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# THOMAS CUBITT'S WOBURN WALK, BLOOMSBURY

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*Woburn Walk (formerly Woburn Buildings), off the busy Upper Woburn Place south of Euston Station, and the adjacent Duke's Road were built in 1822–1826 as rows of shops with residences above. Whilst virtually all other examples of Regency shopping streets have been altered beyond recognition as their shop fronts are updated, these survive largely intact. It is possible that the strength of design of their elevations – an architectural unity over all three floors and lateral uniformity along each terrace – helped ward off later alterations, making this a remarkable and little-studied survival. (Fig. 1).*

## THE HISTORY OF SHOP DEVELOPMENT IN LONDON

From medieval times, London's trade and retail spaces were a mixture of street markets, market squares, covered marketplaces and also ground floor shops, some purpose built and others converted from houses, usually 'lock-ups', separately rented from the accommodation above. In these cases, a 'shop' could also be a workshop, counting house, or any other form of business.

The advent of fashionable retailing brought about impressive commercial exchanges, the first of which was Royal Exchange on Cornhill (1566–8), and other purpose-built shopping venues including bazaars and arcades for the wealthy to browse under the cover of a roof, such as Exeter Exchange (1708, previously housed within Exeter House on the same spot on the Strand) and the Soho Bazaar



Fig. 1. A very attractive view of Woburn Walk taken in the late-1980s after the last major works. The extent of piecemeal alteration to the elevations and the streetscape since then has had a significant impact. *By permission of Camden Local Studies and Archives.*

(1816, originally built as a warehouse in 1801–04 at 4–6 Soho Square).<sup>1</sup> The ever-increasing array of goods brought in from the colonies and elsewhere to sell to an increasing number of Londoners with disposable income, eager to dress themselves and their houses in the latest fashions, was responsible for the vast majority of shops and shopping streets created from the existing residential terraces of Georgian and Regency London.



Fig. 2. House with minimal conversion for shop use. Ebury Street, Belgravia. *Author.*

A general typology of shops converted from houses and the less common type (those set out to incorporate shops) can be described as follows:

1. A house converted for shop use with minimal structural alteration, such as a re-formed or slightly enlarged window. (Fig. 2)
2. A house converted to shop with complete alteration to the ground floor elevation, often including internal alterations to allow the upper



Fig. 3. Original timber bressummer with steel support uncovered during works to a shop in New Street, Covent Garden. *Author.*

floors to be reached by a separate door. (Fig. 4) Intricate classical details were introduced to break up what was otherwise a large plain opening where a bressummer was inserted to hold up the front façade above ground floor, allowing a shop front to be built underneath. (Fig. 3) Classical columns, pediments and scrolled corbel brackets were standard features of architectural detail design books such as W. & J. Pain's *Decorative Details*.<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 5) Surviving examples are of great interest to conservationists, since there are few remaining in anything like their original condition.

3. A house or houses built or redeveloped to include a very basic shop front at ground floor with no specific architectural styling, as in large parts of Covent Garden and St Giles, both part of the original Bedford Estate.
4. A house built to accommodate a shop at ground floor with integrated architectural detailing (including Woburn Walk, and others covered below). The architecturally inspired, uniform, purpose-built shopping street was an uncommon feature before the Regency era, though earlier examples can be found such as The Abbot's House, Shrewsbury, dated to the middle of the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

### WOBURN WALK AND THE BEDFORD ESTATE

Coming under the fourth category, Woburn Walk is a valuable record of early-nineteenth century town planning, part of a private community with guarded bars protecting those inside from unwanted traffic and nuisance. It was the work of two major developers and inadvertent town planners of London: the prolific Georgian developer, Thomas Cubitt, and the landowner, the sixth Duke of Bedford.

The Bedford Estate was developed slowly – the first major northern expansion, following the seventeenth-century developments of Covent Garden and St Giles, took place 46 years before Woburn Walk, with the erection of Bedford Square, begun by William Scott & Robert Grews in 1776. This new form of speculative development required marketing in order to fill the new properties, and thus the ‘estate’ agent became known to us. He knew how to advertise the benefits of the houses, most importantly the privacy afforded by the Estate barriers: ‘a most valuable protection. . . against cattle, carts and the stunning noise of omnibuses’.<sup>4</sup> Trades and retailing were prohibited within the gates of the estate for fear of reducing the desirability of the area, thereby

creating an early version of ‘zoning’. Unsurprisingly, the shops lay just outside this exclusive enclave.

