

Defending Historic Buildings: the contribution of Matthew Saunders

by

JILL CHANNER and FRANK KELSALL



The retirement of Matthew Saunders as Secretary of the AMS after forty years of tireless campaigning and persuasive advocacy must not go unremarked. His extraordinary contribution to the conservation of historic buildings is here celebrated and contextualised in two memoirs by fellow fighters in the same cause.

Jill Channer is an AMS company director, Trustee and chairs the AMS casework sub-committee. She is now an independent Historic Buildings and Architectural Glass consultant.

Frank Kelsall is an architectural historian with a special interest in the history of building conservation. He was the Society's casework adviser from 1998 to 2010.

Matthew Saunders *Conservatorum Princeps*: a memoir of his contribution to statutory casework

by JILL CHANNER

In 2018 a succession plan will be implemented securing seamless continuity in carrying out the statutory casework which the Society undertakes. This memoir, compiled by the current chairman of the casework sub-committee, marks this transition and reveals why, since Matthew Saunders was appointed the AMS statutory caseworker 40 years ago, there has been a drastic drop in applications for demolition.

Members of the Ancient Monuments Society and the Friends of Friendless Churches will be aware that the AMS is one of the six National Amenity Societies. In the Town and Country Planning Act (1968), the Government directed that these Societies be notified of all applications for consent to demolish listed buildings in whole or in part, throughout England and Wales in order to access the societies' expertise in assisting and informing applicants and planning authorities. This statutory consultation process is embedded in government Circulars, Directions and Acts of Parliament. The Amenity Societies also respond to government consultations on general policy proposals that affect the historic environment. Despite its name, the AMS is distinguished by being the only Society of the six (apart from the Council for British Archaeology) which comments and campaigns on historic buildings and structures of all ages and types – an unique advantage when dealing with multi-period buildings and championing new design in historic contexts.

Matthew, a distinguished architectural historian, transferred his campaigning and communicating skills from SAVE Britain's Heritage to the AMS in 1977 when the Society found itself in need of a Casework Secretary. Since then, the number of annual applications to demolish listed buildings in England and Wales has fallen dramatically from c.700 to c.30 in 2017, despite the numbers of listed buildings having more than doubled during the past forty years. The Society's excellent website correctly states that 'The AMS has helped to change the culture in the 3 or 4 decades since then...' Since his appointment, Matthew will have dealt with over 24,000 applications and responded to well over 100 central government policy consultations. The timescale is no coincidence. Matthew IS the AMS. It is he who has played a major part in catalysing the change of culture. His tireless tenacity, authoritative advocacy, intellectual integrity, scrupulous scholarship, extensive experience and positive responses have ensured that the Society is held in high regard by the sector, local and national government consultees, Ministers, Secretaries of State, elected members, heritage and conservation professionals and the press. His leadership as an instigator, and subsequent Secretary, of the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies (1984-2004, relinquished on his appointment as a Trustee of the Heritage Lottery Fund) has ensured irenic and equitable discussion of, and collective responses to, consultation papers, changes in policy and law, taxation and other matters of mutual interest. His exemplary, measured, non-adversarial, balanced responses to statutory consultations demonstrate how the process can achieve positive outcomes and have ensured that the National Amenity Societies have remained embedded in the system, despite attempts by successive governments to diminish their role. A passionate, authoritative and eloquent advocate, Matthew's appearance as an expert witness at public

inquiries and consistory courts has invariably achieved a victorious outcome, successfully establishing and clarifying case law – as Frank Kelsall's vivid personal memoir testifies.

Throughout turbulent times, Matthew has heroically harvested all the changes to the statutory system and generously provided perceptive accessible analyses in the *AMS Newsletter* amplified by in-depth articles on major issues in the *Transactions*. Essential reading for all conservation professionals and historians of the conservation movement, these include: 'Façadism' (vol.30,1986), 'Monstrous Carbuncles and All That: the Extension and Adaptation of Historic Buildings 1988-9' (34,1990), 'Nonconformist Chapels: the Conservation Challenge' (35,1991) and 'No Higher Art: embellishing Christian Churches in the Modern Age' (55, 2011). To reach a wider audience, he has published a polymathic plethora of polemical articles and reviews in a multiplicity of media: learned journals, special interest society magazines, the architectural press, conservation bulletins, church and chapel publications – it will be a considerable challenge to his biographer to capture such an extensive bibliography. Matthew himself reads everything and anything on such a wide variety of subjects: the revelatory informative, characteristically captivating and witty reviews in the *Newsletter* are but a selection deemed of interest to the membership. He assiduously read all the statutory lists produced by the 1980s Resurvey of Listed Buildings as they were revised and issued for the whole of Britain. He travelled with them to read them *in situ* as captured in the photograph taken in Durham. He reviewed the lists in the *Newsletter* – drawing attention to rarities, quirks, peculiarities, anomalies, the weird the wonderful and the whimsical, as well as to buildings and re-attributions of particular interest to architectural historians. He drew attention to down-grading, de-listings and subsequent spot listings – effectively monitoring the entire process and drawing attention to the successes and shortcomings of the designation system.

