

FALSE FRONTS IN MINOR DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE

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THE applied façade is a not uncommon feature among the great houses of this country. During the 18th century, when Italianate forms were regarded as indispensable to the proper expression of dignity, many a mediaeval or Elizabethan mansion received an external skin of Palladian architecture. The dominance of fashion was such that the normal processes of architectural development were superseded by deliberate stage-craft. These façades were not the result of ordinary rebuilding or alteration to meet changed circumstances or structural decay; they were applied only to conform to fashionable taste.

There have been, in the past, isolated instances of comparable screening—the chancel of Gloucester Cathedral is a case in point—but a general and widespread acquiescence to taste is a phenomenon peculiar to the 18th century. In the case of the great house, this is a familiar aspect of design, but there is also, in the minor domestic architecture of the period, a similar deference to fashion. In almost any town which possesses buildings of appropriate age one can find Georgian brick façades masking earlier timber construction. Often, too, a near-symmetrical Georgian front will screen a traditional disposition of rooms.

In the transposition of scale from the great house to the small, that which is ostentatious in the former becomes interesting and often charming in the latter. Particularly is this true of the treatment of materials and expedients involved. No little skill and ingenuity have gone into the simulation of fashionable and pretentious materials by those which are humbler and cheaper.

Historical progression in the use of prime materials for smaller houses may be stated very briefly. Timber building, whether cruck-frame or box-frame, was almost universal for dwellings during the Middle Ages, and consisted essentially of heavy members, closely framed, with panels of lighter material between. In time, the weight of the timber tended to decrease, and concurrently, stone building emerged in favoured areas. During the 17th century, stone where available became general and, at the same time, brick was being increasingly favoured by those who could afford this material. The precedent set by the upper classes was naturally followed by the lower, and the wide availability of brick enabled it to

supersede, generally, both stone and timber—even where these were still available and cheap. The hey-day of brick construction was reached in the 18th century.

In the South of England the tradition of the timber box-frame was firmly entrenched throughout a wide range of building types, and in the small houses resisted well into the 19th century. It is in this part of the country, during the 18th century, that the timber frame on the one hand, now but a very light skeleton, and fashion on the other, together produced one of the most fascinating expedients in simulation.

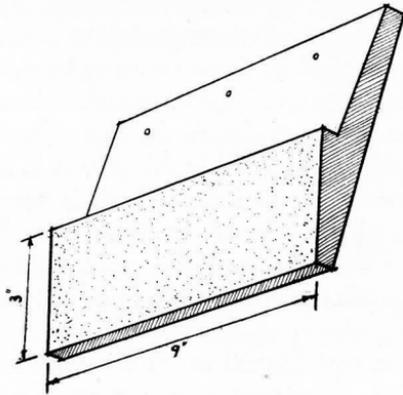
In this part of the country, the timber-framed house is clad in one of three ways; it may be boarded, it may be tile-hung or, less frequently, it may be given a skin of lath and stucco. These three systems were used indiscriminately—either independently or in combination—and it is not unusual for all three to appear on the same house. These three systems, boarding, tile-hanging and stucco, quite clearly express their use as claddings only. When seen, it is reasonable to assume that they are applied to timber-framing, though occasionally they may be coverings over a brick wall. Brick itself often appears as a fourth type of facing—sometimes structural, as when used in a plinth or ground floor wall, and sometimes non-structural when applied in front of an independent timber frame. When, as occasionally happens, a solid brick wall is taken up the full height of the house front, it offers no clue to the real structure, and is nothing more than a mask. Brickwork used in this way is in a different category to the boarding, tile-hanging or stucco, for it is patently misleading; it appears to be structural, yet may be nothing more than a skin applied under the pressure of fashion. Generally, such walls are 9 inches thick, but may sometimes be of 14 inch thickness, as in examples in the Colchester area.

In Kent and Sussex, the apparent use of brick was not long confined to the lower storeys and, seemingly, upper storey brickwork became increasingly frequent. This was achieved by means of an ingenious deception, which is usually so excellently contrived that it escapes all but the closest inspection. The deception was effected by means of the brick-tile, that is a tile of which the lower part was made in imitation of either the header face or the stretcher face of a brick. The tiles are of the section shown in the diagram, and they fit one above the other so that only the lower brick-face section is left exposed. The joints are always pointed up so that the pretence is complete. The upper part may be pierced with one, two or three nail holes, though these are not always utilised. The tiles are usually nailed on to laths fixed across the timber frame, but sometimes they may be simply stuck on to a plaster slurry.

