
Prizing the past for the present and the future

On 1 June 2011, Professor David Lowenthal FBA and Sir Simon Jenkins, Chairman of the National Trust, discussed why stewarding the past benefits the present and the future, and how we can protect, enliven, and enhance our heritage

David Lowenthal

The past remains vital to our utmost being. That dependence is so apparent that the heritage profession tends to take it for granted; preservation gets no justification beyond its economic benefits. Heritage is popular and can be shown to pay. But its social and spiritual benefits are poorly understood. We remain little aware of the crucial role of our inherited make-up and milieu for the habits and the skills that we learn, for our sense of personal and collective identity, for our ambitions and ability to secure a viable future. Heritage underpins and enriches continuities with those who came before and those who will come after us.

From fusty concern with funerary ornaments and antique furniture, heritage in Britain has come to denote all we value from the national past. In particular, countless ancestral deeds and remains shape our sense of collective identity. No other country, British panegyrist often aver, exhibits the same lengthy and conformable continuity of past with present.

Yet heritage in Britain has become deeply problematic. Critics complain that it is suffocatingly voluminous, as well as unmanageably heterogeneous. One is hardly ever out of sight of a listed building, a protected archaeological site, a museum-worthy work of art. Vastness and vagueness marked the legacy from the start. The authors of England's 1983 National Heritage Act 'could no more define [it] than we could define, say, beauty or art ... So we decided to let the national heritage define itself.' It included not only the Tower of London but agricultural vestiges visible only in air photos, not only the duke's castle and possessions but ... the duke himself.¹

Ensuing decades make it still more miscellaneous. Anything old, olde, or old-fashioned is cherished like John Major's beloved pastoral idyll of 'long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer, ... and old maids cycling to holy communion through the morning mist'.² Top icons

elicited in English Heritage's 2006 online survey were Morris dancing, pubs, Big Ben, cricket, the St George flag, HMS *Victory*, Domesday Book, Hadrian's Wall, Blackpool Tower, *Pride & Prejudice*, *The Origin of Species*, the Globe Theatre, and Constable's *Hay Wain*. Respondents in 2008 added fish 'n' chips, *Dr Who*, a cup of tea, the Glastonbury Festival, black cabs, Land Rovers, chicken tikka masala, and queuing.³

So conceived, heritage seems trivial and superficial. The public throngs to historic sites. But much on show is shallow entertainment. Collective memory fades and abbreviates. For all today's indiscriminate nostalgia, for all the evocations of yesteryears in film and television, for all the roots and re-enactments and retro styles, for all the ancestor-hunts and plethora of memoirs, the historically informed past has become *tabula rasa* to most.

Shorn of historical context, 'the heritage industry' is reviled as backward-looking, fossilising an invented past and crippling present enterprise. Such derision reflects anxiety lest heritage tourism debase Britons from makers to hucksters of history. Beginning in the disheartened 1970s, some suggested the nation's future lay in purveying its past. 'Shudder as we may, perhaps the creation of a living history book in this clutch of islands is not so bad a prospect', said Labour politician Andrew Faulds. He envisioned Britain as 'a sort of Switzerland with monuments in place of mountains ... to provide the haven, heavy with history, for those millions ... who will come seeking peace in a place away from the pulsating pressures and the grit and grievances of their own industrial societies'.⁴ The image is satirised in Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998), turning the entire Isle of Wight into a Merrie England theme park.

So toxic by the 1990s was the very mention of heritage that the Department of Heritage was renamed Culture, Media and Sport, and Prime Minister Tony Blair's minders kept him sedulously out of sight of antiquities, lest any taint of elite tradition tarnish New Labour as old hat. On his visit

¹ Lord Charteris of Amisfield, 'The Work of the National Heritage Memorial Fund', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 132 (1984), 325–38 at 327.

² John Major, speech, 22 Apr. 1993, misquoting George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1941).

³ Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 'Culture Online', 2006; Robert Henderson, 'English Icons – an Exercise in Anglophobic NuLabour

Propaganda', 21 Nov. 2010 <englandcalling.wordpress.com/2010/11/21/english-icons> accessed 16 June 2011; Georgi Gyton, 'ICONS – a Portrait of England Reveals the Next Instalment', *Culture24*, 1 Apr. 2008 <culture24.org.uk/history+%26+heritage/art55846> accessed 16 June 2011.

⁴ Andrew Faulds, 'The Ancient Assets That May Be Our Salvation', *Times*, 19 Jan. 1976: 12.

to the 2002 Royal Academy 'Genius of Rome' exhibition, Blair's press officers forbade his being photographed beside a Carracci lest the public get the impression he was not up to date.⁵

Heritage backlash is by no means solely British. In France the surge of heritage is said to overwhelm cultural life and public policies. 'We no longer make history', charges the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. 'We protect it like an endangered masterpiece.'⁶ The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas terms preservation a 'dangerous epidemic' fuelled by 'clueless preservationists who, in their zeal to protect the world's architectural legacies, end up debasing them, gentrifying and sanitizing historic urban centers.'⁷

Vilified as retrograde, nostalgic and elitist, heritage is tolerated only for immediate pay-off. Preservationists focus on how but ignore *why* they protect and steward. 'We stand uncertain and mute as decisions are made ... that threaten the very existence of the objects we care for and the institutions' that house them.⁸ Reduced to a minor role in the gross national product, heritage becomes productive and gross.

Forgotten in the drumbeat demand for instant utility was Benjamin Franklin's legendary reaction to Montgolfier's balloonists in Paris in the 1780s. Asked what benefit this arcane airborne novelty could possibly provide, Franklin retorted, 'What is the use of a new-born baby?' Michael Faraday repeated the analogy in discussing the potential of chlorine in 1816. And when reputedly asked by William Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, what use was electro-magnetic induction, he replied, 'Why, sir, you will soon be able to tax it.'⁹

Far beyond any contribution to tourism or the Treasury, heritage is in fact fundamental to human existence. We are utterly indebted to the past, not merely to its remembered culture and its surviving artefacts, but in every fibre of our being. 'Each generation inherits a treasury of knowledge that it did not itself amass. We speak a language we did not create; we use instruments we did not invent; we claim rights we did not establish'. And we cherish them as essential to our lives.¹⁰ Human cognition secretes events shaped by millions of years of genetic evolution, millennia of cultural history, and for every year of our lives, ten thousand hours of personal experience. Children encounter and interact with their physical and social worlds almost totally through the mediating lenses of pre-existing human artefacts, embodying past makers' and users' views and aims.¹¹

Critics charge that heritage focuses undue attention on the past at the expense of concern for the future. The charge is doubly misguided. A proper concern for the future requires a prior respect for the past. Posterity is conservation's *prime* duty. We steward the past *for* the future.

That care for both is essential and inseparable has long been an axiom of British statecraft. 'People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors', warned Edmund Burke in 1790. Forging a sustainable society 'takes far longer than any single lifetime'. It requires 'a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'.¹² Burke's dictum became a Victorian mantra in every realm of life. 'Old buildings are not ours', declaimed Ruskin. 'They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations ... to follow us'.¹³ 'Society was working not for the small pleasures of today', said Maynard Keynes of Edwardian city fathers, 'but for the future'.¹⁴

Progressive Era reformers of the 1900s sought 'the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time'. No generation had the right 'wholly to consume, much less to waste, those sources of life without which the children or the children's children must starve or freeze'.¹⁵ American conservationists led English welfare economist Arthur Pigou to insist that it was government's 'clear duty as trustee for unborn generations [to] protect the interests of the future [against] our preference for ourselves [over] our descendants'.¹⁶

