Forwards and Backwards: Architecture in inter-war England
Transcript

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The First World War killed eight million people, and shattered the Victorian age. England had not been in a major war since the defeat of Napoleon, and those who imagined riding to victory in shining breastplates were appalled to end up in a network of muddy trenches that, if stretched out in a long line, would have wound itself once round the globe. 7,000 young men were killed every day in the trenches, while 70 miles away in England people still went to the theatre and smoked cigars. The young archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler, later to be one of my predecessors as director of this museum, recalled in his autobiography ‘Those familiar only with the mild casualties of the Second German War can have little appreciation of the carnage which marked its predecessor. It is a typical instance that, of five university students who worked together in the Wroxeter excavations of 1913, one only survived the war. It so happened that the survivor was myself.’

Survivors and their families wanted something different from post-war Britain. But the new direction was a different one from that taken by the French and Germans; it was a gentler and more conservative way. Between the wars Britain neither broke with its past nor was in its thrall. It accommodated it, modernised it, and redesigned it to make it part of everyday life. Modernism and the avant garde, such an important cultural feature of France, Germany or Russia played little part in inter-war Britain. The Arts and Crafts movement was still alive but was now democratised. Millions shared in the country cottage, the countryside, the homely comfort of old England. Modernity in Britain was conservative, comfortable and cautious not angular, jarring and reactionary. This is the key to the title of my lecture this evening: forwards or backwards, which way was Britain, after the First World War to go? Or would it, as I have already hinted, somehow find a way in between.

Forwards or backwards was a key dilemma in the inter-war world of art and architecture, or perhaps put in words of the time the dilemma was traditionalism versus modernism, or again in contemporary words internationalism versus vernacularism. This was neatly expressed by, the then father of English painting, Paul Nash, a confirmed modernist who worked in a native tradition. He was to ask, in 1922, ‘Whether it is possible to ‘go modern’ and still ‘be British’...The battle lines have been drawn up: internationalism versus indigenous culture; renovation versus conservatism: the industrial versus the pastoral; the functional versus the futile’

So what were, in fact, the two choices? Modernism was seen to embrace new materials and innovative technology, it was seen as searching for a radical new visual language based on abstract non-representational forms and minimal decoration as well as an engagement with what were thought to be universal design qualities rather than specific ones. This approach was perhaps best expressed by the Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead, sometimes known as the Isokon Building. It was a block of 32 ultra-efficient flats, each just large enough for a couple, but better for a single person (daring in itself); it was not a place for families. The interiors were hard to personalise furniture and fittings were supplied as part of the package. This was design for living without possessions. The building was designed by Welles Coates, a man without any formal architectural; training, he was an engineer.

So this was the first choice for artists and architects to turn modern. The alternative was to continue in what should be called the historicist vein. In other words architecture that took its lead from past historical styles. As I explained in my last lecture before the First World War this was a style called arts and crafts, or sometimes Queen Anne. It was a funny amalgam of things partly Tudor partly a revival of interest in Christopher Wren, but its essence was a revolt against the standardisation and mechanisation of industrialisation. I’m going to start here tonight, as this was the established look that people were interested in and against which the proponents of modern styles reacted.

J. Alfred Gotch was the first to write a learned account of early Tudor architecture in England in his Early Renaissance Architecture in England of 1901. This expanded his earlier two-volume book of architectural photographs and drawings that covered the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods and added a significant and carefully researched text. Gotch’s contemporary was Thomas Garner who at the same time was compiling an even larger and more ambitious project on the Tudor houses of England. Garner died in 1906 and Arthur Stratton, an architect and lecturer at King’s College London, took up his research and notes. Based on these and his own researches Stratton wrote The Domestic Architecture of England during the Tudor Period, published in 1911. The list of subscribers to the massive two volume work included many of the leading architects of the day including Edwin Lutyns, C.R. Ashbee and W.D. Caroe, the study relied heavily on the researches of a wider group of historians including Gotch, Sir Maxwell Lyte, Ernest law and N.H.J. Westlake. Stratton introduced his book with the claim that

“one of the chief reasons that make this particular period of such supreme importance is that the house building is indigenous to the soil. It is as national as the name with which it is stamped; it breathes the restful yet vigorous spirit of the time that gave it birth, and whatal is characterised by a self-contained homeliness, redolent of the life and customs of the Englishman of the day, and impossible to be either originated or imitated by his continental contemporaries”.

