

NOOKS and CORNERS

VERY civilised country, aware of the cultural and historical importance of monuments and ancient buildings, has a body with powers to protect them from demolition or mutilation for no good reason.

France was the pioneer in this. England, with its exaggerated reverence for property rights, was slow in following but eventually recognised that places like Stonehenge might be protected under various Ancient Monuments Acts and in the ownership of the Ministry of Works. Destruction during the Second World War stimulated the establishment of our listing system under several Town & Country Planning Acts, relying on the advice of the Ministry of Works, then by the Department of the Environment and the Greater London Council, and now by English Heritage.

Today, English Heritage is having a difficult time, with its budget being cynically and ruthlessly cut by a government that is in the grip of the cult of the free market. English Heritage therefore deserves the sympathy and support of civilised people.

But, oh dear, it does try one's patience. Its management is now clearly terrified of inviting further cuts by offending government, and I have lost count of the number of times recently I have been obliged to use the words "*volte-face*" in describing its behaviour in controversies over threats to historic buildings. Now comes yet another *volte-face*, and it is a particularly serious and shaming one.

It concerns part of Smithfield Market in London (see pic), one of the largest historic market complexes in Europe, consisting of fine and eminently practical Victorian structures of brick, stone, iron and glass. It is now a conservation area. The original (listed) central meat market building of the 1860s was designed by Sir Horace Jones, architect to the City Corporation and best known as the designer of Tower Bridge.

Later market buildings between Smithfield and Farringdon Road, equally interesting essays in both architecture and engineering, were also designed by Jones, notably the General Market of 1879-88. It is this – incomprehensibly unlisted – which is now threatened. Henderson Global Investors proposes to demolish most of it behind its perimeter buildings and erect a seven-storey office block designed by John McAslan & Partners which will overshadow the surrounding Victorian market buildings and the splendid Red House cold store.

This threat is not new. In 2008, a public inquiry was held into an earlier proposal to demolish the General Market and the adjacent Fish Market. In this, the developers and the City Corporation – ever keen to promote new development – were opposed by Save Britain's Heritage, the Victorian Society and, yes, English Heritage, which was then adamant that any development scheme must retain the existing

structures. And the conservation arguments prevailed.

Now new developers have returned with a scheme which is almost as destructive, yet English Heritage has thrown in the towel. It has written to the City of London stating that the harm the proposed development will do to the conservation area is only "moderate". This, in effect, supports the scheme.

The only justification given for this disgraceful surrender is that the "very poor condition of the buildings" necessitates a viable scheme that brings the long-derelict site back into use. However, not only is the deplorable state of the market buildings entirely the responsibility of the freeholder, the City Corporation, but the government's own National Planning Policy Framework states that "where there is evidence of deliberate neglect of or damage to a heritage asset, the deteriorated state of the heritage asset should not be taken into account in any decision". As English Heritage itself argued at the public inquiry, "the cost of repairs should not form part of the economic case for demolition".

Now EH is arguing that "it is unlikely that a scheme with less or no new development on the site will come forward in the foreseeable future, as this would be financially unviable". This is an extraordinary statement, as EH knows perfectly well that Save Britain's Heritage has prepared an alternative scheme, with a fully costed business plan, which demonstrates how the existing structures with their fine glazed roofs can be retained and converted to a variety of commercial uses. This would be particularly valuable in the City of London, where high development values are driving out the shops and activities that make a place interesting and civilised.

Almost everything English Heritage is now saying contradicts what it argued at the 2008 inquiry. If the craven management of English Heritage seriously thinks its current stand is "neutral", it is deluded: neutrality is abetting demolition.

If those who run English Heritage are prepared to abandon the arguments it made at a hard-fought and successful public inquiry just to suck up to the City Corporation, many will wonder what the point of the organisation is. In fact, such unprincipled behaviour can only play into the hands of those who would like to see English Heritage abolished altogether. It is now left to independent bodies like SAVE and the Victorian Society to make the serious and compelling case for conservation. And the latter "urges the Corporation to remember that being one of the most interesting and quirky urban areas in the world is one of its key advantages *vis-à-vis* Canary Wharf. There is only a sustainable future for the City if every new development adds to this richness rather than eroding it."

