

Kirkland comes alive

Opportunities to revive a community—when Mike Walford bought a house in the rundown heart of Kendal little did he realise that today, a decade later, his initiative would lead to the reversal of official policy and the saving of a community. Nick Wates* explains.

Eleven years ago, Mike Walford pitched his tent in a field outside Kendal, Cumbria, went into town and found a job in one of three established architectural firms. It was his year out from the Liverpool Polytechnic School of Architecture. He chose Kendal because it seemed an attractive place to live, slotted between the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. After a few weeks he bought a small unmodernised cottage for £900 in a run-down part of the town called Kirkland.

Kendal is not the kind of place one would expect to have 'an inner city problem'. Yet in 1970 short-sighted councillors and planners were systematically demolishing the traditional yards, with their tightly-packed solid stone buildings, and network of pedestrian alleys linking the High Street with the River Kent to the east and the fellside to the west. It was believed that by substituting car parks, shopping complexes and estate housing, more shoppers and tourists could be attracted. Many small businesses were driven out and the residents—mostly elderly—were told they were fortunate in being rehoused on peripheral estates where they could only reach the shops by means of increasingly sporadic bus services. Later of course, most of the grandiose plans were shelved, partly because of the recession and partly because it was increasingly realised that the historic yards were an important part of Kendal's character, and helped to attract tourists. But much damage had already been done, and those who ventured behind the High Street facade found mostly wasteland and rugged stone shells.

Much of Kirkland, where Walford settled, was destined for a motel and car park but, fortunately, was still largely intact though blighted. Back at college for his fourth year, Walford wrote a dissertation on Kirkland, showing how it could once again become a thriving residential area. He has spent the last 10 years putting his theories into practice.

The rebuilding of Kirkland has not been achieved by government powers: it has not been declared a General Improvement Area or a Housing Action Area and little public

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1 The traditional yards lead through a narrow passage into the High Street, the building in fig 7 is to the right.

2 With the early conversion (5) to the left and the new extension to his parents' home (7) in the distance, the five new cottages (12) blend in well on the right. Cottage renovation and extension (11) beyond.

