



Heritage, whose heritage?

Historical property management by National Trust

SUSAN: Sarah Staniforth is Historic Properties Director for the National Trust.

SARAH: I think as far as I'm concerned, heritage is something that we value, it may be something cultural, it may be something historic, it may be something natural. But it's something that we value enough to think that it's worth passing on to future generations.

SUSAN: Why is heritage important in the twenty-first century? Is it particularly important to us now?

SARAH: I think it is because I think it centres people. I think it enables people to understand where they come from. And I think when you know where you come from and you can learn from the lessons of the past, that helps you in understanding where we're going in the future. And I think we have a very uncertain future in the twenty-first century but understanding the past is one of the cornerstones of planning for the future.

SARAH: In the second half of the twentieth century, the National Trust initially concentrated on country houses. There was an act of parliament in 1942 which enabled the National Trust to hold historic buildings on behalf of the nation, in the same way that the original act had enabled the National Trust to declare land inalienable. And as we went through the 1950s and the 1960s, culminating in the V&A exhibition in the 1970s on the destruction of the country house, the National Trust's role was very much to preserve country houses: to stop them being demolished; to stop them being turned into hotels and all the other uses that they were ending up as. From the 1970s through the eighties, the flow of country houses that needed saving slowed down. And, in fact, by the end of the eighties, it had almost stopped. It had gone down to a trickle. But increasingly now we're looking at smaller houses. We're almost looking at representative houses. Ones that you don't instantly think are of enormous architectural value but will become increasingly rare. So an example of that is Mr Straw's house in Worksop, which is a 1930s house and was lived in by quite a modest middle-class family. And you wouldn't instantly think of it as being something that the National Trust would own. But if organisations like the National Trust don't acquire things like that, all of those houses will be modernised and we won't have any typical representative examples of how people used to live.

SUSAN: Do you think that the National Trust makes a great contribution to people's idea about nationality?

SARAH: I think that there is a lot about both National Trust houses but actually probably even more so about the land that we look after, which people in this country really associate with, particularly with the countryside. So I think that the role that the National Trust plays in identity is probably more through the countryside because probably people don't identify so much with the country houses which we are still best known for.

SUSAN: Is the choice about which properties actually make it into the National Trust's collection yours? Or is it done by a committee? Or is it done by a very broad spectrum of people?

SARAH: We would try and involve as broad a spectrum of people as possible. The ideal scenario would be to have some sort of conservation planning process which would involve evaluating significance through consultation with not only experts – and those could be experts in architecture, experts in educational potential, financial experts – but actually the community that are close to that place. Because often local people will see values that the

experts miss. And it could be something as mundane, if you want to call it that, as 'it's a place where we can walk our dogs'. And if you don't involve the people who are going to use that place, you can really miss elements of significance that will subsequently become very important in any conservation planning process. We have to be sure that any acquisition is sustainable in the future. Four out of five of our properties operate at a loss and that's a tremendous burden. So we have to be very canny about taking on more responsibility.

SARAH: I think that in the past we have told, rather than listened to what our audience want to hear. We're now challenging ourselves with maintaining academic standards as far as understanding the significance of a building and a collection and a park is concerned. But also thinking about the way in which we tell our visitors about that significance in a way that they want to hear. If we simply preach, then we can lose the plot. We have to be sensitive to what audiences want now and actually one of the things that they want is to know much more about the process of looking after these places. So at a lot of places we now do what we call 'conservation in action'. So when we do building work, when we put on a new roof, the scaffolding is designed so that visitors can go up it and actually see what's happening on the roof. At Stourhead at the moment, we've been restoring the Pope's Cabinet, which is a a seventeenth century piece of *pietra dure* furniture and the furniture conservator has been doing that in the house in front of the public. And we're doing that because the demand is there.

It's absolutely essential that the National Trust doesn't lose its way with our core audience. And one could characterise our core audience as being white, middle class and, unfortunately, increasingly elderly. But they are our core supporters. They constitute a high proportion of our volunteer force. So we must ensure that we maintain giving them what they want from our properties, whilst also finding ways of engaging with the new audiences. And I think that at most properties, it's possible to do both. And ... For example, whilst opening a historic house with a collection to those visitors who are interested in the historical aspects of the house, we can also have events going on in the grounds for the young families with children. It could be an Easter Egg hunt, it could be Halloween, it could be looking for ghosts, it could be pond-dipping. So it's just understanding who the audiences are at a particular property and finding the things that interest them at the properties.