**Ruskin and the Crafts, Reading I**

**Ruskin’s ‘Workmen’, or, the intertwining of Architecture and Sculpture**

**Introduced by Peter Burman, Director of the Guild of St George with responsibility for International Relationships and Craftspeople & Craftsmanship**

**PETER**

I have the following guests this evening:

1. Andreas Ammon, Dresden, who trained first as a stonemason and later as a specialist historic buildings architect
2. Nic Boyes, Edinburgh, consultant stone and lime specialist, who trained in Fine Arts, in stonemasonry and later as a conservator
3. James Howley, architect, practising in Dublin, well-known for his Millennium Bridge in Dublin, for his work with historic buildings and garden landscapes, lime-based mortars and renders, and for the way in which he works with craftsmen and women in what I can only call a ‘Ruskinian’ spirit
4. Rory Young, Cirencester, artificer, sculptor, letter-cutter; inspiring teacher, e.g. University of York Lime Weeks, tutor to SPAB Scholars and William Morris Craft Fellows; Thailand, invitation of Department of Fine Arts; York, St Albans
5. I am also one of the readers so we will have five voices inter-weaving and inter-acting with one another: architectural historian; many years of involvement with churches and cathedrals; taught at Universities of York and Cottbus; speaking from home in Falkland, a beautiful ancient village in Fife, Scotland

To put our readings in context: it is impossible to think of Ruskin and architecture without recognising his profound influence on the Arts & Crafts Movement, which in turn can be seen as a direct descendant of the Gothic Revival. The Gothic Revival was a rejection of ‘false manifestations’ in nineteenth century life. Its most influential practitioner was Augustus Northmore Welby Pugin (1812-1852), while John Ruskin (1819-1900) was its chief and most powerful polemicist. Today many of us may regret that Ruskin was so opposed to the Classical style of building and sculpture and could speak of ‘the foul torrent of the Renaissance’: after all, Classical buildings were also built by highly competent and frequently inspired craftspeople. But, and this is important for us today, Ruskin also introduced the immensely powerful notion that good art flows from the good craftspeople who create it. Ruskin believed that that was the ‘secret’ of Gothic art. William Morris (1834-1896) enrolled as a student at Exeter College, Oxford, in 1853. There, together with his close friend Edward Burne-Jones, he discovered, devoured and pondered the writings of Ruskin, even as they were (in the case of *The Stones of Venice*) being published. Ruskin’s influence was critical, we believe, in turning Morris’s formidable energies towards two of the great Ruskinian principles: the promotion and preservation of the beautiful in art and architecture; and a determination to ‘make human lives better’, through courageous and articulate activism in the arts, crafts and social politics.

We will read passages from John Ruskin’s ‘Lamp of Memory’ in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) but first we will read from the long essay on ‘The Nature of Gothic’, Chapter VI of the second book of Ruskin’s trilogy, *The Stones of Venice*, published in 1853, one of his most famous works. William Morris so respected the insights of this chapter that he published it as a separate volume at his Kelmscott Press in 1892. To that volume he contributed a preface in which he says that ‘in future days it will be considered as one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century’, and then in a remarkable paragraph he explains why:

**ANDREAS**

‘For the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labour; that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work, for, strange as it may seem to us today, there have been times when he did rejoice in it; and lastly, that unless man’s work once again becomes a pleasure to him, the token of which change will be that beauty is once again a natural and necessary accompaniment of productive labour, all but the worthless must toil in pain. So that the result of the thousands of years of man’s effort on the earth must be general unhappiness and universal degradation, the conscious burden of which will grow in proportion to the growth of man’s intelligence, knowledge and power over material nature.’

**NIC**

The key phrase, and the one most frequently quoted, is ‘that art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labour’.

**PETER**

We will now begin the readings from Ruskin’s chapter on ‘The Nature of Gothic’. At its best, Ruskin’s prose has a directness and vividness which makes it memorable and meaningful; at times, there is a teasing ambiguity which requires us all to try to discover what he means, or to what he is referring. Hence the joy of reading Ruskin together.

