

Facing up to Challenges in Architectural Conservation

Vincent Shacklock

Sir Bernard Feilden's project, described in his 'Foreword', to strengthen the foundations of York Minster in the period 1965–72, was one of the most significant and challenging interventions in a British cathedral in the last 200 years, undertaken by a matchless team, devoted to the building's protection, both professionally and emotionally. I recall visiting this project a few years after its completion in the company of my tutor Professor 'Jimmy' James, of the University of Sheffield. A York Minster guide skipped quickly over the pioneering techniques, huge technical challenges and breathtaking complexity of the work that had been undertaken, concluding it was a job well done, and noting how very pleasing it was that the Minster was back to its normal routine. Jimmy, the former government Chief Planner, described variously by Dick Crossman as 'brilliant' and 'first rate', who had chaired the high-level conference at Churchill College Cambridge first defining the need to protect historic towns, chose to wait until we were back on our journey before observing that the awe-inspiring achievement of Bernard Feilden and his team in saving this great church would, very quickly and appropriately, slide into relative obscurity. 'That is the mark of good conservation', he told me. At that time, I was not able to understand.

Tasks on the scale of the York stabilization are exceedingly rare but, across the country, in every city, town and village we daily draw upon the vision, skills and imagination of architects, engineers and craftsmen to provide timely and expert interventions in staving-off decay, rectifying failures, repairing damage, replacing features, and managing wear and tear. At Lincoln, in my role as a Fabric Council member over the last twelve years, I am very conscious of the value of education and training, having seen many of my own graduates employed on a cathedral which, less than twenty years ago, was in peril of rapid decline, but now enjoys good health, careful management, and a skilled and utterly dedicated team of craftsmen.

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Stable leadership is essential in these cases, and Lincoln's Dean and Chapter, Clerk of Works, Cathedral Architect, Chief Executive and Fabric Council members have worked tirelessly to repair, monitor and guide investment, drawing upon the best advice available, and using every opportunity to discuss and debate the programme of maintenance and individual projects. Good conservation practice frequently follows upon stable and informed management, and Lincoln's in-house building works/crafts team is highly trained, well briefed and, as a result, feels valued, secure and engaged. Individually confident that their labours contribute to the mission of the Church and are valued by clergy, worshippers and visitors alike, they enjoy the sense that they make a small but identifiable contribution to the nation's heritage with each completed task. For these reasons, they are content, hardworking, constantly refining their skills and always keen to take on challenges.

Nationally, our objective should be the same *writ large*. The nation (through its government and institutions) must: be clear about the value it places on its architectural heritage; have systems of training, organization and representation in place; adequately fund essential work (in the interests of society and the economy as a whole); keep ahead of threats through commissioning diligent study and research; be aware of, and learn from, experience elsewhere in the UK and abroad; and make use of eager and committed groups and societies to facilitate needed work, overcome obstacles and ensure volunteer energy is channelled to achieve desirable outputs.

Readers might observe that the papers included in this publication follow very closely this list above. Many great churches and well-loved secular buildings are managed in a manner that is mindful of this approach. Strangely, this easy lesson about benefiting from advice, support and assistance has, in very recent years, not only been ignored by the UK government, but leading politicians have increasingly questioned sector opinions, attempted to devise their own philosophies, and proposed policies based on prejudice and suspicion of the sector's attitudes and ambitions.

This publication appears at just the moment we expect a White Paper on Heritage, a document whose lengthy gestation has been marked by greater uncertainty, confusion and political ambivalence than we have witnessed for some years. In the lead-up to the White Paper, some government politicians, seemingly uncomfortable with physical heritage as defined in recent decades, have wrestled with ideas intended to re-define the nation's heritage in a manner that would be more inclusive of society's many social and ethnic groups. Bob Kindred's very fine paper, 'What Direction for Conservation? Some Questions', enquires into the origins of this suspicion and its potential implications, commenting on it with a skill and deftness of touch borne of many years careful observation of aspiring politicians

and their methods. His assessment is elegant and well-reasoned: significant figures in government believe heritage problems have been largely resolved; the impending scale of investment required for the 2012 London Olympics demands fundamental reconsideration of expenditure in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS); and to achieve this, transfer of funds away from historic assets is appropriate and essential.

