

The Presentation of Guardianship Sites

by

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Since 1984 English Heritage has been responsible for the care of over 400 historic sites held in the guardianship of the state for the benefit of the nation. As such it stands as the still youthful heir to the many other state bodies which preceded it in having responsibility for the care of these historic sites: among them the Department of the Environment, the Office of Works, the War Office, the Office of Woods and Forests and the Board of Ordnance. With the passage of such buildings into guardianship, they almost always – if it had not already long been the case – came to enjoy the status of historic monuments, places which were considered important enough to be both preserved and managed for posterity, and made accessible and comprehensible to contemporaries. From that moment most of the decisions taken about how to treat such structures became essentially acts of conservation and presentation: consciously undertaken either to ensure the structure's survival or to communicate a particular understanding or experience of the site – and the two are often inseparably entwined.

Presentation is a term which requires some definition; it is used here to describe the science, if such a grand word can be used for such an imprecise activity, of the treatment of historic sites undertaken in order to show them to the public, generally speaking for the purposes of encouraging understanding and enjoyment. Just as the question of how historic buildings should be preserved is one which is continually re-examined and agonised over, so the question of how they should be presented is one which needs to be posed and posed again. The purpose of this paper is to say something of the history of the presentation of the sites in English Heritage's care as part of a re-examination of this question.

The Ministry of Works' approach to the repair and presentation of its sites was explicit and was based largely on the 'repair as found' philosophy expounded, among others, by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Broadly, this approach resulted in the clearance from each site of accumulated deposits thought to be later than its defining period (so usually later medieval and after), the consolidation of the fabric, and the landscaping of the site in a fashion which was considered appropriate for the monument.² In presentational terms this, the

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‘Ministry of Works style’, lent a homogeneity to the appearance of a very heterogeneous collection of sites, and gave rise to the familiar sight of a ruined structure standing alone, surrounded by a sea of closely mown grass, with excavated elements exposed to demonstrate the original ground plan of the site, and with all stone elements denuded of organic matter (compare Figs. 1 and 2). In an article for the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* in 1924 Frank Baines articulated this philosophy of approach. There he stated, ‘It is incumbent upon the technician dealing with the work of preservation to sink his individuality to the uttermost and merely to throw up the distinctive character and individuality of the mediaeval constructor’, a statement which demonstrates both the Ministry’s belief in the purity of its own approach and some of the assumptions with which that approach was in fact imbued.³

