

# Heritage trends

## Can we save the sense of place from the global culture?

Director of Museums and Collections at English Heritage, **Julius Bryant**, introduced the first *Best In Heritage* event, held in Dubrovnik this September. During his presentation to an audience comprising many of Europe's leading destination makers in the heritage sector, he identified replication and the onset of 'global monoculture' as the main threats to the world's built, natural and cultural heritage. Here, we reprint his speech in full.

The concept behind Best in Heritage is to provide an inspiring international showcase for our business, perhaps a kind of Heritage Oscars or Cannes Film Festival, only without the glittering prizes. But the potential is also here for an 'Earth Summit', for we are of course responsible for something far more significant than a branch of the entertainment industry. Over the next three days, from the world's latest and finest heritage projects, we will discover how to attract and inspire more visitors, particularly tourists who have been discouraged from travelling by terrorism. But we also have a chance to learn how best to preserve and present not only what the international tourists want, but what our societies each value, the special places that reflect our local cultural identities, our sense of who we are, our heritage.

One week ago today, on September 11th, much of the world was in mourning. We have remembered the heroism of the emergency services but in a modest way we in the heritage sector also have a role to play. Through historic buildings, collections and gardens we can provide a sense of continuity, of calm and, indeed, of comfort. The shelling of Dubrovnik by the Serbian army in 1991 was a criminal act against a World Heritage Site, but the swift and skilful restoration of the city reassures us that the human spirit will prevail. There can be no more fitting setting for this annual festival.

The web site for this launching conference promises you an 'introductory lecture by an international expert' offering 'an analysis of trends and tendencies in the heritage based professions'. I am, of course, most honoured to be invited to fulfil this role and before exploring trends I feel I should explain where I am coming from.

I cannot claim the expertise of a university academic, of a historian of society or of the head of an international design studio, such as we have in

this unique gathering today. My experience comes from spending the last 20 years working as a curator and museum director, specialising in the redisplay of historic houses, castles and monuments at English Heritage. Responsible for the care and display of collections at historic properties, ranging from ancient monuments such as Stonehenge and Hadrian's Wall to Queen Victoria's Osborne House, English Heritage is funded by the British Government and is also its official advisor on the preservation of the historic environment. Founded in 1984 out of several Government departments, it inherited over 400 historic properties. The past 20 years have seen a steady campaign of investment in the re-presentation of these sites to make them appeal to visitors and earn more income. Looking for new ideas, I have to have an international outlook. I am the only elected British Board member of ICOM's international committee for historic house museums, 'DEM HIST' (which you should all join!).

I would like to explore trends and tendencies in the heritage sector by summarising the changes that I have seen in England and America over the past two decades or so, and the issues they each raise. I will conclude with a look at one threat we all need to tackle in the twenty-first century, something we each bring with us to this conference.

### The heritage boom

The past 20 years has, of course, seen a boom in the heritage business. Like many people here today, my career has been accelerated and enriched by it. Indeed, we are all, to different degrees, symptoms of the boom and of the change in public attitude to historic places that it reflects. When I was a schoolboy in the 1970s, 'heritage' was far from the household word that it is today. Public awareness of historic sites at that time was dominated by the fate

of the English 'stately homes' and their estates, which had never recovered from the economic and human cost of two world wars, and from new taxation.

I shall never forget an exhibition I saw at the Victoria and Albert Museum as a young teenager in 1974, 'The Destruction of the Country House', which illustrated through several hundred examples the pace at which perhaps England's greatest contribution to world culture (after Shakespeare and rock music) was being lost. The demolition of more great houses seemed inevitable to a boy growing up in a country dominated by trade unions, strikes, power cuts, the daily closure of manufacturing industries and loss of British household brand names, from shipping and aeroplanes to cars and bicycles - and even chocolate. Against these odds, the battle to save the best examples of our country houses was led by the example of a private charity, the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty. Founded in 1895 to preserve countryside and coastline in post-war England, Wales and Northern Ireland, it saved and opened to the public over 200 country houses.

