

A CHANGING TOWNSCAPE: *Røros throughout a century of heritage management*

METTE BYE

*HiST - University College of Southern Trøndelag, AFT
N-7004 Trondheim, Norway
mette.bye@hist.no*

Abstract

This paper is a presentation of one of five case studies for a PhD-thesis on the treatment of Norwegian wooden vernacular with a heritage status. In the case of Røros my objective is to discern a pattern of architectural preservation from the time of the first listings in 1923 and onwards. Røros has endured a century of preservationist involvement, something which had influenced the townscape by the time it achieved World Heritage status in 1980. Through the study of seven listed buildings I document the changes to a loved and seemingly well preserved street scene, reflect on how and why these changes happened, and discuss what they constitute today in terms of authenticity, values and spirit of place.

1. Introducing Røros

*"It is not really pretty here, in the customary sense of the word, but this place grips our senses in a strong and immediate way, as in a fairy tale."
Architect and antiquarian Halvor Vreim on Røros, 1944*

The mountain mining town of Røros in Norway was enlisted as a World Heritage Site in 1980 under the criteria iii, iv and v, as a well preserved historical townscape representing an important technological phase in European history throughout 333 years of copper mining activity, which ended 1977. Although an interwoven system of buildings, structures and landscape constitute the heritage of Røros, only the actual town was entered on the World Heritage List. The site is now facing a re-nomination process to include prior omissions.

Thirty years after the era of copper mining, the sole foundation on which the town was built, Røros today is a vital community with an entrepreneurial business climate and a growing population. Threats to the preservation in Røros today are material and urban growth in a functioning community striving to balance modern living, job security and the influence of tourism with the responsibilities of administering a heritage site. As this case study will reveal, this complex of challenges is not new.



Figure 1. Røros is one of the coldest places in Norway. From 1644, mining rights radiated 40 km from the town core. The parallel streets are the historical centre, case study area circled. Photograph Dag Nilsen 2003

Figure 2. Case study area “Sohlberg Square” in 2007

2. Ideals and practice in preservation

A characteristic feature of Norwegian built heritage is *wood* as the main building material, a special challenge in terms of durability and material authenticity. In Røros all historical buildings apart from the church are wooden and in this sense the town is representative for many of the country’s historic town cores and hamlets.

2.1. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

The underlying topic of this essay, and of the PhD-study on which it is extracted, is the relationship between *ideals of building preservation* – a *restoration philosophy*, and *preservation as it was practiced*, in form of restoration, renovation or maintenance, on wooden vernacular *homes*. One objective of the Røros case study has been to search for changes in ideals and practice *over time* from the implementation of the Norwegian Built Heritage Act of 1920; another lies in the assumption that preservation ideals, in the actual restoration process, were compromised by other factors, especially in the case of listed buildings that were homes, my goal thus being to define and discuss these “other factors” in terms of how they affected the treatment of the buildings.

The preservation ideals are constituted by the values, opinions and advice put forward by the first generation of heritage professionals employed at the National Antiquarians Office (*Riksantikvaren*). The office, established in 1912, was a small one (as late as 1966 the National Antiquarian boasts of having extended his staff of architects from one to four, Hauglid 1966), as was the Norwegian heritage community, and few wrote what one might characterize as restoration philosophy. This has therefore been extracted from a small amount of texts available on the subject published at that time.

2.2. A NOTE ON SELECTION AND METHOD OF THE CASE STUDY

In this case study seven listed buildings in Røros are surveyed, four of which will be presented in this essay. The sources of the study have been the buildings themselves, which have been surveyed and documented, and all available documentation on the buildings history and restoration processes. The buildings were probably the first in the country to be listed as a “scene”, not individual monuments. This makes the case unique, while the buildings themselves are representative of a widespread building tradition. The buildings are not identical but share a number of characteristics. Their construction, log or frame, is wood, they are two-storey-buildings with a saddle roof, juxtaposed gables and a panelled street

façade colourfully painted. All were built as homes and have that function today. Each property was a town farm with outbuildings circling a courtyard originally reached through a gate in the street façade.

Five of the seven buildings were depicted in paintings by the Norwegian neo-romantic painter Harald Sohlberg. These were listed as a group in 1923, while two buildings facing these were added in a new national round of listings in 1940. The common characteristic relevant to this study is that all the buildings have undergone changes from the time of their listing up until today, and all these changes have been subject to involvement from antiquarians.

