

Joinery and other details

By John Scott RIBA and Stephen Bradley RIBA

Introduction and design history

The purpose of this technical note is to help those involved in works to the houses of Bedford Park to understand the features that give them their special character and architectural value. The overall conservation intent of these guidance notes is to assist sensitive analysis and decision, not to prescribe a single solution. There is often a case for more than one design detail to be appropriate in each circumstance.

At first sight, the design and construction of Bedford Park houses appears to follow a consistent pattern. This is misleading, and the subtleties of each situation need to be appreciated if the architectural integrity of the houses is not to be eroded by incorrect repair, replacement or new construction using inappropriate materials and details. There were original differences even between houses of the same type. That said, the design and construction of the houses in the Bedford Park conservation area as a whole consists of a restricted range of materials, forms and details against which the appropriateness of repair, replacement or new construction can be evaluated.

A very substantial body of relevant knowledge has been amassed in Bedford Park and it is the intent of this work to make it accessible to all of those involved in the maintenance and modernisation of the individual houses. In this way intelligent and sympathetic interventions can be made that preserve and enhance rather than damage our shared heritage.

Some appreciation of how the houses were designed and built over a period of several years will be helpful in understanding the variation in detail. With few exceptions, the architects involved in the development of Bedford Park were not engaged to supervise the construction of the houses. The architects – Norman Shaw et al – determined

overall design intentions and nature of details but as there were a number of builders involved over a period of years, the implementation of designs, and (to a large extent) the detailed constructional decisions were left in the hands of the building contractors. Consequently, when replacing lost features or constructing new ones, care must be taken to research details from an appropriate example.

The following notes will give some pointers to the main issues to be considered, the most commonly successful techniques, appropriate detailing and sourcing of materials. It is recommended that the appropriateness of details proposed should be discussed with the local authority Conservation Officer and ideally one of the local expert architects prior to finalising an application for listed building consent or planning permission, and prior to placing orders for any work.

Details and moulding profiles

All details and mouldings are important to the character of the house, and all replacements should be carefully matched to originals. Some details appear consistently throughout the estate, others vary from house to house, from street to street or between groups of houses. It is important to find the correct source for identifying authentic joinery details. If precedent for a detail does not survive in the house in question, it should be sought from adjoining houses, taking care to establish that the “source” house generally shares design details with the house being worked on. It can be safely assumed that houses clearly built together (pairs of semi’s, terraces) would have originally shared internal details, but over time many individual changes have been made.

Modern standard timber mouldings (architraves, skirtings, etc.) are almost invariably incorrect and inappropriate for Bedford Park houses. Modern

supplies are based on metric dimensions and profiles suitable for mass production. However there are a number of specialist firms that still produce standard 'Victorian' mouldings at reasonable cost, which may match the mouldings of your house. (For more information see the Bedford Park Society list of suppliers.)

Purpose-made mouldings are not expensive but sometimes take time to produce. Wherever possible a pattern sample should be provided for the joiner or timber merchant to work from. *This is not an expensive or difficult process. A small amount of effort and marginal cost, particularly if planned at an early stage, will produce high value for money in retaining the character and integrity of the house.*

Materials

In virtually every case the internal and external joinery of Bedford Park houses was constructed in softwood (imported pine). In the 19th century this was of a superior quality to that available today and much more durable. It was invariably painted, and we know from contemporary commentary that the external joinery was painted white. Replacement of external joinery in appropriate hardwood or high-grade softwood should be considered as a sensible investment rewarded by lower whole-life cost.

INTERIOR JOINERY AND DETAILS

Overall interior design principles

Following "aesthetic" fashion, contemporary principal reception rooms would either have had a picture rail or plate rail bounding a deep frieze along the top of the walls, with a deep skirting but no dado to avoid breaking up the wall surface against which furniture was placed. However, more conventional mid-Victorian interiors (and this applies to many of the Bedford Park houses) would have had a dado with a shallower skirting and optional picture rail and frieze. Many hallways and stairways will have had a dado but no picture rail.

Decorative wall panelling would not have been frequent in the relatively modest houses of Bedford Park. Staircase elements all follow normal Victorian constructional practice. Cornices were usual in hallways and ground floor reception rooms but application to first floors varies and they almost never appear in attic floors. Cornices even in principal rooms are simple. Decorative plaster ceiling centres were normally avoided in Bedford Park. Fireplaces are typically the only element with significant applied detail. Addition of other enriching detail to these interiors is contrary to the

spirit and intentions of Bedford Park and should therefore be resisted.