This was also the view of a large number of architects and private house owners, especially the very rich who, at about the time of the First World War, turned to the Tudor style in force.

Tudor mania led to the restoration of many houses, often incorporating substantial parts of original buildings from elsewhere. Ightam Mote and Sissinghurst in Kent; Ockwells in Berkshire; Athelhampton in Dorset and Avebury in Wiltshire, are just a small number of important Tudor projects of the period 1910-1939. A few were new houses like Bailiffscourt in Sussex by Amyas Phillips for the Hon. Walter Guinness (later lord Moyne). Here, a number of genuine Tudor buildings were bodily transported and re-erected as part of the mansion.

Just as Tudor architecture had become admired so, at the same time was a revival in interest of the architecture of Sir Christopher Wren. Wren is today universally acknowledged as a genius it is hard to image that he had ever been anything other than admired. But in around 1800 the tide of taste began to turn against Wren and by the 1840s the tone had drastically changed. Wren’s palace at Hampton Court built from William III was categorised as a ‘national misfortune’ and an ‘impertinent construction’, his Ionic colonnade was a symbol of desecration and Wren was described as ‘one of the many men ruined by a madness for the classical’. The inner quadrangle, or fountain court, was described in 1849 as ‘sombre and melancholic... the ordinary result of narrow spaces enclosed with lofty buildings on every side, dribleing fountains and little fishes – prisoners of state’.

A growing appreciation of Wren’s genius had begun in 1823 with the publication by the architect and antiquary, James Elmes, of Memoirs of the Life and Works of Christopher Wren. Ten years later C.R. Cockerell, the first professional president of the Institute of British Architects, was the first major architect of the nineteenth century to admire Wren’s life and architecture. In 1838 he painted a remarkable Tribute to the Memory of Sir Christopher Wren, a large watercolour in which Wren’s major works were shown together. John Clayton was inspired by the Tribute to produce his 1848 study of Wren’s city churches, which he dedicated to Cockerell. By the 1860s there was
anyway a fading of the evangelical fervour that had characterised the Gothic revival. It was giving way to something more English, more compromising and entirely secular in the Queen Anne movement and Arts and Crafts. Arts and crafts architects accommodating much of what was seen to be typical about wren’s work, the soft red brick enlivened by Portland stone dressings.

Kinnel Park in Denbighshire is the first and perhaps most extravagant expression of Hampton Court’s calm classifying influence on English architecture in the period 1860-1930. It was built for H.R. Hughes whose vast fortune had come from Copper mining. Hughes’s architect was William Eden Nesfield with whom he had a deepening friendship while executing a number of projects on Hughes’s estate. On 25 May 1868 Nesfield, and the Hughes family paid a trip to Hampton Court with the intention of gaining inspiration for a much larger project - an entirely new house. Ignoring the French roof added to avoid the bleak parapets of Hampton Court, Kinnel Park is recognisably a child of Wren’s Hampton Court. The walls are red brick with stone dressings and have great sashes with thick glazing bars. The house was to come under the Queen Anne movement. But it was less influential than it might have been as it was remote and Nesfield refused to publicise his designs. In the end the champion of the English Baroque revival was Nesfield’s assistant John McKean Bryan who in a series of well informed and historically based lectures and articles argued for the revival of classical architecture.

