

The Welsh Builder in Liverpool

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Introduction

Thomas Roberts, in his paper *'The Welsh influence on the building industry in Victorian Liverpool'* tells us that

"The urban development of Victorian Liverpool was different [from other 'Victorian towns'] and unique in the sense that it was undertaken in the main by Welsh migrants and their families"¹,

The significance of the Welsh migrant's contribution to the built environment of urban and suburban Liverpool is an established view and is well-documented in numerous accounts and histories of the development of Liverpool. Whilst many individual sets of circumstances were to prevail in the lives and unfolding careers of the many Welsh migrants whose contributions have been recorded and documented, it is possible to describe the success of Liverpool's 'Welsh builders' as the natural consequence of regional geography and geology, and the aspirations of suitably ambitious individuals who were able to exploit the particular demands of a rapidly expanding commercial centre.

As communications infrastructure was developed to connect late eighteenth and early nineteenth century centres of manufacture and commerce, the northernmost counties of Wales became increasingly more important as the self-

¹ Roberts, T. A., 1986. The Welsh influence on the building industry in Victorian Liverpool. In: M. Doughty, ed. Building the Industrial City. Leicester: Leicester University Press. P106

perpetuating demands of the Town exploited further, the resources and commodities becoming available within its regional hinterland.

Such was the growth and momentum with which the resources of North Wales became available to a burgeoning Liverpool, that Thomas Roberts informs us that by the 1830s, Welsh migrants were readily absorbed into well-established Welsh firms within the Town, and that by the great expansions of the 1850s and 1860s, three decades of Welsh involvement in the construction sector had already come to pass.²

The course upon which many young craftsmen had embarked in seeking their futures in Liverpool was therefore, by the 1860s an established and well-trodden one, and that such migration to Liverpool was not necessarily a journey into the unknown as it might have seemed to migrants in the late 1700s or the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Whilst the introduction of suitable roads and the extension of the railways between Liverpool and North Wales punctuate the timeline of improved communication between the Town and the wider regions during the middle of the century, the earliest and most significant means by which resources were made available was through coastal navigation. J. R. Jones attests to the 'brigs and schooners'³ regularly operating between Beaumaris and Amlwch and Liverpool, and it is not only in the transportation of raw materials such as stone, clay and lime that these routes were to become important, such sailings also brought craftsmen skilled

² Roberts, T. A., 1986. The Welsh influence on the building industry in Victorian Liverpool. In: M. Doughty, ed. *Building the Industrial City*. Leicester: Leicester University Press. p108

³ Jones, J. R., 1946. *The Welsh Builder on Merseyside : Annals and Lives*. Liverpool: J R Jones. p8

in the use of such commodities.⁴ In this respect, Thomas Roberts has aptly concluded that:

As North Wales was a rich source of building materials, enterprise and labour, the linkage between Liverpool and the North Wales region consolidated into one business and a single enterprise.⁵

Through established routes of communication and a continuity in terms of the supply of not just raw materials, but of skilled labour too, the 'Welsh Builder' in Liverpool was able to monopolise house-building in many parts of the expanding city, and the language of James Allanson Picton as he describes how,

an influx of Welsh builders invaded Messrs. Earles' fields [in the Edge Hill district] about 1863, and in a few years the whole surface north of the railway was covered with houses⁶

suggests, by contemporary account that the 'Welsh builder' was a recognisable presence within the expanding suburbs, and its home-based channels of supply support entirely the military metaphor which Picton has used in describing Roberts' 'single enterprise' that was the 'Welsh builder' in Liverpool.

So who were the 'Welsh Builders'?

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Roberts, T. A., 1986. The Welsh influence on the building industry in Victorian Liverpool. In: M. Doughty, ed. *Building the Industrial City*. Leicester: Leicester University Press. p108

⁶ J A Picton, 'Memorials of Liverpool', Vol 2 Topographical, p447

The most complete survey of 'Welsh builders' working in Liverpool during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is of course J. R. Jones' 'The Welsh Builder on Merseyside : Annals and Lives'.

'The Welsh Builder on Merseyside' was published in 1946 and constitutes a series of "biographical particulars"⁷ of those who had hailed from the Principality having made some contribution to the development of Liverpool and its suburbs. The 'Welsh builder' as a title is somewhat misleading in this context however, as the term is used collectively for the many varied individuals and organisations, from small-scale 'father and son' builders to the large-scale property developers of the successful wealthy, and includes many of those who were involved in servicing these concerns such as land agents, architects and the speculative developers themselves. In the words of its author, the work does not claim to be exhaustive,⁸ but represents a timely and retrospective set of almost four-hundred biographies of individual Welsh builders, timely in the sense that it was written whilst some of the many successes of the Welsh builders were within the living memories of those who represented the last of their generation.

As comprehensive a collection of individuals as it can be, the work includes biographies of those who were actively involved in the building industry in and around Liverpool from the early decades of the Nineteenth century, through to those operating at the close of the second world-war.

We will now spend a few minutes briefly acquainting ourselves with the world of those 'Welsh Builders' that emerge from within its pages, before considering the careers of some of those who played their part in such a vibrant and energetic period in the history of the development of Liverpool.

