

THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE HISTORIC BUILDINGS TRUST

The First Thirty Years 1983-2013

By Roger Evans

Adviser to the Trust 1983-2001, Member of the Board 2001-2013



Birds Cottage, Milton Keynes Village, after repairs 1994 - see pages 11 & 12

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(Talk given by Roger Evans to the Chess Valley Archaeological Society in Chesham in 2002, with some later updates)

Next year will be the twentieth anniversary of the Buckinghamshire Historic Buildings Trust. It is not a very well known organisation. Its part in protecting and saving old buildings in the County is not given a great deal of publicity. Nevertheless it plays a useful role and I shall endeavour to show how that comes about.

The Trust was established in 1983, but its origins go back to the late 1960s. There was concern at that time about the numbers of listed historic buildings being demolished or left to decay. This was due to pressure for new development in the first post war boom, combined with the practice of “slum clearance” i.e. the unquestioning removal of houses, which failed certain tests of amenity – no indoor plumbing, for example. Local Council redevelopment and new road schemes lethally combined with commercial interests such as supermarkets, especially in town centres. Public opinion was shocked by the resulting destruction and the ineffectiveness of the planning legislation to protect listed buildings. The maximum fine of £100 for illegal demolition was no problem for property developers. Buildings were left to become derelict so that permission to redevelop would be easier to obtain. Parliament in response passed a new planning act which became law in 1969 increasing the penalties for illegal works, introducing the need to obtain consent for all significant alterations to listed buildings, and giving planning authorities powers to tackle the problem of neglected buildings

The then County Planner in Bucks, Fred Pooley, in conjunction with the County Land Agent, got the County Council to establish a revolving fund, to be used to purchase, repair, and resell, derelict listed buildings which would otherwise face demolition. Combined with the strengthening of the law, (especially the new compulsory purchase powers as a background threat) this demonstrated to property owners and planning authorities that there could be a viable future for buildings which people then tended to write off as hopeless. The County Council was seen to be “putting its money where its mouth was”. Although the revolving fund did not have to make a profit (it was hoped to break even over a number of projects) in fact the rising property market at the time meant that a profit was made overall. A few prominent buildings in town centres were acquired, repaired and resold successfully before the property boom ended. At the same time, in 1974, the changes to local government led to a pause in the fund’s progress. The responsibility for planning controls over listed buildings was transferred from county councils to the new districts, and this may have been one reason for a different attitude by the new County Council, along with changes to the personnel and financial policies. One property purchased with the fund in Newport Pagnell had been left unrepaired, and estimates suggested an unwelcome loss. Unable to demolish, the new Council embarked on repair and resold the building. It also carried out repairs to some listed houses in Buckingham, which had not been acquired for preservation but demolition for a road

widening scheme which had been abandoned. These were also sold, another success for the conservation movement.

A number of possible new projects were suggested, but the County Council was reluctant to risk the possibility of making a loss and failed to acquire more buildings with the fund during the 1970s. At the same time there was concern that the fund was unused, something always meeting with disapproval from the financial watchdogs.

In 1981 a committee chaired by Lord Montagu of Beaulieu reported to the Government on the issues of protecting historic buildings. The findings were summarized in a report to the County Planning Committee, early in 1982 recommending that the revolving fund should be transferred to an independent trust on the lines suggested in the Montagu Report. These Trusts already existed in some counties and were successful because they had greater flexibility and access to funds not available to councils. The County Council agreed, and after several months of discussion and correspondence, the Buckinghamshire Historic Buildings Trust was registered as a charity and limited company in April 1983 with a Board of Management and official office at County Hall. The County Council transferred the sum of £100,000 (the amount of the original revolving fund) to the Trust, but the District Councils, although represented on the Board of Management, decided not to contribute financially, on the understanding that they might do so for a project in their area.

The original Board of ten members had two County Councillors and two nominees of the County Council, three nominees from the county association of District Councils, one from the Bucks Archaeological Society, and two from a conference of amenity societies. This has now increased to twelve, having five district council nominees and two co-opted members to represent amenity society interests.

The constitution of the Trust as a charitable company was based on the model of the Hampshire Trust, which had been started in 1975. There was a very useful visit to Winchester during 1982 when our members and officers met their equivalents in Hampshire. Other county trusts were also investigated, but Hampshire, although larger and wealthier, was felt to be the best model for us. The much older Trust in Hertfordshire, for example, had a portfolio of properties in its ownership, something our members felt would be unlikely to occur here (although it is not ruled out by our constitution) The Derbyshire Trust, also founded in 1975, had carried out a number of projects, but its finances came only in part from the County or District councils, the Trust relying on donations and subscriptions, again an administrative chore for which we had no staff.

