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John Betjeman, policy entrepreneur

Introduction

John Betjeman (1906-1984) became famous not just as a poet, writer, broadcaster and public personality but also as a popular architectural historian, championing Victorian design with a distinctive eye for the eclectic and eccentric. He is seldom understood, however, as a political operator. This article examines his unusually effective work, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, towards changing the British policy context from one in which Victorian buildings became seen as expendable in the planning of large scale modern redevelopments – imagined then as bizarre kitsch from an era of lost empire – to one where they increasingly became perceived as heritage. The other public architectural historian of the time, Nikolaus Pevsner – Professor of Art History at Birkbeck, University of London, author of *Pioneers of Modern Design* and the *Buildings of England* county guides – is often remembered as the more effective political actor, deploying his formidable connoisseurship to influence what heritage was deemed valuable for the future.¹ In contrast, Betjeman cultivated an image of a bumbling amateur. This image however, as will be revealed through archive sources, *Hansard*, contemporary press reports and biographical accounts, belied his effectiveness.

Some scholars, notably Greg Morse,² have acknowledged Betjeman as public figure who used his status to make the case in favour of Victoriana. Indeed, Morse argues that without Betjeman it is unlikely that buildings such as St Pancras station hotel (1873) ‘would still

¹ M Glendinning *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation* (Routledge London 2013) 315.

² G Morse *John Betjeman: Reading the Victorians* (Sussex Academic Press Brighton 2008).

exist, let alone be respected in the manner it is today'.³ This article will develop this argument by treating Betjeman – for the first time – as a subject of study using insights from an established model of the policy process, namely John Kingdon's multi-stream approach. This model, which is primarily used to examine changes to the policy agenda, will be used to make the case that Betjeman was an enthusiastic and sometimes highly effective political operator, one who used his elite contacts, his status as a respected poet and writer, and his popular standing gained partially through the new medium of television, to provide the platform for his political activities. What follows draws from Kingdon's argument that policy formation is strongly influenced by characters in the policy process known as 'policy entrepreneurs'.⁴

We also argue that Betjeman's ability as a communicator – as an advocate of Victorian architecture – serves as a case study in the nebulous, hard-to-measure, influence of culture over politics. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote in the 1970s and 1980s about 'cultural capital': the knowledgeable deployment of artistic or literary connoisseurship in a way which distinguishes the cultivation of an individual in relation to others. The more refined a discussion, Bourdieu noted, the subtler the grades of refinement and distinction at work. He observed how cultural capital operates among people, alongside the 'low brow' power of

³ Ibid 4.

⁴ J Kingdon *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (2nd edn Harper Collins New York 1995) 122-124.

wealth, of financial capital, to demonstrate status and win arguments.⁵ While Bourdieu's examples came from the French bureaucratic and academic spheres, his observations resonate in a British context. Cultural arguments rarely win-out in politics on their own. But, as Betjeman's case will illustrate, the appropriate display of cultural capital can help a policy entrepreneur to succeed. Betjeman was adept at deploying the right register in the right context: man of the people in his broadcasting; a learned man of culture in committees, correspondence and, it might be deduced, in private conversations behind closed doors. Cultural capital, deployed effectively, and at the appropriate level in the appropriate context, may not win an argument but it can make the advocate appear suitably authoritative and put others in a position of comparative weakness.

It is through his deft use of his cultural capital that we argue that John Betjeman should be remembered less as a gentleman amateur and, instead, as an effective policy entrepreneur. Betjeman's daughter, the late Candida Lycett Green, reckoned that her father 'extended our idea of what is beautiful'.⁶ We argue that Betjeman's primary achievement was indeed to persuade the masses and certain members of the political elite to view what many regarded as ugly instead as beguiling. Furthermore, this change in attitude encouraged modifications to planning law whereby the conservation – particularly of Victorian buildings – was afforded much greater consideration. It will also be pointed out that Betjeman's conception of beauty

⁵ P Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Routledge London 1984) [First French edition 1979]; P Bourdieu *Homo Academicus* (Polity Press London, 1990) [First French edition 1984].

⁶ C Lycett Green quoted in J Betjeman *Coming Home: An Anthology of Prose*, (Vintage London 1998) xiii. See also Morse 4.

(or, rather, one that some infer from an over-simplified characterisation of him as a romantic champion of Victoriana) retains its powerful influence over contemporary policy makers.

Betjeman

Over thirty years since his death in May 1984, it is now difficult to appreciate the almost unlikely level of fame at which Betjeman operated.⁷ As a mark of his establishment standing – not least his position as poet laureate since 1972 – Betjeman was accorded a memorial service at Westminster Abbey, conducted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, where the Prince of Wales read the lesson.⁸ Some of Betjeman's reputation was the result of his poetry. Indeed, through work such as *A Subaltern's Love Song*, in which Betjeman celebrated the athletic Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, and *Slough*, in which he summoned judicious bombing for the improvement of the eponymous town, he became viewed in some quarters as a cultural treasure.⁹ This was not only at the level of the connoisseur. As Julia Stapleton notes, few matched his skill 'in bridging the gap between elite and middlebrow culture.'¹⁰ As A.N.

⁷ A N Wilson notes that Betjeman's death, following years weakened by Parkinson's disease, led to a 'palpable sense of public loss in England, comparable to what happens when a member of the royal family or a deeply loved screen-star meets death.' Wilson *Betjeman* (Arrow London 2007) 7.

⁸ B Hillier *Betjeman: The Bonus of Laughter* (John Murray London 2004) 585.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ J Stapleton, 'Cultural Conservatism and the Public Intellectual in Britain, 1930-70' (2000)

⁵ *The European Legacy* 795-813.

Wilson comments, Betjeman sold over two and a half million copies of his *Collected Poems*, becoming ‘the only English poet to be quoted by people in pubs.’¹¹

His skills as a broadcaster were equally significant. Betjeman was popular on both British radio and television. By the 1960s, he was a seasoned star of the latter medium, then still relatively new, ranking – in Bevis Hillier’s view – alongside luminaries as David Attenborough and A.J.P. Taylor.¹² He was also prolific. As Mark Tewdwr-Jones notes, in the 1960s alone, Betjeman’s output was prodigious, clocking up almost 100 films and television programmes.¹³ Typical of these was *John Betjeman Goes by Train*, a short documentary film from 1962 in which Betjeman engagingly points out easily overlooked sights during a journey through Norfolk.¹⁴ This idea was extended in Betjeman’s most famous work for television, *Metro-Land* (1973), which celebrated suburban London.

Betjeman often used his broadcasts to campaign for subjects that absorbed him, and did so ‘as [...] someone who was totally at ease in front of the camera.’¹⁵ In short, Betjeman helped ‘create that most modern of figures, the television personality.’¹⁶ With his ‘acute eye [and]

¹¹ Wilson *Betjeman* 7.

¹² Hillier *Bonus of Laughter* 190.

¹³ M Tewdwr-Jones ““Oh the planners did their best”: The Planning Films of John Betjeman’ (2005) 20 *Planning Perspectives* 389-411 at 400.

¹⁴ BBC4 *John Betjeman Goes by Train*, 19:00 13/03/2010

<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/00BDE145>.

¹⁵ Tewdr-Jones 406.

