

[architects]

VOLUME 2 PETER WOMERSLEY



HISTORIC SCOTLAND
ALBA AOSMHOR

Charles Peter Womersley (1923-1993), known as Peter Womersley, is widely considered to be one of the most visionary architects working in Scotland in the later half of the 20th century. His legacy rests on a relatively small but diverse body of work, moving from modular timber houses in the early years through to sculptural use of reinforced concrete in his later career. All his work shows great attention to detail. Following a thematic study carried out by Historic Scotland in 2007, some of the best examples of his work in Scotland have been recognised through listing.

[EARLY YEARS]

Born and raised in Yorkshire, Peter Womersley served as an infantryman during World War II. His family and tutors had discouraged the choice of a career in architecture, but lack of military action nevertheless gave Womersley the opportunity to take the Architectural Association entrance exam in 1945. He left the AA with a diploma five years later at the age of 27 and spent the next six months helping to design a palace in Kuwait. On his return to Britain he immediately began work on his very first commission, Farnley Hey (1952-54). This house in Huddersfield for his brother was an early triumph of contemporary domestic architecture bringing two further house commissions in the Scottish Borders where he set up his solo practice a year or so later.



Peter Womersley at home at The Rig, Gattonside

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[A HOME IN SCOTLAND]



The Orchard, Gattonside

In 1956 he completed his first domestic commission in Scotland, 'The Orchard' in Gattonside village near Melrose. He was then able to move his practice into the home he had designed for himself, 'The Rig', also in Gattonside. Drawing inspiration widely, Womersley's early work was influenced by the European houses of Mies van der Rohe and the great American architect Frank Lloyd Wright who placed great importance on his houses having a definable 'heart'. Many of Womersley's houses were open-plan with the fireplace tending to be the focus of attention. Variations in floor level, wall and ceiling finish, and strategically placed units and furniture, all served to demarcate the interior spaces and their function.

[EXPANSION AND EXPERIMENTATION]



Roxburgh County Offices, Newtown St Boswells

Basing his early practice solely around commissions for private houses was sustainable and an invitation to design a sports centre for the University of Hull enabled him to expand. By the early 1960s his practice included five junior architects and was winning larger contracts such as the Church Square housing development in Galashiels. The remarkable Gala Fairydean Football Stadium (1965) was an early example of a functional building type treated in a geometrically sculptural way in Scotland and was well regarded internationally. Womersley won the competition for the Roxburgh County Offices in Newtown St Boswell in 1968. Only 'phase one' of his design was completed. This comprised a large square-plan shuttered concrete office block with a prominent concrete tower. Patterns of circulation and movement through a building were a key preoccupation that returned throughout his work and the "racetrack" corridor plan for the County Offices is a good example. By 1969 the practice received their

biggest commission to date for schools of Town Planning and Sculpture at Edinburgh's College of Art although this scheme was never executed.

[AN ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY]

Peter Womersley was one of a relatively small group of architects, builders and engineers who were keen to push beyond accepted ideas and challenge how their contemporaries viewed the design of homes, offices and public buildings. The period in which he was producing work was one of great optimism and commitment in the field and this is reflected in Womersley's best works, all of which are genuine 'one-offs' which largely eschew system building and prefabrication. In 1972, the architect was commissioned by the artist Bernat Klein to create a studio near to the house he had designed for the artist 15 years earlier. Together, these two very different buildings exemplify the artistic vision of the architect and his contribution to 20th century architecture in Scotland.

[KEY BUILDINGS IN SCOTLAND]



Gala Fairydean Football Stadium, Galashiels, 1963-5

Working with renowned engineering practice Ove Arup, Womersley created this shuttered concrete and brick structure at a cost of a modest £25,000, most of which was raised through a public lottery. It was referred to in the *Architectural Review* (March 1965) as a 'geometrical composition of unusual interest and subtlety'. The bold formalist design accentuates the essential elements of the football stand, a building type that had, up until that point, been exclusively functional in its construction. This approach to sports stadium design has become more common in recent times.





Peter Womersley, Preparatory Watercolour © Bernat Klein

High Sunderland, Selkirk, 1956-7

High Sunderland was built in 1956-7 for the textile designer and artist Bernat Klein (b.1922) who has described the house as “a unique and practical example of intellectual awareness applied to daily living”. This modular timber-framed house has fine bespoke interior details and contemporary finishes and features two separate areas: one for guests and children’s bedrooms and one for the master bedroom and main living area. The house includes a carport, two terraces and a courtyard.





