



From boom to bust: The politics of heritage 1997 to 2009

Professor Simon Thurley CBE

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In my last lecture I followed the course of heritage legislation from its origins in the 1880s to the invention of listing in the 1940s. I suggested that one of the consequences of the growth of protection was that England moved from a situation where private individuals selected, almost at random, which buildings, monuments and landscapes would survive into the future to a position where they were scientifically chosen by professionals. So starting after the War, and then in full force from the 1980s, what parts of our country were to be preserved as history were being chosen by the state.

I wasn't being Orwellian about this, suggesting that in some way these were sinister developments, but wanted to make an observation that I don't think anyone had specifically made before. Tonight I want to take the story onwards to look at the last fifteen years or so and to ask once the State had acquired powers to determine how future generations would understand our national story what would it do with them? What have political attitudes to history and heritage been since the 1980s and how has this affected our heritage?

My story tonight starts in the 1980s which were high years for heritage. This was the period of *Brideshead Revisited*, chintzy interiors, an obsession with country houses and country house life. It was the hey day of Merchant Ivory films: *Chariots of Fire*, *A Room with a View*. Meanwhile National Trust membership hit one million. Margaret Thatcher herself appointed Quinlan Terry the classicising architect to remodel the interiors of 10 Downing Street to make them seem like the interior of a eighteenth century town palace, not just a plain speculative terraced house.

Margaret Thatcher had, I think, seen the arts, heritage and history as a matter of national prestige. I remember showing her round the Museum of London when she had been long retired from front line politics. As we walked through each gallery she talked of 'our' history and the way 'we' beat the French, Spanish and Germans. History was real, present and a defining part of what Britain was to her.

In 1983 her government passed a National Heritage Act a measure that typifies the Tory attitude to heritage at that time. This was not a bill that provided for protection of buildings or monuments but one that created a new bureaucracy that would, for the first time, combine all the heritage functions currently carried out by government in a new semi-autonomous body or Quango as we know them today. English Heritage was the brainchild of Michael Hestletine who, by creating it, at a stroke reduced the apparent size of the civil service by a thousand. The 1983 act was about cost effective management, about exploiting the commercial potential of historic properties in state care; it was about efficiency and presentation not about preservation.

This business-like attitude to heritage was part of a general industrialisation of the society and economy. It was in these years that the tourist 'industry' was born, the leisure 'industry' and of course the 'heritage industry'. It was the latter that was attacked by Robert Hewison in his 1987 book 'the Heritage Industry. Britain in a Climate of decline' with a Dodo on the front cover. Hewison argued that with everything real in Britain now defunct or decaying the only thing we had to sell was a manufactured image of our past. Hewison, a left wing historian, was ahead of his time, this was precisely the accusation that would be levelled at Britain by New Labour a decade later, but I'll come on to this in a moment.

The Conservative industrialisation of culture continued immediately after the 1992 election with John Major's creation of a new department of state, the Department of National Heritage. The DNH, as it became known, was created with exactly the same objectives as English Heritage had been - as a way of properly managing and making accountable a group of broadly similar activities. In fact in 1992 the national heritage, which included museums, galleries, sport and the Media was effectively made into a new state run industry.

1992 was also the year that John Major launched a consultation on raising money for good causes through a National Lottery. This led, in 1993, to a Lottery Act and in 1994 to the foundation of the Heritage Lottery Fund one of four good causes to be funded from lottery receipts. In fifteen years it has disbursed £1.5bn to 12,800 historic buildings and monuments. The creation of this fund was the single most important heritage decision of the last thirty years.

So for John Major history was important too, but his vision of England was more domestic than Mrs Thatcher's, less about kings and queens, victory and defeat. In a speech given on St. George's Day 1993 he spoke of his image of England in the following terms: 'the long shadows falling across the country ground, the warm beer, the invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools-fillers' old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist'. But by 1993 this was far from many people's experience: few old maids would have felt safe bicycling anywhere, especially in the mist.

