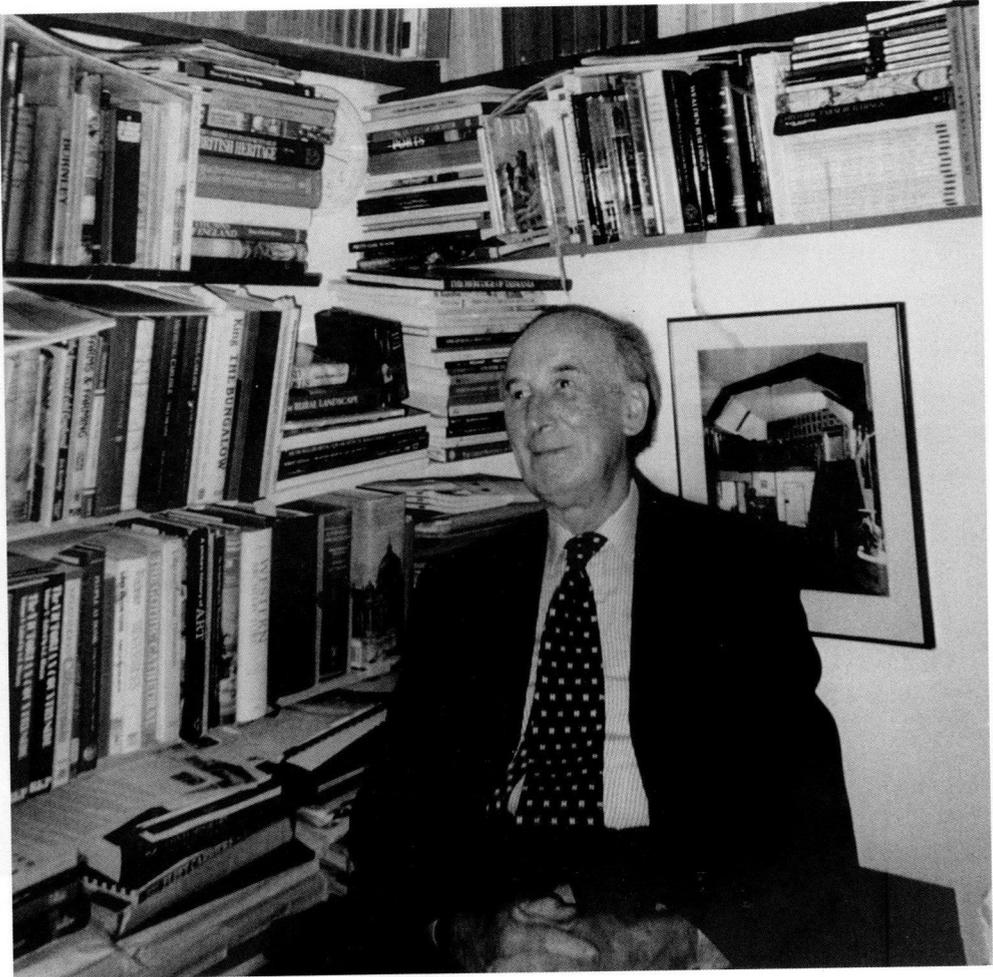


Obituary

Ronald W. Brunskill
(1929-2015)



Dr Ronald W. Brunskill, OBE, MA, Ph.D, FSA (almost invariably 'Ron'), who died on 9th October 2015 was the greatest scholar of vernacular architecture of his generation. He was intimately connected with the life of both the AMS and the Friends of Friendless Churches. No-one else has occupied the Chairmanship of both. He was also the kindest and most considerate of men, a gentleman at all times.

Ron was born on 3rd January 1929 to William and Elizabeth Brunskill, at Lowton near Leigh in Lancashire. His father was a police inspector but his extended family were mostly farmers in Cumberland and Westmorland and he spent his holidays on their farms, walking, cycling and absorbing the appeal of simple functional buildings built from local materials. He was just seventeen when he won an essay in the 6th form at Bury High School on roughly the same subject as his later Masters thesis on 'Traditional Domestic Architecture in the Eden Valley'. The headmaster who gave him a picture of Frank Lloyd Wright's 'Falling Water' cannot perhaps have appreciated the seeds that he was sowing.

