

*Planning and the Historic Environment 2002*

**An Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – 17 May 2002**

**The role of the Amenity Societies**

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Very few historical facts remain immune from subsequent revisionism. But one truism does I think still stand. It is this - that the conservation movement in the United Kingdom was the product of the voluntary sector. The Government has always followed the lead of the private campaigner not pre-empted it. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the SPAB, founded in 1877 remains the oldest conservation body in Europe pre-dated only by one in Norway of 1840. It was the lobbying of the SPAB articulated through Lubbock that led to the introduction of scheduling in 1883 and that of its children the Georgian Group and the Victorian Society which spawned listing in 1947. The conservation area of 1968 is well known as the brainchild of the Civic Trust. I would however dearly like to know more about the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act, which gave local authorities the right to serve Preservation Orders even if these were rarely activated because of the attendant rights to compensation. The rather more powerful Bath Corporation Act of 1937 scheduled the front and in some cases side elevation of 1,251 buildings in that city erected before 1820 for protection on the grounds of “historic interest“ or “architectural interest or beauty“. The infant Georgian Group set up in exactly that year may have had a hand but I’d love to know more.

As the Grand Old Man of Conservation the SPAB, albeit from a modest membership base standing now at 6,000, has exerted considerable authority particularly through its Technical Panel and its sheltering of the guttering flame of truth in its Manifesto which inveighs against shamming as well as destruction. In the 1924 it spawned, as much by reaction as by direct insemination, the Ancient Monuments Society (now combined with

the Friends of Friendless Churches) which retained its base in Manchester until 1953 and regarded itself as the informal equivalent in the North of William Morris's creation. Incontestable offspring included the Georgian Group with a diverse band of founders including Robert Lutyens and the architect Duke of Wellington which moved into its own freehold headquarters in a Robert Adam house in Fitzroy Square in London's west end in 1995 and the Victorian Society first established 1958. The latter's founders were an illustrious if occasionally ill-digested group including John Betjeman, James Richards and Nikolaus Pevsner, all of them later knighted. It has always been an indication of the eclectic nature of the conservation movement in this country that its leaders have included men like Richards and Pevsner who have made their reputation as apostles of the Modern Movement. The crude division in the public mind between those who espouse old architecture and therefore must hate the new has never been true of its intellectual leaders.

In the years after the Victorian Society the organisations tumbled forth. The last of those dealing with a set chronological period, the Thirties Society, emerged in 1980. Despite its name, later changed to the Twentieth Century Society, it has always dealt with the period after 1914 (the decade and a half at the beginning of the twentieth century being then and now regarded as the preserve of the Victorian Society). There have on occasions been tensions within that organisation between the various strands of architectural thought although there is a refreshing freedom from ideological intolerance. There were the traditionalists particularly Roger Gradidge for whom Lutyens is beyond criticism, the flat-roofers who respond to the white walls and rectilinearity of the Modern and the New Brutalists whose chief delight is the bush-hammered concrete of more recent years. DoCoMoMo UK founded in 1990 has the narrower brief of defending only the pure products of the Modern Movement.

The Garden History Society emerged in 1965 and has like nearly all the societies seen its brief as dual: to research and to educate, and to campaign and to conserve. Its younger and more obviously Epicurean sister the Folly Fellowship came together in 1988 but it too marries the pursuit of pleasure with a journal which is essential for anybody

interested in the field.

SAVE (full title SAVE Britain's Heritage) burst upon the scene in 1975, its principal mover and shaker being then, as now, Marcus Binney, who is also behind the freshly announced Heritage Link. It saw its role initially as one of blowing the occasional raspberry after what it saw as the element of self-congratulation in European Architectural Heritage Year. It has combined press releases and reports with heroic action stepping in where others have feared to tread as in the iconic cases of the Lyceum club in Liverpool, All Saint's Church Haley Hill in Halifax and Barlaston Hall in Staffordshire. Its ultimate stand against a Goliath was the contesting through the courts, mostly in 1990, of the consent Lord Palumbo received to demolish nine listed buildings on the "Mansion House Square" or "No. 1 Poultry" site in the City of London. It won the first stages but lost the last and at one point faced a legal bill of £90,000.

The late 1970's and 1980's saw the Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society and the Historic Farm Buildings Group launched in 1985, both of them an unrivalled focus of their particular discipline. The Fortress Study Group took under its protective and scholarly wing military establishments both medieval and modern whilst even relatively limited building types such as piers acquired their own stalwart band of defenders. 1995 saw "Save Our Parsonages" (SOP) with the aim of stemming the now well advanced programme of disposal of historic rectories and parsonages by the church authorities. It seems extraordinary that the Association of Conservation Officers founded in 1981 has only just emerged from its second decade, so authoritative has been its voice as the ACO and as the successor body the IHBC.

