

The Recording of Threatened Buildings: an Aspect of the Work of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

by

NICHOLAS COOPER

For many people, the image of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England may still be of a body that is learned, authoritative, but perhaps at the same time not a little glacial. In fulfilment of the terms of its Royal Warrant, granted in 1908 and enjoining it 'to make an inventory . . . of monuments and constructions . . . from the earliest times of the year 1700', its magisterial volumes on the historic buildings and ancient monuments of the Counties of England came out at the rate of one or two every few years, and then at prices that few could afford. The Royal Commission's Inventories when they finally appeared were the last word on their subject, but it seemed increasingly, as time went on, that for many places that word would never be said. However, over the last few years much has taken place within the Royal Commission to shatter this picture. The ever increasing standards of scholarship in all those fields in which the Royal Commission operated, the vast growth in field archaeology, and the extension of the terms of the Royal Warrant to include the great mass of historic buildings put up since 1700, have led the Commission to embark upon work that is relevant to the needs of a faster-moving age.

As long ago as the late 1950s the Royal Commission realized that numerous historic buildings were going to be pulled down long before they could be recorded in the normal progress of the County inventories, and that some kind of emergency recording capacity was needed. The post-war years were a bad time for old buildings, though it might be claimed that worse was to come. Fifteen years of neglect, of material shortages and of the realization that many such buildings could never again have a viable economic life meant that many owners were giving up the struggle to preserve them. In 1956 the Royal Commission entered into a formal arrangement with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government—the forerunner of the Department of the Environment in the control

of listed historic buildings—whereby the Ministry would notify the Royal Commission of listed buildings whose destruction it had been told about, so that the staff of the Commission could record them before demolition took place.

At the same time, a similar arrangement had been made with the National Buildings Record, as the National Monuments Record was then known. The N.B.R., though now a part of the Royal Commission, was then an independent organization devoted to the recording of historic buildings with photographs and drawings, a task embarked on during the war when there was an obvious danger of numerous national treasures being destroyed. There was thus, for the N.B.R., already a commitment to recording threatened buildings, and the 1956 arrangement (at that stage no more than an *ad hoc* liaison worked out by officials) chimed in well with the Record's long standing preoccupations. For the next few years, the Royal Commission and the National Buildings Record divided the recording of threatened buildings between them, with the Record concentrating on the visual record and the Commission on the interpretative.



Fig. 1
Guilden Morden Hall,
Cambridgeshire: the Solar,
probably of the latter part
of the fifteenth century,
recorded during extensive
repairs in 1986-87
*Royal Commission on the
Historical Monuments of
England*

The climax of these early years was the publication by the Royal Commission in 1963 of *Monuments Threatened or Destroyed: a Select List*, which listed, with photographs (for the most part provided by the N.B.R.) and brief descriptions, some 660 buildings that had gone over the last 6 years or which were likely to go. Even allowing for the fact that some of the buildings included were subsequently relieved, the book makes sad reading. Buildings of all dates and every class are represented, though perhaps the largest single category of buildings is country houses. (For many years the *Construction Journal* was essential reading for the staff of the National Buildings Record, with its weekly listing of country house demolition sales.)

In the 1960s things became, if anything, worse. The neglect of the previous decades (which had at least ensured that some buildings had survived because there was no incentive for anyone to pull them down) was replaced by a scramble for sites, and by a search for any building that by demolition or by drastic conversion



Fig. 2

East Hanningfield, Essex. Willis Farm House: a house of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Despite near dereliction, the house was still inhabited when recorded by the Royal Commission in 1986-87, and has now been restored, for the existing occupants, through initiatives by Essex County Council

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

could make money for a developer. Nor was this at first accompanied by a parallel appreciation that the buildings that were being destroyed were of increasing rarity. The dawning realization that this was so, however, combined with a receptiveness to conservation needs on the part of Government which has probably not been equalled since was to produce towards the end of the decade the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act, which both tightened up the controls on the demolition of listed buildings and for the first time established statutory machinery for recording them.

