

16 Charles Street, The Home of Debrett's

I was pleased to visit 16, Charles Street, the home of Debrett's, in order to see one of the surviving mansions of central Mayfair.

It is a house of 1753, when the street was first laid out. The houses were constructed by a carpenter-cum-builder, John Phillips, who lived in Brook Street and whose office is said to have been at No.27A, Charles Street. He worked in partnership with another builder-cum-architect called George Shakespear. Together, they had been active in Oxford, providing the joinery for the Radcliffe Camera and for the great library in Peckwater Quadrangle for Christ Church. They were classic examples of the artisan world of mid-eighteenth-century construction, running big, commercial operations, producing well-designed, fairly standardised houses which were austere on the outside, with dark brick, but with sometimes elaborate rococo plasterwork interiors.

It is hard to remember that Mayfair is a relatively late addition to London. Sir Richard Carew Pole told me about a conversation with his grandmother, who would have been born in the 1870s, and who recalled a conversation with a man who remembered the sound of hounds hunting down Brook Street.

From the beginning, Mayfair was fashionable, for the bon ton. In the eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon, the bachelor historian of the later Roman Empire, lived in Charles Street, as did Edmund Burke, writer and politician. Beau Brummell, the great arbiter of taste in the Regency period, who took five hours a day to get dressed and insisted that boots should be polished with champagne, lived at 4, Chesterfield Street, on the junction with Charles Street. In the late nineteenth century, it was filled with grandees. Lord Rosebery, later Prime Minister, lived at No. 20. No.37 was elaborately converted in grand Francophile style for the first Lord Revelstoke.

No. 16 was remodelled just before the First World War by Mewès and Davis, the architects of the Ritz, for the Hon. Mrs. Greville, known as 'Mrs. Ronnie'. She inherited enormous wealth from her father, William McEwan, a hard-nosed and successful brewer who gave his name to McEwan's Export. She married well, and became a colossally snobbish society hostess, entertaining in style in her house in Charles Street, where the rooms were furnished by Francis Lenygon, the society decorator. She was described by the Queen Mother, to whom she left her collection of jewellery, as 'so shrewd, so kind and so amusingly unkind, so sharp, such fun, so naughty, altogether a real person'. Harold Nicolson was less generous, describing her as a 'fat slug filled with venom'.

I have a very faint memory of visiting Charles Street as a child, when my aunt still had a family house on the south side with its large entrance hall and air of privilege, the world which was traditionally maintained by Debrett's as the bible of social stratification. I'm glad that Debrett's, which occupies the top floor of Mrs Ronnie's old Mayfair mansion, is nowadays more democratic, supporting social mobility through the recently established Debrett's Foundation.