

# TOWN PLANNING AND HISTORIC BUILDINGS

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THE preservation of historic buildings is properly one of the objects of town planning and it was written into town planning legislation as early as 1932. The planner must also consider the various and conflicting claims upon land and buildings of commercial, industrial and transport interests and of public authorities, claims which sometimes prove inimical to comely but outmoded streets and buildings. However well-disposed towards the interests of ancient buildings he may be, the town planner cannot approach the subject in the same way as the antiquary, whose privilege it is to study such buildings in detail and, if he wishes, in isolation. The first concern of the town planner is not with individual buildings but the relation of buildings one with another and with the place, be it town, village or open countryside. He must cultivate the philosopher's synoptic eye, the eye able to see the town as a whole, as if from the basket of a balloon.

Every living town is subject to continuous change and it is the planner's job to guide and control this change, at the same time providing, where necessary, for the improvement of the conditions under which people live and work. Every town is different, an individual with its own character and custom, and hence very thorough study and survey are necessary before its planning problems can be appreciated. Change is inevitable, due to the continued need for the replacement of obsolete or uneconomic buildings and to the revolution in road traffic brought about by the internal combustion engine.

This paper does not seek to examine the case of any one particular town but to establish principles. For this purpose it is convenient to consider separately the historic town, where the preservation of existing buildings is one of the most important objects of the plan for its future. This kind of town may be a centre of tourist attraction, a place of pilgrimage, the home of an ancient university or a cathedral town. Many of its traders will live largely upon business brought into the town by visitors who are drawn by the interest of mediaeval buildings and historic associations. It is to the advantage of such a place that as little as possible should be done to disturb its old world character, and planning proposals



SUTTON SCARSDALE, DERBYSHIRE.



KIRBY HALL, NORTHANTS.

should be modest and so framed as to allow the preservation of buildings of slight architectural or historic interest, where they help to give the town its character. York, Winchester, Bath, Salisbury and Chichester are a few of the towns in this category. For many of the smaller country market towns it is possible to prepare a similar type of plan.

Another example of the "preservation" plan is provided by the City of Cambridge. Here the consultants to the planning authority, Professor Sir William Holford and Professor H. M. Wright, advocate a strict limitation in the expansion of the city lest the increase in demand for commercial floor space in the centre, and all the road traffic associated with it, destroy the existing pleasant character and scale of buildings in the city. To widen the main streets would involve the demolition of costly commercial premises as well as that of buildings of real architectural interest. The consultants advise against the street widening proposals of the City Council and suggest instead the construction of a new inner relief road to alleviate traffic congestion in the city centre, where at present carriageways are in places barely wide enough to allow two opposing streams of traffic to pass.

In most of our predominantly industrial and commercial towns fine buildings are more scarce, since the pace of rebuilding has been such as to sweep away the pleasant mediaeval and Georgian houses, where any existed near the centre of the town. They have been replaced by the warehouses, factories and railways of the industrial revolution. In Manchester, for example, not more than 20 buildings in the central area of the city are included in the list of buildings of architectural or historic interest prepared under Section 30 of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947. Of these 20 only 3, the Cathedral, St. Ann's Church and Chetham's Hospital, are listed in Grade I as having highest priority for preservation. In industrial towns the needs of present day commercial life are paramount and the few surviving historic buildings present the planner with knotty problems. Where an historic building has been artificially preserved upon an isolated site unrelated to other buildings of its kind or period, the result is not often happy. Examine the Bargate in Southampton, incongruously preserved upon the central island of a traffic roundabout. Who would expect to find a gateway completely surrounded by modern shops, and where the passer-by desiring a closer look may well jeopardise his life in reaching or leaving the island? The Potter Gate in Lincoln has shared a similar fate though here the surroundings are not so alien.

