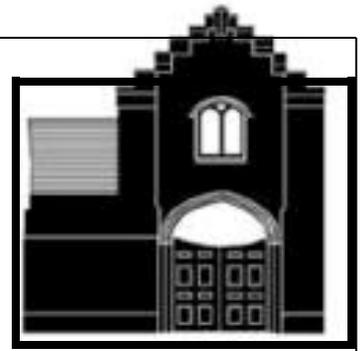


IPSWICH BUILDING PRESERVATION TRUST

NEWSLETTER



AUTUMN 2010

www.ibpt.info

Tom Gondris - KINDERTRANSPORT -

Last Autumn, Tom Gondris was awarded the MBE for 'Services to the Heritage of Suffolk'. The ceremony was performed by Lord Tollemache, the Lord Lieutenant of Suffolk at the Ipswich and Suffolk Club, and was attended by many supporters of the conservation movement in Suffolk.

Many readers will be aware of the tremendous debt of gratitude we owe to Tom for his championing of conservation in Ipswich during his thirty years as Chairman of the Ipswich Building Preservation Trust, but fewer are perhaps aware of the personal story that lay behind that achievement. This article aims to go some way towards filling that gap.

Tom was born in 1930 in that part of western Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland. Those who know the history of the twentieth century will immediately recognise the significance of the location. After Hitler successfully absorbed Austria into Germany in March 1938, his attention focussed on the Sudetenland, whose population included three million people of German origin. Hitler's demands to occupy those parts of the Sudetenland with a majority of German inhabitants led to the Munich crisis.

Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister returned in late September 1938, believing he had achieved 'Peace with honour.... I believe it is peace in our time'. Hitler annexed the rest of the Sudetenland in March 1939. His invasion of Poland in September precipitated the Second World War.

Tom was the only child of a German speaking family of Jewish origin. His father was a partner in a business manufacturing Aertex shirts and other clothing. Following the annexation of the Sudetenland the eight year old Tom and his family moved from their home to Prague in October 1938. The following month the British Government made arrangements whereby refugees younger than 17 could enter the United Kingdom, provided that they had a sponsor who would house them.



Above: Tom receiving his MBE from Lord Tollemache

Below—Tom and Pat arriving at the Custom House for the retirement dinner





Left: Nicholas Winton with a rescued child



Right: Sir Nicholas Winton in Prague October 2007

A £50 deposit was also needed. During those months in Prague, as war became inevitable, the plight of Jewish families was desperate. But also in Prague there was a man who had become inspired to save as many children as possible: his name was Nicholas Winton.

Nicholas Winton was also of German-Jewish parents who had emigrated to Britain in Edwardian times. After a career as banker and stockbroker he interrupted holiday plans to work with a friend on the refugee crisis. From a makeshift

Throughout the summer of 1939 Winton's Czech Kindertransport enabled almost 700 refugee children to make the railway journey across Europe to the Harwich boat train and finally to Liverpool Street Station. Tom travelled alone in July 1939. The final group, travelling on 3rd of September 1939 were turned back: Germany had invaded Poland.

Tom's family had intended to escape via Danzig and join him in England, but events overtook them. Czechoslovakia was overrun first by the Russians and later by the Germans.

Tom was taken in by a Church of England family living in a large house in a village in Hampshire – Medstead. They already had four boys; two were older, and two younger than Tom. He fitted into the family and became one of them. Tom notes with wry humour that at least he was well supplied with the Aertex shirts he had brought with him. His original tongue was German, and in Prague he had spoken Czech. Now he had to develop his English. A Jewish family friend of his mother whose marriage to a Ukrainian



Above: The first 200 children arriving into Britain on the 'Kindertransport'



Above: The Cadbury's factory in Bournville

Eventually he entered a prep school in Malvern and then entered Cranbrook School in Kent where he remained until 1948. The Home Office had offered orphan refugee children naturalisation as UK citizens, and Tom took up this offer. Initially it meant that he was not eligible for National service, so worked as a labourer in Birmingham. Finding the job hard going, and with only £2 10s a week wages he looked for something better. He cycled to Bournville and was taken on immediately as a management trainee at Cadbury's, but within a few days the rules were changed and he was called up for National Service in the Army.

