Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores the role that the office – the architecture of the building, the interior, and the culture housed within it – played in the history of advertising agencies in London (1900 – 1950). It interrogates the duality of the agency office by considering how it was used by advertising agents to both publically project their identity, as well as to shape the ‘private’ identity of employees.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper uses written and visual archival sources including photographs, memoirs, company newsletters, agency publicity material, and correspondence in order to reconstruct the advertising agency office. The paper draws on spatial theory, as well as methodologies from social and cultural history, architecture, and geography in its analysis of these materials.

**Findings** – The office was an important site of identity for those who worked in advertising. It remained a constant amidst wider social and economic change between 1900 and 1950, mooring an industry that was constantly reinventing its output to keep pace with the trends and fads of modern Britain.

**Originality/value** - By privileging the local and everyday in analysis, this paper offers a new perspective on historical continuity and change within the British advertising industry.

**Research limitation/implications** – Archival source material is incomplete, and remains silent on many questions about everyday life. This paper, therefore, uses a range of sources that relate to several advertising agencies over the course of the period.

**Keywords** – Office, everyday life, identity, advertising agency.

**Paper Type** – Research paper

The office characterises the modern advertising agency. Part studio, part bureau, part showroom, the modern agency office housed the multiple components and personalities that made up the service-oriented advertising agency. The office is where advertising campaigns – significant twentieth century cultural artefacts – were conceived and managed. Moreover, it represents the site where the public face of the agency – the projection of the agency’s identity – met the private, ‘hidden’ side of the agency – the daily work place of the people who produced advertising. As such, larger historical trajectories seen in the public positioning of agency identities, such as globalisation and professionalism, juxtaposed and merged with the everyday local concerns of those who worked in the industry. Shifting historical focus to the office, where the industry formulated and projected its identity amidst the rhythms of everyday life, allows consideration of how the advertising industry responded to – rather than created – the challenges of modernity, such as new professional workers and growing American influence. Indeed, by privileging the local and everyday in analysis, this article offers a new perspective on historical continuity and change within the advertising industry. The years between 1900 and 1950 saw advertising agencies in London established themselves as a vital part of the British economy and consumer culture. Indeed, with a burgeoning professional culture of its own, which was complimented and influenced by the presence of American firms seeking a commercial European base, London provides an ideal example for exploring how these questions of identity, modernity and everyday life played out in a specific national context during these formative years, which encompassed peacetime and prosperity, and depression, war and reconstruction.

In considering the history of the agency office, this paper draws on methodological work from scholars working across the arts and social sciences. It recognises that buildings, and the spaces enclosed by them, are historical texts open to analysis (Sparke, 2008) and that there is dynamic interplay between how buildings, space and people shape and inform one another (Dovey, 1999). Spatial theory, stemming from post-modern ideas in geography and philosophy, refocuses historical analysis around the relation of people with and within their spatial environment. By emphasising the
existence of plurality and heterogeneity inside it. Doreen Massey’s definition of space as ‘the product of interrelations…in which distinct trajectories coexist’ offers a means of opening up narratives of advertising history (2005, p. 9). To date, agencies named after their founder (among them W.S. Crawford, Charles Higham, T.B. Lawrence, and Alfred Bates) retain their prominence in narratives that privilege the historical trajectories of the few successful male practitioners over the many historical actors (Nevett, 1982). Spatial theory invites instead both a contemplation of the multiple individuals who, while working in the historical office interior, sustained the identity of the agency and a means of integrating them into a more nuanced historical narrative.

The effect that the agency office culture had on the work practices of advertising creative practitioners is suggested by anthropological and ethnographical studies of advertising agencies of the 1980s and 1990s (Moeran, 1996; Nixon, 2003). Despite this, the local culture of the industry in the first half of the twentieth century has been neglected by marketing historians who have favoured instead a global perspective (Schwarzkopf, 2011). While the history of everyday life has enjoyed renewed interest from cultural historians (Crowley and Reid, 2002; Betts, 2010), current research is largely concerned with the private domestic sphere. Much of everyday life, however, for those employed by the advertising industry specifically, and in professional culture more generally, was spent in the office: a domain that historians have approached using quantitative social and economic methods (Anderson, 1988; Perkin, 1989; Heller, 2008). A qualitative socio-cultural history of the office provides an alternative insight into the lived reality of the advertising industry in modern Britain, a crucial element missing from current scholarship. Moreover, seeking to understand how modernity affected the daily lives of those working within the interior of the advertising agency – and how they sought to respond to it – offers an alternative history to the narrative of linear progress that a focus on modernity can engender (Laird, 1998, Schwarzkopf, 2011).

