

JOHN BETJEMAN AND THE GEORGIAN GROUP

THE EARLY YEARS

Fortunately, the old Ruskinian prejudice against preserving anything that is not medieval or earlier on the grounds that it is 'barn-like' (are barns so ugly?) and 'of no architectural merit,' is almost dead.

Sheffielders who are keen on preserving the Georgian heritage of their city should communicate with the Secretary, The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 20, Buckingham Street, London, W.C.2.

The Society has recently taken under its wing a Georgian Group for the express purpose of saving such buildings as St. Paul's and St. James's.

Your obedient servant,

John Betjeman



Adam Busiakiewicz looks at John Betjeman's – 'a great one for lost causes and new societies' – enthusiastic support for the Georgian Group in the years after its foundation

This short yet cutting letter appeared in the *Sheffield Independent* a mere four months after the Georgian Group was constituted in April 1937. Plain young Mr John Betjeman, long before his knighthood in 1969 and appointment as Poet Laureate in 1972, is often quoted alongside a long list of names of early supporters of the Group. Though he is widely regarded as one of the heroes of the protection and conservation of historic buildings in the twentieth century, none of the amenity societies can claim him to be entirely their own. This is despite Betjeman having dedicated himself to their various worthy causes throughout his life, be they ancient, medieval, Georgian or Victorian.

There is little doubt that it was Georgian architecture which first stirred his interest in conservation. Betjeman's advocacy for the preservation of eighteenth-century buildings began during his schooling at Marlborough College. His first campaign involved writing anonymous letters to the school journal to promote the preservation of Lady Hertford's shellwork grotto on Marlborough mound, then falling into dilapidation. These letters, often

St Paul's Church
Sheffield
(demolished 1938)



Letter from John
Betjeman on the
Euston Arch
(January 1938)



written with a poetic and satirical flair, would set the tone for his involvement in building conservation throughout his career.

Detestation for school sport ensured that he surrounded himself with books and writing, whilst nurturing a deep-held desire to become a poet. Much of his poetry took direct inspiration from acute observations of his surroundings, describing cities, towns and places rather than abstract poetic fancy. *Death in Leamington*, one of the first poems he had published, captured the graceful yet neglected architecture of Royal Leamington Spa with a haunting accuracy:

Do you know that the stucco is peeling?
Do you know that the heart will stop?
From those yellow Italianate arches
Do you hear the plaster drop?

Architecturally, he would later recall that his eyes were initially opened by reading A.E. Richardson's *Monumental Classic Architecture in Great Britain and Ireland* (1911), explaining:

Those pictures opened up a world to me that I did not know existed – that you could go beyond Sir Christopher Wren and even admire Somerset House, and still more the Greek Revival, and notice things like Waterloo Bridge, and the British Museum, and branches of the Bank of England, in the Romano Greek style, in Bristol and Birmingham.

Betjeman would later collaborate with Richardson on several campaigns for the Georgian Group.

First-hand experience of unspoilt Georgian Ireland also left its mark on the young poet. He had first visited as a 20-year-old in June 1926, and stayed at Furness, the home of his Oxford friend Pierce Synnott. They took the opportunity to visit various country houses where he remarked that: 'Ireland seemed to me Charles Lever and aquatints come true'. Shelton Abbey, a Gothic pile built by Sir Richard Morrison from 1770 and, curiously, now a prison, was in his words: 'the dream of the Gothic Revival, and all I could wish ... I'd never seen such luxury and splendour ... It was paradise.' He forged friendships too with the Longfords of Pakenham Hall Castle, where he enjoyed the Strawberry Hill Gothic in abundance. The connections made in his youth helped prepare him for his wartime service in Dublin after being made an attaché for the British Press in 1941. It is clear that the young poet was inspired by the unmolested eighteenth-century buildings and interiors he encountered, writing in his book *Ghastly Good Taste* (1933) that:

... there are still many houses of Ireland, where the Victorian sunlight flooded in less gaudily, that possess their ancient fittings. I have seen many late Georgian houses in Ireland whose severe mahogany furniture remains in the niches designed for it, whose porcelain and silver is of the eighteenth century, whose wallpaper is Chinese, put up when the house was built ... The inhabitants were eighteenth-century characters too.