The brick-tile appears to have been introduced during the middle of

the 18th century,¹ though its use became more widespread towards the end—possibly as a means of avoiding the Brick Tax of 1784. All brick taxes were, however, repealed in 1795, and yet the brick-tile continued in frequent use well into the 19th century. Two fairly authentic dates are 1818, for the annexe to the George Hotel, and 1817 for number 7, Market Square, both at Rye. In the latter case the brick-tiles are colour-washed.

In distribution, this element belongs essentially to the southern counties, and more particularly to the coastal towns of Kent and Sussex. It appears as far west as Salisbury, occasionally in Berkshire, in London—where it was first used to face the rear elevation of brick houses—and also occasionally in Cambridge which appears to mark the northernmost point of its normal incidence. The principal centres are Salisbury, Canterbury, Rye, Brighton, Lewes, Hythe and Tenterden. It very rarely occurs north of the Thames Valley, and then only on isolated country mansions. There are two examples of its use in Northants and a few around Durham. At Althorp, Nottinghamshire, remote from the main area, Henry Holland used a white-faced brick-tile in 1787.



SKETCH OF BRICK TILE.

The normal field of use was on substantial middle-class houses, although it might range from quite humble dwellings to an occasional great house such as Belmont Park in Kent, where Samuel Wyatt made use of a yellow brick-tile. The brick-tile, in actual fact, was not cheap; though not a luxury cladding, it was a sophisticated one. It is interesting to note that Winchelsea possesses practically no examples of the use of the brick-tile although Rye, only two and a half miles away, is a noteworthy centre. Winchelsea has hardly been alive since 1550 and has never had to keep pace with the fashionable world. Another possible factor in the native

¹ John Archibald in *Kentish Architecture Influenced by Geology*, 1934, gives 1725 as the date when brick-tiles were first introduced.



FIG. 1
TENTERDEN, KENT.
Brick-tiles on face—wood quoins.



FIG. 2
CANTERBURY.
Brick-tiles painted cream.

distribution of the brick-tile is of course geology. The eastern extremity of the upper containing arc of the Weald joins the sea almost precisely at Folkestone². So far as the evidence of coastal distribution is concerned, Folkestone appears to demarcate the fairly extensive use of the brick-tile westwards, from a region to the east of it in which brick is far more prevalent, and instances of brick-tile few and far between. Even in between Folkestone and Sandgate, but a short distance apart, the drop in prevalence is very marked, though once again the question of fashion arises; Folkestone was a very minor fishing village until the construction of the harbour in 1809.

The brick-tile was used in a number of different ways. There are houses which have clearly possessed brick-tile cladding as part of the original construction (Fig. 1), and many others where it has been applied to an earlier mediaeval-type, timber frame. This may be done quite openly with no attempt at masking the original construction—possibly in lieu of ordinary tile-hanging when this became necessary in the course of normal maintenance (Fig. 4). It may also be done in a genuine face-lifting operation, simply for the sake of keeping up with fashion (Fig. 2). There are Jacobean or earlier houses which have been converted to the Georgian or Regency mode by this means, and when a solid brick wall has been built below an overhanging first floor to give a face in one plane (Fig. 3) detection becomes extremely difficult. Nor is this type of false front confined to existing timber construction, for it is sometimes applied to existing brick walling in a patent attempt to alter character (Figs. 5, 6) and also, sometimes, for no apparent reason whatsoever. There is one instance at Hythe where solid red-brick walls were faced with yellow brick-tiles nailed on actually at the time the house was built. The brick-tile continued in use for conversions well into the 19th century, although it tended to lose favour in original work. Ellis Bros. building in Rye is a late example, though there the brick-tile is relegated to side-walling.

In normal practice, Flemish bond is most common, with "heading" bond a fairly close second; black-glazed tiles are used only in "heading" bond. Full English bond appears never to have been used, although a modified version appears on rare occasions. In the example at Hungerford there are courses of headers to one of stretchers, with cement quoins at the end. This shop is an interesting example of a false-front built up piecemeal. In all probability the original house was of exposed half-timber construction, with a jettied first-floor. To this was added the Regency shop-front, and later still the mock brickwork of the first storey. The Mermaid Inn at Rye has recently undergone a reversionary change, for

² Observed by Cobbett. *Rural Rides*, Volume I, pages 239, 240.

the brick-tile facing has been removed to expose the original timber framing.