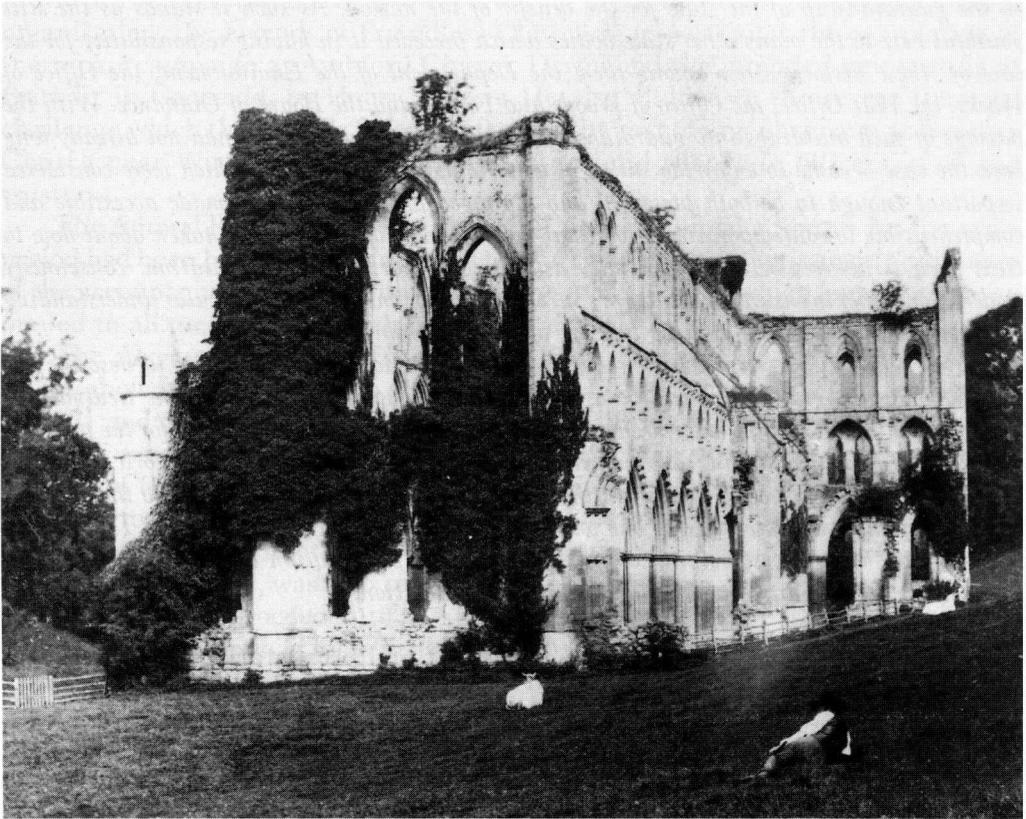


Fig. 1

Rievaulx Abbey from the north-east in the late nineteenth century. The rampant ivy and lumpy landscape of buried features (far left) were characteristic of many sites at the time they were taken into guardianship. Their wildness had been much admired by visitors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

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Perhaps the most influential assumption which underpinned the Ministry of Works' approach was the view that sites had one fundamentally defining period, and that the fabric of this time ought to be revealed and that all works which came after this time were inferior or even irrelevant in comparison. Generally speaking this involved a disregard for post-medieval phases of medieval buildings and led to the destruction of many early-modern structures on sites which were viewed as being essentially medieval; the treatment of Gloucester Blackfriars over the last few decades being a surprisingly recent case in point. Built structures were viewed as texts which could be read by the observer, and it was therefore

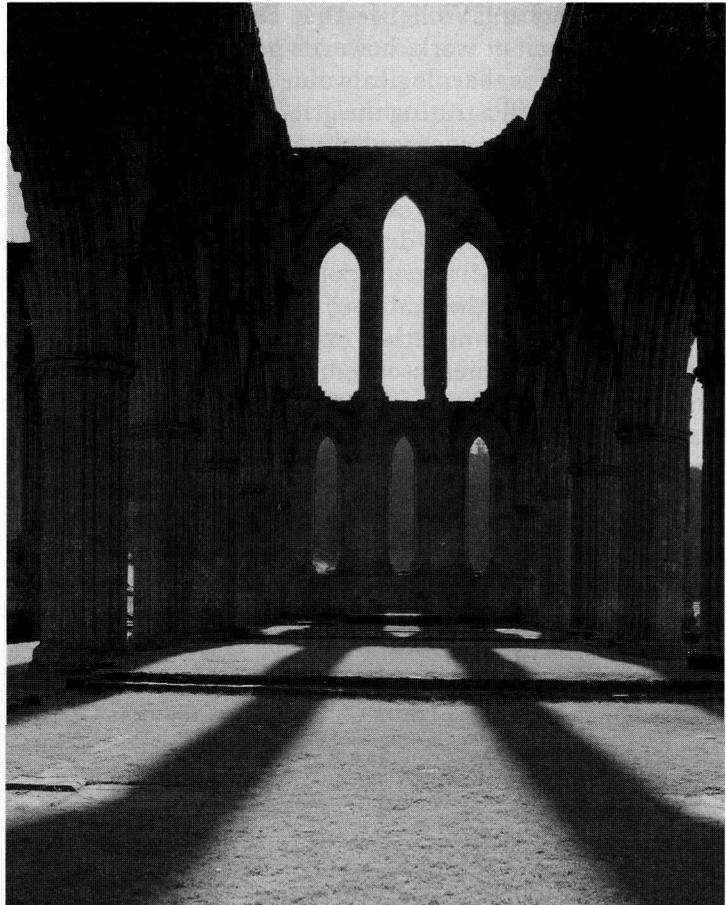


Fig. 2

The interior of the nave of Rievaulx Abbey, looking east, in 2002. The clearance, excavation, repair and re-turfing undertaken by the Ministry of Works in the twentieth century gave many monuments now in English Heritage's care this smooth, clipped and mown look

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considered crucial for the fabric of the defining period to be exposed, so the coursing and phasing of the structure could be interpreted and its lay-out and configuration deciphered. Later accretions which obscured that critical part of the fabric, be they buildings, soil deposits or vegetation, were torn down and dug up to reveal that which lay behind them, the pure results of the labours of the 'mediaeval constructor'.

