

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

John Graham, Chief Executive and Director of Historic Scotland

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

What do we mean by the historic environment today? I want to be quite selective and concentrate on just three aspects of the historic environment today, rather than attempting a comprehensive answer to the question. The three aspects are accessibility, economic benefit and openness. The three aspects are linked. In each case where we are now differs considerably from where we were 20 or 30 years ago. In each case we in Historic Scotland believe there is scope to go further, and are looking to our partners for ideas and support.

Accessibility

The first aspect I want to consider is accessibility. The historic environment is significantly more accessible now than it was 30 years ago. Properties which were never open to the public have been opened by their owners, or acquired by the National Trust for Scotland. Parts of Edinburgh Castle which were closed to the public this time last year are now open to the public. More of our artefacts are now on display. Land reform has facilitated access to our historic landscapes. Access for people with disabilities to historic sites is improving. It is easier and cheaper for people to spend a weekend in Dublin, or Amsterdam, or Prague, and enjoy a wider range of historic environments.

Access to information about the historic environment has been transformed by the Internet in the same way as access to information about everything else. Far more information about the historic environment is available on our website than was obtainable from our predecessors 30 years ago. We are particularly proud of Pastmap, which we developed in conjunction with the Royal Commission. This uses GIS technology to provide information on every scheduled monument, listed building and national monument record site in Scotland. Nowhere else in the world has a comparable facility. And you can now watch the sunrise at midsummer at Maes Howe in Orkney on your computer in the company of hundreds of thousands of people across the world.

We also make much greater efforts nowadays to communicate understanding of the historic environment. Like, I suspect, many in this audience I was brought up on the black and white leaflets and simple metal signs of the old Ministry of Works (perhaps we should be protecting a set of these at one of our sites as a historic style of presentation). We now have much more comprehensive guidebooks and on-site information. We have an extensive educational programme designed to bring the historic environment alive for school children. We have free admission for school parties, including help with transport. We are in Scottish Archaeology Month, and the month of Doors Open Days, which offer a host of opportunities to see and learn about the historic environment. For people with disabilities we have made a start with interpretation in Braille, and the recreation of artefacts such as the Honours of Scotland that can be handled.

So we have come a long way in terms of accessibility, but I think we also have significantly further to go. One of the aims of Historic Scotland is to promote understanding and enjoyment of the historic environment. We do not yet have any satisfactory methods of measuring how far we are achieving that. We have high standards of visitor satisfaction at our monuments, but do they go away with greater understanding? Should we be doing more, as English Heritage have been tasked to do, to attract more visitors from the less affluent and less fortunate sectors of Scottish society? How would we go about doing that? Are we doing enough to deal with one of the issues Chris Smout raised – the relative ignorance of many of our Scottish visitors about their history?

Can we do more to build interest in our properties among the nearby local communities? I know from my last post that one lesson which natural heritage organisations such as the RSPB have learnt is that successful protection of important sites is much easier when you have the understanding and support of the local community. What are the real priorities for increasing access and improving the visitor experience for people with disabilities? Can we continue to improve the quality of our interpretation, so that it matches what our visitors encounter when they travel overseas? How can we best work with others to improve access to finds and artefacts. These are some of the issues we in Historic Scotland are considering and would want to discuss with our partners as we put together our Corporate Plan for the next few years.

Economic Benefit

The second aspect of the historic environment I would like to consider briefly is economic benefit. Thirty years ago the idea of repairing and modernising Victorian tenements in Glasgow, rather than knocking them down, was novel and radical. I recall as a young trainee in the Scottish Office visiting the pioneering Assist Project in Govan, which was one of the first to demonstrate that this kind of project was feasible.

Since then large areas of tenemental property in our major cities have been transformed into comfortable and sought-after accommodation. Likewise many industrial buildings, which 30 years ago would have been pulled down without a second thought when their original use expired, have been converted to provide a base for continuing economic activity. Good examples include the reuse of mills, such as in the Borders, in Paisley at the Anchor Mills, and in Dundee, where former jute works have found new uses. In each case part of the economic advantage has been that the housing, or the employment, remains available in its established location and continues to play its established part in the local community. This avoids the disruption and extra costs which flows from relocation.

The historic environment has been, and has been seen to be, a real asset in urban regeneration. It provides the back drop to thriving city centres. It featured prominently in the publicity for Glasgow's Miles Better and Glasgow's year as the City of Culture, and is epitomised in Dundee's branding as the City of Discovery. In Edinburgh the Old and New Towns have achieved World Heritage Site status. On a smaller scale we can point to the success of the townscape heritage initiatives that we have supported in partnership with the Heritage Lottery Fund in communities such as Beith and West Wemyss. These tired, run down buildings have been given a new lease of life and are now making a positive contribution to the local economy.

As tourism in Scotland concentrates increasingly on short breaks for the more discerning traveller the historic environment has become a more important part of what we can offer. Thirty years ago there were no cruise ships landing parties to visit our monuments in Orkney, apart from one run by the National Trust: this year there were 70. Thirty years ago all you could buy at Edinburgh Castle was lead toy soldiers, pencils, rubbers and postcards. All you could get by way of refreshment was High Tea. A request to get married in one of our properties, unless you were in the armed forces, would have been met with a blank refusal. In the current year we expect to generate around £7.7 million of revenue from sales in our shops, catering and events. All this translates into income and employment for our suppliers, be they caterers, photographers or local craftsmen whose work we showcase in our shops.

