

Architectural Records in the Archive of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

by

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In 1941 the National Buildings Record was founded to make a systematic visual record of historic English architecture. The need for such a record was highlighted by the destruction wrought by wartime bombing. The NBR continued and prospered in the post-war period, and in 1963 its collections and responsibility for the furtherance of its work were transferred to the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. Renamed the National Monuments Record, the archive has expanded to include archaeology and air photography. This paper describes the extensive collections and the wide range of material covering all types and periods of historic buildings in England available for public consultation in the Royal Commission's central London search room.

Monumenta depicta manent—the Latin motto coined by Walter Godfrey for the National Buildings Record aptly describes the task which he began as its first director in 1941 and which is continued today by the archive of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.

Other aspects of the work of the Royal Commission have featured in these *Transactions* in the last two years. The history of the Survey of London was given by Hermione Hobhouse¹ and the recording of buildings at risk has been described by Nicholas Cooper.² Mr Cooper included in his article an outline of the development of the National Buildings Record and its subsequent role (renamed the National Monuments Record) as part of the Royal Commission.³ However, for those unfamiliar with the archive, it may be worthwhile rehearsing the major events which have led to its present position as the principal national repository for records of historic buildings.

One day in 1940 John (later Sir John) Summerson went to look at houses in

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Fig. 1

Lower Market, Exeter, Devon: built 1835–7 to the designs of local architect Charles Fowler. Photographed for the National Buildings Record by Mrs Margaret Tomlinson in July 1942 immediately after bombing; the ruins were demolished soon afterwards

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Berners Street, north of Oxford Street, which had been wrecked by the previous night's bombing. He realized that the interiors displayed remains of plasterwork and fittings which indicated that they were some of the original houses on the Berners Estate built to the designs of Sir William Chambers in the 1760s. Wartime restrictions prevented him from taking photographs of the ruins and within a few days the remnants were swept away totally unrecorded. This experience prompted an approach to some like-minded individuals concerned about such losses and within a very short time a meeting was called. The conference of thirty-three delegates representing eighteen societies and public bodies was held at the RIBA on 18 November 1940 to discuss the formation of an organization to undertake a comprehensive survey of historic architecture, 'in view of the menace to buildings from enemy air-raids'.⁴

A committee was appointed and met for the first time one week later. Its job was to organize a council of management and obtain the necessary funds. Events moved rapidly when the Minister of Works, Lord Reith, lent his support and the

Master of the Rolls, Lord Greene, agreed to become chairman of the council of ten. This supervisory council met on 30 January 1941 and appointed Walter Godfrey, architect, antiquary and member of the London Survey Committee, as its director with John Summerson as deputy director. They began work on 3 February in offices provided by the RIBA.

That such an organization should have been created at the height of the blitz and the lowest point in the war is a tribute to all concerned and not least to the foresight of the official bodies in making funds available. The provision of petrol coupons to enable the photographers to travel to the devastated areas was no less important. The recording of ancient buildings to many must have seemed distinctly unimportant when national survival was at stake, but perhaps it was a feeling that it was for such values and for its identity, exemplified by historic architecture, that the country was fighting for and united in trying to preserve.

Despite the many problems and restrictions the NBR was extremely successful in gathering material and compiling indexes of existing collections. An important development was the transfer by the Courtauld Institute of Art of its collection of photographs of buildings, the Conway Library. With the Conway came its librarian, Mr Cecil Farthing, who was to remain with the NBR after the war, when the collections were separated once more. He subsequently became deputy director when John Summerson left for the Soane Museum, and director when W.H. Godfrey retired.

One of the first tasks for the Record's small staff was the compilation of lists of historic buildings at risk to complement those prepared by architects throughout the country, organized by the Ministry of Works, and then to arrange photography by its own photographers, by the staff of the Royal Commission, or through local committees of enthusiasts.

The photographs taken during the early years of the NBR are a fascinating record of wartime destruction which continue to be used for reference and for all manner of publications to this day (Fig. 1). To commemorate the founding of the National Buildings Record in 1941, the Royal Commission intends to mount an exhibition in the fiftieth anniversary year to illustrate the work of the wartime years and the wealth of material gathered by the pioneers.

