

The Camerton Archive

A final retrospective

This final dip into the Archives focuses on the role of the Society in the recording and preservation of the buildings of Bath.

Margaret Nuth By the late 1930's some parts of the City were undoubtedly becoming run down and there was also a perceived need by the City Council to 'do something' to accommodate the growing number of cars. War time bombing gave an opportunity for the start of some wholesale clearance.

There was no formal archaeological watching brief at that time; PPG16 was many years in the future. However in 1956 the BACAS Chairman, Bill Wedlake, was urging members to report any excavations they might see in Bath and North East Somerset so that the Society could try to record the sites. He says '*A postcard to the Secretary will ensure that a visit will be made ...*'. From 1960 onwards members '*carried out rescue works*' at the Pump Room Hotel (later Arlington Court), St James Church (due to disappear under Woolworth's), Sion Hill and many other central sites.

At that time also the regulation of Listed Buildings was less defined and buildings in the Grade III Listing, which existed at that time, were the most vulnerable. In 1967 the BACAS Chairman, Bill Wedlake, decried '*the wholesale destruction of large blocks of buildings that form part of the ancient City*'. '*These varied street frontages... may not individually be of high architectural merit...but collectively represent several phases in English domestic architecture*'. He continued '*We fear that ... if they are replaced such as we have seen in the High Street opposite Guildhall, Bath, in a few years will lose much of its character*'.

He continued '*Future development cannot be wholly trusted to those who often could not care less and have little real care for the preservation of the City's heritage ... and no respect for its cultural background*'. By this time, the Society was supporting the protest against a proposed development beside the Abbey Churchyard and the destruction of buildings in Bath was drawing attention in the National Press.

However by 1971 matters had not, it seems, improved by much. He writes '*there has been more destruction of buildings in Bath in the postwar years than... the enemy raids during the war*'. '*We have witnessed the destruction of buildings that other enlightened Cities would have prized and preserved*'.

He praises the Secretary, Peter Greening, for his '*valiant efforts to stop the continuing rape of the City especially in the New Bond Street and Kingsmead Square sites*'. '*We are particularly concerned about future developments in the Walcot Street and the Southgate Street development*'. He goes on to say that the Society is making every endeavour to see that cleared sites are properly examined before reconstruction takes place.

From 1970 onwards Wedlake, Greening and other committee members were involved in the Bath Preservation Trust, the Bath Conservation Area Advisory Committee and the Council for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucester and Somerset. In 1973 he records that '*Several buildings of architectural merit have been saved from destruction. This is largely due to the initial efforts of the Secretary*'. He expresses the '*hope that Bath Preservation Trust will diligently pursue every threat to the buildings of architectural and historical interest*'. At the same time the Society was represented at meetings of the Council for British Archaeology, the Somerset Archaeological Society, the British Archaeological Research Group, the Western Archaeological Trust, the Avon Archaeological Council and others.

It is not too much to say that Bath's present World Heritage status owes a great deal to the efforts of these like-minded people who were vocal in resisting the wholesale 'modernisation' of the City.

Should anyone wish to tip their hat to Bill Wedlake and Peter Greening, they are buried in the churchyard at their beloved Camerton. They are in the rising ground to the right of the path. There is a picture of Bill in Camertonia Issue 43 (2005) p 37.