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Albany, London's island of old-world discretion

These Georgian apartments on London's Piccadilly are beloved for their very lack of glitz. Once home to Lord Byron and Greta Garbo, they are now sought after by a special kind of A-lister



Calvin Hui and Mark Peaker at their Albany residence © Lesley Lau/FT

Caroline Roux 16 HOURS AGO

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“Albany is one of the most coveted addresses in London. Some are pretentious enough to say in the world.” So said Fleur Cowles, an American socialite, writer and artist who moved to the discreet building in Piccadilly in 1955. She lived in the finest apartment it had to offer for nearly 60 years — a suite of rooms so splendid that in one, the ceiling was still decorated with the plaster work that the architect William Chambers had specified in 1771 when the mansion was built. His watercolour working drawing is now at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

“In her day, Fleur was the leading personality at Albany, she put on wonderful parties,” says Sir Simon Jenkins, the Guardian columnist, who bobbed from one set of rooms to another between the early 1990s and the late noughties. “I remember going to one she gave for the Queen Mother’s birthday. Gerald Durrell gave a speech, which was rather . . .”

Since Albany people — or Albanians — have always been known for their reticence and discretion, Jenkins fails to finish that sentence. (I think fawning might be the missing word.) Instead he does talk about Albany’s sense of



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seclusion. “It’s like a monastery, it’s really quite austere,” he says of its cold stone staircases, untouched since Georgian times. There is also an old-fashioned *omertà* at play, similar to that of British public schools, or stately homes, or certain goings-on in certain Oxbridge colleges. Talking to residents was a blood out of stone affair. What happens in Albany, stays in Albany.

This, of course, has only contributed to the desirability of the address and to its mystique — a quiet spot, perfectly positioned, where Mayfair and St James’s meet; an enigma slap bang in the middle of London. Though passers-by can see it from Piccadilly — a grand house flanked by two smaller properties around a cobbled carriage drive — they might conclude it contains fancy offices, or a private club.



US socialite and writer Fleur Cowles at home at Albany in 1966 © Lichfield Archive/Getty Images

Beyond that, all is invisible, which is what attracts its occupants — figures such as Greta Garbo, Aldous Huxley, Edward Heath, Bryan Ferry and Bill Nighy have called it home. Alan Clark found it suitable for conducting a string of affairs: it’s all over his diaries.

Albany, then, is for those who are high-profile on the outside (a world-class academic and a superstar architect are among the current residents), but once inside can be swallowed up by its peculiar past. “I must have visited 100 times,” says Richard Dalton, an estate agent for Savills, who has (discreetly) sold property here for 20 years. “And you still get a sense of awe when you walk in. It’s like stepping back in time.”

High-end contemporary living, this is not. Most apartments are small, with few of the luxury amenities — or even much parking — that you might expect from an exclusive Mayfair residence. “They’re not for everyone,” says Simon Burgoyne, senior sales director at Sotheby’s International Realty. “No lifts, no pets, no children under 14.” And, until 1919, no women.

The main mansion was built over four years from 1771 for the first Viscount Melbourne. Along with Apsley House (created for Lord Apsley by Robert Adam, also in 1771) and Cambridge House (built in 1756-61, and currently being turned into a super-fancy hotel and apartments) it is one of the three



Georgian mansions that remain on Piccadilly.

It was designed by William Chambers, the architect of Somerset House, at a cost of upwards of £30,000 (more than £4.2mn today), and by 1791 the profligate Melbourne had sold it to the Duke of York and Albany. The Duke, equally extravagant in his tastes and lifestyle, had to pass it on himself within 10 years and, in 1802, for the sum of £37,000, it was acquired by the developer Alexander Copland. In just a year, Copland, with the architect Henry Holland, had converted the mansion into apartments, and added two rows of buildings behind where an Italian garden had been.



An illustration of Albany in 1790 for 'Paradise in Piccadilly' (John Lane, The Bodley Head, c1925), private collection lithograph © Bridgeman Images



Tall-hatted porters at Albany's front entrance, 1945 © Russell Westwood/Popperfoto via Getty Images

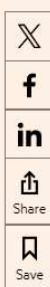
Running from the house to Vigo Street at the back, the 100ft long Rope Walk, protected by a canopy, was flanked by these new buildings which contained “sets” of rooms, reached by the stone staircases. Attic rooms were provided for valets. Kitchens, if needed, could be created in the basement, next to the coal holes. There were 69 individual apartments in all. (There are currently 75, now with their own kitchens.)

