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SIR CHARLES REED PEERS, 1931

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1868-1952

CHARLES REED PEERS was born on 22 September 1868, the eldest son of the Rev. William Peers, Vicar of Harrow Weald, and Dora Carr. His family had long been established at Chiselhampton in Oxfordshire, but in 1868 the manor house was no longer their residence and Peers was born at Westerham in Kent. He was educated at Charterhouse and was admitted to King's College, Cambridge, in 1887. He read Classics and after taking his B.A. studied at Dresden and Berlin.

In 1893 Peers became a pupil in the office of Sir T. G. Jackson, a distinguished architect and writer on the history of medieval architecture. It was a good beginning for one whose interests and life-work were to lie on the historical rather than the practical side of his chosen profession. After three years with Jackson, Peers spent a season in Egypt, working with Somers Clarke at El Kab and elsewhere. From 1898 to 1903 he practised as an architect, returning again to Egypt in the season of 1902.

With his appointment in 1903 as architectural editor to the Victoria County Histories of England began that close study of the ecclesiastical and military architecture of medieval England, for which Peers will be chiefly remembered. The Victoria County Histories, launched at the beginning of the century, had already begun the publication of the general volumes covering a number of counties. The plan provided for these to be followed by topographical volumes, which would include a full architectural description of the churches and of other important buildings. The preparation of the plans and descriptions was the work of a team of architects, carried out under the supervision of the architectural editor. The form of the publication does not always allow the work of the individual to be identified, but a number of accounts of important buildings are attributed to Peers personally and his name appears on many of the plans. More important he is acknowledged as responsible in whole or in part for the surveys contained in some twenty volumes. Winchester Cathedral, Peterborough Cathedral, St. Alban's Cathedral, and the castles of Farnham and Portchester may be mentioned among the larger buildings for the descriptions of which he was responsible. To him must also be attributed a large share in the arrangement of these surveys. With their

period plans and clear concise descriptions they systematically covered the whole district, allowing an appreciation of different regional types to an extent that had not previously been possible. It was a foreshadowing of the methods later taken over and developed by the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments for England, which built on the work of its predecessor.

The work on the Victoria County Histories did not stand alone. In 1900, while still a practising architect, Peers had been appointed editor of the *Archaeological Journal*, the organ of the Royal Archaeological Institute, which each year holds a summer meeting in a different centre. The preparation and editing of the programmes for these meetings provided an introduction to centres not yet covered by the Histories. In 1901 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and in 1908 he became Secretary, at a time when the Assistant Secretary, Sir William St. John Hope, was also an acknowledged authority in the same field. To this period belongs the English Church Pageant held at Fulham Palace in June 1910. The publication of this great historical picture of the Church in England was edited by Peers and his name stands with those of other archaeological friends, Dorling, Hope, and Skilbeck, among the authors of the different episodes.

In 1910 the post of Inspector of Ancient Monuments in H.M. Office of Works (now the Ministry of Works) became vacant. Peers, an obvious candidate, was appointed. Though some work had been done under the Act of 1884, it was generally agreed that more extensive powers were needed and that these powers must be more vigorously administered, if the State were to intervene successfully for the preservation of the architectural and archaeological monuments of the country. The Ancient Monuments Act of 1913, passed three years after Peers's appointment, was the outcome. Two principles were established. On the one hand the State, acting through the Commissioners of Works, would assume the responsibility for the preservation of ancient sites placed under its care; on the other powers were taken to prevent destruction or at the worst to secure a proper review of the circumstances, in cases where antiquities in private ownership were threatened. Churches in use and private houses were excluded from the operation of the Act, the former as the result of a pledge given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, that the Church of England would herself set up an organization for the protection of her historic buildings. Under the Act of 1913 Peers became Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, with

Inspectors for England, Scotland, and Wales. The Act, amended in 1931, two years before his retirement, is still the basis of the extensive and successful work carried out in this field by the Ministry of Works.

This is not the place to discuss in detail the results of the Ancient Monuments Act of 1913. The First World War imposed an unavoidable delay at the outset and a real start was only made in 1920. Inevitably the first of the two principles noted above attracted the greater attention. Though England had largely escaped the thoroughgoing restorations associated with the name of Viollet-le-Duc, the treatment of ancient buildings had already become a matter of controversy. The Office of Works, acting under the guidance of the new chief inspector, adopted a conservative policy, aiming at the preservation of existing remains without attempting a conjectural restoration. Trained to unravel the historical development of a building, Peers realized that secondary alterations constituted a significant chapter in the story and that they must therefore be preserved, both as a documentary record and as features of social and historical interest. The elimination of later work and the restoration of a building to a unitary style could form no part of the duties of the State. New work, if it must be added, should be confined to the minimum necessary to ensure the stability of the surviving masonry. The policy won general acceptance. Some, it is true, preferred the mouldering ivy-clad ruin of the Romantic tradition, but their standards would have rendered all preservation impossible. Criticism from other quarters was concerned mainly with details and with methods and this grew steadily less. The inherent soundness of the policy and the skill of the technical achievement, based as it was on traditional methods and practical experience, have stood the test of time. Today after more than a generation, the achievement of the Ministry of Works in this field is accepted without question. It is difficult to conceive a different policy and the controversies which vexed the opening years of this century are now a matter of historical rather than practical interest.