In discerning a cultural history of the office in the British advertising industry, this article mobilizes draws on a wide range of new archival evidence. Although a significant body of the source material refers to the Samson Clark and J. Walter Thompson Ltd. agencies, it is still possible to gain insight into work practices across the industry through the layering of the multitude of fragments from other sources. The architecture of agency buildings and their interiors can be seen in photographs and line drawings, some of which survive as images in their own right, others illustrate agency biographies and internal staff newsletters, and still others form the basis of advertisements and publicity material for agencies. The buildings can also be visualised through architectural floor plans and textural description. The culture that resides within the office is harder to access because surviving sources remain silent about day to day intricacies and rhythms. However, accounts of everyday life appear in letters between agency staff, and in their memoirs. Fragments of day to day life can also be glimpsed in surviving staff newsletters: specifically the Samson Clark Staff Gazette from the 1920s and J. Walter Thompson’s Round the Square in the post-war era. Given that advertising agencies harboured aspiring writers, it is probable that most agencies would have had some sort of newsletter, even though they do not survive today. The fragmentary nature of primary evidence makes Dorothy Sayer’s Murder Must Advertise (1933) a particularly useful insight into the tensions and relationships characteristic of agency office life. The fictional format of Sayers’ (who worked at S.H. Bensons between 1925 and 1934) writing, enabled candid descriptions of office life. Yet, the accuracy of her characters and their environment is confirmed in a letter to her publisher Harold Bell in 1933: ‘the advertising part is sound enough. I was nine years in an advertising agency, so I ought to know the ground!’ (Sayers, 1995, p. 330).

Using these sources, this article first considers how the office – the architecture of the building, the interior, and the culture housed within it – was used by advertising agencies to project their corporate identity and professional aspirations outwards to the advertising industry and to clients, both current and potential. Secondly, it looks inwards, to consider how the office contributed to the formation of a collective, internal identity of the staff. It examines how the office interior shaped and reinforced identities of its inhabitants through its décor and the allocation of office space. Moving beyond the building, it analyses how office culture moulded the shared identity of agency staff. Finally, it suggests the importance of the collective office identity, formed during the interwar years, for the years during and after the Second World War, where office space was disbanded, transformed, destroyed and recreated.
**New buildings and public identities: 1900 – 1935**

The modern office building functioned as an important mark of status for service agencies: the office was the outward projection of the advertising agency’s corporate identity. Place embodies power, and, in London, aspiring advertising agencies sought out grand buildings with impressive addresses on and around Fleet Street, Holborn, Aldwych and the West End to generate symbolic capital for their flourishing firms. Clustered predominately on and around Fleet Street in the nineteenth century, because of their historic connections with press and printers, following the First World War, London advertising agencies began to move slowly westwards to buildings located on the more desirable streets around Holborn and Aldwych.

In 1921, W.S. Crawford’s head office moved the short distance from Craven House, Kingsway, to 233 High Holborn, and the firm completed building works in 1927 to deliver ‘the special requirements of an advertising agency’. ‘Constructed mainly of concrete, black marble, stainless steel and glass,’ (Saxon Mills, 1954, p. 53), ‘two-three-three’ stood out as one of the most modern looking buildings in London and provided a proto-type for Crawford’s sister offices. Saxon Mills makes clear the metaphorical value of the firm’s new, updated premises: ‘It is a strong building – the heart and the headquarters of that wide-flung organisation which numbers today thirty seven associated offices throughout the world, all based on “233”’ (1954, p. 53). Such a building worked to inspire trust and engender consumer confidence in the agency’s legitimacy, through its physical stability and presence. Poking fun at the vanity of some agencies, Sayers located her fictional advertising agency, Pym’s, in a building which ‘had a solid stone parapet all round about three feet high, to give an air of still greater magnificence’ (Sayers 1933, p. 68). However, the connection between building capacity and personal business prowess is clear in Louise Morgan’s (1936) description of Jessie Reynolds as ‘...the only woman in the country who is head of a great advertising agency, with a complete modern seven-storey building near Oxford Circus as offices, and branches in Melbourne and Sydney.’

Grand office buildings, and offices abroad, contributed not only to the impression of prestige and ability of an individual agency, but to that of the advertising industry as a whole. This sentiment was manifest at the 1922 opening of 57 – 61 Mortimer Street, when Samson Clark declared that he ‘desired to build in the West End a house sufficiently spacious and noble to do honour to the business and profession of advertising’ (“Samson Clark: Marketing and Advertising”, 1960). Impressive buildings were part of the industry’s drive for respectable professional status. As scholarship by Nevett (1982) and Schwarzkopf (2008) demonstrates, from the turn of the twentieth century, the British industry embarked on a project to distance itself from perceptions of its unscrupulous past, characterised in the public mind by fantastical patent medicines advertising and the defamation of natural beauty by outlandish billposting. The industry sought to rebrand itself instead as offering a service vital to the success of the modern British economy (Nash, 1926), which was operating in an increasingly competitive global market (Higham, 1925). In addition to grand office accommodation, the industry formed social and dining clubs, worked to standardise its rates, organised advertising conventions, and founded education programmes for employees. The proliferation of advertising histories and memoirs (in which transition to new office space was used to signify the coming of age of an agency) was also part of this quest for professional legitimacy [1].

