

## DRAWING ROOM DISPLAYS



### **Bedford Square** Creating Social Distance

31 January – 9 September 2022



Opposite: North side of Bedford Square, featuring nos 15–16 the home of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (photo: PMC)

## Introduction

Bedford Square was built between 1775 and 1782. It has always been acclaimed as an outstanding piece of urban planning. The fifty-three houses of the square—all but one arranged in apparently symmetrical order, in four “palace-fronted terraces” around a gated, landscaped garden—are considered exemplars of Georgian architecture. It has been heralded as “the first great triumph of the London Building Act of 1774” (Roy Porter), this being the regulations which standardised and ranked new buildings, helping accentuate a sense of uniformity and order in the metropolis. The arrangement of the buildings remains intact, and many original architectural details and even interiors are preserved along with much of the character of the private garden, making Bedford Square one of the most complete survivals of Georgian London.

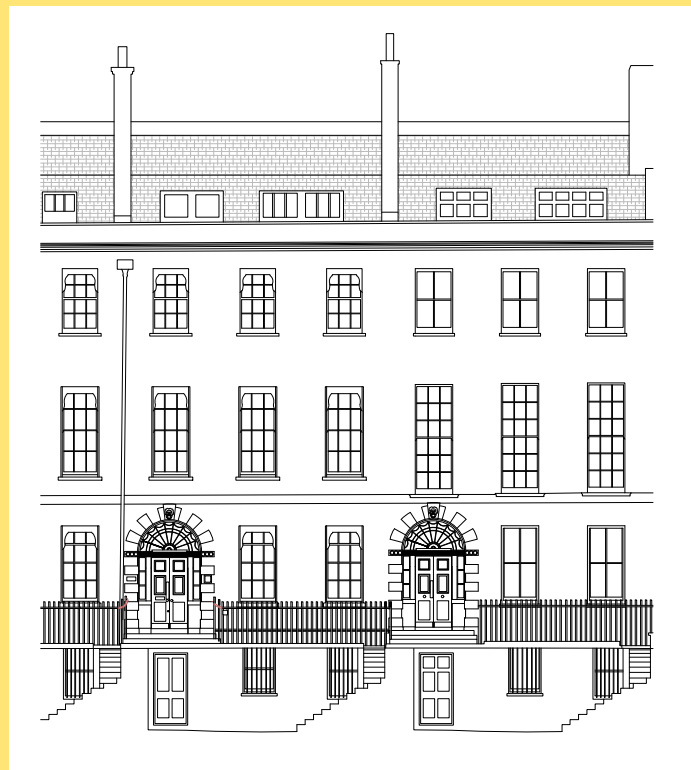
This display considers the history and architecture of Bedford Square. The materials shown in the two horizontal cases reflect how Bedford Square has featured in the literature on Georgian architecture and town planning. The selection highlights the role of the Building Act and the values associated with the ostensibly standardised kinds of townhouse which came after it. But while celebrating the design, the scrutiny of architectural historians has also exposed Bedford Square’s symmetry as less complete than it appears—the standard of building and detailing not as high or uniform as claimed. Some historians have also documented the heady combination of aristocratic power and capitalist speculation which made the development possible.

The upright display case addresses the enduring appeal of Bedford Square for the people who have lived and worked there. The materials gathered here draw attention to some of the people and organisations associated with these properties, including the Paul Mellon Centre which has been based at no. 16 since

1996 and now also at no. 15 after a major expansion completed in 2015. Archival and documentary resources, which are now more immediately accessible than ever allow for the reconstruction of the wider array of experiences and histories than have generally been accounted for by architectural historians.

The display highlights the way that classic Georgian architecture created—and still creates—forms of social distancing: in its physical form, in creating closed and exclusive urban sites, through its internal spaces which separated inhabitants and allocated roles in highly predictable ways, and in its aesthetic values which laid claim to supposedly timeless and universal principles of classical design and geometrical order. Although criticism of the uniformity of the Georgian terrace increased in the nineteenth century, and alternative forms of housebuilding arose, the grandest eighteenth-century townhouses have retained their economic value and remain preserved and often coveted as the embodiment of classical order and aesthetic purity.

