

Peter Buttenshaw (1926-2003)

Peter Buttenshaw, a member of the Ancient Monuments Society Council for eighteen years, died on 22 April 2003. He represented the AMS at four Public Inquiries and it was he who volunteered in the early 1980s to set up an East Midlands Branch for the Society.

Peter was born at Harpenden in Hertfordshire to Nora and Alban Buttenshaw. He was a frail child who suffered frequent bouts of pneumonia. He was taught at home by his mother until the family moved to Stratford-on-Avon when Peter went to King Edward VI Grammar School. His father died when he was twelve, the same year as his brother Michael was born, and the brothers were separated and brought up by different grandparents. After King Edward VI he moved to Bishop Vesey's Grammar School at Sutton Coldfield. Fascinated from an early age by building work, he set his heart on becoming an architect.

He was trained at the Birmingham School of Architecture, graduating in 1949. He was Assistant Architect to two practices in that city up to 1956 but then took the decision to emigrate to Nigeria, working for the Federal Government for two years and in private practice beyond that up to 1973.

His practice was known as Associated Architects and the output was varied, including several schools, Lagos Library built for the City Council, the headquarters in Port Harcourt of the Niger Delta Development Board and the missionary headquarters and Bishop's Palace on Lagos Island. The last, built in 1960 and called Bishops Court, embraced accommodation for the Bishop and his family, offices, conference room, as well as a striking polygonal chapel. Indeed the whole complex was as adventurous as many contemporary designs in Britain. The illustrations show Peter's own photographs taken shortly after completion of the chapel with its derrick-like spire and the huge concrete screen composed of repeated

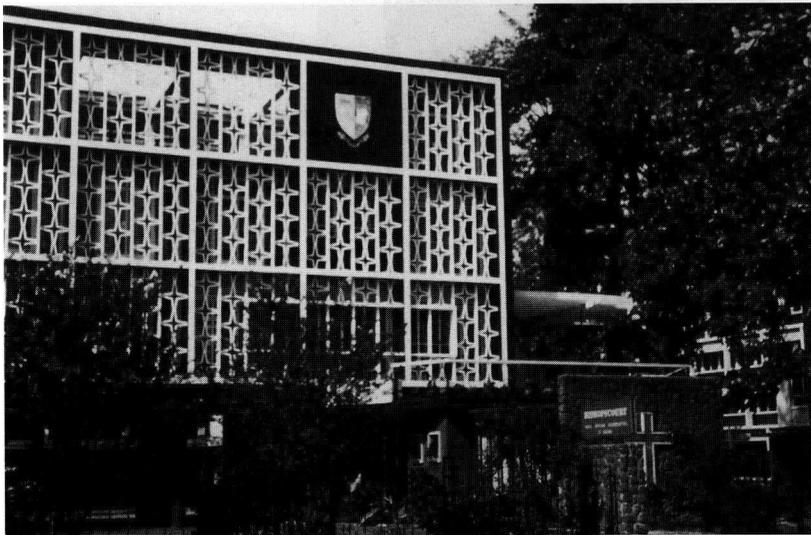


Fig. 1
Bishops Court,
Lagos, 1960.
South elevation
Photograph:
Peter Buttenshaw



Fig. 2 (*above*)
 Bishops Court, Lagos, 1960.
 West elevation showing chapel and
 chaplain's office and flat
Photograph: Peter Buttenshaw

