Restoring the ‘Georgian House’: Architecture, Politics, and Identity in 1970s Edinburgh

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Introduction: The Georgian Townhouse as Museum

Those tourists who make their way from the bustle of Edinburgh’s George Street into the National Trust for Scotland’s ‘Georgian House’ on Charlotte Square must feel that they have entered another world. After first ascending the stone steps from Charlotte Square, they pass through one seemingly pristine historic room after another, each carefully decorated and furnished in the style of the years around 1800: a dining room with Sheraton style chairs, around an elegant table laid with crystal, porcelain, and silver, the walls hung with family portraits; a drawing room lined with Adam-style carved chairs, console tables and pier glasses; a bedroom with a beautifully painted and hung four-poster bed; an eighteenth-century kitchen with range and ovens, replete with flowers; and even a Regency-style water closet. They must leave with the feeling that they have glimpsed an extraordinary survival from another time: a neoclassical town house with its architecture, decoration, and furnishings just as they would have been in the years around 1800.
2 The vivid impression of a vanished lifestyle given by the Georgian House is an example of an urban house museum, an established genre with representatives in many of the major cities of Europe, North America, and Australasia. It is also, however, a representative of a specific subtype that seems to have had particular appeal in the British Isles: Edinburgh’s Georgian House was neither alone in being an eighteenth-century townhouse, elaborately restored to recreate its appearance shortly after it was originally built, nor even the first of its kind. This distinction belongs to 7 Great George Street in Bristol. A fine double-fronted merchant’s house in the city centre, it had been presented to the city’s council in 1938 and found to have exceptionally well-preserved interiors, with many original fixtures and fittings as well as some of its historic contents.

3 The city council decided to decorate and furnish the house in period style so that it could become a museum of domestic life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The decision seems to have been driven by consciousness that houses of the period that survived almost intact and unchanged were growing rare, while city-centre properties were increasingly being subjected to extensive alteration for use as office buildings. This was, moreover, the period when the cult of the Georgian as the epitome of style, craftsmanship, and good taste was approaching its apogee, a source of special pride in Bristol where the greater part of the buildings in the historic core were of eighteenth-century origin (Ison 1952). In the background was a patriotic interest in national, regional, and local traditions and identities – what David Watkin has called the cult of “Englishry” (1980). It was an attitude perhaps most vividly promoted by
Arthur Mee’s series of county guidebooks, inaugurated in 1936 by an introductory volume with the evocative title *Enchanted Land: Half-a-million Miles in the King’s England*. In many ways, then, the Bristol Georgian House reflected quite idiosyncratic and local concerns: a combination of civic pride and antiquarian curiosity, given focus by a broad civic commitment to educational and cultural advancement in a more general cultural climate of sentimental regard for England’s past.

For a considerable time, the Bristol Georgian House was the only one of its kind; but from the late 1960s to early 1980s there was a sudden flurry of activity that saw plans put into action for several new Georgian house museums. The first was in nearby Bath, where No. 1 Royal Crescent was bought by Bernard Cayzer in 1968 to serve both as the headquarters of the Bath Preservation Trust and as a museum of life in eighteenth-century Bath. The principal interiors were lavishly redecorated and dressed with period furniture, paintings, and accessories. They opened to the public in 1970. Meanwhile, further north, the York Civic Trust was beginning preparations for the restoration of Fairfax House, the town house of the 9th Viscount Fairfax (Matthew et al. 1772). Sadly, neglected after decades of use as a dance hall and cinema, it was in a lamentable state but retained almost all its magnificent interior finishes. These included finely moulded and carved joinery and, most impressively of all, a superlative group of Rococo ceilings attributed to the Italian *stuccatore* Giuseppe Cortese. The house was finally opened in 1984 and furnished with Noel Terry’s distinguished collection of Georgian furniture (Brown and Johnson 1989).

The simultaneous emergence of these two new Georgian house museums reflects the radically transformed cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s. ‘Heritage’ had now become a clearly articulated concept – indeed a cause – with considerable political and popular support. This cause was, moreover, increasingly strongly focused on buildings and interiors rather than the more capacious and romanticised sense of national culture – conflating landscape, ancient buildings, and the biographies and achievements of ‘worthies’ – that characterised Edwardian and interwar Englishry. The publication of the Pevsner architectural guides no doubt played an important role in this transition, allowing the educated bourgeois to cultivate an apparently authoritative knowledge of local architectural history. In addition, the National Trust in England had gone from being an organisation primarily concerned with preserving landscapes and – generally – vernacular buildings, to becoming the guardian of the country house. Spearheaded by the energetic and persuasive secretary of the country houses committee, James Lees-Milne, a number of important country houses were transferred to the Trust along with more or less generous endowments for their maintenance. It was, if not the beginning, certainly a major transition in perceptions of historic houses as the heart of Britain’s national heritage.

Edinburgh’s was therefore the third new Georgian House. Work began in 1973 and it officially welcomed its first visitor – Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother – only two years later. At first it seems to fit the same mould as the other museums in the group – an intrinsically important or well-preserved Georgian building that had been meticulously conserved and presented to the highest aesthetic and scholarly standards. Yet the archival sources tell a far more complex – and revealing – story.