**JAMES**

**I should explain our reason for focusing on ‘The Nature of Gothic’. It is because now, in our time, we urgently need to have a fresh debate about what constitutes meaningful work, what sort of freedoms we need to allow us to be creative, and how we ought to be rewarded: so that we can enjoy both our work and our leisure, and so that we can be satisfied by what we are doing and know that it has value, both for ourselves and for what we may call civil society in general or our own particular community.**

**ANDREAS**

And this is what we have to do with all our labourers; to look for the *thoughtful* part of them, and get that out of them, whatever we lose for it, whatever faults and errors we are obliged to take with it. For the best that is in them cannot manifest itself, but in company with much error. Understand this clearly: You can teach a man to draw a straight line, and to cut one; to strike a curved line, and to carve it; and to copy and carve any number of given lines or forms, with admirable speed and perfect precision; and you find his work perfect of his kind: but if you ask him to think about any of those forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head, he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and ten to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all that. He was only a machine before, an animated tool.

**NIC**

§ 12. And observe, you are put to stern choice in this matter. You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them. All the energy of their spirits must be given to make cogs and compasses of themselves. All their attention and strength must go to the accomplishment of the mean act. The eye of the soul must be bent upon the finger-point, and the soul’s force must fill all the invisible nerves that guide it, ten hours a day, that it may not err from its steely precision, and so soul and sight be worn away, and the whole human being be lost at last – a heap of sawdust, so far as its intellectual work in this world is concerned: saved only by its Heart, which cannot go into the forms of cogs and compasses, but expands, after the ten hours are over, into fireside humanity.

**PETER**

On the other hand, if you will make a man of the working creature, you cannot make a tool. Let him begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dullness, all his incapability; shame upon shame, failure upon failure, pause after pause: but out comes the whole majesty of him also; and we know the height of it only when we see the clouds settling upon him. And, whether the clouds be bright or dark, there will be transfiguration behind and within them.’

**JAMES**

‘§16. We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men:- Divided into mere segments of men – broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail[[1]](#footnote-1). Now it is a good and desirable thing, truly, to make many pins in a day; but if we could only see with what crystal sand their points were polished,- sand of human soul, much to be magnified before it can be discerned for what it is – we should think there would be some loss in it also.

**PETER**

And the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than their furnace blast, is all in very deed for this,- that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages. And all the evil to which that cry is urging our myriads can be met only in one way: not by teaching nor preaching, for to teach them is but to show them their misery, and to preach them. If we do nothing more but preach, is to mock at it. It can be met only by a right understanding, on the part of all classes, of what kinds of labour are good for men, raising them, and making them happy; by a determined sacrifice of such convenience, or beauty, or cheapness as is to be got only by the degradation of the workman; and by equally determined demand for the products and results of healthy and ennobling labour.

**NIC**

§17. And how, it will be asked, are these products to be recognized, and this demand to be regulated? Easily: by the observance of three broad and simple rules:

1. Never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary, in the production of which *Invention* has no share.
2. Never demand an exact finish for its own sake, but only for some practical or noble end.
3. Never encourage imitation or copying of any kind, except for the sake of preserving records of great works.’

**PETER**

*Comment*: we can imagine these ‘three broad and simple rules’ commending themselves to William Morris. Morris was a great designer, an artificer – he made things, beautiful and exceptional things, with his own hands, and encouraged others to do so. He had ‘imagination’, which is probably a good synonym here with the word ‘Invention’, which Ruskin uses. The end of the third rule refers to Ruskin’s passion for commissioning young artists to copy works of art, especially in Italy, which Ruskin feared might disappear on account of revolution, ignorance or neglect. [Image: watercolour of a painting recorded for Ruskin]

**JAMES**

For a comparable use of the key word ‘imagination’ we may turn in this context to a very great book, William Richard Lethaby’s, *Philip Webb and his Work*[, Oxford University Press, 1935]: ‘Where work is sound, competent and natural there will necessarily be a leaven of *Invention* keeping it sweet. An architect is properly an experimenter, developer, adapter – an inventor in building, not a supplier by rote of tired and stale grandeurs in the styles.’

**NIC**

In the same book, Lethaby tells the story of Philip Webb giving advice to a young man, Alfred Powell, who wanted to become an architect. Webb wrote to him on 17 March 1894 saying that ‘It would be good fortune for you if you could so arrange things as to have a year’s continuous work at carpentering in its various kinds. Of course, I know this might be impossible, but if so I should say that would be a misfortune. As you would be keeping your eyes wide open to all collateral things, you would pick up much general knowledge of the various other crafts connected with building and would gain much more help to your after work than in any other way …’ Many architects have subsequently taken Webb’s advice seriously, and more should have done!

