

Making an Entrance: Sweetness and Light in Crouch End

by Ray Rogers

A doorway has been described as a transition between two worlds – the individual on one side, the collective on the other. Or, put another way, the home on the inside and the city on the outside. A door is something that frames your coming and going – a place made for an occasion that is repeated millions of times in a lifetime. It is perhaps no surprise that making a doorway has been a significant feature of architecture since earliest times. This article will look at the evolution of the Victorian houses of Crouch End and why their doorways and porches in particular are considered to be fine examples of late Victorian and Edwardian decorative art.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HORNSEY

The development of Hornsey from village to middle-class suburb in the last decades of the nineteenth century has been well documented.¹ The outward spread of London into the new outer suburbs began with Stroud Green in the 1870s, Crouch End in the 1880s-1890s and Muswell Hill from the 1890s to the early 1900s. In only about twenty years or so open fields and landed estates were turned into thriving commercial centres surrounded by streets of new houses.

What were the social, business, artistic and urban factors at play in this transformation? One major factor was the growth of the middle classes generating their income from the professions, public administration, trade and commerce. Secondly, improvements in transport, especially the railways, helped the spread of the urban population. There was also a significant increase in the population. Between 1881 to 1891 Hornsey was among the areas of greatest population growth.

As the distance between home and workplace increased so the idea of the suburb as a haven of comfort and privacy took hold. There was an increased emphasis on detached or semi-detached single-family homes, screened from neighbours and passers-by with gardens, hedges, walls and gates. The front garden path led to the front door which was set well back from the street.

In Hornsey this rapid change was largely brought about by a small group of enterprising builders and developers. William Collins started his business in the 1870s, buying up land close to new railway stations. His first developments on Ridge Road and Stapleton Hall

Road were followed by houses on Crouch Hill, Haslemere Road, Avenue Road and Elder Avenue. By 1901 he was building on Church Crescent in Muswell Hill, with his sons building the Fortismere and Rookfield Estates from 1903. James Edmondson was born in Clerkenwell and started by working in his father's building firm. He developed a successful formula for building distinctive shopping parades with flats above that he repeated in Crouch End, Muswell Hill and elsewhere in London. Together with William Collins, James Edmondson was instrumental in the creation of modern Muswell Hill, building houses in Queens Avenue, Dukes Avenue and surrounding streets. John Cathles Hill was another developer who made his fortune building houses for middle-class tenants with jobs in the City or West End. To overcome a brick shortage he bought the Fletton brickworks near Peterborough, renaming it the London Brick Company. Active in Highgate, where he built several mansion blocks, he also designed some lavishly decorated public houses including the Queens Hotel in Crouch End. John Farrer was a self-made Victorian entrepreneur whose houses can be seen in Weston Park, Cecile Park, Fairfield Road and adjoining streets in Crouch End as well in Highgate, Muswell Hill, Fortis Green and the Warner Estate in Hornsey. Farrer had the good fortune to work for the two local land-owning families of Henry Weston Elder and Joseph Warner. Another notable local builder was Francis Cottrell who built much of the Crouch Hall Park estate for the Imperial Property Investment Company between 1884 to 1894. Unfortunately, little is known about Cottrell other than that at one time he lived on Crouch End Hill.

These men were builders and practical people who had a ready market to fulfil but needed a product to sell. In seeking a style to emulate, the speculative builders and manufacturers of the time could see the homes of the wealthy and the artistic elite, designed by established architects, illustrated in journals such as *The Builder*.

NEW TASTES

In a period of changing tastes it was goodbye to the Georgian and mid-Victorian terraces with a basement area on the street frontage. In the battle of the styles the classical architecture of Greece and Rome fell out of favour although the Italianate and Gothic styles still had

their adherents. It was Philip Webb's Red House of 1859, designed for William Morris, that was to set the trend towards the evolution of the vernacular revival or the 'Old English style' that was to be popularised by Norman Shaw in his wide-fronted, semi-detached houses in Bedford Park between 1875-1881.

