

The Landmark Trust

Cloth Fair Nos. 43 and 45a

'Why cannot the City form a ... committee and grant it a roving commission to move whenever some ancient memorial is threatened, or action to preserve an interesting old building is needed?', wrote an indignant journalist in *The City Press* in 1914. 'It would create public opinion and bestir the citizens in defence of the few architectural links that remain, to unite this prosaic and drab century with the more light hearted, if in many ways far less happy, times of the Tudor era.' This was in protest at the proposed demolition of a portion of Cloth Fair, a lone survivor in London's City of the Great Fire of 1666. Today, Nos. 41 and 43, owned by Landmark, present more of an eighteenth-century air but the timber frames encased behind the later facades date from around 1600.

The row stands almost in the shadow of St Bartholomew the Great, once church to a mighty Norman foundation, which has also withstood Fire and Blitz alike. Even in the priory's days, this was an area of bustling commerce rather than cloistered seclusion; nearby Smithfield was a noisy livestock and meat market from the twelfth century, and once a year, the priory held a great cloth fair on its patron saint's day. 24th August, that gave its name to the street built upon it, Cloth Fair.

At the Dissolution, the priory, a plum site, was bought by Sir Richard Rich, Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations and Thomas Cromwell's right hand man. Rich moved into the prior's lodgings in 1540, but it was his grandson, Robert, 3rd Baron Rich, who began to build seriously on the priory grounds, throwing up speculative housing of grand tenements three and even four storeys high, on 31-year leases. Today's Cloth Fair holds these behind the later brick facings.

The crowded Elizabethan houses around Cloth Fair had become squalid, overcrowded tenements by 1913, understandably vulnerable to the strictures of a more sanitary age. Cloth Fair, with its acquired eighteenth-century proportions, stood its ground rather better than the ramshackle alleys behind it, which the Sanitary Committee for the City Corporation condemned for demolition in 1914. This proposal to clear the area was not without controversy, as we saw in the opening passage, but there was nothing in place to enable present need to coexist sympathetically with the resonance of the past, and the timber-framed tenements behind Cloth Fair were felled.

Cloth Fair itself might have gone the same way had salvation not arrived in February 1930 for No. 41-42, 'the last Jacobean house in London,' in the shape of architects Paul Paget and John Seely. The houses had been scheduled as dangerous structures but Messrs. Paget and Seely had the vision, and the professional skills, to see that they could be saved. The acquisition of others in the row followed.

Cloth Fair also stands as something of an emblem for the conservation battles of the twentieth century, and not just by the virtue of its survival. Urban buildings, no less than the City itself, evolve to meet current purposes, so Georgian re-facings and Victorian shopfronts came to mask the old jettied timber frames. The restoration of St Bartholomew's first focussed attention on the area in the 1880s. The first Ancient Monument Act was passed in 1882; in 1913, the Ancient Monuments Consolidation and Amendment Act recognised for the first time that there are physical remains of the nation's history which are so important that the state has a duty to ensure their continued survival. This Act is generally counted the foundation of modern statutory protection, although it was many years before this was fully established.

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In 1954, Paget came into contact with one of England's most effective architectural conservation campaigners, the poet John Betjeman (1906-1984), through 'a battle about a television mast in the Isle of Wight.' 'Of course I have to live here,' said Betjeman, and he took a lease on the upper floors of No. 43, which he used for the next twenty years as a convenient London bolthole from which to conduct his affairs and campaigns. Betjeman was a passionate yet accessible spokesman for architecture's soul as well as its aesthetic qualities. In 1958, Betjeman was a founding member of the Victorian Society, champions still today of what was then unfashionable and disregarded.

Like John Smith, John Betjeman represents a distinctively English aspect of our tradition of building conservation: the impact of passionately committed private individuals, often championing building preservation in direct opposition to State-sponsored development. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was founded by William Morris in 1877, several years before the first Ancient Monument Act was passed. The National Trust was founded as an independent charity in 1895 by Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley, all private individuals concerned both at creeping urbanisation in the natural landscape and the destruction of historic buildings. John Betjeman gave a voice and a genial face to this gathering crusade for building conservation in the mid-twentieth century.

Through his poetry (he was appointed Poet Laureate in 1972), and eventually his radio and television programmes, Betjeman chronicled with acute but affectionate insight his own time: the 'Metro-land' of the commuter belt, and life in the suburbs as the creep of ribbon development reached deep into Middlesex.

It was from Cloth Fair that Betjeman campaigned to save Euston Arch, an 1837 masterpiece of the Greek Revival designed by Philip Hardwick demolished in 1961, one of the most bruising deliberate architectural losses London has suffered. Betjeman was more successful in lobbying for the late Gothic Revival glory of St Pancras Station, now triumphantly restored and redeveloped as the Eurostar Terminal, where he is captured posthumously in bronze, Everyman in a crumpled raincoat gazing up in wonder at the mighty span of William Barlow's train shed roof.

Without people like John Betjeman, Paul Paget, John Smith and many other advocates, Londoners would live today under very different skylines. London in the 21st century is a vibrant city that celebrates both its past and its future, private initiative tested and refined by a framework of robust statutory protection – even if the debates are as fierce as ever, not least over the future of Smithfield's great Victorian covered market.

Landmark's involvement with the Cloth Fair houses began in 1970, and they even briefly occupied the offices at No. 43. Seely and Paget moved out in 1976, and tenants came and went, Landmark taking its chance to refurbish and restore the flats and offices when it could. In 1981, the flat in No. 46 became a Landmark, and this was followed in 1986 No. 43, that contained John Betjeman's former apartment. The building was cleverly strengthened and extended to create a wine bar on the ground floor with three flats above – demonstrating John Smith's acumen as a developer as well as a conservationist.

Betjeman's flat was redecorated, but still looks much as it did when he lived there. The wallpaper in the sitting room was, appropriately enough, a William Morris design called Acorn. The colourway was no longer in production but happily, Sandersons agreed to reprint it specially.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Nos 43 and 45a Cloth Fair sleep up to 2 and 4 people respectively. To book either of the buildings or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.