⁷ Jones, J. R., 1946. The Welsh Builder on Merseyside : Annals and Lives. Liverpool: J R Jones. P23

⁸ *ibid*

To begin with, Jones acknowledges that particularly Welsh trait of so many of the Nation's sons having to share the same surname, and the problems that such circumstances can cause in differentiating one 'Jones', 'Williams' or 'Hughes' (or 'Rees!') from another. Jones offers the following list of 'Welsh Builders' in their alternative nomenclature:

Porky Williams; Wiggy Roberts; John Jones Drinkwater; John Jones Mayfield; Sky John; Australian Williams; Deaf Tom; Footy Tom; Tom Tom; Honest Tom (which suggests that there might also have been a 'dishonest Tom!'); Rightaway Jack; Windy Bob; Champion; Nosy Jones; Bob the liar; Yankee Bill; Black Jack; Bill South Africa; Cockney Bill; John Hughes bach; John Hughes y cantwr; John Jones y glo; Hughes y cae; Williams bach; Williams Caerdegog; Scotch Williams; Mason Jones; Hugh Ponsonby; Owen fawr; Hugh fawr; China Davies; The Great Bouncer; The Tramper; Brown Williams, and Klondyke Jones.

This list of names helps illustrate the precious uniqueness of the 'Welsh Builder on Merseyside', and also its witness to something of the personalities and characters of not just those individual 'Welsh Builders' that are introduced to us, but also something of the character of the industry which was collectively theirs.

Another facet of 'The Welsh Builder on Merseyside' is that whilst its value to the historian as a text is great, it is such an easy book to thumb through and to immediately appreciate that its significance goes far beyond just the provision of a list of Welsh builders. The author has managed to collect and write an affectionate and endearing record which reveals the origins, the faith, the optimism, the industriousness, the achievements and the successes of those members of the cast, but also occasionally records the untimely deaths in a dangerous industry, the

decisions to give up on Liverpool entirely and to try to find success in America instead, and perhaps the ultimate decision beyond all others when one finds oneself in desperate circumstances, the decision to enter politics!

The one biography which communicates the endearment with which the author embraces the entire panoply of individuals therein however, is one who wasn't a builder at all, and I quote:

Gomer Davies (1845-1896)...was a doctor with a practise in Bayswater, London, and died at a comparatively early age. He was the only son out of the eight (sons of Robert Davies 1812-75) who was not connected with the building industry but the writer thinks it would be a pity to leave him out of this record'

And so J R Jones has left us with a record of 385 builders, and one doctor for completeness, but I suppose that 'The Welsh Builder and one Doctor on Merseyside' would not have been such a catchy title!

So where did the Welsh Builders come from and what were their chances of success?

Olwen Morris-Jones in her thesis 'Welsh migration and the retention of identity in Liverpool' of 2011, has completed some analysis on the origins of the Welsh Builders identified by Jones. More than a third originated from Anglesey and the proportion of those identified as 'second generation,' demonstrates that a majority of Welsh migrants were certainly here to stay.

In terms of the potential for success however, circumstances upon arrival in Victorian Liverpool were not necessarily straight-forward. In his paper 'Welshmen in Liverpool in the 19th Century and Earlier'⁹, read before the Liverpool Welsh National Society on the 14th March 1901, R W Jones, JP [*Diogenes*], reflects upon the idiosyncrasies of being an immigrant 'Welshman' in Liverpool during this period and describes those factors which were to influence the fortunes of those who had moved to Liverpool from Wales during the Victorian Era.

Jones identifies issues of language to begin with and suggests that the lack of 'suitable words [in Welsh] to express his thoughts freely on business and scientific matters'¹⁰ puts the newcomer at a distinct disadvantage in developing a future. Jones also states that the number of successful Welshmen in the town is 'exceedingly few'¹¹ and continues that,

It was, rather, along paths less noteworthy they trod their way to positions and affluence, their trend being mainly towards the timber, stone, slate, and other quiet home trades which catered for the every-day needs of their neighbours.¹²

Whilst, therefore, the success of many individual Welsh Builders would be relatively modest in terms of plying their trades with the tools and materials with which they had been trained, their collective legacy to the city of Liverpool was immense, and the products of their hard graft still characterise parts of the City today.

⁹ Jones JP, R. W., 1902. Welshmen in Liverpool in the 19th Century and Earlier, Liverpool: R Saunders Jones. pp5-20

¹⁰ Ibid, p6

¹¹ Jones JP, R. W., 1902. Welshmen in Liverpool in the 19th Century and Earlier, Liverpool: R Saunders Jones.

¹² p7

¹² ibid

So what of the architectural form of the many thousands of houses constructed by the Welsh Builders? To appreciate the evolution of the 'Welsh terraced cottage' we must first undertake a brief architectural history which begins in the late 1700s.