It is also the case that Bedford Square's placid front-ages and orderly interiors were constructed at a moment of acute historical trauma. The building of Bedford Square coincided precisely with the years of the American War of Independence (1775–1782). In material terms, the war gave rise to an immediate slump in building, making comprehensive schemes like Bedford Square harder to achieve. But the conflict also created a crisis of authority for the British state, sent shockwaves of doubt and anxiety through society, and helped steer Britain's political elite towards more aggressive and exploitative global ambitions. The order and symmetry of Bedford Square can be interpreted as the resolute counter-image of a world that was changing dramatically and unpredictably.



Wright & Wright Architects,  
Architectural plan drawings of the  
exteriors of 15–16 Bedford Square.  
Prepared as part of the feasibility  
study for the redevelopment of  
the site for the Paul Mellon Centre,  
2014 (All rights reserved)

## The first triumph of the 1774 Building Act

– Roy Porter

The London Building Act of 1774 was a key piece of legislation setting out standardised “rates” for new buildings, four of these relating to domestic houses. The rates were based on the size of the property and set expectations about wall thicknesses and other aspects of the structure. It did not invent the type of the London townhouse: that had been established in the seventeenth century. Nor was it the first act attempting a ranking of house types: that had been introduced by the City Rebuilding Act of 1667, following the Fire of London. However, it did impose expectations about orderliness and uniformity in new buildings, which could be measured in strictly economic terms, and empowered District Surveyors in upholding these standards. This standardisation helped ensure that “the forces of capitalist building production unleashed in the late seventeenth century became all but universal” (Peter Guillery). It also, arguably, fixed and helped justify a sense of social structure, with every new house positioned on a scale that linked but also distinguished the lower class, occupying “Fourth Rate” houses, and the middle and upper classes, only the wealthiest having “First Rate” houses—of the kind that made up Bedford Square. In this way, a certain idea of social justice based on stratification was given a strictly economic expression and a lasting physical form in the built environment.

Opposite: Alison Shepherd, Drawing of ‘First’, ‘Second’ and ‘Third Rate’ houses, in John Summerson, *Georgian London*, fig. 54. Image courtesy of Alison Shepherd / Trustees of the Estate of Sir John Summerson



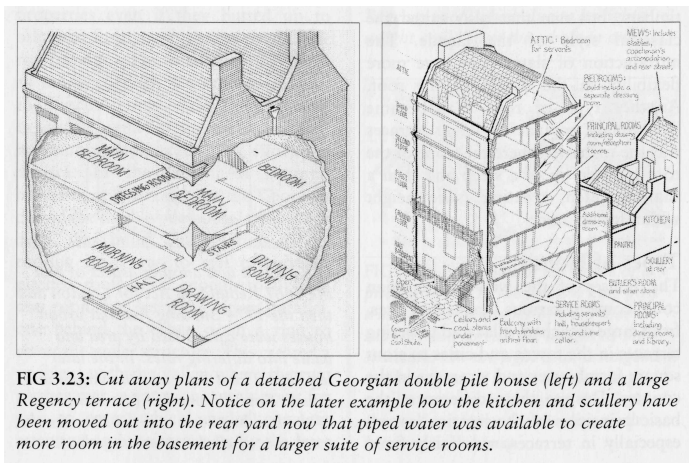
54 ‘First’, ‘Second’ and ‘Third Rate’ houses, classified according to floor area and cost, as prescribed in the Building Act of 1774. The First Rate house is from Baker Street, the others are based on examples in R. Elsam’s *Practical Builder* of 1825.

■ John Summerson, *Georgian London*, (New Haven; London: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2003)

LR: 711.4 (421) SUM

Open to pages 124–125, featuring fig. 54 showing the ‘rates’ of London houses set by the 1774 London Building Act.





