

Façadism and a Vernacular Farmhouse An Example in East Yorkshire

by

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Although entire townscapes have been regarded as palimpsests, with the changing aspirations, abilities and ambitions of tenants, owners, developers and others being recorded in successive changes to the urban fabric, the same point is not often explicitly made in the context of individual buildings. The architectural concept of 'façadism' is currently in fashion, particularly for new developments in sensitive environments such as the centres of historical towns.¹ This technique most commonly entails the demolition of a building save for the main façade, and the construction of a new building behind this shell to modern use-requirements and structural standards. The re-cladding of an existing building, to give the appearance of a new building in a new architectural style, is also common. Examples of developments where a façade had been rebuilt as a replica, or where the new façade is designed in an historicist architectural idiom, are less commonly referred to as 'façadism', with the rather pejorative connotations that this word has.²

Since the layman's impression of most architecture is largely restricted to the front wall, or façade, it is hardly surprising that much thought has been given to this aspect of the entire design. Cases of the re-fronting of standing buildings, or the use of historicist architectural fashions, are common throughout history. The consideration of the building as a palimpsest has been implicit in studies of building alteration, particularly where this has apparently been undertaken for reasons of fashion. Known examples of this fashionable re-fronting and alteration range from Georgian re-fronting in brick of timber-framed mediaeval buildings in Ludlow to the seventeenth-century encasement in stone of similar timber-framed buildings and, in more modern times, the 1933 re-fronting in the then-fashionable fusion of Classical and Art Deco of offices for a building society in Wolverhampton.³

The instances of such partial rebuilding must be far more numerous than are recognised, particularly as there is often little evidence apparent from an external examination of a building. Furthermore, the great majority of intensive studies of

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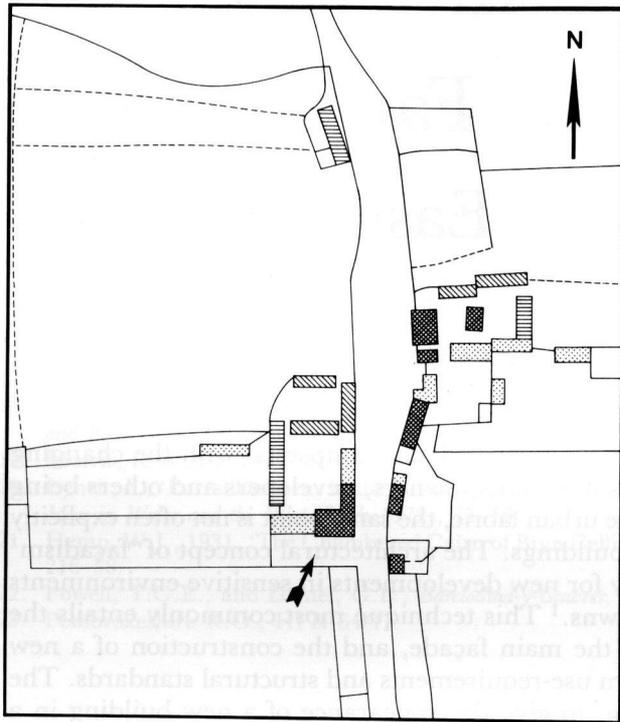


Fig. 1
Wharram le Street: redrawn from
1810 sketch map by William
Rawson

buildings in this respect have been in urban areas, and many have been of buildings in Brunskill's class of 'polite' architecture. Examinations of architectural fashion applied to buildings in rural areas, and to houses rather lower in the social and architectural hierarchy, are rare. In this context, an examination of Red House Farm, Wharram le Street, East Yorkshire, is instructive. Here, the brick encasement of an earlier stone house, suggested by only minor external signs, is proved by the survival, with the exception of one gable, of the cottage walls within the later brick structure.