Hierarchy of detail

In most but not all houses there is a hierarchy of detail from the important rooms (in most cases the front and middle ground floor rooms) to the least important (normally the scullery rear extension and the attic floor bedrooms. This is most significant between reception rooms and those that fell into the servants' domain. This hierarchy should be noted and the appropriate details followed consistently.

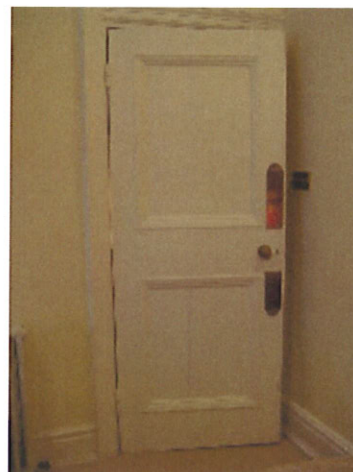
The hierarchy of rooms has often changed since the 1880's, and there is a temptation to upgrade the detail in some such cases. This should be resisted, and the original relevant patterns followed as closely as possible, in order to avoid progressive dilution of the integrity of the house.

Typical examples of detail hierarchies are:

Skirtings: The commonest hierarchy of details is a difference in skirting boards between reception rooms, hallways, bedrooms and servant rooms. There was a characteristic 2-part skirting used in Bedford Park and examples should be retained wherever possible.

Doors: 2-panelled doors with heavy 'bolection' mouldings to the ground floor reception rooms are a special characteristic of Bedford Park, 4 panelled doors with 'ogee' panel moulds to the first floor bedrooms, 4 panelled doors with no panel mouldings to attic rooms and kitchen/scullery areas. In these cases the kitchen door from the hall often has panel mouldings on the hall side only.

Architraves: Large architraves to ground floor doors, sometimes with projecting offsets to top corners. Smaller (or same but not offset) to first floor, smaller still to the attics etc.



An original Bedford Park ground floor drawing room door



An original first floor bedroom door

Staircase balustrades

Staircase balustrades should always be regarded as of fundamental architectural importance and should be preserved carefully. They were intended to be painted. Where there is any doubt of originality refer to the Bedford Park Society for advice on a suitable "source house" for appropriate details for replacement work.



A typical Bedford Park staircase balustrade

Fitted furniture

The planning authorities are concerned to retain original fittings such as cupboards and dressers. These are usually identifiable through consistency of detail with the other original joinery and construction. The rare survival of fittings such as pantries, panelling, servant bells etc is to be cherished, as are door furniture items such as handles, catches, latches and finger plates.

Caution: paint stripping

Original paints are likely to contain lead, so the on-site stripping of paint can have health and safety implications. The removal of items for stripping offsite by 'dipping' in caustic liquid can be appropriate in the case of single sections of timber, which can be removed and re-fixed without damage (stair spindles, architrave sections etc).

However, the caustic dipping of doors and joinery assemblies can lead to serious problems. The stripper attacks the glues used in traditional joinery construction, and the process of dipping and drying causes swelling and shrinking of the timber which can cause cracking, warping and in extreme cases disintegration. It is therefore inadvisable.

FLOORS

Upper floors are normally in softwood boards of normal type, and this sometimes prevails throughout the house. There is however a type of floor of *narrow pitch-pine boards* common in the ground floors of Bedford Park houses which is unusual in its construction and uniquely challenging.

These floors are constructed with a STEEL strip or 'tongue' between the boards. This is impossible to cut without damaging the boards, and any attempt to lift the boards usually results in irreparable damage. Consequently such floors should be left undisturbed wherever possible and only worked on by a skilled operative who knows the construction.

Often the void below the floor is adequate for a small electrician or plumber to crawl into, and can be accessed via a hatch in the understair cupboard or other discreet position. In this case it is preferable for all necessary services to be installed without disrupting the floor at all.

If it is necessary to repair a pitch pine boarded floor suitable material can now only be obtained from reclaimed sources, as new timber is never a good match for colour or grain. Considerable skill may be required for the finisher/polisher to colour match such repairs in any case.

Less common are *parquet* floors, where thin hardwood strips are laid over softwood boards. These commonly have a herringbone pattern with a decorative edging. Repairs should only be attempted by a specialist, and in this situation, as with the pitch pine floors above, it is preferable to avoid any disruption entirely.

EXTERIOR JOINERY

Like the interior joinery, the detailing of the exterior of the houses varies from house to house, although there is a consistent theme between those of the same house type. The comments as to selection of the correct source for missing details *apply equally to the exterior as the interior.*

All replacement external joinery should be purpose made, as no 'off the shelf' fittings will be of suitable detail and construction. Whilst the originals were invariably in softwood, the reduced quality of modern softwood makes it appropriate to replace with hardwood suitable for painting, or durable semi-hardwood at least.

