

Why post-war Britain had a renewed interest in heritage

Simon Thurley, Chair of the National Lottery Heritage Fund

Summary: In this essay, Simon Thurley examines the historical context that saw an increased interest in Britain's heritage in the post-war years. Various attempts at funding and preserving the UK's heritage are examined from the National Trust to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The British Government's enthusiasm for Heritage protection has waxed and waned over the last 140 years. Never an issue of party-political dogma, policymaking and legislation has been driven, more often than not, by the attitudes and enthusiasms of individual parliamentarians. Sometimes taxpayer's resources have been generously allocated, on other occasions they have been withheld. Overall, however, mechanisms developed ad-hoc, and in response to crises and opportunities, have served the nation well. It might even be argued that the array of measures that exist places the UK in the forefront of international conservation practice.

Yet the government took no role in the preservation of heritage until 1882 when the passing of the first Ancient Monuments Act allowed the state to take into its ownership a limited list of ancient monuments and open them to the public. While this was the foundation of the national collection now cared for by the English Heritage charity, CADW (in Wales) and Historic Environment Scotland, it wasn't until 1913 when legislation was passed that widened to scope of monuments to be collected, and extended protection beyond simple acquisition.

At the time it was very controversial. The Duke of Rutland in *The Times* wrote 'The system with meddling with and spying into every one's private affairs which is just now in vogue is as mean and petty a one as was ever legislatively created; and I trust that no other measures of the kind may be brought forward under the cloak of the preservation of ancient monuments; and that if they are, they will be strenuously opposed by those who loathe the system of interference with personal liberty as much as I do'.^[i]

In the House of Lords Lord Curzon spoke at length arguing that historic buildings 'are part of the heritage of the nation, because every citizen feels an interest in them although he may not own them; and they are part of the history of the nation, because they are documents just as valuable in reading the records of the past as is any manuscript or parchment deed to which you can refer.'^[2]

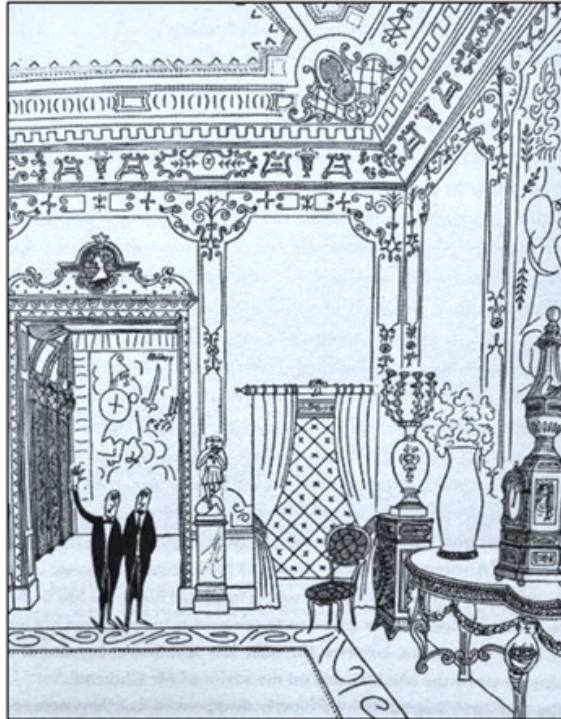
With the support of the ministry of education the 1913 Act was passed thus creating a great outdoor museum of national history.

In 1913 there had only been 44 British monuments in the Ministry of Works' care, but because of the Act by 1933 this had risen to 273, By the time the management of the collection was delegated to the home countries heritage bodies it was over 800. At the same time the 1913 Act allowed the office of works to add buildings owned by private individuals to a different schedule which meant that owners needed to give two months' notice to them for changes or demolition. By 1939 some 3,000 sites had been protected in this way.[3]

Although the 1913 Act was a step forward for the cause of the preservation of historic sites and monuments there were two underlying problems. The first was that the ultimate sanction for protection in the event of non-compliance was compulsory purchase by the state and a series of high-profile cases showed that more often than not parliament regarded people's property rights to be more important than the preservation of national heritage, especially if the Government had to pay for it. The second problem was that, under the Ancient Monuments Acts, it was impossible for the Ministry of Works to accept guardianship of an inhabited house in the way it might a monument. Although it was possible for the Ministry to purchase an inhabited house the cost of doing so made this highly problematic. The National Trust's Country House Scheme, set up in 1939, did some of the work that the Ministry could not, but its powers were limited to those buildings where an endowment could be provided to pay for future maintenance.

