

## JOHN HARVEY: A DECADE OF LETTERS

By Alec Clifton-Taylor

It was in 'The Listener', in the days when all contributions to the Listener's Book Chronicle were unsigned. The book was John Harvey's *Biographical Dictionary of English Mediaeval Architects*, and a longish review ended as follows:

. . . Mr. Harvey's knowledge of medieval buildings is so extensive that his speculations are always worth having, especially as he is scrupulous in distinguishing the proven from the unproven.

The controversial passages are another matter. Readers of Mr. Harvey's previous books may either nurse the hope, or harbour the fear, that in the sober guise of a lexicographer he may at last have ceased to take sides. If they themselves be ardent amateurs of the mediaeval, let them take heart! Mr. Harvey is still his incorrigible, interesting, fearless, enthusiastic, coat-trailing self. Listen to him:

Had it not been for the death, in 1528, of Henry Redman (the designer of Hampton Court), English art might have shown itself strong enough to overcome the catastrophe of the Renaissance (page 274).

What he (Redman) did achieve was sufficient to ensure that the minor brick buildings of England, happily prevented by expense from copying the grand Renaissance styles, should be well fitted to their purpose, suited to their surroundings and a pleasure to the eye (page 221).

Yevele (the designer *inter alia* of Canterbury nave) has been styled 'the Wren of the fourteenth century', but this hardly does him justice . . . St. Paul's Cathedral, regarded as a work of religious architecture, cannot fairly be put on a level with the finest examples of English Romanesque or Gothic (page 319).

It is unfortunately not to be denied that such statements as these will weaken the authority of Mr. Harvey's voice in the societies of the learned. But what is perhaps more pertinent is that the majority of lovers, as distinct from professional critics and students, of architecture in this country undoubtedly believe all of them to be perfectly true.

This review brought the following letter (too long to be quoted here in full), dated 14th April 1955:

Half Moon Cottage  
Little Bookham  
Surrey

Dear Sir,

I have no idea who you are, but I want to thank you most warmly for the excellent and appreciative notice you have given my book. It is not often that an author reads a notice of a serious work, more especially if it is of a lexicographical type, bearing evidence that the reviewer has *read* anything beyond the preface, as you so clearly have. Thank you also for the pungent concluding paragraph, which starts a lot of ideas, such as:

Why is architecture called 'the mistress art', yet never really put before the public? And by public I mean the people who do *love* buildings, not those who want to listen to Third Programme talks from professional critics, admirable as many of such talks are. Surely there must be a great field for work, in both the Home Service and on Television, to bring home to people a fuller understanding of buildings, both the great sophisticated works of architecture and the ordinary vernacular houses and regional parish churches?

. . . . .

Thanks again. It has taken 49 years since Lethaby's great book on Westminster Abbey, and 19 years since my first publication, to get to this stage. At any rate you have encouraged the flagging spirits of one uphill plodder, viz.

Yours cordially  
John H. Harvey

Well, naturally I replied to this warm-hearted letter, and thereby revealed my identity. At that time my mother, whom I used to visit frequently, was living not very far from Bookham, so it was not difficult to meet, and presently we were having all-day walks together in the Leith Hill area, which I shall always regard as scenically the best of all the good walking country within thirty miles of London.

Yet although John and I — and Cordelia too, his staunch and devoted wife and helpmate — met two or three times a year between 1955 and 1963, when they migrated to York, we were much more often in touch by letter. I have a fat file of his letters, mainly written between 1956 and 1963, and since they run to around seventy thousand words the mere task of re-reading them in recent weeks has been quite considerable, but highly pleasurable too, and extremely stimulating.

