

# The View From English Heritage

## Where have we made a difference?

Oliver Pearcey *Special Project Director*

**Working with many partners, English Heritage is transforming the way it manages and promotes the historic environment.**

**D**uring the Second Reading debate on the 1983 National Heritage Bill, the Minister summarised the role of English Heritage as being:

- to manage, maintain and present in a lively and imaginative way the monuments in the care of the Secretary of State;
- to make grants for the preservation of historic buildings and ancient monuments;
- to co-ordinate rescue archaeology work; and
- to advise the Secretary of State on listing, scheduling and guardianship.

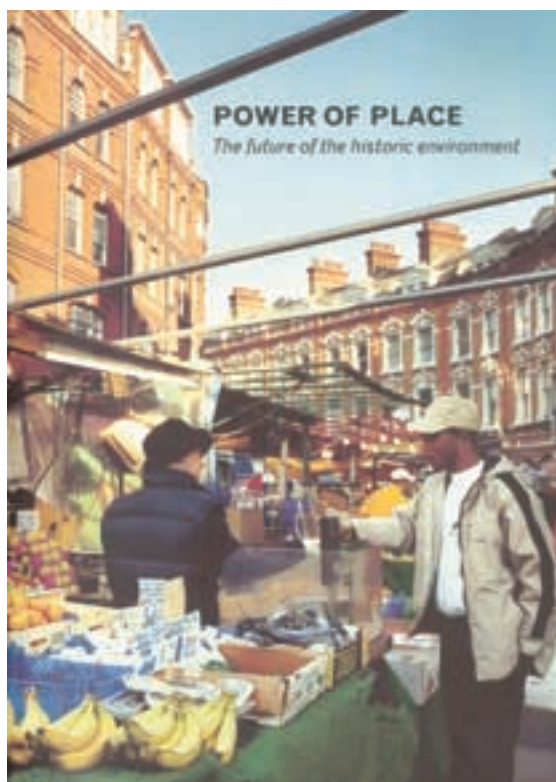
It is significant that the top priority was given to monuments in the care of the Secretary of State, undoubtedly reflecting the view of the government of the time that there was scope for much more commercial presentation; this was also emphasised by the choice of the first chairman, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu.

Archaeology was seen solely in the context of rescue work on development sites; English Heritage's role in the management of change through advice on statutory consents is not mentioned at all.

Compare this with the wording used 17 years later in *Power of Place* and the successor documents produced by the Government, and the change is dramatic. The roles identified in 1983 are still there. But they are set in the context of a new holistic approach that values the historic environment not just for its historic or architectural significance, but also for its wider contribution to a sense of place and to social and economic regeneration. There is also a new acceptance of the need to manage change rather than oppose it, and to recognise the right of participants to appropriate treatment and levels of service. English Heritage has contributed to this sea-change in a number of ways.

### Policies for the historic environment

Two key documents were published in the early 1990s. Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG 16), *Archaeology and Planning*, implemented a significant English Heritage-inspired shift from rescue excavation to archaeological assessment and mitigation within the planning process. This in turn led to a major influx of developer funding into archaeology, together with the reorganisation of the profession into contractors and curators. English Heritage also helped to instigate and drafted much of the subsequent PPG 15, *Planning and the Historic Environment*.



At the turn of the 21st century, *Power of Place* provided a new vision of the contribution of the historic environment to contemporary life. It also demonstrated how the public, private and voluntary sectors need to work in partnership to turn that vision into reality.

These generic documents have since been amplified by a range of more detailed English Heritage guidance on topics ranging from agriculture, enabling development and church alterations to retail development in the historic environment. Quantitative and qualitative surveys include the *Heritage Counts* series – an annual assessment of various indicators of the state of the historic environment – and more detailed surveys into themes ranging from the commercial values of listed properties to the economic return from the regeneration of historic areas.

