

# Owning and living in a Georgian house

by Clive Fewins

**Y**ou don't need to be an expert on period and listed houses to recognise the Georgian style. It is one of the most iconic of house styles, famed throughout the world. Widely loved and appreciated, it is a style that many who long for a traditional houses aspire to.

People who know a lot about Georgian houses can usually get very close to the precise date in the extremely long Georgian period that a building belongs to. It is a difficult call, because George I ascended the throne in 1714 and George IV died in 1830.

Why are lovers of old houses so drawn to this style? The most probable answer is the clean, uncluttered look, elegant proportions and simple, symmetrical facades of Georgian houses. The Georgians derived this straight from Rome, via the ideas of the Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio.

'Proportion is the first principle, and proper appropriation of the parts constitute symmetry and harmony', wrote Robert Morris, Palladianism's first published theorist, in 1751. Geometric proportions, as found in the pattern books of Palladio, were the means by which true perfection of form could be achieved.

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The Circus, Bath,  
completed in 1768  
Photo © Clive Fewins







Many humble Georgian terraced houses as well as grander houses follow this guide. This gives Georgian houses their typical regular facades that so often have a dignity, coolness and elegance that is as equally apparent in a country farmhouse or rectory as a smart town house of the same period.

All this sounds very splendid. Georgian means desirable, we all know that. But it can also mean inconvenient and, because of the size of the rooms, often expensive.

So, what are the practicalities of living in a Georgian house? To answer this I turned to chartered surveyor and historic building consultant Richard Oxley, author of *Survey and Repair of Traditional Buildings* (Donhead, 2003).

In his book, Richard Oxley stresses the need for today's owners to understand the ideas, techniques and materials employed by those who built their homes. He also encourages the Georgian house owner to try to gain an understanding of the speed at which property often went up in the Georgian period. This can often explain the tendency to jerry-build.

The whole Georgian period can usefully be split into three sections. The first was named the Palladian, after the Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio. In the years between about 1714 and 1760 this style reigned supreme.

Between 1760-90 the Adam (or Neoclassical) style was current, and the final section was Late Georgian or Regency (c1790-1830).

With its overlap with the Regency period, when Prince George (later George IV) reigned as Prince Regent from 1811 to 1820 (he finally died in 1830) it lasted very much longer than the Victorian period, which began on the death of William IV in 1837.



An elegant mid Georgian three storey bay-windowed house in Rivers Street, Bath



Handsome curved detailing and studied elegance in Camden Crescent, Bath, most of which was built in 1788. Originally known as Upper Camden Place, numbers 6-21 are Listed Grade I



'Nowadays people often think we live in an age of jerry-building, but the Georgians often cut corners, sometimes with really serious results,' he said. 'I have experienced problems with the brickwork in a number of Georgian houses I have worked on, also with the detailing and the finish.'

Many old house enthusiasts are surprised when they find out that quite often Georgian houses did not always fit together that well. There were often unfortunate juxtapositions of 'good' and 'bad' materials. While the front of the building might be constructed of fine ashlar stone, the side, or sides (and quite often the rear) would often be built from interior stone or even brick. Apart from the fact that this can often look rather bizarre, it could (and still can) on occasions lead to more serious problems of subsidence, particularly when the

house was built on a slope, as many Georgian terraced properties were.

The Building Act of 1774 aimed to end jerry-building by defining the four types of 'rates' of houses which could be built in future. Within each category was a list of specific building requirements, including the important stipulation that gives Georgian houses so much of their 'special' flavour - all external window joinery was to be hidden behind the outer skin of masonry as a precaution against fire.

There is also the matter of roof construction and the fact that this often led (and can still lead) to unwelcome leaks. 'To the Georgians it was a matter of design being paramount over functionality,' explained Richard Oxley.

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'It was vital to them that the roof should be concealed behind the parapet, so the roof construction behind often took the form of an M-shape. This led to all sorts of devices to get the water away, including, quite often, open lead-lined wooden troughs running the length of the roof. There is always the danger that these can freeze, which can lead to all sorts of problems, so some means of insulation is advised (often a heating tape is the best) if your Georgian house has open internal gutters of this type concealed in the roof.

'The best advice is, as is so often the case, regular maintenance. Dead pigeons and build-up of leaves can cause no end of problems in houses with rainwater systems of this sort, so the answer is to stop these problems arising in the first place.'

Jonathan Taylor, who lives in Bath, stressed the energy inefficiency of Georgian houses. 'Large rooms don't help,' he said. 'But there is also the fact that in many Georgian town houses, the walls become thinner the higher up they rise. You can often tell if this is the case as the sash boxes begin to project into the room. This is very common in towns such as Bath and Edinburgh, where the exterior facades are often built of fine ashlar stone.

'Thin walls of this nature do not necessarily mean the houses are more likely to fall down, but they do lead to higher energy bills, more maintenance costs and sometimes other, unforeseen problems.'

OTHER PRACTICAL MATTERS

If you have a Georgian house built of brick, always keep a weather eye on the state of the brickwork. The vast array of brick colours, textures and shapes makes an enormous contribution to the visual interest of even the most modest Georgian facade in a provincial town. However, very often the appearance (and the weatherproofing abilities) of Georgian brickwork is ruined by bad repairs with inappropriate materials and by bad repointing. The two main essentials to remember when repointing are firstly to avoid any method of pointing that encourages water to collect on, and thus ultimately penetrate, the brickwork, and to avoid using cement-rich mortars. Much the same applies to stone.

It is always wise to leave old brickwork completely unpainted. Modern paints usually do not allow traditionally-built brick walls to 'breathe', thus trapping moisture inside.

