

## IHBC 2012 Annual School, Winchester

### Significance: Who Decides?

On Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2012 Winchester City welcomed the IHBC for its Annual Day School. The day, hosted in the Bapsy Hall of Winchester's historic Guildhall, was a whistle-stop tour of all things "Significant", ranging from the complexities and nuances of the language used in the NPPF through to the specifics of stone conservation techniques. The speakers were informative and enthusiastic, and delegates enjoyed not only the formal presentations, but were also able to join an impromptu seminar over lunch on the subject of the "Significance of Public Engagement", hosted by Kate Clarke!

IHBC South Branch was able to offer two bursaries to the day School and our two bursary students were asked to write up their experiences of the Day School.

**Heather Hall**, affiliate member from Hampshire, sent us the following thought provoking piece on the School, and its significance to her:

The concept of significance has long been the crux of building conservation, though we may not have always termed it as such. Phenomenally speaking, the significance of an object changes as we begin to consider it and apply our own individual and shared values to it. It is an interpretative process that in post-structuralist thought naturally involves both light and darkness. In attempting to identify significance we naturally seek to shine a light on what we think is important, what should take priority, but in doing so we naturally leave other areas of interest in the dark. Most problematically perhaps, is the potential for our own personal priorities and beliefs to create their own shadows and in turn result in harm. It is within this rather precarious dappled light that we all carefully tread.

'Who decides?' was the appropriate question this year at the IHBC's Annual Day School, which drew speakers from various specialties and persuasions. The first to offer thoughts on this question was Emily Gee of English Heritage, whose idea of legally defined special interest was particularly troubling for some, as later expressed in discussion. Significance in many instances is continually in a state of flux. As Gee points out, it should be clearly understood that statements of significance are never exhaustive or final and whilst new EH listings remain useful, we should be aware of other types of significance.

Matthew Slocombe, of SPAB, expressed his own reservations about the value judgements we as a profession make on a daily basis. Advocating wholly for the retention of fabric, as we would expect SPAB to do, Slocombe's concern over the subjective and often cursory assessment of significance is understandable. Equally as concerning is the concept of 'enhancing setting' as this can have disastrous effects. In my own opinion, much of the richness of setting can be derived from juxtapositions. There is the potential for this layering of significance to be lost when elements are removed with the aim of improving.

Richard Morrice's following discussion of setting, mockingly pointed out that almost everywhere in the UK is within the setting of a statutorily protected heritage asset; a fact which necessitates that we take an intelligent approach to the management of change based on significance. It isn't hard to see both sides of the argument, particularly in the current economic climate when those potentially best suited to consider these value judgements are being lost, especially those in local authorities.



*Our morning speakers:  
Eddie Booth  
Emily Gee  
Matthew Slocombe  
and Richard Morrice*

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The afternoon session saw Alison Henry, Frank Green, and Kim Wilkie deliver presentations based on their respective disciplines' approach to the topic. Wilkie's discussion entitled *The Historic Landscape: Significance and Change* was particularly stimulating and enjoyable. His journey through various case-studies reminds us that heritage is alive as much as it is of the past. Ultimately, it should inspire us, forcing us to continually re-examine the question of what is significant.

Finally, Chris Wood's discussion of climate change's effect on significance brought up the ever-controversial Green Deal. The government programme threatens dramatic repercussions for heritage and significance, but also exciting opportunities to increase knowledge of the performance of historic buildings by filling existing research gaps.

So then, if we had to answer the question 'Who Decides?', it would have to be, ultimately, all of us; for whilst the speakers expressed particular views, none of them was right or wrong. They all shone a light on a particular aspect of significance that was specific to their beliefs and approach towards the historic environment. If we should take anything from this, it is a reminder that when we highlight a significance, we also potentially conceal another.

Overall, the day in Winchester was hugely enjoyable (despite the rain) and certainly thought provoking. I'd like to thank the IHBC South Branch for providing the bursary, which allowed me to take part in the day's activities, including the Annual Dinner. The event brought together a broad range of topics and interesting debate.

**Claudia Fantino**, affiliate member from Reading University College of Estate Management, tells us what she learnt from the day

As a student of the MSc in Conservation of the Historic Environment it was an interesting and useful experience opportunity, in order to achieve more knowledge about managing assets' significance.

After Eddie Booth's introduction, which briefly analyzed the origin of the meaning of significance from the beginning of the 20th century to today, Emily Gee, from English Heritage, underlined the importance of recognising and celebrating significance through a flexible approach to designation (as written in the Implementation of the Penfold Review). Assessing the recent past was another issue to stress, because only 620 buildings built after the Second World War are listed. Her point about assessing places of historic interest and not only fabric, as in the examples of John Lennon's House – "Mendips" and the Milton Keynes Shopping Centre, stimulated a few interesting audience reactions. Finally, the designation challenge associated with trying to better articulate significance in new listings was discussed, and the benefits that this more detailed approach will have for Local Authorities and other interested parties, especially in relation to the newly listed 20<sup>th</sup> century structures.

