

In Conversation with...Professor John Hume

Interviewed at Greenock Sugar Sheds, by Professor Robin Webster
on 5th July 2017



Robin Webster: Okay, John, tell me about your understanding of the conservation movement and when that really got going in Glasgow.

John Hume: The conservation movement really got going in Glasgow with the establishment of the New Glasgow Society in the late 1960s. I think there were individuals before that time who were very interested and involved, but it didn't get any level of publicity until the New Glasgow Society was set up. And the New Glasgow Society was interesting because it was interested not just in conservation but also in new build and what should be done, and not only new build but new planning of the city. That's where I think it really started.

And the establishment of the Scottish Civic Trust which was about the same time, also was influential but not as influential I believe as the new Glasgow Society. One of the very interesting things about the New Glasgow Society was very early on it began to take an interest in the canals in Glasgow. And I looked up some papers recently and found that I was the convenor of the canal subcommittee. And that proved quite influential there as well.

That is the beginning when people started seeing what was happening in Glasgow and beginning to realise that the city council was not behaving towards the historic buildings asset in the way that it should be.

RW: What do you think are the most significant events over the last fifty years in Glasgow regarding the built environment and conservation?

JH: I think by far and away the most influential event was the passing of the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act, which established listing and listed building consent on a firm basis which allowed both government at national and government at local level to begin to take action about threats to buildings of recognised quality.

But I would also say the setting up the conservation bodies like Glasgow West and now Glasgow City Heritage Trust has been very influential indeed. And too the publication of significant books, '*Glasgow at a Glance*', the little pocket publication that was produced by David Walker and others, I think that got a lot of people who weren't away of quality of Glasgow's buildings thinking. And then the Gomme and Walker, '*Architecture of Glasgow*' publication with its very striking photographs I think helped too. And I like to think that my own book on the industrial archaeology of Glasgow, which I published in 1974, I think that may have had some influence.

Probably beside these background events there has been within the city council officials for quite long periods members of staff who are really interested in what they were doing, and able to influence the elected members towards taking seriously aspects of the built heritage. We moved fortunately so far away from that dreadful concept of comprehensive development areas where you blasted everything as if by an atomic bomb and then hope that miraculously something better would appear.

RW: What have you done that you're most proud of in terms of your career in historic buildings?

JH: I am probably most proud of the way I was able to persuade my colleagues to take the industrial heritage seriously. Before the mid to late 1960s most people thought of mills and other factory buildings as being dark and satanic and something to be swept away. I always saw in the industrial buildings places where people had worked to create things that were really worthwhile and have had a profound effect on human civilisation. And worthy respect in that context. But also worthy of respect particularly in Glasgow and in Greenock because the buildings concerned were often designed to be assets to the place in which they were set. They were designed with aesthetic qualities in mind. They were designed as expression of the wishes of the owners of the factories to produce something which was a real contribution to the life of the people. Not just in terms of what went on inside, in terms of what could be seen from outside. And recently I have been very much aware of Paisley, of the impact of the thread companies and their architecture and the things that flowed from that. I think that's the thing I'm most proud of, being able to position industrial heritage in the centre of people's consciousness.

A very good example of that is the Stobcross Crane, the Finnieston Crane at the Exhibition Centre, which is now a hallmark of Glasgow. My colleague Frank Laurie and I stuck our necks out while we listed the giant cantilever cranes and provided grant assistance for the painting of that particular one. And that is now a symbol. I did the same in Ayrshire with the Barony Colliery head frame which is still standing and which again has become a symbol of that part of the country.

I also spent a lot of time on canals, and to see the realisation of the millennium link come to pass, which came really to be honest from a suggestion that I made that this would be a suitable millennium project for British Waterways to undertake, and it was taken up by the Scottish Executive as a millennium project, Donald Dewar supported it. That's been a tremendous thing for everybody. It's a permanent addition to what Scotland has to offer. And I could mention New Lanark, but I don't want to go on.

