



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Managing Historic Sites and Buildings

Reconciling Presentation and Preservation



edited by Gill Chitty & David Baker

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Managing Historic Sites and Buildings

The *Issues in Heritage Management* series is a joint venture between Routledge and English Heritage. It provides accessible, thought-provoking books on issues central to heritage management. Each book within the series is designed to provide a topical introduction to a key issue on heritage management for students in higher education and for heritage professionals.

Preservation and presentation are arguably the means and ends in the conservation of the historic environment. In an accessible format, this volume examines the choices and tensions involved in the conservation and interpretation of the historic built heritage.

This volume:

- Provides economic, social, cultural and educational perspectives on the tensions between conservation practice and public access to the heritage.
- Discusses the issues arising from these tensions through an examination of real problems faced by those who manage historic sites and buildings.
- Presents introductory and illustrative case histories for students of today's debates and controversial questions.

This volume is essential reading for students and professionals concerned with heritage management, archaeology and planning.

Gill Chitty and **David Baker** are consultants in historic environment conservation.

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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

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Foreword

FOREWORD

This book is the second volume in the new series *Issues in Heritage Management*. The series, a joint initiative between the English Heritage Education Service (EHES) and Routledge, is based on discussions at professional seminars, organised and facilitated by the EHES, where those involved in particular aspects of the heritage were able to meet and exchange views, ideas and approaches. It is important to note that the seminars were conceived as educational, rather than policy-forming, events. They were intended to provide a 'snap-shot' of current policy and current practice and actively encouraged debate and positive criticism of the *issue* under discussion: they certainly were not intended to put forward a particular English Heritage view or policy (although, as would be expected given the subject matter, English Heritage experts contributed to all of the seminars).

Most of the chapters in this volume are based on papers presented at the seminar, although some additional contributions, identified at the seminar as being of major importance to the discussion, were especially commissioned.

The seminar, *Presentation and Preservation: Conflict or Collaboration?*, was held at the Society of Antiquaries, London, in October 1997 and was organised by Gill Chitty and David Baker. I should like to put on record my thanks to Gill and David for all their hard work and diligence in planning and running the seminar. Without them the seminar would not have taken place and you would not be holding this volume. I should also like to thank David Morgan Evans, Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries, for hosting the seminar, Liz Hollinshead, who is the EHES Education Officer responsible for the series, for all her support and Michelle Mulvihill, also of the EHES, for dealing with the administration of the seminar.

Peter G. Stone

Department of Archaeology, University of Newcastle, August 1998

The other conferences held were *The Management of the Rural Landscape* and *Traffic and the Historic Environment*. They will shortly be published within this series.

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CONTEXTS FOR COLLABORATION AND CONFLICT

David Baker

Introduction

What You See is What You Get, says information technology in the age of the consumer; but many things were once not what they now appear to be. The differences carry meanings about the significance of the past, for itself and for us in the present. Visitors to prehistoric Avebury may be disappointed by the part-survival of spectacular embankments and wide-spaced stone circles, but how do they react when told that much of what they see is largely a drastic and controversial reconstruction of the 1930s? Do they feel that their experience is devalued or do they want the National Trust to finish the job? Such ambiguities, conveniently shrouded in the mists of prehistory, become more starkly visible as the landscapes of post-war industrial recession become part of history and industrial archaeology (Figure 1). The population with first-hand memories, often bad ones, of former working lives in factories and mines, is gone or fast reducing, and new generations want to know about things that are now largely outside their experience. Throughout the history of industry, buildings and sites have been abandoned after becoming obsolete for reasons that may be technological, economic or political. Their surviving remains, usually complex and often extensive, provide 'heritage managers' with major problems of selection and even greater difficulties of interpretation, especially when original machinery, markets and social context have been lost.

Difficulties about perception and explanation are, therefore, not confined to prehistoric times; there is plenty of scope for misunderstanding the historic survivals of the millennium now ending. As change accelerates and history laps at the feet of the living, the moving border between personal memory and history or legend has even less time to sweep across the remains of recent industrialisation and world warfare.



Figure 1 Washington 'F' Pit, Tyne and Wear, was closed by the National Coal Board in 1968; in 1964/5 it had employed a workforce of 1500

Source: Gill Chitty

The opportunities for first-hand communication bring with them risks that the inevitable baggage of personal experience will hinder attempts to provide broader perspectives. By contrast, conserved buildings and ruins of the pre-industrial age acquire different complexities with their own sequences of adaptation and change over time, patinas of use and ecologically shrouded decay. These can be sources of confusion and, at the same time, valuable elements in a holistic view of the historic environment. What is now becoming understood as a truly 'sustainable' approach seeks to retain a full range of options for choice in the future, and not to diminish long-term historic assets for the short-term purpose of making them instantly and easily intelligible.

These are just some examples of complexities surrounding the relationship between preservation and presentation. They are central activities, arguably means and ends, in the conservation of the historic environment. Are they self-reinforcing or do they work against each other? More usually they are considered separately, and each tends to look in different directions. Preservation of what has been inherited from the past is a matter for ethical frameworks, technical procedures and managing threats from economic development or natural decay; presentation focuses upon communication, education, marketing and visitor management.

If you start from the position that the fundamental purpose of the whole process is to communicate understanding about the human past, however, it becomes much more important to know how far the ideologies, strategies, tactics and techniques of the two activities are mutually supportive. The ways in which we preserve sites and buildings inescapably emphasise particular attributes; but do we consciously either restrict potential meanings, or impose identities, or keep presentational possibilities open, or perhaps not restrict them sufficiently? Do certain approaches to presentation imperil future preservation, because of what is done to the fabric of the survival, or because of

the impact of the attention and interest it generates? Alternatively, do they threaten it in another way, with ascribed meanings misleadingly altering priorities for resources that could ensure it gets passed on to future generations?

