

WATER-WORN LIMESTONE: GARDEN-WALL DECORATION IN LANCASTER

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Abstract

The use of water-worn limestone cappings and gateposts as decorative features on the front-garden walls of Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war suburban houses in Lancaster is distinctive and eye-catching. There is a lack of published information about the source of the limestone, the period when such wall decoration was fashionable and why such unusual features were favoured by developers, landscape gardeners and homeowners (Plates 1a–c). This paper addresses for the first time this aspect of the local vernacular architecture.



Plates 1a–c Water-worn limestone wall cappings (1a & b) and a gatepost (1c) in Lancaster

Introduction

The front-garden walls to three different categories of house are investigated that all share a distinctive feature unique to the Lancaster area – water-worn limestone cappings that are used in conjunction with sandstone walling. Firstly, there are the front walls to Edwardian villas built at the beginning of the twentieth-century; secondly, the walls to the small front gardens of terraced and semi-detached houses built outside the town centre on new estates between 1870 and 1914; and thirdly, the walls to detached and semi-detached houses with larger front gardens built between 1919 and 1939 and postwar. The walls to the three types of houses have different types of construction to satisfy the changing social structure of the town over nine decades.

Stone type, sources and characteristics

Sandstone

Many stone-faced houses and their front-garden walls in Lancaster were constructed of Namurian Millstone Grit extracted from local quarries to the east or south-east of the town, most notably from Williamson Park, Lancaster Moor, Bowerham, Primrose Hill, Greaves and Freehold (White & Winstanley, 1996). This is a medium- to coarse-grained sandstone that has weathered to take on a colour ranging between yellow, rich brown and dark grey. The sandstone to the front elevation of a house was cut into blocks larger than a modern brick and dressed on the exposed face with one of two types of finish: hammer-dressed and rough-dressed (sometimes referred to as rock-faced) depending upon the age, status and location of the house. It was laid in a regular horizontally coarsed bond (Plates 2a & b).

Limestone

The decorative walling described in this paper comprises Carboniferous limestone originating as exposed ‘limestone pavements’ in three areas of England: Morecambe Bay in North Lancashire, in South Cumbria and in the Pennine area of North Yorkshire. It is a rare rock formation; it covers under 3000 hectares (UKBAP 2007). Limestone pavements are outcrops of rock, naturally

occurring horizontally or slightly inclined, that have formed into curious upstanding blocks of water-worn limestone called ‘clints’ that are separated by fissures known as ‘grykes’ (Plates 1a–c). Each block has a unique shape due to water erosion. The nearest lowland limestone pavements to Lancaster are in the Arncliffe and Silverdale area (JNCC, n.d.).



Plate 2a Hammer-dressed



Plate 2b Rough-dressed (or Rock-faced)

The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) now protects limestone pavements from removal. It authorised local authorities, such as Lancashire and Cumbria County Councils, to issue a Limestone Pavement Order (LPO) under Section 34 of the Act, which created a priority habitat under Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive. Once an LPO is in place, removal of such rock in England is a criminal offence. A limestone pavement can have both an LPO and also be designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), so protecting its wildlife, geology and plants (UKBAP 2007). Prior to this legislation, limestone pavements were quarried in a widespread and uncontrolled way for use in the front gardens and rockeries of residential properties in the Lancaster area between c.1895 and 1981. Virtually all English limestone pavements have been damaged by such quarrying to some extent (Goldie 1986). The uses to which this rock was put in the design of local garden walls and gateposts is described in this paper.