This coming together of the like-minded is unparalleled in the world. Other countries have seen the formation of conservation organisations, but nearly all are generalists and without the specialist brief. Absolutely unique apart from the Netherlands, and in a slightly different way Norway, has been the way that Her Majesty's Government draws upon this reservoir of commitment and knowledge. From the late 1980's the national conservation organisations, christened for these purposes the National Amenity Societies, have been formally drawn into the planning process under the requirement that every application to demolish a listed building in whole or part in England and in Wales has to be notified to the Ancient Monuments Society, the SPAB, the Georgian Group, the Victorian Society, the Council for British Archaeology and indirectly the Twentieth Century Society in order to allow them to comment. Under the aegis of the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies they are also able to make nominations to each of the 42 Anglican Diocesan Advisory Committees and the Non-Anglican equivalents set up in 1994. There is a similar arrangement north of the border that involves the Scottish Civic Trust and the Scottish Architectural Heritage Society. In Northern Ireland the highly respected Ulster Architectural Heritage Society is not involved by law in the planning process but has had a very considerable say in the identification of buildings for listing, a number of its draft lists being adopted without alteration. The Garden History Society has enjoyed statutory status as the consultee in England since 1995 and is likely to enjoy that role in Wales from this year.

The final full member of the Joint Committee, the Civic Trust, co-ordinates the many local civic societies which have provided the bedrock for the communal pride and appreciation without which conservation policies would be blowing in the wind. In 1939 there were 101 local amenity societies. By 1964 the Trust had registered 300, by 1972 760 and the figure is now 950. A handful of these have over 2,000 members apiece.

So much for this rather hurried historical tableau. What now is and what should be the agenda for the voluntary movement for the century that has just started ?

Firstly, this hurried picture must also appear a hideously distorted one as there has been

no mention of the National Trust. The National Amenity Societies have an aggregate membership without consideration of overlapping membership of some 18,000. And yet the membership of the NT is closing on 3 million. It is the largest civil organisation in Western Europe with a membership greater than that of all political parties in this country put together. As an expression of grass roots support for conservation it is without parallel. And as we face the twenty-first century it is rediscovering its own campaigning roots. To some in recent years it has seemed a sleeping giant but now under the new leadership of Fiona Reynolds it has placed itself with consent and with diplomacy once again at the head of the conservation movement. This is done most dramatically by funding for the first year the post of administrator of the newly founded Heritage Link on which I expand later. The NT already has a policy unit larger than that of any equivalent voluntary movement and is in key areas leading the debate particularly on the countryside, sustainability and fiscal issues. My own belief is that the leadership role of the NT has the potential to make more difference to the effectiveness of the voluntary movement than any other single change in the twenty-first century. It is worth reflecting on the change in the organisations membership. In 1939 this was a modest 7,100. Even in 1948 the membership in Wales was 500. In 1970 the figure was 226,000, by 1981 it was one million, by 1990 2 million. Although some of its own membership may have misgivings, it is discovering some of its radicalisms. In the twenty-first century watch out for the NT.

The other organisation with which the societies interact is much more of a newcomer. This is English Heritage, which has only been around since 1983. There is a synergy between EH and the Societies that is actually very strong. No less than five EH inspectors began their life working for the societies, on, I have to say, much more modest salaries. And full circles are being turned in at least one case with Frank Kelsall and the AMS, a semi-retired EH Inspector coming to work for one of the National Amenity Societies. EH sees its role and that of the societies as essentially complementary; in the consultation process this is directly so, in that we will see most applications affecting Grade II buildings, still 94% of the total number of listed buildings, whereas EH reserves its guns to Grade II\* and Grade I and only on Grade II's where the threat is total or

substantial demolition. For EH to serve as policeman and advisor where we do would require an increase in its own staff which its finances would preclude. And that is a principal argument on our part against the single most depressing start to the new millennium which is the Government's threat to the National Amenity Societies in the Planning Green Paper. Since 1972 the Societies have been told by law of applications for listed building consent in England and Wales where there is any element of demolition. The vast majority of these of course are partial demolition, although 200 is still a threatening total. Government accuses us of slowing down the process which we absolutely refute as local authorities can go to determination once the 14, 21 or 28 day consultation period has expired. This is normally co-terminus with the statutory consultation period with neighbours and the onus is on us to reply rather than them to chase us or wait for a response. We genuinely believe that we improve the decision-making process and believe that for the health of civil society cutting out the voluntary sector is a thoroughly bad thing. As you might expect we are lobbying hard to retain a consultee role but it will affect dramatically our ability to change matters in the twenty-first century if that power is dropped or trimmed. If the Government wins I suspect one reaction will be an even closer relationship between EH and the Societies even though we reserve the right to criticise EH and adopt the role of purist defender of buildings where EH may for reasons political or financial have to be a trimmer. So the National Trust has already emerged as a key partner and EH may be even more of a one than it has been hitherto.

One of the reasons why there is a threat to demote our status is I think the belief that the heroic days of conservation are over. In 1979 nearly 700 listed buildings were the subject of applications to demolish in their entirety in England and Wales. Now that figure regularly hovers around 200 at a time when the number of listed buildings has doubled in the interim. For residential properties in good condition listing can now be regarded as an accolade rather than a curse. Just as the threat from the sudden death of demolition has decreased, it is our belief that death by a thousand cuts may be as damaging in aggregate. The plastic window has only been around since 1977 but has done more damage than any other single phenomenon to the character of every street in the country. We recognise

that in order to defeat it we need to advance arguments not just visual but others linked to the demands of sustainability. The decline in the availability and competence of the craftsman, the contractor and to some extent the professional supervisor is also becoming increasingly marked, I have to say pointedly so, especially in Wales. The educational functions of all the Societies especially those of the SPAB will be needed even more in the twenty-first century. We can help not only by offering bursaries but by increasingly pushing the virtue of architectural history in the curriculum of architecture schools and perhaps even, wonder of wonders, in theological colleges. The Societies as vehicles of education face challenges as acute as that for casework in this century.

