

‘A House Transformed: The Restoration of 78 Derngate, Northampton’

A personal perspective by the Curator, Dr. Sylvia Pinches

The transformation of a poky old house into a modern home was the subject of a feature in *Ideal Home* in the summer of 1920. That transformation was the work of the new owner of 78 Derngate, model-engineer Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke, and his designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh. These two men achieved more than a mere ‘semblance of modernity’, for they created a ‘charming and up-to-date miniature residence’ inside the shell of a late Georgian building. The combination of Bassett-Lowke’s interest in modernity and efficiency with the late flowering of Mackintosh’s decorative genius produced something that was ‘in some respects ... a house of the future’, as the *Ideal Home* magazine described it. The work had taken place a few years earlier, between June 1916 and March 1917, and was part of the revival of this street commented upon in the *Northampton Independent* in January 1917, in an article entitled ‘*Derngate Redivivus*’. Then the journalist wrote:

I hear that “Towerfield”, in Derngate, has been bought by Mr. Fred. Smith, the well-known builder associated for so many years with Mr. Henry Martin. He proposes to take up his residence there shortly, but not, I presume, until he has converted its “encircling gloom” into some semblance of modernity ... By the way, Derngate is undergoing quite a revival as a residential thoroughfare.

A better phrase could not be found to describe what has been happening in Derngate over the past few years. Number 78 Derngate has indeed been brought back to life, along with the two adjoining houses at 80-82, also under the management of the 78 Derngate Northampton Trust.

After the Bassett-Lowkes left in 1926, 78 Derngate passed through three sets of private hands before being bought by Northampton High School for Girls in 1964. Thanks to campaigning by local people and those in the ‘Mackintosh’ world, the following year it was listed as a building of Grade II* importance. The race to save it began in earnest when the School decided to sell their Derngate site in 1995. Within a short space of time, the Borough Council was able to take a 999-year lease on the property, thanks to the generosity of Keith and Maggie Barwell. A charitable Trust was formed in 1998 to manage the project: money and awareness were raised and plans were drawn up by the firm of John M^cAslan and Partners. The original vision encompassed a restored 78, 80 as circulation and interpretation space, and 82 as a vibrant centre for displaying and encouraging modern art and design. The plans for 82 also include a café, a shop and offices. Complementing sums already pledged from local sources, a grant of £999,000 from the Heritage Lottery fund in October 2001 brought enough money to begin Phase One, the careful restoration of 78 and the transformation of 80 into a display gallery, allowing access to 78 literally and metaphorically. Phase Two, the renovation of number 82, is scheduled to take place over the winter of 2005/06, after another round of fund-raising.

In January 2002 I was appointed as Curator and one of my first tasks was to conduct research into the history of the house before and after the Bassett-Lowke/Mackintosh period. Research on the Mackintosh work had already been undertaken by independent scholar Perilla Kinchin. In March 2002 the Trust appointed the main building contractors, William Anelay Ltd. of York. This old-

established firm has a great deal of experience in doing sensitive restoration work. Before they could begin work on site the state of the plaster, woodwork, chimneys and roof had all to be assessed. The firm of Crick Smith had already undertaken detailed paint analysis to determine the historic finishes. The asbestos lining in the 1916 boiler still in the basement also had to be carefully removed. The contractors and the architects then assembled a team of specialist sub-contractors and suppliers. Wherever possible local firms were used, but if particular skills were required they were sought the length and breadth of the country, even as far afield as Bombay, in the case of the block-printing of the material for the hall curtains. Eventually, on 9 September 2002, Anelay's took control of the three properties and the work began. It was really a project in two halves: the careful conservation and restoration of 78, and the dismantling and rebuilding of 80 as a modern gallery – the two aspects separated only by a nine-inch brick wall. All was co-ordinated from the site office in number 82.

The very first task was to protect the original features in 78. The front door with its stained-glass panels had already been removed for safekeeping to the Northampton Museum store. The swing-door in the hall screen was taken down, carefully packed and sent to join its companion. The screen and fireplaces were protected by polystyrene, bubble wrap and chipboard. Only once everything was protected could the scaffolding be put up, an enormous construction, entirely covering numbers 78 and 80, including a large projecting platform at the back to form a loading bay and work area. Then began the work of dismantling 80, brick by brick, saving the original bricks from the rear elevation to rebuild the front in the style of its original Georgian flat front. Both 78 and 80 were completely re-roofed, using salvaged slates. New sash windows were made, with traditional cords and weights but with each pane being double-glazed. This work and all the specialist joinery, including the replica front door, was done by Bridgend Joinery of Kendal. For its own safety and the security of the property the original door is on display in number 80, and a replica with a good solid lock is on the house! The glass panels were replicated by the Stained Glass Studio, who also did conservation work to the glass in the screen.

As the steel skeleton went up inside 80, carrying the new staircase, lift and glass case, so work went on to make 78 sound, replacing all the services, installing an air-handling system to prevent the air stagnating and sensors to monitor temperature and humidity, setting up security alarms. As with any building work, it had to get worse before it could get better, but sometimes I did wonder whether we were ever going to get round to the restoration. My frustration was somewhat tempered by the fascination of learning so much about buildings old and new. I have learnt so many new words and phrases, from the spalling of bricks to the use of intumescent paint.