Inability to think more than a generation or two ahead, writes biologist E.O. Wilson, was hardwired into mankind's Palaeolithic brain; among hunter-gatherer bands survival in the short-term was all that mattered.¹⁷ Political leaders today likewise find it pays to think no more than two years ahead, disregarding long-term consequences. 'We borrow capital from future generations, with no intention or prospect of repaying'. Our descendants 'can never collect on our debt to them, [for they] do not vote; they have no political or financial power'.¹⁸ Long-term neglect is pervasive: lethargy on global warming, economists' brutal discount rates, mounting national and personal debts, crumbling infrastructure. Preservation budgets are severed or slashed. Global charters trumpet the rights of future generations, but nations ignore them in practice. A return to Victorian and Edwardian values is neither possible nor desirable. But a national tradition of social and political stewardship, embracing cultural and natural conservation, reaching from

⁵ Mark Fisher, 'Objections to the Object', *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 March 2002, 13-14.

⁶ François Hartog, 'Time and history', *Museum International* 57/227 (2005), 7-18; 'Illusion of the End' [1994], in *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001), 261.

⁷ Nicolai Ouroussoff, 'The Art of Preservation or Distortion?' *International Herald Tribune*, 25 May 2011: 11-12. Rem Koolhaas, 'Cronocoas: an exhibition by OMA', Venice Biennale 2010.

⁸ Chris Caple, 'The Aims of Conservation', in *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas, and Uncomfortable Truths*, ed. Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker (Amsterdam: Elsevier, with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2009), 25-31 at 25.

⁹ I. Bernard Cohen, 'Faraday and Franklin's "Newborn Baby"', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 131 (1987), 177-82.

¹⁰ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912], tr. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 213-14, 351-52, 372, 379.

¹¹ Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Harvard

University Press, 1999), 216, 202. See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* [1922] (Macmillan, 1954), 20; Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Faber & Faber, 1981), 34-38, 169-70.

¹² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790] (London: Dent, 1910), 31, 85, 92.

¹³ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* [1849] (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961), 186.

¹⁴ John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* [1919], in his *Collected Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 2: 12, 41.

¹⁵ W.J. McGee, 'Conserving natural resources' [1909-1910], in *American Environment: Readings in Conservation*, ed. Roderick Frazier Nash; 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1990), 45.

¹⁶ A. C. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare* [1920], 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1952), 27ff.

¹⁷ E. O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 40-41.

¹⁸ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 8.

advocates as diverse as Burke and Ruskin through Keynes and Pigou, is worthy of admiration and even emulation.

Nor is heritage stewardship ever merely preservative: it is ongoing and creative. Many cry havoc at the loss of our precious irreplaceable legacy. But that legacy is neither dwindling nor irreplaceable. It has an organic life of its own, its make-up and lineaments re-evaluated by every succeeding generation.

Such revision is essential, and static preservation folly. 'Societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision must ultimately decay', warned the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead.¹⁸ We in Britain, wrote George Orwell, 'must add to our heritage or lose it'.¹⁹ To be a living force the past is ever remade; the true steward adds his own stamp to his predecessors'. 'It is our felt duty', advises Neil MacGregor, 'to augment what we bequeath'.²⁰ It is not enough to receive and transmit a legacy; it must be refurbished and renewed while in our care.

It is imperative to demonstrate that the past is not a frill or an extra to be enjoyed or dispensed with on impulse. We need to remind ourselves, so as to persuade others, that consciously informed use of heritage is essential to civilised life.

Simon Jenkins

Each generation reinterprets its past. To each generation its past is a sort of jumble of memories, impressions and relics, and all of them become the *mélange* that we then dump before the public as being the heritage of the individual, family, tribe, town, nation. This heritage has become so much of a mess that it no longer has any real historical form, it simply has the form of whatever we have interpreted it to be. As a very practical conservationist – with some custodial responsibility for a sizeable chunk of what passes for England's heritage and that of Wales and Northern Ireland as well – what can I make of it all?

