



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

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GEORGIAN VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Introduction by Peter Richards

It was brave, or foolhardy for the Georgian Group to launch a conference on ordinary, or vernacular, Georgian architecture. By its very nature vernacular architecture is not restricted to a chronological period. There are vernacular examples from all periods and, although the Vernacular Architecture Group studies the chronology of the buildings closely, they do not, as a rule, attempt to slot them into the accepted periods of high architecture, Romanesque, Perpendicular, Jacobean, and so on. I suppose that I have always looked upon the vernacular as seamless, not without stylistic influences, but that influences were, in some way, taken in by craft osmosis. This conference brought about a rethink which is, as yet, unresolved.

The speakers were predominantly well known members of the VAG whilst most of the audience seemed to be from the Georgian Group. A conflict of philosophical approach appeared to be inevitable and with it the excitement of what might be a fresh approach to the study of the lesser (perhaps ordinary is the better word) architecture of the C18.

Christopher Woodward's Bath experience illuminated a fascinating study of the relationship between the Bath architect/developers and the local stonemasons and quarry owners. What influence did the local craftsmen have upon the architecture of the city. John Wood, newly come to Bath, was likely to tread gently with the locals so as to get their full cooperation in creating his vision of terraces, crescent and circuses. In time the masons would absorb Wood's doctrine. Did this result in a Bath Vernacular?

Elizabeth McKellar's paper followed on naturally with a study restricted to a relatively small area of the capital - a very vernacular approach - local methods and details can be identified throughout the kingdom. Two particular features, were pointed up; weatherboarding and the gambrel roof form, both of which were illustrated by others later in the day, a first hint of vernacular Georgian.

Joanna Cox used her southwestern experience to show the continued use of simple materials and methods through the C18 and up to the present time. Thatch and cob illustrate this longevity which is reinforced by the conservation movement striving to perpetuate the vernacular crafts. Members of the audience compared the thatch variations of combed wheat reed, long straw and reed and pointed out that the regional boundaries are being blurred by "foreign" methods used away from their vernacular home areas. David Martin's paper and slides made a similar point with the use of tile hanging in east Sussex, a common C18 material, which is rarely found north of the Thames before the late C19, a variation which cannot be explained by any shortage of brick earth or lack of knowledge of tile burning technology. This paper also identified local methods of timber framing technology, a subject of lively VAG research leading in some cases to the identification of local families of carpenters that continued over long periods. The chronological development of plan forms and their adaptation to suit local usage during the C17 and C18 was the subject of Nat Alcock's paper, which concentrated on the foursquare farmhouse in its various permutations, setting out a firm base for a wider study in regions other than the west midlands.

Anthony Quiney took the audience on a lightning tour of the boundaries of the polite and vernacular Georgian via estate and wayside cottages, almshouses, poorhouses and (to the tip of the polite) Adam at Lowther village where vernacular houses are set within a polite planned framework.

Finally Martin Cherry, Head of Listing at English Heritage, showed that the vernacular has not been overlooked in the listing process. Indeed one of the surprises of the Accelerated Resurvey was the identification and listing of vernacular buildings of all periods; the criteria quite specifically include C18 buildings which are reasonably complete. Further additions to the lists continue to be made but worries were expressed about the recent Green Paper suggesting that consultations with interested parties should be carried out before listing decisions are taken.

Most attending the Conference did not seem to doubt that Vernacular Georgian exists. The difficulty is in the identification – most will recognise it when they see it, but there is unlikely to be general agreement as to where the line between the polite and the vernacular can be drawn. The Conference started the discussion and it might be that some Georgian Group members will find the boundary being set further into the polite than they expected. Perhaps the next conference should be one entitled “Georgian Vernacular – the Ordinary Polite”, possibly jointly organised by the VAG and the Georgian Group.