**ANDREAS**

‘§ 21 … ‘All ideas of this kind are founded upon two mistaken suppositions: the first, that one man’s thoughts can be, or ought to be, executed by another man’s hands; the second that manual labour is a degradation, when it is governed by intellect … We are always in these days endeavouring to separate the two; we want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman, and the other an operative; whereas the workman ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working, and both should be a gentleman, in the best sense. As it is, we make both ungentle, the one envying, the other despising, his brother; and the mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers, and miserable workers.

**JAMES**

Now it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity. It would be well if all of us were good handicraftsmen in some kind, and the dishonour of manual work done away with altogether; so that though there should still be a distinction of race between nobles and commoners, there should not, among the latter, be a trenchant distinction of employment, and more in excellence of achievement. And yet more, in each several profession, no master should be too proud to do its hardest work. The painter should grind his own colours; the architect work in the mason’s yard with his men; the master-manufacturer be himself a more skilful operative than any man in his mills; and the distinction between one man and another be only in experience and skill, and the authority and wealth which these must naturally and justly obtain.’

**PETER**

‘The Nature of Gothic’ gives us a fascinating insight into Ruskin’s enthusiastic espousal of the Gothic style of building, which is definitely something we need to know more about in order to understand *him* and his way of thinking:

**NIC**

‘§38 … For in one point of view Gothic is not only the best, but the only *rational* architecture,as being that which can fit itself most easily to all services, vulgar or noble. Undefined in its slope of roof, height of shaft, breadth of arch, or disposition of ground plan, it can shrink into a turret, expand into a hall, coil into a stair-case, or spring into a spire, with undegraded grace and unexhausted energy; and whenever it finds occasion for change in its form or purpose, it submits to it without the slightest sense of loss either to its unity or majesty, - subtle and flexible like a fiery serpent, but ever attentive to the voice of a charmer. And it is one of the chief virtues of the Gothic builders, that they never suffered ideas of outside symmetries and consistencies to interfere with the real use and value of what they did. If they wanted a window, they opened one; a room, they added one; a buttress, they built one; utterly regardless of any established conventionalities of external appearance, knowing (as indeed it always happened) that such daring interruptions of the formal plan would rather give additional interest to its symmetry than injure it.

**ANDREAS**

So that, in the best times of Gothic, a useless window would rather have been opened in an unexpected place for the sake of the surprise, than a useful one forbidden for the sake of symmetry. Every successive architect, employed upon a great work, built the pieces he added in his own way, utterly regardless of the style adopted by his predecessors; and if two towers were raised in nominal correspondence at the sides of a cathedral front, one was nearly sure to be different from the other, and in each the style at the top to be different from the style at the bottom.’

**PETER**

Towards the end of ‘The Nature of Gothic’ Ruskin gives what he refers to as some ‘plain and practical rules for determining, in every instance, whether a given building be good Gothic or not’.

**JAMES**

‘§107. First, Look if the roof rises in a steep gable, high above the walls. If it does not do this, there is something wrong: the building is not quite pure Gothic, or has been altered.

**PETER**

§108. Secondly, Look if the principal windows and doors have pointed arches with gables over them. If not pointed arches, the building is not Gothic; if they have not any gables over them, it is either not pure, or not first-rate.

**ANDREAS**

If, however, it has the steep roof, the pointed arch, and gable all united, it is nearly certain to be a Gothic building of a very fine time.

**NIC**

§ 109. Thirdly, Look if the arches are cusped, or apertures foliated. If the building has met the first two conditions, it is sure to be foliated somewhere; but, if not everywhere, the parts which are unfoliated are imperfect, unless they are large bearing arches, or small and sharp arches in groups, forming a kind of foliation by their own multiplicity, and relieved by sculpture and rich mouldings. The upper windows, for instance, in the east end of Westminster Abbey are imperfect for want of foliation. If there be no foliation anywhere, the building is assuredly imperfect Gothic.

**JAMES**

§ 110. Fourthly, If the building meets all the first three conditions, look if its arches in general, whether of windows and doors, or of minor ornamentation, are carried on *true shafts with bases and capitals*. If they are, then the building is assuredly of the finest Gothic style. It may still, perhaps, be an imitation, a feeble copy, or a bad example, of a noble style; but the manner of it, having met all these four conditions, is assuredly first-rate.