One of the things that we tell the people of the National Trust all the time is: 'Whatever you do to bring the properties to life, to make it fun, to get the punters in, to be a part of the leisure industry, you must not lose touch with the authenticity of the building or the landscape or whatever it is that has been bequeathed to you. There is a fundamental, historical truth that you have to stay true to.' If you diverge from that at all, you have Disneyland. We have just to remember that there is a basic truth to history, to the past, that we have to fasten on to, or we are going to lose it all.

David Lowenthal

I think that authenticity is a bane. I know that it is constantly used as the mantra: people are said to want the real, not a contrived past. 'The past is unarguably authentic', as Ian Crichton put it.

The past is a world that already existed before Disney and Murdoch ... and all the other shapers of the present day. ... The past is real. It's authentic. *And this make[s] the past unbelievably attractive.* People ... want to visit not other places, but other times ... medieval walled cities, Buddhist temples, Mayan pyramids, Egyptian necropolises, ... the vanished world. And they don't want it to be fake. They don't want it to be made pretty, or cleaned up. They want it to be authentic.²¹

But it is not truth that people want; it is the *appearance* of truth. Fearing a prospective Disney history theme park in their backyard, Colonial Williamsburg staff were dismayed to discover that the public saw little difference. Williamsburg was authentic, but 'Disneyland is authentic too'. 'How can this be? Colonial Williamsburg is a real place, even if much restored. Disney's America is going to be totally made up. It isn't even a real historical site. Everything will be artificial.' 'Sure, but Disney always does things first-class, and if they set out to do American history, they'll hire the best historians money can buy ... to create a completely plausible, completely believable appearance of American history.'²² As in Simon Shaffer's *Letting and Lovage*, a past enlivened by fabrication becomes far more appealing, even when the contrivance is patent. 'Scepticism about one's heritage', noted Alan Bennett, is an 'essential part of that heritage'.²³

Simon Jenkins

It is a difficult challenge you pose. It is very fashionable to be contemptuous about the heritage industry. You put the word 'industry' after something and it immediately detracts from it – makes it seem squalid, money-grubbing. People have lots of leisure and vast amounts of money to spend on their leisure, and they desperately crave something that in some sense they can identify with. They do not want to see the copy; they want to see the original. An entire industry, the museum industry, is totally dedicated to authenticity. An entire profession, that of museum curator, is dedicated to authenticity. These deride the suggestion that you should make a copy of the Elgin Marbles and give the real ones back. Anything to do with copying, to do with the inauthentic, is impermissible.

How do you see the past 25 years?

David Lowenthal

We have gone through a whole generation of using and misusing heritage for tourism, and developing ideas about heritage that seem to me increasingly nostalgic. Back in the 1970s a sense of a future lost or at risk was not nearly so prominent as it has become since. We care about the heritage as a source of enjoyment, but no longer in terms of a social and spiritual asset to help bring about a better future.

¹⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism* (Cambridge University Press, 1928), 104.

¹⁹ George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1941), 109.

²⁰ Neil MacGregor, 'Scholarship and the Public', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 139 (1989), 1263–80 at 1274.

²¹ Michael Crichton, *Timeline* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 436.

²² Sheldon Hackney, 'Who Owns History? Conversations with William Styron and Cary Carson', *Humanities* [National Endowment for the Humanities], 16:1 (Jan.–Feb. 1995), 8–11, 50–53 at 9.

²³ Alan Bennett, *Writing Home* (London: Faber, 1994), 211.

Simon Jenkins

You see no optimism? You see no good news in the fact that in 1980 – I think I am right in saying – the number of visitors to Venice was 1,500,000 a year; it is now 14 million a year. Some might say: ‘This is a complete and total catastrophe: the rabble are at the gates; we have to keep them out, we must not let anyone more in.’ We had the same problem at the National Trust: ‘We must not have any more people in, because they are ruining the properties and are not scholars like us.’ I just do not see it that way. It is hugely encouraging that 14 million people want to go to Venice. They do not believe that The Venetian hotel, Las Vegas is Venice. It is not good enough to go to Las Vegas or Dubai. Venice Dubai is sensational, but it is not Venice. I just find it utterly good that so many people want to enjoy what they see as the past. The nostalgic element to the leisure industry I find wholly benign. People do not simply crave the latest new fad; they crave what you call the old fad.

