



Numbers 4-8 Bradley Street showing the rear of the Lever Street houses to which they were attached.

MANCHESTER EARLY DWELLINGS RESEARCH GROUP

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In 1982 Jacqueline Roberts an extra-mural teacher based at the Greater Manchester Museum of Science and Industry, whose interest in early housing had already resulted in a study of a block of back-to-backs in Collyhurst, led a WEA class on workers' housing.¹ Such was the concern generated for the future of Manchester's remaining pre-1850 housing at the end of the course that the class underwent a metamorphosis and emerged from its WEA cocoon as the Manchester Early Dwellings Research Group — MEDReG. It had become clear that a number of houses dating from the early years of the industrial revolution had survived in the more neglected areas of the city — such as Ancoats. Most had been much altered since their closure as dwellings at the turn of the century and were the homes of a variety of small businesses, or just standing empty awaiting demolition. It was felt that these relics of the infamous slums which had so appalled Engels and other contemporary spectators, were just as worthy of study and preservation as the houses of the wealthy or more imposing industrial remains. Several groups, notably the Victorian Society and Manchester Region Industrial Archaeology Society, had studied and recorded buildings in Manchester but little notice had been paid to the city's housing stock. By 1850 the initial expansion of Manchester was over; the incorporation of the Borough in 1838 had led to the Police Acts of 1844 which, amongst other things, spelled the end of new back-to-back housing in the township and to the beginning of demolition to open up the old courts. Our

interest lay in the housing built for the working classes during the industrial revolution, before any real patterns of working-class housing existed. MEDReG was therefore set up with a twofold purpose, to discover and record all the remaining pre-1850 workers' housing in the central area of Manchester and to preserve some examples preferably in situ but if not then re-erected on a suitable site.

Work started in earnest early in 1983 with Sunday morning searches around Ancoats, Collyhurst, Castlefield and Smithfield identifying houses and adding them to the list. Recording sessions were arranged, again on Sundays, with the most important finds having priority and soon a respectable number of houses had been identified, measured, photographed, plans prepared and drawn to scale. Meanwhile archival research on the recorded houses, by its nature a slow process, was well under way. This pattern of identification, recording and researching has carried on up to the present.

The only way we have found to identify early dwellings is to walk the streets and look carefully at any building not obviously new, which is three storeys or less. After some experience the general shape of the building will attract the house-hunter's eye as being 'right' and then the various constructional details will (usually) confirm this impression; for instance the second floor of houses with long horizontal workshop windows (misleadingly called weaver's windows though only one house so far

researched ever had a handloom weaver as a resident) is an obvious indication of age, usually no later than the first decade of the nineteenth century. In our experience very few houses were constructed with such windows after 1810. Hand made bricks as opposed to the later machine made article are another good indication, as are the typical semi-circular brick arches over doors and the large window openings, originally small pane sash windows, with a flat topped segmental brick arch. In most of the buildings we look at, these architectural features have been much altered, doors and windows have been removed and bricked up years ago, walls may have fallen down and been rebuilt, the original brickwork has been covered by being cement rendered or even a new skin of brick erected over the original. These cases need a lot more detective work but enough clues externally and internally usually remain to help us decide what was originally there. More than once we have been able to work out the positions of the original doorways in what is now an apparently featureless brick wall because, when the doors were bricked-up, some of the sandstone blocks which stood one on each side of the base of the door were left in place. The next step is to check on maps to see what date the house first appeared and whether the shape of the building on the ground today fits in with the plan on the map. Luckily Manchester has been quite well mapped since the end of the eighteenth century, as we have Green's map of 1794, Johnson's dating from 1820, Bancks' of 1831, Adshead's of 1851, Goad's Insurance Plan of 1881 (a mine of useful information) and the various Ordnance Survey maps, of which the very large scale (10' to the mile) map surveyed in 1889 is especially useful, showing enough detail to make interpretation of what remains a little easier.