If its apertures have not shafts and capitals, look if they are plain openings in the walls, studiously simple, and unmoulded at the sides; as, for instance, the arch in Plate 19[, opposite p. 390, Vol. I]. If so, the building may still be of the finest Gothic adapted to some domestic or military service. But if the sides of the window be moulded, and yet there are no capitals at the spring of the arch, it is assuredly of an inferior school.

**ANDREAS**

This is all that is necessary to determine whether the building be of a fine Gothic style. The next tests to be applied are in order to discover whether it be good architecture or not; for it may be very impure Gothic, and yet very noble architecture; or it may be very pure Gothic, and yet if a copy, or originally raised by an ungifted builder, very bad architecture.

If it belong to any of the great schools of colour, its criticism becomes as complicated, and needs as much care, as that of a piece of music, and no general rules for it can be given; but if not—

**PETER**

§ 111. First, See if it looks as if it had been built by strong men; if it has the sort of roughness, and largeness, and nonchalance, mixed in places with the exquisite tenderness which seems always to be the sign-manual of the broad vision, and massy power of men, who can see *past* the work they are doing, and betray here and there something like disdain for it. If the building has this character, it is much already in its favour; it will go hard but it proves a noble one. If it has not this, but is altogether accurate, minute, and scrupulous, in its workmanship, it must belong to either the very best or the very worst of schools: the very best, in which exquisite design is wrought out with untiring and conscientious care, as in the Giottesque Gothic; or the very worst, in which mechanism has taken the place of design. It is more likely, in general, that it should belong to the worst than the best: so that, on the whole, very accurate workmanship is to be esteemed a bad sign; and if there is nothing remarkable about the building but its precision, it may be passed at once with contempt.

**ANDREAS**

§ 112. Secondly, Observe if it be irregular, its different parts fitting themselves to different purposes, no one caring what becomes of them, so that they do their work. If one part always answers accurately to another part, it is sure to be a bad building; and the greater and more conspicuous the irregularities, the greater the chances are that it is a good one. For instance, in the Ducal Palace, of which a rough woodcut is given in Chap. VIII, the general idea is sternly symmetrical; but two windows are lower than the rest of the six; and if the reader will count the arches of the small arcade as far as to the great balcony, he will find it is not in the centre, but set to the right-hand side by the whole width of one of those arches. We may be pretty sure that the building is a good one; none but a master of his craft would have ventured to do this.

**JAMES**

§ 113. Thirdly, Observe if all the traceries, capitals, and other ornaments are of perpetually varied design. If not, the work is assuredly bad.

**NIC**

§ 114. Lastly, *Read* the sculpture. Preparatory to reading it, you will have to discover whether it is legible (and, if legible, it is nearly certain to be worth reading). On a good building, the sculpture is *always* so set, and on such a scale, that at the ordinary distance from which the edifice is seen, the sculpture shall be thoroughly intelligible and interesting. In order to accomplish this, the uppermost statues will be ten or twelve feet high, and the upper ornamentation will be colossal, increasing in fineness as it descends, till on the foundation it will often be wrought as if for a precious cabinet in a king’s chamber; but the spectator will not notice that the upper sculptures are colossal. He will merely feel that he can see them plainly, and make them all out at his ease.

**ANDREAS**

And having ascertained this, let him set himself to read them. Thenceforward the criticism of the building is to be conducted precisely on the same principles as that of a book; and it must depend on the knowledge, feeling, and not a little on the industry and perseverance of the reader, whether, even in the case of the best works, he either perceive them to be great, or feel them to be entertaining.

**PETER**

By this point we hope we may have given the flavour of and something of Ruskin’s ideas about ‘The Nature of Gothic’. This leads us on rather deftly to ‘The Lamp of Memory’, the sixth lamp of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, published in 1849, therefore a few years earlier than *The Stones of Venice.* It contains some of the most enjoyable passages of prose that Ruskin was ever to write: moreover, it lays down a foundation stone for the elaboration of Conservation Ethics and Philosophy in directions which have had world-wide influence from that day to this.

