

English Heritage: Q & A with Simon, CEO, English Heritage.

Transcript of audio taken from the interactive podcast recorded on 11 December 2006.

BlogEd: Thank you everyone for tuning into the first interactive podcast brought to you by English Heritage. The reason why we are doing this series of podcasts is to try to introduce an element of interactivity and further the debate around the issue “Your Place or Mine.” And our first interviewee is Simon who is CEO of English Heritage.

Simon, what have you been doing since the conference, any sort of interesting bits and pieces you have been up to?

Simon: I mean in a sense almost everything English Heritage does is very relevant to the message of the conference and we have been working on the ground with people who live in towns and villages and the cities up and down England, helping them to make the most of their heritage.

BlogEd: So our first question is coming from Richard Justice and Richard says, “I work with an urban regeneration project in Southampton. My question to Simon is, given the fact that England is increasingly a multi-ethnic space, don’t we need to look seriously at what constitutes the historic environment. If we simply pay lip service to the issue does it devalue English Heritage as an institution?” He goes on to say, “as I said in an earlier comment, the community I work day in and day out with think more of influential community characters as part of their heritage than any building.”

Simon: Well there are two very interesting points here and first is that, sure I think we have been busy redefining the historic environment for the last six or seven years. I think that the way we think of heritage, historic environment is fundamentally different, it is a much broader thing, it is a much wider thing, it is a much more conclusive thing than perhaps it has ever been before.

But I think the second part of your question Richard is very interesting because of course heritage does not necessarily mean buildings, it doesn’t necessarily mean landscapes, it doesn’t necessarily mean place, heritage is just what has been passed down to us from our ancestors. And so you are quite right, heritage actually embraces people, it embraces ways of behaving, it embraces tradition, it embraces peoples food, music and a very very wide range of things, many of which very much fall outside the remit of what English Heritage itself does.

- BlogEd:** And our next question has come in from Judy Ling Wong, OBE, and Judy is the Director of the Black Environment Network. She says, “Dear Simon, it is great that English Heritage will be researching and making visible the hidden history of properties identified to be associated with slavery. Will English Heritage consider extending this to identifying and revealing hidden, shared, multicultural histories related to its properties as a whole? The effort would be a marvellous contribution to social cohesion.”
- Simon:** One of the things that English Heritage does and we are very proud of is look after about 400 sites up and down the country and we are always looking into the history of these buildings to try and find something that is relevant, that is interesting and that will grab people’s attention. Usually when anniversaries come up we have a special delve into the archives to see what stories actually relate to our buildings that also relate to the anniversary. And so that’s why we have spent a special amount of time over the last six months looking quite closely at a number of our sites seeing whether there are any links to the slave trade and of course very interestingly we found quite a few.
- BlogEd:** Our next comment, this one has come through on the telephone comments line. This is Pippa Bailey who calls herself an Independent Consultant. Let’s hear from Pippa.
- Pipper Bailey:** My question to Simon is, Maria Adebawale was very eloquent about the need for people to share or people in power to share the power in order for diversity to be more reflective in society, and I am just wondering, how Simon thinks that English Heritage could do more to share the power that they have.
- Simon:** I think it is very difficult if you are a big government body publicly funded, 2000 staff, a £170 million to appear anything other than rather a sort of bureaucratic beast that in some ways is trying to hold power and control to itself. We bend over backwards to try and make sure that everything we do does take into account the view of ordinary people and we are really really pleased that the government is just about to initiate a reform that will change the whole way that the listing works which will allow us to involve the points of view of people who traditionally have been seen if you like to be sort of powerless in the system of protecting our heritage to have a say, and we really welcome that.
- BlogEd:** Our next question comes from Julie Lewis who is a teacher in West Midlands. And she says, “Simon, I am in agreement that Richard’s statement about looking seriously about what constitutes the historic environment. Working with young people as I do there is sometimes a clash with what I am obliged to teach them and what they consider their own histories. Being young maybe means our perceptions of time are a lot more immediate than they are when we mature. With this in mind should heritage

be positively promoted as including very recent history as well? If this were to happen I think English Heritage has a duty to produce high-quality teaching materials and make them readily available to schools.”

Simon: Well of course history covers everything from the beginning of time right up to the present but that one of things that I believe is really important is that people are able to make sense of the place where they live, make sense of the places where they go to school, where they go on holiday, and that does mean actually understanding the fabric of the towns and the cities they live in and the countryside which they visit.

And I think to do that you need a certain amount of historical depth, time depth and that means that I think it is important ancient pre-history, to study the Romans, to study the Middle Ages, to study the 18th and 19th century and of course it is important to study to more recent history because without that the bit of London I happen to be sitting in at the moment surrounded by tower blocks, you won't understand that. But I do think it isn't just adequate to concentrate on the very very near present, people do need time depth if they are going to really understand the place that they live in.

BlogEd: And our next one comes from Mick Harrington, unfortunately Mick hasn't said where he is from. But he says, “Simon, why doesn't English Heritage do more to acknowledge the history and language of gypsies or in travellers and their contribution to England as we know it today as they always seem to be forgotten or treated as not part of our heritage.”

