

# Preservation not restoration

1877-1975

In 1877, a full century before the Sussex Heritage Trust was founded, William Morris, artist, designer and socialist, drafted the manifesto of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). In it he noted that *'No doubt within the last fifty years a new interest, almost like another sense, has arisen in these ancient buildings'*.

Morris, together with the architect Philip Webb and other friends, felt that such an organisation was needed to combat the overzealous restoration of the High Victorian era. He concluded by saying *'It is for all these buildings therefore, of all times and styles, that we plead, and call upon those who have to deal with them, to put Protection in the place of Restoration...'*

The SPAB, which Morris referred to as Anti-Scrape, worked to build connections with art and antiquarian societies and the custodians of old buildings. It also ran high-profile press campaigns, including one to save St Mark's Square in Venice from restoration. His campaigning bore fruit and in 1882 the Ancient Monuments Protection Act came into force and provided some element of protection for a small number of prehistoric sites.

Morris counted all three of the founder members of the National Trust amongst his friends. The SPAB was an active supporter of this new organisation when it was established in 1895 with the purpose of *'The preservation for the benefit of the Nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest...'* It is particularly fitting that the first building acquired by the National Trust was the 14<sup>th</sup> century Alfriston Clergy House, purchased for £10 in 1896. In the early days, however, the Trust was primarily concerned with protecting open spaces.

With the new century came a new champion in the person of Lord Curzon, who had saved Tattershall Castle in 1910. He was the main supporter of the 1910 Ancient Monuments Protection Act which allowed for the issue of preservation orders to protect monuments. One castle was not enough for Curzon; in 1917 he bought Bodiam Castle as an engagement present for his second wife. On his death in 1926 he left both castles to the National Trust.

Up to the Second World War, conservation relied to a large extent on wealthy educated landowners or groups brought together to fight a particular cause, such as the Bath Preservation Trust, founded in 1934 to fight (successfully) new road proposals through the Georgian city. 1937 saw the founding of the Georgian Group; Victorian architecture however had to wait until 1958 and a change in appreciation for its Society to find sufficient support.

In a strange way the losses caused by WWII bombings can be seen as a major impetus for the conservation of our heritage. The destruction made the country realise what it had lost and what it could still lose. This realisation led to the transformative 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, giving statutory protection to 'listed buildings' of particular architectural merit. Whilst statutory protection was increased, people also wanted to take a more practical approach to preservation. This was exemplified by the fight from the late 40's

onwards to save and restore our canals and by the establishment of preservation societies in towns across the country such as King's Lynn in 1958.

1967 was a turning point in conservation with the introduction of the Civic Amenities Act, creating the simple concept of conservation areas. As with green belts, people understood what it was; it also introduced the idea that the character of an area matters as much as its buildings. This led to the establishment of an increasing number of county preservation trusts such as Nottinghamshire in 1967 and Derbyshire in 1974.

1975 was European Architectural Heritage Year, leading to the founding of Save Britain's Heritage, possibly the most influential conservation group to have been established since William Morris founded the SPAB. Other areas of the country such as East and West Sussex explored what could be done to help preserve the county's heritage.

## The beginning

1976-1977

Galvanised by renewed impetus generated by European Architectural Heritage Year, Andrew Thorburn, Chief Planning Officer for East Sussex, took up the challenge for the whole county. In July 1976 he wrote *'I am taking a personal initiative to see whether there is something which can be done... as an initial step, I am writing to a handful of people who I know are personally interested in this subject, with a view to an informal meeting in order to exchange ideas'*.

That initial meeting led to the establishment of a Steering Group, meeting for the first time under his chairmanship in November 1976. Here it was agreed to recommend that the name of any future body should be the Sussex Heritage Trust and the objectives of the Trust should be:

*'To preserve the buildings and features important to the heritage of Sussex by works of restoration, repair and maintenance. This may include present or past furniture, fittings or equipment of property. It will, as necessary, purchase and sell property and make available loans or grants to other owners'*.

