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BENEVOLENT VERNACULAR; COTTAGES AND WORKERS' HOUSING

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There is general agreement that the eighteenth century saw vernacular architecture suffer a terminal decline, even though it lingered on, particularly in the north and west, well into the nineteenth century. The reason for this decline, again it is generally agreed, was the combined influence of metropolitan taste, promoted by pattern books, and the Industrial Revolution, which brought new materials and new methods of using them to every corner of the land. By the time that John Nash was designing Blaise Hamlet in 1811 the revival of vernacular was well and truly started, and the survival of vernacular was increasingly relegated to the realms of the curious and the poor.

So much for the accepted view. My intention is not so much to challenge this view as to examine it, particularly in the context of benevolent architecture and the light this sheds on the survival and revival of vernacular, and perhaps to modify it.

It is immediately clear that the difference between survival and revival is pretty shadowy territory. Survival and revival often go hand in hand, so it is perhaps foolhardy to differentiate them at all. What is artful design and what is traditional craftsmanship cannot be easily sundered for the sake of definitions. This is particularly true in the countryside, as opposed to in town; there were simply not enough craftsmen trained in the new ways to go round despite what they were asked to build. So, even when they were working for an established architect, their vernacular methods were quite likely to survive. What I have called benevolent architecture for the purposes of this lecture demonstrates the point well. By this term I mean any form of building commissioned by one person for the benefit of someone else, but for now I shall limit it to the provision of cottages and other forms of housing by the owners of estates, by speculators and by various institutions who were responsible for ameliorating the living conditions of the poor – or, at least, by people who believed that this was what they were doing.

The issue of survival and revival was famously examined in the context of polite architecture when Sir Nikolaus Pevsner came to explain the origins of the design of the new library built at St John's College, Cambridge, in 1624. 'Some men of judgement liked the best the old fashion of church window, holding it most meet for such a building.' Thus, Pevsner said, the dons of St John's chose Gothic rather than up-to-date classical and, in doing so, consciously revived a past style rather than simply allowing it to be used because their builders had yet to abandon it. So propriety won the day, not high fashion. Unfortunately, architectural history is seldom as simple to determine as this. In fact a case might be made for the library's being a demonstration of survival and revival working together, although that would mean discovering the viewpoints of not only the 'men of judgement' but also the builders who executed their desires.

In the case of vernacular architecture, the difficulties are greater because they are aggravated by the lack of appropriate documents that might provide the kind of insight into the circumstances attending the design of buildings so readily found at St John's.

While Blaise Hamlet is clearly revival in intention and therefore – and even more so than in the case of Gothic – not vernacular in the ordinary sense, it would be interesting to hear what the thatchers who worked there might have thought about the design of the individual cottages. In my mind, I can hear them cursing an architect who designed so many ins and outs around their roofs, contrary to the best thatching practice, for the sake of picturesque effect.

At all events it is not merely a wild speculation that vernacular survival had some life left in it at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To take a few examples at random, I shall first cite the now burnt-down Barn Cottage at Hordle on the edge of the New Forest in Hampshire. Its traditional box frame, dated 1778, carried a purlin roof on pairs of raking struts, and this was covered with thatch. There was nothing self-conscious about its construction; indeed, it had not the slightest trace of any use of vernacular elements other than those to be expected from local craftsmen who displayed total ignorance of the architectural fashions of the day.

Next on my list is a wayside cottage built on the old Dover road at Lydden in Kent. It epitomizes what must be thousands of similar rudimentary dwellings that carried vernacular deep into the nineteenth century and, in certain ways, into the twentieth as well. Its plain flint walls, resting on a brick plinth and finished with brick quoins, are repeated all over southern England, just as is its long, uninterrupted thatched roof.

Nevertheless, one must be careful. Long before the end of the nineteenth century, rural cottages were also being run up in great numbers with balloon frames or platform frames made of machine-cut softwood with a standardized scantling. For the most part they are finished with low-pitched roofs covered with slate cheaply imported from north Wales by what had become a ubiquitous railway system. Their construction and materials – even their cheap machine-sawn weatherboarding – are as untraditional as their plain, symmetrical elevations. Yet they are so readily found in southern England that they seem to be speaking with a vernacular tongue. On Denge Beach there are scores of such cottages, mostly built on a minimal scale. For a mile the beach looks like Carson City brought to Kent, and consequently it has been made a Conservation Area. While these cottages are not vernacular in the accepted sense, a case might be made for them as vernacular in intention – if that is not a contradiction in terms.

