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# **The Staircase**

## **History and Theories**

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## GLOSSARY

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**Balanced step** (or dancing step): a winder built so that its narrow end is only a little narrower than the wider end. It is therefore more comfortable to walk on than a winder in which the nosings radiate from a common center.

**Baluster**: a post in a balustrade of a flight of stairs that supports a handrail (from the Italian *balausto*, the wild pomegranate whose double-curving calyx tube the baluster often resembled).

**Balustrade**: the whole infilling from handrail down to floor level at the edge of a stair.

**Banister**: a baluster (corruption of *baluster*).

**Bracket baluster**: a (steel) baluster bent to a right angle at its foot and built into the side of stone or concrete stairs.

**Bracketed stairs**: stairs carried on an open string. The overhanging nosings are usually ornamental.

**Carriage** (or carriage piece, rough string, bearer, stair horse): an inclined timber placed between the two strings against the underside of wide stairs to support them in the middle.

**Cat ladder** (or duck board): a ladder or board with cleats nailed on it, laid over a roof slope to protect it and give access for workers to repair the roof.

**Circular stair**: a helical stair.

**Closed stair** (or box stair): a stair walled in on each side and closed by a door at one end.

**Close string** (or closed string): a string that extends above the edges of the risers and treads, covering them on the outside.

**Commode step**: a riser curved in plan, generally at the foot of a stair.

**Corded way** (or *cordonata*): a path on a steep slope, protected from erosion by steps formed with wooden or stone risers.

**Corkscrew stair**: a spiral stair.

**Cuner**: the wedge-shaped sections into which seats are divided by radiating passages in ancient theaters.

**Curb stringer** (or curb string): a three-member outer string, consisting of a close string carrying the stair, surmounted by a molding (called the shoe rail) from which the balusters rise, and faced by a facing string.

**Curtail step** (or round or scroll step): a step curved in plan, so that one or both ends project in a semicircular or spiral shape, usually used for the lowest steps in a flight.

**Dancing step**: *see* Balanced step.

**Dextral stair**: a stair that turns to the right during ascent.

**Dog-legged stair** (or dogleg): a stair with two flights separated by a half-landing, and having no stairwell, so that the upper flight returns parallel to the lower flight.

**Double-return (or side flight) stair:** a stair with one wide flight up from the lower floor to the landing and two flights from the landing to the next floor.

**Escalade:** the act of scaling a rampart, by means of ladders.

**Flier (or flyer):** a rectangular tread.

**Flight:** a series of steps between landings.

**Geometrical stair:** (1) a stair with a string that is continuous around a semicircular or elliptical well, and thus has no newel posts and often no landings between floors; (2) "the term commonly applied to stone staircases radiating on their plan from one or more centers, with an open well; the broadest end of each step being tailed into the wall and resting on the rest below it by a back rebate, as in straight staircases, and having in addition to these two elements of strength a third, viz. that derived from the keying character of each step with reference to the adjacent one above and below it." (Architectural Publication Society)

**Going:** the horizontal distance between two successive nosings. (In a helical stair the going varies.) The sum of the goings of a straight flight stair is the going of the flight.

**Gradient of a stair:** the ratio between going and riser; the angle of inclination.

**Guardrail:** a protective railing designed to prevent people or objects from falling into open well, stairwell, or similar space.

**Half-space landing (or half space or half landing):** a rectangular landing of width equal to two flights (*see also* Quarter-space landing).

**Handrail:** a rail forming the top of a balustrade.

**Handrail bolt (or joint bolt):** a bolt threaded at both ends. A square nut at one end is gripped in a mortise in an end of one handrail. In the other handrail, a similar mortise is provided, but the nut is circular and notched and can be turned by

striking the notches with a handrail punch inserted into the mortise from beneath the handrail. The tightening of the nut brings the two ends of the handrail close together.

**Handrail scroll:** a spiral ending to a handrail.

**Helical stair:** the correct but not the usual name for a spiral stair.

**Hipping of handrail:** a characteristic of early Georgian wooden balustrades. The handrail rises at the intermediate newel either at a right angle or in a sweeping curve.

**Kilt:** *see* Wash.

**Kite winder:** the central of three winders turning a right angle.

**Landing:** a platform at the top, bottom, or between flights of a staircase.

**Margin:** the distance between the nosing and the top of an upstanding string.

**Monkey tail:** a downward scroll at the end of a handrail.

**Mopstick handrail (or mopstick):** a handrail that is circular except for a small flat surface underneath.

**Newel (or newel post):** the post around which wind the steps of a circular stair. Also applied to the post into which the handrail is framed.

**Newel cap:** a wooden top to a newel post.

**Newel joint:** a joint between newel and string or handrail.

**Nosing:** the front and usually rounded edge to a stair tread. It frequently projects over the riser below it.

**Nosing line:** a line touching the lead edges of the nosings of successive treads of a stair. The margin of a close string is measured from it.

**Nosing overhang:** the distance that the nosing edge of a step projects beyond the back of the tread below.

**Open newel stair:** a geometrical stair (one without newels).

**Open stair:** a stair that is open on one or both sides.

**Open string (or cut string):** a string that leaves the ends of the treads and risers exposed on the outside.

**Open well stair:** a stair with two or more flights around an open space.

**Perron:** a dignified exterior stairway, usually approaching the main entrance.

**Piano nobile:** the principal floor of a house, raised one floor above ground level.

**Quarter-space landing (or quarter space):** a platform of width equal to one flight, where a 90-degree turn is made.

**Radial step:** a winder.

**Ramp:** an inclined plane for passage of traffic.

**Riser:** the upright face of a step.

**Riser height (or rise):** the vertical distance from the top of a step at the nosing to the top of an adjoining step at the nosing.

**Sinistral stair:** a stair that turns to the left in ascent.

**Solid newel stair:** a spiral stair of stone in which the inner end of each step is shaped to form a nearly continuous cylinder with the inner ends of the other steps.

**Spiral stair (or helical stair):** a circular stair in which all the treads are winders.

**Stair:** (1) a series of steps with or without landings, giving access from level to level; (2) one step, consisting of a tread and a riser.

**Stairhead:** the top of a stair.

**Stairway:** a staircase, or a stairwell.

**Stairwell:** *see* Well.

**Step:** one unit of a stair, consisting of a riser and a tread. It may be a flier or a winder.

**Stepladder:** a ladder built with rectangular stiles and treads (not rungs) that are designed to be horizontal in use (*see also* Steps).

**Steps (or pair of steps):** a stepladder with a framed stay hinged to the top to make it self-supporting.

**String (or stringer):** a sloping board at each end of the treads that carries the treads and risers of a stair.

**Tread:** the (usually) horizontal surface of a step; also the length (from front to back) of such a surface.

**Turret step:** a triangular stone step from which a spiral stair is built up.

**Vis (or vice or Vis de Saint Gilles):** a helical stair.

**Wash (or kilt):** a slight sloping of treads to throw off rainwater.

**Well:** an open space through one or more floors.

**Winder (or wheel step):** a tread of triangular or wedge shape (*see also* Balanced step).

**Winding stair:** a spiral stair; a circular or elliptical geometrical stair.