Tom's experience at Cadbury's gave him his first taste of a model village and his daily efforts on the 'soft centre machine' gave him a taste for chocolates. Employees were wisely allowed to eat as many as they liked. Most stuffed themselves to oblivion and were for ever cured of the craving, but Tom wisely rationed himself to no more than one an hour and prolonged the addiction.

Commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the Royal Army Service Corps he found himself for the next eighteen months in Egypt responsible for forwarding supplies to various twilight outposts of Empire garrisoned around the Mediterranean. While training, however, with the encouragement of his Cranbrook housemaster, he had applied and been accepted to read Economics at University College London. The Korean War beckoned and his unit was about to be transported when early release enabled him to begin his studies.

Being a student in London in the early 1950s opened up a range of experiences including immersion in the world of the theatre. In those days, a ticket for the 'Gods' – the narrow wooden seats in the topmost gallery – cost only 2/6d, but you had to be up at 8am (no mean feat for a student) to queue for the opening of the box office at 9am. You were rewarded by being given a fold-up stool which guaranteed your place in the queue, but you also had to pay 6d for someone to guard your stool while you went away to your university lectures or whatever other activities students find to occupy the middle hours of the day. At 7pm you would re-claim your stool and place in the queue, and that guaranteed you a seat in the theatre. Students in the Hall of residence took turns to secure these seats and as a result Tom saw all the 1950s greats in action – including Richardson, Gielgud, Guinness, and Olivier. Living in Soho he frequented drinking dens and joined the Arts Theatre Club. Eventually his studies caught up with him and he graduated in 1953, in time for his first experience of TV in a steamy darkened room crammed with thirty people eager to view the coronation on a screen little bigger than a blackberry.

The challenge now was to find a job. Tom discovered a natural ability to knock on doors, a technique he honed to perfection in later years with political canvassing and drumming up membership for the Trust and the Ipswich Society. For this first experience, however, all his market research contract required was the answer to two questions – 'Have you got a car?' and 'Would you like one if one were available?' After this auspicious start to graduate employment Tom's flatmate Dennis thought he would go one better and believed he had secured a job at an agency whose clients included European manufacturers who were keen to

trade with the UK. Alas for Dennis the job failed to materialise and the agents – full of remorse – treated him to a slap-up lunch on the Brompton Road. While the wine and conversation flowed, Dennis so endeared himself to his guests that they offered him employment with the agency – but alas again for Dennis he was whisked away in the nick of time to complete his National Service. He had the grace, however, to suggest an alternative employee who might fit the bill – especially as he was a fluent European linguist – or could be with a little brushing up, and Tom joined the company he was to remain with till his retirement in 1995. By that time he was Chairman and Managing Director of H. Erben Ltd.



Above—Tom with his retirement gift at the retirement dinner

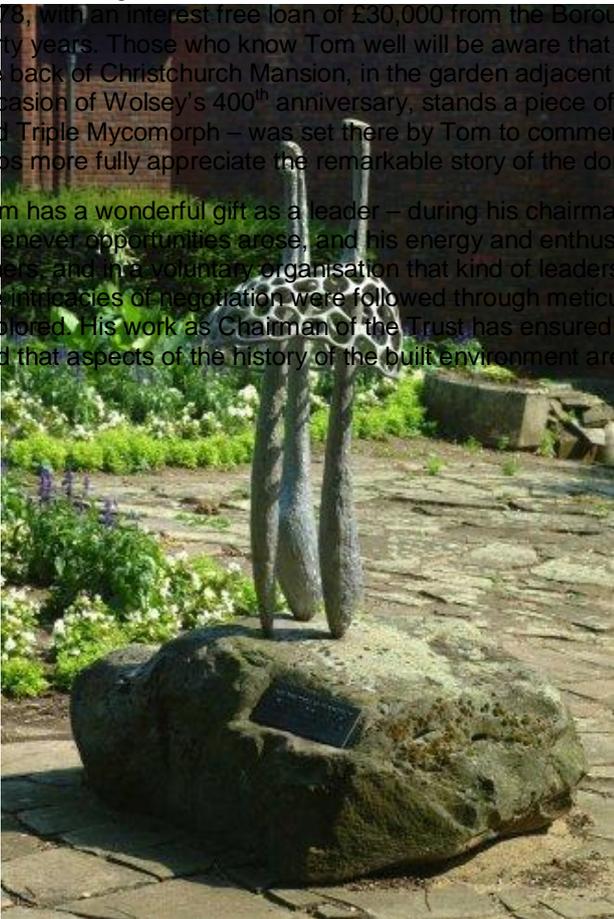


Above; At the MBE ceremony

Tom married in London in 1958 and brought his family to Ipswich in 1968, following the firm's move to Hadleigh. Tom's interest in politics led him to join the Ipswich Labour Party and in 1972 he was elected to the council of the County Borough of Ipswich, with responsibility for Libraries and Museums.

