

# The English Parsonage in the Early Nineteenth Century

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with new photography by Martin Charles

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# Introduction



The story of the Victorian parsonage is part of the well-known history of the gothic revival. But the story of the early nineteenth-century parsonage is a different matter altogether.

From the 1810s onwards the governors of Queen Anne's Bounty, the Church of England fund established to assist poor clergymen, began to issue mortgages for new parsonages once an application procedure had been completed. This procedure required the parson's architect or builder to submit a full set of drawings and a specification for approval by his local bishop. As a result we have many hundreds of detailed applications in diocesan archives, a documentary treasure that has no equal on this scale with any other building type.

The documents themselves, of course, form merely part of a magnificent heritage that can so easily be seen in those many hundreds of parishes all over the country that still have early nineteenth-century parsonages or former parsonage houses. These buildings have become one of the most readily recognisable features of the English village. But it is thanks to the thorough nature of the mortgage application documents that we can really learn about them and appreciate them for their architectural value. We can begin to see how the style and layout of these houses changed over time, and learn the names of those who commissioned them and designed them. In fact the special value of the parsonage files in the county record offices is that they give us an unparalleled insight into the development of the smaller English detached house at a critical period in its history. In particular we can also see exactly how the gothic revival happened, because a great wave of parsonage-house building coincided with it. The elevations, plans and details of the houses of the period, many of them in the form of beautiful drawings that have lain hidden for nearly 200 years, are all there waiting to be discovered. For this we have to thank the clerks of the Church offices of the time, and in particular Christopher Hodgson, the long-time secretary to the governors of Queen Anne's Bounty, for insisting on the highest and most exacting standards from applicants.

The story is not, however, just about architectural style and language. The way in which parsonage houses from the beginning of the nineteenth-century onwards grew in size and quality provides a continuous commentary on the change in the social position of the rector or vicar. At the beginning of our period we encounter the 'squarson', the squire-parson, possibly an absentee with a second or

The rectory at Winterborne Came, near Dorchester, Dorset, a fine thatched house with an attractive verandah designed in the fashionable small country villa style by an unknown architect in the late 1820s.



even a third incumbency some distance away, and who acted like a member of the gentry and hunted and danced with them; with the growth first of the evangelical movement and then subsequently with Tractarianism he is replaced in time by quite a different sort of person – the high-minded Victorian priest living in the heart of his village. This story is familiar from early Victorian literature such as the novels of William Makepeace Thackeray or George Eliot, and it is beautifully illustrated by the development of the parsonage house over this period.

First of all, as our story opens most parsonage houses are in a terrible state of decay and quite unsuited for the second son of a member of the gentry who might by then have taken up his position in the parish: it was not unusual for many incumbents, like Mr Elton in Jane Austen's *Emma*, to be living in a house distinctly inferior in size and quality to that of neighbours of similar social class. Secondly, many more houses needed to be built from the late 1830s onwards because it became increasingly unacceptable, and eventually illegal in most cases, to hold more than one clerical incumbency. The long suffering and badly-paid curate who stood in for the local clergyman, living in very humble circumstances, was eventually replaced by a full-time parson who required a decent house near his church. And thirdly, the actual nature of the job changed: the earnest clergyman of the 1840s, whether evangelical or high-church, required a distinct type of house that could not be mistaken for a common dwelling-place or a minor country house. At the beginning of our period bishops would have objected to a parson building a private oratory in his new parsonage house; by the end, some encouraged it. And by 1860 too, both architects and parsons were writing explicitly about the architecture and significance of these houses in a way that they had never done before. Over our period the offices of the Church authorities who financed the new parsonages developed from a handful of clerks working in an old house to two substantial and expansively accommodated organisations with considerable internal bureaucracies. Building a new house is expensive – for most people, the most expensive project of their lives – and changes in patterns of construction consequently always indicate parallel social and economic developments. Unlike other economic indicators, however, the houses are often beautiful and memorable, and tell a story of their own. One of those stories is a clear demonstration of what people needed in their homes, and how they expected them to look.