Once a house has been identified we have to decide whether to include it in our survey. This can be quite straightforward, for example a workshop on Back Mill Street Ancoats originally a block of back-to-back houses built around the turn of the nineteenth century is obviously a prime example of housing built for workers, but what of a nicely built Georgian house with pillared entrance and good quality architectural stone work? This was not built for workers to live in originally and as such would not seem to qualify, but a lot of middle-class Georgian housing rapidly became multiple tenancy slum property as the wealthier tenants moved out to the near suburbs. In these cases we do a little preliminary research using the rate books and census returns; if the house was tenanted by one respectable tradesperson after another, we do not include it; if it did descend to the poor it is one of ours. This is obviously a slightly grey area and we would record properties which are the right age but a bit 'posh' purely because we could gain access.

MEDReG is a small society in terms of numbers of members, essentially a group of people who do things rather than a society where one goes on trips or has regular monthly speakers. Most of our work being done by individuals, we need only to meet to discuss progress and deal with any business which needs the participation of the whole group. MEDReG members tend to bring what skills they have to bear on specific areas of the group's activities, for instance some specialise in research, some in drawing; we have a very able photographer, while others write up and edit the research for publication. The one thing we all do participate in is the recording session, where we survey and photograph a property. These sessions usually take place on a Sunday morning when as many as possible of us descend on the venue, where armed with tapes and rulers, torches

because there is a dearth of light, and sometimes ladders because there are no stairs, we spend the time measuring, photographing and sketching anything that doesn't move. We then retire to a convenient hostelry for an apres-measuring session and debriefing, after which the hapless drawer takes home a sheaf of sketches and measurements and in time produces a set of scale plans and elevations. All our drawings are in imperial measure; this was decided upon as it was felt that as these cottages were built in feet and inches we would draw them the same way. Our adopted scale 1/8th inch to 1 foot fits nicely onto A4 sheets which is the format we use for our files.

1,3&5 LITTLE PITT STREET MANCHESTER

front elevation in 1982 recorded by MEDREG



dean st. little pitt street 1&3? 5

Materials:
 Front elevation walls - solid 9" handmade bricks bonded in Flemish bond. Stone cuts to timber window frames to left hand side, timber frame to right hand side.
 Rear elevation walls - solid 9" handmade bricks bonded in English bond. Stone cutters to timber window frames to left hand side, timber frame to right hand side.
 Roof -

Extract from MEDReG record file.

The single biggest limiting factor in the speed of our surveying, has been the difficulty in gaining access to the buildings we want to measure. Empty locked-up buildings can be a headache as the owners can be well nigh impossible to trace. Buildings still in use are not without problems, it usually takes a personal visit to the tenant or owner or both to obtain permission to survey and this is a difficulty when most members are at work themselves. The majority of occupiers of buildings are quite happy to let us measure their property once our good intentions are explained. Getting them to open premises specially on a Sunday is more difficult but again most people are very helpful and will make the effort to unlock on their day off, all the more surprising when it is obvious that to the average shopkeeper anyone wanting to grope about in semi-darkness in a two-hundred years old cellar for fun is at the least, a little eccentric. Sometimes owners will not give up their time, and who can blame them, in which case we have no option but to survey during the week. When busy offices or shops are involved this can be difficult to do without causing too much disturbance even if we can find enough members available to do the survey. This year an interesting way out of this quandary arose when one of our newest recruits Pat Garside, a lecturer at Salford University, involved students as part of their course-work. The students selected buildings from a list

we provided and made their own arrangements to gain access, survey and draw up the houses. They gained an interesting project and we gained several more dwellings recorded. We hope that this success will be repeated next year and go on until we have completed our survey.

There is nothing particularly difficult in doing a survey; as with most things anyone can do it with a little practice. The golden rule is to measure everything, as it can be difficult if not impossible to get a second chance. Every room in a property is surveyed in the same way, each wall must be measured as no opposite walls are ever the same length, likewise the diagonals must be taken as the room will never contain a right angle. Windows, doors and other features will be measured and their positions fixed by measurement from the corners of the wall. Ceiling heights, position of roof timbers and staircases all come in for the same treatment and are sketched and photographed. The exterior is measured in the same way, heights usually having to be estimated by counting brick courses, having first measured the height of a sample. All the architectural features are noted, for instance the type of brick and its bonding, whether the roof is stone or slate or of course asbestos or felt. This builds up a picture of what exists today, which we always draw, but we also need to know what the house looked like when it was built. Sometimes not much has altered but often they have been more or less gutted. If the altered building is in bad condition it can often tell us more than if nicely decorated as the lines of the original staircases, doorways and windows can easily be made out.

