

Origins of Grosvenor House

Until the 1730s, the site on which the Grosvenor House Hotel now stands was meadow and pasture land. The land was owned by the Grosvenor family, early property developers who eventually became the richest urban landlords in England. With their financial success came social advancement and in 1874 the head of the Grosvenor family was created the first Duke of Westminster by Queen Victoria.

The first building on the site was a large detached house located on the south side of Upper Grosvenor Street, and its first owner was Lord Chetwynd. The house passed through several owners, including the Duke of Cumberland, son of King George II and commander at the Battle of Culloden (1746). The Duke of Gloucester, brother of King George III, acquired the house in the 1760s and lived there for 40 years. The house became known as Gloucester House.

The property changed hands again in 1806 when Lord Grosvenor purchased it. When he moved in, in 1808, the house was re-named Grosvenor House. It remained the Grosvenor family's London home for over 100 years.

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the house was put at the disposal of the Government, and occupied by the Food Controller's Department until 1920. By then the Duke of Westminster had decided not to re-occupy the house, so it was sold.

The purchaser was a commercial speculator Mr A.O. Edwards. It was Edwards who built what is now the Grosvenor House Hotel between 1927 and 1929.

Building the Hotel

Alfred Octavius Edwards, founder and chairman of Doncaster-based Edcaster Ltd, acquired the lease of Grosvenor House in 1925 and formed a company, Grosvenor House Ltd, to develop the site. A second company, Grosvenor House (Park Lane) Ltd, was set up with larger nominal capital to provide the financial resources necessary for such a large project.

The architect was L. Rome Guthrie of Wimperis, Simpson & Guthrie, with external elevations by Sir Edwin Lutyens. Edcaster acted as the general contractors. The complex was broken up into several separate blocks with deep set backs from the street between them. These were "scientifically designed to catch every available sun ray". The stone attic pavilions show Lutyens refining the American innovation of a crowning classical storey.

The Lutyens colonnade, curved to accommodate the stepping-forward of the building line, was above the then main entrance.

Work began on the first block in April 1927, and was completed in the record time of sixteen months. Edcaster employed many American construction methods to eliminate delay and inconvenience, and each block contained 4,000 tons of steelwork.

Originally planned as two blocks of luxury apartments, the plans were changed on completion of the first block. At that time, it was decided to replace the second block of apartments by a hotel. Work began on the north block in 1928 and was completed by the spring of 1929. Not everyone approved of Mayfair's new landmark. In a letter to *The Times* it was described as "an insult to the good taste and aesthetic judgement of the citizens of the metropolis". Another commentator called it a "self-centred and unsociable building". Among its nicknames were 'Sing Sing' and 'Westminster Workhouse'.

The Hotel Opens

The 472 room hotel opened in May 1929. The key player in the story of the hotel was A.H. Jones, who had worked for Edwards in Doncaster. In January 1929, six months after the completion of the first block of apartments, and six months before completion of the hotel, Edwards brought Jones to Grosvenor House as accountant.

In 1936, at the age of 29, Jones became General Manager of Grosvenor House. In 1939, following Edwards' retirement from the chairmanship, he was appointed Managing Director of Grosvenor House (Park Lane) Ltd.

Apart from the war years, when he served with the Royal Artillery and later in the NAAFI, Jones, universally known as AJ, held this position at Grosvenor House until he retired in 1965.

The hotel was not finally completed until the 1950s because Baron Bruno Schröder, who had acquired the lease of 35 Park Street in about 1910, had refused to give it up to Edwards. Schröder remained in the house until his death in 1943, and permission to demolish the house was finally given in 1956. The house was replaced with a 92 bedroom extension which was officially opened in 1957 by the Chancellor of the Exchequer Peter Thorneycroft.

A Very British Institution

Throughout its history, the Grosvenor House has maintained a quintessentially British style, despite its design features aimed at the American market. The hotel has hosted some of the most famous charity balls over the years, including Queen Charlotte's Ball. This tradition dates from the 18th century, when in 1780 King George III held a ball for his wife's birthday, at which the daughters of the aristocracy of 'marriageable age' were presented to the Queen.

During the next two hundred years, Queen Charlotte's Ball marked the occasion when young ladies 'came out' into Society, with the intention of finding suitable husbands. These were usually the brothers of their fellow debutantes, and were known as 'deb's delights'. 1958 saw the last debutantes presented to the Queen, though the Ball continues to be held each year. Other charity balls which found a home at the Grosvenor House were the Lord's Taverners, the Horse and Hounds and the Royal Caledonian, at which Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother used to dance during the 1950s.

The hotel has seen many visits by members of the Royal Family, and the hotel has hosted parties, dinners and balls to mark most significant national events and celebrations.

A.O. Edwards, chairman of Grosvenor House (Park Lane) Ltd, was immensely proud of the hotel he had built, and also patriotic man. So much so that in 1934 he purchased a de Havilland Comet, which he christened 'Grosvenor House' and entered in the MacRobertson Air Race to Australia. The race was initiated by Sir MacPherson Robertson to mark the centenary of the foundation of the State of Victoria. Charles Scott and Captain Campbell Black, "two of the Empire's finest pilots", were engaged to fly the Comet. After taking many risks they won the race, reaching Melbourne in two days and twenty three hours, ten hours ahead of the second plane.

There was a celebration dinner at the Grosvenor House when the pilots returned. The plane was later preserved and restored, and since 1965 has been in the Shuttleworth Collection at Old Warden in Bedfordshire where it remains on view.