Shaw became the main exponent of what became known as the Queen Anne revival style which had a big impact on speculative builders. The principal features of the Queen Anne style included the use of red bricks with white painted sash windows. Other typical features included tile hanging, pedimented and 'Flemish' (Dutch) gables, bay windows, small windowpanes, wooden balconies and relief panels of sunflowers which were thought to be symbolic of enlightenment and grace. Mark Girouard described the Queen Anne revival as 'an architectural cocktail – a little genuine Queen Anne, a little Dutch, a little Flemish, a squeeze of Robert Adam, generous dash of Wren and a touch of François 1st.'²

At the same time the Aesthetic Movement revolutionised attitudes to interior design, aiming to produce 'art for art's sake' that was beautiful rather than having a deeper meaning. Domestic architecture should be 'homely' – more related to the vernacular than to Greece or Rome. The movement was concerned to make 'beauty' more generally affordable and led to a socially progressive approach to art and design traceable through the arts and crafts period to the garden cities of the early twentieth century. The movement had a major influence on the design and decoration of the home and the role of women in creating the 'house beautiful', aided by new stores such as Liberty which opened in 1875 selling objects for the home and textiles including materials from the middle east and Japan.



Fig. 1 Collins: Houses in Haslemere Road built in red brick and tiles with fretted bargeboards and chinoiserie porch details.

LOCAL EXAMPLES

All of this can be seen in the new houses built in Crouch End and Muswell Hill, which faithfully followed the red brick and white painted woodwork of the Queen Anne

Fig. 2

Collins:
Relief panel of
sunflowers at
Red Gables,
on the corner
of Crouch Hill
and
Haslemere
Road



movement, albeit in a commercial form resulting in an eclectic fusion often combining elements of different styles and periods on the same elevation. In Haslemere Road Collins built large detached and semi-detached houses in red brick with stone dressings, many with an attic floor in hipped tiled roofs. All of the houses have sash windows with small panes, stone lintels and his own pattern of timber front doors inset with coloured glass, with variations in the form and detailing of gables (mixing pargetting and fretted barge boards), entrances and bay windows, including chinoiserie style joinery over the porch. (see Fig.1)

On the corner with Crouch Hill is Red Gables, Collins's demonstration house. It is loaded with Queen Anne revival features made popular by Norman Shaw like tall chimneys, bay windows and elaborate gables, even a moulded brick panel with a Queen Anne movement sunflower. (see Fig.2)

In the streets of the Crouch Hall Park estate Cottrell built his particularly attractive versions of the Queen



Fig. 3 Cottrell: Houses in Coleridge Road showing his distinctive use of quoining

Anne style. The long terraces appear as paired villas, each pair separated by a deep recess containing the 'back' door or tradesman's entrance. The two storey houses are built in red brick with clay-tiled roofs and feature his distinctive white quoining as seen on houses in Coleridge Road. (see Fig.3) The white painted sash windows have a narrow top band of coloured glass panes. The houses in Clifton Road are among the most intact with added details such as a guilloche-pattern moulded band between the ground and first floor; the first-floor windows divided by colonettes.



Fig. 4 Farrer: Houses in Elder Avenue featuring Dutch gables with decorative brickwork

John Farrer developed the Elder estate in Weston Park and the adjoining streets. Farrer threw every popular architectural device at his street elevations. There are a relatively limited number of house types but they are repeated with constant variations in the use of both materials and detailing, resulting in a visually rich mixture giving a varied and ever-changing appearance to the street scene. Farrer's favourite features included the use of richly decorated Dutch gables to create a varied roofline, decorative brickwork and moulded brick panels, the use of red brick contrasting with stone detailing, classical features such as the use of broken pediments above porches, coloured glass to front doors and window sashes, various forms of bay windows and shaped timber brackets together with turned wooden porch valances. (see Fig.4)

The quality of the new houses was ensured by the control exercised by the Local Board, which set strict standards for the new development that supported the objective of building large houses for wealthy middle class tenants and protecting Hornsey's reputation as a healthy suburb 'full of wide tree lined streets.' This objective was supported by the principal builders like

Collins and Edmondson who could see the advantage in maintaining the value of their investments.

