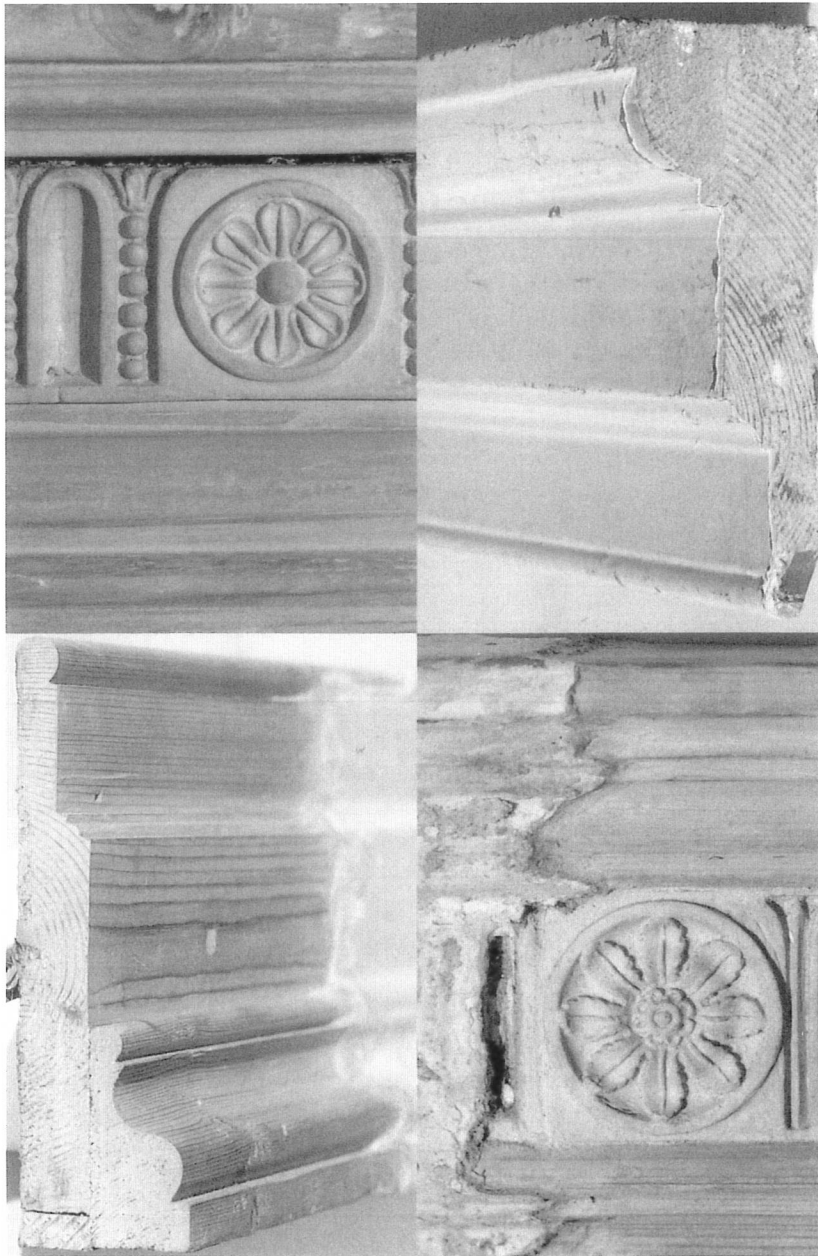


The Georgian Group Guides

Nº 7

MOULDINGS



A Brief Guide to Georgian Mouldings

INTRODUCTION

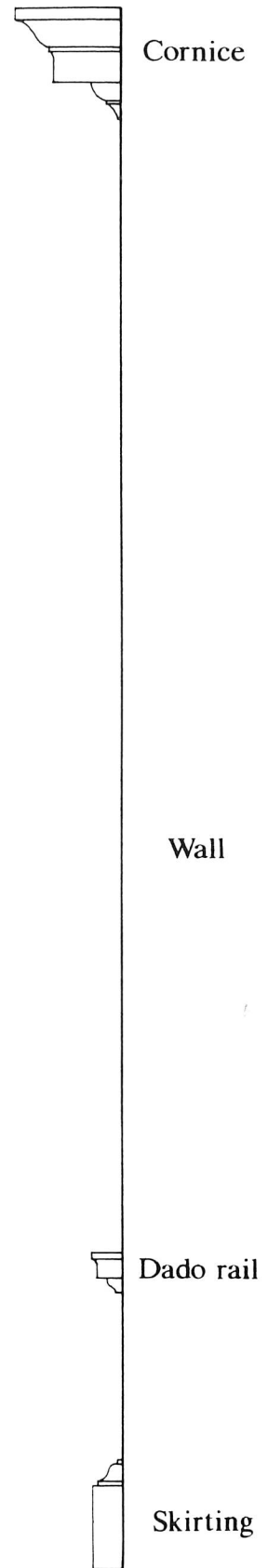
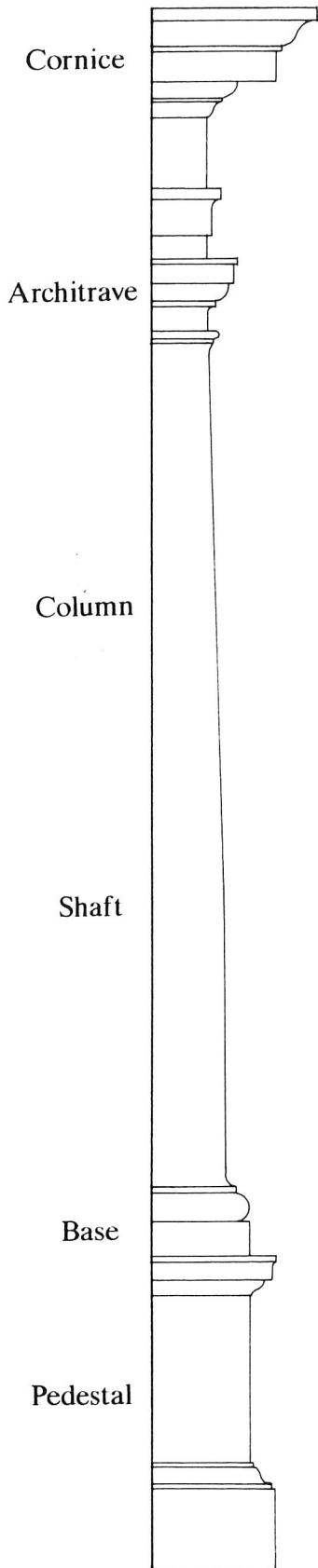
THIS SHORT GUIDE is intended as a general introduction to the subject, designed as an outline of the basic forms and development of mouldings for house owners, architects, craftsmen and the interested lay audience alike. The illustrations included below, taken for the most part from Georgian publications, serve as a useful pictorial reference. The mouldings they demonstrate are by no means suitable for every location in the house, nor do they represent every possible permutation of the classical vocabulary. For those seeking to repair or re-create Georgian mouldings, perhaps the most important section of this guide is the last page, with its list of suggested pattern-books and modern sources. Before you begin, always consult an expert with no commercial interest. Your local District or Borough Council Conservation Officer, or a national organisation such as English Heritage or the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, should be able to help in choosing reliable and experienced joiners or plasterers for such work.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

UN Til the later 17th century mouldings were not decorative pieces inserted into the completed shell of a building, as they are today. Instead they were used to decorate integral structural features that were exposed to view — ceiling beams, door and fireplace surrounds, newel staircases and so on. By definition, these structural mouldings were heavily three-dimensional; this quality remained characteristic of mouldings for some time after they ceased to have a structural function and were merely nailed on or 'applied'.

