

Our archaeological inheritance in care

Synopsis of talk by Anna Ritchie

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On the evening of the 29th July 1814, Sir Walter Scott stepped ashore on the Isle of May at the mouth of the Firth of Forth in the company of the Commissioners for Northern Lights and their engineer Robert Stevenson. They were there to see the coal-fired beacon, almost two hundred years old, that was to be replaced by an oil revolving-light. Sir Walter wrote in his journal 'Mr Stevenson proposed demolishing the old tower and I recommended *ruining it a la picturesque* – ie demolishing it partially. The island might be made a delightful residence for sea-bathers.'

This story has several useful aspects: it reminds us that archaeology is not all underground but includes standing buildings. Sir Walter's advice to reduce the tower to a picturesque ruin was perhaps over-enthusiastic but he was right in thinking that it should be preserved in some form, and he saw the possibilities for tourism, even if the tower was to be no more than a back-drop for bathing in the sea.

We need to consider what is in the best interests for the historic environment in Scotland. I believe that there is no substitute for care by the state through Historic Scotland or by the National Trust for Scotland to provide long term sustainable protection. But private landowners should be encouraged to take more active interest in historic aspects of their land, not just through management agreements with Historic Scotland but by actually spending money on their monuments. Scheduling protects but cannot preserve standing archaeology without intervention, which means that money is required for conservation, and some of these endangered sites should be taken into care.

How then are we to devise a national strategy for the care of the historic environment?

The answer must surely be through increased co-operation between the relevant bodies: Historic Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, local authorities, and the Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, the latter because proper recording of sites and landscapes is essential. Co-operation on an international scale can already be seen in the plans to nominate the Antonine Wall as part of a Roman Frontier World Heritage Site that will eventually span Britain, Germany, Austria and Slovakia. We should also encourage more co-operation on a local scale between museums and Historic Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland to provide outreach from monuments to their associated artefacts, as in the Kilmartin Glen in Argyll.

There should be more consultation between HEACS and the archaeological community, and it would help to have an archaeologist or two on the Council of HEACS.

A strategic approach to what is taken into care should ensure that the overall estate is a representative sample of the remains of Scotland's past. Much is missing from the list of Properties in Care, including the marine environment (underwater wrecks, boat nausts, early lighthouse beacons), less glamorous prehistoric sites such as burnt mounds, deserted medieval settlements (as an antidote to all the high-status castles), and historic landscapes (eg Shetland neolithic landscapes), for our historic environment is not just a matter of individual sites. We must also address the difficult question of taking into care a sample of defence sites from the two World Wars of the 20th century and industrial monuments, especially those connected with coal mining.

Should priority be given to sites of outstanding archaeological or architectural importance? Yes, otherwise posterity would never forgive us, but let that priority be relative not exclusive, in order to ensure that sites of less obvious appeal are not forgotten. It may be necessary to take into care sites that are too fragile to allow normal, unrestricted visitor access. This does not on the whole include sites at threat from coastal erosion, where there are huge costs and practical problems involved in taking them into care, and where funds are better spent on recording them. Excellent work is under way with the Coastal Assessment Surveys achieved through co-operation between Historic Scotland and the Scottish Coastal Archaeology and Palaeoenvironment Trust.

Clearly more funding is needed to expand and enhance the estate of Properties in Care. This relies on public recognition of the fundamental value of our historic environment, and we should ensure that the Government accepts that more needs to be spent on caring for the historic environment than ever can be generated as revenue from visitors. We cannot expect ancient monuments to make real money, and many, rightly, lack the facilities in the form of custodians to take the money. For example, we have already lost one third of the Antonine Wall, and extra funds are needed to take the rest of it into care before it is too late.

Monuments are not frozen in time and there is scope to enhance their interpretation for visitors. Historic Scotland has developed a strategy for improving our understanding of Properties in Care by creating statements of the cultural significance of each site in order to highlight gaps in our knowledge. Guidebooks and on-site interpretation should educate the public about conservation problems, with proper explanation of the needs of the monument and the conservation measures that have been taken. This is particularly true for the erosion caused by visitors themselves, even at apparently robust sites such as settings of standing stones.

Another way in which public engagement with monuments might be improved is to harness volunteer power, perhaps using the Friends of Historic Scotland as a means of recruiting volunteers.