

MAJOR ASSETS - THE CRALLAN REPORT

by Trevor W. Hearl

Affluence can damage our environment no less than poverty, it seems, which is why we now need legislation to protect our towns and countryside. Yet, as Dr Stephen Royle reminded a Canary Island symposium in 1992, the historic environments we now seek to protect all survived without it. For example, he argued, in St Helena Jamestown has been saved by its “isolation and lack of development”. Not entirely, I fear, recalling a quip of Bob Broadway’s about the modern world coming to Main Street in 1937 when “the unwanted ruin next door” (Porteous’ House) was pulled down for a petrol station! If such “an inglorious end to a famous building” (to quote Gosse) is less likely to be perpetrated on St Helena today, it would be nice to think that much of the credit would go to the advice - and ammunition - provided by Hugh Crallan’s Listing and Preservation of Buildings of Architectural and Historical Interest, a welcome new edition of which has been reprinted by Ian Mathieson of ‘Miles Apart’.

Many members will recall with pleasure the meeting in November 1988 at the House of Commons, hosted by Dr John Marek M.P., where Mr. Crallan explained with an urbanity to match the occasion, some of the opportunities and problems he foresaw in caring for St. Helena’s historic buildings. And now once again, by a happy coincidence, he has come to the aid of the Friends with a new edition of his Report giving attractive and authoritative support to their enterprising appeal for a National Lottery award towards the conservation of the Island’s historic buildings.

His easy-to-read, illustrated guide offers us all a chance to take a practical, informed interest in this urgent and vital matter of Island welfare. Moreover its quality has ensured that (apart from costings) it has stood the test of time. In an eloquent Foreword to the new edition, Alan Cheetham describes how, on his arrival in 1994, to prepare another report on Preserving the Island’s Historic Buildings for the St Helena Government, he was handed the Development Department’s pristine copy of Crallan: “I soon discovered that it wasn’t just its condition that was mint. Its entire contents were too, with every message, idea, observation and recommendation as pertinent as ever to their original purpose - to encourage and achieve the preservation of the Island’s architectural heritage”.

“How ironic, I thought, that the Government of this tiny island community, so distant and supposedly isolated from contemporary planning, should have grasped the conservation nettle in such a pioneering fashion long before most of its counterparts back home!”

In fact it was not so much the Government of St Helena that had “grasped the conservation nettle” as its dedicated Honorary Archivist, Wilfred Tatham. In choosing St Helena for his retirement, fresh from the British Council in Athens, he

thought he had found the ideal retreat, but he soon had more than enough to do! Dismayed by the Island's neglect of its heritage, he devoted himself first to its archives and then its historic houses. In the early '70's he prepared a Memo on the latter for the Governor, Sir Thomas Oates, who viewed it sympathetically and forwarded it to London for action. Anthony Dale of the Historic Buildings Council recommended to the Overseas Development Administration - whose Minister then is now Lord Holderness, a member of the Friends - that Hugh Crallan be sent to list the historic buildings and advise on action and legislation to preserve them. For six weeks in January and February 1974 he examined and recorded every building in Jamestown from the Wharf to New Bridge - over 180 properties as well as another eighty in the country and compiled a photographic record for the Governor. His report covers each property, with a general review and recommendations, including five folding plans of Jamestown and 69 photographs. If he was unable to inspect all the fortifications as well, it is hardly surprising!

How far the state of St Helena's historic buildings today reflect his advice is perhaps best answered by professionals. But to the layman the only obvious response has come from the Heritage Society through its Museum and efforts to kindle that "enthusiasm for the whole environment and its enhancement", the lack of which disheartened him in 1974. Otherwise, the last 25 years' progress in housing and public services has certainly . not been matched in the conservation of graded property despite his Report, to later observers' regret. 1993 the Tourism Study, for example, lamented that the Island's buildings - "it's major assets" - needed "much to be done to protect and improve" them, repeating Crallan's 20-year-old plea that Jamestown's historic and picturesque townscape be tidied up and developed into a conservation area. As for St Helena's decaying country houses, today even Teutonic Hall and Farm Lodge would make an estate agent wince. Yet in 1974, in a warning incidentally echoed by Mark Wolfson in the recent Parliamentary debate (22 January) over economic development in general, Crallan stressed that the blight was mainly caused by the Island's own laws.

"Many of these houses have disappeared or fallen into ruin ... due to the lack of potential owners with sufficient wealth to use or maintain them . . . They could find a ready market for retired persons eager to restore them . . . Everything possible (must be done) to encourage the immigration of such persons . . . The Ordinances . . . work in a contrary direction . . . (restricting) the market, depressing property values and tending to ensure the continuance of decay". (para 76)

St Helena should take pride in these houses as legacies of its prosperous heyday and "major assets" towards reviving her economic fortunes without cost to the taxpayer. Conservation of old fortifications is less easily achieved. Their maintenance as a government responsibility is currently causing concern in the Legislative Council as a yawning gap in the High Knoll Fort's curtain wall, due for repair three years ago, still remains with the £50,000 voted for its repair unspent. Other "major assets" in even greater jeopardy include the historic lines at Sandy Bay, and batter-

ies at Banks's and Buttermilk, their preservation if delayed threatening to become a major operation.

The less obvious, but no less real, problems of conserving "major assets" in a small community are not ignored by Crallan. Perhaps it takes a visitor or returning resident to wonder why rubbish and ruins occupy what should be prime sites in Jamestown, and though Crallan hoped that increased prosperity would provide the incentive to "restore the ruins and clear away the old oil drums", he knew that progress would still depend more on education, diplomacy and consent than on money or legislation:

"Heaps of rubbish are a common and obvious target for conservationist action [...] Majority opinion seldom dissents from the general principle that they should be eliminated, yet as soon as the big stick is waved at an individual offender he will attract immediate sympathy as the victim of official pettiness or spite". (Para 74)

The potential richness of St Helena's built environment clearly gives no cause for complacency. One only has to reflect on the fate of its observatories, no fewer than five, with attendant Time Ball, having disappeared almost without trace, despite their association with men of mark - which on St Helena includes Hudson Janisch.

The Report poses enough questions to make a heritage quiz, and I wonder how many have been answered since 1974. Here are three examples: Who were "Gwynne & Co"., makers of the metal market house? What was the elliptical-ended chamber in the Castle Yard used for? Who designed St John's Church? One of the author's doubts, questioning the personal involvement of Benjamin Ferrey in the building of Country Church, has since been met by Bishop Cannan in Churches of the South Atlantic Islands (pp. 105-8) and in correspondence between G.W. Melliss and Col. Hodson in Oakbank Letters (1992). This is significant for the Island's architectural history as Ferrey seems to be, as Crallan explains, the only "important architect to be associated with any building in St Helena".

Ian Mathieson is to be congratulated for a most effective production of text, plans and photographs - some of the latter almost better than the original. Eagle-eyed readers may spot an occasional slip, most notably '1838' for 1858 on p.1 (para. 5), but "Cannister" follows the text though custom allows only one 'n'. Those with a special interest in the conservation of the Island's historic buildings will now want to read Alan Cheetham's 1994 study, St Helena - Preserving the Island's Historic Buildings. An appraisal of the Issues involved in Establishing an Historic Buildings Grant Scheme on the Island. And finally, it will not have escaped readers' notice that, Governor Oates excepted, everyone quoted above is a 'Friend' awaiting a successful outcome to the Society's historic Buildings appeal.

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