

THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

*The national society for
the study and
protection of Victorian
and Edwardian
architecture and allied
arts*

LIVERPOOL GROUP NEWSLETTER December 2009

PROGRAMME CHESTER-BASED EVENTS

Saturday 23 January 2010

ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING

2.15 pm BISHOP LLOYD'S PALACE, 51-53 Watergate Row

After our business meeting, Stephen Langtree will talk about the Chester Civic Trust (whose home this is) in its 50th Anniversary year. Chester Civic Trust has a high profile both locally and nationally: over the past twenty years, as secretary, chairman, now vice-president, Stephen Langtree has had much to do with this.

Wednesday 17 February

7 for 7.30 pm GROSVENOR MUSEUM (Chester Civic Trust / visitors welcome / no advance booking / suggested donation £3)

LIVING BUILDINGS - ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION: PHILOSOPHY, PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

Donald Insall's "Living Buildings" (reviewed in November's 'Victorian') was recently published to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Donald Insall Associates. It was the 1968 Insall Report which proved a pioneering study for Chester's conservation: Donald Insall CBE will reflect on this and other work of national significance (including Windsor Castle) in his lecture.

Wednesday 17 March

7 for 7.30 pm GROSVENOR MUSEUM (Chester Civic Trust / visitors welcome / no advance booking / suggested donation £3)

A NEW PEVSNER FOR CHESHIRE

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Edward Hubbard launched the "Cheshire" volume in 'The Buildings of England' series back in 1971. Expansion and revision now brings Macclesfield-based architectural historian Matthew Hyde (working on the new volume with Clare Hartwell) to look again at Chester and its hinterland. He will consider changes in judgments as well as in the townscape over the 40 years.



*Chester General Station, 1847-8
by Francis Thompson (see
20 March lecture overleaf)*

LIVERPOOL-BASED LECTURES

The following 3 lectures will take place at 2 for 2.15pm at the QUAKER MEETING HOUSE, 22 School Lane. Admission is £3 and it is helpful to the Group if booked in advance.

Saturday 20 February

REDISCOVERING BIRKENHEAD

Elizabeth Davey is well known to many as an invigorating teacher and lecturer on local history matters. She will talk about her approach and her findings in working on her recently published "Birkenhead: A History" (Phillimore 2009, £16.99).



*Former Town Hall,
Hamilton Square, 1883-7
by C.O. Ellison*



*Queen Victoria Monument,
Hamilton Square, 1905
by Edmund Kirby*

Saturday 6 March

GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS: Victorian Visionary

G.F. Watts (1817 – 1904) was a remarkable artist: a great portraitist, social commentator, ambitious allegorist; he's impossible to pigeon-hole and Tony Murphy's illustrated talk (a trailer in part for the 13 March outing) will try to show us why, as well as offering some insights into a most unusual life. He was no Frith, socially, but he did marry Ellen Terry when she was only seventeen ... make sure you're there to find out what happened next!

Saturday 20 March

THE RAILWAY STATION

George Stephenson engineered the world's first major public railway, from Liverpool to Manchester, 180 years ago. A few years later John Foster Jun. designed the first example of a monumental station façade, a Neoclassical screen in front of Lime Street's shed... Graham

Fisher's illustrated survey will reflect on the journey since, as stylistically change followed change in the C19th, with the stark contrasts of Saarinen's Helsinki, Stachini's Milan and Charles Holden's Undergrounds to highlight our C20th excursion.

EXCURSIONS

Saturday 13 March

HARROGATE

(Dept Dale St / North John St corner at 9.00 am prompt. Cost to cover coach and visits [own arrangements for lunch break]: £16. Return to Liverpool for around 7.00 pm)

A day in Yorkshire's famous Spa, now re-invented as one of Britain's most successful conference centres and the home of Betty's Tea Rooms. Tony Murphy will take us to the WATTS EXHIBITION at the Mercer Art Gallery, its only showing outside London; we will tour the main 19th and early 20th century buildings in the town centre; take a closer look at the Royal Hall, the original Frank Matcham 'Kursaal'; and see the best of Temple Moore's churches, St Wilfrid's, recently in the news because of 'development plans' which have worried Gavin Stamp no less. It should be a full and interesting day: please help us by booking early.

