Why the blight is stark enough

by Patrick Wright

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A FEW WEEKS ago I visited the only National Trust property in the East End of London. A starred Grade II listed building, Sutton House stands on a busy corner of Homerton High Street in Hackney. Built in the early 1500s, the building has since accumulated four and a half centuries' worth of additions –from Georgian through to English free style. Old London guide-books spell out its significant features: 16th century linenfold panelling; Jacobean stairs ; a mullioned window rumoured to have come from a Spanish Armada galleon; ancient armorial wall-painting, Jacobean fire-places . . . Writing for the National Trust in 1945, John Summerson singled out Sutton House as a valuable 'composition of fragmentary beauties welded together m the course of time'

A peeling notice still hangs between boarded-up windows to inform the visitor that Sutton House was given to the National Trust by W. A. Robertson, a gift made in the 'memory of two brothers lost in the first world war. By December 1936 restoration had become urgent and a public appeal was launched in *The Times* - a letter signed by the chairman of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the president of the London Survey Committee, and a vice-president of the National Trust. The appeal declared Sutton House to be the most interesting secular building in the East End of London, and insisted that it must somehow be preserved for social services and similar purposes in the district. The vice-president of the National Trust was George Lansbury, Poplar councillor, Labour MP for Bow and Bromley, and erstwhile leader of the Labour Party.

After the Second World War, in the early decades of the welfare state, Sutton House found exactly the sort of use that Lansbury and his co-signatories had proposed. Functional strip-lighting still hangs there as testimony to the years in which various charities have come and gone, succeeded by Hackney Social Services department and later by the white collar trade union ASTMS, based there until 1982. While this period of bureaucratic use has left its mark, the visitor doesn't have to be especially discerning to notice that parts of Sutton House have since been refurnished in conventional inner city blitz style. The

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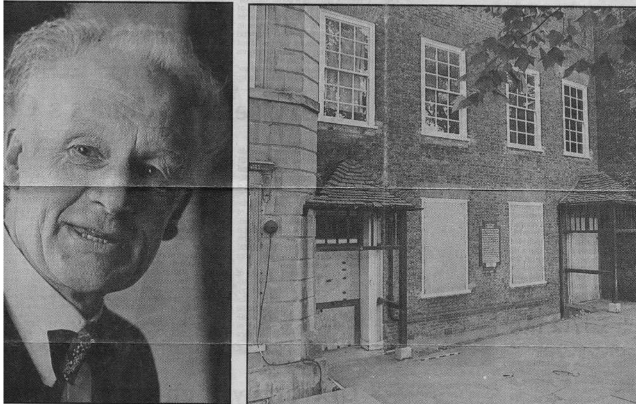
decór of some upstairs rooms dates from the squat that occupied the empty building in 1985.

East End, PATRICK WRIGHT finds proof that the National Trust must put

the blight is stark



Care in the country, neglect in the inner city. Top: Wallington Hall in Northumberland, below, Sutton House in Hackney. Left: James Lees-Milne, ar

Since then things have gone badly wrong. Damp and rot are creeping through the structure. Fireplaces have been stolen or shattered and left lying around in pieces. The sections of armorial painting that aren't sunk under coats of post-war emulsion are blistering away from the wall. The panelling has gone too. A lot of it was stolen - ripped out of the empty building some time last year. It was flogged to an architectural salvage company which recognised its exceptional rarity, and saw that it was returned to the Trust, which now stores it in the safety of the Shires.

Sutton House has fallen into this ruinous state in an anniversary year. Last April the National Trust celebrated the fact that its Country Houses Scheme was 50 years old. The *Spectator,* at least, was punctual in its celebration of an organisation which has been 'holding the bridge' for half a century.
The securing of the country house against the taxing drift of post-war times has been a major preservationist achievement. But the shocking state of Sutton House

- an urban house - suggests that there may be grounds for a more critical look at the Trust's post-war development. We should start by recognising that the country house has not just been preserved: it has also been cultivated as a quotation from a supposedly grander age, one that sparkles with new and distinctly modern significance as it is played off against the grey prose of the post-war settlement surrounding it.

Just as the medieval heaven needed the horrors of hell to keep its contrastingly celestial features clear, the Trust's country house heritage has come to depend on an encompassing sense of danger for its own clarity of definition. A full understanding of the triumphant Country Houses Scheme will consequently remain impossible unless we look beyond the noble edifices which have absorbed so much celebratory attention over the last four decades, and consider the dark portrayals of danger massed in its shadows.