The form of accommodation that we now recognise as 'court' accommodation was to be introduced to the City through the speculative enterprise of Georgian town-house owners who, having decided to vacate or sub-let their large, centrally located houses, were prepared to utilise almost every square foot of their gardens towards the generation of rental income. Ordnance Survey plans of the early Victorian period attest to such spaces being almost entirely built-upon with densely packed rooms for rent. In time, such arrangements were to become standard practise and new court developments were to imitate their infill predecessors in density and form so that by 1841, it is estimated that some 56,000 souls, approximately 1/5th of the population of Liverpool, were living in the squalor of court dwellings. We are familiar with the desperate and dangerous conditions that such accommodation was to propagate and through various means over time the Town authorities were to attempt to legislate to improve these appalling conditions. The aggregate effect of the introduction of sanitary and housing bye-laws was to slowly unfold the short narrow courts into two rows of terraced properties, an arrangement which epitomises the provision of mass-housing from the mid-1860s right through to the end of the Edwardian period. In terms of specific dimensional requirements, the 'Liverpool Building Act 1842' established a minimum width of fifteen feet for new courts, together with a requirement that a ventilation space be

provided at the rear of any property which was two rooms deep. The 'Sanitary Act, 1846' prohibited more than eight houses in any court of the minimum 15 ft width, required an extra foot in width for each extra house, and required the entrance to the court to be as wide as the court itself throughout its full height. The 'Liverpool Amendment Act, 1864' required that courts must open onto a public highway at each end, unless the court was at least 25 ft wide throughout its entire length.

The net effect of this series of interventions, was therefore, in terms of housing density to make the street more profitable than the court in terms of the relationship between the number of houses and the minimum clear width, and so acceptance of the archetypal 'terraced street' as the preferred and more economical arrangement was to evolve in Liverpool just as the resourcefulness of the Welsh Builder was beginning to gain significant momentum.

We have arrived therefore, at a point in this narrative where the industry and enterprise of the Welsh Builder were to push forward the evolution of the small terraced house, to spectacularly transform the fields of Kirkdale, Everton, West Derby and Toxteth Park into vast swathes of mass housing during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Whilst each and every Welsh Builder identified by J R Jones is essential to the story of the development of Liverpool, 'Porky Williams', 'Wiggy Roberts', and 'China Davies' included, it is fair to suggest that whilst such a labour-intensive industry required the sheer effort and determination

of hundreds of individuals to achieve on such an immense scale, much of the success of the Welsh Builder on Merseyside may be put down to the entrepreneurial spirit, the self-motivation and the creative vision of just a handful of individuals who were able to speculate, facilitate and coordinate housing developments, eventually on a huge scale. One such facilitator was Richard Owens, architect and surveyor, 1831-1891.

Richard Owens, originally of Caernarvonshire, moved to Liverpool in the mid 1840's to pursue his trade as a joiner. Shortly after his arrival in the city he commenced employment within the offices of Messrs. Williams and Jones, surveyors and estate agents, where he developed his understanding of the broader aspects of land and building development. Through formal study (at one point attending the 'Mechanics Institute' at Liverpool), he worked towards practising as an architect. This he achieved and established his own office in Liverpool whilst still only thirty years of age.

The earliest pieces of extant correspondence show that the practice was established at 14 Everton Village, not in the heart of the City but certainly within the heart of the Welsh community of Everton, and geographically in close proximity to many of the housing developments with which Richard Owens was to be associated. The office existed at this location for almost two and a half years until relocating to 2 Breck Road, Everton in the winter of 1866. For a decade and a half, the practice continued to operate from this address until c1883 when the office moved into part of Westminster Chambers, Dale Street; offices, shops and

warehousing designed by Richard Owens himself, for the firm of David Roberts, Son and Company, completed in 1881.

Westminster Chambers was to become the established home of the business for the next eighty-eight years, until the practice of Richard Owens and Son was superseded by that of H. A. Noel Woodall, Architect in January 1969. The practice of Richard Owens, and subsequently Richard Owens and Son, was to exist in Liverpool for one hundred and five years and was therefore to be one of Liverpool's most long-lived architectural offices. H.A Noel Woodall, on the 13th July 1978, was able to deposit in the Merseyside Record Office an extensive collection of documentation which had survived from the earliest days of the practice, and it is the early content of this Archive which has been recorded and considered as a significant resource in the context of work undertaken so far, in attempting to shed light upon the work of Richard Owens.

Owens' first significant commission was the design of the Welsh Presbyterian chapel in Fitzclarence St., Everton, the first of at least 150 chapel commissions which were undertaken for congregations in Liverpool and throughout North Wales.

The most architecturally accomplished of these, Mynydd Seion Calvinistic Methodist Chapel in Abergele, was 'the most elaborate chapel in North Wales' according to Owens, writing in 1876.

In architectural terms, these 'elaborations' are Early English in style, and Richard Owens describes the plan of the building as cruciform, with nave, transepts and small apsidal chancel vestries. The single storey

entrance porch projects from the main gable elevation with two-storeyed wings on either side to accommodate staircases to access the galleries. The building is constructed of polygonal 'Penmaenmawr' granite, with dressings of Wrexham sandstone.

An important factor in the creation of Mynydd Seion was the influence of Richard Owens' principal patron, John Roberts MP, Member of Parliament for Flintshire Boroughs, a contemporary and close friend of Richard Owens and the 'son', in D Roberts, Son and Company, of whom much more will be related in the analysis of speculative housing in Liverpool which follows.

