

PLAN FOR HISTORIC PLYMOUTH.

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(Given at 13 Alexandra Road, June 29th, 1944.)

THE President of the Institution, Mr. J. L. Palmer, presided, and in an introduction welcomed the lecturer and also the members of the Plymouth Proprietary Library and of the Old Plymouth Society, who were present by invitation. He said the members of the Institution felt a sense of real civic pride in the new plan. Mr. Paton Watson and Professor Abercrombie undoubtedly had not only delighted Plymothians, wherever dispersed, but captivated everyone interested in planning throughout Great Britain, and had had the distinction of interesting planners throughout the English-speaking world.

True, they had a wondrous opportunity, with clear sites, in a city inseparably linked with the Elizabethan and maritime history of our nation, and with an abundant waterside and effective contours. They had no mere cottonopolis upon which to work.

Nevertheless, it was doubtful if any officers in local government of our day had aroused, in a purely English provincial scheme, such world-wide publicity.

It was terribly important that in that plan most careful attention should be paid to the historic side, and perhaps it was appropriate that they should all gather that night to consider that aspect, under the banner of an Institution with such a long association as that body had with the cultural life of the city.

Mr. Watson expressed thanks for support and approval of the Plan. Even the officers responsible for the preservation of ancient monuments on the Ministry of Works, who were almost a nightmare to him immediately after the blitz, wrote :

"We are delighted with a Plan for Plymouth, and my colleagues and I send their congratulations. We propose to hold it up as a model to others, and I don't suppose we shall be alone in so doing."

So far so good, but expressions of goodwill will not be enough, especially when qualified by demands for a minimum rate and pleading for State help. If the job is worth doing—and none can say otherwise—then it is worth working and paying for.

The city has not done all it might have done in the preservation of ancient Plymouth, and the public should be indebted to the Plymouth Institution for the good work it has done.

The city should have powers to purchase for amenity value. For example, the Elizabethan House in St. Andrew Street should have been in the public's hands years ago.

We must seek to understand and appreciate the past, if our ideals for the future are to bear fruit. Planning has thought of and emphasized the structure, in the past, with the result that towns have become unbalanced by too great an emphasis on certain aspects. An example of this was the planning of the Paris Boulevards by Hausmann, who designed streets of magnificent buildings, forgetting the human spirit living in the slums behind. So our planning objective should be to get full enjoyment out of life. It is more restrictive than constructive, as a gardener prunes the trees. Without care the ancient portion of Plymouth might have fallen off, like the branches of an elm.

It has been said that much of the vulgarity in the facades of modern cities is not a matter of money but a lack of decency. Without culture, we become immune to ugliness.

We should, therefore, plan our towns, not as repositories for industry, with suburbs as night parking places, but for the community in units only so large that the daily intercourse of the citizens may be developed and welded into the common good. While people might be limited by their environment, they could rise above it, and it was a new type of living environment which was necessary. A sound basis for the city's cultural life was as important a foundation as that of industry.

The historic centre in which your Institution is particularly interested is focused around Sutton Pool, and is a worthy termination or, perhaps, it should be said, introduction to the Hoe. It is, however, so close to the business centre of the town, that it must be protected from invasion by it, so as to prevent absorption, as has occurred in so many other towns. That is one of the reasons why we suggested the provision of a definite boundary, so as to create a distinct neighbourhood or precinct. There are few towns where one can, within such easy reach, be absorbed in the ancient atmosphere and feel the inspiration of contemplating the past. In Edinburgh the ancient city is some distance from the new centre. In Chester and York the preservation of the ancient almost strangles the modern life of the city. In Plymouth the two can successfully be kept apart. There would be no justification for allowing our enthusiasm for the past to preserve antiquity within our towns if it means the maintenance of squalor and poverty. That is the humbug of the past, and the proposals in the Report can only be justified if the houses can be modernized and the families living therein can have all the modern conveniences and amenities within the houses and the neighbourhood. In talking to groups of public schools the lecturer has had this opinion confirmed. Is it too much to hope that in the reconstruction of this area city antiquarians, artists and architects may enliven the community life by their residence there, as was the case at the Sallyport at Portsmouth?

The provision of courts, roof gardens and houses with modern conveniences could make this area a pleasant residential unit. In mediæval times the inspiration came from the cathedral, but there was a distinct border between town and country, protecting the town from attack and protecting the country and landscape from "sprawl". The town's gateways formed milestones between nature and man. They are a loss to-day, because you cross the borders of great cities without knowing you have done so.

The lecturer then described the Plan as on pages 14-17 of the Report.

Exeter Street will terminate in a traffic roundabout near the foot of Treville Street, along which certain buses will continue to run, entering the improved St. Andrew Street through the gateway opposite St. Andrew's Church.

The Fish Market is removed to the north side of Sutton Pool.

The Parade is reconstructed so as to be worthy of the centre of such a neighbourhood, culminating in a community house, in which the Plymouth Athenæum might well take a leading part in the establishment of a historical museum, with rooms in which would be the records of the town through its various periods, not forgetting the period of this war and the record of the recent invasion armada. The area might be developed as a unique holiday centre, and, as has recently been indicated by correspondents in the papers, a great deal more could be done in the boosting of Plymouth, although we do not wish to emulate our American brothers, where, it is generally said that in and around Washington, it is difficult to find an inn in which Abraham Lincoln did not sleep!

Speakers in the discussion included Mr. A. S. Parker, Mr. J. J. Judge, Sir William Munday, Mr. C. W. Bracken, and Mr. A. J. Osborn.

Mr. Bracken congratulated the City Engineer on having the Barbican area as a precinct. That area had the nucleus of a community that had existed for centuries.

A vote of thanks was proposed by Mr. A. Preston Pearce, and seconded by Mr. F. S. Blight, Hon. Secretary of the Plymouth Athenæum.