This paper begins by recounting the origins of the Georgian House on the basis of close engagement with the primary sources. It shows how the National Trust for Scotland decided they should convert one of their Charlotte Square properties into the Georgian...
House, and the work they undertook to do so. In doing so, it also reveals how the creation of the house intersected with, and was in part driven by, a series of parallel concerns. These were in part political – driven by the United Kingdom’s recent accession into the European Economic Community and the consequent importance of European Architectural Heritage Year – and in part religious, rooted in the Trust’s close social connections with the Kirk. Then, in a second, more speculative, part of my discussion, I consider the deeper motivations that may have been responsible for driving this process forward with such seeming inevitability. Here, I argue that those responsible for the project were, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to find a place for a ‘heritage’ deeply rooted in the self-conceptualisation and values of Scotland’s traditional social elite – a task of special urgency in a country being transformed by the turn to Europe and by the contemporaneous expectation of Scottish devolution. The creation of Scotland’s own eighteenth-century house museum, I therefore conclude, was the vehicle for greater ambitions than the simple preservation and presentation of Edinburgh’s Enlightenment past.

A Georgian House Museum for Edinburgh

The starting point for the Georgian House Museum in Edinburgh was, in much the same way as with the other Georgian Houses, the acquisition of a suitable period property. Number 7 Charlotte Square was one of a group of three houses that were transferred to the Trust from the estate of the 5th marquess of Bute under the in-lieu arrangement, in which gifts to the nation of culturally significant assets from deceased estates receive beneficial tax treatment. Architecturally, the three houses are of outstanding importance, forming the columned and pedimented centrepiece of the north side of Charlotte Square, the best-preserved part of the greatest surviving urban set-piece by Scotland’s most celebrated eighteenth-century architect, Robert Adam.
The transfer of the houses from the Bute estate was the culmination of long and delicate series of negotiations, as the 6th marquess had clear ideas about the purposes of the presentation of these properties from his father’s estate. He was insistent that the whole group of three houses should be vested in the National Trust for Scotland and held in perpetuity for the benefit of the nation. He also wished the finest of the three houses, Bute House, to serve as an official residence for the Secretary of State for Scotland. It would be administered by a hand-picked board of Trustees. He also clearly expected that number 5, which the Bute estates had leased to the National Trust for Scotland to serve as its headquarters, should continue to serve that purpose. This indeed it did, until as recently as 1999.

Number 7, however, was the exception, for which there was no clear plan. It had been let since 1934 to a commercial tenant, the renowned Edinburgh interior decorating firm of Whytock & Reid. For the moment, Whytock & Reid remained in occupation, their initial ten-year term having become an annually renewing lease, still at the rent set in the 1930s (Opinion Trust Solicitors 1966). It was clearly important to decide how to make best use of the premises and the future use of number 7 became a matter of sustained consideration in the years after its acquisition.

As the Trust had already been headquartered at 5 Charlotte Square for some time, the obvious course of action was to terminate the lease and use number 7 to house the Trust’s administrative offices, then in leasehold offices in Young Street. However, financial and practical considerations militated against this. Financially, the rates payable for occupying commercial premises in the prime location of Charlotte Square were so much higher than those for the Young Street offices that, even though rent
would no longer be paid, such a move would, at best, generate no savings. Practically, there was concern that the bulky membership stamping machine used to validate membership cards would prove difficult to move to Charlotte Square (Note A.C.L.). Presumably for these reasons, plans to take back control of the building were deferred (Excerpts Agenda 1966).

By early 1972, however, the fate of number 7 had once again become the subject of urgent consideration. The initial prompt seems to have been the emergence in early 1971 of the idea that it might be possible to convert part of the Trust’s headquarters at 5 Charlotte Square into an ‘information centre’ with some kind of ‘heritage’ display showcasing the Trust’s work. However, when these tentative plans were reviewed by Lord Bute, who was not only the effective donor of the house but also the Chairman of the Trust’s Executive Committee, he expressed a strong preference that any such display should be in number 7 “since the architectural merit of the interior of this house is so much superior to that of No. 5” (Crichton-Stuart 1971). This idea cannot be traced again until May of the following year, when the future of the house was formally discussed by the Trust’s Executive Committee. Although the Agenda item is bland and the discussion recorded in the minutes apparently open-ended, it is nevertheless clear that the Director of the Trust, James Stormonth-Darling, had by now developed a well-formed idea for what he described as “a Georgian New Town House [...] with period furniture for the public to visit” (Minutes NTS Executive Committee 1975).

The Committee agreed to give Whytock & Reid another year’s tenancy to buy some time for further reflection; meanwhile, Bute requested that the Trust’s staff compose a paper with options and recommendations. Stormonth-Darling responded by asking the Trust’s Curator, David Learmonth, to give his views on his idea. Learmonth responded with enthusiasm, supported the idea, noting that he had long wished to see such a site being opened in Edinburgh. He also mentioned the desirability of it having a similarly furnished basement kitchen (Learmonth 1972).

