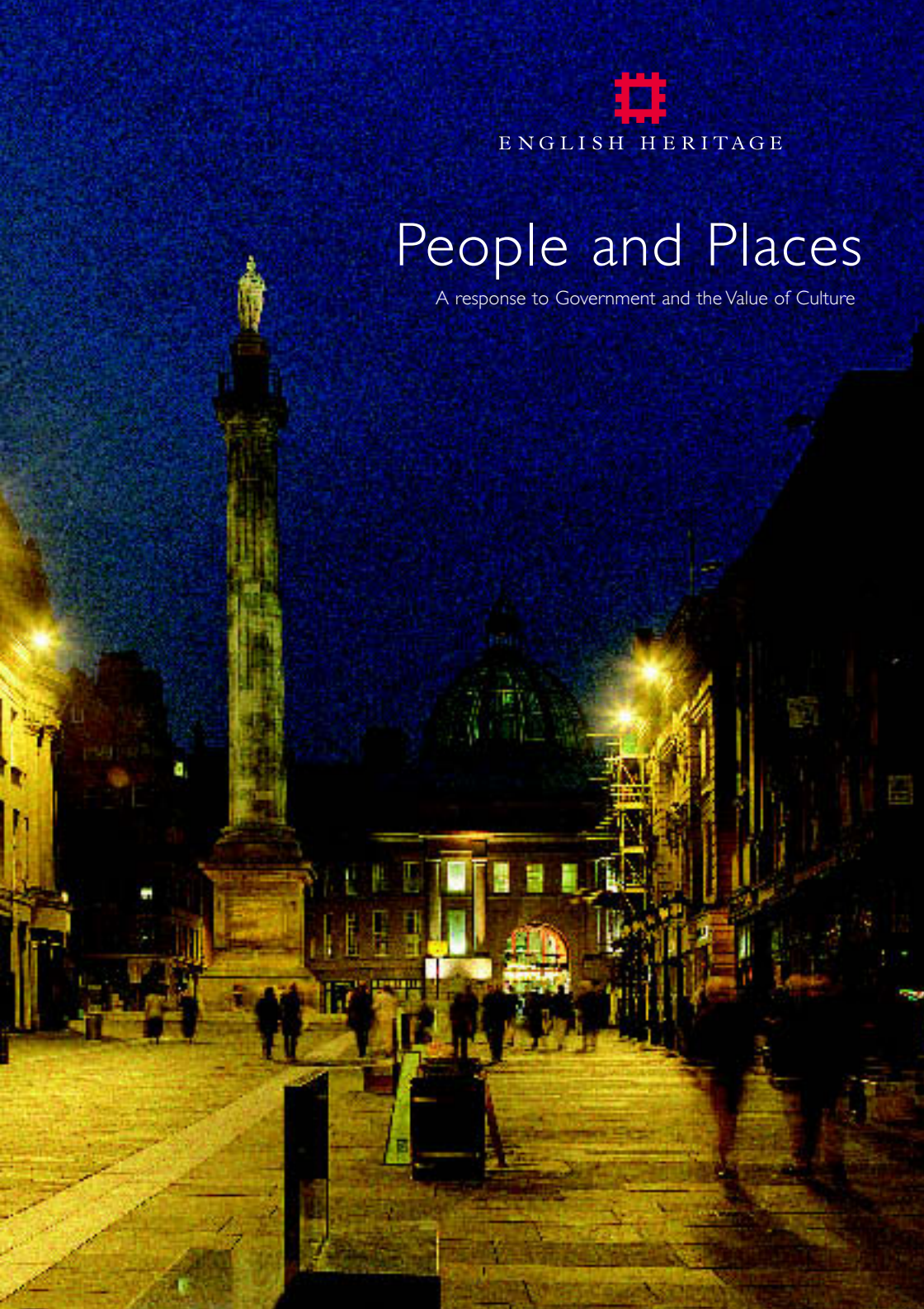




ENGLISH HERITAGE

# People and Places

A response to Government and the Value of Culture



In May 2004 the Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, published *Government and the Value of Culture*, a personal view on the meaning and value of culture in people's lives.

*People and Places* reflects on some of the same issues in the context of the historic environment, which is a cultural asset in its own right and central to people's everyday lives.

Grey Street, Grainger Town, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.  
Recently voted best street in Britain by  
BBC Radio 4 listeners.

