

## **A View from the Past**

# **Vanishing Kidderminster - should we preserve anything?**

**A talk given by**

**Ian Walker F.S.A.**

**to the**

**Kidderminster & District Archaeological & Historical Society**

**1969**

**Ian was a one of the Society's Directors of Excavations and a local builder.**

This presentation by Ian Walker is of particular interest since it came near the beginning of a period when great swathes of Georgian and Victorian properties across Kidderminster were demolished.

A typescript for this talk has survived and is clearly notes recorded by a member in the audience. None of the photographic slides used in the talk were with the typescript. The document presented here is a transcript of the notes with photographs and maps added in an attempt to give an idea of some of the illustrations that might have accompanied the original presentation.

Reference to comments added at the end are indicated by [1] , [2], [3] ... etc.

Bob Millward  
Kidderminster & District Archaeological & Historical Society  
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## Vanishing Kidderminster - should we preserve anything?

Ian Walker 1969

Nikolaus Pevsner, in "Buildings of England: Worcestershire" [1] says: "A town uncommonly devoid of visual pleasure and architectural interest". He excepts Church Street and is comparatively complimentary about Vicar Street, Caldwell Hall and Mortimer Hall (*previously know as 'Elderfield House'*). He criticises the Local Authority for putting the ring road across the front of the church. I believe he did St Mary's in twenty minutes, so feel sure he cannot have seen all the town properly.

J. Lees-Milne, in "A. Shell Guide: Worcestershire" [2] says: "For a large and prosperous town there is remarkably little to of appeal to aesthetes". "But", he goes on, "perhaps the most interesting architecture is the mid-late-C19 pseudo-Renaissance carpet factories". And a little later he says, "In the vicinity of the church are some charming and desirable C18 streets (about to be cleared away as slums)".

Recently an architect from another town asked me "What is happening to those streets of delightful Georgian cottages opposite Hepworths?".



*1924 OS map showing the Georgian grid of street cottages bounded by Lion St, Bromsgrove St, South St and George St. It is this area to which 'the architect' was referring. 'H' marks 'Hepworths'.*

They were then going. Until then I had not realised they were other than slums. How familiarity does breed contempt. Red brick is so normal to me that I was surprised when a holiday acquaintance admired our "mellow West Midland red brick".



*This is one of 'those streets' mentioned above as the bulldozer moves in on Cross Street in 1969*

There is a great deal of confusion in peoples' minds about preservation. There was in mine until recently; and it was partly to resolve my own dichotomy that I undertook the preparation of this talk.

I have worked on old Buildings and know how expensive it is. When one is rescued it needs to be remarkable indeed for enough people to "be willing to pay to see it, for it to be self supporting". None of this class exist in Kidderminster. If we save old buildings, an odd one here and there, logically the town will become studded with them and progress will be hampered, as it was before the days of Compulsory Purchase, by the individuals who will not sell at any price. One building, shorn of its surroundings, out of context, can look very odd indeed.

Conservation is a new concept. This means taking a whole area, as Coventry has done, modernising the houses as simply as possible, removing obsolete outbuildings, tidying up the whole area and re-letting.

This idea been going on for ten years or so now and is now gaining general acceptance.

Under the new Civic Amenities Act Bewdley and Stourport have both been scheduled Conservation Areas. Owners of property can have grants for repairing their property in addition to those previously available for improvements. Bewdley published a notice in the Kidderminster Times on 27th. December inviting owners of property in the Conservation Area to apply for grants from a £44,000 fund. Conservation can be a viable proposition and I feel that this is the proper course for Kidderminster to adopt.

*(Mr Walker here quoted from an article on Conservation that appeared in Financial Times, 14th. December; and then went on to consider Kidderminster from, a conservation point of view.)*

When I began to look at Kidderminster, I looked for distinctive buildings. I soon realised that only about four stood from before 1700-1750 [3]. So that everything standing today is post-Industrial Revolution.