In the wake of the Second World War the government was more concerned with preserving land for public enjoyment than privately owned historic buildings and monuments. The Labour Chancellor Hugh Dalton, a professed enthusiast for the great outdoors, established the Land Fund in 1946 to purchase parts of estates sold as a result of his punitive death duties. The gigantic endowment (£50m) would be used, he said, 'To buy some of the best of our still unspoiled open country, and stretches of coast, to be preserved forever, not for the enjoyment of a few private landowners, but as a playground and a national possession for all our people'. One of the principal vehicles for achieving this was to be the National Trust.[4]

At that moment the National Trust's primary concern was not land but country houses, and the new Fund provided a potential route to cover death duties in return for a transfer to Trust ownership. In 1947 Cotehele (Cornwall) became the first house to be accepted by the Land Fund in payment of Death Duties before being transferred to the National Trust to open it to the public.[5]



"It's a toss-up whether it goes to the National Trust or the Ministry of Works"

But before the establishment of the Land Fund, in the midst of the War, the government had confronted a problem that was to change everything. In 1943 the 8th Lord Braybrooke had died and his successor, a cousin, faced two lots of death duties on his Audley End estate and in May 1944, Braybrooke had approached James Lees-Milne to ask if the National Trust might take it over. Normally the Trust would only accept a house as a gift, with an accompanying endowment but in this case no endowment was offered. It was necessary therefore to find both a tenant and the purchase money if the NT was to take over the house. Unable to make progress, in 1946 Lees-Milne was forced to turn to the government for help. Sir Alan Barlow of the Treasury gave a sympathetic response initially and wrote to the Ministry of Works asking for confirmation of the Trust's view that the house was in fair condition. [6]

Sir Eric de Normann, the First Commissioner of Works (departmental Permanent Secretary), replied by putting in a bid of £30,000 for the house on behalf of his Ministry stating that they were the most appropriate owners. Officials of the Ministry felt they were rivals to the Trust who had, at that date, just started to acquire historic buildings as well as landscape.[7]

Various negotiations then followed including one to buy the house for Cambridge University, but no agreement was reached on its value. At this point Sir Edward Bridges, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury intervened. He argued that it was more important to focus on the principle of whether the State 'should find means of preserving a limited number of the great

country houses of the land' rather than haggle over the price of one of them. To his mind, Audley End was certainly in the 20 or 30 greatest houses in England and it deserved the skilled attention that only the Ancient Monuments Department could give. 'All this, no doubt, is a very unorthodox minute for a Permanent Secretary to the Treasury to write; but it happens to be what I feel about the subject.' [8]

As a result the Ministry of Works was asked by the Treasury to produce a list of houses of notable historic or architectural interest which should be 'preserved at all costs'. A list was quickly compiled of 52 'important country houses' which were not already protected by the National Trust, local authorities or the government. [9]

List of Important Country Houses 22 February 1948

Raby Castle	Drayton House	Dyrham House
Castle Howard	Burghley House	Berkeley Castle
Burton Agnes Hall	Boughton House	Brympton d'Evercy
Harewood House	Welbeck Abbey	Bowood
Wentworth Castle	Woburn Abbey	Longleat
Wentworth Woodhouse	Langley's	Longford Castle
Chatsworth	Hatfield House	Wilton House
Hardwick Hall	Kimbolton Castle	Erddig Hall
Kedleston	Holkham Hall	Powis Castle
Haddon Hall	Houghton Hall	Stokesay Castle
Belton House	Raynham Hall	Compton Verney
Boothby Pagnell Manor	<u>Hengrave Hall</u>	Compton Wynyates
House	Sherborne Castle	Sizergh Castle
Althorp	Forde Abbey	Leeds Castle
Apethorpe	<u>The Vyne</u>	Penshurst
Castle Ashby	Broughton Castle	Loseley House
Deene Hall	Blenheim Palace	Sutton Place
Easton Neston	Great Badminton	

In possession of this Sir Eric de Normann reported that "the Chancellor of the Exchequer [Sir Stafford Cripps] was sympathetic to suggestions that houses of architectural and historic interest, which are threatened, should be preserved." The Chancellor also was "anxious to be informed of principles on which an agreed policy could be built up" and in December 1948, in order to secure independent advice on this, he appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Sir Ernest Gowers.[10]

The committee's remit was 'to consider and report what general arrangements might be made by the Government for the preservation, maintenance and use of houses of outstanding historic or architectural interest which might otherwise not be preserved, including, where desirable, the preservation of a house and its contents as a unity.'[11]

