

The use of rate books as a means of dating properties:

T. E. Owen's houses in Southsea, Hampshire, 1838–62

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Rate books occupy the paradoxical position of being widely recognized as a valuable source of information and yet at the same time being very little used in historical research. No doubt this stems in part from the rich legacy of alternative nineteenth-century sources, notably the census reports, and in part from the apparent reluctance of researchers to work at the level of the street and the house, at least until relatively recently. Yet from the data the rate books make available (the street name, the house occupier and owner, together with the rateable value) information may be obtained about population migration, property values, and ownership patterns. Additionally, it is possible to derive not only an accurate map of urban growth but also the dating of individual houses in a street correct to within three months (the interval between each collection). Attempts have been made to identify properties from rate books and census enumerators' returns used in combination,¹ but because of the long inter-censal hiatus this method cannot provide an adequate picture of rapid change. This article shows how the continuous record provided by the rate books, in conjunction with a number of other sources, has been used to establish the dating of houses put up by T. E. Owen between 1834 and 1862 in Southsea, Hampshire.

Not content with his work as architect, builder, surveyor, and civil engineer, Thomas Ellis Owen (1804–62) secured further income from land speculation and from renting the great majority of properties he built. When set against the national background Owen's houses themselves are by no means outstanding and not surprisingly Pevsner dismisses his villas as 'strange and awkward'.² It was his careful creation of *rus in urbe* through tree-lines, twisting roads and sinuous drives leading to houses barely visible to passers-by that gave Owen's housing areas their distinction.³ In the absence of

other architects and builders with comparable flair, Owen becomes an important figure in early Victorian Southsea, someone whose achievements have generated much local interest in the last decade. The principal work on Owen, by two architectural students, D. A. Preedy and I. Stewart, appeared in 1971,⁴ and although the dates they offer for his houses are for the most part in ten year bands, and no sources are quoted, their findings have been virtually accepted as unquestioned truth by local interest groups hungry for information about the great man. It was against this background that it was decided to use the rate books and other sources to check the veracity of statements on the dating of Owen's houses.

Perusal of the rate books for Southsea allows the compilation of a list by street of houses owned by Owen, but save in the case of terraces (which are always specifically named), it is impossible to identify a particular house within a street. A date may therefore be ascribed to Owen's terraces, but his villas present more of a problem. This is compounded by Owen's policy of building only a few houses each year, causing the dates of properties in the streets in which he was active to vary by as much as fifteen years. However, the problem of locating an individual house may be overcome by the use of large-scale (1:500) Ordnance Survey maps, published in 1867, which provide the names of houses, and of local directories which include the names and addresses of most of those who could afford to reside in Owen's houses. The frequency with which families moved house, coupled with the absence of a run of directories on an annual basis, poses a slight problem. However, later directories have an especially complete coverage of residents' details; in the case of Southsea, *Simpson's Directory* of 1863 is most useful, more particularly since it was published the year after Owen's death. It is a simple matter to relate the directory and rate book entries, and to trace most houses back in time through the rate book lists, utilizing a combination of owner, occupier, rateable value and position on the rate collector's walk, until the entry fails to appear. In this context the rateable value is extremely helpful for it is the one entry that does not fundamentally change, an important consideration when both the owner and occupier may alter simultaneously. Rateable values may change absolutely, but they seldom do so relatively, for an upward swing in the rates is expressed in a percentage change in all rateable values. Owen's practice of designing houses with considerable variation in size gives rise to a concomitant variety of rateable values, thereby easing the process of tracing houses in the same street.

Not all houses are traceable by this means, for its success depends on the nature of the directories' coverage. The solution is to assemble Owen houses and to construct a map of the rate collector's walk to help provide the missing material. This is based on the assumption that the order in which the rate book entries occur is related to the collector's route; in Southsea, as will be shown, this assumption is entirely valid. The value of this exercise is that it allows inferences to be made about the location on the ground of names in the rate books about which no information is available from the directories. An example will clarify this. The October 1851 rate book entry for Grove Road, Southsea, commences: Edward Lang, William Payne, Hugh Evans. No details are available about William Payne's address from the directories, but since the rate collector was walking south along Grove Road, and there is one property unaccounted for between those occupied by Edward Land and Hugh Evans, it is reasonable to assume that it was occupied by William Payne. The census enumerator's returns provide a valuable check on the accuracy of the method described, especially since in some cases the name of the house appears in the entry. By plotting the enumerator's walk and comparing it with that of the rate collector's, discrepancies are immediately apparent, particularly since the routes followed are by no means identical. This may be carried out only once every ten years, but it does provide an independent assessment of information gleaned from the rate books and directories. Figure 1 shows how the 1851 census enumerators' walks and the October 1851 rate walk for Grove Road match up, confirming, incidentally, William Payne's residence.