These early years had seen the foundations laid for the work of the post-war period, which was to present new challenges during the years of reconstruction and redevelopment. Cities and towns laid waste by bombing were rebuilt, old industries were closed and landed estates were divided. There were discussions about the amalgamation of the Royal Commission and the National Buildings Record, but in the event the latter remained independent and the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England received a new Royal Warrant in 1946 which extended its terms of reference and instructed the Commissioners to co-operate with the Council of the NBR. For most practical purposes the surveys undertaken by the two bodies became complementary: the NBR's contribution was in photography and measured drawings (Fig. 2) and the RCHME continued its historical/architectural analyses of historic buildings with some specialist photography. This co-operation also extended to the two occupying the same or adjacent offices in London.

This close liaison continued for some years, during which time the photographic

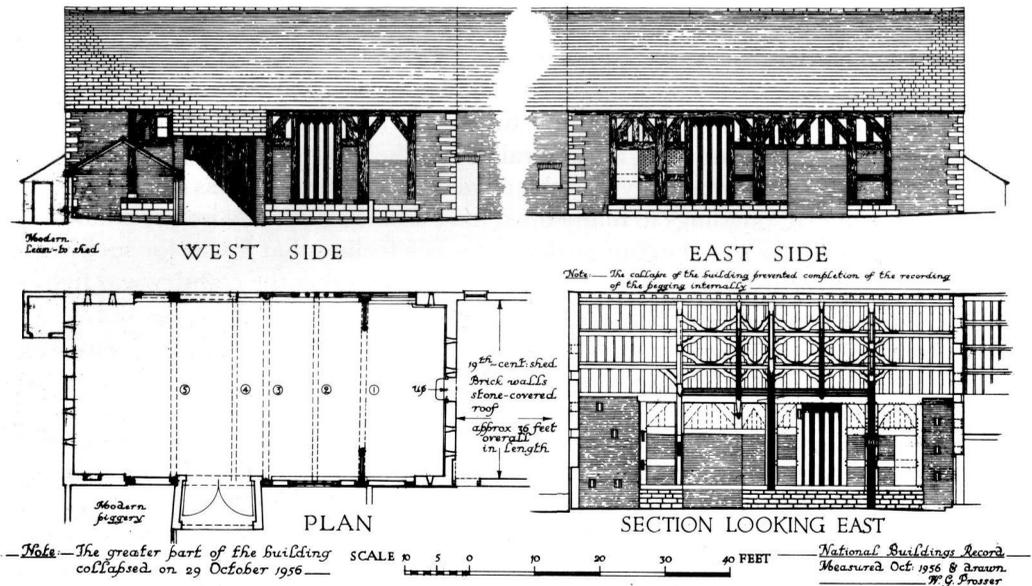
STAND OLD HALL WHITEFIELD N^R BURY LANCS

Fig. 2

Stand Old Hall, Whitefield, Greater Manchester: the remains of a timber-framed open hall house of c. 1400 were recorded in a set of four detailed measured drawings by the NBR's draughtsman, W.G.

Prosser, in October 1956 not long before the collapse of most of the structure

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collections of the NBR increased enormously. Systematic surveys were undertaken by a countrywide network of photographers, most notably Herbert Felton, who had been appointed staff photographer in May 1940. His coverages of cathedrals and country houses taken in the 1950s remain the backbone of the reference collection, and the interior views are still reproduced widely in many publications (Fig. 3). Before the war, Felton had contributed to a number of architectural journals and when he joined the NBR brought with him an extensive collection of glass-plate negatives of 1930s buildings. The value of these as a record of the period has become increasingly important with the passage of time, as Art Deco and International Modern style buildings have been greatly altered or demolished before their worth was recognized (Fig. 4).

With the increased commitment by both the Royal Commission and the NBR to the recording of buildings threatened with demolition came even closer contacts, and eventually it was decided that the two should be merged. In 1963 the NBR was officially wound up, and the RCHME was given a new Royal Warrant to enable

