

“The cult of the country house exemplifies the dangers of the whole heritage phenomenon which, in focussing attention on the ‘surface’ appearances of the past, works against ‘depth’ of historical understanding.”¹

Discuss this statement with reference to at least two ‘country houses’ in Britain.

The country house has been at the heart of English National Heritage since the Second World War and can be seen to embody both sides of the debates which rage in the Heritage Industry. The idea of visiting a country house as a leisure pursuit is not a recent concept, indeed it was common for “members of ‘polite society’” to visit them on an informal basis in the eighteenth century, and the birth of today’s “mass visiting” was during the nineteenth century as the railways developed (Barker, 1999:201).

Although the National Trust was founded in 1895, its primary objective was protecting the nation’s coastline and then its countryside against the “impact of uncontrolled development and industrialisation”; the protection of the nation’s buildings was third on its list of aims (National Trust). Hunter describes the “well-intentioned but essentially toothless measures” (2003:8) concerned with the protection of national monuments implemented by the government in the 1930s, but Walsh suggests that “World War II served as a catalyst not just in political economy, but also for many people’s attitude to the past, or rather the historic environment and what it represented in terms of the nation’s ‘heritage’.” (1992:72). Economically and politically, public money was made available for the first time to preserve places of national interest and the National Land Fund was established in 1947 (Barker, 1999:202). Regarding the change of people’s attitudes Marwick writes that during the “catastrophe of war there [was] a turning of minds towards the precious elements of civilisation” (2003:87).

From the early 1980s the English country house has featured prominently in costume dramas and films from *Brideshead Revisited* set at Castle Howard in 1981 to *Servants* filmed at Dyrham Park in 2003. Since the founding of SAVE Britain’s Heritage in 1975 they, and the National Trust, have been

¹ Emma Barker, ‘Heritage and the Country House’ in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, Yale University Press, page 206.

responsible for the increased awareness of many properties by the public, and saving many significant buildings for the nation.

The increase in interest in the country house must be seen to be responsible in some part for the heritage phenomenon that has emerged over the past twenty years: National Trust membership has risen dramatically with over 3.3 million members as of November 2003, and a vast number of museums and tourist sites have been opened or redeveloped in the UK. More recently in 2002 the hugely successful National Trust campaign raising £1.5m in eight weeks to save Tyntesfield House “for the nation” (BBC News 2002), and the 2003 BBC television programme *Restoration* which not only served to fund the restoration of one historic site but also raised public awareness of the plight of many historic monuments throughout the UK today.

The question of what constitutes heritage is an important one; Hunter warns that there is a “great danger of ‘heritage’ getting the wrong kind of associations and alienating some of the people whom it could interest most”. (2003:9) As ‘heritage’ is defined by an Act of Parliament which determines *who* can “decide what a [...] historic building is, and what can be done with it” the danger of preserving a “past of a favoured fragment of society” (Walsh 1992:79) is clear. Walsh also alludes to Hewison’s accusation of heritage as perpetuating an elitist class hierarchy, and feels that this should be referred to as “State heritage” and that it is “clearly a part of the wider hegemonic struggle on the part of the traditional Conservatives to maintain their position in British society” (*ibid* 75ff).

The *Restoration* programme, but more importantly the Tyntesfield campaign, suggests that this accusation is no longer valid today. Indeed, SAVE’s Tyntesfield campaign brochure states that saving the property “must not mean putting the house under wraps while expert conservators carefully pickle it” (2002:1). The fact that so much money was raised so quickly from the general public provides a more democratic definition to ‘heritage’ countering Walsh’s concerns. The National Trust’s programme of restoration at Tyntesfield continues the idea of providing something for everyone as it involves keeping

the house open during the restoration work and using it as a chance “to create opportunities and nurture skills for as many people as possible” (NT 2003:1) while also allowing people to visit the house as tourists. In many other properties the Trust has opened up more below stairs rooms to offer a fuller picture of life in great houses, although the tidiness and order of these rooms could be seen to provide a highly sanitised interpretation of history. The questions of how history and heritage are presented, “what kind of past we have chosen to preserve” (Hewison, 1999:161), and what people are told they are seeing in these situations all need to be addressed carefully by the heritage industry.

Hewison’s oft-cited argument that heritage provides a “backward-looking escapism for a country unable to come to terms with its own economic decline” (Barker 1999:205) must be seen to be true in parts. As leisure pursuits, such as literature, theatre, and cinema, all provide a form of escapism how can the tourist industry not be a form of escapism? The ‘backward-looking’ description seems dated today in an age where public money is not only spent on preserving the past but also is heavily invested in future technologies; it should also be noted that all countries, not just Britain (as Hewison refers to), rely on their heritage to provide their national identity. The phrase ‘economic decline’ is questionable, as it could be argued that, on a national scale, Britain has not been through a period which could be described as such since the second world war.

Presenting a prescribed history, and to some extent providing any form of escapism, can both lead to claims of obscuring the realities of the past, or providing the tourist with a superficial nostalgia. Walsh describes this form of nostalgia harshly as “typical of much heritage, an attempt to preserve an image, to promote a timelessness in a place which never really existed for anyone” (1992:88). The idea that heritage is trying to recreate something which only exists in people’s imagination is interesting as it brings the validity of great swathes of the heritage industry into question.