**FIG 3.23:** Cut away plans of a detached Georgian double pile house (left) and a large Regency terrace (right). Notice on the later example how the kitchen and scullery have been moved out into the rear yard now that piped water was available to create more room in the basement for a larger suite of service rooms.

■ **Trevor Yorke, *Georgian and Regency Houses Explained*, (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2020)**

Staff copy (lent by Martin Myrone)  
Open to pp.46–47, fig. 3.23  
cut away plans of Georgian and Regency houses.

Aimed at a wide readership, Yorke's book aims to expose "what lies behind" the frontages of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century houses. Fig. 3.23 shows the typical floorplan of a large townhouse with the attic serving as bedrooms for servants, and the basement, or latterly rooms in the back yard, dedicated to working spaces of kitchen and scullery. The layout of London townhouses and the way different rooms were used across houses of different sizes were strikingly predicacble across the period, as the American visitor Louis Simond noted when he was in England in the early years of the nineteenth century.

■ **Louis Simond, *An American in Regency England*, (London: The History Book Club, 1968)**

Staff copy (lent by Martin Myrone)  
Open to pp.36–37.

During his visit to England in 1810–1811, the American Louis Simond set out his observations about the remarkable uniformity of London townhouses across the social spectrum:

*These narrow houses, three or four stories high—one for eating, one for sleeping, a third for company, a fourth under ground for the kitchen, a fifth perhaps at top for the servants—and the agility, the ease, the quickness with which the individuals of the family run up and down, and perch on different stories, give the idea of a cage with its stick and birds. The plan of these houses is very simple, two rooms on each story; one in the front with two or three windows looking on the street, the other on a yard behind, often very small; the stairs generally taken out of the breadth of the back-room. The ground-floor is usually elevated a few feet above the level of the street, and separated from it by an area, a sort of ditch, a few feet wide, generally from three to eight, and six or eight feet deep, inclosed by an iron railing; the*

*widows of the kitchen are in this area. A bridge of stone or brick leads to the door of the house.*

Referring to the 'best houses', Simond noted the finances involved:

*The establishment of such a house ... Is from four to six male servants, and probably as many women—the wages of the former, £40 sterling, dress included; and of the latter, £10 to £12; and the whole annual expence, £4000 to £6000 sterling.*

At that date, a middle-class household would need an income of £250 a year, while an individual labourer might have £12 a year to feed his family.

Opposite: [Fig 3.23 p.46] Trevor Yorke, *Cut away plans of a detached Georgian double pile house (left) and a large Regency terrace (right)*, in Trevor Yorke, *Georgian and Regency Houses Explained* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2020), p. 46. Image courtesy of Trevor Yorke (All rights reserved)

■ Linda Clarke, *Building Capitalism: Historical Change and the Labour Process in the Production of the Built Environment*, (London: Routledge, 1992)

Staff copy (Lent by Martin Myrone)  
Open to pages 168–169, showing plate 11, 'Equity Buildings in 1928.'

Clarke's book provides an avowedly Marxist analysis of the economic forces that shaped the building of Georgian London, focusing on the new forms of entrepreneurship and labour relations. The building of Bedford Square features among the exceptional developments led by the big estates that proceeded with a highly developed sense of unified design and planning. By contrast, much building of the period was far more piecemeal and fragmentary. Clarke illustrates this point by the striking example of Equity Buildings, on the Ossulston Estate, Camden "laid out at the beginning of the nineteenth century and begun by 1804 but never completed beyond the ground floor". The resulting terraces had the makings of standard Georgian townhouses, smaller in scale but fundamentally like those of Bedford Square. But these properties were left stunted and unfinished, and inhabited as such. Set against the grandeur and completeness of Bedford Square, the image exposes the profound inequalities involved in the building of Georgian London.