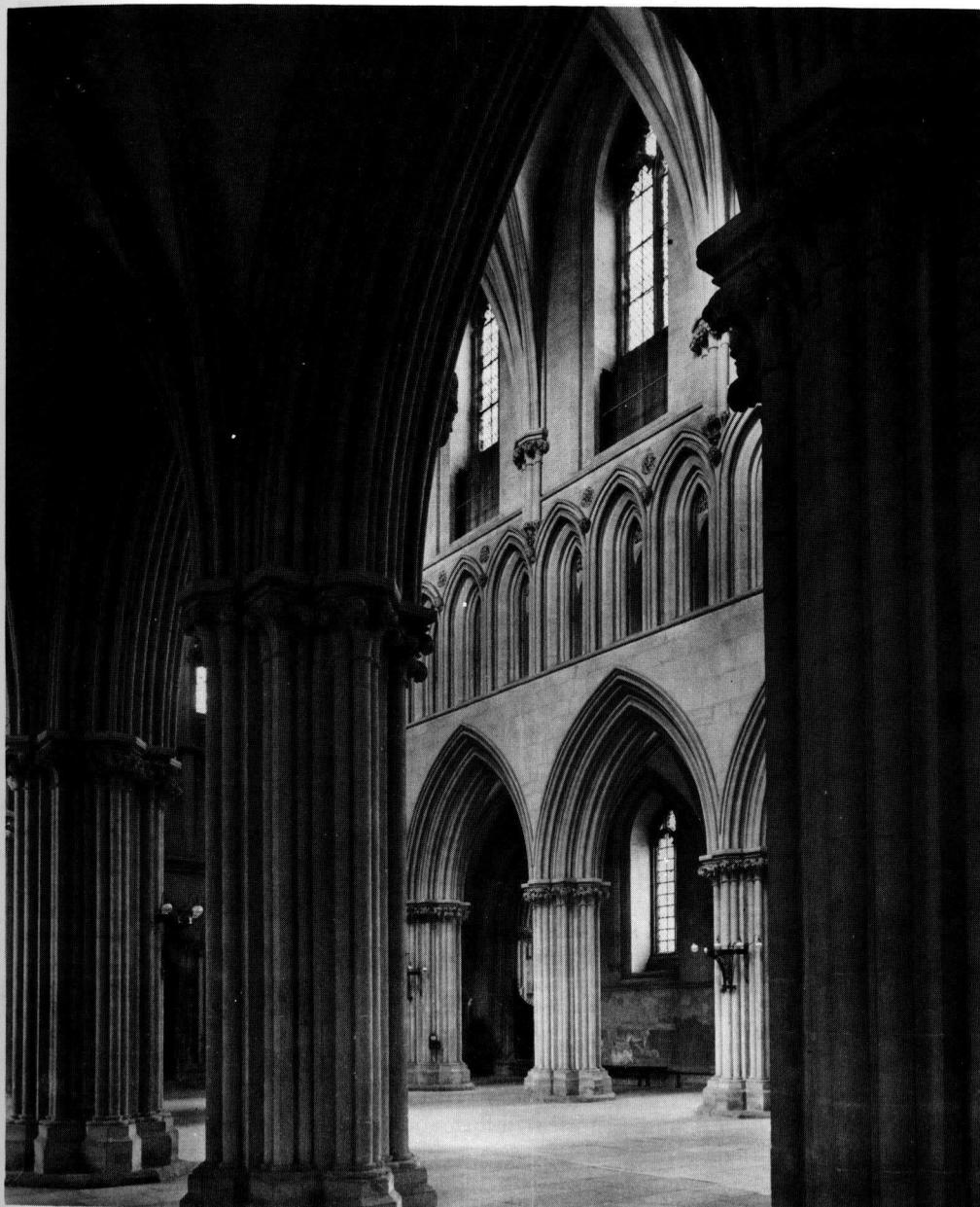


Fig. 3

Wells Cathedral, Somerset: this view of the nave was taken in 1950. In the late 1940s and 1950s Herbert Felton, staff photographer to the NBR, made very detailed photographic surveys of all the medieval cathedrals in England. These photographs continue to be reproduced and remain the core of the NMR's cathedrals coverage

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Fig. 4

Berlei Factory, Bath Road, Slough, Berkshire: the Australian-based garment manufacturers built their International Modern style factory in 1936-7 to the designs of Sir John Brown and A.E. Henson in association with W. David Hartley. It was demolished in 1984. This is one of a series of photographs taken by Herbert Felton in 1937

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it to continue the work of the National Buildings Record. The existing collections, along with the staff, were transferred and the 1963 Warrant empowered Commissioners to make such arrangements for the continuance and furtherance of the . . . Record . . . both generally and for the creation of any wider record or collection containing or including architectural, archaeological and historical information concerning important sites and buildings throughout England.⁵

This paragraph encapsulates the brief for the work of the archive, renamed the National Monuments Record in recognition of its wider role under the Royal Commission's aegis. In one respect only was its scope narrowed: the National Buildings Record had covered both Wales and England, but with separate Commissions for those countries (the Scottish Royal Commission having maintained its own record from the outset) the material on Wales and Monmouthshire was transferred to Aberystwyth.⁶



Fig. 5

Monkton House, West Dean, West Sussex: designed in 1902 by Edwin Lutyens, the principal interest of the house lies in the transformation carried out for Edward James in the 1930s. This view of the dining room shows the sofas and standard lamps designed by Salvador Dali. Photographed by the RCHME in 1986 before the sale of the contents
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The change of name reflected the greater emphasis given to the incorporation of material on archaeological sites and led to the establishment of an aerial photographic unit, devoted to the recording and interpretation of archaeological remains which are visible only from the air. The growth of the National Monuments Record since 1963 has resulted in the division of the collections for ease of reference into three parts covering archaeology, air photography and architecture. This paper concentrates on the last part and describes the work of the architectural record.