RW: In Glasgow what buildings in particular are you most regretful about losing?

JH: I really deeply regret the loss of some of the Glasgow buildings, but right at the beginning of answering that question I must say there are times when a building's life has come to an end and you've just got to accept that it's come to an end and record it as well as you can with photographs, hopefully with drawings, but you can't keep everything.

The ones that I particularly regret losing would include David Dale's house in Charlotte Street, which should not have been allowed to be demolished. It was a very small building, it was not in anybody's way, although the Corporation claimed the site was needed to expand a school playground, as if that was a good reason to demolish anything.

Other ones that I regret are the old Alhambra Theatre, which was a lovely piece of early 20th century almost Art Deco design, beautiful interior, and in fact it was swept away. But out of all the buildings I think I regret losing perhaps the most important in many respects was the old Randolph and Elder Marine Engineworks in Kingston, which was one of the most monumental pieces of industrial architecture ever constructed, cyclopean masonry in an Egyptian style. Geoffrey Jarvis, the Glasgow architect, and I tried to get it adopted as a site of an industrial museum, and that failed, it was demolished and nothing has taken its place on that site of any quality at all.

RW: It would have been rather a good transport museum.

JH: It would have been. It was a bit small to be a museum of any kind, but the construction of it was so remarkable for its period. It had built up timber beams, built up of eighteen inch square bolts of timber to support the crane rails. Now, that was the only one that was ever built like that because after that wrought iron came along and you could build your crane rails out of wrought iron. It was a fantastic building both internally and externally.

RW: What buildings in Glasgow are you currently most concerned about and feel should be retained at all costs?

JH: I think there's only one building that I think really has to be retained in Glasgow now and that is the Egyptian Halls, which to my mind is Alexander Greek Thomson's most outstanding building of any kind, which is a most remarkable piece of street architecture in its repetitive use of classical motifs. It is not a building that would be difficult to do something with, it's to try and get everybody working together to get the effective conservation of that building delivered, and delivered quickly. If Glasgow as a city were to take that building as seriously as it deserves to be taken it would be greatly to its credit.

RW: Who do you think have been the most important folk in Glasgow who have contributed in either a positive or a negative way to Glasgow's built heritage?

JH: I would probably be of the view that the most important contributor to Glasgow's built heritage in my time was David Walker, who was an inspector of historic buildings, eventually became chief inspector of historic buildings, but who also did a very great deal of detailed research into the history of the city's buildings and who was the key figure in the publication of the Gomme and Walker book on the architecture of Glasgow which I mentioned earlier as being very influential in the listing of Glasgow, to which he contributed a great deal, I think this made people very much aware of the quality of individual buildings.

The other person of that character that I think was very important was Viscount Esher who drew attention to the overall quality of Glasgow's buildings, particularly in the city centre and in the west end, pointed out to everybody that Glasgow was one of the outstanding cities in the world of the Victorian period. The more I look at Glasgow in detail the more assured I am of the truth of that assertion which was extremely powerful.

The people who have had a negative influence are people who tend to be anonymous, and I'm going to keep them anonymous, and that is members of the planning department of the city, some of whom were quite violently opposed to historic buildings which they saw as standing in the way of progress, as they saw it, both individually and collectively. One of the major really serious mistakes that they made was the mistake of contemplating comprehensive development areas, which I remember being executed with great rigour. But another thing they did was they took the route of the western ring road, the M8, through some really very fine buildings, and I'm quite sure with a bit more ingenuity some of these could have been kept. We were lucky they didn't build the east flank of that motorway, but nevertheless it resulted in the destruction of some very fine buildings in the High Street and threatened the integrity of the cathedral precinct which in my mind would have been an act of the most profound vandalism. And not just from a building conservation point of view, from an environmental point of view. I think it would have been appalling if they had done that. But for my money they're not villains, they were trying to do their best for the city but they were very much mistaken in what they set out to do.