In this connection it is diverting to read in Adam's *Guide to Rye and District*³ that "it is in the altered and improved effect of numerous old dwellings in all parts of the Borough that the metamorphosis is most agreeably demonstrated, due mainly to the obliteration of unsightly excrescences. Many of the charming exteriors which today greet the eye of the observer were obfuscated with layers of stucco and other material of bygone generations: few would imagine that St. Anthony's, a half-timbered house at the corner of the old Custom House Street (now Church Square), erstwhile resembled a distinctly modern domicile, or that the great variety of half-timbered façades now confronting our ever-growing phalanx of visitors has nearly all been opened out during the last quarter of a century. In similar manner there has been an internal overhauling. Quaint old ingle-sides most ingeniously hidden from view have been restored to their original design and purpose. Massive oak beams, forming so large a component part of almost every building, are also exposed to view—indeed, the burning off and scraping of old timbers has become quite a local industry."

In the simplest work, the ends of a brick-tile wall are stopped by means of a board, while in slightly more pretentious work, this is replaced by wood quoins painted white or cream to imitate stone. Reveals and mock flat arches are usually in cement, though special tiles may occasionally be used to support the falsehood in every detail. Angle tiles, 9 inches on one side and $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches on the other are fairly common, though reveal tiles occur more rarely (Fig. 7). Ordinarily, voussoirs are normal brick-tiles simply hung on their sides (Fig. 8), but gauged brickwork is sometimes simulated by purpose-made voussoirs, although the subterfuge is often spoilt by horizontal joints, scratched on rather too obviously.

At window heads, lead wall flashings are regularly used. When the brick-tiles are carried through horizontally in courses above the window head, flashings protrude slightly just above the window frame. When imitation gauged heads are used, the flashings occur at the top of the imitation gauging, but this as already noted is not common.

The brick-tile is naturally versatile and eminently suitable for use on curved surfaces, particularly where the weight of genuine brickwork would preclude its use—as in the bases of suspended windows (Fig. 9).

A wide range of colours has been available in the brick-tile, from varieties of red to buffs and greys and yellows, in imitation of ordinary stock bricks. Chronologically, the reds are earliest, and greys and yellows come later. Black and white glazed tiles have also been made, although not

³ Apparently written shortly after 1927.



FIG. 3
RYE: The Mint.
Brick-tiles removed from upper storey.

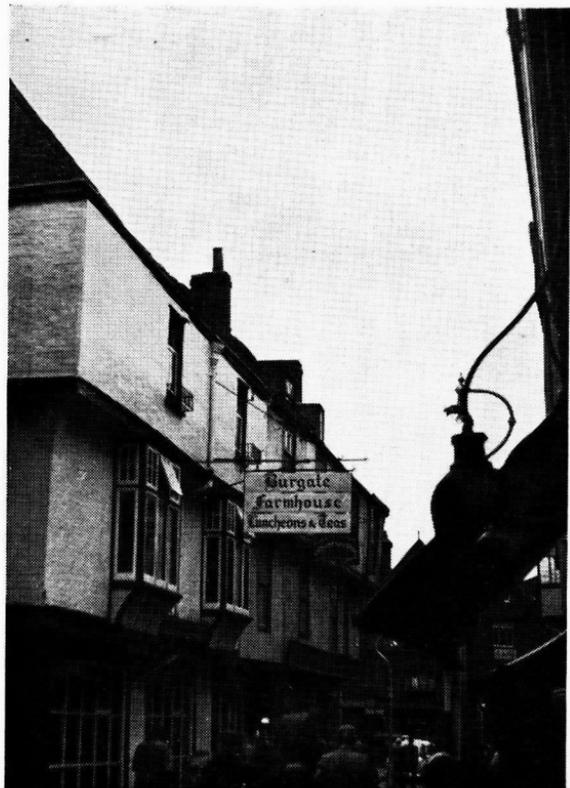


FIG. 4
CANTERBURY.
Brick-tiles with wood filllets at angles.