Saturday – May (date TBC)

HUYTON: Annette Butler will lead an imaginative out-of-period walkabout in the Huyton/Roby area, taking in the medieval St Michael (though its appearance is mostly C19th) and the National Wildflower Centre where modest C19th stables have been intelligently converted by Manchester's Hodder Associates. This will take place on a Saturday in May: full details will be given both at the Chester ABM and at the first of the new season's lectures at the Quaker Meeting House. If you are not attending these, please contact Diana Goodier (see back page) from March for details.

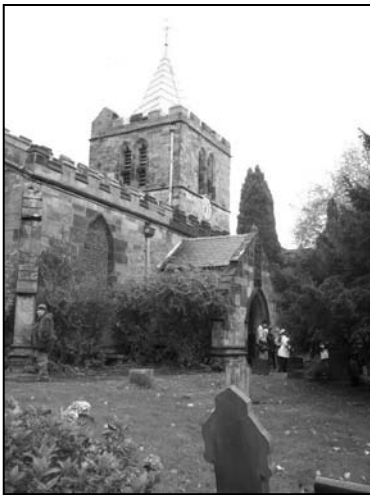
ROUNDABOUT

Gladstone has been much in the haunted air these past few months. The Pottery Museum established in 1974 at Longton was named after his visit to Burslem, to lay the foundation stone of the Wedgwood Institute in 1863. Andrew Richardson's splendid Staffordshire day in August allowed us plenty of time to explore this working pottery; to see one of the bottle kilns is a nostalgic experience as the Rev. Henry Thorold lamented in his 'Shell Guide' of 1978 - "The Six Towns of the Potteries are no longer covered, as of old, with a pall of smoke: the air is cleaner now, and many buildings have been cleaned. Yet the disappearance of so many hundreds of the old bottle kilns must be a cause for regret. Where they appear, as they still do in Burslem and in Longton, behind those long façades that resemble Georgian stable blocks, they provide a shapely landscape feature unique in England."

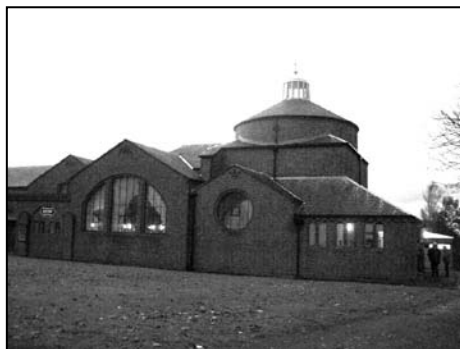
It was the threat of pollution from the Potteries that is said to have led to the abandonment of Charles Barry's nearby Trentham in 1907, demolition following a few years later. Henry Thorold this time lamented that, for all the magnificence of Nesfield's Italian gardens, "there is a great emptiness on the terrace where the house once stood, tarmac paths and cast-iron seats giving the air of a municipal garden". But impressive restoration is in progress at Trentham (the penalty for this may be the 'outlet village' on approach, at least well hidden by the belt of trees) and our group was able to enjoy a sun-blessed afternoon. The lake is superb and it is edged now by impressive modernist garden features from Piet Oudolf and Tom Stuart Smith.

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Gladstone dominates Hawarden and for our November outing we were able to respond to many aspects of the great man. The bicentenary visit began in his parish church with its arts-and-crafts tomb and stunning Burne-Jones stained glass. A guided tour of St Deiniol's residential library followed, emphasis always on Gladstone's liberality, honoured in the freedom with which guests can utilise the collections in John Douglas's brilliantly designed building. After a civilised lunch break, we were greeted at the Castle itself by Sir William Gladstone. His genial introduction preceded guidance through the entrance hall, dining room, drawing room and library, before concluding in the atmospheric 'Temple of Peace' itself. Sir William's recently published "William Gladstone: A Bicentenary Portrait" (Michael Russell Ltd., £18.50) will now be essential reading for many of us. The afternoon concluded with glimpses of the Old Castle before coaching to two churches backed by the Gladstone family, John Douglas's St Matthew's at Buckley, and Harry Goodhart-Rendel's Church of the Holy Spirit, at Ewloe. The latter architect is of some importance in C19th studies - see 'Saving a Century' which follows. And watch for details of bicentenary celebrations in Liverpool on Gladstone's Rodney Street birth date of 29 December.



