

The Ancient Monuments Society: The First Seventy Years Anniversary Address 1994

by

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The Ancient Monuments Society was founded at a meeting held on 2nd June 1924 in the John Rylands Library, Manchester. The Chairman was Sir Henry Miers, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester and the principal speaker was Professor Tout, the eminent historian. He said that “the demon of restoration and demolition, whether it [was] moved by the highest or the lowest motive, [was] fighting to sweep away the history that remained in the monuments of this country”. It was resolved at the meeting to establish the Ancient Monuments Society to promote “the study and conservation of ancient monuments, historic buildings and fine old craftsmanship”. The first Chairman was Professor R. Seymour Conway, the first Honorary Secretary was the architect, John Swarbrick and the first President was the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, then of Haigh Hall, Wigan. Thus was established a body with objectives which remain those of our Society today—for reasons which still apply, and, incidentally, with associations which still remain with Manchester and Salford, with the most senior of what are now their four universities and with the Manchester-based Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society.

The twenty-first birthday of the Society was held on the 23rd June 1945 at a meeting in the Town Hall, Liverpool. Lionel Angus-Butterworth was Chairman in that year and, not least to maintain that balance between Liverpool and Manchester which is so important in this part of the country, he arranged for an Anniversary Meeting to be held in Manchester Town Hall on 23rd September 1945. More than 150 members and friends were present.

In that same year the National Ancient Monuments Society was founded in London with Sir Albert Richardson as President and John Swarbrick (again) as Chairman. Although it was recorded that “the most friendly cooperation was

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maintained with the senior Ancient Monuments Society in Manchester”, one wonders what, apart from the opening of a London office by the Manchester architect, John Swarbrick, was behind the formation of a rival organisation. At any rate in March 1953 an amalgamation was agreed. Raymond Richards became Chairman of the one Ancient Monuments Society and Sir Albert Richardson became its Director.

In 1974, on the 25th September, the Council of the Ancient Monuments Society met in the John Rylands Library, in the same room as in 1924, to mark the 50th Anniversary of the foundation of the Society.

The next major step in the life of the Society was taken in 1980 when it was agreed to form a working partnership with the Friends of Friendless Churches, that admirable organisation which shares the objectives of the Ancient Monuments Society but tries to meet them by actually caring for twenty-one otherwise forlorn churches and chapels of architectural or historic interest.

And now we are seventy years old. We have achieved our three score years and ten and have, it is to be hoped, gained some maturity, having long ago secured our majority. During those seventy years the life of the Society has been enlivened by some remarkable personalities, many of them seeming larger than life in these days when our living personalities seem so often to disappoint us, to be of lesser note than we had assumed. Let us recall a few of them.

We must start with John Swarbrick, the founder of the Society. He was born in 1879 and died in 1964. He was an architect but also an antiquarian and a legal expert. Although our architectural lives in Manchester did overlap, I do not remember him personally though an acquaintance with Swarbrick on “Rights of Light” was very helpful in the Professional Practice examinations.

Lionel Angus-Butterworth who died only a few days ago was, as far as is known, the only survivor of that meeting in 1924 in the Rylands Library. He was a tireless worker for the Society and for building conservation generally. He was Chairman in 1945–47 and again in 1956–57 but over the years he held practically every office in the Society. He brought together material on the early years of the Society that was published in Vol. 20 of *Transactions* and it is on this that I have been able to draw.

Then there was the University of Manchester School of Architecture trio of Bill Singleton, Tom Marsden and Raymond Wood-Jones, like me all disciples of Professor Cordingley. Bill Singleton established the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies at York and so was, in a sense, one of the founders of the University of York. He published a far-seeing article on training in architectural conservation in Vol. 1 of the New Series of our *Transactions*. He was Honorary Architect for many years and would certainly have been Chairman but for his early death. Tom Marsden was also Honorary Architect for many years, a welcome contributor to *Transactions*, and Chairman in 1975–76 but died early and suddenly. He was responsible for the conservation work on Newton Hall, Hyde, Foxdenton Hall, Chadderton, Warburton Old Church, and Turton Tower, near Bolton.