Ossulston Estate, Equity Buildings, 1928, photograph. Image courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives / London Picture Archive



■ Françoise Choay, *The Modern City: Planning in the 19th Century*, (New York: George Braziller, 1969)

Staff copy (lent by Martin Myrone)

Open to plates 9–10 “Balloon view of London” 1851, with Bedford Square highlighted.

Choay writes:

*In English cities the residential pattern was conditioned by standards and a system of practical and esthetic values which had been established in the seventeenth century and were to remain effective and unchanged until the end of Victoria’s reign. Evidence of this is found in London, in the Bloomsbury districts, Mayfair, Belgravia, Regent’s Park. From Covent Garden, for which Inigo Jones received the commission in 1630 ... to Bedford Square (1776), Tavistock Square (1864) or Gordon Square (1860) [sic], the principles of layout are the same ... The great land-holding families, whose rural estates surrounded the towns and could be used for urban expansion, retained ownership of their property, while renting to building contractors.*

Opposite: Balloon view of London, 1851, in Françoise Choay, *The Modern City: Planning in the 19th Century*, figs. 9–10. Image courtesy of George Braziller (All rights reserved)

■ *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster the Borough of Southwark and parts adjoining Shewing every house.* By R. Horwood

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Enlarged reproduction over fireplace and included as a foldout insert with this exhibition guide.

Richard Horwood’s massive *Plan of London*, first published in thirty-two sheets in 1792–99, provided the most detailed map of the metropolis produced to date. It attempted to show every property, even every garden, in individual detail. As a monumental graphic production it provided a vivid demonstration of London’s growth in the eighteenth century, including new urban spaces like Bedford Square that now punctuated the cityscape.





■ Dan Cruikshank and Neil Burton,  
*Life in the Georgian City*,  
(London: Viking, 1990)

LR: 72.034.8 (41) CRU

Open to pages 126–127, photos of  
Bedford Square.

The authors note the piecemeal development of most London housing before the end of the eighteenth century. Bedford Square, “with its ambitious if flawed uniformity—was a special case”. However, these authors also reflect on the tensions and compromises that might be involved in a complex building process that aristocratic landowners and their agents, speculative builders, artisans and surveyors, and architects who were only beginning to secure their modern professional authority. The high ideals of classical design could, in this situation, be undermined, albeit in a way which might be hidden behind a classy façade. The north side of Bedford Square (where nos. 15 and 16 are situated) was highlighted for “showing the unfortunate classical solecism of the centrally placed pilaster, where speculative builders tried to make a classical composition out of two standard three-bay houses”.

Left: *The north side of Bedford Square*,  
in Dan Cruikshank and Neil Burton, *Life  
in the Georgian City*. Image courtesy of  
Dan Cruikshank (All rights reserved)

*Whether it is the grand, symmetrical facades embellished with classical motifs or towering terraces repeated in endless rows or arranged around clumps of greenery, the Georgian and Regency houses conjure up a distinct and much admired image ... a timeless quality that offends few and attracts many.*

– Trevor Yorke

Bedford Square was as a luxury development, intended to prestige society's elite by setting forward an image of prestige and authority. Its earliest residents were successful physicians, merchants, and lawyers, including publicly prominent figures like Lord Eldon, Lord High Chancellor at no. 6 in 1800–1819 and Thomas Monro, Principal Physician to Bethlem Hospital and one of the doctors who treated George III during his bouts of mental ill health at no. 53 in 1779–1793. In the later nineteenth century, the doctors and lawyers were joined by a few successful playwrights, performers, and artists, although the square remained far from bohemian. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the houses started to be used for non-residential purposes, with businesses and learned bodies moving in. Today, the square is fully occupied by offices and educational bodies. The brass plaques next to the doors reveal a range of businesses and agencies, publishing houses and educational bodies, some with a public profile—including the Architectural Association as well as the Mellon Centre—others more obscure, including some tactically named outfits apparently providing discrete financial services.

