

'RCHME' 1908-1998

A History of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

by

ANDREW SARGENT

The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England celebrated its ninetieth anniversary in October 1998. This paper traces its contribution to the recording, interpretation and management of the historic environment in England throughout almost the whole of the twentieth century.¹

LOBBYING FOR A NATIONAL INVENTORY

The appointment in 1908 of Royal Commissions on historical monuments for England, Scotland and Wales was an important step in the creation of an effective legal framework to protect and conserve Britain's historic environment. This development followed thirty years of increasing pressure on government to bring Britain into line with its European neighbours.

During the nineteenth century the face of Britain was transformed to an unprecedented degree. Huge acreages of agricultural land were swallowed up, and many remote areas were scarred by the extraction and processing of raw materials. As the century drew to its close many thinkers questioned the spiritual costs involved in this economic progress. Often they harked back, as a source of educational and spiritual values, to an idealised past before the industrial revolution when agriculture and small-scale rural industries dominated the national economy and when regional traditions were alive. A number of societies and organisations were spawned in this intellectual climate, many with the intention of preserving or recording relics of the past. In 1877 the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was founded, followed in 1895 by the National Trust and in 1899 by the

Andrew Sargent was employed by the RCHME for over ten years and currently works for the English Heritage National Monuments Record.

Victoria History of the Counties of England (VCH). In London, the Committee for the Survey of the Memorials of Greater London (subsequently Survey of London) began in 1894 as a voluntary organisation to record and lobby for the preservation of historic buildings in the capital. From the late 1880s the photographic record and survey movement developed, with the purpose of creating records of lasting historical value.² Many of these initiatives resulted from the energy and commitment of a single individual or a small group. However, they were in tune with the wider sentiments of the educated classes who were prepared to join or support them: the preservation of the natural and man-made heritage was on the political agenda.

The first Ancient Monuments Protection Act was passed in 1882, setting up the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, followed in 1900 by a wider-reaching Act. The 1882 Act was widely criticised for bowing to political pressure to protect private property rights at the expense of public interest. Increasingly the Act was interpreted by government in a purely permissive manner. This left Britain almost alone in Europe and behind its own colonies, such as India where the pioneering Archaeological Survey had been established in 1862, in having no effective legislation to protect monuments. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the creation of an inventory – a full list – of the existing stock of monuments was widely recognised as being an essential precursor to any decisions on their protection. Consequently the Government was pressed both to protect monuments and necessarily to compile an inventory of them.

Two particularly influential monographs were David Murray's *An archaeological survey of the United Kingdom* (1896) and Gerard Baldwin Brown's *The care of ancient monuments* (1905). Both authors drew unfavourable comparisons between the heritage policies of Britain and its European neighbours. Baldwin Brown, Professor of Fine Art in the University of Edinburgh, explicitly proposed the appointment of a Royal Commission (similar to the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, established in 1869). This Commission would have three objectives: to compile an inventory of all ancient monuments in the country, to educate the owners of monuments to value them, and to form the basis for new and extended legislation.³ A copy of Baldwin Brown's book came into the hands of Sir John Sinclair (later Lord Pentland), Secretary of State for Scotland. After a brief period of consultation, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland was formally established on 14th February 1908, and Baldwin Brown was appointed a Commissioner. Meanwhile pressure was building in England.

In June 1907 the Society of Antiquaries of London received a letter from the British Archaeological Association suggesting the preparation of a list of all ancient monuments deemed worthy of national care.⁴ The proposal was muddled by the issue of compulsory acquisition, and it was not taken forward. The idea crystallised with the appointment of the Royal Commission for Scotland. In March 1908, E. J. Horniman MP wrote to the Society of Antiquaries suggesting the formation of a Welsh and English Commission on the same lines as that appointed for Scotland. In April, the Antiquaries, together with the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Royal Society of Arts, wrote to H.H. Asquith, the Prime Minister, to propose

the establishment of a Royal Commission on historical monuments for England.⁵ Later it transpired that other learned societies had also petitioned the Prime Minister along similar lines. In June, Horniman questioned the Prime Minister in the House of Commons regarding his intentions for a Royal Commission for England and Wales.⁶ The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) was appointed by Royal Warrant on 27th October 1908. A Royal Commission for Wales was taken forward independently.

A ROYAL COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND

The Prime Minister took the unusual step of inviting some of the learned societies which had petitioned for the Commission to nominate Commissioners. Lord Burghclere was appointed as Chairman. Sir Henry Howarth was nominated by the Royal Archaeological Institute, and Lord Balcarres by the SPAB, J. G. N. Clift by the British Archaeological Association and Leonard Stokes by the RIBA. In addition, the following were appointed: the distinguished Roman archaeologist Francis Haverfield, James Fitzgerald, assistant secretary at the Office of Works and acting Inspector, Viscount Dillon, a Past President of the Society of Antiquaries, the Earl of Plymouth, E. J. Horniman MP who had done so much in lobbying for the Commission, and Sir John F. F. Horner. George Duckworth, a career civil servant, was appointed as Secretary. The *Architectural Review*⁶ gave an entertaining pen sketch of these appointments. The Society of Antiquaries felt slighted at not being asked to nominate to the Commission despite its key role in lobbying,⁸ but fortunately decided to offer the Commission 'every assistance' despite this official snub.

The Commission was not to be a 'talking shop'. It was expected that the Commissioners would themselves compile the inventory, supported by a small executive staff. For much of the Commission's history, Commissioners continued this tradition and remained closely involved in the work. These first Commissioners were appointed without limit to their period of service, the intention being that they would serve until they had completed the task: limited terms of office were not introduced until 1963.

When the Commissioners first met on 10th November 1908 they found that their terms of reference were vague in the extreme. In the absence of clear guidance from the Government, they had only the Royal Warrant to help them define their task. This outlined the Commission's brief in one short paragraph: 'to make an inventory of the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions connected with or illustrative of the contemporary culture, civilization and conditions of life of the people of England, excluding Monmouthshire, from the earliest times to the year 1700, and to specify those which seem most worthy of preservation'. Two functions were distinguished: 'to make an inventory' and to 'specify those [monuments] which seem most worthy of preservation'. No guidance was offered on how this was to be achieved, what product was required, or how long it was expected to take. The first tasks were therefore to define their own objectives and to develop a *modus operandi*. One of the Commission's first actions was to call C. H.