Raymond Wood-Jones created the New Series of *Transactions* in 1953 and was

Editor until 1967. He served as Chairman 1969–71 and for nearly thirty years was in the forefront of conservation battles, fighting (and usually winning) many Public Inquiries for the Society. He was also a great scholar whose work on the traditional domestic buildings of the Banbury area, first introduced in our pages, has still to be bettered.

For many years the Ancient Monuments Society was dominated by the personality of Raymond Richards. He was a big man in every way: in height, in girth, in enthusiasm for all things to do with historic buildings and their contents and great in his generosity to the Society and its members. We are grateful to Timothy Richards (who 'favours', as we say in Lancashire, his father in so many ways) who generously allowed us to have our seventieth anniversary meeting at Gawsorth because it was, of course, with Raymond Richards in mind that Council chose the location. He was Chairman from 1952–58 and again from 1960–65.

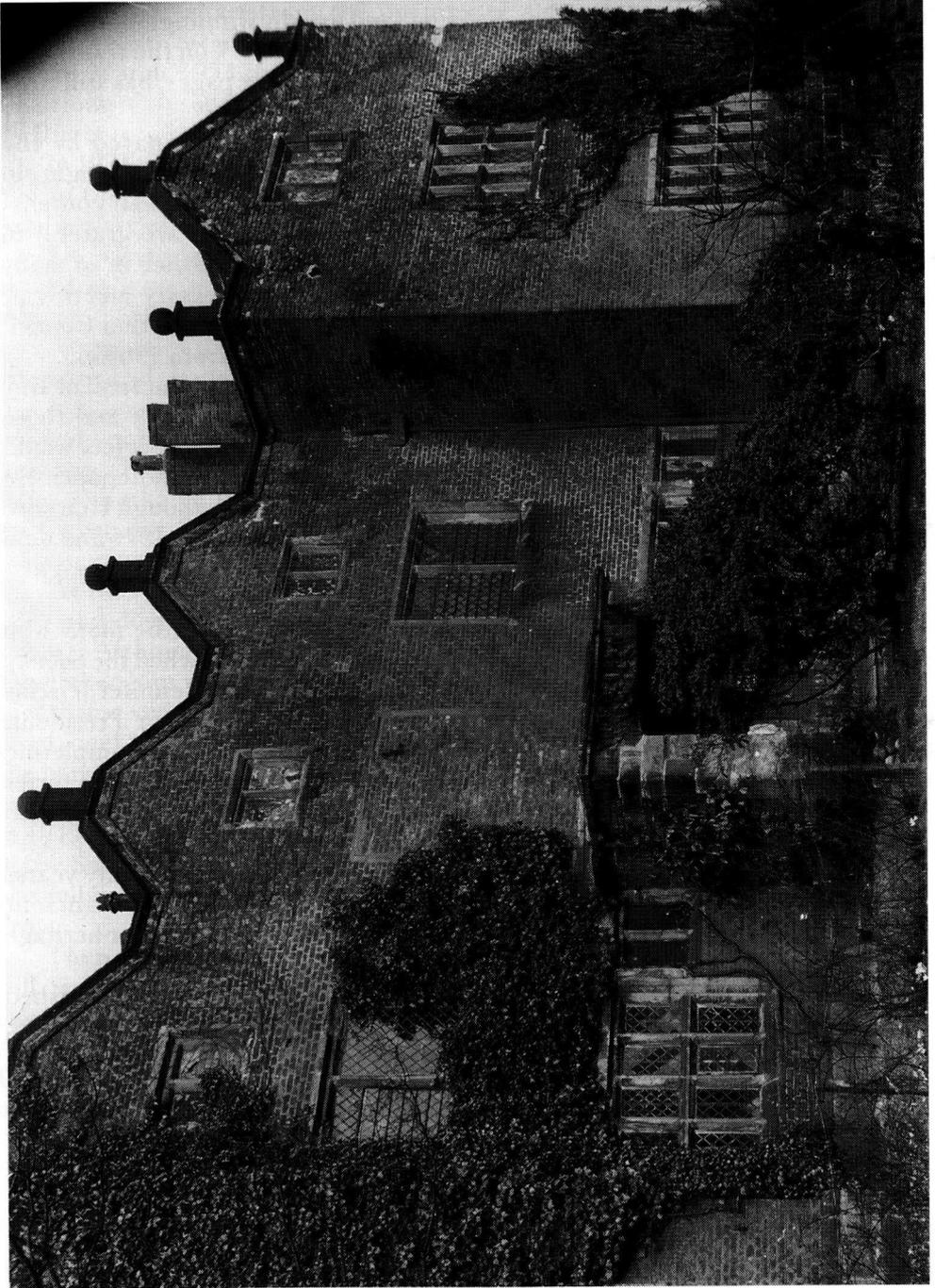
The most recent twenty years of the Society have been under the spell of Ivor Bulmer-Thomas. He first appeared on our scene in 1953 as Secretary and those who dared touch ancient monuments in the wide sense used by our Society would learn to dread those letters coming on Ancient Monuments Society notepaper. He served on Council in many capacities (not as Honorary Architect, though I am sure he could have done the job if necessary) and he became Chairman in 1976 and held that office without interruption until the first signs of ill-health at the age of eighty-five forced him not to seek re-election in 1990.