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Bernat Klein Studio, Selkirk, 1972

Working again with structural engineers Ove Arup, Womersley designed this remarkable concrete assembly of cantilevered floors with a central core of engineering brick to be used as a workspace, meeting clients and for displaying textiles. Finely framed glazing allows views of the secluded tree-lined setting. The ground floor received guests whilst the first floor studio was accessed via a bridge which linked to a wooded path leading to High Sunderland.



In 1973 the Klein Studio won both an RIBA award and the Edinburgh Architectural Association Centenary Medal. The success of the design was instantly recognised by the architectural press and made the cover of the acclaimed Japanese journal, *Architecture and Urbanism* and was more recently voted fifth in a list of the 100 best post-war buildings in Scotland.



The Rig, Gattonside, Melrose, 1958

Built as his own home, The Rig is a compact design centred around a timber-clad core given over entirely to the services, or the “gubbins” as he called it, with a continuous circuit of spaces flowing around them, carefully delineated by changes in floor level and ceiling finish. The interior survives largely in its original form and is of particular importance in that it provided a prototype of the architecture he hoped to produce in future commissions.

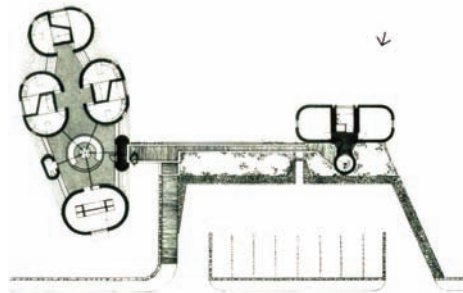




Edenside Surgery, Kelso, 1967

The late 1960's design of the Edenside Group Practice Surgery on Inch Road in Kelso focused on the consulting rooms which are arranged in pairs within four oval-shaped drums or pods. These were set around a sunken waiting area with a timber-ribbed ceiling and two smaller drums forming an entrance porch. The design features more traditional elements such as slated roofs and white harling. As the medical practice expanded, additional buildings were added in 1982 by Aitken and Turnbull Architects in a style sympathetic to the earlier work. A further major refit in 2006 resulted in the loss of the original consulting and waiting rooms.

Consulting rooms, 1968 © Morton, R.S. Licensor www.rcrahms.gov.uk



Peter Womersley, Plan of Kelso Medical Practice, 1967

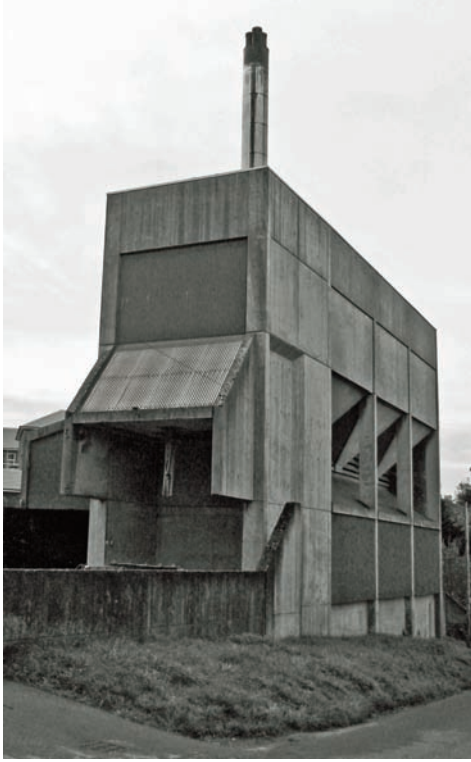
Garlton Unit, Herdmanflat Hospital, Haddington, 1965