**ANDREAS**

§ 2. It is as the centralisation and protectress of this sacred influence, that Architecture is to be regarded by us with the most serious thought. We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her. How cold is all history, how lifeless all imagery, compared to that which the living nation writes, and the uncorrupted marble bears!—how many pages of doubtful record might we not often spare, for a few stones left one upon another! The ambition of the old Babel builders was well directed for this world: there are but two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men, Poetry and Architecture; and the latter in some sort includes the former, and is mightier in its reality: it is well to have, not only what men have thought and felt, but what their hands have handled, and their strength wrought, and their eyes beheld, all the days of their life.

**JAMES**

The age of Homer is surrounded with darkness, his very personality with doubt. Not so that of Pericles: and the day is coming when we shall confess, that we have learned more of Greece out of the crumbled fragments of her sculpture than even from her sweet singers or soldier historians. And if indeed there be any profit in our knowledge of the past, or any joy in the thought of being remembered hereafter, which can give strength to present exertion, or patience to present endurance, there are two duties respecting national architecture whose importance it is impossible to overrate: the first, to render the architecture of the day, historical; and, the second, to preserve, as the most precious of inheritances, that of past ages.

**PETER**

§ 9. The benevolent regards and purposes of men in masses seldom can be supposed to extend beyond their own generation. They may look to posterity as an audience, may hope for its attention, and labour for its praise: they may trust to its recognition of unacknowledged merit, and demand its justice for contemporary wrong. But all this is mere selfishness, and does not involve the slightest regard to, or consideration of, the interest of those by whose numbers we would fain swell the circle of our flatterers, and by whose authority we would gladly support our presently disputed claims. The idea of self-denial for the sake of posterity, of practising present economy for the sake of debtors yet unborn, of planting forests that our descendants may live under their shade, or of raising cities for future nations to inhabit, never, I suppose, efficiently takes place among publicly recognised motives of exertion. Yet these are not the less our duties; nor is our part fitly sustained upon the earth, unless the range of our intended and deliberate usefulness include, not only the companions but the successors of our pilgrimage. **God has lent us the earth for our life; it is a great entail. It belongs as much to those who are to come after us, and whose names are already written in the book of creation, as to us; and we have no right, by anything that we do or neglect, to involve them in unnecessary penalties, or deprive them of benefits which it was in our power to bequeath.**

**ANDREAS**

And this the more, because it is one of the appointed conditions of the labour of men that, in proportion to the time between the seed-sowing and the harvest, is the fulness of the fruit; and that generally, therefore, the farther off we place our aim, and the less we desire to be ourselves the witnesses of what we have laboured for, the more wide and rich will be the measure of our success. Men cannot benefit those that are with them as they can benefit those who come after them; and of all the pulpits from which human voice is ever sent forth, there is none from which it reaches so far as from the grave.

**NIC**

§ 10. Nor is there, indeed, any present loss, in such respect, for futurity. Every human action gains in honour, in grace, in all true magnificence, by its regard to things that are to come. It is the far sight, the quiet and confident patience, that, above all other attributes, separate man from man, and near him to his Maker; and there is no action nor art, whose majesty we may not measure by this test. Therefore, when we build, let us think that we build for ever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say as they look upon the labour and wrought substance of them, “See! this our fathers did for us.” **For, indeed, the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its** **Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity.**

**PETER**

It is in their lasting witness against men, in their quiet contrast with the transitional character of all things, in the strength which, through the lapse of seasons and times, and the decline and birth of dynasties, and the changing of the face of the earth, and of the limits of the sea, maintains its sculptured shapeliness for a time insuperable, connects forgotten and following ages with each other, and half constitutes the identity, as it concentrates the sympathy, of nations: **it is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture; and it is not until a building has assumed this character, till it has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, till its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the shadows of death, that its existence, more lasting as it is than that of the natural objects of the world around it, can be gifted with even so much as these possess, of language and of life.**

**JAMES**

§ 16. Now, to return to our immediate subject, it so happens that, in architecture, the superinduced and accidental beauty is most commonly inconsistent with the preservation of original character, and the picturesque is therefore sought in ruin, and supposed to consist in decay. Whereas, even when so sought, it consists in the mere sublimity of the rents, or fractures, or stains, or vegetation, which assimilate the architecture with the work of Nature, and bestow upon it those circumstances of colour and form which are universally beloved by the eye of man. So far as this is done, to the extinction of the true characters of the architecture, it is picturesque, and the artist who looks to the stem of the ivy instead of the shaft of the pillar, is carrying out in more daring freedom the debased sculptor’s choice of the hair instead of the countenance.

