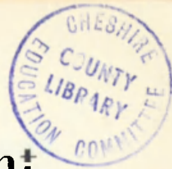

The Preservation of Ancient Buildings

By WILLIAM A. SINGLETON, M.A., Ph.D., B.Arch.

IT is stimulating to find amongst all sections of society a renewed realisation that this country contains a priceless heritage of historic architecture, which is not surpassed anywhere in the world. For example, nowhere else is there such a fine array of exquisite mediaeval parish churches, or such a rich collection of lesser domestic architecture. Nor is this heritage confined to the buildings themselves. Everywhere beautiful fittings and furnishings of historic significance, the craftsmanship of which can never be equalled, abound. It is a constant source of delight and pride to Cheshire folk that their county has a goodly share of these treasures.

The impact of the last world conflict, with its trail of destruction, has brought home very forcibly the value of this heritage. With this has come the realisation that many of these ancient and historic buildings are in an extremely bad state of repair, and in several cases, require urgent and drastic attention. In addition there is grave apprehension about the future amongst all those interested in the protection and repair of ancient buildings.

The realisation and subsequent fear has been responsible for the setting up of two important Commissions, whose reports have been published within the last few years. The first of these, generally referred to as the Gowers Report, published in 1950, deals exclusively with the very vast and complex problem of the Great Houses of this country. Although pressure is continually being applied in Parliament, no implementation of this Report has yet emerged. This is no doubt due to the present financial stringency, but further delay may result in the rapidly worsening situation getting completely out of hand.

The other Report, "The Preservation of our Churches" (June, 1952), is the outcome of the very earnest deliberations of a Church Assembly Commission concerned with the future of the country's 14,000 parish churches, of which about 9,000 are mediaeval.

From these Reports two main issues emerge, both of which are so fundamental that the whole future of our great historic buildings is dependent upon them. Finance is the primary consideration which exercises everyone's mind. How is the money required for even immediately necessary repairs to be found? This often repeated question is the real crux of the problem, but its solution is one of difficulty and complexity. It has to be treated urgently, vigorously, and on a nation-wide scale. The

Reports make very definite recommendations in this regard and already the Historic Churches Preservation Trust has been formed with Her Majesty the Queen as Patron and the Duke of Edinburgh as President. Thus the work of raising the £4 million required for the next ten years has started.

Much of these Reports and, indeed, much of what has been written generally, has emphasised the need for vast sums of money to meet the problem but the other equally important consideration has not been sufficiently stressed. This second problem is to find architects, surveyors, builders, and craftsmen with suitable experience and specialised knowledge in the field of protection and repair to carry out the work in the best possible manner. It is not generally recognised that the repair of old buildings must be entrusted to architects and craftsmen skilled in the techniques necessary for such work. To quote from the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings' Annual Report (1951):

> "The lack of such knowledge leads to irreparable harm being done and time and again the Society finds evidence of expensive, over-drastic and frequent reparations carried out by the ignorant and the inexperienced. The difficulties at present affecting the building trades intensified by the lack of skilled craftsmen contributes further to the problem and calls for constant and knowledgeable supervision by the architect."

Comparatively few such men exist, largely because during the past few decades very little conservation work has been undertaken, and therefore the opportunity to gain practical experience has been severely restricted. Making up this deficiency must be undertaken as a long-term project and all the various societies and public bodies concerned with this type of work are setting about tackling the problem with vigour and a real sense of urgency. The Ministry of Works (Ancient Monuments Branch), the National Trust, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Ancient Monuments Society and the Central Council for the Care of Churches are all working from their own particular angles towards the solution of this great problem.

Probably the most important step in the right direction has been taken by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, who have re-instituted their Lethaby Scholarship. This was originally instituted in 1930 by the Society, in memory of the late Professor W. R. Lethaby, to enable architectural students to study for six months the repair of ancient buildings under the guidance of architect members of the Committee. This endeavour has proved most satisfactory and is an ideal solution of the problem.

Another most valuable contribution is now being made by the Academic Development Committee of the York Civic Trust, who have set up a series of short residential courses called the York Courses on Protection and Repair of Ancient Buildings. These are

a development of the already well-established annual Summer Schools of Architectural Study, which they now supplement. The first course was held in York last September and was an unqualified success, drawing architects, surveyors and builders from all over Britain. A great expansion of these courses is planned for this year, with specialised courses on such subjects as the Care of Churches.

These courses have been organised in such a manner that architects and others, who wish to know more of repair methods, but who find it difficult to leave their appointments or practices for any length of time, can attend. Their duration is for a week or a fortnight, and the whole series can be taken over a period of one or more years to suit personal requirement.