The earliest type of applied mouldings in common use were the box cornice and 'bolection' moulding linking two adjoining planes, both of which were common by 1700. In many cases mouldings were carefully placed to correspond to the vertical intervals of the classical column; thus the skirting corresponded to the base, the dado to the pedestal and the cornice to the entablature. This architectural allegory held true throughout the Georgian era and beyond. However, as the 18th century progressed architects were increasingly concerned to conceal all of the real structural elements of a building; accordingly, mouldings became flatter and less pronounced, and surface decoration took the place of depth. From the mid-18th century onwards, plaster became widely used for embellishing the surface of mouldings, and was often applied to a wooden base moulding. On doors raised and fielded panels gradually fell out of favour. On staircases the efforts to conceal the basic structure were reflected in an increasing slenderness of the balusters and less emphasis on newel posts. Turned balusters were out of fashion by the end of the century, and were replaced by thin, square-section 'stick' balusters; iron balusters could be used at intervals to strengthen the stair. Newel posts, even in the Early Georgian period, were seldom allowed to project above the handrail; in late Georgian houses they were dispensed with altogether (although for reasons of practicality and economy they remained in use for tortuous servants' stairs).

By the early Georgian period mouldings were often employed simply to cover a structural joint or an unsightly transition between different planes — allowing the parts beneath to settle and move, as well as providing a more visually cohesive display of light and shadow. Virtually all mouldings were, in contrast to the practice of the preceding century, painted — resulting in a less heavy and more refined effect (often ruined by the modern fashion for indiscriminate stripping of old woodwork). By the end of the century many mouldings had become light and graceful, and were of comparatively low relief — a development influenced by genuine classical models but largely facilitated



FIGURES 1 AND 2 DIAGRAMS SHOWING THE RELATION BETWEEN THE PROPORTIONS OF THE CLASSICAL ORDERS (LEFT) AND THOSE OF THE DOMESTIC WALL (RIGHT) (BROADBENT MANN)

by technological advances in architectural construction. By 1800, however, the interest in academic neoclassicism — expressing itself in the revivals of the Greek and Egyptian styles — brought a renewed emphasis on solidity and weight. One effect of this seems to have been the popularity of the reeded moulding, often used with paterae (small square panels) at the corners — a form frequently found on Regency chimneypieces, cornices and architraves of between c.1780 and c.1840.

For the purist, the Georgian period was the golden age of the applied moulding. In Victorian Britain the design and siting of mouldings became less influenced by academic considerations, as their classical origins were forgotten or deliberately ignored. The results were sometimes quite crude or even rather bizarre, and many Victorian mouldings bear little resemblance to their supposed Georgian antecedents.