3. Røros –a century of antiquarian involvement

In 1923 Røros was still a mining town. The smelting hut hurled black smog over the town, traditional town farms were operational and the streets unpaved. After the mining company lifted its monopoly on the sale of goods around 1850, local business flourished and changed the town scene. At the same time industrial carpentry was established as a sideline business for the small town. Private enterprise and carpentry fuelled a makeover for the town towards 1900, when every other house was done up in the popular “Swiss style”. While previous styles were made for stone adapted locally to wood this was a style created for wood, which contributed to its popularity. Loved by the people and hated by the architects of the time, it still characterised Røros in the early 1920s.

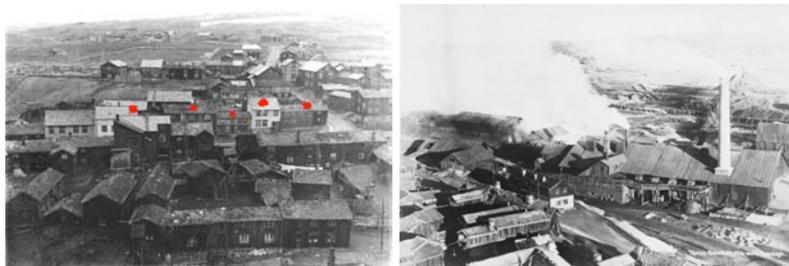


Figure 3. Røros at the time the Sohlberg Square (red dots) buildings were listed. Note the town farm courtyard structure. Photograph by Johan Skjervagen 1925, reproduction courtesy of the Røros Museum.

Figure 4. Smog from the smelting hut in the centre of Røros town. Photograph: Trøndelag Folk Museum.

The town’s economy fluctuated with the copper prices, and Røros was in a recession for decades following the metal market downfall after World War I. This recession largely benefitted the preservation of the town, but at the same time contributed to the fact that a large number of houses by the end of World War 2 were severely outdated and in poor shape. While the inhabitants were set on survival, the antiquarians’ task was to oversee the survival of material remnants.

3.1 RØROS PERCEIVED BY THE OUTSIDER

Descriptions of Røros are almost as old as the town itself. In 1734, ninety years after copper was discovered and the town established by royal decree, the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné wrote after his visit to Røros: “a rather small town ... with simple, one-storey houses ... and no gardens” (Daugstad 1999). While 18th century writings on Røros were mainly scientifically oriented, descriptions from 19th authors were more romantically inclined, displaying a greater awareness for the aesthetic qualities of the town and its setting. With the paintings of Harald Sohlberg the picturesque qualities of Røros were captured and relayed to a wider audience. “The picturesque” was one of the outspoken criteria for heritage in the early 20th century, and there are speculations whether Sohlbergs paintings, displayed in the National Gallery shortly after their completion, were the sole ground for the listing of the depicted buildings in 1923.



Figure 3. “Røraas 1853. Lithographed by C.M. Schult, T.hjem” NTNU library

Figure 4. The buildings on Sohlberg Square: ”After the snowstorm” painted by Harald Sohlberg (1869-1935) in 1904. National Gallery

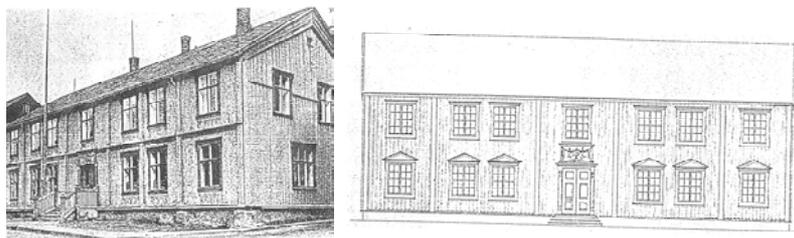
The most interesting of the increasingly numerous writings on Røros in the 20th century are, for our purposes, those of the ones who were actively involved in the preservation of Røros, namely the architects Georg Eliassen and Halvor Vreim and art historian Harry Fett, all first generation employees of the National Antiquarian’s office. In a short article, published in 1927 in “Norway – journal for our country”, Vreim introduced Røros like this: “When one comes out of the big, dark Røros railway station, one meets a small community built on a modest scale, the result of battles between a barren, unpredictable climate and mans own irrepressible ambition and perseverance”. Harry Fett, who was Norway’s first National Antiquarian, wrote a pamphlet on Røros which shows an interesting mixture of poetry and pragmatism. Enthusiastic over the picturesque qualities of the street scenes yet sensitive to the poor town’s uncertain future, Fett proposed a combination of economic and aesthetic improvement to the town, with tourism as part of the cure (Fett 1939).