The Bartlett School of Architecture at London University, on the other hand, has set up a post-graduate diploma course on the repair of ancient buildings on a part-time evening basis. Although this is admirable and extends for one session it is obviously suitable only for those working and living in or near London.

It is of the utmost importance that the right mental attitude to ancient and historic buildings should be developed. Every individual building in all its aspects must be studied and appreciated. Every building of any antiquity bears evidence of its structural evolution and development. The ways of life, beliefs and mental outlook of all its various builders and craftsmen are revealed to all those who take the time to look and study. Overlaid on this will be found the influence, probably the greatest single influence, of passing styles and fashions. Strange as it may seem, this factor is as much in evidence in old work as it is today.

Every building possesses certain fundamental physical characteristics such as length, width and height, but it also possesses a personality very much its own. Some architects refer to this quality as a fourth dimension, but, however it is viewed, it is a quality which that building alone possesses. Once it is destroyed or damaged it can never be re-created. It is impossible to restore this personality, and therefore any attempt to do so must be condemned, as the result at the best can be only "period-fakes." This personality which an old building has is bound up especially with the influence of the passage of time and can be likened to the appeal to one's senses in the face of an old friend, whose very features bring back memories and affectionate thoughts of the past.

It is this quality which blends together in old buildings the often otherwise incongruous work of different historical periods. For example, many of our early parish churches comprise perhaps a Saxon tower, a Norman nave, thirteenth century chancel and fourteenth century aisles with many later additions and alterations.

Thus the vigour of the Saxon, the detail of the Norman and the structural ingenuity of later periods are fused together in a harmonious composition. It is however difficult to define the sources of this "personality" and its attendant atmosphere, because its components included proportion, texture, colour and decoration, each of which is a study in itself, with the passage of the centuries to fuse them altogether.

From these few remarks, it is evident that the problems of protection and of repairing ancient and historic buildings are many and complex. There is however, only space here to consider a few of the main principles to be adopted.

The first essential is to have a real personal and first-hand contact with the structure and materials of the building and get within its "personality." This is vitally necessary in order to avoid its destruction and at the same time to repair it sympathetically. The second guiding principle is that of conservation and preservation. As it is impossible to re-create the atmosphere of individual buildings, it is therefore essential to preserve and protect as much of the original work as possible. Where repairs or replacements are necessary, these should be so contrived that they in no way result in conjectural imitations of the old work. New work should always be in harmony with the old, but subordinate to it. No one is able to place for example, a limb of a human being by an exact replica. An artificial one is used which has the same general size and shape as the real one, but obviously the two could not be confused. So it should be with old buildings. If it is necessary to replace a portion of a richly moulded oak roof-beam, the new portion to be spliced in would have the same general size and shape. In addition the main lines of the mouldings would be lined through but not imitated. Thus the harmony is preserved but without harsh copying or restoration.

Thirdly, the very common archaeological habit of exposing historical features, for no other reason that that they are historical, should be avoided. For example, many mediaeval timber-framed houses, particularly in the towns, have had their eighteenth century plaster facades removed. Thus depriving them of much of their "personality." Apart from the fact that many of these facades were very beautiful in themselves, often with fine decorative pargetting. In destroying them the whole chronological sequence and therefore their authenticity has been lost. In fact in several cases false Tudor windows have had to be inserted in an effort to restore some sort of appearance.

It was principles such as these that led, over seventy years ago, to the founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings by William Morris, Ruskin, Burne-Jones, and similar kindred spirits. They aimed at restraining the Victorian method

of wholesale conjectural restoration, which was so rampant at the time. In 1877 Morris issued his famous manifesto which forms the historical basis upon which the Society works, and which is also printed in their Annual Reports. The second and third paragraphs of this manifesto read as follows:

