

# The Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England 1984-2015: a Personal Essay

by

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*This is a personal reflection from someone who was closely involved, perhaps too closely involved to take a dispassionate view, during the first twenty-one years of the Commission's existence, and who for the last ten years has been a sympathetic but probably ill-informed spectator. Its main theme is English Heritage's emergence as a public voice in defence of the historic environment, first, from its early days, dealing with casework, and, later, in its strategic engagement with public policy. I also look at its role in property management, and the way this has interacted with its other conservation responsibilities, and at its role in promoting the concept of historic landscape. I am conscious that this inevitably neglects other significant areas of the Commission's work, not least its responsibility since 1999 for the National Monuments Record, and the major impact of developer-funded archaeology following the publication of PPG16. The division of the former English Heritage into two bodies has provided the occasion for these reflections.*

Now that the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England has taken up its new identity as Historic England and bequeathed the name 'English Heritage' to the charitable trust that has been created to manage its properties on its behalf, I have been asked to reflect on its achievements during its thirty years of more-or-less integrated existence. This will inevitably be a personal and partial view, concentrating on those areas of its work with which I am most familiar. Others will have to overcome its limitations by considering the impact of English Heritage's stewardship on the National Monuments Record, writing the history of what we used to call rescue archaeology, or evaluating the impact of the division of the archaeological profession into curators and contractors. Still others will need to synthesise the resultant archive of grey literature, as John Blair has done so successfully for the Anglo-Saxon period in his 2013 Ford Lectures.

It is a pity to have to start by taking issue with the Commission's first Chief Executive, Peter Rumble, who had previously served as director of ancient monuments and historic buildings in the Department of the Environment, and who, with Michael Heseltine, the

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Secretary of State from 1979-83, was largely responsible for setting it up. Peter, writing in 2005, recalled that 'policy on our public conservation duties needed a far less radical change than that for monuments in care'.<sup>1</sup> Things looked very different from where I sat in 1984, as the principal inspector of historic buildings looking after the small team of architectural historians responsible among other things for our limited involvement with listed building consent casework. Before English Heritage was created, our only role had been to support a supposedly secret committee of the Historic Buildings Council, known with deliberate obscurity as the Listing Committee, which advised the Department's officials on calling in controversial listed building consent applications for decision by the Secretary of State. As civil servants, we could not say anything publicly about cases where our minister might have to take the ultimate decision, but once we moved into English Heritage this restriction disappeared and we could at last offer our advice openly and be called upon to defend it in public. We tried to concentrate our limited resources on local authorities with a poor reputation for dealing with historic buildings, and our first success came when, despite our being the only objectors, we succeeded in getting an application to replace the windows of a Grade II\* Cotswolds house with UPVc double glazing first called in and then turned down. Our approach was always to encourage people to look carefully at a site or building (the term 'heritage asset' had not yet come into use), and to analyse its special interest before coming up with proposals affecting it – the commonsense approach to conservation that James Semple Kerr had already codified in *Conservation Plan*,<sup>2</sup> and which on English Heritage advice was to be incorporated in PPGs 16 and 15. It found its definitive expression in Kate Clark's magisterial *Informed Conservation*<sup>3</sup> and lies behind English Heritage's *Conservation Principles*<sup>4</sup> and the now universal adoption of statements of significance.

By abolishing the statutory role of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 had left England for the first time in a hundred years without any public institution with a statutory duty to advise the Government on the preservation of the historic environment. Although little noticed at the time, the setting up of the Commission under the National Heritage Act 1983 with a specific duty to secure the preservation of ancient monuments, historic buildings and conservation areas brought this short hiatus to an end. Welcome though this was, one provision of the 1979 Act, intended to be helpful to the conservation cause, had an unfortunate effect on the early culture of English Heritage. The introduction of scheduled monument consent meant that consent could now be refused by the Secretary of State, often without compensation, so that persuasion (with or without some financial inducement) was no longer the only practical means of protecting scheduled monuments. A perverse consequence of this was that English Heritage quickly got a reputation for saying 'no', a reputation made worse when in 1986 it inherited the Greater London Council's Historic Buildings Division. Powers that had formerly belonged to an elected local authority were now being exercised by an unelected quango, and they were being exercised in London, where controversial decisions quickly found themselves under close media scrutiny. Turning round the resultant (and highly damaging) perception of negativity was a challenge faced with relish by Jocelyn Stevens, English Heritage's second Chairman, who had been appointed in 1992 by Michael Heseltine during his

brief return to the Department of the Environment. It was an objective that with able help from Jennie Page, Peter Rumble's successor as Chief Executive, he largely succeeded in achieving.

