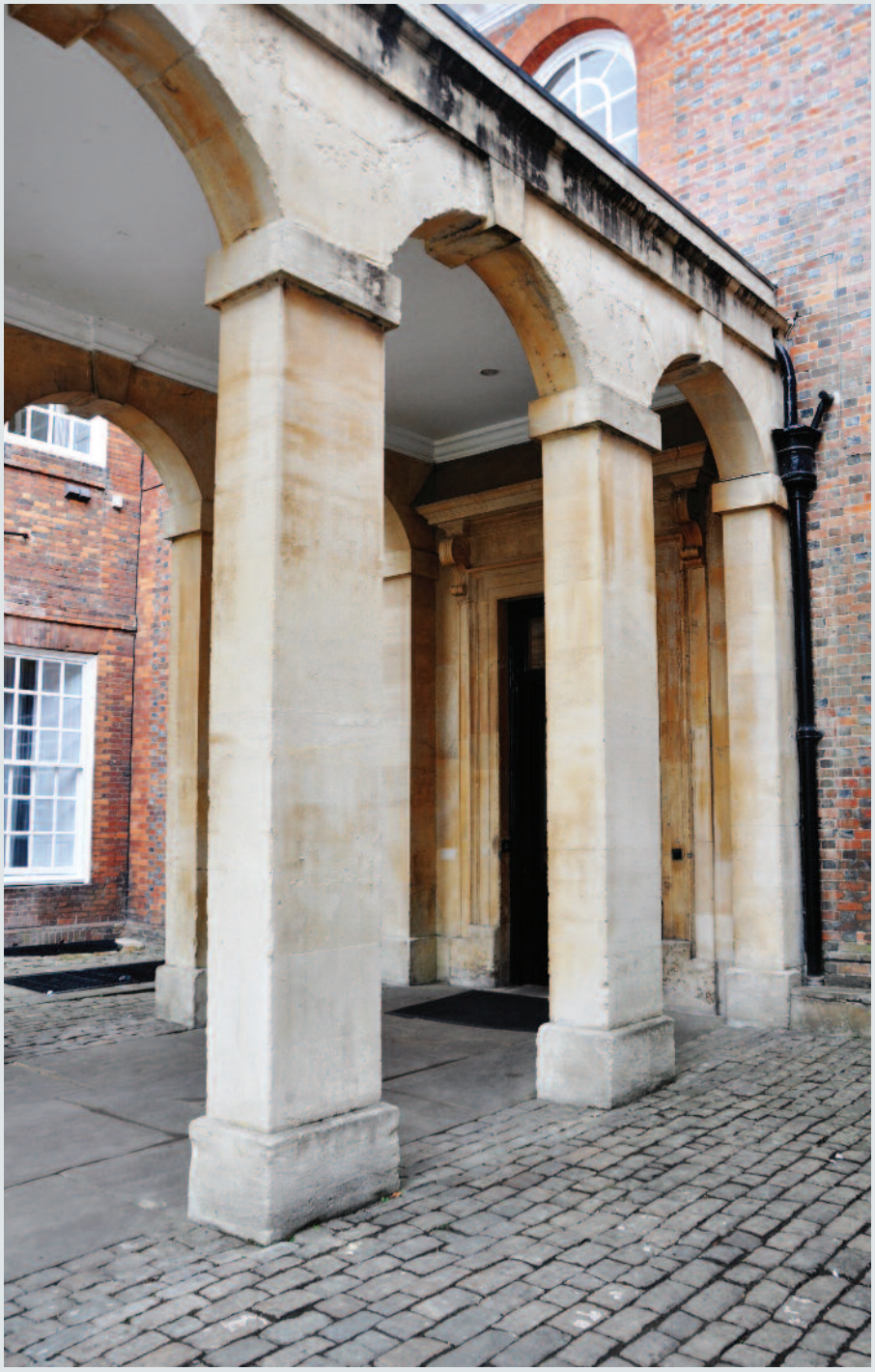
My Favourite Buildings of Marlborough

Sir Charles Saumarez Smith *(C1 1967-71)*, current Chief Executive and Secretary of the Royal Academy of Arts, tells us how his love of architecture was born at Marlborough and which buildings had the biggest impact on him.



I was already interested in architecture when I arrived at Marlborough in September 1967, armed with a copy of Nikolaus Pevsner's *Wiltshire*, which had been published in 1963 and, I think, had been given me by my aunt. It was quickly supplemented by copies of the *Swindon and Salisbury Seventh Series Ordnance Survey* maps, mounted on linen, which were issued to new pupils and which I still regard as part of the essential armoury for architectural expeditions.