¹⁶ N Charlish, ‘Review: First and Last Loves, John Betjeman and Architecture,’ *Culture Wars* 2006 www.culturewars.org.uk/2006-01/betjeman.htm.

heightened sensibility', he was a gifted and professional manipulator of the most pervasive media of the day.¹⁷

However, as both poet and broadcaster, there was – as with many celebrities – a gap between reality and image. As Hillier, author of a multi-volume biography of Betjeman, adds, '[h]e created his own myth through his writings and his television stardom.'¹⁸ That myth being that Betjeman was a cheery crafter of light verse and eccentric preserver of all things Victorian, a comforting figure with a 'nostalgic love of country churches, teddy bears and tea shops.'¹⁹ As Jonathan Meades notes, however, observers should not be 'taken in by the teddy bears and straw hats, the camp Anglicanism and toothy bumbling.'²⁰

Closer reading of Betjeman's poetry reflects his troubled, insecure, and melancholic side; someone who – despite establishment accolades – thought himself an outsider. The only son of Bess and Ernest Betjemann, the latter a furniture maker, his surname of Dutch or German origin made life difficult growing up in London during the Great War.²¹ As Susie Harries –

¹⁷ J Meades 'Pevsner and Betjeman: Kindred Curiosity' in S Harries (ed.), *Pevsner and Victorian Architecture: Proceedings of a Victorian Society Study Day* (Victorian Society London 2015) 54. Betjeman's celebrity was cemented in establishment terms by the award of a CBE and the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1960.

¹⁸ Hillier *Bonus of Laughter* xv.

¹⁹ D Sandbrook *White Heat: The History of the Swinging Sixties* (Abacus London 2007) 523.

²⁰ Meades 'Pevsner and Betjeman' 54.

²¹ B Hillier *Young Betjeman* (John Murray London, 1988); J Betjeman, *Summoned by Bells*, with illustrations by Hugh Casson (John Murray London 1989) [first published in 1960].

biographer of Nikolaus Pevsner, the most famous victim of Betjeman's extravagant grudges – notes:

Betjeman had a great deal of charm, which he used as a weapon, a tool and a shield. He was a role-player, projecting himself in different guises all his life. His most familiar persona – tweedy guardian of the recent past – was itself misleading, more a construct placed upon him by his audience than an accurate expression of a personality that was in reality not at all cosy.²²

Betjeman's numerous broadcasts, which included light-hearted panel games and chat shows alongside programmes about particular places and personalities, included some with a barbed edge.²³ For example, in a radio talk from 1937, the Wiltshire town of Swindon was referred to as 'a blot on the earth', and a monster that 'gnaws its way down college lanes, eating up villages.'²⁴ Similarly, Betjeman's architectural writing could seem angry, with 'jerry building' by unchecked developers a particular target for vituperation. He regarded such commercial building, often in the form of out-of-town developments, as the thoughtless work of 'thick-necked brutes with flashy cars, elderly blonds [!] and television sets.'²⁵ Thus,

²² S Harries *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life* (Pimlico London 2013) 528; see also on the Betjeman/Pevsner rivalry, T Mowl *Stylistic Cold Wars: Betjeman versus Pevsner* (Faber and Faber London 2000).

²³ S Games 'Introduction' in J Betjeman *Trains and Buttered Toast: Selected Radio Talks* (John Murray London 2006).

²⁴ J Betjeman *Trains and Buttered Toast: Selected Radio Talks* (John Murray London 2006), 67 and 71.

²⁵ J Betjeman *First and Last Loves* (John Murray London 1952) 3.

Betjeman recognised that the artifice of his cuddly image could be used to try to effect change. As Nicky Charlish put it: ‘His geniality is dangerous, the smile of the assassin before the knife goes in [...It] was his seeming [...] cuddliness that helped to give him his media status – and, thus, the prominence – that helped him wage successful campaigns.’²⁶

The campaigns that Betjeman became associated with particularly concerned architectural conservation, particularly around Victorian buildings. Betjeman did not start out as a proselytizer for Victoriana. Indeed, his first non-verse book, *Ghastly Good Taste* published in 1933, mocked buildings from that period.²⁷ In 1930 he had been employed as assistant editor at the prominent magazine *The Architectural Review* – a position he held until 1935 – and at that time Betjeman tended to celebrate the emerging ‘modern movement’ in architecture.²⁸ However this insistence on modernism was relatively short-lived. In the post-War period, he grew increasingly disillusioned with concrete, steel and glass, writing that ‘more destruction to English cities and towns was wrought by so-called modern architects than by German bombs.’²⁹

²⁶ Charlish ‘Betjeman and Architecture’ 2.

²⁷ J Betjeman *Ghastly Good Taste: Or, a Depressing Story of the Rise and Fall of English Architecture* (Faber and Faber London 2009) [first published in 1933].

²⁸ A Powers ‘John Betjeman and Modern Architecture’ *First and Last Loves: John Betjeman and Architecture* (Sir John Soane Museum London 2006) 31-39.

²⁹ J Betjeman ‘A Preservationist’s Progress’ in J Fawcett (ed.), *The Future of the Past: Attitudes to Conservation 1174-1974* (Thames and Hudson London 1976).

His interest in Victorian Gothic had been burgeoning since the late 1930s and, in 1950 Betjeman set out his goal in a radio talk to change public perceptions of the Victorian age, and, in so doing, to change public policy:

As fast as elm trees now, we are pulling [Victorian buildings] down. The Ministry of Town and Country Planning employs antiquarians to make lists of Georgian buildings; sometimes as a great favour, they allow buildings to be put on its list that date as late as 1850. What the point of this list is I do not know, for more old buildings are being destroyed by flashy shopfronts now than were destroyed before the war. But why I mention them, is, you see, that art is supposed to stop at 1850. Few of the great buildings I have mentioned stand a chance of survival. No minister will recommend them. Only your affection and your looking at them and finding new ones that I have omitted [...] can help to save Victorian architecture.³⁰

Having established Betjeman's media acumen and outlined his distinctive concerns, we will now address how he tried to influence the policy process so Victoriana would be treated differently, following a framework originated by John Kingdon.

Policy entrepreneurship

Kingdon seeks to explain why certain issues are regarded as problems, some of which are deemed suitable for attempted government amelioration, while others are simply ignored. He explains this process through the metaphor of 'streams' that sometimes converge.³¹ The first of these, he argues, is the problem stream which highlights the manner in which events can

³⁰ Betjeman *Trains and Buttered Toast* 45.

³¹ Kingdon *Agendas* 86-89.

cause a government's interest to be pricked: the arrival of new data to indicate something has gone awry (a rise in infant mortality rates, for example); or a crisis that becomes a 'focusing event', giving that 'little push to get the attention of people in and around government.'³² The second stream concerns policies; that is the vast collection of potential solutions that could attach themselves to one of the problems deemed to require attention. Also swimming in this stream are various individuals and groups who advocate these putative solutions.³³ The third and final stream Kingdon posits is the political one, which focuses on events such as a change in government, in the public mood, or an intensification of interest group activity which can either promote or inhibit a particular issue being tackled.³⁴

Kingdon makes a key point that these streams are largely independent but do converge at particular times: 'Solutions become joined to problems, and both of them are joined to favourable political forces.'³⁵ This convergence provides an often-brief opportunity for new policy to be enacted. He adds that this is not a completely random process but is manipulated by particular actors. These agents are known as 'policy entrepreneurs, that is individuals willing 'to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money – in the hope of future return', often in the form of policies of which they approve.³⁶ Typically these characters are elected officials, civil servants, or traditional lobbyists rather than media-savvy

³² Ibid 94.

³³ Ibid 116-144.

³⁴ Ibid 145-164.

³⁵ Ibid 20.

