

## **‘The non-professional study of Ecclesiology’: a brief history of the Ecclesiological Society**

### **Purpose**

*Did they intend merely to visit, in an agreeable but unintellectual way, a certain number of churches?* – challenged Alexander Beresford Hope. He was speaking to members of the new St Paul’s Ecclesiological Society – our Society, under its original name – during his inaugural address on Tuesday, 1 April 1879. He hoped members would not limit themselves in this way, and went on to encourage them to maintain and develop the ‘science of Ecclesiology’, which was the study of worship in ‘all its material developments’.

The language may be dated, but the point he made is robust, and has stood the test of time. Since its foundation, the Society has continued to study all the physical appurtenances of worship, such as church buildings, furnishings, artistic embellishments, liturgy and music.

It is worth emphasising that from the beginning the Society has been devoted to learning and debate, rather than attempting to lay down the law. This is in contrast with the original Ecclesiological Society, which had been founded forty years previously, in 1839 (beginning life as the Cambridge Camden Society). This earlier Society had been a highly-effective pressure group for the Gothic style, together with a rigid set of ‘laws of church arrangement’. These views had been transmitted with verve, sarcasm and cast-iron certainty through its famous Journal, *The Ecclesiologist*.

But the original Society failed to recruit, the membership aged, and with the close of *The Ecclesiologist* in 1868 (the last issue claiming, with some truth, that ‘we have the satisfaction of retiring from the field victors’), the original Society seems quietly to have faded away, though it was said to have been represented at the funeral of Sir George Gilbert Scott as late as 1878.

### **Foundation**

A prospectus for the new St Paul’s Ecclesiological Society (the present one) announced it to be a ‘successor’ of the Ecclesiological Society, by then ‘dissolved’. Canon *Gregory*, one of the Vice- Presidents, recalled how the new Society had begun ‘as the result of a conversations he had had with a few gentlemen . . . who remarked to him that a want would be supplied if the young men of London could visit the churches of the metropolis, under efficient guidance, on their Saturday half-holidays’.

The object of the new Society, headlined on its first set of *Transactions*, was ‘the non-professional study of Ecclesiology’. This less than inspiring strapline was quietly dropped in succeeding years.

The first president was the dean of St Paul’s, who held the presidency for 21 years. It was because the Society met at the Cathedral that it was called ‘The St Paul’s Ecclesiological Society’, no doubt to help make clear that it was newly founded.

The two surviving prime movers of the original 1839 Ecclesiological Society, Beresford Hope and Benjamin Webb, both became members of the new Society. As we have seen, Beresford Hope gave the inaugural address, and both he and Webb were Vice-Presidents. (It was a peculiarity of the Society at this time that more than ten percent of its membership

were Vice-Presidents.) Very few other members of the original Society joined the new one: many would by then have been elderly.

The new Society began with a bang, with nearly 250 members, including some of the leading architects, liturgists and church historians of the day – men like G. H. Birch, R. H. Carpenter, Alfred Heales, J. Wickham Legg, T. Gambier Parry, J. D. Sedding, J. P. Seddon, Sparrow Simpson, and J. C. Wall.

### **Activities**

In its first years, the Society visited churches old and new, held lectures, and published learned articles. It has, of course, done much the same ever since, the most significant innovation since 1879 being the launch of the Society's website, though this had to await the invention of the internet, and was not introduced for 120 years, in 1998.

For the first sixty years, until 1937, the Society published a continuous Journal, *Transactions of the St Paul's Ecclesiological Society*. Many of the articles in this series broke new ground, and are of very high quality. This was followed by a more intermittent series, the *Transactions of the Ecclesiological Society* (by then the Society had changed its name), until about 1957.

Other publications followed, including a useful series of short monographs, and a lively newsletter. The Society now produces a periodical twice a year (*Ecclesiology Today*), and occasional monographs.

The tradition of visiting churches has, of course, continued, together with that of organising lectures, including the well-established annual Dykes Bower memorial lecture, begun in 1998, and the Annual Conference, first held in 1996.

### **Crises**

It has not, of course, been entirely a smooth ride. Somewhat embarrassingly, there were financial rumblings just one year after the foundation of the Society, when it was realised that income from subscriptions would not equal expenditure, probably because the life-membership fee was set so low. After continued expressions of concern by the Treasurer, and largely unsuccessful appeals for donations, subscriptions were raised in 1884.

Money became a major problem during 1922, largely, it seems, due to excessive expenditure on a previous edition of the *Transactions*. This left the Society technically insolvent. The immediate response was to expel about one quarter of the membership for arrears of subscriptions; for the next few years the *Transactions* were rather thin.

One major decision which seems to have caused some angst was the question of the admission of women. This was first raised at the AGM in 1907. It was recorded that 'an animated discussion followed, from which it appeared that members were by no means in accord on the subject', and it was put aside for further consideration. This incendiary subject was left alone for six years, until at the AGM in 1913 'some discussion ensued', but 'no definite decision' was reached. Finally the Council took a grip on the situation, and at the AGM the following year made a recommendation to admit ladies. There was a long discussion, before it was finally agreed that 'there is nothing in the constitution of the Society to limit the membership to men', and the great matter was settled. By the following year, eight ladies had joined.

Throughout much of the first part of the twentieth century there seem to have been worries about membership, which hovered between 250 and 300, and then began a steady

though slow decline after the clear-out of members in 1922. In 1936, with membership having dropped below two hundred, the Society created a subcommittee to review its future. One recommendation – contested by some members at the AGM the following year – was to change the name to the Ecclesiological Society (dropping the prefix *St Paul's*) and this was finally agreed at an Extraordinary General Meeting attended by just 23 members later that year.

Despite this attempt to reposition the Society, numbers did not rise substantially, and by the 1960s they had dropped to something around one hundred members. At this time there was an active programme of visits, but little in the way of publications. A relaunch of the Society by Stephen Humphrey, the Secretary at the time, supported by a number of Council members, finally led to the desired growth. Since then, membership has been on a general upward trend, and now stands at around 900 members.

Until about thirty years ago the Society was firmly based in London and the surrounding area. Almost all visits started from London. Today, although still weighted towards southern England by a factor of about two to one, the Society's reach is national, and visits to churches take place all over the country.

### **Continuity**

Thus the Society has been in continuous, though not entirely untroubled, existence since 1879. The Council hopes that, after more than 125 years, the Society still meets the needs of those who find churches and their use a fascinating subject for recreation and study, and who enjoy, from time to time, meeting others of a similar turn of mind, making it 'the Society for those who love churches'.

Trevor Cooper, Chairman of Council

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