So much for cottages built by their original occupiers. When one comes to estate cottages, the position of surviving vernacular is similarly unclear, despite the example of Blaise Hamlet. The Duke of Bedford's cottages in Woburn Road, Ampthill (recorded in Eric Mercer's *English Vernacular Houses*), which are dated 1812, 1815 and 1816, have thin frames with brick nogging and thatched roofs. As Mercer recognised, the framing has all the appearance of a tradition in decline – though not yet dead, for these are not balloon frames – and the roofs a tradition still full of life, as indeed thatching was to remain for a long time still. Nevertheless, the houses are built with semi-detached plans comprising a front living room, rear service room and attic bedroom, arguably owing more to well-established estate practice than to ordinary vernacular traditions.

Are these cottages therefore vernacular revival or vernacular survival? The answer seems to be that they are both, or, at least, partly the one, partly the other, depending on which feature one is considering. The only decisive way to resolve the issue would be to examine the estate records in detail and similarly the construction of the houses. What were the intentions of the Duke's estate agent? How did the craftsmen perceive his instructions and then execute them. Were the apparently standardized four-inch timbers hand-sawn or machine sawn? Where did the design of the roof trusses come from – traditional practice or a copybook? Mercer is silent on these matters, and, for lack of evidence, most of the answers would probably remain unforthcoming anyway.

The assumption that these cottages demonstrate the survival of vernacular gradually succumbing to its revival as time takes its toll again is too simple a conclusion. The whole range of Georgian estate cottages shows, if anything, a confusing dialogue between survival and revival with no clear winner throughout the period from 1714 to 1837. The two, in any case, were not in conflict. Examine, for instance, New Houghton in Norfolk, which was begun in 1729, Nuneham Courtenay in Oxfordshire, begun in 1761, even Robert Adam's Lowther village in

Cumbria of 1765-73, the miners' cottages of Old Row, Elsecar, in South Yorkshire of 1805, and Butetown at Upper Rhymni in Glamorgan of 1825-30. There are differences in planning: some cottages are built in pairs, others in terraces; some are laid out in rows, some more formally in squares. But the most striking feature of all of these is their sense of place which emanates from the use of local materials in a traditional way.

The New Houghton cottages are laid out formally to emphasize the South Gate, but their whitewashed brick and pantiles belong to Norfolk in a way that the fine ashlar executed in Yorkshire stone of Houghton Hall clearly does not. The regular rows of semi-detached cottages at Nuneham Courtenay are unrelated to Lord Harcourt's Nuneham Park, and, while their ribbon-development planning is a parody of a medieval manorial layout, their brick construction with queen-strut trussed roofs is as traditional as one could find in any south Oxfordshire cottage of a similar date.

The Adam plan for Lowther village could hardly be further from the precepts of vernacular revival, let alone survival, its scheme of circus (half demolished), Greek cross (only partly executed) and long courtyard being as geometrically formal as neoclassicists liked. This formality is reflected in the elevations, in general of a single storey articulated with pavilions in appropriate places. Here it is the planning of the cottages, each originally as a single living room with a garret bedroom, and their masonry executed in rough-hewn Carboniferous Limestone that provide the truly vernacular elements.

There is a similar message from both Old Row at Elsecar and Butetown at Upper Rhymni. They do better by way of accommodation for their occupants. Old Row is simply that, a row of cottages, rather urban in appearance, but with each cottage laid out in the traditional Yorkshire way with a housebody and inner room, and with a pair of sleeping rooms above. Butetown's classical layout may even be based on the long courtyard at Lowther itself, although its accommodation, like Elsecar's, comprises pairs of rooms on two floors. Both are robustly built from local stone, a form of Coal Measures sandstone in each case.

Despite the specific requirements imposed by the various estate managers and, additionally in the case of Lowther, by one of the finest architects of the day, the work of the building craftsmen in executing these requirements has all the appearance of relying on at least some vital local traditions. If nothing else, they appear to represent a surviving vernacular architecture adapted, not vernacular architecture consciously revived.

