

The Long View: Charles Saumarez Smith looks back on his involvement with Charleston over an eventful era of change

I first encountered Charleston some time in the early 1980s when we were visiting Virginia Nicholson after her parents had moved to their house in Heighton Street overlooking Firle Park. We walked over the fields to see the progress of the conservation of the wallpaper in the downstairs rooms, which was being undertaken by Philip Stevens. I remember being intrigued by the conservation issues raised by the house: a house which is not, and never has been, of particular architectural distinction, just an old Sussex farmhouse in a particularly beautiful stretch of countryside under the Sussex Downs, made special by its former inhabitants, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, as well as the memory of those who stayed there, including Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Roger Fry and Clive Bell. The house had already been turned down by the National Trust because there wasn't a large enough endowment.

In retrospect, this was the best thing that could have happened to it because it compelled Quentin and Olivier Bell to turn to their friends and allies in the art world in order to create a trust with the energetic help of Debo Gage. I half followed what was happening, but remotely in conversations with Virginia and our friend, Mick Brundle, who was closely involved in the restoration of Charleston as one of its first Trustees. I only got involved much later, in 1993, when Christopher Naylor, the then Director, wanted Trustees who had experience of the museum world and Virginia volunteered me as a possible recruit.

It was the first Board I joined. I travelled to my first meeting from London by car, something that I would never do again. I missed the first ten minutes of the meeting which had started (I think) at ten o'clock. It finished at about three. It was quite obvious that the Board were facing an unresolved dilemma, so, at the end of the meeting, I volunteered the two new Trustees, Jessica Rutherford, then Director of the Brighton Museum, and myself, to come down for a day to meet the staff and write a paper on what we thought should be the future direction of Charleston.

The dilemma was not hard to unpick. The progressive line was that it was in Charleston's best interests to expand the Trust's activities into the Barns immediately to the south of the house. But conservationists, who included the two family members on the Board, were nervous of this and its likely cost, and felt strongly that until Charleston itself was secure, the house and its preservation should be the top priority.

Charleston was and is a fragile historic house and the next ten years at least were devoted to ensuring that the house was in good order, preserved as a shrine to the memory of its inhabitants and as the best surviving record of the taste and artistic activities of the Bloomsbury Group.

But the issue of what to do about the Barns remained. They loomed over the south of the house, the great milk lorries thundering up the road, damaging its very foundations. There was a constant threat that the specialness of the site, its relationship to the fields and the Downs, was at risk because of the proximity of an ever expanding agribusiness. Gradually, the Trustees came to a view that the only way of preserving Charleston, making sure that it was sustainable, its staff and visitors effectively accommodated, and the archives and papers donated by Angelica Garnett adequately housed, was to acquire the Barns. The time had come to embrace progress.

It is not an easy responsibility to look after a house, whose economics are never straightforward because of the necessary limitation to the number of visitors each year. There are always, and probably always will be, tricky areas of policy surrounding such issues as how to modernise the management without jeopardising the character of Charleston, what the shop should stock, and problems occasioned by a relatively small staff living on top of one another.

But Charleston is unquestionably in much better shape than it was when I became a Trustee twenty-one years ago. The Board is smaller and harder working (we used to have only four meetings a year). It is more grown up, less bohemian. Its plans for the development of Charleston are professionally thought-through and developed, with an element of discreet contemporary intervention by Jamie Fobert, one of the best architects working today (he is also involved in drawing up plans for Kettle's Yard and Tate St. Ives), alongside the conservation expertise of Julian Harrap, who will ensure the preservation of the historic character of the Barns. Fund-raising is making good progress, although more is needed.

I have been involved in the recruitment of three Directors and have served under four chairmen, whilst Olivier Bell and Virginia Nicholson have been the Board's obvious and effective conscience. There is a group of trustees, old and new, deeply committed to making the refurbishment of the Barns a reality, whilst continuing to place the preservation of the house at the heart of the Trust's work.

I have always regarded the Charleston Board as well run. I particularly look back with admiration on the work that Jonathan Prichard did to help regulate the financial reporting, as well as the unsung work of Pat Berry in making sure that we didn't spend money we didn't have. The meeting I remember best was when we were all asked to write down our hopes and aspirations for the building project. And I have always passionately loved the Charleston Festival, which I think I have come to every year I have been a Trustee.

I will miss it.