The work of the Royal Commission in the 1980s is separated into two broad areas. The first is the recording of historic buildings and archaeological sites by investigators, field surveyors, draughtsmen and photographers. The second is the maintenance and enhancement of the archive, which provides a national database for archaeology and historic architecture. Both aspects have been described by a previous Secretary to the Royal Commission, Dr (now Professor) Peter Fowler, as

akin to painting the Forth Bridge.⁷ The creation of an inventory, in Edwardian terminology, or a database in today's jargon, is no longer seen as a finite task. Changing perceptions as well as the passage of time bring new demands to bear upon the job of keeping records. The work is never-ending as new areas of research are opened up, and types and periods of building, not previously considered, are recorded for the archive. The aim of the architectural section is to provide a comprehensive record of English architecture comprising written reports, measured surveys and photographs. The survey includes ecclesiastical, domestic, civic, commercial and industrial buildings of every type, and also architectural detail, decoration, sculpture, woodwork, glass and fittings. The work of achieving this aim is divided into responsibility for the acquisition and maintenance of archive material and making this available for consultation and study.



Fig. 6

Littlecote House, Wiltshire: the Great Hall, dating from the sixteenth century, showing part of the famous collection of Civil War arms, armour and uniforms. This collection was acquired by the Tower of London Armouries when the contents of the house were sold in November 1985. Photographed by

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Fig. 7

Kirby Hall, North Yorkshire: designed by Lord Burlington in association with Roger Morris, 1747-55. The house was demolished about 1920. This photograph, taken *c.* 1910, was discovered by Mr Peter Reid, who acquired the original glass-plate negative for the National Monuments Record from the collection of the Hon. Lady Richmond Brown in 1970
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The acquisition of material—most prominently photographs—has never been a problem. Controlling the flow and deciding on priorities is more difficult. The largest input is from the Royal Commission's own architectural survey and project work carried out from a network of offices around the country. Particularly important are the surveys of threatened buildings, already mentioned above.⁸ As well as receiving the results of these investigations, staff of the archive also initiate surveys by the RCHME's photographic section of buildings not sufficiently well represented in the collection. For example, in 1986 a photographic coverage in both colour and black-and-white was made of Monkton House, West Sussex (Fig. 5). This house was designed in 1902 by Sir Edwin Lutyens, but became famous as the home of Edward James who transformed it in the 1930s in Surrealist style with the help of Christopher Nicholson, Norris Wakefield and Salvador Dali. Unfortunately, after James's death the educational foundation which he created was no longer able to maintain the house and it was put up for sale, its eccentric furniture, pictures and contents being sold by Christie's in 1986. A comprehensive coverage, made before the sale, survives in the National Monuments Record for future generations of students and picture researchers to consult. The sale and dispersal of contents, especially of historic houses,

often prompts a visit by RCHME photographers. Other surveys made in recent years have included Littlecote House, Wiltshire (Fig. 6), dating from the sixteenth century and renowned for its collection of Civil War arms, armour and uniforms, and Orchardleigh House, Somerset, built to the designs of T.H. Wyatt in 1855-8 for the Duckworth family,⁹ photographed prior to the sale of the estate in 1987.

To complement these modern coverages, the archive seeks out historic photographs and drawings of individual buildings and whole areas demolished or altered before the founding of the Record. This has proved most successful in the case of lost country houses, where the Section has benefited from the researches of Mr Peter Reid. His unrivalled knowledge of houses and their ownership over the centuries has enabled him to bring to light important and undocumented material in private hands.

During a period of more than twenty years this has resulted in some exciting discoveries, such as Edwardian photographs of Lord Burlington's Kirby Hall, Yorkshire (Fig. 7) demolished about 1920, and drawings and photographs of the interior of Aqualate Hall in Staffordshire, designed by John Nash, 1808, and gutted by fire in 1910. Through the generosity of the present owners of this material, the archive has been able to borrow the original photograph albums, drawings, etc., for copying in RCHME's photographic darkrooms. These unique images are thereby safeguarded and made available to a wider public.

