

# Obituary

Professor John Ashurst (1937–2008)

Those involved with building conservation technology are mourning the sad death of John Ashurst who died of cancer, age 71, on Monday 19 May 2008. He was one of the most influential practitioners, authors and teachers of the twentieth century concerned with the conservation of historic buildings and ancient monuments.

Professor Ashurst's contribution especially to the preservation of ruins and archaeological sites cannot be underestimated. He was an internationally recognized authority on the cleaning and repair of historic stonework, mortars, plasters and renders. Through his publications, consulting and lecturing, Ashurst touched generations of architects, engineers, building surveyors, conservation officers, conservators and craftspeople around the world: none more so than in his beloved England.

## Early life and training

Born of Hilda and Leonard Ashurst in Norwood, Surrey in 1937, John grew up in Epsom, Surrey in a household imbued with Christian love, civic duty and the technical aspects of building and civil engineering construction. His father was Deputy County Engineer for Middlesex. John treasured his father's drawing instruments and text books all his life always having them close to hand with pride of place in his living room.

John Ashurst attended Ewell Grammar School and his personal interests were in acting and the theatre (fostered on the social side of his parent's Methodist Church), film, graphic arts and eighteenth-century history and remained with him throughout his career. His architectural training was provided at Kingston School of Art, south of London, from 1954 to 1959. Not known for his athleticism in later life, the youthful Ashurst took fencing lessons while at art school and showed off his épée with great pride. He was an excellent draughtsman (an ability developed at Monday sessions in the Fine Art Department) and possessed good, confident lettering and writing skills that were to emerge later in the fine illustrations to his many books. Contemporaries in his college sphere included those who would later also become conservation architects, Keith Bennett ARIBA and Martin Caroe FRIBA.

## Professional practice

John Ashurst's first ten years in practice were as an architectural assistant with Scott, Brownrigg and Turner (of Guildford), and J. Brian Cooper and Farquhar on local authority housing projects and Shell service stations.



John Ashurst teaching at ICCROM, Rome in 1990. (Jeanne Marie Teutonico)

During this period he gained basic experience of field archaeology at home with the Surrey Archaeological Society (due in part to his brother Peter's interests), primarily on the Roman brickworks at Ashtead.

In 1969 he moved to the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works' Ancient Monuments Division. Then, at the age of 32, John was appointed Research Architect in the Special Services Branch under T. A. Bailey FRIBA and worked as a replacement for Corinne Wilson (now Bennett) who left in 1968 to join the architectural firm of Purcell Miller and Tritton. Corinne, and then John, supported the on-going research Bailey was undertaking with the Building Research Station (now BRE) on stone preservation<sup>1</sup> and culminated in John's first publication in 1972. This period was especially important for John to foster close and lasting ties with the scientific community in support of building conservation. Lesley Arnold, Brian Clarke and Cliff Price of BRE all collaborated on projects to remove salts from masonry and to undertake further developments on the chemical consolidation of decaying stone.

Working on ancient monuments and historic buildings suited John extremely well. Professional influences on his career in the Ministry at this time included architects Bill Adams (who repaired the Banqueting House in Whitehall), Harold Yexley (Royal Palaces, the Tower of London and the Royal Hospital at Greenwich) and Superintending Architect Patrick Faulkner (structural repairs to Bolsover Castle). In fact John, Patrick and the Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, R. Gilyard-Beer (known affectionately as 'GB') would roam England together in Patrick's sports car inspecting and advising on works to monuments in the care of the state and bonding with the craftsmen of the direct employed labour organization in countless pubs of an evening.

John Ashurst's job description remained more or less the same through several changes of administration and title over the course of the next twenty years. By 1970 he was working for the Department of the Environment's Directorate of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings (DAMHB), and from 1983 for the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England (now called English Heritage). He was promoted to Principal Architect and his Special Services Branch became the Research and Technical Advisory Service (RTAS) and grew in size and stature from a single architect in 1969 to six professional/technical staff, two master mason trainers and workshops for metalwork conservation (Regents Park) and stone carving (Vauxhall) by 1989.

### **Links with conservators**

John Ashurst was the lens through which many architects in England first formed working associations with conservators. Peter Burman at the

Council for the Care of Churches sought John's help on the advisory committee for the conservation of the West Front of Wells Cathedral in the great campaign from 1974 to 1986 being undertaken by his college friend Martin Caroe (1933–99). There on the scaffolding and in workshops, John met Professor Robert Baker, his students and helpers, and Kenneth Hempel and John Larson from the Victoria & Albert Museum. John also fostered contacts at Wells with the more caring, thinking building and specialist masonry cleaning contractors such as Bob Bennett and Ian Clayton.

