

RECORDING ENGLISH ARCHITECTURE

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THE systematic recording of our architecture in England is sadly in arrears. The principal continental countries are far in advance of us in this department, a circumstance as much due perhaps to the Englishman's reluctance to give his own land credit for any signal achievement in the arts as to the practical man's indifference to these things. But we are beginning to learn that not only is the country unbelievably rich in beautiful buildings but that many phases of our architecture have qualities of their own which place them in the highest rank. The pity of it is that this realization has come at a time when the preservation and maintenance of fine buildings are becoming increasingly difficult and when the profession of architecture itself seems to have resolved to cut adrift from the practice of an art which for at least two and a half thousand years has transformed building into a continuous pageant of idealized beauty

But the rapid destruction of architecture in England, the abandonment of many of our country houses, the declaration of redundancy of certain of our churches and the removal of buildings great and small which stand in the way of new or wider roads, fresh projects and the course of general re-development, make the necessity for adequate record greater than ever before. If we are not to lose much that is essential to the connected story of English architecture we must get proper records on paper without any loss of time.

The unfortunate fact that recording has not kept pace with destruction does not mean that England has lacked devoted workers in this field. In the eighteenth century we had many notable artists who were skilful topographical draughtsmen and in the nineteenth century much important work was done by architects and others. The Society of Antiquaries led the way with its remarkable series of *Vetusta Monumenta*, local archaeological and architectural societies were formed to put on record buildings of interest, and Britton, Pugin and many more undertook elaborate measured drawings of mediæval work and published them in the form of fine engravings. The new art of photography was employed from the start in taking views of architecture and this work, encouraged by

many societies and undertaken by enthusiastic students grew in volume until the early part of the present century. But it has not always been easy to find where this material could be consulted.

The London Survey Committee which was founded by Mr. C. R. Ashbee in 1894 was one of the first organizations that set out to record the work of a given area thoroughly and methodically. The work which the Committee started and which has been assisted by the London County Council that is now carrying it on, envisaged full measured drawings of the buildings of interest, ample photographs, both general views and studies of detail, and sufficient research to give the main elements and the background of their history. This work can be studied in the 25 parish volumes and 15 monographs, printed in a uniform quarto size, amongst which are the records of several important buildings lost to London through the air-raids of the recent war. Inspired by the Survey of London, the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments commenced a national survey in 1908, and although the Commission's volumes limit their drawings to plans, the value of which is nevertheless very considerable, the investigators' MS. cards contain a great many additional drawings, such as sketches with dimensions and sections of mouldings, etc.

There is no doubt that photography has contributed immensely to our records of buildings and the speed with which the camera can be used is of the greatest value when time is limited. But it must never be forgotten that photography can give us only a partial record and that it is essential to have measured plans, elevations, sections and details if we are to perpetuate the designs of destroyed buildings and learn from them the essential facts as to their place in the history of our national architecture.

In 1942, as the result of a conference of learned societies and individuals who foresaw the losses in buildings which the war was likely to inflict, the National Buildings Record was formed, to serve the double purpose of undertaking the production of records where these are lacking and of bringing together and indexing all existing and new records in order to provide a general service of information for students. The immediate peril gave the new institution no alternative but to rely mainly on its photographers and in the 14 years of its existence the National Buildings Record has built up a collection that is approaching 450,000 items. Amongst these is a very considerable number of measured drawings which have been acquired by gift or purchase in addition to those carried out by its own staff. A special effort is now being made to expand this department of the Record's work and to ensure that no building of importance is demolished before drawings have been made.

Before we examine in greater detail the nature of this recording there are two things that should be said. In the past there has been a good deal

of duplication of records since at a time when students used to do very much more measuring to increase their own proficiency than they have done for a generation or more, they were attracted by standard examples of different periods. The National Buildings Record has a card index of all measured drawings as far as it has been possible to ascertain their existence both in public collections and in private hands and the index is available for reference for all who wish to consult the drawings themselves and for those who contemplate further work and may wish to know if any subject they have in mind has already been covered. The second point has a like bearing on the value of collecting the maximum information on the subject of existing records at a centre from which it can be made generally available. Most architects who have been in practice for some years or whose firms go back before these times must have in their portfolios surveys of buildings some at least of which have historical or architectural interest. If the whereabouts of these drawings were disclosed it would probably bring to light many thousands of records which are now unknown. To turn up or handle old drawings is a long and thankless task when no business compels and yet what a valuable service would be rendered to help the completeness of our architectural history, if those who possess these records would deposit them or allow them to be copied.