WHARRAM LE STREET: SETTING AND DOCUMENTATION

The Yorkshire Wolds area is characterized by undulating chalk wold tops, with steep-sided valleys and a steep scarp slope to the Vale of Pickering. Soils on the wold tops are thin and poor: although ploughed during the mediaeval period, during the sixteenth century and later, much was in use as sheepwalks and some, slightly later, as rabbit warrens.⁴ Wharram le Street lies astride the presumed Roman road between the market towns of Malton and Driffield. Air photography, confirmed by small-scale sample excavations, shows earthwork boundaries on both sides of the road, presumably back lanes and a series of parallel enclosures fronting onto the road. The regularity of this layout suggests a planned two-row village. Planned villages are a common feature of rural settlement in this part of the Wolds, although many of these villages are now either shrunken, such as Wharram le Street, or deserted, such as Cowlam.⁵ Some two-thirds of the Wold townships were not enclosed until after 1730. Wills and

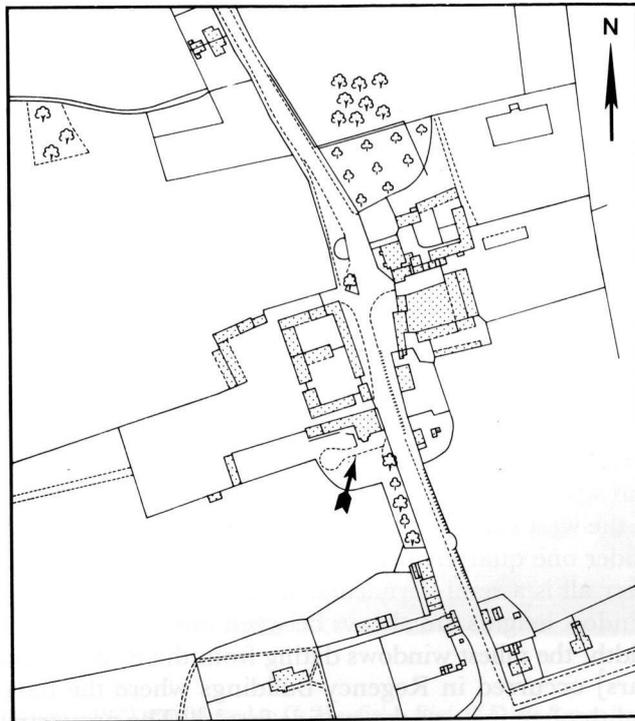


Fig. 2
Wharram le Street: redrawn from
the 1910 O.S. 25" survey

inventories from the early 1700s suggest that tenant farms predominated throughout the Wolds area.⁶ In 1802, Henry Willoughby, 6th Baron Middleton, purchased much of Wharram le Street, including Red House Farm, from a Mr Topham. In 1807, Lord Middleton's diary records that he built a 'New House, barn, stables etc. at Wharram'.⁷

The earliest known map of Wharram le Street is a sketch for an estate plan, *circa* 1810, drawn by William Rawson for Lord Middleton prior to his purchase of Manor Farm, the second major farmstead in the village. Rawson was active in the East Riding and Lincolnshire between 1806 and 1842.⁸ This sketch (Fig. 1) shows several features of interest, principally several types of shading of buildings (diagonal, vertical and dashed) not all evident on the final estate plan. The bold shading appears to indicate inhabited buildings (compare with Manor Farm and cottages to the east). This shading is used for what is now the main house of Red House Farm together with an adjoining building to the north, facing the street. An L-shaped house thus seems to be indicated, with adjacent ancillary building.

This picture is confirmed by the earliest large-scale Ordnance Survey map, the first edition of the six-inch survey, published in 1850. In both of these earlier maps, the representation of the farmhouse in relation to the plot boundaries immediately to the west is significant. In particular, the house is shown as only half of the width of its plot on Rawson's sketch. Although these representations are of small scale, there seems little reason to doubt their accuracy. Other contemporary estate surveyors are

known to be accurate even in architectural detail, and the general accuracy of the six-inch survey is also recorded.⁹

The twenty-five inch map of 1910, however, shows a difference (Fig. 2). The farmhouse is now wider in relation to the plot, has a distinct south-facing extension, and is separated from the farm buildings to the north. From this plan evidence, therefore, it would be concluded that the present Red House Farmhouse post-dates the 1850 O.S. map, and that Lord Middleton's diary entry of 1807 records the building of another farmhouse—possibly a precursor of Red House, but more likely that at Wharram Grange, rented by the Middleton estate from at least 1805.