Even as Learmonth was writing his memorandum, however, the Trust’s Secretary, Ivison Wheatley, was already discreetly sharing the plans for a Georgian House with his contacts and encouraging them to do what they could to foster a ‘climate of opinion’ receptive to them. He focused particularly on the launch at the University of Edinburgh of the published version of the proceedings of the New Town Conservation Committee’s inaugural conference (Wheatley 1975). A few days later, we find him thanking the University’s senior administrator and Principal for doing just that, while emphasising that no formal announcement of the Trust’s plans could be made until the Executive Committee had met again and given their consent to the plan (Wheatley 1972).

By this time, Whytock & Reid had already been given notice that they would be required to vacate their premises on 10 June (Whitsunday) 1973, subsequently extended to 11 November (Erskine and Bryant 1972; Whytock & Reid 1972).1 Meanwhile, Stormonth-Darling again canvassed Lord Bute about the proposals, this time enclosing what he described as Learmonth’s “excellent memorandum” (1972a). As before, Bute’s response was sympathetic but cautious. He accepted, in principle, the idea that part of number 7 could be presented as a historic house museum and suggested that the Trust would be able to attain a higher standard than the Bristol Georgian House. At the same time, he also proposed that the house should contain an exhibition on the history of the New Town and also, potentially, become the headquarters of the New Town Conservation Committee (Crichton-Stuart 1972).
Stormonth-Darling gave little heed to Bute’s reservations, writing back to describe his reaction as “thrilling indeed” (1972b) and then moving forward as if the plans for a Georgian House had received Bute’s ringing endorsement. A formal proposal would be put to the next Executive Committee meeting in September 1972 and in the meantime the Trust’s officers started to develop the idea in more detail, estimate its likely cost, and consider how funds could be raised to meet it. Initial figures suggested that, in addition to the considerable sums needed for repairs to the house, some £25,000 would be needed to decorate and furnish the exhibition rooms, while a further £10,000 of income would have to be generated every year to cover running costs. Stormonth-Darling hoped that approaches to Edinburgh City Council and to the Trust’s Charlotte Square neighbours – mostly consisting of highly remunerative professional and financial businesses – might help the Trust raise funds for both the initial capital outlay and the subsequent running costs. Even so, the prospect of financing such a complex and potentially costly project seems to have been a source of anxiety to the Trust’s financial team (Paulin 1972).

At this point, the project might have become irretrievably mired in financial challenges. By a remarkable stroke of good fortune, however, a potentially generous source of funding appeared on the scene. The Trust’s Factor (senior property manager), Donald Erskine, was a trustee of an extremely wealthy charity, the Baird Trust. Endowed in 1873 by iron and coal entrepreneur, James Baird (1802-76), with the immense sum of £500,000, its purpose was to counter “the spiritual destitution among the population of Scotland and [to] secure the upbringing of the young” (quoted in “About the Baird Trust” 2023). More specifically, the Baird Trust was to do this by supporting the work of the Kirk, the established Church of Scotland.

There would seem to be little obvious affinity between the purposes of the Baird Trust and National Trust for Scotland’s quest to establish a Georgian house museum in Edinburgh. At this precise time, however, the Baird Trust was developing plans to celebrate its centenary year. On the advice of Dr Eric Longmuir, the long-serving Principal Clerk to the Kirk’s governing body, the General Assembly, these plans came to focus on establishing an official residence in the Scottish capital for the Moderator, the General Assembly’s annually elected chairperson. Erskine subsequently recounted that he was immediately struck by the possibility that those parts of 7 Charlotte Square that had not been earmarked for transformation into the Georgian House, might be well-suited to this purpose (01/0053/02/01, unnumbered item). The matter was discussed by Erskine and Colonel Baird, the Baird family’s representative among the Baird Trustees, who evidently approved of the idea.

On 20 July, Erskine reported to Baird that he had broached the possibility with Stormonth-Darling and that it had been positively received. He went on to outline the way that the building’s dual purpose as official Kirk residence and museum might be managed in practice. The moderator would occupy the upper two floors of the house as a spacious flat. The rooms on the principal floors would be used as the Georgian House Museum and, on an occasional basis, as formal reception rooms for the Moderator. The basement, meanwhile, would contain a typical Georgian kitchen that was keenly desired by the Trust’s curator and a small flat for a caretaker, who would look after the Moderator’s residence. He also gave a very rough idea of the costs that might be involved, suggesting the Baird Trust might contribute £20,000 to convert and furnish the Moderator’s flat (at least £250,000 at today’s values), another £10,000 towards the
cost of the Trust’s Georgian House presentation rooms, and finally £20,000 to be invested at interest to provide income to pay for rent, rates, and repairs.

Figure 3. The Georgian House Kitchen


[20] Stormonth-Darling’s copy of the letter was returned to Erskine with a supportive endorsement and, over the next few weeks, the proposals were accepted by all the relevant parties. The Baird Trust formalised its offer on the exact terms outlined by Erskine. The Trust’s Executive Committee gave its assent at its meeting on 10 August 1972, at the same time agreeing to the use of the state rooms and kitchen as public display rooms. Finally, in November, following representations from Dr Longmuir, the Church of Scotland also agreed, subject to satisfactory resolution of the finer details.