In 1963 the Royal Commission had assumed responsibility for the running of the National Buildings Record (which at the same time changed its name to the National Monuments Record) thereby placing the available resources, the academic as well as the graphic and photographic staff engaged in the recording of threatened buildings, under the same managerial umbrella. It was thus logical for the 1968 Act to give to the Royal Commission the right to record historic buildings when listed building consent had been given for their demolition, a right that the Commission with its integrated staff was now equipped to exercise. This right, confirmed by Section 55 of the 1971 Town and Country Planning Act, still in 1987 the operative statute, has been the basis of the Royal Commission's threatened building recording work ever since.

The essentials of the legislation, set out in the 1971 Act and in the statutory instruments and departmental circulars that lay down the regulations by which the Act is carried out, are that the Royal Commission must be told when consent is given for the demolition of a listed building, and that thereafter the Commission has to be given thirty days clear notice and access to the building to record it before it is pulled down. To make easier the forward planning of the Commission's work, local authorities have to notify the Royal Commission when they first receive an application for listed building consent that involves demolition, and must in due course tell the Commission of the decision they have reached. The procedure is not dissimilar to that under which planning authorities tell the national amenity societies (including the Ancient Monuments Society) of the applications that they receive, but there are slightly more steps involved and, of course, the object in informing the Royal Commission is not so that it can comment on the merits of the proposals, but so that a record can be made. There is a note of the statutory references to the Royal Commission at the end of this article.

On receipt of a notification from a local planning authority, the Commission has first to decide whether the building is of sufficient interest, or the threat to it sufficiently drastic, to make a record desirable. When information is to hand, the Commission can decide whether to record a building or not. There are no wholly



Fig. 3

Nantwich, Cheshire. Whitehall, Welsh Row: a sixteenth-seventeenth-century house, demolished in 1964 after years of neglect, and recorded by the National Monuments Record. A senior inspector of the former Ministry of Housing and Local Government considered the building not to be outstanding—a view that may have been justified by reference to the quality of much else that was under threat at the time

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

objective criteria for making such a decision—all buildings have to be assessed in the light of the knowledge of the Commission's staff. But so far as possible, the following twelve points are kept in mind.

- (1) Buildings that are good or relatively untouched representative examples of a type, plan or structure.
- (2) Innovatory buildings, or buildings that throw light on developments in any of these fields.
- (3) Buildings, the understanding of whose use may throw light on other historical questions.
- (4) Buildings that throw light on the processes associated with them.
- (5) Buildings representing regional practices or anomalies in any of these fields.
- (6) Buildings whose successive alterations or changes of use may throw light on any of the above.
- (7) Buildings representative of a rare or threatened type.
- (8) Unusual buildings, whose form, etc., require explanation.
- (9) Buildings that throw light on the occupation or development of a site, or which are significant from their location.
- (10) Buildings that include historic decoration that is representative, well preserved, or of high quality.
- (11) Buildings significant among the *œuvre* of known architects and designers.
- (12) Buildings whose architectural and historic importance is admitted by consensus

Very often no action need be taken. Many buildings are of types already well documented, and many applications relate to proposals that will do little damage. With the twelve per cent or so of notifications where action is thought to be necessary, the next question is what form the record is to take. In a great many cases, photography alone is adequate to indicate the building's type and character; if it is one of a well known class and its interest is largely statistical, or if its importance lies principally in its decoration or ornament, than no more detailed analysis or record may be needed. In other cases, however, if it has a complex building history that it is desirable to unravel, if its structure itself raises important historical points, or if the interest of the building lies in its plan which should be accurately elucidated and measured, then the building must be visited by a draughtsman and by an architectural historian skilled in the analysis of historical structures.

The Royal Commission's photographers, who create the bulk of the Commission's records of threatened buildings, have much

experience and skill in architectural photography. Photographs are taken to show the salient structural and decorative features of a building, and to show how it appears in its setting, in the street or in the countryside, so that its contribution or amenity is recorded and also any visual information about its location that may help to explain its history (Figs 1-14)

More complex buildings, or those where for any reason it is necessary to come to a fuller understanding of the building's origin, structure, development and use, are visited by one or more of the Commission's academic field recorders. The historical analysis of old buildings is often a complex business, bringing together evidence of several different kinds. Much can be deduced from the structural logic of the building—from the interpretation of blocked openings and straight joints, from recognizing the significance of wall alignments and mutilated decoration, and from the deduction that one part of a structure must necessarily pre-date another. Much can be discovered from working out how the building functioned at different periods: what was the use of the spaces within it, how