**NIC**

But so far as it can be rendered consistent with the inherent character, the picturesque or extraneous sublimity of architecture has just this of nobler function in it than that of any other object whatsoever, that it is an exponent of age, of that in which, as has been said, the greatest glory of the building consists; and, therefore, the external signs of this glory, having power and purpose greater than any belonging to their mere sensible beauty, may be considered as taking rank among pure and essential characters; so essential to my mind, that I think a building cannot be considered as in its prime until four or five centuries have passed over it; and that the entire choice and arrangement of its details should have reference to their appearance after that period, so that none should be admitted which would suffer material injury either by the weatherstaining, or the mechanical degradation which the lapse of such a period would necessitate.

**PETER**

§ 18. It does not belong to my present plan to consider at length the second head of duty of which I have above spoken; the preservation of the architecture we possess: but a few words may be forgiven, as especially necessary in modern times. **Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word *restoration* understood. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is *impossible*, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.** That which I have above insisted upon as the life of the whole, that spirit which is given only by the hand and eye of the workman, can never be recalled. Another spirit may be given by another time, and it is then a new building; but the spirit of the dead workman cannot be summoned up, and commanded to direct other hands, and other thoughts.

**JAMES**

**And as for direct and simple copying, it is palpably impossible. What copying can there be of surfaces that have been worn half an inch down? The whole finish of the work was in the half inch that is gone; if you attempt to restore that finish, you do it conjecturally; if you copy what is left, granting fidelity to be possible, (and what care, or watchfulness, or cost can secure it,) how is the new work better than the old? There was yet in the old *some* life, some mysterious suggestion of what it had been, and of what it had lost; some sweetness in the gentle lines which rain and sun had wrought. There can be none in the brute hardness of the new carving …** The first step to restoration, (I have seen it, and that again and again—seen it on the Baptistery of Pisa, seen it on the Casa d’ Oro at Venice, seen it on the Cathedral of Lisieux,) is to dash the old work to pieces; the second is usually to put up the cheapest and basest imitation which can escape detection, but in all cases, however careful, and however laboured, an imitation still, a cold model of such parts as *can* be modelled, with conjectural supplements; and my experience has as yet furnished me with only one instance, that of the Palais de Justice at Rouen, in which even this, the utmost degree of fidelity which is possible, has been attained, or even attempted.

**NIC**

§ 19. Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end. You may make a model of a building as you may of a corpse, and your model may have the shell of the old walls within it as your cast might have the skeleton, with what advantage I neither see nor care: but the old building is destroyed, and that more totally and mercilessly than if it had sunk into a heap of dust, or melted into a mass of clay: more has been gleaned out of desolated Nineveh than ever will be out of re-built Milan. But, it is said, there may come a necessity for restoration! Granted. Look the necessity full in the face, and understand it on its own terms. It is a necessity for destruction. Accept it as such, pull the building down, throw its stones into neglected corners, make ballast of them, or mortar, if you will; but do it honestly, and do not set up a Lie in their place. And look that necessity in the face before it comes, and you may prevent it.

**ANDREAS**

**Take proper care of your monuments, and you will not need to restore them.** A few sheets of lead put in time upon a roof, a few dead leaves and sticks swept in time out of a water-course, will save both roof and walls from ruin. Watch an old building with an anxious care; guard it as best you may, and at *any* cost, from every influence of dilapidation. Count its stones as you would jewels of a crown; set watches about it as if at the gates of a besieged city; bind it together with iron where it loosens; stay it with timber where it declines; do not care about the unsightliness of the aid: better a crutch than a lost limb; and do this tenderly, and reverently, and continually, and many a generation will still be born and pass away beneath its shadow. Its evil day must come at last; but let it come declaredly and openly, and let no dishonouring and false substitute deprive it of the funeral offices of memory.

**PETER**

We began with a quotation, an important one, from William Morris and we shall end with another – and exceedingly influential - quotation, namely the ‘Manifesto’ which William Morris and Philip Webb put together to be the foundation document of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877. A brief letter from Ruskin survives in the SPAB Archives giving specific permission for Morris and Webb to use as much as they wanted of the sentiments in ‘The Lamp of Memory’.