On leaving school he took his degree in Architecture at Manchester University, beginning his studies in 1946, just as the guns ceased. After his undergraduate studies, he did his national service as a second lieutenant (1953-55), partly in the Suez Canal zone. From there he escaped on R and R to Cyprus and Greece and remained very fond of both destinations – the continued division of Cyprus, so violently manifested in the wall that still divides Nicosia along a shattered building line, was a particular source of pain. After he was demobilised in January 1955 he joined the group of young, innovative architects at London County Council, working on high density housing to alleviate the post-war shortage of decent homes. He knew, as senior colleagues, Leslie Martin and (Sir) Hubert Bennett. He was tickled to discover that the altar at The Friends of Friendless Churches church at Milland on the Hampshire/Sussex border had been designed by Sir Hubert after he had retired to the area. These were still the days when you were encouraged to appreciate architecture in the round, whether it be ancient or modern, indeed to see proto-Modernist thought in the laws of utility and status that underpinned vernacular architecture.

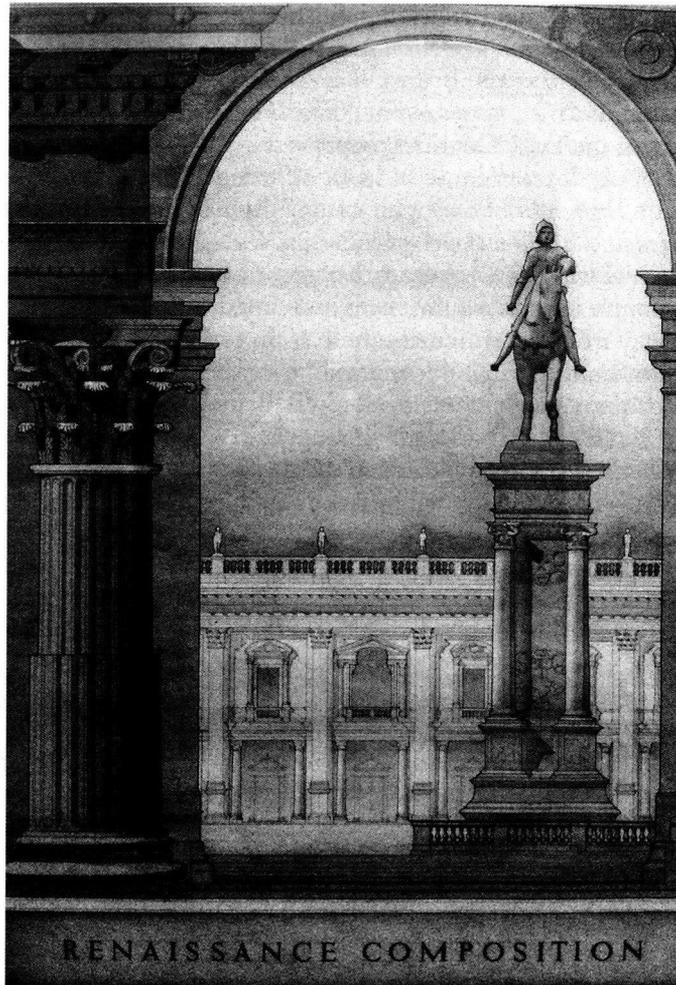
In essence vernacular architecture is built as part of a folk tradition, at variance with 'polite' design which manifested, in Pevsner's words, 'conscious aesthetic intention'. The dictates were utility, tradition and status, not the pursuit of fashion or architectural impact for its own effect. Construction would normally have been in local materials and would not have involved an architect. More lowly structures would, more often than not, have been put up by family members, ramming of earth floors sometimes being encouraged by organising a dance for the neighbours. But Britain is full of polite architecture that has been inspired by the local vernacular. Such inspiration was embedded in the identity of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the mainspring of architects like George Devey. And Brunskill himself showed the way, even though in a telling choice of words he considered Vernacular Revival to lack the 'inevitability' that he saw in the genuine article.¹ In 1962 he designed his own house at Wilmslow in Cheshire, where he lived for the rest of his life – an expression in its dramatically triangular form of the cruck principle rendered in modern materials. And for Ron there was the endless fascination of the well designed machine – two lifelong passions were the train and the tank.

