

RCHME and Recording after PPG 15

by

SARAH PEARSON

Buildings are major historical artefacts. They are a finite resource which, it is generally agreed, should be treated with respect. This is impossible without understanding them. The Government's recent planning policy guidance paper, *Planning and the Historic Environment*, (PPG15), is to be welcomed in its clear acknowledgement of the central role of knowledge and understanding in the conservation process. It states clearly that the impact of development proposals on the historic environment should be assessed and given full weight alongside other considerations (1.3), and that recording 'may be required to understand the significance of a site or structure before an application is determined' (2.11, C.3-4). In addition it recognises the need for education to ensure that there is public support for intelligent stewardship of the historic environment (1.6, 1.7). As one of the heritage bodies funded through Government, these points are fundamental to the aims of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. The Commission not only undertakes its statutory function of recording listed buildings before demolition or major alteration, thus enhancing the National Monuments Record (3.22, A.10-11); it also records historic buildings in order to advance knowledge, enable appropriate assessment, and increase understanding of the material past among a wide range of users, whether for purposes of education, management, conservation, or enjoyment.

As part of the strategic planning process that the Commission has been undertaking recently the criteria on which all survey work is based have been set down. This only clarifies recent practice, but it is helpful to have these formally identified. In future all the Commission's survey work will be based upon the following:

the importance or significance of the building in a national context. This is extremely important to RCHME as an organisation with a national remit, but it does not mean only concentrating resources on Grade I or Grade II* buildings. The concept may encompass the ordinary and typical, particularly when seen *en masse*. It also does not mean only listed buildings, for some buildings which are now thought

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to be historically important were little regarded a few years ago, and the same situation will arise again. That such buildings may 'collectively reflect some of the most distinctive and creative aspects of English history' has been recognised in PPG 15 (6.2).

The second criterion concerns **the degree of vulnerability or threat to the building**. There is now, rightly for a Government-funded body, a greater emphasis within RCHME on buildings where there is need for knowledge because the individual example, or the building type, is under threat. This emphasis within the Commission has been steadily developing over the last fifteen years or more, and it needs to be publicly stated.

The third criterion relates to **the current state of knowledge and the potential contribution of survey to its enhancement**. A great deal more is known about certain types of building than about others, whether the work has been done within RCHME or elsewhere. An example is rural vernacular architecture, a topic which was little understood in the 1950s. Since then knowledge of the subject has been immeasurably enhanced through survey and analysis and, despite the remaining lacunae in our knowledge, it is correct that public funding is now channelled towards other subjects where the current need for knowledge is greater. This does not, however, only mean recording types of structure about which little is known - say, early reinforced concrete buildings. Our knowledge of the development of late nineteenth-century churches, for example, is woefully inadequate, so this too might be a subject which requires attention on a national scale.

The fourth criterion is **the public need and the potential contribution of survey to the work of others**. The Commission's survey work is undertaken in order to assist others in carrying out their objectives, whether directly or indirectly, and whether these are concerned with management and conservation, academic research, or general education. Examples might range from working with the National Trust to elucidate the history of a complex country house prior to its restoration and presentation to the public, to working in close liaison with English Heritage on clarifying the development of a little understood building type prior to a listing programme.

The final criterion is **the overall cost and the possibilities of partnership**. Like everyone else RCHME is now in a position where the cost of survey work must be part of the equation when deciding what to do. It is also obvious that, particularly in a post-PPG15 world, there is far more recording work to do relating to the planning process than one organisation can ever achieve. The Commission, unfortunately, does not have the finances to commission others to undertake work, but it must actively explore, with English Heritage and others, ways in which the number of suitably qualified recorders may be increased, and, where appropriate, collaborate with others to achieve the desired outcome.