But despite a small group of buildings such as Boyton’s Chelsea Town hall (1885-7), John Shaw’s Wellington College (1856-9) and the Municipal Buildings, Leicester (1873-5) 4 inches deep which helped a public hungry for reliable information to appreciate ancient monuments, churches and cathedrals. had in their pocket Our Homeland Prehistoric Antiquities and How to Study Them (1922), one of a series of Homeland Pocket Books only that for the first time the principal enjoyment of a day out was not reaching the destination, but was getting there. The tour was the thing announced in his introduction ‘A new method of travel, in fact, brings in its train the need for a new species of guide-book’. He recognised that the countryside was deluged by visitors, in trains, busses, cars, bikes and on foot. Increasingly long holidays granted to workers meant that by 1937 fifteen million people (a third of the population) took an annual holiday. Cars were, at first, not a means of business conveyance, they were a leisure accessory. Early Motor magazines focussed not on cars, but where to drive them. As a result the market was flooded with guidebooks aimed at the motor tourist. In 1907 James Edmund Vincent the distinguished Times journalist and former editor of Country Life wrote Through East Anglia in a Motor Car one of the first books written specially for motor touring. Vincent announced in his introduction ‘A new method of travel, in fact, brings in its train the need for a new species of guide-book’. He recognised that for the first time the principal enjoyment of a day out was not reaching the destination, but was getting there. The tour was the thing and his guidebook gave advice on routes and roads, and even on the best place to buy driving gloves.

Ordinance Survey maps were stuffed into the glove pockets of hundreds of thousands of touring cars. In 1924 the O.S. archaelogical officer O.G.S. Crawford, under his own steam, published a map of Roman Britain. The Daily Mail described it as one of the most wonderful maps ever made and claimed that it would open up a whole new era in motor touring. It sold out and soon the O.S. produced more period maps opening up archaeological monuments everywhere. More specialised books helped visitors interpret remote Neolithic barrows and stone circles precisely located by the O.S. The Homeland Association was founded to encourage knowledge and love of Britain and published a range of guidebooks in which monuments featured large. In 1930 came a guide to prehistoric Sussex with an introduction by O.G.S. Crawford. Maps, diagrams and air photographs directed people to obscure Iron Age forts and Neolithic barrows. Some may have had in their pocket Our Homeland Prehistoric Antiquities and How to Study Them (1922), one of a series of Homeland Pocket Books only 4 inches deep which helped a public hungry for reliable information to appreciate ancient monuments, churches and cathedrals.

The most successful of all the motoring guides were those published by the Shell Oil Company under the editorship of John Betjeman. Cornwall was the first in the series published in 1934; twelve more were published before the War selling at two shillings and sixpence. They were personal, quirky and took readers to unexpected places to see buildings then thought unfashionable. Often little effort was wasted on historic ruins. Of Launceston castle, Cornwall, Betjeman wrote ‘for those interested in ruins, it is a ruin’. But if Betjeman thought his readers uninterested in ruins he was wrong. Many, without proper car parks were over run by cars. At Kirkham Priory, Yorkshire, visitors without a ticket to theoby were charged a deterrent five shillings to park their vehicle. One writer, Henry Williamson, on a visit to Stonehenge lamented the proliferation of advertisements for motor tyres that had sprung up over Salisbury Plain and, ironically, it was increasing tourism on Hadrian’s Wall, that required improved roads, built with stone from quarries that threatened the monument itself.

So, in short, the countryside was full of people wanting to go places and see things. During the First World War there were 331 Stage Bus operators, by 1930 there were 3,962 and by 1932 busses carried more passengers than the rail network. At the same time there was an explosion in car ownership. In 1918 there had been no more than 100,000 private motor cars, but by 1939 there were two million. The internal combustion engine took people to places that railways and even motor buses could not. The countryside and its monuments were now, for the first time, permeable to almost everyone.

The effect of this was considerable and I want to turn, just for a few minutes to an entirely new category of architecture, buildings for the motor car. For those wanting to buy one of these new-fangled devices the first car show rooms were set up in carriage repositories and occasionally in normal town centre shops but in the years immediately before the first world war interest was growing in the design of purpose-built motor showrooms, indeed in the streets around Great Portland Street in London by 1914 there were already 29 show rooms including numbers 19-21 the shop of W.F. Thorne designed by Frank M Elgood in 1907-8. After the war London dealers trading in luxury
marques congregated in club land in St James’s. The most splendid was the HQ of Wolseley designed by Curtis Green in 1922 with giant Corinthian columns framing plain cast iron panelling and wrought iron grilles. Inside the space was vaulted and supported by red lacquered Doric columns. Cars were not being advertised and sold on technical specification, but on their elegance and sophistication as leisure machines. Traditional structures did start giving way to showrooms in a modern style in the 1930s. In the exclusive shopping area of Bold Street in Liverpool there were a number of dealers housed in modern showrooms with very big windows. Designers often tried to minimise the reflections on the showwindows by building out canopies to shield them from the light.

