



*The Assize Courts designed by Alfred Waterhouse (since demolished)*

## THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY MANCHESTER GROUP

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In the years before and immediately after the Second World War, Victorian art and architecture — particularly architecture — were in general either ignored or actively disliked. “Whatever may be said in favour of the Victorians” wrote P.G. Wodehouse, “it is pretty generally admitted that few of them were to be trusted within reach of a trowel and a pile of bricks”. Weightier authorities were equally dismissive. In 1942, G.M. Trevelyan wrote that:

*These grandfathers and great-grandfathers of ours... produced deplorable buildings and filled them with appropriate furniture and knick knacks... The most refined and educated classes were as bad as any; the monstrosities of architecture created by order of the Dons of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges in the days of William Butterfield and Alfred Waterhouse give daily pain to posterity.<sup>1</sup>*

Fifteen years later, A.J.P. Taylor was just as rude about Manchester:

*Manchester is irredeemably ugly. There is no spot to which you could lead a blindfold-stranger and say happily: ‘Now open your eyes’. Norman Douglas had a theory that English people walked with their eyes on the ground so as to avoid the excrement of dogs on the pavement. The explanation in Manchester is simpler: they avert their eyes from the ugliness of their surroundings.<sup>2</sup>*

It is against this background that we must set the founding of the Victorian Society in 1958. Taste had, in fact, begun to change, and the blanket condemnation of Victorian

artefacts was beginning to seem excessive and ridiculous. Yet at no time had Victorian buildings been in greater danger; plans for the comprehensive redevelopment of towns and cities were getting into top gear and buildings of almost any date were falling victim to the cupidity of developers and the megalomania of town councils. From the start, buildings have been the Society’s main concern. Other aspects of Victorian culture — notably the visual arts — are not neglected but concern for the Victorian built environment is its main business, as the constitution makes clear in its statement of objectives:

1. To awaken public interest in an appreciation of the best of Victorian and Edwardian arts, architecture, crafts and design.
2. To encourage the study of these and of related social history and to afford advice to owners and public authorities in regard to the preservation and repair of Victorian and Edwardian buildings and the uses to which they can, if necessary, be adapted.
3. To save from needless destruction or disfigurement Victorian and Edwardian buildings or groups of buildings of special architectural merit.

The Society soon began to establish regional groups in areas where there was a sufficient concentration of members. (Membership of a Group involves membership of the Society as a national body, and the concept of purely local membership has never been countenanced.) Moves toward the formation of a Manchester Group began in early 1965 and as a result of preliminary discussions a meeting was arranged on 24 March 1965 at the School of Architecture in the University to see if enough support was forthcoming for a “Proposed Manchester Regional



Manchester Town Hall c1880

Branch". It was; 21 people attended, and the Manchester Group was founded. The members originally called themselves "The Manchester Victorian Society", but this Society's affiliation to the Victorian Society was always made clear and before long the designation "Manchester Group" had supplanted the earlier name.

Once properly established the new Manchester Victorian Society decided to promote itself vigorously and with the maximum publicity, and to this end a "Victorian Evening" was arranged in the Great Hall of Manchester Town Hall on 18 January 1966. More than 500 people attended. They were addressed by the Manchester Society's Chairman, Frank Jenkins, by the Lord Mayor, Ald. Langton and by the national Chairman of the Society, Professor Nikolaus Pevsner. He spoke on "Victorian architecture" and his audience is reported to have:

*...murmured approval when [he] championed the city's Victorian buildings — including the Town Hall, which he described as of international importance and as 'perhaps the best Gothic Town Hall, certainly in this country' and the Church of the Holy Name in Oxford Road — and when he said that everybody should know about Manchester's Victorian buildings, and spend time looking at them ...He deplored the fact that architecture of that period was still 'written off, ridiculed or condemned seriously'.<sup>3</sup>*



Manchester Infirmary, Piccadilly c1880

Pevsner was Chairman of the Society for many years and did much to stimulate its activity. His sense of the value of the Victorian architecture of this region is shown by his dedication of the *South Lancashire* volume (1969) in his "Buildings of England" series to "all those who give so generously of their time and energy to the maintenance and development of the VICTORIAN SOCIETY".