³⁶ Ibid 122-3.

poets, but Kingdon expressly states that they can be found in many places: ‘No single formal position or even informal place in the political system has a monopoly on them.’³⁷

Many policy entrepreneurial activities take place in the problem stream, and their functions include attempting to ‘soften-up’ both those involved formally in the policy process and the wider public – through papers, press coverage, lobbying – getting their ideas circulating before an opportunity presents itself to push a proposal.³⁸ However, as Kingdon notes, entrepreneurs do more than simply ‘push for their proposals or their conception of problems’. They also are actively involved trying to ‘hook solutions to problems, proposals to political momentum, and political events to policy problems’, on the look-out for crises that can be turned into opportunities and for allies in high places.³⁹ Kingdon is keen to stress that the entrepreneur, any single personality, cannot force change but *can* take advantage should other factors fall into line.⁴⁰

Kingdon also identifies qualities that characterise a successful policy entrepreneur. The first of these is that ‘the person must have some claim to a hearing’, and this claim can come from three sources: ‘expertise; an ability to speak for others [...]; or an authoritative decision-making position.’⁴¹ The second quality is that ‘the person is known for his [*sic*] political connections or negotiating skill’, and the third quality, which Kingdon suggests is most

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid 127-131.

³⁹ Ibid 181.

⁴⁰ Ibid 182-183.

⁴¹ Ibid 180.

important, is persistence, being willing to push their ideas ‘in whatever way and forum might further the cause.’⁴²

As Paul Cairney has highlighted, Kingdon does not enjoy monopoly over the concept of the policy entrepreneur, with other scholars such as Dolowitz and Marsh and Peter John having their own take on the term – leading to the danger understanding may be ‘hindered by the use of the same term to mean different things.’⁴³ Thus, to be clear, the conception being used in this paper is squarely that of Kingdon’s – which remains the one by which others are compared – namely an individual who can be identified as drawing attention and possibly reframing problems with the aim of using their ‘knowledge, power, tenacity and luck’ to exploit these heightened levels of attention to push their own ideas onto the policy agenda.⁴⁴

It is also worth pointing out that, having gamely served as a popular model for students of public policy for over thirty years, Kingdon’s whole framework has inevitably met criticism. As Cairney and Michael Jones pointedly ask ‘is it simply a study that is much admired and cited (over 12,000 times), but in a rather superficial way?’⁴⁵, and it is the case that the work has been applied, sometimes over-ambitiously, ‘to issues, areas, and time periods not anticipated by Kingdon in his initial study’.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, as Rawat and Morris note,

⁴² Ibid 181.

⁴³ P Cairney *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues* (Palgrave Macmillan Basingstoke 2012) 271.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ P Cairney and M D Jones ‘Kingdon’s Multiple Streams Approach: What is the Empirical Impact of the Universal Theory?’ (2016) 44 *Public Studies Journal* 44 37-58 at 37.

⁴⁶ Ibid 53.

despite its limitations and vagueness, for many researchers the Kingdon's framework still provides sterling service: 'there remains a great deal both of theoretical and practical utility in the work.'⁴⁷ To avoid charges of over-ambition, Kingdon's model is used in this study primarily as lens to sharpen observation of Betjeman in his often overlooked role as a political actor rather than as a means to analyse precise changes in the policy process. In addition, some ideas from cultural theory will also be used to explain Betjeman's success as policy entrepreneur. First, taking Kingdon's qualities that characterise a successful policy entrepreneur in turn, we will reveal through archive sources, *Hansard*, contemporary press reports and biographical accounts Betjeman's role as a political agent of change.

The issue

Victorian architecture had become reviled in mid-twentieth century Britain. As Gavin Stamp notes, for many from the generation that reached maturity between the wars, 'the whole Victorian age came to be seen as dark and oppressive, at once sinister and ludicrous, and there was a violent reaction against its legacy in favour of a clean, uncluttered modernity'.⁴⁸ In a radio talk from 1950, Betjeman put it this way: 'If you say you like Victorian architecture today you are considered affected or ignorant. Victorian, so far as most people are concerned, is another word for jerry-built, ugly, over-decorated, hypocritical and all that goes with what is known as "bad taste".'⁴⁹ As a result, in Kingdon's terms, the demolition and unsympathetic alteration of Victorian architecture was not generally regarded as a

⁴⁷ P Rawat and J C Morris 'Kingdon's "Streams" Model at Thirty: Still Relevant in the 21st Century?' (2016) 44 *Politics and Policy* 608-638 at 628.

⁴⁸ G Stamp *Lost Victorian Britain* (Aurum London 2010) 11.

⁴⁹ Betjeman, *Trains and Buttered Toast* 39.

problem to be ameliorated. Indeed, until the mid-1960s, it was the existence of ‘relics’ from that age that was regarded as the ‘problem’. In February 1964, Labour leader Harold Wilson spoke for many in the political elite of the era when he referred to the ‘sordid, dingy achievements of a century ago’,⁵⁰ a period to be modernised following a promised, if not realised, technocratic revolution ‘forged’ in the ‘white heat’ of scientific advancement, emphasising modernity and productive efficiency, seeking its architectural images in ideas of the future rather than the tropes of the past. In political terms, this view was not confined to members of the Labour Party. As will be illustrated later, the Conservative prime minister from 1956 to 1963, Harold Macmillan, took a similar view on the relative merits of modernity and Victoriana. In both cases, finding a way to build a bright, forward-looking Britain was regarded a key problem and removal of relics from the Victorian era part of the solution.

If illustration is needed, this mid-century disdain towards Victoriana was displayed vividly in a House of Lords debate from 1955, which included discussion of the Buxton Memorial Fountain: a small but elaborate Victorian Gothic memorial and drinking fountain commissioned by Charles Buxton to commemorate the end of slavery in the British empire. Completed in 1866, the fountain was removed from its original position in Parliament Square in 1949 and the debate centred on a proposal to reinstate it in the nearby Victoria Tower Gardens. Making the familiar case that such design was revolting, Earl Jowitt asked if ‘anything can be done to make the statue appear less horrible aesthetically?’⁵¹ The minister

⁵⁰ H Wilson *The New Britain: Labour’s Plan outlined by Harold Wilson, Selected Speeches 1964* (Penguin Harmondsworth 1964) 69.

⁵¹ Earl Jowitt House of Lords Debates 7 December 1955 vol. 299 col. 1177.

who raised the matter, the Earl of Munster, called it an ‘ugly, hideous erection’ and, though for historic rather than aesthetic reasons the fountain survived, he added that ‘[m]uch could be said for employing a sledge hammer to obliterate this monument once and for all.’⁵²

Even in 1955 there were some dissenting voices but at this stage Betjeman was largely regarded as something of a maverick. Indeed, the term ‘Betjemaniacs’ was coined then for those few lobbyists wishing to preserve Victoriana.⁵³ Less than twenty years later, however – by which time the reviled Buxton fountain had been listed – support for the conservation of Victorian buildings had become the norm. Indeed, as one academic planner noted pointedly in 1973, ‘[a] great deal of what is now supposed to be our priceless heritage was [only recently] regarded as extravagant Victorian rubbish.’⁵⁴

This was a striking development both culturally and in terms of the legislative framework for the protection of Victorian buildings – and indeed conservation more generally. As histories of heritage policy, such as those by Michael Ross and John Delafons have illustrated,⁵⁵ the era from the middle of the 1960s to the early 1970s was of great significance, where the ethos

⁵² Earl of Munster House of Lords Debates 7 December 1955 vol. 299 col. 1180.