Alongside this way of viewing the essential character of a site was a horror of the sin of 'reconstruction'. The leading lights of the early twentieth-century Ministry were, like many of their generation, haunted by the fantastic gothic reconstructions

of Gilbert Scott and Viollet-le-Duc. Frank Baines was unequivocal in his view that 'replicas of ancient work, however perfectly or accurately executed, can have no real historic or archaeological value whatever'; 'Such instances would extend into pages of matter, illustrating the grievous and heavy losses which have been incurred; partly, perhaps, as a consequence and a result of the scholarship and knowledge of M. Viollet-le-Duc'.⁴ Any modern work to the fabric of a site which smacked of an attempt to recreate or even recall the past was seen as at best dangerously misleading and at worst downright unethical. However, though the philosophical position which the Ministry espoused set out the rights and wrongs of this approach in black and white, the reality of the decisions taken under the auspices of Charles Peers were sometimes rather more grey, especially when it came to the materials in which his department worked; as he wrote in 1931 'it is better to risk a deception by inconspicuous additions than to proclaim them by conspicuous and unsympathetic materials'.⁵

The clear separation which the custodians of early nineteenth- and early twentieth-century monuments saw between built structures and the landscape in which they stood was another factor fundamental to the Ministry of Works' approach.



Fig. 3

Kirby Muxloe Castle, Leicestershire, from the west at the turn of the twentieth century.

The site came into state guardianship in 1911

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The limited extent of the 'guardianship area' of any site, usually drawn hard about the footings of the most imposing standing structures, was symptomatic of the scale of contemporary interest in the physical fabric of a site as the historic artefact and the relative absence of interest in the wider landscape or ancillary buildings. This lack of interest in the landscape as part of the monument was one of the factors which informed the widespread practice of laying guardianship sites with new turf wherever possible. As a result they assumed the appearance of cricket pitches on which ruined medieval buildings appeared to have been inexplicably marooned; a look favoured all the more by contemporary aesthetic judgements about the attractiveness of an ordered visual landscape about a ruined site, mown grass 'against stone is aesthetically pleasing' being the received view, and a firmly practical approach to grounds maintenance – as one pragmatic observer remarked 'it is easier to keep the ground clean by the scythe and the motor mower than by the laborious process of hand weeding'.⁶ Because the landscape was not treated as part of the historic fabric of the site, it was felt to be excluded from the rules governing the treatment of historic fabric. Therefore on those occasions when the landscape immediately surrounding a monument was treated as complementary to the masonry, the results were dramatic. While Baines and Peers would have shuddered at the thought of the speculative reconstruction of even one bay of tracery,



Fig. 4

Kirby Muxloe Castle from the air in 1991. Between 1911 and 1913 the Ministry of Works undertook a major programme of repair and clearance here; while its approach to the built structure was cautious, its treatment of the landscape – notably the re-instatement of the great moat – was remarkably bold

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they happily reassembled twenty-foot-high earthwork defences round entire castles and lifted out many tons of soil to encircle them with the moats, without which they were naked of their former 'grandeur' (compare Figs. 3 and 4).⁷

The Ministry of Works' approach to the treatment of the nation's guardianship sites was determined to a large extent by experience of two categories of properties, namely prehistoric sites and, particularly powerfully, ruined medieval buildings.⁸ Thus the principle, for example, that re-roofing guardianship sites was inappropriate was adopted on the basis that such an act would necessitate the rebuilding of whole sections of fabric in order to reinstate a roof – which would often have been true of substantially ruined medieval sites. However, it was a principle then carried over to sites to which the reasoning for the approach did not apply: for example the early-eighteenth-century Appuldurcombe House in the Isle of Wight where, shortly after the Second World War, a partially damaged roof was removed entirely when the house was taken into guardianship, rather than being replaced, on the basis of the approach set out above.⁹