As an antidote to post-war austerity, the National Trust's country houses appealed to some as treasure houses full of antiques for connoisseurs, offering beauty and peace. But most visitors really wanted to see how the rich live and to enjoy imagining sharing their lifestyle. Essential ingredients to successful presentation were personal touches, such as rows of old boots in the entrance hall and clusters of framed family photographs beside the sofa. These could attract greater interest than the Titians and Canalettos. Private stately homes such as Woburn and Beaulieu were more daring. They offered motor car rallies, safari parks and even glimpses of the aristocrat owners themselves. Overall, the message for the visitor was of nostalgia for a British way of life that was now disappearing. However, to some it appeared that it was not the houses that were being saved, so much as the lifestyle of the ancient families themselves.

A more historical approach to presenting the country house was offered by the Victoria and Albert Museum in the 1970s at the two houses on the outskirts of London that it managed: Ham House and Osterley. Here the curator, Peter Thornton, took the interiors and gardens back to their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century appearance. The message to the visitor was to admire a thoroughly documented example of period design, not only in architecture and furniture but also in the colourful 'as new' fabrics, the curtains and hangings, which held it all together.

This recreation of historic interiors was then still mainly an American approach, developed for former

presidents' homes, such as Washington's Mount Vernon, which opened in 1858, and the houses of Colonial Williamsburg, founded in 1927. American scholarship, with a touch of Hollywood, could really bring houses to life. Unlike the Americans, English houses at that time did not go so far as to have staff in period costume acting in character, or to dress rooms with historic period props, such as playing cards and replica food. However, if the English country house movement seemed to be an ingenious form of social housing for the old aristocracy, the American historic houses were soon recognised as promoting their own specific set of social values. Williamsburg celebrates the 'American way', of hard-working, professional, self-made men, particularly the lawyers and politicians who created their Constitution. Its museum houses illustrate the rewarding material comforts that await in the land of opportunity, in the home sweet home of democracy. Now able to recognise the social bias of its founder, John D. Rockefeller Jnr, Williamsburg has created alternative exhibition houses, such as the village gaol, and the 'poor widow's home', and provides tours about black servants. Similarly, Mount Vernon has responded to changing attitudes. Beyond telling cosy tales of Martha Washington, spun by its owner, The Mount Vernon Ladies Association, it now also describes life on a former slave plantation.

This social history approach was introduced to the English country house through the service wing in the recreation of the kitchens and other 'below stairs' rooms. This offered a way forward, as a popular alternative to the faded treasures and family relics in the great state rooms upstairs. Like lifting the bonnet on a Rolls-Royce car, opening and restoring servants rooms revealed the engine, the secret army of workers. The upstairs/downstairs relationship suddenly made a house dynamic. Television's costume dramas provided the characters and the country house enjoyed a new lease of life.

### Managing the heritage of Britain

These three approaches - the aristocrat at home with his ancestral collection, the well-researched recreation of period interior design, and the social history of the service wing - provided the menu of options for the presentation of historic houses, palaces and castles in the 1980s. English Heritage was created in 1984. Charged with bringing to life the Government's own dowdy collection of historic buildings and ancient monuments, it swiftly learned the marketing, trading and interpretation skills that private owners of country houses and the National Trust had pioneered. The five most popular attractions in the Government's care, including the

Tower of London, Hampton Court and Kensington Palace, became a separate body, named Historic Royal Palaces, which had to become entirely self-funding within several years. Britain under Margaret Thatcher came to accept its decline as an industrial power, and invested in becoming the world's fifth largest tourism economy. We now welcome an annual visitor population of over 20 million people spending over £10 billion in Britain each year.

