



Late 18th Century London Town House

Some notes on the restoration of the first floor front room chimney piece within a late 18th Century London town house. The chimney piece perhaps attributable to the workshop of the Devall family in Little Portland Street.

Research Report
January 2015



Plate 1: Chimney-piece form after cleaning and restoration work undertaken by Melluish and Davis associates Ltd in 2012. Although much of the surface discolouration has been removed, some deep staining remains and this can perhaps be associated with an earlier cleaning with acids at an unknown date. The central tablet depicts a classical, relief in the antique, Roman, manner, but was probably modelled in terra-cotta by an English sculptor working for the masonry or sculptural workshop that produced the chimney-piece. This process of production at this date required the production of a terra-cotta original, which was then copied in marble. This process accounts for the appearance of closely related centre tablets on chimney-pieces within Encombe House in Dorset.

Due to structural problems within the chimney-breast and brick arch supporting the slab, the chimney-piece from the first floor front room of a large London town house was removed by our masons. During removal it was apparent that the chimney-piece had not been moved since it was installed, and during cleaning and restoration at our Datchet workshop a number of features were identified, which provide an insight into production techniques at the end of the 18th century

Prior to restoration work existing coal soot was removed from all of the internal sections of the chimney-piece. The depth of this problem was considerable as identified on the image below which shows one of the pilaster panels forming the central section of the jamb. The whiter areas indicate where sections of Portland stone had been used to hold the three elements of marble forming the jamb, the inground (or architrave) the pilaster panel and the outground together. The darker areas indicate where soot from the coal fire had penetrated behind the back of the jamb, perhaps an indication that there was some movement within the fabric of the building whilst real fires were still being used as a means of heating. Plate 2

Additional work was required removing the iron cramps that retained the elements to the building as well as those holding the various elements forming the chimney-piece together for these will continue to generate staining within the marble in the years ahead. Plate 3

Plate 3: The left hand plinth block taken from above. Substantial iron cramps join the two sections of marble to a central section of Portland stone. To prevent further staining these iron cramps were removed and replaced with copper wire.



Plate 4: Detail of one of the blockings showing the pitted nature of the surface of the marble ground, the result of acid cleaning in the past, particularly clear in the bottom left hand corner.



Plate 2: One of the pilaster panels prior to cleaning. The darkened areas indicate that soot from the coal fire had penetrated within the jamb of the chimney-piece. The rust mark visible on the plaster bedding at the base of the pilaster is the residue from the iron cramp used to retain the torus moulding beneath the pilaster to the fabric of the building.

Once the rear unseen areas had been cleaned, the exterior facing area of the chimney-piece was lightly cleaned on a test trial basis. It became apparent that at some point in its history the chimney-piece had been painted with a mild acid (perhaps a compound, such as brick clean), which had eaten into the surface of the soft marble. The effects of the use of this compound had a detrimental effect on the marble, causing the surface to roughen and seemingly also strengthening the existing atmospheric discolouration (resulting from smoke from coal fires etc) on the surface and within the marble. Test trials on the depth of this pitting were undertaken and as a result of this a light consolidation of the surface was elected on as the best means of preserving the chimney-piece.

The nature of this acid cleaning is discernible within the following two images which shows the pitting of the surface caused by the application of acid. Plates 4 and 5.

Some additional earlier repairs were also evident, in the astragal moulding at the top of the right hand pilaster panel, and in the rubbed over edges of the plinth blocks (see Plate 10), but particularly noticeable was the re-running of the scotia mould of the left hand cornice end as illustrated below.



Plate 5: Detail of the incense burner from one of the blockings showing the existing discoloration and surface grime as well as a slight sheen resulting from previous cleaning using a weak acid.



Plate 6: Detail of the right hand end of the cornice showing that the upper edge of the cornice had been damaged and the scotia moulding forming the upper edge of the shelf rubbed in to disguise the damage.



Plate 7: Detail looking down onto the top face of the soffit, showing the hole to the centre of the soffit, almost certainly intended to allow for the introduction of a bolt to support the underside of the soffit, but never introduced. The sheen to the top seen face of the soffit bears comparison to the chiselled unseen side, with the sheen of the former a result of acid cleaning in the past.

A number of interesting features were also uncovered. The soffit, had been drilled to the centre, a process generally introduced, from the mid 18th century, in order to support the underside of the soffit, by the means of a threaded bolt and nut which passed through the soffit and into a large stone liner (or occasionally a wrought iron chimney bar) placed above the soffit and hidden behind the frieze. However in this instance the hole drilled is covered by the fascia above the soffit, thereby preventing any bolt from being attached to any liner, as the fascia is supported to the back with a thin stone liner which covered the whole. Presumably therefore this is a simple Georgian mistake. See Plate 7.

