

MAURICE LINDSAY

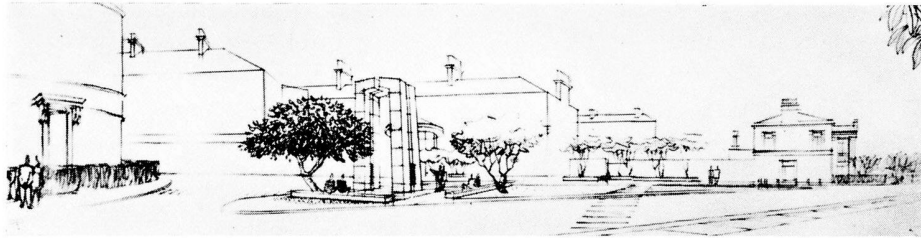
THE FABRIC OF HERITAGE



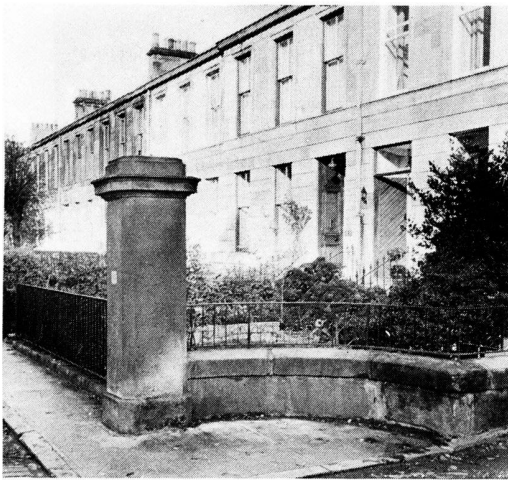
Glasgow District Council's Chief Planner, David Ross, with Mike Stanger, Chairman of the Strathbungo Society

Below left: An artist's sketch of the proposed monument to "Greek" Thomson to mark the centenary of his death. Unfortunately money is not at present available for its construction

Below: Finely incised detail by "Greek" Thomson, even on the chimney pots



STRATHBUNGO GLASGOW



Regent Park Square still possessing one of its gateposts

OF THE fifteen Conservation Areas so far designated in Glasgow, Strathbungo and Pollokshields are the only ones to have been planned as residential entities. Unfortunately, like so many idealistic schemes, while the shape of the Strathbungo development was retained, the man who conceived it, Glasgow's second most distinguished architect, Alexander "Greek" Thomson (1817-1875) was only able to complete one terrace, although through his office, after his death, his influence extends to some other nearby buildings.

In 1859, Thomson was living in Darnley Road. To the south lay green fields, once marshily indented, but no doubt drained by the recent construction of the Barrhead railway line. The name of the area, Strathbungo, in all probability means the marshy valley. To the north of the railway was a brickworks.

Thomson planned to transform these fields into six squares of fine terraces. Nos. 1-10 Moray Place was put up to his plans, and elegant indeed this terrace is. Each house had a dining-room, a morning-room and a kitchen downstairs, whilst upstairs, there was a drawing-room and two bedrooms. It is thus believed that they were intended for bachelors, Victorian family houses requiring much more accommodation. Thomson himself, indeed, was the seventeenth of a family of twenty.

Strathbungo, described by Lord Esher in his "Conservation in Glasgow: A Preliminary Report", as "the gem, Pollokshields the borderline case" was seriously threatened until recently by proposals to locate the South Link Motorway through it, a proposal finally abandoned in January 1976. As so often when long-term grandiose plans of this sort are mooted, planning blight settles upon an area. While the threat lasted building societies refused to lend even on Nos. 1-10 Moray Place, an A listed terrace. Happily, with the threat lifted, this problem no longer exists.