In 1803, only bachelors were invited to take up residence, and strictly no one who dealt in any kind of trade or commerce. Not much has changed in 220 years. The basement corridor that runs the length of the Rope Walk is now used by builders, called in to unobtrusively renovate dilapidated sets when they infrequently change hands. Previously, it was handy for men who wanted to conceal female visitors and servants, kept quite literally below stairs.

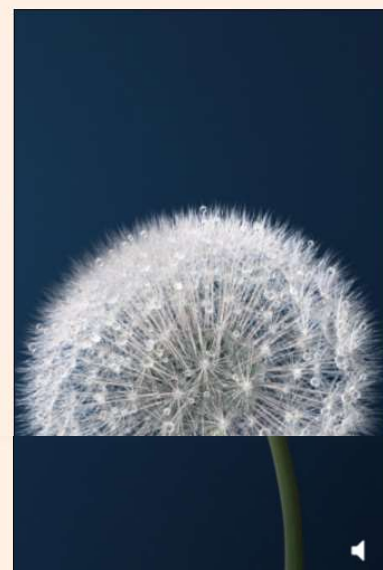
The story goes, however, that when Lady Caroline Lamb visited Lord Byron here (he wrote *Lara* in Albany in 1814), she came through the front door, disguised as a page. Married men were allowed in 1878 and according to Fleur Cowles, Lady Lee, an American married to an English peer, was the first woman to take up residence in 1919. “After so many men were lost in the first world war that the rules became impossible to enforce,” said a dispassionate Cowles in her autobiography *She Made Friends and Kept Them*, published in 1996.

In 2016, Francis Sultana acquired Cowles' (pronounced Coles) former apartment with his partner David Gill, who founded London's first limited-edition design gallery. Sultana is an interior designer and director of the David Gill gallery, and had known about Albany since his teens.





British politician Baroness Sharples at her Albany apartment © Victor Watts/Alamy



“I saw a set decorated by David Hicks, published in House & Garden, when I was 12 or 13,” says Sultana, who is now one of a small number of trustees. “From then on I wanted to live here. I mean, I wanted to *be* David Hicks — he was Britain’s most important designer. He really moved things forward with his strong sense of colour and pattern.”

“**There’s no pool or gym. But then it is this very lack of facilities that creates an indefinable velvet rope**

Sultana has turned their home into an exuberant oasis filled with art and design, which he sees as an extension of his larger creative project as a designer. “Before this, we lived in a set on Rope Walk,” says Sultana, “and I feel that after 20 years, I have developed a great responsibility to

the building, its conservation and its history. This place is not about glitz and glamour. It’s British and old world and I respect that.”

Calvin Hui, owner of 3812 Gallery in Hong Kong and London, which specialises in contemporary Chinese art, first came to look at an empty apartment that his partner Mark Peaker had heard about through word of mouth. “Calvin said, ‘It’s so posh,’” laughs Peaker, an ex-banker and chief executive of 3812. That was around eight years ago, and they have now finished renovating their first-floor set and filled it with western and Asian art and design.



Albany residents have included the British writer JB Priestley (pictured 1966) ... © Lichfield Archive via Getty Images



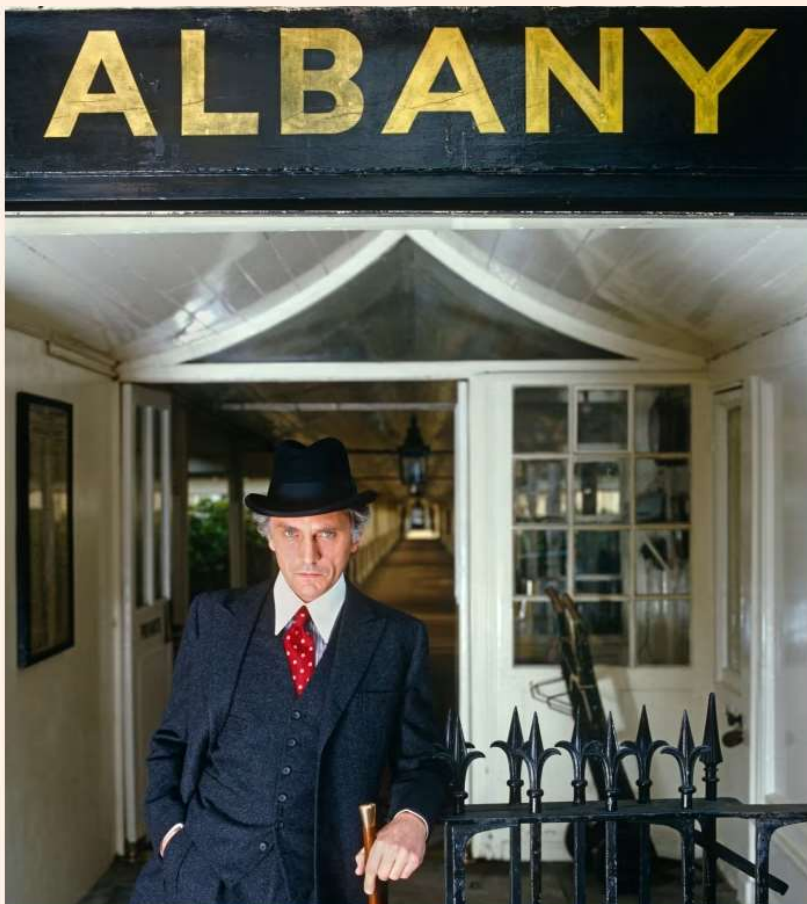
... and the interior designer David Hicks © Victor Watts/Alamy