### Understanding the historic environment

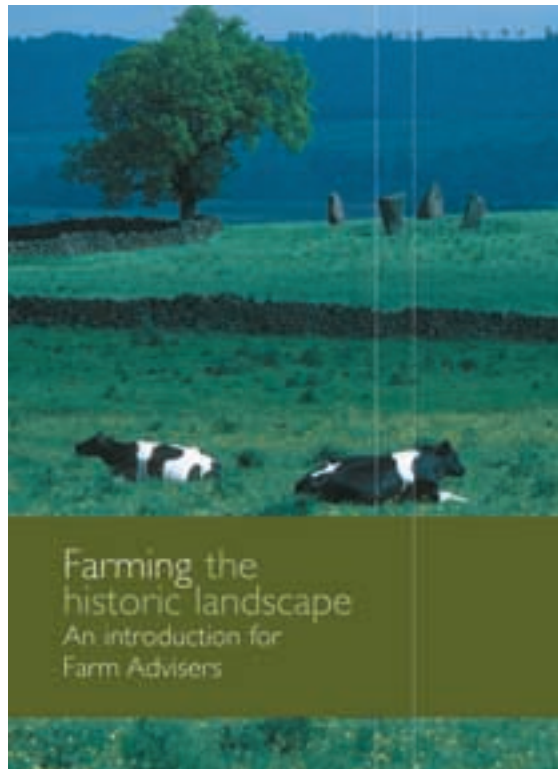
The last 20 years have been characterised by a shift from reactive rescue responses to more coherent management of archaeological interests within the planning framework. The successful development of this approach was aided by vital pump-priming support from English Heritage that allowed counties to build up the capacity to manage archaeological issues and to provide the information base needed through sites and monuments records.

Proper understanding of the historic environment and its significance was further supported by English Heritage's direct expenditure on commissioned archaeological work, which gradually moved from the investigation of individual sites to more synthetic assessment of whole areas under threat, such as wetlands and the intertidal zone. The amalgamation of English Heritage with the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England in 1999 provided the opportunity to extend this approach, both through thematic surveys such as those of Second World War defences and Cold War sites, and more generic work such as the National Mapping Programme, which employs the resources of the National Monuments Record (NMR) to document England's archaeological landscapes from air photographs. All this was coupled with a major programme of academic publication addressing both backlog research inherited by English Heritage and archaeological survey and historic buildings recording work carried out since 1984. In parallel, we have developed the role of science in archaeology, for example through our work on dendrochronological dating methods.

### Conserving and managing the historic environment

Although research and the management of our own properties have tended to have a higher public profile, conservation casework has always been at the heart of English Heritage's work. Casework begins with the need to understand the special significance of places. English Heritage got off to a good start with the accelerated re-survey of listed buildings, which became fully operational in 1984/5, and the compilation of the first-ever register of historic parks and gardens, which was given statutory authority in 1983. These were followed by the Monuments Protection Programme, which was established in 1988 to do for scheduled monuments what the re-survey was doing for buildings. Subsequent programmes of designation have dealt with battlefields, maritime sites and proposals for new world heritage sites. At the same time, the process of designation was extended into new fields, such as the listing of post-Second World War buildings and the survey of nationally important buildings and monuments at risk.

Alongside the evaluation of individual sites and buildings, English Heritage has developed new methods for assessing the significance of the historic environment as a whole, both on a large scale through historic landscape characterisation and intensive urban study,



The Historic Environment Local Management (HELM) project provides accessible advice to local authorities and others whose decisions affect the historic environment, in this case professional farm advisers (see page 39).

and at a site level through the development of conservation statements and plans.

English Heritage's role in statutory casework is changing from that of the reactive adviser (the so-called 'heritage policeman') to the proactive enabler. Along the way we have seen changes to our powers, particularly following our takeover in 1986 of the role of the Greater London Council's Historic Buildings Division, which gave us much more direct authority to intervene in historic environment issues in the capital. The process of self-renewal is not yet complete but increasingly we are acting on our belief that we are meant to be managing change in the historic environment, not preventing it. The need to protect significance must be balanced against the right of people to enjoy the benefits of change. This does not mean that we will not fight where a fight is necessary. It does mean, however, that we will try to move further upstream through earlier involvement in development proposals, by building up the capacity of our partners, by providing them with better technical advice, and by making our casework processes quicker and more customer friendly.