[21] Perhaps because of its secure funding, the conversion of the upper floors of Charlotte Square into the Moderator’s flat was definitively approved by the Trust’s Executive Committee at its next meeting on 10 November. Shortly afterwards, the Trust met with the Baird Trustees and appointed Schomberg Scott as their architect. Scott would supervise the renovation of what was now being referred to as the “Baird Flat”, and it was also suggested that he might also be responsible for all the works at number 7. Scott was, in certain respects, the obvious choice for the job: he had been the Trust’s regular advisor on architecture and interiors since the 1953 and was on a formal retainer from 1965 to 1970. Even so, his skills as an architectural conservationist were not unimpeachable, and problems with his work had led to the dissolution of his partnership with the leading Scottish architectural conservationist of his generation, Ian G. Lindsay, in 1961. The compensation was that, in contrast to the meticulous Lindsay, Scott was pragmatic and efficient (McKean 1998).

[22] In spite of the formal agreement to go ahead with the Moderator’s flat, the Georgian House proposal remained, at least formally, under consideration. Bute, still cautious,
suggested that a final decision should be made only after a specially appointed sub-committee had reported on the viability of the project. He personally selected Alan Roger, a wealthy businessman, plantsman, art collector, and supporter of Scottish cultural causes, as the sub-committee chair. In his letter to Roger, Bute emphasised that the proposal reflected certain assumptions made by Trust staff that were open to question; consequently, the sub-committee should feel free to consider not only the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of the project but whether it should go ahead at all.

The Restoration and Conversion

There is little evidence that Bute’s reservations were taken seriously by the new committee. While the agenda for its first meeting did open with questions about potential uses for the basement to first floors of the house, alternatives to creating a Georgian House Museum do not seem to have been considered with any degree of seriousness. Indeed, the next agenda items proceeded directly to the specifics of furnishing the rooms and visitor circulation routes. The minutes, moreover, show that far from discussing the desirability or practicality of the Trust’s plans, the sub-committee simply confirmed them. Thus, Schomberg Scott was appointed as planned without apparent consideration of any alternative, while the Trust’s curator, David Learmonth, was given, as expected, the task of decorating and furnishing the rooms. The only substantive question the sub-committee’s members raised was whether the house should be restored specifically as an ‘Adam house’ or as a ‘general Georgian house’. The Adam house would evoke the approach to interiors characteristic of Charlotte Square’s architect; Scott’s drawings suggest that this approach would have been primarily defined by the installation of elaborate neoclassical style moulded ceilings. Tellingly, they decided that the choice should be determined by the amount of the original house that remained and the consequential relative cost of the two options (Minutes Meeting 1973). Already at this stage, then, there are signs that authenticity, in the sense of careful restoration of the original form of the building, seems to have been less important than creating the appearance of an intact neoclassical town house.

It is difficult to overstate how revealing this part of the discussion is: it shows, very clearly, that the Roger Sub-committee had just rubber-stamped the restoration of 7 Charlotte Square as a Georgian House, in spite of having little clear idea of the intactness of the building. Indeed, as the Trust began conversion work the essential unsuitability of 7 Charlotte Square for its new purpose would become increasingly apparent. To begin with, the internal layout of the house had been modified several times since its initial construction. There are good reasons to the think that during the time of the house’s second owner, Catherine Farquharson of Invercauld, the original layout of the first floor was modified from a conventional mid- to late eighteenth-century pattern of a three-bay rectangular front drawing room with a separate principal bedroom to the rear, to the more typical Regency to early-Victorian arrangement of an L-shaped drawing room communicating directly through wide double or sliding doors with a more informal sitting room behind, so that the two rooms could be opened into each other for large-scale entertaining.

There were then further alterations in the time of the next owner, Charles Neaves, Lord Neaves, who lived in the house from 1845 until his death in 1889. Neaves was prominent lawyer who served as Solicitor General for Scotland and ended his career as
a judge of the Court of Session. He had a large family – eventually running to six daughters and three sons (Neaves Family Memorial). To accommodate them, the attic was partially reconstructed at the rear and rearranged internally. At the same time, the basement was extended under the plat of the front steps and also enlarged towards the rear, probably to provide bedrooms for servants displaced from the attic by the growing number of Neaves’s children (Dean Guild Petition 1854). As part of this work, the original kitchen wall and windows were opened up. Later, Neaves also lowered the sills of the house’s first-floor front windows and blocked the dummy flanking lights of the tripartite window on the left-hand side of Charlotte Square’s central frontispiece.

Even more extensive changes took place later in the nineteenth century when the house was owned by the Reverend Alexander Whyte, a prominent Free Church minister who ended his career as principal of New College, the Free Church’s seminary in Edinburgh. Whyte further increased the size of the attic by building up the rear wall and to give it a flat rather than pitched roof, creating the space for a new bathroom in the process; added large dormer windows to the front attics; and enlarged an existing WC into a bathroom on the second floor. Perhaps even more significantly, he further changed the proportions of the first-floor drawing room at the front of the house by moving the partition separating it from the parlour behind. While doing this he entirely redecorated the room, introducing a heavy late Victorian block cornice, along with Italian Renaissance-style moulded ceiling and garlanded frieze. He removed the staircase’s original balusters (which would almost certainly have been cast iron), cut off the edges the steps in order to install a timber closed string (a continuous panel along the side of the steps), and then added typical Victorian turned balusters and newel posts. A new chimneypiece was installed in the main second-floor bedroom, and possibly also in the first-floor rear parlour (Dean Guild Petition 1889).

