

Coming in from the Cold War

In 1938 our insular prime minister, who had barely crossed The Channel in his life, uttered those famous words about a “quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing”. Tumultuous events followed, which affected both Czechoslovakia and Britain in widely different ways, but often with a similar devastating effect upon the historic buildings of both countries. The war naturally took its toll but wilful neglect often did more damage in the post-war years.

The post-war destruction of the country house in Britain was chronicled by John Harris in his seminal work *No Voice From The Hall* and The SAVE exhibition of 1975 also looked back over that bleak period. This period had its parallel in Czechoslovakia where, in the upheavals following the war, whole populations of Sudeten Germans were uprooted and many a “German” landowner or aristocrat lost an estate with unexpected consequences for the surrounding communities. Following the Communist assumption of power in 1948, “Czech” estates were also confiscated and their buildings subjected to ideological dogmatism such that chateaus became, at best, institutions and museums or were recycled as reformatories, pig farms or barracks amongst other things.

This situation was made more poignant by the fact that Bohemia and Moravia had been some of the most prosperous parts of the Austrian Empire whose wealth had spawned a

The remote Uhercice chateau, deep in the Moravian countryside close to the Czech border with Austria, is being rescued from history, writes architect and SPAB volunteer **Peter Jamieson**

multitude of large estates with their chateaus and country houses. Also with the defeat of the Protestant forces by the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II at the Battle of The White Mountain in 1620, the Counter Reformation was rolled out across the Czech lands resulting in a building boom and some spectacular churches and monasteries. Right down to the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939 the sophistication of its buildings were a match for anywhere else in Europe. London’s clutch of Modern Movement buildings is dismal when compared to the output in Prague and Brno.

So, in 1989 when the “Velvet Revolution” brought Czechoslovakia in from the cold the situation was dire. The institutions responsible for historic buildings and their contents were starved of funds as the state adjusted to the new

Right: The neo-classical Banqueting Hall at Uhercice became a major project for the Friends of Czech Heritage group



Czech heritage

A view of the Uhercice chateau across the village pond



order. In 1992 the Czech parliament passed a law that allowed “Czech” citizens only to reclaim their property from the state but many estates, chateaus and other buildings were in very poor condition and had little or no income. It had been many years since they were occupied by family members, who had often been exiled and, as a result, contact with their past had been broken.

In those early days of opening up, contacts with the UK were established. For instance representatives from The National Trust hosted delegations from the Czech National Heritage Institute (NPU) – the equivalent of English Heritage – to pass on their experience of displaying collections and running a commercial organisation. Architectural history tours were organised to bring the wealth of what was on offer to a wider audience.

It was out of these events that one small initiative was born with the foundation in 2007 of The Friends of Czech Heritage; a UK charity devoted to providing small “pump priming” grants and working parties, it attempts to give grassroots stimulation to struggling local bodies trying to conserve or repair their heritage. The charity has been involved in a variety of projects but perhaps none so haunting as the chateau of Uhercice in Southern Moravia.

The chateau lies deep in the rolling Moravian countryside close to the Czech border with

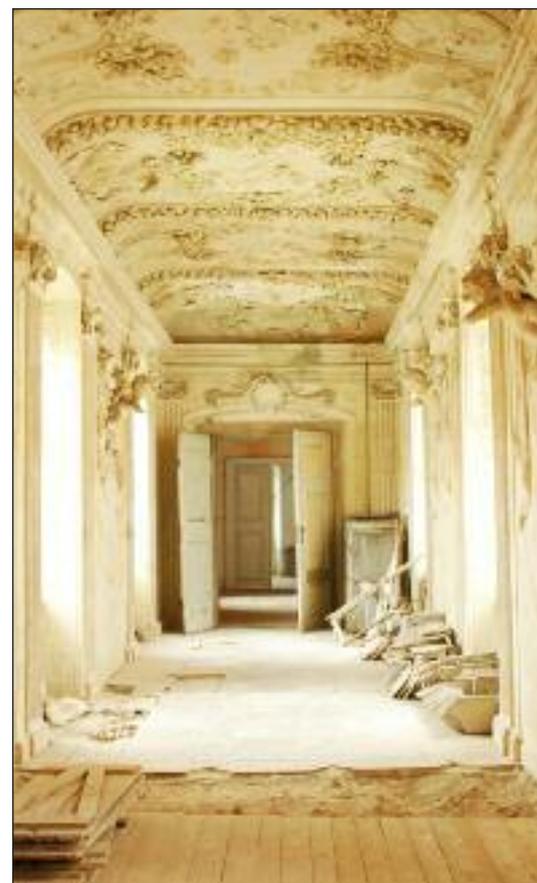
Right: The Baroque Chamber Theatre today with stucco work by Baldassare Fontana

