

Dedham Vale Society

Article: English Heritage - The Official View on Listing

English Heritage is an advisory body advising local authorities who operate the listing controls. EH is also consulted when necessary, by the Secretary of State. It sees only a small percentage of applications, mainly for (I) and (II star) listed buildings, which comprise just six percent of the total, and also proposals involving substantial demolition of listed buildings.

All legislation should seek to strike the right balance between individual liberty and the common good. When it comes to property ownership, we are all familiar with the dictum 'an Englishman's home is his castle'. That image, with all that it conjures up of pulling up the drawbridge and repelling all boarders, still resonates today. However, there are cases where the liberty of the property owner has to be circumscribed, and one such case is where the property in question has been identified as of special architectural or historic interest. Writing in 1877, William Morris, founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, wrote of historic buildings: 'They are not in any sense our property, to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those who come after us...They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all generations of mankind who are to follow us.'

Morris's chief concern was the Victorian mania for 'restoring' medieval churches and cathedrals, work which often involved the unnecessary removal of interesting but 'historically incorrect' fabric and furnishings. Since the second world war, statutory protection and legislation has cast the net of protection a lot wider than ancient monuments and medieval churches, generally in the wake of a notorious or scandalous loss of buildings or townscape. At the time of the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, which introduced the concept of listing, buildings of the post-Georgian period were generally held in low esteem. It took demolitions such as the Euston Arch, the threat to St Pancras station, and the campaigning of the Victorian Society to shift perceptions. Similarly, the demolition of the Firestone Factory on a bank holiday weekend in the 1980s heralded a move to protect buildings of the interwar era. Perceptions and priorities change, and these days a building need only be thirty years old, and in exceptional circumstances only ten years old to be considered for listing (as happened with the Willis Building in Ipswich). Increasingly new building types are being identified for statutory protection: World War II airfields and Cold War structures, post-war universities and even modern housing estates. Similarly designation has moved away from listing individual buildings and monuments towards areas (with the first conservation area designation in 1967), historic parks and gardens and more recently battlefield and maritime sites.

It is a good system, which has evolved with a large measure of public support. That is not to say that the system is perfect. Sadly, too many owners are unaware of or indifferent to the special qualities of the buildings of which they are the temporary custodians. Too many surveyors and builders are ignorant of the construction and repair needs of old buildings, which differ so much from present day methods. Too many architects are unschooled in historic detail and design. Too many local authorities do not employ sufficiently skilled conservation staff, and those that do often afford them low status in the pecking order.

The present review of the listing system being carried out by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is not designed to jettison or dilute the controls that have evolved over the last fifty years or so. It is however seeking to simplify the process, for example by creating a unified national list to replace the present myriad designations of listed buildings, scheduled ancient monuments, registered parks and gardens and battlefield sites. There is a debate as to whether conservation areas should be included in this national list, or left subject to local authority designation and management. Local authorities would continue to deal with the vast majority of applications relating to grade II listed buildings. There was a suggestion in the consultation document that grade II buildings themselves should 'migrate' to local i.e. non-statutory listings, but this proposal has been firmly resisted by English Heritage and many others. There is a proposal that responsibility for listing should be passed from DCMS to English Heritage, with necessary safeguards. This has been generally welcomed, since the present system involves a great deal of delay and bureaucratic double handling. There are also welcome proposals to open up the process of listing, with greater consultation and provision for appeal. However, the principle that listing should be determined according to criteria of architectural and historic importance alone will be retained; the cost of repairing a building, or the fact that there are redevelopment proposals for the site will not affect the decision of whether or not to list, although such factors may of course influence subsequent decisions.

Another significant likely outcome of the current review is a move towards management agreements replacing current listed building controls, particularly in large complexes of buildings under one ownership. The need for this new approach has arisen with the listing of university campuses and modern housing estates, but it can equally be applied to large landed estates, government owned sites and indeed the buildings of the Church of England. Various pilots are in place to test the feasibility and value of such an approach. It is unlikely to be appropriate for the vast majority of historic houses in individual private ownership.

Historic houses will always be popular, because of their individual character and qualities of design and craftsmanship. They retain a premium over other properties, as any estate agent will testify. Sympathetic alterations, using the right materials and details, are worth doing in their own right but also for sound financial reasons; research has demonstrated that unsympathetic alterations to historic buildings not only spoil their character and appearance, but also reduce their value. Similarly, VAT need not be charged for most approved alterations to historic buildings (perversely, like-for-like repair does attract VAT at the standard rate). For the lucky few (and I mean few), there is also the possibility of grant aid from the local authority and English Heritage. These considerations might go some way to offset the concerns of listed building owners about the burden of maintenance and repair. They are the lucky owners of a unique and irreplaceable asset!

Conservation is popular. We see evidence for this in the huge numbers of people who belong to the National Trust (at over 3m, far more than all the political parties combined). We see it also in the membership of English Heritage, the national amenity societies and countless local amenity societies such as the Dedham Vale Society.

This interest in the historic environment can of course take the negative form of Nimbyism. It is one of the ironies of this debate that while many people resent any curb on their liberty to do what they will with their property, they will push for maximum controls over what their neighbour might be allowed to do!

As ever, a balance has to be found. The history of most of our old buildings is a history of change, and often it is the evidence of that change which gives a building its particular interest and delight. There will occasionally be cases where inspirational and imaginative schemes are frustrated by an excessively rigid or misplaced application of 'rules'. Such cases are to be deplored. Much more often, however, plans are submitted with the skimpiest of information and with no professional guidance. The bread and butter work of most conservation officers is not devoted to frustrating masterpieces, but rather to turning an often abysmal submission into something acceptable. The fact that over 90% of applications are eventually approved, and that listed buildings have largely escaped the blight of DIY and other 'home improvements' which has afflicted so much of the building stock of this country, is testimony to the success of their efforts.

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February 2004