A very varied and active programme of events has always been a feature of the Group's activities — lectures and other indoor meetings in the winter months, walks, day trips and weekend visits in the summer. Looking over the list of lectures that have been given to the Group over the years it is scarcely an exaggeration to claim that anyone who has attended them all will have received an extensive, if perhaps unsystematic, education in the art and architecture of the years from 1837 to 1914, while the summertime walks have been the means of familiarising members and visitors with the architecture and history of Manchester and of many other towns in the region.



Manchester Free Trade Hall c1880.

Lest it should be thought that all this sounds worthy but perhaps a little heavy, it is worth pointing out that the Group has always had its lighter side. A visit to Blackpool once saw the Chairman (not the present one) and his wife leading the waltz in the Winter Garden Ballroom and drinking draught champagne in Yates's Wine Lodge afterwards; members have played croquet on the lawn in Bowden and have taken the plunge in Edwardian bathing costumes in the Hathersage Road Baths; and town walks have not infrequently been pub crawls, where the aim has been to allow the interest of the architecture and the excellence of the ale to complement each other.

If this were all that the Group did it would be praiseworthy and useful but it would not have been enough to help to give the Victorian Society the national status that it undoubtedly enjoys. From its foundation, the Society has consistently worked to fulfil its third objective and it has always been involved in campaigns to save notable Victorian buildings from demolition. One of the first cases it took up was the needless destruction of the Doric Arch, the Great Hall and the Shareholders' Room when Euston Station was rebuilt. Despite widespread support this campaign failed and everything at old Euston was swept away but public reaction was enough to show that it was



*Manchester from the Town Hall, 1878*

not merely a handful of eccentrics who were dismayed by the wanton destruction of these monuments of the heroic age of railways.

An important landmark in the Society's history came in 1969 when under a new Town & Country Planning Act the Society became one of the small number of national organisations entitled to be consulted by Local Authorities in cases where Victorian or Edwardian buildings were threatened with demolition or alteration. This greatly increased the amount of casework to be done and placed a strain on the small salaried staff. Responsibility for casework was therefore devolved, in certain instances, to the Regional Groups and the Manchester Group is now, and has been for many years, the voice of the Society where casework in the City of Manchester is concerned. (We also co-operate closely with the Society's Northern Architectural Adviser, who is based in Manchester, in matters affecting the other boroughs of the former metropolitan county.)

The foundation of casework is the protection of Listed Buildings, and the more Listed Buildings the greater the workload but the greater, also, the opportunity to protect the essentially Victorian character of the city. Development must of course take place — one could not turn a great city into a gigantic museum — but development must respect the context within which it takes place. York should not abandon its essentially medieval character nor Bath its Georgian and Manchester has a similar responsibility for its Victorian legacy. Victorian Manchester, it should be remembered, was characterised by Asa Briggs as the "symbol of a new age",<sup>4</sup> and enough remains of its built environment to remind us of that time. Yet in 1945 the post-war development plan advocated the wholesale removal of all traces of the great Victorian city. No more than 10 or 12 existing buildings were to be left in the city centre and the whole of Albert Square — including the Town Hall and the Albert Memorial — was to be swept away.

The City Council's dislike of Manchester's Victorian buildings was matched by the reluctance of the national authorities to include more than a handful of them in the schedule of buildings of special architectural and historical importance; that is, to designate them as Listed Buildings. One of the constant concerns of the Group is to try to put right this neglect. Manchester still has not, in our view, the number of Listed Buildings that it should have, but it is fair to claim that without the Group's efforts there would be even fewer.