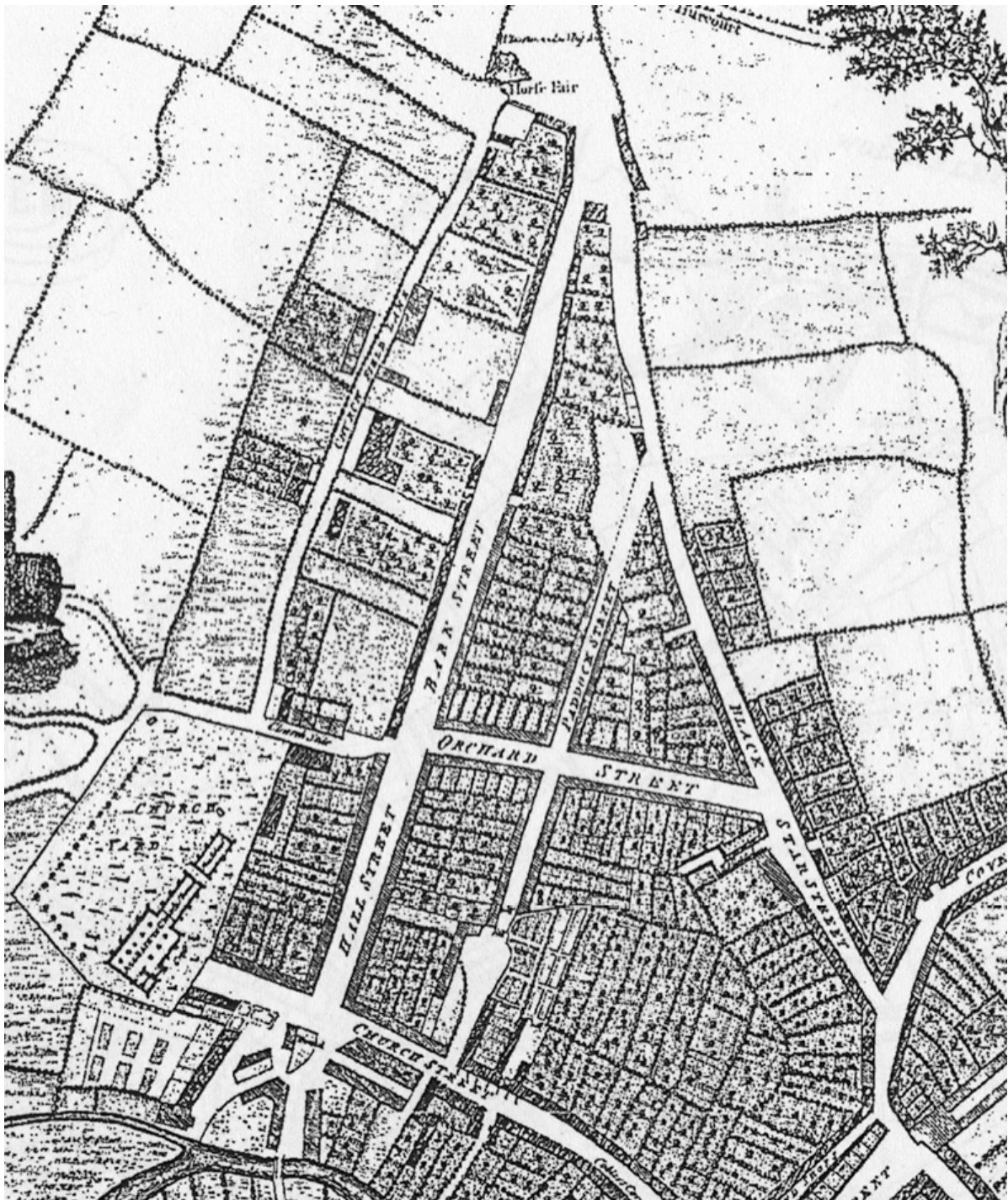
As factories were built houses sprang up around them. Mr Nickson mentioned certain areas as related to certain factories. When you look at Kidderminster today you will see that it is the product of a continuous process of house and factory building.