Retaining the confidence at the same time of both the Government and the wider historic environment sector was perhaps the most important balancing act that English Heritage had to perform. We were lucky that from 1990 to 1992 the Secretary of State responsible for planning was Michael Heseltine and from 1997 to 2006 John Prescott, both politicians who recognised the value of an effective planning system, and had sufficient clout in Cabinet to defend it. Prescott will, I am sure, come to be recognised as one of the most effective planning ministers we have had, seeing off the deregulators, setting up the Urban Task Force and commissioning the Rogers report *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, published in 1999.<sup>5</sup> If only subsequent ministers had continued to implement the key recommendations of Prescott's 2000 Urban White Paper and his subsequent planning policy guidance notes, England's towns and cities would have been spared many of the mistakes of the last ten years.

Throughout this time English Heritage's reputation, and its survival, depended crucially on the quality of its advice and the strength of the support it could rely on from the sector. The ineffectiveness of the sector compared with the much more organised natural environment lobby was, however, a matter for concern in the 1990s, and English Heritage was therefore encouraged by the creation of what is now the Heritage Alliance. It was also important to gain support from those outside the sector whose views could influence the debate and win the ear of ministers, including developers and landowners. Some interest groups were never going to be on board, but others, including the British Property Federation and the Country Land and Business Association, recognised the value of the historic environment and the importance of managing it effectively, and English Heritage was able to establish a good working relationship with them despite some initial wariness on both sides. This bore fruit in *Power of Place*,<sup>6</sup> the wide-ranging review of historic environment policy published in 2000. The brainchild of English Heritage's newly appointed Chairman, Neil Cossons, its importance was twofold. The steering group set up to oversee it has matured into the Historic Environment Forum, which produces the annual *Heritage Counts* state of the historic environment reports and continues to help public-sector officials engage effectively with the private, community and voluntary sectors. The main task of *Power of Place* was to bring some of the insights that had been developing in academic conservation studies over the previous twenty years into the realm of public policy, and it can be credited with helping to break down the artificial distinction between listed buildings and scheduled monuments and to popularise the concept of significance.<sup>7</sup>

English Heritage's relationship with local authorities has of course been critical. Unless it is perceived as providing more comprehensive, specialised and authoritative advice than is possible within a local authority, its involvement in casework will be seen as unnecessary bureaucratic duplication. This is why it has always needed to retain specialist academics and conservation professionals in its advisory teams, and to avoid being seduced by the British attachment to generalism. The 1999 merger with the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England helped by providing the

additional resources needed to undertake the systematic thematic studies which, together with the development of information technology, have made it so much easier to make robust assessments of significance. It has also had to avoid stepping in to fill the gap left by under-resourced local services, supposing that it had ever had the resources to do so, because this would simply have allowed hard-pressed authorities to cut those services still further. Instead, it has always tried to encourage authorities to take their responsibilities seriously, providing training and generic advice through its Historic Environment Local Management initiative and persuading them to appoint members as heritage champions. Whether this approach will be enough to weather the latest round of austerity remains to be seen.

### CONSERVING AND MANAGING THE PROPERTIES

Although the potential for cross-fertilisation and the sharing of professional expertise has sometimes been very fruitful, the relationship between property management and advisory work has always been problematic for the Commission, and it is not too surprising that it has now been decided to separate the two functions and create a new organisation to take day-to-day responsibility for the properties.

Before the creation of English Heritage, the management of what were known loosely (and inaccurately) as guardianship sites was divided between three separate hierarchies, one of building professionals, who also managed the custodians, one of inspectors, and one of civil service administrators, who represented the minister and theoretically held the purse strings, although in practice they were too remote from the properties to exercise effective financial control. There were no in-house estate surveyors; the contrast with the National Trust could hardly have been greater. In 1986 English Heritage brought the various strands together for the first time in a unified Properties in Care Group under Francis Golding's leadership, initially with three regional directors working alongside a separate marketing division. This, and the more commercial approach that it was meant to introduce, prompted a fair bit of suspicion both inside and outside the Commission. The National Trust was understandably uneasy, particularly when English Heritage set up its own membership scheme, a fear that proved unfounded when surveys showed that almost all members of English Heritage were also members of the Trust. There was also concern that properties would be over-commercialised and their interpretation dumbed-down. In practice, of course, the quality and academic standard of English Heritage's recent guidebooks has greatly surpassed that of the old 'blue guides', which were often out-of-date, poorly illustrated and unreferenced. Today's high standards are a tribute to the many scholars involved in their production, and not least to Simon Thurley, whose determination to enhance English Heritage's academic reputation was one of the hallmarks of his time as Chief Executive.