Other examples where Richard Owens employed gothic elements in his chapels include Moriah Calvinistic Methodist, Llanfair Caereinion, Crescent English Presbyterian, Newtown and Castle Square English Presbyterian, Caernarfon.

Those chapels which offer greater harmony in compositional terms however, are often those which have benefited from a more simplistic stylistic approach. Not surprisingly, these buildings are often situated in rural areas, and have not been subject to the architectural ambition and sometimes competition of large, and more affluent town or city congregations.

Chapels at Penmachno, Corwen and Bettws y Coed derive their simplicity from the absence of side wings, elaborate carved detail and pointed arches. In all three examples shown, the porch is reduced to only a suggestion, projecting from the centre of a more conventional gable

elevation. All three examples are variations on a theme, with only the central wheel window and triple-light openings providing any real variation in detail between the three. All three are constructed in semi-coursed local stone with limestone quoins and dressings. Relieving arches over recessed vertical elements help articulate some depth to the frontage, and the geometry of these bays echoes the angle of the roof above. Overall, the simplicity of the general arrangement and the restraint in decorative detail combine to provide chapels which comfortably fit within their rural contexts.

The portfolio of chapels designed by Richard Owens includes neo-classical, gothic and much more localised and simple vernacular arrangements, incorporating Stucco, Yorkshire 'shoddies', hard Welsh granite, imported brick of varying colours as well as other local sandstones and limestones in many locations throughout the region.

Richard Owens of course, is recognised as one of Wales' most prolific chapel architects, and any analysis of the work of his office would be incomplete without at least a very brief consideration of some of those which illustrate the particular characteristics of his work.

Since working through the archive of his practice however, it has become clear that Richard Owens was much more than just the 'Chapel' architect that he has been portrayed as thus far, and from the very beginning of his practice designs for many secular buildings have come to light, particularly in Liverpool.

Categories of building type include 'warehouses and manufactories', some of which were of monumental proportions such as those which still

exist in Effingham Street, along the Dock Road, 'banks and post offices', particularly work for that important Victorian institution the 'North and South Wales Bank,' one branch of which might be familiar; 'institutional buildings', such as the former 'Young Women's Christian Institute', in Blackburn Place; numerous 'schools' such as the 'East Street School' in Llangollen, which is now the Victorian School Museum, and also, once his reputation was well-established, 'legal work and arbitrations' including representing the Borough at the House of Lords Inquiry into extending the Borough boundaries in the late 1880s. Such commissions not only represent a broad office base in terms of the range of work undertaken, it is also very clear that the number of individual projects were increasing in terms of physical scale and commercial value as the practice matured over time.

By far the greatest category of work represented within the archive however, and the most important category of work to the success of the business, was the provision of speculative housing in Liverpool. Richard Owens was the most prolific provider of workers housing in Liverpool, and was the single most significant architect to have contributed to the growth and expansion of Liverpool during the nineteenth century.

In terms of his contribution to housing the working populace of the City, an obituary of Richard Owens, published in the Liverpool Daily Post on 29th December 1891 states that he 'is said to have laid out more land in Liverpool than any other architect' of that period, and having now catalogued his work, this statement is accurate beyond all reasonable doubt.

The division of land for speculative housing is evidenced in the archive in the form of written correspondence, land surveys and street layouts, and the process of locating these areas on period OS maps was completed as part of my recent studies. Site plans for speculative housing schemes appear one by one in the archive and are collated to form whole (or parts of) new streets, which are in turn brought together to show the development of initially quite limited areas of land, but in time, the development of entire estates, some of which might well be amongst that largest of such developments to have been undertaken anywhere in Victorian Britain.

When the projects which are identified by this correspondence are located and sequenced in the order in which they appear within the archive, we are able to recreate in an almost 'time-lapse' way, the entire series of housing projects undertaken by the practice during the lifetime of Richard Owens, and for the first time in almost a century and a half, fully appreciate the significance of the speculative housing work of the Office.

The early housing work comprised discreet projects of relatively small proportions, and each red dot on the map shown, represents housing developments undertaken during the first eighteen months or so of the life of the practice, from the summer of 1864. A similar pattern of development is evidenced for the subsequent three years, and we can run this sequence through to the autumn of 1867.

Projects identified up to this point are typified by the development of Stonewall Street in Everton, which is no longer with us, but as is the case

with many other developments, the correspondence is really very useful in connecting other 'Welsh Builders' engaged in the same development process.

In comparing pre- and post- development Ordnance Survey plans in this area, the context involved the demolition of those large houses which had occupied the higher ground of Everton which had previously looked westward over a panoramic view of Liverpool, the Welsh Mountains and the Irish Sea.

Analysis of the record in the context of Stonewall Street has identified no fewer than twelve individuals and organisations who were involved in some capacity in the development of houses in this street. Consideration of drawn surveys within the Archive identify those developers who were engaged in buying and selling specific plots, and also those who were undertaking the construction work itself.

Also of particular relevance in the development of houses in Stonewall Street are original indentures held within Liverpool Record Office which record the terms of the transfer of ownership of land in this street, specific areas of land which correspond to those which Owens had surveyed as part of the development process.

