

The Sack of Bath

Forty Years On

On Wednesday July 24, 2013 7:30 pm an event was held at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the publication of The Sack of Bath.

The following document contains the text of two of the speeches given at the event.

Introduction to Adam Fergusson

Caroline Kay, Chief Executive, Bath Preservation Trust

It gives me great pleasure to be the warm up act for Adam Fergusson this evening.

Adam Fergusson, was born in Scotland in 1932, graduated in history at Cambridge, was a journalist with the Glasgow Herald, the Statist and The Times. He has been a Member of the European Parliament, a Special Adviser at the Foreign Office, and a consultant on European affairs for international industry and commerce. He has written five books, including three novels; many articles and pamphlets; the book and lyrics of three musical comedies; and much light verse. He is a Vice President of the Bath Preservation Trust.

However Adam's name is probably best known in Bath as the author of the Sack of Bath, whose first edition came out 40 years ago. Perhaps this is an appropriate time for reflection on both the Sack in its context, and the current situation in which Bath finds itself.

40 years ago... unlike some people in this room I am old enough to remember 40 years ago, and had visited Bath on a school trip, but was neither local enough nor old enough to have an inkling of what was going on. However, my brother-in-law, who is a bit older than me, was in 1970-71 an actor with the Bristol Old Vic theatre company and performing Midsummer Night's Dream and A Patriot for Me in rep at the Bath Theatre Royal while the Bristol Old Vic underwent refurbishment. He remembers travelling into Bath on the train one day with a developer - nameless sadly - who, looking out of the window at the Georgian city in front of him, waved his arm and said 'I can have all of this down and redeveloped in 6 months'.

So that is what the passionate fighters who came together in the early 70s were up against at the time. Undoubtedly there were parts of Bath that needed rebuilding and redevelopment after war damage and years of austerity. But the failure to

recognise the special qualities manifest in the completeness of the Georgian City, and to actively destroy parts of the City that were far from beyond repair, was a wilful blind spot in the consideration of how to undertake that redevelopment.

Turning to the present, a regular complaint by contrast is how hard it is to get things done in Bath, how impossible it is to change things, how limiting, perhaps, the constraints of the conservation area, listed buildings regulations, even the World Heritage Site designation can be. But anyone who has these thoughts should be careful what they wish for, and read the Sack of Bath with care. Probably what happened then could not happen now. But other threats do exist.

Bath's World Heritage Site designation in 1987, and the words used to describe it, encapsulated the idea of a precious little city bursting with grand social and aesthetic ideas as manifested in its architecture and its landscape, and nestling in a bowl of hills which meant that the visitor approached the city through an unspoilt rural hinterland until the city was, as it were, upon her. This World Heritage Site setting is supposed to be protected by a buffer zone which, let us be clear about it, aims from UNESCO's point of view to restrict development if it threatens the quality of the site. To date Bath and North East Somerset Council had argued that the Green belt and the AONB constitute that buffer zone. But now they are proposing to build significant numbers of houses within those very areas of Green belt and AONB. The World Heritage Site cannot be deemed to be safe in their hands if this is what they plan for these nationally designated sites.

Bath Preservation Trust's position is clear about these developments. We oppose them, not just for the reasons stated above, but because we believe they are a manifestation of a wider problem in the way planning is now being applied to Bath. In the aftermath of the Sack, power for planning of the city was essentially temporarily removed from the local authority and given to a working party which included national government and national amenity groups such as the Georgian Group as well as local representatives including the Trust.

What such a desperate measure recognised was that Bath was uniquely special and that its national importance needed national input to determine its local plan. We feel that again, the system has lost touch with the idea that Bath is a special place. All we would like to see now is that same recognition, and similarly bespoke solutions being applied. If the planning authority first and foremost, as well as secretaries of state and planning inspectors alike, recognised that Bath is uniquely special, then from that knowledge should the plans emerge, rather than from a formula-based assessment of housing numbers which can never be met if the definition of need is 'anyone who wants to live in Bath'.