Similarly comparison of the two composite capitals provide an insight into the finishing of the carving for both capitals have an anthemion ornament to the centre, comparison of one to the other indicate a degree of freedom of completion, with the left hand pilaster having a far bolder anthemion than that on the right. See Plate 8.

Some residual scribe marks were also visible on the right hand cornice return, showing where the next dental was to be cut away, as shown on the following page, Plate 9.



Plate 8: The two composite pilaster capitals showing the variation in finishing of the anthemion ornament, that on the left hand side is more boldly treated.



Plate 9: Detail of the right hand cornice, showing scribed cuts in the marble indicating where the next section of the dental course was to be cut out. This was not effected as this section of the cornice was let back behind the plaster face.

Some more drastic repair work was required for the internal plinth of the right hand jamb, had deteriorated in the past and an extension had been introduced, as identified by the key marks on the face of the internal return. The causes for this appears to have been due to a break down in the structural integrity of this particular piece of marble, perhaps resulting from exposure to excessive heat. The breakdown of this piece of marble is visible in the image below, which shows that the edge and face are showing considerable signs of distress and wear with the surface marble breaking up when touched, even lightly. To resolve this issue an inch section of marble was cut off, the marble, the newly exposed area consolidated and an extension re-attached to provide a projection to support the projection of the architrave at its base. At the same time the original late 18th century iron cramp was removed and replaced with copper for the iron oxide staining can penetrate the marble and is impossible to remove.

Whilst restoration work was progressing some additional detail on some related late 18th century marble chimney-pieces was uncovered. As yet no specific factual detail has been discovered to suggest which London workshop may have produced this chimney-piece, but the fact that all of the following chimney-pieces do not easily fit into the oeuvre of any of the large late 18th century sculptors or masons workshops, such as those of Thomas Carter at Hyde Park Corner, or Richard Westmacott in Mount Street may indicate that they all originated from another producer.

Plate 10: Detail of the right hand plinth block showing the breakdown of the block of marble forming the internal return. Previous repairs have been effected including the addition of an extension now lost. This deteriorated block was reduced in width by 1" and then re-attached with a replacement extension to support the projection of the architrave moulding on the base. This image also illustrates some previous repairs where the chipped or worn edges of the block were rubbed over- a feature not on the outer edge of the facing internal plinth block, but clearly visible to the side of it.



Of these, seemingly the most likely, is that of the Devall family, probably the younger John Devall (1728-1794) for his father died in 1774. The younger followed in his father's footsteps as master-mason to the royal palaces and in 1784 he became Master of the Masons' Company. Devall executed his own designs for chimney-pieces as well as those designed by architects. For example in October 1771, the architect John Carr writing from York to the Duke of Portland mentions;

"By Dixons account the Dining Room at Burlington house will be pretty near finished by Christmas, Did your Grace speak to Deval about a Chimney piece for it. In the design I sent for the Stucco panels I made a drawing of a chimney piece of a proper size for the Room, with a fluted architrave round the chimney & with Columns to it much like that in the drawg Room at Welbeck. There should also be one for the drawing Room of about £ 60 Value. If your Grace have not given orders for them, you would do well to give Deval a line, and refer him to my drawing for the model for the Dining Room Chimney, & leave the Design of the drawing room to himself".

(University of Nottingham MS PwF 2, 539)