The overriding impression left by these letters (and at times,

especially in 1960 and 1961, there was a long one every few days) is of the immense generosity of the writer. It was the time when I was writing *The Pattern of English Building*, a daunting undertaking which sometimes kept me working into the small hours of the morning, and which I certainly could not undertake today. John, despite all his other preoccupations, including financial pressures which did not always leave him free to work only on what he chose, read the whole of my typescript and commented on it *in extenso*, even, for example, to the point of drawing a detailed map to illustrate the distribution of pantiled roofs in Somerset. The help which I received from him, entirely 'for the good of the cause', was literally immeasurable. The book owes a very great deal to his criticisms and corrections, and to the many references, some quite invaluable, with which he supplied me. It was indeed for me, and for the book, a prodigious piece of good fortune that at that time I was able to enjoy John's friendship, and to draw so much benefit from his faith in the book and boundless goodwill towards it.

The correspondence is, however, concerned with many other subjects besides English traditional building materials. Very little of it is about people, unless they were architectural writers, in which case there might be a good deal of critical comment on their books; there is absolutely no gossip. Religion is discussed at some length, 'I am not a Christian', he wrote on 31st January 1961; 'indeed, I think "Christianity" has less to recommend it than any other dogmatic religion except possibly Judaism. We in Western Europe see real religion through a muzzy haze of organisationalism of the most depressing kind, a new version of exactly the sort of thing Jesus himself so violently opposed, as later on did Voltaire, Blake and D.H. Lawrence'. 'But although', he wrote in another letter a week earlier, 'you are doubtless right that we cannot get much further on the subject of the "evidence for God's existence", I think there are one or two points to get straight. As a sceptic myself, I readily grant that there is no *proof*; but to the evidence already before us, which includes your own profound belief in goodness, we can now add another factor: your 'state of constant gratitude'. It is (as it seems to me) hard if not impossible to believe in goodness in the abstract, without a person who is good; it seems even harder to accept gratitude in the abstract, without any person to be grateful to, for being alive, etc. Personally, though, I agree with you that the important thing about a man is his being, not his beliefs: I should add that it is the *quality* of his being, not *what* he does, that counts. Contrary to the fanatics of "revealed religions", I do not myself see that there is any virtue in belief as such. Nor, contrariwise, in disbelief as such'.

In one of his earliest letters to me (30th November 1955) he

writes, 'Like you, we are smothered at present by pre-Christmas, and that is only exceeded in horror in our year by post-Christmas'. John and I have been scrupulously careful never to send each other Christmas cards! And I have a PAX on Christmas cards with as many of my friends as will agree to it.

The letters cast a spotlight on many other facets of John's personality and interests. Railways, for example. 'My interest in railways is lifelong . . . I am a Great Northern man through and through . . . I very much share your interest in maps and routes . . . *The Trains we Loved*, by Hamilton Ellis, is by far the best railway book I know. He recaptures the wonderful atmosphere of the railways before the catastrophe of grouping'.

Railways, yes, but certainly not cars! 'So far I believe the paperback of my *English Cathedrals* is doing well, but it cannot equal the volume on old motor-cars! The craze for the internal combustion engine is something for which I have no sympathy whatever; it is utterly incomprehensible to me, and the age of the car is repulsive. The great god juggernaut, with his shrine — the *Garage* — attached to every dwelling-unit; holocausts of petrol sacrificed to Him daily, washed down with oil; *lavare est orare*: Sundays reserved for ceremonial washing of His Sacred Body, and for grovelling prostrate beneath Him'. (25 July 1963). This amused me greatly.

Nor has he changed. He is still, as he described himself to me eighteen years ago, 'a thorough townee', his knowledge and love of flowers notwithstanding. (The two are not incompatible, for in England, happily, many townees have gardens). John neither owns, nor drives a car, and is a reluctant passenger, preferring, where there is no longer a train, to get about by bus, or on his bicycle, or indeed by Shanks's pony, since he is still a prodigious walker.

But far and away the principal subject of discussion in our letters was architecture, the abiding concern of us both. Here was our common ground, and the acreage of the field was enormous; yet in the end the boundary walls were reached. Contemporary work hardly figures at all, although at one point John expresses great admiration, which I share, for some of the work of Nervi, and a detestation of the 'weirder works' of Le Corbusier, who can indeed now be seen as the bogey man of modern architecture.