We have reached, I believe, another of these moments where one should say 'thus far and no further', because if you go further the City ceases to be the Bath that

was fought for so hard in the 60s and 70s and which we and millions from round the world enjoy and value today.

I look forward immensely to what Adam has to say, and am delighted to hand over to him now.

The Sack of Bath - forty years on.

Adam Fergusson

This is a most unlikely commemoration. Forty years ago, when The Times sent me down to Bath to see what the fuss was about - and Tony Snowdon to take photographs - it was inconceivable that *The Sack of Bath* would still be in print and, alas, would still be relevant today.

I went there then as a journalist - fair-minded, non-judgmental, willing to hear all sides (like all journalists) - and returned as a crusader, profoundly shaken and motivated by what I had seen and heard. The bulldozers were still destroying huge stretches of what had been a complete Georgian town - not the grandest bits like the Baths and the Assembly Rooms where the visitors went, or the Crescents where they stayed, but, in their thousands, the little houses of the true 18th-century Bathonians.

I am talking of the chair-carriers, the grooms, the buhl-cutters, the porters, the builders, the wig-makers, the shopkeepers; yes, and the pimps, pickpockets and prostitutes - all the people who lived full-time in that contemporary Las Vegas. Streets and streets of elegant little gems were disappearing under the lax preservation regulations of the time; and horrible new brutal developments were changing the character of the whole.

The articles I wrote then became a book, and the book described that scandal, so I shan't go over it again. And the preface to the latest Persephone edition (for anyone kind enough to read it) covers the extraordinary outcry which exploded across Britain, then Europe, then even to America, that followed its publication.

It describes the effect it had in changing planning laws, levering urban conservation into public minds, and quickly bringing the serial destruction of period Bath and other cities to an end.

I shan't revisit that either, in part because, although the threat to Bath's surrounding countryside was mentioned, it was not so immediate as now.

Instead, in the context of preserving our heritage, urban and rural, I want to talk about words: about how words can be employed to warn or to inspire - but also to

confuse, to disguise and to mislead. And, in the matter of planning about how language may thus be used for power and manipulation.

May I digress first on the importance of titles: The one originally suggested for *The Sack of Bath* was the workaday "Bath at Risk". Next came "Bath in Danger", the idea of Sir Christopher Chancellor, then chairman of the Bath Preservation Trust. Well, fine: for it was true: it was in danger. But a proper red alert called for something more emotive. Sack turned out to be the *mot juste*. It caught the imagination. It conjured up the Sack of Carthage, although the Romans there were a good deal more thorough than Bath City Council. *They* levelled the *entire* city to the ground and then ploughed it up. Or it smacks of the Sack of Rome - actually, Rome was sacked six times in all by *inter alios* the Vandals, the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths and the Saracens; so perhaps we should take that as a warning that it can happen more than once.

The Bath *cause celebre* struck chords across the world in 1973: the French were stirred by *Le Sac de Bath; die Plunderung von Bath* excited the Germans. And the name carries on, used by commentators and writers, some of whom I expect have never read the book, or were still unborn when it was written. And the Bath Preservation Trust still refers to that late-60s-early-1970s era of wholesale destruction as "the Sack".

Now, here is another title to contemplate.:

The Bath and North-East Somerset Core Strategy Development Plan Document

Many of you are familiar with it. At present it is the subject of some contention. It was intended as the blueprint, now rejected by the Inspector, for Bath's development up to 2026. It asserted the need now for 11,000 or so new houses in the area (but the Inspector wanted even more), some designated for several green-field sites round Bath.

Well, I am not going to take part in any dispute about the details of these local proposals and counter-proposals. Too many people more knowledgeable than I are coming from too many different directions. My simple view - restated in the most recent Sack's preface - is that the rural setting of Bath is not to be trifled with any more. So you can guess what I feel about the Wansdyke.

My purpose, now, is to highlight the use of language as a weapon in the developer's armoury. I'm sure it's not a new weapon, but I think the layman - whose surroundings and future are at stake - is finding it more threatening than ever.