Though the principles which underpinned the Ministry of Works' approach did not change markedly in the course of the twentieth century, some of the physical manifestations of their application did. The Ministry had, for example, long considered the provision of physical access around the site, with the insertion of bridges and walk-ways, as a permissible intervention to help visitors to understand sites.¹⁰ The principle that modern additions to the properties should be identified as such has been a constant of the philosophy of the treatment of the properties. However, there has been a gradual shift in how this has been expressed. It has always been the case that the personal taste of individuals, among them Regional Architects and Inspectors of Ancient Monuments, has to a large extent determined the physical appearance of modern additions. The 1960s and 1970s saw some of the boldest interpretations of the philosophy that modern interventions should not masquerade as historic fabric. While in some cases new elements of sites – platforms, bridges, huts – were erected from traditional materials to fairly timeless or broadly historic designs, in others a more overtly modernist approach was taken, often involving the use of concrete, for example the spiral stair into the keep at Peveril Castle and the ramp into the Inner Bailey at Beeston Castle. Gone in these cases were Peers' gentle aesthetics, and instead a bolder view was taken of the honest brutality of the juxtaposition of the old and the new. Wooden bridges teetering on the piles of their predecessors were replaced with unsupported spans of concrete and timbered custodial cottages and ticket offices with less rustic modern structures (compare Figs. 5 and 6).

At Conisbrough Castle, a new staircase up to the first floor entrance was inserted after the discovery of the bases of the original steps. When the material for the new stairs was discussed, timber was rejected because of 'the large number of timber uprights that would have been required to support such a structure, forming an ugly forest of timbers', and instead a concrete stair was constructed 'leaving the original arrangements clearly visible'.¹¹ Though the 'honesty' of the form and fabric of these modern interventions cannot be denied, their materials and design were

Fig. 5

The custodian's hut at Furness Abbey, Cumbria, built c.1930. Like many of the structures erected by the Ministry to serve guardianship sites, its solid structure, high-quality materials and gentle Arts-and-Crafts design have seen it age well
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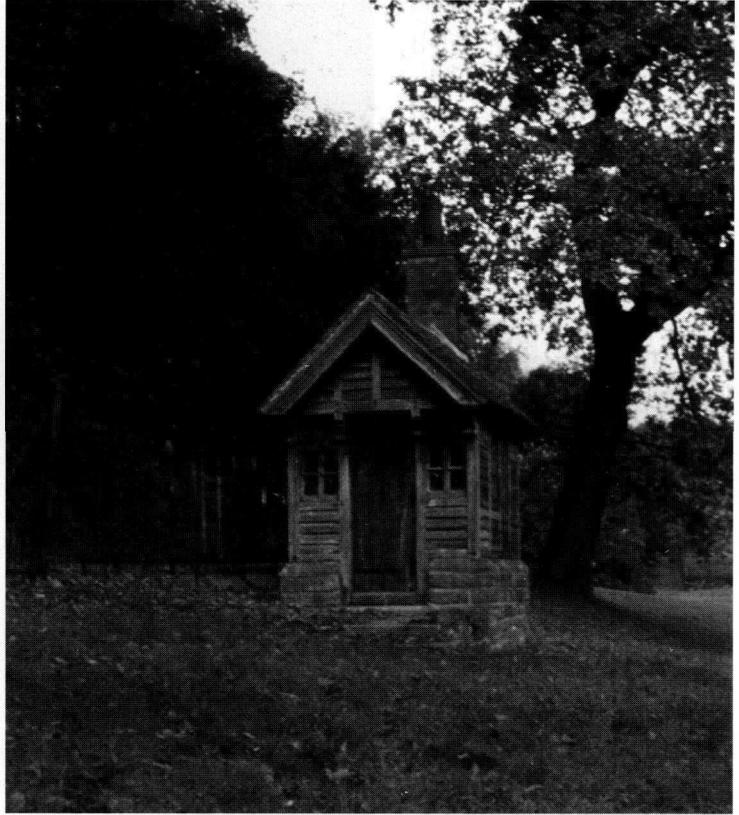


Fig. 6

The ticket office at Wall Roman Site, Staffordshire, 2003. This structure is one of a standard type erected across the country in the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast to the buildings of the early twentieth century, these were cheap to build and deliberately contemporary in design

so quintessentially of their time that they have dated quickly and unmistakably.

