THE BUILDING OF BELGRAVIA—1

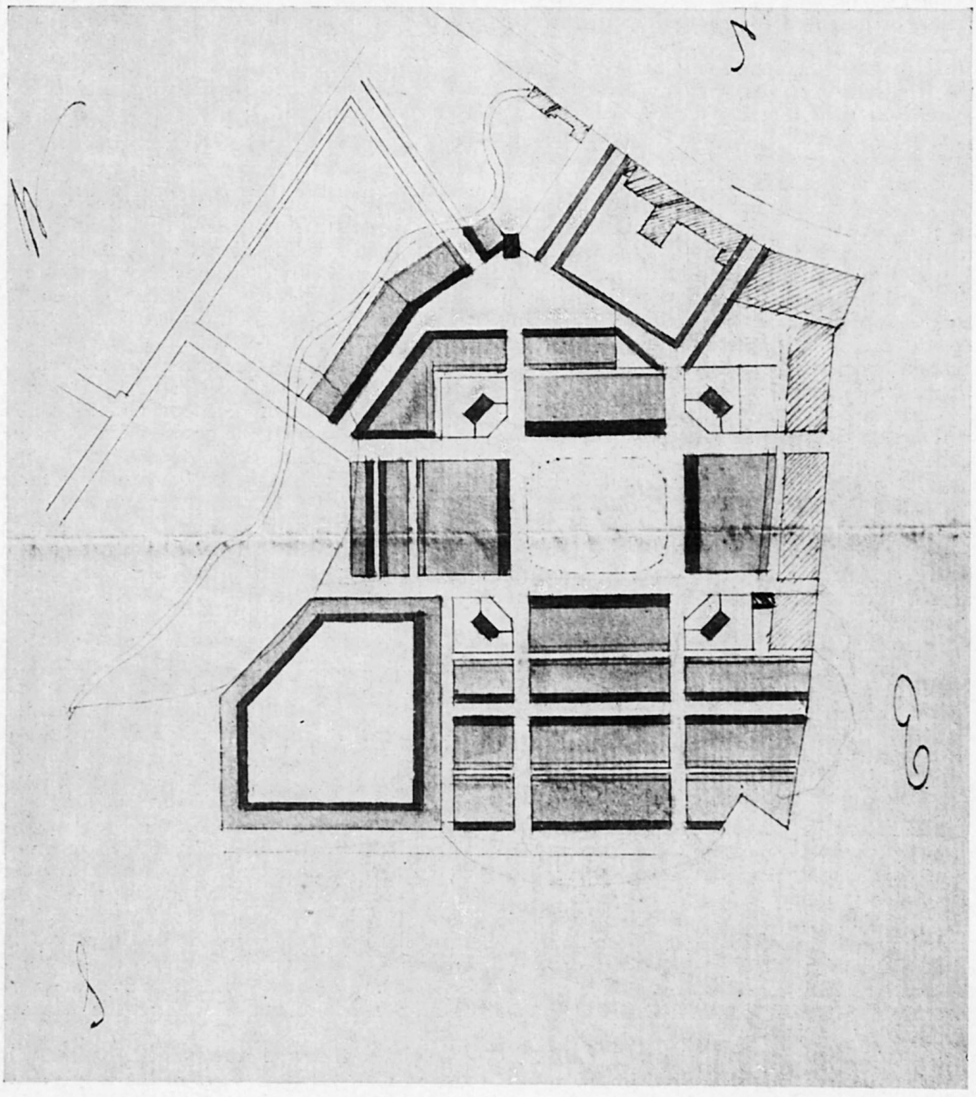
By HERMIONE HOBHOUSE

"I SING *Belgravia!—that fair spot of ground*
Where all that worldlings covet most is found:
Of this stupendous town—this 'mighty heart'
Of England's frame—the Fashionable *part.*"

Thus wrote Mrs. Gascoigne, a resident of Lowndes Square in 1851, at the beginning of an 80 page poem in heroic verse, in which she described every aspect of the neighbourhood. "The richest population in the world", declared a local official in the same year, putting the whole matter more crudely. Both these contemporary comments underline the striking success of landowners and developers in turning an undesirable and unwholesome piece of suburban waste into a fashionable *faubourg* in 30 years.

