

HISTORIC CHAPEL STREET

A personal examination of the street by [Ashley Barker OBE, FSA](#). October 2000.

Topography and Character

It is no exaggeration to say that Chapel Street is one of the most agreeable streets of its kind to be found anywhere in the country. It contains some 50 buildings listed as being of special architectural or historic interest, four of which are included in the relatively rare category of grade II*, and one - The Egyptian House - is listed grade I. All of these listed buildings are individually designated as being of special Group Value for the part which they play in establishing the character of the street as a whole.

Chapel Street attracts favourable notice in virtually all relevant guide-books and, more remarkably, gets a star to itself in the red Michelin Guide. Yet the street is neither grand nor formal and with one or two exceptions its buildings are unlikely to figure in volumes of architectural history. It is in its subtle, lively variety of building-forms and uses, grouped closely between the dome of the Market House and tower of St Mary's church that the character of the street is established. This architectural grouping is informal but strongly cohesive, to a degree that deserves careful analysis.

The street-character depends on a number of related factors:

- on the alignment of the street frontages, following the falling contours of the land towards the church and then more sharply on to the quay - and on the way in which changing views are revealed in sequence to the observer on passing up and down the street.
- on the variety of uses in the buildings as they have developed over many years and the quality of their occupation.
- on the architectural vocabulary and grammar and on the materials of the individual components of the street.

and in particular

- on the 'hierarchy' and disposition of the different classes of building - church, chapel, hotels, shops, major houses and substantial cottages - grouped about St Mary's church, which is the visual lynch-pin of the street.

In fact the character of the street continues to depend critically on the present-day uses and occupancy of the buildings. As with any street of this kind Chapel Street is not a museum-piece but a living expression of the quality and success of the life which goes on in it.

Dates & development

I am not aware of any detailed study of the history of the street and I do not know how much documentary evidence exists. It is clear that the dates given in the statutory list are no more than roughly indicative [although I have repeated them without change in this document] and it may be particularly difficult to differentiate between late 18th century and early 19th century by inspection alone. The matter may be further confused by the re-fronting of buildings. [For example it is said that the Turk's Head Public House retains structures of greater antiquity than its street frontage reveals to the passer-by.]

However, it is clear that the character which Chapel Street possesses today was established progressively through the 18th and early 19th centuries, with most of the present structures dating from the later part of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th. By the time the Methodist Chapel was enlarged and made more splendid in 1864 the street had already taken the form which we recognize today. Photographs, maps and engravings from the last quarter of the 19th century confirm this.

Only one substantial change occurred within the main length of the street south of Queen Square between 1864 and the First World War. That was at Nos 12/13 where the 3-gabled building which is now occupied by a wine bar and restaurant replaced two low two-storied cottages of the kind which still exist further down the street. The rebuilding must have occurred about 100 years ago and nothing else that could be described as major rebuilding or other material change took place during the rest of the 20th century. This is a remarkable record amongst British streets of its kind.

[No's 1, 55, 64, and 65 are also buildings of circa 1900 but they do not affect the main sequence of frontages.]

Occupancy

The street seems to have had a long-standing reputation as the centre of social life in Penzance and as a good address for the socially ambitious. The hotels, the one-time theatre, and the music room provided the core of cultural life in the town before the days of the railway. These 'social' buildings were grouped around the upper end of the street, while a mixture of large and more modest houses attracted a good standard of domestic life around St Mary's church. The great size of the largest of

the houses - many now divided - is a matter for particular remark.

The notes made by J.S.Courtney between 1825 and 1875 and edited by his daughter say of Chapel Street:

"Chapel Street (the best street on the south), described in old deeds under the name of Our Lady Street, as leading to the chapel of St Mary, was for many years the best street in the town, and even when I came to Penzance [ie in 1825] might be described as the court end."

This reputation, once established, has held more or less firm up to the present day. While its description as the 'court end' would sound fanciful today it still represents the best that Penzance has to offer. The physical attractiveness of the street, its central location and its ability to attract business, social and domestic life has always been directly related.

