

Obituary

Richard Fawcett, OBE FSA FRSE HonFSAScot

31 December 1946 – 31 October 2023

Professor Richard Fawcett, architectural historian, died suddenly at his home in Kirkcaldy, Fife, at the age of 77. He is much missed by his wife Sue, his son Tim, and his daughter Claire, as well as by countless friends and colleagues.

Richard Fawcett was the pre-eminent architectural historian of medieval Scotland. After an extremely productive career at the organisational predecessors of Historic Environment Scotland,* Richard entered academia, becoming Professor in the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews.

Richard was born in Hoyland, South Yorkshire, and educated at Ecclesfield Grammar. His passion for old buildings began early: his older sister Anne remembers him often cycling and youth-hostelling to see sites like Conisburgh Castle. He took his first degree in the then relatively new programme of Art History at the University of East Anglia. Following his BA, he worked as Trainee Assistant Keeper at Temple Newsam House, Leeds. He married Sue, who he had met at school, and they had their two children Tim (born 1978) and Claire (born 1982).

Richard's PhD work at the University of East Anglia was characteristically meticulous and original. Whilst working, Richard completed his PhD thesis 'Later Gothic architecture in Norfolk: an examination of the work of some individual architects in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries' (unpublished, 1975), which surveyed many churches in the region. It focussed on linking buildings and identifying potential



ILLUS 1 Richard Fawcett at Pluscarden Abbey, 2016.
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master masons based on stylistic features, such as moulding profiles. A note sent to me by Simon Cotton mentions that many of Richard's attributions have since been confirmed, based on wills and other archival documents to which Richard did not have access. This acute attention to detail and ability to extrapolate out from apparently minor features was to be a hallmark of Richard's

* For ease, I will refer to this body as Historic Scotland throughout, because that was its name when Richard worked there.

work throughout his career. His sense of humour is also apparent at this early stage of his writing: in the preface of his highly-technical thesis, he extended Vitruvius' theories of architects' necessary virtues to include 'steeple jack and tight-rope walker'.

Richard published on his chosen subject during his PhD, often helping small organisations to understand and promote the buildings for which they cared. His 1974 guide *The Architecture and Furnishings of Norfolk Churches* is an early example of the kind of clear, explanatory style aimed at a general audience, which was to become his work-in-trade at Historic Scotland. Based on the expertise he built up during his PhD, Richard continued to publish analyses of Norfolk architecture throughout his career, including writing on Norfolk's late medieval master masons and contributing a chapter on the monastic life of Norwich Cathedral in a book marking its 900th anniversary.

In 1974, Richard joined what was then the Department of Environment (later Historic Scotland) as an Assistant Inspector of Monuments. Allan Rutherford recalls that Richard was given the choice of taking up the position in London or Edinburgh, and leapt at the chance to live and work in Scotland. He was promoted to Inspector of Ancient Monuments just two years after he began his work. In 1988, he was appointed Principal Inspector.

Richard relished his time at Historic Scotland. Not fond of overly long meetings (as impressive doodles sent to me attest), he took the greatest satisfaction from spending time with the monuments themselves. His colleagues remember him as unfailingly generous with his time and knowledge. Richard was proactive in getting many conservation projects off the ground as manager of the ancient monuments grants project, he mentored junior members of staff, and spoke to a huge variety of audiences as part of his role. Richard's many publications from this period were largely written outside of his nine-to-five, and his wife Sue looked after him tremendously whilst he was working.

Richard had many notable projects and achievements during his thirty-two years at

Historic Scotland. One highlight was the restoration of the Great Hall in Stirling Castle, which was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1999. This was a challenging project, against the grain of Historic Scotland's usual 'conserve as found' principles, but which has been praised for its faithfulness in restoring a sixteenth-century building of crucial national importance. Allan Rutherford described Richard as 'fundamental in articulating conservation principles for Historic Scotland'. Richard reportedly took a dislike to the traditional heritage green used for cast signs on Historic Scotland properties and substituted his preferred 'Fawcett Brown'. It may be that many of these signs are still up, and I look forward to spotting Richard's gently anti-establishment influence when I go on my next visits. Richard retired from Historic Scotland in 2006, though he continued to assist in their work, including returning in 2011 to advise on the conservation of architectural monuments.

As recognition for his enormous efforts in the field of architectural history and conservation, Richard was elected to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1975, the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1979, and the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1997. He was incredibly proud to be awarded an OBE in 2008 for his public and voluntary service.