The Edwardian Urban Villa

A Victorian or Edwardian Villa is incomplete without a setting, which brought together garden design, landscaping and the innovative use of naturally occurring materials and building techniques to create a sense of culture and those scenes of picturesque beauty so highly sought after by the Victorians. The approach to a house should be appealing to the eye and in harmony with the character, setting and architectural style of the house. The first view of a house should be from a slight distance to appreciate its sense of place and the subtleness of the grounds and landscape as a whole, serving the dual purpose of providing a foreground to the landscape and a satisfactory outlook when viewed internally from the house. Garden walls to residential properties outside the town centre started to be built from the 1870s, increasing in number with the expansion of house-building until the end of the nineteenth century. Originally the majority of walls and coping stones were in sandstone and the copings took three principal forms: triangular, half-round, and sawn ashlar copings that were either flat or cut into blocks with one or more curved or chamfered edges. A ‘coping’ stone covers the whole width of a wall and protects it from water and frost damage. Sandstone was widely used for coping stones because it was readily available from local quarries, relatively inexpensive and easy to work.

Haverbreaks Estate

Haverbreaks Estate in Lancaster was developed as a garden suburb but there are only two houses on the estate with stone boundary walls that have limestone cappings. ‘Capping’ stones (unlike coping stones) do not cover the full width of the wall and are purely decorative. They survive best when

laid on top of coping stones. In 1909 William Hatch, who co-owned a firm of ecclesiastical joiners that worked for Paley and Austin, converted a stable, coach-house and gardener's cottage to a substantial villa named Rowan Brae which he subsequently occupied and renamed Roxburghe House (Plate 3) (Stansfield 2016, 20–1).



Plate 3 Roxburghe House, Haverbreaks

Particular attention was placed on the high front-boundary wall that borders the road, which is constructed of irregular coursed sandstone with a water-worn limestone capping at eye level. The limestone capping is laid parallel to the linear axis of the wall. There is no sandstone coping on top of the wall and below the limestone capping. The wall gives the notion of security to the house while the limestone capping enhances association with the countryside and the picturesque beauty of the Lake District and the Dales. The entrance to the adjoining house (Tufton Warren) has a similar boundary wall to Roxburghe House but with a flat sandstone coping. Woolerton Dodwell were the landscape designers for Tufton Warren. Woolerton was a pupil in the Mawson practice and it is therefore likely, for reasons that will be explained later, that the sandstone coping to Tufton Warren is an original feature. Whether Roxburghe House also had a sandstone coping that was later removed is not known. Dating limestone-wall capping is often difficult as official records of such decorative changes are scarce.

The second villa on Haverbreaks Estate with a stone boundary wall is Emmanuel House, directly opposite Roxburghe House and the original farmhouse on the site (1658). It has been substantially altered on more than one occasion. By 1845 the former farmhouse was known as ‘Haverbreaks House’ and in 1903 it was coated with a white render and again renovated between 1916 and 1919 by Austin & Paley and occupied until 1921 by Geoffrey Austin, son of Hubert Austin. As part of these renovations, the garden on three sides of the property was laid out by Thomas Mawson, the landscape gardener then based in High Street, Lancaster (Stansfield, 2016, 18–9). The front wall to the house is constructed of irregularly coursed, rough sandstone interspersed with fieldstone cobbles and it has a water-worn limestone capping. The capping detail is identical to that at Roxburghe House. The house and grounds were re-modelled in the 1960s and the name changed to Emmanuel House (Plates 4a & b). Whether the limestone capping was added in 1919 or in the 1960s is not known, but the history of Netherleigh (below) gives a clue.

Netherleigh, Westbourne Road

Extensive building works were carried out to Netherleigh in 1919 for Robert Helme, brother of Norval Helme MP (Plate 5). At the same time, Thomas Mawson was appointed to landscape the gardens for Netherleigh and an adjacent house, The Knoll, occupied by Hubert Austin.

