

Georgian Leaflet No. 9

THE
GEORGIAN
SHOP-WINDOW

THE GEORGIAN GROUP

2, Chester Street, S.W.1

Belgravia 3081

Price Sixpence

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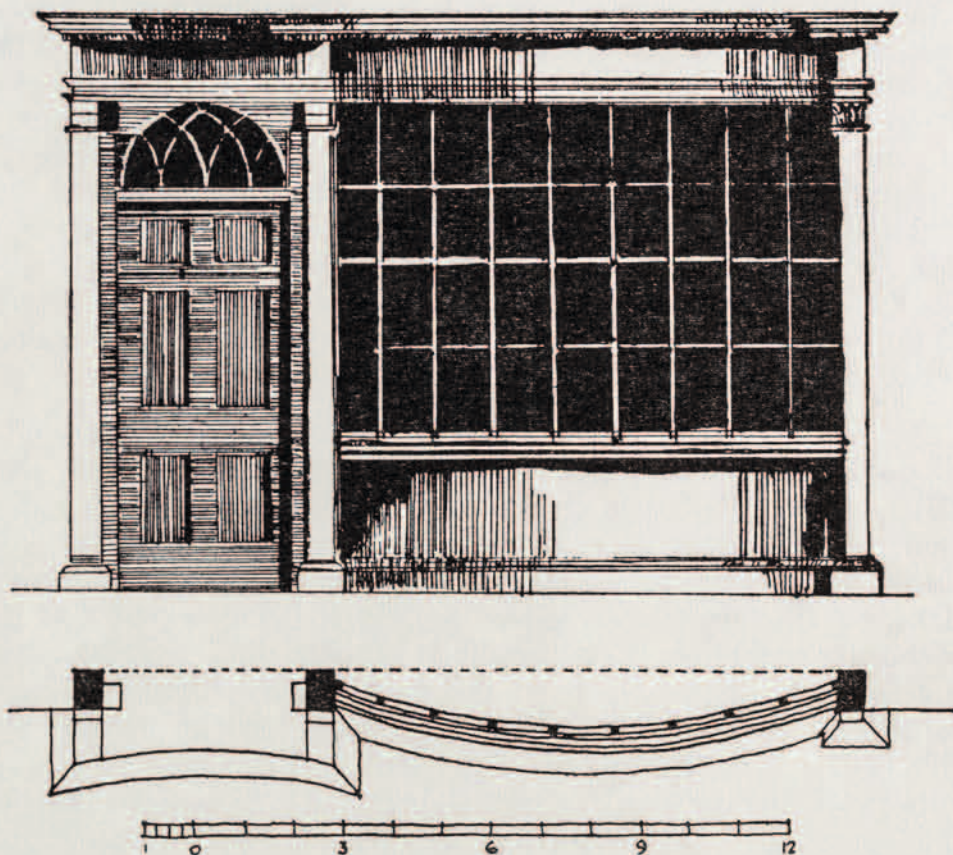
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- The English Landscape Garden by H. F. Clark (†*12s. 6d.*).
- The Georgian Playhouse by Richard Southern (†*12s. 6d.*).
- Treasure in the Caribbean by A. W. Acworth (†*12s. 6d.*).

† *Reduced price to Georgian Group Members: particulars from the Assistant Secretary.*

THE GEORGIAN SHOP-WINDOW

The Georgian shop-window was an attractive and characteristic feature of the 18th and early 19th-century street-scene. Just as the shop-signs—the barber's pole, the chymist's pestle and mortar, the vintner's bunch of gilded grapes, the banker's grasshopper, and the rest—competed with the swinging inn-signs in advertising to the approaching townsman or traveller the shop-keeper's business, so as he drew closer the gentle curve of the shop-window enticed his gaze to the wares displayed within. The scale of the window was exactly right, well-conceived in relation to the building of which it formed a part, to the street and to the height of the customer—it was, in short, part of the architecture of humanism. This was no accident. As was the case with other architectural features, the proportions of the window were the product of careful thought, the proper ratio of height to width had been studied and its curvature was judiciously calculated. For the local carpenter or shop-fitter prescriptions were provided in the "copy books", as shown by the following sketch from William Pain's *Practical House Carpenter*.



That the shop-windows conformed to rule did not, however, prevent great variety of design and it is their marked individuality which gives them half their charm. The fronts could be curved or straight, the door be set either in the middle or to

one side; the windows could be divided simply into rectangles by the usual glazing bars or be given a Gothick flavour by pointing the upper lights; the doors could be of wood throughout or be themselves glazed in part; and to the variations that could be introduced into the detail of pilaster or fanlight there was no end. At Cley in Norfolk a particularly enterprising builder even went so far as to incorporate into the design a wide mounting-ledge for the assistance of the departing horseman—a feature of the shop-front which has fortunately escaped destruction and survived into this motoring age.

However, the invention of plate-glass in the second quarter of the 19th century spelt the doom of the Georgian shop-window. In their eagerness to be up to date, to have ample window-space in which to cram the goods which were pouring out from the machines of Manchester and Birmingham, the shopkeepers of the time ripped out the glazing-bars and the glass, the panelling and the mouldings, now become *démodés*, and inserted in their place the largest possible rectangle of the new material. The new windows seldom bore any relation to their surroundings: they were, indeed, purely "functional".

But destruction was not complete. There are few districts in which one at least of the shops does not retain its Georgian facade. The tailor's shop in Artillery Lane, Stepney, and the tobacconist's shop in Haymarket, Westminster, are perhaps the best known, but there are good examples to be found in Bath and Stamford, in Corfe and in York. A careful survey, such as that now being conducted by the Investigators of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, will doubtless bring to light many others. It is important that they should be solicitously preserved both on account of their intrinsic merit and as interesting and valuable survivals of the architecture of a more gracious age.

The exigencies of war led to the partial supersession of the plate-glass window and the recognition that perhaps after all the quality of the display is as important as its quantity. For this reason, as well as because of the difficulty and expense today of building operations, such Georgian shop-fronts as survive are less in danger than they were. None the less, it is important that those so fortunate to possess them should be sensible of their value, protect them from damage and keep them in proper repair. Planning Committees can assist by refusing to give consent to any works which will affect adversely their architectural character. And Members of the Group can play their part in seeing that both shopkeepers and local authorities are cognizant of what is expected of them and by reporting to the Executive Committee any threat of damage.