

## ***Nick Cahill - historian, teacher and champion of the Cornwall's rich heritage***

***'It's so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone'***

*John Steinbeck*

Our March 2020 Cornish Buildings Group meeting was like any other. Minutes were approved, agenda items were discussed, AOB put to bed and, at a typically late-hour, we all said our fond farewells, contented that we had done some good in the world. Yet, this proved to be a meeting that none of us will ever forget, for this was the last-time we shared an evening with our esteemed colleague and friend, Nick Cahill. That evening I sat next to Nick and, as always, witnessed first-hand a masterclass in how reason, insight and humour can be used to tackle problems, assess situations and offer solutions.

Nick Cahill was born in Southampton, studied Modern History at Oxford and completed his post-graduate degree in English Local History at Leicester. Despite specialising in early medieval history his career path of choice was the historic environment, in particular the relationships between landscape, archaeology and buildings. In the 1980s and early-1990s he worked on the national Accelerated Listing Survey and produced vernacular building reports for the National Trust. He first moved to Cornwall in 1991 to work at Carrick District Council but soon moved to London where, in 1994, he met his wife Mary. Once back in Cornwall in 1998 he established himself as a much respected heritage and conservation professional.

In 2000 Nick and Mary founded the Cahill Partnership, a conservation-planning and historic building consultancy focussing on the archaeology, character, development and history of historic settlements and landscapes – his reports brilliantly evaluated significance against the challenges ahead. Perhaps, his greatest success was his participation in producing 41 *Cornwall Industrial Settlement Initiative* (CISI) reports which defined the history and importance of Camborne and Redruth, St Austell, St Just, St Day and Gwennap, Tamar Valley and Truro (all 2002); Caradon and Liskeard, North Cornwall and St Agnes (2004) and Hensbarrow (2005). For many this would prove an all-consuming task however, Nick still found time to work on the *Hayle Historic Assessment* (2000) for English Heritage and Cornwall Council; act as conservation supervisor for the *Cornwall and Scilly Urban Survey Historic characterisation for regeneration* (2002) project and found time to co-author *Tintagel, Cornwall. Characterisation Assessment* (2003) and *Keigwins, Mousehole* (2007) for Victoria County History. Other co-authored published articles appeared in *Hampshire Studies* (1987) and *Cornish Archaeology* (2004, 2011).

Nick's career within the unitary authority ebbed-and-flowed, a consequence of several reorganisations. In 2010 he was Acting Historic Environment Advice and Policy Manager at Cornwall Council, a post responsible for the 22 conservation officers, grants officers and planning advice archaeologists. He was latterly Historic Environment Strategy Officer and Historic Environment Policy and Information Team Leader. Whatever his job title his advice relating to the impact of the proposed developments on the historic landscape,

archaeological sites and listed buildings, was invaluable. Some of this work ended up in various co-authored reports such as the *Penzance Townscape Heritage Initiative* (2010).

***'I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back'.***

*Maya Angelou*

There is no doubt that Nick was a great academic, having a magpie-mentality for gathering information and an instant recall when asked a question. Indeed, if I had a pound for every-time I have heard the phrase 'we should ask Nick' I would be a rich man. Yet, for many, his lasting legacy will be the impact he made on others.

A first-rate tour guide and lecturer, Nick regularly led walkabouts (in his trademark hat and scarf) and gave entertaining talks, unstintingly sharing his encyclopaedic knowledge and engaging wit with a wide range of attentive groups including Historic England, statutory authorities and national and local interest groups. His remarkable ability to put his audiences at ease with his accessible and easy personality, down-to-earth style and boundless enthusiasm, meant that organisers could rest assured that any event involving Nick would be a triumph. Moreover, there were few topics he could not talk learnedly about including Cornish landscapes, farmsteads and Nonconformist chapels or specific places including those he greatly valued including Lostwithiel ('the fairest of small cities'), Penzance, Porthmeor Studios and St Ives. Nick's talent for connecting people, explaining complex issues in plain English and building trust marked his generous nature both as an intellectual and as a human being.

Nick's inspirational character made him the ideal chairman material for the Cornish Buildings Group, unfortunately his position as chair (2009-10) was short-lived by an understandable conflict of interest with his day-job. He loyally served on the CBG council for some 15 years during which time we benefitted enormously from his wisdom and insight. Not surprisingly, other groups and committees pulled on his time, the long-list of groups now bereft of one of their main consultants include the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Society (SW), the Institute of Historic Building Conservation, Cornwall Buildings Preservation Trust, Cornwall Design Review Panel, Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Truro Diocese Advisory Committee and Truro Cathedral Fabric Advisory Committee, of which Nick served as vice-chair.

For me personally Nick was a great inspiration and mentor. We shared similar backgrounds, both proud Sotonians, a topic that initiated a thousand conversations. We both moved to Cornwall in the late-1990s seeking fresh challenges and immediately became firm friends as we encountered each other at various meetings. Over the years we challenged each other on the finer points of Cornish architecture, slayed the odd sacred cow or two, and networked with the same circle of colleagues and friends. Like many, I owe Nick a lot. He gave me confidence, support and guidance. He was keen to put my name forward for things he wasn't so keen to do himself and, of course, was always the first to tell me when I was going wrong. Needless to say, I benefitted greatly from his modest, understated, genius and learnt so much just by listening and watching him – I cherished our comradery.

**...mediaeval historian manque, lapsed architectural historian, really appallingly bad local authority operative....**

*Nick Cahill (Twitter profile)*

Nick's (little used) Twitter profile at first glance does him a great disservice however, it perfectly sums-up his modesty and self-deprecatory sense of humour.

Together we shared a misplaced sense of humour. Dry meetings would be brightened by exchanging sideways glances when some *double-entendre* or indiscretion was uttered. Honestly, what 'the great and the good' must have thought of us at times! It wasn't uncommon for the pair of us to be sniggering like a pair of primary school children who had first stumbled upon a rude word. Nick's mischievous nature was often on display at Cornish Buildings Group events when he would try and make me laugh, mid-presentation, by shouting out some irrelevant, sometimes rude, comment or when he would suggest we divert *en-route* to the second-half of an event or outing to grab a cheeky pint and/or pasty.

Nick's premature death has deprived us all of an esteemed colleague and friend, a brilliant academic, true gentleman, enthusiastic teacher and skilled mentor. Cornwall has lost an enthusiastic champion of the built environment and contrary to his Twitter profile, a great medievalist, architectural historian and professional ambassador. More importantly, his family's loss is immeasurable.

We mourn his passing but celebrate his shining legacy.

**PAUL HOLDEN**

*Chairman 2010 - 2018*

Nick's paper 'When I first took a plan of the ground...' John Wood the Younger in Cornwall: a universal Enlightenment vision adapted to Penwith particularities? will be published in the *Cornish Buildings Group Conference Proceedings (2021)*.

Nick's legendary presenting style can be seen on 'Fish, Tin & Light; Chronicles of St Ives' a film commissioned by Porthmeor Studios.

<http://stivestv.co.uk/all-st-ives-tv-videos/fish-tin-light-chronicles-st-ives/>