

## CHAPTER 7

# THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE



## Introduction

The surviving country houses of Greater Manchester, which in their architecture, layout and size are palimpsests of the attitudes and organisation of past societies, constitute a diminishing historic asset. The destruction of such buildings in most cases has been due to a number of clear factors, namely: the high cost of repairs; the restrictive or irrelevant nature of their internal layout; and the increasing demand for building land.

None of these factors has, in itself or in conjunction with the others, proved a sufficiently strong incentive for the demolition of a major national country house in recent years. Unhappily for Greater Manchester, few of its homes can be said to be of that calibre. A reading of the gazetteer shows that the majority of buildings are modest affairs with few claims to outstanding architectural merit, but this need not mean that they are unworthy of preservation; rather it suggests a need for a re-evaluation of preservation criteria, when a case for demolition is made. It should be pointed out that a lack of architectural merit does not necessarily preclude the presence of historic value.

## The History of the Preservation Movement

The concept of preserving buildings, inspired by the work and enthusiasm of John Ruskin, led in 1882 to the first Ancient Monuments Act. In 1877 the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings was formed and this was followed in 1895 by the creation of the National Trust. By 1935 the National Trust had only one country house in its possession, but with the powers it acquired by an Act of 1937 and the start of the Trust's Country House scheme, it can now boast of 150 homes open to the public, one of which, Dunham Massey, is in Greater Manchester. The early acts and societies, although engaged in strong and active lobbying to preserve the country house failed to keep pace with, or significantly alter the rate of, destruction. Indeed, the very dimensions of the problem engendered an attitude of pragmatism in which preservationists' efforts were concentrated on the outstanding or major buildings.

In 1950 the Gowers committee presented a report on Houses of Outstanding Architectural or Historic interest to Parliament, and in 1953 the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act was passed. Nine years earlier, the concept of 'listing' buildings had been realized and from this, together with the new Act and the formation of the Historic Buildings Councils, there emerged a new emphasis on preservation. The Councils were empowered to advise their respective Secretaries of State on:

1. The making of grants toward repair,

maintenance, and promotion of houses.

2. Acquisition of buildings by the state.

3. The listing of buildings.

Logically, this new expansion in legislation and organisation augured well for the future prospects of individual houses. However, it soon became clear that state and local government funds would prove insufficient to meet all the demands made of them, and so again the emphasis rested upon preserving outstanding examples, albeit chosen from a wider frame of reference.

## Recent Progress

In recent years, new methods of preserving houses have been explored, and efforts made to offer the buildings a new lease of life by putting them to socially relevant and economically sound uses. For instance, Binney and Martin (1982) lately observed the increasing use of historic buildings as hotels, but as so often happens with such conversions, they proved to be feasible only in the case of large Victorian or Edwardian houses originally designed for weekend parties.

Within the last twenty years there have been several attempts to form housing associations to repair and revitalise a number of specific country houses, and create within them multi-occupier accommodation. Binney and Martin (1982) found that in the majority of cases, however, such associations and their plans proved to be very susceptible to relatively small changes in grants, which had a disproportionately adverse effect on the economic viability of their respective projects.

County based building preservation trusts, however, have proved to be a more successful form of organisation. It is usual for such trusts to purchase and repair individual buildings with money drawn from a revolving fund into which the profits from a successful project are ploughed back. This success seems to be due to two factors; firstly, knowledge of local grants and conditions, and secondly, the relative ease with which they can withdraw in the planning stage from individual projects, should circumstances change. It is characteristic of such trusts that their work has concentrated on small buildings, as they are generally obliged to limit their operations to projects within the price range of the revolving fund. This has led to the criticism that such trusts have failed to tackle any major country house project; however, it should be said that they are one of the few bodies capable of, indeed willing to, consider the smaller houses that are typical of counties like Greater Manchester.

On the whole, although the impact of the attitudes of Ruskin and his disciples has been to make society aware of the value of preserving our historic buildings, the very size of the problem has meant that national and private charitable bodies have continued to concentrate their efforts on the major buildings.

Local government has, since the advent of 'listing', proved to hold a key role in the preservation of the minor houses and halls. Where a building is listed, listed building consent is required for it to be altered or demolished. The granting of consent has often required the active support of local government, even though, in the final analysis, approval must come from the Secretary of State. Equally, local government has, in recent years, made available an increasing amount of money for the preservation of country houses. Despite this progress, which has taken place at local level and therefore helped the minor halls particularly, there are still insufficient resources to meet the demands of preservation.

Once more, choices have had to be made as to what houses should be preserved. The choices that have been made have depended, despite government circulars laying down preservation criteria, largely upon pragmatic considerations that embrace the three factors outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

Much of the need for these pragmatic decisions could, however, be avoided if the owners of such houses understood the value and importance of the buildings, and so recognized the need to preserve them.

### **Aims of the Volume**

This volume is an attempt to disseminate knowledge and so alter the general level of awareness. The chapters on the historical background to, and the development of, the county's country houses show how minor changes in layout and architecture reflect changes in past society. The reconstruction drawings and the discussion of moated sites illustrate how not only the building itself but its associated structures, gardens and fields are all records of past activity. These facets of the subject are not often discussed; rather the majority of studies have tended to concentrate upon the architecture and decor of the buildings. The minor country house, together with its outbuildings, lodges and gardens, forms a complete historical complex that is worthy of preservation.

### **The Working Party Report**

In March 1979 a fresh look at the preservation of country houses, and, for the first time, their associated structures, was taken by the Working Party on Alternative Uses of Historic Buildings, which was set up under the auspices of the Historic Buildings Council for England and the British Tourist Authority. The Report of the Working Party stressed, for the first time at national level, the importance of preserving and making accessible to the public the smaller home, and contained three main

guidelines to be referred to when considering changes of use for a house in order to make it more economically viable, and hence encourage its preservation.