Read, President of the Society of Antiquaries, as an expert witness to advise on available sources and on the methods adopted by others in making similar surveys.⁹

At the third Commissioners' Meeting, on 17th December 1908, a number of decisions were taken which were to shape the work of the Commission for the next seventy years. The word 'inventory' was taken at face value as 'a complete list of all objects of artistic or historical interest within a certain district, and not merely a selection made with a view to ulterior legislation'.¹⁰ Inventories would be published; they would be compiled on a county by county basis, rather than by period; the unit of record within the county would be the parish. A list of all known monuments in a county was to be drawn up by the secretarial staff, with the help of expert assistants from outside the Commission. The local archaeological society was to be invited to do the same. These lists would form the basis for field checking by the Commissioners and their staff. Most significantly, no monument was to be included in an inventory which had not been visited in person by the Commission. In a decision which harked back to the tradition of gentlemen amateurs, the opinions of local clergy, schoolmasters and antiquarian societies were to be sought on the draft inventory. Hertfordshire was selected as the first county for study, possibly because an archaeological survey had recently been published by Sir John Evans¹¹ and the VCH was currently researching the county.¹² It was also conveniently close to the capital. (The reasons for the choice of counties in the early years are seldom preserved. The minutes show that Commissioners voted on a list of nominations.)

The Warrant set a terminal date for recording of 1700. This compared with 1707 in Scotland (the date of the legal union of the realms) and an open-ended Warrant for Wales. The arbitrary nature of the date was widely questioned from the outset as it excluded the developments of Georgian architecture, and as tastes changed pressure grew to include at least part of the nineteenth century.¹³ A revised Warrant of 29th November 1913 extended the date to 1714, the accession of Queen Anne.

Many observers saw that the task the Commission had set itself was extensive,¹⁴ though the Commissioners did believe it was achievable. To facilitate the work, responsibilities were divided between four Sub-Committees each under the chairmanship of a specialist Commissioner:

Pre-Roman monuments and earthworks other than Roman (chairman, Lord Balcarres);

Roman monuments and earthworks (chairman, Professor Haverfield);

Ecclesiastical monuments (chairman, the Earl of Plymouth);

Secular monuments (chairman, Lord Burghclere).

In order to supplement the expertise of the Commissioners, specialists were co-opted as 'assistant Commissioners' (an unofficial title, subsequently 'official Referees'). The first three so co-opted were W. Page, General Editor of the VCH (historical introduction), C. R. Peers, Official Inspector of Historical Monuments for the Office of Works (ecclesiastical and secular) and A. G. Chater, Honorary Secretary of the Congress of Archaeological Societies (earthworks). Page and Peers were subsequently appointed Commissioners.

Considerable thought was given to the nature and format of the resulting publications. They were not simply to be internal government reports. The perceived target audience was the informed public, and much discussion centred around the need to ensure that the Report was attractively presented. The inventory was to be authoritative, and to be unique in both completeness and accessibility. Instructions on style were given to the investigators: 'the executive staff [are] to divest their accounts of the County monuments of all flowers of speech, and to arrange their information in a regular order'.¹⁵ Illustrations would 'add largely to the attractiveness of our Reports, and would also have a certain scientific value for archaeologists'.¹⁶ The structure for inventories set at this time remained unaltered in outline. The level at which the early inventories were pitched was well judged. They were gratifyingly well received, with *Hertfordshire* quickly going into a reprint and complimentary reviews appearing in the national press.¹⁷ One reviewer, however, complained that too many survey plans were copied from the corresponding VCH volume, and would have preferred 'the independent verdict of the Commission's experts'.¹⁸

Even before *Hertfordshire* was published in 1910, the Commissioners were

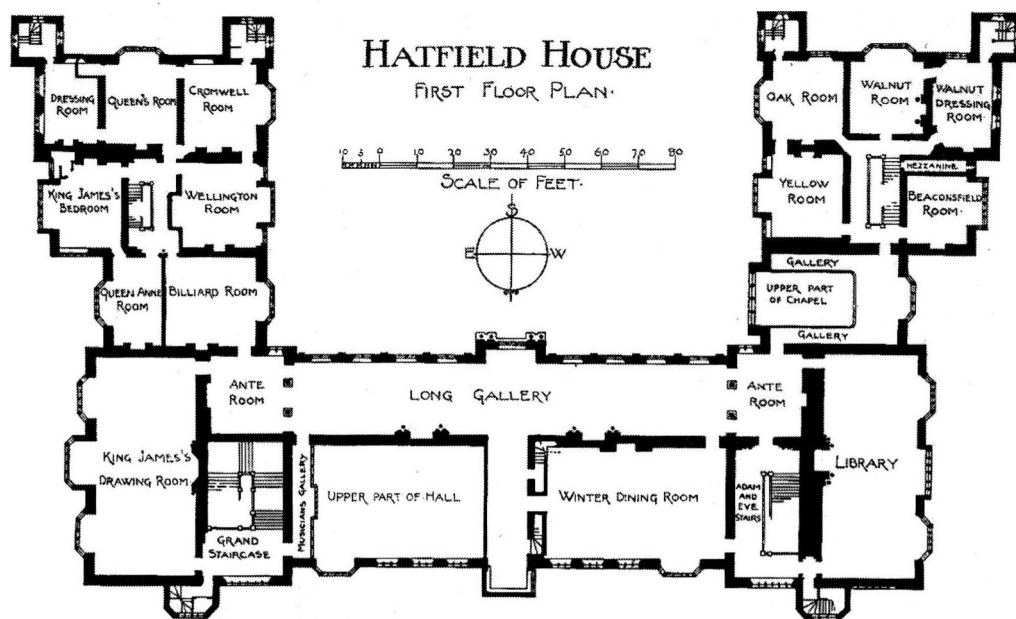


Fig. 1

First floor plan of Hatfield House. Special care was taken with the recording of Hatfield House as it was the first major house to be studied by the Commission and would set a precedent for future work (*Hertfordshire*, 1910)

concerned over the large amount of material gathered which could not be included in the inventory. The initial proposal was that this would be contained in supplementary volumes, but by the time *Hertfordshire* appeared this had become a hope that the Commission's records could be made accessible to students.¹⁹ The second inventory gave the undertaking that these records could be consulted 'by any properly accredited person at our office in Scotland House'.²⁰

Whether the inventory series was what the Government wanted or expected is not known. There appears to have been no official comment beyond the formal acknowledgement by the King of each new inventory presented. However, the experience of the Scottish Commission, which had adopted a similar county format, may be relevant. 'The reception subsequently accorded by the Secretary of State [for Scotland] to the Commission's *First Report* [on the County of Berwick] suggests, however, that what the Government had in mind was a bald list of known monuments, while the fact that the office in St Andrews Square was initially leased for three years may indicate that it was expected that the Commission's work would be completed within that period'.²¹ No such response is recorded in England, though a more rapid sweep had probably been anticipated.

THE FIRST DECADE

The period up until the First World War was one of success and optimism for the new Commission. Once it had developed its brief, it remained confident and focused. Resources were available to employ staff and the inventory goal seemed achievable. Plans were even being prepared to establish teams of investigators to complete several county inventories simultaneously and hence speed up the process.²² Its first inventory, *Hertfordshire*, was published within two years (though described in the official Report as 'somewhat tardy in making its appearance'²³) and was well received. *Buckinghamshire* followed in two volumes in 1912 and 1913, and fieldwork for *Essex I* was completed during the first year of the Great War. Two well qualified experts, Philip Norman and Walter H. Godfrey, offered their services on a voluntary basis and were conducting primary investigations in the City and County of London respectively in advance of a projected inventory.