People who bought cars, at first, tended to store them in existing stables or carriage houses, if they had them, or purpose built timber motor houses. It was only in the 1920s that integral domestic garages began to appear, some of the earliest were built in the automotive manufacturing centre of Coventry. The word garage, is actually French, from the word gare a place for storing locomotives. It was first used in England in 1900. The garage took off as a solution to make efforts to free up space from the new garages properly into new houses. Those living in the middle of towns had to park in underground car parks often built beneath petrol stations or blocks of flats. In 1935-7 the colossal Dolphin Square, Westminster a development of 1,236 flats, was built with a vast car park beneath it reflecting the assumption that most residents would own a car.

Such domestic garages made only a minor impact on the appearance of English towns and villages before 1939. What did make a substantial difference, though, was the need to park cars away from home. Londoners already owned more than 40,000 cars in 1910 and wanted to use them to get to places. Large car parks were built before the second war in seaside towns, in city centres, at railway stations and at entertainment venues. The model was the stable, thousands of which were crammed into city centres to accommodate hundreds of thousands of horses. Like stables early city centre garages were multi story, but had lifts and turntables to move the vehicles. After 1918 the first garages began to appear, mostly simple, to rapidly operate and make repairs. Those in the Bluebird garage at Kings Road, London designed by the car park specialist, Robert Sharpe in 1923-4 were amongst the first; the Bluebird is also an early example of a commercial car park with pumps on the forecourt. Eventually the staggered ramp system that is almost universally used for multi-storey car parks was introduced from America, first in Poland Street Soho London in 1922.

By this date Repair and maintenance garages were also a common sight, in rural areas, many in converted or rudely built roadside structures, but city centre ones were more substantial like the big Hamilton Motors (now Exotic cars) on Edgware Road, London designed in 1928 by O'Donoghue and Halfhide. This combines show room, filling station and repair bays. During the thirties there began to be much greater standardisation in car manufacture and there were fewer types on the road. Those that were tended to be less clumsy and more streamlined. For both these reasons modern-style garages began to be more favoured. The sleek styling of cars was seen to be set off better against a high tech building rather than a neo Georgian one. Mechanics were also keen to have large open-plan floors where cars could be serviced on a production line basis with increasing numbers of machines. The Tower (now maranello Ferrari) garage on Egham Bypass Surrey was built in 1935 by Rix and Rix of Birmingham a firm that specialised in such buildings. Long and low (extended in length later) it has a tower for visibility and vertical accent a common feature for transport and commercial structures.

Petrol stations likewise tended to be vernacular and ad hoc in the country and slicker in town. Country stations like that at Waresley, Hartlebury, Worcestershire blended in with local building styles and were set in gardens. On tourist routes they could be disguised as thatched cottages, half-timbered stables or other vernacular structures. Before the Second World War petrol stations were not owned by large companies but were owner occupied and so were not of standard design and very rarely in the modern-style.

I have spent some time on looking at the architecture of early motoring to emphasise my point this evening. The car was fundamentally a modern forward looking piece of technology, but it was used, at first to look backwards, to gain access to the countryside and its heritage. You see the countryside was invaded by a new type of person. These were not landowners or tenants of landowners there were town and city dwellers seeking something that they saw as part of their national identity. People wanted the security and familiarity of the images that were encapsulated by half-timbered houses with leaded window panes. The interwar years were marked by fundamental and rapid changes, deep economic insecurity and a national self-questioning. The countryside, and as we shall see its buildings, did this effectively.

A major effect of this was the garden City. This was a concept invented by a single man Ebenezer Howard, but one that found instant approval because of the ideas that I have just been talking about. Howard wanted to design a new type of place to live based on the model industrial villages such as sailtaire built by the industrialist Sir Titus salt for the workers in his mills in Yorkshire and particularly Port Sunlight on the Wirral built by the Lever family. These settlements got away from the brutal workers terraces that had characterised some new industrial towns such as Middlesborough housing workers in traditional buildings in a rural setting. What was different about the garden cities is that they were to be funded by their inhabitants not by employers. The first to be built was Letchworth garden city followed by Hampstead garden Suburb. These housing developments, about which much could be said, were important because they presented a view of England and English architecture that was essentially rural, vernacular and native. The types of the houses were Tudor, or Queen Anne, a few were neo Georgian, they were laid out amidst trees and parks; the was counter urban, this was quasi rural.