The Ministry had long been responsible for a clutch of important historic houses (the royal palaces and villas, and houses such as Chiswick House and Audley End which had been given to or acquired for the nation), which had always been treated somewhat differently from the rest of the sites. However, with the Ministry's gradual shedding of its earlier lack of interest in post-medieval buildings came its acquisition of a series of ruined historic houses (e.g. Sutton Scarsdale (1971), Witley Court (1972), Northington Grange (1975)). Those houses were taken on explicitly as exemplars, in order 'to preserve those ruined and neglected examples of polite

architecture which demonstrate the archaeological evidence for the changing development of English architecture since the Middle Ages' and were in many ways subject to the same approach as the medieval and prehistoric monuments with which the Ministry was traditionally associated.¹² In treating these sites as 'roofed ruins', the Ministry made alterations to them which now seem extraordinarily brutal, not least in the practice of removing great areas of plaster and other fabric to expose structural elements beneath, as happened extensively at Kirby Hall (Figs. 7 and 8), among other places.

The 'Ministry of Works' approach has, of course, undergone considerable change in the last two decades. A shift in attitude has occurred, away from the sometimes paternalistic approach of the early twentieth-century, with its occasionally myopic judgements about what the defining moment of a site was, what it meant and what mattered about it. Central to this change has been a broadening of the definition



Fig. 7

The east end of the great hall at Kirby Hall, Northamptonshire, in 1906, before the house was taken into state guardianship

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Fig. 8

The east end of the great hall at Kirby Hall in 1982. Great sections of the historic panelling and decorative fittings were removed once the site had been taken into guardianship, to reveal the archaeology of the structure they adorned

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of the 'significance' of a historic site, and a recognition that buildings are important to a wide range of different groups of people often for quite different reasons.

In the presentation of sites there has been a concomitant shift which has begun to unravel the Ministry of Works' approach. As the historic site has come to be understood in much broader terms, many of the beams of the Ministry's approach have been dislodged. There has been a move away from a preference for the single-phase judgement of significance; an acceptance that if sites are texts, they can be read in a multitude of different ways – be it as a geological narrative, as a picturesque ruin, or a near-perfect survival of the past; interventions – roofs, viewing platforms, modern floors, re-created

interiors – are now viewed more sympathetically, as the means of allowing the visitor to understand original volumes, functions and spatial configurations.¹³

There has also been a dramatic shift away from a narrow definition of the historic site itself, in favour of a much wider interpretation casting it in the context of the broader landscape and socio-economic environment of the time. Partly as a result, the early twentieth-century aesthetic of the clipped and trimmed landscape is no longer viewed as always the most appropriate or pleasing setting for historic properties, while advances in conservation science have shown that this approach is frequently not the best way to ensure the physical preservation of the fabric.¹⁴

This change in approach has been articulated in various ways, among them the English Heritage annual report 1986-7, which stated 'we are trying increasingly

to show the way in which buildings change over the years – periods of use, alteration and adaptation, and even of disuse and dilapidation are as much part of the history of the monument as its initial design and construction...'. In presentational terms this meant 'we are now willing to re-roof properties where appropriate and, where the necessary evidence is available, to re-create interior spaces with floors and partitions. This gives our visitors a better idea of how the building looked when it was in use.'¹⁵