Architecture and Materials

The notes which follow in the account of a street perambulation are based, for the most part, on an examination of the buildings from the street only; but the picture which emerges from such inspection, plus a few old photographs and very fragmentary published sources, is one of increasing prosperity through the second half of the 18th century to reach a peak of well-being reflected in street architecture up to the middle of the 19th century. In the course of the resulting 'improvements' during those years relatively modest granite houses, seldom more than two storeys in height were progressively replaced with larger, taller and grander ones. But even the early 18th century is represented in Chapel Street by at least one tall, grand house at No 24 [now the Vicarage] finely built of squared and coursed granite with a slate roof. This house, which once had its front door facing Chapel Street probably dates from the first decade of the 18th century and has fine interiors. There may be even earlier structures still extant in the street- as for example at the Turk's Head which is said to embody earlier fabric - but, as is common in such streets they may be covered by later re-facings.

Granite and slate were, of course the natural local materials. Good facades were of squared and coursed granite or even fine ashlar for the best quality structures. Granite rubble was used for general carcasings, with large stones, roughly dressed, for lintols and quoins. There was a reluctance to allow such work to appear on the face of a good house, at least in towns, and the next generation of big houses in Chapel Street, dating from the mid to late eighteenth century, shows a remarkable use of brick as the facing material of fashionable choice.

When brick was used it was nearly always set on a coursed granite base carried to a height of two or three feet above the pavement and bounded by granite quoins at the angles of the structure. The quoins could be flush with the brick face as at No 19/20 or projecting and perhaps chamfered as at No 16. Party walls and other parts of the masonry carcass were normally of granite, so that brick was treated as the precious material reserved for special show and what is first seen is a brick house is usually of granite with a panel of brick for the fashionable 'show front'.

It would be good to know more about the choice of bricks available and the economics of brick facework as against granite ashlar in the late 18th century. Brick is relatively rare in Cornwall and transport costs must have been high. According to Alec Clifton Taylor [The Pattern of English Building] there is no known example of brick in Cornwall earlier than that at Ince Castle near Saltash which dates from the 1620s and where bricks were brought by sea. There are subsequently references to small kilns scattered throughout Cornwall, mostly working deposits of clay and weathered material on the surface, and there is said to have been a brick-works at Marazion at some time in the 19th century. However it would seem likely that bricks of good quality for facings were always brought by sea and this must certainly have been the case for the grand 18th century houses of Chapel Street.

Of course the very rarity of the material must have caused it to be seen as desirable, particularly when it was the material of choice in great cities such as London or Bristol, which were the leaders of architectural fashion. In this connection G.B. Millett [Penzance Past and Present 1876] wrote:

"In Chapel Street it is noticeable that many of the older houses are faced with brick, for at a certain period in our architectural history such vulgar material as granite was preserved for the backs. There were, not long ago, several houses in the town whose granite fronts had been painted to represent brickwork."

Most of the brickwork in Chapel Street has by now been painted, which makes the study of brick all the more difficult, but the view that it was treated as especially suitable for high-class work is supported by the unpainted brickwork at No's 10 and 14 where the Flemish bond is patterned with purple headers for decorative effect. Even more remarkable is the employment at No 19/20 [once one huge house] of header bond. Header bond is a great rarity and may be regarded as suitable for the wealthiest building-owner. It occurs for example at No 13 St James's Square W1. Alec Clifton-Taylor said of header bond that it is "...rare on account of cost, so one always comes with pleasure upon a wall of headers."

Amongst the major brick-faced houses in Chapel Street are No's 10, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19/20 and 45.-all of late 18th century date.

But by the beginning of 19th century, when the fashionable cities up-country had turned to stucco as the fashionable facing, brick seems to have lost its appeal in Penzance, so that the choice then lay between the very expensive granite ashlar for the best class of work, or, more usually granite rubble stuccoed.

Roughly squared granite in small stones and set in rough courses looks appropriate enough in the warehouse in Dock Lane [photograph 45], but such work would seldom be tolerated in a more 'polite' domestic setting.

Some small, but particularly refined, houses at the Quay end of the street such as No's 30 to 32, Chapel Street, have granite ashlar, beautifully worked, as did the particularly grand house at No38 built in 1835. At this latter building granite is employed, regardless of labours and expense, in a full Greek Revival architectural display, with its Greek Doric Porch and sets of mouldings. Granite ashlar and a more modest Roman Doric porch occur in yet another very large house at No 47, now difficult to appreciate because of alterations. As previously remarked, some of the Chapel Street houses of the Georgian and William IV periods are astonishingly large for street houses and their owners must have been ready to spend lavishly.