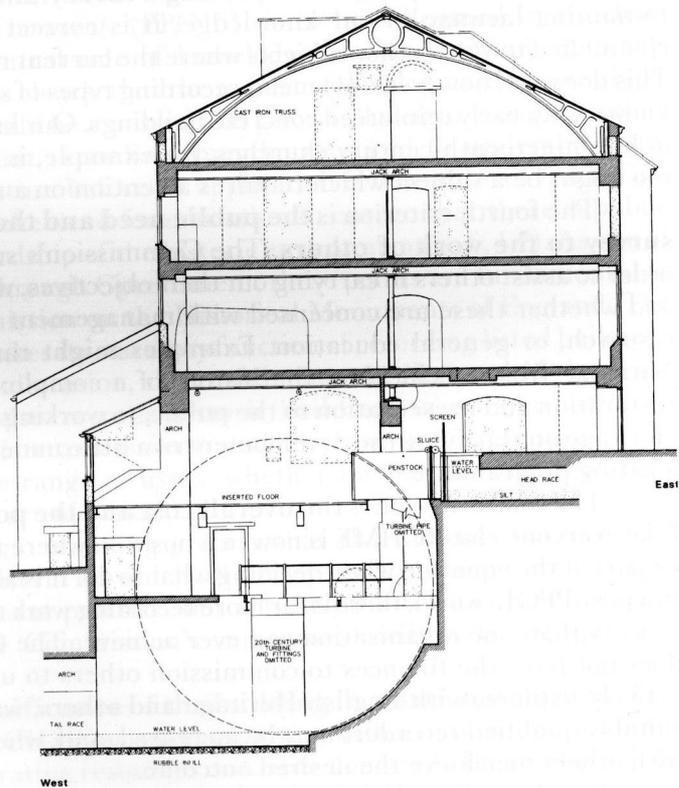
So what effect do these criteria have on the Commission's recording programmes, and how are they relevant to PPG15?

In the first place the emergency recording teams, which in 1994-5 recorded some 850 buildings on 250 sites, and photographed almost 700 sites, are more

consciously choosing to record buildings which are important or significant in a national context. Some of the work is concentrated on recording structures which will be wholly demolished. But of equal importance is the recording of buildings which are undergoing significant alteration. These are often buildings with complex structural histories which it is important to have analysed in detail before work takes place. Where constructive relations with local authorities exist, and the Commission is keen to liaise and develop a dialogue with as many as possible, staff respond when they can to requests to investigate such buildings before decisions have been made, since an earlier rather than a later visit is often helpful to all concerned. This obviously ties in with the recommendations for recording for development control purposes outlined in PPG15. Recent examples of in-depth surveys have been a fire-proof water mill at Tonedale in Somerset, which had extremely good evidence for all its working parts (Fig. 1), and Coombe Abbey, Warwickshire, in which a medieval claustral range had been successively, and expensively, adapted for use as a house, with the resulting problems of interpretation (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1
Tonedale Mills, Wellington,
Somerset, is one of the best-
preserved early woollen mill
sites in south west England.
The early nineteenth-century
fireproof mill, with an unusual
cast-iron internal frame,
was powered by a 30-foot diameter
water wheel driving an upright
shaft via a ring gear. Steam
power was added later, and the
wheel eventually replaced by a
turbine

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Section through fireproof mill showing former water wheel chamber

TONEDALE MILLS
Wellington Somerset

Surveyed: October 1993
Drawn scale: 1:50
Drawing no.: 2 of 4
Grid ref.: ST 1264 2138
NBR no.: 90889