Buildings of classical derivation also receive decidedly short shrift, for John holds strongly that the Renaissance took a wrong turn: 'the deliberate revival of ancient forms at the Renaissance was a serious misfortune for Western European architecture, which has ever since laboured under a handicap that no other art has ever suffered in any other time or place' (16 December 1960). (In another letter, however, he adds, 'I apply exactly the same argument to the Gothic Revival; I am *not* a Puginite, holding

that the forms of Gothic are "good" and the forms of Renaissance "bad": and this seems to me important). Here, nevertheless, we were a long way apart, for there are many Renaissance buildings in which I have always taken a keen delight, and many more which, without delighting me, I hold in high respect. Being avid for sunshine, I have chosen to spend a large proportion of the daylight hours working in a small room that has two walls and a roof constructed mainly of glass. But aesthetically, my ideal house is classical: Queen Anne or Georgian, with sash-formed windows and, of course, impeccable glazing bars. Not so John. 'My personal reaction to sashes', he wrote on 8th December 1960, 'is that they are horrid and most impractical, as well as very dangerous' (*sic*); 'but if one must have 'classical' Georgian fronts, I agree that they suit them'. Well, at least he is more consistent than I, who have never wanted to 'live Gothic'. Two and a half years later, he writes of 'my keen personal interest in the Gothic period and my preference for mediaeval buildings, even for sub-mediaeval housing such as Half Moon Cottage, which is not very far from my ideal house', (despite the fact that it was not well equipped with what would generally be regarded as essential amenities).

There is, as I have already indicated, a great deal in these letters relating to the various building materials discussed in *The Pattern of English Building*. Otherwise it is the mediaeval cathedrals and churches which steal the show. And here I must refer to a practice to which we have both been incorrigibly addicted: the love of drawing up lists, of framing orders of merit. This is a game which can only be played by people who are personally familiar with all the possible candidates, and it so happens that John and I have both been for many years indefatigable travellers. But for us it has always been much more than just a game. He summed it up very well on 6th January 1961. 'This question of "order of merit" in works of art is much conditioned by personal equation: not just personal likes and dislikes, but the philosophical primacies awarded by each of us to different factors. There are, for instance:

- (a) Personal sympathy, or even empathy, our 'love' for a particular work, based on all sorts of emotional and intuitive grounds, which hardly submit to rational analysis;
- (b) Intellectual appreciation of a work as an example of the powers (brain, technical skill) of man;
- (c) Aesthetic perception of qualities of harmony, proportion and the like;
- (d) Mental summation, on a points system, of aggregate value, derived from Categories (a)–(c), and possibly others.

What makes it so hard for us is that the buildings of the Middle Ages are all incomplete': but it was agreed between us that we must assess each building *as it now is*.

On that basis I sent him my list of the four finest English cathedrals: Lincoln, Durham, Wells and Canterbury: and I was delighted to find that he was in total agreement. 'I put Wells first as my personal favourite, but in a matter of serious aesthetic judgement it has to go second to Lincoln' — and also, he agreed later, to Durham, which we both consider the finest of all Romanesque cathedrals, in any country. We both ranked Ely fifth, but after that there was divergence. John also listed the first eight of our non-cathedral churches, but this time only in order of personal preference (category (a) above: not (d)). They were (in 1961) Sherborne, St. Mary Redcliffe, Westminster, Great Malvern, Tewkesbury, Christchurch, Hexham and Beverley, which reveals his life-long devotion to the Perpendicular style. I share this, but, on category (d), my first three would be Westminster, Beverley and Tewkesbury, all of which must rank well above some of the cathedrals.

We didn't confine ourselves to whole buildings but listed individual features too: towers, spires, west fronts, windows, cloisters. After Salisbury, *facile princeps*, he considered (1961) that the finest spires, in this order, are Grantham, Louth, Chichester, Coventry St. Michael and Bristol St. Mary Redcliffe. (In his book *The Perpendicular Style* (1978) the Coventry spire is described (p.112) as 'a work of genius fit to rank with the Wonders of the World'). On towers we started in complete accord: Canterbury's Bell Harry the best of all, then the central tower of Lincoln. As for west fronts, we were also in agreement: Wells the best, among the cathedrals, but surpassed by Beverley Minster as an architectural composition.

