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Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting Houses

TO the study of the history of ecclesiastical architecture in England the 19th century made two notable, though at first sight unconnected, negative contributions. Firstly that century saw the commencement of serious studies of mediaeval architecture as exemplified in the textbooks and copy-books of Rickman, Pugin, Ruskin and the like. This encouraged the use of mediaeval styles by practising architects; it also furthered the study of the middle ages by the new generation of archaeologists who flourished at the same time.

The second contribution is in the great number of nonconformist chapels erected during the years of the industrial revolution, often with only the slightest of means, and rebuilt, enlarged or closed according to the changing needs of urban populations. Not only was the number of denominations concerned very considerable but the number of chapels built greatly exceeded that of the new buildings put up by the establishment.

The effect of this two-fold legacy has been to obscure from public knowledge or interest the surviving meeting places of the late 17th and 18th-century dissenters. The mediaeval bias given to architectural research for long caused all post-reformation building to be regarded as "modern" and ecclesiologists, until the turn of the present century, were generally not only indifferent to but often bitterly opposed to even the best 18th century church buildings. The presence of large numbers of 19th-century chapels of indifferent design and construction has been equally unfortunate in pre-disposing those architectural historians who have shaken off their mediaeval fetters to the false assumption that nonconformist architecture is always dull, "late" and generally uninteresting.

A few of the more spectacular of the earlier meeting-houses were brought to light in the writings of R. P. Jones and Martin Briggs and more recently the Friends, the Methodists and the Strict Baptists have had books devoted to their architecture. The full wealth of early nonconformist building still, however, remains to be discovered and to be made more generally known. The need for this is particularly urgent today with continual changes in population and the amalgamation of churches increasingly threatening the existence of surviving buildings. Nor is there any statutory protection from unnecessary alterations such as exists in the Ministry of Housing and Local Government's lists of domestic buildings. The existence of diocesan advisory committees for the establishment has caused the complete

omission from statutory protection of *all* ecclesiastical buildings—a fault of which dissenters should be aware and which ought surely to be remedied as soon as possible.

The particular threat which therefore exists to the meeting-houses of English dissenters, unendowed with any external assistance as many of them are, has now been recognised by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England). This Commission, which was set up in 1908 and which publishes illustrated county inventories of ancient monuments, has therefore agreed as a matter of urgency to prepare a special publication dealing entirely with nonconformist chapels and meeting-houses throughout England. It is proposed that this should be fully illustrated with photographs and measured drawings and that it should cover all those denominations whose meeting-houses were normally registered as being for the use of Protestant dissenters. In connection with this survey it is intended that all the more important buildings should be fully photographed by the National Monuments Record. The internal fittings and the building structure, notably original roof framing, would be recorded and as complete a list as possible would be made of early communion plate. It is hoped that all buildings dating from before 1800 would be included in this survey—at least 500 examples are already known to exist—and a more selective survey will be appended to include at least the major buildings of the 19th century. Old photographs or prints of demolished chapels would also be sought and copied by the National Monuments Record to recapture at least something of the buildings we have already lost. It is possible that for completeness the few early chapels in Wales might also be included.

The major difficulty to be faced in this project is in the location of buildings worthy of inspection. The Commission would be most grateful for information on these and on the existence of old communion plate which may survive even after an old meeting-house has been rebuilt. Letters should be addressed to Mr. C. F. Stell, M.A., B.Arch., A.R.I.B.A., F.S.A., Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), 10 Great College Street, London, S.W.1. Mr. Stell is a member of the Baptist Historical Society and he would be very pleased to hear from anyone who has been working on this aspect of non-conformist history.

C. F. STELL

Advance Notice. Plans are now being made for the Society's second Summer School which will be held at Bristol Baptist College. Readers may wish to note the date, 2-4 July, 1970.