⁵³ Victorian Society *Report 1962-1963* (Victorian Society London 1963) 3; see also B Levin, *The Pendulum Years: Britain and the Sixties* (Sceptre London 1989) 415 [first published in 1970].

⁵⁴ D Eversley quoted in J Delafons, *Politics and Preservation: A Policy History of the Built Heritage, 1882-1996* (E & FN Spon London 1997) 76.

⁵⁵ M Ross *Planning and the Heritage: Policy and procedures* (2nd edn. London E & FN Spon 1996); Delafons *Politics and Preservation*.

towards the built environment, both in society and government stepped purposefully towards ‘presumption in favour of preservation’ even for the Victorian creations so recently despised.⁵⁶

As Ross has noted, concern about the protection of buildings regarded as historically and architecturally significant has existed for centuries, but such worries only slowly and half-heartedly translated into legislation, Parliament being ‘reluctant to interfere with the rights of property owners.’⁵⁷ The Second World War provided the spur to introduce the Town and Country Planning Act of 1944 which introduced the concept of listing historic buildings. More significant still was the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 which prohibited the demolition, or the carrying out of major works, on listed buildings without two months’ notice being given to the local planning authority, during which time a building preservation order could be served to provide some protection. 1947 also witnessed the start of the first national survey of historical buildings, providing clear identification of what the government investigators regarded as heritage.⁵⁸ However, as Betjeman’s radio talk from 1950 highlighted, the legislation had a limited impact on the protection of Victorian buildings because those compiling the lists tended not to regard them as worth preserving; indeed Ross points out that the most serious charge against the first survey of historic buildings ‘was its almost total neglect of Victorian architecture.’⁵⁹

However, at least partially the result of the pressure to which Betjeman contributed – Ross recognises him as ‘one of the leading lights’ in the movement to make Victorian architecture

⁵⁶ Delafons *Politics and Preservation* 103.

⁵⁷ Ross *Planning and Heritage* 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid* 22-24.

⁵⁹ *Ibid* 24.

respectable once more –⁶⁰ legislation was passed that made it more difficult to ignore the claims of those trying to protect buildings from that era. For example, the Town and Country Planning Act of 1968 gave the Victorian Society – a pressure group co-founded by Betjeman in 1957 to draw public attention to the precarious fate of many Victorian structures – a statutory role as one of what were to become known as the national amenity societies, that is the group of societies required to be notified by local authorities of applications for demolition (in full or part) of any listed building, and a statutory consultee on alterations to such buildings.⁶¹ As one of the ministers involved, Lord Kennett, later wrote, the legislation ‘built these excellent and hitherto somewhat neglected bodies right into the law.’⁶² The Act also greatly increased the degree of protection offered to all listed buildings, not least by truncating the process by which buildings could be listed and protected, and by making the punishments for unauthorized demolition more punitive.⁶³

Betjeman was by no means alone in an ultimately successful campaign to garner support for Victorian architecture from the public and, eventually, policymakers. Other important – and generally more academic – figures included such luminaries as architect H. S. Goodhart-Rendall and historian-critics Kenneth Clark and John Summerson. Also Pevsner, whose approach was to link Victorian architecture to modernism as the progenitor of some of its

⁶⁰ Ibid 24.

⁶¹ R Suddards and J Hargreaves *Listed Buildings: The Law and Practice of Historic Buildings, Ancient Monuments, and Conservation Areas* (3rd edn. Sweet & Maxwell London 1996) 463.

⁶² W Kennet *Preservation* (Temple Smith London 1972) 83.

⁶³ Ross *Planning and Heritage*, 31.

ideas, promoting it as an acceptable precursor to the modern as part of a coherent history, or ‘myth’, of English architecture.⁶⁴ Moreover Betjeman was aware of his reputation as critical small fry compared to the likes of Summerson and Pevsner, once famously describing himself as a ‘lightweight wax fruit merchant’.⁶⁵ However there is danger in taking his self-deprecation too seriously. Though not dismissing the charge that Betjeman led a campaign which ‘shambled in a gentlemanly, shabby-genteel way, from crisis to crisis’,⁶⁶ by attaching details of just a few of his campaigning activities to the three qualities that Kingdon suggests signify successful policy entrepreneurship, it can be shown that the contribution Betjeman made to policy transformation was fundamental to its success.

Kingdon’s qualities

1. Expertise

The first of Kingdon’s qualities is ‘expertise; an ability to speak for others [...]; or an authoritative decision-making position.’⁶⁷ Not an academic expert – and never claiming to be, frequently mocking the academics in the field⁶⁸ – Betjeman was generally, if not universally, respected as an authority on Victorian architecture, seen primarily as a well-informed, if

⁶⁴ W Whyte ‘The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the Making of a National International Style’ (2009) 48 *The Journal of British Studies* 441-465 at 442; see also G Stamp, ‘Lightweight wax fruit merchant,’ *First and Last Loves: John Betjeman and Architecture* (Sir John Soane Museum London 2006) 11-20 at 14.

⁶⁵ J Betjeman, *Letters Volume 2: 1951-1984* (Methuen London 1995) 319.

⁶⁶ Hillier *Bonus of Laughter* 47.

⁶⁷ Kingdon *Agendas* 180.

⁶⁸ Betjeman *First and Last Loves* 5.

wayward, enthusiast.⁶⁹ Indeed, his expertise was accepted enough in 1952 for him to be appointed a member of the Royal Fine Art Commission, a body which provided formal advice on the merits of historic buildings. Another example is provided by the debate mentioned earlier about the Buxton fountain, where one more sympathetic contributor referred warmly to Betjeman's opinion, noting that the fountain – and others buildings from that era such as St Pancras station – were ones 'I was brought up to consider hideous' but were now monuments he had come to appreciate, adding with approval that the memorial was 'already admired by Mr. John Betjeman.'⁷⁰

Further indications of authority, and appointments to speak for others, came through Betjeman's involvement in various of the conservation and civic societies that began to multiply in the early 1950s. These included bodies as diverse as the William Morris Society, the Hawksmoor Committee, the Historic Churches Preservation Trust, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, and the Oxford and London Diocesan Advisory Committees.⁷¹ Of all these organisations, the one with which Betjeman became particularly associated was the aforementioned Victorian Society.

The Victorian Society was one of a succession of societies that have emerged in the UK to protect historic buildings from a particular era. They stemmed from the example of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), founded by William Morris in 1877 to caution against over-eager Victorian 'restorations' of medieval churches. Prompted by the then recent demolition of the Waterloo Bridge and the Adelphi Terrace in London, the

⁶⁹ Stamp 'Lightweight wax fruit merchant'.

⁷⁰ Viscount Esher House of Lords Debates 7 December 1955 vol. 299 col. 1178.

⁷¹ Betjeman *Letters* 11.

Georgian Group (of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings) was established in 1937 to provide a supportive voice for those keen to preserve buildings built from 1714 to 1837, later becoming The Georgian Society.⁷² Betjeman was involved in the formation of that group. Thus, when notable Victorian buildings were threatened with demolition such as the Imperial Institute, the London Coal Exchange, the Oxford Museum, and – most famously – Philip Harwick’s 1837 Doric propylaeum which formed the entrance to Euston station in London (commonly known as the ‘Euston Arch’), the obvious step was to create a new group.⁷³

As Glendinning wryly noted, the Victorian Society as formed in 1957 was a force for change driven ‘by a coalition of enthusiastic amateurs, including a flamboyant aristocratic element.’⁷⁴ The first formal meeting took place in February 1958 at which it was confirmed that Lord Esher – the peer who made the supportive contribution to the Buxton Fountain debate – would chair the society, with Betjeman and Anne, Countess of Rosse, as vice-chairs. The aims of the group were summarized as ‘the study and appreciation of Victorian

⁷² B Hillier *New Fame, New Love* (John Murray London 2002) 408.

