



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

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LISTING AT THE MARGINS

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Summary. Georgian architecture is relatively well-represented on the statutory lists of buildings of 'special architectural or historic interest'. In the early days of listing it was anticipated that the majority of listed buildings would date from this period. A combination of factors, however – a dearth of easily accessible research and the pace of slum clearance – meant that Georgian vernacular remained vulnerable and unprotected until relatively recently. Much vernacular Georgian building, both rural and urban, was added to the lists during the great geographical surveys of the 1980s and early-90s and, although the emphasis of listing policy has now moved towards thematic programmes which target building types at risk, such as those on the great public estates currently being disposed of, careful smaller-scale listing exercises will continue to address serious omissions elsewhere.

What listing means

Listing is designed to identify and, through the listed building consent procedures, afford protection to 'buildings of special architectural or historic interest'. Significantly, it was introduced in the 1940s as part of the Town and Country Planning legislation and as such is concerned about managing change. Listing is not intended to 'freeze' buildings as museum pieces. Underpinning the listing legislation is the presumption that the long-term future of listed buildings, like all buildings, is best secured by their remaining in use. This may often involve change; listing ensures that the special character of important historic buildings is given particular consideration when alterations (or demolition) are proposed. Many thousands have been saved from ill-conceived mutilation and destruction as a result of this legislation.

In order to be effective and retain public support, the consent procedures must be seen to operate flexibly and sensibly. The fact that over 90% of applications for listed building consent are granted indicates that the system works well. But much also depends on the quality of the selection of buildings for listing in the first place. Fifty years is a long time in conservation, and our perceptions of what makes an historic building culturally valuable and worthy of protection have changed markedly since the Second World War. This reflects not only increases in knowledge and shifts in fashion, but also a growing anxiety over the rate of change and the rapid loss of familiar and cherished environments and landmarks.¹

Some early history

For many years, listing tended to seek out the polite and the picturesque. The listing selection criteria, as set down in the legislation, provided no justification for this emphasis, but it was a natural consequence, particularly of the current state of knowledge, but also of the aesthetic preferences of those recruited to carry out the early listing surveys. A close reading of the *Instructions to Investigators*, produced by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in March 1946, however, shows that many of the most significant developments that took place in listing practice during the 1970s and '80s – the inclusion of greater numbers of vernacular and industrial buildings and the growing awareness of the importance of buildings when seen in groups – have their origins in these early days.²

The *Instructions* assumed that 'numerically the (buildings of) the eighteenth century will in total . . . have a clear preponderance over any other' and the aim was to compile lists that

would be as comprehensive as possible for this period. What was then seen to constitute architectural interest already extended beyond elevation and plan to structure and engineering: 'certain industrial buildings are landmarks of the mechanical and industrial revolution, and thus ought certainly to be listed'. The *Instructions* went on: 'the sociological interest of buildings, only now beginning to be studied, has a very important place' including 'small buildings, particularly farmhouses, of regional style . . . unaltered (examples of) cottages and farmhouse(s) . . . which preserve the living and working arrangements of very remote periods.' Buildings of all classes – 'the slums as much as Mayfair' – were seen in 1946 as being 'of direct and substantial value'. Finally, the importance of group value, that is the importance of the modest and small scale, of setting and context, was recognised a full two decades before the Civic Amenities Act of 1967 imposed upon local authorities the duty of designating Conservation Areas. Attention was drawn to 'the special value of whole groups from the historical point of view' which, in towns like Bath had an 'historical value almost of a different order from that attaching to the preservation of individual houses within these groups'.³

The achievement of these pioneer investigators in the face of unrealistic survey timetables, ferociously tight budgets and petrol rationing was remarkable. Desk instructions did not help. In the interests of speed, interior inspections were not allowed – a particularly severe handicap when assessing the interest of vernacular buildings – and analysis was discouraged: the list description was intended primarily to aid accurate identification of a building (in the days before postal codes, or even full postal addresses, were the norm) rather than to illuminate its historic development or significance. A further difficulty was the introduction of a 'cut-off date'. The idea of selecting (rather than simply identifying) buildings for listing was acknowledged as being necessary for those dating between 1750 and 1800 although, as stated above, it was expected that most survivors would be listed. After 1800, however – a date later pushed forward to 1840 – buildings for listing had to be 'of definite quality and character' and this guideline often resulted in the exclusion of the vernacular, the specialised agricultural building, early workers' housing and much good-quality small-scale work of the final years of the Georgian tradition.