Among records the measured plan is of the first importance. Even a sketch plan with rough dimensions can be a great help towards the proper interpretation of photographs and the understanding of the design. The plan sets all the parts in their proper relationship and establishes the position of the salient features and if it is correctly dimensioned with as much detail as is necessary and with the proper diagonals, it is the key to everything else. When the building which is to be recorded is mediaeval or when it comprises within it more than one period, the plan may be the sole clue to its history and development. In such cases it is especially important to note the thickness of all walls and the points at which this varies and also to record changes in material or in type of masonry, brickwork etc. Those who have had experience in measuring ancient churches will know how valuable an intelligently annotated plan can be in recording the vicissitudes through which the building has passed. Students should familiarize themselves with the scheme of hatching in use by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, the Victoria County Histories and by most other bodies of the kind. It should be noted too that whatever the scale used in the original drawing it is becoming the practice, in the case of churches other than of cathedral size, to reproduce the plans in printed reports to a scale of 24-ft. to the inch.

Next in importance to the plans are the sections which should show

as far as it is possible the internal construction of the building. The choice of the lines where these sections should be drawn must be made with care so as to give the maximum information regarding floor levels, roof construction etc. The sections often provide the main opportunities for internal elevations and in buildings such as churches these may at times be of greater importance than the exteriors. In any case it is always better to have too many sections than too few. Where they are sufficient it is possible to draw out the external elevations from these and from the plans, but if an important section is omitted, the loss cannot be made good. By drawing some of the sections to a larger scale, schemes of internal decoration can be shown and many of the minor details of the building can be indicated.

To complete the general survey external elevations should be made of all fronts. If the building is of stone, it is valuable to have the jointing shown, in the case of all dressings and worked surfaces. It is not of course necessary to draw all the joints of ashlar facing, but some part should be shown to give a key to the whole, and in mediaeval buildings changes of wall surfaces should be noted. The drawings of stonework give a more faithful and characteristic representation of the craftsmanship if the mason's joints are shown as well as the worked mitres of the mouldings. It is not necessary in recording brick buildings to show all the courses, although a note of their height and the size of the bricks should not be omitted. In timber framing care should be taken to show the through timbers, the jointing and pins so as to present a proper picture of the construction.

Beside the general survey of a building many features will require large scale detailing with, wherever necessary, full-size sections of mouldings and careful studies of ornament. The latter can sometimes be sufficiently recorded by judicious photography but nothing can replace the exact sectional contours of mouldings. To the modern architect the function or use of mouldings is becoming almost unknown and yet in all the great styles of the past they provide the chief means of architectural expression. Their essential quality can be realized only by the careful measurement and study of their exact form and the relationship of all their members, and this knowledge (or the lack of it) is sure to be clearly reflected in every attempt to put on paper a representation of the design of buildings of whatever period. It is never difficult to gauge the extent to which the draughtsman has familiarized himself with these essential elements when one sees his drawing and on this will depend a large measure of his success. It used to be a commonplace that the means employed by the architect in his delineation of architectural form were by the alternate light and shadow of his mouldings. No study therefore of

historical buildings can hope to be successful until this elementary matter is mastered. Very pleasant and useful studies can be made of the various features, for instance, of an 18th century house. The staircase will generally provide an excellent subject. Such a drawing should be to a scale of at least an inch to the foot; plans should be made of all flights, and a general section and elevation drawn. In addition to this a full-size section of the handrail and the string, with the baluster drawn in elevation between the two, can be conveniently set against the shape of one of the newels. If there are carved brackets beneath the steps, one of them should also be drawn full-size, and any enrichment that may be found elsewhere.

In measuring buildings the task will be very much lightened if two persons can work together. The use of the tape measure will require two pairs of hands, and much time will be saved if one person can call the measurements while another sets them down. The plotting which is done on the site should be on regular sized sheets of paper held in a frame, and each part should be carefully drawn so that the measurements can be shown clearly and easily read afterwards when the final drawings are being made. Good clear pencil work, inked in at completion, without a colour wash or shadows, is the best for permanent records and allows of clear reproduction, when the drawings are required to be published. All lines should be firm and of even emphasis, not too heavy for the clarity of detail, but not too fine to be difficult for the process engraver.

With regard to the classes of buildings that await record, some few remarks can be made. In spite of the considerable work that has been expended on the measurement of English mediaeval architecture—our cathedrals and parish churches, monastic houses, castles and the like, we are still far from having an adequately documented record of all that is required to make our architectural history tolerably complete. Mr. John Harvey has in preparation for the Council for British Archaeology lists of buildings of which more detailed drawings are required, and indeed it would be difficult to find a single building that had been completely recorded as it should be. It is regrettable that there is not yet available a full corpus of plans of English parish churches. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments measures each church in the county surveys, but its progress is slow. Of the 300 or more churches in Sussex, the county Archaeological Society has published the plans of some 200, but many interesting buildings are still unmeasured. That there are still parts of this vast field unexplored is a promise of much pleasure still in store for those who really enjoy learning more of the wonders of our ancient craftsmanship, but the incompleteness of our records is still a serious handicap to the student who lacks material to make his studies effective. When we go further into the domain of the renaissance, we shall find

that not only have a great many important buildings escaped record, but that a large number is still practically unknown. The students of natural history have sought, described, recorded and classified our entire fauna and flora, and left no insect undiscovered or particularized, but a multitude of examples of human art and craftsmanship has been neglected, although each detail is a link in the chain of civilization and national culture.