⁷³ Stamp, *Lost Victorian Britain*, 19-22.

⁷⁴ The first informal meeting was held at Lord and Lady Rosse’s impeccably preserved Victorian home in London on 5 November 1957, attended by the National Trust’s country house expert James Lees-Milne, John Pope-Hennessy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the artist John Piper, cartoonist Osbert Lancaster, and architects H.S. Goodhart-Rendel and Hugh Casson. Pevsner and Kenneth Clark sent apologies expressing support and put forward suggestions about how to proceed. Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement*, 315; Hillier, *Bonus of Laughter*, 27-29.

architecture and decorative arts with a view to preserving outstanding examples.⁷⁵ It was not long before the Victorian Society made an impression on public and elite public consciousness and Betjeman's prominent role was highlighted. For example, in February 1961, *The Times* recorded Betjeman 'speaking for the Victorian Society' during the appeal to save the Coal Exchange in the City of London.⁷⁶ At the same time, in a debate about the proposed demolition of this disused but distinguished Victorian structure, Tom Driberg, Labour MP and a friend of Betjeman's remarked:

It was only quite recently that the Victorian Society has been formed and has begun to educate public opinion on this matter, and indeed has warned us, perhaps only just in time, that we must act quickly if we are to preserve at least specimens of the best building of that once much ridiculed age.⁷⁷

Driberg also mentioned Betjeman, along with Pevsner and Ian Nairn, as experts supporting retention of the Coal Exchange, and, highlighting Betjeman's supplementary role as a broadcaster, Driberg also noted his recent appearance on the BBC to suggest possible uses for the building. Despite the efforts of Betjeman and the Victorian Society, however, failure was commonplace at this stage. For example, even after Betjeman cannily tried to foster public opinion by persuading the City of London to open the Exchange temporarily to stage a

⁷⁵ Ibid 33; The Victorian Society is something of a misnomer being concerned with properties built from 1837 to 1914, the end date some thirteen years after Victoria's death.

⁷⁶ *The Times* 'Report on the appeal to save the Coal Exchange' 9 February 1961.

⁷⁷ T Driberg House of Commons Debates 9 February 1961 vol. 634 col. 784.

photographic exhibition of Victorian architecture, the building was nevertheless demolished.⁷⁸

The now notorious campaign to save the so-called Euston Arch was equally unsuccessful. As early as 1933 Betjeman was a 'lone but articulate voice' trying to defend this structure from railway authorities that regarded it as obsolete and an obstruction to efficient access.⁷⁹ After copious letter writing and the cajoling of sympathetic MPs had proved unsuccessful, matters came to a head in October 1961 when the prime minister, Harold Macmillan, agreed to meet a delegation from the Victorian Society and other interested bodies keen to stop demolition. By this stage, the only remedy to prevent demolition was the imposition of a building preservation order from the government.⁸⁰ Though willing to listen, accounts – including Macmillan's own – of the meeting suggest that the premier was minded not to do this.⁸¹ Indeed it appears he had already decided the Arch's fate in June. When prompted by home secretary R.A. ('Rab') Butler, to come to a final decision regarding the structure – about which Butler suggested demolition, commenting, '[n]obody, as far as I know, has suggested that the Arch is actually beautiful' – Macmillan responded with a terse, 'I agree. Pull it

⁷⁸ Victorian Society, *Report 1962-1963*.

⁷⁹ D Cruikshank 'Betjeman: A Year of Crisis' *First and Last Loves: John Betjeman and Architecture* (Sir John Soane Museum London 2006) 21-30, at 25.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ H Macmillan, *The Macmillan Diaries vol. 2*, edited by P Catterall (Macmillan London 2011) 421, diary entry for 24 October 1961.

down.⁸² It was thus little surprise when Macmillan finally replied to the delegation to report that the government had no intention of adopting any suggestions for conserving it.⁸³ A few weeks later, demolition began and the stones of the Arch were disposed of in a variety of sites around the south of England.

Betjeman was hurt by these losses, feeling ‘guilt at his lack of success.’⁸⁴ Indeed, Dan Cruikshank and Hillier suggest that, alongside the government’s lack of concern and the City’s greed, Betjeman did share some responsibility. As Hillier notes:

He was a great catalyst in any controversy or campaign; but he lacked ‘follow-through’ and staying power. He wrote striking letters to the newspapers. His appearances on television fascinated. He was astute at smelling out his opponents’ motives. But he was no organiser. He could get the public’s attention but could not keep it.⁸⁵

However, these two losses did have a galvanising effect on the broader campaign. In particular, the demolition of Euston Arch can be regarded, and was deliberately used – in Kingdon’s terms – as a focusing event in the campaign to protect Victorian buildings. As Simon Thurley notes: ‘There was a genuine sense of public outrage when the Prime Minister

⁸² The National Archives, Kew, hereafter NA, PREM 11/388, note entitled ‘The Doric Arch at Euston’ from Butler to the Prime Minister dated 22 June 1961; Macmillan’s response is handwritten at the end of the note and dated 27 June.

⁸³ NA PREM 11/388 letter from the Prime Minister to Sir Charles Wheeler 2 November 1961.

⁸⁴ Cruikshank, ‘Betjeman: A Year of Crisis,’ 29.

⁸⁵ Hillier, *Bonus of Laughter*, 182.

refused to intervene,⁸⁶ with Macmillan being singled out by campaigners as one of the main culprits behind, as it was quickly dubbed, the ‘Euston Murder.’⁸⁷ From then on, politicians became increasingly aware that certain pressure groups and members of the public were likely to react vigorously to similar plans in the future.

Thereafter, the Victorian Society – and other such groups – grew more successful in pursuing its agenda. For example, in November 1965 a conference was co-organised by the Victorian Society to discuss the fate of the George Gilbert Scott-designed Foreign Office and other Victorian buildings in the Whitehall district of London at which ministers and civil servants were present. The relevant minister remained keen to demolish the Foreign Office, suggesting that ‘inside it was a squalid office slum’.⁸⁸ Betjeman was one of the most prominent dissenting voices. Having the stature to arrange for himself a tour of the Foreign Office, he decreed that it was, contrary to the minister’s appraisal, ‘not at all that slummy’, and was, in his view, ‘a very important building’.⁸⁹

Despite the wariness of many in Whitehall – not least those working in the Foreign Office – by the summer of 1966 the main policy community dealing with the once firm decision to demolish the Foreign Office was ‘beginning to think in terms of bowing to the

⁸⁶ S Thurley, *Men From The Ministry: How Britain Saved Its Heritage* (Yale University Press New Haven 2013), 218.

⁸⁷ J M Richards ‘The Euston Murder’ April 1962 *Architectural Review* 238.

⁸⁸ Charles Pannell (Minister of Public Building and Works), Leslie Martin archive, RIBA Drawings Collection, Box 0073/5 ‘The Whitehall Plan, Verbatim Report of a Conference at the Institute of Civil Engineers, Great George Street’ London 5 November 1965.

