



Here is a tale of a lost art. It is about the passing of a style of building decoration which lasted two or three hundred years and seemed established, only then to fade away like another mere fad. Pargeting is decorative plasterwork. While the term sometimes relates to both interior and exterior work, it most commonly denotes the latter.

There are references to it in England going back nearly 600 years although it came to full prominence after the Great Fire Of London in 1666 which spawned laws requiring the exterior of wooden buildings to be plastered in an attempt at better fire proofing.

But the style had already begun to appear more widely during the previous century on the better, timber framed houses, most commonly in Suffolk and Essex where the wool barons, having made their money, liked to flaunt it. The finishing adornment to the wealthy merchant's pile was the adding of painted plaster motifs depicting anything from flowers and vines to the supernatural. It spoke to the world - or at least to the neighbours - of financial surplus. And through the time honoured endeavour to keep up with ye Joneses, pargeting gradually became an art form. But then it faded away like many a voguish style before and since. Some old pargeted houses remained as a reminder of what could be done but in the 19th and 20th centuries, hardly any more was. Big houses were still being built but the Victorians in particular went more for lofty and austere brickwork. Perhaps it was their severity of outlook which precluded frivolity, or perhaps it was because their money was being made in industries where mechanics figured more prominently than aesthetics. Either way, the Victorians went with bare brick and pargeting more or less ceased, leaving existing work and its maintenance increasingly in the hands of lay workers. A lot must have been lost.

But all is not yet lost for, lately in East Anglia, there is something of a one-woman revival.

Anna Kettle is a plasterer and pargeter. She has not always been such; for ten years after university she was a computer technician. But one night in a Suffolk pub, she saw wreathing vines on the ceiling as one sometimes does and, smitten by what she saw, she wanted to know how they were done. She was surprised to find that hardly any practitioners were still working in the UK and despite having never really dabbled much in plaster apart from a bit of DIY at home, such was the strength of her inspiration that she decided to get involved. Starting her career change from scratch, she embarked on a basic City & Guilds plastering course and when that was complete, she got a job conserving old plaster.



The word pargeting comes from the old French - par jeter - meaning to throw or cast over a surface. The designs are either cut into plasterwork or added by means of

stamping, moulding or freehand sculpting.

In the century before the Great Fire, it was Henry VIII who had done most to make it fashionable when he hired Italian plasterers to decorate his elaborate 16th century Nonsuch Palace in Surrey.

That building, begun in 1538 and barely complete when Henry died in 1547, was cited as one of the most extraordinary in Europe. It was described nearly 50 years later by one Anthony Watson, Rector of Cheam, who on entering the inner courtyard, found himself 'surrounded by huge figures of gods and goddesses, gleaming white ... So moulded that they seemed to be leaping off the walls'. He was looking at the work of the Italians, large stucco panels mounted between structural timbers which were covered in carved and gilded slate.

Sadly, Nonsuch lasted only until 1682. Having passed down the line - with a few economically and politically necessary diversions before and after the Civil War - its ownership had, after the Restoration, reached Charles II who in 1670 had give Nonsuch to his favourite mistress, Barbara Villiers, Countess of Castlemaine. Unfortunately, she was a gambling lady and not a very good one and she shortly felt obliged to go in for a spot of non-Restoration architectural reclamation - she demolished the place and sold the materials to pay gambling debts. The work of the Italians and the inspiration for the pargeting vogue was reduced to dust.



Ironically, then, it was to Italy that Anna, like Henry, had to turn to find the skills because these days, those skills have retreated to Venice where they are concentrated in the Venice European Centre of Architectural Heritage. The Centre is the only school in the world now teaching the fine art of marmorino plasterwork. The problem for Anna was that to become a pargeter, she would need to take its three month course and the fees together with

that much time off work would be too costly.

Fortunately, she found out about the Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust which promotes modern and traditional crafts and trades. By the autumn of 2001, with a grant of £6,500, she was in Venice, returning then after the allotted time to begin to create new work.

Pargeting is usually done in a lime putty plaster, reinforced with ox hair, and with tallow sometimes added as a plasticizer and water-repellent. The surface of completed pargeting historically was often protected by the application of a limewash to which linseed oil or wax had been added. In the old days, the plaster mix was sometimes reinforced with chopped straw, manure or wood shavings. At times, even beer and cheese are said to have been used, presumably after an initial mishap with a pargeter's lunch box.

It comes in several styles with different techniques.

There is the combing of the a new plaster surface, often in a herringbone design and usually arranged in panels to balance the windows and doors. There is also stamped work formed by placing wooden templates on the plaster undercoat with the final

finish being brought up to the templates to form a contrast once the template has been removed.

Then there is the use of moulds for repetitive work in reliefs such as friezes with perhaps a vine or other floral motif.

But the real art is in freehand sculpted work where soft lime plaster mix is shaped to produce the design.

Anna's work combines all styles. At her workshop in the village of Glemsford, she moulds various motifs for repetition - the grapes, the leaves, the flowers or whatever the client wants - but these mouldings will usually be part of the bigger picture, items to be added to bigger freehand work which she executes on site.

She particularly enjoys creating designs specifically for individual buildings and their locations, ideally on a wall where the sun casts shadows to pick out the design. It is weather sensitive work - driving rain isn't much good for the art or the material of which it is crafted - which means that she is less active in winter. But in the summer months, she travels widely although the bulk of her work is still in East Anglia where the craft has long been rooted.

And there is plenty for her to do in these counties. Three hundred years ago, when the region was still the most densely populated part of the country, albeit of a country with barely 10 per cent of its present population, fine houses with fine parquetry were a feature. But as development increased, later spurred by the Industrial Revolution, they became an ever smaller minority and probably got crowded out of the common awareness. Either way,



with the decline of the art, new work all but ceased and the old work, though valued, was left to the protection of a thinning band of craftsmen with varying degrees of the necessary skills. Add in the decline of the wool industry and its associated diminution of wealth and repairs were increasingly left undone.

It was a deteriorating situation but with this recent import of old school expertise, and the new wealth which much of the region has found, there may be the beginnings of a reversal in that trend. The most hopeful sign perhaps is that new buildings are beginning to feature in Anna's work schedule.

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