As in Hampshire, the Bucks Trust was to be served by County Council staff in three vital areas: Secretary (and legal advice) from the County Secretary's department; Treasurer, similarly from the County Finance Department; and technical advice from the Historic Buildings Officer in the County Planning Department. At that time this officer's specialist advice service was used by all the District Councils except Wycombe, and the architect on their staff who provided specialist advice and was in close touch with the

county officer, was also appointed a technical adviser to the Trust. Since 1998 when the County Council discontinued its historic buildings service, the Trust's advisers are the Conservation or Historic Buildings officers in the four district councils and one unitary council.

The first meeting of the Trust's Board of Management and its advisers was held at Missenden Abbey in March 1983, shortly before the Trust was formally incorporated and registered. A Chairman was elected – Mr. Roger Parker-Jervis, a former County Council Chairman, who had been very active in getting the Trust into existence and continued to work hard for it as Chairman for the next fourteen years.

A list of buildings at risk was presented by the technical advisers, and from it two tours of inspection were arranged, one in the north and one south, a pattern which has been followed every year since, with other visits between as necessary. Members soon became aware of something their advisers knew only too well, namely, that what at first seems merely a problem building, is in fact a problem individual, or family, or results from some complex personal and /or legal situation.



An example was one of the first buildings visited on the southern tour, **49 High Street, Amersham**. Set back a little from the street with an ugly modern shop wing in front, (left 1982) this is a superb example of a small 15th century house, originally having a hall open to the roof with a moulded arch braced central roof truss still visible, although a chimney and floor had been inserted in the 16th or 17th century. Part of the house was now within the adjoining property, with a “flying freehold” and there was a shared outbuilding in the long rear garden, which extends to the river Misbourne, on the edge of which stood the original privy. The outbuilding and the curious subdivision dated from the ownership of the Drakes of Shardeloes who owned most of the old town in the 18th and 19th centuries. But more recently it had belonged to a Mr. Toovey, who had an antique shop at the front and had lived as a recluse in a deteriorating building. When he died about 1980 his trustees had to search for possible relatives before the property could be sold, and there was concern about the condition of this important building. The trustees had no funds to spend on repairs and accordingly Chiltern District Council sensibly decided to make use of its powers to carry out emergency protection works and charge the owner, on the understanding that they would receive payment when the property was eventually sold. The roof was stripped and felted, the old tiles stacked inside for re-use, and the interior was cleared of rubbish, reducing

the dampness. The house now suffered no further deterioration while the complicated legal processes continued. (*right 1986*)

Meanwhile the Amersham Society, who had a collection of local historical relics, expressed interest in acquiring the building as a museum and heritage centre for the town. Eric Corns, a member of the Society and Amersham's County Councillor, helped to co-



ordinate the project. The property was due to be sold by sealed tender in March 1984. The Bucks Trust would use its fund to make a bid, assisted by a loan from the Architectural Heritage Fund (a national body set up in part to help local trusts in this way). If successful the property would then be transferred to a new trust being created by the Amersham Society for the purpose of restoring the building, after which it would go to the Society as a museum. At the last minute a generous donation was offered by Amersham International, which greatly helped the scheme to succeed. The Bucks Trust's offer was accepted and thus it became the owner of its first property for a short time until it passed to the Amersham Trust. It took a little time for the funds to be raised to pay for the purchase and then for the repairs, and the Bucks Trust also gave a grant towards the repairs, which soon commenced. 49 High Street is now well established as a local museum and Heritage Centre. The shop has been replaced (unfortunately the space was



too valuable to permit the front to be exposed). It is now a valuable example of a late medieval small town house that is readily accessible to the public, a great asset to Buckinghamshire. The Trust is proud to have played its part in bringing this about.