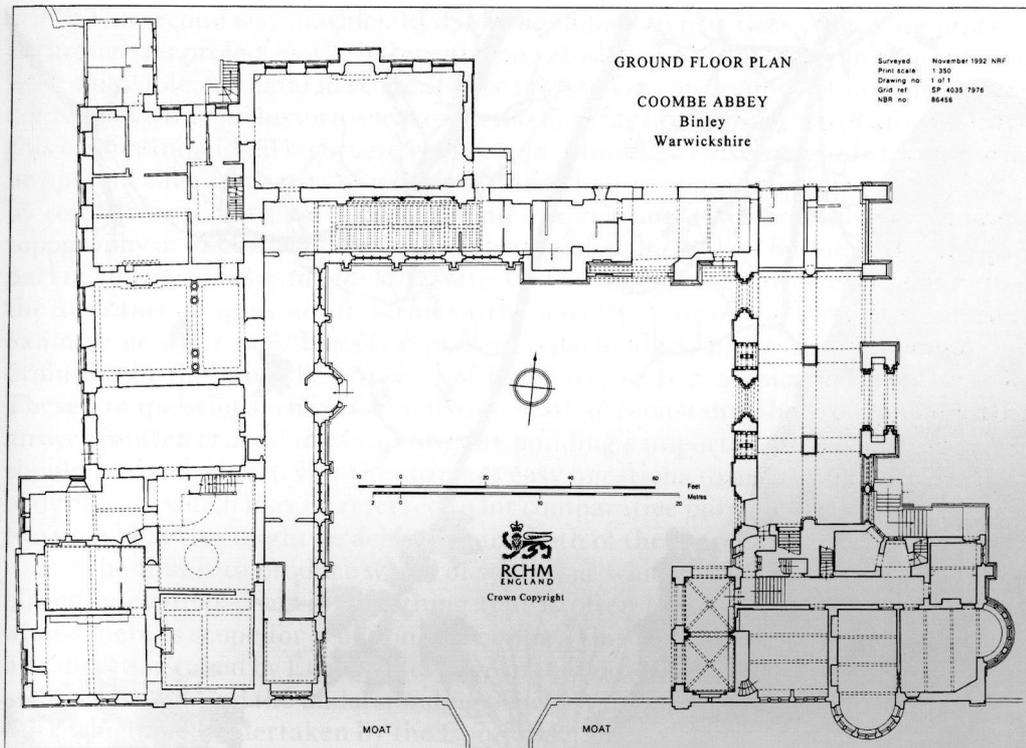


Fig. 2

Coombe Abbey, Warwickshire, was a Cistercian abbey, founded in 1150. After the Dissolution the claustral ranges only were retained and transformed into a house. Major additions and remodelling occurred in the 1680s and 1860s, although much of this later work was removed or destroyed when the house was sold in 1923. Despite this a large, important, and complex building remained to be surveyed
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It may be that in the long term much of this work should be undertaken by private contractors, and paid for by developers. But in the first place neither the mechanisms for this, nor public acceptance that this should be the norm, are yet in place. Secondly, there are not yet enough qualified private contractors in existence, and this is something which the Commission is playing its part in addressing through its training programmes, an area to which it is giving increasing emphasis. Thirdly, there will always be buildings which it is correct should be investigated centrally because they fall within a wider sphere of interest which should be explored on a national basis. At present, for example, maltings and breweries are being recorded, and information from others collated, in order that this highly threatened class of structure may be better understood. It is therefore appropriate for the Commission to record those breweries and maltings which surface through the planning process. Buildings which fall into this category are often ones which may not look individually important, but collectively may be of national significance.



Fig. 3

The German Hospital, Ritson Road, Hackney, London. Accommodation block, 1863-4, designed by T.L. Donaldson and E.A. Grüning. Closed 1987. Alternative uses are being sought
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The second way in which RCHME has a part to play in the planning process, is through its project work. In recent years this has been thematic in content, and where possible, national in scope. There is a growing awareness among all who are concerned with the historic environment that it is not enough simply to deal with this or that individual structure in isolation. Buildings exist in a context. This may be spatial: they form part of a complex and their purpose can only be understood by reference to other parts, for example the relation of an urban building to the topography of its town or city, or the function of an individual building which forms part of a farmstead or an industrial site. Or the context may involve understanding the structure in question in terms of the development of the type. Is it an early example or a late one? Does it represent a particularly important moment in the evolution of the type? Is it typical of its genre, or is it atypical or even unique? These are questions which Commission staff are constantly being asked, and the answer is often critical in evaluating the building's importance, and deciding what should be done with it. But they are not easy questions to answer unless there is a body of work which may be referred to for comparative purposes. There are at least two ways that this might be achieved, and both of them are of concern to RCHME.

The first is to produce works of synthesis, which allow individual cases to be placed in context. This is something that is often best achieved from the centre where there is scope for a national overview. This sort of thinking lies behind the new direction taken by English Heritage in thematic listing. Currently, textile mills are being listed, and the understanding on which this is based relies upon the project work which was undertaken by the Commission and its collaborators in Yorkshire, Manchester and Cheshire. In this case listing is following the recording work, but English Heritage and the Commission are in close liaison about future topics which would benefit from an initial collaborative approach.

The implication behind this is that the Commission is not just concerned to work on buildings which are already protected. The notion of what constitutes the heritage has expanded in the last twenty years, bringing with it a dramatic increase in the need to understand new kinds of structure. More knowledge and a framework for assessment are required prior to protection or conservation, and there is a need for expert information at both national and local level. Most of the emphasis is on structures of the eighteenth-century and later, and the role of the Commission has been changing to meet these new demands.