Another problem was the rapid dilution of the group-value formula incorporated (albeit rather tentatively) into the 1946 *Instructions*. The instructions under the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, enjoined investigators to place in the non-statutory (that is advisory) grade III category all those marginal buildings that did not quite qualify as 'special' together with those 'which so contribute to a general effect that the planning authority ought, in the preparation and administration of its plans, to regard this effect as an asset worth trying to keep'.⁴

There were two further factors militating against the production of fuller lists that adequately reflected the richness of what was then called minor (and what would now be termed vernacular) architecture. One was the lack of easily accessible published material on the subject; the other was the juggernaut of planning and widespread slum clearance. It is worth looking a little more closely at these two factors if we are to understand the rate of loss of Georgian vernacular and the unevenness of coverage on the statutory lists in this area.

The state of knowledge and the lists

The first lists were compiled at a time when little material was published on vernacular architecture and what there was tended to be dispersed throughout books and articles that were primarily concerned with something else. Of those works that addressed the subject at any length, S. O. Addy's *The Evolution of the English House*, published in 1898 and reprinted in 1910 and 1933, dominated the field for two generations and over-shadowed C. F. Innocent's more wide-ranging and technical *The Development of English Building Construction* of 1916. Most of the rest were popular books with a bent for the picturesque. Even the magisterial inventories of the

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England – designed in part to specify buildings and monuments most worthy of preservation – gave the more modest vernacular short shrift and in any case the commission's terms of reference draw the line for selection, first at 1700, then (after 1925) at 1714. The 1714 cut-off date became 'a source of considerable difficulty' when the London volumes were compiled and by the early 1960s investigators for the commission were given discretion to survey important buildings erected after this date, thereby opening up the Georgian period to selective coverage.⁵

The dearth of easily accessible published material concealed a great deal of active research. A number of researchers created the Vernacular Architecture Group in 1954, but it was not until 1972 that the key research tool – and the key to wider dissemination – was made available in the form of a bibliography on the subject. A perusal of *A Bibliography on Vernacular Architecture* is instructive in that, although no chronological range is specified, most studies cited (although by no means all) stop short of the eighteenth century, or (at best) deal with the Georgian period as a tail-piece. This, needless to say, comes well before the then traditionally accepted terminal date for vernacular building – *circa* 1840 with the growth of the railway system.⁶

The peripheralisation of minor and vernacular Georgian buildings by architectural historians appears to have resulted from its falling between two academic stools. Prior to the appearance of a small number of pioneering works such as J. E. C. Peter's study of Georgian farmbuildings in Staffordshire, published in 1969 and Cruickshank and Wyld's analysis of the full range of Georgian housing in London, published in 1975, mainstream architectural historians of the period tended to concentrate almost wholly on the peaks of Georgian architectural achievement rather than on the mass-produced and the vernacular.⁷ Vernacular historians, on the other hand, saw in the very mass-produced nature of much domestic building of the period a subject unworthy of study, one where regional variation and traditional craftsmanship had finally given way to standardisation and the mechanical process. This failure to research into what probably formed the bulk of surviving Georgian buildings – rural cottages and urban housing with its back-tenement developments – provided a poor basis upon which to resist the ever-increasing pressures for change.

Pressures for change

It is easy to forget that while listing was set up to moderate the effects of war damage and rapid post-war change, the dominant climate, particularly within the planning world, favoured renewal. Some proponents of renewal in a modern style found helpful precedents in the Georgian age. For example, Thomas Sharp's plan for Exeter (1946) extolled the virtues of the eighteenth-century builders – 'it did not even occur to them to imitate the work of the past . . . With certainty and confidence they built in the idiom of their own times' – and Sharp leaped immediately from there to proclaim: 'Full restoration is impossible – and highly undesirable . . . The watchword for the future should be – not restoration, but renewal'.⁸

Conservation was not always a dirty word but, with some notable exceptions, the 'fine-arts, polite architecture' approach to historic buildings that characterised the compilation of the earlier lists necessarily informed decisions about which buildings to retain in comprehensive re-development plans. Where they were retained, robbed of their context, these listed buildings can now appear as little more than mis-shelved museum exhibits.

