

OBITUARY

Alec Clifton-Taylor
1907-1985

As so often happens, my friendship with Alec Clifton-Taylor began with a disagreement. I was locked in a deadly struggle with the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, who wanted to demolish St. Mary's, Sandwich, a church architecturally unpretentious but replete with interest inside. The controversy took up a good deal of space in *The Times*, and Alec gave it his opinion that the building was not worth preserving. I have been finally vindicated by the vesting of the building in the Redundant Churches Fund, but Alec never wholly recanted his opinion. It led, however, to great mutual respect and warm friendship.

There was a comparable case where Alec did change his mind to the dismay of many conservationists. At first he shared the opposition to the removal of Skidmore's screen from Hereford Cathedral, but on studying the building after it had been taken away he gave it as his view that the cathedral had been improved.

These two examples show that he was a person of strong individuality who formed his own view in any controversial situation. In a private letter to me in 1984 he wrote that "conservationists, of whom by instinct I am one, are constantly 'overplaying their hand', i.e., making a commotion about saving something which isn't really all that important". This attitude ensured that when he did give his support to the preservation of a building it was particularly effective, and in sum he did as much as almost anyone of his generation for the maintenance of the nation's architectural heritage.

He achieved what he did both through the written and the spoken word. His first book, *The Pattern of English Building*, 1962, immediately established his reputation as an architectural historian and deservedly went into a third edition ten years later. It was followed by *The Cathedrals of England* in 1967 and *English Parish Churches as Works of Art* in 1974, and it gave him special pleasure that the last mentioned work was transcribed into Braille. Though he was not himself a religious man, churches fascinated him, and perhaps there is a lesson here for ecclesiastics—sermons in stone are to many more powerful than sermons in words. Another scholarly study was made in collaboration with our own Honorary Architect, Dr. R.W. Brunskill—*English Brickwork* 1977. He wrote contributions to at least twenty other books.

He gained his mastery of the spoken word first as a lecturer in the University of London Institute of Education and the Royal College of Art (1934-39), and after the war as an extra-mural lecturer (1946-57). By then he was in demand and lectured for

universities, museums and art galleries in every continent and in thirty-two states of the U.S.A. What made him a household name, however, was the series of BBC TV programmes on "Six English Towns". Whereas his books had been read by thousands, his features and voice now became familiar to millions. A second series was soon requested, then a third, and there have been repeats, as well as book versions.

Alec Clifton-Taylor was born on 2nd August 1907 and educated at Bishops Stortford School, The Queen's College, Oxford, the Courtauld Institute (where he took First Class Honours in the History of Art), and the Sorbonne. He served at the Admiralty from 1940-46, being Private Secretary to the Parliamentary Secretary in his last three years there. Then, as already stated, he resumed his lecturing. He was made F.S.A. in 1963, an Honorary Brother of the Art Workers Guild in 1976, an Honorary F.R.I.B.A. in 1979 and O.B.E. in 1982. Among the positions he held was Vice-President of the Men of the Stones, Vice-President of the Society for Italic Handwriting, Patron of the Avoncroft Museum and a Trustee of the Historic Churches Preservation Trust. But the office into which he threw himself most fully was that of President of the Kensington Society. (He had lived at Clareville Grove in the Royal Borough for many years.) His last written words were a deserved diatribe in the Society's magazine against the Council of the London borough for its philistinism. They appeared alas! when he could no longer read them himself. He had gone to India for a holiday but became ill with what he thought was hepatitis and returned. It turned out to be a more serious complaint and he died soon afterwards on 1st April 1985. A memorial service was held at St John's Smith Square on 1st July. The order of the occasion, a programme of readings, appreciations and music, arranged by his BBC producer for two of the Towns series, Denis Moriarty contained a fitting epitaph: "He honoured the past, rejoiced in the present, and built for the future".

Ivor Bulmer-Thomas