CHANGES IN THE BUILDING TRADE

Also at this time major changes were taking place in the building trade. A key feature of late-Victorian and Edwardian speculative housing was the increasing use of building components available from builders' catalogues and local workshops, including architectural elements such as door and window surrounds, and a huge range of mass-produced decorative features.

Builders employed the latest techniques and materials, such as ready-made window and door assemblies ready for installation on site, the machine-made replication of more expensive hand carved decoration. A key local supplier was the builders' merchants Bond and White in Muswell Hill, and the unique front doors used by the Collins firm throughout Crouch End and Muswell Hill came from the Clapton Joinery Works. The joinery for the new houses all came from catalogues. The vast choice of patterns and range of designs meant that builders had the ability to quickly vary their designs from one house to the next. Doors were also a mass-produced item and made in familiar patterns but each could also be made unique by such additions as stained glass panels that were obtainable at a low cost. Even whole bay windows were available as complete joinery elements ready for on-site assembly. The complete



Fig. 5 The classic Crouch End porch in Crouch Hall Road: the front door

building timber and joinery needed for a standard size house could even be bought as a package.

THE PORCH

The entrance porch, a distinctive feature of the new houses, became an integral part of domestic social life, assuming a particular role as a transition space between indoors and outdoors, forming a link between private and public realms. The builder's catalogues contained pages showing ready-made porch and veranda parts including machine-turned porch columns, newels and balusters with fret-cut brackets and arches in differing patterns plus grilles for porches and for placing over doorways.

Porches with elaborately detailed surrounds made in cast stone or sometimes in painted terracotta can be seen on houses of the 1880s in Stroud Green and on early houses on Crouch Hall Road. At a slightly later date, in Crouch End and Muswell Hill, builders began creating wooden porches using fretwork and other decorative effects. The porch from Crouch Hall Road is the quintessential Crouch End porch that appears in books on Edwardian domestic architecture. It was assembled from machine made elements including turned porch columns and balusters and curved brackets. Notable also is the panelled front door with its stained glass and leaded lights. (see Fig.5)

Chinoiserie (or China style) was popular in the decorative arts, garden design and architecture and was

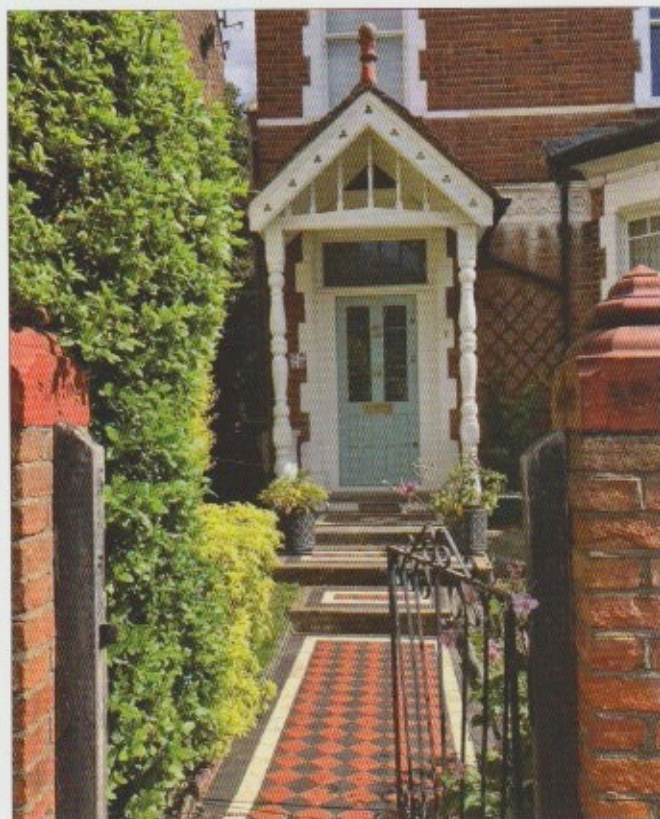


Fig. 7 Cottrell: Porch on houses in Clifton Road featuring turned columns with tiled roofs and terracotta finials and bargeboards with a pierced trefoil pattern. Note also the moulded terracotta gate pier caps and the tiled path.

widely used as a decorative feature for porch valances and for window glazing bars. Collins used this feature on his houses in Crouch Hill and in Haslemere Road, Crouch End. (see Fig.6) Cottrell's gabled timber porches in Clifton Road have turned columns and fish-scale tiled roofs with terracotta finials and bargeboards with a pierced trefoil pattern. (see Fig.7) Both in Crouch End and Muswell Hill there is an extraordinary range of porch designs, many displaying an amazing exuberance and playfulness. The builder's catalogues also contained a vast array of goods in cast iron and there is a cast iron porch made by William Pryor and Company on Mount View Road.

