

# THE ENGLISH COUNTRY HOUSE

## SOME PROBLEMS OF PRESERVATION

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IN this short review an effort is being made to present as true a picture as possible of the present position of England's country houses. The dangers which beset them, and the expedients open to owners will be reviewed. The various Government reports and acts on the subject will be noted, and a few personal ideas about the ideal principles of preservation and repair will be included.

First it is important to consider the case for the preservation of the country house. The paramount consideration is the aesthetic importance of these buildings and their historical, educational and cultural value. Lord Kilmaine, the secretary of the Pilgrim Trust, has stated recently that "No feature of our country contributes more to its beauty and character than the historic houses of which it has such a profusion. They constitute a national asset whose loss would be irreplaceable." Whilst other countries can show larger and more splendid palaces, none can rival in number and beauty the English country houses in their familiar setting of gardens and parkland. These houses represent an association of beauty, of art and of nature, and are possibly the greatest contribution made by England to the visual arts.

In addition, the great houses represent a high-water mark in the building arts and crafts. When church building became less active, fine craftsmanship was concentrated on the building and decoration of the great houses. In them, the mason, the bricklayer, the joiner and woodcarver, the plasterer and metalworker found opportunity for the fullest expression of their skill. These examples of handicraft of all kinds and applied decoration should be preserved in the house for which they were designed and made.

The present threat to our heritage of great houses comes from several directions. The primary responsibility for the present deplorable state of affairs is taxation. Estate duty, first imposed in 1893,

has increased rapidly and steeply, leading to the breaking up of many large estates. Income tax and surtax have also had a calamitous effect.

The second factor is the growing difficulty of getting and paying the necessary indoor and outdoor staff. In the heyday of these houses, wages were low and service at the big house, around which the whole social life of the district revolved, was much sought after.

The last difficulty is that of repairs and maintenance of the fabric and the contents of the house. The attention required is continuous. The roof, gutters and rain-water pipes must be kept in repair. Timberwork needs renewing and painting and decaying stonework has to be made good. Internally, the furniture, carpets, tapestries and pictures require constant and expert care.

The war has, of course, immeasurably worsened a position already serious enough. Maintenance was suspended; the houses were requisitioned for all manner of purposes; their contents often stored in unsuitable conditions; a lack of proper heating and ventilation started dry rot, which at the moment is probably a worse epidemic than ever before. All this culminated at a time when materials and labour were scarce and expensive. Since the end of the last war the process of disintegration of these estates has been gathering momentum at an alarming rate.

At this junction it is necessary to issue a warning. It is a mistake to over-stress the danger in which the historic houses stand. Although the situation is difficult, it is nevertheless a time for optimism. The situation of old houses has always been critical and it is only necessary to think of the Reformation and the misguided enthusiasm of the 19th century to realise this. Indeed the situation today is less serious than it has been sometimes in the past. It is, as already noted, a time for optimism but also it is a time for action both in the practical sense and also in strengthening the already growing weight of public opinion. It is this latter fact that has urged the Government to implement the Gowers Report.

A society such as the Ancient Monuments Society, which has county secretaries and local correspondents, is well equipped to maintain local interest and to keep itself fully informed of threats to historic buildings. Its council and particularly its technical advisory committees are thus able to make all possible representations on both the local and national scale at an early stage, wherever the need arises. So much for the present position, but what expedients are available to landlords? Only three possible ways are open to alleviate their difficulties. The first, with which most people are familiar, is the National Trust country house scheme. Briefly it

consists of the owner transferring the house to the Trust together with sufficient endowment to maintain it, on condition that he and his successors may live there. He also agrees to open it to the public by arrangement.

The second expedient is to open the house to the public. This has its pitfalls and depends largely upon the house itself and its situation. It is often capricious and uneven in operation.

The last, that of the adaption to other uses, is also an uncertain resource. It has been employed successfully in a few cases in a variety of ways. Parts have been converted into flats, let as schools, etc., or made the headquarters of a large-scale farming operation. In such ways owners have managed to shed part of their liabilities, but generally not without capital cost.

Great houses have always changed hands, but today more and more of them are becoming institutions. It is inevitable that this should be so but it is not inevitable that in the process they should be ruined or defaced. It is salutary to review possible uses. Possibly the one which springs to mind first is that of use as a school. More than one historic house has been so used; Stowe is the best known. The most attractive argument in favour of this type of use is that boys and girls who live in such surroundings at a formative age get something of unique value which they will never lose. The difficulties, however, are great, but I think that a future solution in this field lies in the housing of "special schools" in these houses.

Another use to which the great houses have been put is that of a centre for training youth leaders and teachers. Names like Wentworth Woodhouse and Alnwick Castle spring to mind. The accumulated need for teachers is now being largely met and I think that the demands for such centres is on the decrease.

Yet another use, not far removed from the last, is that of adult education college. Over 25 already exist in the country and several are extremely efficiently and comfortably established in great houses, for example, Burton Manor in Wirral, Grantley Hall near Ripon, and Attingham Park in Shropshire.

Experiments have been made to adapt our great houses to other uses, such as hotels, flats and offices. On the whole, however, none of these uses are as appropriate as the ones mentioned earlier. Each case, however, must be taken on its merits.

It was with these difficulties in mind that Sir Stafford Cripps, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Sir Ernest Gowers to study the problem of the great houses. This committee's report, generally referred to as the

Gowers Report, was published in 1950 and was entitled "Houses of outstanding historic or architectural interest." It is not possible to deal with the recommendations in detail, but mention will be made of a few of the most important.