Fig. 4

Mansfield Woodhouse, Nottinghamshire. Manor House: the late seventeenth-century staircase, of outstanding quality, was removed in March 1987 following advice to the local planning authority that such work did not require listed 'call in' for the Secretary of State's decision. Recorded by the Royal Commission (at two days' notice)

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

the circulation was arranged for the maximum convenience of those who occupied it, and the significance of different periods and different levels of decoration. Frequently, too, there are points of importance for structural history, in the form of a roof, or the pattern of framing. The full understanding of a building's history depends critically on the analysis of evidence of this kind, and the Royal Commission's architectural field staff have great experience and skill in working out the history of a building from this kind of physical evidence.

The written, analytical record that results from this close examination often needs to be supplemented by drawings, and the Commission's surveyors and draughtsmen are deployed as necessary. Plans are made of virtually all buildings visited by a field recorder, using sophisticated electronic survey techniques when these are appropriate. The precise measurement of wall thicknesses, for instance, or the angles of walls at a junction, may be of critical significance. Sections may be of great value in illustrating a building's development, and the structural system of a roof (together with the scantlings of the timbers) will generally be far clearer from a measured drawing than from a series of photographs.



Fig. 5

Broadwoodwider, Devonshire. Combe Park: a brick house of the early eighteenth century, in a remote part of Devonshire and shortly to be engulfed by a reservoir. The house has been recorded by the Royal Commission; other early buildings on the site have been recorded as a locally-based project, partly funded by the RCHME

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

The Commission generally employs its own staff to carry out the work, but on occasions it will make use of records prepared by other people. Survey drawing and plans, when they exist and when they are accurate, are invaluable in facilitating the Commission's recording and in supplementing—or exceptionally, in taking the place of—its own records. Funds are available for the commissioning of surveys in appropriate cases and from building recorders of proven skills and knowledge.

The ultimate objective is to explain how the building worked, in terms of its structure and use. The Commission's Royal Warrant has been quoted in part already; the same passage goes on to instruct the Commission to record buildings 'connected with or illustrative of the contemporary culture, civilization and conditions of life of the people of England', and therefore the criterion that the Commission has to apply in deciding what to record is the extent to which any particular building throws light on history and on the way people worked and lived. It is, of course, a broad charge; almost everything created in the past throws some light on the tastes, doings and skills of the people who made and used it. But it does provide the Royal Commission with guidance as to how it is to look at buildings, and to the kind of information that it should endeavour to extract from them.

The Commission's Royal Warrant, granted long before the listing of historic buildings was embarked on under the aegis of another Government department, gave as the purpose of its Inventories the identification and recommendation of monuments for preservation. Clearly, this makes little sense for those buildings where a legal decision has already been taken to knock them down. The ultimate purpose of recording such buildings must remain to serve the ends of scholarship—to ensure that even though monuments have been physically destroyed, enough evidence of them survives to inform historians of their nature and form. But without the direct, final objective set out in the Warrant, the Commission's Threatened Buildings Section has been looking increasingly to see what more immediate uses can be found for its records, uses which can be served as well as the needs of future scholars. In doing so, the Commission must be aware of the changing needs of conservation as well as current academic interests.

In the twenty years or so since the passage of the 1968 Act the number of applications for listed building consent that have been notified to the Royal Commission has increased enormously, from 540 in 1969 to 5360 in 1986—an increase of one thousand per cent. However, these figures mislead: they conceal, rather than truly reflecting, some fundamental changes that have taken place over the last twenty years in the field of conservation and in the policies of the Royal Commission.