With a policy review imminent and legislation likely to follow, the paper from Professor Malcolm Airs, 'Protecting the Historic Environment: The Legacy of W. G. Hoskins', assesses the development of the English landscape over several centuries; and, in particular, Hoskins' stimulation of debate at a time when few peers in this field existed. The final chapter of his groundbreaking book *The Making of the English Landscape* was devoted to the changes and threats he perceived, and this plainly caused him great distress. I read his work as a student in 1971, felt his despairing, pessimistic gloom and took his concerns at face value. But times and society were already changing, and these would bring a raft of new interests, controls and protections into place over the following twenty years that would steer countryside, town and village landscapes more positively. Malcolm Airs, a one-time research student of Hoskins, handles this with the skill and judgement we would expect from such a distinguished academic and commentator.

Adam Wilkinson's paper, 'SAVE Britain's Heritage and the Amenity Societies', points out the importance of having well-organized and committed amenity societies, capable of turning their minds and resources to issues swiftly, bringing understanding and expertise, and ensuring that issues are not overlooked in statutory or other decision-making. Although many countries have voluntary organizations representing public interests in heritage protection, the United Kingdom benefits from a broad and unique range of period-based and theme-based bodies, which are more often than not able to work collaboratively where circumstance requires. The UK is particularly unusual in the manner in which certain key societies have been drawn into the statutory planning process as formal consultees. Effective conservation in the UK has depended in large measure upon a committed, educated and inspired voluntary sector, capable of handling casework on a daily basis, turning resources to urgent threats and undertaking or commissioning research projects as circumstances demand. SAVE Britain's Heritage is part of this movement, yet distinct in its methods. It is long established but abhors convention, undertaking a particular role of its own in a bold fashion now recognized as the hallmark of its operations.

Washington DC-based Donovan Rypkema, a prominent development consultant dealing with the re-use of historic structures, compares and contrasts UK and US models for architectural conservation, observing that

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the aims are the same but the methods decidedly different. His paper, 'The American Contrast', is timely and thought-provoking, vividly depicting, and accounting for, a successful working model in the US which is, in marked contrast to our own, largely local, bottom-up, incentive-driven, and private sector. Contrasts in approach could hardly be greater, but returning UK visitors often remark on the stunning success of individual private and community-based conservation projects, and Rypkema improves our understanding of how this occurs. Rypkema is also an author and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and his balanced and informed assessment strengthens this publication's significance as a commentary on UK practice.

We are fortunate to have two outstanding scholars of historic gardens and landscapes, David Lambert and Jonathan Lovie, the former and current conservation officers of the Garden History Society, pool their skills to provide a paper examining achievements in defining, identifying and protecting gardens and landscapes in recent years under the title 'All Rosy in the Garden? The Protection of Historic Parks and Gardens'. The authors, however, express important, perhaps grave concerns in some areas, as English Heritage cuts resources, the Heritage Lottery Fund tightens its belt, and the National Trust finds itself struggling to sustain maintenance income. Their fear is that parks and gardens will suffer disproportionately in this dilemma. At a local level, the authors advise us that planning authorities remain hamstrung by a dearth of conservation expertise and are struggling to cope with known threats and proposals, while not having the time needed to identify and understand their own stock of historic parks and gardens. If this is not sufficient to worry us, Lambert and Lovie warn that large-scale and harmful proposals for altering historic parks and gardens are, once more, on the rise.

But times do change, and we deal with the world as it is. Today we do have a professional Institute for Historic Building Conservation and a reasonable spread of professional training courses relating to architectural conservation and heritage management, but John Preston's paper, 'The Context for Skills, Education and Training', reveals a frightening absence of craft skills, no holistic analysis of skill needs for the sector, and no convincing case made for building conservation, repairs and maintenance as considered separately from general construction. Efforts to improve skill levels through accreditation have, as yet, failed to make any significant impact. We are bereft of comfort or basic reassurance that the development industry can devise a strategy, let alone a successful plan of implementation, for the development and sustenance of craft skills.

Professor Peter Brimblecombe and Dr Carlota Grossi of the School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, look at the research-base of practice in architectural conservation, calling for a more

comprehensive research agenda that balances past achievements with emerging issues of the future. Their paper, 'Scientific Research into Architectural Conservation', reveals weaknesses and worrying gaps in research on conserving the built environment along with proposals on what future strategies must encompass. Issues in relation to research dissemination are of particular concern.

