

**THE BRITISH
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF PORTUGAL**

**TWENTY THIRD ANNUAL REPORT
AND REVIEW 1996**

**13, Rua da Arriaga
1200 LISBON**

PORTUGAL IN BELGRAVE SQUARE

by Manuel Côrte-Real

The author contributed an article to the Annual Report and Review of 1988 about the London residences of the Portuguese Ambassadors to the Court of St. James. Here he continues the story from 1933, when the Portuguese Embassy settled first at No 11 and then at No 12 Belgrave Square.

Ever since its creation, Belgrave Square has been considered a very prestigious part of London, and has always remained in fashion as a place of residence. To find out why, we need to go back to the 1660's, and to Mary Davies, an extremely wealthy one-year old orphan.

She was the sole heiress of an enormous fortune, including the large estate The Manor of Ebury, which ran from Oxford St. to the Thames. Her mother, deprived of her husband's fortune, offered her daughter in auction: he who paid the largest sum would receive Mary in marriage. The lucky winner and groom-to-be was Sir Thomas Grosvenor, from a well-known and wealthy family in Chester, and the marriage took place in 1677.

The first part of the estate to be developed was Grosvenor Square and its surroundings. Around 1710, Sir Richard Grosvenor, Mary Davies' son, obtained permission from Parliament to grant building leases on the Square. He then put into practice a new concept of property: the long lease. He realised that a large part of the nobility and the affluent classes had large houses and seats in the country, but no town houses in London. If he could build these and let them for long periods, he would surely make a good profit.

It was, of course, a great success, and the development of that part of London took several years.

It was much later, in 1820, when George IV commissioned Nash to rebuild and revamp Buckingham House into Buckingham Palace, that this part of town became very fashionable.

And so, in 1826, another Grosvenor, this time Earl Robert Grosvenor, decided to develop what was then known as the "Five Fields". This was a

swamp, crossed by the river Westbourne, infested by thieves, duellists and vagabonds. In that year, Earl Grosvenor and a certain Mr Lowndes who also owned a small part of the property, obtained an Act of Parliament enabling them to drain the swamps, raise the level of the fields and develop the whole area. They chose Mr Thomas Cubbitt, a builder, to lay out and start building rich mansions for the nobility and the gentry, who enjoyed coming to London for the season. The site was renamed Belgravia and Belgrave Square, after one of the titles of the Grosvenor family, Viscounts Belgrave.

Born in Norfolk in 1788, Thomas Cubbitt was a carpenter by training, who started a building business and worked for the Duke of Bedford in the area of Covent Gardens. After Belgravia, he went on to build Pimlico, Kemp Town in Brighton, and later Osborne House on the Isle of Wight for Queen Victoria. He died rich and famous in 1855.

The architect charged with designing most of the Belgrave Square buildings was the Earl of Grosvenor's own choice: George Basevi, a cousin of Disraeli and a pupil of Sir John Soane and Sir Robert Smirke. He lived from 1794-1845. He was also the architect of the Thurloe Estate and the Smith Charity Estate in Kensington during the 1820's and 1830's, and also designed Pelham Crescent and Egerton Crescent.

After the construction of Belgrave Square, Belgravia joined Mayfair as the most fashionable residential quarter in London. A contemporary source wrote: "Nowhere else in Britain or even in the world, was there such a concentration of wealth, aristocracy, financial power and political influence as there were in Belgrave Sq. and surrounding streets in the Victorian years. The proximity of Belgravia to Buckingham Palace, the Palace of Westminster and to White Hall and the policy of the Grosvenor Estate to admit as tenants only those of known wealth, noble ancestry and political or palatial authority ensured the high level status of Belgrave Sq."

We can now discuss Nos. 11 and 12 Belgrave Square, home of the Portuguese Embassy.

No. 11 is a corner mansion on the North-West terrace, the first terrace to be completed on the Square. It was constructed between 1826 and 1828, in one of the "Five Fields" known as the Knightsbridge Close, on Basevi's design. Belgrave Square's first tenants signed the lease in 1827 and occupied No. 11 from 1828 to 1840. They were Sir Henry and Lady Drummond; he was a Member of Parliament with a country house called Albury Park in Guildford.