A two-tier structure was envisaged, a management board reporting to the Trustees with representation on both being as county-wide as possible. Prophetically the meeting noted that the raising of funds was likely to be difficult. Amongst those on the Steering Group were two men who would play a major role in the future Trust, Professor John Kingman, Chairman of the Regency Society of Brighton and Hove and John Small, architect and Brighton resident. A list of potential future Trustees was put forward.

By early 1977 the Steering Group had produced a report and a number of people were invited to come together and set up the Trust. There were few changes to the Steering Committee's early views except for the addition of an associated society to be called 'Friends of the Trust' and the recognition of the need for publicity to gain as much support as possible.

The first meeting of the future Trustees of Sussex Heritage Trust was held under the temporary chairmanship of Lord Gibson, in the absence of Lord March, on 6 May 1977 at Pelham House, Lewes. The first meeting of the Management Committee was held on 23 May 1977 under the non-executive chairmanship of Prof Kingman. By July the Trust had been founded; a press release was issued setting out the Trust's aims, giving details of the founding trustees and announcing a proposed public meeting on 1 October 1977. The press release read *'The rescue of old buildings and other features of the environment is the principal aim of the Sussex Heritage Trust. So far as buildings are concerned, the Trust will operate mainly by buying or leasing historic buildings in need of repair. After restoration work has been carried out, the Trust will offer the buildings for sale, subject to conditions as to their future maintenance. It will work by direct action and not as a pressure group'*.

The Founding Trustees were the Earl of March and Kinrara ( Chairman), Lord Gibson, Sir Peter Mursell, Geoffrey Johnson Smith MP, Prof Kingman, Cllr Mary Lochner, Cllr George Burton and Andrew Thorburn.

The Trustees were keen to start an initial project. At their second meeting on 10 August 1977, three potential properties had been identified of which one, 11/11A Market Street Lewes, would become the first active project.

Following formal incorporation as a company on 23 September 1977, Sussex Heritage Trust Ltd was now ready to make itself known to the wider world. On 1 October 1977, at the University of Sussex, Lord March and Lady Evershed, Chairman of the King's Lynn Preservation Trust, introduced Sussex Heritage Trust. Details of the first likely projects were given and a call was made for participants to join the 'Friends of the Trust'. All seemed set fair.

## Starting Out

1978-1987

Sadly the public launch of the Trust was not an unqualified success. There was criticism of the narrow spread of the trustees' interests, the relationship between the Trustees and the Management Board and the lack of involvement at the higher levels of existing amenity societies across the county. In particular the proposal to form the 'Friends of the Trust' was given a hostile reception by the same amenity societies; there was understandable concern that the Friends would draw away their existing members and income.

Brian Anthony, a member of the Management Committee, gave a report to the trustees with recommendations for possible improvements. However no mention was made of the criticism in the Trust's minutes and it was agreed at their next meeting to take no action until the Trust had been in place for longer.

By the end of 1977 funds of £10,000 had been donated and the Trust was anxious to press on with its first project. Three initial projects had been identified, 11/11a Market Street Lewes, Brightling Sawmill and Preyste Cottages, Petworth. In November 1977 contracts were exchanged for the purchase of 11/11a Market Street for £3,500. The fate of the other two properties over the coming decade would illustrate the difficulties faced by the Trust in meeting its aims.

In May 1978 Prof Kingman stood down as Chairman of the Management Committee. He was succeeded by John Small and it was during this year that the Sussex Heritage Trust Society, as the Friends were now called, was formally established.

In 1979 the Chateau Briand project in Burwash was taken on by the Trust in partnership with the Official Solicitor. This was successfully completed and sold in 1983. John Small became a trustee in 1980, following his contribution to the Trust's work. This year also saw the purchase of 10/11 Clifton Hill, Brighton, the Trust's next live project. The first SHT Society newsletter was published and historic gardens were added to the Trust's range of interests.

By April of the following year Clifton Hill was virtually complete and membership of the SHT Trust had reached 100. The project at Brightling Sawmill was dormant as grants could not be obtained due to public access limitations. What was initially going to be a gift was now up for sale. The Preyste Cottages had also gone through a complex history of legal hoops. As the property market improved, a developer decided to take on the risks despite the potential complications. This improvement in the market did not last and the downturn linked to rising interest rates exposed the flaws in the Trust's modus operandi.

