portman Estate extended to some 270 acres when it was acquired in 1532 by Sir William Portman of Somerset (1498-1557), later Lord Chief Justice to Henry VIII. Although less high profile than other London landed estates, such as the Grosvenor, Cadogan or Crown Estates, today it covers about 110 acres of Marylebone, an area of prime central London bounded by Oxford Street and Edgware Road to the south and west and by Manchester Street and Crawford Street to the north and east. Development began in the 1750s with Orchard Street and Portman Street, followed by Portman Square between 1764-84. The driving force behind the Estate's further expansion was Edward Berkeley Portman (1771-1823) whose "knowledge of engineering and his irrepressibility changed the landscape of Georgian London".

London differed from major cities outside the British Isles in that its pattern of landownership was divided not into remote freeholds but into landed estates. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, most of central London was owned by private families, enabling them to exert immense control over the capital's development. London soon began to expand northwards and westwards into the arable land and pastures owned by a new breed of hereditary landlord - wealthy and influential individuals keen to profit both financially and socially from the development of their estates. Expansion continued until the introduction of Death Duties in 1893. When the 7th Viscount Portman died in 1948, he left an estate valued at £10 million but subject to a death duty of £7.6 million.

While many great estates have fallen by the wayside and are now lost forever, others have survived by learning to manage their property in a more commercial manner. Instead of being "observers of their fate" they have become "participants in their future". Seaborn comments that "this is one of the most attractive, vibrant and cosmopolitan areas of central London within which to live, work and play. The tranquil squares and quiet village atmosphere belie the proximity and the vitality of the West End".

Often referred to as the "Georgian Estate", the area covered by The Portman Estate has its own distinctive grandeur, both as a commercial centre and as an elegant district with private squares and classical architecture. In the nineteenth century, the area was occupied by prosperous middle class residents who wanted to be close to the heart of the capital. It remains highly sought after, and in order to ensure that it retains its cachet, the Estate managers have embarked on a concentrated programme of refurbishment, restoration and development.

A case in point is Gloucester Place, built in 1810 by John Elwes and named after William, Duke of Gloucester, brother of George III. The houses here were once occupied by royal courtiers and members of the French royal family who had fled the Revolution. Having been designed as single residencies, they are not always suitable for mixed use. However, the impact of the nearby A41, busy and noisy, cannot be underestimated and conversion into self-contained flats has seemed the best way forward. The first phase of refurbishment comprised twelve semi-derelict buildings within a single block occupied by a variety of uses: residential, commercial and medical.



THE PORTMAN ESTATE

The properties were consolidated into six office buildings and six apartment buildings, in order to simplify management and maximise value. The properties were restored to a high standard, including services, acoustics and fire escape. Environmental issues were tackled, including heat loss and insulation. The main difficulty was translating modern building standards into Georgian buildings; much of the cost came in employing the skilled traditional craftsmen needing to preserve and where necessary reproduce the fine internal and external detailing. The finished product represented a complete makeover from foundations to roof, with the overriding ethic of restoration rather than refurbishment.

The first challenge was to obtain vacant possession - the properties were let on an assortment of leases, some with security of tenure and protected by Landlord and Tenant legislation. Indeed, one of the problems the estate has often faced is the presence of an intermediary landlord, or head lease, between the estate and the occupier. With long leases, there was no direct control and as a result buildings could easily fall into disrepair. The Portman Estate, like many others, now manages its properties directly in order to avoid this.

Seaborn acknowledges that the outside world saw an estate with a passive, traditional approach to property management. "This isn't entirely surprising, because historically the estate was based on fixed ground leases and ground rents. Effective but passive management was all that was needed. But this is rapidly changing with the adoption of a proactive, entrepreneurial focus aimed at reinvigorating this are of London". He acknowledges that the Estate tended to sell many of its long-leasehold properties and did not have a particularly close relationship with its tenants. However, he is attempting to change all that. "The plus side of enfranchisement is that it incentivises the Estate to take possession of its residential units. We then let them out on Assured Shorthold Tenancies. We don't have many options, if we want to protect the estate, other than managing directly".

Simon Loomes, Director of Project and Facilities at The Portman Estate, likens the site access to the Gloucester Place development to key-hole surgery. Most of the building materials had to go in or out of the front door, making the cost of refurbishment as much as 25% higher than for an equivalent new build. With escalating costs, the first phase of refurbishment just broke even, but the overall view was that of 'short term pain, long term gain'. Work on the second phase is due to start imminently in close co-operation with Westminster City Council and English Heritage, with the first priority at this stage being to reduce the impact on the Gloucester Place environment.

Elsewhere on the Estate is the recent rejuvenation of what is known as Portman Village, made up of two relatively unknown streets tucked away behind Marble Arch, New Quebec Street and Seymour Place. This adventurous project comprises a mixture of shops, restaurants and flats. Loomes points out that the objective was to create "a characterful focal point, a village centre serving local residents and visitors". It has achieved this after overcoming complexities similar to those at Gloucester Place - fragile listed buildings requiring careful restoration.

Under the guiding hand of The Portman Estate, Marylebone has become one of the most attractive, vibrant and cosmopolitan areas of central London. The intention is to keep it that way. As Seaborn says, "we have been landlords in this area since the early sixteenth century. We are absolutely committed to the long term".

Sebastian Decker
The Georgian
The Magazine of the Georgian Group

Issue 2 2005