The rural values expressed in the garden cities were a political mantra too. Stanley Baldwin The dominating political figure of the inter war years elaborated the rural heritage of Baldwin. Baldwin was not afraid to campaign for this heritage of infinite value. He spearheaded a campaign launched by the Royal Society of Arts to save old rural cottages; buildings he thought captured the essence of England and supported efforts to save the landscape round Stonehenge.

Speaking at the handing over of Haresfield Beacon to the National Trust in January 1931 he asked why it was necessary to preserve spots like this. ‘I think’, he said, ‘it answers to a very deep and profound instinct of the English people... the country represents the eternal home of the English people... it answers to a very deep and profound instinct of the English people. We have never been able to settle ourselves to be the colonisers of the world... the country represents the eternal home of the English people... it answers to a very deep and profound instinct of the English people...’ In June 1931 he unveiled a memorial stone at Old Saruma site that had been taken into government care in 1892 ‘what’ he asked ‘is the site value of old sarum? The site value arrived at by any value... can be but small. But the value to us and all England is infinite. The spiritual value is beyond all computation’.

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It was Baldwin’s government that set up the Empire Marketing Board to promote imperial products worldwide. Its secretary was Sir Stephen Tallents, who invented the concept of national projection, the conveyance of images about Britain that were to marry dynamic forward looking characteristics such as industry, tourism, universities and scientific research with a more established group of icons: the monarchy, London, the Oxford Cambridge Boat race and the Countryside. In 1937 Britain sported a pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition intended to convey exactly this image. The building was partly modern and partly traditional, a white box with...
curvaceous lines but with Georgian shaped windows, inside it contained a traditional vision of England with tennis, weekend cottages, shepherds in white smocks and a cardboard cut-out of Neville Chamberlain fishing. It was designed by the architect Oliver Hill, but with significant input from Franck Pick the brains behind London underground.

So here we come back to forwards and backwards. The Empire pavilion expressed inside the reality of inter-war England: the countryside, cottages and fresh air. Outside it attempted to make a concession to the modern-style that many other countries had adopted more wholeheartedly. But that modernity was a minority interest the mainstream was somewhere else entirely and it is to that which I now want to turn.

After the First World War tastes began to change and while the bourgeois love of the Tudoresque was still spawning miles of half-timbered houses in the suburbs, those with more cultivated tastes turned away from 'ye olde Worlde' of the Arts and Crafts movement. From the 1920s that look was no longer fashionable and it was replaced in urban high society by the apparently simpler, ordered life of the Georgians. It was a metropolitan aesthetic, restrained and well-mannered, that created a stylish modernism with ancestry. Of course part of the admiration for the Georgians was a swing of the pendulum of taste away from the decorative and homely chaos of the arts and crafts towards a more regular, symmetrical sense of design.

The associations of Classical architecture were different for every generation. The Georgians had admired the architecture of Roman senators and generals with whom they associated; the Victorians the Medici and the Gonzaga in whom they saw themselves and the Edwardians admired the Georgians. This was perhaps because they associated with the world in which the terraces of Georgian England were built a world of long, hard and cruel European war. A world of political and social turmoil that managed to produce an ordered and elegant architectural expression.

This developing appreciation for the eighteenth century was promoted by the magazine Country Life under its editor, from 1933, Christopher Hussey. Hussey had been brought up at Scotney Castle in Kent where his appreciation of eighteenth century art, architecture and landscape had developed. Country Life articles, books and guides from 1930 began to re-establish Georgian country houses its readers’ imagination and affection. Meanwhile Margret Jourdain became the first person to write about Georgian design and architecture in a scholarly way. As Georgian buildings came back into fashion so the conservationists began campaigning to prevent their demolition. The conservation society the Georgian group was founded in 1937 to stop the demolition of so many Georgian terraces.

