

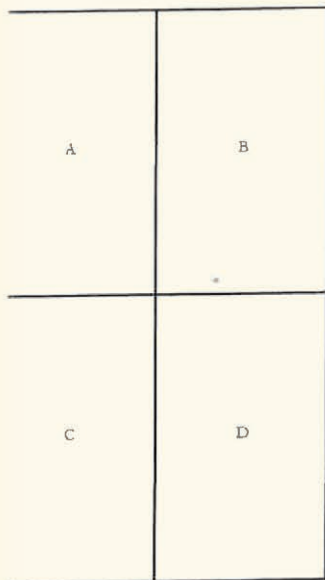
The Georgian Group Guides

Nº3

DOORS



A Brief Guide to the History and Care
of Georgian Doors and Porches



A) NEOCLASSICAL DOOR IN BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON. B) LATE GEORGIAN REEDED DOORCASE IN BEDFORD SQUARE, BOW. C) AGENCY DOOR IN ESSEX ROAD, NORTH LONDON. D) EARLY PALLADIAN DOOR FROM TWICKENHAM, MIDDLESEX.

THE GEORGIAN GROUP is often asked for advice about Georgian doors, both external and internal. We have witnessed increasing numbers of Georgian houses defaced by the replacement of original doors by inappropriate modern products which, however authentic they pretend to be, help both to ruin the proportions and aesthetics of the house and, more practically, to reduce the retail value of the building.

This leaflet covers some of the essentials to bear in mind when dealing with doors and porches, and illustrates the key do's and don'ts of door replacement. Before you start any repairs on a Georgian house, always consult the Conservation Officer of your local District or Borough Council first. And remember that most alterations to listed buildings (or in some cases even unlisted buildings in a Conservation Area) require Listed Building Consent or planning permission before they are attempted. Even stripping the internal or external doors of a Listed Building may require consent.

HISTORY

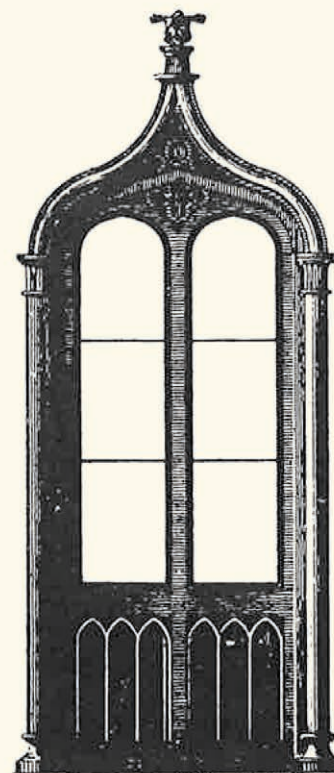
PRIOR TO THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY doors of any importance were generally ledged, i.e. they comprised interlinked planks bound together with horizontal ledges. By the early eighteenth century, however, the panelled door had become standard for all houses of note. These consisted of a combination of panels, rails and stiles. The panels were either recessed or raised, generally with chamfered edges, and were "fielded" – flat, and with a surface on a similar plane to that of the door frame. The number of panels in a door varied – occasionally there were five or seven, one large panel stretching across the door below the lower rail – but the most common arrangement was six panels.

As the eighteenth century progressed, the width of the panels decreased, and the mouldings linking them to the stiles and rails became more subtle. At the same time doors were becoming more substantial, and door furniture more elaborate. In 1749 the architect John Wood noted that, whereas twenty years previously "The Doors were slight and thin, and the best Locks had only Iron coverings varnished . . .", by mid-century "the Doors in general were not only made thick and substantial, but they had the best Sort of Brass Locks put on them". By the middle of the nineteenth century glass was being inserted into the top two panels of the door itself, in order to provide the hall with more light.

Doorcases in the Baroque era tended to be of the hood-and-bracket form, some of the more elaborate examples being provided with profusely-carved and imaginative brackets or scrolls, supporting weighty hoods. During the 1720s these began to give way to the orthodox Palladian temple-front ("aedicular") doorcase which became the standard pattern for the remainder of the Georgian period.

