

John Betjeman's "Baker Street Station Buffet:" The Influence of an Architectural Literati in the fight Against Modern City Planning

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In the decades after World War II, London experienced one of its most significant periods of social, economic, and structural regrowth since the reconstruction of the city after the fire of 1666.¹ An "economic rejuvenation" brought increasingly more people into the city, and, along with them, the need for more efficient means of transportation and housing.² London felt keenly the burgeoning thrusts of change within its bounds, but its growth could hardly be controlled, and much less contained. As it became progressively obvious that London's design needed a reevaluation to bring it to the standards of its inhabitants (and in competitive comparison with other metropolises), the questions about how to do so arose.

Plans of revitalization sprung up in every direction: *The County of London Plan*, *The Report of the Preliminary Draft Proposals for Post War Reconstruction in the City of London*, *The Greater London Plan*. Collections of essays were published, such as *London of the Future*, which explored London's utopian dreams from garden cities to high rises. London societies and government organizations found themselves at no shortage of ideas, but initially failed to provide the public with details, information, and opportunities to voice their opinions.³ This led to a retaliation through media, film, and literary outlets, allowing audiences a chance to hear what was happening in their city—and even take on an opinion. Rather quickly, the best method of revitalization became a question in political debates. On one side of the debate were engineers and government; on the other were intellectuals and the literati. A 1946 documentary called *The Way We Live* acknowledged in the introductory sequence that James Paton Watson and Professor Patrick Abercrombie might either be

"the heroes or villains [of the restructuring in Plymouth], according to your point of view."⁴ This exemplifies that, no matter the efforts to create a unified plan for London, contention was inevitable. While there were numerous personages pitting their soapboxes against the "destructive plans," the most well executed and informative are the works of Sir John Betjeman. His piece entitled "Baker Street Station Buffet" both symbolizes and epitomizes the clash between architectural literati and the modern visions of city planners.

Hailing from Highgate, London, Betjeman proved himself to be a self-made phenomenon after making contributions to film, architecture, and poetry without ever receiving his degree, although he studied at both Marlborough College and Oxford.⁵ His writings were highly regarded and successful, earning himself the title of Poet Laureate as well as a knighthood. His publications are extensive, ranging from prose in *Ghastly Good Taste* to poignant verse in *A Few Late Chrysanthemums*, the anthology in which "Baker Street Station Buffet" was published. Moving from his literary success, he also found radio broadcasts, film, and television to be beneficial platforms for his opinions. It was his innovative filmmaking techniques in pieces such as *Metroland* that allowed him wider access to London and ultimately helped popularize his criticisms on modern city planning. Mark Tewder-Jones claimed that Betjeman's bold opinions acted as an alternative to those of professional city planners, arguing that his criticisms became truly political:

Betjeman turned many of his television broadcasts into propaganda statements against those issues he perceived as threatening Britain and against those in charge of

restructuring the state. He used film to juxtapose the official expertise from the planners and government, a particular film style of the period, with his own perspectives that he genuinely believed to be the ‘voice of the people’.⁶

Whether or not he wished to get involved in the politics of city planning (and it seems as though he did), Betjeman and his works themselves became patrons and symbols of many organizations fighting for the restoration, rehabilitation, and prevention of destruction of Georgian, Regency, Victorian, and Edwardian history and architecture. In a tribute upon his death, the Thirties Society published a piece in their journal about the loss of an ally who fought alongside them against the “destruction or vulgarization” of historic buildings.⁷ They described him as a “friend of the unfashionable and wrongfully rejected.”⁸ Although perhaps exaggerated, their description was not necessarily incorrect. With the rise of modern architecture, electricity, railways, and motorcars, the fight against progression was not in concordance with what many of his contemporaries believed.

