

# PIONEERING CLASSICAL BARBARISM

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Milner Square, just off Upper Street, Islington, London, may plausibly be described as one of the less attractive pieces of Victorian residential architecture. Sir John Summerson wrote that the

‘architecture is of the most sinister description . . . mannerisms in the modelling give the design an unreal and tortured quality . . . It is possible to visit Milner Square many times and still not be absolutely certain that you have seen it anywhere but in an unhappy dream.’<sup>1</sup>

Pevsner quotes Summerson and suggests that Milner Square is a standard case of the ‘disintegration of the classical conventions.’<sup>2</sup> And yet there is an unusual quality about the impersonality and oppressiveness of the square. It comes as rather a surprise to find that it was built in 1841. Some of the detail is routinely early Victorian: the general concept seems unmistakably 20th century.

Liberated by the new technology of steel frames and poured concrete, early 20th-century architects evolved an architectural style which reflects the sheer man-dwarfing size of human achievement, the city’s indifference to the individual, and an ideology of symbolically functional shapes that caused even intimate private dwellings to be presented merely as units within a huge industrial-type complex. Partly because the spread of steel frame technology came at a time when classicism – in the form of neo-Baroque – was in fashion, partly because geometrically right-angled masses so easily accommodated the desired size and functionalism, the main *stylistic* influence on early

twentieth century big-building architecture was classical. But, perhaps because the new technology liberated architects from the purely physical limitations of earlier periods, or because of a need to emphasise how 20th-century industrial civilisation involved a major departure from earlier values, classical architectural motifs were often ostentatiously mis-applied, or presented in disconcerting new relationships; what has been described as the ‘antilogical use of traditional features,’<sup>3</sup> is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the mainstream of great public and commercial buildings in the 1900s and 1920s and 1930s. Thus there evolved a new type of neo-classicism which significantly reversed the values of the older neo-classicism of the 18th and early 19th centuries – sometimes indeed literally stood it on its head. And, though it belongs to the earlier period, Milner Square in many respects adumbrates the features of this later style.

Of course Milner Square is not a single solitary foreshadowing of 20th-century neo-classical. The desire to extend the range and modify the emphases of neo-classical was evident also in the early 19th century. In Britain with Sir John Soane, in Germany with Karl Friedrich Schinkel, in France with Jean Nicolas Louis Durand, there was an attempt to develop the neo-classical style in order to keep it abreast of the practical and ideological expectations of contemporary society. But these new developments in neo-classical were, so to speak, overtaken by the gothic revival in the 1830s. It is possible that no architect in the two generations following Soane and Schinkel equalled their calibre; at any rate



Plate 1 Milner Square, 1841



Plate 2 Milner Square, 1841

the vogue for neo-gothic absorbed the talents of the most successful architects after 1830. The influence of Durand and Soane may occasionally be seen in works such as Lewis Cubitt's King's Cross Station, but these stand out as exceptional, part survivors of the past, part anticipations of the future.

Alexander Dick Gough (1804–1871) and Robert Louis Roumieu (1814–1877), the architects who designed Milner Square, seem to have been a fairly typical partnership during the period when neo-gothic superseded neo-classical. They did the surveys for a number of minor railway lines in southern England, and also the surveys relating to compensation claims against the South Eastern, Great Northern, London and North-Western and Eastern Counties Railway Companies. They were in charge of the rebuilding of Old St. Pancras church, and of the additions to St. Peter's, Islington:

after their partnership dissolved, Gough designed a number of churches in North London: St. Jude's, Mildmay Park; St. Mark's, Tollington Park; St. Mary's, Hornsey Rise; St. Anne's, Poole's Park; Roumieu seems to have concentrated more on offices, warehouses and commercial buildings. Their designs exhibit a truly bewildering range of styles: Gough's churches include mediocre attempts at Anglo-Norman, Lombard, Early English, Decorated and Transitional; and while still partners they designed the Elizabethan/Jacobean villas in De Beauvoir Square, London.

Their essays in neo-classical include the Islington Literary and Scientific Institute built in Almeida Street in 1837. This building, which is now used as a theatre, is in a stark, austere style, with plain piers instead of pillars, and foreshadows the starkness and austerity of Milner Square just around the corner. Though the semi-

detached villas built by Gough and Roumieu in a similar style in Tollington Park over twenty years later worked out quite successfully, the Islington Literary and Scientific Institute is so unusually plain and understated for its time that at first glance it seems to belong to the art deco style of cinema architecture of a hundred years later. Its parsimonious and cramped appearance make it an unimpressive piece of architecture, in inspiration no more than an unfortunate variation on traditional neo-classicism. It needed the size and scope of Milner Square for Gough and Roumieu to display the full confident sweep of their neo-barbarism.

Adam and Nash had aimed, with debatable success, to design residential terraces that suggested the public buildings of classical Greek civilisation: Gough and Roumieu were the first to design terraces that looked like a modern factory. In neo-classical one is obviously always aware of the solidity of the physical structure, but the proportions suggest a confident compromise between the solidity of masonry and the need for space, and, even in the largest buildings, the sense of the human individual's need for an ordered, human-scale environment. Not so Milner Square. It is *oppressive*. The narrowness of the windows and the width of the intervening pilasters suggest square sectioned piers of masonry divided by ventilation louvres, in a building intended for some earth-trembling industrial process. The topmost storey has no external divisions marked between the separate houses, and this suggests a continuous loft, perhaps one vast low-ceilinged workshop along each side of the square.



Plate 3 Almeida Street Institute, 1837

Nowadays this unbroken range of top-storey windows tends to emphasise the clutter below of the too close together front doors and railed front door stairways, but originally – and till the 1930s – there were porches which seemed to make up a functional whole, a walkway or perhaps a gallery along each side of the square. The pilasters on the first and second floor are too plainly decorated to reduce the overall impression of closely-ranked rectangular buttresses. And yet, taken as a whole, Milner Square has something of the kind of grandeur that was to be deliberately aimed at by early 20th-century new style neo-classical architects – its authoritative denial of the human scale, its celebration of mass, right angles and straight lines, its sense of the aggregate rather than the individual. As a piece of 1840s architecture it deserves the condescending strictures of Summerson and Pevsner: as a piece of *modern* architecture it deserves notice as ahead of its time.

#### NOTES

1. John Summerson *Georgian London* (London 1962) 283
2. N. Pevsner *Penguin Guide to London except the Cities of London and Westminster* (London 1952) 236
3. A. Service ed. *Edwardian Architecture and its Origins* (1975) 321