

# **Timber Shopfronts and their Details**

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I intend to talk about the use of timber in shopfronts and will focus on small and medium scale shops generally of mid to late Victorian date. The content is based on observation and conclusion during my time with Edinburgh Old Town Renewal Trust and Edinburgh World Heritage Trust prior to joining Historic Scotland.

## **Shopfront Joinery**

Almost all shopfronts incorporate a substantial amount of joinery. Typical of the Victorian approach to building, the overall architectural form of the shopfront seems to have been the focus without any desire to express the different materials used to achieve this. Instead they were often painted to achieve a uniform effect. For example, two painted shopfronts may be embellished with similar architectural decoration but it is only through scrutiny and tapping that we find that the pilaster and cornice details on one are in stone – with the lintels over the windows and the thin mullions by the door in cast iron, whilst another has a cornice and fascia of timber – the lead capping is the giveaway – with the pilaster by the door also of timber.

A variety of materials might be in use on one shopfront including stone, cast iron and timber. These composite of materials are given unity by a coat of paint. Once covered with paint of course the differing base materials do not register.

## **Shopfront Fashions**

Much in retailing is allied to fashion and revamps and updates were carried out frequently to keep shop architecture up to date. Very often these subsequent alterations to existing stone buildings were done in timber so the perimeter elements and cornice are applied to the stone façade, almost as an extra layer to form a new shopfront. This timber may conceal an enlarged opening slapping made through the stonework where the stone arches and piers have been removed and a cast iron structural beam inserted.

On the South Bridge, Edinburgh, the premises were commercial from the start but in other areas of the city and elsewhere the colonisation of Georgian residential buildings by retail took place and again the architectural embellishment is generally executed in timber which is easier than using stone. It is a layering of a timber façade onto an earlier building.

The white shopfront (right) is a rare survival of an early alteration of the ground floor of a townhouse to retail use by the enlargement of window openings and the addition of cornice and pilasters with the doorway aggrandised by columns. In the much later green and red painted examples (left) the shopfronts have been built out over the basement areas becoming bold and grand showcases for their occupants.



Shops built over basements, Edinburgh



Adaptation of a Georgian townhouse

### Use of the Classical Orders

The basis of the neo-classical architectural treatments employed in these frontages are the established classical details derived from ancient Greek and Roman sites as formally codified in the course of the rediscovery of classical ornament from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Put simply, these are the details used by the ancients to construct their temples. So, we have columns placed at regular intervals supporting a beam at eaves level, called the entablature and frieze, topped by a cornice. The stylistic variations for these can be broadly grouped, with each group referred to as a Classical Order. The three most common Orders are the Doric, Ionic and the Corinthian. There are subtle differences between these with each order having its own proportioning rules so Doric columns are squat and fat whereas ionic columns are tall and slender.

The architectural detail treatment also varies, most noticeably in the different column heads referred to as capitols. That used in the Doric is restrained; ionic has a pair of ears called volutes and the Corinthian capital is most flamboyant based on foliage and acanthus leaves. These are the most obvious differences but at the detail level the ionic cornice has cubic dentils whereas the ionic cornice has a second row of more widely spaced shaped modillions for instance. In shopfronts these are quite loosely applied although an underlying understanding of these Orders is usually evident.

Precise use of these architectural treatments can be seen in many monumental public buildings such as the former Sheriff Court building in Glasgow. Here you can see the temple form directly quoted in the portico with its ionic columns as well as simpler flat pilasters on the corner pavilion block with a continuous entablature, frieze and cornice.



Sherriff Court, Glasgow

What we see in shopfronts is the adaptation of this language in small or large measure; the frieze becomes a convenient fascia board and the columns are represented in pilaster form either side of a stretched opening housing the shopfront. Often too the detailing is stretched with all manner of devices to suit the shops dimensions. The shopfront detailing draws from these formal principles albeit creatively and with some designs applied more rigorously than others. For example, pilaster details which are padded out with additional mouldings or in the red example with an additional panelled section to give height without becoming too elongated or over broad.

Another classical motif employed is the console bracket. You can see examples of their correct use on the former Sheriff Court to support short sections of cornice above the doorway and over the first floor windows. Appropriated for shopfront use, console brackets are used as an alternative to pilasters at the ends of a cornice to provide visual support and termination.



Console brackets

Whilst this use of classical detailing might not lend itself to scholarly analysis, it has a remarkable ability to appear as a complete and satisfactorily proportioned shopfront to our eyes. There is a consistency of design carried through and inter-relationship of the details.



Consoles and pilasters

The classical orders are often treated as the inspiration for the design of these shopfronts and perhaps their designs are as much driven by the Victorian desire to decorate and embellish. Some of the surviving archive drawings suggest that the level of designer's input varied and undoubtedly much was down to the craftsmen's skill and familiarity with this type of classical decoration to be able to judge proportions, interpret carving details and decide how to return mouldings and so on.

That so many have survived in good condition is testimony to the durability of the seasoned timber from which they were built and their constructional detail – built up from sections of timber detailed to allow for limited movement whilst excluding the weather. Some elements such as pilaster bases close to the ground are more vulnerable and have been replaced over the years or sometimes there is a stone block used as a more resistant base.

### **Crown Glass**

Initially I suggested that these shopfronts were about aesthetics and did not express their construction materials. However in one area in particular - glass - material development has dictated shopfront design.

