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Adjusting Vertical and Horizontal Hold - the Real Joined-Up-Ness

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This paper originated in an over-ambitious desire to test whether the idea of the historic environment is perceived in distinctively different ways in various parts of the United Kingdom. Ambition was thwarted by two perceptions, that 25 years of working in Bedfordshire was not the broadest basis of geographical experience, and that the question begs other, more fundamental, questions about the definition and meaning of 'historic environment'. Refocus was encouraged by a comment from another of today's speakers: 'I'm rather going off the historic environment'. Has it indeed become another managerial hi-jack victim (like vision, mission and passion), over-used and worn into a smooth mantra ? Might it be unsafe to base 'Agenda for the 21st century' on the concept of an 'indivisible historic environment' if it isn't actually indivisible, or worse still, is unhelpfully divisible ? So we need some clarity about what is, or should be, 'joined-up' – hence my sub-title. What follows has a three-fold aim: to revisit the idea of the historic environment through a framework model of 'content – process – users'; to start exploring how far this illuminates what appears to unite or divide the interests of our two sponsoring Institutes; and, finally, to offer some thoughts about matters that should underlie those Agenda for the 21st century.

The idea of an historic environment

The term 'historic environment' has been around for over three decades, even longer than this series of conferences. It is one of those phrases that combines description with undertones of advocacy, implying it is really everywhere but somehow stopping at that implication, subliminally asking everyone to be in favour of it without first offering a justifying analysis. Some kind of conceptual framework is needed. One I have found helpful has three interlocking elements, **content** (what is in it); **process** (how we manage it) and **users** (the interests for whom it is managed). It is the connections that matter; their presence or absence can usually explain why something goes right or wrong.

Content

The idea of the historic environment emerged as the fusion of two elements, sometime in the late 60s and early 70s. One was the amplification of historical concerns about environmental damage caused by development and other destructive human activities, extending or borrowing from natural environment and ecological interests. It defined the historic environment simply and broadly as the remains of past material culture, the evidence for the interactive impact of humankind upon the natural world from the earliest times up to yesterday. The other element, helping articulate this totality, was current academic trends including the development of landscape archaeology and the analysis of settlements as organized places and townscape as well as collections of individual historic buildings. That perception chimed well with the ability of the natural environment lobby to portray the threat intelligibly at several scales, from local habitats and recognizable species, through the survival of the human race and up to the capacity of the planet itself to support life.

On these beginnings one could base the Russian-doll model of the historic environment, rising up (or down) from portable artefacts and building details, through sites of former occupation and occupied buildings, to landscapes and townscapes inhabited and formerly inhabited, to island and planet. For all its limitations, it was quite a good way of saying that what individual survivals represented had contexts and inter-relationships, vertically by scale and horizontally through function, often cutting across traditional professional or academic divisions; those inter-connections are an important facet of what we now call ‘significance’.

Process

Threat stimulates a need to protect, identifies a public interest in private property, gives choices about appropriate preservation strategies, and makes us ask why we are doing it all in the first place.

The process model is a linear one of 'investigate / understand > conserve / record > explain'. It also embodies a repeating cycle of conservation and / or investigation by which each episode adds to understanding. Thus each iteration, if carried through properly, ought to improve the basis for decision-making in the next episode and increase the interest and support for doing it.

Process raises issues at many scales. A few random examples include how to get the right lime mix for various tasks, whether single-context field recording bestows objectivity, how to relate the integrity of an historic building and continuing owners' needs in the matter of extensions, and how to meld urban design and historic character in major redevelopment schemes. An essential lubricant of process is information; there is debate about how far its role differs in above- and below-ground conservation work.

Users

As recognised content has become more extensive, and process has become increasingly complex, so the need for justification has grown. The argument that the study of the past is self-justifying – the proper study of man is mankind – is no longer adequate by itself for an activity with today's economic, social and cultural claims. Indeed, the realisation has dawned that the third element of the framework, the users of the historic environment, is perhaps the first. In this matter the outside world has shown our worlds the route to go. Too often, however, the vocabulary has been unhelpfully managerial / commercial, allowing too many of us to ask what it all has to do with us, instead of asking why we are doing what we do and for whom.

The range of uses for the historic environment is by now fairly commonplace and well understood. They can be characterized as continuing use, custodianship, research (primary and personal), education and enjoyment / entertainment. These categories cause the historic environment to pop up in various guises, such as culture, environment, economic regenerator, etc. This is double-edged: on the one hand we are increasingly celebrate this complex and multiple relevance, while on the other we bemoan its consequent distribution around the responsibilities of between three and five government departments, which politically diluting its importance, causing fragmentation and neglect.

A user focus – usefulness and intelligibility

We require some commonality of approach to the needs of users. Criteria of usefulness and intelligibility can be applied to the three elements of the framework.

