

Informed Conservation

What matters and why

A new English Heritage publication considers the contribution that understanding can make to the practical process of conserving historic buildings and their landscapes. Conservation involves managing change, and in order to manage change, it is vital to understand what matters and why

‘All conservation depends upon a clear understanding of what matters, and why.’ Thus concludes the summary for the important new English Heritage publication, *Informed Conservation*, written by Kate Clark with the Historical Analysis and Research Team. Directed primarily at working conservation professionals, owners and their advisers, and subtitled ‘understanding historic buildings and their landscapes for conservation’, it also offers a wide philosophical framework that is soundly based in practice and method.

Though it may seem obvious that you need to understand what you have before you decide how to conserve or explain it, this is not how things have tended to happen. Neither the earmarking presumptions of listing, scheduling and designation, nor less specific ‘material considerations’ for weighing in the planning balance, have been sufficiently successful in getting proposals for change to begin at the beginning. Too often commitment to a scheme – user-driven, financial, political, emotional – is formed without realising its potential impacts and how they might be most constructively managed. Equally often this forces an initial response from regulatory authorities or conservation consultees based upon the status of what is affected rather than an adequately shared understanding of its significance. Unhelpful battles then rage between the railroaders of visions and the unpickers of proposals, talking negatively past each other about how much that is precious must be sacrificed rather than collaborating positively over achieving the best of all practicable worlds in the name of a wide range of social values.

It is in this arena that *Informed Conservation* will be so useful. It helps bridge the gap in PPG15 (Planning and the Historic Environment) between its procedural generalities and the rather specific guidance in its technical appendices, a gap that has allowed too many to ignore the issue of ‘what matters and why’. It also more fully articulates the methodology for understanding – assessment, impact identification and impact mitigation – first brought into historic environmental management by PPG16 (Archaeology and Planning) in 1990. In so doing, it makes two fundamental points, that the

process can be more subtle and complex when dealing with historic survivals retaining an active original or alternative use, and that the (small ‘a’) archaeological approach must be shared by anyone seeking to understand any historic survival, be it inert earthwork or living building.



The tool for these purposes has the arresting acronym of CoBRA – Conservation-Based Research and Analysis – defined as ‘the research, analysis, survey and investigation necessary to understand the significance of a building and its landscape, and thus inform decisions about repair, alteration, use and management’. More measured than the speed of a striking snake, it need not become yet another layer of procedural bureaucracy, providing it is managed so that it is ‘of benefit to the conservation process, justifiable, relevant, timely, of high quality representing value for money, presented in a lasting form, and academically valid’. Hard-line preservationists and wicked developers may seek to ignore or circumvent it, but the wise will work with it to link understanding and decision-making in the interests of conservation policies that are socially, economically and politically credible. □

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Copies of *Informed Conservation* are available for £10 from the new English Heritage Postal Sales, Gillards, Trident Works, Marsh Lane, Temple Cloud, Bristol BS39 5AZ, Tel 01761 452 966 (9.00 – 5.00 or answerphone other times) or Fax 01761 453408. ISBN 1 873592 64 7; PRODUCT CODE XH20171

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