Recording is a fairly fast process slowed down by external factors but researching the recorded properties is by its nature a slow and painstaking affair. If at all possible we try to get sight of the deeds of the property as these can tell us much about the original owner of the land, the purchaser, mortgages, when the house was erected, any conditions or covenants laid down at the time and its subsequent history of sale and resale. Most of the history of the occupancy of the house is to be found in the census enumerators' returns and rate books which are kept at the Central Reference Library. These records give the details of owners and tenants, their age, place of birth, marital status, and occupation. They can show whether cellars were let separately and if houses were in multiple occupancy, for example in the case of No.5 Little Pitt Street, Ancoats the 1851 census shows four separate families and a lodger numbering 17 people in all, occupying four rooms and a cellar. The social effects of this overcrowding can be seen from sources such as Dr. Henry Gaultier's investigation into the 1832 outbreak of cholera,² the reports of Manchester and Salford Sanitary Association³ and the writings of Kay,⁴ Engels⁵ and others. Also consulted are rate books, trade directories for Manchester and of course the various maps and plans which cover the area being researched. Out of this diverse material our researcher Beryl Johnson and her colleagues build up a fuller picture of the history of the house and its surrounding area in some detail. Then it is written up and edited for publication. Of necessity a great deal of interesting material has to be omitted from the final publication. It is hoped that this may ultimately be incorporated into a book or books of more general interest at a later date

We have now been working on this project for four years and although progress has seemed slow we have now reached the point where we can see our labour bearing fruit. We have scale drawings and photographs of 25 surveyed sites which represent some 45 original buildings and the research is completed on most of them. The final



Dean Street cottages prior to their removal to Greater Manchester Museum of Science and Industry.

product is a record for each building consisting of a map of Manchester divided into the old rating districts; a map of the rating district in which the particular property lies; location plans; a set of scale plans and elevations showing the building as surveyed with any evidence of alteration or original features; a brief history of the rating district giving a general outline of the area as it was from 1780 to 1850 and the full history of the house from its building to its closure or demolition, supported by excerpts from the rate books and census returns. The first building to be published was a group of cottages — numbers 1, 3 and 5 Little Pitt Street, Ancoats, demolished shortly after our survey. These had originally been two houses but were converted into three some time between 1820 and 1829. Copies of the research were deposited with Manchester Central Reference Library, the Working Class Movements Library and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. We hope that the archive, when complete, will be a valuable source for any historian interested in the social history of Manchester or housing in general. In the meantime not enough of our work has been published for us to get back a great deal of feedback from users, although the research material has been in use in the Education Department of the Greater Manchester Museum of Science and Industry for some time to great effect.

Over the past four years we have observed a disturbing process at work in Manchester's stock of early housing. The full cycle seems to be as follows: in the late eighteenth century a house is erected, then comes two hundred years of neglect. Next, discovery by MEDReG and inclusion on our list of dwellings to be surveyed, followed with startling rapidity by an overnight transformation into a small car park. This is bad enough when the car park stage follows our survey but all too often it happens *before* we can arrange a recording session. Out of 34 recorded sites, 15 have already been cleared and car parked. From this

blight of car parks a sad fact emerges, none of these venerable but humble relics of Manchester's early dwellings were listed buildings, and this brings us to another activity of MEDReG.

The criteria used in the past for listing buildings of historical or architectural importance were in our opinion, heavily biased towards 'grand' domestic buildings, almost any large Georgian town house will be listed, but a surviving cottage of similar age will at present almost certainly not be, however important it might be historically. In 1974 all towns and cities in England were surveyed for listing purposes. In Manchester and probably most other urban areas the list seems very unrepresentative. The obvious candidates are listed, examples of urban splendour such as Waterhouse's Town Hall, Watt's warehouse (now the Britannia Hotel) and some of the great industrial undertakings like Murray's mills in Ancoats are all listed, but smaller, less spectacular buildings are not included and this despite the fact that in theory any building dated before 1850 should be automatically listed. It is true that if a building was old, small and a pub it stood a very good chance of being listed in 1974 but if just old and small, it stood very little chance at all. The organisation which looks after listing for the Department of the Environment is English Heritage, at present reviewing the listing of urban areas. MEDReG has therefore been engaged in another search, one to find every vernacular building earlier than 1850 in the old township of Manchester, which roughly corresponds to the city centre with the addition of Ancoats and Collyhurst. We have amassed a list of over one hundred separate properties and have sent it to English Heritage indicating which buildings we consider it essential to list if a choice has to be made. That our submission to English Heritage is as comprehensive as it is, is due to the work of one member, Peter Drew, who devoted many hours and much shoe leather to his search of Manchester.