Questions such as these were raised in a stimulating seminar held at the Society of Antiquaries of London in October 1997, as the basis for this collection of essays which was finalised by mid-1998. We have tried to respect the live and developing nature of our topic, keeping synthesis tentative and putting down markers for unfinished business, though we have also gone further than merely collecting together case studies in the hope that general lessons will emerge of their own accord. The mixture of essays is designed to display a range of issues and approaches: some chapters deal with a specific site or building but explicitly raise wider matters; other chapters are general studies of broader issues raised by particular topics or classes of historic survivals. Between them, they cover many of the different circumstances that arise from various combinations of period, location, type, function, accessibility and popularity. Some readers may prefer to obtain a feel for the subject by sampling some of these chapters before returning to the broader and more generalised discussion that is the intention of this introduction.

The three main purposes of this introduction are interrelated, but not necessarily interdependent. First, a few comments on the post-war history of the conservation movement provide some context. After all, what makes this study possible and necessary is the expanding scope of historical recognition, in parallel with changing approaches to the philosophy, management and practice of conservation. There are interesting tensions in a *fin de siècle* world inhabited by residual certainties of antiquarianism and hopeful uncertainties of sustainability. Second, it looks at some aspects of a methodological or theoretical framework for considering tensions between preservation and presentation – whether constructive or destructive. In the sequence of activities that together constitute historical conservation, can we view preservation and presentation as a naturally collaborative partnership, to the extent that even conflicts can take the process forward? There is the range of issues that arise in attempting to present this increasingly complex and diverse historic environment: assessing intelligibility and recognisability; devising compensatory strategies; drawing upon the right media for well-chosen messages; and, perhaps leading everything, identifying the human needs to which interpretation and presentation must respond. Finally, and not least, it introduces the chapters themselves, relating common themes to the wider framework for historical conservation, with brief comments on the major issues each covers, and a coda on some unfinished business.

Developing approaches and expanding philosophies

One of the best pieces of evidence for claims of maturity in the conservation movement is its acquisition of a past. Some appreciation of what happened in that past is essential as background for our topic. Fortunately, it has been chronicled and analysed in a growing number of studies (such as Carman 1996; Hunter 1996), so that little more than the main headlines are needed here, dealing with the growth of understanding about significance, context, process and connections.

Widening scope

Interest has expanded to encompass a widening range of elements in the historic environment, moving out from specific sites and buildings to their interrelated contexts of urban and rural settlement, and natural and semi-natural habitats, together with the visual aspects of townscape and landscape. Care of the inherited past became engaged with a

much wider range of contemporary concerns through topics such as the archaeological evolution of landscape, the attribution of historic value to buildings erected within living memory, and, once money became available, the best ways of devising financially affordable priorities for preservation.

Some over-arching themes have emerged to lend coherence to diverse elements and to integrate them with other environmental and economic interests. In the 1970s, the 'cultural resource' drew on intellectual influences from America and Europe; in the 1980s, the 'historic' environment emphasised human interaction with the 'natural' world; in the 1990s, 'sustainability' is a concept of custodianship suitable for the leap between millennia.

Developing controls

In parallel, mechanisms of control have been devised that now range from detailed prescriptive statutory requirements to voluntary partnerships. A growing awareness of past losses tightened controls over potentially damaging works. Statutory provisions moved from mere notification of intention to a formal procedure that ensures that permission is obtained in advance. The change came for listed buildings in 1968, Conservation Areas (partially) in 1974, and scheduled ancient monuments in 1981; in due course it may sweep over the most recently introduced 'material considerations' in the land-use planning process, parks and gardens, battlefields and ancient hedgerows. These latter topics also illustrate how controls have tended to become less restrictive, the greater the quantity of land or buildings affected, reflecting the economic implications of increased constraint, and the need for collaborative rather than imposed solutions.

Social integration

The conservation movement grew in the last third of the twentieth century partly through the expanding cultural horizons already mentioned, and partly as a function of greatly increased rates of destruction affecting what was recognised as a finite heritage. The basic impacts of visitors upon visited places – worn pathways across ancient earthworks, coaches crammed into the centres of historic cities, and queues snaking through roped-off rooms in the stately homes of England – were recognised over a generation ago (Figure 2). The advent of public policy for conservation and grants in the post-war period amplified rather than created tensions between reconstruction and repair already familiar to doughty Victorian architects and their SPAB opponents. Those seminal pressure groups, SAVE Britain's Heritage and RESCUE, the Trust for British Archaeology, found tourism and restoration already in place when they assembled their demonology of threats to relics of the past.

There has been a progression from reactive and anecdotal litanies of juxtaposed threat and historic survival towards a more established and proactive position. Though there will always be good old-fashioned pitched battles with destruction, progress and profit, the outlook of the conservation movement has broadened out and is now achieving new levels of social integration. Sharing in wider social and economic objectives, it is expected to contribute to their achievement, through generating income and increasing environmental appreciation. With this has come a greater obligation to examine preconceptions, purposes and processes, looking at systems and organisations to ensure that its judgements are properly informed, academically, culturally and socially. 'Conservationists' also have to watch their backs: social acceptance does not automatically equate with political support. Having arrived, you need to fight to hold your position, as the new Labour