On my first weekend, I cycled on my own over the downs to the medieval church of Clyffe Pypard, under the lee of the escarpment, as described by Pevsner, 'In a lovely position below a wooded stretch of the cliff'. There I met a chemistry beak, who was kind enough not to point out that I was out of bounds, beyond the ten-mile limit which was established to prevent pupils going to Swindon. In his report on my performance at chemistry that term (I was never able to catch up with Sir Hugh Pelham *(B3 1967-71)*, Director of the Medical Research Council's Laboratory of Molecular Biology at the University of Cambridge, my exact contemporary both at Marlborough and as a Fellow of Christ's), he wrote something to the effect that, although I was useless at chemistry, I clearly had other interests.

Because I was interested in architecture and already sensitive to the quality and character of my surroundings, I was strongly aware of the various buildings by which we were surrounded at Marlborough.

First, I recall A House, where I spent my first year. It was designed by Edward Blore, who was always rumoured, when I was at school, to have been a prison architect on the grounds that no-one but a prison architect could have designed a building so obviously inhumane, with its loudly echoing central cage, which new boys were supposed to have been made to cross on sheets until one of them had fallen to their death below (I assume this was a myth). He was, in fact, a highly educated, scholarly medievalist, who had worked on

the original designs for Sir Walter Scott's neo-baronial Abbotsford; for the antiquarian Samuel Rush Meyricke's strongly medievalising Goodrich Court, Herefordshire, designed to house Meyricke's great collection of suits of armour; and was employed to complete Buckingham Palace after John Nash had been dismissed. He was brought in to help design the necessary buildings for the newly established school in 1844, including B House, the Master's Lodge, and the original dining hall and chapel, both of which have since been demolished. I don't think he can have devoted much time to the design of A House, but, in retrospect, I don't object to the loose Queen Anne style he adopted for his school buildings, when one might have expected them to be, like Harrow or Rugby, more strenuously gothic.

After a year, I moved across to C House, the Duke of Somerset's house, later turned into a coaching inn, on the west side of the entrance court, with its generous, if battered *porte-cochère*, where, on my mother's instructions, I was given a bottle of Guinness every week by Laurence Ellis *(CR 1955-77)*, my puritanical housemaster, to help me grow. I remember its grand staircase, sitting reading curled up in the window seat on the ground floor, looking out at what remains of Lady Hertford's formal garden, and, of course, more formal functions in Adderley, including a talk about the benefits of masturbation by the then Master, John Dancy *(Master 1961-72)*, where I was easily distracted by the quality of the eighteenth-century coving and the great Gainsborough portrait of George Byam and his family.

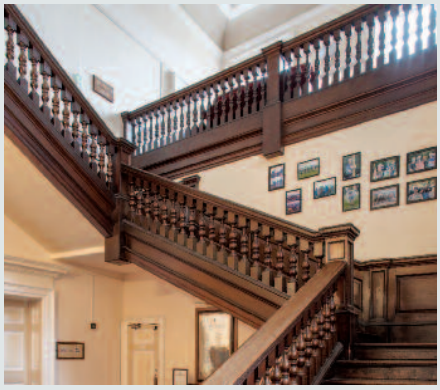
But, it was not only the eighteenth-century C House that I admired. There was the chapel as well, where we would have morning service. I was put in the choir, not because I had a good singing voice, but because it must have been obvious that it would be many years before it broke. I remember the chapel's sense of great height, the pews arranged facing one another in serried rows, and the great painting at the east end, which was a survival from the previous chapel and had been painted up in the early 1950s by Ninian Comper. There was one window by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, who sent his son to Marlborough on the advice of William Morris.

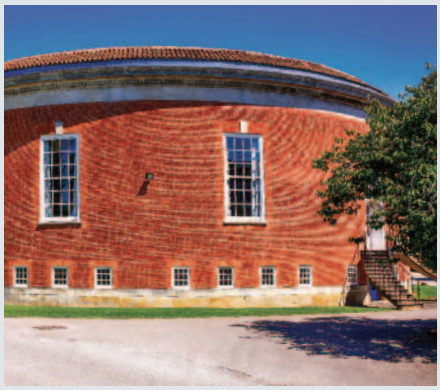
What I realise now, which I did not at the time, other than subliminally, was the quality of some of the later buildings by which we were surrounded every day. There was the Memorial Hall, which has just been renovated. I have just opened a horseshoe lecture theatre at the Royal Academy. It is based on the lecture theatre in the previous University of London building designed by James Pennethorne. But, I realise that its semi-circularity, the sense of proximity to the stage, and the creation of a community of interest and theatrical engagement through the ability of the audience to witness the reaction to what is happening on stage is a device which is, of course, Greek, but was used to good effect by W.G. Newton, architect of the Memorial Hall.