The steady closure of factories, coalmines, railways and the decline of the towns they supported prompted a growing interest in industrial heritage. An alternative to the 'castles and country houses' story of England was developed with recreated towns such as Ironbridge and Beamish offering an English translation of the fully-dressed 'living history' of Colonial Williamsburg. Unemployed factory workers and coal-miners found new skills as tour guides, with the advantage over the actor-interpreters of speaking with authority, having been part of what was now history.

From such local initiatives, many supported by local authorities, there grew a richer understanding of the word 'heritage', for it had become devalued. Indeed, by around 1990 the word 'heritage' had become a marketing cliché. 'Heritage' meant escapism to a romanticised, sanitised, false version of the past, to be enjoyed at weekends, on family visits that concluded in the sanctuary of a 'visitor centre' offering cream teas and heritage shopping. Over the past decade, however, we have learned to value the wider role of heritage. Now it is not only a means to economic regeneration of rural areas in post-industrial England, but also a key to social regeneration, as a way to help people discover their sense of local history, of where their family came from, of what they value and, hence, who they are. Rather disturbingly, the word 'heritage' is now so laden with a sense of collective identity that President Bush used it a week ago in addressing the United Nations Security Council, promising 'By heritage and by choice, the United States of America will make that stand' against Saddam Hussein. This sense of the word is a far more challenging role for the managers of heritage sites in the twenty-first century.

With this sewing back of places of historic interest into their communities we have seen in Britain over the past five years or so a great demand to use historic houses and castles for private social activities, such as weddings, receptions and corporate hospitality. Such activities are regarded either as a necessary evil (to earn extra income) or as an alternative form of public opening that attracts a different kind of visitor who might not otherwise come. We have also been encouraged to widen our daytime visitor audience, to find stories and themes that will make heritage sites more

relevant in a multicultural nation. The recent creation of a national lottery in Britain, the proceeds of which go to the Heritage Lottery Fund and other distributors for the public benefit, has resulted in the biggest investment ever in our museums and heritage sites. With the Heritage Lottery Fund has come, from the grant-giving body, a greater expectation of Conservation Plans including statements of significance for each site. These are expected to embody not only the opinions of expert historians, but also the values of the local community.

### **Technological erosion of authenticity**

Unfortunately, this rooting of heritage sites back into their communities has not prevented them from losing touch with reality in other ways. Following a succession of tragic fires in England at country houses and palaces, and triumphant restoration projects, there is now a cult of craftsmanship, a pride in traditional skills revived that almost rival those of the past. This is a theme more familiar to visitors to historic houses in Russia where great palaces have been recreated after the Second World War. At Uppark, for example, the house proved more popular after it had been burnt, and recreated, complete with an exhibition on its fire and restoration. You can even buy the video. Visitors are now better informed and critical about what they see. Many realise that the sense of entering a private home is an illusion, and are more interested in the processes of conservation and housekeeping than in the lost lifestyle of ancestral owners.

One result of the major fires at Uppark, Hampton Court, Windsor Castle and elsewhere in the 1990s is that there is now no shortage of suppliers of high quality replica interiors. This can be seen as a threat to the authenticity of historic interiors by visitors accustomed to admiring genuine period furniture. At many historic houses and castles, the interpretation traditions of connoisseurship and social history may seem to be in conflict. New technology can also provide replicas, such as printed paintings, produced by laser-scanning the original, and computer-controlled flickering electric candle light. The worst example of this faith in technology was the refurbishing of the Queen's House at Greenwich. It opened to great suspicion in 1990, full of replica hangings, replica sculptures, replica furniture and replica ceiling paintings. After a decade of quiet criticism, it reopened last year as an art gallery, stripped back to its former plain state.

