

TASMANIA - THE HOUSES

There really was nothing to the design of a Tasmanian Style house. One set out on the level ground a rectangle about twice as wide as it was deep, and erected on this base a two-storey box, a little deeper than it was high. Holes were cut in the box, a door in the centre bottom front for an entrance and one or two on each side of it to light the livingrooms, and a row of three or five above, evenly spaced, for the bedrooms on the upper floor. A central hall with a stairway at the rear completed the internal appointments and if one wished to be really extravagant one added a veranda across the front of the ground floor. A chimney could be built anywhere that function dictated at either end of the house, provided only that one remembered to add another identical one in a matching place at the opposite end. Each hole was a simple cut in the wall, about twice as high as it was wide, except the entrance doorway. This was arched, and the semi-circle or semi-ellipse above the panelled door was filled with a fanlight. Here for an instant the austerity and ingenuousness of the whole enterprise was contradicted. The fanlight was an intricate statement of domestic pride carved with affection often from a single piece of cedar.

It would be wrong to suggest that the Tasmanian Style always took the form described above, or that there was anything really unique about it among the many colonial offspring of

Georgian England. Sometimes the Tasmanian house box was three storeys high, as in the classically simple Wanstead or the sophisticated Rokeby, and sometimes only one storey as in charming Runnymede and sometimes, but very rarely, one and a half - a wide cottage with an attic floor - as in Old Illaroo. And once or twice the strict geometry of the box form was broken, as in the urbane Lake House at Cressy, which grew side wings in the inevitable precise symmetry.

Any of these houses might have appeared in almost any of the lands where English builders of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century built. There were few or no exclusive Tasmanian features about them and no tight limits to their architectural qualities. Some were not even Georgian, but Gothicky, such as Westella. Yet overall these houses amount to a Tasmanian Style. Or, at any rate, it can be said that time has given the style to Tasmania. For it would be hard to find anywhere else in the world a group of innocent colonial domestic building as fine and as well preserved as the collection to be enjoyed in Tasmania today. The back blocks of Tasmania, especially in the midlands, are practically a living museum for the architecture-fancier who seeks the old quiet dignity that is lost to most modern cities.

Is it merely nostalgia that draws you who have bought this book and me to these charming scenes, to the worn white flagstones, the twisting shingles, and the louvred shutters' reflected

light on burnt orange brick walls? No doubt a great part of the attraction is simply that lure of a lost world. One assumes of course that one would have been lucky enough to be living on the right side of the servants' passage. Then life would have been as different from ours as a sundial from an alarm clock.

But part of our affection for these buildings is more worthy of us. The rugged stone walls, the crumbly bricks, the clear cedar and the few other ingredients are all intrinsically beautiful materials used honorably and sympathetically by those anonymous and sometimes perhaps otherwise unsympathetic and not very honorable builders. The square box houses and their attendant strings of stables and sheds, and their cylindrical oast houses or octagonal pigeon towers, all were shaped by ancient empirical rules to follow their functions. Fanlights perhaps apart, everything was ingenuous and straightforward, for in most cases the design of a house was an artless and more or less involuntary operation by a builder who had learned by rote just one way to build a house. He built with a good eye, not because his taste was educated but because it never occurred to him to build in any other than the simple way that was traditional when he left England.

Some of the more elaborate buildings must have had architects. For instance, the stately, withdrawn Panshanger, and others which show more original design or more careful reproduction

of some rather pretentious mansion remembered from home. But nearly all names of architects in connection with houses have been lost, unlike those connected with public buildings. In any case, the rare trained architect's contribution was probably confined to a plan and the front elevation drawn at small scale. It is the absence of scholarly ornaments and professional details of finish that separates the houses as a class from the public buildings, yet somehow draws them closer to the Tasmanian soil.