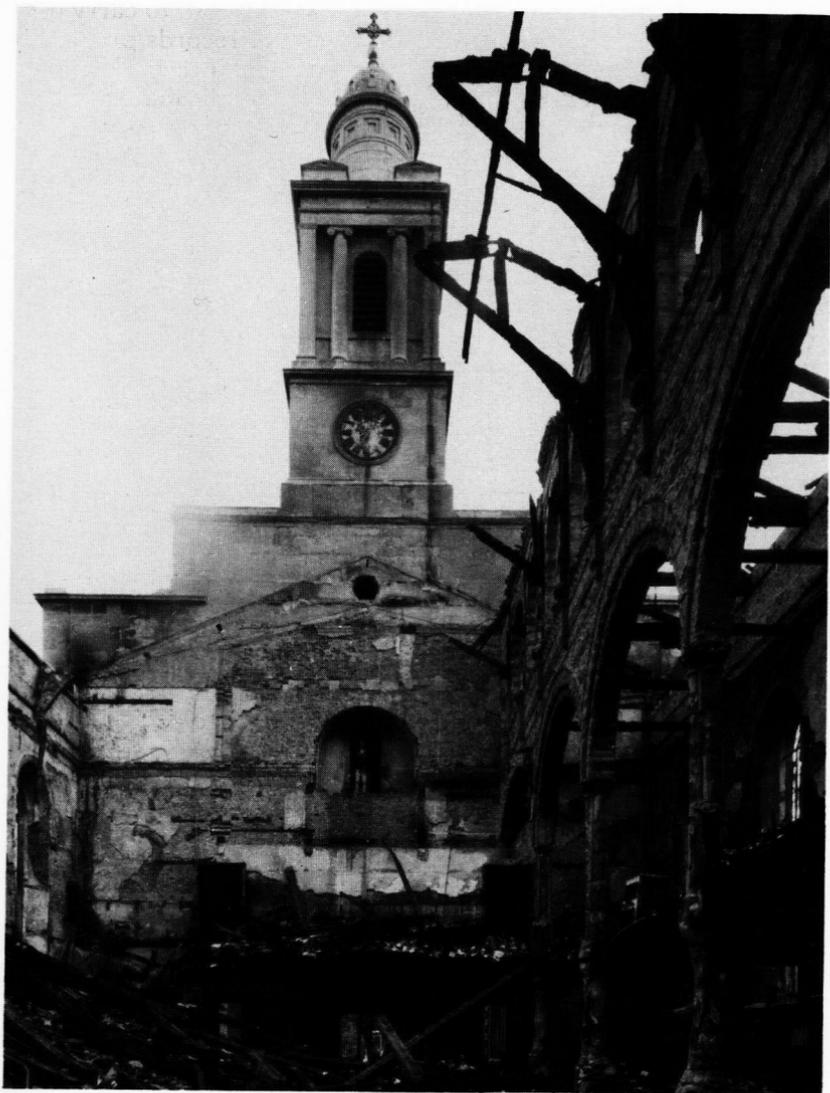


Fig. 6

London. St Peter's Eaton Square: Photographed in October 1987, the day after the church was gutted by fire and before the removal of most of the remaining interior on safety grounds
Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England



Fig. 7

Christchurch, Dorset. Higcliffe Castle: Higcliffe Castle is a romantic extravaganza built in the 1830s by John Donthorne for Lord Stuart de Rothesay, incorporating a number of important medieval sculptural and decorative fragments, mostly of French origin. The house was gutted by fire in the late 1960s, and the carved detail is being fully recorded by the Royal Commission prior to the shell's being turned into flats

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

One thing that has happened is that despite the apparent increase in these figures, in reality the number of buildings threatened with outright demolition has actually declined—and this despite the fact that probably two-and-a-half times more buildings are listed now than were in 1969. So, on the fact of it, there are fewer buildings that need to be recorded, and this must be put down directly to the successes of the conservation movement; what was then tolerable to local councils, perhaps a trifle contemptuous of the old buildings with which they were once familiar, is no longer so now that so much of the country's historic building stock has been destroyed. This should be a blessing, and up to a point it is. But what has happened instead is that the buildings that were formerly destroyed are now modernized, their interiors ripped out or so altered that now they may contain scarcely any information about the life of the past, their exteriors engulfed by additional accommodation or else reduced to mere façades. All this in the name of conservation, and of making old buildings viable—admirable

objectives, but resulting too often in historic buildings preserving little more than a fantasy of the past.

Faced with this situation—a position where there are many more historic buildings being restored than demolished, and where the Royal Commission's duties under the current legislation are some way removed from the objectives of its original Warrant—the Threatened buildings Section of the Commission is devoting more and more attention to buildings that are to be altered or renovated, and where not only can scholarship be served but also the needs of owners, architects, local authority planning officers and inspectors at public enquiries. The degree of destruction in such cases is often, as has been said already, as great as if a building had been demolished completely, but the guidance that can be provided by an expert assessment of the structure may make all the difference in ensuring a more sympathetic treatment of it.



