

## ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION: AN APOLOGY AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

*by Matthew Saunders*

Conservation is now widely accepted in the words of "1066 And All That" as "a good thing". And yet it is based upon the fundamentally contentious tenet that there is merit or at least attraction in Age per se. Although the cry is rarely as crude as Old is Good and New is Bad it remains impossible, in England and Wales, for structures completed after 1945 to be listed. On the other hand, all buildings built before 1700 which survive in anything like their original condition almost always so qualify.

The perversity seems the more pronounced when one considers that architecture, although it can be massive and four-square, enjoys a vulnerability to decay and destruction, normally worsened by age, that is unique among the arts. With paintings the price of disfavour is normally no more than relegation to the attic (just as that of exaggerated respect is export to America). Dirt can obscure and light can fade but the deliberate destruction of great paintings is sufficiently rare for Lady Churchill's burning of Graham Sutherland's portrait of her husband to attract front page headlines. Music may be distorted, it may be forgotten but as long as the manuscripts remain or recordings are taken, perpetuity is guaranteed. Architecture, however, suffers more than any other from the physical demands of "progress" and the seemingly inexorable dynamic towards decay displayed by practically all natural building materials. Buildings may still delight the eye as the architect intended but where the practical use for which they were constructed has lapsed, market forces so often dictate their fate.

It is possible during bouts of pessimism to imagine that Conservation is fighting against the inevitability of natural dissolution. Oak timbers do become harder with age but rarely survive beyond a millennium. Even the hardest granite can crack. The anthropomorphic analogy demands that if humans are born and die why should this not apply to the products of their labour.

Some primitive tribes did atrophy under the deadening influence of ancestor worship. But that is an extreme and no advanced civilization this century has failed to combine a confident advance into the future with a respect, even reverence, for the better legacies of the past. Society is normally seen as a synthesis rather than a succession of New and Old. The revolutionary can display passionate conservatism. The father of the Conservation Movement in this country, William Morris, is also celebrated as a Utopian Communist thinker and agitator. In Italy pioneering work on conservation was carried out after the War by the Communist authorities in Bologna. This is not to ally conservation with the

Left Wing. Indeed far from it; most present-day conservationists extend their architectural conservatism into politics. Rather it is to show the irony that sympathy for historic buildings has so often accompanied faith in the future. Indeed to seek to preserve buildings of beauty is to declare implicitly that there will be a future in which they can be enjoyed. This is the antithesis of the view held by Mr. James Watt, former Interior Secretary under President Reagan, who declared in 1983, as a Born Again Christian, that if the end of the world was just twenty years away there was no need for conservationist legislation. Why should the Government use its best endeavours to protect buildings and landscapes when all will be destroyed?

The modern Conservation Movement is more than the simple reverence for the Past displayed by previous generations and has developed two important variations. Firstly, there is the element of compulsion. The legislative system developed in this country after the War fully accepts the right of the nation as a whole to insist on the conservation of given buildings, if necessary, against the wishes and against the interests, of a private owner. Most listed buildings were in fact constructed by private individuals but the law now takes the view that decisions on their fate should be corporate. Secondly, the present wish to conserve derives not from personal taste nor even primarily from aesthetic approval. Buildings are now listed for their objective "interest" not "merit" or "beauty". The scholarly desire is to retain representative works from all past ages. Queen Elizabeth I is said to have ordered the preservation of the remains of Tickhill Castle in Yorkshire because of its associations with John of Gaunt but as the building was in her possession there was no element of compulsion. The first ever ordinances for protection were introduced in the early 17th century by Gustavus Adolphus and Charles XI of Sweden. The first legislation in Britain arrived in the form of the Ancient Monuments Act of 1882 which heralded an almost linear progress through the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act to that of 1971 which provides most of the present legal framework. Even the pioneers of the Conservation Movement would have been out of sympathy with the present comprehensiveness of concern. The thinking of Ruskin and Morris was selective. Their protective instincts were reserved almost exclusively to the medieval, however broad it was within that time span extending from the great cathedrals to what Ruskin termed the "little grey weatherbeaten building, built by ignorant men, torn by violent ones and patched by blunderers". They sought to conserve partly in order to inspire their generation to follow the style of their ancestors. Morris did bring himself to protest at the proposed demolition of some Wren City churches but generally he felt only antipathy towards classical architecture.