I therefore move on to a marginally more succinct but no less dispiriting title, that of the *Core Strategy's* offshoot, now 2 years old: the *Sustainability Appraisal*

Scoping Report. This 55-page study informs us (and you must follow me closely) that -

“wider issues of sustainable construction are now covered in a specific sustainable construction policy which includes standards for sustainable design for residential and non-residential development - [standards] which change over time in response to government targets”.

Not exactly, I think, how a Milton would have put it. And Milton himself was no mean coiner of new words.

But this word “sustainable”. We know what it means when economists tell us that Britain’s spending on welfare is not sustainable. Or that unlimited Quantitative Easing - that newish euphemism for the debauchery of our currency - is not sustainable. But what does it mean when used by planners, as it is all the time - sustainability, this condition to which they are all apparently pledged?

Last year’s controversial *National Planning Policy Framework* (which has already made things so much harder for the Council) itself insists that “housing applications should be considered in the context of presumption in favour of sustainable development.”

You can plough through the whole *Sustainable Appraisal Scoping Report* - as I have done to my mental bewilderment and exhaustion - without finding any interpretation of the word. The Oxford English Dictionary provides several definitions that can hardly apply, thus - “Capable of being borne or endured; capable of being upheld or defended”. Well, all right, although clearly any judgment of whether a development can be endured or defended would be entirely subjective.

Googling it is more helpful. Sustainable, in the planning context, is there said to mean “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the requirements of future generations”.

So there you are. It sounds admirable. But who’s to judge what future requirements may be, and by whose criteria?

Sustainability is not just jargon. It is another weasel word. Its use is already up-front among the promoters of the HS2 railway.

It seems that if a planner declares that a plan, a proposal, a strategy is sustainable, then there need be no argument. Officially, no future has been nor will be compromised. It is a first-class example of begging a question.

Public companies too now tend to speak piously of sustainability. They previously conjured with CSR - Corporate Social Responsibility, an incantation that still lingers on. As with the ethically-posturing PPP (People-Planet-Profit, the proper

formulaic order for appraisal), it isn't so hard to detect the warm, soft touch of wool being pulled over our eyes.

I am reminded of that scourge of Bath four decades ago - the assumed urban benefit of what they called "comprehensive development". It was based on the premise, unchallenged by a cowed and confused city council, that only total destruction would allow the phoenix of an architectural Utopia to re-emerge from the flames. Of course, in time, this dismal creed was met by its diametrically opposite one - comprehensive *conservation* applied to and provided within a conservation area.

Weasel words. A great fund of these came in that now defunct 2009 effusion with the snappy title *The B&NES Core Strategy Spatial Options Consultation*, mostly written in the tautological, impenetrable, mind-numbing planning-speak which persuades the most diligent lay reader that it has something to hide.

It was long on words like "visioning" and "locational" and "place-based" and "vibrancy"; and "parameters". It had plans (or were they strategies?) for "delivering the vision", to "deliver Strategy Objectives" and even (once) to "facilitate delivery of facilities." One typical flourish in that vapid, uneducated bombast declared that "Meeting the special objectives of the Sustainable Community Strategy for the District as well as the Council's Corporate Vision and its *eight* priorities will be the key objective of the Core Strategy".

So the objective was to meet objectives. Who writes that kind of drivel? Who accepts it? Why? Remember - we pay their salaries. And we pay for what they build.

In his call for clearer language from the civil service Michael Gove has taken up the cudgel of Winston Churchill - he who wrote that well-known marginalium on an official paper, "this is redundant nonsense up with which I will not put". The public whose environment is under threat deserves no less verbal and grammatical clarity from its *local* authorities. The Plain English Campaign would surely agree. So perhaps would the Planning Inspector.

Yet the *Spatial Options Study* for Bath was not all like that: a third of the way through its 150 pages a light shone through and the language changed. The obligation was acknowledged to protect "the setting of the World Heritage Site [the UNESCO accolade Bath won only in 1987] from the adverse effects of inappropriate development". We were invited to picture a "Georgian city with architecture and landscape combined harmoniously". Here are "Palladio's ideas transposed to the scale of a complete city situated in a hollow in the hills". Fine words . . . and the fair point was made that the "setting" is undefined; and that, the better to protect it, to define it would be helpful. Indeed, one of those *eight*

priorities of the “core strategy consultation” mentioned earlier is “to protect the District’s high quality natural and built environment and cultural heritage”.