The Commissioners were supported by a small staff. At the beginning of the financial year 1909/10 an executive staff of three investigators, an editorial assistant and a female staff member (job title not given) was appointed. This contrasts with the Scottish Commission where the Secretary, A. O. Curle, was the sole field investigator for the first three years of its existence. By the outbreak of war the staff had reached fourteen, including three people undergoing a year's training as volunteers. The status of 'unpaid learner' appears to have been established as early as 1910 as a means of building a skill base in this new field from which to draw both voluntary and paid help. By the end of 1915 only three staff remained, but the Commission continued as best it could. Investigation in Essex was suspended at the request of the Chief Constable, as repeatedly staff were being arrested on suspicion of spying. Recording was confined to London, where the Home Office had asked the Commission to photograph and report on monuments damaged by



Fig. 2a (above)

Early photographs of RCHME investigators at work are rare. Here J.W. Bloe sketches the door of Ringers Farm, Terling, Essex, a hall house of c.1400, watched by a group of local men. The photograph was taken on 1st July 1914; the photographer, C.E. Green, was killed in France in 1917

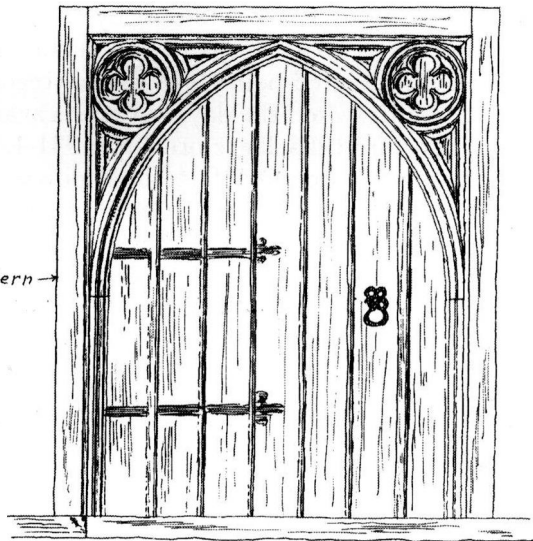


Fig. 2b

The door at Ringers Farm, Terling Essex. This sketch is seen being made by J.W. Bloe in the above photograph (Essex II, Terling, Mon. 6)

RINGER'S FARM. TERLING
ELEVATION OF DOORWAY. 1/2 INCH SCALE.
IN SOUTH WALL (main block)

air raids. Then, on 31st March 1916, the Commission was suspended for the duration and the few remaining staff redeployed to essential war work.

THE INTER-WAR YEARS

On the eve of the First World War the Commission had been making good progress; it did not regain the ground it lost during the War until 1946. The inter-war years were a period of steady routine dominated by financial stringency. The Commission was confident about its role, but lacked both the resources and the imagination to develop. Although the plans to speed up inventory recording prepared before the War had to be shelved, the rate of publication was still creditable, with six counties and the City of Oxford (fifteen volumes in all) completed.

Peacetime found the Commission very depleted. A Commissioner, Sir Schomberg McDonnell, and an investigator, C. E. Green, had been killed in action, while a second investigator, Ernest Rahbula, was so severely wounded that he was unable to return to the Commission until 1922. The economic stringencies imposed by the war debt and the cost of national reconstruction left the Commission starved of resources. Complaints about funding and staffing levels were repeated in each inventory volume until *Westmorland* (1936). Requests to recruit new staff were denied, and funds for travel and subsistence were so restricted that initially recording was largely limited to the Home Counties. The inventory for Huntingdonshire (1926) was only made possible by a donation from Granville Proby of Elton Hall. However, a similar offer in 1931 by a Mr Brudenell to record Northamptonshire was rejected: 'In present conditions it was unadvisable that the sequence of the Commission's enquiry should be influenced by subsidies from outside', especially as such donations were retained by the Treasury (perhaps a lesson from the Huntingdonshire experience?).²⁴ To make efficient use of the limited subsistence budget, the preferred policy was that of recording away from London during the summer months when the daylight hours available for fieldwork were longest (i.e. Huntingdonshire 1926, Herefordshire 1931-4, Westmorland 1936) and near London in the winter (i.e. London 1924-30, Middlesex 1937).²⁵

In 1936 it was agreed that Dorset would be the next county recorded. It was here that the impact of the emerging discipline of prehistoric archaeology was first felt and also that aerial photography was first used systematically to support field investigation; a bid for £50 for aerial photography being submitted to the Treasury in 1939.²⁶ The number of earthwork sites, and particularly field systems and linear features, strained the inventory format to its limits. Work progressed slowly, and was suspended during the War: the first Dorset volume was not published until 1952.

The terminal date continued to be a source of debate among Commissioners and was a cause of difficulty in the field. The artificiality of the date was clearest when recording multi-phase buildings such as churches, where all post-1714 developments were classed as 'modern'. In 1939 the Commissioners eventually agree to extend the date to include a selection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century monuments.²⁷ No formal application for an extension was to be made