Here the partnership of the local community and national agencies has brought new life and vitality to a once neglected part of the city centre.  
© English Heritage

1 We found *Government and the Value of Culture* exhilarating and visionary and we subscribe wholeheartedly to the sentiments you express. We are delighted to contribute to the debate you have stimulated and, as one of your sponsored bodies, to respond to your thoughts.

2 Poverty of aspiration is indeed one of the most pernicious evils that society faces and we stand side by side with you in your enthusiasm to slay it. You are right in identifying culture as one of the most potent weapons we have in our armoury and we need to wield it for the public good. Central to our culture is an understanding of who we are; as you put it, defining and preserving our identity. A significant part of this definition comes from our shared history and its physical remains. The historic environment embodies and reflects the mix over time of cultures and communities and their engagement with the landscapes in which they lived. It includes buildings of bewildering scale and beauty such as Durham Cathedral, landscapes as remarkable and ancient as Stonehenge or the Yorkshire Dales, townscapes as powerful and elegant as Bath or

Spitalfields. The landscape is one of our greatest cultural achievements and from it many of our finest artists, writers, musicians and poets have derived their passion and inspiration.

3 The historic environment puts quality, variety and meaning into people's lives and gives them the opportunity to understand and engage with life. Time and again in our work all over England we see and hear people expressing their love for the distinctiveness of the places in which they live. Time and again it is to the historic environment that they point. The evidence speaks for itself, and did so most recently in *Heritage Counts*, the annual audit of the state of the historic environment. And, paradoxically, as people's lives come to be less constrained by beliefs, traditions and customs and more subject to individual choice, the importance of the historic environment features increasingly in those choices. As other ties are broken, people are increasingly defining themselves - for good or ill - by the places where they live. Characterless, anonymous places produce rootless, unattached people. It is no surprise that people feel abandoned by society if they are

forced to live in places engineered by people with no personal stake in the future of the environment they are creating.

- 4 Where the historic environment is nurtured and harnessed for good it creates real social and economic benefits offering everyone characterful, desirable and distinctive places to live. Where people fail to see its potential, do not attempt to harness its power, where it is neglected and ignored, degraded and destroyed, poverty, crime and economic failure follow. This poverty of aspiration, whether individual or institutional, condemns millions to live in poor quality environments; in places that are ugly, soulless, lacking in distinctiveness and blighted by vandalism. Such places are not valued, cared for or enjoyed.

- 5 To avoid this we must open each other's eyes to the significance of our surroundings, deepening people's experience and increasing the richness and quality of their lives. Understanding the physical context of our lives challenges our prejudices and preconceptions, inspires awe at human achievement and joy at its

beauty. It also exposes us to things we would rather not know, or which make us feel uncomfortable. You have identified these as the characteristics of great art. Our historic environment provides all these experiences in our daily lives. It is one of the most accessible of narratives: history, art and human endeavour, set out in streets and squares, fields and villages, for all to see, appreciate and understand. Too many people are currently denied their cultural inheritance by ignorance. People must be given the opportunity to understand their surroundings, as from understanding comes value and from value, comes the care that makes places worth living in.

- 6 Too many are betrayed by the fact that decisions about their surroundings are taken by people who don't have to live with the consequences – by speculative developers there only for the short term, by remotely based professionals or by policymakers divorced from local realities. The splendours and squalors of our landscape are too often taken for granted as a fact of life over which we have no control. This fatalism, this surrender of influence, must not be allowed to continue. The values and

aspirations of local people must be integral to the process of making places.

7 The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) is tackling the issue of local values and influence through initiatives such as Statements of Community Involvement and Local Strategic Partnerships. But the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) can also play a key role in addressing the issues of education and understanding that should lie at the very heart of heritage policy. The course was set in *Power of Place* and *A Force for Our Future*. But that was three years ago. Much has been achieved since then, by Government and your heritage bodies. The foundations are in place for the crucial legislative changes that are needed to bring heritage protection up to date. Now, we need to move the debate on, to recognise that what we choose to preserve, the nature of the legacy we bequeath to our children, is hugely important – it defines what future generations will think of us, as well as fundamentally affecting the quality of our lives today.

