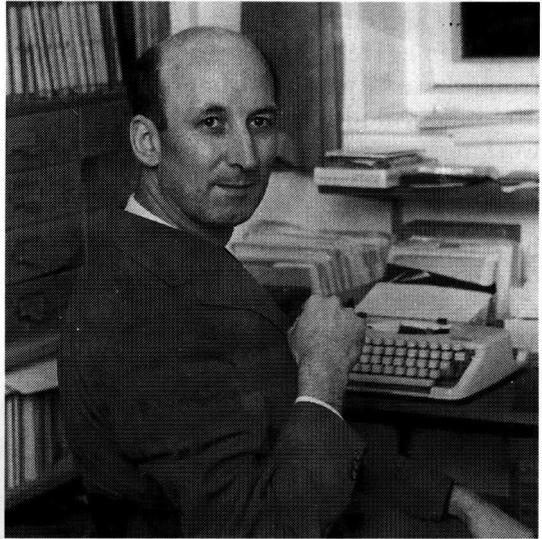


Ronald Brunskill

by

DAME JENNIFER JENKINS

Ronald Brunskill is a man whose clarity of mind shines through his physique, his personality and the purposes to which he has devoted his life. No one could forget the strong lines of his face, the dark hair receding to emphasise the domed forehead, and the bright brown eyes beneath the finely etched eyebrows. And no one could fail to be aware of his integrity and his sense of loyalty to people and to causes. His wry sense of humour is sometimes less apparent beneath his cloak of reserve. His writings and teaching have been directed towards his principal purpose – to record and conserve the vernacular buildings of



this country. He believes that only if architects, owners and the general public learn to appreciate these simple, often fragile, structures will the threats of excessive alteration or even demolition be overcome. During the course of his public work his concerns widened to embrace the whole field of historic preservation and architectural excellence up to the present day.

Brunskill's interest in traditional building dates from his early years. He wrote that, born in 1929, 'I am only one generation removed from the land. I have therefore had the privilege...of spending school holidays on the farms of my grandparents, uncles and cousins, and taking part in a way of life which, as recently as thirty years ago [this was written in 1977], retained intact many of the traditions accumulated over several centuries. It was during such holidays spent in remote parts of Cumberland and Westmorland that I first became aware of differences of walling material, plan form and architectural detail, and it was from practical if inexpert activities that I began to realise the significance in different forms of farmstead layout and farm building design' (R.W. Brunskill, *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture*, third edition, 1987).

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These interests and the encouragement of his headmaster led him to the Manchester University School of Architecture. Here he was fortunate to be taught by Professor R. A. Cordingley, a pioneer of vernacular studies, whom he later joined as a studio assistant while pursuing his studies for an MA. Like many of his generation he took advantage of National Service to widen his experience, serving as an officer in the Royal Engineers in the Suez Canal zone and using his leave to visit sites in Greece and Cyprus.