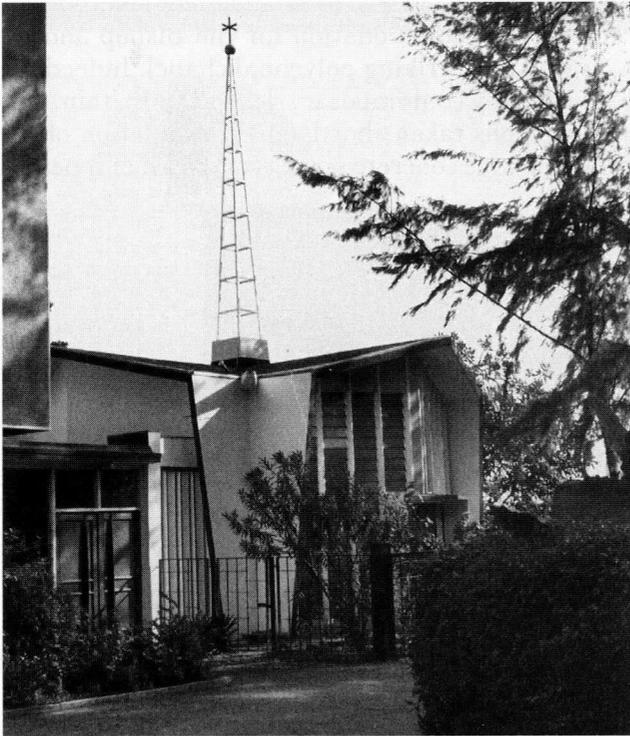


Fig. 3 (*left*)
 Bishops Palace, Lagos
Photograph: Peter Buttenshaw

crosses set into a gridiron which served as a brise-soleil to reduce glare. As was to be expected, most of the work in West Africa was new build but not exclusively so. No. 29 Kakawa Street, also shown here, in central Lagos was purchased by Peter and his partners to serve as headquarters for the practice, the decision to purchase being taken after one of his clients asked him to obtain estimates for demolishing it to make way for a car park. On taking over the house he began to realise the challenge he had taken on. He found it infested with rats, cockroaches and termites



Fig. 4
No. 29 Kakawa Street, Lagos
before repair
*Photograph from the West African
Builder and Architect*

Fig. 5
No. 29 Kawkawa Street,
Lagos after Peter's
meticulous repair campaign
of 1964 to save the building
and adapt it as his practice
headquarters
*Photograph from the West
African Builder and Architect*



which had particularly attacked the bonding timbers buried in the brickwork. However most of the roof timbers were found to be sound, the termites having been mostly attracted to pitch pine which had been used sparingly by the original nineteenth-century builders. After completion of the work he gave over the ground floor to be the Idubor Gallery of Art, widely acknowledged to be 'the best gallery of modern and traditional Nigerian art in Lagos'. It was named after Felix Idubor, born in 1928, who was awarded a UNESCO Scholarship in 1956 which enabled him to work at the Royal College of Art in London and to visit other parts of Europe. Idubor worked in a number of media, carving the throne and panelling in the foyer of the National Hall in Lagos, forging the wrought iron screens and main doors of the Central Bank of the Benin and casting the cement sculpture of the reclining figure in front of the Lagos Library, one of Peter's building designs, in Broad Street.



Fig. 6

The pole stair at the Manor House, Brixworth,
Northamptonshire

After his return to England, Peter set up a private practice at Cranford, near Kettering, in 1973 and operated it for a quarter of a century. Although he was catholic in his commissions, he came to develop a particular passion for historic architecture, especially the vernacular of his beloved Northamptonshire. (He and Ruth lived in a listed stone-built cottage in Cranford for thirty years.) He loved and admired the Northamptonshire limestone and ironstone and teased out problems with great skill, as in the seamless repair of a quite extraordinary late seventeenth century pole stair in the Manor House at Brixworth. His photograph of the staircase reproduced here gives some idea of the virtuosity of the pole itself, a continuous trunk into which the winding treads were trenched.

The rather hazy photograph also shows part of the splat balusters which protected the landings. He became a Vice President of Men of the Stones, that wonderful organization founded by stonemason, Arch Ireson, Mayor of Stamford and part of a stonemasonry family active for four centuries. Peter also threw himself into the Collyweston Slaters' Trust, becoming a key member for a number of years. Northamptonshire is distinctive in its ironstone for masonry but also Collywestons for roofs. These massive stone slates are formed

from a substantial 'log' allowed to split along the natural fissure lines by the action of frost. Increasingly mild winters proved a curse and it was the action of the Trust which was able to offer the requisite if modest subsidy necessary to overcome these seasonable hiccoughs.

Peter was diffident by character but also a man of real enthusiasms. That for historic buildings was evident throughout his career, but another devotion was to the motor car – not a blind enthusiasm for speed like Mr Toad but rather an admiration of the efficiency of the engine and the sweetness of the bodywork. For him driving a sports car was to enjoy a work of supreme design.

The listed buildings in the county that benefited from his professional expertise were legion but he was particularly interested in the work at the Priory in Geddington. He was devoted to the two churches of Cranford. He served as adviser to the PCC and carried on semi-proprietorial interest when St Andrew's was declared redundant and passed to the Churches Conservation Trust in 1996.

Apart from Cranford, three major commissions in this country were especially important to him. First, there was the Sue Ryder Home formed in the Old Palace in Ely – involving the fitting out and renovation to provide accommodation for residents with severe physical disabilities. The job lasted from Autumn 1984 until the Spring of 1987 and it was all consuming. Ruth and he spent their holidays in those years in or near Ely so there was no break in the work. Peter, with Ruth's able assistance, surveyed the whole of the Palace, allowing him to pass on to Lady Ryder survey drawings for the second phase which was carried out by another architect.