Tony Blair, unlike his two immediate predecessors, was not interested in history let alone heritage. The November after his election the new Prime Minister received Jacques Chirac, the French President on a state visit to London. Rupert Cornwall wrote in the Independent newspaper: 'Brash new Britain knows no bounds as Jacques Chirac will discover on Friday. This week's Franco-British summit will not be held at fuddy-duddy Downing Street or that heritage theme-park Chequers. No, it's the blooming Docklands for the French President'. Indeed it was. Blair had asked Terrence Conran to decorate the 38th floor of Canary Wharf tower for the occasion. Chirac, said, perhaps with a hint of irony, 'this gives an image of a young dynamic and modern England, I like it'. As Alistair Campbell perhaps said 'Result!'.

This was, of course, part of the now much derided Cool Britannia. But we should not forget that Cool Britannia had an intellectual underpinning, a pamphlet called Britain TM written by Mark Leonard and published by Demos in 1997. Chris, now Lord, Smith who was to enter the cabinet as the man in charge of Heritage said 'the recent demos work is frightening in the evidence it amasses about the way in which as a nation we look backwards... the demos authors dryly tell us that... Britain's image remains stuck in the past... Britain is seen as a backward-looking has-been, a theme-park world of royal pageantry and rolling green hills'. This, if you remember, was the message that Hewison had started to preach in 1987. Peter Mandelson, speaking at the launch of the Dome had the solution: 'the shift we need to make' he said -is from defining ourselves by our past to defining ourselves by our future-. And this is exactly, of course, what the Dome set out to do with its single-minded concentration on the future and no mention of Britain's long and important past.

Yet in some ways, it could be argued, this not only a political fad, it was part of a zeitgeist, for the huge interest in heritage during the 80s and 90s was beginning to burn out. As the millennium neared there was a general forward looking feeling and attendance at heritage sites took a nose-dive. Now, it has to be said, there were many other factors that caused this decline too, particularly Foot and Mouth Disease that came in 2001 closing large parts of the countryside driving tourists away; there was also the rise of cheap air travel Easy Jet was founded in 1995 suddenly making it cheaper to fly to Malaga than catch a train to Penzance. The previous year Sunday shopping had been legalised and the day previously reserved for family outings was appropriated for trips to the high street. In 2000 a whole host of new visitor attractions opened to celebrate the millennium and from December 2001 national Museums in London became free. The consequence of all this was that 2000 was the high water mark for the heritage industry, the years since then have seen a decline.

In this climate of hostility to the past and a decline in visits to paid heritage sites what was New Labour's policy to Heritage to be? In 1995, as leader of the opposition, Tony Blair had been to Australia where he had been impressed by the Labour Prime Minister Paul Keating's cultural policy called Creative Nation. The essence of this was the commodification of culture so that its economic and social impact could be measured and then selectively supported by the state to boost the national economy. Culture henceforth was to become the 'creative industries'. When Blair got back the shadow Secretary of State for Heritage, Jack Cunningham, was asked to look at copying Australia's big idea for Culture. Cunningham did not get the job in 1997, it was handed to the former health shadow Chris Smith whose job it was to implement the

Creative Nation ideas.

After New Labour's massive win in 1997 the Department of National Heritage was renamed the Department for Culture Media and Sport ' the DCMS. This was not only a re-branding - it represented a genuine change of direction. Heritage was associated with eighteen years of Tory power, with John Major's old maids riding their bicycles to communion. It was associated with *Brideshead Revisited*, a lost English world of privilege and wealth, the physical manifestation of an establishment that New Labour wished to dismantle. Heritage played no part in the vision of the new department. Smith published *A New Cultural Framework* in 1998 which explained that, what were now re-branded as the creative industries, were a new growth sector in the economy both nationally and globally and, against a decline in traditional manufacturing industries, were a future source of employment and wealth creation.

This world, where heritage was reduced to a money generating theme park, was satirised in Julian Barnes's *England England* a futuristic novel published the year after New Labour came to power. In it, the grotesque but visionary tycoon Sir Jack Pitman spotted the money-making potential of England's Heritage, but realised that people were put off by the inconvenience of travelling to see it. So, starting from the premise that tourists are only interested in the top attractions and are as satisfied with replicas as with the real thing, he set out to rebuild England on the Isle of Wight. There, replicas of everything from Buckingham Palace to Stonehenge, from Wembley Stadium to the White Cliffs of Dover are reconstructed. When asked how the inhabitants will react to his plan he replies 'It is not full of inhabitants; what it is full of is future grateful employees'.