English Heritage, which must be consulted on every change — Albany is Grade I-listed — allowed them to remove the dado rails. “Apart from that, we brought it back to its original feel,” says Peaker, a charming and clubbable fellow, who has a passion for collecting Whitefriars glass. A painting by his friend Lady Sarah Chatto hangs in the drawing room, opposite one by Ai Xuan (whose half-brother, [Ai Weiwei](#), is better known in the west). There is furniture by Ron Arad, Frank Gehry, Ettore Sottsass and Mattia Bonetti, the passion of his partner.

Peaker is thrilled to be opposite Fortnum & Mason’s — “it’s where we get our groceries!” — and near his many haunts. “If I’m going to the Carlton or Boodles, then I leave via the front in Piccadilly. It’s the back door for Hertford’s or Oswald’s,” he says. In fact, this place was built for those with Peaker’s preferences — it is a remnant of the lost life of the Piccadilly and St James’s of old. A restaurant in one of the forecourt buildings opened in 1803 but closed in 1810. In Georgian London, as now, even a captive audience did not ensure success in the catering trade. They preferred to go to their club, too.

How much an apartment might cost in Albany nowadays is hard to define, though one did sell in the Mansion in 2017 for around £7mn and since then prices have steadily risen, depending on size. “I’ve sold six in 11 years,” says Simon Burgoyne, who was previously at Knight Frank. “The average set on Rope Walk averages around 1,000 to 1,100 sq ft,” he continues, “so they’re not huge, and they’re not expensive compared to some Mayfair prices. They are really a pied-à-terre.” (My research suggests the Rope Walk sets start at around £3mn.)

There’s also no pool or gym. But then it is this very lack of facilities that creates an indefinable velvet rope. Albanians, most of my interviewees agree, are mostly British, maybe European, and possibly American. Another resident said: “The building creaks and groans, and it doesn’t offer the sort of instant luxury that wealthy newcomers to London might be after.”



The British actor Terence Stamp was also an Albany resident © Victor Watts/Alamy





In 1903, a report in The New York Times suggested that Albany — “a fashionable apartment for bachelors” — was going to be razed to make way for something more modern, and that it was the tenants themselves, the de facto owners, who had made the decision. Testament indeed of Albany’s turn-of-the-century transatlantic fame.

Had the worst happened, Albany would live on, if only in a fictional form. Benjamin Disraeli’s protagonist kept a set there in the 1845 novel *Sybil*. Since then it has appeared in Charles Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*; Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* and Georgette Heyer’s *The Foundling*. In every case, Albany serves as a signifier of social class, tinged with a mildly maverick twist. Raffles, the rakish gentleman burglar created by EW Hornung in 1898, lived here too.



But the building was not sold. Instead, this cloistered world has become home to architects and art dealers, as well as professors and writers, whose current consternation is the possible installation of a gate at the Piccadilly entrance. “You do get people wandering in and the porters have to deal with it,” says Peaker. “It’s difficult on days when there are big demonstrations. And on Thursday nights, when young women who’ve been drinking cocktails at Quaglino’s seem to find themselves here.”

Such behaviour, of course, could not be further from Albanian discretion and good manners, the threshold of which only the invited may cross. After which, what happens in Albany most definitely stays there.

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