

The Historic Environment in Care

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Ladies and Gentlemen

I am sorry that I can't be with you today; Parliamentary business has not made this possible, but my best wishes are with you for a very successful conference.

I want to share with you my passion for Scotland's historic environment, and my commitment to caring for it, which I know you are discussing today.

Although Scotland is a small nation we have a wealth of heritage assets. Our monuments, archaeology and buildings, and our landscape reflect the rich culture of our forebears. We have a resource that is second to none for its range and quality.

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. Your conference today will be considering the role of the State and others in caring for these assets. For the State alone cannot, and should not, be responsible for the care of our entire historic environment. Other organisations and many private owners are making a vital contribution. Nevertheless the State has a vital role to play.

Scotland's historic environment is outstanding, diverse, and internationally important. Our four World Heritage Sites reflect this. I was thrilled to visit St Kilda recently - one of only 24 sites out of over 800 across the world to be listed for both its cultural and natural significance.

Some of our buildings and monuments are mainly of local interest, but that makes them no less important. Others are of international significance. They range from the medieval abbeys of the Borders through to the great castles such as Stirling and Adam's masterpiece at Culzean. They include too, the many Victorian churches which are at the heart of communities across Scotland. They are all of value to Scotland as a nation, providing as they do a sense of place and identity for communities. The important issue of addressing how all of these might be cared for is your challenge for today.

Historic Scotland's portfolio of properties in care covers some 345 monuments of many different kinds, and includes some of the most important sites we have in Scotland. Some, such as Edinburgh Castle and Calanais, have iconic status and are used as symbols of Scotland for audiences at home and abroad. Others are on a much smaller scale and in remote rural locations with few visitors. Yet their significance is such that they must be cared for. Without State care they would probably find it difficult to survive. In the absence of other options the State – on behalf of the people of Scotland - must step in.

I am committed to continue to safeguard the historic environment for future generations. We invest over £34 million in the conservation of properties in Historic Scotland's care and in promoting understanding and enjoyment of them in a variety of ways for the people of Scotland and for our visitors.

Investment in the historic environment creates jobs, generates growth in local economies and offers a wide range of educational and leisure opportunities for all ages.

Over the years other bodies such as the National Trust for Scotland and the Historic Houses Association have made a valuable contribution to caring for important parts of the historic environment. This includes large and important areas of coastal and inland landscape as well as significant houses – both large and small. It is exciting to note the development of the new visitor centre at Culloden to mark the Year of Highland Culture in 2007, and Abbotsford – the home of Sir Walter Scott - is still open to the public with the help of the National Trust for Scotland.

Our rich historic environment attracts millions of visitors from all over the world to enjoy a visit to historic sites in State care, National Trust for Scotland properties and properties in private or other voluntary sector ownership. I would like to offer encouragement to those private owners who are seeking ways for their own houses to be made more accessible to the public and to contribute to our tourist industry.

Behind the scenes at historic properties is a world the visitor seldom gets the chance to see. Historic Scotland's ongoing programme of specialised conservation work and maintenance aims to set the standard for others to follow. The Agency's Inspectors advises owners of historic buildings to help them overcome the challenges from major change. It is rare that proposals cannot be supported, but early consultation can often lead to better solutions all round.

Closer linking partnerships are being developed with other bodies. Historic Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland are close to finalising a concordat for this purpose and I know that Historic Scotland and the Historic Houses Association are holding a joint seminar later this year on promoting partnership for the positive stewardship of the historic environment.

Scottish Ministers, through Historic Scotland, are committed to improving physical and intellectual access to the historic environment. There should be no barriers to access. I would encourage the various organisations to share their expertise in this area as the commitment to reach out to as many people as possible is so important.

Scotland's built heritage is unique and precious, and provides a backdrop for a modern nation.

It is my responsibility to safeguard this heritage for future generations and I have asked HEACS to consider the criteria that should apply to taking properties into care. I know that today's audience will provide a lively debate to inform the advice that they will provide. And I look to you all to help them in that task.

I hope you enjoy an interesting, challenging and rewarding day.