Usefulness applied to *content* distinguishes two broad classes, relatively intact survivals still with functioning original and / or alternative uses, and those that are incomplete, relict and have lost their original uses. Some of the latter retain a wider visual or commemorative interest; others are only reservoirs of information for what has been destroyed or might be reconstructed. Usefulness applied to *process*, also distinguishes two broad classes, traditionally ‘conservation’ allowing change to ensure continuing use, associated with buildings in use, and ‘preservation as found’ in an attempt to keep the curve of the decay path as flat as possible, associated with relict monuments and ruins. The first too easily gets equated with historic buildings conservation and the second with archaeology, when actually, it is more complicated, and rather more is shared by both activities. Archaeological process must be part of the investigation that must inform conservation, and historic building conservation often includes elements that are less useful or without uses. Usefulness applied to *users* gets into complex combinations of values, economic, social, cultural, spiritual, etcetera.   Economic factors are a principal driver, sharpen distinctions between so-called usefulness and uselessness. Through economic spectacles the historic environment is seen as a cultural injection into economic regeneration that enhances the social end-product; most rescue archaeology is perceived not as a contribution to knowledge and local environmental awareness so much as part of an economic equation for commercial developers and commercial field units. But a key point is that the wider and more ‘social’ the range of uses (as distinct from economic), the greater is the potential for the common and shared engagement of traditional archaeological and historic buildings concerns.

Intelligibility applied to *content* raises issues about understanding what something was originally and what changes have happened in the past. This involves imaginative leaps to deal with what is now missing, associated events and original context. It also raises issues about understanding significance now, which can involve a range of historical and non-historical factors, the latter quite easily changing with fashion and circumstances. As with content and process, there is a good meeting point for the small-'a' archaeological skills needed in logical reconstruction and the architectural or design skills for appreciating how places and their buildings worked in the past. Also, practitioners of all archaeological and conservation skills need to approach contemporary significances with awareness and sensitivity.

The challenges of intelligibility as applied to *process* are well illustrated by an interesting recent comment to me by Andy Walters on the workings of the Flemish Monument Watch scheme. This was in response to the recent publication on the IHBC web-site of my short report on specialized information systems supporting conservation officers. "*Despite having a greater availability of repair and maintenance grants, access to a subsidized condition survey scheme and a digitized integrated planning system which exchanges information between the various bodies involved with applications, the whole structure is struggling against uninformed owners and managers. The system was failing the ultimate end user, in that it was not educating them. Owners were left feeling baffled and confused by a plethora of listed building planning legislation, technical architectural language and abstract theoretical concepts of the broader implications of conservation*". The message here reinforces that those who operate process must ensure the systems they devise provide explanation as well as investigation and conservation.

Intelligibility as applied to *users* helps remind us that some understand or appreciate their piece of the historic environment more readily than others. Some don't want to know, some want to but don't know how and need help, while a minority of people do know and hopefully also know what they don't know. Recent analyses of information needs, work done with Julian Richards and Gill Chitty, emphasized that good system-building must start from the user end rather than with hardware and software. Users divide into two broad classes, those who can access raw system-stored information about elements of the historic environment directly (researchers and conservers), and those who need to have the information mediated, by the system managers or third parties in order to be able to use it (most teachers, owners, local communities, tourists etcetera). The latter group is of course by far the largest, the democratic justification and currently the least well provided for. In 1998 educational and general public interest users of SMRs were less than 10% of their predominantly development and conservation –related customers. In 2001 between a half and two-thirds of all local authority conservation officers had no specialist supporting information system of any kind whatsoever; there was nothing that could be accessed by an interested public beyond what might be in a hard-pressed conservation officer's head.

Divisions real and imagined – what unites and divides us

Moving on now to those professions. A framework model of *content – process – users* is only a tool, a means to an end, a logical underpinning for promoting policy and pointing up unforeseen problems in well-intentioned political initiatives. One of the major difficulties in making headway with many problems, particularly over resources, is the picture of fragmentation and disunity we present. Is this type of framework equally acceptable to everyone here and therefore able to reinforce the image and interests of the sector on the wider stage of life ? So the second main part of this paper discusses some of the tensions that prompted the organisation of this day school, amazingly probably the first full-frontal joint-sponsorship of a conference or course by the two principal professional Institutes in the sector. Why has it taken so long ? Is there a fundamental divide between archaeology and conservation or are we merely trapped in our own pasts and using words badly ?