Another long-standing contributor to the NMR is Mr B.E.C. Howarth-Loomes, who is a collector of early photographs and historic photographic equipment. His particular interest is in stereoscopic photography, which reached the height of its popularity in the 1850s and 1860s. He has generously lent original stereo cards from his collection for copying by RCHME, and these often provide a record of buildings or events not known to have been photographed by other more conventional means (Fig. 8).

As well as borrowing illustrations to copy, the NMR also acquires whole collections of historic photographs and negatives, the most notable being the surviving prints and negatives of the architectural photographer, Harry Bedford Lemere (1864-1944).¹⁰ He was employed to photograph the work of the leading architects and designers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and his negatives in the form of 12in. x 10in. glass plates provide an unparalleled record of design and taste in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods (Fig. 9). Other important acquisitions have included negatives by W.J. Day, Hallam Ashley, Eric de Maré and John Maltby. The Maltby collection was purchased by RCHME in 1985. John Maltby had been commissioned to photograph Odeon cinemas in the 1930s and '40s, and he recorded building work in progress, the exteriors and interiors immediately upon completion (Fig. 10), the projection equipment, and sometimes the staff in their brand new uniforms. This collection of about 1,200 negatives of over 150 cinemas is all the more important as few contemporary photographs of Odeon cinemas survive elsewhere.

Collections from amateur photographers include the windmill photographs of H.E.S. Simmons, W.B. Muggeridge and Rex Wailes, the railway collection of the Revd H.D.E. Rokeby, and among other bequests the negatives and photographs of Sir John Pennycuik. A photographer whose work could hardly be described as



Fig. 8

Exhibition Building of 1862, South Kensington: demolished to make way for the Natural History Museum in Cromwell Road. This photograph is copied from one half of a stereoscopic pair. Stereo cards were produced in large numbers in the later nineteenth century and events, such as international exhibitions, were popular subjects
Howarth-Loomes Collection



Fig. 9

Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, Merseyside: the Hypostyle Hall rebuilt 1911 to the designs of Frank Atkinson. The hotel was recorded in great detail for the new owners by H. Bedford Lemere in 1912. The RCHME holds the surviving collection of Lemere negatives dating from the 1870s to c.1925
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Fig. 10

Odeon Cinema, Yeovil, Somerset: designed by Harry Weedon in the distinctive Odeon house-style. Photographed at the time of its completion in 1937 by John Maltby, whose collection of Odeon negatives was acquired by the RCHME in 1985

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amateur was Gordon Barnes, who took up photography in order to record churches and came to specialize in the Victorian period (Fig. 11). He bequeathed his collection to the NMR and his carefully composed large-format negatives of nineteenth-century churches have been widely reproduced. The RCHME has also been extremely fortunate in acquiring a large part of the collection of early photographs, drawings, cuttings, etc., amassed by the late Gerald Cobb. A noted antiquary and genealogist, Gerald Cobb was an authority on City of London churches. He also specialized in collecting illustrations of cathedrals showing the enormous changes which have taken place in the post-Reformation period, an often neglected area of study where he was able to discover a wealth of fascinating engravings and photographs (Fig. 12).

In recent years much greater emphasis has been laid on the acquisition of written reports and measured surveys of buildings to supplement the photographic collections. Individuals and groups have been encouraged to record buildings and send copies



Fig. 11

St. James's Church, Titsey, Surrey: by J.L. Pearson, 1861. Photographed by Gordon Barnes in 1968, this view shows the chancel and the Leveson-Gower chapel beyond. Gordon Barnes bequeathed his extensive collection of negatives of Victorian churches to the NMR

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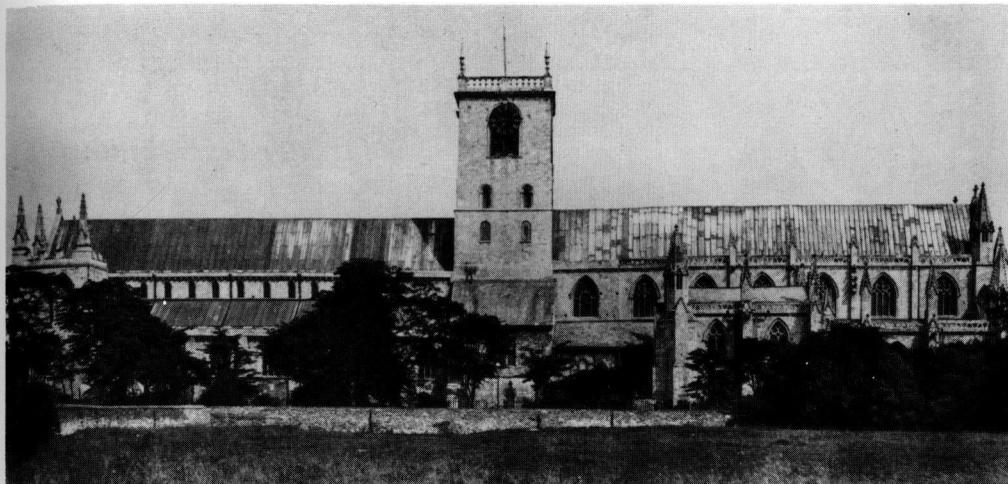


