

# John Newman: An Appreciation

by GORDON HIGGOTT

Architectural historians and the wider public have reason to be grateful for the day in 1963 when John Newman, a young classics master at Tonbridge School with an enthusiasm for the historic architecture of Kent, wrote to Nikolaus Pevsner to ask if he could do anything to advance the Kent volume of *The Buildings of England* series. 'Come and see me', replied Pevsner, who normally looked for researchers at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Within months John had enrolled for an Academic Diploma in the History of European Art at the Courtauld Institute, and within four years of graduating with a distinction in 1965 had researched and written the two Kent volumes — 'the best of the whole series', wrote Pevsner. Since then he has published in almost every subject area of architectural history, trained countless graduates and post-graduates in the field, played a pivotal role as Advisory Editor of *The Buildings of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales*, served as honorary editor of *Architectural History* from 1975 to 1985 (longest tenure in the Society's history), and supported an astonishing range of activities in architectural conservation. These essays, from colleagues, friends and ex-pupils, are presented by the Society in his honour, as a mark of our respect and affection, and in gratitude for his outstanding contribution to architectural history and architectural conservation.

John Newman was born in 1936 and has lived almost his entire life in Kent. His father worked on the development side of the pharmaceutical industry, and from an early age John shared his parents' interests in the arts and music. Educated at Dulwich College, he soon became anchored in the classics stream and went on to University College, Oxford, to read Greats. Here he found much enjoyment in the discipline of rowing, becoming College Captain of Boats. While teaching at Tonbridge school from 1959 he found congenial staff with whom to trek in the Alps in the summer or go walking in the Lake District in the depths of winter, but after four years he yearned to pursue his interest in the history of architecture. During his first term on the Diploma course at the Courtauld Institute in 1963 Pevsner advertised for a driver for a week in Berkshire the following summer. John leapt at the opportunity, and with typical thoroughness hired a car to refresh his driving skills. As his wife Margaret recalls, throughout the day the car refused to go into reverse — a portent of his future career. The next spring he drove Pevsner for five weeks in Hampshire, and when the question of Kent came up again, Pevsner suggested he should research and write it himself. The two Kent volumes, published in 1969, have set a standard of vivid and persuasive architectural analysis that few other surveys of regional architecture in Britain have matched.

John was encouraged to pursue an academic career by Professor Anthony Blunt, Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art. In 1966 Blunt appointed him as a part-time

lecturer at the Institute, and later as full-time lecturer in succession to Dr Margaret Whinney. He has excelled as a post-graduate teacher and research supervisor, not just in British architectural history from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries, but in the related fields of garden history, interior decoration, art patronage, and architectural and commemorative sculpture. Gently undogmatic in approach, but ready to point out the wider lessons or parallels that might be drawn from his students' suggestions, he has always been friendly and accessible to his research pupils, regularly joining them in the Courtauld tea-rooms. The close reading John affords to the drafts submitted to him by his students shows itself in many a marginal note: not only on matters of scholarship, but also on phrasing and grammar. His students have always been grateful for this careful attention, and if his success can be gauged by numbers of completed post-graduate degrees, he must count amongst the finest teachers the Courtauld has ever seen. A few years ago he was supervising seventeen doctoral students simultaneously, seven of whom received their degrees in a single ceremony in 1999.

Recurring themes in his publications on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century architectural history are those he first explored in Kent, when he was writing what have proved to be definitive accounts of buildings like Lees Court or Chevening Park. These are: the links between Court and country, between England and the Continent, and between design and practice, above all in the work of Inigo Jones and his contemporaries. In 1973 he published a perceptive and wide-ranging review of the Inigo Jones fourth-centenary exhibition at the Banqueting House, Whitehall. This was to set the agenda for a critical revaluation of Jones through close study of the primary material, including Jones's architectural drawings and annotated books. From his background in classics and palaeography John developed a methodology for dating Jones's annotations through careful analysis of handwriting style and the way Jones's marginalia related to the Italian texts which they translated or commented upon, a key principle being the need to understand the annotations in context. His underlying purpose was to show how Jones educated himself as an architect. Beginning with an essay in an unpublished Festschrift for his own teacher Peter Murray in 1980, his research bore fruit in papers for conferences at Vicenza (1980) and Tours (1981; published 1988), and in his article in *Architectural History* in 1992.