Broadly speaking the membership profile of the Societies is of the educated middle-classes. Spreading a message beyond these social confines is difficult but we are learning the language of inclusiveness and showing through local campaigning whether it be for the threatened cinema, urban park or aircraft hangar how we can engage with those who have never been engaged with formal conservation before. With names like the Ancient Monuments Society I doubt we will ever be mass in membership but we are very conscious of the Power of Place agenda which calls quite rightly for the cause that so inspires us to reflect the polyglot society in which we now live - not by underselling or mis-selling but by tapping the local frustration at seeing the spread of the plastic window, the much-loved building left derelict and wrecked and the crassness of some modern design particularly that purporting to be "historic" in spirit. We have a battle there but we are aware of the need.

In the twenty-first century the professionalism of the pressure group will no doubt deepen as will the need for more formal camaraderie. To that extent we have always tried to work together with the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies set up in 1972 but now we are expanding beyond that through the Heritage Link. This was formally set up in 2002 and now has a new Secretary, Christopher Catling appointed on 7<sup>th</sup> May. The Link will bring together forty or more voluntary organisations although these will strenuously maintain their independence. Initial co-ordination will be over the Planning Green Paper but the ultimate goal is to make the heritage organisations as effective a

lobbying group as those within the natural environment. We are I think unashamedly jealous of the high profile and clout of the CPRE and seek to follow suit.

One of the overarching presences of the twenty-first century will be that of the superbloc like the European Union combined with its opposite, subsidiarity, delegating more power to local level. Europe remains one of the key centres that we have to lobby on VAT but understanding the machinery of Brussels is an art within itself. The Chairman of the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies John Sell is peculiarly adept at it but it can be taxing and frustrating. The most novel innovation under subsidiarity is increasing regionalisation. This is peculiarly difficult for us to address. The Societies do have branches at present but only in a few areas and certainly not in all nine Government regions. We tend not to relate to the north west or south east as such but much more beyond district councils to those operating at county level. And yet the Planning Green Paper also implies increased threat to county councils. The loss of the outstanding teams of experts at this level whether it be in Essex, Hampshire, Derbyshire would be a hammer-blow and although we have to adapt to a structure which has all the force of New Labour behind it we have equally to arrange that conservation remains a key player. To give them their due some of the new regional structures do that but again the lobbying of Societies has helped. It is worth singling out the North West in particular praise in that regard.

Finally, some of us in the Societies have been crystal ball gazing with a view to predicting future threats to given building types and conservation practices. In the first category comes the agricultural building where the trend to larger farms with less buildings will no doubt continue. The traditional public house is becoming increasingly marginalized by the new vogue for theme pubs, in itself quite a benign use of redundant banks, chapels or even opera houses. The bank itself until the recent change of heart over greater reliance on the internet rather than face-to-face meetings looked set to disappear completely in twenty years. With the non-conformist chapel retrenchment is likely to continue particularly if the presently tentative moves towards a union of the Anglican and Methodist churches takes place. The rate of redundancy among Anglican



churches is now down to 30 a year in England but a quite terrifying number are dependent on five or six loyal people mostly over seventy. Care in the Community has been rolled back but the days of the large institutional hospital are numbered whilst the great nineteenth century barracks, prisons and dock buildings have already been through their particular conservation crises. All of these are areas where the Societies are looking to greater or lesser extent to inform the debate. Some of us too can see the scope for further long-term studies alongside the excellent ones of English Heritage and Historic Scotland on the availability of traditional materials such as stone and thatch, whether their production needs subsidy in much the same way as agricultural production and whether and how they could be made more competitive in relation to synthetic substitutes. Systematic research is also essential in tackling sub-themes such as the conservation of church monuments where the problem of concealed cramps is becoming increasingly manifest and stained glass where the internal dynamic towards decay particularly through the so-called “Borax effect” is building up an enormous conservation bill for the future. And it is now some thirty years since the Civic Trust carried out its pioneering examination of the effect of road traffic on historic buildings. Scope here perhaps for further investigation?

Apart from the privileged few like myself within the voluntary movement who are actually paid, conservation is critically dependent upon those who believe with passion in the cause but don't seek to make a living from it. Those who accept the role of trustee of conservation charities know that by law they cannot be paid. The country's 20,000 parish churches depend upon the commitment of church wardens to raise money to clear out the gutters, to protect against the vandal all of whom again by law and by definition cannot be paid.

The voluntary movement, of which the conservation sector is but a small part, is critical to the future of protection of the historic environment and we trust that the twenty-first century will see its further flowering and further recognition of this key role.