In many ways a seminal test-case of a change in approach came with the transfer into guardianship of Wigmore Castle, Herefordshire, in 1995. Unusual as a medieval ruin in state care which had not been given the 'Ministry of Works' treatment, the castle was 'a proper ruin, undamaged by earlier intervention, and important in public perception as a romantic ruin'.¹⁶ Here the site was not stripped back to reveal the medieval fabric, but instead consolidated as the collapsed, overgrown ruin it had long been. While this has been widely acclaimed as a sympathetic approach to this site, it was precisely because Wigmore had not been 'presented' in any deliberate way before that it was possible here; the conundrum still remains of to what extent sites which have had the 'Ministry of Works' approach can, or should, ever throw that off and assume again the romantic wildness which is quietly managed at Wigmore. The last thirty years have also seen the overturning of the early twentieth-century approach to re-roofing and a series of historic buildings have had roofs of one sort or another re-instated: among them Rochester Castle forebuilding (1986), Appuldurcombe House (1986), Conisbrough Castle (1992), Lulworth Castle (1995), though the challenge still remains: once interior spaces are created, what – if anything – should fill them?

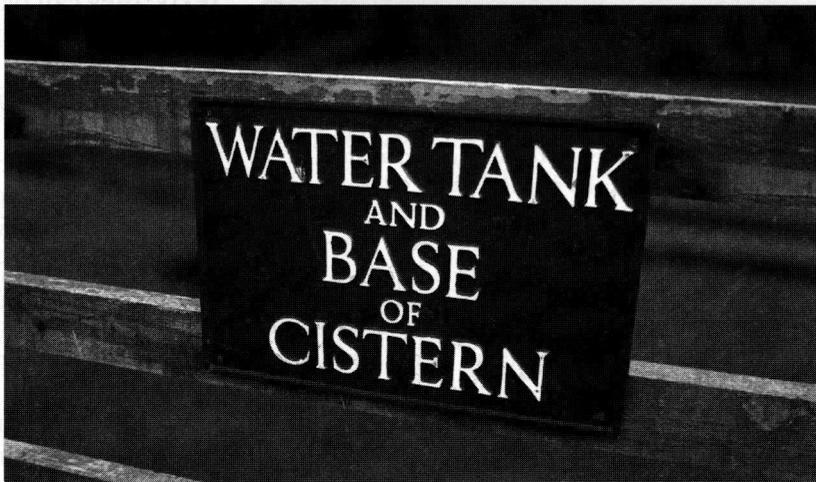


Fig. 9

Aluminium 'label' from Housesteads Roman fort. Though they are easy to read, simply designed and have lasted well, in some cases the terms used on the Ministry's labels were so esoteric that all but the specialist required a dictionary to learn anything from them

In the first report of the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate to Parliament in 1911 the responsibility of the state in providing information on the history and significance of the sites in its care to the public was explicitly recognised, and to the Inspectorate's normal areas of activity was added the compilation of guidebooks. For half a century or so what is now known as 'interpretation' was almost exclusively confined to the production of guidebooks and the fixing of iron or aluminium signs to the fabric of the sites identifying the name or function of a space and its date.

In 1980 the means of communicating information at historic buildings was summarised by one practitioner as still 'largely, though not exclusively a matter of publications'. However the following twenty years witnessed a dramatic increase in the range of interpretative media used at sites: the mid-1980s saw the introduction of re-created interiors at many sites, while in the 1990s, now relatively affordable computer technology – which had become popular through its use in museums in the late 1980s – became a new addition to the stock of interpretative media used to communicate information about historic buildings.¹⁷

Though the diversification of means of communicating information to visitors has been an excellent occurrence, some of the new media have enjoyed mixed success. Some, such as the hand-held audio-guides, have been shown to be effective and popular, while other media have been less so and in some cases have not been well-suited to use on a historic site. In general the question still needs always to be asked just how effective any interpretative medium is in helping visitors to understand and enjoy a given historic site.