Most external changes were reversed after the property was bought in 1923 by the Bute family’s property investment firm, Mountjoy Limited. The sills of the first-floor front windows were returned to their original height. The Whites’ front dormer attic windows were removed and the front roofline returned to its original form, but some of the internal structural timberwork that had been introduced with them was left in place. Adam’s tripartite window was not, however, reinstated.

Mountjoy also undertook work internally, but here the results were less consistently authentic. At first-floor level, the probable rectangular shape of the original drawing room was recreated by blocking off the Regency-style recess. The timber string, rail, newel posts and balusters of the stair were removed; the nosings of the stair treads, cut back when the timber string was installed, were recreated, but in cement rather than stone; and neoclassical-style cast-iron balusters were reinstated. Late nineteenth-century wooden panelling enclosing the flight down to the basement was, however, left in place.

Although incompletely and imperfectly executed, these changes were all more-or-less restorative in their intent. Other interventions, however, were less satisfactory from a conservation perspective. Most notably, the still-extant recesses in the two ground floor rooms – that in the front room probably for a sideboard and that in the back room possibly a bed recess – were lost, as the space between the two rooms was enlarged and rearranged to provide two press cupboards for storage. It was also probably at this time that a number of new cornices were installed in the staircase hall; while inoffensive in
themselves, their highly simplified stripped classical forms were certainly not accurate reproductions of what might have been there in 1795 or 1810.

The cumulative result was that room layouts had been altered on both principal floors; the staircase had been heavily altered and imperfectly restored; there were later cornices through most of the staircase hall and in the first-floor reception rooms; and only two late Georgian chimneypieces survived in the main reception rooms, one in the ground-floor front room, originally the dining room, and the other in the drawing room above. This pattern of repeated alteration and enlargement that probably began with the house’s second owner and continued until Mountjoy’s ownership in the interwar period meant that, by the time the Trust acquired it, 7 Charlotte Square was a house with relatively few indisputably authentic original internal features. It was primarily the exterior, then, that remained to define it as a Georgian house, and even this had undergone some, albeit relatively modest and easily reversible, change.

Creating Authenticity

Because the house had undergone such extensive and repeated change, many of its interiors were predominantly of Victorian or later appearance. It consequently needed a great deal of work to make it suitable for public presentation as a plausibly ‘authentic’ Georgian house. New neoclassical-style cornices had to be installed in the principal reception rooms on the first floor as well as new door architraves. The entrance and staircase halls had lost their original stone flooring. Salvaged stone flags were found for the entrance hall but not enough to extend into the staircase, which had to be given modern pavers. The original chimneypiece in the drawing room was lost to vandalism during the conversion works and had to be replaced with an Edwardian reproduction of an eighteenth-century marble chimneypiece. Salvaged chimneypieces were introduced into the other principal rooms.
Much effort was put into recreating the Georgian service quarters in the basement. During Lord Neaves’s works, the window wall of the kitchen had been substantially reconstructed, with the original windows replaced by a long horizontal light. The two original kitchen windows were reinstated as part of the restoration, although the wall was rebuilt only in standard modern double-leaf cavity construction instead of the original, much thicker solid rubble construction; the rest of the thickness of the internal face of the walls was simply made up with a studwork lining. An eighteenth-century range was then installed, rescued from a skip in nearby India Street. It was inserted into the existing, probably late nineteenth-century fireplace opening. Evidence of an original bread oven was found to the right of the existing kitchen fireplace, and the opening was modified to allow a salvaged bread oven to be inserted. A period hotplate was also installed to the left of the fireplace, with the surrounding masonry simulated in painted hardboard. All other fittings in the room, with the possible exception of doors and door architraves, also appear to be introductions from the 1970s and after, either genuinely Georgian elements brought from elsewhere or modern recreations.

The 1920s cornices in the entrance and staircase halls were left as they were. They were evidently thought good enough to pass unnoticed by most visitors, if indeed they were even recognised by the Trust’s own curator and architect as later insertions. The recesses in the ground-floor reception rooms – characteristic features of late Georgian rooms – were not reinstated. And presumably for economic reasons, initial plans to
provide the ceilings of the main rooms with Adam-style decorative plasterwork were also not followed through.

The overtly late Victorian cornices and ceilings on the first floor, however, could not be left as they were. Schomberg Scott designed a new cornice and frieze, with neoclassical-style bell husk garlands. New doorcases were also required as Alexander Whyte had, as part of his refurbishment of the house, installed heavily moulded Victorian door architraves. These would have been conspicuously out of place in neoclassical drawing room. However, in order to cover the marks, they left after their removal, Scott’s new classical-style architraves had to be made unusually wide.

Figure 5. The Georgian House Drawing Room

The drawing room of the Georgian House, with its recreated Adam-style cornice and swagged frieze, later criticised for its inauthentic proportions.