RW: From your experience what do you think is the most effective way of persuading people to keep a building that's maybe under threat?

JH:

I think the most effective way of persuading people to keep a building which is under threat is to persuade them that the building has a lasting value to themselves and their successors. And this value is in two parts, one is the aesthetic value of the building, in other words, it's a building that people can see it's a good building, a building which has real qualities in terms of the way that you see the environment, and the other is to persuade people there is a useful future for the building as a functional building. I think it's very, very difficult to secure a permanent future for anything other than the smallest of buildings unless it's capable of productive reuse, and the skill and challenge that faces conservationists is to try to show to people that if public money, which it usually has to be, goes into a building it is being spent in a way which has real benefits for everybody.

There are a great many buildings like Egyptian Chambers where you need to persuade people not only that this is a building which is worth looking at but that it can have a function within the city, and there are quite a number of other buildings I could point to. One was the Port Dundas warehouses up at Speirs Warf where the developers there with the support of Scottish Development Agency saw the value of these buildings as townscape, convert them into flats, put a swimming pool into the basement of one of them, and really produced something that encouraged people to think positively.

RW: Earlier we were discussing what pastiche was, and you had rather a good definition for what pastiche is, can you remind me how you put that?

JH: I was asked to give a lecture some years ago on pastiche at an architectural conference and I thought quite long and hard about it, and the conclusion I came to was a lot of what was loosely described as pastiche at that time was in fact what I would term revival architecture. In other words, the use of motifs and forms which were current centuries ago, either classical Greece and Rome, or the Gothic period throughout Europe, or indeed in renaissance Scotland where Baronial architecture came into favour.

I would distinguish very clearly between what I call revival architecture where you take motifs, forms, from an earlier style and reuse them in a way which demonstrates on the part of the designer a real understanding of what he or she is looking at. For example, a person who designs a classical portico and who has looked at genuine Greek and Roman examples and has understood what the style means and how it should be applied then that is to my mind revival. The same goes for people who design a tower house, a modern tower house, who really understand the vocabulary of the tower houses of the 16th and 17th centuries. That is revival.

If however somebody builds a building such as we saw our way in to this interview, where somebody has taken a single motif from a building type and applied it to a totally different building type and the rest of the building has no relationship to that motif then that is pastiche. And to collect bits and pieces from different styles and to apply them to buildings to which they have no relevance at all, that is pastiche as far as I'm concerned.

RW: What do you hope for Glasgow and what do you see as the most encouraging signs that it may be concerned about its built heritage?

JH: The most encouraging signs that I can see in the conservation of Glasgow's built heritage are two in number. One is the increasing acceptance of the role of bodies like the Glasgow Building Preservation Trust, Glasgow City Heritage Trust, and indeed the Scottish Civic Trust as being part of Glasgow and not something which is alien to it. And that is something that I have been very much aware of over the last few years and that's why I'm so pleased to be associated formally with the Glasgow City Heritage Trust as its Patron.

The other thing that I believe is something that can be taken forward but has already been quite influential is the notion of establishing community businesses. And I'm speaking particularly here of the one I'm involved in personally, and that is Govan Workspace. Now, Govan Workspace has already been very effective in taking over three building complexes which are of some architectural interest. Only one of these is really architecturally important and that is the former Fairfield Shipyard offices in Govan Road where they have done an absolutely marvellous job in taking a very well designed late Victorian office block and converting it into modern lettable space without losing the integrity of the interior of the building at all. They have also sponsored the establishment of the Govan Heritage Trust, of which I am now chairman, which has taken on ownership of Govan Old Church, which is a very fine Victorian church building containing some extremely important early Christian monuments, which is going to be developed with a view to creating lettable space in the church halls below the church building and the new build in order to provide a revenue stream to keep the historic fabric going. I think this could be a prototype for a lot of other exercises of the same kind where a business is set up, and I mean a business, which may have charitable status but where the intention is to create an asset not necessarily solely based on the individual building but where buildings are put together which can create a viable revenue stream which can keep the building going for the future.

