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Bernat Klein House, High Sunderland (designed 1955)

Preserving Womersley: his architecture and art

JAMES COLLEDGE grew up in the Scottish Borders in the 1950s and 60s. After completing his professional training as a Chartered Accountant in England he pursued his career in Canada, Russia, and the United States before making France his home in 2015. Throughout his travels, thanks to the influence of his Borders upbringing and family friends, Modernist design and architecture continued (and continues) to attract his attention.

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Peter Womersley (1923-93) was a close family friend and my recollections opposite, no doubt burnished over time, are the memories I have of visiting him at *The Rig* with my parents. Peter himself and their mutual friend Bernat Klein, textile designer, manufacturer and painter, were central to my understanding that an integral part of life is good design.

Womersley's career spanned a short 30-year period from the early 1950s to the late 1970s when he shut down his practice at the height of his creativity while still in his mid-50s. During that time, he created some of the best regarded Modernist residences in the UK, moving on to design social housing, hospital units, sports complexes, local government offices and industrial facilities. He offered numerous local businesses and individuals his expertise in updating and renovating offices, retail premises and private residences. The Scottish Borders, where this Yorkshireman found his home, is an open and welcoming community and boasts a significant proportion of his work.

Designed in 1955 and first occupied in 1958, *High Sunderland* was the home of Bernat Klein and his family until earlier this year. It remains largely 'as built', lovingly cared for by Bernat until his death in 2014, and then occupied and looked after by his daughter Shelley until it was sold earlier this year. It is the earliest of his category A listed buildings to have been built.

Following a series of commissions for private houses, Womersley's attention was taken by a string of striking and strikingly different non-residential projects.

In 1964 he completed the *Gala Fairydean Football Stadium* (category A listed) at Netherdale, in Galashiels. Its dramatic inverted triangles, and use of concrete and glass, results in an almost ethereally light structure for such a muscular use. It remains in use today, suffering from the modern commercial needs of advertisers, but its importance is proudly recognised by the current management and there are fundraising efforts underway to ensure it remains viable.

Edenside Group Practice in Kelso (1967) features a striking set of stucco towers linked by walkways and quite unlike any other Womersley buildings. As originally built it sat in an open, tree-lined site suggesting a countryside setting. Today, alteration has deprived it of the integrity needed to gain a protected category listing and development in the intervening years has changed the site into a suburban enclave. However, it remains in use and is in good condition.

Dingleton Boiler House in Melrose (1977) is a dramatic example of what happens when industrial use meets modernist sentiment: it would have been starkly Brutalist had Womersley's geometric and sculptured detail not given a certain lyricism to functional necessity. This is a building whose original purpose no longer exists, so it will survive only with repurposing. It has found its way into the hands of a knowledgeable group, Studio DuB, led by architect Gordon Duffy. Their plan is for a multiple-residence conversion which will assure its ongoing survival, if successful. (Visit www.theboilerhouseproject.com for details.)



Mosaic detail wall, High Sunderland.



Living room looking out to the countryside, High Sunderland. © HES

REMEMBERING THE RIG

Having rounded the tightest of hairpin bends, the road drops down towards a sharp left-hand turn. Before reaching it, there is just enough space to park without blocking the road. A quick glance to the left reveals a carport, backed by a wall made of delicate dusky pink brick. The convertible's there: he's probably in.

Having parked, you walk up the covered path, with the same elegant white supports and angular canopy as the carport, which reveals an orchard setting as it gently rises, and you glimpse a modernist structure that sits graciously in its midst.

There is a rectangular pond to the right, with a restrained population of water plants. Are there also fish? To the left, what must be the least likely and most secluded suntrap in Scotland: even a hint of afternoon sun beckons the owner to this private enclave, shorts and espadrilles the only clothing required.

Ahead, the building sits almost transparently in its orchard, extensive glass both reflecting the scene and absorbing it, as if you are looking through it to the trees beyond. The front door sits open at the end of the covered walkway.

On entering, a dining area and kitchen to the left, well equipped but perhaps little used, reveal a passageway leading to the bedroom. At the entrance to it, looking up, you spot an exercise bar anchored to the ceiling, bound in sisal cord, well used and worn to a smooth and comfortable patina.

There are no doors or barriers to block the flow from space to space.



The Rig, photographed in 2018.

To the right, bordered by a set of low wood-finished cupboards, is the living room. Stepping down a double step, facing an open hearth, you find the perspective subtly changed. Beyond the fireplace, looking out to the orchard, the view from here is as transparent as that from the outside. This is a building that inhabits its space as if mandated by nature.

The furnishings in the sitting area are all fitted, perfectly proportioned. The natural finishes reflect a rich palette of tones matched to their environment. The wooden floors provide continuity through the spaces.

Turning left, rising up again to its original level, a study houses a working space and eclectic record collection from Pergolesi to Peggy Lee; an Eames chair finishes the sense

of a perfect retreat for the single occupant.

An opening to the left completes the circuit around the central core, where bathroom, toilet and utilities are housed. Leaving the living area with the kitchen now on the right, you look through the front door and spot the guest accommodation at the end of the sun terrace, the other side of, and support for, the carport.

Built in 1957, *The Rig* at Gattonside (category B listed) was Peter Womersley's sole Scottish residence and workplace from the date of its completion until his permanent departure in the late 1970s to live in Hong Kong.



Gala Fairydean Football Stadium (1964).