> "For Architecture, long decaying, died out, as a popular art at least, just as the knowledge of mediaeval art was born. So that the civilised world of the nineteenth century has no style of its own amidst its wide knowledge of the styles of other centuries. From this lack and this gain arose in men's minds the strange idea of the Restoration of ancient buildings; and a strange and most fatal idea, which by its very name implies that it is possible to strip from a building this, that, and the other part of its history — of its life that is — and then to stay the hand at some arbitrary point, and leave it still historical, living, and even as it once was.
>
> In early times this kind of forgery was impossible, because knowledge failed the builders, or perhaps because instinct held them back. If repairs were needed, if ambition or piety pricked onto change, that change was of necessity wrought in the unmistakable fashion of the time; a church of the eleventh century might be added to or altered in the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth or even seventeenth or eighteenth centuries; but every change, whatever history is destroyed, left history in the gap, and was alive with the spirit of the deeds done midst its fashioning. The result of all this was often the building in which the many changes, though harsh and visible enough, were, by their very contrast, interesting and instructive and could by no possibility mislead. But those who make the changes wrought in our day under the name of Restoration, while professing to bring back a building to the best time of its history, have no guide but each his own individual whim to point out to them what is admirable and what is contemptible; while the very nature of their task compels them to destroy something and to supply the gap by imagining what the earlier builders should or might have done. Moreover, in the course of this double process of destruction and addition the whole surface of the building is necessarily tampered with; so that the appearance of antiquity is taken away from such old parts of the fabric as are left and there is laying to rest in the spectator the suspicion of what may have been lost; and in short, a feeble and lifeless forgery is that final result of all the wasted labour."

This statement, although written almost eighty years ago, sums up rather well the problems to be faced and the pitfalls to be avoided if our rich heritage of historic buildings is to be preserved.

There is another aspect of the problem the implications of which are not always fully realised. Certain buildings, which were built for a definite, perhaps rather special, purpose, occasionally become redundant. For example, the population serving a parish church might for one reason or another over the years leave the area and the church, which may be structually sound. Or for reasons of finance, the great houses and halls, which form such an integral part of the countryside, often create difficulties for their owners. Not only were the houses built in the days of spacious living and are therefore unsuitable for modern needs, but death-duties and other taxes have taken almost all of the money needed to maintain the houses and estates. The problem therefore resolves itself into finding suitable new and alternative uses for many of these buildngs. In the case of a church or similar structure, this is difficult. In one or two cases churches have been turned into museums of mediaeval or ecclesiastical art and sculpture; but obviously the times such a use could be tried are strictly limited, with the result that no suitable alternative use can be found. A church, by its very plan and structure, has limited possibilities.

The Great Houses on the other hand are more adaptable, and already many of these have found new uses as offices, residential colleges of all kinds, research centres and convalescent homes. Often they are well suited for such uses. For example, Burton Manor in Wirral, although not very ancient, has been turned into an admirable residential college for Adult Education. In the past five years of the college's existence, over ten thousand students have studied and have enjoyed its facilities and amenities. The fabric is thus suitably protected and the gardens well tended.

On the other hand, some great houses which are occupied or partly occupied, present a difficult problem. This has often been solved by the owners opening the house and gardens to the public at suitable times and at a small charge. In this way not only are funds made available for the upkeep of the estate, but also the public have pleasure in viewing these magnificent houses, their furnishings and their gardens. The nation owes a considerable debt to these owners, who generally at considerable discomfort to themselves, open their doors to interested sightseers. A Cheshire example is Adlington Hall, near Macclesfield, the home of Mrs. Legh.

Alas, many more are completely uninhabited and derelict. As such they are always ideal subjects for the attentions of fungal or insect attack. The words "dry rot" and "death-watch beetle" are all too common these days, and these empty ancient buildings succumb sooner or later to their ravages.

In this short article an attempt has been made to help readers to understand the value of ancient and historic buildings and to learn something of the principles of preservation. The accent has been rather on the negative, but if old buildings are saved from the wrong kind of restoration, much of the excellent craftsmanship still remaining will be preserved. It is always better to preserve than to restore !

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING.

"The Protection of Ancient Buildings." A. R. Powys. (Dent & Sons, 1929).

"Old Churches and New Craftsmanship." A. D. R. Caroe. (O.U.P., 1950).

Annual Reports of the Central Council for the Care of Churches. (Dunster, Somerset).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Local History Committee thanks all those who have so kindly contributed articles or otherwise helped, also The Manchester University Press, The Manchester Public Library and The Chetham Society for the use of the cover block.

The Editor will be pleased to receive articles, short notes and queries to be considered for inclusion in future issues.

ERRATA

Cheshire Historian No. 1.

Page 23 line 12, for two read one.

Cheshire Historian No. 2.

A number of copies require the following—

Page 5 line 15, and page 13 lines 14 and 15, for Clegg read Glegg.
" 8 line 34, for beachmast read beechmast.
" 12 " 9, for attacked read attached.
" 12 " 42, for 1550 read 1559.
" 22 " 21, for Neiderbieber read Niederbieber.
" 35 " 44, for unfortunately read fortunately.
" 47 " 22, for count read court.