

‘A French puzzle in Lee’

Until a few months ago I lived on the other side of Blackheath and my clearest visual recollection of Lee Manor Conservation Area was the curious group of “*frenchified*” houses in Micheldever Road.

Since last June, living in the heart of the area, I have been more than ever struck by this odd outbreak of Francophilia in what is otherwise so very typically a late Victorian and Edwardian suburb.

For once the local history collections are no help for there are no papers or other records relating specifically to this group of houses, although there are photographs of their most distinctive internal feature: the moveable partition that can be raised or lowered rather like a portcullis to divide the main through room on the ground floor.

Whilst this homage to the domestic styles of northern France may be rare in south-east London, there are precedents dating from earlier in the Victorian era, especially in relation to the handsome scale of these houses. As H. J. Dyos revealed in his study of Camberwell, one can identify the different levels of social class from the types of tree that were planted on the streets of the emergent suburban way of life. Limes and horse chestnuts were the mark of roads lived in by the well-to-do, acacias and laburnums were for those of middle incomes and bare pavements were for the working class however heightened were their social aspirations.

We find the first serious outbreaks in London of the sort of bastardised French Renaissance that led to Micheldever Road in 1860. The Grosvenor Hotel by Victoria Station, and Grosvenor Gardens and Place, display a multitude of pavilion roofs, mansards and dormers, seemingly barbaric relics of an imperfect memory following a whistle-stop tour of the Loire chateaux. The architect James Knowles Junior practised for these with “The Cedars”, a pair of identical five-storey blocks completed in 1860 on the north side of Clapham Common. For all their quasi-French skyline, the detailing is decidedly crude, wholly tasteless and grossly un-French, as were later terraces in Mayfair and Maida Vale.

The fondness for French chateaux became a country house craze: Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild imported it authentically, if incongruously, to Buckinghamshire in 1874 in the shape of Waddesdon Manor, the achievement of Parisian architect Hippolyte Destailleur. It was a style that suffered a heavy casualty rate: Normanhurst in Sussex (1867 by Habershon, Brock and Webb) was demolished in 1951; Newnham Paddox, Warwickshire (T. H. Wyatt 1875) was pulled down in 1952; And St. Leonards Hill, Berkshire (C. H. Howell 1875) has long been a ruin. One that does survive is the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle, Durham, designed by J. E. Watson in 1869. North of the border it became “Scottish Baronial” which, as R. Furneaux Jordan remarked, “satisfied starved minds hungry for romance.”

The line to Micheldever Road is stylistically clear though not so frequently trodden as authentic stone gave way to

humbler brick. As the new suburbs were built for the parvenu merchants, manufacturers, bankers and brokers, so the better houses had to be a little bit different. On one hand was the fight against urban squalor and the reaction against “sham” Regency stucco. On the other was the inevitable result: a headlong descent into “revivals” and an ever coarsening stylistic vulgarity. There was still-mercifully- a long way to go before the sordid excesses of stockbrokers’ Tudor. So the Micheldever Road houses are anything but dreary: indeed they are refreshingly unconventional for their time, a cross between a provincial French town hall and the more prosperous housing of northern France or the Brussels suburbs. It is no co-incidence to find that a major housebuilder of the time, W. G. Tarrant Sons and Co., was of Byfleet AND CALAIS.

The continuity of these fascinating houses is important in itself: they have survived remarkably unscathed with slated pavilion roofs and dormers. They are not “listable” by the current criteria of the Department of the Environment. Being in a Conservation Area protects them from the worst of the home “improvements” industry, but one wonders whether the local authority should act more positively. Conservation Areas should be subject to development policy guidelines which actively seek not only to enhance but also to control alterations by means of “Directions” scheduling features for the purpose of retention and eventually, one hopes, for the availability of grant aid for repair and restoration.