A related theme of John's research and teaching is how Inigo Jones sought to educate the Stuart Court in the arts of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. It was an aspect of his long-running and highly successful MA course, 'Art and Patronage, 1560–1660' at the Courtauld Institute. When this course was launched in the early 1970s, the whole study of art patronage was quite new in Britain, and its importance for understanding the English Renaissance had only been considered superficially. John has transformed the situation and, in the process, has trained numerous university lecturers, museum curators and historic-building inspectors.

Extraordinarily scrupulous in his own research and writing, he teaches his students to be as careful as he is. He never commits himself to print unless he has checked and re-checked his facts, and fine-tuned his arguments until they are as nearly unassailable as it is possible to make them in a period when so much of the evidence has disappeared. Typical of his concise yet far-reaching analysis of meaning and purpose in

early Stuart design is his article 'An early drawing by Inigo Jones and a monument in Shropshire' (*The Burlington Magazine*, 1973). It reveals Jones as the author of a design rich in iconographical significance and redolent of the religious aspirations of a learned courtier of James I. His article on Blickling Hall (with Caroline Stanley Millson) in *Architectural History*, 1986, is a model case study of a great house which sheds a great deal of light on Jacobean architectural practice in general and demonstrates his readiness to collaborate with others. His publications have stood the test of time, not just for the fluency and clarity of their prose and the exactness of their observations, but for the soundness of their conclusions.

John was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1971, and was President of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain between 1988 and 1992. His services to the conservation of historic buildings are exceptional, and reflect his almost equal commitment to church and secular architecture. He was a member of the Historic Buildings Council for England from 1977 and its equivalent Committee at English Heritage from 1984, becoming Chairman of English Heritage's Churches Committee in 1985 and a Commissioner in 1986. He stepped down from English Heritage in 1989, as he was then Deputy Director at the Courtauld Institute, but he returned in 1998 as a member of its Historic Areas and Buildings Advisory Committee. From 1981 to 1992 he was Chairman of the Conservation Committee of the Council for the Care of Churches. His cogent report on the effectiveness of the system of ecclesiastical exemption, prepared for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in 1997 and known everywhere as 'The Newman Report', examined all the issues in a historical context. Although it caused a stir in some quarters, it was very well received by the conservation world and is now accepted as the basis for the way the system should work in the future. Since 2000 he has been Chairman of the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches, and, with his increasing interest in the historic architecture of Wales, has become a member of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales and President of the Architectural Heritage Society in Cardiff.

One of John's most significant and lasting achievements in conservation has been as Chairman and Trustee of the Pevsner Memorial Trust, set up in 1986 to raise over £100,000 for the restoration of the Clayton and Bell scheme of painted decoration in the church of St Michael, Garton-on-the-Wolds, East Yorkshire. His indefatigable support for this project in memory of Sir Nikolaus has seen the work successfully completed. Locally, he was for a long time Chairman of the Kent Building Preservation Trust, and was a passionate advocate of Eric Lyons' Span housing concept in the village of New Ash Green on the North Downs, to which he and his wife moved in 1968. As Chairman of the local amenity society he fought hard to preserve the concept when it was threatened by new developers.

The crowning achievement of John's career so far is surely his work for *The Buildings of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales*, which has reached a larger public than his purely academic work. In many ways John has inherited Pevsner's mantle, and kept alive his rigorous spirit of enquiry. He has helped maintain the momentum in the expanded series, both as Advisory Editor (since 1984) and by ensuring progress on *The Buildings of Wales*. He has written two of the new Wales volumes (*Glamorgan*, 1995, and *Gwent/Monmouthshire*, 2000), and plans to revise *Shropshire*. In Wales he was

accompanied by his wife Margaret, who has described how, during their numerous visits, 'his concentration and ability to keep at it were what struck me most, along with a natural ease and courtesy in handling the many people we met by arrangement or unannounced.'

If one were seeking to characterize John Newman's style and enduring influence it would surely have something to do with that quality Pevsner so much admired in English Gothic architecture of the later thirteenth century, and which John so aptly quoted in his fine essay on *Pevsner's Taste* in 1986, referring to a celebrated maxim of Theognis: '. . . the Greek, i.e. classic, ideal of μηδὲν ἄγαν (nothing in excess)'. As those privileged to be taught by him will know: everything is concise, to the point, and meaningful. Architectural history in Britain is immeasurably richer for his teaching, his writing, and his sage advice. We wish him a long and fruitful retirement, with time to read, speak and write on his favourite architectural subjects.

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