In 1820 the Five Fields of Chelsea lay on the very outskirts of London, between a line of noblemen's and gentlemen's houses in Grosvenor Place, and the Hans Town development of Henry Holland on the east and west, and between the thoroughfares of Knightsbridge and the Chelsea or Pimlico Road, now Buckingham Palace Road, on the north and south. This area was partly pasture, partly rubbish dump, with some nursery gardens on either side of the King's Road, still a private royal route which meandered across the Five Fields from Grosvenor Place to Sloane Square and out to the western suburbs.

1.—AN ENGRAVING OF BELGRAVE SQUARE, PUBLISHED WHILE IT WAS UNDER CONSTRUCTION TO SHOW HOW IT WOULD LOOK WHEN COMPLETED. "Each terrace was treated as a single palazzo and little distinction was made between the individual houses"



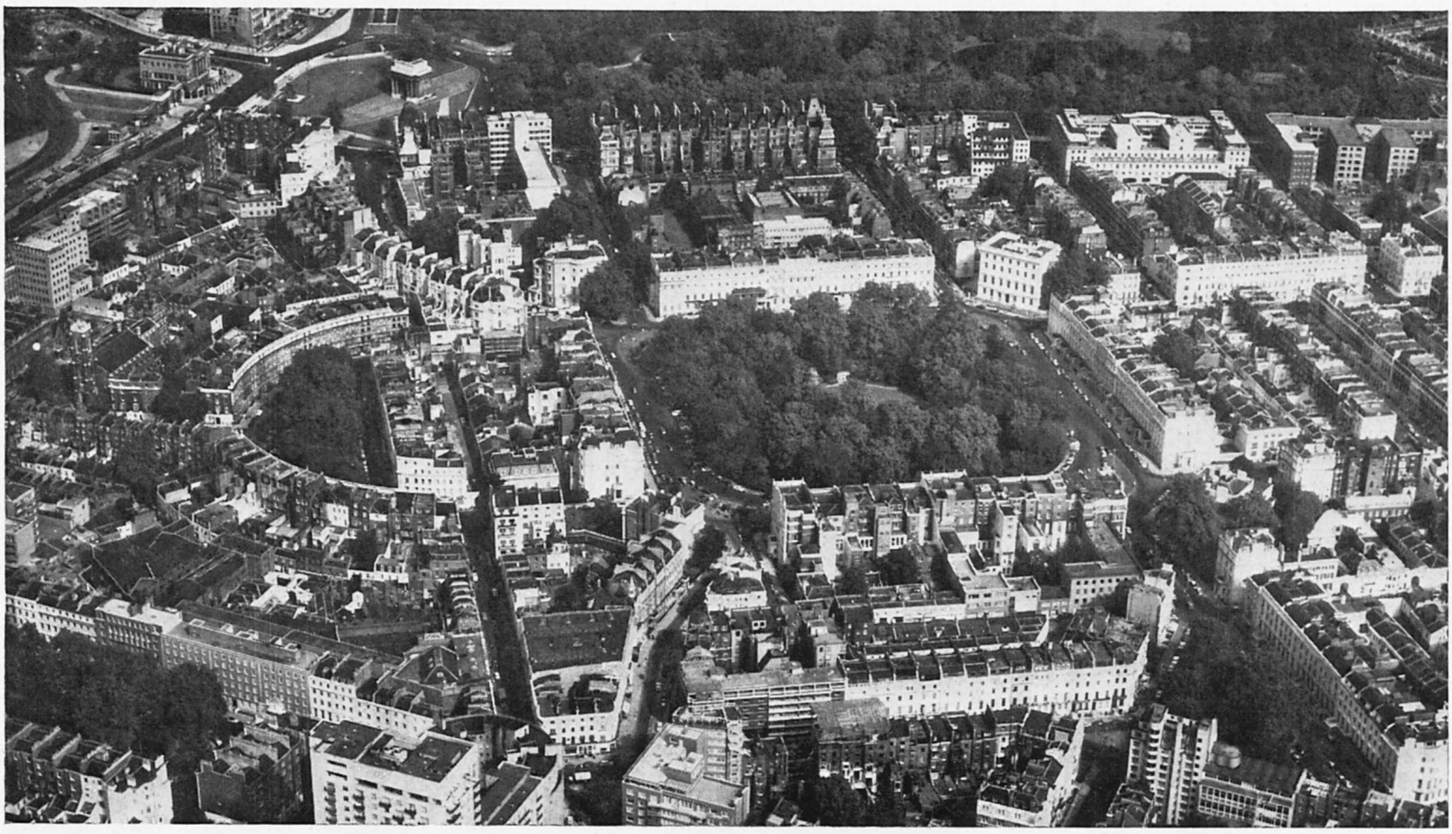
2.—AN 1813 SCHEME FOR BELGRAVIA BY ONE OF THE WYATTS. "This anticipates one of the most important features of the final design, the way in which the corners were finished off with villas standing in their own grounds"

Most of it belonged to the 2nd Earl Grosvenor, and his advisers had long planned its development. Several schemes were prepared, and some minor development took place at the eastern end of Ebury Street, in the early years of the century, but it was not until the major building boom of the 1820s that Belgravia proper was begun.