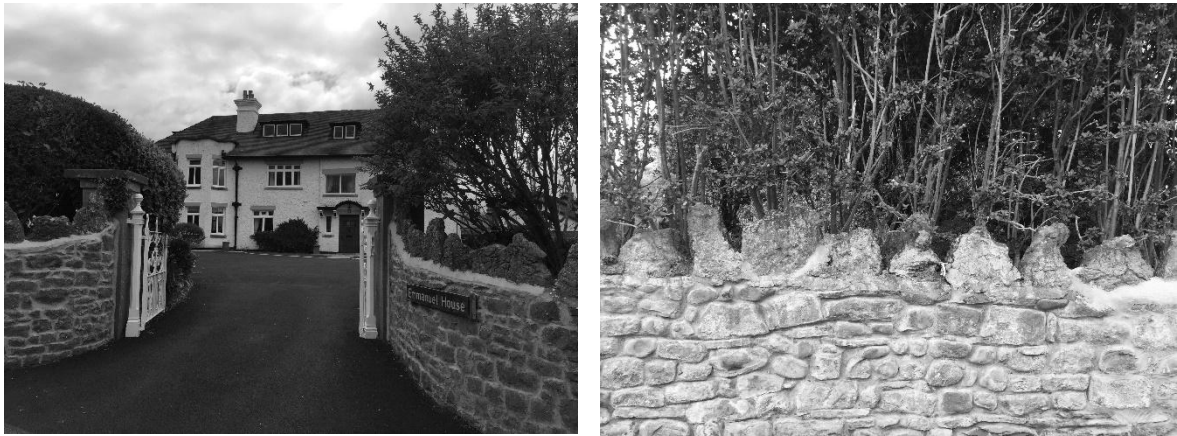


Plate 4a and 4b Emmanuel House, Haverbreaks



Plate 5 Netherleigh, Westbourne Road

The boundary walls are approximately 2 metres in height and constructed of sandstone blocks surmounted by a triangular sandstone coping stone. The whole garden design, including the boundary wall, is a pleasing link between the landscape and the architecture of the house. Around this time, rock gardens were built for display and were designed to be picturesque, rugged and naturalistic. In his book *The Art and Craft of Garden Making* Mawson said: ‘The water-wash capping is an attempt to beautify a utilitarian feature such as a wall. The wall looks rather like an attempt to imitate natural rock and the whole result is spoiled and the work looks puerile and affected’ (Mawson 1912, 208). Netherleigh does not have water-worn limestone cappings to its walls. Additionally in Waymark’s book on Mawson, whereas stone is widely used for balustrades, terraces, steps and rockeries, not one of the 116 photographs of his gardens in the UK shows water-worn limestone wall cappings (Waymark 2009). It therefore seems unlikely that Mawson would have constructed the boundary wall at Emmanuel House with a water-worn capping. Given these remarks it is reasonable to assume that the limestone water-worn cappings to Roxburghe House and Emmanuel House were not installed until the 1960s.

11–21 Meadowside, off the Pointer Roundabout

There are 11 large, late-Victorian or early-Edwardian villas on the west side of Meadowside, two and three storeys in height, with ground-floor bays and very large front gardens. Six of the houses (Nos 11–21) have large limestone boulders, called Cyclopean boulders (DEFRA 2007, 17) due to their size and the deep channels across their surface. They have been used as gateposts (Plate 1c). The houses were constructed in 1897 and 1898 by R. Baines and a photograph taken in 1905, now

in the Lancaster City Library archive, clearly shows the presence of these limestone gateposts. This is the first clear evidence that water-worn limestone was being used for gateposts by the end of the nineteenth century. There are low sandstone walls between the gateposts on all six houses obscured by high privet hedges that are clearly shown in the 1905 photograph. The hedges may have been planted for privacy as there do not appear to have been railings installed between the gateposts.

Eden Park, Scotforth

The entrance to Eden Park off Scotforth Road has excellent examples of Cyclopean limestone boulders over 2 metres high and used as gateposts, similar to those at Meadowside but much larger (Plates 6a & b). Several of the Edwardian houses in the cul-de-sac have similar but smaller gateposts. From a visual inspection it appears these stones were installed when the road was constructed and this provides further dating evidence. The first houses on Eden Park were approved between 1910 and 1915, the developer again being R. Baines.



