



Sir Howard Colvin

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## OBITUARY

### SIR HOWARD COLVIN, Kt., C.V.O., C.B.E., F.B.A., F.S.A., Hon. F.R.I.B.A. 1919–2007

The outstanding achievement of Howard Colvin in establishing architectural history as an academic discipline was the main theme of the obituaries that were published in the national press in the days following his death on 28 December 2007. It was universally acknowledged that everyone with an interest in the subject was deeply indebted to the rigorous scholarship which he brought to bear in place of the dilettante connoisseurship that had previously characterized the study of architecture. From a national perspective that was undoubtedly the right emphasis. Understandably, his influence on his adopted city and county received less notice.

Colvin arrived in Oxford in 1948, when he was appointed as a Fellow of St John's College, and it remained his home for the rest of his life. Within the university he originally taught medieval history, and it was only in the 1960s that he managed to add an advanced paper on English architectural history to the traditional history syllabus. In 1965 he was awarded the title of Reader in Architectural History, but to the discredit of the university he was never given the professorial chair that his scholarship and international recognition demanded. His teaching did not have the charismatic flair of contemporary colleagues such as Lawrence Stone, W. A. Pantin, and W. G. Hoskins, but it was capable of stimulating receptive students with a passion for the subject and giving them a solid grounding in historical research. His pioneering field trips, with groups of students armed only with a blank ground plan and the powers of observation, to the parish churches of the neighbourhood were memorable exercises in building analysis based on the visible evidence. Many of his former students enjoyed his continued support in their later careers. None of them ever forgot his disciplined training during their years of apprenticeship.

His volume of essays on *Unbuilt Oxford* (1983) is partly a tribute to the Oxford don as a patron of architectural ideas, and Colvin himself played a key role in promoting the arrival of modern architecture in the city. In 1956 he led a revolt of younger fellows in St John's that succeeded in replacing Sir Edward Maufe by the Architects' Co-Partnership as the designers of a new set of buildings in the North Quadrangle. The result was the Beehive Building (1958–60), which established a new approach to architectural design by the Oxford colleges. He subsequently championed Philip Dowson as the architect of the Sir Thomas White Building (1972–5) and Richard MacCormac for the acclaimed Garden Quadrangle (1991–4), both developments marking new directions in recent English architecture. In the grand tradition of the educated amateur architect, Colvin designed his own house in Plantation Road, and for the College he created the Lower Library in Canterbury Quadrangle (1975–6) and the Sadler Room in the Senior Common Room (1980–1).

In addition to his active engagement in the remarkable post-War development of his college, Colvin played an important part in the broader cultural life of the city and county. He was briefly a trustee of the Oxford Preservation Trust and contributed to the writing of the *Victoria County History*. He regularly attended weekend courses at the Department for Continuing Education and published extensively on Oxfordshire themes. He served this Society for many years as its Librarian and re-ordered its collection. Although far from being a conservationist by temperament, he acted as chairman of the Listed Buildings Sub-Committee and brought to its deliberations the national experience that he had gained as a member of the Historic Buildings Council for England and as a Commissioner of English Heritage.

Colvin's somewhat reserved demeanour concealed a delightful sense of humour which was revealed to those who knew him well. He was a loyal supporter of those whose judgement he valued and generous with the dissemination of his many discoveries. Blessed with a prodigious memory, which never deserted him, he continued to work on his research and writing to the very end. With methodical precision he completed the index to the third and final revision of his monumental *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* just days before he died peacefully in his sleep. Its subsequent publication in the summer of 2008 is a fitting monument to his remarkable life.

MALCOLM AIRS