After local government re-organisation in 1974 and the demise of the County Borough, Tom was active in the new Borough Council, but lost his seat in 1976. Before then he had joined the Ipswich Society and with colleagues from the Society he developed a lifelong passion for conservation. The Planning Officer, Geoffrey Ramsdale, was a keen supporter of the Building Preservation Trust movement, and eventually the Ipswich Building Preservation Trust came into being in 1976, with an interest free loan of £30,000 from the Borough. Tom became the first Chairman, and remained in post for thirty years. Those who know Tom well will be aware that he has a keen interest in the arts, and sculpture in particular. At the back of Christchurch Mansion, in the garden adjacent to the merchant's house that was added to the Mansion on the occasion of Wolsey's 400th anniversary, stands a piece of sculpture. The artist was Bernard Reynolds, and the piece - entitled Triple Mycomorph - was set there by Tom to commemorate his parents. When we visit the garden now we can perhaps more fully appreciate the remarkable story of the donor himself.

Tom has a wonderful gift as a leader - during his chairmanship he was indefatigable in promoting the interests of the Trust whenever opportunities arose, and his energy and enthusiasm were infectious. His generosity prompted the generosity of others, and in a voluntary organisation that kind of leadership is very powerful. Tom has a keen attention to detail so that the intricacies of negotiation were followed through meticulously, and every avenue to achieve a successful outcome was explored. His work as Chairman of the Trust has ensured that significant buildings in the townscape have been secured, and that aspects of the history of the built environment are more fully understood and appreciated.



Above Bernard Reynolds—Triple Mycomorph



Above: MBE Award Ceremony

FUTURE PROJECTS FOR THE TRUST – SUMMER 2010

Since Tom's retirement, there have been some changes in the membership of the Executive Committee, with some members retiring, and we have welcomed new members who have taken their places. Charles Tracy took over as Chairman in an interim capacity and worked hard to secure purchasers for the major Curzon Lodge project and to complete the final aspects of the refurbishment. Our thanks must go to Charles for steering the committee during frustrating times when it seemed unlikely that future projects could be secured, despite our best efforts. Nick Jacob has now taken over as Chairman, and a range of possible projects is beginning to emerge.

Economic factors always have a significant impact on the availability of property and the price that can be achieved for particular kinds of scheme. The current recession has depressed the cost of property but any scheme eventually needs to pay its way, so the green shoots of recovery are important for achieving good outcomes. Our advantage over the commercial sector lies in the availability of preferential grants for charitable Trusts to restore listed buildings which sometimes provide that margin which makes a scheme viable.

Our remit has always been to secure buildings at risk which can make a contribution to the townscape and perhaps embody historic or other significant features. We are particularly concerned about listed buildings or those on the local list, but we have also been broadening our search to include other properties.

Nationally over the last century or so progress has been made towards the development of schemes which incorporate eco features. We would like to be able to successfully incorporate these into future projects.

Buildings are more often at risk of neglect during a recession, and members of the Executive Committee have been actively researching a number of properties. Details have been obtained of a wide range of properties. For some we simply take on a watching brief, such as 6 – 8 Silent Street (long out of use) and 17 St Peter's Street – both important buildings, but not currently on the market, and St Michael's Church – an important and distinguished building which will require a major scheme – but for which a significant partner would be required.

We have also looked at a range of Victorian and Edwardian terraced properties, with the thought that a renovation scheme there might encourage other owners to renovate and restore, and achieve both visual and ecological improvements. It is worth remembering the Arthur's Terrace scheme from the 1980s which we hoped would serve as a model of sensitive and appropriate renovation for a modest Victorian terraced house.

We have explored several other listed buildings in more detail, and for some we may undertake further research, perhaps leading to a feasibility study if the financing of the scheme seems potentially viable.