Hawarden outing recorded by Joyce Hughes: Parish Church, Castle, 'Temple of Peace', view of Old Castle, Goodhart-Rendel's Church of the Holy Spirit (Ewloe) exterior and interior



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Thomas Shelmerdine (1845-1921) was Liverpool's Corporation Surveyor, responsible for a range of buildings nearly all of some character. In discussing Liverpool's Libraries in a lecture for us the other year, John Tiernan highlighted Shelmerdine's branch library work, beginning in 1890 with Kensington. John has recently written a most valuable article on "Cowell [Liverpool's third Chief Librarian], Shelmerdine and Carnegie" in the 2009 'Journal of the

Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire'. (Available at £5 from Fred Forrest, 32 Rugby Drive, Liverpool L10 8JU). He promises to give us a guided tour of some of Shelmerdine's best libraries in the near future.

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SAVE's latest newsletter describes the Lancaster Canal Corridor North case as "possibly the most bizarre call-in Inquiry of all time". You'll recall that Tony Murphy gave us the background to this on his Lancaster excursion in May; the Inspector's report is due to be submitted to the Secretary of State this January.

Meanwhile SAVE points out that its 'Triumph, Disaster and Decay' exhibition in February won high praise, the most successful exhibition to date at the Wood Street RIBA Gallery. SAVE reflects: "Our long involvement in the city began with the famous and successful campaign to preserve the Lyceum in 1977 [*thanks especially to Florence Gersten; sadly the building is again showing signs of neglect*]. A number of hard-hitting reports followed, including "The Agony of Georgian Liverpool" (1984), which catalogued the shameful neglect of the city's superb stock of Georgian domestic architecture. Recently (Pathfinder apart) things have improved dramatically. Liverpool's time in the limelight as European Capital of Culture 2008 has helped bring in new investment and the centre of the city is buzzing again. Great strides have also been taken in restoring the dignity of Liverpool's magnificent heritage. St George's Hall has been repaired with a major grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, while on Rodney Street, the City Council has boldly taken charge of St Andrew's Church, now under repair after years of neglect..."

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It is always fascinating how others see us. In the 'Daily Telegraph' (5th Sept.) architecture critic Ellis Woodman reported on his jury work for 'Building Design' to award a prize to the worst building erected in Britain over the past year. The winner (or loser?) was Liverpool Ferry Terminal by Hamilton Architects: "Looking like a karaoke version of a Zaha Hadid project, it takes the form of a skew-whiff cross-section that has been extruded like a stick of rock. The long elevations could hardly be more boring, the Dr. Caligari-style end façades no more grotesque. It would be a nightmare building in any setting. The fact that it sits not only within a UNESCO world heritage site but directly in front of the Three Graces makes its construction utterly inexplicable." The same critic places Oriel Chambers and St George's Hall on his personal list of the 50 most inspiring buildings in Britain.

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You may have noticed that the November 'Victorian' has brief reports on two churches in our area which figured in the 2008 list of 'top ten endangered buildings'. They are Caroe's Swedish Seamen's Church, where "things are looking up", and E. W. Pugin's St Marie's R.C. Church - that is at Widnes, where Andrew Richardson's enthusiasm has helped secure the listing of the Health Centre, but that's "a little essay in Art Deco" and hence a C20th Society case...

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"Mark Girouard is our greatest architectural writer and historian and this is his best book - a sumptuous treat" - Colin Amery (in the 'Spectator') on the just published "Elizabethan Architecture: Its Rise and Fall, 1540-1640" (Yale, £45).

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After the success of the 50th anniversary dinner in 2008, the committee is keen to test the enthusiasm for a social event on a similar scale. If you would do your best to attend such a function perhaps you would tick the box on the booking sheet: better still, if you've any suggestions/preferences for location, please add these details. Meanwhile, here's to a contemplative Christmas.
(G.F.)

SAVING A CENTURY

Random Reflections on Changing Attitudes

Cycling home to C20th Prenton from Birkenhead School (Walter Scott, 1871) as the war ended, I relished the town's then exceptionally fine suburbia without having any concept of 'Victorian' or indeed 'architecture'. And leaving school my sentiments were all with 'Modernism' (J. M. Richards, "An Introduction to Modern Architecture", Penguin 1940), quite excited by high-rise on the Woodchurch Estate though aware that we had lost something rather valuable in the rejection of Reilly's plan. My teenage interests were overwhelmingly with film but how far would my townscaping enthusiasms have been helped by publications of the time?

