

# Listing as I Knew it in 1949

by

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*This paper was read before the Ancient Monuments Society at St. Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe on Thursday, 14 October 1993. It is printed here because we feel that it is an important further contribution to the subject following a recent series of articles concerning the origin of Listed Buildings. Readers are referred to: Harvey, J.H., 'The Origin of Listed Buildings', Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society, 37 (1993), 1-20; M. Robertson et al., 'Listed Buildings: The National Resurvey of England', Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society 37 (1993), 1-94; and S. Croad, 'The National Buildings Record: the Early Years', Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society 36 (1992), 79-98.*

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In the current volume 37 of our Society's *Transactions* you may find an article by me on what may be termed the prehistory of Listed Buildings; how privately-compiled lists going back a half-century before the Second World War were officially expanded into a national network under the impact of wartime damage. At the end of that article I just touched upon the post-war transformation of those First Aid (or 'Salvage') Lists of 1941-4 into official form. These so-called Provisional Lists were envisaged under Section 42 of the Town and Country Planning Act of 1944, and produced in the main under Section 30 of the new Act of 1947. It is important for us to realize that there was, through the whole of that period, an all-party consensus on the value of conservation. The provisions of the two Acts in this respect are basically the same, and reflected a very widespread anxiety in the country at large. The terrible losses of ancient monuments, due to the war, had given rise to a corresponding surge of concern for the retention of traditional values. It was a wave of profound feeling for a concept—perhaps best expressed by the words of the song: 'There'll always be an England'—that provided genuinely national backing for this new aspect of the legislation.

Apart from the official agencies concerned, there was a great deal of relevant work being done in several fields. In our previous *Transactions*, volume 36, the early years of the National Buildings Record have been well described by Stephen Croad,

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with the help of many survivors of its heroic early years. The Record dealt with one whole aspect of the problem with remarkable efficiency. That was due mainly to Walter Godfrey's insistence on keeping the N.B.R. for its first twenty years free from bureaucracy. Drawings and photographs, concentrated in a single collection, made it possible to compare one building with another on a nationwide basis, and covered traditional vernacular buildings as well as designed works of architecture. Less recognized is the large amount of activity, towards the end of the war and during the next few years, by private bodies such as regional, county and local archaeological and amenity societies. Besides the independent production and up-dating of lists, much was being done to generate public opinion in favour of conservation. In particular, the planners of a programme for 'Post-war Archaeology' were stressing the need to reconsider the whole question of old houses officially condemned as unfit for habitation. It was at last being realized that large groups of buildings, between one and five centuries old, and forming a highly significant part of our monumental landscape, were being irrevocably swept away. These lesser domestic monuments were, by an irony of fate, to be largely demolished by an unintended effect of the new legislation. To this I must return later.

Before going on, however, it is necessary to correct a few details of what has already been published in our *Transactions*. The introductory background to Martin Robertson's paper on the National Resurvey is not altogether accurate in what concerns the work of the first Chief Investigator from 1946 onwards. When the crucial decisions were made, the ruling body was the Maclagan Committee—not the Galbraith Committee—and it has to be kept in mind that the whole operation was tightly controlled by decisions of that committee, which itself worked under governmental and financial pressures.

Secondly, it is less than a half-truth to claim that 'the fieldworkers had very little background and almost no training'. About half of the 35-40 investigators, at the peak of the first phase of listing in 1946-51, were either qualified architects or antiquaries with considerable experience of the basic problems involved. Far from 'coming from all walks of life', very nearly all of them had some experience in cognate fields, and a substantial number had already been concerned in the preparation of the wartime 'Salvage' lists. As to training, conferences were held, at any rate in 1948 and 1949, where the essential principles of listing were inculcated, and uniformity of approach was made easier by the investigators of different regions getting to know one another. Periodical instructions were issued.