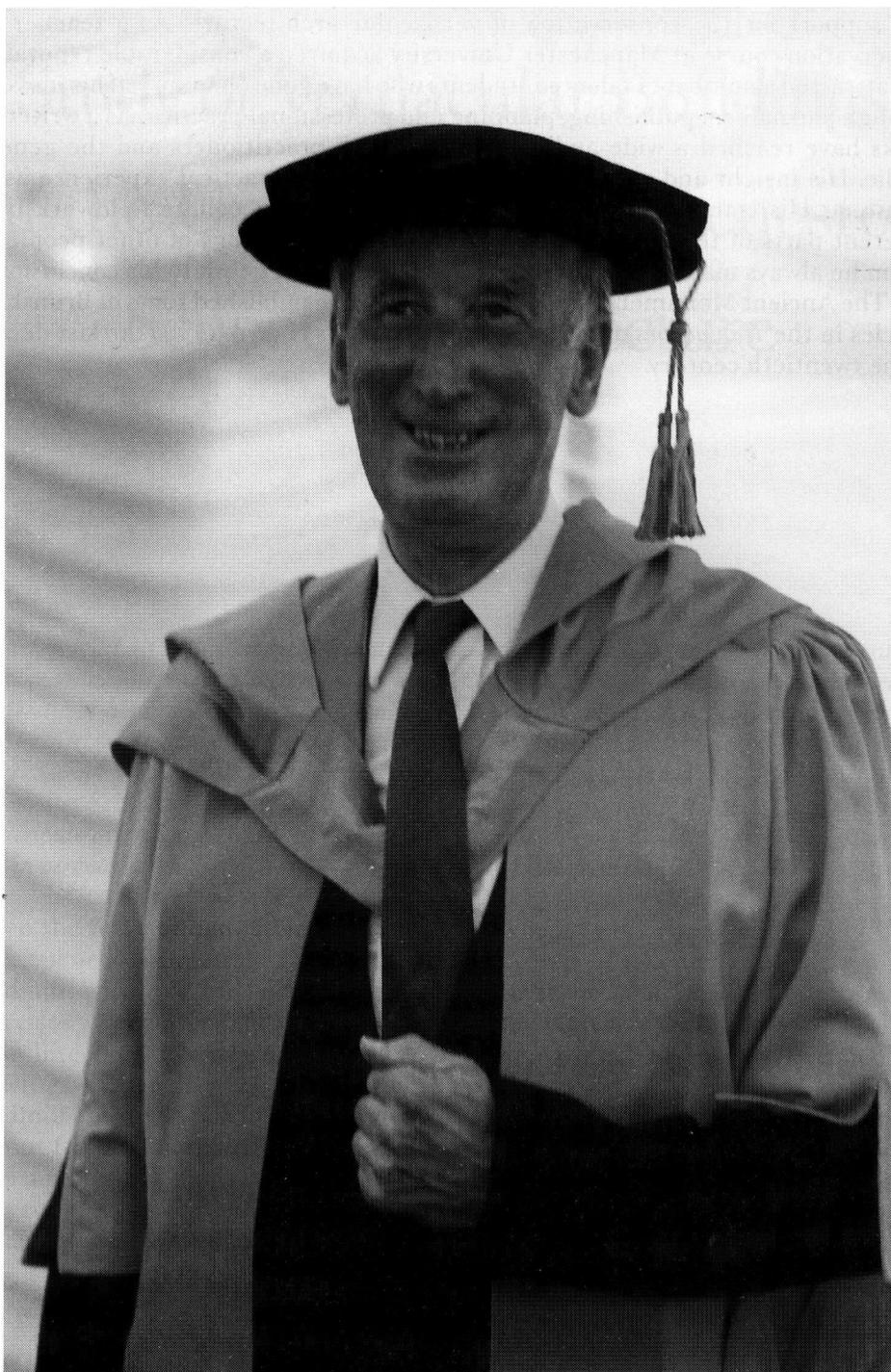
After being demobilised he went to work on housing design in the London County Council Architects' Department, the Mecca for bright young professionals at the time. He followed this with a spell of teaching and research at Manchester from where he won a Harkness Fellowship based at MIT, an exciting centre for new architectural ideas. He spent sixteen months travelling round the United States, working on his chosen topic of high density housing, but also taking the opportunity to observe the variety of American vernacular buildings.

On his return he was employed as the architect to a Manchester bank. In 1960 he took a permanent position at the university, which was to be the centre of his work on vernacular buildings for the next twenty-nine years. The same year proved to be a turning point in his private as well as his professional life for he married Miriam (Mimi) Allsopp, an American with whom he forged a close and warm family life, later to include their two daughters. They soon moved to Wilmslow, Cheshire. Here he designed a house for himself, strikingly modern in the use of a giant 'A' frame, but echoing the cruck cottages which he knows so well, and where they have lived ever since.

Brunskill's writings are listed later in this volume. As one of the 'enthusiastic amateurs' to whom he has addressed much of his work I can testify to his success in illuminating the complex development of the traditional buildings which form the fabric of our historic towns and villages. I particularly enjoy playing a sort of visual crossword, trying to fit the house in which I live and others I know into the diagrams which he draws to illustrate his text and which are an important element in his books.

I came to know Ronald Brunskill when he was a member of the Historic Buildings Council. Later our paths crossed in the Heritage Lottery Fund, where he chaired the Urban Parks Panel. He was a welcome colleague, always well-informed, interested and unfailingly courteous. A commissioner of English Heritage for six years, he served on almost all its specialist committees and as chairman of those responsible for historic buildings and for cathedrals and churches. Indeed, he devoted much time during the 1980s and 1990s to the conservation of churches, as a member of three Cathedral Fabric Committees, of the national Cathedral Fabric Commission and as chairman of The Friends of Friendless Churches. A decisive but not a dictatorial chairman, he preferred to make suggestions and then to proceed by consensus. As a passionate defender of standards of scholarship he valued his fourteen year membership of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, where he has a holiday house.

It would be difficult to over-estimate Brunskill's influence in arousing interest



and support for the conservation of vernacular architecture. As a teacher his conservation course at Manchester University acquired a considerable reputation and attracted a number of talented students who have gone on to spread his message through journalism, publishing, planning and professional practice. As a writer his books have reached a wide audience among both practitioners and the general public. His insight and spatial sense owe much to his practical experience as an architect. His comprehensive studies and his ability to collate fieldwork from different parts of the country, drawing together the findings of other people, to whom he always made generous acknowledgement, add depth to his conclusions.

The Ancient Monuments Society is proud to have published some of Brunskill's articles in the *Transactions* and to have had him as its chairman for the last decade of the twentieth century.