⁸⁹ Betjeman, *ibid.*

preservationists'.⁹⁰ The minister who thought the Foreign Office fit for demolition had been replaced by another who – according to an official from the Treasury – was 'inclined to sympathise with the preservationist line generally',⁹¹ and, despite a rear-guard attempt by those who regarded Betjeman's views as sentimentalism, the 'preservationists' prevailed and the Foreign Office remained standing. The move to a position in favour of securing a future of such buildings was partly because this stance possessed 'merits' that were once unseen but also – tellingly – 'for the sake of a quiet life'.⁹² This story was repeated elsewhere, for example with the campaign to prevent the demolition of St Pancras Station, where again Betjeman proved vigorous campaigner in support of the endangered structure. The station was listed – with the most secure Grade 1 status – in November 1967, just days before demolition was planned. And, as noted earlier, the following year's Town and Country Planning Act gave the Victorian Society a position in law by making it one of the national amenity societies.

It is worth acknowledging that, by the time of most of these campaigning successes, Betjeman had become a less central figure in the Victorian Society. The main reason for this was the death of the society's original chairman, Lord Esher, in October 1963, and his replacement by Pevsner. As Harries notes, Pevsner rather than Betjeman was the obvious choice to lead the society as he would be expected to professionalise the society's work and, crucially, 'give it credibility with local authorities, with which most of the decision-making

⁹⁰ NA T227/2299 note by S P Osmond 'Whitehall Development' 11 July 1966.

⁹¹ NA 227/2299 note by J P G Rawcliffe 'Whitehall Redevelopment – Policy Committee 30 June 1966.

⁹² Ibid.

on historic buildings rested.⁹³ Nevertheless, the group's successes remain partly attributable to Betjeman's efforts in co-founding the society and, particularly, his initial work – to use Kingdon's term – to soften-up both the public and the policy community to the idea that at least certain Victorian buildings were artefacts whose value was worth reconsidering, worthy of a part in ideas of national heritage and decisive to many British townscapes.⁹⁴

By the late 1960s, Betjeman's authority as an authoritative expert had become no longer dependant on his role in groups like the Victorian Society. As Hillier notes, it began to be 'that no respectable campaign [about historic architecture] could afford to be without John's name.'⁹⁵ Indeed, to some extent Betjeman became tired of being solely associated with preservation and Victoriana. As Morse notes, in 1969 Betjeman broadcast to the nation that he did not think 'everything old must necessarily be preserved' nor was 'everything Victorian [...] beautiful', and, elsewhere, he found some warm words to say about the giant concrete block of flats at Park Hill (1957-61) in Sheffield.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, it was as a preservationist of Victoriana that he remained best known, and he became an increasingly effective operator, devising the idea of a contemporary multimedia preservation campaign. As Tom Dyckhoff has noted, though Betjeman was not the first to

⁹³ Harries *Nikolaus Pevsner* 639.

⁹⁴ Moreover, it was at least partially the result of Betjeman's celebrity that the membership grew from an initial twenty-eight in 1958 to 1,824 by 1970 – and to 3,200 a decade later. W Filmer-Sankey 'History of the Victorian Society' www.victoriansociety.org/about/history-of-the-victorian-society/.

⁹⁵ Hillier *New Fame, New Love* 565.

⁹⁶ Morse *Reading the Victorians* 112.

attempt to rehabilitate Victoriana, ‘he was the first to popularise it through the media’, becoming in the process, ‘the first architectural celebrity of the nascent media age’.⁹⁷ These skills were evident, for example, during his contribution to the campaign to prevent alterations by developers to Bedford Park, a Victorian development in London regarded as the world’s first garden suburb. Behind this mid-1960s campaign Betjeman ‘threw the weight of his public fame’, which involved the composition of poetry, patronage of and attendance at festivals staged to keep the developers at bay, and several television appearances.⁹⁸ This time the campaign was successful, as was increasingly the case, confirming Betjeman’s status with the public as ‘a gladiator of conservation.’⁹⁹

2. *Negotiation*

The second quality that Kingdon noted is that ‘the person is known for his political connections or negotiating skill.’¹⁰⁰ Betjeman was always not the most committed negotiator, famed for preferring to go to the pub than sit through a serious meeting.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, he was willing to engage directly with key players in the policy process. As Stamp notes, much of Betjeman’s conservation work was ‘carried out behind the scenes, writing to ministers and officials, using his powers of persuasion over acquaintances in positions of influence.’¹⁰² Sometimes this was relatively low level but significant work, such as his contributions to the

⁹⁷ T Dyckhoff ‘What do these buildings share?’ *The Times* 23 August 2006.

⁹⁸ Hillier *Bonus of Laughter* 235.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Kingdon *Agendas* 181.

¹⁰¹ Hillier *Bonus of Laughter* 38.

¹⁰² Stamp ‘Lightweight wax fruit merchant’ 1.

Labour Party Arts and Amenities Committee.¹⁰³ However, Betjeman was extremely well connected with those at the top of political elite, with some relationships going back to school days – as was the case with Rab Butler and Labour leader from 1955 to 1963, Hugh Gaitskell.¹⁰⁴ Though he was not always successful, he used these connections keenly in his campaigning. For example, in 1957, he dropped a letter to another connection, albeit a tenuous one, the then prime minister Harold Macmillan, about plans to modernise the Albert Bridge in West London, imploring: ‘Please, please do something about it.’¹⁰⁵

A particularly significant contact was Richard Crossman: minister of housing from 1964 to 1966, and someone who had known Betjeman since student days at Oxford. Indeed Crossman records a visit he, and his family, made to the poet’s house in 1965 to discuss ‘the reorganization of the section of the Ministry which deals with the preservation and listing of

¹⁰³ For example, see NA WORK 12/813 ‘Headquarters Accommodation London: Unified plan for the Whitehall Area, correspondence with the Victorian Society’ 12 February 1964.

¹⁰⁴ Betjeman’s daughter, Candida Lycett Green - herself a formidable campaigner – confirmed that, though her father was acquainted with a great many politicians, he himself ‘had no political leanings’ (quoted in J Betjeman, *Coming Home*, xiii); though, in Betjeman’s working library, preserved at Exeter University, there are two explicitly party political publications, which are pamphlets from Welsh nationalists Saunders Lewis and Wynne Samuel.

¹⁰⁵ Betjeman *Letters* 100.

houses.¹⁰⁶ Later Betjeman was invited to join a conference organised by Crossman's department to discuss policy regarding the preservation of historic towns.¹⁰⁷ Betjeman seems to have regarded that a successful event, remarking to Crossman that it was 'a marvellous gathering in that brain cellular college', and that 'I am sure the right conclusion was come to – that is to say, the triumph of the eye and heart over dates and styles', a sentiment to which Crossman responded sympathetically.¹⁰⁸ Indeed Crossman is regarded as one of the pivotal ministers who transformed departmental attitudes to conservation, seeking 'a new and sensible relationship between planning and preservation.'¹⁰⁹ For example, Crossman was

¹⁰⁶ R Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, vol. 1 Minister of Housing* (Book Club Associates London, 1975), 297, diary entry for 31 July 1965. The Crossman Diaries also include a jolly photograph of Betjeman and Crossman together at the Cropredy country fête.

¹⁰⁷ NA HLG 126/1830, notes for Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Preservation of the Character of Historic Areas Conference on 'Preservation and Change' at Cambridge University, 7-8 January 1966.

¹⁰⁸ NA HLG 126/1830 letter from Betjeman to Crossman dated 12 January 1966; Crossman's reply is dated 20 January.