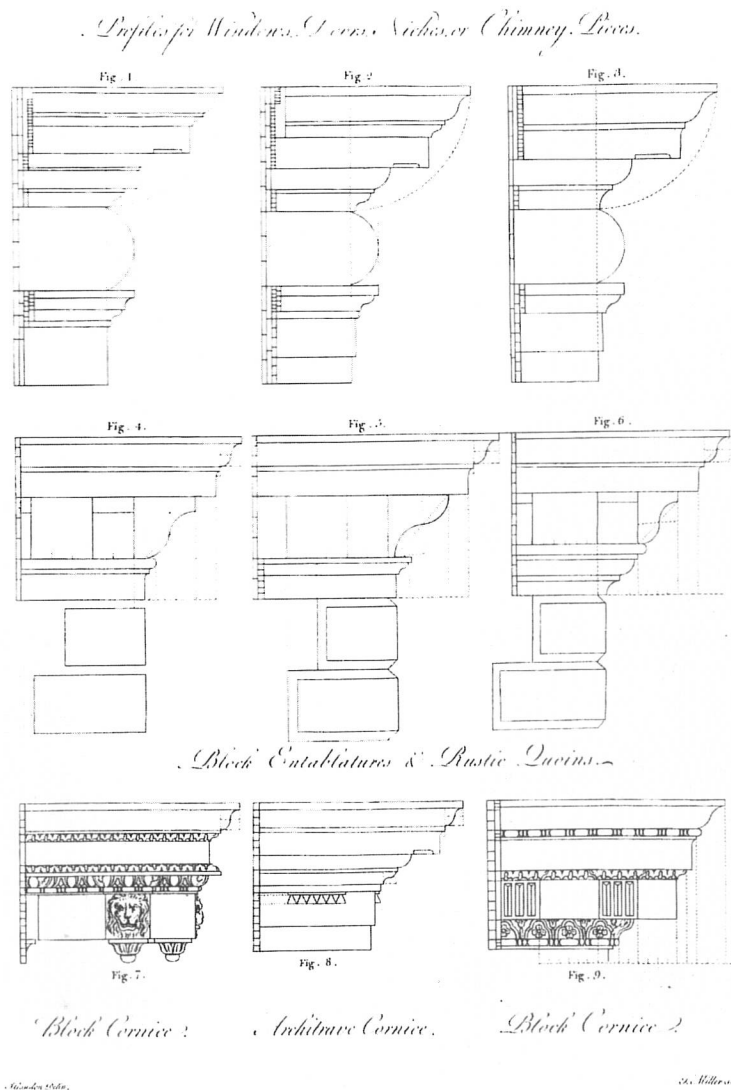


FIGURE 3 'PROFILES FOR WINDOWS, DOORS, NICHES OR CHIMNEY PIECES' OF 1759, FROM WILLIAM CHAMBERS' *TREATISE* (THE BRITISH LIBRARY)

RESTORING MOULDINGS

THE NEW OWNER of an old house may be faced with the task of restoring the character of a building that has lost many of its mouldings — perhaps as a result of conversion, of neglect or of a viciously inappropriate modernisation. Where they have been removed their careful reinstatement can dramatically enhance a plain room.

In all cases the work should be approached cautiously, and a minute examination of the room should be made before beginning. Dados and skirtings long since removed may have their profiles sharply preserved in the built-up layers of paint on a door architrave; their positions may show as ghostings against the wall plaster when the wallcoverings are removed. Panelled doors and balustrades are often found excellently preserved between modern layers of painted hardboard.

If the house is in a uniform terrace it is always worth inspecting your neighbour's house in case it has any mouldings which have been lost from your own. It is not difficult to draw out their profiles using a ruler, set-square and commercially-available profile gauge, and any competent wood-machinist will be able to duplicate them for you. Unless you are starting entirely from scratch off-the-peg mouldings are generally unsuitable, since beyond the most basic skirtings and architraves they tend to be historically inaccurate and fairly crude.

The complexity of mouldings and their decoration corresponds directly to the dimensions and the relative social significance of their location. Thus, while Drawing Rooms on the ground or first floors may feature elaborate cornices and rich, heavy doorcases, rooms at the top of the house may possess only simple box cornices, a rudimentary dado and perhaps no skirting mouldings at all. The decoration is proportional to the pretension of the room; the humbler the function (and indeed the fewer the visitors), the more modest the mouldings. If reintroducing period mouldings of plaster or wood into a house which has lost all trace of the original pattern, it is very important to keep this context firmly in mind. Wooden mouldings and panelling bought wholesale from architectural salvage outlets, for example, are often re-used in unsuitable and incongruous settings. Over-sized and over-elaborate mouldings set in a small, modest room inevitably look cramped and ridiculous. Remember that what looks splendid in a grand country house — or a cavernous warehouse — may be highly inappropriate for your own terraced home.

Georgian farmhouses and cottages can raise different problems. The simplest cottages have boarded doors and often originally had no skirtings or architraves at all. These latter features were often added by the Victorians, and good examples should be retained.

As a general rule, mouldings should not be used to change the character of a house; rather they should be used with restraint, to draw out the character that is already there.