For the sum of two thousand seven hundred and fifty pounds, Robert Hughes, Benjamin Mercer Burroughs and Evan Pritchard "contracted and agreed" with James Bourne and Thomas Dyson Hornby to lay-out and form a street on the property, to sell lots within it to various purchasers, and to make payment to the joint owners each time such a transaction was

completed. It is in the service of the three speculators named that Richard Owens becomes involved in the process, by undertaking initial surveys of the various parcels of land, producing drawings, and supervising the progress of the kerbing, flagging and construction of those properties that were, in the event, completed in Stonewall Street.

Also of particular interest is to acknowledge contemporaneous events across the Atlantic at Chancellorsville, Virginia, where General 'Stonewall' Jackson had been mortally wounded on May 2nd 1863, and was to die of his wounds eight days later. It seems that Liverpool's trade with the Confederacy and perhaps Thomas Dyson Hornby's own mercantile interests in particular, were reasons to identify with the cause of The South and Jackson's contribution to it in selecting a name for this particular street.

By the time building work in the street was complete, fifty-three houses had been constructed and a measure of the success with which such entrepreneurship might be rewarded is illustrated by reference to the 1871 census, which records that sixty-six 'households' were in occupation.

So for every red dot upon the plans illustrated, similar circumstances will have prevailed, where landed property or much smaller plots were rapidly developed through the construction of many hundreds of terraced houses.

In the vicinity of Stonewall Street, the accumulation of such developments would result in the aggregation of streets which followed almost entirely, the pre-existing boundaries of those large properties that had been demolished to make way for streets of much smaller houses.

Unlike the series of properties adjacent to Saint George's Hill however, the fields to the east necessitated the development of a rational subdivision of the land if such property was to be successfully developed for housing purposes, and the largest of these, The Campfield, was to be the first of at least fourteen estates to be laid-out and supervised by Richard Owens in the decades that followed.

In considering drawn surveys contained in the Archive, again in the order in which they appear in the Record, we can recreate the general order of construction, initially across the north of the site, commencing c1864, right through until the completion of those streets to the south of the estate, c1878.

The Campfield Estate survived for almost a century before large scale demolition was commenced in the 1960s, which was followed by the subsequent development of cul-de-sacs of predominantly semi-detached houses in the 1970s. A comparison of two aerial photographs of Everton, the first taken prior to demolition in the 1960s, the second taken in the 1990s, contrasts 19th and 20th century approaches to acceptable development densities and therein captures the inevitable demise of the first significant mass-housing project undertaken by Richard Owens during the formative years of his practice.

The development of the Campfield Estate established Richard Owens as a safe pair of hands in the arrangement and supervision of large tracts of speculative housing, and he was never to look back after these early successes.

There is insufficient time in a presentation such as this to explore in detail many of the other similar projects to emerge from the archive, but one housing development which was contemporaneous with the development of the Campfield was to be of great significance to the future prospects of the office, because it was the first to be undertaken for D Roberts, Son and Co., timber merchants.

David Roberts, a native of Llanrwst in Caernarvonshire, arrived in Liverpool in 1822, was apprenticed to one David Hodgson, the principal of a firm of timber merchants operating in Toxteth Park, and by 1828 had established his own successful timber business following the demise of his employer's concern following what J R Jones describes as 'troubles in the Baltic.' Jones also suggests that the particular expertise of Roberts in the provision of mahogany enabled him to establish 'influential business connections' and that by 1834, Roberts, together with one John Jones had established Messrs Jones and Roberts, and was operating two timber yards in the Town. In 1848, the arrangement was re-established as David Roberts and Company which opened a third timber yard in order to expand the business. In 1857, David Roberts' son John joined the organisation and by 1871, David Roberts, Son and Company had extended its timber business across the River Mersey and had established further premises in Church Street, Birkenhead. By the 1860s therefore, the timber business founded by David Roberts had, in one form or another, existed for more than thirty years, and found itself in secure enough circumstances to take full advantage of opportunities for investment in land and property throughout the remaining decades of the nineteenth century.

One half of a mile to the east of the Campfield Estate, between Whitefield Road and West Derby Road, similar houses were under construction for a number of developers, including D Roberts, Son and Company on the West Derby Road Estate, and in his perambulations, James Allanson Picton, that well-known local architect and historian passes comment on the rather “peculiar nomenclature” of Celt Street, Goth Street, Lombard Street and Saxon Street that make up part of the Estate, though his remarks in terms of the overall result are complimentary indeed,

The class of houses varies considerably, but on the whole the neighbourhood has been constructed with due regard to the demands of sanitary science and the comfort of the inhabitants.

The West Derby Road Estate was eventually cleared and re-developed with housing in a similar vein to that of the Campfield Estate in the 1970s, and again, as one of the earliest examples of such estate development in the archival record, it is not surprising that their demise should be amongst the first of Richard Owens’ estates to succumb to the forces of urban change and decay.

The development of that part of the West Derby Road Estate for D Roberts, Son and Company however, was to lead to further commissions in the provision of similar houses for the same client in developments in Toxteth Park. Houses constructed as part of these projects constitute some

of the earliest examples of the speculative housing of Richard Owens to have survived, and therefore present the first opportunities to be able to physically appreciate the houses themselves in something like their original form.

