

# ENGLAND'S MULTI-HERITAGE

## Cultural diversity and the historic environment

*An increased knowledge of the contribution made by ethnically diverse communities will broaden the interpretation of historic places*

The cultural diversity of the historic environment is an interaction of the influences of the past with the populations of the present. To appreciate what remains – an historic place, a building, a landscape – an onlooker has always balanced personal knowledge with specialist interpretation. And interpretation has been constantly evolving.

The interpretation of historic places has been undergoing democratisation. The process has changed from a traditional approach, in which the main subject was the original owner or creator, to one which includes the experiences of all those who have been part of the place, whether their contributions were acknowledged in the past or not. This development also acknowledges the necessary role of the onlooker in creating relevance and meaning in a more inclusive interpretation. An intermediate stage between these two approaches is that of the specialist view, in which expert advice is required to translate the palimpsest of overlapping histories for the non-specialist onlooker. Today, interpretation of historic remains can incorporate both traditional mono-cultural history and specialist knowledge of artefacts and archives by drawing out the human experience and cultural diversity of the past in a modern context.

### The cultural mix

In England the onlookers of today include 7 million people whose race, as stated on census forms and other official documents, is that of an ethnic minority, and they represent the most

measurable group of English people who have more than one cultural perspective. Add to this group the 2 million people with dual racial heritage and the 4.5 million whose personal heritage involves immigration during the last three generations to this country from Europe and other predominantly white countries, and the rich mix of cultural diversity becomes global. Personal cultural diversity is, moreover, made up not just of race but other attributes such as education, geographic location and personality, and it becomes quite a challenge to find two individuals, even in the same family, who could claim the same personal cultural heritage.

### Interpreting the historic environment of Brick Lane

A recent study by Jim Gard'ner on the historic environment of Brick Lane, Tower Hamlets, East London,<sup>1</sup> examines the disparity between older and newer interpretations of what is significant. Gard'ner began by interviewing members and leaders of the Bengalee community to find out which buildings and places were important to the British Bengalee of east London. The Bengalee community, the largest ethnic group in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets after the white community, makes up 22% of the population and 61% of the Spitalfields/Banglatown ward in which Brick Lane lies. This well-established community is a recent example of the many waves of immigration to have defined the character of the area since the 17th century.

*Bhai Ram Singh, principal craftsman of the Durbar Room, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, at work during construction, 1891. The Durbar Room, an Indian-style state reception and hall, was used by Queen Victoria for official functions*



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Gard'ner then compared the specialist view of the area, as reflected in the listed buildings, registered parks and Conservation Area criteria, with what the Bengalee community valued. He found that of the 22 places of importance identified by the Bengalee community only 2 were registered as Grade II\* listed buildings and another 9 had Grade II status. None of the mosques, buildings used as community centres, housing, schools, parks, gardens, street markets and monuments were registered because of Bengalee significance. In the light of Gard'ner's research, current methods of defining the historic environment can fail to consider the broad range of significance.

## Re-use of historic buildings

The continuing adaptation of the historic environment can also be seen in the re-use of historic buildings, which contributes to the conservation of the past in diverse ways (see also Brown, 14–15). Thirty-six different uses have been identified for 231 former nonconformist chapels in Norfolk.<sup>2</sup> The variety of uses reflects contemporary attitudes towards value and significance. Most have been converted into private dwellings, some used as stores and garages, but many still retain a public function, part of the original intention in their creation. Outside Norfolk, a notable example of re-use is the large former United Reform Chapel in Cleckheaton, Yorkshire, saved from dereliction by conversion into the biggest Indian restaurant in the world.

### Reuses of Norfolk non-conformist chapels by percentage in 1995

Amusement arcade	0.43	House	54.98
Antiques room	1.30	Library	1.30
Arts studio	0.43	Masonic Hall	1.73
Barn	1.73	Museum	0.87
British Legion	0.87	Nursery School	0.43
Builder's store	0.87	Offices	3.46
Day centre	0.43	Paint shop	0.43
Doctors' surgery	0.43	Pottery studio	0.43
Engineering workshop	0.43	Printing works	0.43
Farm store	0.87	Scout Hall	0.43
Funeral parlour	0.87	Shop	4.33
Furniture store	0.43	Sports Hall	0.43
Garage	5.63	St Johns	0.43
Garage store	0.43	Ambulance	0.43
Grain store	0.43	Store	9.09
Guide Hall	0.43	Village Hall	2.60
Hall	1.30	Workshop	0.87
		Youth Centre	0.43