Although Thomson's Great Western Terrace is now generally regarded as the most impressive of his domestic ranges, an outstanding authority on Victorian architecture, Professor H. R. Hitchcock, has described Moray Place as "the finest of all Greek terraces". This had led some writers to question what exactly is Greek in the design and construction. While

the pediments, standing above an entablature resting on four giant pillars, are, in a sense Greek, the columns providing the square stone mullions on the upper floor are not Greek; indeed, their squareness is peculiarly un-Greek. The fact is that Thomson owed as much to oriental and Egyptian sources – the late J. M. Reid went so far as to say "Old Testament sources!" – as to Greek, much of the decorative work, finely incised, bearing this out. But whatever its influences, as with all the great Victorian architects, the influences of the past were assimilated by Thomson to produce his own original, if sometimes eclectic, style. Its sense of balance, its satisfying proportion and the beauty of its detail make 1-10 Moray Place outstanding by any standards.

According to tradition, his brother, George, objected to the amount of time and money expended on Nos. 1-10. Consequently, the next part of Moray Place, Nos. 11-18, while still coolly nodding to Thomson's design concept, has an upper storey without columns and a plain facade. It also lacks any comparable incised detail. The third section, Nos. 19-26, with its two massive pavilion windows at either end, abandons all Greek pretensions, although its elevation and overall proportions remain in harmony. Though his scheme was not to be completed to his own designs, Thomson himself occupied No. 1 Moray Place for the last fifteen years of his life.

Of the other planned streets in the Conservation Area, not built to Thomson's design, Queen Square, put up between 1864 and 69, is plain classical. The gateposts which used to seal off the whole area at night still survive on Queen Square, although unfortunately the gas lamps which once topped them have gone. Marywood Square (originally named Prince Square) still has its original lamp posts, but also has a large number of guest houses. Regent Park Square, most severely classical, went up between 1861 and 1866. It once housed William Mackintosh, the father of the famous architect, and his family. Charles Rennie Mackintosh himself moved to No. 27 Regent Park Square in 1896, where his father gave him a room in the basement. According to T. M. Howarth, in his "C. R. Mackintosh and The Modern Movement", it seems that "Toshie" took a dislike to the fireplace in this



The Beaverbrook damage at the Pollockshaws Road boundary of the Conservation Area

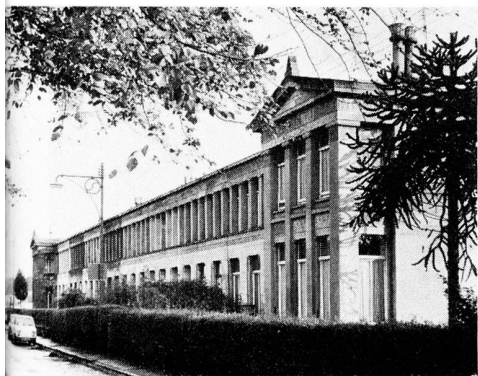


A handsome tenement on Pollokshaws Road from Queenspark

Below left: 1-10 Moray Place. "Greek" Thomson lived at the far end

Centre: Moray Place, Nos. 19-26, built when the recent fashion for oriel windows had extended here to end pavilions

Right: The magnificent curved tenement on Nithsdale Road with, in the foreground, a building once the first commercial garage in Glasgow



room and proceeded to dismantle it, to his father's horror, uncovering a simple cottage type hob-grate with wrought iron bars and a plain surround, which, it has been suggested became a model for some of his later designs. He then covered the walls of the room with coarse brown wrapping paper, adding a stencilled frieze.

Apart from this corner, and the handsome 1860-ish tenement blocks on Pollokshaws Road, four in all, facing Queen's Park pond, most of the rest of the area was built at the end of the '20s and early '30s. The red sandstone houses, though solidly constructed and well maintained, are not of any architectural distinction, but are included in the Conservation Area to mark out the limits of the original planned conception. There are those who feel that the Conservation Area should be confined to the Victorian sector, since the 20th century part of it is in no real need of protection. What does seem important, however, is that the handsome building on the corner of Nithsdale Street/Nithsdale Drive by Thomson and his partner in final years and later successor Robert Turnbull – a splendidly decorated curving tenement block in Thomson's most ebullient manner – should be included whatever decision is ultimately taken with regard to the newer properties.