In 1945 Batsford's moderately prestigious 'British Art and Building' series issued "British Architects and Craftsmen" by Sacheverell Sitwell and five years after came "Nineteenth Century Architecture in Britain" by Reginald Turnor. Sitwell's impressive 'Survey of Taste, Design and Style during Three Centuries 1600 to 1830' concluded thus: "We are arriving at the last architects: Wilkins, Elmes, Barry. The mid-Victorian architects are often magnificent in their measured drawings. Burges, particularly, is quite remarkable in this respect. But we find it impossible, for our part, to share in the craze for the sham Gothic churches of the mid-Victorian 'Revival'. That can only be a pastime for minds that have not tasted the beauties of the past. Their only pleasure in such buildings must be the despair of hopelessness. Probably the most horrible experience of this nature is a visit to St Mary's Cathedral, at Edinburgh, the 'Early English masterpiece' of Sir Gilbert Scott, built in the most barren period of the 'seventies', and peerless for ugliness, unless it be for its own sister, Scott's chapel of St John's, at Cambridge. The prospect is bleak indeed, though Sir Gilbert Scott and his contemporaries were certain, nevertheless, that they were living in a period of Christian architecture second to none..."

Reginald Turnor likewise has it in for Scott, "that Victorian colossus of industrious dreariness", and dismisses "nostalgic raptures over red plush, gas-brackets, wax fruit" which sounds like a dig at Betjeman. Turnor judges the Victorian revolution as, in the main, moral (as opposed to the aesthetic character of the Renaissance and the materialistic dominance of the Modern): "It can hardly be overstressed that Pugin and Ruskin equated art with morals in a manner altogether new and, as I think, disastrous". He views the Victorian period as "reactionary, a sort of re-death", treating much of the century as a patient ("in an age of taste Butterfield might have been a great architect for he had everything except taste") with art recovering only slowly from its long illness. After "the extraordinarily misplaced assurance of Scott, Butterfield, and Waterhouse", Turnor ends the century happily with "the rescue of architecture into convalescence undertaken by Norman Shaw and helped on by the Voysey brotherhood, Newton, and Lutyens". Sitwell likewise concluded: "But rescue is not far off. Less than fifteen years separate Balmoral and the Red House, Bexley Heath, built by Philip Webb for William Morris. Soon Norman Shaw and the more original Charles Annesley Voysey are at work. The first house by Lutyens was built in 1889, and the story of English architects and craftsmen is brought down to our own times."

The notion of mid-Victorian sickness and gloom was very powerful. Chesterton had described early C19th culture as "unintelligible" while unthinkingly trendy attitudes were common in the wake of Lytton Strachey's debunking "Eminent Victorians". As late as 1942, G. M. Trevelyan in his "English Social History" could glibly dispose of Victorian architecture - "Butterfield and Waterhouse giving daily pain to posterity" - laying some of the blame on Ruskin and some on mass-production. Analysing these attitudes, Sir John Summerson argued that they were much more extreme than customary changes in taste. He pointed out that, while buildings in their own time had traditionally come to be accepted as right, early and mid-Victorian architecture had been considered "horribly unsuccessful" in the eyes of contemporary critics. We know the C19th as one of ideological cultural debate (Pugin, Ruskin,

Morris), the consequent doubts and anxieties feeding through into that wish for a unique style, a wish invariably frustrated by the general view that style equalled ornament.

But, from early decades of the C20th, there were critical pioneers who should be celebrated. On the local Chester scene there is indebtedness to Hermann Muthesius, championing a provincial architect like John Douglas in "Das Englische Haus" (1904-5), his influential survey of English domestic architecture on behalf of the German government. And our recent Gladstonian excursion reminds us of the importance of Harry Goodhart-Rendel. His impressive Church of the Holy Spirit (1937) at Ewloe could be said to (idiosyncratically) have one foot in the past and one in the future but his academic impact derives from Victorian 'excavation'. His legendary card-index to Victorian churches and their architects has been in continual use, while Betjeman described "English Architecture since the Regency" (first published in 1953 but originally given as Slade lectures at Oxford in the 1920s and 1930s) as "like St Paul's Epistles: you can find more in it every time you turn back to it". Of his lectures Summerson recalled: "It was well-known that Victorian architecture was bad or screamingly funny or both. Rendel begged to differ, but what really stunned his audiences was that he knew, and knew in great detail, what he was talking about". 'The father of us all' was Kenneth Clark's verdict on Goodhart-Rendel, a significant compliment since Clark's "The Gothic Revival" (1928) is also pioneering in treating the subject seriously. This work certainly acknowledges the strengths of Butterfield and Street though there is a tendency to present them as oddities. Overall, Clark felt that the Gothic Revival encouraged conscientious building but could never produce agreeable architecture. His heart was elsewhere.