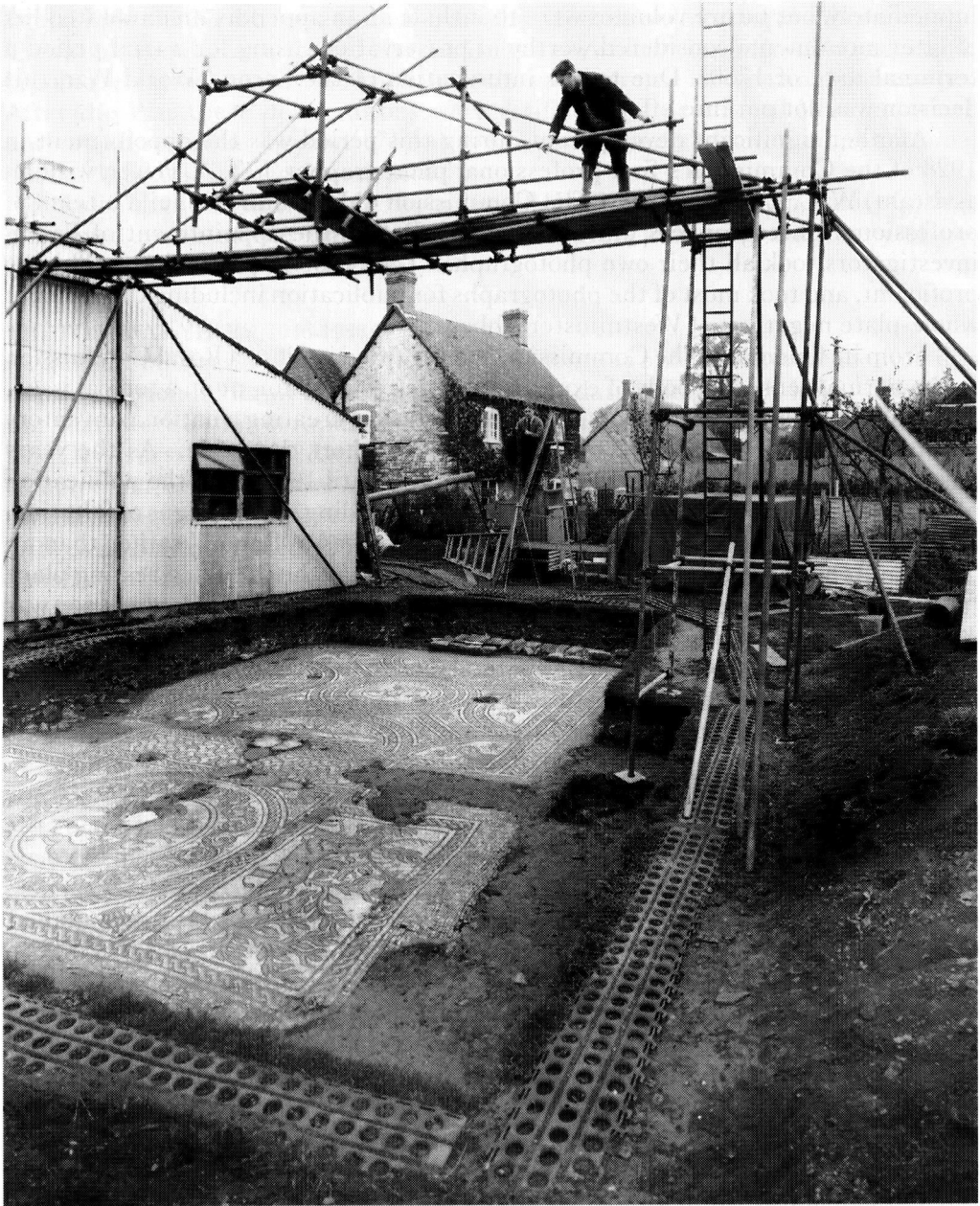


Fig. 3

Two staff photographers, W.C. Light (on the stepladder) and R.E.W. Parsons, record the Roman mosaic at Hinton St Mary during its excavation by the British Museum in 1963.

The gantry was erected to enable them to take vertical photographs.

This picture was taken using a long cable release

immediately, but future volumes were to include as an appendix an annotated list of later monuments considered worthy of preservation, using for a trial period a terminal date of 1760. Due to the intervention of the Second World War, this decision was not put into effect.

Another significant development during this period was the appointment in 1928 of the Commission's first professional photographer, F. T. A. Power, with an assistant, W. C. Light, in 1937. The Commission did not start to build a team of professional photographers until the 1950s. Before the appointment of Power, investigators took all their own photographs. J. W. Bloe in particular was highly proficient, and took most of the photographs for publication including the series of whole-plate negatives of Westminster Abbey.

From its foundation the Commission had regarded itself as a Royal Commission in the normal sense of a body of experts reporting to Parliament on a topical issue. This understanding was only possible while the task of creating a national inventory was believed to be achievable within a relatively short timescale. As the years passed, this became harder to sustain. It was not until 1936, with the publication of the inventory for Westmorland, that this understanding showed signs of faltering. *Westmorland* was the first inventory to describe itself as a 'Report' rather than an 'Interim Report', and the first not to name the PRO as the intended resting place for the archive. These small but significant changes hint that the Commission was starting to face up to the enormity of its task, and had begun the slow process of adjusting its self-image. An alternative model of an on-going body already existed in the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts; indeed, this was the model which had been proposed by both Murray and Brown.²⁸

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Commission fared better during the Second World War than it had during the First. At the outbreak of hostilities the staff consisted of the Secretary, an editorial assistant, nine investigators and a photographer. This was reduced to the Secretary, editorial assistant and one chief investigator, augmented later by the secondment of O. G. S. Crawford from the Ordnance Survey and the arrival of A.T. Phillips, discharged from the army on the grounds of age and ill health.

From its temporary home in Trinity College, Cambridge, it remained active. The opportunity was taken to start work on an inventory for Cambridgeshire including the university town. At the same time, the Commission worked closely with the newly formed National Buildings Record (NBR), which had the task of recording buildings at risk from enemy action.²⁹ An extensive photographic survey of towns in eastern and central counties was undertaken, from Yorkshire to Buckinghamshire, while Crawford photographed monuments in the southern counties and Phillips surveyed in the Home Counties.

The Commissioners continued to meet and used agendas which were less crowded with housekeeping matters to plan for peacetime. Policy issues were debated, such as the nature of the relationship with the NBR, staffing levels and the future of the Commission's archive. A new terminal date of 1850 was considered

(to include the Neo-Greek and early Gothic Revival architectural movements).³⁰ This would require an enlarged investigating staff, while recording would necessarily become selective towards 1850 to handle the vast increase in surviving monuments. After the War these deliberations were ratified by a new Royal Warrant which authorised recording beyond 1714 at the Commissioners' discretion. A terminal date of 1850 was informally adopted.³¹

Sadly, on the night of 16th-17th February 1945 a fire in its rooms in Trinity College destroyed much of the Cambridgeshire inventory material and many of the Commission's earlier documents.

THE POSTWAR YEARS: 1946-1988

As a result of careful planning, the Commission was able to enter peacetime in a strong position underpinned by a new Warrant dated 29th March 1946. The post-war years were a time of rapid growth, both in staff numbers and in responsibilities. The Treasury authorised the appointment of additional staff over the 1939 complement, which in time allowed the realisation of a long-cherished scheme to establish regional offices in order to prepare several inventories simultaneously. Offices at Bristol (closed 1952), Cambridge and York were opened by 1950, and a Salisbury office in 1956. On the eve of the War the staff complement was fifteen, by 1964 it had risen to forty-five, in 1967 following merger with the NBR it stood at seventy-eight, and by 1988 it had reached 168½. Despite frequent increases in staff numbers, new expectations and competing claims constantly stretched the Commission's resources and organisational structure causing it to lose its previous clear focus on the inventory goal.

In 1908, the Commission had almost defined 'professional archaeology'. By the post-War years it had become just one piece within a rapidly growing picture. Increasingly excavation was seen as the cutting-edge of archaeology, and there was considerable pressure for the Commission to become involved. Under the strong influence of one Commissioner, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the first excavations were undertaken in the late 1940s. At first, small trial trenches were cut to help interpret difficult features or to provide dating evidence for sites surveyed for the Dorset inventory (e.g. a pond barrow in the Sheepsdown Group, 1947-8³²). Quickly, the Commission was drawn into larger-scale academic excavation projects (e.g. Corfe Castle, 1949-52³³), and its involvement in the long-running excavation beneath York Minster was to be a drain on resources for over twenty-five years. No new excavations were initiated after 1970, but post-excavation work continued, with the final volume of the York Minster excavation report not being published until 1995. With hindsight, the Commission's adventure into excavation is seen to have been a misjudgement. Its unique skills and contribution to field archaeology were, and continued to be, in the area of analytical survey. As a sad postscript, a Commission investigator, Jeffrey Radley, died in an accident in 1970 while excavating in York.

