

John Newman at the Courtauld Institute

by MICHAEL KAUFFMANN

For over thirty years John Newman has been the human face of the Courtauld Institute. Whenever the Courtauld was accused of being, like other metropolitan institutions, upstage or arrogant, there was someone to demur, 'Ah, but there's John Newman.' And, indeed, his modesty and kindness highlight the human side of the Institute, of which there were of course many other representatives.

John took Greats at Oxford in 1955–59 and then went on to teach Classics at Tonbridge School. However, by 1963 he had firmly decided not to pursue schoolteaching as a career. He had become more interested in art history and, as he wrote to the Courtauld when he applied for a place on the Academic Diploma course, 'especially in architectural history'. He passed the Diploma with distinction in 1965 and began work on a Ph.D. under John Summerson on English seventeenth-century architecture. But as early as 1966 he was appointed full-time Assistant Lecturer, which left him insufficient time to complete his thesis.

His architectural expertise had been given a practical impetus by his many field-trips with Nikolaus Pevsner, for whom he acted as chauffeur and assistant for several years. John always spoke of the experience as the formative one for his professional career, and it certainly forged the links with the Penguin *Buildings of England* series, for which he has produced some of his best work.

His administrative skills and his rapport with students made him the obvious choice for the post of Director of Studies in the 1970s. As a teacher he has always been concerned as much with the weaker as with the brighter students. He was promoted Senior Lecturer in 1972 and Reader in 1987. It was then, perhaps for the first time, that his academic standing was widely acknowledged. A senior assessor for the promotion described John as 'one of the most distinguished architectural historians working in Britain today' and gave his opinion that, in particular, his two volumes on Kent 'were simply the best in the whole *Buildings of England* series'.

From 1989 until 1994 (when all the Director's blandishments failed to persuade him to stay in post) he was Deputy Director of the Courtauld. It was during this period that all his wisdom and experience, his combination of modesty, kindness and utter integrity, bore greatest fruit. He was implicitly trusted by the Director, his colleagues and students alike. His advice on academic, organizational and personnel matters at board or committee meetings was always carefully listened to and usually followed. Storms were kept in teacups, and the Director was frequently told, in the nicest possible way, where he had gone wrong. All this was largely due to John's tact and

sense of fair play, but it was also the result of hard work uncomplainingly done. Letters were always answered by return and bureaucratic documents rapidly deciphered and incisively commented upon. He became not only the conscience of the Institute but also the fount of its historical and communal experience.

Since relinquishing the Deputy Directorship John has had more time for teaching and research, and the results have led to a renewed flowering as a scholar. Apart from his recent publications — to mention only the article on Inigo Jones and the Glamorgan volume of *The Buildings of Wales* — he has had as many as a dozen Ph.D. students to supervise.

This concentration on John's career at the Courtauld is not intended to belittle his distinguished role in the world beyond. He has been a Commissioner for English Heritage and a committee chairman for the Council for the Care of Churches, and his reports have been widely influential. He has also served as President of the Society of Architectural Historians. It goes without saying that the strongly supportive home environment of his wife Margaret and their two daughters has been crucial to the calm persona with which this eminently diffident and shy man faces the world and renders it a better place.