Advertising agencies not only used representations of their office space as literacy devices; images of their office buildings also featured in their advertising material. As such, the symbolic capital generated by their grand exteriors was used to sell the agencies’ services to audiences beyond the physical location of the office building. Significantly, when Samson Clark advertised their Australian agency services in to a British audience in 1925, they used line drawings of their new ‘palatial’ office buildings in Melbourne (“Sam 5 Large Scrap Book”, n.d.). The office, although on the other side of the world, was represented as an extension of Samson Clark operating abroad: clients’ advertising would be produced in an environment as professional as that at home. Smith’s and Sells are two of the older agencies in London whose early publicity (from 1886 and 1908 respectively) survives at the History of Advertising Trust. Both show detailed line drawings of their offices (with Sells captioned ‘the finest Building in Fleet Street’) in conjunction with descriptions of the services that they offered to the potential advertiser (“The Propelling Power”, 1908; Smith, 1896). The drawings locate the businesses, giving them physical context and lending gravitas to their claims. Mather & Crowther agency advertisements placed in the industry press during the 1900s also consistently show their (ever expanding) buildings on New Bridge Street, London. Even as late as the late 1940s, G.S. Royd’s advertisement on the inside cover page of the widely-read *The Advertiser’s Annual* (1938 – 1945) used photographs and line-drawings of Royd’s office. As business continued to run at reduced capacity...
following wartime lack of consumer goods, the agency reverted to its substantial building as a symbol of its enduring physical presence amidst the chaos of the reconstruction years.

Unlike office space belonging to other emerging professions, such as banking or the civil service, the advertising agency building served not only as a private office to produce advertising work and administer campaigns, but also as a public showroom to sell work to clients. The fundamental instability and flexibility of the boundaries between private and public is characteristic of a modern interior (Sparke, 2008, p. 11). It was this instability, Sparke argues, rather than separation per se that denoted modernity, ‘reflect[ing] the constantly shifting identities and the increasingly fragmented experiences of the inhabitants of the modern world.’ Samson Clark advertising agency was aware of the publicity value of inviting clients to cross the threshold into the ‘private’ interior of their agency building: the staff gazette reminded staff, ‘...our best advertisement is our own building. Time was when we were proud to show people all our many departments at work, and now... we can make the tour much more instructive and interesting’ (Samson Clark Staff Gazette, 11 September 1925). Tours gave potential and current clients exclusive insight into the ‘private’ interior space and work culture of the advertising agency. Not only did this act demonstrate hospitality on the part of the agency, it also seemingly made the practices of the staff open and transparent, further enhancing the professional image of the firm.

Although the rise of the professional interior designer did not occur until after the Second World War (Tigerman, 2007), the interior decoration of offices was taken seriously by advertising agencies. Samson Clark was ‘always aware of the value of first impressions...Therefore, in planning the building, he directed the architects to pay special attention to the Entrance Hall. It was to be dignified, [and] of noble proportions without being wasteful of room’ (“A history of Progress”, 1925). Sam Soper, who started as a controller at J. Walter Thompson Ltd in 1932, described his first impressions of Bush House when he went for an interview: '[I was] agog at the marble floors and the lift which whizzed me up to the seventh floor to the perfectly groomed receptionist sitting by the shaded desk light in the carpeted room, backed by limed-oak bookcases and wall lights and a ceiling lit by elegant candelabra. One did not have to be very bright to realise that here was an outfit operating on a much loftier level’ (Soper, 1996b, p. 73). Compared to cutting edge interior design of the time, the furnishing of these offices was traditional, functional and quietly masculine, reflecting the agencies’ commitment to professionalism, duty and service. Yet this does not hamper the agencies’ claims to modernity. The modern interior went beyond aesthetic ‘modernism’. Its modernity was captured in its ability to contain merging public and private spheres and hold multiple meanings: it was at once a showroom and a workspace.

The interiors of agency offices are also glimpsed in their publicity materials: as with their exteriors, agencies sought to disseminate the symbolic capital of their interiors to the widest possible audience. Samson Clark produced a brochure to celebrate its anniversary, which provided an introduction to its departments while making reference to its ‘romantic past’. Departments and their history were placed firmly in the context of its modern office space on Mortimer Square, illustrated in black and white photographs (“A history of Progress”, 1925). Mather & Crowther published Practical Advertising, an annual handbook of newspaper rates, almost every year between 1900 until the outbreak of war in 1939. In addition to newspaper listings, it featured articles about the current economic climate, the theory of advertising, clients’ letters of commendation and examples of their work. The book also regularly contained articles about the services and facilities available at Mather & Crowther, which sought to demystify the advertising process for potential clients, illustrated by photographs of the agency at work. Staff members, both men and women, were depicted performing a wide variety of jobs within the office space, from artists working on poster designs to secretaries with typewriters, to those working in the printers and the post room. The photographs offer an intimate, if manufactured view, into the culture of the agency, and the agency was presented as modern, respectable and transparent.