Matthew Slocombe, SPAB caseworker and Director designate of SPAB, made a brilliant and provoking speech, suggesting a critical approach to the Historic Environment. He stressed the SPAB approach that the fabric value-based decision-making process is the most relevant. The significance of assets designated for their relationship to ideas and concepts is difficult to define, and therefore to preserve. The SPAB fabric-based perspective tries to understand the big difference between character and significance



*Winchester Guildhall*



*The Bapsy Hall  
Winchester Guildhall*



*Question Time:  
Get ready for a grilling!*



*Enjoying the display stands  
during the lunch break*

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which often leads to deceptive considerations (like valuing “ancientness” in a building just because of the character when in fact the fabric is a recent repair). In addition he said that sometimes the value of an asset is considered more important than other objects they are related with. Therefore, it is possible that ideas of enhancement of existing significance is, actually, not giving more significance to the assets. Finally, he made a good point about where destruction of fabric takes place, such as the example of a church torn apart by an IRA bomb and rebuilt so that there is no evidence of the explosion; would it be more sensible, where possible, to have rebuilt the church in such a way as to reflect that event and give future generations evidence of what had happened, or to simply not rebuild at all and leave the memories of the past?

Richard Morrice was the last speaker of the morning, analyzing the setting of the heritage assets and their contribution to significance. He ran through and compared the old PPS5 with the new NPPF policies, concluding that PPS5 emphasised the value of setting to significance, a position which is expanded upon in the NPPF, with setting including both the buildings and location, and people experiences surrounding it. He also stressed that setting varies and changes over time and so the significance changes also, any development capable of affecting the significance has to be included in the setting and setting hasn't to be designed to be considered; unintentional views are also setting

The lunch time break gave delegates the opportunity to have a look at the exhibition stands (among them, I was really impressed by the ten English Heritage publications about conservation) and to join the Kate Clarke workshop about significance. She suggested a good way to deal with and articulate significance, and discussed the role that management plans have in understanding places. Kate also emphasised the need to engage with and value the contribution of specialists and non-specialists alike, and the way in which “impact assessment” can be used to define significance and avoid harm.

The afternoon began with Alison Henry, who explained a universal method applicable to the conservation of materials by analyzing five different types of conservation options in relation to her specialism - stone. She emphasised that studying, understanding and repairing materials can help to retain the authenticity of the asset, enhance its historical value, and maintain the link with the past. She explained how authenticity is affected by material, how evidential and historic values are affected by alteration and aesthetic value can be modified by weathering.

Frank Green, archaeologist from the New Forest National Park, described the significance of the park given by-its rare values (like the salt building house and the historical cottages), the management of the National mapping programme and the *LiDar* Assessment Project. In addition, he pointed out how, sometime, it can be difficult explaining and passing on to the public, all the important aspects of the National Park.

Kim Wilkie, Landscape Architect, underlined the importance of the *Genius*, the *Use* and the *Beauty* in working within landscape projects. His message was that parks and landscapes have to be kept along with their natural changes; the professionals have to be inspired by the original design without ruining the significance of the historical place.

The last speaker was Chris Wood who dealt with the Green Deal issue and the conflict between building and energy conservation. He made an important point about the improvement of energy efficiency by saying that such works rarely enhance significance, even if they do cut carbon emissions. Among many good examples, he underlined how wall insulation can have damaging effects on historic buildings, how roof insulation



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can affect moisture movement through buildings and how small interventions such as repointing with natural lime mortar can halve heat loss. Chris also talked about the basic principal of the *Green Deal* and the work of the Sustainable Traditional Buildings Alliance are doing to try to influence the process.

A short intervention about the proposal to increase VAT on listed building alterations to 20% rounded off the day, and it was suggested that members bring evidence (with documents) to MPs to demonstrate that such a change will inevitably damage our heritage, instead of promoting good conservation practice.

To sum up, for me the IHBC Day School stressed the primary role of maintaining authenticity by using special conservation methods; suggested the importance of engagement by Local Authorities, and the participation of others in Conservation decision making; and emphasized that genuinely involving people could be a good solution in order to manage significance in the future.

**Thank you to both our bursary winners for these reports.**

After the academic rigours of the day, the IHBC AGM proved a light relief (!) attracting a good crowd of members. The business of the day was then concluded with the Annual Dinner at the Mercure Winchester Wessex Hotel, a wonderful three course dinner accompanied by the presentation of the 2011 Gus Astley Student Awards.



*Locally sourced produce had inspired the Annual Dinner menu*

Guest judge Rory Cullen, Head of Buildings at the National Trust, ably assisted by Bob Kindred, Gus Astley Trustee, gave us a brief run-down of the 51 entries and his deliberations before announcing the winner to be Emma Anderson, student on the Oxford Brookes MSc Course, who submitted her work on the rebuilding of listed buildings after catastrophic destruction. Rory said of the winning submission: 'This is a very well researched exercise, extremely readable, with good and wide-ranging case studies that might inform practitioners' advice.'

Finally, IHBC President Trevor Thorpe and Helen Parvin, member of the organising committee for the Winchester School, presented Alison Davidson, Chair of the Winchester Annual School Organising Committee, with a framed picture of Winchester in thanks for all her hard work over the last 3 years. Well done Alison and team for such a great Annual School. Hope to see you all again next year in Carlisle!

*Emilia Hands, Chair IHBC South*



*Our illustrious Director, Sean O'Reilly, having a chat with Philip Grover of Grover Lewis Associates over dinner*



*Bob Kindred and Rory Cullen made a great double act, presenting the Gus Astley Awards*



*And the award goes to... Emma Anderson*



*Thanks to Alison and her team for organising such a wonderful school!*