Manchester's first List included only 84 buildings and of these no more than 25 were post-1840 buildings in the city centre. During 1972 members of the Group contributed to the compilation of an extensive list of Victorian buildings for consideration by the Department of the Environment, prior to a forthcoming revision of the statutory List. Forms, photographs and a detailed street map were submitted in the autumn of that year, along with similar material prepared by the Civic Trust and other bodies. The city was surveyed afresh during 1973 and in October 1974 the new "Greenback" list was issued. It contained about 560 buildings; a considerable advance but still, in the Group's view, not a fair reflection of the significance of the city's architecture.

Over the next few years additions by means of the spot-listing procedure (many of them initiated by the Group) raised the total to about 640. This was still felt to be insufficient and from 1982 onwards the Group Committee regularly discussed what further steps to take. Eventually in January 1986, as a result of work done by a small band of enthusiastic members, a further 75 suggestions were put forward. These were arranged in classes to illustrate our contention that some types of buildings had been almost wholly neglected. We hoped that the Department would begin by listing all or most of the 75 and then, or concurrently, undertake a new survey. This was refused and after a delay of over two years they finally accepted 48 of our suggestions in the summer of 1988.

The most recent development is that the Department — prodded, perhaps, by us and by other amenity societies — has made money available for a review of the Lists in many big towns, including Manchester. A review is not a survey; the reviewer works alone and is given a very limited time for his task; and he is dependent upon individuals and amenity societies to carry out preliminary work to bring unlisted buildings of merit to his attention. (It should be mentioned that his primary task is to inspect existing Listed Buildings and to amend or amplify their descriptions where necessary.) Once again members of the Group have been active in making suggestions — in describing and photographing buildings for the reviewer's attention, and in preparing maps showing their location. We have also taken part in seminars organised by the Inspectorate of English Heritage (who advise the Department of the Environment in these matters) to discuss what special features and problems are presented by the survival of so many nineteenth-century industrial and commercial buildings of various types in the city centre.

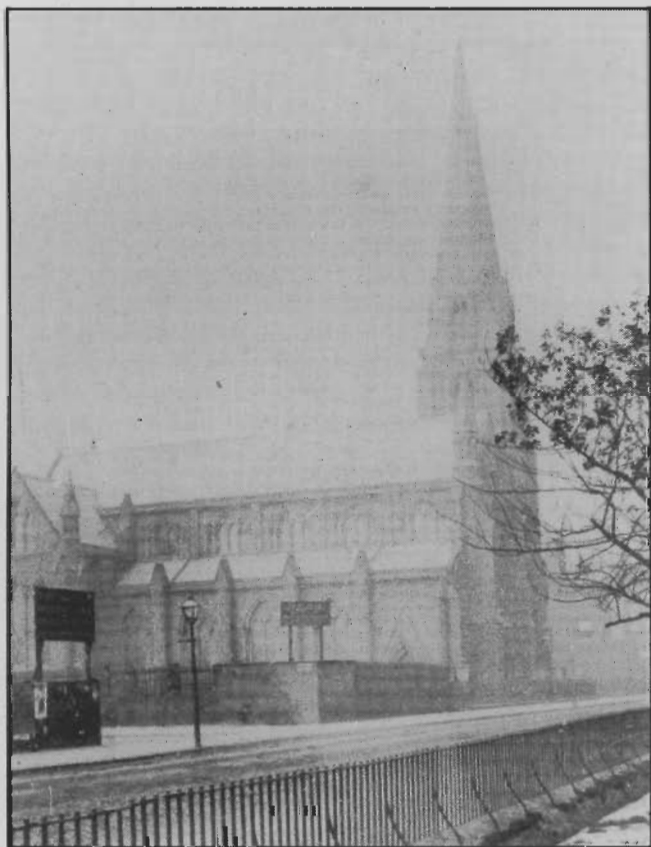
*Manchester's skyline today*



The Manchester review began in July 1989. The consultant engaged for the task has now, we understand, completed his fieldwork, and the results are awaited.