It was when we turned to the French cathedrals that a wide gulf opened between us, as of course I knew it would, for John has not hesitated to voice his very personal and unorthodox views on this subject in several of his books. 'It is not really true that I dislike them,' he wrote on 28th January 1957, 'but, apart from Bourges, I cannot work up any intense enthusiasm for the early ones. Their scale and "striving" overpowers and to some extent depresses me'. Now, I have long held the view that if I could only keep one building in the world, in its present state, it would be the cathedral of Chartres, admittedly because of the stained glass and sculpture rather than, primarily, for its architectural quality, relatively high though this is. And if only two buildings, Chartres and Rheims, which is architecturally well ahead of Chartres: John and I were in full agreement about that. Bourges for me comes third. But his order of merit was very different, and might even be described as idiosyncratic! In 1956 his order of preference for

the French cathedrals was Bourges, Bordeaux, Narbonne, Troyes, Coutances, Bayonne, Tours: 'the great classical Gothic cathedrals are too cold for me'. 'The front of Notre-Dame is indeed "Classical"; for that reason it is not very Gothic, so does not very much appeal to me'. In the following year he added, among his favourites, Clermont-Ferrand and a non-cathedral, St. Ouen at Rouen, (which is too cold for me!). By 1960 the list had changed quite a lot: it was now Bourges, Coutances, Narbonne, Clermont-Ferrand ('the stone, (to which I had objected), may make the impression cold, but it is a most exquisitely proportioned and articulated design'), Limoges, Rodez and Séez. Well, John would, I think, be the first to agree that he does not know the French cathedrals nearly as well as the English and Spanish, on which he has written with such deep knowledge and understanding.

From England to France; from France to the World! 'After much difficulty, I have made out a list of the world's twelve greatest Gothic buildings, in order of merit, and here it is. Bourges, Lincoln, Wells, Canterbury nave, Rheims, Narbonne, Cologne, León, Seville, Westminster Abbey, Westminster Hall, King's College Chapel. The runner-up was Beauvais, which would beat Cologne if it had been completed, but cannot on a points system. I include maturity of style as an important factor, which is where Seville scores so much'. That was on 15th May 1957. Three and a half years later, we were at it again. There are now some changes in his list, together with some explanatory comments, to help the resolution of this 'intriguing but fiendishly difficult question'. The new order of merit starts, as before, with Bourges, Lincoln and Wells Cathedrals. Then Westminster Hall, Canterbury Cathedral, primarily for its nave, Westminster Abbey, King's College Chapel, Rheims Cathedral, León Cathedral; this last because it is the one among the near-perfect High Gothic designs that is lucky enough to have kept its glass in something approaching totality (and the modern insertions do not "nag"). At Chartres the glass, by itself, is a miracle largely because it happens to survive. To me it has the drawback of representing the early 'dim religious light' type of glazing, which is more Romanesque than Gothic; León's glazing is truly Gothic. Chartres is half-grown, ungainly Gothic, and that is why I cannot choose it to represent Gothic to the Universe'. I could not agree about this, while never questioning the view that León is the finest cathedral in Spain, and a gem of Gothic. Chartres is much larger, has many more windows and less restoration; wonderful as León's glass is, it cannot in my opinion rival the best of the Chartres glass as regards quality, variety of design and beauty of armatures.

After León come the Cathedrals of Narbonne, Cologne and

Seville. Narbonne, although unfinished, 'is really exquisite and in the class where one just does not know how to improve anything, as is Bourges in its period'. Cologne, 'at any rate internally, and also externally in the distant view, brings off (to my eye) the typically mediaeval contrast between the importance of God and the insignificance of man. That is where Germany scores: both Mainz in the Romanesque period, and Cologne in the Gothic, succeed in "giving the glory to God", not to human cleverness, which is so strongly in evidence in most of the French works. To my mind this is a most important quality, which cannot be shrugged off as independent of aesthetics'.