It would of course be quite wrong to describe Conservation as imposed from above. Legislative advance in every case has been encouraged by public agitation, pressure from below. Perhaps the first body of like-minded in the field was the Society of Antiquaries, originally founded in 1572. In 1817 John Britten, the indefatigable architectural publicist, was involved in an abortive move to establish a nationwide society for the preservation of ancient buildings. The Association for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths formed in York in 1826 to raise funds for the restoration of the City walls was probably the first society set up specifically in opposition to a proposed demolition. The Sidmouth Improvement Committee founded in 1846, and surviving still as the Sid Vale Association, considers itself to be the first local amenity society. It certainly seems to have been the first motivated by the desire to conserve. The Society for the Improvement of the Town of Ledbury (in Herefordshire) founded in 1812, formed a sub-committee in 1820 to acquire and demolish Butchers Row, a narrow street of medieval timber-framed properties regarded not as a picturesque souvenir of the past, as they might be today, but as a cursed repository of vice and disease. The great advance came in 1877 with the establishment of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, generally regarded as the oldest conservation society in the world. The founding committee members, alongside William Morris and John Ruskin, included the architects J.F. Bentley, who designed Westminster Cathedral, E.R. Robson and Philip Webb, the painters, Holman Hunt, Burne-Jones, Alma Tadema, G.F. Watts, Millais and Rossetti and the historian, Thomas Carlyle. The next great step forward came in 1895 with the foundation of the National Trust by Octavia Hill, Canon Rawnsley and Sir Robert Hunter. In 1904 the Trust House Movement, founded, as part of the Temperance Campaign, by Earl Grey (whose predecessor had carried out extensive excavations at Fountains Abbey) took as one of its objects the acquisition of public houses of historic and architectural interest. The hope was that the historic pub would attract the drinker away from the modern gin palace so that his moral well being could be supervised as he sat within the inglenook. The Ancient Monuments Society and the Royal Fine Arts Commission followed in 1924, the Council for the Protection of Rural England in 1926, the Georgian Group in 1937, the Victorian Society in 1958 and the Thirties Society (concerned with Inter-War architecture) in 1980. In 1975 one of the most successful of all conservation groups, SAVE, burst upon the conservation scene largely through the endeavours of Marcus Binney, more irreverent in style and later more strategic in its thinking. The majority of the founding founders of such societies have been young, the precipitants normally being the loss of a particularly outstanding

monument. These sacrificial lambs were the demolition of the Adelphi for the Georgians, that of the Euston Arch for the Victorians and the Firestone Factory for the Thirties.

The combination of legislation from above and freely developed sentiment from below, represented by national and local societies and concerned individuals has brought the conservation movement to its present position of pre-eminence. Its sentiments are now so widely spread among the 1.3 million members of the National Trust, the 300,000 members of local amenity societies, the 30,000 members of the C.P.R.E. and the 12,000 members of the more specialist national amenity societies that it seems possible to hope that the pendulum has swung so far that it can no longer be regarded as fashionable and transitory.

There have of course been critics. Only perhaps one ideology, that of Marinetti and the Futurists in early 20th century Italy, has stated that progress and respect for the past are mutually exclusive and that the former depends on systematic destruction. His demands for the regular burning of museum exhibits did however find ideological support in China during the Maoist Cultural Revolution. Even the most adventurous modern architects such as James Stirling and Richard Rogers accept the need for some control. Stirling lobbied with enthusiasm, although without success, in defence of a warehouse in Manchester of 1911 of pioneering design which had inspired his History Faculty Building at Cambridge, at a Public Inquiry held in the 1970's. In 1983 Rogers personally visited President Mitterand in France to protest at the threat to the setting of Le Corbusier's extraordinary church at Firminy.

Support for conservation can often be for extra-architectural reasons. Perhaps the most powerful is a backward-looking longing for a lost Golden Age and a belief in the largely irredeemable rottenness of the present. Ruskin declared in "The Seven Lamps of Architecture" that "We have built like frogs and mice since the 13th century (except only in our castles)". Morris confessed in 1894 that "Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been, and is, hatred of modern civilization". To Ruskin the architecture of the past, however imperfect, always was evidence of honest labour: "All old work has been hard work. It may be the hard work of children, of barbarians, of rustics; but it is always their utmost". And yet however extreme these statements might seem it cannot be denied that much of the strength of the present conservation movement derives from the unprecedented financial and social failure of modern architecture. Tower blocks erected just ten or twenty years ago have had to be blown up in Birkenhead, Leeds, Hackney and Liverpool. And yet: 18th century houses were notoriously jerry built whilst the structural

brinkmanship displayed at many cathedrals occasionally overreached itself. The west tower of Hereford did collapse in 1788 as did the central tower at Chichester in 1861. Past building practices contain basic design flaws such as valley gutters which become easily clogged and allow the ingress of water into vulnerable roof spaces, and iron cramps placed within stonework, designed to bond blocks but splitting them as they rust and expand. The famous crooked spire at Chesterfield is testimony both to the imperfection and the adventurousness of medieval architectural knowledge. To love the past by damning the present is in the end intellectually bankrupt if only because today's present becomes tomorrow's past and by that law the unloved must inexorably become the loved. Gilbert's litany of the foolish from "The Mikado" includes:

"The idiot who praises, with enthusiastic tone,  
All centuries but this, every country but his own".