So we have come a long way in realising economic benefits from our historic environment. But we still have some way to go, in my view, in defining and communicating the economic benefits of the historic environment. It is understandable that the individual developer, faced with an objection from us to a particular scheme, is preoccupied with the short term costs we may be seeking to impose or the implications following the return on the particular scheme. But a proper economic assessment of a scheme affecting a listed building, a conservation area or the Edinburgh World Heritage Site needs to take the impact of the scheme on that setting into account. This is not straightforward: it takes us into the area of environmental economics which I think it is fair to say is still a developing science. I think we need to build more understanding of how economic benefits are best assessed in these potentially contentious cases.

I think we also need to develop our thinking on our management of the historic environment as an aspect of sustainable development. More effective resource use is a central plank in the Executive's approach to sustainable development. At a simple level re-use of existing buildings makes sense in that context. But assessing the full environmental impact of some of the choices that face us – between re-use and replacement, or between different types of re-use, is another area where techniques are still evolving. We have more to learn about the performance of materials and how best to minimise future repair bills. We have more to learn at some of our sites about maximising the attraction to the visitor while protecting the long-term value of the site. There are also areas of our work where the challenge is to unlock economic value more effectively. We have sites with unexploited potential, and difficult choices about where we should commit our investment. Some of us, for example, were at Kinneil House recently, where we have an example of something for which Ruth Wishart was seeking, in the shape of the cottage in which James Watt did some of his early experiments, and indeed one of his boilers, all currently sitting unexplained and unappreciated. The point of our current consultation about our grants scheme is to explore how we can maximise the economic, social and conservation benefit of what we spend.

Openness

My third and last aspect is openness. The historic environment is something we need to have an open and honest discussion about; which is why we are having this conference after all. And which is why Scottish Ministers created and need HEACS.

Again if we go back 30 years it was very different. Decisions on policy, or on listing, were taken with little or no consultation, even with the owner. The historic

buildings division may from time to time have talked to the other heritage bodies, and to other experts, but did not talk extensively to anyone else.

At national level we still work closely with the other statutory heritage bodies – we have concordats with bodies like Scottish National Heritage, The National Museums of Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. But we are now working more closely than ever before with the voluntary heritage sector. We have welcomed the establishment of BEFS, the Built Environment Forum for Scotland, and are working closely with them. We collaborate well with the National Trust for Scotland, and are developing a concordat to enhance our relationship. We support financially a variety of bodies which promote the historic environment at national level, and a growing network of heritage trusts in our cities. We work in partnership with the professional bodies that are engaged in the historic environment.

At local level we are now far more engaged with communities up and down Scotland. Local people are involved in our interpretation project at Whithorn and setting up a community liaison group at Urquhart Castle. We fund a storyteller in residence at Crookston Castle. There is also a network of local "Friends" of Historic Scotland such as the "Friends of Rothesay Castle", who provide valuable local insight and links into the community. And there must be hardly an evening goes by with out one of our staff being out there addressing meetings of local history societies, or civic or church groups.

It is not just who we work with that is important, it is the ways in which we work. The things that we are doing are done in a more open and consultative way than ever before. I want to give you just 3 examples:

- We are in the process of introducing a new definition of national importance for scheduled monuments. In the past, this is something that Ministers would have just announced. Now, however, we had a consultation paper and a 3 month consultation period. BEFS hosted a consultation seminar at which Historic Scotland staff spoke and engaged in discussion. Our consultation paper was on our website and we even had a Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments engaging in debate in a Pagan Internet chatroom.
- We have also changed our approach to the listing resurvey programme. We are now out there actively seeking discussion with local communities in areas where the listing resurvey is taking place. We piloted our new approach last year in Colinton, in Edinburgh, and this year we are speaking to communities in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park area where resurvey is under way – and working very closely with the Park Authority in the process.
- Even in our research we are seeking to achieve greater community involvement. For example, we have worked with the local community at Arnol in the Western Isles on our recently published report on the Arnol Blackhouses. All the members of the community are getting a copy of the research report for their household. In partnership with the Scottish Stone Liaison Group, we have been keeping the local community council informed about the research that is being done at Ballachulish on investigating the chances of getting Scottish slate back into production after a 50 year gap.

Again, however, I think there is more to be done. On the back of the intensive work HEACS is doing on several major policy issues we need to open up more debate about our policies and make them easier to access – there is no policy section on our website at present. I agree with Ruth Wishart that we need to do more to communicate the basis of listing decisions. I am sure that there is other information some of you would like to see on our website, and I hope you will let me know what this is. I and my senior colleagues need to devote more time to explaining and debating what we are doing, and listening to views, and I hope you will give us the opportunity to do that in your various organisations. Should we be looking for peer review of the conservation plans for some of our key sites? I want to explore the scope for using our website to keep our stakeholders more up to date with what we are doing. We plan a more extensive consultation over the winter about the priorities for our corporate plan for the period starting next April. We shall be advertising next month for non-executive appointments to the Board of the Agency.

Conclusion

To sum up I am all too conscious that I have said nothing about many other aspects of the historic environment, and nothing about much of our work in Historic Scotland. I hope however that I have demonstrated how far we have come on my three chosen aspects of accessibility, economic benefit and openness, and that I have provoked some thought on the challenges that still face us in each of these areas. I and my colleagues in Historic Scotland look forward to working with you to tackle these challenges.