

A BRIEF HISTORY OF YORK PLACE, WORCESTER

BACKGROUND

In the C14th Worcester had a population of 3000 all living within the city walls but by 1820 population had grown to 20,000 with rapid industrial expansion due to opening of the Worcester Birmingham canal. Wealthier businessmen had moved out of the confines of the city wall and built large houses along the London Rd and Bath Rd and Lansdown Crescent and Rainbow Hill Terrace.

The Tything and Foregate Street were already established as quite grand streets of town houses but to accommodate the new gentry of businessmen a planned suburb was commenced to the north of the city walls on land known as Pound fields. The area we know as Britannia Square and Albany Terrace.

In 1825 an adjacent piece of land known as Third Pound Field was divided into five parts, one of which was halved and sold by Thomas Stephenson in 1827 to two businessmen, John Rowlands and Henry Wilding.

Their plan was to develop a street of artisan dwellings to accommodate the tradespeople and servants upon which the residents of Britannia Square would depend.

The original intention was to build 78 dwellings but in the event only 62 houses were built. Rowlands and Wilding set up The York Place New Building Society selling off plots to individual members for £24.00 each. The members then paid £1.50 a month into a fund to finance construction of the dwelling on each plot, with the eventual ownership of the plot decided by ballot amongst the members.

Construction started in 1831 at the north end of the street and was completed by 1835.

The street was named after the Duke of York and Albany of Grand old Duke of York fame.

HOW WERE THE DWELLINGS BUILT

The first and most significant feature of the development is the topography of the site – it is the secret of York Place and a source of great entertainment to their owners since the houses appear from the street frontages to be two stories but are in fact four stories – How does this come about when you pass along Britannia Square and Albany Terrace apparently on perfectly level streets?

The developers in fact took advantage of a subtle level change to the north of Albany Terrace sculpting the land slightly to create lower ground floors to the rear of each side of the street and creating what is effectively a raised causeway giving front access to the upper ground floor rooms at street level.

The dwellings therefore are 4 stories in height with a lower and upper ground floor, first floor and attic floor accommodation.

PLAN FORM

Three basic plan types were established generally with houses about 4 metres wide by 8 metres deep, though they vary in both width and depth but never in height. The houses were generally built in groups of twos or threes and the internal arrangements consisted of a parlour and living room on the upper ground level. On the lower ground floor level there was a coal hole accessed via a grating in the pavement with a kitchen to the rear. Some of the coal stores extended under the pavement level. The upper levels served as bedrooms with the attic floor divided into two by a thin timber partition. The kitchen, living room and first floor bedroom were all served by open fires with individual chimney stacks to each dwelling.

The staircase where it rises centrally through the dwelling was lit by a glazed lantern set each side of the ridge – a pattern typical of regency houses from the grandest to the humblest dwelling.

To the rear of the dwelling was the wash house and beyond this beside the rear boundary was the privy, and the occasional gig house. In some cases the wash house moved to the rear boundary – no 25 still retains bits of this incorporated into the present garage. Expressly stated in the deed of sale was exclusion of building of a pigsty.

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ARCHITECTURAL FORM

The architecture was rigidly set out with a uniform frontage. Built of a handmade brick with rubbed brick arches, the facades were given a crisp classical appearance with use of tuck pointing.

Windows were 8 over 8 sash windows to ground and first floors windows. The glass was hand blown crown glass and the glazing beads were as fine as the joiner could make them to maximise natural light coming into the rooms. The front windows on the upper ground floor all had shutters and a number of dwellings still retain the shutter hooks and fasteners or evidence in the brickwork where the fasteners have scored the brickwork. The shutters had all been removed by the start of the 2nd World War.

The front entrance doors are all set to the right of the house. The door case was of two types – either with or without a fanlight though you will note that the owners of both Nos 4 & 5 succumbed early on to the ‘door to door’ door-salesman and were persuaded to purchase rather swanky pedimented doorcases.