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Great Pulteney Street, Bath. This magnificent terraced street connects the area to the east of the River Avon with the centre of the city via the Robert Adam-designed Pulteney Bridge. Completed in 1789, famous former residents of the street include Jane Austen the novelist and William Wilberforce the anti-slavery campaigner. Forty-three of the houses are Listed Grade I

How not to do it: ashlar-faced Georgian buildings are particularly susceptible to cracks and damage to the sometimes sensitive stone if drainpipes and gutters are not properly maintained. Photo courtesy of SPAB



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The roofs of Georgian houses are usually hidden behind high parapets, which means all manner of devices were used to get the water away. This exposed lead-lined gutter runs the width of the house and access is clearly difficult. Nevertheless, it should be kept clear of leaves, moss and other debris, however much of a challenge that might pose

*Photo courtesy of SPAB*



Change of scene: this handsome Georgian house in a country town in Oxfordshire has careful window detailing and a rusticated render on the ground floor at the front as well as rusticated quoins. Rustication is masonry cut in massive blocks separated from each other by deep joints, the object being to give a rich and bold texture to an exterior wall. It was a technique much used by Palladio. Renders (stucco), as is the case on the front wall here, are often used to achieve this effect



From the outside it is the windows that have the greatest effect in enhancing the character of Georgian houses. This is just as evident in modest terraced houses and Georgian country cottages as it is in grander multi-windowed houses. Sash windows are the key. From about 1670 they were the most popular form of window opening and continued to be so for more than two centuries. Sash windows are usually made of wood and are, in the main, vertically sliding and 'double hung'.

From about 1700 onwards the double hung sash – both windows sliding and both probably containing six-over-six or eight-over-eight panes – was widespread in houses. The key to Georgian sash window construction is that each pane should be taller than it is wide. While earlier panes were often virtually square, the trend as the 18th century progressed was to emphasise the verticality of the window. Gradually the manufacture of larger panes of glass became easier and glazing bars became thinner. These bars were moulded in a variety of ways and this can

still be done for the purposes of restoration or repair. In contrast to modern small pane windows, there was never a standard Georgian window or pane size.

#### OTHER ELEMENTS

**Staircases:** In any Georgian house of quality staircases should be the most impressive interior feature. If you are renovating a Georgian house do not be tempted to throw out complete staircases just because they are in a poor state of repair. Like windows, you will find it very hard to get exact replacements, one of the reasons being that most joinery companies use machinery on a widespread scale and only a small number nowadays specialise in the traditional hand techniques that produced such unique staircases.

**Fanlights:** These were set above the door to provide light to the passageway inside. They were one of the ornamental features that alleviated the relative austerity of the typical Georgian domestic facade. Fanlights had a function to perform, but the Georgians made

a virtue of necessity by giving them a decorative look. If you have a fanlight in need of repair in your Georgian house, take it seriously. You will do a botched job at your peril.

**Interior mouldings:** These are very important in Georgian houses. In early buildings the structural timbers themselves were often moulded to provide decoration. The Georgians saw the value of applied timber mouldings, such as architraves, which were fashioned by hand using a variety of moulding planes. In any Georgian house the mouldings really matter. Maintenance is vital, correct repair is important, and accurate replacement (when needed) is *de rigueur*.

**Stucco:** When used on the outside of Georgian houses stucco was usually applied in three coats. The final application was flattened with a wooden float, and as it began to set it was often incised to resemble blocks of finely

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dressed stone. Most stucco was intended to be painted. When repairing it, as with any render, each coat should be progressively weaker and try to ensure that the materials used in the mix produce a finish of a colour, texture and strength similar to the existing finish.

There are many important internal matters such as plaster types, paint colours and finishes, doors, fireplaces and shutters to name but some of the important ones. Space prevents more than a mention of these subjects.

It is also as well to note that if you wish to be totally authentic in restoring a Georgian house that has fallen upon hard times, bathrooms did not really exist in Georgian houses! All that these buildings had by way of a bathroom were very basic plunge baths – filled not by taps but by water brought from the kitchen. This arrangement was introduced into more hygiene conscious middle class homes during the second half of the 18th century.

Kitchens are a little easier; at least the Georgians had them. However, they were fairly crude by modern standards. If you are renovating a Georgian house, free-standing kitchen cupboards and chests of drawers,

Country Georgian. The delectable brick frontage of a handsome Georgian house in a village in the Vale of White Horse, Oxfordshire. With brick it is sometimes possible to spot, as it is here, where there have been changes to the windows and other openings in facade over the centuries and for many this adds to the appeal of this material

preferably unpainted, and a flagstone or simulated flagstone floor would fit the bill best.

Remember that, if faced with a tricky restoration project, bad repair work can not only look hideous or ridiculous but can also damage the fabric of the house. Such structural harm, when combined with the effect of making the building less of a genuinely 'period' home, inevitably reduces the character and makes the property more difficult to sell.

Careful sympathetic restoration will always make your Georgian home look far more beautiful and inviting than an attempt to drag it back to some semi-fictional look that it probably never had. It is often true that spending less than you are initially inclined to on your refurbishment can often produce better results than throwing money at it. So many historic homes are ruined by wholesale 'restorations' which, while probably very well-intentioned, are often sadly misguided. ❁

USEFUL CONTACTS

SPAB – the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings  
020 7377 1644 [www.spab.org.uk](http://www.spab.org.uk)

Richard Oxley, Oxley Conservation  
01491 414191  
[www.oxleyconservation.com](http://www.oxleyconservation.com)

The Museum of Bath Architecture  
01225 333895  
[museumofbatharchitecture.org.uk](http://museumofbatharchitecture.org.uk)

The Georgian Group  
020 7529 8920  
[www.georgiangroup.org.uk](http://www.georgiangroup.org.uk)

You may also find *The Georgian Group book of the Georgian House* by Steven Parissien very useful.

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