The creation of English Heritage coincided with a significant change in conservation practice. I have written elsewhere that the old adage 'preserve as found' as a description of the Ministry of Works' approach to conservation could hardly be more misleading.<sup>8</sup> It certainly underlined the Ministry's refusal to contemplate speculative reconstruction, but it did not mean leaving well alone. Buildings were ruthlessly stripped back to a 'golden age': monastic sites had anything thought to be post-Dissolution removed without

record, sometimes, as in Gloucester, reducing a complete 16th-century building to a mere ruin. In marked contrast to the SPAB approach, timber structures were dismantled, their individual timbers repaired or replaced, and the structure reassembled. English Heritage quickly adopted a far lighter touch, summed up in the phrase, 'it's all part of the history of the monument'. Authenticity, preserving the evidence of change and the impact of time, became the watchword. Nothing was demolished or removed unless it could be convincingly argued that it was insignificant in itself – 'get rid of it before it becomes interesting!' – and that what would be left would be chronologically coherent. If layers were to be peeled away, they were taken off in order, the latest first. At the same time, the importance of recording our own interventions began to be recognised. The Ministry's approach had always been distinctively archaeological, but this had tempted inspectors to regard the archaeological evidence left in the structure as a sufficient record in itself, ignoring the fact that without recording the evidence on which conservation decisions had been based it is difficult to know what weight to put on them in subsequently reinterpreting a building. English Heritage has therefore been assiduous in publishing detailed reports on its conservation work, starting with Stokesay Castle<sup>9</sup> and including accounts of pioneering exercises such as Wigmore Castle<sup>10</sup> and the academically rigorous redisplay of Kirby Hall.<sup>11</sup> Important archaeological monographs include Paul Drury's study of Hill Hall<sup>12</sup> and Kirsty Rodwell's of Acton Court.<sup>13</sup> One of the first such reports, on a grant-aided building rather than a property in care, and commissioned before English Heritage came into existence, was on work carried out by a young Duncan Wilson, now Historic England's new Chief Executive.<sup>14</sup>

A necessary condition for this new rigour in recording conservation work carried out on English Heritage properties was unfortunately the abolition of its direct labour force: unfortunate, because at its best the Ministry's labour force had been an important training ground for apprentices in traditional craft skills. In origin a mobile force brought onto a site to complete a major project, by the 1970s it had declined into a static establishment of one or two men based at a single monument, often with little or nothing to do, but protected from redundancy by a combination of management inertia, ministerial policy (wishing to avoid anything potentially controversial) and employment legislation (preventing a move to another site where they would have been more useful). The result was that work, when it was needed, moved very slowly, often very slowly indeed, making it impossibly inefficient to arrange for archaeological supervision on a regular basis. Work was sometimes created unexpectedly to give the men something to do, so that walls might suddenly be taken down and rebuilt without warning. The change to carrying out necessary work by contract, using experienced conservation contractors, imposed the discipline of preparing proper contract documentation and gave inspectors the opportunity to arrange archaeological supervision when and where it was needed.

In 1997 the political climate changed. Regionalisation was now at the top of the agenda with the creation of regional development agencies, regional spatial strategies and appointed regional assemblies. Under its new Chief Executive, Pam Alexander, it was thought to be important for English Heritage to respond to this new context. As a result, the reform introduced ten years earlier was reversed, the separate Properties Group was abolished, and the management of the properties was reintegrated with the



Commission's advisory work under nine regional teams each covering one of the new regions into which England had been divided. There was understandable concern that elected regional government was likely to mean the dismemberment of English Heritage, and there was palpable relief when the move towards regional government was brought to a halt following its rejection by a popular referendum in the North East.