49, High Street in 2013

The Trust had thus quickly succeeded in its aim of saving an important historic building and giving it an assured future, without suffering any financial loss. It now rested on its laurels, and there seemed to be a risk that it might suffer from the same cautiousness that affected the County's revolving fund. But the Board continued to review the lists of buildings at risk drawn up by the County Historic Buildings Officer, visiting some of the more promising candidates. While its capital was not committed, there was income from it, and the Charities Commission expected to see some activity. The Trust had already offered a small grant to the owners of **a building at Chicheley**, towards the additional cost of proper leaded windows in openings, which had been bricked up. While not wishing to be seen as a grant making body, such special cases are occasionally assisted. Some historic structures seem to fall between the eligible categories of grant making bodies, an example being churchyard walls and monuments, some of which are listed in



their own right. The Trust gave a grant for rebuilding the **churchyard wall at Gawcott**, which is important in the village street scene (although not itself listed) and has offered one for the unusual perforated **brick wall at Hulcott**, (left) designed by the noted Victorian architect George Devey; but unfortunately no repairs have been done to date. (left in 2009. Since then the wall has deteriorated further and parts of it have been illegally removed.¹)

Several churchyard monument repairs have been the subjects of grant assistance. One problem is that monuments belong to the descendants of the deceased and are not strictly a responsibility of the church authorities, most of which have more important financial priorities. A notable success was the repair of the **Freeman Mausoleum in Fawley churchyard**. (right) Designed by an 18th century squire who was a talented



¹ Restoration of the wall and lychgate was announced in October 2013.

amateur architect, and based on a Roman tomb on the Appian Way, a local churchman organized the repairs, obtained grants from four bodies, including the Trust, and also persuaded the family to set up a trust for the future maintenance of the mausoleum. (*Right, in 2012*)



In contrast, the beautiful neo-classical **Fountaine monument at Stoke Hammond** with its elegant iron railings rusting away, remains unrepaired despite a grant offer. (*left 2010*)

Two stone chest tombs of 18th century date at **Bradwell** have been repaired with a grant from the Trust. (*below, 2012*)

The Trust also offered to support the Chilterns Conservation Board in getting repairs to the unusual **Liberty tomb**, which is in a field near the remains of old Flaunden church on the Chess valley path between Latimer and Chenies. Chiltern District Council involved, the Liberty family of The Lee have also supported the project. The repairs have now undone some of the ugly cement patching of earlier misguided repairs and have put this brick box tomb and its surrounding railings into good order.



The Trust has been involved in two other cases in **Chesham**, both fairly depressing. One was the demolition of Nos 2-6 **Market Square**

(right 1980) permitted to enable the inner relief road to be completed. They were dismantled for re-erection at the Chilterns Open Air Museum, but funds were needed to ensure

that they were first properly recorded for an accurate reconstruction. The Trust, using its freedom too help historic buildings in any way it thought fit, paid for this exercise.



The other was the final chapter of the long and sad saga of **Lords Mill**, a case in which the Trust, regretfully, decided that it could not help. For whatever reasons the decay of



the building had reached a very advanced state, and the impracticality of repair, given the apparent impossibility (or expense to the authorities) of diverting the river from below the mill back to its main, now restricted, channel, appeared to rule out any chance of saving what was left of the structure.

Lords Mill in 1975

But Lords Mill was one of the very few buildings considered by the Trust to have been lost. One of the Trust's undoubted achievements has been to stimulate the repair by the owner, or sale and subsequent repair by new owners, of buildings in which it has shown an interest. Of course it is impossible to be completely certain about this and I can provide no hard and fast examples or figures. But when I was looking through the old files recently I found that this effect had already been noticed by a member of the Board

in a report on the Trust's first year to the District Council's Association: "It was interesting that several buildings which had little interest shown in them for some time, suddenly at the onset of interest by the Trust, became the subject of repairs, ideas for disposal etc. by their owners and this was the cause of considerable satisfaction to members."



The "Gothick" subway at Gayhurst before repair in 1984 and after in 1988

Of the thirty buildings included in the very first list of buildings at risk considered by the Trust, only two have been demolished (one of which the owner chose to rebuild in replica). Two have been saved by the Trust through acquisition; while the remaining 26 have all been repaired, only one of which, the Chicheley case, received any grant from the Trust. In later years there was sometimes some "follow up" of properties after sale, including grant aid in special cases. A particular example of this was the **subway at Gayhurst**, a romantic gothic style façade to a tunnel, which took an ornamental walk from the mansion to the wood and river under the intervening turnpike road, designed by the great landscape gardener Humphrey Repton. It was in a sad state, partly in ruins and with some of its stones stolen. It was sold, together with the nearby Bathhouse, a healing spring and woodland, to an enthusiastic young man keen to restore the features if he could convert & gain access. A scheme was agreed, and with grants from a number of bodies including the Trust the subway was repaired. Thus an almost useless, but very ornamental and delightful little building was at last saved from dereliction.