While all the basic building work was going on, much more detailed research was being conducted into how the various finishes and fittings should be recreated. This aspect was co-ordinated by Sarah Jackson of John McAslan's. The key people involved were Mary Schoeser, fabric researcher, and Allyson M^cDermott, wallpaper conservator. They had regular meetings together, sometimes with Helen Hughes, English Heritage's expert on historic paint, and also consulted widely. Professor Pamela Robertson, Curator of the Mackintosh collection at the Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow, was generous with her time and advice. Then came the making. If I attempt to make a comprehensive list, I will miss someone out, which would be invidious. So

many people have put so much knowledge, skill and effort into the restoration. The whole of the restoration was recorded by i2i Television for the Discovery Channel. The documentary series, introduced by Eric Knowles, followed the building work from start to finish, including visits to the workshops of the specialist makers. It also included background information on Charles Rennie Mackintosh and on W.J. Bassett-Lowke. A 90-minute version of the series is available in our shop on VHS and DVD.

I was involved in the discussions with experts and architects about the interiors and at the same time was drawing up all the operational plans for opening. With Perilla Kinchin I wrote the text and chose the illustrations for the display panels in number 80. These were designed by James Wells Graphics and manufactured by Designs and Interiors Ltd. of Wellingborough. Quite a lot of my time was spent in finding objects for display in the glass case in number 80 and I am very grateful to everyone who has lent us Bassett-Lowke models and personal items. One of my main tasks was to recruit and train the volunteers, without whom the house could not operate. There are some hundred volunteers, working as guides, receptionists and shop assistants. Setting up the shop has also been my responsibility, not a role I was looking forward to, but even the till has proved less daunting than I originally feared.

The main restoration was completed in the autumn of 2003. After a month's trial opening in late November – early December, we opened for our first proper season on 1 March 2004. We had a most successful year, with over 16,000 visitors enjoying the chance to see the last completed commission of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The restoration received wide coverage in the press and critical acclaim, including awards for conservation from the Royal Fine Art Commission and the Royal Institute of British Architects. However, the praise I value most is the happy expressions on the faces of our visitors as they leave.

78 Derngate is open March-November, Wednesday to Sunday from 10.30p.m. – 5.00 p.m. (last entrance at 3.30p.m.). Entrance by pre-booked guided tour. To book, please telephone 01604 603407. For more information, see our website, www.78derngate.org.uk.

78 Derngate, Northampton, is the only surviving example of a Charles Rennie Mackintosh designed house outside of Scotland. 78 Derngate Northampton 01604 603407. Streetmap / Multimap The BBC is not responsible for the content of external websites. Panelling in 78 Derngate. The interior of this Georgian town house in Northampton has been painstakingly restored, thanks to money from the Heritage Lottery Fund. It was in 1917 that Charles Rennie Mackintosh was invited to design the interior of the house by its owner Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke. The designs were years ahead of their time and still have a modern feel, despite being nearly 90 years old. To find out more, see our 78 Derngate feature and browse our 78 Derngate photo gallery. Search through 124 Semi-Detached Houses and Detached Properties to let in Northampton from £179 per month. Coming soon coming soon to the market is this and well presented three bedroom mid-terrace... And well presented two bedroom mid-terrace property located on the edge of northampton town centre in the area of the mounts. Located within close proximity to a range of schools, amenities, the racecourse and northampton train station. This property also has travel links to the a43, a4 and m1. I... A house transformed: The restoration of 78 Derngate, Northampton. October 2005. S. Pinches. In 1998, a charitable Trust was formed to manage restoration of 78 Derngate. The original vision encompassed a restored 78, 80 as circulation and interpretation space, and 82 as a vibrant center for displaying and encouraging modern art and design. The plans for 82 also include a cafe, a shop and offices. Complementing sums already pledged from local sources, a grant of £999,000 from the Heritage [Show full abstract] Lottery fund in October 2001 brought enough money to begin Phase One, the careful restoration of 78 and the transformation of 80 into a display gallery, allowing access to 78 literally and metaphorically. The restoration of the house on 78 Derngate, designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in 1916-1919, which had had lost its strikingly colourful Mackintosh design furniture and interior decor. By acquiring the adjoining house, no.80, and transforming it into a new visitor centre, the building could be opened to the public as a museum on the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and WJ Bassett Lowke. For the new design and the immaculate re-creation of the truly stunning interior of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's last completed work. More information www.78derngate.org.uk. View all 2005. Share. Our Contacts. Europa Nostra International secretariat Lange Voorhout 35 NL - 2514 EC The Hague T +31 (0) 70 302 40 50 F +31 (0) 70 361 78 65 E info [at] europanostra.org. Grade II*-listed 78 Derngate in Northampton was remodelled by the Scottish designer in 1916. The trust in charge of restoring the house opened it to the public in 2003. It is seeking funding from Northampton Council and other sources to expand nearby 82 Derngate to improve public facilities. He transformed the interior of early 19th Century house 78 Derngate with his distinctive Art Nouveau style of design. Les Patterson, company secretary of the trust, said it hoped to secure a commitment of a grant of up to £200,000 from the council which it would look to match with funding from other organisations such as the Heritage Lottery Fund. image copyright Steve James.