The layout was based on a scheme by one of the ubiquitous Wyatt clan, probably James Wyatt, amplified in 1813, when two developers, Daniel and Alexander Robertson, offered to take the area from the Grosvenor Estate. "Mr. Wyatt's Plan" (Fig. 2) provided for a large square to provide the showpiece of the development, in the accepted contemporary fashion, with a number of streets leading off to connect with the existing roads. Tucked away in each corner of the square was a mansion standing in its own grounds, originally intended to have more privacy than modern traffic arrangements have left them.

This treatment echoes the octagonal plan of Henry Holland's Hans Place, *circa* 1780, but could have been dictated by the necessity to accommodate two roads at each corner of the square, always difficult to achieve gracefully and economically. The four corner mansions may have been an attempt to repeat more formally the fortuitous siting of Montague House across the north-west corner of Portman Square. Whatever its inspiration it is a unique and successful plan for a London square, generous in its scale and allowance of garden. At the north end the boundaries of the estate dictated a curious and unsatisfactory layout, while at the southern end Wyatt planned another open square with five sides to accommodate a branch of the Ranelagh sewer.

The Robertsons improved on this by adding the open driveway of Eaton Square, probably copied from Euston Square, and a rather more elegant solution to the northern



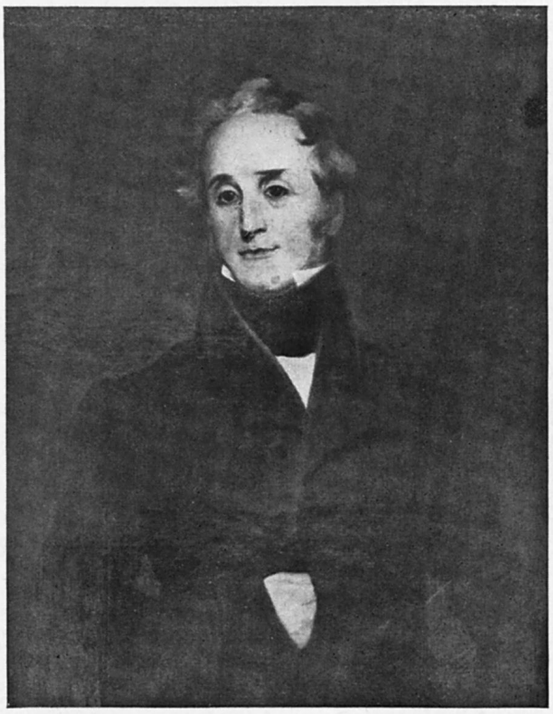
3.—AN AERIAL VIEW OF BELGRAVIA. "It was built on land that was partly pasture, partly rubbish dump, with some nursery gardens either side of the Kings Road"

