



THE BETJEMAN SOCIETY

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January 2021

Dear Member

Thank you for welcoming me as your Patron. Bevis Hillier is irreplaceable, but I will do my best to promote and encourage the Society in all its aims and activities.

This morning, I hunted through my disorganised bookshelves for *The Best Loved Poems of John Betjeman*, a copy sent to me in September 2006 “Straight down the line (branch) from Mrs Green of Uffington Station - Thank you for all you have done, are doing and will do in honour of my old dad.” A few days earlier, our Betjeman Centenary train from Marylebone to Quainton Road had stopped in Lower Metroland so I could recite *Harrow-on-the-Hill* over the PA system. Like you, and having never consciously learned them, I can recall stanza after stanza of JB’s poems. They have a habit not so much of sticking in the mind as teasing and, perhaps, haunting it.

When, like Betj, I was a very young Assistant Editor of the *Architectural Review*, (AR) we met for lunch in Chelsea. I was hoping he would write once again, and half-a-century on, for the “Archie”, but JB felt too tired to do so. We talked instead about working in Queen Anne’s Gate and, after a bottle of champagne, obscure Victorian architects and forgotten poets of the era of Oscar Wilde. Betj introduced me to Ernest “Gone with the wind” Dowson and Theodore Wratislaw. He recited these wonderful opening lines to the latter’s Lily-scented *Sonnet Macabre*

*I love you for the grief that lurks within
Your languid spirit, and because you wear
Corruption with a vague and childish air,
And with your beauty know the depths of sin*

I am pleased JB has played a role in my life as he has in yours. As a schoolboy, his *City of London Churches* encouraged me to explore each and every one of this sorcery of buildings. We went to the same Oxford college, worked six years apiece with the AR in Queen Anne’s Gate and both became Fleet Street journalists, JB at the *Evening Standard*, me at the new broadsheet, *The Independent*, where I was Architecture and Design Editor, feature writer, comment page writer, news reporter and would have done the washing up if asked to, such was the wonderful family atmosphere of that special paper.

The Indie allowed me to campaign against dismal architecture and banal and destructive planning and development. I continue to do so in a later life, while celebrating the best in architecture, engineering and design, past, present and to come. I must stop for now - the Jack Russell wants a walk through rain-sodden, church-studded Suffolk fields - but look forward to discussing and plotting some new ideas and ventures as well as catching up with yours this year and preferably over a drink rather than “tea-cakes and scones”.

Yours in Betjeman

Jonathan Glancey