

**Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
Architectural Review**

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David McDonald, the Royal Borough's principal design and conservation officer, takes you on a tour of his own favourite buildings in Kensington and Chelsea.

Very often a visitor's first and only stop in the Borough is to visit Harrods. Architecturally there is much to admire in its sumptuous interiors, particularly the famous food hall. On the outside the elaborately detailed terra cotta facade can be appreciated at its best at the Hans Road doorway with its classical surround. While there, it is worth pausing to look closely at three of the houses opposite. Whilst Harrods exhibits much of the riot of exterior decoration associated with the Queen Anne Revival style of architecture, the houses at 12-16 Hans Road in quiet red brick and stone represent the work of two architects of the Arts and Crafts style, C F A Voysey and H Macmurdo.

Another of Macmurdo's houses is at the rear of another Department Store but of a very different style and ethos; Peter Jones at Sloane Square. The house is on Symonds Street - wedged between part of the original Peter Jones store, with its 1889 date and the initials 'PJ' high up on gables - and the more famous 1928 rebuild. The glass curtain walling of Peter Jones elegantly turns the corner of Sloane Square and the King's Road and a delicate canopy protects the passer-by from rain and also contains blinds to protect the shop displays from the summer sun.

An alternative approach to 1930s department store design is that of Barkers and the former Derry and Toms building on Kensington High Street, currently occupied by BHS. Each has a boldly expressive Art Deco facade. The roof garden of Derry and Toms is the largest in London and has flamingos and ducks in residence. Look out for the carved reliefs on the stonework. Aeroplanes and cars express its modernity. The sheer bulk and dramatic form of Barkers gives it a stronger presence on the High Street than Derry and Toms. Its bronze and glass towers are local landmarks and can be seen from a number of viewpoints in juxtaposition with the spire of St Mary Abbots church nearby.

Moving from Mammon to God, George Gilbert Scott's masterpiece of Gothic Revival architecture, St. Mary Abbots, boasts the highest church spire in London. The church welcomes visitors and it is a delight to walk through the unusual cloister from Kensington High Street and to sit in the nave, far from the hustle and bustle. The Borough also boasts one of the earliest examples of the Gothic Revival, St. Lukes in Sydney Street, designed by James Savage in the 1820s. It was described in 1892 as, 'one of the most remarkable efforts of the band of architects who brought about the revival of the Gothic or Christian architecture at the beginning of the present century'. Its Bath stone facade has been cleaned in recent years and its high tower and nave with flying buttresses dominate Sydney Street. Holy Trinity, Sloane Street and St Cuthberts, Philbeach Gardens have gabled facades which hint at some of the best Arts and Crafts church interiors in the land, in fact Holy Trinity has a magnificent stained glass window designed by Burne Jones and installed by Morris & Co.

We have to go to the far north of the Borough to appreciate the recently restored Dissenters' Chapel at Kensal Green Cemetery. This fairly plain classically designed chapel is open as a visitor centre for Kensal Green Cemetery which has been described as, '...the most distinguished of London's cemeteries. Not only is it older than the others with an early history synonymous with the history of the whole English cemetery movement, but it also retains its original range of buildings and boasts an unequalled array of mausolea, three of which commemorate royalty'.

A far cry from the Dissenters' Chapel is the Baroque splendour of Brompton Oratory. A more un-English interior could not be imagined. Its gold, Siena marble and Venetian mosaics - a piece of Italy transported to Kensington - was described with affection by Murial Spark in her novel a 'Far Cry from Kensington'. Pevsner suggests that it is

'designed to create an atmosphere of Italian devotion and Italian fervour and succeeds in it'.

The Oratory has always been a rather neglected London landmark because of its more illustrious neighbours, the Victoria and Albert and Natural History Museums. The V&A's Cromwell Road frontage, with its recently cleaned brickwork contrasts with the Henry Cole wing on Exhibition Road where severe shrapnel damage can be seen to this day - a poignant reminder of the World War II bombing of London.

On the other side of Exhibition Road stands Waterhouse's Natural History Museum. His Romanesque style masterpiece impresses not only by its stunning size and composition but also by the wealth of ornament both inside and out. These architectural embellishments are in the form of living and extinct animal species reflecting the variety of exhibits in the museum.