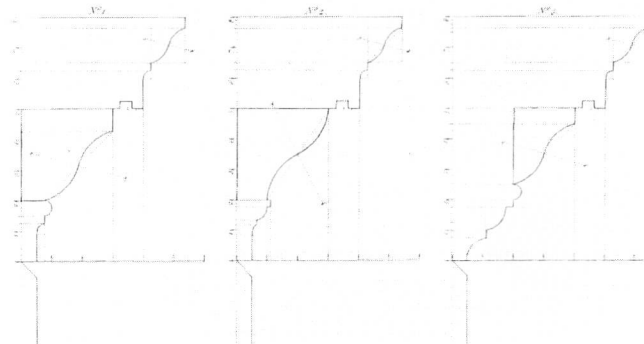
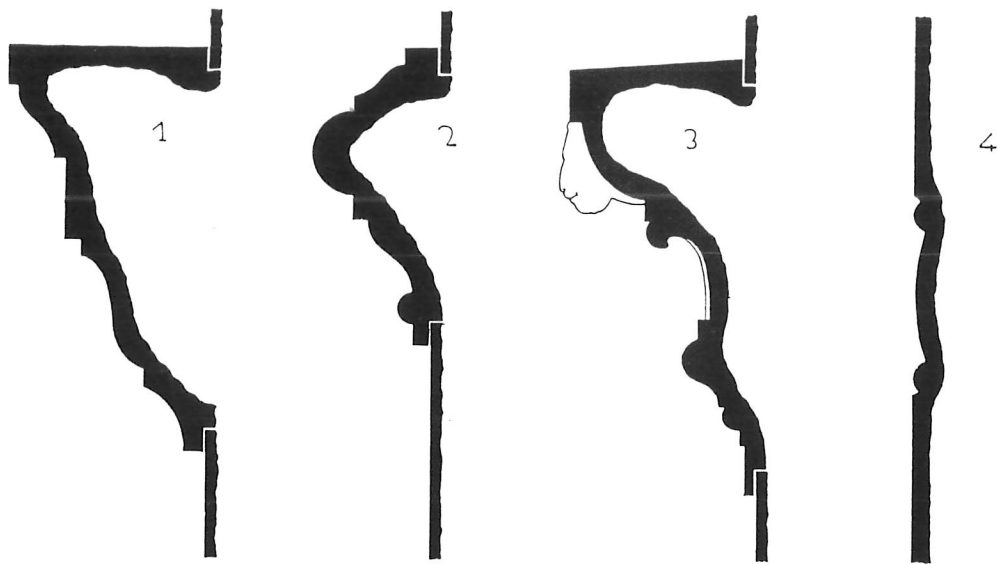
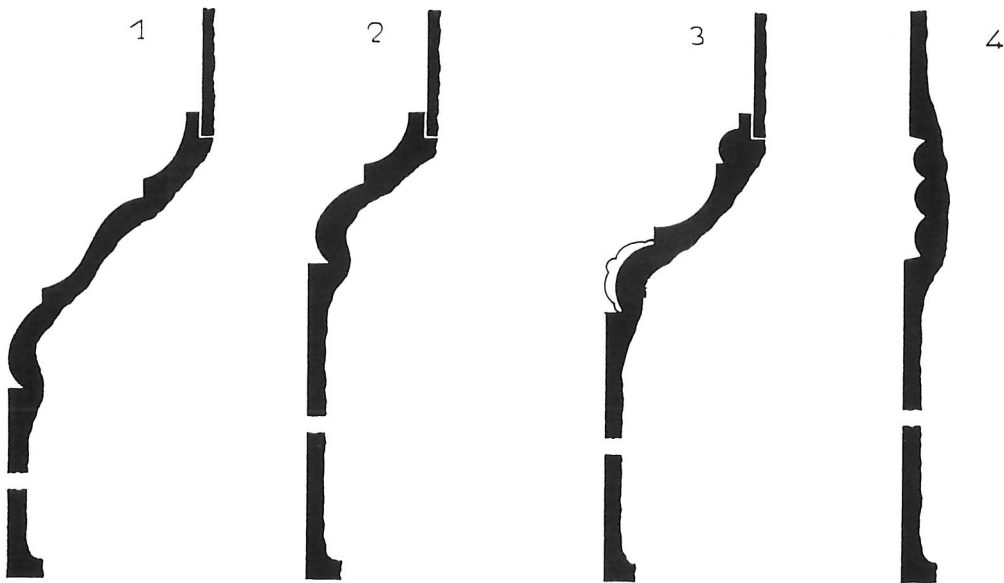


FIGURE 4 'THE PROFILES OF BLOCK CORNICES' FROM JAMES GIBBS' *RULES FOR DRAWING* OF 1732 (THE BRITISH LIBRARY)