These compromises did not go unnoticed by informed observers. John Knight, architectural advisor to the New Town Conservation Committee, remarked in a letter to the Georgian House’s recently appointed coordinator, the Honourable Marista Murray Leishman, that

> the cornices in the drawing and adjacent parlour are decidedly wrong. The top cyma moulding is far too deep and belongs more to 1730 than 1790, while the swags are too large, and in too heavy relief [...] the delicate modillions of the hall [sic] and dining room indicate the daintiness in which the cornice should have been reproduced [...]. The architraves of the drawing room doors are almost double the width they should be. I can find no excuse for this, as original doorcases exist all over the house. (Knight 1975)

The Trust had recovered sufficient salvaged eighteenth-century stone paving to lay in the entrance vestibule, but not enough to extend the restored finish into the staircase hall. Here, modern machine-cut square pavers were laid chequerboard fashion, and Knight undiplomatically complained of the resulting “unfortunate patio effect”. Similar observations were subsequently made in the Edinburgh volume of *The Buildings of Scotland* (Gifford et al. 1984).

The criticisms provoked a degree of embarrassment and unease. The most architecturally expert member of the advisory sub-committee, the eminent Adam specialist Alistair Rowan, broadly conceded their validity. He went on to suggest that there should be some kind of formal mechanism for scrutinising the Trust’s
architectural proposals for their authenticity. Rowan went on to attribute the controversy to a generational change in the approach to the restoration of historic buildings:

The point is surely this that architectural conservation has become an infinitely more complicated and more historically based exercise than it was even ten years ago, and the new generation leaving the architecture schools and postgraduate conservation courses will apply very exacting standards. (1975)

In the end, however, the Trust’s senior managers seem to have decided that the criticisms were picking up on minor details that would be of little relevance to most visitors’ experience of the building.

Politics, Class, and Nation in the New Politics of Heritage

Stormonth-Darling was almost certainly right in his assumption that excessively wide architraves and heavily detailed cornices would pass unnoticed by all but a few if the Edinburgh Georgian House’s visitors; but in important respects that very reality serves to emphasise the contrast between the Trust’s new project and the equivalent Georgian Houses in England. As we have seen, the Georgian houses in Bristol, Bath and York grew more-or-less naturally from the particular historic and architectural qualities of the houses themselves. Their fundamentally conservation-led concerns brought with them intrinsic standards and expectations for the approach taken to their restoration. In Edinburgh, however, the motivations were fundamentally extrinsic, the result of Stormonth-Darling and Learmonth’s openly stated conviction that Edinburgh had to be able to offer a specific kind of heritage-related visitor experience that could be found in the city’s English equivalents but not, at that time in Scotland.

The concern was in part, of course, simply a reflection of Scottish and institutional pride, goaded by a sense that Scotland’s most important Georgian city and its premier conservation organisation were failing to keep up with its English peers. To that extent, the creation of the Georgian House could be interpreted as, at least to some degree, a manifestation of the ‘inferiorism’ that has been such a prominent theme in Scottish historiography and wider political and cultural self-reflection since the 1970s. In so far as it was the latter, however, it is questionable whether it really reflected a deep-rooted lack of cultural self-confidence that the proponents of the inferiorist interpretation seem to be concerned by. If anything, indeed, it was rather the opposite. Underlying the Trust’s endeavour at Charlotte Square was a fundamental conviction – driven primarily by James Stormonth-Darling – that the Trust could create something that would, in the ways that they thought really counted, be completer and more compelling than its English equivalents. In certain respects, then, it reflects not inferiorism, but its opposite: a bold conviction that Scotland’s superiority in enterprise and ingenuity could compensate for its relative lack of scale and resources.

The immediate prize being pursued was reputational. For the timing of the Georgian House’s creation was not arbitrary. The year in which works began was the year that the UK joined the European Community. By this time the Council of Europe had already designated 1975 as European Architectural Heritage Year, something which seems to have been an important factor in focusing the Trust’s thoughts on the fate of number 7. In part this reflected a lack of notable conservation work by the Trust within the cities.
Its most celebrated achievement was, rather, the pioneering ‘little houses’ scheme to refurbish vernacular domestic buildings, principally on the East Neuk of Fife. This was a remarkably successful attempt to develop a financially viable alternative to the raze-and-redevelop ethos of the post-war town planners (Watters and Glendinning 2006). International recognition for these efforts had been attained in a recent Europa Nostra award. But in Edinburgh itself the new face of the conservation movement was the independent Edinburgh New Town Conservation Committee (NTCC). The Trust was therefore confronted by the somewhat discomfiting reality that at the heart of Scotland’s capital in Architectural Heritage Year – the very moment when it might be expected to have its moment in the sun – it risked being eclipsed by a bold, new, and relatively youthful organisation.

While strongly supportive of the NTCC – it even offered the basement rooms of 7 Charlotte Square to act as its headquarters – the Trust undoubtedly also hoped that it would be able to attract attention in the Scottish capital to its own work. Thus, we find a number of interesting urban initiative, such as the Trust’s development of self-guided audio tours of the New Town, surely a pioneering use of audio technology to make history and heritage more attractive. Nevertheless, the creation of a Georgian House Museum was clearly understood to be a far more impactful way of attracting attention to the Trust’s activities, “especially in Europe where it is already so well known in Europa Nostra circles for its Little Houses work” (NTS Director 1972).