David Lowenthal

Three points. Nostalgia now is different from that of the 1970s. The nostalgia of now is retro nostalgia. It is much more recent; it is much more ironic and it is much more interesting in many ways. The second point: yes, all those people go to Venice. They also go to Las Vegas and they enjoy Las Vegas. Millions also visit Knossos in Crete, quite unperturbed that this ‘Minoan’ site – the world’s earliest reinforced-concrete antiquity – is in large measure the imaginative invention of Sir Arthur Evans in 1900. Third, the whole business of original and copy has become far more sophisticated in terms of public understanding. We learn to appreciate originals through copies. We appreciate the copies for their own sake, because in some respects they reflect what we value better than the decayed and eroded originals.²⁴

Simon Jenkins

I was looking at the weekend for a new technique for copying an Axminster carpet. Rather than having to ban people from walking in our rooms, we can put down new Axminster carpet, which looks just like an old one and they can walk on it. This is liberating for the room: we do not have to put up a rope. You can take the rope out and people can wander around. I am sure someone is going to come along and say ‘That is a fake’. But these techniques are not offences against authenticity, they are simply enabling larger numbers of people to enjoy something of the past.

Question

What about the idea of national heritage? The metaphor of heritage is dangerous, because it brings in the idea of ownership – who owns the past? Add the adjective ‘national’ and things

²⁴ Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand, eds, *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter 2011).

get really tricky, given the number of cultural items that can be reasonably claimed by more than one nation: Greek coffee or Turkish coffee, or a painting by Mantegna that has been in England for 400 years, and so on.

David Lowenthal

The nationalisation of heritage seems to be increasing, whatever the power of the nation state. The identity of the nation state has become bound up with its heritage. That said, most heritage matters to people when they think it is theirs, either individually or collectively. That it should be so focused on the nation state creates major problems, especially when it comes to repatriation. Repatriation requires, essentially, that every object be sent back to where it supposedly came from. But where things supposedly came from thousands of years ago is often either unknown or not identifiable as a current political entity. In any case, a great deal of what we consider to be heritage was portable, made to be trundled around and sold.

Simon Jenkins

When so many other aspects of life have become denationalised, neutralised, internationalised, cosmopolitanised, people revert to their nation. They find nostalgia, they find heritage, in the nation state. The restitution debate is not going to go away. You can never ever tell the Greeks that they will never get their Marbles back, so they may as well forget it. It is the same for Maori heads or the Benin Bronzes. These things will not go away, because heritage is not just some bit of froth invented by the merchandisers of the museum business, it is deeply embedded in people’s psyche. It will always be and it is clearly getting more significant.

David Lowenthal

You can never persuade the Greeks that the Elgin Marbles should not go back, but you have to sort out the politics of their claim from the realities. I have been frequently in Greece, and almost all the young professionals that I meet say ‘We know very well that we are better off not having them back, but go on asking to have them back.’

Simon Jenkins

That is what smart Greeks I know say as well. It is important to see that heritage is successful because it has become politically significant; it has become economically significant. The politics is not going to go away. The task of politics is to resolve these conflicts. Every day, people are trying to resolve these conflicts which have come out of the heritage business. This is reality.

Question

The past is getting bulkier as we speak. How can you preserve everything? How do you decide what to keep and make into our heritage?

Simon Jenkins

In the 1970s we founded something called the Twentieth Century Society (originally called the Thirties Society). Saving Victorian England was easy; you saved everything. Saving Georgian England, you certainly saved everything. Twentieth-century England? We had terrible rows about it. I, frankly, cannot stand new brutalism: if someone came along with semtex to blow up Gateshead Car Park, I would be the first pressing the plunger. But the argument was: 'Save everything. You just do not know what is going to be valued in 100 years time.' So, you must be sensitive to changing tastes in what it is you want to save. The fact that it is old is good enough.