The doyen of vernacular or regional studies before Brunskill had been Professor Reginald Cordingley, under whom he had studied for his MA, and the opportunity of working with his mentor drew him back to Manchester. It was there that the two men began to plan a seminal course for students.² The AMS has been proud to publish key publications by Brunskill on significant components like roof types and plan-forms, much of which resulted from his studies and those of his students. His 'Systematic Procedure for Recording English Vernacular Architecture', published in *Transactions* 13 (1965-66), became our best-selling offprint. And as Manchester was the city where the AMS was founded in 1924, Ron was able to reciprocate with an overview of the first seventy years of the AMS in *Transactions* 39 (1995). We were proud to publish a full list of his prodigious output in the Festschrift that we dedicated to him in AMS *Transactions* 46 (2002).

By the summer of 1955 Brunskill was using his leave to act as tutor at the Summer School in York and the link with that city, and subsequently with Newcastle, was one that developed over the next fifteen years. His perspective was not just a national one. In 1956 he was awarded a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship and spent a year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, delivering courses and travelling extensively in the USA, Mexico and Canada. His chosen topic for study was High Density Housing, a subject on which he later became jaundiced in light of its social effects. This explains the codas on American evidence which constitute the final chapter in several of his books. In 2009 he was the recipient of the prestigious American Henry Glassie Award. The citation spoke of his being an instrumental force in shaping the study of vernacular architecture on both sides of the Atlantic. Towards the end of his Fellowship he was offered a job at MIT but was unable to accept; the terms of both the Fellowship and visa meant that he had to remain outside the United States for two years afterwards.

So in the Autumn of 1957 Brunskill returned to the UK, taking up a post with Williams Deacon's Bank. He stayed there for three years: a young architect in his late twenties responsible for the upkeep of a network of almost 250 branch buildings, overseeing many reconstructions and designing twenty new branches with a staff of five assistants and two clerks. He took some pride in having designed one of the few 'drive-in' banks in this country – this was one of his American imports that did not thrive and not one example now seems to survive. In October 1960 he returned to Manchester as a Lecturer (later becoming Senior Lecturer, then Reader). After having left there after some politicking had killed off his course, despite its reputation, he became Visiting Professor at De Montfort University (1995-2001). Also in 1960 he had married Miriam Allsopp (known to everybody as Mimi). Theirs was a perfect marriage of complementarity, he warm but reserved, she a lovely bubbly American, spontaneous and direct. And on occasions they lived a dangerous life together – Mimi owned a slice of Florida swamp, where the alligators had the annoying habit of escaping into the locality. They found themselves having to fly over to separate Man from Beast.

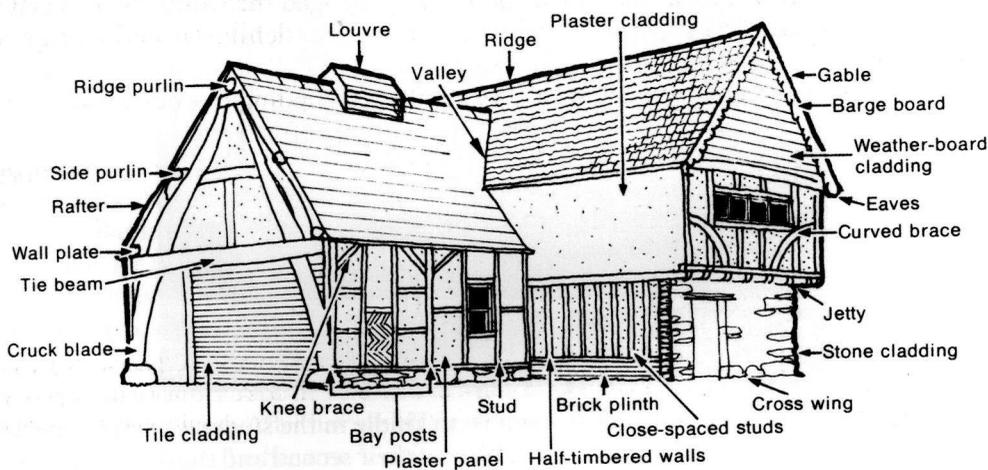
Professor Cordingley had recognised that students required a working knowledge of a wider range than vernacular. He was notably enthusiastic for the Greco-Roman and Renaissance traditions, hence Ron's magnificent rendition of the Capitol in Rome (Renaissance Composition), prepared as a student exercise. He began to establish an archive at Manchester to record and conserve the vernacular buildings of this country and by the 1970s it covered parishes in almost every county.