Chris Smith's priorities were reflected in Government spending. Over a five year period from 2000 the DCMS poured money into museums (36% increase), to make them free; deluged money into the arts (53% increase), meaning contemporary art and flooded sport with new funding (98% increase), as the former poor relation of state funding. Heritage meanwhile got 3%. The Heritage Lottery fund too suffered. Money was taken out for a number of other good causes including, of course, the Olympics. In comparison to other branches of culture, to the planning system, to education, even to the countryside, the financial picture for heritage has been bleak since 1997.

So was this attitude to heritage, at best indifferent at worst actively hostile, a new one for a new Labour party? If you look back over the heritage legislation that I described in my last lecture you will see that almost all of it was passed by either Liberal or Labour governments. The first three important heritage acts were Liberal measures. Then from 1931 came a series of acts either initiated or passed by Labour governments. Only one of the major heritage conservation acts was passed by a Conservative government and that was the wartime coalition of Winston Churchill which passed the 1944 act that essentially invented listing.

So it is possible to argue that conservation of England's heritage was deep in labour's bones. And the one type of history the 1997 labour government was interested in was their own. So why apparently abandon it?

Well to understand the genesis of heritage conservation in England in political terms we need to do more than I did in my last lecture when I reeled off the measures successive governments took to protect historic buildings and monuments. If we look closely at the parliamentary debates that accompanied these bills we will see that in no case was conservation of heritage a government priority or even in many cases a concern. In fact in every case conservation provisions were either slipped in to existing measures by determined individuals or introduced afresh as private members bills.

The very first act of 1882 was initiated and prosecuted by Sir John Lubbock a liberal MP who must take the full credit for the measure. His personal sponsorship of the bill was to come to characterise the way heritage legislation in England developed. I'll give you one example of how this happened. In 1967 the Civic Amenities Act created the power for local authorities to designate conservation areas. This was an act passed by Harold Wilson's first ministry. We know a great deal of the genesis of this act as its passage is recorded in two books: the first is the diary of Richard Crossman who became Minister of Housing and Local Government after the 1964 election and the other is the memoir of his junior minister (after 1966) Wayland Kennett, Lord Kennett, who wrote a memoir called *Preservation*.

Crossman's diary records a visit he made in May 1965 to Newcastle. He visited Eldon Square perhaps the city's finest Georgian square then earmarked for demolition and replacement by a shopping centre. He wrote in his diary 'I blew up our regional staff in Newcastle and told them that they were vandals for giving my consent. But I knew that it was already a fait accompli and that when I get back to the Department I

shall be forced to draft the directive letter saying that they should have permission'. This event stimulated his desire to do something to protect historic towns that were, at that very moment, under huge threat of redevelopment.

Crossman set about brigading all the powers for listing and grants into his department and then pursued a bill that would not only protect individual buildings, as listing had done, but protect whole historic townscapes. The civil servants did everything they could to stop him. In his diary he wrote that the Permanent Secretary proudly 'counted herself a modern iconoclast, believing that there was 'a clear cut conflict between 'modern' planning and 'reactionary' preservation'.

Crossman and Kennet teamed up with the Conservative MP and former housing minister Duncan Sandys who had drawn first place in the ballot for private members bills. Between them they ultimately agreed on a bill for the protection of what was described as neighbourhood amenity by the designation of Conservation Areas. It passed into law in 1967.

Our heritage system thus came about not due to carefully thought out government policy, but as a result of the determined and sometimes subversive efforts of individual MPs and ministers. So in reality in 1997 neither New Labour nor the Tories had a tradition of introducing heritage legislation. Yet Chris Smith did realise that heritage needed some sort of policy and commissioned Sir Neil Cossons, the then Chairman of English Heritage to review heritage and come up with one. This he did in 2000; it was a document called Power of Place: the future of the historic environment. There is no doubt that this was a very important report. It too rejected the word heritage - heritage was now the 'historic environment' a much less emotive and loaded phrase, one which set heritage as part of a much wider and more complex environment in which we all live. It recognised that as part of the wider context of our lives it should not just affect culture policy, but it should be part of those branches of government that affected the places in which we live.

