

Planning and the Historic Environment 2002
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Shared outlooks and common ground

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‘Archaeology’ and ‘Conservation’ are terms that can divide and exclude. In practice, everyone involved in field archaeology and historic buildings conservation is engaged in the same pursuit, and wants to achieve similar outcomes. This is demonstrated by the cross-disciplinary achievements of post-medieval archaeology. But it is not only good scholarship that requires the disciplines to work together, so too does effective advocacy. Too few people yet realise that securing the future of the historic environment is an essential part of sustainable development. To get our message across, we have to speak with one voice, and, at least as important, it has to be in a language which the unconverted understand and backed up by arguments that are coherent and persuasive. We still have a long way to go.

This is a very important gathering of two arms of what is in essence one area of common interest and one of professional interest. I would like to give some idea of where English Heritage as an organisation is going in what is a fairly tough situation for the historic environment and, I hope, to elicit your support. Some points are directly relevant to what the Institutes do, but most are contextual, in terms of the broader areas of interest, anxieties and capacity that affect and influence our ability to nurture the historic environment.

The common glue that brings us all together around a common agenda is our belief in the importance of the historic environment, whether as a scientific source of evidence and information, or as part of the quality of life for people living in towns and countryside redolent of history that can be expressed through place and read as a narrative. It is something that touches us all. The research associated with *Power of Place* showed that the historic environment strikes a chord in the hearts and minds of the large proportion of people in this country; most do not understand what the word ‘heritage’ means and are not card-carrying members of any archaeological or heritage organisation but they still attach a strong

value to their historic surroundings. I believe that as a sector we, and English Heritage, are letting them down. We are being out-manoeuvred by other economic, political and social forces for whom that issue of place, historical place in particular, does not register.

As an activist in the late 60s and early 70s, I look around and see people of my generation who were part of those same battles and wars. My biggest shock when I became Chairman of English Heritage just over two years ago was to realise that those battles I had thought we had won then have to be re-fought over and over again, from scratch with new people and in new circumstances of change. The generations have changed, and those who now control the political strings of society have changed too; all at a much more rapid rate than we have as the champions of the historic environment. As someone whose interests have tended to be in the above-ground built environment of the last two hundred years, I feel that the traditional archaeological battles have in one sense been all but won, because they are encapsulated in the enormous success of PPG16. They are in the bag, uncontentious, buttoned up as a nice discrete package. Many archaeologists might not agree with that, but by the standards of the battles that still have to be fought for the landscapes of the 17th, 18th, 19th and even 20th centuries, that is the case. At face value that sounds perhaps like divisiveness, but it seems to me there is, in fact, a professional indivisibility in terms of knowledge and expertise and that those of us whose interests might be in 18th century industrial landscapes have more to learn than most from what archaeology over 150 years has achieved in terms of developing its professionalism, its knowledge, its understanding and its science. So, we have in traditional archaeology an extraordinary intellectual resource, incomparable, widely respected and developed over many years, with a strong and powerful academic base. All of that represents good, but it also has some aspects of bad; in terms of complacency, inertia, introversion, self-interest, and all the other things that too easily define professions.

So here we are in new and perhaps more hostile circumstances for making the case about the historic environment. The conditions out there are harsh for the sorts of things in which we believe. We have a government rightly and inevitably focused upon modernisation and in renewing the infrastructure of the nation; it is not prepared to brook blockages to those initiatives. More importantly, this is not an old-style command-and-control publicly-funded modernisation initiative; it is a plurally-funded programme dependent upon the private sector. That means it has to encompass flexibility and compromise if it is going to bring on

board the people who are going to pay. So people like us will be seen as getting in the way of those kinds of initiatives. If government wants business and private money to build new roads and railways, support the health service and do all sorts of other things, nobody is going to be listened to who stands up and says “there are three Victorian buildings listed Grade II* which we think you should take into account before you sweep through”. That is the critical point. In the old days we talked to government and government did the business. We were very good at battling with government and getting victories. Government now is in a trading position; it is mediating change with a wider financial sector and we must not forget that.

There is an economic dynamism from which we all benefit, and, if you remember, it was economic dynamism and the rate of change in the post-War period of modernisation in the 50s and 60s which led to the battling, activism and anxiety about what was happening to the landscape. Today, keeping alight the flame of prosperity is sacrosanct. It is the thing governments crave for, it is the symbol of their success and they will protect it at all costs. And, most people will back them. We are all more prosperous than we were in the 60s, we have a higher disposable income, and we have the capacity personally to dispose that income in a wide variety of ways.