Two months after the committee sat the Ministry of Works bought Audley End and decided that they should argue to the Gowers Committee that the National Trust was ill-qualified and under-funded for the work of looking after historic buildings, and that 'we should claim all historic houses as our domain, leaving to the National Trust places of natural beauty.' They envisaged amendments to the Ancient Monuments Acts to give the Minister of Works the same powers over inhabited houses as he already had over ancient monuments, including the ability to accept guardianship. [12]

The National Trust meanwhile submitted 'that our custody is superior to the Ministry of Works, and as many families should be retained as possible, as it is only they who can maintain the country house atmosphere'. This was certainly true, and a legal fact, as without changing the law, the government could not acquire a house that was privately occupied.[13]

The Gowers Report appeared in June 1950. It strongly recommended that houses of outstanding importance were best preserved as private houses, occupied by the families connected with them. This should be facilitated by generous tax arrangements, in return for public access. Owners would also be able to benefit from grants or loans provided by independent statutory bodies called Historic Building Councils. There was no support for the idea of the Ministry of Works taking over houses.[14]

When the government finally responded in April 1951, however, it had decided that there was almost nothing in the report that could be accepted and an alternative policy was put forward which, while accepting that private occupation of houses was desirable, did not accept the idea that private ownership was necessary and was more inclined to encourage public ownership by the State or, preferably, by the National Trust.

Although the detailed recommendations of the Gowers Report were largely rejected, a draft Bill prepared by the Ministry in July 1951 was an ambitious and far-reaching set of proposals which sought to solve more than just the problem of country houses including that the preservation work of the Ministry of Local Government and Planning, including listing, should be transferred to the Ministry of Works so that there was one central authority for the preservation of historic houses.

By the time of the 1951 general election the Monuments and Buildings (Protection) Bill was almost ready to put before Parliament, but the victory of

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the Conservatives in the General Election brought a new Minister, David Eccles, who declared the Bill to be 'too Socialist for my liking'. Fear of losing the Bill altogether meant that the Ministry of Works did not press either its claim to a transfer of powers from the Ministry of Local Government and Planning or the extension of guardianship powers to inhabited houses.

A simplified Bill was eventually introduced which focused on the creation of Historic Buildings Councils and new grant-making powers for the Minister of Works. The Act received Royal Assent on 31 July 1953. Although it fell a long way short of the ambitions of the Gowers Committee and the intentions of the Ministry of Works, it nevertheless marked the start of a new age in heritage protection.

The Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act, 1953 gave new powers to the Minister of Works for the grant-aiding and acquisition of historic buildings. In so doing it ensured that in future there would be less reliance on taking monuments and buildings permanently into the Ministry's care as a means of preservation. The principal motivation behind the Act was the preservation of country houses, preferably in use and still occupied by their traditional owners. Legislation was needed because inhabited houses had been excluded from the provisions of the Ancient Monuments Acts relating to grant aid and to guardianship.

To provide what the Minister called "a powerful buffer" between himself and the queue of owners wanting grants, the Act created advisory councils, known as Historic Buildings Councils, for England, Scotland and Wales. The councils advised on the making of grants, on the acquisition of buildings and on finding new uses for redundant buildings. For the purposes of the new grant scheme, however, a ring-fenced budget of £250,000 a year was created.

Section 5 of the 1953 Act also gave additional powers under which the Minister could purchase historic buildings on the advice of the Historic Buildings Councils. But the money they had at their disposal was limited and, after 1959, capped at £400,000 a year. The big money was in the National Land Fund, but it had barely been used. In fact by mid-1951 it had disbursed less than £500,000 'buying' just two houses, Cotehele and Rainham Hall, Essex. The following year it made its largest grant, £207,000 for Penrhyn Castle in North Wales. Yet expenditure was so low and so slow that, in 1957 with the endowment standing at some £60m, the government took £50m back leaving just £10m in the bank.[15]

The Fund was put to its ultimate, and as it happened, its final test in 1977. That year the earl of Rosebery announced that he would be selling his high Victorian mansion, Mentmore Towers (Buckinghamshire), together with its huge collection of art and furniture. A powerful lobby pressed for Land Fund money to be released to meet the asking price of £2m. The Treasury refused, and Mentmore went to auction, the contents alone raising £6.25m. It was a scandal, and the following year an all-party Parliamentary report called for the Land Fund to be removed from Treasury control and handed to an independent body of Trustees and that its endowment should be restored to the original £50m.