The contribution of Richard Owens to the expansion of Victorian Liverpool in developing speculative housing through the fields of Toxteth Park was to constitute one of the most significant single extensions of Liverpool's urban periphery that the Victorian period would witness. Almost 4,300 houses were constructed in four estates, on behalf of D Roberts, Son and Company, over a period of more than twenty years. That such a significant contribution to the urban growth of Liverpool should be laid-out by one architect, and that, by the early decades of the twenty-first century his efforts should be almost forgotten, is to fail to recognise the importance of one of Liverpool's most successful master-planners of the industrial period.

The four estates identified were to become incrementally more extensive over the period of their construction and would reflect the growing confidence and significant successes of the company in undertaking its speculative ambitions over an extended period of time. As well as a maturity of scale, two decades of design and construction would also produce a discernible evolution in the nature of the streets and the form of the houses themselves, a systematic improvement of the product which would be reflected in the quality and disposition of houses constructed in other speculative developments elsewhere in the expanding suburbs. In being commissioned to undertake the development of the four estates

identified, the fields of Toxteth Park would become a proving ground for Richard Owens in establishing his skill as a master-planner, and a specialist in the provision of workers housing.

Though nothing remains of the houses that were constructed as part of the first Estate, a majority of the houses of Estate No.2 still exist. The houses of Estate No.2 were of 15 feet frontage throughout, were generally uniform in type and were restricted almost entirely to two-storeys.

The Estate comprised four streets: Pickwick Street, Dombey Street and Dorrit Street running approximately west to east, and Dickens Street which runs approximately north to south. The houses constructed in Estate No.2 continue to be viably occupied, are amongst the earliest examples of Richard Owens' work to have survived almost complete, and exist in sufficient numbers to allow an appreciation of the variety of material detail employed in their construction, notwithstanding such uniformity of proportion and general arrangement.

With the exception of twenty-two houses fronting Upper Warwick Street which incorporated single storey rear sculleries, and four, three-storey houses fronting Northumberland Street, houses were of the six-room type, constructed with third bedrooms and sculleries accommodated in two-storey out-riggers to the rear. In hierarchical terms, Dombey Street at the centre of the development was given prominence through the provision of ground floor bay windows and railed enclosures to the front of each house, in contrast to the majority of the rest of the houses where frontages directly abutted the footwalk. Dickens Street is not provided with houses in

the interests of efficiencies in setting-out, and the line of frontage of those houses in Northumberland Street to the east of Dickens Street rakes northwards, in deference to the south elevation of St. Philemons Church which occupied the corner of Northumberland Street and Windsor Street.

As a basic unit in the mass-production of workers housing therefore, the efficiency and success of the housing arrangement illustrated is confirmed by the numbers of such houses that were constructed in the development of subsequent estates in Toxteth and elsewhere in the suburbs of Liverpool.

That Estate No. 3 would eventually constitute a six-fold increase in the extent of land compared to the area of Estate No.2, reflects the confidence with which Richard Owens and D Roberts, Son and Company could satisfy themselves that between them, they had arrived at a very successful formula indeed for the provision of mass housing.

Estate No.3 was to comprise 1,776 houses, a significant majority of which were to be of that generic form which, by 1872, had become the default solution adopted by Richard Owens in the planning of such estates. There is a general hierarchical pattern in the distribution of accommodation provided, with the largest three-storey houses constructed closest to the grandiose boulevard of Princes Road, whilst four-roomed houses were developed closer to the River and the docks, within a precedential urban context of smaller houses.

The setting-out of streets in Estate No.3, and the houses within them, also demonstrates in their configuration a level of understanding and

subtlety in terms of accommodating the transition in urban environment between the grandeur of Princes Road and the less salubrious context of the streets to the south of Admiral Street. When consideration is given to the ways in which bay-windows and their railed enclosures were articulated, a gradation becomes apparent which adjusts the ambience of the streetscapes from north to south.

In this context, the line of Geraint Street, Shallot Street and Rhiwlas Street, coloured yellow, marks the general line of transition, beyond which the bay-window is most often omitted, in-keeping with the less-impressive urban grain of those streets which existed closer to the River. In this respect, the strategic planning of streets within Estate No.3 demonstrates Owens' own recognition of the differing environments which lay to the north and to the south of the site, and the skill with which the simple bay-window might be utilised in accommodating the transition from one urban context to another.

The construction of streets and houses on Parliament Fields to the north of Princes Road commenced c1875 and by the time it was complete, the development was to constitute the largest single undertaking of D Roberts, Son and Company in the speculative housing sector. Work was commenced whilst progress on Estate No. 3 continued in earnest, and such a decision is illustrative of Company policy towards seamless investment in land speculation, street-making and the construction of houses. Though according to the Record, Estate No.4 was begun up to six years after the commencement of Estate No.3, both projects were completed at approximately the same time, c1882.