Fig. 12

Selby Abbey, North Yorkshire: this photograph of the south side was taken *c.* 1880; since that time the central tower has been rebuilt, a new south transept constructed and the western towers heightened. The late Gerald Cobb was an avid researcher and collector, who discovered photographs of all these phases as well as engravings of earlier stages

Society of Antiquaries Collection

of their analytical accounts, drawings and photographs to the archive. Among the most prolific in their contribution to the national collection has been the Domestic Buildings Research Group (Surrey), but other counties, notably Yorkshire, Somerset, Sussex and Essex, are also well represented. Records of vernacular buildings predominate, but the scope is widening to include such varied building types as lead mines in Shropshire, workers' housing in Oxfordshire and ruined churches in Norfolk. These surveys are often as comprehensive as the Royal Commission itself would produce and benefit from the local knowledge which enthusiasts bring to the subject (Fig. 13).

A large number of organizations throughout England is involved in the making and holding of records of buildings, and during 1984-5 a preliminary survey was carried out with the aim of identifying these and assessing their activities. Questionnaires were sent to over 800 bodies—planning departments, archaeological units, record offices, museums and libraries. The responses were extremely encouraging and over a hundred follow-up visits were made. The results were published in 1986.¹¹ Since then the survey has been maintained, and abstracts of the survey forms, indexes, etc., are available for consultation in the Royal Commission's public search room. Also, a number of the collections identified in the course of the survey have been microfilmed and may be consulted on request.

Another recent development has been the increased commitment to joint ventures. By co-operating with other bodies, it has been possible to make the best use of meagre