Since 1971, the amenity interests of the area have been looked after by the Strathbungo Society. Even before the threat of the motorway, the area had begun to go downhill, a matter of regret to those who valued its architecture. Many of the houses in the older parts became guest houses, or fell into multi-ownership. Nos. 27-32 Moray Place, for instance at present contain the Consort Hotel.

This section is most in need of environmental attention. If the ultimate fate of these houses is to merge into a single hotel, then a restoration job similar to that so well carried out by Mr. Reo Stakis on half of Grosvenor Crescent in the Glasgow West Conservation Area should be envisaged.

Chairman of the Strathbungo Society is Mike Stanger, whose enthusiasm is reflected by the fact that out of 550 possible households eligible for membership, 300 have joined. There is a wide social mixture of people living in Strathbungo, though since it has taken its

environmental turn for the better, there has perhaps tended to be an increasing proportion of the younger professional classes. There is still, however, a fairly large moving population of students living in the numerous guest houses.

There is also accommodation for lorry drivers, who sometimes park their lorries in streets eminently unsuitable for the purpose. The construction of secured lorry parks in major re-distribution centres like Glasgow is long overdue, since the parking of lorries in a Conservation Area is not only quite out of keeping with the intention of its creation, but a disagreeable nuisance and possibly also a danger to local residents.

There is, indeed, a general parking problem in the older part of the Conservation Area. The streets were simply not designed for motor vehicles, and are so narrow that a large vehicle unwisely attempting to get down Marywood Square, for instance, could easily damage several parked cars. One solution would be for car-parking facilities to be provided at the rear of the gardens in the back lanes, although there are problems of cost in such conversions, since the lanes themselves are narrow.

Quite a lot of cleaning has been carried out on stonework. An early scheme was operated in Queen Square during the '60s. More recently, the Society has been responsible for arranging the cleaning of a section of Moray Place itself as well as a tenement block in Nithsdale Road. With financial assistance from the former Glasgow Corporation, a pavement improvement scheme was also carried out three years ago.

Whatever might be found worthy of admiration in the achievements of the late Lord Beaverbrook, his disastrous war-time edict which caused the widespread removal of Victorian iron railings for a purpose for which they were totally unfitted was undoubtedly the most serious single blow to urban conservation ever inflicted. Queen Square is fortunate in having retained its stair railings, his gesture-loving lordship having granted dispensation where a safety factor was involved. Mr. Stanger feels that a unified scheme for the replacement of re-cast railings made of a modern synthetic material would do more than any other single thing to reinstate an even greater sense of local pride. The expendi-

ture of £250,000, or £500 per household, could, in his view, result in the transformation of Strathbungo into a model Conservation Area.

The Strathbungo Society, however, is already giving ample proof of its pride in its own Conservation Area. In conjunction with the Scottish Civic Trust's Facelift Glasgow, it recently organised a clean-up of the railway embankment in front of Moray Place. It now wants to landscape the part of Nithsdale Road immediately adjacent to No. 1 Moray Place, which at present is an important carpark but which looks unnecessarily bleak.

Anyone who visited Strathbungo Conservation Area, let us say a decade ago, and who returned now, would be astonished at the improvement in the area. Much still remains to be done, particularly in Regent Park Square, which looks decidedly down at heel, and where there is a strong case for the Local Authority exercising Article 4 Directions, the powers which it gets from the Secretary of State to ensure that buildings are not mutilated or otherwise damaged by unseemly embellishments or inappropriate decoration.

Glasgow, however, is establishing a good record in the beginnings of the practical implementation of a conservation policy. The part to be played by groups such as the Strathbungo Society is an important one, and collaboration between the Local Authority and the Society is already excellent. It is much to be hoped that the one will stimulate the other to still greater improvement, because only through such fruitful public participation can a conservation policy be made to work.

In a city like Glasgow, which urgently needs to make the most of every single asset it possesses in the interests of maintaining its image, and therefore its job-attracting potential, conservation is not something to be laid aside as a luxury because of stringent economic circumstances. On the contrary, conservation becomes more than ever an absolute essential, however hard the times, if Glasgow is to have any hope of holding its head high among comparable but perhaps more environmentally conscious cities throughout Europe, also seeking to attract and sustain new job opportunities.