In terms of hierarchy, Park Way, Mulgrave Street, Granby Street and Kingsley Road divided the estate into three separate sections from west to east, and along these principal streets more houses, numerous shops, a bank, a school and a post office were constructed. Whilst all other streets on the estate were singularly residential in purpose, Granby Street alone was laid-out and constructed as the central commercial high street, where further living accommodation was provided in the form of flats above the shops and retail premises which lined the street.

In terms of the streets of the second order within which substantial numbers of terraced houses were constructed, Harrowby Street was typical, and ran the full width of Parliament Fields from Park Way in the west to Kingsley Road in the east. The image shown attests to the uniformity and repetition which characterised the environment which existed between the principal thoroughfares.

Those houses constructed in Ponsonby Street, towards the southern half of the central area of the estate, represent a typical and familiar arrangement where a front parlour, kitchen and scullery existed beneath three bedrooms.

In contrast, houses constructed three streets further south in Beaconsfield Street and within a similar frontage of 15 feet, incorporated a passage which by-passed the kitchen and provided direct access to both the scullery and a stair flight which descended towards a basement.

Houses in the westernmost portion of Beaconsfield Street however, were provided with a mansard roof and dormer window to the front, which constituted the first significant compositional change in the general character of such houses since the mid-1860s.

Of the larger houses constructed in Estate No.4, those in Mulgrave Street represent the culmination of the terraced house in the context of Toxteth Park, and just a single terrace of these now survive to remind us of the grandeur that once lined one of the principal thoroughfares in the streetscapes of Parliament Fields.

The four estates identified in Toxteth Park are important in the wider context of Richard Owens' speculative housing development in Liverpool in evolutionary terms. The basis of designs for houses which were brought to the area in the mid-1860s for deployment in Estate No. 1, had been developed in the early suburbs of Everton and Kirkdale, and those which were constructed towards the end of development in Estate No. 4 'Parliament Fields' would be similarly exported and adapted in subsequent estate developments by Richard Owens in the decade that followed. In this respect therefore, the work of Richard Owens in the development of terraced housing in Toxteth Park is important because in its entirety, and in its continuity, it encapsulated the evolution and changing character of workers housing in the local context, through a period of significant change and historical development within the speculative housing sector.

The disappointing twenty-first century situation however, is that due to large-scale demolition and redevelopment, the thread of historical

precedence in both architectural and urban planning contexts is increasingly more difficult to follow, as streets and houses are cleared and connections in the evolutionary process are lost.

The yellow shaded areas of the slide show the extent of the four estates which have survived, though to varying degrees of originality and standards of repair. It is immediately clear that Parliament Fields has suffered significantly in terms of demolitions, and what still remains towards the south of the Estate has been largely abandoned and is in a derelict condition. Of Estate No. 3, the streets adjacent to the northern edge remain viably occupied, together with those streets closest to Admiral Street in the south. The 'Welsh Streets' in the east of Estate No. 3 are earmarked for demolition and should this transpire, the physical connection between Estate No. 3 and Estate No. 4 will finally be broken after a period of one hundred and thirty years.

This slide shows two aerial views across the northern end of Princes Road looking towards the Parliament Fields estate at the top of the images. The first photograph, taken in the early decades of the twentieth century bears witness to the order and rationale of the Estate as it was created, the second image taken almost a century later captures the disorder and irrational deconstruction of the estate, and illustrates the complete lack of a master-plan in its redevelopment. Such circumstances therefore represent a return to that process of uncoordinated aggregation of development which Richard Owens and D Roberts, Son and Company between them, had so successfully managed to prevent in developing this part of Toxteth Park during the second half of the nineteenth century.

I should imagine that working through the development of these large estates, and listening to descriptions of the layouts of houses, the significance of bay-windows and the extents of demolition and such like might well be heavy going by now, so perhaps it's appropriate to accelerate the sequence of mapped projects to the final years of Richard Owens' career.

During the 1880s, numerous other estates were laid-out by Richard Owens, though not on the same scale as those developed in the fields of Toxteth Park. Notably, the Kensington Fields Estate was designed by Richard Owens for the City authorities and remains today one of the most complete examples of a Victorian estate of this period in the country. Kensington Fields was designated a conservation area in 2007 and so has a measure of protection against the ravages of time.

Throughout the last ten years of his life, Richard Owens continued to pursue commissions for the provision of speculative housing, and his consultancy by the Borough of Liverpool in the development of Kensington Fields in 1885, recognises his authority in being asked to impart advice to a public body on how best to develop housing based upon his experiences in the private sector. Two years before his death, in May 1889, Richard Owens seemed as enthusiastic as ever in terms of undertaking master-planning activities and drew upon his significant experience in the pursuit of similar commissions elsewhere. Writing as part of an application to his Lordship the Right Honourable Lord Shrewsbury for the position of Surveyor to the Oxton Estate, Owens informs his Lordship that,

...I have been for over twenty years the adviser of Messrs D. Roberts Son and Co., the largest land speculators in Liverpool, as well as other leading firms. My experience in developing landed estates for building purposes in this neighbourhood has been most exclusive and I may say I am well acquainted with the management of the Derby and Sefton estates.

Of course if honoured with the appointment I would keep my private practise, but [?] say such an arrangement would be of benefit to your Lordship's estate as my calculations in this work would be of advantage in developing the same.