First of all the committee recommended the creation of Historic Buildings Councils for England, Wales and Scotland, to be entrusted with duties both general and specific for the preservation of houses of historic or architectural interest. The relationship of these Councils with existing authorities was well defined.

Secondly, each Council should compile and publish a list of suitable houses to be known as "designated" houses. The contents of houses could also be included and "listed." As a matter of policy designated houses should be preserved and occupied as private residences.

Thirdly, far-reaching recommendations were made about tax relief, for example relief from income tax and surtax for expenditure on repairs to home and contents. Relief from death duties on house and listed contents so long as they were not sold.

Lastly, the Councils should have wide powers to aid the preservation of designated houses and listed contents by giving expert advice, by themselves carrying out works of repair and maintenance and by loans and grants. In addition, Councils could acquire by agreement or compulsorily and manage estates so that they might be preserved. Other duties suggested included publicity and the furtherance of training of architects and craftsmen in protection and repair work.

The first implementation of this Report has been the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Acts of 1953. In this several of the recommendations have been followed, in part at least. Separate Historic Buildings Councils have been set up for England, Wales and Scotland with what may be termed advisory powers. Section 4 of the Act gives the Minister (i.e., the Minister of Works) powers to make grants for the preservation of buildings, their contents and their adjoining lands. He is also able to make grants to local authorities and National Trusts for the acquisition of historic buildings. Indeed he may acquire them himself. The maximum allotted for this purpose at present is very inadequate, about £200,000 per annum.

Part II of the Act deals with amended procedure for the protection and preservation of ancient monuments. It considers preservation orders and compensation. Parts III and IV contain miscellaneous provisions, including damage to monuments, prosecu-

tion of offenders, etc.

The Historic Buildings Councils, which include several well-known public figures, have now been set up for over a year and have published their first report. Many famous country houses have been allocated grants to aid their repair and preservation.

Before considering some of the principles of conservative repair, it is appropriate to consider what other (i.e., other than the 1953 Act) machinery exists.

At present, research and recording of ancient monuments, which is an essential preliminary, is carried out by two organisations. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments and the National Buildings Record. The former prepares inventories, county by county, of all ancient monuments. The latter was established in 1940 to make a quick record of all valuable buildings. It is thus a clearing house for architectural information about historic buildings in Great Britain.

The listing and scheduling of buildings is the duty of two separate organisations. The Ministry of Works, under the Ancient Monuments Acts of 1913 and 1931, prepares schedules of "ancient monuments." These do *not* include inhabited houses or churches.

The 1953 Act, however, extends these provisions and subsequent preservation orders which may be made to include houses of merit.

Under the 1947 Town and Country Planning Acts the Ministry is charged with the duty of compiling lists of "buildings of special architectural and historic interest." These lists contain both inhabited and uninhabited houses. Buildings are divided into three grades in order of importance. Local Planning Authorities have power to place preservation orders on buildings in danger of destruction, but these orders are of a negative kind. The building may be preserved from destruction but nothing is prescribed for its maintenance. It would seem that the 1953 Act goes some way in alleviating this position and placing preservation on a more positive basis.

Now to turn to a more practical side of the problem and one in which everyone can play a part. It is of the utmost importance that the right mental attitude to ancient and historic buildings should be developed. Every individual building in all its aspects must be studied and appreciated. Every building of any antiquity bears evidence of its structural evolution and development. The way of life, beliefs and mental outlook of all its various builders and craftsmen are revealed to all those who take the time and trouble to look and study. Overlaid on this will be found the influence,

probably the greatest single influence, of passing styles and fashions. Strange as it may seem, this factor is as much in evidence in old work as it is today.

Every building possesses certain fundamental physical characteristics such as length, width and height, but it also possesses a personality very much its own. Some people refer to this quality as a fourth dimension, but, however it is viewed, it is a quality which that building alone possesses. Once it is destroyed or damaged it can never be re-created. It is impossible to restore this personality, and therefore any attempt to do so must be condemned. The result, at best, can only be "period-fakes."

It is, however, difficult to define the sources of a building's "personality" and its attendant atmosphere, because its components include proportion, texture, colour and decoration, each of which is a study in itself, with the passage of the centuries to fuse them together.

From these few remarks it is evident that the problems of protecting and repairing ancient and historic buildings are many and complex. The accent in this short article has been rather on the negative side. However, the picture is not quite so black as it is often painted. Now is a time for renewed optimism and renewed vigilance. A time for positive and concerted action by all those who have the interest and future of our historic houses at heart. If the old buildings of this country are saved from the wrong kind of restoration, much of the excellent craftsmanship still remaining will be preserved. Preservation is always preferable to restoration.

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#### BOOK REVIEW

*Studies in Architectural History* edited by William A. Singleton, M.A., Ph.D., B.Arch., F.S.A. Octavo. 184 pp., including 84 plates. St. Anthony's Press. 1954. 15/-.

This book comprises a series of essays based for the most part on lectures which have been given at the York Summer Schools of Architectural Study since their inception six years ago. The writers—E. A. Gee, Dorothy Stroud, Dr. Thomas Howarth, Professor Wittkower, Dorothy Sylvester, Maurice Beresford, D. G. Thornley, and C. J. Main—are well-known in this country for their individual contribution to the study of architectural history, and the essays cover a wide range of architectural topics. The book is well presented and fully illustrated by a large number of drawings and photographs, and will be of value to all interested in the study of historic buildings.

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