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HOUSING REVIEW



ST. MARY'S CLOSE, SHINCLIFFE, DURHAM

For the Dean & Chapter of Durham Cathedral

Architect:

Donald W. Insall, F.R.I.B.A., M.R.T.P.I.

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Above. Layout plan, showing the arrangement of the dwellings of different types around the Middle and Upper Greens between the church (photograph on the front cover) and the high streets.



Right. Perspective of single storey houses at the entrance to St. Mary's Close.

SHINCLIFFE, DURHAM

A view across one of the Greens around which the houses are grouped at St. Mary's Close.



A close-up view of one of the houses. Type plans are reproduced on the next page.

A New Residential Community in a Village

ST. MARY'S CLOSE, SHINCLIFFE

Architect: Donald W. Insall, F.R.I.B.A., M.R.T.P.I.

THE VILLAGE of Shincliffe lies about two miles out of Durham City, and with its attractive tree-bordered street of white-painted and mellow red-brick houses, is one of the most attractive in the County.

The land upon which this new housing scheme has now arisen previously formed an enclave between the main street of the village and the by-pass; and the only access to it was through frontaging land in the ownership of the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral. In order to prevent the sterilisation of useless back land, inaccessible for agriculture, the Dean and Chapter have purchased this, and in conjunction with the Rector of St. Mary's Church, have included glebe land at the rear to form a total site of 4½ acres, on which 29 houses have now been constructed.

The contractors were Messrs. Bell & Ridley, of Durham, who also advanced the building capital. All houses are held on 99 years lease, with suitable maintenance covenants. The architects for the scheme were Messrs. Donald W. Insall, F.R.I.B.A., S.P.Bip., of London.

Survey and Analysis

The site is in such close proximity to the village that it was essential that any new housing project built there must be very closely integrated with the village character and atmosphere, and become in effect a natural extension of it.

A. The Village.

It is not easy to reduce the spirit of a place to its basic elements, therefore a careful analysis was carried out by the architects before any planning or detailed site layout was commenced. This suggested that at Shincliffe much is owed to three main elements – namely:

- (i) The sense of place and community, which the village retains so much more strongly than any of its neighbours.
- (ii) Harmonious but varied architectural detail, of which a close analysis was made.
- (iii) The enclosed greens, with their very attractive and important trees and planting.

B. The Site.

A further and more detailed study of the site itself also revealed three main characteristics:

- (i) A natural grouping into an upper and lower green, separated by a belt of mature sycamore trees.
- (ii) After a steep entrance, a gentle but continuous

slope up the site to the east, again backed by a continuous curtain of trees, and by existing back gardens calling for privacy.

- (iii) The dominating feature – the spire of St. Mary's Church – which lies immediately to the head of the site, and to which it was felt that any new development should lead.

Considerable pains have been taken by the Chapter and their architects to underline and emphasise these characteristics, and to maintain the natural 'precinct' character of the site.

Entrance to the Site

At the entrance to the site, the road rises sharply from the existing 'Low Green' outside the site, through a cutting with steep banks on either side. To provide an architectural link with the village, houses here have been kept small and of one storey, stepped up the slope and linked by white-painted pergolas. Low-pitched roofs were designed to avoid any over-intrusive skyline. The houses are set at an angle to the road, and thus 'face into' the site leading the eye towards the centre.

Middle Green

The road then curves round to the left into the first enclosure, named 'Middle Green'. Facing out over the entrance and again canted to look into the green, are three two-storeyed houses, their roof-lines backed by the line of trees.

The group of houses around Middle Green have all been planned with, so to speak, 'linked arms', in such a way as to present a continuous ground-floor wall around the green. In this way a sheltered and inwards-looking communal grouping has been attained, focussed upon the Middle Green. Its children's play-area, play-features, paths and seats in the grass are all backed by the line of sycamores.

Upper Green

Passing through these trees to the Upper Green, the main feature of the site, St. Mary's Church with its spire, comes fully into view, although it can also be seen from almost everywhere on the site, either over the rooftops or through spaces between buildings.

Around the left of the Upper Green and climbing up the slope towards the church is the main crescent of pairs of houses, stepped and angled so as to lead one's eye up to the church. These houses look over a

small green, across and through the open layout of individual houses sited on the opposite side, which complete the natural grouping around the Upper Green.