But Power of Place and the government response to it 'A Force for our Future' had little discernable effect on planning policy apart from some promises about reforming legislation 'when time allowed'. Heritage in the early 2000s was politically still seen as a blockage, as a retrospective and inhibiting force in society. But in 2003 there came a turning point, John Prescott and the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, responsible for regeneration and planning, suddenly realised that heritage mattered. This came about through the case of Nelson, a small Lancashire mill town. To explain this I need to take a few steps back.

In the late 1990s an academic at Birmingham University called Brendan Nevin produced a series of papers on areas of run-down inner city housing in the midlands and the north where the value of properties had fallen to as low as a few pounds. He suggested that if these Victorian and Edwardian houses were cleared and replaced with modern buildings attractive to higher income residents they might move from the suburbs back into the inner cities bringing economic and social revitalisation.

These ideas found favour in the Treasury and the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister which was responsible for housing and regeneration. It led to a programme launched in 2002 known as Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder a multi-billion pound programme to tackle nine areas in the midlands and the north comprising about 850,000 houses.

As these proposals were being formulated proposals were being drawn up for large-scale clearance in Nelson, more specifically Whitefield, the most complete Victorian townscape in Pennine Lancashire with a mix of houses, mills, weaving sheds, church and school integrated with a canal. The majority of the buildings date from 1860 to 1890. The decline of the textile industry from the 1960s was accompanied by the employment of skilled workers from Pakistan and Bangladesh so that by the 2000s the area has a 90% ethnic minority population: many of these people were unemployed and despite the fact that almost all the houses are privately owned the area was very poor.

The local council, Pendle, proposed to demolish a third of the houses in Whitefield and replace them with new housing and pay for the refurbishment of a further third. It was proposed to demolish 400 houses as part of this process and compulsory purchase orders were served on 162 houses as the first stage in 2001. Local people and English Heritage were very unhappy. We believed that they had drawn the boundary of the conservation area in such a way as to exclude some of the best parts of the town which would, as a consequence not be protected.

EH called for a public enquiry. It sat for eleven days and the inspector decided in August 2002 that English Heritage's case for refurbishing the houses rather than demolition should be upheld. The Secretary of State thought differently. Mr. Prescott had by then published the details of the housing market renewal plans and had designated east Lancashire as one of its pathfinders. Obviously the arguments at Nelson about the

viability of Victorian terraces went to the heart of this and so the inspector's was asked to re-open the enquiry in light of the government's proposals.

It sat again in February and March 2003 amidst great publicity and intense political scrutiny. When the inspector reported again in September 2003 he asked the secretary of state not to confirm Pendle's application for compulsory purchase on the grounds that they had paid insufficient regard to the area's architectural and historical interest. He also said that the repair of the homes would be cheaper than clearance and redevelopment and that the council had not compared the options properly.

The government had little choice but to accept these recommendations and since then parts of Whitefeld have, indeed been refurbished, although the arguments there are far from over. The battle for Nelson was very important as it showed in stark terms that restoring heritage rather than demolishing it could regenerate declining places more effectively and economically than clearance and new build.

One of the big features of the Nelson campaign was the vocal and integral part that local residents played in defending their town. Popular protest and then participation in thinking about alternative solutions made a big mark on both government and ourselves. We decided to capitalise on this by turning it into a television event.

As the Nelson Public enquires were being fought together with Jane Root, the comptroller of BBC 2, English Heritage dreamt up a programme called Restoration. It was developed with Peter Bazelgette the inventor and owner of Channel 4's reality show Big Brother. The concept was for English Heritage to identify 30 buildings at risk and then get the public to vote on which one should be saved. The winner would get money from EH and the HLF. The first series went out in summer 2003 and the first winner was the spectacular and crumbling Victorian Manchester baths. It was such a success that the BBC re-ran the series twice more.