Cubitt promoted and encouraged the same approach when he started developing the northern part of the Bedford Estate in 1821.<sup>5</sup> He was committed to developing the site over a period of years, and the rate at which he would be able to lease his new buildings would be governed by their desirability. Despite the general attitude towards commercial activity within the Estate, he was sufficiently astute to realise that the area required even the most modest provision of shops. Although it was designed to be quiet and residential, having no local facilities would be inconvenient and unpopular with residents. Like the houses they were built to serve, in Tavistock Square and the streets around it, the shops at Woburn Walk were an early development in speculative building. This meant the Estate could control who would take them and begin trading in the area. Even where shops were to be permitted, extensive lists of ‘offensive trades’ were prohibited by covenant in every building and repairing lease.<sup>6</sup> This early form of town planning not only established the separation of residents from potentially hazardous trades, but also contributed to



Fig. 4. A shop converted entirely at ground floor, St James Street. *Author*.

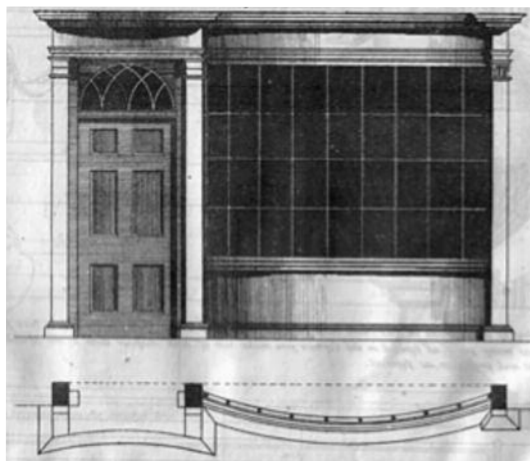


Fig. 5. Design for a shop front by W & J Pain, from A. Richardson, *Decorative Details of the 18th Century*, 1946.



the segregation of residents according to class and wealth. Hermione Hobhouse pointed out that although this sounds rather like snobbery, the reasons were far more basic than the accusation of elitism would suggest: with no police force and sanitary provisions still in their infancy, protecting the developed areas of the Estate from degradation was of paramount importance.<sup>7</sup>

The cost of building the houses would have fallen entirely to Cubitt under the terms of a 99-year building lease which began in 1822. A peppercorn rent was payable to the Estate for the land, but, when finished, Cubitt would benefit from the proceeds of leasing the buildings on to occupiers. The north terrace, and adjoining street of identical design, then named Duke's Row, were constructed by Cubitt shortly afterwards. The shops on Duke's Row and the connecting shop on Woburn Buildings were all 'rack rented' by Cubitt for a period of three years. Cubitt's financial ledger shows that things did not always go according to plan; heavily underlined against the records for no. 13 is the statement 'Mr Butler has absconded'.<sup>8</sup>

Post Office directories available for the area from 1841 onwards show that the shops were reliably leased throughout the nineteenth century, initially for basic food and household provisions, as was surely intended. By the 1850s, like the nearby Tottenham Court Road, as it remains, in part, today, the street was filling with carpenters, plumbers, upholsterers and furniture sellers to satisfy the needs of those buying into the newest parts of the Bedford Estate. This trend abated in the later years of the century, and whilst a number of general provisions and furniture shops remained, a dressmaker, bookbinder, statue cleaner, basket maker and other more artisan trades began to enter the street.<sup>9</sup>

The Bedford Estate in Bloomsbury was never as fashionable as Cubitt's next major development of Belgravia, with its close proximity to the new Buckingham Palace. It soon became apparent that the original plan to provide a gated community of large



Fig. 6. The north terrace in 1922 showing extent of alteration of bay windows, loss of detail and general dilapidation. *By kind permission of the Duke of Bedford and the Trustees of the Bedford Estates.*

houses for wealthy residents was fundamentally flawed, since such families were not sufficient in number to satisfy the oversupply that Cubitt had created.<sup>10</sup> The lack of consumer research undertaken by the Duke's advisors and Cubitt prior to embarking on their new neighbourhood was all too apparent, and the area became reliant for respectability upon middling professional classes, for whom somewhat smaller houses would have proved more viable. The vacuum created by the departure of their ideal tenants also brought landlords and landladies using the large houses as guesthouses and lodgings, ideal for housing young men working in the City and lawyers at the Inns of Court. The opening of Euston Station as the terminus of the London and Birmingham Railway on 20 July 1837 was another setback for the overall cachet of the area. The presence of University College London and other academic institutions helped consolidate its diminished character as further rooms were leased for student accommodation.