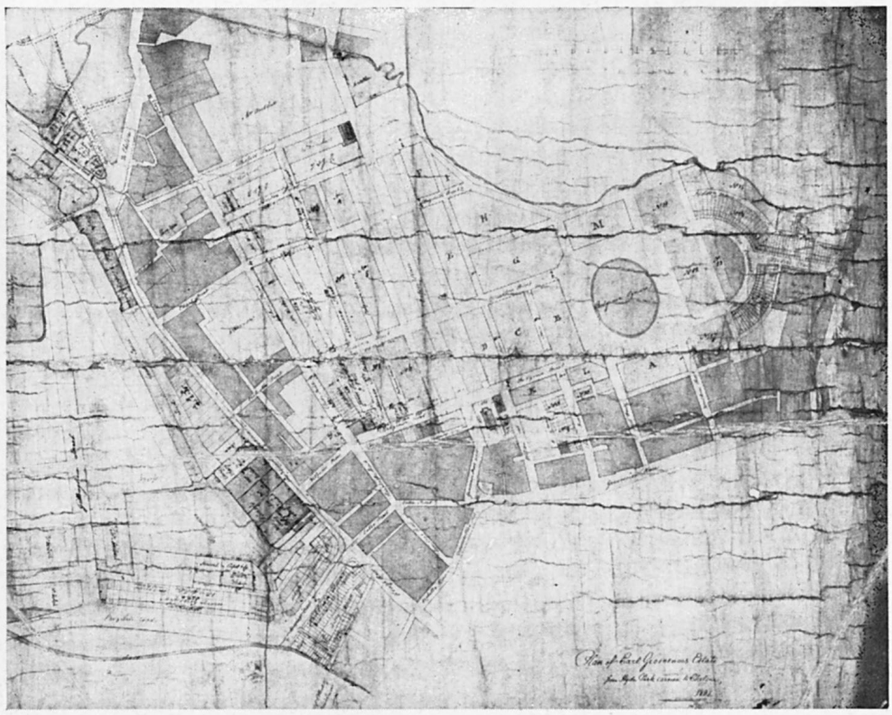
limits in the shape of a crescent. Their scheme came to nothing because of their bankruptcy, and it was not until the appointment of Thomas Cundy the elder (1765–1825) as the Grosvenor Estate Surveyor in September, 1821, that the plan was finally revised and the development of Belgravia began in earnest (Fig. 5).

Cundy's plan shows the Belgravia we know today with the exception of two important later additions—Chester Square and Grosvenor Crescent, both apparently suggested by the developers rather than the estate. He replaced the messy layout in the north with Wilton Crescent, connecting via Wilton Place with the busy thoroughfare of Knightsbridge. He carved up the south-western "square" into more realistic if less agreeable streets and mews. The plan allowed for generous mews accommodation, always easy to let in horse-drawn London, since if tenants keeping their own carriages did not materialise, then livery stable-keepers, job masters, and even small tradesmen who wanted workshops, were always anxious for mews houses.

Several builders and developers were involved: Thomas Cubitt (Fig. 4) and Seth Smith were the most important; Thomas and Joseph Cundy, the sons of the estate surveyor, took some of the southern land near their builders' works in Ebury Street, and Samuel Archbutt took most of the land to the south and west of Eaton Square.

Thomas Cubitt (1788–1855) took 19 acres extending from the north side of the King's Road up to and including the eastern and western terraces of Belgrave Square, in August 1824. Seth Smith (1791–1860) took the rest of the Grosvenor land, including the northern terrace of Belgrave Square, and to the south, he took six blocks on the south of Eaton Square and on the north of Minera Street, between Belgrave Street and Buerton Street (now South Eaton Place). In August 1825, the Haldimand syndicate—George and William Haldimand and Alexander Louis Prevost, took most of Belgrave Square itself from Cubitt and Smith.





4.—A PORTRAIT OF THOMAS CUBITT, THE BUILDER OF BELGRAVIA. (*Right*) 5.—A SCHEME FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF BELGRAVIA BY THE GROSVENOR ESTATE SURVEYOR, THOMAS CUNDY. This shows the area as it is today, with the exception of Chester Square and Grosvenor Crescent (compare Fig. 3)

William Haldimand (1784–1862) was the son of a Swiss merchant who had settled in London, after founding the banking house of Morris, Prevost and Co. He had become a director of the Bank of England at the early age of 25, and added to this other directorships including that of the St. Katherine's Dock Company. In 1828, he retired permanently to a villa near Lausanne, leaving his affairs in the hands of Basevi and Prevost.

George Basevi, Junior (1794–1845) was the son of a stockbroker, and, through an aunt, a first cousin of Benjamin Disraeli. He is said to have been Soane's most brilliant pupil, and it was doubtless through the latter's position as Surveyor to the Bank of England that he came to the notice of Haldimand. He was also Surveyor to the Guardian Assurance Company, from whom Cubitt obtained some of his finance for the building of Belgravia.

Though designs had been prepared for the original agreement with Thomas Cubitt, Basevi produced new designs for the four terraces, including three houses which were built and let directly by Cubitt. His designs for the northern and eastern sides were exhibited at the Royal Academy, in 1826, and were engraved for Elmes and other topographers (Fig. 1).

Each side of the square varies slightly in detail, but Basevi made them uniform in design, more so perhaps than those of any other important square in London with the exception of Bedford Square.