A similar success has been achieved at **Stoke Park** where a beautiful late 18th century **bridge**, designed in collaboration between the landscape designer Humphrey Repton and the architect James Wyatt, has at last been revealed after years of neglect. The Trust has taken an interest, but will probably not have to contribute. The missing stone balustrade will, I hope, be recovered from the lake.¹

¹ The bridge has now (2005) been fully restored by the owners, Stoke Park Club. They received some assistance from English Heritage after the listing grade of the bridge was raised to II*. Valerie Scott, former Conservation Officer to South Bucks District Council, discovered the balustrade to be not stone but an artificial material, probably Coade Stone. A few balusters were found in the lake, but a new balustrade of artificial stone has been provided, so that the bridge has returned to its original function as a beautiful and prominent feature of the historic landscape design of Stoke Park. It will not, however, be used by any vehicles heavier than golf buggies! The Trust has not been asked to help financially but its interest and encouragement was of importance. (*photos from Stoke Park Club*)



Stoke Park Bridge, Stoke Poges

Another way in which the Trust has been able to trigger the repair of buildings at risk is by a “pump priming” payment for a survey or feasibility study, which then encourages the owner to proceed with repairs. A good example of this is a **small garden room or gazebo in the grounds of Tickford Abbey**, a small country house on the edge of Newport Pagnell, which is used by the W.R.V.S. as a retirement home. The gazebo dates from the 18th century and stands on a steep river bank, down which it appeared to have been sliding for a long time, judging from ominous cracks in the walls and signs of previous repairs. Almost hidden by ivy growth it was in a sorry state and the owners showed little interest in what they thought would be a prohibitively expensive project for little result.



Left 1982

below 1987



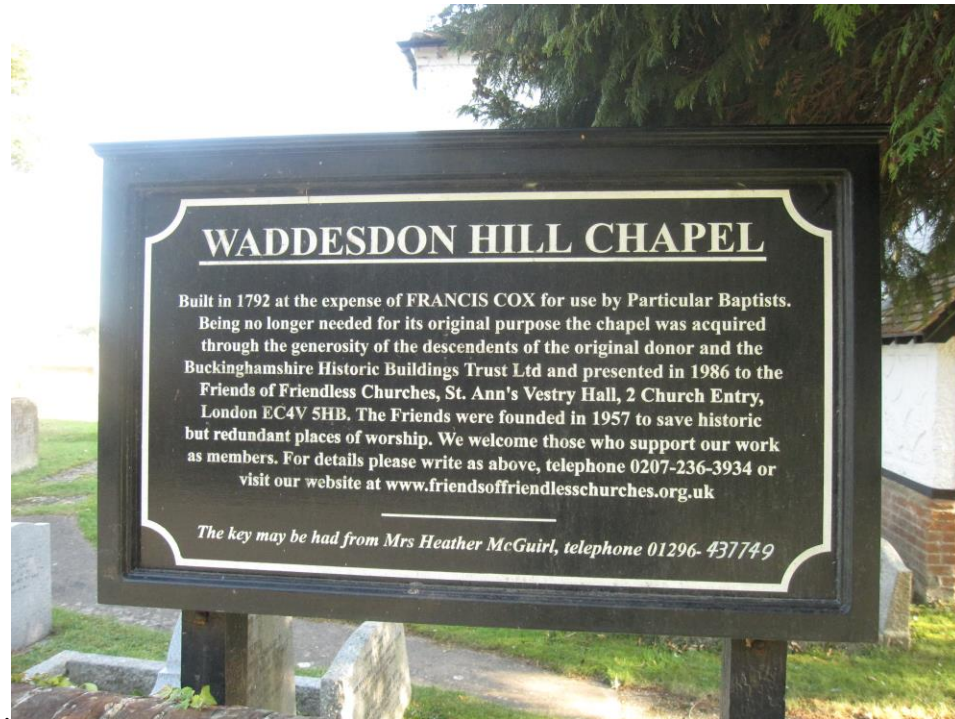
The Trust therefore commissioned a local architect familiar with historic buildings to carry out a feasibility study in conjunction with a structural engineer and they produced not only a beautiful set of drawings showing how good the little building would look if restored (it has a very fine ornamental iron finial crowning the pyramid roof, and stone dressings to the door and windows) but also that by using a piling technique it could be stabilized and repaired for a reasonable amount. This inspired the W.R.V.S. to proceed, and the building is now used for its original purpose, that is as a garden room for the enjoyment of the residents. There was a grand opening ceremony with speeches emphasizing the that W.R.V.S always planned to rescue the gazebo with no mention of the Trust, Milton Keynes or Bucks County Councils, all of which gave grants!