POPLARS FARM, 1661
SHURDINGTON

GLOS. SO 922186

SURVEYED AUGUST 1977

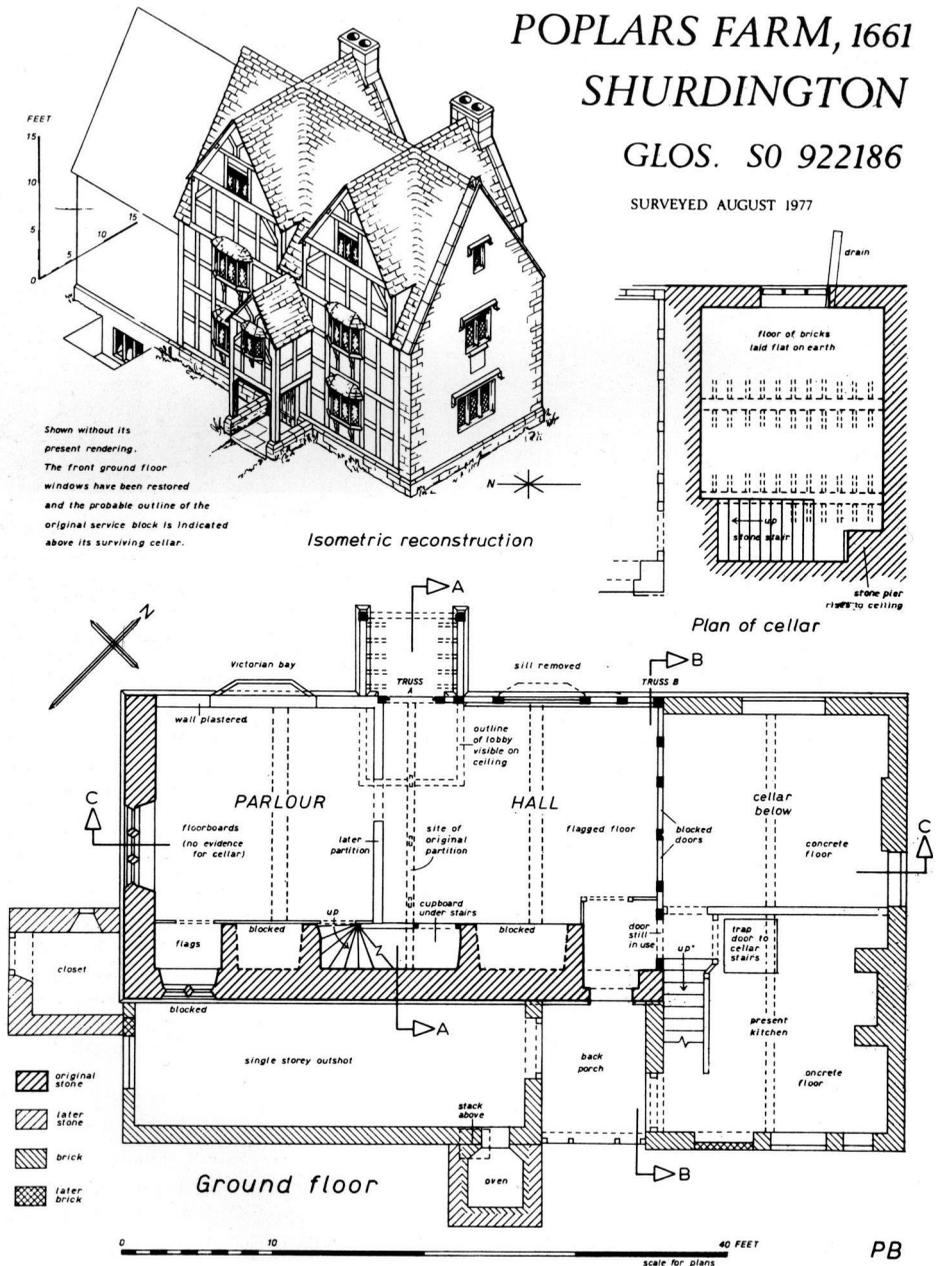


Fig. 13

Poplars Farm, Shurdington, Gloucestershire: one of a set of four very comprehensive survey drawings by Miss Patricia Borne. The RCHME has been fortunate in receiving copies of drawings and reports, particularly of vernacular buildings, from groups and individuals throughout the country

Copyright Patricia Borne



Fig. 14

Canterbury Cathedral, Kent: panel from one of the miracle windows in the Trinity Chapel Ambulatory, c. 1220, showing the cure of Matilda of Cologne at the tomb of Thomas Becket in the crypt at Canterbury. Photographed by the RCHME as part of its contribution to the national survey of medieval stained and painted glass funded by the British Academy
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resources and enhance the archive in very specific areas. The most notable project is the collection of illustrations of medieval window glass established with funds provided by the British Academy. The *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi* (CVMA) is an international undertaking intended to identify and publish the surviving medieval stained and painted window glass in Europe, and in museum collections throughout the world. This was begun after the Second World War when the vulnerability of the medium had been painfully demonstrated and also for the first time scholars had an opportunity to study at close quarters the panels removed from churches and cathedrals for safekeeping. The first reason parallels the establishment of the National Buildings Record in the United Kingdom, so it is appropriate that the CVMA archive is made available to the public in the NMR. The British CVMA committee is sponsored by the British Academy, which in 1981 appointed a research worker in the National Monuments Record to create a separate archive of information and photographs of medieval glass. Work began with the complete coverage of glass at Canterbury Cathedral (Fig. 14), almost entirely photographed by the RCHME. With the extra funds available it has been possible to create a far more detailed catalogue than the archive is normally able to provide. There is already a computerized index of the subject matter and iconography as well as a catalogue of the windows panel by panel. Since then, indexing of other major monuments, including York Minster, York city churches, Fairford church and Great Malvern Priory, has proceeded, together with the complete holdings of stained and painted glass in the Victoria and Albert Museum, photographed in black-and-white and colour by the Royal Commission.

The success of this joint project has prompted the development of a similar scheme to record surviving medieval wall paintings in England (Fig. 15). Photography and investigation has been underway for some years in collaboration with the Courtauld Institute of Art, but it is hoped that a separate photographic archive with computerized retrieval will shortly be established with additional funding provided by the Getty Center in California.

The extensive collections gathered over many years include countless items of intrinsic historic value, which give the RCHME an additional responsibility. The past few years have seen increasing resources devoted to the conservation and care of original drawings, photographic prints and negatives. The photographic collections in particular require specialized storage conditions if they are to survive for the benefit of future generations of researchers. Mention has already been made of the collections of large-format glass plate negatives, which are obviously vulnerable to breakage if inexpertly handled, but the equally extensive collections of early film-based negatives require even more care as nitrate film stock is inherently unstable.