In 1827, they were among the largest terrace houses in London, and mark the gradual change from the Mayfair terraces, considerably more modest in scale of accommodation and more varied in the treatment of the façade, to the enormous middle class barracks built in South Kensington from 1860 to 1900. The increasing demand for accommodation is reflected in the way in which the long gardens connecting house and mews, shown in the Wyatt plan, give way to a complex of service rooms.

All four terraces are treated in the same way, all wholly stuccoed, with a slightly projecting central block of five or seven bays marked by Corinthian pillars or pilasters,

6.—THE NORTHERN TERRACE. All four façades are stuccoed throughout, with a slightly projecting central block, and elaborate stucco decoration above the attic storey

7.—THE EASTERN TERRACE. The façades though similar in arrangement vary in details such as the treatment of the columns, the pediment over the windows and the decoration of the attic

with elaborate stucco decoration in the blocking course, above the attic storey. The ends of each block project slightly, also with similar pilasters and a similarly ornamented blocking course. Both the central blocks and the balustrade along the whole length of the terraces are crowned with urns, which are used to distinguish between the individual houses, and to add interest to the skyline of the square.

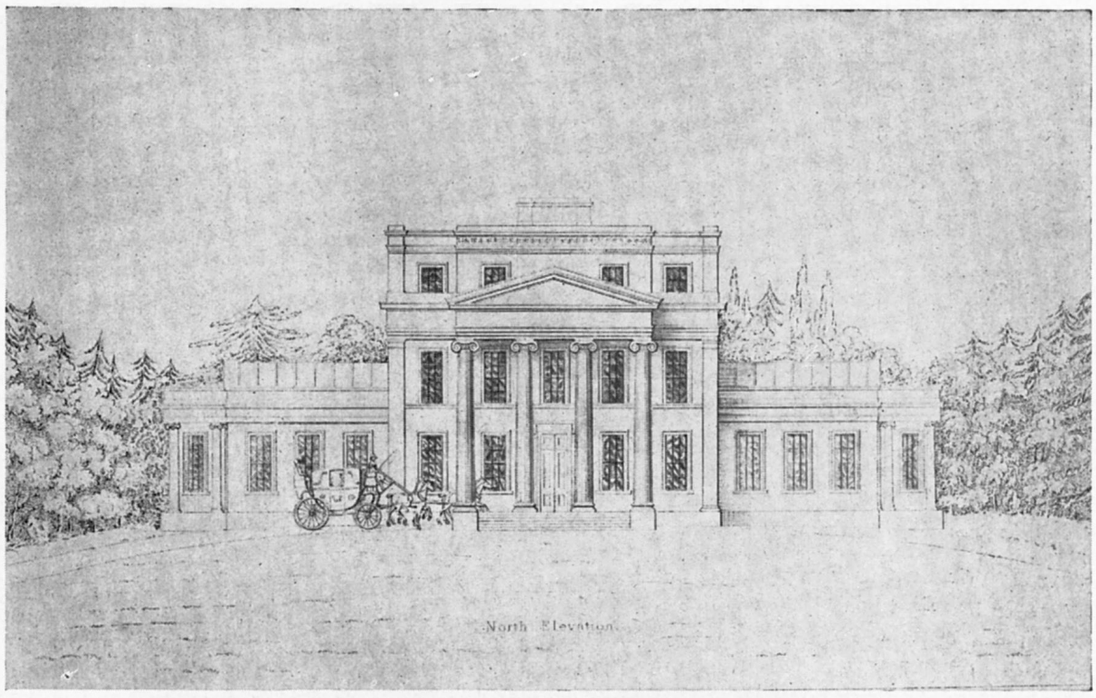
The two earliest terraces, the northern (Nos. 1–10) and the eastern (Nos. 38–48), resemble each other particularly closely (Figs. 6 and 7). The focal points of the façades are the five-bay projections with the porch of the central house, usually more expensive than the others, in the centre of the terrace. Six half columns with Corinthian capitals carry the heavy dentilled entablature, with above, six flat square pilasters carrying the blocking course. Basevi used an ornamented blocking course on No. 6, and again on the opposite terrace, while he used an open balustrade with a cartouche to crown the eastern and western sides. Further emphasis and importance is given to the central blocks by the use of triangular pediments rather than flat architraves over the first floor windows. Throughout the square the porches project from the

façades individually, except in the southern and latest terrace which boasts two important central mansions instead of one. Here, Basevi used the device of a portico carried on pillars the width of the area to give importance to the whole terrace without invidious distinction between the two central and more expensive houses, a device he later repeated in Onslow Square.