Above: Holywells Mansion Tower



Above: The garden between orangery & stables



Above: The orangery in protective cladding



The Old Bell

Members of the Executive Committee visited this listed public house during August. The building is claimed to be the oldest pub in the town, but has been closed to the drinking public for a number of years. Externally it is clear that the building has lost its eastern bay due to road widening, but it does retain much of its timber frame and some interesting historic features, Including a mediaeval corner post, and there are some attractive details in the alley to the west. Internally it has been subdivided in typical Victorian fashion to provide a range of accommodation and function rooms. It clearly had some rooms used by visitors in the not too distant past. The roof timbering appears to have been altered with the addition of later roof structures above earlier timbering (see detailed illustration) Generally the building is deteriorating rapidly and will require very substantial renovation.

There is a yard area which might provide scope for new residential units. Members of the Trust have suggested that this could become a

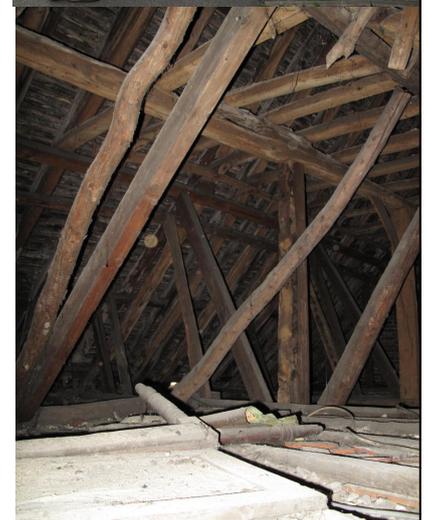
scheme like the Half Moon and Star, perhaps with a partner such as a housing association. There is a strong feeling that the pub use should be retained if at all possible, and that a 'niche market' user would be ideal.

The proximity to the dock regeneration could be a clear advantage but present economic conditions are very unfavourable, and the location of the Old Bell, surrounded by very busy roads, the bridge, and a plethora of traffic lights and street furniture is a major challenge to the long-term viability of such a scheme. Although close to the dock area, immediate access is very hazardous. At the moment the asking price in any case does not reflect the necessary costs of restoration, so this potential scheme is simply one of many that might one day come into being.

Top: Main frontage overlooking Stoke Bridge

Centre: carved corner post with small bell (a later addition) with the docks behind

Right: Roof interior



1-5 College Street

This important listed building is deteriorating rapidly and is now, we believe, in the hands of receivers. It was once the offices of Burtons but for many years has been in a very sorry state. The building with its C18 façade concealing a timbered structure is potentially a very attractive neighbour for the revitalized St Peter's Church and the Wolsey Gateway, and stands nearly opposite the splendid Dance East building and the new developments on the quayside.

Holywells Orangery

Once the orangery attached to the Cobbolds' Holywells mansion this building escaped the demolition of the house itself. Together with the remaining stable block it stands as a reminder of the very different climate in the post-war years when redundant C19 buildings were subject to wholesale clearance. Not long ago it was used for plant sales but became subject to vandalism. Its security is now assured by a massive corrugated iron shell while it awaits a future use. Again members of the Trust visited the site in August and were impressed by its potential within the tremendous setting of Holywells Park. In Ipswich we are truly fortunate in the provision of public open spaces which once were the pleasure grounds of local magnates. The orangery itself is a fairly typical single storey glazed construction and would perhaps make an ideal café or garden centre. Some additional facilities could be provided, perhaps where the building was once joined onto the now demolished mansion. This project is one which members felt would be an exciting scheme, providing that arrangements could be made to take over the building from the Borough Council, perhaps with an arrangement to lease back to the Council once completed in order to secure an appropriate final use. Additional funding might be available for such a project from the Architectural Heritage Fund; in addition a major advantage of the scheme could be its place within a wider community scheme perhaps also involving the stable block. Further research is being undertaken by the

Executive Committee.



Above: Holywells Park and Orangery

Buildings at Risk

The Planning Department is currently updating the at-risk register of listed and other noteworthy properties within the borough. Half of the properties already considered are unoccupied, and thus even more at-risk. Bob Kindred will keep the Trust closely in touch with any other properties that could become projects in the future.



Above: Holywells Park and Orangery



The Orangery, Holywells Park

Top: west elevation with bowling green

Right: west elevation prior to being protected behind the current corrugated iron envelope

Below right: east elevation prior to being protected behind the current corrugated iron envelope

Below: east elevation in 1994

