

England's Heritage

The changing role of government

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The historic environment enjoys broad cross-party support, but has not always been well served by the machinery of government.

Since its foundation in 1984, English Heritage has been very fortunate that whatever government has been in office, the historic environment has never been a party-political issue. All the main legislation, from the 1882 Ancient Monuments Act to the National Heritage Act 2002, received cross-party support. In her pamphlet *Better Places to Live*, published shortly before the recent election was called, Tessa Jowell reflected a broad political consensus when she wrote that the role of government in relation to the historic environment was to provide 'vision, leadership and support, including public investment as necessary'. English Heritage's first 13 years were spent under a Conservative government and the next 8 years under a Labour one, but one of the most obvious characteristics of the government's attitude to the heritage has been its continuity.

When I worked in a government finance division in the 1980s I found that my desk instructions began with a Treasury minute issued by Gladstone and it is no surprise that one of the continuities of public administration has been the concern, for which Gladstone was famed, for economy and efficiency. In the early 1990s, there was a major drive for privatisation, which saw the transfer of English Heritage's direct labour force to the private sector and the closure of its specialist craft studios. In the wider sector, the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering in local authorities led to the contracting out of parks departments and the loss of one of the main entry routes into horticulture. The sector skills council, with help from English Heritage, is only now beginning to address the resulting skills shortage.

More recently, the introduction of resource accounting has led to increasing pressure on departments to divest themselves of property

with a high capital value. DCMS has supported the work of English Heritage's Government Historic Estates Unit in advising on disposals, while departments' overall stewardship responsibilities towards the historic sites and buildings in their care are enshrined in the Protocol for the Care of the Government Historic Estate issued by DCMS in 2003, which has now been adopted as part of the government's Framework for Sustainable Development.

A related and equally ever-present issue has been the government's concern to keep to a minimum the burden of regulation on the economy. Successive attempts have been made to make the planning and listed building systems as simple and consensual as possible. There is a fair case to be made that English Heritage, by providing authoritative advice with the minimum of delay (it now turns round between 93 per cent and 98 per cent of consultations within 21 days) has done more than most to oil the regulatory wheels of the planning system, the generic problems of which are usually the result of the need to ensure that all the necessary checks and balances are in place when people's property rights are involved.

Another common strand is the need for democratic accountability and community participation. English Heritage derives its own legitimacy by being accountable through ministers to Parliament, and by being transparent in its operations; it chose to anticipate the demands of the Freedom of Information Act several years before they were imposed by law. One of its original functions, which it retains, was to alert ministers to cases where the wider public interest would be best served by calling listed building consent applications in for national decision. In recent years, the need to find

new and more effective ways of engaging people in the management of their local environment has led to the development of Local Strategic Partnerships and community plans, and the introduction of Statements of Community Involvement as part of the planning process. English Heritage's most recent contribution to this debate was the publication earlier this year of our guidance on *Local Strategic Partnerships and the Historic Environment*, but five years ago the sector led the way (and anticipated the Planning Green Paper) by emphasising the importance of community participation in *Power of Place*. In many ways this was a defining moment. Criticised by some for being too politically correct, and by others for not saying anything new or interesting, the final report emerged from a wide consultative process that introduced ministers and civil servants to ideas that had been gaining ground in the academic world over the previous two decades, in particular the concept of multiple significance and the necessity of mediating contested values.

The other main issue with which *Power of Place* began to grapple, and which is now bearing important fruit through the work of the Heritage Protection Review, was the essential unity of the historic environment, and the pointlessness of some of the traditional subdivisions into which the heritage sector has been divided. These divisions had been exacerbated by the way in which government was organised and legislation enacted. The first Ancient Monuments Act gave guardianship powers to the Office of Works, and its successor Departments retained responsibility for archaeology and archaeological monuments for nearly 90 years. The 1947 Planning Act nevertheless made the Ministry of Town and Country Planning responsible for listed buildings, and the ghosts of this cultural divide (which allowed historic designed landscape to fall between the stools) persisted into the early years of English Heritage. The abolition of the old Ancient Monuments Board and Historic Buildings Council when English Heritage was set up was sweetened by requiring the new body to establish 'at least one committee' to advise it on ancient monuments and at least one on historic buildings. English Heritage subsequently decided that it made more sense – given that the historic environment does not naturally divide along statutory lines – for it to be one and the same committee. In the meantime, the government's Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 on *Archaeology and*

Planning (PPG16, published in 1990) and Note 15 on *Planning and the Historic Environment* (PPG15, published in 1994) perpetuated the idea that (in some minds at least) archaeology stopped at ground level, or possibly at some time in the first millennium CE. The language in *Power of Place* was therefore deliberately inclusive, talking about the environment as a whole rather than making a distinction between sites and buildings. Since then, the government has adopted a similarly inclusive approach, both in its 2001 policy statement, *A Force for Our Future*, and subsequently in its review of heritage protection.

Over the past 21 years this joining up of the historic environment has been paralleled by a similar joining up of some of the bodies dealing with it. English Heritage itself has been merged, first in 1986 with the Historic Buildings Division of the former Greater London Council, and then in 1999 with the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. This has meant that the several of the most powerful traditions of public-sector engagement with the historic environment – the Office of Works, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, the London County Council, the Royal Commission, the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division, the Survey of London and the National Buildings Record – all began to flow in the same direction for perhaps the first time. Meanwhile, the government departments responsible for the historic environment have continued to evolve. The Department of National Heritage emerged from the Office of Arts and Libraries and the Department of the Environment, and changed its name to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport when 'heritage' no longer seemed the appropriate word to cover sport, broadcasting and the creative industries. The department responsible for the planning system first lost its responsibility for transport, and then in 2001 its responsibility for the environment. Given the cross-cutting nature of the historic environment, which has never been easy to keep within simple administrative boundaries, it was therefore particularly encouraging when in 2003 ODPM and Defra joined DCMS as joint signatories of English Heritage's funding agreement. It is probably this, rather than the mere passing of years, that marked the historic environment's real coming of age as a proper concern for government.