

A Plea to Preserve Comiston Old Farmhouse

There has been a steady erosion of old farm buildings in Edinburgh over the years, some inevitable where they stood in the road of major new developments, such as at Lothianburn near the summit of the City Bypass. Others, such as Redheughs near Gogarburn were subject to senseless destruction, where the handsome farmhouse and steadings could have been incorporated into the new office developments of Edinburgh Park as an attractive feature.

Old farms are as much part of the historic landscape as castles, *big hooses*, old kirks and manses. They are historic markers of old social and economic structures. In Mid and East Lothian the farming regime that emerged with the Agricultural Revolution became a world showpiece, and by the 1820s people were coming from other parts of Europe and the emergent US to see how it was done. This was the great age of “high farming”, driven by the capital from empire, but above all by a scientific approach to agriculture as part of the Enlightenment, with the first practical chair of agriculture in the world at Edinburgh University.

The farms of Mid and East Lothian were mostly in the 200+ acre bracket, but with some up to 500 acres. The Estate supplied the fixed capital of land, housing and steadings; the farmer supplied the moveable capital of stock and equipment. The farmers were substantial men of business, and notable figures in any community, and until after WW1 at least they would have been commonly known by their farm’s name. They would have written good English and spoken good Scots, and as major tenants they were the aristocrats of the common people. They were also major employers. If we guess that Comiston was at least 200 acres, there would have been 4 *hinds* or ploughmen, and perhaps a *grieve* or foreman, a shepherd and a cattleman, all with their families. The families were important, because the women were as important as the men in the workforce. So if we include the farmer, the eight families could multiply into between 30 and 50 souls. And at the centre of this was farmer and his family – and domestic servants – in his house.

Part of the culture was that the laird’s tenants’ reflected his own prestige. His substantial tenants lived in pleasant and respectable dwellings, and in turn their farm servants lived content in decent cottar-houses. The intention often became badly diluted towards the poor end of the scale, but the Lothian farm houses of the 19th century were often remarkably substantial and even elegant, more like a small laird’s house. That is Comiston Old Farmhouse. And what is more, the outside appears to be unaltered since the day it was built, probably in the 1850s or 1860s, at the height of the High Farming prosperity. By the 1880s agricultural depression affected all of Europe, triggered by cheap grain from the developing New World, and no more farmhouses like Comiston would be built. Following the Great War, there was a widespread breakup of the old estates, and many tenant farmers now became owner-occupiers. They struggled through the 1920-30s depression, but came into their own after Hitler’s War, and with the new prosperity they naturally embarked on all manner of improvements on the farmhouses. Comiston seems to have escaped this, perhaps because it was already very adequate.

To destroy this pleasant and elegant product of the age of High Farming, and also of a pupil of the great Playfair, would be ignorant vandalism. One is surprised that the statutory authorities in charge of listing and protecting the built inheritance are not aware of this.

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