Subsequent archival evidence confirms that the Office was indeed undertaking work on Lord Shrewsbury's Oxtun estate, though the nature of the environment was significantly different to the development of workers housing on the opposite side of the river and the property would be set-out for large bespoke houses rather than mass housing.

Although Richard Owens is now almost forgotten, over a period of approximately thirty years between 1863 and 1891, he was responsible for planning the development of more than 325 acres of land for speculative housing in the suburbs of Liverpool, and was to become the Victorian equivalent of a millionaire in the process. The slide shown illustrates an area of 325 acres, superimposed upon the 1851 Ordnance Survey sheet: a

significant proportion of the urban environment for any one individual to have been responsible for.

Having attempted to provide a general overview of the work of Richard Owens by considering the extent and general nature of the projects for which he was responsible, I would like to conclude by sharing some aspects which help us piece together a better understanding of the personality of the man, in-keeping with the approach that J R Jones perfected in preparing his recollections of those other Welsh Builders to which we referred at the beginning of this presentation.

Whilst working through archival correspondence, opportunities presented themselves to experience something of the personality of Richard Owens, articulated through the phraseology and tone of language used in his written communications. The opportunity to read his correspondence in sequence has contributed to a sense of familiarity with the character and personality of the man, and the following transcripts illustrate the sorts of approach which go some way to suggesting that Richard Owens was not one to be trifled with. In a letter to the Clerk of the Allerton Local Board, Owens writes'

I beg to call your attention...to a plan which I have submitted for two houses and a shippon in Rose Lane, Mossley Hill. I am given to understand that the plan complies with the bye-laws in every respect, but that a

question has been raised as to fencing an area in the cross-street, a question in my opinion that you have no right to interfere with and as I am anxious to proceed with this work I shall be glad if you will come to a final decision on the point and pass the plan so that I may proceed with the work. Your attention will oblige.

In a letter to a Mr. R K Jones of Mold, Owens writes,

Dear Sir. You have too many committees and too many Clerks of the Works at your place. The work I saw last Wednesday was done exceedingly well and I have no reason to think but that all the rest is done the same.

And thirdly, to the editor of the 'Goleuad' newspaper he writes,

Sir. Your paper 'the Goleuad' came to my hand this day by accident and I find that advertisement for tender to new chapel Llanfaircareinion put in a very comical manner, just as you are in the habit of doing. Penmachno chapel before was done just as strange. You must have a lot of blundering idiots as composers. In this case Llanfaircareinion is put down as Llanfairfechan and my name instead of being Richard Owens is Richard Davies and this is not the first time you made this mistake. The very same advertisement was sent to the Oswestry Advertiser and it appeared quite correct, but yours is a most misleading affair that ever appeared in print. I should fancy that there are so much controversial questions flying about

your office in trying to keep the cash in order that it quite put business matters in obscurity.

Finally ,whilst attempting to locate an image of 'Wylfa', the large mansion constructed for David Hughes at Cemaes on Anglesey, now demolished and covered by a nuclear power station of course, the image shown was identified as such and was catalogued as part of the 'John Thomas [1838-1905] Collection,' held at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth. Whilst similarly pursuing images of another house, for the Rev. Owen Jones at Llanfair Caereinion, an image of this property was also identified as being held within the same collection. Whilst 'Wylfa' was a substantial house in a prominent setting, Gelli, in Llanfair Caereinion was a piece of work which had nothing particularly significant about it, yet John Thomas its photographer, [who also resided in Everton,] was persuaded to visit both of these distant and remote edifices to take photographs. The fact that both houses had been designed by Richard Owens and that both had been photographed by John Thomas, meant that the John Thomas Collection warranted closer attention. During further searches of this collection, a beautiful photograph came to light of 'Plas Bell,' in Caernarvonshire, the birthplace of Richard Owens, which included at least eight individuals and one horse, carefully posed within the composition. Of particular interest was the gentleman standing with four young girls at a distance on the right of the photograph, sporting what appears to be a very substantial Victorian beard. The 1871 census informs us that Richard Owens was living at 65 Aubrey Street, Liverpool and besides his wife

Margaret and Hugh his eleven year old son, four daughters: Elizabeth, aged four; Janie, aged seven; Annie, aged eight and Catherine, aged ten, made up the household. Another image held within the same collection shows an old man with what contemporaries described as a chin-curtain beard sitting next to an unidentified standing female, possibly his daughter. A third image shows the same old man in a similar pose but alone but certain to be the man in the group photograph. All of the photographs are referenced either 'Owen' or 'Owens' by the photographer on their original envelopes, the house in the group photograph is the birthplace of Richard Owens, four young girls who seem of appropriate ages at the time to have been Richard Owens' daughters are present, the youngest of whom seems to be holding her father's hand. Finally, the last photograph to have emerged from the collection was unlike the rest because it was taken in a studio and was of a man with a very substantial beard and was marked 'Owen, some of this by Saturday.' A visit home with a local photographer to capture the moment sometime in the 1870s, has corroborated for us a unique image of Richard Owens, (1831-91) 'chapel architect', 'housing specialist' and one of the most successful 'Welsh Builders' of them all.

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