An Appendix, 'The Listing of Buildings' by Bob Kindred, provides a general outline of the way in which listed buildings in England are currently protected.

I remember first seeing the opening pages of John Delafons' *Politics and Preservation: Policy History of the Built Heritage, 1882–1996* when it was first published, and commenting to a colleague that I had found it impossible to focus upon the opening paragraphs of this outstanding review without being drawn repeatedly, to the impressively well-selected cartoon on the left-side page.¹ A burly Viking warlord, in battledress, stands at the head of a column of marauders – their axes, swords and spears a potent declaration of destructive intent. A longboat on the beach disgorges additional, heavily armed marauders. But observing a public notice board, the leader has come to a stop and, resting his weapon on the floor as he digests the message, explodes in angry frustration: 'Bugger me... This is a conservation zone!' We are, of course, encouraged to imagine the Viking horde taking reluctant heed of the notice, returning to their oars and departing to pillage and destroy an unfortunate settlement elsewhere, one unencumbered by such a restrictive statutory designation.

It was with this cartoon in mind that during an informal gathering between IHBC members last year, I asked innocently whether preventing unauthorized harm within conservation areas was more difficult now than in the past. Had historic buildings been safer then, simply by virtue of their appearance on the Statutory List? Did inclusion in a Conservation Area in those days make owners more cautious than now of making even minor changes without careful check with the local planning authority? Conclusions were difficult to draw, but the feeling tended to the view that conservation area designation and/or listing was once rather more of a check on hasty, unplanned and unauthorized alterations. It was felt that twenty years ago, the development process was more predictable. A generally slower pace of change, planning officers' frequently impressive local knowledge, the more positive regard in which they, conservation specialists, in-house architectural advisors, and other 'experts' were held, had meant that a measure of discussion and guidance usually informed the owner's understanding, and led to a less harmful building intervention.

Since then, our society has changed enormously. The plastic window phenomenon, together with its stable-mates – plastic eaves, guttering and doors – and a bewildering stream of television programmes encouraging

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them to 'd.i.y. their way' to greater comfort, convenience and resale value, has force-fed the idea that property is an investment, to be coaxed to ever greater return. So, the gathering hesitatingly concluded, rogue owners of historic properties had been slightly fewer in number, or at least easier to identify, influence and manage. But though this applied at the local and domestic level, there was less sign of it applying more widely; furthermore, and rather worryingly, it was suggested that the time available to a conservation or planning officer to give advice to a building owner was, in many cases, less with each passing year.

In the ten years since Delafons skilfully drew our attention to the achievements and failings in our protection of our architectural heritage, his publication remains the most impressive critique of strategy and policy in the UK. But the nature of our economy and society has changed more in the last ten years than in the previous thirty. Government in the UK, at all levels, now functions in constant flux, and architectural conservation finds itself within a turbulent confusion of organizational structures, policies and practices. Managing English Heritage is unquestionably more complex in this climate.

It was Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment, responding to a proposal from Maurice Mendoza, Director of the of the then Ancient Monuments and Historic Building Directorate, who set in place the generally helpful process of change leading to the creation of English Heritage. A resultant 1982 document – *Organisation of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings in England: The Way Forward* – set out ideas and provided reassurance for many readers.² The new body would manage around 400 monuments, including castles, abbeys, burial mounds, hill forts, and so on, presently in the care of the Secretary of State. All held with the brief to bring them more 'alive' so that they were better visited, appreciated and understood. It would also: make grants for the preservation of historic buildings, areas and monuments; act as adviser to the Secretary of State on listing and scheduling; guide matters of policy; and inform statutory decision-making. Heseltine had the advantage of being, more than most other ministers of the period, visually literate, understanding of architectural heritage, and interested in the environment as a whole.

The argument that professional expertise and greater commercial-mindedness would be more evident if undertaken by an agency, rather than a government department, was not lost in the radical Thatcher years. Peter Rumble, the first English Heritage chief executive, confirms that the parliamentary debate did not really cover the rationale for division of responsibilities, and seemed to revolve around the assumption that if an action benefited an individual or organization, it could be given to an agency, but if, on the other hand, it could be deemed harmful, particularly in relation to property rights, it should rest with a minister accountable to

Parliament.³ The National Heritage Act was given Royal Assent in May 1983, with the agency we would soon know as English Heritage coming into place on 1 April 1984. By the same day in 1986, staff committing themselves to continued employment in this new organization ceased to be civil servants, and, with the demise of that thorn in the Prime Minister's side – the Greater London Council (GLC) – the GLC's Historic Buildings Division became, albeit reluctantly, part of the new body.