3 Mike Walford surveys the scene in front of his office (9) converted from a derelict cottage in 1978/9.



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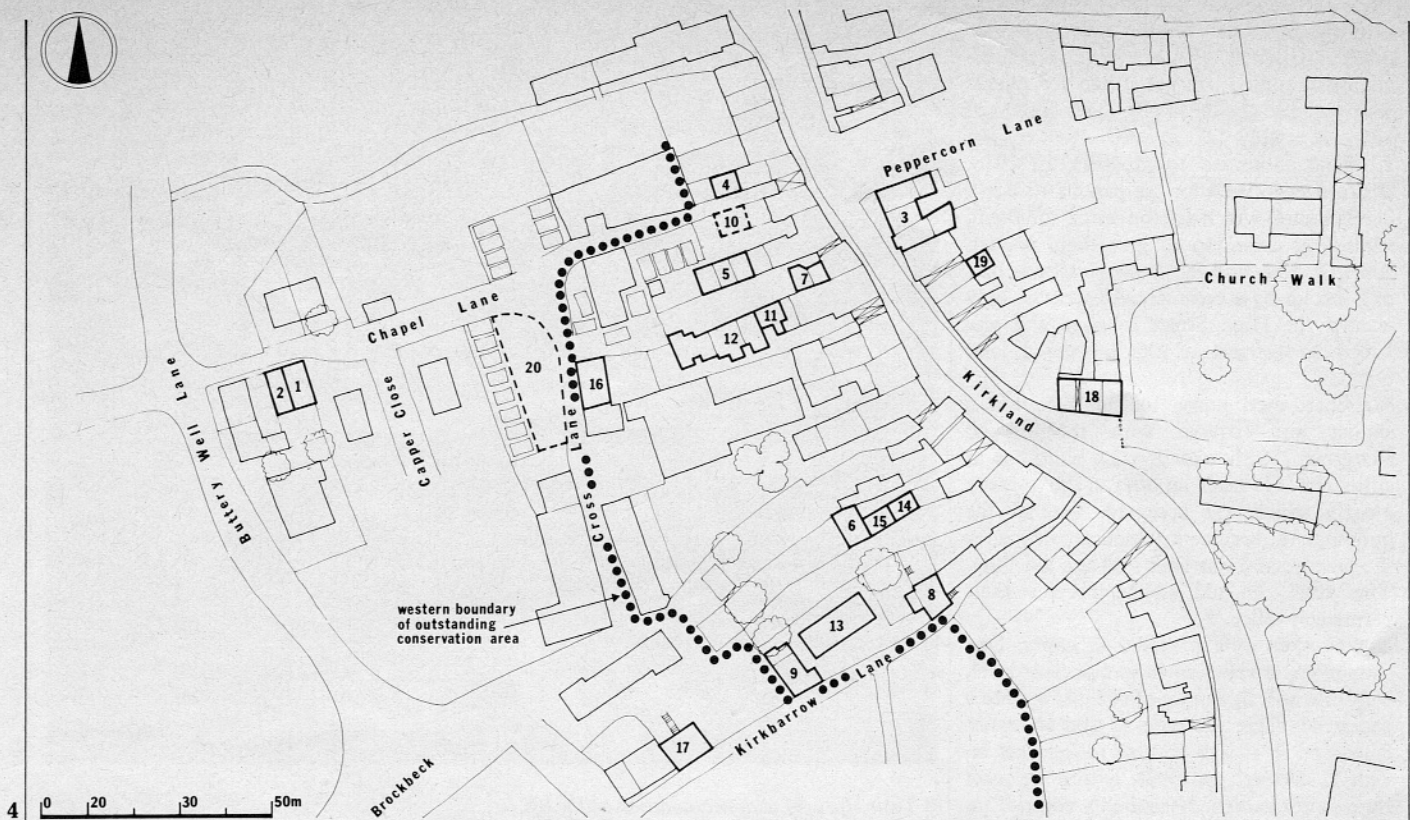
money has been spent on it. Instead it has been rejuvenated entirely by small scale private initiative, with no encouragement (at least initially) from the local council. Walford's role has been crucial—as an architect, as a local resident and as an inspirational catalyst.

After modernising his own house, 1, he did a similar simple conversion for his neighbours, 2. His first large job was on the High Street. Three dwellings with two shops on the ground floor were due to be demolished because they were at the entrance of the Abbott Hall car park, 3. Their demolition would only have provided a few extra car spaces and would have destroyed the architectural unity of the High Street, leaving an even worse gap than that existing. The owners, local shopkeepers, were to get a pitiful £300 compensation. 'I was unethical I suppose as an RIBA student member in approaching the owners and saying, 'Look, this is hopeless. Surely you can do some-

thing?' And they said, 'Alright, you tell us what we ought to do.'

It was quite a challenge for a student with virtually no experience but Walford managed to pre-empt the Compulsory Purchase Order and the conversion went smoothly, the owners ending up extremely happy with a property, now in 1981 worth around £100 000.

Next came a stable in the yard leading from Walford's house to the main street. 'I walked past it all the time and it seemed a shame to have it empty. We had a couple of good friends, a married couple who wanted a house in Kendal. They were being priced out of the market. I thought this would make a smashing spot so I approached the owners.' The owners had already considered converting the stable but had been put off by a builder's quotation of £3500 for the work. 'I said, if we can do a scheme for about £2000 and get an improvement grant of £1500 so it's only costing you £500, would that be an attractive proposition?' Walford was reticent about effectively acting unethically and poaching the scheme from another architect, but by doing so he was able to turn another abandoned building into a home, and solve a young couple's housing problems. The final



contract price came to £1998.

By this time people began to see what he was doing, liked it, and instead of him having to approach other people, they started coming to him—he modernised three tenanted cottages in 1973, 5.

