

Clerk to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee  
7 Millbank  
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17<sup>th</sup> January 2006

Dear Clerk

Response from The National Council on Archives (NCA) to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee New Inquiry: Protecting, preserving and making accessible our nation's heritage

The National Council on Archives (NCA) was established in 1988 to bring together the major bodies and organisations, including service providers, users, depositors and policy makers, across the UK concerned with archives and their use. It aims to develop consensus on matters of mutual concern and provide an authoritative common voice for the archival community.

The NCA welcomes the opportunity to give our views to the Committee.

**SUMMARY**

The Committee should be aware that built heritage, historic buildings and structures, do not constitute the entire heritage sector and that both built and 'moveable' heritage comprise a whole. Moveable heritage, papers, books, objects, provide us with the context surrounding the built environment, as well as a much wider perspective on the development of our culture and the history of ideas.

There are many complementary aspects between the built historic environment and the moveable heritage sector, especially the archival documentary evidence that enables the built environment to be interpreted, preserved and restored in a manner that is appropriate and historically accurate.

There are sections of society for whom the built heritage sector is much less accessible than the moveable heritage sector and these tend to be those communities most at risk of exclusion.

The existing provision of responsibility and funding for all heritage sectors is leaving large areas of our heritage at critical risk of decay and loss. Additionally, it cannot cope with the development necessary to release the potential that these treasures hold for inter-domain capacity building, community cohesion and commercial exploitation for the organisations that safeguard them (which would offset their reliance on the public purse in the long term).

There appears to be a lack of cohesion between some government departments responsible for heritage, particularly evidenced by the fragmented nature of their policy and operations.

In some sectors, there is a critical shortage of conservators with the necessary skills to preserve our heritage for generations to come.

### 1. What the Department for Culture, Media and Sport should identify as priorities in the forthcoming Heritage White Paper

Although the remit of the present inquiry appears to focus on the built environment (historic buildings, museums, galleries, etc.), it is worth reiterating that these buildings do not constitute the entire heritage left to us. Indeed, to a growing section of UK society, many of the magnificent Georgian and Victorian civic and private buildings embody a legacy built on the proceeds of practices now rightly despised, such as colonisation, slavery and other enforced labour.

The so-called 'moveable' heritage sector, papers, books, objects and their repositories, can offer a much more accessible way to understand our history for many people. Archives, unlike libraries, hold original documents; the authentic voice of the past speaking directly to people of today without any intermediaries or interpreters. Archives, unlike museums, expect visitors to access these original documents directly, touching them and connecting with the past in a way that may relate specifically to that person, through records of their own family, for instance.

The documentary evidence held in archives is often essential to the appropriate conservation and restoration of built heritage. It is the view of the National Council on Archives that archival evidence is underused in the planning system but is a vast resource offering accurate historic information and context often not available elsewhere. This is an aspect of archives that is being constantly researched and made available to planning officers and conservators (*see Journal of the Society of Archivists*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2004 "A Cross-disciplinary Approach to the Use of Archives as Evidence of Past Indoor Environments in Historic Buildings", May Cassar and Joel Taylor, UCL Centre for Sustainable Heritage).

The National Council on Archives believes that the DCMS should identify as priorities in the forthcoming White Paper those areas of our heritage, built and moveable that are in most danger of being lost to present and future generations, which at the same time have the most potential for being of direct relevance to those generations. The DCMS, in preparing these priorities should recognise the contribution which all aspects of heritage can make, and propose a fair distribution of resources to support them.

### 2. The remit and effectiveness of DCMS, English Heritage and other relevant organisations in representing heritage interests inside and outside Government

There are significant distinctive areas of the public heritage sector that 'fall between stools' and have no organisation or department responsible for them. This leads to a lack of strategic cohesion, a lack of core funding and a consequent waste of public money in trying to preserve the heritage with recurrent project funding which does not adequately address the inherent accessibility and conservation problems.

There are other areas where government heritage bodies seem fragmented in their policy and operations. In particular, the NCA notices that this Inquiry, and this question itself, make no reference to the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) which is indicative of a lack of cohesion between the two bodies.

### 3. The balance between heritage and development needs in planning policy

The NCA believes that there is a vast potential for using historic buildings and documentary evidence to inform planning policy to make built developments more accessible and sustainable. There are good examples of the use of existing structures to meet today's needs in a historically informed and creative way.

However, as always, the integration of good planning policy and heritage requires resources, not only in the shape of money, but also in research, expertise and talent. The NCA is confident that not funding such planning policy is a false economy, leading to developments that fail their communities and lose large amounts of public money rather than thriving and becoming commercial and community assets.