Fetts colleague Eliassen criticised the way the locals treated their heritage, following the fashionable fads of the decorative “Swiss style”, disrespectful of the buildings original architectural qualities (Eliassen 1939). This line of thinking was followed by Vreim in his 1944 essay “The cultivation of a townscape” in which he provides practical advice on how to

improve the buildings of Røros in accordance with the towns “true character”.

3.2. THE BEGINNINGS OF RESTORATION ACTIVITY IN RØROS

The era of antiquarian and aesthetic cultivation of Røros was initiated during World War 2 with a generous grant from the German-instated Prime Minister Vidkun Quisling, a fact which is known to few (Lidén 1991). Among the early planned restorations was the former home of the director of the Røros Copper Mine, “Bergskrivergården”, a grand 18th century building which was stylistically restored away from its “Swiss style” facade back to its neoclassical origins, a model plan which set the standard for later restorations of street facades in Røros (Vreim 1944).



Figures 4 and 5. The monumental “Bergskrivergården”, stylistically restored back to its neoclassical origins after a design by the architect Tycho Castberg. Photograph to the left shows the building “done up” in the popular Swiss Style; plan for the façade restoration to the right.
In reprint from Vreims 1944 article.

Restoration works in the post-war era in Røros were primarily supervised by the National Antiquarians representative Halvor Vreim. Vreim grew up in Telemark, a region where log-building and decorative traditions are strong, and initially trained as a carpenter. After receiving a degree in architecture he worked at the open air building museum in Oslo, before becoming the National Antiquarians main (for a long time the only architect) advisor for listed buildings, working all over the country. Vreim was an expert on all aspects the wooden vernacular and wrote several books on the subject. He was active in the Røros scene till his death in 1966.

The Built Heritage Act of 1920 provided no guidelines for the treatment of listed buildings. The general criteria for listing were “historic and artistic value”. What this constituted and how it was to be preserved was not specified in the listings documents, which for example for Sohlberg Square worded: “Five houses above the church, on the hill, which constitute a street scene especially characteristic for the town, while the buildings at the same time are good examples of the towns building typology” period. In this case the picturesque aspect seems to have been a stronger motive for listing than the value of each individual house, something which may help explain the antiquarians’ tolerance for the alterations the buildings subsequently endured.

3.3 THE RESTORATIONS OF THE SOHLBERG SQUARE BUILDINGS

Little work was done the buildings on the listed buildings on Sohlberg Square before 1950. This was mainly due to the recession and the war; although the municipal engineer blamed the listing for the lacking maintenance. The substantial amount of planning documents on the Sohlberg Square buildings testify to fluent communications between all parties involved, not least by the National Antiquarians representative Halvor Vreim, who also visited Røros regularly to survey the sights. In his letters to the municipal engineer Vreim frequently referred to buildings that needed care, as such taking an active approach to their improvement.

All works for the Sohlberg Square buildings numbers 52-60 were, technically speaking, initiated by the owners themselves. They involved both minor and major alterations to the buildings, from design and materials in façades and roofing to floor plan and elevation, construction, wall insulation and sanitary installations.

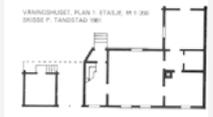
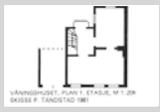
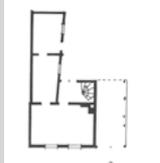
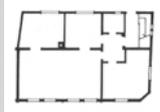
#	Ground floor plans (1982)	built/rebuilt/ listed/ restored	key words/ description of "restoration"	parties involved in the restoration/ renovation
52	*			
54		1763/1857 /1923/ 1954	Outer stairs removed, façade and minor interior alterations	- Halvor Vreim- - Municipal Engineer - Owner
56		1762/1857 /1923/ 1952	Existing house demolished, new house erected. Characterized as restoration	- Halvor Vreim -Municipal Engineer -State Housing Bank (application denied) -Regional Physician - Architect
57	*			
58		1762/1829 /1923/ 1930/1949/ 1955/1975	Ground floor converted to shop, many façade changes. Restored to home in 1975	- Halvor Vreim - Municipal Engineer - Owner
59	*			
60		1859 /1923/ 1954	Existing house demolished, new larger house erected characterized as modernization	-Halvor Vreim -Municipal Engineer - State -Housing Bank (application approved) - Architect - Owner