Published in 1954, *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* contains several pieces of verse, which express his sentiments of love for the countryside, and disdain for the city planning which encroaches upon its tranquility. Poems such as “Baker Street Station Buffet” and “The Dear Old Village,” though very clearly show Betjeman’s criticism, are far less harsh than some of his other pieces. In his film *Bird’s Eye View, An Englishman’s Home* several years later in 1969, he took on a heavily sarcastic tone. A piece of verse featured in the film begins with him openly mocking the city planning: “Oh, the planners did their best. Oh yes, they gave it all a lot of thought.”⁹

Although “Baker Street Station Buffet” resonates strongly with his critical themes, not all of the verses in *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* are architecturally or historically focused and thus still digestible for the average literary reader. As pointed out by Thomas Peter, Betjeman had an eye for detail that allowed him to create scenes based off the smallest of characteristics, like Baker Street’s old electrolier, whether his intention was to express it negatively or positively.¹⁰ The chopped trees and murmuring firs of Baker Street can be taken at face value for their simple nostalgia, but, when put into context of Betjeman’s involvement and other works; you can glean the politics of city planning through its “worn memorial.”

“Baker Street Station Buffet” certainly memorializes the careful beauty and excitement of new electricity and progress and its sour slide into hostility. Betjeman sets the scene of likely an Edwardian Era individual whose parents lived in one of the small neighboring London country towns. The tone starts off lighthearted and wistful, describing the electrolier and its installation with “radiant hope.” Old fashioned streets lined with trees, stained-glass windmills, and pots of tea fill the first stanza, and the early electric feels distant as we follow a couple on a train into London, watching the villas and green slip away. What is portrayed to be a happy trip to food stalls at Farringdon and shopping on Oxford Street with its hydraulic lifts, which he even describes specifically as “safe,” swiftly changes tone in the last stanza. Although they met up “beneath the hearts of this electrolier” and return home via the first non-stop train to Willesden Green, the very first line of the next stanza is “Cancer has killed him. Heart is killing her.” Their loves and hopes have flurried away with their long-gone country villa, where now stands a theater with flashing lights. Betjeman deftly makes his readers feel the initial excitement and love for progress and modernity before revealing to them that its happy glow and rising opportunities are a ruse, and ultimately will lead to the destruction of their homes—leaving what once was exquisite and familiar as only worn memorials.

A writer from the *Thirties Society Journal* emphasized that Betjeman’s reliability lay primarily within his “sympathetic understanding of inter-war suburbs and of the people who lived in them...he did more to engender a serious interest in the diversity and peculiarity of suburbia than any writer or historian.”¹¹ His opinions may have been harsh on the occasion, but his ability to create prose and verse with the most seemingly negligible of details (“Of copper, beaten by Bromsgrove Guild.”) is identifiable and relatable to the public, allowing him to rally the community against the destruction of their communal history.

As a symbol of the fight against modern city planning that bore its teeth into the rich history and countryside of London’s satellite cities, “Baker Street Station Buffet” is a poem that stood its ground in the larger political controversy. The desire to retain London’s history, in the eyes of much of the public, clashed with “the ascendancy of experts and professionals who, the people were constantly reminded, ‘knew best’.”¹² Betjeman became the spokesperson for the anxieties that London would be “leveled down”¹³ by the loss of its vast cultural styles and differences. Yet Betjeman was not the only man with concerns over what modernity meant for

London. Gilbert mentions that perhaps parts of the past are not worth preserving, but quotes Lord Crewe's concern that this leveling of London would lead it to be "neither modern nor picturesque."¹⁴

Attempts to keep up with other modern cities, such as Paris, Zemgulys has argued, spurred on the government to the demolition of some of London's historical buildings.¹⁵ Not only was Postwar London affecting the rest of Britain—it has more than once been described as an octopus reaching out to strangle every settlement and city within its reach¹⁶—but it had to keep up with the rest of the world and act as a center for international communications and economics, all the while accommodating to its growing size and culture. In a city that sprung forward both unregulated and unplanned, the process of retracing their steps to reorganize and plan the entire city was proving to be a challenge, especially with activists discovering the power of news and media outlets. It is impossible to say whether the destruction of history inside the city or the encroachment of London into the nearby suburbs was worse, but Betjeman addresses both with solemn respect and distress. Peter sets the scene quite accurately for Betjeman's "The Dear Old Village" by pointing out that the quiet country towns were growing less and less quiet and increasingly more congested¹⁷ with citizens who had little desire for the country, but were being driven out from the city due to population, pricing, and slum removal. Many of his poems are set in these little intruded-upon settlements and exhibit his displeasure with what the blocks of concrete have done to the countryside. Even at the front of the war, in his poem "Slough," he is severe in his condemnation:

Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!
It isn't fit for humans now,
There isn't grass to graze a cow.
Swarm over, Death!¹⁸