DADO MOULDS



SKIRTING MOULDS



PILASTER MOULDS
HALF FULL SIZE

FIGURE 5 COMPARATIVE STUART AND GEORGIAN MOULDINGS: FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, THE QUEEN'S HOUSE, GREENWICH (1620s-30s); HAMPTON COURT PALACE (LATE 17TH CENTURY); 20 ST JAMES'S SQUARE, LONDON (THIRD QUARTER 18TH CENTURY); 13 LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, LONDON (c.1800). FROM NATHANIEL LLOYD'S *THE ENGLISH HOUSE* OF 1931

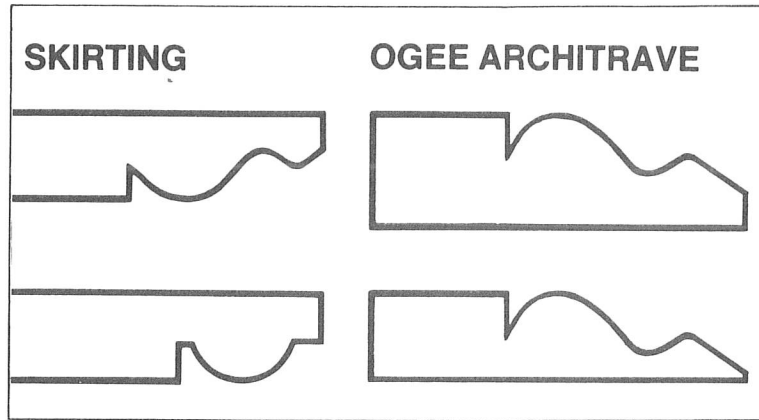


FIGURE 6 CRUDE AND UNSUITABLE:
 MODERN, OFF-THE-PEG MOULDINGS.
 COMPARE WITH FIGS 3-5

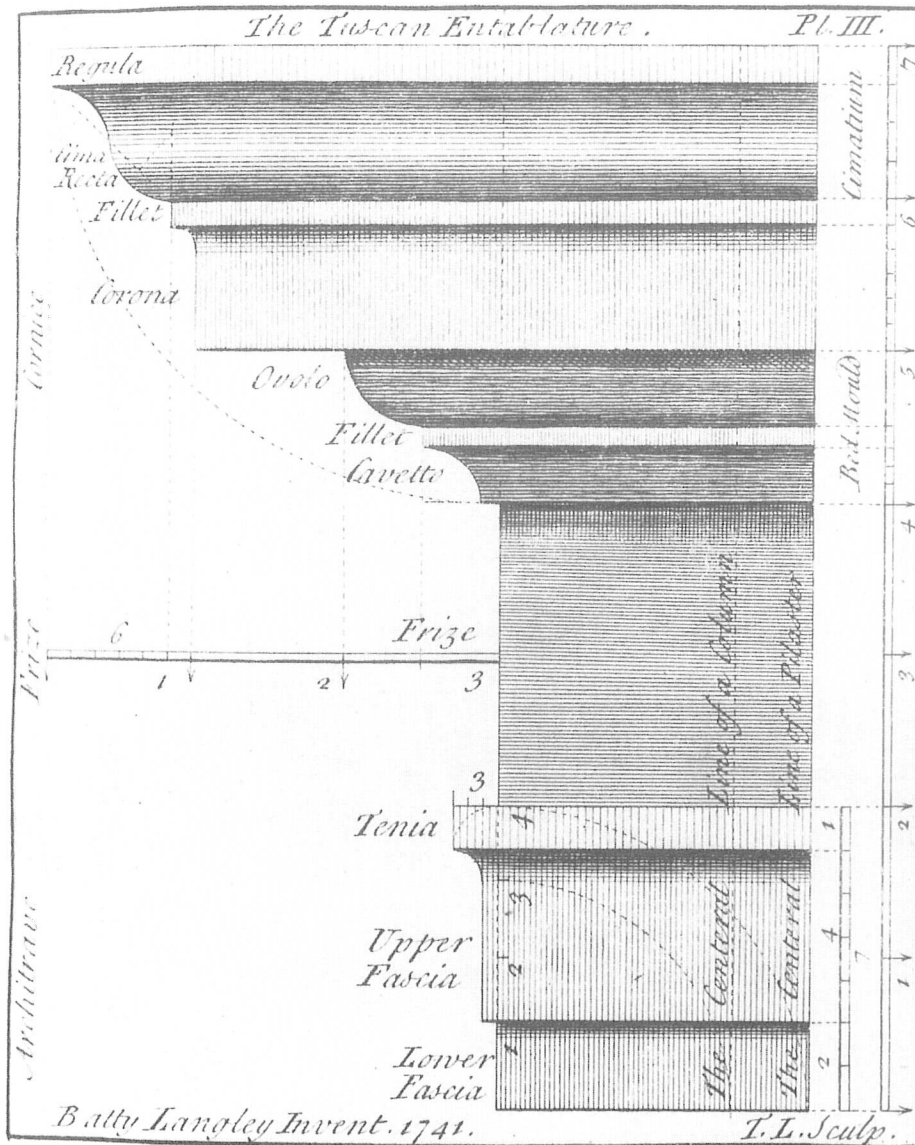


FIGURE 7 THE PARTS OF THE
 ENTABLATURE EXPLAINED: PLATE 3 OF
 BATTY LANGLEY'S *THE BUILDER'S JEWEL*
 OF 1754 (THE BRITISH LIBRARY)

MOULDING TYPES

THE VOCABULARY OF CLASSICAL MOULDINGS is voluminous, and the multiplicity of terms often extremely confusing. However, as Dan Cruickshank has pointed out, 'all moulded decorations are based upon two simple and complementary forms: the curved convex quadrant called the ovolo (also occasionally called the echinus) and the flat-faced right-angular fillet' (*Life in the Georgian City* (1990), 167).