There was also, however, a broader socio-political background against which the Georgian House must be seen. The house was conceived in the year Britain entered the European Community. In that same year, moreover, the Royal Commission on the Constitution, under the chairmanship of Lord Kilbrandon, delivered its report. Kilbrandon advocated, as was widely expected, substantial devolution of power from Westminster to the four home nations, setting in train the course of events that would lead to the first – ultimately unsuccessful –Scottish devolution referendum in 1978.

The construction and completion of the Georgian House therefore coincided with the turning of Britain away from its imperial past and towards a new future in Europe, and from a traditional conception of the Union centred on Westminster to one in which Scotland would have greater autonomy. This transition complemented, and in part resulted from, deeper socio-economic pressures. The 1970s were simultaneously the highpoint and the beginning of the end for the post-war political consensus based on the optimistic ideal of a benign and rational state using steeply progressive taxation to reduce social inequality while taking care of its citizens’ welfare ‘from the cradle to the grave’.

The economic basis of the post-war model had been undermined by rapid deindustrialisation, driven in part by increasing foreign manufacturing competition and in part by the perceived failings of many of the UK’s nationalised industries, which were increasingly dependent on substantial public subsidy (Foreman-Peck and Milward 1994). At the same time, the long-term use of monetary stimulus to drive economic growth had resulted in progressively worsening inflationary pressures. These became full-blown economic crises following the 1973 and 1979 oil shocks. The impacts of rising oil prices were felt throughout the developed world but were particularly acute in the UK, where they helped precipitate an unprecedented collapse in the public finances only a year after the Georgian House opened. This was so serious that the Labour government would be forced to request an emergency multi-billion-dollar loan from
the IMF. The rapid contraction in public expenditure that the IMF exacted as the price for its support then led the unions to launch the crippling strikes of the ‘winter of discontent’ of 1978-9.

46 At the same time, the moral basis for the post-war consensus was being undermined from both ends of the political spectrum. On the right, the focus of disenchantment was on ‘big government’, ‘big labour’ and the ‘welfare trap’ and the conviction that together they were undermining both national prosperity and human freedom. The prescribed antidote was a return to free market economics, fiscal discipline, and a small state – the core tenets of ‘Thatcherism’. On the left, the primary concern was the dehumanisation and environmental despoliation that resulted from consumer capitalism and increasing corporatisation. This led to growing interest in self-sufficiency and grassroots political and economic self-organisation, an approach given cohesive theoretical expression in the ‘small is beautiful’ philosophy of E. F. Schumacher (1973).

47 Against the backdrop of such polarised responses, one of the few areas of relative consensus was increasing concern at the destructive impacts of modernity on the historic built environment. Among the traditionalists, the destruction of historic buildings was seen as a painful reflection of the collapse of traditional spiritual and cultural values. It was also, of course, a reflection of the progressive cultural and economic marginalisation of the traditional elite. The continuing impacts of punitive taxation – which after a brief hiatus from 1971 returned with a vengeance in 1974 during Dennis Healey’s Chancellorship. Sustained taxation on incomes and inheritances had led, over the course of a century, to the gradual erosion of landed wealth. The great architectural expression of the wealth and culture of the landed elites, their country houses, were one of its most visible victims (Strong et al. 1974; Mandler 1997).

48 The youth of the 1960s and 70s, the rebellious heirs of post-Second World War utopianism, with their desire to ‘turn on, tune in and drop out’ had little sympathy with the rigid moralism and strong sense of social hierarchy of their elders. Nevertheless, young radicals, too, saw in the destruction of the historic environment a symptom of a world out of joint (Powers 2004; Powell 2004). The bureaucrats and developers were seen as the proponents of a soulless politics and economics of ‘progress’ regardless of the feelings and preferences of the people they were supposed to serve: as Alan Powers has put it, “the Counter Culture overthrew the technocratic assumptions of avant-garde architecture, coming at the same time as the rapidly mounting awareness of environmental pollution” (Powers 2004). The conservation movement, then, went from being a rather highbrow, and often humorous undertaking (Lancaster 1949), to becoming something akin to a popular movement: “Few changes in public opinion”, wrote the leading proponent of architectural conservation, Marcus Binney, in 1973 “have been so rapid and at the same time appeared so real and lasting as the growing concern for the preservation of buildings of every kind” (quoted in Mandler 1997).

49 The socially unifying potential of heritage offered more, however, than the promise of common purpose in a fractured and alienating contemporary culture. The appreciation of architecture, art and traditional craftsmanship was viewed as the special domain of the traditional upper and upper middle classes, not only by that class’s own members but also by many outside it. While their social and economic superiority had been subject, as we have seen, to continual erosion, the world of heritage provided a kind of ready-made opportunity to make use of their affinity for high culture while
maintaining a kind of special status, as the guardians, managers and pedagogues of the nation’s heritage. The upper reaches of Britain’s heritage organisations were consequently dominated by privileged, privately educated, well-connected members of the social elite (Wright 1985; Hewison 1987; Adams 2013). By the mid-1980s, the close affinity between the heritage movement and the socio-cultural elite was so taken for granted that it became subject of (somewhat self-regarding) humour in the form of the *New Georgian Handbook* (Robinson and Artley 1985). Published by the glossy society magazine *Harpers & Queen*, it was a companion volume to the *Official Sloane Ranger Handbook*, itself inspired by the overtly aspirational humour of Lisa Birnbach and Jonathan Roberts’ *Official Preppy Handbook*. All three books simultaneously mocked and extolled the manners and mores of their subjects—respectively the well-connected leaders of the conservation movement and the traditional social and cultural elites of the UK and the US East Coast.

