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Euston 4959

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MARLBOROUGH

21, HILL STREET, M. R. W. I.



MARLBOROUGH HOUSE
S.W.1.

25th April, 1947.

Dear Mr. Acworth,

Thank you very much for
sending me a copy of the Georgian
Group "Visits - 1947" circular,
which I have had the honour of
handing to Queen Mary.

Her Majesty was very glad
to have this paper and said that
it will be of much interest to
her to read it.

Yours very truly,

H. S. Graham

Private Secretary to
H.M. Queen Mary

A.W. Acworth, Esq.,
Hon. Acting Secretary

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THE CONTINUOUS PRESENT

The Georgian Group and Traditional Craftsmanship, 1937–2017

DAVID MCKINSTRY, SECRETARY

Our architecture and our language are the arts of England. But the art is impractical without its craftsmen. It is this that gives to architecture its corporate body. The art is not personified in a single figure. The minor arts are all flourishing, and all fall together. The leaves wither, and the long winter comes. We may conclude that it is unlikely it will flower again our lifetime.

SACHEVERELL SITWELL

British Architects and Craftsmen, 1600–1830, London, 1945

When Sitwell wrote his low-spirited view of the future of historic buildings and contemporary craftsmanship, much of Britain had been devastated by bombing and war in Europe was ongoing. The Georgian Group, founded in 1937, hibernated throughout the war, and although individual members remained very active, the survival of the Group in a post-war landscape was doubtful, where the ‘rebuilding’ of Britain often led to the demolition of historic fabric. Yet the Group not only survived; by 1947 it had been instrumental in achieving the statutory listing of historic buildings, and indeed that any building dating from before 1850 should be treated as listed until the statutory lists had been completed. In addition to this, the Group campaigned for the preservation and repair of vast swathes of bomb-damaged fabric in the face of a severe shortage of materials, and, often very successfully, campaigned against the demolition of country houses. Such successes demonstrate the determination of both the Group and the public to save and protect the physical links with the national heritage in a period when one may have thought it impossible.

These achievements required both a public appreciation of Georgian buildings and architects and craftsmen capable of restoring them. While there were many exemplary restorations of Georgian buildings in the post-war period, often attempts had to focus on preserving and reinstating the spirit of the building. Surely that generation of conservationists and craftsmen should regard our own age with envy, when decades of education, research and technological development should have made it easier than ever to continue the living legacy of traditional craftsmanship? Yet we have only to look around the historic environment today to see that, all too often, outside of ‘heritage projects’ or ‘conservation areas’, more than a lifetime of work has been disregarded. The ethos of the Group was that while statutory protections for the historic environment were vital, the true focus of its efforts would be to make such protection

less necessary through public education. Rather than passively relying on local planning authorities to prevent harm, the property owner should be encouraged to reverse damage and halt decay.

While the wholesale loss of Georgian buildings is thankfully now a rarity, all too many are still affected by thoughtless and ill-informed alteration, left to decay, or even fall victim to deliberate harm. A risk-averse commercial sector, a financially beleaguered government, a housing shortage; all of these are used to excuse the neglect and maltreatment of the national heritage. But if a nation under rationing and other hardships could find time and skills to repair and conserve its heritage, and to do so as a priority, then there really is no excuse for not doing the same, and far more, today. As the Georgian Group celebrates eighty years as a conservation charity, it is worth reflecting on our founding principles:

To save from destruction or disfigurement Georgian buildings, whether individually or as part of a group, monuments, parks and gardens of architectural and historic interest and, where necessary, encourage their appropriate repair or restoration and the protection and improvement of their setting.

To stimulate public knowledge and appreciation of Georgian architecture and town planning; of Georgian taste as displayed in the applied arts, design and craftsmanship, and its influence on later periods.

The Trustees of the Group recently reaffirmed those aims in advance of the eightieth anniversary, and recognised that these objects are mutually reinforcing and therefore need to be pursued together.



Top: Kingston House, Kensington, demolished 1937.

Above: Kingston House site today.

Therefore the Group's eightieth anniversary is marked with a special programme of events focusing on the best contemporary craftsmanship as it relates to the Georgian environment. In so doing, the Group seeks to inspire the public to challenge the pessimistic, despondent and utterly erroneous assumption that intervention in the historic environment must necessarily be jarring, in materials and design, and without reference to our enormous repository of inherited national craft skills, many of which were honed to the peak of virtuoso perfection in the long eighteenth century and are practised with equal skill today. It was not for nothing that Sacheverell Sitwell called the years following 1600 'the continuous present, those centuries of a universal language in the arts of life'.

The works displayed in this exhibition combine both of the Group's charitable objects. For, by stimulating public knowledge and appreciation of Georgian craftsmanship, it is easier to save Georgian buildings and landscapes from destruction and disfigurement, and, in showing the happy influence of the eighteenth century on later periods, it is easier to encourage the appropriate repair of historic fabric today.

The Georgian Group's earliest manifestation was as a pressure group, in reaction to the zealous demolition of Georgian London; not least that of John Nash's Regent's Street and the Adam brothers' Adelphi Terrace. The period between the Great War and the Second World War saw the demolition of thousands of British buildings; many others were abandoned or partially destroyed. It was during this period that houses such as Wingersworth, Derbyshire were lost. With no government support for owners and no legislation to prevent destruction, even buildings of the highest architectural and historic merit were dismantled and sold for their scrap value. The practical legacy of the Georgian terrace was also obliterated

in cities across the United Kingdom, often in favour of development, which has since been demolished due to its rigid inadaptability for present inner-city needs.

