



# JULIAN BICKNELL

## A MAN WITH A PLAN

From Brideshead Revisited, to The Prince of Wales Institute, to Princess Square, we meet the man for whom traditional values and architectural integrity are at the heart of every project

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Julian Bicknell is not what I had expected.

I have worked with architects before; quite a few in fact. Giant offices; more glass and metal than wall; smartly-suited, neat, efficient, clinical.

An exacting breed I have always thought.

And then, there's Julian Bicknell. As I said,

not what I had expected.

Based in a doubtless expensive, but very lived-in residential street in Richmond, I walk past Bicknell's office twice, and then ring a colleague, before I am convinced that this unassuming brick-fronted building really does house one of England's most acclaimed period architects.

A balding head pops up from behind a desk, casual sports jacket slung over a light summer shirt.

"Hi, I'm here for an interview with Julian." The face

breaks into a smile. "Welcome! Nice to meet you."

No reception. No formality. This is Julian Bicknell.

I'd like to say that the room contained no computers or modern technology, but that would not quite be true. It did, however, make a reassuring antithesis to any architect's office I've ever visited. Pens and pencils – hundreds of them, half-drunk cups of coffee, rulers of many and varying lengths, drawing boards, stencils, paints, compasses, walls covered in fabulous, curling watercolour designs, and even pots of ink; real ink. Maybe my previous encounters with architects have always been atypical, I don't know, but this to me felt exactly as an architect's office should feel; working, alive, and above all, comfortingly creative.

For a man who seems so eminently suited to his surroundings, Bicknell hadn't always dreamed of being an architect. He was part-way through his first year at





Above: Bicknell surrounded by the tools of his trade in his busy office in Richmond, London

**“I’m deeply wedded to the traditional way of building, and there’s nothing that irritates me more than when people make bits of fibreglass, and it’s all stuck on with glue, and it’s thoughtlessly detailed and out of proportion.”**

Cambridge, studying engineering, when he “began to get the blues.” A visit to an uncle, himself an architect, persuaded a change in direction, and soon Bicknell was training under the stewardship of one of the England’s most influential modern architects, Edward (Ted) Cullinan. Bicknell admits that, given his own love of period architecture, Cullinan - who is best-known for his contemporary, sustainable buildings, and was recently awarded the RIBA Gold Medal, the UK’s highest honour for an architect - was an unlikely mentor:

“The thing that we have in common is a complete absorption in the process of building,” says Bicknell after thought. “And all the things that he does, including his new ideas, are to do with rethinking the process of building. My approach is much more from the craftsmanship side. I adore working with people who carve stone, who cut wood, and who make things.

“But Ted is an inspiring individual, extraordinarily charismatic, and has an approach which is wonderfully accessible to students. People flock to him because he is lovely. He talks about the relationships of spaces within a building using a fat felt-tip pen, and doing little cartoon diagrams. And he used to do the same with construction. It was this simple, almost child-like logic that he used to make wonderful buildings. He took it for granted that everything had a geometric discipline, and I have absorbed that and it is now an essential tool in what I do.”

Following his apprenticeship, Bicknell “set up on my own kitchen table, doing conversions for friends,” whilst also teaching two days a week at the Royal College of Art. It was here that a chance meeting led Bicknell to his next chapter. He launches into the story with gusto: “While I was at the Royal College of Art, a chap called

George Howard [the late Baron Howard of Henderskelfe, to use his more formal title] was on the governing body, and he was the owner of Castle Howard in Yorkshire,” Bicknell begins.

“I threw myself at his knees and said could I bring my students up and do a project based in Castle Howard. He not only said yes, but he said come for the entire weekend!”

From this initial contact, Bicknell tells me that he became involved in some of Lord Howard’s restoration projects at Castle Howard. When the magnificent 18th-century residence was chosen as the set for the 1981 TV adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*, Bicknell was the obvious choice to mastermind the architectural element.

“Part of the castle was destroyed by a fire in the 1940s and the idea came up to make a set in one of the destroyed rooms,” says Bicknell.

“George jumped in and said if we are going to make a set, couldn’t we collaborate and make it permanent. I did the outline of this room in collaboration with a painter called Felix Kelly, who was a long time friend of George’s.

“The room was absolutely vast, and Felix said that he didn’t want to die doing it! He suggested we made it into a series of panels, so my job was to make an architectural framework into which these panels would go. In the end he did four panels and four over-door paintings, and in the movie Jeremy Irons does the painting.

“The whole thing became rather bizarre, because we were enacting the book, and I think George recognised that there was a certain echo in this whole thing.

“As the brief was a stage set, the wonderful thing was that it was completely un-embarrassing because if it had been a failure they would have ripped it up and thrown it away. It’s still there! →



Above: Working drawings of Royalton's Princess Square development, on which Bicknell and his team have worked for more than three years

And that was the beginning of my playing with classicism."