Appearance is not the same thing as proof and proof cannot readily be found in any of these five examples. Yet, looking more widely, there is no doubt of the vitality of the surviving vernacular of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Take the very different example of one of the most famous medieval terraces of houses known to us today (thanks to David and Barbara Martin's research). This was built in Sussex for Battle Abbey just outside its precinct in Upper Lake at some time between 1460 and 1477. The terrace was given the form of a symmetrical arrangement of Wealden houses, marked out with a full Wealden house comprising a hall and service and solar. The symmetrically ordered architectural design of the terrace about its centre was one of its most remarkable features: within the standards of the fifteenth century, the terrace was no less consciously designed than Adam's Lowther. The terrace survives, but, as housing standards developed after the Middle Ages, there were changes. The halls were floored over and other modifications were put in place. This included a gradual refronting of the terrace, house by house, in an ad hoc fashion and always within the terms of the less consciously designed vernacular style of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was achieved in effect by underbuilding most of the houses in brick, tile-hanging the upper storeys and refenestrating them with small-paned casements and, later on, by sashes. In a sense, by reducing the original, more formal architectural qualities of the terrace by applying a new suit of rough and ready clothes to the front of each

house, the later craftsmen were making the terrace more vernacular than it had been in the first instance.

While it seems certain that the intentions of these craftsmen were purely vernacular, it can well be argued that sash windows do not really belong to the vernacular tradition in the way that casements do. Their late arrival in the terrace houses of Upper Lake does indeed mark the decline of the vernacular tradition in the nineteenth century; in the eighteenth, it marks the imposition of a polite architectural feature from above on to the everyday tradition of ordinary craftsmanship. Incidentally, the history of the sash window in Britain has yet to be written, but one may assume that its assimilation into vernacular has a parallel in the assimilation of classicism.

The arrival and assimilation of new forms in vernacular architecture can be readily seen in the industrial housing of the north. Like many houses devoted to the home industry of weaving, High Kinders at Saddleworth in Greater Manchester has a long history of development since it began in 1624, with addition piled on addition, sideways and upwards, until it reached its present outline in the early nineteenth century. The original family that built the house eventually expanded and brought in outsiders until High Kinders became an industrial commune. Like most weaving houses, it is characterised by long bands of low, so-called weaving windows in the top storey, some finished as opening casements, and originally filled with small panes of glass set in diagonally arranged lead comes. These were an eighteenth-century innovation, and they are very much a part of the local vernacular until well into the nineteenth century.

Many early back-to-back houses were similarly provided with weaving windows, evidence of the continuation of home industry within houses that had been built by speculators to rent out, as opposed to by weaving masters for their own use. They even appear on some of the back-to-back houses that were designed with cellars for cotton weavers. The example of Industrial Place at Bacup in Lancashire is all the more interesting for demonstrating how a range of back-to-back houses was built about 1800 with a vernacular elevation, complete with cellars, on the side facing the canal, and an elevation facing Rochdale Road finished more politely with the typical arrangement of ordered doorways and sash windows common to the Georgian terrace throughout Britain.

Within a few decades home industry had entirely succumbed to the greater efficiency of the factory, and the local vernacular had succumbed with it. The weaving cellars of Industrial Place were abandoned as a workplace and became dwellings with all the attendant disease to be expected in such dark, damp spaces. The whole block filled up with workers who found employment in the local factories and it quickly descended into slum conditions.

So notorious did these blocks of back-to-backs become, and indeed most urban rookeries that had started life as tolerable vernacular houses, that speculators found a ready market for their packed rows of terraces, which they laid out on endless grids for the mill workers of Lancashire and Yorkshire. With their thoroughly debased Georgian style, mass-produced bricks, doors, windows and roof timbers, with their imported roof slates, they are evidence enough that the second half of the nineteenth century saw vernacular housing well and truly into the grave along with many of its occupants.