Tourist attractions which claim to bring the past to life such as The Oxford Story whose web site describes the visitors’ experience as a “twenty-five minute indoor ‘dark’ ride” on which they will “travel

through 900 years of University history, complete with sights, sounds and even smells” (Oxford Story, 2004) should not be considered comparable to the more academic approach favoured by institutions such as the National Trust. Although as Barker notes, the Trust has been accused of standardisation with “identical shops, signs, tea-rooms”, similar decorations and landscaping providing a comparison with branch offices of a national business (1999:206).

It is this type of commodification of heritage that Barker’s worry about focusing attention on the ‘surface’ rather than the ‘history’ really applies. Walsh also discusses the overriding preoccupation with the shallowness of heritage, seeing it as being “that which only seems to be ‘something’, an image, an historical surface, rather than a building or object which possesses a history” (1992:80). Although every building has a history, and surely that is one of the principal reasons for it to be considered worthy of gaining any form of heritage status, it is again a question of what the tourist site is showing and telling the visitor.

The Tyntesfield issue is an interesting one with regard to what is provided for the visitor. At present the National Trust owns a property which does not have any of the ‘standard’ trust facilities (although temporary ones are planned to come into action in 2005 with permanent ones being made available in 2008) and paying visitors must utilise a park and ride service from a local supermarket to access the property. Regardless of this there have still been 28,000 paying visitors to the house between autumn 2002 and the end of 2003 (National Trust 2004a:1).

The process of making this property available to the public is experimental as far as the Trust is concerned. Usually a newly acquired property is closed for approximately five years to bring it up to the standard of other Trust properties, but Tyntesfield was opened to the public within weeks of the purchase. The purpose of this is to provide a different experience for the visitor where they can see what is involved in the conservation process as it is really happening. Looking at the house as a whole, its principal attraction to visitors is the depth of the history, rather than just the surface of a country house, which is

being made accessible to them. Sadly there appears to be no guarantee that when the conservation process is complete and standard facilities have been made available, the ethos of the property will not change to make it a more superficial experience.

Barker provides evidence of the Trust's earlier attitude towards retaining a newly acquired property intact through Calke Abbey. This house was transferred to the Trust's ownership in 1985 with its contents all in place; it was described by the press as a 'time capsule' in the same way that Tyntesfield has been. Although the original intention was given as leaving the place untouched, the Trust has been blamed for destroying the 'magical atmosphere' of the place by "tidying up the clutter" (1999:215ff). Having left the house as an example of the "country house in decline in the twentieth century" (NT, 2004b:1) does illustrate a movement towards 'archaeological' presentation in which buildings are conserved as they were found.

This method of conservation is very different to the aesthetic approach practised by the Trust in the 1960s and 1970s. A clear example of this can be seen in the Staircase Hall at Sudbury Hall where John Fowler took a decorator's, rather than an historian's, approach to the colour scheme: he chose a "strong yellow" for the walls to "contrast with the staircase" (Barker, 1999:213). The Trust was again censured, this time by the former owner, for changing the character of the house "to create an interior which they think, regardless of history, is aesthetically satisfying" (quoted in Jenkins & James 1994:272).

The question of aesthetics and history is explored in the Dining Room at Kedleston Hall which the Trust decided to return to the original and historical accurate appearance of 1760 disregarding alterations made as late as the 1970s while the house was still in private ownership. Unsurprisingly the Trust was again subject to animadversion by the former owner who "accused the Trust of high-handedly obliterating its identity as a family home" (Barker 1999:219). In this instance although the Trust had acted with historical accuracy it had chosen to promote the aesthetic above the reality of a country house as a way of life. This

is redolent of Walsh's comments of heritage only being concerned with "an historical surface" rather than the history which a building possesses (1992:80).

The people with responsibility for country houses with public access are in a difficult position. They are responsible for one of the corner stones of English National Heritage and every decision will be scrutinised by both their supporters and detractors and criticism will often be rife. Recently the National Trust appears to be moving away from some of its more traditional roots by changing the way in which it operates although such changes will take time to filter through the organisation, and the more traditional concern of presenting the surface of heritage will still be apparent. To some degree Tyntesfield has forced their hand, but, at present at least, this one property is certainly offering more historical depth than 'surface' to interested parties which will hopefully bode well for their future work.

Fashions change rapidly and in an industry where visitor numbers are critical tourist sites will have to adapt to meet the demands of their visitors. If handled poorly this could result in more artificial experiences, such as The Oxford Story, but there should be no reason why each venue cannot promote its individual strengths in its own way. Acknowledging that each monument has something different to offer is important, and Walsh warns against presenting history "via of uniform set of media which emphasises the spectacle rather than any depth of historical analysis" (1992:145).

The industry's decision makers have an opportunity to promote deeper historical understanding of their charges, and recent events have shown there is an increasing interest in heritage. It can only be hoped that they will respond positively to this interest and avoid the over commodification of the country house.

(2092 words)

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