I want to take up the story in 1753, when Lord Foley commissioned John Doharty to prepare a scheme for 200 cottages "to house the workers in a new industry". Prior to 1753 weaving was a well established cottage industry here. Fragments of weavers' cottages may still survive in the older streets, but Lord Foley's are the earliest I have photographs of. This scheme is a redevelopment scheme in the modern sense of the word and a good starting point for my survey. [4]

I want now to examine building from 1753 to 1914. I choose the latter date because this is another turning point: when terraced cottages ceased to be built.

Lord Foley's scheme must have been the beginning of a process that obliterated almost entirely pre-1753 Kidderminster and pushed the boundaries out to Comberton, Franche, Foley Park and Broadwaters. Lord Foley's cottages are important in two ways. They are the first sizeable terraced cottage development and the first stage in factory development as well.

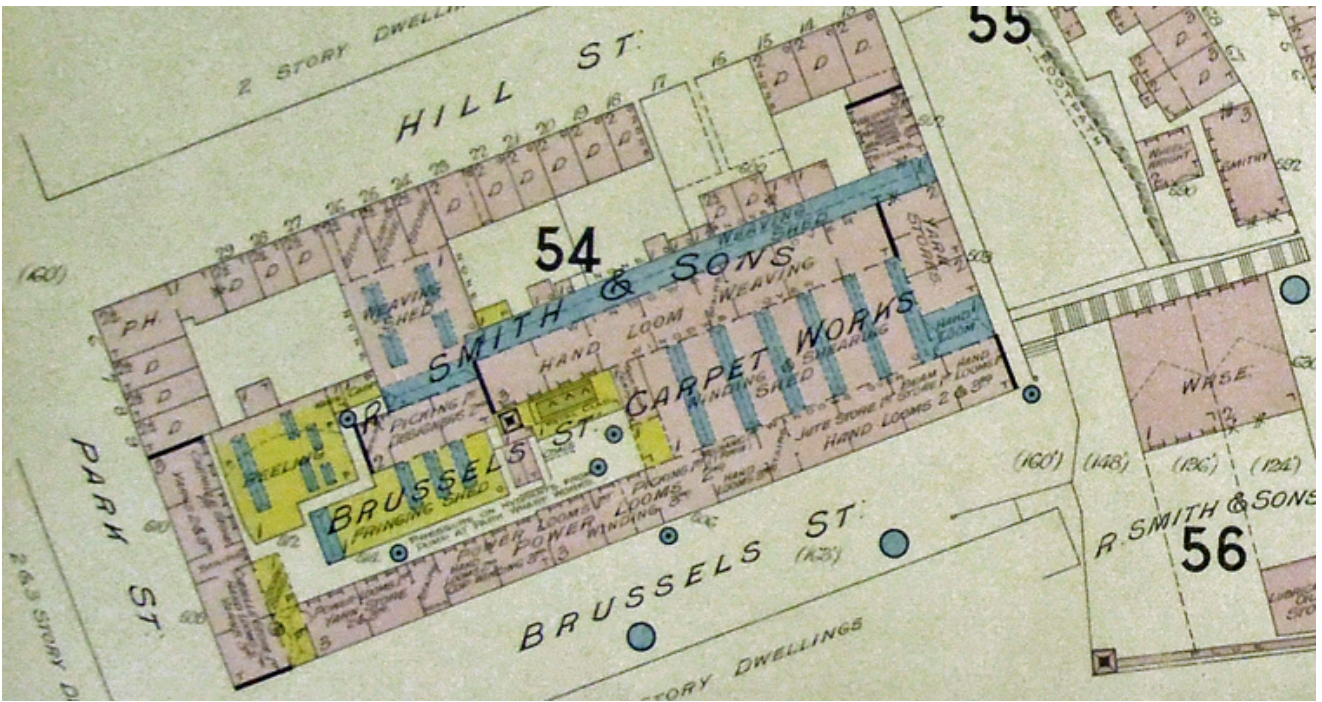
From that point both develop in stages, with some divergences; and there is a complex interrelationship between housing, factories, materials and design. We have specimens of all but a few stages still surviving here, some under imminent threat of demolition. The earlier types are scarcer now, but a huge bulk of late Victorian survives; and very varied and interesting it is when you look at it.



