

HISTORIC DETAILS: RAINWATER GOODS



Fine late 18th century lead rainwater head with downpipe, with owner's cypher and elaborate cast-lead date numerals.

In the seventh in his series on Georgian architectural furnishings, **Charles Brooking**, looks at the design and development of Georgian rainwater goods

In the late seventeenth century there was a revival of the lead-worker's craft. High-status eighteenth century examples followed these traditions, many displaying family crests with elaborate entwined initials. Great flair is also evident in the varied forms of their date numerals. Eighteenth century rainwater heads are often beautiful examples of the plumber's or lead-worker's skill. They are purely functional objects which were transformed into distinctive architectural details in their own right.

Most rainwater heads were formed from sheet lead, often with cast lead ornaments. A cheaper form of rolled lead manufactured in a rolling mill was introduced in the late seventeenth century, ornaments, initials and dates often being cut from lead sheets as an alternative to types being produced by the sand-casting method. The traditional rainwater forms, such as the semi-circular tapering designs, were hand-dressed around a wooden block.

High-status rainwater heads sometimes had gilt lettering or numerals. In other examples, elements of the raised decoration were gilded and coats of arms picked out in heraldic colours, some having a tinned finish. Evidence of this is often preserved under accumulated layers of later paintwork. Careful analysis by an experienced paint conservator should be undertaken if a serious repair programme is planned. Until the late eighteenth century gutters and downpipes were all formed from lead. The London Building Act of 1724 stipulated that the front elevations of houses should have downpipes. In many cases these led into a cistern or tank, some being of highly ornamented lead. Most lead rainwater heads were fitted with attached 'ears', the wrought-iron fixings being driven into the mortar joint or built-in wooden blocks, and the heads of these were concealed by a lead surface flap which was folded back to cover the fittings.

There was a clearly defined social hierarchy in the



Zinc rainwater head, c.1820s–30s. This is constructed of zinc sheet sections soldered together.



Simple lead rainwater head, c.1810–28, from Woodhill Manor, Shamley Green, Surrey.



Sheet copper rainwater head, late 18th/early 19th century. This design was almost certainly worked around a wooden former-block, as with lead varieties.



Late 18th century tapering semi-circular design, c.1780–89. The lead flaps that originally covered the wrought-iron fixings have been lost.



Fine late 18th century widely used rainwater head pattern. Typical of designs that have been dressed over a wooden former-block.



Lead rainwater head. Note cast lead floret and spheres, the numerals were cut from lead sheet.

detailing of rainwater or hopper-heads, as they are sometimes known. This dictated their size and decoration. In many cases, until the late 18th/early 19th century, many buildings were merely provided with water-spouts, more humble buildings often having little provision for rainwater drainage. The development that revolutionised this was the introduction of cast-iron gutters, rainwater heads and downpipes at the end of the eighteenth century, which became general in the early nineteenth century as cast-iron became a cheaper alternative to lead. Improved casting techniques, all fruits of the industrial revolution, provided the opportunity for not only decorative rainwater heads constructed of cast-iron, but 'ogee' gutters, often supplied with 'lion's masks' at the

overlapping joints. I encountered good examples of these at Charlwood Park near Crawley, West Sussex, built in c.1809, and sadly demolished for the expansion of Gatwick Airport in 1981.

Lead rainwater goods remained in use for much high-status work, the heads generally becoming smaller and more restrained in terms of their decoration during the Regency period.

Cast-iron rainwater goods were always intended to be painted. Early forms followed the more traditional smaller lead varieties in their design, sometimes being fitted with a 'D'-shaped downpipe, possibly in lead. A common failing with cast-iron heads is corrosion of the back plate which, once fitted, was often difficult to keep painted.

1 Lead rainwater head with central cast-lead decoration and later cast-iron rectangular downpipe.



2 High-quality lead rainwater head with cast-lead naturalistic decoration, and dentil cornice, the front panel appears to have been lost, the downpipe being modern.



3 Highly ornamental head, pipe-brackets and downpipe of 1722, probably entirely of cast lead. Note fluted pilasters, dentil cornice, and depiction of birds on pipe-brackets and fixing ears. Re-sited to a house on the promenade at Lyme Regis, Dorset.



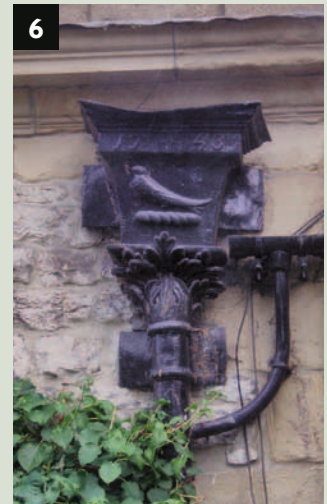
4 Corner lead rainwater head with the owner's initials. The lead guttering is possibly an early Victorian addition. The rainwater head has been re-fixed at some time with later exposed fittings.



5 Lead example retaining its original rectangular section downpipe, with cast-lead ornaments and initials.



6 Lead example dated 1743, with crest and elaborate cast-lead lower portion. Retaining its original lead 'ears' concealing the wrought-iron fixings.



7 Fine mid-18th century example with family crests on rainwater head and downpipe bracket, and fixing 'ears' with scrolled sections covering the fixings.



8 Restrained lead rainwater head with 'lion's mask', c.1813. From the rear elevation of The Sir John Soane's Museum, London. A typically restrained Regency design.



9 Corner lead rainwater head with a crest and initials, 1836, from Penshurst Place, Kent. Despite the availability of cast-iron, lead continued to be employed in high-status work.





An early cast-iron version, following the traditional lead form but on a smaller scale, c.1825–35. The fixing lugs forming part of the casting.



A cast-iron design of the c.1820–45 period. This example was fixed directly through the back-plate of the rainwater head.



A widely-used faceted design, c.1810–50.



A faceted design which appeared in the early 1800s and remains in production with slight variations to the present day.



A good example of restrained naturalistic ornament on a cast-iron rainwater head of the early 19th century.



An interesting example, c.1795–1810, with a 'D'-section downpipe, possibly originally made of lead. The elegant design closely follows the detailing of late 18th century examples, but on a much smaller scale.

Decoration on the mass-produced early cast-iron rainwater heads was usually quite restrained.

In 1805 zinc sheets became available which enabled the manufacture of rainwater goods in zinc. I have also encountered late eighteenth century examples of copper rainwater heads.

Original examples, particularly lead varieties, should be carefully conserved and preserved. SPAB. have produced an excellent technical advice note on



A fine example of an ornamental semi-circular tapering cast-iron rainwater head, c.1820–50.



A combination of lead and cast-iron rainwater goods, c.1820–35. Note the simple lead box design (top) with rolled moulding to the upper edge. The cast-iron rainwater head (below) is a faceted design widely used from the early 19th century until the early 20th century.

the conservation of decorative leadwork. In the case of cast-iron, many of the early traditional cast-iron rainwater head, gutter and downpipe designs are now reproduced.

Before replacement work is undertaken it is worth carefully examining existing goods to establish if any early 19th century cast-iron examples still survive, to enable sympathetic repair or replacement. As much original fabric should be retained as possible, particularly surviving early cast-iron rainwater heads. In cases where important examples should be retained it is well worth having a new section remade. Lead rainwater heads tend to be easier to repair or remake. Hall Conservation Ltd, Greenwich, are specialists in this field, amongst others. If replacement is necessary, modern designs and uPVC should be avoided at all costs, needless to say! I have seen many conservation projects ruined by the fixing of inappropriate rainwater goods – a feature that has often been ignored.