Restoration demonstrated, if it was needed, that restoring and reusing historic buildings was not only an economically advantageous way of regenerating places it was deeply popular. In fact Nelson and Restoration between them revealed the gulf between the official and unofficial view of Britain. The British people were living a double life. The old Britain, an old country with a long history where people loved their built heritage was the unofficial country where people actually lived. Then there was the official re-banded Britain, its modern counterpart which only really existed amongst the tiny metropolitan political elite who had invented it.

These two nations were still reflected in cultural policy. In heritage terms most people valued their towns and villages, the countryside and cityscapes because they made them feel good, because they were beautiful or awesome, because they had historical resonance, because they made places more interesting and characterful. Politicians, it seemed, valued them for the economic and social contributions they made: the way historic places 'levered in' private investment, the way that historic places 'added value' to the balance sheet of property companies, the way that they might contribute to the amelioration of deprivation and social disadvantage.

In 2000 Power of Place started to argue from the former position commissioning from MORI a survey that demonstrated that 87% of the population believed that protecting historic places was important and that 77% of people disagreed that, as a society, Britain protected too much. But within three years heritage bodies had come together to start gathering the hard data that would prove to the government that Heritage was worth funding. Realising that the instrumental approach was here to stay, and led by English Heritage, they launched an annual survey called Heritage Counts which captured hard data to demonstrate in economic terms just what a powerful contribution Heritage made to society.

After seven years in power there began to be signs that labour policy towards culture might be shifting. In 2004 Tessa Jowell, Chris Smith's Successor as Secretary of State, published an essay looking at the relationship between government and the bodies in her department. In it she wrote that 'too often politicians have been forced to debate culture in terms only of its instrumental benefits to other agendas and that we need to find a way to demonstrate the personal value added which comes from engagement with [culture]'. Ironically her pamphlet was published only a few days after the think tank, The Institute for Public Policy Research published a report For Art's Sake? Society and the Arts in the 21st Century which argued that the Art for art's sake' argument won't win cash and that cultural bodies should improve the way they measure and assess their social impact if they were going to secure the funding they need.

Tessa Jowell never translated her views into policy, perhaps partly because of the force of Treasury opinion against her as expressed in the IPPR report. But her successor had the potential to be much more successful. In June 2007 James Purnell became DCMS Secretary of State. From the start he rejected the whole instrumentalist notion for measuring cultural activity. In his second month in post he asked Sir Brian McMaster, former Director of the Edinburgh International Festival, to undertake a review to see how it might be possible to move the discussion about public subsidy from 'measurement to judgement', from a culture of target setting to a new emphasis on excellence. In January 2008 McMaster Reported. The same month Purnell was reshuffled to the Department of Work and Pensions and the report was buried.

What I think this shows is that though Labour policy on heritage has remained solidly instrumentalist since 1997 both of Chris Smith's immediate successors, Jowell and Purnell were searching for a policy that would recognise more fully the contribution that Culture made to society. Neither of them were specifically thinking of heritage as they searched for this, but heritage certainly would have been a beneficiary.

Meanwhile from about 2002 Labour policy on heritage began to concentrate on the reform of heritage protection law. Given all I have said about New Labour attitudes to history and heritage in the years after 1997 this seems, at first sight, strange, but once again it was the personal enthusiasm of a junior minister that pushed ideas for heritage forward. Andrew Mackintosh had started his career as a Haringey councillor in the 1960s before moving on to lead the labour group in the GLC. At Haringey he had been involved in planning and the replacement of Victorian terraced houses with large social housing projects. But at DCMS, as Lord Mackintosh, he was passionately interested in heritage and even took the title Heritage Minister, something his predecessors had not. It was Mackintosh who took up the suggestion, mooted in Power of Place, that heritage protection legislation needed reform.

