



## GEORGE VIALLS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF COCKMOILE SQUARE, LYME REGIS

The small square between the Museum and the Guildhall, or Town Hall, perpetuates Cockmoile Square. It was originally bounded on the east by the seventeenth century Guildhall (described in 1861 as 'a dingy cottage, apparently worth about ten pounds a year, and dignified by the name of *town hall*') and on the south and west by a group of houses, one of which was the fossilist Mary Anning's home in the early nineteenth century.

The Square's present appearance is mainly the work of the architect George Vialls (1843-1912), who designed the recreated Guildhall, built in 1887-88, and the Philpot Museum, built in 1900-01. There have been two alterations which damage his composition: the very ornate upper part of the east wing of the Museum, above the present entrance arcade, was replaced by cement tile hanging in the 1960s; and the wall (the back of cottages facing Gun Cliff) which linked the Museum to the Guildhall disappeared when the cottages were demolished in the 1920s. With a range of buildings designed for other clients in the town Vialls changed the face of Lyme Regis between 1883 and 1901.

George Vialls came from Northampton, where he began his architectural training. In 1868, aged 25, he joined the London practice of Sir Matthew Digby Wyatt. He exhibited a 'design for a town hall' at the Royal Academy in 1868. He won the Soane Medal the same year enabling him to travel, though we do not know where, and in January 1869 he was admitted an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. In 1871 he set up his own practice, working from Great James Street, London. In 1874 he married Eliza in Luton and lived in Doughty Street, London. In the mid 1880s, at the time he began working for rich clients in Lyme Regis, he moved to Grange Park, Ealing, where he lived in some style with five children, a cook and two maids until the death of his wife in 1891.

Throughout his career he specialised in church projects in different parts of the country: new buildings, restoration, repairs and extension, sometimes in conjunction with other architects. His new churches were St Andrew, Patras, Greece (1872; it is not known if he actually went there), St Matthew, Luton (1876, with J R Brown), St Michael and All Angels, Northampton (1882), St Michael and All Angels, Leicester (1887) and All Saints, Millbrook, Cornwall (1892).

His restoration and extension projects included St Catherine, Littleton, Cambridgeshire (1870), St Bartholomew, Gransden, Cambridgeshire (1873), St Pandionia, Eltisley, Cambridgeshire (1879), Christchurch, Luton (1882), All Saints, Wing, Buckinghamshire (1883), St Leonards, Herefordshire (1884), St Peter and St Paul, Wingrave, Buckinghamshire (1890 and possibly again in 1898), St James, Pensax, Worcestershire (1891), and St Paul, Nuneaton (1897). Like most architects who were influenced by Pugin, Vialls' churches are gothic and meet the new approaches of the time to the internal layout of Anglican churches. His secular work, which seems to have been largely confined to the Lyme Regis area, is much more diverse. Here was someone who could give his clients what they wanted.

George Vialls' work in the Lyme Regis area begins in 1883, when he was 40 and with an established practice. For the next 19 years, until he resigned from the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1902, he enjoyed the patronage of a number of important individuals in Lyme Regis. Especially significant were Colonel William Pinney, Liberal MP for Lyme Regis and Charmouth for much of the period from 1833 (when the borough was reformed) to 1865 (the seat was abolished in 1868); the Reverend Edward Peek, a high-church Anglican priest without a parish; and Thomas Philpot, from a family of lawyers and of independent means.

William Pinney (1806-98) was the grandson of John Preter Pinney (1740-1818), a Bristol plantation and slave owner on Nevis in the West Indies, who built Racedown house near Marshwood around 1785 and acquired Somerton Erleigh, Somerset, in 1799. The rebuilding of St Mary, Marshwood (a chapel of St Candida, Whitchurch Canonorum) completed in 1883, with which Pinney was involved, was Vialls' first big commission in the area and carried out in a plain Early English style. Private commissions from Pinney followed. In 1884 Vialls was designing a loggia, lodge gates, and a tennis court at Somerton Erleigh. In 1885 he designed stables, wagon house and cottages at Racedown and a summerhouse at Somerton in 1887. In 1887 - 88 he was responsible for an extension to the Monteclefe National School in Somerton, originally built in 1851 by William Pinney's sister Anna Maria, a friend of Mary Anning.

The Reverend Edward Peek (1841-1898) was brother of Sir Henry Peek, Baronet, Conservative MP for Wimbledon, a tea merchant in the City of London and a campaigner for public open spaces, who built the Rousdon estate. The family wealth enabled Edward Peek, who had no church appointment in Lyme itself, to buy Poulett House, now the Alexandra Hotel. From 1884-86 he employed Vialls to completely redesign the interiors and to convert the stables into a chapel 'in the style of the English renaissance'. This was not Vialls' usual church style. Vialls' brief included the design of all the furnishings, which were acquired from leading suppliers in London. In 1884 Peek also commissioned Vialls to design a new churchyard cross for Combpyne as a memorial to the rector William Poulton and to produce the plans for his St Michael's College, intended as a school for the sons of clergy for which he bought the former vicarage in Pound Road in 1888 (now Coram Court and the adjoining Coram Tower). Vialls' work here was in a mixture of styles: Coram Court was modified by adding a turret with a fine carving of St Michael by the leading architectural sculptor Thomas Earp (1828-93); Coram Court is early 17<sup>th</sup> century in style. In 1889 Peek paid for the new screen in the parish church, designed by Vialls. The College did not long survive Edward Peek's death in 1898. The Peek family eventually gave the chapel to the vicar of Lyme Regis, it continuing in use for religious purposes until the 1960s.