RW: You also suggested that while some of the modern venues in Glasgow are extraordinarily successful with huge turnovers, there would be value in making lists of other smaller venues in Glasgow, or different venues. Do you want to say something about that?

JH: Yes, on the subject of venues in Glasgow we have the situation where the big venues, particularly those run by Scottish Conference Centre, the Hydro and the Armadillo and the SECC's own performance base, these are phenomenally successful. I believe that the total revenue of these events base is greater than the revenue of Glasgow University, which gives you some idea of the scale of these things. But I do believe that there are quite a number of smaller venues ranging down through the Concert Hall and the City Halls down to quite small venues like the Trades House Hall, the Merchants House Hall, and the Panopticon.

My feeling is that a lot of people come to Glasgow specifically to attend performances in the big spaces where there are big attractions, where there are internationally known performers with all their entourage that come and put on spectacles, which a few years ago one could hardly have dreamt of. But there will be quite a lot of people who come to Glasgow either as visitors on their own or as part of conference attendances and so on who would very much like the opportunity to see performances in other spaces on a much smaller scale. And my vision is that there would be a place where people, probably on the web but possibly also in printed form, could see what was going on in performance spaces and to see performance spaces that they might want to visit even when there are not performances being undertaken.

I'll give an example, the last few weeks I've been to performances in Webster's, the former Lansdowne Parish Church, and in St Mary's Cathedral just along the road in Great Western Road where there have been first rate performances by musical groups of very, very different character but where the actual space has been very much a part of the performance. And I think there are a lot of potential visitors to Glasgow who would very much like to see not just a festival program which comes and goes, but on a round the year basis what opportunities there are to see things other than the big boys and the big girls and the big groups in the big performance spaces.

RW: Thank you, John. You're full of ideas as always, it's a joy to talk to you. Can you maybe characterise what it was like being part of the conservation movement in its early stages? How were you perceived by the establishment? What was that like?

JH: In the early days of the conservation movement those of us who were involved felt very exposed because there was no real general sympathy on the part of the civil authorities or from the generality of the people of Glasgow. There was no real understanding or sympathy for what we were trying to achieve. That I learned from that time when I was lecturing on industrial heritage both formally in the University of Strathclyde but also informally to different groups was that there was quite a lot of real hostility.

I remember giving a lecture to the Glasgow Archaeological Society in the university which the then chief inspector of ancient monuments said that he thought industrial archeology was a complete waste of time. And that was quite a common feeling. The way I responded to that was to conclude that what I would call direct action, in other words, establishing campaigns to fight for individual buildings against that background of hostility was a waste of time.

And I must admit, I am only now admitting it, that I made a resolution then to try to get inside the pail, to begin to work with people who are actually taking the decisions and influencing decisions about the heritage. And that was why I was very pleased to be asked to be a member of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland representing industrial heritage, and why I was delighted to be able to move inside the civil service, the bit that dealt with heritage, and to try and influence things from inside. That was why also I got involved in the Waterways Amenities Advisory Council, which was advising the government on canals. Once you're inside, once people realise that you're not a nutcase and that you have some element of judgement then you can begin to influence things. If you're always throwing your hands up in the air saying "we ought to do this, we ought to do that" then it doesn't have quite the same effect as it does if you can show you're not looking to preserve everything, what you're looking to do is keep the best and make the best possible use out of it. Then people will listen to you.

RW: How proud are you of what you've achieved? And what does it make you feel emotionally in your connection to the buildings you've been able to save and help protect?

JH: You're asking how proud I felt and how much satisfaction I felt from what I'd achieved, and I think the answer to that must begin by saying that I don't feel pride, because I'm old fashioned enough to believe that pride is one of the seven deadly sins and you're better not to have it. Satisfaction, yes.