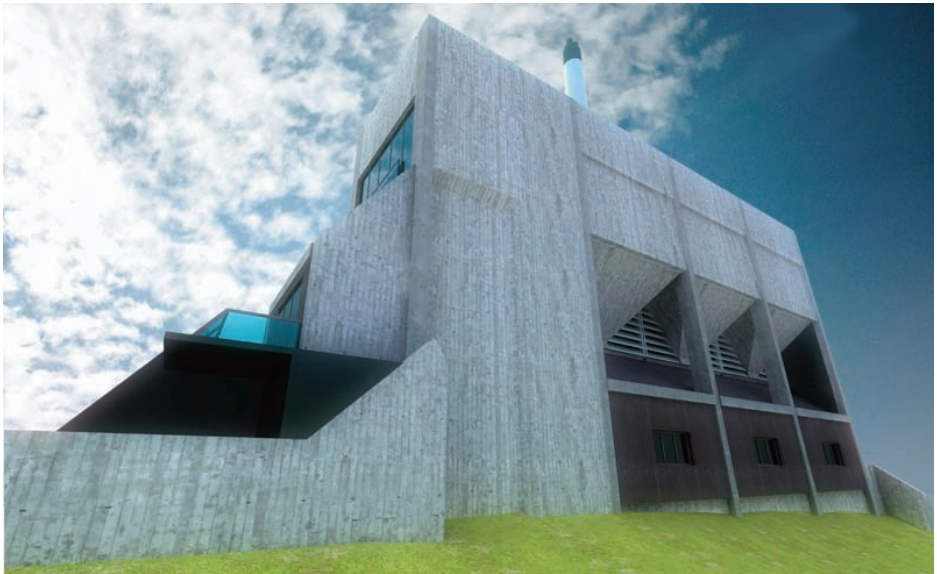
This building is a fine example of a mid 1960's residential hospital admission unit, surviving in a largely unaltered condition and remaining in its original use (2010). Its modular elevations, cantilevered sections, strong vertical ribs and striking grid pattern set it apart as an example of its type. The building is set on sloping ground in a corner of the hospital grounds overlooking an apple orchard. The building received a Civic Trust Award in 1968.



Dingleton Boiler House, Melrose, 1977



A monolithic landmark of functionality, the boiler house was built to serve the adjacent Dingleton Hospital near Melrose. Womersley used concrete increasingly in his later works which gave him freedom to experiment with more sculptural forms. The building received the *Financial Times* Industrial Architecture Award on completion in 1978. More recently, Studio DuB Architects have received permission to convert the building into five residential apartments.

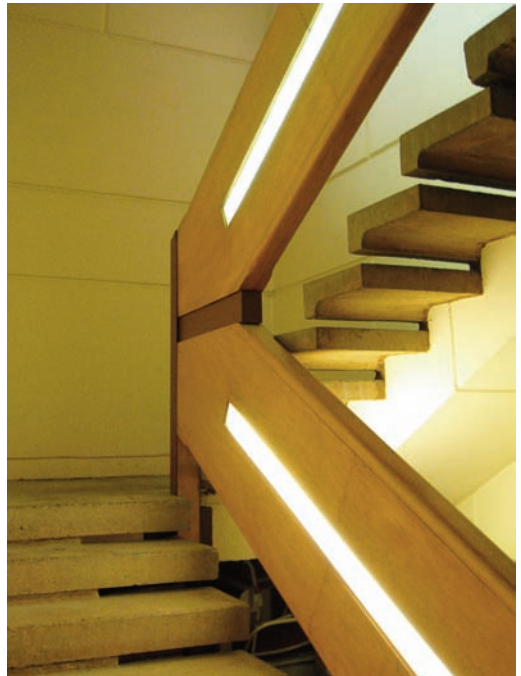




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Nuffield Transplant Unit, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh, 1963

Womersley began with the question “What on earth does a building devoted to surgical transplantation of human organs look like?” and spent four years producing this iconic hospital building in Edinburgh which sought to fuse services, structure and appearance into a convincing unity. Altered significantly in 2007, the building continues to demonstrate a remarkable sculptural presence within the wider hospital complex.



[HISTORIC SCOTLAND]

This booklet is the second in a series focusing on some of the leading architects who worked extensively in Scotland. Each gives a brief overview of the architect, their approach to design and their influences and focuses on a number of key buildings, giving an indication of what makes them special.

Historic Scotland is an executive agency of the Scottish Government charged with ensuring that our historic environment provides a strong foundation in building a successful future for Scotland. Amongst the duties of Historic Scotland is to compile and maintain statutory lists of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. We have a dedicated listing and designed landscapes team which researches and assesses listing proposals.

To find out more about Peter Womersley and his listed buildings in Scotland you can search online at www.historic-scotland.gov.uk or contact the Listing and Designed Landscapes Team at hs.listing@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

WEBLINKS AND FURTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

www.scottisharchitects.org.uk – Charles Peter Womersley

RIBA Journal (May 1969) "Architects' Approach to Architecture – Peter Womersley" pp189-196

Architectural Perspectives No12 (Winter 1958) "Five Houses – Peter Womersley" pp17-22

Kitty Cruft, John Dunbar, Richard Fawcett, "The Buildings of Scotland – Borders" (2002) pp301, 319, 376-7, 550

Historic Scotland (2009) "Guide to the Protection of Scotland's Listed Buildings – What Listing Means to Owners and Occupiers"

www.historic-scotland.gov.uk

ILLUSTRATIONS

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Peter Womersley, preparatory watercolour of High Sunderland reproduced courtesy of Bernat Klein.

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