But other big and showy buildings, like the Union Hotel and some of its neighbours at the upper end, chose the obvious option of stucco which gave a good effect more cheaply. The surface of the stucco was ruled with incised lines to represent ashlar joints and the work would no doubt have been decorated in some semblance of stone following up-country fashions. It seems likely that fashion would have dictated a Bath stone colouration rather than any attempt to represent local granite - which would have been impractical and in any case would have seemed less desirable. The ashlar lines are soon obscured by redecoration if steps are not taken to maintain the appearance, but they show clearly in places, such as the upper part at No 56/57.

In a few places in Penzance [none of them in Chapel Street] the stucco rendering has been removed from a house front to reveal the nature of the walling which was never intended to be seen. It is commonly composed of granite rubble - uncoursed - with large pieces of granite for lintols, jambs and to form the angles of the structure. Small amounts of poor place-brick could be used to turn an arch over a front-door or even to form a soldier-arch over a narrow window opening. Such bricks may have come from a brickyard like the one mentioned at Marazion.

The roofs of Chapel Street are of Cornish slate in small sizes, scantle or rag, which makes for very attractive lichened roofs, but the narrow width of the street means that they are comparatively little seen on the taller buildings. There has never been any sensible alternative to slate for roofs.

The narrow pavements were generally of fine granite slabs which wear and weather wonderfully well. There are extensive survivals of these pavements in Chapel Street.

There are some very good cast-iron railings, with extended ranges to the Methodist Chapel and to St Mary's Church, as well as those protecting the narrow basement area at No 38.

The Egyptian House

Requiring special note and worthy in its own right of independent pilgrimage is the Egyptian House at Nos. 6/7, the only grade 1 building in the street built in 1835/1836 to house a private geological collection. This facade is of national importance in the history of 19th century Egyptian Revival architecture and bears a close stylistic relationship to the one-time Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly.

The designer may have been John Foulston of Plymouth. The street front is of three substantial stories and three bays wide, composed in the form of an Egyptian temple pylon with remarkably well considered detail - Egyptian roll and gorge mouldings, battered openings, lotus-bud capitals flanking the doorway etc. It also incorporates the Royal Arms of William IV with supporters.

The whole is done with conviction & brio and gives much to enjoy. It is now owned by the Landmark Trust as holiday flats above two shops and is maintained in splendid decorative order.

CHAPEL STREET TODAY

There is a distinction to be drawn between Chapel Street and its approaches. While Chapel Street itself has been generally fortunate with its historic architecture its approaches have not survived nearly as well. I shall therefore deal with Chapel Street proper first, before coming to look at Market Place, Queen Square and Quay Street.

There has been no major rebuilding or redevelopment in Chapel Street since No 12 went up a hundred years ago - and if we except No 12 - nothing much since the Methodist Chapel was extended in 1864.

This must be something of a record amongst town streets of any comparable kind. Moreover the street has so far been lucky in its ability to attract the right users to its shops, pubs and hotels and inhabitants to its houses. Standards of occupancy and maintenance have been fairly good and most visitors would agree that the street is very agreeable and a very lively place. It has so far avoided the stultifying effect which sometimes comes from self-conscious 'conservation' and has nothing of the 'museum' about it. In its old buildings and its overall topographical form it is a street of immense charm.

Its future will depend on its continuing to attract the best uses and users as well as the right sort of visitors.

Where the street sometimes fails to please this is due largely to slipping attitudes to building maintenance and through a failure on the part of those responsible to see how a building was intended to look. The tendency has been all too often to knock off a defective part rather than repair it. This has gone hand in hand with the failure of skills and traditions in the building trades so that the builder is no longer able to offer his client the 'right job' as he would have done in the past.

There are, therefore, some things in the street which might make it yet better, and I have noted these points at the end of the itinerary which follows. I have simply set them down as personal reactions without regard to practicability and no criticism of any building owner is intended in any way!