

Exploring the boundaries – what do we mean by the historic environment today?

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Delivered at the First National Conference of the Historic Environment Advisory Council for Scotland, Glasgow City Chambers, 22 September 2004

Ladies and Gentlemen. I am sorry that I can't be with you today; I have to be in Edinburgh on Cabinet business rather than with you in my home city, but my thoughts and best wishes are with you for a successful conference.

I want to share with you my passion for Scotland's historic environment, the boundaries of which you are exploring today. Scotland's story is told not just by its people but through the many monuments and buildings, ancient to modern, that create our historic environment.

From prehistoric standing stones, such as those at Calanais, on Lewis which I visited recently, through medieval abbeys, such as Jedburgh, to Victorian factories and the architecture of the 20th century, our built heritage is at the heart of many communities in Scotland.

The buildings of this century have an equally important connection with the communities that surround them or use them. That resonance can be seen in the Tower at the Glasgow Science Centre or the Education Centre in Holyrood Park.

The historic environment promotes a wider understanding and appreciation of Scottish culture, and of the history of our nation. Scotland's built heritage is a precious resource. It cannot be replaced. And it is a resource that I am committed to conserving and enhancing.

Our monuments and buildings reflect the rich culture of the nation. They are physical examples of much of our history, often from a time before records were written. Scotland's rich and diverse historic environment is unique. It is our common inheritance and it is my vision that it can and must be conserved for its own sake and for the benefit of future generations.

Although ours is a small nation we have a wealth of heritage assets. In the words of the great Hugh MacDiarmid, "Scotland small; our infinite Scotland small!" We have distinctive historic burghs and town centres that are full of character. We have an archaeological resource that is second to none for its range and quality. In Orkney, we have in the care of Scottish Ministers the earliest visible stone-built houses in Europe and our proposed nomination of the Antonine Wall as a World Heritage Site reminds us of Scotland's common bond with the international community.

I am committed to continued support of the historic environment and to safeguarding it for future generations. That support is practical. My agency, Historic Scotland, has invested over £100 million through its grants scheme in the regeneration of old buildings, giving them new life and purpose. This has generated at least a further £200 million from other sectors to support professional and craft skills in the construction industry and promote the use of traditional materials. Investment in the historic environment creates jobs, generates growth in the local economy and improves standards in skills training.

The historic environment belongs to all of us; we all benefit from it, and we all have a responsibility to care for it. Government has a key role to play but we can

only succeed if we work together in partnership with local authorities, with the voluntary and business sectors, and with local communities.

The First Minister has challenged all of us to put culture at the heart of our thoughts and actions; we must rise to that challenge. I look to local authorities to play their part in the sustainable management of the historic environment and in harnessing its economic potential.

Many local authorities in historic towns around Scotland have recognised their responsibility. They have committed political will, time and money – such as at Cullen, where the local town scheme helps to preserve a sense of place. I commend them and call on other local authorities to follow their lead.

I also call on the voluntary heritage sector to grasp the opportunity that their important and increasing role in the historic environment presents. Over the years bodies such as the National Trust for Scotland, the Scottish Civic Trust and the Society of Antiquaries in Scotland have made a valuable contribution. Now the Built Environment Forum for Scotland is making their contribution as the umbrella body for voluntary and professional bodies with an interest in the historic environment.

Our rich historic environment attracts visitors from all over the world. Every year millions of people from all over the world enjoy a visit to one of more than 300 properties in State care. Behind the scenes is a world the visitor seldom gets the chance to see. Historic Scotland's ongoing programme of specialised conservation work and maintenance sets the standards for others to follow.

Historic Scotland is the nation's largest operator of paid visitor attractions. Their properties are recognised as symbols of Scotland throughout the world. By investing in improving facilities, they ensure that the public enjoy and benefit from their visits. A major part of that visitor experience is Historic Scotland's events programme.

Scottish Ministers, through Historic Scotland, are committed to improving physical and intellectual access to the historic environment. There should be no barriers to access and we are harnessing the power of technology to make that happen. Historic Scotland is leading that challenge through interpretation at properties to give visitors a greater understanding of the historic environment.

Scotland's built heritage is unique and precious. It provides a focus for tourism, an inspiration for education and a backdrop for a modern nation. It is my responsibility to safeguard this heritage for future generations. I look to HEACS for the strategic and impartial advice that will help me discharge that responsibility. I look to you – attending the first HEACS National Conference today – to help them in that task. I hope you enjoy an interesting and rewarding day.