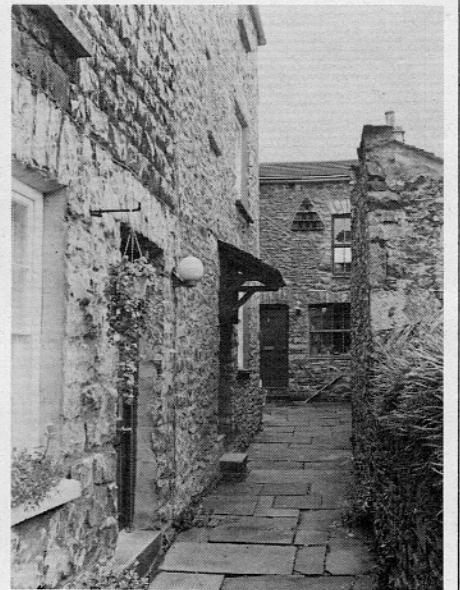
Walford was then working for his RIBA Part 3. He and his wife, having started a family, needed more space and bought a cottage at the end of a yard which they converted themselves using self-build techniques, 6. Also at this time he set up his own partnership with Brian Huck. Although other practices in Kendal were laying staff off because of the recession, this did not unduly worry Walford and Huck. 'By going around just poking one's nose into situations it was creating work. It was generating work in an area which obviously needed a lot doing to it. There's a lot of work to be done generally. It's just a question of getting the owners organised.'

Another key to their success was the small scale nature of their operation. They were determined to keep the practice small and have maintained this policy even when they had enough work coming in to expand. For one three-year period they employed an assistant but found they preferred working on their own, taking each job through from beginning to end. Partly because of their insistence on 'getting their hands dirty', they have developed a talent for handling the traditional materials—stone, timber, slate—and a rare expertise in obtaining the maximum potential from existing buildings with judicious use of extensions. Their speciality is the use of roof spaces to create usable floor area and a sense of spaciousness in otherwise small buildings. At the same time they have introduced a few modern materials—such as brightly coloured Sadolins stain—and innovative details which give their work a distinctive style.

As a result the practice has obtained a reputation for cheap, simple yet imaginative work in harmony with the traditional local



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4 Plan marked with references to text.

5 The interiors reflect their imaginative use of the changing levels within the buildings.

6 Walford's parents' home (7) with its new extension with splayed window to reflect the character of the area.

7 Yard 38 with Walford's present house (6) in the background.



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architecture. Their work soon expanded outside Kirkland, to other parts of Kendal and surrounding villages, often for clients who would not normally have used an architect at all.

Kirkland continued to progress. In 1976, Walford negotiated for his parents to buy a derelict shell which he converted for them, adding an extension to give them enough space, **7**. The land had been bought as part of a job lot by a commercial user who only wanted the High Street frontage and was happy to get rid of the unwanted land behind.

Walford's own house looked out onto a similar site, strewn with rubble and overgrown, with two derelict buildings at either end. He made an offer to the brewery owners which was accepted. One of the buildings, **8**, became a temporary office for the practice and was later sold as a dwelling. The other, an old stable, became their permanent office, **9**.

Not all sites were obtained so easily. One cottage was derelict down to first floor level, with one wall in danger of collapsing onto a pedestrian alley. Attempts to find an owner failed and so it was decided to 'just get on with it anyway' and make it into a pocket community garden. Neighbours chipped in, financially and physically, and the site was made safe, flagged and provided with seats, **10**. The local council has been asked to acquire squatters' rights on the site after 12 years.

The way that the area was slowly coming back to life did not go unnoticed. Each property converted and each site cleaned up meant another adjacent shell became usable. People started to realise that Kirkland was once again going to become an attractive place to live in—the snowball gathered momentum.

