

Obituary: Freddie Charles (1912–2002)

BERNARD FEILDEN



Figure 1
Freddie Charles.

Freddie (despite always writing as 'F.W.B. Charles', he was universally known as 'Freddie') was recognized as the great national expert on the conservation of timber-framed buildings. His understanding of medieval technology, his respect for craftsmen, and his knowledge of the different behaviour of green oak and seasoned oak, give his work the unique quality of authenticity. He was Chairman of the ICOMOS-UK Wood Committee and a member of the ICOMOS International Wood Committee. In that capacity, he was invited to the Soviet Union, on one

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of his many visits, to advise on the difficult problems of the Church of the Transfiguration at Kizi Pogost. He also visited Japan, Norway, and Bulgaria for ICOMOS. How did this come about?

Freddie trained as an architect at Liverpool (1930–35) under Professor Reilly, and then went into the modernist office of Maxwell Fray, when Gropius was attached to it. From 1940 to 1945 he worked in the Ministry of Supply under Lord Holford, in regional planning in Scotland from 1945 to 1948, and then became a respected and loved tutor to Edinburgh and Birmingham Schools of Architecture. He married, firstly, Nancy Strugnell when working in Penang in 1937. His son, Martin, was born on their return to England at the outbreak of war. After moving to Edinburgh in 1945, they separated and he lived with Mary, whom he married in 1950, and by whom he had three more children.

In 1952 he moved from Scotland, to set up office in Bromsgrove, where he was deeply involved in establishing Avoncroft Museum for historic timber structures. He finally moved to Worcester and, in 1963, settled for the rest of his life in his beloved Churchill Mill. At his recent commemoration in Bredon Barn (Worcestershire), we were told of the very happy family life he and Mary had there, surrounded by children, animals, and many friends.

Freddie was a gifted designer. His training in the Modern Movement enabled him to understand the design and construction of timber buildings. He put artistic achievement as his true objective, and used his knowledge of medieval practice to obtain this aim.

His office in Worcester was lively and fun, as testified by former members. They would take on any reasonable commission in order to survive. Freddie's main projects were the White Hart Inn in Newark (Nottinghamshire) where, to the disapproval of the Historic Buildings Council, he removed later additions of the Georgian period to reveal a perfect fifteenth-century front. He also restored Spon Street in Coventry, as well as the High House in Newark.

Many articles and books imparted his considerable knowledge. His major work was *Conservation of Timber Buildings* (1984), which still provides the basic reference to working on timber frames. In this, he starts by describing the growth of trees. His understanding of timber was fundamental. He wrote for the *Architects' Journal*, as follows:

The replacement of original members by new timber is clearly an even more exacting task than framing the original building. Not only must the

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dimensions be dead accurate, but the new components must be inserted into an existing frame, instead of assembled in a logical sequence of operations, followed in the original construction, which would allow slight adjustments to be made and the timbers fitted afterwards. The problem of shaped or curved timbers is even more difficult. In the original building, the profile for instance of a carved brace determined the exact location of mortices cut into the receiving members. In a replacement, the member must not only fit the mortices, but its form must be as grown, that is, in accordance with the natural grain rather than shaped by tools. It may also have to match a corresponding member, which survives in the original structure. Since no two branches of a tree are ever exactly alike, this difficulty can be insuperable.

The behaviour of new oak depends largely on its method of conversion. Boxed heart and cleft timbers are less liable to shake or warp than sawn timber. Cleaving is also the means of avoiding knots, at any rate on the important upper face or exposed surface. It seems that new timber converted in the traditional way will not suffer ill effects either when used as new components inserted into the existing framework or when jointed as a repair to an old timber.



Figure 2 Bredon Barn, Worcestershire.

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His great works on medieval barns and historic houses were masterpieces of investigation, documentation, and execution. He recorded Bredon, and the other three great medieval barns of the area out of love for these structures, before it was accidentally burnt down in 1980. This fact enabled him to persuade the National Trust to restore it. A book, *The Great Barn of Bredon...* (1997) records his work there. Several speakers at the gathering in his memory mentioned the terse words of Sir Christopher Wren's memorial in St Paul's Cathedral – *Si Monumentum Requirit, Circumspice* (if you want a memorial to me, look about you).

On a personal level, Freddie was something of a radical maverick and a member of the Communist Party until 1958. He was a Marxist and made many visits to the Soviet Union with Mary. He loved argument in the friendliest manner, for he had great charm. His lovely sense of humour enlivened his conversation with colleagues, who appreciated his 'life enhancing' quality. We owe him a lot, and must express our gratitude for his life and works.