In the 1930s an educated minority decried the destruction of original eighteenth-century fabric, both in its own terms, but also as a loss of basis for contemporary design. Far from being saved for reasons of nostalgia, the twentieth-century sympathy towards the Georgian legacy arose from a belief that it offered a rational design code with which to challenge a commercial interest intent on filling the public realm with a disparate array of individualistic buildings, united only in their disregard for the conventions of public good manners and rational town-planning.

The distinctive point about the formation of the Georgian Group is that it did not seek to preserve buildings and places simply because they were 'old', but because of their design qualities or aesthetic merits. Indeed, those who founded the Georgian Group were not only anxious to protect the built heritage of the long eighteenth century from destruction, but also to prevent it being altered or replaced by that which was, in the words of Lord Derwent to the House of Lords, 'jerry-built, shoddy and an agony to the eye'. However, simply building something loosely 'classical' was never accepted as an excuse for a badly conceived building. The monolithic sub-Wrenian 1930s flats of Grosvenor Square were not seen as justifying the destruction of eighteenth-century houses any more than the deeply underwhelming American Embassy of the late 1950s, and the mechanical 'Georgianism' of 31 St James's Square added insult to the injury of the demolition of Norfolk House in 1938. Rather, the key argument of the Group's aesthetic crusade was that the architecture of the long eighteenth century was worth preserving not only for its historic value, but also for its current design value and its

ability to inform contextual modern buildings of the appropriate scale, fabric and character for their location.

On 4 January 1938, on BBC programme *Farewell Brunswick Square*, the Group's Vice-Chairman, Robert Byron, and committee member John Summerson argued that modern town-planning had to involve preservation of historic buildings; that the past should inform and inspire modern design. Town-planning should not fail to relate to historic buildings or produce schemes necessitating their total clearance. While the demolition of historic buildings is more unusual today, the argument that modern development ought to respect and enhance the historic environment is a daily battle for the Group. Indeed, in most cities in the United Kingdom, the harm caused to the settings of Georgian buildings, through over-scaled and poor-quality new buildings, has become far worse.

During the 1938 broadcast, Byron was anxious to point out that the design merits of the Georgian inheritance did not lie simply in the ornate works of the period, but equally in vernacular and modest buildings. In the view of the Georgian Group the Georgian aesthetic suited English cities, because, Byron stated, it corresponded;

...almost to the point of dinginess, with our national character. Its reserve and dislike of outward show, its reliance on the virtue and dignity of proportions only, and its rare bursts of exquisite detail, all express as no other style has ever done that indifference to self-advertisement, that quiet assumption of our own worth, and that sudden vein of lyric affection, which have given us our part in civilisation. These are exactly the characteristics that London ought to express.



Top: Munster Square, The Regent's Park demolished after 1945 but proposed for demolition since 1936.

Above: The Kingston House site today.

What is immediately apparent is that the Group was not seeking to preserve the terraces of Georgian cities because they were ancient, but for reasons relating to their character, appropriateness and adaptability. That the public agreed with these values is evidenced by the surge in donations and membership following the broadcast.

The Second World War brought new challenges, but the massive redevelopments of the post-war period spurred the revival of the Group under a constitution outlining its charitable purposes. It was in the post-war years that the Group began to extend its concern and expertise towards the country house, which was threatened with destruction. In the period after 1945 early members of the Georgian Group, not least James Lees Milne, tirelessly campaigned for the National Trust to take on as many 'at risk' houses as possible. While the days of total demolition are no longer as extreme as in the mid-twentieth century, the Group is still engaged in debate and practical advice regarding the British country house. The recent fire at Clandon Park, the ongoing decay of Piercefield Hall, the future of Wentworth Woodhouse all require attention, along with the many private houses on which the Group consults every year.

Today the Group's concerns still relate to the overall context of Georgian heritage. Alterations which do not harmonise with the original fabric, the loss of a historic collection in its original context, repairs poorly executed or completed in inappropriate materials; all form part of the Group's concern, alongside its statutory role in the planning process. Therefore the Group sees appropriate craftsmanship as essential, certainly for the repair and maintenance of historic fabric, but also for new work in historic contexts. While it may well be unwise to extend a medieval tithe barn in the style of Ely Cathedral, it is equally unwise to extend a Georgian house

by means of glass boxes and copper louvres, as though it is some arcane fragment of a period so dead that there is no longer any sympathetic context in which it can sit comfortably. Incongruity of contemporary intervention is not the hallmark of good heritage stewardship, especially for buildings whose design aimed at harmony and integration of all of a building's components. The belief that 'of its own time' means new work executed in general accordance with the principles first espoused at the 1932 MOMA exhibition is not logical, although used enthusiastically by both educated architects and crass developers to defend disfiguring alterations to the historic environment. And concerns that, unless visual dissonance is created, it will somehow become impossible to distinguish between original fabric and later work, displays little confidence in the sensibility of the skilled craftsman or the abilities of the architectural historian.

Today the Group aims to protect historic buildings through providing advice to owners and architects and through our role as a statutory consultee in the planning system. We retain an active interest in works affecting the public realm and designed landscapes. Our annual Architectural Awards promote excellence in design and conservation as well as new work in the classical tradition. In its casework and educational activities, the Georgian Group advises owners, local authorities and churches on works to the historic fabric and setting of structures built between 1700 and 1840.

Therefore the legacy of positive and proactive conservation, and appreciation of our Georgian heritage, as established by our founding members, continues apace in the twenty-first century.