The strictness of Basevi's control over the several builders working in the Square is shown not only by the careful formality of the façades, but also by the uniformity of the ironwork. All the terraces have a mixture of the traditional London "balconettes" with iron railings, and the heavier balconies with Portland cement balusters which were becoming fashionable, and were generally considered smarter. Unity is given to the façades by the way in which railings and balconies are handled without too much obvious division between the houses. The uprights are slender and unimportant, while there is a band of ornament along the top rail, and a "dog rail" along the bottom, both of which give strong horizontal lines to the façade. The area railings have an elaboration of the traditional London spear at the top, an elaborate dog railing and a cast iron rail with semicircular appendages giving the impression of swagging from a distance (Fig. 9). Basevi designed the rest of the ironwork for the Square, both iron railings for the Square gardens, removed for salvage in the second World War, and also the lamp posts, which were more elaborate and expensive than those designed for the rest of the area by Thomas Cubitt.

The original plan provided for villas in all the corners, but with the making of Grosvenor Crescent in the north-eastern corner to provide easy communication with Hyde Park Corner and the Park, the fourth was abandoned. All the plots were leased individually to important tenants who employed their own architects. No. 12, in the north-western corner, was leased to Earl Brownlow, who employed Sir Robert Smirke (1781–1867) to design it, and the firm of Baker, probably the same firm who built Bridgewater House later on, to build it. It has a plain good-mannered but uninteresting façade, which compares poorly with Basevi's terraces.

At the same time, in the south-western corner, H. E. Kendall senior (1776–1875) was engaged on a much more light-hearted and elegant house for Thomas Read Kemp, the Brighton speculator. The grandeur of Kemp's ideas, which were to lead him to virtual bankruptcy, is shown by the charming sketch of his villa, backed by forest trees (Fig. 8), and by the fact that he originally took two plots for it. Kendall designed a central block with a pediment carried on four Ionic columns, and a square attic storey above, with two single storey wings with bow windows at the ends. Soon after it was finished in 1834, Kemp had to let it, and a later owner doubled its depth, and increased the height of its wings.



8.—ONE OF THE VILLAS IN THE CORNERS OF THE SQUARE, DESIGNED BY KENDALL FOR THOMAS KEMP, THE BRIGHTON SPECULATOR. Kemp's grand ideas led him to virtual bankruptcy and he was forced to let the villa soon after it was finished

Ten years later at the opposite corner, Lord Sefton employed Philip Hardwicke (1792–1870) to build him a well-appointed town house with its own stable yard, and servants' quarters at the rear. Cubitt's own men built the house at a cost of some £22,000, as they had No. 24. Correctly classical, austere and well-proportioned, No. 37 lacks the original porte-cochère, and the driveway on the south into the stableyard.

No. 49, which replaced the original villa planned by Wyatt, and is but little more than a continuation of the south side of Grosvenor Crescent, was built to a design from Cubitt's own office, approved by the second Marquess of Westminster in 1847.

The line of Grosvenor Crescent itself, not finally opened till 1860, cut through the famous horse auction mart of Tattersalls, which stood next to St. George's Hospital. Seth Smith built the houses on the north side, Cubitt those on the south.

No. 49 was the last house in Belgrave Square to be taken. The success of the development is shown by the speed with which these expensive houses were taken and occupied, all the more remarkable in view of the severe depression of the late 1820s and early 1830s. Twelve householders were paying rates by 1830, and 31 by 1835, amongst which could be counted the Duke of Bedford at No. 6, two earls and both Lord Westminster's and Thomas Cubitt's bankers.

In 1840, the Duchess of Kent, Queen Victoria's mother, took No. 36, built by Cubitt for Lord Ingestre, for a year, while she waited for the King of Hanover to vacate his apartments in St. James's Palace.

Belgrave Square is, however, only a small part of Belgravia, though its immediate success was the all-important factor which guaranteed that of the rest of the district. The surrounding squares and streets have their own distinctive character and I propose to look at their development in a second article, and their share in the neighbourhood's meteoric rise.

Illustrations: Westminster Public Library, 1 *and* 8*; Grosvenor Estate Office,* 2*; Aerofilms Ltd.,* 3*; Lord Ashcombe,* 4.

(*To be concluded on May* 22).

9.—A HOUSE IN THE NORTHERN TERRACE. "Unity is given to the façades by the way in which railings and balconies are handled without too much obvious distinction between the houses in the terrace"