Firstly they suggested that, when reviewing buildings already adapted for office, institutional, hotel or other use, further changes should encourage the reversion of the building to residential use. Secondly, they argued that where derelict or abandoned buildings were being considered for rehabilitation, the presumption should be in favour of residential use. Lastly, it was laid down that future schemes should include all the surrounding outbuildings as part of a comprehensive scheme.

The heavy emphasis placed upon residential use in the guidelines sprang from the Working Party's findings that the large number of conversions of houses to institutional use that took place after 1945 had, in most cases, resulted in major wear and tear to the buildings. It might also be pointed out here that such conversions are only feasible in the case of the larger house. They also noted that many of the institutional uses were short-term and that a general residential conversion, to hotel, holiday accommodation or multi-occupier residence, usually resulted in new viable long-term uses being established that were more in keeping with the building's original function. A change to an economic use and relevance remains one method of securing the future of a country house.

### **The Private Sector Owner**

As has been observed above, the responsibility for preservation often comes to rest with the owner. The private sector owner as developer is faced eventually with the problem of what to do with an individual building. A number of clear rules should be observed in order to avoid many of the common pitfalls associated with developing such sites.

Owners should have early and informal discussions with their local planning officer in order to identify the overall criteria that will be used when the planning application is decided. The local planning officer will also know what grant assistance is available at local government level and be able to put the owner in touch with interested national bodies. It is important from the outset to realise, however, that any demolition is likely to be resisted and seen as a last resort. The complexity of the planning issues involved in restoring or revitalising a country house, and the system for giving grants, when these are unavailable, are such that the whole process may take some time, and therefore the owner should consider stop gap measures such as 'moth-balling' the building in order to prevent a deterioration in the structure.

The informal discussions at local government level should make it clear what options are available, and it is essential after this for the owner to try to obtain the advice of professional architects and advisors who are experienced in dealing with old and historic

buildings. Seeking such experienced advice is vital as otherwise resistance may be met when planning approval is sought, and unsympathetic development can lower the long term value of the building. Advice on who would be suitable can be obtained from a number of sources, and it is worth considering approaching local historic and conservation societies as these will give an idea of whose local work is most approved.

After plans have been drawn up, the cost of the proposed work and what grants are available should become clear. In any commercial private sector evaluation of the cost of such works, an unusual factor should be considered, namely, prestige. Without a doubt, the sympathetic revitalisation of an historic building can only create a good public image, and this factor should play its part in any consideration of costs.

It is important to ensure that the contractors engaged in such work are experienced in dealing with historic buildings, as no amount of careful design can hide shoddy or inexperienced workmanship. The do-it-yourself renovator should also seek advice and guidance, as many modern materials are unsuitable for restoration work and some of the supposed 'Tudor style' objects and plans in circulation appear out-of-place when used indiscriminately.

### A Success Story

An example of what may be achieved with thought and attention is provided by Newton Hall, Hyde. Faced with imminent destruction as recently as 1968, this hall, one of the earliest timber framed buildings in the region, was rescued by the intervention of Messrs William Kenyon and Sons.

The medieval sequence of operations for constructing the Hyde building was followed in the 1969 restoration, and in the process a greater understanding of the methods used and problems faced by the medieval builder emerged.

The first stage of construction was the establishing of red sandstone walls to support the large oak cills, which formed the base for both the cruck trusses and the timber walls. The next major stage was the rearing (or raising) of the crucks, sequentially, from one end of the building to form the basic skeleton of the structure. This was followed by the insertion of the timbers of the 46 ft long side walls into the oak cills. The final stage consisted of filling in the walls and roofing the building.

The cost of re-erecting such a timber building is quite high, and the Weald and Downland Museum, who specialise in re-erecting buildings, have devised the following formula which is used for initial estimates:

Re-erecting timber frames    £20 per cubic foot

Erecting suitable walls        £20 per square foot  
and roofs

The thoroughness of the approach to restoration

of Messrs William Kenyon and Sons is illustrated, not only by the quality of the finished building, but also by the fact that they conducted documentary research into the social history of the Hall. This lively approach revealed such interesting items as the will of Alexander de Newton, an owner who died in 1557, which records amongst his possessions:

Two of my best oxen,  
My best waine (waggon) and wheles,  
My best silver spoons,  
My best bed, with the coverynge belonge to same,  
A grett panne or a grett brasse pott with two arks for myle

The Hall is now used by Kenyon's to accommodate their boardroom and offices; however, they have built a glass bay onto the building so that visitors may view the interior. They have succeeded, not only in preserving the structure and the essential character of the building, but also in finding a viable use for it.

Newton Hall stands as an example of what the committed private sector owner can achieve when dealing with the problematic smaller house.

### Conclusion

Listing buildings, making grants and raising an owner's awareness of the value of a building all play an important part in preserving such buildings; however, choices over the allocation of priorities and resources currently have to be made on the basis of pragmatic factors and generalised statements of value.

The recent re-listing of buildings and the gazetteer in this volume could, however, form the basis for a new empirical approach to the problem. Such detailed data on the houses should allow wider and more rational choices to be made in which comparisons of numbers of types of houses could come to play their part. Such empirical approaches to preservation are not new; rather they are common in archaeology where even more empirical techniques of resource allocation have been devised (Groube and Bowden 1982).

It is to be hoped that efforts will, in future, be concentrated on preserving a representative sample of the halls of Greater Manchester for future generations.



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