Bicknell's relationship with period architecture continued when, in 1979, he joined Arup Associates, where he specialised in the conversion of existing buildings. From here, he was lured to Japan, where during the 'bubble years' he satisfied a huge demand for English character architecture, blending the features of the traditional English country house with characteristically Japanese buildings.

"The truth is, you don't choose the work, the work chooses you," says Bicknell with a smile. "The Japan story is exactly that. We did a very high flown eating establishment, we did a golf club, a wedding reception facility, a Shakespearian village, and we did a whole range of leisure projects, all on the back of the crest of the financial wave that swept Japan.

"There are more differences between Japanese cultures on every single level than anywhere else in the world, but after the initial shock, I absolutely adored it. And they make buildings in a completely different way from us,

and in fact they do it much better...they make classical buildings with not a hair out of place."

Another talking point of Bicknell's career, is his decade-long involvement in the development of the Prince of Wales Institute of Architecture, where, until 2000, he acted on both the academic board and as a teacher. The Institute has since become The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment, but its *raison d'être* is largely unchanged: 'to teach a broad range of stakeholders in the built environment the principles of integrated, harmonious place making.'

"When the Prince of Wales started his great initiative, I was approached by one of the characters that he had briefed to bring people together. By far the best things we did were the summer schools which were meant to be pilots; they were mind bogglingly exciting. We had six weeks of unbroken tutorials, first of all in Oxford, then France, then Italy. We were trying to work out what was missing from contemporary architectural teaching. The experiment was to see if it could be



reintroduced or rediscovered."

While Bicknell admits to certain frustrations with the Prince's scheme ("it didn't succeed because it was resolved to establish a competition, an alternative system of education, and it didn't do so because it couldn't work standing alone"), it did allow him to pursue his fascination with architectural theory.

As I sit surrounded by reams of the most beautiful watercolour interpretations of many of Bicknell's current designs, I ask him whether he considers his trade more art than science?

"It's both," he says without hesitation. "It's a science in the sense that in the end you're looking for the rules that hold it all together; but I am fairly clear in my mind that a lot of the things that we have made over the years assemble ideas that were previously available, perhaps separately, and integrate them in a new way. If you look at Picasso, for example, and if you see enough of the stuff, you realise that each painting absorbs lessons from the one before, and you can see an unbroken sequence of development, which, when you see it at the end, you realise he is just growing something."

And so we come to the present, where Bicknell, now comfortably heading-up his own successful London-based practice, has become increasingly involved in the design and construction of new buildings, in which, as his website states 'lessons of history are combined with contemporary architectural →



Above and inset: Bicknell's office is overflowing with fabulous water colour paintings of his work

thinking and technology'

I ask Bicknell of his recent experiences with Royalton, and of turning historic Princess Square into a series of fabulous new luxury homes. I want to know how this was achieved without compromising the integrity of the original building.

"Well, it's like so many English things; it's an amalgam, a patchwork,"

Bicknell begins. "It's complicated too, because the original Millbourne House was a 19th century domestic property, quite a grand one.

Then there's an Edwardian moment when the whole of the red brick thing was added to it, which made a fairly monstrous house which then become an institution.

Then in the 1960s or 70s some



large business enterprise brought it, and added offices and built a huge block behind.

"Those first drawings I did in a weekend," he gestures to the pile of paintings which lie sprawled across the table. "Now it's been three years of my life, and not only have we done the drawings, but we've built it!"

"My only line is if you're going to do it, do it properly! I'm deeply wedded to the traditional way of building, as I've hinted, and there's nothing that irritates me more than when people make bits of fibreglass and it's all stuck on with glue, and it's thoughtlessly detailed and out of proportion. If you're going to spend that sort of money, do it properly. It's rather like classical music, you can do lots of things, but still work within the rules."

I ask Bicknell for a standout project or property in his forty year career, and am somewhat surprised by the answer; given the list of historically significant buildings with which he has been associated over the years, from Highgrove House, to Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, to a whole range of fantastic stately homes up and down the country.

"The odd thing is, I do rather live for the moment," he frowns slightly as he speaks. "I mean the building I'm most excited by at the present is this one," Bicknell shuffles some

more drawings and pulls out a hand-drawn elevation of a rather grand-looking stately home.

"It's under construction as we speak, and the great thing is, you can go down there every fortnight and something has happened."

Bicknell it seems is just as fulfilled working on a modern interpretation of classical architecture, as on the real thing, and he clearly treasures every building block that has brought him to this juncture.

"In the past I have thrown away letters, which now I regret, but I've never thrown away drawings," Bicknell gestures around the room, whose walls are lined with vast wooden document drawers into which have been crammed hundreds, or even thousands, of drawings which now lie gently browning, and curling with age.

"I even have some of my grandfather's in here..." He lurches around and tugs open one of the drawers to reveal layers and layers of beautiful, hand-drawn architectural illustrations.

"Now he really knew what he was doing," Bicknell smiles and tilts his head to get a clearer look at the pen and ink drawing he has unearthed.

In this drawer alone I sense a whole new chapter, but my time is up, and it will have to be saved for another day.