It is moreover a commonplace that value often increases with age. The older the building the greater is likely to be its rarity value and the more beguiling its visual appeal. Ruskin declared that "A building cannot be considered as in its prime until four or five centuries have passed over it". Like wine buildings mature. Philip Webb told Lethaby that he defended ancient buildings because "You see, they are my grandmother". Throughout the later years of the 19th century it seemed to be a regular pastime of architects to design replacements for two buildings by William Wilkins, the National Gallery and the Screen in Kings Parade, Cambridge, then universally abominated but now both listed Grade I. Distance can cleanse structures of unpleasant associations. In India statues of Viceroys and Generals toppled on Independence are now being repaired and reinstalled. It is to a large extent the close association of the great Palladian and Victorian country houses of Ireland with the power of the Anglo-Irish that has stunted the development of the conservation movement within that country. But this association of the lifestyle with the buildings that it produced, can work in reverse. The traditionalist 20th century architect, Sir Albert Richardson, banned electricity from his beloved Georgian house at Ampthill and at Williamsburg in Virginia inhabitants of this reconstructed 18th century town wear 18th century dress. Such attempts at fidelity are however plagued by irreversible differences. Ceiling and lintel heights within medieval cottages were designed for humans that were an average of four inches shorter than 20th century man.

There are further associational defences. These include the belief that historic buildings are directly therapeutic. This thinking is central to Sue Ryder's campaign to provide homes for the

handicapped within ancient houses such as Leckhampton Court in Gloucestershire. Buildings worn by age provide a sense of permanence amid bewildering change, a defence against what the American author Alvin Toffler has christened "Future Shock". The need for symbols of continuity explains the reverence with which the "progressive" Government of Post-War Poland painstakingly reconstructed the city as it existed before the German invasion as if to testify that that nightmarish experience had never taken place. The 1946 National Land Fund for the purchase of beautiful landscapes and historic buildings, the predecessor of the existing National Heritage Memorial Fund, was specifically designed as a war memorial. There is the curious but rare device of the historic building as a thank-you present: St. Mary Aldermanbury, one of the many Wren churches bombed in the War, was transplanted and rebuilt in Fulton, Missouri to symbolize the Western Alliance whilst various monuments of ancient Egypt were despatched to those countries which had helped modern Egypt to construct the Aswan dam. In much the same spirit sections of the old London Bridge and Canons House were distributed soon after demolition the length and breadth of the country for incorporation into a wide variety of new structures or as garden features; the historic building, or bits of it, as token and souvenir.

The emotional urge to conserve is often in creative friction with the drive to destroy, the obverse, which can possess an equally powerful symbolism. Churches were for burning in the Spanish Civil War as were country houses in Ireland in the early 1920's. The Suffragettes too resorted to arson, Redlynch Park in Somerset being among their victims. In the great age of iconoclasm in the 16th century the defacing and destruction of works of art and architectural decoration became a religious duty. In the Second World War Hitler thought that the so-called Baedeker raids on Bath, Canterbury and York would deliver a mortal psychological blow. In the rhetoric of resistance Churchill declared that he would rather see London in ruins that "tamely and abjectly enslaved". In something of the same spirit John Ruskin pronounced without equivocation that he would prefer to see buildings collapse than he subjected to "false" repair and resoration. The Buddhist Thais believe that greater merit is gained in the after life by building a new temple rather than by repairing old ones. In strict gypsy lore the caravan of the father and all its contents must be burned on his death, each successive generation being obliged to start afresh.

Decay has its champions too. Sir John Vanbrugh's remarks in defence of the ruins of Woodstock Manor in 1709 which he wishes to see retained as an eye catcher from Blenheim were taken to be some of the first "conservationist" remarks. He commended the

“lively and pleasing reactions” which they evoked. The Neo-Classical Movement had such a fondness for ruins and their stimulus to the Muses that where they did not exist they were built afresh, in pure and conscious contrivance.

The economic defences see demolition primarily as wasteful rather than distasteful. Historic buildings are interpreted as an inherited capital resource which it would cost infinitely more nowadays to construct because the absolute price of labour has greatly increased, because old crafts and skills have died and because elaborate legal and planning structures have introduced standard requirements which are expensive to attain. It was calculated in the early 1970's that the equivalent of ten tons of coal was needed to build a new house but only one to renovate an old one. Thick walls and thatch can be more energy efficient and resistant to noise than the concrete and thin partitions of modern structures. The market for “period homes” is so buoyant that derelict cottages and dilapidated but convertible barns are being snapped up at extraordinary prices. It was calculated in 1979 that property values within Lavenham, one of the most perfectly preserved of all medieval towns, were 25% higher than in other Suffolk settlements. Of course, elsewhere the market can have an opposite effect: the timber-framed building of exactly the same size and charm as one in Suffolk which happens to be in Lancashire or another part of the country in economic doldrums can languish unsold on estate agents' books for months. Run down areas are vital to the economy of healthy cities in providing cheap “seedbed” accommodation for small and new businesses. There is an advantage in an economic plateau, in some degree of sleepiness. Lavenham is so remarkably intact because it slid into genteel economic decline thus reducing those surpluses in the 18th and 19th centuries that might have been spent on schemes of ambitious rebuilding. The optimum stimulus to conservation is undoubtedly a buoyant but not booming economy producing sufficient money for a high standard of maintenance and a regular but selective programme of infill replacement.

Arguments both aesthetic, associational and economic provide an impressive and comprehensive intellectual defence of conservation, an armoury against the day, which never seems to come, when a counter-attack may be launched.