This was actually not a new idea; in the last year of the Conservative administration the DNH Secretary of State Stephen Dorrell published a consultation document called Protecting the Heritage. This was a deregulatory paper born out of Dorrell's concern to open up the listing system. Still, in the 1990s, there was no consultation with owners of buildings before they were listed, a concern raised by Conservatives in debates for the acts of 1944 and 1947. However both times the attempt to introduce this was defeated by fears that owners might deface or even demolish their buildings when they knew listing was being considered. The case of the spectacular American-style art deco Firestone factory in west London stiffened the conservationists resolve on this point. The factory was recommended for listing in April 1980 and on a Friday night before a bank holiday Monday a civil servant innocently phoned the owners to inform them that the factory would be listed the following week. That weekend the owners, Trafalgar House, moved in and demolished the central portion of the building rendering it unlistable. Dorrell's 1996 paper got round this by proposing a system of 'provisional' listing that would protect a building while it was being considered for protection.

The idea of consultation, provisional listing and structural ideas such as abolishing the distinction between the various heritage protection systems were put forward by Mackintosh in a consultation paper called Making the System Work Better, in July 2003. 500 people responded and Mackintosh, in decisive mode, rapidly published his 'decision paper' in June 2004 announcing that a heritage protection bill would go forward. Mackintosh was replaced in 2005 and the bill then started to make its own slow way through officialdom as in the face of a rapid turnover no subsequent minister really understood or championed it. So the genesis of this bill was typical of heritage legislation in England, started in the dying days of one government and then taken up by the personal enthusiasm of a junior minister. The bill fell in the autumn of 2008 overwhelmed by a government in the grip of the most traumatic financial crisis since 1930s.

In the last year things have changed. The credit crunch has seen a different attitude to the way we live our lives. People have been less obsessed with short term spend, spend and a new spirit of make do and mend is discernable. A new age of austerity perhaps. People are looking to things that are reliable, permanent, tried and tested. History and heritage are on their way back. People are going abroad on their holidays less; more people holiday at home. The certainties of the last ten years are being eroded and something else will come and take its place. This is what has happened to heritage visits. The National Trust and English Heritage have had their best years ever. A recovery to the pre-2000 years.

But there is still a policy vacuum on heritage. The labour Party, despite toying with the idea of dropping the instrumentalism of the mid 1990s still has it deep in its bones. The difficulties of redefining the value of culture against a government machine that runs on targets has proved too much. When the price paid by society for the horrors of cancer is given a monetary value by the Treasury how can the Secretary of State for Culture try and argue that their areas should be exempt.

Strangely it has been in the field of planning that heritage has made the most ground. The government's current interest in what they call place making embodies an assumption that old buildings, landscapes and neighbourhoods are part of what makes places nice to live in. This was hard won and in it the battle for nelson played its part. As I speak a consultation has closed on a new planning policy guidance note on how local authorities should consider heritage issues in planning decisions. The signs are that it will recognise the huge contribution that this country's historic places make to the quality of our lives.

So what do I predict will be the heritage policy of the future? First tonight's story tells a heartening and positive tale about our parliamentary system. Heritage protection has never been a primary or even secondary concern of governments, the protection that we have in this country has been the work of individual politicians who were determined to protect places that were precious to them and their constituents. I believe that will continue to be the case. It is very unlikely that heritage policy will ever win an election, but the passion of individual politicians will continue to safeguard this country's long history. But what of government's intentions? What is really interesting to me is that all the main parties are now very concerned about energy efficiency and carbon reduction. This, I think, will play an important part in discussions about heritage in the next few years.

Everyone in this theatre will, where possible, recycle their aluminium cans. Here is a typical terraced house. Let's say that this building is demolished to build a new one. In demolishing it we will have wiped out the entire environmental benefit from the last 1,344,000 aluminium cans we recycled. This is because embodied energy must be considered in calculating pros and cons of demolishing buildings. A standing terraced house contains the equivalent of about 212,000 litres of petrol in embodied energy - enough to drive round the world more than once. When it's torn down that is wasted and the new energy efficient replacement will take between 30 to 50 years to recover the carbon expended on constructing it.

The arguments for keeping old buildings will shift from the old ground of historical and architectural value and will increasingly revolve around carbon reduction. These are the new arguments for heritage for the new age of austerity. Perhaps the economic bust will mean a heritage boom. Only time will tell.

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