Buildings, once listed, acquire a degree of protection but many will become subject to proposals for development, and in such cases the Group will, as mentioned earlier, be consulted by the Local Authority and will usually wish to make a response. This can be done in two ways. The Group has representation on the City's advisory Conservation Areas and Historic Buildings Panel and can thus make its views known through the comments sent by the Panel to the Planning Committee. Alternatively it can make its views known separately in its own right, either to reinforce the Panel's comments or perhaps to put a different point of view.

Sometimes a case is so complex, or is in some way so "different", as to require special attention, perhaps over a period of years. One such was the Grade I Listed Liverpool Road Station — the oldest passenger railway station in the world. In 1972, having been neglected for many years and being by then out of use, it was reported as being in a critical state. The Group joined with other interested bodies in making protests. Meetings and protests continued in various forms over the next four years. In 1976 the GMC let it be known that they were resolved that something should be done by 1980, but all through that year uncertainty persisted. Eventually in 1977 the Group was instrumental in founding the Liverpool Road Station Society, which for its first few months was almost a sub-Group, but which by mid-1978 had become fully independent.



*Cavendish Street Chapel, c1870 (demolished)*

Liverpool Road was an exceptional case, which called for, and received, an exceptional response. Another area of concern to the Group over the years has been Albert Square and the Town Hall. One important case here was the Albert Memorial, which by 1975 had been neglected for years and was in a poor state. Its loss seemed a possibility but an appeal was launched in which the Group joined, and to which it gave full backing. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (as he had now become) gave a lecture in the Town Hall on the Gothic Revival, which attracted an audience of 500 and produced nearly £400 for the appeal. A few years later the Group was involved in surveying the interior of the Town Hall and in making recommendations for its refurbishment, while in more recent years the pedestrianisation of Albert Square was closely watched, and constructive comments made.

Many other cases could be mentioned; for example, Parr's Bank (later National Westminster Bank) in York Street occupied the Group's attention for over a decade, first in helping it and later in preventing unsympathetic treatment of the interior. The Mechanics' Institute in Princess Street, the Church of Christ Scientist in Victoria Park and Watts Warehouse (Britannia Hotel) are others. More recent is the Albert Hall in Peter Street, which first came to notice in 1981. This was listed in late 1982, largely through the Group's efforts. Various highly objectionable proposals, all involving destruction of the fine interior and mutilation of the facade followed, to all of which we objected. The last scheme went to a Public Enquiry to which we submitted written evidence, and had the satisfaction of hearing in January 1990 that the Inspector had dismissed the developer's appeal.

The establishment of Conversation Areas is another field in which the Group has been active. That at Castlefield owes much, and the one recent established in Ancoats owes not a little, to our efforts. We also protested, in conjunction with SAVE, at the erosion of the Cathedral Conservation Area.

Cases where the Group has failed are unhappily fairly numerous. They include the Milne Building in Moseley Street, Cavendish Street Independent Chapel, St Paul's New Cross, the Great Synagogue in Cheetham Hill Road, the railway offices facing Victoria Station and St Gregory's School, Ardwick, all of which are now no more. Current matters of concern are the future of the Refuge Building and of the Great Northern Railway Warehouse, the latter threatened by a development of almost unbelievable banality. The future of two of the city's outstanding Roman Catholic churches — Holy Name, Oxford Road and St Francis, Gorton — is also to some degree uncertain. There is, too, the Free Trade Hall; it would show a strange lack of historical perspective if the city of Cobden and Bright were to mark the establishment of the Single European Market in 1992 by the closing of the Free Trade Hall.

Information about the Society and the Manchester Group can be obtained either from the national headquarters at **1 Priory Gardens, Bedford Park, London W4 1TT** or from the Hon. Secretary of the Group, **Kathryn Cope, 37 Norfolk Avenue, Thornley Park, Denton, Manchester M34 2WL.**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (1942), p.524

<sup>2</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, "Manchester" in *Encounter*, March 1957, Reprinted in his *Essays in English History* (1976) p.309

<sup>3</sup> *The Guardian*, 19 January 1966

<sup>4</sup> Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (2nd edn. 1968) ch.3