In 1840, new tenants arrived at No. 11. They were the Earl and Countess of Kenmare, owners of 18,000 acres of land in County Kerry, Ireland, who, with their family and 12 servants, stayed in the house until 1883. They were followed

by the Farquhar family in 1884, who occupied the property until the death of the last member of the family, Alfred Farquhar, in 1929.

At that time, the residence of the Portuguese Ambassador at 12 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, was inadequate and in bad repair. In 1933, the Portuguese Government decided to move the residence and bought the lease of 11 Belgrave Square for 999 years. The first Ambassador to take up residence there was Ruy Ulrich, a Professor of Law and ex-member of Government. He was married to the celebrated hostess, writer and fashion leader, Genoveva de Lima, the daughter of Carlos Mayer, who was a member of the famous group "Vençidos da Vida". She turned No 11 into a shrine of art deco style.

Today, No 11 is the Chancery of the Portuguese Embassy and most of the furniture and works of art that used to grace it are now at No 12. However, one or two interesting pieces still remain. These include the tapestry that hangs in the Ambassador's office. This was woven at Aubusson in the third quarter of the 18th century from cartoons inspired by Joseph Vernet's romantic painting of coastal and harbour scenes. There is also a splendid posthumous painting of the Marquis de Soveral by Henrique Medina. Soveral would infinitely have preferred the luxurious surroundings of 11 Belgrave Square to the inadequate residence he himself had had at Gloucester Place.

No 12 Belgrave Square, which is the current residence, is the West Mansion of the four standing at each of the Square's cardinal points. It was the first to be completed, and was designed expressly for Earl Bronlow in 1833 by the leading architect of his time, Sir Robert Smirke (1781-1867). A protégé of Sir Robert Peel and the Conservative Party, Smirke was a known Greek revivalist, and was responsible for The British Museum, the Central Post Office (St. Martin's Le Grand), King's College at the East Wing of Somerset House, St. George's Hospital at Hyde Park Corner (now the Lanesborough Hotel), and the College of Physicians (now Canada House) in Trafalgar Square.

He planned this house for the very wealthy Earl Bronlow, who entertained lavishly until his death at No 12 in 1853. The house was then occupied by the Duke of Buccleugh. In 1863 Lord Aveland took it over and remained until his death in December 1910. Aveland became the first Earl of Ancaster in 1892, and was joint hereditary Great Chamberlain of England. The next tenant was the Earl of Bathurst, who owned 11,000 acres of land at Cirencester and 2,000 acres in Derbyshire. Educated at Eton and Oxford, he was an excellent sportsman and a friend and companion of Edward VII.

After his death in 1943 and during the war, the house was requisitioned by the Commissioners of His Majesty's Works and Public Buildings to be used as administrative offices. When the war ended, the house was in extremely bad

condition and remained closed for some years. The Duke of Palmela, then Portugal's Ambassador to the Court of St. James, bought the remaining years of the lease and a new lease - totalling 110 years (it will expire in 2051) - for £16,725. As he was on the point of leaving London, it was his successor, Pedro Theotónio Pereira, who started the repair works and decoration in 1952. Pereira was a former member of Government, friend of Salazar, ex-Ambassador in Madrid, and a man of great taste.

Portuguese architects Luis Benavente and Alberto Cruz were put in charge of the project. The two or three rooms on the ground floor were converted into one large room, a showcase of Portuguese art and culture aptly known as "The Portuguese Room". All the furniture is Portuguese and Indo-Portuguese, and includes three magnificent cabinets. The walls are tiled with *azulejos* from the second half of the 18th century. Most striking of all is the superb tapestry depicting the departure of Catherine of Braganza from Lisbon to marry Charles II, woven at the Real Fabrica de Tapices in Madrid in 1955. This factory was founded by the De Stuyck family of "maîtres tapissiers" in the 18th century, and is still run by them. Theotónio Pereira knew Señor Gabino Stuyck very well from his years as Ambassador in Madrid, and their correspondence, kept at the Embassy, shows he followed the progress of this remarkable work of craftsmanship very closely. The tapestry was made after an engraving on the same subject by the Dutch artist Dirk Stoop. He was working in Lisbon at the time of the departure of Catherine of Braganza, and he accompanied her to London where he remained until his death.