That this view did not universally prevail is apparent in those post-war development plans that approached conservation issues holistically. The 1949 re-development plan for Warwick prepared by Abercrombie and Nickson, for instance, valued the back tenement developments that have so often been swept away: 'Picturesque passages and courts . . . may be more romantic than hygienic but they must, nevertheless, be handled with sympathy by the planner: for to sweep them away and substitute hygienic brave new world architecture would be to destroy an

essential part of the town's character'. Sympathetic observations such as these are exceptional in the corpus of post-war redevelopment plans.⁹

The vulnerability of the more modest buildings, including substantial tracts of Georgian urban housing, comes out clearly in these post-war reports. A typical sight in Warwick (to take a single example) was 'An eighteenth-century block . . . (showing) patched but still leaking roofs, faulty gutters, and decayed and bulging brickwork, with the mortar washed out below cill-less windows; internally the attics are low, dark and unusable and the cellars . . . contain only gas meters'.¹⁰ This story can be repeated for many of England's historic town centres. Whereas the Housing Acts allowed for the rehabilitation of older properties, and many cities had pursued vigorous re-conditioning programmes between the wars, it was not seen as a sufficiently radical solution to the housing problem. Especially after the war, wholesale renewal was considered preferable to improvement. A similar situation could be found in the countryside where renewal and new-build were preferred to repair and renovation and a provision in the Housing (Rural Workers) Act of 1926, which enabled local authorities to grant-aid the repair and improvement of dilapidated cottages, seems seldom to have been used.¹¹

The turn of the tide

From the late-1960s a radical change can be detected in official thinking about conservation. This was partly a response to growing public unease at the rate of ill-considered and destructive change, particularly within historic town and city centres, and the first stirrings of organised protest against it. At last, the notion of group value shifted centre stage. The Civic Amenities Act (originally introduced as a private member's bill by Duncan Sandys, the chairman of the Civic Trust, and supported by the government), required local authorities to designate Conservation Areas (although not all did), and the government's popular policy statement, *Historic Towns. Preservation and Change* (1967), underlined the important contribution that the more modest buildings made to historic townscapes. 'The historic centres of many old towns have a quality of their own which transcends the value of the individual buildings they contain . . . It is not only the individual buildings that matter: their settings may also be important'. Such thinking was reinforced by the findings of four studies commissioned by the government 'to examine how conservation policies might be sensibly implemented' in Bath, Chester, Chichester, and York. The cumulative effect of historic infill, back tenement development, the small-scale and the modest came to be seen as being as important in its own way as the more conventionally-prized architectural set-pieces.¹²

It is worth mentioning, in passing, that official policy was also responding to the growing awareness that the renovation and conversion of old building stock was often considerably more economical than building anew. That conservation and economic viability might go hand in hand was flagged up in *Preservation and Change* which recognised that 'there is no reason why preservation should prevent desirable change . . . The surest way to avoid a conflict between the old and the new is to plan preservation and change'.¹³

The effect of all this new thinking on listing policy and practice was profound. New instructions issued in November, 1969 widened the discretion available to investigators. It became possible to include in the statutory lists categories of building that hitherto had been eligible only for the advisory grade III category (which was abolished at this time). Modest eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century houses of plain character in both town and country now became candidates for listing, as did 'the last productions of the Georgian tradition' of the 1830s. The notion of listing for group value was finally enshrined in these instructions: 'buildings in informal groups of mixed quality in which the groups were not hitherto thought so important that it was essential for each item to be listed statutorily' could now seriously be considered for inclusion. In addition 'buildings in a planned estate or group which have

survived intact but are of modest quality' now qualified for listing along with a wider range of nineteenth-century buildings including those that had undergone a degree of damage.¹⁴