It was not long before Simon Thurley, brought in by Neil Cossons to replace Pam Alexander, once again set up a dedicated property management structure, but the brief integration of advisory and property work had helped to highlight the role of direct management as one of the means by which conservation objectives can be achieved. It remains the most effective way in this country of protecting historic entities, when the significance of the whole – buildings, contents and landscape – is more than the sum of its parts. With no statutory protection for moveable items, other than the conditions that can sometimes be attached to inheritance tax exemption, taking a property into care is often the only option available if an entity is under threat. In the past, this had usually been achieved by placing a property, with a suitable endowment, in the care of the National Trust. Here the Trust's fear of English Heritage as a potential rival may have been partly justified, for although Calke Abbey and Tyntesfield went to the Trust after English Heritage came into existence, Osborne House, Apsley House, Brodsworth Hall, Down House, Eltham Palace and the three ex-GLC properties, Kenwood, Marble Hill and Ranger's House, Blackheath, were all passed to English Heritage. The fact that they were taken on without a continuing endowment, on the grounds that any deficit would be covered by English Heritage's public funding, may present a problem in future for the new English Heritage Trust.

Direct management is also often the most efficient way of saving a building at risk when the cost of carrying out necessary repairs exceeds its value when repaired. Grant-aid will usually be the most appropriate solution when a building is in use and its owner wants to continue in occupation, particularly when its continued use for the purpose for which it was designed – for example as a place of worship – is an important part of its significance. But when a building is in poor condition, unoccupied and in need of an alternative use, it can be difficult to persuade a developer to take it on, even with the promise of grant-aid. Here, taking ownership of a building, carrying out sufficient repairs to give it a positive value and then selling it on will usually be a more efficient use of limited resources than offering grant-aid. This was certainly the case at Hill Hall and Acton Court, and has hopefully been the case at Apethorpe. It is a precedent that I hope Historic England will be able to follow.

## GARDENS AND LANDSCAPE

In preparation for the setting up of English Heritage, Jennifer Jenkins, the Chairman of the Historic Buildings Council from 1975–84, who was widely expected to be the first Chairman of English Heritage,<sup>15</sup> had initiated the preparation of a non-statutory register of historic parks and gardens, the first ten county lists being published as soon as English Heritage was set up. The register went on to gain statutory force, and was the first of a number of major initiatives connected with gardens and landscape. With the exception of Audley End, which had been managed as an outlier of the Royal Parks, none of the

gardens that English Heritage had inherited from the Department of the Environment had been maintained by specialist staff. Gradually, when resources allowed, its gardens came into the care of trained horticulturalists and grounds maintenance began to be overseen by qualified landscape managers. Historical research was undertaken, specialist garden historians were recruited and as a result of work commissioned by English Heritage garden archaeology began to be a recognised discipline.<sup>16</sup> Several important historic gardens were added to the collection of properties, including those at Wrest Park, Osborne House, Kenwood, Brodsworth Hall and Witley Court. Jocelyn Stevens additionally encouraged the creation of 'contemporary heritage gardens', designed to be in keeping with their context while setting standards for modern garden design. By 2015 English Heritage had become one of the leading sources of advice on the care of historic gardens.<sup>17</sup>

A similar story of developing awareness can be told in relation to the wider historic landscape. From the beginning English Heritage took a broad interest in historic landscape.<sup>18</sup> This led Chris Patten, when he was briefly Secretary of State in 1989–90, to include in his environment White Paper, *This Common Inheritance*, an invitation to English Heritage to prepare a list of landscapes of historic importance. Awareness that the whole of the English landscape has been shaped by human intervention nevertheless quickly pointed English Heritage away from identifying 'special' landscapes for a national register, and instead to develop methodologies for universal historic landscape characterisation.<sup>19</sup> This was a major initiative, chiming with the development of landscape-scale conservation in the natural environment sector, and underlines the importance of fostering public awareness that the whole of the English landscape is a cultural artefact, including its most cherished examples of 'natural' beauty. It is ironic that one of Historic England's biggest threats over the next few years may come not from housebuilders, or even from the Treasury, but from the Thoreau-inspired romantics of the international nature conservation movement who have come to regard any human intervention in a landscape as a loss of value.<sup>20</sup> Now that the large-scale 're-wilding' of European landscapes is increasingly being advocated, reasserting the value of human creativity in shaping the world in which we live is a challenge that the whole of the historic environment sector may yet have to meet.

## NOTES

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