By the late 1930s, J. Walter Thompson Ltd., although part of a global corporation, still chose to show their office and staff at the heart of their identity in a campaign entitled ‘Agency in Action’ (Daily Mail, 1937; “Agency in Action”, 1937). However, their work was much more dynamic than the straight-forward presentation essay and illustration. A full page spread in a supplement to the 1937 Empire Convention includes a photograph of the Bush House offices on Aldwych displayed at the top of the page. Below, a dense cartoon strip, with boxes filled with J. Walter Thompson’s characteristic reason-why copy, shows staff at work within the building. The office building is presented as a marker, a context for the activity that goes on within, like a scene-setting shot in film. Here, the office
is made up of people, their ideas and things; their collective function is to produce advertising. The agency is shown to have comprehensively adapted the building to best serve their needs. A wide range of departments are presented at work, with special mention given to the radio department whose studios had been converted from the basement swimming pool, on the foundation of Radio Luxembourg. The tension between public and private is also evident in the presence of the consumer within the advertisement: J. Walter Thompson staff went out beyond the bounds of office ‘into the field’ in order to conduct market research to create advertising. In doing so, they opened up a dialogue between not only the client and the agency, but the consumer and the agency too. In this advertisement, although the building is used to situate the agency and show off the vast resources at their disposal, J. Walter Thompson explicitly identifies itself instead with the talent and ability of its professional and well-trained staff: the productive office culture, housed inside its architecture, operating within its interior.

Private identities: the office and its staff in the interwar years

While the office building was used by advertising agencies to project their social capital and professional aspirations outwards to clients and wider society, it also shaped the identities of those working within the agency. Sam Soper suggests the effect that a grandiose building could have on the morale of the staff who worked within them when he recalled that ‘just to be in the “ace” office building of London [Bush House] was a thrill’ (1996a, p. 12). Equally, through both the layout of its interior and the culture housed within it, the office was a formative influence on staff identities. The appropriation and configuration of office space could enforce and regiment status, and subsequent power, within a firm (Dovey, 1999). Yet, modernity also represented the promise of a more fluid hierarchy, with education offering opportunity for men and women of all classes to progress through companies. The office space of service-oriented agencies was a site where staff could formulate an identity with the modern world (Sparke, 2008, p. 124), through their uses of new technology, their espousal of professional values and inter-gender interaction, as well as a group identity through formed gossip, shared living and collective events.

The agency building shaped the identity of its staff through the layout of its interior. Staff members were to be open, dynamic and creative people: Saxon Mills (1954, p. 47) described how Crawford ‘positively encouraged and enjoyed battles of opinions in the house...“we’re always quarrelling in Crawford’s,” he said, “that’s how we produce our best work. But we’re all good friends.”’ This collaboration between staff was facilitated by spatial programming that encouraged staff interaction. Margaret Tempest (1963, p. 2) recalled that the Resors’, the directors of the J. Walter Thompson Company, had, since the 1920s ‘... thought in terms of freedom of thought [with regards to office layout]. Freedom of ideas, with people popping their heads in’. Equally, at Pym’s, Sayers (1933, p. 33) imagines that ‘[t]he copy department on the whole worked happily together, writing each other’s headlines in a helpful spirit and invading each other’s room at all hours of the day.’ In their ‘Agency in Action’ campaign, J. Walter Thompson Ltd depict their staff animatedly discussing work around a table, as well as working together to use the agency’s cutting edge facility: the radio studio. Architectural plans of office space of Bush House show departments collected together, with staff sharing offices which had multiple interconnecting doors (“Plans of Bush House”, c. 1931).

Creative collaboration may have resulted in more informal address among staff at some agencies – Saxon Mills (1954, p. 46) recalled how at Crawford’s ‘Christian names were more common currency than ‘Yes, sir’ and ‘No, sir’ – but hierarchy, albeit fluid, remained, reinforced by the layout of the office, which mediated power relationships within the agency and denoted a person’s place within them. In Bush House, offices which looked southwards out towards the Strand were commandeered by Senior Management, while rooms on north, east and west walls were used by Copywriters, Art directors, and Departmental Managers. The centre was occupied by a large general office space (“Plans of Bush House”, c.1931). Soper recalled how ‘The partitions were glass above waist height and the doors to the rooms were glazed, too, so that daylight (but not air) came through to the very large General Office space in the centre. This light, however, was not sufficient enough for us to work by, and so white opaque pendant lights were always switched on for those who started out in the General Office’ (Soper, 1996a, p. 12). Stanley Resor, in particular, used the location of his room to assert his position within J. Walter Thompson Company. Rather than taking a room near the front of the building, he chose instead a corner office at the farthest point from where he entered the building, so that he could be seen by everybody as he walked past them into his room. Margaret Tempest (1963,
p. 2) recalled that ‘everyone on that floor saw him; everybody knew that he was in. He said good morning to everyone.’

