

## **Unveiling of Oxfordshire Blue Plaque to Sir Patrick Abercrombie**

### **Speech made by Stephen Ward at the unveiling ceremony on 15 July 2023**

- Good afternoon, everyone.
- Before I unveil this plaque, I want to tell you a little bit about who Patrick Abercrombie was and about how he came to be associated with this house.
- When he moved here, into the Red House, during the second world war, Abercrombie had already become the foremost British town and country planner of his generation.
- During the years he lived here, right until his death in 1957, his renown largely endured and even grew further, especially internationally.
- His professional achievements had begun even before the first world war. He gained what was called a research lectureship at Britain's first School of Planning, at the University of Liverpool.
- But, like many early planning academics, he was also an early planning consultant.
- And it was his consultancy work that won early success when a plan that he and two other architects had prepared for Dublin came first in an early town planning competition held in 1914.
- After that, many more planning commissions followed in the years between the two world wars. His work consistently showed him to be a planner who always thought regionally, about towns and cities as integral parts of their wider areas.
- So, by the 1940s, he was already recognised as a leading planning figure. But it was his two wartime plans for London and its wider region that fully cemented that reputation.
- These plans brought together all the key parts of his thinking about planning.
- They tackled major problems like bad housing, overcrowding, traffic congestion, urban sprawl and the loss of countryside around London.
- Abercrombie's proposals were a mixture of complete clearance of the worst slums, protecting what was good from London's past development and carefully controlling and shaping how it should expand in the future.
- His legacies include the wide green belt of protected countryside around London and the planned growth points beyond it. These include the new and expanded towns built after 1945 instead of the unplanned suburban sprawl outwards of the interwar years.
- Because Abercrombie wasn't just an urban planner. He believed passionately in a parallel need – to protect the countryside.
- In the 1920s he was a key figure behind what was originally called the Council for the Preservation of Rural England. It's now, with the same initials, the Campaign to Protect Rural England.
- So, one of the main reasons why Abercrombie became such a central figure in planning was that, more than anyone else I think, he brought together all the main strands of what British planning was about.

- And still is about – but of course, since his time, planning has changed.
- Today’s planner certainly isn’t someone we would expect to see wearing, as he did, a monocle.
- The biggest difference, though, is that, for all Abercrombie saw planning as a way to make people’s lives better, he definitely saw the planner as someone who would use their skill and knowledge, to tell people what that best way forward was.
- Today planners would try to give a bigger stake and a bigger voice to people in choosing that best way forward for themselves.
- But I’ve probably said enough about Abercrombie the planner, so I’m going to finish with a few words about his connection with this house.
- In 1935, when he became Professor of Town Planning at University College London, Patrick Abercrombie and his family had moved from Merseyside to London and to living in an elegant west London flat in Brompton.
- But, after war broke out, although his important wartime planning work often kept him in London during the week, the dangers of actually living there and his wife, Maud’s, rapidly declining health saw them move away from the capital.
- Initially this was on a short-term basis, I think, living in a small semi-detached house at Rose Hill in suburban Oxford.
- Sadly, however, his wife died in 1942, so was not with him and their daughter Deborah when that move from London became permanent, when they moved here, to the Red House.
- I recently came across an airmail letter that Patrick wrote very soon after the Abercrombies moved here to a fellow architect and planner in what was then called Ceylon.
- Before I quote it, however, there has to be a sort of health warning – this was one architect writing to another and keen to show that he had not forgotten all the thinking about the aesthetic rules of architecture that had shaped his professional training, thinking and his own teaching.
- Anyway, this is what Patrick said of the Red House: “it is not an architectural gem – but we like it well.” These last words are, I think, the key ones to take away – “but we like it well”.
- All the signs are that he did indeed “like it well”. It was a spacious place where he could base his extraordinarily active late career. A career which often took him abroad for many weeks at a time. And it was an abiding place to which he could return, where he could recharge his batteries and enjoy the garden and the surrounding countryside of what was then Berkshire.
- I could tell you quite a lot more about Patrick Abercrombie, but somehow, I feel I’ve probably said more than enough already.
- So, without any more ado, it now gives me great pleasure to unveil this plaque recording this association of a very important figure in the world of planning with this, the Red House, his last home and – the place that he liked so well.