By 1983 Clifton Hill had still not been sold although it had been completed almost two years earlier. Grants for Chateau Briand were now charged at over double the initial interest rate and the Trust was technically insolvent. This state of affairs continued until 1985 when 11 Clifton Hill was finally sold. Without funds the Trust's work was restricted to advising, cajoling and supporting various bodies such as Hastings Borough Council in its efforts to preserve St Mary in the Castle. It also concentrated the Trustees' minds on how to raise funds. 1983 to 1985 were given over to fundraising activities, both professional and personal. By 1986 the Trust was in credit to the tune of £1700; by December 1987 this had risen to £10,000.

At the end of the first decade of the Trust's activities came the news that the owner of the Brightling Sawmill had completely demolished the roof. The District Council refused to take any further action even though it was a listed building. The minutes record that '*The Trust is therefore in no position to object - a regrettable event after all the efforts made by the Trust in 1977-1980 to preserve the mill and its machinery.*'

On a more positive note, at the same time came the introduction of a project that was to figure in the Trust's activities for the next twenty years, St Helen's Church, Ore, Hastings.

## New directions

1988-1997

The trust began its second decade having completed three live projects and with some involvement in 24 other projects, but also with the realisation that its original 'activist' model was flawed. This was due in part to the unavailability of suitable properties which did not have ownership, legal or planning issues, but also because of a lack of funds.

By 1988 the Management Committee concluded that the 1986 fundraising appeal was a 'damp squib' to a large extent because the major flagship project that the Trust had hoped to hold up as an example of what it could do had fallen through. This was the regeneration of 22 Brunswick Terrace Hove and its sorry history helps to illustrate the Trust's difficulties. Faced with compulsory purchase by Hove Borough Council, an intransigent head lessee and ten sub-lessees, it was never going to be an easy project. The situation was exacerbated by lack of flexibility on the part of Hove Council and changes to the grant structure.

By 1989 it had reached the point where the Trust's legal advisor was acting for the Tenants' Association against Hove Council, the Trust's original partners. The time taken to try and resolve these issues allowed a developer to intervene and take advantage of all the work the Trust had put in. The project had to be dropped.

In April 1990 the Management Committee, now chaired by John Small, put forward a paper entitled *New Direction 1990*. By the time of the September meeting, the way forward for the Trust had been distilled into the following options:

- Raise its profile and become the Sussex-wide heritage campaigning body
- Seek to fulfil its original intention of direct action
- Offer a fee-based heritage consultancy service
- Offer to co-ordinate the 'buildings at risk' survey

The Management Committee, now chaired by Robert Minton, concluded that *'The Trust should establish and attain positive objectives by the 1992 Annual Meeting with the corollary that failure must lead to a decision on its continuance'*.

The Trust agreed to the conveyancing of St Helen's Church Ore, a project that would span the next two decades. By 1992 St Helen's had been scheduled as an Ancient Monument; works to secure and consolidate the tower were undertaken. In November the Trust agreed to join with Arun DC to save 155/156 High Street, Clapham, a 16<sup>th</sup> century timber-framed vernacular house. At the same time, Ashcombe Toll House in Lewes was identified as a possible project, limited only by uncertainty as to its ownership.

By 1992 the Trust had agreed to undertake the last three of the proposed options listed above. In 1993 however the Management Committee agreed to concentrate on the 'Buildings at Risk' survey rather than seek properties on the open market. 1994 saw the successful completion for English Heritage of the 'Buildings at Risk' survey of a number of districts in East and West Sussex. A project officer was appointed for the Clapham houses, although the project hit the usual problem of delay in grants being paid and the consequent problems of cash flow.

Whilst the Trust sought to chart a way forward, changes to Charity and Company legislation required a complete overhaul of the Trust's structure. This resulted in the combination of the Trustees and the Management Committee into one slimmed-down board of Trustees with a Managing Director and a non-Executive Chairman. One anomaly that this restructuring exposed was that none of the original trustees had been registered with the Charity Commission since the Trust was founded, only members of the Management Committee.