Matthew's concurrent Honorary Directorship of the AMS's partner, the Friends of Friendless Churches, has given him unique experience of the operation of the ecclesiastical statutory control system, designed to operate in parallel to the secular system. Matthew is an ordained member of an exclusive club comprising those who understand the theological complexities of the effective operation of the successive Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Orders in both England and Wales. His timely appointment by the Secretary of State to the Church Building Council of the Church of England, and its Statutory Advisory Committee on Closed and Closing Churches, brings his experience and expertise to the current challenges facing their 16,000 places of worship. An accomplished, indefatigable public speaker, his missionary work in educating all involved with the effective operation of the statutory system for managing change to the historic environment of both sacred and secular buildings has had a major positive impact on the entire sector. AMS members will have appreciated the insights into Matthew's achievements through his concise accounts of current casework in the *AMS Newsletter* and the more extensive record of the annual review samples of selected cases published in the Society's *Transactions*. Both are eloquent of his 'vital role in commenting on such applications; preventing unnecessary destruction, opposing unsympathetic conversion, and championing sensitive new design in historic settings' (AMS Website). They also illustrate his exceptional ability to encapsulate complex cases and identify the issues in language accessible to all.

I first encountered Matthew in 1984 when the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, vulgarly known as English Heritage, came into existence on 1 April having been 'quango-ed' from the Department of the Environment by the National Heritage Act (1983) by the Secretary of State, Michael Heseltine. I applied and was appointed as an Inspector of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings. Having spent the previous ten years as the Secretary of the *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi* Great Britain, my initial responsibilities were as a Church Inspector covering the Archdiocese of York. My remit subsequently seeped from the sacred to the secular arena to incorporate secular casework consultations. This had previously been a mysterious process whereby the Department's Inspectors advised local authorities on applications for listed building consent on behalf of the Secretary of State on departmental notepaper. Although the Act altered the relationship between consultant and consultee, the Inspectorial advice after the transition continued to be pitched at a vertiginously high level, imbued with all the authority of being issued by the Department's appointed expert. The documents frequently contained impressively gratuitous displays of recondite knowledge, obscure terminology, fascinatingly abstruse arcana and highly personal opinions. In the pre-computerisation of the process, the applications came in huge files frequently engorged with previous applications containing copious correspondence. Among them all, the AMS responses were outstanding, invariably written with concision and clarity – actually addressing the issues raised by the application itself and offering persuasive, practical advice using the language of the legislation, which the local authority officer would find extremely easy to lift verbatim. In those days, encounters with the nascent species of Conservation Officer were extremely rare: the joyful recipients of the Inspectorial advice, often a long way down the food chain in the planning department, frequently neither appreciated nor knew how to embody the advice in compiling the committee report.

Aspiring to emulate the effective AMS communicator, I telephoned him and arranged a meeting – anticipating I would encounter an awe-inspiring, ancient, battle-scarred behemoth, possibly with a military background, a training in psychology or extensive experience in local government. I was totally shocked on meeting Matthew to discover that he was not only younger than me, he was wonderfully welcoming, witty, blushing modest, excellent company and extremely generous. I became an instant pogonologist, fascinated by his extraordinary narrow 'beard' which defined the perimeter of his face by an improbably thin line shaved with impressive technical symmetry – which totally failed to achieve the impression of age. I took out life membership of the AMS immediately. We became firm friends.

As I achieved promotion up the spine of the organisation, I was assigned responsibility for listed building policy (outside London, which then had special powers of Direction) and servicing the statutory advice section of the Historic Buildings and Conservation Areas Advisory Committee. I became the English Heritage 'observer' on the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies and, with Matthew's support, set up regular meetings between their statutory caseworkers and the EH Inspectors – easy to do before regionalisation. This enabled collective collaboration between the Amenity Societies, EH and the Department/s on the drafting of Circular 8/87, PPG15 and effective operational desk instructions. During the ten years I occupied this position, I had the privilege of

Matthew's wise counsel, sense of humour and optimistic advice.

Matthew, at the time of writing, is the longest serving Secretary of all the National Amenity Societies. His amazing photographic memory of the millions of buildings he has seen or experienced through thousands of applications is a veritable living search engine. The constant organisational eruptions and churning of experienced staff in both Cadw and Historic England, has resulted in consequent loss of expertise and collective memory and it is now his knowledge and experience which provides the continuity of casework. Sadly, since HE has resiled from commenting on grade II listed buildings, there is a general feeling that the standard of Historic England letters has declined – it is understood that HE Inspectors do not meet regularly and that most cases are not taken for guidance to any HE panel of experts. Fortunately, through Matthew's impeccable succession planning, the promotion of Lucie Carayon as Director of the AMS has ensured that the society will continue to be the gold standard in the secular statutory process.

