

Nikolaus Pevsner (1953), Elizabeth Williamson (1983), revision by Martin Roberts, 2021: *The Buildings of England: County Durham* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021), 880 pp. £ 45.

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In 1953 Nikolaus Pevsner published his volume on County Durham, one of the very first in a ground-breaking series. Although he acknowledged the “preliminary reading” of an assistant, it was a remarkable pioneering fieldwork exercise. His approach set a particular framework or road map for subsequent revisions. After thirty years Elizabeth Williamson produced the first revision. Now, after almost another thirty years, Martin Roberts has produced a second. There is a further symmetry in that the 1983 volume contained 300 more pages than the original, while the present volume is increased again by a similar figure. Such enlargement is only partly due to the inclusion of new buildings; in truth, the present Durham volume has been raised to an entirely new level; uniquely comprehensive and authoritative.

It is fair to say that the revising author alone has the background and credentials required for the formidable task of revising the master’s work. Martin was trained in Newcastle, had a career as Conservation Officer for the City of Durham District and Inspector of Historic Buildings for English Heritage in the North-East; is author of the definitive volumes on buildings in Durham City and the University; he provided the momentum for the founding of the North East Vernacular Group, restoration of Old Durham Gardens and revived interest in preserving Beaurepaire. Not least, he has been an enthusiastic lecturer, freely sharing his knowledge, while at the same time ever anxious to learn from those to whom he lectured.

The volume is eminently readable and attractively produced. Notable here is the inclusion of 125 coloured photographs and over sixty engravings, drawings and plans (seven by the author). Both are welcomed innovations, with the latter bringing clarity or understanding to key structures. Pevsner had 91 black and white photographs, a quarter being of Durham Cathedral and only three of buildings post 1900. If this reflected his training as an art historian, then Elizabeth Williamson’s 1983 revision hardly moved the story on, reprinting many of the originals, again a quarter relating to the Cathedral and still only eight post 1900. The present volume has 10 relating to the Cathedral, 25 post 1900.

The introduction to the County’s physical base and historical evolution of buildings through the centuries provides a more comprehensive coverage than previously, while the following settlement by settlement, or parish by parish, recording has echoes of Pevsner’s sense of humour or *mot juste*.

In the Durham and surrounding area – to which this review is confined – memorable instances are for the University’s Palatine Centre (“insectivorous”) and Fundamental Physics building (“reminiscent of a motorway pile-up”). Or, more subtly, introducing residential Newton Hall:

“Like dandelions through tarmac, vestiges of the lost C18 house and landscape poke through the modern suburban housing that lies across the estate.”

The introduction to Durham City could but begin by repeating Pevsner’s oft-quoted, “Durham is one of the great architectural experiences of Europe.....” Here, inclusion of the Bucks’ 1745 panorama is singularly appropriate. (Incidentally, the cathedral astride the peninsula had greatly impressed Pevsner more than two decades earlier when, on a tour of England, he was taken aback by the vista, it being the first classical architecture he had seen to compare with that of mainland Europe.)

The description of the Cathedral, as the most important building is given most attention. Research since the last revision, in particular by Ian Fernie and Malcolm Thurlby, is incorporated into a fuller examination of the structure. Hence we find reference to the link of the building’s dimensions and the spiral motif of its columns to Old St Peter’s, recent discussion of rib vaulting, change in bay lengths from the original intention, and of asymmetric chevrons in the south transept. The replacement of wooden inner doors by glass to both the north and south entrances is not mentioned, although the seamless glass treatment between undercroft restaurant and book shop is highly approved. Overall, In the adjoining monastic buildings major recent alterations associated with Open Treasure are deemed to constitute “a superb design.” Description of The College is much more informative than previously, aided not a little by the author’s plan.

The Castle is similarly given more detailed treatment, including reference to gardens created by 17th century bishops. City Trust members will regret that no mention is made of the Castle’s one new structure – an administrative block respectfully inserted into the Fellow’s Garden by Dennis Jones. (It is shown, as No.27, on a plan of the Castle.) It is puzzling also that description of the Castle kitchen, with its huge fireplaces and earliest brick work in Durham, remains identical to the previous entry, given that this historic space was compromised in controversial circumstances in 2012. (Even the CEO of English Heritage remarked that there were “a number of lessons to be learned from the project.”)