I shall mention just one type of building that underlines the way in which vernacular architecture succumbed to the idea of mass production inherent in the Industrial Revolution. This is the workhouse. Many early workhouses were no more than ordinary houses which had been rented for the purpose. Nevertheless, an early example of a purpose-built workhouse was built, probably during the seventeenth or early eighteenth century at Chiddingstone in Kent to provide for out-of-work labourers in the Wealden iron industry. The building carries the date of the Elizabethan Poor Law – 1601 – which instituted the workhouse, and for all that this is

unlikely to be the date of construction, the house has the vernacular form and appearance of an extended lobby-entry house, providing two storeys of accommodation for men on one side and women on the other. Today, it has become – in the parlance of estate agents – a delightfully secluded residence in one of Kent's most favoured villages.

Similar workhouses came to be built in a vernacular way throughout the eighteenth century, for instance Cudham workhouse of 1731, again in Kent (formerly – it is now in the London Borough of Bromley), which has the brick-and-flint character of the wayside cottage at Lydden, though not the thatch. And there are the almost identical Middlesex pair serving Harefield and Ruislip, of 1782 and 1789 respectively (now in the London Borough of Hillingdon), which are brick throughout, but otherwise similar in most respects to Cudham workhouse.

However, the intense poverty that followed the end of the French Wars made it impossible for many parishes to provide effective poor relief, and workhouses built on this scale were swamped. So the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act allowed parishes to form unions, and unions in turn built new workhouses with all the scale and efficiency of factories. Once again, a type of building, formerly in the domain of vernacular architecture, was seized by the new professions of architect and surveyor, and the old craftsmen were instructed in what they must do and this was not to follow past traditions, except perhaps in a few basic skills.

To conclude, by the middle of the nineteenth century vernacular architecture had little more than a toehold left, and its seven-hundred-year-old traditions were only of interest to the architects of the up-and-coming Old English style as a kind of fancy dress for their creations. They took up vernacular as an ideal of a vanished utopian past. None was so assiduous in promoting this as William Morris, but fancy dress has no need of craftsmanship, despite Morris's valiant achievement in reviving it. We may laugh at his wilder assertions as we applaud his arts and crafts, but we laugh in vain if we forget what Morris knew – that vernacular architecture provided some spectacular achievements in bringing fine buildings within the compass of ordinary people, and did so until well into the nineteenth century. The eighteenth century brought changes to vernacular traditions, but, at least, it entered into a long marriage of convenience with polite architecture, before the needs of romance brought disaster.

So, it was the nineteenth century that killed off this finely made manifestation of ordinary architecture and put a romantic image in its place. Yet Georgian vernacular remains difficult territory for the historian. The mixture of survival and revival confuses any final determination of what the builders' motives were, and this mixture, too, continues well into the nineteenth century.

Three houses on the Dering estate at Pluckley in Kent show the confusion of image and reality that we still have to live with. At Chamber's Green two all but identical cottages prominently face each other across the road. They are of one and a half storeys and have a symmetrical arrangement of round-headed windows. Both fronts date from the middle of the nineteenth century when Sir Edward Cholmeley Dering spent much of his wealth on improvements. One of these cottages was entirely new. The other was a refronting that concealed a fifteenth-century hall-house, so little did Dering care for medieval ideals. Above all, he wanted what he liked to call his 'lucky windows', those that have the characteristic round heads, and these he liberally scattered all over his estate as well as on both of these cottages.

What he wanted for the benefit of his tenants is hard to say – rather less than the image of luck, I think. Not far away on the estate is Dowle Street Cottage, another fifteenth-century hall-house. This was a bit out of the way, so Dering left it alone architecturally, and simply packed three families of tenants into it and took their rent. After the Second World War the house had fallen upon evil times and was condemned as unfit for habitation. Luckily (though it has no round-headed windows), it found someone willing to buy it for repair rather than

redevelopment. The job has been so well done that today it is almost more easy to imagine Dowle Street Cottage as it was when it was first occupied towards the end of the Middle Ages than as it was in its poverty-stricken days between 1850 and 1950.

The kind of rural poverty that nearly crushed this house was typical of most of the Georgian period and possibly haunted many of the houses so benevolently provided that I have illustrated today. To set against an uncritical view of Georgian benevolent vernacular as something essentially pretty and worth studying for aesthetic reasons, here are the words of a Georgian poet who knew the circumstances of the countryside too well to remain silent – George Crabbe. Remember *The Village* (1783):

Ye gentle souls of rural ease
Whom the smooth stream and smoother sonnet please,
Go! if the peaceful lot your praises share,
Go look within, and ask if peace be there.