The Treasury report, published in 1950, which led to the establishing of the Historic Buildings Councils for England and Wales and for Scotland, challenged

the continuing existence of the Commission.³⁴ The wide powers and responsibilities outlined for the new Councils led to the suggestion, 'if the Historic Buildings Council becomes responsible for all ancient monuments, the Commissions could perhaps be wound up and the preparation of the Inventories made a specialised branch of the Councils' work'. No such recommendation was made formally as it was thought to exceed the committee's terms of reference, but close co-operation between the Commissions and the new Councils was recommended. However, it was specifically recommended that the Councils should absorb their respective National Buildings Records. In the event, both the Commissions and the NBRs continued as independent bodies.

In 1955 two new long-term commitments were entered into. Just as aerial photography was beginning to reveal the wealth of surviving prehistoric sites, huge areas were placed under threat from afforestation, gravel working and new agricultural techniques. The Ancient Monuments Board of the Ministry of Works appealed to the Commission to take the lead in recording the archaeology of these 'marginal lands'. At the same time the Ministry of Housing & Local Government invited the Commission to co-operate in the recording of 'threatened buildings'. These new functions were seen as good opportunities to collaborate more closely with the Ministry of Works and the NBR. When the Treasury authorised an increase in the staff complement and recruitment to full strength, both tasks were accepted. Even so, resources were badly stretched. These new functions were open-ended commitments which would divert the Commission from what many saw as its 'core' role of compiling county inventories. The then Chairman, Lord Ilchester, was not alone among the Commissioners in believing that they also took the Commission outside its tightly defined terms of reference. He believed that the Commission's sole responsibility was to concentrate on and complete the inventory programme, and he threatened to resign over the issue.³⁵ Soon, however, the Commission became more adversarial on behalf of the heritage. Evidence was submitted to several committees on heritage issues, while *A Matter of Time* (1960), followed by *Monuments Threatened or Destroyed 1956-62* (1963), was a clear attempt to influence both government policy and public opinion.

Despite Lord Ilchester's reservations, the Commission had a history of involvement in the recording of 'threatened buildings'. Following its close collaboration with the NBR during the Second World War, resources were temporarily directed to assist the Ministry of Town & Country Planning with its new task under the Town & Country Planning Act of 1944 of 'listing' buildings of national importance. When in 1955 the Commission accepted the Ministry of Housing & Local Government's invitation to co-operate in the recording of threatened listed buildings, this activity was initially justified as making a record in advance of inventory work. Following the incorporation of the NBR in 1963, the 'threatened building recording' function (with two members of staff) was seen as a means of building up the national record. Concern was expressed that, despite the volume of records created, 'little profit, or credit to the Commission, would accrue unless the information were issued to a wider public'.³⁶ Typically, the solution was

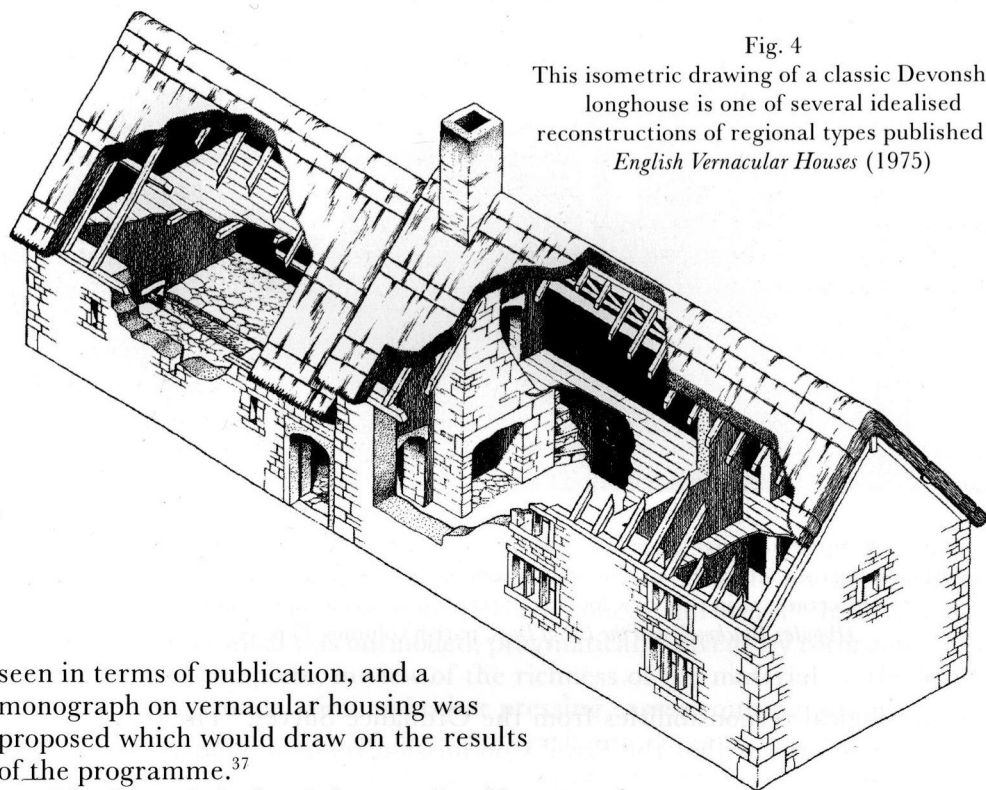


Fig. 4
This isometric drawing of a classic Devonshire longhouse is one of several idealised reconstructions of regional types published in *English Vernacular Houses* (1975)

seen in terms of publication, and a monograph on vernacular housing was proposed which would draw on the results of the programme.³⁷

The Commission's role in recording 'threatened buildings' was formalised in the Town & Country Planning Act of 1971 (and subsequent revisions). Under Section 55 of that Act, the Royal Commissions for England and Wales were to be notified of, and were granted the statutory right to record, listed buildings for which 'listed building consent' for demolition or alteration had been granted. This gave the function a high profile alongside the preparation of inventories which at that time dominated the Commission's policies, and it has continued to be an important role.³⁸

The organisation of ancient monuments provision in England underwent considerable change in the early 1980s.³⁹ The establishment of a new agency was proposed to take responsibility for the day-to-day administration of statutory protection of monuments and historic buildings through scheduling and listing and the management of guardianship sites, which was at that time being carried out by the Department of the Environment. Views were sought as to whether the Commission should be included within this proposed new agency. The value of maintaining an independent scholarly body with a high level of expertise in its own field was balanced against its close links with the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings and the role of the National Monuments Record as a major source of reference material particularly following the projected transfer