The potential for adding buildings to the statutory lists increased enormously. But, by and large, the investigators used their discretion cautiously and the overall effect of these major changes remained limited and uneven when viewed across the country as a whole. The vulnerability of the smaller-scaled buildings of the Georgian period was graphically exposed in a number of high-profile planning decisions that underlined not only the weaknesses of the legislation, but also – more positively – the possibilities open to local authorities to act constructively in support of sensitive historic environments. The so-called 'Sack of Bath' in the early-1970s, which involved the destruction of much of the city's Georgian artisan housing, is the most well-known. In the Trinity area of Frome in Somerset, two 1960s re-development schemes had destroyed a substantial number of run-down houses and the remainder were due for clearance in the summer of 1975. Research carried out by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England established that these houses formed part of an extremely rare urban estate of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. The demolition proposals were rejected and a rehabilitation scheme devised in its stead. In Swindon (Wiltshire), the remarkable railway village of the 1840s and 50s was similarly saved from destruction by the local authority and the houses renovated. Other groups of unassuming housing also benefitted from this political change of heart, and the harder-edged industrial housing, mostly of the nineteenth century, began to receive government grant aid through the Historic Buildings Council in the late-1970s.¹⁵

The slow progress on the listing surveys through the 1970s and the loss of important buildings – most notably the Art Deco Firestone Factory in 1980 – brought about another government re-think. The accelerated listing re-survey, launched in 1982 by Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment, aimed to bring the statutory lists up to an acceptable national standard in as short a time as possible. Priority was given to the revision of the oldest and most defective lists, or those areas that did not already have full lists. With some major exceptions (such as Liverpool) the re-survey targetted the countryside and the smaller market towns. Much interesting urban and rural Georgian urban vernacular was identified and protected. The high expectations that the accelerated re-survey would iron out the unevennesses of coverage and achieve a reasonably consistent overall standard were largely met in the areas that were surveyed, but there still remained some problems and inconsistencies.¹⁶

Instructions to field-workers still urged that interior inspections be kept to a minimum in order to keep the programme on time, thereby perpetuating one of the major inadequacies of the lists as a vehicle for guiding planning authorities, as well as a source of information for owners and the general public.¹⁷ Problems of legal definition sometimes meant that minor structures that were clearly once ancillary to a firmly listable building (such as a stable to a house) might no longer form part of the curtilage of a listed building if the ownership had been divided by the time of the listing inspection. Many buildings fell through the net in this way. There also remained uncertainties as to how to interpret the listing criteria, especially at the margins. Inclusion of buildings for group value was more generous in some areas than others, and the 1840 'cut-off' date was invoked with a rod of iron here, and treated as a moveable feast there: in any case, judgements in the field were difficult when firm building dates were not easily available. To cap it all, by the time the accelerated re-survey was completed, the lists for many important towns and cities were already twenty years old or more and seriously defective in that they reflected neither recent research or current listing practice. A new initiative, the urban list review, set up in the face of considerable government resistance in 1989, began to tackle the worst of these, and was completed towards the end of last year. Even so, a substantial number of statutory lists still date from before 1980.

The current situation

While the unassuming and modest Georgian building has suffered its share from the shortcomings in the listing system outlined above, the most vulnerable – and by no means always the most unpretentious – are those buildings that date from the very end of the period. Georgian architectural conventions long outlived George IV and it is sometimes inconsistent to the point of absurdity to draw the line too rigidly at 1840. In the case of Georgian housing development in London – the squares, terraces and the detached and semi-detached villas which are of international significance in the history of town planning – it makes sense to include on the lists those buildings that fall firmly within the tradition even if a little beyond the date threshold. The recently revised statutory list for Islington (published in 1995) reflects this more inclusive approach.

In other towns, a similar pattern prevails. Henrietta Street in Cheltenham, for example, an excellent late-Georgian speculative development of artisans' housing set out in the 1830s and '40s, once boasted only a single listed building. This contained an interesting decorative interior but was otherwise similar to its unlisted neighbours. A more flexible approach to the cut-off date, interpreting it in the spirit rather than the letter, was taken during the recent urban list review resulting in a number of additional listings here and in similar contexts elsewhere in this remarkable late-Georgian town. A similar pattern of consolidation within this chronological grey area is evident in other recently completed urban list reviews.