This has been a roll of gentlemen and mentions only some of the many who have served so whole-heartedly, but, of course, many ladies have enriched the Society by their efforts as well as having graced it by their presence. Dame Jennifer Jenkins was an actively campaigning Secretary from 1971–75 and is now our President. Miss Honeybourne was Editor of *Transactions* from 1967–73. As well as completing many years as Assistant Secretary, Mrs Susan Gold devised that remarkable series of tours to architecturally exotic places in Germany, Central Europe, Spain and Italy, which did so much to raise the prestige of the Society.

What has the Society done to meet its objectives over the past seventy years? Its accomplishments fall under two headings: fighting to preserve ancient monuments (the casework) and working to increase public awareness of our heritage (the study).

The catalogue of casework is even longer than the gallery of distinguished officers and members of the Society, but some stand out as being early, long-lasting, or notable victories.

The case which led to the foundation of the Society was that of Hough End Hall in south Manchester. Hough End Hall is a brick house built in the unusual English Cross Bond about 1566 by Sir Nicholas Mosley, a wealthy cloth merchant who became Lord of the Manor of Manchester and Lord Mayor of London. The house and estate belonged to the family for some 250 years. In 1921 John Swarbrick discovered that the proposed Arterial Road No. 10 (now called Mauldeth Road) was to pass right through Hough End Hall. He arranged a meeting in Rylands Library, set up a Hough End Hall Preservation Committee and made representations



Hough End Hall, Manchester in a photograph of 1942. Copyright: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments

to the Ministry of Health (in charge of planning in those days) to such good effect that the line of the road was diverted about fifty yards and the Hall was saved. But as we know only too well that can often be the easy bit, the hard part being to secure a viable future. The newly established Ancient Monuments Society explored all sorts of solutions: museum, art gallery, hall of residence, home for bodies such as the Ancient Monuments Society etc. Everyone was anxious to help: Lord Egerton of Tatton was willing to donate the building subject to the occupying widow's tenancy, Sir Oswald Mosley offered to donate a lot of family furniture, the University was willing to make it a hall of residence but the UGC cut the budget, the City Council was prepared to make the hall and grounds a memorial to the coronation of King George VI in 1937 but, as they were deliberating, the threat of war arose and nothing happened. After the War threats to the building returned and the Society had to fight again and again. Hough End Hall still stands, now as a pub-restaurant, but it has been altered inside and is overshadowed by a couple of office buildings. However, it is there, and we can thank John Swarbrick and his Ancient Monuments Society for that.