### **Links with the stone industry**

In the close-knit world of the English stone industry (i.e. stone quarrying, masonry conservation and restoration) John Ashurst found himself at home amongst the leading lights of the 1970s and 1980s and often acted as a catalyst for their interactions. Chief among these were Archie Ireson of the 'Men of the Stones' and conservation architect and stone expert Donovan Purcell FRIBA<sup>2</sup> who paved the way for new British Standards on stone masonry and helped to found the Standing Joint Committee on Natural Stone which John eventually chaired. John also liaised closely with Geoffrey Hutton over the latter's report for the Department of the Environment and the Stone Federation on the state of the English stone industry. He also made a life-long working friendship with Francis (Frank) G. Dimes<sup>3</sup> at the Geological Museum in Kensington and the pair lectured and published together.

With the arrival of Robert Chitham as English Heritage's Directing Architect in the early 1980s, John's collection of internal technical advisory notes for staff became a priority to publish for wider consumption and the seminal volumes of *Practical Building Conservation* were released under Jill Pearce's editorship at Gower Technical Press in 1988/9. They remain the world's best-selling technical books on building conservation and John had recently been involved in the revisions for their long-awaited second edition.

Able assisted by master mason Colin Burns, Ashurst began to focus in the early 1990s on the poor quality of craft skills applied to ruined monuments and archaeological sites. Through his vision, English Heritage established the £1.6 m Building Conservation Training Centre at Fort Brockhurst, near Gosport in Hampshire to train its direct labour staff and contractors. But this highly influential establishment closed after five years in 1996 when English Heritage's direct labour force was privatized. The famous 'ruinettes' (facsimiles of ancient monuments constructed within the casemates of the Palmerston fort), equipment and training materials were all rescued however and transferred to West Dean College, a private foundation near Chichester where John continued to teach until his recent illness.

John lectured extensively on stone masonry conservation and repair throughout his career, notably at the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies at York University (for Derek Linstrum) from the inception of its conservation courses in 1972, at the Architectural Association from 1975, and further afield at ICCROM (the Intergovernmental Centre for Studies in the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) in Rome after Bernard Feilden<sup>4</sup> arrived there as Director General (1977–81).

John left English Heritage and the United Kingdom in 1991 to set up a freelance consultancy practice in Canada. He had advised the Canadian Government with Keith Blades (now of Almonte, Ontario) on the stone repairs to the Canadian Parliament Buildings in Ottawa in 1977, produced standard-setting reports in the 1980s, and lectured extensively in both Ottawa and Toronto for the Association for Preservation Technology. In Toronto he was warmly welcomed and worked closely with the late Don McRae, the region's leading conservation contractor at the time. His Canadian adventure was short-lived however, and he returned to his beloved England to take up an appointment as the first British Petroleum Professor of Heritage Conservation at Bournemouth University, there establishing degree courses in building conservation. Through the university, he also became Director of Historic Buildings and Sites Services (HBSS), a consultancy with English Heritage among its clients. Subsequently this teaching practice transferred to the private sector and was renamed 'Resurgam' as part of Hutton and Rostron Environmental Investigations Ltd., based in Gomshall, Surrey.

In 1999, John joined building surveyor Graham Abrey and conservator Catherine Woolfitt in a new architectural conservation practice called Ingram Consultancy Ltd. He eventually eased back to become a part time consultant to the firm. During this period John worked on Guildford Castle, at Masada in Israel, and for the Getty Conservation Institute at Butrint in Albania.



John Ashurst 1937–2008.  
(Margo Teasdale)

## Ashurst the man

John was complex and enigmatic. In spite of his high public profile he was a very private person and even his closest work colleagues and friends found it hard to get to the man behind the mask. Sometimes a glimpse might be allowed, usually very late at night in a bar a long way from home. But it would be fleeting and soon the mask would be firmly back in place again. However he was always very good company and his chuckle (often erupting slowly across his entire upper body) was never very far away. His greatest pleasures seemed to lie in the English countryside, village life, researching Epsom's history, and in his final home with Margo, restoring their Dorset cob Toll House and taking walks with their golden retrievers.

John carried his expertise very lightly and suffered fools not gladly but always with patience and courtesy. He had a way of making everyone he worked with feel special, whether they were his students, fellow professionals or workpeople on site. This facility, combined with his unquestionable mastery of his subject, made him a very charismatic teacher and colleague.

John's knowledge was nothing less than encyclopaedic and his ability to recall even the most arcane technical details was always impressive, if unsettling. He lectured without repetition, hesitation or deviation and without notes; he would seldom select his slides more than an hour (or less) before a performance. Always a consummate and charming performer (remember he was an 'amateur dramatics' enthusiast), he is remembered once, during a lecture, being confronted with an unexpected slide which had somehow crept into the carousel by mistake. Without interrupting his flow he incorporated it seamlessly into the narrative as though he had meant it to be there all along.

## Summary

John Ashurst's greatest quality was his ability to embrace theory (always based on sound scientific principles) and practice – he was equally at home in the company of scientists and of stonemasons. His expertise, instincts and judgment were second to none; his solutions were never less than elegant, often ingenious and always practicable. He taught everyone the value of methodical and analytical problem solving: an approach involving rigorous observation, asking the right questions, making the correct diagnosis, selecting the appropriate remedies and reviewing the results.