Looking to the future of the presentation of the historic sites in English Heritage's care, there are a number of guiding principles which emerge, in part from a sense of how they have come to look the way they do. The first is to try to avoid falling at the first and highest hurdle of any big institution, old or new, and that is of letting consistency of standards give way to uniformity of approach. With sites ranging in date over seven millennia or so and in scale from single fragments of masonry to complex castle sites covering ten or twenty acres, we must be suspicious of any homogeneity of treatment at such extraordinarily varied structures, which, for all their many inter-connections, can be defined as a group only by the fact that they have been judged special or singular enough to require preservation. A thorough understanding of the history and significance of any single site must underpin all decisions about its presentation, which should be conceived to communicate this significance in imaginative and engaging ways. While seeking to avoid the mistakes which hindsight reveals in the work of the Ministry of Works, English Heritage must also recognise the place of that phase in the continuing history of its sites and the strengths of many areas of its work, such as, for example, its deft ability to create gentle and durable buildings to accommodate the presence at the site of visitors.

In any attempts to present sites, that is to try to encourage understanding and enjoyment of them, we must strive to ensure that the site itself does not become simply an adjunct or backdrop to this process. The more people can be helped to understand the function of a building through their own actual experience of that

building the better. It may be easier to explain how noble households worked in a modern exhibition gallery than on an incomplete and sometimes inhospitable site, but we should constantly be striving for new ways to do just that through the site itself. We should be bold in asking questions of how the physical treatment of a site can facilitate that, and be wary of conservation approaches which unnecessarily stifle human experience and understanding of a place. One approach which we are keen to adopt widely is to reunite the collections and the sites from which they come: the well thought out display of the ephemera of a kitchen, pots and griddles, knives and trenchers, can do much to give visitors a sense of the patterns of life in places and at periods which may sometimes seem impossibly remote from familiar human experience. English Heritage has in its care finds and other historic objects from a large proportion of the properties, in total over 13,000 boxes of archaeological material relating to the sites and a further 450,000 individual objects, a collection which has a much greater role to play in the presentation of the sites. In seeking always to help people gain pleasure from a site, we should ensure that the ways in which this is done do not undermine that end. Too often in the past a badly positioned ticket office or disfiguring and poorly designed car park – created to facilitate the visitor's passage round a site – have actually diminished the very thing they are conceived to support, a visitor's experience of a historic place.

It is a happy fact that there has been no tailing off in the numbers of people who visit historic sites over recent decades, but this should act only as further stimulation to a drive to ensure that the sites are made meaningful to as broad a range of people as possible. Properly understanding the preconceptions and previous knowledge of those who may visit our sites is crucial to catering properly for them; and this applies equally to the first-time and the well-informed visitors, and should never see the enthusiast treated as less deserving than the sceptic.

While the means of communicating the significance of a site will and should vary greatly from place to place, the standard of the information and the quality of the means of communication should be exemplary. It may be possible to put over only a limited amount of material at some sites, but the quality of this information should never be the less because it is expressed in two hundred words on a information panel, rather than in a research paper. Many of the sites for which English Heritage is responsible have not had significant new work done on them for many decades, and the account of them that is being given to the public is in some instances shockingly out of date. Building into presentation work, however modest, the presumption for new research is a crucial step towards remedying this, and the creation of a dedicated properties research team at English Heritage should see this happen. Greater consistency in the quality of design on sites is also an important aspiration, which if fulfilled will make the sites much more pleasant places to visit, and will ensure that functional and transitory interventions do not detract from the special and significant site they serve. New buildings should be built to endure well: from materials and to designs which will last for many decades, and not be rendered ineffectual or unappealing within a short time period.

The presentation of the sites for which the Ministry of Works and now English

Heritage has responsibility will always be a challenging science; the inherent difficulty of trying to help the modern visitor understand sites which not only hail from a distant past, but which are in most cases substantially ruined is a constant for any body charged with their care. However in the continuing endeavour to explain and elucidate, the fact that many of these sites have been ruins far longer than they ever were complete buildings performing their original function should never pass out of sight. While the old conceit of noticing this only in a short, 'After the Dissolution', paragraph at the end of a guidebooks has generally passed, there is still a need to remember that the ruination of so many of these sites is not just an inconvenient epilogue to their stories, but is one of their most compelling and revealing chapters. As Edmund Vale put it, in the first years of the Second World War: 'When the ruin that was neglected and let go is put into a state of preservation and tidied up, we do actually lose something that is irreplaceable, and that is the vivid presentment of the ravage of Time. We may also lose certain artistic values which used to belong to the ruin when it formed the keynote of a wild setting, or when it made a striking note of contrast, as when a thatched, whitewashed labourer's cottage was seen to make use of the curtain of a vast fortress for its back wall.'¹⁸