The door and doorcase were again of a typical Regency style with a reed and roundel type doorcase and a five panel door- a pair of vertical panels above and below a horizontal central panel.

This style of door and doorcase was also used internally for the grander upper ground floor rooms though this was abandoned on the upper floors for a simpler ogee architrave.

The internal decoration generally was simple and restrained – there were cornices in the rear upper ground floor rooms and enrichment of the fire surround with some decorative detail to the staircase but these were not designed as grand dwellings. The walls would have been painted with plain colours except in the entrance halls and principal living rooms. There the walls would have been more decoratively treated, with stenciled patterns being a popular style at the time – several dwellings have traces of this with the best surviving being No 27. The patterns follow wallpaper design but because wallpaper was taxed until the 1835 it was cheaper to stencil the walls than paper them.

SERVICES

Servicing of the house was basic. By 1844 only one mile of sewers had been laid in the city and piped water did not arrive until the construction of the Pumping Station in Pitchcroft in 1858. Water therefore was supplied by wells of which there was one to each pair of dwellings built on the line of the boundary wall. Mrs Green, a former resident at o 25, recalled the survival of the pump mechanism between her home and No 26

CHANGING PATTERN OF THE STREET

How has the street changed – well the most notable change to the street has been the invasion of the car – the view taken a few years ago when the street was being re-surfaced gives an impression of its original appearance. The shop, No 15, had arrived by 1851 formed out of a dwelling and in the same 1851 Worcester street directory No 45 is noted as being occupied by John Humphreys, beer retailer and until the late 1960s Nos 45&46 were used as a public house called the Royal Oak. No 45 was used by the ladies with men exclusively using the ‘smoke’ room in no 46. Latterly the basement of No 46 had been used for production of a different mind altering substance but that is another story.

At various times during the last 100 years dame schools were operating from various addresses in the street and in 1906-7 no 3 York Place was used as a shelter for Young Women.

Lacking the restrictions which the Article 4 direction places on the frontages of the street, the rear elevations have now been considerably altered with addition of rear extensions, changes to window pattern, and addition of dormers. Compare this photograph taken in 1950 with a similar view taken in 2006.

CHARACTERS OF THE STREET

What of the characters of York Place – despite what we regard as the relative smallness of the rooms it seems as if this was no impediment to the creation of large families. The picture of the Orgee family outside No 4 shows the father of 9 boys who lived in the house with 4 daughters, and 13 family members lived at no 18.

More recently the most notable characters of the street are Mrs Cane who has lived in the same house for her entire life, and Mrs Green and her sister Mrs Vale who also lived in

the street their entire lives, Mrs Green living in No 24 until she married before the 2nd World War and in No 25 from thenceforth.

IN SUMMARY

York Place is an early example, unique in Worcester of a co-operative housing development. It has survived relatively unaltered largely due to the far-sighted introduction of the Article 4 designation which has protected the street frontage from unsympathetic alterations preserving its individual character. The architectural integrity of the street ensures the houses are always in big demand whenever they come on the market.

It is a recognizable achievement I think and testament to the adaptability of the York Place dwellings that they continue to serve as a house for life. They are indeed also a model for houses of the future being simple and robust, easy to heat and maintain and a perfect example of how good architecture forges strong communities.

APPENDIX

Some occupants and their trades taken from the 1869 Kelly's Directory

No 10 Mrs Ellen Gibbing taylor/drapers
No 13 Mrs Hartland - laundress
No 15 William Cooke – grocer
No 18. James Lane - coachman
No 24. James Tomlins - clerk
No 25 John Nott - clerk
No 28 Mrs Daniel – milliner
No 29 James Hemming - plasterer
No 33 John Smith = drapers assistant
No 34 Thomas Trimmel- taylor
No 44 George Palmer – carpenter
No 45. John Humphreys – beer seller
No 54 John Grisman – builder, carpenter, coffin maker
No 60 William Willoughby - shoemaker

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