Thirdly, and this shows the great difficulty of interpreting personalities that one has never known: the idea that S.J. ('Richard') Garton 'saw (listing) as a military operation' is farcical. After he had joined the Ancient Monuments Branch at Rhyl I shared a room with him for a year or so and we became close friends. It would be hard to find anyone less military. Garton was a many-sided artist: not only a trained architect but a musician of professional standing on the violin and the French horn, able in emergency to take parts in great orchestras; he also possessed the musical sense of absolute pitch. He was a painter in oils and a considerable water-colourist, as well as one of the few people who ever went through the whole of the Turner Collection while it was hidden away. To top up, he was a distinguished connoisseur

both of wine and beer. Garton's investigators may in some respects have resembled Dad's Army, but he saw them as the members of a band who had to play in tune.

It is time to return to the main reason why the work done in the five years from 1946 was so largely ineffective. This was the decision 'from on high', coming through the Maclagan Committee, that only buildings placed in Grades I and II would receive statutory protection. During the war, all buildings placed on the 'Salvage' lists had been treated as equally meriting first-aid, and it came as a shock to find that the great majority of all listings, namely Grade III, were to be relegated to Supplementary lists, hitherto intended for the marginal buildings originally to constitute a 'Grade IV'. The disappearance, within a few years, of splendid old streets in Oxford, virtually the whole of old Gosport, and thousands of vernacular cottages all over the country was not primarily due to ineffective survey. Most of them had been placed on the lists. The tragedy followed directly from the provision, in the form of the Supplementary lists, of a guide to areas ripe for profitable redevelopment. By the time that Grade III came to be abolished, it was too late: the irreparable damage had been done.

The official *Instructions to Investigators* was a booklet issued as far back as March 1946, a year in advance of the new Act. It begins with a fairly detailed account of the legislative background, leading up to the effect of Section 42 of the 1944 Act, which provided that the Minister had a duty to list buildings of special architectural or historic interest, or to *approve such lists compiled by other persons*. That proviso allowed for the incorporation, at least as an interim safeguard, of the very many existing lists prepared by societies and individuals with high qualifications. The listing under the Act was to have a double effect: to guide local authorities in their own planning; and to put owners of buildings under an obligation to give notice before demolition or making serious alterations. It was already obvious that the lists would be of use also in ways which could not at that time be foreseen. One far-sighted remark is that: 'occasion has arisen to compile lists of towns, villages and areas, of special amenity from the architectural point of view'. Once the lists were in existence a factual statistical basis would be provided for estimating the degree of 'special amenity'.

Because of the impossibility of foreseeing all the uses to which the lists might be put, it was considered 'the more important to take as wide a view as possible of their scope'. There was a correspondingly important proviso, 'to guard against the consequent risk that there may hereafter be uncertainty as to just what considerations have and have not been taken into account'. 'The compilation . . . must be carried out in haste and therefore superficially. It will . . . seldom be possible to give time to inspect the interior of a building'. But for that very reason 'it is the more important that the basis of compilation should be uniform'. Uniform use of symbols and abbreviations was insisted upon, as well as 'the much more difficult result of uniformity in standards and grading'.

A lengthy chapter dealt with 'The Varieties of Special Interest', noting the following categories of importance, as: firstly, a work of Art in its own right; secondly, as 'possessing in a pronounced form the characteristic virtues of (a) school of design'; and thirdly, on aesthetic grounds 'of fragmentary beauties', e.g., St James's Palace and the like, which 'exemplify a link in the chain of architectural development'. It

was emphasized that Architectural History was not only the history of architectural design, but equally . . . of structural technique—‘a steel bridge is as much a building as a cathedral’.

A lower limit of date was *not* specified, but general rules were given (normally no building after 1914 ‘unless it appears possible that the building may not be brought to light by central research’.) There was indeed a great deal of central research by Garton and his H.Q. staff, especially in regard to modern buildings. Pure historic interest included both ‘the evidential and the sentimental’; and it was pointed out that in both these contexts ‘the substantial preservation of a whole village, say, is more helpful than that of the same number of houses spread over a county’. Similarly, ‘the sociological interest of buildings . . . has a very important place’. Special attention was directed to unaltered cottages and farmhouse types in the more remote and thinly populated regions. ‘Investigators ought at any rate to be aware of the existence of this problem . . .’.