Listing a building does not preserve it but it does draw attention to that building and makes it a little more difficult for it to succumb to the car park syndrome. A case in point would be the three cottages in Bradley Street off Houldsworth Street near Stevenson Square. Nos. 4, 6 and 8 Bradley Street are one up and one down cottages with cellars, built in 1787 and connected by workshops to the much grander houses which front onto Lever Street. As these are the *only* known surviving examples of the intimacy of the homes of the masters and artisans in late eighteenth-century Manchester they are of great interest — there are simply no more left. During the nineteenth century they became slum dwellings of the worst kind. No. 4 for example had twelve or thirteen people living in it in every census from 1841 on. Pressure from MEDReG and others caused them to be spot listed in 1984 as Grade II buildings but the owner of the site wanted to develop and upgrade the Lever Street properties and applied for planning permission to knock down Nos. 6 and 8 to make — yes you've guessed it, a car park. Consent was eventually refused after a public enquiry. We were delighted but this does not mean that the cottages will be preserved — far from it, if money is not spent they will fall down, indeed No. 4 already has a large hole in the front wall. It is easy to blame the developers but that would be simplistic. The developers would have been quite happy to leave all three cottages standing, but in order to get planning permission for the upgrade to office accommodation they had to provide on-site car parking. The site is fully built up so the only way to do this was to demolish. Once permission was refused the developers faced an impasse; without providing the car park they could not

obtain planning permission and without the demolition they could not provide car parking. It seemed the future for the whole site was bleak but we recently had an assurance from the City Planning Department that the developers were preparing another plan and that grant aid was still available. We presume that on this occasion the regulations have been made more flexible and look forward to the day when these unique buildings are finally safe from further degradation.

The Lever Street/Bradley Street complex is one case where preservation in situ is essential, but in other cases, where a house is isolated in its modern surroundings, preservation on a different site, as has been successfully done at Avoncroft Museum of Buildings in Worcestershire, and the North of England Open Air Museum at Beamish in County Durham is the best alternative. Early in its career MEDReG was able to interest the Greater Manchester Museum of Science and Industry in a project to save some of the city's early dwellings and re-erect them on a site within the museum as a 'slum court' with the aim of not only preserving them but also of using them to illustrate the conditions and life of the working people of the last century. A pair of cottages, Nos. 36 and 38 Dean Street off Great Ancoats Street were in imminent danger of collapse and with the aid of a grant from Greater Manchester County (of blessed memory) were taken down, numbered, and are at present stored in the museum vaults awaiting re-erection on a suitable site. Unfortunately we have not, since the demise of G.M.C been able to raise any money to have the other derelict buildings for the project taken down. For many it is already too late, the bulldozer has already done its work and cars browse upon the unmarked graves. If money cannot be found from somewhere we will have only the Dean Street cottages to re-erect and the whole project will have lost its importance.

Raising money is always a problem for any group — MEDReG has been lucky in that we have been aided financially by small grants from the W.E.A. and the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society who have been very supportive. Another group which has helped us in the past is the Salford Heritage Project, a part of the Greater Manchester Archaeology Unit. They have been executing a programme of rescue archaeology in Salford and as two of their sites are 'our' style of house we have been able to return the compliment and offer them the experience we have gained in the problems of interpretation which much altered buildings from the Georgian period pose. They were able to persuade owners of one of the groups of dwellings in King Street, Salford, that they should donate any 'removable' fixtures to the Greater Manchester Museum for use in the reconstruction of the aforementioned slum court. MEDReG was able to take out several cast iron hob grates with stone surrounds and a cast iron wash boiler, amidst unparalleled clouds of soot and general dirt that will be fondly remembered by the members present. The Greater Manchester Archaeology Unit have joined us in the presentation of exhibitions and displays; we now have a set of display boards illustrating our activities and of the Salford Heritage Project.