RED HOUSE FARM: THE ARCHITECTURAL EVIDENCE

The existing structure is of orange/red brick, slate-roofed, in a plain late-Georgian/Regency style (Fig. 3). The main aspect is not to the street, but rather to the south, across a sizeable garden. Although the brick fabric bears similarities to farm buildings in this area of the Wolds dated to *circa* 1800, details of the doorcase and window proportions would suggest a later date. The dimensions of one window, in the west side of the drawing room, are 6'11" x 2'10", and glazing bars are slightly under one quarter-inch thick. It has been suggested that in smaller houses, and this after all is a semi-vernacular farmhouse rather than a polite country mansion, 'the window heights are always between one and a quarter to one and three-quarters the width, the tallest windows dating from the Regency period' and 'the thinnest [glazing bars] occurred in Regency buildings where the bars were often no wider than an eighth of an inch on the outside face'.¹⁰ The proportions of the dining-room window, to the right of the main door in Fig. 3, also suggest a Regency date. These stylistic hangovers, still in use in the early-Victorian post-1850 period if the map evidence is correct, provide a useful dated example of the persistence of features common in one morphological period into its successor: such features make the assignment of buildings into morphological periods from external evidence somewhat problematic.¹¹

Although a simple external inspection of Red House suggests a one-period construction, broadly symmetrical and of late-Georgian/Regency proportions, several features become apparent on close inspection that merit further investigation. These are the differences in level of windows on the road frontage, interesting despite the south-north dip in ground level; the 'steps' in the brickwork on the north and east frontages, and the brick bonding of the north frontage.

THE HIDDEN HOUSE

The opportunity arose to make a measured survey of the farmhouse. This revealed thin brick walls in the south part, and thick stone walls, with different floor levels, in the north part. The stone walls correspond exactly with the steps in the external brickwork and the different floor heights explain the not quite symmetrical layout of windows on the road frontage, although the uniform eaves-height retains some of the idealised symmetrical layout. It is, therefore, evident that the rebuilding of this farmhouse in brick, leading to the name 'Red House Farm', involved the encasement in brick of an earlier stone dwelling, leading to the one brick-thick difference visible externally, and the addition to the south of a new entrance hallway,



Fig. 3

Red House, south frontage, from postcard of c. 1920 reproduced in C. Hayfield, *Birdsall Estate Remembered*, Arley (1989)

two major reception rooms (sitting and dining rooms) with bedrooms above (Fig. 4).

Further investigation, with the assistance and encouragement of the owner, showed that the majority of the stone dwelling survived, most evidently in the roof-space of the nineteenth-century house (Fig. 5). The stone is a calcareous sandstone/limestone, with numerous small carbonized plant fossils, of the Middle/Upper Jurassic: a local building stone, outcropping at the junction of the Chalk of the Wold tops with the main valley floor. All four walls are here evident, with the 'new' roof resting on the north and east walls. The old building was originally gabled, with much of the west gable, now within the roof-space, remaining complete with chimney flue and attic window opening. A further window, with frame, still exists beside what may have been an original front-door opening, now an interior door. The size of this window opening, 4'8" wide and 2' deep, is such that it is now used as a cupboard. Recent interior work revealed a similar window directly above this, in a first-floor room.

The brickwork and brick skin of the stone building is all in the same brick, using a variant of English Garden Wall bond (one row of headers to five of stretchers). Half of the north face, however, is in no regular bond, being mostly stretchers with some cut stretchers and a few headers to accommodate five window openings and one doorway. It may have been the sheer number of openings that dictated this irregularity: with the structural stone wall remaining behind, a thick brick wall with

proper bonding was not required for load-bearing purposes. However, it is at this point that the second building, shown in the same type of shading as the inhabited farmhouse in Rawson's 1810 sketch (Fig. 1) abutted the original building. Whether this was, in fact, a further inhabited building, demolished at a late stage of the brick encasement works leaving a hole to be patched, is only conjecture.

