

HISTORY OF EARL'S COURT SQUARE

Architecture of Earl's Court Square by Christine Powell

All the properties in Earl's Court Square, apart from the Mansion Blocks and the Dutch houses on the southern side of the Square, were built in the Palladian style, after Palladio an Italian architect who lived in the C16th. The main features are a portico with Corinthian columns and steps up to the ground floor entrance which were adorned with black and white tiles, some remaining or have been replaced with matching ones. There are steps down to the lower ground floor, which would have been the servants' and tradesmen's entrance. There is a balcony on the first floor and often a pediment over the second-floor windows. Some of the balconies have black metal railings but the majority have stone 'bottle' balustrades. Most of the properties have a 'Juliet' balcony on the second floor, supported by decoration from the first floor.

The front elevation in the most cases, is of stucco, made from sand, lime and water, which imitated stone and was less expensive. Robert Adam favoured it as render in the C18th and it was also popularised by John Nash. As well as No. 1, the east terrace has stucco up to the first floor, the west terrace to all floors. On the north terrace, Nos, 3-19 have no stucco while the remainder have stucco to the third floor. The dentils, at the top of the buildings, are not all the same and the top parapets are either a plain wall or a balustrade.

The ground floors offered a dining room, a morning room and a study or breakfast room. The first floors comprised a library or drawing room and the grandest of all, the ballroom or salon. The second and third floors would have had six or seven bedrooms while the basement contained the kitchen, scullery, butler's pantry and servants' hall. When some of the properties were converted into flats / apartments earlier on, several of their internal features were retained with sweeping staircases, encaustic tiles in the entrance hall plus mouldings and decorative cornices.

The first property to be built was No. 1, Earl's Court Lodge, 1873-1875, by Edward Francis with financial backing from Sir William Palliser who then went on to live there. The architect was Frederick Nesbit Kemp. Sir William was Member of Parliament for Taunton and he is known for inventing and patenting the Palliser gun. He is buried in Brompton Cemetery.

Nos. 280-288 and Nos. 292-302 Earl's Court Road (it is not known why there is no No. 290) followed and then the properties in the northeast arm of the Square. These are not as high as the other properties but have a mansard roof with dormer windows on the third floor. There are metal railings to the balconies and they do not have stucco work.

The eastern terrace commenced in 1875, the west side in 1876 and Nos. 25-37 followed with all the north side underway by 1878. Extra servant quarters on Nos. 25-37 may or may not have been added after the houses were completed. The houses along this terrace vary in width but not depth. No. 12 is a grander house and retains its conservatory over the porch.

It was earmarked by Lord Kensington, who owned the land and had leased it to Edward Francis, for one of his close female relatives. No 15 had an extension built at the rear ground floor to accommodate a billiards room for a young banker and his bride and the salon / ballroom was decorated with gold leaf finish on the Italian plasterwork. By 1879, Edward Francis went into liquidation, although he also developed North End Road in West Kensington. By 1881, 28 houses were still empty with only six sold by 1885 and some still on the market by 1890. Most of these were turned into boarding houses, hotels, schools or split into rudimentary flats.

At the beginning of the C20th the façades of the properties became blackened, caused by the London smog. After the First World War, Nos. 15 to 19 were painted in white and finally all were painted white after the Second World War.

In 1942 during the Second World, a bomb destroyed much of the rear of Nos. 25-27 (Queens Court) behind the façade which remained standing. It had been mostly serviced rooms but no one was hurt as they had taken refuge in the basement. It was rebuilt as flats in the late 1940s. The columns were not restored in the original Corinthian style, being too costly, so we now have two square pillars where previously there had been three. Some people would like them to be changed while others say it is part of the history of the Square.

When the Earl's Court Square Conservation Area was set up in 1975, the stucco work was painted in Magnolia BS4800 08B15 and the woodwork white. The colour of the front doors is for individual owners to decide. During the late 1990s / early 2000s, special ECSRA funds were used for the house numbers to be painted in black on each of the columns.

The coal holes are of specific note. They were originally made of cast iron, mostly in London, and there were about 160 of them in the Square. RBK&C started to repair them when they had begun to leak into the vaults under the pavements and become unsafe. Urged by Jennifer Ware and Ilke Vowinckel that they be preserved, about 50 were saved and if you look at them, you will see that some of them are in different designs.