¹⁰⁹ Crossman *Diaries* 623, diary entry for 11 August 1966; see also Delafons, *Politics and Preservation*. Though not usually enamoured of ministers, Betjeman identified five he regarded as having done 'good work' (Betjeman 'A Preservationist's Progress' 62-63). These were Conservatives Duncan Sandys (who founded the Civic Trust) and Nigel Birch, and – from Labour – Crossman, Anthony Crosland (one of Crossman's successors as cabinet minister responsible for planning matters in the Wilson government), and junior minister to both, Lord Kennet. Kennet – also known as Wayland Young – had a longstanding interest in

instrumental in laying the groundwork for the successful passage of the Civic Amenities Act of 1967, which provided statutory acceptance for extending protection on the grounds on special historical or architectural interest from beyond merely individual buildings to whole areas.¹¹⁰ This concept of the conservation area quickly became ‘an important tool in the battle against unrestrained development.’¹¹¹

It is also worth noting Betjeman’s contact with one individual very close to the centre of power in the late 1960s Britain who took his views particularly seriously. This was Mary Wilson, wife of the prime minister. She and Betjeman met in 1967, and according to Mary Wilson herself:

We established a rapport straight away and both wrote to each other the following day. Our letters crossed. From then onwards we met regularly right until the end of his life. We both loved quoting poetry to each other and we both liked the same type of things.¹¹²

historic buildings, and played a particularly significant role in reconfiguring conservation policy during his time as minister from 1966 to 1970.

¹¹⁰ Studdards and Hargreaves *Listed Buildings* 73; Crossman *Diaries* 525, diary entry for 20 May 1966.

¹¹¹ Ross *Planning and the Heritage* 30.

¹¹² M Wilson quoted in Betjeman *Letters* 313.

An exchange of poems – in the form of letters – about a shared train journey to Diss in Norfolk is perhaps the most famous artefact of this close relationship.¹¹³ The extent to which Mary Wilson influenced her husband’s views is difficult to assess, but it is noticeable that prime ministerial pronouncements about removing ‘the grime, muddle and decay of our Victorian heritage’ did dwindle after 1967.¹¹⁴ And more definitive evidence of the prime minister’s approval came with Betjeman’s knighthood in 1969, a classic acknowledgement of establishment preferment. While not always the most adept at making the most of his network of prominent political actors, Betjeman certainly used his ties to keep his ideas about the conservation of Victoriana current in top political circles.

3. *Persistence*

The third and final quality that Kingdon identified – and which he probably felt was most important – was sheer persistence, a willingness to champion ideas over a long period to whoever, whenever and by whatever means possible.¹¹⁵ This attribute Betjeman had in profusion. He would talk to anyone, from enthusiastic child to prime minister, about his concerns and, as A.N. Wilson notes, spent much of his time, to the detriment of his poetry,

¹¹³ M Wilson *New Poems* (Hutchinson London 1979)52-54; see also C Booth and C Haste *The Goldfish Bowl: Married to the Prime Minister 1955-1997* (Ted Smart London 2004) 136-137.

¹¹⁴ H Wilson quoted in Stamp *Lost Victorian Britain* 18.

¹¹⁵ Kingdon, *Agendas*, 181.

‘answering letters and campaigning [...] He was tireless, and deeply serious (for all his larking about).’¹¹⁶

In terms of longevity, Betjeman’s first radio on the topic of architectural conservation was in 1932 when he championed the original Waterloo Bridge¹¹⁷ and he was still campaigning into his final years. A newspaper report from 1980 highlights a typical Betjeman performance in support for the campaign to save Southend Pier. Betjeman – in his guise as president of the National Piers Society – was reported ‘being wheeled the mile-and-a-third length of the pier’, after which he declared: ‘To close Southend pier would be like cutting off a limb. Money doesn’t matter; beauty matters because beauty lasts.’¹¹⁸ The pier was eventually retained.

He was also prolific. In 1961 alone, *The Times* recorded his activities not only in support of the major buildings such as Coal Exchange and Euston Arch but appealing for the conservation of less famous structures such as a Barn at Avebury, Wiltshire; St Edmundsbury Theatre Royal, Bury St. Edmunds; and the Church of St Mary Radcliffe, Bristol.¹¹⁹ In addition to the main ‘battles’ reported in the press, Betjeman was also involved in many minor so-called ‘skirmishes’. Hillier provides, as one example, a handwritten letter to a thirteen-year-old schoolboy concerned about the fate of Lewisham town hall.¹²⁰ In this letter,

¹¹⁶ A N Wilson ‘John Betjeman: A Poetic Visionary Who Spoke For England’ *The Telegraph* (17 May 2014).

¹¹⁷ Games ‘Introduction’ 4.

¹¹⁸ *The Times* ‘Poet Laureate joins fight’ (31 July 1980).

¹¹⁹ *The Times* Reports and letters printed 12 January 1961, 9 February 1961, 3 May 1961, 7 July 1961, 27 September 1961.

¹²⁰ Hillier *Bonus of Laughter* 261.

from May 1961, Betjeman writes that he will refer the case to the Victorian Society and concludes: ‘Fight on and don’t be put off by officials & bigwigs.’¹²¹

Furthermore, as highlighted earlier, Betjeman’s persistence was augmented by his status as a pioneer in deploying a wide variety of media. Some of his poetry has been regarded as a form of conservationist propaganda, but more influential still was his prose writing, particularly his contribution to the famous *Shell Guides* of the counties of Britain, and his journalism such as his ‘City and Suburban’ column in the *Spectator*, and later the *Daily Telegraph*.¹²² He also co-wrote a play with a conservation theme – *Pity about the Abbey* – which was broadcast on television in 1965.¹²³ Most significantly of all, Betjeman was an accomplished performer on radio and television. As Tewdwr-Jones points out, Betjeman was ‘an artist’, involved not merely in the narration and images, but also in the editing, cutting and directing of programmes which were designed to produce ‘a form of architectural propaganda.’¹²⁴ For the masses, Betjeman became the nation’s ‘alternative planning expert.’¹²⁵ As Alan Powers notes:

People who never thought much about architecture saw unusual buildings represented in Shell posters that Betjeman commissioned in the 1930s, heard him give lectures up and down country, read his journalism and finally, switched on to find him as a born television performer, the first of a succession of wild-eyed eccentrics to present

¹²¹ Ibid 261-2.

¹²² Stamp ‘Lightweight wax fruit merchant’.

¹²³ Hillier *Bonus of Laughter* 192.

¹²⁴ Tewdwr-Jones ‘Oh the planners did their best’ 408.

¹²⁵ Ibid 390.

architecture to a mass audience that had previously been assumed to be indifferent to the subject.¹²⁶

Betjeman can be regarded as an early British example of a particular type of political celebrity popularised by the work of John Street, namely the artist, performer or ‘star’ who has used ‘their status and the medium within which they work to speak out on specific causes and for particular interests with a view to influencing political outcomes.’¹²⁷

In Kingdon’s terms, Betjeman was able to use his media profile to soften-up the wider public mood, gently but repetitively encouraging it to be less hostile to the relics of the Victorian age. This is acknowledged in a contribution to another debate in the House of Lords, this time from 1963, over planning powers for the proposed new Greater London Council. At one stage in this debate, former Conservative minister Lord Molson noted that:

Anyone who has had to deal with the preservation or listing of historic buildings comes up against two problems – the problems of date, and the problems of locality. As regards date, during the last few years, and largely as a result of the activities of Mr. John Betjeman, people have come to perceive architectural merit in many buildings which only 30 or forty years ago were not regarded as of any value at all.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ A Powers ‘Foreword’ *First and Last Loves: John Betjeman and Architecture* (Sir John Soane Museum London 2006) 4-5 at 4.

¹²⁷ J Street ‘Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation’ *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2004) 6 435-452 at 438.