We have made similar changes to our grants programmes, which have moved from reactive support of repairs to programmes that target elements of the historic environment at risk. One example is the scheme for gardens introduced after the great storms of 1987 and 1991; another is the support for social and economic regeneration provided through Conservation Area Partnerships and Heritage Economic Regeneration schemes. These and other schemes increasingly seek to meet funding needs not addressed by other grant-giving bodies, especially the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). They are further underpinned by our work to help raise the standards of practical conservation work through technical research, professional and craft training, and support for accreditation schemes. On occasion we have also acted as a building preservation trust to repair and then either sell on or keep in hand buildings which are too expensive or otherwise too risky for any other private or public sector partner to take on. Recent examples include Danson House, which has been passed on to a trust for management following the completion of repairs, and Apethorpe, which has just been acquired compulsorily for repair and selling on.

Casework interventions are inevitably controversial and at times unsuccessful. This has been particularly true in London, where intense development pressures have led to



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major policy debates over the issue of tall buildings as well as a number of specific *causes célèbres* such as the Baltic Exchange and the Gherkin. Our resources have always been limited but even the much greater funds of the HLF have been insufficient to secure the future of every nationally important building at risk, and some such as Brighton West Pier have been lost.

West Pier, Brighton. In 2004, English Heritage and its partners had to acknowledge that there was little chance of saving this famous Grade I pier from the ravages of fire and the sea.

### Enjoying the historic environment

From the very beginning English Heritage was under an obligation to present its properties in new and exciting ways, as well as significantly increasing the income generated from them. As government support for English Heritage has declined in real terms this has become a much more significant element in our total funding. Our membership scheme has been a huge success with more than half a million members already recruited and more on the way. We have acquired a number of major new properties such as Clun and Wigmore castles, Brodsworth, Eltham Palace, and Apsley House, which will always require public support to survive with their historic significance intact. At the same time, we have set up local management agreements that allow local people and knowledge to inform the presentation and management of many of our smaller properties. We have also hugely increased our event programmes, from the large-scale Festival of History to smaller events at our individual sites.

As well as paying greater concern to the needs of our visitors we have significantly changed the way we treat our sites. The most significant elements of this are a less ruthless approach to conservation that allows greater respect for historic fabric of all ages, more emphasis on documentary research and

The dining room, Eltham Palace, London. This remarkable combination of medieval royal palace and 1930s art deco pleasure house was opened to the public in 1999 following an intensive programme of conservation and restoration.



Jonathan Bailey © English Heritage

recording, the adoption of new techniques such as garden archaeology, a greater understanding of monuments and buildings in their setting and a willingness to countenance reversible non-destructive restoration of gardens and interiors.

We are also making much greater efforts to increase understanding and enjoyment of the historic environment as a whole. Our education and outreach schemes, ranging from Blue Plaques to site-based projects involving specific groups of people, are extending appreciation of the historic environment into excluded communities and groups. We are publishing and disseminating more information, both through our popular publishing programme and newer electronic

media. One example is our support for immensely popular television programmes such as *Restoration*; another our hosting of internet projects such as *Images of England*, which by its completion will have photographed every accessible listed building in England, and *ViewFinder*, which makes images from the NMR available for schools and other users. We have also worked with the Civic Trust to put extra resources into Heritage Open Days, increasing both the number of properties taking part and the number of people visiting them.

### Conclusion

While its core responsibilities remain unaltered, English Heritage itself has changed dramatically over the last 21 years – and has led many equally profound changes in the heritage sector as a whole. It is clear that yet more change is inevitable, starting with Heritage Protection Reform, which will radically alter the whole statutory structure of regulation. Amidst all of these changes, the one fixed certainty is that English Heritage will in the future, as in the past, be unable to do its job without the support and partnership of all those interested and involved in the historic environment.

Festival of History, Stoneleigh, August 2004. A company of amateur performers re-enacts a scene from the English Civil War:



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