

# Obituary

Stephen James Croad  
(1946-2017)



Stephen Croad joined the National Monuments Record in 1968, the year after graduating from the Courtauld Institute with a degree in the History of European Art. He came to embody the buildings section of the Record which although long absorbed into the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), maintained the degree of separation and individuality of approach which had characterised the former National Buildings Record, notwithstanding integration with the recording arm of the organisation. The public library of photographs, meticulously arranged in red boxes, by county and civil parish was Stephen's domain. But as Head of the Architectural Record (1981-94) he was responsible for far more: the vast store of records in the basement and elsewhere pertaining to architectural investigations carried out throughout the country by the Commission and others, the large collections of photographs purchased or acquired by gift or bequest. This was a treasure trove for the researcher, crucial evidence for conservation and preservation, protection through listing, serious historical enquiry and analysis, and straightforward illustration for publications and television. Stephen also believed that the library in Savile Row was used for research by at least one well turned-out country house burglar. It was a first port of call for anyone with a serious interest in the built heritage.



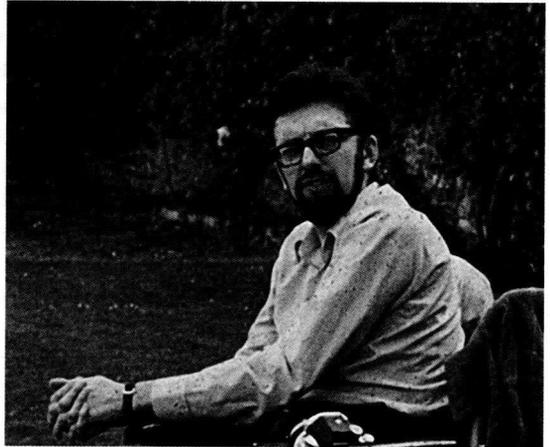
Stephen was born in Bridgwater, an only child, the son of Lionel, latterly a golf course groundsman, and Dorothy (née Stephens), a school secretary. It was his mother, together with the history and art teachers at Dr Morgan's Grammar School who encouraged his enthusiasm for art and architecture which he indulged productively by first cycling and later driving with a friend to visit, sketch and photograph local buildings. Through his art teacher he became aware of impressionist and post-impressionist painting and by extension the Courtauld Gallery. So the Courtauld Institute became the obvious place to study, once he had achieved, with some difficulty and more than one attempt, the requisite Latin O-level. It must have been a culture shock to go at that time from a provincial grammar school to the cultural hub directed by Sir Anthony Blunt, but he made the transition, applied himself very successfully, made many friends and graduated in 1967. It was no surprise to him in 1979 when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher outed Blunt in Parliament as a spy: 'we all knew about that – Guy Burgess's suitcase was still in the basement'.

Stephen was a paraplegic wheelchair-user following a devastating car accident in 1969 which kept him in Lodge Moor hospital in Sheffield for six months and a regular visitor to Stoke Mandeville thereafter. He was not expected to survive and indeed heard the doctors explaining this to his parents. Stephen recalled regaining consciousness and, seeing so many medical staff around his bed, thought they were probably over-staffed with not enough to do. That he recovered at all and was able to enjoy a very successful career, greatly respected by all his peers, with a very large circle of friends and a wide range of interests is a tribute to those hospital staff and also to his own indomitability and great courage. He would not be deflected from what he wanted to do – come back to work with buildings - and live an independent life. He achieved both of these with great success, overcoming everyday impediments which would have sapped the morale and strength (he always used a manual wheelchair) of the hardiest of the able bodied. He was a keen theatre-goer, having acted himself successfully in the 6<sup>th</sup> form, a follower of cricket, particularly Somerset, the eternal bridesmaids of the County Championship, and an avid, omnivorous reader. He had a great love of animals and wildlife.

In the NMR Stephen was ever-present, always helpful and extremely knowledgeable. One of our colleagues recalls his 'keen curiosity to help to the point of nosiness, wheeling across the library to ask what it was you were investigating, and his extraordinary visual memory. More than once he took a look at the pictures of the building I had out and said something along the lines of "oh, that looks like X [obscure building elsewhere], have you looked at that?"', which of course I hadn't. Computers still can't match that'. He was a natural cataloguer. If he had become post-Courtauld an expert on paintings rather than buildings he would have produced the catalogue raisonné of a hitherto unjustly under-studied British painter. He was dedicated to the public service of providing an accurate and accessible basis of information for people to use for whatever purpose they had in mind – he did not distinguish or privilege one form of research over another. He helped everyone and transmitted that impulse to a loyal and devoted staff to whom he was always generous and encouraging. He was so eminently decent and even-handed in all his dealings that he was able to get on with everybody without revealing any *partipris* of his own. Although conservative, valuing tradition, public service and avoiding

change, he was not religious, and never had any desire to be a spokesperson for any ideology, even disability equality – it was a non-issue for him; he was a very private man who did not burden others with his difficulties.