Even the bow-fronted shop windows of Woburn Walk with their small glass panes were becoming old-fashioned as early as the late 1820s, as the increased use of cast-iron pillars and the availability of larger

plate glass enabled the smart retailers of the West End, like those of the newly-built Regent Street, to transform their shop fronts. Shops were still sparse in the area, so Woburn Walk continued to serve the local community with basic food and household provisions throughout the nineteenth century. But whilst its existence was secure, its state of repair was less so. Early photographs of the street, dating from the 1920s, show a very dilapidated northern elevation. (Fig. 6) By now the shops were largely 'lock ups' and the upper floors were leased separately to residential tenants. Shortly afterwards the London branch of the Co-Operative Society bought the northern terrace and carried out basic repairs to the exterior, including re-rendering the elevations and replacing some of the aged bow fronted shop windows, unfortunately with canted bays and heavy glazing bars. As the larger houses in the area were divided into separate lodging rooms it appears that those in Woburn Walk were similarly divided. The accommodation above the shops was let as multiple dwellings, with two or even three units above each shop, resulting in very cramped accommodation providing little privacy. The street continued to deteriorate up to the Second World War, at which point photographs record missing bay windows boarded up, others replaced with canted bays and single panes of glass; whole elevations missing their external render and much ornamentation lost.

## ARCHITECTURAL DETAILING

Woburn Walk is not only exceptional as a relatively unaltered survival of a purpose-built Regency shopping street. It was also very unusual for its time in its detailed architectural design. Terraces including groups of shops (often two to six buildings) were constructed across London and elsewhere in Britain, but rarely to such a coherent design. Of the fourth type of residential shop described above, Woburn Walk appears to be the most considered architectural composition of an entire shopping street.<sup>11</sup>

Cubitt is generally associated with the design and development of residential terraces, not shops or shop fronts. He rarely constructed shops, and no others are known of this level of design. In his later development of Belgravia many building leases were sub-let to smaller developers, and shops – which were restricted to minor streets crossing the major parallel terraces such as Elizabeth Street and Lower Belgrave Street – were conceived simply within the terrace with no special architectural detailing. Uniformity was not insisted upon and alterations occurred throughout their lifetime.

According to Hobhouse, at least three designs were separately proposed for Woburn Walk. The first, of a single storey with round-headed windows, was discarded as the plot had been incorrectly measured; the second (Fig. 7) was passed over for a slightly more intricately designed third elevation, as



Fig. 7. Coloured alteration of the south terrace, 1821.  
*By kind permission of the Duke of Bedford and the Trustees of the Bedford Estates.*

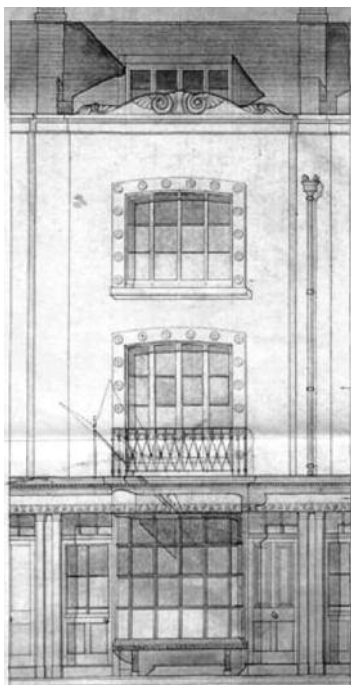


Fig. 8. An elevation of a single building at Woburn Walk (as built) subsequently drawn from life by A. Cooper & F. Skinner, Architectural Association 1929. *National Monuments Record Archives.*

built.<sup>12</sup> (Fig 8) The final version may have been originally prepared by Cubitt's brother Lewis, who trained in architecture under Henry Kendall. Whatever the reasons for the change of design, the obvious degree of care taken over it sets Woburn Walk apart from other contemporary London streets. The ornate Greek revival style is not typical of Cubitt's work, though it was a fashionable style for shopping arcades of the day. It seems likely that Cubitt felt that shops designed by him should take on the appearance of a fashionable shopping destination to enhance the respectability of the Estate.

