Town Houses Selection Guide

Domestic Buildings (2)

Heritage Protection Department

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Selection Guide
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1 INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS

English towns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have left behind a wealth of town and terraced houses. The grander are outwardly imposing and inwardly sumptuous; the more ordinary may still be of special interest for their planning and construction, and all will be of historical interest for the light they shed on past ways of living. Losses have been many and grievous, but the survivors play a major part in defining the character of our historic towns. In scale they vary from the *palazzo* to the humble lodging house: each will have different claims to special interest. One particularly important urban form was the terraced house, and a substantial proportion of listed domestic buildings (and hence of our older building stock) falls into this category. It is this sort of house that will be principally considered here.

With the notable exception of Dublin, almost all European cities that experienced significant growth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries housed the greater part of their population in high-density tenements, where a number of families occupied apartments in multi-storeyed buildings. English architecture - following continental precedents, it is true - took a different, less dense, path. Individual houses (often in multiple occupancy) were constructed on a smaller scale.

Occasionally, these were conceived as unified architectural compositions of some sophistication: large-scale compositions evolved which injected spatial drama into towns and represented a major contribution to town planning. Squares, circuses, crescents, terraces and planned streets form high-points in the history of English urbanism. Continental visitors have long admired the novelty and subtlety of the Georgian terrace as England's great contribution to the urban form, and the planning interest of numerous urban domestic developments can be very considerable.

In London, Bath and Brighton whole districts of terraces exist that have defined our perception of these cities, yet examples are distributed across the country: from Liverpool and Plymouth; to towns in rural Lincolnshire; and in resort towns like Sidmouth (Devon) and Tunbridge Wells (Kent). Northern developers continued to commission grand examples in Headingley (Leeds) and Sunderland into the 1870s, showing the enduring vitality of this urban form. Terraces have proved themselves to be adaptable. Where speculations failed or a district lost its cachet, dwellings would fall quickly into multi-occupation. In the largest cities, terraces were preserved in the 1940s-1960s when they were converted into flats and maisonettes by local authorities. Town houses and terraces built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have also proved exceptionally adaptable for other uses, as shops or workshops for example.

A great number of town houses and terraces have gone: many were demolished to make way for higher density re-development and others were lost in wartime raids on cities like London and Exeter. But, during the 1930s in particular, eighteenth-century urban architecture stimulated the interest of architects, planners and historians and this growing respect was reflected in the first lists of historic buildings produced in the

1940s. Town houses and terraces built before 1840 have thus long been an important part of our protected heritage.

The term 'town house' implies a one-off design of considerable grandeur. In some cases, surviving odd houses may represent the remnants of a larger development or terrace. Others, although large and detached, are not technically 'town houses' at all but were built in villages and hamlets that have been absorbed by the spread of the nearby city. A terrace may be a formal, coherent composition in which emphasis is frequently given to the ends and sometimes the middle, but it can also be an informal row of houses erected piecemeal over several decades.

This selection guide focuses on urban housing, with an emphasis on terraces, from the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries. There is inevitable cross-over with other selection guides. For earlier town houses, see the selection guide Domestic (1) Vernacular Houses; for the late Victorian and twentieth-century coverage, see the selection guides Domestic (3) Suburban and Country Houses and Domestic (4) The Modern House and Housing.

2 HISTORY

Town houses From the medieval period onwards, grandees have often had imposing houses, conveniently situated close to centres of power and commerce. These combined impressive public areas, private quarters, and ancillary accommodation for retainers: because of the value of their inner city sites, few of these early modern *palazzi* have come down to us today. While this development is most readily seen in the London context, other provincial cities such as York or Newcastle, King's Lynn or Salisbury, all could boast of large houses which impressed through their opulence and scale, and reflected social and economic hierarchies. With the continuing ascent of the merchant classes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the emergence of a specifically urban identity, these houses grew in number but were increasingly located in suburban locations, where greater opportunities for display, comfort and expansion presented themselves (see the selection guide Domestic (3): Suburban and Country Houses). Town houses of the grander variety were designed as places of entertainment, with large rooms for receptions and prominently designed staircases: actual numbers of rooms could be quite small, as is the case with the Adam brothers' Chandos House of 1769-71 in London's West End. Accommodation was placed on upper floors. Outward restraint can sometimes conceal interior display of remarkable effect. Always a tiny minority of urban residences, such houses could attain great heights of architectural accomplishment, and survivors tend to be listed in the highest grades. They continued to be built during the Victorian period, but changing lifestyles and rising ground values caused many to be demolished.

