

Celebrating all the works of John Betjeman

Sir, Thank you for highlighting the important messages behind John Betjeman's "versifying" about the trivial ("Poets and their poison pens wrote off Betjeman as lightweight versifier" and "Chapter and Verse", Jul 19). His warnings about damage to the landscape, building standards and the impact of developers are as relevant today as in the Sixties, yet critics focused on the quality of the poetry rather than on the message.

"I am not sure this is the best film I have ever seen," Betjeman wrote as part of an early review. As a young critic trying to earn a crust, he chose the words carefully, knowing that the final seven would be extracted by the press, thrill the film's producers and obscure his real opinion. From a young age Betjeman had a skill with words, and as the "light versifier" he became he opened our eyes to architecture, campaigning to save buildings that are now treasured and rallying the great and good to his support. He predicted the threats we see regularly to our environment and buildings — the Liverpool Street Station development is one of the most recent follies proposed.

Betjeman knew the value of poetry

in alerting people to important issues, and he was a master at using rhyme and rhythm to memorable effect — that poems about Slough and tennis girls are still quoted is testament to that skill. Even today, he enhances our knowledge and interest in so many aspects of life: places, people, churches, buildings, trains, words.

It may be judged that he is not the "best poet", but thanks to the Betjeman Society we could not have seen, heard or enjoyed ourselves more. Let us hope the selectors of our next poet laureate think widely.

Philippa Davies, founder and vice-president, and **Steve Jackson**, chairman, the Betjeman Society

Sir, In 1975, as John Betjeman was waiting for an appointment at St Bartholomew's Hospital, his consultant, my late husband John Wickham, suggested he might like to write a poem about Barts. This is what he wrote:

"The ghost of Rahere still walks in Bart's/ It gives an impulse to generous hearts/ It looks on pain with a pitying eye/ And teaches not to fear to die./ Eight hundred years of compassion and care/ Have hallowed its fountain,

stones and square./ Pray for us all as we near the gate — St Bart the Less and St Bart the Great."

This year the Priory Church of St Bartholomew the Great and the Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew are celebrating the 900th year of their foundation, and the words of this poem are woven into their foundation.

Ann Wickham
Dorking, Surrey

Sir, Confidential discussions about a potential poet laureate go back a long way, but were more civilised in the past. When Wordsworth died in 1850, Prince Albert wrote on Queen Victoria's behalf to offer the laureateship to Samuel Rogers. Rogers, approaching his 88th birthday, felt he was too old and, with great reluctance, refused the honour. Lord John Russell, the prime minister, asked Rogers for a character reference for Tennyson. Rogers, as well as endorsing the appointment, lent Tennyson his court dress for the ceremony. It was, apparently, a tight fit.

Nicola Bruton Bennetts
Upton Cheyney, Gloucs