**RORY – Manifesto of the SPAB**

A society coming before the public with such a name as that above written must needs explain how, and why, it proposes to protect those ancient buildings which, to most people doubtless, seem to have so many and such excellent protectors. This, then, is the explanation we offer.

No doubt within the last fifty years a new interest, almost like another sense, has arisen in these ancient monuments of art; and they have become the subject of one of the most interesting of studies, and of an enthusiasm, religious, historical, artistic, which is one of the undoubted gains of our time; yet we think that if the present treatment of them be continued, our descendants will find them useless for study and chilling to enthusiasm. We think that those last fifty years of knowledge and attention have done more for their destruction than all the foregoing centuries of revolution, violence and contempt.

For Architecture, long decaying, died out, as a popular art at least, just as the knowledge of mediaeval art was born. So that the civilised world of the nineteenth century has no style of its own amidst its wide knowledge of the styles of other centuries. From this lack and this gain arose in men’s minds the strange idea of the Restoration of ancient buildings; and a strange and most fatal idea, which by its very name implies that it is possible to strip from a building this, that, and the other part of its history – of its life that is – and then to stay the hand at some arbitrary point, and leave it still historical, living, and even as it once was.

In early times this kind of forgery was impossible, because knowledge failed the builders, or perhaps because instinct held them back. If repairs were needed, if ambition or piety pricked on to change, that change was of necessity wrought in the unmistakable fashion of the time; a church of the eleventh century might be added to or altered in the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, or even the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries; but every change, whatever history it destroyed, left history in the gap, and was alive with the spirit of the deeds done midst its fashioning. The result of all this was often a building in which the many changes, though harsh and visible enough, were, by their very contrast, interesting and instructive and could by no possibility mislead. But those who make the changes wrought in our day under the name of Restoration, while professing to bring back a building to the best time of its history, have no guide but each his own individual whim to point out to them what is admirable and what contemptible; while the very nature of their task compels them to destroy something and to supply the gap by imagining what the earlier builders should or might have done. Moreover, in the course of this double process of destruction and addition, the whole surface of the building is necessarily tampered with; so that the appearance of antiquity is taken away from such old parts of the fabric as are left, and there is no laying to rest in the spectator the suspicion of what may have been lost; and in short, a feeble and lifeless forgery is the final result of all the wasted labour. It is sad to say, that in this manner most of the bigger Minsters, and a vast number of more humble buildings, both in England and on the Continent, have been dealt with by men of talent often, and worthy of better employment, but deaf to the claims of poetry and history in the highest sense of the words.

For what is left we plead before our architects themselves, before the official guardians of buildings, and before the public generally, and we pray them to remember how much is gone of the religion, thought and manners of time past, never by almost universal consent, to be Restored; and to consider whether it be possible to Restore those buildings, the living spirit of which, it cannot be too often repeated, was an inseparable part of that religion and thought, and those past manners. For our part we assure them fearlessly, that of all the Restorations yet undertaken, the worst have meant the reckless stripping a building of some of its most interesting material features; whilst the best have their exact analogy in the Restoration of an old picture, where the partly-perished work of the ancient craftsmaster has been made neat and smooth by the tricky hand of some unoriginal and thoughtless hack of today. If, for the rest, it be asked us to specify what kind of amount of art, style, or other interest in a building makes it worth protecting, we answer, anything which can be looked on as artistic, picturesque, historical, antique, or substantial: any work, in short, over which educated, artistic people would think it worth while to argue at all.

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, to stave off decay by daily care, to prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof by such means as are obviously meant for support or covering, and show no pretence of other art, and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands; if it has become inconvenient for its present use, to raise another building rather than alter or enlarge the old one; in fine to treat our ancient buildings as monuments of a bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying.

Thus, and thus only, shall we escape the reproach of our learning being turned into a snare to us; thus, and thus only can we protect our ancient buildings, and hand them down instructive and venerable to those that come after us.

*Comment:* from PB on points arising from RY’s reading of the Manifesto, and thanks to him for his insightful reading. PB to ask Simon Seligman for comments or questions in the chat.

Leading into SS’s ‘parish notices, and a few sentences thanking the team for the collaboration with one another and with him.

*PETER BURMAN, 27 November/revised 2 December 2022*

1. This is a reference to Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)