I think my general approach to buildings of all types and all periods is I begin by being well-disposed towards them. I love buildings, and I love buildings of all kinds. I love everything from a little four-in-a-block council houses up to some of the great buildings. Not all of the great buildings, some of the great buildings. Over the years I think I have

become very conscious of what I would call the underlying character of a building. I do not like, and the older I get the more I dislike, buildings which set out to be pretentious. They set out very largely to achieve a particular effect, which is based on the pride of individuals or of larger groups. What I like are buildings where somebody has shown a love in their creation.

And one of the things I've been looking at recently is the town of Paisley, which is aiming to be the City Of Culture 2021, and where I've taken a good deal of time to think about Paisley. For two months I thought of very little else but Paisley with a view to trying to help to put the bid together, although I didn't have a direct involvement in it. And one of the conclusions I came to about Paisley was that a great many of the buildings, and indeed parts of the layout of Paisley, were designed by and for people who really, really cared about the place, right to the bottom of their beings cared about the place. The most obvious examples of this are the thread families, the Clarks and the Coates, both of whom built factory buildings of the highest aesthetic quality, of very different character but of the highest aesthetic quality. They then went on to give to the town community buildings, museum, library, churches, hospital, and so on. Places where they felt that people would enjoy being.

And that is true not just in Paisley, let's be honest, but it's true of Greenock, it's true of Glasgow, it's true of Stirling, it's true of most of the bigger medium-sized towns in Scotland. The people have been very pleased to be Stirling people or Greenock people, or even Port Glasgow people, smaller though Port Glasgow is. And they want to do their best for the place. And they want people to feel that they belong to a place, and that is what I value probably most highly.

And I would say that when you are looking at a building, any building, look at it and think why it looks like that. If an office block, for example, is thrown up in a few months using a steel frame and a lot of glass and so on and it came down tomorrow, would you really weep? No, you wouldn't. But if you find a building that is even quite a modest building, or part of a group of buildings, where you feel that your existence would be impoverished by its loss, these are the ones you want to fight for. These are the ones you want to persuade people are really worth keeping.

RW: You mentioned a couple of times grant aiding different projects, and obviously that's a core function of the City Heritage Trust, and with public funds ever more precarious and squeezed I wondered if you could say something about how important it is to be able to offer grant assistance, to encourage the very best in conservation and the reuse or repair of these buildings?

JH: I am very firmly of the view that the availability of grant assistance has been absolutely pivotal to the conservation movement. When I was Chief Inspector of Historic Buildings one of my functions was to advise what was then the Historic Buildings Council for Scotland on the award of grant, both main grants, but also conservation area grants, and I like to think that I was able to help quite a number of buildings to be conserved.

Subsequently I served as an Advisory Member of the General Trustees of the Church Of Scotland, which also gives grant assistance to church buildings, and I am still a member of the grants committee of the Scotland's Churches Trust, which also gives grants for church buildings. These grants, even though they may be fairly small as individual grants, are an encouragement to people wanting to keep buildings in good order, to seek money from other people for other purposes. And of course the key player in all of this now is the Heritage Lottery Fund. My view is the Heritage Lottery Fund has been of

phenomenal importance. Other funds which have been of equal or even greater importance for individual cases have been the European grants. When it came to the creation of the Millennium Link it was European money that actually tipped the balance towards getting the whole scheme completed.

My personal view, and it was a view that I expressed when I was in the civil service, is that the quantity of money that central government gives to building conservation is actually far too small and is far too dependent on matched funding. One of the arguments that I advanced over the last few years since I retired is that central government, through Historic Environment Scotland, should think very, very seriously about giving 100% grants for some deserving cases. I'm not going to specify which I have in mind, but I think that the amount of effort that is put in by administrators in trying to scabble around to raise really what are in the bigger scheme of things quite small amounts of money is quite counter-productive. We ought to be looking at projects, not just buildings, projects which are of real and lasting importance, where an injection of one or two million, three, five million, would be able to achieve the objective without people having to spend the time not just scabbling around, but also getting demoralised by the business of scabbling around.