Country Life also took up the role of mouthpiece and campaigner for the preservation of the countryside. It linked itself to other campaigning bodies such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the National Trust and argued for protective and planning measures in statute. Its concerns were not limited to countryside matters for it was at the forefront of arguing for the preservation of Wren’s City Churches, Nash’s Regent Street, Soane’s bank of England and Georgian squares. However it was the country house that most concerned Hussey and where his energies was most influential.

Architecturally all this led to a Georgian revival which was perhaps the dominant style in inter war England. Appropriately one of the first and best neo-Georgian buildings in Westminster was the new offices of Country Life in Tavistock Street of 1904-5, but the really big neo-Georgian stuff came after the war. I’ll just take one example, that you can all easily visit, if you like. Go to Grosvenor Square, the largest square in Mayfair and one that has virtually nothing of the real eighteenth century. However from the 1920s the whole square, virtually, was rebuilt in neo-Georgian taste for the fashionable and rich elite who now fancied themselves as the new Georgians.

While such blocks of flats were despised by the modernists who built the isokon building as historicist and backward-looking, some managed to convince themselves that Georgian architecture with its emphasis on regularity and proportion, with its minimal use of ornament, with its functional appearance was, in fact part of the same forward looking conception. But I can’t really buy this as, at its root, modernism was a rejection of historical styles and the Georgian revival was emphatically a backward looking phenomenon. Funnily enough though, modernism was such a curiosity in inter war England that it also became a sort of historical choice. To illustrate what I mean I want you to take you to the seaside.

Ever since the Prince Regent had built his Marine Pavilion in Brighton, the seaside sported buildings that were fun and fantasy; that enabled seaside visitors to escape from their mundane lives and enter a magical world of the annual holiday. After 1918 Victorian seaside towns that had built incredible sights such as the Blackpool tower and the winter gardens took another direction. Instead of bringing exotic styles from India, from Spain, from Mexico and goodness knows where else they turned to the fashionable continental French Riviera and to the sea going ocean liners. Working class Britons now had no need to afford to go to the dangerous and morally suspect south of France where people ate garlic and frogs legs, nor the crippling expensive upper class pastime of the cruise; they could experience the sophistication of all this at home. In Morecombe bay, for instance, where the Midland Hotel brought glamorous foreign style to a Victorian town.

Perhaps you might take a flat at Marine Court in Hastings, built in 1937, which was described as a liner on land, or go to the movies in the cinema on the front at Margate, now the entrance to Dreamland but, when built in 1935 was the first entertainment building to have a tower with a thin fin attached, the model for thousands of others. On your holiday you would certainly want to bathe in one of the vast Lidos constructed on the beaches of most resorts. Here is Saltdean Lido built in 1938 the most sophisticated of all the seaside Lidos consciously influenced by aircraft and airport design.

The fascinating thing about all this is that the modern was not seen as a serious style. Houses in Grosvenor Square were Georgian and serious architecture. These were where the money was – but on the coast a new fantasy style was to join the others, a new sense of escapism. This wasn’t real England, this was fun. Real England was rooted in the past.

But there was a hint of threat in even these seaside structures. It was through leisure pursuits that many British people saw the huge threat of Americanisation. By the 1920s successful films, the ones people wanted to watch, were almost all American; so was the music, hot jazz, ragtime and foxtrot to which young people danced. It was the BBC that acted as a bastion against creeping Americanisation championing British traditions in music, comedy and crystallising a calendar of national events from the sound of the first nightingale to the choristers of King’s College Chapel. In 1932, ten years after its foundation the BBC commissioned the first purpose-built broadcasting building in the UK. Broadcasting House was designed by George val Myer, a commercial architect who had built a number of city office blocks. In the context of its neighbours his design was uncompromisingly modern overwhelming All Souls Langham Place next door. In its height and art deco inspiration there was much that came from America, but it had Georgian windows and was built in Portland Stone the material of London’s public buildings.

So here you have it. Forwards and backwards a position that English architecture found itself in between the wars. Not uncomfortable, but distinctive and representative of a society traumatised by the terrible events of 1914-18.

While the First World War did not mark a decisive break in English architecture, the second was cataclysmic. So I would like to invite you to join me on 6 March to hear ‘Coming to terms with Modern Times’ which will be about architecture after 1945.