Thomas Embray Davenport Philpot (1859-1918) lived at Gatesfield in Sidmouth Road, which he acquired in 1884 at the age of 26 and renamed Holme Cleeve. He was the great nephew of the Misses Philpot, whose geological collections went to Oxford University and who had worked with Mary Anning. The family were wealthy lawyers with a house in Portland Place, London. Never married, he became a town councillor, mayor of Lyme Regis in 1890-92, a county magistrate, Lyme Regis's first county councillor following the creation of county councils in 1889, and a stalwart of the Primrose League which supported the Conservative Party. Vialls designed a rather severe extension and other improvements at Holme Cleeve in 1885 including a lift and conservatory. Philpot's brother John, who lived in the old family house at Morley Cottage, Silver Street, now the Mariners Hotel, was also a town councillor and magistrate. Thomas remained in Lyme and later contributed financially to two civic improvements designed by Vialls. The very plain National Schools and adjoining head teacher's house in a near arts and crafts style (1892) were built to improve schooling in Lyme. He paid for the Drill Hall, now the Marine Theatre, on the site of the former seawater baths which, with other land in the area, had been acquired by Philpot. He leased it to the 1<sup>st</sup> Dorset Volunteer Artillery (1894). Thomas Philpot was in fact a local developer, financing suburban growth around what is now the Woodmead Hall.

These three patrons all had London addresses or clubs and met Vialls there as well as in the Lyme Regis area. They formed a natural network of clients who were influential in Lyme Regis affairs, along with other figures such as the Reverend Charles Myers, who became vicar in 1887, and Zacchary Edwards, a barrister not practising, who was mayor in 1888 and owner of a small school. It is not, therefore, surprising that in 1887 Vialls was chosen to design the Guildhall to mark the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria. Vialls' first report on the condition of the Guildhall (April 1887) states that he had been asked to examine the building by Edward Peek rather than the Borough. Edward Peek agreed to meet the cost of restoring and refitting the original interior panelling and must have suggested 'his' architect should be used. Given the decrepit state of the building, the need (subsequent to Vialls' original report) to widen the street and move the entrance to a better position, the council (whose members included John Philpot) could not refuse Peek's proposal.

The contractor for the panelling was H. Randall, also a town councillor, who had already been used by Vialls for work for Peek and Philpot. As well as Peek's contribution, William Pinney, now over eighty, paid for the coat of

arms over the main door and there was another large anonymous donation, possibly from Philpot. The structural works were undertaken by H. T. Cooper, completed in December 1888 and opened on 21 January 1889 with grand ceremonies and a formal banquet, the interminable speeches of which were reported in the *Bridport News*. The Mayor, Zachary Edwards, perhaps unintentionally, managed to damn Vialls' work with faint praise: 'he has given us, if not a grand architectural building, one of considerable merit'. Vialls in his own speech saw a great future for Lyme Regis, with able men in its government and private individuals promoting the good of the town.

The Guildhall was almost entirely rebuilt with a new staircase, cells, open arcaded market beneath and a recreated courtroom on the first floor with a much higher ceiling. The only recognisable original features to have survived seem to be most of the panelling and the Venetian-style windows. Vialls created a nineteenth century version of what he thought the seventeenth century townsmen would have wanted if they had done the job properly in the first place. Vialls was obviously rather proud of this his first public building. Its design was published in *The Builder* and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1889, the first time he had exhibited since his early days when he also showed a presumably theoretical student 'design for a town hall'.

Perhaps because of the West Country connections he had built up, in 1894 Vialls moved first to Yeovil following his wife's death, and then to Crewkerne, where he restored and extended the Chubb almshouses (1897) and did work at Cheddington Church (1898).

The construction of the Philpot Museum more than ten years after the Guildhall is more of a mystery. Thomas Philpot had acquired the remaining buildings in Cockmoile Square some time earlier and they were demolished – including Mary Anning's birthplace. He began discussions with Vialls about the project in 1899, commissioned him to design it and paid for the construction. Vialls produced a rather grand building in north European renaissance style – an unusual miniature city museum in a tiny town. It is now a grade 2 listed historic building. It was built by William Caddy, a Lyme builder. But what Philpot intended to put in to it is not clear. It was given eventually to the Town Council by his niece and opened with a borrowed collection in 1921.

The Museum seems to have been Vialls' last major commission. His client base in Lyme had disappeared, in part as a result of the effects on major families of the introduction of death duties in 1894. The Revd Charles Myers left Lyme in 1894 for Salisbury. Councillor John Gold Philpot, Thomas's brother died in 1895. William Pinney, Sir Henry Peek and Revd Edward Peek all died in 1898. Peek's College had no endowment and closed and Poulett House was sold to investors for the planned hotel. Thomas Philpot left Lyme for a long period, only returning in 1916.

Vialls moved to Priorswood, Southampton by 1901 where he lived with Mary Champion, his housekeeper who was from Crewkerne, and his three-year old daughter. In 1902 he resigned his ARIBA and retired. His later years may not have been prosperous. By 1911, now married to Mary, he had moved to Heavitree in Exeter with his family, including another son born in 1909. He died on 8 September 1912 leaving £200.10s.9d (about £12,000 today). His executor was Frank, a timber merchant's clerk and his youngest son from his first marriage.

Together, Vialls' Guildhall, Museum and other public buildings provide an insight into Lyme society towards the end of the nineteenth century, the influence of its 'great and good', and the work of a minor 19<sup>th</sup> century architect who knew how to serve their interests in a variety of architectural styles.

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