David Lowenthal

Heritage is not always nice. To be historically truthful you have to keep the bad stuff along with the good. More and more people in more and more countries are concerned to rectify what they conceive of as the injustice of the past, and are valorising sites of conscience: prisons, famine places, slave pens. In some countries, such heritage remains an unbearable burden. As Günter Grass remarks (*Crabwalk*, 2002), 'The history we Germans have repeatedly mucked up, is a clogged toilet. We flush and flush, but the shit keeps rising'.

Simon Jenkins

Fascination with the past does encourage people to have arguments. At National Trust houses now the objective is to tell stories, to encourage people to question the stories, to have events in which discussions take place. If you lose touch with past reality, then I think it is difficult to anchor these debates. And if you lose that anchor, then you are going to be constantly vulnerable to highly charged versions of history.

David Lowenthal

No better example of this can be found than the Tea Party movement in the United States, which has managed to disseminate more misinformation about American history in a few pungent phrases than anyone could possibly have imagined. Appropriating and domesticating the past, they have made the present a foreign country.

Question

A lot of curators do feel preservation is the key – keeping things preserved for posterity. But part of the truth of the past is about decay and loss and the ephemeral nature of things. By choosing to preserve everything, do we lose that inherent truth?

Simon Jenkins

In the Red House in south-east London, William Morris's house, the walls have been covered in white paint over the years. It is now like a medieval church. Underneath the whitewash are Morris's original wall paintings. Do you copy them over the white paint, or do you spend an

absolute fortune trying to remove the white paint to get at Morris's paintings underneath? In doing so you are probably going to damage them. You will, doubtless, age them; they will age anyway. Why not just have fun repainting them? – as they have done with that wonderful church at St Fagans in Wales, where they have effectively recreated a 16th-century Welsh church with all the bright colours in it. The interior of Dover Castle is now absolutely authentic 1150. It looks terrific, but it takes a great effort of the will to see that this is what it would have been like then, rather than how we would expect it to be – heavily decayed over time. Memory is also enshrined in ageing.

David Lowenthal

That is why some textile conservators I know say: 'We should collect every bug along with every rug.'

Question

Some years ago National Trust restored Ightham Mote. They spent a lot of money on restoring the medieval structure of the building, but then they covered up the whole thing with the more modern design of the later owners of the building, so nothing could be seen at all. On the other hand, one does not want things to be kept in aspic: some of the draperies that one sees in properties are so dishevelled one wonders why they have not been replaced by a modern replica. How far are you prepared to go for authenticity before it becomes something which is not very real?

Simon Jenkins

The answer is there is no answer. Ightham Mote had been restored in the early part of the 20th century and effectively, kind of Edwardianised. Do you take it back to what was done then, or to what was there before? There is no answer to that question. A decision was made to take it back to what was done in the 20th century. So, part of the building is, indeed, as it was restored, and it covers up quite a lot of the original material in so doing.

The *locus classicus* of this is the great debate over Uppark. Uppark was gutted by fire in 1989. What should you do? Leave it as a ruin like Seaton Delaval? Restore it with an ultra modern interior, like Richard Rogers' house? Put it back like it was immediately before the fire, employing the vast talents of the distressing industry that can age anything you want precisely to the period you want? Or do you put it back to what it was when it was built, in the reign of Queen Anne? The decision was made to go for the reign of Queen Anne. But if you walk around it you see the spirit weakens every now and then. They have left a burnt bell pull. They have left a snake carved in a piece of woodwork with the scorch mark still on it (Figure 1). They have left bits of ragged carpet, just to show that they did not quite have the courage of their convictions. I find the whole thing completely fascinating, but the answer to your question is there is no answer, just a debate.

The one thing you must not do is destroy the past. The past is real. And the only obligation you have towards the past is to not destroy the relic.



Figure 1. Conservation choices. After the fire at Uppark, the serpent 'capitals' of the Saloon doorcases were restored, but scorch marks were left on the woodwork. Photo: ©NTPL/Andreas von Einsiedel.

