



Bloomfield House –

a ‘mongrel’,
‘not really a thing of beauty but certainly
curious’ ...
‘a fascinating house and design!’

In February 2013, having been kindly sent the c.1938 photograph (probably one of the very last taken before the house was demolished) by Brian Sheil, I forwarded it to the architect Marcus Patton OBE.

I wrote to Marcus (square brackets indicate my recent editorial additions or comments):

What a strange house it is. Thoroughly Victorian dormers, but the ground floor windows would almost suggest a hint of art nouveau [rather before its time!]. The chimney pots seem to be some sort of dragon’s tooth type (also visible in the demolition pic) [that photograph is available on the *1775 to 1798* page of this BloomfieldBelfast.co.uk website]. I’m suggesting that the original 1775 house has been remodelled, perhaps several times, and trying to suggest dates for such tampering. ... The most likely time for remodelling was in the late 1840s, followed perhaps by a date in the 1870s [I now believe that there would have been little or no ‘remodelling’ after Robert Boyd’s death in 1869].

I’d very much value your professional opinion about the c.1938 photo and whether or not there’s much left of the 1775 building. Brian Sheil recalls spending a couple of summers there (he was just about 8 years of age then) in one of the flats (into which Bloomfield House had been converted) – his family let their Bangor house to holiday makers and relocated to Belfast each summer. He recalled the basement/cellar and was intrigued by ‘a dark, spooky, secret passage with bars across the door leading out of the cellar. He was told that it led to another house a quarter of a mile away’. I suspect that it may have led (if anywhere) to the farm outbuildings.

Marcus Patton replied:

A strange house indeed and suggesting the hand of a builder rather than an architect, because it has so many different styles mixed up.

Stylistically, it has a touch of rather crude Greek Revival – the little pediment and loggia in front of the central dormer, and the shallow pediment and battered surrounds to the ground floor windows. Likewise the giant order square columns supporting the central dormer. The Music Hall in May Street [Belfast] of 1840 was a more sophisticated Greek revival [interestingly, given the context, it had been designed by the architect Thomas Jackson, a sometime associate of Robert Boyd]. The central dormer has shades of Greek Thomson [Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson (1817-1875)] in Glasgow, with architectural features obscuring more practical ones on the plane behind. So [a date of] 1840-70 would seem about right.

There seems to be some sort of cast iron railing topped with acroteria on the boundary wall which could go along with that date. Incidentally it looks as if the corner finials of the garden wall are similar to the pots – perhaps spares?! although they do look a bit squatter, and I wonder if we're looking at a brick chimney stack up there with rounded ends rather than chimney pots – the dragons' teeth arrangement is very wide for a flue opening.

Although houses were often remodelled, it was usually done to take advantage of a different orientation or to get more space, with the new house planted in front of the old and the old walls turning up in servants' quarters behind. So you wouldn't necessarily find the same features reproduced in the new building in the way you're suggesting. And the chimney breast arrangement on the gable is very odd – Georgian houses would tend to be very regular and work within the box, particularly as you get better value from a chimney within the shell rather than one losing heat on three sides.

The odd recesses that the first floor windows are set in to be sure do suggest a structure that stopped at wall-head level previously – and, if so, the first floor windows might have been shorter than the ground floor ones, three panes over six rather than six over six. Georgian houses would usually have a parapet rather than gutters at the front.

It seems to have been fortified with cannon on the front steps!

Belfast News-Letter, Tuesday 30 August 1938, page 1:

FOR Sale, two large Cannons, at present at Bloomfield House, Bloomfield Road. — Apply 33, Shaftesbury Square.
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Note: 33 Shaftesbury Square was the address of Property Brokers and Estate Agents J. McCartney & Co., who had converted Bloomfield House into flats and managed them.

Marcus later reminded me that the Royal Ulster Yacht Club in Bangor used to have (maybe still does) cannon, not unlike the Bloomfield ones, that they used for starting races. Might the RUYC have bought theirs from Mr McCartney, the agent for Bloomfield House?

Then, in November 2013, I received two splendid photographs of Bloomfield House from Ian Temby in Australia. They date from a late 19th century period and it would be nice to think they were from the late 1860s, and maybe taken by Robert French (1841-1917) for the Lawrence Collection.

I forwarded those two photographs to Marcus for further comment. He replied:

Thinking back to your original question of whether the house could be based on an earlier one, I can see from the main photo how this could have been. That very strong string course below the dormer windows might have corresponded to the roof of a Georgian house, with deep Regency eaves that would come down to the first-floor

window heads. The small pane sashes there and (as we can now see) on the gable don't match those ground floor windows or the oversized front dormers.

I had suggested that a Georgian house would be more likely to have a hip roof and chimneys on the cross walls rather than at gables, whereas these monstrous stacks look very Victorian. However, they do look oddly planted onto the projecting gable bays and seem to be taking advantage of features left over from the earlier design. By 1860, Greek Thomson had begun to make his name and some of the Grecian details might have been derived from his work – could there have been a Glasgow connection?

These photos show even more of a mongrel than the earlier one, but also look more like a conversion / refacing, and I would suggest are more like 1860 than 1850 – the ground floor windows couldn't have had small panes, so moving towards the advent of plate glass, while still retaining what looks like crown glass in the upper windows.

Not really a thing of beauty, but certainly curious!

In October 2017, four years after the previous correspondence, I sent the two 19th century photographs to the architect Matt O'Connor for a further comment:

Matt O'Connor replied:

... what a fascinating house and design!

My immediate thought was that the design is from what I call the *Hatter's Castle* mould. As A.J. Cronin put it, Brodie's House was built 'to his pride, vanity and pretensions'. Many fine Georgian houses suffered at the hands of late Victorian owners when the industrial 'nouveau riche' sought to emulate and upstage their aristocratic predecessors. It would be interesting to find out more about the character of the perpetrator!

I agree with the fine scholarly analysis by Marcus of the building and his conclusion that the original Georgian building had a hipped roof above the 'strong string course below the dormers'. I also agree that it is highly improbable that an architect was used in the late Victorian reconstruction. The design is architecturally incoherent with crude massing and detail. Many of the early Georgian mansions, particularly those built as summer houses for the gentry lacked sufficient fireplaces and were comprehensively 'upgraded' and extended by the Victorians when they became permanent homes.

The eclectic use of elevational neoclassical decoration without understanding is typical of the period, probably coming from a builder using a pattern book. At least they didn't mix neo-gothic with the neoclassical detail! ...

Bloomfield is a very interesting house, a big statement, reflecting a period of great social and economic change brilliantly.