With all these changes, Bedford Square has remained an exclusive and attractive address for those who can afford it. But the litany of “principal residents” organised

1808	d	✓	George Cholmondeley Esq	Head	M	✓	Robert	X
			James	High	M	✓	Scholar	
			George Thomas Esq	Esq		✓		
			James Bell Esq	d		✓		
			Robert	d		✓		
			Charles	d		✓		
			Thomas Howard	Esq	S	✓	James (Dorset)	
			James	Esq	d	S	James	
1816	d	✓	John Reynolds Esq	Head	M	✓	Robert & John Blayney	
			John Reynolds Esq	Esq	M	✓		
			Thomas Howard Esq	Esq	S	✓	Robert	
			Thomas Howard Esq	Esq	S	✓	Robert (Dorset)	
			Robert Howard Esq	d	S	✓	Cooper	
			Miss Mary Jones	d	S	✓	Edwards	
			Miss Mary Jones	d	S	✓	Thomas	
			Thomas Howard Esq	d	S	✓	Thomas	
1841	d	✓	Thomas Howard Esq	Head	M	✓	Thomas Howard Esq	
			Thomas Howard Esq	Esq	M	✓	Thomas Howard Esq	

1891 Census Record,  
Courtesy of Public  
Records Office (All  
rights reserved)

by the architectural historian Andrew Byrne in his history of the square tells only part of the story. The array of parochial and civil records, court records, newspaper and magazine reports, which can now be accessed digitally with an unprecedented immediacy allows us to discover other stories—of the working people who served these households, of the poor and alienated who occasionally intruded into a square that was meant to be socially exclusive. And our growing awareness of global and imperial contexts alerts us to the multiple ways that the square connects with these wider histories. An audit of early residents suggests that as many as one-third can be directly implicated in Britain's colonial violence—as plantation owners, or investors in the slave trade or the East India Company. Lord Eldon was a famously conservative figure, a fierce opponent of representative government and opposed to the abolition of the slave trade, while Monro's abusive treatment of his patients and liberal use of chains and restraints merited public investigation. If Bedford Square endures as a privileged symbol of cultural authority and aesthetic value, we might ask what the material and social underpinnings of this image were: its palace frontages might speak of a *timeless quality that offends few and attracts many*, but at what cost?



■ Rachel Stewart, *The Town House in Georgian London*, (New Haven; London: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2009)

LR: 728.3 STE

Displayed closed – cover photo of no. 1 Bedford Square.

No. 1 Bedford Square was designed by the architect Thomas Leverton. He went on to live at no. 13, but no.1 served as a kind of showhouse for the square, with finer and more elaborate detailing than is found elsewhere. Often illustrated in architectural histories as an exemplar of Georgian elegance, its image also serves as the “cover star” for Rachel Stewart’s book. The book itself offers a critical account of the meaning of Georgian architectural style for its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century inhabitants and observes a misalignment between the criticism of some commentators about the uniformity and predictability of the design of Georgian townhouses, and their enduring cultural value. As Stewart notes, the resilience of the townhouse rested, paradoxically, on its adaptability. The repurposing of Bedford Square’s grand family homes into offices, teaching rooms, meeting spaces, and studios provides evidence of a combination of practical mutability and aesthetic immutability.

■ South side of Bedford Square, London, offered for sale at about two million. Press photograph, dated 7 Jan. 1970 and inscribed ‘Echo & Post’ (Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire).

Staff copy (lent by Felicity Myrone and Martin Myrone)

Displayed on the North Wall.

In 1970, the Duke of Bedford offered the fourteen houses on the south side of Bedford Square for sale at £2 million, attracting extensive press coverage. The average price house in London at that date was £4,848. Here a local press photographer has inscribed the then-astonishing figure into the snow in Bedford Square itself.

The grandest Georgian townhouses may embody “a timeless quality that offends few and attracts many” (Trevor Yorke). But Georgian classicism arose with, and arguably helps mask, a society and economy based on profound inequalities and violence. Their enduring aesthetic appeal means that these disparities are reproduced and allowed to pass, only perhaps apparent when we confront the shocking reality of raw economic disparities—as this press photographer brilliantly exposed.

