

Sharing the Past with Everyone

Engaging with England's Heritage

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In a cosmopolitan world, we should celebrate the contribution that the heritage makes to contemporary society.

The details of my own odyssey from student arriving in London to the Commission of English Heritage some 20 years later are of little public interest but a few recollections from those years may be useful. I was born and raised in New England, an American region that has a great sense (detractors would say too great) of the past. My father and most of his family were very involved in the work of museums and galleries and one of my most important mentors was Abbott Lowell Cummings, Director of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, the New England equivalent of the National Trust. So a love of history and a sense of the pleasure of engaging with the past was part of both my nature *and* my nurture. When I arrived in

England in 1974, I was of course overwhelmed by the variety and ubiquity of what people were just beginning to call 'heritage'. My early excursions took in sites as different as Stonehenge, Hadrian's Wall, the Tower of London, Manchester Town Hall and King's College Chapel. In the 1970s standards of interpretation and presentation to the public were not what they have become, but it is worth remembering that the England of the mid-1970s was a much poorer country wrestling with grave political and economic problems. I was particularly interested in what I soon learned were called 'unroofed attractions' (previously I just thought they were ruins), and I confess that I very much enjoyed the primitive-looking but scholarly pamphlets that I believe the Ministry of Works published to guide visitors around them. I certainly appreciated not just the academic underpinning of the heritage business, but also the commitment to wide public access. Coming from a much more free market economy I was also amazed by the generosity with which the public purse supported the historic environment. The dark side of the picture was a general shabbiness symptomatic of a culture of dependency, a desire to court the public without engaging them and, as is so often the case when the creaky machinery of big state institutions is involved, an inability to get things done. In the past 30 years much in that picture has changed and much has remained the same.

'How are we doing?' is an important question to ask because large amounts of public money, as well as substantial private funds, are devoted to the heritage, and also because many of us believe that the way we manage the heritage is a vital sign of the health of our society. International comparisons are entertaining

Hadrian's Wall, near Haltwhistle, Northumberland. At Cawfields Crags a fine consolidated stretch of the wall runs westwards past Milecastle 42.



Skyscan Balloon Photography © English Heritage



Tyntesfield, near Bristol. This great Victorian house has been saved by the National Trust with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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but not always valuable, as even in the age of globalisation national conditions remain so specific. England has a very large amount of heritage (however you may wish to define it) in a relatively small, very densely populated area. We can legitimately regard England as the birthplace of the modern conservation movement, and as a result there is a large amount of academic and practical knowledge about conservation and a strong cultural bias towards its value. Equally it is important to recognise that England has been, and to a certain extent remains a strongly hierarchical society as well as an increasingly cosmopolitan one, with many competing ideas about what heritage is and indeed to whom it belongs.

Judged solely by our own standards the heritage record is, I think, bright if rather patchy. The inability to solve the problem of Stonehenge – in spite of the fact that three successive chairmen of English Heritage have invested a great deal of intellect, time and prestige – is puzzling and shameful. The saving of Tyntesfield by the National Trust (www.nationaltrust.org.uk) is probably something that could only have happened in England, as was the long and ultimately successful battle to save the terraced housing of Nelson, Lancashire. The educational work of the National Trust and English Heritage is inspiring and the role that the private sector plays largely through the Historic Houses Association is, I am pleased to say, increasingly well recognised. As someone who travels frequently (so far this year to the United States, China, India, Italy, Greece, Denmark, Lithuania, Germany, France and Switzerland), my instinctive feel is that we manage our built

heritage extremely well taking all things into account.

I am acutely aware, though, of very significant challenges and difficulties that not just the heritage bodies but the country as a whole must address. There is of course the constant pressure to somehow value the contribution that heritage makes to society, and while it is possible to quantify the role heritage plays in economic regeneration (the most obvious examples can be seen in the revival of our great regional cities), it is difficult, if not downright impossible, to say what the exact worth of heritage is in terms of building citizenship, spiritual values or a sense of meaning and belonging. Although spending on heritage is relatively trivial in terms of overall public finances, a number of external factors (including but not limited to the pensions crisis, the soaring medical costs of servicing the aging population, the expenses of the war on terror) mean that every penny of public spending will be bitterly contested for many years to come. As a result heritage bodies will be forced to generate more income and, I believe, more savagely prioritise their operations. There could be a temptation to prune what might be thought of as ‘below the line’ academic activities. In my view this would be fatal: scholarship and research provide the absolutely sacrosanct foundations upon which the whole edifice of our heritage rests. A more creative path would, I hope, inspire us to find new ways of reaching the many who feel that heritage is either not for them or for special occasions only. If we can enthusiastically, cogently and joyfully communicate the contribution that heritage makes to society, we can indeed secure its future.