Fig. 8

Calke Abbey, Derbyshire: a typical room, as existing when the National Trust acquired the building, with a tiny part of Sir Vauncey Harpur Crewe's vast collection of stuffed birds. The Royal Commission is taking advantage of the long programme of repairs at the Abbey to try and analyse the building's very complicated structural history

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

Yet even the legislation, laid down in its essentials twenty years ago, is no longer wholly appropriate to this new situation. It empowers the Commission to enter a building to record it after consent for demolition has been given, yet increasingly it is in advance of work that the Commission's expertise can be of immediate value. The law, too, required local authorities and applicants to tell the Commission of the demolition of listed buildings, and though in an obscure section in the last pages of the 1971 Act a definition can be found that makes it clear that the Commission must be told of partial, as well as of total, demolitions, a number of local authorities and owners (and, presumably, their lawyers) seem unaware of this. Most of the applications that the Commission is notified about do not concern outright demolition, but there are still many local authorities that think the Commission need only be told when a building is to be demolished in its totality. It must be said that the Royal Commission enjoys excellent relations with very many local authorities and their conservation staff, who are fully aware of the Commission's responsibilities and needs, but it still seems that the staff of the Threatened Buildings Section spends a good deal of time on the telephone, explaining the requirements of the law.

The solution that the Royal Commission is finding is twofold. One is an increase in staff. For a number of years, the effective field staff of the Commission available for recording threatened



Fig. 9
Richmond on Thames, London.
The Palm House, Kew Gardens:
the interior of Decimus Burton's
Palm House, photographed in
1984 before major reconstruction
that will affect the appearance of
the glazing and consequently the
whole character of the building.
(The Palm House was also
photographed by the Royal
Commission with plants still in
position)
*Royal Commission on the Historical
Monuments of England*

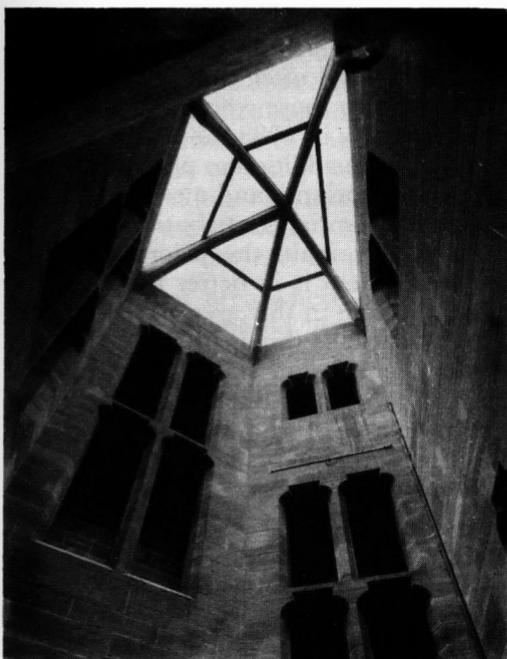


Fig. 10
Peckforton Castle, Cheshire:
the light well to a secondary
staircase. Peckforton Castle,
designed by Salvin and built
in 1844-50, is the most
learned and convincing of
all nineteenth-century sham
castles, but contains detail
that can be appreciated as
pure geometry. Empty for
many years, Peckforton
Castle was fully
photographed in 1985
*Royal Commission on the
Historical Monuments of
England*



Fig. 11
Sleaford, Lincolnshire. Bass
Maltings: a massive complex
of 1892-1905, by H. A.
Couchman. Redundant since
changes in the technique of
malting, permission to
demolish was refused after a
Public Enquiry in 1983, and
the buildings are now empty.
Recorded by the Royal Com-
mission in 1982
*Royal Commission on the
Historical Monuments of England*

buildings throughout England has been five photographers, three architectural historians, and one draughtsman. It is pointless to try to adopt a higher profile, to try and offer the Commission's expert analysis of a historic building to those who may be able to use it, with so tiny a resource. By early in 1988 the staff available to the Threatened Buildings Section, in addition to photographers, will be two draughtsmen and six historians, and a section of this size may begin to make a more substantial contribution not only to scholarship (which must always remain the priority) but to conservation as well. The other element is in better publicity for the Royal Commission's potential role in this area of work. The opportunity to publish such an article as this is of course useful; so is the appearance of Royal Commission staff at meetings of conservation officers and similar gatherings. But the best publicity of all, of course, is the experience of the recipients of the Commission's work that has been provided is both authoritative and immediately useful.