TABLE 1. Key information for seven listed buildings in Solberg Square. Ground floor plans by P. Tandstad. The houses prior to the "restorations" varied in size, whereas after they are more homogenous both in size and character, a fact noted when studying old photographs. *Buildings that have yet to be surveyed.

The municipal engineer came to the aid of the least resourceful families, helping them to put the building applications forward. In one case the regional State Physician delivered a statement in support of building

renovation, declaring the building a health hazard. In two cases funding was applied for with The Norwegian Housing Bank, a state-owned institution established in 1946 to provide affordable loans to families to improve building standards.

The building applications referred to the works as restorations and modernizations randomly. It seems clear that, for the applicants, improvement of living conditions was the main purpose.

4. Principles and practice in restoration

“Antiquarian and aesthetic care of a densely built community, a town swarming with life, growth and development, is a complex task”

Halvor Vreim, 1944

Halvor Vreim does not define the term “restoration”. The common use of the term was (and is) used rather randomly for all sorts of work on a building. Viollet le Ducs definition of restoration, usually referred to as stylistic restoration, can serve as a point of reference: “to restore is to re-establish the building to a *state of wholeness* that may never have existed” (Jukilehto 1999). Although le Ducs restorations were much focused on technical solutions, his overall motive was the historically based aesthetic whole. In contrast, the terms *rehabilitation*, *renovation*, and *modernization* for our purpose imply practically motivated solutions aiming to move the building forward and not “back” in time.

4.1. PRESERVATION VS MODERNIZATION

In Sohlberg Square, antiquarian Vreim was involved as an advisor and not a restoration architect, as was employed for more monumental buildings like Bergskrivergården. It is difficult to derive principles from Vreims priorities. He was for example strongly opposed to the removal of the stairs in number 54, while commenting only subtly on the demolitions of 56 and 60, projects he even grudgingly granted subsidies from the meagre fund for listed buildings. Number 54 was rather large and well fitted for its time, and with a façade Vreim found valuable. An explanation might therefore be that Vreim fought his battle over an aesthetic dilemma and gave in to alter the smaller and poorer houses, thus declining to argue against the recommendation from the municipal engineer that the owner of 56 be allowed “to repair his tiny, fragile and derelict house, wherein five people lived, one seriously ill”, even when the “repairs” involved demolition of the entire historical structure.

Degrees of modernization were also influenced by the contradicting approaches from different authorities. The Housing Bank granted loans for new housing only, impairing the antiquarians arguments for restoration. The Built Heritage Act of 1920 was a weaker tool than today’s legislation and did not always prevent demolition.



Figure 6. Sohlberg Square around 1913.
Postcard reproduced courtesy of Amneus Bookstore, Røros



Figure 7. Sohlberg Square circa 1950. # 56 is painted, 58 is converted to a store with a new façade and the sod roof replaced by cement tiles. The dark log wall in 60 now has panelling and the windows are fitted with new mouldings.
Photograph: Mittet, NTNU library



Figure 8. Postcard from the late 1960s. The front door and stairs in # 54 are removed. 56 is completely altered, its eaves now levelling with its neighbours, the façade without stairs or a front. The store in 58 has enlarged its premises into the gateway area, moved the front door and stairs and fitted a new shop window. In # 60 a new house has replaced the old one.
Photograph Normann Kunstforlag.

4.2. THE PREFERENCES OF ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

By the time of the listing in 1923, Sohlbergs painted version of the street scene in Sohlberg Square was already gone. Number 60, the red house on the corner, had by that time acquired a Swiss style façade makeover, as so many of the town's buildings. In his 1944 article, Vreim described this particular building in the following terms: "Poisonous and murky colours, splintery side-boarding and shabby mouldings." and recommended the following treatment: "... different panelling, mouldings and colours and the house will again fall into the true image of Røros." Ten years later the house was demolished and replaced with a new structure twice the size. This was not what Vreim advised, but at least architectural features were improved according to his recommendations. The fact that these buildings were listed as a "scene" and not as individual buildings is likely to have contributed to the compromise. The result has been described as an early example of *adaptive* or *harmonizing* architecture (Eide 1990).