Room size and decoration also reflected personal rank and power within a company. A photograph of J. Walter Thompson’s offices at Berkeley Square, shows a smartly dressed man posed thoughtfully in his spacious, well lit office, while his secretary, half obscured by the doorway, sits as gate-keeper with telephone and typewriter at her desk just outside (Miscellaneous photograph, c.1940). His room is sparsely decorated; a second photograph shows that the only personal object is a photograph in the corner behind the desk. A long table, surrounded by chairs, suggests that the room also hosted meetings, blurring again the boundaries between private and public space. Those lower down the agency ranks made do with starkier conditions: in Murder Must Advertise (Sayers, 1933, p. 12) Mr Ingleby describes ‘with gloom’ the copywriters’ individual offices as ‘kennels’. Yet Sayers herself was grateful to have a room of her own at S.H. Bensons, although she complained that being directly under the roof made it unbearably warm in summer (Sayers, 1995, p. 191). More common were rooms such as those photographed in Bush House, and at Mather & Crowther, where multiple individual desks shared the same space; a practice which became increasingly common as staff numbers swelled during the inter-war years.

Even more cramped were the typist spaces and the switchboard (“Plans of Bush House”, c.1931), which Sayers (1933, p. 8) describes in her novel as ‘a small, inconvenient cubicle’. Yet, these smaller spaces, often ‘crowded […] to bursting point,’ functioned as the ‘meaningful centres of everyday life’ in a building, which Anthony Giddens (in Dovey, 1999, p. 18) refers to as ‘locales’. These places, including typists’ rooms, cloakrooms and conjoining corridors, lay at the centre of the flow of office life, drawing in people, and gossip, from across the agency. Mostly the domain of the young and the female, they saw the interaction between typists, stenographers and secretaries, with housekeepers, tea ladies and errand boys, and junior copywriters, researchers and artists. Directors, whose secretaries ran errands for them (Sayers, 1933, p. 42) and so did not frequent these locales, were excluded from the intricacies and fractiousness of staff life. Thus, Miss Meteryard, a fictional copywriter at Pym’s, observed that ‘Directors are the last people to hear anything about the staff. Otherwise they wouldn’t be able to stand on their hind legs at the Staff Dinner and shoot off the speeches about co-operation and all being one happy family’ (Sayers, 1933, p. 233). Due to the informal and oral nature of exchanges, and lower ranking status of those involved, the movement and vivacity of these places is largely absent from written sources. Yet, these places were centres of power too, positioned as they were at the heart of office social life.

A collective staff culture was created through the shared experience of living with office conventions and regulations, and lubricated by news and gossip. This office culture, housed within the interior of the office, was also significant in creating a common identity for staff who worked at an agency. Tebbutt (1995, p. 1), writing about gossip, notes that ‘the voices that we hear are, on the whole, only faint echoes of reality, and straining to understand the thoughts and feeling which give them meaning can be rather like eavesdropping on whispers and half-heard conversations.’ This makes Sayers’ account of everyday life at Pym’s a valuable source, since she includes gossip and light-hearted exchange in order to bring her imaginary office to life. In the following exchange (Sayers, 1933, p. 120), she shows how quickly – and willingly – gossip could be disseminated around the office. Significantly, Mr Bredon goes to the typists’ room in order to begin spreading the word:

Naturally, in five minutes time, the insinuating Mr Bredon was in possession of the whole story.
‘But you needn’t go and spread it all round the office’, said Mrs Johnson.
‘Of course I needn’t’ said Mr Bredon.
‘Hullo! Is that the lad with our coffee?’ He hastened into the typists’ room, where Miss Parton was detailing to a prick-eared audience the more juicy details of the morning’s scene with Mr. Armstrong.
‘That’s nothing’ announced Mr Bredon. ‘You haven’t heard the latest development.’
‘Oh! What is it?’ cried Miss Rossiter.
‘I’ve promised not to tell’ said Mr Bredon.
‘Shame! Shame!’
‘At least, I didn’t exactly promise. I was asked not to.’
‘Is it about Mr. Tallboy’s money?’
‘Oh! You do know, then? What a disappointment!’ [...] ‘Here’s Mr. Ingleby.
Coffee Mr. Ingleby? I say, have you heard about old Copley pinching Mr Tallboy’s
fifty quid?’