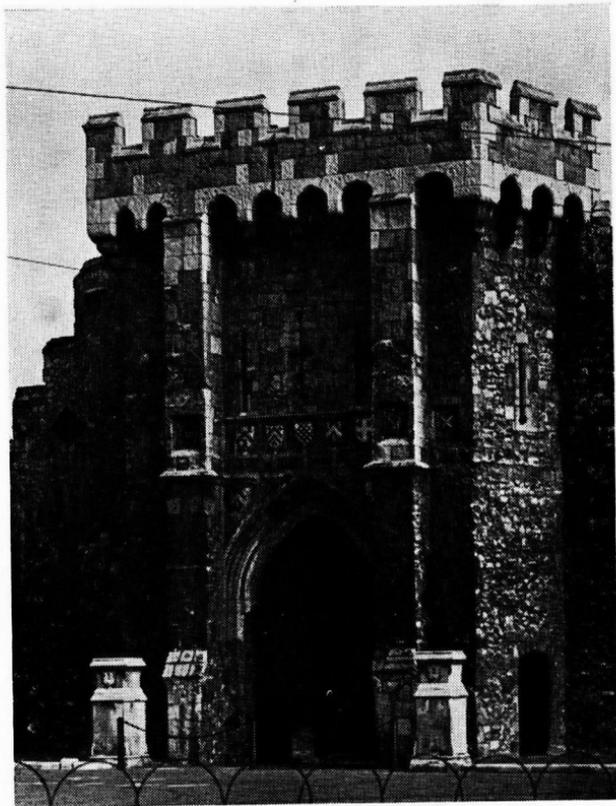
An alternative to this form of treatment is that given to Sir Christopher Wren's Temple Bar, the gateway to the City of London which was removed in 1878 due to the obstruction it caused to traffic in Fleet Street. It was re-erected in Theobalds Park, Cheshunt, where it stands to-day

awaiting, perhaps, a return to some site in London more closely linked with its former associations. The purist may question the propriety of these peregrinations but to a harassed town planner such a solution must be considered where the building concerned is reasonably portable. Large buildings can rarely be moved due to the enormous costs involved, and where they occupy sites of great value and no longer fulfil the purpose for which they were designed there is, inevitably, an argument for demolition. It may be possible in some instances by skilful adaptation to convert buildings for some useful purpose. Many fine town houses, too large for the present day mode of life, have been fairly satisfactorily converted into flats. Others have been used as galleries and museums but the demand for such premises is strictly limited. There must remain a number of gracious but unprofitable buildings which, if they are to be preserved, become a charge upon public funds, whether of the Treasury or of the local authority.

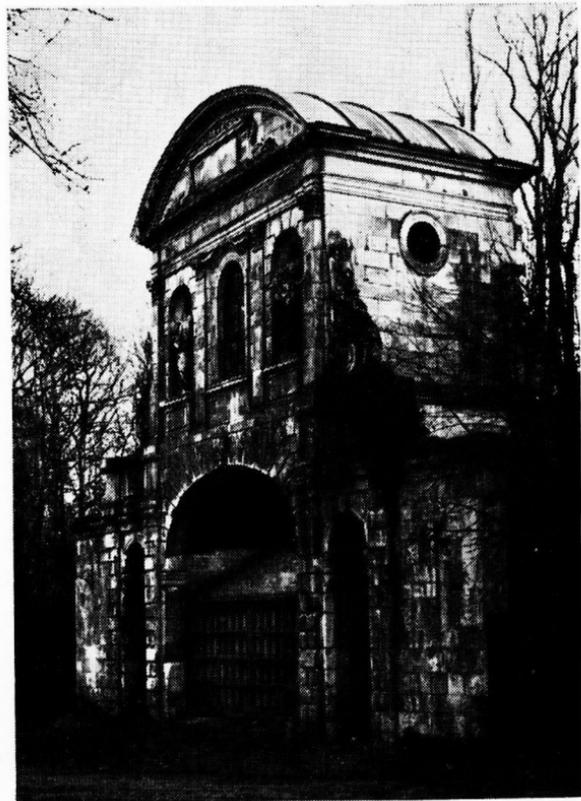
Country mansions, which form so large a part of the English architectural heritage, present peculiarly difficult problems to those who seek to preserve them. If the approach is pedantic, then the house may be preserved, a static and unusable shell, to be looked at but not lived in. It may even be a partial ruin as is Kirby Hall. A more human approach recognizes that the majority of the country houses have already undergone numerous alterations and "improvements" to the taste of their owners. The house is primarily a home for its occupants, particularly if the family has been living in it for a very long time. Such a view would countenance considerable structural changes to enable the house to continue in its former role, that of giving shelter to a family. Failing this it could be adapted to house some school or institution or the like.

If a mansion is geographically situated close to centres of population there are opportunities of using it with its grounds as a place of recreation as is Lyme Park near Stockport. Unfortunately there are many buildings not situated in this way nor on any tourist route and a number of them await destruction. For example, Sutton Hall at Sutton Scarsdale, near Chesterfield, a fine Palladian mansion built in 1724, now is a ruin facing open cast coal workings.

The desire to preserve buildings may spring from a number of different sources. The first and clearest is an appreciation of the art of architecture and the building as the individual product of an architect's creative mind. Secondly a building may be preserved, not because it is in itself beautiful, but because of the embodiment of features which are individually interesting or beautiful. Lastly a building may be preserved for its association with great men or historic events. In selecting for preservation buildings in these three categories very different kinds of values are involved,



BARGATE, SOUTHAMPTON.