Vreim spoke of "the *true image* of Røros", and that "the particular must sometimes be subordinated for the sake of the whole" (Vreim 1944). The "true image" of Røros was the town around the year 1800, prosperous times for the Copper Mines best exemplified in the neoclassicism of the church, built 1784, for which Vreim expressed great admiration (Vreim 1927). This era had been greatly promoted by Vreim's art history teacher Carl Schmitler. Also, a preference for classical architecture was not unusual for architects of Vreim's generation, who worked during the neoclassical style fad of the 1920s. The claim is therefore that Vreim's taste, not personal but an acquired, professional aesthetic judgement and unspoken "guideline" for antiquarians of his time, influenced his decisions on what to discard and what to promote.

4.3. THE QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY

Norwegian art historian Hans Emil Lidén (1991) points out that the early days of heritage management were based on unwritten rules known only to an inside elite, based on intellectual breeding rather than argument, making it a mystery for "commoners". In 1953 the Røros Building Committee requested guidelines for the treatment of listed buildings, but received no response. Today an answer would certainly involve the concept of "authenticity". The Venice Charter relates authenticity in the restoration process to substance and to context (§9), and also establishes the principle of continuity (§11) which calls for respect for all phases of a monument's history. The Nara Document acknowledges authenticity in new materials and craftsmanship. These concepts of authenticity are implemented as guidelines managing Røros built heritage today.

Vreim discarded recent façade changes and argued to improve a building in accordance with its "true image". In this he was both art historian and architect. His expressed attitude can be written off as a defence for stylistic restoration, but it must be kept in mind that what he expressed such eagerness to discard were, at least at the time of his earliest writings, fresh modernizations in a widely popular prefabricated style and, to his

knowledge, of poor material quality. Self-scrutinizing preservationists today will easily find parallels in current examples.

5. Preservation history of Røros and the spirit of place

The Røros of the 1800s, with smog drifting over the roofs, livestock in all backyards and dirt streets, cannot be restored. The miniscule buildings of Sohlbergs painting do not exist any more, the street scene as it stands today is the image of the 1950s. Which to preserve? Sohlbergs scene is lost; it was already altered by the time of the listing in 1923, attempted reinvented in the 1950s restorations, but compromise to accommodate modern-day standards left us with yet a new version.

Røros is no museum but a living community, and it was as homes that the buildings were restored. They tell a social history, of the post-war shift in economy and lifestyle, a legacy to the long story of survival in this secluded mountain village. This is a legitimate part of its history. They are also documents of the aesthetically motivated restorations of the first generation of antiquarians, providing living proof of the shift in preservation philosophy in reference to the current emphasis on material authenticity. The “spirit” of Røros has shifted throughout a century of social and economic change and antiquarian involvement. The houses in Sohlberg Square stand today, in the richness of their 1950s authenticity, as an essential part of the world heritage. In concluding I assert their value as living heritage, including their recent restoration history in the substance worth preserving.

REFERENCES

- Christie, S., Hinsch, L. (red.) (1983) *Fredede hus og anlegg*. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo
- Daugstad, Karoline (red.) (1999). *Bergverksbyens omland*. NIKU, Trondheim
- Eide, Trond (1990) *Bevaring i teori og praksis*. Diplom Arkitekthøyskolen, Oslo
- Eliassen, Georg (1939) *Fremtidens Røros*. FNFB, Oslo
- Fett, Harry (1939) *Glück Auf! En bergstadpreken på Røros*. Kunst og Kultur, Oslo
- Jukilehto, Jukka (1999) *A history of Architectural Conservation*. Elsevier, Oxford
- Lidén, Hans Emil (1991) *Fra antikviteten til kulturminne*. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo
- Nara Conference on Authenticity (1995): Proceedings, ICOMOS www.icomos.org
- Venice Charter (1964) ICOMOS www.icomos.org
- Vreim, Halvor (1927) *Byggeskikk på Røros*. Norge - tidskrift for vårt land 3 (22):6, Oslo
- Vreim, Halvor (1944) *Pleien av et bybillede (Cultivation of a townscape)*. FNFB, Oslo