The Green Paper could become a Developers’ Charter because it has to deliver to that modernisation programme. We would all support the idea of a streamlined and more efficient planning service, but an organisation like English Heritage is seen as a blockage in the system, whereas we can demonstrate that in 81% of the cases we handle we have imposed no impediment in terms of processing issues. In fact, one of the biggest impediments is the lack of ability on the part of applicants and their agents to get the right quality of information into their applications, despite guidance in PPG15, with the consequence that they have to be sent back again.

We also have a property-owning democracy of a kind quite unique in Europe. If you believe property is the new universal currency, all the indications are that Britain’s ability to survive the economic vicissitudes of the last few years is due to what we spend as shoppers and to our financial status as property owners. That is the engine of the economy, and no government is going to turn the tap off on it. This puts place, buildings and landscape in a new context when we talk about who decides on their future. People who have their houses

listed love it, and we have complaints to English Heritage from people whose houses are not listed; they would like them listed because on average it adds about 8% to the value. Equally there is plenty of evidence that listed office buildings perform economically no worse than modern ones and in many cases better. But, it is more difficult to persuade the world of developers that listing has any relevance to them. Developers tell me they see English Heritage as a serious impediment blocking the wealth of the nation. And, house builders, who own much of the Green Belt, watch its value rise, bolstering their share prices and enabling them to bank on a future when government eventually capitulates, restrictions are relaxed and they can make a second killing by building houses on it.

So we have all the pawns in place for a battle royal coming along in the next few years, and the historic environment might be the loser. You can see the signs of it; I had two of them yesterday. One was a leaflet through my door from CPRE – ‘Urban Sprawl Affects us All’ was the headline; 658,000 houses to be built in the next ten years, 300,000 of them in the Green Belt. The second half of the document said urban regeneration is the answer with a picture of run down Liverpool. So the debate about brown field and green field is hotting up. The second sign was an advertisement in yesterday’s ‘Times’. ‘If half a million people send a message to Tony Blair, farmers, consumers and the countryside will all get a better deal.’ The supporting organisations included the CBA, the Friends of the Earth, and many others; three million members all banded together under one headline about a common cause.

When we were gathering data for *Power of Place*, time and time again people were saying that the historic environment sector is fragmented; it is 10 or 15 years behind compared with the way the activists in the natural environment fought their battles, to a great extent successfully. The nation is signed up to the natural environment, to biodiversity, village ponds, habitats and hedgerows. They too might say that the battle is won but, interestingly, they believe that it has to be fought continuously, despite the fact that by our standards they are streets ahead of us. And here we are; we stratify ourselves by date – people are interested in old things, not so old things, slightly less old things, Georgian things, Victorian things, and so on, most of whom do not quite talk to each other much of the time. I know something is being done about that now through Heritage Link, but it is still a major issue for us. And, it is still fashionable for archaeologists to snipe at each other. For heavens’ sake let’s grow up; there is a bigger issue at stake here. Knocking English Heritage has become a

sort of blood sport: we are not perfect, but it is in all our interests to have a strong English Heritage. Just as it is in English Heritage's interest to have a strong voluntary sector. If we go down, the whole shooting match goes down too. But, of course, we're not going to and nor is the sector. But, we do have to become much more aware of each other, mutually supportive and more unified in order to be stronger.

No government is going to prejudice prosperity for single-issue groups whose language is obscure. We are talking in language that most people out there do not understand, partly because in the last round of battles in the 1970s and '80s, we professionalised ourselves. That was good because it raised standards, promoted training and codes of ethics, and invested in developing our expertise. But, professionalisation almost always results in internalisation and that is how we can so easily lose the plot. If a profession exists to dispense expertise it should, of course, invest in the development of that expertise, because there will always be a market for it, but it must always remember to talk to the wider world. We are finished if, as happens with many professional organisations, we turn inward upon ourselves, find it comfortable to talk to each other and forget about talking to the outside world. So we are all dependent upon your professionalism and knowledge, but equally upon your ability to persuade people by using language that a wider audience can understand.