It was the plight of a Georgian building that encouraged the 25-year-old John Betjeman to join the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1932. John Rennie's Waterloo Bridge, built between 1911 and 1917 and which had been praised

for its architectural beauty by the likes of Canova, had been targeted by the authorities on the discovery that it was sinking into the Thames. Attempts to stabilise the bridge had all failed and demolition was imminent. In 'The Truth about Waterloo Bridge' in the *Architectural Review*, where he was sub-editor, he made the passionate case that:

Suffice to say that Rennie was an engineer, and his bridge has always stood as the supreme example of the contention that engineering and architecture are one and the same thing.

He continued to write on the poor design of its replacement, which would not only cost a wasteful sum, but also break the continuity of its design with Chambers's Somerset House. Despite the greatest efforts of the SPAB, and its new advocate, the bridge was eventually demolished in 1935.

It was defeats such as Waterloo Bridge, and the menace of demolition experienced in the same period, that encouraged the formation of the Georgian Group in 1937. The breakaway was initiated by journalists and fellow writers Douglas Goldring, Robert Byron and Lord Derwent as an 'active' group within the SPAB (along the lines of their windmill section), with the specific task of protecting Georgian architecture and town-planning against the menace of demolition. Considering Betjeman's long-standing interest in eighteenth-century architecture, it is no surprise that he became an early member and supporter. His friendship with several of the founders must have also played a part, including that with Byron, who had had a strong association with the *Architectural Review* since 1932.

Betjeman's name is encountered quite regularly through the opening years of the Group's foundation in 1937 up until the outbreak of the War. Some interesting letters and notes have emerged from the archive, which mark his involvement with the fledg-



Above: The rebuilt Colonade from Arno's Castle in Portmeirion



Left: St Swithun's Church Worcester

ling Georgian Group. Although only in his early thirties at this point, the Group's Executive Committee minutes attest to his regular attendance at meetings held at Stratton House, Piccadilly.

It seems that Betjeman performed several roles for the Group, perhaps most importantly making visits to buildings which were brought to the committee's attention by a well-connected web of 'watchers' and sympathisers across the country. Due to his intimate knowledge of the South West, further enriched by his involvement in writing the popular *Shell Guides* from 1934 onwards, much of his efforts for the Group were focused in this part of the country. His services were called on to investigate the Bristol Theatre Royal in May 1938; built as the Coopers' Hall in 1744 by William Halfpenny and seemingly under threat by developers. Betjeman's assistance was also sought to petition architect Sir James West, in opposition to the demolition of the façade of The Crescent, Taunton, for the creation of

a new post office. Betjeman's connections in Exeter were exploited to raise the public's attention to the proposed demolition of Charles Fowler's Higher Market. Writing in *The Telegraph* in 1938 he made the case that the building was 'as significant in Exeter as the Assembly Room in Bath or Somerset House in London. Admittedly it is a later building, but that should not militate against the genius of its architect.' Efforts were made to encourage Exeter Council to realise that their Georgian and Regency buildings were as great an attraction to visitors as medieval ones. The Market was saved, despite later receiving particularly disfiguring alterations.

Buildings in Bristol too attracted his attention. This included the threat of demolition to the city's many churches, a passion that would remain with him throughout his life. His efforts for the Group also extended to the fate of Arno's Castle, a mid eighteenth-century folly castle built for Bristol merchant adventurer William Reeve. Betjeman pro-



The Crescent,
Taunton

duced a report on the condition of the building, after accompanying Lord Methuen and several architects on an inspection. He drafted a letter to *The Times* (signed by Lord Derwent) explaining that: 'We are not Bristolians, but we appreciate the magnificent examples of Georgian building in the city and neighbourhood and the efforts made by the corporation and local preservation societies to

retain them'. The fine colonnade was eventually removed and re-erected in Portmeirion in the next decade. Writing in *The Telegraph* during the 1950s, Betjeman commented on the recent developments in Bristol that: 'It has filled up the basin at the City Centre and planted a silly municipal garden. It has bisected Queen Square and allowed the Bath House at Arno's Castle, which contained the finest plaster-work in England, to fall into ruin. But it still remains our grandest old city and has kept more of its individuality and variety than London itself.'

Perhaps better known is Betjeman's decades' long attempt at preserving the Euston Arch, a campaign the Group took up with great fervour in the years prior to the War. His longest surviving letter in the archive makes clear his passion for protecting this monumental yet forlorn part of the capital's architectural history. With an ever-keen eye on exposing the blatant hypocrisy of its stewards, here he stressed the blatant contradiction of London, Midland & Scottish Railway's centenary celebration, which involved the demolition of its most iconic London landmark. He had remarked that with their intention to destroy the Great Arch, they had; 'already hidden [it] with an hotel and the Great Hall which they have already deformed with kiosks.'