As a result of political and economic changes over the last decade, institutional buildings of all kinds have come under threat. Among them are hospitals on which the Commission has recently completed a national survey. Everyone knows that changes in the Health Service have led to the closure of hospitals and thrown a question mark over the future of the buildings (Fig. 3). But there was formerly no overview allowing an assessment of the significance of individual examples, whether from an historical or an architectural point of view. Already there has been a great deal of contact with English Heritage and a number of local authorities over particular cases, and it is hoped that the forthcoming publication will provide a more generally accessible framework in which to see this type of building.



Fig. 4

Moat Farm, Haceby, Lincolnshire. The farmstead was abandoned when its land was amalgamated with another farm

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A second area where work is well under way is farmsteads. By the 1980s it was apparent that economic circumstances and the inability of old farm buildings to adapt to modern agricultural methods, allied to the boom in the housing market and strong pressure for more rural housing, had finally sounded the death knell for the majority of traditional farm buildings (Fig. 4). Few of them were listed, and the importance of studying farmsteads as entities had previously been appreciated by few people. There was, and still is, an enormous amount of work to be done. With hindsight it is clear that the situation would have benefited from earlier attention, but as mentioned above, there has been a radical shift in what constitutes the historic environment over the last twenty years, and the Commission has had to learn to change along with everyone else.

There were simply too many farmsteads to undertake a national survey along the lines of the Hospital project, so selection was inevitable, and five areas of England have been chosen to represent different agricultural regions and practices. The survey looks at all the buildings of the farmstead, asking questions about what sort of agriculture was practised, when and how the farm evolved, and how it worked in its final form and in any identifiable stages along the way (Fig. 5). The concentration