Porches were often decorated with floor-to-ceiling or dado height tiled panels. Ceramic tiles were used throughout late-Victorian and Edwardian houses, providing a relatively cheap, colourful and easily cleaned surface of any size. When used for porch walls they provided permanent decoration that, to quote a Victorian source, may 'make or mar the first glimpse of the home'.⁵ Builders bought tiles from trade catalogues or from specialist tile producers such as Maw and Company of Shropshire. (see Fig. 8) Dado height and full height tiled porches can be seen in Weston Park (see Fig.9), Hatherley Gardens, Mount View Road and even further afield in Farrer's houses in Nightingale Lane.

Encaustic floor tiles made by companies like George Woolliscroft and Son of Hanley, Staffordshire were used



Fig. 6 A Collins porch with chinoiserie feature in Haslemere Road. Note also the trademark Collins front door with its coloured glass.

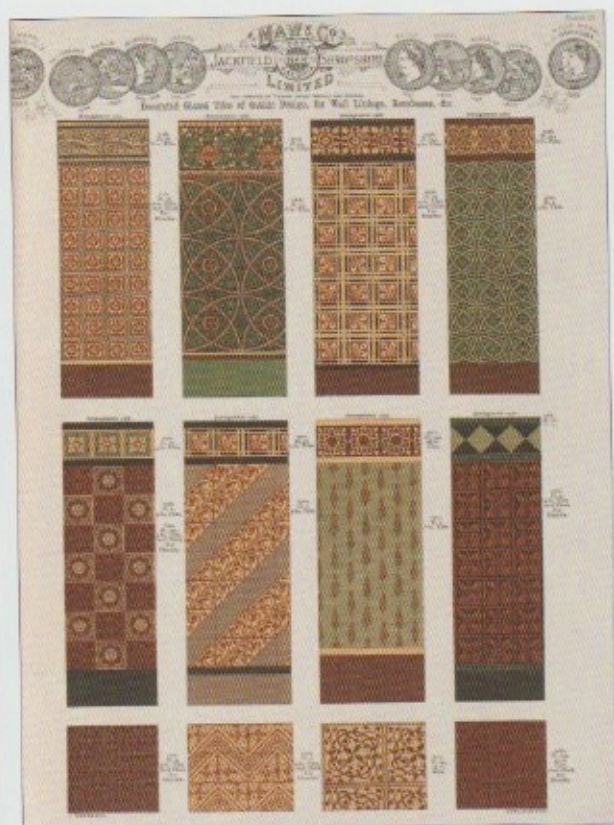


Fig. 8 Wall tiles by Maw & Co – catalogue illustration of dado height tile panels

for garden paths, porches and hallways. The well-known firm of Minton in Stoke upon Trent made a range of hand painted 'art tiles' that were incorporated into



Fig. 9 Porch with dado height wall tiles on a Farrer house in Weston Park. Note the black and white floor tiles in the porch and the panelled door with coloured glass.

Fig. 10

Tiled panel incorporating a painted picture tile as the centrepiece in the porch of a Collins house in Mountview Road



tiled panels used on the porch walls. (see Fig.10) Whilst photographs can give some idea of the decorative richness of the Victorian wall and floor tiles, the task of assembling a definitive record of decorative tiles in Crouch End still awaits.