Research into the history of photography itself is an area where use of the archive has increased greatly. Prints originally acquired for their subject matter (Fig. 16) now have a quite different interest for the photographic historian, and the archive must keep in mind this wide variety of needs which may not have been foreseen when the prints and negatives were first collected and catalogued.

The primary uses of the archive continue to be for the study of historic buildings and sites and for architectural and local history. To these ends the topographical



Fig. 15

St Faith's Priory, Horsham St Faith, Norfolk: mid thirteenth-century wall painting showing the figure of the saint, discovered in the 1920s. The RCHME is co-operating with the Courtauld Institute of Art in a joint project to record all the surviving medieval wall paintings in England
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arrangement of the open-access files has always proved the most easy to use. However, as the archive has grown the more time consuming it has become for researchers to work their way through a large body of material. The more successful the acquisition policy has been, the more problems of retrieval have been created, and so in 1983 the decision was taken to computerize the indexes to the architectural records. Because of the size of the problem, it was decided to computerize information about each building or site, rather than each individual item (e.g., photograph or drawing) in the archive. As this could still amount to several hundred thousand entries, the initial information input about the building has to be relatively small, whilst offering the user of the archive a more sophisticated search and retrieval facility than can be achieved by a purely topographical index.

The basic buildings-index has over thirty fields of information covering three broad areas: the location of the site; the type, date and status of the building, and the extent of the coverage in the archive. It is intended that subsequent datafiles will give more detailed information on particular types of building or fittings, for example the dating, subject matter and iconography of stained glass windows, previously



Fig. 16

Lambeth Palace, London: the Gatehouse photographed by Roger Fenton, c.1857, showing in the background the Palace of Westminster before completion of the Big Ben clock tower and the first Westminster Bridge covered in scaffolding prior to demolition. The NMR holds a number of original prints by Fenton, famous for his photographs of the Crimean War

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mentioned. A related computerized index to the photograph collection is being developed and tested to enable a more comprehensive search to be made into the huge variety of subjects included in the archive.

Priority in the computerization of architectural records has been given to the incorporation of material gathered in the course of RCHME project work, for example in West Yorkshire and Wiltshire, and the reports prepared on threatened buildings from 1956 onwards.

In addition, a computer database has been created of architectural terms. This thesaurus is also available in published form.¹² Work on this began in 1984, jointly

funded by the RCHME and the Historic Buildings Division of the Greater London Council. Both organizations were engaged in computerization programmes for the cataloguing and management of their holdings of architectural records, and the production of a joint thesaurus of terms was seen as an important step towards achieving consistency in classification. Since the abolition of the GLC in 1986, the compilation has continued to be funded jointly by the Royal Commission and English Heritage.

The next major step will be the computerization of the Department of the Environment's lists of historic buildings protected under the current legislation. It has been estimated that there will be about 500,000 buildings on the statutory list when the re-survey is completed. Copies of the lists are held in the NMR, but the availability of this information on computer would be of inestimable value to all concerned with the management of historic buildings or sites as well as to architectural historians. The Royal Commission and English Heritage have prepared a joint submission to the Department of the Environment for the necessary funding, and a positive response is eagerly anticipated.

All the varied activities described above are for the benefit of present and future users of the archive, and the central London search room is open every working weekday.¹³ Some 4,000 visitors per year avail themselves of the facilities for research and in addition staff deal with about 9,000 inquiries by letter or telephone.

From its difficult beginnings in wartime, the archive has grown to become the principal national collection of records of historic buildings in England and is freely available to all whatever their interests in the past.

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4. *First Annual Report of the National Buildings Record*, (1942).
5. The Royal Warrant is quoted in full at the beginning of each *Inventory* volume; for more details of the background see S.J. Croad and P.J. Fowler, 'RCHM's First 75 Years: an Outline History, 1908-83', *RCHM Annual Review 1983-4*, pp. 8-13.
6. The Welsh NMR is situated in the offices of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, Edleston House, Queens Road, Aberystwyth SY23 2HP; for Scotland the address is 54 Melville Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7HF.
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10. For the work of Bedford Lemere see Cooper, N., *The Opulent Eye*, Architectural Press, (1976).
11. *Survey of Architectural Surveys*, RCHME, (1986).
12. *Draft Thesaurus of Architectural Terms*, RCHME, (1987).
13. The architectural section of the National Monuments Record is situated in the offices of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, Fortress House, 23 Savile Row, London W1X 2JQ; telephone 01-734 9847.