## Our Beliefs

- 8 In English Heritage we have a vision of a society that understands, values, cares for and enjoys its past; a society that nurtures its history as part of its present success. Not a society that is backward looking, obsessed with nostalgia, but one that is secure and comfortable with its history and recognises that it is the foundation upon which the future is built.
- 9 We believe that the people of England share a dynamic and evolving historic environment that establishes our sense of place, belonging and well-being. History is created by change and this country will – and must – continue to change in all sorts of ways. New buildings and landscapes will be created, and old ones replaced. Today we are making the history of tomorrow. But how we manage that process of change will define, more than anything, the quality of tomorrow's places.
- 10 The historic environment is not an exclusive place, nor simply a place that you visit from time to time, important and inspiring as that can be. It is the context in which we live our lives. It is a public good: a resource that we squander at our peril.

11 If, as we believe, heritage policy is to be one of the means of improving the lives of millions of people there are a number of issues that need to be addressed.

## Belief into action

12 First, we have to recognise that responsibility for the future of the historic environment is essentially a local matter. National bodies should help identify those issues that prevent local councils seeing their historic environment as one of the key elements that build a sense of quality, local identity and place into people's lives. They should ensure that authorities have the capabilities to manage the process of change, making properly informed decisions. They should support, help and advise, through capacity building, standard setting and training.

13 Second, we should look at heritage as a whole, across all of government. Your Department has done much to see that this is so, yet the silos in Whitehall still prevent the historic environment from being treated in an holistic way. We need closer and more effective policy making and more intelligent funding delivered across a wide range of

departments – not just ODPM, DEFRA and DFES. We need to stretch heritage investment, integrate delivery, prevent double handling and ensure the contribution of central government is made where it will bring the greatest impact.

14 Third, there must be closer working between those championing new design and those who nurture the existing landscape. Too often these are seen as opposites. In reality they are two distinct and important sides of the same coin. Too much energy has been expended in setting up opposing points of view. In reality many of the best and most inspiring of new places come from a creative fusion of new and old. Recycling the landscapes of yesterday as assets for tomorrow and adding to them high quality new buildings makes sense from every point of view – for communities, economies, the natural environment and long term sustainability. This is especially important in the context of the need to build new and sustainable communities in the Thames Gateway and the M11 corridor. Here is a chance to reinvent an English vernacular that derives its energy and inspiration from a full and proper understanding of the human landscape; contemporary design that

neither parodies the past nor brutally suppresses the texture and topography of today's landscapes. This will need leadership and partnership, the seeds of which already exist. They will need to be grown and grown quickly if we are not to repeat the mistakes of the post-war era.

15

Fourth, we need to recognise that engagement with people is not something that only happens at historic sites open to the public. We need to concentrate our efforts on community involvement and learning. This has already started: Planning for Real, town and village appraisals, the work of pioneering initiatives such as the Building Exploratory in London. The Historic Environment Liverpool Project (HELP) is helping the new World Heritage city and Capital of Culture determine its historic building priorities. Congregations of thousands of parish churches are writing their own Statements of Significance, to help them understand their churches better. All this helps to build pride of place, inform change and help secure the future. Government must increasingly focus its resources on this work rather than on an important, but limited portfolio of star attractions.

16 Fifth, those engaged in the historic environment have traditionally been motivated by protection. Indeed, the origins of much of our legislation and many heritage organisations – governmental and non-governmental – lie in the widespread concern in the latter part of the nineteenth century to protect from the ravages of industrialisation what was left of a mythical Arcadian England. The time has come to move on. Of course, protection will remain as a crucial element in the processes of managing change. But, increasingly, we see the real opportunities for nurturing the historic environment deriving from a recognition that it is in improving the quality of people's lives that the dividends are going to be realised. People shape places and places shape people. We must move from the adversarial world of confrontation to a more intelligent and creative debate. That will require a different emphasis, a different approach. It is for government and English Heritage to lead this.

## Conclusion

17 Your paper has made us hungry to join the debate, to widen it and to suggest what we believe you should do in shaping heritage policy for the next five

# People and Places

A response to Government and the Value of Culture

years. Our five points are about a change of perception and a widening commitment. The foundations for this new way of working exist. We are determined to continue the momentum and to find ways of releasing the extraordinary power of England's historic environment to slay the beast of impoverished aspiration.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Neil Cossons". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sir Neil Cossons  
July 2004



# People and Places

A response to Government and the Value of Culture

*English Heritage*  
*23 Savile Row*  
*London*  
*W1S 2ET*

[www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)