A shopkeeper with a derelict back yard commissioned Walford to build five new cottages following the traditional yard pattern, **12**. They were the first new yard cottages to be built in Kendal for probably 100 years. Another developer bought the land next to the office and commissioned four new cottages, **13**. A new yard was created.

Professional regulations in force at the time prevented Walford from being a developer himself, although he would have liked to have done so and does not believe it would have been harmful. 'I would have liked to have been involved,' he says, 'because I'd like to have had more control over the standard and design. At this scale of development I think it would not be too unprofessional.'

A builder bought a miniscule cottage three doors down Walford's yard and converted it himself, **14**. Two young couples, both with building trade skills, bought and converted the intervening shells on a self-build basis to Walford's design, **15**. For an outlay of around £10 000, both couples now have properties worth around £20 000. Neither would have been able to afford a standard modern house on a new estate, and they were unconcerned about the lack of gardens and car parking.

By 1981 another stable had been converted to a dwelling, **16**, and several other schemes were in the pipeline, **17**, **18**, **19**.

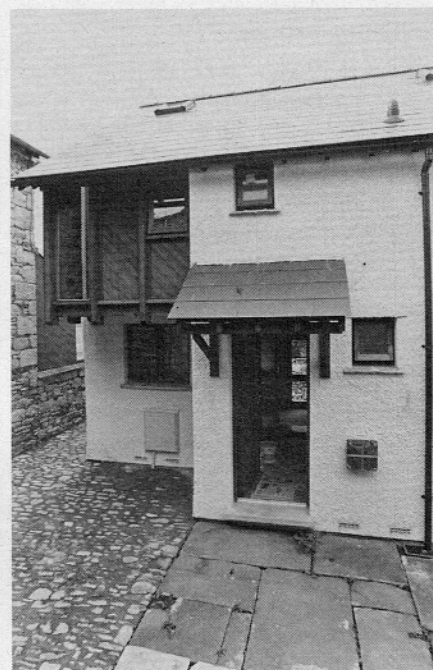
From being scheduled for a motel car park,



8 Their office (**9**) with new addition on the left. The arch right was only discovered during building under rubble.

9 Four new cottages (**13**) built in 1978/9 reflect their distinctive use of stained timber.

10 The other side, (**13**) on the left, his office (**9**) on the right.



Kirkland is now recognised as one of the better areas of Kendal. Councillors who would have spared it from the bulldozer 'over their dead bodies' are now proud of it. Three years ago the whole area, together with central Kendal, was declared an Outstanding Conservation Area. Indeed, partly as a result of Kirkland showing it was possible, the whole attitude towards Kendal's yards has changed. 'The local authority, and building regs and health departments, who five years ago would have said "There's no way you can live in this warehouse" are now falling over backwards to be helpful,' says Walford. 'Although in a slightly schizophrenic way, the planners still complain about over-intensive development. The planners are now looking at the yards from a high density point of view.

'They can't see how anybody in their right minds would want to live in a little two-up two-down or even one-up one-down cottage in a small cobbled yard in the town centre. Well, I can see how they would.

'I would not expect everyone to want to live like that but the planners should not expect everybody to live in their "anywhere suburban house" or whatever is fashionable at the time. What we are looking at are energy resources, shelter from the weather and lack of mobility. An over-intensive development approach to me can be very applicable.'

The final seal of official recognition perhaps is that the council itself is now building a short terrace of housing in Kirkland, 20. Yet there is little doubt that the council could not have handled the Kirkland rejuvenation in such a sensitive way as Walford, or as cheaply. As he says, 'Local authorities cannot deal with very small localised problems. It's a problem in miniscule really—we're only dealing with a couple of dozen properties. They are not into that kind of thing, unfortunately, so it's had to be private initiative on a very low key level.'

Equally important has been an intimate knowledge of the area, its fabric and its people. 'You've got to be able to work at a very small scale and be sympathetic to small scale things. You want to be living at that social level I think.' During one day that I spent with Mike Walford, we were twice stopped in the street by people offering him new commissions—'Could you look at the tin shed in my back yard. . . .'