Just as fascinating are the Borough's own smaller museums. Linley Sambourne House in Stafford Terrace might at first glance be no more than a smart 1860s Kensington terraced house, but its facade hides a magnificent late Victorian 'artistic' interior which has survived largely unchanged. For a well-preserved Georgian interior one should visit Thomas Carlyle's modest house on Cheyne Row.

Nearby, one can see the stuccoed terraces that have become the Borough's trademark. Some of the finest are the set pieces of Pelham and Egerton Crescents, where the restrained decoration builds on the Georgian tradition. Interestingly, the stucco render was originally left unpainted because it was intended to mimic Bath Stone. Undoubtedly, the Borough contains some of the most exquisite domestic architecture in London from this transitional phase between the prim Georgian to the bold High Victorian.

In looking at these architectural set pieces it is important to appreciate the contribution that garden squares make to the Borough's townscape. They not only act as a landscaped foil to the grand terraces, but also provide oases of greenery and welcome garden space for residents. The railings around the squares give enclosure and security and also link architecturally with the front boundary railings of the houses. The railings around many of the Borough's 100 or so squares were removed during World War II and are gradually being reinstated with the assistance of the Council.

In contrast with the grandeur of the terraces, squares and crescents is the relative modesty of the mews, which are so common in Kensington and Chelsea. Together with garden squares they give a unique character to the Borough. Originally built as stables with accommodation for drivers and grooms above, the majority are now in solely residential use. A notable feature of the mews is the arch which forms the entrance. These structures acted as architectural devices to give continuity between the terraces which they linked, and also served to screen from polite society the activities which took place behind. Holland Park Mews has a fine arch with well-preserved properties on either side of a cobbled roadway.

The extreme of late Victorian individualism style can be found at Harrington and Collingham Gardens where stand houses with Flemish and German inspired facades in red brick, stone and terracotta by Ernest George and Peto. The different facades and variety of materials suggest individual buildings constructed over a period of time when in fact they are a single planned speculative development.

The nearest one can get to appreciating an interior of this era is to go to the Council's other museum, Leighton House in Holland Park Road. Lord Leighton created behind a rather reticent frontage an exotic interior, including a sumptuously tiled Arab Hall. The majority of the tiles were brought from the Middle East, but were completed by

exquisite copies made by William de Morgan.

The Melbury Road area with its many grand Artists' houses and more modest studios bears witness to the artistic tradition of the Borough. Chelsea, notably in Tite Street, Glebe Place and Cheyne Walk, was home to many less well-known artists. Today, the large studio windows and rooflights on many of the properties hint at its Bohemian past.

The grandest domestic residence in the Borough is obviously Kensington Palace. Originally built in the time of William and Mary, it was added to by Sir Christopher Wren with the intention that it should be connected to his Royal Hospital by a Grand Avenue. Only the southern section was built (now Royal Avenue) giving views from Kings Road to the Hospital. Little remains of the other grand country houses which pre-dated the Georgian and Victorian development of the Borough. Although the remnants of seventeenth century Holland House, which was badly bomb-damaged in the last war, still forms the centrepiece of a wonderful park - truly the 'Jewel in the Crown' of the Council's open spaces.

Just to the west of the park is a house which gives us a link back to department stores. The William de Morgan tiles are in even greater profusion at the unusual Debenham house in Addison Road built by Halsey Ricardo for the owner of the famous department store. The plain exterior tiles were intended as protection from the London weather and pollution. The idea was that soot and dirt could be easily washed off, leaving the tiles as good as new.

Tiles have been used recently in the Borough's most unusual but most talked about landmark, the Westbourne Grove public convenience. The green tiles, clock and flower stall all contribute to one of the Boroughs most photographed modern buildings.

Another award winning contemporary building takes us full circle to Harrods. The stores' former depository in Draycott Avenue, a terra cotta building which was never completed has been added to by a dramatic steel and glass extension. This is an exciting fusion of old and new in a Borough where Victorian values in architecture can in the right hands be combined with the best of today's designs.

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