No doubt it may be argued that the dates of first occupancy derived from the rate books are not necessarily synonymous with the dates of construction. Indeed one would not expect every house to be occupied immediately on completion, and clearly some must have stood empty longer than others. On the other hand, the high proportion of rented properties, amounting to 79 per cent of the total in central Southsea in October 1855,⁵ suggests that shortage of capital by prospective occupiers was not an issue, rendering it unlikely that houses would have remained unleased for more than a matter of months. However, the rate books themselves remove the need for this speculation for they offer firm evidence as to the existence of a building, irrespective of whether it was occupied or not. Unoccupied houses are listed in the returns, the owner is indicated and a rateable value is assigned, but no rate is levied. It is clear that this is so since under the heading 'Amount not Recoverable

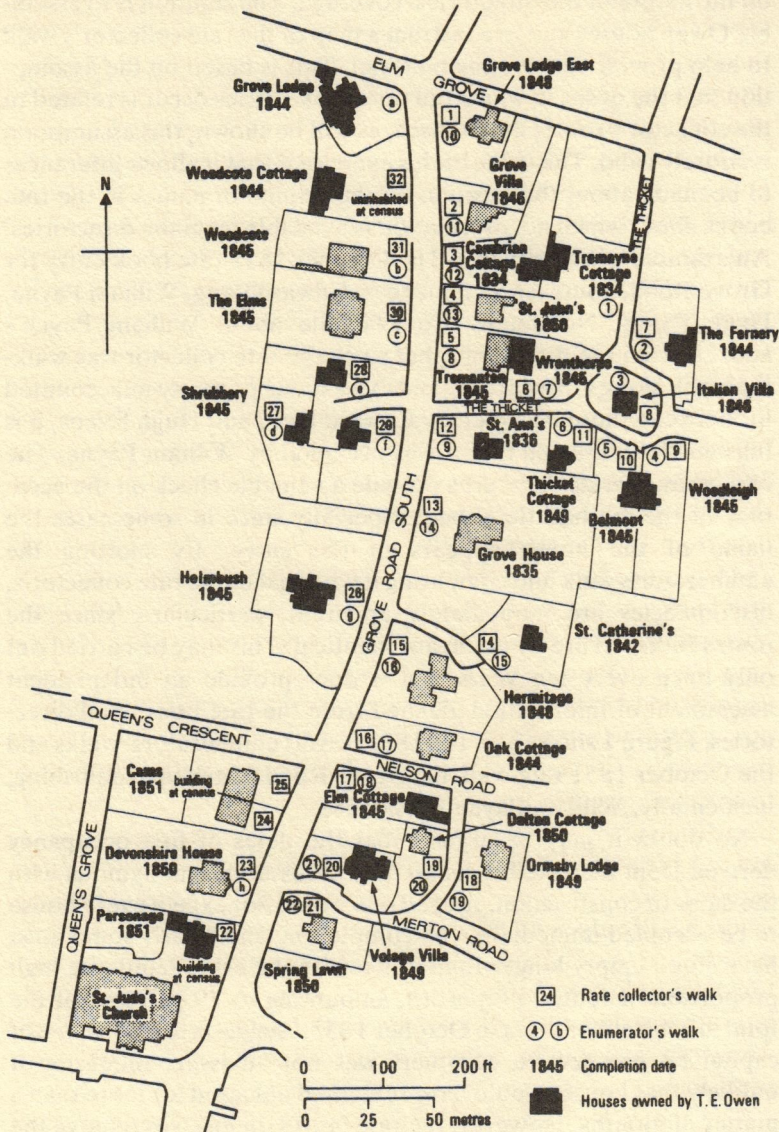


FIG 1: The Census Enumerators' and Rate Collectors' Walks for Grove Road, Southsea, 1851.

or Legally Excused' is entered the identical sum appearing under the heading 'Total Amount to be Collected'. In the 1840s the subheading 'Causes' was introduced; where no occupier is shown the word 'Void' appears. This practice is most valuable for it allows houses to be dated to within three months of construction, a level of accuracy much more rigorous than is normally required.

The building dates derived from the rate books indicate that Owen began work rather later than Preedy and Stewart suggest. These authors argue that he completed ten houses in Grove Road, and seven in Kent Road, Queen's Terrace, and Sussex Terrace between 1835 and 1837. Rate book evidence shows that two of these properties – Cambrian Cottage (1834) and Tremayne Cottage (1834) in Grove Road – were completed prior to this date and that only three houses – Grove House (1835) and St Ann's (1836) in Grove Road and Swiss Cottage (1837) in Kent Road – were finished within the period mentioned. Further, since Grove House and Swiss Cottage were not owned by Owen, there is a possibility that he was not connected with them. The ten villas in Grove Road date from 1834–5, those in Kent Road (Swiss Cottage apart) from 1843–4, and Queen's Terrace from 1838–40. Quite aside from the rate book entries, since Queen's Terrace was named after Queen Victoria, who was crowned in 1837, it is hardly likely that it would have been completed in 1836 as Preedy and Stewart claim. Sussex Terrace does not appear in the rate books until 1854, a date so much at variance with Preedy and Stewart that a change of street name seemed a possibility. A search of the rate books was therefore made to ascertain whether any of the tenants of the terrace had previously been listed in the vicinity under another street name, but this proved not to have been the case. Additionally the terrace does not appear in the 1841 or the 1851 census enumerators' returns. The claim made by Preedy and Stewart in respect of this property seems especially tenuous. By subsequently employing longer time periods for dating purposes, that is, 1838–51 and 1851–60, Preedy and Stewart provide themselves with considerable latitude and one would not cavil at most of their findings, although they certainly lack precision.