Each of Womersley's projects reflected the same strong relationship between site and function as with his own home. His use of materials changed, and his practice moved on from its residential roots into public and industrial buildings, yet each one retains a unique sense of identity, inextricably linked to a design process that was as complete in its conception as it was in its realisation.

The high proportion of listed buildings in England and Scotland speak to the regard with which his work is held. Professional and academic interest remains strong and yet, just 30 years after Womersley closed his practice - in part disillusioned by the ongoing struggle to retain design control over his projects - this irreplaceable legacy is under threat. Already, the imposing presence of *Port Murray* at Maidens in Ayrshire (1963) has been lost to the demolishers' hammer.

The jewel in the Womersley crown, however, is the category A listed *Klein Studio* (1972), commissioned by Bernat Klein and used for twenty years as his workplace and exhibition space. It is a structure of extraordinary lightness and harmony.

Driving up from Selkirk on the A707 in the direction of Peebles, it reveals itself slowly as you dip down towards a left-hand bend passing in front of the gates to the Sunderland estate. Emerging out of the trees, it will stop you in its tracks, and if you were not expecting it, leave you in wonder that such a sight even exists on this quiet Scottish country road.

Sold by Klein in 1992, it found a use first to house a project supporting textile industry participation for people displaced by the decline of the industry in the post-

war decades. The project ended in the late 1990s, the Studio fell into disuse and, in 2002, was placed on the Buildings at Risk Register.

Sold again in 2002 into private hands, the current owner received planning permission to convert the building into two apartments, the upper one with a rooftop terrace. Work began and progressed well over the next few years, only to run in to the dual problems of the 2008 downturn and a massive flood caused by a broken pipe that was left running and destroyed much of the conversion work undertaken. Activity halted.

The building deteriorated further, taking on the air of dereliction that attracts both the interest of the architecturally curious and the socially disaffected. Most recently, evidence of vandalism and occasional unauthorised occupancy have confirmed the decline.

Having left the UK in 1980, while retaining family links and occasional visits, from 2005 I began returning more frequently as my parents' health declined and work brought me back to Europe. By that time my cousin was undertaking maintenance work at High Sunderland for the Kleins. His son, Michael Smith, had developed a keen interest in the work of both Klein and Womersley, and he related to me the sorry state of the Studio. From then on, I added an itinerary of visits to favourite Womersley properties when coming to the Borders. On Michael's recommendation I began following Womersley groups on social media. Another name was prominent in these forums: Chris Hurst, a Borderer educated at Hull University and exposed to



Dingleton Boiler House in Melrose (1977).

Womersley's work there in the form of its sports hall. Chris developed a deep interest in and knowledge of his work and is now well-regarded in the Womersley world for his dedication to the subject.

Late last year, when the extent of the Studio's decline seemed to be advancing rapidly, Michael and I had a conversation where we agreed "enough is enough". Having no particular background in campaigning for the preservation of significant architectural heritage, but recognising that not to do so would be almost a betrayal of our mutual interest in the subject, we contacted Chris, whom Michael had met in 2016 during a joint AHSS and RIAS tour of Womersley's Borders buildings.

With its focus on the Klein Studio as the starting point, we worked on the development of a website, the intent of which was to pull together the various strands of interest in Womersley's work in one place. Receiving generous and strong encouragement from the Womersley and Klein families, the site was launched at the beginning of April this year.

The website, preserving-womersley.net, aims to bring together the disparate threads of interest that alone might not be strong enough to draw attention to the plight of the Studio. Collectively, it provides these interests with a louder voice which has the potential to inform and spread the word about this remarkable body of work beyond the somewhat rarefied world of academics and professionals. We hope the site will provide a central place to gather bibliography, biographical material and – of

course – academic knowledge, expertise and published works. Our current focus, apart from the Klein Studio, is to create on the site a short biography of each of Womersley's buildings.

Coupled with a social media presence that includes Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, we were astonished to have generated over 320 supporters on the website within ten days of launching and have gained significant attention on the other platforms since. These supporters represent a mixture of the professionally interested, influential, enthusiastic and those newly introduced to Womersley's work via our efforts. Shortly after the launch, a sympathetic and balanced article was published in the Scotland section of *The Times* newspaper (May 4, 2018), under the byline of Gabriella Bennett, recounting the challenges faced by the Studio.

The same day that this article was published, the owner of the Studio met with the Scottish Borders Council's Built and Natural Heritage Manager. Promising that work would recommence on June 1, by the time of writing in mid-August, there have been confirmed reports of materials delivery, tradesmen on site and the fencing off of areas immediately adjacent to the building. Hopeful signs? We will keep fingers firmly crossed and document progress in the public eye through our online presence.

While Preserving Womersley can likely take credit for nothing more than good timing, we are confirmed in our original belief that interest in Peter Womersley's work is riding high, that there is an appetite for sharing news, and publicising both the plight of buildings at risk and the successes in preserving those that could have been lost. Please join us on this adventure. ■

PRESERVING WOMERSLEY

This article was written by James Colledge on behalf of *Preserving Womersley* and its founding members, Michael Smith and Chris Hurst. We are an unfunded group seeking to add to the voices that speak for Peter Womersley's architectural heritage.

Find out more and lend your support at: preserving-womersley.net

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The Bernat Klein Studio (1972), photographed above in 1979. © HES



Above and below: the Bernat Klein Studio in 2016.