Smaller town houses have always been built too: detached residences on various scales, taking advantage of whatever building opportunities presented themselves within the crowded urban context. Meaningful generalisation is difficult in this area, given the range of house types encountered within this category. Always exceptional, such houses reflect the aspirations of the aristocracy and of the professional and merchant classes and retain crucial evidence of long-vanished life-styles and attitudes. They are often endowed with good internal decoration, and overall reflect changes in polite taste.

The first terraces Medieval precedents, such as the rows of Chester or the Vicars Close at Wells, can be identified, but the arrival of the regular terrace dates from the seventeenth century, when brick and stone began to be used more consistently as the materials of housing of status. Some of the largest houses were the work of individual owners and architects, but by far the greatest impact on the growth of our towns and cities has been the work of the speculative builder, creating housing for leasing or rent. Although the initial inspiration for the regular terrace was probably Inigo Jones's Covent Garden begun in 1630, itself inspired by continental models such as the Place des Vosges in Paris of 1605, most early rows were erected by local builders on standard-sized plots with a broadly unified front

The first regular, classically-inspired streets in London (like Great Queen Street) were being laid out from the late 1630s, but the earliest survivors are now a row of four on Newington Green (Islington) dated 1658. Although a few great terraces were the work of prominent architects, most were built by craftsmen, with a carpenter or bricklayer usually acting as principal building contractor. The late seventeenth century also saw the beginnings of larger-scale speculative developers, led in London by Nicholas Barbon, but generally houses were built in very small numbers. Several builders could be involved in erecting the houses once an estate plan was approved. This lends to variety in both the treatment of elevations and house plans, as well as in decorative finishes to interiors such as chimneypieces and joinery.

The Great Fire of London in 1666 was followed by the first of a significant series of Building Acts (1667). London's houses were divided into four classes, defined by the number of storeys, ceiling heights, road widths and wall thicknesses. It required brick or stone to be used for all external and party walls: the prevalent timber fronts which characterised the Tudor and early Stuart London house were henceforth banned. Successive Acts further reduced the amount of exposed timber – important in limiting the spread of fire. Although this Act applied only to the City, it provided a format for London's master builders and its influence spread beyond the capital. A most important feature of the terrace, and again a peculiarly English one, is the sash window, developed c.1676. Early examples often have only one opening light, rather than two carefully balanced sashes, and thick glazing bars; over the following century they grew larger and more refined. Regular window openings became a key determinant of the appearance of the town house, and their careful proportions and fine construction offset the austerity of many a front.

Plan form The typical double-depth, two-room, layout behind a narrow frontage could be organised in many ways. In the seventeenth century chimneys and stairs were sometimes placed together, separating the front and back rooms. As terrace building became an established house type in late seventeenth-century London, it became more usual to place the chimneystacks in party walls, heating rooms from the sides rather than the corner. By the early eighteenth century, a 'standard' plan had developed for more fashionable houses whereby the staircase was placed to the rear along a party wall, beyond an entrance passage, allowing the stairs to be directly lit. After 1800 this plan had become ubiquitous even for artisan developments. It spread widely outside London. The basement kitchen and service area had emerged by the early eighteenth century, while the best drawing room was increasingly to be found on the first floor, the ground floor being reserved for dining and perhaps a business use. But there were many variants depending on the uses given the principal floors, whether there is a basement,

whether the building was intended as a single house, perhaps with a shop or workshop, or whether it was planned with the option of subdivision into multi-occupation. One-room layouts are rare but were once much more widespread, so survivals are of particular interest.

Eighteenth-century town houses The London experience continued to set the standard for house design elsewhere. The Building Acts of 1707, 1709 and 1774 were of great importance in changing the appearance of London's terraces, and are useful for us today in dating a house. Their impact slowly extended across the country. The 1707 Act eliminated thick timber cornices, and although it applied only to the City and Westminster the heavy modillion cornices that are such a delight in Queen Anne architecture steadily disappeared from new buildings elsewhere too. Still more influential was the 1709 Act, which set back window frames behind the building line. Some terraces were built to match: others (like Church Row, Hampstead) consist of similarly scaled houses of different width and detail. Greater uniformity emerged during the century. The 1774 Act consolidated various amendments over the century, and controlled decoration on facades still more rigidly. Because legislation did not affect all regions equally, and especially because building materials still varied considerably, constructional methods differed. The eighteenth century saw the publication of many pattern books and ideas spread rapidly across the country.