History rather suggests that there is a divide. Evidence of divisibility came at the outset in the 1970s, with the formation of two distinct pressure groups, RESCUE for archaeology and SAVE for historic buildings, which ploughed their individually distinctive furrows in the field of *causes celebres*, communicating minimally. The emerging professionals organised, again separately. Local government archaeologists were first in the early 1970s, followed by the managers of archaeological field units, a distinction that was to become increasingly significant as so-called ‘public’ archaeology became commodified by the forces that ultimately produced PPG16. Conservation officers in local government organised themselves in the early 1980s.

But history is one thing, and the future is another. Are the differences are **circumstantial** or **intrinsic** ? Do the two approaches actually share a broad framework of content – process – users ? If not, we need go no further. If they do, is it as two parallel largely unconnected versions, or is there some inter-connectedness ? If the latter, is it occasional, for selected aspects or stages only, or rather more extensive than that ?

Circumstance includes legislation and administrative arrangements. The *legislative* pattern is familiar and does not need recounting in any detail. Two sets of codes have grown up separately, in England the Ancient Monuments Acts and measures for Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas within the Planning Acts, amplified by separate planning guidance documents. Interestingly, the archaeological provisions are the older, but the two codes have developed on a leap-frogging basis. The early Ancient Monuments Acts reflected political views that their subject is useless and defenceless while owners could be expected to look after useful property. The post-War Planning Acts extended a public interest in private property to designated elements in the useful fabric of everyday life, and introduced much more widespread controls over historic buildings. The introduction of what planning jargon calls ‘material considerations’, associated with growing environmental awareness, then led to still more potentially pervasive controls outside specific designations in the form of the arrangements facilitated by PPG16 for archaeological conservation. Interestingly, it also opened up a path for convergence of process with its insistence that planning decisions affecting important archaeological sites should be fully informed by proper understanding of what is affected. Significantly, this was expressed less firmly and clearly in what PPG15 says about historic buildings, and continues to be much less supported legislatively in building conservation. It is much harder and more labour-intensive to put in place and properly manage an equivalent level of controls for historic buildings in the form of Article 4 Directions.

The *administrative* pattern, naturally enough, has shadowed the legislative one, with ancient monuments controls exercised at a national level and historic buildings ones by local government albeit with national involvement through reserve powers and appeal mechanisms. Again there might have been the scope for convergence with the increasing involvement of archaeology in the locally administered planning system from the early 1970s onwards. But other factors kept things apart. The two kinds of expertise were promoted largely separately by DoE and English Heritage in its earlier days, with archaeological posts in local government perceived as the more difficult to establish, and more systematically pump-primed. The local government system did not help with its constant state of piecemeal reorganisation from 1974 onwards: generally, archaeology pushed for involvement at county level, many being too big for a single post, while building conservation tended to push at district level, many of whom felt they were too small to support a post. Comprehensive county teams serving all their districts were held up as the answer, but these tended to wither under reorganisation-related in-fighting and many were distinctly un-joined-up as between archaeology and historic buildings.

Moving on to **intrinsic** differences, there is a need to reconcile the claims of the particular and of context. Many people are content with their specialisms and do not want to look much further than them, whether it is pottery or pargetting. We need people who are expert in the vernacular buildings of an area or Roman marching camps and it is unreasonable to expect them to take on board a much wider range of knowledge. But we also need to recognise the inter-connectedness of such elements within the wider historic environment. There are at least three ways in which this gets expressed. One is *adjacency* of interest, the need to be aware that pursuit of one aspect of the historic environment may affect another – a matter of process. Classic examples include repairs to the foundations of historic buildings, which can affect archaeological deposits that are part of the history of the building, and the effects of site management regimes on ecological interests. Another is *nesting* of interest, how a concern for the larger elements of the historic environment, landscape and townscape, cannot be properly followed without an adequate appreciation of their components, whose understanding may well be the province of another – a matter of content. Yet another is *networking* of interest, how anyone with general responsibilities for an area and all the buildings and / or archaeology within it must operate on the basis of the formula 'knowing who to ask is just as important as knowing the answer oneself'. Surely these are outlooks that we ought to have in common.

Taking the **professions** as part of the intrinsic rather than the circumstantial, some interesting issues emerge. One is competences. IFA and IHBC have to hold a delicate balance between defining competence in terms of specific subject areas and process skills, and ensuring that wider professional awareness is not compromised. It is interesting that IFA, the older Institute, began with a complex set of Areas of Competence designed to cope with the various different types of archaeologist, and is now moving towards a more flexible scheme of self-validation and peer review. IHBC, however, went straight for a broad eight-fold classification of competences, all of which all members must demonstrate. There is now some convergence towards recognising individual sets of knowledge and skills within a broad framework.

Another is the relationship of the Institutes to the concept of the historic environment. The messages here are interestingly mixed. Compare the statements in the current 2002 Year Books of the two organisations. On paper at least, the scope of IHBC's vision and requirements is far broader than those of IFA. Yet one of the triggers for this event was a 'political' perception that archaeologists were trying to take over the historic environment. It would interesting for IFA to produce its own mirror version of the IHBC Year Book statement in order that there could be a proper comparison of how much the two Institutes have in common at the level of high rhetorical endeavour.

