

Restoration tragedy

The heritage industry is now so powerful that it is impossible to criticise, let alone demolish, old buildings. Patrick Wright on a morbid nostalgia

Patrick Wright
The Guardian, Saturday 13 September 2003



Locked in the past?: Kinloch

Castle, one of the finalists of Restoration

The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and Clarifications column, Saturday September 13 2003

In the article below, we suggest that Barbara Cartland was Princess Diana's grandmother. We should have said that Raine (Spencer), Cartland's daughter, was "now remembered as the stepmother of Princess Diana".

Only a few years ago, when Jane Root was establishing her directorship of BBC2, it seemed unlikely that programmes concerned with the conservation of historic buildings would feature largely on her channel.

Early in her tenure, she decided not to renew the Travels with Pevsner series; as youth-orientated and "lifestyle" programmes burgeoned, ancient buildings seemed to have precious little going for them. They are, after all, old, inert and ungendered. Their struggles against the passage of time are often depressing and they tend to disintegrate slowly, without the drama with which television likes to constitute "an event".

But everything seems to have changed when Endemol UK Productions came up with the proposal for Restoration. Its idea was to select a cast of the nation's most evocative and threatened old ruins, elicit their strange life stories, and then force them to play Who Wants to be a Millionaire?

There can be no doubt that Restoration has been a major success. The ratings show well over three million people watching most episodes. People have been phoning in their votes by the thousand. The programme website has been filled with animated debate, and the Restoration fund has pulled in fortunes. Destined to be restored with money from the BBC's hugely publicised appeal, the winning buildings can surely look forward to becoming the stars of a new kind of makeover show.

The series has also provided further indication that television doesn't merely grant space to its chosen themes, but remakes them in its own image. Television history favours battles, kings and queens, military hardware and the secrets of the well-born laundry basket. Television archaeology prefers the "treasure-hunting" imagination of amateur metal detectorists to the laborious methodologies of the professionals.

And so it is with Restoration, which concentrates on the historical building as a single endangered structure, and sees conservation as a wholly good cause: a secular version of church-going, which only a satanic monster would question.

Not all critics have been disarmed. Stephen Bayley has stepped up, as he has done many times over the past 20 years, to declare that we have a "national psychosis about old buildings", and to insist that it would be far healthier to tear down these old structures and start again. But for the BBC, the idea that conservation or "heritage" might raise critical questions was seen off in the early weeks.

The expulsion took place on Radio 4's Straw Poll programme on August 23. The motion that "The heritage industry distorts British history" was proposed by Robert Hewison and Terry Deary, author of the Horrible Histories series, and opposed by the Guardian's heritage correspondent, Maev Kennedy, and Jeffrey Richards, a cultural historian from Lancaster University. The motion was defeated by four to one.

Those who had presumed to raise critical questions about the heritage industry were dismissed, both in the programme and the Talkback sequel, as trendy lefties who held ordinary people in contempt and hated "fun". To the extent that it was represented here, the British public seemed squarely behind the socialist historian Raphael Samuel, who, not so long ago, conducted a post-Stalinist "unmasking" of those he derided as "heritage-baiters" and convicted them of being metropolitan literary snobs.

As one who has been fingered by these accusers, I will admit that offences have occurred. There has been too much easy sneering at theme parks, and too many tendentious attempts to blame museums for economic decline. Yet it would be quite wrong to assume that the critical perspective has been confined to contemptuous and disconnected onlookers.

It is increasingly assumed that the phrase "the heritage industry" was coined by Robert Hewison, who used it as the title of a polemic in 1987. This was claimed by the presenter Nick Clarke in his introduction to the Straw Poll debate. It is also asserted as a matter of fact by the historian Richard Weight in his recent book about postwar Britain, Patriots.

In fact, the phrase "the heritage industry" was launched by the anarchist writer and campaigner Colin Ward. He used it in 1985, in a review of my book, *On Living in an Old Country*. By that time the word "heritage" was already widely used in connection with buildings and historical landscapes, but the "industry" with which Ward coupled it had first come into view in the early 1970s, a time when the destructive nature of much postwar urban planning had become plain to see.

Ward was then working as education officer at the Town and Country Planning Association. Aware of the poverty of public understanding of architecture and design, he co-founded the Council for Urban Studies Centres, whose aim was to teach children about the urban environment through "streetwork".

Schools were encouraged to take part in the development of "town trails", urban versions of nature trails that promised learning in "areas where the architectural heritage is less well known, or more badly damaged, and the contemporary environment is poor". The initiative was supported by the Civic Trust, an organisation that campaigned to protect and improve the urban environment - but that did not want to be seen as wholly "preservationist" or backward-looking in its approach.