DISCUSSION OF THE HOUSES

Very little detailed work has been published on the vernacular houses of the Yorkshire Wolds. It is suggested that very few houses built before the mid-eighteenth century have survived, but that the hearth-passage plan dominated the High Wold region. Houses of the planned estate section of Settrington, apparently rebuilt *circa* 1800 (but the layout predates 1599), retained some kind of hearth-passage. It is also suggested that, for the wider region of the east Yorkshire uplands (including the Yorkshire Moors and Vale of Pickering), 54% of houses surveyed had cross-walls of light timber studding, with stone interior walls only becoming common after the middle of the eighteenth century.¹² Many Yorkshire cottages

followed an almost standard plan of two rooms side by side on the ground floor and two rooms over, creating a long, narrow house with the staircase either in a projection at the rear or in between the two rooms. The chimneys were always at the gable ends, and the rooms were as low as practicable to keep the height, and therefore the cost of the building, as small as possible.¹³

The remaining stone walls are quite substantial, being approximately 2'1" thick at their base, and 1'7" thick where truncated in the present attic. The remaining gable end is thickened to 2'3", with a central attic window, known chimney flue to the south, and one presumed to the north from the position of a fireplace in the room below. It is presumed that both flues joined above the window opening to form a central gable chimney, giving the roof a steep pitch. The external stonework here is of sizeable well-shaped stone blocks, averaging 1'4" x 5", laid in regular courses. The interior of the attic room was thickly plastered. Downstairs, the presumed south doorway leads into a passageway, the east wall of which is of timber studding at both ground- and first-floor levels.

This is, therefore, a surviving stone house of substantial construction, having two main floors, an attic room, at least some interior walls of timber studding, and of some size (interior dimensions 44'10" x 21'). It is likely to have been a tenant farmer's house, rather more grand than a cottage, but of similar aspect. Its orientation is at right angles to the street, with probably a gable wall facing the street. This is a most unusual layout: the great majority of all local stone-built cottages have eaves facing the street. It may result from the adjoining farm buildings, one possibly inhabited, marked on the 1810 sketch. It does not seem likely that the main building faced the street, and what survives is part of that main building with a gabled rear extension: the thickness of the north wall stonework does not suggest an interior wall, and the quality of the gable stonework does not suggest a rear extension. The date of this stone building cannot with certainty be stated; timber-stud walls notwithstanding, its size may indicate a late eighteenth-century date.

Unlike major urban houses, whose owners may be expected to react to current architectural fashions, the owners and occupiers of rural buildings are rarely so highly