Simon: Well I am not sure that this question really is one for me. English Heritage as an organisation has a duty to look after monuments, a duty to look after places, places where things have been built, places where people have made changes. And the very essence of being a gypsy or a traveller is that you don't have buildings and you don't have landscapes. And so it is a little bit difficult for us in our role as guardians of the sort of physical build heritage to do much in this area. But I am absolutely certain that the Heritage Lottery Fund, our sister organisation is working in this area.

BlogEd: And I think we have got another audio comment. This time Kati Preston who is a multi-cultural storyteller.

Kati Preston: Oh good morning, my name is Katie Preston and I am a multi-cultural storyteller living and working in Cambridge. My question for Simon is that, the custodians of some of our heritage buildings tend to hold their entrustment very remote from their surrounding communities and the make up of those communities has increasingly widened so that they are made up of people from many areas and continents of our planet. And those communities

along with people from the local indigenous communities tend to have a very different view of the heritage as it is presented to them currently. How can we go about widening the perceptions of the guardians of our collective heritage so that they perceive and appreciate the immeasurable value of drawing in all communities? Thanks very much indeed.

Simon: Well Katie that is a really interesting question, it is a really important one too because of course great monuments which sometimes may be of international world significance also very very much belong to the communities who live around them. And there has to be a very very very careful consideration of the various weights that you put to interpretation on a particular site. And I think those weights must include the views of local people as well as the views of the wider community from across the world who might appreciate ?.

So if you take for example a castle that English Heritage looks after in Kenilworth which is not so far from Coventry, there are a couple of big issues for us here. First of all, that castle very much belongs to the local community, it is a core part of their history, everybody looks at it everyday. But it is also a building of international importance that has importance to people who might come from abroad. And so somehow we have to balance the interests of the local people with people from elsewhere. But in that the most important point is, is that you are quite right, in the past one half of that balance, that is the local communities have sometimes been lost and what we need to try and do is make sure that their views are taken into account.

BlogEd: And our next question comes from Brian Hilton, who represents the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disable People. Brian says, "like many other civil rights campaigns, the disabled people's movements often finds its history and culture either ignored or denied when the past is explored. What lessons do you think disabled people can draw from other marginalised groups to ensure that its heritage is not lost forever?"

Simon: Well Brian thank you very much for your question. I think that is an extremely interesting one. I think you are quite right that disabled people's view of the historic environment is marginalised and I think that although great strides have been made over the last few years there is still quite a long way to go and without any doubt other marginalised groups have in some ways done better and gone further. And I think that there are lessons to be learned both from as it were sort of formally open sites to the public and how they are managed and how they are presented but also much more importantly how the historic environment more generally is perceived by people.

BlogEd: And our next question from Nick Poole. Nick says, “greater engagement means bringing or at least thinking differently about some of our existing beliefs about authority and validity. Do you think there is scope to make the process of interpretation more constructive, open and democratic without fundamentally undermining the role of custodian and curator?”

Simon: Nick thank you very much for that question. I think that’s an extremely interesting and actually very helpful one. There is of course an extremely important role that the custodians, the curators, the historians, the experts have to play. And their role is a fundamentally different role to the role that is played by people who haven’t spent their lives studying various parts of the heritage or the historic environment. What they need to do is they need to be supportive, they need to provide a framework, they need to provide a sense of direction, they need to help refine the views of people when they start to consider their heritage and their history and their surroundings. And in a sense over the next few years that dynamic between the role of the custodian curator, the historian and the role of the public is going to be one of the key areas and I think finding a happy balance between the two is going to be fundamental.

BlogEd: And our final question, this time from John Preston who is Education Secretary at the Institute of Historic Building Conversation. John goes on to say, “Simon, what single action would you take to encourage young people from different cultures and backgrounds to make careers in professional conversation of their shared heritage?”

Simon: John, that is another interesting one actually. I am tempted to say money, I am tempted to say we ought to pay them more money because one of the things about working in the conservation world is that it isn’t particularly well paid, a lot more being in one of the new industries, and a lot more probably working for a mobile phone company. So why should people if it is not a very well-paid area come and work for Heritage. Well the answer to me is actually quite a straightforward one. Heritage is so important to the quality of people’s lives and to the quality of the places in which people live that working in heritage, working in conservation should be as much as a calling or a vocation as it might be working in the Probation Service or working for Social Services.

BlogEd: I just want to say thank you for Simon for joining us here today, I hope everyone out there appreciated it.

One more point to the community, we just want to make sure, if you can would you mind subscribing to the updates. It is very simply in the right-hand side of the blog you will see a text box and just above it says, “For media updates, please enter your e-mail address here.” What that means is that each time we update the

blog with some new content you will automatically get a copy of whatever is going up.

And there is also a second point as well. If you would like us to bring in somebody in specific, just send us an e-mail to yourplace@english-heritage.org.uk, the address will be in the main blog post and we will see if we can get them fixed. And lastly thank you very much for joining us.