The choice by Preedy and Stewart of the year 1838 as a divide between Owen's early and middle period seemed somewhat arbitrary and prompted the thought that the tithe map, *Map of the Parish of Portsea*, drawn up by Owen himself in 1838, might have constituted a guideline. With the single exception of Sussex Terrace, all the properties that Preedy and Stewart regard as having been built

by Owen between 1835 and 1837 do appear on the tithe map, and it seems more than likely that this was their source. The rate books confirm that the properties in question, with the exception of Sussex Terrace, were Owen's earliest, but that they were completed by 1845 rather than 1837. The explanation of the discrepancy is to be found at the back of the schedule to the tithe map where the earliest entry gives the first apportionment as 13 February 1845. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that while the map survey was undertaken in 1838, the schedule was not finally drawn up until 1845, and in order to provide a correct record, buildings put up subsequent to the survey were added to the map. Indeed, the map has been considerably amended, for instance, by the inclusion of the railway which dates from 1847, and of roads not laid out until the 1850s and 1860s. Without the accurate record provided by the rate books it must be doubtful whether this flaw in the dating of the tithe map would have come to light.

Although the research was principally concerned to establish a method of dating properties, it became apparent at an early stage that the choice of Owen's houses raised the issue of their identification. Preedy and Stewart rely on architectural evidence and attribute many more houses to Owen than the rate books indicate he owned. To a degree this is to be expected, for as a successful architect he could have designed houses for construction by other builders, and he could have sold houses on completion. The tithe map shows him owning virtually all the land mapped in Figure 1 and he probably did build all the houses thereon, for they do appear to bear his design touch. Wrenthorpe and Tremanton, for instance, were built as a semi-detached pair, and that Owen owned Wrenthorpe and not Tremanton would suggest that he sold the latter when it was built. There are other areas in Southsea where it is more difficult to lend support to Preedy and Stewart. One such locality is Villiers Road. Here the houses may be on the same scale as those known to be by Owen, but at no time did he own any of the properties, all of which stand in a regimented line at identical distances from and their fronts parallel to the linear road. In short, they lack Owen's penchant for subtle curves and ingenious dissimilarity of aspect and design. The same is certainly true of the small, cramped and quite unremarkable houses in Albany Road.

The rate books allow a more positive rebuttal of association with Owen in the case of four terraces: Clifton, Netley, Richmond, and Brunswick. A date of c. 1845 is suggested by Preedy and Stewart for the impressive Clifton Terrace – Pevsner describes it as 'fairly

monumental in scale' –⁶ when the rate books indicate completion in 1856. More importantly, the owner is shown as Henry Francis Gauntlett, an architect, surveyor and builder who, like Owen, operated his own brickworks. It is inconceivable that such a person would commission Owen to design buildings for him, yet at the same time there would be nothing to stop him imitating features characteristic of Owen which some present-day architects assert they can see in Clifton Terrace. Similar remarks apply to Netley Terrace. Preedy and Stewart date it between 1838 and 1851, but the rate books indicate that it was built between 1859 and 1860, the owners being Isaac Moody, a timber merchant, and Henry Francis Gauntlett, suggesting the existence of a partnership. Gauntlett is also shown as the owner of Richmond Terrace, completed in 1860, although placed in the 1838–51 period by Preedy and Stewart. The smaller Brunswick Terrace, long demolished, was owned by John Aylen, a small builder who may have had the capacity both to design and to construct the property.

Although it is a labour intensive task, the collection of material from the rate books, supported by evidence from maps, directories and the census enumerators' returns, represents an accurate method of dating nineteenth-century properties, and as is shown in the case of the Portsea tithe map, is a useful base against which the validity of other sources may be checked. In furnishing information about ownership, the rate books at the same time have an important role in the attribution of properties; there must be many a Henry Francis Gauntlett lying unrecognized beneath the aura of better known men.

Notes

¹ For example, R. S. Holmes, 'Identifying Nineteenth-century Properties', *Area*, vi (1974), pp. 273–7.

² Nikolaus Pevsner and David Lloyd, *Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 462.

³ R. C. Riley, *The Growth of Southsea as a Naval Satellite and Victorian Resort*, The Portsmouth Papers No. 16 (Portsmouth, 1972), pp. 9–11.

⁴ D. A. Preedy and I. Stewart, 'Thomas Ellis Owen' (unpub. thesis, Portsmouth Polytechnic, 1971).

⁵ Portsmouth Record Office, Rate Returns, 19 October 1855.

⁶ Pevsner and Lloyd, *Hampshire*.