English Heritage's mission has always fallen across several ministries and so has been obliged to engage, inform, educate or defer to a range of ministers. This can never have been an easy task, particularly when so many secretaries of state and ministers have come into the job, particularly in recent years, without much interest in the field. Michael Heseltine and Peter Brooke seemed to have had an intellectual understanding of the UK's physical heritage. Dick Crossman was interested, well informed, and had a keen eye for a building of quality. Despairing at the lack of a good private secretary, he wrote in his diary 'Thank God...' on news that he acquired the services of John Delafons.⁴ But even Delafons might have had difficulty with the cross- and multi-ministry practices of the modern government and civil service.

I have some sympathy for the English Heritage director who recently and positively expressed the view that

...given the cross-cutting nature of the historic environment, which has never been easy to keep within administrative boundaries, it was... particularly encouraging when in 2003 ODPM [the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister] and DEFRA [the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs] joined DCMS as joint signatories of English Heritage's funding agreement ... It was probably this that marked the historic environment's real coming of age as a proper concern for government.⁵

I risk being considered dreadfully naïve, but I cannot find real evidence of conservation being a concern for government in a manner that might attract critical praise; as for the identification, protection and support of the nation's architectural heritage being dependant upon effective collaboration between three Whitehall ministries, collaboration even within one is sometimes quite a cause for celebration.

For this special publication, more than a dozen figures who have made their contributions as politicians, policy-makers, commentators, writers and so on have gamely agreed to respond to the question: 'It has been said that anxiety pervades the British conservation sector in 2006. What changes would you most welcome or most strongly resist, and why?' There are some intriguing replies, and I am grateful to them all for taking up this

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challenge. It is interesting to see the VAT issue come up again, and to see reinforcement of some of the principal themes emerging from the main papers.

As for what more we might have done in this publication, it would have been good to include greater coverage of issues in relation to churches, world heritage, contemporary design intervention in historic buildings, and matters of new-build architectural design in important historic areas. The Editorial Advisory Board does, however, plan to return to these areas in due course.

Finally, I should record the warm thanks of the publisher and all members of the Editorial Advisory Board for the advice, guidance and encouragement provided by Sir Bernard Feilden over the last dozen years, covering the *Journal's* early development, editorial advisory board appointments, and its establishment here and abroad as a publication of choice in the broad field of architectural conservation. Though he has now stepped down from his former active role, we are all most pleased he has agreed to remain our Patron.

Biography

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Vincent Shacklock is Dean of Architecture, Art and Design at the University of Lincoln. He played a key part in establishing the Journal and is a founding Editorial Advisory Board member. Following work in three local authorities, he ran a private practice before being appointed Director of the multidisciplinary Centre for Conservation Studies at DMU, Leicester. He has led projects on the conservation of various historic buildings and gardens in Italy, and has been a member of Lincoln Cathedral's Fabric Council during the last twelve years of extensive repairs. He has lectured in the US and Italy on historic architecture and gardens.

Notes

- 1 Delafons, J., *Politics and Preservation – A Policy History of the Built Heritage 1882–1996*, E & FN Spon, London (1997).
- 2 Department of the Environment (Organisation Development Division), *Organisation of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings in England: The Way Forward*, HMSO, London (1982). This Division was also responsible for co-ordinating the setting up of English Heritage and the abolition of the Ancient Monuments Board and the Historic Buildings Council for England in 1984.
- 3 Rumble, P., 'The Creation and Early Days of English Heritage', in *Conservation Bulletin: English Heritage – the First 21 Years*, Issue 49, Summer 2005.
- 4 Crossman, R. H. S., *The Crossman Diaries. Selections from the Diaries of a Cabinet Minister 1964–70* (edited by Anthony Howard), Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, London (1979), p. 80.
- 5 West, J., 'England's Heritage. The Changing Role of Government', in *Conservation Bulletin: English Heritage – the First 21 Years*, Issue 49, Summer 2005.