Perhaps I may be excused for including part of my reply to this, which I happen to have preserved. 'On Gothic, which is the architecture I cherish beyond all others, there is possibly a fundamental difference between us, very well expressed by you. I *revel* in the non-mystical quality of the great French cathedrals, It is possibly because they are such a superb *human* achievement that I am so thrilled by them. 'That men can have achieved *this!*', I say to myself at Rheims — or Bourges, — and therein is a cause for ecstasy. I don't *want* to feel "the importance of God and the insignificance of man" there. Although not a religious man (being a believer in goodness rather than in God), I *do* get that feeling of the infinite littleness of man and the majesty of nature when I am in the mountains: I have walked a lot amid the high mountains, and although not forgetting that man has now conquered even the highest mountains by his resourcefulness, courage and endurance, I find them awesome . . . Among the mountains I am not oppressed by the feeling of man's littleness — as the 'men of reason' of the eighteenth century undoubtedly were — because of being at once aware that they are not of man's creation. The cathedrals, on the other hand, *are* man-created, and I do not see why man should not be allowed the full glory of his own achievement. I even rather resent the idea of God being given any credit here! It is sufficient, in my view, that the great mountains are there to prevent man from getting, as it were, too big for his boots' (4th January 1961). And six days later, 'To me the Gothic cathedral is above all the expression — and indeed the supreme expression — of man's desire to build, and to beautify, indeed to glorify, what he has built. Never mind about the motive. All through the history of art we can find works, sometimes great works, created for motives which have no relevance whatever to our present day experience, and for me they lose nothing in validity or significance as a result. I accept them gratefully for what they are — buildings the very sight of which may be such a marvellous experience that one's heart misses a beat. And that, surely, is what we have really been talking about in these letters. 'Order of merit' really means

'Which buildings give the greatest, the most uncontrollable *thrill* to see?'

It was at this point that John framed his 'analysis of primacies' recorded some pages back. To this I replied: 'Fine, I don't quarrel with any of it. But being the kind of man I am, (c) (aesthetic perception) counts far the most in my estimates, (b) (intellectual appreciation) next, and (a) (personal sympathy) much less. I have a feeling that (a) counts for quite a lot with you . . . I have, as you know, an immense respect for your learning and, usually, for your judgement, and there is certainly no human being with whom I would rather be discussing Gothic buildings than yourself: but when I differ radically from you, as for instance over Chartres or even Rheims, I always feel that the source of our difference is (a)'.

Six runners-up were now added to John's revised list, 'about which I felt most uneasy': Beauvais, Palma de Mallorca and Coutances Cathedrals, the Abbey of St. Denis, Strasbourg Cathedral, and the Frauenkirche at Munich (a most surprising inclusion, in my view). I have never myself ventured to produce a world list of Gothic buildings, but if I did I feel sure that I could not possibly include so many English buildings (six out of the first twelve in both lists) nor so few French (only three: Bourges, Rheims and Narbonne).

In addition to his love of lists, John has always been given to singling out individual buildings (and other sights) for the receipt of special accolades, a habit which I have never failed to find totally endearing, if only for the cornucopia of surprises. What, would you suppose, is 'the most beautiful building I have ever seen' — better than the cathedral of Bourges (which, after all, has, as I pointed out, a sadly inadequate west front)? I will take a long bet that, if you do not know John, you will have guessed wrong. The answer is the Selimiye mosque at Edirne (Adrianople), by the great Ottoman architect Sinan. He adjudged 'the first sight of nature improved by man's handiwork' to be the city of Istanbul, while in the same letter (11th July 1964) he is also able to specify 'the finest natural sight known to me', which is the view from near Inch, on the south side of the Dingle peninsula in County Kerry. The towns which receive special commendation are Aberdeen (in 1962 'the only city in the whole of Britain that looks better than it did a generation ago'), Norwich ('my favourite urban specimen in this country at the present time' — which was 1961) and Kendal ('most remarkable . . . an unspoilt example of old England, which I put next after Norwich now': that too was in 1961).

