



Bus line 24 from Edinburgh's city center.  
Drylaw, United Kingdom.

## On Pebbledash: Scenes from Suburban Britain

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*This far out, the buses stop less frequently.*

*It's a different clientele at dusk: nothing left to go to or return from, just a few people spread over two storeys of seats, scanning the streets and visibly uncertain as to which stop they'll pick tonight. Look through the windows and it's more of the same. Houses arranged in concentric circles but otherwise interchangeable, coated with pebbledash, a material that blends into the sky. At sunset, Scotland is a deeper purple than would seem possible, but that's faded a bit by now, backed down to a gravelly ambience that's more texture than color. As the light fails, a thrilling blandness envelopes suburban Britain; each house blurs together a bit at the edges. If not for the accent of the driver, this could be Middlesbrough or even Norwich—anywhere vaguely near a coast, close enough to get the scent of it, the occasional bird. It's not London: at least not a part of it that anyone would recognize.*

Pebbledash is currently the most common type of cladding used to “render” the exteriors of residential buildings in the UK. The material has ancient roots in the British Isles where its predecessor, roughcast—a composite slurry of plaster and aggregate applied to masonry—can be found in castles and structures dating as far back as the Roman occupation. The technique that underlies modern pebbledash, however—throwing aggregate so that it sticks to a surface coated in plaster—first made its appearance during the Tudor era, when masons launched vibrant handfuls of broken glass against wet plaster walls in what must have been a particularly vivid event marking the completion of the building process. Because pebbledash betrays its process of handwork in such a conspicuous way, it came back into vogue during the Arts and Crafts movement as a material that was held up to be particularly representative of the handmade and the vernacular.

Pebbledash’s true rise to prominence, however, came later, playing a pivotal role in the development of British council housing that endures to this day. While the earliest council houses funded by the Addison Act of 1919 were relatively spacious, designed to be “homes fit for heroes,” the pressing need for slum clearance and the devastation of German bombing raids prompted an abrupt change in design after the Second World War. Standardized floor plans were chosen by the government to fill densely packed neighborhoods on the outskirts of industrial centers. Quickly contracted out for mass production, these homes employed everything from low quality brick to metal scraps of destroyed military vehicles as construction materials, and pebbledash proved to be the great equalizer, covering whatever was on hand in a uniform coating that came to visually define the suburbs.

Pebbledash outperformed in its role—being an exception to the rule of ‘fast, cheap, good - choose two’—as it was quick to go up, “nearly indestructible, and much cheaper than painting”<sup>1</sup> While most units were designed with a fixed lifespan ranging from ten to sixty years, many still stand today, testament to the surprising resilience of what seemed a temporary solution. Pebbledash thus played an essential role in crafting a more complete pattern of architectural conformity, reflecting in exterior texture a process of standardization that began in the interior with floor plans that could be found anywhere from southern England to northern Scotland.

Some try to remove the inherited pebbledash exteriors of their homes, either by scraping and chiseling, which in some cases exposes old masonry details, or by painting over it instead, eliminating the tonal and textural differences between the pebbles by abstracting them into a uniformly colored field of gem-like geometries.<sup>2</sup> The second method often backfires, as a characteristic of pebbledash is its propensity to crumble—for individual pebbles to be knocked off as the surface wears. When that surface is painted, the absence of a pebble becomes highly visible in both texture and color. Even when pebbledash is not painted, dislodged material is evident to the careful observer who will find the absent figures of fallen pebbles cupped by the remaining plaster. This tendency to crumble incidentally gives

1 Laura Barnett, “Gry, Lumpy, Impossible to Remove – but Pebbledash Isn’t All Bad,” *The Guardian*, 21 April 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/apr/21/pebbledash-homes-nick-clegg>.

2 Guy Alexander Bell, “A Wall Coating for an Arts and Crafts House, Tenby, Wales,” *Never Paint Again UK*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.neverpaintagain.co.uk/blog/arts-and-crafts-house-tenby/>.

Builder applying pebbledash.  
Drylaw, United Kingdom.



A homeowner, grinning, oversees the application of a fresh coat of pebbledash; for all of its drabness, it almost glistens in the daylight. “The main house had it put on before Victoria, last owner said. It was still there, so I thought I’d do the garage as well.” Thirty minutes northwest of Edinburgh’s center, Drylaw has countless homes that fit this story: some semi-detached, some council housing from the ‘50s, but all coated in the same sandy greys and browns. “Two-thirds of it ends up on the ground,” adds one of the builders sheepishly. “But it’s good work, this. Got a real rhythm to it.” You can still hear them another few blocks on, and he’s right: the scrape of the trowel against the bucket, a pause, and then it hitting the wall, not all at once but spread out over a few moments as each pebble finds its place against the plaster or on the ground.

structures clad in pebbledash a defensive material characteristic, making it difficult for curious youth and burglars alike to climb on the buildings as their handholds constantly give way. Ironically, this built-in failure of the material might be the key to its longevity and resilience; while more rigid materials fail in a single, spectacular moment that compromises the whole system, pebbledash functions despite the regular loss of material, shrugging off the punishment of its environment.