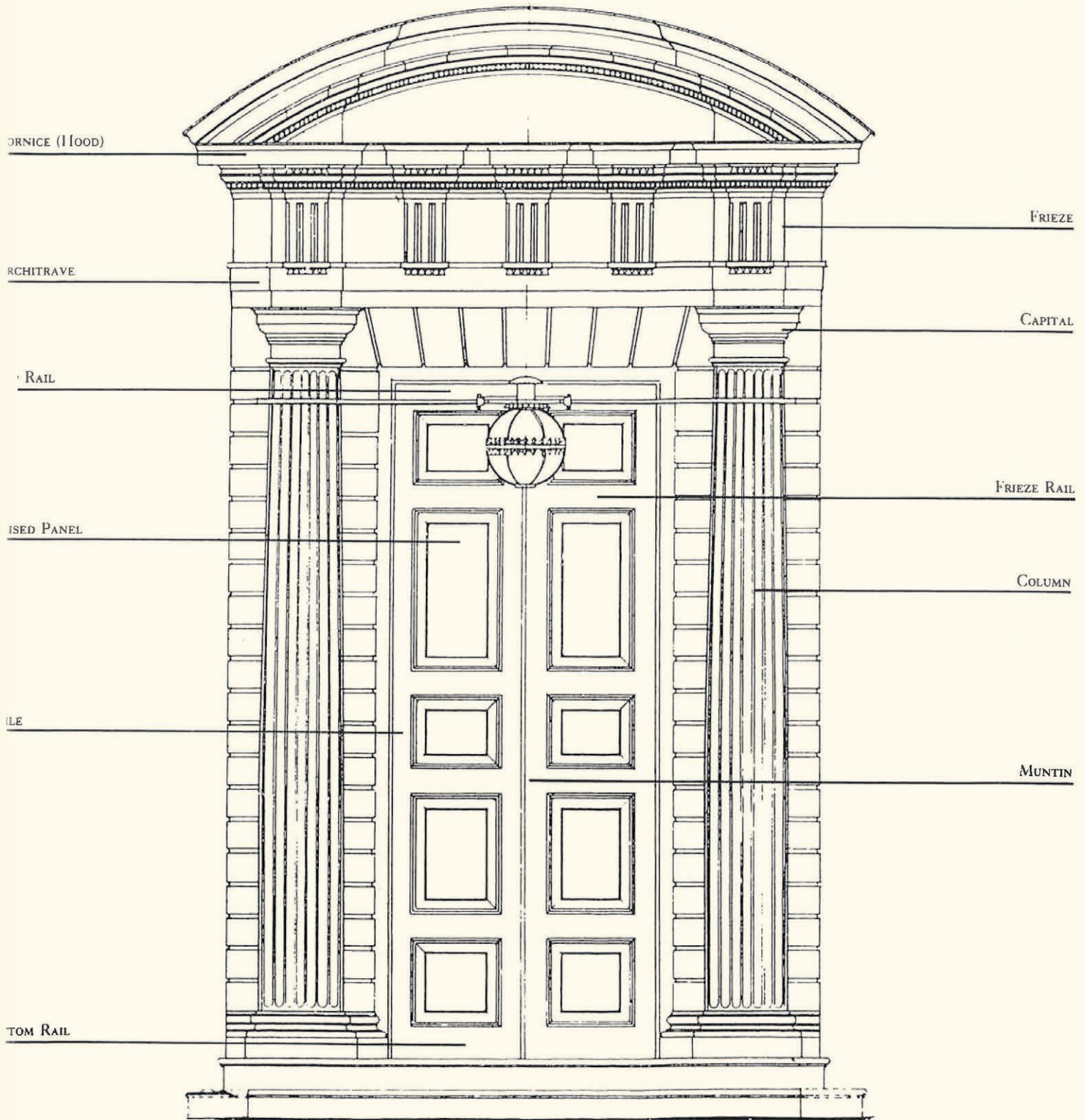
Baroque hoods, Palladian pediments or simple lintel-entablatures were all invariably hollow, and were protected from rain penetration by simple lead flashings.

DESIGN FOR AN OGEE ARCHED GOTHIC DOORCASE TO BE INCORPORATED WITH A SHOP FASCIA C.1800.