Where full-scale list reviews have not proved possible, more focussed emergency spot-listing exercises can be equally effective in safeguarding sensitive groups of buildings. In Cromford (Derbyshire) the earliest lists included only the first-generation houses of Arkwright's pioneer planned settlement. Subsequent listings added later houses which preserved their architectural details (such as mullions) reasonably intact but excluded those that had been damaged, along with housing dating from the final (1830s and '40s) phases that, taken together with a number of ancillary structures, gave the whole place its striking visual and historical coherence. The holistic approach to Cromford's protection – such as was envisaged in general terms in 1968 – was only achieved in the late-1980s when most of the houses and a large number of minor ancillary buildings were added to the statutory list. This fuller coverage has enabled the local authorities to make more effective provision for these houses through grant-aid and management schemes.¹⁸

Listing policy must constantly adapt to meet changing circumstances. The large-scale geographical re-surveys and reviews were extremely time- and labour-consuming. Rapid and far-reaching changes in the management and disposal of major public estates, such as those of the Ministry of Defence and the National Health Service, necessitated a shift in emphasis away from geographical reviews towards more focussed research-based programmes concentrating on the areas most at risk. The old-style reviews were also failing to address some of the challenges raised by new research findings, particularly in the field of industrial archaeology. To take one example, the lack of published research on the textile factories of Greater Manchester had made it difficult for those conducting listing surveys there in the early and mid-1980s to make safe and sensible decisions about what to include and what to leave out. Recently available research has now allowed us to refine our selection criteria and make a substantial number of recommendations for listing which, being placed more securely in context, can be more robustly defended.¹⁹ This is particularly important given the government's decision (in 1995) to open up the listing procedures on programmes such as this to public consultation.

NOTES

1. Current official thinking on listing and listed building consent procedures are best summed up in *Planning Policy Guidance: Planning and the Historic Environment* (HMSO, 1994) – known for short as PPG 15 – especially sections 3 and 6.

2. *Instructions to Investigators for the Listing of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest under Section 42 of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1944.*
3. *Ibid*, ch 3 ('The Varieties of Special Interest'), pp 9-16.
4. The 1947 instructions are most easily accessible in Wayland Kennet, *Preservation* (1972), appendix I, p. 207.
5. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London, II West London* (1925), p. xi.
6. Robert de Zouche Hall (ed.), *A Bibliography on Vernacular Architecture* (1972). The background is set out in the introduction, pp. 11-13.
7. J E C Peters, *The Development of Farm Buildings in Western Lowland Staffordshire up to 1880* (1969); Dan Cruickshank and Peter Wyld, *London: The Art of Georgian Building* (1975).
8. Thomas Sharp, *Exeter Phoenix. A Plan for Rebuilding* (1946), p. 88.
9. Patrick Abercrombie and Richard Nickson, *Warwick. Its Preservation and Development* (1949), p. 100.
10. *Ibid*, p. 142.
11. John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (2nd ed. 1986), p. 334; C S Orwin (for the Agricultural Economics Research Institute, Oxford), *Country Planning. A Study of Rural Problems* (1944), p. 123.
12. Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Historic Towns. Preservation and Change* (1967), pp. 23-5; for the Four Town Reports, see Kennet, *op cit.*, 68-71, 75, 91-5, 98.
13. *Preservation and Change*, Forward (by Anthony Greenwood).
14. Kennet, *op cit.*, pp. 210-12.
15. Adam Fergusson, *The Sack of Bath. A Record and an Indictment* (1973); Roger Leech, *Early Industrial Housing. The Trinity Area of Frome* (1981), especially p. 2.
16. Martin Robertson et al., 'Listed buildings. The national resurvey of England', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 37 (1993), pp 21-94.
17. A point picked up in National Audit Office, *Protecting and Managing England's Heritage Property* (1992), para 2.7 (p. 8).
18. A leaflet on the Cromford Conservation Area Partnership – *Arkwright Houses at Cromford* (1985), published by Derbyshire Dales District Council, Derbyshire County Council and English Heritage is available on request direct from any of those bodies.
19. For further discussion on these aspects of listing policy see Martin Cherry, 'Protecting industrial buildings: the role of listing' in Marilyn Palmer and Peter Neaverson (eds.), *Managing the Industrial Heritage: Its Identification, Recording and management* (1995), pp. 119-24. On similar issues raised in a different context see the same author's 'The present situation' in Susan MacDonald (ed.), *Modern Matters: Principles and Practice in Conserving Recent Architecture* (forthcoming).