In 1936the young James Lees-Milne was employed (on the recommendation of Vita Sackville West) as secretary to the new National Trust committee responsible for the Country Houses Scheme. His involvement with this aspect of the Trust's work was to extend for a full 50 years. Lees-Milne grasped the polarity between heritage and danger in deeply autobiographical terms. As a child he had grown up in the timeless tranquility of Whickhamford Manor near Evesham, but he also knew the threat of dispossession — bundled up by his father in the infernal image of the General Strike and looming revolution. At Eton and Oxford this structure of feeling was appropriately confirmed, Lees-Milne learned to love the threatened country house as the embodiment of all that was precious in the nation. He also learned that 'one cannot love without hating' and, with the fervour of a convert, adopted Communism as the necessary object of his hatred.

In the 1930s Lees-Milne was a Franco supporter of extreme and reactionary opinion, and the polarity between heritage and danger proliferates luxuriously in his published diaries from the 1940s. Initially part of a civilised barbarism which values buildings over people, it goes on to establish an opposition between the traditional nation and the degenerate modern society which, after the war, was threatening to displace it. The Communist menace was certainly still abroad, but its domestic equivalent emerged as Churchill gave was to Attlee.

The instinctive aristocratic culture and naturalised social hierarchy embodied by the country house were easily redirected against the false enlightenment of 1945.

Lees-Milne viewed the democracy of those whom he called the 'little people' with undisguised contempt, and he scorned attempts to harness the country house to the cause of social democratic reform. In March 1948 Lees-Milne visited Attingham Park in Shropshire, where George Trevelyan was setting up an adult education college, and his comments are typical: 'A little folk-dancing, some social economy, and Fabianism for the miners and their wlves. We felt quite sick from the nonsense of it all. At a time when this country is supposed to be bankrupt they spend (our) money on semi-education of the lower classes who will merely learn from it to be dissatisfied. The house looked very forlorn and down at heel which worried me a good deal.'

The polarity between traditional nation and modem society quickly developed a territorial dimension. Some areas had been lost forever and in these no one should expect to find the traditional nation at all. The East End of London was clearly one such place. Ten years after the Lansbury appeal, Lees-Milne made his first reluctant visit to the Trust's Hackney property in April 1946. 'And what a wretched one !,' he commented: 'It is no more important than hundreds of other Georgian houses still left in slum areas. Very derelict after the bombing all around it. Tenanted by a number of charitable bodies. It does have one downstairs room of linenfold panelling. 1 found it terribly depressing and longed to hurry away.'

Bombs may not have been so absolutely good for these slums as they were for Betjeman's unrelievedly modem Slough, but with the true nation beleaguered and needing assistance in the Shires, Sutton House could be abandoned to the municipal oblivion that was already engulfing it. And this is what happened. When Lees-Milne prepared the National Trust guide to its buildings (published by Batsford in 1948) Sutton House went unmentioned. I'm told by the Trust's librarian that the file even got lost.

James Lees-Milne merged the Trust's widely supported and quite legitimate concern that historic buildings and collections be preserved with an anti-democratic and reactionary assessment of post-war social developments. His was not the only influence over the Country Houses Scheme, but the anti-democratic bacillus was there from the start. It kept renewing itself in the post-war period, breaking through to plague the Country Houses Scheme with regular turns for the worse.

It emerges in the Trust's well-developed style of appeal and acquisition, and especially in the sense of imminent crisis that pervades the Trust's work with country houses. The emergency has certainly been real for some buildings and collections, but it can also be incorporated into an advantageously managed sense of perpetual crisis — which puts the Trust itself beyond critical question.

The most intriguing signs of disease have appeared in the aesthetic which the Trust has built up around the country house. Country houses often come to the Trust through an arrangement which guarantees continued rights of residence to the family concerned. The Trust's country house aesthetic has accordingly been bent over backwards to make a special feature of ancestral continuity.
The family itself is incorporated into the exhibition. Its possessions are displayed in a vital associational context where the whole is always more than the sum of its parts, and which is offered in superior contrast to the dead classificatory procedures of the public museum.

A particular imagination of the country house interior lies at the heart of this aesthetic. Behind the door, which only the Trust can open with proper discretion, lies an esoteric chamber of private association where the centuries are still in place. Preserved against a modern world where history has degenerated into false 'progress,' the National Trust interior is a place of incremental value, where meaning has accumulated undisturbed. The really authentic National Trust interior is even set off against secular ideas of interior arrangement or design. Idealized, certainly, it also tends to be rather untidy: mixing up priceless masterpieces with stuff that would not be indistinguishable from ordinary household junk were it not for the enchantment of ancestral association.

