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The Ancient Monuments of England

POSSIBLY few of the public who visit our ruined castles, abbeys and other historic sites are conscious of the extent of their indebtedness for their æsthetic enjoyment or the satisfaction of their intellectual interest to the activities of the Office of Works in the exercise of the powers conferred upon it under the Ancient Monuments Acts. The Friday evening discourse on "The Ancient Monuments of England" delivered by Sir Charles Peers, the Inspector of Ancient Monuments, at the Royal Institution on January 27, served a double purpose by demonstrating the various forms of activity of the Office of Works in carrying out this branch of its duties, and in reminding his hearers why these duties should have come to be accepted as the responsibility of a government department functioning at the charge of the State.

The sense of national responsibility in the matter of the preservation of ancient monuments and buildings, which afford concrete evidence of the life and history of Britain in the past, has been a plant of slow growth. As Sir Charles Peers pointed out in opening his address, the term 'ancient monument' has been in use no more than fifty years; nor does it even now apply to every monument of antiquity. Until recent legislation, it covered only certain restricted classes of prehistoric remains; and it does not apply to any church, inhabited house, or to Crown property. Although Sir Charles did not dwell on this aspect of his subject, the dangers are patent.

Any building or structure which falls within these latter categories, whatever its historic interest or æsthetic value, is at the mercy of any craze for 'improvement' or restoration, however well- or ill-instructed, or even, in the instance of the private owner, of desire for pecuniary gain. In the not very remote past, priceless panellings and carvings in wood and stone have been torn from their settings and sent to America; and only a year or two ago the historic palace of Queen Elizabeth at Enfield was demolished, although a public-spirited purchaser was ready to forgo a handsome profit, had a public body been prepared to accept his offer to sell at a comparatively low price. An object-lesson of the enforced impotence of the Office of Works is afforded by the reply of Mr. W. J. Ormsby-Gore, as First Commissioner of Works, when asked recently in Parliament if his Department would not intervene to secure the

preservation of the historic buildings of the Adelphi on the Thames Embankment. Archaeologists who are more immediately concerned with the preservation for science of the material bearing on the period before written records, have shown repeatedly that they would welcome a greater measure of control over the exploitation of privately owned sites of archaeological interest.

It must be admitted that under recent legislation great advance has been made, especially in the field of prehistoric and early historic times. The recent additions to the list of scheduled 'monuments' mark a greatly extended range for the operation of the Acts. Individual acts of vandalism, it may be assumed, will always be with us; but public opinion may now, perhaps, be credited with being so far educated as to deprecate, and even to do its best to prevent, anything like the wholesale destruction which threatened the stone monuments of Dartmoor or the neglect which allowed a monument like Stonehenge to fall into a deplorable condition a generation ago. It is rather the less conspicuous and spectacular sites which call for 'protection'.

Sir Charles Peers spoke of the distinguishing marks which primitive man by the use of his hands has set on natural objects, marks which set him apart from all other living things. These are documents beyond price for the study of the early history of man. While, as Sir Charles said, the work of man can never be obliterated by natural forces, it is equally true that it can be defaced and destroyed by man himself. However meagre, scattered, or insignificant, such evidences of man's early progress should be preserved from the destructive activities of both ignorance and deliberate vandalism.

Speaking more particularly of prehistoric antiquities, this desire to preserve even the least vestige that has survived from the past arises from no spirit of mere antiquarianism. Those who for many years pressed for the enlargement of the powers conferred on public authority under the Ancient Monuments Acts had more in mind than preservation for its own sake. Their object, from the point of view of archaeological science, was immediately practical—the preservation of the data with which the archæologist must work. If we are able to present a connected story of the past in Britain from the time of our later stone age, say, 2300–2000 B.C., as Sir Charles Peers said, even though we cannot lay claim to a civilisation comparable to the venerable culture of

Mesopotamia or ancient Egypt, it is due to the synthetic studies of those who by patient plotting of scattered details on distribution maps have elicited conclusions out of all proportion to the apparent significance of any one piece of evidence taken in isolation. Yet in many instances such evidence has survived by happy chance rather than of design.

As an example of what has been achieved, Sir Charles surveyed present archaeological theory of the early peopling of the British Isles by the megalithic peoples and the beaker-folk; and in another connexion he spoke of the results of the series of excavations which in recent years have been carried out on the hill-top camps in different parts of the country. He might also have referred to the enlargement of our knowledge of the mode of life of prehistoric peoples which has come from single sites where there was little to show the casual observer before investigation, such, for example, as the home of the flint-miners of Blackpatch in Sussex and, had Scotland come within his purview, the bronze age village at Skara Brae, explored with the co-operation of the Office of Works under the direction of Prof. V. Gordon Childe, the most remarkable and illuminating habitation site of that period north of the Alps.