Then there was St Peter's Church, Irthlingborough. Some of this was inevitable repair of an ancient building, especially to the roof and to the floor. However, it also involved an extension to the north porch shown here, added in 1989 to provide a meeting room and Sunday School with kitchen and cloakroom. The conjunction between the new and the old is as seamless as possible – the parapet continues on the flat from the rake of the existing with exactly identical profile, whilst the ironstone banding marches onto the new build as if always intended. The openings

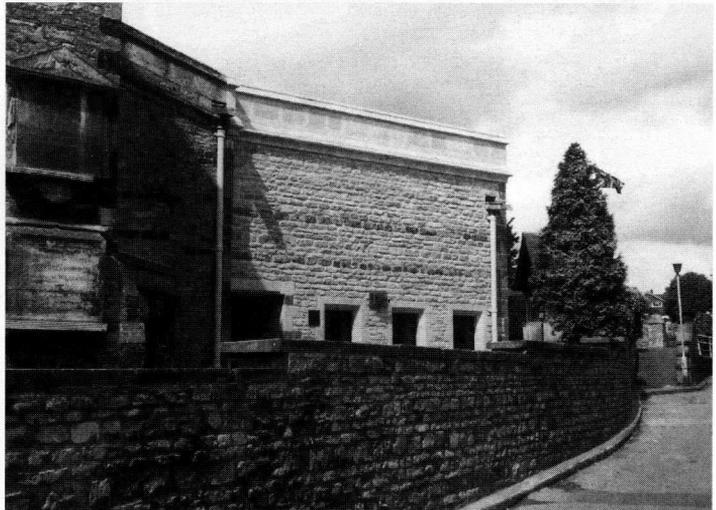


Fig. 7

The seamless extension onto St Peter's Church, Irthlingborough,
Northamptonshire

Photograph: Peter Buttenshaw

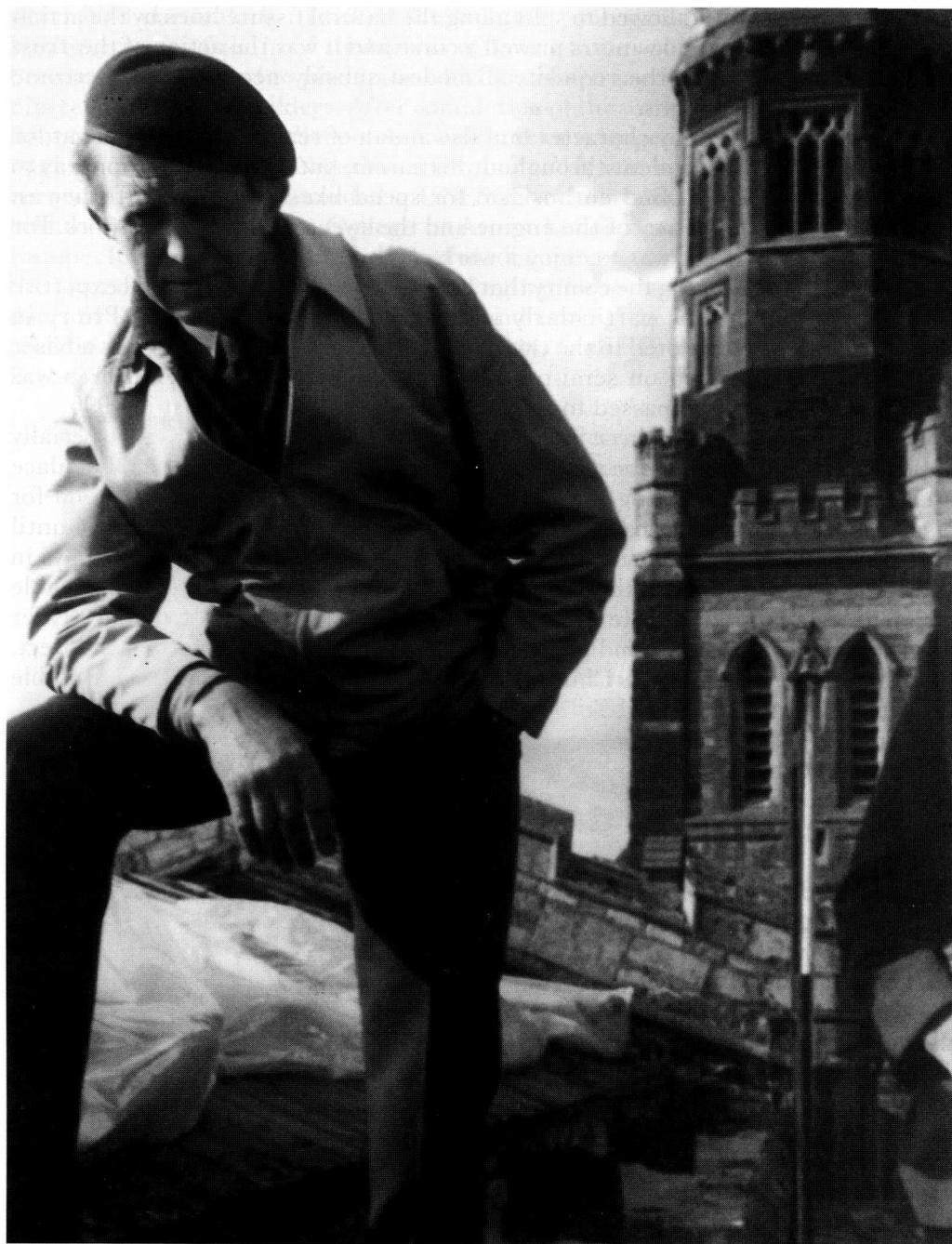


Fig. 8

Peter on the roof of St Peter's, Irthlingborough, with the church tower behind him

Photograph: R. Buttenshaw

are simple and unassertive but, once again, delicately contextual – the main door has a careful chamfer to the arris at its lintel and ironstone blocks are interleaved with their larger limestone counterparts. Beyond the rainwater goods, the quoins are formed of irregularly sized ironstone blocks in the traditional manner. But Peter did not eschew the scope for innovative work. The other photograph shows the glazed infilling, looking into the main space from the extension where the three huge fanlights are taken by engraved glass depictions worthy of John Haywood. The artist was in fact Miss J. Conway of Manningtree.