This bare statement conveys little of the effort needed to formulate the policy and carry it into effect. Staff had to be recruited to supervise this work and carry out the other duties laid on the Department by the Act of 1913. Technical methods had to be evolved in consultation with the architectural staff of the Office of Works, tested in the field, and, where necessary, revised and improved. The aim was to make each of the

monuments in the care of the Commissioners historically revealing and aesthetically satisfying. The results, scattered throughout the length and breadth of the country, remain today for all to judge.

In 1933, at the age of sixty-five, Peers retired. His services were in considerable demand as a consulting architect. In 1935 he became Surveyor of Westminster Abbey, a church for which he felt a particular affection, and there, in the Islip Chapel, his ashes were laid to rest. He was also consulting architect to York Minster and Durham Cathedral, and architect in charge of the Durham Castle restoration scheme. At the same time he was appointed Seneschal of Canterbury Cathedral. In these years he sat on the Oxford Diocesan Advisory Committee and undertook work for New College and elsewhere in the university.

Peers's tenure of the Secretaryship of the Society of Antiquaries lasted thirteen years till 1921, when he was elected Director, succeeding in 1929 to the Presidency which he held for the five-year term till 1934. This long tenure of office—over a quarter of a century—is some measure of his devotion to the Society, from which he received the Gold Medal for Archaeology in 1938. He continued to take a keen interest in its affairs down to the end. The Society's publications and those of the Royal Archaeological Institute contain many of his contributions to the history of medieval architecture, monographs on buildings with the exploration and preservation of which he had been concerned. It is a pity that they were not more in number; Peers possessed a gift of lucid explanation and a grasp of the essential points. The great bulk of his published work is to be found in the Victoria County Histories, where much is of necessity shrouded in a veil of anonymity, and in the series of guides, which he wrote for the historic buildings in charge of the Office of Works. These guides he regarded as an essential part of his duties as chief inspector. A monument preserved and maintained at the public expense should be provided with a proper explanation for the instruction of visitors. The guides, though written in popular form, without footnotes or documentary references, embody a tradition of sound scholarship and form an impressive monument to the activity of a busy civil servant.

Peers received the C.B.E. in 1924 and was knighted in 1931, during his Presidency of the Society of Antiquaries. In 1932 he was elected President of the First Session of the Congress of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences, which met in London. His address dealt with the early history of prehistoric researches

in this country, carrying the story down from the scholars of the Renaissance to the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1936 in the course of the second session at Oslo he was decorated by King Haakon as a Knight Commander of St. Olaf. He was Honorary Litt.D. of Leeds (1933) and Honorary D.Lit. of London (1936). In 1933 he was appointed Trustee of the British Museum, having already served in an *ex-officio* capacity for the five years when he was President of the Society of Antiquaries. He was also a Trustee of the London Museum from 1934 and Antiquary to the Royal Academy of Arts. Already a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, he received its Royal Gold Medal in 1933.

In 1921 he was appointed a member of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England. But his association with that body goes back to its establishment in 1910. In the first report, on Hertfordshire, the Commissioners record a 'deep debt of gratitude to Mr. C. R. Peers, who has served as a member of both the Ecclesiastical and Secular Sub-Commissions and has himself visited practically all the Ecclesiastical and Secular Monuments in our Inventory'.

With this tribute to his thoroughness the record of his career of public service may fittingly close; it would be wrong to end this memoir without a word of more personal appreciation. Peers was a man of wide sympathies and of many interests. He had married in 1899 Gertrude Katherine, daughter of the Rev. Frederick Shepherd, by whom he had three sons. With them he returned in 1924 to live in the family manor house of Chiselhampton. The Georgian dwelling of mellow red brick, with its extensive garden, and the contemporary parish church beside the entrance gates were a fitting setting for the student of English architecture. Here he returned as often as duty permitted and here he delighted to entertain his friends. The care of his farms and the improvement of his garden were among his chief interests. The love of gardens showed itself not only at his home but on many of the monuments in his care. The daffodils on the rock of Harlech and the smooth lawns and herbaceous borders on many other sites showed his desire for the enhancement of the architectural setting.

As a colleague Peers was an exacting taskmaster. He set a high standard in his own work and expected one from his assistants. All those who were privileged to serve under him either in London or on the monuments throughout the country will bear witness to the interest which he aroused and the stimulus

provided by a master, who was so thoroughly versed in the principles and technicalities of a difficult and absorbing study. To a beginner he was helpful and sympathetic and the friendship formed during official contacts continued long after that association had ceased.

Peers was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1926; he served on the Council from 1937 until 1946, and in 1926 delivered the Aspects of Art Lecture on 'English Ornament in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries', which was published in the *Proceedings*, vol. xii.

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