

Georgian Leaflet No. 6

GEORGIAN ARCHITECTURE  
and  
THE REPLANNING OF  
OUR TOWNS

THE GEORGIAN GROUP

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*Price Twopence*

*“ People will not look forward to posterity  
who never look backward to their ancestors.”*

Edmund Burke

# GEORGIAN ARCHITECTURE and THE REPLANNING OF OUR TOWNS

After a hundred years of *laissez-faire* the lay-out of English town and countryside, began in 1932 to be consciously planned in an endeavour to obtain by deliberate design the seamliness and amenity which resulted in the 18th and early 19th century from the general observance of the rules and grammar of classical architecture. This state of affairs is full of opportunity and of peril—not least in relation to our great heritage of Georgian buildings. It is the purpose of this Leaflet to consider how we may make the best of both worlds and plan for the future without sacrificing the legacy of the past.

The greatest danger to Georgian buildings comes perhaps from the doctrinaire planner who in his enthusiasm to build a New Jerusalem discards all existing structures and outlines on the drawing-board the arbitrary pattern of the town or city of his dreams. There is engaging simplicity about such an attitude, but it is grievously lacking in realism—at any rate in relation to Georgian buildings. In the first place, such buildings may be old but, as a rule, they are far from being obsolete and it is unpardonably wasteful to destroy buildings which, if reconditioned, would have a long and useful life before them. Secondly, our heritage of Georgian architecture is much more than so much stone or stucco or bricks and mortar. It is so often the Georgian buildings (and particularly the way they are grouped) which give to our towns the individual character and charm it is so important to preserve. It may be less easy to replan a town if certain buildings or groups of buildings are regarded as inviolate; but then, as Samuel Butler remarked, nothing that is really worth doing ever *is* easy!

A second danger is from the planner who would impose upon the centre or some other part of a town, a new monumental lay-out unrelated to the existing organic pattern which lies beneath. Whatever opinion we may have of the Paris of Haussman or the Washington of L'Enfant, these cities represent a design for living which is alien to the English temperament. The charm of our towns lies in their avoidance of exaggerated formality: even when the lay-out is sophisticated, it is on a human scale and takes the form of squares and crescents, architectural forms which limit the view. In laying out Regent Street (in its day one of the finest streets in Europe), Nash took advantage of the limitations imposed by existing buildings and thoroughfares to design a sequence of pictorial effects each of which had its natural place in the general scheme. By resisting the temptation to redesign in the "grand manner", not only will buildings of merit be saved from needless destruction but the scale of civic design will remain one in which Georgian buildings will find themselves quite at home.

More insidious is the danger from road-widening. Here no plans are exposed for demolishing whole squares or terraces, plans which

from their very ambition evoke opposition: instead, building by building, our architectural heritage is eaten away in order to ease a corner here, to straighten a roadway there, or broaden a thoroughfare somewhere else. And so to the loss of the Assembly Rooms of Midchester is added the demolition of the " Old George " at West-hampton. Already, before the War, it was beginning to be realised that to drive thoroughfares for fast traffic through our towns meant the loss not only of fine and characteristic buildings but also a steady toll on human life, and that the solution of the traffic problem was to be found in the by-pass. Today, the device of the by-pass is complemented by the general acceptance of the " precinct " principle in civic design. The town, or it may be the neighbourhood, is again to become, what it was in the 18th century, a place to walk in, and fast traffic will be diverted from its streets. The need to cut traffic arteries through market towns will exist no longer and the landlord of the " Red Lion " can serve his customers free from the threat of the loss of six feet off his frontage—including, of course, the whole of the 18th-century facade!

So much for the dangers: what of the opportunities? Despite the demolitions of the years between the Wars, despite the losses by enemy action, we are still the possessors of a glorious heritage of Georgian buildings. If we are not more conscious of our architectural riches, it is because through lack of a positive planning policy, some buildings have become obscured or overwhelmed by ill-placed or disproportionate neighbours, others find themselves in alien surroundings and used for a purpose for which they are ill-adapted, while through damaging alterations or garish display of trade-names or advertisements the character of many more has been destroyed. Replanning affords an opportunity of remedying these ills and not only of preserving for those who will come after us the best of our architectural heritage but of ensuring that it shall be seen to advantage and used for proper purposes.

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The GEORGIAN GROUP was founded in 1937. Its aims are:

- (1) to awaken public interest in Georgian architecture and town planning;
- (2) to afford advice in regard to the preservation, repair and use to-day of Georgian buildings;
- (3) to save from destruction and disfigurement Georgian squares, terraces, streets and individual buildings of special merit;
- (4) to ensure, when an area is replanned, that Georgian buildings are not wantonly destroyed, and that the new buildings harmonise (though they may contrast) with the old.

*Particulars of Membership can be obtained from the Secretary.*