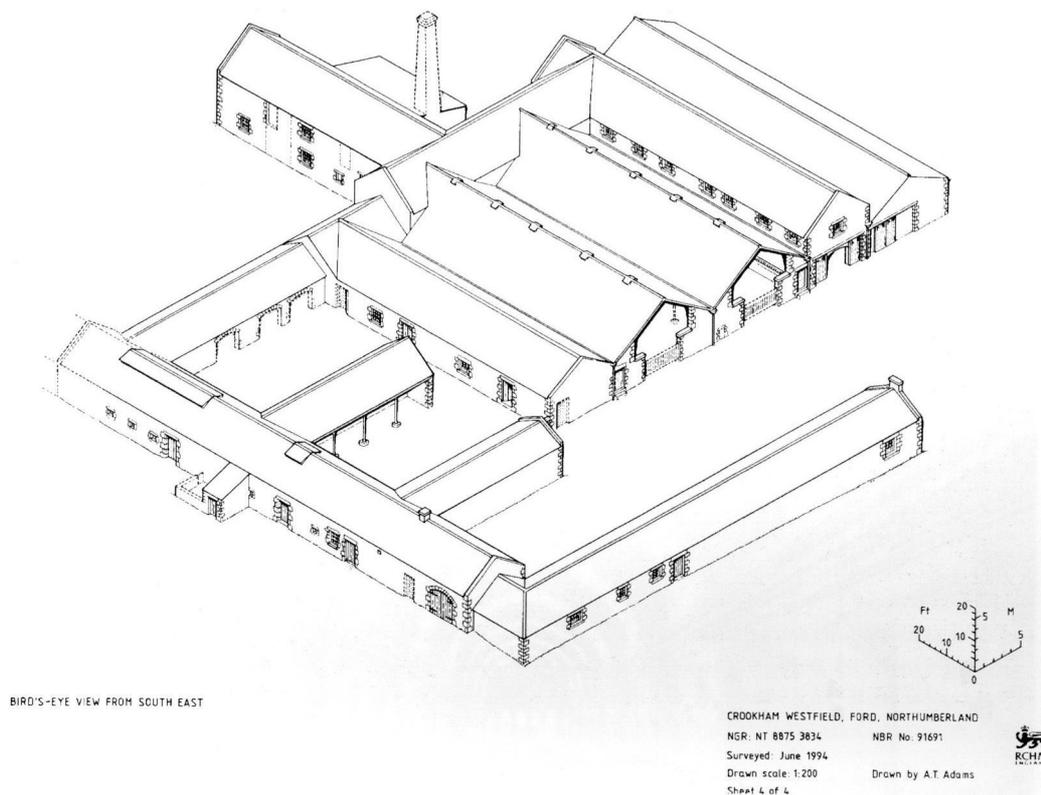


Fig. 5

Crookham Westfield, Ford, Northumberland, is a large arable and livestock 'factory farm' of the late nineteenth century. The view shows how the elements were integrated. The three two-storeyed ranges were a threshing barn (with attached steam engine house and reconstructed chimney), a straw barn, and a turnip house. The last two stored and prepared litter and fodder for cattle accommodated in the covered yards. The yards in the foreground were for horses

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has been on buildings of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for this is the period when most surviving farm buildings were erected. Once again English Heritage's thematic listing is now also getting to grips with this neglected subject, and the two organisations are in close contact. It is hoped that the book the Commission will publish will enable local authority personnel to understand this type of structure better and help them to make conservation decisions from a more informed position.

Other building types which are currently being tackled are prisons, workhouses and military sites. Prisons are currently being extensively modernised, and the opportunity to study their growth and evolution, and to document their present state will soon disappear (Fig. 6). It is planned to record about 1,000 buildings in 150 prisons, with seventy to eighty being recorded in detail. Some of these lie in



Fig. 6

HM Prison, Preston. Interior of C Wing, 1865-78. The overall plan of the prison resembles Pentonville, but examination of the existing fabric, maps and documents reveals that Preston was built in four phases between 1840 and 1900

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castles or country houses. But the aim of this project is not to understand, for example, Lancaster Castle as a medieval castle; it is to understand how the medieval castle was adapted for use as a prison in the late-eighteenth century, and how that prison developed and relates to other prisons elsewhere in England. Workhouses pertain both to hospitals and prisons, and like the former they are under great threat through changes to the National Health Service. Some of them are listed, and have been recorded over the years as threatened buildings or as part of the Hospitals project, but lack of an overview has made it difficult to assess their individual significance satisfactorily.

A final theme which the Commission is just beginning to come to grips with is that of military sites. Over the last few years a number of barracks and dockyards have been recorded in depth, and joint archaeological and architectural investigation has been undertaken on individual sites such as the royal gunpowder works at Waltham Abbey or the dockyards and associated buildings at Sheerness. But the subject has now been catapulted to the front of the agenda by the Government's reduction in the armed forces and the large-scale disposal of military establishments. Airfields, barracks and naval installations are all affected. Many of the structures at risk are unlisted and extremely vulnerable to demolition. Yet some have played a vital role in the history and development of defence in Britain. The scale of the threat is so great that at present only a low level of recording can be undertaken, to establish what is there (Fig. 7). But it is a subject of great interest to many people, both within and outside the national agencies, and it is therefore one which will almost certainly be looked at in more detail and in more sophisticated ways as time goes by.

The question of the level of recording is obviously one which concerns a number of people. Some believe that detailed examination is the only way to understand a building, and in certain circumstances few would disagree with this. Complex medieval or early modern structures which have evolved over centuries, and had large amounts of money spent on them during several campaigns of work, may well require detailed survey and analysis before they can be fully understood. Churches, castles and country houses are obvious cases in point. But this kind of assessment is not relevant to all buildings, nor to all circumstances. The current threats to large-scale complexes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are demanding new approaches by recorders. The analytical skills and survey techniques required to record airfields and factories are largely the same as for medieval buildings, but the background knowledge, the type of questions asked, and the appropriate level of recording may vary. Likewise, different stages of the planning process in its widest sense require different levels of understanding, and some buildings need a greater depth of analysis than others. The Commission consciously tries to match the level of its recording to the complexity of the structure, and to the purpose for which any individual building is being recorded.