***Selected from John Doharty's plan of Kidderminster 1753 to illustrate the areas where Foley planned his cottages: including Hall St, Barn St (Dudley St) Orchard St, Paddock St.***

Let us look first at the ground plan of Lord Foley's cottages and look at the factory line. (*shows plan*). They represent the gathering of scattered cottages into a more efficient layout for the distribution and collection of materials.

The factory building built by Lea in Brussels Street in 1801 is really rows of cottage kitchen sized compartments arranged in spurs along a central gangway and stacked up three storeys high. There are several other similar buildings of various sizes in Kidderminster. When steam came along in about 1850 this layout would be well suited to power drive off central shafts above the gangways. Structurally this is still a cottage-like building. With the materials available it was about as big as possible.



*This Goad Insurance map of 1897 reveals the factory built by Lea in 1801. Here shown in the ownership of Richard Smith & Sons but still with handlooms, soon to be replaced with power looms. (Note the original 'Carpet Steps' leading down to Park Lane which were removed to their present position sometime between 1924 and 1927 when Rock Works was extended.*



*An aerial photograph of Kidderminster 1920 (Britain from Above). Lea's three story 1801 carpet factory is shown running along one side of Brussels Street*



*A later aerial view of Hill & Brussels Street 1967. The original 1801 Lea's factory is seen bordering Brussels Street with north light weaving sheds added towards Hill St since 1897. Courtesy Kidderminster Past.*

The development of cast iron frames was a breakthrough that made possible huge floor areas. Pike Mills, demolished last year, had a cast iron frame, with timber main and secondary beams supporting wooden floors.

Lea's Mill, demolished two or three years ago, went even further. It had a cast iron frame supporting brick vaults and the entire roof framework was iron as well. It was built in 1807 [5], a few years after the first such building (Jones' Maltings in Shrewsbury). It was completely fireproof. These buildings were the first of the type in the world and the natural ancestor of all skyscrapers.

At about the same time, north light shedding developed and cast iron was used. Iron roof trusses were carried on cast iron box gutters; the box gutters rested on hollow cast iron stanchions, which also acted as downpipes. The building in Mill Street, now occupied by Boots, is a composite version with timber between stanchion and box gutter [6]. *(Mr Walker here showed some slides illustrating this development)*

As the carpet industry flourished more and bigger buildings were built and the pseudo-Renaissance carpet factories referred to by J. Lees-Milne were built. Many of these were in polychrome brickwork. This seems to have begun in about 1860 and to have enjoyed a vogue to about 1880. This is reflected in the housing of the period; and it is because many of them bear dates that I quote these dates for the factories.

*Barton's Carpet factory in Vicar Street. The left hand part of this polychrome building dates from 1856. Architect J G Bland*





*Woodward & Grosvenor, Stour Vale works 2017. Green Street. The polychrome building also designed by J G Bland dates from 1855*

I was at a conference on Industrial Archaeology recently when a Swedish professor told us off nicely for doing so little about our relics from the Industrial Revolution, "which only this country has got". It is a salutary reminder that much that we are discarding so casually, if it is the first of something, is the first in the world. There is a National Survey proceedings we really ought to feed Kidderminster into it. J.H. Easom in his thesis has dealt extensively with factory and other development.

I want now to turn to housing which no one seems to have bothered with. This is where I got my biggest surprise. To some extent the decorative treatment of the factories was reflected on the housing of the period and helps us to date both.

Let us now look at housing for the workers, for this is by far the largest proportion of housing in Kidderminster and has been steadily going on, changing gradually, all the time.