FIG. 5
SALISBURY.
No. 47 Winchester Street.
Brick-tiles added to
earlier brickwork.



FIG. 6
A detail of the
applied façade.

extensively used. Brighton is the centre of the black vitreous brick-tile practice, a most sophisticated one. The best known example is perhaps "Ye Olde Bunn Shoppe" in Brighton, 1794, a date which is fairly authentic.

White and cream colour-washes are frequently used over red tiles, although there is a likelihood here of doing more harm than good, as colour-wash tends to emphasize any discrepancies in jointing, and if the intention has been to unify the wall surface, the result is disappointing. Brick-tiles are still being made today, although they are used almost entirely in repair work.

Brick-tiles are not solely responsible for minor architectural deceptions, as stucco inevitably lends itself to imitative practice. When used quite plainly, it is a frank and often successful surface skin. It is a familiar finish on brick-work, but was also used in the past on half-timbered buildings and covered equally both the timber frame and the panels between. This practice seems to belong essentially to the south-eastern counties in contrast to the North and West, and the evidence suggests that the stucco was applied at the time of building or at any rate, very soon afterwards. The "Rose and Crown" at Hythe has a plaster face of this character, which is eminently successful. There is no pretence, but rather a poise and grace which are almost Classical Greek. Along the same street are a number of houses which show a variety of treatment in stucco. The jointing of stonework is often imitated on stucco in all parts of the country; in the sandstone area of Cheshire, stucco is frequently colour-washed buff, and stone joints scratched on which coincide in size very closely with actual masonry walling. At Shaftesbury, in one instance at least, the toolings on the face of Chilmark stone are imitated, as well as those around the joint margins. When deep rustication is attempted the effect is somewhat incongruous.

Strongly defined wooden quoins in imitation of stone are quite frequent in the South, but when the same treatment is attempted over the whole wall surface, fortunately but rarely, the result is not satisfactory. With almost all timber some movement is inevitable, and when the mock stonework opens out or is distorted, the effect is disturbing. Clap-boarding over a light timber frame has always been regarded as a low-grade form of covering, and rustication is resorted to in an attempt to disguise the true material.

False façades in brickwork are more numerous than is commonly supposed, and many a house which appears thoroughly Georgian, boasts in reality nothing more than a Georgian veneer over a perfectly honest timber frame. A more thorough-going transformation may be seen in Salisbury, where the brick face is given stone dressings and a brick-tile side wall.

For simple honesty it would be difficult to emulate a particular false front in brick which stand in Watchbell Street, Rye (Fig. 10). There are many of these façades in nine inch brickwork which are precariously posed before a light timber framework. For daring of construction they are unequalled in vernacular architecture; it is extremely difficult to discover any effective ties between these fronts and the structure of the house behind.

Most of the material in this brief review of frontal treatments in minor domestic architecture is based on practice in the southern half of England. It might, therefore, be of interest to turn northwards, and note what comparable practices were in vogue. In general it is safe to say that the standard of architectural honesty is very much higher, and little or no attempt is made to follow fashion around the clock. The timber-framed house in the North does not show the wide variety of treatment of the South; in general the heavy timber frame does not develop into a light skeleton, but gives way to either brick or stone construction. The frame itself appears always to have been exposed, although, in common with all other walling materials, traditional usage may have been followed in the application of coats of lime-wash. Infilling panels, consisting of wattle and daub, were often replaced by brickwork, when deterioration made this necessary, and any changes which took place, sometimes obscuring the original construction, were dictated primarily by necessity and not by taste.

The principal front of a house was naturally afforded greater attention, and this is seen not only in door and window details, but also in the wall itself. In brick building the front elevation is usually in Flemish bond, sometimes with yellow headers, and the other three elevations in some form of English bond—if a bond should be at all recognisable. This is but a modest concession to fashion. Stonework shows a similarly slight differentiation, with front walls of smooth, carefully bedded ashlar, while side and rear walls might be of squared or even random rubble. The jointing material, particularly in the case of rubble walling, was often a mixture of clay and straw. There are, of course, innumerable houses throughout the country whose outside appearance gives no clue whatsoever to their internal arrangement and construction. These are houses which have been altered or rebuilt to provide new standards of accommodation or to overcome the effects of time and decay in materials. These are in a different category to those hitherto considered, because the changes effected have arisen through the play of circumstances other than fashion.