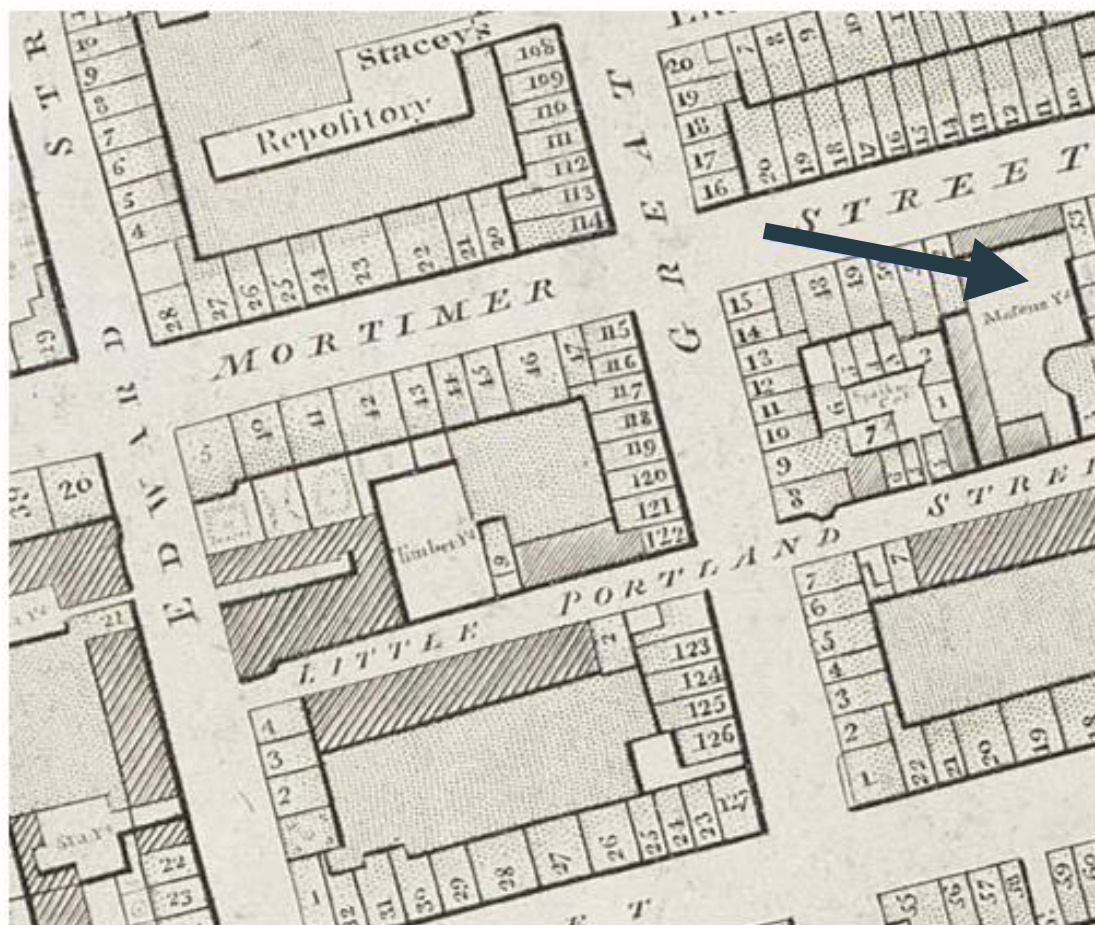


Plate 11: Horwood's map of London 1792-9 showing the "Mafons Yd" on the North side of Little Portland Street, presumably the Devall family yard where a variety of chimney-piece "patterns" were to be seen.

In 1786 Carr wrote (again) to the Duke of Portland about a house he was designing:

'I do not attempt to mark out the chimneypieces for the rooms because Your Grace may see a variety of patterns at Mr. Devall's or at Mr. Mails at the end of Great Portland Street'.

Devall's shop was in Little Portland Street which he left to his son, also called John. The workshops were clearly extensive for Devall's will refers to the 'shops, sheds, yards, gardens, backsides and tenements' and this area can be identified on Richard Horwood's Map of London which dates to 1792-9. Plate 11.

The close proximity of the Devall family yard to the house this chimney-piece was fitted into, combined with the fact that the Devalls are known to have worked with the Adam brothers on a number of building projects, including for example the provision of chimney-pieces to drawings provided by Adam for Nostell Priory, Newby Hall, Croome Court, Lansdowne House and Harewood House and speculative building within the Adams development of Mansfield Street (John Devall is mentioned in the surviving Adam drawings in the Soane Museum for 13 Mansfield Street) adds further weight to the possibility that the chimney-piece may have come from the Devalls.

Related chimney-pieces include those following, Plates 12 to 15.



Plate 12: Chimney-piece formerly within the rear west room, 2nd floor of 148 Piccadilly (now demolished). Although of an Corinthian order of architecture, the projecting, inlaid columns and inlaid pilasters generate a similarly substantial blocking projection which bears very strong similarities to the restored chimney-piece although the ornamentation is different. In keeping with several other chimney-pieces within this group the central tablet has a thin border around it. (LMA Image).

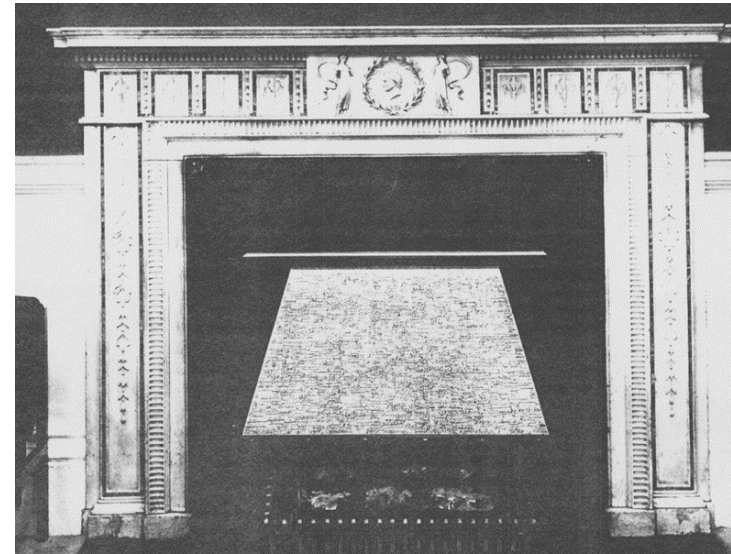


Plate 13: Chimney-piece, The Foreign Office incorporating a closely related frieze panel ornament both incorporating inlaid coloured marbles and related anthemion carvings. (NMR Image)