The Trust is not directly responsible for everything that has followed from its cult of the country house, but there can be no doubt that it has promoted some of the more questionable interpretations of its own work. Six months after the empty Sutton House was squatted in 1985, the Trust opened its Treasure Houses of Britain exhibition in Washington DC. Here was an unquestionably lavish display of the yields of the Country Houses Scheme, organized as a series of stately interiors. Predictably, the exhibition placed the private aristocratic past at the centre of its definition of the national culture, celebrating the aristocrat as a figure of profound humanity and culture.

The exhibition catalogue included an essay by Marcus Binney and Gervase Jackson-Stops reviewing 'the last hundred years' of British history from the

viewpoint of the country house. As this essay showed, when the country house is take n as the yardstick of national history, every attempt at redistribution and democratic social reform looks like treason.

But the most striking feature of the catalogue concerns the National Trust interior. The argument about ancestral continuity, and the inimitable aura achieved by objects in their proper associational context, is displayed as lavishly as any exhibit. While the implied criticism of the public museum fits well into an age of cuts, privatization, and admission charges back home, it finds different connections in the United States where it is used to persuade Americans that their own well-stocked museums cannot hope to rival the authenticity of a visit to the old country itself. This ingenious application of aesthetics to the promotion of tourism is good patriotic stuff, but there is more to the catalogue than this.

In his discussion of The British as Collectors, Prof. Francis Haskell quotes from what has indeed become an inaugural moment for the National Trust. Going back beyond the 1890s, when the Trust was actually formed, Haskell raises the voice of Quartremére de Quincy, the French archaeologist and theorist of museums, from the 1790s when the Museum of French Monuments was established.

This was a public institution set up by the revolutionary authorities to save valued artefacts from the blows of over-zealous republicans, and to incorporate them into a programme of political re-education. Chateaubriand and other figures of the Right condemned this disenchanting (and short-lived) museum as a wretched attempt to separate art from its proper identity with Church, aristocracy and monarchy. As for Quatremére de Quincy, it was in his attack on the museum that he launched the modern argument about the vitality of associational context and the humiliation suffered by works of art when they are exhibited in statutory public space.

There could be no clearer indication of the cultural drift that has beset the National Trust since the Country Houses Scheme was set in train by James Lees-Milne. While the Trust was actually set up in 1895 to promote a public interest over the delinquency and neglect of private owners, the post-war country house aesthetic now offers to refound the organisation in the French 1790s, aligning it with a reactionary assertion of private meaning, and identifying the public interest with the rampaging egalitarianism of a revolutionary mob that would make even George Lansbury blush.

The dismal fate of Sutton House fits against this background all too well. The Trust insists that it has tried hard to find a community use for the building, but to no avail. In the apparent absence of local inter-st, Sutton House was finally advertised in the *Estates Gazette* in 1985 and a developer, with whom the Trust has arranged the terms of a lease, has applied for planning permission to turn the building into five residential units.

But the problem is broader than this. The Trust's officers may have been stumbling vigorously in the direction of their distressed charge, but it is a sad fact that vigour alone — however heroically it is maintained — will not ensure that the stumbling man ever arrives at his destination.

Sutton House is administered from Hughendon Manor in Buckinghamshire, a poor cousin from the London slums squeezed under the leafy umbrella of the Trust's Thames and Chiltern Region. The distance between the Hackney building and the Trust's office in the manor can be counted in a few dozen miles. But ordinary mileage can't measure the cultural chasm that has opened between them during the years of the Country Houses Scheme. How many miles, after all, come between the private traditions of the aristocratic mansion and the public interest of the inner city; between the French 1790s and the English 1890s; between the Trust's country house paradigm and a non-conforming building acquired before this paradigm was assembled ?

Embarrassed by the recent (and undeniably 'local') agitations of the Save Sutton House Campaign, the Trust is now urging the objectors to sit down with its chosen developer to see if some sort of public usage can't be built into his proposed scheme. A mixture of residential and community use may indeed be appropriate, but it would be scandalous if the Trust were to expect a local campaign to raise hundreds of thousands of pounds and then to buy the public interest back into a building which has already been given to the nation ' inalienably' and restored through public appeal.

Sutton House confronts the Trust with a genuinely historical opportunity. Here on Homerton High Street, the Trust can return to its roots in that founding Victorian concern with the public good. It can honour the memory of its own democratic past - from Octavia Hill to George Lansbury - and it can start to separate its proper preservationist cause from the fraudulently ancestralised history which it has been peddling in the Shires. As Paul Gilroy has recently

insisted, the 'expressive cultures' of Britain's black population prove that ethnicity doesn't have to be lived in grimly traditional terms. The people of Hackney would doubtless be interested to see the National Trust demonstrate that a traditional building like Sutton House can do very well without primitive dreams of descent like those which the Trust has been building into its conception of significant national culture—during the very years when Britain, out there beyond the deer park, has most visibly become a multi-cultural society.

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