

## *The Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group*

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For two years the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group has had an informal existence. It has held two meetings, one on rural architecture (Edinburgh 1972), the other on village and urban architecture (Dundee 1973). At the Dundee meeting it was unanimously resolved that the Group should be established on a more formal basis, to unite lay and professional interest in the common purpose of stimulating and encouraging the systematic study and recording of vernacular buildings in Scotland.

In recent years there has been a remarkable increase in the amount of attention paid to vernacular buildings, unfortunately more than matched by the rate of their disappearance. The National Monuments Record for Scotland, though sorely stretched for time and manpower, has carried out high-quality surveys of single buildings and groups of buildings in several parts of the country. This body of data—when set alongside the Scottish Development Department's Statutory and Provisional Lists of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest, and the survey or background data in the archives of the Scottish Country Life Section of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, and of the School of Scottish Studies—already provides a basis for growth. The *Bibliography on Vernacular Architecture* (Newton Abbot 1972), edited by Sir Robert de Zouche Hall for the Vernacular Architecture Group (founded in England in 1954), also includes Scottish sources, though their smaller proportion in relation to those for England shows how far Scotland has been lagging behind.

Some academic growth is possible on the basis of existing knowledge, but there is a real degree of urgency about extending the range. In the course of a short bus-trip around Dundee, the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group was astonished to see the number of hitherto almost unrecorded building types, ranging from farmhouses with walls built of patches or lengths of clay, bricks and stone as a result of repair or extension, to the village of Erroll, unique in Scotland as a village of two-storey clay-walled houses. These are being surveyed and recorded by the staff and students of the Dundee College of Art; but there is a rapid rate of disappearance, and even in Erroll, some centrally-placed buildings have been vacated prior to demolition for road-widening. Should this happen, the layout of a Carse village of more than ordinary interest will be needlessly spoiled. With every building demolished a little more of the social and cultural history of Scotland is lost, and it should never be forgotten that the human history of the country is indexed better by her buildings than by any other artifact.

At the moment there is no formal study of vernacular buildings in the universities and architectural colleges. There are no Government departments with a positive remit to concern themselves with farms, cottar houses, croft workshops, tradesmen's houses and the like. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland has no mandate for a general survey of structures of this type. Buildings of this relatively lowly, 'vernacular' kind have scarcely been thought worthy of architectural study. Yet they have value, which is greater than their individual merits, for architectural, and social and economic history: their form, structure and groupings reflect the history and resources of a district and establish its regional character and identity. They demand study not only by architects, but by historians as well, if their full significance is to be appreciated.

In a recent issue of *The Scotsman*, it was announced that the Secretary of State had turned down a move by the South Side Association and the Cockburn Association to save a group of 49 houses in West Nicolson Street, Edinburgh. The objectors to the demolition order argued that the buildings formed an urban group of architectural and historic interest, which should be maintained as residential accommodation. The Secretary of State turned this down, however, on the grounds that the buildings were of local rather than national interest. Such an opinion betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of vernacular architecture and perpetuates the older attitude that has led to the thoughtless destruction in the past of so much of the heritage. Because few extensive studies of vernacular buildings exist in print, there is as yet no body of informed knowledge that can demonstrate beyond any shadow of contradiction that it is just as much in the national interest to preserve or adapt buildings of local interest. National history is a tight amalgam of the history of the regions, and regional identity is itself part of the national picture. No building, therefore, should be dismissed as being of merely local significance. As with historical studies in general, it should never be forgotten that people live in parishes and small units, and that this fact of 'regionality' is basic to the history of the country.

The formation of the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group marks a step in the attempt to remedy the persistent neglect of an important subject. To do this, it has set itself four main aims—to provide a meeting point for all individuals and institutions concerned with the subject; to meet at regular intervals in different places to discuss specific topics; to diffuse knowledge of the subject through discussion and publication; to stimulate and encourage more systematic activity in the surveying and recording of vernacular buildings. As far as the Group is concerned, it will concentrate on rousing interest, helping to add to the body of available data, and urging the adoption of the subject as an element in university and college teaching.

But this can only be a beginning. The aim of surveying and recording is, ultimately, preservation. Requests for official assistance in preserving interesting examples of vernacular buildings have rarely been successful in the past, largely because information on the size and nature of the problem has been lacking. No doubt the authorities,

understandably enough, have had a fear of an open-ended commitment. Obviously, therefore, before any degree of official protection can be sought for such buildings, there should be a body of evidence based on acceptably wide surveying. This would show whether or not a building being considered for preservation was sufficiently characteristic of a regional type for a real effort to be justified. Equally, it would permit the application of a principle of *selective* preservation, very different from the current kind of approach that often advocates preservation in ignorance of what other, possibly better, examples are available. It is a simple matter of long term economics, to survey first, then to select; and if preservation, as often happens, is confined to the façade or structure of a building, then every effort should be made to survey and record the internal fittings and furnishings as an essential and integral part of the history of the building and of the generations who lived in it. There is the further advantage that by working in this way, samples of buildings of various types can eventually be preserved on the spot, or in open-air museums, in a way better calculated than anything else to demonstrate the cultural, historical, and geographical heritage and identity of the regions of Scotland.