Formal planned ensembles Inigo Jones's Covent Garden piazza of 1630 was followed by other London squares: Bloomsbury Square was laid out at the time of Charles II's restoration in 1660, but lacked architectural uniformty. Bristol's Queen Square, laid out from 1699 to 1727, was one of the largest as well as one of the earliest outside London. Squares occupied precious land, but offered salubrious residences facing onto gardens, and monumentally conceived fronts (pioneered by John Wood at Queen Square, Bath, in the late 1720s) enabled grand architectural effects to be created. The next stage in this exploration of how to lay out houses in a novel way also took place in Bath. Crescents and circuses introduced a sinuosity into terrace design, and were made fashionable by John Wood's Circus (1755-67) and his son's Royal Crescent (1767-75). They were emulated elsewhere in developments such as John Carr's the Crescent in Buxton, Derbyshire (1780-90), and Joseph Kay's Pelham Crescent, Hastings, East Sussex, of the 1820s. Both of these towns were places of resort, reliant upon renting quarters to visitors. The Adam brothers' riverside Adelphi development in the heart of London of 1768-72 (demolished 1937) was the mightiest of the grander ensembles, wedding Roman inspiration to established house building practice.

Later Georgian terraces The London Building Acts were more strictly enforced after 1774. Later eighteenth-century terraces are generally more austere; their windows longer and glazing bars thinner; grey or stock brick superseded red; and projecting bands of brickwork were eliminated. What is lost in the detailing is made up for in the syncopation of repetition, and in the emergence of finely detailed decorative ironwork and carved or moulded stonework which lent an extra level of interest to the later Georgian town house. Many more grand compositions of individual houses and terraces date from the first half of the nineteenth century, following the precedents of Robert Adam. Building on a major scale became less exceptional: in London, James Burton and

later John Nash led the way in undertaking major speculations and erecting houses by volume.

John Nash, in his world-renowned terraces around London's newly-created Regent's Park, started in 1812, created palatial ranges of Roman inspiration which actually comprised of individual houses. In Newcastle, Richard Grainger created a distinct enclave of fine classical domestic architecture at the very end of the Georgian period that is without peer. The drama of such schemes was echoed in later nineteenth century undertakings, such as the early Victorian West Cliff Terrace in Ramsgate, Kent. Neoclassical detailing was the most common style, and the use of painted stucco over brick helped to create the impression of antiquity. Plasterwork, joinery, chimneypieces, decorative wall treatments and furnishings all combined to continue the theme within. Different floors performed different functions, creating a distinct hierarchy of spaces. To the rear of the grander terraces lay stables, coach- and mews houses. These were sometimes screened by ornamental garden structures.

Many smaller set-pieces exist too, showing the adaptability of the terrace as an urban form. Neoclassicism brought with it a high degree of decorative and ornamental conformity, in Greek and Roman styles: the dates for its introduction will depend on location, with remoter areas taking longer to adopt fashionable metropolitan tastes. Marble chimneypieces continued to provide accents of opulence: those in lesser rooms were more often of cast iron and timber. The reeded mouldings common in the Regency 1820s are a distinctive feature that can unify an interior scheme of cornice, fireplace and door surrounds. Conventional terraced houses can gain added architectural pretension by making a feature of top-lighting their staircases: these remained areas in which it was possible to bring off an architectural effect through the clever use of space. Increasing quantities of fairly standard terraced housing, often lacking overall architectural compositions, was built in the post- Waterloo period. Sometimes these were sparsely ornamented with decorative elements; sometimes they are extremely plain.

Houses after 1840 There is a significant growth in the number of houses both built and surviving after 1840. The increased availability of building materials delivered by train, and greater mechanisation in the building trades, combined to create even greater standardisation across the country; allied to these developments was the professionalisation of the building trade and the emergence of the local architect. Industrialisation was affecting building: the arrival of plate glass windows led to the loss of glazing bars, and the insertion of larger sheets of glass. Moulded lintels began to replace carefully gauged brick heads over windows, and high quality facing brickwork, one of the most appealing aspects of Georgian building, was on the wane. Established approaches to house building underwent major change in the 1850s and 60s. The Gothic Revival encouraged a rekindling of interest in traditional building forms, and led to the application of greater amounts of decoration to houses of modest size. Industrial processes led to the creation of affordable cast stone and terra cotta, cast iron, ceramic tiles, and other materials. New features to note include the arrival of bathrooms and lavatories, kitchen ranges, and attached conservatories.