There is no firm evidence for the inspiration behind the design of the façades, but it is possible to examine the contemporary developments that might have influenced Cubitt. One obvious example of a



Fig. 9. 1-6 Market Place, Cheadle, Staffs. Shop doors in bow fronted windows. Alan Powers.

comparable purpose-built shopping street with a strong architectural identity is Nash's Quadrant at Regent Street, begun in 1818, though obviously on a much grander scale for much grander occupants. The Quadrant's colonnades veiled differing shop front elevations, so technically this was not a uniform architectural composition, and the colonnades themselves were pulled down at the behest of the leaseholders in 1848. More in keeping with the size, scale and purpose of Woburn Walk is a similarly designed row of shops in the Market Place at Cheadle, Staffordshire (1819), with doorways contained in the large bay-fronted shops. (Fig.9) But there is nothing in the architecture above the ground floor to link them to the shop front design or to differentiate them from other terraces of houses. Nos. 1-8 Goodwin's Court near Covent Garden in London, rebuilt c.1780 (Fig. 10) is another simple example of a purpose built row of shops with bow-fronted shop windows, also much less architecturally considered. William Street in Edinburgh has a flat-fronted example with a stone façade, by Robert Brown (1824-5) (Fig. 11), and Montpellier Walk in Cheltenham (1836) is another stone fronted parade of shops, much altered at ground-floor level, with unusual caryatids between the shop fronts. Here the continued cornice over the shops is very like Woburn Walk, but otherwise there is nothing about the upper floors which distinguish them from the common residential architecture of





Fig. 10. Nos. 1 to 8 Goodwin's Court, Covent Garden.  
*Author.*

their time, or that ties them to the shop front design with any architectural design or detail.

The uniform, single-sided developments at D'Olier Street, Dublin (c.1800) and Reform Street, Dundee (1824) are two more flat-fronted examples, not unlike William Street in Edinburgh. They do not, however, have the degree of architectural detailing of those mentioned above, and according to James Stevens Curl 'frightful mayhem has replaced the order intended by the original designers.'<sup>13</sup> Other examples of groupings of purpose-built shops and houses of uniform design can be traced in Arlington Street and Exmouth Market in Clerkenwell, and can reasonably be assumed to have also existed in other Georgian towns and cities in the United Kingdom, although, as in Dublin and Dundee, few of the original elevational drawings survive.

The design of Woburn Walk can probably be traced to the birth of the shopping arcade in London.



Fig. 11. William Street, Edinburgh.  
*RampantScotland.com, by permission.*

Claude Mignot describes a trend towards 'co-ordinated rows of shops' in the late eighteenth century in Paris.<sup>14</sup> In 1784–6 the Galeries de Bois was constructed in the form of timber arcades, lit from above with fanlights built between the courtyard and garden of the Palais Royal. This example, and others built in Paris over the following decade, were the probable models for the new shopping arcades put up in London after the end of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>15</sup> Both the Royal Opera Arcade, Pall Mall (John Nash, 1817, with shops on only one side of the arcade), and the Burlington Arcade in Piccadilly (Samuel Ware, 1818, this time with shops on both sides), have strong architectural similarities to the uniform, continuous bay formation that is found at Woburn Walk. (Figs. 12 and 13)

Woburn Walk was designed just after the building of the Burlington Arcade, its closest comparison, suggesting that Cubitt was following current trends in retail architecture to promote the Bedford Estate as a fashionable district. The parallels are quite striking, though Woburn Walk is without a roof and doors closing off each end from the adjacent streets. A symmetrical frontage with flattened bows and quadrant-shaped corners in the Grecian style was the pattern-book plan for the Arcade's shop front, and the style is continued over the first floor windows, contrary to the typical street design where the upper floors look just as a house with no shop would appear.