Prior to about 1850, manufacturing methods and tax applied to glass meant that the size of economically available glass panes for shop windows was limited. For example, 24" x 15" sheets of crown glass were considered large. The crown glass manufacturing process involved a lump of molten glass being spun to create a thin disc of glass which was then cut up into panes. The process was limited by the weight and size of glass that the artisan could handle. As the thickness varied across the disc and a central knurl was left by the tube, only relatively small panes could be produced.

The restored Georgian shopfronts here show how display window joinery design responded to the constraints of limited glass size but also that showiness was important- so the opportunity was still taken to create an elaborate design to the window heads.



Use of plain glass decoratively

### **Plate Glass**

Larger sheets of glass could be produced by pouring molten glass onto a flat surface to form a plate but this then required costly, labour intensive grinding and polishing to produce usable glass. Glass is a fragile material and as pane size increases, the thickness has to be increased to ensure sufficient strength to resist wind loading and impact. Until 1845, tax was imposed on glass by weight and so larger, thicker and therefore heavier panes were disproportionately expensive.

Manufacturing limitations on pane size, cost and transport restrictions are perhaps why we see some surviving shop windows glazed with a large display window area subdivided by thin astragals – often of timber but also sometimes of brass.

Repeal of excise duties after 1845 allied with mechanisation of processes made polished plate glass more affordable and from this date we see very large pane sizes used with the obvious benefit of improving the connection between displayed goods and the shopper. Glass was still an expensive commodity though; and was often protected by shuttering arrangements at night.

By the 1880s extensively glazed shopfronts with canted glazed returns into recessed doorways were being used to create a more open frontage, further dematerialising the barrier between the browser and the goods – and working particularly well when seen obliquely approaching along the pavement. Very fine framing for the glass at the horizontal transoms and at the vertical mullion was used and usually incorporates a turned timber mullion at the corners although sometimes these are of metal.

### **Glazing Details**

At a pragmatic level, one practice to note in shopfront glazing is the installation of glass into joinery glazing rebates from the inside. This is the opposite of standard window practice which is to glaze from outside and probably originated for visual effect to present a crisp timber moulding to the window shopper rather than a potentially uneven putty joint or potentially misaligned loose glazing bead detail. Also where there are delicate profiled mullions there is little option but to glaze from inside.

Having said this, Lindsay Lennie has unearthed early examples of small paned shop windows conventionally glazed from outside with putty, sometimes for constructional reasons in those bow windows which have deep horizontal glazing bars, but sometimes it seems simply because the conventional window glazing detail was adopted.

### **Slatted roller shutters and rising shutters**

Providing security discreetly is an area where 19th shop design excels. Early shops appear to have made do with lift off shutters but later protection was often provided in the form of timber slat roller shutters integrated into the fascia or ceiling void above the frontage which could be dropped down over windows and recessed doorways.

A large number of shops in Edinburgh have these shutters but no longer in operation. Sometimes they remain in situ but often there's just a slot at the window head (often covered over by a batten) and all that's left as evidence are the narrow guide rail recesses at the sides of the windows.

An alternative ascending shutter arrangement appears to have been commonly used in Edinburgh. There are a couple of surviving examples still in use in Cockburn St near Waverley Station. The shutters are of panelled construction like a large door and run in wide channel recesses set in the sides of the window opening. They are hung like a window sash and counterweighted for ease of operation. There are examples of similar provision in Jedburgh so they may have been widely used. The surviving working examples don't have any provision for weather proofing the gap at the cill.

Sometimes no integral protection was provided and if required lift off grilles and shop gates in recessed doorways must have been relied upon.



Slatted shutters



Rising shutters

### Storm Doors

When opened back these doors are cleverly detailed to read as panelling forming a recessed entrance sometimes with matching panelled soffit panel - with a lightly constructed inner half glazed door into the shop. Examining the detail of this set up brings home the completeness, refinement and subtlety of Victorian shop front design.



Shop storm doors

The storm doors are shop hung – that is their hinges are set up so that they sit back flush when open and as a further refinement a half round quirk bead profile has been run down their outer stiles to align with the exposed knuckles of the hinges. In this example heavy projecting bolection mouldings have been used around the storm door panels whilst the inner

shop door makes use of a lighter bolection panel moulding on its lower half and a very light moulding around its glazed upper panel.

Another aspect to note is the diminishing stiles to the inner door, which slims to allow for as large a glazed panel as possible – these are commonly referred to as gun stock stiles and give the door a lighter, more refined appearance whilst maintaining strength in the lower area.

### **Late Victorian and Edwardian**

By the late Victorian period and into the Edwardian period a more flamboyant style became popular referred to as Free Style because of the way it mixed traditional classical detailing, often in a heavy baroque style, with other more florid curves and filigree forms.

Here the classical orders have become decorative motifs – the heavy keystone and cornice with unequally spaced modillions for instance. By this time hardwoods were often used for shopfronts, and were particularly suitable where their fine grain enabled very fine light weight mullions and clerestory glazing to be formed.



Edwardian Free Style



St Andrews

And then finally, a more restrained and elegant example from this period - still with vestigial remnants of classical detailing in the use of stylised capitals to the window mullions and the dentilled cornice. This example in St Andrews has a lovely juxtaposition of heavy cornice, fascia and door surround with elegant lightweight elements to the display window framing. The design is completed by clerestory glazing to the upper part of the windows incorporating art nouveau stained glass flower in the Glasgow School style – a fitting example of east meets west to end on.