Opposite: Rachel Stewart, *The Town House in Georgian London* (cover feat. 1 Bedford Square, attributed to Thomas Leverton, c. 1778). Image: Stephen Whitehorne





*Alongside Bloomsbury's associations with literary and cultural gentility runs a less comfortable story of exploitation and oppression ... The development of these streets, with Portland Place being laid out in the 1770s, Bedford Square in 1775–1780 and Russell Square in 1800, coincided with the deepening of ties between London's mercantile and professional classes and the slave colonies.*

– Nick Draper and Rachel Lang

As the historians Nick Draper and Richard Lang from the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave Ownership indicate, many early residents of Bedford Square can be connected with the profits of slavery and the slave trade. These include the Scottish-born merchant and plantation owner James Baillie who lived at no. 14 in 1782–1793, and two occupiers of the buildings that now house the Paul Mellon Centre—James Williams at no. 15 in 1798–1807 and Thomas Wildman at no. 16 in 1785–1795. Williams's will documents him as the owner of several valuable plantations in Jamaica. Wildman was a lawyer who managed the business affairs of the Beckford family, who owned extensive slave plantations in Jamaica: he also owned property there himself.

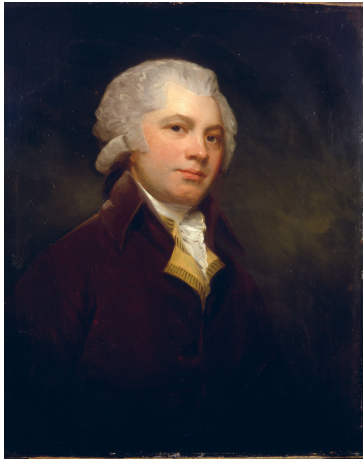
The Wildman and Beckford connections with Bedford Square help point to a further story, however. The parliamentary *Report from Select Committee on the Extinction of Slavery* (1833) contained a report of a visit to the Jamaica plantation of James Beckford Wildman, the nephew of Thomas Wildman, and an encounter with a Black man working as a slave in the fields:

*When Mr. Wildman went to Jamaica in 1824, he found upon the estate an individual, a slave carpenter, and it consisted with Mr. Wildman's knowledge, that that man was born in London, in Bedford Square; he instantly conceived that he had no right to detain the*

Opposite and front cover: Mark Road, South side of Bedford Square, offered for sale at £2,000,000, 1970. Image courtesy of Mark Road (All rights reserved)

*man in slavery, and, in spite of the protestations of his friends in Jamaica, he liberated the man. He very honourably said, that to make amends to the man for having had his services unjustly for thirty years, he would give the man the right of residence upon his estate, and he hired him as a carpenter, and was to give him 2s. 6d. a day.*

Whether the story was true or accurate cannot presently be established: it served, perversely, as a way of suggesting the slave-owning Wildman could demonstrate humane feeling. The anonymous man “born in London, in Bedford Square” seems certainly to have been the son of a servant working at Thomas Wildman’s house, no. 16, which James Beckford Wildman would have known well: Black servants were commonly found in wealthy London homes, particularly those with connections to the West Indies.



George Romney, *Thomas Wildman*, 1785, oil on canvas, 76 × 63.5 cm. Private Collection. Image courtesy of Christie’s Images (All rights reserved)



Thomas Gainsborough, *The Baillie Family*, c. 1784, oil on canvas, 250.8 x 227.3 cm. Tate (N00789). Image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0)



## Other books and materials on display

■ T.F. Reddaway, *The Rebuilding of London after the Great Fire*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1951)  
LR: 711.4 (421) RED  
Open to page 80, facing plate  
"Specimens of Houses Authorized by the Rebuilding Act of 1667"

■ Andrew Byrne, *London's Georgian Houses*, The Georgian Press 1986  
Staff copy (Lent by Martin Myrone)  
Open to pages 78–79, "Bedford Square"