Samlesbury Hall near Preston was saved by John Swarbrick and the Society following a meeting held on 11th October 1924 and now flourishes as a museum and a venue for all sorts of cultural and mildly sporting activities. Warburton Old Church, near Lymm in Cheshire was conserved through the efforts of the Society in 1925, 1957 and again in 1971 after it had been accepted by the Redundant Churches Fund (now the Churches Conservation Trust). The remains of Macclesfield Castle were under threat in 1932 from construction of the proposed store of Marks and Spencer. Various ideas for moving and re-erecting the remains were tried out and the stones were carefully drawn and numbered. They were discovered in the Town's Yard a few years ago and Rick Turner published an article on them in our *Transactions*, Vol. 43, 1987.

Kersal Cell, Salford, Bramhall Hall, Stockport, the Conwy River Crossing, the proposal to rebuild Fountains Abbey were among the early cases but one which had a curious sequel was the case of the Chester Roman Amphitheatre. A joint appeal for £8,000 was made in May 1922 when the western inner by-pass of Chester was under construction and found to be passing right through the amphitheatre of Roman Chester. The Ancient Monuments Society and other societies secured the diversion of the road to its present graceful curve and the amphitheatre half was excavated and the remains consolidated. So far, so good, but a few years ago there was a proposal to create a sort of Roman theme park by excavating the rest of the amphitheatre and demolishing two listed buildings in the process. Matthew Saunders, the Secretary of the Ancient Monuments Society led the case for the objectors at the Public Inquiry with his characteristic verve, persistence and skill in argument. Technically we lost since permission for the work was granted, against the advice of the Inspector, but effectively we won as the theme park has yet to be built.

Other cases have turned up again and again. Highcliffe Castle, near Christchurch, was a problem case in 1967-68 and has remained so though expensive

conservation work is now in hand. The Euston Arch battle was lost in 1961 but a recent TV programme has suggested that the stones have been found in the River Lea and the 'arch' may yet be re-erected. Then we joined with other societies in the battle over the proposals for the No. 1 Poultry site in London, but again the cause of historic buildings was lost.

These are only a few of the hundreds of cases which pass through the hands of Matthew Saunders and his assistant Andrew Martindale, supported by Tess Powell, the Assistant Secretary, every year. Through their efforts, incautious developers remain in dread of those letters on Ancient Monuments Society notepaper.

Our main means of encouraging the study of ancient monuments, historic buildings and examples of fine old craftsmanship continues to be by way of our annual publications. We began in 1926 with the *Ancient Monuments Yearbook* edited by John Swarbrick; this was followed by the *National Ancient Monuments Yearbook* in 1927 (216 pages for 2s 6d) and then a quarterly *National Ancient Monuments Review* appeared until the early 1930s. An annual series of *Yearbook and Proceedings* of the Society began in 1932 and continued until 1947 while the New Series of *Transactions* began in 1953. It is instructive to compare Vol. 1 with Vol. 38. The mix of articles has been quite consistent, bearing in mind the interests of the different editors, and the quality of contributions and production is maintained at a very high level, while the number of subscribing libraries and institutions confirms their high standing.

The educational work of the tours has already been mentioned. The Newsletters prepared by our Secretary are remarkable in the amount of topical information they convey to members. For many years we have run a series of Autumn Lectures linked by a theme and held in the church of St. Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe, our home for so many years. Attendance is very good with an average of more than 100 per lecture being achieved for the especially popular series held on stained glass.

The 1934–35 *Yearbook*, quoted in Vol. 27 of *Transactions* contained a foreword by the Chairman, Dr E. Bosdin Leech:

What does the Ancient Monuments Society stand for? It exists to give expression to a thought which has at some time or other in our life come to all of us when we see or hear of interesting historical remains which have been spoiled or destroyed and when we say 'what a shame it is that nobody took the slight amount of trouble that was necessary to save it. If only something had been done in time...'

The Ancient Monuments Society exists to see that something is done in time. Long may it survive to do so.