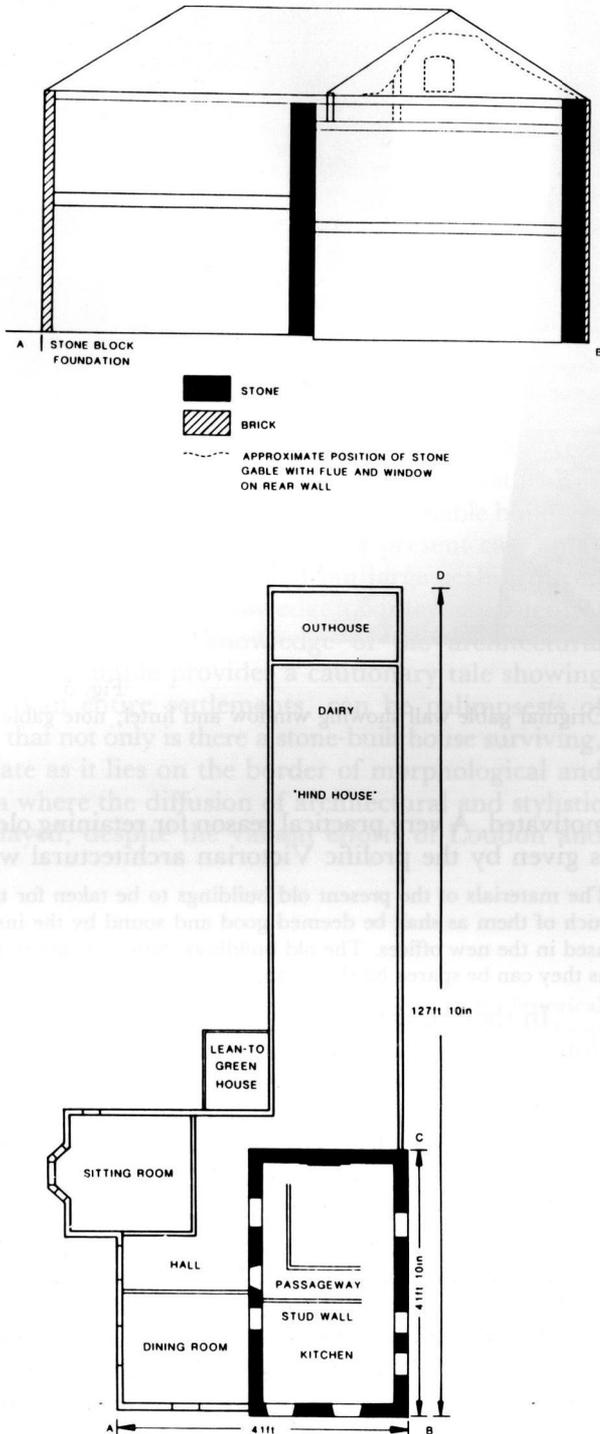


Fig. 4
Red House: plan and cross-section



Fig. 5

Original gable wall showing window and lintel; note gable cut down for later roof beams (to right)

motivated. A very practical reason for retaining older buildings during reconstruction is given by the prolific Victorian architectural writer J.C. Loudon:

The materials of the present old buildings to be taken for the use of the respective contractors; and such of them as shall be deemed good and sound by the inspector, such as stones and timber, to be used in the new offices. The old buildings, however, are to be taken down only in such order of time as they can be spared by the tenant, so as he may not be put to unnecessary inconvenience thereby.¹⁴

In the present case, such retention was carried to the extreme of encasing the stone walls, retaining their structural function and compromising the ideal symmetry of a Georgian/Regency façade and layout.

Brick was apparently sufficiently unusual in Wharram le Street to give the farm its present name, Red House. Brick was known earlier on the Wolds, for a variety of farm buildings including high barns at Towthorpe, an adjoining township, and later became the preferred material for new estate cottages and rebuilt farmhouses on the adjoining Sykes estate, based around Sledmere. In detail, however, the chronology of brick use on the Wolds, and its supplanting of local stone, both indigenous chalk rubble and better architectural stone from quarries on the scarp at North Grimston and elsewhere, remains to be elucidated.

However Georgian/Regency in its attempt at symmetry and window proportion, the aspect of the new Red House is certainly Victorian in one respect: the asymmetry

of its south front (Fig. 3) with the projecting sitting room and its bay window. Interestingly, this bears a strong resemblance to a sketch in Loudon that shows a similar projection and bay.¹⁵ The importance of this is in the reliance placed upon such pattern-books by builders who, in many cases, designed their own buildings with no formal architectural training.

CONCLUSION

Red House is an unremarkable Yorkshire farmhouse, at least to the casual observer. Despite its use of Georgian/Regency style, and the use of a main façade similar to one given by Loudon in 1846, map evidence suggests that it was built post-1850. These stylistic hangovers are typical of the conservatism of areas distant from the centres of fashion. Upon detailed examination, some external structural anomalies reveal the presence of a virtually complete stone-built house, now encased and extended by the nineteenth-century brick structure.

This interesting survival has several implications. Although largely hidden from view, it markedly increases the architectural, cultural and historical interest of Red House. It suggests that detailed interior inspection of otherwise unremarkable buildings is invaluable, as what may be known to the occupier, as in the present case, may not otherwise be revealed to the specialist. Recent detailed but large-scale work in urban areas, notably Ludlow, has shown how a knowledge of interior structural survivals and details adds considerably to the knowledge of the architectural development of an area.¹⁶ Lastly, this example provides a cautionary tale showing that individual buildings, no less than entire settlements, can be palimpsests of settlement history; and, in this case, that not only is there a stone-built house surviving, but its encasement is difficult to date as it lies on the border of morphological and historical periods, and is in an area where the diffusion of architectural and stylistic fashion may be expected to be delayed, despite the valiant efforts of Loudon and his contemporaries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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