Staff newsletters, which published the less scandalous news of the office, along with business
news, offer a further insight into the extent of the opportunities, occasions and social interactions
offered by, and inherent within, office life. For the J. Walter Thompson Company, these newsletters
were international and functioned as means of integrating the global with the local. However, J.
Walter Thompson Ltd. recognised that because ‘New York’s “JWT NEWS” is a distinguished effort in
the interest of the company as a whole [...] it can’t be expected to publish all of London’s gossip’
(JWT/BRMB News, 1950). Therefore, following the Second World War and their move to Berkeley
Square, a London newsletter was set up. The Samson Clark Staff Gazette survives from the 1920s and
was delivered to all staff along with their pay envelope on Fridays. The heterogeneity of the office
community is seen in its pages. The Samson Clark Athletics and Social Club was advertised, as was a
‘physical culture class for girls’ to run during the winter season, since ‘obtain[ing] the exercise
desirable for the sake of health as well as grace is always a problem for the business woman’ (Samson
Clark Staff Gazette, 27 Nov 1925). Personal news was a staple. ‘Are we a business house or a
matrimonial bureau?’ the gazette asked in September 1923. It recorded the marriage of a George
Simonesen to Miss Violet Saville of the front office. ‘[T]he vogue in matrimony in the art department
continue[d]’ with the wedding of Miss Holdith to Mr. W.A. Gatheridge (24 August 1923). The
Gazette also carried news of people who had moved away from the office community: ‘Mrs. Williams,
better known to us as Miss Pearce, of the fashion studio, now has a daughter’ (7 September 1923).
The enduring nature of identification with the office is demonstrated by news of those who still
returned. In this account, the office was also used as a device to denote time: ‘Miss Glass, head of our
counting house in the late 1890s, when our whole organisation was accommodate in one room, still
keeps in touch. She was up in London last week on hols and looked in’ (Samson Clark Staff Gazette,
14 September 1923).

Weekly news of everyday life was supplemented by reportage of specific events in a firms’
calendar. The two minutes silence on Armistice Day in 1925 brought the staff of Samson Clark in
collective remembrance with the rest of Great Britain:

Two-minute period of silent remembrance was observed as usual in this building on the
eleventh. It seemed here, as elsewhere throughout the country, that a special significance
attached to the ceremony this year [...] At any rate, the presence of that great company of the
glorious dead was never felt more actually or more intimately (The Samson Clark Staff
Gazette, 13 November 1925).

Sports events and dinners demonstrate the extent to which office culture and sociability extended
beyond the physical boundaries of the office building during the interwar years. Officially sanctioned
sport and competitions were a popular way of channelling social rivalry and office politics, which
arose from working in close proximity to one another. At the Samson Clark sports day in 1925, the
Gazette (10 July 1925) reported that ‘Mr. Harvey upheld honour in the jumps... the 80 yards ladies’
sprint was won by Miss Howell, and the copy-room team won the ladies’ relay race’, and it was the
annual two innings cricket match against clients ‘Brotherhood’ that provided the back drop for action
in Murder Must Advertise (Sayers, 1933, pp. 248 - 263). Dinners and parties during the interwar
period provided a more dignified occasion for the office to socialise together and foster a collective
identity. At Pym’s, Sayers (1933, p. 41) imagines ‘the Grand Annual Dinner and Dance for the whole
staff, at which the amount of the staff bonus was announced for the year, and the health of Mr Pym
was drunk amid expression of enthusiastic loyalty.’ Photographs at in the London Office records at
Duke University show young, carefree staff dressed up formerly for the J. Walter Thompson 1936
Christmas party and a dinner at the Waldorf Hotel on 29 January 1937. While these parties and sport
events represented opportunities for shared experience and subsequent reminiscence, following the
Second World War their nostalgic value was heightened, as they helped a war-weatherd office remember
its youth and a more innocent and carefree time.
The Second World War and reconstruction: identity endured?

As this suggests, the Second World War threw the British advertising industry into turmoil (Nevett, 1982; Clampin, 2008). Advertising’s work to stimulate demand was made redundant, and paper shortages resulted in soaring prices, which already curtailed budgets struggled to meet. Agencies faced grave decisions about how to respond to the war. Some, such as Saward, Baker and Co. ‘pulled together’, with staff taking wage cuts in order to keep everyone in employment (Pearce, 1939). Others retained a core organisation at the expense of some departments: C.F. Higham’s, for example, closed its editorial department at the outbreak of war (Lorimer, 1939). Some staff left to join the forces, while the success of the industry’s propagation of its professional image prior to the war was brought into question by the lack of advertising personnel invited to serve in the wartime Ministry of Information (cf. Advertisers’ Weekly, 1941). Office buildings themselves became vulnerable in the Blitz and some agencies chose to evacuate departments: until 1942, J. Walter Thompson Ltd. operated between London, Oxley and Cheshire. J. Walter Thompson Ltd also moved office to 6 Grafton Square, since Bush House was requisitioned by the government (Sutton, 1996, p. 44). The war radically reconfigured offices; but office communities, although fragmented, carried on beyond their building. The collective identity of the office, formed during the interwar years, remained a resilient one.