The National Trust for Scotland was no exception to the general rule of upper and upper-middle class domination of heritage institutions. James Stormonth-Darling was a scion of a highly respected Edinburgh legal, political, and military family. He was the great nephew of Moir Todd Stormonth-Darling, Lord Stormonth Darling (1844-1912), a prominent judge and Conservative politician. The Trust’s favoured architect, Schomberg Scott, was the grandson of the 7th Lord Polwarth and Lady Isobel Kerr, daughter of the 9th Marquess of Lothian, and was connected through his wife, Deborah Castle, to the Howards of Castle Howard. His virtual monopoly position as first choice for almost all major Trust projects that required architectural expertise could not, nevertheless, entirely disguise his growing distance from the standards of practice expected by younger professionals in the field. His close social affinity with the Trust’s leadership can only have helped him establish and retain his extensive run of commissions from the organisation. The Georgian House’s manager, Marista Leishman, was similarly well-connected. The daughter of Lord Reith, first Director General of the BBC, she had previously sat on the Trust’s executive committee, a voluntary position from which she had to resign to take up her new role. She brought her father’s high-minded commitment to ‘inform, educate, entertain’ to her work for the Trust, no doubt to its benefit. But there is no evidence that her appointment to the paid position of manager was subject to any kind of competitive recruitment process.

In important respects, then, the Georgian House can be seen as a part of a rear-guard action – albeit, no doubt, sincerely felt and idealistically motivated – by the Trust’s socially homogenous leadership to establish a place for traditional values in a rapidly changing world. This is, of course, nowhere more clearly manifested than in the mutually beneficial transformation of the upper floors of 7 Charlotte Square into the official residence of the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, and the secondary use of the Georgian House’s public rooms as its state rooms. While the Trust quaintly explained that this would “restore to Charlotte Square something of the residential atmosphere for which it was designed by Robert Adam”, it must also have been rather more than happy coincidence that it resulted in what a contemporary NTS press release referred to as “[t]he proximity of the Church and State, in the persons of the Moderator and the Secretary of State for Scotland” (NTS Press Release 1973). The result was an extraordinary assertion of Scotland’s traditional religious identity at the precise moment that its political identity was expected to be redrawn by devolution.
Conclusion

The Georgian House, then, suggests that the remarkable success of the conservation movement in the 1960s to 1980s was not just the result of the populace developing an enlightened awareness of the destructive impacts of the contemporary economy on the nation’s built heritage. It was also a reflection of the traditional elites’ near monopoly over a sphere of activity that had the potential to make room for traditional hierarchies and values in a world where they seemed to be irremediably losing their power. In many ways, it reflected a new ability by the elite to co-opt the modest conservatism of the ordinary citizen in favour of an agenda, which in the name of conservation, could also have more widely conservative aims. By creating a physical place for the past, and its traditions and values, in the new Scottish and European identities that were supplementing and increasingly displacing the traditional British imperial identity, they sought to bolster their position in the world just as their political and economic dominance seemed about to fade. There is something rather special and specific about the historical moment that enabled such a community of concern between traditional elites and ‘the man in the street’ to emerge. It deserves wider, and deeper, scrutiny.

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1. An attempt to increase further the rent payable was successfully resisted by Whytock & Reid’s director, J. Campbell Reid, who professed to be “somewhat surprised that [NTS] should seek to extract the last penny for the remaining few months of our thirty-six [sic.] years of occupancy” (Whytock & Reid 1972).

2. See also Letter from Schomberg Scott to Marista Leishman on 12 May 1975, containing his indignant rebuttal of Knight’s criticisms, and including much interesting detail on the rationale behind many of the decisions taken during the restoration process (Schomberg Scott 1975).

ABSTRACTS

The National Trust for Scotland’s restoration of 7 Charlotte Square as a museum of the Georgian New Town was both more and less than an exemplary restoration of a townhouse at the centre of Robert Adam’s great neoclassical urban set piece. It was conceived and executed in 1972-5, a moment pregnant with significance for Scotland’s – and the United Kingdom’s – political and
cultural identity. Lord Kilbrandon’s Commission on the Constitution was about to report and was widely expected to usher in dramatic changes to the relationship between Scotland and the wider Union. At the same time negotiations for the UK’s entry into the then European Community were on the point of bearing fruit. Completion of the restoration was, moreover, timed to coincide with European Architectural Heritage Year and with the UK’s first European referendum. This paper will set the creation of the ‘Georgian House’ in this exceptional context, exploring how it became the vehicle for a distinctive vision of Scotland’s past and future, and then setting out the consequences – and the many compromises to good practice – that resulted from this unavowed but omnipresent agenda. In particular, it will show how the National Trust for Scotland’s leaders – almost all drawn from the country’s well-connected social elite – sought to make use of the prestige of eighteenth-century taste and cultural achievement to carve out a new place for Scotland’s cultural and spiritual heritage, and, perhaps no less importantly, for themselves, in a rapidly changing world.


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