Michael Middleton was director of the Civic Trust at that time. He says that the word "heritage" (to his mind "a bloody nuisance") first arrived on his agenda in 1972, when the Council of Europe announced that 1975 should be celebrated as European Architectural Heritage Year. The Civic Trust was appointed to create and administer a series of events to mark the year in Britain; the first heritage centres were set up in Faversham, York and Chester as a result. Middleton, however, disapproved of the word "heritage", because it threatened to impose its own distorting shape on the trust's activities.

One person who did happily adopt the word was the daughter of Barbara Cartland, a formidable lady who, on marrying Earl Spencer, became known as Raine, Countess of Dartmouth. Now remembered as the mother of Princess Diana, in the 1970s she was on the board of the British Tourist Authority, and chair of the UK executive committee of European Architectural Heritage Year.

Dartmouth felt that Ward's urban studies initiative should also be subsumed under the rubric of "heritage"; the Urban Studies people resisted, arguing that the past-orientated and spectacular perspective implied by this word was exactly what they were trying to get away from. It was with this history in mind that Ward started talking about "the heritage industry".

His criticism was not founded on literary snobbery, metropolitan arrogance or high-table contempt for amateur appreciations of history. It was provoked by direct experience of the extent to which a state-imposed process of relabelling could undermine the activities it claimed to advance.

This kind of critical reflection has long been an essential part of the conservation movement itself. When William Morris founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877, he did so in order to oppose "Restoration" of the whimsical and ignorant kind that tried to "scrape" historical buildings back into a single period style.

Different arguments attended the launch of the Georgian Group, founded in the late 1930s by the radical journalist and "propaganda" novelist Douglas Goldring. He had been concerned with the preservation of Georgian architecture since 1924, when he witnessed the destruction of John Nash's Regent Street in London. But no sooner had he established his committee than he found he had accidentally set up "a sort of observation post" among a ruling class with which 99% of the population was lucky enough to have no contact at all.

From this position, he observed the snobbery and hauteur of people who loathed their fellow citizens, supported appeasement of Hitler and thought General Franco was just what the modern world needed. For these people, the cause of Georgian architecture was just another version of their own self-interest, and Goldring was an upstart imposter motivated by an offensively democratic idea of the public interest.

"No one," as Goldring wrote, "who has not felt its impact, can have the least idea of the social discomforts, if one strays into exalted circles, of being regarded as a 'Red'." Goldring, who was actually a follower of Dickens rather than Lenin, did not last long in that company, but his account of the experience suggests that it has long been advisable to maintain a critical eye when ideas of the national heritage are being promoted.

In my view, this sort of vigilance remains necessary in our time. "Heritage" can produce grossly oversimplified versions of British history, just as it can also lead to bad "camouflaged" architecture and, when it becomes a euphemism for pseudo-Victorian lampposts and bollards, diminish the historical atmospheres it proposes to enhance. Yet it is culpably absurd to suggest, as some commentators have done, that conservation is itself the problem.

The blanket argument that museums and art galleries are repositories of backwardness and "decline" should also be abandoned. It was never persuasive in economic terms, and it has become increasingly evident in recent years that the most imaginative of these agencies are actually engaged in questioning inherited assumptions about history and encouraging people to review the national past from the point of view of other traditions and perspectives.

This was certainly the attraction of Artangel's recent intervention at Imber, on Salisbury Plain. Here was an obscure village that had been taken over and evacuated by the War Department in 1943, and then retained afterwards. Mourned in Wiltshire as a site of broken promises and burning injustice, Imber became a place of national attention during the wider protests of the 1960s. Artangel did not set out to rekindle that old vision of Imber which, once detached from its local circumstance, might easily have engaged a morbid nostalgia for an organic, monocultural and supposedly unmodernised rural England. Instead it went to Georgia, a resurgent nation that has also had its trouble with the encroaching state - in this case the USSR.

Artangel commissioned a work from the composer Giya Kancheli, and also flew in the Rustavi choir, known for re-creating "the era of heroic song". Having looked around the ruins of Imber, some of these dagger-wearing male singers joked that they couldn't quite

see what all the fuss was about. After all, half of Georgia looked like that - mauled by the Soviet military or half-built thanks to ongoing economic crisis.

As should become apparent when Artangel's film of this event eventually arrives on BBC4 next year, this was "heritage" not as a mournful business of shoring up ruins or trying to perpetuate a closed idea of national identity, but as a playful meeting of cultures that put that long-standing English grievance into a larger perspective and perhaps also helped lay any lingering morbidity to rest. There is no reason why BBC2's Restoration prize winner should not be approached in a similar spirit.