TEMPLE BAR, LONDON, in Theobalds Park.

Photo: E. W. Tattersall.

aesthetic, historic, literary and sentimental. The aesthetic yardstick is the most dependable and the most lasting. The literary and sentimental values are to some extent suspect due to their subjective nature. The fact that a house was once occupied by a great man is not necessarily of any importance at all—the man himself may have been indifferent to his house or may even have actively disliked it. Once one begins to preserve dwellings solely because important people have lived in them it is difficult to know where to stop.

Present day Town and Country Planning legislation carries a statutory system of national survey and protection of historic buildings as far as is desirable but only in a restrictive and negative way. The lists of buildings of special architectural or historic interest are compiled by the Minister of Housing and Local Government or his advisers. The effect of listing is to prevent the owner from demolishing or substantially altering a building without giving two months' notice to the local planning authority. During this period of two months' grace the planning authority has the opportunity of making a "building preservation order" which requires the consent of the planning authority before any affected building can be altered or demolished. The planning authority is also empowered to acquire the preserved building compulsorily if the owner is unable to bear the cost of upkeep himself. In such a case half the compensation payable to the owner is recoverable by the authority from the Exchequer.

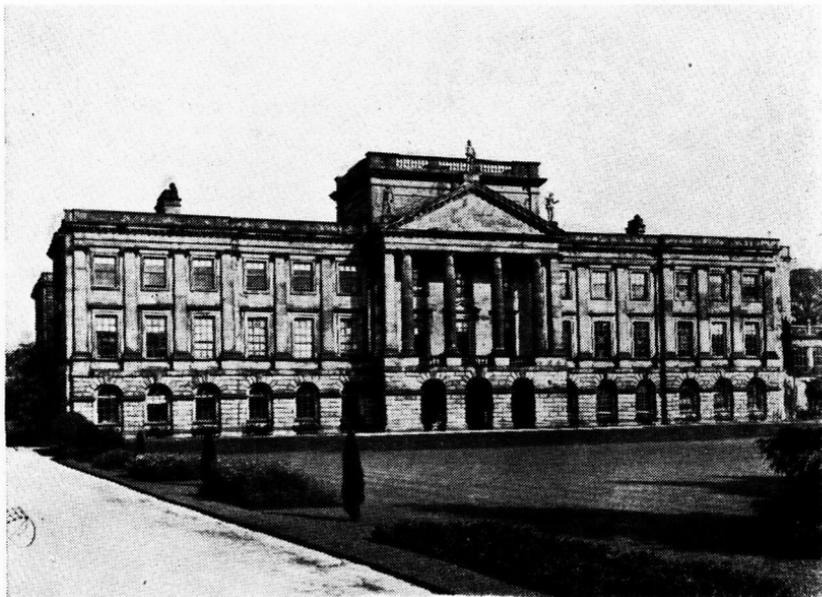
The statutory "listing" of buildings has progressed steadily but somewhat slowly since it was commenced in 1944. The latest progress report of the Minister of Housing and Local Government states that, up to the end of 1954, lists had been prepared for 819 administrative areas out of a total in England and Wales of 1,480. The lists covered a total of 45,832 buildings whilst 342 buildings were protected by building preservation orders.

The machinery for listing and making preservation orders in respect of historic buildings is satisfactory as far as it can go, but it stops short of the provision of funds for the upkeep of a building once a preservation order is in force. For this reason the local authorities concerned are often reluctant to make preservation orders, if so doing means that they will have to assume the burden of maintenance for the preserved building. One might have expected as a corollary of a preservation order some financial means for making it effective in fact. This has not been the case. The government have seen fit to approach the financial problem from a different direction. Following upon the Gowers report of 1950, the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act, 1953, provides for monetary grants for the upkeep of historic buildings to be paid where approved applications are received from owners. Under this Act the

Minister of Works was given powers to set up Historic Buildings Councils for England, Wales and Scotland and the purpose of the Councils was to advise him concerning the making of grants. The Councils were set up late in 1953 and in the following year grants to a total of £215,000 had been offered to applicants in respect of 86 historic buildings in Great Britain.

There is a readily apparent gap between the listing of an historic building and the action of its owner in seeking assistance from the appropriate Historic Buildings Council. Many owners may not wish to preserve their historic buildings. Listing is the responsibility of one Minister, the distribution of grants in aid of maintenance is that of another. The gap is to some extent filled by other bodies whose valuable work in the cause of preservation is well known; most important of these are the National Trust, the Georgian Group, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Ancient Monuments Society.

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LYME PARK, CHESHIRE.