After all that, there is also some good news too. *Power of Place* revealed huge latent support for the historic environment. We see history and archaeology as being hugely popular, a central part of television broadcasting, the new gardening, the new tomorrow. And, look at the £20m campaign the British Tourist Authority and others are launching. After financial services our largest external currency earner is culture and heritage. People come to this country not for beaches and bikinis but for landscape, the richest, most enchanting and engaging landscape in the world, which has a quality and depth to it because it has a history second to none. We squander that at our peril.

But that, I believe, is only part of the argument. We in English Heritage must fight for the historic environment because it is a good in its own right. We have spent too long over the last decade finding second-order justifications for why it is important. I believe we can advance a credible argument that the historic environment is an asset in its own right, a good that benefits every man woman and child in the country. Now we have to get message and language right. We know that many people out there who will believe the message if it is put

to them properly; it has to be put to them in a manner that is clear, consistent and unified, by people like those in this room and the organisations they represent.

What is impressive about the natural environment organisations is how, when the chips are down, they get their wagons into a circle. We have not done that yet. We are still wandering uselessly over the prairie looking for the last buffalo. If the amenity societies are marginalized as one of the outcomes of the Green Paper, we will have lost one of the great strengths that has enabled us to feed huge knowledge and expertise into the debate, and in many cases winning the day. Issues that we play with, like characterisation (which I believe in, but nobody else understands the meaning of) are fine but it is the archetypical example of a group of expert people shuffling ideas around amongst themselves but of being unable to explain them clearly and simply to anyone else. Too easily characterisation gets characterised itself as creeping conservation, a sort of plague, and laid at the door of a demonised English Heritage by those who misunderstand or misrepresent its mission as one of stifling everything. We then get stuck and so do you, because we are all seen as single-issue pressure groups. Yesterday in the City, Ken Livingstone said English Heritage must be comprehensively defeated [on tall buildings] because it is an obscure monastic order. Last time he had a go at me I was the worst thing to have hit London since Adolf Hitler, and the time before that, the Taliban of the planning process. Now we may laugh, but he has some support for that view – but not much – from amongst those who believe that English Heritage is getting in the way of the future.

My final point is that today English Heritage has launched a report, a rapid study of resources in English local authorities: you can find it on the English Heritage web-site as *Heritage Resources under Pressure*. This has brought out some crucial issues. At the same time as we have more interest than ever before in the historic environment, we have a diminishing capacity in local authority planning departments to handle it. There are less Conservation Officers now than there were a decade ago and, broadly speaking, at a lower level within the local authority. They are therefore younger, tend to be less experienced; their clout in terms of exerting influence is proportionately less. The ability of local authorities to deliver has been severely prejudiced over the last decade. That has impacted upon English Heritage's ability to deliver because of the need to pick up problems local authorities cannot handle for lack of staff or expertise. That is not what we should be doing.

We must change our own stance and help build capacity in local authorities so that they can do their job on the ground capably and competently while we do ours.

Let me turn now to the modernisation of English Heritage. Our objective is to make EH fit for purpose, efficient and able to punch its weight much more effectively. We started the process of modernisation last summer. We now have a professional head in Simon Thurley; there will be a modernisation programme agreed by Commission in June. Let me give you an example. There is no policy unit in English Heritage; there are bits of policy bubbling away in corners of Swindon and Savile Row, but we have to bring it all together at a senior level and be capable of hitting hard. The post of Director of Policy and Communications was advertised recently in *The Times*. That policy has got to be something to which you all contribute, as archaeologists, as historic buildings people. We are going to have to be one gang.

We have just had a Quinquennial Review, about to be published. It was a tough and searching process but we are totally signed up to implementing its findings, not least because the key ones were on our own agenda already and lie at the heart of the modernisation programme begun last year.

Let me conclude. The historic environment is, I believe, subject to more threat than at any time for a generation. The threat comes in massive development pressure, the willingness of government – national and local – to put renewal and the economy before everything, while failing to understand that the historic environment is a key component of and contributor to that programme. The job of the historic environment sector – for all of us here today – is to demonstrate that there is a win win opportunity, that a modern nation will not be achieved by sweeping away the past. On the contrary, a thoughtful, pluralistic (dare I say, joined up) view of tomorrow's landscape – urban and rural – will not only value the past, but see it as a resource worth investing in as a vital component of the future; important in its own right, a major contributor to the quality of life for most people, and a unique asset which if lost will be lost for ever.