He devoted his professional life to two things: conserving historic sites and buildings, and teaching others how to do it. Of his many publications,<sup>5</sup> his last, *The Conservation of Ruins* will be his own monument, the culmination of forty years of hard-won knowledge and practical

experience. He recognized that, in the end, success and failure are in the hands of the craftspeople and devoted much of his professional life to helping them develop their knowledge and skills – and inspiring others to do the same. This will be his lasting legacy. Professor John Ashurst Dip Arch (Kingston), RIBA, EASA (Hons); born Norwood, Surrey, 14 March 1937; died at home in Dorset aged 71, on Monday 19 May 2008; survived by wife Margo Teasdale (married Toronto, 1 December 1990).

*John A Fidler (with assistance from Jeanne Marie Teutonico, Iain McCaig, Corinne and Keith Bennett, Keith Blades, Bob Bennett, Peter Burman, Cliff Price, William Crocker and especially Margo Teasdale)*

#### Notes

- 1 Bailey T. A. and Schaffer R. J., 'Report on Stone Preservation Experiments', internal publication of the Ancient Monuments Branch, Ministry of Public Building and Works (1964).
- 2 Donovan Purcell, Principal of Purcell Miller and Tritton Architects in Norwich, Surveyor of the Fabric of Ely Cathedral and author of *Cambridge Stone*, Faber & Faber, London (1967). Died 1973.
- 3 Francis (Frank) G. Dimes: At the time curator of the Building and Decorative Stones Collection and after retirement consultant geologist, teacher and joint author with Ashurst. Died 1993.
- 4 Now Sir Bernard Feilden, former Surveyor of the Fabric of St Paul's Cathedral, London and of York Minster, and Director General Emeritus of ICCROM.
- 5 Clarke B. L. and Ashurst, J., *Stone Preservation Experiments*, Building Research Station, Garston (1972); Ashurst, J. and Dimes, F. G., *Stone in Building: its use and potential today*, Architectural Press, London (1977); Ashurst, J., *Mortars, Plasters and Renders*, Ecclesiastical Architects and Surveyors Association, Guildford (1983, revised 2006); Ashurst, J. and Ashurst, N., *Practical Building Conservation*, Vols 1–5, English Heritage Technical Handbook series, Gower Technical Press, Aldershot (1988); Ashurst, J. and Dimes, F. G. (eds.), *Conservation of Building and Decorative Stone*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford (1990); Ashurst, J. (ed.), *Conservation of Ruins*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford (2006).

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*From Colin Burns and Catherine Woolfitt*

Professor John Ashurst passed away at home peacefully on Monday 19 May 2008, losing the struggle with secondary cancer. This is a tragic loss to his wife Margo and close friends. His death will resonate throughout the conservation world. John was an inspiration to so many who came into personal contact with him through his teaching and training, both in the UK and abroad. In addition, his books and papers have had, and will continue to exert, an international influence.

John was an exceptional conservation architect, with a rare practical understanding of materials and a passionate interest in history. John was at the forefront of the lime revival in the UK and an authority on stone conservation and lime based materials. The breadth of his technical experience was exceptional, and encompassed the survey, repair and conservation of ancient monuments and historic buildings, as well as the technology of traditional building materials. He was a gifted writer, lecturer and artist and an exceptional person whose expertise and special qualities attracted people to him and his subject.

Many will remember him for his abilities as a lecturer. John's unique presentation style was informative, authoritative and humorous. Listeners were drawn to him; he inspired numerous people to pursue a career in conservation. An early interest in the theatre greatly influenced his accomplished lecture style; this included amateur dramatics and the work of the great architect and set designer Inigo Jones. John's distinctive technical drawings, which illustrate his various publications, are immediately recognizable, and were inspirational.

John was responsible for establishing the Heritage Conservation degree course at Bournemouth University. He was instrumental in the development of the English Heritage Training Centre at Fort Brockhurst, which continues at West Dean College as the Building Conservation Masterclasses. These training courses are an important part of his legacy and will carry on to influence future conservation work. The people who have been taught by John number in the thousands and through them many historic structures will benefit from his unique and holistic approach to the conservation of sites and monuments.

John was approachable and caring, which enabled him to relate to people at all social and professional levels from craftsmen working on sites to architects and surveyors responsible for specification and management of work. Close colleagues will remember his sense of fun and gentle and even temper which made working with him such a pleasure. John was without pretence or personal ambition; he was motivated by an empathy with our heritage and the people engaged in its conservation. He was an inspiration, a gentle person, of enormous warmth and humility, considering those talents which were bestowed upon him. He had both respect and love for life, people and nature. Golden retrievers became an essential part of his life and dog ownership was a litmus test of his assessment of others. His subtle sense of humour was evident in virtually any situation, his distinctive chuckle often remarked upon. John's sense of humour, on occasions, left him in uncontrolled fits of laughter, head buried deep in his hands. It will be these and other fond images that will help fill the enormous void left by John's passing.