Recounting the often long and complex stories behind many of the cases considered by the Trust, most of which, as I have said had happy outcomes whether as a result of the Trust's interest or not, would make this talk much too long. But there are two further cases, including the one of purchase, repair and resale, which the Trust has completed.

Before that however, I must mention the **Primitive Baptist Chapel at Waddesdon Hill**, which stands on an isolated roadside near Upper Winchendon. Built in 1796 by the Cox family, it served worshippers from surrounding villages, and hence its isolation, reminiscent of the late 17th century when non-conformist chapels, were prevented by the "Five Mile Act" from being built in towns. Although not entirely in its original internal form, it retains many old features, but above all the atmosphere of a rustic puritanical preaching house. It has a baptismal pool under the floor, and in the corner of the graveyard, with its old wooden memorials, is the brick stable which has a room with a copper for heating water.

The declining Strict Baptist congregation was happy to transfer the building to a charity devoted to preserving such places, called "The Friends of Friendless Churches", who also care for churches at Boveney and Hardmead at the two extreme south and north ends of Bucks. But the Charities Commission insisted that they must obtain the highest price, and almost disastrously were told by District planners that a residential conversion would be acceptable because it was a listed building. Unfortunately they did not seek specialist advice before giving this opinion, which would have been appropriate for some buildings (e.g. some redundant barns) but not in this very special case where residential conversion would have destroyed the most important qualities of the chapel.

Fortunately it proved possible to retract the initial advice and when the Commission was satisfied that no higher price could be obtained, sanctioned transfer to the Friends. The Trust's contribution was to finance the conveyancing, which was actually done by the County Council's legal team. Thus another very important, if little known, building was put into safe hands for the enjoyment and education of future generations. A notice board outside the chapel does, however acknowledge the Trust's help.



Finally, the only building which the Trust, to date, has acquired, repaired itself and sold, is one that was included in the original list but not under the name by which it is mostly known, and as a building of local interest only. It is a thatched cottage in **Milton Keynes village**, one end of which was derelict and the thatch collapsing. The main part of the house had been more recently occupied. It had been the home and office of a family of builders called Bird and is now known as **Birds Cottage**. When the listing for the area was revised in about 1975 it was not thought to be of sufficient interest to be listed – no doubt because the external walls are mostly 19th century brick - only one gable retaining exposed timber framing.



The north gable end of Birds Cottage, Milton Keynes Village, in 1987

A small thatched barn nearby, which was put together with reused timbers in the 19th century, was, oddly enough, listed, but proved too fragile to be repaired. In about 1990 a local archaeologist working for the Milton Keynes Development Corporation who owned the building got inside and recognized the structure to be a “base cruck” hall probably of 14th century date, perhaps the residence of the Keynes family after whom the village, and now the new city, is named. It was quickly reassessed and listed in the high grade of II*.

The Development Corporation had a good record of preserving and itself repairing old buildings in the designated area, but by this time it had dispensed with its conservation architect and was guided by government policies to maximize assets. It therefore sold Birds Cottage to, I believe, an Egyptian businessman, who at first showed interest in restoring it, although with undesirable requirements for extensions. Fortunately these were not built, but unfortunately the new owner lost interest and the cottage was left to rot. The District Council and its officers were very concerned about this, and took steps first to carry out emergency protection, and second to agree a “back to back” deal with the Trust so that if the Council had to use its compulsory purchase powers it could transfer the building to the Trust with no financial deficit to the Council.

The Trust made the owner an offer, and when he knew that the Council had resolved to compulsory purchase, he quickly accepted. The Council contributed towards the cost by donating the protective scaffolding they had erected, and it served for the repair works. The Trust had also discussed the matter with the Development Corporation (soon to be wound up under the Thatcher government programme) and found that it had something of a guilty conscience and was willing and able to contribute significantly towards the project. The Architectural Heritage Fund was again asked for a loan and was very enthusiastic about the scheme. The Trust employed a private architect with conservation experience to prepare and supervise the refurbishment of the cottage. A grant was obtained from English Heritage and for this reason, and because of the listing grade – also because of the need for the Trust to observe the highest standards in repairing old buildings – the costs inevitably increased. The condition of the timber framing at the north end of the building was much worse than anticipated and a quantity of new oak had to be expertly introduced. The carpenters were a father and son team from Northamptonshire who were very skilled and sympathetic. The roof was entirely rethatched in good quality long straw. Consequently, when the repaired cottage came to be marketed the Trust ended making a small loss. If it had not been for extra grants from English Heritage and in particular the contribution from the M.K.D.C. the loss would have been far greater.