Nor is it necessarily in the more important buildings that we shall find all the significant facts that interpret the life and ideals of those to whose skill and ingenuity we owe so much to-day. Farmhouses and cottages will be found well worthy of record, not only because of their simple and often inspired shaping but because their types of plans form the basis of an interesting sociological study. They also contain many of the elementary points of technique in masonry, carpentry etc. that serve to elucidate more elaborate constructions elsewhere.

One most instructive and fascinating type of record is to draw the whole frontage of a street in one of our older towns, dating from the period when urban architecture was neighbourly and when its elements seemed never to fail to group effectively. At the National Buildings Record we have street elevations of Lewes, Marlborough, Blandford, Burford and many other county and market towns. The width of each house and the inclination of the ground can be taken from the Ordnance Survey plans, and when their lines are set up the heights of storeys, windows, roofs, and chimneystacks can be calculated from a few simple measurements. For instance, if the houses built of brick are chosen to give the scale, the height of four or more courses can be measured, and by counting these courses, fairly accurate heights can be secured for all the features of the front. Other houses will have regular quoins, which when the size is known will assist in the same way. With a little ingenuity and care it will be found possible to obtain an approximately correct elevation of the whole street to say a scale of 16-ft. to the inch. Beside their value as records, these studies are most illuminating as to the methods by which street fronts especially in the 18th century, were given infinite variety in detail without interfering with the basic relationship that brought them into one harmonious scheme.

In conclusion a word or two may perhaps be usefully added on the subject of photographs as records. There can be no doubt of course that the camera will give us quickly and effectively the general idea of a building and also what is sometimes equally valuable it will place it for us in its surroundings and show its relationship to other buildings in a group. But one must always remember that the perspective of the camera lens is different from that seen by the human eyes, and there are many elements of foreshortening and distortion which militate against the

value of the normal photograph as a record. If however elevations and particular details are photographed exactly opposite the subject, the results can be of very great value, and the light and shade assists greatly in the appreciation of the modelling of the moulded or carved surfaces. Serious attention should be paid to getting the subject in exact focus to ensure clean and clear definition. Modern plates and films which are manufactured for rapid exposures seldom give the remarkable distinctness which we see in earlier photographic work, and the prints of to-day will not bear comparison with those produced at the end of the last century, unless an equal amount of skill and time is taken in their production. Nor are they as permanent. Much thought is needed to bring the products of this transient age to the fine and enduring standards which record work demands.

BOOK REVIEW

The Life and Work of James Gibbs (1682-1754) by Bryan Little. Batsford, 1955. 25/-.

This is the first biography of an architect well known as the designer of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and as the author of two important architectural publications. Mr. Little's book is thoroughly readable, and an excellent treatment of the subject. Generous guidance is offered to those wishing to proceed to further enquiry, while, for the general reader, the book itself provides a wholly adequate and enjoyable review.

James Gibbs' output was diverse, and is not easy to relate to the context of its time. It may be recalled that recently Gibbs has been linked, by Mr. Sitwell, to the Rococo, while Mr. Summerson considers him essentially the individualist. Now, Mr. Little has described him as "the eclectic practitioner in Baroque and 'Palladian' alike." Gibbs, it seems, even dabbled in the Gothick; but in the Palladian quality of his country house interiors there is a truer reflection of the artistic climate of the earlier Georgian phase. Consider the doorcases of Gibbs' Orleans House, Octagon and their similarity to those of Leoni's Moor Park Hall; while the doorcases of Gibbs' Hall at Ditchley (apart from the putti) are very like those of Houghton Hall. In all, no doubt, a common factor is the contribution of the stuccoist Artari; but in these designs we see that Gibbs and the Palladians stand very close together. On the same theme, the reminder that Gibbs was born only a year before William Kent may be surprising—although the fact that he outlived Kent by six years was perhaps even less expected.

The author sketches the visit of an 'inconveniently corpulent' Gibbs to the decaying Tetbury Church, and in so doing, provides the story of Hiorne's delightful Gothic revivalist structure with a new and interesting introduction. Another note, on which modern architects of hospitals and 'places of learning' might reflect, is that Gibbs when so commissioned either made no professional charge at all or reduced his fee to two and a half per cent.

Mr. Little's work is to be recommended; it provides much food for thought—particularly on the relationship of Gibbs and the Palladians. In this connection, his comments on Gibbs' second publication *Rules for drawing the Several Parts of Architecture*, will be found equally rewarding.