In 2007, Richard changed tack after his long career at Historic Scotland to take up a post in the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews. He largely taught Masters' courses, including on country houses, Romanesque architecture, and Scottish medieval architecture. He was a popular and inspirational teacher, and instructed his students in formal analysis and patronage studies, which formed the fundamentals of his architectural history (he eschewed cultural theory). Richard also had two PhD students during his tenure, myself and Christian Clarkson, and we both still work in the field.

Richard had always been a prolific writer and he tenaciously embarked on several major projects during his time at St Andrews. He collaborated with others, particularly Julian Luxford, Richard Oram, and Tom Turpie on the indispensable *Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches*, funded by the AHRC. He continued



ILLUS 2 Richard Fawcett receiving his OBE from Queen Elizabeth II, 2008. (Photograph kindly provided by his son, Tim Fawcett)

to make medieval architecture accessible to non-specialists, as can be seen in his involvement in the Open Virtual Worlds project. Richard completed his magnum opus, *The Architecture of the Scottish Medieval Church*, in 2011, and continued to teach, write, and take active part in all manner of scholarly activities. Notably, he presented the great breadth and depth of his knowledge in the Rhind Lectures in 2013. He was an active scholar until the last; for example, conversing with Richard Oram about Scottish Augustinians just a few days before he died.

Alongside being a scholar of immense standing, Richard was a funny and caring person. He had a cheeky sense of humour, and his deep chuckle was rarely far from the surface. His passion for buildings was always imbued with a boyish enthusiasm, as if Professor Fawcett might still be a teenager on his bike eager to see the great Yorkshire abbeys. He drew often, whether they were meticulous diagrams for his

work or fantastical buildings sketched during meetings. Richard enjoyed DIY, and his son Tim particularly remembers an intricate dolls' house he made for his daughter Claire. Richard had a sweet tooth, and often strategically placed himself closest to the door in lectures so that he could be first to get to the coffee and biscuits. His sister even told me that his courtship with Sue was encouraged by the chocolate cakes her mum would make him to take back to university. When Sue fell ill, he became her devoted carer. He was an active member of St Peter's Episcopal Church in Kirkcaldy, where his funeral service was held.

Richard produced an enormous corpus of writing during his career, which spanned more than fifty years. Many of his works took the form of guidebooks to or books about sites managed by Historic Scotland. His skill of taking the complexities of architectural monuments and distilling them into short, accessible volumes is

one of his lasting legacies. Perceptive and meticulous, Richard created or totally re-wrote the histories of so many of Scotland's buildings, as the number of his works which focus on single monuments attests. His work at Historic Scotland also involved formulating guidance on the principles of architectural conservation and guardianship, which is still used today. Another of Richard's contributions to the field is that of synthesis: his breadth of knowledge and interpretive vision meant he was able to tell the stories of huge swathes of Scottish architectural history. He was so productive that it would be impossible

here to list all of his publications, but below is a range which I hope is broadly representative of his work, though naturally, it remains an imperfect and personal selection.

Many people have fed into this obituary. I would especially like to thank Richard's son Tim and his sister Anne for sharing their stories with me and making sure I got my information right. Allan Rutherford was extremely helpful on Richard's time at Historic Scotland, Julian Luxford guided me on his time at St Andrews and Richard Oram helped me to understand his character.

LIZZIE SWARBRICK, FSAScot

SELECTED LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

- 1971 *Oak Furniture from Yorkshire Churches, Temple Newsam House exhibition catalogue*, Leeds: Temple Newsam House.
- 1974 *The Architecture and Furnishings of Norfolk Churches*, Norwich: The Norfolk Society.
- 1982 'St. Mary at Wiveton in Norfolk, and a Group of Churches Attributed to its Mason', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 62(1), March 1982: 35–56.
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- 2003 ‘The Buildings of Scone Abbey’, in Welander, R, Breeze, D J & Clancy, T O (eds) *The Stone of Destiny: Artefact and Icon*, 139–68. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.
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- 2021 ‘An architectural analysis of the church and related buildings on the Brough of Birsay’, in Barrowman, R C (ed) & Morris, C D *The Birsay Bay Project Volume 3: The Brough of Birsay, Orkney: Investigations 1954-2014*, 66–73. Oxford: Oxbow Books.