#### 4. Access to heritage and the position of heritage as a cultural asset in the community

The NCA firmly believes that access to heritage is being limited because of funding, and that the entire heritage sector is not fulfilling its vast potential as a cultural asset of all communities because of this. For instance, a survey carried out in the Northwest of England in 2003 found that 29% of archival holdings are un-catalogued. It would take one professional archivist an estimated 299 years to make this material fully accessible. As long as backlogs like this exist these collections will remain inaccessible to the public – a great waste of archives’ huge untapped potential.

There is still no provision for public on-line access to the statutory list of historic buildings, preventing key aspects of engagement with the historic environment. There is a need for more funding to digitise historic environment records for England (which lags behind Scotland and Wales - *see* <http://www.rcahms.gov.uk>). We are sure that English Heritage would find this valuable.

English Heritage is doing a good job in working with the other home nations but its task is far more daunting. This is a massive collection, responsibility for which is spread across a variety of funding sectors - TNA holds key records, as does English Heritage's regions and the NMR, plus local authorities, universities etc. (*See* HEIRNET <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/HEIRNET/about.html> and HEIRPORT <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/heirport>).

For the general public with an interest in history, local historians as well as professionals, this is a vast underexploited resource, with legal and evidential as well as cultural and educational value. Finding appropriate funding to allow it to be exploited is a key challenge for the sector.

#### 5. Funding, with particular reference to the adequacy of the budget for English Heritage and for museums and galleries, the impact of the London 2012 Olympics on Lottery funding for heritage projects, and forthcoming decisions on the sharing of funds from Lottery sources between good causes

Through English Heritage, DCMS sponsors one of the biggest public archives outside of The National Archives. Yet, despite this, public awareness of their right to access this is extremely limited, and this is primarily because of the lack of funding to develop this asset.

It is the view of the NCA that many historic collections are at present housed in historic buildings which do not adequately provide conservation level accommodation for these collections, thus placing them in danger. At the same time, those historic buildings require a better level of maintenance than organisations that care for moveable heritage collections can often afford, as their core funding has to be spent on collection care.

It seems obvious to the NCA that these needs should be tackled holistically. There are examples of collections housed in the buildings for which they were collected and designed, e.g. The British Museum or The Bowes Museum. But there are many other examples where collections are housed in buildings that just happen also to be historic for other reasons, and these synergies should be encouraged, as they provide a home for collections in appropriate surroundings and a use for valuable but otherwise unused buildings.

While the NCA fully recognises the need to make a success of the London Olympics, we would be concerned if the necessary funding were found at the expense of other parts of the heritage sector which are already under-funded.

6. What the roles and responsibilities should be for English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund, local authorities, museums and galleries, charitable and other non-Governmental organisations in maintaining the nation's heritage

The NCA recognises the vital role HLF has played in funding major improvements in archive services, and hope that they will be able to continue fulfilling this role. We see the need for MLA to play an enhanced role in representing the views of the sector to government, where the concerns of the sector are not always recognised. In many ways, the NCA views the existing structure of roles and responsibilities to be adequate. However, there are some areas where the present coverage is significantly failing.

The failure of The Archives Task Force (2004) to secure any funding at all was viewed by the archives sector as evidence of government's disinterest and lack of appreciation of their contribution. This should be seen in the context of the awards, additional to core funding, of £100m Renaissance in the Regions programme for museums and £13m to the Framework for the Future programme for libraries to realise these domains' vast potential as community cultural assets.

Despite the duty to preserve the nation's moving image heritage being given to The British Library by law, the responsibility for UK film archives is presently lodged with the British Film Institute via UK Film Council whose main preoccupation is, quite rightly, the generation of new films. Consequently, they do not grant the BFI any funding for film archives. The film archives themselves are each funded differently, struggling to obtain support from local councils, interested higher education institutions and the Lottery funders to supplement the minimal funding they receive through the regional screen agencies to keep their activities going. Because of this lack of joined up thinking, these film archives are now facing critical funding gaps and possible closure within the next 12 months.

7. Whether there is an adequate supply of professionals with conservation skills; the priority placed by planning authorities on conservation; and means of making conservation expertise more accessible to planning officers, councillors and the general public

In some areas, there is a critical shortage of professionals with conservation skills. In film archives, for instance, which preserve film footage that often contains the only pictorial evidence of some historic areas and buildings and how they were used, there is a significant lack of conservators with the necessary skills to preserve the various formats in which the material has survived. In order to make this material more widely accessible, all film archives now have a systematic programme of digitising their material, but the original format must be made stable before this process can happen. Indeed, these digitisation and accessibility programmes themselves are in danger of being halted altogether because of the lack of core funding the film archives receive. This has not been adequately addressed because of the labyrinthine structure of responsibility for the film archives (*see above*).

Yours faithfully,  
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This submission has been prepared specifically for consideration by the Committee.