One major circumstance has been the deterioration of timber, and solid load-bearing walls of brick or stone have often been added in support of weakened timber members. Where these are outside walls, there is of course an immediate change of appearance. A second major circumstance has been the extension of accommodation, particularly upwards.



FIG. 7
SALISBURY : New Canal.
Special angle tie.



FIG. 8
HYTHE.
Brick-tiles side-hung to form arch.

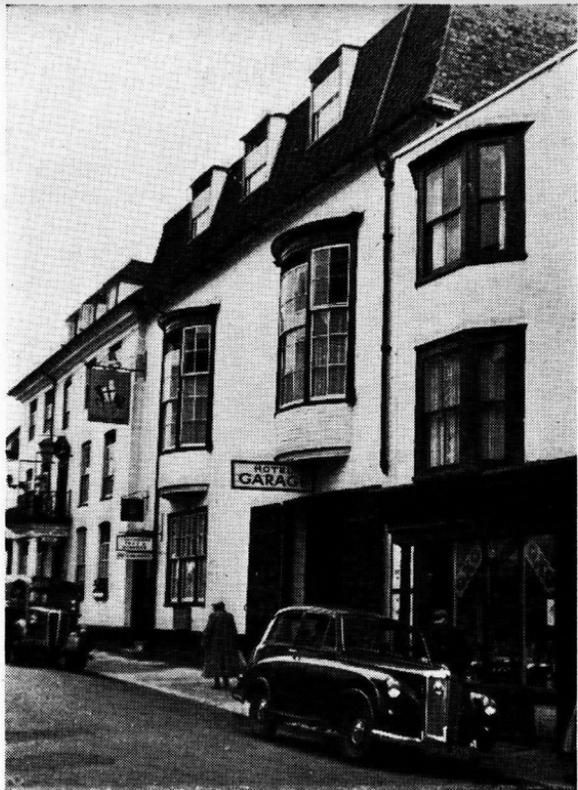


FIG. 9
RYE.
George Hotel.



FIG. 10
RYE.
Watchbell Street.

Many houses originally built with only a loft over the ground-floor rooms have had the front wall lifted up to accommodate windows and greater head-room. This also has resulted in external modifications which tend to obscure the original construction. This is particularly true in the case of cruck-frame houses, and if the external work is carried out in brick, there is then no indication of the cruck-frame itself.

These are but two instances where the original form might be obscured by subsequent change, but they do not, of course, savour of pretence. The truly false front has little to do with utility or convenience; it is essentially a fashionable charm—sometimes ostentatious, often entertaining.

For much of the detailed information on brick-tile practice, and for the photographs of No. 47, Winchester Street, Salisbury, the writer is indebted to the kindness of Professor R. A. Cordingley.

BOOK REVIEWS

The English Cathedrals by John Harvey. Batsford. Second Edition, revised and re-illustrated, 1956. 25/-.

In the vast body of literature which has been inspired by the cathedrals of England, Mr. Harvey's work has long been recognised as one of the best books on this subject. First published in 1950, the book was originally intended simply as a folio of plates by Mr. Herbert Felton, with an accompanying text. As it was not possible at that time to reproduce the photographs on the scale originally envisaged, Mr. Harvey's contribution was developed to share at least an equal part with the very fine illustrations.

Changed conditions have now permitted Mr. Felton's collection of photographs to be properly published in *A Portrait of English Cathedrals*, and *The English Cathedrals* has now reappeared, re-illustrated and with Mr. Harvey's text enlarged and amended. It is always a pleasure to read a new work by Mr. Harvey, for his ability to combine the most careful scholarship and research with a pleasant readability. As the principal authority on the builders of the medieval cathedrals, the author has used his intimate understanding of medieval architects and craftsmen to give life to his subject. The volume follows a historical survey of cathedral building, now enlarged to include the results of recent researches by the author, and includes a section devoted to historical and descriptive notes on each cathedral, again considerably increased in significance from the original edition, whilst a glossary has been added. The production of the volume is up to the best Batsford tradition, with 50 pages of plates and many plans and illustrations in the text. This is not simply the second edition of an important work, but a new and major addition to the literature of the English cathedral.

R.B.W.-J.