



## No.68 Old Church Street

This unique house on Old Church Street is the only residential home in England designed by the founder of the Bauhaus, Professor Walter Gropius in the 20th century 'modern' style. Walter Gropius was described by the *Times* obituary as "one of the most influential architects of modern times" and the house even includes Nori bricks, a specialist brick also used in the construction of the Empire State Building. The Chelsea house was built for playwright, Benn Levy, who worked on Alfred Hitchcock's first 'Talkie' and his wife, Hollywood actress, Constance Cummings, remembered for her film *Blithe Spirit* with Rex Harrison.

### **Professor Walter Gropius**

Walter Gropius established his successful career in Germany during the early 20th century, first working with another ground-breaking architect, Peter Behrens. He was appointed master of a school of Arts and Crafts in Weimar in 1919, which he transformed into the renowned Bauhaus. Gropius was responsible for shaping and establishing a new era of architecture, utilising the developments in technology and industry and combining this with the arts. He heavily utilised materials such as steel, glass and concrete – designs heavily influenced by industrialisation. His designs were not only for a new style of building, but also product design and furniture. He was responsible for a new door handle, which today is considered an icon of 20th century design – and one of the most common forms of door handle across the globe.

### **Gropius in England**

Gropius fled an increasingly hostile Nazi Germany and moved to England in 1934. He worked with Edwin Maxwell Fry and it was through this collaboration that Gropius was commissioned to design a new home along Old Church Street, Chelsea. However, Gropius only stayed in England for a few years before he was offered the role of Chair of Architecture at Harvard University. He moved to the United States in 1937, where he remained for the rest of his life.

### **The Modern Movement comes to Chelsea**

The only residential home completed by Gropius in England was commissioned by playwright and producer, Benn Levy. Benn Levy and his cousin, publisher, Dennis Cohen purchased the vacant land (previously a row of cottages) to build neighbouring family homes. Benn Levy commissioned Gropius and Edwin Maxwell Fry in 1936, whereas Cohen commissioned a similar 'Modern' home by Eric Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff (today's No.64 Old Church Street).

### **Benn Levy**

Benn Levy had a long and varied career, but first and foremost was a playwright. His first play, *This Woman Business*, was produced in the West End in 1924, when he was only 24. He continued to write and produce plays in the West End and Broadway, with *Mrs Moonlight* in 1929 and *Ever-Green* in 1930. He also worked with Alfred Hitchcock on his first 'talkie', *Blackmail* in 1929. During the 1930s Levy's success continued with *Young Madame Conti* (1936) and in 1937 he directed his wife, Constance Cummings, in an adaptation of *Madame Bovary*.

As well as Levy's theatrical success, he was part of the intelligence service during World War II, was appointed MBE in 1945 and from 1945-50 was a Labour MP for Eton and Slough. Levy was close friends with other Labour politicians Jennie Lee and Aneurin Bevan (the creator of the NHS), who often visited Levy and Cummings in their home. Levy was also active in the fight to abolish stage censorship and the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and regularly contributed to the *New Statesman* and *The Tribune*. During this time he also continued to write and produce plays, one of his last being *The Tumbler*, staged by Laurence Olivier in New York in 1960.

### **Constance Cummings**

Constance Cummings was an American born actress who saw much success on Broadway and in the burgeoning Hollywood film scene during the 1930s. She made her Broadway debut at the age of 18 in the George and Ira Gershwin musical *Treasure Girl* and went on to perform in films, *American Madness* in 1932, directed by Frank Capra and starred opposite Mae West in *Night After Night*, also in 1932.

Cummings married Benn Levy in 1933 and shortly afterwards moved to England. Cummings made her West End debut in 1934 in *Sour Grapes* as well as acting in a number of her husband's plays. Cummings continued to perform throughout the war years, including *Skylark* and Oliver Goldsmith's *Good Natur'd Man* in 1942. Cummings continued to be seen in films, most notably in Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* opposite Rex Harrison in 1945 and in the Peter Sellers film *The Battle of the Sexes* in 1959.



Constance Cummings continued to wow stage audiences throughout the 1960s and 70s, acting with such notable names as Sir Anthony Hopkins, Sir Michael Redgrave, Sam Wannamaker and Sir Laurence Olivier. Cummings won the Evening Standard drama award for best actress for *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1971, the Tony award for her performance in *Wings* in 1979 and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

### **No.66 Old Church Street**

The house along Old Church Street was completed in 1936 to critical acclaim. *The Times* in October called it “[one] of the most ‘advanced’ buildings in London”. Original drawings from May 1935 are kept by the Royal Institute of British Architects in the V&A museum and give great details as to the materials and features of this ‘modern’ house. The house included a day and night nursery for the Levy children, along with the ‘best bedroom’, ‘sleeping porch’, ‘Mr Levy’s bedroom’, ‘butlers room’ and a ‘secretary’s room’, which included a phone “that must be capable of being switched to the pantry”. The house was also completely fitted with staff bells, washing yard (behind the garage) and also included specialised architectural lights.

### **Specialist materials**

Large sections of the house were rendered with a new (and untried) form of rendering known as ‘Brizolite’, which Gropius brought from Germany. Other features include, glass crete, reeded glass and Nori bricks, a specialist brick, which were the same bricks exported to build the Empire State Building.

### **Creating No.68**

After World War II, the house was altered to create a separate apartment on the upper floor, which became No.68 Old Church Street. The plans by Jane Drew show that many of the original materials were re-used, including, timber handrails and light fittings. The house was again renovated during the 1970s, slightly altering the original external appearance, but maintaining the unique design by Gropius.

### **Home for many years**

The occupational records show Benn Levy and Constance Cummings lived in the house from 1936 until Levy’s death in 1973. From 1948, the flat, No.68 was home to Mrs. Rachel M. Lloyd, until the widowed Constance moved upstairs in 1974. From this time until the early 21st century, the award-winning actress Constance Cummings remained at No.68 Old Church Street. After almost 70 years in the same house, Cummings only left when she was in 90s and passed away at the age of 95 in 2005.