ANATOMY OF A DOOR

(from Colin Amery, *Three Centuries of Architectural Craftsmanship*, Butterworths 1977)



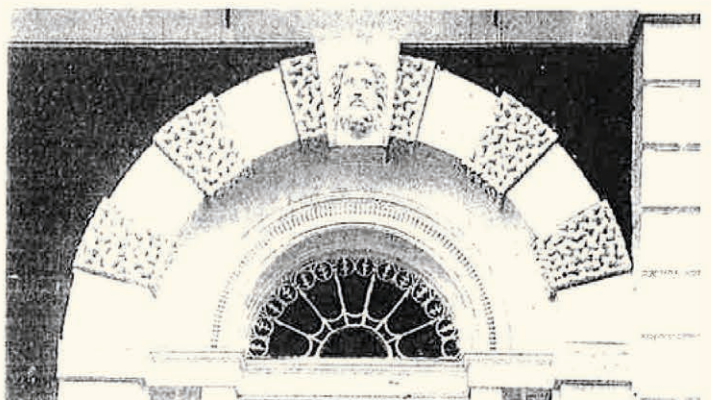
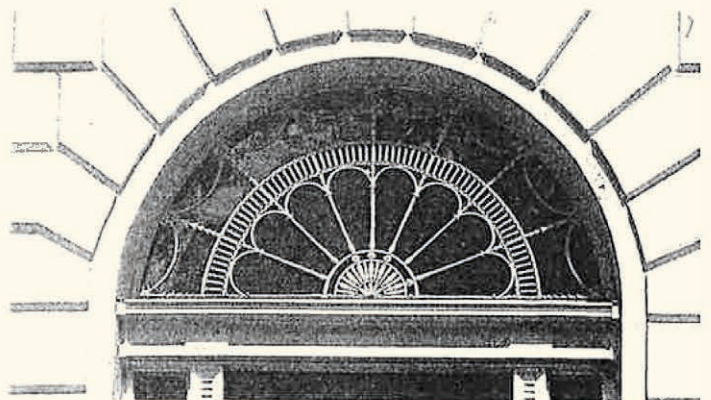
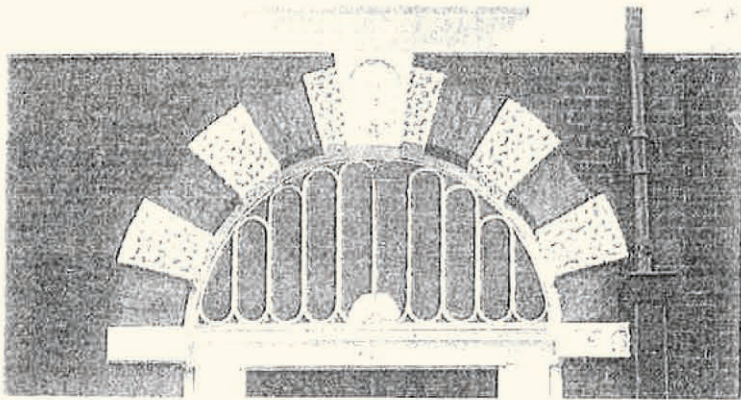
FANLIGHTS

FANLIGHTS FIRST BEGAN TO APPEAR during the 1720s, being immediately accommodated within the Palladian doorcase format. They provided the designer with great scope for individuality, and were thus highly popular both with the mid-century practitioners of the Rococo style and the proponents of the delicate Neoclassical tracery of Robert Adam and his followers. By the early 1800s, however, plainer fanlights, based on simple, circular motifs, had begun to replace the more fanciful Adam examples. By the 1840s leaded fanlights had become much less fashionable as glass began to be inserted into the door with greater frequency, and single-sheet fanlights replaced the structurally weak leaded examples. Single-sheet lights became especially popular following the introduction in 1832 by Chance Brothers of Stourbridge of good quality 'broad' glass, which did not need internal glazing bars.

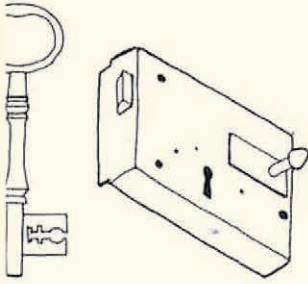
Fanlights are still made in the traditional fashion but many would-be improvers of Georgian houses are led to believe that the only alternatives available to them are the grotesque and ridiculous parodies which pose as genuine Georgian designs. Thankfully, this is not the case.

Basically, if repairing or re-inserting a fanlight, you should take care to integrate the glass with the glazing bars – fake bars should not simply be stuck onto the outside – and avoid the clumsy pastiche 'wrought iron' that is becoming so prevalent. Above all, *never* incorporate a fanlight or any other glazing within the door itself, unless the door already has such a feature. And remember, it is always better to repair a damaged Georgian fanlight than to insert a lifeless modern reproduction.

FOUR DIFFERENT FANLIGHTS, ALL IN
BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON.



DOOR FURNITURE



A SLIDING LATCH LOCK.