Fig. 12. Royal Arcade, Pall Mall. *Author.*



Fig. 13. Burlington Arcade, Piccadilly. *Author.*

It was not just the architectural styling of the arcade, but also the stringent controls the proprietor upheld over traders in order to maintain respectability that was likely to inspire Cubitt when he conceived Woburn Walk. The Burlington Arcade has been patrolled by beadles (security guards) in top hats and tails since its opening, providing a sense of control which one can imagine would have impressed Cubitt, with his strong desire for securing respectability.

There is no evidence of any plans to cover Woburn Walk with a glazed and arched roof like that of the Burlington Arcade. This was presumably for practical and financial reasons. The division in landownership in the centre of the street may have presented insurmountable problems, as would the nature of the building and repairing lease system that Cubitt and the Bedford Estate employed. A repairing lease made it clear that it was the occupants' responsibility to maintain the fabric of their building. An arcade would require a landlord to maintain it, presumably

something that did not appeal to the Duke of Bedford or to Cubitt. It is likely that some combination of these factors induced Cubitt to marry the aesthetic and architectural style of the arcade with the tried, tested and profitable leasehold system he knew.

#### CONSERVATION AND THE FUTURE

The survival of Woburn Walk into modern times was not a foregone conclusion, and little of what falls upon the eye at street level today can be described as original. In 1939 St Pancras Borough Council received – *and granted* – an application from the leaseholder and developer Percy Hill to demolish the south terrace and replace it with a new seven-storey development of retail and residential units. Presumably the arrival of the war put his plans on hold, and the immediate post-war years offered little possibility of commercial development.

Fortunately, the demolition of much of London's residential heritage rendered beyond repair by German bombing raids soon awoke general interest in saving important sites from destruction. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 was passed to help preserve important architecture which might otherwise have been lost in sweeping away areas of war-damaged urban landscape. Section 29 of the Act gave St Pancras Council the authority to serve a Preservation Order on the south elevation – the first ever to be served by a Metropolitan Borough Council. This presumably overruled their earlier decision to allow demolition, and it was decided that the leaseholder, together with the Council, and with the aid of the Georgian Group's Architect (and celebrated conservationist of his time) John MacGregor, would repair the buildings. In 1954, however, Mr Hill surrendered his lease and the Bedford Estate re-applied for permission to redevelop the site. The street was immediately listed on 10 June that year, thereby securing its survival. Continuing this run of timely good fortune, the Ancient Buildings and Historic Monuments Act of 1953 gave St Pancras Council the opportunity to purchase the terrace, and a grant was made by the Minister of Works covering approximately half the purchase cost and also part of the cost of the restoration.<sup>16</sup> Plans and specifications were drawn up by MacGregor and the Borough Surveyor, C. S. Bainbridge, and work was begun by the Council's own building department in 1956.<sup>17</sup> For the period, immense care was given to restoring the terrace, and since then the area has enjoyed something of a re-birth.

Two major restoration programmes to the south terrace, in the late 1950s and mid 1980s, and repairs to the north terrace at the time of its conversion at the rear for hotel use in the early 1960s, have had significant impact on the external fabric. Much more has been lost to the natural effects of the passage of time and poor maintenance.<sup>18</sup> The buildings proved difficult to maintain, and another programme of repairs to the south terrace was carried out, this time

by Camden Council, in 1986. Since the interventions of the mid twentieth century the street has continued quietly in somewhat decayed and bohemian multiple occupancy, under the rather sleepy gaze of Camden Council's planning department.<sup>19</sup> But a lack of subsequent general maintenance has allowed much of it to fall back into disrepair. Signs of ongoing structural movement and continued problems with wood rot, together with the negative effects of piecemeal alteration, are all threats to the future of Woburn Walk. Without an organised and informed programme of basic maintenance to the fabric of the existing structure, future repair will be sufficiently intense to greatly reduce the authenticity of the buildings again. In the meantime, although at first glance the street looks picturesque, it stands a sorry shadow of what it once was.

Woburn Walk is an exceptional survival of a purpose-built Regency shopping street, the greater part of it still used for the same purposes as those for which it was designed nearly two hundred years ago. It is an expression of the social mores of the day, a small, controlled enclave of retail establishments on the fringe of what were once the gated principal streets of the respectable Bedford Estate. It is possibly unique in its symmetrical and uniform architectural composition, reflecting that of the fashionable arcades built at the time, particularly the Burlington Arcade in Piccadilly. It is also a pioneering example of partnership in heritage protection between a local authority and a government agency: the first site to be placed under a Building Preservation Order by a metropolitan borough council and an early Ministry of Works grant-aided purchase and repair programme.