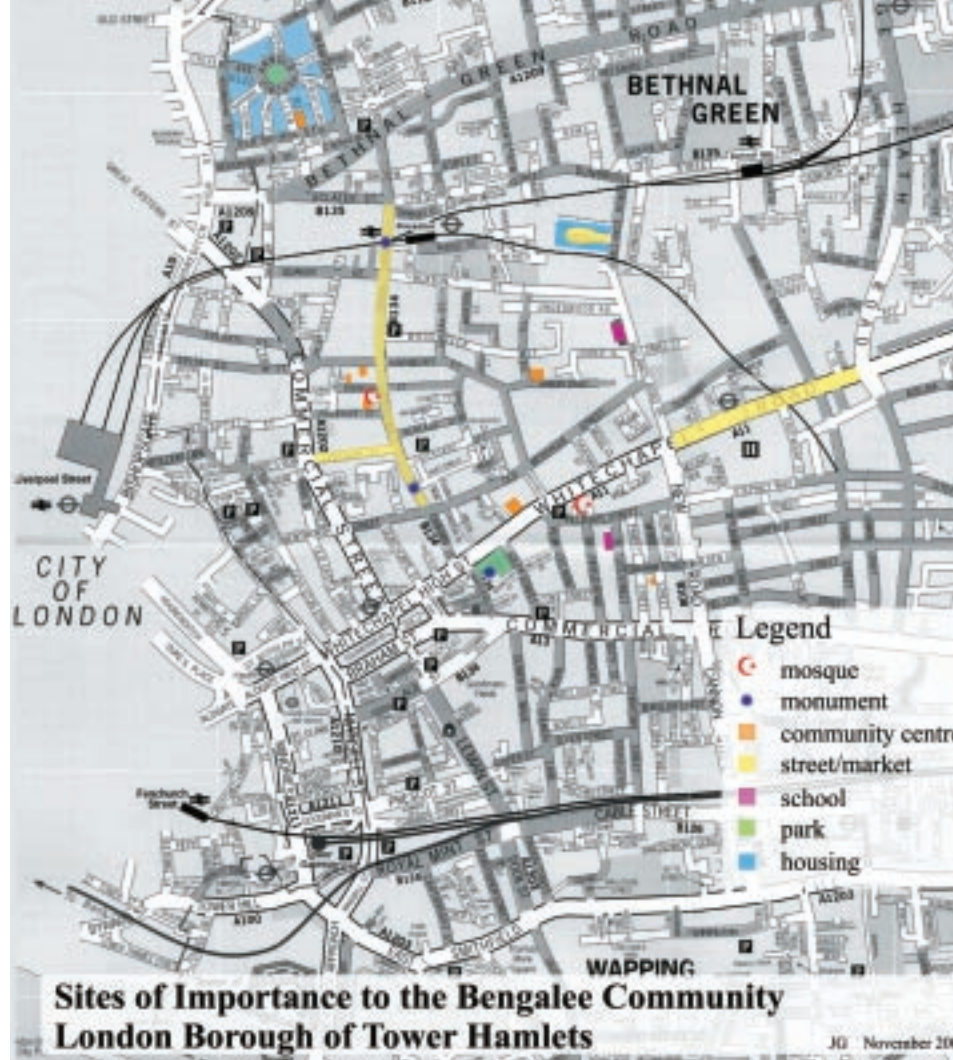
## MORI poll

In *Attitudes to the Heritage* (2000),<sup>3</sup> prepared by MORI for English Heritage, market research showed that 'three in four people believed that the contribution of black people and Asians to our society is not thoroughly represented in heritage provision.' The figure was even higher among people from those ethnic backgrounds.

Building a picture of the contribution of black people and Asians will depend on discovering the hidden histories that are part of the historic environment. The intense movement of ideas and peoples – begun in the reign of Elizabeth I and which led to her famous decree in 1596 that there were too many black people living in

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London and that they should be expelled – has developed into a world-wide exchange in the telecommunications age of Elizabeth II. The most English of places will also be those that encompass the history of those movements of ideas and peoples. As one of the focus group members from the MORI research put it, heritage is about who you are:

*Important places for the Bengalee community in Brick Lane, Tower Hamlets, East London*

'I agree about educating myself because I have found that now I have got older I actually want to know more about my black history which I never did before. I was too busy wanting to get on with life. I also want to know about the English heritage because this is where I live and I think it is important to know both sides because it makes you who you are.'

**Jez Reeve**

**Head of Social Inclusion and Diversity**

1 Gard'ner, J, 2001 Heritage protection and social inclusion: A case study from the Bangladeshi community of East London, in *Adopting Cultural Diversity*, unpublished diploma thesis, Architectural Association of London

2 Reeve, J, 1995 *Norfolk Church Sites: Management and Conservation*. English Heritage

3 MORI, 2000 *Attitudes to the Heritage*