Also in this room is a nice portrait, unfortunately unsigned, of Abraham de Castres, who was the British envoy to Lisbon from 1710 until his death in 1757. It was given to him by the people of Lisbon as a token of gratitude for his services during and after the great earthquake that demolished that city. I presume he distinguished himself by pressing the British Parliament to grant aid to the people of Lisbon. The painting was bought by the Portuguese government in 1954 from his descendent, the Rev. Faversham.

On the other side of the hall is the formal dining room. Large oil paintings of beautiful landscapes line the walls. These paintings were bought by Theotónio Pereira in 1954 following the advice of his friend and remarkable interior decorator, Lady Elles, née Blanche Paiva Raposo Hornung, who was responsible for much of the decoration of this Residence and for all the soft furnishings. The paintings used to adorn the house of Mrs Wakefield Saunders at Hyde Park Gardens and were acquired through Leggatt Brothers at Duke Street for the sum of £1,500. In the late 1980's, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art researched these paintings and found that, although sold

as "School of Gainsborough", they are in fact Dutch and were painted by the 18th century artist Jacob Maurer. They were probably painted for an important Amsterdam house.

From the hall, a grand staircase ascends to the first floor. The staircase was designed by the architect Luis Benavente, and is made of pale yellow Estremoz marble. Original 18th century blue and yellow tiles depicting landscapes and maritime scenes form a striking dado along the stairs. Several tapestries from the Portuguese State collections hang on the walls, including the "Battle Scene" by Jan Rees, one of the most important tapissiers working in Brussels between 1610 and 1635. A more important tapestry is "Triumph of Bacchus", part of the series "Triumph of the Gods", woven in Brussels in 1720 from cartoons by van Orley and Antoine Coypol. A third and smaller tapestry shows the "Abduction of Prosepine by Pluto", also woven in Brussels in 1700.

Crowning this impressive staircase is an imposing but charming ceiling, made of what we call *de caixotão* wood, painted with "putti" scrolls and flowers in the rococo style by the Portuguese revivalist painter Antero Basalisa.

The ballroom is on the first floor. Its decoration of plasters, mouldings and cornices is typically Edwardian, but the furniture is not. There are two gilded settees adorned with griffins which supposedly came from the Brighton Pavilion. Of the pictures in this room, apart from two charming 18th century portraits of the Duchess of Manchester and Mrs Oaks, we must mention the portrait of D. José, Principe do Brasil, son of Queen Maria I. It is signed by the Portuguese painter Miguel António do Amaral (1710-1780), and an exact copy, also signed, hangs at Queluz Palace. We know that Amaral received a commission by Catherine II of Russia to paint portraits of the Portuguese Royal Family for the Hermitage. Is it possible that this portrait did not reach its destination?

When leaving the ballroom, a large drawing room furnished with English and French pieces and English and Dutch paintings, leads to the small dining room. The best painting in the house hangs here: it is "Venus", by the Italian painter Guido Renni (1575-1642), so highly acclaimed at the time that Renni himself or his studio had to paint several copies. We know there is one at the Dresden Museum, and another at West Wycombe, the house of Sir Frances Dashwood.

The remaining floors of the house are taken by the Ambassador's suite and other suites and guest rooms, all very well furnished and pleasantly decorated.

Several landscapes by well known Portuguese painters from the beginning of this century adorn the walls of these guest rooms.

On the whole, No 12 Belgrave Square is surely the largest house in London where elements of Portuguese and British art mingle so pleasantly. We do hope

that the Portuguese government will be willing to buy a new lease on the house when the present one expires, and so maintain for many more years such a prestigious presence of Portugal in London.

—ooOoo—

Manuel Côte-Real is a Portuguese diplomat and is, at present, Portugal's Ambassador in Kiev. He was a Minister/Councillor in London for some time and, among his many decorations, he is a Commander of The Portuguese Knights of the Order of the Garter published by the British Historical Society in 1992.