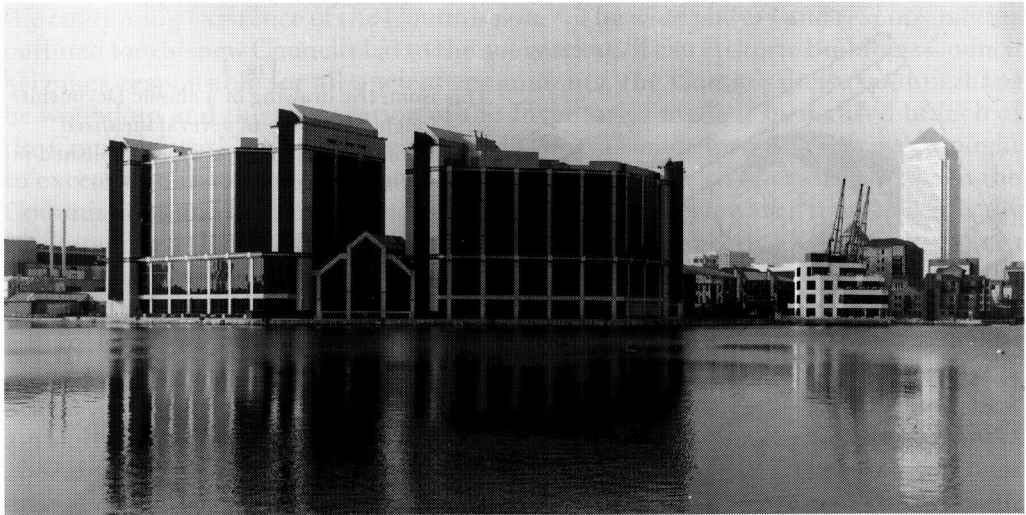


Fig. 5

The Survey of London recently studied the changing face of the Docklands. In addition to historic structures due for demolition or conversion, a record was made of modern architecture, as in this view looking north-west across Milwall Dock in 1993 (*Popular, Blackwall and the Isle of Dogs*, parish volumes 43 & 44, 1994)

of archaeological responsibilities from the Ordnance Survey. The result of this complex equation was that the Royal Commission remained independent when English Heritage was created in 1984.

In 1984 the Commission accepted responsibility for the Survey of London following the abolition of its sponsor body, the Greater London Council. Founded 1894, the Survey was in origin similar to the Commission, producing an inventory or 'register' of historic buildings in order to encourage their preservation. The two bodies had continued to develop in parallel, so that the Commission offered an appropriate home from where the Survey has continued to discharge its unique function.⁴⁰

CREATING A NATIONAL RECORD

Two developments in the post-War years dramatically changed the shape of the Commission and gave it a new orientation. These were the transfer of responsibility for the NBR in 1963, and the transfer of the Ordnance Survey (OS) Archaeology Division in 1983. Together they broadened the scope and role of the Commission immensely, providing the collections, database and staff for a fully functional public national record of the man-made environment, the National Monuments Record (NMR). This altered the whole balance of the Commission, which up to that time had been a recording body with only a minimal public face. The two sides of the Commission's work, its recording and public record-keeping roles, were not formally reconciled until 1988.

For its first fifty years, the Commission remained focused on the inventory as the primary means of fulfilling its Warrant, both as a method of recording and a format for publication; and with the restricted scope then defined for inventories, national cover might have been possible to achieve given patience. As the disciplines of archaeology and architecture developed, and as specialisms within them emerged, the Edwardian dream of a uniform set of county inventories steadily growing on a library shelf quickly became unattainable; although as late as 1955 some Commissioners were still concerned not to divert the Commission from its 'proper work of compiling Inventories'.⁴¹ The result was that, from 1950, there was a tension between accepting new and valuable responsibilities and completing the national inventory programme.

Once normal activities resumed after the Second World War, concern quickly arose over the publication rate for inventories. The first instinct was to 'fine tune' existing procedures. Proposals included closing the new Bristol office to allow staff to be redeployed to editing duties,⁴² imposing stricter criteria for the selection of monuments and shortening the descriptive text.⁴³ The Treasury was constantly asked for permission to augment the complement of editorial staff. By the 1970s it was clear that not just the inventory, but the Commission's whole philosophy, required drastic review. When the change came, it came suddenly. In 1979 a new Secretary, Peter Fowler, reviewed practice and policy in all areas.⁴⁴ It was accepted that the inventory ideal was outmoded; pragmatically, inventory recording 'would take too long to complete, in view of the richness of the material ..., the limited resources of the Commission and other pressing cases requiring attention'.⁴⁵ At the same time the need to be more responsive to conservation needs was also recognised.⁴⁶ The radical solution was to replace the traditional county inventory with new, more useful yet equally prestigious formats.⁴⁷ Key to this new policy was the NMR, which would make available to the public that information which would otherwise remain unpublished. This about-turn of policy removed a twenty year old tension and allowed the Commission to integrate its constituent elements and re-focus them on new goals.

The fruits of the new publication policy were quickly seen. From 1980 a supplementary series saw the publication of a number of joint projects dealing with regional themes or individual monuments,⁴⁸ followed by a series of more technical contributions on heritage issues. One interesting experiment was the series of popular photographic books based on the NMR's collections, such as *The Garden Room* (1982), many of which were 'best sellers' and reached a different readership from that of the traditional inventories. Several county inventories which were in-hand were halted and the decision was taken to publish selectively from the existing records. For example, *Long barrows in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (1979), due to form part of volume I of the Hampshire county inventory, was published as a free-standing monograph.

Major survey projects over recent years have addressed national themes rather than counties,⁴⁹ and several important regional survey projects have been undertaken.⁵⁰ Closer integration of the work programmes of architectural recording