DOOR FURNITURE IS ALSO AN AREA where there are a number of fundamental modern misconceptions. Despite what many firms are keen to imply, fittings for external Georgian doors were, at least before c.1810, rarely of polished brass, but were invariably made of cast iron and painted black. Shiny modern fittings are quite inappropriate and dominate the rest of the door to an excessive degree. Georgian doorknobs, for example, were not massive, gaudy handles but merely simple painted or brass knobs; they were generally situated at waist height, halfway up the middle or lock rail (often at 2 feet 9 inches above ground level). Care must be taken to avoid applying inappropriate finger-plates and locks within the house, too.

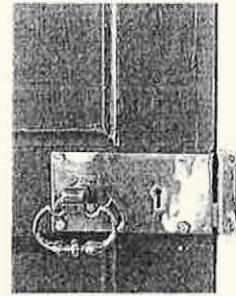
During the eighteenth century brass or iron rim locks (i.e. with the locking mechanism largely on the exterior of the door and architrave) were most common. Mortise locks, integral with the wood of the architrave and shutting stile, appeared only towards the end of the century, while the first Chubb lock, able to identify the wrong key, was not produced until 1818. Also to avoid are the purely decorative strap hinges that hide modern hinge mechanisms. Georgian iron hinges are often quite irreplaceable, so take care to save as much of this kind of door furniture as possible. Remember, though, that the Fire Officer may insist that the door locks be altered to enable the doors to be self-closing. In this happens, try and save the original fittings if you can. If you must fit new door furniture, ensure that the additions are as subtle, discreet and sympathetically-proportioned as possible.

MODERN 'PERIOD' DOORS

MANY MODERN EXAMPLES of the door-manufacturer's art – usually designated 'period', 'traditional', 'Georgian-style', or something similar – have in fact very little in common with the designs they are supposed to evoke. And yet they are frequently inserted into Georgian houses in the mistaken belief that they are aesthetically and historically appropriate. In the case of listed buildings or houses in a Conservation Area, the provision of such doors can actually result in legal prosecution – Listed Building Consent being necessary for a major alteration such as this – and at very least can reduce the value of the property.

Two basic misconceptions about Georgian doors should be quickly demolished. Firstly, the modern trend for 'slipped' or integrated fanlights within the door is not based on Georgian precedent. As noted already, glass only appeared within the door during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the Georgian door was in most cases totally separated from the glazed fanlight above. It is perfectly acceptable to insert glass into internal doors – a design where the top half of the door is divided into nine glazed panels is quite a common example – but *not* into Georgian front doors, excepting where the small upper panels have been replaced with glass. There are, of course, local exceptions to this rule; but this is generally the case with exterior doors in virtually all town houses, and certainly the majority of country houses.

The second widely-held belief is that wood (not only in doors and doorcases, but also for window-frames and wall panelling) was originally left unadorned in the Georgian house. This is quite wrong, and appears to



MID-GEORGIAN RIM LOCK.
COURTESY OF PALLANT HOUSE, CHICHESTER.



CRUDE AND AHISTORICAL TROPICAL
HARDWOOD 'SLIPPED FANLIGHT' DOOR
IN A GEORGIAN TERRACE.

be based on confusion of Georgian practice with the fashion of the 1960s for 'honest' stripped Scandinavian timber. Georgian doors were invariably painted, and never left bare or (as in the case with modern 'Georgian' hardwoods from Brazil and the Philippines) varnished. Some humble internal doors, away from the principal rooms, may have occasionally been left unpainted in Georgian homes, but even these would have been given repeated layers of wax polish.



OUR MODERN, SHAM-HISTORICAL KAMPLES IN THE SAME NORTH LONDON TERRACE. NOTE THE SLIPPED TRANSLIGHTS AND THE UNPAINTED TROPICAL HARDWOOD.

PAINTING

DOORS AND DOORCASES should be repainted about every three to four years in order to prevent water from seeping in through damaged paintwork and thereby allowing the timber to rot. Inevitably this leads to a build-up of paint layers which sooner or later must be removed if the mouldings are not to be wholly obscured. Paint layers can be removed by using hot air guns, gentle caustic solutions or liquid paint strippers; solutions that eat into the wood or plaster and particularly blowtorches should be avoided.