Groups were considered under several heads: (1) the planned architectural group (e.g., Royal Crescent, Bath); (2) the accidental or pictorial architectural group (e.g., High Streets). A nice distinction had to be made. Buildings regarded as a ‘cumulative group or (of) character value’ were usually to be placed on the Supplementary list.

Then there were also monuments valued in right of the sentimental interest of an individual person or a class, etc. (e.g., Keats’s house; the Stock Exchange; medieval abbeys); ‘old buildings having the power to kindle the historical imagination in a way denied to documents which supplement them’. There were also buildings associated with historical events, such as the Ship Hotel at Greenwich where the whitebait dinners were held . . . ‘the booking office of the Stockton and Darlington Railway at Stockton’. (I must confess to a doubt as to whether this was not a slip, meaning North Road Station in Darlington, at the other end of the line.)

Chapter 4 of the *Instructions* is on ‘The Field Technique of Listing’. In the first instance there needed to be contact with secretaries of local archaeological societies and the like, to make local contact and to gain access to any existing lists or specialized information on particular buildings. Each building investigated had to be accurately identified and marked on an Ordnance Survey map: at six inches to the mile for rural areas, and at twenty-five inches for towns. Lists were to be formed on the basis of the latest official boundaries of County Boroughs, and of Urban and Rural district councils; as a preliminary, the sheets of the map had to be clearly and accurately marked with these boundaries of the local authorities.

Every building was to be placed in one of the grades I, II or III; with the marking ‘Grade IV’ reserved for marginal cases included to provide an answer to criticisms of carelessness or neglect. An especial proviso was made for the listing of architecturally poor districts: standards might be lowered, in relation to other districts, in order to give due weight to *local* value; but the standards for listing and for grading had to be ensured *by example* . . . ; by instructions on the site; or by the checking of actual lists already accepted as adequate.

Garton had a wide knowledge of English literature, and it was therefore no surprise to find that the sample listing at the end of the *Instructions* was for the town, and the rural district, of ‘Barchester’; as imaginary instances of ‘historical’ interest, references

were inserted to the Sherlock Holmes canon: at 'No. 25 Abbeygate Street' he noted 'Plaque: John Watson M.D. Biographer, born here 1851'; and in the civil parish of Gatherum 'Gaboriau Lodge' was graded III and described as 'of no interest architecturally, C. 19. Home 1860-1867 of Sherlock Holmes', with the footnote: '\*But the public interest evinced by the number of visitors from all parts of the world (150,000 tickets were sold in 1938, as against 110 at Gatherum Castle) may warrant a higher grading'. On my remarking on this in a letter, Garton wrote back: 'I am told that three of the original drop mouthpiece pipes and at least two cocaine jars and the fine old Klotz violin are on view there, together with one of the deerstalker caps . . . (but this may be merely hearsay'. A cheerful tone was set by this approach, and in spite of the inevitable impact of civil service methods, the work of listing was kept as free of red tape as might be.

Though I was not myself present at the first Conference of Investigators, held in London on 11 February 1948, I was given a copy of the Report, which shows that besides the Chief Investigator, twenty-six full-time or part-time investigators attended. The main subjects dealt with were: (1) the need for uniformity, with discussion of examples; (2) the importance of the correct postal address being given for every entry; (3) the special difficulties of listing mid and late nineteenth-century buildings; (4) checking with all the wartime 'Salvage' lists and with all known existing local lists; (5) the proper marking of maps, which were to become sealed legal documents; (6) balance in description between the very lengthy and the unduly terse; and finally (7) a discussion of the knotty problem of Groups, notably where the Group consisted of individual buildings of different grades. The major snag was explicitly expressed: 'the Maclagan Committee has put us in a certain difficulty by saying that all our low-grade material must be relegated to a supplementary list'. I was told later that very strenuous representations had been made to the Committee at an earlier stage, to resist this relegation, but in vain.