In emphasising the evidential value of material, much of which may be comparatively unimpressive, and the need for its preservation, it must be remembered that there is another side to the question. We owe a duty to posterity. There are at least two reasons why we should hand on to our descendants these evidences of antiquity in a state of preservation at least not less secure than we have received them. On one hand, they are the possessions not of a day, but for all time. On the other hand, if there is one lesson to be learned from the progress in archæological studies during the last ten or fifteen years, it is that both method and theory in archæology are being developed with great rapidity. Hence it behoves us to preserve untouched at least a part of that material to serve the needs of a generation better instructed than our own. On more than one occasion recently, directors of excavations have recorded that they have left part of a site untouched for future investigators. This might well be made a condition of permission to excavate or of the co-operation of the Office of Works in the examination of a site.

In looking to the rights of future generations, it is inevitable that the question of repair and

restoration should arise—a question of considerable difficulty in which, however, no better guide could be sought than Sir Charles Peers himself. Happily for the prehistorian, this is a question of less complexity in dealing with a prehistoric monument than it is for those who have the charge of early historic or medieval buildings. Repair, in the view held by Sir Charles Peers, should be reduced to a minimum, and considered as auxiliary to archaeological investigation. As an illustration, he referred to the recent work carried out under the supervision of the Society of Antiquaries at Stonehenge where, after this monument had been presented to the nation in 1919, steps were taken to prevent the fall of unstable uprights, and much valuable information bearing on the methods employed by the builders of the monument was obtained. Under present legislation, the future of our prehistoric monuments should be secure. They need for the most part nothing more than that they should be left undisturbed, pending the time when their careful examination in the interests of scientific archaeology may be thought desirable.

The difficult question of repair and maintenance was more nearly germane to the latter part of Sir Charles's lecture, in which he dealt with the more representative monuments of the early historic periods, Roman, Saxon, Dane and Norman. Here the question is not one of sites but of buildings, and he showed his audience in some detail the work that has been carried out with the co-operation of the Office of Works on such historic monuments as the coast-fortress of Anderida, now Pevensey, Portchester Castle, Whitby, Rievaulx and Byland, where much has been learned of medieval life and technical achievement from what in some instances, before operations began, had been no more than grass-covered hillocks.

Enough has been said, it is hoped, to indicate why the preservation of ancient monuments should be regarded as a national duty under the supervision of a public department, as is the safe custody of written records. The latter, however, stand in a different category. They can be kept under conditions which ensure their safety, so far as that is humanly possible, and they are accessible to the public only under proper supervision. Ancient monuments, we may say in a large number of instances, cannot be kept under 'lock and key'. Further, they are open to the vicissitudes of the weather and other causes of decay; hence the

appeals to the purse of the public, when some building of historic interest and importance is in danger, as happens, unfortunately, all too frequently. The Ancient Monuments Acts may ensure the protection of a site or structure in a technical sense by including it in the schedules to the Acts. They cannot thereby make provision for its maintenance, and this may involve a heavy sum. The best protection for an ancient monument is a public which has been trained from school age to recognise and reverence with understanding the relics of its past; and the maintenance of a monument which is a national treasure should be a public charge.

Diamonds

The Genesis of the Diamond. By Alpheus F. Williams. Vol. 1. Pp. xv+352+vi+89 plates. Vol. 2. Pp. xii+353-636+iv+plates 90-221. (London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1932.) 84s. net.

THE author of this monumental work on the diamond has supreme claim to authority on the subject, having been connected with the diamond industry for more than thirty years, latterly as general manager of De Beers Consolidated Mines, Limited, and consulting engineer to the Jagersfontein and Koffyfontein mines, and in former years as assistant to his predecessor in that post, his father, Dr. Gardner F. Williams, whose book, "The Diamond Mines of South Africa", published in 1902, gave the first authentic account of the rise and development of the diamond mines of South Africa. The present book is not confined to its titular subject, but gives also a very readable account, fully illustrated, of the present-day practice of diamond mining and recovery, as adopted by the De Beers Company at Kimberley and elsewhere, as well as a chapter on the alluvial diggings in the diamond-bearing gravels of South Africa.

So long ago as 1899, Mr. Alpheus Williams had started to record data bearing on the origin of the kimberlite pipes (the 'blue ground') and fissures, and the nature and genesis of the kimberlite itself. He also commenced making a collection of diamonds, the natural uncut crystals, with the object of determining the conditions under which the diamond crystal grows. Those who, in 1929, had the privilege of seeing this collection, and that of the crystal-inclusions other than diamond in the kimberlite, as well as the wonderful series