■ Stanley C. Ramsey & J.D.M. Harvey, *Small Georgian Houses and their Details 1750–1820*, (London: The Architectural Press, 1977)  
LR: 728.3 RAM  
Open to part 2, plates 20–21  
(interiors at 1 and 13 Bedford Square)

■ Dan Cruikshank and Peter Wylk, *London: The Art of Georgian Building*, (London: The Architectural Press Ltd, 1975)  
LR: 728.3 CRU  
Open to pages 216–217, details of railings incl. Bedford Square (fig. 14)

■ Donald J. Olsen, *Town Planning in London: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982)  
LR: 711.4(421)OLS  
Open to pages 46–47, with view of west side of Bedford Square 1982

■ Andrew Byrne, *Bedford Square: An Architectural Study*, (London: Athlone, 1990)  
LR: 711.61 BYR  
Open to pages 146–147, 'Principal Residents of Bedford Square'

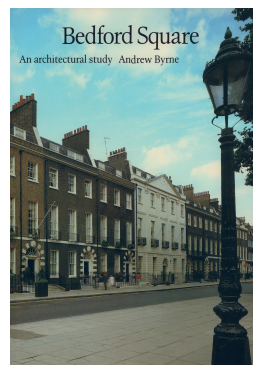
■ PMC Newsletter 2 (June 1996)  
Displayed closed, cover article 'New Premises for the Centre'  
AR: PMC 7/2

■ Photograph of the refurbished drawing room at 16 Bedford Square, c. 1996.  
Photograph: Ian Parry  
AR: PMC 17/13

■ Wright & Wright architects, feasibility study undated (probably January 2014)  
Open to architectural drawings of the plan of the ground floor of 16, 15 and 14 Bedford Square  
AR:TN4

■ PMC Newsletter 42 (15 June 2016)  
Open to 'Building works at 15 & 16 Bedford Square'  
AR: PMC 7/26

■ PMC Notes no. 14, 'The Paul Mellon Centre 1970–2020: A Brief History' (2020)  
Open to pages 54–55 ("2015")  
AR: PMC 7/26



■ Hugh Belsey, *Thomas Gainsborough: The Portraits, Fancy Pictures and Copies After Old Masters*, 2 vols, (New Haven, CT: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2019)  
LR: 7 GAIN(T).B  
Vol. 1, open to pages 50–1, the entry on Gainsborough's *Baillie Family*

■ Alex Kidson, *George Romney: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings*, 3 vols, (New Haven, CT: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2015)  
LR: ROMN (G).KK  
Vol. 2, open to pages 630–631, the entry on Romney's *Thomas Wildman*

## Further reading and resources

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, *The London Square: Gardens in the Midst of Town*, New Haven and London: The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art 2012

*Legacies of British Slave Ownership*, online resource <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>

Nick Draper and Rachel Lang, 'The Slave-owners of Bloomsbury', *Fitzrovia News* (25 Sept. 2012), <https://fitzroviannews.com/2012/09/25/the-slave-owners-of-bloomsbury/>

Peter Guillery, *The Small House in Eighteenth-Century London: A Social and Architectural History*, Yale University Press 2004

Roy Porter, *London: A Social History*, Penguin 2000

Matthew Sangster, *Romantic London*, online resource, <http://www.romanticlondon.org/>

*Survey of London: Volume 5, St Giles-in-The-Fields, Pt II*. Originally published by London County Council, London, 1914. Online at <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol5/pt2>



*Bedford Square: Creating Social Distance*  
31 January – 9 September 2022

Text and curation: Martin Myrone  
Project curator: Bryony Botwright-Rance  
Design: Luke Gould

Overleaf: Andrew Byrne, *Bedford Square: An Architectural Study*, (London: Athlone, 1990). Image © Andrew Byrne

Above: View of Bedford Square from the North side (Photo: PMC)





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*for Studies in British Art*

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