I have the same view of research. I think there's a great deal of academic research now which is of very little value but where the promoters of the research have to scabble around to try to get the money to do the work. I would much rather there was a view taken on the lasting merit of schemes, whether they be building schemes or intellectual schemes or whatever, and back them, and don't be afraid of attracting opprobrium by backing those particular ones as against other ones of lesser value and importance.

RW: Very good. Although I'm always reminded of the research that was going on in the Antarctic, the funding for which was withdrawn because it was seen as not being very important, and then they discovered the hole in the ozone layer...

JH: Well, that's very true, you cannot always know. What I think you can say in terms of the value of research or the value of projects is if you have confidence in the quality of the people doing the work, of their genuine intellectual ability. Because somebody who has got genuine intellectual ability will always be able to do something worthwhile. People who are not quite up to it I don't think should be encouraged. That's very elitist but I think in terms of progress for the human race that's the way one ought to go. Also, I'll tell you a story to finish up with Antarctic research, and that is that one of the most celebrated Antarctic explorers was Ernest Shackleton, and Ernest Shackleton got quite a lot of his funding from Sir William Beardmore, the west of Scotland industrialist. And the reason why Shackleton was given this money was Beardmore felt that Shackleton and Lady Beardmore were getting altogether too close.

RW: Very interesting. There can be all sorts of reasons for doing things.

JH: The building we're sitting in here is known as the Sugar Warehouse of James Watt Dock. When I was a lecturer at Strathclyde University every year I had to supervise a number of students for the end of preparation of their final year dissertation. And one of my students was a very nice lady whose name I regret to say I have now forgotten who did a dissertation on the docks of Greenock. And it was through her that I learned a lot of what I'm now going to retell to you.

Greenock in the 18th century was the most important port on the Clyde. It was the port through which most of the celebrate tobacco trade of Glasgow was conducted. What happened was that tobacco ships came over from the southern United States and the

West Indies, unloaded their cargos here which were then trans-shipped into other ships, which took most of the tobacco to western Europe, particularly to France, which was the biggest market for Glasgow-controlled tobacco.

In the late 18th and early 19th century Glasgow spent a great deal of money on improving the Clyde to the point where seagoing ships could go up to the centre of the town, and in the 1860, '70s particularly the Glasgow docks began to be developed, the Kingston dock, Queen's Dock, and then eventually Prince's Dock and beyond that to George V Dock. Greenock found itself being bypassed by that trade, the ships went straight up to Glasgow instead of coming here to unload their cargoes. And so the Greenock Town Council began a program of harbour improvement, which began about the middle of the 19th century with the construction of the Victoria Harbour, which is to the west of us here. And then the Albert Dock, and then this one here, the James Watt Dock.

The James Watt Dock was one of the finest docks in Scotland when it was built. It was built partly to handle the sugar trade, because sugar was brought over as raw sugar, which looked a bit like gravel, from the sugar producing areas, particularly in the West Indies, and it was unloaded here and then it was taken up to the sugar refineries behind us in Greenock, of which there were three or four really big ones and quite a number of smaller ones as well.

This warehouse and the docks were designed by a man named Kinniple, who was a very innovative dock designer, and this warehouse, big iron-framed warehouse, was a very remarkable thing for its time. And not only was it designed as a functional warehouse, but as you will be aware from having looked at it from the outside it was designed to look good. The way that the massing of the bulk of the warehouse is handled from the street side I think is very, very fine indeed. Red and white brick in a style which was pioneered, I believe, in Greenock earlier in the century. The riverside of the warehouse, the iron framing is expressed, and it's expressed in a way which I would consider to be in the best traditions of functional design in engineering and architecture.

And I'm very pleased I'm being interviewed here, I think it's a very fine building. I'm not sure I didn't list it, actually. I might have. But I do believe it's a very important building, not just in Greenock terms, but in Scottish terms.

RW: That's excellent, thank you so much.

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