The basic varieties of mouldings are best explained visually, as in figures 7 (preceding page) and 8 (below).

Astragal

A small convex moulding, often decorated with a bead and reel low relief pattern.

Bead

A small cylindrical moulding, often enriched with ornament resembling a string of beads.

Bolection

A moulding used to cover the joint between two members with different surface levels. It projects beyond both surfaces. Frequently used in 17th and early 18th C joinery.

Cavetto

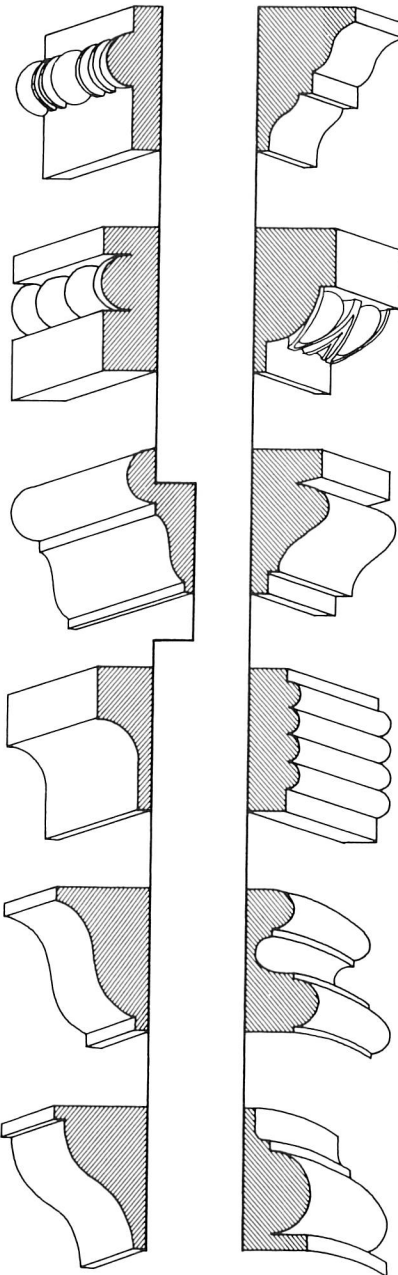
A concave moulding whose profile is usually a quarter of a circle.

Cyma recta

The cyma is a moulding consisting of a double curve. The cyma recta or ogee moulding is concave above and convex below.

Cyma reversa

The cyma reversa, or reverse ogee, also called a keel moulding, is convex above and concave below.



Fillet

A narrow flat band used to separate two mouldings, or to terminate a series of mouldings as in a cornice, sometimes called a listel.