In a letter to Howard Henderson, who worked at the New York office of J. Walter Thompson, Bill Hinks, a director of the London office, describes how the blitz affected the office:

Broadly speaking, we go down to the office in the morning around 9:30, though many people are inevitably later because communications get upset every now and then and sometimes it takes two or three hours to get there. We probably get five or six warnings during the day. We don’t go down to the shelters now until we get the special warning from overhead. Personally, I don’t mind the daylight ones so much because you always have a chance to see something for your money. But at night it isn’t quite so much fun...We have to get away around five because as soon as it is dark the sirens go (about 6:30 now) and broadly speaking it doesn’t finish until about 7:00 in the morning. [...] Of course, we have had them [shells] all around the office, but no direct hit as yet. [...] Many people at the office have been bombed out and some of them have had amazing escapes...We have all been very grieved to lose one of our best writers and finest men, Adolph Deys, who was killed by a bomb the other night on the way back to the office. It all seems terribly unreal’ (Hinks, 1940).

For those who stayed in the immediate office communities of the skeleton agencies – as well as those who joined up – war necessitated new responsibilities, which for some resulted in new identities. Those who carried on working in British advertising assumed additional duties in the office. Audrey Deans (1939), although still head of the media department at J.C. Pritchard Wood and Partners also became Air Raid Warden at the office. Aileen Cutting remained at J. Walter Thompson Ltd. in London, and took care of the first aid post while continuing to man the telephone exchange with ‘two girls’ (Round the Square, 1952b). For some, the war confirmed that their peacetime career choice was the right one. Sam Soper, for example, tried his hand at writing while posted at Teesside, but quickly decided that, despite earlier ambitions, he was not cut out to be a copy writer (Soper, 1996a, pp. 63 – 91). Others, however, found that the war gave them more freedom to demonstrate talent than they had been permitted in the peacetime. In this poem, published in the Christmas edition of the Advertiser’s Weekly in 1943, ‘RLG’ laments the loss of a woman who, although a disorganised and chaotic typist, appeared to flourish in military life:

To a Lady who left

I miss her in the office;
She was good at making tea.
Though she couldn’t type for toffee
She was good enough for me

Her spelling too, was comical
she did shorthand in a dream;
Making error astronomic –  
And the desk was never clear

[...]

She joined her mob in ‘39  
She didn’t ‘wait and see’  
Her work they say is wonderful –  
A sergeant soon she’ll be.

Perhaps she’ll get a medal  
Or a glowing MID  
Which was more than – as a typist –  
She ever got from me.

The war resulted in a reconfiguration of the space of the office community, with the local members thrust out globally. With former staff away, and new members arriving, it became increasingly important to maintain contact in order to sustain the agency body. As part of this effort, throughout the war, J. Walter Thompson Ltd. sent small monetary retainers to staff who had joined up (Soper, 1996b, pp. 1 – 13). Possibly more valuable in sustaining unity, however, was the news bulletin for the troops that Copy Group Head Doris Grundy produced (Soper, 1996b, pp. 14 – 64). Just as national news was believed to be vital in maintaining morale and bridging the gap between the home front and the front line (‘War reporting in North Africa’, 1943), so local (arguably more personal) news performed a powerful role in maintaining the bonds between the scattered office community. Sent out to all staff members who had enlisted and were serving in the military, the news bulletin suggests the importance of the office culture as a source of comfort and morale to those away from its physical location. As in peacetime, the newsletter included news and light hearted stories from the offices, but now also the personal news of the troops which the London office received and redistributed. A bundle of unmarked photographs of servicemen and women in the ‘London box’ in the JWT archive suggests that troops also sent photographs to the office in their absence as aide-memoirs for remaining staff.

The London office building, first Bush House, then 6 Grafton Square and finally 40 Berkeley Square, was depicted in line drawing, in photographs and in cartoon in the newsletters. It functioned as a focal point for the imagination of troops away, and for those on leave it became a place to return to exchange news. While newsletters kept troops up to date with anecdotes and personal stories, and many had visited the office on leave, J. Walter Thompson Ltd. still felt it necessary to issue a memorandum to equip and prepare troops, as they returned home, for changes in the pre-war office conditions and practices that they had left behind (Soper, 1996a, pp. 85). Changes in personnel, the type of work in which people were engaged and smaller advertisement size were highlighted. Material office conditions after the war were difficult. J. Walter Thompson Ltd. was one agency that needed new premises. 40 Berkeley Square was found, but had to be adapted from five floors of residential flats into functional office space. This in itself became part of staff folklore: Soper (1996a, p. 96) tells the story of Director Martin O’Grady sitting on a toilet cover (his room had been a bathroom) dictating to his secretary, which is also recalled by Head of Copy department Norman Bassett and Doris Grundy (Sutton, 1996, p. 46). The job of conversion was complicated by the need to move people as fast as possible from Grafton Street, where the office still was, while allowing everyone adequate space in which to work. As late as 1952, conversion work on the fourth floor continued. G.S. Royds and W.S. Crawford’s office at 233, Holborn Road survived the blitz, but, like J. Walter Thompson, would probably have needed new equipment to function. Indeed, looking back, the J. Walter Thompson newsletter predicted that more than 50% of the furniture and almost all the typewriters in the office had needed to be replaced by the end of the war (Round the Square, 1952b). ‘Some idea of the magnitude of the job’ it reported, ‘can be gathered from the fact that in the last four years Hilda Harrison has approved bills to the value of between eighty and ninety thousand pounds. And this was for only the most urgent necessities. There [was] no room in her budget for luxuries.’