That cannot be said of Betjeman! I cannot join those who complain that he never gave us a systematic study of Victorian architecture, though I do find his skittishness silly at the expense of the Professor. Betjeman has given us so much - from early times Kenneth Clark recognised his 'conversational' value, his enthusiasm for the 'unloved', those fifty years of letters to 'The Times'. Pre-war, Betjeman's enthusiasms were largely reserved for Georgian and Modernist, but the elegiac 'Shell Guides' (with his friend, the great John Piper) date from 1933 and this stated aim: "primarily to draw attention to Georgian and early Victorian architecture and to deplore over-restoration". Post-war, he was unstoppable, rarely away from print or screen, reportedly not always following cases through, but a magnificent lesson for those academics who are careful not to dirty their hands with actual threats to the built environment. (His 1952 "First and Last Loves" became as essential to my desert island as the 1966 "Nairn's London".) And we've all commented on the injustice of the lack of a Vic Soc invitation to the revamped Scott & Barlow show - indeed Betjeman is there, but sadly not the Herr Doktor, whose scholarly attention to the C19th is virtually unmatched and who truly fought the St Pancras battle.

Nikolaus Pevsner ensured that the Victorian period was treated with balance and intelligence throughout his magisterial 'Buildings of England' series (from 1951). There is though an ideological issue: from his ground-breaking "Pioneers of the Modern Movement" (1936) onwards, Pevsner made it clear that he placed the more functionally adventurous Victorians in a line that led ultimately and desirably to the Bauhaus and the International Modern. He lived long enough to note with sadness the relative failure of the latter, but his social democratic convictions did lead to bias in much the same way as a century before ("Contrasts", 1836) Pugin's vision of medieval Catholic harmony led him to espouse the Gothic above all else. As David Watkin has written, "both Pevsner and Pugin use the same kind of argument to champion the cause of their chosen type: that it is not just a style but a rational way of building evolved inevitably in response to the needs of what society really is or ought to be". Nevertheless, it is as a consequence of the maturity and sophistication which Pevsner introduced to C19th studies that his pupils and followers are in a position to sometimes challenge his assessments. And there were others who, by the time of the Victorian Society's launch, had helped establish serious academic study of the period. Notable was Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the American architectural historian, whose "Early Victorian Architecture" (1954) is outstanding. Hitchcock called for a charitable, uncensorious approach to the subject, avoiding extreme selectivity or excess of humorous reference, emphatically concluding that "the C20th has no right to patronise the C19th".

By the 1960s the tide had really turned, with the general public coming on board as they witnessed the 'modernist' massacre of our city centres, sensing a comprehensive computerised anonymity where once there had been buildings of personality. Gavin Stamp has written persuasively (in "The Sixties", Twentieth Century Society 2002) of "the great sea-change in public attitudes, a major cultural shift, which occurred in the first half of the 1960s". He lists an assortment of factors which fed into this. There was the shameful destruction of the Euston Arch and the Coal Exchange. There was Sir Leslie Martin's terrifying plan for Whitehall. Betjeman was everywhere. Ian Nairn was 'counter-attacking' against 'subtopia'. The 'Architectural Review' was stunning, with Nairn, Pevsner, Nicholas Taylor, Gordon Cullen, Kenneth Browne. The 'Sunday Times' colour supplement (Mark Boxer as editor) was launched, with outstanding photographic features (Pevsner celebrated the Victorians in a lively piece called 'Pride and Prejudice', characteristically extolling Oriel Chambers as a forerunner of curtain-walling). John Hadfield's "Saturday Book" continued to appear with pieces on such Victorian cultural manifestations as fairgrounds and canal-boat art (Edwin Smith finely illustrated a piece on 'Betjeman's Britain', characteristically extolling Comper's St Mary's, Wellingborough). The 60s also witnessed the satire boom (Richard Ingrams began 'Private Eye', which Betjeman joined in 1971) and the Art Nouveau Revival, with Mucha and Beardsley exhibitions at the V & A and the short-lived wonder of Barbara Hulanicki's unforgettable Biba shop. Perhaps this was a heady atmosphere for our newly established Society but at least that old developers' put-down - "Oh, it's only Victorian" - had been consigned to the dustbin of history.

Graham Fisher

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**1 Priory Gardens, Bedford Park, London W4 1TT
020 8994 1019 – Membership hotline: 020 8747 5890
www.victorian-society.org.uk**

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