Ovolo

A convex moulding, usually a quarter of a circle, sometimes ornamented with egg and dart or similar motifs.

Quirk

An acute V-shaped groove, often found between a convex moulding and a flat member. Also used to afford shadow to an ogee or ovolo.

Reeding

A form of surface decoration, consisting of parallel convex mouldings

Scotia

A small concave moulding between the two tori in the base of a column. It throws a deep shadow.

Torus

(plural: tori) A bold convex moulding used in the bases of columns.

FIGURE 8 BASIC DECORATIVE
MOULDINGS (REPRODUCED BY KIND
PERMISSION OF TRADITIONAL HOMES
MAGAZINE)

COVER: MOULDINGS FROM THE BROOKING COLLECTION. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DADO RAIL WITH GESSO DECORATION OF 1792 FROM A HOUSE IN GREAT TITCHFIELD STREET, LONDON, DEMOLISHED IN 1981; A SIMPLE ARCHITRAVE OF THE 1750s FROM STOKE PARK MANSION, SURREY, DEMOLISHED IN 1977; DADO RAIL OF THE 1780s SHOWING THE RESULTS OF THE REMOVAL OF ACCUMULATED LAYERS OF PAINT, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME ENSURING THAT THE SECTION RETAINS (ON THE LEFT) A RECORD OF ITS PAINT HISTORY: ARCHITRAVE AND DADO RAIL FROM THE ADAM BROTHERS' 49 PORTLAND PLACE (THE CHINESE EMBASSY) OF 1785, DEMOLISHED IN 1980. (PHOTOS BY LARK GILMER/ COPYRIGHT PHAIDON PRESS/BY KIND PERMISSION OF CHARLES BROOKING)

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The British Library, Gt Russell St, London WC1:

Georgian pattern-books (ask the Georgian Group for recommended titles; you will need a reader's ticket for the BL).

The Brooking Collection, University of Greenwich, telephone for an appointment, tel. 0181 331 9897: a vast, invaluable collection of mouldings from every period.

English Heritage (Research and Technical Advice Service), 23 Savile Row, London W1X 1AB, tel. 0171 973 3000: expert advice on how to proceed with repairs.

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 37 Spital Square, London E1 6DY, tel. 0171 377 1644: expert advice on building history and structural repairs, including an invaluable range of information sheets.

FURTHER READING

Colin Amery, *Period Houses and their Details* (1974)

Robert Chitham, *The Classical Orders of Architecture* (1985)

Dan Cruickshank, '*Material Success*' in *Renovation*, March 1989

Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton, *Life in the Georgian City* (1990)

Nathaniel Lloyd, *The English House* (1931)

Franz Meyer, *Handbook of Ornament* (1888)

John Olley, '20 St James's Square' in *The Architect's Journal*, 21 February 1990

Tunstall Small and Christopher Woodbridge, *Houses of the Wren and Georgian Periods* (1932)

Suggested Pattern-Books

James Gibbs, *Rules for Drawing* (1732)

Joseph Gwilt, *An Encyclopaedia of Architecture* (1842)

William Halfpenny, *The Art of Sound Building* (1723)

William Halfpenny, *Practical Architecture* (1736)

Batty Langley, *The Builder's Complete Assistant* (1738)

Batty Langley, *The Builder's Director* (1747)
(also numerous other useful volumes by Batty Langley)

Peter Nicholson, *Mechanical Exercises* (1812)

Peter Nicholson, *An Architectural Dictionary* (1819)

William Pain, *The Carpenter's and Joiner's Repository* (1778)

William Pain, *The Practical House Carpenter* (1789)

Abraham Swan, *A Collection of Designs in Architecture* (1757)

The Georgian Group exists to save Georgian buildings, townscapes, monuments, parks and gardens from destruction or disfigurement; to stimulate public knowledge of Georgian architecture and Georgian taste. The Group offers a yearly programme of visits and educational events; application for membership can be obtained from the group office at 6 Fitzroy Square, London W1T 5DX, Telephone: 020 7529 8920. The Group is a registered charity, No. 209934, and benefits from Covenants.

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