In the winter of 1948-9, just at the time that I became a part-time investigator, arrangements were made with the Council for British Archaeology so that contact might be made with the Secretaries of all its constituent organizations—some 120 in number covering all parts of Britain. This system ensured that all local knowledge already formulated was included in the draft lists before they were issued. It must be realized that in the twenty years which elapsed before the beginning of the Resurvey in 1968, a gigantic total of work had been done by societies and individuals in all areas, providing a largely unacknowledged basis for the new look. This particularly concerns the wholly new specialized bodies, starting with the Vernacular Architecture Group, which held its first conference in 1954; but includes also many local societies newly founded, and campaigns of work by older bodies. In many cases this activity was called forth by the inadequacy of some original lists and far more by the storm of destruction that raged from 1951 onwards, at the very time that the number of Investigators was severely reduced.

We now reach the Second Conference held at Oriel College, Oxford, on the last weekend of March, 1949. Meeting for tea on the Friday, that evening was spent in general informal discussion and getting acquainted. The Saturday was spent on the formal conference, and the Sunday on a coach-tour of Witney, Burford and

Woodstock under the guidance of Peter Spokes, while in the afternoon Billy Pantin led a party around the medieval buildings of Oxford.

The formal conference dealt largely with details of the listing, such as the avoidance of abbreviations; the importance of making descriptions readable by (architectural) laymen; and concentration upon salient features in the 'attempt to create a visual image of the general character of the building'. Next came the difficult questions of consultation with the C.B.A. and with the Local Authorities in each district. We were impressed with the fact that consultation with the branches of the C.B.A. was mandatory, and it was agreed that it was best to tackle the constituent bodies at the start of work. However, I find myself reported as saying: 'Generally speaking, it is not the big county Society with direct representation on the Council for British Archaeology that is the useful society. In my experience it is the small local societies with much experience of dates and houses and of interesting interiors from whom one gets the most useful information'. It is recorded that 'other members concurred in this'.

Representations from several local authorities were reported, ranging from anxiety to add numbers of mediocre buildings at one end of the scale, to calls for the exclusion of entries which might stand in the way of proposed works or road-widening. In general, however, it could be said that authorities were becoming more interested and were taking the work seriously and reasonably.

The grading of churches was discussed at length and it was agreed simply to mark the more outstanding examples A. or B.

Ancillary buildings, *including garden and park walls*, were to be indicated individually in all conglomerate entries within a single curtilage. This was to have important repercussions a generation later, as it provided the thin end of the wedge that led to the Registration of Gardens by 1984. There was also a discussion on the inspection of interiors, noting especially the helpfulness of local antiquarian societies and individuals.

In the afternoon session written questions sent in by Investigators were discussed: the problem of Groups; the distinction between 'monuments' which could be listed, e.g., man-worked natural caverns, signposts and milestones, village crosses, stocks, ruins standing above ground, and crypts and undercrofts; as contrasted with earthworks, mottes, barrows, foundations now below ground and invisible, tombstones (except in a few outstanding cases), all of which latter category were *not* to be listed. There were also discussions on lower fringe buildings; the effect of restoration or bad condition on grading; and the status of 'unorthodox' buildings, viaducts, bridges, aqueducts, etc. There was also reference to the need to refer to Demolition and Condemnation Orders against listable properties; it was stressed that it was vitally important that the information given under these heads should be clear and correct. The day ended with a discussion on the control of advertisement, not only on listed buildings, but in their vicinity.

An important outcome of the discussions at the Second Conference was the issue by Garton, a month later, of detailed instructions on 'Group' listing (*Instruction to Investigators*, No. XIII). This underlined the need for a clear distinction to be made in all lists, between a group of Grade III items considered *on group value* as deserving

full statutory protection, and a group falling short of that standard. All future listing in such cases was to upgrade every individual building from III to II to ensure statutory treatment, but with the added statement: 'Graded II because part of the group—otherwise III'.