13	1753 Type house in Hall St		
14	22-45 Bewdley St	Pre 1835	
15	" Backs	Pre 1835	
16	22-45 OHS	Pre 1835	
17	Edward St Wood St	Pre 1835	
18	2-13 Bromsgrove St	1820	
19	"		
20	Cemetery cottages Park St	1835-1859	3 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> " Bristle Brick
21	"		
22	Leswell Place	1851	Thick Pressed brick (Vide St George's School 1827)
23	Elizabeth Terrace [7]	1878	Polychrome front
24	"		
25	Malva Cottage [8]	1882	
26	Victorian backs		
27	GRIMLEY	1905	
28-29	Back to Backs		
33	Summer Place	1822	
35	32-9 Radford Avenue	1913	5/3d houses

*(The above handwritten notes probably relate to the slides Walker used in the section of his talk below. Similarly numbered photographs have been added in an attempt to show the sort of slides he might have used.)*

Lord Foley's houses were basically still country cottages; water was from a pump in the yard and earth closets were as far from the house as possible. They were emptied by the night soil men (ancestors of our Drainage and Purification Officer). The ground floor was one large room, with stairs up the back. Windows were casements, with arches of the same  $2\frac{5}{8}$  red hardnode brick as that of the building; roofs were steep pitched and tiled and the timber used was local hardwood.



**(13) Hall St 1959. Lord Foley's late 18C houses**

The next stage, about 1800, when the loom had been removed to the factory, was the division of the ground floor into a kitchen for cooking in, and a living room at the front. The stairs now went up the side of the kitchen and had steps down to a cellar under it.



**(14) Part of Woodfield Row (22-45 Bewdley Street. These date from before 1835**



**(17) The cottages shown on the right of this photograph of Wood Street are pre-1835**





*(33)  
Summer Place  
1822  
Blakebrook  
Photograph 2007  
Nigel Gilbert*

At about 1840 a thick ( $3\frac{1}{4}$ " ) bristled brick appears and is widely used (a thinner version had a short life). This plan persists for some time, while main drains and water are brought in and outbuildings are brought closer, often within 8 feet of the houses. Ratios vary, but are seldom better than one brewhouse to four houses and one W.C. to two houses.



*(20) Cemetery Cottages, Park Street – junction with Castle Road., 1835-1859. ( $3\frac{1}{4}$ " ) bristled brick.  
Photograph April 2017*

Sometime at this stage facing bricks began to be used on the front elevation. Hitherto, bricks came straight from the kiln and were sorted on site into best and others: the best were used on the face and the others (overburnt, underburnt, batts, chipped cracked, chuffs) for backing in.

As time went on the best of the best were used on the front and the second best, round the sides and back. This eventually led to the deliberate production of facings and commons: two distinct and separate products. I remember old labourers still referred to facings as best bricks.

Early in this stage sash windows appear on the fronts, still with brick arches over. Later stone arches replace the brick and a square wood doorcase replaces the earlier pitched canopy, like a rudimentary pediment. Small casement windows and brick arches persist on the back elevations. Slate roofs seem to have come in before 1835, but after that date railways brought Welsh slate in cheaply and after 1850 few were built with tiled roofs.

As time goes on the windows tend to get larger. In about 1860-80, the polychrome brick stage, the fronts really begin to take on a Victorian appearance, some have arches over front doors and panes of glass get bigger. But, as at Elizabeth Terrace [7], the basics still have small casement windows and the outbuildings are separated.

From before 1827 (George Street School) a thick, pressed, rather soft orangey coloured facing brick had been in use, as well as thin handmades of similar colour.



***(23) Elderfield Lodge c1900. Distinctive polychrome but later than Ian Walker places such architecture.***



***(22) Leswell Place, Leswell Street 1851. Photograph December 2006***

*(At this point in the MS there are two inserts, handwritten, in the margin: "G. Hale & Co., Pensnett". "Giles, Hartlebury".)*

Then in about 1880-90 a very superior red brick, the Muffle burnt stock brick appears. There are three different sources, I think; and there are some very good imitations as well later on.

By 1880 sash windows are used on both elevations. The staircase is moved from the side of the kitchen and placed between the back and front rooms. More important still, each house has its own kitchen/scullery, coal house and W.C., connected to the back of the house in a strong wing. Previously as many as seven houses shared two brewhouses and W.C.'s.

Since about 1820 stone dressings had been standard on the fronts of houses. In about 1900 terracotta makes its appearance and, just before World War I, had almost ousted stone completely.