NOTES

1. This paper is a slightly expanded version of a section of a paper submitted to the Commissioners of English Heritage in June 2003 as a 'Properties Presentation Strategy'. It does not purport to contain new research, but rather collates various pieces of secondary material in presenting a view of how guardianship monuments have been treated in the past, and how they should be treated in the future. I am grateful to the many people at English Heritage who discussed this subject with me, and in particular to Keith Emerick for sharing with me his unpublished work on the treatment of guardianship monuments.
2. Vale, E., *Ancient England: a Review of Monuments and Remains in Public Care and Ownership* (London, 1941), 6; Emerick, K., 'From Frozen Monuments to Fluid landscapes: the presentation of ancient monuments from 1882 to the present', (unpublished PhD thesis, York, 2003), chs 1, 2, 3, *passim*.
3. Baines, F., 'Preservation of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings – Part II', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, XXXI, 6, (26 January 1924), 165-6.
4. Baines, F., 'Preservation of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, XXXI, 4, (22 December 1923), 106.
5. Peers, C., 'The Treatment of Old Buildings', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, XXXVIII, 10 (21 March 1931), 311–25.
6. 'The Department has voided a reversion to these [wild landscapes] not by weeding but by turfing all the wild open spaces, including the sides of the moats', Vale, *Ancient England*, 10.
7. At Kirby Muxloe, Baines proudly expounded the purity of the physical remains as treated by the Ministry 'No attempt has been made...to re-face the scarred brickwork, but the flaking and decaying brickwork has been seized by a mastic cement and the original faces retained without any addition', making no reference to the massive works to the landscape, 'Preservation of Ancient Monuments', II, 171. All an interesting contrast to Peers' mantra that 'repair and not restoration is the essence of the matter'; Peers, 'The Treatment of Old Buildings', 312.
8. The original schedule of ancient monuments attached to Sir John Lubbock's (soon to be Lord Avebury) Ancient Monuments bill, was composed almost entirely of prehistoric sites, a fact which reflected Lubbock's own interests, concerns about the costs of taking on maintenance-hungry masonry structures, and – interestingly – a nervousness about the 'questions of style and taste' which decisions on the form of such repairs would necessarily raise, Kains-Jackson,

- C. P., *Our Ancient Monuments And The Land Around Them* (London, 1880), iv.
9. Boynton, L.O., *Appuldurcombe House* (London, 1986), 18-9.
 10. 'Improved access is another feature of treated buildings. In old castles, wherever possible, both wall-walks and turret-tops are made accessible to the public ...', Vale, *Ancient England*, 9.
 11. Thompson, M.V., *Ruins: their Presentation and Display*, (London, 1981), 83-4.
 12. Saunders, A.D., 'A century of Ancient Monuments legislation, 1882-1982', *Antiquaries Journal*, LXIII, (1983), 11-33.
 13. See 'English Heritage Policy Statement on Restoration, Reconstruction and Speculative Recreation of Archaeological Sites Including Ruins', February, 2001.
 14. As seen, for example, in the recent work of the English Heritage Conservation Department on the benefits of soft-capping walls, e.g. Ogilvy, R.I.L., 'Observations on the practice of soft topping of walls', 1996.
 15. *Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, Report and Accounts 1986-1987* (London, 1987), 34-5. See also 'English Heritage Policy Statement on Restoration, Reconstruction and Speculative Recreation of Archaeological Sites Including Ruins', February 2001.
 16. Coppack, G., 'Setting and Structure: the Conservation of Wigmore Castle' in Chitty and Baker, eds., *Managing Historic Sites and Buildings: Balancing Presentation and Preservation* (London, 1999), 61-70.
 17. West, J., 'Keeping our house in order', *Conservation Bulletin*, 23 (1996) 17-9.
 18. Vale, *Ancient England*, 3.