Heritage, whose heritage?

Save Britain's Heritage

SUSAN: Adam Wilkinson is Secretary of SAVE Britain's Heritage, a heritage campaigning group that's been active since 1975.

ADAM: The English Country House is a peculiarly English phenomenon., These wonderful country houses in large estates, designed, and with very fine furniture designed for them. And they're treasure houses, they're wonderful architectural set-pieces and things which really dominated the landscape and dominated society at the time they were built. And they tell us a great deal about the time and place where they were created and the lives that were lived there – on all levels, not just those of the lords and ladies, but of everyone who lived and worked the Estates. And they're a most amazing architectural resource as well. In terms of Save Britain's Heritage, we deal with the built heritage, that's heritage that is made by man. That includes landscapes it includes buildings, it includes individual monuments. It also includes townscapes as well – how towns fit together and how they work. Now within that, heritage is usually always linked to communities and to people. It may be a community that lives there or it may be a much broader community which doesn't live there but has some involvement with that site or with those buildings or some interest in them.

SUSAN: Why do you think that the preservation of a building is actually so vital?

ADAM: We are a nation that has been building solid buildings for well over a thousand years: wherever you look in the UK, there is something old. There's also something good, it's something which can be re-used, it's something which can be recycled. It's something which lends a sense of place, it's something which gives visual continuity. And that visual continuity and that sense of place have perhaps a civilising influence over people, it helps anchor them and helps them understand where they're from and who they are.

SUSAN: You talk about rootedness and a sense of place. I wonder whether or not you think what extends to people in this country from, um, Afro-Caribbean or Asian backgrounds. Would they feel a rootedness and a sense of place with the buildings that you want to preserve?

ADAM: I strongly believe that that is the case. We have a number of cases where we've been fighting alongside the local communities. In fact, nearly all our cases, we rely on our local community to help us fight. And these are of all backgrounds, of all colours. So we've been dealing with cases in Forest Gate, for example, where you have a strong, um, West Indian community or cases up in the North where government is clearing masses of housing, where you've got strong Asian communities. So to us it seems clear that people from all backgrounds can find a place and find a sense of place and be proud of it as well. And this really just enforces the links that there are between communities and their buildings. You know it takes a generation or so for people to put down roots and for social networks to build up and they build up around the buildings and around the streets. And very often the Victorian and Georgian streets were actually put together in a way which reflects communities and how communities work and how those informal social links work.

SUSAN: Do you think that there a relationship between heritage and the buildings you want to save and a sense of nationhood?

ADAM: I think that buildings are perhaps subconsciously a part of a national identity and a sense of nationhood. The terraced house for example is a peculiarly British concept and they dominate our towns. Also people identify Britain with country houses. People identify different parts of Britain with different types of building. So perhaps the cotton towns of the

North identify with the wonderful mill buildings. Or perhaps in Cornwall, they identify with the tin mines and other elements which are now part of their landscape and part of their mental landscape as well.

ADAM: SAVE Britain's Heritage came about as a result of an exhibition at the V&A Museum called 'The Destruction of the Country House' in 1974. And people were so shocked by what they saw that they reacted very strongly. And this reaction was noted by those who set up the exhibition and was used in that they sent a press release out to every single local paper where one of these country houses had been about the house, about the house's story. The press releases were picked up by every one of these papers and every one of them ran a story. And so SAVE was born around this concept in 1975 of using the press release as a means of highlighting the threat to historic buildings, motivating public opinion and making things happen.

SUSAN: How are the objectives of the organisation different from the National Trust or English Heritage?

ADAM: SAVE is different from other bodies because it is able to speak in a manner which is completely unrestrained about historic buildings and historic areas and the threats to them. The National Trust and English Heritage have very set remits, um, and are not able to be as undiplomatic as SAVE is in certain circumstances. English Heritage's funding comes from government so it's limited in the criticism it can lay upon government, even when it really deserves it! The National Trust has a set focus on its buildings and in spite of being the biggest membership organisation in the country, with a larger membership than any of the political parties, it has to be very careful about how it throws its weight around. And when it does, government should listen. And it's starting to become more active but it can't work like we do. We're much smaller, we're much faster, we don't have the bureaucracy and we're completely unrestricted.

SUSAN: Can you give me a couple of examples of current campaigns?

ADAM: One of our major campaigns at the moment is against the government's Housing Market Renewal Initiative, also known as *Pathfinder* in the North and the Midlands of England. The scheme was designed to bolster the housing market in these areas and renew the housing stock. Unfortunately, at some stage, civil servants managed to insert the words 'mass demolition' into the scheme, as a result of which initially it was proposed to pull down up to 400,000 pre-1919 terraced homes. We became involved in this campaign after local groups alerted us to the threats to their areas. And we fought with these local groups, shoulder to shoulder, to try and prevent their areas and their communities being wiped out. What would happen is that communities would receive letters telling them their houses were to be compulsorily purchased and they could either choose to stay and fight this compulsory purchase, which is an extremely stressful process and requires a great deal of expertise, which they didn't have, or they could just simply give up. Many of them decided to stay and fight and have been extremely effective. We've also fought this at a national level: trying to get government to change its policy. We seem to have shamed them into at least reducing the numbers they want to demolish down to about 57,000 but that's still far too many.

SUSAN: Opponents of SAVE might argue that the constant and routine preservation of buildings, the sense that nothing can be knocked down without a fight, as it were, gives people looking at Britain the idea that the country has a great past behind it but isn't that much interested in the future.

ADAM: Well, I think that's rubbish. Firstly, it's not about preservation, it's about conservation – which means not preserving in aspic but working with what you've got. Secondly, people when they look at Britain, they're often horrified at what's lost – they're absolutely amazed that we allow things to be demolished. And in terms of our future, well, your future is always rooted in the past. It's a sad hangover from the modernist philosophy that we have to forget

everything from the past and start again. There are plenty of areas where we can build modern buildings, fantastic new architecture, without destroying historic buildings or without trashing the urban landscape. Part of the challenge of architecture is reacting to context and reacting to historic areas or the areas which a building is in. Not all buildings need to be stand-alone monuments. In fact, the best ones are often where the architect has used his intelligence or her intelligence and reacted to what's around and come up with something which works with the area. And these are often the most popular new buildings as well. I think you've got to accept what you've got, work with it and that will produce something which helps Britain understand where it is and where it's going.