The University and its buildings have always received their deserved attention. One measure of the disappointing quality of buildings or major extensions since the last revision is the fact that a dozen entries are listed solely by basic form, materials and architect. Three or four others have a single adjective or the briefest of phrases to suggest approval. Thus, the Geography extension is “respectful”; the architect for Josephine Butler College showed “great imagination” to produce a heap of earth to show an axis towards the cathedral; the Calman Building provided “just the right focus in the centralised, landscaped area”; the Fundamental Physics building was “exciting and anarchic [with] a restless, jagged geometry”. This last building was the only one where the interior is mentioned: “a thrilling and beautiful full-height, top-lit atrium.” The author reserves his fullest assessment for the Palatine Centre, which justifiably gets its comeuppance. Its shape is inelegant and disjointed,

its mood threatening. Within the existing historic city its impact is hugely damaging, its character arrogant and overbearing.

Towards the inner City two more University buildings receive comments even though they were assessed in the first revision. Dunelm House, under threat of demolition from the University, receives favourable comment; “one of the most controversial C20 buildings in the City, but perhaps one of the best.” The reputation of Elvet Riverside is further blackened - “one of the city’s most reviled buildings” - but, from his researches into the University archives for his earlier work, we learn that the structure is a compromise scheme chosen after much disagreement.

Nearby, Old Shire Hall is another building to receive further comment. He quotes Pevsner’s memorable lines, and agrees with Williamson that by 1983 both its size and colour had become acceptable, but he is the first author to enter the building, where he devotes more than a dozen lines to an interior which is summarised as “sumptuous”.

With one exception, the size of developments about the centre since 1983 show no sign of becoming more acceptable. The Prince Bishop’s Shopping Centre was the earliest. Its Leazes Road elevation is deemed “awkward” - a generous assessment? - while the riverside elevation has “overbearing proportions, unsatisfactorily articulated.... compounded by a staircase with offensive acid-green tiles.” A footnote on William Whitfield’s Leazes Bowl car park, which was demolished to make way for the shopping centre indicates what was lost: “a finely tuned composition, whose battered and buttressed walls.... demonstrated how to empathize honestly with a medieval walled city.”

Nearby, in the words of the author, “the Millennium Square scheme set new standards for contemporary architecture in the City, only to be let down by its neighbour, Walkergate.” The former is judged as “probably the best new Durham building in the past fifty years.” The latter “grew too big and high.” The same accusation is accorded to the recent transformation of the Milburngate Shopping Centre into The Gates (now “Riverwalk”). The former merited its Europa Nostra award. Recently, “more heightening and bulking up, obscuring the carefully layered proportions of the early scheme dwarfs the modest Phase 1. Worst of all, a large area of alien timber cladding now overlies the original brickwork.” The volume comes too soon to assess the adjacent Milburngate House site, but it is ominously noted as a “vast development in progress.”

Differing judgements are given on other City centre structures. Examples are the repaving of central streets (“cold, unwelcoming”), St Antony’s Priory (“a gem”) and Highgate (“well-designed and executed traditional housing”). Interestingly, although the building is now closed, reference is made to the former DLI Museum in more glowing terms than in the 1983 volume: “One of the city’s most attractive modern buildings: a sophisticated, finely balanced design.” Nearby, the opinion on Aykley Heads House is, “After a serious fire, an equally impressive restoration.”

The present revision adds significantly to the descriptions of Old Durham, Kepier Hospital and Burn Hall, and further afield at Ushaw College, Beaurepaire and Brancepeth. The last-name requires special attention, of course, since the interior of the village church was gutted in a fire in 1998. The destruction of the interior is considered as probably the North East's greatest cultural loss in the twentieth century, which may explain why four-fifths of the entry describes the church which has been lost. However, since the burnt-out shell is considered to have been "magnificently restored", it is a pity that the strikingly different interior receives no further comment.

A concluding comment. In compiling this review it soon became evident that the author, the City of Durham Trust and this reviewer appeared to be of one mind. This of course, was no surprise, as a trawl through the Trust's Bulletins and Annual Reports will immediately confirm. The clearest single indicator is the Trust's annual Architectural Awards, which were given to no fewer than eight of the buildings singled out by Martin for particular commendation. Such affirmation of the values held by the Trust apart, the volume as a whole deserves to be on the shelf of anyone interested in the architecture of County Durham.