Technology has been introduced more happily to historic sites as personal recorded tours. Now the size of mobile phones, they offer multiple choices to

suit our interests, as do the computer terminals that provide film footage and graphic reconstructions of lost rooms and cities. In the United Kingdom, 76 per cent of the population now have mobile phones and just under half the population uses the Internet. Now that we can have pictures on our third-generation mobile phones, and satellite navigation in our cars, how long will it be before a visitor to Dubrovnik can dial into the local heritage database to take a personal guided tour of the city and its museum collections through his mobile phone? Before long, all the audio tour handsets, computer terminals, guidebooks and wall labels will be obsolete, as we rely on our personal hand-held computer. We will have been attracted to visit Dubrovnik by live programmes on our interactive digital television linked to optional computer archives of historical information and hotels. Such technology provides the opportunity to open up our historic sites and museums to new, wider audiences, bringing greater expectations of the sites themselves.

### Global 'monoculture': the new threat

I have described the change in appreciation of the word 'heritage' from nostalgia tourism to social identity. Looking ahead at future trends, we must not underestimate the expansion of public understanding. The rise of ecotourism will encourage people to seek out places that illustrate conservation in action. Zoos have redefined themselves from being seen as animal prisons to being enjoyed afresh as nurseries sustaining the survival of endangered species. In the same way, historic sites need to respond to public awareness of threats such as climate change, acid rain and even erosion by tourism itself.

Asked to name the main threat ahead, the most familiar reply is 'Disneyland'. By this people do not mean the excellent management and customer care at their amusement parks, but the fairy-tale treatment of history that much of the public seems to prefer. The launch of Euro Disney near Paris was marketed in heritage terms, with Pinocchio, Snow White and friends claiming they were returning to their European roots. The bigger threat represented by Disney, however, is international standardisation, perhaps best known in terms of Coco-Cola and McDonald's, for you are what you eat. Facilitated by cinema and television with their fast food of sound bites and sight bites, by the Web and by e-mail, the twenty-first century is seeing the rapid spread of the global monoculture.

Museums clearly are not exempt, as we see the branding of great institutions like the Hermitage and the Guggenheim, which now boast

international branches, and the employment of the same architects for the latest museum buildings, such as I.M. Pei (Washington, the Louvre) or Daniel Libeskind (Manchester, Berlin). Cinema is our greatest rival, and the vehicle of the monoculture. Over the past year in the United Kingdom 59 per cent of the population went to the cinema, 42 per cent visited historic buildings and palaces, and 45 per cent went to museums and art galleries. The movies can help to attract visitors. But for all their well-researched costumes and sets, films present the values of the present day. Cinema breeds its own replica reality, even into the world of antiques through producing props that are sold with certificates of authenticity.

This is where we come in, after the firefighters of Manhattan. Fortunately, historic sites cannot travel like collections. They provide a sense of place. For example, the Anne Frank House gave me a more immediate, personal, sense of the Holocaust than Washington's vast new museum could convey. In the same way, the humble heritage interiors of New York's Lower East Side Tenement museum house address the world issue of human migration. There is a sense of 'being there'; of what the poet Alexander Pope called consulting 'the Genius of the Place'.

Trusted by society with the privilege of redisplaying such special places, we cannot escape the risk of promoting the monoculture. I am at risk today, for I have come to Dubrovnik looking for ideas for the redisplay of Stonehenge, for our greatest World Heritage Site is now the subject of an \$87.5million scheme. In burying the road and creating visitor facilities, can we get back to the fresh, immediate uninterpreted sense of encounter captured in paint by J.M.W. Turner? We all know the key to success in marketing is to identify the 'USP', the Unique Selling Proposition of a place, and then to promote it in our advertising. But when visitors reach the place, too often they find its uniqueness buried beneath the standard interpretation formula, of didactic text panels, plus scale models, videos, replica objects, replica people, costumed interpreters and the heritage shop. If the medium is the message, our media are getting monotonous and they are selling a standard set of current Western social values.

On great occasions like this, we are all guilty of industrial espionage. But we must resist the temptation to borrow too many of each other's good ideas, to use solutions that worked well elsewhere. We must invent our own, drawing our primary inspiration from the historic sites and their communities. One challenge to us over the next three days, as we each come to realise what we each mean by 'the best in heritage', is to learn how to be different from one another.