Plate 14: Chimney-piece Encombe House, Dorset incorporating a similar, but marginally less broad central tablet. (NMR)

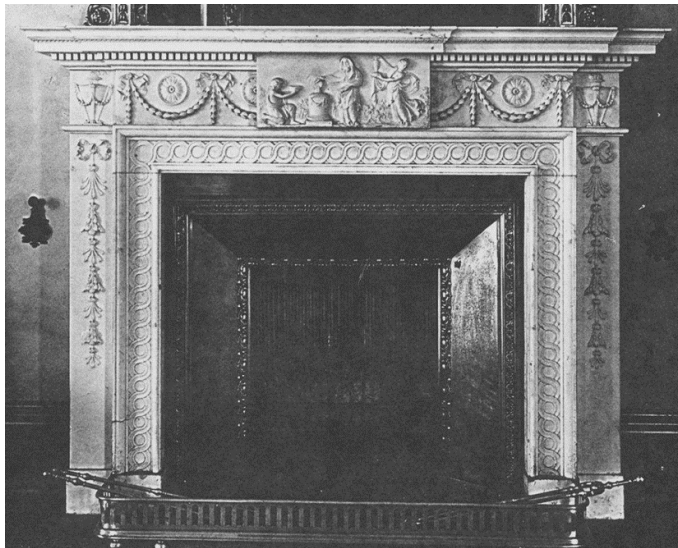


Plate 15: Chimney-piece Cams Hall, Fareham, Hampshire probably lost during the demolition of the interior in the 20th century. The frieze incorporates the same decorative inlaid pattern and anthemion decoration to the frieze. (NMR)

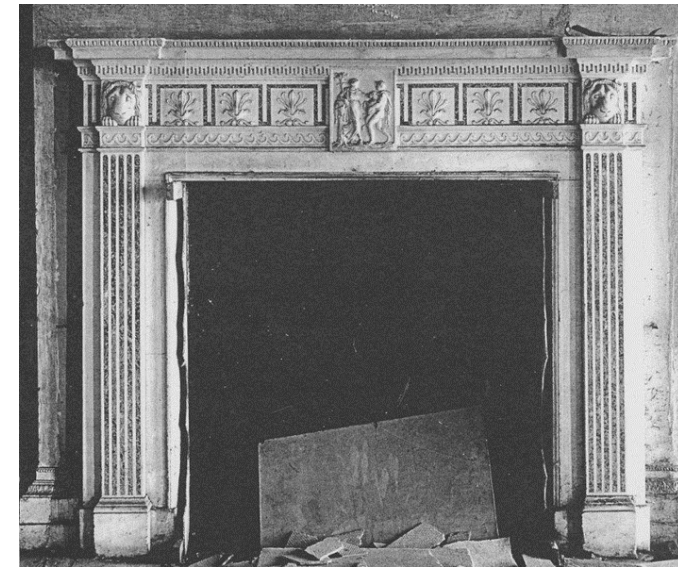




Plate 16: Detail of the central tablet of the chimney-piece in the ground floor rear room. The thin border to the edge is repeated on the first floor chimney-piece, and this feature may be indicative of the Devall family workshop.

Plate 17: Chimney-piece, a 20th century introduction, into Clarence House, St James's. Unfortunately the chimney-pieces' provenance is unrecorded but the inlaid ornament to the frieze panels and raised carving may suggest it originated from the Devalls workshop.



Plate 18: Chimney-piece formerly within the rear east room, 2nd floor of 148 Piccadilly (now demolished). The chimney-piece was of a smaller scale to that illustrated on page 8, an indication that it was fitted into a smaller room. In keeping with several other chimney-pieces within this group the central tablet has a thin border around it. (LMA Image).



It is perhaps interesting to note the repeated use of a similar centre tablet within different chimney-pieces stems from the process of manufacture whereby once a clay model had been created, closely related marble copies could be produced incorporating the same relief on a tablet which could be extended in width and height as required, but with the sculptural size generally remaining the same.. The repeated use of the same inlaid geometric border, or fret as they were generally referred to, together with the repeated carved anthemion leaf ornament is again indicative of the same yard producing a consistently popular motif, but it is also worth noting that many of the chimney-pieces illustrated above also incorporate a thin raised border to the edge of the tablet, a curious feature, rarely seen, and perhaps indicative of the Devall family workshop. It should also be noted that the ground floor chimney-piece within the same house incorporates a similar border as did the chimney-piece in the smaller room of 148 Piccadilly..

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12th October 2012

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