

From Russia with determination

The SAVE director on the battle for Smithfields and life in Moscow

IT'S a crisp autumn morning in Clerkenwell and commuters are pouring out of Farringdon station. Many are heading for the surrounding warehouses that have been converted into offices. It's no surprise that SAVE Britain's Heritage should be based here: there must be more architects and designers per square foot in this buzzing neighbourhood than anywhere else in London.

Throwing an orange wool coat over her *matelot* jersey and plum-coloured trousers, the director, Clementine Cecil, leads me in search of breakfast. In a corner of Starbucks, she launches into the story of the battle that Britain's best-known architectural heritage lobby group is fighting on its doorstep.

What drives conservation is a sense of injustice

Cowcross Street, on which SAVE has its offices, takes its name from the cattle that used to process along it on their way to Smithfield Market. For anyone who loves London, the setting of the city's wholesale meat market in the thick of offices and bars sums up the stimulating unexpectedness of urban life at its best. When, in 2006, it was decided that a disused part of the Victorian market buildings would be redeveloped, it seemed obvious that it would, like Covent Garden fruit market, become shops and cafes. However, its owners, the City of London Corporation, had other ideas and gave permission for a massive office block on the site.

Appointed director of SAVE in the spring of 2012, Miss Cecil was pitched into its campaign against the scheme. She helped raise a petition, lobbied MPs and marshalled celebrity champions, from playwright Alan Bennett to chef Fergus Henderson. Given

the potential value of the site as offices, things didn't look good, particularly as the Corporation has a deplorable record for architectural conservation.

Then, in September, to widespread delight—and some astonishment—Communities Secretary Eric Pickles decided that the scheme would be called in for a public enquiry next year.

'We were incredibly happy,' says Miss Cecil. 'I think it shows vision on the part of the Government. We'll be fielding a strong team for the enquiry and proposing an alternative scheme. SAVE's got a vision for the site and we've got the experience.' When I ask how she assesses her chances, she seems superstitiously unwilling to sound too upbeat: 'There are glimmers of hope.' She bears too many conservation scars for optimism, although they were endured in Moscow, not London.

The choice of Miss Cecil to run SAVE was a refreshing move in the overwhelmingly masculine and rather tweedy world of architectural conservation. Now in her late thirties, she is a daughter of the writers Hugh and Mirabel Cecil and was born in North Yorkshire, but brought up in north London.

At Cheltenham Ladies' College she made a decision that was to determine her future: she took up Russian, 'for no particular reason except that my best friend had'.

She paid her first visit to Moscow aged 17, spending New Year with a friend of a friend. 'I stayed in a hideous high-rise block. It was terrifying, but I loved the people. When it comes to talking, there are no holds barred for the Russians; they're so hospitable. Russia is the promised land for conversation.'

Miss Cecil returned to Moscow while an undergraduate at the University of Glasgow, working for the theatre director Anatoly Vasiliev, an experience she describes as 'complete hell': 'It was too exhausting. Everyone works themselves and everyone else to the bone.'

But she went back. 'I phoned *The Times* with an idea for a story about Soviet Afghan war heroes. Richard Beeston [later foreign editor] asked if I'd ever done any reporting as they needed someone on the ground in Moscow. When I said no, he said it didn't matter.' Miss Cecil spent 2½ years as the paper's Russia correspondent. 'There was lots of travel, and I got to go to Chechnya, but I got tired of writing about the negative side of Russia and wanted to do something positive.'

The catalyst for what Miss Cecil describes as 'the most rewarding chapter of my life' was when the apartment block that had been her home was demolished. 'It was a simple 1920s building and pretty nondescript, but it held many memories and the families who lived there were dispersed and the

building was replaced by a gated apartment block.'

It was a good moment to get involved, as interest in preserving Russia's historic buildings, which stalled during the Soviet Union's dissolution, had been reinvigorated by David Sarkisyan, director of Russia's State Museum of Architecture. Miss Cecil was one of the westerners drawn into his orbit, who, in 2004, co-founded the Moscow Architecture Preservation Society (MAPS).

At the suggestion of the World Monuments Fund, Miss Cecil sought advice from SAVE. Its founder, Marcus Binney, a former editor of *COUNTRY LIFE*, and secretary, Adam Wilkinson, visited Moscow and, in 2007, collaborated with MAPS on the first of three joint reports, *Moscow Heritage at Crisis Point*.

Fighting the brutal treatment of Moscow's buildings has been good preparation for Miss Cecil's battles in London, despite the very great differences between the two cities, not least the widespread belief in Russia that 'restoration' means replacing historic buildings with replicas. She was, in some ways, relieved to return to England to study for an MA in Historic Environment Conservation at the Ironbridge Institute. Yet she warns against complacency: 'Yes, we've got an incredible system here, but it doesn't always stop bad things happening.'

One of SAVE's most bitter campaigns was against the last government's costly 'Pathfinder' scheme. Now defunct, it condemned thousands of serviceable Victorian terraces to destruction in the name of slum clearance; the fate of many still remains undecided. 'I've never in all my time in Russia seen people treated as badly as they were in Liverpool. What drives conservation, here as in Russia, is a sense of injustice, a feeling that people don't have control of their own environments.'

Michael Hall

On the record

Clementine Cecil is director of SAVE Britain's Heritage (020-7253 3500; www.savebritainsheritage.org)

Where is your favourite place? Wiveton, Norfolk, where my parents have a house

What is your favourite building? The Melnikov House, Moscow (1927), designed by the architect Konstantin Melnikov for himself

Book? *War and Peace* (Leo Tolstoy)

Music? Mungo's Hi Fi, a Glasgow reggae and dub sound system

Food? Partridge from Smithfields

Holiday? Norfolk

Who is your hero? Pyotr Baranovsky, who saved St Basil's Cathedral in Moscow from demolition in the 1930s