PHOTO: CZECH HERITAGE INSTITUTE NPU



Czech heritage

PHOTOS: CZECH HERITAGE INSTITUTE NPU



From left: The Baroque ‘Cupid’ corridor at Uhercice prior to the Second World War; the corridor pictured in 1966; and in its current state

Austria. The implementation of borders across Europe had a profound effect upon towns and buildings in the course of the 20th century. Originally merely part of the Czech lands of the Austrian Empire, Moravia and in particular Uhercice lay on the corridor that linked Vienna with Prague. This easygoing relationship was jeopardised by the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918 and frozen solid when the Iron Curtain came down leaving Uhercice in the no man’s land of a military border. During the great freeze it was used variously as a state farm, woman’s reformatory prison and barracks for frontier guards. One of the towers collapsed and much of the decorative work was left in a perilous state.

Fortunately in the 1990s the quality and potential of Uhercice was recognised and in 1996 it passed into the care of the National Heritage Institute which has since undertaken a long-term programme of restoration work. The roof coverings have been renewed and some of the interiors have been conserved. But progress has been slow, partly on account of the “remoteness” of the chateau and the limited number of visitors, which has given it a wistful Cinderella status.

Like many houses in the Czech lands Uhercice has passed through a succession of owners. Founded in the Middle Ages it was remodelled in the 1550s in the Renaissance style with extensive Baroque additions in the late

17th century. The Italian plasterwork of this period by Baldassare Fontana is truly spectacular. The chateau was acquired by the Collalto family, patrons of Mozart, from Northern Italy, an indication of the mobility of cultures within the Austrian Empire, who held it until they were dispossessed in 1945. Perhaps the most arresting sequence of rooms are those created in the early 19th century under the influence of Romantic Classicism, which include the neo-classical Banqueting Hall with its extravaganza of trompe l’oeil pilaster and allegorical figures. It was this room that became a major project for the Friends of Czech Heritage mentioned above.

In 2010 attention was focused on securing the Banqueting Hall. The windows needed replacing, archaic electrics replaced but most importantly the vast decorated ceiling needed to be stabilised. Following a survey by an expert conservator it was clear that the ceiling was in danger of collapse and The Friends of Czech Heritage offered to try and raise a grant toward the cost of this work.

The ceiling was constructed of timber boarding fixed to ceiling joists with woven reed mats fixed to the boards with iron hooks. This formed the key for the two-coat lime plaster, which had in many areas lost its key, become delaminated or simply fallen. The decoration had become degraded through exposure owing to the

missing windows. The remedial work took a conservative approach, which generally conformed to the SPAB philosophy. The boarding and reed backing were secured using screws and washers and loose areas of plaster either fixed in the same way or by injection. Cracks were filled with lime putty and missing areas of plaster replaced to correspond to the original. The painted decoration was stabilised to prevent further deterioration but the “retouching” has yet to be carried out.

There seems to be a tradition in Central Europe to repaint decorative finishes – particularly externally – as a part of the natural cycle of building maintenance. There is therefore some concern that the decoration at Uhercice might be “restored” though this does not seem to be the current intention. Instead the suites of rooms glow in their faded glory in a manner that is much more alluring than many a well-tended country house in the UK.

As the local guide book states: “We can only hope that the genius loci is stronger than time in Uhercice and the chateau will revive at least to an afterglow of its previous beauty.”

● Peter Jamieson presented a paper on the work of the SPAB at the International Conference on Education and Heritage Management at Telc in the Czech Republic in September 2015.

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