Another aspect is inter-professional relationships. I have a strong impression, not backed up by any serious research, of different patterns within the two Institutes. There is relatively little cross-membership of both Institutes. Archaeology seem relatively in-turned, albeit within a fairly large sub-disciplinary circle. Historic Buildings Conservation in relatively outward-looking, and has significant overlaps with other cognate main-line professions, mainly represented by the RTPI and RICS. Both Institutes are young and trying to grow. Both suffer from the inevitable gaps in potential membership due to the absence of non-joiners not forced to act by membership being an essential qualification for practice. But IFA probably suffers more from the kind of fragmentation that allows some segments of the world of archaeology to say that they cannot or do not want to see what a professional Institute holds for them.

Yet another aspect is professional culture. To put it all in rather an overcrowded nutshell: there is a view that building conservation is mainly concerned with ensuring good design and that acceptable development facilitates continuing uses for physically conspicuous structures and places. Preservation 'as found' is part of the process but not the overriding objective; information as a 'finder' has a subservient role. In contrast, archaeology is seen as mainly concerned with historic elements that have lost economically viable uses and face threats from decay or development. Systematically stored information is more important because archaeological elements may be quite difficult to find or recognise; the lack of options for alternative uses increases the importance of creating and storing an accessible record when preservation is not possible. What this tends to ignore is what Kate Clark has put so well in her 'Informed Conservation', that understanding significance includes using archaeological skills and that those skills should be with others outside the circle of traditional archaeologists.

Conclusion – using the framework

To conclude: all this is as much about contexts for agendas as agendas themselves. The idea of a framework comprising *content*, *process* and *users* is hardly new, but it is also bedrock upon which sound structures can be based. Perhaps it is the key instrument for achieving joined-up-ness. Signing up to it doesn't involve great declarations – it's something the two Institutes could promote as worth discussion and it should certainly be regarded as an education thing. It is not a Trojan horse of any kind because it is a device that enables us to identify what we have, and what we do not have, in common, a basis for celebrating convergence and diversity without worrying excessively about the territory. There are a few specific suggestions, again largely on underlying matters.

We have got to do something about the misuse of the 'a'-word - archaeology. It is causing trouble and confusion. It actually describes an academic discipline, a way of doing things, the processes involved in recognising, analysing and explaining all the content of the historic environment, survivals of past material culture, whether now useless or still useful. There is prehistoric archaeology, landscape archaeology, church archaeology, industrial archaeology, buildings archaeology, etcetera. If we all do our job properly by ensuring that as far as possible we understand what we have before we decide how to preserve, conserve, manage, modify or explain, then we are all doing something archaeological. So, to put it crudely, there's no need for historic buildings people to feel threatened by perceptions of archaeological imperialism over matters such as buildings analysis – they should be useful colleagues. Anyway, a good conservation officer has got a lot of archaeologist in him or her.

We must not lose sight of our explanatory role, and of the importance in it of good information. The interest of the historic environment justifies its conservation and preservation, and that interest must be conveyed widely. Explaining why should be an integral part of conserving any useful survival from the past. Making available in one form or another should be the *sine qua non* of information collection on any topic.

We should look carefully at the reasons why we do not communicate the interest of our subject as widely as we might. Some of them are cultural but some are also a matter of resources and priorities – the lack of resources that keeps people nose-down to reactive casework until they lose sight of their explanatory role as part of the basic reason for doing it all in the first place. The minority of incorrigible particularists, who hold to the heresy that their personal interest in the subject is its own justification need TLC or CPD.

Finally, we must look outside ourselves at the wider world of history within which aspects of all our activities are set. There is a new level of discussion, connecting philosophy, practice and audiences and raising both dangers and opportunities in ways that we neglect at our peril. It is well put by some of the publicity for a debate later this evening at the National Portrait Gallery, organized by the Institute of Ideas (www.instituteofideas.com) 'History with a capital H is being outflanked by particular and local histories. National history is rejected as an ideological deception, but credence is given to stories that help ethic communities and other interest groups understand and define themselves in the present … what is considered heritage has been widened from historically significant buildings to places, areas or buildings that create a sense of local belonging and identity-formation. Both English Heritage's Power of Place and the DCMS'document look at how the historic environment can be used as a tool in social inclusion policies. What explains the growing interest in the past ? Is there such a thing as a universal history that is relevant to us all ? How can history help us understand the present ? And how valid is the use of history for the purposes of social cohesion ?'

There are others out there: at our peril we fail to influence and join-up in common cause.