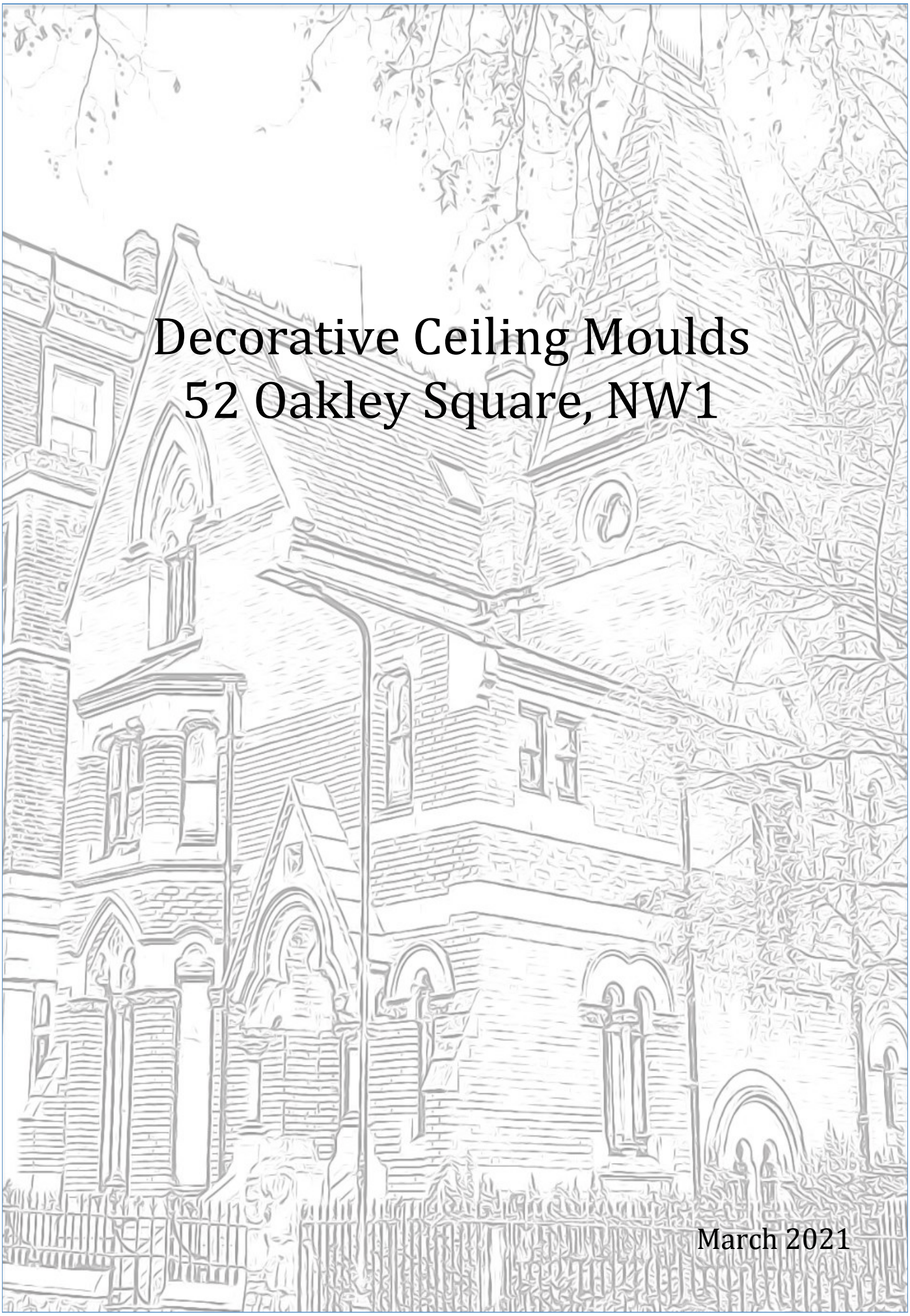

Decorative Ceiling Moulds
52 Oakley Square, NW1

March 2021

A brief history

Before the Victorian era, decorative plaster mouldings were created on site using fingers on wet plaster. With seventeenth century plasterwork ceilings were impressively ornate containing heraldic or naturalistic images. Repetitive motifs were separately cast and applied later. In the 18th century, Italian stuccadores created intricately designed ceilings on site and by hand.

During the 18th century, the profiles and types of plaster ornaments increased enormously and although they were copied from historical examples, they were used and interpreted fairly freely. It was the builder, the person who marketed newly built houses, who had to choose the appropriate mouldings for the house and this could heavily influence the interest or not in buying the property. Expensive houses needed elaborate mouldings to justify their selling price and similarly, in lower-class houses, expensive mouldings were neither appropriate nor affordable. Decorative plasterwork was used to emphasize the social hierarchy and add extra drama to the spaces used for entertaining. Generally, the rooms that received the guests such as the porch, reception room, dining room, parlour and hall tended to have mouldings that were larger and more decorative than the private rooms. Mouldings were matched to the use of each room so for example fruit would feature on the mouldings in the dining room and floral swags in the drawing room.