To carry out such work effectively, however, the Royal Commission needs better information. In deciding what buildings it should be recording, the Royal Commission must assess both the importance of the structure and the seriousness of the threat. Some of the descriptions of buildings in the D.o.E. lists—particularly those early ones that have not yet been revised (and

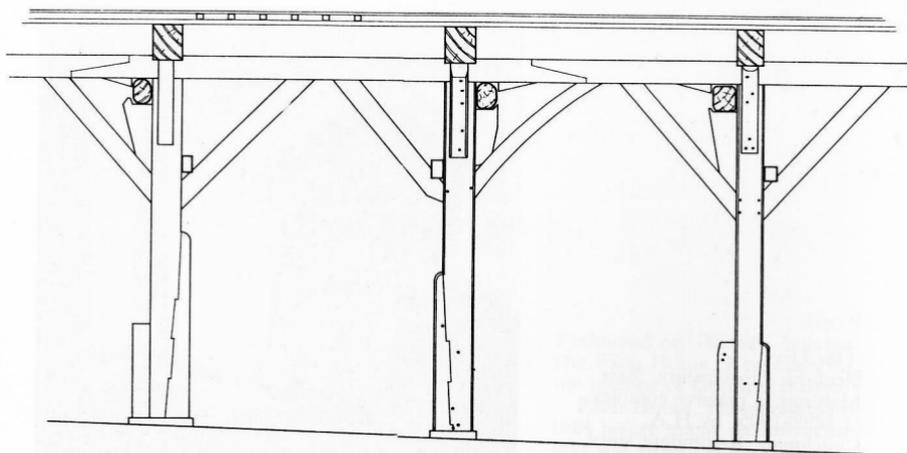


Fig. 12

Chatham, Kent. Chatham Dockyard: The Mast House: built in 1753, the contract required the re-use of timbers from old men-of-war (one of only two buildings known to Royal Commission staff actually to have been built out of ships' timbers! This stipulation explains the form of scarf used on the posts—a form apparently unknown in building construction.

Recorded by the Royal Commission, 1987

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

perhaps will never be)—are far too inadequate to make possible an accurate assessment of their possible importance; very many buildings give little indication externally of what they may contain, and even that indication may only be recognized by someone with skills and experience that were simply not available to the historic building listers of thirty years ago. The staff of the Threatened Buildings Section has often to devote a good deal of time to discovering more about a building before a decision on whether to record it or not can be made.

The other area where better information is often needed is about what is proposed. Applications submitted for listed building consent are often far from precise: the phrase 'internal alterations' very often appears, unqualified, and it is then necessary to establish