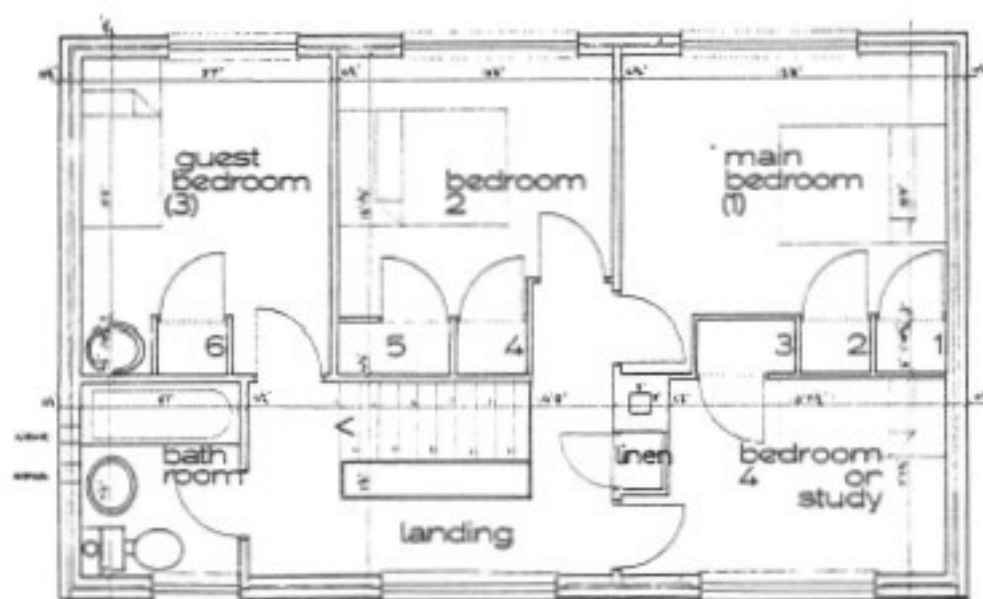
Architectural Design

The architectural character of all the houses has been kept simple and village-like rather than suburban – although without recourse to historical forms. Building materials and the principal elevational features have all been kept simple and unified throughout the whole group. The principal material is brick, carefully selected for texture and colour, and emphasised by white-painted horizontal boarding on the upper frontages. The roofs are low pitched and of Hardrow slates.

The form and grouping of the building has as far as possible been stressed by using darker materials in the natural shadow areas and lighter bricks and paintwork for the more important highlights, so that even on a dull day the architectural form is sunny and telling in its effect.

House Types

Four principal house plans are employed, with the addition of the five individually planned houses to the South of the Upper Green. The accommodation provided varies from the small single-storeyed houses, with 2 bedrooms and one large living-dining room, to large 3 or 4-bedroomed houses, some also having a study in addition. The inclusion of a study has proved especially attractive to lecturers at Durham



Four-bedroom two-storey house type used at Shincliffe.

First floor plan.



Ground floor plan.

University.

In all cases circulation has been cut down to a minimum and the greatest possible amount of space given to living areas. Very often a large living-dining room has been provided, with dividing doors to cut off either, as and when required.

All the living rooms have windows facing south or west for sunshine. The fireplaces have been planned on internal walls to minimise heat losses. Bathrooms and kitchens are grouped for economy in plumbing and in most types there is a small ground floor cloakroom. The glazed external porches have proved popular, and are designed to house a pram as well as to reduce draughts.

Adaptability

Plans have all been kept adaptable, to allow for alternative room arrangements – for example one type can be built with either 3 or 4 bedrooms of differently graded sizes. The room to the rear of the kitchen in the Middle Green houses is designed to serve alternatively as a study or workroom depending upon family needs.

Garages

Garages have been provided for every house, in most cases attached to it, but set back where possible so as to screen parked cars and any garage doors left open. Near the entrance to the site, where houses

are set above the road and unbroken grass banks were felt to be specially needed, the garages have been grouped together inconspicuously out of earshot and out of view, but within easy distance of the houses to which they belong.

Landscaping

The scheme provides direct walkways linking all houses with the approaches, the church, the village and the bus stop.

The planting scheme has been planned by the County Planning Officer and his landscape staff, as a local example for the county. Existing trees have been emphasised with new planting grouped to stress and underline the main architectural layout. Flowers and shrubs have been chosen to give interest at all times of the year. Paved areas, with seats and children's play zones, are sited on the greens and carefully integrated with the planting. All front gardens throughout the scheme have been combined, unbroken by fences or hedges to form a spacious setting; while hedged private gardens are provided to the rear of all houses. These vary in size for each house-type, allowing choice for the keen and the not-so-keen gardener.

Property at Shincliffe has always been much sought after, because of its position and character. St. Mary's Close will provide more people with the opportunity of living there, whilst in this case enhancing rather than spoiling an unusually attractive village.