In the 19th century, however, the mouldings became less ornate and more bulky with heavier detail. In the Georgian period, it was fashionable to leave the dining room chairs against the walls away from the table and so a wooden dado rail or chair rail became fashionable to protect the walls from knocks. The dado rail would be positioned 3 to 4 feet from the floor.

In Victorian times it was fashionable to leave the chairs around the table so the dado rail-served no function and disappeared. Wooden picture rail mouldings remained to provide a feature that pictures could be hung from and the skirting boards became taller and cornices deeper to balance the dado-less wall.

In the mid-Victorian era the tendency was for the frieze to become narrower and for plaster decorations to be on the ceiling. Simple cornicing was still being made on-site and three dimension additions that were made elsewhere in moulds and were then applied to the cornicing for a more decorative effect.

In 1851 gelatin moulds were shown at the Great Exhibition and in 1856 fibrous plaster containing hessian and lathes, which was lighter and stronger than solid plaster, was invented. These two inventions made it possible to cast one long piece of decorative cornice in a workshop and reliably transport it to the site to be fitted.

Fibrous plaster was also used. It became ubiquitous in theatres and music halls during the boom of their construction from 1880 to 1910, this helping to popularise the material over a wide geographical area. Theatre commissions in fibrous plaster of the period were not just for new construction, but also for partial or full refurbishment, or rebuilding after a fire. However, it was not limited to places of entertainment. A fibrous company catalogue of 1891 lists its commissions in places of entertainment (40 in number), private residences (36), public halls (17), hotels, restaurants and clubs (17), banks (8), and various others (20)…"

Relevant examples

1) The Old Parsonage, Oxford, OX4 4EJ

A house connected with the church has stood on the site of Iffley Rectory (as it was known for most of its history) for a very long time - possibly indeed from the date of the church's foundation in the 12th century. Furthermore the building as it exists today is one of only two or three parsonages in Oxfordshire of which there is a substantial amount surviving from before the Reformation of the mid-16th century.

Traces of other structures have been found to the north of this small house, some of them dating back to the 12th century, but the north end in its present form did not exist before about 1500. Its fine rooms, with their mullioned windows and wide fireplaces, were clearly intended to form the principal living quarters. The service rooms were in the south end, which now had new floors, and walls rebuilt entirely in stone. The Tudor rooms of the north end were altered in small ways over the following centuries. The sitting room has a late 16th-century moulded plaster ceiling. On the staircase is a piece of stained glass on which is inscribed 'William Moore new leded ye window 1753'.

Soon after this, however, the Rectory suffered a period of neglect, because in 1790 it was declared unfit for habitation. It remained in this state for another 30 years. Not until 1819/20 were improvements carried out by a new vicar, Rev. Edward Marshall, who happened also to hold the lease of the Rectory.

2) The Grange, Ramsgate, Kent, CT11 0EY

The Grange is an interesting example of a decorative ceiling within a collection of buildings by an architect seeking inspiration from religion. The owner and architect, Augustus Pugin, purchased the land at Ramsgate in 1841. His builder, George Myers, built the house between 1843 and 1844. Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-52) was one of the most influential and prolific architects and designers of the 19th century. Only 40 years old when he died, Pugin spent his life trying to revive medieval Gothic architecture and design as the only fit architecture for a Christian society, part of a movement known as the Gothic Revival. He also designed the interiors for the Houses of Parliament. Pugin built few domestic houses and the site in Ramsgate is particularly important because here he was building for himself, to create his ideal setting for his family. He wanted to bring Catholicism back to this part of Kent and so a church and monastery were also part of his plan, to recreate the medieval social structure that he so admired. The house was designed to enjoy views of the sea and the monastic site next door from all angles and was richly wallpapered, painted and paneled.

3) Oakley Court, Windsor, SL4 5UR
Oakley Court is a Victorian Gothic house set in 35 acres overlooking the River Thames and Water at Oakley in the civil parish of Bray, Berkshire. It was built in 1859 and is currently a hotel. It is a Grade II* listed building. Just a coincidence, but we found it amusing to have a similar sounding building name (and similar year of construction)!

4) The Priory, Windermere, Cumbria
An ancient priory awarded Grade II status by English Heritage. The Priory is a Gothic mansion built in 1869 for William Carver who was a Manchester cotton mill owner. It has an ornate ceiling in the central staircase. Other features include stain-glass windows of the 'Ladies of Windemere", stone gargoyles and quatrefoil woodwork.

Sources:
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