By November 1996, 155/156 High Street Clapham had been completed and sold. The Trust began to examine how it could complete the 'Buildings at Risk' survey for the whole of the county following the loss of funding from English Heritage and the local authorities. The estimated cost of this was £20,000 and no funding was in place.

The Trust had found a new direction and had also sought to widen the scope of advice it gave to other bodies and individuals, believing that the importance lay in getting the restoration done, not in who does it. It now looked to see how it could celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1997 with various ideas including an awards scheme.

## The Awards

### 1998-2007

1997 saw a recovery in the property market meaning that, although the Trust continued to give advice and support to a wide range of projects, it was very difficult to evolve viable schemes. This prompted a number of resignations from the Management Committee.

The Trust commenced repair works to Ashcombe Toll House whilst seeking full rights of ownership. It continued to press both East and West Sussex Councils regarding the 'Buildings at Risk' survey despite a considerable divergence of attitude from planning officers.

If the Trust sought a new direction and stimulus, it found it in the Awards scheme. Under the chairmanship of Lady Renton, the Awards Committee launched the first awards in 1998, the Trust's 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary. The first awards were a success with 60 people attending the luncheon. It was subsequently agreed to hold the Awards again in 1999 but not to make them an annual event. The view was that there would not be enough projects to sustain annual Awards.

During 1998 Robert Minton stepped down after ten years as chairman of the Management Committee, to be replaced by Alastair Johns, who produced a paper entitled Aims and Objectives. This proposed a five-year rolling programme concentrating on the 'Buildings at Risk' survey. Fundraising was to be a top priority, together with the necessary amendments and streamlining of the structure of the Trust. There should be an emphasis on the role of the Trust as a catalyst and advisor by raising public awareness of the issues, for example by the Awards.

The 1999 awards had 65 entries, 99 guests and broke even financially. It was resolved that they should continue on an annual basis.

That year saw the reorganisation of the Trust with a single-tier structure, a non-executive chairman and a managing director. The Earl of Limerick agreed to serve as chairman and Alastair Johns was appointed managing director. This change required some of the original trustees to retire and become patrons. These included Andrew Thorburn, who in 1976 had instigated the idea of the Trust, and the Duke of Richmond, who as Lord March had become Chairman of the Trustees 22 years earlier. The changes were not only to the structure of the Trust but also to its aims, now agreed with the Charity Commission as 'To



*preserve, improve and encourage the appreciation of the architecture and natural landscape of Sussex’.*

This was also the first year that the Trust opened Ashcombe Toll House during Heritage Open Day in September, though the Trust was “squatting” as ownership had yet to be established. Work began on a Heritage Lottery bid for a grant to complete and maintain the Buildings at Risk Survey. This was ultimately to prove unsuccessful. In Alastair Johns’ words, it did not ‘embrace any of the fashionable criteria deemed to be necessary for a successful bid’.

2002 saw the creation of the role of President which was taken by Lord Lloyd of Berwick following the unexpected death of the Earl of Limerick. In line with this change, Alastair Johns became Chairman of the Trustees. The two assumed these roles at a time of financial difficulties. However the Awards continued to grow in importance and were swiftly becoming a major source of income. 250 guests attended that year’s lunch which saw the awarding of the Silver Jubilee award to Richard Reed, the notable Downsman.

In 2004 the first Man of the Year Award was presented to John Small on his retirement from the Trust. He had served on the original steering committee, had become the second chairman of the Management Committee and had personally overseen the projects at Lewes and Brighton as well as many others that never came to fruition. He had later served as a Trustee. In 2005 the Toll House was let. The Trust continued to look for a role as the continuing property boom meant that that few buildings, even those at risk, had a negative value and were therefore potential projects.

In 2006 Alastair Johns stepped down as Chairman and was replaced by Sir Arthur Watts. This year also marked the retirement of another of the original members of the Trust, Robert Minton. Like John Small, he had been with the Trust from the earliest meetings and had served as chairman of the Management Committee and as a Trustee. Together with John Small, he became a patron of the Trust.

