

THE RESTORATION OF BANKTON HOUSE

TRAVELLERS into Edinburgh on the A1 road will be delighted to see the recent restoration of Bankton House, Prestonpans. In its fine coat of copperas (orangey) limewash it glows as its original builders in 1720 intended it to.

What a metamorphosis of the derelict ruin which was a standing disgrace to us all three years ago. Now the wedge of the Edinburgh Green-belt lying between Prestonpans and Tranent has been transformed. Few will remember the terrible state of this area in 1967 when Bankton House was ruined by fire: a two horned coal washery bing, a large derelict coal stacking yard, the remains of two collieries and their rail lines which were all rehabilitated with a handsome green pyramid and the large central playing fields of Meadowmill in 1975/76 by the Lothian Regional Council to plans prepared by the former East Lothian County Council.

The restoration of Bankton House finishes this process of redemption and adds a building of great beauty and historical significance to the landscape of East Lothian.

For this was Colonel Gardiner's house, the hero of the Battle of Prestonpans, fought not a quarter of a mile from his own front door. He was a soldier of great character whose story and part in the Battle is to be told in the undercroft of the restored Dooocot at the House. It was also the first of the houses built to reflect the expansive mood of the early eighteenth century when houses opened up to the landscape. Bankton, with its long and high flanking walls ending on the east with its newly rebuilt Belvedere and on the west with its matching doocot, faces north onto its parkland and south onto its orchard. Tree belts defined its land.

The House also represents a distinct phase in Scottish domestic architecture being designed geometrically with the same symmetrical elevations to both north and south and similar gables to east and west. It is built economically in the old Scottish tradition of rubble masonry with worked stones only used where necessary at quoins, window surrounds and cornices. All decorative work is concentrated on the



gable where the scalloped skewers guard the wall heads and in the central pedimented doorways. A few years later William Adam was to introduce classical columns and smooth ashlar stone, pilasters, urns and balustrades.

But Bankton also represents the last stage in the pre-classical age which can be seen in the nearby fifteenth century Preston Tower with its Renaissance house on top, sixteenth century Northfield House with its bartizans and seventeenth century Hamilton House with its decorated dormers. The old village of Preston is truly the place to study early Scottish domestic architecture.

The restoration was carried out by the Lothian Building Preservation Trust, a charitable company set up in 1983. In 1988 it decided to carry out a feasibility study of its structure, costs and marketability. In 1991 British Coal agreed to give the ruin and 14 acres to the Trust as part of their restoration of the opencast coal site at Blindwells. The Trust obtained major grants from Historic Scotland and East Lothian District Council. It also received a grant from the European Regional Development Fund for the regeneration of mining areas. Loans were obtained from the Architectural Heritage Fund and the Clydesdale Bank.

In 1992 approvals were obtained for plans prepared by Nicholas Groves-Raines, Architects, to rebuild the Belvedere, to restore the House as four dwellings, to restore the Dooocot to their original appearance, without the use of Velux skylights or metal stove pipes. The nineteenth century pantiled Steading will

be converted into two houses. In April 1992 the orchard to the south was planted both as a fine landscape feature and as a reminder of the commercial orchards that were a feature of Prestonpans.

Building work did not start until October 1993 when a contract was awarded to Campbell & Smith Construction Co. Ltd. of Ormiston and was practically complete in March 1995, although the start of the Steading is dependant on the sale of the four houses. It is a reflection of the state of the housing market that these beautiful houses, prices between £114,000 and £158,000, have not yet been sold although the price represents about half the cost of the work put into them.

The four three-bedroomed houses are designed for families who wish to give their children the benefits of rural life and pursuits in their own 14 acres of parkland, paddocks for grazing horses and orchards and yet be able to travel to business or schools in Edinburgh in 12 minutes from Prestonpans railway station, to which a footpath has been constructed through the park.

There must be four lucky families wishing to live in a historic house, which is now as good as new and enjoy the amenities of East Lothian and the ready access to the city. They should contact:

DTZ Debenham Thorpe
46 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 2NX
Telephone 0131 459 2222.

FRANK P. TINDALL, O.B.E.,

Former County Planning Officer of East Lothian;
Director of Lothian Building Preservation Trust.