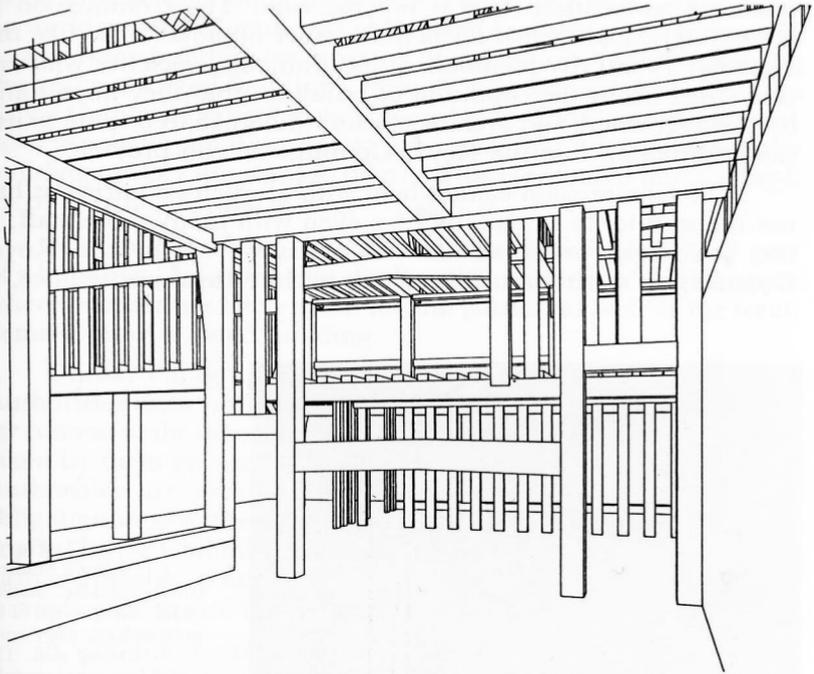


Fig. 13

Newark, Nottinghamshire. The Governor's House: a timber-framed house of 1450-1550, of three jettied storeys to the front and with an open hall range to the rear. The Royal Commission is developing the use of computer-generated, three-dimensional imaging projections for the analysis and comprehension of complicated constructional detail. The drawing shows the two storeyed hall, looking toward the fireplace, with the masonry stack between that and the front (storeyed) range removed to assist in the understanding of their relationship

what is likely to be altered (and destroyed) in the process. This can be quite drastic: the removal of original staircases and partitions, the remodelling of an original roof, or even the total rebuilding of a structure within the old shell, can all be described as alterations by applicants and accepted as such by local planning authorities, and it is then necessary for the Commission to spend yet more time in discovering exactly what is proposed, and in persuading those who have applied for consent to such works that the Royal Commission not only wishes, but has a statutory right, to record the building where such work is taking place. With close on 400 local planning authorities in the country, the task of education is a formidable one, and one that never ends.

It has been implied in what has gone before that the Royal Commission is dependent for all its information on threatened buildings on the statutory notifications that it receives from local planning authorities. This is not the case. The Commission is increasingly approached for help by other organizations (like the National Trust), by members of local amenity societies who are concerned about the condition of buildings that they know, and by private owners and architects who would like to be able to use the information that the Royal Commission can provide.

The Commission cannot help with all such enquiries; it has not the staff to do so. In any case even with many more staff, if the buildings concerned do not measure up to the Royal Commission's criteria of historic or architectural importance, it



Fig. 14
King's Stanley,
Gloucestershire. Stanley
Mill: the ground of an
outstanding, early iron-
framed mill. The
building is being fully
recorded by the Royal
Commission and by the
Institute of Industrial
Archaeology prior to
decisions being made
about its long-term
future
*Royal Commission on the
Historical Monuments of
England*

would not be right for the Commission to divert resources from its fundamental and enduring task. That task must remain the recording for scholarship and for posterity for the historical monuments of England. But should such a monument be in danger, whether from outright demolition or from insensitive and ill-informed alteration; should there be the opportunity for the Royal Commission to record such a monument because of the needs of an owner or a planning office for the Commission's expert analysis; then the Commission will do its best to respond.

Note: The Requirements of the Law

Under Section 55(2)b of the 1971 Town and Country Planning Act, notwithstanding that Listed Building Consent has been granted for the demolition of a listed building (under Section 55(2)a of the Act), such demolition is an offence unless the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England has been given reasonable access to the building for a period of at least one month following the grant of Listed Building Consent, in order that the staff of the Royal Commission may make a record of it. The Commission may, however, before that time state in writing that it has recorded the building or does not want to do so. (This is repeated in Paragraph 75 of D.o.E. Circular 8/87.)

Section 290 of the 1971 Act defines 'building' as 'any part of a building'. It follows that the Royal Commission's rights apply where consent has been given for the partial, as well as the total, demolition of a listed building.

Under Paragraph 81 of Circular 8/87, Local Planning Authorities must notify the Royal Commission of all applications for consent to the demolition of a listed building, and of the decisions taken by them on such applications. Under Paragraph 117 Local Authorities are asked to remind successful applicants of their obligation to give the Royal Commission the one month's notice implied by the Commission's rights under the 1971 Act. (A standard form is available to Local Planning Authorities which they can send to applicants to use for this purpose.)

A condition attached to a Listed Building Consent (in accordance with Appendix VII to Circular 8/87, or otherwise) to the effect that some other person or body must be allowed access for recording purposes does not affect the need to give the Royal Commission one month in which to make its own record.

The serving of a Dangerous Structure Notice does not remove the obligation to follow the procedures for obtaining Listed Building Consent, and the Royal Commission must still have the opportunity to record the building before demolition begins.