Pictures and the graphic arts do not often figure in our correspondence; but here again John steps boldly in, and names his favourite: the Wilton Diptych. The Leonardo Cartoon is valued

for its superb draughtsmanship, to such a high degree that, on 27th November 1962, he wrote that the Diptych was 'the only work of portable art now in this country which I would *not* sacrifice, in order to keep the Cartoon'.

From all that I have written it is, I suppose, possible that anyone not privileged to know John personally might suppose that he was dogmatic, opinionated and prejudiced against a great deal of Gothic architecture in France and against almost *all* post-Gothic buildings in every country. Opinionated he certainly is, but in the most engaging way, his most 'outrageous' assertions being made almost always with a twinkle. That is why I could not resist describing the drawing up of orders of merit as a game. It is something that he immensely enjoys, and as I do too, it has been the subject of many lively exchanges between us. But what counts with John is that he *cares* so tremendously, so that these endless assessments of works of architecture are really an essential part of his being.

Deep down, I believe that he is a very shy man; and I have to say, even now, that I have never known him really well. Some fifteen years ago our paths ceased to cross, and now, to my impoverishment, we seldom either meet or correspond. Not even his best friends would call him 'easy'. Partly, no doubt, this is because he has not had an easy life. Almost all the people whose friendship I have valued most in the course of my life either made no mark at school or were really unhappy there, as John was at his. 'It was an absolutely ghastly place to be in then: a violent, extrovert, hearty and bullying school'. For sensitive people who care for the arts and have no interest in ball games nor athletics, the schools are better places today than they used to be; but such people still fit awkwardly into the school ethos.

The subject of lecturing was discussed on a number of occasions. During my first lecture tour of the United States, in the autumn of 1956, I wrote a series of long circular letters for the entertainment of my friends. John and Cordelia were among the readers. 'For me to deliver lectures of this kind adequately would need a great deal of coaching from somebody', he wrote on 16th March 1957, 'and it might turn out to be you, so take care what you are about! It is indeed a pity, regardless of degrees, that I have never had a chance to attend the whole of just one series of lectures such as yours . . . Sheer necessity of bread-and-butter work has constantly been the bane of my existence' (of which an example was his exceptionally thorough and scholarly revision of the Blue Guides to Spain).

Six years after that, it was he who proposed me for a Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries and enlisted my sponsors: a kindness for which I have always been specially grateful. And no

members of the Ancient Monuments Society will need to be told that he can deliver a much more scholarly lecture than anything of which I would be capable. This indeed was once a subject of some badinage between us, for in 1956, at the Royal Archaeological Institute, he read a paper about the Westminster Abbey masons which I compared to Tio Pepe. 'It is pleasant to be ranked with Tio Pepe, a drink which I enjoy *occasionally*. We roared over that'. A year later I was (genuinely) unable to attend the delivery of another no doubt equally learned paper, 'though this time there will at least be lashings of cream in the form of slides to coat the rather solid rock-cake'. My absence evoked reminiscences of the earlier occasion. 'I really should never have asked you to come. But I wonder whether you realise how much my reputation has been *enhanced* by that dry-as-dust paper? Until then I was regarded with the gravest suspicion as a frivolous cream-bun vendor'.

Cream buns are the last comestible that one would associate with John's splendid series of books produced during a life of prodigious industry laced in many directions with the most arduous and single-minded research (some of it in mediaeval Latin), which even now has not received its due in some quarters. Perhaps I cannot do better than end this heartfelt tribute of regard, admiration and gratitude with a quotation from a remarkable letter which he wrote to me on 16th November 1960. 'It is always interesting to try to get outside and look at oneself. I know that on the side of scholarship my work is very defective, largely because I have too many interests; but I think that there in some compensation in that I am less surrounded by a watertight bulkhead of one specialised interest than are a good many much better scholars than I. Similarly, I do agree that my taste is extremely subjective; but there I should defend myself with what Constable (I think it was) said: "A true taste is never a half-taste". . . One should have tolerance, but none the less I want to hear real views, and these are necessarily personal and subjective'.