The most distinctive terraces of the early Victorian period are the vast stuccoed compositions characteristic of Pimlico in south-west London or the 'palace facades' such as Victoria Square, Bristol (1845-53). These developed the approach of John Nash's monumental Regent's Park Terraces, and attained considerable status, particularly in the

emerging coastal resort towns. Instances are many: examples include Queen's Terrace, the first development by Decimus Burton for the new port of Fleetwood, Lancashire (1836-41) - or of a fashionable resort, such as the Italianate Powderham and Barn Park Terraces of the 1850s in Teignmouth, Devon (1846). The grandly composed terraces built in Sunderland in the 1850s and Leeds in the 1860s, set off the road in their own communal grounds and internally embellished with fine internal joinery and plasterwork, show how the terrace could sometimes rival the detached villa as a form of opulent middle class housing. The seaside terrace continued well into Victoria's reign, e.g., Pier Terrace at West Bay, Bridport, Dorset of 1885 by E.S. Prior. A town such as Cromer, Norfolk, shows very clearly the development of the town house from Regency classicism to Victorian eclecticism and revivalism.

Overall, however, except in select developments (or where land value determined a denser approach to development), the terrace had become the preserve of the lower middle classes by the 1890s, and great numbers were built in the fast-rising suburbs. Working class housing consisted of 'by-law housing': rows of standardised dwellings erected cheaply by builders close to a factory or where discounted workmen's trains made commuting viable. Too often these terraces were poorly built, on cramped sites, and with deep plans containing long back extensions that allowed little light to penetrate.

Industrial housing Housing associated with early industrial development is highly significant. Rural terraces are a distinctive feature of the Pennines handloom weaving industry from the early to mid nineteenth century, as found in Lancashire, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and Derbyshire. In Holmfirth and Hebden Bridge (both W. Yorks.) a second row of 'underdwellings' can be found beneath the principal terrace, a canny use of the steep terrain. In Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, long upper windows on the upper floors of houses denote workshops for framework knitters, and in Coventry for ribbon weavers.

Enlightened industrialists (and some improving country landowners) provided model housing, often together with social facilities such as a school, a hall and a church. Pioneer developments include Ralph Allen Cottages, a row of small houses for his stone-workers in Bath, designed by John Wood in 1737, and Richard Arkwright's terrace of houses and attic workshops at Cromford, Derbyshire (1776-7). Model housing became more common after 1840, especially in London, but some of the most famous are the work of West Yorkshire mill owners: e.g., Edward Akroyd's model villages at Copley (1847-53) and Akroydon (from 1859), both near Halifax, and Sir Titus Salt's Saltaire (1849-1876). Many are much later, such as the Bolsover Colliery Company's enlightened settlement at New Bolsover, Derbyshire (1888-93). The north-east also has its own distinctive forms of terrace. Around Newcastle can be found Tyneside flats – long two-storey terraces of what in London are called cottage flats, indistinguishable from conventional houses save that each unit has two front doors, one leading to a separate upstairs dwellings. Sunderland has a still more unusual terrace type, the 'Sunderland cottage', lines of deep bungalows perhaps influenced by Scottish precedents. Of interest, too, are early surviving examples of back-to-back terraces, once a common feature of northern towns and cities, particularly in West Yorkshire. Leeds had 33,000 back-to-backs in the 1930s, many newly built, and numbers still survive in Headingley.

3 SUMMARY OF SELECTION CRITERIA

- ***Pre-1700*** Houses, even when substantially altered, whether individual houses or a group, are likely to be listable.
- ***1700-c.1840*** Houses surviving in anything like their original form should be listed. The earliest, most complete and elaborate terraces may be listable in a high grade. Individual houses should have special intrinsic merit such as good composition, detailing or distinctive plan form. Later Georgian terraces survive in considerable numbers, and discretion is required when assessing the more standard or more compromised examples.
- ***c.1840-1880s*** Because of the increase in the number of houses both built and surviving, greater selection is required. Model housing has special sociological as well as architectural interest.
- ***Architectural interest*** The large majority of the grander town houses and terraces will have been listed already on account of their architectural and historic interest. This can reside in their design; decoration; planning; construction; the survival of early or unusual features. Polite architecture is not the only ground of interest, however, and the adaptation of building approaches for more modest contexts may be of interest too.
- ***Regional interest*** Respect should be accorded to important examples of regional approaches to house building, as reflected in design, planning and materials.
- ***Decorative features*** Fanlights, original panelled doors and door furniture; the survival of glazing bars, margin light glazing (perhaps with coloured glass); gauged brick heads; ironwork, e.g., to windows, railings and gates, and staircases; fireplaces, scullery fittings, stone slabs for cold storage, wine and ale cellars are all features of special interest.