While pebbledash's tendency to slough off allows us to understand it as 'slippery', it is also 'rough', proving the material's resistance to singular definitions—"Rough as in all those childhood scratches and grazes. You could easily scrape a hand or leg on the stuff when playing games around the council."<sup>3</sup> In addition to acting as an abrasive skin, the roughness of the material gives its surface an irregular, ragged edge, presenting a unique 'corner problem' that is usually resolved in one of three ways: capping corners with a different material such as brick or flashing, acknowledging the impossibility of the pebbles adhesion to a sharp corner and leaving the corner seam itself nude, or thickening the corner seam into a filleted curve so that the pebbles are able to cling to its surface. Though pebbledash is often compared to terrazzo, another ancient process of casting many small, usually glass materials into plaster or concrete, pebbledash's unique expression at the corner betrays fundamental, diagrammatic differences between pebbledash and terrazzo. Terrazzo is a volumetric mixture that takes the shape of the container it is cast in, revealing its inner contents as they terminate

3 Mel Healy, "A Line about Pebbledash," 10 October 2014, <https://melhealy.wordpress.com/2014/10/09/a-line-about-pebbledash/>.

against smooth chamfered surfaces. By contrast, pebbledash is a surface condition, in which the application of textured materials necessarily problematizes the corner.

Today, unrest with generations of visual uniformity has fallen squarely on pebbledash as an icon of the drab, endless scenes of post-war Britain. Contemporary preservationists point to what they call "slapdash pebbledash" as a blight that disregards local, vernacular architectural character—a lazy field of sameness applied indiscriminately as a crutch to cover up bad craftsmanship. Indeed, UK builders' sayings include any number of ways of communicating that all conceivable mistakes can be hidden by a skin of pebbledash.<sup>4</sup> Even more offensive to the preservationists though, is when pebbledash is applied to historic structures:

*"Acres of these harsh cementitious renders enveloped the facades of humble terraced houses in the late 20th century, irrespective of whether the underlying surface was brick or stone, plain or elaborately decorated, Georgian or Edwardian. The original surface details which give these buildings their character were obliterated."*<sup>5</sup>

Ironically, this now-maligned use of pebbledash actually had a preservationist spirit, as the material was intended to extend the lifespan of buildings by repairing cracks and crumbling details, serving as a kind of ornamental glue to hold the rapidly deteriorating buildings together.

4 "Interview with Pebbledash Contractor in Drylaw," Interview by Henry Weikel, September 2018.

5 Jonathan Taylor, "Edwardian Pebbledash and Roughcast," *Building Conservation*, <http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/pebbledash/pebbledash.htm>.

Material Contentions. Drylaw, United Kingdom.



*In the oldest parts of Drylaw, there are moments when the uniformly textured pebbledash walls are marred by intrusions both ancient and modern. Bundles of wire spread over the exteriors like something organic, bolted on at hasty right angles that slice the facade into indiscriminate segments. CCTV cameras jut out from the walls like so many ravens, perched at impossible angles. Even more jarring, though, are the architectural fossils—bits of the Georgian, Elizabethan, and even medieval cities below gently breaking the surface, offering the flavor of a forgotten style even in their illegibility. In spite of this, the cladding and the cladded don't seem opposed. Though newer and more finely ground, pebbledash is simply an extension of these earlier practices—a more thorough redistribution of Britain's geological resources into shelter.*



Weathered pebbledash. Drylaw, United Kingdom.

*Few materials could withstand Drylaw's harsh coastal weather, but pebbledash manages to endure through a process of slow failure: sloughing off the walls like a thick husk only to puddle at the base—piles of it, disaggregated and rearranged, a decade in the losing. The walls left piebald, resurfaced in a slightly different color: knocked down even, the whole house gone and just a halo of that material remaining, scattered over vacant fields. The bolted-up slogans of anti-violence campaigns—"No knives, better lives"—are framed by it, adding a layer of social history to the existing record of abrasive weather and daily use traced in its bare patches. While it is undoubtedly a sad material—one that excels through cheapness, uniformity, and protracted deterioration—you can't help but feel that the neighborhood would be sadder without it; an inescapable vernacular.*

The pebbledash industry has seemingly tried to respond to these critiques by moving away from the solid greys and beiges that dominate suburban Britain and adding new mixes of multicolored, often-imported pebbles that might yield more appealing and contextually appropriate coatings. Most of the names chosen for these new "recipes" take on a pastoral character: Sunflower, Barleycorn, Oatmeal, Harvest, or even the more ephemeral, Sunset.<sup>6</sup> This strategy of color diversification and bucolic branding is also an attempt to mitigate the loss of market value associated with an unappealing pebbledash exterior—"What other coating could you put on your house that costs €3,000 and will instantly devalue your home by four times that amount."<sup>7</sup> Even as contemporary attitudes towards pebbledash sour, the material reinvents itself once again, as its structural flexibility—being as much a process of assembly as a material unto itself—ensures its longevity. Like other materials closely tied to the visual character of their region, pebbledash will remain a point of cultural fixation, with questions of taste, nostalgia, and modernity playing out on the shifting facade's of Britain's architecture.

<sup>6</sup> "Pebble Dashing Aggregates," *The Pebble Mill*, <https://www.thepebblemill.co.uk/pebble-dashing-aggregates>.

<sup>7</sup> Mel Healy, "A Line about Pebbledash." 10 October 2014, <https://melhealy.wordpress.com/2014/10/09/a-line-about-pebbledash/>.