The enthusiasm which Brunskill was able to kindle in the students was reflected in the number who made such buildings the subject of their second and third year exercises. The introduction of a new range of historical options for undergraduates and the launch of an MA course both acknowledged the confirmation of vernacular building as an academic subject and heralded Brunskill as the leading scholar of his generation in the field. He remained a practising architect, as Partner in Carter, Brunskill and Associates, the firm which he had founded in the late 1960s. His international academic work also continued. He was visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Florida for a year in 1959-60, and lectured in Virginia and Toronto. He met leading North American academics to discuss the establishment of an American organisation equivalent to the English Vernacular Architecture Group (set up in 1954 without either Cordingley or Brunskill). While in Canada he advised on a nation-wide survey of buildings constructed before 1914.

It was in January 1971 that Brunskill published the work for which he is best known: *The Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture*. This became the principal textbook for students over the next forty years, Brunskill revising, updating and enlarging it through four editions, the last of which appeared in 2000. It led to a series of regional handbooks, the first of which, on the Lake Counties, appeared in 1974. The remainder of the series never materialised, not least because of work on many other books. Among these, the following stand out: *English Brickwork* (with Alec Clifton Taylor, 1977); *Traditional Buildings of Britain* (1981); *Traditional Farm Buildings of Britain* (1982); *Timber Building in Britain* (1985) and *Brick Building in Britain* (1990). A feature of these books was his exquisite and prolific drawings. The example here shows the terms associated with timber framed architecture. He did not shy away from the similarity these seem to share with stamp collecting and 'I Spy' but for him, quite rightly, understanding of the whole flowed from identifying and naming the component elements. And it was Brunskill who coined phrases like the 'Vernacular Threshold' which had both a felicity and utility which lasted for years. The Vernacular and the Polite Thresholds were the meshes at either end of the 'Vernacular Zone' below which vernacular shaded into the lost and impermanent and above which the language of metropolitan fashion began to dictate.

For some thirty years Ron was a constant member of the Conservation Great and



the Good – an English Heritage Commissioner for six years, he served on almost all their specialist committees. He chaired those for Historic Buildings, for Cathedrals and for Churches. The combustible EH Chairman, Sir Jocelyn Stevens, always falling out with everybody else, regarded Ron as reasonable, calm and deliberative, where he knew himself to be volatile, reactive and volcanic. He trusted Ron with implementing the controversial decision to offload some 140 EH properties onto local authorities, trusts and the ancestral owners. And another giant of a figure, Ivor Bulmer Thomas, wanted Ron to succeed him as Chairman of the AMS and as Chairman of The Friends – he knew a steady committed and kindly pair of hands when he saw them. Ron chaired the AMS for a decade and the Friends for eight years, later becoming President. For fourteen years he

was a Commissioner of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (he and Mimi had a cottage in Harlech) and when the Heritage Lottery Fund was established in 1995 he was asked to chair its Urban Parks Panel – a very particular accolade as he admitted to knowing precious little about the municipal park. But what the HLF recognised was his gifts as a natural Chairman. And the honorary offices came thick and fast – he was Vice-President of the Weald and Downland Museum Trust, President of the Vernacular Architecture Group and of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

Ron was a private man and in general company he kept his counsel on weighty matters. This makes it all the more touching that his preferences on individual buildings and music were drawn out in a harmless skit on Desert Island Discs conducted in RICS *Building Conservation Journal* 20 (Summer/Autumn 1998) when the Roy Plomley role was taken by Jim Humberstone. Ron listed his favourite buildings as: Liverpool Anglican Cathedral; the church at Walpole St Peter, Norfolk; Rivington Barn, near Bolton; Fort George, Inverness, enjoyed for its ‘precise geometric arrangement’. And the music to comfort his insular exile: Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*; Bach’s *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*; Beethoven’s *Fifth*; Sousa’s *Stars and Stripes*.

Ron was a hugely-respected and much-loved figure, who really can claim to have framed a complete academic discipline and to have changed the world. He is survived by Mimi, two daughters, Lesley and Robin, three grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.

(I am very grateful for the help of Ron’s family in compiling this obituary).

MATTHEW SAUNDERS

NOTES

1. R. W. Brunskill, *Traditional Buildings of Britain, an Introduction to Vernacular Architecture*, (London 1983), 108.
2. The AMS dedicated volume 46 (2002) of the *Transactions* to R. W. Brunskill. Among the papers was one by Frank Salmon on the centrality of the Manchester School of Architecture under Cordingley and Brunskill to the study of vernacular architecture.