And, as it happens, the early development of the Victorian parsonage coincides with one of the most obscure chapters in English architectural history. The architecture of the 1830s has been overlooked by architectural historians, coming as it does between the easily identifiable Regency style and the earnest buildings of the high gothic revival. Anyone who is not an expert in English architectural history might be hard put to identify an architect of note who was working between the ages of John Nash and A.W.N. Pugin, and the general impression is often that a kind of romantic and incompetent gothick style perpetuated by local builders lingered on until the Victorians put an end to it. In fact a close examination of the story of the parsonages shows that the real situation was a great deal more interesting and complicated. It soon becomes clear that the builders of the period are not anything like as romantic and incompetent, not to mention gothick, as conventional histories like to suggest. They are professional people working in an increasingly demanding professional atmosphere, and their work soon reflects their concerns: they need to accommodate a fast increasing number of specific technical spaces and equipment inside their new houses, and they are required for the first time to think hard about how exactly the parts of a building fit together and how exactly the thing is to be paid for. Coincidentally they have access for the first time ever to accurate drawings of the historical buildings of England, even if they do not quite yet know what to make of them, and that at a time when politicians and historians are engaged in a period of national introspection. The result was that the gothic, or more accurately Tudor-gothic, style of the 1830s is quite different from either that of the 1820s or the 1840s. There is a period of architecture here that has long deserved detailed treatment.

And on top of all that there is also the story of the birth of the true gothic revival, in many ways a different matter altogether and quite possibly as much to do with the national psyche as it is to do with architectural style. Pugin is the central figure in this second story. Very often he appears in architectural histories as either the end or the beginning of a tradition; alternatively he is treated primarily biographically, as a one-off who with his various peculiarities does not compare easily to other architectural figures of his generation. This study of contemporary parsonages aims to put Pugin back where he belongs – in the context of the architects of his time who faced

similar problems. It was the extraordinary way in which he managed to provide an architectural imagery of great coherence and power exactly at a time when English religious society was searching for a way of projecting a vision of inspiration and control that makes him so important to any history of architecture; and it is the enormously rich supply of detailed documentation that the parsonage files contain that makes it possible to see exactly where it was that his work differed from that of his colleagues, and indeed how it was that the changes he made came to be echoed in the work of architects during the later part of the nineteenth century. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, theoretical architectural principles cannot change the way we live; our houses have developed not because Pugin or anyone else made impressive statements but because artistic genius has allowed social conditions and preoccupations to express themselves powerfully.

We have in this country been very fortunate in our historians of the early nineteenth century, especially in relation to the Church of England: in particular, Peter Virgin, G.F.A. Best, Robert Hole and R.J. Smith have chronicled the 'Church in an age of negligence', in Virgin's memorable phrase. On the other hand, there has been until now almost nothing (and nothing at all currently in print) about the houses the parsons were building. No one has yet transformed the many intriguing details to be found in the later entries of Sir Howard Colvin's *Biographical dictionary of British architects* into a coherent narrative. What follows is based on a study of some 500 parsonages, to a great extent although not exclusively drawn from the diocesan collections now mainly located in county record offices. Further useful evidence has been found in many other places, including the records of Queen Anne's Bounty and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, now at the Church of England Record Centre, and the Royal Institute of British Architects Library Drawings Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum; but the true glory of this history is provided by the many hundreds of houses themselves, still standing, very often scarcely altered and waiting to be rediscovered, ready to tell their astonishing story of a great revolution in English domestic architectural history.

I have tried in this book to present a collection of different types of image to do justice to the story of the houses. Most of the drawings in archival collections consist simply of plans and elevations, and very often they are needed in order to present the facts of a particular

instance in the clearest possible way. But I have also chosen to include drawings that seem to me to be unusual or attractive in order to give a sense of the delightful work that is hidden away, and also to give an indication of the geographical spread of the various collections where clergy house drawings can be found (which in one case shown here is as far away as Australia). I have also wanted to demonstrate how the style of the drawings develops along with the style of the architecture – partly because of the increasing professionalism as architects begin to replace builders and surveyors, and partly also because of the greater importance attached to these houses by their designers as the mid century nears. I have also included a selection from the published drawings that architects were looking at, particularly during the critical years of the 1820s and 1830s, in order to convey a sense of the interests and values of these far-away people. On top of all this, the magnificent photographs of Martin Charles convey so well the delightful and varied architecture of the houses that one could almost be standing in front of them. It is as much thanks to him as to my own researches that this neglected but important chapter in English architectural history will come alive before you in the pages that follow.