Betjeman brought a great variety of worthy buildings and causes to the Group's attention. This included the likes of St Swithun's, Worcester, on which the poet submitted a report on this unspoilt church built in 1736 and containing the original box pews, three-decker pulpit and glass. A photograph of the interior from this period survives in the Group's archives, possibly one of the several pictures which Betjeman circulated during a Group meeting on 21 September 1938. Smaller houses too, located in provincial towns, were on his list of cases worthy for the Group's attention, Holyrood House in Spalding, Lincolnshire, being one such example. His visit there on behalf of the Group resulted in a handwritten report that survives in the Group's archive, opening with the salutation 'Darling Secretary'.

The injustices of inconsiderate and destructive planning always remained at the forefront of his efforts. Through his contacts in Marlborough, the proposed demolition of The Old Town Hall at Devizes spurred on a swift reaction in the form of letters. A transcribed letter in the archive reads:

Holyrood House,
Spalding, Lincolnshire



This is a superb stone building in the mid-Bath manner, now a wine merchant's cellar, I think ...

If Local Councils are going on with this dirty work while we are all occupied, there out [*sic*] to be a revolution. Democracy, my foot!

Fortunately, a short letter by Betjeman, with accompanying photograph, was published in *Country Life* and the threat of demolition was lifted.

Attending meetings in Oxford, to represent the Georgian Group's views towards the extension of the Ashmolean Museum, became a recurring activity for the poet, who would later become Secretary to the Oxford Preservation Trust. Preserved in the poet's own papers is a letter from the Group's secretary entreating him: 'So- darling John Betche will you who always do all the dirty work, please go? Some [*sic*] who thoroughly understands architecture must

go ... so there is only you.' This plea was undoubtedly the scribbling of Wilhelmine 'Billa' Cresswell, the Group's Secretary who stole both the hearts of members Christopher Hussey and Betjeman, the former allegedly having been briefly engaged to her.

After the War his name slowly vanishes from the Group's papers, up until the opening years of the 1960s when the Euston Arch was once again facing demolition. By this time Betjeman had joined the newly established Victorian Society in 1957, which had in many ways imitated the success of the Georgian Group's break with the SPAB exactly two decades earlier. Mrs Dance, the SPAB's long-standing Secretary during his involvement, would later write that: 'John is a great one for lost causes and new societies, but when they begin to gather momentum he loses interest.'

Finally, yet not of least importance, Betjeman became the unlikely host of a series of short film documentaries in the 1960s which brought his message to the masses. His advocacy of Georgian building comes across most brilliantly in *The Architecture of Bath* (1962), now freely available on the internet for anyone to watch.

Most of all, television captured his endearing humour, most often in the form of the voice of the commercial developer, pontificating on the Circus at Bath that:

[in a comedic accent] 'It's very monotonous, I grant you that for its time the Circus was a very daring innovation, but today we must consider the teenagers. I mean, an enterprising corporation could have made a motorbike track here and a much-needed car park where we are standing. And there was no need to repair those houses in the old fashion style.'

Equally humorous was his lampooning of the modernist architect, inserting high-rise towers into a historic setting, explaining his disfiguring buildings:

Today building must express itself honestly and sincerely, for instance in this feature which might be termed the vital buttocks of the construction. As you can see it expresses its purpose (whatever that may be) sincerely and honestly, this causes it to blend harmoniously and naturally with the Georgian on the left there. Each age express itself as it really feels, and you can see how this age feels about the Georgian ...

Despite being filmed over 55 years ago, these programmes still carry their full sting. Their timeless message, phrased in a simple yet poetic style, has ensured that his argument has never aged. Will there ever be another series quite like it? It would be impossible to imagine any modern television commissioner coming within a hundred miles of such a programme. Those critical of poor modern architecture would instantly be branded as backwards or out of touch by those used to surrounding themselves in cold transient glass studios devoid of anything permanent. Would they ever let someone in front of the camera without that enforced television smile or polished script, expressing an informed opinion rather than prescribed dogma?

Although Betjeman's direct involvement with the Group was relatively short, his contribution to the protection of historic Georgian buildings in the twentieth century was significant. His life as an activist and his rich library of written works, on all ages of architecture, will no doubt serve to provide a model to follow and to inspire future generations to appreciate and campaign for our shared historic environment.

The Old Town Hall, Devizes