Stephen was clear sighted, with a sharp intelligence, a witty pricker of pomposity and never sentimental in his view of the world. Visitors who did not know him, who took his occupation of a wheelchair to be indicative of a more general disability or defect and either shouted, believing him to be deaf, or spoke very slowly and clearly, as if he were slow on the uptake, were frequently surprised. He did have a tendency when not out and about, to hide behind his desk, a captive audience. Always ready to talk, listen and advise, he did not like being talked-



at or hectored and the characteristic slide down the wheelchair began as ennui set in and he became almost horizontal, remaining thus until rescued by another colleague alert to the situation. The sole advantage for being in a wheelchair for Stephen was that it offered a ready-made excuse for avoiding boring meetings, sending out others in his stead to those less glamorous departmental gatherings requiring the mere reporting of and justification for activities which he himself regarded as self-evidently valuable and in no need of further justification at all.

Stephen's meticulous approach to cataloguing and to historical accuracy was manifest in numerous publications. He was from 1994 until 2011 the assistant (and book reviews) editor of the *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society* – self effacing and preferring the back room he consistently avoided the actual editorship, but his contribution to the AMS was nevertheless immense. He first published in the *Transactions* in 1989 on the architectural records of the RCHM(E), following this in 1992 with an essay on the early years of the National Buildings Record. From 1996-2000 he produced annual accounts of significant findings from emergency recording, initially throughout the UK and latterly concentrating on England and Wales. He was an expert on London and wrote notable essays on the Carreras factory (1996), the 'temple of tobacco' in Camden Town where 3,000 staff produced 1,300 cigarettes per minute (Black Cat and Craven A – said to be kind to the lips and harmless to the throat), and on the transformation of the Thames and the Port of London (2005). The latter followed his two immensely valuable books on the river: *London's Bridges* (1983) – from Tower Bridge to Teddington Lock – and *Liquid History: The Thames through Time* (2003) (republished and retitled in 2016 as *The Thames through Time: Liquid History*), which went the other way, from Staines to Yantlet Creek, delimited by the London Stones, ancient boundary markers of the jurisdiction of the City of London. Both of these books take the catalogue form – historic and contemporary photographs from the NMR collections accompanied by succinct accounts of buildings

and landscape. *Liquid History* in particular is a beautifully produced book (by Batsford) featuring the very best of London's photographers over 150 years. Stephen was responsible also in collaboration with Secretary Peter Fowler for much of the work on an account of the first 75 years of the RCHM(E), published in its *Annual Review* (1983-4), which according to his co-author was intended to be definitive. A further catalogue of NMR photographs with descriptive extended captions was published (with an introduction by Sir John Summerson) in 1991 as *50 Years of the National Buildings Record*, accompanying an anniversary exhibition at the V&A. Stephen was not named on the title page since this was a collaborative effort, but Secretary Tom Hassall's foreword gave the game away in thanking Stephen for conceiving and co-ordinating the exhibition and publication. Here once more was the assistant editor doing most of the work.

The removal of the headquarters of the Royal Commission and much of the library to Swindon in 1994 was far from universally welcomed and Stephen became Head of the small, surviving London office, remaining until he was able to take early retirement in 1996. He had an active life thereafter, moving home to Somerset where he continued independent life in a new flat, built to his specifications, overlooking the River Tone in Taunton, full of books and papers, supported by his network of old friends and many new ones. He became an active member of the Somerset Vernacular Buildings Research Group (Chairman 2005-07) and continued editing, summarising survey reports and reviewing books for the *Proceedings* of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, of which he was a trustee, until declining health curtailed activities. On the national scale his great contribution to scholarship and public service was fully recognised. He was one of the first members of the Committee of the National Inventory of War Memorials (from 1989), a member of the Council of the London Topographical Society (from 1996), a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (1990) and of the Royal Geographical Society (2000). He was appointed MBE in 1997.

In later years Stephen's life became constrained although he remained independent, stoical, uncomplaining and cheerful (on the telephone) to the last. He began to find the use of the car too difficult, then, after a period in hospital, was not able to re-establish computer use and email contact. He continued to write letters and cards, was abreast of all recent publications and news and enjoyed very long telephone conversations at prescribed times. Stephen was greatly loved, a notion which he would have found embarrassing and inappropriate, and highly respected. His was one of the great enabling contributions to English architectural history and public life. We are in his debt.

JOHN BOLD

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Reprinted with minor changes by kind permission of Mike Pitts, editor of SALON, the electronic newsletter of the Society of Antiquaries, in which this appreciation first appeared: Issue 394, 17 October 2017. The photographs of Stephen were kindly supplied by Tony Rumsey: Stephen on Hampstead Heath c.1968 is by an unknown photographer. I thank my friends and former colleagues Priscilla Boniface, Nicholas Cooper and Peter Guillery, and Stephen's old friends Paul and Vivian Upton for their help in the compilation of this appreciation.