

ADDRESS TO HEACS CONFERENCE, 20 May 2009

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Opening comments on demise of HEACS – have never approved of the so-called Bonfire of the Quangos, and have never heard satisfactory explanations from ministers about how the work is to be better done. Sympathise with HEACS and applaud the work they have done.

1. Why heritage matters is the rather daunting title given to this closing address. I believe we've heard many reasons given in the course of today, but a simple answer could be: it matters because it is the story of ourselves and who we are. It is our history in stone.
2. In his great poem, *On a Raised Beach*, Hugh MacDiarmid writes:
... We are so easily baffled by appearances
And do not realize that these stones are one with the stars.
It makes no difference to them whether they are high or low,
Mountain peak or ocean floor, palace or pigsty.
There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world, but no ruined stones.
3. Because Scottish history is still such a sadly neglected subject in too many schools; because the way it is taught is so often fragmented and incoherent, these solid, tangible, and lasting reminders of our history become more rather than less important as time passes.
4. We are fascinated by ancient remains because we can reach out and touch them, and because they link us tangibly to the past. I often think that history is at its best when we feel a personal involvement.
5. This was brought home to me forcibly ten years ago when I went along to the office of the Lord Lyon King of Arms to research my wife's ancestral connections. She had been made a Liberal Life Peer and I thought she should have a coat of arms. Because she is descended from the Sinclairs, a very grand clan, I had no doubt we would find much useful information.
6. What I was not prepared for was to find out about the Linklaters. We were very far from grand. Indeed my father had always assured us that we had nothing but 500 years of peasant ancestry behind us.
7. I was, therefore, amazed when the Lord Lyon informed me that the Linklaters had in fact been Goddings to the Jarls of Orkney, holding significant amounts of land on the west mainland of the island. A Godding means something like a steward.
8. My very left-wing son was furious. All this time, he said, I've been boasting about being of simple peasant stock. And now I find that we were forelock-tugging tax-collectors.

9. I disagreed, and thought it merited a limerick:
“Our acquaintance with God has been nodding
For centuries now we’ve been plodding
But oh how unpleasant
To be merely a peasant
And how nice to upgrade to a Godding.”
10. My research was not very demanding – it was just to walk down to Register House – where, by the way, I discovered that the Sinclairs had been on the wrong side at Culloden. But that is another story.
11. For an example of genuine first-hand research that literally digs out history, you should go to the far north coast of Scotland, where a latter-day Sinclair is carving his research out of 700 year old stone. Girnigoe Castle, stronghold of the Earls of Caithness, dates back to the 15th century, and was begun by the son of the First Earl who built the rather more famous Rosslyn Chapel.
12. But whereas Rosslyn, as we know is an ornate gothic treasure house, Girnigoe was, five years ago, just a ruin jutting out of a cliff.
13. Today, £500,000 and five years of excavation later, one of the greatest castles in the North of Scotland, uninhabited for three and a half centuries, is shedding new light on the history of Scotland. Just look at their web-site to see what they have discovered.
14. And because the work is ongoing, we can see the actual process evolving in front of our eyes. Clambering over it is a revelation. Each time you go back a new well, a courtyard, a bailey, a drawbridge, a portcullis, and, of course, a moat is revealed.
15. But clearing this moat is not done on expenses. It is paid for by a combination of various bodies -- the world Monuments Fund, the Caithness area of Highland Council, CASE, Historic Scotland and donors to the clan Sinclair Trust. None of it, however, would really have happened if it had not been for one man, Malcolm Caithness, the present earl, and his enthusiasm. Without his time and energy and drive, Castle Girnigoe would still be nothing more than a pile of stones.
16. So much of what we have been hearing about today stems from individuals, driven by a combination of different circumstances to pursue their own particular dream, often at great personal cost. I dare say that when James Simpson is finally gathered, they will find Mavisbank carved on his heart. His restoration plans for this wonderful Robert Adam house are heroic. Jamie Troughton on the other hand has described something equally brave – taking a much-loved castle and hauling it into the 21st Century by actually adding on contemporary features. That takes courage.
17. There are others who have inherited a crumbling castle and have devoted their lives to preserving what turns out to be a strictly non-revenue producing asset. They do it through a curious sense of duty, maybe even love – but it often costs them dear. No one got rich on a crumbling castle.

18. So do these enterprises get the support they deserve? Or are they carried out in the teeth of official resistance? Is the process of rescuing our heritage so fraught with bureaucracy that we actually frighten off the very people who have the boldest of visions?

19. We all have our stories of pedantry and obstruction by some of our conservation bodies. The box-ticking, the benchmarks, the arcane language that only officials understand, the pedantry of their inspection processes, the European legislation that is so often cited.

20. So often, the intentions are admirable, but the jargon impenetrable. I would recommend that every official currently working in this field gets hold of the paper on plain English circulated recently by the new Chairman of the National Trust in England, Sir Simon Jenkins. He quotes Sir Ernest Gowers, the author of Plain English, who had three basic rules:

Use no more words than are necessary to express your meaning;

Use familiar words rather than the far-fetched;

Use words with a precise meaning rather than those that are vague.

21. Now I know that these bodies in turn are staffed by real experts, who know their architectural history backwards, and can spot the difference between an architrave and an entablature at 20 paces. I also understand – and applaud -- their defence of the integrity of our architectural heritage. We do not want to see Scotland turned into a Disney-style theme park.

22. But I also think that there are times when they should accept that standing back and allowing a conservation process to proceed without interference may be the best guarantee of its success. A living building is usually better than a dead one. Allowing it to become a home, even a hotel, or to form part of a community may be better than simply conserving it in aspic or allowing it to crumble. I went to Dumfries House before it was rescued: it was a real time-warp – every stick of furniture in place exactly as it was when it was first bought, like Miss Havisham's mansion – but it was immensely sad. Now, thanks to the last-minute intervention of its rescuers, it is having new life breathed into it.

23. But, if standing back is sometimes better than aggressively interfering, there are other times when I would like to see our conservation bodies speaking out more boldly when they see the potential destruction of our heritage.

24. I feel, for instance, that there is a complete lack of vision and leadership right here in Edinburgh on some of the most controversial of our developments – the projects that will change aspects of the Old Town, either in Caltongate or on the South Bridge.

25. They may be for good or for bad, but we have heard far too little about that from the national bodies which should be most centrally involved in conserving the past. There is too much nervousness on their part when it comes to dealing either with government on the one hand, or commercial interests on the other.

26. I was horrified recently when Tesco's were allowed to pull down one of the last of great wool-mills in the centre of Galashiels. The only people prepared to fight it were concerned individuals rather than the conservation bodies who should have been in the front line.

27. They should be prepared to take a position, not just behind closed doors, but in public, where that debate needs to take place.

28. Now, with some of those projects on hold because of the economic climate, would be a good time to speak up and say whether our heritage is to be moulded by a real vision or whether it is to be sacrificed to the lowest common denominator of commercial interest.

29. These are just gripes – what my friend Murray Grigor calls a girnathon. I know that everyone in this room is committed to preserving our heritage. HEACS may now cease to exist – but the task it handled does not. I know too that as a country we are enormously rich in our heritage and in our history. The two belong together. Both need our support and dedication.