Stained glass has already been mentioned in connection with front doors. By the 1890s medium to larger sized houses in Crouch End started to have ornamental glass installed in vestibule doors, hallway and staircase windows and in the upper lights of main front room windows. The improved lighting levels available inside houses at this time made leaded art glass designs more visible from the street and they were considered to add to the appearance of a house. Using stained, painted or transfer-printed leaded glass, elaborate designs incorporating Aesthetic Movement motifs such as birds and sunflowers were achieved, often set into the front door and its side panels. The stained and painted glass can be best appreciated when seen at night illuminated from the interior of the houses. (see Fig. 11)

CONCLUSION

Crouch End is distinguished by the character of its high-quality residential and commercial architecture, which combine to produce a townscape of interest and human scale. It is an excellent example of a late-Victorian/early Edwardian suburban development created from the last quarter of the 19th century until the start of the First World War. The area was built up in phases as land

became available for development, but it nevertheless has a cohesive character deriving partly from its development by a relatively limited number of builders and architects under the strict control of Hornsey UDC. This arrangement ensured not only the generally high standard of materials and construction to be used in new buildings but also a consistent architectural approach, influenced largely by the residential work of Norman Shaw, resulting in the creation of a new middle-class suburban community complete with shops, places of worship and entertainment. The houses reflect an eclectic design approach based on the principles of the Queen Anne revival, exploiting the use of prefabricated and machine-made components such as windows, porches and other architectural details including ceramic tiles and glazing to achieve their full decorative potential.

Much of Crouch End's special interest derives as much from the quality of the details and materials of such areas, especially its porches and front doors, as it does from the overall character of its streets and shopping parades. Many of these original details remain and where they do they make a very positive contribution to the appearance and interest of the area. However, much of this quality is easily lost by small scale individual changes that can collectively undermine the appearance of individual houses and of whole streets. Poor maintenance or thoughtless replacement, once done, is often

irreversible and makes for a collective loss. Supported by conservation area designation, the preservation of Crouch End's unique architectural heritage is a shared responsibility between residents, house owners and the local planning authority.

Notes

- 1 Hornsey Historical Society, 'A Brief History of Crouch End'.
- 2 Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light, the Queen Anne Movement 1860-1900* (Yale University Press, 1977), p.1.
- 3 V&A Museum, *An Introduction to the Aesthetic Movement*, V&A web archive
- 4 'Hornsey and Crouch End', *London*, 19 March 1896, p. 268 (from Long, p.57)
- 5 W. J. Furnival, *Leadless Decorative Tiles, Faience and Mosaic* (Stone, 1904, p. 806), (from Long, p.147).

Bibliography

- Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, London 4: North* (1998)
 Steven Denford, *Hornsey Past* (Historical Publications, 2008)
 Helen C. Long, *The Edwardian House, the Middle-Class Home in Britain 1880-1914* (Manchester University Press, 1993)
 Janet Owen, John Farrer, *The Man who changed Hornsey*, (Hornsey Historical Society, 2009).
 Ray Rogers, 'Making an Entrance', Hornsey Historical Society Newsletter, March 2024.
 Andrew Saint et al, *London Suburbs* (English Heritage, 1999).

Illustrations

All photographs are by the author.
 Figure 8 is sourced from Internet Archive (Public Domain Mark 1.0).

Glossary of architectural terms

- Bargeboards** Projecting boards, sometimes carved or decorated, placed against the incline of the gable end of a building, hiding the ends of the horizontal roof timbers.
- Chinoiserie** A popular decorative style incorporating Chinese elements, forming a fanciful interpretation of Chinese architecture and ornament.
- Colonette** A small column.
- Dutch gable** a curved or shaped gable sometimes surmounted by a pediment.
- Encaustic tiles** Glazed and decorated earthenware tiles used for flooring
- Gable** The triangular upper part of a wall at the end of a pitched roof.
- Guilloche** A repeating pattern of interlacing curved bands.
- Pargetting** A form of plasterwork modelled with ornamental patterns, originally used to decorate the exteriors of timber framed houses.
- Pediment** In classical architecture, a low pitched triangular gable used over porticos, doors and windows.
- Quoin** Dressed stones or distinctive brickwork used to reinforce and emphasise the corners of a building, usually laid so that their faces are alternately short and long.



Fig. 11 Coloured glass in the front door and side panels of a Collins house in Mountview Road