The second way in which recorded buildings may be used for comparative purposes is through the collection of individual records in an archive. If conservation officers had easy access to well-ordered, well-indexed reports, drawings and

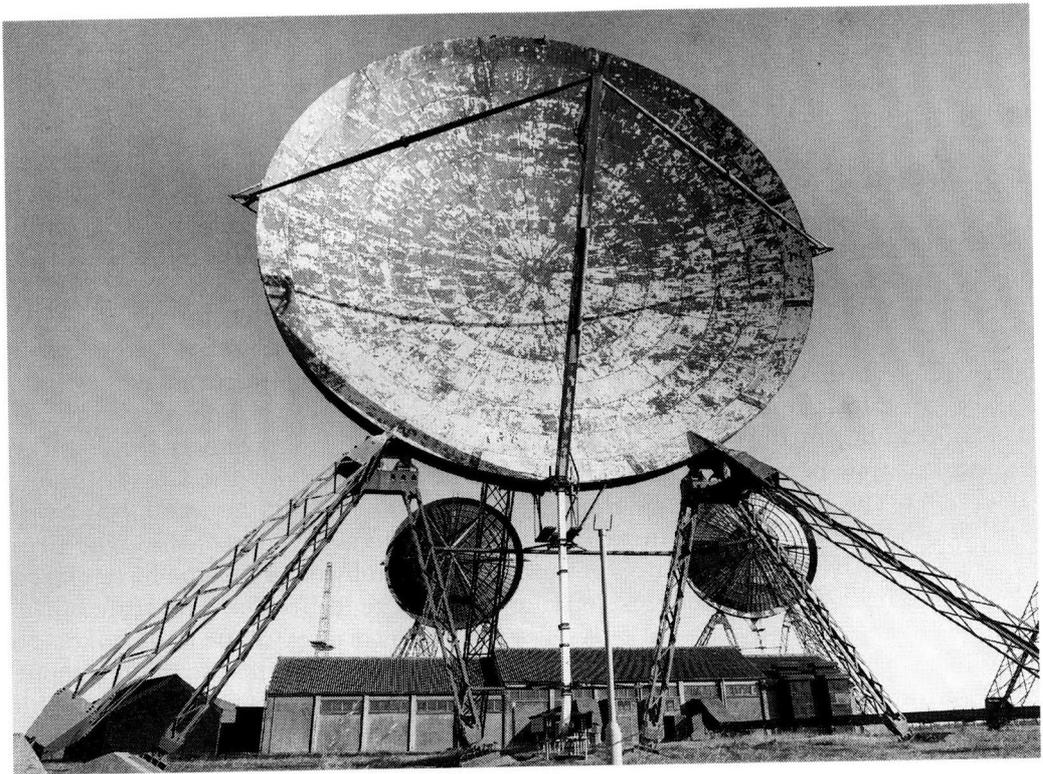


Fig. 7

Tropospheric scatter dish, NATO Forces Scatter Station, Stenigot, Lincolnshire. Built in 1960. Made obsolete by satellite communication, and shortly to be demolished

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photographs it would be of inestimable value to them as they considered the significance of new cases. The National Monuments Record has an integrated archive of over seven million records of buildings, archaeological sites and air photographs for public consultation. When much of this information becomes available electronically, and is combined with the Lists of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest, it will be invaluable as a research tool. But the Commission cannot, and should not, collect and conserve all records of all buildings, and electronic information is unlikely wholly to replace the physical archive. Hard-pressed conservation officers will always require on-the-spot visual information about local buildings which no national collection can ever contain. Archaeologists are quite clear about the importance for planning purposes of the material deposited in county Sites and Monuments Records, and there is an urgent need for suitable regional or local repositories for architectural material of regional rather than national interest. Some SMRs already include such material, and there is encouragement from PPG15 in this direction. But it does not immediately solve

the problem. Unlike archaeology, most building conservation is dealt with at District level, and it is unclear at present how this need can be catered for adequately. It is a matter of considerable concern to the Royal Commission because it is the central Government body responsible for data standards, and the conservation and accessibility of heritage records. It is important that, in partnership with other national and local bodies, it seeks to ensure that records of historic buildings reach a certain standard, are appropriately conserved and managed, and are made available to all who have a legitimate interest in consulting them. Solving this issue satisfactorily will play an important part in the successful implementation of PPG15, and it is one of the biggest challenges facing us all.

I would like to thank my colleagues at RCHME for their assistance in the preparation of the illustrations for this essay.



Fig. 7

Tropospheric scatter dish, NATO Forces Scatter Station, Spangol, Lincolnshire. Built in 1960. Made obsolete by satellite communication, and shortly to be demolished.

By Miss Janet Cooper

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