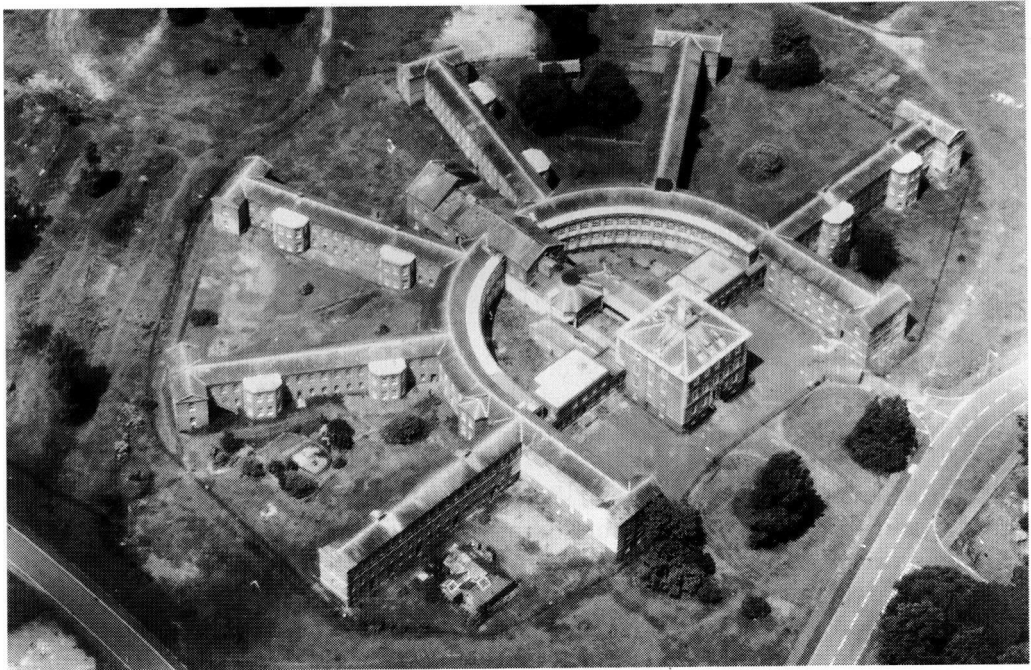


Fig. 6

Aerial photography helps to understand the layout of large and complex sites. The unusual plan of the Devon County Asylum, Exminster, designed by Charles Fowler and built in 1842-5, can be appreciated more easily from the air (*English Hospitals 1660-1948*, 1998)

and the statutory role of recording listed buildings threatened with demolition resulted in a series of projects to record textile mills, a class of building at risk due to economic changes, and Urban Development Corporation areas, where impending regeneration was likely to result in wholesale demolition.⁵¹

The gap left by the cessation of the inventory series was filled by an enhanced NMR. From its foundation, the Commission had viewed the unpublished material gathered in support of its inventories as 'forming in truth the complete National Inventory'.⁵² However, the national record was eventually created by the combination of three formerly independent records: the National Buildings Record, the Ordnance Survey's non-intensive record of archaeological sites and the Department of the Environment's National Library of Air Photographs (NLAP). Together with material generated by the RCHME's survey work and collections of national importance acquired from a range of public and private sources, this formed the NMR.

The NBR was founded by voluntary effort in 1940 to make a photographic record of buildings in England and Wales damaged or threatened by bombing. It was supported by a combination of government and charitable funds. With a directorate of two, two office staff, and a band of willing photographers around the



Fig. 7a & 7b

During the War the RCHME worked closely with the NBR to record historic buildings at risk from enemy action. The eleventh-century church of St Benedict, Norwich, was photographed in July 1941 by Ernest Rahbula of the RCHME, and again by F.J. Palmer following the Baedeker raids of 27th and 29th April 1942. The NBR collection was transferred to the RCHME in 1963



country, it clearly could not undertake this work alone. From the outset, the remaining small staff of the Commission worked closely with the NBR, which was quickly successful in its attempt to acquire extensive records of buildings.

By January 1945 the Treasury had decided to secure the future of the NBR after the War by merging it with the Commission.⁵³ The process of merger progressed a long way, even to agreeing a name for the new organisation ('RCHM(E) incorporating the NBR'), while the Government Vote for 1946-7 was to be based on a joint estimate.⁵⁴ The proposal was then quietly dropped. The NBR and the RCHM(E) continued as independent bodies, both funded by the Treasury, but working closely together and sharing a London address.

The idea of merger was not raised again until the 1960s, when it formed only a small part of a more sweeping package. A report to the Treasury recommended that the Commission, the NBR, the historic buildings and monuments survey functions of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Branch should be combined in a new non-Departmental body which was to push forward a national non-intensive survey to be followed by scheduling and listing.⁵⁵ There followed in 1963 a Ministerial Standing Committee on the Recording of Ancient Monuments, which was briefed to 'bring into being in due course a single central archive of archaeological, architectural and historical information concerning important sites and buildings throughout the country'.⁵⁶ In the event, the amalgamation of the NBR with the RCHM(E) seems to have been the only significant outcome. This move was accepted by the Council of the NBR as 'the only way to assure the future of the collections'.⁵⁷ Material relating to Wales was subsequently transferred to the Welsh Royal Commission.

The potential offered by this new record was quickly recognised. A new Warrant in 1963 explicitly made provision for 'the continuance and furtherance of the work of the National Buildings Record ... and for the creation of any wider record or collection containing or including architectural, archaeological and historical information concerning important sites and buildings throughout England'. A new collecting policy was drawn up with its emphasis on active development. Relevant archive material was to be obtained, borrowed or copied to augment the collections, including copies of excavation archive, aerial photographs and OS archaeological record cards.⁵⁸ The name for this enlarged Record was to be the 'National Buildings and Monuments Record',⁵⁹ shortened to the 'National Monuments Record'. The NMR was to continue to be administered by a separate management committee reporting directly to the Commissioners. For the next ten years the reports of the NMR management committee were accepted by the Commissioners with little recorded comment.

The transfer of the OS Archaeology Division in 1983 provided the second major element of the NMR. The OS had always marked visible antiquities on its maps, and from 1920 this was formalised with the appointment of an archaeology officer and subsequently a team of surveyors and desk-based recorders who ensured the accuracy of mapped antiquities. This grew after the War under the direction of C. W. Phillips, until the OS found itself maintaining the non-intensive national record