¹²⁸ Lord Molson House of Lords Debates 21 May 1963 vol. 250 col. 158.

Though not as academically respectable as figures like Pevsner, Betjeman made a significant impact largely through his persistence and his personality. As Kenneth Clark – one of Britain’s best-known art historians – noted, Betjeman was possibly the most important name in the task of opening people’s eyes to the Victorian age precisely ‘because his influence has not been exerted through learned articles, but through poetry and conversation.’¹²⁹ Clark added, lyrically, that history ‘is not to be found solely in files of learned publications, but in human contacts and the radiation of a single personality.’

Conclusion

The 1960s marked a change in planning policy, from one in which concerns about modernisation tended to take precedence over issues of heritage – particularly concerning buildings from the Victorian era – to one where there was presumption in favour of preservation.¹³⁰ This transformation was confirmed by the growing reluctance to allow the demolition of buildings such as St Pancras and the Foreign Office and in the form of influential and effective legislation such as Civic Amenities Act of 1967 and the following year’s Town and Country Planning Act. Of the two names most associated with the raising interest in conserving aspects of the Victorian age in Britain, Betjeman and Pevsner, the latter was the more traditional academic expert and the one taken most seriously by political elite. Pevsner was, as Glendinning notes, Britain’s ‘most authoritative champion of Victoriana’, and also ‘the “secret weapon” that allowed the Conservation Movement in Britain to tackle the vast Victorian heritage’.¹³¹ Betjeman’s role was different but no less effective. He too –

¹²⁹ Quoted in Hillier *New Fame, New Love* 406.

¹³⁰ Delafons *Politics and Preservation* 103.

¹³¹ Glendinning *Conservation Movement* 315.

despite appearances – was a serious political operator who used, and enjoyed, the qualities associated with being a policy entrepreneur. Indeed, as a crude measure of comparative cultural impact on the political elites, the name ‘Pevsner’ results in thirty-six ‘hits’ on the Hansard archive (which searches mentions in the official proceedings of the House of Commons and the House of Lords from 1803 to 2005); ‘Betjeman’ results in a more substantial 105.

In terms of Kingdon’s ‘problem stream’, Betjeman helped popularise a renewed respect for certain types of Victorian architecture and prominently framed the destruction of such buildings as a ‘problem’ in print, on radio, and on television. Until that point successive governments had haphazardly acknowledged the need to protect historic buildings, most notably illustrated by the introduction of the listing process in the 1940s, but for much of the twentieth century Victorian buildings were not regarded widely as worthy of such support. Betjeman used all the credibility he had built up through his celebrity and his association with numerous organisations and individuals to encourage others to change their view. As noted earlier, he was not the only figure to challenge the prevailing opinion that mid-to-late nineteenth century buildings were ripe for redevelopment but Betjeman was amongst the first and – as Clark noted – the most conspicuous to pose the question that hastened the process of change: ‘can it really be true that the Victorian age in England which produced such great poets and artists produced no architects?’¹³²

In terms of the policy stream, Betjeman was active in suggesting policy solutions to attach to the constructed problem of the destruction of Victorian Britain, both in formal and informal policy communities, and through personal contact with high-ranking politicians. Ideas

¹³² Betjeman *First and Last Loves* 134.

circulated by Betjeman and the Victorian Society about widening and strengthening the listing process were picked up by sympathetic ministers, who were increasingly minded to intervene to protect Victorian architecture as time went on. Most notably, Betjeman was able to influence the public mood in Britain primarily through his radio and television work as well as his journalism. As Powers enthuses, '[g]rowing up in an age of new communication media, Betjeman was probably the greatest communicator architecture has ever had.'¹³³

Significantly, Lord Kennet, a minister involved in planning matters in Wilson's 1966-70 government – and observer of the effectiveness of Betjeman's advocacy – remarked that his work did no less than to shape a nation's way of seeing its own history, claiming that it 're-awakened our visual nostalgia, but as an informed, not sentimental nostalgia, [while he] gave us enjoyment by sharing his own.'¹³⁴ This provided the accommodating setting for decision makers such as Kennet to be able to change policy. And it is telling that, in 1969, Kennet was making the case that the Wilson government – which had so recently promised a 'New Britain' and the modern images that would reinforce it – should instead be lauded for its services towards conservation, and that the Conservatives should be excoriated for their role in the destruction of the Euston Arch, now regarded – with phrasing redolent of Betjeman – as 'the great shibboleth and paradigm of Philistine demolition in our century in London'.¹³⁵

Nearly fifty years later, Betjeman's cultural legacy – at least one based on his simplified image as doughty champion of Victoriana – lives on. The Victorian Society he co-founded still exists, campaigning with vigour, the celebrity element currently provided by popular

¹³³ Powers 'Foreword' 4.

¹³⁴ Kennet *Preservation* 52.

¹³⁵ Lord Kennet House of Lords 4 February 1969 Debates vol. 299 col 127

television presenter and Victorian Society Vice President, Griff Rhys Jones.¹³⁶ Currently it is fighting to save the integrity of, amongst many other Victorian buildings, the Ambassadors Theatre in London and the Harris Museum in Preston. Moreover, it still fulfils its statutory functions as one of the national amenity societies.¹³⁷ In addition, the Victorian Society has been the acknowledged model for other similar organisations, for example the Twentieth Century Society founded in 1979 as the Thirties Society, to protect buildings of a later era, and initially led by Betjeman's biographer, Bevis Hillier. Moreover, the Victorian Society inspired kindred spirits across the Atlantic: the Victorian Society in America, 'a sister organization to the Victorian Society in the U.K.', was founded in 1966.¹³⁸

Regarding the man himself, with his distinctively hatted, endearingly fageyish appearance frozen in a statue (by Martin Jennings, completed in 2007) on London's St Pancras Station, Betjeman's image as the nation's teddy bear has been strikingly preserved; though, as Morse has suggested, this image has sometimes hindered the process of taking Betjeman seriously as a poet or a political campaigner.¹³⁹ Demonstrating a more direct political legacy, John Hayes, as minister of transport, recently referred to 'Betjeman's advocacy of the romance of the rail'¹⁴⁰ and – in a much-publicised speech entitled 'The journey to beauty' – has used

¹³⁶ The Victorian Society 'The Victorian Society: Campaigning for Victorian and Edwardian Architecture' (2017), available at www.victoriansociety.org.uk/.

¹³⁷ Department for Communities and Local Government (24 March 2015), Arrangements for handling heritage applications Direction 2015, available at www.gov.uk.

¹³⁸ Victorian Society in America 'About Us' (2016), available at www.victoriansociety.org.

¹³⁹ Morse *Reading the Victorians* 1-3.

¹⁴⁰ J Hayes Westminster Hall Debates 2 December 2014 col 99WH.

language redolent of Betjeman to call for, *inter alia*, ‘No more soulless ubiquity. No more demolition of our railway heritage.’¹⁴¹ The ‘totem’ Hayes picks out as ‘our guide to the future, our chance to signal the renaissance’ is a significant one. He promises that ‘[w]e will make good the terrible damage that was done to Euston, by resurrecting the Euston Arch.’¹⁴² As noted earlier, in 1961 Conservative grandee Rab Butler suggested that no-one considered Euston Arch ‘actually beautiful’. Over half a century later, rebuilding the edifice Betjeman fought long to protect will be considered by Butler’s successors the single most significant signpost on a ‘journey to beauty’.

¹⁴¹ J Hayes ‘The Journey to beauty’ speech delivered on 31 October 2016 at the Independent Transport Commission discussion evening
<http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-transport>.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*