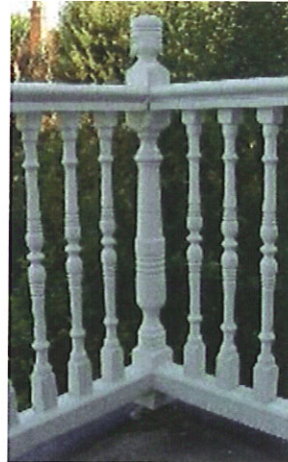
Windows

Casements and double-hung sashes feature in approximately equal numbers around Bedford Park, and both are frequently used on the same house. In many cases of repair it is possible to salvage the frame, with repairs and perhaps partial replacement, even when the casements or sashes are in need of replacement. This is not only less disruptive but it also often results in a better job as the quality of the original timber is normally higher than that available for replacement.

When replacing components great care should be taken to match the appropriate details, and no assumptions should be made that they follow conventional Victorian practice. In particular, the shape of the 'horns' on sashes should be noted. It is particularly necessary to research whether the window being replaced is a suitable model to follow. In several cases, inappropriate replacements will have been made and a good "source" house should therefore be selected as a guide to details. Here again the advice of the Society and local architects will be helpful.

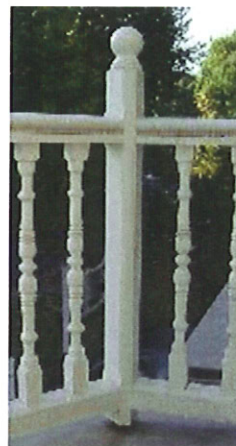
External Balustrades

The turned timber balustrades to balconies and terraces are one of the most distinctive features of Bedford Park. As a general rule these were relatively well standardised in detail around Bedford Park. Variations in detail are largely the exceptions to a rule of standardisation and have mainly arisen through careless replacement. Balustrades on angled bays have different newels to rectilinear rear balustrades.



A typical rear balustrade that has been "stretched to comply with Building Regulations. The newel post is kept clear of the asphalt roof finish on a specially made galvanised steel base.

If an original balustrade exists, it should be verified against a suitable "source" house and the detailing should be replicated. If however there is no such precedent it is almost invariably appropriate to use the 'standard' design for newels, balusters and handrails. In some cases the height may have to be adjusted to suit individual cases and contemporary regulations. The 'standard' details can be obtained from local architects or by copying from "source" houses with guidance from the Bedford Park Society.



A typical front balustrade on an angled bay. The tapered newel post at the 45degree corner is kept clear of the roof finish on a metal dowel.

It is a false economy to use standard softwood and suitable hardwood or highest quality imported softwood and high quality preparation and painting should be insisted upon. Particular attention should be made to protection of the timber from permanent dampness through contact with roof and walls.

Special houses

There are a small number of houses in Bedford Park that vary from the prevailing norms, and these are either one-off designs or houses which were modified during construction for individual customers. Most of these are detached houses in the western part of Bedford Park. In these cases the nature and subtleties of the joinery is of greater significance, and especial care must be taken in its alteration or repair, with the house itself being the only truly satisfactory source for details.

Illustrative examples are:

3 Newton Grove

A modified version of a standard Norman Shaw detached house, known to have been completed for a specific occupier with modifications to plan and details. The internal joinery is slightly richer in detail than is usual, and includes rare examples of 'pocket' sliding doors and bracketed oriel windows.

7 Queen Annes Grove

Another modified version of the same design, but this one is PLAINER than normal. External brickwork is stripped of detail, and internal joinery is rigorously simple with ALL of the 4 panelled doors being plain without mouldings to first floor as well as attic.

54 Woodstock Road

Again modified from the same design. The internal joinery is richer still in detail than 3 Newton Grove, with bracketed plate shelves to ground floor hall and reception rooms and other individual features. In this case the enrichment may be the result of later alterations.

This note draws on the knowledge amassed about Bedford Park houses by local expert practitioners and members of the Bedford Park Society, as well as accepted good conservation practice in building construction. They have been discussed and agreed with the Conservation Officers of the boroughs of Hounslow and Ealing. Whilst every care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the contents of these technical notes, no responsibility or liability for any loss occasioned to any person acting or refraining from action in reliance upon any statement in the technical notes will be accepted by the Bedford Park Society, any of its officers or members, or any contributors to the technical notes