This type of house was being built to let at 5/3 per week in 1913.

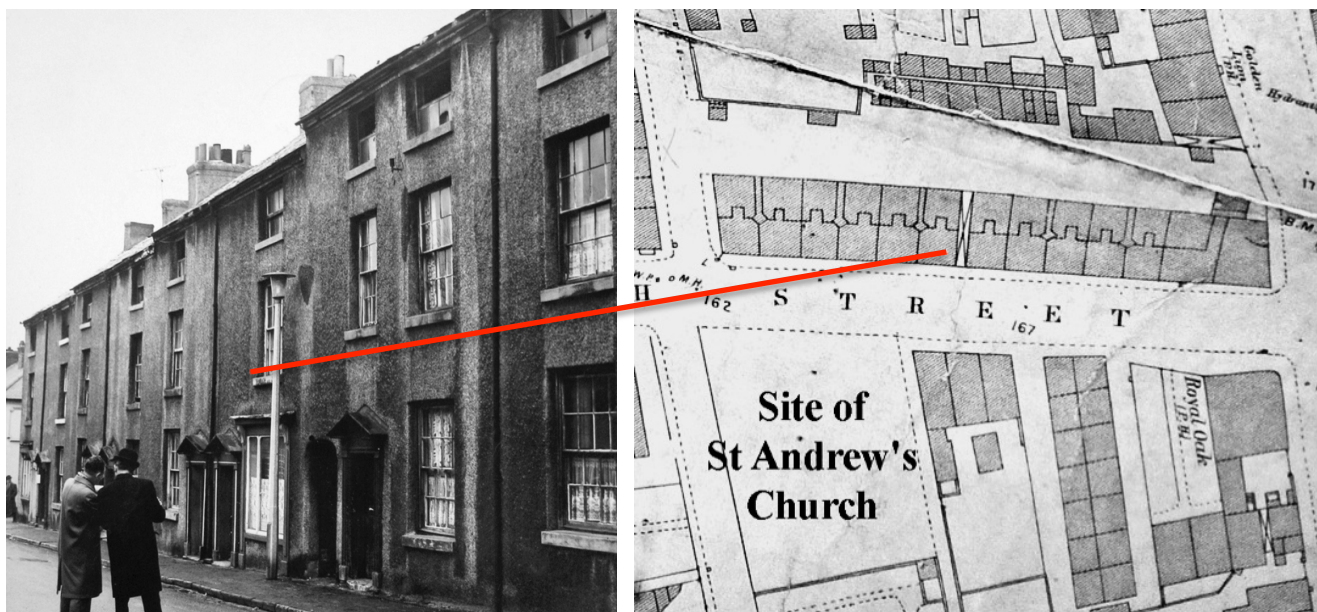
*(35)*  
*32-39 Radford Avenue*  
*c1913*  
*Photograph April 2017*



There are 2, 2½ and 3-storey versions of each of these three basic types, with or without cellars and in varying sizes. These made up the vast bulk of housing built in this period. There are many variations in detail; and special treatments for end and corner positions and on steep slopes. A Double-fronted type was fairly common, but was not built in quantity, so I have not included it though many were little bigger than terraced housing for workers.

*Example of Terracotta houses in Lea Street.*  
*Photograph April 2017*

First let us get another sideline out of the way: the back to back house. One lot between Blackwell and Dudley Streets achieved a density of eighty to the acre. They also existed in ones and twos in back yards of larger premises. If any remain I would like to know where they are.



***(26, 28-29) Left: a row of houses along South St that were built as back to back. Right: 1894 OS map shows the interleaved back to back adjoined houses in plan view. On the other side of the road, off South Street, are another row of 14 back to back houses. By 1953 most, but not all, of the houses in both rows have been knocked through to form 'through' dwellings. By 1963 the row along South Street has been demolished. The other row still appears on the 1969 OS map was soon to make way for the ring road..***

Having looked round and realised that there was this progression and wealth of detail and concentrations in certain areas, I attempted to find an area to recommend for conservation. Leaving aside factories and concentrating on housing.