There are many contemporary reports in nineteenth century Manchester of the overcrowding, squalor and lack of sanitation amongst the poor. Kay, Engels, Reach⁶ and others have left graphic descriptions of these conditions, and evidence of overcrowding is plain to see in the census returns for the houses we have investigated. These same writers also criticised the fabric of the buildings themselves, poorly built and badly maintained.

The houses we have measured, fully justified these reports. Some of them it is true are built of good brick, nicely bonded quite often in Flemish Bond and with fine stone work details but these are houses originally built for prosperous owners, which later came down in the world; late alterations are poorly executed. The houses built expressly for the working classes are a different matter; on some the bonding is so bad as to be non-existent, bricks simply piled on bricks in an entirely random fashion, chimney stacks and cross walls not keyed in; the whole appearance is of a building erected as cheaply as possible. Considering that Engels was complaining in 1844 of the lack of maintenance of cottages, then probably only twenty years old, it is a miracle any of them remain at all. It can only be assumed that continuous occupation and usage has ensured that any bits which did fall off had to be put back — albeit badly. There is no evidence remaining of the lack of sanitary facilities, later alterations have seen to that but plenty of map evidence exists for the enormous number of houses which had to share one tap and one privy. It seems from what we have seen that most houses were provided with a fireplace in each room, certainly on the ground floor and more often than not in the bedrooms as well, but never with cooking facilities, the simplest of hob grates being fitted. In one house, in Back Portugal Street we could find no evidence of a chimney ever having existed, although this could be a problem of interpretation. If true, the conditions inside could only have been marginally better than out in the street. One feature we found surprising at first was the size of the window fitted to these cottages; they seemed very large when compared to the meanness of the rest of the fittings. One explanation might be that the narrowness of the streets and the all pervading gloom under the permanent smoke canopy meant that large windows had to be provided if the occupants were to see at all. A more cynical view might be that a large window was cheaper per square foot to build than a brick wall. Possibly also light rooms attracted tenants keen to do work at home. It is one of the revealing features of our research that many questions surrounding the building and use of working-class housing remain unanswered.

MEDReG is unusual amongst historical societies in that being dedicated to a single purpose it would seem to have a limited life. Once our aims are achieved what then? It is true it will be several years but eventually we will have to decide our future. We might stay as a group promoting interest in early working-class housing in Manchester or spread our searches into surrounding areas; we might just meet occasionally to relive past glories over a drink. Whatever its future, MEDReG is at present just as strong as when it was founded. The reasons for our continued health are not difficult to find. Working in a group like ours has several benefits. Many people have an interest but can never get around to doing any serious work on their own, working with others on a long project such as

ours is an excellent introduction into research and it is satisfying to be involved with the production of a finished piece of work however small the individual contribution. Our measuring sessions offer unrivalled opportunities to get covered in filth, sometimes in total darkness, to those members so inclined, whilst less adventurous individuals soak up the atmosphere — literally, as heavy rain and leaky roofs frequently accompany our forays. As reward



MEDReG members surveying houses in Back Portugal Street.

for our endeavours we treat ourselves to a couple of summer excursions, usually including a picnic or pub lunch, to other areas with working-class housing — Port Sunlight, Saltaire and Hebden Bridge have all been visited. Another traditional function is our Christmas dinner which we try to eat in a building of suitable character i.e. earlier than 1850, though I must admit that food takes precedence over history in this instance.

As has been mentioned MEDReG does not have regular meetings. If anyone is interested in joining us, telephone the secretary, Tim Gausdsen, (061-681 2654). We welcome new members, but be warned — MEDReG can be addictive.

NOTES

1. J. Roberts, *Working-class housing in nineteenth century Manchester — the example of John St. Irk Town, 1826-1936* (1982)
2. H. Gaultier, *The origin and progress of the malignant cholera in Manchester considered chiefly in their bearing on the contagiousness and the secondary causes of the disease* (1833)
3. *Reports of the Manchester and Salford Sanitary Association* — Archives Dept., Manchester Central Reference Library
4. J.P. Kay, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes employed in the cotton manufacture in Manchester* (1832)
5. F. Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1892)
6. A.B. Reach — ed. C. Aspin, *Manchester and the Textile Districts in 1849* (1972); see also the more recent *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales 1849-1851* (vol.1) edited by Jules Ginswick (1983)