Plates 6a and 6b Entrance to Eden Park, Scotforth

16–22 Redvers Street, off Westbourne Road

There are four Edwardian three-storey terraced houses built c.1905 at the south-west end of Redvers Street with unique front-garden walls. The houses have ground-floor bay windows and very small front gardens and are similar to other local houses but of a more modest design and in a different setting to the houses in Meadowside and Eden Park. Each of the four houses have Cyclopean boulder-stone gateposts with sandstone boundary walls between them that are surmounted by water-worn-limestone capping stones that have been laid at *right-angles to the linear axis of the walls*, the only example of this Lancaster (Plates 7a & b). This alignment is in keeping with the limestone walls and cappings to houses and farms in the Lake District. There is no evidence for the presence of water-worn limestone cappings laid *parallel to the main axis of the garden wall* in residential areas in Lancaster until after the Second World War. The existence of Cyclopean boulder gateposts to all four houses and the lack of any original sandstone copings under the limestone cappings support the view that the gateposts and limestone cappings were built with the houses around 1905.



Plates 7a and 7b Redvers Street, off Westbourne Road

Suburban Housing in Lancaster built between 1870 and 1914 and between 1919 and 1939

The decades after 1870 saw considerable expansion of Lancaster's built-up area. From the 1870s there was housebuilding at Freehold, Dry Dock, Moorlands, Primrose and Westbourne Road. From the mid-1880s houses went up at Bulk, Greaves, Marsh, Aldcliffe Road, the streets around Dallas Road and Regent Street, in Bowerham (Coulston Road) and in Greaves and Scotforth along the A6 to the Boot & Shoe public house. After 1900 expansion continued at a slower pace up to 1914 in these areas with the addition of the Edwardian villas in the Westbourne Road area, Meadowside, Haverbreaks, and in Scotforth. In the interwar years there was a substantial increase in housing provision, particularly in Bowerham.

From the start of suburban expansion in the 1870s there was widespread aspiration to occupy terraced and semi-detached houses with front gardens separating the house from the pavement. The size of these gardens varied. The most basic gardens were approximately 2.5 metres deep, extending across the full width of a house with a front boundary wall and two side-division walls separating neighbouring properties, a gate and a path leading directly from the pavement to the front door of a substantially two-storied, four-roomed terraced house. The next progression was a deeper front garden of 3–4 metres where the gate was on the opposite side to the entrance door of the house and the path curved across the garden to the front door. These houses were more frequently three-storied with six rooms. The final progression was to a semi-detached or detached house. The provision of a front garden was highly coveted. It provided a separation between the pavement and the front door – a private space in which to create a small garden. It also allowed the introduction of single- or double-storey bay windows to allow more light into the most important rooms in the house – the lounge and the main bedroom. The front walls were built very low, commonly of the same type of stone as the main façade of the house, with sawn sandstone copings and infilled with decorative wrought iron railings. Photographs of Cromwell Road, off Aldcliffe Road, in the late 1890s and Belle Vue Terrace, Greaves, in the 1920s, show sandstone walls and gateposts with wrought iron railings. The earliest photographs showing limestone cappings date from the 1950s and 1960s.

In the inter-war period, many of the semi-detached and detached houses in Bowerham were built of brick and either rendered or, more commonly, pebble-dashed. The front gardens were generally much larger than those of the terraced and semi-detached houses built up to 1914. The front boundary walls to many of these houses were constructed of brick and reflected the finish on the façade of the house: there were few iron railings and copings, the render or pebble-dash to both sides of the boundary wall was carried over the top. There were exceptions where some houses had sandstone front walls with a flat sandstone or concrete coping added, but railings were rare.

Examples of front garden walls to suburban houses built between 1870 and 1914, and 1918 and 1939 are shown in Plates 10(a) – 10(f).