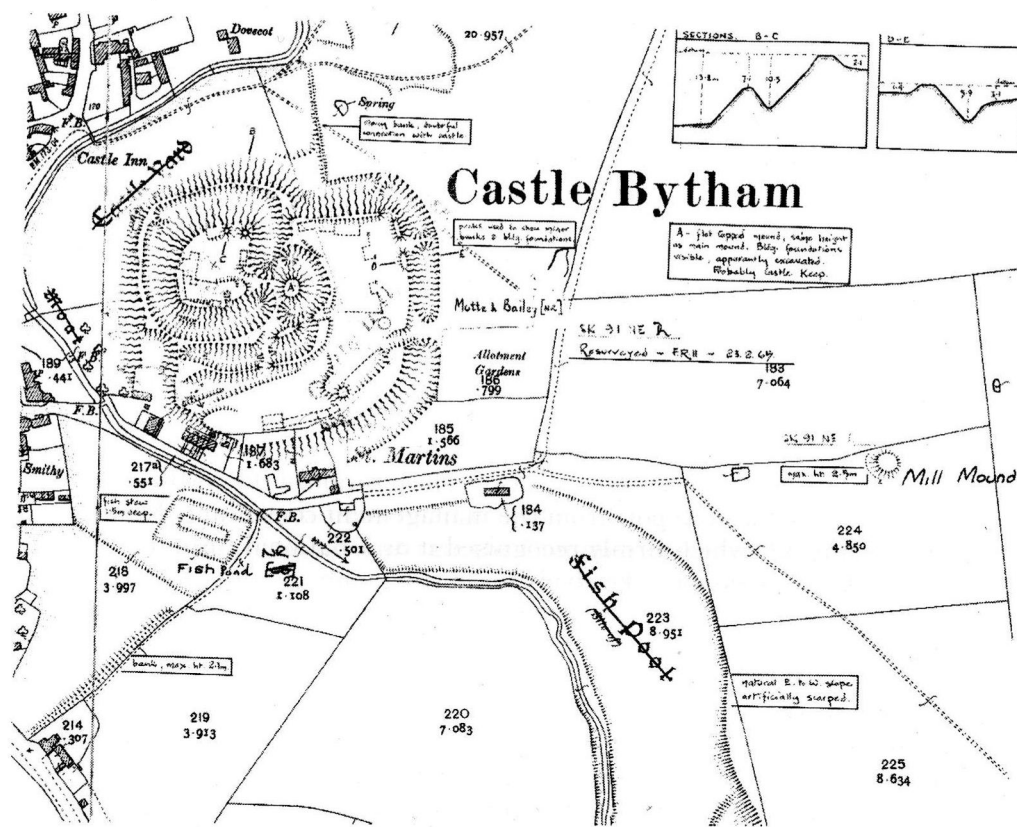


Fig. 8

'Antiquity models' are working documents used to revise the depiction of sites on published Ordnance Survey maps. The important collection produced by the OS Archaeology Division, including this model of Castle Bytham, Lincolnshire, was transferred to the NMR in 1983

of all archaeological sites, whether or not 'mappable'. The recording of 'non-mappable' antiquities was supported by a subvention from the Department of the Environment. During the 1970s the OS sought to rationalise its activities around its core functions, and consequently began to run down its Archaeology Division. In 1976 it was suggested that the OS's archaeology work could be transferred to the Royal Commissions, which were delighted when in 1979 the Serpell (Ordnance Survey Review) Committee into the long-term policy and funding of the OS recommended that the Archaeology Division should be transferred to them. Protracted negotiations focused upon the adequate resourcing of this new work, and in 1983 the transfer was made: in England only twenty-two staff were transferred rather than the forty requested. The Commission had gained academic control over the record, which now formed a major component within the NMR, and found itself responsible both for supplying mapping information to the OS for map

revisions and for maintaining the non-intensive national record of archaeological sites. Computerisation of the record was set in train immediately, and the staffing situation was bolstered by the use of Manpower Services Commission teams.

The third major element of the NMR was provided by the Department of the Environment National Library of Air Photographs, consisting of about 2,000,000 RAF and OS vertical and oblique aerial photographs embracing the period 1945-68. This was transferred in 1984 to join material already held by the Commission.

The NMR's holdings grew rapidly. Prior to merger the NBR held 550,000 photographs and measured drawings. Over the next two decades a number of important collections, both small and large, were added to the NMR, together with the results of the Commission's own fieldwork. The national database of monument information was also maintained. By 1971 the NMR collection had grown to 783,000 archive items,⁶⁰ by 1988 it contained some 5,000,000 items and by 1998 *circa* 12,000,000 items. It was recognised by government as 'a prime source of scholarly reference in the field of ancient monuments'.⁶¹ The position of the NMR was greatly strengthened in 1988 by a Report from the management consultants KPMG Peat Marwick McLintock⁶² which firmly recognised it as a national resource. KPMG identified the Commission as a key body for heritage information, with the NMR providing a gateway for public access to the results of its survey and recording activities.

A DECADE OF CHANGE: 1988-1998

A decade of radical change began in 1988 which saw the Commission transformed into a significant national and international heritage leader; though the seeds for this were sown as early as 1979 when Peter Fowler first articulated his vision for modernising the organisation.⁶³ In 1987-8 the Department of the Environment, the Commission's sponsoring body in Government, engaged the management consultant KPMG Peat Marwick McLintock to review the role and effectiveness of the three Royal Commissions, with special emphasis on their continued relevance, on whether public funding remained appropriate, and on their relationships with existing government bodies. The House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment specifically requested that the possibility of merging the RCHME with English Heritage be considered.

KPMG's Report⁶⁴ was an endorsement of all three Commissions and pointed the direction for future development. A set of revised duties were established for England in a new Warrant of 15th April 1992, which consolidated the many changes and responsibilities acquired since the previous Warrant of 1963. In accepting the KPMG Report, the Under Secretary of State announced that the Commission was to be the national body of survey and record. In this new role, the Commission accepted responsibility for setting standards and for training professional peers in survey methods. Following the recommendations of the Joint Nautical Archaeology Policy Committee in 1989 and a White Paper in 1990, the Commission created a central record of historic wrecks within the twelve-mile coastal limit⁶⁵ which now forms one element within the NMR. In 1989 the Commission was appointed lead

national body for the oversight of the system of local Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs). Since the 1970s survey projects have increasingly been developed with external partners. The survey function was further strengthened in 1998 with the launch of RCHME Survey Services as a commercial service to complement and extend its work in this area.

The relocation in 1994 of the Commission's head offices to the former General Offices of the Great Western Railway's Swindon Works was a key element within its strategy. It brought a number of benefits including the co-location of previously scattered staff which allowed improved internal liaison, while management restructuring allowed a better match of operational structure to targets defined in a Strategic Plan.⁶⁶ For the first time, it was possible to bring together under one roof the three elements of the NMR, the London head office and the Salisbury field office; and most significantly the opportunity was taken to build an archive store.

THE FUTURE

Some recent initiatives demonstrate the Commission's commitment to reaching a wide audience, where appropriate using the latest technology. The Commission seized the opportunity offered by the internet as a popular new means of access to information and opened its own web-site as a first step to developing on-line access



Fig. 9

The south-east front of Rykneld Hall, Derbyshire, built in *c.* 1780. This Grade II listed building, now a special hospital, was photographed by P.A. Bloomer for the Images of England project

to the core data held in the NMR. The statutory lists containing information on *circa* 360,000 listed buildings in England were computerised between 1994 and 1996 in collaboration with English Heritage and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). NMR Education Services was launched in 1998 to make the NMR's extensive resources available to schools.

In partnership with the Royal Photographic Society and with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, a major project has been developed to create a photograph of every one of England's 360,000 listed buildings by 2002 and to make those images available digitally over the Internet and in other ways. This important project, named *Images of England*, will complement existing databases and collections.

In June 1998, the DCMS's *Comprehensive Spending Review* proposed the merger of the RCHME with English Heritage to form an enhanced new 'lead body' for heritage, to be known as 'English Heritage'. This was confirmed following a period of consultation. Both organisations welcomed this opportunity to develop a more integrated body as an advocate for the historic environment. Full legal merger will take perhaps two years to complete, but operational merger was achieved on 1st April 1999. The functions of the Commission continue to serve the public as part of this new body, while at the same time making a stronger contribution to the conservation and management of England's heritage.

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