

CHANGING PATTERNS

The architecture of Adelaide Crescent

Have you ever noticed the variety in the appearance of the houses in Adelaide Crescent? Compared to the formality of the composition of the two sides of Palmeira Square, the Crescent displays a mixture of styles, which tell the story of its development. The gracious sweep of buildings and garden setting tend to give a first impression of strict architectural control and implementation of a single design idea, but closer inspection reveals a wide selection of variations in both concept and detail.

The “Heritage of Hove” display boards (there is one by the eastbound bus stops) show an illustration of the original design, by Decimus Burton, for a single continuous curve flanked by classical pavilion ends facing the sea, all raised grandly above road level and approached up long ramps. This striking layout was to be the next phase in the development of Brunswick Town, following the success of the new Square and Terraces to the east. Decimus Burton was making a name for himself as an architect in the Greek revival style, as was Charles Barry, and both of their work was finding great favour amongst the fashionable gentry. Both had completed important public buildings in London. Burton had the Athenaeum Club and the Hyde Park Arch to his name, both architects were in the forefront of the new High Italian Renaissance revival style for urban buildings, known generally as “Italianate”, and both found commissions in Brunswick Town.

In 1830 Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmith purchased the Wick Estate from Thomas Scutt to develop the area as a grand extension to Brunswick Town, and asked permission of King William IV to use the name of his Queen Adelaide. Decimus Burton was employed, the single curve design was approved and work began. By 1832 the earthworks, ramps, and first eight houses including the east end pavilion were finished. The fine classical Italianate composition and carefully considered proportions of these early houses set them apart visually from the rest. A five bay (window width) house was placed at the centre of the pavilion end facing the sea, flanked by three bay corner houses. These corner houses made up for their narrower frontage by occupying eight bays on the sides. The design of the pavilion end was squared round into the Crescent by eleven bays, articulated to appear as three houses, but in reality only two. All bays on three sides were provided with individual bottle baluster balconies at first floor level with pedimented windows, and a large pediment over the central house on the south. A massive cornice was supported by large projecting corbels with small second floor windows cunningly hidden in between. Unfortunately the majority of these have subsequently been lowered, spoiling the effect (Nos 4 and 8 remain as original). A continuous solid bottle baluster prevented sight of the roof, and at ground floor semi-circular window heads in a rusticated plinth completed the Italianate scene. The first four of the run up the Crescent (Nos 5, 6, 7 and 8) continued the theme in a subordinate manner with narrower frontages. The rising ground required a step up in the houses, and at this stage a decision was taken to modify the design, omitting Decimus Burton’s heavily corbelled cornice. As the layout curved, the next five houses (Nos 9 to 13) varied from two to three bay, as shown on the original design. From the Wick Estate records, only Nos 1 to 10 appear to have been fully completed and occupied at the time.

The work ground to a halt. Fashions were changing. The Court of William IV did not revolve round Brighton. Houses became difficult to let. A recession in the housing market obliged work to stop. The young Queen Victoria disapproved of the excesses of her uncle George at Brighton, and the town declined.

The unfinished Crescent sat neglected until 1850, when work resumed on a revised scheme for a square leading out at the top; the layout as we know it now. The letting market now demanded larger family houses, and a further step in the elevations gave the opportunity to add another floor and simplify the design. The last six houses on the east side (Nos 14 to 19) set the pattern for the rest of the development, but with the addition of porches on the west side. In practice, porches would have been more useful on the east side, where the entrance doors face the prevailing south-west winds. Note that the number of bays in the house fronts changes from three to four depending on either a convex or concave location. By 1860 The Crescent was complete.

Over the last 150 years there have been many changes. All but two houses (Nos 6 and 8) are now converted to flats. Combining of two or more houses to achieve this has sometimes removed street entrances (Nos 16, 20, 28 and 37). Top floor windows have been altered, spoiling the original proportions in an effort to improve the view from inside (Nos 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 20, 21, 28, 29, 31, 32, and 35 to 38). Original glazing bar patterns have disappeared, though some remain (Nos 6 and 7 second floor; Nos 11, 12 and 26 third floor). Since Listed Building status the threat of such changes has been removed, and unsuitable alterations such as the roof extension on No 5 are now thankfully impossible.

There are curiosities too. Why is there a first floor balcony missing from the side elevation of No 3? And have a look at the railings outside Nos 20 and 21; escapees from Palmeira Square apparently.