Woburn Walk is both exceptional for, and challenged by, its uniform design, since it is held in multi-ownership and fulfils multiple uses, the differing requirements of each placing pressure upon its fragile form. If the many users and owners do not have a clear and accessible guide to what is permissible and how to maintain their own buildings, the continued significance of the asset is threatened.

Concluding the revolving pattern of decay and restoration will benefit the street by minimising the extent of replacement of fabric and will also prove economical in the long run. The likelihood of complete loss is now remote, but this does not in any sense guarantee the future of Woburn Walk, or its significance as anything more than an aged, picturesque shopping street. In order to preserve its significance in the flesh, and not just on the pages of its scant listing entry, a new approach to understanding and managing these buildings is essential.

#### NOTES

- 1 E. Walford, *Old and New London* III [1881], pp. 115–7; K Morrison, *English Shops & Shopping* (New Haven & London, 2003), pp. 34, 93.
- 2 A. E. Richardson, *Decorative Details of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* by W & J Pain (London, 1946) p. 76
- 3 Morrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–3.
- 4 M. Draper, 'Bloomsbury Gates and Bars', *Camden History Review* 12, (1984), p. 2. A deposit of one guinea was demanded for a numbered silver disc that gained the residents and their staff access between 7am (8am in winter) and 10pm each day. See also D.J. Olsen, *Town Planning in London* (New Haven & London, 1982 ed.), pp. 45–8.
- 5 Olsen, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–63
- 6 These typically included some of the following familiar trades – brewer, baker, distiller, smith, carpenter, innkeeper, brothel keeper, butcher, slaughter man, fishmonger, farrier, dyer, tanner – others that may be less obvious to the modern reader: tripe boiler, scavenger, melter of tallow, soap boiler, flayer of horses.
- 7 H. Hobhouse, *Thomas Cubitt: Master Builder* (London, 1971), p. 60.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 9 As do two rather Victorian sounding charities: The Invalid's Dinner Table run by a Pricilla Bishop, and the implausibly titled 'Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendacity': *Post Office Directory* entries for Woburn Buildings at ten-year intervals from 1841 to 1891.
- 10 In 1840 Cubitt wrote to the Surveyor to the Bedford Estate, Christopher Haedy: 'The great struggle not infrequently is between men in business and their wives and daughters. Their convenience would keep them here within easy reach of their places of business, but their wives and daughters would give their preference to a more fashionable address at the western or north-western end of this town': S. Halliday, *Making the Metropolis* (Derby, 2003) p. 65.
- 11 I have found no other uniform parade of shops of this era in an 'arcade' architectural style.
- 12 Hobhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
- 13 J. Stevens Curl, *Georgian Architecture* (Newton Abbot, 2002), p. 144.
- 14 C. Mignot, *Architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Fribourg, 1983), p. 154.
- 15 Glass roofs were built over existing shopping streets as early as 1770 at the Foire Saint Germain in Paris, giving rise to the basic architectural form of the shopping arcade: *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 16 A beautiful report on the works was commissioned by the Minister of Works, containing great detail on the project, and images before, during and after the repairs were carried out: C. Bainbridge, 'The Restoration of 4–18 Woburn Walk' (1960- copy held at *Camden Local History Centre, Holborn Library*, Theobalds Road), pp. 3 and *passim*.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 The render and decorative detailing is all replacement, as are the shop windows (with the possible exception of No. 4) as are those of the residences above. No. 18 suffered its shop window and door to be swapped over, although this was reversed in the works of 1956–8. The roofs are largely replacement although serviceable covering materials have been retained, and only the rear elevation of the south terrace and parts of Duke's Road maintain their original perspective. Of the shop fronts, a number of the doors, fascias and the wooden frameworks are original, although all have undergone substantial repair. For further details on the extent of surviving interior features see note 19.
- 19 The vexed question of the more recent and future conservation of the street is the main theme of my postgraduate thesis: 'Woburn Walk – The conservation of an exceptional Regency shopping street' (Architectural Association, Dip. Conservation of Historic Buildings 2009).