An interesting exercise now is to compare Kirkland with the new-build yard scheme by Frederick Gibberd & Partners (AJ 24.8.74 p482-3) which won a Civic Trust Heritage Award in 1975. Gibberd started with a cleared site, and undoubtedly produced a more humane scheme than many architects would have. But the green field, one-off, scheme by a famous London-based architect with little real understanding of the locality and its people competes dismally with Walford's Kirkland in terms of townscape and the satisfaction of the inhabitants. Ironically, Walford is now trying to tidy up the edges of Gibberd's scheme to link it with the older parts of town.

The Kirkland story is completed by two more ironies. The first is that Walford never got on very well at architecture school: 'I could not see the point of designing some golf club house at Skelmersdale, doing lots of drawings and writing about it, when it was never going to be built. I preferred to be



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11 *The view from Walford's kitchen window down Yard 38 with two cottage renovations (14, 15) to the right.*

12 *Neighbourhood garden, (10) created and funded by the community.*

13 *The award-winning and sensitive scheme by Gibberd's echoes many of the qualities of the yards but does not recapture their intimacy.*

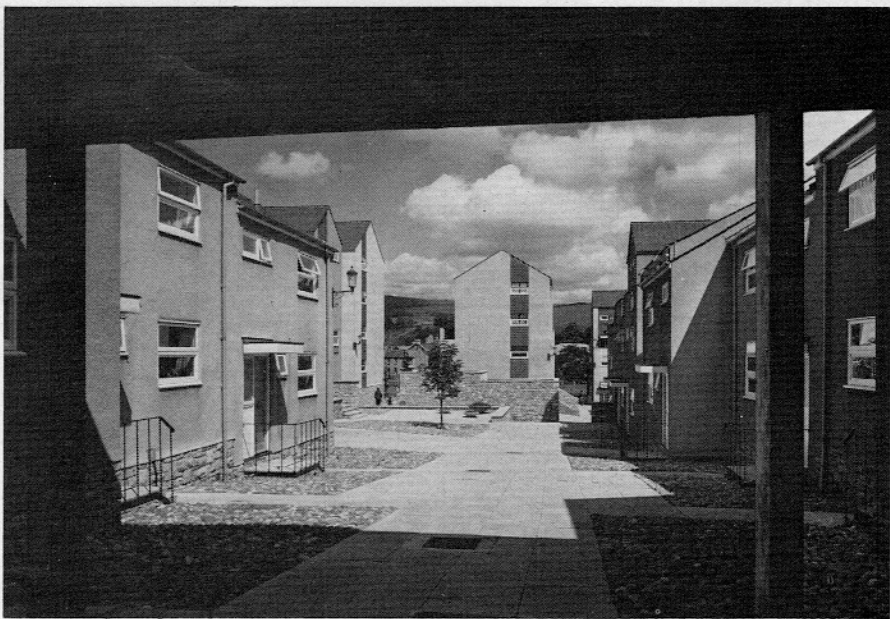
doing.' And indeed he was doing. By his fifth year he must have already built far more than most of his tutors. Yet his practical work went completely unrecognised and during the year that he submitted his Kirkland study, he was failed and had to retake the year.

The second irony relates more directly to Kirkland. Throughout the past 10 years, Walford has had a more or less constant battle with planners and other officials who have complained about over-intensive development, undersized dwellings, lack of daylight, no car parking, shortage of headroom and so on. He has had to stick his neck out again and again, ignoring their requirements and arguing with them. Yet in the yard in which he now lives a house well below Parker Morris standard, with no car parking and no garden, has recently been bought by a young professional, who just happens to be a planner for the local South Lakeland Council; a council which would not allow that property to be built now because it would contravene almost all its rules. Furthermore, a senior planning officer is currently negotiating for one of the new-build yard cottages.

With his tongue in his cheek Walford remarks, 'Now there we have discerning buyers. I'm pleased to see that the area is going up-market.'



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