At St James the Great, Gretton, the challenge was one of repairs alone to a building very exposed on its high bluff above the Welland Valley. The photographs



Fig. 9
St Peter's,
Irthlingborough.
View from the
new extension
through the new
doors into the
nave of the
church



Fig. 10

St James the Great,
Gretton, Northamptonshire.

Condition of the masonry on the tower before
commencement of repairs

Photograph: Peter Buttenshaw

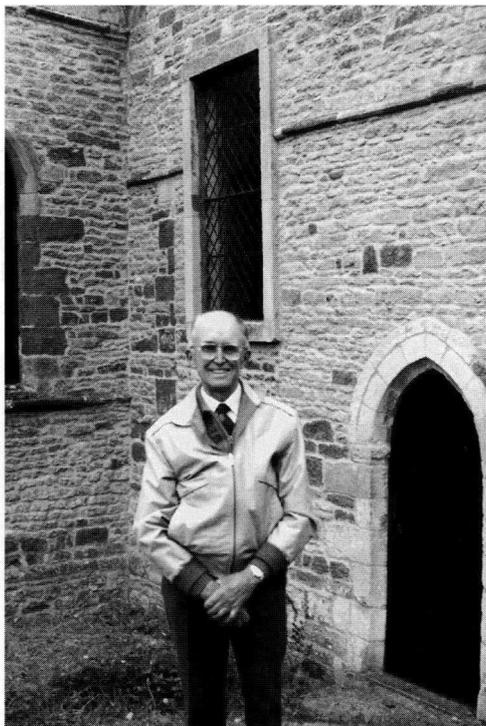


Fig. 11

Peter standing outside St James the Great,
Gretton, taken in the early 1990s

give some idea of the condition of the stonework on the tower and the crassness of earlier repairs. He allowed himself one indulgence – in the carving of a cheeky new gargoyle on the tower.

In 1963 Peter met and married Ruth, Peter being an active member of the PCC at the Nigerian church they attended. In 1969 the hard work and the climate were taking their toll. He came back to the UK for six months for cardiac surgery but returned to Nigeria for another four years spent in Lagos. The Nigerian Civil War had resulted in widespread unrest and economic problems and in a very difficult decision he sold his practice and came to live and work from Cranford. It was his first experience of village life and he enjoyed it.

His last years were marred by an increasingly debilitating heart condition but for a man whose 'hole in the heart' was only formally diagnosed at the age of forty-two, he used to confide that he felt himself lucky he was alive at all.

In a typically generous gesture, he left the Society £2,000 in his will; money we shall spend wisely on the casework he championed in his lifetime.