The entire sector will be gratefully appreciative and mightily relieved that Matthew, *Conservatorum Princeps*, will continue to compile the Society's triennial *Newsletter* – the most admired, informative, distinctive and authoritative voice will continue to offer us all the benefit of his insights and experience during what will inevitably be a bumpy ride for the historic environment.

Matthew Saunders: A personal memoir

by FRANK KELSALL

Perhaps uniquely among the national societies the Ancient Monuments Society has been identified with the skills and personality of a long-serving officer. Founded in Manchester in 1924 the early years of the Society were led by John Swarbrick under the title of Hon. Reporting Architect; after a post-war wobble the Society moved to London and Ivor Bulmer-Thomas became Secretary in 1958, later moving to be Chairman. Jennifer Jenkins might have made the role of Secretary what it became under Matthew had her tenure of the post not proved relatively short-lived between her appointments at the Consumers' Association and the Historic Buildings Council. It was the Society's good fortune that Matthew began his work for the AMS from the Jenkins' spare bedroom, followed her as Secretary and turned the Society into the force it has become today.

I first had dealings with Matthew by letter. In June 1972, from the Greater London Council Historic Buildings Division, I answered his query on the buildings of Edmonton Crescent of which he sent a photograph. Ever economical he asked for the return of the photograph; I duly sent it back with information which I had been able to find about this intriguing group of buildings to which he had drawn my attention. I like to think that a helpful reply from an architectural historian already in the conservation business led him to his future life's work, but the fact that he had sent the letter in the first place shows where his interests already lay. Three years later there was further correspondence when

Matthew turned his work on Edmonton into an undergraduate dissertation at Cambridge.

I had only occasional contact with Matthew during the 1970s and 1980s. I worked for the GLC and the AMS has not usually dealt with much casework in London. But I was also involved with the Society of Architectural Historians. Matthew has been a regular attendee at the Society's annual conferences, located in different parts of the United Kingdom and providing great opportunities both to see buildings and to exchange gossip; they were, and still are, an interface between the scholarship of academic architectural historians and the campaigning enthusiasm of the conservation movement. More than most, Matthew has bridged this divide. SAHGB members often joined the AMS in the overseas tours arranged by Susan Gold. In these years too Matthew built the AMS more soundly into that wider conservation movement, for there were fences to mend. Both John Swarbrick and Ivor Bulmer-Thomas could be prickly characters and the AMS had not fitted easily into a pattern where newer societies took on a more vocal role. This can be seen especially in the Whitehall public inquiry of 1970 where Ivor Bulmer-Thomas had not identified himself with the case put forward by the joint-committee formed by SPAB, the Georgian Group, the Victorian Society and the Civic Trust but instead led the AMS in a separate role in which he was less than enthusiastic about the preservation of Norman Shaw's Scotland Yard, to many the most significant building under threat. That Matthew brought the AMS into increased co-operation with the other societies was marked by his assuming the role of Secretary of the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies in 1984 ('at least for the immediate future' according to the minutes), a post he then held for twenty years.

After the abolition of the GLC in 1986 I began to deal with listed building casework outside London for English Heritage. This brought me more often into contact with Matthew and the AMS, with the added good fortune that for some of those years the chairman of the EH committee to which I reported was Ron Brunskill, also chairman of the AMS. The telephone wire between Savile Row and St Andrew by the Wardrobe and later the Vestry Hall became much hotter, and the letter from AMS signed by Matthew was an important item in the battle to persuade a local authority to take the right decision or, failing that, to get government to call in an application and to defend a building at public inquiry. Towards the end of my time at English Heritage this co-operation reached a peak over the proposed demolition of a church, always a topic to raise Matthew's high activity level to a frenzy, and we found ourselves in adjacent seats for several days at the non-statutory public inquiry which eventually led to the vesting of Paley and Austin's Christ Church Waterloo, Liverpool, in the Churches Conservation Trust. It was not inevitable, but it seemed quite natural, that when I took early retirement from English Heritage in 1998, I should find a seat for two days a week in the Vestry Hall.

For twelve years we worked at desks facing each other. Matthew was usually on his feet, because the papers on his desk rose too high to read sitting down and the telephone was on top of a filing cabinet which meant that it could only be used in a standing position. I came to know at first hand his phenomenal capacity for hard work, the skill with which he dealt with people and his devotion to the causes he held dear, especially the AMS and the Friends of Friendless Churches. To most visitors the Vestry Hall seemed chaotic, but it was ordered chaos; Matthew's piles were a joke in the conservation world

but he always knew in which pile a particular piece of paper or the necessary book or document could be found. What carried us along was Matthew's undying optimism and unfailing good humour. In part his positive attitude stems from a long perspective, for he began work when the annual demolitions of listed buildings numbered hundreds (and there were far fewer listings) to the present day when total losses are few; his own contribution to that change is incalculable. There will always be conservation battles to be fought; Matthew's example shows us that they can be won, but his retirement from the fray will make that job harder for those who remain.