4 SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SELECTING TOWN AND TERRACED HOUSES FOR DESIGNATION

Status and survival The Georgian town houses that survive today will tend, through natural selection, to be the grander examples. Few humble working-class dwellings survive, and any modest houses and terraces prior to the mid nineteenth century are worthy of careful consideration: their rarity and interest are only now becoming clear. In all cases, the things to look for are the same: the survival of exterior and interior features, and of plan form. Early terraces of workers' housing are particularly worthy of attention, especially if they form a coherent group that retains internal timber partitions and simple staircases.

Alteration Houses are for living in, and inevitably change over time. Because many were built to last no more than the length of their original leases - usually 61or (later on) 99 years - partial (or even total) rebuilding was often necessary. The key issue is whether alterations have seriously undermined the special interest. Loss of major elements such as the staircase, or the stripping out of all internal detailing, is likely to render a house unlistable. Great care is required where the ground floor has been converted into shops. Some shopfronts can be original, or can even add to the overall interest of a

building, but generally the insertion of a shop will have had a major impact on the fabric of a house. Occasionally later insertions have intrinsic architectural interest or some sociological interest in the history of the locality. Rare survivals, such as in-situ kitchen fittings, early wallpaper or decorative glass, should be accorded due weight. Alterations to the less prominent parts of a house, such as bedrooms and service areas, may have less of an impact than alterations to the principal spaces. Window replacement, roof extensions, rendering, the loss of architectural elements such as capitals or railings: all can have a decisive effect on list-worthiness. Discretion will be required on a case-by-case basis.

Regional variations Research into town houses and, particularly, terraces has focused on London. However, because fashions established in the metropolis were widely and quickly disseminated and because the Acts of Parliament governing London influenced decisions made elsewhere, this focus does throw considerable light on the regional experience. Nonetheless, there are important regional variations - not all London features were adopted elsewhere and local conditions often led to local solutions - and assessment for designation should take full account of these. Buildings a distance away from major cities should not be expected to be in the vanguard of architectural fashion either.

The 1840 threshold Post-1840 houses ought to display a higher level of special interest than earlier ones if they are to be listed. There are sound reasons for this: survivals become more numerous, designs and construction becomes more standardised, and architectural and decorative achievement is not always evident. While this threshold needs to be treated thoughtfully - post-1840 buildings, particularly outside the great cities, may well warrant inclusion too, and pre-1840 survivals can sometimes lack sufficient interest themselves - a higher level of special interest will be required because of the nature and number of survivals. Moreover, the intrinsic qualities of a building are more important than the exact date of construction.

Victorian housing The terrace tradition carried on throughout the nineteenth century, and where coherent runs of decorative ironwork, fanlights, door cases, and gauged brick heads over sash windows or margin-light glazing survive, a terrace of the 1840s or '50s is likely to be as listable as one of the 1830s. Generally speaking, from the middle years of the century onwards, only the more architecturally ambitious terraces are listable. Careful selection is required, especially in the vast stuccoed London suburbs. The formally composed terraces, squares and crescents have generally been listed, but the journeyman rows have not. While conservation area designation may provide the best vehicle for management of these wider environments, more modest buildings may be listable if they enhance the setting of the set pieces. This is more likely to be the case if the latter are highly graded. Victorian housing which demonstrates new approaches to planning and design, or which brings interesting variations on the established themes of terrace and square, should be carefully considered too.

Grading High grades take account of exteriors with decorative brickwork and fine details such as door cases and interiors with an elaborate staircase, moulded panelling and cupboards and possibly distinctive plan forms such as a corner fireplace in the rear room with a closet wing beyond. The most skilfully composed set pieces from the late

eighteenth and early nineteenth century are likely to be listed in high grades for their architectural importance and picturesque use of their site – as with the terraces of Bath and Bristol. Even when individual houses have undergone some alteration, the overall importance of an ensemble may well justify listing at a high grade. Only the grandest nineteenth century terraces forming a set piece to a new development are likely to be listable in a high grade. High grades may also be given for historic interest to terraces that, for example, denote the first speculative development in a town, as with Fortfield Terrace at Sidmouth (Devon) which marked the start of the town's growth as a fashionable resort in the 1790s. High grades may be appropriate for houses with historic association where the levels of survival of original fabric are high, and where the houses possess intrinsic architectural interest.

Historic interest Well-documented historic associations of national importance may increase the case for listing but normally a building should be of some architectural merit in itself or it should be preserved in a form that directly illustrates and confirms its historic associations. The occupancy of a distinguished person may be a consideration - and can be the determinant one in exceptional cases - but generally a plaque (rather than listing) will be the most appropriate way of recording the association.

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