However, there perhaps lies the problem. To have more than one priority is a contradiction - in this case surely a conscious obfuscation - which invites conflict. To postulate so many priorities, to pay lip service to every issue, is to make each an excuse for undervaluing another - and probably for doing what you intended anyway. Bath has been here before.

The later *Core Strategy Development Plan* also has its own excursion into cultural responsibility, borrowing from its forebear and again referring to “the green setting of the City in a hollow in the hills” - though turgidly continuing that the World setting “includes a range of elements such as views [goodness me!] and historical, landscape and cultural relationships . . .” - and giving the assurance that “proposals will be assessed against Policy 4B which seeks to ensure that the impact of development will be properly considered”. For sustainability, no doubt.

I am tempted to quote one further unconscionable passage from the same paragraph [2.32]. It alludes to a World Heritage Site Study which

“provides the background information needed to assess any potential impacts and provides an impact assessment framework to form the basis for assessing the potential impact of a development.”

Some wordsmith! As they say, you couldn’t make it up. But my point is that, when evidently controversial and destructive planning is hidden in mumbo-jumbo, it is almost always accompanied by genuflections towards the ideal of preserving beauty, art, history, amenity, and so on. Do the concocters of these plans and strategies sincerely believe what they say? Or are their tongues deep in their cheeks as they insist that compromise is essential, indeed inescapable -subtly suppressing the often intangible requirements of the future and setting the needs of the present instead against what [40 years ago] they condemned as the *tyranny* of the past.

Notice how the tone changes as the written argument moves on from obscurantism to recognition - in the case of Bath - of its architectural and historical importance. And not just the tone changes - the style, the English - ah! “that hollow in the hills”. Then tremble again when you hear words like strategies (especially spatial ones), or impact assessments, or outreach, or synergy, or modules, or ballparks, or bottom lines, or stakeholders. (Not so long ago a stakeholder was by definition and purpose an *impartial* third party holding the bets - not someone with an axe to grind, or an outcome to fear, or a profit to make),

Those expressions are not the language of Ruskin or Austen or Dickens; nor of a Christopher Wren, a Robert Adam or a John Wood. They are the language of the

Philistine and the Vandal with whose cultural or spatial problems one may sympathise but whose judgment one dare not trust.

But, if it is also the language of the cynic, of the manipulator of opinion, then we should have room for neither trust *nor* sympathy - not even for planners who, let's face it, are ever having to squeeze quarts into pint pots, or to reconcile the evidently irreconcilable,

Or is the use of unintelligibly opaque language about *power*? Remember the trouble William Tyndale and John Wycliffe got into for translating the Bible into words people could actually comprehend. In Tyndale's case his presumption was terminal.

The Sack of Bath showed some understanding for councillors out of their depth, but did not mince its words when it came to an architectural and planning department leading them by the nose; nor, so help me, when it came to members of the Royal Fine Art Commission trying to make the right noises but failing to intervene.

We have all noted that we now have a planning minister - presenting the aforementioned *National Planning Policy Framework* - whose arguments for permitting looser development have reportedly included suggesting that fields might be "boring." Shocking, no doubt - but at least he seemed to be saying clearly what he felt. I gave him credit for that, until I found the expression he actually used was "environmentally uninteresting". That leaves open the question whether his own position is or is not . . . sustainable.

If I were the Minister, or the Secretary of State, or his Inspector, reviewing new proposals for in-and-around Bath, I would say this: "Plan as you please, but don't come back to me to approve any development in the countryside until every brown-field acre in this world-heritage site has been used up; and every existing building properly occupied. And don't then bring me a plan which isn't written in plain, simple English." And, even after that, especially in this fortieth year since *The Sack* was first published, I would add that the green belt round Bath is not negotiable.

Adam Fergusson

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