David Lowenthal

I would agree that the past is real, and the past does not exist either. It is the present that exists, and we have to remember this all the time. What we are seeing is remnants; what we are seeing is memories, shadows, and we are seeing it through 21st-century lenses. So we can never actually go back to what it actually was; we try, but the fascination is in the trying, the impossible but laudable effort to understand and appreciate our ever alien precursors.

Two developments in heritage seem to me to be positive and likely to expand. One is restoration. I know that restoration is seen in many quarters in the old 19th-century way, as a way of destroying the reality of ancient original fabric. But the restorationists with whom I work now see their task as one of melding what remains of the past with efforts to recreate the circumstances, at least, of that past for the better – ecologically, architecturally, or whatever.

The second realm is re-enactment, which has become hugely popular on both sides of the Atlantic, not only in battle replays, but in engagement with everyday aspects of the past. For tens of thousands of people, re-enactment is now the prime mode of participatory engagement with the past, and a major pedagogic tool. Re-enactment also enables us in the heritage field to reconnect with history itself. R.G. Collingwood’s notion of re-enactment has enlivened historical insights since the 1920s. ‘Get a Roman ruin beneath your feet’, taught Collingwood, ‘and you begin to understand a little bit about the men who made it and why they made it.’ Our best biographers, memoirists, historians seek to recapture by re-experiencing the sense of place

connected with the past that they are writing about. They are dedicated to travelling those same roads, Roman and other.

Professor David Lowenthal is Emeritus Professor of Geography at University College London, and a Fellow of the British Academy. Over an illustrious career, spanning some 60 years, he has taught at universities on both sides of the Atlantic. He has advised organisations including English Heritage, SAVE Britain’s Heritage, UNESCO, ICOMOS, Europa Nostra and the British Museum. He is a medallist of the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, the International Institute for Conservation and the American Geographical Society, and in 2010 was awarded the Forbes Prize by the International Institute for Conservation for his services to conservation.

Sir Simon Jenkins is an author and journalist, who was appointed Chairman of the National Trust in 2008. He is currently a columnist for the Guardian and the Evening Standard. Sir Simon has a longstanding interest in heritage and the heritage sector, and has been a member of the Millennium Commission, a trustee of The Architecture Foundation and deputy chairman of English Heritage.

An audio recording of the full discussion can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2011/prizing-the-past.cfm

Preserving cultural heritage, a diverse and complex concept, has long been a matter of concern for Fellows of the British Academy. The discussion between Professor David Lowenthal FBA and Sir Simon Jenkins formed part of a wider theme of work examining a range of potential threats to material heritage and offering recommendations to policymakers and academics to help mitigate and counteract these threats.

The main output of this, an essay collection entitled *History for the taking? Perspectives on material heritage* was published on 24 May 2011. Introduced by Sir Barry Cunliffe FBA, the chair of the project, it consists of four essays dealing with different issues affecting material heritage.

- Dame Fiona Reynolds, Director-General of the National Trust, writes on the growth of the UK’s cultural tourism industry and the tensions between enjoying and preserving our heritage.
- Professor Michael Fulford FBA offers an analysis of planning guidelines and the inadequacy of access to the results of commercial archaeology in the UK.
- Dr John Curtis FBA of the British Museum uses the examples of Iraq and Afghanistan to highlight the connection between war and damage to heritage assets.

- Professor Anthony Harding FBA assesses issues surrounding the trade in illicit antiquities and the dilemmas facing academics regarding the study of objects of dubious or unknown provenance.

In each case, the authors examine the current situation and its implications, before suggesting policy measures to better protect our cultural heritage. The messages of these essays are particularly pertinent in today’s climate, with heritage, in spite of its value to present and future generations, at risk of slipping further away from the mainstream policy agenda.



History for the taking? Perspectives on material heritage is available to download via: www.britac.ac.uk/policy/History-for-the-taking.cfm