The return to routine office life was an important part of the move to peace-time. Here again, newsletters facilitated the formulation of a collective identity by disseminating news and office gossip. The first edition of what became Round the Square requested ‘personal items, long before any of them
take place, if possible – but at any rate before too stale’ (JWT/BRMB news, 1950, p. 2). In addition to its news content, Round the Square included features on particular departments, and a section dedicated to welcoming new staff, as a means of keeping staff up to date with the work and people of the office. However, unlike the interwar newsletters from Samson Clark, which focused on the present and immediate past and future, the post-war newsletter at J Walter Thompson took a much deeper view of time. Memory is important when identity is under pressure, and staff profiles in Round the Square offered old-hands the opportunity to assert their past status within the firm, in the new post-war surroundings. Each issue also included photographs of pre-war events. One is captioned ‘1938 There are younger, but still familiar JWT faces in this picture, taken of an office dinner and dance 13 years ago. Can you identify Stanley Jackson, Doris Grundy, FG Colwell, Fred Boulter, Gracie Small, H.B. Leis, Harold Stansbury and Eric Knott?’ (JWT/BRMB news, 1951, p. 16). Another read: ‘Nostalgia corner – this is what Tony Parker, Copy department Group Head, looked like before he went to India to help build up the JWT organisation there’ (Round the Square, 1952a, p. 2). In the post-war office, operating in the reconstruction years from a different building, with a much larger staff body, newsletters wove together the back story of the firm, with gossip from its ever-changing present, and the hopes for its future.

Conclusions
Despite the great changes that the wider environment of the office underwent during the war and immediately after it, the core identity and focus of J Walter Thompson staff, developed during the interwar years, remained remarkably resilient. Everyday life in the office continued, as much as possible, despite the ruptures to routines and difficult material conditions. While the war and its shortages demanded changes in advertising practice, the desire for continuity in everyday life was strong, and it was the office that acted as an anchor in changing times.

Tracing the history of the office – the building, the interior and the culture – provides a different sense of continuity and change within advertising history to that highlighted by existing literature. In contrast to the cyclical copywriting vogues that Fox (1983) and Marchand (1985) emphasise or the linear progress towards regulation and professionalism that Nevett (1982) and Schwarzkopf (2008) suggest, the office and its everyday life remained a constant amidst wider social and economic change between 1900 and 1950, mooring an industry that was constantly reinventing its output to keep pace with the trends and fads of modern Britain. The continuity of the office calls into question the watersheds typically used in advertising history: people and organisations exist beyond and through the eras demarcated by war and peace and have discrete histories of their own. Indeed, in the histories written by advertising agents, as well as in their publicity leaflets, office buildings are used to mark time, and to signify stages of development for the particular agency (Saxon Mills, 1954; Soper, 1996a; “A history of progress”, 1925).

The office, as the site of the dynamic relationship between advertising people and their environment, also provides insight into the construction and projection of identity within the industry. The flexibility of the building, which was both publicly outward-facing and privately inward-facing, was, at this time, peculiar to the advertising industry. The office was actively used by agents to engender clients’ trust as well as to demonstrate to wider society their professional aspirations, which bolstered the image of the industry as a whole. Compelling publicity was the business of advertising agencies, so seeking to understand how office buildings and their culture were used by advertisers to promote themselves reveals their values and priorities. Privately, the hierarchy and values of the office culture were entrenched and mediated in architecture, through layout and room design, while the office culture housed within also shaped the identities of those worked there. The building became representative of the culture and in doing so, has become an important focal point of memory. The permanence and duality of the office has allowed layers of stories, histories, people and ideas to accumulate, overlap, interact and intersect, which has created a rich and varied history. Much of that history is still to be pieced together, but it promises to be a different, more egalitarian history of an industry that emerges when it is.

Notes
[1] This sentiment is illustrated in Saxon Mills’ (1954, p. 46) description of W S Crawford’s move to new office space in the spring of 1921: ‘with the move to Holborn, the firm began rapidly to assume the pattern and proportions of a modern creative agency... Crawford’s was soon an established agency’. 
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