Betjeman's works, both in literature and in filmography, have proved themselves to be vital to the study of 20th century London's history. He manifests, for one of the first times in history, the important role televised and broadcasted journalism (in conjunction with poetry) played in the attempts of saving Britain's history. Media gave the public a voice when the UK did very little to actually confer with Londoners,¹⁹ and Betjeman was one of the first personages to discover the power of "transposing prose and poetry into a filmic format."²⁰ His significance to London's history has been recognized both in modern and contemporary times. When *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* was first published, his peers and contemporaries—even the ones that did not entirely agree with him—recognized his

work in the underrepresented and under-appreciated. In a review when the anthology was first published, John Arlott acknowledged that:

He saved much from that output which our age had lumped together and dismissed as ugly or in a fashionable minority collected as comically odd. Indeed, for many a jettisoned Victorian artist and craftsman, he became a new voice of posterity, rediscovering and displaying neglected merits.²¹

"Baker Street Station Buffet" then offers a modern historian the unique perspective of an intellectual and architectural minority. In a time of copious publications for utopian London, high rises, and garden suburbs, Betjeman represented not only a minority, but the overall fears which accompany any amount of great change or reworking of a city. London was (and still is) progressing and changing structurally and culturally, and, in the words of Conway, "none of us can stop it."²²

While Betjeman may not have offered any real solutions to the problem of growth in London, he played the important role of reminding the organizations at the time that preserving history was necessary and healthy, all the while acting as an intermediary between the public and the government. In an era of "celebrated new architecture, improved housing conditions, faster transport and economic growth," this architectural literati worked to ease the agitation felt on the traditional, old fashioned, and familiar ways of life.²³ Without works like "Baker Street Station Buffet" to commemorate the past, some of it may have been lost.

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¹⁶ Mort, "Fantasies of Metropolitan Life," 133.

¹⁷ Peter, "John Bull Speaks," 294.

¹⁸ John Betjeman, "Slough," in *Continual Dew* (John Murray Publishers, 1977).

¹⁹ Tewder-Jones, "'Oh, the planners did their best,'" 390.

²⁰ Tewder-Jones, "'Oh, the planners did their best,'" 400.

²¹ John Arlott, "A Few Late Chrysanthemums: Book Review," in *The Spectator* (Periodicals Archive Online, July 16, 1954), 98.

²² Gilbert, "London of the Future," 103.

²³ Tewder-Jones, "'Oh, the planners did their best,'" 393.

Endnotes

¹ Frank Mort, "Fantasies of Metropolitan Life: Planning London in the 1940s," in *The Journal of British Studies* Vol. 43, Issue 1 (Cambridge Online Press, 2012) 120.

² Mark Tewder-Jones "'Oh, the planners did their best': the planning films of John Betjeman," in *Planning Perspectives* Vol. 20 (London: Bartlett School of Planning, 2005), 393.

³ Tewder-Jones "'Oh, the planners did their best,'" 390.

⁴ Jill Craigie, director., *The Way We Live*, Film (Two Cities Films, 1946).

⁵ Tewder-Jones, "'Oh, the planners did their best,'" 396.

⁶ Tewder-Jones, "'Oh, the planners did their best,'" 390.

⁷ "Sir John Betjeman," in the *Thirties Society Journal* No. 4 (The Twentieth Century Society, 1984), 1.

⁸ "Sir John Betjeman," 1.

⁹ John Betjeman, *Bird's Eye View: The Englishman's Home*, Film (1969).

¹⁰ Thomas Peter, "John Bull Speaks: Reflections on 'The Collected Poems' of John Betjeman," in *Western Humanities Review* Vol. 27, No. 3 (Periodicals Archive Online, 1973), 292.

¹¹ "Sir John Betjeman," 1.

¹² Tewder-Jones, "'Oh, the planners did their best,'" 394.

¹³ John Betjeman, reported in *The Times*, Speech (July 22, 1932). Also referenced by Tewder-Jones in "'Oh, the planners did their best,'" on page 397.

¹⁴ David Gilbert, "London of the Future: The Metropolis Reimagined after the Great War," in *Journal of British Studies* Vol. 43, No. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, January 2004), 112.

¹⁵ Gilbert, "London of the Future," 111-2.