In 1980 Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government passed the National Heritage Act which re-founded the Land Fund as the National Heritage Memorial Fund with the full £50m endowment, a £5m a year top-up and powers to grant endowments to both the National Trust and to independent heritage trusts. In the next few years endowments were granted to Canons Ashby (Northamptonshire), Belton House (Lincolnshire) and Calke Abbey (Derbyshire). Later it endowed independent trusts such as Burton Constable (Yorkshire). In 1985 the government awarded the Fund an additional £25m to buy Kedleston (Derbyshire).[16]

Country Houses and historic buildings supported by the National Heritage Memorial Fund

King's House, Salisbury
Grange Farm Barn, Essex
Cressing Temple, Essex
Countess of Huntingdon Free Church, Worcester
Hill House
Barlborough Old Hall
Cardiff Ship Stores
Chastleton House
Norman House, Norwich
Coldharbour Mill
Fairfax House, York
New Lanark Mills
Dale House Coalbrookdale
Canons Ashby
Castle Coole
Barlston Hall
Thirlestane Castle

Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Manchester
Fyvie Castle
Rudchester Roman Fort
Calke Abbey
Belton House
Belton Village Properties
Kedleston Hall
Weston Park
Auchinleck House
Whitchurch Silk Mill
Back-to-Backs, Bradford
Cwmdu
Plas Dinefwr (Newton House)
Studley Royal
Nostell Priory
Dulwich Picture Gallery

Burton Constable Hall
A La Ronde
Verdant Works
Erno Goldfingers' House
Lady Victoria Colliery
Buxton Crescent
Tyntesfield Estate
Dumfries House
Llwyn Celyn
Yr Ysgwrn
Wentworth Woodhouse
Gunter Mansion
Gwrych Castle
Paxton House
Hopetoun House
Broughton House
Holmwood House
Mavisbank House

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Three years later the National Heritage Act 1983 amalgamated the Ancient Monuments Board and the Historic Buildings Council to make a new body, The Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (soon to be given the trading name English Heritage), to which, the following year, the grant giving powers were be transferred. In 2015 the Commission was again re-branded as Historic England, it's grant-giving powers remaining the same.

Both These sources of funding were dwarfed in 1994 with the arrival of the National Lottery and its heritage distributor, the Heritage Fund. With a far broader remit than either Historic England or the Memorial Fund the Heritage Fund has never been a significant funder of private heritage and the Memorial Fund and Historic England grants remain the tangible legacy of the Gowers Report.

End notes

[i] The Times 12 October 1911

[2] Hansard, April 1912, vol 11 c872

[3] Simon Thurley, *Men from the Ministry, How Britain Saved its Heritage*, (Yale, 2013), pp.66-122.

[4] J. Gaze, *Figures in a Landscape. A History of the National Trust*, (National Trust, 1988), pp. 146-9; J. Jenkins and P. James, *From Acorn to Oak Tree. The Growth of the National Trust 1895-1994*, (London, 1994), pp135-8.

[5] Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, (Yale, 1997), pp.334

[6] J. Lees-Milne, *J. Prophesying Peace: Diaries 1944-1945*, (Norwich, 2003), Diary entry for 4 May 1944, p.58

[7] Letter, Sir Eric de Normann to Sir Alan Barlow, 3 October 1946, TNA file T 218/419.

[8] Memorandum from Sir Edward Bridges to Mr Trend, H.M. Treasury, 9 January 1948 on file TNA T218/419

[9] See TNA file HLG 126/16

[10] Memorandum by Sir Eric de Normann, 6 May 1948 on TNA file HLG 126/16

[11] Report of the Committee on Houses of Outstanding Historic or Architectural Interest. M. Binney 'The Future of the Country House', R. Strong, M. Binney and J Harris, eds., *The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975* (London, 1974); Peter Mandler 'Nationalising the Country House', M. Hunter, *Preserving the Past: the Rise of Heritage in Modern Britain*, (Stroud, 1996), pp.105-107

[12] File note by R. A. Barker, 8 March 1949 on TNA file HLG 126/16

[13] Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, (Yale, 1997), p.342

[14] Simon Thurley, *Men from the Ministry* (Yale, 2013), pp.192-95

[15] J. Delafons, *Politics and Preservation. A Policy History of the Built Heritage 1882-1996*, (London, 1997), pp.73-5

[16] Suzannah Cough, ed., *Treasures for the Nation. Conserving our Heritage*, (National Heritage Memorial Fund, 1988), pp.17-18; Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, (Yale, 1997).