Visit by the Board 1993

Also see front cover



Even so, the experience of Birds Cottage has been to make the Trust very wary about taking on another property. Since its sale in 1995 no more buildings have been acquired but the Trust has continued to look out for suitable candidates, while also making a number of grants. At present it is involved in discussions over another building which has been on its list since the beginning and which it has twice visited: the 18th century **New Inn Farm at Stowe**, built to accommodate visitors, and perhaps craftsmen, when the great house and gardens were being created by Lord Cobham, but now derelict and partly ruinous, despite being still a working farm.¹



New Inn Farm, Stowe, in 1982



'mothballed' by National Trust 2007



Restored by NT as Visitor Centre 2012

¹ After long and difficult negotiations with the owner this building was acquired by the National Trust and is at present (2005) "mothballed" and in a very fragile condition. A full record of the buildings and the site has been made, towards the cost of which the Trust has contributed, with an offer of further help towards restoration when it can be started. The National Trust continued with sympathetic repair of the Inn and reinstatement of the farm buildings for various uses so that New Inn was opened in 2012 as the Visitor Centre for Stowe Landscape Gardens.

There are also other projects under discussion, but it might be premature to go into detail about those at present.

THE FOLLOWING CASE EXAMPLES HAVE BEEN ADDED:-



Amersham, Drake Almshouses, Grant for repointing and brickwork repair to grade II listed charitable building. Visit by Board members and advisers 2009*



Bledlow Homes in 2011 – on the first “at risk” list 1983. Legal dispute over ownership delayed repairs to roof until 2013.



Dinton ‘Castle’ in 1977 and 2011 - conservation of ruin- grant for recording 2009



Chiltern Open Air Museum - Witchert house from Haddenham , grant 2007. Board Members and Adviser with Curator of the Museum and builder June 2009



after completion July 2013



***Dropmore, The Aviary** – visit June 2007*



***Haddenham** witchert churchyard wall, – grant for repair 2012*



***Olney** – Cowper's Summerhouse in 1994 and 2012 - grant for specialist repairs 1994*



***Quainton Road** 2009 – waiting room – inspection – grant not needed*



***Soulbury** – roadside cattle trough 2011- grant offered 2012*



***Stowe** – Captain Cook monument ‘adopted’ by BHBT. Moved back to original island site and globe restored by National Trust.*



***Tyringham Gateway** – stonework repairs & new chains 2010 - grant*



***Swanbourne**- churchyard wall repair grant*



***Tingewick** – churchyard wall repair grant*



***The George, Winslow** –grant for iron balcony repairs 2006*



A NOTE ON STOWE

Stowe is probably the most important site, from the standpoint of architectural and landscape gardening history, in Buckinghamshire; and the only one of outstanding national, if not international importance. In 1983 when BHBT was established the school which had owned Stowe since the early 1920s was struggling to keep up the extensive ornamental gardens with their many monuments designed by the leading architects of the 18th century. Repair grants came from government funds via the Historic Buildings Council, about to be replaced by English Heritage, while the County Council, with a very small fund for historic building grants, helped to finance repair work which probably saved the extraordinary Grotto at the head of the Elysian Fields from collapse

Left- Temple of Ancient Virtue, 1965

Not far from the Grotto stands one of the most perfectly beautiful buildings of the Stowe landscape, a domed rotunda by William Kent (who also formed the Elysian Fields) known as the Temple of Ancient Virtue. The condition of this temple was only one of a number of major headaches for the school, and it was about this time that a Stowe Landscape Trust was set up to tackle them. It was to this Trust that BHBT made a donation (I have forgotten the amount but think it was about £1000) specifically for repairs to Ancient Virtue.

Legend has it that it was on learning of this transaction that an anonymous benefactor offered a very large sum of money on condition that the school handed over the entire landscape gardens at Stowe into the care of the National Trust. The negotiations were prolonged and probably difficult but resulted in the NT not only restoring the buildings but the whole landscape to the fine condition it is in today. The Buckinghamshire Historic Buildings Trust can therefore be proud of apparently triggering a process that led to the saving of this outstanding county and national treasure.

Right - 2013