Graining or marbling painted onto internal doors should be reproduced where possible, as should gilded detailing on doorcases in very grand houses – gold paint being a very poor substitute for gold leaf in instances of the latter. Graining – painting inferior woods such as pine to resemble expensive materials such as mahogany or seasoned oak – was very popular at the beginning of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At other time colours such as brown and green were commonly used for internal doors (and indeed for much internal woodwork), and dark hues for external doors. The Georgian Group's leaflet No. 4, *Paint Colour*, details the variety of paint colours used for such features.

REPAIRING

IF NEW HARDWOOD IS TO BE USED to replace parts of a door; make sure it has been properly seasoned before insertion, otherwise it



may distort. Warped doors can be remedied by planing (best done by a joiner). If bad draughts are the problem, a weathering strip can be added to the bottom of the exterior bottom rail: this can additionally be grooved on the underside to catch water, a corresponding drop in the level of the rebate ensuring the water will flow away from the door. Many firms now sell excellent, unobtrusive and cheap brush carriers which can easily be fitted to the underside and bottom rail of the door; these serve to exclude both draughts and noise. For greater security, metal straps can be fixed to the inside of the front door, emulating Georgian practice.

Remember that it is always preferable to leave internal doors in place, even if they are no longer in use. The alternative is often an ugly infill panel which ruins the intended proportions or aesthetics of the room or hallway.

Porches can also present difficulties. They are particularly susceptible to damp – especially if the lead flashing has come adrift from the wall of the main house – and to tilting. The latter can be solved by providing a slip joint between the porch and the wall, by underpinning the porch and improving the foundations, or literally by binding the porch more effectively to the brick or stone behind; all of these solutions, however, need to be executed by a professional. In repairing porch mouldings, remember to ensure that existing details are repeated, and to follow any regional variations or characteristics if they are relevant. Don't be tempted to suggest the addition of new details for which there is no precedent, or indeed to add completely new but historically inappropriate porches to extant doorways; the result will nearly always look very uncomfortable. (Admittedly, though, such practices as inserting contemporary fanlights into earlier doorcases were indeed quite widespread during the later Georgian period.)

If certain elements of the doorway or porch are wholly unavailable – for example, the 'Coade stone' mouldings that proved so popular from c. 1770 – then a faithful replica in plaster or masonry is the best alternative.

FIRE REGULATIONS

IN THE PAST Fire Regulations have often been used as an excuse to mutilate or even totally replace Georgian doors. This does not have to be the case. The Fire Precautions Act states that doors should be not less than 45mm thick, whilst the door should have at least 30 minutes' fire resistance. Georgian doors are solidly built, and frequently the stiles and rails, although not the recessed panels, are thicker than the 45mm limit; if so, then additional panels can be attached to the existing surfaces, or better still, the door panels can be split and fire resistant sheets inserted sandwich-style. Again, however, this is best performed by an expert joiner. The use of a layer of 'intumescent' paint can also help; this expands to form a heat barrier whilst acting to starve the flames of oxygen. The much favoured solution of the 1960s, a hardboard or asbestolux cover stuck over the panels, is reasonably effective but aesthetically unsatisfactory. If the Fire Officer insists that the door locks be altered to make the doors self-closing, try to ensure that the new lock is, on the outside at least, a duplicate of the old.



SELECTION OF ELEANOR COADE'S
'ETCHINGS OF COADE'S ARTIFICIAL
STONE', A SALES CATALOGUE
PUBLISHED IN 1799.

FURTHER READING

- ed Colin Amery
Period Houses and their Details (1978)
- ed Colin Amery
Three Centuries of Architectural Craftsmanship (1978)
- Andrew Byrne
Bedford Square (1960)
- Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton
Life in the Georgian City (1990)
- ed Davey, Heath etc.
The Care and Conservation of Georgian Houses (1978)
- W. G. Davie and G. Tanner
Old English Doorways (1903)
- Essex County Council
Period Doors (1986)
- Hove Borough Council
Conversions and Alterations (1988)
- John Sambrook
Fanlights (1989)
- Matthew Saunders
The Historic Home Owner's Companion (1987)
- Charles Viney
London Doors (1989)

The Conservation Officer of your local District or Borough Council will be able to advise you on suitable local joiners and manufacturers.



The Georgian Group exists to save Georgian buildings, monuments, parks and gardens from destruction or disfigurement; to stimulate public knowledge of Georgian architecture and Georgian taste; and to promote the appreciation and enjoyment of all products of the English classical tradition. The Group is a registered charity, No. 209934, and benefits from Covenants. The Group can be contacted at 6 Fitzroy Square, London W1T 5DX.

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