Garton took considerable trouble in compiling an illustrative set of examples of groups of individually minor buildings which nonetheless demanded 'the utmost possible control as a whole'. He named, among Towns: Castle Street, Farnham; Long Street, Devizes; Church Square, Rye; parts of High Street, Yarm, Yorks.; parts of High Street, Tenterden; parts of High Street, Guildford; most of High Street, Oxford; and parts of Richmond, Yorks. Among Villages he cited: most of Castle Combe; Lacock; numerous parts of Lavenham, Suffolk; numerous parts of Clare, Suffolk; Kimbolton; the west side of Minchinhampton main street, Gloucester; Deddington, Oxford; Dent, Yorkshire; Crayke, Yorkshire; Coxwold, Yorkshire; both sides of Amersham, Bucks.; and Little Barrington, Glos.; which we had visited on the conference tour. It was this introduction which paved the way for the later decision to abolish Grade III and re-grade monuments into statutory protection. Furthermore, it was one of the biggest steps leading to the Lists of Towns and Villages compiled by the C.B.A. and published in 1964-5; and the formulation of Conservation Areas soon after that.

It would be a boring recital if I were to recount in detail my own work on listing. In any case, I was only able to work half-time and for the eight months January to August of 1949. A good deal of time was taken up with bureaucracy: it took four-and-a-half months from the time that I had been *invited* to apply, until I began work. One typical time-wasting ploy consisted of my being told, long after my application, that I must also apply to the Ministry of Labour. Recommended for the job on 16 August, I was told on 16 October that the Ministry of Town and Country Planning was prepared to offer me employment, but only after approval by the Appointments Office of the Ministry of Labour and National Service. Nearly three weeks elapsed before I received a reply dated 4 November, enclosing an enrolment form and informing me: 'I feel sure that you would wish me to tell you that vacancies for part-time employment . . . are very rare . . .'. My letter of appointment was dated 9 December, one week short of four months from recommendation.

In the course of the eight months I worked, from January to August 1949, on a half-time basis and, deducting leave periods, I put in a total equivalent to fourteen full-time weeks. Of these one half, seven weeks, were spent on listing the whole Borough of Guildford, three weeks on the Urban District of Leatherhead (comprising five parishes), another two weeks in various parts of rural Surrey. The remaining fortnight was taken up by the Oxford Conference, administrative matters, and some days spent outside Surrey to check earlier lists. I must emphasize the fact that there was, when I was at work, no 'expectation' that a town would be listed in a month. My average was five weeks for one large and one small urban area, ten weeks together. A lot of time had to be spent, not in the field, but on correspondence and meetings with officers of the local authorities, amenity societies and individuals with special knowledge. The Chief Investigator spent three days in going over the areas with me in a car, once in January, once in June, and again in August. We discussed problems

of all kinds and especially those of inclusion or exclusion, and of grading. A good deal of serious consideration was devoted to the listing of twentieth-century houses at Guildford, by Thackeray Turner in Bury Fields and by Baillie Scott and Roger Fry in Warwick's Bench and Chantry View Road. We found ourselves in agreement upon the general proposition, that it was practically impossible to reach a correct judgement on modern—that is more or less contemporary work; but on the contrary, we could agree on the outstanding and quite exceptional importance of what was designed by Thackeray Turner in the twenty years 1894–1913.

Such judgements are in any case subjective, but there is all the same room for individual decisions on value. In the light of all that has happened in the generation since Garton retired in 1961, it now seems that he was almost incredibly correct in his views and in his assessments. The precise extent of his responsibility for the text of *Instructions to Investigators* is unknown, but he certainly played a great part and was the chief author of later *Instructions*. He also steered the conferences of 1948 and 1949 so far as their technical programmes were concerned. In his fifteen years as Chief Investigator he laid firm foundations for the listing of all buildings of architectural and historic interest. We should hail him as a truly great man in the sphere of conservation—and a great deal else.