The Second World War

In the early 1940s the Government ordered all post-1850 iron railings in parks, outside offices and at residential homes to be removed and melted down for the war effort under Regulation 50 of the Defence (General) Regulations 1939. This was intended to be a unifying act for the country and of propaganda value. Wrought-iron railings to front-garden walls outside the town centre were very common in Lancaster and there is still widespread evidence of these former garden-wall railings. It is easy to see the cut ends of the top and bottom horizontal rails of the railings where they had been built into the gateposts (Plates 8 & 9).



Plate 8 Evidence of railings having been removed



Plate 9 Evidence of limestone cappings having been installed after the railings had been removed

Post-war period

The Conservative Party was returned to power in 1951, the same year that the Festival of Britain was staged. This coincided with a picturesque revival in British architecture and improved collaboration between architects and landscape gardeners. Householders were keen to look forward to a brighter and more hopeful future. The front garden was a space that received attention regarding landscaping, and in particular, filling in the gap in front boundary walls left by the removal of railings. Some homeowners installed new railings while many others preferred limestone cappings on top of the remaining sandstone wall. At that time water-worn limestone was easily available from, and advertised by local builders and it offered an attractive and cheap solution (*Lancaster Guardian* 1954). Limestone was regarded as one of the more attractive garden features. Gardeners appreciated the eroded and weathered appearance – each stone uniquely shaped – imparting a timeless quality and seeming to have been exposed to the elements for many years. The limestone cappings were so popular that even 1950s garden walls which never had railings had them installed on top of pebble-dashed walls and on walls between adjacent properties. There are examples on the north side of St Paul's Road and the south side of Victoria Avenue in Scotforth.

The water-worn limestone gateposts and decorative cappings are now seen as curiosities verging on poor taste. This is very different from how they were viewed by the Victorians and Edwardians and later by the increasingly affluent post-war generation for their homes and gardens, encouraged by

the new garden and DIY press, garden centres and the annual Ideal Home Exhibition at Olympia in London. By the end of the 1960s social values had changed as more people became aware of the irreversible damage being done to the environment by the wholesale quarrying of local limestone pavements. Such decorative wall cappings lost their popular appeal and steadily faded into obscurity.

Conclusion

It is not straightforward to date exactly the use of water-worn limestone cappings to walls. Although it must at present be a matter of some conjecture, until further research is undertaken, it is postulated that water-worn limestone was introduced to Lancaster in two phases. The first phase saw large boulders used as gateposts to late-Victorian and Edwardian villas between 1898 and 1920 by landscape gardeners, wealthy house owners and contractors. The second phase began between the late 1940s and the late 1960s when limestone cappings became a popular and cheap form of garden wall decoration for middle-class homeowners to replace the wrought-iron railings removed in the early 1940s, installed perhaps without recourse to professional help.

Examples of front walls in Lancaster



Plate 10a Belle View Terrace, Greaves, c.1891

A sandstone wall with sandstone coping to No. 35. The railings are original. Nos 37–53 are similar but the walls are higher and have retained their original railings.



Plate 10b Belle Vue Terrace, Greaves c.1850

A low sandstone wall with a sandstone coping. A limestone water-worn capping has been added sometime after the railings were removed to Nos. 3, 9, 21 and 23.



Plate 10c Bridge Road, Greaves c.1901

A typical original front wall with detail in sandstone. Note the end view of the sandstone coping: the inner face vertical, the outer face cut to a slope. There would have been railings on the flat top of the coping. The adjoining house has identical detail but a limestone capping has been added.



Plate 10d Primrose Street, Primrose, c.1880

The original railings have been removed and later replaced. The replacements are bolted to the gate posts whereas the ends of the horizontal top and bottom rails of the original railings were set into holes in the gateposts and secured with molten lead. See Plates 8 and 9 for an enlarged view.



Plate 10e Bowerham Road c.1930

A brick boundary wall rendered on both sides and carried over the top. The water-worn limestone capping was added sometime after the wall was built.



Plate 10f Belle Vue Terrace, Greaves c.1893

The large water-worn limestone capping has been added later to the original sandstone coping.

Author profile

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