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## Editorial.

### On Trust for us.

IT'S INTERESTING TO FIND that as long ago as the end of the eighteenth century a man could feel pressed for time if he were to see the best of England's antiquities before they were swept away. The other day, in Professor Jack Simmons' delightful new anthology, "Journeys in England," I came across a discerning traveller named John Byng, who wrote: "I come abroad to view old castles, old manors and old religious houses, before they be quite gone." He might be surprised today at the number of antiquities still with us, but I doubt if he could ever be made to understand that the owners of the large houses that survive can no longer afford to live in them.

These houses, built by craftsmen of incomparable skill, are not only works of art but a concrete expression of English history. The things they stood for when England was largely governed from them are disappearing, but if we have any feeling for our past we cannot deny their national importance. Their beauty is beyond politics. In no other country has the great private house been developed in the variety and profusion that it has here; and with the houses go gardens brought to perfection by artists to whom time and money were nothing. They will never be made again.

The plight of the remaining owners is now almost hopeless. Successive death duties have shot their capital to pieces, and taxes have reduced their incomes to a figure which is often more than swallowed up by maintenance. Five thousand a year sounds fine until you get the death-watch beetle in a roof the size of a football pitch. Many of our big houses have been lived in by the same families for centuries, and not unnaturally their present owners are hanging on as long as they can. Love of their homes and a sense of loyalty to their estates make it seem worth while to camp uncomfortably in a corner of a mansion which in winter becomes a vast refrigerator because its furnaces were designed for a battleship. In the summer owners may charge a fee to visitors, and sell them vegetable marrows as they leave, but however gallantly they struggle, and re-plan their farms, and put leather on their elbows, not many can survive another hammering from death duties.

The recent Gowers Committee on Historic Houses came to the conclusion that it would be a calamity not to preserve the best of them before it was too late, and also that wherever feasible they should be lived in, if possible by their present owners. This rider was imaginative, for an old cap on the hall-table gives a reality that no immaculate museum can match. The committee's main recommendation was that, subject to safeguards, the owners of such houses should be relieved of income tax, as they are in France. April, 1951, however, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, while admitting the importance of active preservation, stated that the Government could not accept the principle of special tax relief for owners. State assistance, he said, must be within Parliament's control; and he therefore proposed legislation in the next Session which would bring suitable houses directly under the wing of the Minister of Works, who would be given power to use the Land Fund for purchase and maintenance, and for helping owners. . . .

In the meantime the outlook would be very black indeed if it were not for a body to which every Englishman already owes an immense debt—the National Trust. Whether it can continue to save our heritage for us depends entirely on how much backing it receives from you and me. Many people seem to think the Trust is something very rich in Whitehall. In fact it has no connection with the State, and last year was seriously overdrawn. In 1895, when it was founded by Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Rawnsley, its aim was to preserve the best of the English countryside from encroachments of industry. Until the 1930s it spent most of the money it drew from public subscriptions and legacies on taking over parts of the Lake District and the Peaks, and such unspoiled stretches of coast, where rare birds breed, as Blakeney Point and Scolt Head in Norfolk. In the 1930s higher taxation began to hit country houses lethally; and Lord Lothian, who subsequently left his superb Jacobean home, Blickling Hall, to the Trust, led a movement which resulted in an Act giving the Trust exemption from tax on similar bequests. In addition the Trust possesses the following privileges: it can declare any of its properties inalienable, i.e., safe from sale or mortgage, and also from compulsory acquisition except by Act of Parliament; these inalienable properties and their maintenance funds are exempt from death duties; and local authorities are empowered to help with grants, and often do.

The Trust, which has its close counterpart in Scotland, covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It works through a number of expert committees in London and all over the country. Because of limited funds it cannot accept a property without a capital endowment sufficient to cover maintenance; but having once decided (and the vetting is strict) that a property is nationally valuable, any regular income from it is taken into consideration. An owner handing over can go on living in the house and suggest a tenant to follow him; if he leaves his property at death he can still recommend a successor. The tenant pays rent, while the Trust looks after the property. In return this is thrown open to the public at specified times. Being flexible, the Trust is open to compromise. One house, for instance, is shared by the owner's widow, with her own estate office, and an adult education college. Houses no longer suitable for private residence are let to other tenants, who include the Y.W.C.A., the Youth Hostels Association, The Workers' Travel Association, and also the Ministry of Works, which administers Ham House as a museum; but whenever possible the Trust acts on the conviction it shares with the Gowers Committee that the house still in private use is the most interesting to the public. In many of its mansions notable art collections have been taken over intact, and the legislation that is pending proposes to exempt future acquisitions from estate duty.

The Trust owns over a thousand properties, covering 160,000 acres. In addition to a heartening list of great houses and also of ones where great people have lived and worked (from Drake to Winston Churchill) it holds safe—for you and me, don't forget every variety of landscape; famous gardens, castles, manors, mills, ancient monuments, hotels, hostels and even whole villages. Its open spaces are free to all of us (a privilege too often disgraced by tons of

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