At the close of the Trust’s third decade, the Chairman wrote in his annual report *‘The whole world of charities and their modus operandi has changed out of all recognition since the Trust was founded 30 years ago. The Trust needs to make equivalent changes to the way we set about achieving the tasks we have set ourselves..... and there is every reason to believe that we will make them and so ensure for the Trust the future it deserves.’*

## Moving forward

2008-2017

Sadly the Trust’s fourth decade began with the death of its chairman Sir Arthur Watts. Alastair Johns stepped into the breach and, at the 2008 AGM, was able to report that resources were sound but he questioned what they were for. He concluded that they were not sufficient for any ambitious undertaking, such as the renovation of a building. He proposed that the Trust should make a major contribution to the strategic planning of the region and help make the housing stock greener. This signalled a shift in emphasis towards becoming more of a campaigning body.

By 2009 Lord Egremont had become President on the retirement of Lord Lloyd. Fundraising had again become a priority with an initiative to revive the idea of an appeal to the membership to sustain a capital Fund. There was also a wish to complete St Helen's before the vandals, badgers and ivy undid the works carried out to date. A feasibility study had been funded and an initial Heritage Lottery Fund grant application made. By October the case for the grant was strengthened when the locality was made a Conservation Area and Hastings Borough Council agreed to take on the completed project.

In February 2010 the new Chairman Chris Gebbie was able to report that the HLF grant had been received and work commenced to raise the additional parallel funding required. The Awards continued to attract publicity and sponsorship. They remained the most visible endorsement of one of the Trust's main objectives, to preserve the quality and vernacular of Sussex architecture, whilst also fostering innovative new design that would be the bedrock for future generations to enjoy and appreciate.

April 2011 saw the second HLF grant application succeed and all fundraising was now directed towards the completion of St Helen's. In December planning permission was finally obtained for the proposals.

One new direction was the setting up of a number of sponsored apprenticeships in conservation and traditional building skills, to address the skills shortage and raise the Trust's profile in the educational sphere; in 2012 two bursaries were awarded.

The works at St Helen's started in early May 2012 with significant local involvement. This was a crucial part of the HLF grant requirements and included the founding of St Helen's Friends, a community archaeological dig and a significant school educational programme run by a Trust officer. The publicity arising from the Trust's involvement in the project meant that its display material needed updating; it adopted as its banner line '*Respect for the past, design for the future*'. The works at St Helen's were completed in early 2013 and the project was handed over to Hastings Borough Council on 9 May.

With the publication of the South Downs National Park 'State of the Park' report in 2012, the question of how best the Trust could contribute to the Buildings at Risk survey was again raised. One major concern was how to address the 'Sussex Hole' of properties from the late 19th century vernacular missing from the register; the person compiling it at the time appeared not to appreciate Victorian architecture. At the AGM, John Godfrey became Chairman as Chris Gebbie had been appointed High Sheriff of East Sussex.

In 2014 the apprenticeship scheme continued but the take-up remained low and it was agreed to widen the entry criteria. The Awards remained the Trust's primary public activity. As a result of the Buildings at Risk survey in the South Downs National Park, the Trust agreed to work with the Park to produce a report on the future of K6 telephone boxes.

Over the next year came a new website and a push for greater involvement with the Friends. The Trust's policy on Renewable Energy was published and a successful link with the Weald and Downland Living Museum was forged to boost the apprenticeships.

By 2016, thoughts were already turning to how to celebrate the Trust's 40th anniversary. It was agreed this should be a dinner at Petworth House by kind permission of Lord Egremont, to be held in October 2017. The end of the year saw the publication of the



Trust's report on the K6 telephone boxes which was to receive considerable country-wide publicity.

In 2017, as the Sussex Heritage Trust marks its fourth decade and its contribution to the preservation and conservation of the natural and built landscape in Sussex, it issued a new mission statement setting out its aims for the future:

- *By recognising and celebrating high-quality conservation, restoration and new-built projects in Sussex.*
- *By taking a strategic interest in Sussex buildings and landscape conservation issues.*
- *By highlighting, surveying and reporting on Buildings at Risk.*
- *By working with government agencies, local authorities and community groups on heritage projects.*
- *By offering relevant educational opportunities in the conservation building and construction industry, for young people based in Sussex.*

Julian Lockett  
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