To do this I got a street plan and put red on it for housing of the period 1753-1914 (*Showed plan 1*). Next I marked in the factories and got this picture. (*Showed plan 2*) Like a heart and two lungs: one on each side of it.

Soon I realised there were pockets of bigger houses. So, using red for the workers' houses and purple for the larger ones, I produced this rather intricate jig-saw. Intricate because few streets are without a few houses of truly different style or period to the majority. (*Showed plan 3*)

In an attempt to solve this I took more paper and put red or purple rings round the main groups. (*Showed plan 4*)

*(Unfortunately, the plans described above have not survived with the text.)*

It is now apparent that the two main groups sub-divide into about six groups each, with a number of outliers.

To the east of the town the sub-division is into six groups, four substantially workers' cottages and two of larger houses. To the west the grouping is fragmented by main roads, factories, King Charles School and Blakebrook Hospital. But basically the groups stretching from Park Street to Poplar Road are one group. As in the George Street - Chester Road area the earliest houses are near the town centre and they get later as you move outward. Most of the demolitions have been near the town centre where the Georgian cottages usually lie.

So my next effort was to use more colours to represent sub-divisions within my period; and from this it seems that relatively little Georgian cottage development remains except in one pocket, from Habberley Street to Crowther Street. (*Showed plan 5*)

Since it is building of this period that is now vanishing fastest, this seemed a good area to study. (*Showed slides and O.S. plan*)



*1924 OS map. Showing the area (YELLOW line) Ian Walker is considering. The approximate line of the present ring road is shown in RED. Crowther St (bottom) and Habberley St (top) are marked in GREEN.*

You will see this is the largest area of surviving cottages of the type and period we are talking about. It includes a few larger and later houses. The streets are wide, it is off the main traffic routes, density is about 13 per acre, and there is a lot of open space. It is an excellent area for the exercise.

There are many other areas remaining, generally later in date. Somewhere there may be a few comparable to Lord Foley's. They should get special consideration. Other areas are indicated on these plans and I have listed a few with reasons.

We have a vast bulk of Victorian, which is just becoming respectable as a style. Soon it will be as revered as Georgian or Tudor. We have an opportunity to study a vast bulk of it including larger houses that I have not touched on tonight.

When I suggested this talk to our Chairman I had no idea that Kidderminster was other than a 'hodgepodge' of unrelated buildings. At first I looked for good pieces of architecture. Then I began making notes on several blocks of the "delightful Georgian cottages" that were being demolished and soon a pattern began to emerge and I realised that Kidderminster was an entity, with a complex relationship between design of houses, factories and building materials used, and, at the moment, an enormous wealth of Victorian cottage front design.

I have tried to convey a general idea and make a few points in the time available tonight. I have barely scratched the surface. In doing so I have realised that here is a town produced by a continuous evolution over 200 years. I have realised that Kidderminster has architecture, architectural history and industrial archaeology ... **It cries out for a conservation study.**

I am glad for myself to have found that Kidderminster is worthy of study in its own right. I hope that I have put it in a new and better light for all of you who have listened to me tonight.

*And there the talk ended.*

*Unfortunately there is no record of the discussion that must have ensued.*

#### Comments

- [1] Nikolaus Pevsner, in "Buildings of England: Worcestershire" published first in 1968.
- [2] J. Lees-Milne, in "A. Shell Guide: Worcestershire" published in 1964.
- [3] About four pre-1700 buildings Caldwell Tower, St Mary and All Saints, the timber framed property in Church Street, and one other ...?
- [4] Note: the Foley/Doharty plan was not fulfilled during Foley's life time and parts of the plan were never completed. For instance, Paddock Street did not materialize nor did the straightforward exit from Orchard Street into Blackwell Street. See Nigel Gilbert 'History of Kidderminster' 2004.
- [5] The whereabouts of this 1807 Lea factory has yet to be established.
- [6] Where was Boot's in Mill Street in 1969?
- [7] Where is/was 'Elizabeth Terrace'?
- [8] Where is/was 'Malva Cottage'?