

● History of Lowther Lodge

Lowther Lodge, the headquarters of the Society, was designed by the architect, Richard Norman Shaw and is undoubtedly one of the finest and most important examples of 19th century architecture in London. Norman Shaw (1831-1912) was the most outstanding domestic architect of his day, and Lowther Lodge was his first large commission in the capital. Built in the 'Queen Anne' style, it contains some of the best interior details from the period, and provided an appropriate setting for the clients, the Hon. William Lowther, MP, and Alice Lowther, his wife, a high-minded society hostess and amateur artist. Mainly through Lord Curzon's efforts, Lowther Lodge was bought by the Society in November 1912, and, after minor alterations by the architects, Thompson and Walford, the Society's doors in Kensington Gore were opened for the first time on 14 April 1913. The main event in the building history of the house after its acquisition was the addition of a lecture theatre and library wing in 1928-30 by the London architects, Kennedy and Nightingale.

Lowther Lodge was highly influential in advancing the fashion for red brick, rubbed and cut brickwork, and irregular but balanced compositions, which are the most important characteristics of the 'Queen Anne' style. Basically the forms and details of the style used at Lowther Lodge are derived from the early to mid-17th century, which provided chimneys, and from the late 17th and 18th centuries, which contributed sash windows, wrought ironwork, window aprons, and hipped roofs. The 19th century's preoccupation with technology was also brought to bear in 'Queen Anne' houses, not the least example being the introduction of plentiful bathrooms and water closets, and at Lowther Lodge, what is thought to be the first passenger lift in a private house in London (still in working order and to be found in the Presidents' Lobby off the Main Hall).

The irregular and picturesque outline of the house, happily breaking away from the conventional symmetry of the typical London townhouse, opened the main reception and bedrooms to more light and pushed them into the garden by means of tall window bays. To a great extent, the interior arrangement of the rooms was determined by the Lowthers' requirements for a dignified and artistic setting in which to entertain their elegant friends from the world of politics and society. Mrs Lowther was an active artist and collector with an interest in the decorative arts (the ceramic tiles in the Main Hall fireplace were painted by her) and, as a founder member of the *Royal Amateur Art Association*, she hosted annual exhibitions of works of art by its members, using the Main Hall as an art gallery – rather as it is used on occasion to this day. The woodwork, glazed and leaded windows, marble chimney-pieces, and plaster-work ceilings and friezes which remain in the building today are among the finest surviving 'Queen Anne' interiors. This legacy is also a reminder of the high level of craftsmanship that was at the command of London architects, prompted by the Gothic Revival and a conscious desire to revive the decorative arts as a result, in part, of the Great Exhibition of 1851, which had been held across the road from the site of Lowther Lodge in Hyde Park.

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Following the death of William Lowther the house was sold to the Society for £ 100,000 in 1912 at the instigation of its new President, Viscount Curzon. Following some alterations and additions, the Society moved in the following year. The Great War halted plans for expansion until 1927, when the building of the Lecture Theatre wing was financed by the sale of a large portion of the garden. The architects, Kennedy (a former assistant to Lutyens) and Nightingale, created a between-the-wars classicism which was sympathetic to Shaw's house. Careful use was made of materials chosen to match those employed in the existing building. The needs of the Society were thoroughly considered; for example, traffic noise from the busy intersection outside was restricted by making the Lecture Theatre windowless. Across the garden front, a variety of window types (sash, arched, and casement) and sizes were employed, and their disposition reflects the play of levels inside and repeats and reinterprets motifs from the older building.

Extracted from 'An Architectural History' by Lynne Walker, published in The Geographical Journal, 1980.

Recent developments

In 2001, the 750 seat lecture theatre was re-furbished and renamed 'The Ondaatje Theatre' in recognition of the Society's benefactor Sir Christopher Ondaatje CBE. During the 2001 refurbishment, care was taken to keep the traditional ambience at the same time as providing more comfortable seating and state-of-the-art audio-visual capacity. Improved lighting, temperature control and facilities for those with disabilities have also been incorporated.

Working with architects *StudioDownie*, in 2003 the Society enhanced its conference and seminar facilities through the development of some rooms for educational purposes (the Education Centre in the former Map Room and the Sunley and Drayson Seminar Rooms).

In June 2004, the new glass pavilion opened to the public forming a new main entrance along the Exhibition Road and a space for exhibitions. Below the newly excavated terrace, and overlooking the landscaped garden, is the new Foyle Reading Room which also opened in 2004, together with extensive controlled storage for the Society's world class collection of maps, atlases, books, archives and artefacts. Refurbished staff offices and consultation rooms occupy the remainder of the basement. In 2005, The British Construction Industry Awards presented the Society and the *StudioDownie* project team with an award for a building which the judges considered to be especially inspirational.