Pevsner says that the Memorial Hall 'comes as near to the American Campus style of the same years as anything this side of the Atlantic'. This is correct. Newton's father was Ernest Newton, a successful Arts and Crafts architect, with whom he published a series of illustrated volumes on English Domestic Architecture and became joint editor of the *Architectural Review* in 1921. He was trained at the Architectural Association where he wrote a prize essay in 1912 on the subject of *The Architectural Contribution of Imperial Rome*. The Memorial Hall belongs to a style that is now very unfashionable, whereby classicism was still treated as a living style, like composing in ancient Greek. Newton was able to design using the language with confidence, not in a doctrinaire way, but as a natural part of a tradition in exactly the same way as the architects of equivalent buildings at schools and universities in the United States, as at Harvard, where the Fogg Art Museum, where I later studied, is identical in style and date.

It was Newton, too, who designed the Science Building, tucked behind the Memorial Hall. This, I now realise, shows the total revolution in architecture round 1930, based on the adoption of the International Style by young architects and its publication in the *Architectural Review*, mostly after 1927 when Newton stood down as its editor. In between designing the Memorial Hall and the Science Building, Newton had written a monograph on the work of his father, published in 1925, with an introduction by Reginald Blomfield, the arch-conservative, and, in 1930, a book compiled for private circulation amongst members of the Foreign Architectural Book Society (FABS), the inner sanctum of the architectural profession, whose members meet regularly at each other's houses partly to discuss architecture and, in theory, to admire their book collections.

Newton's position within the profession makes it all the more fascinating that, in 1933, he should have designed one of the more pure, early Bauhaus buildings in the country, quite programmatic, built of reinforced concrete, with rows of metal-framed windows, which were supplied and fitted by John Gibbs Ltd, bringing light into the building. Pevsner wrote sarcastically that 'what is good enough for stinks is not good enough for prize-givings', which demonstrates his implacable prejudice against neo-classicism, however inventive, conveniently ignoring the fact that, when the Memorial Hall was designed, it was unimaginable, particularly given its commemorative function, that it might have been designed in the style of a German factory.





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Last of the major buildings that left an impression on me was the so-called Norwood Hall, named after Cyril Norwood *(Master 1917-25)*. I now realise that this was a building of relatively recent construction when I was at school. It had been designed in the early 1960s by David Roberts, a conservative modernist, who taught architecture in Cambridge and mostly designed university buildings, including the Master's Lodge at his own college, Magdalene. I don't know how he got the commission, but it won Pevsner's qualified approval in 1963 as being 'newer, ampler and friendlier' than its predecessor, which had been designed by Blore. I liked its lightness, height and airiness, if not the food which was served, and the way that its use of red brick made it fit comfortably and unobtrusively into the general grouping of buildings round the great entrance court.

In fact, as I look back on the experience of the buildings at Marlborough, as I used them and lived in them day by day, experiencing them viscerally and perhaps more intensively as an adolescent than I have similar buildings later in life, what I liked about them, and still admire, was the syncretic element, whereby they had been added to, and accumulated round, the entrance courtyard of the original eighteenth-century coaching inn. The Porter's Lodge, as one entered the court, was designed by G.E. Street, the Gothic Revivalist and designer of the Law Courts in the Strand. North Block, with the library, is recorded by Pevsner as having been designed by Thomas Garner on his own, but at the time he was working in partnership with G.F. Bodley, with whom he designed the chapel (probably more by Bodley than by Garner). The Bradleian was designed by G.E. Street, as was Museum Block, although the drawings are signed by his son. They were good, not great, buildings, designed in a soft, composite version of neo-Tudor and Queen Anne Revival, all in brick, cohesive, as Nikolaus Pevsner rightly points out, like an American campus. This campus approach extended, I think, to the style of teaching, moving between different buildings, including Peter Carter's wonderful room upstairs in Museum Block that he refused to allow to be modernised.

How did the buildings influence me? They made me interested in different styles of architecture, each of which I learned to recognise to have its own integrity. It was a pattern book of styles from the eighteenth century to the present day, to be lived in and experienced every day, if not studied in depth. The heart of my intellectual interests has always lain in the early eighteenth century, perhaps influenced by the experience of C House and Adderley. But I think it is sensible to recognise the legitimacy of different styles of architecture and not be too doctrinaire, as Pevsner was, about their respective merits.

John Betjeman *(B2 1920-25)*, Pevsner's adversary, was a pupil at Marlborough. I have always liked his attitude to architecture, which was as an eclectic, anti-doctrinaire enthusiast. I knocked on his door in Cloth Fair when I was 17 having tried to persuade him to give a talk to the Fine Arts Society. Not showing the faintest surprise, he welcomed me in, as if 17 year olds appeared at his door every day, commended me for my bravery, showed me his architectural library, gave me one of his original guides to the Soane Museum (a work of considerable value), and asked me which I preferred, poetry or architecture. I said architecture. It was the right answer.

Charles Saumarez Smith is standing down from the RA at the end of the year to join Blain Southern as a Senior Director